



# SEASON'S CHANGE

CAIT NARY



*Season's Change* includes depictions of anxiety, depression, panic attacks, homophobia, internalized homophobia and the use of slurs.

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## **Author's Note**

The North American Hockey Association (NAHA) is a fictionalized professional hockey league. While it shares similarities with the league you may be familiar with, it is intentionally different in multiple ways.

# **Contents**

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Chapter Forty-Six](#)

[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Excerpt from \*Heated Rivalry\* by Rachel Reid](#)

## Chapter One

Puking like an under-conditioned rookie was not an auspicious start to Olly Järvinen's sixth North American Hockey Association training camp—his first after getting traded to the Washington Eagles.

But here he was, bent over a black plastic trash can. Acid burned at the back of his throat, worse than the wildfire in his lungs from sprinting on the treadmill. By some undeserved miracle, his maximal oxygen uptake number was only a little lower than last year's. It was hard to be grateful for that when the inside of the trash can was flickering around the edges: water bottles, wet wipes, half-digested bites of the protein bar he'd choked down that morning.

"Good run, Olly. You okay there?" a trainer asked, offering a squeeze bottle and a towel.

"Fine." He didn't snap it out, even though he wanted to. Instead, he spat water and the taste of bile, straightened his shoulders, and got in line for the vertical jump test. He didn't recognize the guy in front of him. Olly kept his eyes down, sucking in air that smelled like old sweat and eighteen-year-old male determination. It felt out of reach at twenty-four.

Olly's preparation for camp had always been impeccable. He wasn't a superstar, so it had to be. But not this year, and he had no one to blame but himself. He'd been a mess: not working out or eating right, hiding up at his cabin so he didn't run into his trainer in Duluth, or hear about his lack of gym time from his dad. Well, his dad left him voicemails, but he'd deleted them without calling back, for the first time in his life.

Whatever workouts Olly had or hadn't done were irrelevant now. He had to get through the tests, get through camp, just get through it. He couldn't think about the stretch of the season—eighty-two fucking games and probably the playoffs, if he was still hanging around by then—or his stomach would heave again.

Maybe he wouldn't make the roster; maybe he'd get sent down to the Eagles' farm team.

Maybe he'd walk out and be done with it.

But Olly wasn't a quitter. His fuckups had gotten him into this mess. He was going to have to deal with the consequences.



So he filed out of the weight room and got dressed for his on-ice testing. The locker room was loud, pump-up jams and the Eagles' captain, Mike Dewitt, making an encouraging circuit of the room.

"Looking good, Järvinen." That had to be a lie.

Olly nodded and kept his eyes on his skate laces. Dewitt stood there for a second, like he was waiting for a response. When he didn't get one, he moved along.

Olly had been excited for camp last year. He could remember that. Signing with his hometown team in Minnesota: two hours' drive away from his mom and his boat and two of his brothers, with his third brother, Sami, twenty minutes away in Minneapolis.

Look how that had turned out.

The on-ice testing that followed was a blur. Olly puked again, halfway through. He couldn't have said whether it was because of his level of fitness, or something else. Maybe they'd cut him; and he didn't want to want that, he was a professional, he'd never fuck up on purpose. But maybe he wasn't fucking up on purpose. Maybe he was just...fucking up.

He heaved over another trash can. A different trainer handed him a different towel and water bottle. He spat a different mouthful of backwash Gatorade.

Olly put his helmet back on, and somehow—some fucking how, his brain went offline and his body *went*, the slick of the ice and the cross of his skates, burning in his hamstrings and quads and lungs, leaning into the pain like it was going to fucking fix something—he made it through the endurance test with one of the top times.

Olly staggered through the gate, managing not to flinch away from the backslaps and the *atta boys*. Kept his head down while the rest of the guys finished up; didn't laugh along with everybody else when one of the rookie D-men tripped on a cone and went sprawling across the ice.

Once the refrigerator-sized rookie had managed to stop laughing and get through his test without losing an edge, Dewitt—Dewey, everybody called him—cornered Olly in the locker room for more captainly outreach. "Good day," he said, punching him in the shoulder.

It hadn't been. Olly knew that. He pulled an Eagles-branded T-shirt over his head, temporarily blocking out Dewey's square jaw and salt-and-pepper stubble. "Thanks."

"I wanted to welcome you to DC. Check in. Make sure you're settling in

okay.”

There was no point to settling in until Olly saw his name on the final roster. Instead of saying that, he said, “Yeah.”

“We’ve got an apartment for you,” he continued, “with one of the rookies from the D-League. We like to make sure our new guys have a support system. And Benji’s a good guy, even if his edgework leaves a lot to be desired.”

Olly swallowed convulsively. He couldn’t stand to wonder what Dewitt might have heard about Olly’s last roommate; what he might be thinking behind the professional Canadian politeness.

“I’ll text you his number. Go tonight.”

“Okay,” Olly said, a little too late. He didn’t understand why they were pushing him to get into an apartment now, before the final roster had been announced. NAHA players didn’t get housing until they were a sure thing. Olly was anything but that.

Instead, he felt...tenuous. Exhausted. More than he should be, even after camp and the drive down from Minnesota. He’d done the whole thing in one stretch, since he wouldn’t have slept if he’d stopped halfway. He hadn’t slept last night either, listening to the hum of the A/C unit in the Arlington hotel where they put all the new guys. Except his future roommate, anyway.

He’d hoped that camp would tire him out enough that maybe, maybe, maybe he could sleep, like he hadn’t all summer.

Feeling the tension radiating out from his stomach, Olly doubted it.

\* \* \*

Benji Bryzinski was just a dumbass from Duncannon, Pennsylvania, but he had *arrived*.

That was what he told himself after the first day of training camp, leaning on the railing of his Washington condo’s balcony and looking out at where the river was bracketed by the blue glass towers of office buildings.

Well, he wasn’t quite in DC. But Rosslyn, Virginia, was more convenient to the practice rink, where he would be spending a lot of fucking time over the next three years of his contract. Jesus Christ. The goddamned NAHA: everything he’d been working for since he was seven years old. He grinned, the excitement bottle-popping through his body.

Camp was hard, of course it was, but he was honoring all those years of

work, all those hours in the gym; that little kid he'd been, suiting up in secondhand gear and taking his first wobbling strides across the ice.

And he was making the roster, after two years with the Eagles' Major Developmental League team in Hershey. His housing letter, and his signature on the lease of this nice fucking apartment, said so. It was unusual to get housing before camp, even if the head coach had told him "*you'll be back for good next October*," after his most recent stint covering for a defenseman out on injured reserve.

His phone buzzed in the pocket of his basketball shorts. He fumbled it out, managed to drop it on the cement with an ominous crack.

"Fuck." Even if breaking his phone wouldn't be so bad, now. He had enough money to buy a new one, without even thinking about the balance in his bank account.

His older sister Krista's face lit up his (unbroken) lock screen. "Crate & Barrel has three couches that I think will work. Do you want to try them out or should I just show them to you on FaceTime?"

"Uh, whatever you think is best."

She blew out a breath. "I'll show you."

The three couches looked identical. All he cared about was that it was comfy and sized for his six-five frame. "You pick. You'll just tell me my opinion's wrong, anyway."

"Fine," she said. "I assume you don't have an opinion about your plates or towels, either?" She rolled her eyes at whatever she saw in his expression. "I don't know how you thought you were going to do this on your own."

"I was going to figure it out." Okay, he hadn't thought beyond buying a king-size bed. Plus, maybe his roommate was going to have stuff. It didn't make sense to get too much, although it would probably be good to have something to dry his hands with after he took a piss. Sisters were useful, Benji had to admit.

Even if Krista's motivation for driving down to DC was less about buying Benji silverware, and more about having walked in on her husband fucking an Instagram model.

Again.

As she disconnected the call, anger bubbled up from Benji's chest. His stomach muscles clenched; the hand still leaning on the balcony fisted so tightly that the tendons stood out along his forearm.

At the same time, though, he could hear his therapist at Quinnipiac's calm,

steady voice, asking him to go into his body, to evaluate what he was feeling.

Consciously, he uncurled his fingers. Took one breath, held it, let it out, took another.

Benji had known Rob was bad news from the first time he'd seen them together, seen the way he watched the waitress lean over even while he had an arm around Krista's shoulders.

He went back inside, put on his shoes, stuck a key in his pocket, and walked out the door. He couldn't sit still: he knew he needed to, like, interrupt the pattern of his thoughts. Give himself an outlet until he calmed down.

His apartment was a ten-minute walk away from the Mount Vernon Trail, which paralleled the Potomac River. He'd never lived anywhere as big as DC, and he'd thought it would be nice to be able to get into sort-of nature.

Sucked that he couldn't enjoy his first trip. Benji wanted to punch every single one of the engaged-looking husbands smiling at their wives and cute fucking dogs.

But he was calmer by the time he got home, less likely to climb into his truck and drive to Pittsburgh and dig a big fucking hole for Rob McMeade's big fucking body.

Krista was leaning on the breakfast bar. She looked perfect: low-key in a Pittsburgh ball cap and sneakers, wearing jeans that would have paid their rent for a month back in Duncannon. She was unrecognizable from the crying mess who had gotten his shoulder soggy when she arrived the day before, swearing they just needed a break for a few days.

In Benji's opinion, Krista needed more than a break. She needed a fucking divorce lawyer. Rob liked having a pretty wife to wear his team sweater to his hockey games; didn't like not fucking other women. But she always went back.

The more Krista got to optimize Benji's life, though, the more cheerful she got. She'd already messaged Anna Dewitt about the Eagles' traditional preseason off-day barbecue.

She looked up, raising one blond eyebrow. "You really need a new truck. Every time I park next to it... It's just, you can't park a 2002 Toyota next to your teammates."

"Watch me." Benji had been driving the same shitty Tacoma forever. He didn't fuck with seventy-five rituals for putting on his skates, but his truck was his good-luck charm. He'd borrowed it from a buddy's family to drive

himself to Michigan, after he'd scraped his way into the US National Hockey Training Center. Davo's dad had told him to pay him back when he made it to the NAHA. At the time, Benji couldn't imagine the amount of money it would take to give away a truck. But Davo's mom was a doctor and his dad was a principal, so in hindsight maybe a car the same age as their son hadn't been the biggest sacrifice. (Benji had called Davo's dad to try to pay him for the truck over the summer. He said he'd take free tickets instead.)

"You need to think more about your image."

"Nobody gives a shit what kind of car I drive."

Whatever she was going to say was cut off by the sound of the door buzzer—his new roommate. Järvinen had been in the NAHA for a few years but had gotten traded from Minnesota on kind of weird terms, if Benji remembered correctly. He was a center. Super-fast, defensive-minded, but inconsistent. There had been a lot of healthy scratches toward the end of last season. Under twelve goals. They were in different groups at camp, but Benji had kept an eye out. Unlike Benji's, his edgework was impeccable.

Really nice hair, too.

Benji watched Krista head for the door, throwing him a narrow glance over her shoulder like the conversation about his *image*—as if he gave a shit, or was ever going to give a shit—wasn't finished.

Järvinen better not be the kind of guy who was going to be a dickhead about Benji's truck or who wanted to talk about Instagram all the time.

## Chapter Two

Olly wasn't sure what to expect when he knocked on the door. He hadn't heard too much about Benji, other than that he was a defenseman coming up from the Hershey Howl. Aside from watching him wipe out during the endurance tests, Olly hadn't been paying much attention to anyone else at camp, just keeping his head down and gritting through it. He'd done a quick search before heading over: not much social media; a press release from when he'd been drafted; a few articles about a short college career at Quinnipiac that had still included a trip to the Frozen Four; one headline about *Former Junior Howler to Play for Eagles*.

Definitely no mention of the pretty blonde who opened the door.

"Hiiii," she trilled. "You must be Oliver!"

"Olly's fine. And you're...?"

"Benji's sister. Krista." She didn't look anything like Benji's roster picture from the Howl. "I'm just down for a few days."

Krista ushered him inside. The apartment looked fine, even if it was totally empty: a big kitchen, a wall of windows leading out onto a wide balcony.

"Yo," said a deep voice from next to the refrigerator.

And there was the guy from the Google search, who Olly had halfway seen across the ice. His sister was a peanut, but Benji—Bowie, Dewitt had called him—was huge. Olly would probably bounce off him like a six-foot let's-round-it-to-180 pounder getting smacked by The Mountain from *Game of Thrones*. Seeing Benji and Krista standing next to each other, there were similarities: they had the same tanned skin, strong jawline, and tilted eyes, even though hers were blue and his were an ambiguous greenish hazel; and they both had curly hair, hers blond and his dark brown. Hers was gorgeous, his looked like baby rats nested in it.

That was it. Other than the fact that they were both extremely good-looking, Olly noticed with a sense of foreboding.

Krista continued the tour of the apartment, Benji drifting behind them. Olly didn't care about the bathrooms or the closet space if he could get along with whoever he was living with. And he would: he didn't have an alternative. After last year, Olly had to keep his head down and do whatever the Eagles told him. If he could make the roster, he could get a fresh start.

“Yeah,” he said, when he realized Krista was waiting for him to say something. He’d been looking at Benji, who was peering into the closet of Olly’s future bedroom as if he’d never seen it before in his life. He looked relaxed and easy, and why wouldn’t he. “Sure.”

Benji mouthed *busted* when Krista rolled her eyes. “Zone out much? I was asking if you lived in a house or an apartment back in Minneapolis.”

“Ouch, Kris,” Benji said. “Maybe give him a few days.”

“I had an apartment with one of the boys.” Which had been a disaster, but Olly wasn’t thinking about that.

“I’ll show you the balcony,” Benji offered, “since we’ve gotten to the part where Krista starts hazing you.”

It had a view of high-rises and the Potomac, bisected by a bridge Olly would learn the name of at some point. He leaned his forearms on the railing. This was nice, actually, looking out at the river and feeling a breeze ruffle his hair. And Benji seemed okay. Chill, not like the kind of guy who sucked the air out of every room he stepped into. He told Olly about a trail by the river, sounding more animated than he had in the apartment without his sister hovering.

Olly knew that he had to try right now. Once Benji’s description of the trail had tapered off, he asked, “So you like to run?”

“Used to hate it. But I figured anything that felt that bad had to be building character, or some shit. And eventually I started liking it. It’s peaceful.”

“It’s gotta be hard, running with that big body.”

Olly immediately wondered if he’d said something weird, but Benji looked philosophical as he slapped himself on the bicep. “This is my summer body. I’ll lean out in the season.”

“Same.” Only he had no weight to keep on, courtesy of his fuckup summer.

“You’re okay,” Benji said, after what had absolutely not been an assessing once-over. “You cook?”

“I specialize in takeout.”

They covered some more basic roommate shit: yes, they should get a house cleaner; Benji liked to party; Olly was trying to be chill but wasn’t going to be uptight about it; sure, Olly would go running with him; yes, getting a dog would be stupid with their schedules; and yes, they needed furniture.

“But like,” Benji said, “maybe less expensive shit than whatever Krista bought today.”

“I heard there’s an IKEA.”

“Thank Jesus.” Benji was leaning against the railing, back to the view. He gave Olly a cheerful, crooked grin, showing off a hockey gap. There was also a bump in his nose, like he’d broken it at some point. “I need to make sure I’ve got enough money left to get my teeth fixed.”

“But all the real blueliners go for that toothless badass look,” Olly chirped on autopilot. He leaned in, which he realized was a bad idea when he caught a breath of Benji’s smell: crisp and clean, like fresh laundry. “You gotta be missing at least four to be eligible for the Defenseman of the Year trophy.”

“Fuck you,” Benji laughed. He turned to look at the view again. Their forearms brushed, unintentional. Olly edged his away. “Fuck, man. I’m gonna be in the NAHA,” Benji said, like he couldn’t believe it.

\* \* \*

Olly moved in the morning of their first day off. It didn’t take any time at all, especially with Benji’s help carrying shit in from the car. His sister was camped out in the kitchen prepping for Dewitt’s barbecue, and Benji had grinned down at him and mouthed *Save me?* and Olly hadn’t been able to come up with a reason to refuse.

He’d left all his furniture in the apartment in Minneapolis: no bed frame or dresser was worth going back there, and he’d managed to grab most of the shit that he cared about when he picked up his clothes. His favorite mugs. The coffeepot. Nothing that had needed a second pair of hands, nothing that wouldn’t fit in the trunk of his car.

Most of that was still in his parents’ basement in Duluth. All he’d brought to DC was a couple of suitcases and his hockey gear. It didn’t seem like there was any point to going to the trouble. Who knew how long he’d even be here, no matter what sense of optimism was motivating the Eagles to get him housing now. Or more realistically, their weakness through the center of the ice.

So he had his suitcases, and he’d ordered an air mattress and sheets online. Benji’s sister had acquired a sofa. Benji said he had a truck; they’d go to IKEA. It was fine, or as fine as it was going to get.

Still, Olly didn’t know how he was going to make it through the meet-and-greet barbecue that afternoon. His body was shredded from camp; he’d spent last night staring at the backs of his eyelids, listening to the hotel elevator



grind up and down on the other side of the wall.

He tried to take a nap—laid down on his air mattress, turned on a podcast—but it only emphasized his inability to sleep.

Olly had to get through it, the same way he was going to get through camp, the same way he was going to get through the season. New shift. Clean ice, if he could stop fucking up and take advantage of it.

He made himself get up. There was a built-in mirror on the back of his closet door—he looked okay, wearing the same generically appropriate shit he'd been wearing to mandatory team bonding events for years. Khaki shorts, a navy polo. Clean-cut, dark red hair knotted back, nothing that made a statement.

Olly could hear Krista out in the hall, yelling at Benji about whatever he was wearing, and Benji complaining back at her. It made Olly tired, but then, everything made Olly tired.

He picked up his phone. He had a few texts from his parents and his brothers Sami, Joey, and Levi, all wishing him luck, saying they hoped he liked his new place and that camp was going well. He didn't bother answering.

“You wanna carpool, right?” Benji asked him.

Krista cut in. “I can drive. We're not taking your truck.”

Benji made a face. “Don't start, K.”

“I'm driving,” Krista said with finality. “I've got lots of space.”

Olly helped load the car with a big thing of sangria, covered bowls. He ended up in the back seat, Krista and Benji and the GPS arguing at each other in the front. Olly was familiar with long-running sibling arguments, and he did not want to get dragged into this one.

He didn't want to get dragged into anything, much less casual chitchat with his new teammates.

That wasn't the attitude you had if you were coming into a new team.

Olly knew that.

The preseason get-together was exactly what he was expecting, from the two times he'd been the new guy on a NAHA team before. A massive house in a way-distant development. Lots of guys; rookies up for their first round of camp, terrified and trying to hide it; wives, kids. Benji waded into his buddies from the D-League, grins and backslaps and fist-bumps all around. Krista was trading air kisses with another pretty blonde—Anna Dewitt, presumably—so Olly let himself get carried along in Benji's wake.

Benji knew everybody, because he'd been in the Eagles pipeline since they'd drafted him, and because he'd apparently never met a stranger. Olly stayed in his radius, smiled at the appropriate moments, kept his mouth shut. At least Benji didn't seem to mind Olly following him around, and God knew he was loud enough for the both of them.

He tried not to wonder what every guy he met would say if they knew about him. What expressions would twist over their generically hockey-handsome faces. What they'd say, what they'd do. Which of their juniors buddies they'd been talking to over the summer.

Olly plastered on a smile, shook someone's hand, admired a new baby. He had a bunch of nieces and nephews; he liked kids. Maybe he could put himself on babysitting detail for the rest of the barbeque, instead of following Benji around like a lost puppy.

\* \* \*

A couple of hours into the party, Benji realized he hadn't seen Olly in a minute. Which was fine. Olly didn't need Benji looking out for him; except that at the same time, Benji kind of thought he might. He'd looked nervous when they were walking up. It made sense: new team and all that, and he seemed like a quiet guy.

Benji didn't go looking for him, specifically, but Krista asked him to get her phone charger from the car, and there he was: at the basketball hoop in the driveway, playing horse with two mini-sized Mike Dewitts. Benji watched as Olly drained a three-pointer, nothing but net. One of the kids gave him a high-five; the other missed a layup and demanded another shot.

"Didn't know we were getting LeBron in this trade, too," Benji called, while the twins were arguing about the rules.

Olly shrugged, making a face like he'd gotten caught. "I'm not that good."

"Better than me. I've made, like, ten three-pointers in my whole life."

"I've made a hundred," one of the kids said.

"I've made a thousand," countered the one who'd missed the layup.

"Yeah, yeah, okay." Olly shook his head, smiling. It was one of the first real smiles Benji had seen on his face. He looked a lot less—tense? was that the word?—out here, even though it was hot as fuck, even though Benji had heard a few stories about how hyper the twins were.

Benji headed back down to the car, the yells of the kids and the *thunk* of

the basketball following him down the driveway.

When he got back inside, Krista was in the kitchen with a collection of other wives and girlfriends. She flashed him a sparkler of a smile, plugged her phone into one of the sockets on the counter. It buzzed; kept buzzing. Benji only saw her expression flicker because he knew to look.

“I need to make a real quick call, okay?”

The WAGs were talking about spin classes, so he drifted back outside to watch the game. It had devolved into the twins shooting and Olly helping them with their foot positions or release or whatever, he didn't know shit about basketball.

A twin made a three-pointer. The other kid missed, shot again, missed, finally made one. Benji should be out back with the rest of the guys. He wasn't contributing anything to the great sport of basketball, and Olly wasn't talking to him. Or anyone, other than Dewey's kids.

“You want to shoot?” Olly asked, after the twins had rattled in a few more three-pointers.

The door opened behind him before he could answer. Krista stepped out. She had her tension-face on, white knuckles around her phone. “What are you doing hiding out here?”

He nodded toward Olly and the twins. “Helping babysit. Man-to-man defense.”

“You can't disappear at a team event. I don't think you know how important it is that you fit in with these guys.”

“I got it,” he said, levering himself to his feet. “I know everybody. We're chill.”

“You can't afford to be chill.”

Benji opened his mouth, closed it. He'd been fighting with Krista long enough to know a lost cause when he saw one. He knew who'd been leaving her messages. None of this was about him, except that sometimes he thought she tried to control everything about his life because she couldn't control one of the biggest things in her own. “Yeah, okay,” he said, instead. “Olly, you wanna check out the grill?”

Olly shrugged, rebounded a shot off the rim, then sprang up and dunked it. “I guess,” he said, like it was his execution.

\* \* \*

Krista left first thing in the morning. “I’m so glad I came down and helped you get off on the right foot with everybody,” she said, quickly, like she was performing it for herself. Couldn’t be for Benji.

“You can stay as long as you want.”

She shook her head. She already had her expensive sunglasses perched on top of her perfect blond hair. “Rob wants to have some of the guys over tonight. The house is a mess and I’m sure pictures are going to go up on Instagram. My social media partnerships expect a certain kind of presentation, you know? And I won’t have this kind of market position forever.”

“Are you sure Instagram pictures are worth going back to your cheating fucking husband?”

Krista’s face froze. “You still don’t understand that I’m building a business. Being married to Rob helps me do that.”

“You don’t need him.”

“You don’t get to tell me how to live my life,” she shot back.

There was nothing Benji could say to that. Nothing that he hadn’t said before, nothing that would make any difference. He’d tried everything he could think of before he turned twenty years old. And here she was: going back, again.

“Love you,” he said. “Drive safe.” Because it was all he could say.

After she left, the apartment got quiet. Olly had his door shut. Benji thought about knocking, then rolled his yoga mat out in the living room instead. It was never the wrong time for the one-two punch of injury prevention and mindfulness.

He could only control himself, and he’d be damned if he fucked up his career because he was too busy worrying about his sister. Or his new roommate, for that matter.

## Chapter Three

On their next day off, Benji texted his billet mom from Hershey for a shopping list for the kitchen. Things still felt a little weird with Krista, and his rookie salary might not cover whatever fancy-ass store she thought he'd need to go to. But Alise FaceTimed him back immediately.

"Heya, baby," she said, a big smile on her pale, freckled face. "You settling in okay?"

"Yeah, it's all good. Trying to get all the stuff we need before practice gets any more intense."

"I asked around and your roommate's supposed to be a good kid. Shame things didn't work out in Minnesota. Andre told me he's got talent." His billet brother played for LA; between Andre, Alise, and his billet dad, Marc, who used to play in the minors, the Deveraux knew everyone in hockey.

"Um, yeah, he seems good." Olly had stayed in his room or in his own little corner at the practice facility, other than shadowing him silently through the barbecue. Benji was used to being buddies with everyone; he didn't know what to make of Olly. "Quiet, though."

Alise made a humming noise. "Maybe he needs a friend."

"We're going to IKEA," he said. "We can talk then, I guess."

She gave him the most basic list of kitchen shit possible, all stuff they'd used when she taught him to cook his first year back in Pennsylvania. "Send me some pictures of your dinner, okay? Make some for Olly."

"You ready?" Olly asked. He'd drifted out from his bedroom while Benji and Alise were saying their goodbyes. Olly hadn't brought much down from Minneapolis: himself, his gear, a couple of bags. It was sad—didn't he have the money for nicer stuff than that?

At least he didn't seem to be judging Benji for his truck as they buckled themselves in. Okay, maybe Benji was judging himself a little bit, after going to the Dewitts' and seeing the line of luxury imports. Olly had a silver Audi; hopefully they could carpool to anything important. Benji couldn't give up his truck. He gave it a pat on the dashboard.

Olly fiddled with the GPS on his phone.

"I should probably get a stereo with an aux cable."

Olly shrugged. Moved on to fidgeting with the radio as Benji pulled out of

the garage, and immediately got stuck in the 24/7 gridlock. He settled on a station playing old pump-up hairband rock.

“This what you listen to?” Benji asked. Olly was giving him nothing to work with.

“Sometimes.” He shrugged again, then looked out the window.

Benji got to take his foot off the brake, and they moved forward about twelve feet before stopping at a red light.

“I know the team kinda put us together, but do you want to find somewhere else to live?” Benji asked, over the howling of Def Leppard. What a soundtrack for a kind-of-serious question. “‘Cause I don’t know, man, it seems like you might be happier with your own space. That new goalie from Quebec got them to let him do it, so it’s not a total no-go.”

Although Olly was sleeping on an air mattress, for fuck’s sake. He was a professional athlete. That was not a good look.

“It’s not that,” Olly told the window. Benji could see his knee start bouncing. “No, I mean...no. I don’t want to find another place.”

The therapist Benji had seen at Quinnipiac would always sit there until he said something. So he focused on the traffic, inching his way through the green light. It would take three hours to get to IKEA at this point, so Olly would have plenty of time to think about what he wanted to say.

“Stuff got kind of fucked up, in Minnesota,” Olly said, finally. When Benji flicked him a glance he was clenching and unclenching his right hand, looking down at it like it belonged to someone else. “With everything. I was living with Crowder—” one of their third-line wingers “—and then the coach who was there when I came in got fired, and the system the new coach was running wasn’t a fit for me. And it’s not like Crowder and I were ever friends, really, just kinda coworkers who ended up living together.”

Olly was on the smaller side, if only in hockey and not in the real world. All the guys going to Minnesota over the summer had been twice his size, and Crowder the roomie was a fucking goon. Benji didn’t think that would get them too far: speaking as a big bruiser of a D-man, he had plenty to contribute out on the ice, but you needed skill players, too. Players who could find space where there was no space, create something out of nothing.

“It got to me,” Olly finished. “I didn’t handle it...well.”

“What’s that got to do with staying locked in your room all the time?”

“Ouch, man.” He was smiling, though, a little. “It would have been easier if I’d had some space from it, is what I’m trying to say. But he was up in my

shit all the time, and then we had a big blowup, and, well.”

“Here you are.”

“Here I am.”

“Is Crowder as much of an asshole as he seems like in his interviews?”

Olly snorted. “Worse.” It looked like he might keep talking, but he shut his mouth again.

Their little heart-to-heart had gotten them out to the Beltway, which was a literal highway to hell. Fitting, since Olly’s dad-rock station was playing AC/DC. He had to focus on driving too much to keep interrogating Olly, but at least they’d talked. Or something.

\* \* \*

Olly took a second, after they’d parked and Benji had gotten out of the truck, to breathe. His chest was tight and his heart rate was up, even though Benji had laid off the interrogation and gone back to humming along to Lynyrd Skynyrd.

It was just that the shit in Minnesota last year had been the worst time in his life.

He had the media-ready sound bites, courtesy of his agent. *I’d like to thank the Minnesota Wolves for giving me a chance to live out eight-year-old Olly’s dream. I’m excited to contribute and I think the Eagles have great energy going into the season, in an upbeat and decisive tone. No, I don’t think I’ll have any trouble fitting in. All the guys have been so welcoming, followed by an anecdote such as, hit up IKEA with my roomie Bowie, we’ve got the ultimate bachelor pad.*

What he didn’t have was any other way to talk about it. He was going to need to fucking find one, or it was going to be Minneapolis 2.0. Can’t take a joke. Doesn’t fit with the culture.

He was freaking out, he realized. In Benji Bryzinski’s truck, in an IKEA parking lot in fucking Woodbridge, Virginia, and he needed to pull his shit together *now*.

Benji knocked his knuckles against the window. Olly jumped. He was looking a little pissed-off through the glass, but whatever he saw on Olly’s face made his expression smooth back out.

Olly fumbled the door open. So much for freaking out. Game face on. Get through the fucking shift.

“You okay?” Benji asked, sounding like he gave a shit.

“Yup.” Olly popped the *p* in a way that had always pissed his mom off, because she knew it meant he was lying.

“Hey.” Benji wasn’t walking toward the entrance. “We don’t need to do this now, if you need a minute.”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay. Um.” He scratched at the back of his head, fucking up his hair. It was tangled and fluffy, a total disaster. “You know Persy, the forward? He’s Swedish and stuff. He said I had to try the meatballs while we were here. Want to do that? Before we start looking at furniture and shit?”

Olly didn’t know what would be worse: diving into IKEA, or sitting with Benji in the food court trying to eat meatballs. “It’s two o’clock.”

“And I’m hungry.” He paused. “Well, no, but I’m supposed to be eating.”

“Jesus, again?” They’d had lunch right before they left. Or Benji had had lunch—a giant sandwich—and Olly had made a regular sandwich and escaped back to his room.

“I wasn’t kidding about the weight thing.” Benji blinked down at him with his slanted greeny-whatever eyes. He had unnecessarily long eyelashes. “It’s hard for me to keep it on.”

“I can’t really see it.” They were walking now, and he could breathe again. Kind of; it was painfully hot, heat radiating up from the pavement, and it was so humid they were practically swimming. “You’re massive.”

“My nickname in junior hockey was Rainbow. That’s where Bowie came from. Wanna know why?”

Olly’s mind did not go to the right place. He nodded, anyway.

“For, like, a rainbow shrimp. You know, those mushroom-trippy-looking pretty murder-shrimp things.”

Olly took a second to parse that. “Murder...shrimp?”

“Oh my fucking god, you don’t know about this?” Benji was looking at him like he was about to let Olly in on the best secret in the whole world.

They made it to the food court line, which was predictably nonexistent at 2 pm on a Tuesday. Benji got meatballs with a side of smoked salmon; Olly got an apple.

Benji pulled out his phone as soon as they claimed a table. He loaded a video of an, okay, trippy-looking rainbow-flag-themed shrimp. Which then proceeded to murder a fish and start chewing on its head.

“That is one cold-ass murder-shrimp,” was all Olly felt capable of adding.



“What does this have to do with your junior hockey nickname?”

“I was a tiny little shrimp, but I fucked people up.” He said it with a giant shit-eating grin, then paused, skewing his mouth over to the side. “I think the rainbow thing was a joke. They’re actually called mantis shrimp. But my boy Davo always said I was pretty.”

“I don’t know what definition of pretty your boy Davo was using,” which was a lie, not that Olly should be paying any goddamned attention. It wasn’t true now with the broken nose and the gap in his teeth and the overall proportions, but he could see how a shrimp-sized version would have been: his bone structure and his damned eyelashes.

“Nah, you’re the pretty boy.” Benji leaned back in his chair and shoved a meatball in his mouth. “Your fucking hair. Christ.”

Olly choked on a bite of his apple. “I’m from Minnesota,” he managed. He didn’t think Benji had even seen him with his hair down. He couldn’t imagine it touching his neck when it was this hot outside.

“Whatever you say,” Benji said, shoving his last meatball in his mouth. “Ready to do this thing, then?”

Olly wasn’t, exactly, but the sooner they got it over with, the sooner he wouldn’t have to be doing it anymore. So they acquired a coffee table, a console for their future TV, a bed for Olly, and a mattress that he wouldn’t have to re-inflate every night. By the time they were in the kitchenware section, with Benji consulting a list that he’d pulled out of the pocket of his shorts, Olly was feeling unexpectedly...settled.

There was no way that Benji was as aggressively pleasant as he seemed, though. It was impossible to go to IKEA without at least one total meltdown over Scandinavian design. Especially not if your family was Finnish, and you had national pride at stake.

They tussled briefly over the bill, which Olly won. Colorado had called him up four years ago and he was on his second contract; he’d almost forgotten what it felt like to think about money. Until last season, anyway, when he’d been pretty sure he’d been headed for early retirement.

But now he had a fresh start. If he could just keep it the fuck together.

## Chapter Four

Benji invited some of the boys over once they had a TV and an Xbox. He was weirdly proud: he'd never owned a gaming system before. He could have bought one while he was in the D-League in Hershey, but it was more fun to let his billet sis, Darcy, kick his ass at Pro Hockey 21 in the living room, than to get one for his suite in the basement.

Darcy wasn't allowed in the basement, because she was a smoke show seventeen-year-old and hockey bros were dogs. Not that Benji would have laid a finger on her, even without the warning from Coach that the Deveraux were taking him on as a personal favor because they'd heard what an upstanding young man he was, and that if he fucked this up over pussy, he was DOA. (Not that he was allowed to put *Darcy* and *pussy* in the same sentence.) The ominous text from an unknown number that turned out to be Andre-in-the-NAHA, and the lecture from his billet dad, Marc, in the car on their way home for the first time, his dark-skinned face set in serious lines—those had really been unnecessary.

Billetcest was a big ol' nope to begin with; but more than anything else Benji hated disappointing the people who believed in him. Coach believed in him. The Deveraux believed in him. And they were the family he'd dreamed about when he was a skinny kid in a trailer park, from Alise's hug-ambushes to the fatherly lectures from Marc to the three floofy little dogs. Maybe his dream fam hadn't had Pomeranians, but close enough.

Olly was in the kitchen, fidgeting with the snacks like a total mom. He was no Krista—there was no white wine whatever with fruit chunks floating in it—but he had the same uptight will-everyone-like-me thing going on. He had put the tortilla chips, like, in a bowl.

“Buddy,” Benji said. “Stop fiddling.”

“Sorry.” He almost flinched. Olly was a twitchy little fucker.

Benji loved how hard they were working in camp. And he was playing well. Things were clicking with him and Emilio Dvorak, the Eagles' all-star D-man who he'd been replacing last January, so there was a chance he'd be Mils's other half on the Eagles' first defensive pairing. Wild.

Olly was the opposite: the deeper they got into the preseason schedule, the tighter he got wound. And he wasn't playing well. Not in an objective way;

he could skate circles around Hershey's first line. But he was not doing what the Eagles were going to need him to be doing.

Probably the first thing the Eagles needed him to do was to chill the fuck out and get out of his head. He was a beautiful skater, fast as hell to begin with and then adding enough technical ability to make scouts cream their pants. Benji had binge-watched his highlights from his first two years in Colorado a few nights ago. Olly could do the damn thing. He just wasn't.

"Get a beer and come here."

The door to the refrigerator clinked, followed by Olly appearing with a bottle of some craft brew bullshit and a Miller Lite for Benji. He sat on the farthest edge of the couch and stared at his beer.

"Why are you freaking out right now?"

Olly winced. "Is it that obvious?"

"Yeah, bud. It's obvious."

"I can't fuck this up."

Benji didn't think Olly was talking about their little get-together. He pivoted. "Lot of pressure."

He nodded. Took a swig of his fancy beer.

"Have you thought about seeing a, like, therapist? Not just the sports psych, but someone a little more comprehensive."

Olly dribbled beer down his chin. He did shit like that a lot when Benji talked. "See a what?"

"A therapist."

"I'm not crazy." Now he sounded pissed. And they had people coming over in five minutes. If this relationship was going to work, Benji had to improve his timing. Olly had more going on than just hockey and video games and wheeling on girls.

"I'm not saying you are. Sometimes it helps to talk to someone. That's all."

"Like you would see a fucking shrink." He sounded more disgusted than pissed, which was okay because Benji could get pissed off instead.

"I *did* see a fucking shrink and it was super fucking helpful, actually."

"You what?"

"Hello? Sports are about the mental as much as the physical. Buddy. Come on." They'd all had sessions with a sports psychologist at Quinnipiac, this badass lady who went to the Olympics for soccer. She'd looked him in the eye in their one-on-one and told him she thought he should talk to someone

in the counseling center. To, like, unpack his childhood. And get a lock on the anger issues, because Benji's career goals did not include becoming a busted-up enforcer with twelve concussions, no knuckles, and a pill problem.

So Benji had gone to see a therapist, the same way he stuck to the meal plan and never slacked off in the weight room. And fuck if that fluffy dude hadn't helped him a ton, and also turned him on to yoga and mindfulness apps. And given him, like, validation for blocking his mom's number and never speaking to her again, which Benji hadn't known he needed until a hippy-dippy man with soothing music and a bottomless tissue box had given it to him.

Meanwhile, Olly was staring down the neck of his beer bottle as if it was going to show him the answers to *why am I so fucked up* or *how do you put the puck in the net*. "I'm not crazy," he repeated after a while. "I got this."

"Sure, dude. But it doesn't mean you're crazy. It just means there's someone who can help with something you might not be the best at. Same reason we work with figure skating coaches sometimes."

"Maybe *you* do."

"Oh, fuck you. We can't all skate like, I don't know, a figure skater who started playing hockey." He'd teed it up on purpose, so Olly would summon up the little smirk he got around his blue eyes, when he successfully nailed a chirp. Seriously, though, Olly's edge drills were a thing of beauty. Maybe Benji could teach Olly how to be a human, and Olly could teach him how to skate like a Minnesotan.

"My mom was a figure skater. I can even jump."

"Jesus, all the fucking advantages."

"You're a lefty. Don't talk to me about natural advantages."

Benji rolled his eyes tolerantly. "Okay, bud. I've got one thing and you've got, like, everything else."

The door buzzed. Olly hunched down into his shoulders again. Shit. Benji heaved an internal sigh and went to welcome the flood of Hershey Howl players and dudes from Russia and Scandinavia to apartment 505.

It was a fun afternoon, fucking around playing *NAHA* on the Xbox. Benji lost basically every time, but Olly's Detroit Wheelers reigned victorious. And he seemed okay if he had the game to focus on.

Also, Benji needed to spend less time worrying about Olly, and more time thinking about his own shit.

\* \* \*

Olly lay in bed, not sleeping. That wasn't new. He couldn't remember when it had started—maybe after he'd gotten hurt in Denver. But it had gotten bad in Minnesota, like everything else in his life.

And like everything else, moving to DC hadn't fixed it.

*"Have you thought about seeing a, like, therapist?"*

He rolled over, shoving his face into the gap between his pillows. Benji had delivered that shot with his usual wide-eyed sincerity. Olly had taken it like a bullet, felt it lodge somewhere under his collarbone.

Benji hadn't meant to hurt him; Benji didn't have a malicious bone in his body. People loved him. His phone lit up 24/7, and he was on FaceTime with some former billet family member or coach at least once a day. He was the only one who could have pulled off the *Pro Hockey* get-together for all the boys hovering on the verge, right before the first roster cuts.

Half the team was in Charlotte tonight, for their second preseason game. Olly was trying not to read into it that he hadn't gone to either of them, shove down the insistent fear that he wouldn't see his name on the roster tomorrow. Benji had been at the first game, and more than held his own: he'd gotten a sick stop on Ryan Stewart. In a preseason game. Still: Ryan Stewart.

And Olly had seen him carry a yoga mat onto the balcony to do sun salutations and mindfulness.

*"I did see a fucking shrink and it was super fucking helpful, actually."*

But then Olly thought about...talking. About Minnesota. Himself. Expectations, pressure, the way there was an iron band tightening around his chest; how every day it was harder and harder to get a lungful of air. How his lungs seemed to lose more of their capacity, every goddamned time one of his shots dinged off the pipe. Every time someone knocked him off the puck because he was underweight, because he'd been fucking up all summer. Every time he saw a coach look at him, and write something on a clipboard, like *we're paying how much money for this?*

Olly couldn't fuck this up.

He couldn't.

He was fucking it up.

He staggered out of bed and barely made it into the bathroom before he threw up.

\* \* \*

Olly's group was skating in the second slot at practice the next morning, but when Benji asked if he wanted to carpool, he agreed to drive. If he stayed home, he was just going to get worse. He could still feel bile at the back of his throat.

He could have done something useful—extra reps in the weight room, stretch—but instead he pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head and went to lurk in the stands. It was a random weekday. Not many spectators, other than the local beat writers. Benji's group included Dewitt and Luke Chen, of fucking course: the big guns on offense.

Olly bounced his tennis ball off the concrete floor, catching it over and over while he watched the boys run drills. He felt about as nervous as he had before he played in the Western Conference Final, his second year in Colorado. Fucking hell, that had probably been the apex of his career.

He didn't see it getting any better from here, sitting alone in the stands watching other guys play better hockey than he could.

He bounced the tennis ball faster, until he lost control. It went rolling down the aisle and landed at the feet of Danny Olenyik. The damned head coach.

"Järvinen," Coach Olenyik said. "I was hoping to find you."

Not good.

"I came in with Bowie." Olly dug his fingernails into his palm, hung on to the discomfort.

Coach O folded himself down onto the bleacher next to him. They watched the guys whipping around cones. Benji lost an edge and skidded into the boards, his yelp cutting through the cold air of the rink, followed by a laugh.

"I don't understand how he skates as fast as he does," Coach O said.

"It's like someone strapped ice skates on a bison."

Coach O snickered, which wasn't something Olly ever thought he'd hear from a head coach. "Were you saving that for a special occasion?"

"It's the truth."

"Fair, fair." Coach O watched Luke Chen blaze through the cones, followed by Logan Beverly, one of the other top-six wingers. Two players of color on one NAHA team was unusual to begin with; add Olly's orientation, and they were...

The muscles in Olly's shoulders wound tighter. At least he wasn't getting screamed at, yet. Olly wasn't some dainty doll. He'd been yelled at by coaches or his dad or his brothers his entire life.

But Coach Barnard from Minnesota had really loved to let loose. One of

Olly's last memories of being a Wolf—after they'd all known he was on his way out, after they'd missed the playoffs and nothing mattered—was Coach Barnard right up in his face. Inches away. Screaming. Olly'd had to wipe the spit off his face. He could still feel it, the trapped way he'd let his eyes go unfocused and concentrated on trying to breathe.

He dug his nails into his palm again, harder; swallowed against the roil in his stomach.

“How do you think things are going?” Coach O asked, after Benji had successfully navigated the cones.

Olly thought about lying. But fuck, nothing he was doing was working. “Not great.”

Coach O nodded. “How's the living situation?”

“Benji's good. Everybody loves him.” Olly was so goddamned pathetic, his head coach was checking on his housing like a concerned fucking dad.

“I'm asking about you, though.”

“We get along.”

“No problems with...”

“That's not going to be a problem.” Olly cut him off. He couldn't talk about that here. Or anywhere. But especially here.

“Järvinen.” There was another pause, like Coach O didn't know what to say. Olly got it. There was no roadmap. “If you think you're the only gay player in the NAHA, you're delusional.”

Olly choked on spit. There it fucking was. “I know I'm not.”

Coach O snorted. “I guess you would.”

“Not like *that*. There isn't a group text.” Had his coach just chirped him for wheeling on dudes at work?

“I'm not doing a great job in this conversation,” Coach O told him. “This isn't a situation I've come across before.”

“Me neither.” Down on the ice, an intern rearranged the cones while the guys who'd been doing drills took a water break. Luke squirted Benji in the face.

“What I'm trying to say is...what they were trying to do to you in Minnesota? It wasn't right. You know this team needed somebody with a defensive mindset in the center. But when I heard the rest of it? My brother is gay. They shouldn't have been talking waivers to you, for doing the same damned thing all those boys do every weekend.”

Olly shook his head, back to staring at his knees. There was a loose thread

on his left pant leg. He tried not to jiggle his foot.

“I get it if you don’t want to talk about it.”

Good. Olly did not want to talk about it. Even though nobody was screaming at him, or trying to hit him, or throwing him out of the place where he lived into the street in Minneapolis at 2 am in February. Even though Coach O was trying to be a good guy.

“But clearly something went down. I know your agent and your lawyers and the league got that side of it dealt with, and so help me God if I see any ‘unnamed sources’ talking shit, I’ll have Sokolov knock their teeth in. But you need to handle your part of it. Because you’re not, right now.”

“*Have you thought about seeing a, like, therapist?*”

“I will.”

Coach O clapped him on the shoulder. Olly tried not to flinch. “I told Dewitt to keep an eye on you. Get you living with someone who wasn’t going to be an asshole, who could be a little bit of a support system. We have a place for you here. I know what you’re capable of, and I knew there was a chance you were going to need some time to get settled in. So I don’t want you to be worried about the roster cuts. But we need to see that you’re doing the work.”

“I’m trying as hard as I can.”

“Then maybe it’s not about trying hard. Maybe it’s about trying something different.”

“I don’t know what else to do,” Olly said, which was the truth: he only knew one way to be a hockey player.

“Oh, buddy.” Coach O gave his shoulder a shake. “Go talk to your trainer. See the sports shrink. And damn it, Järvinen, *relax*. Hockey is *fun*. Remember playing pond hockey on whatever frozen body of water your pack of neighborhood idiots could find.

“And if you can’t, well.”

There it was. The stick behind the carrot. Olly pushed down hard on his knee; it had started bouncing when Coach O told him to relax.

“Benji does yoga,” Olly blurted out, because it was start talking or throw up. “I could try that.”

“Yoga. Okay. That’s a start.”

“How many people know?” Olly asked his knees, when it seemed like Coach O was about to stand back up.

“Here? The GM, our chief counsel, the head of the PR department, and me,



and I don't see that changing. I couldn't say in the NAHA central offices. But they don't want this on SportsNet any more than you do."

"I wouldn't have actually done it," Olly said, which he'd never told anyone before. "I would have retired, not put the league through the lawsuit." When he'd gotten off the phone with his agent from the back of a Lyft, that night in Minneapolis, a lawyer had called him ten minutes later. He'd been in her office first thing in the morning. She'd looked him in the eye and told him she was going to crush the Wolves like cockroaches.

She had. He still didn't know how she'd kept Crowder from running his mouth, but her threat to sue the Wolves and the entire North American Hockey Association, when the GM told Olly that he was looking at waivers, had been crystal-clear. She'd been assisted by Coach Barnard's well-documented practice of screaming that every underperforming player, Olly very much included, was a "*pathetic little queer*." Not a good look for a league trying to show how modern and inclusive it was.

"But that shouldn't be a choice any athlete has to make," Coach O told him. "Järvinen. I don't want you to take the wrong thing away from this conversation: we need to see changes from you. You know that. I know that. But I want you to know that this organization is going to have your back with the media, and with anybody who tries to push you around because of something they maybe heard a rumor about."

Olly nodded. He pressed back down on his knee. Coach O handed him his tennis ball, and Olly squeezed it as hard as he could. Down on the ice, men were wheeling and scattering across the surface of the rink, shouts drifting up through the refrigerated air.

## Chapter Five

Benji would never tell anyone this, but one of the trippiest moments of his career had been getting a stop on the Philadelphia Pride's captain. He'd grown up a Pride fan: the first game he'd ever gone to had been the Winter Classic, Philly versus Pittsburgh, with the best of his mom's exes. Benji had told Earl that he was going to play in the NAHA, and he was pretty sure Earl had paid his fees with the Junior Howlers for a few years—he'd been a long-haul trucker, so he'd had plenty of money. He'd definitely bought Benji his first set of secondhand gear.

Hosting the Pride had been their last preseason game, and the Eagles won it convincingly. Olly even summoned up an assist from somewhere, a quick stop and cut around two Philly D-men before he'd lasered a pass over to Lukesy. That had made Benji almost as happy as the win, to see his roommate look like a real boy in the post-goal dogpile, with a big smile and a flush along the tops of his cheeks.

They went out to a rooftop bar in Clarendon after the game, even Olly. Their first game of the regular season wasn't until Tuesday, so they had a little time to unwind.

Lukesy arrived from his bar run, two beers in hand. He hit Benji with a friendly hip-check and offered Olly a fist bump. "Thanks for the assist, dude."

Olly managed a smile. "Anytime."

"To many more." Benji raised his beer and clattered it off Lukesy's and Olly's bottles. Olly had been sipping on the same one all night: it had to be down to dreams of beer and backwash, but he'd declined when Lukesy asked if he wanted another. Right, he'd said that he was laying off the alcohol. He had a beer occasionally, some snobby craft something that tasted like ass, but always stopped at one.

Lukesy ambled off a few minutes later. Benji leaned on the railing, looking out over the city: darkness was falling and lights were going on, and he felt happy, buzzed. Jesus Christ, he was about to open his first NAHA season.

He turned to Olly, who was dangling his beer bottle out into the air. Olly stuck close whenever they were at team things. Benji didn't mind. He was like a nervous little puppy, one of the shivery ones on the commercials with

the sad music. Impulsively, Benji reached out and yanked Olly into his side. He tensed, and then relaxed.

“I was actually gonna ask you something,” Olly said.

“Yeah?”

“I talked to Coach, and he says I need to try some different stuff with training. Get out of my head.”

Benji squeezed, because he didn’t want to verbally agree with that. But he totally agreed.

“I was thinking...yoga. I know you do that.”

“Yeah, bro. Yoga’s great.”

Olly looked up at him and wrinkled his nose. He had a few freckles scattered along the tops of his cheekbones. Dark red hair and blue eyes to go with them. “You are the least likely person to do yoga. In the history of the world.”

“Come on, bud. At least I don’t do those ballet barre classes, with the pliés and shit.” He would, though, if they made him better at hockey. As he’d been told many times over the course of his life, by many, many people, Benji had zero shame.

“Do you just...start doing it?”

“Yeah, but I’ve been practicing for a few years. When I started, I went to classes, so the teachers could fix my form and shit.”

“Oh.” Olly was tensing up again. It was like Benji had a link to how stressed out he was, right through the underside of his arm. Olly didn’t try to pull away, though.

“I got this, bro. I’ll find us a class.”

“Us?”

“Buddy. I’m not dropping you into the shark-infested yogic waters on your own.”

“Shark...infested.”

“Some of those yoga people are way intense. Like, Dewitt-on-the-way-to-the-net intense.”

“Great.” He deflated.

“But, like, you have to bring the joy and the peacefulness to your own practice.” There was probably something profound in there, but it was slipping away from him. He squeezed Olly’s shoulder tighter instead. “I told ya, buddy. I got you.”

A while later, chilling on the rooftop had transitioned to partying in the bar

downstairs. Olly left with the first wave of married guys, and Benji kept forgetting that he didn't have to keep an eye on him. Jesus, not that he needed to keep an eye on Olly, anyway. Benji was the rookie and Olly was a grown-ass man. He was three whole years older.

But still. Sad shivery puppy eyes.

"Where's your wife?" Benoit Poirier, a rookie goaltender who had arrived via trade from Montreal, yelled over the music.

"What?"

He leaned in. "Long hair. Pretty blue eyes. Stays within five feet of you at all times."

"I dunno, your mom's the only one who's been giving me a look recently."

Poiro whacked him. They were about the same height, but Poiro was a lot leaner out of his goalie get-up. "Women in DC make me sad," he said, gesturing at the rest of the bar. "It's a wasteland."

"It's a Sunday."

"Still."

Benji shrugged. He'd been focused on getting himself and Olly settled, and playing hockey, and also dealing with Krista, so picking up hadn't registered yet. The girls in the bar looked fine as hell to him, but then he was from central Pennsylvania, not sexy-ass Montreal.

"Seriously, Bowie. I am depressed."

"What about..." Benji did a scan. "Her. The blonde over by the end of the bar."

Poiro sniffed. Actually sniffed, like some disdainful French wine critic. "Maybe for *you*."

"Well, then. Have a nice night by yourself." Benji grinned, and sailed toward the bar.

The blonde turned out to be super fun. She was in town for a conference, so she took him back to her hotel room. And whatever the fuck Poiro thought, she had a sick body, she made him laugh, and she gave incredible head. So Benji was putting that in the win column.

\* \* \*

"How was your night?" Poiro asked him in the locker room the next morning. Olly was on his other side, doing his complicated little skate-lacing ritual. Of course Olly had a skate-lacing ritual, to go with his putting-on-his-pads ritual,

to go with his taping-his-stick ritual, to go with... Benji didn't want to know. He'd find out when he fucked something up at the apartment and doomed them to missing the playoffs.

"Best blow job of the year," Benji answered cheerfully. He hadn't even had to stay late: she had an early meeting, so they'd waved good-night after exchanging orgasms. It was his perfect relationship. "Man, if your standards exclude girls who are that good in bed, I'm glad mine are different."

Poiro made an agonized noise. "Now *you* depress me."

"It's mutual, buddy." He knocked into Poiro's shoulder. "And keep your shit out of my stall." Fucking goalies, leaving their crap everywhere. Olly's stall was immaculate, even if he couldn't put away a dish to save his life.

Poiro responded with something French that sounded rude, but then all French sounded like baguettes and insults to Benji: it wasn't like he'd ever been exposed to French literature or shit. He only ever heard pissed-off Canadians cussing up a storm.

Olly, the fucking traitor, choked on a laugh.

"You too?" he asked in disbelief. "Roomie. Back me up here."

Olly said something in French to Poiro, whose eyes lit up immediately. He was the only Frenchie bastard on the team; Lukesy was from Ottawa but only spoke English (well, and Chinese), which was a profound disappointment to Benoit fucking Poirier, the prince of French-Canadian culture.

Their little cultural exchange was interrupted by the goalie coach yelling for Poiro to get his *putain de cul* on the ice. Benji did know what that one meant.

"You're such a traitor," he told Olly, once Poiro had cleared out.

Olly grinned. "I thought taking French would be more useful for my career than Spanish."

"You should have learned Russian," Sokolov said from Olly's other side. "Real language."

"*Nyet*, buddy," Benji told him. "We're in America."

"Lucky you're a baby D-man. If on forward line I'd squash you like a bug."

"Or a shrimp," Olly piped up. Apparently he was feeling good today. If all Benji was going to get out of it was chirps and betrayal, he could go right back to being an abused puppy.

"Fuck you both," Benji said. "Yelich! My man. Come save me from these assholes."

Yelich, the last of the rookies to make it through the final roster cuts, tromped over. "I'm not taking on Soko for ya, bud. But I can handle Jarvs." He had such a goddamned Canadian accent.

From Olly: "I'm on your line. You can't fight me."

"Fuckin' me against the world," Benji told the locker room at large. He grabbed Olly around the neck and went in for a noogie. Olly spluttered and attacked back. If Benji hadn't already been wearing pads, Olly would have gotten him a good one in the kidney. "Ow!"

"Don't try this with me, I have three older brothers."

"Uh-oh, Mom and Dad are fighting," Yelich told Sokolov, who rolled his eyes.

"Young love. Is the hardest."

Olly went rigid, quickly enough that Benji almost dropped him. "You okay down there, bro?"

"Fine," Olly bit out, and just like that, he was so tense he was vibrating. Yoga. Yeah. Benji should get on that.

## Chapter Six

Morning skate had gone right to hell, after Benji's little attack-hug and Sokolov's chirp. Olly had been feeling good, coming off the preseason against Philly. Seeing his name on the final roster. But this morning had been terrible. He could feel himself thinking too much about his passing and his angles, and fucking them all up.

He threw up in a trash can in the tunnel. A trainer brought him water and asked if he'd gotten a flu shot yet. Olly didn't snap at her.

He hid in the back of the video room, pretending not to see Benji waving to a spot next to him, their little moment from the morning forgotten. Olly wished he could forget it that easily. He knew, he fucking *knew*, that Yelich and Sokolov hadn't meant shit. That it wouldn't even occur to them to mean it. And if it had, they wouldn't have been giving him a well-meaning, brotherly chirp about young love.

See exhibit A, Eamon Crowder of the Minnesota Wolves. Olly had never had any interest in letting his sexuality intersect with the NAHA. Crowder's reaction had only confirmed that he was making the right decision.

Olly ducked into the hood of his sweatshirt, and forced himself to focus on nothing but the video and the coaching staff until his heartbeat slowed back down.

\* \* \*

When they got home, Benji announced that he was making lunch before Olly could escape. Reluctantly, he dropped onto one of the bar stools. The apartment was still mostly empty: nothing on the walls and not a single piece of extra furniture. Benji had the kitchen set up, though, as far as Olly could tell. He was currently assembling two quinoa and salmon bowls from the groceries Olly had ordered a couple of days ago, consulting his phone from time to time. Olly shouldn't think the word *cute* about a teammate, but yeah, okay, Benji was cute in the kitchen. He knew how to make three types of protein—salmon, steak, and chicken—and rotated them with the assistance of a whiteboard he'd stuck to the fridge. Not that Olly could judge; he could make a sandwich, put shit in the microwave, and operate a phone.

“Let me know if the greens are too much,” Benji said, like he was worried Olly wouldn’t appreciate his homemade lunch.

“I like spinach.”

“Dressing okay?” He’d made it himself, using God only knew what. Olly had not known that people made salad dressing from scratch, until he’d seen Benji measuring things into a bottle, with his billet mom, Alise, on speakerphone.

“Stop fishing for compliments, dude. It’s good.”

Benji flashed him a big smile, one of the ones that made his eyes go all crinkly. “Glad you like it. I never got food like this growing up.”

“I don’t think my mom has ever heard the word *quinoa*.” Olly had been raised on meat and Midwestern starches.

“Mine either.” Benji looked down at his wild-caught Alaskan salmon. “It was kind of a miracle if there was a fruit or veggie in our house. I don’t know how I didn’t get scurvy.”

“Didn’t stunt your growth any.”

“You know I didn’t start growing until I was, like, fifteen, right? And then I had to practically relearn how to skate because my center of gravity was all fucked.”

“Your skating is still pretty fucked,” Olly pointed out, smiling. It felt good to be able to joke around a little, to exchange normal teammate chirps.

“Shut up, Toe Loop.”

Olly should never have admitted to the figure skating thing.

“Don’t start pouting on me again,” Benji ordered him. “I just got you to smile.”

Olly winced. “Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.”

“Don’t you mind?” It was out before he could stop himself. Apparently, it was his week for heart-to-hearts.

“Mind what?”

“Getting stuck with me,” Olly answered. “I know you’d probably rather be living with Pairo or Luke or somebody.”

“Buddy.” Benji leaned back in his stool, balancing it on its back legs. “I would love it if you would put your fucking dishes in the dishwasher, but other than that we’re cool.”

“You can’t mean that. I know I’m not—fun. Right now.” Christ, he’d used to be fun, hadn’t he? He could remember it. Or maybe he wasn’t



remembering things right. His brothers had always been yelling at him to leave them alone, but he'd thought it was in good fun—they'd never stopped him from following them around. And he'd had friends at school, friends from hockey. He'd gotten into all kinds of shit.

"I don't need more fun," Benji told him. "I'm not the best at reining it in; I can get pretty crazy. I don't want to get distracted. And Pairo and Luke are pretty fucking distracting."

"They're good, though."

"Of course they're good. We're all good. Or we wouldn't be here."

*Not me*, Olly thought. Whatever Coach O had said, the NAHA had needed someplace to stick him to get the Wolves out of the legal crosshairs, and avoid a very messy lawsuit. And he was playing like shit. That assist had been a lucky bounce.

"Oh my god." Benji flicked him on the cheek. Olly jumped. "I can see you stressing out over there, dude. Stop."

"I can't," Olly answered, which was maybe the most honest thing he'd said today.

"Good thing I have a surprise. We're going to yoga, bud."

\* \* \*

After lunch and a nap—well, a nap for Benji; Olly had stared at the insides of his eyelids for an hour—Benji packed them into his truck and headed across the Key Bridge into Georgetown.

Their destination was an airy space with Yoga Georgetown on the door. Its front desk was manned by a blonde in leggings and a sports bra, who looked at Benji like she wanted to eat him. He was apparently oblivious as the two of them signed release forms.

"Don't you want to, uh," Olly said, flicking his eyes toward the girl. He hadn't missed the sidebar on Benji's late-night activities, and he wasn't the best judge of female beauty, but he thought even Pairo would have to admit she was a knockout.

"Nah." Benji signed his release form with a flourish. "I'm good."

They were the first ones there for class. The instructor, a serene-looking woman with iron-gray locs, got Olly set up with a mat in the back. She asked him a bunch of questions about his goals for his practice, which Olly stumbled through until she finally gave him a peaceful nod, told him to take

the class as it came, and to focus on aligning his breathing with his movements.

