



YOU, AGAIN

THE ELMWOOD STORIES BOOK ONE

LANE HAYES

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The hometown hockey hero and his best friend's brother...

Vinnie

Hockey is in my blood. I learned to skate before I learned how to ride a bike. I've been on a wild ride, playing at the highest level for some of the biggest and best teams in the league. But now it's over, and I'm not sure what to do with myself.

So I'm going home to Elmwood.

But I'll tell you what I'm not gonna do—I'm not going to coach my buddy's junior hockey league. No chance. I don't know how to deal with kids, and besides, the other coach—who happens to be my best friend's brother—hates me. With reason.

That may be old news, yet something tells me we're going to have to deal with the past.

And that's almost as scary as coaching teens.

Nolan

No, I don't hate Vinnie, but he drives me nuts.

He's cocky, goofy, selfish, and yeah...after all these years, I'm still attracted to him. But I'm a responsible adult now. I run my family's business, and with the help of my ex, I've made Elmwood Diner into a New England institution.

So maybe my life isn't particularly exciting at the moment, and maybe Vinnie isn't the worst. Nonetheless, I have no desire to rekindle a friendship with the hockey hero who no doubt will be on the first flight out of town the second he gets bored or gets a better offer.

And I'm not coaching with him. No way.

Ugh...

I can't believe I'm doing this again.

You, Again is an MM bisexual, best friend's brother, frenemies to lovers romance featuring old friends, a new quest, and a little hockey HEA!

To Bob

*My partner, my best friend, my forever inspiration. For me, it
will always be you.*

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VINNIE

“**O**ur enemies can never hurt us very much. But oh, what about forgiving our friends?”—Willa Cather, *My Mortal Enemy*

LIGHTS FLASHED and cell phones lit up the arena as the starting lineup took to the ice. Our hometown crowd roared in anticipation and appreciation, stomping their feet, clapping, and whooping like maniacs. These fans were voracious—and thankfully, forgiving.

Our season had been lackluster at best. We’d been plagued by injuries, a management shake-up, and a host of twenty other excuses that had kept us from the playoffs for the first time in a decade.

Not the way I wanted to go out, but this was it—the final game of my sixteen-year career.

My teammates slapped their palms on the C on my jersey and bumped my fist as their names were called.

Riley Thoreau, a talented center, a good friend, and most likely my replacement as captain, knocked his helmet against mine and grinned. “Gonna miss you, Kimbo.”

“Who’s gonna hide your tape next year, Trunk?”

“No one, fucker.” He snorted, fiddling with his mouthguard.

Side note: Nearly every team member on every squad I'd played for since Pee Wees was given a nickname. Sometimes it was a simple abbreviation of their first or last name, like mine. My last name was Kiminski, and some wise guy my rookie year joked that I came at the opponent like Rambo, guns blazing, no prisoners taken and—*boom*, I became Kimbo. Trunk Thoreau, on the other hand, was an average-sized man whose big-ass quads resembled tree trunks. Makes sense, right?

It was going to be weird as fuck to return to a world where people used first names on the regular.

I shook off my mopey vibes and cupped my ear. “You hear that? They’re restless out there. Get your ass in gear so we can get the party started.”

“And I suppose you’re the party?”

“You know it.” I winked.

He stomped his skates on the rubber mat. “Are you ready for everyone to ask what you’re doing for the rest of your life? Or this summer?”

“Fuck, no.”

“Didn’t think so.” Trunk held out his fist and tilted his chin meaningfully. “It’s been an honor, man. A fucking honor.”

Great, now I was feeling *verklempt*. I didn’t want to be sad tonight, and I didn’t want to think about summer...or autumn or winter.

I wanted to be completely in the moment. I wanted this to be a celebration. One last awesome game before I hung up my skates.

I stood alone at the mouth of the tunnel and watched the spectacle of lights in the dark, smiling as the crowd chanted my name, “Kimbo, Kimbo, Kimbo...” I took a cleansing breath, then glided onto the ice.

Seventeen thousand screaming fans jumped to their feet, whistling and cheering. I thumped my chest twice and held my

stick in the air in acknowledgment. If possible, the decibel level in the arena rose to a fraction beneath ear-splitting.

What can I say?

I was Seattle's hero, the scariest D-man in the West. I never backed down, I was tough on the boards, grumpy when my team lost, and slightly obnoxious when we won. Sue me... *I yam what I yam*—a six-foot-five, two-hundred-and-fifty-pound wall of solid muscle, and the fans here loved me.

Or they were at least entertained by my antics. Air guitar, disco moves, the impromptu dog piles...yeah, I always brought the party. More importantly, I kicked ass on the ice. I protected the net, intimidated our opponents, and scored at will.

I used to, anyway.

It sucked to admit it, but at thirty-six, I was a shadow of the player I'd been in my prime. Numerous concussions, multiple cracked ribs, and more broken bones than I could count had wreaked havoc on my body over the years. I was slower than I'd ever been and inclined to use brawn instead of my brain. Not a winning strategy.

To put it bluntly, I'd turned into a relic and what used to work didn't anymore. Meh, what can you do? It happened to the best of us.

The writing was on the wall, and I wanted to go out with dignity—captain of the Slammers, career leading scorer for a D-man in the Western Conference, two-time Norris Trophy winner, and...the fiercest and funnest dude in the NHL.

Was funnest a word? Whatever. Not important.

I could have kept my final hurrah classy with a quick wave and a smile, but I wasn't exactly known for being a gentleman. I skated like the wind, turned backward, and played a phantom guitar while skating on one leg—much to the crowd's delight. It was a tired schtick, but it was mine. I soaked up the love, basking in raucous cheers and applause before taking my place on the line where my teammates...and our opponents tapped their sticks on the ice in a show of appreciation and respect.

There was a team party scheduled next weekend in my honor, a fan meet-and-greet, and a couple of league dinners to commemorate my retirement, but this...standing here, surrounded by brothers I'd fought, bled, and sacrificed with day in and day out and thousands of adoring fans whose support made it all worthwhile...this was magic. I swallowed around the grapefruit-sized lump in my throat, blinking away tears as the first few notes of the national anthem swelled.

I loved this game. I loved these warriors and these fans. I wanted to give them one more win for the books.

Just one more.

WE LOST.

Of course we fucking lost. The Kings were playoff bound, so it wasn't totally unexpected, but it still chafed. I'd really been hoping to go out with a roar. Not a whimper.

The reporters at the postgame press conference didn't seem to care, though.

"Are you sure you're done, Kimbo?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. In a perfect world, I'd play till I was eighty." I paused as a polite twitter drifted through the room. "But this is a good place to stop. Next."

A curly-haired middle-aged man who wrote for *Sports Illustrated* raised his hand. "Any future plans?"

"I don't know, Mikey. I might come for your job," I teased.

The reporters chuckled and raised their hands like overly eager elementary school kids.

"Any plans to expand your burger biz?" A younger man with red hair and freckles asked.

"Good question. Are you hungry, Cory?" More laughter. When it subsided, I replied, "I'm gonna give myself a little vacay first and think things through."

"Where are you going, Kimbo?" someone called out.

“Where should I go?” I motioned to the room. “Any suggestions?”

I rubbed my stubbled chin thoughtfully as the press playfully bombarded me with typical holiday destinations.

“Bahamas.”

“Fiji.”

“Hawaii!”

“Great ideas. Thanks. Hey, we need to wrap it up here, but, um...before I go, I want to thank the Seattle Slammers.” A hush fell over the room as I continued, “Thank you to the owners, management, the coaching staff—especially Coach Marsden. And of course, my teammates. I love every single one of you. I want to give a shout-out to my friends, my family, even my cousin Colin, who still owes me five bucks. Hell, while I’m at it, I might as well thank my mailman. Seriously, though...um, I want to thank our fans. You make the best game on Earth even sweeter. It’s been a great ride. Really. Thank you for the incredible memories.”

I sniffed loudly into the mic and cleared my throat, gingerly standing in deference to the fresh bruise on my left shin and the tight feeling around my ribs. The entire room stood, erupting in a new round of applause.

I shook hands with a few reporters, posed for dozens of photos, and renewed the “Where should Kimbo go?” conversation. Paris, France; Perris, California...I pretended to consider every idea, though I knew exactly where I was heading next.

Home.

“ELMWOOD.” Sienna wiggled into panties so skimpy they could have been mistaken for dental floss and bent to retrieve her bra. “Where’s that?”

I plumped the pillow behind my head and admired the view. Sienna Montrose was fucking gorgeous. She was a tall, willowy auburn-haired former model turned LA-based cosmetic guru with perky tits and a sexy mouth. Her pretty pout had to be for show, 'cause there was no way Sienna actually cared about my next move. We weren't that kind of couple.

In fact, we'd never been a real couple. We were more of an "on again, off again" item with a gratuitous relationship based on public perception. What did that mean? Well, we photographed nicely together and according to our agents, our supposed love affair boosted both of our careers. Don't judge. It happens all the time.

Look, a beautiful model cheering me on hadn't magically translated to more ice time, but it certainly hadn't hurt. And if the trade-off involved occasionally showing up in a tux at some chi-chi LA hipster event and rubbing elbows with rock gods and movie stars...well, okay—sign me up. The cool part was that Sienna was smart, easy to talk to, and sexy as fuck.

Best of all, she wasn't interested in settling down or getting serious. There was no way she'd give a fuck if I retired in Timbuktu or some obscure village in outback Australia. So...yeah, the crease in her forehead that had to be working her latest Botox injection overtime confused me.

"Vermont," I replied, kicking the sheet off and reaching for my cell on the nightstand.

"Ah, a family visit." She pivoted to face me as she fastened her bra, sending her reddish locks cascading over her shoulder. "I thought your dad was in London for the summer."

"Yeah, but I have friends I haven't seen in ages and it feels right." I let my gaze roam over her hips appreciatively and commenced mindless scrolling.

"Oh. How long will you be away?"

"Don't know. Why?" I asked without glancing up.

"I have an event in Miami at the end of August. We're launching a new lip-gloss line. Can you be there?"

“Hey, uh...” I dropped my phone in my lap and squinted at her. “Look, I mean this in the nicest possible way, but...we should move on, you know. I’m done playing hockey and—”

“So? You’re still a legend, and you’re hot.”

I pointed at my chest in faux disbelief, then shrugged and nodded. “I know.”

Sienna chuckled. “Of course you do. Just...stay fit and don’t get weird in Vermont. Seriously. If you show up at my event talking about fishing and hunting, I’ll pretend I don’t know you.”

“Ouch. Did I agree to Miami?”

“No, but you’re a sweetheart and you don’t mind doing a favor for a friend. And we are friends, right?”

“Sure,” I agreed, scrolling away while she redressed.

She moved into the bathroom and returned a moment later, slipping a high heel onto her right foot. “You know, you could always...unretire.”

“I’m not un-retiring,” I scoffed.

“Well, you *could*...that’s all I’m saying. You’re in good shape, and the fans love you. What if you played for LA or New York for a year?”

I furrowed my brow. “That’s not going to happen.”

“Stay here. Seattle loves you.”

“I love Seattle too, but it’s time to move on. I just put this house on the market and—”

“No way,” she gasped. “Why? Tell me you’re joking. This house is gorgeous.”

It was phenomenal, actually. My home was a custom-built modern masterpiece on Puget Sound with amazing views, but it was kind of cold and small. More of a tricked-out large condo than a cozy house.

“Yeah, but like I said, I’m outta here,” I replied, casting a brief glance her way. How long did it take to put on a pair of

shoes, for fuck's sake?

“Right. To Vermont. Sounds enchanting,” she snarked, her lips twisting like a kid who'd accidentally sucked a lemon wedge.

I could defend Elmwood's honor, but what would I say? I grew up in a town the size of a postage stamp. It was so small that we had one market, one gas station, and shared a high school, a hospital, and a post office with the neighboring town of Pinecrest. It was quaint and picturesque but probably wouldn't appeal to anyone looking for sophisticated entertainment. Or a Starbucks.

“It's nice enough. And it's super chill and laid-back.”

“*Hmm*. What do you do for fun in Elmwood?”

“We used to drink beers around bonfires while our parents played bingo at the church, so...bonfires, beers, and bingo.”

There was that lemon face again. “Fun.”

“It's a little sleepy,” I admitted with a laugh.

“You won't last a month,” she predicted, sauntering to my bedside. She cupped my balls through the sheet as she bent to kiss me. “Call me when you return to civilization, Vinnie. And don't forget...Miami in August.”

I listened for her footsteps to recede, then the telltale sound of the door closing behind her before turning my full attention to the text message thread on my screen.

You're coming home this summer? That's awesome! I could use your help.

I'm not working at the diner, Ronnie, I typed.

Ha. It's not my diner, it's Nolan's. And Nolan still hates you. But he might give you a job as a busboy. Text me when you get here. I'll have beer ready.

I signed off with a thumbs-up and tossed my cell aside to scratch my nuts. I had a to-do list a mile long, bags to pack, and a few friends to say good-bye to, but as I headed for the

shower, my brain took a sharp left and spiraled down memory lane.

Nolan still hates you.

Fuck.

I had to fix that. I wasn't sure how, though.

Truth was...Nolan was always somewhere in the back of my mind, fluttering like a butterfly I couldn't decide if I wanted to set free or capture. I hadn't seen him in seven years now.

Second truth...I'd avoided Elmwood like the plague.

It had been easy to do.

During the holidays, I'd fly my dad to cities with museums he loved—New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago. Or I'd have him join me in Seattle and set him up in style in my box to watch one of my games.

Ronnie came with his dad a few times too...years ago when Mr. M was still alive. But not Nolan, and I understood. We were...complicated.

Maybe it would always be this way between us. If so, I'd have to live with it.

You know, I'd thought I could stay away forever, but the day I announced my plans to retire, I knew it was time to go home. And every day afterward, the pull was stronger than ever. So I bought a house on the outskirts of town through a private trust under an alias and had it furnished, so it would be ready for me. The only person who knew I was coming was Ronnie. I wasn't sure how long I'd stay, and I didn't want any fuss.

I just wanted...fuck, I didn't know what I wanted. I didn't know what my next step was. I'd had one goal in life, and I'd achieved it.

Now what? My agent had lots of ideas. "*You're still popular. You gotta cash in on your legacy, Kimbo.*" That was probably smart, but I had money and I'd made good investments. I didn't need millions more. I needed a reset and

time to think, away from corporate expectations and exes who wanted to swap our celebrity status to further our brands.

The folks I knew in Elmwood didn't think that way. And the people I was closest to liked me for me.

Except for Nolan.

Yeah...this could be interesting.

NOLAN

“**Y**ou’re kidding.”

My brother shoved his hands into the pockets of his hoodie, unfazed by my deadpan tone and testy stare. “Nope. This little stroke of good luck will do wonders for our enrollment. Not to mention our chances of getting to state next year.”

“Are you high? If so, pass along your happy juice. You’re running a youth program in the boondocks, and our best players just graduated. That dickhead isn’t gonna help you out.”

“Sure, he will.” Ronnie flashed his signature happy-go-lucky grin, scowling a moment later at whatever action was unfolding behind me. “Protect the puck, Anton. Don’t let it get behind you.”

I inhaled deeply and blew out a frustrated breath. “Vinnie is a flake. You don’t need him. You can—”

“I *do* need him, Nol,” Ronnie intercepted. “I’ve got bills to pay, and I can’t afford to hire another coach. I have too many teenagers running things as it is.”

“You have me too, asshole.”

“And I’m grateful for that, little bro. You know that. But you have a restaurant to run, and I need some new ideas. C’mon...look at that bunch of bananas.”

I crossed my arms and followed his gaze to center ice, where a posse of eight-to-ten-year-old kids was busy hacking

and slashing at a puck in a free-for-all. At least this group knew how to skate, I mused, shifting to study my brother.

Ronnie and I were born sixteen months apart and had always been close. We'd looked alike till we were teenagers—brown hair, brown eyes, and dimples. Not so much anymore. I'd gone through a growth spurt in college and sprouted an extra two inches taller than Ronnie's five foot eleven. I was also thirty pounds thinner and I still had all my hair. He joked that he'd entered middle age early...and in some ways, it was true.

Ronnie was bald by the time he was twenty-nine and had a decent paunch, thanks to his beer and junk food habit. But those deep crevices etched in the corners of his eyes weren't from years of laughter. No, he'd known real pain—the kind no one walked away from unscathed. The fact that he'd picked up the pieces and rebuilt his life for himself and his daughter was just another indication that Ronnie Moore was a great man, an admirable man.

I already knew that, though. Ronnie was the best brother in the world. I'd been his shadow when we were kids, always tagging along, hoping he wouldn't kick me out or tattle on me. He rarely did. He'd claimed he liked my company, but I realized later that he was helping out so our folks didn't worry about me while they were at work.

Days not hanging out with Ronnie and his crew were spent in a booth at the diner with homework or a stack of coloring books and a box of broken crayons or in the kitchen listening to Mel, the chain-smoking fry cook, gripe about picky customers. Boring.

Being with Ronnie was fun. Outgoing, adventurous, he'd always made friends easily. Other kids tended to gravitate to him like moons around a planet. And because he'd include me, they would too.

Even Vin Kiminski.

I might not like him now, but I hadn't always felt that way. There was a time I'd worshiped him and thought he could do

no wrong. Vinnie was the best of us. The fastest, the funniest, the most loyal.

But tigers had a way of showing their stripes. Vinnie had proved he was a pompous ass, a show-off, a condescending prick, and if you asked me, a fair-weather friend. Ronnie deserved a break in the form of a lottery ticket or a string of good luck. He didn't deserve a supersized helping of Vinnie. None of us did.

However, the rink was Ronnie's baby, so there wasn't much I could do other than say "I told you so" when Vin skipped out of town in the middle of summer to catch a last-minute flight to Saint Tropez. Trust me...it would happen. He'd take one look at Ronnie's motley crew of pee wees and juniors and come up with whatever excuses necessary to steer clear.

On the other hand, leaving the diner every afternoon to help out here was cutting into my bottom line too. It was smarter to embrace the idea of a superstar fill-in, no matter how long he stayed. Every little bit helped, right?

But Vinnie. *Ugh.*

I eyed the "bananas" in question as Gavin, our teenage assistant, skated into the scrum to restore order. "You really think Vinnie can handle kids that young?"

"No way." My brother smirked. "But he'd be great with the juniors. If he agrees, Gavin will help him and you can step aside for the summer or coach the younger kids with me."

I'd been angling for a small hiatus to concentrate on a few side projects, so I should have been a thousand percent behind this idea, but I was too cranky about you-know-who to be reasonable.

"Of course. That makes sense," I snarked. "The guy who stole his cousin's pot and regularly hosted beer pong parties on the rink's roof after practice is a perfect choice to lead impressionable teens."

Ronnie elbowed me in the ribs. "Lighten up, Nol. That was a long time ago."

True. I had to shut up. I sounded bitter to my own ears, and that was not a good look on me.

I glanced at my watch as I stepped away from the ice. “When are you expecting him?”

“Anytime now.”

I froze. “You mean...today?”

“Yeah, today.” Ronnie blew his whistle when the scrum got a tad too scrappy. “I gotta get out there and help Gavin. Are you stickin’ around?”

“Uh...”

“If not, tell Erica to let Vin know where to find me,” he called out, skating backward and pivoting away.

I released a beleaguered sigh as I pushed open the door to the lobby area and headed for the front desk, where a teenage receptionist with a high ponytail, pink-tinted lips, and a black Elmwood Ice tee sat chewing gum and scrolling her cell.

“Hey, Erica. If anyone is looking for—”

“Did you hear?” She smacked her gum, finishing her text, then glancing up at me. “I’m freaking out. My brother is going to lose his mind. And my friends...don’t get me started. Everyone wants my job now.”

“I bet. Well, you know where to find Ronnie. Later.”

“Wait.” She stood abruptly and pointed at her wrist. “Do you think it would be weird if I asked Vinnie to autograph my arm? I want a tattoo before Lisa Shoemaker beats me to it.”

Wow. “Not weird at all.”

“Should I call him Vinnie or Mr. Kiminski?”

“Go with your gut, Er. Gotta run.” I pasted a smile on my face and hooked my thumb toward the parking lot. “See ya.”

The afternoon sun felt like a welcoming warm bath after the chill inside the rink. Goose bumps melted away as I plucked my sunglasses from my shirt and slipped them onto my nose. I dug my keys from my pocket, frowning at the Jeep

parked too close to me—so close I'd have to hop in through the passenger side and heave my ass behind the wheel.

What the fuck?

The lot wasn't full. It was midweek in June, not a game day in January.

I pointed my fob, unlocking my truck as I studied the Jeep's license plate for clues to the owner's identity. I was more focused on getting the hell outta there than finding the asshole responsible, though. This wasn't going to be pretty, but I was flexible. A little shimmying would do the trick. And hopefully, I wouldn't tweak my knee in the process.

"Damn, Nolan. Someone did you dirty," a deep voice drawled behind me.

I spun on my heels, my breath catching in my throat as I came face-to-face with Vin Kiminski for the first time in... years.

"Vinnie."

I couldn't help noticing that he was bigger than I remembered. There was more *him*...all over. He was taller, stronger, more fit. His shoulders were broader, his torso was thicker, and his tattooed biceps were ginormous. No kidding. His muscles challenged the integrity of his T-shirt in every way possible without looking ridiculous.

He was hotter too.

I'd known Vin my whole life. He'd been the cool kid on the block to my brother's affable boy next door. Guys had wanted to hang out with Vinnie and every girl I knew used to have a crush on him. Okay, fine...once upon a time, I'd had a crush on him too. A big one.

I hadn't known what to call it back then. That weird, fluttery feeling in my chest, a loss of hearing, and a curious stomachache seemed like the kind of symptoms I should have seen a doctor about, but being around him felt good too. Uplifting...like walking on a cloud and touching moonbeams with your fingertips.

How embarrassing.

That crush lasted longer than I'd ever admit to anyone... ever. A testament to my younger, naïve self. If my parents had noticed, they'd probably assumed I had a wicked case of hero worship. I'd adored my big brother and it made sense to extend those feelings to his best friend.

Yeah, that wasn't it. It had taken me a while longer to figure out that I was gay. Back then I hadn't even known what that word meant. I'd just known that whatever I felt was... different.

Vinnie had confused and confounded me. He always would.

But Ronnie was right. I had to let that old shit go and aim for some form of neutrality. Total ambivalence was the ultimate goal, though even I knew that was a stretch.

He was still insanely good-looking with sharp hazel eyes, a strong scruffy jaw, and a slightly crooked nose from the time he'd gotten into a fight with a goalie during playoffs his junior year of high school. His longish dark hair curled at his ears and brushed his collar, giving him a deceptively angelic look. There was nothing innocent about this man, though. He was a rakish, crude, unpolished barbarian...who just happened to have a godlike bod.

Whatever. At thirty-five, I wasn't so easily swayed by washboard abs and a cocky smile. My memory was longer too. I knew Vinnie Kiminski, and I didn't like him.

And I sure as fuck didn't trust him. I'd bet my next paycheck that was his Jeep blocking my door.

"Good to see you, man. How's it goin'?" he asked.

"Okay." I gestured toward my truck. "Is that you?"

He pulled his Ray-Bans off, narrowing his eyes as he surveyed the renegade parking situation. "Me? I was a valet at Maxim's the summer I learned how to drive."

"So?"

“You know Maxim. That old man was a fucking tyrant. He made us move any car he thought was too close to another. On my first night, they were hosting the Phillipses’ wedding and for whatever reason, everyone had a van. Maxim wanted them all in that back lot behind the Christmas tree farm. I can’t tell you how many times he drove after us on his golf cart, pulling what was left of his hair outta his skull, screaming, ‘Move that van, move that van!’ ”

My lips twitched without my permission. “Maxim thought he was running a fine-dining establishment.”

“Any restaurant rockin’ wood chips on the floor, a broken jukebox, and a cigarette machine from the seventies has serious delusions of grandeur,” Vinnie scoffed.

“True.”

He grinned, hooking his glasses in his shirt collar, momentarily exposing a hint of chest hair. “So...other than a minor parking woe, how’s life?”

My reluctant smile reformed into a cynical twist. “Groovy, Vin. Just groovy.”

“I heard you took over the diner. Still serving killer fries?”

“Of course.”

“And shakes? Please tell me you still have the double-chocolate-chip shake on the menu,” he pleaded, reminding me of the teenager who used to save the clover marshmallows from Lucky Charms cereal to eat last.

“We do.”

“Cool. I’ll be by sometime. I opened a couple of burger joints in Seattle that have done pretty well. Blue Line Burger. I was thinking of expanding.”

“Here?”

“Or somewhere nearby. Let’s talk. Maybe we can help each other out.”

“Right.” I snorted derisively.

Vinnie frowned, scratching his temple thoughtfully. “I’m sensing animosity.”

“I was going for ambivalence.”

“Ambivalence,” he repeated, thumping his chest. “Toward me? Impossible.”

Damn it. That was truer than I wanted to admit. Time to get going.

“Ronnie’s waiting for you. Later.”

He grabbed my elbow before I could stalk away. “Gimme a hint. What’s he up to?”

Vin turned to the rink that had served as a second home to most everyone in town. Including this former NHL superstar.

I shook out of his grasp. “Find out yourself. Oh, and Vin...”

“Yeah?”

“If you fuck him over, I will come for you.”

Hey, for a guy who’d never been known for a menacing glare, I thought I’d pulled it off pretty damn well. I braced myself for one of those adolescent comebacks Vinnie had delivered like a boss when we were kids. He’d always been able to make “Oooh, now I’m scared” sound like a Shakespearean quip.

Whatever.

I’d said what I’d needed to and drawn the proverbial line in the sand. With any luck, our paths wouldn’t cross much during his hopefully very short stay.

Now I just had to figure out how to get into my truck without looking like an idiot.

I studied the two-inch gap the Jeep owner had left between us with a sigh before rounding my vehicle and opening the passenger side door. A blast of heat engulfed my face like a furnace. Fuck me, the faux-leather interior scorched the skin my shorts didn’t cover on my lower thighs and the back of my knees.

I leaned over to insert the fob in the ignition and rolled down the windows for a little relief. Then I began the tedious contortion-like maneuvering necessary to hike my long legs over the console and behind the steering wheel. Not pretty.

Without skates on my feet, I was kind of a klutz, so it was no surprise that I kned the horn and that sudden noise startled me into jostling the volume on the “Out and Proud, Give it to Me Loud” playlist my best friend in LA had personally curated for me. Gloria Gaynor’s survival anthem rocked my truck at ear-splitting decibels worthy of a gaggle of teens screaming their hearts out at a Harry Styles concert.

Holy fuck. I couldn’t get in my seat fast enough to adjust the sound. And when I finally did, my thighs sizzled on the hot upholstery.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.”

I winced in pain and punched the Off button on the stereo, slumping in relief, my heart pounding against my chest as a welcome silence descended.

Well, not total silence.

Laughter floated in the air. The doubled-over, uncontrollable, tears-running-down-your-face kind of laughter associated with extra funny shit. It didn’t take a brainiac to figure out who that was.

I glanced in my rearview mirror at Vin chuckling merrily at my expense. Jerk. I fastened my seat belt and noticed I’d accidentally left the passenger door open, so I undid my seat belt and leaned across the console, singeing my arm hair and bruising my knee in the process. I was able to accomplish the chore without additional acrobatics so...yay me.

I took a deep breath and buckled up again just as the Jeep on my left fired up its engine.

“Oh, shit. You meant this Jeep? Sorry, man.”

I probably looked like a befuddled cartoon character, going from confused to comically irate in seconds flat. I was Elmer Fudd to Vin’s Bugs Bunny, always thinking I’d finally gotten

the last word only to have a stick of dynamite blow up in my face.

I fixed him with a blank stare. “You haven’t changed a bit, Vinnie.”

He wagged his brows and grinned, so...I maturely flipped him off with as much cool as I could muster and got the hell out of dodge.

VINNIE

Well, so much for a sneak-attack icebreaker.

I should have known that joke wouldn't land. It was too high school and too presumptuous. In retrospect, I shouldn't have led with a prank at all. I should have gone with serious and polite and—shit, I sucked at apologies.

I stared after Nolan's truck for a beat and sighed, then killed the engine of my Jeep and headed for the main entrance to Elmwood Rink.

Memories flooded over me like a tidal wave the moment I set foot in the lobby. We're talking a base level, organic, déjà vu times a thousand feeling. This was hallowed ground.

The squeak of the scuffed tile floor, the hint of ice in the air, the wall of photos lining the wide corridor to the dented wooden reception area. This hallway had seemed so long when I was a kid. It would take forever to slog my gear from my dad's SUV, across the lot, along this very corridor, and into the locker room. I remembered telling Dad they should build an ice escalator so we didn't have to waste so much time getting to the good stuff.

Now, I could see the rink through an adult's eyes and...it wasn't much to look at. It was too quaint, too small, too worn down. I'd been in arenas all over the globe, and Elmwood Ice Rink would never measure on anyone's cool meter.

It was marked by multiple generations of townsfolk who'd poked through the photos tacked on corkboards to find

themselves, kicked their skates against the front desk, and carved their initials into the locker room benches.

Nowadays, they'd call it vandalism and charge the guilty party for defacing private property, but back in the day, we were just marking territory. My initials were under benches and in at least two bathroom stalls. Oh, yeah, and I'd drawn penises under every other seat of the last row under the projector window when I was eight or nine, too.

I would have kept going, but I'd gotten caught and the threat of being expelled from the rink had been enough to curb my naughty graffiti streak for a while. I'd scrubbed the crayon off, tears in my eyes, while my dad had sat nearby grading papers, occasionally looking over to inspect my work. I'd done my best, but I'd bet the smudges were still there. Unless Ronnie had installed new stadium seating.

Nah, no chance. Everything from the worn rubber mats in front of the rink gates to the giant digital clock gifted by the Elmwood Eagles parent booster group, circa 1967, was the same as it was when I'd left home nineteen years ago.

Nothing had changed. Not here or anywhere in town.

I figured my dad would have mentioned something new. Then again, maybe not. It took a lot to get my father's attention, which made him a terrible source of information. I stayed in touch with Ronnie and a couple of other friends, but it wouldn't have occurred to me to ask if the yellow light on Monroe was still too long or if Henderson's Bakery still made those mouthwatering maple cookies.

Fuck, I hoped so, but I couldn't figure out why it mattered. It was as if I needed assurance that this slice of my childhood was exactly as I'd left it—a little innocent and full of hope. And for the most part, it was. However, the unrelenting waves of nostalgia took me by surprise.

I'd been hit by the memory bus the moment I crossed the county line. And the closer I got to home, the stronger it got. But the biggest kick in the gut by far was Elmwood Ice. It wasn't much to look at, but this was my Mecca. I could have sworn I heard a voice welcoming me home.

“Mr. Kiminski?”

I shook off the reverie and pasted a smile on my face as I stepped up to the reception desk with my hand outstretched, knocking the strap off my shoulder. “Hi, there. Just Vinnie.”

The teenage girl blinked and bit her bottom lip hard enough to draw blood. “H-h-hi. I’m, um—it’s nice to meet you, sir. Ronnie—I mean, Mr. Moore is expecting you.”

My grin widened. I was used to the occasional tongue-tied hockey fan recognizing me, but for some reason, it felt a little sweeter in my hometown. And Mr. Moore? I wanted to tell her the only Mr. Moore I knew was Ronnie and Nolan’s dad, but I caught myself.

Mr. M had passed away years ago, and while nothing in Elmwood had changed on the surface, everything was different now.

“Cool. Thank you...what was your name?”

“Erica. Erica Williams.”

“Oh, yeah? Any relation to Kirby Williams?”

“He’s my dad,” she squeaked.

Holy crap. How was that possible? Was I really old enough that my peers had teenage kids? Yeah, okay. Math wasn’t my thing, but I knew the answer to that one.

“No kidding?” I scratched my nape. “I played hockey on the juniors team with your dad.”

Her smile softened to something less manic. “He might have mentioned that...four or five hundred times.”

I chuckled. “Tell him I said hi.”

Erica nodded like a puppet. “I will. Um, I c-can escort you inside if you’d like.”

“Nah, it’s okay. I know the way,” I assured her. “Have a good one.”

“You too, Mr. Kimin—Vinnie.”

I gave her a thumbs-up and turned toward the visitors' entrance to the rink, my fingers looped around the strap of my bag.

The delicious blast of artificial ice was the truest welcome yet. I sucked in a lungful of refrigerated air as I made my way to the players' bench, where a familiar figure sat with his head bent over a whiteboard, drawing out plays with a teenage boy.

"Yo, is that Ronnie Mo?" I called out.

Ronnie started, snapping his head in my direction. A wicked grin split his face in two a moment later. "Well, look who's here."

I dropped my bag on the bench and opened my arms wide. "Bring it in, man."

He shoved the whiteboard at the teenager and flew at me, wrapping me in a tight Moore-style bear hug.

The Moores were the most effusively affectionate people I'd ever known. Their door was always open, their fridge and pantry always stocked for stray friends. So different than the quiet, drafty house where Dad and I had lived a few blocks away. Ours was bigger and our neighborhood was nicer, but I'd liked the Moores' house better.

Mr. and Mrs. Moore had always made me feel as though I were an honorary family member. They'd made room for me at their table, shared their food, their old skates and cold weather gear, invited me fishing, camping, to the movies... No doubt they'd felt sorry for me, but I didn't care. I'd gladly accepted their wholesome brand of charity. It had been chaotic and noisy but a hell of a lot cheerier than my house.

"God, it is great to see you," Ronnie enthused, blinking back tears as he stepped aside. My smile dipped then slipped into place again when he introduced the wide-eyed young man with a thick shock of auburn hair next to him. "Vin Kiminski, this is Gavin Lockey. He's my assistant this summer. He's playing for Holy Cross in the fall."

"No kidding? Holy Cross has a great program. Congrats," I replied, shaking Gavin's hand.

The kid's Adam's apple bobbed theatrically. "Thank you. Um...it's really great to meet you. I was required at birth to root for the Bruins, but I've secretly been a Slammers fan for years."

I shoved my hand into my pocket. "Thanks. I appreciate that. What position do you play?"

"Right wing, sometimes center."

Ronnie clapped Gavin's shoulder proudly. "He's a natural. Best the Eagles have had in years."

"Since you?" I teased.

"Pretty much," Ronnie countered, rocking on his heels.

Gavin cocked his head thoughtfully. "Huh. I thought Nolan led the old-timer best record by a forward in the league."

Ronnie gave a mock scowl. "Didn't you have somewhere to go?"

"I'm going, I'm going." Gavin handed over the whiteboard, grabbed his bag from the bench, and waved. "See ya tomorrow, Coach."

I waited for him to leave, my gaze fixed on the ice, weaving patterns and plays in my head in an effort to stay present. It would be far too easy to lose myself here.

"Nice kid," I commented, tilting my chin as I snatched the board from Ronnie's grasp.

"He's the same age you were when you left for college."

I didn't have much to say to that, so I punched his biceps lightly and grinned. "How are ya, man?"

