



**BAD**

*Puckin'g*

**INFLUENCE**



**MICHELE LENARD**

# **Bad Pucking Influence**

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Michele Lenard

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# Prologue

**M**y stomach tingles the way it does before I take the ice for a game, as if the pressure is on, though I can't for the life of me understand why. I'm at a team barbeque for God's sake, not getting ready to face down an opponent, so there's no need for me to be on edge, muscles coiled and ready to spring into action.

Glancing around the yard, I try to make sense of what has me feeling jittery, and without conscious effort my eyes land on him. *Again.* The stranger standing next to Coach's son.

It makes sense that an unfamiliar face would stand out in a crowd full of my closest friends, but the butterflies that come with it... That I can't quite reconcile.

If I focus on physique, I can sort of explain the way he piques my attention. After all, I know the work that goes into staying in top shape, and even though this guy is lean and sinewy compared to the bulging muscles my teammates and I have, it's clear he leads an active lifestyle. Only, it's not just his physique that has me stealing glances in his direction.

Tall enough to cast a similar shadow as my new teammate Niko, the

stranger has blond hair that the dark stubble along his chin suggests isn't natural. That's unique in and of itself, but what really draws my eye is the harsh yet ethereal lines of his face. Striking in their simplicity, they come together to create the most enticing image I've ever seen. I'm helpless—enthralled—as I commit his features to memory, though I'm not sure why I feel the need to do so.

Objectively, I can tell when a person is good looking, and I recognize that some people have a swagger you can't help but notice. Usually that's all it is though. A quick glance to register what you're seeing and then you move on, never giving the person a second thought. And I did that—*once*. Then twice. And a third or fourth time. Now, my eyes seem to search for him every time I take them off the beer in my hand.

That's what I can't make sense of. That I'm searching for *him*, based solely on the way he looks since I know nothing of his character.

I catch his Adam's apple bob from over a dozen feet away, an innocent movement that looks anything but on his intriguing face. And when he laughs or grins with mirth, which he does often, his abs contract in a way that suggests the emotion comes from deep within. No polite gestures with this one—his amusement is genuine. Infectious.

If I didn't know better, I'd think he was a model.

I dated one once, years ago. She had a similar presence, confident yet hypnotic. It was hard not to watch her or be enamored by her, but it turned out to be an act. That confidence was a mask she wore in public, and without it she was almost mousy. Feeble. We didn't make it past three months.

She's not representative of all models, of course, but the experience still made me want to avoid models at all costs. Come to think of it, I avoided

dating in general after that. It's not her fault. Still, our break up was the catalyst that made me realize I was chasing something I didn't want.

Dating, relationships, sex... Those things haven't appealed to me in years. If I wasn't so focused on my career, I'd probably wonder why that is, but since hockey consumes so much of my time and energy I don't have much left over to worry about life outside the rink. I'm questioning that now though, since my stomach seems to flutter every time my gaze lands on this stranger.

# Chapter One

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# Noah

“**Y**ou’re really not gonna fill that thing with water?” I wipe sweat from my brow as my teammate and new neighbor, Niko, sets two lounge chairs by the edge of the empty pool.

“And give up this view?” A goofy smile spreads across his face as he watches his boyfriend, Xander, roll shirtless around the giant hole on his skateboard with his friend, Tripp.

“Wouldn’t you get the same view if this pool was filled with water, and he’d be in a bathing suit?”

Niko worries his lip as he chews over my words. “Good point. Maybe I’ll build him another one to cool off in.” He blows out a puff of air and fans his face as I stifle a laugh. *He’s so gone for his boyfriend.*

Though he’s only been on the team a year, and is about a decade my junior, Niko and I have become close. He’s a phenom on the ice, making even the toughest veterans look like novices, and his work ethic is something to admire. Not only that, he had the balls to come out as gay in his rookie season, which a lot of people thought might tank his career, but it didn’t stop him from announcing to the world that he’s dating our coach’s son.

Guys shoot pucks at me for a living, but if I was in his shoes and in my rookie year, I'm not sure I would've been as brave. I've always respected hard work on the ice, but after getting to know him and witnessing what he's been through, I respect him more for his courage.

I tap my beer bottle to his with a chuckle, nodding toward the pool where Xander is positively glowing. "I think you won him over."

"I'm the winner here, Noah. *I'm* the winner." Niko pastes a dopey grin on his face like the lovesick fool he is as I stifle another laugh.

Drinks in hand, we settle onto the chairs, and since there's no water to cool off in, we lose our shirts to get a little sun. Niko leans back in his lounge and lets out a contented sigh, and I'm right behind him. Only, mine gets trapped in my throat before I can fully recline. It's like my brain has short-circuited and forgot to tell my lungs to breathe when my eyes catch motion to my left, and I find myself entranced by him. *Again*.

Since I first saw Tripp at a team barbeque Xander dragged him to last summer, I've found myself noticing him more and more. In my defense, it's hard not to. Standing at six feet, with perfectly mussed bleached-blond hair and dark stubble that's hard to miss since the contrast is so stark, it's the mischievous tilt of his lips that really captures my attention. I often find myself wondering what's going on in his mind, particularly since he's a professional at giving people the shock-and-awe treatment. His antics amuse me more than they should, even when they involve silly excuses to measure my biceps with his hands.

Between his loud looks and even louder personality, he doesn't exactly fade into the background, and if I'm being honest, I find his brash nature freeing. I sort of like that he's become a bit of a regular fixture in our social circle. What's confusing to me is that it's not just his personality that catches my

attention. His appearance fascinates me, especially now, with him skating around shirtless.

Tall and lean, every muscle is on display, showing off a smattering of tattoos that would otherwise be hidden. They're kind of mesmerizing to watch as they ripple under his skin. So is the youthful gleam in his eye. It's not arousing exactly, but it's *something*. Something I've yet to put a label on, but I only seem to experience it around him. Which might mean sitting here watching him is a bad idea, at least until I sort out some of my confusion.

*If only I could look away.*

"So, we just sit here and watch them skate while we drink beers?" I suppose it's not much different than them watching us play hockey, although since I'm not sure whether I'm watching the man or his skill on a board, maybe it is.

"That okay? I love watching Xander skate." Niko grins sheepishly.

"Yeah, I just don't know much about skateboarding so I wasn't sure if we're supposed to be quiet or cheer or—what do you even cheer about in skateboarding?" I'm rambling, but if Niko notices he doesn't let on.

"If they do a cool trick you can cheer."

"What's a cool trick?"

His brows draw together as he chews the inside of his cheek. "I don't actually know. They have really weird names that I can't keep straight, so just go with what looks impressive. Or join in if they cheer for each other."

"Easy enough." I relax into the chair and zone out, letting the rhythmic sound of wheels gliding over concrete put me in a trance. I may not understand what I'm watching, but I can appreciate the fact that balancing on wheels takes just as much skill as balancing on skates, and watching Tripp maneuver elegantly on that board is hypnotic.

He must have years of practice, because his movements seem effortless. It's like his body knows what to do without his mind giving any instruction. This must be how my teammates and I look during warm-ups, when we circle the rink. We skate with barely any movement, coasting gracefully for yards on end just from a slight shift in our weight.

I'm not sure how long we watch Xander and Tripp, but when I realize Niko is waving his hand in front of my face, I blink my surroundings back into focus. "Earth to Noah. You need another beer?"

I hold up my half-full beer and shake my head no.

"Kind of cool to watch, isn't it?" He grins, and even though I know he's talking about the act of skating and not the men, I feel my face heat.

"It reminds me of the ice." I try to explain away the intensity of my stare. "It must take a lot of balance to ride one of those."

"I think that's part of why I like watching so much, except for the shirtless boyfriend part, obviously. It's familiar and not at the same time."

The nostalgic expression on his face is one I can relate to. "You're missing the ice, aren't you?"

Niko dips his head to rub the back of his neck. "Sort of."

"That embarrasses you?"

He leans against the back of his chair and watches his boyfriend as he talks. "No, but it does make me feel a little guilty. We're barely into the off-season, and I finally get to spend some quality time with Xander now that my life isn't consumed with games and travel. I should just enjoy that, and I am, but..."

"But you miss the sound of blades scraping ice, and the chilly air in the arena."

"Yeah." He exhales heavily.

“If you didn’t miss those things in the off-season, it’d be time to retire.”

“You still feel that way? You’ve been in the league a long time.”

At thirty-three, I’ve been in the league longer than most, and I know the end of my career is looming. I’m hoping for one more Stanley Cup before I retire, but as Niko unknowingly pointed out, we’re in different stages of our love affair with the ice.

“I do. It’s not as all-consuming as it used to be though.”

“You’re thinking of retirement?” His eyes seem to bug out of their sockets. “You had one of the best seasons on record for a goalie, like *ever*. Twelve shutouts. That’s basically unheard of.”

“Some of those shutouts were just as much your doing as mine.” I tip my bottle in his direction.

“You can’t give me the credit. I know in at least five of those games the other team got the jump on me, but you stopped the puck. You’re way too good to be thinking about retirement.”

“I’m not thinking about it seriously. Even though it’s not the first thing I think of when I wake up anymore, I still miss the ice when I’m not on it every day. It’s not time for me to leave the game yet. Besides, I want another cup before I hang up the skates.”

“Good.” He visibly relaxes. “I think we have a real shot at it this season.”

Every hockey player wants to believe that, but Niko isn’t off base. We made a strong run last season, and we managed to keep most of our top tier players on the roster heading into the upcoming one. I don’t like to get my hopes up since there’s still a long way to go—eleven months to be precise—but if we stay healthy and play like we did last year, it could happen. I can’t say that though, because as Captain it’s my job to keep the guys from getting ahead of themselves.

“Anything can happen between now and then. If we keep level heads and play the way we’re capable of, then yeah, we could do well.”

“Do you put your full name on the cup, or nickname? Technically I’m Nikolas, but since everyone calls me Niko maybe I should go with that.”

“Debating which version of your name to put on the cup is not keeping a level head.” I shoot him a withering look.

He completely ignores my warning, looking at me with a smile so big his dimples look like craters instead of shallow divots. “Tell me you didn’t think the same thing as a rookie.”

“My name is Noah. So, no. I didn’t debate which version to use. I—”

The sound of hands slapping together distracts me from finishing that thought, and I look toward the pool to spot Xander and Tripp giving each other a high-five.

“What’d I miss?” I ask Niko.

“If I had to guess I’d say one of them landed a trick they’ve been working on. Probably Tripp, since I don’t think Xander’s been practicing anything specific.”

Tripp does seem to have a satisfied air about him, although I wouldn’t say that’s indicative of anything since he projects confidence regardless of what he’s doing. I’m pretty sure it’s one of the reasons he keeps grabbing my attention. There’s something magnetic about a person being as comfortable in their own skin as he is.

You’d think I’d be immune to that since I’m surrounded by pro athletes, and one doesn’t get to the NHL by second-guessing themselves. But I think the reason I’m not is because my counterparts are confident about their skills, not necessarily their personas, so Tripp’s form of self-assurance is more internal.

As if he can sense me trying to puzzle through my feelings, Tripp's eyes find mine from across the pool, and a slow smile spreads across his face. It's not the first time I've seen it since he's caught me watching him before, but it's the first time he doesn't let me off the hook by looking away, and I think that means I've crossed a line I'm not sure I'm prepared to see the other side of.

## Chapter 2 -Tripp

L.O.V.E.

My friend Xander is in it... The guy swore off relationships, specifically with closeted men, then went and fell for one anyway. A big brute with a heart of gold—so he says—who also happens to be a hockey god, or *Rookie of the Year* if I'm being literal, but to me they're one in the same.

I think it was the massive cock that tipped the scales. Not that I've actually seen Niko's cock, but the man is huge, so... Probability and all that.

Speaking of probability, I've been hoping that Xander dating Niko would translate into me snagging a hockey god of my own, since I occasionally hang out with them now. It's one of the perks of being his closest friend, and a perk I intended to use and abuse.

Luckily, the other players don't seem to mind my relentless flirting. They probably don't take me seriously, even though I'm absolutely serious—I'd do them all and twice on Sunday. That's how much I like sex. And dick. And showing straight guys what they're missing. Especially the ones who are taller and stronger than me, which is like trying to find a needle in a haystack since I'm tall and strong myself, but my new hockey friends fit the bill. Every last one of them. I'd lick them all given the chance.

There's one in particular I've had my eye on though. He's a Thor lookalike who either doesn't care or is too polite to say no when I invent reasons to touch him. Not without permission—I'm bold, but not a creep—and since he hasn't denied me, I plan to keep asking.

Xander hates that I'm brazen enough to ask to touch a man, gay or not, but I refuse to be ashamed of my sexuality. That and I'd rather push buttons early on to see if people can handle me than do the polite thing and find out later they can't. Thanks to years of childhood therapy I was unwillingly subjected to, I know that's a defense mechanism so people don't disappoint me. I'll never admit that though. I prefer to think of my obnoxious tendencies as a sparkling character trait.

Speaking of handling me, Thor—it's actually Noah, but to me he's Thor—appears to be just fine with my antics, and as long as he allows it, I'll touch that hot body every chance I get. Therein lies the problem. I want to touch that particular hot body so bad I haven't been trying to touch any others, and for a guy who prides himself on his shameless sexual escapades, that's nothing short of concerning.

I'm not a one-man type of guy. I don't *do* relationships. And don't even get me started on love. That particular emotion doesn't apply to me. I'm an advocate of one-night-stands, and I'm not ashamed of it. Or the fact that I'm gay.

I don't wear it on my sleeve—you won't find rainbow clothes in my closet—and though I'm lean I'm not small. No one would label me as effeminate, much less gay based on my appearance alone. However, if I see something I like... I'm not afraid to ogle. And I'll ask to touch. In Thor's case, he hasn't said no, but he hasn't encouraged or reciprocated either. He merely obliges when I give him a line about being curious if his arms are bigger than both my hands.

I might've given up trying to get my hands on him if it weren't for the fact I've caught him looking at me from time to time. In the beginning those looks

were curious. Contemplative. Now, I'd swear there's an undercurrent of desire to them, especially as they track my movements on my board.

His eyes linger longer than they used to. They wander from my face to my torso. And while the looks haven't crossed into outright lust, I'd like to think that's coming. Which is why, nearly a year after first meeting him, I haven't rid myself of this infatuation. In fact, I think it's time to take it to the next level, and since he happens to be sitting poolside next to Niko as Xander and I skate shirtless inside the empty bowl, I'm thinking today is the day to up the ante.

"Points to Niko for picking a house with its own private skatepark so you can ride to your heart's content, but it's hot as fuck out here," I complain to Xander as we ride up to the rim and step off our boards.

"It's Denver in late July. What did you expect?" My always grumpy friend says.

"I expect a man with as much money as your boyfriend to plant some trees. Or maybe, he can get one of those industrial sized fans. Hell, he could even hire people to stand around the edge with giant palm leaves. Preferably sexy, shirtless men. Like his teammates."

"He plays hockey for a living. You think he ever has to worry about overheating?" *Typical Xander, ignoring my attempt to get a rise out of him.*

"I have at least half a dozen smart-ass responses for that but it's too hot for my brain to do brain things and pick the best one. Instead, I'll have to settle for a drink." I drop into the pool, gliding around the perimeter one last time before popping over the rim in front of the two stacked athletes lounging by the side.

Despite the scorching sun, my body shivers as I feel Noah's eyes wander over me. "Toss me one of those?" I nod to the cooler of drinks sitting

between them.

Noah lobs a can in my direction, but rather than popping the top and slamming it back, I swipe the cool aluminum over my chest, feeling my nipples pebble from the cold.

“You’d cool off faster if you put that on your neck.” Xander calls me out on my antics as he rolls to a stop beside me.

“I look sexier this way.”

“If we all agree you’re sexy, will you stop trying to show off?” Xander huffs.

“Where’s the fun in that? Besides, I’m not showing off, I’m making an effort.”

“What’s the difference?” Niko cocks his head and squints up at me.

“Showing off would be posing seductively or licking the water drops off my fingers. Making an effort is a simple act to demonstrate that I look good while cooling off.”

“Still not seeing the distinction.” Niko’s lips press together as he shakes his head.

*Silly hockey god.* “Making an effort is like having self-respect. Wearing actual pants instead of sweatpants when you go out for example, or fixing your hair. Hell, even showering is the effort for some people. Showing off would be flaunting your outfit or your hair.”

“How are you not flaunting then?” Xander sits between Niko’s spread legs on the lounge chair and leans against him, sweaty back and all, and when Niko wraps an arm around his waist the strangest little zing flares in my chest. If I had to define it, I’d go with yearning, which is totally foreign and quite frankly, unwanted. I don’t do yearning, except maybe for cute little

dogs or a sick new skateboard. Never people, or couple-y things like cuddling.

I shake my head to clear the feeling. “If I was flaunting, I would’ve rubbed the can all over my body and made sex eyes at Noah. Instead, I made one pass over my chest, a tiny little gesture which is the equivalent of saying I look good even though it’s hot as fuck outside.”

“I can’t believe I’m admitting this.” Niko shakes his head ruefully. “But I actually understand what he’s saying.”

Xander rolls his eyes. “Don’t encourage him.”

“I’m not encouraging, just admitting that I understand his point. Plus, you have to admit, for him, that little show was tame. Just sayin’.”

“Not exactly resounding support, but I’ll take it. Thank you, Niko.” I pop the top on my beer and take a few ambitious gulps, not so subtly showing off my ability to swallow—my deep throat game is strong—and turn my focus to Noah. “You’re awfully quiet over there, big guy. Missing the chill of the ice rink?”

“No, but I am wishing that pool was full of water,” he says.

“Bite your tongue, it’d be a travesty to fill a perfectly good pool with *water*.”

“Not in this heat.”

“There are other ways to cool off.” I grab a few cubes of ice from the cooler and swing my leg over the foot of the lounge chair. Noah’s eyes pop as he realizes I’m about to sit on his legs, and he quickly drops them to either side of the chair, so my ass hits the cushion instead.

“What are...argh!” he shouts as I press the cubes against his bare chest.

“Tripp,” Xander hisses. “No touching without permission.”

“He’s let me touch his pecs before,” I reason. “And he wanted to cool off.”

“It’s fine,” Noah stutters, his glacial blue eyes locked on mine as his chest heaves under my palm. “I just wasn’t expecting the cold.”

Reaching for Noah’s hand, I guide it to his chest to replace mine, giving him control of the ice. That makes Xander relax but only because he thinks he’s put an end to my antics. *As if.* Sitting back to admire Noah rubbing the cubes all over himself is a fantasy, and just as satisfying as touching him.

“See. Those nipples perked up nice and tight, no pool necessary.” I grin.

“Jesus, you need a warning label,” Xander mutters.

“If the warning is ‘beware, fun times ahead’ buy me the t-shirt.” I feel rather than see the eye roll since my own are focused on the drop of water meandering over the taught abs in front of me, lingering on one for a mere second before gravity beckons it lower, toward the barest hint of that little happy... *Shit, I better stop looking or I’m going to pop a boner. Right here. Right now.*

I’m trying to pull my eyes away when the view is spoiled by a beach towel hitting Noah in the chest.

“Dry yourself off before Tripp tries to lick the water away,” Niko tells his friend.

“I wasn’t going to...” Niko’s cocked eyebrow stops me from finishing that sentence. “I was only *thinking* about it. I’d never do that without permission. Preferably without inquiring eyes... Nope. Forget that last bit. I don’t think I’d mind an audience.”

The slight flush in Noah’s cheeks as he rubs the towel over himself has me thinking he might have given permission. Or been tempted to, anyway.

“Stop embarrassing him,” Xander warns me.

“I’m not the one who brought up licking.” I hold my hands up innocently. “If anyone’s embarrassing him it’s you two with the way Niko’s fingers are

*this close* to slipping under your shorts. Go christen something and let me and Noah suffer heat stroke in peace.”

My friend fixes me with a blank stare—the one he gets when he’s asking himself why he tolerates me—but I catch Niko’s sly smile just before he brings his mouth to Xander’s neck and pump my fist in my head. *I knew at least one of them wouldn’t be able to resist the suggestion they christen something in this new house of theirs.*

“We have company,” Xander lifts his shoulders and leans forward, attempting to be more good-mannered than the company—me—cares for.

“We can go,” Noah offers.

“See, they can go. And you and I can try out our new shower.” Niko doesn’t offer any polite excuses in front of Noah. *Interesting.*

“Tripp is rubbing off on you,” Xander grunts. “It would make us horrible hosts.”

“At least here we’ve got the option to leave. On road trips we’re all on the same floor, and not all hotel walls are as thick as you’d want them to be.” Noah’s head drifts from side to side as if he’s reliving what must be a salacious memory.

“Ooh, I need to hear more about thin walls in hotels.” I waggle my eyebrows at Noah, loving the way it makes his cheeks flush.

“What happens on road trips stays on road trips. Team rules.” Niko shrugs his shoulders with a sorry, not sorry look.

“Fine. Go test out your shower and we’ll tell you how soundproof the walls here are.”

Noah clears his throat as he shakes his head. “I’d rather not know if they’re soundproof. I’m gonna take off.”

“Buzzkill,” I huff. “Fine, I’ll go too since my car is at your house.”

“Why is your car at his house?” Xander asks.

“It’d have ruined Niko’s ‘*I bought you a house*’ surprise if you pulled up to this place and saw my car here, so I hid it at Noah’s.” I might’ve pouted a bit when Niko told me I couldn’t park here since it would make Xander suspicious, but since it forces me to leave with Noah that’s not a bad turn of events.

I grab my shirt from the pool deck and tuck it into the waistband of my shorts while Noah puts his on—*pooh*—and we say goodbye to our horny friends.

“You can leave your board here if you want,” Xander offers as we cut through the house to the front door. “Then you’ve always got one to ride.”

“Dorothy stays with me at all times.” I drop my prized possession on the ground and hop on, riding in small circles on the drive as I wait for Noah to lead the way. He gives the guys a final nod and starts walking toward the street while I zigzag back and forth behind him.

“Dorothy?” He casts a curious glance in my direction.

“Wizard of Oz. I always figured she should’ve had a skateboard instead of red heels on that yellow brick road.”

“You’re a fan of ‘*The Wizard of Oz*?’”

“The old lady who raised me loved it.” I glide up next to him and put my hand on his shoulder, so he pulls me along without me having to push. He doesn’t even break stride, like it’s perfectly natural for him to be my engine, which makes my chest do that weird zinging thing again.

“You call your mom, *old lady*?”

“I call the old lady who raised me *old lady*. I call my mom... Actually, I don’t call her anything.” It’s been years since I even said the word mom, and I’m not sure why I did it just now. I’d rather not think on that too hard.

“I’m sorry. When did she pass?”

“I don’t know if she has.” I rock my weight back and forth so the board weaves slightly as it moves forward. “This would be a good training exercise for you and Niko. Jogging while you pull Xander and I on our boards. I think you should add it to your morning routine.”

Usually, I’m much more subtle at changing the topic of conversation, but to his credit Noah doesn’t dwell on that. “Hockey players shouldn’t train near anything on wheels. That’s a broken ankle waiting to happen.”

“Why haven’t you pushed me away, then?”

“You’d just come right back.”

I put my free hand over my heart. “You get me. You know what that means?”

He darts a nervous gaze in my direction. “Uh, what?”

“It means I’m not going to forget about the thin walls comment. I need details.”

He shakes his head. “You heard Niko. Team rules.”

“There’s no need to use names or anything, just let me live vicariously through their sexscapades. Are there any threesomes? Foursomes? Orgies?”

“You know all those guys are straight, right?” He arches a blond brow.

“Since we aren’t using names, I can pretend we’re talking about men only.”

“Why do you need to live vicariously? Aren’t you like...*active*?”

I bark out a laugh, both because his attempt to be polite is adorable, and because he couldn’t be further from the truth. I *used* to be active. Lately, the chase has been more exciting than the kill, but since I’m chasing a straight man, or a man who thinks he’s straight—jury’s still out—the only action my dick has seen recently is from my hand. I can’t admit that, though. Not

without inviting questions I'm pretty sure Noah's not ready to have answered.

"I'm flattered you think so highly of me, but I bet gorgeous hockey players have a better orgy game than little ole me."

"You think you aren't hot enough for orgies?" *Oh my god, he actually looks confused by that. I knew he thinks I'm hot.*

"Please," I scoff. "My bank account isn't big enough. So, what are we talking about? How crazy does it get?"

"I've never heard orgies. Threesomes, but not more than that. Not that I know of."

"You've heard? Um, you're orgy material yourself, how come you've only *heard* what's going on?" Noah's body is built for mischief, so if he's not getting into any, I think I'll be disappointed. Or validated in my growing suspicion that he's not as straight as he thinks.

"I'm the captain, so I can't really encourage...*that.*" He waves his hand, so he doesn't have to use his words, which makes me want to push him a little further. *What can I say? I live for this shit.*

"So, you're like the *daddy* of the team?" It takes about two seconds for the red to spread from his neck to his face. "You know," I lower my voice, "daddies should get to have fun too."

## Chapter 3 – Noah

Tripp leans his head toward mine as his voice gets softer...*huskier*. It makes it impossible to ignore the scent of sun and sweat that lingers on his skin. Or the innuendo behind his words. I'm not sure how to react to either.

I'm too used to the smell of sweaty men for it to turn me off, or on for that matter, but his words... That's another story. I can't tell if he's just being his normal, flirtatious self, or whether there's subtext to what he says. So, I'm not sure if I should ignore him or play along.

Usually, I find it amusing that he says things most people wouldn't dare—I think I might envy his ability to be so bold, if I'm honest—but this conversation is a little intense, even for him. And with his hand gripping my shoulder, his bare chest inches from my arm as we near my house, it's not just the conversation that's intense.

There's a pull between us, like a persistent hum that gets louder the longer we maintain contact, lulling me closer. It could just be his energy—he's got a lot of it. Still, I get the sense the next words out of my mouth could make that energy crackle to life or fizzle out, and I'm not sure which outcome I want more.

I *should* shut this down. Ignore the daddy thing altogether and tell him there's plenty of time for fun after I retire from hockey. Yet a part of me wants to understand this undefined feeling I get around him, and I won't get an answer if I don't play along. Or at the very least seem ignorant to the game.

“I don’t know if you’re fishing for my kinks or trying to tell me yours, but this isn’t a topic I want my neighbors to overhear.” I’m feeling pretty confident that I haven’t shut the door or held it open with that response, until Tripp kicks the thing off the hinges.

“No one can hear what we’re saying from inside their McMansions. Besides, we’re talking about how you’re allowed to blow off steam, not comparing our dicks in the street, so there’s nothing for them to get scandalized over. Unless you want to show each other our dicks... I wouldn’t be opposed but it would be a scandal.” He waggles his eyebrows.

“Oh my god,” I mutter, both because I think he’d actually do it and because I’m not as offended by his *suggestion* as I should be. “Why would you say that?”

“Why would you be surprised I did? Have I given you the impression I’m shy?”

“No, but I didn’t think your exhibitionist tendencies included indecent exposure.”

“It’s only indecent if you don’t appreciate the view. Most people do.” He releases his grip on my shoulder and hops off his board as we reach my driveway. With a stomp the board snaps into his hand and he strides to his car to put it away. *How does he make that look so graceful? Why am I even noticing it?*

“So.” He spins to face me and plops his ass on the trunk. “How much should we bet?”

“What are we betting about?”

“Whether they break the shower they’re trying to christen.”

“Why would we bet on that?”

“Why wouldn’t we?” He gives me a look that says *duh*.

“Just out of curiosity, is sex the only thing you talk about?”

“That offends you?” A sly smirk takes over his face.

“No, but I haven’t really heard you talk about anything else.” You’d think it would bother me that he talks about sex so much when that’s not something I’ve been interested in for years, but it really doesn’t. I’m only asking because I’m wondering if it’s that topic or something else entirely that makes me feel different around him.

Obviously, there’s something about his looks that gets to me, but is that a byproduct of this risqué conversation or something else altogether? I’m not sure how to tell the difference without us changing the subject.

“We talked about music and making videos at that concert last year,” he reminds me of one of our earlier encounters, when we bumped into him and Xander at a show. I remember him being flirty then too, but also serious about the video he was hired to make. *Mostly.*

“You were trying to make the band look sexier on camera than they were in real life.”

“Not my fault that’s what they hired me for.” The grin turns almost bashful.

“Seriously. Tell me something about you that doesn't have to do with your cock.”

He fans his face. “We won’t get far with you saying words like cock out loud.” I cross my arms in front of my chest, and he relents with a throaty laugh. “Okay, okay. What do you want to know?”

Knowing he’ll have something to say about music, I start there. “Favorite band.”

“Current or former?”

“What’s the difference?” I grunt, losing patience.

“Former doesn’t play together anymore and current does.”

“Fine. Former.”

“Queen,” he answers easily.

“Current.”

He rubs a knuckle over the bridge of his nose. “I’m kind of on a Dirty Heads kick right now.”

“Why?”

He lifts a shoulder, drawing attention to the fact he’s still shirtless, and standing a few feet away, I can tell at least one of his tattoos is a rose. Another is something scribbled under the greyscale image of a mountain. “It’s summer, they’re kind of mellow but still upbeat. Easy to skate to.”

“Why skateboarding?”

A shadow crosses his face despite the fact there isn’t a cloud in the sky, though it’s gone so fast I think I imagined it. “It’s uncivilized.”

Although that makes a lot of sense, it’s not the answer I’m expecting, and I get the distinct impression those aren’t actually his words. Before I can follow up, he asks a question of his own. “Why hockey?”

“I’m Canadian.”

“No shit?” He tilts his head to the side as he studies me. “You a citizen now or still on a Visa?”

“I’m a citizen.”

He nods appreciatively, but doesn’t say anything else.

“How’d you meet Xander?” I try to get him talking again.

“Skate park. He was on a study break, and I was…” He seems to start and stop a few times before answering. “Burning off some energy. We hit it off.”

“And now you work together?”

“He’s got the degree that got his foot in the door, and he brought me with him since he liked my designs.”

“What designs?” I ask. Tripp glances down at his chest with a casual shrug, and I point to where his gaze lands on his stomach. “Tattoos? You did those?”

“I drew them. Someone else put them on.”

“Can I see?”

Another shadow drifts across his face before he gives me a curt nod.

Resting his elbows on the truck, he reclines so I can see the art. The rose is far more intricate than I first realized, with the words *‘Fall seven times, get up eight’* written in elegant cursive along the stem.

“What’s this mean?” I start to reach my finger toward the image but stop myself before making contact with his skin.

“It’s a Japanese proverb.” The firm set of his jaw suggests he’s not going to say anything more about it, so I don’t ask.

“And this?” I point to the text under the mountain range. *‘Over every mountain is a pass, although it may not be seen from the valley.’*

“Quote from Theodore Roethke.” When my brows draw together, he elaborates. “A poet.”

“What does it mean?”

“I think it’s supposed to be a metaphor for overcoming obstacles, but to me it means there’s a reason for everything, even if I might not understand what that is.”

Once again, his answer surprises me, and while I’m sure there’s a lot to unpack there, it’s not the time or place. Especially, since what he just shared makes my stomach flutter more, not less. It proves that it’s not just the sex talk that makes me feel *things*. Instead, I focus on the art.

“The detail is impressive.” Once again, I almost bring my finger to his skin—something about the intricate lines makes me want to trace them—but I

pull back at the last moment, right as his muscles tense in anticipation.

“Don’t be afraid to touch.” Playful Tripp is back, I assume to distract me from asking any more personal questions, and since I have a feeling he shared more about those tattoos than he intended to, I don’t object. I also don’t respond. I’m too distracted by the long lashes that line his hazel eyes, the full lips that frame his mischievous grin. *He really is beautiful. Not for a man either, just in general.*

“You’re staring,” he accuses after a minute of silence.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Tell me why.”

Even though his heated gaze makes me feel like he can see right through the clothes I’m wearing, I’m not uncomfortable. Only confused. “I’m not sure, it’s just sort of hard not to. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone so pretty before. Man or woman.”

Tripp bolts upright with a comically offended look. “I am not pretty. Hot as sin, sure, but not pretty.”

“Why can’t you be both?”

“Pretty is a safe word. *Ooh, such a pretty girl. What a pretty flower.* Bleh. Before you give a compliment to a man, stick the word dick in there. If it sounds lame it probably is.”

His anger would be amusing if I understood it, but I’m hopelessly lost. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Tripp leans forward, bracing his hands on his knees. “How would you describe your dick?”

“Um...” I wrinkle my brow, not sure how to answer.

“Is it pretty?” He stares at me for a moment and when I still can't formulate an answer, he relaxes back onto the trunk. “See? Pretty doesn’t work. No one

wants a *pretty* dick.”

“How do you describe yours then?”

His eyes flare with mischief as he leans forward again and murmurs, “Spectacular.”

I swallow back the gasp I almost let escape. “Uh, what makes it spectacular?”

Tripp lifts a nonchalant shoulder. “The length. The girth. Don’t let this slim frame fool you.” His hand moves down his torso as if showcasing his body. “I’m hung like a horse. And my skin is soft and kind of fair, so when you squeeze it, it turns nice and red. You can see your hand prints.”

I’ve never attempted to visualize another man’s cock, but it’s hard not to when Tripp paints such a vivid picture. It makes my mouth feel dry, so I have to lick my lips to speak. “I guess that does sound nice.”

“*Nice?* Come on, being in a locker room with naked guys is practically your job. I’m sure you’ve seen dozens of dicks. Tell me mine doesn’t sound spectacular.”

“I guess. I mean, I haven’t really compared...dicks.” I run my fingers through my hair, smoothing non-existent tangles just to give my hand something to do.

“Have you touched one? Besides your own?”

“No. I mean, I’ve seen guys touch theirs before, but...”

“Ooh, do tell.”

The gleam in his eye has me talking before I can think better of it. “I spend forty nights a year in hotel rooms with a roommate. Privacy is hard to come by.”

“So, you’ve watched people jerk off but never jerked anyone off?”

I have no idea how he connected the dots so fast, but he’s not wrong, and I

feel my face heat as I answer. “Yeah.”

“That embarrasses you?”

“I probably shouldn’t have admitted that. It’s not the kind of thing my teammates would want people to know.” I bite my lip to stop it from flapping.

“We aren’t talking about them, we’re talking about you. Did you like watching?”

“I mean, I didn’t hate it. It didn’t do much for me though.” Our star forward, Luca, needs to get off before games, and he usually needs an audience to cross the finish. More often than not that audience is me, because the act doesn’t make me as uncomfortable as it does some of the other guys. What the team doesn’t know, what I’ve never told them or anyone, is that I’m indifferent to the whole experience.

I’ve watched Luca fuck women and jerk himself off, and I didn’t react to either situation. I wanted to—so much that I’d have been happy to get excited by either or both scenarios—but I didn’t. On the surface the logical conclusion is watching other guys doesn’t do it for me, especially if that guy is a teammate, but since the women didn’t affect me either... I’ve made an effort to focus on hockey instead of attempting to answer why that is.

“So, you aren’t into dicks?” Tripp almost sounds disappointed as he puffs out his lip in goofy pout, though whether that’s real or for show I have no idea.

“Not my teammates. They’re like brothers to me.”

“If it’s not a teammate, you’d be into it then? Touching one?” That mischievous grin is back.

“Why, you offering?”

When Tripp doesn’t laugh at my joke, I wonder which one of us missed the

punchline. “Hell yeah, I’m offering. Take it out if you want.”

*I’m the one who missed the punchline. Great.* “While I’m sure it’s every bit as spectacular as you say, I’m good.”

“You sure?” He smooths his hands over his shorts, emphasizing the bulge between his legs, and for a second there I’d swear I feel some sort of twinge between mine. *Was that? No, it couldn’t be.*

“I’m sure.”

“Suit yourself.” He hops off the trunk and walks to the driver’s side door, not even attempting to hide the fact his shorts are tented. “In case you change your mind, there’s no expiration date on that offer. See you around.” He winks at me before falling into the seat and driving off, which should make me feel relieved. Instead, I’m more confused than ever.

*Did my cock just try to come alive around Tripp? Did I want it to?*

## Chapter 4 - Tripp

Something is seriously wrong with me.

It's been well over a month since Noah almost touched me, and in that time no one else has seen me naked, much less been close enough to put their hands on me. If anyone knew I haven't been railed in weeks they'd have me on a therapist's couch faster than I can drop my pants and bend over. Fortunately, summer means vacation, so people I'd normally see on a regular basis aren't around to notice my dry spell.

Even Xander, who's been in Sweden visiting Niko's family for the last few weeks. I'm almost disappointed he gets home tomorrow. He'll undoubtedly notice when I don't bombard him with tales of my escapades during his absence.

Yes, I've had this weird infatuation with the big guy since I first saw him, and yes, I tempered my antics after we met. But I wasn't celibate. I thought that word had been stricken from my vocabulary, yet since Noah nearly touched me in his driveway, my dick hasn't received any attention. *By choice... I might as well have joined a convent.*

I've replayed the encounter in my head more times than I care to admit. When Noah's skin nearly brushed over mine, I swear every nerve perked up, like someone hollered out *free condoms*. My entire body prickled with awareness, and the spot where he nearly made contact seemed to sizzle like an invisible current flowed between us.

No, not a current, a seismic force, like the damn tractor beam from Xander's space movies. It had me fully in its grasp, helpless to resist. My

lungs seized up, and not from some coy attempt to hold my breath. I wanted his touch *so bad*, and didn't want the subtle rise of my chest to spook him. I think I might've prayed to a God I don't believe in for Noah to lay his hands on me, and when he didn't... When he resisted the pull...it nearly killed me.

The last time I felt that crushed I was sixteen years old and newly homeless. I was so lost and alone, part of me wished for death. Fear of actually dying is the only reason I didn't give up, and while Noah's hesitation didn't put me back in that headspace, the flicker of disappointment hit harder than it should've. Needless to say, I'm less than thrilled it's where I've ended up, especially since I can't fuck away my frustration with anyone else.

That's never been an issue for me before. I love the chase, and usually I'm successful. On the off chance I'm not, I've got no problem moving on. Plenty of cocks in the sea, as the saying goes. Only that near miss with Noah seems to have ruined my mojo. There hasn't been a single twitch in the nether region since. Nada. Zilch. In fact, the only thing that's made my cock perk up is my own hand, but only when coupled with mental images of my sexy Thor admiring my tattoos the way he did that day.

I am way too young to be dried up. I shouldn't have to rely on Viagra, either, and sadly I'm seeing that little blue pill in my future... There's only one way to fix this. I need Noah to work up the courage to take me for a spin. Hopefully, that will reset whatever off switch he flipped and get me back to my typical shameless self. It has to. I can't live in these conditions. Not even skating has been able to set me right. In all fairness, that might be because I've been skating at Xander's, hoping to bump into the big lug, but still.

Letting myself in through the back gate, I prop Dorothy against a lounge chair and strip off my shirt so at least one item of clothing isn't soaked through by the time I'm done. Strapping on my helmet, I drop into the empty

pool, and glide around the bottom aimlessly. Maybe the motion of the board will help settle the chaos in my mind.

Usually, the sun on my back and the wind in my face is soothing. It still is, but not to the extent the niggling questions about the state of my life are completely erased. It's futile to expect skating to solve my problems, so I refocus my thoughts on perfecting some tricks. Pumping my legs to gather speed, I pop off the edge and grab the board while I spin in a circle, landing cleanly on the downslope so I can do it again at the other end.

I'm only doing three-sixties, but I've been doing them for over a decade, and they're a good warm-up for the seven-twenty I want to land. Unfortunately, I don't get to attempt that trick. A sudden crack breaks my concentration, and my weight shifts to the backseat, sending the board shooting out from underneath me.

My ass takes the brunt of the fall, but momentum carries me backward until my head smacks on the ground. Even with the helmet I feel the thump of the impact, and I just lay there a minute cataloging which parts of my body still function before attempting to move. *What the fuck just happened?*

"Tripp! Are you okay?" A head of blond hair looms over me, blocking out the sun and illuminating a square jaw I know well after months of studying it.

"You're not actually a God, right? I only call you that in my head?"

"What?" Noah's concerned frown turns to one of confusion.

"You've got a halo."

"Is your vision blurry? You banged your head pretty good. I can take you to the hospital."

"It's not... Nevermind. Were you *clapping?*" I try to touch my head only to smack my hand into the helmet that probably kept my brain inside my skull.

"Niko said I should if you do a cool trick."

I hold my hand out so he can help me sit up, and even though I may be borderline concussed, I'm well aware of how his touch singes me. Flames lick up my arm, curling their scorching fingers around my heart and making it beat double time. Fortunately, I think he mistakes my panting for an adrenaline rush, not a burning desire to have him touch me *everywhere*.

Unbuckling my helmet with my free hand, I try to stay focused on the conversation. "Yeah, don't listen to Niko. There's no clapping in skateboarding."

"How do you acknowledge when a person does something cool?"

"For starters, don't do anything if the person doesn't know you're there. Why the fuck are you here anyway?" Though I'd been hoping to bump into him, I would've preferred not to be flat on my back when it happened. Scratch that, being flat on my back would be great if my dick were throbbing as much as my head.

"I'm staying here, at least until tomorrow when Niko and Xander are back."

"What's wrong with your McMansion?"

"I was having a leak in the bathroom fixed when they found mold behind the wall. I can't stay there until the contractors get it mitigated."

"How long does that take?"

"About a week, so another four days. Can you stand?" He offers me his hand again, and I hold my breath as I take it in an effort to prevent myself from gasping when I feel his touch. It mostly works.

"Why don't you stay here the whole time?" I hobble over to the side of the pool and brace my forehead on the ledge. It's not spinning so much as reeling, and the solid surface helps me feel a little steadier under Noah's heavy gaze.

"I don't want to crowd Niko and Xander in their own place."

“You mean you don’t want to hear them fucking all the time.”

“That too.” His large palm settles between my shoulder blades, and even though my mind knows the gesture comes from a place of concern, my cock tries to say, “*me next!*”

“Then what?”

“You mean when they get back? I’m not sure.” He sighs heavily. “A hotel probably.”

“The horror.” I mock his defeated tone. “A staycation with room service... Sign me up.”

“I see enough hotels during the season. I’ll take my own place and DoorDash any day.”

“Hmm. I sorta forgot about how much you travel.”

“Are you sure your head is okay?” *Oh fuck...* He’s rubbing my back, gently sliding his warm palm along my spine, lulling my mind into a relaxed state as he stirs up a pool of desire between my legs. “You’re acting sort of... normal.”

“As opposed to...?”

“Obnoxious.” He pulls his hand back, like he’s afraid he might have offended me, and I swallow back an amused chuckle.

Feeling infinitely more stable, I pick my head off the ledge and look at his stoic face. “I’ve got a lot of layers.” I steal a line from my favorite animated movie. It’s one I wish I would’ve helped create even though it came out long before I got into video production.

“Yeah, I can see that. So, do you need a ride or anything? Or do you need to crash here. I’ve got the place one more night.” Noah dips his head and rubs his giant paw over the back of his neck.

“You want to have a sleepover?” I arch my brow suggestively.

“Um... Well... You’re not supposed to be alone after hitting your head, right?” An adorable flush paints his cheeks. "And Niko would kill me if anything happened to you after falling on his property."

“I didn’t hit it that hard. Look.” I take the helmet off and hold it out for his inspection. “It’s not even cracked.”

He lifts his head, blinking furiously as his full lips part. “It doesn’t work like that in hockey, and I bet the same is true for skateboarding.”

“If you’re determined to play doctor I won’t stop you, but I’d rather do that at my place. I’ve got a spare room that’s yours as long as you need it.” *Oh hell no. I must’ve hit my head harder than I thought. I only want to have a little fun with the big guy, not become roomies.*

“Really?” A tentative smile ghosts his lips. “You’d let me stay with you?”

“Sure, why not?” *Shut up. Abort. You’re a slut, not a masochist, and since Noah’s yet to show any interest in holding your dick, then you’re setting yourself up for four days of torture.*

“I would feel better being close enough to keep an eye on you tonight, and it’d be nice to have someone to hang out with instead of killing time in an empty hotel room. Are you sure you don’t mind?”

I lift my shoulder, one of the few parts of my body that doesn’t hurt. “My turn down service is better than what you’d find at a hotel.”

The sexy fucker actually laughs instead of running the other direction. *Can you die from blue balls, cause if I have to see Noah every day without emptying mine it just might kill me.*

“I’m sure it is.” He cracks a wry smile. “Should I drive us both, just to make sure you’re okay?”

“You can just follow me. That way we aren’t short a car.”

“Following you won’t keep you from getting in an accident.”

“Fine, Daddy. Give me a ride.”

Just like the last time, color floods his cheeks as I bait him, but Noah averts his eyes, which is a shame since the name sort of fits. At least if he’ll be living with me for the next week, I’ll have plenty of opportunity to find the name he does react to. That won’t alleviate my sexual frustration, but it might be amusing.

I wave off his attempt to help me out of the pool—my semi doesn’t need any excuse to get bigger before I have to strap a seatbelt over it—and once he has his bag, we make the drive to my condo.

Thanks to the ingenuity of my grandfather, and the fact that he died before he or my parents could rescind the terms of his will, I got a small windfall when I turned eighteen. I used it to buy my own place, so I’ll never be homeless again. It’s modest, but it’s perfect for one, and that’s all I need since I have no plans to hitch myself to someone else like Xander did. Having a houseguest for several days might even be too oppressive for my liking, though I’ll certainly do my best to make it entertaining.

“Want a beer?” I make a beeline for the fridge as we head inside.

“Should you be drinking after that fall?” Noah’s concerned gaze follows me to the kitchen.

“You’re taking this doctor game very seriously.” I hand him a can and gesture for him to sit on the black leather sectional that doubles as my bed when I stay up too late. Kicking off my shoes, I claim my favorite spot. “Want me to strip and lie down so you can examine me?”

“You don’t have to take your clothes off for me to see your pupils.”

“Pity. I thought you were offering to inspect the other head.” I shoot him a mischievous wink as I crack open my beer and take a sip.



## Chapter 5 - Noah

Tripp's made no less than three sex jokes in the last thirty minutes, so he's either really good at acting "*normal*" or he doesn't have a concussion.

Truthfully, I didn't think he'd given himself a head injury, but it made for a good excuse to stick around. I only wish I knew why I had a minor panic at the thought of him leaving. It's not like I'm unaccustomed to being alone, and Tripp's company often leaves me with questions I don't know how to answer. Yet, when he offered a room in his place... That felt like a lifeline.

Am I lonely enough that even Tripp's lewd company seems appealing, or am I lonely for Tripp? Given that any one of my teammates could offer lewd company, I have to consider the possibility it's the latter. I'm still not sure why that is: entertainment, curiosity, fascination. Maybe some combination of the three. I only know I like being around him. I prefer it to being alone, even if he tries to rile me with his shameless flirting.

Speaking of, he's watching me expectantly, waiting for my reply. "Why are you so determined to show me your dick?" I ask him.

"That bothers you?" He arches a suggestive brow.

"No. I sort of expect it now. I just don't know why you keep offering."

"Because you're so curious to see it." He reclines into the couch and takes another sip of his beer like he didn't just make an outlandish assumption.

Since he's so nonchalant, I act the same. "What makes you say that?"

His eyes gleam as though I've walked right into his trap. I probably have. "First, I see the way you look at me when you think I'm not paying attention.

Spoiler alert, I'm always paying attention. And second, you don't discourage my lame attempts to touch you. You totally play along."

"I don't ask you to touch me," I say reflexively.

He casts me a sly grin. "You don't stop me either. I mean, measuring your biceps? Asking whether you can flex your pecs independently of each other and telling you I need to feel it since I can't see it? All excuses to put my hands on you, and you oblige every time."

*Huh*, I guess I don't discourage him. I'm not sure that makes me eager to see his dick, though truthfully, my own seems to wake up a little when he touches me. It hasn't become hard, but it didn't stay flaccid either.

I lift my gaze back to his, not realizing I dropped it. "I don't mind humoring you."

"You don't, do you?" He smirks like we've just shared some private joke, though I'm not sure what it is. "Like I said, I'm always paying attention."

"About that, what did you mean when you said you see how I look at you? *How do I look at you?*"

"With desire, obviously. You may think it's because I'm *pretty* or whatever, and it may have started that way, but now you want to do more than look."

Once again, my first instinct is to object, but before I can get the words out his start to sink in. I *do* think he's pretty—I've admitted that to him—and I've admitted to myself that I like looking at him. Watching him move, especially on that skateboard. *Does that mean I want to do more than look? Does it mean I'm physically attracted to him?*

Considering my body does seem to be more alert around him, I suppose it's possible. Hell, the first time I saw him I suspected that the unknown feeling I got was attraction, though in the months since I convinced myself it was

affection since I genuinely like him. It does surprise me that I might be attracted to Tripp since he's so loud and brash and deliberately obnoxious, and I'm...*not*. Although there's no denying it's hard to keep my eyes off him. Touching him though... Is that why I look?

"Are you short-circuiting over there? All I did was imply that you might not be as straight as you think." Tripp's blunt assessment, though slightly off the mark, is a welcome interruption.

"I'm not freaking out if that's what you're asking. I'm just not sure you're right."

"Because you're so clearly attracted to women?"

"Because I'm not sure I'm attracted to anyone at all. Man or woman." The retort is out of my mouth before I can decide whether it's a good idea or not. Though, I have to admit watching Tripp's jaw bob comically up and down is pretty satisfying. He's used to delivering shocking statements, not receiving them.

I pop the top of my beer and take a sip to hide my proud smirk, indulging in a little liquid courage before the inquisition begins.

"You... I... Seriously? You're..." He swivels his hand in the air as if that will help his brain process information. "You're asexual?"

*I guess I have to walk through this door now that I opened it.* "Maybe."

"What do you mean *maybe*? How do you not know?"

"I don't really dwell on it. Hockey is sort of all-consuming, and I figure I'll have plenty of time after I retire to focus on other things."

"Other things being sex." His jaw still doesn't shut all the way, which is starting to make me feel uncomfortable. *It's not that strange to be indifferent about sex, is it?*

"Sex, hobbies, travel," I rattle off the first things that come to mind.

“Hold up.” He raises his hand like it’s a stop sign. “Have you ever had sex?”

“Of course, I have.”

“Then you’re not asexual.”

“I don’t think it works that way.” I pull my brows together.

“How does it work then?” He tilts his head to the side, giving me a critical once over.

“I don’t know. If I feel the need to have sex, I do, I just don’t feel the need often. I’m not sure if that makes me asexual or...something else. Like I said, I’ll have more time to figure that out when I’m done with hockey.”

“Still not following.” He shakes his head. “If you’re not interested, why do you rake your eyes over my body when you think I’m not looking?”

“I didn’t know I was.” Tripp rolls his eyes, forcing me to protest. “Seriously. I admire the way you move on a skateboard, I think because it’s similar to skating on ice in some ways. But guys on the ice are covered in pads so they’re kind of a solid blob whereas you’re usually shirtless so I can see how your body moves.”

“So, you’re watching *a* body in motion, not necessarily *my* body?”

I sip my drink while I consider the question, feeling my face heat slightly as I answer. “I don’t watch Xander the same way I watch you, and I’m not sure if that’s because he’s my friend’s boyfriend and I deliberately avoid focusing on him, or because he doesn’t hold my interest. I’ve never really analyzed it.”

Tripp studies me as he chews on his lip like he’s mulling over what to say next. “Why do I hold your interest? And don’t say that I’m pretty, you know how I feel about that word.”

This isn’t a conversation I expected to have today, or ever really, though it’s not as embarrassing as I expected. A little awkward maybe, but not

embarrassing. Plus, I half wonder if sharing my thoughts aloud might give me some clarity.

“The first time I saw you, I wondered if you were a model. You have the angular bone structure and lean physique the industry looks for, and you project this confidence that reminded me of a model I once dated.”

“You watch me because I remind you of an old girlfriend?”

“At first.”

“And now?”

My brows draw together as I search for the right words. “That’s harder to answer. Obviously, you’re an attractive—”

“Hot,” he interjects.

“Hot man.” I try not to smile. “And I like your confidence. It makes you seem authentic, not superficial, which I respect.”

“Oh my God. Are you about to give me the *‘it’s not you it’s me’* line? I have all these great qualities, but I don’t get your dick hard?” He huffs out a breath of air and drops his gaze to his lap, muttering softly, “You better snap the fuck out of it because I am way too young to be celibate.”

Now it’s my jaw that drops. “Celibate?”

“I’m sorry, what?” Tripp sets his drink on the coffee table and looks at me like he didn’t say anything at all, but the flush creeping up his neck says otherwise.

“I just confessed something I’ve never told anyone because I don’t even understand it. I was willing to tell you since you’re the only person I know who might be able to help me figure this out. You’re open-minded and aren’t afraid to say anything. Don’t change that now. What did you mean by celibate?”

Tripp’s eyes narrow just a fraction, making me think he’s about to clam up,

but his features seem to soften as he flops back against the cushions. With a groan, he drapes an arm over his eyes and gestures to the bulge his shorts are doing little to hide. “This only happens around you, big guy.”