Meanwhile, Benji was sitting with his legs crossed, hands on his knees, straight-up meditating or something. Olly didn't know that he'd ever seen Benji so still before, the kind of stillness that it would take practice to achieve. It gave Olly an uncomfortable moment to stare at him, from the full curve of his mouth to the breadth of his shoulders.

Shit. Wrong thing to be looking at. Olly had been viewing his teammates as pieces of furniture since he was thirteen years old. It was not the time to break that streak.

During his little moment, the class had filled up.

Olly blinked.

Blinked again.

"Bud," he whispered.

Benji opened his greenish eyes. "Yeah?"

"Why is this class full of old people?" They were the only people under sixty.

"Oh, it's a yin class," Benji said, as if that was the most totally fucking obvious thing in the world. "It's very, like, gentle and restorative. For healing your energy flow and stuff."

"Energy flow," Olly said carefully. He'd never thought about *healing his energy flow*—what did that even mean—once in his goddamned life.

"Dude. The season's about to start. I wouldn't take you to something intense like Ashtanga right now."

"Oh, obviously. You'd take me to yoga for old people."

Benji grinned at him, big and open. "If the shoe fits, buddy."

\* \* \*

Olly would not say his first-ever yoga class was physically difficult; he wouldn't say he enjoyed it, either. The teacher led them through a sequence of poses that felt pretty good in his hips, and found places in his shoulders that he hadn't realized needed to be stretched. But it was just moving his body from one weird pose to another for an hour. If Olly's energy flow was being healed, he couldn't tell.

He was pretty pissed off by the end of it. Like, this was his life: doing yoga with old people because his head was apparently this fucked up.

And it wasn't even *helping*.

They did a final relaxation thing, where they lay on their backs with soothing music playing, and Olly could feel tears squeezing themselves up under his eyelashes.

He wanted to fix himself, but he didn't know how.

## Chapter Seven

Olly was already in the kitchen when Benji came out the next morning, staring at the coffeepot while it dripped. Olly had acted weird as fuck after the yoga class. Like, extra weird. He'd gone straight to his room and kept the door shut the rest of the night. Benji had resisted the urge to leave him a plate of chicken and veggies in the microwave, like a fucking '50s housewife.

"Morning, buddy."

Olly jumped a little bit, which Benji was getting used to. It was like he got so stuck in his head that he forgot about the rest of the world.

"Want some oatmeal?"

"Um, sure. Coffee should be ready soon."

"Thanks." He didn't like coffee that much but Olly had decided it was his contribution to mornings in the 505, so Benji was trying to develop an appreciation.

Olly looked bad, though. Worse than Benji could explain by a lack of caffeine. The circles around his eyes were darker, and his skin bordered on clammy. Even his perfect hair was fucked up, like he'd been laying on it weird, or hadn't used all his products, or whatever it was that he normally did. Benji had no idea what went into maintaining normal hair, much less Olly's level of flow.

"Are you okay?" he asked cautiously. They had their first regular-season game tomorrow, against Boston.

Olly's fingers went white on the edge of the granite countertop. "Yup."

"Sorry if yoga with old people got you down." Something had gone sideways around then, anyway.

Olly closed his eyes. "It's not your fault."

"Well, yeah. I know." Benji busied himself with the oatmeal. Alise said Tom Brady was staying off dairy, so he'd told Olly to switch the grocery order to almond milk. Apparently he was also supposed to give up tomatoes, red meat, and whatever the fuck the "nightshade family" was, but that wasn't going to happen unless he needed to do something drastic.

"I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing," Benji ordered the stove. "We had this conversation yesterday."

“Okay,” Olly snapped, “and what exactly do you want me to do instead, then?”

Benji put down his spoon, took two steps toward the coffeepot, and wrapped Olly up in the tightest hug he could manage, before he had time to think about how Olly would react. Olly didn’t tense up or try to pull away this time, though.

“Hey,” Benji said into his hair. This was not the best day to be talking into Olly’s head; his roots were pretty fucking greasy up close. “I only got here because people gave a shit about me, okay? And because I was somehow smart enough to take the fucking help they were trying to give me, even though I was the most clueless little dumbass fuckup you can imagine. I hate to see one of my buddies having a hard time.”

“You don’t know me.” Olly was all muffled, talking into his shoulder.

“I don’t have to know you. You’re on my team.” He paused. “But, like, I *do* know you, okay? You’re a *Pro Hockey* wizard and you’re funny and you speak French and shit like some kind of genius, and bad shit obviously happened along the line but it doesn’t have to be like that now. I believe in you, buddy.”

Olly’s shoulders were shaking. “I don’t think it’s ever going to get better, though. I’m just all fucked up.”

Benji squeezed him tighter. “Maybe it won’t get better today, maybe not tomorrow. But it will.” He paused. “I really think you should talk to someone. Like, what could it possibly hurt? If things are already this bad.”

“I can’t talk about it.”

“Doctors have to keep things privileged. I was worried about that, when I saw my counselor in college, but he couldn’t tell anyone what I said unless I was going to hurt myself. No one would find out.”

“I need to get tougher. I can’t keep acting like this.” He tensed up, as if he was going to go run or watch video or start bouncing his stressed-out tennis ball. Benji tightened his arms.

“It’s not about being tough.”

“The team would hate me. *You’d* hate me,” Olly continued, like he hadn’t even heard him.

“Buddy.” He gave Olly’s torso a shake. “Did you murder a puppy? Did you hit my sister? No? Then I don’t hate you.”

“You don’t even know.” Olly pulled away, for real this time, and Benji let him go.

What the fuck had gone down in Minnesota? He'd watched some interviews on his little stalker-binge, and Olly-in-Denver had seemed okay enough, even with the injuries his third year. Olly-in-Minneapolis had started looking like Olly-in-their-kitchen toward the end of December. Benji sincerely hoped that he was a better roommate than Crowder had been. Or he was going to have to take a long, hard look at his life.

They managed breakfast, survived a short run down the trail and morning skate. Olly was silent outside of whatever he had to call at the guys he was skating with. Coach O had Olly lined up with Yelich and Persy. He kept over-skating them. Yelich looked ready to cry; who the fuck knew what Persy was thinking behind his Swedish Viking beard.

"Bowie!" Mils barked at him. "Focus on your own fucking squad. You can stare into Olly's eyes later."

"They're so pretty, though," he parried.

Lukesy made a gagging noise. "Dewey didn't know what he was setting loose on us."

"True bromance, man," Benji told him. "Get some."

And then he knocked Lukesy off the puck and sent it sailing into the goal.

Which was fucking nuts. Lukesy had gone fifth in the draft. Mils was an All-Star and had an Olympic medal, and it was still looking like they were going to be paired up.

Pinch him.

\* \* \*

Benji's high from practice got punctured as soon as he checked his texts in the car. He couldn't hold in a sigh.

"What?" Olly was staring at the red taillights in front of them. He had his 1980s metal on again.

"My agent is totally up my ass about getting on this social media shit."

"It's not that hard."

"I'm not good at spelling and stuff, though," Benji admitted. If Olly could be vulnerable and shit around him, he could admit the things he sucked at, too.

"I could help you, if you want. It's pretty important."

"Oh my god, not you, too. Krista's always bothering me about it." Benji tapped the car's touch screen to skip Mötley Crüe. There were limits to even

his tolerance. Whitesnake's "Here I Go Again" started. Could be worse. "Plus, my agent wants me to get, like, a makeover. But leave my fucked-up teeth."

"You could probably get a haircut."

"You're a fucking traitor. We can't all have your—" He flapped a hand at Olly's loose waves, which somehow looked amazing again after a quick scrub with the soap in the locker room. He'd started leaving it down in the last couple of days; it was long enough to brush his shoulders. "Gifts."

"Okay, whatever. Your life. Your bank account."

"Are you getting chippy with me over my hair?"

"It's..." Olly paused, and winced. "*Really bad*. And not like funny hockey-player-mullet bad. Just bad."

"Fuck you, dude."

"I mean, you can't have it all together. Or the rest of us would feel terrible about ourselves."

"Bud, I don't know how I fooled you into thinking I have it all together." Benji was only where he was because he had worked so hard for so long to compensate for his weak spots: cooking, edge work, self-regulation, every basic life skill he should have learned at home.

The traffic finally let them crawl up to the turn for their garage. Olly parked next to the truck, then shot Benji a glance out of his blue eyes. In the dim light, they looked even darker than usual. "We can work on self-improvement together, then. But I don't see you fucking stuff up like I do. Except with your hair."

Benji held out a pinky. "Promise me one thing, okay?"

Olly pursed one side of his mouth. "What?"

"Don't shut yourself up in your room. Even if you won't see a counselor or whatever—which is totally your choice—I want you to talk to me." He thought about it. "And also stop apologizing for being a human who has feelings."

"That was three things."

"I don't give a shit." Benji paused again. Added, "You also need to help me get better at *Pro Hockey*."

"If you're getting four things," Olly said, very seriously, "I need you to give me one more."

"Anything, buddy."

"Let me fix your fucking hair."

When they got back up to the 505, Olly did some Krista-level Yelp triangulation and name-dropping that resulted in the first appointment Benji ever had at a barbershop that didn't take walk-ins. He had to admit, his hair did not look like a giant puff-cloud when it was done, and she'd rubbed something through it that de-frizzed it, but involved zero weird tools.

New season new Benji, or something.

\* \* \*

Olly looked goddamned good in a suit, even in the airport at six in the morning for their first road game of the season. He was all lean and crisp-looking, in some gray windowpane number that made him look taller than usual. Benji knew nothing about fashion, but Olly was like one of those catwalk dudes with the cheekbones and the lips going everywhere. It was really amazing how well his suit fit him.

Poiro did not share the same opinion of Benji's suit.

"*Oliver*," he rasped over his cup of airport coffee, "how could you let your husband out in *that*."

Olly flinched. He did that a lot when he got chirped about their bromance, Benji was realizing. Hopefully he didn't have a problem with gay people or some bullshit, although Benji couldn't really square that with his buddy's general character.

"This from a man wearing velvet loafers," Olly rallied.

"Fix this," Poiro ordered. "Mary, mother of god. The hair was just the beginning."

"You fix it, since you care so much."

Benji tried, "I don't think I'd look good in velvet loafers, buddy."

They ignored him and continued squabbling as they boarded the chartered fucking jet—what was his life. Poiro eventually lapsed into aggravated French, and Olly responded in kind.

Benji collapsed into an open seat next to Lukesy. He was wearing a normal blue suit: no velvet, no print, not even one of those little fabric thingies in his pocket. "Bud, is my suit really that bad?"

"Yeah, bro. Sorry." Lukesy shrugged. "I mean, I don't give a shit. I've got better things to do than stare at your ass like your two girlfriends."

"My ass is pretty great, though."

"Not in that suit, it's not."



“Rookies! Shut the fuck up,” Sokolov yelled. “Too much energy for this early in the morning.” He sat, then heaved himself back up again. “Bowie, get a better suit. Disgrace to our blue line.”

Lukesy gave him a soft pat on the shoulder. Benji decided it was time to retreat into his headphones and take a goddamned nap.

\* \* \*

“Don’t ever let me go out with Pairo again,” Benji moaned the morning after the game. They’d shut the Demons out, which was a hell of a way to kick off their road trip. Olly had done okay, too. He’d dropped Yelich a few times, but managed to find Persy’s tape with a few sweet passes. And there was this moment where he deked the shit out of one of the D-men, and Benji had been able to see the smile on his face all the way from the bench. The result had been enough to put Pairo in a celebratory mood, which turned out to be a dangerous combination in proximity to New York City.

“Weak” was Soko’s verdict. He had no goddamned pity. “Don’t know how you got so drunk and still kept curfew.”

Olly had seen the way the night was going to go at the team dinner, stolen his phone, and plugged in a series of increasingly capitalized alarms (“drink some water now,” “forty-minute warning,” “call a lyft NOW,” “YOU ARE SO FUCKING LATE”).

Benji didn’t think that was going to make anyone believe they were less married. But it had worked, so.

Olly and Pairo showed up late, Olly exasperated and Pairo on the verge of death.

“That fucker,” Olly said, dropping into a chair next to him.

“Fun night?”

“He wanted to talk about his girl from juniors. Oh, *Delphine*,” he gasped, really Frenching up the pronunciation. “Is so sad, finally go to New York, zere are models everywhere, still cannot find a girl more beautiful than *ma petite Delphine*.”

“Neither of you are fit to say her name,” Pairo informed them. He was leaning on Yelich and looking pathetic. Olly must not have put the “drink water now” reminders on his road-roomie’s phone. And Benji had never flown hungover before but he bet it sucked balls. Sure enough, Pairo staggered to the bathroom twice in the hour-and-twenty-minute flight. The

coaching staff did not look impressed.

Benji just fell asleep on Olly's shoulder. Lukesy showed him a picture while they were deplaning, and said he'd have to pull up his lame fucking Instagram to see the caption. Olly blushed, looked awkward, and shoved him off the plane.

## Chapter Eight

They didn't have practice when they got back from New Jersey, which was a gift—Poiro had been a lot to deal with. Olly wouldn't have been sleeping, anyway, but there was a difference between quietly listening to a podcast and having a six-five goalie cry it out about his long-lost love.

And then there was the whole falling asleep on Benji thing, on top of the getting hugged by Benji thing. Benji was oblivious, which Olly knew—he fucking *knew*—was the right way to handle it. Bromance in the 505, aren't they cute, Olly is totally his wifey, laugh it off.

But Olly wasn't oblivious.

Olly couldn't be oblivious.

The picture on Luke's Instagram story was set to be visible to his close friends only, and was going to vanish in twenty-four hours unless someone screenshotted it; and also, it was really fucking cute. Olly could see that, objectively. Benji was hunched over his shoulder, still wearing that godawful suit (did he only own one?); Olly's head was tipped over to rest on top of Benji's, and he looked conked the fuck out. Lukesy had captioned it “#onelove #bros #forever.”

It was the first time Olly had fallen asleep on a plane in years. And now he felt wired, either because he'd finally gotten an hour of uninterrupted sleep, or because he was freaking out. They were supposed to be staying off their feet, but Olly couldn't sit still. Meanwhile Benji was on the couch, watching *Pitbulls and Parolees* and chewing through a bag of turkey jerky. He was really serious about his caloric goals from the team nutritionist. But then Olly had never been trying to stay above 215 so he could splatter 170-pounders like bugs on a windshield.

He shoved Benji's feet out of the way and sat on the far edge of the couch. “We need more seating.”

“Sure do.” Benji put his feet right back in Olly's lap. Olly tried not to mind. Benji had no concept of a personal bubble; he would probably have asked Poiro for a foot massage. It was fine; it would be weirder for Olly to make a big deal about it.

On the TV, a happy family hugged a wriggly black dog. The mom was crying.

“Fuck, I want that dog,” Benji said. “Look at her little smooshy face.”

“I dunno, we always had huskies.”

Benji gave him a big-eyed, pathetic look. “Buddy. Why have you been holding out on me?”

“My parents don’t have one right now.” His parents had had to put Pebbles down over the summer, while he was hiding at the lake, not even able to drag himself to Duluth to say goodbye to his family dog. Levi and Joey still had dogs, though, keeping the Järvinen husky streak alive. Sami and Olly were the dog-free weirdos, in more ways than one: Sami with his PhD program and Olly with the I-prefer-dicks situation.

“Pics or it didn’t happen.”

Olly opened Sami’s Facebook on his phone and chucked it over. He’d put together an album of pictures they’d taken since his dad brought Pebbles home. There were a few of her curled around his nieces and nephews that made his chest hurt. Fuck it, there was nothing cuter than a dog and a baby all snuggled up together. Pebbles had been a champion snuggler.

“Bro,” Benji said a few minutes later. “*Bro.*”

“What?”

Benji held up his phone. Sami had added some pictures: there was a tiny Olly, bent over for a ball-hockey face-off with a dog play-bowing on the other side of the ball.

“How do I text myself a picture from Facebook?”

“You don’t?”

“Oh, buddy.” Benji shook his head. “I most definitely do.”

“Ugh, whatever.”

“Is it weird if I friend-request your brother?” He was flipping through more pictures. “I need this in my life.”

“If you have to pick one, pick Joey.” Joey was the most chilled-out of the brothers Järvinen. Levi and Sami would grill Benji mercilessly and tattle to their parents. Classic middle siblings.

“Oops, I accidentally liked this one.” He held the phone back up. It was a picture from when Olly and Sami had been headed to the championship tournament his sophomore year. They both had blond mullets that they’d bleached in the kitchen sink. Pebbles was sitting on the couch next to them, giving them canine side-eye. “Outstanding lettuce.”

“Everyone did it.”

“I missed out on so much in Pennsylvania. We just grew patchy beards like

a bunch of scrubs.” He handed Olly his phone back and poked his leg with one of his toes. “So are you close with your family? You don’t talk about them a lot or anything.”

Olly checked his text thread with Benji. He’d screenshotted the face-off and the mullet and sent them to himself. Hopefully poster-sized versions weren’t going to show up in Olly’s stall tomorrow. “They’re fine.”

“Bud, I think you say that when you don’t want to be honest.”

“Ouch.”

Benji shrugged. “I don’t know, you don’t have to tell me shit. But it’s not like I’m going to judge you. I haven’t talked to my mom in three years and my sister is married to goddamned Rob McMeade, so.”

“They’re just…” Olly paused. “Well. My dad is your stereotypical hockey dad. The family joke is that he decided they were done having kids when the youth coaches told him he had one who could make it to the NAHA.”

Olly had been happy to go back to Minnesota. He could have re-signed in Colorado when his contract had come up. But no—his dad had encouraged him to look at Minnesota, talked up the coaching staff. And he’d missed his family, wanted to spend more time with his nieces and nephews. It was home, damn it, even if Minneapolis was still two hours away from Duluth. He could go hug his mom, or take the boat out fishing with Joey or Levi. And he’d figured even *his* dad wasn’t going to be driving down to watch practices, or tell a NAHA coaching staff to give him more minutes.

Then his dad started talking about taking early retirement from the port to have more time to support his career. Olly had been able to handle his input from the distance of a plane ride, over the defined period of a summer break; but the idea that Dad would have nothing else to do with himself, other than provide Olly with *support*, had been too much. So the wheels had fallen off. Like every other fucking thing.

“I can see you thinking right now.” Benji poked him in the side again.

“He wouldn’t let me go to college,” Olly continued, finally. “I had a full ride to Michigan. But he was worried about my, I don’t know, focus. So I went pro after Colorado drafted me instead. Even though the level of play wasn’t as good. But there weren’t all the distractions.”

And he did not recommend a suburb of Salt Lake City as the place for any scared eighteen-year-old to grapple with their sexuality, much less one who was simultaneously starting a career as a professional athlete. Fortunately, he’d only stayed in the minor developmental league one season before he’d

gone to the major D-League in Colorado: long enough to lose his virginity to an equally closeted Mormon neighbor, anyway.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to go.” Benji paused. “It’s obvious that you’re smart, you know?”

He snorted.

“Shut up. Listen to me for a sec.”

Olly shoved Benji’s feet off his lap, stood up, and paced over to the kitchen for a glass of water. Benji twisted himself around on the couch. From over the counter, he was all shoulders and curls and big green eyes.

“What I’m trying to say... I think it’s great that you’re smart. That you probably could have done something other than get paid to fuck up your body, and pray you don’t end up with CTE and get dementia at, like, forty-five. I didn’t have another option. I don’t even know what would have happened to me if Andrew fucking Smith hadn’t broken his ankle after the NHTC combine, and I hadn’t gotten pulled off the alternates list. If your dad isn’t happy that he raised a kid who’s smart, who could have gone to a good school and become—fuck, a French translator, I don’t know—that’s pretty sad for him.”

Olly turned back around to fidget with the ice maker. His eyes were stinging. It sucked that his daddy issues weren’t even in the top three problems in his life. He could still hear the last words his father had said to him, when Olly had called to tell him he was going to the Eagles: *“I can’t believe I raised a son who’s running away the second it gets hard.”*

Olly had smashed his phone against the wall of his hotel room instead of howling back that his father had no idea how hard his life was, every single fucking day that he woke up and strapped on his skates and waited for the axe of his sexuality to fall on the back of his neck. He’d sent every call since then to voicemail.

Olly wasn’t the kind of person who smashed phones or ignored his dad’s calls. He also wasn’t the kind of person who got drunk enough to take a guy home to the apartment he shared with Eamon Crowder, or considered coming out to his dad in a screaming rage, so.

“Want to go to old-people yoga?” he asked the refrigerator, because he couldn’t sit still and the trainers would kill him if he went running on a recovery day.

“Sure, bud.”

\* \* \*

Olly cried—with actual tears, running down his face—in class. They were all in downward dog, after some twisty rotation sequence, and he just felt them...happen. Watched them drip down onto his loaner purple yoga mat and spatter on its goddamned lotus blossoms.

He was so fucking angry, and he was so fucking sad, and he was such a goddamned fucking *mess*. His body felt like his enemy. It wouldn't let him sleep; he could feel the impact it was having on his recovery, even this early in the season. He could barely go three days without puking. It wouldn't let him get out of his own way, whether it was fear of taking another hit that would land him on a surgical table, or fear that he'd hit his limit, that he'd maxed out, that he couldn't do this anymore, the one thing that he'd let become the entire point of his goddamned life. The thing he'd sacrificed for, the thing he'd fought for, the thing that kept him away from his mom and his brothers. The thing that meant he'd never had a real relationship in the entire twenty-four fucking years he'd been on the planet. Fucking hockey: it was all about playing through the pain.

But the yoga made him *be* in his body, the bag of nerves and bone and blood whose capabilities were the cornerstones of his entire fucking life. He couldn't shove it down, like he could on a run or out on the ice. He couldn't fight it.

He had to listen to the fucking teacher and *be fucking present in it*.

And it was crying. And he couldn't stop it.

\* \* \*

Yeah, so, Benji was worried about Olly. He hadn't shut himself up in his room after yoga, but he'd come as close as he could get while sticking to the letter of their pinky promise: he watched tape on his tablet with his headphones in, while Benji had tried to work on his *Pro Hockey* game. Olly hadn't even bothered to chirp him for losing to the Xbox, or reminded him to use all the complicated moves he'd shown him a few days ago.

And Benji hadn't said anything, but he had totally seen him crying during yoga. Benji wasn't going to judge; he'd had to dip into his therapist's tissue box more than once in college. So he had long since worked through any feelings he had about *boys don't cry* or whatever bullshit.

After practice, Coach O pulled him into his office. Benji tried not to feel

like he was twelve years old, sitting on the wrong side of his middle school principal's desk. "Bowie. I wanted to talk to you."

"About, uh, what?"

Coach O steepled his fingers in front of his face. He had reading glasses shoved onto the top of his head. He didn't look like he was about to send Benji back to Hershey. "How's your living situation going?"

"Olly and I get along okay."

"No issues?"

"Um. I mean, no." Benji paused. He didn't want to act like this was a whole Thing, but Olly definitely wouldn't want anyone else on the team to hear it. Mental health should be a normal thing, just like Olly's MCL surgery, but that wasn't how it worked. He went with "I think he's got some, uh, stuff going on."

"What kind of stuff?"

Benji chewed on his lip, looked down at his knuckles and back up at Coach O. His face was carefully smooth.

He was a good coach. Benji didn't think he'd hold it against Olly, that he was struggling. Coach O didn't treat his guys like they were robots, nothing more than live bodies to plug into his preferred system and rack up points. But still. Olly was a private person, who was obviously going through some shit even if he didn't want anyone else to know about it.

Benji swallowed. Coach O's eyes were steady, calm. Held no judgment.

"Like mental health stuff," he said, because in the final analysis ignoring it wasn't going to get Olly anywhere.

"What makes you say that?"

Fuck it. Benji laid it out: the jumpiness, the insomnia. He didn't mention the crying at yoga. That seemed a little too far.

Coach O took off his glasses and folded up the earpieces, before he set them precisely down on his desk. "That's it?"

"I mean, I think that's enough? Isn't it?"

"It's plenty," Coach O answered, sounding weirdly relieved. "Thanks for telling me." He paused again. "Are you okay, living situation-wise?"

Benji blinked across the desk at him. "Why wouldn't I be? Olly's my boy. I had my own shit to deal with, so I know it doesn't mean he's, like, weak or whatever."

"If you ever have any issues," he said, "I want you to come to me first. With anything."



“Sure, Coach.” Benji squinted. “I dunno what that would be about, though. Unless you have some way to get him to do his dishes.”

## Chapter Nine

Two days after Olly cried in fucking old-person yoga, they lost 4-2 to Vegas, one of those nights where nothing clicked. Olly couldn't have found Yelich's tape if he'd had a fucking GPS in his stick. Luke and Dewitt clawed back a goal each in the third period, but it was too little, too late.

The locker room and the parking deck were both quiet post-game. Benji was still wearing his terrible blue suit; Olly should have dragged him shopping, but he hadn't had the energy. Pairo caught them before Olly had hit the button to unlock his car.

"Present for Bowie," he yelled, tossing a suit bag at Benji. "I can't look at you in that piece of trash anymore."

"You didn't have to buy me a suit, bro," Benji said. "It's not that bad."

"It *is* that bad. And I didn't buy you a suit. That's one of mine, and if your giant ass rips it, you're getting it fixed."

"With, like, duct tape?"

Pairo clutched his chest. "You wound my soul."

"Buddy," Benji said, "have you ever wondered whether your life would be easier if you were seventy-five percent less dramatic about literally everything?"

Olly turned a laugh into a cough.

Pairo still speared him with a glare. "*Oliver*, get this asshole home before I take the suit back."

"Can't have that," Olly answered. "In you go, bud. We can burn the trash bag out on the balcony."

"Maybe not," Benji said, sliding into the passenger seat. "It's kinda plasticky. I don't think it would be great to breathe in the fumes."

\* \* \*

Olly was innocently pouring himself a travel mug of coffee the next morning when the door to Benji's room swung open. He inched out, holding Pairo's suit jacket and his suitcase in front of him. Olly had never seen him look so...nervous?

What the fuck. This was a rookie who'd gone toe-to-toe with some of the

NAHA's most legendary active players, and barely batted an eyelash. To say nothing of when Olly was freaking out all over him. Olly still didn't quite know what to make of that.

"Okay over there, buddy?" he asked, because it was the least he could do after Benji had spent so much time dealing with what a mess he was. That reminded him: he'd promised to help Benji with an Instagram post about the road trip.

Benji swallowed. "I don't know."

Again: what the fuck? "Are you sick?"

"No, it's not..." He trailed off. Stiffened his shoulders. "I don't know if I can wear these pants."

Olly had just taken a poorly timed sip of coffee when Benji stepped out from behind the jacket. He barely managed to avoid spitting it down his light blue shirt. "Oh my god."

It was pornographic. He didn't know how Benji had gotten Pairo's pants *on*, much less buttoned. Benji was a big boy in every sense of the word, and every single inch of him was on display.

Every. Single. Inch.

Benji tried for a leer, which mostly failed. "That's what all the puck bunnies say?"

"How did you get those zipped?"

"Determination? But now I don't know if I can get them off." He winced down at himself. "Is it really that bad?"

"Block and fucking tackle, bud." He swallowed a giggle. Didn't manage to keep the next one in.

"I should have just gone to the stupid store," Benji mumbled. "But I asked Pairo where to go and when I showed up at one place, it was so terrible I walked right out."

Olly wanted to give him a hug and promise to help, but he didn't think he could get within five feet of Benji without spontaneously combusting. There was treating your teammates like furniture, and there was living with Benji fucking Bryzinski of the broad shoulders and thick thighs and cheerful grin and giant fucking cock. Olly couldn't pretend it didn't exist right now. It was fucking—displayed. And Olly already knew how good it felt to be pressed up against Benji's chest.

"We're going to get through this," he said, to himself as much as to Benji. "Just...hold your jacket over your arm. I'm going to call someone and we're

going to fix this after the game.”

Benji’s face shifted immediately to panic. “Shit, I’m supposed to have dinner with Krista and fucking Robbo. I cannot be wearing this then. Can. Fucking. Not.”

“Do you want to change?”

In a total rookie move, Benji had left his trash-bag suit crumpled up in the middle of his floor. It was unsalvageable.

\* \* \*

The chirping was unspeakable. Even Coach O got in on the action, which was how Benji knew he had fucked up.

He deserved it, so he tried to be a good sport. Olly had called a fancy-ass store from the plane, and worked some “I’m a professional athlete and it would be a personal favor” witchcraft that would result in someone bringing suits to the hotel.

He’d had to let Pairo take his measurements standing in the aisle of the jet, with a pack of twenty-two assholes hollering encouragement. Benji thought of himself as an open-minded guy, but that was not an experience he ever wanted to repeat. Pairo had really gone for it—Benji hadn’t had another guy that close to his dick since the Frozen Four after-party at the Q, where things had gotten a little sloppy with one of the forwards and no less than three Tri Betas.

And there were cameras waiting for the bus as it pulled up to the stadium. He stuck his jacket in front of his dick and tried to stay as close to Soko’s back as possible.

“You disgrace,” Soko told him, hip-checking him out of the way. “Go give them a money shot. Maybe you’ll get new career in porn.”

The good news about Pantsgate was that it had distracted him from the upcoming game. Benji didn’t get nervous about games. He got hyped, or he anticipated, but he hadn’t been nervous since he’d played his first international tournament with the NHTC. If a kid from a trailer park at a glorified truck stop could fly to the freaking Czech Republic to play hockey for the US of A, anything else was icing.

But Benji was nervous about playing Robbo. He’d sent Benji a few texts to the tune of *hope ur ready to play w the big boys lol*. Benji wasn’t great at writing and stuff, but even he was better than that.

“McMeade is really your brother-in-law?” Yelich asked, as they were filtering down the hall to the dressing room. They’d have a quick skate, then go back to the hotel to nap and (hopefully) Benji would get non-obscene pants.

“Guilty.”

“I don’t want to insult your sister but she’s got pretty bad taste, eh?”

“I don’t disagree, my man.” He had to be the only player in the league who would throw his teammates in front of his sister. Literally anyone, even Pairo, would be better than Robbo. He was bad news. Dirty player, rumors about pills, and that was on top of cheating on Kris. Benji had no idea how his contract had gotten renewed. NAHA rosters did not have players like Robbo. Guys like Soko, sure, who didn’t mind dropping the gloves. But Soko could play hockey, even if he was never going to the All-Star game.

Fuck, even Benji himself, after one of the last stupid fights he’d ever gotten into. He could still remember his NHTC coach: *“you’re borderline at best, one wrong move and you’re out, there is no fucking place on this team for a fucking goon. I didn’t want you here in the first place so if you want to keep playing fucking hockey you had better work harder than you’ve ever worked in your fucking life.”* Then he’d kicked over a trash can.

Benji had been legitimately worried Coach was going to give himself an aneurysm—also he had nowhere to live if he got kicked out, since he wasn’t welcome back home and Krista was couch-surfing in Pittsburgh—so he’d gone back to his billet fam’s house and googled “how to stop getting angry” on the desktop computer in their living room. He’d been a work in progress for a while there, but it was under control: fighting was verboten in the NCAA, and he’d gotten through two years in Hershey doling out big hits and only dropped his gloves once or twice.

But Benji most certainly *could* fight. You could take the boy out of the trailer park and give him a six-figure salary, but the trailer park was a lot harder to take out of the boy.

“Are you okay?” Olly asked, when they were getting suited up for morning skate. Taking Pairo’s goddamned pants off had been a whole thing.

“Yeah, bud.” He paused. Might as well admit it; he might need someone to back him up on the ice later, and Soko was hovering on Olly’s other side.

“Just worried about fuckin’ Robbo.”

“Fucking goon. We’ve all got your back.”

Soko leaned over. “Even after we all see your dick, rookie.”

Benji made a face. “You’re my boys, but it’s, like, damned if I do, damned if I don’t. ’Cause of the sis. I know he’s gonna come after me. He’s hated me since day one and fuck if it isn’t mutual. But Krista’s gonna kill me if I fight him.”

“It’s hockey. Fights happen, the wives deal.” Soko shrugged.

Kris had been sending him parallel texts like *Benji you have got to be the bigger man here, you know it’s not his fault*. Because it was always someone else’s fucking fault, whether it was the Union coach or Benji or the new girl in his DMs. It had to be exhausting, coming up with that many excuses for a piece of fucking pond slime.

“If he doesn’t want to get his bell rung, he could try not stirring up shit,” Olly said. “I haven’t even played Pittsburgh that much and I still know he’s an asshole.”

“Have you ever been in a fight, Oliver?” Pairo snarked. “Or are you too scared to risk your pretty face?”

“I have three older brothers. If I couldn’t throw a punch, I wouldn’t have survived.”

They started fighting in French again. Benji didn’t know if Pairo picked all these little fights to distract Olly before he skated, or if he was genuinely just an argumentative piece of shit.

Soko reached over to grab Benji’s shoulder. “Will be okay. I don’t have to sit at Thanksgiving dinner with sister. Neither does Milsy or roommate. We take care of it.”

“Olly’s not going to fight Robbo.”

“Calm down, papa bear. He’s a NAHA player, too.” Soko narrowed his eyes at Pairo and Olly. Yelich had somehow gotten stuck between them going down the tunnel, and was looking nervous at the increasing pace of French insults. “Although face too pretty to break. We won’t let it come to that.”

Benji realized, with a flash of absolute clarity, if Robbo touched Olly in the game that night, Benji was *ending* him. And not one single person on the fucking ice was going to stop him.

\* \* \*

But first, he had to survive putting Pairo’s pants back on, keeping the national sports media from getting a clear shot of his dick walking to the bus

back to the hotel, and meeting whoever had the job of being a concierge shopper in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia.

That turned out to be a petite Black man named Loic. He was wearing makeup: fake eyelashes and the whole shebang, like Soko's extremely Russian wife.

And he was dragging a rack of garment bags behind him. Benji had never been so happy to see another human being in his entire life.

"Kay, darling," Loic said, sweeping into Olly and Piro's room. "Let's get this situation handled."

Piro looked like someone had butt-ended him in the back of the head. Olly was trying to hide behind his phone.

"I really need some help," Benji told him.

Loic flicked his eyes up and down Benji's body, widening briefly when they landed on his extremely visible *block and fucking tackle*. "This is going to be tough, because hockey players all have asses and such big thighs. But you're so fit, and your hips are so skinny, it really throws off the ratio. You're going to be a lot more difficult to deal with than the baseball players I work with."

"I can basically only wear sweatpants and basketball shorts."

"And that is a crime against humanity," Loic informed him. "We've got a time crunch, so I'm going to try to be respectful of your delicate sensibilities since you don't know me yet, but I need you to take off all of your clothes. Right now."

Piro made an *oof* noise, like he'd been about to say something and Olly had elbowed him in the diaphragm.

Loic narrowed his eyes at the peanut gallery, managing an expression shockingly like the Eagles' goalie coach. "Like I said, darling. Time crunch, especially since I am not *literally* a magical fairy godmother and we're going to need to find the time to alter *something*, because that *masterpiece* of an ass is not going to play nicely in standard sizes. Distractions will *not* be tolerated."

Benji dropped trou.

As quickly as he could when he was wearing pants cling-wrapped to his ballsack, anyway.

Fortunately, Loic's suit selections were a lot less flamboyant than what he was wearing himself. They were also less ridiculous than the shit Piro wore, so maybe Benji wasn't the only Eagle who should be considering a personal

stylist.

Loic stuck him in a basic gray number. Piro held up a hotel notepad with 3/10 scribbled on it; Olly used the other notepad to hit him. Loic *hmm*-ed and tweaked something with how the waist of the pants fit.

Piro gave an outraged squawk over God knew what while Loic skimmed Benji into a white shirt that felt like it was made of the cheeks of baby angels. Benji was retroactively embarrassed about the button-ups that he'd bought at Walmart in college. Okay, he'd kind of known his suit wasn't up to the standards of the other guys in the league, but he hadn't thought there could be that much of a difference in shirts.

"Are they always like this?" Loic asked Benji, as the squawking continued.

"Sometimes it's in French. Other than that, yeah."

"I can't tell if they're fighting or flirting."

"Me neither, dude." He was glad that he didn't bring out Olly's inner seven-year-old, though. He liked regular Olly.

"If they ever fuck," Loic said, slipping a navy blue jacket over his shoulders, "please call me. I would pay so much money to see that."

"Sure, bud. I do want your number, anyway, since I apparently don't even know how to buy a fucking shirt the right way."

"Anytime." Loic swung around to face him from the front. "Well, you'll do for today. Gentlemen!"

He gave an authoritative clap.

"Navy's boring," Piro whined immediately.

"It's classic," Olly countered. "You look great, dude."

"It's a first step," Loic agreed, reaching up to brush an invisible speck of dust off Benji's shoulder. "Go check yourself out, big man."

The full-length mirror was on the back of the bathroom door. Benji blinked at the rich fucker looking back at him. The suit looked good. He looked like a NAHA player, like someone who stepped off private jets to go, he didn't know, drink expensive scotch and fuck supermodels.

He also looked like a stranger, from his fancy haircut to the way the color of the suit made his eyes go all green. The room tilted; he couldn't help wondering how many months of rent on the trailer this perfect suit would have paid for. Also he didn't like either scotch or women whose hipbones poked him while he was fucking them.

"I guess it's fine?"

"It's better than fine." Olly appeared next to him in the mirror. He was still



wearing his suit pants and button-down, cinnamon-colored hair falling out of the knot he'd thrown it in at the rink. The reflection of his blue eyes met Benji's in the mirror. "It's okay to have nice things."

Benji shook his head. No way was he getting into emotional shit with Pairo and a personal shopper in the room.

"You look good. Pinky swear. Buy the fucking suit." He gave Benji a crooked smile, and held up his hand.

Suit approved, Loic disappeared to "*go full Project Runway on those pants*" in one of the hotel's business services rooms. Benji should go back to the room he was sharing with Soko to nap, but he'd ended up sprawled on Olly's bed in Pairo's sweatpants and T-shirt (which fit a lot better than the suit), and he was too comfortable to move. It already felt like the day had lasted forever, and they still had a game. He picked up his phone, shot off a quick text to Soko to let him know he was napping in Pairo and Olly's room.

Pairo had his headphones in and was watching something on his iPad, looking about a second away from dozing off. Olly was sitting at the desk, watching tape.

"Get over here," Benji told him. "Nap time."

"Maybe in a minute." He narrowed his eyes at his iPad.

"Pretty sure it's a contractual obligation, bud."

"Well, you're in my bed, so."

"Um, it's way more comfortable than my bed."

"It's the exact same bed."

"But I'm here, and it's all the way on the other side of the hotel."

"*Câllice!*" Pairo snapped, ripping out an earbud. "Shut the fuck up and get in the bed, Oliver. If you can nap on him on the plane, you can nap on him now. Some of us are trying to *sleep*."

Olly was actually blushing as he shut his laptop and padded over to his bed. Benji rolled over to the far side of the bed and made himself as small as possible. Which wasn't very small, but hey, he was trying. Not hard enough to get up, though.

The mattress dipped as Olly climbed in and got settled, and that was the last thing he remembered until an alarm went off an hour later. Then Loic was swanning in with the new suit, and the entire team was giving him sarcastic claps on the bus yelling shit like "*way to glo up, Bowie!*"; and it was time to play fucking Pittsburgh.

## Chapter Ten

Olly jiggled his knee on the bench, watching the Eagles and the Union fly by on the ice. The game had been even so far, with a handful of scoring chances on both sides.

Soko nudged his shoulder. “Stop worrying.”

“I always worry.”

“Okay. Worry about scoring goals.”

Olly sucked in a breath as the Union’s captain steamed toward their defensive zone. As calmly as if he’d been doing it for years, Benji got his stick on the puck and sent it back up the ice to Luke.

Yelich whistled. “He’s really fucking good.”

“Will be All-Star if improves offensive production,” Soko agreed. High praise, even if he had clearly adopted Benji as his personal rookie.

The Eagles defense had an answer for everything the Union could throw at them in the first period. Their offense, on the other hand, was struggling. Olly liked Luke’s hockey but he wasn’t a natural center: his defensive mindset needed work.

The first period ended scoreless; so did the second. Coach O pulled Luke aside in the locker room. They both looked tense, until finally Coach O shook Luke’s shoulder and rounded everyone up.

“We’re going to shake up a few things,” he announced.

The bottom dropped out of Olly’s stomach as Coach O rattled off the line changes. He was moving up to 2C with Luke on his right and Logan Beverly at left wing.

“Hey,” Benji hissed in his ear. “You got this, bud. I’ve seen your highlights from Colorado. Get out there and do your fucking thing.”

Olly tightened his fingers on his stick. Nodded. His vision was flickering at the edges of his visor, and he couldn’t suck in a full breath, but it was time to man the fuck up. His team needed him. He could fall apart later; the shift came first.

The Union coach had decided to change things on his side, too, except his new plan involved sending Robbo out to act like a human wrecking ball. Olly wasn’t prone to getting in the refs’ faces, but found himself getting dragged away from a linesman after a no-call on a blatant slew-foot against Bevvo.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up,” Luke was chanting in his ear. The good news was that Olly was angry enough that the anxiety had faded away.

But the shit with Bevvo wasn't the real problem. The Union forwards couldn't get around Benji, and Robbo was there to fuck him up.

An attack fizzled out in the Eagles' defensive zone. Robbo pulled off his gloves and tugged on Benji's sweater. Benji backed away, hands up; Robbo followed, smirk on his face and mouth moving. Olly couldn't hear over the rushing in his ears. He didn't know who hammered in between them first, him or Milsy. But Mils shoved Olly and Benji back; dropped his gloves; and hit Robbo like a freight train.

“Fuck,” Benji panted, trying to pull away from Olly's restraining arm. “Fucking shitfucking goddamn!”

Robbo was already down, dripping blood onto the ice from a cut under his eye.

“You're okay, bud.” Olly skated Benji backward. “We've got you.”

Mils glided toward the box, shaking out his right hand and aiming a *fuck you* toward the Union bench. The Eagles tapped their sticks.

“Shit,” Benji said. “I can't believe he actually did it.” He shook his head. “What the fuck, Ols? You can't fucking fight Robbo McMeade.”

“Can and would, buddy,” Olly told him, and headed toward the face-off dot in their defensive zone. He won it, too, Luke and Bevvo moving around him like they'd done it a hundred times. Olly fed the puck to Bevvo, who took it up the ice and snapped it back to Luke. He twisted free of a Union D-man and buried the puck top shelf.

They won 1-0. Olly felt something verging on happiness after a hockey game, for the first time in recent memory: he'd clicked with Luke and Bevvo, in a way he didn't with Yelich and Persy.

But of course, Luke and Bevvo were better hockey players than the guys on Olly's line. They were faster, more experienced, earned more points. Luke had gone fifth in the draft; Bevvo had won a Cup with LA. Olly shouldn't get used to it.

He didn't have time to dwell. Some journo had cornered Benji, probably to ask him about Robbo. Olly could already hear the color commentary: they were going to say he was scared to fight. McMeade was going to say he was scared to fight. What a fucked-up situation.

Olly snagged a seat next to him on the bus. He was staring out the window, watching the Pittsburgh lights crawl by and turning his phone over in his

hands. Olly didn't know what to say. Settled on, "Have you heard from your sister?"

"No."

Olly nudged him with his elbow. It was hard not to think about earlier, waking up with the long, warm line of Benji's body against his back, but none of Olly's issues were important right now.

\* \* \*

Benji had an exemption from team dinner. Olly wondered if he'd show up, anyway, if Krista cancelled, but he didn't.

Poiro got a little too drunk at the restaurant, which was nothing new. Olly thought a come-to-Jesus moment might be headed his way if he didn't watch it with the alcohol. But he and the younger guys went out after dinner, anyway, which meant Olly had the room to himself.

It was tasteful, neutral, indistinguishable from every other hotel room before it, he thought as he changed out of his suit. Everything was quiet, after the mayhem of dinner and the arena. And it had been a long goddamned day, even without Benji's suit drama. Olly felt his lips tug up into a smile: Benji had looked so sweet in the mirror, staring at the man in the suit like he didn't believe it could possibly be him. He'd looked good as hell, too, which—shit, that was one of those thoughts Olly wasn't supposed to be having.

It was so goddamned hard not to.

Olly picked up his phone. *Did your rookie come home?* he asked Soko.

*No mama bear,* Soko responded after a few minutes. *If he's not back soon will call.*

Olly shouldn't text him. Benji was fine. *You okay,* he typed, then deleted it. He frowned at his phone. Had an idea.

He zipped on a hoodie over his T-shirt, stuck his feet in his sneakers, and headed downstairs.

Olly found Benji in the back of the hotel bar, still wearing his suit but with his tie spilling out of his breast pocket. He was staring into a glass of whisky, head propped on one fist. It was a nice bar: polished wood, leather club chairs, music quiet enough for conversation. Olly hoped nobody knew who they were.

"You okay?" he asked, even though he hated it when people asked him that. Well, everyone but Benji. Hopefully it worked the same in reverse.

Benji picked up his glass, tilting the whisky back and forth. His eyes shaded toward brown, surrounded by all the wood grain and leather. He seemed to really be thinking about Olly's question, his dark brows drawing together at the center. "I don't know." He offered the glass to Olly. "Do you want some? I hate scotch."

"Sure." The glass was still warm from Benji's fingers. He took a sip, rolled the peaty burn across his tongue. Swallowed. The liquor settled into a warm liquidity in his stomach. He hadn't had anything stronger than a beer, singular, since that night in Minneapolis.

Benji was smiling a little, looking at him. "You like it?"

"Yeah. My dad's a big scotch guy."

"I fucking hate it."

Olly shrugged, flagged down the bartender, ordered a Heineken. His dignity wouldn't extend to Bud. "Trade you."

"Thanks." Benji clinked the lip of his bottle against Olly's rocks glass.

It felt like they were in their own little world, tucked away in the farthest corner of the bar. Olly tried not to enjoy the familiar lines of Benji's face as they smoothed out. He'd shifted toward Olly a little, opening the angle of his shoulders. The white of his shirt collar contrasted with the golden tan of his skin. Olly looked down at the surface of his drink, so he wouldn't look at the line his throat made as he swallowed.

"Robbo cancelled on dinner," Benji said finally. "No fucking surprise. Kris promised she'd come, anyway. Then I'm sitting in the restaurant, this goddamned place where I can't read half the shit on the menu, and she calls." He stopped. Took another pull from the beer. "She's making up some bullshit about a headache, and I know she's trying not to cry. Finally she goes into the whole thing—it was just going to be a fight, everyone fights in hockey, it would have been a funny story, Rob didn't mean anything by it.

"It's always, *Oh, Benji, you're so sensitive, he likes trying to get a rise out of you, don't make it so easy on him.* But now poor Rob is embarrassed, and my goon D partner broke his nose, and it's all my fault. Because it can never be *his* fault.

"You know she didn't just come down to DC to help me move, right? She caught him screwing some other girl. Again." He stared at the label on his bottle, tracing the points of the red Heineken star with the pad of his thumb. "Our family situation was pretty fucked up. Mom didn't work much. Always had some new man paying for her shit, because she's really charming when

she can pull it together. But it would never last with the good ones, since she couldn't keep it up for that long. Kris and I swore we'd never be like that, never depend on someone else like that. And she was working, taking classes at the community college.

"Biggest fucking regret of my life, telling her to come out with us after this one clinic Rob and I were both at. As soon as they met, it was right back to the same shit. She said she didn't want to get married until she finished her degree, but she did. And now Kris is in the same damned situation. Just in a house with more bedrooms. Wearing more expensive clothes."

Olly reached out and gripped his forearm. "Benji. Jesus, I'm so sorry."

He rolled his shoulders back, circled his head around on his neck like he did when he was getting ready to go out for a shift. "I can't fix it. I know that. I can't push too hard because I don't want her to stop talking to me at all. And she swears she knows what she's doing, that she's gonna make it as, like, an Instagram influencer or whatever." He gave Olly a sad smile, one that didn't reach his eyes. Shrugged. "But I hate to see what it does to her, staying with him. She's all I've got."

"No, she's not." Olly reached across the narrow space between their two stools, and wrapped his arm around Benji's shoulders. Pulled him in for a sideways hug. It felt like the right thing to do, with how tactile Benji always was. "I haven't known you that long, but people care about you. And I've always got your back, okay? Whether it's fighting Robbo or just, you know, talking."

"You're not fighting Robbo, bud," Benji told him, sliding his arm around Olly's rib cage. "I'll fucking murder him first."

"Okay, tough guy." Olly didn't let himself think about how good Benji's body felt, or wonder what this would look like if someone put a cell phone picture on Twitter.

They finished their drinks. Talked about the game, Olly waving it off when Benji tried to compliment how well he'd played. He'd just been out there with better guys, and he wasn't going to stay on that line. He'd barely centered the second line in Colorado; maybe he'd been playing up there more his third season, he guessed, but then he'd fucked up his knee.

"I don't even want to watch the commentary," Benji said. "I'm gonna get shit on." He was done with his beer; Olly swallowed the last sip of the scotch, then gestured for the bill.

"Never listen to what those fuckheads say," Olly said. Which was very

much *do as I say*: he'd never been able to resist reading his own bad press. And there had been plenty in Minnesota. Fuck, there had even been plenty after the trade, randos on the Eagles Instagram saying he was overpaid, that he was made of glass. It used to motivate him; but then it had gotten all fucked up, like everything else.

He wasn't going to worry about that right now, though. His issues had occupied enough of their time, and Benji still looked like a worn-out shadow of himself. "Hey. Come on, give me your phone. We need to post a shout-out to Loic for the new suit."

## Chapter Eleven

Benji had a voicemail from Krista after they landed in DC. Coach O had an optional afternoon skate session, and Benji wanted to go instead of fighting with Kris again. About half the team was there, mostly the younger guys who didn't have families. Plus Dewitt, who was always trying to set a good example. Bevvo bounced up and gave Olly a hug and a backslap, which was nice to see. Benji hoped Coach O kept Olly on the second line. The Eagles weren't so stacked through the center that they were knocking down a superstar. Lukesy was his boy, but he was a little...picky. Not in a diva way, but more that he liked to play how he liked to play, and that did not involve playing center.

So okay, maybe he was a little bit of a diva. But Dewitt wasn't begging to play center, either.

Poiro slipped in late, followed by the goalie coach. Olly said he'd gotten back after curfew in Pittsburgh again. Benji mouthed *busted* across the room; Poiro responded with a rude gesture.

It was an easy practice. Coach O had Olly with Lukesy and Bevvo again, and he looked lighter when they were done, blue eyes wrinkling at the corners when he laughed at something Bevvo said. Benji liked Olly's laugh: his whole face got involved, and it always seemed to take him by surprise to find himself laughing his head off.

They went shopping afterward. Poiro tried to invite himself along, but Benji nixed it. The new clothes and shit made him all nervous and off-balance; and he trusted Olly not to make fun of him, or troll him into getting something ridiculous. He tried not to get into his whole, like, *history* too much, the way he had in Pittsburgh. None of his teammates wanted to hear his sob story. Olly had been nice about it, though. Supportive, the same way he was being now.

"You said Loic is still helping you?" Olly asked in the car, eyes on the taillights in front of them. "You don't mind that he's, you know."

Benji blinked, looking up from the message string with his agent. He'd been using it to procrastinate on calling Krista back. "That he's what?"

"Gay, or whatever."

He shrugged. "He knows what's up with suits, that's all I care about."



“That’s good,” Olly said, after a second. And then a new text popped up from Benji’s agent.

It was a photo of Benji walking off the bus in Pittsburgh, screenshotted off—he squinted—@HockeyHimbos on Twitter. It wasn’t quite as bad as it could have been, like maybe the picture showed his block, but not...all the tackle. His agent’s text said *EXPLAIN*.

“What the fuck was that noise you just made?” Olly asked.

“Someone got a shot of the pants.”

This was dire enough for Olly to take his eyes off the Beltway. “Oh, no.”

“It’s on the internet.”

“Well,” Olly said. “I think the women fans are going to love you.”

“And maybe some of the guys, too.”

While Olly navigated the ever-shitty traffic, Benji did something new: he googled himself. The good news was that his dick was more interesting to Twitter than not fighting Robbo.

*Who is this big rig and why do I want him to punch me in the face* was the first thing he saw. The leading response was, *He won’t fight so he’s not your type*.

“This isn’t the worst thing,” Olly pointed out. “You needed more social media engagement, anyway.”

“I’m pretty sure this is the worst thing, bud.” Benji locked his phone and chucked it in the back seat. It started buzzing immediately. He felt a squirming thread of guilt for ignoring his agent—or Krista, it was even odds—but what the fuck was he going to say? He was on his way to fix the problem. Thinking about the amount of money he was about to spend on fucking *clothing* made him feel physically ill.

“Benj.” Olly braked so some asshole with diplomatic plates could swerve across their lane. “I’ll do your social media for you, if it’s stressing you out that much. Or sit next to you while you do it. It’s really not that scary.”

“I don’t want to be on Twitter for this bullshit. I want people to be talking about my hockey, not my dick size.”

“They’ll be talking about your hockey, dude. You’re killing it.”

Benji let his head thunk over against the window. “I’m gonna get murdered in the locker room.”

“Yeah, but next week they’ll be onto some other shit. Piro told me Yelich is proposing to his girlfriend. Fuck, *Piro*’s gonna get caught with his dick out at some point.”

“At least my dick is bigger than Pairo’s dick.”

Olly made a choking noise. “If that’s how you want to look at it.”

Benji rolled out his neck and took a couple of cleansing breaths. He’d learned to deal with getting chirped at as part of his whole anger management, personal growth journey. Normal bullshit in the locker room, normal bullshit out on the ice. Didn’t mean he had to like it.

Groaning, he fished his phone off the back seat and called his agent.

Once they arrived and Benji’s agent had tired himself out, Loic FaceTimed into round two of personal shopping, giving directions to a woman who hustled Benji in and out of a variety of outfits. By the end of it, he had multiple suits and pairs of pants that were actually going to fit. For, like, the first time ever. Apparently people even got shorts tailored? Who the fuck knew.

“I don’t see how people do this for fun,” Benji informed Olly, once they’d gotten all his new shit into 505. At least the stuff that wasn’t getting tailored. So like ties, socks, and underwear, only.

“Everyone who’s seen you wear clothes knows you hate shopping.”

“Hey, now.” He swatted the back of Olly’s head. “Apparently my ass is so spectacular it won’t fit in pants for regular people. I don’t see *your* ass needing special pants.”

Olly smacked him back. “Not everyone has your gifts, okay.”

“Your ass is great, bud. It’s just not gonna trend on Twitter.”

Olly had no response for that one.

## Chapter Twelve

They beat Toronto, and then lost to New York. Benji was pissed, even if he was trying to laugh it off—he'd missed a block on the game-winning goal. Soko dragged him out for a drink, which left Olly feeling oddly aimless. It hadn't been that long since he'd moved into the 505, but he'd gotten used to having Benji around. They might get chirped at for their bromance, but he couldn't deny that he felt better with Benji. Not in a gay way, okay, but Benji could get him out of his head, and didn't seem to mind that he'd gotten stuck with the team fuckup.

Olly was back to skating with Yelich and Persy. They'd put together solid pressure on Toronto, and he'd gift-wrapped Yelich a goal from a face-off during the New York game. His first in the NAHA: Yelich had practically been crying during his celly. And it had gotten a point for Olly, not that it had mattered in the end.

The 505 felt quiet. Olly could never forget that Benji was there: watching *Animal Planet* or David Attenborough nature documentaries in the living room, making something in the kitchen, asking if he wanted to go for a walk or dragging him back to old-person yoga. Olly should be glad for the peace and quiet. Even with his roommates back in Denver, he'd always been happy to have the place to himself.

He tried to focus on the *Our Planet* episode about the oceans, but gave it up when even the cool drone footage of the dolphins couldn't hold his interest. He was scrolling through Insta, thinking about what he should have Benji post next, when a text popped up on his phone.

*Good assist, from his brother Sami. Killed that faceoff.*

*Thanks.*

Sami sent back a gif of one of Olly's cellys from Colorado, which was never going to stop being weird. He wasn't famous even in hockey circles; he did not need gifs of himself on the internet. *The goals are coming little bro.*

*Sure yeah.*

*You like it better down there though.*

*Definitely.* Sami'd had the best view of Olly's meltdown with the Wolves, since he was getting his PhD in something in physics at UM in Minneapolis. If pressed, Olly would say he was closer with his oldest brother, Joey, but Joey hadn't had a clue what was going on in his life, either. And Joey hadn't been in touch much since Olly had stopped taking calls from Dad. Which hurt.

It hurt a fucking lot, okay, to have Joey misunderstand something like that. To chalk it up to Olly being the bratty baby of the family. To Olly not wanting the help his dad had been giving him his whole life.

But there weren't many parts of Olly's life that *didn't* hurt. Even the good things felt temporary, like they'd go to hell as soon as someone finally leaked something to the press, or Crowder got drunk enough to forget his NDA, or Coach O decided he was more trouble than he was worth and traded him to Buffalo.

His phone vibrated again. He accepted the FaceTime request.

"Heya, broski," Sami said. He was sitting on the floor in Olly's niece's room. "I told someone I was texting you, and she needed a good-night from Uncle Olly."

Olly smiled as Sami flipped the camera, and waved to Ada. She waved back from under her *Moana*-themed bedspread. "How's my favorite night-owl niece? Did you finally get your parents to move your bedtime back?"

"Mama let us stay up with Daddy to watch your game. And Daddy says 'cause you got an assist we can watch all the other ones. Matty fell asleep, but I didn't."

"Sounds like you're my good-luck charm, then."

"Woah, woah," Sami interjected from off-screen. "Bedtimes are real. Say good-night, Ada."

Sami switched off the light and slipped out of her bedroom, camera bouncing as he jogged downstairs to his office. Olly had a brief, swinging view of Sami's stacks of textbooks. Olly had been fine at math and science in school, but there was Honors high school physics and then there was Relativistic Quantum Field Theory. Joey had done a few years of college before he started at the port, mostly to play hockey, and Levi had gone straight into an electrician apprenticeship; but Sami had always been the smart one. He was athletic, too, obviously, but Dad had let *him* take the

hockey scholarship to Ohio State. Even handled it with something approaching grace when he'd quit after his freshman year.

Nobody had thought Sami was going to the show, though.

"I wanted to talk to you," Sami said finally, fixing the camera and propping his chin on his hand. It was what their mother did when she wanted to get serious. "I wanted to really see how things were going in DC. I know shit got a little messy up here."

"Why? You going to tell Dad about it?"

Sami rolled his eyes: the same blue eyes he, Olly, and their mom all shared. "No. Come on."

"Didn't stop you from telling him everything last year." As much as he'd known, at least. Olly had made sure that nobody knew the why behind any of it.

"I was worried. I thought Mom and Dad could help you. You weren't letting me."

"Yeah, thanks for that." He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice. "*I can't believe I raised a son who's running away the second it gets hard.*" Olly's career had never been anything *but* hard, even when things were going well. His sexuality was a fucking land mine that would go off the second he put one foot wrong. He couldn't date, he couldn't have a relationship; he'd flown solo at all three of his brothers' weddings, brushing off the well-meaning questions about when he'd be settling down himself. Kids were out of the question, even though guys from his draft class were starting to pop up on social media with fat-cheeked babies in tiny sweaters.

But most of all, he couldn't be honest with his teammates. He couldn't be honest with his own family. He had to lie, by word or action or omission, every single goddamned day of his life.

And his father thought he quit when it got *hard*.

"I'm sorry that I did the wrong thing," Sami said, after a pause. "But you and Dad were always close. I didn't mean to make things worse."

"Sure."

Sami blew out a breath. "Bro, I don't want to fight with you. I just wanted to see if you were okay."

"I'm fine."

"That's what you said in February, when you showed up on my doorstep at 3 am with no coat, no shoes, and a giant black eye. And then you moved into a hotel and locked yourself up with your agent and the scariest fucking

lawyer I've ever seen. I've known you your entire life—you were not fine.”

“Things are okay now,” Olly said. “The Eagles’ system is a better fit for me. I’ve gotten some assists.”

“I’m not talking about hockey. I’m talking about *you*.”

“It’s the same thing, isn’t it?” There was the bitterness again, rising up and threatening to choke him. It all came back to fucking hockey. Everything he loved in his life; everything he hated.

“It’s really not.” Sami paused, added, “I don’t think Dad ever got that. Remember that tournament when you were what, twelve? You had the flu and you kept puking all over the place. I don’t know how you were even standing up, but there you were, taking face-offs and then throwing up the second your shift was over. Or when you broke those ribs in sophomore year, and you taped them up and kept going the whole season because Dad said the scouts would be watching. I remember thinking you were such a tough little SOB, but...” He trailed off. “Now I’ve got kids, and I can’t imagine doing that to them. Or wanting them to do that to themselves.

“I mean...” Sami stopped again. “Dad wasn’t a walk in the park for me, either. I know he meant well. But I think, maybe, you got it the worst. Even if you never seemed to mind it.”