To my relief, he grinned, seeming more like himself—cool and composed, not a trace of rogue emotion.

"I'm great."

We exchanged once-overs, sizing each other up after a few years of absence. Ronnie had lost his hair and filled out around the middle since the last time I saw him. I could tell he'd look

a lot like his old man in a few years...unlike Nolan, who was as fit and good-looking now as he was when—

Whoa. What the actual fuck?

I pushed weird thoughts aside and focused on Ronnie.

“It’s been a while.”

“Seven years,” he replied.

Fuck, that was awful. I’d come home for Mr. Moore’s funeral and stayed a total of three hours before hopping a private jet to New York for a game against Buffalo. That whole day was a horrible blur of tears and the weight of unbearable sadness. I remembered sitting on the tarmac in Buffalo, praying to a god I wasn’t sure I believed in anymore. I wasn’t religious. I didn’t have stock prayers to lean on, so I’d made shit up in my head. *Please let them be okay. Please let me be okay. Help us all make him proud.*

I’d played one of the best games of my life that night. I’d scored twice and defended the net like a beast, shoving anyone who dared cross me into the boards, hard enough to snap bones.

Don’t quote me, but I vaguely recalled being accused of breaking Volker’s nose and cracking Marquette’s collarbone. I believed it. First of all, there was blood everywhere and second, I’d been in pain and I’d wanted to cause pain.

I’d roared like a wild beast on center ice afterward, pounding my chest, tears streaming down my face, my stick raised to the heavens like an offering. The press had said I was possessed, the Sabres had said I was dangerous, and their fans had insisted I was mentally unhinged. I’d been all of the above, but hey, it was hockey.

My teammates had slapped high fives with me, then given me a wide berth. They had no idea what had gotten into me, and they were probably glad I was on their side. No one had ever asked if I was okay.

Except Nolan.

He was pissed at me for reasons we didn't talk about, but he'd still texted the next day to check up on me. Christ, and he was the one who'd just buried his father, yet he'd known I'd felt the loss almost as hard as Ronnie and he did.

I still felt it.

The point was, it was the sort of thing I'd expect Ronnie to do. Of the Moore brothers, Ronnie had a reputation for wearing his heart on his sleeve. He was selfless and kind... sometimes to a fault. While Nolan was matter-of-fact and stoic, and—

Okay, I did not need to be thinking about Nolan right now. I cleared my throat and swept my hand out to encompass the rink.

“I haven't seen this place in longer than seven years.”

Ronnie smiled. “It's a little tired, but there's been this wild renaissance in the area ever since that mystery writer moved to Fallbrook. Clive says there are more tourists staying at the Black Horse Inn than ever, and since Nolan hired a serious chef at the diner, reservations are required. If you don't book days in advance, you're out of luck.”

My eyes almost bugged out of my skull. “Are you kidding?”

“I'm very serious. And get this...last winter, our junior team went to the semis for the first time since Dad coached. I had more kids sign up than I thought lived here. Some were driving from two towns away to play hockey.”

I opened and closed my mouth, flabbergasted. There really wasn't a nice way to say “How and why and what the hell are these people thinking? This rink is a dump,” so I raked my teeth over my bottom lip to bide myself a few seconds, and finally came up with, “That's...amazing.”

“I know,” Ronnie agreed. “Those kids graduated and the new bunch is green as can be, which has put me in a bit of a pickle. I don't have the man or womanpower to devote to the older kids. My coaching staff has been me, Nolan, Gavin, and Chick Connery. Gavin is outta here in August, Chick is—”

“A dinosaur,” I finished. “He has to be eighty.”

“Seventy-five and he’s spry as ever, but I could use some help,” he said, somewhat tentatively...as if he thought I might refuse.

I kicked his shoe and grinned. “You know I’m in.”

Ronnie’s eyes lit up. “Yeah?”

“Of course. I’m here for you, man. Just tell me how much you need.”

“No more than two hours a couple of days a week, Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, and every other Saturday for games. Or whatever time you can spare. Nolan stepped in to help with the juniors while I concentrate on the younger kids, but it’s temp—”

“Hold up. I meant...how much *money* do you need? I can transfer whatever you need by tomorrow.”

“That’s generous of you, but I was hoping I could talk you into coaching the juniors,” Ronnie explained, looking slightly chagrined.

“Coach?” I repeated incredulously. “Coach kids? Dude, take my money.”

Ronnie shook his head. “No. Look, I know this is a big ask, but...your name will give the program a shot of life and some cred so we don’t lose customers to programs with nicer facilities.”

“I have a better solution...take the money and remodel this place.”

“I can do more with a little of your time than more of your money.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” I huffed.

“I assure you, it’s true,” he replied. “Hockey Rule Number One—”

“Put the puck in the net.”

“Okay, Rule Number Two...the long game is more important than the short one. I want to build this place into something special again. The way it was when we were younger.” He punched my biceps playfully. “C’mon, what’re you gonna do all summer? Go to some tropical resort, get a tan, and forget how to play hockey?”

“I will never forget how to play hockey,” I deadpanned.

“That’s what they say,” Ronnie singsonged. He sobered in a flash and looked away. “Hey, I don’t mean to pressure you. Just think about it. You can let me know at Sunday dinner at my mom’s. I told her I’d invite you and that I wouldn’t take no for an answer. So you have to come...or call her and break her heart yourself.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good.”

I pointed at his sneakers and lifted my bag. “Get your skates on. Let’s play.”

We tore across the ice, testing each other’s speed as we passed, and took shots on an open goal. We hadn’t played at the same level in almost two decades, but we still had fun.

We always had.

The Moore brothers were my original teammates. We used to challenge Nick Solomon and his cousins to scrimmages and shootouts before we really understood the rules of play. With skates, sticks, and a slab of ice, we’d had everything our hearts desired. All winter long, we’d sweat through multiple layers with runny noses and pink cheeks from the cold, skating till our blades were dull and our legs felt wobbly. Or until somebody’s parent called us in for the night.

Those were good memories, and I didn’t want to fuck them up by making new bad ones.

Coaching? *Shit*. That would never end well.

But maybe...maybe this was the angle I needed to patch things up with Nolan. Maybe Ronnie had orchestrated this as a ploy for that very reason.

I wanted that.

If Nolan did.

If he didn't, that was cool too. I was used to people hating me—irate fans, thwarted opponents, ex-girlfriends. I could deal with Nolan's scorn for another fifty or sixty years.

Or maybe it was an eternal sentence. Maybe he'd haunt me in the afterlife. Or maybe we'd been taking turns haunting each other for centuries and—okay, that was dumb.

This was the kind of stuff I spun over lately, though. I couldn't shake the feeling that if I ever hoped to have any peace, I had to make things right with Nolan.

THIRTY-SIX HOURS LATER, I was still thinking about him. Not good for my sanity.

I slipped my running shoes on at an ungodly hour, adjusted the volume on a Foo Fighters classic, and jogged down the dirt road leading into town, hoping a little exercise would help purge him from my mind and clear my head. Not sure it helped, 'cause everything about this place held a memory tied to Nolan Moore.

Like the three-hundred-year-old giant elm that divided Elmwood from Fallbrook. We'd perch on sturdy branches with our parents' binoculars and pretend we were pirates. We couldn't see shit through the leaves, but we'd make up stories about ghost sightings and zombies that scared us senseless.

The ancient cemetery adjacent to St. Finbarr's Catholic church gave us plenty of inspiration too. It was built in the mid-1800s and was deemed too small a hundred years later. A new church had been built on Adams Street, and the old one was abandoned...which made it a perfect place to drink contraband beer and hang out. As we got older, we'd invite girls we liked to join the party. Shockingly, only a couple took us up on the offer. Too spooky.

But Nolan and I had stood under that arch alone and— *No, don't go there.*

I eyed the church again before continuing my tour through town—the dentist's office on Madison, the picnic table in the park next to the playground equipment we'd all broken or gashed some body part on.

I jogged past my friends' houses, noting the old cracked sidewalks and elegant weeping willow trees. We'd swung on those branches, tripped over the uneven cement, and rode bicycles like demons through streets our ancestors had named after dead presidents and trees...some that would never survive a Vermont winter. Like Palm Street and Jacaranda Lane.

The thump of my sneakers on the pavement echoed along the empty streets when I reached Main and crossed the sidewalk in front of a new coffee shop I hadn't noticed my first day here. Rise and Grind. *Huh.*

I hadn't noticed the vegan bistro on the corner or the florist next to Henderson's either. I'd been so focused on the familiar that I'd failed to notice what had changed. Ronnie had mentioned a renaissance of sorts in town and I could see it now. There was a hint of something new mixed in with the old. Kind of interesting.

I wiped a bead of sweat from my brow as I turned left, and slowed to a stop in front of the Elmwood Diner.

Holy shit. The place looked...amazing.

The exterior was the same yet different. The log siding was cleaner than ever and the landscaping had been updated with ornamental rocks, maple saplings, and some delicate purple flowers.

The windows were bigger too, and they weren't covered with squiggly handwritten promises and deals, like "Best Burger Ever!" or "Buy One Get One Free Pancakes and Eggs!" It looked as though the parking lot had been repaved recently too. I doubted the local teenage crowd gathered here to kick it with a twelve-pack of Bud Light after dark.

The brush had been cleared in the area near the woods to make room for a wide firepit with Adirondack chairs adjacent to a three-tiered deck strung with fairy lights. Christ, this was a sophisticated restaurant, not a diner. I wondered if they still had the best omelets in town.

Great. Now I was hungry. I made a mental note to come back later as I pulled out my cell and scrolled through my playlist. I adjusted my earbuds...just as a familiar truck turned into the lot.

Well, what do you know?

NOLAN

“Mornin’.”

I snapped my head sideways with a start at the sight of the sweaty, sexy man grinning as he pulled his earbuds out. “Oh. What are you doing here?”

“Running.” Vinnie gestured to his shoes, then at the diner. “I almost forgot where I was. That’s not the greasy spoon I remember.”

I faltered for a moment, disarmed by the blatant awe in his tone. I tipped my baseball cap to meet his eyes, willing my heartbeat to settle into a normal rhythm.

“Uh, right. We did a huge remodel a few years ago, hired a chef, and expanded the menu. It’s been a big hit,” I reported, sounding vaguely like a marketing ad.

“What’s the coffee like?”

“Amazing.” I moved toward the entrance, keys in hand and a computer bag slung over my left shoulder.

“Cool. I could use a cup of joe.”

“Sorry. We’re not open,” I replied, unlocking the front door. “Try Rise and Grind.”

“Come on, Nol. I’ll pay triple for it. I need my java and...I want to talk to you.”

“About?”

“Ronnie’s proposal.”

I fixed him with a suspicious once-over before reluctantly inclining my head. “Fine. Come in. Take a seat at the counter.”

I dropped my computer in my office just off the kitchen and turned on the lights. Seconds later, the row of pendants over the counter lit up, framing Vinnie in a flattering aura as he studied his surroundings. I followed his gaze, knowing it had to look very different to him than he would have remembered.

The interior was an elegantly updated version of the family-friendly diner of our youth. The overall layout was the same, but the smoke-stained ceiling tiles had been replaced by open beams that made the small diner seem twice its actual size. The cigarette and candy vending machines were gone, and so was the reception desk with its glass-enclosed case filled with cheap toys for under a dollar and the old-timey cash register circa 1952. In its place was a small podium with a chalkboard panel.

Vinnie bypassed the marble counter and marched to the third booth on the left to inspect the new emerald leather upholstery, reminiscent of the funky color my dad had installed in the seventies.

I watched him run his fingers over the cool leather, unsurprised by the paralyzing wave of déjà vu. In a flash, I was sixteen again, flicking packets of artificial sweetener between the goalpost Ronnie made with his hands.

Vinnie’s right thigh and elbow were glued to mine, my heartbeat like a hummingbird’s wings, fast and furious. He was too close, yet not close enough.

My palms went clammy, my mouth dry. I sipped Coke and laughed a lot, hoping to appear normal when in fact, it took everything in me not to drop those stupid sugar packets and slip my hand under the table to cover Vinnie’s thigh.

He wanted me to touch him. I’d swear it. And I wanted it too. I wanted things I couldn’t make sense of in my head.

“Whatever happened to those tabletop jukeboxes?” he asked, pulling me from my reverie.

I tapped a few buttons on the industrial coffee machine and pulled two white mugs from an open shelf as he settled onto a barstool. “We sold them. Most of them didn’t work anymore, and the ones that did played the same two songs over and over. If I had to listen to ‘The Candy Man’ or ‘Raindrops Keep Fallin’ on My Head’ one more time, I was gonna go fucking bonkers. You still take your coffee black?”

Vinnie gave a thumbs-up and turned to study the artistic photography on the wall, peppering me with questions about the photo gallery of Elmwood’s finest eating pancakes and burgers that used to hang in the entrance. I might have answered, but my mind was foggy at best.

My gaze stuttered to a halt, admiring his thick biceps and broad shoulders. And all that gorgeous ink. Vinnie was an elite specimen...a professional athlete who’d obviously taken extremely good care of his body and his—

Holy fuck. What was wrong with me?

I slid a cup across the counter, swallowing hard when he flashed a brilliant smile in thanks and lifted the cup to his full, sexy mouth. Geez, I had to get my shit together. Drooling over Vinnie Kiminski was not acceptable. No way, no how.

“You okay?” He sipped his coffee, eyeing me curiously over the rim of his mug.

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “I’m fine.”

“Good. This is nice.” Vinnie extended an arm as if to encompass the diner. “You still serve burgers and fries?”

“We do.” I pulled a paper menu from a shelf under the counter. “This is the regular menu. We have daily chef specials too. Last night Jean-Claude made *coq au vin* with herbed basmati rice, steamed spinach, and fresh bread. He was talking about *osso buco* tonight, but I won’t know for sure till he comes in with the printed specialty menu.”

I whistled appreciatively. “That sounds incredible. Where’d you find your chef?”

“Montreal.”

“Montreal?” he repeated. “What’s the story?”

Fair question. Montreal was close, but talented chefs didn’t clamor for gigs in sleepy New England towns just because, and Elmwood wasn’t a tourist destination. People came to visit friends or family members who’d inexplicably chosen to settle here. Or they took jobs nearby and found affordable housing in Elmwood.

Or they fell in love, but it didn’t work out, and the outsider stayed.

“JC is my ex.”

Vinnie lifted a brow. “Oh.”

I pasted a passable smile on my face and poured myself a cup of coffee. “So, Ronnie wants you to coach. And you said?” I prodded.

“I said I’d think about it, but I don’t know. It was practically my job to invoke terror on the ice—play dirty, protect my guys and the net, and do whatever was necessary to make sure the good guys won and the bad guys didn’t. I know how to *do* it, not *teach* it. Maybe you could talk him into taking my money.”

“You might have inherited your dad’s educator genes.”

Vinnie scoffed. “Doubtful.”

We sipped our coffee in silence, lost in our own thoughts.

“Are you staying with your dad?”

“No,” Vinnie replied. “He’s in London for the summer, so I suppose I could have, but I bought the Asburys’ old place. It’s private and it’s in good condition.”

The Asbury estate was more like a log cabin on steroids than a basic house. It was situated at the very edge of town, accessible via a winding dirt road, and surrounded by woods. The perfect spot for someone who needed a little privacy. But it was a lot of house for one person.

I didn’t say that, though. I went with, “I heard the Collinses redid the kitchen and bathrooms before they moved

to Burlington last September.”

“Yeah, they did some nice work. You should come by and see it.”

Like that was ever gonna happen, I mused sarcastically.

I cocked my head. “How long are you staying?”

“Through the summer...I think.”

“Then you should coach for Ronnie.”

Vinnie widened his eyes comically. “*You* think I should do it. Why?”

“Ronnie could use a break. If that’s you...so be it,” I said flatly.

He furrowed his brow hard enough to give himself a headache. “Now I’m really suspicious.”

“Don’t be. It’s a simple proposition.”

“But?”

I sipped my coffee thoughtfully before setting the mug on the counter, my gaze locked on his. The ensuing stare-down was epic. Standing gave me a bit of an advantage, but Vinnie’d had years of practice intimidating opponents on the ice.

I finally looked away and leaned against the counter, arms crossed. “But...I think you’ll walk away when it gets tough or when you get a better offer, or when you just get bored of this place. Like you always do.”

“Ouch. That’s gonna leave a mark.”

“I’m not being a dick. I’m being honest. Your life isn’t here...Ronnie’s is. You can walk away whenever you want and not lose a thing. It’s a little different for the rest of us,” I continued conversationally.

“And this is the part where you’re not being a dick?”

“Trust me, it is,” I huffed. “Just to give you a little background, Ronnie took on a boatload of debt and has been in over his head since he convinced the Thompsons to sell him the rink five years ago. He’d been treading water, trying to

keep it going while raising his daughter on his own. The effort is paying off, but he still isn't quite there. Sure, an influx of money would help immediate concerns, but Ronnie is convinced that your star power will do the trick."

"And what do you think?"

"He's probably right. Shaking things up is the only way to succeed."

"It seems to have worked here," he commented, swiveling on his bar stool.

"Exactly. I took a chance by bringing Jean-Claude in. No one in town liked my plan. I can't tell you how many times I was told that my poor dad was rolling over in his grave. They gave JC a wide berth at first—friendly but not too friendly. But once they tasted his *beignets*, those same folks welcomed him with open arms. Of course, it helped that we kept most of the old menu too." I lifted my forefinger. "Except for that terrible beet salad my dad loved."

"Good call," Vinnie hooted. "That was fuckin' awful."

His smile lit his eyes and catapulted him into a godlike level of handsome. It was so bright and unexpected, it took my breath away. Nineteen years ago, that unfettered grin would have melted me into a puddle of goo. He'd thrilled me and scared me, unintentionally throwing me into a new phase where self-doubt threatened everything in my world—my dreams, my escape plan, my sanity.

Dramatic, yet very fucking true.

But now I was back to neutral. I'd had a couple of days to get used to the idea of Vinnie being around and in spite of our awkward history, his presence didn't have to affect me. He was just my brother's best friend. That was it.

"More coffee?" I asked as my shoulders slipped a notch or two from my ears.

"Sure. Thanks."

I refilled our mugs and slid a glass of water to him, letting him redirect the conversation back to Ronnie and the rink. He

asked a dozen or more questions about the youth league programs, peppering in memories from the days my dad coached us. Vinnie was animated, amusing, and seemingly unperturbed by my stiff cordiality. I told myself this was good practice if he was going to be around all summer, but ten minutes of overly polite conversation was my limit. I was just too aware of this man.

Damn it.

“Sorry, but...I should get to work,” I said apologetically.

“No problem.” He set a twenty on the table and stood. “Thanks for the coffee.”

“It’s on the house,” I insisted, pushing the money toward him.

“No, no. I support local businesses. Keep the change.”

His over-the-top wink practically begged me to roll my eyes, but I had more to say. We had to clear the air...at least a little.

“Um...hey, even if you don’t make it through summer, your presence alone is good for business for the whole town. ‘NHL Hero Comes Home’ and all that bullshit. If you don’t mind the attention, and I’m assuming you don’t—come help out at the rink. It’s easy and fun. You won’t regret it.”

Vinnie rubbed his scruffy jaw thoughtfully. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

I smiled tentatively and raised my hand for a high five. “Great.”

“But only if you’re my assistant.”

“What?” I pulled my hand away before he could slap it, furrowing my brow. “No way. Gavin is perfectly capable of ___”

“Nope. It has to be you.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“ ’Cause...” Vinnie blew out an exasperated breath. “I want to fix this. Me and you. And I can’t do that if you ignore

me.”

And just like that, the invisible wall between us shook in its foundation.

“We’re fine,” I bluffed.

Vinnie arched a brow. “You’re mad at me. I know why, and I get it. We don’t have to go into it now, but at the very least, we should call a truce ’cause if we’re working with impressionable teens, you really oughtta be nice to me, Moore.”

My mouth opened in a perfect O. “I’ve been perfectly civil to you. More civil than you deserve, Kiminski.”

“See? That wasn’t nice,” he teasingly scolded. “I can’t believe I’m the voice of reason here.”

I fixed him with a bored sardonic stare. “You are never the voice of reason.”

“I kind of am now.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“Yes, I am.”

“No, you—oh, my God.” I pointed at the door. “Good-bye, Vinnie.”

He snickered, flashing a lopsided devil-may-care grin my way. “Wait up. Let’s seal the deal on this truce.”

“Oh, brother.”

“I’m serious. Let’s shake hands, hug it out, kiss and make up, or all of the above.”

I regarded his outstretched hand suspiciously and cautiously slid my palm against his. “Fine. Truce.”

“See, that didn’t sound friendly. You ruined it. Gimme a hug,” he demanded, pulling me into a bear hug, squeezing me hard enough to crack a rib.

I let out an *oomph* of surprise and tried to wriggle out of his hold. He took the hint and loosened his grip. I knew it was all in good fun or at least meant to playfully rile me up, but

when he bent to kiss my cheek, I turned my head just as he swooped in and *bam!* Our lips collided in an actual, honest-to-God kiss.

A fucking kiss.

I couldn't speak for Vinnie, but I was too shocked to move.

We'd been here before.

Sure, it had been almost twenty years ago, but I was positive neither of us was looking for a repeat. *I* certainly wasn't. Any second now, he'd back up, swipe his hand across his mouth and make some ridiculous joke to right the balance. But he didn't.

He softened his lips and molded them to mine, tilting his chin as if testing a new angle. And suddenly, this felt real.

Oh, no.

Oh...no.

I pushed out of his arms, sucking in a gulp of air.

Holy shit.

My heart beat like a drum, and my mouth was bone dry.

"I think—I think we're good now," I rasped.

Vinnie's shell-shocked expression gave way to something unreadable. He scratched his nape and stepped aside.

"Yeah. Uh...what time is practice?"

"Thursday at three."

He nodded and tried a smile that never reached his eyes. "Cool. See ya, Nol."

I froze in place as the door swung shut behind him, willing my heartbeat to calm the fuck down.

Did that happen?

It wasn't real. I knew that, but he didn't pull away. He lingered, he pressed closer, he...he kissed me.

Reality check: Vinnie was a notorious prankster. He was always doing something to push boundaries—make you laugh,

make you mad, make you stop taking life so damned seriously. Silly was his fallback language. If lighthearted pranks and teasing kept some uncomfortable parts of the past at bay, I was all for it.

But I was still confused. Very confused.

TEENAGERS WERE A NOTORIOUSLY tough age group. Spiked testosterone levels often led to excess energy, rough play, bouts of misguided anger, and frustration. If you factored in school, friends, family, social media BS, and hormones, you were dealing with human powder kegs one spark away from blowing a fuse. And that was just on the ice.

“Pass the puck, Kinney,” I called out.

“I was open. You could have passed to me,” Jason Umboldt growled, holding his stick in the air as he skated the blue line.

“You weren’t open,” Kinney argued. “Max was all over you.”

“Like a flea. I could have shaken him off, no problem.”

“Hey!” Max snarled, charging forward.

I blew my whistle and raised my arms in a universal “Stop fucking around” gesture, prepared to dive between the two sixteen-year-olds. “Cool it. Let’s try it again and—”

“Yo, what did I miss, Coach?”

Ten awestruck teens spun in a comical one-eighty, their mouths agape as Vinnie Kiminski glided toward us, his signature cocky grin locked and loaded. My brain took an unwelcome inventory, noting that his black workout pants hugged his quads and his muscular chest tested the seams of his pullover. He was big all over...almost twice the size as when we were the same age as these kids—sixteen and seventeen.

I used to be as in awe of Vin then as they were now.

He'd been faster, stronger, tougher...and hands down, the coolest kid on the team. And the most fun. His juvenile locker room pranks were still the stuff of legend—putting unwrapped, soggy mini candy bars in everyone's skates or leaving tiny paper cups filled with water in helmets.

He'd had the sort of contagious energy that fueled the rest of the team. We'd worked hard and played hard 'cause we'd wanted to keep up with him. He was the sun, the rest of us mere planets caught in his gravity.

Nineteen years later, his magnetic aura burned brighter than ever. I wanted to claim immunity, but my heart was racing. In fact, it hadn't stopped racing since he'd come by the diner the other day.

I'd analyzed that kiss over and over, touching my lips as I dissected the second his mouth met mine.

Ugh. I was such an idiot.

It had always been this way with Vinnie and me. There was always something to get over or get through, so we could act normal around everyone else. Today...I just had to get through this practice and hope like hell my expression was a tad more neutral than this gaggle of teens. Their collective unabashed amazement was kind of funny.

I hadn't warned them about a possible hockey superstar sighting, 'cause I wasn't sure he'd show up. And if Vinnie was seriously considering coaching this summer, I wanted that news to come from him. Not me.

Of course, when he got bored or got a better offer elsewhere, I'd be the one left doling out explanations.

At the moment, that didn't seem like such a big deal. Elmwood's Great One was in the building.

The kids surrounded him like eager puppies, accepting fist bumps and high fives, reverently whispering his pro nickname, "Kimbo" before one brave teen blurted,

"What are you doing here?"

“I’m your new coach,” Vinnie pronounced. He skated away from the chorus of “Whoa! For real? No way!” and came to a stop at my side, shaving ice as he flung his arm over my shoulder. “I’m helping Coach Nolan out this summer. We’re gonna whip you into shape and get you ready to play the best hockey of your lives. Who’s in?”

Ten enthusiastic hands shot into the air. Vinnie nodded his approval while the teens gathered their courage and started firing questions at him.

“What’s it feel like to hold the Stanley Cup? Is it heavy?”

“Was it better winning the first time or the second time?”

“That play you made in the semi-finals against Toronto, third period...the one where you dinked the puck into the net from that weird angle? Can you teach us how to do that?”

“Did you really break Weber’s jaw?”

Vinnie answered them as they came. “The cup is heavy as fuck, and both wins were equally sweet. I was hoping for a hat trick, but two is cool. I think I remember that move, so yeah... let’s do it. As for Weber...I broke his nose and I felt bad about it. Not at that moment, ’cause I wanted to win and his face must have been in my way.” He shushed the uproarious laughter with a subtle wave. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding. It was an accident. We’re buddies.”

I let a few more questions in, then blew my whistle. “Let’s get to work. We aren’t here to chat, are we?”

“Fuck no,” Vinnie replied, punching his fist in the air. “Let’s do this.”

“One touch pass drill. Get warmed up again. Go.” I shoed them off but motioned for Vin to hang back with me.

His eyes darted excitedly around the rink as he hooked his thumb behind him. “I’ll grab my stick and meet you in a sec. What do we want to do first? I’ve got a few ideas to—”

“Great. Just cool it with the F-bombs, Kiminski.”

“Huh?” His thick brows met over the bridge of his nose.

“You heard me. They’re kids, not hardened old-timers.”

“They’re teenagers,” he corrected. “Teenagers swear all the time.”

“Not here they don’t,” I countered matter-of-factly. “We weren’t allowed to swear when we were their age.”

He smiled. “True. Your dad would have strung us from the rafters.”

“That hasn’t changed. I mean, not the rafters part, but...we run a respectable program with—”

“Got it. My bad. No lecture needed. I’ll watch my fuckin’ mouth,” he griped without heat.

“See that you fucking do.”

Vinnie grinned. “There’s my grumpy Nolan. Missed you, man. I’ve gone a whole day and a half with no one riding my ass. Kind of fuckin’ boring.”

“Very funny.” I glanced over at the kids showing off their speed and stick-handling prowess for Vinnie’s benefit. “Hey, they’re excited to have you here, but I doubt they’re going to be able to concentrate for long. You can go over any drills you want and show off your tricks. We can get back to business on Tuesday.”

“Okay. So, I gotta ask...what’s the deal here? Why don’t you practice more often? And you need more players. How do you scrimmage with ten?” He rubbed his scruffy jaw as he studied the teenagers across the rink.

“They’re just having fun, Vin. We don’t have the manpower to organize a camp for the older kids...just the pee wees. But we are part of the Forest League, so we—”

“What the fuck is the Forest League?” He snorted incredulously. “It sounds like a bunch of Smokey Bear park rangers, not hockey players. What genius came up with that idea?”

I laughed ’cause he was right. It was a terrible name. “Ronnie. It’s a newish collaboration of club teams from Fallbrook, Pinecrest, and Wood Hollow. We practice Tuesdays

and Thursdays and play every other weekend. Our next game is in two weeks.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah. We have a few scrimmages and a final competition weekend at the end of summer. It’s a good off-season filler for these guys. Otherwise, they wouldn’t play again till late August or September.”

Vin cocked his head thoughtfully. “I’m no genius, but it seems like you’d generate more money and give the kids more ice time, which in theory should make them better players if you organized a real camp for this age group. I’m not talking one-week deals. You need a six-week program...at least.”

“Like I said, we don’t have the resources. And until recently, we didn’t have the interest.”

He grunted in disapproval. “Christ, I wish Ronnie had said something. I’ve offered to invest and he’s always turned me down. I would have—”

“Come home sooner and played hero for a weekend?” I supplied, moving into his personal space. “Don’t go there, and don’t judge something you know nothing about. If you want to help him now, be *their* hero.”

I gestured toward the rowdy group of boys stealing glances our way as they ran through a passing drill.

“Fine.” He pulled away, skating backward. “Let’s see what these bad news forest rangers can do.”

VINNIE

Holy crap. These kids were terrible. Their stick handling was sloppy; they were slow skaters and puck hogs. The only thing truly going for any of them was their love of the game.

They recited stats and picked apart championship plays from a decade or so ago. They each had a passion for the sport, but no one seemed to have any real drive...or desire to become truly good at it. They embodied a self-fulfilling prophecy to become sofa coaches, swigging beers while yelling at the players on the television to do shit they'd never been able to do themselves.

Now, that didn't mean they didn't have potential.

And it didn't mean Nolan was a bad coach. In fact, Max was a decent defender, Jason was an accurate passer, Kinney was the fastest by far, and Jenkins showed no fear in the net. Problem...Max's aggression was a tad reckless, which was saying a lot coming from me, and my dead grandmother had skated faster than Jason. If Kinney was my teammate, I would have tackled his ass for hogging the puck, and honestly, Jenkins had to learn some self-preservation skills or he'd need a whole new set of teeth.

And those were just the kids whose names I could remember. The others were equally bad. Whatever redeeming qualities they had were offset by egregious traits that would put them in the sin bin or relegate them to the bench. *Hmm*. Definitely the bench.

See, this was why I'd never be a good coach. I had zero patience for mediocrity...or anything at all, really. I hadn't always been on winning teams, and I'd known professionals who'd struggled to achieve their full potential, but they fucking tried, damn it. These kids didn't have killer instincts or the drive to be the best.

Maybe my bar was way too high. Or maybe I just sucked at this. Don't get me wrong. I think the kids liked me. I kept it fun, showed off a little bit, answered a bazillion NHL-type questions, and grinned through clenched teeth when their passes missed the mark time after time. But could they actually learn from me?

Meh, maybe?

Nolan, on the other hand, was a natural. He was patient, yet firm. He praised progress and offered constructive advice. He reminded me a lot of his dad—a softer-spoken version.

“All right, gang. I'll see you next week,” Nolan said, calling an end to practice.

“Will you be here too, Coach?” someone asked.

When eleven sets of eyes darted in my direction, I realized the question was for me. “Uh...yeah. I'll be here.”

They broke out in a chorus of “all rights” with a few whoops and a couple of “fuck yeahs” that earned the offending party a no-nonsense glare from Coach Nolan. I slapped high fives with a smile fixed on my face and made sure it stayed in place until the last teen was off the ice.

Nolan scooped up a cone. “Well? What'd you think?”

“They're terrible. Like...really fucking awful,” I deadpanned.

He huffed indignantly. “No, they aren't. They're just kids.”

“So what? I'm pretty damn sure we were better at their age.”

“You were. The rest of us weren't,” he replied cryptically, skating to the next cone.

“You were good too.”

Nolan shrugged. “I did okay in college, but I was never going to go pro.”

I watched him glide away, picking up cones and stacking them under his arm till it looked as if he were holding an orange torpedo. I followed him off the ice and into the equipment room, perching my ass on a steel bench against the wall while he hefted pucks and cones onto an open shelf.

“Where’d you go to college? Minnesota or Wisconsin? I forgot,” I lied.

He sat on the opposite end of the bench and untied his laces. “Wisconsin. I was there for two years before transferring to UCLA.”

“UCLA,” I repeated. I knew he’d transferred and had moved to California, but I couldn’t remember why. Or maybe I’d never asked, so... “Why? You were at a Division One school, why transfer to D-two?”

“I stopped playing after my freshman year.”

“Why?”

“You sound like a two-year-old,” he snarked. “Why, why?”

“Well?”

Nolan pulled his sneakers out from under the bench, wiggled his feet into them, and bent to tie his laces. He took his sweet time looping the lace around his thumb and double-knotting it...right foot first, then left. Same as always. It was a superstition we’d shared when we were kids. Right, left, right, left.

I was about to kick that left sneaker to get his attention just as he straightened and twisted to face me.

“I came out.”

That was it. Three words.

And the crazy thing was that it wasn’t news. I knew he was out. I’d personally known he was gay since he was sixteen. But I’d never heard the story or had been brave enough to ask

how he'd told the rest of the world. Ronnie had mentioned it in passing once. I'd probably said, "That's cool" or something passive and neutrally supportive. Something that in no way reflected how I'd really felt.

True...I hadn't seen Nolan in seven years, but still...this was something we'd never ever discussed. It felt momentous and important. And maybe something I could use to address that sort of accidental kiss the other day.

But of course, I flubbed it.

"Came out of what?"

Nolan rolled his eyes. "Can you ever be serious?"

"Fuck serious. Serious is the worst. Serious ruins everything." I leaned forward and braced my elbows on my knees. "And...I knew you came out. Ronnie told me a while ago."

He inclined his chin slightly. "Yeah, I was nineteen—homesick, heartsick, and...believe it or not, I'd started to hate hockey."

I bugged my eyes in dismay. "What?"

"No joke. I passionately hated it. I hated going to practice, I hated my coach, my teammates, I hated the smell of the ice. Nothing about it made me happy anymore, and it showed. I became a permanent fixture on the bench."

"Fuck. That's...bleak."

"I know. Maybe I wasn't the best forward on my team, but I'd always been *one* of the best. I became the worst. It was like I was punishing myself or something. My folks suggested a change would do me good. They wanted me to come home. Instead, I transferred to the other side of the country, came out to them over the phone, and delved headfirst into becoming my best gay self."

My heart tripped over itself in a furious round of cartwheels and somersaults. I swiped my sweaty palms on my thighs and squinted. "How'd that go for you?"

Nolan chuckled. “Very well, thank you. I played hockey on a club team, graduated with a business degree, got my master’s, and worked for a set designer in Hollywood...until my dad died.”

I gulped. “Did you ever want to go back to LA?”

“Are you kidding?” he scoffed. “I dreamed about it every damn night for the first two years I was home. I loved LA. It’s so different from here. Manic, fast-paced, plastic in some ways, more gritty and real in others. And you can’t beat the weather. You’ll never hear me complain about seventy-degree days in December. Ever.”