My chest suddenly feels tight, like it’s too small to hold my lungs. “What only happens around me?”

Tripp lifts his arm just enough for me to see his exasperated look. “You stop pucks at a hundred miles an hour, don’t tell me you can’t see what you do to my cock.”

“I mean, yeah, of course I can. But I thought that happened around lots of people.”

“It used to.” His arm falls over his face again.

“That’s... You mean that’s specifically for me?” I point to his junk even though he can’t see me. “You actually want to sleep with me? That’s not just you being an outrageous flirt?”

“Of course, I’m being an outrageous flirt, that’s kind of my thing. Only with everyone else it’s empty words.”

“I don’t understand.” I shake my head to clear it. “Why me?”

Tripp turns his head to face me as his arm drops to his side, his hazel eyes sullen instead of roguish, which causes a strange ache in my chest. “You do realize you look like the Norse God of legend only hotter, right?”

“Uh...”

“And you’re pushing six-and-a-half feet tall, which I’m assuming means you’ve got a big, *gorgeous* cock.”

“Um...”

“Not to mention you look at me like you want to touch but are too shy or confused to make a move.”

“Oh shit. Have I been leading you on?” My stomach flips, making me

queasy at the notion I may have instigated this whole thing by being ignorant of my actions and the fact they were sending a signal I didn't mean to project. What's worse, for an overly sexual guy like Tripp, rejecting him physically might be just as bad as rejecting him emotionally, something I'd never want to do.

Tripp looks at the ceiling and inhales deeply, holding the breath for several seconds before he lets it out. "To be fair, I knew you thought you were straight. I suspected you were questioning that, so maybe I mistook your confusion for sexual tension."

"Maybe I mistook sexual tension for confusion," I confess, though whether that's for his benefit or mine I'm not sure.

His gaze snaps back to mine. "What are you saying?"

Taking a deep breath of my own I recline against the couch, resting the beer on my thigh as I drag a finger around the metal rim. "I feel *something* around you. I'm not sure what it is exactly because it's always different. Sometimes it's in my stomach, sometimes my chest. That day in my driveway I think it was..."

"Did I make your cock hard? Please tell me you had blue balls after I left because you damn sure gave me a set that was a bitch to drive with."

"I'm not sure hard is the right word—"

"Oh fuck, now you've done it." He groans and palms the bulge between his legs, and this time I'm excruciatingly aware of the tingle between mine.

"What did I do?" I blink, as if that will help me see what the heck I did wrong.

"You said hard. Even if you weren't, just imagining it is... Damn that's a nice visual."

"Do you need a moment?" Though I'm offering him an escape, I might be

the one who needs it, considering the tingle is only getting stronger the longer I sit here, watching his hand cover his dick. *Do I sit here and see what happens, or make an excuse to get up?*

“I’ve got an idea.” Tripp bolts upright. “You said you’ve seen your teammates beat off and it didn’t do anything for you, right?”

“Yeah,” I say warily.

“But you feel something around me that you don’t feel around them?”

“I don’t know what that is,” I remind him, though he waves me off.

“I’m not asking you to classify it, just acknowledge it.” His fist seems to clench around his shaft over his shorts, and another twinge of *something* surges along mine.

“Yeah,” I exhale heavily, letting my eyes drift closed as I brace myself for the words I know are coming.

“Watch *me*.”

I open my eyes to find the vigor back in his, and while I’m happy to see Tripp acting like himself, I don’t want to lead him on any more than I already have, however unintentional.

“This doesn’t usually have the results I think you’re looking for.”

“We won’t know until we try, will we?” He licks his lips suggestively. “But just to be sure, we’ll change it up. Tell me how you ended up watching your teammates? Was there a big circle jerk?”

I rear back. “What? Of course not.”

“Too bad.” He waggles his eyebrows. “I bet that’d be hot. Did they know you were watching?”

I set my half-empty can on the table and run my hand through my hair. “It was just the one guy, and yes. He knew. It was his idea. The release is

something he needs before a game, and he gets there faster if someone is watching.”

“Did he stand in front of you? Or lay on the bed?” I swear Tripp’s eyes go hazy, like he’s imagining himself in the room.

“He’d either lay down or just sit on the bed, facing me.”

“Naked?”

“No. Usually he’d pull his boxers down just enough to, you know, hold it.”

“So, you didn’t really see much?”

“I mean, I saw enough. And remember, my teammates are like my brothers, so the whole thing was more about him reacting to another body in the room than either of us reacting to the other.”

“Hmm, okay. Sounds like maybe things are different with me since I’m not a *brother* but that doesn’t tell us whether you like cock or not. You need to see one to be sure.” He stands up and whisks his shirt over his head, flashing those tight abs as he hooks his thumbs in the waistband of his shorts and guides them below his hips. When they’re low enough, his cock springs free, slapping against his stomach and bobbing in midair as it comes to a rest, pointing directly at me.

*Oh. That’s... I’ve never seen that before.*

Even after all the hints that he’d do it, I never actually expected Tripp to whip it out, and the quiver between my legs suggests I don’t hate it. Still, my eyes ping pong between Tripp and the coffee table, unsure of where they’re supposed to be focused in this scenario.

“Don’t be afraid to look. Hell, you can touch if you want.”

He steps out of his shorts and comes closer, placing his cock directly in my line of sight, no more than two feet away. And while my brain hasn’t

consciously decided to look, my eyes seem to have a mind of their own. Slowly, tentatively, I let myself take in the man before me.

He's got a great body, lean and lithe yet still cut, sinewy limbs sporting a soft golden hue from his time in the sun. And the part of his body he likes to tell me is spectacular... It's long and thick, with skin fair enough that I can see the blue vein pressing against the otherwise smooth surface. *Smooth.*

*Smooth?*

"You don't have any pubes."

"Nope." He pops the 'P' and grins mischievously. "Things are so much more *sensitive* without hair. Want to feel?"

I blink up at him, trying to get my bearings as the pressure between my legs seems to increase. "No. Uh, no." I shake my head and avert my eyes.

"That's not how this is gonna go." Leaning down, he hooks a finger under my chin, forcing me to look at him. "You're supposed to watch. Actually, scratch that. You're going to direct."

"I ... What?" I swallow thickly. "I said I didn't want to touch."

"You don't have to. But you do have to tell me what to do." He backs up a few paces and clasps his hands behind him.

"I'm not... I don't..."

"See this?" He swipes a finger over the tip and holds it up for my inspection. "I need to come. I'm desperate for it. But until you give me some direction, I'm just going to stand here. Waiting. *Hoping.*" He tucks his hands behind his back again, rocking his hips forward like he'd fuck the air if he could. "Take pity on my poor swollen cock, Noah. Tell me what to do."

Despite the playful pout, Tripp has a daring look about him, as though he enjoys being on display. Thrives on issuing a challenge. Whether it's my

competitive nature that refuses to back down, or my desire to understand what's happening, I can't stop myself from taking the bait.

"Fine." I exhale heavily. "Stroke yourself."

"How?" He sways his hips, showing off his length. "Fast, slow, gentle, hard?"

"Whatever you want."

"No, it's whatever *you* want." His hazel eyes meet mine, gleaming with challenge.

A memory of Luca jerking himself furiously comes to mind, and for reasons I can't explain, that dictates what comes out of my mouth.

"Hold it gently. Go slow, root to tip."

I see the shiver travel up Tripp's body as my words sink in, and a similar one washes over me as I watch his eyes flutter closed when he takes himself in a loose fist. With a relieved moan he moves his hand along his length, back and forth, skin stretching taut as his fist hits his pelvis, and bunching up as he moves to the crown.

The motion is fluid. Languid. Yet his muscles strain beneath the surface as if it takes tremendous restraint to handle himself with such care.

His chest rises and falls with long, deep breaths, a tempo you could set a watch to, though when he abruptly rocks to the balls of his feet, chasing his fist, the rhythm falters, and he seems to gasp. Then moan, trapping a plump lip between his teeth in an effort to contain it. *That's... God, he's beautiful like this. Coiled. Primed. Aroused.*

Tripp's fist slides leisurely along his length, over and over again, the occasional thrust the only indication he wants it harder. Faster. I'll let him have that, later. Right now, I appreciate how the slow pace allows me to see

his entire, engorged cock, and how that's making my body hum with an awareness that's both familiar and foreign.

As his hand strokes toward the tip, I notice it's purple, and glistening slightly in the dim light of the room. "You're dripping."

"So, you are watching?" He opens his eyes, bringing his gaze to mine, and the primal lust I see there has me licking my suddenly dry lips. "You got so quiet I was starting to wonder."

"You didn't give me much choice."

"You could've left me hard. It wouldn't have been the first time." His breath catches as his fist reaches the swollen head. "And as for the choice you made, are you happy with it? Do you enjoy driving up my need by making me go slow, or do you just want to savor the moment? Look your fill?" He drags his hand back to the base, palming his sac and giving me an unobstructed view of his steel length.

I do like looking my fill, I think, but since I can't make sense of that right now I bark out another command before he can jumble my mind any further. "Swipe your thumb over your slit. Spread your precum around the crown."

"Mmm, it's slippery." His eyes flick to mine, watching me from under thick lashes. "Makes my cock tingle everywhere I touch it." He sighs as he circles his finger around his tip, rocking his hips forward to increase the pressure, and a sharp zing ricochets through my length. *Holy shit. I think... I think I'm getting hard.*

"Cup your balls," I rasp. "Roll them around your palm."

His head falls back as he massages his sac, which makes his dick bob from the motion of his hand. "Fuck, that's good." Tripp spreads his legs, giving himself more room to work, plumping his balls in his hand as he rocks his hips, rigid cock spearing the air.

My own presses against the fabric of my shorts, the zing having faded to a pleasant warmth that leaves a faint hum simmering between my legs. I can't help shifting in my seat to see what it feels like to have the material brush against my skin, which doesn't go unnoticed.

"Those shorts getting a little tight?" Tripp bites back a moan as he tugs on his sac, his bold gaze tracking over me like a predator savoring its prey. Blatant. Unabashed. Hungry. I can't remember the last time anyone desired me so openly before, if ever, and the way it makes my cock stir is both exciting and embarrassing.

I don't recognize my body right now. The sensations I'm feeling, the thoughts running through my head. They're echoes of a distant memory, things I'm vaguely aware of having experienced before, though not recently enough to know what comes next, and certainly not in this context. I have a sudden urge to bring this to fruition, to end it before I lose the tenuous grasp on my control, if only to maintain my dignity in front of Tripp.

"Grab your cock," I bark. "Jerk it hard and fast."

"Fucking finally," he exhales, wrapping a tight fist around himself and pumping firmly, slamming his pelvis against his hand with each stroke. "Jesus those thirsty blue eyes of yours are killing me. I've never been this hard from my own hand before."

Tripp's abs contract under the power of his thrusts, the tendons in his forearm flexing as he vigorously works his shaft, which is now a dusty pink under the pressure of his grip. "Holy... Keep your eyes on me. Don't look away until I've spilled every last drop."

The warning isn't necessary. Even if I could divert my eyes, I don't think I would. The image of Tripp on the cusp of euphoria is too captivating to ignore. Chest heaving, lips glistening, eyes fluttering—his pleasure is

hypnotic, a siren song I'm helpless to look away from. I only hope I can witness it without falling apart.

“Oh God. Oh fuck.” Tripp doesn't even try to contain his release, letting milky white ropes of cum bubble from his slit, coating the fingers that grip his cock like a vise. A sharp cry pierces the air around us as he snaps his hips back and forth, spreading his cum over his length until it stops seeping from his crown. Only then does he slow his thrusts to a gentle roll, stroking through the last of the tremors as he brings his gaze to mine.

## Chapter 6 - Tripp

It takes a minute—or three—for my vision to return to normal, and when it does, there’s no denying Noah’s got a tidy little bulge between his legs. I doubt he’s fully hard, but he’s not unaffected, and that’s all the incentive I need to keep pushing.

“Looks like you enjoyed the show.” I wipe my hand over my stomach, loving the way his eyes track the movement.

“I...” He licks his lips. “I guess.”

“You guess? I’d say the answer is between your legs.”

He glances down for a nanosecond and shakes his head. “That’s... It’s not really...”

“Don’t hold back.” I’m playing dirty, using his perception of me against him, but I have a feeling this whole experiment will be for nothing if I let him take the easy way out. “Are you hard?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” I rest my hands on my hips.

“No. Sort of.”

“Which is it?”

“I don’t know,” he shouts, eyes growing wide as if his own volume takes him by surprise, and I get the sense I need to tread carefully because he maybe *doesn’t* know. Or doesn’t know what it means.

Rather than ask if he was affected by watching me, I operate under the assumption he was. “Noah, are you ashamed to get hard for another man?”

“No.”

That's promising, but it raises another question, one I'm almost afraid to ask. "Are you ashamed to get hard for *me*?"

He shakes his head firmly as a pink flush creeps up his cheeks. "No. I'm... I'm embarrassed."

"Um, I'm standing here naked with my dick going soft and *you're* embarrassed?"

"It's..." He licks his lips as he runs a hand through the blond waves that hang just below his ears. "I don't know what's happening. I don't know what to expect. You're...confident and proud and experienced and I'm... I told you this might not have the results you wanted."

Before I can weigh whether it'll comfort him or spook him, I straddle Noah's legs and sit my naked ass on his lap. He goes stiff at first, leaning away to put some distance between our faces as he sucks in a breath of air. But he doesn't make any attempt to get me to move. Then he relaxes into the couch with a slow exhale.

I rest my hands on his chest, noting the strong yet erratic heartbeat underneath them. "These are exactly the results I wanted. I showed you my dick, and you didn't hate it." I wiggle my hips slightly over the semi I feel underneath me. "Maybe you even liked it a little."

"But I didn't—I don't even know if I can—and..." The poor guy looks so confused I'm tempted to take him in my arms and just hold him, which I might've done if a cringe-worthy scratch didn't reverberate between my ears like a needle dragging over the surface of a record. *Oh, thank God for imaginary warning bells. I don't do the whole nurturing thing.*

"My cock may be a work of art, but as far as I know it's never made anyone come just from looking at it." Noah cracks a timid smile, but of course I need to go bigger. "We can try if you want, though. I'm not shitting you about how

magnificent that orgasm was. Apparently, showing off for a Thor-lookalike really does it for me, so I will gladly jerk off in front of you any time you want. Fuck, I'm getting excited just thinking about it."

He chuckles softly, which was the original goal, but I've already taken it too far.

"That's not an exaggeration. Look." I lift my brows and drop my gaze. "Of course, it could be that I'm naked and sitting on top of a sexy as fuck man, but," I clench my jaw as I try to keep my hips from rocking, "I like having your eyes on me."

"Is this normal? For you?"

"Which part? Wanting to be watched or sitting naked on a man who's fully clothed, which is also really doing it for me by the way."

Noah let his eyes fall to my lap briefly before bringing them back to my face. "The ah, getting excited again part."

I bite the corner of my lip and stare into his baby blues. "I've been known to recover quickly."

"So, um. Does that mean you need to jerk off again?"

"I can." I shift my palms from his chest, over his shoulders and down his arms until I find his hands, and set them on my thighs. "Or you can do it for me."

His fingers clench my legs as he gasps.

"You've never touched another man's cock before, right?"

He shakes his head firmly but lets his gaze drift downward.

"Do you want to?" I rock my hips slightly, so the tip of my shaft brushes over the shirt covering his stomach.

Timid eyes meet mine for a fraction of a second before they dart away. "Would you...want that?"

“I would love that.” I take one of his hands in mine and hold it between us, tracing my fingers over his. “I would love to feel these long, strong fingers wrapped around me. Squeezing and rubbing and pulling my cum out of me.”

“I’m not sure I can do that.”

I set his hand back on my thigh, loving how the warm weight of it feels on my skin. Loving even more that he lets it rest there. “You can just watch again, if you want.”

“No, I mean I’m not sure I can do that for you, since I’ve never... I don’t know what you like.”

“I like having my dick played with.” I prop my hands on his legs and lean back slightly, giving him plenty of room to ogle, touch, even dump me off his lap if that’s what he wants. But considering he hasn’t shoved me off yet, I’m betting he’ll let me sit here until I come again. I’m also betting he’ll join in for this round.

That’s maybe a little presumptuous of me. I don’t have any experience with asexuality—if that’s what we’re dealing with here—so it’s possible I’m pushing him too far too fast. However, I’m a pretty observant fucker, good at reading what people say with their expressions, and Noah’s tells me his curiosity hasn’t been sated. Still, I’m caught a little off guard when one of his large hands slides along my leg, up my torso, and starts rubbing my chest.

The pressure is firm, not hard, though not as tentative as I would’ve expected. His palm slides between my pecs, gliding over one before moving to the other, fingertips grazing a nipple that perks up obediently, and I find myself closing my eyes as I sink into his touch, my steady breathing the only audible sound in the room.

My cock is standing at attention, begging to be touched, but this slow perusal of my body feels just as heavenly as having my dick pumped. Who

knew?

“Why blond?” Noah interrupts the silence.

“What?”

He tips his chin up, indicating he means my hair. “Why blond? Why not blue? Or green?”

“Blond goes with my eyes.” I arch into his hand, a silent plea for him to keep stroking. He does, dragging his fingers down to my rose tattoo and tracing the lines almost reverently.

I don’t typically let people do that—most guys treat ink as a sex symbol when it’s the one thing on my body that I don’t flaunt for sex—but the gentle giant admiring them now isn’t doing it to turn me on. Not deliberately. I can tell by the awed expression on his face, the same one he wore when he first asked about them. He appreciates the art, respects the words, and for that I’ll let him look as long as he wants.

Noah’s finger brushes over the petals, but when it hits the stem, which hovers just above my hip, my stomach clenches as I gasp. He pulls his hand back abruptly, mumbling a hasty, “Sorry.”

I take his hand and put it back, holding it to my torso. “Don’t stop. Just be ready for me to jump if you tickle me again.”

Using a firmer touch, Noah slides his hand to my hip, fingers grazing where my pubes would be if I had them, and I groan softly.

“It’s really more sensitive?” he asks, referring to my smooth skin.

“You ever shave that stubble off your face?” A faint line divides Noah’s brows but he nods his head even though he clearly doesn’t follow why I’m asking. “Then you know without that hair your nerves seem to wake up. They’re so alert you can actually feel the air on your face.” His expression softens as he connects the dots. “That’s how I feel *everywhere*.”

Noah's Adam's apple bobs as he swallows, and his hand shifts lower, fingertips ghosting along the base of my cock, which bobs expectantly. Blue eyes riveted between my legs, he traces a path up my length, licking his lip when that finger catches the precum pooling at the crown.

While I have the presence of mind not to spook him with jerky movements, I'm helpless to stop my hips from tilting upward, chasing after his touch. The barest of friction puts my entire body on edge, like I'm a star on the verge of becoming a supernova, the energy within me too unstable to contain.

Why his slow, curious touch has me so riled when I'm usually a fan of enthusiastic fucking, I have no idea, but with my cock as hard as a steel rod, there's no denying I like being the object of his sexual exploration. That's not new—I enjoy the opportunity to corrupt men who think they're straight—although it doesn't usually go like this. Sure, they might be a little hesitant at first, but there comes a point where they either strike like a rabid animal or nope the fuck out. I've never had a guy embrace the experience in such a prolonged way, mapping my body with awe.

I may boast about my spectacular dick, and I'm proud to say no one's ever expressed disappointment. Still, Noah's fascination is hot and mind-blowingly erotic, yet unexpected.

Circling the head, Noah spreads my precum over the tip, heightening the already delicious friction and making me keenly aware of his delicate touch. Then he slides his damp finger down my length to my heavy sac, cupping it in his large palm.

I rock my body over his with a heady moan, trying to stifle a gasp when I feel a firm ridge of pressure underneath me. This is getting him hard. Really hard. I give myself an imaginary pat on the back before shoving the thought

from my mind. He'll say something if he wants to acknowledge it. Instead, I let my body take control.

"I didn't know men could feel so smooth." He kneads my balls slowly, dragging his thumb over the somewhat taut skin.

"Do you like it?"

He gives them a firm tug, causing my cock to twitch with a ragged jolt, and resumes rubbing them with a distant, almost contemplative look. "Yeah. I like that you feel soft."

"We need to work on your vocabulary. Nothing about me is soft."

"I suppose not." He slides his hand from my sac to my shaft, trapping it in his vice-like grip, and my vision goes hazy while my soul jumps out of my body.

*Holy mother of God, have I entered Heaven?*

"Damn that's an iron grip," I stutter when my senses return and I realize my hips are bucking and swiveling and straight up humping his hand completely of their own accord, because the fucker's just holding my dick, not jerking it.

"Too much?" He relaxes his grip as he angles his head to the side like he actually thinks he might be hurting me.

"Fuck no. Keep doing that."

The pressure returns, and I start thrusting into his fist, grinding my ass against his erection with each pass.

Jaw locked tight, Noah grumbles as I slam onto his lap, but he makes no effort to move. Whether that's because he's too afraid or too engrossed by the feel of my dick in his hand I don't know, but the way his baby blues darken under hooded lids suggests any fear he might have is trumped by lust.

*And I am here for it.*

Though my limbs are straining with the effort to hold myself up while

thrusting into his hand, I fucking love the imagery of writhing naked on top of a fully clothed man. It's so...filthy, so primal and debauched. I'm ready to blow just picturing it, yet before I can Noah loosens his grip, and the explosion I almost reached fades into a quiet hum.

"Oh fuck. That's... I need... Don't stop." Random words fall out of my mouth as I press my groin into his hand, straining to reclaim the bliss I almost found. When I can't find it, my tortured gaze meets Noah's.

"Can I?" He gives a leisurely pull on my cock.

*He doesn't want to stop, he wants to take over.* The relief is so potent my arms struggle to support my weight.

"Fuck yes," I pant. "Do whatever you want to me."

Once again, he starts slow, with feather-light strokes from root to tip. It's not enough, my chest heaves with the effort to restrain myself from bucking wildly, but my hips don't move, giving him the freedom to explore at his own pace.

Back and forth, his hand travels over my shaft, gradually getting faster, squeezing harder, learning what makes me gasp or moan or roll my eyes back in my head. And while I try to limit my reactions to what he's doing to me, sometimes it's what I do to him that gets me.

Brow furrowed in concentration, blue eyes dark with desire, Noah is one sexy motherfucker. Add his slightly parted lips, his staggered breathing, and the hard dick pressing against my ass, and before long the pressure of impending release is back.

"Don't stop. Please, *God*, don't stop." My hips swivel in earnest, alternately pushing my dick into his grip and rubbing my ass over his. Mercifully, he gets the message, pumping me harder. Faster. Until we're a tangle of squirming, wriggling limbs lost in a frenzy of lust that couldn't be contained

even if we wanted it to. I'm on the verge of detonation. But it's the astonished look on Noah's face as he quivers beneath me that tips me over the edge. *Oh. My. God.*

My earlier restraint dissolves as my body takes over, rearing almost violently as my dick pulses out its release. Toes curling, fingers gripping Noah's thighs hard enough to bruise, my muscles go into lockdown as a tsunami of pleasure tears through me, robbing me of the ability to do anything but hang on as I coat us both in the sticky aftermath of my bliss.

It's a savage orgasm. Untamed. And even before my limbs stop sizzling, I know I'll want more. Much more. As much as Noah's willing to give.

As my dick stops weeping, I try to take stock of whether I can move only to come to the conclusion that I can't. I'm boneless, incapable of standing, and I'm strangely content with that. Using the last of my energy I pull myself upright only to collapse on Noah's chest, resting my forehead on his shoulder as my breathing slowly returns to normal. *It's not cuddling, it's recovery. There's a difference.*

Noah's hand releases me, sliding over my hip and coming to rest on my thigh as his own breathing slows, and for a moment there I swear I hear a breathless "*thank you,*" although I'm too dazed to give it much thought.

When I'm finally capable of movement it's dark out, and I'm still on the couch, covered by a blanket. Noah is nowhere in sight.

## Chapter 7 – Noah

I like dick.

Or at least, my body does. I wouldn't have guessed that about myself until Tripp pushed me to examine the possibility of it. Even knowing I felt something different around him, I'm not sure I'd have done anything about it without his influence, and for that I'm grateful. I'm also still confused as hell.

Am I bi? I have to acknowledge that's possible since I can now say I've done sexual things with both women and men, although since a woman hasn't piqued my interest in quite a while bi doesn't feel right. Have I been gay and not asexual all along, and just didn't realize it? And if I really am gay, how come seeing Luca pleasure himself didn't do anything for me while seeing Tripp do the same got me hard? I assume the difference is because I see Luca as more of a brother, but if I imagine watching anyone else, Xander for example, that doesn't do anything for me either despite the fact I can objectively say he's good-looking.

Does that mean last night was some sort of anomaly—a right place, right time sort of thing—or that I only react to Tripp? Is it even possible to respond to one particular person and not a gender? If I didn't think that'd freak him out, I'd ask Tripp, but I don't want to imply he's the key to my sex life. Especially not after the way the night ended.

Neither of us mentioned it—he passed out pretty quickly after coming a second time, thank God—but I'm pretty sure he could tell I came, too. That wouldn't matter except for the fact I warned him it probably wouldn't happen, and while I'm pretty sure he'd be proud of succeeding where others

have failed, I highly doubt he'd want to consider the fact he's the *only* person who can do so. I don't even want to consider it. Still, it's hard not to, given my history, and the fact that I can't substitute any man for Tripp in my mind and feel the same level of excitement.

God, he was a vision—confident and sexy. Tripp unabashedly showcased himself for my pleasure then used me to chase his own. The way his body contorted. The heat in his eyes. The mixture of delight and relief on his face as he painted us with his cum. I didn't know seduction could be so filthy yet still so beautiful, much less that I could find release from that alone.

For a brief moment afterward, I didn't have the presence of mind to bite my tongue, and I thanked him for giving me what I thought I'd lost. I think he was already asleep at that point because he didn't react, and fortunately he'd already left for work by the time I got up, so I have time to get my shit together before facing him. And by getting my shit together, I don't mean freaking out about what we did since I clearly enjoyed it, I mean figuring out whether my body likes men, or just Tripp.

However, I have no idea how to go about figuring that out. I could engage in a little more experimentation while I'm here, though that wouldn't answer the question of whether my body can respond to anyone else. And that's hardly a question I can ask the man I'm fooling around with to help answer. It doesn't feel right to ask Niko or Xander since they're friends with Tripp, and even if Luca and I had the kind of relationship where I asked him for advice, I couldn't in this scenario since he's as straight as they come. Besides, I wouldn't know where to start.

Aside from Tripp, who I inexplicably find myself opening up to, I haven't hinted to anyone that I've been questioning whether I'm not cut out for sex. After all, locker rooms are more of a '*share your exploits*' than a '*confide*

*your secrets'* environment, and as the last line of defense on the ice, it's better that I appear focused on the game instead of my own internal conflicts. To burden my teammates with my questions now... Even if I could, I doubt any of them are equipped to give me sound advice.

Restless yet mentally exhausted, I revert to the one and only thing that's ever quieted my mind – physical exertion.

Usually, hockey practice is my outlet, and it's so rigorous it's no wonder I don't spend time dwelling on my inactive sex life. But during the off season running typically does the trick, and in a new neighborhood I figure the scenery alone will be enough of a diversion. And it is, though not in the way I'm expecting.

Rather than flowers and trees, of which there are plenty, I find myself noticing people. Specifically, other men who are running. Only, I'm not noticing them the way I notice Tripp. I don't see the shape of their legs, the swing of their hips, or the cut of their jaw. Instead, I see only the whole person, which is no more or less appealing to me now than it was before I met Tripp.

After a grueling seven miles, my mind is as restless as ever, and it's apparent nothing but puzzling out this mystery will give me any relief. So, I collapse onto the nearest bench and just sit, searching every face, every figure, to see if one of them might hold my attention the way Tripp does.

Physically, there are several. Men and women alike, with the lean physique indicative of an active lifestyle that would be compatible with my own. I'm able to discern that several have attractive faces, though none have the charisma that Tripp exudes. None of them are so alluring I can't look away. In fact, they sort of blend together, becoming indistinguishable the harder I try to recall any of them specifically.

I think there's some sort of condition to describe that. The inability to recognize people's faces. I don't have it, obviously, since I can tell who's who, although in terms of sex appeal, I don't seem to be able to pinpoint my interests. It feels a little like there's everyone else, and then there's Tripp.

*What does that mean?*

"Noah Tremblay?" A deep voice startles me out of my trance.

"Yes." I look up at a man who matches me in size, with wavy black hair and ocean blue eyes.

"I thought I recognized you. I'm sorry to intrude, it's just that I jog this path regularly, and I've never seen you before. I couldn't pass up the chance to say hello. I'm Justin."

The man holds out his hand, and I grip it for a handshake. *Classically attractive, athletic, firm grip. Do I feel anything?*

"I've been a Bulldogs fan for years. Never been lucky enough to bump into anyone on the team before now. Do you live around here?" He lets go of my hand and gestures to the surrounding area.

*Nope, nothing. Not a single thing.*

"No, just wanted a change of scenery during my run." Pro athlete 101, don't tell people where you live. Or where you're staying temporarily.

"Oh, nice. So, um, I don't mean to pry or anything, but you looked kind of...dazed just now. Are you okay?"

*Shit*—I can't afford to zone out where people can see me, they'll start questioning my health and I'll get stuck talking to doctors every week.

"Yeah, man. I'm good. Just visualizing a game."

"Always in training, huh?" Justin smiles brightly, as if I've given him some special insight into my pre-game process.

"Something like that, yeah."

*This guy is handsome, polite... No idea if he's into men or not, but even if he isn't I could still be attracted to him. So why aren't I?*

“Mind if I get a picture?” he asks.

“Sure.” I stand up and smile for the selfie he takes, and with another quick handshake I say my goodbyes and head out before anyone else can recognize me, feeling a little disheartened that because of my celebrity, answering the question of whether I'm attracted to anyone beyond Tripp is going to be much harder than I anticipated.

## Chapter 8 – Tripp

I'm nervous.

That's not an emotion I'm familiar with, especially considering I'm about to walk into my own house. But for the first time since moving in, that house isn't going to be empty when I get inside, and I'm not sure how to feel about that.

On the one hand, last night was hot as fuck, and I want to do it again. And *again*. And many more agains, after that. On the other, I've never had anyone stay the night. *Ever*. Not once. So, I'm not sure what to expect. Complicating things even more, Noah isn't exactly experienced in the hookup department, much less the hooking up with *men* department, so I don't know whether he'll be freaked out, casually curious, or clingy.

Considering I'm pretty certain he said '*thank you*' last night, my money's on clingy, but I hope I'm wrong. I wouldn't mind getting carnal with the big guy since he really gives my junk a hard on, but emotions are not my jam. If he goes fatal attraction on me, I wouldn't just lose him, I could lose Xander, as well.

I might've pushed the boundaries of our budding friend group last night, and Xander won't hesitate to castrate me for it if it backfires. He'll claim I should've known better—which I did—as if he doesn't know I'm unlikely to stop chasing a dick I want.

Usually, I have no shame in the pursuit of a good fuck, but I also don't usually pursue acquaintances, or people I genuinely like. Noah just does

things to me I can't seem to ignore. I should make sure he's on the same page though.

Shoving all the 'what-ifs' from my mind, I push through the door with my trademark coy smile, only to have it turn into a gasp when I'm hit with the most divine aroma I've ever experienced inside my little sin bin. *Hockey terminology is so appropriately filthy.*

I round the corner into the kitchen and find Noah bent at the waist—showcasing a deliciously round ass—and pulling some sort of pan out of the oven. “What kind of foreplay is this?”

“Foreplay?” Noah arches a curious brow as he sets the dish on the stove.

“You know, stuff that makes your dick hard.” I point to the steaming plate. “What is it?”

“Tourtéire,” he says with a little French flare. “Beef inside a pastry crust.”

“I didn't know pot pie was such an aphrodisiac.”

“Not pot pie. Tourtéire,” he clarifies as if I didn't just try to make things inappropriate. *Our normal dynamic still applies. That's a good sign.*

“Which restaurant delivers these? If it tastes as good as it smells, I'm gonna have to put it on my favorites list.”

“I didn't order this. I made it.” He helps himself to the cupboard and pulls out two plates that have probably never held actual food, only takeout containers.

“With what? I don't have any groceries here.”

“You do now.” He pulls a knife from the drawer and starts slicing the pie while I open the fridge to find that I do, in fact, have food. A lot of it. Fruit and vegetables and eggs, stuff I don't eat unless I order it.

“So, this is like a frozen thing? Where's the box? I'll take a picture, so I know what to get.”

“No box, I made this from scratch.” He scoops a slice onto a plate and hands it to me.

“For real?” I twist and turn the plate, inspecting it from all angles. It looks just like a heaping slice of apple pie, only with ground beef instead of apples, but with the same golden flaky crust you’d expect in a dessert. “You can cook?”

“Sometimes. When I’m bored, or...” He lifts a casual shoulder then dishes a piece for himself.

“Hmm.” I close my lips around a forkful of pie, and an explosion of savory flavor hits my tongue. The meat is so tender it practically melts right along with the flaky crust, and I swear my eyes roll back in my head a little as the cinnamon-sweet aftertaste floods my senses. “Holy shit, that’s incredible.” I rush to take another bite. “How’d you get it to rise like an actual pie? I always thought those were hard to make at altitude.”

Noah cocks his head to the side as I take another bite, realizing too late the blunder I just made.

“I didn’t expect a guy who keeps literally no food in his house to know anything about baking.”

“Late night TV,” I say around a mouthful, figuring that’s enough of an explanation to keep him from asking anything more.

“Which show?”

*Dammit.*

“Fuck if I know. Sometimes I just leave the thing on while I fall asleep. Maybe I picked things up by osmosis.”

His wary expression says he doesn’t buy that, but too bad. Just cause I show a guy my cock doesn’t mean I’m gonna tell him all my sordid history

about watching our housekeeper cook since I didn't have friends to hang out with. Fortunately, he doesn't seem to be in a challenging mood.

"I like *'Is It Cake?'*" He carries his plate to the tiny kitchen table and takes a seat.

"What now?" I grab a beer from the fridge and follow him with my dinner.

"People make cakes that look like real objects, and you have to guess which are real and which are cake."

"Pfft. Doesn't sound that hard."

"That sounds like a challenge."

My fork stops midway to my mouth as I cut Noah a suspicious look. *Is he flirting with me? That's new. And kind of intriguing.*

I take my bite and wash it down with a swig of beer, grinning playfully. "Okay big guy. What do you have in mind?"

"I'm not going to bake a cake if that's what you mean. I'll show you an episode and you have to guess which are the cakes."

"And if I guess correctly? What do I get?" My smile turns almost sinister as I imagine the possibilities.

"Bragging rights?" He has the good sense to look a little wary.

"Uh, uh. I want another dinner." I toss him a softball, mostly because if I go straight to the good stuff I won't get a home-cooked meal, but I can be creative in showing my appreciation if he cooks for me again.

"I only know how to make a few things."

"You don't cook like this for yourself all the time?"

His head swivels back and forth. "I have someone make meals for me. Mostly lean proteins that keep me in top shape, not comfort food like this."

I have a brief flashback to sitting at the kitchen island as a kid, a steaming bowl of Rose's homemade ramen in front of me. Most people probably don't

think of Japanese cuisine as comfort food, but to me... Let's just say it's one of the happier aspects of my childhood.

"Tripp?" Noah's voice jolts me out of the memory. "You good?"

"Of course." I take a pull from the bottle to wet my dry throat. "So, even if you only know how to make a few things, that's plenty for one more dinner."

"You're so sure you can spot the cakes?"

I run my fingertip around the opening of the bottle. "I am."

The corner of his lip tugs up with a soft chuckle. "Alright then. What do I get if I win?"

"What do you want?" I tip my chair back and prop my feet on the one next to it, settling in for what promises to be an entertaining conversation.

"Um." He looks at his food and takes a bite, as if that could hide the fact his face is starting to look like a tomato, which on a Thor lookalike is actually not a bad look. Then he takes another bite, clearly struggling with how to say what he wants.

"Oh, my poor, sweet Noah." He glances up just in time to see me lick my lips. "You do know I put out without having to lose a bet first, right?"

He gives a curt nod and looks back at his plate.

"Why go through this whole bet thing then? What is it you're afraid to say?"

"What if... What if last night was a fluke?"

"You think I can't make you come two nights in a row?" I arch a brow as his eyes snap to mine, confirming what I already suspected. *He came last night.*

"Can you?"

"I can sure as hell try." My eyelids get heavy as I imagine getting a glimpse of what I'm sure is a nice, fat cock.

“And if I don’t?”

I purse my lips together with a frown. “I don’t understand the question.”

“If I don’t come, then what?”

“You go to bed with blue balls?” I shrug noncommittally.

“No.” He exhales heavily and shakes his head. “I mean, if I don’t, does that mean I don’t actually like guys?”

*Oh, we’re going deep. Shit, okay.*

Dropping my feet back to the floor, I right the chair with a thud. “I think you’re expecting attraction and desire to be black and white, and in my experience they’re more like a rainbow, and no, that’s not a gay reference, it’s just an analogy.”

“I’m not following.” *Damn those blue eyes are intense when they’re confused.*

“Okay.” I chew on my lip, searching for a way to simplify the complexities of sexuality. “How’s this? Mostly, I like men who are bigger though every once in a while I want to play with someone smaller. I gravitate to white guys but sometimes I’m in the mood for Latin. Or Asian. And I’ve been known to crush on straight guys from time to time. My preferences change with my mood, but my mood swings don’t define me.”

“In every one of those examples you’re still gay,” Noah points out.

“That’s because my rainbow is narrowly focused on men. Yours might be more broad, including men and women.”

“I also don’t have sex nearly as much as you.”

“So what? That just means my rainbow is more vibrant.” I throw my hands up. “The point is, sex isn’t black and white, it’s a gradient. Maybe you won’t like cock as much tonight as you did last night. Maybe you’ll like it more.

Either way, it's not like you have to label yourself afterward, and even if you did, there's no rule that says you have to stay with that label forever."

*Nailed it.*

"I'm not worried about the label." Noah swirls his fork around his empty plate. "I just... For years I didn't give myself time to be confused. I focused on hockey and didn't let myself ask questions I didn't have the answer to. After last night, I can't make the questions stop."

*Oh shit. It's not quite fatal attraction level clingy, but he's trying to solve existential issues of attraction while I'm on more of a 'bang him out of my system so my suddenly picky junk goes back to normal' mission.*

"These questions." I rotate my wrist in a circle like that might help me find the right words. "Are they still along the lines of whether you like cocks or not?"

"Partly."

"Anything else?"

"Whether I'd finish...if a man touched me."

I assume since he said man his questions must refer to *men* in general, not *me* specifically. I can work with that. And hallelujah because I really do want to get my hands on him. "I accept your terms. Show me this cake."

Noah drops his fork with a clatter and sits ramrod straight. "My terms?"

"If you win the cake bet, I'll play with *your* dick this time." I wink and pop out of my chair, heading toward the living room. "Coming?"

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"There's literal stitching on that cake," I protest, because even though I really want to touch Noah's cock, I can't turn off my competitive nature. "She cheated somehow. Leather stitching isn't edible and the whole thing has to be edible, right?"

“The icing is meant to look like leather stitching.” Noah grabs the remote off the coffee table and rewinds the program to the close-up view of the baseball and mitt that a knife cuts through seconds later. And even though I’m well aware that there’s cake inside the mitt, my brain won’t let me accept the fact that it’s actually cake when it looks so real.

“Then you cheated. You’ve seen this one before and knew which was the cake.”

“This episode just got released last night. I haven’t had time to watch it until now.”

“You could’ve watched it while you were making dinner and conveniently suggested this little game knowing you’d win.”

“Right, because I knew we’d be making bets involving sexual favors and household chores.” His eyes have a playful little glint to them that I don’t normally see. *Definitely flirting.*

“You honestly expect me to believe you didn’t foresee this outcome? The way to a man’s dick is through his stomach, and you combined my two favorite things, meat and pie.” I raise my fingers as I list off my weaknesses. “Sneaky bastard.”

“A, I didn’t know meat—” he catches the smirk on my face and connects the dirty dots. “I didn’t know pie was one of your favorite things. And B, the saying is actually ‘the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.’”

“Not this man.” I shake my head vigorously.

“Are you saying you don’t have a heart?” Noah cocks his head to the side as his eyes drift over me.

“If I do it’d take a hell of a lot more than food to find it. My cock on the other hand,” I rush to change the subject, “responds to pretty much anything. But a bet’s a bet so tonight we get to play with yours.”

I drop to the floor and crawl between Noah's thick thighs, noting how he tenses when my palm connects with his bare knee. "Change your mind?"

His head swivels so slowly it's hard to tell whether it's moving, but his mouth stays shut. I let my hand drift higher, fingertips sliding under the thin fabric of his shorts to press against the inside of his thigh. He sucks in a breath of air as his eyes grow wide, seemingly caught between wanting me to retreat or push forward.

"Okay?" I rub my thumb back and forth over the soft skin of his inner leg, hoping that will both soothe and excite him.

"Feels..." He exhales deeply as he relaxes into the cushions behind him. "Feels nice."

Using far more control than I thought I possessed, I linger in the same spot, gently sliding my fingers over his skin as I watch him for signs of distress, another thing I've never tried to do with my hand inches from a guy's junk.

Noah's chest rises and falls with measured breaths, not panicked, but not without tension either. A forced calm, as if he's both anxious and afraid to enjoy what I'm doing.

"Lean back and close your eyes," I say softly.

The twist of his head is less hesitant now. "I want to watch."

"You will. But first you need to relax. Stop thinking about what's happening or what's going to happen and just feel."

The words are meant for him, but I find myself following the same instructions. Whether that's an effort to set a good example, or an attempt to stick to this slow pace, I have no idea. I just know that for the first time in, maybe ever, I'm noticing how soft skin feels on the inner thigh. How hair tickles the pads of my fingers when I barely graze it. How muscles tense when you first touch them and unwind the longer that connection remains.

And while I still haven't seen or touched his cock, mine is enthralled.

## Chapter 9 - Noah

Trusting that Tripp knows what he's doing, I close my eyes and let my head fall to the cushions, focusing on the feel of his hand on my leg rather than what other parts of my body may or may not be doing.

It's warm...heavy, except at his fingertips, which are ghosting over my skin. Down to my knee, up to mid-thigh, occasionally dipping to the inside, Tripp's touch is calming. Except when it inches higher and sparks a tiny little flutter of awareness deep inside my groin. It's a rumble of need that coaxes my dormant sense of desire out of hiding.

And wow—he's only touching my leg, but by concentrating on that point of contact my entire body seems to come alive. A pleasant warmth radiates out from his palm, seeping into my limbs, my extremities, even my chest, which rises in rhythm with the glide of his hand rather than my attempts to force breath. And then his hand slips higher.

The general sense of warmth becomes more acute, settling deep in my stomach. All while subtle, yet persistent, waves stretch toward my balls. A satisfied moan wafts over my ears, though whether it came from me or Tripp I can't say. I don't even really care, since I'm guessing that noise is responsible for Tripp's hand inching higher until his fingers are mere inches away from my nuts.

My answering inhale isn't sharp, but it is deep, filling my lungs with the air needed to steady myself amid the torrent of sensations flooding my nerves from that one, simple advance. That's when I realize Tripp's hand is high

enough to reach my dick, if it were still resting against my thigh. Only it isn't.

It's pushing against the fabric of my shorts.

"There you are." Tripp's voice is thick and sweet, like honey, drizzling over my heated skin. "I've been waiting a long time for this."

My eyes snap open just in time to see the heated gleam in Tripp's as he stares at the slight tent in my shorts. He leans forward without warning, mouthing my cock over my shorts. His warm breath makes me jump against the material between us.

*Oh, God.*

Sparks zing from the base of my shaft all the way to the tip as a steady hum surges to a crescendo. The sheer intensity would have me sinking to my knees if I wasn't already seated on the couch.

My jaw falls open on a silent moan as my cock swells, the tiny pulses of my heartbeat feeling more like beats on a snare drum in my rapidly growing dick.

"So excited," he mumbles between open-mouthed kisses, the heat of his mouth making my shorts damp as my dick twitches again. "You're good for my ego."

My breathing turns erratic as I watch Tripp nuzzle and murmur to my shaft through my shorts. Watching a guy talk to your junk should be unsettling, but once again Tripp manages to make the obnoxious seem normal.

I'm so focused on the way he's making me feel, it's not until Tripp's fingers slide under the waistband of my shorts that I realize his hand is no longer rubbing my leg. I inhale another lungful of air as he lifts his gaze to mine, hooded emerald eyes silently asking for permission. My head bobs once, and cool air hits my heated skin as my shorts are pulled lower.

Tripp taps my hip, and I obediently shift my weight so he can pull the

fabric off completely. Tossing the garment to the floor behind him, he spreads my legs and drags his eyes up my calves, over my thighs, settling on my shaft.

Holding my breath, I let my gaze follow his, coming to rest on my cock. My body shudders as my lungs expel their relieved air.

It's firm. Not as full as I've seen it, but fuller than it's been in a long time.

"Hello beautiful." Tripp licks his lips, and my dick jumps in response.

Looking at me from under thick lashes, Tripp seems to fight for control of his breathing. "I want to do *all* the things. Hold it, suck it, *ride it*." He stretches his arm forward, finger straining toward my tip, then suddenly pulls back. "What do you want, Noah? What am I allowed to do?"

"Honestly, I wasn't sure my body would let us get to this point, so I hadn't considered what I'd be comfortable with."

"Touching then? I'd love to wrap my hands around you." His eyes seem to go a little unfocused before they blink back into control, which seems very un-Tripp-like. *He must be trying to make me feel good about not being all the way hard. That's...pretty cool, actually.*

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "Touching."

Tripp reaches for the base of my cock, eyes fluttering shut with a groan as he closes it in his fist. Then he slides his hand to the crown, gently pinching it between his thumb and forefinger.

*Holy shit.*

He's *holding my dick*. Not pumping it or playing with it the way I did his, just *holding it*, rubbing his thumb back and forth over the tip like I'm some skittish animal he's trying to calm. I guess in a way I am, though not because he's a guy like he implied the other night. Because it's been so long since anyone's touched me.

The last person, a woman, had small, soft hands. And her touch was gentle. Tripp has big, strong hands. They're holding me firmly, covering most of my dick, which is now harder than it's been in ages. Maybe ever. Just from him holding it.

Keeping his grip firm, he slides his hand to the base and gives me a little squeeze. Relaxing his hold on the upstroke, he pumps me several times before once again tightening his fist. Alternating between the two with no discernable pattern, he continues to stroke me, never letting me fully sink into the rhythm before changing it up again.

The constant adjustments are maddening, but only because I'm anxious to find the release I'm still not sure he can give. Truthfully though, if he's able to achieve it after all this teasing, I'm fairly certain it will be the best I've ever had.

Sliding his hand low enough to cup my balls and press them into the base of my cock, my hips surge forward as my head lolls back against the couch and a garbled moan escapes my throat.

Tripp lets go of my dick and palms my sac, giving it a nice, firm tug. "No wonder these are so sensitive. They're ready to burst, aren't they?"

I swivel my hips as he kneads them, too consumed with lust to care that the motion makes it look like I'm fucking the air, which Tripp seems to enjoy.

"Jesus, big guy. What I wouldn't give to be sitting on that beauty right now. I knew it'd be big, but big *and* you know how to use it... *Damn.*" He gives my nuts a final squeeze and spins toward the coffee table, sliding open a drawer I hadn't noticed before.

"What's that?" I heave as he grabs something inside.

"Lube. I don't want to chafe you and risk not getting to have any more fun."

“What sort of fun?” I ask before I can stop myself.

Tripp’s grin turns devious as he squirts the liquid into his palm and wraps it around my shaft, causing me to gasp and buck simultaneously. “Damn that’s cold.”

“I’ll warm it up, don’t worry.” He starts stroking me, twisting his wrist as he reaches the top. As promised, the friction makes the gel warmer as he gets my cock nice and slippery.

I wonder briefly if this is what it feels like to be with a woman bare. I never tried it, but the thought nearly takes me out of the moment, and in a desperate attempt to salvage it I repeat, “What sort of fun?”

“Hand jobs, blow jobs, fucking.” His eyes snap to mine, hooded and heated and full of challenge. I swear the carnal nature of his gaze has my toes curling. “You like that idea?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that while you’re holding my dick.”

Tripp throws his head back with a whoop that turns into a bout of laughter. “I don’t think anyone’s ever made me laugh while I’ve had a raging boner.”

“You’re hard?” With him kneeling before me, only his eyes gave any indication he was enjoying this.

“Wanna see for yourself?” He swipes his thumb over my slit and gives the crown of my shaft a firm squeeze.

Since I kind of know how this goes after last night, I don’t hesitate. “Yeah.”

Tripp lets go of my cock and stands between my legs, holding his hand up. “You have to undress me. My fingers are too slippery.”

With his groin even with my face, I can see the bulge straining for release, and mine jumps in response. Using surprisingly steady hands, I unfasten his pants and shove them down his hips. He steps out of them and straddles my lap, resting his weight on my thighs.

“Shirt too,” he instructs.

Once the excess fabric is out of the way, he scoots forward until our cocks are side by side. The firm skin rubbing against mine steals my breath, and I can do little more than gape as I look at our dicks pressed into one another from root to tip. It’s an image I never expected to see much less appreciate, though there’s no denying I enjoy it.

Tilting his hips, Tripp uses the slippery surface of my skin to glide his erection against mine. Every nerve along the way ignites like a firework, a series of tiny explosions that pop and fizz and render my senses useless as I revel in the obscene amount of pleasure this rigid friction brings.

*Has it ever felt like this?*

Admittedly, it’s been a while since I’ve been intimate with anyone, so my memories about what it was like in the past are fuzzy. What I can recall is having to really concentrate, to visualize what it should feel like rather than experience it, because the reality somehow fell short. And while I could force myself to finish, it never quite felt like the epic encounters I’ve heard my teammates describe. Hell, I’ve even *seen* some of Luca’s encounters, and mine definitely weren’t like that.

What’s happening right now though... I’m not conjuring some scenario as a means to an end. I’m not telling myself what it *should* feel like to revel in some false reality. I’m simply reacting to what’s happening. No imagination necessary. In fact, I doubt my imagination could top what I see with my own two eyes.

Tripp hovers above me, the peaks and valleys of his stomach rippling in a hypnotic rhythm as he pumps his hips. The muscles in his left shoulder are taut as he braces a hand on the back of the couch, and the muscles in his right contract while he works our shafts with feather-light strokes. Glazed

green eyes track his movements, though they drift briefly to my face when he flicks his head to the side to clear away unruly strands of white-blond hair.

*This—Tripp—might be the most erotic thing I've ever experienced.*

My breathing gets more labored with each slide of his solid length against mine. I don't know if that's from the sensation or the view. Maybe some combination of both. All I know is two swollen cocks rubbing together makes my heart race in a way I've only ever felt on the ice. Then Tripp contracts his fist, and my pulse finds another speed.

Tripp cants his hips as he strokes up and down our lengths. "Rub your dick against mine. Fuck my hand."

Mirroring his movements, I punch into his grip, the lube making it impossibly easy to seek out the friction driving me wild.

Tight. Hot. Hard. As soon as I register a sensation it's replaced with a different one, all of them swirling together to create a tornado of ecstasy that drives all rational thought from my brain. Who I like, what I like, what it means... The questions dissolve as the pressure in my balls becomes overwhelming, the need to come all consuming.

My pelvis bucks wildly, a frenzied attempt to spear my length into Tripp's fist as if it's the key to nirvana, which it just might be, considering I've never felt desire of this magnitude.

"Holy shit, big guy," Tripp pants as he tightens his grip. "I can feel your cock twitching in my hand. You're gonna blow like a fucking volcano. Let me see it."

The heat of his palm, the constriction of his fingers, and the slippery slide of our joined dicks combine until all that's left is utter euphoria. A full-body spike of awareness seizes me, causing my limbs to freeze for just a second, long enough to warn me that I've got no control over what comes next. And

then it's gone, along with the ability to feel anything other than the pleasure coursing between my legs.

My head falls back against the couch as a guttural moan rumbles up my throat. Bliss radiates from my groin, up my spine and down my arms, igniting my body with a rush of energy reminiscent of the way lights suddenly and blindingly illuminate the area when flicked on. Fingers clenching the cushions, my dick quivers and quakes as spurts of cum erupt from my tip, joining Tripp's and coating us both with more evidence that my body may not be broken after all.

When my orgasm seems to have run its course, Tripp releases me. "See what happens when you get out of your head."

I open my eyes to his smug grin, and the five sticky fingers he's wagging between us.

*Oh my God. He did it. I came, and it was... Everything.*

Too stunned to move or speak, I watch helplessly as Tripp grabs his shirt from the couch and wipes us both down before hopping off me. "Dibs on the first shower." He winks and saunters toward the stairs, leaving me breathless and—for the first time ever—boneless.