Olly swallowed. His eyes were stinging and his throat was closing up. He couldn’t speak.

Sami shut his eyes, looking tired and...dad-like, honestly. Not like their dad. Like Matt and Ada’s dad, who attended tea parties and would never get thrown out of a youth hockey game.

“You’re my baby brother, Olly,” Sami said finally. “I want you to be happy. And I want you to know you’ve got a family that loves you and will still love you even when life gets hard. Messy. Not-fine. Whatever. You don’t have to face down everything on your own.”

“Thanks, Sami.” Olly still felt a little wobbly, but he made himself add, “There’s a good group of guys down here. I know they’ve got my back. Coach O, too.”

Sami smiled. “Yeah, you and that roommate look like good buddies on Instagram. I was hoping that wasn’t social media BS.”

“Benji’s a good dude.” That was inadequate, but Olly wasn’t going to tell Sami about the yoga and the pinky-promises and the crying; and he didn’t want to open the door to thinking about what would happen to all of that, if Benji knew the truth.

They talked for a few more minutes, Sami filling him in on some gossip from their youth team. Olly hadn't talked to any of them in years, even though he could remember being at graduation parties, swearing they'd be buddies forever.

It all felt like it had happened to a different person, back when the worst thing in his life was that he was going to become a professional hockey player instead of going to college.

As they said their good-nights, Olly couldn't help thinking about that tournament Sami had mentioned. The one where he had the flu. He couldn't remember the games themselves—it was a long time ago, a haze washed in stomach acid and thrown-up Gatorade.

What he did remember: the weekend before, sitting tucked into a corner of the basement while Joey and Levi had friends over. They were in high school at that point, and the friends snuck in beer through the back door. They had either forgotten Olly was there or were letting him stay as long as he kept his mouth shut. They'd been playing *Mario Kart* and he'd been internally debating whether he dared ask for a turn, when two of the friends had started fighting over the controller. The bigger guy was a wrestler, and he pinned the other one, right there on their grody basement carpet. Olly had felt a shock of heat and the burn of the thought, *I wish that was me*.

He'd scrambled up the stairs immediately, cheeks flushed red and hands shoved in his pockets. Crawled into bed and didn't know what to do with the things he was feeling.

But he'd still known they were wrong. Had been terrified someone was going to look at him and *know*.

The flu felt like a cosmic balancing of the scales. Playing through it had been his twelve-year-old attempt at penance; or maybe he'd been afraid to show any weakness. If he hadn't played, had given any hint of a flinch, he'd thought people would be able to see it all over him.

It was all tangled up, now, the terror and the stomach acid and the sour burn of the shame.

Maybe it shouldn't have been that way. Maybe it wouldn't be, for Matt or his other nieces and nephews, if they ever played with the same promise Olly had.

But Olly couldn't help the way that it had gone for him.

He put his phone down and restarted the documentary, settling into the darkness of the living room and the hypnotic rhythm of David

Attenborough's voice. Olly watched walruses fall off cliffs, bouncing down rock faces until their lifeless bodies washed in the eddies of the tide; and glaciers calve into the sea, lifting waves to the top of the world. He didn't sleep, exactly, but he settled into a kind of daze, deep enough that he was startled when he heard Benji's key in the door.

"You're up," Benji said from the doorway. The light from the hall turned him into nothing more than a silhouette and a voice as he threw his jacket on the breakfast bar and collapsed onto the couch at Olly's feet. He'd taken off his tie; his shirt gaped at his throat.

"Couldn't sleep," Olly answered, even though he hadn't really tried.

Benji yawned, scratched a big hand through his messy curls. "Can you ever?"

Olly shrugged and curled deeper into the couch. The episode ended and the next one began, and at least he wasn't alone on the worried track of his memories anymore.



## *Chapter Thirteen*

Benji hadn't meant to fall asleep on the couch, but the beers with Soko had knocked all the energy out of him. He hadn't been in the best place after the game; he hated fucking up, and he should have read the play better, gotten into a stronger position. But he hadn't. And he could tell himself that they'd had five more minutes in the third period to equalize until the cows came home, but it wasn't going to make him feel better. He'd just have to make fucking sure they beat Florida.

Olly was asleep at the far end of the couch: his eyes were closed, his breathing was regular, and he seemed to be drooling on the cushion. He'd played well, irritating the shit out of whichever New York players were on the ice. So that was something.

His feet were tucked under Benji's leg, and Benji had wrapped a hand around the warm skin of his ankle like it was a fucking teddy bear. His hair was redder than usual against the gray of the upholstery, falling out of the knot at the back of his head to curl against the angles of his cheekbones.

It was late—neither of them had set an alarm—and Benji should get up. Make breakfast, do his morning routine. But he didn't want to move, and Christ knew the last time Olly had gotten any sleep. He looked peaceful. Relaxed.

So Benji didn't go anywhere.

He was halfway through an email from the PR office about some upcoming charity shit when Olly finally woke up. The leg under Benji's hand tensed. He realized that he'd never gotten around to letting it go, and that his thumb was making slow circles into the skin over Olly's anklebone.

Olly blinked at him with sleepy blue eyes, lifting a hand to push his hair out of his face. There was a crease from the seam of the pillow dented into his cheek. He looked disoriented and kind of cute, like a cat caught napping that was pretending it had been awake the whole time.

"Morning."

"Hi," Olly mumbled, swinging around to put his feet on the floor. "What fucking time is it?"

"Late. Still plenty of time until skate, though."

"Shit." Olly buried his face in his hands and scrubbed at his eyes. They

were both still wearing after-game clothes; Olly's normally pristine white shirt was crumpled and an extra button was undone. "I need coffee."

Benji gestured expansively to the kitchen as Olly stumbled to his feet. "Did you sleep, at least?"

"Guess so." He twisted around to watch Olly shrug his shoulders under his wrinkled shirt. The coffee machine gave its good-morning gurgle; Olly reached up to dig his fingers into his hair, shaking it out of the last remnants of the knot he'd had it in. It caught the light angling in from the windows leading onto the balcony.

"Your hair looks real gingery today." That was, okay, a nonsense thing to say.

Olly gave him the finger over his shoulder. He tied his hair up again and was back to Viking raider mode. Viking raider who couldn't grow a beard mode, maybe. Did Vikings come from Finland? He wasn't sure.

Benji dragged himself off the couch—whatever else he was feeling about Krista, she had A+ taste in living room furniture—to take a piss and change out of his suit pants. He was surprised he wasn't more tired; the couch might be comfortable, but he couldn't spread out like in his own bed. But his body's only complaint was the echo of an ache in his shoulder, where he'd gotten rammed into the boards. It didn't feel serious, but he'd talk to the trainers. Benji had been told point-blank that his lack of an injury record was a major advantage. So he took injury-prevention seriously, and had zero qualms about telling the coaching staff if he had a twinge.

Olly was leaning on the counter when he got back out, looking like he was about to fall back asleep.

"Go back to bed, bud," Benji told him. "I'll get you up when we actually need to leave."

He shook his head reflexively, then kind of drooped. "Yeah, maybe. You don't mind?"

"Course not, bro. Go sleep." It was obvious he needed it.

Benji made breakfast—scrambled eggs with spinach and chicken sausage—left a plate out for Olly, then unrolled his yoga mat in the living room for a quick practice to loosen up his hips and shoulders, and to formally bid his fuckup from the night before goodbye.

\* \* \*

By the time he was done, they needed to leave. Olly had left his bedroom door open; Benji knocked on the frame, then eased in with a travel mug of coffee. He realized it was the first time he'd been inside Olly's room. It was a white box: nothing on the walls, a half-unpacked suitcase shoved against the dresser. Their road hotels had more personality.

Olly was facedown on the bed, head stuck underneath a pillow. He'd changed into track pants, but he wasn't wearing a shirt. He was too skinny, Benji thought; he could practically see the outlines of his ribs in his back, rising and falling as he breathed. Benji would be shocked if he was the 185 advertised on his stat sheet.

"Rise and shine, buddy," Benji said, wafting the coffee cup toward Olly's face.

Olly responded with a whiny noise in the back of his throat before he pushed himself up. He blinked up at Benji with his sleepy blue eyes and grabbed for the coffee.

"You're pathetic." Benji low-key loved seeing him all off-kilter and early morning sleepy.

"I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me," Olly mumbled into the mug.

"Think you're tired, bro."

Olly rubbed his eyes. "I'll be ready in a second, promise."

"Breakfast's in the kitchen."

"Thanks." He paused. Benji could practically see his brain trying to work. "Um, not just for the wake-up call. For, um, everything."

Benji smiled down at him, feeling weirdly warm. Probably from holding the coffee. "Duh. What are friends for?"

\* \* \*

They only had a day until they hosted Florida, so morning skate was light. Olly watched Benji amble off to go talk to the trainers afterward, saying something about a twinge in his shoulder.

"Oliver, walk with me," Piro ordered, materializing at Olly's shoulder like a cranky Francophone ghost.

"Where?"

"I don't fucking know! Just walk. Fucking Puritan Americans. It's about the journey."

Olly rolled his eyes. For someone who had nothing in common with Olly's brothers, it was startling how much interacting with Pairo reminded Olly of interacting with his brothers. Only, when he'd been ten years old.

They took the elevator down to street level—why the Eagles practice rink was on the top floor of a parking garage, Olly would never know—then headed out into the chilly October sunshine.

Pairo ordered two Americanos at the Starbucks across the street. Olly turned down the offer of a chunk of his coffee cake. Pairo shoved half of it in his mouth while they waited for their coffees. He looked a little demented, all long limbs and elbows with his hair going five different directions and crumbs stuck to his chin. Say what you would about Pairo, but unless he was drunk off his face at three in the morning, he had a lot of self-possession.

Olly started to get worried.

"A little bird told me something," he said as he picked up their coffees and herded Olly to a table.

He was still speaking French. The bottom dropped out of Olly's stomach. "Yeah?"

Pairo collapsed into a chair. "This fucking team might send me down to wherever the actual fuck *Hershey, Pennsylvania*, is."

The air whooshed out of Olly's lungs in relief. That probably made him an asshole, right? But he'd been sure Pairo was about to say, *I found out about you sucking another man's dick*. He settled on a "Fuck" in response.

"Quote, 'continued misbehavior will not be tolerated.'" Pairo sneered it out like a pissed-off Professor Snape.

"Throwing up on the plane is not a great look."

"It doesn't affect my game."

Olly shrugged. Pairo was a bastard to score on in practice, but he wasn't starting over Stormy, either.

"I don't need any judgment from you, Oliver. One beer and you're home like a good little wife."

Olly rolled his eyes again. He refused to let Pairo see how much it bothered him. "Sure."

"You're so fucking uptight."

"Whatever you say, bud."

"I can't get sent down," Pairo mumbled to his coffee.

"Then cool it with the partying."

"But that's my personal life!"

Olly shrugged. “Can I tell you something?”

“I don’t care about your hair-care routine.”

Olly continued as if Piro hadn’t spoken. “I almost got put on waivers last season.”

That made him listen.

“I was playing like shit, but it wasn’t only about that.” He chewed on his lip. “The stuff off the ice—it shouldn’t have mattered, but that didn’t keep it from mattering. And I wasn’t showing up hungover to anything.” No, his sexuality just didn’t fit into the NAHA’s narrative of marrying an Instagram model by twenty-three.

“Fuck me.” Piro put his face in his hands. “I hate being *boring*. This is such a boring fucking town.”

“Bud, DC is the capital of the fucking country.”

“I don’t live in DC. I live in *Northern Virginia*.”

“You’re going to be living in Dewitt’s basement or Hershey if you don’t watch it.” Piro was the only one of the younger guys who lived by himself. Yelich was staying with Stormy’s family like a good Canadian; Lukesy and Bevvo had a very bromantic townhouse.

“My soul would die.”

“I guess you’re gonna need to stop partying so much.” Olly paused. “The league has resources to help guys if they’re having issues with alcohol, right?”

“I don’t have an *issue*.”

“Just thought I’d mention it.” Was this how Benji had felt, tiptoeing around telling him to get his ass to therapy?

Piro dramatically heaved himself to his feet. “Enough. Let’s go find your husband before he gets worried you’re going to leave him for a sexier model.”

“Sorry to break it to ya, bud, but you’re not my type.”

“Nobody has any fucking *taste* here,” Piro moaned, and spent the rest of the walk back to the rink bitching about DC’s buttoned-up government-stiff vibes.

Benji was leaning up against Olly’s car, scrolling through his phone, when they emerged from the elevator. “Hey, guys.”

“See you tomorrow,” Piro snapped. He slammed himself into his Benz and peeled out. As much as anyone could peel around the corkscrew turns of their parking deck.

“What the fuck is wrong with him?”

Olly filled Benji in on the drive home. He could see Benji going into fix-it mode. Everybody said Olly was the mom, but Benji had a lot of not-even-that-low-key parent energy.

Olly poked him in the shoulder, trying not to remember how they’d woken up on the couch. The warmth of his hand. “Quit it. I can see you scheming to invite him to yoga and normalize mental health care.”

Benji deflated. “Yeah, maybe.”

“He actively engaged me in the conversation and could barely keep himself from cussing me out in the Starbucks. I don’t think Pairo is the fight that you will win.”

He perked back up. “Does that mean I’m winning the fight with you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Although maybe he could use the help, with the Eagles’ upcoming visit to the Wolves in Minnesota.

“Okay, buddy.” Benji still sounded cheerful. It almost made Olly want to call a therapist, just so he could tell Benji he’d done it.

\* \* \*

Predictably, since things had been going well—despite the Wolves game and the accompanying visit with his family dragging closer by the day—hosting Florida was a clusterfuck. Olly lost face-off after face-off, and that was the *one* thing he’d never stopped being able to do. The only reason they weren’t completely out of it by the end of the second period was because their blue line was terrifying.

And then the third period happened. It started with a freak bounce on a Florida shot. The puck hit the ice, skipped, and then took a weird deflection off Bevvo’s knee to fly past Stormy’s stick. They were three goals in the hole. Their barn went totally silent.

Olly was surprised that Coach O even sent their line back out. They were doing less than nothing, had barely gotten a shot off all night, but the other guys needed breathers.

Olly lost a face-off, because of course he lost the fucking face-off. There was a melee in front of the Eagles net, and in the scramble for the puck Olly kicked it over the line. 4-0.

Which was bad enough. But it wasn’t the problem.

The problem was that Stormy lost his blocker in the scrum. And while he

was scrambling for the puck that Olly had knocked into his net, his hand got slammed into the ice at the *wrong* fucking angle.

He let out a strangled-off scream that Olly never wanted to hear again.

And there went their starting goalie.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

Benji started to offer Olly something—dinner, a beer—once they were back at the 505. He'd been tense on the drive home, white knuckles on the steering wheel and swearing under his breath at the traffic. "Hey, do you want..."

"I don't need you taking care of me," Olly snapped, pulling a Gatorade out of the fridge and closing the door hard enough to make the condiment bottles rattle, before slamming into his bedroom. They'd showered at the rink, but he heard the water start running in Olly's bathroom.

"Fuck you, too, dude," he said to Olly's closed door, shut on whatever pinky-promise bullshit Benji thought they'd agreed to. He understood needing some space after a tough L, but that slammed door was rude as hell. Benji had been on the ice for the final whistle of that game, too.

He'd maybe started to think that he could count on Olly, that he could trust Olly to do what he'd said he'd do—but obviously not.

Benji stuck in his headphones and dragged his brain through his meditation app, forced himself to exhale the anger and frustration with his breath. They were leaving immediately for a nice long roadie. He couldn't hold onto that twisted-tight knot of anger, not if he was going to show up for his team the way he needed to.

And Benji didn't disappoint people. His efforts behind the blue line didn't matter, though. Things didn't get better out on the ice: Pairo looked shaky, and suddenly they had a four-game losing streak. They clawed back an OT win against Montreal to close out the road trip, but it felt like less than nothing.

Benji had been proud, okay. He'd been fucking proud of the official start of his NAHA career.

And now this.

It happened. It fucking happened. Benji had been on teams going through rough patches before.

But the energy in the locker room was bad, all of a sudden. Olly was stuck so deep in his head that he could barely make a pass on time, much less crack a smile or keep a meal down. Pairo, on the other hand, hadn't thrown up on anything, and as far as Benji knew—because Olly wasn't talking to him (or anyone else, which should maybe make him feel better but didn't)—he was



sticking to curfew, but he was being such a fucking bastard that no one would talk to him.

So Benji practiced restorative yoga, on his own, in hotels in Montreal and Ottawa and St. Louis. He called Alise, caught up with his coach from the Q. He took care of things on the ice, as well as he could. They lost, they won, they got a pity-point from OT, and lost, and won. None of them were good wins, just lucky bounces and grinding on D, but they weren't on a free-fall losing streak anymore.

"*Focus on the work,*" the coaches said. Benji knew how to do that. Maybe he didn't have Olly or Pairo or whatever else he'd fucking maybe started to think he was going to have; but none of that meant he couldn't throw himself into hockey, into full-body checks, flying down the ice, being the best at this one thing that he could possibly be.

The rhythm of that work had been the only constant in his life since he was a skinny kid, suiting up in his secondhand gear and taking his first cautious steps out onto the ice, behind the other kids in his age group in skill but not caring because he loved it so, so much.

\* \* \*

They flew to Minnesota. It looked like Olly was cracking further apart in front of Benji's eyes, the closer the bus got to Olly's former home arena.

Olly suited up in the Wolves' visiting locker room like he was heading to his execution. His skin was gray and clammy, and he ducked out of Coach O's pregame speech to run to the bathroom, probably to throw up. He looked worse when he got back, wiping his wrist across the back of his mouth, almost shaking. Benji watched his leg bounce in place instead of listening to Dewitt try to get everyone hyped, watched the frenetic energy in his hand as he knocked his pregame tennis ball up and down, up and down, up-down-up-down-up-down.

He'd been a mess before the last few games, ever since fucking Florida. But this was next-level. He looked terrified.

Benji didn't bother asking how he was, though. Just wrapped an arm around his shoulders and squeezed. Dropped it when Olly tensed up further and pulled away.

So much for being buddies.

But Benji got it as soon as Olly hit the ice for his first shift: these fuckers

*hated* him.

Every time the refs had their eyes on a different end of the ice, he got slashed, slew-footed, checked late. Coach O was screaming his head off at the refs from behind the bench, but it didn't make any difference.

The first period ended scoreless. Benji followed Mils back down the tunnel. His jaw was clenching tightly enough to bite through his mouth guard. He could hear his therapist's voice, all the way from his office in Quinnipiac: "*When you recognize the patterns that tell you you're getting close to your tipping point, tell me what strategies you're going to use.*" Benji shut his eyes, took deep breaths, stuck in his earbuds, and listened to a five-minute meditation sequence, visualized himself calmly floating down the Mount Vernon Trail with the quiet water of the Potomac murmuring next to him.

By the end of intermission, he'd walked himself back from the brink. Even after he watched Olly scrape himself up off the ice after yet another late hit from behind. Even after some asshole in a Wolves sweater tripped Lukesy right in front of a ref, and he did fucking nothing.

Benji had it under control, okay. He was channeling his anger into the productive, therapist-approved channel of flattening Minnesota like a fucking bug.

He got Dewitt an assist. He scored himself five minutes later—his first NAHA goal, holy shit—tapping in a rebound. He barely even felt it, though: Olly jumped on him, looking like he was about to cry from happiness, and all Benji could see was the fat lip he'd gotten from some fucking goon's elbow.

Not some fucking goon, though: fucking Crowder, the former teammate who had apparently reduced Oliver Järvinen to a bombed-out shell of himself.

And, okay, Benji had learned to let the chirps roll off his back. But there were chirps, and then there was this fucker, looking him in the eye with a nasty smirk and saying some real fucked-up shit.

And Benji could take it. Benji could fucking take it. He was a big boy. He was tough. He had dealt with worse shit in his life than this fucker.

That's what he was telling himself on the bench, squirting Gatorade in his mouth and yelling encouragement at his boys. They were up 3-2 and they fucking needed this win. *Olly* needed this win.

Soko headed toward the bench, and that was Benji's cue. He swung over onto the ice. Fucking Crowder got right up in Benji's ear. "*Järvy gonna suck*

your dick later? That what you like, huh?”

Benji winked. “Jealous he got himself an upgrade, baby?”

Crowder’s face twisted, going from ugly to uglier. He slammed the butt end of his stick into Benji’s chest. Did a referee give a fuck? Nope.

Mils dragged him back; Benji gritted his teeth and followed his cue. Crowder still looked vicious, though, and he went after Olly as soon as he was out for his next shift. Benji watched Olly push himself up off the ice, *again*, while Crowder’s mouth kept moving.

And he was abruptly, suddenly, and completely. Fucking. Done.

The rage roared through him like a jet engine at takeoff. He was across the ice before he was even aware of it, gloves off. And his fist was smashing into Crowder’s face. Again. And again. And again. He didn’t stop when his knuckle split open on Crowder’s teeth; he didn’t stop when Crowder went down; he didn’t stop when blood was splattered across the ice.

Benji didn’t know when he would have stopped. But there were finally enough bodies to drag him off.

Crowder wasn’t moving. Benji wasn’t done.

“Fucking touch him again,” he said, in a tone of voice he’d never heard come out of his mouth before, “and I’ll kill you. That is a fucking *promise*.”

Benji shrugged off the arms across his chest and took himself down the tunnel without a backward glance.

\* \* \*

All Olly wanted to do after the game was punch Benji right in his crooked nose, and then maybe give him a hug. And then punch him again.

Benji was laughing about his Gordie Howe, getting congratulated on bagging his first NAHA goal and first NAHA fight in the same game. But there was a look in his eyes that Olly didn’t know what to do with. His taped-up knuckles made Olly want to find Crowder and smash his orbital bone again for good measure. Olly should have taken care of it himself, maybe, given him some payback for that night in February, but Coach O had pulled him aside before the game to talk about *not rising to provocation* and *focusing on moving the puck*. Like that had done any good. At least Minnesota had been too busy playing smear the queer to do anything else.

He also *hurt*. Nothing broken or cracked, but *fuck*.

The team doc had put a stitch in his lip during the first intermission, so it

wasn't leaking blood anymore. Still stung like a bitch. He didn't want to think about his ribs. His knee and hip had gotten jammed into the boards at unnatural angles. And it would all hurt worse tomorrow when he started to tighten up.

But in a way, he felt better. They'd done their worst, and the Eagles had pulled out the W. Olly was going to live to skate another day.

Benji made a sound when Olly pulled his tarp off, like Crowder had managed to get in a delayed-reaction sucker-punch.

"It's not that bad," Olly told him.

"You can't see it."

Benji looked ready to storm over to the Wolves dressing room and start throwing haymakers. Olly whacked him in the shoulder. "Simmer down. Nothing's broken."

Benji shook his head. There was a sweaty curl plastered to his forehead; Olly's fingers itched, for a brief and ridiculous second, to push it back.

Instead, he took a shower and got ready to face the next obstacle in his night: his family. Getting his ass kicked all over the ice had been a decent distraction from that, at least.

It was too late for dinner, but they were meeting for breakfast tomorrow. He'd probably stay up all night freaking out about it. But for now, even though Olly's body ached absolutely everywhere, his mind had a scraped-out calm. He'd gotten through something that had taken up residence in his brain, metastasized into something bigger and darker than a game of hockey. The only way it was ever going to get worse than this was if Crowder or Barnard yapped to the media, which would bring the collective wrath of the North American Hockey Association and Olly's lawyer down on their heads. For the small price of whatever tatters of his career he had left.

He wasn't going to think about that, though. His brain, for once, was willing to skip past the worst possible outcome.

"Where are you going?" Benji asked, when he was starting down the hallway.

"Saying hi to my family."

"Oh." He blinked his offensively long eyelashes. "I didn't know they were coming."

Olly felt a stab of guilt. He hadn't been talking to Benji. He...couldn't. The Minnesota game was taking up too much mental space, on top of his colossal fuckup against Florida, and then he'd been remembering every single play

he'd ever screwed up. His lowlight reel. "Do you want to come meet everybody?"

## *Chapter Fifteen*

Olly's family was waiting for them out by the exit to the bus, bundled up against the frigid Minnesota night. Flurries scattered down from the steel-gray clouds, in and out of visibility in the orange halos of the streetlights. Benji stuck close to Olly's heels. Now that he was back in the land of the living, or at least the land of talking to Benji, he felt weirdly unwilling to let him out of his sight.

Maybe he'd ask Pairo to switch rooms with him tonight. But that would be...un-chill. And Benji needed to be chill, if he was meeting Olly's family and his fuck-you hockey dad. That was one thing he had to say for his family background: nobody tried to stick an oar into his career or got so emotional they were thrown out of his youth games. Earl had kept coming to Benji's games for a while, even after he'd broken up with his mom, but he'd never tried to call the coach about his minutes.

Olly introduced him to his parents, his brothers Sami and Joey—the third one hadn't made it down from Duluth—and his sisters-in-law. The brothers all had the same sharp cheekbones and expressive eyebrows, but Sami and Joey had squarer jaws and blockier builds, obvious even under layers of down coats and sweaters. Olly looked more like his mother, who moved with the contained grace of a figure skater. They had the same eyes, a cool, deep-water blue.

Olly's father was a bear of a man, red-bearded and imposing. But Benji was taller, he noticed, while Mr. Järvinen was trying to break his fingers via handshake.

Benji smiled at him politely and squeezed back harder. Early signs pointed to: fuck this dude.

"So you do know how to fight," he said, in a nice clapback to the Pittsburgh game.

"When called for, definitely."

"Looks like you've still got your teammates fighting for you," Mr. Järvinen told Olly. Which was exactly the kind of statement calibrated to pull Olly's shoulders up to his ears. Benji watched it land. Decided this was one throwback fucker: nobody wanted their top-six forwards in the sin bin. Olly was clearly supposed to be in the top six, even if he was not, technically, at

this moment, on the second line.

“We watch out for each other,” Benji told him cheerfully, with a giant fucking smile. He wrapped an arm around Olly’s shoulders; tilted him toward his mom; summoned Pairo with a wiggle of his eyebrow, since he was lurking outside the bus staring at them like a creeper anyway; and went on a charm offensive while Pairo cornered the dad.

Benji was good at parents, if they weren’t complete assholes. After a few minutes Mrs. Järvinen was looking at him like he was her long-lost fifth baby. Ditto Sami, the science brother, who invited him to breakfast.

He slung an arm around Olly’s neck and dragged him into his side. He was a little surprised that Olly stayed put instead of shaking him off, but that was fine: he was exactly where Benji wanted him.

\* \* \*

Benji followed Olly and Pairo back to their room, saying he was too wired after the game to go to bed. So, whatever, they were going to watch a movie. It was late, but Olly wasn’t going to be dropping off anytime soon.

Olly had seen what Benji had done with his dad, the way he’d deftly shouldered him out of the conversation. How he’d magicked Pairo up out of nowhere. And maybe he should be uncomfortable that Benji saw him as someone to maneuver, like he was a Border collie and Olly was a particularly needy sheep; but mostly he felt grateful.

Maybe he could stick with that. He couldn’t lie to himself about his reflexive dread the second he’d seen Dad’s eyebrows narrow, the way they always did when he was about to start picking Olly’s game apart. Or in other words, offer him useful feedback, since didn’t he care about playing better?

Olly squished himself down in bed, trying to resist pulling the covers over his face.

“What are you worrying about?” Benji asked, flopping down next to him before Olly could start hoping he’d throw himself at Pairo instead.

“Nothing.”

“You are, bud. You always get a little line right...there.” Benji pressed a fingertip into the skin between his eyebrows.

“You do,” Pairo yelled from the bathroom. “I can’t even see you and I know exactly what he’s talking about.”

“Screw you both.”

“Shut up, you love us.” Benji dragged Olly into his chest and gave his rib cage a squeeze. It hurt like shit and he couldn’t choke down a little hiss, which he followed with a thump to the side of Benji’s idiot head. “Sorry, sorry!”

Poiro reappeared from the bathroom to chuck a jar of something at the two of them. Only the professional-athlete reflexes saved Olly from taking it to the face. “Put this on, Oliver. Your husband can get your back.”

“I don’t need whatever the fuck that is.”

Benji claimed the jar and made a pleased noise at what he was reading on the ingredients list. Which probably meant it was like, sage smudge and the sweat of the Buddha. With no dairy, because Tom Brady. “Ols, take your shirt off.”

“I can get a massage tomorrow.” Olly didn’t like getting manhandled by the massage therapists and trainers, but it was a fact of life for an athlete.

“Do you want to fuck up against Winnipeg because you’re too stiff to move?”

“I’ll probably fuck up anywhmmmph.” Olly trailed off, eyebrows shooting up in offense: Benji had plastered a big, warm palm over his mouth. While they were in his bed, also, in case anyone had managed to forget that. Olly most certainly had not.

“Shut up, bud.” Benji dragged down the blankets and grabbed for the hem of Olly’s shirt. And they were not wrestling while Benji tried to undress him: they just. Were not. “I’ll get Poiro to hold you down,” he threatened.

The fucker would, too. He had his determined little serious face on, like he was confronting a recalcitrant salad dressing recipe or the league points leader Ryan Stewart.

“Fine,” Olly grumbled. He wriggled back on top of the blankets. “Put the fucking movie on first.”

Benji and Poiro agreed on something with fast cars, lots of explosions, and no discernable plot. While they were fucking with the remote, Olly tugged his shirt off and rested his head on his crossed forearms. Benji was not getting access to the front of his body, that was for damned sure.

His eyes were closed, so he jumped a little when Benji dropped a dot of the cream between his shoulder blades. It felt like Icy Hot on steroids: a shivery, tingling burn. It smelled spicy in the neutral hotel air.

Olly twitched again when Benji’s hand settled on his back. His touch was clinical, though; no different than what Olly would have gotten from one of



the trainers.

Except that it was. Olly couldn't forget that it was Benji's hand smoothing down the back of his ribs, Benji avoiding the obvious bruises, Benji making a displeased noise when he hit a spot on Olly's hip that made him flinch.

"You're so tense," Benji murmured from behind him. "Relax."

He squeezed his eyes shut tighter, then tensed his shoulders and core before mindfully releasing them. Benji dug his thumbs into Olly's traps, and Olly felt something give way in his neck. He was aware from a distance that he was going all boneless and sleepy, even with the freezing burn tracking the wake of Benji's fingers. The dialogue from the movie was hypnotically bad, and for once Piro was keeping his mouth shut; even the punctuation of all the gunfire wasn't enough to wake him back up, as long as Benji's big, warm hands kept smoothing up and down his skin.

\* \* \*

He halfway woke up while the closing credits were rolling. The room was dark, other than the glow of the TV. Benji was leaning up against the headboard, one of his palms still resting on Olly's shoulder. Piro had rolled himself up in his blankets on the other bed. The pain was further away than it had been before.

Olly heard himself make an interrogative noise in the back of his throat.

"Go back to sleep," Benji told him, fingers tightening slightly.

To his distant surprise, Olly did.

\* \* \*

He woke up confused again: the alarm was unfamiliar, and there was something weighing down his shoulders.

It moved, trailing fingers across the naked skin of his back, and the alarm cut off. Olly recognized the disgruntled growl that was Piro's first step toward the land of the living. He turned his head, and there was Benji. He had a terrible case of bedhead, uneven dark stubble lined his jaw, and he was swallowing a yawn as he dropped his phone back onto Olly's nightstand. He smelled like his ridiculous organic laundry detergent—clean cotton and a hint of pine—and sleep.

"Morning, sunshines," he said, because he was exactly the kind of fucker who said things like that. He smiled down at Olly with an uncomplicated,

green-eyed sweetness that made him want to hide under the sheets forever. “Sorry I fell asleep.”

Olly felt foggy; his brain couldn’t catch on the right edges of things. He wasn’t great at mornings to begin with, and today all he wanted to do was bury himself under the blankets and let the drag of exhaustion pull him back under. He’d been dreaming something nice, he thought.

“You’re such a mess in the morning.” Olly responded with a displeased noise, but he was too comfortable to retaliate.

He’d slept. The whole night, he realized.

He tried to push himself up—breakfast with his family, and his dad was on team “if you’re not five minutes early, you’re late”—but froze halfway there, swallowing down what might have been a moan of pain if he’d let it out.

He’d been playing hockey since he was four years old. Olly was no stranger to pain. He’d had a concussion, bad enough that he couldn’t hide it from the D-League trainers; he’d played that whole season with cracked ribs back in high school; he’d broken his collarbone crashing his mountain bike in middle school; he’d had his MCL saga in Colorado. But he’d never had an entire NAHA team try to wipe the ice with his ass before.

“Yeah, imagine how much worse this would have been without a massage last night.”

“I’m fine.”

“Course you’re fine, you bullheaded idiot.” Benji grabbed his arm and towed him up, which made every part of his body howl in protest. But he was vertical.

“Shut the fuck up, you fucking lovebirds,” Pairo complained. “I don’t want to hear your fucking pillow talk.”

Benji launched himself onto Pairo’s bed for an extremely full-contact hug/snuggle. Which turned out to be one of the more eventful ways to start a morning.

All the yelling and crashing resulted in Dewitt hammering on their door five minutes later. Olly was dressed by then—he didn’t want to keep looking at the amount of his torso that was a nice bruise-purple—with a toothbrush hanging out of his mouth when he opened the door. Growing up with three balls-to-the-wall brothers, he had advanced skills in ignoring chaos he didn’t want to get involved in.

“I knew it wasn’t you,” Dewitt told him, before shoving into the room and grabbing Pairo by the scruff of his neck. Benji sprawled out on the bed,

grinning up at them. “You’re worse than my damned nine-year-olds. Cut it the fuck out, you chuckleheads. I don’t even want to know why Bowie’s in here.”

“Sorry, Dewey,” Benji singsonged, totally unrepentant. “We were watching a movie and I fell asleep.”

“*I’m not fucking sorry,*” Pairo spat. “Why isn’t *he* in trouble for missing curfew?”

Dewey scraped his fingers over his salt-and-pepper stubble, looking exhausted. “Well, it looks like Benji was peacefully sleeping in a team-assigned room, instead of falling out of a club on his ass. So maybe start there.”

Pairo had some thoughts about that. Loud thoughts. Louder thoughts than anyone should have at this time of the morning. Olly shook his head, left them to it, and retreated into the bathroom.

\* \* \*

They made it to the diner five minutes early. Olly tried not to notice how tidily Benji herded him into the chair the farthest away from his father. Dad looked...displeased. Olly tried to summon some annoyance at Benji sheep-dogging him again, but couldn’t find it. Sami looked amused, anyway, eyes flicking from Benji to Dad and back.

The building stare-down was interrupted by Joey and his wife Liz’s arrival. “Sorry we’re late,” Liz said, like she didn’t give a fuck at all. She wasn’t intimidated by Dad, or anything that Olly had ever seen her encounter.

Dad started grilling Benji about his career, in a very Midwestern politeness-as-a-tactical-weapon way. Which was total bullshit, because he would have memorized it all the second he found out they were living together. Benji smiled back and acted like the NHTC, a U18 silver medal, winning the Frozen Four, and being voted D-League Defenseman of the Year were absolutely meaningless, while working every single one of them into the conversation. His résumé was a hell of a lot more impressive than Olly’s had been at twenty-one, that was for sure.

Olly’s phone buzzed. He checked it under the table.

*Your boy is driving Johann BONKERS,* said a text from Liz. The other sisters-in-law called him Dad. She refused.

*If we got them drunk we could sell tickets at Dad’s local,* answered Joey.

*Can we invite him to Christmas?* Sami asked. *Levi will be so sad he missed this.*

Olly blinked at his brothers. Joey gave him a “what?” expression, but Olly had no idea that they did shit like talk smack about Dad in group texts. It wasn’t happening in the main one for their family, so that might mean they had another one, didn’t it? MN-only, or not-Olly-only.

Benji, meanwhile, had gone all wide-eyed and innocent-looking—a fucking lie—and started expounding on how yoga, meditation, and therapy were crucial to his route to the NAHA. It looked like a vein was about to pop out on Dad’s forehead.

Sami buried a snort into his cup of coffee. Mom was still smiling at Benji like he was the second coming, before turning to Olly to ask him about life in DC.

After breakfast, Olly’s mom gave him a hug; Sami and Joey slapped him on the back and told him to tear it up in Colorado.

“Stay tough out there,” his dad said, squeezing Olly around the shoulders. He smelled the same as he always did: machine oil, wood shavings. Olly’s breakfast lurched in his stomach.

## Chapter Sixteen

The Eagles started going in the right direction as November rolled into December. Their offense was...okay, it was not the best. Dewitt and Lukesy were never going to play nicely on a line. Benji didn't want to jinx it by saying it out loud, but Olly seemed to be putting more minutes on the second line with Lukesy and Bevvo by the game.

Olly had a scar on his lip, though, from the elbow he'd gotten in Minnesota. It made Benji want to go get himself another game misconduct for beating Crowder's face in. They didn't host the Wolves until March, and Benji *sincerely* hoped that Crowder would leave him a space on his fucking dance card.

They had a long stretch in DC after the road trip, though, and Benji was ready to chill for a minute. These dudes were big as hell, and they hit hard, so Benji had to hit them harder. He wasn't injured, but his body needed to not slam into 200-pound guys flying full tilt down the ice for a few days.

"Are we decorating for Christmas?" Olly asked. He was on the couch, glaring at ESPN anchors while Benji cleaned up the kitchen after lunch. Benji knew enough about football to fumble through locker-room conversations; Olly really gave a shit, and had gotten into more than one argument with Bevvo about it. Too bad the Vikings were dead last in whatever conference they played in.

"You want to?"

Olly mumbled something about needing a distraction from the Vikings offensive line, which was probably a yes.

Benji bounced over to the couch and threw himself down. His head ended up in the vicinity of Olly's lap. "I've never had my own Christmas tree."

"I thought you'd be, I don't know, Elf. Spirit of the holidays."

Benji shrugged against the couch cushion, shoulders pressing into the side of Olly's leg. Olly squirmed a little bit but didn't shove him off. Was that progress? Toward what, Benji couldn't say. "Dunno, bud. It was never really a thing for us, growing up. No money."

"We don't have to go crazy or anything."

"I like crazy." Benji smiled up at him. Olly smiled back, like he hadn't been able to tell his face to stop in time. He had a nice smile, and he'd been

letting it out more recently. He still needed to go to therapy, but some of the weight had lifted off his shoulders after Minnesota: he hadn't cried in any of their hotel-gym yoga sessions, and as far as Benji could tell, he'd only thrown up before a couple of games. Benji had crashed in his and Pairo's room a few more times, and Olly had slept, too. The dark circles under his eyes were looking less acute.

Olly pulled out his phone to look up tree farms. Benji's suggestion that they get a plastic one was met with blue-eyed disgust. Benji had a lot of ground to make up on the Christmas front: his billet fam in Michigan was Jewish, and the Deveraux always went to LA to visit Andre. And they had a fake tree, so apparently it didn't count.

He shut his eyes and got more comfortable, Olly muttering to himself about trees. It was soothing, at least until Olly shoved him off his lap. "Let's get a Christmas tree, bud."

They took Benji's truck, which he had not been giving enough love recently. Olly directed him out of the clusterfuck of Northern Virginia suburbs, and after a minimal number of backups—it was like 2 pm on a Monday, to be clear, why was anyone else on the damned road—they were cruising down a highway out past Dulles, radio tuned to Christmas music. The roads narrowed and farms replaced subdivisions. The vertebral ridge of the Blue Ridge Mountains drifted closer, until they were far enough into the foothills that he couldn't see the mountains themselves at all.

"Pretty," Benji said, after the companionable silence had been dragging on a little too long. It reminded him of Central Pennsylvania, only less desperate-looking. Lots of white fences and horses wearing fancy plaid coats. Every driveway had a sign with an estate name.

Olly made a quiet noise of agreement. He was looking out the window, at one of the first really cold days they'd gotten in Virginia. That Minnesota fucker was still only wearing a jacket, though, even if his hair was spilling out of a gray beanie. Benji was in an Eagles puffer coat. He did not fuck with freezing his ass off.

There were only a couple of other trucks in the field, behind a cheerful Snickersville Turnpike Tree Farm sign painted with a cartoon Christmas tree.

"We should put this on Instagram," Olly told him. As promised, he'd been working on Benji's social media game. So far they'd made his account public and tripled his number of posts, mostly with game photos and a few funny pictures from team dinners. A lot of them were of Olly looking some

variation on exasperated with him. But as promised, he'd helped with the captions.

They snapped a selfie, then headed for a red-painted shack. A fat chocolate lab sprawled on the ground, thumping her tail on the winter grass. Benji squooshed her face and rubbed her tummy, while Olly and a guy wearing camo took a deep dive into the pros and cons of firs versus spruces.

Olly was such a nerd. If there was one fucker in the world who'd have an opinion about whatever the fuck a noble fir was, it was him.

"Can I have the dog?" Benji asked, peeling himself up off the ground. The lab followed, panting happily as he propped his arm on Olly's shoulder.

"Make sure she doesn't jump in your truck," camo dude said. "One family got fifteen minutes down the road before they noticed her."

"I would be super-sad about that." He winked. "Maybe someone would let me get a dog. If it was an accident."

"We talked about that like two times," Olly said, pushing him off. "Also we can't get a dog."

Camo was flicking his eyes between them. "Well," he said eventually, "whatever works for you folks."

He handed Olly an orange-handled saw and Benji a map with the types of trees, and off they went.

Olly had gone all strange and tense again, though. This was his little adventure, but he'd clammed up as soon as they'd left the shack, the lab still waddling along behind them. Benji was totally stealing her if she could manage to get her chub up into the back of the truck.

The map told him they were in a field with Leyland Cypresses. Benji didn't bother asking the OG Christmas tree connoisseur if any of them were coming home with them. Even Benji could see that these fucks were inferior. His first Christmas tree was not going to look like landscaping from a cheap subdivision.

Next up were Scotch pines. Benji thought they looked nice and fluffy. Huggable, like the lab.

"What about one of these guys?"

Olly demonstrated how bendable the branches were and informed him that they weren't great for hanging ornaments.

"Bro, do we even have any ornaments?"

"No," Olly snapped.

"Dude, what the fuck is wrong with you?"

Olly spun on his heel and stalked deeper into the pines. His hair trailed down the back of his jacket like a flag, bright as holly berries against all the greenery. Benji stuck his hands in his pockets—it was fucking *cold*, with a low gray sky and wind with bite to it; he should have worn a more substantial hat than his Frozen Four snapback—and stomped after him.

It was hard to stomp effectively on nice, springy pine needles, but he thought he gave it the good old college try.

Olly finally stopped in a stand of silvery trees. They were short and fat, also like the lab. She was still toddling along with them, and leaned into Olly's leg when he'd drawn himself to a halt. He put his free hand on her head and dug his fingers into her fur.

"Sorry," he muttered, aiming it toward the dog's upturned face.

"You should be," Benji informed him, after a calming breath. "I don't know why you're trying to bite my head off."

"I just..." He paused. "Doesn't it bother you? What that guy was thinking?"

"Um, no, because I have no idea what he was thinking. And if I did, why would I care?"

"He thought we were, like, dating. Because you were all over me. And you were talking about how I wouldn't let you get a dog."

"Bud, I have no idea how you read all that into a two-second conversation. Also, I was not all over you." If Benji was all over someone, it was a hell of a lot more obvious than an arm on a shoulder.

"Fuck." Olly shook his head. "You don't get it."

"What the fuck is there to even get?" Benji could feel his heart rate accelerating, which was a sign that he needed to take a step back from the conversation.

"Nothing," Olly shot back, in a way that made it clear that whatever the fuck was going on was actually the opposite. The lab was still propping up his leg, shooting a concerned look at him. She licked her lips and whined.

"You're scaring the fucking dog."

"*You're* scaring the fucking dog! You're the one who's yelling!"

"I'm not yelling!" Okay, maybe he was yelling. Strike two. He needed to walk away. "Olly, I'm gonna remove myself from this situation and calm the fuck down. Maybe you can figure out what the fuck is going on and then clue me in, because, buddy, I am not fucking seeing it. Why the fuck would I care if some rando fucking dude I'm never going to see again—some fucking



camo-wearing dude at a Christmas tree farm in—I literally don't know where the fuck we are right now—maybe, *just* possibly—no independent confirmation on this or anything—thinks we're gay?"

He spun on his heel and stomped away again, managing to bring his boot down on a nice, crackly branch to give it some effect.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

The Christmas tree field trip was a disaster. Benji had disappeared for twenty minutes, coming back with two Styrofoam cups of box-mix hot chocolate. He shoved one into Olly's hand. The watery, chemical taste burned at the back of his throat.

Olly picked out a tree: a blue spruce that he realized had a giant hole in the back, once he'd already cut it down. Fucking great.

Benji was correct that they didn't have any ornaments and Olly had been too rattled at the farm to remember to pick up a Christmas tree stand. He'd been opening his mouth to propose a Target run once they got back to the 505—anything to avoid sitting in the apartment, feeling Benji's anger radiating out at him—when Benji picked his keys back up and announced he was going over to Pairo's. He shut the door with a slam.

Fine. Olly could go to Target by his own damned self.

There was no way Benji was ever going to understand, was the thing. And what the fuck could Olly do to make him understand? Come out? Because it had gone so well last time.

Okay. Olly had to admit, as he slammed a box of lights into his bright red cart: Benji did not strike him as the type of person who was going to freak out and attack him.

It would change things, though. One more chink in the wall of secrecy Olly huddled behind. One step closer to being dissected on ESPN and TSN like a helplessly soft little lab animal. He couldn't keep playing, if he got outed; he wasn't strong enough to take the abuse, whether from other players, the media, fans, or the comments sections. He wished he was, but he just fucking wasn't. He was barely hanging on as it was.

While he'd been at his lake house last summer, hiding from everyone, he'd read every single comment on the NAHA's social media posts for Pride. Felt every single one dig its claws into his stomach, cling in and burrow deeper. He'd found a notepad in the kitchen drawer and kept a tally: one column for "there's no place for you here," one column for "I support you."

It hadn't even been close. Hundreds in the "shut up or get out" side of the scales. A handful trying to tip it back the other way. It wasn't enough.

Picking out a Christmas tree skirt was the last fucking thing he wanted to

be doing right now, breathing big box store air and listening to “Jingle Bell Rock.” But here he was, anyway, balls-deep in Target’s Christmas Forest. He threw a navy-and-gold tree skirt in the cart.

Ornaments were beyond him. His family had boxes and boxes of them, everything from third-grade macaroni art to a ceramic husky he’d found in Denver that looked exactly like Pebbles. Their tree had never looked like the stylish ones some of the team WAGs put together, but it was theirs: kind of a mess, way too many hockey-themed ornaments, his mom trying to carve out a little slice for herself with some delicate frosted-glass balls. At least one got broken every year, and every year his dad gave her a new one.

“Excuse me,” said a voice from behind him.

Olly turned. A girl, maybe nine or ten, was looking up at him with big earnest brown eyes. She had something clutched in her hands.

“Are you Oliver Järvinen?” she asked, pronouncing his last name carefully, like she’d practiced.

“That’s me.” Olly didn’t get recognized much, even though to his surprise, DC was a decent hockey town.

“I thought you might want this for your tree.” She offered him an ornament in the shape of the Eagles logo. He could see a guy that looked like her dad, leaning on a cart over by the Support Your Local Teams section.

“Thanks a lot,” he told her, setting it in the cart with a lot more care than he’d used with the tree skirt. “You like hockey, yeah?”

“It’s my favorite,” she announced, and told him about playing in the only girls’ youth league in the area.

Her enthusiasm was pretty fucking cute. When was the last time he’d been that excited about getting out on the ice and zooming around?

She was waving her dad over to take a picture when she added, “Also my dad says you need to get out of your head and shoot the puck.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he promised. Jesus fuck.

The dad mouthed *sorry* at him over her head. Olly made himself laugh it off and signed another Eagles ornament for her.

\* \* \*

Benji wasn’t in the apartment when Olly got back. He set up the tree in the empty corner next to the TV. Why would he care if Benji was home or not? This was clearly Olly’s deal, even if Benji getting his first Christmas tree at

twenty-one years old made his chest squeeze.

Their apartment was still basic as hell: an industrial box with a couch, a TV, and the minimum additional furniture required for life. Not like it was worth making it any nicer. He might be gone by next season, anyway, and even if he was still hanging on, Benji would probably be done with him.

The tree made the apartment feel...sadder, though. Like it was trying as hard as it could, bare patch hidden against the wall, white lights glowing, single ornament front and center. And it still wasn't getting there.

He turned on the Vikings and opened a beer. Followed that up by ordering a pizza. Because literally, fuck everything. Fuck the NAHA, fuck his diet plan, fuck the terrible Vikings offense, fuck Benji, fuck his life.

He ate half the pizza and opened another beer. Kirk Cousins got sacked, which was not a metaphor for Olly's own miserable life.

By halftime, Olly was done with his second beer.

And, he realized, he was also—done.

With everything.

Fuck his dad. Fuck the Wolves. Fuck the fucking haters on the internet.

And fuck this paralytic, life-ruining black hole of terror.

He grabbed his laptop as the Vikings defense, the bright spot of their otherwise terrible season, allowed the Chargers to move the chains twenty-five yards down the field. He pulled up a hockey stats website and made it spit out his numbers.

And the thing was: every single one of them was going in the right direction. Minutes. Assists. Penalties killed. Goals—okay, he really needed to put the fucking puck in the net—but he had them. The coaching staff believed in him; the front office had to believe in him, or they wouldn't have taken him knowing what a liability he was. The league could have punted him to Buffalo or Arizona, if the point had been to stick him somewhere to call off the attack. Or they could have let Minnesota put him on waivers and said "I dare you" to the lawsuit, and he'd have been back in the D-League in some irrelevant corner of America.

Except he wouldn't, because he wasn't that bad at hockey.

Had never been that bad at hockey, he forced himself to admit, staring at his numbers. His third year at Colorado had been good until he got hurt, which happened. It had dragged on for longer than it should have, because he'd been too fucking stubborn to take the recovery time he'd needed. He'd started out okay in Minnesota, even if the team had been struggling; his

issues hadn't come until the coaching change in December.

Olly wouldn't have played in the D-League. Someone would have claimed him off waivers, even if it was fucking Buffalo.

But none of that had happened. Olly had a team who believed in him, now. He liked these idiots, from Dewitt's carpool-dad energy to the way Luke'sy rolled his eyes during all of his speeches; Yelich's broad, earnest face; Pairo swinging from laser-focus between the pipes to barely tying his shoes without making it a Broadway production. Benji, herding him back toward the land of the living with salmon bowls and old-person yoga in a hotel gym in Winnipeg.

And here he was, on the verge of a meltdown because someone had maybe thought he and Benji were *close*.

Olly would love to be lucky enough to find someone like Benji to be close to, when he retired. He was thoughtful and kind and, okay, so hot that sometimes Olly physically could not look at him: sitting on the couch this morning, Benji's head in his fucking lap, with those tilted greeny-hazel eyes grinning up at him while he said, "*I like crazy.*"

And Benji was pissed at him now. He had every right to be. Olly needed to do more than apologize this time: he had to fix it, just like he needed to fix whatever was going wrong in his head.

He couldn't keep going like this.

Olly's brain must have tired itself out eventually, because he managed to fall asleep on the couch. He woke up feeling not exactly refreshed, but less drugged-out and delirious than the other nights he'd slept. Benji stumbled in while Olly was making coffee.

He smelled like the floor of a cheap bar, looked worse. Olly very carefully kept all expressions off his face. This wasn't the type of shit that Benji pulled, even though he went out on a regular basis.

"Here's a Gatorade," he offered.

Benji unscrewed the cap, chugged half of it, and stopped, looking queasy. "I'm going to bed. Get me up when we have to go?"

"Roger, bud." Fortunately, it was a late game.

Olly's phone buzzed as he watched Benji trudge down the hall to his bedroom. It was Pairo: *This one is NOT my fault Oliver. IDK what the hell got into him.*

He swallowed. Started about three different responses; deleted all of them.

*I see your text in progress dots, what the hell is going on*

Olly really needed to remember to turn that setting off. *He's going to sleep it off*, he answered finally.

*If any of the coaches ask, I had nothing to do with this!!*

Olly sent back the thumbs-up emoji, even though six hours of sleep didn't end up making a dent in Benji's misery. Olly tried to dose him with Gatorade, but watching him sip Lemon Lime while gnawing on a cold slice of pizza in the car was one of the sadder sights in his recent memory. Benji hadn't even wanted a kale smoothie or a chia pudding bowl.

"We could say you have the flu," he offered, as he pulled up to the player's entrance.

"I did this to myself," Benji said. "I'm not lying about it. I'll be fine."

"Whatever you say."

"Don't fucking judge me," he snapped.

"Whoa, bud. I'm not." He was, maybe, but from a this-isn't-like-you-what's-going-on place.

Benji shuffled toward the locker room. Olly winced and followed him. He still smelled like the inside of a shot glass, and NAHA coaching staff had spidey senses for rookies with hangovers. He was going to get such a big ass-whipping, and very probably also benched and fined.

Poiro seemed okay, if a little panicky after the defensive coach dragged Benji out of the locker room.

"I tried to get him to chill out!" Poiro hissed, leaning over Benji's empty stall. "I was giving him waters and trying to distract him, but he would not fucking cooperate. And there was this girl... I went to the bathroom for *one* minute and when I got back they were gone. Olly, you have to back me up on this."

"I believe you." He hadn't seen Poiro have more than two drinks at once since their little chat in the Starbucks, even if he still went out constantly.

Poiro deflated. "I don't know what's wrong with him."

"We kind of got into it yesterday." Olly finished swapping his suit for shorts and a hoodie.

"Oh my god, fix your marriage."

Olly rolled his eyes and shoved Poiro's face back into his own stall. "Sure,

dude.”

He put on his headphones and headed for the weight room to go through his pre-warm-up sequence. Benji dragged in during the fourth song on Olly’s pregame playlist, while Steven Tyler was screaming through “Walk This Way.”

His shoulders were hunched in on themselves, his curls flattened in the back from being slept on. Benji wasn’t looking at anyone, at least until he must have felt Olly’s eyes on him; and then he looked up, gave his head a little halfway shake. His eyes looked swollen and puffy, barely more than green slits.

It was unimaginable that Benji cared enough to let Olly affect him this way. But there he was, shrugging off the eye contact and bending to adjust the settings on his bike.

Olly dropped his own head back down. For the next few hours, he knew exactly what he needed to do.

\* \* \*

They were down 2-0 by the first intermission. Benji had somehow avoided getting benched, but his reaction times weren’t where they needed to be, and the Eagles couldn’t get the puck out of their defensive zone. Detroit was in a dogfight with Chicago for the top of their division, and they needed a W.

Olly put his headphones back in and shut his eyes. Shut it all out, except for the steady throb of the bass line from “Back in Black”; the chilly space crackling between Dewitt and Luke; the soft goal Pairo had let in before the buzzer; Benji with his head between his knees, back heaving under his pads.

When the next period started, Detroit scored immediately. 3-0.

Pairo looked shell-shocked. Their blue line had a Benji-sized hole in it; Coach O obviously agreed, because he dragged him off the ice right after the goal and sent in Soko. Benji was one of the loudest guys on the bench: yelling, rattling his stick, generally making a nuisance of himself. Today he looked sick and quiet. Olly didn’t know if he’d ever fucked up like this before.

Coach O barked in Olly’s direction that he was up next, as Lukesy went over the boards.

“We’re not losing this fucking game,” Olly told Benji. One stupid rookie mistake was not going to become the defining story of this *fucking* night.

Benji didn't answer.

And fuck it.

Olly scored, anyway, on exactly the kind of play he never tried: deking one D-man, squeezing between two others, and firing the puck five-hole behind Lukesy's screen.

Two minutes later, Bevvo crashed the net after a scramble around the Wheelers' goal. They went into the final intermission with the score at 3-2.

"Keep doing what you're doing, Järvinen," Coach O ordered in the locker room.

Olly didn't know what he was doing: he was as angry as he'd been the night before, at himself and everything wrong in his life. He didn't get a redo on that. So the only thing he could do was play fucking hockey.

With the final period halfway gone, Olly snatched up a sloppy turnover in the neutral zone. One of the Detroit Ds was caught out of position; Lukesy was streaking up the right, yelling for the puck, and suddenly it was a two-on-one. Olly tapped a pass to Luke; Luke shouldered past the Detroit D-man, got the goalie leaning right, and then put the puck back on the center of Olly's tape.

He sent it straight into the top left corner. The lamp lit up; the goal horn blared. Luke jumped on his shoulders, screamed "*I fucking love you buddy!*" and Olly couldn't hear anything else over the roar of the crowd. He was crying, maybe; he could feel tears gathering under his eyelashes when he squeezed his eyes shut. He shouldn't be crying; had never cried out on the ice, not even as a little kid. He'd known better.

But here he was. Two goals. Tie game. It felt—clean.

Benji shoved Lukesy out of the way when they were back on the bench. "Proud of you, dude," he said, dragging Olly in for a bone-creaking hug. "Way to get after it."

"Look at him, he's about to say it was a team effort," Bevvo chipped in from down the bench.

Olly shut his mouth. Benji's arm was a heavy weight across his shoulders. He let their helmets tip together, just for a second, amid the chaos of the bench. It was a relief, or something. Not just the goals, but the pressure of Benji's arm against the back of his pads.

Not a solution to anything, but more than he'd had before. Progress.

Coach O called for Dewey's line to go over the boards, and Benji's arm got knocked off in the shuffle. They were all on their feet in a minute,



anyway, as Dewey made it four on another breakaway.

And they fucking won.

Olly was named first star once the clock had run out. It was unreal, stepping back out onto the ice and doing a quick little loop with his stick raised toward the crowd. Applause thundered down from the rafters. It felt like it had to be happening to someone else: but no, there was the ice under his skates, the sweat dripping down his back, plastering his hair to his skull.

Olly had told Benji that they weren't going to lose this game.

And by god, they hadn't.

For once, Olly didn't try to duck out of the backslaps and congratulations in the locker room. He could feel his cheeks aching with the unfamiliar sensation of a smile. It reminded him of being in Colorado, almost, after the first goal he'd scored in the NAHA. Just a skinny kid on a call-up holding out a puck with his name written on it, posing for the cameras and proving that he belonged.

"Olly," Coach O called, once Dewey's speech and Bevvo's victory playlist had wound to a close. "Come here for a second, before you go."

Olly followed him down the hallway to his office. It was the first time he'd been inside it, he realized, as Coach O leaned a hip against the side of his desk. It was neater than he would have expected, the desk clear except for a laptop and a few pictures of Coach O's family. He wondered if one of the group shots included Coach O's gay brother; he wondered what Coach O wanted to talk about, since he'd been pretty hands-off since their first little chat during training camp.

He wasn't about to get told he was being traded, was he? It felt unlikely. But at the same time, that familiar voice in the back of his head—the one he thought he'd gotten to turn off, at least for a little while—began to raise its usual chorus of Olly's failings and inadequacies.

Olly clenched his fingers in the pockets of his suit jacket, wishing he had his pregame tennis ball.

"I just wanted to say," Coach O began, "that I'm proud of what you went out there and did tonight."

He forced his fingers to loosen their grip on the lining of his pockets. That didn't sound like a precursor to *pack your bags for Buffalo*.

"I know this hasn't been the easiest transition, and I'll admit that I've been worried a few times this season," he continued. "But when you play like that, it's proof of all the reasons why we wanted you to be a part of this

organization. And why it's been worth it to give you a little more space to work things out."

Olly took his hands out of his pockets. He didn't want to be the kind of player who needed space to work things out. He never had before. "I've been working hard on..." He paused, swallowed. "The things we talked about before. Yoga. The mental stuff."

"I can tell."

"I think I'm going to start going to therapy," Olly blurted out. He braced his shoulders, even though it was probably unnecessary. The Eagles had a sports psychologist on staff, for Christ's sake, and Coach O had practically ordered him into sessions when they'd talked before. Olly hadn't listened, obviously, and maybe this was too late, maybe Coach O had only meant for him to talk about the sports performance angle, not the rest of it—

"That's good," Coach O said immediately, like he hadn't had to think about it at all. "I'm glad to hear that."

Olly felt his shoulders relax. "Thanks, coach."

"Now get your damned roommate home so he can finish detoxing, and tell him I want to see his ass in this office bright and early tomorrow morning."

Olly opened his mouth to say something in defense of his *damned roommate*. Based on the expression on Coach O's formerly patient face, he elected to shut it on anything but "Yes, sir."

## Chapter Eighteen

Benji wanted—badly—to pretend the previous twenty-four hours of his life hadn't happened. But he hadn't gotten where he was by ignoring the hard stuff, so he took his lumps after the game; groveled for a solid twenty minutes in Coach O's office after morning skate; and escaped to Olly's car without a one-way ticket back to Hershey, just a hole in his bank account and the queasy regret of having disappointed someone whose opinion he cared about. And a text from Krista asking if he was sick, which he non-answered with *fine today*.