I gave a half laugh, sobering quickly. “But you stayed here.”

“Yeah. And I rarely plot my escape anymore, either. I don’t need to. I have nothing to hide.” Nolan looked away briefly and flipped his palms up. “I didn’t mean to go into all that. I just...I found my passion for hockey again, but it’s nuanced now. I love the smell of the rink. I love sharp blades and smooth ice. I love the sound of the Zamboni, and I love teaching younger kids. You’re right...we don’t have the strongest group of juniors this year. Maybe one or two of them will play in college instead of eight or nine. That’s okay. I hope they enjoy every second of it ’cause one day, they’ll hang up their skates for good and stick to pleasure skating. They’ll be content to watch their kids play and hope one of them will make this town proud. Like you.”

“That’s...depressing.”

“No, it’s not. That’s real life for most of us, Vin. My point is...hockey is fun. It took losing it for me to appreciate it. And I’m thrilled those guys want to be here in the summer when they could be out fishing out on Carlton Creek or smoking pot in the lot behind St. Finbarr’s,” he said. “It means they love it too. They don’t have to go pro to learn and enjoy.”

Christ, he sounded like *my* dad. A hockey professor instead of an English and history one.

“You’re good at this, Nol. Fuck, you don’t need me at all.”

“Not true. We need your name...remember?” Nolan singsonged.

“Right.” I bopped him upside the head as I stood. “Text me when you need me next. If you already told me, I wasn’t listening. Do you have my number?”

“If you haven’t changed it, then yes.”

I nodded. “It’s the same.”

“Okay. Thanks for today. And um...I apologize for being a dick about it earlier. I just—”

“Hate me?” I made a funny face to defuse the sting of honesty.

“No. I don’t hate you. We’re good.” He pulled his keys from his pocket and jiggled them meaningfully as he moved to the door. “I need to go to the diner. Maybe I’ll see you at my mom’s on Sunday.”

I followed him and did my best to get ahold of that flip-flop, fluttery feeling in my chest. I wasn’t sure what was going on with me. Maybe I was at some weird nexus where nostalgia aired some unwanted truths from the past.

That kiss the other day didn’t help. I could bury that shit in a heartbeat and I knew Nolan would let me, but instinctively, I knew that nonstop fucking fluttering wasn’t going anywhere now. I had something to say, and this was the best place to do it.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted.

Nolan shot an inscrutable look at me, his hand on the doorknob. “For what? The kiss?”

“No. That was—no. Not that. It was...weird maybe, but not a big deal, right?” I didn’t wait for him to respond. If I was going to open an old wound, I had to rip the bandage off fast. “I’m talking about...when we were kids. I’m not sorry it happened, but I-I’m sorry for the way I left and—”

“Stop.” He slapped his hand on the door and faced me. “Jesus, Vin. Where the fuck did that come from?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about it for a while. Months...maybe years.” I swallowed around the Sahara in my mouth and licked my lips. “Look, I want to clear the air once and for all. I don’t want us to walk on eggshells, trying to avoid any hot topics. I know you’re pissed at me for that night after the graduation party, but—”

“No, I’m not,” he intercepted. “Not even close. Sure, my ego took a hit, but I got over it.”

“Right. Okay,” I replied woodenly.

“Like you said, we were kids, and at the end of the day, it was just a kiss.”

I expected a wave of insta-relief to wash over me, not an indignant desire to defend our younger selves.

Let it go, let it go.

I couldn’t do it.

“It wasn’t just a kiss.”

Nolan raised a single brow. “What was it?”

“There were other...parts involved,” I said awkwardly. “Your hands and...my dick. And for the record, I’m talking about when we were teenagers, not the other day.”

He didn’t say anything for a long minute. “I remember. Did that...mess you up or something?”

“What? No, I—” I sucked in another deep breath and scratched my head. “Okay, yeah. It did...a little.”

“And that’s why you stayed away? You were afraid I’d out you or blab about a one-time drunken experiment when we were sixteen and seventeen?”

“We weren’t drunk,” I corrected. “And no, I didn’t think you’d say anything, but I—”

“Hey.” Nolan moved from the door and came to stand in front of me. His gaze was serious and steady...like him. “We were teenagers, Vin. Yes, my feelings got hurt, but I grew up and I got over it, and I dealt with my own shit. Coming out was no party, and I spent too much time in my head for years.

That's on me, not you. But if this is something you need to hear, listen up...one night with a guy doesn't make you gay or even bi. You're just...you. And even that silly kiss at the diner is just...not a big deal."

"Then...why are you pissed at me?" I demanded.

He pursed his lips. "I don't think this a good time or place to hash out the past or—"

"It's a great time. Let's go, Moore. Give it to me."

A heavy silence fell between us.

"Okay. Fine. I'm mad that you weren't there for him," he replied, his tone matter-of-fact. "You got a taste of the sweet life, experienced some fame and fortune, playing the game our dad taught you to play, and you never once showed up for him."

"Your dad? I came home for the funeral. I—"

"No, dumbass. Ronnie." Nolan leveled me with a harsh stare and continued. "Where were you when he tore his ACL, got addicted to painkillers, cut from the team at Michigan, and spent six months in rehab? Where were you when his wife OD'd and left him with a newborn to raise on his own? You never even fucking met Jasmine. And you haven't seen Mary-Kate since Dad's funeral...seven fucking years ago."

"I know, but—"

"Yeah, I get it. You're important. But I also think you're a selfish prick, Vinnie. I think you love the spotlight and the accolades, and I think it must feel really fucking good to come home a hero. But if you ask me, a real hero comes around for the hard parts too. At the very least, they give more than a passing 'Everything cool, man?' " He swiped his hand through his hair and sighed. "And now *I* feel like an asshole. But you asked, so...there you go. That's why I'm pissed at you, and that's why I don't trust you. I'm glad you're here now. The whole fucking town is happy to have the great Kimbo in our midst. But if history has taught me anything, I expect you to lose interest well before summer is up. And who knows when we'll see you next?"

Holy crap.

I hadn't been prepared for a thorough beatdown. I felt as though I'd been punched in the gut and knocked out by an uppercut to the jaw. The cartoon version of me currently had tweeting birds and twinkling stars circling my head.

I gaped at him, unsure if I should defend myself or keep my mouth shut.

Nolan exhaled. He hooked his thumb toward the door and opened it, seemingly out of words.

"Wait. I don't know what to say to all that." I held my hands open in surrender. "I'm sorry."

"Fuck, Vin, you don't get it. You don't owe *me* an apology. You probably owe Ronnie one, but he'll brush it off. What you can do is be honest. Stay or go. Help him or don't. I hate seeing him accept less than he deserves. Especially from people he loves." He flattened his hand over the doorjamb. "As for me and you...the past is the past. That night didn't mean anything. It was teenage hormones gone wild. I know that. All we have is now, and my biggest immediate concern is for my family. I want my brother to succeed, I want his daughter to grow up knowing she's well loved, and I want my mom to be happy. That's it. You're an old friend, and if you can play any part in that...awesome."

"Uh. Okay."

"Great. So...see you Sunday?"

I gulped and bit the inside of my cheek. "Yeah. Sunday."

Nolan gave me a thumbs-up and walked away while I stared at the chipped gray paint on the back of the door, rattled to the core.

It wasn't that he'd said anything I didn't know. It was that he had no idea that everything I'd done or hadn't done over the past nineteen years was directly related to that night.

That night.

That night was a turning point.

That night was the beginning of me and the end of me all in one fell swoop.

That night changed me for good and forever. It had scared the fuck out of me, and I didn't do well with fear.

Fear made me hard, it made me mean, it made me dangerous—great qualities for a D-man. But it also weakened me in ways no one could understand.

Well, maybe Nolan, but after almost two decades, it was probably too late to stir that pot. He'd said it himself...the past was over and done. I was less worried about my relationship with Ronnie. I loved that guy and he knew it.

Nolan...

He was a different story.

Maybe I was being an idiot, but everything about that night haunted me. It lived in the shadowy parts of my brain and popped up randomly. It faded when my focus was hockey. But I didn't have hockey anymore. What I had was a lot of churned-up emotional bullshit I couldn't figure out how to process.

If I'd come home to rid myself of whatever guilt or shame I'd attached to that night, Nolan had set me free. He'd moved on.

But I hadn't.

I WASN'T KNOWN for my deep thoughts, so it was vaguely alarming that I couldn't shut my brain off at night. My conversation with Nolan was on constant replay.

It wasn't just a kiss.

No, I wasn't talking about that semi-innocent lip mash at the diner the other day. That was nothing. The summer before I left town for college...and for good? Those kisses were burned in my memory. He'd seemed so clear-headed and unaffected by the past. Me? I lay in the dark with my hand

wrapped around my dick, reliving ancient events for the third night in a row.

Contrary to Nolan's claim, it wasn't just one night. It was a string of summer days where every glance and touch had led to something so unexpected, I'd had no way to shield myself from the avalanche of...desire.

At seventeen, I'd kissed a boy and I'd liked it.

Then I'd craved it.

My childhood was filled with memories of Nolan. My best friend's little brother laughing at all of my jokes, taking every dare, and following me on some ill-advised adventures.

I couldn't figure out what had changed that last summer.

Why had my pulse raced whenever he smiled at me? Why had I needed his attention? Why had I manufactured ways to be near him...to touch him? His bony elbow, his sun-kissed shoulder...anything.

I'd lain awake with my hand on my dick back then too, drumming up porny fantasies of Sandy Martin's tits, only to have my subconscious switch the channel on me. Instead of soft curves and the taste of strawberry-tinted lip-gloss, I conjured images of Nolan's tanned, toned abs and the way his swim trunks accentuated that sexy dip where his V-line met his pelvis.

And that ass. Perfectly round and muscular...we grew up changing in and out of hockey gear, PJs, and swim trunks. I'd seen his junk and he'd seen mine dozens of times. The difference was that I'd suddenly *noticed* him.

Yeah. That was one big, scary hint. Was I gay or something? Bi, probably. I liked girls and by the time I was seventeen, I'd had plenty of sex. But I'd never obsessed about those girls like I obsessed over Nolan. I'd jerked off to strange snapshots of him undressing in the locker room, tying a towel around his waist, jokingly showing off his biceps. Even his scrawny muscles had done something for me.

I'd planted my feet on the mattress of my childhood bed, gripped my dick, and let it fly. Nineteen years later, I was at it

again. I was older, wiser. I'd had more women in my bed than I should ever admit. Beautiful women, amazing lovers, fun companions...but I couldn't picture their faces or their bodies to save my life.

Only Nolan.

I shoved my boxer briefs off and kicked the sheet to the end of my king-sized bed, closed my eyes, and stroked myself. My cock was a fucking steel rod. I thumped it against my lower abs a couple of times, smearing precum over the head to use as lube before going at it in earnest.

The teenage boy in my fantasies was replaced by the cautious man with broad shoulders and a sharp gaze. Nolan was a good-looking guy and damn, he had a sexy mouth. So sexy, I'd wanted to shove my tongue inside, rip the buttons off his shirt, and plaster my body all over his. Like we'd done that night so many years ago.

And there went my dirty mind...

Those two boys kissing tucked in the arch of an abandoned church were replaced by two grown-ass men, chest to chest, sucking face as we pressed our cocks together and moved along to some ancient rhythm we knew well. I tweaked my left nipple and jacked myself a little faster, a little harder, wondering what he'd say if he knew I wanted him.

Just one more time.

I wanted to feel him, see him, touch him—so much that it hurt. How big was he now? How thick did he get when he was strung out and ready to combust?

In my mind, my hand was on his cock, not mine. I picked up the pace, biting his bottom lip and sucking it better while I rubbed him like a genie in a bottle. And when my orgasm tripped along my spine, it was his too. I painted my abs with jizz and grunted through an epic round of full-body shivers.

I wiped sweat from my brow with my free hand and stared up at the ceiling.

Holy fuck. This was some fucked-up kind of torture. Leave it to me to have a bisexuality awakening moment with my best

friend's brother...who at best, tolerated me.

Could I actually survive a summer of this?

MY BIGGEST FEAR about retirement was having too much time on my hands, which was especially dangerous in a place like Elmwood. But I'd done a decent job of keeping busy so far. I wiled away hours chatting with locals at the diner, the bakery, the coffee shop, and of course, at the rink. I'd also met up with Ronnie and some old high school buddies for drinks and a game of pool at the Black Horse Inn. And it was...nice.

I'd stumbled through an awkward apology to Ronnie at the bar while our friends argued over stripes and solids, and it had gone pretty much as Nolan had predicted.

Ronnie had given me a confused look, then punched my shoulder and laughed. "Don't do that, Vin. We're good, man. And you're here now. Cheers."

That was it.

It should have felt like a weight had been lifted from my chest, but guilt was a stubborn bitch. It clung to me in ways it never had before. I didn't get it. Ronnie didn't like negativity of any kind, and he didn't want to talk about regrets. Nolan had cleared every proverbial cobweb out of the closet the other day. He didn't hate me for our teenage fumbling and once he'd blasted me for being a bad friend to his brother, he'd been sincere about moving on. The past was the past.

I could be here in this tiny town on the outskirts of nowhere and just...be.

Except I was having a hard time relaxing.

Sunshine drenched the swath of lawn leading to the pond behind my house, sparkling like diamonds strewn on a sheet of glass. It was so peaceful. No traffic, no airplane noise...only quacking ducks and twittering birds.

Like the sparrow that had landed on my deck railing, eyeing the crumbs of peanut butter toast on the plate balanced on the armrest of my Adirondack chair. I went as still as possible, fascinated by the bird's daring. The little fucker wanted that bread badly.

I found myself watching for blue jays and cardinals and grinning like a fool when one perched on the branches of the beech tree beside the deck. The riot of colors enchanted me. Blue skies, majestic green trees, red wings. Things I noticed as a kid and hadn't in a while. I cradled my coffee mug, soaking in the natural beauty and wondering if it would be weird to get my binoculars out. Thirty-six was too young to become a serious birdwatcher...wasn't it?

Maybe not, but I couldn't spend all day watching birds. I had to think about what came next for Vin Kiminski. This place had given me direction when I was a kid, and I kind of hoped it would inspire me now, 'cause I really had no idea. Those burger joints I'd opened in Seattle were an investment, but I had nothing to do with the actual running of Blue Line Burgers. The only thing required was my name and money. Which was pretty much the same story in Elmwood.

I was more than happy to cash in on my NHL fame, but none of those ventures required much of my time. So...what was I going to do with my life? What did I even like besides hockey? Dogs, fishing, food...

Stay tuned for more deep thoughts with the idiot holding his breath for a greedy bird, I mused, jumping when my cell buzzed on the end table next to me.

"McD, how're they hangin'?" I answered, my gaze flittering to the now empty railing.

My agent chuckled in a low smarmy tone I'd always associated with a stereotypical car salesman. Gary McDermott always had a sweet deal in the works and like most pompous braggarts, he loved to toot his own horn, but he'd done well by me, so I usually let him go on and on about his new boat, new SUV, new watch, new shoes, a new luxe vacation spot no one else knew about. Trust me, it was always something.

I wasn't in the mood today. I wanted to protect the quiet I'd found here, but morbid curiosity won. Sure, I had contracts for a couple of years of athletic endorsements, but we both knew I wasn't his big hitter anymore.

"Hangin' low, baby. How are you doing in the Vermont boondocks? Or are you packin' your bags for a Caribbean getaway? If you are, let me hook you up. Jen and I stayed at this killer resort in Montserrat. You'd love it. Turquoise water, white sand, blue skies, and fucking amazing cocktails. Take Sienna and turn it off for a while. You won't be sorry."

"*Hmm*, sounds nice," I agreed distractedly.

"Yeah, man. Relax and chill and then...think about maybe coming back."

"Where?"

"To hockey, baby."

I shook my head in amusement. "I'm retired, remember?"

"Un-retire," he countered. "What are you doing that's so interesting now? Golfing? Watching Netflix?"

"Actually, I'm bird-watching."

"Bird-watch when you're eighty. C'mon, Kimbo, your fans love you. You're good for the sport, and everyone thinks you've got at least one more season in you. Maybe not in Seattle, but what if, say...the Ducks were interested?"

I snort-laughed. "They don't need me."

"What if they did, though? What if they needed an image boost, and you were the guy they were talking about? What if they paid you a shitload of dough for a year? What if that deal won you endorsement extensions? We're talkin' big money, Kimbo. Many, many millions. You could be in LA, near Sienna—"

"Hey, thanks, but...I retired for a reason." I sighed. "I wanted to end my career on a high note instead of a sad statistic or the old guy who doesn't know when the party's over."

“You know I respect that, but maybe the party isn’t over. I’m giving you the 4-1-1. I have eyes and ears all over. You’re popular, and you still have something to add to the game. I’m talking to Mitch Campbell, and he’s fired up about you.”

“Gary...”

“Just think about it.” He let a poignant pause fill the silence, then blurted, “Hey...did I tell you about my new golf clubs? I’m taking them for a test drive in Torrey Pines next month. We’re staying at the...”

I tuned him out. I supposed it was nice to have an NHL option, but it was a ludicrous case of capitalizing on one last hurrah. I didn’t need more money. I didn’t need the accolades. Don’t get me wrong...I’d never forget the rush of hearing my name chanted in a filled-to-capacity arena. But how many curtain calls did a retiring athlete need or deserve? When the game became all about the money, was it even a game anymore? Or was it just a job?

Whatever. I didn’t have the heart to burst McD’s bubble and hell, maybe I’d change my mind. But at this very moment, I couldn’t help thinking I needed something new.

Or something old.

Something I could only get here.

NOLAN

Mary-Kate wedged herself next to me in the hammock, kicked her skinny legs over mine, and opened her book.

“This is *Anne of Green Gables*. I’m on chapter four,” she reported.

“That’s great. I thought you were reading *Black Beauty* next.”

“I finished it. So good! Nana surprised me and bought me both books.”

“She knows you well.”

Mary-Kate was a pixie sprite seven-year-old with shoulder-length straight brown hair, hazel eyes, glasses, and the biggest smile this side of Lake Champlain. She was Ronnie’s only child, my only niece, and my mother’s only grandchild, which made her more special to the Moore clan than her near-genius IQ.

No joke. Mary-Kate was a voracious learner. She soaked up information like a sponge. Math, science, English...while her classmates were struggling with basic addition and subtraction, Mary-Kate had moved on to fractions and word-solving problems the kids two grades ahead of her were tackling.

And don’t get me started on reading and writing. She had a wild imagination and had already written a few very good short stories. Her favorite subjects were animals—usually

horses and dogs. She couldn't decide if she wanted to be an author, an astronaut, or a vet, but she wanted to figure it out by her tenth birthday. We suggested that she might want to keep her options open, though she knew she'd always have our full support no matter what she eventually chose to do.

The only thing Mary-Kate showed zero interest in was hockey, much to my brother's chagrin. She knew how to skate, of course—that was practically a compulsory skill in our family. In fact, she was pretty damned good at it. But she hated going to the rink, refused to join the Pee Wee team, and didn't like watching games.

To each their own. But it made summers hard on my brother. Thankfully, she liked hanging out with my mom or sometimes at the diner with me. As long as she had a book in her hand, she was happy.

She twirled her hair around her finger. "Can I read to you?"

"Of course." I sat up to sip the foam from my beer before it sloshed on both of us.

Mary-Kate's melodic voice drifted along with the host of cousins and old friends mingling in my mom's backyard. It was a perfect summer day. Sunshine, blue skies, and just the right amount of breeze to keep it from getting too hot and sweaty. I could easily nod off and—

I jerked upright when a boisterous cheer broke the quiet vibe. I didn't need two guesses to figure out who'd arrived.

Sure enough, Mom's guest of honor sauntered into the yard a moment later, looking better than anyone should in khaki shorts and a Hawaiian-print button-down shirt. I watched Vin make the rounds, hugging my mother, fist-bumping and hugging Ronnie, our cousin Clay, his wife, and the usual crew of relatives.

Mom had wanted to invite some of our high school friends too, but I'd gently reminded her that her Sunday dinner would escalate into a full-fledged blowout with fifty-plus people if she wasn't careful.

“Is that my dad’s friend?” Mary-Kate asked, slipping the green ribbon she was using as a bookmark into place and closing her book.

“Yeah. That’s Vinnie.”

She twisted to face me. “Is Vinnie your friend too?”

I sipped my beer and nodded. “Yeah.”

“It’s complicated” would have been a more accurate reply, but that would have required an explanation. Mary-Kate was a master interrogator.

Mary-Kate studied me intently. I almost sighed in relief when she looked away. “He’s very tall and he has big muscles. Like that guy you went on a date with on Valentine’s Day. ’Member him?”

It was my turn to wiggle away from her and this time, beer dribbled over the lip of the bottle. “That was one date. We don’t need to talk about that guy.”

She made a button-lip gesture she had to have learned from my mom and glanced over at Vinnie again. “Is Vinnie gay?”

“Wh-what—why? No. Why would you ask?” I fumbled, taking a liberal sip to avoid spillage.

“Because he sort of looks like your valentine,” she explained patiently. “And if Vinnie’s gay, you could date him instead.”

“I’m not dating—whoa! Where are you going?”

Mary-Kate tucked her book to her chest as she scrambled out of the hammock. “I’m thirsty. I’ll be back!”

She was gone in a whirl of limbs and a flouncy pink sundress, jumping onto the grass with a quick “ta-da” before racing away. I supposed that was my cue to join the party, but I took advantage of the leaves shading the hammock from full view of the yard and observed Vin as he made the rounds. He was greeted warmly with big hugs, friendly biceps punches, and at least five beverage offers.

Mary-Kate held her dad's hand, twirling her hair with her fingers as Ronnie introduced his long-lost best buddy to his daughter. Vinnie's grin took over his entire face. He kneeled on the grass and offered Mary-Kate his fist to bump. She shyly complied, then must have said something that made Vin laugh. And damn, he had a contagious laugh.

That was the problem with Vinnie. He was charming, funny, and gregarious. He slipped into conversations as if he'd never left. He was no stranger here. He was one of us. And if we were going to coach together and bump into each other at family barbecues, I had to put in a little effort.

With that, I guzzled the last of my beer and hauled my ass out of the hammock.

Two more beers, two tequila shots, two hamburgers, a heap of Mom's potato salad, and too much watermelon later, I was stuffed—and buzzed. After a decent period of a prerequisite catch-up, followed by a relentless Q and A about life in the NHL, Ronnie insisted on a game of badminton. That required setting up the net, finding racquets, and keeping the shuttlecocks away from my mom's mutt, Spencer.

It was good, clean summertime fun with raucous laughter amid the buzz of crickets and the Top-40 tunes blasting over a portable speaker. Mary-Kate danced and flitted happily about the yard, having lost her initial inhibitions around the “stranger” at the party.

To his credit, Vinnie didn't feel like a stranger. He finished Ronnie's sentences, teased Clay about the time he'd let the frogs free in Ms. Steinbeck's first-grade classroom, and held a serious conversation with Mary-Kate about horses.

“Did you know that Thoroughbreds are one of the fastest animals in the world?” Vin asked, leaning casually against the tree with Ronnie while Mary-Kate dragged her toes in the grass under the hammock. “Quarter horses are even faster.”

“Oh! I didn't know that,” she replied, pushing her glasses into place as she squinted up at Vin.

“It’s a fact. Right, Nolan?” Vinnie raised his beer as if welcoming me into their mini sidebar meeting.

The evening was winding down now. Our cousins had left and my mom was cleaning the kitchen with her childhood friend, Margaret, who was pretty much a fixture at every Moore family gathering. Which left me, my brother, my niece, and the other honorary Moore...whose membership had seemingly been fully reinstated.

I handed my brother the water bottle he’d asked for and shrugged. “Uh...I honestly don’t know.”

Mary-Kate squinted. “Have you ever ridden a horse, Mr. Vinnie?”

He pulled a funny face. “Just Vin or Vinnie. And yeah, I’ve been on a horse a few times. A friend of mine owns a ranch in Colorado. We used to do team bonding weekends... ride horses, herd cattle, till the land. It was fun, but man, it was hard work. No television, no Wi-Fi, no wives or girlfriends allowed. But we did have a cook, and I don’t think I’ve had better barbecue in my life.”

Ronnie glared playfully. “What about those burgers I made tonight? Those were darn good.”

“Excuse me. The second best,” Vinnie corrected with a laugh.

Mary-Kate tilted her head from side to side, a telltale sign she was working out a puzzle in her mind and formulating a barrage of questions. With her avid imagination and penchant for embracing a wide medley of topics at once, it could be anything from humane farming practices, her recent thoughts about maybe, possibly becoming vegetarian, or she’d steer us back to horses.

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

Okay. I hadn’t expected that one.

“Nope. I’m single,” Vinnie replied.

“Do you have kids?”

“No.”

“Do you want kids?”

Vinnie took the twenty-question treatment in stride. “Yeah, I think so. Someday. I’ve been traveling a lot, and that’s not easy to do with kids.”

“That’s no excuse. Plenty of hockey players have families,” Ronnie pointed out. “And what about that pretty redhead who’s always photographed with you? Isn’t she your girlfriend? What’s her name? Sierra or—”

“Sienna. But we’re friends. That’s all.” There was a finality in Vinnie’s tone that didn’t invite further questioning on the subject.

Seven-year-olds didn’t always pick up those cues, and I knew from experience that Mary-Kate assumed any single man might be a potential mate for her gay uncle. Even Vinnie. Not okay. I couldn’t risk her going there... especially after he’d resurrected *that* night from the dead. Talk about awkward.

I opened my mouth, a witty segue on the tip of my tongue, but Mary-Kate beat me to it.

“I don’t like hockey,” she announced.

Bold words in present company. I met my brother’s gaze and bit back a grin. We were used to Mary-Kate’s proclamations and strong views, but it probably wasn’t cool to openly diss someone else’s career and passion, though.

Ronnie mussed his daughter’s hair. “Hey, Mary-Katie-kins, we don’t—”

“Wacka-wacka-what?” Vinnie blinked in exaggerated dismay and held his free hand up like a stop sign. “Hate hockey? How? Why? When? Who says that?”

Mary-Kate giggled at his over-the-top performance. “I do. It’s too dangerous.”

“Well...okay,” he conceded. “It can be a little dangerous, but so is walking down the street. It’s a wacky world out there, MK. You gotta be a fighter. Please tell me you know how to skate.”

Her ear-to-ear grin split her cheeks in two. “Yes. Who’s MK?”

Vinnie pointed at her. “You, smartie pants. If you skate, you can play. Do you have a girls’ team here?”

Ronnie plucked his daughter out of the hammock and drew her to his side, resting his hand on her shoulder. “Our Pee Wee league is co-ed and—”

“The boys are too rough,” Mary-Kate intercepted. “Tyler Adams pushed me and almost split my eyeballs open. That was the last straw for me.”

“Oh, man, that’s when it gets fun. I hope you popped him one,” Vinnie said.

“I couldn’t. I was gushing blood everywhere. Wasn’t I, Uncle Nol?”

I nodded. “Yeah, it was gory.”

“Yeah, well, if you fall off a horse, you gotta get back on it,” he advised.

“That’s what everyone says.” She spared her dad and me a meaningful glance. “But no, thanks.”

Vinnie released a comedic long-suffering sigh just as Ronnie declared it was time to say good night.

“I’ll make you deal. A real horse ride in exchange for a real hockey lesson.” Crickets. Vinnie tugged my wrist, spilling my water as he draped an arm over my shoulders. “Your uncle will help. We’re coaching together this summer, right, Nolan?”

“*Mhmm.*”

“Right.” He messed up my hair, snickering when I elbowed him. “So...what do you think, MK?”

She bit her bottom lip. “No, thank you.”

“Well, the offer stands if you change your mind.”

Ronnie bent to kiss the top of his daughter’s head. “Time to say good night, peanut.”

Mary-Kate hugged me around the middle, accepting my playful noogies with grace before turning to Vinnie with her hand outstretched. “It was nice to meet you, Vinnie.”

Vinnie smiled and shook her hand, then held his up for a high five. “See you, MK.”

“Grab your book and say good-bye to Nana too,” Ronnie instructed. “Good night, guys.”

Vinnie punched his shoulder playfully. “Later, Moore.”

Ronnie chuckled and of course, retaliated, giving Vinnie an enthusiastic shove. I sidestepped the overly friendly gesture and toppled into the hammock.

I expected Vinnie to follow my brother inside, but after another round of bro fist bumps, Vinnie flopped onto the hammock with me instead, upending my water and sloshing it all over my shirt. I flailed like a fish on dry land as I struggled to sit up.

Vinnie stood abruptly, either to escape my flailing or because his prank meter was running and he sensed he could do a little more damage. The unexpected flurry of motion fucked with my precarious balancing act. In my quest to steady myself, I misjudged my position on the hammock, flipped backward, and landed flat on my ass...with water dripping from my nose and my eyelashes and soaking my shirt.

I sputtered and coughed as I sat up, glaring at the asshole hooting with laughter above me. “Damn it, Vinnie.”

“Looks like you took a bath. Need a hand?”

“No, I’m fine,” I grumbled.

“Take my hand, Nolan,” Vinnie insisted, crouching slightly.

I stifled a groan and let him help me to my feet. “You’re going to tell me that was an accident, huh?”

“Gotta be prepared for anything, man.”

I peeled my shirt from my chest, then squeezed out the excess moisture. “Good thing I’m close to home. Here. Hold this.”

I handed him my water bottle and unbuttoned my shirt. Vinnie was curiously quiet for a moment. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was sizing me up. I was vain enough to be glad I made good use of the weights and treadmill in my garage.

“Where do you live?” he rasped, taking a swig of beer.

“I bought the Mansers’ old house on Birch. I probably have a T-shirt in my old room, though.” I gave him a faux dirty look as I plucked my empty water bottle from his fingers.

“I’ll head inside with you and thank your mom before I go.”

We moved silently down the grassy slope to the house and found Mom and Margaret chattering away as they washed dishes. Vinnie was treated to motherly hugs and general fawning, but he was a good sport about it.

“I’ll leave you to catch up. I need to change.” I held up the wet shirt bunched in my fist for proof.

“What happened?” Mom asked.

“Vinnie happened,” I huffed without heat.

“Don’t be rude, Nolan. I’m sure it was an accident.” Mom reached for a dish towel and beamed at Vinnie. “I’ll walk you to the door, Vinnie.”

“No need. I know the way out,” he assured her.

The house I’d grown up in was a maze with well-worn rugs and white paneled walls lined with family photo collages. Mom bought a sectional sofa for the TV room, but otherwise, nothing had changed since my dad passed away.

I paused at the bottom of the stairs to open the front door for him. “Later. Tuesday at practice?”

“Yeah. Sure, but I gotta see what it looks like up there.” He gestured vaguely in the direction of the second-story landing.

I chuckled. "Prepare yourself for the ultimate time warp."

He closed the door and followed me upstairs, stopping every so often to study a photograph. I left him to explore on his own and moved into my childhood room to riffle through my dresser. I shook out a wrinkly tee with an indecipherable faded design and sniffed it.

"Moldy?" he asked from the doorway.

"A little." I watched him in my periphery as I pulled it on over my head. He seemed lost in deep thoughts...not something I associated with Vinnie. "Been a while, huh?"

A crooked smile tilted his lips. "It brings back memories."

"I bet."

He wandered the small space, picking up trophies, pet rocks, and ancient stuffed animals on the built-in bookshelf opposite the twin bed I'd slept in till I was eighteen. "Why haven't you cleaned out your room? Geez, I think my dad converted my old bedroom into an office the weekend I left for college."

"Ask my mom. We've offered to help her go through this stuff, but she won't hear of it. Although, she did give Mary-Kate Ronnie's old room."

"*Hmm.* Your niece is cute." He perched on the corner of my old desk and crossed his tattooed arms.

"She's awesome and brilliant too," I bragged.

"Must get that from her mother's side."

I snickered at his deadpan delivery. "Probably. Hey, don't take her hockey aversion personally. We haven't figured out how to get her to pick up a stick since that admittedly nasty head wound. And...she'd rather read."

"Definitely takes after her mother. What was she like?"

"Jasmine?" I leaned against the wall to face him. "I didn't know her very well. Ronnie met her in rehab in Michigan. They got hitched at county hall. As you can imagine, my parents were wrecked about that. I was living in LA at the time

and every phone conversation began or ended with my mom wanting to organize a second wedding and reception for the happy couple here in Elmwood. But they got pregnant and wedding celebrations gave way to baby plans. Mary-Kate was born in Ann Arbor, and Jasmine was gone five months later.”

“Fuck. That’s awful.”

“Yeah. You’ve heard the story a few times by now, I’m sure. Jasmine had a bad drug problem. There was concern she’d been using while she was pregnant and that it might have affected the baby. My folks flipped, then swooped in and took over. They organized a funeral instead of a wedding, helped Ronnie pack up and move home. A few months later, Dad died and I moved home too. And...here we all are again. Even you. It’s fucking weird.”

“Maybe a little,” he agreed. “Sounds like you’ve been raising your niece too.”

“I suppose so. She’s a really easy kid, though. She doesn’t have a mischievous bone in her body. She’s a rule follower to the extreme.”

“You were a rule follower too,” Vin commented with a sly grin.

“I followed *you* assholes everywhere. And unlike Mary-Kate, you were not cuddling up in your nana’s comfiest chair with a book.”

“No, I wasn’t.” He barked a laugh and pointed at the bookshelf. “Is that rock from the time you fell into the creek?”

I looked over at the smooth rock the size of my fist, narrowing my eyes. “Uh...I have no idea where that came from.”

“Liar. We were skipping stones. It was dusk and still hot as fuck. You picked that one up and you were about to throw it, but you put it in your pocket instead. You said it had diamonds inside. I’m pretty sure we made fun of you for that.”

“No doubt,” I huffed dryly.

“So you pretended to throw it at me, lost your balance, and ended up in the creek. Violence is never the answer,” Vinnie tsked. He hopped off the desk and grabbed the rock off the shelf, turning it in his big palms. “I guess this part sort of looks like a crystal...or a diamond.”

I snatched the rock from him and returned it to the shelf. “You can’t have it.”

“I don’t want your fucking rock, Nolan. I want—”

He didn’t finish his sentence and the longer he lingered, the more uneasy I became.

Vin filled a room like no one I’d ever known, and this already cramped space was beginning to feel claustrophobic. I was aware of him in ways I didn’t want to be. The smell of his cologne, the hair on his forearms, the sharp lines of his stubbled jaw...

What was going on?

“Vinnie?”

“I want...to skip rocks,” he sputtered. “We should go sometime. The creek is close to my place. It feeds into my pond, which might make it...not a pond. Supposedly, there’s a huge debate going on about whether my pond is actually a mini lake. It’s deep but small and by definition, a lake is over an acre and a half...or something like that.”

Uh...okay. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was nervous.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. I’m just—” Vinnie raked his fingers through his hair and released a ragged breath. “Okay. Fuck. Maybe I’m not fine.”

“What is it?”