*So, this is what good sex feels like. I can finally see the appeal.*

## Chapter 10 - Tripp

Xander and I have been skating for nearly an hour by the time Luca, Justus and Noah show up, joining Niko on the pool deck to watch while they have a few beers. Usually, I don't mind an audience—I'm a show-off by nature—but Noah's eyes on me have my stomach doing flips. Its a feeling I enjoy—fuck, maybe even crave—but it's typically a result of gravity bringing me back to Earth after soaring over the rim of the pool, not because of Thor.

Last night might have been the hottest encounter of my life, the first night with him a close second, and neither of those progressed to the point where I had to wrap my dick. Or his.

I always thought the best orgasms required sex, and the fact that doesn't seem to be true with him is fucking with my head. So the urge to do it again, to want more of him in every carnal way—more than I did a few days ago—that's not normal for me.

I'm no stranger to chemistry or sexual tension. I live for the chase, but once I get what I want, the desire fades... just not with Noah. Is that because we haven't fucked? Have our little encounters served to tease me? It's possible. Maybe once we've gone all the way, the lust will fade. At least, I'm hoping it will.

By then, Noah will have his answers. He'll know what he likes so he can enjoy sex the way nature intended and I'll get to return to my harmless but enjoyable flirtation. Business as usual.

“Your seven-twenty is looking good,” Xander remarks as I pop out of the bowl and roll to a stop next to him, rescuing me from the thoughts in my

head.

“Thanks. I worked on it while you were gone.” As a tall man, spinning two full circles in the air isn’t the easiest trick to land. Unlimited use of Xander’s pool helped me figure it out. “You know, you still haven’t told me how my favorite half of the egg is doing after your little trip to Sweden.”

“Am I supposed to know what that means?” Xander squints at me.

“One egg, two people, duh.”

“You know boy/girl twins don’t come from the same egg, right?”

“I wasn’t referring to Niko, I was referring to me.” Niko may be his sister's biological twin, but I’m her twin in spirit. “Clearly, Anna and I are the same person in two different bodies. Ergo, half of my egg. Usually, people will be polite and call the other person the better half, but we all know that’s me so to spare her feelings we’ll share the title.”

Xander shakes his head the way he always does when my word vomit frustrates him. “You and Anna both have limited filters and like dicks. I’m pretty sure that’s where the similarities end.”

“Those similarities connect us in a way you can’t possibly understand. She’s my literal soul sister. No one gets me like she does.”

“You met her once.”

“And we bonded instantly. If she had a dick I’d have already proposed. Since she doesn't, I'll settle with her being my best bitch for life.”

Xander visibly shudders—my work here is complete—and changes the subject. “Moving on from that terrifying thought, why does Noah keep glancing at you and looking away like he got caught doing something wrong?”

*Why indeed?*

I can’t admit it’s probably a freak out over whether people will know

another man has held his cock just by looking at him, which pretty much every guy wonders after their first gay experience. Spoiler alert- there's no such thing as flashing neon sign or arrow over your head claiming you like dick.

“He's probably worried I'll fall.”

“Sorry, what?” The whites of Xander's eyes are suddenly very prominent. “Why would he be worried about that?”

“I didn't know he was here the last time I used the pool, and it freaked me the fuck out when he started clapping, which Niko apparently told him to do, by the way. I fell off the board and hit my head. No biggie with the helmet on, but I think it scared him. The big guy probably felt guilty.”

“Oh shit,” Xander groans.

“What?”

“Noah's like the caretaker of the whole team. It's literally part of his DNA to look out for people.”

“So?”

“So, if he felt responsible for you falling, he'd stick around to make sure you're okay, which would give you an opportunity to be...*you*. And with no one around to reel you in... What'd you do to him?”

*Wow Xander's eyes can get dark fast.*

“Nothing.”

“What'd you do *with* him, then?”

Xander's fishing for information I'd normally boast about if my escapade had been with an unknown party, but it's not my place to tell anyone about the things Noah's questioning, or the role I've played to help him figure things out.

“I would think that'd be obvious,” I scoff. “After all, a man that size likely

has an equally sizeable dick, and if I'd been lucky enough to have it in me, I doubt I'd be able to skate flawlessly."

"You're telling me you didn't try to fuck him while he was feeling guilty for making you fall?"

This is probably where I should say Noah's been crashing with me, so it doesn't look like I'm trying to hide anything. I don't, but it doesn't dismiss the fact I should. Since we drove separately—he needed to swing by his place first—there isn't a reason to volunteer that information. I won't deny it if it comes up, but I'm happy to leave that detail out since it'll only make Xander more suspicious of what I may or may not have gotten up to with the big guy.

"I'm always trying to fuck him, but to date, my cock hasn't met his ass. Or vice versa. Happy?" Sadly, it's not a lie.

"Yes, actually."

"Rude," I gasp. "You know, you could be my wingman on this the same way I helped you with your hockey god."

"First, you didn't play wingman. You just gave advice when I needed it. Second, Niko isn't and has never been straight. The situations are totally different."

They're not as different as he thinks, as far as the straight part goes anyway, but I'd never say that without Noah's permission. Even if Xander would understand and be supportive, it's not something I have the right to do.

"Fine. Ignore the fact I arranged for Niko to be your DD, which led to the driving lessons, which led to the hottest sex you've ever had. I'll wear Noah down on my own."

"I'm not encouraging that, but since he keeps looking at you, maybe we should take a break from skating. The team would never forgive us if their star goalie has a heart attack because you fell off your board."

“I only fell because he startled me.” My pride demands I save face. “But if you want to take a break we can.”

When we reach the other side of the pool, Xander sits between Niko’s legs on the lounge and reclines against him—their PDA game has no shame—while I take a seat at the foot of Noah’s because there’s literally nowhere else left. And everyone is used to me trying to get close to him, though I don’t actually help myself to his lap the way Xander does to Niko.

“I still can’t believe there’s no water in that pool.” Luca glances at the cement hole in the ground and shakes his head longingly.

“I wouldn’t swim in it even if there was. It’d be full of their jizz.” I grab a water from the cooler and start chugging.

“They make chemicals for that,” Niko says.

“They make jizz eliminating chemicals? Damn, whoever came up with that must be making bank. I bet they sell that shit in gallons instead of ounces.”

“You don’t need a pool,” Justus says. “You need a hot tub.”

“In this heat?” Luca balks.

“No, for the winter. How nice would it be to soak in a hot tub after a game.”

“Better than an ice bath.” Noah shivers.

“Those ice baths are why you’re still the starting goalie at your age.” Luca reaches over and smacks his arm.

“I’m only two years older than you.”

“But you’re falling apart faster.”

“Goaltending is hard on the knees,” Noah mutters while Luca smirks.

“It’s bad enough camp starts Monday. Let’s not make it worse with talk about ice baths,” Niko groans.

“Weren’t you just talking about how you missed the ice last time I was here?” Noah asks him.

“Yes, but I miss it in an ‘*it’d be fun to coast around the rink and take a few shots way*’ not a ‘*bust your ass till you drop*’ way.”

“You only drop if you’re out of shape,” Luca sniggers.

“I just got back from visiting my family for several weeks, of course I’m out of shape.”

“Does your mom cook all your favorite childhood foods and guilt you if you don’t eat them too?” Justus asks.

“No, I just didn’t exercise.”

“Except for fucking,” I quip as Luca snorts.

“Why are you making us out to be sex-crazed?” Xander asks me.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It’s not all we do.”

“Doesn’t being in a relationship mean you get to fuck regularly? I would’ve thought that’s the biggest perk.” I look around the group for confirmation.

“It’s the only perk.” Luca nods in agreement. “Except for the fact you only get to bang that one person.”

“What’s wrong with only banging one person?” Justus asks.

“Nothing if that’s what you’re into. I like variety, which is why road games are my favorite,” Luca says.

“I’m honestly shocked at how much women adore you when you’re blatantly with a different one all the time,” Niko tells Luca.

“Puck bunny culture is weird, but my God, it’s a wonderful thing.” Luca smiles dreamily.

The look on his face gives me an idea. “The gay crowd needs to get in on that. We could be the puck bucks and we could offer a special welcome to all the visiting teams.”

“A buck?” Justus frowns.

“I mean we could go with puck butts, though that seems a little crass to me.”

Xander snorts. “*You’re* worried about being crass?”

“Not particularly, but bunny has a touch of class to it and gay men deserve the same, even if we are just looking for big hockey sticks.”

“Isn’t a phrase for gay hockey chasers futile since there’s only one gay player in the league and he’s spoken for?” Luca asks me.

“Only one that we *know* of. I bet there are more thinking about following Niko’s lead. If we build it, they will come. Pun intended.”

Niko chokes on a laugh, causing Xander to warn, “Don’t encourage him.”

“I can’t help it, that was funny,” Niko whines, clamping his lips together to contain himself.

“If Tripp was kidding, yes, it’d be funny. But he’s not. Don’t give him any more family passes or he’ll hover by the locker room trying to pick up members of the other team.”

Luca shrugs. “Who cares. If there are any gay players out there, they might appreciate bumping into Tripp after the game.”

“No. Bad idea.” Though Noah’s voice is level, the steely set of his jaw tells me he’s pissed. *What’s that about?*

“What? Why?” Luca gives his teammate a confused look.

“He can’t sleep with the competition.”

“Why not?” Justus asks.

“Because he’s not some random guy whose hookups won’t impact us.”

Niko scratches his head as he squints at Noah. “I’m not really following you, buddy. None of us have a say where our friends stick their dicks.”

“What if he hooked up with Blaise?” Noah asks his teammates.

“That douchebag on the Rockets?” Luca’s smile quickly morphs to a frown.

“Blaise is gay?” Justus looks around, confused.

“I’m just picking him as an example,” Noah says. “Would any of us be okay with Tripp hooking up with him? Or any of the assholes in the league like him?”

“That’s a good point.” Luca chews on his lip.

“How is that a good point?” I ask.

“If he’s as big a turd to you off the ice as he is to us on it, we’d probably end up fighting with him,” Niko responds. “Best case that’s just a penalty, worst an ejection and a fine.”

“So, your hockey season comes before my sex life?” I narrow my eyes in Niko’s direction.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Cock blockers,” I mutter, though I’m not nearly as disappointed as I should be to learn my friendship with the local hockey gods won’t pave the way for me to sample more of them.

## Chapter 11 – Noah

The short drive to Tripp's place didn't take the edge off, so I'm still vibrating when I walk in the door. On some level that worries me—I always shrug off my anger before it festers, even on the ice—yet more than an hour later Tripp's puck buck comments still aren't sitting right.

“Puck bucks, seriously?” I ask as soon as we're in the door.

Tripp tosses his keys on the entry table. “You're right. It doesn't have the same classy ring as *bunny*. What about puck buddies?”

That answer only frustrates me more. “Is it really that important to you to score with one of us?”

He gives me a bemused once-over as he takes a seat on the couch. “I don't have a bingo card I'm trying to fill with sexual escapades if that's what you're asking. although, I probably should cause that'd be hot as fuck.”

Still rooted by the door, I cross my arms in front of my chest. “Wow... Okay.”

“What's wrong with sexual freedom?”

“Why the fixation on hockey players?”

“I'm not fixated on them, I just happen to like the idea of people having sex unapologetically. Like puck bunnies.”

I feel like I'm glaring, though I can't seem to relax my face. “Don't you do that already? Why would you need a fancy name and mission to chase after hockey players?”

“I wouldn't.” He stares right back, head cocked to the side. “What's this really about? I just told you I like the balls on those bunnies. I think gay men

should have sex as unabashedly as they do. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing." I drop my arms and stalk toward the couch, dropping heavily onto the opposite end.

"Then why are you upset?"

"I don't know, maybe because you're talking about picking up other players while you're hooking up with me." It's not until the words are out of my mouth that I realize their implication. *Oh shit, am I jealous?*

A coy little smirk creeps across his face, like he's privy to some secret I'm not. "I said gay men should take a page out of the puck bunny playbook. I didn't suggest that I planned to pick up anyone. The other guys just assumed I meant me."

My mouth drops open in protest though no words come out. I would've sworn he said he wanted to pick up visiting players, but my memory can't definitively put those words in his mouth.

Tripp arches a knowing brow, and I hate that I notice how attractive that makes him look. "You thought I was trying to find a new hockey god while I've been hooking up with you?"

"I...well..." A second ago, I was convinced that was his intent, but as I struggle to justify my thoughts the playful glint in his eye fades, leaving him looking almost wounded.

"I'm a lot of things, Noah Tremblay, but I'm not that big of an asshole. I am a little confused though. You don't want me chasing anyone else, but you also didn't tell your friends you're staying here. Does that mean you don't want them to know what we've been doing the last few days?"

Until just now, my mother was the only person to reprimand me using my full name, and it has the same effect, making me feel both ashamed and defensive. "I don't care if they know," I tell the floor.

“Are you sure about that? A few days ago, you were convinced you were asexual, and before that you thought you were straight. Now you’re into men, something you didn’t admit when you had the chance.”

“It’s not okay to be confused?” I wring my hands together to keep them from shaking, whether from anger or insecurity, I’m not sure.

“I didn’t say that.” Tripp shakes his head while pursing his lips.

“I’m not afraid of being attracted to another man.” I’m afraid of being broken, of not understanding who I am, but not of how attracted I am to Tripp.

“I believe you. That doesn’t mean you’re ready for your friends to know, or that you even know what to tell them.”

“What does that mean?” I find the nerve to look at him, a strange combination of patience and wariness on his face.

“Are you gay, bi, pan, something else? Do you like all men or just me? If you like men, are you a top or bottom?”

I lick my lips nervously. “No one is going to ask if I top or bottom.”

“Not a reporter, but anyone you hook up with will. And you don’t know the answer.”

“Then help me figure it out! Fuck me.” I point my finger at my chest. “Maybe then I’ll know.”

Based on Tripp’s frozen expression, the desperation in my voice surprises him as much as me. I only hope it’s a good sort of surprise, because now that I’ve said it out loud, it doesn’t sound like a bad idea. It sounds...*right*.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” Tripp sighs, “but I think we should just chill tonight. Dicks in our pants.”

“You don’t want to have sex?” I nearly choke on the words, my shock making it hard to breathe. In my wildest dreams Tripp never said no to a

request to fuck, yet he's still sitting on the other side of the couch, not even attempting to undress the way I expected he would.

Tripp shakes his head slowly back and forth. "I always want to have sex, but just sex. No relationship stuff. No *feelings*. I don't want to blur the lines."

*Blur the... Where is this coming from?*

"The only thing that's blurry is you told me how much you want to fuck me, said you wanted to help me figure out if I like guys, and now that we know I do you're backing off. What's changed? Just last night, you were insanely proud to get me off. Now, you're not bragging about doing it again? Why?" I hate the anguish in my voice, yet I can't seem to hold it back. These past few days are the only ones in recent memory when my body didn't betray me during intimate moments, something Tripp's guidance and patience were instrumental in, and the thought of losing that so soon after I found it is terrifying.

"I *am* proud I got you off when no one else could, and I do want to do it again." His voice is disturbingly level, like he thinks a calm tone will calm me. "But you were upset thinking about me with someone else earlier, and that should be a red flag for both of us."

Okay, I admit the thought of Tripp with anyone else set me off. Though, I think that was on principle, not because I want to have a claim on him. *Isn't it?*

"You have a problem with monogamy?" I ask.

"I have a problem with relationships. I don't do them. And you shouldn't do them with the first guy you experiment with. If you want to fuck around no strings attached, I'm your man. I'll even go as far as agreeing to hook up with only you while you explore this if it makes you feel better. But only if

you agree this is strictly a fuck buddy thing. I'm too selfish for a relationship and you're too vulnerable for one."

"Confused isn't the same as vulnerable."

"No, but they do tend to go hand in hand." Tripp runs his fingers through his artfully mussed hair, which only makes it look better. "Look, I think you should figure out what you want from me. If it's just to explore being with a man, I'm all in. If you think it might be something else, something where you don't like the idea of me being with other people when this is over, we shouldn't take it any further."

Though I know his words are meant to protect me, they hurt more than help. Tripp is the first person—the only person—I've confided in about my sexuality, and the thought of losing that terrifies me. So does the idea of experimenting with another man. But if I'm being honest with myself, I know he makes a valid point about the repercussions. I've already questioned whether it's all men or just Tripp I respond to, and if taking things further could ruin the friendship we have, that may be worse than never figuring myself out. After all, at least now I have someone I can talk with openly.

Sighing heavily, I nod my head. "Yeah, okay. I'll think about it."

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The first day of training never fails to kick my ass, no matter how good of shape I think I'm in. Lungs burning, muscles shaking from the strain they're under, I pump my arms and legs until I cross the line with the rest of my teammates, locking my hands behind my head to catch my breath before we have to line up for the next sprint.

Though it all worked out in the end, as a kid I thought goalies would escape the dreaded wind sprints, so I eagerly signed up. That little misconception led to a great career considering I'm far better at blocking shots than I am at

taking them, but it's hard to be grateful for that when my legs feel like jelly. I've been doing this long enough to know my body won't hate me as much in a week. Still, I'm still a little bitter that my off-season discipline isn't paying off right now.

"Fuck this heat, man." Luca wipes the sweat from his brow. "You need to fill that pool with water, Niko."

"You're the one with the movie room, and the game room, and about a dozen other rooms you don't need but still have. Don't tell me you can't afford a pool," he retorts.

"Of course, I can, but why would I go through the trouble of building it when I could just use yours?"

"Except you can't use his," Justus says as Coach shouts at us to line up again.

He blows the whistle, and we take off, running as fast as we can. Thanks to my long stride I don't come in last, but I'm not as close to first as I used to be. Luckily, my job doesn't require me to skate up and down the rink, which means being a little slower isn't the end of the world as long as my reflexes are solid.

Once we're done with sprints people trickle off, but I hang back to do my stretches. Since I squat so much during a game, I'm more likely to get hip or groin injuries than my teammates, and either one could end my season, especially for a player over thirty. Luca won't admit it, but he's in the same boat, so he lingers with me.

"How do you think we're looking?" he asks, same as he does every year.

Though we're nearly the same age, and co-captains, he's always looked at me as the leader, probably because I have the more level head. "When have I ever been able to answer that on the first day?"

“Humor me.”

“The hunger is there. Making it to the playoffs and getting knocked out in the first round is a good driving force.” I drop to my back and pull my right leg toward me to stretch my hamstring.

“Our sprints were a little sluggish.” He mirrors me as I switch to the other leg.

“It’s day one. If we still look like this on day five, I’ll worry.”

“Fair enough.”

I drop into the splits to stretch my groin, and out of nowhere I’m hit with the memory of Tripp spreading his legs wide that first night, giving me an unobstructed view of his hand sliding over his cock. I enjoyed that encounter far more than I expected to, enough that I’d like to repeat it, but can I do that without developing feelings? I’m not usually a casual sex guy, but I also haven’t tried it. And with my demanding hockey schedule, chances are, casual is the only option.

“Earth to Noah. I asked what you thought about the rookies,” Luca says.

“Sorry, I was distracted.” I press my hips lower to deepen the stretch.

“I got that. Where were you just now?”

I’ve never had to ask Luca for advice, personal or otherwise, and I’m not sure how comfortable I am doing it now. At the same time, the only other person I could talk to is Tripp, and since this is about him that’s not an option.

“Is it possible to sleep with someone without developing feelings for them?”

Luca lets his leg crash back to the ground as he sits up to face me. “I thought you preferred to only sleep with people you have feelings for.”

“I thought so, too,” I mumble as I revisit my past partners, most of which I

was dating when we slept together.

“Not anymore?” When I don’t answer, a sly grin spreads across his face. “Okay first, it’s about fucking time you have some fun, so hell yeah. And second, you see me do it all the time. Of course, it’s possible.”

“I see you hook up with different puck bunnies. Maybe a few of them are repeats, but you don’t have a regular...*arrangement*.” I swing my legs in front of me and press the soles of my feet together like a butterfly to get my inner thigh.

“Are you talking a friends with benefits thing or a fuck buddy thing?” Luca runs a hand through his hair, pushing the sweaty strands away from his eyes.

“There’s a difference?”

“Of course. Friends with benefits is someone you’re already friends with and you add sex to the mix. Fuck buddies is someone you just see for sex. So, which situation are we dealing with?”

While I follow that logic, it doesn’t make things any clearer. “It could go either way I think. We sometimes bump into each other socially, so I’m tempted to say friends, but we’ve never made a deliberate attempt to make plans or anything.” Unless you count Tripp extending the invite to stay at his house, but even that came about through a fluke meeting.

“So, this is more like a friend of a friend that you’re attracted to?”

I shift into a low lunge to stretch my hip flexors as I roll that idea around. “I guess you can say that, yeah.”

“Okay, that makes it easy. As long as you don’t get together without your mutual friend—unless it’s for sex—you’ve got the perfect fuck buddy setup. And yeah, I think it’s possible to have that without catching feelings since you’d only need each other for the physical release, not like grabbing a drink together or anything.”

He makes it sound so simple, when the reality is the fact that I'm staying with Tripp could blur the lines a bit. Although, I've only got one night left before I can move back into my place, and after that, things could go back to the way they were. We see each other only when there's a group event, unless we meet up strictly for sex. That seems a little cold and impersonal to me, but I think I'd rather go that route than try to explore this with anyone else. After all, Tripp's the one who helped me open this door, and I already know I can trust him to be honest and patient and even encouraging.

"Hey, I lost you again," Luca interrupts my thoughts. "Are you gonna get yourself a fuck buddy?"

While this conversation didn't go the way I expected, it did end up helping. "Yeah, I think I am."

## Chapter 12 – Tripp

I turned down sex. *With Thor*. A hockey god I've wanted to defile since the first time I saw him, yet when he begged me to do it, I said no. *Who am I right now?*

Noah's emotional state should be none of my concern. He's a hookup, not a boyfriend. It's neither my job nor my place to make him think twice about asking for sex. I should've just bent over and dropped my pants. Let him fuck me to his little heart's content. And if he turned that into something more than just a good time... Not my problem, right?

That's how these things usually go. You screw around, you go your separate ways, end of story. Yeah, having mutual friends complicates matters, which is why I've made some concessions for him I wouldn't make for a random stranger, like lots and lots of talking. But telling him to think on it instead of falling onto his dick when he pleaded for me to... I don't recognize myself right now, and that's a little scary.

I don't want to make changes for Noah. I don't like what that implies—that he's special—or means something to me. And while I genuinely like the big guy, I can't let whatever this is become more than platonic. I can't let him in. Not even Xander has achieved that.

My best friend thinks he has, and he's come closer than anyone to scaling the walls I've put up. But he hasn't reached the top, hasn't realized that I overshare about everything that *doesn't* matter, and lock down everything that *does*.

I'm in a good place right now, and I only got here because I didn't set myself up for failure. I didn't allow anyone to get close enough to hurt me. Mostly. Sometimes I worry I'm too close to Xander, but I think my obnoxious tendencies are just annoying enough to keep him at arm's length. I'm not sure the same can be said for Noah, though. That's precisely why I should stop making concessions for him, mutual friends be damned.

He's sexy as sin and I want a piece of that. So, if he asks again, I'll give him what he wants, and he can figure the rest out himself.

Yup, that's the plan. No more saying no.

God, I hope he asks again. When he gets home in like, two hours. *Fuck that's an eternity. I've gotta burn off some energy.*

I turn on the PlayStation and pull up Rainbow Six Siege, my go-to game when I'm restless. Since I've been playing for well over a decade, I'm not half bad, and I easily fall into the digital world, blasting the enemy and talking shit with the other avatars who make up my team.

Shooting imaginary bad guys is cathartic in its own twisted way. An outlet to expel the feelings I don't share with anyone. My parents used to hate that I could get so lost on the screen. Even today, I feel an extra little jolt of satisfaction knowing I'm doing something they'd hate, despite the fact they'll never know, and undoubtedly couldn't care less. That probably bears some analysis, but I like my petty revenge.

I'm so absorbed, I don't even realize the time until Noah plops onto the couch next to me with a timid, "Hey."

I mute my game mic and nod. "Hey yourself. How was practice?"

"Tiring, but good." He runs his hands over his thighs, whether from nerves or because they hurt after practice, I'm not sure. Regardless, it makes it damn

hard to block the memory of sitting on those beauties while we jerked off. “So, I thought about it, and I’m good. With what you said.”

I assume he’s referring to the sex with no strings rule, and the pang of anxiety I’ve felt weighing on my chest lifts. The sheer relief of it causes me to lose focus and blast my own teammate *dammit*. I shouldn’t be so invested in him, but I desperately want him to say he’s down to fuck.

“Good?” I arch my brow in his direction while battling soldiers on the screen, trying to act indifferent.

“Uh, to be fuck buddies.”

My cock instantly perks up, excited that he’s on board. “Fuck buddies, huh? Is that what we’re calling it?” I bite my lip and waggle my eyebrows to see if I can get him to blush. He doesn't disappoint.

“I mean, isn’t that what we’d be?”

“It is, but I like hearing you say it.” I shoot the last remaining soldier in the level and climb onto those thick thighs, facing the TV.

Noah holds his arms up like he’s been caught red handed. “Uh, what are you doing?”

“Foreplay.” I wink at him over my shoulder.

“This—What now?”

“I’ve still got two levels in this campaign, and I’m not taking the risk of you changing your mind.” I grind my ass over his lap, loving how it makes him inhale sharply. “So, *foreplay*. You just sit back and enjoy while I finish my game.” I turn my mic back on and tell the rest of my team I’m ready, rolling my hips in another circle while Noah’s hands fall limply to the cushions.

The level starts up with all of us on high alert, scoping out potential targets and shouting when we spot enemies. The tension of the game always makes

me wiggle, even when there isn't a hockey god underneath me, and now that there is... I'm playing dirty with the big guy, but the one constant so far is that he's never quite sure how his body is going to react to sexy times, so I'll use every trick in the book to help him get excited.

"On your left, T," a voice echoes in my ear, and instead of turning my head toward the threat I tuck my hips and lean my weight to the left, pressing my ass into the slight bulge underneath me. A sharp gasp tells me Noah enjoyed that, so I do it again for good measure.

"One o'clock, Captain," I tell my teammate, and our little group of soldiers move ahead on the screen. Thrusting my hips in a forward and back motion like I'm urging a horse forward, I earn myself a delicious moan from the beast underneath me, whose fists seem to be getting tighter and tighter by the second.

I give myself a mental pat on the back for being a creative genius and try to concentrate on the game—we're sort of kicking ass right now—while still keeping things interesting for my hockey god.

"Shoot him, *shoot him*," I shout to my teammate as the enemy tries to escape. My frantic bouncing pulls a series of soft grunts from deep in Noah's throat and his legs tense under mine. I twist my head just in time to see his head fall back on the cushions, and I slow my movements so I can put even more pressure on the hard ridge between his legs.

The entire level, I bump and grind and generally torment the man underneath me to a chorus of moans and groans and ragged breathing. Fuck, I love that I can feel how much he wants me, evident in the rigid length beneath me and the labored breath against my back. Honestly, my pride gets a bit of a kick out of it too, seeing as I'm now three for three as far as getting him worked up goes.

A tiny little voice in the back of my mind warns me that might not be a good thing. He may regard me as a fuck buddy now, but his caregiver personality makes me think casual isn't in his wheelhouse. Plus, there are still lots of questions about his sexuality, and if he's more pan or demi than bisexual, being an overachiever in the seduction department might backfire on me. It doesn't stop me from telling the voice to fuck right off, though. Surely, a few weeks of fun isn't pushing it. And I *really* want my fun before we go back to being friends of friends or whatever.

“Ooh, that was close,” I tell Noah as I mute my mic and press the pause button on my hips. “We lost half our team and almost didn't make it past that level.”

“So, you're done?” His voice is deliciously scratchy.

I take a peek at him over my shoulder, struggling to keep the victorious smile off my face when I see how tightly he's holding his jaw.

“Not yet, big guy.” I pat his chest before turning my attention back to the game. “One more level.”

“How long will that take?”

“Hard to say.” I play coy. “If we play well, thirty minutes or more. If we don't, it could all be over in five.”

I'm about to turn my mic back on when a strong arm wraps around my waist, hauling me up just enough that I'm weightless for about two seconds before a blast of cool air hits my semi-hard cock. “What are you doing?” I glance down to see Noah has shoved my athletic shorts down to my thighs.

“Making it so you don't play well.” He wraps a warm hand around me and starts gently kneading my dick, coaxing it to attention.

*So, wow. Delayed gratification makes Noah kind of assertive. I like it.*

“T, you there?” a voice crackles in my ear as I suppress an unexpected

tremor.

Turning the mic on, I croak, "I'm here."

"They're trying to flank us. Hold your position."

"Yeah, sure. *Ungh.*" I switch the mic off to conceal my groan as Noah cups my sac, tugging it gently before rolling my balls in his palm.

"Easy there, big guy. I need to concentrate." I grit as I maneuver my avatar to face the oncoming attack.

"I'm not stopping you." Noah presses my balls into the base of my shaft, giving them a final squeeze before they slip from his hand as he wraps it around my length.

"This is a serious game," I scold even as my hips try to chase his hand. "It's the final level."

"Okay." He gives me a few languid strokes before clutching the tip in his firm hold, sending an unexpected jolt through my body as my eyelids grow heavy with lust.

Curses ring through my headset, snapping my focus back to the game. "Dammit, I just killed my teammate."

"That sucks." Noah massages away the sting with more soft strokes, then grips me hard and gives my junk a strong tug, sending carnal little sparks of desire ping-ponging from root to tip.

"You don't even understand how shitty that is, do you?" My ass clenches as he circles his thumb over the crown.

"Nope."

"Team killing people is a big deal. You can get kicked out of the group," I rant even as I rock my pelvis forward to spear my dick through his fist. "It's like stepping out of the goal and letting the other team take a free shot."

"Sounds like maybe you should keep your dick in your pants while you're

playing then.” He releases me from his grip—I totally don’t groan in frustration when he does, it’s because I nearly killed my own guy again thank you very much—and cups my sac.

“I’m not the one who took it out.” I grind down on his lap to take back some control, which is short-lived since it makes his fingers graze my hole, and I shoot Ted. *He’s never going to forgive me for that.*

“What the fuck, T. Get your head in the game.”

I turn the mic on long enough to choke out, “My bad,” and shut it off before I moan.

“Sounds like you’re having trouble concentrating.” Noah slides his big hand up my length, closing it in his fist as he starts to pump. Leisurely at first, feather-light strokes that seem to be more about him learning my body than getting me aroused. Then tighter, faster, as if he wants to see how rough I can take it—what will make me moan the loudest.

Soft and gentle, hard and furious, he alternates between the two with zero warning. Noah’s either a natural at hand jobs or so clueless he doesn’t realize he’s edging me. Either way, it’s damn near impossible to keep my eyes on the game instead of the giant paw holding my swollen cock.

This is not what I had in mind when I suggested foreplay. I thought I’d rub my ass over his covered junk for a minute—or thirty—to get him in the mood. A little friction, a little pressure, nothing that would get him so riled he’d turn desperate. And I definitely didn’t expect him to be so needy he’d pull me out to play. I’m not complaining.

Admittedly, trying to keep my head clear enough to play video games while getting jacked off is kinda hot, but I thought I’d be the one teasing him. Instead, I currently resemble a puddle of goo on his lap... whimpering each

time he changes his rhythm and robs me of the explosive release building in my balls.

“Am I distracting you?” he growls from behind me as he swirls my precum around my crown.

“Like you could keep your eye on the puck with my hand on your dick,” I scoff as I—*finally*—kill a bad guy.

“I can try. Got any hockey video games?”

“Who are you, and what have you done with confused, timid Noah?” I lean back against his chest, partly to see if my eyes will focus better on the game with a little more distance, but mostly to give him more room to maneuver. He’s worked my cock into a steel pipe, and even though I’m sitting down, I’m struggling to hold myself upright.

“I don’t feel confused anymore.”

“So, what are you? Gay, bi, pan?” I use his body for leverage as I thrust into his fist.

Noah’s chest shakes with a soft chuckle. “I’m still confused about that. I mean I’m not confused about being into you.”

Despite the fear that comment ignites, it takes all the strength I possess to stop rutting into his hand. “What about me?”

“You know...what I want.” He pumps me again, twisting his wrist at the top. “And I want to fuck you. Or get fucked by you. I want to find out what I like, and I trust you to help me with that.”

The warning bell pings inside my head. There were a lot of you’s—aka me’s—in that comment, and being comfortable with me probably isn’t too far a leap from developing feelings. The logical part of my brain, which doesn’t come out often but is still there, knows this. However, Noah’s playing with my cock like it’s his new favorite toy, and I really, *really* like that.

“T, look out.”

My eyes find the screen just in time to see my avatar drop to the ground. Game over. *Fucking finally.*

I leap off Noah’s lap, kicking off my shorts and ripping my shirt over my head as I spin to face him. I’m so frantic to get naked it’s a miracle I don’t trip over my own feet. Grabbing my junk, I start pumping. Noah’s hungry, blue eyes grow wide, but other than that he doesn’t move a muscle.

“Foreplays over, big guy. You’ve got about thirty seconds to get your cock inside me.”

Rather than rush to get undressed with me, he stays utterly still and opens his mouth, causing me knees to damn near buckle.

“Is that supposed to be an invitation?” I ask, sounding breathless.

“Isn’t that obvious?” He cocks his head to the side in that adorably innocent way of his. *Adorably innocent? Jesus the need to come must be scrambling my brain.*

“You better shut that mouth before I shove my dick in it because I’m in a fuck your face state of mind and you’ve never sucked a cock before.” A wave of regret washes over me the moment the warning is out, hanging in the air between us. I probably could’ve been nicer, but I don’t think he understands the state he’s worked me into.

“I can take it.”

“Not sure you can, champ. I plan to stick my cock in your mouth repeatedly, but it’d be a bad idea to force feed it to you now and have you tell me you don’t like it.” I squeeze the base of my shaft, trying like hell to keep myself from plunging over the edge.

“Put it in my mouth, Tripp.”

“I’ll come.” Hell, I almost came from that growly order alone. “You don’t

want me to do that during your first time.”

“Why not? You recover fast.”

“Oh, fuck it.” I take the challenge, closing the distance between us and guiding my dick between his parted lips. With shallow thrusts—*look at me exercising control*—I rub the tip over the flat of his tongue, hoping the gentle strokes will both get him used to my girth and satisfy my need for friction without tipping me over the edge. It sort of works, until he closes those plump pink lips over my crown and sucks softly.

“Holy *fuuuccckk*.” My groan is guttural, desperate even. A sound I didn’t know I was capable of until now. Every muscle in my body vibrates with raw need that I’m struggling to contain as a shudder rakes through me. It starts at the base of my spine and pulses through my limbs, and the tremor catches Noah’s attention. His big blue eyes flick curiously to mine, and somehow, I just know he’s asking for guidance.

“Look at you...,” I mumble as I thread my fingers through his silky hair, caressing his scalp with far too gentle a touch. “Swirl your tongue around the tip and give it another good suck. Use your hands if you want. Play with my balls or hold the shaft so I don’t thrust too deep.”

He pulls away and looks at me quizzically. “Isn’t that the point? I thought you were going to fuck my face.”

“Trust me when I say we need to work up to that.” I push in, gnashing my teeth together to keep my hips from spearing further into his slippery, wet heat, or pulling violently on his hair. And somehow, despite a lifetime of evidence that hard and fast and dirty is my jam, I manage to keep myself mostly still while Noah maps me with his tongue.

Licking up one side of my shaft and down the other, sucking my balls into his mouth, slurping me like a straw, the man is enthusiastic in his exploration.

Lips and tongue and fingers work together to investigate every inch of my cock. And by investigate, I mean full-on explore, leaving no stone unturned. You'd think a thirty-something guy giving his first blow job would be hesitant or...neat. Not Noah. He's flat out sloppy, so immersed in the experience he's practically drooling on my cock, and... Damn. I am *here* for it.

His enthusiasm is possibly the hottest thing I've ever seen, which makes it an epic feat for me not to go feral on him. My body literally aches from the effort of holding back. It's only because it's erotic as hell to be the object of such thorough intensity that I manage. Especially, with him fully-clothed while I'm butt-ass naked in my living room.

I bet we look absolutely filthy like this, and while I've never done the filming thing—kind of a shocker since I work in video production—I feel like this would do well on Only Fans. Not that I'm looking for a career change, but seriously, a naked guy getting blown by a fully clothed Norse God would rack up the views. It'd make me blow, for sure.

On that note...

“Pull your dick out, big guy.”

Noah wipes saliva off his swollen lips when I step out of reach. *Why is that hot?*

I pull at the fabric covering his chest. “Shirt off, too. You're gonna fuck your first man.”

He gapes at me, wide eyes blinking in rapid succession, for about three seconds before he whips his shirt off and fumbles with his shorts, shoving them down just enough that his thick cock slaps against his stomach when it springs free.

“God, I love that sound,” I muse, grabbing lube and a condom from the

drawer in the coffee table. Without wasting a second, I kneel between his legs, which can only spread so wide trapped in his shorts. “FYI, I’m clean. I got tested after my last encounter.” I lick a path from root to tip, loving how he tries to chase after my mouth. “And I’m guessing you are too since you haven’t been with anyone in a while. So,” I hold up the condom, “your call. Want to wrap up or not?”

I mentally slap myself for making the offer—I never go bare—but I sort of want to rock his world, and while he doesn’t need to be bare for me to do that, I kind of don’t want to cover up when it’s my turn, so it’s only fair to offer.

“Have you ever gone without?”

The truth might make it seem like he falls into one of those ‘concessions’ categories again, which I don’t want. But I want to feel that beautiful cock raw more than I want my fortified walls. “No. I’ve always wanted to, though, if I thought it’d be safe.”

“If we don’t need it, I’m good.” He tips his head toward the hand holding the condom. I toss it aside with a wicked grin and squirt a glob of lube into my palm to coat his dick.

He flinches from the cold, muscles tensing gloriously beneath his skin. After a moment, he relaxes into the couch as the friction from my hand warms him up. When he’s nice and slippery, and *glistening* I straddle him and line him up to my hole.

“Don’t you have to stretch first, or something?” His brow furrows with concern, blue eyes wary.

“I’ll take it slow for your first time.” He doesn’t need to know that my recent dry spell doesn’t extend to my dildo, or that I used it as recently as last night.

Holding my breath, I sink lower. The big guy didn't get his nickname as a means to boost his ego, it's obnoxiously accurate on all accords. I force my body to relax as I take him inside me, exhaling deeply as he breaches the tight ring of muscle, and groaning with relief when I feel the fullness inside me. "Shit that's good. Still with me, champ?"

Noah's eyes are squeezed shut, jaw locked so tight he almost looks like he's in pain. For a quick second, I wonder if he is, and whether that pain is physical or mental. Sure, he talked a good game about being okay with his attraction to another man, but when it comes to actually fucking one—maybe he isn't as ready for this as he thought.

I'm about to freak out, believing I've overestimated his comfort level, when he finally exhales, whispering, "So tight. God, I... Jesus that's the tightest thing I've ever felt."

"Yeah?" There's no disguising the pride in my voice as I start to rock my hips forward, only to have him clamp his hands on my thighs, *hard*.

"Don't move. Not yet."

"You're killing me, big guy. I'd say going mid-fuck would be kind of the perfect end, but it'd be a tragedy not to bust this nut after you worked it into this state."

"I want to last longer than a few pumps. I want you to enjoy it."

Prying his hand off my leg, I wrap it around my now angry-red length. "Does it feel like I'm not enjoying this?"

Noah flexes and squeezes his fingers, then gives me a slow, firm stroke. "No."

"Okay, good. Now..." I rock my hips slowly, warming him up for what comes next. "I'm gonna ride this fat cock of yours, hard and fast, and the only thing I want you to do is feel it. Get lost in it."

“I don’t want to finish before you.” A glimmer of worry flickers over those baby blues.

“Jack me off when you get close, and I won’t be far behind.” I’m doing it again. Making concessions, spending way too much time making sure his mind is at ease. Caring. I guess that’s okay since it’s his first time, but I can’t make a habit of it.

Noah gives me a terse nod, and I rise up until only his tip is buried inside me before slamming down. His head falls back on the couch with a garbled moan while I take a second to catch my breath—I don’t think I’ve ever felt so full. Then I’m off, riding him like a man possessed because, let’s face it, at this point I probably am.

The clapping of skin echoes around us as I bounce up and down, my heavy cock banging against his abs each time I bottom out. Noah tries to lift his head to watch, but loses the battle, incapable of holding it upright, mumbling a string of curses and moans as I give him a proper fucking.

My thighs, which were already pushed to their limit trying to hold still while he blew me, quiver and shake from the effort of holding my weight. I’ll feel that later, but I don’t give a shit. The absolute euphoria I feel right now will be worth the discomfort later.

It’s cliché—and I’ll deny thinking it as soon as we’re done—but he fits in my body like he was made for it. He’s wide enough that he stretches me without causing pain, just an intense pressure deep inside. And the way his shaft presses against my prostate... I swear my vision goes a little hazy each time he pegs it. My eyelids are almost too heavy to hold open, so I basically can’t see anything. I just writhe on his lap, chasing the orgasm I have no doubt will be epic as his moans spur me on.

“Tripp. Jesus, *fuck*... I” He wraps his big paw around my dick and starts

pumping frantically. It's my signal that he's close, and thank God because my balls are ready to burst.

Upping my tempo—apparently, having Noah's hand on my dick throws me into a higher gear I didn't know existed—I slam my body rhythmically onto his. My panting and groaning hits higher pitches like I'm the star of a cheesy porno. I try to hold it in, but the countdown has started. Liftoff is imminent. And when the hockey god underneath me goes rigid with an animalistic growl of his own, I explode.

My hole clenches around the rod pulsing inside me, my dick shuddering violently inside Noah's palm as my balls unload. A rush of warm liquid fills me, causing more tremors to ripple through my body as the one underneath me twitches and trembles through its own release.

Chest heaving, tendons straining, lips still swollen from their earlier workout, sated Noah is a vision. A wet dream come to life. I want to massage the hard curve of his shoulder, trace the peaks and valleys of his muscles, brush my thumb along his square jaw. But that's not how fuck buddies work.

I can admire during sex, not after. Never after. That's how things go from sex to something more, and I don't do more.

“Still with me, big guy, or did you blow your mind with your load?” I give his nipple a gentle pinch to get his attention.

“That...” His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. “I don't think I've felt anything so intense in my life.”

“That's just the beginning. Wait until I introduce you to your prostate.” I start to lift off him, pausing when he grabs my hand.

“Thank you.”

*Whoa, not good. I wanted to rock his world, and mine, not make him feel grateful.*

“First rule of fuck buddies, there’s no need to be polite. For example, a good host should give you dibs on the first shower since I went first last time.” This time I do lift all the way off his lap. “But I’m the one with cum dripping out of his ass so I call dibs again. I promise to be quick though.” I grab my clothes and jog upstairs, hoping he makes his way to his room before I come back down.

## Chapter 13 -Noah

It's only because of muscle memory that the puck doesn't slip between my legs.

One minute, the other team is working it around our end of the rink, the next, gravity is pulling me to the ice, and I feel it hit my pads. The ones in my shorts instead of the ones on my knees, meaning I just barely stopped its trajectory.

The puck is so buried, no one else knows where it is. All they know is there's no goal since the flashing light isn't going off, but like sharks swimming in chum, players sense its presence, hovering over me to see if there's an opening to get their stick on it. It's not until the ref whistles for a faceoff that I rise and reveal it.

People will praise me for being in good position or claim that my lightning quick reflexes enabled me to make the save, and while there's some truth to that, it's more accurate to say dumb luck stopped that puck. I'm not anticipating the opponent as well as I usually do, especially during the first period when everyone's fresh. Fortunately, my body reacted before my brain made the conscious decision to move so we're still up by one for our home opener.

"All good?" Niko asks as he skates by me while the ref collects the puck for the faceoff.

It still boggles my mind how perceptive he is in his second year, though if anyone can spot when I'm off it's him. And while no one wants to hear that

their goalie's head isn't in the game, I have too much respect for my teammates to blow them off with silly excuses.

"Got lucky on that one," I admit.

"Were we blocking your view?" He knows none of our defenders were in my line of sight, but he's giving me the out anyway in case my pride demands it. That's not my personality, but other guys need that coddling, and Niko's learning how to manage different personalities. He'll make a good captain one day.

"Nope, I was just slow to react on that one, but I'm good."

The ref drops the puck and Luca's on it right away, winning the faceoff and circling around the goal to give it to me so I can slow things down and set up the offense. Most of the players start migrating toward the other end of the rink, though Niko hangs back to take the pass I send him. He takes his time moving the puck, passing it around until a tiny window opens up for Justus.

Niko delivers the puck to him right in front of the goal, but instead of taking the shot Justus spins away from the net, turning one hundred and eighty degrees and flicking the puck over the goalie's shoulder. Lights flash as the crowd goes wild, both because we put another point on the board and because that was one hell of a trick shot.

For the next two periods both teams go back and forth controlling the game, and while they get one by me when I come out of the crease to challenge a fast break, that's the only score they get. Niko is virtually a solid wall between me and the other team, and if they do manage to get off a shot, I time my blocks to land on the puck instead of giving up a rebound opportunity and an easy score. It's a delicate balance, and one I'm typically pretty good at, which is how Niko could tell I was a little distracted in the first period.

He'll probably ask why in the locker room, and I'm man enough to admit the truth. It was a glimpse of Tripp's hair—which is now dark at the root and sort of emerald green at the tip—that got me. What I won't admit is that I suspect the green is because I asked why he chose blonde instead of green or blue when he was writhing naked on my lap.

Normally, Tripp wouldn't catch my attention during a game, but Luca happened to crush one of the opposing forwards into the boards right where he and Xander were sitting. And while that's happened before without causing me to lose focus, this is the first time it's happened since we became intimate.

The fact is, I haven't seen or spoken to him since he took me inside him nearly two weeks ago, and I wasn't mentally prepared for the emotions that accompanied that first glimpse. I'm not talking about the things that plagued me initially, like why he hadn't called or whether he was deliberately avoiding me, I'm talking about the sense of longing that hit me hard enough to steal my breath.

Even from twenty yards away, I could see how the green in his hair made his eyes pop, giving him an even more naughty air than he usually possesses. That alone was enough to take my eye off the game, but when I realized he was wearing *my jersey*... I've never had the urge to stake my claim on anyone, and Tripp certainly isn't the type to let anyone claim him, but in that moment, I liked the idea of him being mine.

I suppose that's why he was so concerned about getting our labels straight, so I wouldn't confuse fucking with something more. That could also be why he hasn't called. I hope that's the reason, anyway. I'd much rather he put a little distance between us to manage expectations than to have him decide

he's not interested. Although, that distance is what got me off track during the game...

"Epic, man. Just epic." Luca is slapping Justus on the back along with half a dozen other guys when I enter the locker room, and the noise in my head instantly fades to nothing as I watch them shower him with praise. This right here, this brotherhood, is what I live for.

There's something about pushing our physical limits together, sharing blood and sweat, battling exhaustion and chronic pain, that binds us on a deeper level. Makes us function as one, like we share the same mind. It sounds corny, but when you see it come together... When you see a guy make a blind pass that he just *knows* his teammate will be there to receive, or you can communicate how you want a play to develop with a single look, the only explanation is that we're mentally connected. We're never truly alone.

I think that's why I never got too hung up on the questions about who I am off the ice. My teammates, my brothers, were always there. Now that I'm edging closer to retirement, closer to the end of that bond... I guess maybe that's part of why I'm asking the question now, although I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be examining things too closely if it weren't for Tripp.

*Dammit, why does it feel like things always come back to him?*

"That's gonna make ESPN's top ten plays for sure." Luca's excitement brings me back to the locker room. "We need to celebrate!"

"Frosty Dog?" Niko suggests our go-to pub. "I'll tell Xander to meet us there."

"Hell yeah." Luca plants his hands on Justus's shoulders, using them for leverage to jump up and down. "The ladies will be lining up to see if this guy's got as much magic in the bedroom as he does on the ice."

Justus turns as red as a tomato—or maybe that's just exertion from the

game—and steps away to start putting stuff in his locker while Niko snorts under his breath. “You’re totally gonna pimp him out to try to score yourself, aren’t you?”

“Duh.” Luca shrugs as if that should be obvious.

Once we’re all showered and changed, we head over to the bar, which as usual, is packed after a home game. The crowd graciously parts as we work our way to the back where the owner reserves a section for us, random hands begging for a high-five or slapping our shoulders as we pass. Since the owner has a policy against asking us for selfies and autographs, we manage to cut through the crowd pretty quickly.

This time I’m prepared to see Tripp, who as usual is sitting across the table from Xander. I’m actually a little grateful that this encounter isn’t the first time I’m seeing him tonight, because the sight of him in my jersey is even more powerful up close. I blink and watch Niko kiss his boyfriend hello so I don’t give off the wrong impression, though when I finally bring myself to look in Tripp’s direction he’s patting the seat next to him with a knowing smirk.

“You like?” He pinches the shoulder of his shirt between his thumb and forefinger.

Across the table Niko whines, “Even Tripp is wearing a jersey. The wrong one, but still.”

“Tripp cannot wear my boyfriend’s number,” Xander says, shaking his head. “Not a chance in Hell.”

“Well, my actual boyfriend isn’t wearing it.”

“You know dating a jock goes against my moral code, don’t ask me to broadcast it.” Xander grins and rolls his eyes.

As the two of them flirt-fight, I angle my head towards Tripp. “Where’d

that come from?" I ask quietly as I tug on the hem of the jersey.

"It was incredibly hard to find." He sighs with mock frustration. "They only carry it at every sporting goods store, online, and at the gift shop at the rink."

"I mean why would you buy it? I'd have given you one if I knew you wanted it."

"How would you know I wanted it when you haven't called?"

"You haven't called me, either." I arch a brow and cross my arms over my chest.

"True, but I'm exceedingly comfortable with having a fuck buddy and you... Well, we don't know that yet. So, I figure it's up to you if I *put my stick in your net*."

Fortunately, Niko and Xander are too busy pretending to be the only ones here to notice me blushing or hear Tripp. "You're the one who has a thing for dark and moody. Wearing a jersey is the opposite," Xander insists.

"What if you wear it while I fuck you? Then no one will see it but me." Niko's proposal has Xander chewing on his lip suggestively.

"I feel the need to point out this isn't a fanboy thing." Tripp interrupts their bickering and plucks his jersey again, which has green numbers on a black background, then points to his hair. "Green just happens to be a difficult color to match."

Niko and Xander pay him no mind and go back to negotiating the terms of wearing a jersey while I try in vain not to reach out and touch Tripp's hair. "So...green. Where'd that come from?"

"I needed a change. And bonus, Bulldogs colors are black and green."

"You just said this wasn't a fanboy thing."

"That's right."

"You didn't pick green since I asked about it?"

“Did you? Hmm, that’s right. But you also asked about blue. I probably should’ve gone that route. Green really is a challenging color. Beers!” he exclaims as Luca and Justus set a pitcher with a half dozen glasses in front of us.

He puts a hand on my leg—his finger dangerously close to my junk—and leans over to reach for a glass. The gesture isn’t at all out of character for him, though instead of pulling back to give him some space like I typically do, I lean toward his ear and lower my voice. “I think it makes you look sort of dangerous. And sexy.”

“What are you blushing about over there, Tripp?” Luca asks as Tripp retreats to his seat.

“I just felt Noah up and I liked it.” He doesn’t miss a beat, and since everyone is so used to his antics, they don’t consider he’s telling the truth. But I know better. He’s blushing because I called him sexy.

“Fine, I’ll wear it for the playoffs. Final games only though, as in playing for the cup, not winning your conference.” Xander takes the focus off Tripp, laying out his terms to Niko like a peace treaty.

I’m not sure how they went from sex to playoffs, but I’m happy for Niko. Having someone you care about wear your jersey, especially one you give them, is a point of pride for most of us. For Niko to see Xander wearing his number in the stands, I’m not sure there’s any greater motivation than winning for the person wearing your name. Except winning for your teammates.

“Guys, we have to play for the cup.” Niko clears his throat and turns a near desperate gaze on all of us.

“Uh, don’t we do that every year?” Justus asks.

“Yeah, but the only way Xander will wear my jersey is if we make it to the

final round.”

“Xander, what would your father say?” Luca scolds, which makes sense since Xander’s dad is our coach.

“He’d pat me on the back for finding a way to motivate Niko.”

“I’d say he doesn’t need that to motivate him.” Justus shoots an apologetic look at Niko. “But knowing how he feels about you, having you wear his jersey is just as meaningful as winning the cup.”

“Cruel but effective.” Luca taps his glass against Xander’s before raising it for a group toast. “Speaking of effective, have you ever seen a shot as brilliant as the one my boy took tonight?”

Now, it’s Justus’s turn to blush. As a fellow forward he idolized Luca for years, and now his adolescent hero is his mentor. I’ve heard the saying that you should be careful about meeting your heroes, but in this case, it seems to be benefiting both of them. They’ve developed a rhythm that’s hard for defenses to stop.