He didn't know what to do about Olly. He'd been normal after the game, waving away his first star with a media-ready sound bite about team effort; and he'd been normal this morning, making the coffee and shrugging off a compliment on their new Christmas tree and pacing Benji through their morning run. Quiet, but Benji hadn't known what to say either, as their footsteps thumped against the pavement. It had been a frigid, silent morning, their exhalations making clouds in the air as the sun inched its way over the DC skyline.

He was still pissed about Olly picking that stupid fucking fight at the tree farm; that he'd gone on the ice and played outside of his skin couldn't make it go away, even though Benji was glad the story from the game was *Järvinen: Finding His Form?* rather than *Bryzinski: Where the Fuck Was He?*

Benji usually let drama with his teammates roll right off his back. He didn't know why he couldn't let this thing with Olly go, too.

There was a decent break between Buffalo and Pittsburgh (which Benji was trying very hard not to think about more than he'd think about any other game). To Benji's surprise, Olly invited the guys over to watch football. They got wings delivered and Benji made a giant salad. Between the tree in the corner and Pairo's Santa hat, the 505 felt almost festive.

Olly stayed tucked into his corner of the couch in a Vikings hat, frown line deepening between his eyebrows as Bevvo gave him shit for even turning the game on. He and Lukesy had dragged a second TV over from their place, which was showing the Cowboys game on mute. Dak Prescott was having a better game in Dallas than Kirk Cousins up in the Twin Cities. The Vikings trailed the Packers by two touchdowns in the frozen north's big rivalry, so

Olly was extra-mutter-y.

Poiro gave them all shit for wasting their time on such a dumb sport, especially Luke, whose birthright as a Canadian was to know better. Benji—not a football guy—was trying to explain the rules to Yelich—even less of a football guy—until Bevvo took pity on him and explained what the fuck the offside rule actually meant.

“Your team sucks, bud,” Benji told Olly, dropping to the floor by his side of the couch. They needed more seating. And had gotten so many chirps for Olly’s pathetic-ass Christmas tree. Krista was coming down for the Pittsburgh game; maybe she could help them.

“It’s a rebuilding year,” Olly shot back, with a lot of dignity for someone who had been yelling at a television less than three minutes before.

Benji leaned up against his legs, because they were convenient, and because he would have done it last week. He was tired of the strange energy: he missed his weird, uptight roomie. It was strange to miss someone he spent so much damn time with, but there it was.

\* \* \*

Olly did the dishes after everyone left, Benji supervising from the breakfast bar with a bottle of coconut water.

“You’re so weird, dude,” Olly told him. Coconut water was nasty. So were gross-ass dishes and the little sponge, nurturing bacteria like a petri dish.

“I’m enjoying watching you do dishes, you lazy piece of shit.”

“I’d rather exchange a tiny fraction of my salary for someone else to clean the fucking kitchen.”

“We could get the cleaning service to come more often, I guess.” Benji propped his cheek on his hand. “I don’t really think about stuff like that, you know? So, like, NAHA life-hacks. Hit me.”

Olly scrubbed a particularly crusty spot on a plate. “Personal chef. But you eat well enough, I don’t think you need to go for that. You’ve got a stylist, and we aren’t getting a dog, so you don’t need concierge pet care.”

“Interior decorator?” Benji offered. “Christmas tree stylist? Is that a thing?”

“Anything is a thing if you have enough money.”

“Your Christmas tree is sad as fuck, bud. I would maybe go that direction.”

“Shut up, asshole.” Olly rinsed the stack of plates. “I don’t see you

contributing to the holiday cheer.”

“I like, tried, though.” It looked like he was going to keep talking, but then he stopped, lips pressed together.

Olly was so fucking sick of apologizing to Benji Bryzinski. He was trying to do the whole show-don't-tell deal instead: he'd made an appointment with a therapist just like he'd told Coach O, and he'd had the guys over because it was what Colorado-Olly would have done. Putting all of that into words was impossible. “There's a Christmas market over on the Mall. Want to go?”

Benji blinked at him, a slide of eyelashes over green eyes. He turned his bottle of coconut water around in his big hands. Olly squeezed out the sponge instead of watching the movements of his fingers. “I dunno,” he said. “Are you gonna pick a bullshit fight again?”

“No.” Olly dropped the sponge onto the counter next to the sink.

“If you promise.”

“I promise.”

Benji smiled, slowly enough that Olly could see the way it started around his mouth, moved through his cheeks and up to squeeze at the corners of his eyes. Olly felt it in his stomach. “Let's go, then.”

The Mall felt like Christmas Disney when they got there, white lights and the smells of cider and cut pine. It took Benji a few minutes to engage with the spirit of the endeavor, but Olly knew he'd get there.

They meandered, Olly acquiring two cups of not-terrible hot chocolate along the way. Benji smiled, like he knew it was the best Olly could manage as a peace offering.

An outdoor rink had been set up by the carousel, overlooked by the redbrick towers of the Smithsonian building.

“Come on, we have to,” Benji said. He was weighed down with too many shopping bags for someone who didn't do Christmas, cheeks pink and dark curls poking out from under a knit hat he'd picked up after a FaceTime consultation with Loic. It was a dark maroon-y red. The color looked good on him, echoed the red of his lips. Not that Olly paid attention to Benji's lips. They, and the hat, and his mischievous green eyes, were just there. Observable, to anyone who looked at him. “I still haven't seen you in figure skates, Toe Loop.”

“You're not going to like them.” But resistance was futile, especially because Benji looked exactly as ridiculous tripping on his toe picks as Olly had dared hope. “You're bad at this.”

They were, to be fair, shitty rental figure skates, and the ice was exactly what you'd expect from an outdoor rink in DC in December.

"Shut up," Benji said, grabbing his arm. "I've worked with skating coaches plenty. I don't want to sprain my fucking ankle."

"Language." Two kids in hockey skates whizzed by, one in a Dewitt jersey. If they noticed who Benji and Olly were, they weren't giving any sign of it.

Benji figured out his skates as the December night deepened around them, and it started to feel calming, gliding in unhurried ovals under the pools of light. Or as calming as it could be, when they were dodging people clinging to the boards and kids scooting behind triangles. It reminded him of being little, his mom skating backward to hold his hands while Christmas music piped through tinny speakers.

Olly flipped on his edges to skate backward himself, feeling the rumble of the uneven ice under his blades. It was nothing like the skating he did every other day of his life.

"You should show these assholes how to really skate," Benji told him after a while. There were a few guys wobbling through fake jumps, trying to impress their girlfriends; one girlfriend who jumped like she knew what she was doing.

Olly shouldn't; he really shouldn't. The skates were terrible, the ice was worse. But he already knew he was going to do it. "I haven't jumped in years."

Since before his MCL surgery, actually. He used to like to show off whenever the figure skating coaches came in. He had real figure skates in the basement in Duluth, with all the boxes he hadn't bothered to bring down. Olly had always enjoyed the precision of it. Not as much as the power and aggression of hockey; definitely not enough to put on tight pants and sequins and twizzle. But okay, in a universe without sequins, he could have been a figure skater.

"I'll catch you if you fall."

"I'm going to need you to lie to Coach O if I tear my MCL again."

"Cross my heart, buddy." He drew an X over his chest with one gloved finger, as Olly swung toward the center of the ice.

Olly let himself pick up some speed, more than they'd been getting as they meandered along. He visualized the sequence of movements in his head, putting them together like links on a chain.

One of the bad skaters wiped out. His girlfriend laughed, giving him a hand to his feet, and Olly was next.

He set himself up; then reached with his left toe pick, dug in, and lifted off. He wobbled like a fucker on the outside edge of his landing foot, and barely got the other foot up to knee-height. But he landed it, and earned himself a whoop from Benji and a smattering of applause.

“I got a whole inch off the ground,” he said, laughing it off as he skated back up to Benji.

“You should maybe stick to hockey.”

“You think?” Olly elbowed him.

Benji laughed, grabbing his elbow and towing him back out. “I dunno. You’d look pretty cute in one of those little outfits.”

Olly rolled his eyes. He couldn’t even take Benji seriously with that. “Sure, buddy.”

They kept skating, talking about nothing and laughing a lot. Benji convinced him to jump a few more times, and with each repetition it felt easier, his body lighter. The cold air was sharp on his cheeks, like it could start snowing, but the sky was clear and it didn’t snow here in December, anyway.

The ice was nearing empty by the time Benji asked him how to do some spins. It went about as well as he would have expected, Benji flailing his arms around like a five-year-old and unable to keep his feet even slightly close together. Plus, every time he completed one torturous rotation, they’d make eye contact, and crack up.

Olly called it when Benji almost clocked him with a stray arm, catching it in the air and giving it a yank.

“Quit it, I’m practicing!”

“You’re too bad at this to practice!”

“You’re the worst fucking skating coach I’ve ever had.” Benji jerked his arm back, and Olly skidded into the solid line of his body. They pushed at each other, still laughing, until Benji caught a toe pick and staggered. That set them off even worse, slipping and shoving at each other until Olly ended up wheezing into Benji’s coat. Benji had a fist around his collar, which he used to drag his face up: Olly was going to make another crack about his skating, but it died on his lips when their eyes caught.

Benji’s eyes were crinkled up at the corners, and he was looking down at Olly with an unguarded, open affection that made something turn over in his

stomach.

And okay, yes, there were his lips, the same ripe-berry color as his new hat.

Olly knew he should move: use the hands pressed against Benji's chest to push him away, get an elbow up against the iron wall of his stomach. But he couldn't. Literally could not move.

Benji licked his lips, narrowed his eyes a fraction. Olly's heart was rabbiting in his chest, worse than the longest shift he'd skated against Buffalo.

He felt Benji's hand move. Very slowly make its way up from his collar, over his throat, along the line of his jaw. Olly wondered if Benji could feel the way his pulse was pounding, under the thin, implausible camouflage of his skin.

It was too much, Benji looking like this, like everything Olly had ever wanted and was never, ever going to have. He wanted to run away and push closer, eliminate every molecule of air between their bodies and simultaneously re-establish every boundary he'd ever failed to keep.

He couldn't do it. But the moment kept dragging on, and on, like they were frozen together in ice. Looking at each other, green eyes into blue.

Benji blinked, finally. He flicked Olly's nose, and the sting of it brought reality surging back. "It's late," he said.

"Gotta rest up for Pittsburgh," Olly answered, stupidly. It was days away, and Benji didn't need the reminder right now.

He blew out a sigh. They were still close enough together that Olly could feel the air moving across his cheekbones; at least until Benji stepped back, shaking his head. "These shitty-ass skates are giving me a blister, anyway."

They returned their terrible skates and Olly helped Benji get his Christmas shopping back to the 505. When he woke up in the morning, three new ornaments had joined the Eagles logo on the tree.



## Chapter Nineteen

Krista had some thoughts about the state of the apartment—“God, it’s still so empty!”—when she arrived in DC, so Benji let her take him to buy two extra chairs for the living room.

It made her happy. And they did need chairs.

Olly was conspicuously absent, slipping out for some unspecified errand. It shouldn’t bother Benji that Olly did shit without him. But he could know what his reaction *should* be, and simultaneously feel a vague itch at not knowing what Olly was doing.

Krista kept up a patter of gossipy chatter all day, like if she stopped talking about her new partnership with some skin-care company, her wheels would fall off. He could tell it was fake. She couldn’t hide things from him at this point. But she clearly wanted to, and he wanted to have a nice visit, not end up fighting the way they always did. Not end up feeling like there was nothing he could do to keep her from getting mad at him. Benji’d had enough of pissing people off recently.

They went out to dinner in Dupont Circle, some trendy place Anna Dewitt had recommended. Krista made a whole production of announcing Benji’s name for the reservation, as if the girl at the hostess stand gave a fuck who he was.

Just like the restaurant where he’d been stood up in Pittsburgh, he didn’t recognize half the shit on the menu. And not because it was, like, quinoa—Benji was fluent in health food, thank you very much—but because it was all in another language. Not even French this time. Something with a lot of *t*’s and *x*’s.

Krista ordered sparkling water and a glass of white wine. Benji let the server upsell him on a fancy mocktail, to see what the fuck “smoked ice” could possibly be about. After the Detroit fiasco, he had instituted a ban on drinking the day before games.

“So,” K said, like she was about to get real for the first time all day. She turned the stem of her wineglass between her fingers. “I’m worried about you.”

“Really.”

“I heard about the last game. You weren’t sick. And people talk.”

“I fucked up.” He shrugged, took a sip of his drink. It wasn’t worth nine dollars. “It was a mistake. I won’t make it again.”

“This can’t be the story of your rookie season. You already had that pants incident. And the fighting. That’s a lot of distractions.”

He set his drink down. “I’ve got an agent. It’s under control.”

“I don’t think you’re taking this seriously enough.”

“Can we talk about something other than my job? Jesus.”

“I’ve been around the game, that’s all.”

“And I haven’t?” he snapped, and immediately felt guilty. She’d always been like this: doing her best to act like the mom neither of them had ever had. He wished it came without the side serving of perennial disappointment, though. Like no matter what he did, it wasn’t going to live up to her ever-evolving standards.

“*Fine*,” she shot back, with a flash of fire that made her look more like the sister he knew.

He grinned at her. “There’s my girl. Come on, yell at me in this fancy-ass restaurant.”

“Stop.” She rolled her perfectly made-up eyes and took a sip of wine, leaving a lipstick print on the rim. “So what do you want to talk about? Your love life? If I can’t grill you about hockey, I get to grill you about girls.”

“Good. ’Cause that means there’s nothing to grill me about.”

“Seriously? You’re my brother, but I can see that someone might find you attractive.”

“Touching me right in here, K.” He patted his chest.

“Don’t you want to meet someone?”

“I’m focusing on my career.”

She lifted her glass, acknowledging the point. “Well, Anna says she can set you up whenever you want. Her yoga teacher is a big hockey fan.”

“Perfect. I love bringing that puck bunny energy into my practice.”

“She’s from Minnesota, god. Anna wouldn’t set you up with a puck bunny.”

Benji snickered. “I’m at capacity with high-maintenance Minnesotans, thanks.”

“Benj.”

“What?”

She was looking at him seriously now. Her eyes were a different blue than the ones he was used to having stare back at him. Krista’s were as light as a

summer sky; Olly's were all dark and serious, like the deep water of whatever Great Lake he'd grown up on. "You're twenty-one. And you've never had a girlfriend."

"Fuck you, I totally have."

"Not one that counts," she said, with a dismissive hand-wave. Which, okay, was maybe not the most invalid take on his love life. For his first two years of high school he'd been kicking too hard to keep his head above water, between school and hockey and working to pay for his ice time. In the NHTC he'd been working his ass off to relearn how to skate with his adult bod and keep up with everybody else. There'd been a couple of girls at the Q, though, the longest-running one his sophomore year. He kept fucking her until he realized that *she* thought he was going to meet her parents while *he* was still on the friends-with-bennies track. And he hadn't wanted to close himself off to the possibility of five-ways with Tri Betas and Derrick from the first line. So that had been the end of that.

The inquisition got derailed when their food arrived. Krista photographed hers carefully, then made him take like seven different pictures of her from the other side of the table, smiling with her wineglass. It was better than getting grilled, so he played along, steered the conversation back toward the new branding things she was working on for her Instagram. He was happy for her to be putting energy into literally anything other than goddamned Rob.

They were supposed to try dinner with Rob again, after the game. Krista had sworn it would be different this time.

Benji wasn't holding his breath.

\* \* \*

It wasn't different. Well, it was. Robbo went down after a hard check in the first, the kind of hit that made the whole arena go *ohhhhhh*. He didn't return.

The rest of the game was chippy, but nothing extraordinary. The Eagles' power play was firing on all cylinders for the first time of the season, and Pairo's wobbliness between the pipes seemed to have settled itself down, so it ended 3-1. Olly got an empty-netter to score in consecutive games for the first time in...whenever. Benji didn't know every single one of his stats.

"Come out, buddy," Pairo invited, stripping his pads into Benji's stall.

"I'm supposed to have dinner with the in-laws."

"Yeah, right." Pairo rolled his eyes and unsnapped a forearm guard,

dropping it onto Benji's slice of bench.

"Keep your shit in your own cubby, dude. Olly, you see what I have to protect you from?" He whipped the guard back at Pairo's head. He caught it with his freak-reflexes.

Olly was down to his Under Armour, sweaty hair falling out of the braid he kept it in for games. His cheeks were flushed red and he had a visor cut across the bridge of his nose, which Benji hadn't noticed or he would have boarded whoever did it. "Thanks for all the hard work."

"Can I come to dinner?" Pairo asked, like the asshole he was. "Your sister's hot."

"Be my guest."

"Naw," he finally said, like he was really thinking about it. "I'm too young to be tamed."

Olly coughed something that sounded like *sure seems like staying out of Hershey tamed you*, but Benji was not getting in the middle of that. Even if he was, literally, in the middle when Pairo went on the attack.

It wasn't enough to distract him from Krista's so-apologetic text, begging off from dinner. She couldn't *wait* to see him for Christmas, though.

Benji had been trying not to think about his upcoming self-inflicted roadie to Pittsburgh, so all the things he was trying not to think about resulted in going out with the guys. Olly even came, for once, which made Benji feel bizarrely like something in his life had settled into alignment. They crammed into a booth at some douchebag college bar, critiquing Yelich's game plan for proposing to his girlfriend. Better than sitting alone with his thoughts, for sure.

## Chapter Twenty

Olly put together points in the next two games against Buffalo and Ottawa. So, two of the worst teams in the league. He explained this to his new therapist, a very calm woman named Dr. Martinez, over FaceTime from one of the little business-services meeting rooms in the hotel in Ottawa. How it didn't really count, how half of his points for the season were against basement dwellers.

She asked him why he was saying his success didn't matter.

He felt like his brain had been scraped out after they finished talking. It was their third session. He'd picked her mostly at random—all he'd cared about was finding someone who could see him quickly, who would do video when he was on the road.

But this was different. He hadn't talked about his sexuality yet, just the pounding anxiety and how he felt like he was clinging to his career with his fingernails and how he wasn't sure he could get through Christmas with his family.

Benji was flying from Ottawa to Pittsburgh; Olly had almost asked him if he wouldn't rather go back to DC. Finish decorating the tree. Go ice skating, and stare into each other's eyes, and fall asleep on the couch close enough that they woke up touching.

Yeah fucking right.

He went back to Minnesota. Joey and Levi still lived in Duluth, Levi's family a block away from the Järvinen homestead. So it was Olly, Sami, Suzana, Ada, and Matt packed into the house. It looked the same as it always had, when he and Sami pulled up from the airport: colored lights winding around the maple tree in the front yard, and the two skinny cypresses flanking the front door. A light-up plastic Nativity scene sprawled underneath the maple, and the Christmas tree glowed through the living room window.

"Here we go." Sami cut the engine of his car.

"How's tonight looking?"

"Dad and Liz were arguing about whether potatoes count as a vegetable when I left."

Olly snorted. "Sounds about right."

Sami twisted around to look at him, the red and blue and green lights from

the maple blinking across his face. “You seem a little better?” he asked, like he wasn’t sure. “Than the last time we talked.”

“What, at the diner?”

“No, on the phone.” Sami grinned at him, flashing his damned dimple. He was the only one in the family who had one, and he abused it mercilessly. Joey was the steady one, Levi was the wild one (or had been, anyway), and Sami had somehow ended up as both the smartest and the hottest of the Järvinen brothers. (Olly was the gay one.) “I was too busy watching your boy out-nice Dad at the diner. I’m glad you’re doing better with your roommate this year.”

Sami punched his shoulder hard enough to remind Olly that he was still the baby of the family. He unbuckled his seat belt. “And if he turns out to be a dickface, too, just give us enough notice to get down there and kick his ass, ’cause it might take all three of us to hold him down.”

Sami grabbed Olly’s suitcase and hauled it up the driveway to the back door. Salt crunched under their feet, and Olly enjoyed the burn of the cold air against his face. He missed the winter—real winter, white with teeth.

The kitchen was empty: it was past the kids’ bedtime, and the other siblings and cousins and spouses had cleared out. They stripped off boots and layers in the utility room at the back of the kitchen, like Olly had been doing his entire life. He hung his coat on the hook that said *Oliver J* in his second-grade handwriting.

“You want a beer or anything?” Sami asked, padding over to the refrigerator in his sock feet. It was covered in grandkids’ artwork and family pictures: Disney when he’d been eight, that picture of Olly and the dog taking a face-off that Sami had put on Facebook.

“Sure.” He hadn’t started to be tired yet. The game yesterday had been late, and he’d played enough minutes to tire himself out. He’d fallen asleep on top of the covers, Pairo and Benji arguing about *Die Hard* in the background. The last thing he remembered was Benji complaining about how Soko had started watching creepy true-crime documentaries all the time.

Benji’s alarm had gone off early for his flight, but Olly had slipped right back to sleep afterward, curled up in the warm dip Benji’s body had left in the mattress. He’d been too sleepy to think about it, but he’d woken up with a nervous, skittering feeling in his stomach and his hips pressing down into the bed.

He might be blushing at the memory. He didn’t know where all of this was

coming from: sex and his teammates had always existed in separate worlds to him.

He knew himself well enough to admit that he would, most certainly, fuck Benji. Except that he never would.

“Okay over there, baby bro?” Sami asked. “You had a good game yesterday. We all watched.”

Olly realized he was staring at a drawing of stick-figure Grandma and Pops like it was the *Mona Lisa*. “Thanks.”

He pushed himself up to sit on the counter next to Sami, like they’d just gotten home from practice and were trying to steal bites of dinner before Mom finished getting it ready.

His phone chirped. *Is it too late to go back to DC*, Benji said, with the gritted-teeth emoji.

*You and Robbo aren’t bonding yet?*

Benji responded with the eyeroll emoji.

Olly set his phone down. He needed to take a break from thinking about Benji. Use the next couple of days to get his head on straight—literally, ha fucking ha—and slot him back into the teammate-as-furniture category, where he belonged.

\* \* \*

Breakfast was chaos, with Ada announcing she didn’t like oatmeal anymore and Matt throwing a spoonful at her face; and then Joey, Liz, and their three kids showing up as soon as the oatmeal war had settled down, because somebody had lost a skate and they had to leave for a tournament ten minutes ago.

“Do you need to hit the gym, Ols?” Sami asked, once they’d clattered back out.

He didn’t, really, but he hadn’t slept well and needed something to shake off the cobwebs. So he jogged upstairs to change.

His bedroom was a time capsule. His parents had redone the other one, but hadn’t touched the room Olly and Joey had shared: bunk beds with navy-blue comforters, a Vikings jersey above the desk for Olly and a Chicago sweater over the dresser for Joey. The dresser was cluttered with hockey trophies, as was the rickety bookshelf in the corner. Not the most impressive ones—those

were in the living room, where all his dad's buddies could see them—but a representative sample of their lives from birth to age eighteen.

Acid twisted around the oatmeal in his stomach. Not pictured: realizing he was hopelessly, helplessly different. Shoved in a desk drawer: his stack of college acceptance letters, from Michigan and Boston and North Dakota.

He turned his back on the desk and fumbled on workout clothes. He looked like a ghost when he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror: pale skin, dark circles under his eyes. He was picking up his phone before he thought about it, typing *I'll get a ticket to DC if you will* into his text thread with Benji.

He didn't send it. Instead, he went to the gym with Sami and his dad, and listened to feedback on the speed he set on the treadmill, how he needed to lift heavier. Dad meant to be helpful, Olly knew that, but with every word he got less and less air into his lungs.

He was having a panic attack: that was what Dr. Martinez had told him. He had to recognize the signs and learn to stop them. (She'd also told him he could take medication. He wasn't going to do that; he could handle it.)

He dropped the bar back onto the rack.

"You only did half your reps," Dad said.

"I think I'm done." Olly pushed up from the bench and stumbled into the bathroom. He was worried he'd throw up, listening to the clang of weights and avoiding Sami's worried face.

He turned on the water at the sink, splashed his face. It was cold, Minnesota Christmas cold. He focused on getting air into his lungs, listened to the sound of the water and the distant thump of weights and someone calling encouragement to their buddy; the smell of old sweat and cleaning products; and the twisty, overwhelmed feeling in his stomach.

Slowly, the flickers faded at the corners of his eyes, and his heartbeat slowed.

He was a little surprised that Dr. Martinez's grounding exercise had worked. Olly wasn't used to anything working.

\* \* \*

Sami found him by the smoothie bar. His dad had bitched when they put it in. Olly had been in Denver, surrounded by smoothie spots and cold-press juice bars, but Dad had worried that his no-frills gym was being taken over by



wimpy hipsters.

In honor of Benji or possibly to spite Dad, Olly had gotten a brilliant green one.

“We need to talk.” Sami dropped down next to him, stole a sip of his smoothie, and made a face. “What the hell is in that?”

“Spinach, mango, and a shot of wheatgrass.”

“Jeez.” He shook his head. “I thought Liz was the worst about weird vegetables.”

“Don’t come to DC. Benji is quinoa and superfood greens and virtuous smoothies 24/7.”

“So, I told Dad off,” Sami said, apropos of nothing.

“Jesus, why?”

“Do you really not know?”

“It’s just how he is.”

“But it shouldn’t be. Broski. You are a professional athlete. He played one year of semi-pro hockey in 1985. He should not be telling you what to do at the gym.”

“He only wants to help.”

“But...” Sami narrowed his eyes. “Is he helping you, though? Can you tell me the last time he gave you advice that was actually helpful? We all know the shit he pulled about college. Don’t tell me you wouldn’t have been drafted higher if every damned team in the NAHA wasn’t wondering why you weren’t going to Michigan.”

Olly remembered, with a sick lurch, the grilling he’d gotten in his draft interviews about why he hadn’t committed to an NCAA program. “There’s no way to know that.”

“Fine. Maybe. But he doesn’t know more about your workouts than your own trainers.”

“It’s really not a big deal,” Olly snapped. But, Christ, why was he defending Dad? He didn’t need feedback on how many pounds he was benching. He hadn’t needed to be pushed to play for the Wolves, even if nobody could have foreseen how badly that would turn out.

He hadn’t needed the guilt trip about leaving for the Eagles.

He hadn’t had a panic attack in almost a week, which was a record in his recent life: and he got one as soon as he and Dad hit the gym.

“I know he wants the best for you. But I don’t think *his* best and *your* best are necessarily the same thing.”

“Jesus, dude. You’re really hitting this hard.”

“Somebody has to,” he said, grabbing Olly’s smoothie to take another sip.

\* \* \*

Benji wouldn’t say that he’d been looking forward to meeting Rob’s parents, who were coming down to Pittsburgh for Christmas; but he’d been hoping, maybe, that it would be easier with more people to act as a buffer. That hope died quickly, as Kris fell over herself to laugh at every one of Rob’s dad’s bad jokes, to make sure the turkey was perfect, to set the table like it was in a fucking magazine. There was more than one fork, wineglasses with absurdly long and breakable stems, and Robbo McMeade’s cheating mug at the head of the table.

Rob’s mom took two bites of the food Krista had slaved over for the entire day and said, “I don’t see why you didn’t just get this catered.”

Rob’s dad grunted, shrugged. He had a bulldog neck and reeked of cologne. “She’s his wife. She should know how to cook.”

“The green beans are really great, Kris,” Benji tried.

Rob said, “They’re a little cold, though.”

Krista stood up and grabbed the dish of green beans and took them into the kitchen and microwaved them and brought them back and set them down in front of Rob. His mom made a tight little face; his dad nodded. Rob didn’t say a word.

Benji didn’t snap the stem of his wineglass. Only because he didn’t want to see what these fucking people’s faces would look like if he did.

He had a missed call from Olly when he finally managed to escape back to the second-best guest room. It was on the other side of the house from everyone else—the only advantage of this barn-sized McMansion, in an unfinished subdivision way too far outside of Pittsburgh.

Benji called him back.

“Hey.” Olly’s voice was familiar. “You’re up late.”

“Couldn’t give Robbo and his fucking dad the satisfaction of running away.”

“Going that well, huh.”

“I hate this,” Benji said. “It’s...fuck, bud. It’s horrible.”

“I’m sorry.” There was a long pause. Benji could hear the distant sound of Christmas carols, kids’ voices. “It’s gotta be hard.”

“Yeah.” Benji blew out a breath, pulled off his goddamned tie. The fucking McMeades dressed up for Christmas dinner: suits and ties, diamonds at the women’s throats, photos on the staircase with a camera on a tripod. At least thanks to Loic’s upgrades to his wardrobe, those fuckers had one less reason to look down on the Bryzinski siblings. “Hey, does your family dress fancy for Christmas?”

Olly laughed. He sounded tired, but not bad-tired, not like he got sometimes. “Do tacky sweaters and matching pajamas count?”

“That sounds perfect, actually.” He could see it, three generations crammed around the Christmas tree he’d seen on Insta yesterday, all wearing red and green. Dogs and wrapping paper everywhere.

“Liz likes the outfits to be color-coordinated for pictures, and nobody says no to Liz. Well, Dad tries, but he loses, and then he looks so fucking confused.”

Benji laughed, for what felt like the first time since he’d left the Pittsburgh airport. “Tell me about it.”

“Tell you about what?”

“Christmas in Duluth. Everything.”

There was a pause. Then Olly said, “Okay,” slowly, and he did, and Benji hung on to his voice like it was some kind of fucking—he didn’t know. Lifeline.

\* \* \*

Olly was there when he got home, two days before they hosted Carolina. He was tapping at his phone, hair spilling loose past his shoulders, and wearing a soft-looking cream-colored sweater Benji had never seen before. Benji was across the room before he realized where he was going, picking him up off the floor and swinging him around.

Olly put up a token protest. The sweater was as soft as it looked.

“Glad to see you, bud.”

“Obviously.” Olly shoved him in the chest. His phone was open to Seamless: the only reason he didn’t die of starvation, since he had no idea how to cook any of the groceries he faithfully had delivered. “Takeout should be here soon. I got bowls from Cava.”

“My favorite roommate.” Benji hugged him again, not bothering to keep himself from petting the sweater. Olly felt like he was wearing a baby cloud-

kitten. “Mmm, where did you get this?”

Olly pushed him off, not that hard. “I’ve had it forever. Brought some stuff down from Duluth, that’s all.”

Now that Benji was looking, there were a few prints on the walls: a black-and-white pen drawing of the state of Minnesota by the front door; artsy photographs of lakes and snowy forests and a wave crashing against the base of a cliff, arranged behind their little dining table. There were new ornaments on the tree, too, that looked like they’d been made by the sticky, glittery hands of Olly’s nibblings.

Together with the stuff Krista had gotten when she was in town, it made the 505 less temporary. Like Benji could think the word *home*, and mean it. Like he could count on Olly, at least for now.

Once the delivery showed up, they ate on the sofa with a hockey game in the background. Olly looked comically offended that they’d added Brussels sprouts to his spicy lamb meatballs, but he ate them, anyway. He looked—not exactly good. Well, he looked good, bitching about the Brussels sprouts with the spiciness of the lamb bringing a flush to the tops of his cheekbones. But he also had dark circles under his eyes, like he hadn’t slept in a while.

“Poiro and a couple of the guys are going out,” he said, staring at the Brussels sprout on the end of his fork.

“I’m pretty beat,” Benji said, which was true, and also not. It had been a long three days, and trying to cram his body into commercial airplanes was a struggle. He could still go out, though; he should *want* to go out, knock back a beer and hear about Yelich’s proposal. She said yes, obviously.

But all Benji wanted to do was sit on the couch and listen to Olly talk about his nephew’s hockey tournament, then play a few rounds of *Pro Hockey* and let Olly beat him mercilessly.

“You’re so bad!” Olly crowed after his third victory in a row. “Do you even play hockey?”

“Maybe I’m going easy on you.”

“Sure you are, bud. Every time we’ve ever played.”

“Oh, shut up.”

Olly grinned, all bright and shiny even with the circles under his eyes. He had his legs crossed on the couch, sock feet tucked under him, and he’d put his hair up in a messy bun once the game got serious. The only response to the way he was looking at Benji was to drop his controller and tackle him. Olly yelped and fought back, and they wrestled to the upbeat song on the

soundtrack. Benji knew to watch out for elbows by now, and it was his turn to shoot Olly a victorious grin as he pinned him with one arm trapped under his hip, and the other one above his head.

“What do I get for beating you?”

Olly wriggled. Benji smacked his arm back into the couch. “Nothing! We’re not in the same weight class, you cheater.”

“I don’t wanna hear excuses, bud.”

He rolled his eyes. “Fine. What do you want?”

“Hmm.” Benji rocked back on his heels, pretending to think about it. Olly tried to pull the arm by his side free, and Benji squeezed his knees in warning. “Don’t try.”

“Try *what*?”

He should have known from the way Olly’s blue eyes went all big and innocent. But in, like, less than one second flat, Olly surged up and flipped them, landing on Benji’s chest with a giant smile. Things went downhill until they were both sweaty, laughing messes and Olly finally had to admit defeat. Benji had him pinned again, chest-down with a hand wrapped in his hair and the other planted firmly on his tricep.

“We’re not in the same weight class,” Benji reminded him, shoving his face into the back of the couch.

“Ugh, fine.” Olly relaxed, before tightening back up like a tension rod. Benji realized he was kind of absently stroking the back of his arm.

“Your sweater’s so soft,” he said. His tongue felt a little thick for some reason, and he didn’t want to let go, but his buddy was clearly not happy anymore so he rolled off the couch and went to get them beers. Olly stayed where he was for a second—yes, Benji was keeping an eye on him from the kitchen—before pushing himself up and opening Netflix. He fixed his hair and straightened out his sweater and it was like it had never happened at all.

## Chapter Twenty-One

It was a relief to get back on the ice for Carolina, even though they lost. Olly pushed himself as hard as he could, letting the scream in his lungs and the fire in his muscles burn out the memory of the *stupid* wrestling match on the couch.

He got two assists, even though Carolina had an answer for both of them. Coach O was happy with his performance; Olly wasn't—they'd fucking lost—but objectively, he was putting together a decent run of points.

Whether he'd be able to keep it up was another question. That should be the only thing he was worrying about.

But it wasn't.

He couldn't lie to himself at this point: he'd managed to get a massive crush on his fucking roommate. His teammate. His *friend*. A first in years upon fucking years of playing hockey with big hot dumbasses wandering around naked, of roadies and his smoking-hot roommate in Colorado who was allergic to shirts. Olly had never felt more than an academic acknowledgment that yes, wow, Jake's abs were really cut, so, could they share notes in the weight room?

His hockey was maybe getting on track, and the universe had to hit him with *this*.

\* \* \*

Olly hit back against Nashville, though, slicing in the game winner after a sweet little back-pass from Lukesy.

The Nashville game was on New Year's Eve. The Eagles management rented out one of the bars in Chinatown, a few blocks over from the arena, and hired a DJ. It all felt very fancy. Olly just wasn't a suits-on-a-night-out guy—give him a game of darts at a sports bar anytime. Still, he dutifully wrangled everyone for a group picture that he could tell Benji to post on his Instagram.

Poiro went to find the future Mrs. Yelich as soon as they arrived. He always had to be in the middle of everything, because he was a control freak goalie weirdo. Bevvo called him Captain FOMO.

Benji slung an arm around Olly's neck and towed him toward the bar. He was wearing a black tux, because Loic wanted Olly to suffer. "I need a drink."

"Dunno if they serve Bud Lite." The bar had pale wood and copper chandeliers. The vibes were not Bud Lite.

"That's a burn, Bowie," Luke told him as they hit the scrum around the bar. "In case you didn't know."

"Fuck you all. Beer shouldn't taste like grapefruit ass."

"Smoothies shouldn't taste like kale, either."

"I went a little overboard one time."

Luke shook his head, looking disgusted. "Can't wait to listen to you two all night."

"Why would you?" Benji asked. Luke and Bevvo usually rolled pretty deep at team events.

Luke pointed across the room, to where Bevvo was handing a cocktail to a dark-skinned woman in a red dress. She was taller than he was. "Bevvo slid into one of the Mystics' DMs, and he's in loooooove."

"Well, she's a fucking rocket, so." The look Benji shot the basketball player was unashamedly appreciative. "Did she bring any teammates?"

Olly turned to the bar and got two beers, an IPA and the most basic lager available for Benji. He hid a smile as Benji tasted it and made a face, like craft beer was offensive to a guy who had opinions when Olly accidentally put the wrong kind of nut butter on the grocery order. His fledgling Instagram had gotten to about fifty percent hockey content and fifty percent content that team dieticians dreamed of.

Soko and his wife made the rounds a few minutes later with trays of vodka shots, imported all the way from Mother Russia. Olly tried to get out of it, but Soko yelled something about respecting their culture and he gave in. It burned like ice going down his throat and his fingers had the after-image of a prickle, where they'd brushed Benji's as they clinked glasses.

"Wow, your alcohol tolerance is shit," Benji said, a few beers and another shot later.

Olly was a little blurry around the edges. He was also trying not to enjoy the warm strength of Benji's body propping him up. He was totally not listing, but—yeah. Benji was so solid.

Maybe he said that out loud, because Benji laughed down at him. "Is this why you never drink?"

“No,” he said. “It’s ’cause I get into trouble. Can’t get into trouble here.”

“You’re the *least* troublesome motherfucker on this team,” Luke yelled. His face was bright red and he’d lost his tie and jacket; either his tolerance was as bad as Olly’s, or he’d been taking extra shots. “Fuck those furry assholes!”

“What?”

“Furry assholes!” Luke repeated, like it was going to make more sense the second time. “The fucking Wolves,” he clarified. “Making my liney all bummed out and shit.”

Luke went in for what was supposed to be a supportive hug, which actually resulted in the two of them stumbling into a wall and almost taking out Anna Dewitt. Luke fell all over himself to apologize, Olly hiding laughter in his shoulder—furry assholes, was Lukey for real?—and not helping at all. But he appreciated the love, anyway. He was drunk enough that it seemed plausible he would stay on a line with Lukey, too.

Benji and Anna had a sidebar conversation that resulted in Benji disappearing for a minute (Olly tried not to pout into Luke’s jacket; they were lineys but Luke’s shoulder was not as nice as Benji’s) and then returning with bottles of water.

“Hydration break, buddies.”

Olly took the water obediently, shifting himself off Luke’s shoulder to lean against the wall. Luke bounced off to find Bevvo. The water tasted good, cool on the inside of his mouth and as it slipped down his throat. The DJ had started a set and a few people were dancing: Luke and Bevvo with the Mystic player sandwiched between them, Pairo and the future Mrs. Yelich. Benji and Anna were still talking. Olly shut his eyes. He could pick out the vibration of Benji’s voice under the music.

He took another sip of water, and licked his lips to catch a stray drop.

When he opened his eyes, Anna was gone, and Benji was looking down at him. The bow tie Pairo had tied for him in the locker room hung open around his neck, and he’d unfastened the top few buttons of his shirt. Olly could see the dip where his collarbones met. He wanted to lick it; and Benji was looking at his mouth.

Panic blazed through the alcohol. Olly jerked sideways, Benji blinking down at him with concerned green eyes. “Okay there, bud?”

“There’s Mrs. Yelich,” Olly said, which was the only thing he could think of. He had to get away, before he forgot all the things he was and all the



things he could never have.

Benji found him for the countdown, though, with Mils hanging off his shoulder. He'd caught up on drinks; passed Olly, maybe, from the flush in his cheeks and the messy curls stuck to his forehead. He'd been tearing it up on the dance floor, contagious enthusiasm and unexpected rhythm in his hips.

He got one arm around Mils's neck and one arm around Olly's. "My people," he announced. "The best D-buddy and the *best* roomie. I'm so fucking excited for the new year!" Because he was one hundred percent the drunk hockey player who loved his bros more than life itself.

He smashed them both into his chest, which kind of worked with Olly and did not work at all with Mils, since Mils was almost as tall as he was.

Mils was laughing about *can you believe this fucking rookie* and gesturing for his girlfriend to come over, as the countdown reached five.

Olly hid his expression in Benji's shirt and tried not to breathe or feel the thump of his heartbeat or notice anything at all; then the countdown was over, and confetti was blasting from somewhere and Benji was kissing everyone he could reach: Mils, Mils's girlfriend, glancing one off the side of Olly's cheek.

The after-image press of Benji's lips didn't mean anything; of course it didn't.

\* \* \*

Benji woke up on the couch on New Year's Day. Olly was actually *in* his lap: he was pretty sure they'd started on opposite ends, but whatever. All of Olly's hair had fallen out of its drunken sloppy knot, spilling across the tuxedo pants Benji was still wearing. He had his face turned into his elbow, and he was going to be so disgruntled when he woke up and realized he'd accidentally touched another human being.

That made Benji smile, a little bit. Olly's face got so—okay, there was no other word for it—*cute* when he was annoyed. He'd scrunch up his dignified fashion-model nose and get that little line between his eyebrows.

Benji was a little foggy on how they'd gotten home. Olly had passed him the torch of drunkenness, and he had vague memories of Soko pouring them into a cab. He wasn't even that hungover, thanks to Olly making them both chug Gatorade once they'd stumbled home.

He thought he should get up, or try moving Olly off his lap to spare his

tender feelings. But he just didn't want to. The couch was comfortable, and Olly was a warm, solid weight across his thighs. His hair felt like silk when Benji touched it. Carefully, so he wouldn't wake up.

\* \* \*

The sound of the door closing woke him up the second time. Olly—that fucker—was coming in from a run, endless legs in his black track pants.

“You shoulda gotten me up,” Benji grumbled, pulling himself up on the back of the couch.

Olly froze, one earbud halfway out. He was the only person Benji knew who never lost a single AirPods. “You looked so peaceful, dude.” He was out of breath, so he must have been hitting it hard. Neither of them were winded by their little trips down the trail at this point in the season.

“It's cool. I know you need your solo Olly time.”

He shrugged and unzipped his running jacket. “Just wanted to get moving. Beat the hangover.”

Benji nodded, finally dragging himself off the couch. “Let me take a shower and I'll make breakfast, yeah?”

Olly kept his distance the rest of the day. Not in a shutting-himself-in-his-room way, in an I'm-busy-watching-tape-taking-notes way. They dragged themselves to Coach O's optional afternoon skate, and Benji got a massage afterward.

Olly said he had an errand, so Benji Ubered home once the massage therapist had reduced him to a pile of goo. He had no reason at all to be bothered by the fact that Olly hadn't waited for him.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Dallas was the last stop on their post-New Year's roadie and Olly was still pissed off, at the losses and the voicemail his dad hadn't been able to resist leaving about their PK unit, and how Benji had fled Soko's true-crime kick to sleep in his bed *again* last night. Olly had woken up with his forehead pressed against Benji's shoulder, breathing in his smell and scrambling to hide his hard-on. Just like on the couch during their stupid wrestling match, when Benji had put him facedown with a hand in his hair and he'd felt so big and overwhelming that Olly wanted to come out of his skin. Just like his blurry memories of New Year's, unbuttoned white shirt collars and lazy green eyes, waking up with the heavy pressure of a hand on the back of his neck. Not knowing what would happen to any of it, if Benji knew the truth—either about Olly's sexuality in general, or the specificity of the ways it seemed to be arranging itself around Benji.

They smashed Dallas 4-1. He got two goals and an assist. He was tired enough afterward to fall asleep on the plane, safely tucked into a window seat with Luke on the aisle.

By the time they landed at Dulles, he was okay again.

That's what he told Dr. Martinez, anyway.

She said therapy wouldn't work unless he was willing to be emotionally vulnerable.

They were hosting Philly next, though, which was not a team to play while *emotionally vulnerable*. Benji had mentioned that some friends from his youth team were driving down for the game. And Philly was one spot above them in the playoff standings. Olly wouldn't say that Benji was aflutter, but he was less Zen-master than usual.

"We've got this," Olly found himself reassuring Benji in the car, as he merged onto the Roosevelt Bridge.

Benji flipped from one song to the next on the touchpad. "It's a big game. And all my buddies are gonna be there."

"They've watched your games before."

"In Hershey."

"You know you've been killing it." Benji's name was being mentioned in conversations about the Rookie of the Year award, frequently enough that the

talking heads on NBC and SportsNet had agreed on how to pronounce his last name. Olly still got a hard *J* from time to time.

“It’s a team effort,” he said, like Olly was shoving a microphone in his face.

“Sure is, bud.”

“Oh, stop it, Mr. First Star in Dallas.”

Olly made a face. Couldn’t figure out anything to say other than, “It was a team effort,” which made Benji laugh until he snorted.

\* \* \*

Lukesy knocked him in the shoulder when they were on the ice for warm-ups. “Did someone forget to tell us it was Pride Night?”

“Um,” said Olly, with ice-bucket terror rushing out from his stomach. “Why?”

Lukesy pointed toward the stands. There was a whole row—not right behind the Eagles bench, but not that far up—of people wearing brightly colored Spandex bodysuits.

“Are they doing ROY G BIV?” Bevvo asked as he skated up. “Pride Night’s early, eh, boys? Where’s our rainbow tape?”

“Yeah but…” Luke squinted. “Why the fuck is there a guy in a shrimp suit on the end?”

There was a simultaneous explosion of noise from the D-men on the other side of the Eagles half.

“They’re a rainbow shrimp,” Olly told them. “That’s our boy’s youth team.”

“What the actual fuck,” from Bevvo.

“You know,” Luke said. He was leaning on the butt end of his stick, gazing contemplatively at the Hershey Junior Howlers reunion destined to end up on the highlight show of the weirdest moments of the season. Jesus, the guy in yellow had pulled out a printed sign showing Benji punching Crowder in the face, with rainbows radiating out from his fist. “I’m not even surprised.”

Benji accepted the rainbow-related chirps for the rest of the night with grace, helped by the fact that he played a lights-out game: their blue line limited Philly to one goal, and Benji handed Dewey a sweet assist for the game-winner.

After media had wrapped up—they all had important questions about his

hockey nickname—Benji wanted to go out with his buddies. Olly was surprised to find himself agreeing to go. It wasn't a rowdy night, just one beer and a blur of new faces; but Benji was happy, introducing Olly around, buying drinks and promising to catch up over the summer.

"I can head home on my own if you want to stay later," Olly said.

"It's cool." Benji smiled down at him. They said their goodbyes. It was a good night; Olly wasn't thinking about how it was better because they got to end it, together, tracing the familiar late-night streets between the arena and the apartment.

\* \* \*

Benji's stall was plastered in rainbow stickers and cartoon shrimp and somebody's daughter's My Little Ponies (why?) when they arrived for skate. Olly, the traitorous little fucker, was snickering next to him and filming his reaction.

"Thanks, boys. I feel right at home," he called to the room, moving a pony off his shin guards.

"We support you, buddy," Lukesy called. "And your choice of lifestyle."

"Shut up." Bevvo was grinning, though. "It's not a lifestyle. He was born this way."

Benji picked up a sparkly pink pony and whipped it at Bevvo's head. Dewey snatched it out of the air and told them to get on the ice.

He didn't realize until he was already in his skates that Olly had gone silent in the stall beside him. His eyes were fixed on his skate laces, his fingers still.

"Ready, bud?" Benji asked.

Olly's shoulders tightened, visible even under his pads. "Go ahead."

Benji didn't have time to worry about it. They headed to the airport after practice, for the quick flight to Boston. Benji needed to be worrying about Ryan Stewart's one-timer, not what was going on inside his roommate's brain.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

“You coming out, Oliver?” Piro asked Olly, after they lost to Cincinnati a few days later. Brutally, one of those games where the other fuckers got every lucky bounce.

“Not tonight.” All he wanted was to go home and collapse. If Benji was out with the boys, all the better. Olly knew all the rainbow shit wasn’t his fault, but it was days later and he couldn’t get it out of his head. “*Your choice of lifestyle,*” like anyone would fucking choose this.

It wasn’t even bad, not like last year. Nobody was screaming at him; nobody was throwing around *queer* or *fat* in the room. Coach O had come down on Yelich like a ton of bricks the first and last time he’d called something *gay*.

Luke wasn’t a bad guy. But Olly couldn’t help wondering what Luke would say if he knew there was *actually* a gay dude on his line, in his locker room.

His stomach twisted. He swallowed and shoved his feet into his shoes.

“Not coming, bud?” Benji asked. He’d gotten back from the shower and was scrubbing a towel through his hair. Olly kept his eyes on his shoelaces. The last thing he needed was for someone to catch him looking at Benji’s naked body. Or possibly he couldn’t look at all, the drops of water gathered on his hip, the towel dipping toward the place on his lower belly where the hair started to thicken.

Olly shook his head. “Have fun.”

Benji rummaged around his stall, then waved his phone into Olly’s field of vision. He’d turned on the series of notifications Olly had programmed into it, all those months ago. “Not too much, I promise.”

“You don’t need to promise me anything.”

Benji sighed. If Olly didn’t know better, he’d say that he almost drooped. “Yeah, okay. Have a good night.”

Olly didn’t have a good night. He drove home, scrounged together a smoothie, thought about leaving out the requisite handful of spinach but felt guilty and dropped it in at the last second. Which was a sad fucking thing to feel bad about, but he was thinking about Benji’s sad fucking face back in the locker room, and how Olly fucked up everything that he cared about. His

career, his family, his best buddy on this fucking team.

He could hear Dr. Martinez asking if what he was thinking was totally accurate.

Sure fucking felt like it.

He stripped off his suit, threw on sweatpants and his oldest hoodie. His hair was still damp, and he twisted it back into a knot. It would get all fucked up if he let it dry like that, but who the hell was he trying to impress.

His phone dinged before he finished his smoothie. It was from Pairo: a picture of him, Bevvo, Luke, and Benji, all crammed into a too-small seating area with an assortment of girls around them. Benji had one in his lap. His hand was on her hip, and she was laughing. *look at what ur missing oliver.*

Olly locked his phone and put it facedown on the counter. His smoothie tasted horrible, but he made himself choke it down. He left the glass in the sink, even though he knew it got on Benji's nerves when he did that. It got on Olly's nerves when Benji...

He shouldn't care. He *didn't* care. Or he couldn't care, or—he didn't know.

He got in bed, because it was after midnight and he was so fucking tired, of everything.

Hours later, Olly was still awake to hear the apartment door swing open, the jangle of keys dropping onto the counter. Two sets of footsteps in the hall, two voices, the low rumble of one and the higher pitch of a second.

It was the first time Benji had brought a girl back. All his other hookups had been elsewhere.

Benji could bring home whoever the fuck he wanted. There was no reason Olly should hate it. He couldn't even claim they were keeping him up—giggles in the kitchen, the click of Benji's door—because he'd be awake, anyway.

He queued up a new guided meditation. Dr. Martinez wanted him to try them when he couldn't sleep. They didn't help, ever, but especially not tonight: he didn't want to be quiet, and still, and hear every noise coming through the wall.

\* \* \*

He must have fallen asleep eventually, some unsettled fragmentary intermediate thing that left him more tired than he'd been when he'd gotten

into bed.

Benji was on the couch—by himself—with the low hum of the NAHA Network in the background, as Olly headed for the coffeemaker. “Good night?”

“Sorry about that.” Olly knew, without having to see it, the aw-shucks expression on his face. “She was a little, uh, loud.”

“Sounded like you were both having a good time.” He took a sip of his coffee. Benji hadn’t added enough grounds. It tasted weak. Olly closed his eyes. They had to go to the rink in an hour. “Are you going to see her again?”

“Uh, no.”

“Why not?”

“She was in town for her friend’s twenty-first. She’s from New York or something.”

“That’s not that far. We’re in New York all the time.”

“Dude, I know where NYC is.” Olly heard Benji standing up, the sound of his bare feet thumping toward the kitchen. “She was chill, but nah. I don’t do relationships.”

Olly opened his eyes. Took another sip of the weak coffee. Of course Benji didn’t *do relationships*. “Okay.”

“You want to go for a shakeout run?” Benji was in his running gear, everything but the shoes. He must have been waiting for Olly to get up.

“Tweaked my hip a little.” It didn’t hurt now, but he didn’t want to go running with Benji. Didn’t want to see his shoulders moving out of his peripheral vision, didn’t want to listen to him say the same thing he always said when they ran past the turnoff to Roosevelt Island: “*we should come down and take a walk over there someday*,” even though they never did. Didn’t want to wonder if Benji would still want to go running with him, if he knew the truth; didn’t want to want him, the way that he did.

Once Benji was gone, Olly poured out his shitty coffee and made another pot. The caffeine soured in his stomach.

\* \* \*

Olly’s next appointment with Dr. Martinez ended up falling during their next road trip. He couldn’t figure out whether that was a good thing or not, as he slipped out of his hotel room and down the hallway, nodding to a few of the guys as he passed.



If he was being honest, he was not doing exactly well. But what fucking excuse did he have for that? Hitting the post in a couple of games? Some stupid chirps about Benji's rainbow nickname? Benji hooking up with a girl and not wanting to be tied down to a relationship, like any normal twenty-one-year-old? Olly's stupid crush, which was pointless for so many different reasons?

He needed to toughen up. He couldn't let nothing bullshit affect him so much.

But Dr. Martinez was about to look at him with her calm, understanding eyes for the next hour, asking him to talk about it in her calm, understanding voice.

Olly could blow it off. He could just...not open FaceTime. Even if he did, he could talk about the weather or football playoffs for an hour.

But he was trying to do this. To take it as seriously as he took video or practice or the weight room. He knew he had to. That, or quit, and Olly wasn't a fucking quitter.

He wasn't.

Olly could feel his leg bouncing under the desk in the little business services room once he got there, talking about the Saints' offense like his life depended on it. He hadn't known he could come up with that many opinions; he was so busy during the season that he barely kept up with the Vikings the way he wanted to.

Maybe he should retire. Do nothing but watch football from September to February. Get one of those cable packages where you could watch four different games at once.

"I don't think you actually want to talk about Drew Brees for the next forty-five minutes," Dr. Martinez said, finally.

Olly made himself nod. He could see her office behind her: gray walls, an abstract painting, a bright pink orchid. "It's...easier."

"Easier than opening up."

He nodded, digging his fingernails into the skin of his quad, pressing down until he could make his leg be still.

"You've always felt like you had to keep things hidden."

"I mean, I do."

"That can't be easy."

He shook his head. "I guess. I—" He stopped. "I told you I'm gay. And. That's never been a problem for me with team dynamics, or anything. Like,

I've never wanted to go there, with anyone I've played with. Ever." He swallowed. His throat was so dry it clicked. He fumbled at the cap of his water bottle. He needed to say this, to someone. "But I think I have a, a problem. Now. I just can't..." He got the cap off. Swallowed a mouthful of water. "I can't seem to get past it."

"Past what?" she prompted, after he'd been quiet for a while, because he couldn't say it. He could feel it tightening around his chest, like a heart-rate monitor strapped on too tight. If he had one on right now, it would be going haywire: he could feel his heart pounding, the opposite of its clean, expected acceleration out on the ice.

"My fucking roommate," he choked. He'd love to be able to say that opened some internal floodgate and everything came spilling out; but it didn't. Every single word that he forced past his teeth was like skating a double shift in three-on-three OT.

But he did it. He couldn't look at her face, only the collection of hotel-branded pens sitting in a cup on the corner of the desk, his hands where they were twisted in the fabric of his sweatshirt. The front read *property of the Washington Eagles*.

"That's a lot for you to be dealing with," she said when he was done.

He shrugged against the sensation of the sweat dripping down his back. Choked down another sip of water. He couldn't let himself get dehydrated before a game, not on top of all the other ways he was fucking up. "I just, I feel like I can't get away from it. Not with the way he is. And I know I can't do anything about it, and he doesn't really do relationships even if I could, and so I want it to go away. I keep thinking if I can get some more space from him it will be better, but it doesn't ever work."

Dr. Martinez nodded, and talked about boundaries, and communication, and Olly could tell she was trying to lead him somewhere but he—couldn't. His brain was numb, his fingers thick and unreactive, the water sloshing ominously in his stomach.

But he'd told someone, about Benji. The clock was still ticking and as far as he could tell, the world was still turning. It had been easier when he'd told her that he was gay: people knew that. His lawyers, Coach O, those fuckers from the Wolves. Maybe no one who mattered to him, on a personal level. But he'd had time to get his mind wrapped around the fact that people knew.

No one knew about Benji. And it needed to stay that way. There wasn't another option, even if Olly was so lonely he could scream; even if all he

wanted in his deepest most secret heart was to lean his head on Benji's shoulder, lie down next to him on clean white sheets with the warmth of his skin close enough to touch.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Krista called. Benji thought about going for a walk while they talked, to give himself something to focus on other than the forced cheerfulness in her voice; but it was raining, or sleeting, whatever combination Canada offered in January, and he'd only made it as far as the lobby.

Krista was telling him that Rob wanted to start trying for their first kid. "Hopefully a boy," she said, in the determinedly up-tempo voice she used when she'd already convinced herself that something was a good idea. "Rob wants a golf buddy."

"Why can't he golf with you?"

She laughed. Benji tightened his fingers so hard around his phone that the plastic creaked. "It's not the same."

Benji sighed. "Okay. Just. I hope you really—" he swallowed "—give yourself time to think about it, before you jump into it."

"I've thought about it," she said, flat. "I've always wanted kids."

"I'm not saying you haven't..."

"I was hoping you'd be supportive."

"I'm not trying to *not* be supportive."

"It feels like it," she snapped. "Look, I'm excited. I'm happy. I wanted to share that with you." She said those words—*excited, happy*—like if she repeated them enough times, they'd become true. "I've got to go."

The line went dead. Benji stared at the screen, the rows of brightly colored icons for social media apps his sister and his agent wished he gave a shit about.

He gave a shit about Krista, but she ended up pissed at him no matter what he said. And he knew it wasn't *about* him, really, but that didn't make it suck less.

He shoved his phone into his pocket. It was time for his pregame nap, or close enough.

Olly got on the elevator on the second floor. He looked pretty horrible, actually. Dark circles under his eyes, skin pale. Benji wanted to be able to fix something for him, the way he'd never been able to for Krista. Make him feel better. Sit on the plane and let Olly fall asleep on his shoulder. Useless fucking impulse, because Olly didn't want him around, either.

“What’s up,” Benji said, a little late.

Olly leaned on the back wall of the elevator. He had his iPad under his arm. “Nothing.” Then, as another floor ticked past, “Just tired.”

“Good thing it’s nap time.”

Olly shrugged one shoulder, like it was all he could manage. His hair was falling out of a messy ponytail, hanging around his face. “I guess.”

The elevator dinged for their floor. Luke and Bevvo stood in the hallway, laughing as Lukesy mimed punching Bevvo in the arm.

“Have you heard the good news?” Lukesy asked. “Has he blown up your phone? Has he gotten a, like, personal skywriter yet? Sandrine lowered her standards enough to let him convince her to be his steady girl. You remember, the Mystic? From New Year’s?”

Benji sure did. Whistled, thumped Bevvo on the back. “Way to go. She’s a rocket.”

“She’s the shit,” Bevvo said, grinning like he wasn’t even trying to play it cool. “She can squat as much weight as I can.”

“Damn, dude. Gonna have to step it up in the gym.”

“You know it.” Bevvo slapped his bicep. “Still got her on the upper body stuff, but she says she’s coming for my deadlift PR.”

They talked for a few more minutes, until Dewey stepped off the elevator and tapped his watch. “Boys.”

“Yeah, we know,” Lukesy said, rolling his eyes once Dewey was safely down the hall. “Fuckin’ Dad.”

“He’s not wrong,” Olly pointed out. He’d been hovering at Benji’s shoulder, quiet as a ghost.

“Now Mom’s disappointed in us, too.” Bevvo hadn’t quit smiling, though. “Come on. Let Lukesy get his beauty rest, god knows he fucking needs it.”

Olly and Pairo’s room was next in line down the hallway. Benji almost followed him in on muscle memory, but Olly shut the door in his face. It took him a second to shake it off; or maybe he didn’t quite manage it, on the heels of his phone call with Krista and Bevvo’s happiness about Sandrine.

Benji wanted to be happy for Bevvo. Shit, Benji *was*. How could he not be? Maybe Benji wasn’t a relationship guy himself, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be happy for a good buddy locking down a quality girl.

Maybe Benji wasn’t interested in wifey-ing up one of the Mystics, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t care in other ways.

And okay, yeah, it hurt that his sister and his alleged best buddy didn’t

want to hear anything he had to say. Didn't want to tell him what the hell was really going on with them.

But it was fine, wasn't it? Or it was going to have to *be* fine. They were getting on the ice in a few hours, and Toronto was on a win streak. Benji had more important things to worry about than the stupid sting of hurt that Olly was shoving him away again.

Even if Benji was kind of bummed out, Olly was going through some shit. Had been all season, but he'd seemed to be doing better. Only now he wasn't.

Benji wanted to be able to say something funny enough to make the worried line between Olly's eyebrows go away. Maybe try and ask what was wrong, and have Olly trust him enough to tell him, instead of shutting a hotel door in his face.

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

Olly didn't believe it when he saw the puck hit the back of the net against San Jose. He was still waiting for someone to wave it off when the goal horn sounded, followed by the buzzer to end the game.