“It’s—I...” Heavy sigh. “Ever since you brought up that night, I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“*You* brought it up,” I corrected, rubbing my arms to give my hands something to do. This just got real in a hurry. I bit

the inside of my cheek, adding, “Like...what part of that night?”

“The part where we made out till our lips were raw, the hand job part, and the part where we humped against each other till we shot our loads. You know...the gay parts,” he replied matter-of-factly.

Gulp.

“I see, but like I told you, it was one time. Coming home hasn’t made you bi or gay or—”

“No, it’s always been there. The gay part. I usually have other means to distract myself from...you know...”

“Queer thoughts?” I whispered.

“Yeah. I guess.” He bit his lip and stared at the hockey montage on my wall featuring *Sports Illustrated* pics of my favorite athletes from the nineties.

Oh. Wow.

“Are you...um—are you coming out to me? I mean, do you think you’re bi?”

Vinnie released a frustrated sigh. “I dunno. Maybe?”

“Um...” I had to proceed carefully here. I wasn’t sure what to say. “Do you have questions? How can I help?”

He scoffed. “What can you do? Suck my dick to test a theory?”

I smacked his arm. “It’s impossible to have a mature conversation with an almost forty-year-old man who acts like an adolescent who—”

“I’m thirty-six, asshole.”

“Yeah, well, you still act like a real...”

Vinnie arched a brow. “A real what?”

I had no idea what we were talking about. I’d held back a dam of awareness for as long as humanly possible, but the floodgates were open and I was suddenly very fucking overwhelmed by the nearness of him.

Time stopped. It didn't propel us into some fantasized version of our younger selves, though. This was us now. Two grown men with a past we hadn't acknowledged until a few days ago. Vinnie was looking at me as if he hoped I could explain the sudden spark of electricity between us. *Yeah, right.*

It was pointless to remind myself who he was. I knew and I didn't care. I wanted things I shouldn't want from this man. He might be bisexual or bi-curious with time on his hands, but he was still Vinnie Kiminski. My first crush and first truly bad idea. One of us had to step away...now.

Maybe it had to be me.

I stuck my hand out as if reaching for the doorknob, but at the last second, I pushed him against the wall and crashed my mouth over his.

My brain had obviously closed up shop, 'cause holy crap, what was I thinking? This wasn't a repeat accidental lip-lock. This was the real deal. And damn, he was a fabulous kisser, commanding and ravenous.

He wanted this as much as I did. And at that very moment, nothing mattered but the feel of his lips on mine. I licked the corner of Vin's mouth in a wordless request for entry and almost swooned when he parted for me, cupping my face in both hands as he glided our tongues together.

This was no gentle exploration, and I didn't detect the slightest hint of hesitation in him. Vinnie was bigger and stronger than me by a long shot. He could flick me away like a bug if he wanted to, but he was the one driving this bus now.

He switched positions, pinning me to the wall as he feasted on my mouth, nibbling my lips before driving inside again and again. I splayed one hand on his chest and rested the other on his hip, angling my head to deepen the kiss without forcefully pulling his neck. If he'd been anyone else, I probably would have hiked my leg around his thigh to give my poor cock a little relief. I had just enough of my wits about me to remember I was playing with fire.

This was stupid. This was madness. Nothing good could come from making out with my brother's best friend.

Our tongues twisted greedily, sucking and licking until the kiss became demanding and more dangerous by the second. We were veering from accidental happenstance to something deliberate and difficult to explain. And I couldn't stop it to save my life. I hadn't been with a man in too long, and even though Vinnie was the original bad idea, he felt so fucking good.

And damn, did I mention he knew how to kiss?

When we finally broke for air, he rested his forehead on mine for a beat and gently stepped away.

"We're very fucking good at that," he rasped, his voice thick and gravelly.

I almost swooned. "Yeah. We are."

He pecked my cheek and opened the door. "G'night, Nol."

Wait. What?

"I—should we talk about this?" I stepped into the hallway and almost tripped over Spencer, who immediately started barking.

"Nolan, honey? Are you still here?" My mother called from downstairs.

"Yes." I released an exasperated breath and shot a dirty look at my amused companion as my mom instructed me to join her in the kitchen to help put away the platters she stored on a pantry shelf she'd never been able to reach without help. "Be right there, Ma."

Vinnie smiled gently. "Go help your mom. We can talk another time. And don't worry...we're cool."

Were we, though? Was "cool" even possible?

It had taken me years to get Vinnie out of my system. Many years. And now...I was back to square one.

Way to go, Moore.

VINNIE

D *id I just come out?*

I hadn't specifically said those words. Or had I?

Sure, I'd admitted I'd thought about kissing Nolan and rubbing up on him. That was pretty gay. But I was skilled in the art of skirting uncomfortable topics. I could brush it off, blame it on tequila, and move on, happy in the knowledge that our friendship was on solid ground again.

But that kiss was five thousand times better than the accidental one I'd milked into something almost real at the diner. It was more potent than whatever we'd done in the dark when we were teenagers. Yeah, this was the real deal. And it was amazing. Earthshakingly amazing.

I wanted to do it again...and again. With Nolan.

I had no desire to relive any part of the past now that I knew what he was like today. His broad chest, toned and muscular physique, and...that mouth. Nothing about him felt familiar and yet, he fit me perfectly. We were like two cogs clicking into place, revving an engine to life.

Everything about him turned me on.

I jacked off in the shower as soon as I got home from Sunday dinner, visions of Nolan dancing in my mind. The way he'd pushed me against the door, covered my mouth and my body. My imagination supplied a new storyline with Nolan on his knees, sucking me like it was his job. I came like a racehorse sprinting for the finish line, bracing my palm on the

cool white tile to avoid keeling over when a monster orgasm ripped through me.

It happened again the following morning...and afternoon. Oh, yeah, and last night.

Look, on some level, I'd known for a while that I was bisexual. I simply hadn't been ready to adopt a label. Labels were tricky for athletes who worked to gain notice in their sport. I liked women too, and no one talked about that. They talked about what a badass I was on the ice. As it should be.

I wanted my fans to analyze the shots I took and the bruises I delivered, not secretly speculate what I did or didn't do in the bedroom. Was I a top or a bottom? Was I attracted to twinkies, geeks, jocks? It was no one's fucking business. And since I'd never let myself go there, I wasn't sure what the answers were anyway.

One advantage of being a little older was that I didn't need to google the sexual part of bisexuality. I wasn't that same naïve teenager anymore. I knew what went where and what I hadn't experienced firsthand, I'd certainly seen in porn. Granted, there was generally a woman in the mix, but I'd seen guy-on-guy action too. I'd purposely never sought it out, but if two dudes were sucking each other in a hot threesome, I didn't turn it off.

Maybe I'd been subconsciously watching them, though, admiring their perfect asses and impressive dicks. Maybe I'd — *Okay. Stop.*

And this was why I couldn't be trusted in my own head.

Fuck retirement. See, in the past, I'd thrown everything I had into my game. I'd worked out vigorously, trained hard, and played with more intensity than necessary or safe sometimes. I'd gotten lost in the rhythm of my blades slicing across the ice, skating like a madman. I couldn't do that now and losing myself in meaningless sex, nowhere relationships, and booze wasn't an option in a town where there was a strong chance of being on Main Street and running into both my high school track coach and the priest who'd married my parents.

There was nowhere to hide from this constant yearning. Nolan was everywhere.

I jogged by the diner and caught a glimpse of him chatting with someone in the parking lot, drove by his house and spotted his truck in the driveway. His name came up in conversations with Ronnie and random childhood friends I bumped into at the gas station, the pharmacy, the bar.

And of course, I was with him Tuesdays and Thursdays from three till five at the rink. Neither of us acknowledged whatever was buzzing under the surface between us. We made it all about the kids.

I tried anyway, but every little thing set me off—the scent of his cologne, the curl of his lip when he was about to sling across the ice. It was a strange form of torture to be in my safe place and feel so out of my depth.

I was supposed to be about cleaning out my mental closet this summer, purging the demons I'd been chasing since I was a six-year-old coping with catastrophic loss and grief. Tears never resulted in the reaction I hoped for. I hadn't wanted sympathy, I hadn't liked being coddled, and I'd hated being told everything would be okay eventually.

I'd learned early on that the only place everything was okay was on the ice.

Knees bent, weight forward, blade over blade...faster, faster, faster.

I'd loved the feel of the cold wind as I sprinted around the rink. I'd loved that other kids had noticed and wanted to be like me. And I'd especially loved overhearing whispers of my so-called potential. Like the day I heard Mr. Moore tell my father I had real talent. He'd been on a crusade to pump up numbers on his Pee Wee team, so in retrospect, he'd probably told every parent their kid had potential. I was the kid who'd needed to hear it the most.

That random comment became my quest. I'd set my sights on the NHL, and I'd worked my ass off to make my dream into a reality.

None of these kids had that fire. They didn't need or burn for hockey. It was as Nolan said...they just liked it.

That was a different gear for me. Like moving from a racetrack in a tricked-out Ferrari to driving a station wagon in the slow lane. I had no choice but to follow Nolan's lead at the first couple of practices. He was the epitome of patience, and his drills were always within their capabilities.

And I was sort of this impotent celebrity—too careful with the kids, too careful with Nolan. It was only a matter of time before I snapped and told them all they looked like drunk penguins on ice.

Today was that day.

“Kinney, my man. What's with you hoggin' the damn puck? You have teammates for a reason. Pass, pass, pass.” I skated to his side, stole the puck, and passed it back to him. “Who's open?”

“Lyle.”

I inclined my head in acknowledgment when he passed the puck to Lyle, who was immediately surrounded.

“Who's in danger?”

“Lyle.”

“Possibly.” I pointed at Max, hovering next to the goal. “Max is a little too open. In a real game, he'd be your best option...depending on your defense. I see zero defense out there, so I think you're safe today.”

“Hey,” Jason griped. “I'm on defense.”

“You're...” I cupped my ear. “Sorry...you're on what fence?”

“Ha. Ha.”

I skated to his side and patted his back in a “just kidding” gesture as Nolan blew his whistle.

“Great scrimmage today, guys. We've got a real one coming up on Saturday. Do you think they're ready for this, Coach Vin?”

Fuck, no.

But there were only two acceptable responses... “Yes, or yes, but we gotta pay attention to the puck” or some other constructive BS line. I wasn’t a good liar.

I sighed. “Can I be honest?”

The boys nodded as Nolan skated to my side and whispered, “Not too brutally honest, please.”

I rolled my eyes and turned to the sweaty teens. “Our passing is weak and we’re not executing on scoring opportunities. And defense? Oh, Lordy, help us.”

“What are we doing wrong?” someone asked.

Everything.

I glanced over at Nolan, who was serving me some serious side-eye, and shrugged. “We’ve gotta crank up the intensity. Pretend those motherfuckers just stole the last brownie you’d been craving all damn day. They haven’t eaten it yet...they’re just taunting you. There’s still time to get it from those assholes if you go full board. And if you have to pin them to the boards to shake it loose, you do it. Makes sense, right?”

Ten heads nodded in unison.

“It’s a little more nuanced than a brownie chase,” Nolan piped in.

“Sure, it is. There’s a lot to think about...your stick and body position.” I shifted my hip and skated toward the net. “I’m angling as I move. I want to cut him off and make it so he has to dump the puck to his worst option.”

Jason raised his hand. “How can you tell who the worst option is?”

“Good question.” Actually, it was a terrible question. They should have known that shit by now. It was instinct. Was it even possible to teach instinct? I knit my brow as I visualized how to explain what I meant. “You gotta read the ice.”

Ten blank stares. Great.

“Why don’t we show them?” Nolan suggested, popping the puck away from me.

“Good idea.” I skated backward. “You need someone to pass to.”

Nolan scanned the group and pointed at Max. “Let’s go.”

He flicked the puck to Max, who bobbled the pass and had to scramble after it. I made a show of leaning on my stick, peeking at my watch while whistling. The kids cracked up on cue. As soon as Nolan had the puck again, I burst into action, flying across center ice, angling my hips and my stick to cut off any possible shot Nolan might have had on goal.

Okay, so...I might have come at him with a bit more horsepower than necessary. I was that damn Ferrari, pedal to the metal, speeding after the guy I’d been obsessing over for far too long. This was poetry, therapy, and the best kind of release, I mused, bumping his shoulder and sending him flying into the boards.

Not hard enough to do any damage, but enough to piss Nolan off. He growled at me as he chased after the puck and sent it back to Max. I intercepted Max’s shot on goal easily and skated over to the posse of cheering teens.

“That, my friendly firefighter hockey brigade, is defense.”

Was that too much? Maybe, but I was done playing it safe.

NOLAN STOMPED AHEAD of me into the equipment room. He threw a bag of pucks into a cabinet, then sat on a bench, pointedly ignoring me as he unlaced his skates.

Okay, maybe he hadn’t stomped, but he’d definitely walked aggressively. Yep, he was pissed. Only one way to deal with that. I sat next to him, close enough that our shoulders brushed, and took off my skates and my sweaty socks, tossing one over his shoe.

He kicked my sock away, sighing grumpily as he twisted to face me. “Cool it.”

“Sorry.” I stuffed the errant sock in the bag I’d stored under the bench and wiggled my toes, not budging an inch.

“Would you please move the fuck over?”

I scooted closer, stifling a grin when he swatted my knee and shoved his feet into his sneakers. He stood abruptly, jangling his keys. I took the hint this time and waited for him to lock up before following him to the office next to Ronnie’s. It was a smaller version with the same old desk, worn-out chairs, and crappy view of the parking lot behind vertical blinds with missing slats.

“This place needs a makeover. Stat.”

“Right.”

“It smells like mildew and sweaty jocks,” I commented, opening and closing the blinds obnoxiously.

Nolan set his workout bag on his chair and opened a drawer. He stuffed his wallet into his pocket as he rounded his desk. “Hmph.”

I set my hands on my hips. “Hey, I didn’t mean to hurt you out there. Sorry about that.”

“You didn’t hurt me, asshole.” His jaw worked overtime as he stepped into my space. “But it was a cheap shot in front of a bunch of impressionable teens who think you’re God’s gift to mankind. That’s what it was—totally unprofessional and exactly what we’re *not* teaching here.”

“It’s fucking hockey, Nolan. It’s a physical game. You’re not supposed to be polite. You’re supposed to throw your weight around, fight for the puck at whatever cost. You know that, for fuck’s sake.”

“You don’t do that by shoving your co-coach,” he hissed. “I need to be done talking about this right now, because the urge to punch you is a little too strong. See you later.”

I closed the door before he could open it, rolled up my sleeve, and offered him my biceps. “Hit me with your best

shot.”

“No, Vinnie,” Nolan huffed in exasperation.

I tapped my muscles. “C’mon. Show me what you got.”

“Out of the way. I need a shower and I need to get to the diner. I don’t have time for this. Just don’t...don’t fucking do that again. I get it...you’re strong, you’re powerful, you’re—” Nolan looked away when his voice faltered.

And just like that, I couldn’t breathe.

“I’m...what?” I prodded in a barely-there whisper.

Nolan bit his full lips. The same lips I’d envisioned wrapped around my dick this morning in the shower. *Fuck. Do not sport wood now, Kiminski. Do not.*

Christ, even sweaty and angry, he was seriously hot. Every one of my porn-infused fantasies slammed into me like some kind of X-rated kaleidoscope, filling my head with images of Nolan begging me to kiss him, touch him, fuck him.

Whoa. That was—

True.

I wanted to fuck him. I wanted inside his ass. I wanted to finger his hole, lick him open, and pound into him. I wanted—

“Sorry about last week,” he blurted.

“Huh?” I furrowed my brow.

“The kiss attack at my mom’s. We never discussed it, and we should. I don’t know why that happened or what I was thinking, but—”

“You were thinking I’m hot and you want to do me,” I deadpanned.

Nolan didn’t laugh like I hoped he would. He looked away and let out a long exhale that sounded as though he’d shifted the weight of the world from one shoulder to the other.

“Right. Well...”

I didn’t want to hear the rest. No excuses, no regrets. The fastest way to shut him up was to do exactly what he implied

shouldn't have happened at all.

So I pulled him toward me and pinned him against the wall. Shock immediately gave way to a menacing glare. I had less than two seconds to explain myself, and I had to make it good.

“I don't want to hear sorry. We can talk all fuckin' night if it makes you feel better, but it doesn't change a thing. I'm still gonna want you.”

He clenched his jaw and grasped a handful of my shirt. “You don't know what the fuck you wa—”

I shut him up with a rough kiss...all heat and desire, zero finesse.

Fireworks exploded in my brain, like some kind of internal signal that this was exactly where I was supposed to be. Maybe Nolan felt it too.

He softened the connection and sank into it, pushing his tongue between my lips. And if possible, the fire burned hotter than ever. I sucked his bottom lip between my teeth, roaming my hands down his sides, resting them on his hips before squeezing his ass and dragging my cock alongside his through our joggers.

“Fuck,” I hissed. “You're hard.”

Nolan shoved my chest. “This isn't—we can't do this. Not here.”

He was right. This wasn't the time or place.

But at least he hadn't said it was a bad idea.

I nodded. “I think we need to do it, though. Don't you? We can't act like it's nothing when it's definitely something.”

He raked his hands through his hair and sighed heavily. “This was easier when I hated you.”

“You don't hate me.”

“No, I don't,” he whispered. “But you have to tell me what you want. Be specific.”

“I want you.”

“That’s not specific enough.”

Okay.

I swallowed hard, my heartbeat reverberating in my ears like a helicopter during takeoff.

“I want to touch you.”

“Where?”

“Everywhere.” I caressed his earlobe, ran my thumb along his jaw, and rested it on his lower lip. “I’m burning up from the inside, out. I’ve been trying to play it cool, but I’m having a hard time convincing myself this is a fluke. It’s not a fluke, Nol. It’s a twenty-year itch, and we need to fucking scratch it.”

He let out a shaky exhale. “Maybe you’re right.”

Relief flooded my veins. “Come to my place.”

Nolan frowned. “Now? I’m—I’m supposed to be at the diner soon.”

“You’re the boss,” I reminded him.

“I...yeah.” He nodded, his eyes darkened with lust. “I am.”

I kissed him breathless, then gently moved him out of the doorway, opening the door as I hiked my bag over my shoulder. “See ya, Nol.”

Would he follow? I was counting on him being as close to the edge as I was, but I couldn’t be sure. And let’s face it, I was newly off his shit list, so there was a good chance that he flat-out didn’t trust me.

Why couldn’t I read him? Once upon a time, he’d been an open book, and now...I had no idea how to communicate how real this felt to me. I didn’t want to hurt him or use him. I just wanted to touch him.

And maybe get a sense of who I was without hockey.

I couldn’t help thinking Nolan might have the answers.

I DROVE STRAIGHT HOME, jumped into the shower, and changed into a pair of workout shorts. I was about to yank a tee over my head when I heard an engine pull into my driveway. I tossed the shirt onto the entry table and stepped outside just as Nolan alighted from his truck.

Damn, he looked hot. He'd changed into khakis and a white oxford shirt, and his damp hair curled around his ears. He must have taken a shower too. I tamped down the sudden desire to sniff him on the front porch.

He set a hand on the railing and glanced at the woods abutting the property. It was so quiet, you could hear the babbling creek nearby, tweeting birds, and the gentle sway of branches in the summer breeze.

“Wow. It's really nice,” he commented, pulling his sunglasses off. “I've never set foot in this house. It's like the lone Beverly Hills estate in Elmwood.”

I hiked a thumb toward the house. “Come on in. You gotta see the view from the kitchen. It's insane.”

I moved ahead of him into the massive great room. It was decorated in cabin chic with a leather sectional and comfy armchairs positioned in front of a stone hearth and the ginormous flat-screen hanging above the mantel. Throw pillows and blue plaid throw blankets provided a pop of color, but the real showstopper was the yard. The wall of floor-to-ceiling windows offered expansive views of the dock and the large pond out back and the forest beyond.

Quick note: The pond was huge. As I'd told Nolan—or babbled to him—it was deep in the middle and large enough to stretch the definition of itself into more of a mini lake. In the winter, it would be the perfect size for an outdoor rink.

Nolan pivoted to the enormous family-style kitchen and ran his finger along the butcher-block island, taking in the state-of-the-art appliances and trendy open shelving.

“I knew they’d done a remodel, but I had no idea it was so grand. I’m seriously jealous of this kitchen,” he remarked. “I heard this place had a pink marble bidet. Is it still here?”

“No. Too bad, huh? But I’m all about this deck. Come outside.” I unlocked the sliding glass door and gestured at the pond. “Supposedly, the bacteria level is safe for swimming, but I’m not going in until I personally have it checked. It’s pretty with that forest of trees behind it, isn’t it?”

He walked to the banister. “Beautiful.”

We stared out at the water, the incessant hum of awareness buzzing between us louder than ever. He had to hear it too. The anticipation of words or action or something happening was slowly killing me.

“Nolan...”

He licked his lips, breaking the wall of sound as he stepped away from the railing. “I shouldn’t have come.”

“I’m glad you did.”

We stared at each for a heated moment. Uncertainty slipped away, replaced by something a million times scarier—desire unlike anything I’d ever felt for anyone. I swallowed hard, a mini battle raging inside me.

Do it. Kiss him before he reminds you that this isn’t smart.

That might have been true, but I’d never been good at walking away from trouble. So I pulled him to me and slanted my mouth over his.

Nolan opened immediately, wrapping his hand around my nape, and driving his tongue inside.

And holy fuck, it was...everything.

I sucked and nipped at his lips, backing him against the railing and caging him in as I feasted like a hungry wolf. I know, I know. That was dramatic, but every nerve in my body tingled with a primal urge to take whatever he’d give me. This was good, though. Very good.

Nolan tilted his head and raked his fingers along my spine. God, I wanted to crawl inside him. I wanted to touch him... any part of him. I unbuttoned his shirt and yanked it from his khakis and snaked my hands underneath, flattening my palms on his chest. I groaned into his mouth, blissed out by the feel of his skin.

Fucking embarrassing, but I couldn't help it. He was warm and smooth. I had to have more. I ran my fingers along his sides as we kissed in a growing frenzy, hooking my thumbs inside his khakis.

Was it okay to unbuckle his belt, or should he do that? I didn't know the rules and though I was doing my best to keep my dick out of the equation, it wasn't easy. My cock had a heartbeat of its own at the moment. I wondered if it was the same for him.

I sucked Nolan's tongue and oh-so tentatively rested my hands on his ass, squeezing as I pressed him close, grinding our hard-ons. *Holy fuck*. I blinked at the flood of sensation, frozen with need. His moan of approval gave me courage. So I did it again, sliding my erection alongside his, pumping my hips as we made out like a couple of horny teenagers.

I nearly blew my load right then and there.

No kidding.

Nolan pushed my chest, licking his swollen lips as he studied me. This was where we'd parted last week in his childhood bedroom. But we'd done a hell of a lot more when we were younger. I'd held his cock in my hand, fondled his balls, and scraped my teeth over his nipples. I wanted to do that and so much more. I didn't know how to say that in actual words, though.

"God, what are we doing?" he finally rasped.

"We're making out." I brushed my thumb along his jaw. "Don't ask me what it means. I don't know, but I don't want to stop."

He craned his neck as if making sure the coast was clear. "Me either, but...should we go inside?"

“No, I don’t want you to go anywhere,” I hummed, shifting to lean against the railing and pull him between my thighs before shoving my tongue in his mouth.

I bent my knees to accommodate our height difference. Our breaths hitched in unison at the first brush of friction below. He was as hard as I was and just as horny. Thank God we were on the same page there.

His kisses were manic and his hands were everywhere—in my hair one second, sliding along my chest, tweaking my nipples, and grabbing my ass the next. I kept up as best as I could, chasing his mouth or licking his neck while we wantonly humped like animals in heat.

Fact: I was a big fan of sex. Anytime, all the time, but I hadn’t been intimate with a guy since...this guy. I was freaked out by how not freaked out I was. I couldn’t get enough of him. I licked his neck, nibbled his ear, and devoured him as I rutted and pawed him with all the finesse of my younger self.

“I want to touch you. Can I?” Nolan asked.

My throat contracted like a boa constrictor digesting a large animal. “Fuck, yes.”

Nolan’s breath ghosted my lips as he slipped his fingers under the elastic of my shorts and boxer briefs, slowly lowering them over my ass. He wrapped his hand around my length, his gaze fixed on mine. “This okay?”

“Yeah, that’s good,” I choked out.

He brushed his thumb over the wide mushroom head, once...twice. His careful movement made me wonder if he thought I’d change my mind. That wasn’t going to happen. Not now. I tugged at his belt, unbuckling and unzipping in a blur. My hands shook as I pushed his khakis and boxers out of the way, freeing his cock so fast that it swayed between us like a flagpole.

We stood toe-to-toe with our dicks out, bathed in summer sun. I noted golden strands in his brown hair and the way the afternoon light surrounded him like a halo, highlighting his chiseled cheekbones. Nolan had always been a handsome guy,

but he looked positively stunning...even in his current disheveled state. Comparatively speaking, I was big and clumsy. But damn, I was eager.

I licked my lips greedily and reached out to trace the prominent vein along his rigid pole. He hissed at the contact, groaning aloud when I closed my fist. I matched him stroke for stroke, tangling our tongues...sweet and slow. He picked up the tempo, jacking me in quick, short pulls that sent shivers along my spine. I broke the kiss to watch him, mesmerized by his every little move—his hooded eyelids, his teeth puncturing his bottom lip, and his talented hand working magic below.

He released me, then licked his palms, and took us both in hand.

“How about this? Still okay?” he asked, stroking us in a tight grip.

“Oh, fuck...yeah.” Incredible.

I leaned against the railing and closed my hands over his, guiding them up and down our shafts. I was on fire from head to toe. And when the languid, steady slide gave way to something more urgent, I grabbed his ass cheeks, pumping my hips in a wordless request for more.

Nolan let go instead.

He pushed his khakis out of the way and dropped to his knees, glancing up at me as he swallowed me whole.

Christ, I’d never seen anything hotter in my life.

Nolan bobbed his head, sucking and licking me into a frenzy. I ran my fingers through his hair and gave in to the urge to move my hips...just a little.

Something told me he liked being on his knees for me. He liked teasing me and he probably liked fooling me into thinking I was running the show here. No, no. This was all Nolan. He controlled the rhythm and the pace. He moved faster now, working me over like a suction cup and twirling his tongue around my tip.

I watched my cock slide in and out of his mouth, noting his long eyelashes, his full lips, and the humming sound he made when he came up for air before diving in for more.

I'd been on the receiving end of some pretty amazing blowjobs, so I could safely report that he was a little too good at this. I rocked forward, pulling his hair and fucking his mouth. My eyeballs almost rolled into my skull when he splayed his hand on my inner thigh and deep-throated me. And when he teased my crease with his thumb as he sucked, that was it.

I pushed his forehead and tried to form words that sounded like pure gibberish.

"Give it to me. Come on. I want it," he growled in a low, fierce voice I'd never heard him use in my life.

"Fuck."

I came like a rocket launching into space. I swore I saw stars and white light as I unloaded my balls down Nolan's throat. *Holy fucking fuck.* I blinked and gasped in a mixture of amazement and disbelief.

Was this actually happening? Yeah, that was Nolan, all right. And that was my spent cock in his mouth.

He milked every drop out of me, burying his face in my crotch for a beat, then leaned back on his heels to finish himself off. His fist flew as he tugged furiously, shooting ribbons of cum on his chest and the hem of his unbuttoned shirt.

Nolan closed his eyes briefly, tilting his chin skyward. "Wow."

That was one way to put it.

I helped him to his feet and pulled up my shorts, gesturing to the jizz on his belly.

"You made a mess, Moore. Let's get you cleaned up."

"Yeah." Nolan wrinkled his nose and followed me inside.

“Want a beer?” I asked, tossing him the tee I’d left on the entry table and heading into the kitchen.

“Just water, please. Um...do you want me to wash this or ___”

“No.” I grabbed my shirt, aka cum rag, and dropped it on the ground. Maybe no one was good at awkward post-BJ chats, but I was especially terrible at them.

I poured two glasses of water and slid one across the island.

Nolan ignored the water. He crossed and uncrossed his arms, eyeing me warily. “We just made summer weird, didn’t we?”

I gave a wry half laugh. “I can live with a little weirdness. I’ve wanted to do that for a long-ass time.”

His mouth hung open. “Really?”

“Really.” I gulped my water and filled my glass again. “I’m not proud of the way I left, and I’m not proud of the reasons I stayed away. But I’ve thought about you...a lot.”

“Then why didn’t you just call like a normal person?”

“I was scared, man. Fucking terrified,” I admitted, raking my fingers through my hair.

“Of what?”

“You. Me. I had a path out of here and you...you scared me. I didn’t know what to do with wanting something or someone other than hockey, so I tried to forget. I threw myself into the game. I left everything on the ice, and it showed. I was a beast. The press and the fans couldn’t get enough of me. They applauded my ruthlessness and they loved my energy. They said I was fierce and brave...like some kind of Polish American Viking. A berserker.”

“You were pretty amazing. Scarier than I remembered.”

“You watched my games?”

He nodded. “Of course.”

I filed that away for later. I was on a roll with feelings “stuff” and I wanted to unleash it all before I chickened out.

“I wanted to be scary. I wanted to be the guy who tore up the ice, rocked my opponents, put on a show. But the real me? The kid from Elmwood?” I sighed heavily. “I was fucking terrified of that kid. Terrified, Nol.”

“He was a brave kid too.”

“He was a fuckin’ pussy and a selfish asshole,” I scoffed. “He wanted out of this town, he wanted to play pro hockey, and he wanted to be...straight. That’s it.”

“Two out of three isn’t bad,” he quipped.

My lips twisted in a sardonic almost smile. “You know, I punched a hole in a wall at a Renaissance Inn in Vancouver the night Ronnie told me you came out.”

He frowned. “Really? Why?”

“Jealous? Confused? Dunno. I kept my cool on the phone with him, but I was a fucking wreck. I hated the idea of you being with another man. Hated it. It tore me up inside for weeks. Maybe longer. It was easier thinking you were like me and maybe you’d find some nice girl to marry, have babies, and do cool things on the West Coast than to imagine you with...”

I couldn’t finish the sentence. I swallowed hard and sipped my water instead.

Nolan shook his head in dismay. “You’re impossible.”

“Huh?”

“You have no idea how much I needed to hear that, you fucking dick. It’s nice to know I wasn’t alone, but Jesus, I could have used it years ago.”

“I just...wasn’t ready to—”

“I know. You didn’t have to come out for me, Vin. You didn’t have to do anything special. You could have just said, ‘Hey, Nol. It was a good thing, bad timing.’ Or something... anything,” he huffed in exasperation.

“Did I mention I was scared shitless? Dude. I’d break into a cold sweat every night, worried I’d get cut from my team. And ’cause I was seventeen, I worried about what my friends would think. What would Ronnie think? What would your dad think?”

“My dad wouldn’t have cared, Vinnie. He would’ve supported you.”

“Maybe. I couldn’t take that chance.” I blew out a breath when my voice trembled. “Christ, your parents took me in, included me at family gatherings, and I repaid them by trading hand jobs with their son? Yeah, not brave enough. No way.”

Nolan tilted his chin. “I understand. I do. We were young, and Dad was...formidable.”

“He was the fucking best man I’ve ever known,” I rasped. “I love my father, but we both know I was invisible to him when I was a kid. Especially after my mom died. We didn’t get each other, and we didn’t know how to try. Your dad made an effort. It was always easy to be with him. I wanted to impress him, show off for him, be someone he’d notice. I had visions of him cutting me off...and I couldn’t handle it. See? I was so fucking selfish. Such a fuckin’ coward.”

“Vinnie...”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “I used to hope you’d take one of the extra tickets I sent him for my games. I used to look for you in the stands. Stupid, huh? I know what you’re gonna say. I should have called, I should have come home, I should have—”

“Shh. You’re here now. Let the rest go.” Nolan closed the distance and wrapped me in his arms.

I blinked away tears and rested my temple against his, then kissed his cheek as I pulled away. “What now?”

“That depends on you. If you came home for forgiveness, you have it. If you’re looking for solace, you’ll find it here. This is your town. Every door is open, everyone here wishes you well—and not because of your stats or your impressive career. You’re one of us. That means something.”

I perched on the nearest stool. “Thanks, but I meant...me and you.”

“Me and you,” he repeated.

“I’m as strung up over you now as I was then. I know I don’t have the right to ask this, but I want a second chance.”

Nolan’s eyes softened as he smiled affectionately. “You mean you want to get naked with me.”

“That too.”

He chuckled. “Vin, be honest. We were childhood friends and each other’s first gay crush. It’s not me you want. You want someone safe to get your gay on with.”

“You are *not* safe. You’re still very fucking dangerous to me,” I whispered. “The difference is, I’m not going anywhere.”

“This summer,” he clarified.

“Well, yeah. The point is...I’m not gonna fight this feeling.”

“What feeling?”

He was killing me with the cross-examination, but hey, if I wanted to be honest, I had to lay it all out there. *So...here goes nothing.*

“I want to kiss you, I want to touch you, taste you. And I really wanna fuck you. If you’re...into that.”

Nolan’s eyes darkened with unchecked desire. “Yeah, I’m into that.”

I rubbed my thumb over his bottom lip. “We can take it slow. Or fast...or whatever. You call the shots. I’ll follow.”

“Okay, but...let’s keep it between us. I don’t feel like explaining this to anyone, and I don’t think we—”

I clapped my hand over his mouth. “Can it, Moore. Understood and agreed. No more talking.”

I swooped in to kiss him before he could reply. I knew all the ways this could go wrong. But I wasn’t the same person I

was then. I didn't feel trapped or scared now. I felt...free. I wanted the same thing I'd wanted years ago, but I understood what it meant—and what it didn't mean.

Wanting Nolan wasn't dirty or shameful.

It was just...complicated.

NOLAN

Don't ask me how we got here. I had no idea.

This was the grown-up second edition of the last summer we'd spent together before Vin left for college. We'd been inseparable but usually within the safety net of a group of friends. We could sit next to each other, our skin glued by summer sun and sweat, while my brother and the rest of our gang yammered on around us, unaware of the sizzle of heat between us. The teenage version had been exhilarating and heartbreaking...something I'd promised to never subject myself to again.

But the adult version of us was righteously liberating. We'd had our talk, and we'd acknowledged mutual attraction and had given ourselves permission to act on it without assigning labels. The nature of the beast was sexual gratification, nothing more. We dove headfirst into quenching our thirst.

And yes, that was what it was...a raging, soul-consuming thirst. No joke. I'd had my share of lovers, but it had been a long time since I'd been this aware and in tune with another human.

The moment Vinnie walked into a room, my veins hummed, my synapses buzzed, and the air crackled with lust. It happened everywhere—the diner, the rink, Sunday night dinner at my mom's. And shockingly, no one seemed to notice.

For those first few weeks, we existed in a bubble, going about our daily business. I'd open the diner early, balance the

books from the previous night, sign off on the fresh veg or meat delivery, sort through the upcoming evening menu notes JC had left for me, and make myself useful by pouring coffee or folding napkins.