We all toast Justus’s incredible play then start rehashing our favorite moments from the game, while Xander offers his bird’s eye perspective—he’s fairly astute as assessing games given his lineage—and Tripp gushes about fast shots and hard hits.

Though I jump in with my own observations and laugh at all the right moments, my thoughts never stray completely away from Tripp. We’re not touching, but he’s close enough that I *feel* him next to me, like a live wire, crackling with energy. It makes me want to put my hand on his leg, to trail my fingers along the inside of his knee and watch him shudder. I’d do it if I thought it was a fuck buddy gesture, but since that kind of touch is something Niko and Xander started only after coming out to us, I’m pretty sure it falls into boyfriend territory.

Needless to say, by the time everyone's ready to go, I'm feeling desperate and deprived. I'm positively clueless about how to say that to Tripp. I manage to catch his eye a few times as we pay the bill, and again in the parking lot, but when he heads to his car, I can only assume those looks didn't say what I wanted them to. It's not until I'm home, staring blankly at my phone and debating how to start a text asking to see him, when the doorbell makes me realize they worked. Sort of.

"You're lucky you resemble a Norse god because puppy dog eyes don't usually work on me," Tripp declares as he steps inside, green eyes full of mischief.

"Puppy dog eyes?"

"You know, the sad, helpless stare cute little animals give you when they want something. I don't usually consider it a good look on a man but you're sexy enough to pull it off. Besides, if a man misses my cock enough to silently plead for it, it'd be pretty cruel to deny him."

"I wasn't pleading. I was... Trying to gauge your interest."

"Sure, you were." He pats my chest as he brushes past me and sets his keys on the foyer table. "In that case, I'd say you could just ask if I want to fuck, but since I'm always interested you can skip that step and just say your place or mine. Now, show me to your bedroom. I assume you've got a giant bed and I think we should use every inch of it." He walks further into the house.

My body is intrigued by that plan if my rapid heartbeat is any indication, but my mind is stuck on logistics. Do we really just go at it without any *buddy* stuff?

When he's a few paces away Tripp pauses and shoots me a puzzled look over his shoulder. "Fucking against the wall works too if that's what you want..."

Ducking my head, I rub my hand over the back of my neck. "I..."

"Why is timid Noah back?" He faces me, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "I thought you were pretty clear on wanting to explore sex with me."

"Well, yeah. I do, but..."

His eyes soften when I bring mine to meet them. "You need me to seduce you, is that it?"

I shrug sheepishly. With a subtle sigh, he closes the distance between us and starts kissing my throat, his hands roaming over my chest, down my stomach, ghosting over my groin. "What are you in the mood for? A striptease? A lap dance? A massage?"

Threading my fingers through his hair, I capture the strands in a gentle grip and tug his head back so I can see his eyes. "Why are you really wearing my jersey?"

A slight crease forms between his brows. "I told you, it matches the hair."

"I don't buy it. You heard the same conversation I did between Xander and Niko. You know it's not just a jersey when you're sleeping with the person wearing it."

"I'd never heard that until tonight." He makes an imaginary cross over his chest.

"But you wanted me to see you in it. Didn't you?" That's more of a gut instinct than a statement, until I catch his eyes darting away from mine for a brief second.

"It might have occurred to me that you'd want to fuck me in it."

It's an offhand remark, delivered with the same sass he's prone to using when he wants to bait me, but it confirms that he thought of me despite not making the effort to get in touch. And even though he explained that earlier when he implied he's letting me dictate our encounters, it's not until just now

that I understand giving me control doesn't mean he's not interested. Or that he hasn't given me a second thought while we've been apart.

That knowledge sends a bolt of lust coursing through my veins, which I'm guessing Tripp can sense since his hand starts softly kneading my cock. Either that or he noticed my gaze was focused on his lips and decided to distract me.

I'm a little bummed because even though there's lots of things I still haven't done with another man, I sort of assumed kissing would be one of the first, and we haven't done that yet. I'm starting to think Tripp prefers it that way, though I hope I'm wrong about that. I'd love to feel his mouth on mine.

"You like that idea. Pounding into me while I'm wearing your number." It's a confirmation, not a question, as his hand drifts lower, rubbing my balls over the denim of my jeans.

Since it's hard to acknowledge that without sounding as possessive as seeing him in my jersey makes me feel, all I can do is grunt. And grip his hair a little tighter.

Tripp's eyes flutter shut on a sharp inhale, mouth morphing into a sly smile as the breath slowly escapes. "Hard and fast, huh big guy? Is that how you want me?" When I manage only another grunt he rises to his toes and growls into my ear. "Bedroom. Now."

I release his hair and grab his hand, pulling him behind me until we reach my room. But before I can get him on the bed he plants his feet, forcing me to turn and face him.

"This time you get to be the naked one while I'm clothed. *Mostly.*" He reaches for the hem of my shirt and peels it up and over my head without any help from me, which makes my knees go weak. No one's ever been able to undress me on their own—I'm too tall—but since Tripp's only a few inches

shorter he manages with ease, and I find that I really like the act of being undressed instead of doing it myself.

With my shirt out of the way, Tripp kisses a path over my chest, licking my nipples as his fingertips trace the ridges of my abs. This, too, is a new experience. Not in the sense that no one's ever put their mouth on me, just not in the way he does it, with sighs and moans and curses that suggest he has some sort of reverence for my body. Every inch of it.

I've never felt so admired. So *appreciated*. While Tripp has made no secret of the fact he likes my body, up until this point all physical contact seemed geared toward my benefit. My pleasure. Right now, it feels like he's exploring me for his.

Dazed from his touch, it takes me a second to realize he's worked my pants open and is shoving them off my hips, boxers too, leaving my full cock on display. I might be self-conscious about that except for the fact Tripp watches it hungrily, licking his lips like he's stalking prey. Once again, I react to his intense perusal with a full body shiver, my engorged length bobbing eagerly under his feral gaze. He drops to the ground and takes it in his fist, looking up at me with a wicked gleam in his eye.

“Has anyone ever swallowed this gorgeous dick?”

I suck in a surprised breath when he swirls his tongue around the crown. “Swallowed?”

“Mmm.” He licks the underside and seals his lips over the tip, and even though he's sucking gently it feels like he's pulling every nerve ending, every brain cell, all my oxygen into my cock, so that the only thing I'm capable of feeling is his wet heat on my shaft. “Taken this full, fat dick all the way down their throat.”

“I don't think...” I can't get even get the words out before his nose is

brushing against my pelvis, his throat constricting around my length. He pulls back and does it again. And again. Taking me deeper than I thought possible and making gurgling, squelching sounds as he coats me with his saliva.

When he mentioned pounding into him earlier, I assumed he meant the other hole, not the one he needs to breathe. As deep as I am, my cock has to be choking him, yet I can't seem to find the strength to pull away. The sight of him on his knees, mouth stretched wide around me, is more captivating than I expected it to be. The sloppiness of it is carnal even though the act of taking me into his body is beautiful, a contradiction I can't look away from.

Moving on autopilot, my abs flex as my dick spears between his lips while his eyes flutter in some sort of hedonistic bliss... I'm engulfed in a vortex of pleasure and emotion, a fog of ecstasy unlike anything I've ever experienced. I can't tell if I'm floating or falling, groaning or whimpering. All I know is both my body and mind are reeling, overwhelmed by what Tripp's doing to me.

Rocking onto the balls of my feet, I chase his mouth, yelping when he unexpectedly gives my sac a firm tug and pulls off me with a 'pop.'

"Don't be greedy, champ. I want that cock in my ass before you bust that nut." He stands up and takes his pants off as I kick mine away from my feet, crawling onto the bed on all fours. Even with the jersey hanging off his lean frame, I can see his dick hanging between his legs. Before I can take it in my hand, he flicks his head toward the pants crumpled on my floor and says, "There's lube in my back pocket. Get yourself nice and slick."

I fish the lube out and slather it over my dick while Tripp eyes me ravenously, biting his lip to stifle a moan as he watches my fist slide along my length. It's a show he's undoubtedly put on before, but I let myself

indulge in the fantasy that it's just for me. That only I can make him so desperate.

Once I'm coated in the gel, I step behind him, but instead of pushing inside I take his cock in my hand and stroke him slowly, noting how it makes him arch his spine as he pushes into my grip. "Trying to get me to catch up?"

"Not really." I swipe my thumb over his slit and give him a few languid pumps. "You said you like having your dick played with, so..."

"If you hadn't made me wait two weeks for your cock I wouldn't object, but since you deprived me of all cocks except yours, I'm not feeling very patient. Now put your hands on my hips and give it to me."

Though I fully expected Tripp to honor my request not to sleep around while he's sleeping with me, the fact that he basically admitted he's mine—for now—while wearing my name on his back erases all my restraint.

I line myself up, nudging just the crown of my dick inside his hole. Then I grip his hips and thrust forward.

The cry that rumbles from his throat is filled with both need and relief, a strange mix of satisfaction and yearning. I want to savor it, but the pressure that engulfs my dick makes it impossible to think of anything beyond staving off my release.

"God, how are you tighter?" I rasp, chest heaving as I try to fill my lungs with the air they can't seem to hold. I tried to recreate the feeling of Tripp's body with my hand, to recapture the sensations I'm feeling now without being buried inside him. I could never get my fist tight enough. Or hot enough. I'd always end up feeling empty. Unfulfilled.

*Fuck...*, being joined to him, I'm basically in free fall, spiraling uncontrollably as I struggle not to lose control.

"Maybe you're bigger." His voice helps to ground me. "My blow jobs must

agree with you.”

“Ungh,” I half-grunt, half-laugh, fighting back a burst of euphoria that ripples through me when he shifts his weight. “Hold still.”

“Can’t,” he strains.

“Fuck,” I grumble and take a deep breath, holding it as I pull back and tentatively push forward. Despite the give of his warm channel, the easy acceptance of my intrusion, his ass is so tight the pressure is dizzying.

My eyes roll back in my head as my legs quake with the effort to stay upright, which is sort of terrifying, given that strong legs are a basic requirement of my job. Yet, not even the hundreds of pounds I squat make my thighs tremble as much as they are right now.

“Harder, big guy. Don’t hold back.” Tripp taunts me with a daring glance over his shoulder, and as much as I want to savor this encounter, I want to please him even more.

I flex my fingers and grip his hips, widening my stance to the same athletic position I use in goal when I need ready access to speed and power. Then I start to move.

My hips piston forward, spearing my length into his warm, wet hole as I use my arms to pull him to me. The lewd sound of skin slapping against skin is a steady drumbeat around us, and his frantic moans are the melody.

Tremors of ecstasy ripple along my shaft as I give it to him, culminating in a hefty twitch each time I sink to the hilt. My abs blaze as they coil and release again and again, biceps smoldering from the near violent push and pull as I strain to fit my body into Tripp’s.

“Fuck, you’re gonna split me in two. Don’t stop.”

Beads of sweat trickle down my chest, along my abs, pooling at the base of my groin, already damp from the lube dripping out of Tripp’s ass. It occurs to

me not only that sex has never been this messy before, but that I like it this way. Loud and wet and uninhibited.

The only thing that could make it better is seeing Tripp's face. The way his eyes get heavy with lust as his orgasm builds. How his lean chest heaves when he starts panting. How his lips part just slightly when he moans.

Seeing my name on his back is thrilling in its own way, but it can't compete with watching the man come undone in front of me.

That memory has pleasure engulfing me, threatening to tip me over the edge long before I want it to. I run drills in my mind, stopping imaginary pucks in an attempt to convince myself that I'm not about to find heaven. But not even hockey can distract me from the notion that it doesn't just feel good, but *right*, to give my body to Tripp. Like it should belong to him, if he wants it.

That thought makes me falter slightly, not out of fear so much as worry that he wouldn't appreciate such a revelation. But it's enough that he notices the shift in my movement.

"More, Noah. Jerk me. *Please.*"

"How? I'm barely hanging on." I curl my fingers into his skin.

"Pull me up," Tripp gasps. "My back to your front."

Wrapping my left arm under his chest, I heave him up to a groan that sounds a lot like '*fuck that's hot*' as my right hand closes over his cock. His keening cry of relief is like a shot of adrenaline straight to my balls, and I find a second wind, spearing into him ferociously as my fingers slide over his length.

Rocking into him as my fist bottoms out helps me keep a constant rhythm, but it's not until Tripp wraps his arms around me to start fondling my cheeks that I have the leverage to fuck him like he wants, and once I do...

The raspy moans coming from Tripp's mouth spur me onward, encouraging me to plunge deeper, pump faster. My body pushes all rational thought from my brain, its singular focus finding the nirvana that looms... Right. Fucking. There. In that place where Tripp and I are so connected I'd swear we were one. We're moving together without conscious thought so much as intuition. It's an innate sense of what we want...a craving to be closer regardless of the limitations.

My dick throbs with the need for release, the same as his does in my hand. With each thrust we inch toward the precipice, and the friction of Tripp's palms gripping my ass tips me over the edge.

I come, slamming into him, and before I can catch my breath, he clenches around me. The vise-like grip of his body wrings another wave from my tip as his release coats my hand, and a guttural cry rumbles from my throat.

A torrent of sensation crashes over me. Ecstasy, exhaustion, affection, gratitude; wave after wave coming so hard and fast, I can't tell which way is up. My body vibrates like a guitar string, a strange mixture of sated yet spent that keeps my muscles tense despite the fact they can barely hold my weight.

Tripp shudders in my arms as his orgasm finally dissipates, his rapid breath causing my arm to rise with the rhythm of his chest. His head falls back against my shoulder as his grip on my ass relaxes, and it's only then that I realize I'm still holding his dick, stroking it absently. And that he seems just as content to stay like this as I do.

It won't last, and I understand why, but I'm also not going to point out that we're a sticky mess and should probably clean up. I may still be learning about who I am and what I want, but one thing I don't question is the fact that I like the non-sexual contact I have with Tripp as much as I do the sexual kind.. So, if he's happy to let me hold him, I will.



## Chapter 14 – Tripp

Even with my eyes closed, I can tell the room is brighter than usual. And hotter. And...stickier. *Wtf?* I try to roll onto my back, but the wall won't let me. *Wall? Since when is there a wall next to my bed ?*

Cracking an eyelid, the first thing I notice is the floor to ceiling windows across from the bed. Windows that are impressive in scale, and way too big for my small condo. The next thing is the gray comforter underneath me. It's fluffy and soft—high quality—but it's too dark. I prefer lighter colors that don't showcase the evidence of my extracurricular activities if they get a little...*vigorous*.

Okay, so, I'm not at home. I'm at Noah's. Inconvenient, but not the end of the world. I've passed out in a post sex haze before, so I know the drill. Get up quietly, grab my clothes and tiptoe out. Easy peasy.

That's how it's supposed to go, anyway.

The heavy weight draped over my torso is going to make that particular escape a little difficult. So is the half-chub rubbing against my ass, which—hello—seems like it'd be a shame to waste.

Seeing as my prior accidental sleepovers were more of a pass out cold situation than a deliberate plan to stay the night, they didn't involve cuddling. Or waking up to someone's morning wood knocking on my back door. My jury's still out on the cuddling part—although I slept like a fucking baby—but I could get on board with the wake-up sex.

*No, bad Tripp.*

Though I'm happy to confirm the gentle giant behind me is a beast in the sack, I'm not sold on the declaration that he's good with no strings sex. I think he'd like to be—I'd like that too—which is why I followed him home last night. But slip ups like staying over might send the wrong message. So, I need to Houdini myself out of here.

Wrapping my fingers gently around his wrist, I try to lift his arm off me. I move it maybe half an inch before my hand slips and Noah hugs me tighter to his chest. I'm ready to try again when he grumbles, "Trying to sneak out?"

"I don't sneak." *I totally sneak.* "I was trying to be polite and not wake you."

"You didn't."

"So, you're intentionally spooning me?" That not so subtle hint doesn't get him to move his arm.

"I woke up like this. Figured as long as we were both comfortable, I'd stay that way."

*Houston we have a problem.* Snuggles could lead to feelings, and that's a slippery slope to boyfriendville. It's a town I have no desire to visit like *ever*. Why subject myself to the illusion that people give a shit about me when history suggests they only care about themselves?

I scoot away and roll to face him, regretting it the moment I do. *Sleepy, rumped Norse god is HOT!* "So, how did we end up here exactly?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. I remember trying to catch my breath, and I think maybe my legs gave out and I fell on the bed."

"Hmm, sign of a good night. You're welcome." I pat his deliciously hard chest. "Okay then, I should go."

He tugs on the jersey I'm still wearing when I try to sit up. "What's the rush?"

“Um, the rush is you're spooning me. That's against the fuck buddy rules.”

“It's not like I broke the rules on purpose. Or by myself.” He runs a lazy hand through his hair, a loose strand falling back over his face, and my stomach does a little flip.

“Exactly. I broke them too, which is why I should go.”

“It's Sunday and you don't have work.” He scratches his big hand over his perfectly sculpted pec, which makes me notice his chest again, then his abs, then the heavy cock resting on them, and *damn* I need to get away from naked Thor. “Shower and I'll make some breakfast. Then you can take Dorothy over to Xander's if you want.”

*He remembers the name of my most prized possession? And doesn't think it's weird that I named her?*

I'd swoon if I did that sort of thing. Or climb on him and ride like I was making for the border.

*Down, boy.* Morning after sex is definitely not a fuck buddy thing. Neither is breakfast, although I am kind of starving and I'd love to skate. “Can you cook breakfast as well as you cook dinner?”

“I can fry an egg.”

“I guess I'll take you up on that shower then.”

Noah gets me set up in the bathroom and heads off to the kitchen, leaving me the privacy to clean up without an audience, or a partner. That's somewhat disappointing considering his shower would be fun to play in. It's got a bazillion jets and showerheads, and even a little bench that looks like marble in a sea of tiles that resemble wood planks—very masculine and contemporary. Although shower sex is possibly too intimate for what we are, so getting clean solo is probably for the best.

I linger slightly since I haven't been in a shower this nice in nearly a

decade. Wrapping myself in a plush white towel, I hunt down some mouthwash, finding it in the medicine cabinet above the sink, but when I finish and close the mirrored door I freeze.

*What am I doing?*

My image stares back at me, familiar yet not. Running my fingers through my damp hair, the emerald tips taunt me with a truth I don't want to admit.

*I picked green because I thought he'd like it.*

Like he said, the darker color does make me look less playful and more mischievous. Both are accurate representations of my personality, although I went blond as a way to remind myself to focus on the light. To appear approachable rather than inaccessible, at least on the surface. I may have sky-high walls, but I only put them up around the deep, personal stuff I keep to myself. I don't use them to push people away on sight—my obnoxious comments do that so I don't waste time on people who can't handle me—and dark always struck me as the equivalent of saying back off without having to say anything at all.

*I also thought the darkness of the green might warn him away.*

Part of me wanted that to happen. If he backed off, I wouldn't be the asshole for saying, *'thanks for showing me your dick, now lets be friends.'*

Wanting him to like it and hate it is fifty shades of fucked up. I need an intervention, but the only person qualified to set me straight doesn't know his boyfriend's teammate has a hard-on for my hard-ons. Or that mine seems to require that sexy Norse god to make a *full* appearance.

By the time I'm dressed in a plain white shirt—one I'm hoping Noah doesn't realize is his since his jersey doesn't hide cum stains—he's scooping eggs onto a plate with buttered toast and fruit. Only one though.

“Where's yours?” I take the plate he offers and help myself to a seat at an

island so big I could comfortably stretch out on top of it. That is, if it weren't made of rock.

"My breakfast is dictated by the team dietician." He sets a bowl of oatmeal and a smoothie on the counter and takes the stool next to me as I wrinkle my nose. "You aren't a fan of healthy eating?"

"I'm a fan of eating whatever I feel like, and it's never been that." I point to his meal with a grimace. "Does it even have any taste?"

"Not much, but you get used to it. Besides, this is what keeps me fit enough to play at the professional level in my thirties."

My eyes blatantly wander up his now clothed torso, which his snug t-shirt does nothing to hide. "If you're telling me that crap is the reason you're a walking wet dream then I guess I approve."

"Uh, thanks?" He eyes me the same way, cocking his head to the side with a slight frown. "Is that my shirt?"

*Busted.*

"I had a bit of a wardrobe malfunction." I scoop up the runny part of the egg with my toast. "Hope you don't mind."

"You can wear anything of mine you like. Even if it doesn't fit." His baby blues twinkle as he fights a smile.

Glancing down, I have to admit the shirt is a little big. "I'm not so sure your clothes fit you either." I reach over and pinch the fabric of his shirt between my fingers, giving it a gentle tug, though the material barely moves since it's already stretched to the brink. "Maybe you should lay off the protein."

"I wouldn't be able to manhandle you as easily if I did."

"Why would I want you to manhandle me?" I arch my brow in his direction and take another bite of egg toast.

"You call me *big guy*."

“It’s a fitting nickname.”

“And you groaned ‘*fuck that’s hot*’ when I hauled you against me last night.”

“You were pounding my prostate and jerking my dick. Totally hot. And also, fuck buddy etiquette says you can’t hold people responsible for what they say when you’re stroking their cock. It’s like, shit said under duress or something.”

“Would it be against fuck buddy etiquette to say I bet if I toss you over my shoulder that’ll make you hard?”

“That wouldn’t be a stretch since this conversation is making me hard.” I look pointedly at my crotch.

“So, you’re saying I’m right.” He crosses his arms in front of his broad chest.

*Damn those blue orbs shine when he’s feeling frisky.*

“I’m saying there’s only one way to find out.” I shoot off the stool and round the island, putting that big hunk of cabinetry between us. Noah jumps up in a flash, crouching slightly so he’s ready to spring whichever direction I choose to run.

*I probably should’ve put more thought into challenging a professional goalie not to catch me.*

“Think you can outrun me?” Noah smirks.

“I think I’m lighter on my feet than you.” Faking right, I quickly change course and go left, heading for the back door. I twist the handle and throw it open, launching myself over the threshold and clearing the two flagstone stairs before I hit the patio and take off running. But I only make it a few feet before I hear a strangled wail and a heavy thud.

The brat in me wants to believe he’s using some sort of ploy to catch me off

guard, but since I'd be perfectly happy to be caught and tossed over his shoulder I play along, skidding to a halt and turning to face my pursuer. Only he's not pursuing me. He's lying on the ground, reaching for his ankle with a strained grimace on his face.

*Shit.*

*Shit. Shit. Shit.* Not only do I have zero fucking clue what to do with hurt people, I don't do well with guilt, which I'm feeling pretty heavily right now since my stupid game of chase is what's got the big guy writhing on the floor, and not in an *'I just blew the biggest load ever'* way.

I give myself three point seven seconds to freak the fuck out then trot back to Noah and crouch down next to him, patting his shoulder awkwardly. "Are you okay?"

He shoots me an incredulous glare.

"I mean, obviously you're not, but, is this like one of those *'I need a minute'* things or this is a full-blown *'something's broken'* thing?"

"Somewhere in the middle." He closes his eyes, chest rising dramatically on a deep breath that he seems to hold for a few seconds before letting it slowly out.

"Right. And that means what exactly? Do I help you get inside or call a doctor or..." The corner of my lip tries to tick upward, and I press them together to try to keep them flat.

Noah blinks me into focus and cringes. "Why are you smiling?"

"I'm not." I slap my hand over my mouth, which doesn't do anything to stop my lips from twitching except hopefully make it less noticeable.

"Now you're laughing?"

"I... No." I shake my head vigorously back and forth, never taking my hand off my mouth.

“This is funny to you?” Anger and hurt war for dominance in his eyes.

I purse my lips together so hard I bet they’re turning white, which he hopefully can’t see under my hand, and shake my head.

“Jesus Christ,” he mumbles. “You’re fucking laughing.”

The number of swears in that sentence is telling, yet I can’t make my face look empathetic. I’ve never been able to. Until now, I thought that was because I *wasn’t* empathetic, but I do actually care about what happens to Noah, so it must be genetic or something.

“I’m not... Laughing isn’t the right...” *Dammit I’m making it worse.* “It’s a condition,” I finally squeak mid-giggle.

“A condition?” Noah scoffs, wincing when he probes his ankle.

“I promise I’m not being cheeky.” I bite back another impish grin. “Bad things happen, and I laugh. Always have. I used to think that’s because it actually *is* funny when bad things happen to people I don’t like. Only, I like you and this isn’t funny but I can’t stop myself from smiling. I don’t know what to do and it’s sort of unnerving since I know I should be doing *something* I just don’t know what. I’m a horrible caregiver. It’s why I don’t have pets.”

By the time I finish my rambling some of the anger has left Noah’s expression, although he’s still sort of looking at me like I’m every bit the obnoxious little shit most people assume me to be. Even though that’s not an inaccurate perception, he’s never looked at me like that before. I don’t like it.

Pasting a concerned look on my face, or what I hope is concerned, I say, “Tell me what to do.”

I must get it right because the big guy offers me his hand to pull him up, and even though he must have at least sixty pounds on me I manage to get him standing with an arm draped over my shoulders so he can hop inside.

We hobble to the couch where he falls heavily onto the cushions, and I stand frozen waiting for more instructions.

“What?” He sighs.

I shrug helplessly. “Want a beer?”

“It’s ten in the morning.”

“After I banged my head we had beer, and then...”

“I don’t want to watch you jerk off right now.”

“Whoa, I didn’t suggest that.” I was going to, after I got an answer on the beer thing, but now I’ll keep that to myself. “What *do* you want though?”

Noah’s head falls against the back of the couch. “How about an ice pack? There’s one in the freezer. And a dish towel.”

“Coming right up.” *Coming right up? I’ve never even been a server—no one would trust me around the customers.*

After rooting through half a dozen Tupperwares of food his chef person must leave for him, I find one of those gel things that’s technically ice although it’s mushy enough to wrap around a limb, which even comes with a Velcro strap so you can attach it. I make a note to look for one myself since it’s probably better than the frozen veggies I used as a kid. Grabbing a towel off the counter, I head back to Noah, who’s managed to get his foot propped on the coffee table.

I hand him the towel and ice pack, which he tries to wrap around his quickly swelling ankle, but when he can’t get it secure, I take over, even putting a cushion under his foot so the edge of the table doesn’t dig into his calf. *I’m already getting better at this.* Then I hover next to the couch, waiting for instructions since the cushion thing exhausted my ideas.

“Can you just sit?” Noah asks a few minutes later.

“How do you know where I am? Your eyes are closed.”

“I feel you looming.”

“I’m just waiting for you to tell me everything’s fine and it’s a false alarm.”

“It’s not a false alarm.”

“It has to be, because otherwise this is my fault, and you’ll hate me.” It’s not until I say the words out loud that I realize they’re true. Especially the part about him hating me.

For weeks, I’ve been preaching about boundaries, mostly for his protection but also for my peace of mind. It was supposed to ensure he didn’t hate me when the sex part of our buddy plan ran its course. I never anticipated he might have a reason to hate me that didn’t involve dicks and holes, and now that my antics have put his season in jeopardy... He might actually hate me for this, and that’s more unsettling than the idea of never getting to fuck him.

I don’t have feelings for the big guy. That’s not what this is about. But I do like him as a person. I enjoy his company, respect his honesty, and get a kick out of flirting with him. Have I been toying with him... Yes, but only because he allows it, and it seems to be helping him understand himself a little better. Until this little hiccup, it was all a little harmless fun. Now, I’m actually a little surprised he hasn’t kicked me out yet.

“Come here.” Noah holds a hand out to me. I’m not sure what to make of that since, A. we don’t hold hands and, B. the ice on his foot might be sending arctic blood to his head.

“What?”

“Come here,” he repeats, opening his eyes and pinning me with a glance that suggests he won’t take no for an answer.

I take his hand with a furrowed brow, allowing him to pull me toward the empty spot next to him. As I take a seat, he drops my hand and rests his own

on his thick thigh, flexing his fingers as he takes a deep breath. “Me getting hurt isn’t your fault.”

“Um...”

“And I don’t hate you.”

“I don’t understand. You were chasing me when you fell.”

“Right. *I* was chasing *you*. That’s on me.”

“But I basically dared you to do it.”

“And I took the dare.”

“If I hadn’t made the dare, you wouldn’t have taken it. Now look at you.” I point to his foot. “How is that not my fault?”

Noah’s blue eyes follow my gaze, looking a little sad, but not angry. “Neither of us could’ve known a little game of chase would end like this.”

“Which is why I shouldn’t have started it.” I throw my arms up, exasperated.

“Why are you so determined to think this is on you?”

I start to say ‘*because it is*’ when I realize that’s not really an answer, just a feeling. A deep-seated, inherent belief that when there’s something wrong, I’m to blame. There’s probably some daddy issues to unpack there, but let’s face it—since I enjoy a little bit of trouble, most people wouldn’t call me innocent. He shouldn’t either.

“Poor judgment, not thinking things through, acting like a kid... Take your pick—any of those are reasons to blame me.”

“You can’t single yourself out when I did all the same things.”

I roll my eyes dramatically. “Are you trying to say we’re both to blame?”

“I’m saying neither of us are. Shit happens. Do I wish I could take it back, think it through before doing something reckless?” He runs a hand through his thick blond hair, a nervous tic maybe. “Yeah, of course. I don’t know

what this is gonna mean yet, but I doubt it's good, and I'm dreading what I find out. At the same time, I was having more fun goofing off with you than I have in months. Maybe even years. How could I blame you for that?"

"There's a whole city of people out there who would easily blame me. Not to mention your teammates. And Xander. And his dad... You know his dad might actually come after me. He's never liked me." I recall the way I got booted from one of his team cookouts a few years back when I asked the guys to feel their muscles.

"No one needs to know all the details. I'll just say I tripped."

"Yeah, because people will believe the guy who balances on ice for a living would fall on dry land." I snort.

"Stranger things have happened."

I give him a critical once over, wondering not just why he's being so chill about this, but why he'd spare me from the people's wrath. My dick isn't that spectacular.

"Sure, we can go with that plan. You tripped over your own big feet doing something you probably mastered when you were one. Now what?"

"Now, I find out how bad this is."

"How?"

"I call the team doctor and ask him to make a house call." He pulls his cell from his pocket and selects the doctor from his contacts, pausing to give me a forlorn look before he makes the call. "You should probably head home, just to make sure you aren't linked to this."

He's right—the only way to stay completely out of this is to make myself scarce—but I don't jump up and make my exit the way I should. Even though I'm zero help right now, maybe even less than zero, it feels pretty shitty to leave him hurt and alone. Especially, when he looks so lost.

It goes against everything in my free-spirited, no-strings, me-first persona, but I can't abandon him. Not now.

"What if I just hide until the doctor leaves? Then if you need that beer, I can get it for you." *Omigod did he almost smile? I really am getting better at comforting him or whatever.*

"That won't work if he sees your car in the driveway." Noah's face reverts to the pitiful look he was wearing when he suggested I go home.

"I'll stash it in your garage." I lift a shoulder to my ear. "It looks big enough to be its own car lot."

"It only holds three cars."

"Do you have three cars?" I ask pointedly.

"No."

"Perfect. You have room for mine then. I'll put it away and hide in your bedroom until the coast is clear." *Coast is clear? Great. Now, I've invoked Scooby Doo. Too bad I can't ask Noah's doc for an MRI because something is clearly off with my brain.*

I hop up before my mouth can do any more damage to my totally badass image and head off to find my keys. But before I can make it too far, I hear my name.

"Tripp?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks." Noah offers me a sad smile, and it hits me that he's scared of what comes next.

*You and me both, big guy.*

## Chapter 15 – Noah

Dr. Cutter checks the images he took with the portable x-ray on his laptop while I sit helpless on the couch, trying not to panic.

Given our performance last year, and the way we've been looking so far, I know in my heart we have a shot at the cup this year. Or we did. Not to say our backup goalie can't do the job, or to sound cocky myself, but there's a reason he's the backup. He doesn't have my reflexes. Or my size. He'll give us a fighting chance, but guys like Niko will have to step up, and he's already playing at an elite level at the most elite level there is.

It's not realistic to think we'll get through an entire season without suffering some injuries among the team, but to start the season that way... To get hurt off the ice no less... I fucked up. Put the entire team and our season at risk. And now I'm going to lie about how it happened.

Tripp doesn't deserve the fallout that will come his way if people find out he was here. We were both horsing around, but I'm the only one with a contract that states I won't take unnecessary risks. And while I regret that my decision could affect the team, I don't regret those moments with Tripp. We were flirting, both of us, and it felt natural. I liked it. I want to do it again, without the chasing and the injury, of course.

I knew before I hit the ground that something was seriously wrong. The pain hadn't even come, it was just the unfamiliar motion of my ankle that tipped me off, and I was probably on the ground a full two seconds, knowing I was in trouble, before the agony hit. It's faded to a dull ache now thanks to the ice, which gives me some hope that things might be better than I first

thought. The fact that the doctor hasn't said anything for nearly fifteen minutes isn't helping my mental state though.

*God, I wish Tripp was sitting next to me.*

Knowing he's in the house helps, but if he were *here* he'd probably say something ridiculous to distract me, like, "I wonder what my dick looks like on an x-ray?" to which Dr. Cutter would probably gasp and turn beet red and maybe even have to wrestle the thing away from Tripp when he tries to take his own picture.

I know the man is an acquired taste for most, but I envy his ability to say whatever comes to mind. It's refreshing. And even though it's sometimes obnoxious, I like that he's not afraid to be himself.

"Do you need anything for the pain?" Dr. Cutter interrupts my imaginary scene as he finishes wrapping my ankle.

"No, why?"

"You're wincing, but you're also kind of smiling as if you're trying to ignore the discomfort."

Sounds about right. Tripp does have the unique ability to make people laugh and cringe at the same time. "I'm just trying to think positively," I fib.

"That's an excellent attitude to have. Thinking positively really does help with the healing process."

"Speaking of which, what sort of process am I looking at?" I hold my breath, as if a lungful of air can ward off the bad news.

"You're looking at a mild grade two sprain." When I don't exhale he elaborates. "There looks to be some partial tearing of the ligament. Primarily, in this section here." He points to a spot on the image that doesn't look all that different from the rest, at least to my eye.

"It's quite a small tear, so you aren't looking at extensive downtime. You'll

need to stay off it for seven to ten days, at which point we'll start physical therapy. You'll gradually return to weight bearing, with a full recovery in approximately four to six weeks."

"Seven to ten days? As in, do nothing for seven to ten days?"

"You can do some range of motion exercises, just don't put any weight on it," the doctor says.

Okay, not ideal, but that puts me back on the ice before Thanksgiving, which is well before All-Star week. As long as we aren't in last place going into that break, we should have plenty of season left to make the playoffs. Hopefully, that will soften the blow when I break the news to the team.

"Would you like me to talk to Coach Nydek, or do you want to do it?" Dr. Cutter asks.

Normally, I'd own my own mistakes, but in this case the good doctor will be better able to communicate what my prognosis is. "You go ahead. I'm sure he'll have questions."

Dr. Cutter nods and pulls out his phone—I'd thought he'd leave to make the call instead of doing it here—meaning I've only got a few minutes to come up with a reasonable explanation for what I was doing when I sprained my ankle. I'm still trying to work out what that could be when he passes me the phone. *Great.*

I clear my throat before putting it to my ear. "Hello?"

"What the hell, Noah?" Coach barks. "You chose a shitty time to hurt yourself l, kid. What happened?"

"I'm not sure, Coach. One minute I was fine and the next I was on the ground."

"What were you doing when you fell?"

I look at the doctor as if he might have the answer, but of course he can't

hear what Coach is saying. “I saw a coyote and you’re supposed to scare them off with lots of loud noise, so I was running outside banging on a pot and then I guess I tripped.”

“You tripped?” he shouts. “Why the hell are you chasing off a coyote?”

I can’t stop myself from wincing at the anger in his voice, but at this point I’m committed to my lame excuse. “My neighbors said it’s been lurking around, and they’re worried about their pets. I figured if I was loud enough, I could scare it off for good.”

“It’s a wild animal. If it wants to eat your neighbor’s pets it’ll do that whether you make a ruckus or not. *Jesus!* What am I supposed to tell the press? You jeopardized your season so you could save Fido?”

“Rufus. And he’s a bulldog.” That part is actually legit. My neighbors dress him up in a little doggy jersey with my number for the games.

“That’s supposed to justify your stupidity?”

“No, Coach.”

“What the hell were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t. I just reacted.” I’m familiar with how Coach looks when he’s disappointed, but until this moment he’s never worn that expression because of me. I’m both ashamed and grateful that I can’t see it.

“Of all the... You know this falls outside the team’s coverage, right?”

“I... What?”

“You got injured on your personal time. That means the team isn’t responsible for your medical, your pay while you’re out, or to keep you on the roster.”

Getting cut at my age is like the kiss of death. It’s too soon. I’m not ready to be done with hockey. Or the Bulldogs... The oatmeal I had for breakfast threatens to make an encore appearance. “You think they’ll cut me?”

“No, I think you’re too valuable for that. But I wouldn’t expect them to pay your bills.”

“I understand,” I mumble. “I’ll take care of it myself.”

“Good. Now as for what to say, I obviously can’t lie to management, but as far as the public is concerned you suffered an undisclosed injury during training, and you’re expected to make a full recovery in four to six weeks. When you come back I don’t want anyone targeting what they think might be a weakness, so until you’re mobile you will not so much as step foot outside your house. Have Dr. Cutter run your PT from home. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach.”

“I’ll notify the team. I expect daily updates until you’re cleared to come back to practice.”

“Okay.”

“Good. So help me if I find out you try to fight off another fucking coyote... Are we clear?”

“Yes. Got it.” I hand the phone back to Dr. Cutter and sit with my head bowed like a little kid who’s too ashamed to look his parents in the eye. He speaks to Coach a few more minutes—about what I can’t say since I’m too numb to pay attention—then startles me out of my stupor when he rests a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t get too discouraged. You’ll recover from this in no time.”

Pressing my lips together I give him a curt nod.

“I grabbed some crutches while you were on the phone with Coach Nydek.” He tilts his head toward the corner of the couch where I now see they’re propped. “I’ll be in touch next week to schedule your PT. We’ll go over what equipment you have here and what the therapist will need to bring. In the

meantime, keep that foot elevated, ice for twenty minutes four times a day, and take Advil for any swelling.”

Nodding again, I make a pathetic attempt to smile. “Send me the bill for today please.”

“No need to worry about that right now.” He picks up his bag and grabs the portable x-ray machine. “I’ll see myself out, so you don’t need to get up. We’ll talk soon.”

I watch until he’s out of sight, hearing the click of the front door a few seconds later. Then I collapse against the back of the couch with a shaky breath.

The dull soreness I felt while the doctor was here morphs into a throbbing discomfort, only now it’s not just my ankle but my head that aches in rhythm with my beating pulse. *That couldn’t have gone any worse.*

“Cut you?” I gasp when an angry voice pierces the silence. “They’re going to cut you?”

*Tripp. I forgot he was here.*

“It sounds like they could, but Coach doesn’t think they will.”

“He doesn’t think...? You’re like, the star of the team. They’d really let you go over a sprained ankle?” He paces back and forth, an uncharacteristic look of disgust on his face. “What kind of organization is this? Players get hurt all the time, is this how they treat you when it happens?”

“When you get injured on the ice, no. When you get injured off it...” I realize too late Tripp will do the whole blaming himself thing as those words sink in.

“Ohmigod.” He sinks onto the couch. “I cost you your spot on the team.”

“No, you didn’t. I just told you it won’t come to that.” I’m not sure why since I’m worried about being cut myself, but convincing Tripp that won’t

happen somehow makes me feel better.

“But you told the doctor to send you the bill. That doesn’t mean you’re off the team?” He props his elbows on his knees and rests his head in his hands as if the room is spinning and that will stop it.

“It means the team won’t cover my expenses for injuries I incur on my personal time.”

He looks up at me, open-mouthed “Wow. Even my insurance covers me when I’m not working and I’m just a lowly artist.”

“I’m sure my insurance will cover it, it just won’t be free like it is if I get hurt during a game or while I’m training.”

“Still sounds shitty if you ask me.” His offended look is back, which makes my heart do this strange little flutter.

“It’s a business, and I’m a commodity.”

“That’s a very Thor thing to say.”

I cock my head to the side. “It is?”

“He downplays saving people because that’s his job. You’re downplaying your value because hockey is a business. Same thing, really. Speaking of heroes... You injured yourself trying to save an imaginary dog from an imaginary coyote?” The sly sparkle is back in his eye.

“The dog isn’t imaginary. It lives next door.”

“Uh, huh. You should’ve said you were running on the treadmill and the power went out. I bet they’d have considered that ‘*training.*’” He punctuates that with air quotes.

“I’ll use that excuse next time.” I bite back a smile, my first since getting hurt.

“Next time? Are you crazy? There will be no more funny business where you could get hurt. I’m not going to be responsible for you getting cut from

the team.”

“You aren’t responsible now. We’ve been through this.”

He dismisses me with a wave of his hand. “You need a bodysuit made out of bubble wrap. That way if you fall over there’s no damage, just a cool sound. Ooh…” He looks at me with wide eyes that are a little too green with mischief. “If you wear it while we’re fucking, we could make some pretty cool music. Can’t you hear it? Pop, pop, pop, moan. Pop, pop, grunt. I’d listen to that all day long. I’d probably get fired for having a perpetual boner, or at the very least I’d make an excellent case for why I should be allowed to work from home. Do you have any recording equipment? I have editing software but not recording equipment. Why are you crying?”

“I’m not,” I say as I wipe my eyes. “I’m trying not to laugh.”

“You have the same condition I do where you laugh at inappropriate times?” His brows draw together in confusion.

“This is an inappropriate time to laugh?” I blink away the last of my tears.

“Well, I was being serious.”

I honestly can’t tell if that’s true or not, but either way I feel better than I did a few minutes ago. “Thanks for staying. It helps having you here.”

“About that.” He sighs heavily. “You’re going to need help, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t put any weight on that foot. How are you going to make those fancy frozen meals for yourself or get cleaned up or…whatever else?”

I gnaw on my lip as I turn those words over in my mind. It’s been years, well over a decade, since anyone’s had to take care of me. Sure, I have someone that cooks meals for me to reheat, but minus the use of one leg even that will be hard to manage. And showering… That’s a slip hazard right there.

“Sounds like I’m gonna have to be a bath guy for the next few weeks.”

Tripp cracks a small smile at my lame joke. “Look, as much as you want me to believe I’m not responsible for this, I know better. I’m not saying I take all the blame.” He holds up a hand to stop me from objecting. “But I share the blame. So, it’d be pretty shitty of me to leave you like this. It’d make me no better than those douche canoes you play for.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying if you need someone to stick around and help you with, whatever, I can do that. I need to run home and grab some things, but I can come back.”

“You’d do that?” There goes my heart again, only this time the flutter spreads throughout my entire torso.

“You did it for me. When you thought I might have a concussion.”

“That was one night. This would be a lot more.”

“Spend a few nights in the most luxurious home I’ve seen in years? Twist my arm a little harder.”

“I think I heard you offer to help me shower.” I rub the bridge of my nose to cover my grin.

“Add a big dick on top of it? Now you’re catching on.” Tripp licks his upper lip suggestively. “Just make sure that healthy chef of yours leaves good instructions. Even if I’m only reheating shit that doesn’t mean I can’t still screw it up.”

“Actually, I’m sort of feeling like today would be a good cheat day. Maybe we could order in.”

“I am excellent at ordering delivery.” He shoots me a playful wink and hops off the couch. “I’m gonna run home and get some stuff for a few days, and when I get back, you can tell me what you want for your cheat dinner.”

“What about dessert?” I call after him as he makes his way to the garage.

“That’s where that big dick of yours comes in,” he hollers back.

Even the pulsating burn in my ankle can’t stop the goofy grin from spreading across my face.

## Chapter 16 – Tripp

“I can’t believe you brought your video game system over.” Noah shakes his head as he watches me connect my Xbox to his TV.

“We don’t know how long I’m going to have to play nurse, which I can’t do from my house.”

“You can’t do it here either, if you’re too busy gaming.” There’s a hint of humor in his voice, almost like he’s taunting me. I’m not sure when exactly he transitioned from timid big guy to flirtatious Norse god, but lately he seems to be coming out of his sexual shell, and I am so here for it. Who doesn’t like to flirt?

“I’m an excellent multi-tasker. Besides, Betty offers you one more thing to stay busy when you’re stuck sitting on your butt.”

“Betty?”

“The Xbox.” I finish the connection and turn it on to make sure everything’s working properly.

“Do you name all inanimate objects?”

“Only the ones I can’t live without. I…” The doorbell interrupts my train of thought. “That must be the food. I’ll get it.”

I feel Noah’s eyes on me as I stride to the door, so I put an extra little sway in my hips because...*duh*. Only it’s not the delivery guy standing on the front porch. It’s Niko and Xander, both of whom wear matching expressions of WTF when they see me. *Busted*. It’d be comical if it didn’t also mean I’m about to get my ass chewed.

“I don’t even want to know.” Xander shakes his head.

“Are you sure? It’s a really good story.” Not that I plan to tell him any of it, I’m just being honest. I mean, no one—least of all me—could’ve predicted that *I’d* be responsible for the well-being of another person. That’s quality entertainment right there.

“I want to know,” Niko says.

“Trust me, you don’t. Not unless you want a mental picture of what these two have been getting up to.” Xander shudders. *Rude.*

“Yeah, maybe I don’t then. Is Noah in there?” Niko jerks his head toward the living room, and I step aside so he can enter.

“Your dad called you?” I ask Xander when we’re alone.

“He did. Told us Noah was laid up and to come check on him. Luca and Justus should be here any minute too. He left your name out of the conversation, though.”

“I would hope so since he doesn’t know I’m here.”

“Why are you here exactly? Spare me the salacious details, just the facts.”

*Boring.* “Remember how I said Noah felt guilty about me hitting my head?” When Xander nods I continue. “I left out the part where he stayed at my place to make sure I was okay. I’m returning the favor.”

“You told me, and I quote, my cock hasn’t met his ass or vice versa.” Xander gives me a stern once-over and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“And that was true. *Then.*”

His eyes fall shut as he takes a deep breath, I assume to calm himself although based on the color in his cheeks I don’t think it’s working. “And now?”

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

“You literally do. All the time.”

“Yes, but I haven’t kissed him so there’s nothing to tell.”

“You’ve done something else though.” Xander arches a knowing brow, daring me to deny it.

“Is that a problem?”

“It is when the guy you’re playing with doesn’t play for our team.”

“In my defense, I’m not the first guy to show him my dick.”

Xander chuffs and rolls his eyes. “Locker rooms don’t count.”

“I never said it was in a locker room.”

“You’re telling me he’d already been with men before you started messing with him?”

“Not *with* men, but not a good little straight boy either.”

“What does that even mean?” Xander’s brows draw together.

“That’s up to Noah to share, if he wants. Just know I didn’t corrupt the Norse god. Ooh, dinner’s here. And more company.” I step around Xander to pay the delivery guy and take the pizzas we ordered as Luca and Justus step onto the porch, then strut back inside like my best friend didn’t just assume the worst of me. Even if I sort of deserve it. “Will you guys be joining us?” I ask the group as I make my way to the kitchen.

“Pizza?” Luca asks as he follows me inside. “Oh shit, is your season over?” He turns to Noah with a panicked expression.

“I was just telling Niko it’s not that bad,” Noah says.

“Um, excuse me, but how do we make the leap from pizza to season ending?” I set the boxes on the counter and start opening cupboards, looking for plates.

“Noah’s on a strict diet during the season.” Justus shrugs. “Pizza isn’t on it.”

“I figured a shit day might as well be a cheat day too,” Noah says. “But I’ll be back on the diet tomorrow.”

“Is this one of those ‘you have to eat bland food because you’re old’ things?” I hand Noah a plate with three slices, ignoring how way too many sets of eyes are watching our exchange.

“It’s one of those ‘a good diet ensures I can play a long time’ things,” he answers.

“Oh right. I see the difference.” I manage to keep a straight face even though I snort. “You all better grab some or there will be leftovers and I can’t be held responsible if this guy makes it two cheat days in a row.” I plop down next to Noah and take an oversized bite so I can give my mouth something to do other than talk, which I know they’re all expecting. Normally, I would, but in this case, I need to follow Noah’s lead, and since I don’t know what he wants to share during circle time, I plan to keep my mouth too full to put my foot in it.

One by one, the guys help themselves to a slice and join us on the couch, listening intently as Noah explains his prognosis, and looking slightly less pale when he assures them the timeframe for his return isn’t just getting back in goal, but being one hundred percent.

“Will you be at practice to help get Gauthier ready?” Niko asks.

I assume that’s the backup goalie.

“Coach wants me to lay low until I’m not visibly limping so no one can speculate what my injury is,” Noah says.

“Why?” Justus looks at his teammates in turn, clearly confused.

“Some guys would do anything for an advantage, including targeting someone’s weakness,” Luca says between bites. “Blaise on the Rockets is one of them, and we play them in a few weeks.”

“Seriously? That’s...” Justus trails off with a horrified expression.

“Um, how are you even a hockey player?” I ask him.

“What?”

“You seem genuinely shocked that there might be competitive assholes on the ice with you. How do you get to this level and not realize this is a brutal sport?” I clarify.

“I mean, you can be brutal but still play a clean game.” Justus’s little cheeks flush pink. *For real, how is he a pro?*

“Not everyone has your skill.” Luca bumps him with an elbow, and I swear he gets even redder.

“Gauthier is totally capable.” Noah gets us all back on track. “He doesn’t have my reflexes, but he has good instincts. He plays smart. He’ll obviously lean on you guys more than I do since he doesn’t get as much playing time, but he’ll keep us in contention, and I’ll be back with more than half the season left.”

“You won’t be traveling with the team?” Luca’s voice is steady, but the way his eyes dart to Noah’s is anything but.

So he's the one Noah was talking about...

“Sorry.” Noah looks conflicted as he shakes his head. “We’ll figure something out.”

*Figure something out? Does that mean... Whoa, did I just flare my nostrils?*

“Yeah. Okay.” Luca offers a weak smile.

Noah takes a deep breath and taps my leg, pointing to his crutches. “I need to use the bathroom.”

I grab his oversize walking sticks and offer him a hand to pull him off the couch, making sure he’s steady before stepping out of his way. Then, out of the goodness of my heart with no ulterior motive whatsoever I ask, “Need me to hold your dick for you while you piss?”

Noah chuckles and shakes his head. “I think I’ve got it.”

“Always trying to get in his pants,” Niko laughs, completely oblivious to Xander’s wary gaze.

“I mean he has to take it out and have steady aim all while balancing on one leg. It’s a hazard if you ask me. Holding his dick is a small sacrifice to make sure he heals quickly.”

Niko rolls his eyes. “That sounds like something my sister would say.”

“I told you we’re two halves of a whole.” I point at Xander as I sit back down. “When is she coming back? I need a good night of debauchery.”

“I thought you were gay?” Justus looks at me with wide eyes.

“Not that kind of debauchery. The getting drunk and playing silly games kind. Maybe we’ll do Truth or Dare this time.”

“No one is allowed to fuck my sister,” Niko warns.

“Why would anyone do that?” Justus still looks comically aghast.

“The last time she was here we played kiss, marry, fuck. It’s usually kiss, marry, kill, but we didn’t like the idea of un-aliving anyone, so we amended the rules. Anna said she’d fuck Luca,” I explain.

“And you can’t dare her to do it.” Niko points a finger at me.

“But that’s a guaranteed win,” I protest.

“How do you figure?” Luca asks.

“Easy. You’d never sleep with your teammate’s sister behind his back.”

“You don’t know me that well.” Luca smirks.

“You’d sleep with Anna?” Niko glares at him.

“Of course not.” Luca holds his hands up like he’s innocent. “I’m just saying Tripp shouldn’t bank on other people being honorable to secure his win.”

“Who’s winning what?” Noah crutches back into the room.

“I’m winning Truth or Dare. Did you hit the target?” I smile sweetly up at

him.

“I didn’t get to pick if I wanted truth or dare,” he replies, and the fact that he jumped right into my imaginary game without missing a beat does unspeakable things to my resolve to stay in the fuck buddy zone.

*Bad Tripp! Everyone’s playing your silly game, no need to get feelings about Noah doing it.*

“It’s more of a hypothetical game.” I shake my head to clear it.

“Hypothetically speaking then, I pick truth. I think dare would be a bad idea under the circumstances.” Noah half sits, half falls onto the couch, setting his crutches on the floor.

“Are you really sure about Gauthier?” Niko asks.

“Promise to go back on your game diet tomorrow?” Justus talks over him.

“Are you and Tripp fucking?” *Well, that escalated quickly. I didn’t realize you were paying attention, Luca.*

The questions are asked on top of each other so it’s sort of hard to pick them out, but apparently Noah got the gist. “Yes, to all,” he says. And the room goes quiet.