"You got a fucking hattie!" Benji bellowed into his face. Luke slammed into him from the back, knocking him into the boards. The fans were screaming, hammering on the glass.

The locker room was rowdy after the game, from the combination of a win over one of the best teams in the league, and a Friday night with nothing to do until the end of the All-Star break. Well, for everyone but Mils and Dewey, who were taking a trip to beautiful Edmonton, Alberta. Luke was pretending not to be pissed about it.

"You coming out?" Benji asked. He'd been—Olly didn't want to say he'd been keeping his distance. They still lived in each other's pockets, even if they were going their separate ways for the break. But he could tell that some part of Benji had pulled back, even though he was still offering Olly smoothies at the same rate.

It was what Olly had wanted—needed—to happen. Even Dr. Martinez had agreed. Well, she'd said that Olly needed to think about a way to work through his feelings. Space was the only idea he had.

"Yes, he's coming out! He got a fucking hat trick!" Pairo yelled, and Olly realized he'd been staring at Benji's face—sticky with sweat, helmet line across his forehead, dried blood down the side of his nose from a visor cut—without saying anything.

It was a bad idea. He was off-balance and anxious and unhappy, and he wasn't going to be able to keep the boys from pouring hat-trick shots down his throat.

He started to say, "I don't know," but Pairo made whomp-whomp noises loudly enough to drown him out, and then Lukesy and Bevvo were frog-marching him into the back of an Uber. Luke produced a flask and stared at him until he took a swig.

He felt loose by the time they made it to the club. There was a Friday-night line snaking along the sidewalk; Lukesy and Bevvo strolled past it, right into a wall of noise. Pairo, Benji, Yelich, and some child up from the D-League—

what the fuck was his name? Olly didn't want to keep calling him Hotdog—were in a VIP area on a balcony.

“Shots, boys!” Lukesy yelled, and it escalated from there.

Later, Olly would remember the night in flashes: watching Benji lick salt off his hand for a tequila shot, the burn of his own shot going down his throat. Strobe lights on bodies, sweat, getting drunk enough that Benji could drag him onto the dance floor. Olly let himself be led, tethered to the pressure of Benji's fingers around his wrist.

Luke, with his tongue down some girl's throat. Bass rattling around in his skull, settling in the bottom of his stomach. Hotdog grinning wide enough to split his face open on his first night out as a NAHA player. Olly wished him the fucking best. He might have shouted it into his ear over the music, before Benji grabbed his collar and dragged him against his side. Olly wanted to stay there forever, and he said it out loud, mouth moving against the fabric of Benji's T-shirt.

“What?” Benji yelled, and Olly shook his head.

He and Yelich stumbled to the bathroom at some point. When they got back, Benji had found a girl, or a girl had found Benji. She was tall, athletic-looking with curves and a dress that left strips of bare skin down the sides of her ribs. She had a tattoo on her back, some spreading floral thing.

“Your boy needs better taste,” Pairo yelled in his ear.

“Girls with tats are DTF,” was Hotdog's contribution.

“I don't think that's true,” Olly tried to say, but his lungs were being carved out of his body, watching them curve into each other and him kiss her neck; so who knew if he said it at all. It was worse when he realized Benji was watching him, green eyes focused and intense. Olly wanted to run, and punch something, and kiss him, and light his entire life on fire.

He'd watched Benji pick up girls, listened to them fuck from the other side of the wall: but this right here was why he didn't really drink anymore. It made him forget that it didn't matter what he wanted.

The thing was: Olly had a reckless streak. He'd always been the first guy to cliff-jump into the lake; to go skinny-dipping; to steal the giant plastic M&M outside of the downtown Duluth Walgreens, and set it up on an empty plinth in Leif Erikson Park. Fine, that had been Levi's idea, but Olly had never been the guy to pump the brakes. That was how he and Sami had ended up with bleach-blond mullets; that was how he'd broken bones.

He'd buried it ruthlessly deep after one close call too many with the



Mormon in Utah. Set his shoulders to the grind of the NAHA, and never let up.

But that was how he'd blown his life to hell in Minneapolis: a surge of *fuck it all, why not*.

"We're out," Benji told him, some blurry amount of time later. He pulled Olly into his side again, dug a hand into his hair. The girl with the tats was under his other arm, and she smiled at Olly like she knew a secret.

"Bye, then." A slower song was playing, something with a sinuous, hip-grinding beat.

"Come on. Time to go home."

"No," Olly said, because he'd rather crash on Pairo's couch than hear them fucking one wall away.

"Yes," Benji countered.

Olly couldn't begin to explain the reasons why he wanted to stay in this stupid club he hadn't wanted to come to in the first place. So Benji took the middle seat in the Lyft, even though his knees were up to his shoulders and he didn't begin to fit. He and the girl—Heather—whispered and laughed, but he'd put his hand in Olly's hair again somewhere near Logan Circle. Kept stroking his thumb up and down the tendons in the back of his neck.

"Heather thinks you're fucking hot," was what Benji said, when the car pulled up to their building. He was close enough that Olly could feel the wash of breath over his skin.

Olly pulled himself away from Benji's hand in the kitchen, trying to regain some toehold in his normal routine, handing out Gatorades like he always did. But one second they were all rehydrating in the kitchen, and then the next the mood flicked like a switch, Benji kissing Heather up against the wall with one of her legs wrapped around his waist.

"You coming?" Heather asked him, from across the kitchen. Her eyes were electric blue over Benji's shoulder, half-lidded.

Olly didn't know what possessed him to let Heather slide down from the wall and take his wrist with one of her feminine little hands. His well-buried reckless streak raising its head; the after-image sensation of fingers on the back of his neck; the traction drag of Benji's green eyes behind her, gone sleepy and pleased like he'd never seen them before.

Olly meant, as much as he could have meant anything at that point, to watch, to leave that one line uncrossed. And then Benji said, "Get over here, Olly," in a lazy, authoritative voice, and God help him, Olly went: propped

himself up against the headboard, watched the muscles flex in Benji's back while he ate Heather out; let her suck on his fingers and then get her mouth on Olly's dick, while Benji fucked her from behind.

He couldn't keep himself from looking at Benji when he came, pinned down by his golden-green eyes.

Benji said, "Fuck, *Olly*." His hips snapped forward and he reached out, grabbing for Olly's shoulder like he couldn't help himself.

\* \* \*

Olly woke up the next morning on his stomach, arms wrapped around a pillow. He didn't know where he was. That wasn't unusual, given how much time he spent waking up in hotel rooms across North America.

But he was naked, and there was a hand on his lower back, hot as a brand.

Every muscle in Olly's body went tense at the exact same moment. He opened his eyes slowly, hoping with no real sense of hope that things would be different. They weren't. He was only a couple of inches away from Benji: he lay on his side, curled toward Olly, with his lashes making dark crescents against his cheeks. His lips were soft, halfway parted.

Lips Olly had not kissed, he remembered, through the rising tide of panic. In his drunk mind, that had made a difference.

Carefully, carefully, he eased himself out from under Benji's hand. He made a sleepy, displeased noise as the bed shifted, but didn't open his eyes.

Olly made it to his bathroom before he started throwing up. Barely, but he made it.

## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

Heather wanted to get breakfast. Benji wanted her gone, the way he always wanted his hookups gone. But more intensely. Watching her sit at the breakfast bar made his teeth hurt, made him want to check over his shoulder for the play developing on the other side of the ice.

She caught on eventually, making a face and kissing his cheek. “At least I crossed ‘threesome with professional athletes’ off the bucket list.”

“You’re welcome,” Benji said, summoning up what he knew was a charming smile.

He wasn’t an asshole. He gave her a travel mug of coffee, a sweatshirt to throw over her dress, and an Uber.

He could hear Olly’s shower running, white noise through the wall. It went on and on, while Benji started the coffee machine, made himself an egg-and-avocado sandwich. He was less hungover than he should have been, probably. He’d been plenty drunk, and his bottle of Gatorade was sitting, only halfway gone, on the counter. He’d been a little too busy to finish it.

Benji made a face. He had the feeling that last night had been a mistake. He couldn’t have said why, exactly. He was no stranger to sharing a girl with a buddy, and it had only gotten weird one time, way back in Michigan when he’d been too young and dumb to know what he was doing.

Maybe because it was Olly, who was so particular about being touched, who had never mentioned a girlfriend in the five months they’d been living together. Olly, who’d told him in so many words that he wanted space.

Yeah, a threesome was probably the opposite.

Shit.

Benji didn’t have anything to distract himself with. No practice, no games for a whole week. He should pack, maybe, for his flight tomorrow—Jamaica with a couple of guys from the NHTC. Pairo and some of his buddies were staying one resort over.

Olly was going to Minnesota, which was the opposite of vacation as far as Benji could tell. He was going to give a straight no thank you to any plans centered on an ice-fishing hut.

But right, space.

“Fuck,” he said to his sandwich. A glop of avocado oozed out the side and

landed on his sweatpants.

The shower cut off eventually, but there was no sign of Olly. Benji couldn't focus on *Call of Duty*, couldn't fall back asleep, couldn't force his brain in line with his meditation app. He felt twitchy and nervous and shitty, and then he was pouring Olly a mug full of coffee. He'd brought it back at Christmas: some fancy handmade thing, with curves that felt perfect in his hand.

He tapped his knuckles against Olly's door. He'd never knocked on it; had always accepted it as a sign to leave him the fuck alone.

There was a long pause. He shut his eyes until he heard footsteps.

Olly opened the door. His hair was dripping over the shoulder of an ancient gray sweatshirt. Olly only wore ratty sweatshirts with holes in the cuffs when he was down. Sure enough, his eyes looked punched-out and miserable.

"I brought you coffee," Benji said, like the fucking idiot he was.

Olly took the cup. Didn't drink.

"And, um." He stopped. "Sorry if things got out of hand last night."

Olly twitched one shoulder. "It's fine."

It was clearly not fine. "I was pretty fucked up."

"Me too."

"Still." Benji tried not to fidget. "I, uh." His default post-drunken-threesome script—a fist bump and a *fuck yeah, bro*—didn't seem appropriate. Didn't seem like it was in the same universe as appropriate.

"It's fine," Olly repeated, like if he said it again it would become true.

"Shit happens."

"I don't get the sense that kind of shit happens to you, though."

Olly's mouth pulled to the side. Not into a smile. "I kept telling you I make bad decisions when I get drunk."

*Ouch.* "Sorry," he said, again. "I mean, I've done that—" he waved a hand—"plenty of times. And it doesn't have to get weird."

Olly's shoulders tensed. Benji had never known someone else's body language this well. "Not that it's weird or wrong that you're having, um, a feeling about stuff. But it doesn't have to change anything, or mean anything about you, or, like, us, or...whatever."

Olly took a sip of the coffee, still looking down. He had dark eyelashes, even with his hair. Benji didn't know why he knew that, or that the freckles he'd arrived to training camp with had disappeared in December. Or that he'd

flushed all the way down his chest when he came, staring up at Benji like he was dying for it.

“It’s a good thing you made me get a therapist,” Olly told his coffee. “I didn’t have enough shit to talk about.”

“Oh, buddy.” Benji reached out for a hug automatically. He hadn’t known he’d finally worn Olly down. But touching him did not feel like his best option, so he ended up with one hand hovering in the air between them. Fuck. Benji wasn’t used to feeling awkward.

“Fuck you,” Olly said, tired. “If it’s not gonna be weird, give me the damned hug like you would have yesterday.”

Benji had him folded up before he was even done talking, not careful enough of the coffee: he could feel hot liquid seeping into his sweatshirt. But who cared. Olly was leaning his forehead into Benji’s shoulder and there was no space between them at all.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Olly's flight to Duluth passed in a fog. He was still halfway fucked up, hadn't slept, even though the rest of the day after the goddamned threesome had been normal enough. Benji made him breakfast; they went to Georgetown for old-person yoga.

And Olly was going to be fine. He was going to unpack this whole experience with Dr. Martinez, and he was going to keep playing halfway decent hockey, and nothing was going to change. Benji clearly had no idea it had been any different than those other threesomes he'd had plenty of times before. Olly never had—had never done anything more with a girl than kiss his prom date. He hadn't wanted to lie like that, when he knew he wouldn't ever feel the right way about her.

It was weird, Olly thought, watching the dark blur of Lake Superior give way to Duluth's lights. He should have been losing his shit; had been, yesterday morning, had been having a complete fucking meltdown, sitting in his shower with the water pounding down on his shoulders and stomach acid on the back of his throat.

But he'd realized: he was going to get through it. He was going to fucking survive. Benji was a solid dude, and fuck it, Olly *trusted* him. And if everything really went to hell, he was still going to be fine. He had money; he could move to his cabin on Lake Vermilion and fish all day and never think about this shit ever again.

Joey and Sami met him at the airport. Levi had bailed because of some emergency at work.

It was snowing as they pulled out of the arrivals lane in Joey's truck, flakes materializing out of nowhere in the beam of the headlights. It was only two hours to the cabin Joey had rented on Lake Winnibigoshish—a new place, some resort that would turn on the heat in their fish house for them. Apparently Dad had been giving Joey shit for going soft.

Olly caught them up on the season as they rolled up Route 2, the windshield wipers a quiet shush over their voices. Olly was glad to be there: the Järvinen brothers had been going ice fishing during the All-Star break since he'd made it to the show. He barely remembered last year, he'd been such a wreck. Not sleeping, drinking too much. The whole week had been a

blur of trying to hold it together, and realizing that he was failing.

Sami was asleep in the passenger seat by the time they drove through Deer River. The conversation had tapered off around Grand Rapids, and the snow was getting heavier. Olly felt a little sleepy himself, lulled by the narcotic hush of the windshield wipers and the soft music on the radio.

“Olly,” Joey said quietly. All Olly could see from the back seat was the curve of his shoulder, the nape of his neck. “I wanted to say—I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Last year. I should have been there. For you.”

Olly couldn’t think of anything to say. They were passing the casino: its lights blazed against the darkness.

“Sami filled me in, a little, after Christmas. But he shouldn’t have had to. I should have...” He stopped again. “I should have known you better than to think what Dad was saying was true. That you needed to be tougher, or whatever, that you were giving up. You’re the toughest little bastard I’ve ever met.”

“I don’t feel like it.” Olly leaned back against the headrest. Shut his eyes. It was easier to talk in the dark. “I was so fucked up.”

“We were all worried about you last year, but—shit. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what to do. You don’t make it easy to—I don’t know. To know what’s going on. That’s not an accusation or me trying to make an excuse. I should have figured it out. Manned the fuck up and talked to you.”

“I wouldn’t have talked to you.”

“I would have fucking made you.” That was Joey’s big-older-brother-voice: the voice that had helped him with his wrists, that had carried him piggyback around the backyard, that had pushed him on the swings and helped him tie his shoes and showed him how to shotgun a beer.

“I’m gay,” Olly said to the black space behind his eyelids.

Joey didn’t say anything, but the truck slowed, pulled off to the side of the tiny road. Olly opened his eyes as Joey put it in Park, Sami waking up with a curious noise. Joey got out, opened the back door, and pulled him into his chest, as far as he could get with his seat belt still fastened.

Belatedly, Olly realized that he was crying into Joey’s flannel shirt, hard, like when he was four years old and had fallen down the steps into the basement. Before he’d learned to play through it.

Sami was scrambling out of his seat belt, demanding to know what the fuck was going on, and Joey was telling him. The other back door opened,

letting in a whip of snow, and then Sami was crashing into his back, wrapping his arms around him from the other side.

They made it to the cabin eventually, all three of them raw-edged. Olly's head had gone fuzzy, from a day in airports and all the fucking emotions. They hadn't talked, really, on the rest of the drive. But no one hated him.

Olly didn't know what else to do. He emailed Dr. Martinez once his phone got connected to the wireless at the cabin. He also got a text from Benji of an icy drink with an umbrella, in front of crystal-colored ocean water. *Stay warm up there.*

Sami dragged in the last load of stuff from the truck, a cooler with all the beer and steaks and breakfast shit they'd need for the week. Only craft beer; no quinoa or butter made from anything but peanuts; no vegetables, unless you counted potatoes. Neither Benji nor Liz would count potatoes.

"I think we all deserve a fucking drink," Sami said. He pulled three IPAs out of the cooler and handed them around. Joey popped the top of his off on the side of the counter—he'd learned to do it in college and always liked showing off his trick. Olly and Sami stuck to the Buckeyes bottle opener on Sami's key chain.

Olly tried not to drain half his beer at once. Failed. Sami handed him another without a word.

They ended up on the couches in the living room, arguing over what to watch the same way they had their entire lives. They settled on the Calgary-Winnipeg game. It felt like every ice-fishing trip they'd ever been on; Olly was so grateful he didn't even know what to do with it.

"Don't think we're not gonna talk about your shit," Sami told him, when the game was over and Olly was half-asleep on the couch.

"This fucker loves to talk about feelings now." Joey sounded resigned.

"I have a therapist." Olly swallowed a yawn. "So apparently I do, too."

There was a long pause. Joey and Sami stared at each other over his head: Olly wouldn't have had to know them for his entire life to know it was a speaking look.

"Did your big, sexy roommate have anything to do with that?" Joey asked, finally. "'Cause Liz is ready to roll out the welcome wagon if you want to get gay-married."

"No," Olly informed them. "We are not doing this."

"Oh, Olly." Joey reached out to give him three soft pats on top of his head, like he was one of the fucking Järvinen huskies. "We are *definitely* doing



this.”

\* \* \*

They did, too, giving him shit all goddamned week. But it was the same shit they’d always given each other, bullshitting around the fish hole and reminding each other of every embarrassing thing they’d ever done.

And they talked for real, too, around the pine-topped table in their kitchen, looking out onto the white of the lake while Sami fried fish on the stove. Olly told them about the Wolves, more than he’d ever told anybody—letting his eyes go unfocused so he wouldn’t have to look at Barnard spitting in his face, calling him a bitch-ass little faggot every time Olly’s checking wasn’t up to his ever-evolving standards, every time he failed to get in front of a puck; how by February he’d been so desperate and fucked up that he’d gone out to a bar and gotten smashed and let himself get picked up, and how that had been the one night Crowder hadn’t stayed out with the boys until two in the morning. The legal shit, the brewing scandal, the relentless grind of being a fucking gay professional hockey player.

All the shit he’d been hearing his entire life.

All the shit he’d picked up without ever once having to be told.

He wouldn’t say any of it hurt less, exactly, like one week could make up for a lifetime. But it was something.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Olly got back to the 505 looking good as hell, like standing on six inches of ice to pull cold-ass fish out of even-fucking-colder water really did something for him.

Benji was still dehydrated from the sun and saltwater and rum. Piro had reverted to type in Jamaica, and combining him with the craziest fuckers from the NHTC had been the recipe for one hell of a week. Benji had been the old man of the group, chasing after everybody with Gatorade and sunscreen. Any party squad where he was the responsible one was...yeah.

But it had been good to get out of DC, have a little time to wrap his head around the Olly thing.

They'd texted all week, but it was different than having him there: tucked into the corner of the couch and frowning at *Pro Hockey*; wrinkling his nose at doing the dishes; falling asleep on Benji's shoulder on the plane, close enough that he could smell whatever he put in his perfect fucking hair. He could never figure out exactly what it smelled like: sharp and fresh, underlain with masculinity.

So yeah. He didn't think he'd gotten his head around much of anything. Or figured out what in the actual fuck had made him think it was a good idea to go there with his complicated, very-not-DTF Olly.

Benji refocused on chopping carrots while Olly filled him in on ice fishing. It sounded like actual hell, but it agreed with Olly, so Benji cared about listening.

\* \* \*

They came back from the break with a long home stand—games every other day while most of the Western Conference swung through. Mils called it the Groundhog Day schedule: skate, eat, sleep, repeat.

Benji liked the rhythm, settled into the work with a will. He didn't like to assume things, but the Eagles were making the playoffs as long as they didn't implode spectacularly, even though their offense was not the best. Coach was rumbling about sending Lukesy back up to 1C, which he was being a total diva about. Prince Luke liked playing with a consistent line, not to mention

having Olly and Bevvo pick up his slack with checking.

But Piro had remembered how to stop pucks and their D was nailing shit down. And Stormy was back on his skates in a white no-contact jersey, which gave everybody a boost.

Nothing was different back at the 505. Olly seemed happy to act like he'd been struck with selective amnesia. He was spending more time FaceTiming his brothers, and Benji liked listening to the laughter from his bedroom, liked coming back from drinks with the boys to find him sprawled on the couch, long legs angled over the back cushions with his phone tucked into his shoulder.

But sometimes—fuck—Benji worried he wasn't doing *quite* as good of a job at playing it off.

Well, he was. Benji was being his most chill and normal.

But sometimes...he'd be in his shower, or getting ready to fall asleep, and it would hit him like an electric shock: Olly's eyes fluttering open, dark Great Lakes blue in the dim light of his bedroom; the dent his teeth left in his lower lip; the punched-out gasp he'd made when he came.

Benji didn't understand why he kept thinking about it.

He wasn't thinking about it that much.

Except for when he was.

\* \* \*

"Where's your better half?" Piro asked, when he slipped into their room two minutes before curfew.

"With Soko." Olly locked his iPad. He'd been watching tape of San Diego. His old roommate from Colorado, Jake, was tearing it up this year. And his abs were still as ridiculous as they'd ever been, if Instagram was anything to go by.

"Trouble in paradise? Still?" Piro flopped onto his bed. "Or has Soko gotten finished with his murder-show kick?"

"Go brush your teeth. You're disgusting."

"Fucking Christ, *Oliver*." Piro rolled his eyes, like he was offended by basic dental hygiene, but he did haul his ass out of bed to brush his teeth, so.

Olly clicked off the light when he got back, shut his eyes, and rolled to face the wall. He wasn't tired, even after the game and a steak the size of his face, but the video had started blurring in front of his eyes. He needed his

brain to shut up. Lay in the dark and do his mindfulness exercises, like tonight they were finally going to work.

He didn't know how long it had been—long enough that he thought Pairo was asleep; the bastard slept like a blameless, innocent child—when Pairo's sheets rustled. "Olly?" he whispered. "You know you can talk to me, right. If you wanted to."

"We talk all the fucking time." Olly reluctantly rolled himself over.

Pairo was propped up on one elbow, a blur of black hair and white sheets in the dark. "Mostly bullshit and chirps."

"Did you finally learn more English, then?"

"Fuck you," Pairo shot back. He had an accent, but he was fluent. "I'm trying to have a real talk, and all you do is insult me."

"I really feel the togetherness," Olly told him. He appreciated that Pairo was trying or whatever, but he wasn't having this conversation. "I feel like this is a very safe space."

Pairo chucked a pillow at his head. "Fuck you, for real." He flopped back down onto his bed. Olly thought they were done, but no. "It's just. You're a decent guy for an asshole, Oliver. So I want you to know that I've got your back. And if you ever need anyone to rearrange Benji's face, I'm your man."

"I would pay money to see you try to beat Benji up."

"I'm not fucking stupid. I'd get your lineys to hold him down."

"I don't know why you want to beat Benji up at all."

"I don't *want* to," Pairo said. "Just if you *need* me to."

"Why would I need you to whale on my best buddy on the team?"

"Fuck you, Oliver." Pairo hurled another pillow, getting less power on it since he was all cuddled up in his blankets. "All I'm saying is that. You know. Whatever's going down. There are guys who've got your back."

"Nothing is going down." There was no way Pairo knew what had happened before the break. Unless Benji had said something in Jamaica. But if he had, Olly didn't think Pairo could manage to be this subtle about it. And Olly thought he was handling it okay, the best that he could. Sometimes the wanting cracked him in half; but it was more manageable, now.

"Fine," Pairo snapped. "Be difficult. And give me my goddamned pillows back."

He was quiet after that, at least. Olly turned on a podcast and gave up on sleeping. All of this felt like it could blow up in a fucking instant. His knee, a concussion, a career-ending scandal about the gay guy tricking his roommate

into sex.

Still, Olly couldn't remember the last time he'd had a panic attack about hockey; the last time he'd thrown up had been the morning after the threesome, which he thought was more than justified. And, anyway, he and Benji had been fine since the stuttered-out apologies Benji had offered along with a cup of coffee and makeup yoga. They'd been leaving a little more space between each other, maybe; no falling asleep in the same bed, no naps on each other's shoulders on the plane.

It didn't make anything *easier*, exactly, but it was what Olly needed.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

They finished out the road trip, and then won against the Demons at home. Olly sacrificed his rib cage to a puck in the second, and skated off to get checked by the trainers. He was back in the third, before he got knocked into the boards and Coach O pulled him.

Benji didn't let himself worry about Olly until after the game. (He did his best to crack some bones on the guy who checked him, though.) (Legally. The Demons had a decent power play.) He found Olly propped up in his stall, a bag of ice taped to his ribs and a determinedly neutral expression on his face, indicating *I'm suffering but I'll die before I admit it*.

"I'm fine," he said, before Benji even opened his mouth.

"Course."

The locker room felt a little weird that night, a little tense. Benji didn't want to listen to Coach O talk about the importance of not dropping points against Winnipeg, didn't want to pump everyone else up. He'd played seventy fucking games straight. He'd been doing his job all season. Hopefully this game meant they'd start winning again, because Carolina was inching up behind them—but he didn't know what the fuck else he could do, about the Eagles, or the tense conversation he'd had with Krista that morning, or Olly, or anything.

He hated feeling helpless, for a lot of reasons he'd spent a lot of time talking about in therapy.

"Are you okay?" Olly asked when they were halfway home, waiting at a stoplight with the Washington Monument to their left and the White House on the right. It was incredible that this was Benji's life: big city, expensive car. He ran his palms across the smooth fabric on his knees, thought about how many bags of groceries his suit would pay for. Not Whole Foods groceries—ramen noodles and off-brand cereal from the bargain grocery on Bloomfield Road, *SNAP/EBT Accepted* taped in the front window.

"I will be," he said, because it had always been true before. He didn't stay down about things for long. Never had. Never would. Getting over things was kind of his specialty.

"Okay." Olly stepped on the gas when the light turned green. Benji was staring at his profile, he realized, eyes catching on the scar on his upper lip. It

was, somehow, Olly's only visible scar: he'd broken his nose, but it had healed clean; he'd never lost a tooth; the scars from his MCL surgery were faded-out white lines around his knee, hidden by time and expensive fabric and hockey pads.

But Olly's scars went a lot deeper than that. Wherever the fuck they'd come from. The Wolves or his dad or just life in the North American fucking Hockey Association.

"Want to watch a movie?" Benji asked when they got home, even though he was starting to think Olly wasn't the only one who could use a little space. He kept...noticing things, feeling a vague pulling sensation in his chest, and it only seemed to get worse.

So it was almost, but not quite, a normal night: *The Fast and the Furious* franchise, gradually sliding lower on the couch until they were almost, but not quite, touching.

\* \* \*

Olly got the winner when they went down to Florida, a beauty of a wraparound conjured up out of pure determination. The guys wanted to hit one of the bars on the beach afterward.

"Come with," he told Olly, who scrunched up his nose but came, anyway.

Right. Fucking space. Benji was bad at it. At least Olly was, too. He stuck close at the bar, like he had at the beginning of the season; except that he talked and laughed at people's jokes. None of them had changed before they came out, so they were all halfway out of their suits. Olly's tie hung around his neck, his white sleeves rolled up his forearms.

Benji clinked his Bud off Olly's Corona, gestured at the open windows along the side facing the beach, and the warm, salty air drifting in. There were for-real palm trees. "It's 39 and raining back home."

"It doesn't suck."

"High praise from you, buddy, since it's not a frozen lake with minus-fifteen windchill. Are you hanging in there with your peasant beer?"

Olly elbowed him under the ribs. Fucker had the sharpest elbows he'd ever experienced. But Benji couldn't help smiling: look at them, joking around and being okay. Maybe their issues could go to hell.

"I think I'm gonna go walk on the beach," Olly said, "then head back."

"Do you want company?"

Olly made a face. “Fine,” he said, but not like he was pissed about it.

The sounds of the bar faded as they slipped out the patio exit. They took off their shoes; Benji could feel all the little muscles in the arches of his feet as they walked toward the water. They were in Miami, basically—it wasn’t quiet. There were people and lights, a road humming behind them.

But still, there was the dark swell of the Atlantic, waves murmuring up the beach and blending with the sounds of the traffic.

Benji rolled up his trouser legs and dropped his shoes. The water was still cold in March, but the air was bathwater warm, and Olly brushed against his shoulder as he stepped into the water himself.

“Have you ever been skinny-dipping?” Olly asked.

“That would be a no for me.”

“Too bad. It’s pretty freeing.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Not trying to end up on Twitter again.”

Olly chuckled, warm in the semi-dark. “You’re too big for anyone to miss.”

“Thanks.” Benji pretended to preen. “I work hard for this body.”

“I know you do.” He could hear the eye roll.

Impulsively, Benji slung his arm around Olly’s neck. He would have done it a few weeks ago. Benji had always been on the touchy-feely side of the spectrum; Davo said it was because he hadn’t gotten hugged enough as a kid. Sure, whatever, maybe he had a hug deficit to work off, but Olly had always felt perfect under his arm.

He didn’t know how long they stayed out there, watching the moon ripple on the water and breathing in the salty air. Not that long; it was still well before curfew when they walked back to the hotel, clusters of people still lingering in the lobby bar.

“Want another drink?” Benji asked, not quite wanting the night to end. He was tired, but—not.

“Better not. Early flight.”

The elevator doors slid open for their floor, splitting apart their reflections in the shiny bronze metal. “Night, then.”

“You don’t want to come watch a movie or something?” Olly asked, eyes fixed somewhere around Benji’s kneecaps.

He shouldn’t. But he did.

\* \* \*



Olly stood in the shower, hot water pounding down onto his shoulders. He'd slept, and when he'd woken up he'd been able to feel the warmth from Benji's skin. There was still time until the alarm went off, but he hadn't been able to stay in bed with the sleeping angles of Benji's face: the shadow of dark stubble along his cheek, the absurd length of his eyelashes and the red softness of his mouth.

Olly shook water out of his eyes. His dick was having a hard time forgetting what Benji's hand felt like on his shoulder, the warmth of his skin under the blankets. And last night had been nice. Low-key, like it was possible that they could fuck around and still be easy with each other.

It was dangerous.

Olly still hadn't told Dr. Martinez about the threesome. He just couldn't deal with it. Unpacking the ice-fishing trip had given them plenty to talk about. She'd asked about Benji, the last time they'd talked, and he'd shrugged it off with what he hoped had been a convincing lack of concern.

Were you supposed to feel guilty about not telling your therapist shit? Olly didn't know, and he wasn't going to ask his resident mental health expert about it.

At least thinking about disappointing Dr. Martinez had killed his boner.

## *Chapter Thirty*

Benji woke up in Philadelphia a few days later, with a mouthful of Olly's hair. It had come loose overnight and was spilling all over the pillows, bright against the white sheets.

They'd gotten in late, the whole team shuffling upstairs from the lobby half-asleep. Benji's tired fucking brain hadn't even thought about going back to his room, autopiloting after Olly instead. They'd brushed their teeth—three grown men in the bathroom, knocking each other with elbows, Olly saying it reminded him of being home with his brothers—and fallen into bed.

Benji had passed out immediately. He didn't know about Olly, but either way it looked like he was sleeping now. He lay on his stomach, face turned toward Pairo's bed, his hair everywhere, the skin at the back of his neck like a secret.

He wanted to reach out and—touch? Smooth out Olly's hair, see what it felt like if he twisted it through his fingers and pulled. When they'd been in bed with that girl, it made sweaty little curls against Olly's temples. His eyes had been—

Yeah. Thinking about the threesome was a bad idea, when they were this close together, when he could smell the fancy shit Olly put in his hair, the laundry detergent that he'd picked up for the two of them at Whole Foods.

It had been hot, though. Maybe the hottest thing he'd ever done. Even if he couldn't shake the feeling that it had been a mistake. They were fine now, he thought, or maybe hoped: like the water in Florida had washed some of the bad shit out to sea. The first time Benji had seen the ocean had been the summer he'd left for Michigan, taking a precious week off his landscaping job to visit the house Davo's family rented every summer. He could still remember what it had been like: this big, overwhelming thing that his brain couldn't wrap itself around, other than that it was beautiful, and new, and that he'd wanted to throw himself into it as soon as he could.

He wasn't sure why he was thinking about that now. He'd been to the beach loads of times since then.

\* \* \*

Benji wasn't thinking about anything other than the game when he picked up his phone, before they left for the arena. He had a text from Krista that read, *Benji this is hard for me to say but Rob and I talked about it, and I don't think I want to see you right now. It's important for me to surround myself with people who will support me in this phase of my life and I don't think you are doing that right now. My family has to be my priority.*

The bottom dropped out of Benji's stomach. He sat down heavily on the edge of Olly's bed.

He was angry. He felt it spreading out from his chest, a wash of tension, the way his heartbeat picked up.

Benji realized that Olly had said his name. "Sorry, what?"

"I asked if you're ready."

Was he? He got his jacket on; fumbled with his tie. The fabric was slippery. Olly knocked Benji's numb fingers out of the way, tied it, and snugged the knot up to his throat. Gave him an assessing look with his cool blue eyes.

"What's going on, bud?"

"We've got to go." He brushed past Olly to join Pairo in the hallway. He didn't need this; didn't know what to say to Krista that wouldn't piss her off worse. He was angry she'd texted him now—she knew his schedule. He wanted to call her, try to explain, try to tell her that this wasn't her, that it was all fucking Rob twisting her around, this idea that she had to have a perfect life for her *brand partners*—

It wasn't a good idea. He was about to play against a team that wasn't far behind them in the standings. It was important.

Krista was important.

This fucking game had to be the *most* important thing, in the three hours left until the puck dropped.

Olly leaned against his shoulder. "What's—"

"I can't right now." It came out snappier than he meant. All he wanted to do was to get behind the wheel of this bus and drive to Pittsburgh and make Krista see that she had so many fucking choices other than staying with Rob. He could hear her voice saying, with a brittle laugh, "*He loves me. He's from a good family. He's successful. We work well together,*" like if she repeated it enough times she could will it to become true, the same way she'd willed herself out of Duncannon.

Benji had hockey to hold on to. Krista hadn't had anything but her drive,

her determination. Her looks, he guessed. They hadn't had the easiest relationship since he'd left for Michigan. He was leaving her behind, she'd said, the same thing their mom had said. Even though she was graduating and taking a Greyhound bus to Pittsburgh, the week after Benji started his road trip in Davo's dad's old truck.

Neither of them had wanted to stay in Duncannon a second longer than they had to. He hadn't understood why she wasn't happy for him. *I am*, she'd promised, eventually, and he hadn't believed her all the way, but as soon as he'd gotten to Michigan he'd been skating for his life—his literal life, a roof over his head, since their mom had made it clear that if he left he didn't get to walk back in whenever he felt like it.

He'd done his best to be there for her, though. Answer her texts on his brick of a phone, when every other guy in the program had a fancy little supercomputer; call her as often as he could, even though his schedule never lined up with the hours she worked at the bar. He remembered when his phone ran out of minutes in November in the middle of a call, and he'd mentioned to his billet mom that he needed to put more money on it. She'd said, "*Why don't we add you to our family plan?*"

Two days later he had a hand-me-down iPhone. The nicest thing he'd ever owned, other than his gear and his truck.

Krista said, "*Must be nice to have everything handed to you,*" like she didn't know how he had to smile and say thank you every time one of his teammates' parents picked up his tab for something—ice time, a new stick—because that was the cost of getting his contributions on the ice. Like she didn't know how he sweated for it, bled for it, broke his nose for it, spat teeth onto the ice for it, so he could look like one of the Mountain Dew-mouthed junkies who loitered in the Sheetz parking lot on Route 22.

So he got used to the moments of disconnection with the guys on the team when he said the wrong thing, hadn't gone to the right camp, didn't know the right people. And it was okay, right—they were a chill group of dudes, he got along with everybody. But it was clear he was different.

He'd never tried to pretend otherwise. Hadn't then, didn't now. It was obvious as soon as anybody talked about summer vacations, or golfing with their dad, or when he'd admitted to his billet mom how much he was struggling in his English class. He had to maintain a certain GPA or he'd get kicked out.

She sat down with him and his textbook, and asked him, "*Benji, why*

*didn't you get a tutor, if your school wasn't teaching you this?"*

She froze and then apologized. She'd known by then that he wasn't like the other kids she'd billeted.

She got him a tutor. The tutor turned out to be pretty helpful for his math class, too.

He didn't get kicked off the team. He got a scholarship for college, got drafted.

Krista had always been better at school than he was. She'd talked about going to college, getting a job where she could make real money, the same way Benji had talked about going to the NAHA.

Then Rob had shown up and all of that had gone away.

Before he got off the bus, he texted her back, *I'm really sad to hear that, I love you and I will always be there for you. I'll be here whenever you want to talk.*

He put his phone in his bag and did his job. Not well, as it turned out, but even though he got in a dumb fight, had an even stupider turnover to hand the Pride their first goal—hockey was a team game. They had nineteen other guys who could have found a way to put pucks in the net. None of them managed to figure it out.

It didn't help.

\* \* \*

Benji was quiet after the game, mumbling through media—of course they wanted to ask him about his turnover—and not joking around in the showers.

"Don't beat yourself up over it," Olly told him, once they were on the bus.

"Over what?"

"That turnover."

"Oh." Benji shook his head, digging a hand into his damp tangle of curls. There was a bruise on his cheek from the fight. It hadn't been much of one: he'd gotten Benji once and then Benji had put him down. "I wasn't. I mean, it sucked, but the game's over and I'm gonna make sure nothing like that happens again. 'Cause that's all I can do, right?"

But even if Benji was saying the right words he didn't quite look like it. He looked worn-down, sad, something like that. It was March. They were all worn down. But Olly had gotten used to Benji being his six-five ray of sunshine. Except for when there was a problem with—

“Krista,” he guessed.

Benji shrugged. “Yeah.”

Olly leaned against his arm, as the bus crept up the street to their hotel.

“Want to get a drink?”

Benji leaned back. He was warm, solid. “Yeah, okay.”

\* \* \*

The nice thing about Philadelphia was it had dive bars, even in the nice parts. They were still in their game-day suits, out of place in the fug of a yellow Yuengling sign, but Olly had the feeling this place had seen weirder shit than two dudes wearing button-downs.

The bartender pushed their glasses across the bar. Olly’s water sloshed over the side, dripping down over smudgy fingerprints. Benji stared at his beer, took a long swallow. Olly couldn’t keep himself from watching his throat move.

He said, after his beer was mostly gone, “I don’t want to lose her, you know? She’s all I’ve got.”

“She’s not. All you’ve got.” Olly looked down at his glass of water, turned it in a circle on its cardboard coaster. “You’ve got the Deveraux, and Davo, and everybody from the NHTC or the Q or Hershey who texts you or calls you every single day. And, you know. Us. The team.”

“It’s not the same.”

He wasn’t wrong. Olly leaned an arm across his shoulders. “It sucks, dude.”

“Fuckin’ right.” When Olly took his arm away, Benji dropped his elbows onto the bar. “I hate not being able to *do* anything, you know? And even when I’m trying to just, whatever, be her family, make her think, it’s like she takes it all out on me because she can’t—” He stopped talking, maybe because his voice was cracking.

Olly didn’t know what to do. He put a hand on Benji’s shoulder, made a tentative circle on the wrinkled cotton of his shirt. With his other hand, he tapped out a quick text to Pairo. *Can I have the room?*

*OMG did u just sexile me Oliver.*

He rolled his eyes and stuck his phone back in his pocket. “Want to head back?”

Benji scrubbed at his eyes. His hair fluffed all over the place; he hadn't put anything in it when he showered. His eyes were red-rimmed and the bruise was purpling on his cheekbone. "Are you saying I'm too much of a mess to be out in public?"

"Maybe. Or just that, you know." He didn't know what he knew. "You're scaring the children."

"This is Philadelphia, Ols. The kids don't scare easy." A sad little smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. It hurt something in Olly's stomach. He didn't know what he wanted to do more: drive to Pittsburgh and shake his sister until she saw sense, or wrap Benji up and keep him somewhere it wouldn't hurt him. (Olly also wanted to kiss that exact corner of his mouth, until it wasn't sad anymore.)

"You don't have to do all of this, you know?" Benji continued, after Olly had refocused his eyes on the smudged bar top. Apparently he wasn't ready to leave yet, after all.

"All of what?"

"Being, like, nice to me when I'm being such a bummer."

"Don't say that. You know I don't mind."

Benji shrugged, still hunched over the bar. "I just always feel like... I guess I just always have to keep it together, you know? Like, I've worked way too hard to let shit affect me like this. With hockey, or, you know." He waved a hand.

"That's not how it works."

"I mean, kinda, though." He turned his beer glass in a circle, long-lashed eyes tracking the movement of the logo. "I wouldn't be where I am if I let shit...linger. Let it affect things with my team. I never would have gotten to where I am if I'd made everything a giant pity party, you know?"

Olly did know, actually. He was just more used to being on the other side of the conversation. "You get to feel things, though. People care about more than your numbers."

"Yeah, I know."

Benji was still looking down, though. Abruptly, Olly wasn't sure that this shithole bar was helping anything. He nudged Benji with his elbow. "Come on, buddy. Let's go."

Olly tossed a few bills down on the bar top, and they walked back. Dewey tried to call them over to the hotel bar, but Olly waved him off. He didn't know where this protective streak had come from, but he didn't want Benji to

feel like he had to be on. That he had to keep up his act like everything was okay, when it wasn't. When *he* wasn't.

Olly had never felt like this before. He felt like he was drowning; he didn't know what to do, other than stand where he was. Next to Benji.

The hallway was empty, their footsteps silent on the pile of the carpet. Olly tapped his key card against his door. He stepped through, realized that Benji wasn't following him, and turned around.

"Aren't you coming in?"

"I'm tired." He looked like it: shoulders slumped, wrinkles in his shirt. But more than that he looked uncertain, picking up his hands to scrub at his face. Olly didn't know what to do with that. With any of it: he wanted to fix it, make Benji better like Benji helped make him better. But some things were unfixable, and Olly didn't want to make it worse: with his feelings, with his stupid fucking crush.

So he hovered at the threshold of his hotel room, the quiet dragging out between them.

"Come on," he finally said, and held out his hand for God only knew what reason.

Benji looked at it; looked up at him, eyes wide and green. It was easy to forget how young he was, but for once Olly could see it: Benji Bryzinski, all of twenty-one years old, stripped of his swagger and hard-won self-assurance. The scared kid in hand-me-down pads, clinging with every bit of his strength to the only thing he thought might save him.

Benji stepped forward and slid his hand into Olly's. Their fingers knit together, and the door was closing behind them and they were crashing into each other, Benji hanging on to him so tightly that Olly couldn't breathe. He shut his eyes against the crumpled fabric of Benji's shirt and just—held on.

It wasn't chill; it wasn't bros; it wasn't anything Olly would have ever let happen with anyone he'd ever known, even while he was rubbing slow circles on Benji's back and murmuring nonsense into the side of his neck.

After a while Olly could feel Benji straightening himself out, tightening the muscles in his back and getting ready to pull away.

"I should go," he mumbled, lips moving against Olly's hair.

"You don't have to."

"Okay," Benji said, immediately, like he hadn't wanted to go at all.

They undressed quietly, Benji pulling Pairo's extra pair of sweatpants out of his suitcase. Olly climbed into bed, and Benji followed him under the



blankets, tucking himself into Olly's side in a way that felt as familiar as a homecoming and as charged as a lightning bolt. "Is this okay," he whispered, as if Olly wasn't going to take any excuse to pull him closer, because he had that reckless, damn-the-consequences feeling again—even if the only place it went was to run his thumb over the warm skin on the back of his neck, let Benji fall asleep on his chest to the Discovery Channel.

\* \* \*

Olly didn't want to know what Piro thought when he found them in the morning, all tangled up.

All he did was raise a Gallic eyebrow and stalk into the bathroom, mouthing *You owe me* over his shoulder. As if Olly hadn't covered for him when he'd missed curfew to go hook up.

They hadn't even done anything.

Other than, well, *cuddle*.

And there it was—the anxiety rushing out from his stomach. Piro was going to say something at the wrong time, because he couldn't resist the easy joke. And what if Benji woke up and got weirded out—this wasn't the kind of thing buddies did, a world away from happening to pass out in the same place, and what if Benji thought Olly was trying to take advantage of something because...

Benji stirred against his shoulder. "Why'd you get all tense?" he mumbled. Olly felt lips moving against his neck, an arm tightening over his chest.

"No reason."

"Breathe, bud." Benji was not freaking out.

"Okay."

Benji made a pleased noise. Olly remembered it from the threesome.

"Where's Piro?"

"Shower."

"Mmm." Benji was sleepy and warm, pressing Olly's left side into the bed like a weighted blanket. He was usually up and at 'em, unless he was hungover. Not today: he was acting like he had no immediate plans to get out of bed, even though they'd be leaving for Pittsburgh in an hour.

Olly knew he should get up himself, but he couldn't make it happen. The surge of anxiety had faded, even though it would be back later like it fucking always was. And Olly was comfortable, he realized, breathing in Benji's

smell and feeling the rise and fall of his chest.

They must have dozed back off, because the next thing he was aware of was Piro blasting some godawful Euro techno out of his phone.

“Rise and shine, *mes enfants*. Bus in twenty,” he singsonged, throwing granola bars and bananas at their heads. “Say thank you for bringing you breakfast in bed.”

“*Merci*,” Benji grumbled, heaving himself vertical.

Piro zipped his suitcase and swanned back out, techno fading down the hallway behind him.

“Guess I’d better get dressed,” Benji said. He had his back to Olly now, feet on the floor. It felt immediately colder without his body heat under the blankets.

Olly kicked back the covers and swung himself up. Or he tried to, before Benji grabbed on to him again and tugged him into his lap.

“Thanks,” Benji mumbled into his hair. “For, you know. Being there.”

Olly could feel the vibrations in his chest while he was talking. “Of course.”

Benji shook him. “Seriously, Ols. I mean it.”

“Shut up,” Olly said. “It’s not like I haven’t lost it all over you a hundred times this year.”

“Still. I don’t know how I got so lucky,” which was absolutely the kind of thing Benji said, and absolutely the kind of thing that was going to make Olly lose his goddamned mind and also, something was melting in his chest, and he didn’t know what to do about any of it.

Other than shove him away, bully both of them into travel suits, and make sure they made it onto the bus with ninety seconds to spare.

\* \* \*

Pittsburgh was anticlimactic. He already knew he wasn’t meeting Krista for dinner. He already knew Robbo was going to try to start shit. So he let himself tune out the noise.

It helped that they won with a definitive 4-1, Olly’s line accounting for two of their four goals. They were clicking when they needed to—Luke and Olly were both on silly points streaks.

If they didn’t have an epic meltdown, Benji was going to the playoffs. Which, holy shit: the fucking *Cup playoffs*.

Pinch him.

Poiro did, that fucker. “Of course we’re going to the playoffs. This isn’t some shithole team.”

“You still have to win the games, rookie,” Olly shot back, and then they were sniping at each other in French and everything felt—good. Weirdly good.

It made no fucking sense and maybe he was going to regret thinking it later, but fuck it. Krista was going to be however Krista was going to be and there wasn’t a damned thing he could do about it, other than be there for her when she came around. He and Olly were solid again, some way, somehow. He’d drifted awake in the morning, warm and comfortable with his mouth full of Olly’s hair, and he’d thought, *Thank god*.

For whatever reason.

He didn’t like not getting along with people. Especially his teammates. Especially his, whatever, best friends.

(He’d never wanted to wake up with Davo’s hair in his mouth. Or anybody from the Q.)

(Whatever. It wasn’t a thing.)

## Chapter Thirty-One

They were hosting Tampa Bay, and then Minnesota. They could have locked in a playoff spot if they beat Tampa, but they couldn't manage it.

But Olly would be damned if he let them lose to the Wolves.

He had his headphones on, blasting AC/DC—"Back in Black" again; fuck it, it was maybe his song of the year—and drilling his tennis ball off the wall.

Olly knew what he had to do. He'd watched the video. He'd practiced. He'd worked his fucking ass off, in the weight room and on the ice and on fucking FaceTime with Dr. Martinez.

It was time to do it.

The first period started off chippy, one of the Wolves forwards getting into it with Dewey around the Eagles goal. Dewey was hard to piss off on the ice, so he must have been acting like a real asshole.

And then Olly was skating out for his first shift. It was smooth as silk: Dewey tapped a pass from behind the Wolves goal out to Bevvo; Bevvo slung it over to where Olly was charging in from the right, and Olly scored with his first touch of the game.

The goal horn sounded, and Benji slammed into him, bumping their helmets together, screaming. Olly vanished under a pile of bodies in navy blue sweaters, and they were off.

It was a righteous fucking hammering, ending 7-1 to the Eagles. Their D was relentless: every time Olly turned around, one of the Wolves was getting checked or slammed into the boards. Benji played a blinder, with two assists and a cannon of a slapshot.

Also, Olly got his second hat trick of the season.

Listening to the arena chant his name—*Ol-ly, Ol-ly, Ol-ly*—Olly couldn't actually believe it. He'd been such a wreck when he got to DC; and maybe he still had work to do, maybe he still had shit to figure out, but for real, for tonight: fuck it all.

He would work it out. And if some asshole finally went and yapped to the media, he'd retire to Lake Vermilion on a high note.

To make the night even better, Carolina lost, so they officially punched their ticket to the playoffs. The Eagles weren't going to finish at the top of their division, but they were solidly in second, with God only knew who

behind them. Half the conference was within three points of each other, but that wasn't Olly's problem.

No, Olly's problem was that he was out of beer, and he was stuck on the inside of the booth.

He elbowed Benji. Their ankles were tangled together under the table. Benji had done it while Olly coached him through Instagramming about making the playoffs, and Olly felt too good to move.

"What, bud?"

Olly wagged his empty pint glass.

"I think Yelich went to get another pitcher," Hotdog called from across the table. He was back up from Hershey; he'd be a real Eagle next season.

"Jesus, don't trust Yelich with the pitcher." Bevvo sounded alarmed—nobody had forgotten about the 10% beer incident. Benji was drinking a Miller like a seventeen-year-old, as usual.

"I'll go check on him." Luke heaved himself up to head toward the bar, but angled off immediately toward Pairo and a cluster of girls.

"Lukesy has the attention span of a goddamned gnat," Bevvo complained. "Hotdog, go make sure Yello's not ordering stupid shit. If you talk to a girl before you get back, I'll skate blade your fucking neck."

Olly snorted into his empty. Now that Bevvo had a girlfriend, he liked to act all responsible, but he couldn't quite manage it. Sandrine had the patience of a saint.

"What? Mad I'm out-momming you?" Bevvo grinned.

"I dunno, Mama Ols has loosened up a lot," Benji said. He slid his arm around Olly's shoulder and squeezed. Left it there.

"Fuck the Wolves," was Olly's contribution.

"Fucking for real. Don't know how you stay so professional in interviews." Bevvo leaned forward like he was talking into a mic and erased all traces of personality from his face. "I'd like to thank Minnesota's coach for throwing me under a bus, and I want to commend the fans for being the biggest assholes on Twitter. I'll always be grateful they were dumb enough to trade me."

"Boston's fans are the biggest fuckheads on Twitter," Hotdog announced, back with pitchers.

Olly drank another beer and laughed at everybody's jokes. His phone was blowing up with texts from his family. Even his dad hadn't been able to find anything in his game to constructively criticize, for maybe the first time since

he'd picked up a hockey stick. And Benji was warm and solid against him, from his shoulder all the way down his body.

"Ready to go?" Benji asked him after a while. Luke and Pairo had disappeared with the girls; Hotdog and Yelich were swapping stories about Canadian farm country, accents getting more ridiculous by the minute. Bevvo's face cycled through fascinated and disgusted.

They slid out of the booth and met an Uber. Benji made polite conversation with the driver and Olly watched the city rush by: the intricate bronze tiers of the African American History and Culture museum; the angular white facade of the Kennedy Center, reflecting off the dark water of the Potomac. He'd never been to half the shit on the National Mall. The grind of the season had caught him, narrowed his life to hockey and airplanes and exhaustion the way it always did.

Maybe not only those things.

He tipped his head back against the headrest and found Benji looking back at him. He was smiling, like he couldn't help himself, and he mouthed *playoffs!* with his eyes crinkling at the corners. It was dark enough that Olly couldn't see their color. He didn't need to: could picture them with perfect clarity, green with flecks of whisky-brown around the pupil.

Olly was probably in love with him, which was a complete fucking disaster.

It didn't feel like it, though, halfway across the river with the trees of Roosevelt Island rising beneath them, and Benji smiling as he pressed their ankles back together.

\* \* \*

The kitchen lights spilled pools of brightness onto the counter and left the rest of the 505 in darkness. Olly grabbed two Gatorades out of the fridge. He was still buzzed, a little. Enough to feel loose, disconnected from the heaviness of reality.

He tossed Benji one of the Gatorades and let himself spill backward over the couch, ending up with his legs hanging over the back and his head on the cushions, everything upside down.

"Take off your suit, drunkie," Benji told him, voice all warm and affectionate.

Olly shut his eyes. "You can't make me move."

“At least take off your shoes.”

Olly kicked them off, letting them clatter to the floor. “Happy now?”

The couch dipped when Benji sat down, close enough to touch. “Maybe.”

And then there was a hand in his hair, gathering it up where it was falling over the edge of the couch. Olly didn’t shiver.

“It’s so long.”

“Playoff mullet.” He could say it now that they’d qualified.

Benji’s hand stilled. “You’re joking.”

Olly opened his eyes. Horror and amusement fought it out across Benji’s face. “I’m from Minnesota. It’s required.”

“Jesus Christ.” Benji hadn’t let go of his hair. He gave it a tug. “You’re going to look like such an asshole.”

Olly shut his eyes again and wrinkled his nose. “I look worse if I try to grow a beard.”

There was a long pause. Benji’s hand started moving again. Olly felt fingertips on his scalp, sliding over the contours of his skull. With his eyes closed and the last of the alcohol curling through his bloodstream, everything in the world upside down, it was easy to press up under Benji’s hand. It was big, and warm, and he could feel something hot uncoiling in his stomach.

He opened his eyes.

Benji was looking down at him with a puzzled arch in his eyebrows, like he wasn’t sure what he was seeing, like he wasn’t sure about his next move. Olly was used to Benji being a force of fucking nature.

Very slowly, one of his fingertips moved out of Olly’s hair. Skated across the thin skin behind his ear, drifted over his cheekbone. Then it was on his mouth, barely the suggestion of a touch. Olly couldn’t move, pinned down by the concentration in Benji’s eyes.

Benji’s thumb caught on the scar tissue on his upper lip. Stopped. He tilted his head, like he was thinking; and then, so slowly that Olly had all the time in the world to stop him, he bent down and replaced his thumb with a featherlight touch of his lips.

“I fucking hate that scar,” he whispered. His lips moved on Olly’s skin, barely offset from his mouth. Olly didn’t know what to do with the surge of feelings that ran through him, other than make a broken noise he’d never heard come out of his throat before, and tilt his head so that...

Fuck.

They were kissing.

Slow, exploratory, a dry and cautious brush of lips on lips. It was a weird angle, Olly upside down on the couch and Benji twisting to bend over him. Only lips, but it was nothing like the way Olly had seen him kiss women, loose and...insignificant.

Then he was pulling back, hand still framing the side of Olly's face, thumb brushing across his cheekbone.

They stared at each other, breathing the same air. Olly didn't know what to do; didn't know how to do anything but brace himself for impact.



## Chapter Thirty-Two

“Hey, so.” Benji was still whispering. He could feel Olly under his lips, a faint catch of stubble, the raised line of that fucking scar.

“What?” Olly’s voice was equally quiet. Benji didn’t know what to make of the expression in his eyes.

“I don’t, um.” He didn’t know what to say. Settled on, “oh, fuck it,” and got a hand back in Olly’s hair, towed him up and around and into his lap. Olly came without protest, and also without punching him in the face, which in retrospect Benji should have been more concerned with. Olly didn’t like being manhandled.

But instead, Olly perched on his lap, knees bracketing Benji’s hips. He was taller from this angle, looking down the slope of his nose with opaque blue eyes.

Benji wished he were drunker. Alcohol made it easier. He’d had enough of a buzz to think it was a good idea to...okay, he hadn’t *thought* so much as done. But he wasn’t close to drunk enough to keep bulldozing on, like that other time.

So here they were, staring at each other. Olly looked—okay, he looked fucking *good*, even if Benji could admit by now that Olly always looked good to him. His hair was bright against the white of his button-down, and there was the faintest little blush along his cheekbones. He was heavy, a solid weight from the spread of his shoulders to the taper of his waist.

His blush deepened at whatever he was seeing on Benji’s face, and he tensed up like he was going to try to move. Benji caught him with a hand on his hip, teasing his thumb over the ridge of his muscle.

“What the fuck are you doing,” he asked, wrinkling his nose.

“Dunno,” Benji answered, aiming for honesty and winding up in confusion. “Looking at you,” he qualified.

“You see me every day.”

“Not like this.”

Olly made a face. “I don’t know what you’re doing,” he repeated.

“This, maybe,” and Benji tipped a finger under his chin, used it to pull him down, slowly enough that. Well. Olly could punch him in the face if he really wanted to. But he didn’t; just shifted himself forward until they were kissing

again.

They didn't do any more than that, not that "that" wasn't plenty. The game and the beers and the, whatever, kissing, caught up with them eventually—or it caught up with Benji, who the fuck knew about Olly—and they drifted off on the couch, like they didn't want to get up and snap out of the space they were in. Olly was tucked into his side, one arm wrapped around his chest and breath steady against his neck.

And that felt...right. Not like the shit with the girl, which had been hot but left him feeling something in the morning. Like a mistake, like he'd pushed too far, or they'd been too drunk and. Whatever.

No, falling asleep all pressed together with Olly's arm weighing him down—it was an extension of what they already did. The friendship they already had.

Probably he should still be worried about it.

Whatever. Tomorrow.

\* \* \*

Tomorrow was a recovery day. Benji's phone alarm still went off too damned early. Olly made a grumpy noise into his neck, which was exactly how he acted in the morning. If it was his idea to get up, he was fine; if it was someone else's alarm or he didn't want to be awake, he was a little mess.

"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty."

"Pass," Olly mumbled into Benji's shirt. Seemed to realize where he was; froze.

"Fucking stop it, it's fine." Benji gave him a little shake. Nobody was going to have a panic attack in a bathroom about this, if he had to dump Olly right onto his therapist's doorstep.

Olly forced himself to relax, muscle by muscle. Benji rubbed an encouraging hand over his back. "See? All good."

"Fuck you, dude." Olly shoved off his chest and stumbled toward the coffee machine. His hair was a wreck and his clothes were worse. He was such a neat freak about his looks; Benji enjoyed the reminder that Olly's clothing could get wrinkled, too.

Benji joined Olly at the coffeepot, watched him twist his hair into a knot on top of his head. Disobedient wisps curled down to make little question marks against the back of his neck.

“I don’t get you,” Olly told the coffeepot.

“What’s to get?”

Olly waved a hand. “Fucking everything. Nothing ever rattles you.”

The first thing Benji thought was, *You rattle me*, but he wasn’t going to say that. He settled on a neutral, “Plenty gets to me. You know all that shit with Kris kills me.”

“That’s different.”

Benji shrugged, watched the coffee drip down into the glass carafe. “So you’ve never...you know. Fucked around. With a buddy.”

“No.” Definitive. A pause, then, “What, have you?”

Again, Benji’s first thought—*Obviously, bud*—was not the winner. “Not regularly.”

Olly poured the coffee before it was done dripping. A few drops sizzled down against the machine. “So...irregularly.”

Benji shrugged again. “I mean, shit happens, you know? Oh, fucking stop, I know you’re about to say *no, I don’t know, actually*.” Olly’s mouth clicked shut and he made a face: guilty. “But like...yeah. A few threesomes. Some shit in Michigan with my road roomie. Nothing, like, major.”

(Well, the shit with his road roomie had gone past mutual jerk sessions and sharing a girl to what Benji would file under bro-jobs. But Benji had not been on the, um, *giving* end of those. Also it had been hot, even if it had gotten a little intense there at the end, so.)

Olly shook his head, hid behind his coffee mug. Said, “Nothing major.”

“I mean, it’s not like it was serious. I’m not gay. Like, I’ve got no problem with gay guys or anything. Just, you know.”

“You like women.”

“Women are fucking hot.”

Olly nodded. “You want, like, a girlfriend. A wife. Kids.”

“Not fucking *now*.” He shuddered. “When have you ever seen me act like I want to do that whole deal? Yelich can keep that shit, thank you very much.”

\* \* \*

They got back from their final road trip of the regular season a few days later, the roads empty in front of the headlights. The closer they drove to the apartment, the quieter Olly got. His old-person music was playing, a little mellower than the power ballads. Benji didn’t recognize it, even after nine

months of living in a musical time warp.

“Last trip,” Benji said, as they pulled their suitcases out of the back.

Olly made a face. “Hope not.”

“Of the regular season, buddy.”