All standard stuff.

However, if anyone had been paying attention, they'd notice I was busiest at 8:58 a.m. I didn't want to get caught checking my watch or gazing out the window for Vinnie.

He usually made a prompt appearance at nine o'clock on the dot, his hair damp from his post-jog shower. He'd acknowledge everyone who said hello with handshakes, waves, and warm smiles before making his way to his corner stool. We'd greet each other cordially, I'd deliver the order I'd placed for him, pour him a cup of joe, and engage in whatever conversation the counter crew had going. The Red Sox game last night, the mosquitos on Carlton Creek, Mandy and Jack Robinson expecting baby number four...

By ten, I'd be ready to roll and leave the diner in the capable hands of the manager. Vinnie would time his departure without fanfare or discussion. He'd never ask what my plans were, and I'd never ask if he wanted me to come over. I'd just showed up.

Within a minute of him pulling me over the threshold and locking his front door, we'd be half-undressed with our lips fused, humping and grinding, bumping into walls and furniture on our way upstairs—or on his sofa if we couldn't wait. Hand jobs, blowjobs, naked kissing, groping, and swaying into each other until we were sweaty and spent.

I'd been so afraid we'd revert to something clumsy in the aftermath—too polite and unsure of our footing in this new alliance we'd formed. I should have known better. Vinnie didn't let uncomfortable silences gather for long—at least not while we were in the same town. And he was the type of person who threw himself headfirst into any new situation or challenge.

So he was new at this whole sex experiment with a man thing...so what? The only way to conquer fear and become an

expert was to practice. And we did. Often.

I became well acquainted with the ridge of the angry vein on his cock when I sucked him. I knew that he loved it when I traced a seductive path from his tip along his shaft to his balls, pausing to fondle them as I teased the sensitive skin behind them with the broad side of my thumb. I memorized the sounds he made, loving his raw growls and lusty commands for more.

Vinnie wasn't tentative in any part of his life, so I supposed it made sense that his dirty talk was shockingly obscene. I mean, c'mon, I was the gay man with plenty of bedroom experience, but the things that came out of his mouth made *me* blush. Or cringe.

“Did you really tell me to suck you like a vampire?” I wiped my belly as I sat up in his bed.

“No, I said, ‘Get all vampire on me, baby. Suck that cock.’ ” He chugged half a water bottle and handed over the rest. “Or something like that. Too much?”

I snickered. “Not at all.”

“How much time do we have?” he asked, swinging his legs off the mattress and stretching his arms above his head.

I glanced at my watch. “Twenty-five minutes till practice. Fuck.”

“Cuttin’ it close.” He smacked my ass when I scrambled out of bed. “C’mon, you need a shower.”

I narrowed my eyes. “So do you, and don’t spank me, asshole. It’s weird.”

“Spanking is weird? Since when?” He moved ahead of me into the en suite bathroom and turned on both rain-head faucets in the two-person glass-and-tile shower.

“Since...always.”

Vinnie met my gaze in the mirror over the sink and rolled his eyes. “Sounds like your kink meter needs a tune-up. Spanking can be hot as fuck. Just sayin’.”

“Kink meter?” I stepped under the spray and tilted my chin to avoid looking at him. I could tell I was blushing, and how embarrassing was that?

“Yeah, whatever cranks your engine, ya know.” Vin lathered shampoo in his hair. “I’ll try anything once, so I can tell you for sure that having my toes sucked does nothing for me. But spanking is definitely on the go-to list.”

My mouth hung open for a beat. “So you want me to spank you?”

He snickered. “I’ve never been on the receiving end, but I’m happy to pull you over my knee and paddle your ass. Pass the soap, please.”

I handed over the soap, clenching my ass cheeks and willing my dick to behave. “Thanks, but I’m not into spanking.”

“Tell it to that guy.” He pointed to my semi.

“That guy likes everything.” I snorted.

He grinned as he moved under my spray to kiss me...and wash me. What I thought was meant to be a quick tease evolved into more. Deep, openmouthed kisses with water sluicing over us. His talented hands soaping my cock and my balls. I was impressed with my recovery time. We’d spent the entire afternoon getting each other off, but apparently, I still had another round in me.

I blinked water from my eyes and reached for him.

“No. This is just for you.” Vinnie pulled away, turned off the water on his side of the shower and returned, kissing a sexy trail along my neck. “I want to try something.”

He got on his knees and rubbed his nose along my shaft. Just a ghost of a touch, but it was enough to direct my available blood supply to my erection.

“Vinnie...”

He stroked my cock a few times before swallowing me whole. Well...half. He gagged, his eyes bright with laughter. “Whoa, I suck at this.”

“You have to keep sucking to be good at it.”

And then we were both laughing. It wasn't particularly funny, but it was...perfect.

He tried again and this time—oh, yeah, Vinnie was a fast learner. He licked me, twirling his tongue over the head, and sucking as much of my length as he could while he massaged my balls. I widened my stance to give him room to work. He took that as an invitation to explore, gliding his palms along the inside of my thigh and teasing the sensitive skin behind my sac.

I pushed his hair from his forehead for a better view of his mouth on my dick, his eyes half-closed in a blissed-out look I wanted to imprint in my brain forever. This was Vinnie. My first crush, my childhood friend. His tongue circled my tip as his fingers nudged my hole and—

“Turn around, hands on the tile,” he growled, standing to turn off the water.

It took a moment for words to register, but I obeyed. He dropped to his knees once more, pulled my ass cheeks apart, and licked my entrance.

“Holy fuck,” I moaned. He kept going, digging his nails in as he tongue-fucked my hole. “I—Vin, I...”

He smacked my ass hard enough to leave a handprint. “Stroke yourself. We're on the clock. Let's see if you can come this way.”

Uh, the answer was a resounding yes. However, for the sake of experimentation, I flattened my left palm on the cool tile and jerked off while he reduced me to a puddle of goo. He bit my ass cheek and slowly stood behind me, kissing my shoulder as he slipped a single digit between my crease. He teased my hole and nibbled my ear, whispering nasty words of encouragement of the “Let me see you jack that cock for me” variety. I was already near the edge when he pushed a finger inside me and ground his dick on my ass.

“Fuck, I'm gonna—”

“Yeah, that's it. Come.”

I came hard, shooting over the tile as my entire body shook. Seconds later, I felt his warm release on my lower back.

Vinnie wrapped his arms around me, nestling his scruffy chin on my jaw. He peppered kisses along my neck, then nudged my hip till I faced him. Our tongues twisted in leisurely satisfaction, deep and carnal with no sense of time.

The niggling feeling that we were supposed to be somewhere surfaced after a minute or so. I broke free with a gasp and motioned for him to turn on the water.

“We have to go soon,” I hummed against his lips.

He stole another soul-stirring kiss. “Let’s call in sick.”

“We can’t do that,” I panted.

Vinnie sighed as he reached for the faucet knob, yelping under the sudden cold spray. I laughed, so of course he splashed water at me. I couldn’t let that go, so I retaliated and started a mini splash battle in between madly soaping up and rinsing off.

By the time we’d finally dressed and raced to his Jeep, we had five minutes to get to practice. And you know, any other time, I would have been stressed out of my mind. I hated being late. Not today.

He held out his hand as he navigated his long driveway, smiling when I laced our fingers. We probably talked or maybe listened to music, but I couldn’t concentrate on words or sound. My head was in the clouds, and my heart did funny somersaults. I wished I could stop time and make the road longer. I wished we could drive without a real destination.

Just two old friends who’d made their way back to each other and discovered something more.

ELMWOOD DINER WAS the pride of the Moore family and had been a town institution for over a hundred years. No kidding.

We'd been here much longer than that, though. The Moores first settled in our little corner of Vermont sometime in the late eighteenth century. My ancestors were farmers turned innkeepers who eventually decided to open a dining hall adjacent to their property when the demand for roadside eateries grew.

That diner was lost in a fire in the early 1930s and was immediately rebuilt at its current location on Main Street and Blossom. And yes, it was still owned and operated by the Moore family—specifically, me.

Let me first preface this by stating this had never been my dream job. No way, no how.

I'd had high hopes of making it big in set design in Hollywood after I graduated from UCLA. For a few years, it had looked like things were finally going my way. I'd met an amazing group of friends in college, started my own business, and had done very well freelancing for a few major studios. I'd been one payday away from purchasing a condo when my dad died unexpectedly and my world crumbled.

The grief was all-consuming and left wreckage none of us were prepared for. My quick visit became a temporary move to help my mom out at the diner. I assumed, after a month or two, that Ronnie and Mom would take over, but Ronnie had been busy at the rink and needed help with Mary-Kate. And Mom struggled with severe depression in the wake of Dad's death.

I'd pushed my return to California back three times before acknowledging I was stuck in Elmwood. I'd told my friends it was just a matter of time till I returned, but here I was...

And you know, it wasn't so terrible now.

Look at this place.

Elmwood Diner was a freaking gem. I'd kept the log cabin exterior when I remodeled the restaurant a couple of years ago, but I'd made sure to open the ceiling and add a wide bank of windows. I stuck with classic touches like emerald-green leather booths, a long counter with swivel barstools, and black-and-white tiled flooring, but the ambience was definitely

modern. Sophisticated pendants lit the refinished bar area while modern starburst chandeliers hung from the rafters in the dining room.

The real draw was always the food. We served burgers, fries, and shakes using the same recipes my great-great grandparents had perfected years ago, but JC had added a few culinary masterpieces to the mix, and the new menu was a hit.

“Bonjour.” I shut the kitchen screen door behind me, nodding a greeting to the chef. “How’s it going?”

Jean-Claude, or JC as he was known here, lifted his fingers out of the doughy mixture in the bowl in front of him, and gave me a thumbs-up. “*Tres bien*. The menu is on the board if you are interested. If you are not, don’t tell me...I am sensitive today.”

I chuckled.

JC was our French-Canadian chef—a stocky man in his late thirties with twinkling green eyes, thick reddish hair, a contagious laugh, and a broad Quebecois accent. He was also the most self-deprecating, occasionally grumpy, and accidentally funny person I’d ever met. He was the kind of guy who told you more than you needed to know about everything from his feelings about world affairs to the state of his digestive tract.

Needless to say, he was very entertaining. Good boyfriend material too. For a little while, anyway.

Whatever we’d had was a heat of the moment, alcohol, and sex-infused thing. We shared a love of food, hockey, and we were both gay. That wasn’t enough for forever, but it was a good start, right?

We’d met at a bar in Montreal. I was with a group of college buddies and notorious bad influences. Needless to say, I was schnoekered. A one-night stand led to a second, and a third. And I wasn’t ready to say good-bye. So on a whim, I’d offered JC a job.

And to my surprise, he’d accepted.

He'd needed a change, and my offer had come at the right time for him to make one. A temporary one. We'd originally agreed to a two-or three-month consultation where he'd put together new menu options, work with our cook, and meet with local sources. His input was invaluable. Three and a half years later, JC had pretty much taken over the kitchen. No one minded. Even Haskell, the old fry cook my grandfather hired in the seventies, liked JC.

The boyfriend part ended after a year, but we'd become good friends and honestly, it was nice to have someone to lean on who couldn't claim they'd known me since birth.

So...win-win.

"I'll be gentle with you," I teased, stealing a sliced carrot from the cutting board island.

JC glowered, pointing a knife the size of a small machete at me. "You play dangerous games."

"Sorry. I'm just...starving."

He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head as if noticing something new. "You are smiling."

"I always smile," I bluffed.

"Different kind of smile. I know that smile. You have a man." He set the knife aside and scratched his beard thoughtfully. "Who?"

I hiked my thumb in the general direction of the diner. "Later, JC. I'm going to check out the menu and—"

"Is it the hockey dad you said was cute but too short?"

"Who—never mind. I don't know what you're talking about."

JC's chuckle was low and knowing. "You are a terrible liar. Why lie anyway? He's divorced, *non*? Have all the sex you want with the dad—"

"I'm not having sex with anyone's dad, ya weirdo," I whisper-hissed.

“Then who? I am only curious. There are four gay men under fifty in Elmwood...me, you, a boring banker, and a know-it-all barista. Another question: how do you find the time for a liaison? You work, you coach, you—” JC paused abruptly. “*Mon Dieu.*”

“What?”

“The NHL hometown hero.”

I didn’t bother denying it. As Jean-Claude noted, I was a terrible liar.

“I—it’s—don’t say anything,” I sputtered. “I’m not kidding. This is new, and he’s...”

“Not so straight,” he finished, raising his hands in surrender before making a button-lip gesture. “My lips are sealed. But are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Of course not. It’s a terrible idea,” I scoffed. “It’s just a summer thing and it won’t last, but he’s my brother’s—”

“Shh. I am like a vault. I tell no secrets.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s okay. Have fun and...be careful, yes?” JC waited for my nod of agreement, concern etched in the corners of his mouth. Then he pointed at the door. “Good. Now out of my kitchen. Go. Your mother and Mary-Kate are here. Bother them, not me. I’ll bring you samples when I’m ready.”

“Soon, I hope. I’m hungry,” I grumbled, chuckling when he threw a carrot at me.

“Out!”

The smell of apple pie, french fries, and summertime mingled with soft chatter and laughter in the dining room. Midafternoons were pretty mellow in the restaurant.

I waved at our hostess, Marlene, and made my way over to the counter, where my mom and Mary-Kate were hovering over a laptop.

“What kind of trouble are you two getting into?” I asked, squinting at the computer screen.

“Hi, Uncle Nol. We’re shopping for new books.”

“Again? What happened to *Anne of Green Gables*?”

Mary-Kate furrowed her brow. “I finished that ages ago.”

Oh. That seemed like something I should have known, but in my quest to get up close and personal with Vinnie’s dick, I’d been lapsing in basic guncle duty. I still saw my niece daily, either here at the diner or at my mom’s, but we usually had at least one outing a week on our own—a trip to the ice cream parlor, the nail salon, the bookstore. I had to step up my game.

“Hey, I have an idea. How about if you and I go book shopping in Pinecrest? We can stop for ice cream on the way home.”

She swiveled on her stool and gasped gleefully. “For real? Now?”

I winced. “I have to work now, but...how about tomorrow?”

Mary-Kate jumped off her stool and lunged for me. “Yes, yes, yes! Thank you! What time?”

I mentally ran through my calendar. “I’m free after practice tomorrow. Four-thirty.”

“Perfect,” Mom chimed in. “I’ll drop you off at the rink to save Uncle Nol a second trip.”

Mary-Kate grinned. “Yay! Let’s shake on it.”

We both shimmied, flailing our arms like the Gumby inflatable in front of the tire store on Main Street. This was our sacred uncle-niece version of a secret handshake. I hoped we were still doing it when she had kids of her own someday.

“Sounds like a lovely date.” Mom smiled and primly tucked a stray piece of her short gray hair behind her ear.

“I can’t wait!” Mary-Kate pushed her red-framed glasses into place on her freckled nose with her forefinger in a move that made her look just like her grandmother. Yeah, the kid

was spending way too much time with adults. “I’m going to tell JC and see if he needs help in the kitchen, okay?”

“Yeah, but make sure it’s okay with him. You know how he gets,” I warned.

Mary-Kate beamed. “*Mais oui. Merci!*”

“And wash your hands,” Mom called out, sliding onto the stool Mary-Kate had abandoned and leaning against my side. “You, my darling, just made that girl’s day.”

“Sorry I didn’t think of it sooner. I’ve been...busy.” I stole a cold french fry from her plate to give my hands something to do.

“I bet. I haven’t seen much of you. Ronnie said he hasn’t, either. I hope you’re not overworking yourself,” she chided.

“No, I’m fine. Just doing the usual stuff...you know, here and at the rink,” I babbled.

Stupid move. My mom shot an eagle-eyed glance my way. “How are things going with Vinnie?”

“Fine,” I squeaked, clearing my throat noisily before trying again. “Fine. Why?”

“Just wondering. I’m glad to hear that. It makes it easier to ask you a favor.”

I frowned. “What kind of favor?”

She fiddled with the top button of her pink cardigan and swiveled till our knees bumped. “Town council wants to throw a welcome home parade in Vinnie’s honor. We’d start at the firehouse on Washington, go down Main Street, and end up... here.”

“At the diner?”

“Yes. Your brother has all kinds of ideas about how to generate business at the rink, but a parade would generate revenue for the entire town. We could ask that social media gal who helped you with your website to put together a little campaign.”

“Mom...”

“Your father would have loved to give Vinnie a hero’s welcome. You know how much he loved that boy...and hockey. He’s gone and this place is yours, which makes it your decision, of course. So, what do you think? I was going to ask Ronnie to talk to him, but you see Vinnie just as often, if not more. Maybe you could do the honors...unless you’re still angry at him?”

Oh. Weird.

“No, we’re...we’re good.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that. Resentment is bad for the soul. In the words of Buddha...holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.”

I gaped incredulously. “You’re quoting Buddha now?”

“I don’t know really if that was from Buddha, but I have to keep you on your toes!” She gathered her laptop and kissed my cheek, the familiar scent of her favorite perfume wafted between us. “I’m off to take Mary-Kate home.”

“All right. Love you, Mom.”

Mom waved as she skirted the counter, bursting into the kitchen as if she owned the place...which, she kind of did. Only twenty percent, but it was a weighty twenty. If she wanted to throw a parade and party for Vinnie, I’d figure out a way to make it work.

Assuming he wouldn’t laugh at the idea.

VINNIE

“A parade? You’re fuckin’ with me.” I tapped my stick on the ice and looked up at the rafters, a huge smile splitting my face in two.

“Yep. It’s an idea my mom had to drum up business for the town, but you’re already doing this.” Nolan gestured to the group of hockey hooligans practicing a passing drill nearby. “So, no pressure. We can let my mom down easy.”

“Are you nuts? I’m honored and...stuff.”

Nolan punched my biceps lightly. “You mean you’re touched?”

“Yeah, that too.” And overwhelmed. I had a healthy ego for sure, but the idea of a hero’s parade in my honor was... humbling.

“That’s cool. She’ll be thrilled. Seriously. She said it’s something my dad would have wanted to do for you, and that’s true. He wouldn’t have cared if the celebration generated a dime. He’d just—”

“Uncle Nolan! Hi!”

We pivoted to the bench and waved at Mary-Kate, whose wide grin rivaled mine.

“Hey, you,” Nolan called out. “We’ll be done in ten minutes. Hang tight.”

She gave him a thumbs-up and sat, swinging her legs on the bench, idly watching the teens on the ice.

“Skate lesson?”

“No, we’re going book shopping. I’m making up for being an absentee uncle lately.”

I didn’t comment on Nolan’s tendency to compensate for perceived shortcomings. He gave a hundred percent to his family and his business and even made time to coach pro bono. He didn’t seem to do anything just for himself without countering it by doing a good deed for someone else. Interesting.

And in this instance, it was kind of my fault. No apologies here, but it was definitely worth noting.

“MK, where’re your blades?” I asked, my voice echoing off the walls.

She shook her head, jostling her glasses from her nose. “I didn’t bring them.”

I skated to the bench to avoid a yelling conversation and held my hand up for a high five. “Too bad. I was hoping we could do some shooting. I heard you’re pretty good.”

She looked mildly surprised. “Who told you that?”

“Your dad. What are you and your uncle up to?”

“We’re going to the bookstore and to get ice cream too.”

“Lucky. What book are you gonna get?” I leaned on the board.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Something with dragons, I think. Or maybe the first Narnia book.”

“How many are in the set?”

“Seven, but I don’t want to be greedy.”

I couldn’t relate. I’d always been a greedy bastard, even as a kid. “*Hmm*. How many books do you think you could read this summer and still have time for fun?”

“Reading *is* fun,” MK insisted, wiggling on the bench.

“Yeah, okay, but if you’ve got forty-five days before school starts and you wanted to spend some of that time

watching movies or hanging out with friends...how many books could you read?"

"Thirty. Maybe thirty-five."

She giggled when my eyebrows shot to my hairline. I wanted to joke that I'd never read that many books in my life, but I doubted she'd be amused.

"Wow." I rubbed my bearded jaw thoughtfully. "Is this bookstore you're going to any good?"

"Yes! It's gigantic. They have everything! If you haven't been, you should come with us."

"That might be cool." I glanced over at Nolan and the juniors. "Hey, I have a crazy idea. Actually, I think it's straight-up bribery, but I can't resist. I'll buy all the books you can carry if you show me your shooting skills."

She tilted her heart-shaped chin and squinted. "For real?"

"Yeah. I don't want to butt in on your adventure with Nol, but I could drive separately and hook you up with half your summer's worth of reading."

Nolan skated up just then and squeezed his niece's shoulder in greeting.

"We're done for the day. Did you want to say anything to the boys before we let them go?" He blew his whistle when I shook my head, and turned back to MK and me. "What are you two chatting about?"

"Bribery," she replied, filling him in on my book exchange idea.

Nolan chuckled. "Oh, Vinnie. She could wreak havoc on your credit card. Mary-Kate is the best seven-year-old shooter who's not in a league...no question. And she could easily carry twenty books in her arms."

"Thirty," MK piped in, interested in spite of herself.

"Too bad you didn't bring skates." I sighed.

She bolted to her feet. "I have skates in my dad's office. I can get them now."

“That was kind of genius,” Nolan commented.

“Bribery, man. Works every time.”

“Nah, I think it’s you. She’s curious about you. Be prepared for the ‘fifty questions in ten minutes’ game,” he warned with a laugh.

He wasn’t joking.

Mary-Kate skated out like a boss, wobbling slightly as she stopped in front of Nolan and me. “How many goals do I have to get? Is there a time clock? Do I have to put them in the corners or just anywhere? Are you going to play goalie? Are you—”

“Hold up, steamroller. You don’t have a stick yet. Use mine.” I pushed my stick into her hands, biting the inside of my cheek when she giggled.

“It’s too big for me.” So were the kneepads Nolan insisted she wear, but we wouldn’t be out here for long. Her yellow shorts, T-shirt, and pink Disney princess sweatshirt weren’t exactly ideal for rink time.

“Oh. You didn’t know you’d have to use this one?” I scratched my head in faux confusion.

She went quiet, swiveling expertly on her skates to face the net. “Okay, I can probably do it, but—”

“I was kidding. Guncle Nol is grabbing a pee wee stick for you.” I picked up one of the cones Nolan had left out for us and dropped it on the blue line. “Can you score from here?”

MK snickered. “No way. Why did you call Uncle Nolan guncle?”

“Guncle is gay uncle...or so I’ve heard.” I moved the cone in between the two face-off circles. “How about here?”

“Still kind of far.”

I nudged the cone forward a couple of feet. “All right, but we don’t want to get too close to the crease.”

“What’s the crease?”

“The crease is where the goalie works. A player can skate through the crease, but the puck has to reach the crease before a player can score. Of course, if the goalie is out of the net, anything goes.”

She wrinkled her nose in comical confusion. “I don’t know what that means.”

I chuckled. “Never mind. You just need to score. No need to worry about being offside today. Ignore the blue line behind you and—”

“What’s the blue line?”

I threw my hands in the air and skated to the line. “This. The line that’s blue.”

“Why is it blue?” she asked.

“Are you punkin’ me, kid?”

MK snickered. “Yes. But I have one more question.”

“Make it good,” I mock grumbled.

She pulled a funny face and fixed her glasses. “No, I changed my mind. I don’t think I’m supposed to ask.”

“Ahh, must be a nosy question. I’ll give you a hall pass. Go for it...one question.”

“Do you like my uncle?” she blurted.

I wasn’t a dummy. She wanted to know if I thought Nolan was cute or something. I could have laughed it off as a silly query, but it felt like a truth moment. I wasn’t out, and I didn’t intend to come out to a seven-year-old. However, I didn’t want to lie either.

“Yeah, I like him a lot.”

MK smiled. “Are you—”

“Okay, that’s enough of that,” Nolan said, skating up to us. He snatched my stick from MK and handed her a pee wee one. Then he dropped a dozen pucks and squeezed her shoulder. “There you go, Princess. Show us what you got.”

MK sucked in a theatrical breath and nudged her glasses again. She eyed the goal while adjusting her grip—right hand on top, left under the shaft. She wiggled her hips like a golfer preparing to tee off.

“Loosen up and let it fly,” I advised. “Don’t think too hard. Just go for it.”

She nodded and...went for it, nailing ten consecutive shots with more power than I’d seen from a few juniors. Ronnie and Nolan weren’t kidding. The kid had real talent. Sure, she was only seven and yes, she missed a few, but once she relaxed, she was a natural.

Nolan whooped and spun her in a circle. “Ice queen!”

I offered her my hand and squeezed her shoulder. “Well done. Looks like I owe you a few books. Do me one last favor and pass with me. Just to the other goal and back.”

“Okay.”

We skated a couple of feet apart and leisurely passed the puck. I had to chase after it more than once, and tried to make it funny by pantomiming some terrible figure skating moves that made her howl with glee. She stopped at the opposite goal, clutching her side when my double axel sent me into the boards. I still managed to pull off a decent pass, but I’d lost her to a new round of hilarity.

“Did you swallow a bag of feathers or something?” I teased. “What’s so funny?”

“You are.”

I grinned. “I like you, MK. Let’s go buy some books.”

THE THREE OF US piled into Nolan’s truck—Nolan behind the wheel, and MK and I in the cramped back seat. A six-foot-five dude had no business folding himself in half in an extended cab pickup, but her unfettered laughter spurred me on.

Everything was funny to her—my knees squished against the seat in front of me, the honky-tonk song on the radio, the new sign on the coffee shop with an artistic swirl of steam I

offhandedly mentioned looked like poop. In between giggle fits, she asked questions.

Why did I play hockey? Had I ever been to California? What about Disneyland? Why did I move to Elmwood?

Thankfully, the drive to Pinecrest took less than fifteen minutes. Our impromptu shooting session had cut into MK's perusing time. According to Nolan, that was a blessing.

"She can spend hours walking up and down these aisles," he said with an indulgent smile, crossing his arms as his niece skipped ahead to the children's section. When she was just out of earshot, he leaned into me. "Thanks for this. It was really cool to see her on the ice again. It's been a long time."

I didn't have a chance to reply. MK called his name just as the owner reminded us they'd be closing soon.

Twenty minutes and twentysomething books later, we were on our way to Elmwood. We stopped at the Frosty Freeze, ate ice cream on picnic benches, and talked about dragonflies, magic portals, and the possibility of fairies living in the forest.

"Maybe. My dad used to tell me about the selkies who supposedly lived off the coast of Ireland," I reported conversationally.

"What's a selkie? Who's your dad? Who's your mom? Do I know them?"

Nolan glided his tongue across his chocolate cone like an unintentional porn star and flashed an amused grin my way. I bumped his knee under the picnic table. It was meant to be a quick poke, but I liked being attached to him, so I left it there.

"Uh...well, a selkie is a mythical creature—half human, half seal," I replied.

"A mermaid!"

"Yeah, something like that." I licked my chocolate chip and continued. "You might have met my dad, Jan Kiminski. He's a professor at the community college in Wood Hollow. He teaches English and history, and he loves mythology."

“Yes, I know him. He’s nice.” MK shifted from one knee to the other and wiped her mouth daintily with a napkin. “Do you have a mom?”

“She died when I was six. A long time ago.”

“Oh.” MK darted her gaze to me. “Mine died too. I don’t remember her. Do you remember yours?”

I gulped. “Yeah.”

“What did she look like?” she pressed.

Nolan shook his head. “Let’s talk about something else. What book are you going to—”

“No, no. It’s cool,” I interrupted. No one had asked about my mother in so long that I didn’t know where to begin, but it seemed important to share my memories. “She had dark hair and pale skin, and she sang a lot. She loved music. Kate Bush and Tori Amos were her favorites.”

I immediately winced. I wasn’t good at this. *Way to kill the fuckin’ party, Vin.*

MK nodded thoughtfully. “What happened to her?”

“She was in a car accident.”

I left it at that.

She didn’t need to know I’d been napping in the back seat and had come to with a gash on my forehead, covered in blood. She didn’t need to know that I’d crawled over glass to shake my mother awake. Or that I’d screamed when she keeled face forward into the steering wheel. She didn’t need to know that the sound of sirens still freaked me out or that I still listened to Kate Bush to remind myself my mom was here... somewhere, looking out for me and my dad.

But this kid was an old soul. She seemed to sense my turbulent thoughts, and for once didn’t ask twenty questions to pry my secrets loose.

MK set her hand over mine briefly. “Sometimes I’m jealous of kids my age who have two parents, but my dad is the best. And I have Nana and Uncle Nol too, so it’s okay.”

“You’ve got it made.” I concentrated on my ice cream till I was sure my voice wouldn’t crack. “I was lucky too. I missed my mom, but I had the best friends in the world. Your dad and your uncle...and your grandparents were really good to me. Your grandpa especially.”

She tilted her head. “Nana said my grandpa was a good barbecuer.”

“He was good at lots of stuff. No kidding. He taught me how to ride a bike, how to skate, how to swim, how to dive, how to hook a fish. And he taught me how to play hockey. He taught all of us.” I flattened my tongue over my cone. “I like hockey as much as I do because of your grandfather. He made it fun.”

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah, and it’s cool that your dad and your uncle pass that love on to other kids. It’s kind of poetic to share what you love with the next generation. You love to read. Maybe you’ll write stories someday or open your own bookstore, MK.”

She crunched into her cone, nodding in agreement. “Today was fun. I liked the hockey part too. Thank you.”

“Any time, kiddo.”

Nolan pressed his knee against mine and hit me with an affectionate look that made me feel ten feet tall. He mouthed, *Thank you.*

I didn’t trust myself to do anything more than smile. What I really wanted to say was, “I should be thanking you.”

I came home to regroup, mend bridges, and figure out what came next. I hadn’t expected these ties to be so strong. This wasn’t just the town of safe, old memories, familiar faces, and streets I could navigate with my eyes closed. The connections were more nuanced now. Like I was part of the soil, the water, the air. And as far-fetched as it seemed, it felt as though the loved ones who were long gone were still rooting for me.

Nothing in this world felt more real or honest than sitting under an elm tree with Nolan Moore and his niece. It was as if

I'd finally realized that he'd always been home.

He knew about my mom. He'd lived the story with me. He'd seen me cry, he'd seen me scared, he'd seen my rage, and he'd stayed.

The truth of us...the depths of us scared the hell out of me.

But it was also incredibly...beautiful.

WE DROPPED MK off at her house, had a beer with Ronnie, but turned down his offer to stay for dinner. I mentioned something about picking up my ride at the rink, but I forgot about my Jeep the second we drove away. I just wanted to be with Nolan.

We ordered Chinese food and brought it to his place, a pretty two-story shingled cottage on a quiet tree-lined street. I commented on the pink hydrangea bushes framing the porch and followed him inside, cradling chow mein and chicken fried rice. He plucked the takeout bag from my hands and set it on a narrow console table under a landscape painting, shut the door, and launched himself at me.

My head hit the wall, rattling the painting as he sucked my tongue and hiked my shirt up, splaying his hands on my chest. Something inside me burst like a dam. Pent-up emotion and passion surged and spilled in a torrent of wild kisses and passionate groping.

"Upstairs," he grunted, yanking his tee over his head as he moved ahead of me.

I followed him up the narrow stairway, along a short hall to a generous bedroom with three large windows facing the backyard. Nolan turned on a bedside lamp, dimly illuminating the queen-sized bed and the flat-screen television propped on a massive dresser on the opposite wall. A few photos broke up the otherwise spartan space.

It was very Nolan. Clean, comfy, and organized with everything you could possibly need and no extra fuss. Throw

pillows and chairs that inevitably became discarded clothing deposit zones were silly distractions. I had no doubt, however, that there was an ample supply of lube and condoms, and maybe even a toy or two in the nightstand drawer.

We finished undressing, kicking off shoes, shorts, boxer briefs, and socks in record time, then fell onto his mattress in a tangle of limbs and tongues. Nolan pushed the duvet to the end of the bed and rolled on top of me, nipping my jaw as he writhed, sliding his hard cock against mine. I cupped his ass and spread my legs, pulling him as close as humanly possible. I wanted more tonight. I wanted inside him.

“Christ, I want you. I want to fuck you,” I panted.

He sat up abruptly and stared deep into my eyes. “Are you sure?”

I swallowed hard. “Yes. Very sure.”

He kissed me quickly and leaned across me to gather supplies. I panicked slightly at the thought of him handing me a condom and lube and telling me to get to it. Mechanically, I knew what went where and I was more than ready for this, but c’mon...this was Nolan.

My heartbeat sounded like a propeller plane in my ears as a barrage of foreign emotions hit out of nowhere. Excitement, nerves, fear. I loved sex, and I was fairly confident I was damned good at it, but I wanted this to be amazing. Not for me...for him.

“Hey, stay with me, baby,” he crooned, kissing a path down the middle of my torso.

He licked circles around my belly button, laved my V-line, rubbing his scruffy chin on the tip of my drooling dick. He breathed me in and glanced up to meet my gaze before taking me to the root.

“Fuck.”

Okay, this was good. Nolan was a champion cock sucker and yeah, I was new at it, but I was improving on the daily. The point was...this was familiar enough that I could relax and enjoy. I threaded my fingers through his hair and pumped

my hips, fucking his mouth while he jacked himself. He licked my balls and the inside of my thigh, then pulled away to grab the lube and condom.

“Put that on,” he instructed, tossing the foil square onto my stomach.

I obeyed, my eyes fixated on him as he uncapped the lube and reached behind him.

“Wait up. I want to see.”

I pushed him off me, the way I might have when we were teens wrestling for no apparent reason. Nolan rolled to his back, lifted his legs, opening himself to me as he rubbed a lube-slicked finger over his entrance.

Gulp.

I licked my dry lips. All I could think was, *I want that. That's mine.* I snatched the lube from him and poured far too much on my palm. I put some on my sheathed dick before slipping a single digit alongside his.

“Oh, fuck,” he moaned. “That’s good. Gimme more.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant, so I went with my gut. Twisting my finger inside his tight hole, studying his every sigh and facial twitch. I added a second as he pulled his away, and...a third. We stared at each other, transfixed by the surrealness of the moment. I couldn’t believe this was us. It felt so...right.

But we could do better.

“Are you ready? I’m gonna come in this fuckin’ condom if I don’t get inside you soon,” I said in a gravelly tone.

Nolan nodded. “Yeah, but you have to go slow. It’s been a while, and you’re kinda big.”

“Kinda big? I’m huge,” I bragged, hoping to add a smidge of humor and calm my frazzled nerves. My hand was shaking so hard I was going to need his help guiding me in, like a tanker truck pulling into a station.

Okay. Weird analogy, but like I said...fuckin' nervous here.

Nolan just smiled and leaned forward, bracing himself on his elbow. He smoothed his hand down my chest and wrapped his fingers around mine, which were currently gripping my dick for dear life.

“Relax. I’m ready.”