“You’re... bi?” I’ve never seen Luca look so off-kilter. I suppose learning the guy you’ve jerked off in front of might not have been as impartial to the view as you first thought could be jarring. Especially, if you don’t also know that he really was impartial.

“I don’t know what I am.” Noah lifts a nonchalant shoulder.

“Hello?” Niko points to himself. “I could’ve helped with that.”

Xander slaps his chest with the back of his wrist. “Excuse me?”

“Not like that.” Niko grabs Xander’s hand and threads their fingers together. “I mean you could’ve talked to me,” he tells Noah.

“I appreciate that, but I think this is something I need to work through on

my own,” Noah says.

“Fair enough. Is this something you want to stay in this room?” Niko’s gaze darts between the two of us.

“Don’t look at me. This is his journey of self-discovery.” I jerk my thumb toward Noah. “I’m just the lucky guy who gets to introduce him to the dark side.”

Niko stifles a chuckle—he’s such a sci-fi nerd, I knew my Star Wars reference would get him—but for some reason I have trouble finding the humor in my own joke, which is so wrong since it *should* be funny.

“Sorry,” Noah says sheepishly. “I should’ve asked if you were okay with telling them before I said anything.”

“I don’t care if they know you like my dick.” I wink.

“Do you care if other people know?” Noah asks.

“Hell no. It’s good for my reputation.”

“Tripp,” Xander groans.

“Kidding.” I hold up my hands innocently and stick my tongue out at him before turning to Noah. “I’m an open book, big guy. You can say whatever you want about us, but maybe keep it to this room until you know what you want to tell people about yourself and your personal life.”

“You could always do what Niko did and say nothing at all,” Justus says. “Just live your life and not answer any questions that don’t pertain to hockey.”

“Maybe,” Noah says. “Either way, I think I’d like to understand myself better before I make any decisions.”

“So, uh. Tripp is going to help you while you’re laid up?” Luca breaks his silence for the first time since asking *the question*.

“Yes.”

“No offense, but shouldn’t you have...someone else? Like one of the team doctors or something?” Luca ducks his head, so he doesn’t have to meet my eyes.

“Uh, offense taken. I’m perfectly capable of ordering take out. You’re eating the evidence right now.” I point out.

“He’s got that special diet though.” Justus bites his lip like he’s unsure if he should’ve spoken up.

“And he’s got a chef to make those meals for him, which I can heat up just as well as anyone.” Why I’m defending my caretaking abilities when they’re abysmal at best I have no idea, but I don’t particularly like the thought of anyone else doing it. *Time for that intervention, Xander. I know you’re skeptical, call me out, stop me before I completely lose my sanity.*

“It’s up to Noah who he wants to help him,” Niko says. “And team doctors travel with the team. Tripp doesn’t, so it makes sense to have someone not associated with the team to help out.”

“Not a resounding yes but I’ll take it.” I give Niko a nod of thanks even as I ask myself why I care. “Besides, he can’t get the same healing with the doctors he can get from me.”

“Sexual healing isn’t a thing.” Xander shakes his head.

“Of course, it is. There’s even a song about it.”

“Yeah dude, I don’t think that’s what the song is about,” Luca agrees with Xander.

“Even if it isn’t, who wouldn’t appreciate a toe-curling orgasm when they’re otherwise unable to move?”

“Good point,” Niko says, rubbing his chest when Xander smacks him again. “What? If I couldn’t skate, sex would keep my morale up.”

“Morale is important when you’re injured.” Justus looks around the room

bashfully before adding, “ACL tear three years ago.”

“And sex kept you going?” I ask.

“I didn’t really have anyone for that, but I can’t see it being a bad thing.”

He ducks his head to rub the back of his neck.

“Unless it puts more strain on the injury,” Luca snorts.

I don’t know whether he’s out of sorts about the fact his little pre-game ritual is being threatened, or the fact that *I’m* the one Noah is playing nurse with. Either way, while I’d love to poke that bear, it wouldn’t benefit the big guy, so I’ll be good.

“All kidding aside, the reason I’m here right now is to help Noah. If he wants that to include sex, I’m game as long as we’re careful of his ankle. If all he wants is someone to bring him food and listen to him rant about how much he’d rather be on the ice, I’m game for that too. He gets to decide how I can help him best. Besides, I can’t gloat about sleeping with a hockey player if he’s not actually playing hockey, so…” *Okay so I put my own spin on it. I was still good.*

“Makes sense,” Justus says softly as Luca nods—almost imperceptibly but I’m counting it.

“We should probably all head out. We’ve gotta get up early to catch our flight for the next game.” Niko tugs Xander off the couch with him as he stands, Luca and Justus following suit.

Since Noah can’t see them out, I do it, trailing them all to the door and promising to let them know how their goalie is doing while they’re on the road. I’m about to close the door when Xander pauses and turns back to face me.

“I’m right down the street if you need anything.” The fact that he didn’t issue another warning, but rather offered to help, makes me a little nervous.

Does that mean he thinks I can actually take care of the big guy, or that he doesn't object to me sleeping with him? Both would be a reversal of his initial impressions, which means he saw something just now to make him change his mind. I'm not sure I want to know what that is, so I give him a curt nod in response and shut the door.

## Chapter 17 – Noah

“I really am sorry for blurting that out. About us,” I tell Tripp as he comes back from showing everyone out.

He waves me off and starts clearing the plates the guys left behind. “And I really don’t care if they know you want my dick. I’ve made no secret about wanting yours.”

“That doesn’t make it okay for me to tell them without your permission.”

“I’m already out, big guy, so it’s not like you broke some sort of sacred trust. Besides.” He sets the plates in the kitchen and comes back to sit on the opposite end of the couch, leaning one arm across the back and spreading his legs wide. “I have no shame when it comes to sex. Tell them your cock is my favorite meal, that you like to top, show them one of my dick pics, I literally don’t care.”

“You have dick pics?”

“Spectacular, remember.” He waggles his eyebrows.

“I don’t have any. And if I did, I wouldn’t share them.” Damn, I wish my voice didn’t sound so small, but I’m having a hard time reconciling the fact he wouldn’t care if I showed people such an intimate picture of him.

“You wouldn’t share your dick pics with me?” he pouts.

“I meant I don’t have any pictures of you.” I shake my head back and forth. “And like I said, if I did, I wouldn’t share them.”

“Well, I guess bragging about your fuck buddy’s incredible cock loses some luster when your only gay friend is already spoken for.”

“No, I mean if I had any pictures, they’d be just for me. I wouldn’t want anyone else to see you the way I get to.” Though Tripp doesn’t move an inch, his whole body seems to tense up, and I can tell I’ve said too much. “You know, since you said you wouldn’t sleep around while we’re... I figure that includes dick pics. No sharing.”

“Uh, huh.” His head bobs once, slowly. “Is Luca freaking out because you won’t be around to play voyeur?”

I recognize his attempt to change the subject, but I figure since he’s still here after my slip up I’ll play along.

“You caught that, huh?”

“Kind of hard not to,” I admit.

“Yeah, he probably is.”

“That whole thing seems like a weird superstition, and that’s coming from me.” Tripp points to his chest. “How does that even become a pregame ritual?”

“I never asked. When he first told me about it, he said it was something he’d been doing for years, and that’s all I needed to know. You don’t mess with a guy’s superstition or ask for details, you just accept it.”

“What’s yours?” Curious green eyes meet mine.

“I just told you, you don’t ask for details.” I bite back a grin.

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.” He grins back. “So, why didn’t you ask Niko for advice about...things?” He swivels his wrist to finish the thought. “Is it because he’s so young?”

“He may be young in age but mentally he’s so much more mature than most of our teammates, and it’s clear he’s pretty comfortable with who he is. He would’ve been a good person to talk to if I knew what questions to ask.

Although, asking my rookie teammate to help me figure out my sexuality probably wouldn't have made the best impression."

"Because you're the captain?"

"And one of the older guys on the team. I'm supposed to have my shit figured out by this point in life. That's what the new guys expect."

"I know guys who didn't figure their shit out until their mid-forties." Tripp snorts. "One of them raised two kids before he sorted himself. And it's not just sexuality either. Some people don't find their calling until later."

"I hear you." I play with the hem of my shorts while I get my thoughts in order. "The thing is, it's sort of my job to take care of the new guys. Show them the ropes and make them comfortable and stuff. The coaches rely on me for that. And everyone looks to me as the example of what to do. How to train and what to eat and how to behave. How can I be anyone's good example when I can't even answer a basic question about who I am? That's why I couldn't ask Niko, or any of them, to help me."

"You know when I compare you to Thor that's mostly an appearance thing, right? I'm not actually calling you a god."

"I... What?"

"Gods are perfect. People aren't. Flaws are what make us interesting. Not that having questions about yourself is a flaw, but if you were perfect, all your little hero worshippers would be suffering crippling anxiety from trying to live up to your greatness. Being less than perfect but still trying to set a good example gives them something achievable to work toward."

When I do little more than let my jaw hang open Tripp points to his hair. "Dye job, not a state of mind. Oh wait." He frowns. "I forgot it's not blond anymore."

I can't help but smile at his defeated expression as he realizes his punchline

missed the mark. “I’m not speechless because you said something insightful.”

“Really?” He arches a skeptical brow.

“No. I’m speechless because I just now realized I’ve spent years setting the wrong example. And because that’s the most words I’ve heard you string together without saying dick.” I bite the corner of my lip to temper my grin, hoping that gesture will lighten things up since I know serious Tripp is prone to getting skittish, and I don’t want him to go anywhere.

He grabs a throw pillow and hucks it at me. “Dick.”

“Uh, you ruined it.”

“Not possible. Everything is so much better when dicks are involved.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

He drops to the floor and crawls between my legs, careful not to nudge the one propped on the coffee table, smiling up at me with wicked intent as he reaches for the waistband of my shorts. “Dessert.”

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“Watch the fast break. Come out of the crease, not too far. He’s gonna fake right. He’s gonna fake right. Nice stop.” I punch the air.

We’re tied in the last period of the first game I’m missing—everyone is stepping up to help give Gauthier the best chance of success—and while he’s let one get past him, he’s holding his own. It helps that our forward line is one of the best in the league, keeping the pressure on the other end of the rink. It’s a small comfort under the circumstances, especially since I’m not on the bench with them.

I get why coach wants me to lay low—speculation about my injury is just that—whereas confirmation could put a target on what people perceive as my weak side. But the inability to talk to Gauthier during the game puts us at a disadvantage. Even though it’s still early in the season, losses can add up.

And though I meant what I said about Gauthier being capable, if we end up falling behind that will be on me.

“Ice.” Tripp hovers over me with the pack, and I reluctantly lift my ankle off the cushion on the coffee table so he can wrap the cold pack around it. It’s the fourth time he’s issued this order today, and while I want to appreciate it, I find myself being bothered.

“I thought you said you were a horrible caregiver?”

He flicks his head, clearing the emerald strands of hair from his eyes in a way that’s both casual and sexy as he reaches for his phone. “Turns out it’s not so hard when you program reminders in the calendar.”

“You actually put reminders in there to take care of me?”

“Seemed like the best way to make sure I didn’t fuck up.” He taps away at the screen and sets his phone by my foot so I can see the numbers tick down before joining me on the couch. “Twenty minutes.”

I grunt, not because the ice is cold, but because everything feels wrong. Being here while my team is gone. Being confined to the couch. Being taken care of. I guess if anyone has to do it, I’m glad it’s Tripp, because he’s got a way of putting me at ease when I’m mentally or emotionally uncomfortable. But right now, even though he’s going out of his way to help me, I’m finding it hard to feel grateful. Or calm.

“He’s going around back. He’s shooting. Watch the ricochet.”

“You know he can’t hear you, right?” Tripp says as Gauthier clears the puck.

I lift my shoulder, keeping my eyes glued to the TV as Niko takes the puck across center ice, passing it to Justus, who skates behind the net and fires off a rapid pass to Luca. The tiny opening Luca had closes as soon as the puck

hits his stick, so he passes it off and skates around two defensemen, trying to put himself in position to receive another pass and take a clean shot.

One of the defenders gets a lucky break—the puck hits his skate so the pass to Luca goes off course—rocketing back towards our goal. Bodies scramble to chase it down, and unfortunately the two closest ones belong to the forwards on the opposing team. They pass it back and forth as they drive toward Gauthier, leaving him in a situation where he can't challenge one without giving the other what amounts to a free shot. All he can do is lurk in the goal and hope his reflexes are fast enough to stop the shot that eventually comes.

They aren't.

Lights flash above the goal as the puck hits the back of the net, and I try to talk him down from hundreds of miles away. “Shake it off. You couldn't have stopped it anyway.”

“Why not?” Tripp asks. “The last time he moved out of the circle thingy and blocked the shot. Why didn't he do it again?”

I take the ice pack off and toss it on the floor with ten minutes left on the timer. “Last time was a one-on-one. This time if he came out of the circle to take on the guy with the puck, he'd be leaving the other guy wide open. That's a guaranteed goal. By staying close to the net, he had a fifty-fifty chance of being in the right spot to stop whoever ultimately took the shot.”

“That's not what the TV's saying.”

I turn the volume up so I can hear the commentators. “You're right John. Two on one is hard to defend, but if Gauthier had drifted slightly left to take on Dubois, he could've blocked the pass to Saunders, which would've bought time for his defense to get back in position. Tremblay would've made that play.”

“Blowhards,” I mumble under my breath. “Neither of those two played goalie. They have no idea what they’re talking about. Just stirring up shit.”

“The Bulldogs could really be in a tight spot without Tremblay,” the commentator says. “We still don’t know what’s keeping him off the ice, and if the team falls too far out of the lead before his return, they won’t make the playoffs.”

I grab the remote and hit the mute button, tossing it on the table in disgust and reaching for my phone.

“What are you doing?” Tripp asks.

“Texting the guys not to let Gauthier listen to any of the post-game talk. It’s all bullshit, and it could really mess with his game if he takes it to heart.”

“What’s bullshit? The part about Gauthier or the part about you?”

“All of it. Gauthier’s playing well, and I’m not gonna be out that long. These guys are talking just to talk. None of it’s accurate.”

“So, you couldn’t have stopped that shot like that guy said?”

“If I did it would’ve been luck. I wouldn’t have played it any different than Gauthier did, that’s for sure. I wish I could tell him that in person.” I sigh and collapse into the cushions behind me. *One more week. One more week before I can start rehab and get off this damn couch.* I bolt up and reach for my crutches.

“Where are you going?” Tripp asks.

“I don’t know.” I push myself off the couch and crutch toward the kitchen.

“Are you always this jittery, or only when you’re supposed to be sitting still?” His voice is close enough that I assume he’s following me.

“Asks the guy who literally bounces up and down while he’s playing video games,” I chuff.

“You were holding my joystick, so...”

“That’s...” I shake my head back and forth. “Can’t you ever be serious?”

“When the situation calls for it.”

“You don’t think this is a serious situation?”

“What I think is you’re so used to playing the role of Mr. Perfect that you haven’t let yourself get pissed about your ankle, and you’re starting to buckle under all this pressure of pretending you’re fine.”

“I...what?” My chest heaves as I try to keep myself from shouting.

“You’ve never let yourself feel angry or sad or guilty about getting hurt, which I’m guessing is why you can’t sit still and have been prickly all day. This shit sucks. Get angry.”

“I already told you this isn’t your fault.”

“And I didn’t say to get angry at me, just to *get angry*.”

My nostrils flare as I take a deep breath, preparing to defend myself. Only I can’t, because every bit of what he said is true. I am trying to stay in control, and I don’t know how to handle the fact that I’m not. My skin is crawling due to the overabundance of restless energy, anger and guilt, none of which Tripp deserves to bear the brunt of. That’s hard to remember when he’s smirking at me though, daring me to take his bait.

“Fuck!” I shout.

“There you go.” Tripp winks.

“There I go?” My volume is still abnormally high, but I’m no longer shouting. “There you go, being a brat again.”

“You seem to like it.”

“What?” I seethe.

“You’re reacting. Showing some emotion. That’s good.”

“How would you know? Your only emotion is not giving a shit.”

The wince is so slight I’m not even sure it’s real, though before I can regret

my words, he pastes a blank look on his face. “We aren’t talking about me.”

“We could be, Mr. I don’t do relationships.”

“Yeah, but we’re not. Right now, this is about you, and how it’s okay for you to not be perfect and in control all the time.

“You want me to lose control?” My hands are gripping the crutches so hard my knuckles are white.

“If that’s what’ll get your head right.”

“Don’t bait me.”

“Or what? You’ll throw something. Punch a wall. Fuck me.” He licks his lip suggestively.

“Typical. Always thinking about dicks,” I mutter, shaking my head.

“Have you ever hate-fucked anyone?”

That’s not the response I’m expecting. “What? Why the hell would I do that? Those two things don’t really go together.”

“They do when you need an outlet, and you have a fuck buddy who likes it rough.”

“I don’t need a fuck buddy right now! I need to be on the ice, with my team.”

“But you can’t.” Tripp steps so close our chests are practically touching. “And that’s driving you mad so stop trying to pretend it doesn't piss you off.”

“Of course, it pisses me off.” The damn breaks as I let go of my crutch to grab him by the back of the neck. “I’m here while my team is gone, they’re losing because of me, and you...” The words die on my tongue as I realize our faces are so close, we’re breathing each other’s air.

Time seems to stand still as our gazes lock, Tripp’s green eyes glinting in triumph. Then our chests brush together on a precarious inhale, and the room around us fades away as every lingering noise is drowned out by our heavy

exhales. Trapped in this little bubble, fear and desire ripple through me, fighting for dominance. There's a split second where fear almost wins, where I nearly reign in my aggression and pretend I'm not coiled so tight I'm about to erupt.

I should step away... We have an unspoken rule to never kiss. Yet, as I stand here, like I've been placed under some sort of spell, I can't bring myself to move. Hell, I forget how to blink, and the only understandable thought in my mind is how badly I want to kiss him—to devour him.

Closing the distance between us, I smash my mouth against his, moaning when our tongues meet, and I realize he's not fighting me. He's matching me in desperation and intensity, stealing my breath as he gives me his own.

Whether this is part of his challenge to get me to let loose or because he wants it as badly as I do, I don't know. Don't care. I just know that the rough brush of our lips, the scrape of stubble along my jaw, is the most intoxicating thing I've ever felt.

I want to claim him, to slam him against the wall and wrap his legs around my waist. The urge to make him mine is consuming, but I'm fully willing to give myself over to him in return. I let my other crutch fall to the floor and give him my weight, so we topple onto the couch.

Tripp doesn't miss a beat as I fall on top of him, lips and teeth and tongues tangling in a frenzy of lust. He bites my bottom lip just hard enough to sting before licking away the burn and delving inside my mouth, groaning as his hips rut against mine.

Hands rake through my hair, down my back, groping my ass. Mine are just as eager, clutching at Tripp's arms, chest, and head, trapping his mouth against mine and swallowing the sounds he makes.

I've kissed people before—women—and while it was often soft and gentle,

there were times it became hurried and needy. But it was never passionate. It never consumed me or flooded my senses. It never threatened to drown out the world until the only sensation left was the feel of my partner's lips.

My chest aches with want. My heart beats like it does when the seconds tick down on the clock and I'm desperately trying to hang on for the win. That's never happened with another person—only the game. The game I'm not playing right now.

The anger that had started to dissipate comes roaring back, mixing with the adrenaline and desire. It makes me crave Tripp with an almost feral need.

Somewhere, in the deepest recesses of my mind, a voice tells me to slow down. That I'm too unhinged. Then Tripp slides his hands under my shirt and rakes his nails down my back. "I need you. Now."

We're a tangle of limbs as we race to shed our clothes, miraculously staying on the couch as we contort ourselves to get naked. Then Tripp leans over the arm, sticking his ass toward me, and hands me a small packet of lube.

I lean forward and growl into his ear. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Boy Scout motto. Always be prepared." He rocks back and forth, trying to rub his crease along my length.

"You were a boy scout?"

"Fuck no, but you never know when you might get the chance to play with a fat cock."

I don't know if it's the obnoxious words or the visual of my dick resting between his cheeks. Either way, the thought of anyone but me seeing him like this suddenly has me seeing red, and before my mind can catch up my palm cracks down on his ass.

"Oh fuck," he moans, rocking backward. "I didn't know you had it in you, big guy, but I like it. Again. With your cock in me."

His command has precum practically dripping from my slit. *Have I ever been this hard before?* I rush to get myself nice and slick and line up to his hole.

“Don’t be gentle.” Tripp looks at me over his shoulder, biting the lip that’s still puffy from my kisses.

I punch forward as I grip his hip and pull him toward me, nearly losing it when my intrusion makes his eyes flutter closed in bliss. *God, he’s beautiful.* Then I smack him again.

Tripp’s mouth falls open on a guttural moan as his hole clenches around me, gripping me so tight I have to choke off the air in my lungs to keep my body from tipping over the edge. *Holy...* I smack him again as I thrust my hips forward, and it happens once more, only this time my lungs give out, and I let out an animalistic groan of my own.

Just as before, all my restraint seems to evaporate, and I give in to my baser urges. My hips piston forward relentlessly as I latch onto Tripp’s waist for support, pulling his body over my cock as I drive it deep.

The pleasure is so intense my vision blurs, the slip and slide of our joined bodies engulfing me in a carnal nirvana unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. It’s as if every nerve in my body has gone on vacation, except for the ones cocooned inside Tripp’s body, and they’re on high alert, crackling and zinging over and over again like fireworks as they build toward the finale.

Grunting, I push toward the precipice, the feel of Tripp’s cock slapping my leg driving me forward. Then a sharp tug on my balls turns that grunt to a needy whine. I gasp as I realize he’s squeezing both our sacs in his palm.

“Not yet, big guy. I can still hear the guilty voices in your head. No coming til they’re gone,” he commands.

Planting my right foot on the ground for leverage, I thrust as hard and fast as my body will allow, the smack of skin on skin drowning out the post-game coverage on the TV. The speculation about me, and the team, and our future. All the noise that threatened to send me careening into an abyss of anger and self-pity, before Tripp gave me his body as a lifeline.

*Jesus. How does he understand me so well? How does he know what I need before I do? How does he make me feel whole?*

“Harder.” Tripp's order has me realizing my pace has started to slow. “Get out of your head and fuck me.”

With renewed focus I drive into Tripp's slick hole, losing myself to the friction and pressure that surrounds me as I tunnel into him.

“That's it, big guy. Give me all of you. Everything.” He lets go of our balls and grips his cock with a throaty groan, and I find a rhythm that borders on frantic, pounding into him relentlessly as my mind finally quiets, allowing my body full control.

My abs burn, my thighs twitch, and my cock feels like it's chafing despite the slickness surrounding it. And then his hole clamps down like a pressure cooker, squeezing me to the point of pain. My toes curl and cramp, my balls draw up tight, and I unload like a damn firehose, filling him so fast my cum seeps out and slides down our thighs.

The room goes dark as my release fades, my body too spent to hold my eyelids open, and I collapse against Tripp's back. My weight causes his arms to give out, and as we fall against the cushions. Our sweaty skin is just slippery enough that my torso slides off his, coming to rest between his warm body and the back of the couch, though our legs are still tangled.

“I hope you pay your cleaning lady well because I painted my entire load on your sofa,” Tripp mumbles beside me.

“I’ll just flip the cushion.”

“And leave my jizz there as a memento? First a spanking and now this? Kinky.”

“I didn’t spank you to be kinky. You were talking about always being ready to fuck, but you don’t need to carry hookup supplies around when we’re in *my* house.”

Tripp shifts to lay on his side so he can face me, eyebrow arched impishly. “Hate sex doesn’t go so well if you have to say, *‘please hold while I try to remember where I put the lube.’*”

“Was that hate sex?” I set my hand on his hip, focusing on the way my fingers glide over his skin instead of the look I might see in his eyes.

“What did it feel like?”

“Salvation.”

He snort-laughes. “I know I’m a good fuck, but you’re giving me too much credit.”

“I’m serious.” I swallow thickly, risking a quick glance at his face before I study my hand again. “I was about to spiral, and you stopped it. That doesn’t feel like hate.”

“It’s not. But hate fucking has a better ring to it than get it out of your system fucking,” he says airily.

“Why would you let me do that to you?”

“You needed it.” I feel him shrug. “And in case you didn’t notice, I happen to *really* like it.”

“I was pretty rough. I’m not even sure I was aware of what I was doing half the time. I could’ve hurt you.” My fingers flex and release on his hip as if to punctuate my words.

“You let go of your control, just like I asked you to. Do you feel better?”

“Yes and no.” I swallow again. “I’m not as angry, but I’m a little confused.”

“About what?”

“I’ve never been that way off the ice.”

“What way?”

“Aggressive. Unhinged.”

“I believe you’re saying *hot as fuck* wrong.” Tripp trails a finger between my pecs, making me shiver.

“What?” I half-scoff, half-chuckle.

“I mean, you’re always hot, but wanting me so bad you literally can’t control yourself...” His finger ghosts over my nipple. “Damn.”

“Your ego knows no bounds.” I grab his hand, holding it next to my chest.

“What can I say, I’m blessed.” He shifts again so he’s laying on his back, his hand falling out of my grip, while I’m still on my side, facing him.

“I kissed you.” I press, resting my hand on his lean stomach.

“True.”

“And you kissed me back.”

“Also, true.”

“Why?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Felt right at the time I guess.”

I want to ask if that means we’re more than fuck buddies, but I have a feeling this conversation is already testing his limits, and as long as he’s not saying we shouldn’t do that again I won’t push it.

“I thought the same thing. We should probably clean up.”

“You mean we should see if I really did ruin your couch?” He waggles his eyebrows.

“I don’t give a shit about the couch. Help me up. I dropped my crutches

when I tackled you.”

Tripp hunts down my crutches and holds them steady as I struggle to stand up, frowning slightly as I make my way out toward my bedroom.

“That’s something you don’t see every day,” he mutters.

“What?”

“A naked man hobbling around on crutches. I wouldn’t expect it to be hot but... It makes the muscles in your back ripple all sexy like, and your ass jiggles when you plant your foot.”

“Jiggles?” I huff, rolling my eyes. “I’m already laid up, don’t take the rest of my dignity by saying jiggles.”

“It’s a compliment.”

“It doesn’t feel like one. Walk ahead of me. Go start the shower.”

Tripp pinches my ass and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Brat.” I grumble as I watch his sexy ass strut down the hall, a goofy grin plastered on my face.

## Chapter 18 – Tripp

“What?” Noah asks hesitantly when he catches me watching him from the corner of my eye.

“Nothing.” I glance back at the TV, pretending I’ve been watching it since he plopped down next to me.

“You know how you chew the corner of your lip when you’re dying to say something people might find offensive and you’re wondering if the backlash will be worth it?”

“No.” *Note to self, don’t chew on my lip when I’m debating whether to open my mouth.* “I don’t ever wonder if the backlash is worth it. I don’t care.”

“Depends on how offensive you’re about to get. And toward who. So, out with it.”

“Out with what?” I ask innocently, which Noah answers with a heavy sigh. “Fine. I was just thinking that for a hockey god who’s got possibly the best body I’ve ever had the pleasure of climbing, you’re looking awfully winded after walking ten yards.”

“Crutches are exhausting.”

“You’re only using one. You’re practically walking.”

“I’m mostly trying not to fall.”

“Still, shouldn’t you have more...stamina?”

I totally didn’t mean for that word choice to be so charged, but I can’t say I don’t love the wave of lust that glazes his eyes.

“Noah Tremblay, get your head out of the gutter.”

“You dragged me down there.” His bashful smile damn near makes me crack one of my own. *This man is too gorgeous for his own good.*

“That’s getting easier and easier to do. But as much as I like how your mind immediately conjured an image of me bouncing on your cock, I’m genuinely worried. You look worn out.”

Noah’s smile fades to a strained grin. “The swelling is just... It makes my foot feel tight, like it doesn’t fit in my skin. And that pain makes walking a lot harder than it looks.”

Cocking my head to the side, I study the ankle he has propped on the coffee table. “I guess it does still look pretty puffy. Can they juice it?”

“Juice it?” He wrinkles his nose in disgust.

“Don’t give me that look. I didn’t come up with the term. Willy Wonka did.”

“Willy Wonka?”

“You know, the candy guy in that movie? When that girl turns into a giant blueberry they take her to the juicing room, I think. We should take you to get juiced.”

He laughs, looking at me like I’m both absurd and amusing. “The only way to get swelling down is time. Although, I suppose a massage wouldn’t hurt.”

“A massage?” Now it’s my turn to wrinkle my nose. “You want a foot massage?”

“I mean, if you’re offering—”

“I’m not. Nope. Not offering that.”

“You don’t like giving massages?”

“I don’t like touching feet.” I shudder at the thought.

“Let me get this straight, you’d happily stick a finger up my ass but not touch my feet?” The gleam in his eye says he’s baiting me, but I’m too

grossed out to take it. There's one body part I don't love on anybody, and I don't plan to start now.

"You haven't let me put my finger in your ass yet, but yes. I'd take that over touching your feet."

"What about my swelling?" He adopts this wounded puppy look that's so fucking cute words spill out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"Will that extra fluid go to your dick and make it supersized?"

"No." His lips split into a wide grin as he laughs at my pout.

"Would you let me put my finger in your ass?" *I can't believe I'm playing along with this, but he really does have the nicest, roundest, most beautifully jiggly butt and I desperately want a piece of it.*

"Maybe."

"Fine," I huff. "Give me your foot."

A heavy weight finds its way to my lap, and with my eyes closed I tentatively reach for it.

"If it grosses you out that bad you don't have to touch it." Noah starts to pull his leg back, but I hold it firmly.

"Just... Distract me." I gently knead the squishy skin around his ankle, telling myself it's an ass cheek.

"What made you get into skateboarding?"

"I already told you. It's uncivilized."

"You could say the same thing about hockey."

"I suppose, although if a sport costs thousands of dollars to play, most people would say aggressive or even violent, not uncivilized." *Did he just sigh? Maybe he's pretending I'm rubbing his ass too.*

"So, if it cost money your parents would support it, and if it didn't they'd hate it, so you went with the one they'd hate?"

“And here I thought hockey players were just dumb jocks.”

“Not a dye job, but also not a state of mind.” I open my eyes to see Noah pointing at his hair, and roll my own before getting back to my imaginary butt massage.

“Did you get to pick hockey or did your Canadian roots decide for you?” I ask.

“Both. It was pretty much expected that I learn the game, but when I started growing and realized I have solid reflexes for my size, it became something I wanted to get better at.”

“I bet your parents are psyched about that.”

“They were.”

“Were?” My hands still.

“They passed about eight years ago. Car accident.”

“I’m sorry.” To my surprise I don’t laugh, even though this is a prime example of an inopportune moment. Maybe I’m finally outgrowing that particular personality defect.

“Thank you,” he says, and when nothing else follows I start rubbing again.

“What?” His question brings my gaze to his, and I see him point to his lip. “You’re chewing on it again. What?”

No way. I’m not going to admit I was thinking about my own shitty parents when he’s clearly sad about losing his.

“You really don’t want to know.” I knead his ankle, shoving my family out of my mind and focusing on my salacious daydream. This time I know he sighs in response, which makes me feel oddly content despite the fact I’m touching his foot.

“Of course, I want to know.”

“Fine,” I groan for maximum effect and tell him about my fantasy instead

of the reality he caught me remembering. “I’m pretending I’m rubbing your ass.”

“That’s how you stomach rubbing my foot?” He chokes back a laugh.

“We all have our phobias. And the ass visual worked for me. Or it did.” I nudge his leg away because with him saying *foot* I can’t pretend anymore.

“Well, I didn’t have the same visual, but I think it had the same results.”

“What?” I twist my head to look at him, and see him pointing to his junk, which is standing at full attention. As much as it can be from underneath his track shorts.

“My foot rub did that?”

“I thought it was an imaginary butt massage.” He points to my shorts, which are also tented. *Huh*. “Looks like it worked for you, too. You know what this means?”

“Time to bounce on your cock?” I lick my lips eagerly.

He chuckles and reaches for my hand, dropping his legs to the floor as he pulls me onto his lap. “Only if I get to suck on yours first.”

*Oh, fuck yes!*

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It’s torture sitting at my desk.

Correction, it’s torture sitting here by my lonesome when I’ve spent the last few weeks working at Noah’s kitchen table. It was fun showing him what I do, eating all our meals together, and vegging on the sofa when we were done for the day.

When I volunteered to help him out with his ankle and made arrangements to work from his place, I didn’t think I’d see as much of him as I did. I figured he’d watch TV or read while I was a good little worker bee, and I’d pop up to get him snacks and shit when he asked so he wouldn’t have to

walk. I didn't expect him to take an interest in my projects and sit by my side while I worked on them, oohing and aahing over my designs and even brainstorming ideas with me. The man may be a jock but he's no dud in the creative department, and while I love my job to begin with, he made it more fun.

Now that I'm back in the office, sitting alone, I feel antsy. I can't explain it, but I miss the back and forth we had, and I keep looking at the clock to see when I can leave. Time to bother Xander, since pestering him often rejuvenates me.

"I'm in literal heaven. Noah loves dick," I confess as I plop my ass on the corner of his desk.

Even though he's clearly skeptical about the big guy and I playing footsy with our dicks, it's sort of tradition for me to exploit my exploits, and now that our secret's out I see no reason why I can't gift Xander with some of the saucy details, which... *Dear Lord.*

I've been *'taking care of'* Noah for almost two weeks and he's slightly more mobile now. Even though I've started working in my office again, I'm still staying at his place every night. In his bed. Where he makes sure I'm thoroughly exhausted by the time I fall asleep, and sometimes again when I wake up. It's like I've got my own personal sex doll. Or dildo. Or... Cock worshiper sounds obnoxious, but it's not entirely inaccurate given his fascination with my junk.

"Yes, I sort of assumed that since you're dating," Xander says blandly.

"Fucking," I correct. "But yes, he loves it." Ever since he hate-fucked us into the next universe, he's been greedy for it, coming after me day and night. I suppose a small part of his desperation could be attributed to the kissing, a

slip up on my part but one I can't say I regret. It's led to more sex, and the big guy is a fantastic kisser.

True, I'm breaking the rules I set for myself, which should be concerning. Prior to Noah, neither kissing nor sleepovers were part of my vocabulary. I know in the long run it will prove to be a bad idea that I've let them become habit, but... *Sex!* Lots and lots of it. In every room, on every surface, and in every position imaginable as long as he can do it without putting weight on his foot.

Have we crossed into friends with benefits territory instead of fuck buddies? Probably. However, I refuse to accept that repeated, mind-blowing orgasms shouldn't be enjoyed to the fullest, so that's what I'm doing, even if it means I sometimes, occasionally fall asleep in his arms.

And wake up there.

*Naked.*

"He can't stop touching it," I gush to Xander. "Before we go to bed, first thing when we wake up, in the shower... He even edged me while I was playing video games."

"I don't need to know that." Xander winces slightly and shakes his head.

"Of course, you do, because it's actually super-hot. Noah's not a gamer but he said he needed something to do while I play, so I let him hold my dick, which turned into me riding his while I shot up bad guys. And staying focused on the game while you're getting jerked off *and* pegged is no easy feat, let me tell you. I did pretty well, though. I only team-killed, like, three guys."

"TMI." Xander presses his hands to his ears.

I pull them down with an eye roll. "I listened to all your shit with Niko. The least you can do is listen to mine."

“I literally never told you anything about our sex life.”

“Which is a travesty since that man is fucking glorious, and you’re only forgiven since it led to me meeting Noah. Did I mention he *loves* my cock? The other day, he had his head in my lap while we were watching TV, and for no reason at all he just pulled it out and started sucking on it, and...”

“Tripp!” Xander hisses.

“What?” I blink, leaning back slightly since he sort of yelled at me at whisper volume. Xander's gotten frustrated with me before, but he's *never* yelled. Not once, no matter how much I overshare. Now he'll never hear the juiciest part of that story, which I was tempted to share. That for some strange reason I was fine with Noah's head in my lap. I wouldn't have minded even if blow jobs weren't included.

Xander closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger with a heavy sigh. “Do you think Noah would be okay with you telling me all this?”

“I mean, you’re not some random guy, you're his teammate's boyfriend. Besides, it's just sex.”

Xander drops his hand and gives me a withering look. “Is it?”

I'm not usually speechless, but my mouth opens and shuts at least three times before I blurt, “Well, what would you call it?”

“Dating.”

My mouth has trouble forming words again. “It's not dating if you've never been on a date.”

“Semantics.”

“Semantics are pretty important, you know. Critical even. And aside from the fact that we haven't been on a date, I *don't* date. So, your definition

doesn't apply." I'm rambling, but since that's normal for me I figure he won't make an issue of it.

"Does *cohabitating* work better for you?"

I gasp with as much disgust as I can muster. "I would never—"

"How many nights have you spent at your place in the last two weeks?"

"I've been playing nurse. You know that." I cross my arms over my chest.

"And how much nursing are you doing? Noah's got a chef and a physical therapist, and he should be walking by now if his recovery is on track. So, what's your role, exactly?"

"I gave him a foot massage the other day," I blurt defensively, realizing a little too late that won't help my case.

"You hate feet." Xander smirks knowingly, forcing me to double down.

"Which clearly demonstrates what a good nursing job I'm doing."

"Or it says you like Noah."

"Of course, I like him. He's a friendly guy and he's got a beautiful cock." I lift a nonchalant shoulder.

"You could say the same thing about most guys you hook up with, but you've never spent the night with them."

Right about now, I'm regretting the extent to which I exploit my exploits to Xander. In my defense, I was pretty certain he wasn't paying attention half of the time.

"We're talking in circles here. You know why I've been spending the night. Stop reading into everything."

"Stop pretending your motives are purely altruistic. You're staying there because you want to, not because you need to."

"He does have a magnificent shower." I snatch a pen off Xander's desk and start spinning it around my fingers.

Xander snatches the pen back. “He’s different, admit it. And while we’re on the topic, so are you, and I don’t just mean your hair color. Since the day I met you, you’ve been hiding in plain sight. You’re loud and obnoxious and outspoken, but you don’t fool me. It’s an act to make people think you’re an open book when really all they see is the cover. Noah sees through it, doesn’t he? And you like it, don’t you? That’s why you haven’t left when he doesn’t, and never really did, need you to take care of him.”

Wow. All this time I thought Xander was too broody and guarded himself to realize there wasn’t much substance behind most of my word vomit. Being sickeningly happy—like a chocolate addict being welcome into Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory—must’ve opened his eyes. I blame Niko. Clearly, he’s at fault here.

“Perhaps the big guy is more interesting than I first thought.”

“Still not willing to admit you might have feelings for him, huh?” Xander narrows his eyes, and while that warrants a saucy retort, I’m embarrassed to say I don’t have one, so I just stare at him blankly. “Fine,” he dismisses me by focusing on his computer, and since I don’t have a retort for that either, I slink back to my own desk, wondering if it’s already too late to say we’re simply friends with benefits.

## Chapter 19 - Noah

“When are you coming back?” There’s an uncharacteristic hitch in Luca’s voice, which I’m not sure can be attributed to a poor connection.

“The doctor says at least two more weeks, if I have full range of motion.”

“Dammit.” He exhales.

“What’s wrong with that? It’s faster than originally projected.”

“I need you back. I’m playing like shit.”

“You guys have two losses. That’s nothing we can’t recover from.” I try to talk him down.

“I’m not talking about the team, I’m talking about me. Everyone else is pulling their weight but I’m flailing out there. I need you back. I’m not myself...” he trails off.

He doesn’t need to say anything else for me to know where this is going, and it’s a direction I’m not as comfortable with as I once was. Still, I have to tread carefully because regardless of what I think, he’s rooted in his beliefs. And if there’s one thing I understand, if something makes you feel like you play better, regardless of how ridiculous it seems, you do it.

“Luca, I’m not the key to your success. You’re still playing great. Just yesterday you scored two goals.”

“That was a home game. I have an arrangement for those.” *He has an arrangement? Huh. I always wondered how that worked.* “It’s the road games where I struggle. I need you to—”

“I’m not cleared to travel,” I interrupt before he can ask what I suspect he wants to ask.

“I know, but maybe we can work something out. I could video chat you or something.”

*Shit.* That’d be a reasonable solution if I was still single, but I’m not. At least, I don’t think I am... Tripp might have a different opinion. We haven’t talked about what we are, and I was hoping not to just yet since I’m pretty sure he’s not ready to label it. But Luca won’t understand my hesitation without a label to explain it, and if I’m going to deny his request after all these years, I owe him an explanation.

“Can we come up with another option? One that maybe doesn’t involve me?”

“One that... *Oh shit.* This is because of Tripp, isn’t it? You’re not just fucking you’re...*fucking.*”

“I don’t understand the difference, but yeah. It’s because of Tripp. I don’t feel right being your audience when I’m sleeping with him.”

“The difference is you’re not just having a little fun between the sheets, you like him.”

“I do. I really do.” I’m suddenly grateful to be on the phone so he can’t see the heat rush to my face with that admission. Not that I’m ashamed to have feelings for Tripp, I just can’t help worrying that those feelings will be our downfall, seeing as we had an agreement. We promised not to let ourselves get to this point. If I’m being honest, I always suspected this would happen, and I secretly hoped it would.

The fact we’ve been practically living together for the past few weeks probably accelerated things, but right from the start I questioned whether I liked all men or only Tripp. Now, I can confidently say it’s only Tripp. Whether I’d be attracted to another man if I gave myself the opportunity to explore that I’m not sure, but I am sure I don’t need to find out.

Tripp makes things fun. Not just sex, but life. He's full of energy, finds pleasure in just about everything, and makes me see things in a new light. For years, all I saw was hockey, and I don't regret that. The sport has given me so much, and it's fulfilled me in a way nothing else could. It's also why I was wary of retirement, which is looming in the not-so-distant future. For the first time in, maybe ever, I can see a future that doesn't revolve around hockey. Tripp gave me that.

When I think of the future, there's only one thing that matters. I just want him in it.

"You know, he'd probably be on board with watching," Luca hints.

"He probably would." I sigh heavily, hating the way that image makes my stomach sink.

"But you aren't." Luca must hear the reluctance in my voice.

"Not really, no." I'm fully conscious that wanting Tripp for myself threatens everything. He might be a willing participant, and I know on some level I'm important to him, but if he came to the realization that this is more than sex to me I'm afraid he'd pack up and leave.

"So, this is serious with you two?"

I rub a hand over my face, as if that will stave off the tension building in my head. "I don't know. It wasn't supposed to be, then this injury happened and... Things feel different now. I haven't acknowledged that out loud. All I know is whatever this is, I don't want it to end."

"You're going to leave me hanging over something you aren't even sure is serious?"

"You're going to give me shit over being confused after I suffered through years of your unconventional pre-game ritual?" I fire back.

"Suffered?" Luca sounds genuinely shocked. "I thought it didn't bother

you?”

“I didn’t mean it like that, sorry.” I apologize. “It didn’t bother me.”

“About that,” he pauses a few seconds before speaking again. “Were you gay this whole time? I don’t care if you were, I just thought that wasn’t your thing.”

“I didn’t think it was either. And I wouldn’t say I’m gay since I’m not attracted to all men. Just Tripp.”

“Pfft. I’m way hotter than Tripp,” he mutters.

“You sound like you want me to be attracted to you.”

“I don’t,” he rushes to clarify. “Having you watch was never about that, it’s a superstition I haven’t been able to shake in...forever. Still, it kinda bruises my ego, anyway. I know that doesn’t make any sense. Maybe I’m just freaking out over what to do...”

I don’t know the origin of his superstition, but I get why he clings to it so fiercely. It makes sense that changing things up would rattle him, especially when that change comes with a healthy dose of *‘I didn’t see that coming’* like the one I just sprung on him about being gay for only Tripp, if that’s what I am.

“What if you video chatted someone else? Whoever you have that arrangement with here?” I don’t have all the salacious details about how Luca’s superstition works, but if he has an arrangement here then there are other options.

“I guess I could try that.” He exhales heavily. “So, what are you gonna do about Tripp? Think you’ll tell him you’re into him?”

“I thought I might ask him on a date.”

Luca coughs and sputters on the other end of the line. “Doesn’t that step usually come *after* you decide you want to date?”

“Hell if I know. I couldn’t even tell you the last time I went on one. But my neighbors are having this charity fundraiser thing and since they invite everyone in the area, I’m sure Niko and Xander will be going, so it’d be more of a group thing.”

“A charity fundraiser? That’s your idea of a date?”

“I guess I doesn't have to be called that. We have to dress up for it, so maybe? I just don’t want to go alone or be the third wheel to Niko and Xander, so I thought it might be okay to ask him and see where it goes.”

“I’d probably have the ‘*are we fucking or fucking*’ conversation first, but yeah. Ask him out.”

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After a grueling PT session where I managed to hit about eighty percent of my mobility, I hit the shower to clean up, paying particular attention to *that* spot. Just in case.

It’s probably silly, but there’s a part of me that feels like I won’t ever find out where this thing with Tripp can go if I don’t let him in. *Physically*. I’ve been getting more and more curious about it, and now that we’ve been sleeping together for nearly a month, it feels like the right time. That and I might have an ulterior motive.

Though Tripp is well-spoken when he wants to be, at his core he’s a physical, sexual guy. I think he’s more comfortable with actions than words, and taking the role of bottom is one way for me to acknowledge I’ve developed feelings for him without putting him on the spot by saying the words. Sort of like that kiss.

I didn’t plan that, I just acted, and he didn’t stop me. He’s even initiated it a few times since then. Only during sex, but considering that was a line between us that’s no longer there... It seems to me the best way to approach

new dynamics with Tripp is to just act. So, tonight, I'll tell him I'm game for more than just a sexual relationship by offering to bottom. If he accepts, I'll know we're getting closer to the point where I can say the words without driving him into a panic.

Tripp's a little jumpy when he gets home, darting back and forth between the kitchen and living room to grab me a drink, himself a drink, clean up, and who knows what else.

"Bad day?" I ask.

"No, why?" Tripp starts to sit, pats his pockets and looks toward the kitchen with a frown before bolting in that direction for his phone.

"You're making me dizzy with all this up and down. Just sit and relax," I tell him.

He sits at the opposite end of the couch, but rather than slouch into it like he usually does his spine is ramrod straight, eyes darting around the room. "Where are you crutches?"

For the last several days, I've used them to take a little of the burden off my ankle while walking, but I've finally made enough progress to ditch them completely. "The therapist said as long as it wasn't uncomfortable, I could walk without them."

"Hmm." Tripp nods. "So, you're better?"

"Getting there. They aren't ready to let me try skating yet, but I have the green light for standing and walking."

"You probably don't need me to help you out anymore then."

*Fuck.* I didn't see that coming, even though it's a logical assessment. Truthfully, I think we both know I never *needed* him to take care of me, we just went along with that ruse since it was a convenient excuse to have him

stay. I could be honest and tell him I like having him around, though I think that would be worse than admitting I can take care of myself.

“Who would rub my ankle when it’s sore?” I ask with mock seriousness, hoping my flirty tone implies there’s a legitimate reason for him to be here.

“Doesn’t your physical therapist do that?”

“It doesn’t have the same results.” I take a page out of his playbook and look pointedly at my crotch. Even though it feels deceitful to use sex to get him to stay, my gut tells me he’ll respond to that, buying me time until he’s ready to hear the truth about my feelings.

A wicked gleam flashes over his eyes. “Are you saying sex is crucial to your recovery?”

“I mean, it can’t hurt. Right?”

“As long as you’re not fucking me up against the wall on that ankle, which is all I can picture now, dammit.” Whatever was on his mind earlier is clearly a thing of the past as he practically vibrates in his seat.

“Or you could fuck me up against the wall.” I hold my breath as I wait for his response.

“You evil bastard,” he whispers, shaking his head slowly back and forth.

My shoulders slump. “You don’t like that idea?”

“I fucking love that idea. I’ve wanted your virgin hole for so long. You know I’d never turn down a chance to get inside that beautiful round ass of yours.” His eyes are so hooded with lust they’re barely more than little slits, which makes my cock swell visibly inside my shorts.

Pulling a packet of lube from my pocket, I toss it to him and arch my brow suggestively.

“Now who’s the boy scout?” he smirks.

“I learned from the best.”

“Get naked,” he demands, and I damn near rip my shorts trying to get them off. “Lie back and put one foot on the floor. The other over the back of the couch.”

Doing as he says, I find myself spread wide open, my thick cock resting against my stomach, rising and falling with each anxious breath. Tripp scoots between my legs and rubs his palm up my thigh, between my pecs, and over my stomach. His finger grazes my shaft in the process and it lurches at the slight touch. Aside from a tiny grin, Tripp doesn’t acknowledge the effect he has on me. He just keeps rubbing his hand over my heated skin, like he’s savoring every contour, committing it to memory.

His touch isn’t overtly sexual, but it makes me tingle everywhere. It wakes up my senses, coaxing me into a state of heightened arousal. And while I’m sure the gentle touch is for my physical comfort, it soothes my heart at the same time.

Whether he intends to or not, he’s caressing me like a lover would, like he cherishes me and wants to take care of me. He’d be mortified to realize the emotions he’s creating inside my soul, but I can’t bring myself to be the bigger man and call this off before I fall for him irrevocably. Even if it leaves me heartbroken in the end, I want to experience this moment with him.

Gradually, he inches lower, fingers grazing over my taint, between my crack. My ass clenches involuntarily, both eager for and leery of the coming intrusion. As usual, Tripp seems to sense how I feel.

“Relax,” he says as he opens the packet of lube and spreads some over his fingers. “This will feel strange at first, maybe even a little uncomfortable. Don’t fight it. I promise it’ll get better, and you’ll love it.”

I gasp as the cool gel on his fingers comes into contact with my skin, exhaling slowly as he draws circles around my puckered hole. It’s not

entirely unpleasant actually. There's a faint quiver deep inside my groin, which makes a bit of precum seep from my slit.

My thighs relax as Tripp probes the area, lulling me deeper into an aura of bliss as a contented moan rumbles from my throat.

“Fuck, that’s a sexy sound,” Tripp rasps as the pressure on my hole suddenly increases. “First finger. Let me hear it again.”

This time I utter more of a groan as my hole strains around the slight disturbance, and while it feels interesting enough that I want him to continue, the fullness of his finger inside me seems similar to... “Oh God. Is it supposed to feel like I have to take a shit?”

“Jesus. And people accuse me of talking without thinking,” he scoffs as his finger pumps leisurely back and forth, which after the initial shock feels pretty good. I don’t want him to stop. “You’re lucky I have a one-track mind,” he continues, “because I’m horny enough to ignore that comment.”

“Sorry, it’s just... I didn’t know how else to describe it.”

“Don’t describe it, just feel it. I’m adding another finger.”

The burn of the stretch takes over and I squirm uncomfortably until I feel a firm grip wrap about my cock. Suddenly, the discomfort is replaced with the familiar tingle of arousal. Tripp’s fist strokes up and down my length, and a wet heat surrounds my crown. Something that’s part moan, part sigh passes through my lips as my body tries to process the torrent of sensations flooding through it. Between the suction on my tip, the pressure on my shaft, and the fullness in my ass, I don’t know which way is up. Torn between the need to fight for control or bucking my hips wildly, my muscles throw in the towel, turning to jelly as I give myself over to the whirlpool of stimulation coursing through me.

My dick falls out of Tripp’s mouth with an audible pop. “There you go.

Nice and relaxed. Now, let's make your cock dance."

Something shifts inside me, and my dick lurches upward as a bolt of pure electricity ricochets throughout my body. "Holy shit!" I cry, propping myself on my elbows so I can look down my body. "What the hell was that?"

"Big guy, meet your prostate." I feel another shift deep in my core—Tripp's fingers—and my cock lurches again as a fresh drop of precum oozes out.

"Jesus." My head falls back onto the cushions as I gasp for air, a wicked laugh the only warning before he nudges it again, and again. I writhe beneath him, realizing that my prior understanding of bliss was sorely lacking.

With each swipe of his finger, my muscles contract, spasms wracking my body to what would be the point of pain if they weren't so euphoric. I've never felt pleasure like this. It's like I'm vibrating on a higher plane of existence. My body is so stimulated it can't contain my consciousness, and I'm so zoned out it's hard to form words.

"Is this...? When I...?"

"That's right, big guy. This is what it feels like when you fuck me. Ready for my dick?"

I can't speak. Can't moan. Can't even move my head. I think I blink though, which earns me a little peck on the lips as Tripp mumbles, "Fuck yeah."

The ecstasy bubble pops as Tripp's hands leave my body, and I whimper at the loss. Then I notice him shedding his clothes and lubing his cock.

Licking my lips, I watch his fist slide over his length. I don't know if he looks so big because of the lack of pubic hair, or because he really is big. Either way, the smooth skin stretched taut over his shaft is a mesmerizing sight. The view is even more enticing with the gel coating his skin, making it

glisten in the light. “It’s gonna be uncomfortable at first.” Tripp lines himself up to my hole. “Breathe through it.”

The pressure is sudden and intense, forcing my eyes to snap shut as I choke on a breath of air.