“You’re just a rookie. Who knows what you know.”

“Shut up. You’re only three years older than me.”

“Four, now.” Olly quirked a smile at him from the corner of the elevator; his birthday had been in February.

They got their suitcases in the front door with the ease of long practice. They had a rhythm by now, whatever shit was going on around the margins; not that Benji was worried about that either, exactly.

Everything had been so normal since that night on the couch, their conversation in the kitchen. Olly had dozed off on his shoulder somewhere in the air above North Carolina. They’d had movie night with Piro at the hotel.

Nothing was different. Not like after that stupid fucking threesome.

Except that Benji wanted to do it again.

He kept catching himself...looking. The interplay of muscles in Olly’s forearms when he was taping his stick to his exacting fucking specifications; his face lighting up when someone startled him into a laugh; his shoulders moving as he shrugged out of his suit jacket.

Benji didn’t, whatever, *want* people. Well, he did. He got laid plenty. But he’d never wanted someone enough to notice the way their noses twitched when they wanted to be too good to laugh at a bad movie, but they 110% were not. Or to develop a very specific interest in how his tongue would fit into the dip between their collarbones.

Olly folded his tie and suit jacket on the breakfast bar and poked around in the fridge. “Want a coconut water?”

“Sure.” What he wanted was to pin Olly up against the stainless steel of the refrigerator door and kiss him again, he realized.

Benji drank his coconut water and Olly drank his Gatorade, leaning up against the counter. Their shoulders just barely didn’t touch.

Benji didn’t know how to bridge the inch between them. He wanted to. He wanted a lot, looking at the curl of Olly’s ponytail over his shoulder.

It was different from whatever the fuck else they’d done with each other. Benji was stone-cold sober, in full possession of all the inhibitions he would have sworn he didn’t have.

And he didn’t know what to do. He realized, right there in their familiar

kitchen, that he couldn't remember the last time he'd kissed someone sober. It would have been his not-a-girlfriend from college, but she had always been pretty irrelevant.

Olly was the opposite of that.

"What the fuck are you thinking about?" Olly asked. Because, yes, Benji had been staring at his face.

"Kissing my ex-girlfriend," he answered, before he thought about it. Olly choked on his sip of water. Benji thumped him between the shoulder blades. "Not like *that*, Jesus."

"I, yeah." Olly wheezed. "Just, buddy."

"It was not a favorable comparison." Olly stopped coughing, and after all that it was easy to lean forward and kiss his stupid mouth. Fucking Christ, his lips: another thing Benji had a very specific interest in. Maybe he hadn't realized it until this exact moment; maybe he hadn't let himself realize it.

He stepped into Olly's space, pressed him back against the counter with one hand on his hip and the other going to the back of his neck. Olly made a little noise, like he was surprised; but not like he wanted to stop, if the way he was wrapping his arm around Benji's neck and kissing him back was any indication.

Benji wanted to memorize the way his lips felt, the specific texture of their tongues tangling together; wanted to swallow his hitched little breath when Benji got his teeth around his lower lip. It felt different from kissing a girl: he could feel that little bit of stubble, and Olly's chest made a hard line against him.

Benji fumbled at the rubber band holding up his hair, let out a pleased rumble when it came tumbling down. His hair, *fuck*.

"Don't get a fucking mullet," he said, twisting a hand in it and using it to tug Olly's head back, show off the long line of his throat.

Olly was looking...well. Halfway turned on and halfway laughing. "Got to. It's a tradition." His voice had a breathy note that Benji wanted to fucking eat. "Why, won't you like me anymore?"

That was stupid, and Benji told him so, punctuated it with trailing his mouth along Olly's jawline, nipping at the hinge of his jaw. That made Olly shiver, all over, and so he did it again.

\* \* \*

Benji was big, and overwhelming, and holy fuck, but Olly could feel how turned on he was. His cock was pressed against his hip, hard as a rock from making out in the kitchen like two horny teenagers.

Whatever was going on in Benji's head, there was no way Olly could tell himself he wasn't into it.

So he hung on to Benji's shoulders as he rolled his hips into Olly's body, wrapped a leg around Benji's hip because the only thing going through his head was *yes*. Benji pulled on his hair, getting a different angle to keep biting at his neck.

There were fingers on the buttons of his shirt. "Can I?" Benji said into the skin of his throat.

"Yeah." He didn't recognize his voice: it was all scratchy and breathy, and caught again when Benji started on the buttons. Benji dropped his shirt on the floor, watched him pull off his undershirt. Olly felt strangely self-conscious at the focused way Benji was watching him; it wasn't like Benji didn't know what he looked like naked.

Benji was still wearing all of his clothes—blue suit, a tie with a floral pattern—and Olly didn't know if he liked it, because goddamn did his shoulders fill out a suit jacket, or if he wanted it all gone immediately.

He stopped thinking about it when Benji dipped to kiss his collarbone, then tongued at the hollow in the base of his throat. His stubble rasped against Olly's skin, made him shiver again; his free hand was moving restlessly up and down Olly's side, pausing to play with a nipple. That made Olly gasp again, and Benji growled something that sounded like *fuck, yes* into his neck before he got his mouth on the other one.

He tangled a hand into Benji's curls, not trying to hold him in place exactly. But okay, maybe. He didn't know how far this was going; had no idea where they were headed. But fuck if he wasn't going along for the ride.

"Get up," Benji said after a while, in his sex voice. Holy shit, Olly knew what his sex voice sounded like: low and lazy wrapped around a solid core of authority.

Olly knew what he liked, even if it was mostly an abstraction: and what he liked was big and bossy. He'd never stood a chance.

They trailed clothes down the hallway—Benji's jacket and tie, Olly's belt—and by the time Benji was shoving him down onto his bed, Olly was down to his briefs and Benji's shirt was off. His eyes were focused and steady, shading more brown than green in the low light.

He was looking at Olly again. Olly tried not to squirm: here he was, definitely not a woman. Even if Benji had been down for *some shit in Michigan with his road roomie*. Olly had tortured himself with that one for a while, wondering exactly what shit and which roommate.

“Whatever you’re thinking, stop.” Benji was unbuckling his belt, slow and deliberate.

“Why don’t you get down here and make me,” Olly shot back, before his brain could get in the way.

Benji dropped his belt. The buckle hit the floor with a metallic clink, and then he was pinning Olly to the bed with the weight of his shoulders and hips and kissing him again. One hand went back into his hair like there was a magnetic fucking attraction; Benji pulled and Olly couldn’t swallow another gasp.

Benji’s back was hot under his hands, muscles over bone as he moved. Their hips were rolling together in exactly the right place, and Olly should maybe be embarrassed at the wet spot on the front of his briefs but he wasn’t, not when he could feel Benji’s answering hardness against him. He could come like this, probably, without Benji even having to touch him.

But then he was. His hand was too dry and a little too tight and massive and absolutely perfect and Olly was coming before he even knew what was happening, squeezing his eyes shut and letting everything go because he had no other option.

“Fuck, look at you.”

Olly opened one eye a sliver, blinked them both slowly open. Benji looked captivated, some shit like that; leaned down to kiss him again, thoroughly. Olly couldn’t look that good, with his underwear hanging off one leg and come cooling on his stomach. But Benji was staring at him, unzipping his pants, shoving them down around his hips and getting a hand around his fucking horse cock with a groan, then coming all over Olly’s abs.

Olly’s dick twitched when the heat of Benji’s come hit his skin. It was way too soon for him to get it up again, but his dick was trying, with Benji collapsing on top of him to kiss him, sloppy wet and openmouthed.

Benji mumbled something into his shoulder. Olly blinked; everything was starting to get hazy around the edges, the game and the late night and the orgasm making him fuzz out a little.

“What?”

“Can you breathe?”

He evaluated. His eyelids weighed a hundred pounds and Benji weighed double that, but he could definitely breathe. Because the way Benji smelled, pine and laundry overlaid with the musky scent of sex, was lasering itself into his brain. “Yup.”

Benji propped himself up on an elbow. They were nose to nose; Olly felt his wrinkling itself up, unable to handle the...closeness, or whatever the fuck his brain was trying to convince itself he was seeing in Benji’s eyes. “I like that I don’t have to worry about crushing you.”

“Live to fucking serve, bud.”

Benji snorted, dropped a kiss on his cheekbone. “Then don’t get that fucking mullet.”

“The mullet is non-negotiable,” he mumbled, shutting his eyes again because he literally could not keep them open: whether because he was exhausted or because he couldn’t keep looking at Benji and keep his sanity intact.

Benji bit him on the earlobe. Hard enough that Olly yelped and whacked him in the head, and then they were wrestling and laughing, Benji kicking his pants to the floor. Olly found out that he was able to get it up again, after all.

\* \* \*

Montreal was in the hunt for the last wild card slot in the conference and came out swinging the next night, but Stormy wasn’t having it. Olly felt almost bad for beating them 5-1. Said so, in the bar after the game.

“You feel bad about everything,” Luke told him. He was swiping at Tinder on his phone. “You probably feel guilty about jerking off.”

Olly stared down at his drink. He could feel his cheeks flaming; he didn’t care about getting chirped about jerking off, but Benji was *right there* and he had some pretty graphic memories from the night before. And at what point did this whole disaster of a situation cross the line of just-buddies plausible deniability, to Olly taking advantage of something? It would be undeniably different, if Benji knew the truth about him; it changed every single part of the calculus.

Meanwhile Benji was chuckling like he didn’t have a goddamned care in the world, ruffling Olly’s hair—speaking of the memories, Jesus—and leaning over him to look at Luke’s flavors of the week. He was fucking unflappable.



Olly settled on “I hate you both,” and elbowed Benji out of the way so he could drink his beer in peace.

Or try to, anyway, because Benji draped an arm over the back of his chair and kept invading his personal space.

So it was business as usual.

But also very not.

Because as soon as they got home after the game, Benji pinned him up against the front door and sucked on his neck again and ripped—literally ripped—his shirt buttons open. He got their pants halfway off and both of them in one big hand.

And then Olly had gotten off with his roommate/teammate/friend—who was straight, or at least definitively not gay, and who didn’t do relationships even if he was maybe on the bi-er end of the spectrum—sober, two nights in a row.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Olly was proceeding with his mullet plan. Benji didn't know why he cared that much. It was fucking hair; it would grow back.

It was just that fine, okay, the thought had occurred to him that maybe he had a *thing* about it.

Like a sex thing.

Olly had told him to shut up and be grateful he wasn't bleaching it, too. Then looked all awkward and embarrassed, because he'd probably picked up on Benji's *thing* by this point; and he'd skittered out the door to go to the barbershop before their video session.

Even Olly couldn't make a mullet look good, though. Well, it looked better than his shit from high school. Kind of dirty-rock-star-ish, if dirty rock stars wore track pants and Eagles hoodies and had impeccable personal hygiene. And having it shorter in the front did, whatever, call attention to his cheekbones.

And Benji officially hated himself. Because apparently he could, in fact, find a mullet hot. And the back was still long enough for him to get ahold of.

That wasn't a thought he was going to have at the practice facility, though, even if the whole room applauded when Olly rolled in. He looked low-key pleased with the attention, laughing it off and accepting compliments on his fresh new salad.

They had to get through a last, meaningless game before they played Carolina in the first round of the playoffs. Coach O was enough of a professional to be prepping for it, even if everyone was looking toward Carolina. Because they had, like, the worst record against those fuckers.

But only the playoffs counted now. Benji would be damned if those guys were the reason he lost in the first round of his first Cup playoffs.

\* \* \*

It had only been two seasons since Olly suited up for playoff hockey, but in the league that was a lifetime. Colorado had barely missed it his third year (maybe wouldn't have, if he'd stayed healthy); the Wolves hadn't been in contention (maybe they would have made it, if he hadn't been a shit show).

Well, he was at a point where he could see everything—the things that were totally out of his control—that had screwed him over in Minneapolis. He hadn't worked in Barnard's system. He hadn't been a fit in the locker room. Maybe his rehab for his knee hadn't been all the way there yet.

It wasn't because he was a failure.

Olly didn't know what, exactly, had gotten him back to this point, getting ready to head out onto the ice against Carolina.

The Eagles were a better fit for him than the Wolves, or even Colorado: he liked these fuckers, from Pairo's bitchiness to Yelich's dumbass earnestness. Coach O had given him a chance to work his shit out, in a way that Olly would never have expected from a head coach. Yeah, the therapy, skyping Dr. Martinez from hotels across North America.

He didn't know how to think about Benji, with music blasting down the tunnel and red-and-blue lights swirling across their home ice. He was bouncing on his skates, tapping sticks with Soko, and slapping Mills on the ass, giant grin like he was getting everything he'd ever wanted.

They didn't line up near each other. But tonight, he ducked back, getting a weird look from Yelich and shoving down a ripple of anxiety at disrupting his pregame routine.

He didn't know how he even had time to be thinking about this shit. He should be focusing. And he *was* focused. He was ready.

Benji lit up even more when he saw Olly waiting for him. He knocked their helmets together and bumped their fists, and they skated out together.

They obliterated Carolina, Dewey bowling over D-men like they played in a U14 league. They were up 3-0 by the end of the second, and Olly notched his first playoff goal in three years, a one-timer off a rebound.

Carolina won the second game, but the Eagles took the next three.

They were on fire, with Dewey and Luke scoring at will. Skates on the ice, goal horns, the lactic acid burn of getting after shifts in the third period, when he should have been exhausted and instead all he felt was *go*.

\* \* \*

Some of his family flew down to DC for Game 5. He didn't see them after the game—Benji had gotten a pretty hard hit, and Olly wouldn't say he was pacing around the training room worrying about him, but he also was.

Well.

In the training room. Keeping an eye on things. Luke was getting a massage and coughed something that sounded like *codependent*.

“Shoulder’s fine,” Benji told him on the way to the car. “Quit worrying.”

“Actually fine or playoffs-fine?”

“Playoffs fine.” Benji rattled the pill bottle he was holding in his giant mitt. “It’ll hold up.”

Pause.

“Olly, I’m not going to get a pill problem.”

“Okay.” Olly didn’t honestly believe that he would, but it wasn’t unheard of. He had some heavy-duty shit over there.

“My actual mom wouldn’t give a shit about me getting a pill problem. It would be, like, a family tradition.”

“Buddy.”

Benji made a face. “Shut up. At least Krista texted me for the first time in like, weeks, to say she hoped I was okay. But I don’t want *your* family, either. There’s too damned many of you.”

Olly winced. Not all of them were even here—his parents, Sami’s family, Levi and his wife and their newest baby.

Benji’s billet parents had decided to make a last-minute trip down, too. Olly had asked where he was taking them for lunch, and Benji looked confused and said, “*I thought we were all hanging out?*”

And something had yanked in his stomach, because of fucking course it had. So they were all having lunch in a private room at a nice restaurant in Georgetown, and he was trying not to feel like it was all very *Meet the Parents*. Olly knew perfectly well that his brothers had certain *suspicious* about him and Benji, the kind of thing that made his palms sweat and his heartbeat tick up to think about, and that this stupid joint lunch wouldn’t do anything to disabuse them of those notions. He doubted that Sami would say anything in front of the whole crew, but it was one more damned thing to worry about.

\* \* \*

It was nice to see Olly in his element, listening to stories from his nibblings and holding a fat-cheeked baby like he knew what the fuck he was doing with it. Sami the science brother, his wife, and Olly’s mom all acted happy to see Benji; Levi, the brother he hadn’t met yet, was nice enough.

It was great to see the Deveraux, too, even if his sis Darcy had stayed in PA for school; and he and Krista had texted a few more times that morning, both of them trying to stay polite. Alise greeted him with a hug tight enough to make him wince. His shoulder hurt like shit, and honestly he was counting down the minutes until he could take the good drugs again. But he wasn't going to be kinda high around the Deveraux or Olly's fucking dad.

Olly's mom had told him to call her Paola. No similar offer was forthcoming from Olly's father.

This restaurant had a homier feeling than the other nice places in DC that Benji had gotten dragged to. There were old pictures and a wooden airplane propeller on the wall above their table, and the biggest steak on the menu was calling his name.

Benji leaned his elbow on the back of Olly's chair. He had his baby niece standing in his lap, using his hands to balance. She was pretty cute, with wispy ginger hair under a navy Eagles bow. She giggled and grabbed at his beard.

"Don't pull on your uncle Benji's beard," Olly told her mildly, disentangling her little fist from Benji's face. She transferred it immediately to the party section of his mullet. Olly made a face at her, crossing his eyes and sticking out his tongue like he had totally lost his natural sense of dignity.

It made his stomach swoop, or something, watching Olly with his mini-me. He was going to be a good dad. The kind of dad Benji had dreamed about when he was a little kid, waiting for someone to drive up one day and take him to a nice, clean house the next town over. Then Krista had told him that they had different dads, and that if Benji's showed up, they'd never see each other again.

And in the end, Benji had saved his own damn self, even if he'd had to get a lot of help along the way.

He pushed away from the back of Olly's chair, turning around to talk to Alise. He blinked at the look on her face. "What?"

She shook her head. "Nothing, baby," but she smiled and rubbed the back of his shoulder.

Olly's dad was staring at them, too, Benji realized. He stopped as soon as he caught Benji looking back.

Overall, though, lunch was cheerful, everybody happy about the game. Benji considered begging out of the walk along the riverfront afterward, because his shoulder wasn't feeling any better. But fuck, it was strolling at

the pace of the four-year-old Ada. So less of a walk, and more of a distractible sideways trot.

Olly was giving the slightly bigger Matt a piggyback ride, Matt pointing out every boat on the river. “Where’s your boat, Uncle Olly?”

“In Duluth.”

Matt shook his head. “You need a boat here, though. How else can you go fishing?”

He grinned. “Know what? You’re right, Matty. I should get a boat.”

Matt jumped down to go spread Olly’s news.

“I think you’re getting a boat, bud,” Benji offered. Their elbows bumped companionably.

Olly shrugged. “Why not? We share the boat up in Minnesota, so it’s not all mine, anyway.”

“You’ll be the most popular guy on the team.”

“And you’re going to need a bigger truck to pull it.”

That made Benji bark out a laugh and sling his uninjured arm around Olly’s neck. “You think I’m hauling your boat around, buddy? Maybe you need to get your own damned truck.”

Olly managed to look down his nose at him. “I don’t want to park a truck in this city.”

“Weak.”

“I do all the driving, anyway. Contribute one thing.”

“God, you’re the mouthiest car service in the District.”

Olly snorted, and then they were both laughing. Matt ran back up and pulled on Olly’s arm. “What’s so funny, Uncle Olly? What’s so funny?” and somehow that set them off even more.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

Olly wasn't surprised by the incoming call buzz, the day before their first second-round game against Cincinnati. His phone had been lighting up all day with good-luck messages.

He was on the couch, legs propped on the arm with his head in Benji's lap while they watched a replay of Detroit and Chicago's Game 7. Benji may or may not have been petting his hair. He was high on painkillers, which was probably the only reason it was happening.

Benji took his hand away when Olly wagged his phone at him, pausing the game with a giant sigh.

It was Sami. Olly accepted the video call and padded into his bedroom, waving at Benji to restart the game without him. He could hear the rumble of the commentary through the door.

"I wanted to wish you good luck."

Olly snorted and leaned against his headboard. "No, you don't. Or you would have texted me." Well, his dad had left him a voicemail. A nice one, actually.

Sami assumed an expression of injured dignity. His hair was sticking up at mad-scientist angles, with a sparkly rubber band around one section at the top. "Fine. I wanted to make sure you were doing okay. You know, with your mental game or whatever."

"Why the fuck do you still think you can lie to me?"

"Language, bro. Tiny ears are listening."

"Jesus Christ, Sami! *What.*" Olly's pissy baby-of-the-family tone didn't come out that often, but even he could recognize it this time. Sami did, too, sniggering and ruining his supportive-big-brother con.

"Okay, fine. I wanted to ask if you and your big, sexy roommate had made out yet." He paused. "Actually, Liz wanted me to ask but it's not like I don't want to know, too."

"Why would you even ask me that?" Well, Olly knew. But still.

Sami shook his head. "You didn't watch you two assholes acting soft as hell all day."

"I thought we were watching our language." Also, what? They were not *soft as hell*.

“You haven’t denied it.” Sami totally ignored Olly’s call-out.

“Why would I have to deny something that fucking ridiculous?”

“Bro, he wants you *bad*.”

“We’re in the playoffs. It’s a little intense, that’s all.”

Sami made an air-quote with his free hand. “*Intense.*”

“I don’t have to take this from you,” Olly told him. “I’m never talking to you again.”

“Oh my god, you’re such a liar.”

“It’s the *playoffs*.”

“The ‘*playoffs*.’”

Olly disconnected the call and threw his phone down beside the bed, in his second pissy-baby-brother moment of the conversation. How had he forgotten how goddamned *nosy* Sami could be, even if he’d managed to avoid making any little comments during lunch? Fucking middle children.

His phone vibrated on the floor. His brother had not sent him an eggplant emoji. That was not a thing that had happened in his life.

Detroit had gone up by two by the time Olly came back to the living room. He slid down on the couch, glancing at Benji out of the corner of his eye.

He looked spacey and relaxed, his face halfway hidden by a playoff beard. It was softer than it looked. Olly knew because he’d felt it on his skin last night.

Things started to twist around in his stomach: talking to Sami, the game tomorrow, Benji’s beard as he’d kissed the place where his shoulder met his neck. The fact that he still didn’t know the truth about Olly; the fact that Olly had let things go on like this as long as he had. The hopelessness of feeling the way Olly felt, about someone who was never going to want the same things he did.

“That wasn’t your dad, was it?” Benji asked, in his halfway-high mumble.

“Sami.”

“Oh.” He blinked, frowned a little. “You have that face on, though.”

“What face?”

“That face like you just talked to your dad and you’re trying not to let it get to you.” Benji winced. “Shit. I don’t think I meant to say that out loud.”

“It’s okay. It’s kinda true, anyway.” Olly blew out a sigh. Decided to come clean, about at least a little bit of it. “I think Sami figured out that something was. You know. Going on.”

“With what?”



“You know.” Olly waved at the space between them. This wasn’t the worst time to acknowledge it. Whatever *it* was, because he didn’t fucking know; but Benji was high enough that Olly could take him out. If worst came to worst, he could nail him in his shoulder.

Not that there was any chance that would happen. He didn’t even know why he was thinking like that.

Well, he did know. Because he was never going to forget what had happened in Minneapolis.

He took a deep breath. Reminded himself that Benji wasn’t like that; that Benji wasn’t going to punch him in the face. The one time Benji had gotten really pissed off at him, at that damned tree farm, he’d just yelled and stomped off.

Benji looked the opposite of that: a little confused, mostly hazy. “What do I know? Or was it what does Sami know?”

“Jesus *Christ*, you druggie bastard,” Olly said. “That we’re fucking.”

Benji blinked, a slow slide of dark lashes over green eyes. “Think I’d remember fucking you, bud.”

“Not the point.” His knee was starting to bounce. Neither of them had acknowledged that they could, theoretically, be doing anything other than hand jobs and grinding. But there it was, in the air between them.

Not that Benji looked rattled. Instead, he pawed at Olly’s shoulder with his good hand, dragged him into his chest. His heartbeat was steady as he gave him a one-armed squeeze. “I read on the internet that pressure can help with anxiety. Like, weighted blankets and getting hugged really tight and shit.”

Olly’s ribs might be cracking, whether because of the pressure from Benji’s big, solid arm or the thought of him googling *how to help my buddy’s anxiety*. “That’s not the point. Sami *knows*.”

“Is Sami gonna blast it on Twitter?” Benji’s voice rumbled around in his chest.

“No,” Olly admitted. On the TV, Chicago pulled one back.

“Then who gives a shit?”

“You! You should give a shit.” He paused. “You’d give a shit if you weren’t high off your ass.”

Benji moved his hand up and down Olly’s back, before it inevitably ended up smoothing through the party section of his mullet. “I give a shit about Cincinnati. I give a shit about my stupid fucking shoulder. I don’t really give a shit if your brother knows we jerk off together sometimes.”

It was a lot more than that. Olly didn't understand how Benji didn't get it: how he was so completely fucking unbothered by the thing that had been ruining Olly's life since he was twelve years old, running upstairs from his parents' basement.

Probably because he wasn't gay, at least not all the way. Not like Olly was.

There was no way someone with another option would ever choose this. Choose him.

Olly was convenient, like his road roomie from the NHTC. Easier than going out and finding a girl like he really wanted. Olly was, whatever, *available*.

He slipped out from under Benji's arm. They watched the rest of the game in silence.

## *Chapter Thirty-Five*

Benji's memories of their conversation during the Detroit game were a little fuzzy.

But it was clear that something was fucked up. Olly had gone tense again, wound tight, unable to sit still. His knee bounced as they listened to Coach O before the Cincy game, his face white as a sheet. Benji would bet money that he'd thrown up lunch and that he hadn't slept at all. It wasn't the pressure of the playoffs: he'd been fine during the first round.

That left either his family, or their—thing.

Or both.

Whatever the fuck it was, now was not the time to think about it.

\* \* \*

They won the first game. Dropped the second, then the third. Clawed their way back to take the fourth in Cincinnati.

They had no margin for error in Game 5, and Benji's body was giving out on him at exactly the wrong time. He wasn't thinking about his shoulder and he wasn't thinking about whether he'd cracked a rib checking goddamned Brody Kellerman. He wasn't even tall; he was just built like a fucking brick wall.

Benji'd had to make the stop. Or Kellerman would have fed the puck up to Yevchenko, lurking by the goal. It was the playoffs: you sacrificed your body.

\* \* \*

The less said about Game 6 the better. Dewey took a hit halfway through the second and got pulled into concussion protocol. Lukesy limped down the hallway ten minutes later. They lost 4-3.

\* \* \*

Benji didn't want to remember Game 7, either: losing on home ice in front of a sell-out crowd.

He knew it would be motivation, eventually. He knew they were a young team. He knew their luck with injuries in their top six had run out at the wrong time. He knew they needed another center. He'd go to sessions with a sports psychologist over the summer and do the work and by October, it would be the fire keeping him going until he won the whole fucking thing.

Knowing that didn't help right now.

He didn't know what to do with himself after the game. Mils, Stormy, and Olly dealt with the media, putting a constructive spin on *we fucking lost*. One mic got shoved in Benji's face; he mumbled something about working harder next year.

Olly looked beat to hell when he dragged back out of the media room, half hiding under his Eagles hat with his fucking mullet straggling over his shoulder. At least Benji wouldn't have to keep looking at it until June.

It would have been worth it.

He wasn't sure he'd be seeing Olly's hair for much longer, now.

Why he was thinking about Olly's goddamned hair, he didn't know. Other than that he was fucked-up over losing, and now they had to deal with their—whatever. He couldn't handle things staying this wrong.

"Ready?" Olly asked, still hiding under his hat.

They drove home in silence. Benji could feel every inch of air between them, as they passed the lights of the monuments for the last time of the season. It hurt. It all fucking hurt, from his shoulder to his ribs to his pride to the sick twist inside his chest. Maybe he should be angry instead; maybe a few years ago he would have been. But now he was just...sad. He'd played as hard as he could and it hadn't been good enough.

"I thought you'd want to go out with the boys," Olly said in the garage. He swung the car into the spot next to Benji's busted old truck, headlights flashing across its chipped turquoise paint.

"I'm too fucked up to be around people." He was probably too fucked up to be around Olly and their fucked-up whatever the fuck, too. But at least he knew that Olly would let him, like, feel his feelings.

Olly picked up both bags, shooting him a glare when Benji tried to take his back. Of course Mama Ols would be worrying about his shoulder. The doc didn't think he needed surgery or anything, just PT and to stop slamming into the glass.

Olly dropped their bags in the middle of the floor, then stood there behind the couch, arms crossed low over his stomach.

Benji picked up the thread of their routine. “Gatorade?”

“How about a beer?”

Benji popped the tops off the bottles and handed Olly his IPA. He didn’t chug it, but it was close; he went back to the fridge to grab another before Benji was halfway done with his first.

“I don’t want to think,” he told Benji.

“Cheers to that.” He tapped their bottles together, and they stood there staring at each other.

Benji hated this. Hated losing, hated feeling like a failure, hated feeling like there was something with Olly that he was missing. It had all gotten tangled up together. He’d known from day one that Olly had more going on than the usual bullshit, and he thought he’d figured it out but obviously he hadn’t. He kept thinking he had a handle on it—okay, on *them*—and being proven wrong.

“Fuck, I wish we had something stronger.” Olly turned away to put his empty bottle on the island.

“I’ve still got Percocet.”

“That had better be a joke.”

“Obviously.” Benji drained the rest of his beer. “They’ve got a bar at the Hyatt down the street, right? Nobody there is going to know who the fuck we are.”

They both changed out of anything hockey-branded. Olly tucked his hair under another hat. They were probably too casual for where they were going, but Benji was done with suits until October.

The lobby bar was empty this late on a weeknight. It was almost closing time, and they hadn’t given DC anything to celebrate. They slid into seats at the farthest end of the bar. It reminded Benji of that night in Pittsburgh, way back at the beginning of the season: drinking scotch he hated; wearing a suit that made him feel like a fraud; pouring out his sob story onto Olly’s shoulder.

Scotch was still nasty, but he’d gotten used to the suits. That was progress, or something.

Olly leaned one elbow on the bar, rolling the whisky in his glass back and forth. Lines of muscle and tendon stood out along his arm. Benji had dropped plenty of weight since the beginning of the season, but Olly looked like he’d been pared down to bone and connective tissue.

He didn’t remember Olly being this skinny before the second round. He’d

have noticed, wouldn't he? With the amount of attention he'd been paying to Olly's body, from his collarbones down to the precise indentations of his abs.

"You're staring at me," Olly said, setting his glass down.

"You're too fucking skinny."

He shrugged one shoulder, bones moving under the thin fabric of his T-shirt. "It's the end of the season."

"Sure is." Benji had a gin and tonic. Pairo had told him it was a bitch drink, but he didn't see why he should care. He liked the cool fizz the gin left across his tongue. He had some catching up to do, from the flush along the tops of Olly's cheekbones.

He drained the rest of his G&T and let the bartender make him another one. She had deep curves and a low-key flirty vibe, but nah.

The muted TV screen behind the bar was tuned to ESPN. Benji made a face as they started showing hockey highlights.

"Boston looks good," Olly said. Of course he was watching. Ryan Stewart trucked over a Toronto defenseman on the way to the goal. Benji's ribs gave a sympathetic twinge.

"Hockey's the last fucking thing I want to think about right now."

Olly shrugged again, wrinkled his nose. He glanced back down when their game came up. Benji didn't want to watch, either. He could feel every minute of it in his bones.

"What are you doing this summer?" he asked, instead. They hadn't talked about it—Olly had a superstition thing going. A lot of the guys did.

"Minnesota. But Pairo wants to go to Mexico first."

"Good luck. He's a monster."

"I like the beach. Didn't go last year." It was Olly's turn to finish his drink and wave for another. "Are you coming?"

"He didn't ask me." Benji didn't ask, *so, are you?* He didn't want to make things worse, again.

"You should come." Olly's dark blue eyes were focused on the bottles behind the bar.

"Dunno, bud. Should I?" That was more honest than he'd meant to be, maybe. There was something in his tone, even he could hear it. It reminded him of being a kid, looking at his friends with their nice families in their nice houses, too scared to ask to be let in.

"Yeah," Olly told his glass. "You should." He looked at Benji, finally. His teeth were worrying at his bottom lip. Benji wanted to bite it. Olly's blush

deepened, like he could read it all on Benji's face.

They didn't talk much on the way home. Benji felt it every time their elbows brushed, deep in his belly, until he had to put an arm around Olly's shoulders because he couldn't stand to not be touching him. He hated being this thirsty for this asshole and his goddamned mullet.

Olly pressed him up against the door when they got home. They stood there, not quite kissing, like Olly was trying to decide something, before he leaned up to close the centimeters between them. His eyes were dark under the brim of his hat, and his breath caught when Benji reached up to trace his thumb over the arc of his orbital bone, slowly, softly.

"I missed you," he said, because it was true.

Olly shut his eyes like he was in pain; but then they were finally kissing again, tongues and open mouths. He pulled Olly in closer, hitched him up so that their hips lined up right, and swallowed his shaky little gasp.

"You're gonna get beard burn," he murmured into Olly's neck, tonguing at his earlobe.

"I don't care." Olly pulled their mouths back together, like he was desperate, and Benji was more than okay with that. He knocked off Olly's hat, tugged at the hem of his T-shirt, and then there was skin under his hands, hot and smooth and smelling like locker room soap. He thumbed at one of Olly's nipples, and that made him suck in a breath and push closer, dig his fingernails into the skin on Benji's back.

He was always so responsive. Benji wanted to tie him down and spend a day memorizing every single way he could make his breath catch.

"Bedroom," he ordered.

Olly looked good as hell on his bed, hair swirling over one shoulder and skin pale against the dark blue blanket. He had one arm behind his head, blushing while he watched Benji finish kicking off his pants; his other hand hovered near his hip, like he wanted to touch himself but wasn't quite sure it was allowed.

"Touch yourself," he said, to see if he'd do it.

He did. It was Benji's turn to suck in a breath, watching the way Olly's head tipped back at the pressure from his fingers. His dick was hard, the head red and already starting to go slick; Olly brushed a finger across it and gave a shuddery little moan that Benji wanted to swallow out of his mouth.

"Fuck. You look—" He didn't have the words; couldn't do anything but cover Olly's body with his own, bite at his neck and play with his nipples

while his hand moved faster and faster, and finally his hips surged up and he was coming, painting streaks up to his collarbone.

Benji ran a fingertip through one, curious enough to lick it off. It had a tangy kind of bitterness. He didn't like the taste, but he liked Olly's full-body twitch and the way his dick found another couple of drops to come.

"Benji," he said, like it was killing him.

He liked the idea of Olly panting out his name while he came, too. He liked it a lot. More than he should—but they shouldn't be doing this shit at all, probably, so how much could one more thing possibly matter.

Olly rolled onto his elbow, hair shifting over his shoulder. Benji wound a hand in it and towed him in. Olly's mouth was warm and pliant, hot skin and the edges of teeth. He kissed along Benji's jawline, apparently not giving a fuck about the beard burn; nipping at the skin over his collarbones.

"You're fucking killing me," Benji told him.

Olly rolled his blue eyes up at him. He was halfway down Benji's chest, and Benji's dick was hard enough to pound nails. "Shut up."

"You like it when I talk in bed." It was the fucking truth.

Olly made his scrunched-up Olly face. Benji yanked him back up to kiss it off him. His hard-on was getting red-zone critical. He got his free hand on Olly's ass, which earned him another choked-off gasp and full-body twitch, but it still wasn't quite enough.

He moaned, possibly more frustrated than he'd ever been in his entire life. Olly bit his bottom lip—hard, the little fucker—and finally, fucking *finally*, pulled back far enough that he could get a hand around Benji's dick. Two good strokes, and it wasn't going to take much to get Benji there at all—but then he was lightening up again, until his palm was barely skimming over Benji's skin.

"Olly." He couldn't stop his hips from chasing Olly's hand. "You fucker."

"Shut up," Olly repeated.

It took Benji a minute to catch on to what was happening, after that: exactly where Olly was going when he slid himself down Benji's body, pausing along the way to tongue at the dip of his belly button, the heavy ridges of muscle along his hips.

If Benji wasn't going to last long with a handie, he definitely wasn't going to last with Olly's actual mouth wrapped around the head of Benji's actual dick. He couldn't get all the way down and had to stop, coughing, to make up the difference with his hand; Benji could not find one single fuck to give,



when it was taking everything he had to keep his hips planted on the bed and not thrust up into the hot slick of Olly's mouth.

He couldn't keep from getting a hand in Olly's hair, though, using it to get his pace right. And that, fuck, that made Olly *moan*. Benji felt it hum through every inch of his dick to settle, buzzing, in his balls.

"Fuck, Olly, I'm gonna—"

He didn't back off at all: swallowed him down and stayed there, face against his hip bone and Benji's hand twisted through his hair, while Benji worked on getting his nervous system back online.

His settings were stuck on *holy shit*. Benji sucked in a few more breaths, pulled Olly back up when he could move again.

"That was—" Olly ducked his face into Benji's neck. "Hey. Get back out here."

"No." It came out muffled. Benji could feel Olly's lips moving against his skin. "I'm done, bud. Just fucking done. See you tomorrow."

"I'm holding you to that."

All Olly did was made a sleepy, mumbling noise into his neck. Benji smoothed his hand up and down Olly's back, shifted him off a sorer spot on his ribs.

\* \* \*

Benji saw a missed call from Krista in the morning. He hadn't wanted to look at all the better-luck-next-year texts on his phone last night.

It was the first time she'd called since she told him they were trying for a kid. She'd texted a few times. Benji had been polite and careful when he answered.

*Call me when you can*, she'd texted, instead of leaving a voicemail.

"What's got you looking like that?" Olly asked from the other side of the breakfast bar. He'd positioned himself, catlike, in the patch of sunlight streaming in the balcony doors. It gleamed off his hair like a sunrise. He wasn't in bed when Benji had woken up, but he hadn't gone for a run or hidden in his room, either. He'd just been out here with his iPad, coffee at his elbow. It looked like he had Instagram open; maybe he'd been nice enough to make Benji's end-of-the-season-thanks-to-the-fans post for him.

"Calling Krista back." He let his head thunk against the cupboard. "Better get it over with, right?"

Olly shrugged one shoulder. “You don’t have to.”

“I’m not used to you being a bad influence.”

Olly blushed, dropped his eyes back to his iPad. Benji smiled at him; didn’t resist trailing a hand over his shoulder on his way out onto the balcony to call his sister.

They started off carefully, the way they’d been texting. She was sorry that his season was over; he asked what she was doing for the summer.

“I’m glad you asked,” she said. “Do you want to come up to Toronto? One of the companies that we—I mean, Rob and I—work with is putting on a camp.”

“I dunno.” He was trying to be polite; he wasn’t going anywhere near a camp with Rob. “I don’t know if that’s really my scene.”

Krista blew out a breath. “I should have known better.”

“Than what?”

“Than to think you’d help me with a partnership that could be really important,” she said. “I know you don’t think I’m doing the right thing. I know you think I should go back to school, even though *you* dropped out. But I have a five-year plan. I’m getting traction as an influencer.”

“I’m not trying to say no,” he said. “I just got knocked out of the playoffs. Give me a minute.”

“If I give you a minute, are you going to say yes?”

Apparently his silence was telling.

“I guess I’ll just have to keep doing it on my own,” she said, and hung up before he could say anything else.

Benji did some deep breathing with his mindfulness app before he trusted himself to go inside. Declined to text her *maybe you wouldn’t feel like you were doing it on your own, if you treated me more like your brother and less like a branding opportunity*, because that would have been reacting from a place of anger, and he didn’t do that anymore.

Olly hadn’t moved from his spot at the counter when he was back under control. “That bad?”

“It’s a good thing I’m going on vacation.”

## *Chapter Thirty-Six*

The resort was south of Playa del Carmen, all white sand beaches and dark green leaves and the manicured spread of a golf course. He and Benji had an earlier flight in than Piro and his buddies. Benji had smiled at him, uncomplicated; said he was glad they could spend some time, just the two of them.

That made something thump at the inside of Olly's rib cage like it was trying to get out. It was alarming for someone required to maintain such a high level of cardiovascular fitness.

He should have gone straight up to the lake. Never said a word to Benji about Mexico. He didn't want to imagine the expression on Piro's face when he'd texted that Benji was coming.

Benji looked pleased with their suite, though. It had two bedrooms; a living room opening out onto a pool; clean white linens and golden marble and champagne in an ice bucket. He had the same kind-of-incredulous smile as when he scored goals, or got perfect sear lines on a chicken breast, or, okay, made Olly come his brains out.

Olly couldn't look at him. So instead, he popped open the bottle of champagne. Maybe it would help if he stayed drunk the whole week.

\* \* \*

It did not help. It turned out that champagne made Benji loose enough to put Olly on his knees in front of the white couch. And there went Olly's resolution that the BJ had been a one-off.

\* \* \*

They went down to the beach afterward, Benji looking relaxed and still with that smugly pleased expression. Since he'd shaved off his beard, Olly couldn't even pretend it wasn't there.

They claimed a couple of chairs under a thatched umbrella, as a server appeared with margaritas. After half of the margarita and zoning out to the sound of the waves, Olly could approach chill. Not that Benji was helping.

Even though he wasn't doing anything other than existing, with his shirt off, wearing a pair of turquoise swim trunks with smiling yellow pineapples on them.

The color looked nice with his tan. How Benji had a tan in April was beyond Olly.

“Enjoying the view, bud?” He was grinning, arching an eyebrow above his aviators and gesturing at the expanse of his body. Olly tried not to think about where the arrow of hair that started on his chest and continued down along his abs was pointing.

The only possible response to all of that was “Fuck off,” and to glue his nose back onto the screen of his iPad.

Benji kept grinning and asked if he needed help with putting sunscreen on his back. Olly did, unfortunately, because he didn't have tan genes; and then Benji had way too much fucking fun with the sunscreen, and Olly had to lie down on his stomach until his stupid erection went away. Which took a while, since Benji kept a hand on his shoulder, rubbing his thumb back and forth over the outside bone on his clavicle, for no reason that Olly could possibly imagine.

This was already the least relaxing vacation he'd taken in his entire life.

Poiro—along with half the Quebecois playing hockey in North America—showed up after Olly was no longer in danger of embarrassing himself. They were drunk already, their slurred slang-y French requiring too much concentration for Olly to worry about how slowly Benji had taken his hand off his shoulder.

Olly channeled their drunk energy into a beach volleyball tournament. He tried—he really tried—to end up on a different team than Benji, but of course he failed at that, too.

Benji was bad at volleyball, at least. Horrible, to be more accurate, since he was only using his right arm. Not that he cared, the big lug.

“Soft hands!” Poiro yelled from across the net, after Benji had spiked the ball ten feet out of bounds.

“Fuck you!” he shot back, grinning his big, unbothered grin like he was having the time of his life. “I can only use one arm, dumbass!”

The next time he was up, Olly served the ball right into Poiro's fucking face. He broke his sunglasses and gave him a bloody nose. Poiro deserved it, for being the architect of Olly's misfortune.

\* \* \*

Olly was a sleeper at volleyball—of course—and kept bulleting aces right past whoever they were playing. But especially Pairo.

Benji did not get their relationship sometimes. It mostly seemed like they hated each other, like two pissed-off cats. But he knew for a fact that they hung out on the reg and texted in French, and even talked about real shit from time to time.

“I think you broke Pairo’s nose.”

“Is he not going to be pretty enough for you anymore?” Olly sniped.

Some of the Quebec buddies walked Pairo over to the bar for a handful of napkins and a beer, and the game dissolved. Olly was talking to another one about renting kayaks, if the word *kayak* was the same in French and English.

“Want to come?” Olly asked.

“Nah, I want to chill for a bit. And my shoulder’s not, like, the best for that.” He shouldn’t have been playing volleyball, even if he’d tried to use his right arm the whole time. So fine, maybe he hadn’t been playing objectively *well*, but try playing a sport you already sucked at, using your non-dominant arm, against a bunch of hypercompetitive athletes. They were lucky the only bloodshed was Pairo’s.

Olly blinked, like he couldn’t imagine wanting to sit on his ass instead of going to paddle around and get eaten by a shark. He had a smudge of sand stuck to his cheekbone. Benji wanted to brush it off, wanted to reapply his sunscreen, wanted to take him back to their fancy-ass room and fuck up the million-thread-count sheets.

They bumped fists and went their separate ways.

Benji had a beer, then another margarita, at the beach bar. Pairo was bitching about Olly ruining his chances of hooking up for the whole vacation. Poor little fucker was getting a shiner, and his nose was pretty swollen.

“My *coworker* did this to me,” he told one of the girls sitting next to them, playing up his accent and gesturing at his face. “Can you believe that?”

Benji peered around him. “I promise he deserved it.”

She leaned in and looked sympathetic. Maybe the black eye wasn’t going to be such a liability for Pairo’s chances, after all.

Sympathy drinks transitioned into more drinks transitioned into another round of beach volleyball, after the rest of the girls’ bachelorette party arrived. This one had a lot more giggling and a lot less testosterone.

Benji sat it out, allegedly reffing. He could see the dots of a couple of

bright orange kayaks out on the water.

One of the girls flopped down next to him. She had honey-colored hair and one of those one-piece bathing suits that showed off more skin than a bikini.

“Not a volleyball player?” she asked.

“Nah. And I hurt my shoulder, anyway.” Benji leaned back on an elbow and yelled at Pairo that his serve was out of bounds, mostly to fuck with him.

“Sorry if this is a weird question,” she said. “But who the fuck are you people? You’re all giant and they’re all so bad at English.”

He grinned. “We all play hockey. So I’m flattered you think I’m good at English.”

“Hockey. Huh.” She twisted a piece of hair around her finger, inspected the ends. “I’m from South Carolina, so that’s not a thing I know about. But I’m Beth, by the way.”

They kept talking while the volleyball game got rowdier, Beth popping up with some A-plus chirps and trolling ref calls. It was amazing to see someone piss Pairo off as much as Olly did, only Beth was a rocket in a bathing suit, so he couldn’t scream his head off at her.

It was really beautiful, actually. Benji might be able to summon up a tear if he tried hard enough.

Olly and his kayak buddy turned up a little before dinner, when everyone was well and truly drunk, and Benji had decided that Pairo and Beth were destined to be together. She was hot and funny and did not have one single fuck to give about his ego.

“Olly!” he yelled, when it looked like he was about to try ducking back into the game. “Come meet Beth.” He tried to say with his eyes, *this is Pairo’s future wife*. He wasn’t sure if Olly got it, but he trudged over, anyway.

The top of his nose was sunburned and he looked so fucking good, even with his short haircut and his boring-ass navy bathing suit.

Benji grabbed his wrist and dragged him down. Olly landed halfway in his lap. It was way less sexy than Beth’s descent, but what the fuck ever.

“Ow, buddy,” Olly said, tone mild and elbow wicked-sharp as he shoved himself off Benji’s lap.

They talked for a while longer. Well, mostly Benji and Beth talked, and Olly slouched back on his elbows and drank a beer, staring out over the little waves lapping against the beach.

When he was done with his drink, he climbed back to his feet, brushing

sand off his arm and right onto Benji's shoulder. "I want a shower before dinner. See you in a bit, then."

"Nah, I'll come with," Benji announced. He and Beth exchanged numbers—he was going to get her hooked up with Pairo or die trying—and he held up his good hand for Olly to grab.

Olly stared at it.

"Buddy. Come on."

Olly made a face and pulled him up, like Benji was so fucking demanding. Just for that, Benji yanked him in for a sweaty, sandy hug. Olly *oofed*. Benji didn't give one single fuck, as they waved goodbye and started back to their suite.

"You didn't have to come with me," Olly said, in the direction of his slides.

"I wanted to."

Olly didn't believe him, but Olly thought they stopped making new music after 1987. So what the fuck did Olly know.

To prove how very much Benji had wanted to leave the beach, he followed Olly into the white-marbled bathroom and got him off under the hot steam of the water. Olly came with a broken-off little noise, mouth wet and open under Benji's lips.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Olly couldn't figure it out. They'd met up with that girl, Beth or whoever, and her friends for dinner, and Benji was clearly happy to see her. She was hot, legs and lips and hair, and also a fun personality or whatever. Olly hadn't wanted to like her, sitting on the beach and heckling the volleyball players; but she was the total fucking package.

So he didn't get why Benji had followed him back to the room to pin him up against the wall of the shower to kiss him fast and hard like he was dying for it.

Benji wasn't gay. Anyone who had ever watched him talk to a woman—anyone who had ever *been in a threesome* with him and a woman—knew he wasn't gay. No gay man ate pussy with that much enthusiasm.

Olly knew bi guys were a thing. And he even knew Benji had fucked around with guys before. But there was just-buddies in juniors, and there was leaving Beth-the-rocket to fuck around in the shower. She was the type of girl Olly would kill to be able to want, but of course he didn't; couldn't; never would.

Unlike Beth, he was a sure thing, Olly guessed.

So he spoke French at dinner, while Benji put on the charm for Beth (and by extension Pairo) on his other side. But Benji kept their ankles pressed together all night, going so far as to shoot Olly this offended little look when he tried to move.

He couldn't handle another threesome.

“Sorry, what?” he asked Antoine, the guy next to him.

Antoine nodded down the table. “Too bad your friend locked down the prettiest girl already.”

“I'm sure there's still someone out there for you, bud.”

Once dinner had wrapped up, Olly didn't want to go dancing, but what the hell else was he going to do? Go to the room and wait for Benji to bring Beth back, or spend his whole night wondering if Benji was going to come back at all?

Olly didn't want that.

He wanted things that were impossible.

“What's wrong with you?” Pairo yelled over the music.



“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Pairo said, wagging one long finger in his face and looking halfway concerned. “I know...”

“What?” he snapped. “What the hell do you know?”

There was no way he was talking about anything here, standing still in the middle of a crowded dance floor while the Quebecois buddies bounced against his shoulders. Pairo had come to a stop as well, close enough that Olly could smell the tang of his sweat over the beer on his breath. He leaned in closer, but it was loud enough that he still had to yell over the pulse of the music.

“Look, I get that you don’t like talking about—”

Olly stuck an elbow in his diaphragm before he could finish. “Then shut up.”

Pairo narrowed his eyes, looking more stubborn than usual.

But Benji popped up before he could say anything else, a laughing Beth in tow, and that was the end of that.

Olly ducked off the dance floor before Benji could grab him; stayed at their table with Antoine long enough to drink another beer, hoping alcohol would help. All it did was make his stomach feel queasy and over-carbonated.

Huge, tropical leaves soaked up all the light as he wound his way back toward their suite, the dark punctuated occasionally by a yelp of laughter. There were still people in the pool, shadows moving against the bright blue tiles, and Olly didn’t know the last time he’d felt so alone.

The suite was silent. He brushed his teeth in the massive bathroom, not thinking about the shower water plastering Benji’s curls against his forehead, or the rasp of his chest hair against Olly’s nipples, or his deep voice telling Olly exactly when to come.

He slipped into bed with his headphones and turned on a podcast and told himself he didn’t care what Benji did.

He was two episodes in—not asleep but not all the way awake, listening to the sound of the voices without understanding the words—when he heard the whir and click of the suite’s door. Shoes on marble, the sound of them getting kicked to the floor.

Benji was alone. Olly didn’t want to be grateful for that. But he was, hopelessly.

His door opened, shining a square of light onto the twisted-up white sheets

of his bed. Benji was a dark shape against the brightness of the hallway, backlit and impossible to see in detail.

Benji switched off the light, everything turning dark and cool. He slipped inside, pulling off his shirt and stepping out of his khaki shorts, and then he climbed into bed, settling himself against Olly's back like—like it was where he'd wanted to be all along.

"Why didn't you tell me you were leaving?" he mumbled into the skin of Olly's shoulder, words blurred into a bass rumble like they got when he was drunk. "I looked for you for ages."

"I didn't think you'd notice," Olly answered, feeling like his chest was made of raw, broke-open edges.

"Shut up, Olly," Benji said, one big hand sliding over his hip to settle against his stomach and pull him closer. "I always notice you."

\* \* \*

Olly didn't think he'd fall asleep, not with the anxiety gnawing in his stomach and Benji a hot weight on his back. But he woke up with morning light streaming through the gauzy curtains, and a tropical bird sounding off like a goal horn outside the window.

Benji was exactly where he'd put himself the night before, on his side with one hand resting on Olly's lower back. His eyelashes were long and dark where they rested against his cheek, and his full mouth was relaxed, half-open. The sheet was slipping off his hip, flirting with the tan line already darkening from the sun.

Olly couldn't look at him; couldn't stop looking at him. How was he supposed to remember what they were and what they weren't, when Benji looked like that? Acted like he acted?

There was no future in it, that was the thing. Benji was going to find himself a girl, eventually, and where the hell was that going to leave Olly? Exactly where he'd been before: alone and miserable with it, because he could have a life or he could have hockey, but he'd never been naive enough to think he could have both.

Benji's mouth twitched, and he blinked open one green eye. "It's too early for whatever you're freaking out about," he said, half-muffled by the pillow.

"I'm not," Olly lied.

"Yes, you are." Benji leaned over to kiss him, warm and sleepy. He had

morning breath and his skin smelled like sweat and leftover sunscreen; Olly wanted to hide his face in his shoulder and stay there forever.

Benji didn't let him hide for long, though. Drew him out for another openmouthed kiss, thumb brushing lightly over the hairs at the back of Olly's neck; kissed down his throat, and then kept going, and Olly couldn't do more than lie back and try to swallow all of the helpless little noises his throat wanted to let out.

He'd never thought this was something Benji would do, but there he was, blinking up at Olly like he wanted to see how he reacted as he gave him a long, slow lick. He wasn't hard all the way yet, but he got there quick.

Benji made a low, appreciative noise; Olly couldn't find anything to say that wasn't going to show too much. He shut his eyes instead, felt Benji chuckle into the crease of his hip and go to work.

\* \* \*

"Fuck," Benji said, when they were both done. He was braced up above him on his good arm, Olly's legs wrapped around his waist. They were both sticky with come and Jesus Christ, Benji had a dab of it drying next to his mouth. "If I'd known how hot that was going to be, I would have done it before."

Olly thumped him with a heel. Benji just said shit like that, like it didn't matter. "You're heavy. Get off."

Instead, he rolled them over, landing on his back with Olly on his chest. It shouldn't be hot, how he could manhandle Olly with no discernable effort. Olly wasn't small, but Benji moved him around like he was insignificant, didn't hesitate to put him wherever he wanted him: which was sprawled across his chest with a possessive hand on his ass.

"I'm going back to sleep," he muttered, chest rumbling under Olly's cheek. "Wake me up for breakfast."

"No can do," Olly said. "Got a tee time with the boys."

Benji smacked his ass. "Fuck you, you do not."

"Definitely do." He didn't need to be awake yet, not really, but he couldn't survive staying here, either.

Benji made a betrayed noise and followed him up.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Benji took a pass on golfing, because of his shoulder and also because he only golfed to drink outside with his buddies. He was at the fucking beach; he could drink outside wherever he wanted.

Olly golfed. Of course. One of the Frenchies asked his handicap at breakfast, and the number made the whole table groan.

“What, I’m not that good,” Olly said, which was a lie from the way everyone immediately started pelting him with napkins and sugar packets.

“Mr. NAHA Summer,” Antoine muttered. “He fishes, right? Does he own a lake house?”

“Obviously.”

“Wakeboards?”

“Safe bet.”

“Christ.” Antoine took a resentful swig of coffee. “Where’s the pretty blonde, eh? That’s all he’s missing.”

“Still working on that one, I guess,” Benji said. And then he was thinking about Olly with a blonde wife and a house in Minnesota, full of strawberry blond babies and Siberian huskies.

He couldn’t quite see it, somehow.

Maybe he didn’t want to see it. Olly getting married—that was weird, even though once Benji thought about it, of course he would. Olly was so obviously a family man. Loved kids. Didn’t fuck around. Parented the shit out of half the team already.

It wasn’t like Benji thought they were going to be roomies in the 505 forever.

Benji’s inexplicable bad mood lingered while he sat on the beach, pretending to read a magazine but mostly drinking Bloody Marys. Because fuck it, rich assholes drank Bloody Marys before 10 am all the time. And he was a rich asshole now, he guessed.

Either he had a delayed-onset hangover or...whatever. He was kind of pissed at Olly. Maybe both.

He hadn’t come down to Mexico to *not* hang out. But Olly was finding every excuse to avoid him: kayaking, dipping out of the club, golf.

His fucking jaw was still sore.

He'd never done that before, okay. He hadn't expected a commemorative puck and a round of applause, but it would have been nice to get more than kicked out of bed for golf. Was this how his not-a-friend-with-benefits-after-all had felt, back at Quinnipiac? Shit.

He was moodily scrolling through Instagram—it was all dogs and golf, babies and highlights from the lucky bastards still in the playoffs—when Beth and her friends showed up, wall-to-wall perfect asses and one girl in a bachelorette sash.

“You get abandoned?” she asked.

“For golf,” he answered, fake-pouting up at her.

“We're doing a booze cruise, if you want to come.”

It turned out that Benji did want to go on their booze cruise, thanks. He hadn't put anything on Instagram lately, other than an end-of-the-season thanks-to-the-fans post; but he made sure to get one of the whole group out on the boat, frozen drinks and smoke show girls for days.

He captioned it *and the boys asked if I wanted to go golfing!!* Davo responded immediately with fire emojis and *Bowie you're a legend*.

“Ugh, why are you sitting in the corner on your phone?” Beth asked, dropping down onto the bench. “Boy trouble?”

Benji snorted. “Nailed it, babe.”

She flicked an invisible piece of dust off her perfect shoulder. “I'm going to act like I believe you,” she said, “so we can do my guaranteed heartbreak cure—tequila shots.”

After, like, four shots—maybe more, he wasn't counting—Benji remembered why he hated tequila. It made him horny, which made him sick: here he was, on a boat in Mexico surrounded by beautiful women, and all he could think about was goddamned Olly.

That pissed him off, to be totally honest.

Beth was giving off zero DTF vibes, though. So they could kick back in their corner with a pitcher of piña coladas, and everyone would think they were trying to fuck each other and leave them alone, except for an occasional hopeful intrusion.

“Are you taken?” Beth asked, after he'd dispatched the most recent girl who wanted to laugh at his weak-ass jokes. “My friends are hot and you aren't into it.”

“Nah,” he said. “Just not feeling it.”

“I thought you were a professional athlete,” she said. “Aren't you always

supposed to be feeling it?”

“It’s, whatever. Complicated.”

“Aw, girl troubles for real? I was joking before, you poor big, sexy, baby.” She dropped her chin on his shoulder. “Promise she’s not worth it.”

Even halfway blurry, Benji knew he did not want to go down that road. So he said, “You should fuck my buddy Pairo. He’s an asshole but I think you’re perfect for each other.”

“Oh, honey.” She was laughing harder. “You know my type, then. You’re way too sweet for me. Hope your girl figures her shit out.”

\* \* \*

Benji staggered off the boat with the bachelorettes, maybe got a little lost getting back to the suite. When he finally made it, Olly wasn’t there. Of course he wasn’t fucking there.

Benji chugged a bottle of water and lay down on the floor, because it was cool, and he was sweaty, and his bed was too far away. The bed he hadn’t slept in. He’d been annoyed with Olly for running off last night, although not as pissed as he was today; but mostly his drunk brain had wanted to be, whatever. Close. Feel Olly breathing under his arm, and have him be there, skin-to-skin and the smell of the nape of his neck when he woke up.

Well. He’d gotten that. It had worked out great.

He should have fucked a bachelorette. Someone uncomplicated, with an expiration date, who wanted him.

He could think that, safely behind a locked door. Even his drunk brain knew he wouldn’t have done it. He’d had every opportunity, a good angle on an empty-netter. But he hadn’t wanted to shoot, because he was mad at his fucking roommate slash fuck buddy slash who even fucking knew.

He’d moved from the floor to the couch and turned on *Finding Nemo*, when Olly finally showed up.

“I’m pissed at you,” Benji said.

“Okay.” Olly tossed his baseball hat onto the table next to the couch and ran a hand through his hair. “Sorry,” he added, with automatic Midwestern politeness. “Do you want me to give you the room? I can go down to the beach.”

“Great, yeah, that would be fucking perfect.”

Olly put his hands on his hips. He looked like a golf ad: spotless white

shorts, a navy polo setting off his eyes. He had a strip of sunburn on his wrist, where his glove stopped. He'd probably had the best fucking day. "What's going on, bud? I didn't even think you'd be here."

"Where the hell did you think I'd be?"

"With Beth," he answered, looking everywhere in the room except for Benji. "I saw your Insta."

"I came back to wait for you, asshole."

"I—Sorry," Olly repeated, like he didn't get it but would default to apologizing, anyway. "We just finished dinner."

"Do you even want me here?" Benji couldn't keep sitting; paced over to the window, looked at the beautiful view of the beautiful pool. The water glittered like a piece of jewelry, blue on blue.

There was a long pause. Of course Olly didn't know; of course he'd make it complicated, get everything knotted up inside his head. Or worse, he did know, and he was trying to come up with a nice way to tell Benji to leave—because he could be snappy in the day-to-day, but when it came down to it, he was a good guy.

So maybe Benji had crossed a line this morning. Maybe it had been too much, or too...whatever.

Finally Olly stepped up beside him, and leaned on the windowsill, palms down. There was a spike of laughter from the pool, muffled through the thick glass. He could see the crisp line of a razor at the nape of Olly's neck, the perfect fade of his new haircut. He hated it, even more than the fucking mullet.

"I didn't think it mattered what I wanted," Olly said at last. He was looking down at his hands, braced against the white paint of the windowsill.

"Of course it does."

"It really doesn't." Olly looked up, and he looked bleak. His eyes were blue holes in his pale face. Benji felt his anger drain away: there was old pain there, something bruised deeper than his own annoyance.