I brushed the sweat from my brow, lined myself at his entrance, and pushed. *Holy fuck*. An inferno raged inside him. He was so hot and so damn tight I wasn’t sure I’d fit. Of course, I did—it just...took a while. We used eye contact like a lifeline, watching each other for clues. Not to sound crass, but I’d been with a couple of women who liked it and I’d been game to try. Those few instances felt like insignificant experiments.

This...this felt like touching a star.

I sank balls deep into Nolan, resting my forehead on his. I didn’t move. I didn’t dare. I was a bundle of hypersensitive synapses. I literally tingled from head to toe. One stroke could set me off. I had to proceed with caution. I pressed into him and pulled halfway out.

Nolan lifted his legs higher and inclined his head.

Message received.

I pressed my lips to his and slowly...oh-so-fucking-slowly began to move.

Oh, my God. It was unlike anything I’d ever felt with a lover. Intense pressure and pleasure. Intense longing and lust. Every push and pull, every sigh and sharp intake of breath held meaning.

Soft kisses turned needy. We tongue-fucked as I pumped my hips...a little faster, a little harder. Nolan arched his back and spread his knees, his fingernails digging into my ass cheeks.

“Fuck, fuck, yes. So good, Vin. So fucking good. More.”

More?

Damn, he was gonna kill me. I was pretty sure my cock had never been harder or more eager. I snapped my hips double time, driving deep inside, my arms wrapped tight around him. The bed creaked and groaned as we met thrust for thrust until he hiked his leg and threw me off stride. I took the hint and rolled over. And yeah, I nearly combusted when Nolan climbed on top and lowered himself on my pole.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whispered.

He smiled and licked his lips, jacking his dick as he rode me hard and fast. I didn’t know where to put my hands first, so I clutched his ass and bounced him up and down, up and down.

“Oh, shit. I’m gonna come.” He threw his head back, grunting as cum shot over his fist and onto his stomach and mine.

That was all it took. My release ripped through me a moment later.

I roared with the force of it, pulling him against my chest as wave after wave rippled through my system, sending me reeling into space.

We held each other, rocking slowly, and finally parting with matching dopey smiles.

“That was the best thing I’ve ever done in my life,” I rasped, striving for levity and failing, big-time. “Can we do it again?”

Nolan’s Cheshire-cat grin lit his face to perfection. “Definitely. Food first.”

We cleaned up, redressed, and reheated our dinner, then took it upstairs and had a picnic in bed.

We talked about MK’s book-palooza, compared notes on Pinecrest’s main drag versus ours. I thought ours was better, but they had nice gift shops. We laughed about even noticing that and veered toward our usual topics—sports in general and hockey in particular.

He asked about past teams I'd been on, my favorite coach, and players I considered good friends. He didn't ask if I thought they'd still be my friends if they knew about us. In fact, we didn't talk about "us" at all.

We weren't ready to make any calls on this new thing between us. Who were we now? Something more, something different. I thought so, but I was too chickenshit to ask. And there was no need. Not now.

This was perfect. Just like this.

NOLAN

Once upon a time, I had a crush on my brother's best friend—my friend too. I didn't have words to describe the way I felt when Vinnie Kiminski walked into a room. Joy with a shot of anxiety? No one made me laugh like him. No one challenged me, made me think, made me angry, made me feel quite like he did.

Fast forward nineteen years, and the heady sense of déjà vu unnerved me. But I wasn't afraid this time. I knew who I was...no guilt, no shame. We were adults, and we could do whatever the fuck we wanted. Vinnie probably needed time to sort through his bisexuality, but I had no intention of asking for more than he was ready to give. I knew him too well. And though I knew he wanted me, I was out and proud in a small town.

If we kept this up, our friends and family would begin to speculate about why we spent so much time together. They'd either feel sorry for me for mooning over a straight man or... they'd wonder if Vinnie wasn't so straight after all. And I didn't get the impression that he was ready to come out.

It was okay. He'd do so in his own time...or not at all. It was up to him. If this sexual experimentation phase only lasted this summer, I'd be sure to enjoy every second of it.

Discovery was the new name of the game.

I switched my schedule to free up my late mornings or early afternoons to be with Vinnie. Occasionally, we met up after practice at his house and spent the evening naked in his

sheets. His place was safer than mine—more remote and private. There was little to no chance of my mother or brother banging on his front door at a random hour.

Funny enough, this wasn't a nonstop sexathon. We talked a lot too. Hockey, baseball, music, places we'd traveled, items on our bucket lists...

"I've never been to the Grand Canyon," I said around a bite of turkey sandwich and squinted at the glare off the water. "Or Paris. Those are both on my list."

"Dude. You need to stop what you're doing, hop a plane to Arizona, rent a car, and get your ass to the Grand Canyon ASAP. It will blow your fuckin' mind." He opened his fist next to his temple and reached for the bag of chips on the blanket he'd spread on the dock between us. "And Paris just has to be experienced. You gotta go...like now."

I chuckled. "I can't go anywhere right now."

"Sure, you can. I'll take you."

I kicked his shin as I straightened my leg in front of me. I should have been on my way to the diner by now, but basking in the sun with a shirtless hunk after being in the rink for a few hours had been too tempting to pass up. And so was the sex. We'd tumbled into his living room, fumbling with our clothes in between dirty kisses. After a weak attempt to climb the stairs, we'd fallen onto the sectional, where he'd tongued my hole and fucked me into the cushions.

We'd napped, showered, made sandwiches, and headed to the dock for an impromptu picnic.

I could be a little late today.

"I'm not going to Paris with you, weirdo."

"Why not?"

"First of all, unlike you, I'm not retired and I can't take off whenever I want. Second, how would I explain a romantic vacation with you?"

Vinnie's mouth curled into a devilish lopsided grin. His sunglasses shaded his eyes from view, but I knew they were

crinkled at the corners in amusement.

“Romantic, huh?”

“Fuck you. You know what I mean. I associate Paris with romance and...not clandestine booty calls,” I huffed.

“Fair. When was the last time you took a vacation?”

“Three years ago. A week in Montreal. It was only supposed to be three days, but...it turned into more.”

“That’s where you met JC the *magnifique*?”

“*Oui*.” I took another bite.

“*Hmm*. I like him. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad it didn’t work out, but he’s a good guy.”

“He is,” I agreed.

“So...what happened? Why’d you break up? There’s gotta be a good story here. He uprooted his life and moved to Elmwood of all places for you. And he stayed. Is he hoping for a second shot or something?” His tone was deceptively casual.

“No. We’re both happier as friends and honestly, nothing happened. After first lust wore off, we didn’t do it for each other. We could talk about pastries, farm-to-table cuisine, and the latest episode of *Top Chef* all night, but the sex wasn’t thrilling anymore. It was an amicable split. I asked him to stay through that summer ’cause I was shorthanded and completely in over my head. He agreed and never left. I know Elmwood doesn’t compare to Montreal in any way, but I think he truly likes it here.”

“That’s cool.”

“What about you and the model?”

He squinted. “Who?”

“Sienna Montrose. She’s beautiful. You know the media still thinks you’re with her.”

Vinnie shrugged. “People believe what they want. And to be perfectly honest, we still got together when we were in the

same town, which makes the whole ‘we’re not together’ thing confusing to outsiders.”

I gaped. “She’s your booty call too?”

He snorted. “No, asshole. I mean...no. She’s a friend. I told her we were done when I retired. She wants to use me as arm candy to sell her cosmetic line, and as a friend, I don’t mind showing up to help her out, but the relationship part is over. I don’t know if you could really call it a relationship anyway. It was more of a...sexship. You know?”

I fixed him with a withering glare. “You’re gross.”

“Oh, come on. It takes two to tango. If two people agree that all they need from each other is sex, that’s okay. I’m not equipped for the real deal. My life has always been hockey first, everything else last. Including the beautiful model who liked my dick and my fame. I’ll be a has-been within a year, so what’s the point in pretending we’re something we’re not? She’ll find someone else. No hard feelings.”

I shook my head and chomped another bite. “If you get back together with her or if you want someone else, let me know. Not to sound like a prude, but I’m not down with sharing.”

“Me either.” Vinnie cocked his head sideways. “It took me a long time to get here. I’m not ready to propose or anything, but I don’t want to fuck it up. You do it for me.”

My heart soared and careened like a bird cresting a current. *You do it for me.* In Vinnie speak, that was practically a sonnet.

“The feeling is mutual,” I replied, bumping his arm affectionally.

“Good to know. What does it for you?”

“You.”

“No, moron. I mean specifically. I’m new at this, so like... what can I do better?”

His earnestness took me by surprise.

“Uh...I don't know. You're good at everything,” I gushed. I could tell he was frustrated with my reply, so I hastily added, “Especially kissing. I could make out with you for hours. You're the best kisser...possibly ever.”

Vinnie beamed. “I know, right?”

I barked a laugh. “You suck.”

“I'm getting better at that too, huh?” He waited for me to catch my breath and continued. “Not as good as you. I mean, you must have a degree in cockology, 'cause you're a fucking maestro.”

We snickered at our adolescent compliments, leaning on sun-kissed arms, shoulder to shoulder...like old friends.

See, this was why almost everyone on the planet liked Vinnie. He was silly and irreverent with an infectious sense of humor and an uncanny ability to live in the moment. Best of all, he didn't dwell on dark thoughts or recriminations and he didn't romanticize...whatever this was.

We could make out and writhe naked for hours, and when we were sated, we'd redress and fall into an old familiar banter reminiscent of our youth. Of course, it had evolved into a more adult theme—I'd nag him for stealing covers and he'd push me into the wet spot or make up words like cockology.

I felt lighter around him, more carefree. Things that used to seem tedious were fun again.

Like coaching.

I'd agreed to help my brother at the rink 'cause he needed me, but I didn't always enjoy it. It was more like a bad-paying second job with a side serving of family guilt. I did it for my brother, for my dad, and for a family legacy I didn't always feel attached to.

Now I did it to be with Vinnie. I didn't want to miss seeing the great Kimbo in action, zipping across the ice in his usual gregarious way, boisterously coaxing the teens to concentrate, try harder, skate faster. He was funny, charming, and easy to talk to.

Vinnie reached those kids with his in-your-face, slightly unorthodox truth-bomb approach. Kinney *was* a puck hog, Max *was* terrible on defense, and none of them were particularly fast skaters or accurate shooters. His self-deprecating humor softened his critique and made him relatable...at least during practice.

Honestly, other than his copious use of colorful language, Vin reminded me of my dad out there. And my father had a way of making you want to work. It wasn't enough to tell kids to protect the puck or fight for position. You had to show them why and how their efforts mattered. Dad had been a natural. And though he wouldn't agree...so was Vinnie.

The juniors adored him. So did their parents.

We had an audience at every practice, and our last scrimmage had garnered a record attendance. Vinnie had been mobbed by fans who'd driven from the far reaches of Vermont to see an NHL great. He'd signed jerseys, ball caps, and body parts, and smiled through dozens of selfies after our team was demolished by the Pinecrest Penguins.

At any other time, I might have been bummed about the loss and concerned about shoring up the kids' confidence, but now I was more bewildered by my brother's apparent genius. Ronnie was right. Vinnie's presence alone created a stir.

Over the past two weeks, we'd signed an additional six teens to our junior summer league and started a waiting list for the fall that currently consisted of at least ten players willing to drive half an hour or more to spend ninety minutes twice a week at the El Rink. It was madness.

If I'd wanted out, this was probably a good time to tell Ronnie to hire a more experienced offensive coach to help run the program. The rink was generating some serious cash now—enough to hire someone who'd played at a higher level than I ever had.

But I wasn't ready to sacrifice a single second of this summer with Vinnie. We were a good team. I was the practical one; he was the powerhouse motivator. I set the drills and kept everyone on track while Vinnie alternately entertained and

cajoled his adoring pupils. It wasn't a perfect system, but it was working.

Yet, I couldn't help thinking we could do more.

"Ronnie needs a social media expert," I commented, wadding my napkin into a ball.

"Definitely," Vin agreed. "I'll mention it to him tonight."

"What's tonight?"

"We're meeting up with a few high school buddies for beer and pool at the Black Horse. Jim Ashton, Dirk Cafferty, and a couple of other guys. They were all in our grade, but you know them. You should come," he enthused.

"Maybe I'll swing by on my way home from the diner."

He nodded and popped the last of his sandwich into his mouth, his thick brows furrowed as he chewed thoughtfully. "What do you think Ronnie will say when I tell him I'm bi?"

"You're going to tell him?" I choked in surprise.

"Not tonight, but soon."

"Oh. Well, he'll be happy for you."

"Happy? That's weird. It's nothing to be happy or sad about. It just is what it is." He lowered his ball cap over his forehead and sighed. "The bi part isn't a big deal. It's the strong desire to fuck his brother that's really gonna throw him off."

I choked for real this time. "Jesus, Vinnie."

He shrugged. "It's true, though. What did your family say when you came out?"

"They said all the right things—told me nothing changed, and gave me their unconditional support and love. It was almost anticlimactic. I'd been geared up for the fight of my life for years. Ready to do battle at a moment's notice, pissed at myself for being born this way, and pissed at society for making it into a big fucking deal. And the people whose opinions I cared most about were so...good to me." I leaned

back on my hands and cast a poignant look at him. “Especially my dad.”

Vinnie nodded. “That makes sense.”

“Your dad won’t care either.”

His smile was instantaneous and disarming. “Dude, my dad’s head has been buried in his books for sixty years. He is the original absent-minded professor. Real life distracts the hell out of him. Is it any wonder he’s in London the one summer I’m here? When I told him I was thinking about coming home, I’m sure all he heard was Charlie-Brown-style gibberish-speak. It’s who he is. I could tell him I purchased a seat on a space shuttle, won a ga-billion-dollar lottery, or that I accidentally burned his house down, and he’d say, ‘That’s nice, son.’ You know I’m not exaggerating.”

That was all very...accurate. Heartbreakingly so. But I still felt the need to argue on his dad’s behalf.

“He’s not that bad,” I said in the least convincing tone ever.

“He’s worse than that.” Vinnie chuckled softly. “I love the guy. Even when I was a kid and I didn’t understand why my mom was gone and how I got left behind, I couldn’t hate him. He was in pain and in his own way, he tried. But...I used to wish I could trade places with you when we were kids. My house was so...fucking sad.”

I scooted a little closer and mirrored his pose, linking my pinky around his as I looked up at the fading sun. “Your new house is happy.”

Vinnie kissed my shoulder. “Yeah. I’m happy.”

Those two little words had never sounded so sweet.

WE HAD a packed house at the diner tonight. The outdoor area had been fully reserved for a week, and we’d filled our last vacancy of the night earlier in the day. I loved looking over the

sea of chatty patrons, enjoying a nice meal under the stars or in candlelight inside. It was high-end but cozy...the way only a small town could pull off.

I had JC to thank for that. He added what he called a certain French-Canadian *je ne sais quoi*—a little something extra in the form of basic fare with a *haute cuisine* twist. And I added...the basics—a diner with a great reputation. During the short time we'd been a couple, we'd talked endlessly about how to create a brand using his culinary expertise and the marketing skills I'd picked up in LA. We'd done a damn fine job if you asked me. The diner was kicking serious ass...and it was fun.

I'd spent most of my evening helping out on the floor, pouring wine, directing the waitstaff, and generally schmoozing customers who expected a warm greeting with their filet mignon as if we hadn't bumped into each other at the dry cleaners or the rink earlier in the day. Like Sherry and Harv Kinney.

“Barclay hasn't gone a full day without mentioning Vinnie Kiminski,” Sherry gushed with a starry-eyed look that indicated she didn't mind in the least.

It took me a second to remember that Barclay was Kinney, our resident puck hog who'd actually come a long way over the past few weeks.

“Can't blame him,” Harv piped in, pushing his empty plate aside and patting his round belly with satisfaction. “We never had an NHL superstar even sniff the rink when we were kids.”

“That's true.” I reached for his plate. “Did you save room for dessert?”

“I'm stuffed. Unless...do you have any of that key lime pie tonight?”

I stifled a laugh. Harv hadn't changed much. This was the guy who used to sweet-talk Mrs. Henderson into letting us sample her pies after school.

“We do,” I confirmed.

Harv's eyes lit up. “Sold. Want a cup of coffee, hon?”

“*Hmm*. I don’t think so. I’ll be fine with a bite of your pie.” She winked at her husband, tucking a stray strand of honey-blond hair behind her ear before turning to me with a mischievous grin. “And...an inside scoop from Mr. Moore here. I heard through the grapevine that the Ducks want Vinnie to play for them in the fall. Any truth in that?”

“Uh...he’s retired.”

“Yeah, yeah, but according to SportsCenter, he’s in high demand. Toronto wants him too,” Sherry replied conversationally. “The boys have been asking him, but apparently Vinnie is keeping mum. His girlfriend did a power-couple post on TikTok showing them all decked out at fabulous soirees, but I haven’t seen hide nor hair of her since Vinnie’s been here. Have you?”

“Um...no.”

She sighed. “Barclay’s too polite to ask about the girlfriend, but he says Vinnie doesn’t talk about her or where he’s going next, and ooooooh! I’m so curious!”

“Me too,” Harv said as I stacked their plates, my brow furrowed in faux concentration. “C’mon, you must know something, Nol.”

I shook my head and flashed a smile I doubted met my eyes. “I know that if I don’t hurry to grab a slice of key lime, you might be out of luck.”

Harv shooed me off with a laugh and compliments for the chef. I did as instructed and made sure to pass along his dessert order to his waiter. I had no intention of going back for round two of the “What’s Vinnie up to?” guessing game. I was pretty sure he would have mentioned un-retiring and signing with a new team to me, but we purposefully didn’t discuss anything beyond summer.

We existed in the past and the present. The future had always eluded us, but there was no point in being sad about it.

No way. I was grateful for this second chance.

This thing between us was precious and private. It was reconnection on the deepest level with someone who still

remembered the secret handshake my brother had made up when we'd called ourselves the three hockeyteers the summer we were nine and ten. The guy who'd teased me for the way I tied my skates, then painstakingly taught me a better method. He was the seven-year-old boy I'd sat quietly beside as he'd stared at the sky with tears in his eyes.

I'd known Vinnie in his darkest hours when we were kids, but that was only part of his story. Secrets in the dark, longing stares, and clandestine touches belonged to the here and now. I had no idea what we'd be in a year. Friends?

Christ, that sucked. I mean...no. It was good, but it still kind of sucked, right?

I pushed into the kitchen and let my smile slip. JC glanced up from the spotless butcher block island where he was perched on a barstool, enjoying a glass of wine and a small plate of cubed cheese.

“*Le Vieux Pin* Syrah. Have some, *oui*? Whoever pissed in your Pop-Tarts will have no luck here. The kitchen is closed.”

I gave a tired-sounding half laugh. “No one pissed on or in my Pop-Tarts, which I don't eat, by the way. And I'm fine.”

“Hmph. If you're not angry, you must be thinking too hard. You do that sometimes, you know,” he said, narrowing his keen gaze. “That's unhealthy for everyone, but particularly for you. So...*arrête ça*, okay?”

I rolled my eyes. “I don't know what that means.”

“It means stop it. Live in the moment. Eat cheese, drink wine, eat chocolate...” He popped a chunk of cheese into his mouth, adding, “Screw the hockey hero.”

“Okay, we're done here.” I saluted him and spun on my heels, fishing my keys from my pocket. “I was going to close with Martin, but I want to leave a little early and—”

“Go. Martin is the manager. He can handle closing without you looking over his shoulder.”

“True. All right, then...I'll be in early.”

“I’ll be in late,” JC countered, lifting his glass. “I hope you do all the naughty things, *mon cher*.”

I started in surprise at the relic term of endearment that used to melt me from the inside out. Now, I knew it was meant to be offhandedly affectionate rather than adoring, but in my current off-kilter state, it jolted me.

“Overthinking fucked us up, huh? We didn’t call it that, but...that’s what it was. I analyzed spreadsheets and budgeted the time we spent working versus being a couple, and you went with the flow. And fuck, that pissed me off. But now...I wish I was more like you,” I said in a rush, jingling my keys nervously. “So if you have any hints or bits of advice on how to live in the moment, I’m open to suggestions.”

JC set his wineglass down and swiveled to face me. The fashionable pendant light over the island cast his cheekbones and bearded jaw in stark relief and peppered his reddish hair with streaks of gold. He looked like a pirate. Strong, brave, and slightly dangerous. I’d thought he was out of my league from day one. He was accomplished, smart, driven. I couldn’t understand why he wanted me...or what had made him follow me here. I still didn’t.

“I have no advice to give. Just don’t be like me, Nol. Be you. Only...perhaps be kinder to yourself. Less changing, more accepting, eh?”

I nodded as though I knew exactly what he meant. I wasn’t sure I did, and I wasn’t in the right mood for any further philosophical musings.

I CRANKED up a Rihanna song to drown out my thoughts as I veered my truck along the winding road leading to the Black Horse Inn. Vin had said he was meeting Ronnie and some of their old buddies at the adjacent bar, and there was no reason for me not to join them. In fact, it was weird not to check in with everyone. They were my friends too, and they knew Vinnie and I were cool.

Quit overthinking. Quit overthinking.

I parked in the half-empty lot near a copse of pine trees and did a double take at the petite brunet herding a group of wobbly-looking grown-ass men into a Suburban.

“Andie?”

“Oh, thank God! Nolan, you’re an angel. I need help wrangling these idiots home.” She gestured toward her husband, Kirby, Ronnie, Vinnie, Jim Ashton, Dirk Cafferty, and Emmett Michaels—pillars of society in their mid-to-late thirties who’d seemingly reverted to frat boys. “I can fit everyone in, but it’s going to take some coordination.”

That was an understatement. I snorted affectionately at the six drunk morons butchering the lyrics to Tom Petty’s “American Girl” as they swayed like palm trees in a hurricane.

“How ’bout if we split the work? I’ll take half of them home, you take the others.”

Andie heaved a sigh. “Jim, Dirk, and Emmett live on the same street. I have the bigger truck, so I’ll take that crew if you don’t mind taking your brother and Vin.”

“No problem.” I clapped my hands decisively and marched over to the delinquents. “Hey, there. Looks like I missed a party. You ready to go home?”

“Nolan, Nolan, Nolan!” They chanted my name and offered drunken high fives in greeting.

Kirby Williams wrapped an arm around my shoulder in an awkward side hug. “Man, this guy is a cool guy. I like this guy.”

“Hands off. I like him more,” Vinnie asserted, pushing forward like a running back making a play for a touchdown. “Look at that face. He’s like...hot or somefin.”

They all stared at me intently as if trying to decide how I measured on a hot meter. It was comically ridiculous, but it was also a tad alarming. Then again, I doubted anyone would remember much in the morning.

“Gee, thanks, Vin. Let’s get you guys home.” I tugged at Ronnie’s elbow. “Ready?”

My brother nodded. “Yeah, yeah. But for the record, I’m not drunk. Nowhere near as bad as these guys.”

Huh. He seemed fairly lucid.

“Good to know. Is Mary-Kate at Mom’s?”

“Yeah, so you might as well drop Vin off first,” Ronnie said, reaching for the passenger side door handle.

“No way. Shotgun!” Vinnie raised his hand and stomped toward a white SUV that in no way resembled my ride.

“Wrong truck. This one, Vin.”

I made sure Andie had her charges settled and was safely on her way before getting behind the wheel, unsurprised to find Vinnie in the passenger seat.

“I like this song. Who is it?” He squinted at my radio and fiddled with the volume. “Iz Ed Sherman?”

“Close enough.”

“I like it. Do you like it?”

“Sure, Vin.” I stole a covert glance at my brother in my rearview mirror who snickered as if amused by the whole situation. He folded his arms, gaze fixed out the window, leaving me to deal with an air guitar-playing exuberant passenger.

“I wish I learned how to play a six-string. I own one. It’s in my house in LA. I should take lessons. I might be good at it. Check my technique.” Vinnie thrashed his head back and forth, fingers flying over a pretend fretboard.

“You have a house in LA?” I asked, furrowing my brow.

“Yeah, at the beach. Don’t ask which one. I forget. I haven’t been there in ages. I sold my Seattle place. The buyer wants my furniture but he can’t have my gee-tar. Oh, hell... wait up. I fuckin’ love this song. Ronnie, drumsticks ready!”

Ronnie came to life, sitting forward in anticipation as Vinnie adjusted the volume on Phil Collins's "In the Air Tonight" to earsplitting levels. They sang at the top of their lungs, off-key, off pitch, yet somehow endearing.

This was the way it always used to be. The three of us together—me, the responsible one, my brother, the lighthearted, easygoing guy, and Vinnie...the life of the party. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine us the way we were before the real world tore us apart and forced us to make big decisions and deal with heady shit like death, addiction, and stardom.

My feelings for Vinnie were complicated, but underneath it all, we shared an indelible connection that felt like a gift. JC was right. There was no reason to overthink this thing between Vinnie and me. The details were murky, but it was oddly comforting to know there would never be a real end. We simply were and always would be...us.

Ronnie didn't fuss about being dropped off first. He was too busy banging his head and scream-singing lyrics he'd memorized in high school. He was pumped up with renewed energy and grand ideas about continuing the party with just one more beer.

"No," I huffed. "Go to bed. I need to take this guy home."

Ronnie beamed. "Oh, yeah. You like each other again, huh? Don't deny it. I can feel the love. Fuck, I'm smart. See ya."

Vinnie watched intently as Ronnie disappeared into his house.

"I wonder if he knows something," he commented soberly, lowering the volume on the radio.

"Like what?" I slammed on the brakes in the middle of Ronnie's driveway and twisted to face him. "And what is happening here? I thought you were drunk."

"Are you kidding me? They still serve piss for beer at the Black Horse. I'd have to drink a full keg of that shit to get buzzed. The tequila shots would have done the trick, but I

passed mine on to Kirby and Emmett. I'm slightly tipsy at best."

I snorted. "So that was all a big act?"

Vinnie shrugged good-naturedly. "I might have turned it up a notch or ten when I saw your truck. It worked. I got you alone."

"Sneaky bastard," I huffed, making a left on the main road. "I should drop your ass off here on the grounds of trickery and deceit."

"You probably should," he replied in a barely audible voice.

"What makes you think Ronnie is on to us?"

He waved dismissively. "I dunno. I'm probably being paranoid. He talked a lot about you tonight. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was trying to set us up or—hey, turn right here."

"Why? Your house is on the other side of—"

"I know. I just...I want to see something."

And that was how I found myself in the weed-choked parking lot behind St. Finbarr's church. The brick edifice was covered with ivy, its tall steeple flanked by unwieldy pines. In autumn, huge pinecones would litter the adjacent graveyard and in winter, snow would bend the branches and mini icicles would form like glittery holiday ornaments.

No one would clear needles away or worry about black ice 'cause no one bothered with this place anymore. It should have been repurposed by the church years ago, but Rome didn't seem to be in a hurry to take care of this one. So it sat on its own on the outskirts of town, slowly being swallowed by vines and neglect.

In a place as small as Elmwood, the air of absolute abandonment felt heavy. This lot belonged to ghosts now. But it used to be ours.

I got out of the truck and followed him to a familiar patch of wall under an archway. We'd met here that summer at odd

hours with well-coordinated excuses at the ready. Late movie, watching a show with friends, a birthday party, a bonfire...I'd had enough friends in my grade to make my excuses plausible—total necessity with my folks. Vinnie, on the other hand, hadn't even had a curfew.

Sometimes he'd pick me up at the Frosty Freeze and park behind the trash bin that had been home to a dozen raccoons, but usually, I'd ride my bike. I'd toss it in the ivy out of sight, and lean against the wall to wait for him, checking my watch nervously until he showed up.

My pulse would jackhammer as he made his way toward me. Vinnie had been a handsome teenager—thinner and lankier than he was now, but anyone could see there was something special about him. He was the epitome of masculine beauty and strength—confident and cocky with a sense of humor that made smoothed out his rough edges. A mere hint of the larger-than-life hockey star he became.

And now? I wasn't sure what we were doing here, and I said as much.

“Looking for something.” Vinnie pushed aside a patch of ivy under the archway.

“What is it?”

“It's more of a show than tell sort of—bingo! Check this out.” He pointed at a crudely etched circle in the brick, inside was an equation...eleven plus fifteen.

“Twenty-six.” I rubbed my arms and peered up at the inky night. “Or is it a secret code?”

“It's us.”

I cocked my head curiously. “Huh?”

“Check it out, dufus. I was number eleven in high school, you were fifteen. The circle is supposed to be a hockey puck. Hearts and initials scared me, but this seemed more like us anyway.”

I gaped at the carved numbers in disbelief, touched and confused. “You...I...wow.”

“Right? I did it the morning I left for college.”

I traced the jagged edges of the circle, then met his gaze, overwhelmed by emotion. “Why?”

“Dunno. I had a bad habit of defacing public property in my youth. And I liked you,” he added flippantly. “Still do.”

“I like you too. I just—”

“Ah, no, no. No words.” He waved his hands manically and made a face like a kid sitting at the dining room table with a bowl of peas. “Words make shit weird.”

True.

I worried my bottom lip between my teeth, unsure how to navigate something that felt like an important revelation in spite of his lackadaisical tone.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Take me home and have your way with me, Nol. You might have to ride me or something, though. I can get it up no prob, but it’s been a long day and I swear to God, if I heard Emmett tell that stupid-ass story about the time he...”

I sneaked one last peek at the ivy-covered wall and followed him to my truck, my mind buzzing in an effort to straddle the divide between past and present. As if it mattered somehow. It didn’t.

Nothing mattered but now.

This moment was all I could control. The secrecy was still there, but the shame was long gone. We were a better, stronger version of our teenage selves, and we could do whatever we wanted. No overthinking, no second-guessing.

Thank God the drive to his place was short.

We made out on his porch, tongues tangling as he worked his key into the lock, then fell inside and ricocheted off the foyer wall, jockeying for dominance. Shirts were yanked off and belt buckles clanked noisily as we fought to get to skin, breaking feverish kisses only when absolutely necessary.

The details went fuzzy, but somehow, we made it upstairs. We rolled naked around his giant bed, pumping our hips as we slid our precum-slicked cocks together. The friction sparked a wildfire of need. I wanted him inside me and I didn't want to wait.

I climbed onto Vinnie's lap and braced my hands on his chest as he stretched me open with two fingers. I batted him away when he went for a third, sheathed his cock, added lube, and slowly lowered myself.

My breath hitched as the initial burn receded and pleasure flooded my veins. Vinnie's awed expression turned wicked in a flash. He smacked my ass once hard and growled, "Ride me."

So I did.

I dug my knees into the mattress and bounced on his dick like a cowboy on a bucking bronco. Vinnie gripped me at the base, stroking me and dragging his thumb over my tip in the way he knew drove me wild. I rode his huge tattooed body with gusto, admiring his every contour, every scar. He was so fucking beautiful, so big and powerful, and yet...kind of sweet.

His adoring gaze had an awestruck quality that assured me I wasn't in this alone. He was right there with me. And he kept it sexy. Vinnie might have been newly acquainted with his gay side, but he held nothing back. He gave me everything he had, pumping into me from below with short, wicked strokes until I had no choice but to fall apart.

We came to slowly, cleaned up, and dove under the covers. He tucked me close, cradling my head on his chest. He whispered, "Good night" and kissed my forehead with an easy affection that did something funny to my heart.

I think that was when I realized that my "living life in the moment" rhetoric was all well and good, but I was still fucked 'cause damn it...I'd done what I promised myself I'd never do.

I'd fallen in love with Vinnie Kiminski.

VINNIE

I might have mentioned this already, but it bore repeating—I loved sex. I mean, like...I *really* loved it. But I'd never been good at being part of a couple. Being a boyfriend had always felt like work. Remembering to call, considering feelings, and memorizing schedules or habits...yuck. It was exhausting.

Sex, on the other hand, was easy. That was probably why Sienna and I got along so well.

We liked each other fine, but our expectations had always been appropriately low. Even when we were sort of in a “relationship” I wouldn't have been offended if she told me she'd met someone else or simply wanted to move on.

I did *not* feel that way about Nolan. No way, no how.

He turned me inside out like no one else. I thought about him constantly, then had to concentrate on not acting like a lovesick puppy the second he walked into a room. My smiles were too big, my playful bear hugs lasted a beat too long, and I had a tendency to stand too close to him in public. I was under a wickedly strong spell.

That had to be it. Why else would I notice crazy shit like the fact that his mouth tugged to the right when he was amused and trying not to be and that he bit his bottom lip when he was anxious or pensive? I wanted to be in on his jokes. I wanted to soothe his nerves and know what he was thinking. The kind of stuff that had nothing to do with sex.

Scariest still, I wanted him to know me. That had to be why I'd shown him my renegade church etching. Those chicken scratch marks were hard evidence that I'd been churned up over him two decades ago. And now? Well...I didn't know what I had to offer that he'd be interested in, so I gave him everything I had.

I shared the locker room antics of some of my favorite teammates, the thrill of hitting the ice on my first ever NHL game, and the bittersweet feel of saying good-bye at my last one. I talked about coaches I'd admired, rabid fans, sold-out venues, and puck bunnies. He snort-laughed at the story of the suburban mom who'd stuffed a G-string with her phone number into my pocket after I'd signed a puck for her son and the time I'd sat in an airport bar till midnight buying martinis for a group of cute little old hockey-loving ladies waiting to board their plane to Aruba.

I loved that I could still make him laugh. I would have happily sat on a barstool at the diner or on the dock at my place, regaling him with silly slices of life on the road all day, all night in exchange for whatever stories he was willing to share with me. Nolan wasn't always an open book, which meant I had to do a little coaxing.

And surprising him with weird shit no one but him would understand seemed to do the trick.

For example, this morning, I marched into the diner, emptied my pocket, and pointed at Nolan. "That's for you."

"A rock. Gee, Vinnie, I'm touched." The sarcasm was hard to miss, but his eyes lit up and a radiant smile spread across his face.

"Yep. I found it on my run this morning. It's got those crystalline bits you like inside."

Nolan twisted the basic small gray stone in his hand, clearly amused by my Flintstones-inspired gift. "Weird, but...I like it. Thanks."

I grinned. "You're welcome. I'll have the usual."

“You got it.” He beamed at me, then slipped the rock into his pocket and turned to place my order in the kitchen.

JC came out to gab about hockey stats and talked me into trying some new veggie-and-cheese combo in my omelet. I agreed 'cause he was a good guy, an enthusiastic hockey fan, and two breakfasts gave me an excuse to linger for as long as I wanted. The diner's coffee was amazing, and the omelets were to fucking die for.

I slid onto the same swivel stool at the counter I had almost every morning that summer and said hello to the same people who took the same seats at their booths. And I liked it.

Funny 'cause I'd hated the sameness of life here when I was younger. Now, I found it comforting. It helped that I didn't expect this place to be something it wasn't. I wasn't looking for adventure, and I didn't need to prove anything to myself anymore.

I'd been there, done that. But the locals still wanted to know what came next.

I had no idea.

I'd ignored a couple of recent texts from my ex and my agent who'd wanted to know the same thing.

Gary: Answer your damn phone, Kimbo. We need to talk.