“Breathe.” His gentle reminder comes as a slippery fist circles my cock. “Focus on my hand. Feel it sliding over your dick, nice and slow. That feels nice, right? The way you fit in my hand. I think this is my favorite cock in the world, besides mine. It’s so big and long and thick.”

“Are you trying to distract me by complimenting my dick?” I grit.

“It worked. I’m all the way in.” Two things register at once. My ass is almost uncomfortably full, and Tripp’s voice sounds off. I open my eyes to find his jaw locked tight, the tendons in his neck visible underneath the skin as he takes shaky breaths. *He’s stunning.*

“Tripp?”

“I need a second. You’re... Fuck, you’re so tight.” In all the times we’ve been together, I can’t say I’ve ever seen Tripp with such a tenuous grip on his control. The sight pushes out all lingering traces of discomfort and fills me with a mixture of gratitude and pride.

Whether this is the start of something real or the end of something fleeting, knowing I have such a profound effect on another person will always be seared in my memory. I’ll forever be marked by this experience, and I’m guessing he will, too.

I’m still staring, admiring the beauty of his tightly coiled features, when his eyes flutter open and lock onto mine.

“Tripp,” I groan, though whether it’s a plea or a warning I’m not sure.

He lets go of my dick and leans over me, trapping it between our bodies as he braces his hands on either side of my chest and ghosts his lips over mine.

“Grab my ass. You control the pace.”

I cup his cheeks in my hands as he starts to move, rocking slowly back and forth to help me adjust. It’s awkward at first, but after a few pumps my channel adapts, welcoming the slide of his cock.

The friction of his stomach on my shaft feels divine, but the weight of his steel length against my prostate is pure heaven. Within seconds, I’m back in that trance-like state, where I’m so overcome with bliss my mind shuts down and my body runs on autopilot.

My carnal urges take control, hips rolling to give Tripp better access as my biceps struggle to pull him closer. Yet even as I strain to bring us together, there’s no urgency behind my movements. No rush to reach the finish. I simply want to feel him *everywhere*.

Dropping to his forearms so we’re chest to chest, Tripp pistons his hips in long, languid strokes, hitting all my pleasure points with each thrust. Sweat pools between us as we rock into each other, the sound of our labored breathing echoing in the room around us.

My hole flexes and contracts as Tripp brushes over my prostate, causing him to groan. “Holy fuck, big guy. Your ass is heaven. I’m not gonna last.”

Gripping him tighter, I help him spear in and out of my channel, increasing our pace as we charge toward the finish. Suddenly we’re face-to-face, breathing each other’s air as we grunt with the effort to get deeper, closer, more.

And then time stops. The tension in my balls explodes through my tip, drenching us both in my cum as I clamp down on the cock pulsing inside me. Mouths hovering above each other, frozen in a silent scream, wave after wave of tremors wrack through us as our hips buck through our release.

Trapped between us, my dick twitches and spurts as we rock against each other, wringing out every last quiver of our orgasm.

Warm liquid gushes out of my hole as Tripp's mouth rests against mine. Not kissing just, breathing, which is more intimate and somehow not at the same time. Then he lifts his chest off mine with shaky arms and gives me a lazy grin. "I'm not gonna have to fight you for the bottom now, am I?"

I know that's supposed to be an offhand comment, nothing to read into. But I read into it anyway, clinging to the hope that it means there's more of this... of *us* in our future. "I know how to take turns."

"Good to know." He winks as he pulls out and offers me a hand to sit up. "Want me to make sure you don't get lost in your shower?"

That's an olive branch, I think. Offering to help under the guise I need it instead of admitting he likes to shower with me. And since tonight was a big step for both of us, I won't press for more. But one day soon I will—I don't want to live in limbo now that I know who I am and what I want—and hopefully he'll be ready to take that step with me.

"Right behind you." I let him pull me up.

## Chapter 20 - Tripp

“I didn’t know you were going blond again,” Noah says when I get home—*home?*

“Green tips are too difficult to maintain. They start to fade pretty quickly, and the boss man doesn’t like me taking an extended lunch every week to get my hair colored, which is really a shame because I wouldn’t mind trying a dark blue next.”

Noah’s eyes dart to mine, telling me he knows exactly where the blue idea came from, just like I intended. “I didn’t realize it was that labor intensive to have colored hair.”

“Depends on the color.” I point to my freshly bleached hair.

“So, I have a question for you,” he says as he takes two of his chef’s premade meals out of the oven.

“You know you don’t have to ask to bottom, right? You can just tell me that’s what you’re in the mood for.” I palm his delectable ass and give it a nice squeeze since I’ve become well-acquainted with it over the last week. Even though we agreed to take turns, he’s still working up to the point where he can take me without a lot of prep, and I am happy to oblige.

“Noted.” He smirks. “But that’s not what I was going to ask.”

“Okay, what’s up?” I snatch a piece of broccoli off one of the plates and pop it in my mouth. *Still can’t believe I actually like the green stuff his chef makes.*

“My neighbors have this charity party every year—they invite the whole neighborhood—and it’s coming up this weekend. I thought maybe you could

come with me?”

The muscles in my body grow instantly heavy, like they’ve turned to concrete, making it hard to move let alone speak. “You want me to go to a party with you?”

“Yeah.”

My heart feels like it’s going to beat right out of my chest. On the one hand...*party!* On the other, I’m not a stranger to these types of charity events, and they aren’t the type of thing you bring the guy you’re fucking to. “I feel like that’s a couple’s thing, not a fuck buddy thing.”

To my surprise that statement doesn’t seem to faze him. “You’ve been staying here for weeks taking care of me. Aren’t we past fuck buddies?”

“Okay... Maybe we’re friends with benefits.”

“I think it’s more than that.”

*Oh shit.* I knew I’d overstayed my welcome, but... Hot sex. On the daily. I guess that’s bound to happen when two spectacular cocks come out to play, but... *Ugh, focus!*

“Well, what would you call it? We’re not boyfriends,” I state plainly. “I don’t do that, and we still don’t even know if you’re gay or bi or what. You can’t be anything more than friends with benefits without knowing that.” I’m making this shit up as I go because I can’t handle thinking we’ve crossed into boyfriend land.

*I knew I shouldn’t have fucked his hole.*

I knew he was using that as a way to get me to stay, but I listened to my cock instead of my brain. Not that I can’t be talked into pretty much anything with the promise of sex, but deep down I suspected the offer to top him was his way of steering us towards something beyond just fucking, and I was too horny to care, *dammit.*

“I think maybe I’m demi.” Noah interrupts my internal rant.

“Ooh, someone used Google.” It’s a childish retort but... *Hello*, it's me. I take my plate and sit at the kitchen table, putting some distance between us.

“I’m serious.” Noah follows me. “I think I’m only attracted to people I feel connected to.”

“And you think you’re connected to me? *Me*, not my cock? I’d understand if you were confused, especially since you’ve been working through some stuff. We should probably make sure though.” I stand to unbutton my pants.

“Do not show me your dick right now. A hard-on doesn’t solve everything.”

“That didn’t even cross my mind.” *It totally crossed my mind.*

“So, what’s that then?” He points to my crotch. “Checking to make sure your zipper works?”

“I had to readjust.” I drop back into my chair and pretend I wasn’t trying to avoid this conversation with sex. “Okay, I can see how you’d feel connected to me after I took care of you, but I could get you going even before that. That’s not demi.”

“Not true. I’ve always found it easy to talk to you. To be myself. I think because you’re so unapologetically...you.” Noah waves his hand over me from head to toe. “You made me comfortable enough to be me.”

*Okay, that’s actually sweet, but still scary since I don’t do sweet.*

“What are you saying?”

“I like you. A lot.”

“Cool.” I spear a piece of chicken and shove it in my mouth. “I like you too.”

“No, I mean I *like* you. As in I want to be with you. Preferably as more than just two friends who fuck each other.”

“Like boyfriends?” I feel my eyes grow wide with panic.

“I mean, yeah.” Noah shrugs bashfully, which is adorable, but not cool.

“Okay. Um...” I scratch my neck.

Then my arm.

Then my side.

Obviously, this is a deal-breaker, but I don't want to hurt the guy, so I have to let him down easy. But that means no more mind-blowing sex. No more sleepovers, either, which I will only admit to myself this one time that I sort of like. Still, cold turkey is the way to go. Clean slate. Full stop.

*Is it hot in here?*

“What's wrong?” Noah's brows draw together in gentle concern as he reaches for my arm.

I pull it away to scratch my neck again. “I feel itchy.”

“Are you having an allergic reaction?”

“Maybe?”

“Did you eat something weird? Or touch something weird?”

I scratch at my forearm when he reaches for it again. “No. I... Can you stand over there?” I point to the far side of the room.

“Where?” He twists to look behind him.

“Just...there. Back. And stop looking at me like you like me.”

“I do like you.”

“Yes, but don't look at me like you do. Look at me like I'm just a piece of ass.”

Noah pulls back with a frown. “You're not just a piece of ass. That's what I'm trying to tell you. You're important to me.”

“I know. I think that's the problem.”

“Why is that a problem?” He shifts his head back and forth, clearly not

following me.

“I’m not important to anyone. And don’t say *you* because you’re fucking me so that doesn’t count.”

“Fine.” He crosses his arms in front of his chest. “What about Xander?”

“I’m pretty sure he wants to strangle me half the time.” I snort as I itch my chest.

“If that were true, he’d have done it by now. Plus, Niko likes you.”

“Niko tolerates me for Xander.”

“His sister loves you.”

“That might actually be true, but only in a drinking buddy kind of way. And that’s fine. It’s better that way.”

“How is that better?” He reaches for me again, but I wave him back.

“There’s no false hope with drinking buddies.”

“False hope? What does that mean?”

“Drinking buddies are for a good time only. They aren’t expected to care about you beyond their stool at the bar. You hang out and have fun, but that’s all it is. I’m good with it.” *I'm getting hives. Great. Just what I need. I'm pretty sure they're making my brain swell, too... Making me say things I normally wouldn't.*

“I don’t think anyone sees you as just a drinking buddy. I don’t. Why are you itching yourself raw?”

“Because you’re messing up the pattern. Fuck around, have fun, say goodbye.” I scratch at my lower back.

“I don’t want to say goodbye.”

I roll my eyes dramatically. “Everyone does. That’s how it works.”

“How what works?”

“Life. You get close to people and they let you down. That’s why I don’t do

boyfriends. Only hookups. Get it?”

He’s looking at me like I’m deranged, and considering I look like a monkey in a zoo, I get it. Only he thinks it’s my reasoning, not my sudden rash, that’s irrational. I know better.

People like to tell you they care all the time, but in my experience it’s just talk. A line people feed you because it’s expected. Since my wake-up call nearly a decade ago, I’ve learned most of that talk isn’t malicious. Friends, colleagues, acquaintances...they get wrapped up in their own shit and forget about yours. I get it. It’s when the people closest to you don’t give a shit that messes with your head, and I figure it’s better to avoid those situations altogether than to give someone the chance to break you.

That’s how I’ve operated for the past ten years, and it works for me. I haven’t had any crushing disappointments because I haven’t put myself in a position to experience them. Given the way Noah’s looking at me right now, like he’s not going anywhere, I have a feeling I’ve already let him get too close.

“Who hurt you?” he asks softly.

*No. Nope. Not going there. I don’t tell anybody that. Ever.*

“Not your concern, big guy. The takeaway here is, I don’t do boyfriends. So, this has been fun and all, but you’re gonna have to find someone else to experiment with.” I stand, ready to bolt out of the kitchen, and find him blocking my path. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re trying to keep me from leaving.”

He crosses his arms in front of his chest, adopting a very Thor-like stance. “I am.”

“I’d say that’s kinky if it didn’t have a kidnappy undertone.”

“Joke around all you want. I’m still not letting you leave until we finish talking.”

“We are finished. Besides, haven’t you missed enough games?” I point to his ankle. “I don’t think you’re prepared to give chase, and I will run if I have to.”

“I’ll risk it.”

“Yeah, right.” I snort, glancing around to plot the best exit route. “You can’t be serious.”

“Deadly.” His calm tone is so unexpected I can’t help looking at him to see his expression, which is nothing short of sincere.

“You’d risk hurting your ankle again just to stop me from leaving?”

“Not my ankle. My career. If I don’t get back on the ice, chances are the Bulldogs won’t have a reason to keep me around. I’m too old for other teams to give me serious consideration. If I have to sacrifice the game to convince you you’re important to me, so be it.”

The itch that had started to fade comes back with a vengeance. *He wouldn’t really do that, would he?* “Nice speech, but I don’t buy it. You’ve been jumping out of your skin to get back on the ice.” I claw at the back of my neck.

“I *was* jumping out of my skin. You helped with that. *You* knew what I needed to calm down and get out of my head, and *you* helped me deal with my fear and frustration.”

“Glad I could be of service, but I think we can agree I’ve exhausted my usefulness.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Downplay what you’ve done for me. Downplay *this*. You’ve been staying

here for nearly a month, sharing my bed *and* my life, and even though I'm not on the ice right now I'm happy. I think you are too. Or you could be if you get out of your head."

That's usually my line, the thing I tell him when he's overthinking. I'm not sure how I feel about him using it on me.

"Have you thought this through?" I change tactics. "We've been in a bubble for weeks, but that will change once you're cleared to play. You'll be gone half the time, so we won't be *sharing* anything. You'll be gone, and unless you plan to keep me here in secret, people will find out you're with a man."

"So."

"So?" I echo. "What do you think people are going to say when not one but *two* players on the Bulldogs are gay?"

"I'm not gay, so who cares." He lifts a casual shoulder.

"Stay in your lane, big guy. I'm the brat in this relationship." I point to my chest. "So don't sit over there acting all smug like it's no big deal if people say... What?" I bark as he collapses into a fit of laughter.

"You said relationship." His lips twitch into a satisfied smile.

"I..." My jaw bobs up and down. *That's not true. I'm morally opposed to them. Even friendships are a stretch. I'd never willingly admit to being in one. So, why can't I deny it?*

Closing my eyes, I try to breathe through the panic and uncertainty that feels like it's crushing my chest, the way it did all those years ago when life pulled the rug out from under me. *In... Out... In... Out...*

It doesn't help. My head starts to spin, and I know I've only got a few seconds to sit down before my legs collapse. Except, they're rooted to the floor like they're glued in place, and I wobble when I finally manage to shuffle a foot forward.

Instead of falling, I find myself pressed against Noah's broad chest, his arms wrapped protectively around me. "I've got you," he whispers as he guides my head to the crook of his neck.

Though my heart is still trying to win a record for the most beats per minute, the dizziness begins to fade the moment my body makes contact with his. If I was in my right mind, I'd probably worry about that, but the only conscious thought in my brain is that I'm safe in his arms. Admittedly, that's a strange thought for a guy who thrives on his independence, but it's turning out to be a weird day.

*Fuck me, I'm a mess. A mess with a...boyfriend?* The thought makes me shudder, or shiver—I'm not sure which—I only know it makes Noah's grip on me tighten, and I lean into his embrace.

The longer he holds me, the calmer I feel. Usually, I feel jittery when people get too close—in a non-sexual way—but Noah's touch seems to ground me. It dulls the warning bells in my head and the anxiety in my limbs, leaving me somewhat stable. And...*content?*

*Is this what dating feels like? This weird sense of peace and comfort that has nothing to do with arousal? That's maybe worth exploring.*

I don't know how long we stay like that, hugging in the kitchen while Noah tenderly sifts his fingers through my hair, but by the time he guides me to the couch to sit down, my pulse is somewhat back to normal and my breathing is steady.

"I'm sorry," Noah kisses the top of my head as he tucks me against his side. "I didn't realize I was pushing you that far out of your comfort zone."

"I didn't realize I was in a...relationship." I wrinkle my nose since that word still feels strange on my tongue. I'm not sure why, since this sleepover thing has been going on awhile, and it hasn't been about taking care of him

for at least a week. Maybe Xander's right and it never was. I just wanted to be around him. God knows, I've opened up to him more than anyone else in my life. I was just too stubborn to admit it to myself.

"We don't have to call it a relationship if you aren't ready for that. We can stick with the friends who fuck thing."

"Well, lightning hasn't struck me down yet so..."

"What if we don't use labels?"

I take a deep breath and let it out with a heavy sigh. "You're a public figure, people will hound you to define this until you do. And really, I'm being silly. Lots of people dream of a hockey god sweeping them off their feet. I should be shouting that shit from the rooftops."

"Not if it makes you uncomfortable." Noah's voice is understanding even though he tenses underneath me, and I feel like an ass for making him confused.

I kiss the shoulder I'm leaning on, which feels surprisingly natural. "You don't make me uncomfortable."

"But dating does." When I only nod, he continues. "Are you willing to tell me why?"

"Not today. I will," I rush to clarify, "but realizing I'm in a...a..."

"Relationship."

"Yeah, that. That's enough for one day."

"Okay," he says, and for the second time since I walked in the door, I'm struck by how sweet my Thor is. *Omigod, it's happening. I called him mine—in my head—but still. Is that normal? One second, you're a proud hedonist and the next you have a...person?*

"You're thinking awfully hard over there." Noah's lips brush over my forehead.

“Yeah, it’s just. I don’t know how to do this. I don’t know how to be with someone.”

“I think we just keep doing what we’ve been doing. Hanging out, helping each other get through the shit we’re dealing with. Maybe with more kissing, though.”

I wait for another bout of panic to hit me, but instead of the cool tingle of anxiety I feel a warm tingle of desire. As much as I don't want to admit it, I've enjoyed the feeling of Noah's mouth on mine. Up until this point, it's only happened during sex, when we're breathless, and desperate, and ravenous for each other. *I wonder...*

Tilting my chin up until our lips are a hairsbreadth apart, I hold as still as a statue, waiting. Watching. Gathering courage and seeking permission. Noah's breath hitches, but he doesn't make a move, giving me the space to do only what I feel comfortable with. *Fuck it.*

Holding my own breath, I lean slowly forward, closing the distance between us until our lips meet in a soft, chaste kiss. The instant we make contact heat blooms deep in my gut, though it's not the familiar heat of arousal. More like the warmth of affection. The promise of faithfulness and honesty and trust.

Gentle hands stroke my face as our lips brush softly together. The tender touch somehow even more intense than the passionate kisses we've shared previously, despite the fact it's not making my dick hard. And the crazy thing is, I don't even care. I'm sort of content to have no ulterior motive, no end goal driving me forward. I just like the comfort of Noah's mouth on mine, giving me the stability and support and care I didn't think I wanted, but now can't imagine going without.

As Noah's tongue meets mine, it occurs to me I've never been kissed like

this before, with reverence and respect. It's so sweet yet so powerful, I feel like I'm melting and flying at the same time. Invincible and vulnerable, but not scared like I was earlier. Not with Noah. He makes me feel...*whole*.

## Chapter 21 - Noah

“Oh ...” I lick my lips and swallow thickly as Tripp emerges from the bathroom in his tux, tugging casually at the cuffs peeking out from under the jacket. It’s a mundane action but his catlike grace makes it look effortless and sexy in a refined, aristocratic sort of way. The blond hair and dark stubble on the other hand, coupled with the bowtie slung around his open collar, gives him a downright sinful air.

“You like?” He smirks impishly.

“I like.” I cross the room to meet him, resting my hands on his hips while I nip at his plump bottom lip. “I like it so much I sort of want to bend you over right here, right now.”

“That sounds better than your stuffy charity party.” He tilts his head to the side so I can kiss along the side of his neck.

“If I didn’t like the cause, I’d skip it.”

He rubs his stubbled cheek against mine. “What’s the cause again?”

“Underprivileged youth.”

“I suppose that’s worthy of delayed gratification.” Tripp sighs heavily.

“I know I should be thinking of the cause.” He groans softly as I pull him to me, rubbing our pelvises together. “But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like the idea of showing up with the sexiest man alive on my arm.”

“Ooh, flattery will get you a blow job.” Tripp’s fingers dance over the back of my neck.

“Give me a blow job and then you can have my ass.” I bite down gently on his earlobe and give it a little tug, which makes him shiver.

“Deal, although if I top, I may have to ruin your man-bun. Even though it’s sexy as fuck, I’ll need something to hold onto while I pound you into the mattress.” He swivels his hips, pressing his semi-hard cock against mine.

“Jesus, we’re never gonna get out of here if we keep this up.”

“You could always just write a fat check and we can get straight to stripping each other down.” Tripp slides my hands to his ass, encouraging me to give it a firm squeeze.

“I wish I could.” I lick into his mouth—he’s been wholly on board with more kissing since our talk last week—groaning when his tongue meets mine. “We have to show up at several of these a year. Might as well get this one out of the way.”

I start to pull away, but Tripp squeezes the base of my neck. “I know you said this already, but are you sure you’re ready for this? Our first outing doesn’t have to be so public.”

“This is only our first outing because I’m finally healthy enough to hide my injury. And the Bulldogs organization already knows about us, so who cares if the rest of the world does.”

*That* was an interesting conversation, not because the top execs objected to me dating a man, but because Tripp and my coach, Xander’s dad, have very different ideas about what classifies as acceptable public behavior. In his defense, Tripp insists the guys gave him permission to feel how strong their pecs were before he touched them during the first team cookout he attended, which was long before my arrival. The act got him banned from all cookouts until Xander got tired of attending on his own and dragged Tripp along last year.

Still, I had to assure Coach that Tripp wouldn’t draw unnecessary attention to himself if we went public. I hate that stipulation—Tripp’s antics are part of

who he is, and I don't want him to have to change since he's dating me. Fortunately, he said—privately of course—that being a little less crass is a small price to pay to have my cock all to himself. His words.

“I guess coming out is one way to take the focus off your injury.” Tripp slides his hand from my neck to my chest, resting it over my heart. “And it might be sort of fun to watch people try to keep a straight face when you introduce me.”

“It's the twenty-first century. I doubt any of them will give it a second thought.”

“Bet?” He arches a sly brow.

“What are we betting?”

“I get to spank *you* this time.” A wicked grin spreads across his face.

“Fine.” I shrug. At this point, there are so many things he's helped me discover, most of which I never expected to like, let alone enjoy. What's one more? I won't say no until I try it. “And if I win, you move in.”

Just like he did during the boyfriend conversation, Tripp freezes, his breath coming in shaky spurts. I'm still not sure what causes him to react this way—I figure he'll tell me when he's ready—but I'm not going to avoid the topic of *us* just because it scares him. We wouldn't be here right now if I did, and aside from not skating, this has been the best week of my life.

I wrap my hand around the back of his neck and lean my forehead against his as I put my other hand on his chest. “You've been staying here a solid month, and nothing bad has happened, right?”

It takes a second, but eventually I feel a small nod.

“That's right. And if you're not ready to move in, then you're not ready. It's okay. But if you are, I'd really like to have you here when I get home

from road trips, and I'd like to be here for you when you get home from work. Whenever you're ready for that step, I want you to know I am too."

Is it odd to put living together on the table before I've told him I love him? If it were anyone but Tripp, I'd say yes, but given his obvious hesitation, I actually think this order of operations makes more sense.

"Can I still spank you if you win?" The request is barely more than a whisper.

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't." I kiss his forehead, then bring my hands to his shirt. "Do you want to go bad boy who cleans up nicely or stick with the roguish I don't give a fuck look?"

"Which do you like?" His emerald eyes are full of trust when they find mine, and I have to swallow down the lump in my throat before I can answer.

"I like roguish, but I'm supposed to get through the evening without mauling you, so we better go with cleans up nice."

A tiny smile pulls at the corner of his lips as I button his shirt and work his tie into a perfect bow. I give it a gentle tug on both ends until it sits straight underneath his angular jaw.

"You're stunning." I place a chaste kiss on his lips.

"And you're learning."

"Hmm?"

"I might've just found another adjective for my dick."

I chuckle against his mouth as I recall his rule about making sure the descriptor you choose sounds good next to the word 'dick.'

"So, since you're going to be coming out this evening, we should probably talk about what that looks like," Tripp says.

"What do you mean?"

"Private little bubble, remember?" He clutches my hips and leans into me.

“We don’t have any idea what it’s like to exist outside the walls of this house. As boyfriends.”

My brows draw together as I try to piece together what he’s saying. “Do we really need to make an announcement?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I need to know what you’re comfortable with in public. Do I hold your hand? Sit on your lap? Stick my tongue in your mouth?”

“Can’t we just do what feels right?”

“Well, sitting on your lap and sticking my tongue down your throat would feel right to *me*, but maybe not to *you*.”

“If I say affectionate touches not sexual ones does that work?” I rest my hand on his hips, the same way he’s holding mine.

“I mean, I still don’t see how those aren’t related, but yes, I get your point. No swapping bodily fluids in public.”

I can’t stop the small chuckle from rumbling up my throat. “I would’ve said that differently, but yeah. Now, let’s pick up Niko and Xander before they start pinging us to ask where we are.” I reach for Tripp’s hand as his chest starts to vibrate.

He pulls his phone from his pocket and checks the screen. “Too late. At least they said to get our pants on instead of telling us to fix our hair. If I’m going to be accused of being late I’d much rather it be assumed my tardiness is from having a dick in one of my orifices.”

Tripp pockets his phone and takes my hand, letting me lead him to the car, and even though this isn’t what I’d have chosen for our first date, I can’t remember the last time I felt this excited off the ice.

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The line of cars inches forward until we’re parked in front of a sprawling

entry where a valet takes my keys. The Cooper's go all out for this event every year. While there isn't a red carpet—it is a private residence—there is a photographer snapping candid pictures of the guests as they arrive. If I remember correctly, they aren't allowed inside, but the pictures will be accompanied by a write up of who hosted the event and how much it made, which I'm sure is equally as important to Charles Cooper as the cause he's supporting. Politicians.

Niko, Xander, Tripp and I enter together, none of us holding hands because the reality is, that would get more attention than the event itself. We want the charity to be the main focus. I don't plan to be as discreet once we're inside, so I reach for Tripp's hand the moment we cross the threshold just as a tiny Asian woman with graying hair in a maid's uniform brings her hands to her mouth with an astonished gasp.

“Mr. Preston?” Her voice trembles as she stares at the man next to me.

Tripp stands statue-still, eyes blinking in rapid succession. Then without warning he breaks into an ear-splitting grin, the biggest I've ever seen on him as he steps toward the woman, scooping her up in his arms and spinning her around in delighted hug.

“What happened to your hair?” The woman laughs as he puts her down. Niko, Xander and I exchange confused looks.

“Mine? What happened to yours?”

“I got old.”

“Well, I got daring.”

“You were always daring. That's why you got into so much trouble.” She pokes at his chest.

“We both know that wasn't the only reason.” He rolls his eyes playfully, catching mine as he does, and waving me over.

“Rose, meet my boyfriend, Noah,” he says when I reach them. “Noah, the old lady who raised me.” He slings an arm around her shoulder and lowers his head to her ear, and even though they’re slightly turned away from me, I can just barely make out the words, “You finally found a good family to work for, huh?”

“Mr. Preston—”

“I don’t go by that anymore. Call me Tripp.”

“Mr. Tripp—”

“Rose, kindly let our guests make it all the way into the house.” A stern baritone voice cuts into their conversation, and though it’s quiet enough not to be heard across the room, both Tripp and Rose visibly stiffen. Then Tripp takes a deep breath and drops his arm from Rose’s shoulders as he spins around to face the voice. Following his gaze, I locate the man just in time to see his jaw fall slack as his face goes white.

Charles Cooper casts a wary glance to either side before pasting a composed look on his harsh features, speaking with an obviously forced calm. “Preston. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“That makes two of us, Pop.” Tripp’s voice holds an air of disdain and mocking as he over enunciates the ‘P.’

“Pop?” I mouth to Niko and Xander, both of whom shrug helplessly. *Is this...?*

“You know I don’t appreciate that name,” Charles says, his disapproving gaze bouncing between Tripp and Rose.

“I don’t appreciate mine either. I prefer Tripp.”

“What sort of a name is that?” He looks down his nose at my boyfriend, despite the fact he’s no taller.

“You don’t recognize it? It was your doing actually, since you always made

a point to tell me how much I was tripping up.” Tripp’s grin borders on maniacal as he stares his father down, which garners a few curious looks from the guests trickling in.

“Uncivilized as always,” Charles mutters as Rose retreats to the far wall, out of the line of fire, it would appear.

“So,” Tripp spins around, taking in the ornate entry, with its curved staircase and expensive artwork. “Nice digs. I’d say I wondered where you went after you ditched the old place, but I really didn’t. Although, I am flattered you went to such lengths to make sure I couldn’t find you.”

“Evidently, not enough. If you wanted to speak you should’ve called my office.”

“As if your staff didn’t have strict orders to turn me away,” Tripp huffs.

“Yes, well. This is a private event.” Charles runs a hand over his silver hair despite the fact not a single strand is out of place.

Tripp’s eyes find mine, and for the first time since this exchange started, I get the sense he’s not sure what to say.

“Actually, Tripp’s here as my guest.” I step in.

Charles looks in my direction, his demeanor smoothly shifting from cold and callous to warm and inviting when recognition hits. “Noah, I’m sorry I didn’t see you there. It’s been years since I’ve seen my son and I was momentarily distracted. Welcome.” He holds his hand out, though I make no move to take it, having no desire to after the exchange I just heard.

The purpose of this event is to help underprivileged youth, and based on the way the man’s treating his own son, I’m starting to question how charitable he really is.

“I saw you suffered an injury earlier this season,” he lowers his hand and continues as if I didn’t just slight him. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better. Tripp’s been helping me with my recovery.”

“That’s what doctors are for, right?” Another silver-haired man appears out of nowhere, placing a hand on Tripp’s shoulder.

“Judge Calahan.” The smile Tripp offers is slight yet genuine.

“Uncle to you. Finally back stateside, I see.” The judge returns the grin. “I’ve gotta say, I never pegged you for the Doctors Without Borders sort, but your parents said you’re really making an impact. Good for you. Are you back to make some real money now?”

Tripp cocks an eyebrow toward his father as he bites the corner of his lip, and I have only a brief second to wonder which will win out, the brat or the good boy. As if it was ever really a question.

“Doctor, huh? And an international one. I suppose the altruistic son angle might get you a few votes. I expected you to go with a kid who died tragically young, but I guess there’s really no explanation for someone coming back from the dead in awkward little run-ins like these, so, good choice not killing me off in your fantasy world.”

“Fantasy world?” The judge casts a wary gaze between father and son. “What’s going on here?” he asks as his hand slides off Tripp’s shoulders.

“Nothing,” Charles replies. “A misunderstanding.”

“You’re saying disowned wrong, Pop.”

Before Charles can respond, a middle-aged woman in a floor-length gown with perfectly coiffed blond hair glides into the foyer. “There you are Charles. The guests have been asking—” Her voice drops off as her gaze lands on Tripp, and like her husband, she expertly pivots direction after only the slightest pause. “Preston, darling. What a lovely surprise. I didn’t know you’d be here for this event.”

Anticipating the need for a quick exit, I meet Niko’s eyes and toss him my

keys. He and Xander slip away as Tripp's mother strides toward him, leaning forward to place a kiss on his cheek, which he steps away from. "Don't let the clothes fool you. I'm still a filthy gay man, mother. The streets didn't scare it out of me."

"Preston?" She shoots lost looks between father, son and the judge, and if I hadn't witnessed the exchange with his father, I admit I might've been fooled by her feigned confusion. My new insight makes her act hard to miss. Apparently, the judge agrees.

"Just where exactly has my Godson been for the last decade?" The judge's eyes are little more than narrow slits.

"Overseas," Charles digs his heels in.

Tripp snorts. "I've never even left the country since you had my passport. Plus, it's kind of hard to get another one without the proper identification."

"Without... Why in the hell would you not have proper identification?" The judge's voice rises an octave, drawing the attention of some of the guests.

"I only had my driver's license on me when they kicked me out."

"They kicked... And you didn't come to me?" the judge asks.

Tripp looks at the man who apparently considers himself an uncle, a contrite look on his face. "They said you'd be obligated to put me in juvie for a drug offense they'd un-bury if I tried to reach out to you or come home. Sixteen-year-old me believed it."

The judge wheels on Tripp's parents, but I don't hear his angry words. I'm too focused on my boyfriend.

My stomach roils at the thought of a young Tripp, cast out by the people who were supposed to love him. No wonder he's so terrified of relationships. The one that's supposed to be unconditional failed him, bringing him nothing but pain and disappointment. And rather than respect his fear, I've been

pushing him to face it without ever understanding the magnitude of what I was asking.

I'm known for being level-headed, even on the ice. But right now, I'd like nothing more than to drive my fist into Charles's face. Instead, I hold my hand out to Tripp, pulling him to my chest when he takes it.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper in his ear as I wrap my arms around his shoulders. "I never would've brought you here if I'd known."

"It's okay." Tripp wraps his arms around my waist.

"No, it's not. You have the same last name for God's sake, and I didn't think twice about it."

"Cooper's pretty common. And it's not like I told you enough about my past to make you think there'd be a connection."

Pulling back, I cup his face in my hands. "I knew you had a past though. Something you didn't want to talk about. And because of me you had to face it without warning."

"It was a long time coming." He gives me a tight smile.

"Is this the first time you've stood up to him?"

"More or less. I was good at being a disrespectful shit, but I never challenged him outright over the way he treated me. Or Rose."

I pull him to me and whisper in his ear. "I'm proud of you. And I'm so sorry I pushed you about the dating thing. I shouldn't have done that without knowing where you were coming from."

"If you hadn't pushed me, I wouldn't have a boyfriend right now." I feel a tug on the lapel of my jacket.

"Yes, but do you want one?" I take a half-step back so I can see his face, letting my hands drop to his waist. "I'll understand if it's too soon for that."

I'm vaguely aware there's a murmur in the gathering crowd as I wait for his

answer. Between the way I'm looking at Tripp and the tongue-lashing the judge is giving his parents, I'm sure they're getting quite the show.

Tripp rises on his toes to give me a quick peck on the lips before taking my hands in his. "No take backs. You're stuck with this hot mess."

"Good answer." I can't stop the goofy grin from spreading across my face as a relieved warmth seeps through my chest. "Xander and Niko are waiting in the car. Let's see if we can't salvage the rest of this evening."

"By salvage do you mean I get to spank you?" He bites his lip playfully.

"Are you claiming you won the bet?"

"I mean, people were clearly surprised to see me."

"Fine, I'll concede. But only because you're sexy in a tux, not because I think you won." I give him a quick kiss and keeping his left hand in my right, I step toward the door only to have him tug me back.

"Rose." He casts a worried glance toward his parent's housekeeper, still cowering by the far wall. "I couldn't take her with me the first time, but I can't leave her."

The two of us approach the woman whose eyes are darting nervously around the room as the judge, fresh off his rant at Tripp's parents, finds us. "Between the three of us we're creating a bit of a scene. You two should get out of here before the gossip spreads to the rest of the guests and they come running to see the show."

"We aren't leaving without Rose," Tripp says. "When the guests are gone and they don't have to keep up the act anymore, my parents will lash out at her."

"Are you saying they'll get physical with her?" The judge pales, and I feel a twinge of sympathy for the man who clearly just learned he never really knew the people he thought were his friends.

“I don’t think so. They haven’t before that I’m aware of, but they’ve never suffered this level of embarrassment before either. Will you come home with us, Rose?” Tripp puts a gentle hand on her arm.

“I can’t leave.” She looks at him with teary eyes. “They took my green card after I helped you before. They’ll have me thrown out of the country.”

“They most certainly will not,” the judge booms. “It seems I’ve got something else to discuss with them this evening after all. Rose, go get your things while I deal with this. You can stay at my house until this is sorted out. You two.” He looks at me and Tripp. “The cat’s probably out of the bag, but you might be able to limit the damage if you leave now.”

“Damage?” I frown.

“I haven’t seen anything in the press, so I assume you wanted to keep this thing between you off the public’s radar.” He tips his head toward our joined hands.

“We wouldn’t be here together if we were trying to hide anything,” I tell him.

“We didn’t plan to put on a show either,” Tripp says, his wary gaze telling me he’s concerned about what the Bulldogs might have to say when this gets out.

“It’s settled then. You two take off and I’ll make sure Rose gets out safely,” the judge declares.

But Tripp doesn’t budge. “Rose, are you okay with that? I understand if you’re not. Even after I realized my parents were probably bluffing about what the judge would do if I went to him for help, I was afraid to trust him because he was friends with them. After tonight I know differently, but if you don’t want to go with him we’ll wait for you to get your things.”

She glances between the two men, finally relaxing a bit when her

affectionate gaze settles on Tripp. “He’s right, you should go now. I’ll be okay, Mr. Tripp.”

My boyfriend, who’s still skittish about showing affection without the promise of sex, hugs Rose, and then the man who calls himself Tripp's uncle, which almost makes me tear up. If the one good thing that comes from tonight is Tripp learning that this guy has always been in his corner, and isn’t going anywhere, then this shitshow of an evening will have been worth it.

The judge pats Tripp on the back and lets him go. “Good to have you back, son. Now get out of here. And call me this week. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

His hand locked in mine, I lead Tripp out the front door and past the photographer who clicks away as we get into the car and drive off.

## Chapter 22 – Tripp

“Damn, the press are fast. It hasn’t even been a full hour and the pictures are already up.” Niko holds his phone so we can see the snaps of Noah leading me hand-in-hand to the car, opening the door for me, and the four of us driving away.

Huddled in a back booth of a club all the Bulldogs have an exclusive membership to, we’re able to drink in peace. It’s not our preferred scene—to uppity—but tonight the rich dark atmosphere, and the discreet staff, is sort of a godsend. Even if people recognize us here, they won’t approach us or put us on the spot, and after the night I’ve had, I’m grateful for whatever privacy I can get. Not that I give two shits about my parents’ downfall or the role I ended up playing in it, I just don’t want to be drawn into it any further before the evening ends. There’s plenty of time for that later.

“Cute pictures, though,” Justus says offhand. Why he and Luca showed up, I’m still not sure. I suspect it’s because they were some of Niko’s biggest supporters when his personal life went public, so they must be playing the same role for Noah. “Noah looks very protective of you, Tripp.”

Not too long ago, that statement would’ve freaked me the fuck out—and in some ways it still does. I’m new to this whole relying on and trusting other people thing, but as far as Noah’s concerned, I have to agree with Justus. It’s cute.

“Have they figured out who I am yet?” I ask Niko.

Niko scrolls down the page. “They’re going with Mystery Man.”

“Mystery Man?” I wrinkle my nose. “That makes it sound like I belong on Scooby Doo. It should be Man of Mystery.”

“You’ve got the wrong hair color for that, Freddy,” Luca snorts, and everyone at the table, including me, bursts into laughter.

“You’re funnier than you let on, hockey boy,” I tell him.

“Maybe you were just too preoccupied with getting in Noah’s pants to notice my sparkling personality.”

“True. I’m single-minded like that.” I’m not sure what brought it on, but after his initial concern over Noah and I playing show me yours and I’ll show you mine, Luca seems less skeptical tonight, which is cool. I just hope this isn’t an olive branch to keep using my man as his audience for his pregame mumbo jumbo. Before we were boyfriends, I didn’t care about that, but now my feelings are more complicated. We’ll probably need to talk about it before Noah goes back to traveling with the team.

“Will they even connect the dots?” Xander steers us back to the identity issue. “I mean, you’ve changed your name and your appearance, will they put it together?”

“You changed your name?” Justus asks.

“I always hated the name Preston. And yeah, since Tripp didn’t exist until ten years ago people will dig around to see who did. My name change record will come up.”

“Preston?” Luca snorts as he swirls the liquid in his tumbler. “I can see why you hated that. It doesn’t fit you at all.”

“Ten years ago... You were sixteen when they kicked you out?” Niko asks. “What’d you do?”

This isn’t a story I share, and with the exception of one man, no one actually knows it. Not even Noah. But the reassuring hand he rests on my

thigh keeps my heartbeat calm as I recount the events that led to me becoming Tripp.

“The last time I saw my parents, before tonight, was ten years ago when they kicked me out with nothing but the clothes on my back. Fortunately, I had my wallet and car keys on me, so I had a little money and a place to sleep. And when I snuck back the next day, Rose gave me what she could gather of my clothes and other belongings.” Noah gives my leg a squeeze when he hears her name. “I spent the first month in my car, grabbing a meal from a shelter when I could, out of a dumpster when I couldn’t. Eventually this guy who owned a tattoo shop got curious about this nice car that was perpetually parked on the street—it wasn’t a bad area, but a brand new BMW was out-of-place—and he confronted me.”

“This is the guy who gave you the tattoos you designed?” Noah asks softly.

I give him a slow nod and continue. “I’d been trying to work up the courage to ask for a job—that’s why I was always parked there—but I kept talking myself out of it because I wasn’t sure what would happen if anyone found out I was a homeless teen.”

“When he finally cornered me, he first thought I stole the car, but I had the title in the glove box. I was supposed to put it in a safety deposit box, but I was a lazy kid who got a kick out of doing the opposite of what my parents told me to do and never got around to it. That ended up being sort of a life saver since it backed up the story I gave Jim. He owned the tattoo shop.”

Noah gives my leg another reassuring squeeze.

“Anyhow, Rose had smuggled out my sketchbooks, and after he looked at them, he said he could hire me as an office assistant, but he paid me for any designs I gave him too. He even paid me under the table and helped me find a little studio apartment so I could stay off the authorities’ radar as long as I

promised to get my GED. Once I was eighteen a trust fund my grandfather left me kicked in. Fortunately, my parents couldn't touch it, and I bought my condo. I didn't need a guardian to get certified copies of my birth certificate and social security card, so I was finally able to get all the documents to go through the name change process and officially disappear."

"Your parents never even tried to look for you in those first few years?" Justus seems truly baffled that such a thing is possible. He must have a close-knit family.

"They didn't care where I went, and they didn't want to be found. They put the house on the market the day after they kicked me out and were gone within a month—Jim looked them up even though I told him it was pointless. I'm actually surprised my dad didn't move his office too, but I guess he figured security was tight enough I wouldn't get past them. Not that I tried."

"Why'd they even kick you out, if you don't mind me asking?" Luca broaches the subject I'm sure they're all dying to know but are too polite to bring up. I actually respect the fuck out of the fact that he asked. I would've.

"They caught me kissing a boy." The expressions around me range from disbelief to anger, but not surprise. I guess they all had an inkling where my parents drew the line. "There were years of disappointments before then—I didn't like the sports they approved of, I liked art instead of business or math, I resented that they tried to mold me into their image—you name it we didn't see eye-to-eye. But being gay is what really sealed the deal. My dad hauled me up by my shirt, tossed me out the front door and locked it in my face."

Xander curses as Noah takes my hand in his and brings it to his lips for a soft kiss. I flash a weak smile to let everyone know I'm okay.

"To this day I'm not sure if I kissed that kid because I wanted to get caught or because I actually liked him. I'd known I was gay for years, and I'd also

known my parents wouldn't approve of it. I remember being tired of hiding, and when this cute new kid moved to town, I saw an opportunity to explore the thing I'd been hiding for years. I could've done that anywhere but my house, and I didn't, even though I knew it was reckless. The only thing I remember clearly is watching that door slam and promising myself I'd never be ashamed of liking men, no matter the consequences. Sorry I never told you this," I tell Xander, who is the closest thing I have to a real friend, probably shouldn't be hearing this for the first time.

"You don't have to apologize," he says. "I wasn't exactly forthcoming with all my issues until recently. And if being gay has taught me anything, it's that no one has the right to judge how other people deal with the scars from their past. I understand why you wouldn't want to talk about that period of your life."

"Thanks. Although I should clarify, I talk about that period all the time. Not my evil parents but the time period once I left their house. It was the start of my sexual awakening, which is absolutely worth sharing." Not to make light of his words, but we've had enough heavy stuff for one night.

"You can apologize for that if you want to. It won't erase the images in my head," Xander snorts, "but it's a start."

"Please," I huff. "That was good material, and you know it. I bet you've even re-enacted some of it with the hot piece of ass sitting next to you."

"We don't need to re-enact anything." Niko slings his arm around Xander's shoulder. "Our sex life is awesome."

"How about we leave sex out of the conversation tonight." Xander gives him a wry look.

"Fine." Niko kisses Xander's temple. "So, what do you think will happen to your folks after this?" He asks me.

“No idea. Don’t really care.” I sip the whiskey in front of me. *My boyfriend’s springing for the good stuff.*

“Can he get kicked out of... What kind of politician is he again?” Justus asks.

“A senator,” Noah replies for me when I don’t answer. “He can’t get kicked out but he’s up for re-election next year so he could get voted out.”

“You had to learn that for a citizenship test, didn’t you?” I nudge his shoulder, and he smiles bashfully.

“I’m still not clear on something,” Luca says. “This charity thing was for underprivileged kids, which you basically were for a while.” He points a finger at me. “And aren’t a lot of those kids gay or bi or whatever? Why support a charity if you don’t like the people impacted by it?”

“Denver skews Democratic and he’s a Republican. I assume it makes him more appealing to Independents or moderate Democrats if he seems supportive of the LGBTQ+ community,” Noah says.

I nudge him again. “I’m the bad boy dating the teacher’s pet, aren’t I? That’s kinda hot.” Noah’s hand finds mine under the table and he threads our fingers together.

“What a douche.” Luca wrinkles his nose in disgust.

“He could be facing some legal trouble if what Rose said about holding her green card is true,” Noah muses aloud.

I’d forgotten about that until he mentioned it, and as much as I’d enjoy seeing the man squirm, my guess is it would turn into a big headache for her. “I’m guessing Judge Calahan will get that worked out without involving the authorities. Hopefully, with some sort of big payout for her so she doesn’t have to work again.”

“We’ll make sure she doesn’t.” Noah gives my hand a squeeze as my air

gets lodged in my chest. While the big guy has done some pretty sweet things for me, this is the one that tips my world off its axis. Being boyfriends, moving in, those things are stages in a relationship that may or may not last. Committing to take care of the only mother I've ever known... That's *permanent*.

“Hey.” Luca suddenly perks up. “You’re out in public and walking just fine. That means you’re coming back to the team, right?”

I try not to tense—it’s not like I didn’t know this was coming—but I’m even less thrilled about Noah traveling with Luca than I realized. *Apparently, having a boyfriend makes me possessive.*

Noah rubs his thumb over the back of my hand, sensing my distress, I think. “I’ll start practice Monday, but it’ll still probably be a few weeks before I’m in a game, just to be safe.”

“Gauthier’s killing it and all,” Niko starts, “but it’ll be nice to have you back. His reflexes are a hair too slow for my liking.”

“Slower than mine maybe, but not slow. He’s a big part of the reason we aren’t too far out of first in the conference,” Noah points out.

“Agreed.” Niko nods vigorously. “I just feel a little more at ease with you.”

The guys dissolve into a conversation about cold stuff while I sip my drink and marvel over the fact that I just shared what I did. It’s not that I was ashamed of what happened, lots of kids have shit parents that make their lives miserable. It was more about not wanting to put myself in a vulnerable position again by trusting people who could eventually hurt me. And rather than be offended I didn’t open up, the people at this table accepted it without question.

I didn’t expect that.

Given the way they acted when Niko and Xander came out to them, and

even Noah, I probably should've realized they'd accept me too. But I'm not on their team, and I kept Xander at arm's length for years. I didn't give any of them much reason to be so tolerant of me. Hell, I probably baited them to push me away instead, but they're still here.

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By the time we get home it's nearly midnight, and we're both exhausted. That doesn't stop Noah from pinning me against the door the second we get inside.

"Do you have any idea how hard it was to keep my hands off you when you look this sexy?" He licks up my neck, over my jaw, and takes my mouth in a searing, possessive kiss.

I bite my lip suggestively when he pulls back to look at me. "The un-tied tie and open collar really do it for you, huh?"

"You have no idea." He nuzzles my chest, just above the open shirt.

"Oh, I think I do. Just remember, you're the one who made the PDA rules, not me. I'd have happily played with your cock under the table." I reach for it now, palming the hard bulge over his pants.

"I'm a patient man. I don't mind waiting for the things I really want."

"And what is it you really want?" I flex my fingers around him, enjoying the way he fills my hand. Nice and long and thick.

"You... In my mouth." He nibbles along my jaw as he works my pants open, dropping to his knees when he has them parted just enough to pull my boxers off my dick, but not so much that they fall from my hips. When I start to take off my shirt—being naked while he's clothed seems to be my new favorite kink—he reaches up to stop me. "Leave it on. I like seeing you so polished and so dirty at the same time."

*When he puts it that way...*

Keeping my hands trapped in his, Noah leans forward and places a feather-light kiss on my tip as his eyes flutter closed. He repeats the gesture again and again, peppering my skin with tiny little waves of pleasure that fan over my length the way water ripples when it's disturbed by a stone. This might be the first time anyone's actually kissed my dick, and it's more enticing than I could've imagined.

When he's covered every inch with his soft lips, Noah parts his mouth and gives me his tongue, leisurely swirling it around my crown a few times before sucking gently on the head. Releasing our hands so he can hold me in his grip, mine find their way to his hair, undoing the tie that holds it back so I can thread my fingers through the silky strands. A soft sigh sends a wave of hot air over my damp skin, and we both shudder.

Using the flat of his tongue, Noah laps at my slit like he enjoys my taste, then takes me into his mouth. Closing his lips around my crown, he slurps me delicately, swiping his tongue over my sensitive flesh with each pull. Despite the fragile treatment, my thighs quake, pent up desire and adrenaline threatening to unleash within me and take control.

Though the gentle pace is completely foreign, it's satisfying as hell, and my restraint starts to wane. I flex my fingers against Noah's scalp, guiding him over me as I push forward. Slow and steady, the wet slide of his tongue lavishes every inch of my length. The gentle glide of his mouth is both teasing and tender, like he enjoys taking me as much as I enjoy him doing it. That's... Hot seems too common a word to describe it. More like mesmerizing.

As he takes me to the back of his throat, Noah's hooded eyes lock with mine. He watches my chest rise with each breath, and my lips part on a soft moan. With strong hands, he guides my pants off my hips and runs his

fingertips up and down my thighs. My balls ache as he palms them, a lone finger applying the slightest amount of pressure to my hole. I flatten myself against the wall to keep upright as a torrent of sensations bombards me. The tenuous grasp on my self-discipline is ready to snap.

My cock glistens with Noah's saliva as he unhurriedly bobs his head over my length, a satisfied groan rumbling around it as he pushes deeper. Watching it sink gradually into his mouth, it occurs to me, I've never had such a gentle blow job. Never had a gentle encounter period until the big guy, but getting sucked off all sweet-like... Even guys who love sucking cock tend to rush, slurping and slobbering all over the place. Don't get me wrong, a messy, wet blow job is an excellent way to get my dick hard, but to get hard while making me feel like I'm important... Treasured even. That's some lovey-dovey...

*Holy shit!*

*Is that what this is? Does Noah love me? I know he likes me—he's said that much—but does he love me? Do I love him?*

The man did just publicly claim me, and hint that he'd take care of Rose, and when I think of the coming weeks, months, years... For the first time in my life, I don't like the thought of spending that time alone. I want him to be there. And since the L word doesn't appear to be giving me hives...wow!  
*Shit!*

*I think I love him.*

It could be the impending orgasm making my brain all fuzzy, but I feel like this is something I need to tell him. Something he needs to know. Probably not while my dick's in his mouth, though.

Using strength I didn't know I possessed, I yank Noah off my cock and slam our mouths together, plunging my tongue against his. The kiss is urgent,

desperate, like I need it more than I need my next breath. Like the force of it could fuse us together forever or some shit like that, so neither of us will be alone again. And then I taste myself on his tongue, mixed with his musky flavor, and my frenzy starts to wane. Something about the two of us together softens the kiss, morphing from feverish need into this overwhelming sense of peace and belonging.

This would be the perfect time to confess how I feel, and it's on the tip of my tongue to do just that. But I can't get the words out. I've never said them to another person. Never heard them in return. Not even from my parents, who weren't the affectionate type even before I was old enough to really piss them off. It makes me question whether I can trust my emotions, so instead of saying something profound, I say, "Bedroom. Now."

When we get to his room Noah sets me gently on the bed and tugs my shoes and pants off before undoing my shirt. He pauses to look at me when I'm gloriously naked but he still resembles Thor dressed up as James Bond.

"Take your dick out and fuck me," I rasp breathlessly.

Noah starts to remove his jacket and I shake my head vigorously. "Just your dick. Like you're in the middle of something super important and don't have time to get naked but you have to be inside me."

"Some fantasy of yours?" He arches a brow but pulls his cock out like I asked.

"I'm making this up as I go." I pull the lube from the nightstand and drizzle some in my hand, rubbing my palms together before wrapping them around Noah's cock and slicking him up while he hovers over me in his sexy tux. "I just really like the idea of getting fucked by a man dressed like a billionaire."

"Millionaire," he corrects as I stroke over his length, getting him nice and slippery. "I don't have that much money."