He didn't know what he would have said, then. Never got a chance to find out, because Olly stepped into his body, kissed him lightly at the corner of his mouth, then deeper and hotter until there was nothing else left.

## *Chapter Thirty-Nine*

Olly didn't wake up the next morning, really, because that would mean he went to sleep; and he hadn't. He lay in bed with Benji's arm across his back, listening to the quiet, regular sound of his breathing, trying not to let the sleeping curves of his face burn themselves any more deeply into his brain.

But there they were. He knew how Benji would stretch, slowly, while he was waking up; knew exactly what color his eyes would be the first time he blinked them open, and how dark the stubble would be along his jaw. His fingers itched to push the stubborn curl of Benji's hair off his forehead, to remind themselves of the exact contours of his cheekbones and the healed ridge of bone in the middle of his nose. He wanted to kiss his morning breath and let Benji roll him over, press him down into the sheets with the weight of his shoulders and the slow roll of his hips.

He didn't do any of that.

Instead, they went to breakfast, Benji grumbling about a headache until his ibuprofen kicked in. He'd turned the hardcore stuff in to the team doc. He might joke about getting a pill problem like everyone in his hometown, but Olly knew Benji took that seriously as hell.

For as hard as he worked, Benji liked to make it look easy. Liked to laugh everything off, liked to accept help—from Olly, from his billet mom, from his stylist or coaching staff—with easy self-assurance.

Sometimes Olly had to wonder what that cost him: to keep it up, to act like nothing other than his sister ever bothered him. And he'd been bothered the night before. Olly didn't know how to make sense of that.

"You're quiet." Benji had his head propped up on one fist while they waited for coffee. He looked so goddamned hot, even in a Hawaiian-print shirt unbuttoned halfway to play peek-a-boo with his chest hair. Loic had gone to town with his vacation wardrobe, and Benji made it work with an ease he'd never had in a suit. Even half-asleep and three-quarters hungover, curls flattened against the back of his head, he got looks.

Olly was just saying: it wasn't fair.

"Coffee," he answered vaguely.

Benji snorted. "You know what? I barely even drank coffee before we moved into the 505, but now I'm this fucking misery-zombie and it's all your



fault.”

“It’s all my fault,” Olly agreed.

Benji kicked his ankle under the table. “Asshole.”

“Fuckhead.”

“Bag skate of dicks.”

“Hawaiian shirt motherfucker.” Which made Benji snort again, and then they were both laughing, even though it wasn’t funny.

“Hey,” Benji said, when the teenaged giggling had died down. He nudged Olly’s ankle under the table. “Sorry I kinda yelled at you yesterday.”

“You didn’t yell at me.”

“Snapped, whatever.” He waved it away through the morning mugginess. “I just—I dunno. I’m not used to you not wanting to hang out, and it made me, whatever, worry.” His hazel eyes were all big and earnest and made Olly want to hide under the table.

“You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“I know.” Benji shrugged. “I’m not saying it makes sense. It’s just, like, more obvious down here, with the golf and stuff, that I don’t really...fit. And usually I don’t care, but I guess it got to me a little bit.”

“I don’t care about your golf handicap.”

“The golf was a, like, metaphor.”

“I haven’t had enough coffee for metaphors,” Olly said. “But you know I’m not going to stop being your friend because of that, right? Or because you snapped at me one time?”

Benji looked low-key dubious. “I think it’s been more than one time by now.”

“You get it, though. Don’t you?”

Poiro and the guys showed up before Benji could argue the point any further, since the province of Quebec had another tee time to get to.

Olly—conscious of Benji staring down at a pile of scrambled eggs and guacamole, not saying a fucking word—begged off. Even though he was historically bad at chilling on beaches, and it was a horrible idea to let himself laze around with Benji, no matter how big and sad his eyes had been. Things kept getting more and more twisted together; he was going to lose his mind when it fell apart.

He’d ask for another trade, if he was playing well enough to be worth something, or maybe he’d retire. He wasn’t strong enough to watch Benji lose interest, to play the supportive buddy when Benji found a girl he wanted

to keep around.

“Stop looking so serious,” Benji ordered, while they were strolling down to the beach.

“Just thinking.”

“Fucking stop, then. Jesus, we’re on vacation and we already maxed out the serious convos for the day.” He slung an arm around Olly’s neck. It was an awkward way to walk, with his shoulder jammed into Benji’s side and their hips bumping into each other. Once it was obvious that Benji wasn’t letting go, he didn’t have another option but to rearrange their shoulders and slip his arm around Benji’s waist.

They claimed an umbrella near the water. The surf was low, barely more than a ripple of white foam where it lapped onto the beach. It was hot already, even with a breeze off the water, and despite everything Olly felt himself start to relax.

“I’ll get your back.” Benji held up the sunscreen.

Olly let Benji shove him down face-first onto the beach chair. He was thorough, big hands everywhere over the muscles of his back. It reminded him of that night after they’d played the Wolves, when Benji had given him a massage. He’d felt—taken care of. He felt that way now, reluctantly and against his better judgment, with Benji’s thumbs digging into his traps and heat radiating out from his palms. Benji had a few calluses, from weight bars and his gloves or whatever else. Olly was dialed in enough that he could feel them against his skin.

It made him shiver, which made Benji make a low, pleased noise. He rubbed his thumb over the back of his neck, like there was a smudge of sunscreen, or like he’d wanted to. “There.”

“Thanks,” Olly mumbled into his forearms. Benji stayed perched on the edge of his lounge, close enough that their hips touched. They talked about nothing in particular: Olly’s golf round, the bachelorettes’ shenanigans, Yelich’s upcoming wedding in Alberta.

Olly felt wrung out, and warm, and comfortable, with Benji’s voice rumbling over the quiet waves. All the tension was leaching out of his body. Which was fucking stupid: he wasn’t any better off now than he’d been the day or the week or the month before, but maybe for now, maybe for the rest of his vacation, he could just let it go.

“You falling asleep, bud?” Benji asked, voice low.

“No.” It was probably a lie.

Benji chuckled and stroked a hand down his spine, fingers lingering in the small of his back. "I'll stop bothering you."

"Don't," Olly said, and that wasn't a lie at all.

\* \* \*

Benji stole Olly's iPad out of his backpack, because obviously he was pulled-together enough to bring more than his phone and card key to breakfast.

Olly needed the sleep, probably. The alcohol had gotten to Benji last night and he'd passed out as soon as they'd both gotten off. Which was rude, but one of the benefits of hooking up with Olly versus some random girl was that he was supposed to understand about shit like that.

Not that Benji understood a damned thing about what was going on. He'd never given this much of a shit about someone he was fucking around with before. It was complicated and it made him mad and he could run through a mental list of every single reason why he didn't fuck with repeats, and not one of them seemed more important than the bone-deep rightness when he had Olly where he belonged.

Which was with him. Laughing about bullshit at breakfast, napping on the beach, pinned against white bedsheets with his throat thrown back and one long leg wrapped around Benji's hip.

Benji tried to be subtle when he adjusted himself, then settled into some Western Conference highlights. San Diego was up three to one over Vegas. Hadn't Olly lived with their star winger at some point, when they were both in Colorado? Benji was not, like, out to wheel on him, but that was one fucking hot dude.

It made him think about that time they'd talked in the kitchen, when Olly had been all *oh no, I've never done any just-buddies shit*. But he'd lived with Jake Gagner and all sixteen of his abs. Olly wouldn't lie about something like that, would he?

Why the hell would Benji care if Olly fucked around with Gagner, anyway?

Fine. Okay. He didn't like thinking about it, that was all. Didn't love the idea of someone else hearing the choked-off little noises Olly made when he was trying not to come; was not really into someone else watching his eyes go all hazy and desperate.

Especially not Gagner, who appeared to be a total dumbass. Benji was a

hockey player—his standards were low to begin with.

Olly should have better taste than that dude. He needed someone who was calm, steady. Someone who could get him out of his head and keep him grounded.

That was all.

(Something in the back of Benji's mind was starting to get the suspicion that wasn't it at all.)

\* \* \*

Olly came awake all at once, with a full-body twitch. The angle of the sun had changed, far enough that his legs were in the sun. Everything was warm, washed in the sound of the waves.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty." Benji sounded fond.

"Jesus." Olly swallowed a yawn, shoved himself vertical. "How long was I out?"

"Long enough." The little thief had stolen his iPad to keep himself entertained. "Some crazy highlights from the LA series. Wanna watch?"

Olly did. Benji heaved himself over to his lounge chair, and they watched his billet bro, Andre, make a nasty one-handed goal. It sucked watching other guys play while Olly was sitting on his ass on a beach, but not enough to throw him for a total loop. It had, last year. He'd watched all the games, all the commentary, locked in the lake house and hating himself.

Even if the Benji situation was going to end in a total fucking train wreck, Olly was better off now than he had been. And Benji was a big part of that.

"What?" Benji asked.

"What, what?"

"You're smiling at me, bud," he said, like this was some weird and suspicious event.

"Fuck you." It was a reflex.

"Yeah, okay." His lips twitched like he wanted to laugh. "I'll put it on the calendar."

Olly shoved at his shoulder. It was like trying to shove a mountain: Benji was selectively immune to physics. "I'm getting a drink."

"Mmm." Benji flopped back onto Olly's chair and smiled up at him, green eyes crinkled up at the corners. "Piña colada, please."

"I didn't say I'd get *you* a drink."

“Oliver Järvinen,” Benji said, very serious except for the laughter in his eyes. “Would you do me the *great* favor of getting me a tropical frozen drink with a paper fucking umbrella in it.”

“No,” said Olly, which definitely meant *yes*.

There was a little bit of a line at the bar. Which, okay, not like Olly could judge since he was standing in it, but it was barely past noon. He hadn’t had this much to drink in a long time. But it seemed to be going okay. What was he going to fuck up, really? He’d never gone for drunken heart-to-hearts, just dumb reckless physical shit that Benji didn’t seem to mind. At all.

He was enough in his head that it took him a second to realize the guy in front of him in line was trying to talk to him. “Sorry, what?”

“I said,” he said, “it’s early for this many people to be drinking, even on vacation.”

“Oh, uh. I was just thinking that.”

He smiled, like Olly had just said something amazing and charming instead of confused and halfway-stuttered. He had very white teeth, and he was on the older side—maybe mid-forties, somewhere around there—but still very fit. And super-friendly. He kept talking as they inched their way closer to the bar, asking about golf and the different pool bars and how long Olly would be in Mexico.

Olly went along with it; it wasn’t like he had anything else to do. And his mother would reach down from Minnesota to this Mexican beach bar to guilt trip him if he was ever impolite to someone, so.

After they’d both gotten their drinks, Olly was still trying to extricate himself from the conversation when Benji showed up.

“I thought I was gonna have to send out a search party,” he said, hooking his elbow around Olly’s neck. Instead of leaving his hand to dangle in his typical bro-buddies way, though, he pressed it onto Olly’s chest, thumb right on his collarbone.

Olly shrugged up at his weirdo roommate. “There was a long line.”

“Sure.” Benji was smiling at Olly’s line buddy, all pointed and sharp with five fingers spread out on Olly’s skin. “Ready to head back, bud?”

“Yeah, okay.” He handed over Benji’s piña colada and followed him back to their beach umbrella. “What the fuck, dude?”

“What?”

“You just acted superweird back there.” Benji loved meeting people. He was approximately as extroverted as a golden retriever; Olly didn’t know if

he'd ever seen him take an immediate dislike to someone before, unless he played on the Minnesota Timber Wolves. Or was Olly's dad. Okay, maybe he tended to go all white-knight over Olly's drama, but the guy in the line had been perfectly pleasant. If anything, he'd been a little too friendly.

"I didn't like how he was looking at you," Benji said, sipping his piña colada as if that was a response that made any sense at all.

"He wasn't looking at me any kind of way."

"Bud." Benji shook his head. "He was trying to wheel on you. One hundo percent."

Olly took a belated sip of his Corona. It fizzed on his tongue. "Yeah, no."

"Yeah, yes." He shrugged again. "I mean, it's your business. Or whatever."

"Not when you manhandle me."

Benji's lip twitched, enough that he couldn't quite hide it in his glass.

"What *now*, you asshole?"

He stopped bothering to keep his snicker behind the piña colada. "Pretty sure you like it when I manhandle you, bud."

The only possible response to that was for Olly to kick him in the hip, as hard as he could, and take his damned iPad back.

That was how they spent the rest of the week: lounging around, not doing much of anything (except each other). Olly kept falling asleep, like his body cut out once he let himself stop barreling forward. Benji could chill with the best of them, but sitting on his ass watching his buddy nap shouldn't have been his favorite way to spend his vacation.

Whenever they did anything else, he was counting down the minutes until it was over.

\* \* \*

"Pennsylvania's going to be a downgrade, eh?" Pairo asked him, their final morning in Mexico. They were down on the beach, soaking up the last of the saltwater and bottomless booze.

"Like Montreal is that amazing," he fired back, just to watch Pairo splutter. He was going to be back in Hershey, going to physical therapy and working out with Andre until the NAHA Awards—no way was he actually winning Rookie of the Year, but his agent said he had to show up in a tux and smile for the cameras, anyway. Loic was beside himself—he'd apparently started working with a few players from Pittsburgh, too, not that they'd be picking

up any hardware.

After that, it was up to Alberta for the Yelich wedding; then he didn't know. DC, maybe. Not Pittsburgh, not Toronto; that was its own kind of thing. He hadn't been thinking about it. Didn't want to start now.

"Not going to Minnesota?"

"Hadn't planned on it," he answered, ignoring the sideways pressure that generated in his chest.

"I will be very surprised if you two codependent assholes can manage to go an entire summer apart."

"We'll see each other in Alberta." Which Benji was fine with. Olly was going to bury himself in kids and huskies and brothers and fishing lures. It made sense that they weren't doing the whole summer thing together.

"Sure you will."

"I don't even know what you mean," Benji said.

Poiro muttered something under his breath in French. Benji didn't need Olly to translate it to know it was uncomplimentary.

"Way harsh, Tai," Beth said, anyway, coming up to wrap herself around Benji's arm. She spoke French. Not as well as Olly, but well enough that Poiro couldn't get anything by her. "It's such a bummer that you're leaving today." She was talking to Benji, totally ignoring Poiro.

"Gotta get back in the gym, babe. And cool it with the piña coladas and the hot girls."

"Or his *actual* girlfriend will get jealous," Poiro grumbled.

"Oh, right," Beth said. "Miss It's-Complicated. The one we did tequila shots about."

Poiro made a noise of profound discontent, face collecting itself in a way that meant he was going to get very noisy, very quickly. Benji gave Beth a squeeze, dropped a kiss on her head, and got the fuck out of there. He had absolutely no interest in sticking around to let Poiro grill him, about anything, but especially about anyone who might potentially be *complicating* his love life.

## Chapter Forty

It was hard not to think about the last time Olly had landed in Duluth back in January, his head three-quarters fucked up.

He was still fucked up, maybe, as the plane braked down the runway. Fucked up or totally screwed; possibly both. But it was light out this time, early-summer green against the blue glitter of the water. Joey and Liz met him in the arrivals hall, Kieran and Sarah wearing Eagles sweaters and Mikey defiantly rocking a Wolves T-shirt. Liz mouthed *sorry* over his head.

Olly scooped him up. “Buddy, we need to talk about your taste in hockey teams.”

“Birds are stupid. I like mammals,” said Mikey, who was all of four.

Kieran and Sarah disagreed. That carried them through the baggage claim and out to Liz’s minivan.

“What do you want to do first?” Joey asked, after the kids had gotten settled. “Shower, lunch, drop off your stuff?”

“Whatever.” He was feeling relaxed. He’d spent the second half of his vacation passed out, whether in a beach chair or in bed. Benji had given him a hickey the night before. A fucking hickey. Right in the crease of his hip. “*Something to remember me by,*” he’d said.

“Hockey!” Sarah piped up. “Dad said you’d practice with us.”

“I may have promised that,” Joey allowed.

“Guess we’re playing hockey, then.”

He spent the rest of the afternoon messing around with the niblings, laughing in the summer sunshine and acquiring enough of the neighborhood for five-a-side ball hockey, Olly and Joey in goal and the dog interfering at will, snatching up the ball to take off down the cul-de-sac.

It was what he’d always thought his life would look like: happy kids hacking away at a ball on a blue-sky Minnesota day.

And it hurt that he wasn’t going to get it.

“You look serious,” Joey said, on a break while the kids were chasing down the dog. She was a blur of black-and-white fur, tongue lolling out as she zoomed back and forth across the cul-de-sac while the kids shrieked behind her.

“Just thinking.”



“You’re a pro hockey player. You’re gonna hurt yourself if you do too much of that.”

“Fuck off.”

“Really.” Joey leaned on his goalie stick. “Talk to me, bro.”

Olly shrugged, inspecting his own stick’s tape job. “This is nice, that’s all. Family. The kids. It’s just that I, you know. Don’t really know if I’ll ever get to do it. Myself.”

“Pretty sure gay dudes have families and play ball hockey. Duluth even has an LBGT team in the rec league now.”

“I can’t, though. With the league. And the media.”

“Can’t you?”

Olly shot him an are-you-kidding look. “How am I going to explain a husband and kid? My career barely survived the Wolves. You think I’m trying to go there at a national level?”

“It would be different,” Joey said, like someone who had recently spent a lot of time googling *coming out in big four sports*. “You’d have your PR strategy figured out, and you rocked it this season. The Eagles seem like they’d have your back, and someone’s gotta be first.”

“Not me,” Olly told him, and meant it.

\* \* \*

Olly always stayed with his parents while he was in Duluth. Dad had been on his best behavior so far, but Olly was still walking around the house braced for a comment. He had another two weeks to sit on his ass before he got back in the gym, so he wasn’t busy—he did some promo spots, softball interviews with the local media—but mostly he was hanging out. Sleeping. Texting Benji; even FaceTiming, Benji’s face against an ugly plaid couch in his former billet fam’s basement.

He was realizing that he didn’t like going too long without talking to Benji. Like, hearing his actual voice, seeing the actual crinkles at the corners of his eyes. It was kind of a massive problem, but Benji didn’t seem to mind; called him half the time, telling him about his shoulder PT and Andre-from-LA’s gym routine.

(They didn’t have phone sex. Olly thought about it. Didn’t begin to know how to bring it up; didn’t know if that was a thing they would do, even if he did.)

\* \* \*

They messaged throughout their respective families' Game 7 watch parties. Olly sat on the floor with the kids in Levi's living room, Benji out by the Deveraux's poolside TV as Boston and San Diego hammered at each other. Olly had messaged Jake the day before, a quick good-luck-tear-it-up-out-there. It appeared to be working, but Ryan Stewart and the Boston blue line weren't going down without a fight.

The kids wanted to know if Stewart was as scary in person as he was on TV (yes, for hockey; not on a personal level); the sisters-in-law wanted to know if Jake had as many brain cells as he had muscles (debatable).

His dad kept it chill, too. No side comments. No backhanded comparisons that left Olly off-balance and inadequate.

It was a good night, leaning back against the edge of the couch with his baby niece a sleepy weight against his shoulder, another kid puppy-piled into his other side. Down in Pennsylvania, Benji and Andre were getting increasingly sloppy, if the growing pile of hard seltzer cans on Benji's SnapChat were anything to go by. His billet sis appeared in a few of the frames, rolling her eyes at whatever they were getting into.

After the game ended, Olly and his parents had made it most of the walk home when his phone vibrated. The neighborhood was dark and quiet, the last cars from other Cup parties making their way down the streets.

"Who's calling you so late?" his mom asked.

"Drunk hockey player, if I had to guess," Dad offered, smiling.

Olly confirmed and accepted the call. He didn't know if his dad would be so happy to hear it was Benji. "Hey, buddy."

"*Olly.*" He was drunk, all right. Olly's liver needed a break after Mexico, so he'd only had a beer or two. Benji's liver was more resilient, or Andre was a bad influence.

"What's up?" He waved his parents inside, settled himself on the steps to the back door, and stretched out his legs. The air was soft and dry; moonlight spilled down over the familiar contours of the backyard: his mom's tomato plants, the swing set that had been in the back corner as long as Olly had been alive.

"Turn on your video," Benji ordered, all plaintive. And there was his face, sideways on that godawful couch with his hair curling over his forehead. The light was a diffuse gold, shadowing the angles of his face and warming up the

curve of his lips. He smiled brightly as soon as Olly's face showed up on his screen. "Hi."

"Having a good night?"

"Better if you were here." He paused, chewing on his lip. "Or I was there."

That space was hurting in Olly's stomach again. Benji was so goddamned sincere. He made it impossible to remember that this thing between them was just...whatever it was, for however long it kept happening. Fucking each other's brains out for a week in Mexico. That ghost of a hickey on Olly's hip.

All he said was, "Yeah."

They talked about San Diego winning their first Cup; Benji's billet sis Darcy's new boyfriend, some fancy brewery Andre dragged him to, how physical therapy for his shoulder was going. Olly's interview with the local paper about his comeback season, the morning he and his mom had helped Kieran and Sarah with their edgework. Dumb shit that was only interesting because it was Benji.

Olly missed him. Missed the rumble of his voice, missed *Animal Planet* in the background, missed pretending to bitch about his newest green smoothie. Just missed him, and didn't know what to do about it, other than stay out in the backyard way too late, watching his face go looser and sleepier, until he drifted off in the space between two words.

\* \* \*

It didn't say anything good about Olly's mental state that he seriously fucking considered showing up at the NAHA awards, just so he could see Benji a few days earlier. His agent had wanted him to go. But Olly had been once while he was in Colorado. It had not been his scene, and it wasn't like he had a WAG who wanted an excuse to work a gown on the red carpet.

No, he had—or didn't have—the pair of massive shoulders and tilted green eyes smiling politely at the camera, as the TV panned through the Rookie of the Year nominees: a goalie from Florida, a baby-faced center from Cincinnati, and Benji. It was anybody's race.

"Is Benji gonna win?" Sarah asked him.

"We'll find out."

"He looks pretty handsome in that tux," Liz offered. "If anybody here cared about that."

Olly ignored her. He was on the floor again, playing snap with Sarah and

Kieran. All three of them agreed that the NAHA awards were a lot less interesting than the Cup final, but Olly had wanted to watch, anyway. Out of solidarity, or whatever.

They'd talked again that morning. Benji was nervous: he hated cameras, wasn't comfortable in a penguin suit at a black-tie event, would rather take a slapshot to the face than stand up on a stage in front of hundreds of people and make a speech broadcast on national television.

Olly wished he was in Vegas, again. Uselessly.

He could deal with Benji's Insta, at least.

"Snap!" crowed Kieran, pulling his attention away from the TV.

"You got me," Olly admitted, as one of the US Women's National Team soccer players unfolded an envelope and announced that the Rookie of the Year Award would be awarded to Benji Bryzinski of the Washington Eagles.

Sarah and Kieran cheered, Mikey joining in a second later; Liz and Joey clinked their beers together. Olly hid a smile: he was fucking proud of Benji, okay. He'd been killing it all season, and he could make some big fucking hits even if he was never going to be a highlight-reel goal scorer. Olly was glad to see him get the recognition he deserved, even if he did look like he was marching to his execution as he headed toward the stage.

The NAHA Awards set a low bar for speeches, so all he had to do was smile—which he was very good at—and congratulate the other nominees, then thank the team, the management, and the fans.

"And finally," Benji said on the TV, "I'd like to thank everyone who helped me along the way, from my buddy Davo's family for giving me rides to practice, to the NHTC for taking a chance on me. The best two billet families in the world. And..." He smiled, looked right into the camera, and Olly felt it like a jolt: it was a soft expression, not one of his uncomfortable, cameras-in-his-face looks. "Olly, I know you're watching, so thanks for making my rookie season one I'll remember forever."

He wagged the trophy at the camera, then headed back to his seat. Liz made a muffled noise; Olly could feel himself blushing.

"Yeah," Joey said, over the kids squealing about Uncle Olly getting a shout-out on TV, "Sami's totally wrong. He doesn't have a thing for you at all."

"Shut up," Olly said, with as much dignity as he could muster.

Which was not a lot, since the kids immediately started screeching about how you weren't allowed to say shut up, and he had to give them all extra

turns as a penalty, and things devolved from there. That was fine with Olly. He'd rather lose dramatically at snap than think about his idiot family's insinuations, and the warmth in Benji's eyes, and how none of it mattered, because the two of them were never going to want the same things.

## Chapter Forty-One

Sitting on a bus outside of Calgary International Airport wasn't his favorite place to be, but Benji was looking forward to the weekend. Based on Instagram, Yelich was half thrilled and half terrified, splitting his time between helping his fiancée and golfing in front of truly absurd mountain scenery.

Olly was excited about the golf.

Benji could go this time, he guessed. Even if he was more interested in drinking beer than figuring out his chip shot.

At least drinking beer looked like it would be featuring heavily in his activities for the weekend. The vibe on the bus was festive as hell, night and day from their hellish Alberta road trip at the beginning of the season. Even Coach O had sunglasses propped on top of his head and a beer barely disguised in a koozy, so he must be in vacation mode.

Dope. Benji had never partied with a coach before.

"Where's Pairo?" he asked Olly, once the last of the stragglers were settled. Yelich's juniors buddies had already started singing a drinking song in the back; kids were screaming intermittently; and someone had produced a cooler of Molson and hard seltzers from underneath a seat. No vodka shots, at least, since Soko was back in Russia.

Olly shrugged. Benji could smell him, sanitized plane air not quite smothering the crispness of his shampoo. "He's flying up tomorrow. He has a family thing."

Bevvo kicked the back of Benji's seat. "Sandrine says he's bringing someone."

"Sandrine's right here," she said, amused. They were holding hands when Benji twisted around to look at them. He wouldn't be surprised if he was on a bus to their wedding, next year.

"Olly, confirm or deny—your boy has a wedding date," Bevvo ordered.

"I don't know."

"You're fucking useless."

"*You're* fucking useless," Olly shot back. "Ask Anna. She knows everything."

Anna confirmed the existence of Pairo's wedding date, which got Sandrine

and Bevvo bickering about why he hadn't believed her but he'd believe Anna; which led to Mils yelling at them to stop arguing and start shotgunning beers with the juniors buddies.

Olly could shotgun beer like a fucking professional, which he played off with an explanation of "older brothers." And at some point Benji would stop being surprised by his ability to be the *most* hockey at all times. But today was not that day, as Olly explained to him all the ways Benji had been shotgunning beers wrong since he was fifteen years old.

\* \* \*

Olly was trying to act sober at the (very fucking fancy) check-in desk, and the receptionist looked extremely over it. But the hotel had to have known what it was signing up for when it agreed to host the wedding of a professional hockey player. Benji couldn't stop laughing. He was pleasantly buzzed, Lake Louise was so pretty it looked fake, and he was surrounded by good buddies.

"Shut up, you're making it worse," Olly hissed, once he'd managed to get the key cards for their suite.

"Maybe if you were worse at shotgunning, you wouldn't be so drunk."

"I am *not* drunk."

"Course, bud." Benji herded him toward the bank of elevators.

The suite was gorgeous, with a sweeping view of the turquoise water of the lake—and Benji did intend to enjoy it, but they'd barely gotten inside the door before Olly was dropping his suit bag and pushing him against the wall. Benji was okay with that, laughing as Olly overbalanced into his chest and blinked up at him with annoyed blue eyes, like he was offended by his fucked-up balance.

"Stop looking pissed off, you're on vacation," Benji ordered. Olly was a warm and welcome weight against his chest, even if he was making a disgruntled noise. He had freckles again, dusted across the bridge of his displeased nose and the tops of his cheekbones.

"If I'm on vacation, can't I do whatever I want?" Olly asked, fake-serious.

"Yeah, okay, champ." Benji tipped his chin up with one finger. "What *exactly* do you want to do?"

Nothing that Benji wasn't totally down for, as it turned out: once on the couch and once in the shower.

Olly pulled it together for the welcome dinner, though, sticking to water

and a token glass of wine. But there was a lingering blush on his cheeks, on the back of his neck, and Benji knew the exact fucking locations of the bite marks he'd left inside his thighs. Maybe he was only thinking about it because it was his turn to be buzzed, sitting at a table with a heavy white cloth and Olly's elbow brushing against him from time to time; but the thought that Olly was sitting here, using the right silverware and taking little sips on a glass of wine that Benji couldn't pronounce the name of, with his inner thighs bitten to hell...

It was something, that was all. Something that had Benji shifting in his seat and trying to remember that he wasn't actually going to drag Olly back upstairs by his hair. It was too short; he couldn't get a proper grip.

Leaving the hickey in Mexico had been an impulsive, heat-of-the-moment thing. He'd wanted to do it and he had, and Olly hadn't gotten offended when it was still there the next morning. And that had been that, just a hot thing that had happened.

Except that Benji hadn't been able to stop thinking about Olly going through his day—buckling his seat belt on his flight, sitting down for an interview with a local TV station—with that mark still there.

They were at a table full of their coworkers and Benji could still taste Olly's come in the back of his throat, had total recall on the way he'd fucking *whined* when Benji was working him over.

Benji coughed. Almost knocked over his wineglass. Only Lukesy's reflexes saved him.

Luke waved his own glass at a table full of girls. "Bowie, how are we feeling about the bridesmaid situation?"

Benji hadn't noticed they existed. "Dunno. How are you feeling?"

"Not the best I've ever felt." Lukesy heaved a sigh. "Maybe the hot ones are getting in tomorrow with Pairo."

"She's pretty," Olly piped up, pointing to a girl heading to the bar. She was, too, even if she wasn't Benji's type—itty-bitty, glossy dark hair, one of those complicated pantsuit things that Sandrine always wore on Instagram.

"Buddy!" Luke exclaimed. "Is that what you go for? I've literally never heard you say a girl is hot. Get the *fuck* in there, dude."

Olly blushed, like, literally blushed: Benji watched the color wash over his face. "Uh, I meant for you."

"Shut up." Luke set his jaw. "I'm not sniping the love of your life."

"Luke. I can absolutely guarantee you that girl is not the love of my life."



“I’m getting you her number.” He swallowed the rest of his wine and charged toward the bar like it was the goal and he was lagging behind Dewey in the points race.

Olly was staring down at his wineglass when Benji got done observing the Luke Chen show. His attempt to crash the net was getting shut down. More power to the tiny little cute girl.

“Lukesy’s striking out,” Benji offered. He didn’t give in to the temptation to slide an arm along the back of Olly’s chair, although he couldn’t have said why.

“Poor Luke.” Olly sipped his wine, replaced it precisely on the table, and nudged it a millimeter farther into alignment with his water glass.

“Yeah, you don’t mean that.”

“Not really.” Olly blew out a sigh. Benji didn’t know what was going through his head. “Sorry, I’m tired. Flights out of Duluth suck.”

Benji knew. He’d looked at flights between PA and Duluth a few times, late at night in the Deveraux’s basement. Just to see. “We don’t have to stay out late.”

“You can if you want.”

He shrugged. “Nah, you’re right. Long day.”

Luke was not filled with joy by their decision to go back to the suite after dinner. He muttered something like *is everybody fucking old and married and lame, I expect this bullshit from Olly but I thought you were a better man, Bowie*. Benji didn’t care; they’d be partying plenty, and right now he’d rather crawl into one of the suite’s king-size beds and arrange Olly on his shoulder.

It had been a while since they’d watched a bad movie in a hotel in Canada, that was all. Olly kept up his under-the-breath commentary on how terrible it was. Benji had gotten used to it: had found the Deveraux’s no-talking-during-the-movie rule strange to go back to. So he was happy to be here, Olly’s arm across his chest and their legs all tangled together.

\* \* \*

Day 2 was blocked off for golf. This wasn’t going to be one of the mornings that Olly was okay with being awake, not even to school his teammates. He was blurred edges and grumpiness as he staggered out of bed toward the coffeepot in the living room, basketball shorts riding low on his hips.

He looked good, even with his eyes three-quarters closed as he headed

back to bed. Whatever he'd been doing in Duluth, it was putting weight on him, covering the acute angles the season had carved into his shoulders.

Olly collapsed on top of him, sticking an elbow in his stomach and whacking their kneecaps together. Not exactly restful. "Just until the coffee brews," he mumbled into Benji's collarbone.

"It's your day." Benji wasn't quite able to stop himself from stroking a hand down the warm skin of his back.

"Stop it."

"Stop what?" Benji definitely did not have a hand full of Olly's ass, definitely was not exploring the silky way the fabric of his shorts slid over the backs of his thighs. Would not say he was thinking about what noises Olly would make, if he pushed down on one of the bite marks from yesterday.

"You're going to make me late."

"I'm going, too," Benji reminded him. Kissed the corner of his mouth. Olly gave a grumbling sigh but kissed him back.

They weren't horribly late for breakfast but they weren't on time, either.

\* \* \*

Benji had been telling Olly all year that he was bad at golf, but—holy shit. "You are really fucking bad at golf."

"I told you," Benji reminded him. "I was completely honest about this situation."

"He was," Luke pointed out.

"How are you not..." Olly stopped; he'd been about to ask something like *how are you not better at this*, but he knew. Benji hadn't had a parent to take him to the driving range. Benji had laser-focused on hockey and, whatever, therapy and yoga, like they were the only lifelines he was going to get. And he hadn't been wrong about that. Grinding his way through the NHTC, college, getting drafted, right up to winning Rookie of the Year; even learning to cook, his meditation app, always being down to hang with the boys. If it was going to make him a better hockey player, a better teammate, Benji did it.

Olly had to wonder where he fit in. Lower-maintenance than a girlfriend, someone who was never going to bitch about his schedule or complain about all the time on the road.

He didn't believe that, not really; but now he was thinking about it and he couldn't make himself stop. How there was no way that anyone would ever choose—this.

"I don't give a shit," Benji was saying to Luke. "I'm just here 'cause I wanted to drive the cart."

"Yeah, goddamned Olly will even out his score, anyway," Bevvo complained.

"You're mad he's better than you," Luke said, poking him with his driver. "Not the biggest stud on the team anymore, eh?"

Olly wanted to get out of his head, listening to the familiar rhythm of Luke and Bevvo arguing, the uneven whish and pop of clubs hitting golf balls. It was a gorgeous course, too, in the valley between two rock-faced mountains, accented with pine and ponds that were as still and clear as glass.

A couple of holes later—Benji had blatantly given up, dropping his ball wherever he wanted and having way too much fun gunning the golf cart around—they ended up with some space from Luke and Bevvo.

"You okay?" Benji asked. His eyes were the same color as the spruce trees he'd just fished his ball out of. Olly couldn't even be annoyed at the cheating; it was that or play a thirteen-hour round. "You're quiet."

"Thinking about my game, bud. Maybe try it," he chirped reflexively.

"But then I'd be thinking about golf." He grinned. "Can you imagine anything worse?"

"Reading smoothie recipes on your phone."

"Thinking about your fucking shotgunning technique." Benji bumped him with his shoulder. "You're such a nerd, dude."

"You sit around, with your eyes closed, with a spaced-out hippy telling you to visualize. You can't call me a nerd."

"But you're definitely the nerd, though." Benji was smiling, familiar face creased into its familiar, happy lines. Looking at him felt like a late check Olly hadn't seen coming. "Truth hurts, bud."

"Fuck you."

Benji just grinned at him. Sliced a shot into a crystal-colored pond.

\* \* \*

Poiro had arrived by the time they got back to the hotel and was, as ever, ready to party.

“Finally, somebody fun,” Luke yelled across the lobby.

“Is that...” Olly said, because Piro was uncurling himself from around the back of a girl who looked familiar.

“*Beth?*” Benji tugged her in for a hug and she came, laughing, until she realized how sweaty he was. “How’d you end up with this loser?”

“He slid into my DMs. He’s better if it’s not in person.”

Piro smirked, leaning against the hotel bar. He looked good, tan from Mexico and his lake in Quebec; and fuck if he didn’t look happy, too, sliding little sideways glances at Beth like he couldn’t help himself.

They’d meant to go clean up for the ceremony, but they ended up hanging out at the bar instead, sweaty golf gear and all. Benji and Beth had their heads together, laughing at receipts of Piro trying to flirt on Insta; Olly let Piro catch him up on his summer training, nonsense gossip about movements in the league. Olly didn’t care, but he’d been bullshitting about hockey his entire life. It was low-stakes, in a bar in Lake Louise surrounded by people who liked him. Who he liked, even if it was going to come flaming down around his ears sooner or later.

## *Chapter Forty-Two*

They were late by the time the hangout at the bar wrapped up, with barely enough time to rinse off the dried sweat from golf and suit up. Benji shelved the idea of BJs in the shower.

Later, though.

That was a nice thought. He liked the idea of coming upstairs with Olly, when the night wound down: watching him kick off his shoes, take off his jacket and tie, pull a Gatorade out of the minifridge. Something low-key to look forward to, even if he had also been high-key missing the blowies.

“You coming?” Olly asked from the door.

Benji shoved his feet into his dress shoes. “Lead the way.”

He followed Olly downstairs to the fanciest wedding he’d ever been to, since it turned out Mrs. Yelich was some sort of Albertan agricultural princess. Benji mostly tuned out all the talking, even though Pairo was getting suspiciously red around the eyes. Beth passed him a tissue; Olly swallowed a laugh while Pairo tried to kick him in the ankle.

Benji had made the rookie mistake of sitting between their pigtail-pulling, so he only had himself to blame for the new bruise on the back of his Achilles. That wasn’t going to stop him from also blaming Pairo.

“Ow, you shithead,” he hissed.

Pairo smirked. Benji had never been smirked at by a dude who was also teary-eyed over loving love.

The pastor-dude pronounced the Yeliches man and wife. They kissed; the crowd applauded; and then an entire NAHA team got unleashed on the cocktail hour. Benji was proud of his teammates for not all getting shitcanned immediately, like the youth hockey buddies were doing. Maturity, or Coach O’s watchful gaze.

Everybody was taking pictures for the Gram, so Olly made him upload one of the two of them with Pairo and Beth. Sandrine caught Olly mid-laugh and gave Pairo two chins. So that was perfect, and it stayed perfect through the first half of the reception: laughing at Yelich’s brother’s speech, having to wipe his eyes during his parents’. He tried to use a napkin; Beth made a pitying sound and handed him a tissue from her tiny purse.

Benji was mostly at peace with his whole family situation, since he had the

Deveraux and Davo's family and a great group of buddies and, okay, Olly; but sometimes, it got driven home that there were things he was never going to get. Had never gotten to have. He hadn't heard from Krista since that disaster of a call before Mexico, not even after he won Rookie of the Year; he hadn't known how to reach out himself without making it worse, since he was never going to training camp with Rob.

"You okay?" Olly asked. They were sitting close together, knees touching under the table.

"It's just tough sometimes. Like, family stuff. You know."

Olly nodded. He leaned into Benji's shoulder, a little; and that helped. It also helped that the cater-waiters brought around more wine, and that the DJ was getting the dance party going. Benji would have been all over that, but—surprise, surprise—Olly made a not-a-chance face when Benji asked him to dance. Pairo sniped something back and it was easy enough to stay at the table, laughing with Beth about their bullshit and hooking his ankle around Olly's.

\* \* \*

When he got back from the bathroom an hour or so later, Olly was on the dance floor for once, carefully spinning a little girl under his arm. Benji was buzzed enough that it hit him sideways in the chest: his wide-open grin, the thought of him carefully cupping his long fingers around the back of some tiny bundled-up baby's head. Miniature ice skates, ball hockey in the driveway, sticks and pucks and dogs everywhere, takeout menus on the refrigerator because Olly was never going to learn how to cook.

Benji had never thought about wanting that. Wanting anything like that, other than with an indistinct sense of someday, later; or the backward-facing ache of *I wish things had been like that for me*.

Olly wanted it. It was so fucking clear. He needed someone, too: someone to make him laugh, someone to make sure he ate vegetables and got sleep and didn't get too stuck in his head.

"Okay over there?" Pairo asked. He was flushed from dancing, Beth under one arm and his shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest. He had sunglasses propped on top of his head and he looked like an even bigger douchebag than usual.

"Course, why?" Benji dropped into his chair, swigged from his water

glass.

“You looked a little soft.”

“It’s a wedding, shithead. It’s supposed to be soft.”

“Is it because of your girl?” Beth asked.

“What girl?”

“The one you said things were complicated with. Back in Mexico.”

“Yeah, Bowie.” Piro shoved his sunglasses farther up into his hair.

“How’s your *girl*.”

He didn’t sound...nice. Which wasn’t a new thing; Piro was an asshole on a good day. But there was an undertone to his voice that Benji didn’t like, a sharpness around his eyes that was usually focused at unlucky forwards on a breakaway.

Benji took another swallow of water. The quiet at the table was dragging out, even as the dance floor cheered. He’d lost his window to laugh it off. He wasn’t sure why he hadn’t. “Still complicated,” he said. He couldn’t help it when his eyes went to Olly. He had a different kid on his shoulders and he was laughing, bright and delighted. Benji wanted him to look like that, always.

“What—” Beth started, before she cut herself off, eyes flicking back and forth.

“You’d better be fucking careful,” Piro said, deadly serious.

“Or what.” Benji was not here to get pushed around by Benoit Poirier. He knew who was winning that fight and it sure as shit wasn’t Piro.

“I’ll fucking kill you.”

“Good luck with that.”

“I’m serious.”

“What makes you think I’m *not*,” he snapped, not knowing what he was going to say until it was out of his mouth. But then he’d said it, and Benji realized that he—meant it.

Huh.

How about that.

“I’m getting a drink,” Beth said, after another long pause. Piro had shut his eyes, massaging the skin between his eyebrows. “Do either of y’all want anything?”

Benji did want a drink, actually. More than one. He was light-headed, out of breath like he’d gotten bag-skated. Like things were rearranging themselves too quickly for his brain to process.

Holy shit. How had he not known what they were doing with each other.

“*Tabarnak.*” Piro threw his sunglasses on the table. A new song started, apparently the juniors buddies’ anthem. They hoisted Yelich on their shoulders and threw him in the air. It was a hell of a backdrop for whatever the fuck was happening at their table. “*Que Dieu nous aide.*”

“Still don’t speak French.”

“English is not sufficient for my feelings.” He rubbed his eyes. “I don’t even know what I want to know.”

“It’s not...” Benji took another long drag from his water glass, the ice clicking against his teeth. “Look, it’s not a whole—thing.”

“I thought you said you were serious.”

“I don’t know, okay.”

“Figure it out, then. *Calice.*” He gestured to the dance floor. Olly was, very carefully, tossing a little girl wearing a bow tie into the air. “Does that look like someone who wants to fuck around with nonsense bullshit? After the shit that happened last year?”

“Fuck the Wolves.”

“Fuck *you*,” Piro snapped, “if you fuck this up for him.”

Benji had received three shovel talks in his life, all about his billet sis, Darcy: one from his coach, one from his billet dad, Marc, one from Andre. He would never have thought the fourth one would come from Benoit Poirier, about his goddamned teammate. “But you don’t care.”

“I care a fuck of a lot. Not about whatever the fuck the two of you are getting up to. I literally could not care less about that, other than the bleach I will be using on my brain when I think about how many sleepovers we had on the road. But I *do* care about Olly.”

“Shit,” Benji said. “Just—shit, man.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, until Piro thumped him on the shoulder. “I don’t think you’re actually a piece of shit. You’re just the dumbest fuck I ever met.”

“Wow, thanks a lot, good buddy.” Benji thumped him back; then Beth was there with an armful of beers, and that helped, smoothed out some of the jagged edges in his head.

Why *did* it have to be complicated? Olly liked him, he thought; and fuck knew he liked Olly. They—fit. The thought of not having Olly around... Christ, it hurt, didn’t it? The idea of someone else hearing his unhappy noises first thing in the morning; listening to his stream-of-consciousness mutter



about football, or smoothing out the line between his eyebrows; or twisting a hand through his hair, and kissing the skin of his throat.

Shit.

Holy *fucking* shit.

Beth wanted to dance after a few minutes, and Benji was glad to get up and move. He danced with the Yeliches, he danced with Sandrine, he danced with Lukesy and the tiny brunette bridesmaid; but he kept an eye on Olly the whole time.

Olly was drunk enough to be staying on the dance floor, laughing and letting somebody's grandma pull him into a conga line; laughing and letting Bevvo and Lukesy smash him into the middle of a liney sandwich for the wedding photographer; laughing and laughing. His hair was a sweaty mess, too short for a ponytail and too long to stay pomaded back.

He always looked good, but right now he looked better than that: happy and flushed and the best thing Benji had seen in his entire goddamned life.

Benji had always seen a good thing and grabbed on with both hands.

"Hey," he yelled over the music, finally getting his arm around Olly's shoulders, his fingers in the sweaty hair at the nape of his neck.

"Hey." Olly tilted his head to look up at him.

"You look good."

Olly twitched his nose. "It's a new suit."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"What else would you be talking about?" He looked confused, a little too drunk for everything to make sense.

"*You*, dickhead. Your face, and stuff."

Olly's eyebrows wrinkled. "You can't say shit like that."

"Why not?"

"You just can't." It was too loud; they weren't having to yell, but they weren't far off.

"What if I want to?"

Olly shook his head.

Fuck it. Benji got a hand around his wrist and towed him out of the ballroom. There was a doorway in the hall that led outside, down to the lake.

The night was warm after the air-conditioning inside. It smelled like pine and mountains and, faintly, Olly, because they were standing close enough together that Benji could smell him: clean sweat, the crisp, woody thing he always put in his hair. The lake glittered out in front of them, alpine green

reflecting the golden lights of the windows.

“What’s going on?” Olly asked.

Benji still had ahold of his wrist, and he used it to drag him in. Kissed the side of his mouth because he couldn’t stand to do anything else.

Olly yanked his wrist free and stepped back. “Quit it.”

“I don’t want to,” Benji said, because it was important that Olly know that.

“Fuck—there’s people.”

Benji didn’t see anyone out here, and even if there had been: “I don’t care.”

“You should.” Olly scrubbed a hand through his hair, fucking it up even worse—not as bad as Benji wanted to mess it up. “Someone could see.”

“So?”

Olly stared at him, hand freezing in his hair. “Are you *fucking* kidding?”

“No. I—Fuck, Ols. I fucking—” He didn’t know what to say. “Poiro knows, okay? He doesn’t give a shit.”

Olly went even stiller. Benji thought of a prey animal, small and frozen and folding in on itself. “*What* does Poiro know?”

“About us. Whatever, fucking around.” Even though that wasn’t how Benji wanted to talk about it, because it was more than that, wasn’t it? Or he wanted it to be; but maybe Olly didn’t, maybe Olly wanted that pretty little bridesmaid with the shiny dark hair who could be a mother for his kids and—

“*How?*”

“He figured it out, I guess. But look, it doesn’t matter, he doesn’t care—and Olly, I wanted to talk to you, I wanted to—”

Olly bent in half, hands on his thighs. Benji reached out, automatic; felt the bowstring wire of the muscles in his shoulder shake for a second before Olly knocked him off. He was ghost-white in the uneven light from the hotel windows, staggering a few steps down the path. “I can’t...” he started. Stopped. Started again. “I can’t be here. We can’t do this.”

“Ols—” Benji tried to touch him again, unable to stop himself.

Olly shook his head, though, stumbling back. “I can’t,” he said, and then he was gone, disappearing into the gloom of the trees.

Benji yelled *fuck* and punched a tree. Didn’t feel the pain until a second later, looking down at his knuckles: bits of bark, future bruises, one knuckle oozing a slow trickle of blood.

## Chapter Forty-Three

It felt like all Olly had done this year was fly into Duluth International Airport, watching the arc of the bay materialize out of the clouds, and think about goddamned Benji.

He'd left Lake Louise before the sun rose. Staggered to the reception desk at midnight, asked for a new room and a car to the airport as early as possible. All his shit was still in the old room: his suitcase, his golf bag, his phone charger. Not his phone, which had been blowing up all night. First Piro, then Luke and Bevvo and Dewey and Benji. Even Coach O, by the time the plane had bumped up to the gate in Minnesota.

Olly should be thinking about what he looked like, in a day-old suit that still smelled like wedding wine. He had a hangover, enough of one that he'd bought a cheap pair of sunglasses during his layover. Enough of one that everything was worse.

He'd thrown up again in the hotel room; picked at a bagel he'd bought at the airport in Calgary, and thrown up at cruising altitude. His mouth was a backwash of acid and his lungs went tight every time he tried to breathe. He'd ripped apart one of the in-flight magazines, watching the pile of shredded paper grow on his tray table and trying to ignore the way his seatmate edged toward the aisle side of her chair. Olly knew he should be calling Dr. Martinez with the 5% of battery left on his phone, knew he should be using one of his approximately nine hundred strategies to disrupt his panic attacks; but he couldn't imagine sitting down in a chair at Gate 3, and closing his eyes, and distracting his fucked-up brain with naming five sensations.

Instead, he puked in the bathroom; dodged eye contact with somebody from high school; and climbed into a cab. Had to put his head between his knees when the cab driver asked where he wanted to go, because he didn't know.

He couldn't go to his parents' house. *"I can't believe I raised a son who's running away the second it gets hard."*

The cab driver looked at him with concern in his brown eyes. "Maybe drive for a bit?" he asked, in a quiet, even accent.

Olly nodded. He didn't know if the cab driver could see him, with how he was folded up in the back seat, but the turn signal clicked on, and the car

pulled into traffic. The radio played something low, in a language Olly didn't speak, and he tried to focus on that: syllables, percussion, a man's voice, then a woman's, and eventually the fist clenching in his chest relaxed enough for him to sit up and push the hair out of his face and tell the driver Joey's address. No one would be home—the Järvinen clan always descended on their parents' house for Sunday dinner. That made it easier.

Olly gave the cab driver a hell of a tip when they got there. The door was locked and his keys were in his suitcase in Canada, so he went around the back instead.

Their yard was almost the same as their parents': tomatoes in cages along the sunnier side of the yard, leafy and covered with fruit; a tangle of zucchini vines; a play structure that Kieran and Sarah were outgrowing and that Mikey was still the right age for. Theirs was primary-color plastic, not the splintery wood of the swings at his parents' house.

Olly wished he could find it reassuring that life was fundamentally the same, outside of all his fucking problems. But he didn't. His brothers would keep moving on with their lives, and Olly would always be the way he was. Gay, alone, so fucked up in his head that he would leave a buddy's wedding at five o'clock in the morning wearing his suit from the night before, travel for thirteen hours to get back to Duluth fucking Minnesota, where every single thing was a reminder of every single way he was a failure.

Eventually he heard the growl of the truck's engine; Liz calling for Kieran to pick up a Tupperware full of something, Sarah to grab the dog's leash. The kitchen opened onto the back deck, so they'd see him soon. Sure enough, the dog was at the back door, bouncing and giving an inquisitive husky woo until footsteps came running up behind her. Kieran's thin voice called, "Why's Uncle Olly in the yard?"

Olly thought he'd felt as badly as he could feel. As always, he'd been wrong. This was worse: the crawl of shame; his heartbeat kicking back up; the backyard flickering around the corners. He couldn't breathe. He was panicking again.

The door slid open, and the dog ran out. She usually jumped all over him, but this time she whined and lay down by his side, sticking her cold nose against his clenched right hand.

Joey wasn't far behind. "What the hell?"

Olly shook his head, squeezed his eyes shut more tightly and unclenched his hand enough to dig it into the soft fur around the dog's neck.

Joey sat down on his other side and rested a heavy arm across his back. Didn't talk, mercifully; just leaned into his side while Olly shook.

It couldn't last forever, though. At last Olly could feel his heartbeat slowing down, the dog starting to fidget under his hand. He let her go and levered himself up, elbows on his knees and head in his palms.

"Someone figured it out," he said, to the tomato plants and the red plastic slide and the chewed-up football in the middle of the grass. "About Benji. And me."

Olly hoped, really hoped, that Joey wasn't going to turn it into a continuation of the running joke, final confirmation that everyone was right, they'd been hooking up all along.

He didn't. "And now you're here," he said, like it was a question. "Did they—It wasn't another Wolves situation?"

Olly shook his head, dragged a hand through his hair. It was sticky with day-old pomade. "I don't think so. I didn't talk to him. Benji told me. And," Olly choked out something that wasn't even close to a laugh, "nobody would be fucking dumb enough to start a fight with Benji. Benji said he didn't care. But he would say that. He doesn't get why it matters. I don't—I don't even think he's gay. I know he likes girls. And even if he's bi or whatever, he doesn't do relationships. He told me that. It's just—none of this is possible. In any way. We don't want the same things."

Joey didn't say anything for a while. Olly looked across the yard at the dog. She gnawed on the football, one watchful blue eye on the people.

"Benji cares about you, though. That's obvious to anyone who's spent five minutes around the two of you."

"It doesn't matter."

"I think it matters a hell of a lot, actually. I think that matters a lot more than this, whoever, person, who knows about the two of you and doesn't care."

"Pairo."

"So, your other best buddy on the team."

Olly nodded, looking down at his knees. His right one wanted to bounce, but he pressed down on it, hard. He was tired; could feel every hour he'd spent awake last night, curled into a ball in his hotel bed, his stomach clenching every time his phone buzzed on the nightstand.

"And Benji says he doesn't care." Joey was trying to lead him toward something: Olly could see that. None of his brothers had ever been known for

their subtlety.

“Can you not?” Olly asked his knees. “Right now. I can’t deal with it.”

Joey put a hand on his shoulder, gave it a push until Olly was looking up at him: his square jaw, his stubble coming in red even though his hair was dark, like their father’s, smile lines at the corners of his eyes. “Yeah, okay. But you’re gonna have to deal with it eventually.”

They went inside after that, Joey having a whispered summit with Liz while the kids all clustered around Olly. He made himself smile, give Mikey a hug, ask Sarah and Kieran how their last few days of hockey camp had gone. It was easier to give in to the routine, until Liz herded them upstairs to put on pajamas.

Their guest room was familiar, and so was the ancient T-shirt from a youth hockey tournament that Joey tossed on the bed for him to sleep in. It was too big for him, gaping at the neck even with the summer weight he’d managed to put on; but it was soft, and clean, and smelled like the good parts of home.

## Chapter Forty-Four

Benji was still reeling when he landed in Pennsylvania. He didn't know what had happened. Didn't understand how everything had gone from totally fine—great, even, the way he'd been fizzing with excitement, bubbling over with it like some stupid bottle of wedding champagne—to...this.

Well, he knew. He'd tried to talk to Olly. Olly hadn't wanted to hear it, had been so fucking horrified that he'd run off and disappeared from the hotel at five in the morning. He'd left all his shit in their room to stare Benji in the face when Benji stumbled upstairs, after he'd shaken out his hand and walked it off.

He'd thought Olly would be there. That was all.

But he wasn't. He was just gone. Benji had thought he must have needed some space, gone to crash with one of the other guys; but nobody had seen him and he wasn't answering his phone, not for Pairo or Dewey or even Coach O.

Coach O, party mode officially offline, talked to the front desk in the morning. That was the only reason they knew he'd gone to the airport.

People kept asking him what happened; he kept saying he didn't know, even though he did, because he couldn't say it. Didn't want to say it. Didn't want to admit how comprehensively he must have fucked up, to think there was a chance that they could be together, like really together; that Olly could ever want to be with dressed-up trailer trash like him.

Pairo tried to corner him in the morning. Benji wasn't having it: he was hurt, and he was worried, and he was angry, still, even after he'd calmed himself down from the initial spike of rage, stuck a Band-Aid on his bloody knuckle.

Benji had given all of Olly's shit to Pairo—his golf bag, his suitcase, his fucking passport; he'd only been able to get back into the US because he kept one of the little cards that only worked for Canada and Mexico in his wallet, like the emergency backup goalie of American travel—and taken the bus back to the airport, sunglasses on, not talking to anyone.

He went back to Hershey, like the last year of his life hadn't happened at all. Not DC, not upgrading his suits, not winning fucking Rookie of the Year. Not Olly.

It wasn't something that he should be mad about. He'd chosen to go back for the first part of the summer, at least. Being there shouldn't make him feel trapped and restless, the closer Darcy's car got to the house.

He could always leave. Had told Alise that he would, probably.

"Minnesota?" she'd asked.

"Why would I go to Minnesota?"

She'd rolled her eyes. "You can stay here as long as you want, baby. I know Andre's happy to have someone to train with."

Anyway. Darcy was telling him a story involving her loser boyfriend and a spiral of fake Instagram accounts. It was still running when she put her car in Park in the driveway and tucked her dark braids behind her ears. The Deveraux lived in an upscale area like most of Benji's friends from hockey, with professional landscaping and rules about what color you could paint your mailbox.

Benji had never let himself worry about whether he belonged in this nice suburb—of course he did, it was the address where his fucking mail got delivered—but right now everything felt off-balance, out of alignment, and he had to wonder. What the hell was he doing here, anyway? Why had *he* gotten to live some fancy fucking life—private jets, a stylist picking out his suits for weddings at five-star hotels?

Nobody else was home when they got there, thank Christ, other than the Pomeranians. Benji didn't feel up to facing Alise's questions. Unlike Darcy, she was going to have them.

"Hitting the gym," he told Darcy, even though he wasn't scheduled to work out. But he needed to find a place to put all the ugly shit running through his head, twisting up the inside of his chest.

He biked until he wanted to throw up and his eyes stung with sweat (not tears); knocked out an upper-body set that left his arms shaking. He turned up his music loud enough that it should have been the only thing he could hear.

Benji had been happy. He'd been excited, looking at Olly on that dance floor; thinking about Olly laughing when Benji did something stupid in *Pro Hockey*; his quiet, steady presence at his shoulder when they went running, morning fog eddying over the river, traffic and birdsong; Olly finding him at that hotel bar in Pittsburgh, when he'd traded Benji a beer for his pity-scotch.

That was gone, he guessed. Benji knew better than to hang around where he wasn't wanted.

He'd always been good at that. Figuring out what would help him, what



was a good thing, what would get him further away from where he'd started.

He'd never had a problem cutting the rest out. Middle school buddies from down the road—fuck them. They could call him and his sister sell-outs and “*look who’s too good to answer my texts now*” every day of the goddamned week. His mom, too: “*It’s gonna be different now, I know you got that scholarship, can’t you help me out one more time,*” but it never was going to be different, and if he'd realized that with a therapist at his paid-for private college...

That was proof that Benji was on the right track.

So much for Olly, then. One more thing Benji was giving up. He couldn't have things in his life that were going to do this to him. Hurt him like this, trap his mind in this cornered, desperate place.

He didn't understand. He looked the same, or close to the same, when he stared at himself in the mirrored wall of the Deveraux's basement gym: same eyes, same shoulders, same missing tooth that he hadn't gotten around to fixing yet.

Different hair, though. That was such a fucking stupid thing, to be what pushed him over the edge. Hit him like a cross-check he never saw coming, his workout playlist still pounding through his headphones, weights unracked around him.

\* \* \*

Alise found him out by the pool. He hadn't showered, just grabbed a beer and put on his swim trunks—the ones he'd taken to fucking Mexico, with the pineapples that were so ridiculous-looking they made Olly smile when he thought Benji wasn't looking—and dropped on a lounge chair. He hadn't eaten. The beer made him dizzy and nauseous at the same time.

“Darcy said you're in a mood.” Alise sat on the chair next to him. One of the Poms hopped up next to her, panting happily with his tongue lolling out.

Benji didn't bother denying it. “Things got kind of shitty.”

“Want to talk about it?”

He did, and he didn't. “I don't know if I can. It's not just about me.”

“Olly, then.”

“How'd you know?”

“Sugar, you're an open book.”

They sat for a while, watching the sun catch on the water of the pool. He

had to reek—he hadn't showered after spending a day on planes, much less working out; hadn't even jumped in the pool. Like he didn't deserve anything that nice, or some shit.

"I don't know what to do," he started, at last. "I thought—I wanted—It's like I finally figured some stuff out, I guess. But then it got all messed up. And I'm fucking—sorry—I mean. I'm mad. I'm really...angry. Like I haven't been in a long time. And I can't seem to make myself stop."

"Baby," she said, pushing her sunglasses onto the top of her head. She had darker eyes than you'd expect from her blond hair, so brown they were almost black. "Sometimes being angry is justified. And I know you, okay? You wouldn't be this upset over some insignificant little thing."

"It's not," he said, choking on it, "insignificant."

"Okay." She nodded, calmly. She was always calm, whether because she was a mom—not the kind of mom Benji had—or because she was a nurse or because it was just the way she was. "So what are we going to do about it?"

"There's nothing to do." Olly had made that clear, when he'd pushed Benji away, when he'd left for the airport, when he'd ignored every single one of Benji's calls and texts.

"There's always something to do. Even if it's only to take care of yourself. When's the last time you ate something? Or took a shower?"

"Not recently."

"There you go." She reached out and patted his knee. Her hand felt cool on his sweaty skin. "You know you can tell me anything, don't you? There's nothing you can say that's going to make me think less of you, or mean that you don't have a place in this family."

He managed a smile. "I know that, yeah. But..." He stopped, thought about it. "If I don't have Olly, there's nothing to tell."

"I don't know if I believe that," she said. "But sure, sweetheart. You go take a shower and I'll make you something to eat, okay?"