Sienna: Call me, honey. I need you in Miami. And OMG, I heard a rumor you're signing with LA!

I didn't feel a burning need to talk to my agent and yeah, I could swing Miami for Sienna, but I hadn't been in the mood to defend my retirement. It was a done deal as far as I was concerned. I had other things on my mind. Like needling Nolan while he organized the evening menu, replenished sugar packets, or whatever the fuck he was doing.

“That's not how you're supposed to fill a saltshaker.” I thanked him when he set two plates in front of me and immediately shoveled a piece of bacon into my mouth. “You're wasting the salt. And shouldn't you use that rock salt anyway? It's fancier.”

Nolan shot me an irritated glance. “Fancier, eh?”

“Yeah, and this is a fancier joint nowadays,” I said.

“Not everyone here likes fancy. They want the old-fashioned saltshakers. So...I offer both.”

“You always were a pleaser.”

“You always were a dickwad,” he retorted with an affectionate glint in his eye.

He finished his task and picked up an iPad, skirting the counter and perching on the stool next to mine.

“Are you finished working?” I asked conversationally.

“For now. Yes.” He kept his eyes on his screen as he typed. “What’s with the rock, Vin?”

“You like rocks.” I shrugged awkwardly as I studied his profile, stoically resisting the urge to lean in and sniff him.

“I liked them when I was a kid.”

“What do you like now?” I picked up my fork and speared a cherry tomato.

He eyed me warily. “I like bagels.”

“Plain cream cheese or flavored?”

“Plain cream cheese.”

“So you’re not Satan. That’s good to know,” I snarked.

Nolan chuckled. “I do like hot-mustard Doritos, though.”

“Never mind. You are Satan,” I deadpanned. “You still like chick flicks?”

He kicked my ankle under the counter. “I never liked chick flicks.”

“*Pretty Woman* ring any bells?”

“Shut up. Everyone likes that movie.”

“Not me. I don’t like Cinderella stories. They’re so... predictable. Boy meets girl, falls in love, snore, snooze, snore, boy loses girl, snore, snooze, boy wins girl back. Continue

snooze.” I bit the inside of my cheek when he busted up laughing. “Gimme *Lord of the Rings* any day.”

“Viggo Mortensen. Yes, please,” he said in a campy tone I’d never heard from him...ever.

It threw me off guard. It was kind of...gay. He was gay and I was sitting next to him, tingling all over ’cause I was wildly attracted to him, and that was gay. And all this gayness felt like a superhero power I’d finally worked up the nerve to use.

I fixed my gaze on his mouth. “You’re so fucking hot.”

Nolan furrowed his brow and glanced over his shoulder. “Your voice carries, Vin. You’re going to scandalize the natives.”

“I don’t think I care. Come home with me,” I purred.

He trailed his fingers along the inside of my knee. “I can’t. I’m covering for Stella, but I’ll see you at practice.”

Fair enough.

WHERE THE FUCK IS ELMWOOD? I’m going to personally come there to pull your fishing rod out of your hands and shove it up your ass if you don’t call me back. Now.

I stared at the message for a beat, weighing the threat. Yeah, she might do that.

So, I scrolled Sienna’s number and pushed Send.

“When did you get so violent?” I asked in greeting.

She snorted indignantly. “When you stopped returning my phone calls. What’s your deal? All that fresh air must have gone to your head and I’m happy for you, but...I also need you in Miami. Can you be here on the twenty-sixth?”

“The twenty-sixth,” I repeated, rubbing my stubbled jaw.

I was busy that day...maybe. I couldn't remember why, though. I squinted at the sunlight reflected off the window of the corner coffee shop, tilting my chin politely to a woman pushing a baby carriage. I was pretty sure I'd pulled her pigtails in kindergarten and—

“Vinnie?”

“Uh, sorry. I don't know. I'll check my schedule and text you, okay?”

She sighed heavily. “You promised, Vin.”

I winced. “I know. Shit, okay. I'll make it work. Just...text me the info and I'll fix my schedule.”

“What's on your schedule? I thought you were relaxing.”

“I am. But I'm working with juniors at my buddy's rink.”

“Aww, now that's cute!” Sienna gushed. “Why didn't you lead with that, asshole? I want to see you coaching.”

“That's not gonna happen.”

“Why not? I'll come see you. I'll—”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. I gotta run,” I intercepted.

“Fine. Text me!”

She hung up before I could argue or agree. Just as well. I had places to be.

I DROPPED a bag of hot-mustard Doritos on the bench. “For you.”

Nolan finished tying his skates and looked up. He examined the bag, chuckling lightly. “Thank you. You're spoiling me with—”

“You fucking dickhead! You're the laziest piece of shit out here.”

“Are you kidding? You suck, Max. You suck eggs, you suck dick, you suck...”

“Whoa.” I jumped over the board and skated to center ice where Max had Kinney in a headlock. I shoved a few onlookers aside and pulled the two lugheads out of the scrum. “What the fuck is the matter with you two?”

Nolan joined me a moment later, his brow furrowed with concern. I was sure he’d reprimand me for F-bomb usage, but he was too focused on the disgruntled teens. “Well?”

“Nothing,” Max grumbled testily. “Just tired of losing ’cause Kinney doesn’t know the meaning of the word pass.”

“Chill, Max. This is summer league. It’s not that big of a deal,” Jason chided.

“That’s why we’re still losing. Losers always come up with excuses,” someone else chimed in.

“You’re the fuckin’ loser.”

“Yeah, right, asshole. You can’t find the puck with both hands and you can’t...”

Nolan and I shared a bemused look as our band of usually mellow teens dissolved into utter chaos. He blew his whistle and waved his arms above his head while I pulled bodies apart and let out a berserk roar that had the usual effect of startling a crowd into silence.

I gave Nolan what I hoped transmitted as “I got this” vibes, put my hands on my hips, and pivoted in a half circle, coolly eyeing the boys.

“Hey, no one wins the blame game. The only way a team wins is when they work together...as a team. I’ve been here for almost two months, and I can honestly say I didn’t think winning mattered much to you guys. I wasn’t sure you were listening to Coach Nolan or me. Maybe I was wrong. Was I? Do you actually want to win a fucking game?” I challenged.

“Language,” Nolan warned as the boys shouted a chorus of “Hell yeses” and “Fuck yeahs.”

“Okay, then. Let’s make a few adjustments. First up...you gotta play with fire in your veins. You gotta play hungry every single time you get on the ice. Take all this angst happening

right here”—I motioned between them all—“and channel it. Dig in when you skate, pass that fucking puck, take the shots, defend your goal. Don’t play scared. Don’t back down. Be accountable. If you’re telling me you can do all of those things, we can win, no problem. Whoa, whoa...wait up. But only if you play together, work together, grind together. The greatest shooter ever can’t win a game alone. The greatest defender can’t defend the net alone. Not possible. So, if you’re really serious about taking this to the next level, show me what you got. Show me your speed, show me those passes, show me that defense. Show me that you’re here to fuckin’ win. Show me it matters to you.”

The boys tapped their sticks on the ice as a new round of “yeahs” rumbled through them.

“All right, let’s do it.” I clapped my hands, then held them in the air and waved. “Hold up. One more thing...and this is important. You need nicknames. Max, you’re Hothead. Kinney, I love the simplicity, but let’s tweak it. Kinnster, Kinnmoney, K’dyver? What do you think? Tim, you’re tall, you have red hair, you’re Big Red. Jason...”

I spent the next fifteen minutes making up nicknames for knuckleheads before Nolan and I split them into smaller groups and got to work.

TWO AND A HALF HOURS LATER, Nolan pulled his truck behind my Jeep and met me on the doorstep. We wordlessly trudged upstairs, undressed, and hopped in the shower. Afterward, we sat on the deck and ate hoagies we’d picked up in town. We didn’t say much at first. Sandwiches were good, beers were cold, the sun was shining. And across the town, a dozen or so teenagers decided they wanted to be champions. For the Smokey Bear association, but still...life was good.

Nolan tilted his chin toward the sky. “You created a monster tonight, you know. I think they really want to win.”

“Everyone wants to win. The problem is that we want it to come easy. It never does.”

“Not even for you?” he teased.

I drained my beer bottle, shaking my head slowly. “Definitely not. I worked hard from the start. I was too afraid of being sent home as Elmwood’s biggest bust—and for other reasons we’ve already talked about. Long hours, sore muscles, body covered with ice packs every night, no social life outside of my team. It was tough. I didn’t make millions right away, ESPN didn’t want to interview me, kids weren’t saving up for my jersey. I couldn’t have been more average if I tried. Don’t get me wrong, I was good enough to be in the NH fuckin’ L, but I wanted to be more than ‘good enough.’ I wanted to be great.”

“You were. How’d you do it?”

“I drove myself to the brink of exhaustion every day at practice and home workouts. And I played harder on the ice than I thought I could. I created this good-natured asshole persona on the ice, and the fans ate it up. Suddenly, ESPN noticed, *Sports Illustrated* noticed, and...women noticed,” I added with a frown. “I fed off that energy and soaked up the limelight like oxygen...like I needed that praise to fucking breathe. To be honest, it wasn’t easy to adjust to being just plain ol’ me when I was alone. I got lost a few times along the way. And now...I’m home again.”

“Anticlimactic, eh?”

“No, it’s been good. I still don’t know what comes next, but I had more fun this afternoon coaching those terrible teenage menace hockey players than I should admit.”

Nolan barked a laugh. “You were amazing.”

“Nah, but it felt like we got through to them today, and I can’t help but think it must be cool to string a few days like that together. To light a fire under someone and make them believe they could be anything they want to be.”

He slipped his hand in mine and squeezed. “Did my dad do that for you?”

“Yeah, definitely. But...so did you.”

“Me?” He pulled back, cocking his head curiously. “How so?”

“Ah, Nol. I can’t explain. It’s just...who you are. You quietly take care of everyone around you. No fuss. You check in with your friends and your mom, you babysit your niece, you take over your dad’s business, you help your brother coach....You give and you give, and all the while you’re cheering everyone on. The night before I left for college, you hugged me, wished me luck, and you said, ‘Go be a superstar.’”

“You remember that?”

“I remember everything about you,” I replied, staring out at the horizon where the setting sun painted streaks of pink and purple across the blue sky. “You didn’t ask when I’d be home or what would happen to us. Next thing I knew, a year or two had gone by and I figured we both moved on and that was... okay. You know, your dad called to congratulate me when I got drafted?”

“No.”

“He said you were away at school and told me to call you. I chickened out.” I pursed my lips and sighed. “I regret that. I’m haunted by the things I’ve lost when I thought I’d won.”

“No regrets, Vin. We’re here now.”

“I know.” I brought our joined hands to my lips and kissed his knuckles. “I know. And it’s better than I ever thought it could be.”

I held his hand tightly, listening to the gentle lap of water below us, and warblers and crickets somewhere in the distance.

As twilight descended, we went upstairs, undressed in the moonlight, and came together with soft kisses and featherlight caresses. I slowed the pace, pulling away when he clung to me like a koala. It would have been too easy to take and plunder, but I didn’t want this to be about me...my pleasure, my discovery, my needs. I wanted to worship him the way Nolan deserved to be.

I licked him from the column of his throat to his nipples, the dips in his rib cage, his belly button to his V-line. I pressed kisses along the inside of his thigh, his calf, and the arch of his foot. I bit his big toe and he laughed, pulling me on top of him. I changed tactics and manhandled him onto his stomach, urging him to his knees.

“What are you—oh, fuck.”

I pulled his cheeks apart and feasted on his ass as if I couldn't get enough. I slipped my hand between his knees and stroked his cock while I laved his entrance, loving his deep hum of approval.

“Feel good?”

“Yes, fuck...yes,” Nolan groaned, wriggling under me. “But I want...”

“What do you want, baby? Tell me. I'll give you anything.”

He tweaked my nipples as he faced me. “Let me do it to you. I want you to feel this too.”

And that was how I found myself ass up, clinging to bed sheets while my male lover tongued my hole. Talk about a first.

This wasn't a position I'd ever fantasized about being in. I'd always been the one on top and I'd assumed that was what Nolan wanted, but maybe...maybe he wanted my ass. I wasn't sure how I felt about that, but I gave in to sensation and enjoyed the attention.

It wasn't hard to do. He awakened nerve endings I hadn't known existed. Sparks tingled along my spine, igniting an inferno deep in my core. My stiff cock leaked precum onto the sheets. I didn't dare touch it, knowing one firm tug would set me off.

Pressure built with every not-so-innocent flick of his tongue. He was turning me into a pile of mushy, needy goo. I wanted more than I knew how to ask for.

Till he straightened and rested his shaft on my crease.

“Holy fuck, Nol,” I panted.

He folded himself over me and whispered in my ear, “Can I?”

I blinked furiously and licked my lips while a mini parade of questions played out in my head: *Will it hurt? Will you go slow? How does it feel? Will I like it? Will you be disappointed if I hate it? Will this change anything or everything?*

Yeah, my brain was spinning like a top.

I opened my mouth and the only thing that came out was, “Yeah.”

Nolan kissed the shell of my ear and sat up to grab supplies. I buried my head in the pillow, feeling vaguely sorry for my poor limp dick, withering from his proud boned-out state to a sad semi. A condom wrapper opened, the lube bottle clicked, and a slick finger grazed my entrance before slipping inside.

Okay, that was...good. A little different, but not bad.

He coaxed my cock to life with one talented hand while he fingered me, hooking his digit and massaging my prostate with — *Oh*.

Oh, yeah. I liked that.

Two fingers, more prostate action. Three fingers...yeah, no kidding—three fucking fingers in my ass and I was a ho for him. Writhing, grunting, moaning. My dick was at full sail again and I wanted something I never thought I’d be seconds from begging for. I wanted him to fuck me.

“I think you’re ready, but if it’s too much or you need me to stop, tell me and I will. I promise I’ll make it good for you.”

An unintelligible grunt was all I had in me, but Nolan understood. He tapped his cock on my hole and slowly inched his way in.

So...let me say this, it was weird and invasive and it hurt. Then it didn’t. I felt too full, though, and I wasn’t into that... until he started moving. Slow, gentle thrusts. He caressed my shoulders, ran soothing hands along my sides as he rocked in

and out. And suddenly, the fire he'd stoked to life earlier was raging.

I pushed my hips to meet him and nearly blacked out as waves of pleasure rolled over me, one after the other. I could barely catch my breath. I white-knuckled the pillow as I pulled my knees under me, presenting my ass like a gift. Nolan took it gladly.

He upped the tempo, pumping his cock into me double time while mine bounced and drooled on the bedsheets. He was relentless and I fucking loved this side of him. All that power and need focused on me. He wanted this. He wanted me.

“Fuck, Nol. S’good, so—”

He pushed me flat onto my stomach and rolled us sideways, holding my right thigh open as he fucked me like a boss. I was a big dude. Much bigger than Nolan. This position should have been awkward. I was exposed and vulnerable in a way I hadn't been on my knees. But this was Nol, my soul mate, my lover, my friend.

When he kissed the crook of my neck and whispered sweet nothings as he curled his fingers around my length, it just felt right. And good.

Like I'd finally, truly found my way home.

I exploded in a haze of white light, trembling and gasping for air. It was one thing to ride out my own orgasm, but the feel of him coming inside me was enough to send a new round of shivers along my spine.

Holy fucking shit. I'd just experienced nirvana.

Nolan gently pulled out, and he must have left to do mature things like dispose of the condom and grab a towel. I couldn't say. I was too fucked out for words. I stared at the ceiling, counting the knots on the wood beam above as my heart rate returned to normal.

He swiped at the mess on my belly, his smile strained and careful. “You okay?”

“Are you really asking me that? I’m not here right now. I’m on Pluto or something. No talking on Pluto.”

Nolan snickered. “Pluto?”

“Yeah, my mind is...” I made a ka-pow gesture with my fingers as my eyes drifted open. “I had no idea it felt that amazing. Do I make you feel like that?”

His face melted in unfettered affection. For me.

“Oh, Vinnie. You have no idea.”

I did, though.

See, for all that sex I’d had, I’d never been here. I’d never almost suffocated under an avalanche of sheer adoration for another human being. Not like this. I was drowning in a sea of feelings I couldn’t control.

I admired him, I desired him, I respected him—and fuck me...

I think I love him.

NOLAN

The freefall scared me. I'd been infatuated and I'd been in lust. But I'd never felt anything like this with a lover. I did my best to act cool, as if I'd been here before and knew how this love business worked. I didn't. It took everything I had not to act like a dope around Vinnie at practice or at the diner. If JC's amused snorts and Ronnie's quizzical looks were an indication, I was doing a poor job of it.

It would have been nice to confide in my brother, but I couldn't make that call without outing Vinnie. He'd come out on his own terms...or not at all. As far as I knew, he was still only here through August. He shrugged off rumors of signing with LA and laughed aloud when one of the regulars from the diner said he'd heard that Vegas wanted him.

"Not sure the Stanley Cup winners are in the market for an old guy like me, but it's a nice thought."

That was the type of response that left wiggle room for last-minute decisions. He didn't clarify his plans beyond August, and I didn't ask. I lived as completely in the moment as possible and hoped for the best. Like the grown-up version of the same kid who'd had a terrible crush on his brother's best friend in high school.

Christ, some things never changed.

"Penny for your thoughts."

I jolted to attention and glanced up at my niece stirring brownie mix across the island from me in my mom's kitchen.

“Uh...nothing. I was thinking about hockey.” Which was more or less a half-truth.

Mary-Kate dropped the spatula in the bowl and pulled the prepared baking pan in front of her. “I have a surprise for you.”

“You’re making me brownies,” I deadpanned.

“No, silly. It’s something else. I decided I like hockey...a little bit. This much.” She held her thumb and forefinger approximately one inch apart.

I bugged my eyes out, clutched my chest, and fell theatrically onto the floor. My mom’s dog rescued me with sloppy kisses while Mary-Kate hooted like a loon.

“What’s the ruckus about?” Mom asked, sashaying into the kitchen with my brother behind her.

I stumbled to my feet and pointed at my giggling niece. “This kid likes hockey now. It’s a miracle.”

“I knew my girl would come around.” Ronnie gave her a playful noogie and swiped a taste of batter from the side of the bowl, earning him an exasperated, “Da-a-ad!”

Mom grinned in that pleased way she did when the people she loved the most were all under the same roof. “It makes perfect sense to me. The whole town has summer hockey fever. We haven’t seen the likes of it since your dad was coaching.”

Ronnie slapped me on the back. “I told you Vinnie would help us out. Did I tell you that for the first time in the Forest League’s admittedly brief history, they’re requiring tickets to the championship game? And they’re charging five bucks apiece!”

I widened my gaze. “No way. That’s awesome.”

“I hope you win the whole shebang. That would give the parade an extra boost,” Mom commented, helping Mary-Kate pour batter into the pan.

“Ooh, sorry, Ma. That’s not going to happen.” Ronnie grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl and polished it on the

hem of his T-shirt.

“What do you mean? Town council approved the parade and—”

“Vinnie isn’t going to be here that weekend. His girlfriend needs him for some high-profile event in Miami,” he replied, chomping into his apple.

“Girlfriend?” Mary-Kate narrowed her eyes. “I didn’t know Vinnie had a girlfriend. Did you, Uncle Nol?”

It felt like I had a mouth full of cotton balls as I shook my head. “I think she’s a friend.”

Ronnie cast another inscrutable glance my way. “All I know is, he’s not around the weekend you’d planned the parade.”

“Well...we’ll change the date.”

“Don’t bother, Ma,” Ronnie said. “Vinnie won’t be here in September. He wants to give the juniors the spotlight, so instead of a parade, let it be about the kids. Let’s put up posters, name ice cream sundaes at the diner after each team member, and have the town cheer them on. What do you think, Nol?”

“Good idea,” I agreed, changing the topic to something more immediately interesting, like when the brownies would be out of the oven.

My mom bustled around the kitchen, mulling over ways to celebrate everything at once. I didn’t want to rain on her parade...pun intended—but this conversation was a reality check that this carefully constructed bubble of ours had a two-week shelf life, tops. It was about to be invaded by a town-wide interest in a hockey game no one had thought twice about in the past....Oh, yeah, and Vinnie’s weekend in Miami with his ex.

Of course, I was excited for the boys and no, I wasn’t jealous of the supermodel. But I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was about to give.

Rationally, I knew Vinnie was famous...or semi-famous. Guys like him didn't settle in small towns and come out to be with their gay lover. They had beautiful girlfriends who jet-setted to celebrity events in trendy locations. They had homes in multiple states so they could escape sweltering heat in summertime and enjoy sunshine in winter.

Guys like Vinnie retired from hockey and founded charities, opened other businesses, or became talking heads on ESPN. He had endless options. And though I knew he cared about me and was as invested as I was in everything we'd shared this summer...I couldn't imagine him choosing me.

So yeah, September was always on my mind.

“WHO'S FUCKIN' ready to kick some ass?” Vinnie bellowed in the Pinecrest Penguins' locker room.

The juniors paused in the midst of taping their sticks and strapping on pads to raise their fists and roar.

This was it. Game day.

This motley crew had rallied and stepped up their determination and intensity just in time to end their summer with a bang.

“Language,” I chided under my breath, nudging Vinnie's elbow.

He flashed a boyish “Oops” my way before launching into a pregame pep talk. I couldn't believe this used to be my job. Vinnie was so much better at it. He was funny and self-deprecating. He reminded the boys of their strengths and cautioned them to beware of weaknesses they hadn't ironed out.

“This is the big one. Are we gonna do this?” He waited out another roar, a proud smile on his handsome face. “I like that attitude. But today's gonna be tough. Pinecrest is strong on the boards, and their goalie is a monster. He's not going to let any sugary shots in. Make it count. And remember, you're not

alone out there. Pass the damn puck.” Another roar. “Coach Nolan, did you want to add anything?”

I cast a fond gaze over the group of teens and shook my head. “No, let’s do this.”

The Forest League summer championship could best be described as a pumped-up scrimmage with a trophy made at Mike and Jack’s Sports Gear in Pinecrest. This was Ronnie’s brainchild—a way to gather hockey and skating enthusiasts together and generate business for our smaller communities. There’d been a lot of interest from the start, but nothing like this.

We’d sold every ticket to every game leading up to the championship. Our website crashed when Vinnie posted a video urging all hockey fans in the Forest area to come on out and cheer for the juniors. Our recent social media posts had over ten thousand likes. No kidding. For the sake of perspective, that same “Come join the fun” notice got ninety likes last year.

The buzz in the air was hypnotic and frenzied. The juniors became local heroes in the weeks leading up to these final games. Someone’s parents made a huge life-sized poster with a team photo and got the town council’s okay to hang it on the side of the post office so everyone saw it as they pulled onto Main Street.

And Vinnie...he was a hero. He’d brought life, fun, and commerce back to Elmwood. He’d shown up, given his time, and sparked joy in the community. It didn’t matter if we won or lost today; his work was done.

But of course, we all wanted to win.

Four teams, three games. We won our game against Wood Hollow yesterday. Pinecrest beat Fallbrook, which meant the championship was between the Eagles and the Penguins. The kids hooted with laughter at Vinnie’s sarcastic, “Is it even possible for a penguin to kick an eagle’s ass?” till I reminded them that yes, in this case, it was.

Pinecrest was a larger and wealthier town than Elmwood. The championship was held at the Penguin Pond rink because it had more seating and was quite frankly, way nicer than the El Rink. They had more coaches, more players, more programs, and more fans than us. And they had the winning record.

Even with the great Kimbo co-coaching, we were the long shot.

But the crowd here hadn't gotten the memo. Everyone in the rink was on their feet, cheering and chanting, "Eagles, Eagles, Eagles." I heard a few "Kimbos" in the mix, and wow, it was all so...surreal.

I scanned the completely filled arena, waved at JC, my mom, Ronnie, and Mary-Kate, and did a double take when I spotted a vaguely familiar-looking man I was pretty damn sure played hockey with Vinnie.

"Who's the big guy with the Seahawk ball cap behind us?" I asked, studying the play Vinnie had just drawn on his pad.

He twisted, then waved, chuckling softly as he turned forward. "That's Trunk. I wonder what the hell he's doing here."

"Trunk?"

"Riley Thoreau. He's Seattle's new co-captain," he replied, still grinning. "Gonna have to buy him a beer after we win."

"Let's do the win thing first."

Both teams were off to a shaky start in the first period. Their passes were too long or too wide, and no one seemed to remember how to skate worth a damn. It was painful.

A brief pep talk and a line change worked wonders in the second period. The boys woke up, shook off the cobwebs, and charged the ice. Two minutes in, Kinney scored on a breakaway, and I swear the roof on Penguin Pond nearly erupted. Unfortunately, our defense broke down with less than a minute to go, and the Penguins were on the board.

“Tie game, third period.” Vinnie let out a low whistle as he pointedly made eye contact with each kid. “Plenty of time, plenty of time. But it’s also when you go deeper and play smarter. What are you noticing out there?”

“Number five only passes forward. I think he has a bruised rib or something,” Max offered.

“Number ten is their whole defense. That guy is the one to watch out for,” Kinney chirped up, rubbing his shoulder. “We need to do something about him.”

“That it. That’s what I’m talking about. What are you gonna do?” Vinnie asked.

“You’re going to isolate him,” I jumped in, checking the clock. We didn’t have time for theories. “Two on one, three on one if necessary. Keep him in sight, but don’t let him get in your head. Remember, this is your game to win, and you’ll do it if you remember the basics. Pass the puck.”

Vinnie beamed at me. “That’s it, Coach. That’s fuckin’ it.”

“Language.”

The boys burst into laughter, then hopped over the boards, shoving their mouthpieces in as they took their places on the ice.

Kinney won the face-off and passed to Jason Umboldt, who sailed halfway down the ice before getting pummeled by number ten in what looked like a clean defensive maneuver. We shot to our feet and let out a collective sigh of relief as Jason scrambled to his feet. Unfortunately, Max lost his mind, went after number ten, and earned himself time in the sin bin. Great.

Jenkins miraculously held off nine shots on goal, and when Max was done serving time, he came out with a vengeance, skating circles around number ten. Their defense scrambled to regroup as they passed the puck, looking for a scoring opportunity we’d assured them would present itself.

And *boom*...with thirty seconds on the clock, Big Red zipped a shot from the far right at a wicked angle for the winning goal.

The final buzzer sounded a moment later and the crowd went wild.

The team stormed the ice with an old hit song from the nineties blaring overhead. I threw my hands in the air and turned to Vin, who whooped triumphantly as he pulled me into a hug, and planted a kiss on my cheek. It was a chaste and funny gesture—not the kind that would make anyone think twice.

It still made my heart skitter 'cause this was Vinnie and we'd done this together...in front of our hometown. We'd conquered old demons, set aside old hurts, and fostered a new generation of players. It was a summertime lark of a championship in a town no one could find on a map, but damn, it felt fucking magical.

Handshakes, hugs, back slaps, and general well-wishes passed in a happy blur. My mom had tears in her eyes, Mary-Kate attached herself to her dad's hip, grinning as he presented the modest trophy to Vinnie and me, thanking us for putting our little patch of Vermont on the map.

And then there were photos—team photos, coach photos, silly photos, serious photos. Everyone wanted a pic with Vinnie, and he insisted I had to be in them too, so I stayed at his side, soaking in the jubilation.

We were joined by local business owners and the who's who of the four-town Forest League. Shop owners who'd donated to the league, council members, parents, and his buddy, NHL star, Riley “Trunk” Thoreau, a six-foot-three hunk of muscle with steel-gray eyes, dark-brown hair, and a sunny smile.

Vinnie greeted him with a bro hug, affectionately punching his biceps. “What are you doing here?”

Riley grinned. “Are you kidding? I couldn't miss it. I was visiting my folks in Toronto, so it wasn't too hard to find you. Why didn't you tell me you were coaching kids this summer? I would have helped.”

“I didn’t know I was,” Vinnie replied. “Hey, Trunk, I want you to meet Nolan. We grew up together. He owns the diner in Elmwood that serves fries that are twenty times better than Blue Line Burgers.”

“They must be good.” Trunk widened his eyes as he shook my hand. “My flight leaves tonight. Maybe I’ll stop in beforehand.”

“Good idea.”

“Sienna says you’re outta here in the morning too,” Trunk continued conversationally.

Vinnie furrowed his brow. “Sienna?”

And right on cue, a beautiful woman in a slinky floral sundress flew into Vinnie’s arms, her auburn hair cascading over her shoulder in elegant waves as she molded herself to his chest.

“Hey, handsome. Surprise.”

Oh.

Fuck.

A twitter and hum rippled and cameras flashed. I moved to give her room and found myself relegated to a spectator status while my secret boyfriend’s ex-girlfriend kissed him in front of...everyone.

And that *was* a kiss.

Not a sexy one—more of a mash of lips than anything, but it was still a kiss. It was the possessive kind that drew lines and staked claims. It was a reminder that Vinnie Kiminski belonged on a bigger stage with celebrities, sponsorships, fans from around the world, and infinitely more glamorous friends.

When she finally released him, she slinked her arm through his, beaming as she extended her hand. “I’m Sienna. You must be Nolan. Congratulations on your win.”

Oh. Fuck. September was here early.

VINNIE

I gently untangled Sienna's arm from mine and caught Nolan's wrist just as the photographer for the Fallbrook Daily cleared some hockey revelers out of the way to snap a few pics.

"This is wonderful! Our readers are going to go bonkers. Now can I get Mr. Thoreau, Ms. Montrose, and—don't you dare go anywhere, Zimbo! Front and center, please," she directed.

Another professional photographer descended. This guy wanted team shots with Trunk and Sienna, me, and...Nolan, but he was off to the side.

Then Ronnie and me with the coaches from all of the teams, plus Trunk and Sienna...and Nolan, off to the side.

And more of me and Sienna. A lot more of me and Sienna.

I couldn't find Nolan in the mass of bodies anymore, but I smiled and tried to tell myself the social media frenzy was almost funny. Our tiny town was on the map for the first time ever and Ronnie was over the moon. Hell, everyone was.

The beautiful model and NHL players mixing with the locals was news. And after an epic win, it was almost too good to be true. Everyone sensed it and fought to capture the moment for Instagram likes and TikTok reels.

That was okay. This was all...okay. It wasn't about me. Or Nolan.

It was about the kids.

I would have loved a minute or two alone with Nolan, but that wasn't in the cards. Celebrations sprouted up all over Elmwood, even at the diner.

So I concentrated on being the life of the party. I congratulated the boys, schmoozed their parents, and shook hands like a politician, smiling till my cheeks hurt. I kept an eye out for Nolan too, but he was suddenly elusive. I'd spotted him earlier, helping his staff serve burgers, fries, and shakes by the dozens while Ronnie and I held court with the team and our celebrity guests on the back lawn.

"Your friends are cool," Ronnie commented, fiddling with the bill of his Slammers ball cap. "And Sienna's...very pretty."

I glanced over to Trunk and Sienna chatting amicably with Mrs. Moore and nodded absently. "Yeah. Hey, have you seen Nol?"

"Not recently. He's probably in the kitchen, but I—where are you going?"

I set my empty glass on a table and strode inside where one of my new favorite waitresses was busy with the counter crew. I had two things going for me just then. A, Dierdre liked me and B, she was too distracted dealing with a posse of teenagers ordering complimentary shakes. Those were the only reasons I made it to the kitchen without getting yelled at.

And then I bumped into JC.

"Out," he barked, chopping onions with a knife the size of a small machete. "You don't belong in my kitchen."

I held my hands up in surrender. "I'm looking for Nolan. Have you seen him?"

JC stilled his knife and met my gaze. "Maybe."

"Great." I huffed in exasperation. "Where is he?"

"Herb garden." He inclined his head toward the kitchen door and resumed chopping. "Stop."

I obeyed with a sigh. "What is it?"

Chop, chop, chop.

“I don’t care if you’re famous. Don’t fuck with him, Vinnie.” JC didn’t elaborate or look up from his onions.

My chest puffed up with righteous indignation. “What the hell does that mean?”

“No secret meaning.” *Chop, chop, chop.* “I like you, and I think you’re a good guy. But...I like Nolan better. That’s all.”

I bristled with misspent outrage, but I didn’t want to waste precious time sparring with my lover’s former lover. I rushed out the side door and—

“There you are.”

I spotted Nolan near the gate leading to the herb garden. He cocked his head and waved as he made his way to me along the narrow path.

“Yeah. We needed mint for the shamrock shakes Big Red and Kinney ordered.” He held up a sprig, a crooked smile on his gorgeous mug.

“Nothing screams celebration quite like a green milkshake.”

Nolan gave a polite half laugh. “It’s their party, so I figured I should make the effort.”

I nodded but couldn’t think of a light and breezy reply with my heart lodged in my throat. I was suddenly nervous and unsure why.

Not true. It was probably the combination of JC’s warning and having the wrong person glued to my side on a day that should have been ours alone.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and stepped off the porch. “Hey, I haven’t had a second to tell you how fucking proud I am of you. I’m stoked for the kids too, but I’m proud of us. Of you. I’ve had more fun this summer than I have in years, and...thank you.”

Nolan flinched as if I’d smacked him upside the head rather than complimented him. “Me too. I think Ronnie wants to offer you a job.”

I chuckled fondly. “Coach Kimbo has a nice ring to it.”

“It does,” he agreed, hooking his thumb at the side door. “We should probably get back to the party.”

“Wait up.” I held my arms open and wiggled my fingers. “C’mere. First, let’s sneak in a congratulations kiss...with tongue.”

“Vinnie...”

“The coast is clear,” I cajoled, stealing a playful glance behind me.

Nolan let out a strangled guttural noise that might have been a laugh and moved down the path to a private patch of lawn hidden by a high shrub. He dropped the mint on a wooden bench and licked his lips.

“I can’t. I thought we’d have more time, but...”

You know that feeling when you’re thrown into a tense situation out of the blue and you can’t seem to stop saying and doing all the wrong things? Yeah, that was me.

“We have plenty of time,” I hummed, setting my hand on his hip.

He pushed away from me. “I’m serious, Vin.”

“What’s wrong?”

Nolan rubbed his hand over his nose and took a deep breath. “I don’t know what will happen over the next week or two. I don’t want things to get weird and there’s no reason they have to be, but...I want to thank you for being here, for showing up and staying and—”

“Whoa.” I cocked my head, eyeing him cautiously. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Miami?”

“Oh, well...yeah, I promised. It would be an asshole move to pull out now.”

“And then LA? Your agent has been trying to reach you, your ex is here.”

“I didn’t know she was coming, Nol. I swear I didn’t—”

He held a hand up. “I know. It’s okay. But your old life is calling, and summer is almost over. It’s time to move on.”

My mouth fell open. I glanced over his shoulder when a whoop of laughter from the other side of the hedge invaded our mini fortress. It felt like a sign—as if the real world were closing in on us.

“I don’t want to move on,” I choked out.

“Me either,” he whispered. “But I can’t...I can’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“Me and you. Us.” He gestured manically between us. “You don’t see it like I do, but it feels like history is repeating itself.”