“Humor me, big guy.” I lay on my back and spread my legs, hooking them behind my knees. With an exaggerated sigh, Noah lines himself up and pushes into me. His head falls back as he bottoms out, his prominent Adam’s apple bobbing when he swallows thickly. *I don’t think I’m supposed to need a spank bank anymore now that I have a boyfriend, but for the times he’s traveling, this right here is going in it.*

Holding my breath, I wait for him to move. To start pounding into me like a man on a mission, but he doesn’t. He just stands there, balls deep like I’m some sort of cock warmer. It’d be pretty hot if I wasn’t desperate for the friction of movement.

“Remember, you don’t have a lot of time,” I prompt. “Get to the fucking.”

“No.”

“*No?*”

“You heard me. I’ll keep the tux on like you asked, but I’m not rushing this.” To emphasize his point, he pulls out excruciatingly slow, then presses back in, rotating his hips when he’s fully seated so his crown rubs all over my prostate.

“*Holy fucking mother of god,*” I groan. “Where did you learn how to do that?”

He pummels me with a series of short, rapid pumps, jackhammering that sensitive bundle of nerves before retreating and pressing back in leisurely. “I didn’t learn it. I’m making it up as I go.” He steals my line, but I’m too blissed out to comment on it.

*All this time I thought I was well acquainted with my prostate, but it turns out the real key to nirvana is my boyfriend’s dick.*

“Can you reach your dick like that?” Noah asks as his pelvis tilts forward.

Though I’m bent like a pretzel, it’s not a stretch. I nod.

“Good. Wrap your hand around it.”

I do as he says with a soft groan. “Can I jerk it?”

“No, just hold it. Squeeze to keep yourself from coming if you need to, but nothing else.”

I want to huff in displeasure. Instead, another moan passes through my lips as Noah circles his hips, the fat head of his cock kissing my pleasure center before pounding it and disappearing...*again*. Over and over, he teases me to the brink and backs off, the slight frown of concentration completing the image of a sophisticated man getting ready to bust a nut in his favorite hole.

It’s sinful, and beautiful, and it makes me near delirious with ecstasy as the tension in my groin coils tighter and tighter. It’s the single hottest moment of my life, pushing me toward what could be an epic orgasm. But I can’t help feeling like something’s missing.

Hockey god looking extra sexy in his suave tux... Check.

His thick dick filling me to the brink... Check.

Full lips slightly parted, gasping for air as he tries to maintain control... Fuck, that’s it.

“Kiss me,” I blurt.

“What?”

“I’m about to come, and I want your mouth on me when I do. Kiss me.”

Noah pins my wrists above my head as he collapses on top of me, trapping my swollen cock between us. With our fingers laced together, he drives into me long and deep as his mouth gently meets mine.

Our tongues slide together, giving and receiving the love we confessed only moments ago, and making my heart thump in my chest. *This is what I needed. His lips on mine, sharing our air as our bodies tumble into heavenly oblivion.... It's perfect.*

The orgasm starts as a series of tiny quakes, short but powerful bursts that make me gasp from their intensity. It quickly morphs into a full body tremor, trapping my breath in my lungs as my body bucks upward. My ass clenches around Noah's cock as if it could somehow take him deeper.

I breathe a soundless cry against his lips as he shudders inside me, his warm cum filling me as my own spreads between our joined stomachs. And while it's every bit as filthy as I hoped it would be, it's also hauntingly beautiful. The way our heartbeats pulse in sync as our eyes manage to lock together in the dark room... I'll never forget it.

Tentatively, I tilt my chin up, so my lips brush against Noah's.

"Yes," I whisper between kisses.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I want to move in with you." I bite my lip, waiting for his reaction.

He pulls my lip away from my teeth with his thumb and gives me a lingering kiss. "Good, because this is where you belong."

I know this makes me the world's biggest cheeseball, but even though I still have to go through the whole moving thing, hearing him say that makes me feel like I'm already home.

## Chapter 23 - Noah

“Will you build me a pool?” Tripp asks as we’re packing up his room.

“If I build a *swimming* pool I’m going to use it to swim.”

“Who said anything about swimming?”

I’ll build this man whatever he wants, but I see no reason why I can’t have a little fun at his expense first. “As far as I’m concerned there’s only one use for a pool, and that’s to put water in it. Besides, there’s a perfectly good *empty* pool down the street. You and Xander can skate in that and swim in ours.”

“There’s a major flaw in your plan.” He stuffs a pile of t-shirts into a duffel bag sitting open on the bed. “If our pool has water we’ll have Xander, Niko, Luca and Justus hanging around all the time.”

“Where’s the flaw in that?”

“If they’re always around it will really cut into our sexy times.”

“How much sex are you planning to have?” I empty his sock drawer into the bag sitting on his dresser.

“Noah Tremblay, do not pretend to be ignorant about this. Live-in boyfriends get sex morning, noon and night. It’s the most important requirement.”

I lift my brows in mock surprise. “There are requirements for living together?”

“Several.” He raises his forefinger. “First, do *not* wake me up at the ass crack of dawn if you have to go to practice or catch a flight or something. Second,” he raises another finger. “If you do wake me up at the ass crack of dawn, the only acceptable way to do so is with a complimentary blow job.”

Third, I get to wear your clothes but you can't wear mine because they're too small, boxer-briefs excluded because your cock will look fantastic in my smaller underwear. Fourth, the aforementioned sex, and fifth," he lifts a final finger, "while it's not a rule per se I propose we don't need clothes in the house."

"I accept your terms." I hold my hand out for him to shake it. "Except for the last one. If you're naked all the time I'll be hard all the time, and there are some things it's not smart to do with an erection."

"Name one."

"Cooking."

"Pfft. You have a chef for that."

"True, but you like when I cook for you and neither of us wants me to burn my dick because I'm distracted by your sexy ass."

Tripp purses his lips as he seems to consider my point, finally taking my hand when he relents. "I suppose preserving your manhood is an acceptable reason not to be naked all the time."

Once I have his hand in mine I pull him toward me and slam our mouths together, swiping my tongue against his as I tease the hair on the back of his neck. "I'm glad you agree," I rumble. "Now let's finish packing."

"So bossy." He stuffs more shirts in the bag, concentrating for about two minutes before he speaks up again. "Can I have an office?"

"Don't you have one of those already?"

"Not for my *job*, job, although I'm not giving up on the work from home idea. For my hobby job, helping local bands."

I've been so focused on my recovery I forgot all about that passion of his, which makes me feel like shit. I know how much he likes working with bands—one of the first conversations we had was when I ran into him at a

concert and he showed me what he was doing with his video equipment—and he hasn't been to a concert since he started crashing at my place.

“You haven't missed any work because of me, have you?”

“It's not work, it's a hobby. And no, I haven't missed any. I've missed several shows while I was taking care of your ass, but since that ass is now mine I'll forgive you.” He cracks one of those shirts on my backside before tucking it into the bag.

I throw a pair of socks at his head. “Yes, you can have an office. If you take me to the concerts with you.”

“Um duh. My famous boyfriend is my backstage ticket, so of course you're going with me. I might even add that to my list of live-in-boyfriend requirements. It'd be a shame for me not to meet fancy people because my fancy boyfriend isn't there to flex his name.”

“So, you're just using me for my celebrity access?”

“And your big fat cock.” He flings the socks at my crotch, but I catch them before they hit the target and put them in the bag. “Fucking goalies,” he mutters.

“Hey now. It's a good thing my reflexes are so fast, otherwise with your aim you might jeopardize the morning, noon and night sex you're counting on.”

“Omigosh” Tripp's eyes go comically wide. “I don't know why I never thought of this before, but you literally put your body in front of flying objects. What happens if you take a puck to the dick?”

*Of course that's his biggest concern.* “I wear protection.”

“Yes, but how much can those pads really protect you? I don't like the idea of my most prized possession being in the line of fire. I mean, I'm happy to kiss it all better if it gets hit, but I don't think my kisses can fix a bent carrot.”

“Bent carrot?” I arch an eyebrow.

“Haven’t you ever seen the commercials?” He rolls his eyes. “Penile trauma is a thing. They can give you medicine, but I’m not sure that’s a cure. Your cock fits in me perfectly, and I’d prefer not to mess with perfection.”

“Perfection, huh?” I stifle a laugh. “And here I thought *your* cock was your most prized possession?”

He waves a hand dismissively. “It’s more of a tie at this point. I mean, I guess I could exclusively top, but I really do like to switch. How close are you to retirement? I’m not sure how long I can live with the stress of you suffering permanent damage.”

Knowing Tripp, I have no doubt he’s legitimately concerned about the well-being of my penis. But I suspect that pales in comparison to what’s really going on in his head, and this little rant is his way of coping with whatever’s on his mind.

“Are you having second thoughts about moving in?” I ask.

“What?” He feigns ignorance.

“You’re rambling even more than usual. Why are you freaking out?”

“The fact that you know I’m freaking out, for starters,” he mumbles.

“And?” I take a seat on the bed and pull him onto my lap.

Tripp rests his head on my chest, I think so he doesn’t have to look at me. “Since running into my parents, I’ve been remembering little things about living with them. Like how they’d complain that I was too loud. Or too messy. Or always in the way. And I know that I was probably just a normal kid and not doing anything wrong, but... I haven’t lived with anyone since then...”

“You’re worried I might say the same things?” I rub my hand along his spine.

“Yeah. And I know that’s stupid because I’ve been staying with you for a month already and you haven’t said anything like that, but if you did I could always come back here.”

I kiss the top of his head. “And you’re afraid of not having a place to retreat to if something goes wrong.”

He relaxes against my chest. “Yeah.”

“You know moving in with me doesn’t mean you have to give this place up. I never want you to feel trapped.”

“I don’t feel trapped. Not consciously. And this sucks because I know you’re nothing like them, but their shit keeps popping into my head.”

In some ways I get what Tripp’s going through. Every once in a while I’ll remember something about my parents out of the blue, and it’ll paralyze me. The difference is those memories are happy, and the paralysis is almost welcome because it forces me to relive a good time in my life. It keeps me from forgetting them. In Tripp’s case the memories are traumatic, and the paralysis is borne of fear of being abandoned or homeless. I don’t know how to help him get through that except to give him time and space. And if the space part of that equation is keeping this condo, even if that’s just a mental security blanket, I’ll give that to him. With a twist.

“What if you give this place to Rose?”

“Like put it in her name?” Tripp sits up straight, glancing at me with the softer expression I’m starting to see more and more of.

“If you want. Or leave it in your name but have her move in. Either way, it’ll be here if you need it, so you never have to worry about not having somewhere to go.”

“She does deserve a place of her own after all the shit she put up with from my parents.”

“What sort of shit was that?”

Tripp fiddles with a hangnail as he answers. “Emotional abuse mostly, same as me. Telling her her work wasn’t good enough, that she cooked things wrong, that it was her fault I was a handful. I always wondered why she put up with it. I know now she stayed because of the green card thing, at least after they kicked me out, but before that I think she stayed for me.” He brings his glassy eyes to mine, and I wrap him in my arms.

“So, what do you think?” I sift my fingers through his hair to comfort him. “Keep this as a safe place for the two of you?”

“I think we’d both like that.”

“We’ll make it happen, then.”

Tripp pulls back and places the sweetest kiss on my lips. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“So.” A sly smile spreads across his face. “Where did we land on the whole pool thing?”

I lift him off my lap and playfully smack his ass. “Finish packing. Then maybe we’ll talk.”

“Yes, Daddy.” He quips, and I can’t even correct him since he’s too fucking cute.

## Chapter 24 - Tripp

The bell echoes on the other side of the door, and while I wait for the judge—Uncle Callahan—to answer. I briefly wish I’d taken Noah up on his offer to come with me, but he has practice, and deep down I know this is something I need to do on my own.

Seeing my parents rattled me more than I’d like to admit, and the hardened exterior I’d honed to perfection over the years started to crack. I know that’s not all bad, I was too isolated and independent before, but I’m too wary and unsure of myself after coming face-to-face with my past.

Noah has been exceptionally patient and understanding while I sort through the things I never really dealt with, and while I don’t think he minds taking care of me—that’s kind of his personality—I don’t want to be the kind of man who needs to be coddled. Prior to the run-in with my folks, I wasn’t, and I want that back. No, scratch that. I want to find a balance between taking care of myself and letting him take care of me.

“Preston,” Uncle Callahan booms as he opens the door.

“Tripp, actually,” I correct him as I step inside.

“Right. Sorry. That might take a little getting used to.”

“It’s okay.” I follow him as he leads us to his office, a room in dark cherry wood with an ornate desk and a wall of books. It’s everything I imagined a judge’s office would look like. Even though this is a friendly visit, I can’t help feeling a little like I’m in a principal’s office, about to be interrogated.

He gestures to one of the wingback chairs as he takes a seat behind the desk. “Rose is packing her bags. I thought we might catch up until she’s ready.”

“Sure.”

“First off, I’d like to say I’m sorry.”

“What?” I balk. “Why are you sorry?”

Uncle Callahan props his elbows on the armrest and steepled his fingers together. “I always knew your parents weren’t really the parental type. They were both rather ambitious, even back in college, and in truth I think that’s why we became friends since I was the same way.” A wistful smile flashes across his face before he becomes serious again. “You were a bit of a surprise, and while I knew they continued to put your father’s career first even after you arrived, I did think you were being treated well at home.”

He takes a deep breath before continuing, “I knew you and your father butted heads of course, but that was no different than any other father and son relationship. At least not that I saw, and having no child of my own, I didn’t feel qualified to second guess my friend. Not even when they shipped you off to a military academy for getting caught up in drugs.”

My eyes widen on their own accord as my jaw drops.

“Yes, I knew about that. A few joints clearly intended for personal use wouldn’t have landed you in too much trouble, but I stepped in to help make that go away at your father’s request. They told me it was because of the drug incident that they sent you to school, although I now know they kicked you out.”

“Then they told you I became a doctor.” I put the pieces together. “And you believed that?”

“I did find it strange since I knew you to be an artistic kid, but military schools aren’t exactly known for their art programs, so I thought it was possible you discovered an aptitude for science.”

“You didn’t think it was strange that I never came home?”

“Since I knew you weren’t overly close with your parents, no. Plus, they spend half their time in Washington, so I had no reason to think they were making up stories that you visited them there.”

I chew my lip, considering his words. “The lack of family photos wasn’t a clue?”

“Are there *any* family photos in their house?”

“Good point.” I laugh without any humor. “Still, you’re their closest friend.”

“*Was*. We haven’t been close in years. Your father’s ambition out-paced mine a long time ago. While we kept in touch sporadically, that was more out of a sense of obligation than desire. We’re both prominent men in the community, and our decades-long friendship has been well-documented. It was easier to go through the motions than to sever ties. That’s why I owe you an apology. Your parents and I may have drifted apart, but I was still your Godfather, and I failed you.”

This is a lot to take in, and while part of me wishes he had done more when I was a kid, I can see how my parents manipulated him the same way they did me.

“*They* failed me, not *you*.”

“I’m a grown man, son. I can admit when I’ve screwed up, but I’d like to do better going forward. If you’re open to that.”

Not that long ago it was just me. And maybe Xander in a platonic way. Now I have a boyfriend, several friends, the only mother I’ve ever known and possibly an uncle in my life. It’s been a weird several weeks.

“Um, yeah. I’m open to that.”

“Wonderful.” His smile is almost blinding. “Maybe you and that young man of yours can come over for dinner. I’d love to hear more about how you

helped him after his injury.”

“You remember the part about me not being a doctor, right?”

“Of course, but he said you helped him get through it.” Uncle Callahan’s brow wrinkles.

“Yeah, you probably don’t want the details on that.” *Omigod am I blushing? I don’t blush. What is happening?*

“Perhaps not.” Uncle Callahan clears his throat. “He’s special to you though, yes?”

“I—” It’s on the tip of my tongue to downplay my feelings since they still terrify me, but I can’t get the lie out.

Somewhere in the midst of helping Noah sort his shit, he helped me sort mine. Not that either of us realized I was the bigger mess when we made our little arrangement, but he’s taking it in stride, and while I still have my moments of panic, deep down I know he’ll be there to help me get through it. That my man will do anything for me, because he loves me.

*He loves me.*

And I totally, completely, unequivocally, love him.

“Yes. He’s special to me.”

Uncle Callahan gives me a warm smile. “I’m happy to hear that, son. You deserve it.”

“It doesn’t bother you that I’m with a man?”

Now, *he* seems to turn a little pink in the cheeks. “There’s a reason I never married, son.”

“You... You’re gay?” When he doesn’t say anything I continue. “And you’re still in the closet.”

“You’re a lot braver than I ever was. Than I am.” Uncle Callahan looks at me like... *Wow, this is... Is he proud of me? It sort of feels like he is. I...*

“I’m ready, Mr. Tripp.” Rose pokes her head into the office right before I can spiral into unfamiliar emotional territory. *Good timing.*

Uncle Callahan stands when I do, stepping around the desk to give me a hug. I know we did this at my parent’s party, but it still feels weird. Not bad, just different. I don’t hate it though, so I return the embrace.

“I’ll uh... I’ll call you. About dinner?”

“Please do.”

He escorts us out and helps us get Rose’s bags into the car. There are only a few since it seems my parents kept her on a pretty tight leash the last few years, but if the smile on her face is any indication, she’s not concerned about the lack of personal items. She’s just happy to be out of their house.

I’m not sure we’ll ever talk about them—I get the sense we’d both rather move on—but I’ll listen if she ever needs me to. I do have one question though.

“What are you going to do with all your free time?” Between the condo I’m giving her and the cash Uncle Callahan got her in exchange for not pressing charges, at Rose’s request, she doesn’t need to work anymore.

“Nothing, Mr. Tripp. Absolutely nothing.”

“I think that sounds perfect. Can I ask you one favor though?”

She looks at me curiously, but like any mother would, she says. “Of course.”

“Teach me how to cook your ramen? I want to introduce Noah to the comfort food I had growing up.”

Rose bobs her head slightly. “I’d be honored.”

## Chapter 25 - Noah

It's been heaven to be back on the ice.

Honestly, just walking is paradise after not being able to for several weeks. You never realize how much you move throughout the day until you suddenly can't. Everything from cooking to going to the bathroom, to just trying to find the damn TV remote, becomes a whole production when you have to do it on one leg. Don't even get me started on how hard it is to actually stand up off the couch with one leg and a set of crutches.

Finally putting my skates on and taking the goal, even just for practice, was like having this oppressive weight lifted off my chest. It didn't just make me feel independent again the way walking did, it was the difference between a wheezing breath and filling your lungs full of air. Feeling whole. If I'm being honest, the void I felt from not getting on the ice was considerably smaller than it would've been if I didn't have Tripp. So much so, a part of me is kind of dreading this road trip we're about to go on.

I'm excited to play again, but for the first time in my professional career, I'm not amped about the travel part of playing hockey. After years of staying in hotels, I prefer my own bed, but hotels aside, I usually look forward to seeing new places. It can be grueling, yet it can also be a great way to bond with my teammates. That was when I had no one to say goodbye to, no one waiting for me at home. Now, I do.

Between getting back on the ice and having Tripp move in, I'm privileged to say there's nothing I could want that I don't have, which makes it difficult to admit I'm a little sad about leaving for this road trip.

I'm practical enough to realize that means my love for Tripp might surpass my love of the game, and given my age... Let's just say, I'll have some deep thinking to do at the end of the season. For now, I just need to get through the next four days.

I toss some sweats, similar to the ones I'm wearing, in my duffel and open the dresser drawer to find some t-shirts while Tripp watches me from his perch on the bed.

"Don't you have to be all fancy and shit when you travel?" he asks.

"We have to dress up to go to the arena, but we can be comfortable the rest of the time. Fortunately, we go straight to the hotel when we land so I don't have to travel in a suit."

"Do you have to travel in gray sweatpants, though?"

"What's wrong with gray sweatpants?"

Tripp's jaw nearly drops to the floor. "They're the equivalent of kryptonite for anyone who likes cock, man or woman."

"Really?"

"Yes." He gives me an exasperated look. "Plus, I don't think they're very conducive to hiding that monster between your legs, and I definitely don't want people posting pictures of my second favorite cock all over social media."

"I follow the second favorite thing since yours is obviously your first, but you lost me at social media."

"Omigod, seriously? You don't know that people will take pictures and zoom in on the crotch and talk about how big the package behind the zipper is? Since those sweats don't have a zipper they won't leave nearly as much to the imagination."

I glance down my body, noting that from different angles he may have a

point. Still, it seems crazy to me that people might take such an interest in how I look in my pants. The cross look on Tripp's face tells me I'm the one who's under-reacting.

"Should I wear a pair of jeans?"

"You'll probably still look hot as fuck, but I suppose that's better than broadcasting your assets," he grumbles as he reclines against the headboard.

"Help me understand this," I say as I ditch the sweats and pull on a pair of jeans. "You've been speculating about the size of my cock for the better part of a year, yet you're worried about other people doing that same thing? Why?"

"That cock is *mine* to ogle, no one else's."

"Oh my gosh." I pause with the pants resting on my hips, still unfastened. "You're possessive."

"What? Am not."

"You totally are." A giant grin spreads over my face as I cross the room to sit on the bed, right at his hip, and lean in to nip at his chin. "You want me all to yourself."

"That doesn't make me possessive." He tilts his head so I can kiss his neck.

"No? What does it make you?"

"Protective," he says resolutely. "You wouldn't believe some of the comments people make. Depending on the angle, people could imply that you're woefully inadequate or hiding a can of Pringles. I'm saving you from rampant mischaracterization."

"You know the only opinion that matters is yours, right?" I cup the back of his head and tease my fingers through his hair as I give his earlobe a playful bite. "I don't care what people say about me or my body."

"Yes, well a man's penis is sacred. It shouldn't be seen by just anyone."

That statement gives me pause, and I pull back to look him in the eye. “I know you believe that first part, but the second is a little out of character. If you could legally do it, you’d charge admission to let people take a peek at yours. What’s this really about?”

Tripp rolls his eyes with an audible huff. “I wouldn’t do that *now*. And nothing’s going on.”

“Tripp,” I prod, resting my palm on the back of his neck.

“Ugh, fine. I know what happens on these little *road trips*.” He makes air quotes to emphasize that last part. “And I’m not a fan.”

Tilting my head to the side I search his face for some clue about what he’s trying to say and come up empty. “I’m not following.”

He exhales a frustrated breath. “You and Luca and the peek-a-boo pregame nonsense.”

*Me and... Oh shit! I never told him we ended that.*

“Tripp.” I rest my forehead against his. “I told Luca I can’t do that anymore.”

“I... You... When?”

“Weeks ago. He was getting in his head about a bad game and said he couldn’t wait for me to get back so he could get back on track, and I told him we needed to find another option.”

“Why?” It’s barely a whisper.

It’s hard to see with our heads so close together, still I do my best to lock eyes with him. “Because I didn’t feel right being in that situation with him when I’m with you.”

“We weren’t even together then. We were just—”

“I know.” I sigh, closing my eyes.

“But, aren’t superstitions a big deal? Like it could mess up your season,

kind of big deal?”

“Yes.”

“And Luca’s okay with this?” Tripp pulls back to look at me, a wary expression on his face.

“He was nervous at first, but he understood where I was coming from, so he made other arrangements.”

“Where were you coming from?” he whispers.

“I think you know.” I hold his gaze, praying I haven’t spooked him with that implication.

Tripp inhales deeply, holding his breath for what feels like an eternity. Then he leans forward to brush his lips over mine. “I love you.”

Now it’s my turn to suck in a startled breath, though I recover much faster since I’ve been ready to say this for weeks, and was just waiting for him to catch up. Cupping his face in my hands, I lean my forehead against his. “I love you, too.”

Tripp’s body visibly relaxes just before his lips meet mine in a tender kiss. Then the spike of adrenaline from admitting his feelings catches up with him and he starts rambling. “That’s really cool of Luca to let you off the hook because of me. Seriously though, where’d that ritual even come from? I know people do lots of weird shit in the name of good luck or whatever, but that’s got to be the weirdest superstition I’ve ever heard.”

“I always figured Luca would tell me if he felt like it, and he never did, so your guess is as good as mine. I’m just glad he found a way to make the arrangement he has for home games work for the away ones too. At least I assume that’s what he did since he’s been playing well these last few games.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t suggest I watch, too.” Tripp snorts.

“He did.” I stroke his stubbled cheek with my thumb. “I ruled it out because

the only person I want to share that kind of intimacy with is you.”

Tripp gives me a relieved smile and leans forward like he’s going to kiss me before pulling back abruptly. “Wait. If you told him to figure something else out a few weeks ago then you told that dick how you felt about me before telling me?”

“I thought you liked Luca?”

“I called him a dick, *right?*”

“And you like dicks,” I finish for him.

“Exactly. I still don’t want him seeing yours, though. I also don’t like that he knows stuff about you I don’t.” Tripp crosses his arms in front of his chest and puffs out his bottom lip.

“And you’re not possessive?” I fight back a smile.

“Nope.” He shakes his head firmly back and forth.

“Brat.”

“That’s been well established. And you love it.”

I lean forward until our lips are just barely touching. “I really do.”

Tripp’s lips meet mine for the sweetest, most perfect kiss. And then he squeals when I scoop him into my arms.

“Um...lover. If you want to carry me, I recommend tossing me over your shoulder. It’s more dignified than treating me like a damsel.”

“Lover?”

“We said the ‘L’ word. Besides, it’ll make Xander gag, so it can’t be all bad.”

“I’m gonna ignore the fact you brought up someone else’s name while I’m carrying you to bed and say I’m more comfortable with boyfriends. But I still love you.”

He flashes a bashful smile, which is a new look for him, but might just be

my favorite. “I love you, too.”

*I will never get tired of hearing that.*

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“How long have you been dating Preston Cooper?” The reporter asks when I point to him.

“I don’t know a Preston Cooper.” Honestly the question doesn’t bother me—I expected it since Tripp’s identity was finally unearthed yesterday—I just want to poke a little fun at the press for asking me about my boyfriend before they bring up the first game I’ve played in six weeks. And since my boyfriend is a brat, I have a pretty good idea how to make my point.

“Preston... Changed his name to Tripp ten years ago,” the guy prompts.

“Why didn’t you say Tripp then? I mean, I assume if someone changes their name, they’d like to be known by the new one instead of the old one. Isn’t that reporter 101? Getting the facts straight?”

“How long have you been dating Tripp Cooper?” he rephrases.

“Can we really call it dating? We’ve only been out in public once, and I feel like the term dating implies multiple outings, not just one.”

“How long have you been seeing him?”

*Damn, he’s persistent. I knew two out and proud men on the same team would get attention, but jeez.*

“Since I first looked at him. Just like I’ve been seeing you since the first time I looked at you. Recognition is pretty cool like that. Did you know there’s a condition where you don’t recognize people’s faces? I can never remember what it’s called—I don’t have it obviously—but I’ve always wondered about it.”

I point to the next reporter since that one’s out of questions.

“Did you know Tripp was the son of Senator Charles Cooper when you met

him?”

“Is that customary? I wasn’t aware that was something I should know about people I just met. I’ll probably need to make a list because I know a lot of people, and this could get confusing.”

She, too, sits with a harumph, and I point to the next.

“Bit of a rocky start this season, first the injury then the drama with Senator Cooper after the charity event, are you a distraction for this team?” He tilts his recorder so the microphone is pointed at me.

*Ouch. That’s not the direction I thought this would go, but at least now we’re talking about hockey.*

“Both of those things are in the past, so I don’t believe they’ll be a factor going forward.”

“Maybe not, but you’re also one of two openly gay men on the same roster, and that’s a unique scenario that might take the focus off the team.”

“I’m not overly concerned, seeing as the only people focusing on it are members of the press.”

“You don’t think two gay players on the same team is newsworthy?” he follows up.

“Statistically speaking, one in every eight men identifies as gay, which doesn’t include anyone identifying as bi or pan or demi, and there are twenty on this roster, so... If there are two gay men on the team, I’d say we’re right in line with the national average.” If there’s one thing travel gives me plenty of time for, it’s reading, and I may have brushed up on a few facts in preparation for the questions I knew would come my way.

“*If* there are two gay men?” He arches a skeptical brow.

I look to the players and coaches lining the wings of the room. “Did I miss an announcement that I’m gay? I don’t remember making a statement like

that.”

“You’re dating a man,” the reporter presses.

“When was that established?”

“You don’t think this exchange will be distracting to your teammates?” He changes tactics.

“I’m only answering the questions you ask.” I hold my hands up like I’m innocent.

“You’re not answering, you’re evading.”

“Ask me a question about hockey and I’ll answer.”

“This team fell short in the playoffs last year and is already four games out of first. Can you turn things around?” He studies me critically.

“Considering we just won today, I’d say so.”

“That’s only one win.”

“I have faith in us.”

“Why?”

“Because if we fall seven times, we’ll get up eight.” I wink, just for Tripp, who I know is watching.

Later that night, my phone beeps with an incoming video call, and before I can even say hello, Tripp bombards me. “I don’t know a Preston. Is that customary? Statistically speaking. Omigod I about came in my pants. You make one sexy brat.”

“Well, I learned from the best.” I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

“Damn right. Now flip the screen and show me your gorgeous cock. It’s been way too long since I’ve seen it.”

“You saw it yesterday,” I remind him while doing what he says.

“Exactly. That’s entirely too long.”

# Epilogue

TWO YEARS LATER

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” I grumble, wincing as the tattoo gun hits my skin.

“Oh, come on, it’s not that painful. I’m sure you’ve taken a puck that hurt worse.” Tripp rolls his eyes.

“It’s not the pain I’m complaining about.”

“You don’t like my artwork?”

“I love the artwork. Or I did until you told me about its alternative meaning.”

Despite having rings that say we belong to each other, Tripp wasn’t satisfied with something that could be removed, so he talked me into matching tattoos. He drew up a design with two hockey sticks framing a skateboard like a heart, and our initials in an elegant old English-style text. Then he shaded it to look sort of vintage.

“I mean, it’s not inaccurate.” He smirks mischievously as the second hockey stick gets inked onto my skin, crossing over top of the first.

“The rings on our fingers already say we’re crossing swords. We don’t need a literal picture of crossing swords on our arms.”

“Technically it’s crossing hockey sticks.” Tripp points to the blade as evidence while Jim tries to hide his laughter and ends up snorting instead.

“Did you know he was sneaking hidden meanings into the design?” I ask the man who helped Tripp get off the streets.

“It’s Tripp.” He shrugs as he gets more ink on the needle. “I sort of assume there’s always a double meaning to anything he does.”

“The guys are never gonna let me live this down.” My head thunks against the back of the chair as I try to remind myself that I asked him to marry me because I knew life would never be boring.

“We could’ve put them on our asses, like I first suggested,” Tripp unhelpfully says.

“Yeah, because when I’m old and decrepit I want the equivalent of a wrinkled raisin on my ass.”

“But they’d be *matching* wrinkled raisins.”

“I thought the whole point was to show that we’re together.” I sigh heavily.

“These do, and personally I think I nailed it. I mean, look at all the little Easter eggs in this design. Your hobbies, my hobbies, all bundled up in a little heart that screams *gay pride* to boot. Tell me that’s not poetic.”

“Still not gay,” I remind him.

“For me you are.” He bites his adorable bottom lip like the little brat he is, and my agitation fades instantly.

“Yeah, Tripp.” I smile affectionately. I stopped trying to figure out what label fit me best once I realized that didn’t change how I felt about him. Still, he’s never been more right. “For you I am.”



# Chapter Two

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# Tripp

**L**.O.V.E.  
My friend Xander is in it... The guy swore off relationships, specifically with closeted men, then went and fell for one anyway. A big brute with a heart of gold—so he says—who also happens to be a hockey god, or *Rookie of the Year* if I'm being literal, but to me they're one in the same.

I think it was the massive cock that tipped the scales. Not that I've actually seen Niko's cock, but the man is huge, so... Probability and all that.

Speaking of probability, I've been hoping that Xander dating Niko would translate into me snagging a hockey god of my own, since I occasionally hang out with them now. It's one of the perks of being his closest friend, and a perk I intended to use and abuse.

Luckily, the other players don't seem to mind my relentless flirting. They probably don't take me seriously, even though I'm absolutely serious—I'd do them all and twice on Sunday. That's how much I like sex. And dick. And showing straight guys what they're missing. Especially the ones who are taller and stronger than me, which is like trying to find a needle in a haystack

since I'm tall and strong myself, but my new hockey friends fit the bill. Every last one of them. I'd lick them all given the chance.

There's one in particular I've had my eye on though. He's a Thor lookalike who either doesn't care or is too polite to say no when I invent reasons to touch him. Not without permission—I'm bold, but not a creep—and since he hasn't denied me, I plan to keep asking.

Xander hates that I'm brazen enough to ask to touch a man, gay or not, but I refuse to be ashamed of my sexuality. That and I'd rather push buttons early on to see if people can handle me than do the polite thing and find out later they can't. Thanks to years of childhood therapy I was unwillingly subjected to, I know that's a defense mechanism so people don't disappoint me. I'll never admit that though. I prefer to think of my obnoxious tendencies as a sparkling character trait.

Speaking of handling me, Thor—it's actually Noah, but to me he's Thor—appears to be just fine with my antics, and as long as he allows it, I'll touch that hot body every chance I get. Therein lies the problem. I want to touch that particular hot body so bad I haven't been trying to touch any others, and for a guy who prides himself on his shameless sexual escapades, that's nothing short of concerning.

I'm not a one-man type of guy. I don't *do* relationships. And don't even get me started on love. That particular emotion doesn't apply to me. I'm an advocate of one-night-stands, and I'm not ashamed of it. Or the fact that I'm gay.

I don't wear it on my sleeve—you won't find rainbow clothes in my closet—and though I'm lean I'm not small. No one would label me as effeminate, much less gay based on my appearance alone. However, if I see something I like... I'm not afraid to ogle. And I'll ask to touch. In Thor's case, he hasn't

said no, but he hasn't encouraged or reciprocated either. He merely obliges when I give him a line about being curious if his arms are bigger than both my hands.

I might've given up trying to get my hands on him if it weren't for the fact I've caught him looking at me from time to time. In the beginning those looks were curious. Contemplative. Now, I'd swear there's an undercurrent of desire to them, especially as they track my movements on my board.

His eyes linger longer than they used to. They wander from my face to my torso. And while the looks haven't crossed into outright lust, I'd like to think that's coming. Which is why, nearly a year after first meeting him, I haven't rid myself of this infatuation. In fact, I think it's time to take it to the next level, and since he happens to be sitting poolside next to Niko as Xander and I skate shirtless inside the empty bowl, I'm thinking today is the day to up the ante.

"Points to Niko for picking a house with its own private skatepark so you can ride to your heart's content, but it's hot as fuck out here," I complain to Xander as we ride up to the rim and step off our boards.

"It's Denver in late July. What did you expect?" My always grumpy friend says.

"I expect a man with as much money as your boyfriend to plant some trees. Or maybe, he can get one of those industrial sized fans. Hell, he could even hire people to stand around the edge with giant palm leaves. Preferably sexy, shirtless men. Like his teammates."

"He plays hockey for a living. You think he ever has to worry about overheating?" *Typical Xander, ignoring my attempt to get a rise out of him.*

"I have at least half a dozen smart-ass responses for that but it's too hot for my brain to do brain things and pick the best one. Instead, I'll have to settle

for a drink.” I drop into the pool, gliding around the perimeter one last time before popping over the rim in front of the two stacked athletes lounging by the side.

Despite the scorching sun, my body shivers as I feel Noah’s eyes wander over me. “Toss me one of those?” I nod to the cooler of drinks sitting between them.

Noah lobs a can in my direction, but rather than popping the top and slamming it back, I swipe the cool aluminum over my chest, feeling my nipples pebble from the cold.

“You’d cool off faster if you put that on your neck.” Xander calls me out on my antics as he rolls to a stop beside me.

“I look sexier this way.”

“If we all agree you’re sexy, will you stop trying to show off?” Xander huffs.

“Where’s the fun in that? Besides, I’m not showing off, I’m making an effort.”

“What’s the difference?” Niko cocks his head and squints up at me.

“Showing off would be posing seductively or licking the water drops off my fingers. Making an effort is a simple act to demonstrate that I look good while cooling off.”

“Still not seeing the distinction.” Niko’s lips press together as he shakes his head.

*Silly hockey god.* “Making an effort is like having self-respect. Wearing actual pants instead of sweatpants when you go out for example, or fixing your hair. Hell, even showering is the effort for some people. Showing off would be flaunting your outfit or your hair.”

“How are you not flaunting then?” Xander sits between Niko’s spread legs

on the lounge chair and leans against him, sweaty back and all, and when Niko wraps an arm around his waist the strangest little zing flares in my chest. If I had to define it, I'd go with yearning, which is totally foreign and quite frankly, unwanted. I don't do yearning, except maybe for cute little dogs or a sick new skateboard. Never people, or couple-y things like cuddling.

I shake my head to clear the feeling. "If I was flaunting, I would've rubbed the can all over my body and made sex eyes at Noah. Instead, I made one pass over my chest, a tiny little gesture which is the equivalent of saying I look good even though it's hot as fuck outside."

"I can't believe I'm admitting this." Niko shakes his head ruefully. "But I actually understand what he's saying."

Xander rolls his eyes. "Don't encourage him."

"I'm not encouraging, just admitting that I understand his point. Plus, you have to admit, for him, that little show was tame. Just sayin'."

"Not exactly resounding support, but I'll take it. Thank you, Niko." I pop the top on my beer and take a few ambitious gulps, not so subtly showing off my ability to swallow—my deep throat game is strong—and turn my focus to Noah. "You're awfully quiet over there, big guy. Missing the chill of the ice rink?"

"No, but I am wishing that pool was full of water," he says.

"Bite your tongue, it'd be a travesty to fill a perfectly good pool with *water*."

"Not in this heat."

"There are other ways to cool off." I grab a few cubes of ice from the cooler and swing my leg over the foot of the lounge chair. Noah's eyes pop as he

realizes I'm about to sit on his legs, and he quickly drops them to either side of the chair, so my ass hits the cushion instead.

"What are...argh!" he shouts as I press the cubes against his bare chest.

"Tripp," Xander hisses. "No touching without permission."

"He's let me touch his pecs before," I reason. "And he wanted to cool off."

"It's fine," Noah stutters, his glacial blue eyes locked on mine as his chest heaves under my palm. "I just wasn't expecting the cold."

Reaching for Noah's hand, I guide it to his chest to replace mine, giving him control of the ice. That makes Xander relax but only because he thinks he's put an end to my antics. *As if.* Sitting back to admire Noah rubbing the cubes all over himself is a fantasy, and just as satisfying as touching him.

"See. Those nipples perked up nice and tight, no pool necessary." I grin.

"Jesus, you need a warning label," Xander mutters.

"If the warning is 'beware, fun times ahead' buy me the t-shirt." I feel rather than see the eye roll since my own are focused on the drop of water meandering over the taut abs in front of me, lingering on one for a mere second before gravity beckons it lower, toward the barest hint of that little happy... *Shit, I better stop looking or I'm going to pop a boner. Right here. Right now.*

I'm trying to pull my eyes away when the view is spoiled by a beach towel hitting Noah in the chest.

"Dry yourself off before Tripp tries to lick the water away," Niko tells his friend.

"I wasn't going to..." Niko's cocked eyebrow stops me from finishing that sentence. "I was only *thinking* about it. I'd never do that without permission. Preferably without inquiring eyes... Nope. Forget that last bit. I don't think I'd mind an audience."

The slight flush in Noah's cheeks as he rubs the towel over himself has me thinking he might have given permission. Or been tempted to, anyway.

"Stop embarrassing him," Xander warns me.

"I'm not the one who brought up licking." I hold my hands up innocently. "If anyone's embarrassing him it's you two with the way Niko's fingers are *this close* to slipping under your shorts. Go christen something and let me and Noah suffer heat stroke in peace."

My friend fixes me with a blank stare—the one he gets when he's asking himself why he tolerates me—but I catch Niko's sly smile just before he brings his mouth to Xander's neck and pump my fist in my head. *I knew at least one of them wouldn't be able to resist the suggestion they christen something in this new house of theirs.*

"We have company," Xander lifts his shoulders and leans forward, attempting to be more good-mannered than the company—me—cares for.

"We can go," Noah offers.

"See, they can go. And you and I can try out our new shower." Niko doesn't offer any polite excuses in front of Noah. *Interesting.*

"Tripp is rubbing off on you," Xander grunts. "It would make us horrible hosts."

"At least here we've got the option to leave. On road trips we're all on the same floor, and not all hotel walls are as thick as you'd want them to be." Noah's head drifts from side to side as if he's reliving what must be a salacious memory.

"Ooh, I need to hear more about thin walls in hotels." I waggle my eyebrows at Noah, loving the way it makes his cheeks flush.

"What happens on road trips stays on road trips. Team rules." Niko shrugs his shoulders with a sorry, not sorry look.

“Fine. Go test out your shower and we’ll tell you how soundproof the walls here are.”

Noah clears his throat as he shakes his head. “I’d rather not know if they’re soundproof. I’m gonna take off.”

“Buzzkill,” I huff. “Fine, I’ll go too since my car is at your house.”

“Why is your car at his house?” Xander asks.

“It’d have ruined Niko’s ‘*I bought you a house*’ surprise if you pulled up to this place and saw my car here, so I hid it at Noah’s.” I might’ve pouted a bit when Niko told me I couldn’t park here since it would make Xander suspicious, but since it forces me to leave with Noah that’s not a bad turn of events.

I grab my shirt from the pool deck and tuck it into the waistband of my shorts while Noah puts his on—*pooh*—and we say goodbye to our horny friends.

“You can leave your board here if you want,” Xander offers as we cut through the house to the front door. “Then you’ve always got one to ride.”

“Dorothy stays with me at all times.” I drop my prized possession on the ground and hop on, riding in small circles on the drive as I wait for Noah to lead the way. He gives the guys a final nod and starts walking toward the street while I zigzag back and forth behind him.

“Dorothy?” He casts a curious glance in my direction.

“Wizard of Oz. I always figured she should’ve had a skateboard instead of red heels on that yellow brick road.”

“You’re a fan of ‘*The Wizard of Oz*?’”

“The old lady who raised me loved it.” I glide up next to him and put my hand on his shoulder, so he pulls me along without me having to push. He

doesn't even break stride, like it's perfectly natural for him to be my engine, which makes my chest do that weird zinging thing again.

"You call your mom, *old lady*?"

"I call the old lady who raised me *old lady*. I call my mom... Actually, I don't call her anything." It's been years since I even said the word mom, and I'm not sure why I did it just now. I'd rather not think on that too hard.

"I'm sorry. When did she pass?"

"I don't know if she has." I rock my weight back and forth so the board weaves slightly as it moves forward. "This would be a good training exercise for you and Niko. Jogging while you pull Xander and I on our boards. I think you should add it to your morning routine."

Usually, I'm much more subtle at changing the topic of conversation, but to his credit Noah doesn't dwell on that. "Hockey players shouldn't train near anything on wheels. That's a broken ankle waiting to happen."

"Why haven't you pushed me away, then?"

"You'd just come right back."

I put my free hand over my heart. "You get me. You know what that means?"

He darts a nervous gaze in my direction. "Uh, what?"

"It means I'm not going to forget about the thin walls comment. I need details."

He shakes his head. "You heard Niko. Team rules."

"There's no need to use names or anything, just let me live vicariously through their sexscapades. Are there any threesomes? Foursomes? Orgies?"

"You know all those guys are straight, right?" He arches a blond brow.

"Since we aren't using names, I can pretend we're talking about men only."

"Why do you need to live vicariously? Aren't you like...*active*?"

I bark out a laugh, both because his attempt to be polite is adorable, and because he couldn't be further from the truth. I *used* to be active. Lately, the chase has been more exciting than the kill, but since I'm chasing a straight man, or a man who thinks he's straight—jury's still out—the only action my dick has seen recently is from my hand. I can't admit that, though. Not without inviting questions I'm pretty sure Noah's not ready to have answered.

"I'm flattered you think so highly of me, but I bet gorgeous hockey players have a better orgy game than little ole me."

"You think you aren't hot enough for orgies?" *Oh my god, he actually looks confused by that. I knew he thinks I'm hot.*

"Please," I scoff. "My bank account isn't big enough. So, what are we talking about? How crazy does it get?"

"I've never heard orgies. Threesomes, but not more than that. Not that I know of."

"You've heard? Um, you're orgy material yourself, how come you've only *heard* what's going on?" Noah's body is built for mischief, so if he's not getting into any, I think I'll be disappointed. Or validated in my growing suspicion that he's not as straight as he thinks.

"I'm the captain, so I can't really encourage...*that.*" He waves his hand, so he doesn't have to use his words, which makes me want to push him a little further. *What can I say? I live for this shit.*

"So, you're like the *daddy* of the team?" It takes about two seconds for the red to spread from his neck to his face. "You know," I lower my voice, "daddies should get to have fun too."

# Chapter Three

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# Noah

**T**ripp leans his head toward mine as his voice gets softer... *huskier*. It makes it impossible to ignore the scent of sun and sweat that lingers on his skin. Or the innuendo behind his words. I'm not sure how to react to either.

I'm too used to the smell of sweaty men for it to turn me off, or on for that matter, but his words... That's another story. I can't tell if he's just being his normal, flirtatious self, or whether there's subtext to what he says. So, I'm not sure if I should ignore him or play along.

Usually, I find it amusing that he says things most people wouldn't dare—I think I might envy his ability to be so bold, if I'm honest—but this conversation is a little intense, even for him. And with his hand gripping my shoulder, his bare chest inches from my arm as we near my house, it's not just the conversation that's intense.

There's a pull between us, like a persistent hum that gets louder the longer we maintain contact, lulling me closer. It could just be his energy—he's got a lot of it. Still, I get the sense the next words out of my mouth could make that

energy crackle to life or fizzle out, and I'm not sure which outcome I want more.

I *should* shut this down. Ignore the daddy thing altogether and tell him there's plenty of time for fun after I retire from hockey. Yet a part of me wants to understand this undefined feeling I get around him, and I won't get an answer if I don't play along. Or at the very least seem ignorant to the game.

"I don't know if you're fishing for my kinks or trying to tell me yours, but this isn't a topic I want my neighbors to overhear." I'm feeling pretty confident that I haven't shut the door or held it open with that response, until Tripp kicks the thing off the hinges.

"No one can hear what we're saying from inside their McMansions. Besides, we're talking about how you're allowed to blow off steam, not comparing our dicks in the street, so there's nothing for them to get scandalized over. Unless you want to show each other our dicks... I wouldn't be opposed but it would be a scandal." He waggles his eyebrows.

"Oh my god," I mutter, both because I think he'd actually do it and because I'm not as offended by his *suggestion* as I should be. "Why would you say that?"

"Why would you be surprised I did? Have I given you the impression I'm shy?"

"No, but I didn't think your exhibitionist tendencies included indecent exposure."

"It's only indecent if you don't appreciate the view. Most people do." He releases his grip on my shoulder and hops off his board as we reach my driveway. With a stomp the board snaps into his hand and he strides to his car

to put it away. *How does he make that look so graceful? Why am I even noticing it?*

“So.” He spins to face me and plops his ass on the trunk. “How much should we bet?”

“What are we betting about?”

“Whether they break the shower they’re trying to christen.”

“Why would we bet on that?”

“Why wouldn’t we?” He gives me a look that says *duh*.

“Just out of curiosity, is sex the only thing you talk about?”

“That offends you?” A sly smirk takes over his face.

“No, but I haven’t really heard you talk about anything else.” You’d think it would bother me that he talks about sex so much when that’s not something I’ve been interested in for years, but it really doesn’t. I’m only asking because I’m wondering if it’s that topic or something else entirely that makes me feel different around him.

Obviously, there’s something about his looks that gets to me, but is that a byproduct of this risqué conversation or something else altogether? I’m not sure how to tell the difference without us changing the subject.

“We talked about music and making videos at that concert last year,” he reminds me of one of our earlier encounters, when we bumped into him and Xander at a show. I remember him being flirty then too, but also serious about the video he was hired to make. *Mostly*.

“You were trying to make the band look sexier on camera than they were in real life.”

“Not my fault that’s what they hired me for.” The grin turns almost bashful.

“Seriously. Tell me something about you that doesn't have to do with your cock.”

He fans his face. “We won’t get far with you saying words like cock out loud.” I cross my arms in front of my chest, and he relents with a throaty laugh. “Okay, okay. What do you want to know?”

Knowing he’ll have something to say about music, I start there. “Favorite band.”

“Current or former?”

“What’s the difference?” I grunt, losing patience.

“Former doesn’t play together anymore and current does.”

“Fine. Former.”

“Queen,” he answers easily.

“Current.”

He rubs a knuckle over the bridge of his nose. “I’m kind of on a Dirty Heads kick right now.”

“Why?”

He lifts a shoulder, drawing attention to the fact he’s still shirtless, and standing a few feet away, I can tell at least one of his tattoos is a rose. Another is something scribbled under the greyscale image of a mountain. “It’s summer, they’re kind of mellow but still upbeat. Easy to skate to.”

“Why skateboarding?”

A shadow crosses his face despite the fact there isn’t a cloud in the sky, though it’s gone so fast I think I imagined it. “It’s uncivilized.”

Although that makes a lot of sense, it’s not the answer I’m expecting, and I get the distinct impression those aren’t actually his words. Before I can follow up, he asks a question of his own. “Why hockey?”

“I’m Canadian.”

“No shit?” He tilts his head to the side as he studies me. “You a citizen now or still on a Visa?”

“I’m a citizen.”

He nods appreciatively, but doesn’t say anything else.

“How’d you meet Xander?” I try to get him talking again.

“Skate park. He was on a study break, and I was…” He seems to start and stop a few times before answering. “Burning off some energy. We hit it off.”

“And now you work together?”

“He’s got the degree that got his foot in the door, and he brought me with him since he liked my designs.”

“What designs?” I ask. Tripp glances down at his chest with a casual shrug, and I point to where his gaze lands on his stomach. “Tattoos? You did those?”

“I drew them. Someone else put them on.”

“Can I see?”

Another shadow drifts across his face before he gives me a curt nod.

Resting his elbows on the truck, he reclines so I can see the art. The rose is far more intricate than I first realized, with the words *‘Fall seven times, get up eight’* written in elegant cursive along the stem.

“What’s this mean?” I start to reach my finger toward the image but stop myself before making contact with his skin.

“It’s a Japanese proverb.” The firm set of his jaw suggests he’s not going to say anything more about it, so I don’t ask.

“And this?” I point to the text under the mountain range. *‘Over every mountain is a pass, although it may not be seen from the valley.’*

“Quote from Theodore Roethke.” When my brows draw together, he elaborates. “A poet.”

“What does it mean?”

“I think it’s supposed to be a metaphor for overcoming obstacles, but to me

it means there's a reason for everything, even if I might not understand what that is."

Once again, his answer surprises me, and while I'm sure there's a lot to unpack there, it's not the time or place. Especially, since what he just shared makes my stomach flutter more, not less. It proves that it's not just the sex talk that makes me feel *things*. Instead, I focus on the art.

"The detail is impressive." Once again, I almost bring my finger to his skin—something about the intricate lines makes me want to trace them—but I pull back at the last moment, right as his muscles tense in anticipation.

"Don't be afraid to touch." Playful Tripp is back, I assume to distract me from asking any more personal questions, and since I have a feeling he shared more about those tattoos than he intended to, I don't object. I also don't respond. I'm too distracted by the long lashes that line his hazel eyes, the full lips that frame his mischievous grin. *He really is beautiful. Not for a man either, just in general.*

"You're staring," he accuses after a minute of silence.

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Tell me why."

Even though his heated gaze makes me feel like he can see right through the clothes I'm wearing, I'm not uncomfortable. Only confused. "I'm not sure, it's just sort of hard not to. I don't think I've ever seen anyone so pretty before. Man or woman."

Tripp bolts upright with a comically offended look. "I am not pretty. Hot as sin, sure, but not pretty."

"Why can't you be both?"

"Pretty is a safe word. *Ooh, such a pretty girl. What a pretty flower.* Bleh. Before you give a compliment to a man, stick the word dick in there. If it

sounds lame it probably is.”

His anger would be amusing if I understood it, but I’m hopelessly lost. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Tripp leans forward, bracing his hands on his knees. “How would you describe your dick?”

“Um…” I wrinkle my brow, not sure how to answer.

“Is it pretty?” He stares at me for a moment and when I still can't formulate an answer, he relaxes back onto the trunk. “See? Pretty doesn’t work. No one wants a *pretty* dick.”

“How do you describe yours then?”

His eyes flare with mischief as he leans forward again and murmurs, “Spectacular.”

I swallow back the gasp I almost let escape. “Uh, what makes it spectacular?”

Tripp lifts a nonchalant shoulder. “The length. The girth. Don’t let this slim frame fool you.” His hand moves down his torso as if showcasing his body. “I’m hung like a horse. And my skin is soft and kind of fair, so when you squeeze it, it turns nice and red. You can see your hand prints.”

I’ve never attempted to visualize another man’s cock, but it’s hard not to when Tripp paints such a vivid picture. It makes my mouth feel dry, so I have to lick my lips to speak. “I guess that does sound nice.”