He did feel better after a shower and food, less like the world was made of sharp edges that he'd forgotten how to protect himself from. Darcy hung around while he ate, messing with her phone and showing him little videos of people doing funny dances. She asked if he wanted to play *Pro Hockey*, and Benji wasn't sure if he was in the mood to get his ass kicked; but she was trying to show up for him, he realized. That made him feel all soft, even when the scoreboard on the TV showed that LA was blowing out the Eagles 6-1.

“You’re my favorite billet bro,” she told him during the second intermission, halfway between sarcastic and serious.

“You’re my favorite billet sis,” he echoed.

“He’s an idiot if he doesn’t want you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“God.” She rolled her eyes. “Maybe Mom’s polite enough to dance around it. But the two of you are hooking up, right?”

“Darcy.”

She swung around to sit cross-legged on the couch, facing him. “Well, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know why you’d think—” He stopped when she rolled her eyes again, extravagantly.

“Cut the bullshit.”

“You’re my baby sis,” he said. “You’re too pure for this convo.”

“As *if*. I can see your dipshit heart-eyes all over Insta. Not even, like, a finsta. Your actual blue-checkmark, verified Insta. *You’re pure.*”

“I only have the stupid checkmark because of him.” That came out sounding pathetic as hell, actually.

“You’re such a fucking *loser.*”

“*You’re a loser,*” he shot back. She stuck her tongue out at him, and celled way too hard on her next goal for someone winning a *Pro Hockey* game 7-1.

\* \* \*

So Benji was pretty miserable. But he was getting sleep, and making dinner for the Deveraux, and finishing up PT, and doing yoga, and hitting the gym with Andre. Even if he felt like a robot version of himself, going through the motions, it was something. And Alise told him over and over that the only way to get over someone was just—this. Time.

He’d never had to get over a broken heart before, if that was what this was.

It was, he guessed, because Alise told him so.

Alise had never given him bad advice, so he figured he could do worse than listen.

He tried not to wonder about Olly. Benji hoped he was okay, though. Thought about calling him, or texting him, or texting Pairo to see if he’d texted him, every hour of the day.

Didn’t.

Olly didn't want him.

He'd said so. And every time Benji had tried to reach out, build a bridge over whatever fucked-up things had made Olly the way he was, all the way back to when they first met—he'd gotten slapped back.

That wasn't true, maybe. It felt like it, anyway.

He did call Krista, because Alise had also told him it was important to lean on his support network, and for once Benji didn't have that much interest in talking to any of the guys from the team. He didn't want to deal with the questions that he knew they'd have. It wasn't as if Benji had any answers that he could share with them, anyway.

Krista wouldn't have questions about Olly, at least. It took her long enough to pick up that he thought she was letting him go to voicemail, even though he knew she had her phone with her every second of the day.

"Hey, B," she said when she picked up, in a brittle-bright voice.

"How's it going?" he asked, wondering if she'd tell him anything approaching the truth.

She didn't, filling him in on how they had a house in some Toronto suburb, near Rob's parents and the goddamned camp. She kept talking about "the GTA" and name-dropping all the other hockey players and WAGs they were seeing, the branding partnerships she was finalizing, like if she stayed upbeat enough, she could convince him that she was doing as well as she wanted him to believe that she was. She didn't ask him to fly up to the camp, though, which was maybe some kind of progress.

"How are things with you?" she asked, once she'd run out of steam.

Benji swallowed, looking up at the ceiling of the Deveraux's basement. "I'm kind of having a hard time right now, actually."

"About what? You won freaking Rookie of the Year. And I saw some pictures from your teammate's wedding. It looked gorgeous."

"I guess."

"The award, though," she said. "That's a big deal. Your agent must be working on some new deals for you."

He was. Benji didn't pay much attention to that kind of thing, though. "Not that you told me congrats, or anything."

There was a long pause, echoing from Ontario down to Pennsylvania. "I didn't think you wanted to hear from me."

Maybe he hadn't. He rubbed his free hand over his face, dug his fingers into the inner corners of his eyes. "Not about, I don't know. Rob's camp.

Sponsorships. Whatever.”

“I don’t know what you want from me, then.”

This was the last thing Benji needed. “Okay. Yeah. Of course you don’t.”

“Those things matter. To me, even if they don’t matter to you. We don’t all have the opportunities that you got.”

Benji inhaled. Held it for a count of four. Exhaled. “Look. I don’t want to fight about this again. Things are kind of shitty, right now, and I thought it might be nice to talk to my sister.”

Krista laughed, a sharp-edged kind of sound. “You won Rookie of the Year. You’re getting everything you ever wanted. Even if, I don’t know, you have some kind of career-ending injury next year—you’re set. You can get a coaching job, or something in a front office. That’s how hockey works. So I don’t know what the hell could be going wrong for *you*, right now.”

“Jesus, Krista. There’s more out there than, I don’t know. Money. Work.”

“For you, maybe. Not everyone is so goddamned blessed.”

“Do you think,” Benji said, realizing as he heard his voice that his grip on his temper was fraying, “that I don’t work for this? Every inch of success that I’ve had? Do you think that someone *handed* this to me? That any part of this has ever been easy? To take the fucking handouts, to work my ass off for years and years and fucking years, because this was my *one* shot? I’m not smart like you—I didn’t have another option. I *don’t* have another option. So I don’t know what part of that you think is a fucking *blessing*.”

“Which is why it’s so frustrating that you won’t take the opportunities that other people would kill to have!”

“I’m not you, and I’m not Rob, and there’s nothing I can do to change that.”

“You could help, though,” Krista said. “And you won’t.”

“Rob could help himself if he cleaned up his act. *You* could help yourself if you stopped making so many excuses for him. None of this is on me, K. Except that maybe I thought I could talk to my sister, instead of some second agent that I never asked for, about something that has nothing to do with any of this.”

“Tell me, then,” she snapped.

It was Benji’s turn to bark out a laugh. He could feel the plastic of his phone creaking under the pressure of his fingers and forced himself to relax them. “Like I feel like talking about any of it now.”

“Fine,” she said. “You never want to talk about anything I care about,

anyway. So why should that change.”

“You know what,” Benji said, after a second. “We’re done, okay? I can’t deal with this on top of everything else. You can act like my sister, like a, like a *friend*—someone who sees me as more than someone to resent, or like a goddamned blow-up doll to feature in some fake-ass picture for an Instagram partnership—or we can be done. That’s it.”

He hung up before she could say anything else.

He couldn’t tell if he felt better, or worse.

## *Chapter Forty-Five*

Olly dragged himself out of bed after the morning chaos of footsteps and kids' voices quieted down—Joey and Liz to work, the kids shuttled to camp. If Olly was being a good uncle, he would have done the camp drop-offs.

He couldn't, just like he couldn't eat, or run, or go to the gym. Or sleep. He'd stayed awake all night with a murder podcast in his headphones.

He choked down half a protein bar and a glass of orange juice. He was losing weight. He could see it in the wings of his collarbones when he looked in the mirror after he'd showered.

Olly couldn't start another season this far in the hole. His career wouldn't survive it, not again. Even if the coach liked him; even if the guys liked him. Or they had, until he'd stopped answering their calls. Only Pairo was bullheaded enough to still be trying.

Benji hadn't reached out, not after the first night. It was for the best. Olly couldn't think about him, about the bright-edged happiness he'd felt, sometimes: skating outdoors at Christmas, careful kisses on their living room couch.

Olly had known all along he'd never get to keep any of it.

He heard keys in the lock as the dog gave an excited whine. Olly looked up, expecting to see Joey or Liz, in search of some random thing one of the kids had forgotten, but it wasn't.

It was his dad.

The bottom dropped out of Olly's stomach. He swallowed reflexively; forced himself to stand up straight.

"I brought breakfast." Dad held up a creased white bag. "Got you French toast."

"I already ate." It was as true as it was going to get.

"Guess I'm eating by myself, then." He shrugged and dropped the bag on the counter, then dished the food out on two plates—a pile of French toast, hash browns, a diner-style country omelet, covered in grease. Benji would have a heart attack.

Dad dug in. Olly picked up a fork, poked the French toast. It was the greasy breakfast he'd gotten after a hundred late nights in high school, hockey games or cheap beer or both; but he couldn't imagine slicing off a

bite, and putting it in his mouth, and chewing, and swallowing. The only thing he could imagine was throwing it back up. The orange juice and the few bites of protein bar he'd managed were already roiling in his stomach, because of everything and also, specifically, because of his dad being here—leaning against the counter like he belonged, barrel chest straining at a T-shirt from a family reunion Olly had missed because of prospect camp for Colorado. Olly had heard him on the phone for weeks with the extended family, working it into every conversation. *“We’ll all be there, Olly’s the only one who can’t make it, you know he got drafted so he’ll be at camp.”*

And Dad was looking at him like he had something to say, which made the churn in Olly’s stomach worse.

“Your brothers told me that I had to lay off you,” he said, after another few bites of his omelet. “That I’m too hard on you. That I’ve always been too hard on you. That was something, getting sat down by my own kids and lectured like that.”

Olly couldn’t look him in the eye. He focused instead on tracing a fingertip over the branching veins of the granite countertop, gold on black.

“I know you don’t want to hear it. And I get the sense that I really screwed up, somewhere along the line. But I do want you to know that...” He stopped. This wasn’t the kind of conversation that they’d ever had before. “Oliver, whatever’s going on with you, and I don’t pretend like I know because you don’t talk to me, and maybe that’s my fault, I don’t know—whatever this shit is, right here, whatever’s happening in your head or with your team—you’re stronger than whatever the hell it is.”

Olly shook his head, still looking down at his finger on the countertop. “You don’t want to know.”

“Of course I want to know.”

“No, you don’t. Because I can’t be Olly Järvinen, NAHA player, with it.”

“You’re probably right,” his dad said. “Because you’re losing weight and you’re not going to the gym, and you scraped by last year but they’re not going to let you get away with it again.”

Olly’s stomach heaved, and there he went, throwing up OJ and a few mangled bites of protein bar in the kitchen sink, splattering the coffee cups and milk glasses and cereal bowls left over from the rest of the family’s breakfast. He leaned his head on the edge of the sink when he was done, listening to the pound of his heartbeat in his ears and his father’s footsteps as he walked to the downstairs bathroom, ran the water, came back, and handed



Olly a damp towel.

“Sit down. I’ll clean this up.”

“Don’t, I’ll get it...”

“Sit, Olly,” Dad said, in his I’m-not-fucking-around voice, his put-that-game-on-pause voice, his you’d-better-help-your-mother-right-now voice.

Olly sat at the table in the corner. The dog stood up from where she’d been curled in her bed, stretched, and padded over to put an inquisitive nose in his lap. He rubbed her ears while his dad turned on the sink and started clinking around dishes.

When the sink was clean, Dad sat down heavily on the other side of the table. He pushed a glass of water across the plastic tablecloth. “Here.”

Olly took the water. Braced himself.

“How—” Dad started, stopped. Squared his shoulders and started again. “How did you manage this, during the season?”

“Yoga. Therapy.” He said it like a dare. He knew exactly what his dad thought about both.

It was obvious his dad was thinking about what to say. He settled on, “Okay.”

There was another long, dragging silence. Olly swallowed a mouthful of water and the dog leaned against his leg, staring up at him with her blue eyes.

“Can you do those things now?” Dad asked. “I’m pretty sure we’ve got yoga and therapists up here. Hell, there’s even yoga at the gym, now, for all those smoothie people.”

“It’s not going to fix anything.”

“Will it make it worse?”

Olly stared at the table. Would it? The thought of rolling out his yoga mat, linking up his breath, focusing on his body—it made him feel tight all over, made his heartbeat tick up a degree of intensity. He didn’t want to be in his body. If it weren’t for his body—his cardiovascular capacity, the resilience of his muscles and ligaments and tendons, the speed of his reflexes—none of this would matter, because he could have gone to Michigan for...nothing. Could have fucked around, and maybe joined the club hockey team, maybe not; could have gotten fucked for the first time by someone who didn’t hate himself, and hate Olly for the things he made him feel.

“There’s no point. It’s never getting better,” he finally said. “Because I’m never changing, Dad. The thing that makes me like this—it’s never going to stop mattering, as long as I’m playing.”

“That won’t be long if you don’t pull yourself together.”

Olly flinched back, tightened his fingers in the dog’s fur. There was the dad he recognized, from a thousand youth games, a hundred conversations about his draft stock, his minutes and his plus-minus and whether he was getting lazy on the back-check.

But he wasn’t done. “And maybe that’s not the worst thing, if this is what it’s doing to you.”

Olly looked up. He couldn’t help it. That was so far from anything he’d ever expected to hear his father say, even if the expression on his face was familiar: bullish jaw, beard bristling, eyebrows drawing together in the middle, exactly the way Olly knew his own did.

“I’m not a quitter,” Olly said, even though he’d thought about it so many goddamned times: take the L, retire, get it over with.

“You might not have a choice if you show up at camp again the way you did last year.” He must have seen Olly cringe; because he continued, voice gentler, “Nobody who knows you thinks you’re a quitter. You’re the stubbornest kid I ever saw.”

“*You said I was,*” Olly yelled. He was on his feet, shaking; the dog whined, ears low against her skull. “You said I quit, you said I was running away because it was *hard*. But you don’t know how hard it’s been for me, how hard it’s *always* been, how close I was to—”

He cut himself off. He’d never yelled at his father. He stood there, the sound of his breath loud in the quiet of Joey and Liz’s cheerful little kitchen, with handprints on the sliding glass door to the backyard, crayon artwork and Christmas cards stuck to the refrigerator, drifts of husky-fur fluff collecting in the corners.

“I was wrong,” his father said.

Olly would never have thought to hear that. Dad was immobile in his convictions.

“I think,” he went on, looking down at his broad-knuckled hands, “I don’t think I knew how to handle you, Olly. Your brothers—they’re straightforward. What you see is what you get. But none of them had your talent. Or your drive. Jesus Christ. I’ve never seen someone work the way you work. Everything you did had to be perfect, whether it was school or hockey or your damned golf swing. And God help me, I don’t think I knew what to do with that. I was a knucklehead. Your brothers are knuckleheads, even with how smart Sami is and all. I figured, okay, the kid wants to be the

best, and the coaches said you had a real shot, like I never did—it sounds pretty bad, when I say it like that.

“But I guess I could always tell there was something else going on with you. And I wanted to make sure you were tough enough to handle it, that it didn’t distract you from everything you’d been working so hard at for so long. But obviously that went wrong somewhere. So if hearing me say I messed up will do anything to help fix it, I wanted to say it. And that’s...that’s all I got, Olly.” His voice was gruff.

Olly was crying, tears dripping down the point of his chin.

Dad didn’t try to hug him, but he squeezed his shoulder, hard, and handed him a paper towel, and told him to call his therapist and that he was looking up the yoga schedule at his gym and that they were gonna go tomorrow, together.

\* \* \*

Things weren’t all the way better after that. But it was a start, even with all the things still hanging in the air, unsaid: his sexuality, what had happened with the Wolves, Benji.

Olly took the kids to camp. Guest-coached a couple days, because if he was focusing on eight-year-olds strapped onto ice skates, he couldn’t be focusing on himself. He got to experience his dad experiencing yoga; they switched to fishing pretty quick, but that was okay, too, hours listening to the water lap against the sides of the boat, their favorite bands playing quietly over the radio.

He texted Coach O back, apologized for leaving Lake Louise the way he had; he called Dr. Martinez and agreed to do a trial run with some medications. The first one didn’t help, but the second one did. They talked about whether an emotional support dog would make sense, one small enough to fly with the team. He got back in the gym, for real, for more than yoga; he started sleeping, started eating. Went up to the cabin on the weekends with his family, kids and dogs everywhere, ministicks in the driveway. They knew the worst of him, and the kids were still laughing, and Joey was still trying to beat him at *Pro Hockey*, and Liz and his dad were still fighting over whether potatoes counted as a vegetable and making everyone in the family choose sides.

In honor of Benji, Olly lined up on Team Not a Vegetable. He didn’t know

what Benji was doing. Didn't know what any of the guys on the team were doing. Piro was still calling, but Olly couldn't bring himself to answer.

\* \* \*

It was late July by the time Olly's mom cornered him on the cabin's back porch. It was Olly's favorite part of the whole place: three levels and a firepit, leading down to the dock with an expansive view of Lake Vermilion framed in pine trees. The sunset was starting to turn the water as red as its name. It was a little too chilly to be outside without a jacket, but Olly was too settled to move. He and Levi had worked hard in the garage gym that morning. He felt a wrung-out, pleasant kind of tired.

"I brought you this," she said in her quiet voice, handing over a sweatshirt and settling onto the chair next to him.

Olly tugged it over his head. "Thanks, Mom."

"You haven't been talking about Benji at all," she said at last. Night birds were starting to call from the pines; Olly watched one swoop from one tree to another. "The two of you seemed so close."

"It's complicated," he said, tugging the sleeves of his sweatshirt down over his hands.

"Does it have to be?"

"Mom." He looked down at where the fabric stretched tight over his knuckles.

She took a deep breath. She wasn't looking at him: she was looking out over the water. "Is it easier if I say it?"

"Say what?" Olly asked, even though he knew.

"That you're..." She trailed off and took a deep breath, the way she'd told him she did before she skated out onto the ice to perform: "*Inhale, hold it, exhale, and you're ready.*" It was easy to imagine his mother, younger, setting her shoulders back and drawing her spine as straight as it could go. "You're gay, aren't you? And the two of you—"

Olly had never thought of nodding his head as a difficult thing to do: to tell his chin to dip, the muscles along the back of his neck to lift his head back up. This time it was; but he was tired of hiding it, or maybe it was some lingering childhood instinct about needing to tell his mother the truth. Either way, it was done.

They sat quietly, together, watching the dock and the trees and the birds,

and the crimson-gold ripple of the sun on the water. After a while, she reached for his hand, untwisting the fabric of his sweatshirt sleeve from around his fingers, and replacing it with her own.

“I miss him, Mom,” he said. Maybe there were tears in his eyes. He was trying not to think about it; he was so tired of wanting to cry over Benji Bryzinski. “But I screwed up. And I’m *scared*.”

She was smoothing her thumb over his knuckles in a steady, grounding motion. “What are you going to do about it?”

It was a question she’d asked him a thousand times, if not more, about fixing fights with his brothers, misunderstandings with his teammates or coaches, group project members who weren’t pulling their weight.

And Olly did know, was the thing. He didn’t want to retire, even if it would be easier in so many ways; he didn’t want to ask for a trade; he didn’t want to fly back to DC and play eighty-two regular-season games alongside a version of Benji that was exactly the same, except that Benji hated him.

Even if there was no chance they could ever be together, really be together, the way Benji had maybe thought he’d wanted (the way Olly wanted with every nerve and cell and fiber of his entire being)—he couldn’t leave it like this.

\* \* \*

Olly called Pairo in the morning.

“Look who finally fucking remembered how to use a phone,” he snapped. It wasn’t that early in Minnesota and it was an hour later in Montreal, but Pairo still looked sleep-ruffled, shirtless with his black hair sticking out in all directions. “You’re a dickhead, Oliver.”

“Takes one to know one.”

Pairo barked out a laugh. “Well, what’s the fucking occasion? You finally wanted your golf bag back?”

“I wanted to...apologize. For going MIA.”

“Yeah, okay.” He shrugged one pale shoulder. Olly didn’t know how to have this conversation. It wasn’t something he ever thought—ever could have begun to imagine—that he’d be doing.

“So I...” Olly was breaking out in sweat all over his body, and he could feel his chest tightening and his breath getting shallower. He forced himself to breathe slowly, the way Dr. Martinez had told him.

He would have expected Pairo to be snapping at him to *spit it the fuck out, Jesus Christ, I don't have all day*; but he wasn't. He was propped up against his headboard in Montreal, waiting for Olly to man the fuck up.

"I guess," Olly said, "you know already, probably, but I figured I should tell you, anyway. That I'm...gay."

"Yeah, I know." He frowned at his phone camera, belatedly tried to smooth out his hair. "Your heart-eyes at Bowie kind of gave it away."

"Pairo—" Olly didn't know how to ask what he wanted to ask. "Do people...know?"

"Our team is full of complete dumbasses," Pairo told him, rolling his eyes. "No, they don't know. But they wouldn't care if they did, and if they wanted to say something, Dewey would go full dad-mode and knock the shit out of them. And so would I, you fucking idiot." He paused. "And—I don't know, Olly. I think your lineys know what it's like to not be like every other asshole in this fucking league, okay? To be different. It's not the same for them—there's no closet for being Black or Asian—but you're even more of a dumbass than I thought you were if you can't see that."

Olly swallowed. "I'm still not going to be out. I can't. A few people in the front office know, and Coach O knows, but that's it. So don't...tell people."

Pairo shook his head. "As if I'd do that, you asshole. But I think if you do want to tell a few people—they're gonna have your back. No matter what's going on with you and Bowie."

That was a conversation for another day. Olly shook his head, let Pairo catch him up on Montreal, talk around the corners of Beth's recent visit. Didn't even chirp him for the smug, pleased little smile that he couldn't keep off his face.

So about as far away from how things had gone with Crowder as possible. Olly had known, in his brain, that it would be different: he wasn't giving Olly a black eye from all the way in a different time zone, to start with. But it was one thing to know that and another to live it.

That had been the easy one, though.

## Chapter Forty-Six

Benji was in the gym with Andre, trading sets on the squat rack. He'd woken up tired and the only thing he was thinking about was how close he was to being done. Instead of sweating it out, every rep had ground the exhaustion in more deeply.

He didn't want to say it was because of Olly—every goddamned thing in his life wasn't about Olly abandoning him—but blaming it on FaceTiming with Krista the night before, for the first time since their blowup, wasn't totally accurate, either. She'd kept it positive, kept it light. Kept it fake as hell, if Benji was being totally honest. But she hadn't pushed him about anything, and if he hadn't filled her in on anything deeper than how his first sessions back on the ice were going—well. However much money she was making on Instagram, there were dark circles around her eyes, visible through her perfectly applied makeup.

Benji had sat on the couch in the basement until the haze of anger faded into dull, numbed-out acceptance that there wasn't a single thing he could do other than keep showing up in whatever way she'd let him, in whatever way he felt like he could give her. She'd apologized for the way she'd been acting, though, and that was maybe a start.

It was still more than enough to explain his bad mood. Olly had nothing to do with it.

Anyway. He could talk about it with Alise or find another therapist. Right now, he was in the gym, and he had one more set of squats before it was time to stretch.

Dre racked the bar and stepped out from under it, and Benji made the mistake of looking at his phone.

It wasn't like everything went silent: it was loud, music over the speakers and the clang of weights, their trainer coming over to check on them. But the only thing that Benji could think about was the name on his lock screen, and a text that read, *hey, can we talk?*

Benji blew out a breath. Put his phone back in his pocket and finished his set.

\* \* \*

He didn't mention the text to Andre, or Darcy, or Alise, or Davo when they met up for dinner that night. He hadn't answered it. He hadn't thought about anything else, though, when there were so many things that it could mean. Things with Olly had never been clear, he was realizing: what they were doing with each other, what they meant to each other.

If it had meant anything at all.

Benji just hadn't known. He was only twenty-one. He'd never been in love with someone before. It hadn't occurred to him until Alise had used the *L*-word, and it had crashed into Benji's brain like goddamned Brody Kellerman in Game 5; and then he'd gone back over his relationships with his buddies, wondering if that was why he'd never dated any of the large number of attractive women who'd thrown themselves at him since he became a stud athlete.

But nah. In retrospect he could see how he'd wanted to bone some dudes—Derrick from the first line in college; the road roomie who'd given him the blowies, who in retrospect had been at least as much of a significant other as his quasi-ex-girlfriend from the Q—but he'd never wanted to help them, like, manage their difficult fathers.

And women were still hot. For example, the curvy blonde two tables over. Davo saw him looking, engineered a not-that-casual look over his shoulder.

"Buddy," Davo said. "You should talk to her."

Maybe Benji even would have, if it weren't for the text message sitting on his phone.

Because he could want to fuck her, even if he'd also been hooking up with a dude on the regular for the last five months. Benji had watched plenty of porn with bi chicks, and had recently spent some quality time on Google, so he was not unaware that sexuality could be a spectrum or whatever.

But here he was. Not wanting to wheel a girl who was exactly his type, because it turned out the only person who he was interested in fucking was fishing on some godforsaken mosquito-infested Minnesotan lake.

And he wanted to *talk*.

"What would you say," he asked, "if someone you'd been hooking up with, and you'd like, maybe caught some feelings for, but it got kind of messy—said that they wanted to talk."

"You caught a feeling?" Davo looked astonished.

Benji didn't know how he felt about that. "Dude, I have feelings."

"Yeah, but not about puck bunnies."



“It’s not about a puck bunny.”

“So a future wifey situation.”

People had called Olly his wife enough times that Benji nodded. It wasn’t that he thought Davo wouldn’t be supportive, but he wasn’t doing the whole *oh by the way I apparently bone dudes* thing unless he had a reason. Right now, all he had was an extremely vague text message.

“I dunno,” Davo said, unhelpfully. “Was it, like, a positive text? Or were you getting bad vibes?”

“It said, literally, ‘hey, can we talk?’”

“Ruthless.” He shook his head. “Yeah, bro. I have no idea.”

“Real fucking helpful.”

“Is she in DC?”

“We met there,” Benji hedged.

“It’s not that far,” Davo said. “Maybe just go there? Stuff’s shitty over text.” And then he went off about his ex. Benji didn’t know why he ever thought Davo would have something helpful to tell him about relationships.

Fortunately, Alise did. She even agreed that texts were not a great way to work things out. Benji awarded Davo an unexpected mental point and retreated to the basement to plot his next move. And also, stare at his text thread with Olly. The last text he’d gotten before *hey, can we talk?* was when Olly had boarded his flight in Toronto, on the way to the wedding.

That was the kind of thing you’d do if you were in a relationship, right? You’d think about the other person. Even if it was something as mundane as getting on an airplane, where it was statistically unlikely you’d die in a fiery crash but there was always that slim little chance; and you’d want one of the last things that you did to be telling your person that you were thinking about them, that you were moving one step closer to being with them.

Probably that was bullshit. Benji didn’t know how relationships worked.

Even if they weren’t going to be in one, though—and he was pretty sure they weren’t, even if he couldn’t figure out how he felt about that; whether it was disappointment or anger or, like, gratefulness, because Benji didn’t have the mental space to deal with ongoing emotional drama—Olly wasn’t wrong. They did need to talk. About where they were going to be living, because Benji wasn’t self-destructive enough to think that he could go back to living in the 505 like nothing had changed. About how they didn’t fuck up the locker room with whatever dynamic they did or didn’t bring back to DC.

He picked up his phone, and opened his contacts list, and called Olly.

Olly was a little out of breath when he answered, like he'd scrambled to get to the phone. "Hey," he said, in his familiar voice.

"Hey," Benji said, wondering if this was what it felt like to be dying. He didn't get scared of much these days, but he was scared of this.

"So..." Olly trailed off. Benji heard voices in the background, the sound of a door shutting, and then it was quiet. "I thought about doing something really stupid, like flying to Pennsylvania."

Benji didn't know what to say. Olly wouldn't fly all the way to Pennsylvania to tell him some new variation on *I can't do this*, would he?

"I wanted to say sorry, I guess," he continued. "I know I freaked out. Again. You must be pretty fucking sick of dealing with that."

"I don't like to see you hurting."

"I really was," Olly said quietly. "But I shouldn't have taken it out on you. I shouldn't have left the way I did, especially with everything you've told me about your family. I've been working hard, though. On the mental stuff. And I think I'm doing better. I'm on some meds, and I can't believe this but I'm getting one of those fucking emotional support dogs, if the team clears it."

"That's great, dude."

There was another long pause. "At the wedding," Olly said, "you said Piro knew. About us."

"Yeah."

"I talked to him. I told him—I told him the truth, which is that I'm..." Benji heard him swallow. "Gay."

Benji laughed; he couldn't help it. "Ya think, bud?"

"You're not, though."

"No. I'm bi, I guess. But—" It was his turn to stop. He didn't know if any conversation in his life had ever been this hard, not even with his mom, the last time he'd ever spoken to her, when he'd known it would be the last time and she hadn't. "What I wanted to tell you, that night, was that I—I don't know. I've never tried to do this before."

"Do what?" Olly asked, voice quiet.

"I care about you, you asshole."

"I know."

"Like—*really* care," Benji added.

There was a long pause. "Even after I bailed on you in Canada—"

"Always, you idiot." He rubbed at his forehead. "I mean, probably, I guess. As long as you don't leave me again."

“*Probably. You guess.*” Olly was laughing. Benji wanted to listen to him laugh forever, watch it take over his face, wrinkle the corners of his pretty blue eyes. “Are you serious? You know I’m not talking about something, like...casual.”

“For sure, bud.”

“*Bud.*” Olly was gasping. “Really? You’re going to call me bud right now?”

“What the hell else should I call you? Sweetheart? Honey?”

“God, no.”

“Wifey?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I don’t think you know what I would or wouldn’t do.” He was smiling; he hoped Olly could hear it in his voice, all the way up in Minnesota. There was something unfamiliar in his chest, like racing down fresh, clean ice on newly sharpened skates.

“When are you going back to DC?” Olly asked.

“Dunno. When are you?”

“I—” He paused. “I can leave whenever. Not for the whole rest of the summer, but...”

Benji was grinning like a fool. “Tomorrow?”

There was a pause. Benji could almost see the thoughtful wrinkle between Olly’s eyebrows, the gears turning in his stupidly impressive brain while he thought about logistics. “Yeah, okay. But it’ll be late.”

“I’ll wait all night,” Benji said. That was probably not, like, the most chill thing to say, but it was also true.

\* \* \*

In the morning, Olly texted him—way too fucking early, Benji didn’t even want to know what the clock was reading in Central time—that he was driving to the airport. At the breakfast table, Benji asked Marc and Andre if they could help him buy a car.

“*You* want to buy a car,” Dre said, eyebrows doing something that was, frankly, offensive. “Bowie. You know they cost money.”

“I spend money on shit.”

“Yeah, but like, you want to spend money on a *car*.”

“Is there another way to get one?” Maybe there was more professional-

athlete wizardry he didn't know about.

"You love your busted truck."

"I'm not getting rid of the truck. I'm just driving back to DC and I honestly don't know if the truck will make it."

"We'd be happy to help," Marc said, shooting Dre a shut-it look.

So Benji bought his first car. Well, a truck. It wasn't like, a fancy make or anything, not on the NAHA scale—but he liked the way it handled and it had plenty of legroom, plus enough space in the back for two people's hockey gear. And it could pull a boat.

Dre said he was disgusted by Benji's lack of vision; Marc said it was a sensible choice. "You can park the old truck here as long as you want," he added.

\* \* \*

As promised, Olly wasn't getting into DC until late, so Benji got back to the 505 with time to kill. He cranked up the AC to get the air circulating; he went to Whole Foods; he put clean sheets on his bed. Tucked in the corners and thought about what Olly would look like spread on top of them.

It was strange to be acknowledging things. Exciting. Scary, kind of.

Like, he didn't want to fuck things up. He didn't want to assume anything. But they were probably having sex, right?

Benji felt a hum of anticipation under his skin. Time was passing so slowly. It was too hot to go outside, and he couldn't get his mind to settle on Netflix or yoga or anything other than a loop of Olly-Olly-Olly. In a few hours, he'd be here: sitting on his end of the couch, beating Benji at *Pro Hockey*, or maybe they'd be in bed. He didn't know. He didn't think Olly would either, since as far as Benji knew, neither of them had been in a relationship before.

Unless you counted—well, everything that they'd been doing since the beginning of the season. Only with fewer shitty parts and more blow jobs.

He wasn't just in it for the blow jobs, though. Benji could get a blow job from lots of people, especially now that he had opened his third eye to some additional genders. But he only wanted to get blow jobs from Olly, because they were extremely good blow jobs, and also, because the lady from his high school health class had been right when she said sex was better when you attached feelings to it.

Benji hadn't known. Benji had never found someone he wanted to have sex-with-feelings with before.

So he should probably do his best not to fuck it up. Because Benji had always known to hang on to good things, and Olly was complicated and sharp-edged and Jesus, it wasn't like Benji thought any part of it was going to be *easy*; but aside from hockey, Olly was the best thing he'd found in his entire life. Maybe Benji didn't know how to be a boyfriend, exactly, or whatever Olly was going to require long-term; maybe he hadn't grown up with a, like, stable parental relationship to learn from...but he was a fast learner when it mattered.

He could do it.

They could do it.

\* \* \*

Olly's flight was arriving at Reagan, which was a lot closer than Dulles. Benji parked his shiny new truck in the garage; pulled his old Frozen Four snapback low over his eyes; and headed into the terminal.

He had that flying-down-the-ice feeling again. It crescendoed when he saw Olly's familiar shoulders walking out of the arrivals corridor. He was wearing an anonymizing hat, with his hair curling out from underneath it, and he looked so good, scanning the waiting area until he saw Benji and his face fell into the easy, open smile that Benji wanted to see every minute of every day for the rest of his life.

Benji held up his hand for a fist bump. He was smiling, too. "Want to go home?"

## *Chapter Forty-Seven*

Olly didn't know how to act when they got back to the 505. Everything in the airport, in the truck—which was unbelievable, Benji looking bashful when he hit the unlock button, mumbling about installing a tow hitch—and in the hallway outside their front door. It felt bright-edged and unreal, like one wrong move and it was going to pop.

But here they were, Benji unlocking the door and walking inside, the same way Olly had seen him do a thousand times before; Olly following, smelling like airplanes, an overnight bag weighing down his shoulder.

“Do you want dinner?” Benji asked. He tossed his keys onto the counter. Olly watched the muscles in his back move under his T-shirt.

“Okay.”

He turned around. “Or do you want to—”

“Yeah.” Olly would agree to anything Benji wanted to do.

Benji grinned down at him, backed him up against the door. Olly's bag dropped to the floor with a thump. “You don't know what I was going to say.”

“I had a guess.”

“Was it this?” And then they were kissing, Olly's arms going around his neck. He hadn't forgotten how big Benji was, but there was remembering and then there was feeling it: the spread of his shoulders, how he got a hand under Olly's ass and lifted him up so they were eye to eye, like he weighed nothing at all.

“I missed you,” Olly said into his mouth.

Benji pulled back far enough that Olly could see him properly: his eyelashes, the bump in his nose. His eyes looked huge and green. “Then don't leave me again.”

“I won't.” Olly slipped a hand down from the back of Benji's neck, letting it tiptoe across his collarbone. “Pinky promise?”

Benji hooked their little fingers together, huffing out a breath that wasn't quite a laugh. “You've broken them before.”

“I don't want to this time. Look, I can't promise I'm going to—” He swallowed, and made himself continue, “Not fuck up. But I want you to know that I'm trying. That I'm working really fucking hard.”

“I know.” Benji folded his hand into his giant fucking paw. Kissed his knuckles, carefully, with his eyes on Olly’s face like he wasn’t sure how he was going to react.

Olly didn’t know, honestly. He’d never done this before. “What do you want?”

Benji grinned, shrugged. He said, “You,” like it was nothing, like it was everything.

Olly felt like he was standing with his toes on the edge of one of the cliffs near the cabin, waiting to remember how to be brave enough to jump. “Have me, then.”

Benji blinked, a slow slide of his eyelids, and tilted his head to the side. A curl fell across his forehead; there was nothing to stop Olly from giving in to the impulse to tidy it back. “I just want to be clear,” he said, “because I think we’ve been pretty bad at talking about stuff: are you asking me to fuck you, or is that, like, a metaphor.”

“I don’t know.” Olly laughed, leaning his head back against the door and looking at Benji through his eyelashes. “What do you want it to be? Got a preference, bud?”

“I’ll give you a *preference*,” Benji grumbled, then stopped. “But like. Um. I read some stuff online and it said—Yeah. Should we, like, talk about it, some more. To make sure we agree about things.”

Olly shook his head, then pushed at Benji’s shoulder until he stepped back, took his hand, and led him down the hall. It would be easier if they’d had a few beers, maybe: he’d seen the Whole Foods bags out on the counter, he knew Benji would have picked up a couple of six-packs along with the groceries.

But it was probably better if they were sober. Olly was back to his one-drink limit, anyway.

Benji’s room smelled like clean laundry and Benji. Olly toed off his shoes and pulled his shirt over his head. Behind him, Benji made an appreciative noise; stepped forward to rest his hands on his hips.

“You look good,” he said.

“Are you saying I didn’t, before?”

Benji laughed, air puffing over the back of his neck. “Are you fishing for compliments? But—yeah. You look fucking good. I like the freckles.” He bent his head and kissed Olly’s shoulder. The scratch of his stubble made Olly shiver; so did the spread of his palm on Olly’s lower belly. He leaned

back against Benji's warm bulk.

It was overwhelming. Not in a bad way—there was nothing bad in the way Benji was nosing at the side of his neck, sucking a kiss behind his ear, playing with the button of his shorts.

“You know what you're doing, right?”

“Mmm, hope so.” Benji sounded pleased with himself as he palmed Olly through his shorts. “Doesn't feel like you've got any complaints.”

“I meant with—sex. Like, what we're going to do.” Benji had said they had to talk about things, and he wasn't wrong.

“Are you asking me,” he asked, his voice an amused rumble underneath Olly's ear, “if I know how to take care of you? Know how to make you feel good?”

Olly swallowed. His mouth had gone dry. “It's not like fucking a woman.”

Benji nipped his earlobe. “Pretty sure anal works the same, bud. I've got you.” His voice got a notch lower. He tightened his hand, possessive. “I know what you like, okay?”

Olly nodded. He didn't think his voice was working, anymore.

“Get on the bed.”

He got on the bed, kicking off the rest of his clothes. Benji watched, evaluating him like he was a particularly tricky new sequence for a set play. Olly could see where he was tenting up the front of his basketball shorts. It seemed a little silly to him, now, that he hadn't realized—hadn't wanted to realize, maybe—that Benji was into him. It had been too much, he guessed. Too real.

“Come here,” he managed.

It was Benji's turn to strip, losing the shorts, his socks and slides, his T-shirt. He was heavy with summer muscle when he eased himself down on top of Olly, the shape of his shoulders and biceps a bare inch away from how Olly remembered them. Olly didn't want to touch Benji and have his body feel unfamiliar, ever again.

Everything else was familiar, though: the way he kissed, the sting of his teeth against Olly's throat, the grip of his hand and the confident way he pressed his fingers against the hole of Olly's body. He long-armed a tube of lube out of his nightstand; Olly had his eyes shut by then, too overwhelmed by the stretch and burn of Benji's fingers inside him to be able to *see* it, too. It had been a long time—since that poor, sad kid in Utah—and Benji's hands were huge: thick fingers, big knuckles. He didn't find Olly's prostate right off



the bat, but he got there eventually, made a pleased noise when Olly's whole body spasmed.

"Did you," Olly managed, "read about that on the internet, too?"

Benji was smiling into his hip bone. Olly could hear it in his voice. "Might have watched some tape."

"Oh, *fuck*."

"Yeah, that's the idea." He sounded so goddamned pleased with himself. Olly thumped his back with a heel. It was like kicking a wall. He opened his eyes: Benji looked as pleased with himself as he'd sounded, face all creased up with a smile.

"Do it, then."

"Look who got bossy all of a sudden." Benji sounded amused, though. He crooked his fingers; Olly jerked, made some helpless little gasp. He was so turned on, he was going to explode if Benji didn't do something. Blow him, fuck him, whatever he wanted. "You're waiting until I think you're ready, baby."

There was nothing Olly could do but shut his eyes. Put himself in Benji's hands and trust him.

He was shaking by the time Benji pulled his fingers out; squeezed his eyes shut again as he heard him tear open the condom packet, Benji's long exhale as he rolled it on.

"Come on," Benji said, spreading warm fingers over his hip bone, tugging him up to slide a pillow under his lower back. Careful. "You okay?"

Olly nodded. Benji smoothed a hand over his face, calluses on his cheekbones, on his lips. They were so close; they were going to be closer. It was going to hurt, but Olly had never been scared of pain.

Benji folded his leg against his chest. Olly felt the intimacy of the position, spread out the way he was, no hiding anything: his hard dick standing up against his belly, the slick of the lube between his legs, the flush he could feel burning in his cheeks.

"Look at you," Benji said. "Fuck." He sounded overwhelmed. There was a tremble in the fingers pressed against Olly's thigh.

Olly opened his eyes, reached up, and cupped his hand against Benji's jaw. "Come on," he said. "I want you," and even though his voice was shaking, this time Benji nodded and kissed him and pressed forward. It hurt—of course it fucking hurt—until it didn't, and then it was perfect: Benji all the way inside him, openmouthed kisses, the sounds their bodies made as they

moved together, all of the things Benji was saying into his ear, his jaw, the soft skin of his throat. The calluses on his palm, the sensation of his back moving under Olly's fingernails as he gasped, and came, and pulled Benji over with him.

Benji laughed into his mouth, after they'd kissed each other down from it, slow and smooth. "Fuck," he said. "Holy shit."

"Happy with yourself, bud?" He was going to be sore tomorrow, but that was fine. More than worth it. His body would learn to adjust, or it wouldn't; either way he didn't plan on stopping. Ever. Hopefully. That was wild, wasn't it? The steady warmth of looking forward to this. Wanting something as badly as he wanted this, and getting to have it.

"This is going to sound really fucking stupid."

"What else is new?" Olly asked, rolling onto his side. He was smiling, though; Benji rolled his eyes, dropped a kiss on his shoulder as he slid off the bed to deal with the condom.

He disappeared into the bathroom. Olly heard water running. Benji came back out with a hand towel and knocked Olly's hand out of the way when he reached for it. Olly lay there, let Benji clean him up. The towel was warm. Olly should stop being surprised by how considerate Benji was; or maybe he shouldn't, should never let himself get so complacent that he stopped appreciating it.

"You haven't said anything yet," Olly pointed out, sitting up when Benji was done. He wasn't sure what he wanted more, food or a shower, but his body felt drained and lazy, like after the best kind of workout.

Standing on the other side of the bed, Benji yawned and scratched at his lower belly. His curls were sticking in every direction. "Okay," he said. "Fine." He pulled on his basketball shorts; Olly enjoyed the view when he bent over, because that was something he was allowed to do now. "What I was going to say," he said, and then stopped. He fidgeted with the drawstring.

Benji didn't usually fidget. Olly heaved himself out of bed, and stepped up against his chest, wrapped his arms around Benji's waist, and let his forehead drop onto his shoulder. "What?" he asked again. Chuckled into his skin when Benji put a possessive hand on his ass.

"Is it stupid," he said, finally, "that it took me so long to figure out I was in love with you?"

Olly smiled, helpless. Benji was warm everywhere they were touching. "Didn't figure it out until we fucked, eh? Is my ass that good?"

Benji squeezed his handful of the ass in question. “Well, yeah.” He paused. “It’s just—I dunno. I didn’t think I’d ever...” He shook his head. “I got so much more than I ever thought I would, you know? Coming from where I come from. I don’t think it even occurred to me that I could want more. That I could have it, even if I wanted it.”

“Me either.” Olly tightened his arms and they stood there together for a long time, weight balanced perfectly between them.

## *Chapter Forty-Eight*

“This neighborhood is so fucking ridiculous,” Benji said. “I think that every time we have to come out here.”

Olly shrugged, flicking his eyes from the road to the white fences, the horses, the giant McMansions. “I’m sure it’s quiet.”

“I’m sure it’s boring and bullshit,” he countered. “Do you know how fucked-up homeowners’ associations are? Dre accidentally repainted the Deveraux’s mailbox with paint that was, like, glossy instead of matte, and it’s a whole fucking thing.”

“I think the Deveraux can afford a new can of paint.”

“It’s the principle, though. It’s their house. Who the fuck cares about how they paint their mailbox?”

“The homeowners’ association, I guess.” He flicked the turn signal and pulled into Dewey’s long driveway. They were early for the preseason barbecue, so there weren’t many cars there yet, and he could recognize all of them. Piro, Luke, Bevvo, Mils, Soko, Yelich. No Stormy—as expected with his contract expiring, he’d been traded. “I dunno, dude. My family always lived in the city. We never had one. But I’m sure Dewey can give you the rundown if you want.”

Personally, Olly didn’t like the HOA’s odds of going up against Marc and Alise. He’d talked to them a few times over the summer, FaceTiming from Minnesota to Pennsylvania. Even after they’d met up in DC, Benji had stayed in their basement, working out with Dre; Olly had gone back to Minnesota, alternating between Duluth and the lake the same way he always did.

It wasn’t the same, though.

Even without getting into the rest of it, training camp had been night and day from the season before. Olly was prepared, maybe in the best shape of his life. Every part of his body felt like it was doing what it was meant to do: skate fast, shoot the puck. Nobody had worried frowns on their faces when they wrote his numbers down on their clipboards.

He was looking forward to the season for the first time in a long time.

He didn’t even know how long it had been. Colorado. Maybe high school. And then there was the rest of it.

For example, this little pre-get-together get-together. The stated reason was

that they were helping set up, not that the ever-competent Anna Dewitt needed the help.

Olly swallowed after he put the car in Park. Breathed in, held it, breathed out, held it. Benji watched him quietly from the passenger seat.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he said, reaching out one of his giant mitts and wrapping it around Olly’s shoulder. He rubbed his thumb in circles. “They all know.”

They did know. All of it.

Olly’s brain tried to shy away from it, sometimes; sometimes it went into a shocky spiral of terror that woke him up at three in the morning, heart rate spiking, instead. But he was getting better at talking himself down. Using Dr. Martinez’s grounding techniques. Getting through the foundational realignment of the fact that some of his teammates knew about him.

About them.

Olly breathed in. Maybe it was cowardly, but he hadn’t been able to face the conversations himself. Pairo had offered to do it for him, so that *“if anyone needs a few minutes to say any dumb shit they’re going to say, they say it to me, not you.”*

Pairo had started with Dewey. Dewey had been on all the next calls, so that *“if anyone says any dumb shit, management hears about it from someone less dramatic than goddamned Pairo.”*

Nobody had said any dumb shit, though.

Olly had planned to get through the whole *Olly is gay* thing before opening the door to the *Olly and Benji are kind of in love with each other* thing. Except that Luke—oblivious fucking Luke—had apparently asked, *“oh, so they’re dating?”* and Pairo hadn’t bothered to lie about it, and now everyone knew.

Benji didn’t care. His exact words had been, *“I don’t give a fuck.”* He’d told the Deveraux; he’d told his buddy Davo. He hadn’t told Krista yet, which Olly was aware was its own thing.

Olly’s family had rolled out the welcome wagon for him, so Benji was maybe picking up more in-laws than he’d ever wanted; but Olly still didn’t really understand how he was so Zen about all of it.

*“I’m the same person I was,”* he’d said, on one late-night FaceTime. *“Nothing’s changed about me. I just know something I didn’t know before.”*

“You okay over there, or do you wanna work on your breathing exercises for a few more minutes?” Benji asked, squeezing his hand on Olly’s

shoulder.

“I’m okay.” He touched Benji’s wrist—familiar skin, familiar tendons, familiar bone—and turned off the car.

Dewey’s twins were in the driveway shooting hoops as they walked up, Benji lugging a massive bowl of some kind of grain-based salad and Olly carrying a case of beer.

“Nice layup,” Olly called.

“Come out and play later!” one of the twins yelled back, then immediately got distracted arguing with his brother about foot placement.

“Fucking kids,” Pairo muttered, materializing out of nowhere. Almost like he’d been waiting for them.

Olly shot Benji a glance. He shrugged, not looking particularly repentant about having summoned up the honor guard.

“You know it’s going to be fine, right?” Benji asked.

“Of course it’s going to be fine,” Pairo snapped. “Dewey’s threatening to make the entire team do a day-long diversity workshop. Nobody wants to fuck up and get stuck with that.”

“Maybe a diversity workshop would still be a good idea,” Benji said. “We should all work on, like, awareness, and stuff.”

“You’re a walking goddamned caricature of yourself.” With that, Pairo opened the door and shoved them through before Olly even knew what was happening.

It was a smaller group than there would be later, obviously, but Olly had still been worried that everyone would be standing around, staring, waiting for him—them—to arrive.

Camp had a defined purpose: he showed up and skated. Everyone was focused on making the roster, not on whatever he and Benji were doing. Olly knew how to handle himself at practice; he had two decades of experience to fall back on. And the two of them had agreed that everything was staying professional at the rink, on the road.

But he’d never had to figure out how to hang out with his teammates and their significant others, with his own boyfriend, who was also his teammate.

It turned out to be fine, though.

More than fine: kind of a whole entire revelation.

Soko thumped Benji between the shoulders; his wife kissed Olly on the cheek. Anna Dewitt glided in from the side to take ownership of the salad.

While Benji was busy with his salad, Luke and Bevvo cut in from the side

to shepherd Olly out into the backyard, allegedly to put the beers in the cooler.

“We’ve got a plan, bro,” Luke proclaimed, once a beer was safely installed in Olly’s hand.

Luke Chen attempting to plan anything made Olly feel very, very nervous. “What?”

“Emotional support linemates,” Bevvo clarified. “Since I know the dog is still a work in progress.”

“I really think I’m fine.”

“You’ve got your stress-face on,” Luke said. “We don’t want you to have your stress-face on. We want you to enjoy this nice beer, and this day that is magically less than fifty percent humidity, and we want the three of us to kick ass this season.”

“So, to kicking ass,” Bevvo said, knocking their drinks together.

“Lineys for life!” Luke announced.

“Lineys,” Olly agreed, smiling as he took a sip of his beer, felt it fizz against the top of his tongue. The sun was shining, light rippling off the surface of the Dewitts’ pool. Sandrine, Mils’s girlfriend, and the Yeliches stood in a knot over by the grill, laughing as Yello struggled to light the charcoal.

It was a smaller group, maybe. Not the whole team: he hadn’t been able to get his head around that. Didn’t know if he ever would, honestly.

But it was something. A start. A change in what he’d thought was possible.

“Here comes trouble.” Luke nudged Olly carelessly in the shoulder, pointing his beer toward where Benji and Piro were headed across the yard.

“Thought I lost you,” Benji said, hooking his elbow around Olly’s neck. Olly could feel his thumb on his collarbone, warm as the sunshine, and the cheer from the grill as Yelich finally got the chimney to catch.

“Uh, no.” He looked down to hide his smile, automatically, but caught himself when he realized he didn’t have to.

Piro made a gagging noise. Fucking predictable. “I thought the two of you couldn’t get any worse this season, but I was wrong.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Luke snapped. “I think they’re sweet. Hashtag relationship goals, or whatever.”

“You’re just in your feelings because that girl from the wedding stopped answering your texts.”

“I don’t have to take this from you,” Luke said. “I remember how you

were so worried I was gonna be a dickhead. Thanks for giving me no fucking credit, asshole. That's my goddamned liney."

"Not just our liney," Bevvo pointed out.

Benji raised his hand in acknowledgment. "Thanks, bro."

"Yeah, but nobody was worried about Benji, because Benji would straight-up commit a murder."

Olly decided to tune out the bickering, since it seemed like the three of them were settling in for the long haul. Tentatively, he let himself lean into Benji's side. It was something he would have done before, but it felt different now. They'd both admitted what it meant; everyone who was here knew what it meant.

"Are you okay?" he asked, quiet under the increasing decibel level of the lineys versus Pairo argument.

"Couldn't be better," Benji said. His fingers had migrated to stroke through the hair at the base of Olly's skull. It was at an awkward, growing-out length, too long to stay off his neck and too short to pull back. "I appreciate that, you know? How you always worried about me, even when nobody else did."

"We're a team."

"Kinda more than that, I think." Benji winked broadly, smiling as he tugged on Olly's hair. Benji smiled a lot—he always had, and Olly sincerely hoped he always would—but this was a quiet, private curve of his lips, a smile that Olly was getting used to seeing first thing in the morning and before he fell asleep at night.

"Goddamn," Luke said, shattering the moment. Olly could feel himself start blushing. Wiped the lovesick expression off his face. "I take it back. Make them stop smiling at each other. Holy shit. I'm so fucking single."

"I thought they were hashtag goals." Pairo smirked.

"Oh, how the turntables turn," Bevvo added.

"Yeah," Benji said, "they really do."

Olly was smiling again. He didn't look down this time. "It's a new season, eh? Never too late to make a change."

\* \* \* \* \*



## Acknowledgements

When I started drafting this book, I had no idea where it would end up. Maybe posted online somewhere; maybe languishing half-finished on my hard drive, like so many projects before it.

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I never saw myself as a published author. I hope that one day, you, my reader, will also find yourself in a place that you were never brave enough to imagine.

## *About the Author*

Cait lives in Virginia with her husband and a very anxious German shepherd. Neither of them gives her too much grief when her writing alarm goes off at 5:30 a.m. If Cait isn't writing, trying a new muffin recipe, or running on a trail somewhere, she is probably shouting at the Philadelphia Flyers. Find her at [caitnary.com](http://caitnary.com) or on Twitter [@caitnary\\_writes](https://twitter.com/caitnary_writes).

*Nothing interferes with Shane Hollander's game—definitely not the sexy rival he loves to hate.*

*Keep reading for an excerpt from  
Heated Rivalry by Rachel Reid!*

# *Heated Rivalry*

by Rachel Reid

## *Chapter One*

*December 2008—Regina*

Ilya Rozanov trudged through the bitter cold of the hotel parking lot to the team bus. Like most of his teammates, it was his first time in North America. He had expected to feel more overwhelmed by that, but Saskatchewan was hardly New York City. Here, there was nothing to focus on but cold and hockey, and those were two things that Russians were very familiar with.

It was two days before Christmas, but for the world's best teenage hockey players, Christmas meant the World Junior Hockey Championships. For Ilya, it meant the chance to finally get a firsthand look at Shane Hollander.

There had been much made of the seventeen-year-old Canadian phenom. Ilya was sick of hearing the name, which had caused such a stir in the hockey world that even Moscow wasn't far enough to escape the hype. Both Ilya and Hollander were eligible for the NHL entry draft that coming June, and they were already expected to be the number one and two overall picks. The expected order of those two picks depended on who you asked.

Ilya knew *his* answer.

He had never met Shane Hollander. Never played against him. But he was already determined to destroy him.

He would start by leading Russia to a gold medal victory, here in Hollander's own country. Then he would lead his team back in Moscow to their championship. And then, surely, he would be chosen first in the draft. This was the year of Ilya Rozanov. Since he was twelve years old, 2009 had always been the year he was expected to burst onto the world stage. No Canadian pretender would change that.

The Russian team arrived at the rink for their scheduled practice at the tail end of the Canadian team's. Ilya paused with some of his teammates to watch the Canadians run drills. The practice jerseys didn't have names on them, so he couldn't pick out Hollander before he was told by his assistant coach to get his ass into the dressing room. The schedule at the practice rink was very tight.

They took to the ice as soon as it had been cleared by the Zamboni. The rink was small, and kind of dumpy. The actual games would be in the large arena downtown. There were a few people sitting in the stands, watching the Russian team practice. Some scouts, no doubt, and the few family members who had actually made the trip from Russia, as well as several local hard-core hockey fans.

Halfway through the practice, Ilya noticed a young man sitting a few rows above the penalty box, wearing a Team Canada ball cap and jacket. He was flanked by a man and a woman, who were probably his parents. It was hard to tell from the ice, but Ilya thought it might be Hollander. His mother was Japanese or something, right? He was sure he had read that somewhere...

“Care to join us, Rozanov?” his coach bellowed in Russian across the ice. Ilya turned, embarrassed to find the rest of his teammates huddled around the coach.

He didn’t like that Hollander—if that *was* Hollander—was here watching them. Or maybe he did. Maybe Hollander was nervous about facing him later in the tournament. Maybe he felt threatened.

*He should.*

After the practice, Ilya showered and dressed quickly. He headed back out into the rink to stand behind the glass and look at the stands. Hollander and his parents were gone. The Slovakian team had taken to the ice for their practice.

Ilya shrugged and made his way to a vending machine. He bought himself a bottle of Coke and wondered if he could slip outside for a quick smoke before getting back on the bus.

He zipped his Team Russia parka up to his chin and slipped out a side door. It was cold as fuck outside. He pressed himself against the wall of the brick building, stuffed his Coke into his coat pocket, and pulled out a cigarette and a lighter.

“You’re supposed to smoke over there,” someone said. It took Ilya a moment to translate all of the words.

He turned to see the person that he now definitely recognized as Shane Hollander. He had a very distinct look. Some of his features were clearly from his mother—jet-black hair and very dark eyes—but his father was of some bland, Anglo-European heritage, so Hollander didn’t look exactly Asian. His skin, however, was flawless. Distractingly so. Smooth and tan with—and this was his most striking feature—a smattering of dark freckles

across his nose and cheekbones.

“What?” Ilya said. Even the single word sounded stupid with his accent.

“The smoking area is over there.” Hollander pointed to a far corner of the parking lot, next to a large snowbank. It looked very windy there.

Ilya settled back against the wall and lit his cigarette. *This fucking country.* Bad enough he couldn’t smoke indoors anywhere—he needed to go sit in the fucking snow while he did it?

“I’m surprised you smoke,” Hollander said.

“Okay,” Ilya said, exhaling a long stream of smoke between his lips. There was an uncomfortable silence, and then Hollander made another attempt at conversation.

“I wanted to meet you,” he said, extending his hand. “Shane Hollander.”

Ilya stared at him, and then felt his lips twitch a bit.

“Yes,” he said. He pinched the cigarette between his lips and shook Hollander’s hand.

“You’re an awesome player to watch,” Hollander said.

“I know.” If Hollander was expecting Ilya to return the compliment, he was going to be waiting a long damn time.

When Ilya didn’t say anything else, Hollander changed the subject. “Are your parents here with you?”

“No.”

“Oh. That must be rough. With Christmas and everything.”

Ilya struggled a bit to translate so many words, then said, “Is fine.”

Hollander shoved his hands in his jacket pockets. “It’s cold, huh?”

“Yes.”

They leaned against the wall together, side-by-side. Ilya rolled his head against the brick to look down at Hollander, who stood a good four inches shorter than him. He was very interesting to look at. His cheeks were rosy from the cold, and his breath was emerging in white clouds from between his pink lips.

“Next year these are gonna be in Ottawa. My hometown,” Hollander said.

Ilya finished his cigarette and dropped the butt on the ground. He decided to make an effort, since this guy seemed so determined to talk to him. “Is Ottawa more exciting?”

Hollander laughed. “Than here? I don’t know. A little. It’s just as cold.”

“Your parents are here.”

“For this? Yeah. They’re here. They always try to come see me play

wherever I go.”

“Nice for you.”

“Yeah. I know. They’re great.”

Ilya didn’t have anything to add to that, so he stayed silent.

“I should probably go. They’re waiting for me,” Hollander said. He moved away from the wall and turned to face Ilya. Ilya’s eyes went right to those damn freckles. Hollander stuck out his hand again.

“Good luck in the tournament,” he said.

Ilya accepted the handshake and grinned. “You will not be so friendly when we beat you.”

“That’s not happening.”

Ilya knew that Hollander truly believed that. That he would get the gold medal and be the NHL’s number one draft pick because he was the fucking prince of hockey.

Maybe Hollander expected Ilya to wish him luck as well, but Ilya just dropped his hand and turned to go back inside the rink.

\* \* \*

In the car, Shane told his parents that he had been talking to Ilya Rozanov.

“What’s he like?” his mother asked.

“Kind of a dick,” Shane said.

\* \* \*

When the final game of the tournament was over, the Canadian team had to suffer one more humiliation. The Russians stopped celebrating long enough to line up so the teams could shake each other’s hands—a show of sportsmanship that, at that moment, Shane did not feel in his heart.

For one thing, the Russian team had been *dirty*. He had hated playing against them.

For another thing, Ilya Rozanov was really fucking good. Infuriatingly good. And over the course of the tournament, the media had put a lot of effort into building up their rivalry. Shane tried to ignore the press, but it was possible that they were stoking the flames of his hatred.

When he reached Rozanov in the handshake lineup, he could see camera flashes all around them. He made sure he looked Rozanov right in the eye when he tersely said, “Congratulations.”

Rozanov smirked and said, “See you at the draft.”

They hung a silver medal around Shane’s neck that may as well have been a dead rat, for all he wanted it. He respectfully endured the playing of the Russian national anthem, blinking back frustrated tears that he refused to let fall, and then he was finally allowed to leave the ice.

It wasn’t supposed to have gone like this. He was supposed to have led his country to gold *in* his country. It was what the nation had expected. Canada’s hopes had been heaped onto his seventeen-year-old shoulders and he had let them all down.

Every face-off he had taken against Rozanov, the Russian had looked him dead in the eye and smirked. Shane was not easily shaken by anyone, but that goddamn smirk threw him off balance every time.

Maybe it was just that, after a life of playing at a level above everyone else, Shane had finally met his match.

He was sure that was all it was.

*Don’t miss Heated Rivalry by Rachel Reid, available now wherever ebooks are sold.*

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Season's Change

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