“No. What are you talking about? No, this is different,” I argued, staving off a rogue wave of nausea when his distraction gave way to laser-sharp focus. “You know it is.”

“How? Because we’re older? Wiser? No, we’re still the same stupid kids we always were. Summer was always the end for us. The date is fuzzy this time. August thirty-first, tomorrow, or maybe sometime next month. I want to say I’m flexible, but I’m nervous now and I’m losing myself by hiding in the shadows like a dirty secret.”

I was sweating now. “You’re not a secret.”

“Vinnie, I’m the dirtiest secret you’ve ever had. I’m your downfall, your ruin. I’m the scariest person you know and I fucking hate it,” he said in a manic rush. “I don’t want to be the one who brings you shame. Never again. Not me. I’m sorry. This is terrible timing, but—”

“Stop. Just...stop.” Blood drained from my face so fast I felt dizzy. “None of that’s true. You’re the best thing in my life and if you didn’t know that, you know it now. I’m fucking crazy about you. What can I do? What do you want?”

He hesitated for a beat. “Something you can’t give me.”

“Bullshit. I can give you everything,” I insisted. “Anything. Name it.”

He cast a nervous glance at the row of hedges. “Vinnie...”

“Talk to me. Tell me what you want, Nol. Please.”

“Okay...I want a happy-ever-after. A real relationship. I want marriage, I want kids, I want animals, I want summers at the lake, I want winters at home by the fire, I want smooth ice and time to skate, I want quiet Sunday mornings, thunderstorms, and lightning bugs. I want one man. Forever. And I know it’s a fairy tale and I bet I just freaked you the fuck out, and I’m sorry for that. I just...” Nolan bit his lip and glanced away briefly. His voice cracked when he added, “You have another life out there with obligations and complications, and...I understand that, but I’ve loved you for a long time, Vin. I don’t think I’m ever gonna shake you, and I can’t pretend that I’m okay with a piece of you. So maybe it’s easier if we just...go back to being friends.”

“No. No way.”

“Vinnie...”

My Adam’s apple bobbed in my throat. I clenched my jaw and balled my hands into fists as if it might help me from spinning out of control. “Nol...I don’t want that.”

“Me either, but...I think we both know it’s the best we can do,” he whispered.

Nolan kissed my cheek, mumbled something about checking in with the kitchen and walked away.

And me?

I felt like I’d just taken a bullet to the chest.

No joke. I couldn’t fucking breathe. I flopped onto the bench and leaned forward with my elbows on my knees, willing my pulse to steady. It wasn’t working. Voices and laughter buzzed in the air with a hundred or more of our friends and family nearby and I was slowly bleeding out.

I wasn’t one for introspection, but I knew I’d been here before. Always keeping secrets, always hiding in the shadows,

always guarding something tinged with shame. It killed me that he'd put his name on this burden and carried it like a suitcase for years. And I'd let him.

I hadn't meant to hurt him, but I hadn't been brave enough to tell the truth either.

After all these years, I didn't know where to begin.

NOLAN

K *nock, knock*
Ding-dong

I squinted at my watch. 7:28 a.m.

Knock, knock

I pulled on a pair of PJ bottoms and stumbled downstairs, rubbing sleep from my eyes as I pulled the door open, and—

“Mom? What are you doing here?”

“You left the party early and you weren’t answering your phone, and quite frankly, I was worried.” She cupped my chin and gave me a head-to-toe once-over. “You look all right.”

“I’m fine,” I lied.

“You probably need coffee. I’ll make some.” She set her purse on the bottom step and paused. “Unless...you have company?”

I shook my head slowly. “No company.”

She patted my cheek and sailed by me. “Good. Are you hungry?”

“Mom...it’s Sunday and it’s early and...I didn’t sleep well last night. Let’s forget coffee, and I’ll stop by the house for dinner later, okay?”

“Would you like your eggs scrambled or sunny side up?” she called from the fridge.

I blew out a rush of air and slumped against the counter, warily wondering what this was all about. There was no way she knew about Vinnie and me. No one knew. I'd been so good about staying away from him at the diner last night. I'd barely noticed when he left with Trunk and Sienna.

I mean, of course, I'd noticed.

I'd noticed everything about him. The rigid set of his shoulders, the tightness in his jaw. My timing sucked. What could I do, though? Wait till after he returned from Miami with his beautiful ex? I wished she hadn't shown up, but maybe she'd done me a favor. This was never going to end well, and there was never going to be a good time to remind him of who we really were.

"Um, scrambled is good. Thanks. I'll make coffee."

"Wash your hands, honey."

"Yes, ma'am," I agreed, rolling my eyes behind her back.

"Don't roll your eyes at me. And please set a third plate. Your brother should be here any moment, but not Mary-Kate. She's having pancakes with Margaret."

"Margaret," I repeated.

"Yes, my friend, Margaret." *Ding dong*. "Open the door for your brother, honey."

This was a lot.

I let Ronnie in, grunting at his overly cheerful, "Good morning."

"Why are you here? Why is Mom here?"

Ronnie shrugged. "Dunno. Margaret came by with her niece's puppy and invited Mary-Kate over for breakfast, and then Mom called. I think we've been summoned, but as far as I know, we haven't broken a lamp or knocked any ugly porcelain figurines off a shelf."

I chuckled in spite of my mood and followed Ronnie into the kitchen. I started the coffee and chatted idly about the game with Ronnie while Mom scrambled eggs at the stove and

popped bread into the toaster. When she was done, she piled our plates with a bit of everything and pointed at the table under my kitchen window.

I picked up my fork and tried not to flinch at her eagle-eyed Mom gaze over the rim of her mug. “Thanks for breakfast. Can I ask why you’re really here now?”

“No, because I don’t think I can say what I need to say without crying.”

Ronnie and I shared an alarmed look.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing is wrong. But I was thinking about your dad yesterday. He would have loved—”

To my absolute horror, my mother burst into tears. “Hey, it’s okay, Mom.”

She fanned her fingers in front of her eyes and blinked away tears. “I know, I know. The things you two have done with the diner and the rink...you’ve taken this small slice of him and me, and you’ve created something so beautiful. Dad would be so proud of you both.”

“Thank you,” we said in unison.

“Ronnie, he’d tell you he never could have imagined building a hockey league the way you’ve done. Seeing people come from miles around on a summer day...that was extraordinary. He would have been in his absolute element at the diner afterward too.” Mom reached for my hand and squeezed it. “And he’d tell you that you can still be anything you want to be, Nol. You don’t have to stay here for us. You’re not stuck. You can go to LA or—”

“Whoa.” I frowned and shot a quick glance at Ronnie who shrugged in confusion. “LA. Where is this coming from? What makes you think I want to leave?”

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “That’s not it. I overheard Vinnie’s friend compliment the food last night and he might have mentioned it was on par with anything he’d had in the finest restaurants throughout the country.”

“He might be an Applebee’s fan, Ma,” I joked, hoping to steer us into light and happier topics. My chest hurt already.

“Nothing wrong with Applebee’s,” Ronnie piped in.

Mom twitched her nose. “He meant it was fancy...and special. Truthfully, I think a summer with Vinnie has been good for you. He’s a cosmopolitan man about town now. I heard he has houses in California and Colorado, and he’s jetting off to a swanky black-tie event in Miami, and...you’re here. But you don’t have to be, honey. Dad would tell you the same thing. He’d tell you to spread your wings and follow your heart and your happiness. And yes, I know you came home for a reason. We needed you and you dropped everything and made sacrifices you weren’t ready to make, but it’s not too late to live the life you’ve always dreamed of.”

I swallowed hard. “Thanks, but...I’m not going anywhere.”

“I don’t want you to go, but I don’t want you feel trapped, so...that’s something I needed to say.” She reached out to cover each of our hands, squeezing my pinky finger till it went numb. “You’re true leaders, good friends, great men, and wonderful sons.”

I kissed her hand. “Thanks, Mom.”

She sniffed noisily. “I’m sorry to be a sap, but he’s been on my mind...never more so than yesterday. Seeing you boys and Vinnie together—oh, honey, he’s smiling from heaven. I just know it. Now help me clean up.”

Mom gathered our dishes, commenting on the size of the strawberries from the Ellis’ farm and a recipe she was trying to shake out of JC. Her conversation was background music that didn’t require input. I cast a questioning glance at Ronnie, but he seemed to be lost in his own thoughts.

After she left, he hung back for a third cup of coffee, promising to pick Mary-Kate up within the hour.

“What do you think that was all about?” I asked, refilling his mug.

Ronnie arched a brow and sighed. “I think she really misses Dad, and that was Mom-speak for thank you for not growing up to be total dickheads.”

I huffed in amusement and reclaimed my seat. “Maybe so.”

“She mentioned Vinnie a few times. That was... interesting,” he added conversationally.

“He coached the team to a win, so...not really.”

Ronnie sipped his coffee. “Hmm. Call me crazy, but I think she was trying to tell you she knows you’re still head over heels for Vin.”

I gaped in shock, then pushed my cup aside and slumped forward in defeat. “Is it that obvious?”

“Yup.”

Fuck. “He’ll be gone soon. It’s—it’ll be fine.”

“You’ve been telling yourself that for a long time. Since we were kids,” he commented.

“That’s embarrassing.” I sighed, reaching for my cup again.

“No, it’s not. It’s a great story.” *Huh?* “And you never know...it just might work out.”

I didn’t know how to respond, so I said the first thing that popped into my mind. “That would require some serious alignment in the stars.”

“Don’t give up on him, Nol.” He drained his mug and stood. “I need to stop by the rink before I pick up the kiddo. Love you, bro.”

I wanted to ask what the hell he meant, but I was too stunned to go after him. How much did he know about us? Had they all known? Even Dad?

Geez, that was an odd one to wrap my head around. My family had always been tight-knit and supportive. I might have doubted myself, but I’d never doubted them. And even though

my dad had been gone for seven years, I could feel his presence.

He'd been the sort of man who wasn't easy to ignore. He'd done everything big. His footsteps had creaked loudest on the stairs, his voice had boomed, his laughter had reverberated through walls.

“That’s the damnedest thing about life, son. You can’t make someone do anything they aren’t ready to do on their own. Sometimes you have to let go and send out a prayer it will work out all right.”

The lump in my throat was a bowling ball now. It was a sobering thing to be surrounded by so much love and yet feel so adrift. I could be patient and vigilant, but my dreams were unrealistic.

I had no choice but to let go.

Again.

VINNIE

“**E**lmwood is very...quaint.”

I poured a cup of coffee, grunting unintelligibly as Sienna opened my sliding glass door and strode onto the deck. This felt like the first time we'd been alone since she'd shown up out of the blue in Pinecrest. I hadn't wanted to hash out her Miami expectations in front of an audience last night, so I'd suggested coming here. She'd fallen asleep on my sofa before I'd had a chance to ask what she was up to and had woken up disgruntled and confused.

She didn't belong here. At all. Sienna stood out like a red rose in a field of sunflowers—too fragile, too elegant to last. I followed her outside, giving her a sideways glance when she lit a cigarette, lifting her chin skyward to blow a stream of smoke.

“*Hmm*. Those things will kill you,” I commented, leaning on the railing.

“I need this. Yesterday was a long day, and today will be too. I had no idea how long it took to get here. I flew into New York, hopped a second plane to Burlington, then drove three hours, and got lost twice on the way to Pineconeville.”

“Pinecrest.”

Sienna puffed her cigarette and raised an eyebrow. “Whatever you say. You can do the driving this morning. Our flight is at noon, so we should leave at—”

“I'm not going with you, Sienna.”

She whirled toward me indignantly. “You promised.”

“I did, but your event is next weekend, not tomorrow. I’m not going to Miami to hang out to be seen or...whatever.”

“Oh, come on, Vin, it’ll be fun,” she cajoled. “I’m here giving you supportive girlfriend press, so it only makes sense for you to join me immediately in Miami. You did your kid hockey good deed, spent time with the natives. Now you can get back to the real world.”

The real world.

“Right.”

“What’s wrong? Summer is over, babe. It’s time to move on.”

That was pretty much exactly what Nolan had said. I took another sip and stared out at the pond. Fuck, my head was a mess. I wanted to be angry with him for pulling the rug out from under me, but Sienna’s presence signaled change. The glamorous model and the pro hockey hero went together like peanut butter and jelly. It didn’t matter that we weren’t a real couple. We were pretty enough to make headlines, and that had been enough.

It wasn’t enough anymore.

“Sienna, I *have* moved on. This is where I want to be. Here.”

“Here? I know it’s home for you, but there’s nothing here, honey,” she replied with a conspiratorial laugh. “What would you do with yourself? There’s no pro team nearby and you’re not close to any major broadcasting networks. You’d have to commute by helicopter to get to the airport, and that might be fun the first few times, but it’ll get old fast.”

“And this is why I told you it was time to move on after my season ended. I’m not interested in that life anymore.”

She stared at me blankly. “You met someone.”

Wow. She was good.

“Yeah, I did.”

Sienna smacked my arm. “You sneaky son of a bitch. I knew there was a reason you left me asleep on your sofa instead of inviting me upstairs. Did I meet her yesterday? Of course, I did. Why didn’t you say something? Fuck, she must hate me. Does she know I’m here now? Shit. What did you tell her?”

Was I doing this? Coming out? I’d literally tossed and turned, thinking about it all night. Everything I wanted was here, but it wasn’t a place. It was a person. A man. My shot at anything beyond summer with Nolan required honesty. And bravery.

So, yeah...it was time to tell my truth.

“There’s no her.”

“What does that mean? You just said—” She went still. “A man?”

“Yes.”

“No! You’re not gay.”

“I’m bi.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“I’m...in shock,” she said after a long moment.

I shrugged. “It’s true.”

“Oh, my...” A slow smile curled at the corners of her mouth. “You’re full of surprises, Vinnie Kiminski. Tell me all about him. He’s gotta be special for you to come out and—are you coming out? I won’t say a word.” She crossed her heart. “You can trust me.”

“I do trust you. Coming out is...going to be weird, but I’ve been thinking about this most of the summer, and it’s time.”

She nodded thoughtfully as she put her cigarette out on the ashtray I’d given her. “Are you ready for the press? They’ll swarm this tiny town, scrounging for juicy tidbits about you and him. Warn him or...don’t mention his name. Maybe give

everyone a chance to get used to the idea of you with a dude before you feed him to the wolves and—”

“You’re not helping.” I snorted.

“I’m sorry. I’m on your team. Tell me what you need, and I’m there.” She slipped my coffee mug from my hand and took a sip. “Gross. Needs cream.”

“Get your own coffee.”

“You’re the worst host ever,” she teased. “But you’re a good guy. Whoever he is, I hope he makes you disgustingly happy. You deserve it.”

“Thanks.”

I didn’t mention that I had some groveling to do. I was inwardly reeling with a renewed sense of purpose.

This was happening.

I was coming out.

AFTER SIENNA LEFT for the airport, I showered and made my way into town, admiring the banner on the post office wall as I turned left into the almost deserted lot at the El Rink. I parked next to Ronnie’s truck and raced inside, down the dark corridor to his office.

“Good. You’re here.”

Ronnie nearly jumped out of his seat. “Holy crackers! You scared the shit out of me.”

“I hope not,” I joked, flopping onto the chair across from him and immediately standing to pace to the window and back. “Hey, I want to talk to you.”

“I figured. Take a seat and—”

“No, I can’t. I’m too jittery. I’ve had five cups of coffee.” I shook my hands and crossed my arms.

“*Hmm*. Your timing is good. My mom is picking up Mary-Kate from her friend’s house while I catch up on some paperwork. I didn’t get a damn thing done after yesterday. That was some win, man,” he gushed.

“Yeah, it was great.” I raked my fingers through my hair.

“It was nice to meet Sienna. She’s prettier in person than in magazines. You’re a lucky guy.”

“We’re friends. That’s all.”

Ronnie widened his eyes comically. “Really? We all got the impression she was here to get her man and ride off into the sunset with you. I was hoping I’d get a chance to thank you for—”

“You’re welcome. Look, I’ve been thinking about what comes next, and I have a couple of ideas. Hockey ideas. This place is an untapped gold mine and I can help you, Ronnie. I have more money than I know what to do with. Let’s remodel the rink, rebuild the program, hire a few coaches. You might not want to use my name after what I’m about to tell you, but my money’s good. You should take it.”

“Whoa. We’ve been through this, Vin. I don’t want your consolation money. I’m not keeping score, and I’m not hanging on to the past. If I lived like that, I’d be a lonely man and a really crappy father.” He worried his bottom lip the way Nolan did when he was thinking of exactly the right words to say. “I never expected you to drop your life to save mine. I had to save myself and I did, so...let it go.”

“I know, I know. It’s not consolation money,” I snapped. “Okay, it was when I first got here, but it’s not now. I mean this. I want to help. I want to stay.”

He cocked his head as if waiting for a punch line. “Here. In Elmwood?”

“Yeah, well...there’s a twist.” I inhaled deeply, opened my mouth, and...nothing happened. I tried again, same result.

Maybe the twist was that it was a lot easier to come out to an ex-fuck buddy than a best friend.

“What twist? You okay, man?”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat and glanced toward the window. “I’m bisexual.”

“Okay...”

“And Nolan and I are—we’re...together.”

“That’s it?” he asked casually.

I furrowed my brow incredulously. “Yeah, it’s serious too. I mean...it’s new, but not new.”

“I know,” he drawled, rounding the desk.

“What do you mean, ‘you know’?”

“You two are the most obvious idiots I’ve ever met,” he gloated. “The goo-goo eyes, secret smiles—even Mary-Kate suspected you had the hots for her Uncle Nol.”

I opened and closed my mouth. Twice. “Really?”

Ronnie chuckled, his eyes crinkling merrily at the corners. “Really. The ex-girlfriend showing up was a little confusing, but that’s for you two to work out.”

“That’s all you have to say? You’re not upset or pissed off?”

“Why would I be?”

“He’s your brother and I’m your best friend, moron.”

He shrugged. “It’s pretty cool, if you ask me.”

“Okay, great, but when I come out...and I intend to—there might be reporters and photographers around. They might want to do stories about the rink and us, and maybe some of your clients won’t want their kids associated with—”

“That won’t happen here. On the off chance I’m wrong about that, fuck ’em,” Ronnie intercepted. “Stay, come out, let them write about us. I can guaran-damn-tee you, everyone in this town will have your back.”

My heart swelled in my chest, and tears pricked behind my eyes. “And I have yours. Always.”

Ronnie beamed. “Love you, man. Welcome home, Vin.”

I ignored his hand and pulled him against me for a monster bro hug.

Friendship was something I’d never taken lightly, but I hadn’t been great at showing the people who mattered most to me that I cared. I’d thrown money where I should have given time. I’d been lazy and self-involved, hiding behind my career to avoid emotional confrontations that might have forced me to reveal myself. But those days were over.

I was truly home now, and it was time to set things right.

GRAND GESTURES WERE KIND of my thing. Or so I’d always thought. If my dad mentioned something on his bucket list, I made sure it happened. Last minute tickets to Rome, flying first-class? No problem. If a friend wanted tickets to a game, *boom!* Best seats in the house, on me.

However, I wasn’t particularly good at initiating meaningful dialogue, which was kind of ironic since I’d graduated from college with a degree in communications. I tended to bluster my way through shit that needed to be said. But I didn’t want to do that with Nolan. I wanted to be cool, charming, and ideally, romantic too.

I thought about buying us tickets to Paris for the weekend, or maybe even just adding to his rock collection. Good ideas, but I was too “me” to pull them off.

So I barged into the diner instead.

“Nolan!”

The entire restaurant glanced up from their Sunday lunches, shouting greetings and congratulations for yesterday’s win my way. I inclined my head in acknowledgment and made a beeline to the counter where an octogenarian hockey fan sat in my regular spot, shootin’ the shit with JC.

“The hero, *l’capitan*,” JC singsonged. “What do you want to eat? The burger with a side of cyanide—”

“Thanks, but...later. Where’s Nolan?” I peered around JC, hoping for a glimpse into the kitchen. “Nolan! I saw his truck out front. He’s here, right? Nolan!”

I sensed every eyeball on me, wondering with barely concealed curiosity what had crawled up my ass on this gorgeous August afternoon. I ignored them all and bellowed Nolan’s name again.

JC’s faux-affable expression shifted to concern as he rounded the counter to deal with the upstart patron making a scene. “Enough. Go home and—”

“Vinnie? What are you doing?” Nolan appeared in the kitchen doorway, drying his hands on a red-and-white checked dish towel, his brow furrowed in concern and maybe irritation.

He’d never looked more beautiful to me.

“I need to talk to you. Now,” I said in a rush, dragging my hand through my bearded jaw.

Fuck, I was nervous. And no, it had nothing to do with the fact that every eye in the joint was now on me.

“Uh, okay. Give me a minute to—”

“I can’t wait a minute, Nol.”

“Why?”

“Why?” I repeated incredulously. “ ’Cause I have something to say.”

He set the dish towel on the counter and moved toward me, wrinkling his nose the way he always did when he was confused. It was so damn cute. He was cute. No, he was incredible and sweet and adorable and sexy and...he was looking at me as if he were sure I’d lost a marble or two.

“Okay. Um...we can talk outside if—”

“It’s important,” I blurted, louder than intended. “Life or death important.”

A new ripple of surprise filtered through the crowded restaurant. *Shit*. What was I doing? I hadn't intended for this to be a spectator event. I licked my lips as I registered Nolan's shocked expression.

"Come outside." He yanked my arm and pulled me to the dining patio. He narrowed his eyes against the midday sun and turned his back to any curious patrons peeking out the windows. "Life or death? Jesus, Vinnie. Everyone is watching us, and what are you doing here anyway? I thought you were going to Miami."

I shot a quick look over his shoulder and shook my head. "No, I'm not going anywhere. I love you."

He started in surprise. "I—what?"

"I fucking love you. And I'm staying."

"Vinnie..."

"I love you," I repeated. I traced his jawline with trembling fingers and swallowed hard. "You're home, and this is where I want to be. With you. And I don't care who knows. In fact, I want the whole damn town to know you're the best thing that ever happened to me and that I'd give anything to be at your side from now until...always."

Nolan threw his arms around my neck and sealed our mouths in a scorching kiss. And yes, the diner erupted in catcalls, wolf whistles, and deafening applause. We broke for oxygen and glanced sheepishly at our audience behind the pane of glass.

He threaded our fingers and pulled me behind the far side of the building, out of sight from nosy patrons.

"You came out back there, Vin. You know that, right? People are going to think you're serious and—"

"I am." I kissed his open palms. "I love you."

"I love you, too, but—"

"No buts. People have been asking me what's next for a while now, and I've been wondering the same thing. Where would I go, where would I play? Who'll have me, who'll root

for me and not forget me when I'm old and washed up? I was afraid to come home 'cause I'd made mistakes I didn't know how to fix. I won't let that happen again, Nol. I'm not running anymore."

"Good, but what about Sienna and your career and—"

"Sienna is my friend. I told her about us. I retired and I never had any intention of reversing that decision. My agent doesn't take no for an answer, which has been good for my bank account, but this is a new chapter and...I have someone in my life who might want a say in where we live and what we do. See...I want to be where you are. I want those lazy Sunday mornings, lightning bugs in summer, and smooth ice in winter with you. I want to take you to Paris, carve your initials on a bench by the Seine. I want a real relationship, and I'm ready to tell the world that you're the one I'm gonna marry someday."

"Jesus, Vin." He let out a half cry, half laugh, and pushed a wayward strand of hair from my eyes. "I love you so much."

"When you said you've loved me for years, you gotta know it's the same for me. It was always you. You, again... and again, always. Just you, Nol."

We came together, tongues tangling, our lips salty with tears. I held him close, tucking him against my shoulder with my eyes shut tight, overwhelmed by a flood of emotion.

There'd never been a moment in my life where I hadn't known Nolan—as my best friend's little brother, my friend, my secret crush, my secret lover. And now...the man who owned my heart.

I vowed to be brave enough and worthy of him. I wanted his forever in this little town in the middle of nowhere that was in fact, the center of our universe.

And the beginning of us.

EPILOGUE

“**A**nd it’s not that I want to have you. All I want is to deserve you.”— Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, *Dangerous Liaisons*

FIFTEEN MONTHS LATER...

Nolan

Snow flurries skittered across the frozen pond, dusting the deck and the evergreen wreath Vinnie and Mary-Kate had abandoned in favor of strapping on their skates. Dozens of pucks and cones littered the ice as a result of their impromptu shooting clinic, while three boxes of ornaments, countless yards of fresh garland, and a twelve-foot Christmas tree lay unattended in our living room.

I glanced at the mess of holiday cheer with a sigh. It could wait. I filled a thermos with hot chocolate, shrugged on my winter coat, and headed outside to join my fiancé and our niece.

“Did you see that shot?” Mary-Kate spun in a circle, her eyes as wide as her toothy grin.

Vinnie dropped his stick, threw his arms in the air, and broke into the signature wild man celebratory maneuver that a sports reporter had fondly called the Kimbo—a combo air guitar, one-legged crouched skate followed by a fist pump.

Once upon a time, his manic antics had electrified arenas, driving fans to their feet to cheer for the dynamic D-man who'd put his heart and soul into the game and left it all out on the ice. Nowadays, it made our niece laugh, the kind of joyful sound that rang bright and clear on a cold, gray afternoon.

“Are you kidding me?” Vinnie finally replied, his cheeks pink from the chill. “That was awesome! Who’s kickin’ Fallbrook’s ass next weekend?”

“We are!” Mary-Kate slapped his hand in an enthusiastic high five, waving when she spotted me on the deck. “Hey, Uncle Nol, did you see that? I made a corner shot from the snowbank. That’s like half the rink!”

“Amazing! I brought you a little something to warm up.” I held up the thermos. “You two have been out here for a while. I thought you might need a refreshment.”

She skated over, pulling her gloves off. “Thank you. Is it okay if I make peppermint tea instead? After I help pick up the pucks.”

“Don’t worry about cleanup. I got it,” Vinnie said, tugging at the pink ball on her knit hat. “Make your tea and while you’re at it, decorate the tree for us.”

Mary-Kate snickered, kneeling to untie her skates and stuff her feet into the boots she’d left by the deck. “By myself? No way, it’s huge. I’ll organize the ornaments now, though. My dad will be here in an hour. He can help too.”

She was gone before either of us could respond. I set the thermos down and waited for the back door to click shut, then wrapped my arms around Vinnie’s neck and kissed him breathless.

He fluttered his eyelashes as if coming out of a trance. “What was that for?”

“For being the best guncle ever. And the best boyfriend too,” I gushed.

“Almost-husband,” he corrected.

True.

So, what was that all about? Well, Vinnie proposed in Paris on a bench overlooking the Seine in October and of course, I said yes. He wanted to commemorate the occasion by carving our initials...I said no to that one. Technically, we were secretly engaged at that point. He'd also asked me to marry him in the parking lot at St. Finbarr's in August on what he called our official one-year anniversary.

A proposal in a weed-infested lot on a mosquito-infested, hot summer night shouldn't have been romantic in the slightest, but it was.

Vinnie had brought candles, had lain a blanket on the steps under the arch and secured the edges with the finest "crystally" rocks he'd found in the creek. He'd cut the vines away from the wall to reveal his old artwork, gotten down on one knee, and said something utterly romantic like, "I want to marry you, Nol. Say yes and I promise I'll spend the rest of my life making you happy. And the faster you agree, the sooner we can get outta here. These motherfucking mosquitos are eating me alive."

"Yes. Yes, yes, yes."

Somehow, he'd talked me into helping him carve our names and the date into the wall while I'd grumbled that we'd spend our first night as an engaged couple in the pokey for trespassing and vandalism.

"Nah, we're good. I bought this place from the church. I have an architect coming by later this month to draw up plans for the youth center, sports and fitness facility—kind of an annex to the rink. I finally talked Ronnie into remodeling the El Rink, but it's never going to be big enough for the programs we want to run. I own the land next door too," he'd said, gesturing to the empty field in the distance. "We'll build there and make the church into a bookstore. For the kid. And no, I won't make a habit of defacing the brick, but I'm definitely leaving this art right where it is. For posterity and shit."

I lifted my champagne flute and tapped it against his, my smile threatening to split my face in half. "To posterity and shit."

That was so Vinnie—my accidentally romantic hero. The man who'd come home to sort through the past before dealing with his future was the first to admit his life had taken a series of unexpected turns since he'd announced his retirement from the NHL a year and a half ago.

He came out as bisexual, relocated to Elmwood for good, became joint owner of the Elmwood Rink, broke ground on the youth center, started the girls' twelve and under league, got Mary-Kate to join that team, and agreed to be head coach of the juniors club team. His goal was to put Elmwood on the map as a hockey town powerhouse. I had a feeling it was going to happen.

Next summer, Elmwood would open the first-ever five-week organized hockey camp for teens coached by some of the biggest names in the NHL, including his good friend, Trunk Thoreau.

It was a wild fantasy come to life. Something my father wouldn't have thought possible. However, Vinnie saw things differently. This town had fostered him and given him wings that led him to a career and wealth beyond his wildest dreams. He figured that it was only right to give back. And the town was flourishing as a result.

The Black Horse Inn was always at full capacity, the diner was booked well in advance, and there was almost always a line outside Henderson's Bakery and Rise and Grind. It was almost scary to think what it would be like during summer when families came to stay for weeks on end. But we'd prepare as best we could and deal with the crowds in July.

We had a June wedding to plan first.

We both hoped to keep our ceremony smallish, but our guest list included at least a dozen NHL players and their dates, a certain supermodel, a bunch of my friends from LA, and basically the entire town. There was talk of *People* doing a spread, because let's be real, the great Kimbo marrying a man was big news.

I didn't think Vinnie had known what to expect when he put out a brief video statement announcing that he had no

intention of un-retiring, and that while he was at it, he might as well come out too. He was bi, in a relationship with a man, and in love. That was that.

But it wasn't that simple.

Reporters descended on Elmwood to interview anyone and everyone who'd ever known Vinnie Kiminski. The buzz lasted a couple of weeks but died down the way hot news stories tended to. There was a hurricane off the coast of Mexico and some scintillating tale of an actor behaving badly on the set of a popular cable network series. That was life.

His sexuality was the least interesting thing about him, in his opinion. But he was quick to admit it hadn't been an easy secret to share. I think it made him more cognizant of being an out and proud public figure while he had the public's interest.

"Fans may forget about me someday, and that's okay. I want to make sure I leave something meaningful behind. I can do that in this town. I can coach, I can build, I can be the best uncle, friend, son in the world...and the best husband to the man who makes all good things possible. And on days when I'm not my best, I want you to know that I'll keep trying."

I didn't doubt him for a moment.

I brushed snow from his hair and kissed his nose. "I love you."

Vinnie quirked his lips in a boyish half smile. "Oh, yeah? What'd I do?"

"You're just...you. You're a great uncle and the best tree putter-upper in the whole state."

He rolled his eyes on cue. "I knew I was being buttered up for manual labor."

"It's holiday manual labor. Totally different."

"All right. Then you can suck my candy cane in payment." He sat on the deck and pulled me beside him so I landed half on his lap.

I snickered, unscrewing the thermos. "Deal. Want some hot chocolate?"

Vin took a sip. “*Mmm*. This is good. Hot chocolate, our own patch of ice, sharp blades on my skates, a warm house, and the hottest guy in the world who just promised candy cane favors at my side. I don’t think life gets any better, Nol.”

I relaxed against him, sighing in contented agreement. “I agree.”

He squeezed my hand. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being mine. You could have taken one look at my sorry ass when I showed up at the rink a year and a half ago and said, ‘Ugh. You again.’”

“I did,” I joked. “I still do. But it’s all in the inflection. I don’t say ‘You, again’ and groan. I say... ‘You, again,’ and I smile,” I commented.

Vinnie brought my fingers to his lips. “I like that.”

We passed the thermos between us, chatting amicably about Mary-Kate’s progress, the selection of trees at the lot this year, how long we thought it would take to decorate ours, and whether it was totally necessary to deck out the diner and help Ronnie do the rink this year. I voted yes, but Vinnie wasn’t convinced. If he was being forced to work, he’d need more than candy cane suckage for his troubles.

I threw a snowball in response. He retaliated...or tried to, anyway. He couldn’t get to the good snow with his skates. So he glided gracefully onto the ice, gathering the pucks and pausing to blast me with a surprise snowball every so often. When his chore was complete, he leaned on his stick and stared up to the heavens, his eyes closed and a happy grin on his face.

Then he glanced over at me and positively beamed, sending a tidal wave of unchecked love and adoration my way. My heart filled to the brim and threatened to explode out of my chest.

I loved him. I always had.

This second chance was a love story. It was all-encompassing and larger than life with an invisible connection that spanned a lifetime. Our futures were as entwined as our pasts. He was all of my tomorrows...and I was his.

And yes, it was a beautiful thing.

THANK you for reading Vinnie and Nolan's story!

Turn the page for more information about my Elmwood Stories series and be sure to subscribe to my newsletter, [Lane's Letters](#) for upcoming release news!

A NOTE FROM LANE

I love small towns! I've been a California girl for over forty years, but when I was a kid, we lived in the small town in upstate New York where my father, grandparents, and great-grandparents were born and raised.

The treelined, cobblestoned streets were quaint and narrow with old-fashioned lampposts. The parks featured bandstands circa the turn of the twentieth century and the cemeteries were the straight out of a scary movie with leaning, weather-worn tombstones. It was a sleepy place where Friday night church bingos and Sunday picnics were the norm. And yes...everyone seemed to know each other.

This, of course, was my inspiration for Elmwood.

I can't wait to introduce you to Book 2 in the Elmwood Stories series, [Next Season](#). Turn the page for a sneak peek at JC and Riley's story.

Happy Reading!

COMING SOON- NEXT SEASON

EXCERPT FROM NEXT SEASON- OCTOBER 2023

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

“No sunglasses today?” I commented.

It seemed safer than complimenting his lovely eyes. Dierdre was right. He was very handsome. *Très beau*.

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

“I’m glad. Where’s the container?”

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

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

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

“It’s fine. I have time now. I’m going to teach you how to make your own tuna salad. Come this way.”

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

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

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

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

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

He wrinkled his nose in a way I could only describe as cute. “Let’s not. It’s barely ten a.m. and I already ate some of this stuff. I hits different when you’re supposed to be eating Cheerios, if you know what I mean.”

“It’s no good?”

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

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

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

“King Jean-Claude,” he snarked.

“You catch on quickly. Now let’s talk about the tuna. It’s terrible in the morning. I tried to warn you.”

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

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

“Platitudes?”

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

“Jerk me off?”

“Yeah...that.”

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

I raised a brow. “Blaspheme.”

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

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

“*Touché.*”

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

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lane Hayes loves a good romance! An avid reader from an early age, she has always been drawn to well-told love story with beautifully written characters. She loves wine, chocolate and travel (in no particular order). Lane lives in Southern California with her amazing husband and her fabulous pup, George.

*Join Lane's reading group, [Lane's Lovers](#) for immediate updates!



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