“*Nice?* Come on, being in a locker room with naked guys is practically your job. I’m sure you’ve seen dozens of dicks. Tell me mine doesn’t sound spectacular.”

“I guess. I mean, I haven’t really compared…dicks.” I run my fingers through my hair, smoothing non-existent tangles just to give my hand something to do.

“Have you touched one? Besides your own?”

“No. I mean, I’ve seen guys touch theirs before, but...”

“Ooh, do tell.”

The gleam in his eye has me talking before I can think better of it. “I spend forty nights a year in hotel rooms with a roommate. Privacy is hard to come by.”

“So, you’ve watched people jerk off but never jerked anyone off?”

I have no idea how he connected the dots so fast, but he’s not wrong, and I feel my face heat as I answer. “Yeah.”

“That embarrasses you?”

“I probably shouldn’t have admitted that. It’s not the kind of thing my teammates would want people to know.” I bite my lip to stop it from flapping.

“We aren’t talking about them, we’re talking about you. Did you like watching?”

“I mean, I didn’t hate it. It didn’t do much for me though.” Our star forward, Luca, needs to get off before games, and he usually needs an audience to cross the finish. More often than not that audience is me, because the act doesn’t make me as uncomfortable as it does some of the other guys. What the team doesn’t know, what I’ve never told them or anyone, is that I’m indifferent to the whole experience.

I’ve watched Luca fuck women and jerk himself off, and I didn’t react to either situation. I wanted to—so much that I’d have been happy to get excited by either or both scenarios—but I didn’t. On the surface the logical conclusion is watching other guys doesn’t do it for me, especially if that guy is a teammate, but since the women didn’t affect me either... I’ve made an effort to focus on hockey instead of attempting to answer why that is.

“So, you aren’t into dicks?” Tripp almost sounds disappointed as he puffs out his lip in goofy pout, though whether that’s real or for show I have no idea.

“Not my teammates. They’re like brothers to me.”

“If it’s not a teammate, you’d be into it then? Touching one?” That mischievous grin is back.

“Why, you offering?”

When Tripp doesn’t laugh at my joke, I wonder which one of us missed the punchline. “Hell yeah, I’m offering. Take it out if you want.”

*I’m the one who missed the punchline. Great.* “While I’m sure it’s every bit as spectacular as you say, I’m good.”

“You sure?” He smooths his hands over his shorts, emphasizing the bulge between his legs, and for a second there I’d swear I feel some sort of twinge between mine. *Was that? No, it couldn’t be.*

“I’m sure.”

“Suit yourself.” He hops off the trunk and walks to the driver’s side door, not even attempting to hide the fact his shorts are tented. “In case you change your mind, there’s no expiration date on that offer. See you around.” He winks at me before falling into the seat and driving off, which should make me feel relieved. Instead, I’m more confused than ever.

*Did my cock just try to come alive around Tripp? Did I want it to?*

# Chapter Four

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# Tripp

Something is seriously wrong with me.

It's been well over a month since Noah almost touched me, and in that time no one else has seen me naked, much less been close enough to put their hands on me. If anyone knew I haven't been railed in weeks they'd have me on a therapist's couch faster than I can drop my pants and bend over. Fortunately, summer means vacation, so people I'd normally see on a regular basis aren't around to notice my dry spell.

Even Xander, who's been in Sweden visiting Niko's family for the last few weeks. I'm almost disappointed he gets home tomorrow. He'll undoubtedly notice when I don't bombard him with tales of my escapades during his absence.

Yes, I've had this weird infatuation with the big guy since I first saw him, and yes, I tempered my antics after we met. But I wasn't celibate. I thought that word had been stricken from my vocabulary, yet since Noah nearly touched me in his driveway, my dick hasn't received any attention. *By choice... I might as well have joined a convent.*

I've replayed the encounter in my head more times than I care to admit.

When Noah's skin nearly brushed over mine, I swear every nerve perked up, like someone hollered out *free condoms*. My entire body prickled with awareness, and the spot where he nearly made contact seemed to sizzle like an invisible current flowed between us.

No, not a current, a seismic force, like the damn tractor beam from Xander's space movies. It had me fully in its grasp, helpless to resist. My lungs seized up, and not from some coy attempt to hold my breath. I wanted his touch *so bad*, and didn't want the subtle rise of my chest to spook him. I think I might've prayed to a God I don't believe in for Noah to lay his hands on me, and when he didn't... When he resisted the pull...it nearly killed me.

The last time I felt that crushed I was sixteen years old and newly homeless. I was so lost and alone, part of me wished for death. Fear of actually dying is the only reason I didn't give up, and while Noah's hesitation didn't put me back in that headspace, the flicker of disappointment hit harder than it should've. Needless to say, I'm less than thrilled it's where I've ended up, especially since I can't fuck away my frustration with anyone else.

That's never been an issue for me before. I love the chase, and usually I'm successful. On the off chance I'm not, I've got no problem moving on. Plenty of cocks in the sea, as the saying goes. Only that near miss with Noah seems to have ruined my mojo. There hasn't been a single twitch in the nether region since. Nada. Zilch. In fact, the only thing that's made my cock perk up is my own hand, but only when coupled with mental images of my sexy Thor admiring my tattoos the way he did that day.

I am way too young to be dried up. I shouldn't have to rely on Viagra, either, and sadly I'm seeing that little blue pill in my future... There's only one way to fix this. I need Noah to work up the courage to take me for a spin. Hopefully, that will reset whatever off switch he flipped and get me back to

my typical shameless self. It has to. I can't live in these conditions. Not even skating has been able to set me right. In all fairness, that might be because I've been skating at Xander's, hoping to bump into the big lug, but still.

Letting myself in through the back gate, I prop Dorothy against a lounge chair and strip off my shirt so at least one item of clothing isn't soaked through by the time I'm done. Strapping on my helmet, I drop into the empty pool, and glide around the bottom aimlessly. Maybe the motion of the board will help settle the chaos in my mind.

Usually, the sun on my back and the wind in my face is soothing. It still is, but not to the extent the niggling questions about the state of my life are completely erased. It's futile to expect skating to solve my problems, so I refocus my thoughts on perfecting some tricks. Pumping my legs to gather speed, I pop off the edge and grab the board while I spin in a circle, landing cleanly on the downslope so I can do it again at the other end.

I'm only doing three-sixties, but I've been doing them for over a decade, and they're a good warm-up for the seven-twenty I want to land. Unfortunately, I don't get to attempt that trick. A sudden crack breaks my concentration, and my weight shifts to the backseat, sending the board shooting out from underneath me.

My ass takes the brunt of the fall, but momentum carries me backward until my head smacks on the ground. Even with the helmet I feel the thump of the impact, and I just lay there a minute cataloging which parts of my body still function before attempting to move. *What the fuck just happened?*

"Tripp! Are you okay?" A head of blond hair looms over me, blocking out the sun and illuminating a square jaw I know well after months of studying it.

"You're not actually a God, right? I only call you that in my head?"

"What?" Noah's concerned frown turns to one of confusion.

“You’ve got a halo.”

“Is your vision blurry? You banged your head pretty good. I can take you to the hospital.”

“It’s not... Nevermind. Were you *clapping*?” I try to touch my head only to smack my hand into the helmet that probably kept my brain inside my skull.

“Niko said I should if you do a cool trick.”

I hold my hand out so he can help me sit up, and even though I may be borderline concussed, I’m well aware of how his touch sings me. Flames lick up my arm, curling their scorching fingers around my heart and making it beat double time. Fortunately, I think he mistakes my panting for an adrenaline rush, not a burning desire to have him touch me *everywhere*.

Unbuckling my helmet with my free hand, I try to stay focused on the conversation. “Yeah, don’t listen to Niko. There’s no clapping in skateboarding.”

“How do you acknowledge when a person does something cool?”

“For starters, don’t do anything if the person doesn’t know you’re there. Why the fuck are you here anyway?” Though I’d been hoping to bump into him, I would’ve preferred not to be flat on my back when it happened. Scratch that, being flat on my back would be great if my dick were throbbing as much as my head.

“I’m staying here, at least until tomorrow when Niko and Xander are back.”

“What’s wrong with your McMansion?”

“I was having a leak in the bathroom fixed when they found mold behind the wall. I can’t stay there until the contractors get it mitigated.”

“How long does that take?”

“About a week, so another four days. Can you stand?” He offers me his hand again, and I hold my breath as I take it in an effort to prevent myself

from gasping when I feel his touch. It mostly works.

“Why don’t you stay here the whole time?” I hobble over to the side of the pool and brace my forehead on the ledge. It’s not spinning so much as reeling, and the solid surface helps me feel a little steadier under Noah’s heavy gaze.

“I don’t want to crowd Niko and Xander in their own place.”

“You mean you don’t want to hear them fucking all the time.”

“That too.” His large palm settles between my shoulder blades, and even though my mind knows the gesture comes from a place of concern, my cock tries to say, “*me next!*”

“Then what?”

“You mean when they get back? I’m not sure.” He sighs heavily. “A hotel probably.”

“The horror.” I mock his defeated tone. “A staycation with room service... Sign me up.”

“I see enough hotels during the season. I’ll take my own place and Door Dash any day.”

“Hmm. I sorta forgot about how much you travel.”

“Are you sure your head is okay?” *Oh fuck...* He’s rubbing my back, gently sliding his warm palm along my spine, lulling my mind into a relaxed state as he stirs up a pool of desire between my legs. “You’re acting sort of... normal.”

“As opposed to...?”

“Obnoxious.” He pulls his hand back, like he’s afraid he might have offended me, and I swallow back an amused chuckle.

Feeling infinitely more stable, I pick my head off the ledge and look at his stoic face. “I’ve got a lot of layers.” I steal a line from my favorite animated

movie. It's one I wish I would've helped create even though it came out long before I got into video production.

“Yeah, I can see that. So, do you need a ride or anything? Or do you need to crash here. I’ve got the place one more night.” Noah dips his head and rubs his giant paw over the back of his neck.

“You want to have a sleepover?” I arch my brow suggestively.

“Um... Well... You’re not supposed to be alone after hitting your head, right?” An adorable flush paints his cheeks. "And Niko would kill me if anything happened to you after falling on his property."

“I didn’t hit it that hard. Look.” I take the helmet off and hold it out for his inspection. “It’s not even cracked.”

He lifts his head, blinking furiously as his full lips part. “It doesn’t work like that in hockey, and I bet the same is true for skateboarding.”

“If you’re determined to play doctor I won’t stop you, but I’d rather do that at my place. I’ve got a spare room that’s yours as long as you need it.” *Oh hell no. I must’ve hit my head harder than I thought. I only want to have a little fun with the big guy, not become roomies.*

“Really?” A tentative smile ghosts his lips. “You’d let me stay with you?”

“Sure, why not?” *Shut up. Abort. You’re a slut, not a masochist, and since Noah’s yet to show any interest in holding your dick, then you’re setting yourself up for four days of torture.*

“I would feel better being close enough to keep an eye on you tonight, and it’d be nice to have someone to hang out with instead of killing time in an empty hotel room. Are you sure you don’t mind?”

I lift my shoulder, one of the few parts of my body that doesn’t hurt. “My turn down service is better than what you’d find at a hotel.”

The sexy fucker actually laughs instead of running the other direction. *Can*

*you die from blue balls, cause if I have to see Noah every day without emptying mine it just might kill me.*

“I’m sure it is.” He cracks a wry smile. “Should I drive us both, just to make sure you’re okay?”

“You can just follow me. That way we aren’t short a car.”

“Following you won’t keep you from getting in an accident.”

“Fine, Daddy. Give me a ride.”

Just like the last time, color floods his cheeks as I bait him, but Noah averts his eyes, which is a shame since the name sort of fits. At least if he’ll be living with me for the next week, I’ll have plenty of opportunity to find the name he does react to. That won’t alleviate my sexual frustration, but it might be amusing.

I wave off his attempt to help me out of the pool—my semi doesn’t need any excuse to get bigger before I have to strap a seatbelt over it—and once he has his bag, we make the drive to my condo.

Thanks to the ingenuity of my grandfather, and the fact that he died before he or my parents could rescind the terms of his will, I got a small windfall when I turned eighteen. I used it to buy my own place, so I’ll never be homeless again. It’s modest, but it’s perfect for one, and that’s all I need since I have no plans to hitch myself to someone else like Xander did. Having a houseguest for several days might even be too oppressive for my liking, though I’ll certainly do my best to make it entertaining.

“Want a beer?” I make a beeline for the fridge as we head inside.

“Should you be drinking after that fall?” Noah’s concerned gaze follows me to the kitchen.

“You’re taking this doctor game very seriously.” I hand him a can and gesture for him to sit on the black leather sectional that doubles as my bed

when I stay up too late. Kicking off my shoes, I claim my favorite spot.

“Want me to strip and lie down so you can examine me?”

“You don’t have to take your clothes off for me to see your pupils.”

“Pity. I thought you were offering to inspect the other head.” I shoot him a mischievous wink as I crack open my beer and take a sip.

## Chapter 5 - Noah

Tripp's made no less than three sex jokes in the last thirty minutes, so he's either really good at acting "*normal*" or he doesn't have a concussion.

Truthfully, I didn't think he'd given himself a head injury, but it made for a good excuse to stick around. I only wish I knew why I had a minor panic at the thought of him leaving. It's not like I'm unaccustomed to being alone, and Tripp's company often leaves me with questions I don't know how to answer. Yet, when he offered a room in his place... That felt like a lifeline.

Am I lonely enough that even Tripp's lewd company seems appealing, or am I lonely for Tripp? Given that any one of my teammates could offer lewd company, I have to consider the possibility it's the latter. I'm still not sure why that is: entertainment, curiosity, fascination. Maybe some combination of the three. I only know I like being around him. I prefer it to being alone, even if he tries to rile me with his shameless flirting.

Speaking of, he's watching me expectantly, waiting for my reply. "Why are you so determined to show me your dick?" I ask him.

"That bothers you?" He arches a suggestive brow.

"No. I sort of expect it now. I just don't know why you keep offering."

"Because you're so curious to see it." He reclines into the couch and takes another sip of his beer like he didn't just make an outlandish assumption.

Since he's so nonchalant, I act the same. "What makes you say that?"

His eyes gleam as though I've walked right into his trap. I probably have. "First, I see the way you look at me when you think I'm not paying attention.

Spoiler alert, I'm always paying attention. And second, you don't discourage my lame attempts to touch you. You totally play along."

"I don't ask you to touch me," I say reflexively.

He casts me a sly grin. "You don't stop me either. I mean, measuring your biceps? Asking whether you can flex your pecs independently of each other and telling you I need to feel it since I can't see it? All excuses to put my hands on you, and you oblige every time."

*Huh*, I guess I don't discourage him. I'm not sure that makes me eager to see his dick, though truthfully, my own seems to wake up a little when he touches me. It hasn't become hard, but it didn't stay flaccid either.

I lift my gaze back to his, not realizing I dropped it. "I don't mind humoring you."

"You don't, do you?" He smirks like we've just shared some private joke, though I'm not sure what it is. "Like I said, I'm always paying attention."

"About that, what did you mean when you said you see how I look at you? *How do I look at you?*"

"With desire, obviously. You may think it's because I'm *pretty* or whatever, and it may have started that way, but now you want to do more than look."

Once again, my first instinct is to object, but before I can get the words out his start to sink in. I *do* think he's pretty—I've admitted that to him—and I've admitted to myself that I like looking at him. Watching him move, especially on that skateboard. *Does that mean I want to do more than look? Does it mean I'm physically attracted to him?*

Considering my body does seem to be more alert around him, I suppose it's possible. Hell, the first time I saw him I suspected that the unknown feeling I got was attraction, though in the months since I convinced myself it was

affection since I genuinely like him. It does surprise me that I might be attracted to Tripp since he's so loud and brash and deliberately obnoxious, and I'm...*not*. Although there's no denying it's hard to keep my eyes off him. Touching him though... Is that why I look?

"Are you short-circuiting over there? All I did was imply that you might not be as straight as you think." Tripp's blunt assessment, though slightly off the mark, is a welcome interruption.

"I'm not freaking out if that's what you're asking. I'm just not sure you're right."

"Because you're so clearly attracted to women?"

"Because I'm not sure I'm attracted to anyone at all. Man or woman." The retort is out of my mouth before I can decide whether it's a good idea or not. Though, I have to admit watching Tripp's jaw bob comically up and down is pretty satisfying. He's used to delivering shocking statements, not receiving them.

I pop the top of my beer and take a sip to hide my proud smirk, indulging in a little liquid courage before the inquisition begins.

"You... I... Seriously? You're..." He swivels his hand in the air as if that will help his brain process information. "You're asexual?"

*I guess I have to walk through this door now that I opened it.* "Maybe."

"What do you mean *maybe*? How do you not know?"

"I don't really dwell on it. Hockey is sort of all-consuming, and I figure I'll have plenty of time after I retire to focus on other things."

"Other things being sex." His jaw still doesn't shut all the way, which is starting to make me feel uncomfortable. *It's not that strange to be indifferent about sex, is it?*

"Sex, hobbies, travel," I rattle off the first things that come to mind.

“Hold up.” He raises his hand like it’s a stop sign. “Have you ever had sex?”

“Of course, I have.”

“Then you’re not asexual.”

“I don’t think it works that way.” I pull my brows together.

“How does it work then?” He tilts his head to the side, giving me a critical once over.

“I don’t know. If I feel the need to have sex, I do, I just don’t feel the need often. I’m not sure if that makes me asexual or...something else. Like I said, I’ll have more time to figure that out when I’m done with hockey.”

“Still not following.” He shakes his head. “If you’re not interested, why do you rake your eyes over my body when you think I’m not looking?”

“I didn’t know I was.” Tripp rolls his eyes, forcing me to protest. “Seriously. I admire the way you move on a skateboard, I think because it’s similar to skating on ice in some ways. But guys on the ice are covered in pads so they’re kind of a solid blob whereas you’re usually shirtless so I can see how your body moves.”

“So, you’re watching *a* body in motion, not necessarily *my* body?”

I sip my drink while I consider the question, feeling my face heat slightly as I answer. “I don’t watch Xander the same way I watch you, and I’m not sure if that’s because he’s my friend’s boyfriend and I deliberately avoid focusing on him, or because he doesn’t hold my interest. I’ve never really analyzed it.”

Tripp studies me as he chews on his lip like he’s mulling over what to say next. “Why do I hold your interest? And don’t say that I’m pretty, you know how I feel about that word.”

This isn’t a conversation I expected to have today, or ever really, though it’s not as embarrassing as I expected. A little awkward maybe, but not

embarrassing. Plus, I half wonder if sharing my thoughts aloud might give me some clarity.

“The first time I saw you, I wondered if you were a model. You have the angular bone structure and lean physique the industry looks for, and you project this confidence that reminded me of a model I once dated.”

“You watch me because I remind you of an old girlfriend?”

“At first.”

“And now?”

My brows draw together as I search for the right words. “That’s harder to answer. Obviously, you’re an attractive—”

“Hot,” he interjects.

“Hot man.” I try not to smile. “And I like your confidence. It makes you seem authentic, not superficial, which I respect.”

“Oh my God. Are you about to give me the *‘it’s not you it’s me’* line? I have all these great qualities, but I don’t get your dick hard?” He huffs out a breath of air and drops his gaze to his lap, muttering softly, “You better snap the fuck out of it because I am way too young to be celibate.”

Now it’s my jaw that drops. “Celibate?”

“I’m sorry, what?” Tripp sets his drink on the coffee table and looks at me like he didn’t say anything at all, but the flush creeping up his neck says otherwise.

“I just confessed something I’ve never told anyone because I don’t even understand it. I was willing to tell you since you’re the only person I know who might be able to help me figure this out. You’re open-minded and aren’t afraid to say anything. Don’t change that now. What did you mean by celibate?”

Tripp’s eyes narrow just a fraction, making me think he’s about to clam up,

but his features seem to soften as he flops back against the cushions. With a groan, he drapes an arm over his eyes and gestures to the bulge his shorts are doing little to hide. “This only happens around you, big guy.”

My chest suddenly feels tight, like it’s too small to hold my lungs. “What only happens around me?”

Tripp lifts his arm just enough for me to see his exasperated look. “You stop pucks at a hundred miles an hour, don’t tell me you can’t see what you do to my cock.”

“I mean, yeah, of course I can. But I thought that happened around lots of people.”

“It used to.” His arm falls over his face again.

“That’s... You mean that’s specifically for me?” I point to his junk even though he can’t see me. “You actually want to sleep with me? That’s not just you being an outrageous flirt?”

“Of course, I’m being an outrageous flirt, that’s kind of my thing. Only with everyone else it’s empty words.”

“I don’t understand.” I shake my head to clear it. “Why me?”

Tripp turns his head to face me as his arm drops to his side, his hazel eyes sullen instead of roguish, which causes a strange ache in my chest. “You do realize you look like the Norse God of legend only hotter, right?”

“Uh...”

“And you’re pushing six-and-a-half feet tall, which I’m assuming means you’ve got a big, *gorgeous* cock.”

“Um...”

“Not to mention you look at me like you want to touch but are too shy or confused to make a move.”

“Oh shit. Have I been leading you on?” My stomach flips, making me

queasy at the notion I may have instigated this whole thing by being ignorant of my actions and the fact they were sending a signal I didn't mean to project. What's worse, for an overly sexual guy like Tripp, rejecting him physically might be just as bad as rejecting him emotionally, something I'd never want to do.

Tripp looks at the ceiling and inhales deeply, holding the breath for several seconds before he lets it out. "To be fair, I knew you thought you were straight. I suspected you were questioning that, so maybe I mistook your confusion for sexual tension."

"Maybe I mistook sexual tension for confusion," I confess, though whether that's for his benefit or mine I'm not sure.

His gaze snaps back to mine. "What are you saying?"

Taking a deep breath of my own I recline against the couch, resting the beer on my thigh as I drag a finger around the metal rim. "I feel *something* around you. I'm not sure what it is exactly because it's always different. Sometimes it's in my stomach, sometimes my chest. That day in my driveway I think it was..."

"Did I make your cock hard? Please tell me you had blue balls after I left because you damn sure gave me a set that was a bitch to drive with."

"I'm not sure hard is the right word—"

"Oh fuck, now you've done it." He groans and palms the bulge between his legs, and this time I'm excruciatingly aware of the tingle between mine.

"What did I do?" I blink, as if that will help me see what the heck I did wrong.

"You said hard. Even if you weren't, just imagining it is... Damn that's a nice visual."

"Do you need a moment?" Though I'm offering him an escape, I might be

the one who needs it, considering the tingle is only getting stronger the longer I sit here, watching his hand cover his dick. *Do I sit here and see what happens, or make an excuse to get up?*

“I’ve got an idea.” Tripp bolts upright. “You said you’ve seen your teammates beat off and it didn’t do anything for you, right?”

“Yeah,” I say warily.

“But you feel something around me that you don’t feel around them?”

“I don’t know what that is,” I remind him, though he waves me off.

“I’m not asking you to classify it, just acknowledge it.” His fist seems to clench around his shaft over his shorts, and another twinge of *something* surges along mine.

“Yeah,” I exhale heavily, letting my eyes drift closed as I brace myself for the words I know are coming.

“Watch *me*.”

I open my eyes to find the vigor back in his, and while I’m happy to see Tripp acting like himself, I don’t want to lead him on any more than I already have, however unintentional.

“This doesn’t usually have the results I think you’re looking for.”

“We won’t know until we try, will we?” He licks his lips suggestively. “But just to be sure, we’ll change it up. Tell me how you ended up watching your teammates? Was there a big circle jerk?”

I rear back. “What? Of course not.”

“Too bad.” He waggles his eyebrows. “I bet that’d be hot. Did they know you were watching?”

I set my half-empty can on the table and run my hand through my hair. “It was just the one guy, and yes. He knew. It was his idea. The release is

something he needs before a game, and he gets there faster if someone is watching.”

“Did he stand in front of you? Or lay on the bed?” I swear Tripp’s eyes go hazy, like he’s imagining himself in the room.

“He’d either lay down or just sit on the bed, facing me.”

“Naked?”

“No. Usually he’d pull his boxers down just enough to, you know, hold it.”

“So, you didn’t really see much?”

“I mean, I saw enough. And remember, my teammates are like my brothers, so the whole thing was more about him reacting to another body in the room than either of us reacting to the other.”

“Hmm, okay. Sounds like maybe things are different with me since I’m not a *brother* but that doesn’t tell us whether you like cock or not. You need to see one to be sure.” He stands up and whisks his shirt over his head, flashing those tight abs as he hooks his thumbs in the waistband of his shorts and guides them below his hips. When they’re low enough, his cock springs free, slapping against his stomach and bobbing in midair as it comes to a rest, pointing directly at me.

*Oh. That’s... I’ve never seen that before.*

Even after all the hints that he’d do it, I never actually expected Tripp to whip it out, and the quiver between my legs suggests I don’t hate it. Still, my eyes ping pong between Tripp and the coffee table, unsure of where they’re supposed to be focused in this scenario.

“Don’t be afraid to look. Hell, you can touch if you want.”

He steps out of his shorts and comes closer, placing his cock directly in my line of sight, no more than two feet away. And while my brain hasn’t

consciously decided to look, my eyes seem to have a mind of their own. Slowly, tentatively, I let myself take in the man before me.

He's got a great body, lean and lithe yet still cut, sinewy limbs sporting a soft golden hue from his time in the sun. And the part of his body he likes to tell me is spectacular... It's long and thick, with skin fair enough that I can see the blue vein pressing against the otherwise smooth surface. *Smooth.*

*Smooth?*

"You don't have any pubes."

"Nope." He pops the 'P' and grins mischievously. "Things are so much more *sensitive* without hair. Want to feel?"

I blink up at him, trying to get my bearings as the pressure between my legs seems to increase. "No. Uh, no." I shake my head and avert my eyes.

"That's not how this is gonna go." Leaning down, he hooks a finger under my chin, forcing me to look at him. "You're supposed to watch. Actually, scratch that. You're going to direct."

"I ... What?" I swallow thickly. "I said I didn't want to touch."

"You don't have to. But you do have to tell me what to do." He backs up a few paces and clasps his hands behind him.

"I'm not... I don't..."

"See this?" He swipes a finger over the tip and holds it up for my inspection. "I need to come. I'm desperate for it. But until you give me some direction, I'm just going to stand here. Waiting. *Hoping.*" He tucks his hands behind his back again, rocking his hips forward like he'd fuck the air if he could. "Take pity on my poor swollen cock, Noah. Tell me what to do."

Despite the playful pout, Tripp has a daring look about him, as though he enjoys being on display. Thrives on issuing a challenge. Whether it's my

competitive nature that refuses to back down, or my desire to understand what's happening, I can't stop myself from taking the bait.

"Fine." I exhale heavily. "Stroke yourself."

"How?" He sways his hips, showing off his length. "Fast, slow, gentle, hard?"

"Whatever you want."

"No, it's whatever *you* want." His hazel eyes meet mine, gleaming with challenge.

A memory of Luca jerking himself furiously comes to mind, and for reasons I can't explain, that dictates what comes out of my mouth.

"Hold it gently. Go slow, root to tip."

I see the shiver travel up Tripp's body as my words sink in, and a similar one washes over me as I watch his eyes flutter closed when he takes himself in a loose fist. With a relieved moan he moves his hand along his length, back and forth, skin stretching taut as his fist hits his pelvis, and bunching up as he moves to the crown.

The motion is fluid. Languid. Yet his muscles strain beneath the surface as if it takes tremendous restraint to handle himself with such care.

His chest rises and falls with long, deep breaths, a tempo you could set a watch to, though when he abruptly rocks to the balls of his feet, chasing his fist, the rhythm falters, and he seems to gasp. Then moan, trapping a plump lip between his teeth in an effort to contain it. *That's... God, he's beautiful like this. Coiled. Primed. Aroused.*

Tripp's fist slides leisurely along his length, over and over again, the occasional thrust the only indication he wants it harder. Faster. I'll let him have that, later. Right now, I appreciate how the slow pace allows me to see

his entire, engorged cock, and how that's making my body hum with an awareness that's both familiar and foreign.

As his hand strokes toward the tip, I notice it's purple, and glistening slightly in the dim light of the room. "You're dripping."

"So, you are watching?" He opens his eyes, bringing his gaze to mine, and the primal lust I see there has me licking my suddenly dry lips. "You got so quiet I was starting to wonder."

"You didn't give me much choice."

"You could've left me hard. It wouldn't have been the first time." His breath catches as his fist reaches the swollen head. "And as for the choice you made, are you happy with it? Do you enjoy driving up my need by making me go slow, or do you just want to savor the moment? Look your fill?" He drags his hand back to the base, palming his sac and giving me an unobstructed view of his steel length.

I do like looking my fill, I think, but since I can't make sense of that right now I bark out another command before he can jumble my mind any further. "Swipe your thumb over your slit. Spread your precum around the crown."

"Mmm, it's slippery." His eyes flick to mine, watching me from under thick lashes. "Makes my cock tingle everywhere I touch it." He sighs as he circles his finger around his tip, rocking his hips forward to increase the pressure, and a sharp zing ricochets through my length. *Holy shit. I think... I think I'm getting hard.*

"Cup your balls," I rasp. "Roll them around your palm."

His head falls back as he massages his sac, which makes his dick bob from the motion of his hand. "Fuck, that's good." Tripp spreads his legs, giving himself more room to work, plumping his balls in his hand as he rocks his hips, rigid cock spearing the air.

My own presses against the fabric of my shorts, the zing having faded to a pleasant warmth that leaves a faint hum simmering between my legs. I can't help shifting in my seat to see what it feels like to have the material brush against my skin, which doesn't go unnoticed.

"Those shorts getting a little tight?" Tripp bites back a moan as he tugs on his sac, his bold gaze tracking over me like a predator savoring its prey. Blatant. Unabashed. Hungry. I can't remember the last time anyone desired me so openly before, if ever, and the way it makes my cock stir is both exciting and embarrassing.

I don't recognize my body right now. The sensations I'm feeling, the thoughts running through my head. They're echoes of a distant memory, things I'm vaguely aware of having experienced before, though not recently enough to know what comes next, and certainly not in this context. I have a sudden urge to bring this to fruition, to end it before I lose the tenuous grasp on my control, if only to maintain my dignity in front of Tripp.

"Grab your cock," I bark. "Jerk it hard and fast."

"Fucking finally," he exhales, wrapping a tight fist around himself and pumping firmly, slamming his pelvis against his hand with each stroke. "Jesus those thirsty blue eyes of yours are killing me. I've never been this hard from my own hand before."

Tripp's abs contract under the power of his thrusts, the tendons in his forearm flexing as he vigorously works his shaft, which is now a dusty pink under the pressure of his grip. "Holy... Keep your eyes on me. Don't look away until I've spilled every last drop."

The warning isn't necessary. Even if I could divert my eyes, I don't think I would. The image of Tripp on the cusp of euphoria is too captivating to ignore. Chest heaving, lips glistening, eyes fluttering—his pleasure is

hypnotic, a siren song I'm helpless to look away from. I only hope I can witness it without falling apart.

“Oh God. Oh fuck.” Tripp doesn't even try to contain his release, letting milky white ropes of cum bubble from his slit, coating the fingers that grip his cock like a vise. A sharp cry pierces the air around us as he snaps his hips back and forth, spreading his cum over his length until it stops seeping from his crown. Only then does he slow his thrusts to a gentle roll, stroking through the last of the tremors as he brings his gaze to mine.

## Chapter 6 - Tripp

It takes a minute—or three—for my vision to return to normal, and when it does, there’s no denying Noah’s got a tidy little bulge between his legs. I doubt he’s fully hard, but he’s not unaffected, and that’s all the incentive I need to keep pushing.

“Looks like you enjoyed the show.” I wipe my hand over my stomach, loving the way his eyes track the movement.

“I...” He licks his lips. “I guess.”

“You guess? I’d say the answer is between your legs.”

He glances down for a nanosecond and shakes his head. “That’s... It’s not really...”

“Don’t hold back.” I’m playing dirty, using his perception of me against him, but I have a feeling this whole experiment will be for nothing if I let him take the easy way out. “Are you hard?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” I rest my hands on my hips.

“No. Sort of.”

“Which is it?”

“I don’t know,” he shouts, eyes growing wide as if his own volume takes him by surprise, and I get the sense I need to tread carefully because he maybe *doesn’t* know. Or doesn’t know what it means.

Rather than ask if he was affected by watching me, I operate under the assumption he was. “Noah, are you ashamed to get hard for another man?”

“No.”

That's promising, but it raises another question, one I'm almost afraid to ask. "Are you ashamed to get hard for *me*?"

He shakes his head firmly as a pink flush creeps up his cheeks. "No. I'm... I'm embarrassed."

"Um, I'm standing here naked with my dick going soft and *you're* embarrassed?"

"It's..." He licks his lips as he runs a hand through the blond waves that hang just below his ears. "I don't know what's happening. I don't know what to expect. You're...confident and proud and experienced and I'm... I told you this might not have the results you wanted."

Before I can weigh whether it'll comfort him or spook him, I straddle Noah's legs and sit my naked ass on his lap. He goes stiff at first, leaning away to put some distance between our faces as he sucks in a breath of air. But he doesn't make any attempt to get me to move. Then he relaxes into the couch with a slow exhale.

I rest my hands on his chest, noting the strong yet erratic heartbeat underneath them. "These are exactly the results I wanted. I showed you my dick, and you didn't hate it." I wiggle my hips slightly over the semi I feel underneath me. "Maybe you even liked it a little."

"But I didn't—I don't even know if I can—and..." The poor guy looks so confused I'm tempted to take him in my arms and just hold him, which I might've done if a cringe-worthy scratch didn't reverberate between my ears like a needle dragging over the surface of a record. *Oh, thank God for imaginary warning bells. I don't do the whole nurturing thing.*

"My cock may be a work of art, but as far as I know it's never made anyone come just from looking at it." Noah cracks a timid smile, but of course I need to go bigger. "We can try if you want, though. I'm not shitting you about how

magnificent that orgasm was. Apparently, showing off for a Thor-lookalike really does it for me, so I will gladly jerk off in front of you any time you want. Fuck, I'm getting excited just thinking about it."

He chuckles softly, which was the original goal, but I've already taken it too far.

"That's not an exaggeration. Look." I lift my brows and drop my gaze. "Of course, it could be that I'm naked and sitting on top of a sexy as fuck man, but," I clench my jaw as I try to keep my hips from rocking, "I like having your eyes on me."

"Is this normal? For you?"

"Which part? Wanting to be watched or sitting naked on a man who's fully clothed, which is also really doing it for me by the way."

Noah let his eyes fall to my lap briefly before bringing them back to my face. "The ah, getting excited again part."

I bite the corner of my lip and stare into his baby blues. "I've been known to recover quickly."

"So, um. Does that mean you need to jerk off again?"

"I can." I shift my palms from his chest, over his shoulders and down his arms until I find his hands, and set them on my thighs. "Or you can do it for me."

His fingers clench my legs as he gasps.

"You've never touched another man's cock before, right?"

He shakes his head firmly but lets his gaze drift downward.

"Do you want to?" I rock my hips slightly, so the tip of my shaft brushes over the shirt covering his stomach.

Timid eyes meet mine for a fraction of a second before they dart away. "Would you...want that?"

“I would love that.” I take one of his hands in mine and hold it between us, tracing my fingers over his. “I would love to feel these long, strong fingers wrapped around me. Squeezing and rubbing and pulling my cum out of me.”

“I’m not sure I can do that.”

I set his hand back on my thigh, loving how the warm weight of it feels on my skin. Loving even more that he lets it rest there. “You can just watch again, if you want.”

“No, I mean I’m not sure I can do that for you, since I’ve never... I don’t know what you like.”

“I like having my dick played with.” I prop my hands on his legs and lean back slightly, giving him plenty of room to ogle, touch, even dump me off his lap if that’s what he wants. But considering he hasn’t shoved me off yet, I’m betting he’ll let me sit here until I come again. I’m also betting he’ll join in for this round.

That’s maybe a little presumptuous of me. I don’t have any experience with asexuality—if that’s what we’re dealing with here—so it’s possible I’m pushing him too far too fast. However, I’m a pretty observant fucker, good at reading what people say with their expressions, and Noah’s tells me his curiosity hasn’t been sated. Still, I’m caught a little off guard when one of his large hands slides along my leg, up my torso, and starts rubbing my chest.

The pressure is firm, not hard, though not as tentative as I would’ve expected. His palm slides between my pecs, gliding over one before moving to the other, fingertips grazing a nipple that perks up obediently, and I find myself closing my eyes as I sink into his touch, my steady breathing the only audible sound in the room.

My cock is standing at attention, begging to be touched, but this slow perusal of my body feels just as heavenly as having my dick pumped. Who

knew?

“Why blond?” Noah interrupts the silence.

“What?”

He tips his chin up, indicating he means my hair. “Why blond? Why not blue? Or green?”

“Blond goes with my eyes.” I arch into his hand, a silent plea for him to keep stroking. He does, dragging his fingers down to my rose tattoo and tracing the lines almost reverently.

I don’t typically let people do that—most guys treat ink as a sex symbol when it’s the one thing on my body that I don’t flaunt for sex—but the gentle giant admiring them now isn’t doing it to turn me on. Not deliberately. I can tell by the awed expression on his face, the same one he wore when he first asked about them. He appreciates the art, respects the words, and for that I’ll let him look as long as he wants.

Noah’s finger brushes over the petals, but when it hits the stem, which hovers just above my hip, my stomach clenches as I gasp. He pulls his hand back abruptly, mumbling a hasty, “Sorry.”

I take his hand and put it back, holding it to my torso. “Don’t stop. Just be ready for me to jump if you tickle me again.”

Using a firmer touch, Noah slides his hand to my hip, fingers grazing where my pubes would be if I had them, and I groan softly.

“It’s really more sensitive?” he asks, referring to my smooth skin.

“You ever shave that stubble off your face?” A faint line divides Noah’s brows but he nods his head even though he clearly doesn’t follow why I’m asking. “Then you know without that hair your nerves seem to wake up. They’re so alert you can actually feel the air on your face.” His expression softens as he connects the dots. “That’s how I feel *everywhere*.”

Noah's Adam's apple bobs as he swallows, and his hand shifts lower, fingertips ghosting along the base of my cock, which bobs expectantly. Blue eyes riveted between my legs, he traces a path up my length, licking his lip when that finger catches the precum pooling at the crown.

While I have the presence of mind not to spook him with jerky movements, I'm helpless to stop my hips from tilting upward, chasing after his touch. The barest of friction puts my entire body on edge, like I'm a star on the verge of becoming a supernova, the energy within me too unstable to contain.

Why his slow, curious touch has me so riled when I'm usually a fan of enthusiastic fucking, I have no idea, but with my cock as hard as a steel rod, there's no denying I like being the object of his sexual exploration. That's not new—I enjoy the opportunity to corrupt men who think they're straight—although it doesn't usually go like this. Sure, they might be a little hesitant at first, but there comes a point where they either strike like a rabid animal or nope the fuck out. I've never had a guy embrace the experience in such a prolonged way, mapping my body with awe.

I may boast about my spectacular dick, and I'm proud to say no one's ever expressed disappointment. Still, Noah's fascination is hot and mind-blowingly erotic, yet unexpected.

Circling the head, Noah spreads my precum over the tip, heightening the already delicious friction and making me keenly aware of his delicate touch. Then he slides his damp finger down my length to my heavy sac, cupping it in his large palm.

I rock my body over his with a heady moan, trying to stifle a gasp when I feel a firm ridge of pressure underneath me. This is getting him hard. Really hard. I give myself an imaginary pat on the back before shoving the thought

from my mind. He'll say something if he wants to acknowledge it. Instead, I let my body take control.

"I didn't know men could feel so smooth." He kneads my balls slowly, dragging his thumb over the somewhat taut skin.

"Do you like it?"

He gives them a firm tug, causing my cock to twitch with a ragged jolt, and resumes rubbing them with a distant, almost contemplative look. "Yeah. I like that you feel soft."

"We need to work on your vocabulary. Nothing about me is soft."

"I suppose not." He slides his hand from my sac to my shaft, trapping it in his vice-like grip, and my vision goes hazy while my soul jumps out of my body.

*Holy mother of God, have I entered Heaven?*

"Damn that's an iron grip," I stutter when my senses return and I realize my hips are bucking and swiveling and straight up humping his hand completely of their own accord, because the fucker's just holding my dick, not jerking it.

"Too much?" He relaxes his grip as he angles his head to the side like he actually thinks he might be hurting me.

"Fuck no. Keep doing that."

The pressure returns, and I start thrusting into his fist, grinding my ass against his erection with each pass.

Jaw locked tight, Noah grumbles as I slam onto his lap, but he makes no effort to move. Whether that's because he's too afraid or too engrossed by the feel of my dick in his hand I don't know, but the way his baby blues darken under hooded lids suggests any fear he might have is trumped by lust.

*And I am here for it.*

Though my limbs are straining with the effort to hold myself up while

thrusting into his hand, I fucking love the imagery of writhing naked on top of a fully clothed man. It's so...filthy, so primal and debauched. I'm ready to blow just picturing it, yet before I can Noah loosens his grip, and the explosion I almost reached fades into a quiet hum.

"Oh fuck. That's... I need... Don't stop." Random words fall out of my mouth as I press my groin into his hand, straining to reclaim the bliss I almost found. When I can't find it, my tortured gaze meets Noah's.

"Can I?" He gives a leisurely pull on my cock.

*He doesn't want to stop, he wants to take over.* The relief is so potent my arms struggle to support my weight.

"Fuck yes," I pant. "Do whatever you want to me."

Once again, he starts slow, with feather-light strokes from root to tip. It's not enough, my chest heaves with the effort to restrain myself from bucking wildly, but my hips don't move, giving him the freedom to explore at his own pace.

Back and forth, his hand travels over my shaft, gradually getting faster, squeezing harder, learning what makes me gasp or moan or roll my eyes back in my head. And while I try to limit my reactions to what he's doing to me, sometimes it's what I do to him that gets me.

Brow furrowed in concentration, blue eyes dark with desire, Noah is one sexy motherfucker. Add his slightly parted lips, his staggered breathing, and the hard dick pressing against my ass, and before long the pressure of impending release is back.

"Don't stop. Please, *God*, don't stop." My hips swivel in earnest, alternately pushing my dick into his grip and rubbing my ass over his. Mercifully, he gets the message, pumping me harder. Faster. Until we're a tangle of squirming, wriggling limbs lost in a frenzy of lust that couldn't be contained

even if we wanted it to. I'm on the verge of detonation. But it's the astonished look on Noah's face as he quivers beneath me that tips me over the edge. *Oh. My. God.*

My earlier restraint dissolves as my body takes over, rearing almost violently as my dick pulses out its release. Toes curling, fingers gripping Noah's thighs hard enough to bruise, my muscles go into lockdown as a tsunami of pleasure tears through me, robbing me of the ability to do anything but hang on as I coat us both in the sticky aftermath of my bliss.

It's a savage orgasm. Untamed. And even before my limbs stop sizzling, I know I'll want more. Much more. As much as Noah's willing to give.

As my dick stops weeping, I try to take stock of whether I can move only to come to the conclusion that I can't. I'm boneless, incapable of standing, and I'm strangely content with that. Using the last of my energy I pull myself upright only to collapse on Noah's chest, resting my forehead on his shoulder as my breathing slowly returns to normal. *It's not cuddling, it's recovery. There's a difference.*

Noah's hand releases me, sliding over my hip and coming to rest on my thigh as his own breathing slows, and for a moment there I swear I hear a breathless "*thank you,*" although I'm too dazed to give it much thought.

When I'm finally capable of movement it's dark out, and I'm still on the couch, covered by a blanket. Noah is nowhere in sight.

## Chapter 7 – Noah

I like dick.

Or at least, my body does. I wouldn't have guessed that about myself until Tripp pushed me to examine the possibility of it. Even knowing I felt something different around him, I'm not sure I'd have done anything about it without his influence, and for that I'm grateful. I'm also still confused as hell.

Am I bi? I have to acknowledge that's possible since I can now say I've done sexual things with both women and men, although since a woman hasn't piqued my interest in quite a while bi doesn't feel right. Have I been gay and not asexual all along, and just didn't realize it? And if I really am gay, how come seeing Luca pleasure himself didn't do anything for me while seeing Tripp do the same got me hard? I assume the difference is because I see Luca as more of a brother, but if I imagine watching anyone else, Xander for example, that doesn't do anything for me either despite the fact I can objectively say he's good-looking.

Does that mean last night was some sort of anomaly—a right place, right time sort of thing—or that I only react to Tripp? Is it even possible to respond to one particular person and not a gender? If I didn't think that'd freak him out, I'd ask Tripp, but I don't want to imply he's the key to my sex life. Especially not after the way the night ended.

Neither of us mentioned it—he passed out pretty quickly after coming a second time, thank God—but I'm pretty sure he could tell I came, too. That wouldn't matter except for the fact I warned him it probably wouldn't happen, and while I'm pretty sure he'd be proud of succeeding where others

have failed, I highly doubt he'd want to consider the fact he's the *only* person who can do so. I don't even want to consider it. Still, it's hard not to, given my history, and the fact that I can't substitute any man for Tripp in my mind and feel the same level of excitement.

God, he was a vision—confident and sexy. Tripp unabashedly showcased himself for my pleasure then used me to chase his own. The way his body contorted. The heat in his eyes. The mixture of delight and relief on his face as he painted us with his cum. I didn't know seduction could be so filthy yet still so beautiful, much less that I could find release from that alone.

For a brief moment afterward, I didn't have the presence of mind to bite my tongue, and I thanked him for giving me what I thought I'd lost. I think he was already asleep at that point because he didn't react, and fortunately he'd already left for work by the time I got up, so I have time to get my shit together before facing him. And by getting my shit together, I don't mean freaking out about what we did since I clearly enjoyed it, I mean figuring out whether my body likes men, or just Tripp.

However, I have no idea how to go about figuring that out. I could engage in a little more experimentation while I'm here, though that wouldn't answer the question of whether my body can respond to anyone else. And that's hardly a question I can ask the man I'm fooling around with to help answer. It doesn't feel right to ask Niko or Xander since they're friends with Tripp, and even if Luca and I had the kind of relationship where I asked him for advice, I couldn't in this scenario since he's as straight as they come. Besides, I wouldn't know where to start.

Aside from Tripp, who I inexplicably find myself opening up to, I haven't hinted to anyone that I've been questioning whether I'm not cut out for sex. After all, locker rooms are more of a '*share your exploits*' than a '*confide*

*your secrets'* environment, and as the last line of defense on the ice, it's better that I appear focused on the game instead of my own internal conflicts. To burden my teammates with my questions now... Even if I could, I doubt any of them are equipped to give me sound advice.

Restless yet mentally exhausted, I revert to the one and only thing that's ever quieted my mind – physical exertion.

Usually, hockey practice is my outlet, and it's so rigorous it's no wonder I don't spend time dwelling on my inactive sex life. But during the off season running typically does the trick, and in a new neighborhood I figure the scenery alone will be enough of a diversion. And it is, though not in the way I'm expecting.

Rather than flowers and trees, of which there are plenty, I find myself noticing people. Specifically, other men who are running. Only, I'm not noticing them the way I notice Tripp. I don't see the shape of their legs, the swing of their hips, or the cut of their jaw. Instead, I see only the whole person, which is no more or less appealing to me now than it was before I met Tripp.

After a grueling seven miles, my mind is as restless as ever, and it's apparent nothing but puzzling out this mystery will give me any relief. So, I collapse onto the nearest bench and just sit, searching every face, every figure, to see if one of them might hold my attention the way Tripp does.

Physically, there are several. Men and women alike, with the lean physique indicative of an active lifestyle that would be compatible with my own. I'm able to discern that several have attractive faces, though none have the charisma that Tripp exudes. None of them are so alluring I can't look away. In fact, they sort of blend together, becoming indistinguishable the harder I try to recall any of them specifically.

I think there's some sort of condition to describe that. The inability to recognize people's faces. I don't have it, obviously, since I can tell who's who, although in terms of sex appeal, I don't seem to be able to pinpoint my interests. It feels a little like there's everyone else, and then there's Tripp.

*What does that mean?*

"Noah Tremblay?" A deep voice startles me out of my trance.

"Yes." I look up at a man who matches me in size, with wavy black hair and ocean blue eyes.

"I thought I recognized you. I'm sorry to intrude, it's just that I jog this path regularly, and I've never seen you before. I couldn't pass up the chance to say hello. I'm Justin."

The man holds out his hand, and I grip it for a handshake. *Classically attractive, athletic, firm grip. Do I feel anything?*

"I've been a Bulldogs fan for years. Never been lucky enough to bump into anyone on the team before now. Do you live around here?" He lets go of my hand and gestures to the surrounding area.

*Nope, nothing. Not a single thing.*

"No, just wanted a change of scenery during my run." Pro athlete 101, don't tell people where you live. Or where you're staying temporarily.

"Oh, nice. So, um, I don't mean to pry or anything, but you looked kind of...dazed just now. Are you okay?"

*Shit*—I can't afford to zone out where people can see me, they'll start questioning my health and I'll get stuck talking to doctors every week.

"Yeah, man. I'm good. Just visualizing a game."

"Always in training, huh?" Justin smiles brightly, as if I've given him some special insight into my pre-game process.

"Something like that, yeah."

*This guy is handsome, polite... No idea if he's into men or not, but even if he isn't I could still be attracted to him. So why aren't I?*

“Mind if I get a picture?” he asks.

“Sure.” I stand up and smile for the selfie he takes, and with another quick handshake I say my goodbyes and head out before anyone else can recognize me, feeling a little disheartened that because of my celebrity, answering the question of whether I'm attracted to anyone beyond Tripp is going to be much harder than I anticipated.

## Chapter 8 – Tripp

I'm nervous.

That's not an emotion I'm familiar with, especially considering I'm about to walk into my own house. But for the first time since moving in, that house isn't going to be empty when I get inside, and I'm not sure how to feel about that.

On the one hand, last night was hot as fuck, and I want to do it again. And *again*. And many more agains, after that. On the other, I've never had anyone stay the night. *Ever*. Not once. So, I'm not sure what to expect. Complicating things even more, Noah isn't exactly experienced in the hookup department, much less the hooking up with *men* department, so I don't know whether he'll be freaked out, casually curious, or clingy.

Considering I'm pretty certain he said '*thank you*' last night, my money's on clingy, but I hope I'm wrong. I wouldn't mind getting carnal with the big guy since he really gives my junk a hard on, but emotions are not my jam. If he goes fatal attraction on me, I wouldn't just lose him, I could lose Xander, as well.

I might've pushed the boundaries of our budding friend group last night, and Xander won't hesitate to castrate me for it if it backfires. He'll claim I should've known better—which I did—as if he doesn't know I'm unlikely to stop chasing a dick I want.

Usually, I have no shame in the pursuit of a good fuck, but I also don't usually pursue acquaintances, or people I genuinely like. Noah just does

things to me I can't seem to ignore. I should make sure he's on the same page though.

Shoving all the 'what-ifs' from my mind, I push through the door with my trademark coy smile, only to have it turn into a gasp when I'm hit with the most divine aroma I've ever experienced inside my little sin bin. *Hockey terminology is so appropriately filthy.*

I round the corner into the kitchen and find Noah bent at the waist—showcasing a deliciously round ass—and pulling some sort of pan out of the oven. “What kind of foreplay is this?”

“Foreplay?” Noah arches a curious brow as he sets the dish on the stove.

“You know, stuff that makes your dick hard.” I point to the steaming plate. “What is it?”

“Tourtéire,” he says with a little French flare. “Beef inside a pastry crust.”

“I didn't know pot pie was such an aphrodisiac.”

“Not pot pie. Tourtéire,” he clarifies as if I didn't just try to make things inappropriate. *Our normal dynamic still applies. That's a good sign.*

“Which restaurant delivers these? If it tastes as good as it smells, I'm gonna have to put it on my favorites list.”

“I didn't order this. I made it.” He helps himself to the cupboard and pulls out two plates that have probably never held actual food, only takeout containers.

“With what? I don't have any groceries here.”

“You do now.” He pulls a knife from the drawer and starts slicing the pie while I open the fridge to find that I do, in fact, have food. A lot of it. Fruit and vegetables and eggs, stuff I don't eat unless I order it.

“So, this is like a frozen thing? Where's the box? I'll take a picture, so I know what to get.”

“No box, I made this from scratch.” He scoops a slice onto a plate and hands it to me.

“For real?” I twist and turn the plate, inspecting it from all angles. It looks just like a heaping slice of apple pie, only with ground beef instead of apples, but with the same golden flaky crust you’d expect in a dessert. “You can cook?”

“Sometimes. When I’m bored, or...” He lifts a casual shoulder then dishes a piece for himself.

“Hmm.” I close my lips around a forkful of pie, and an explosion of savory flavor hits my tongue. The meat is so tender it practically melts right along with the flaky crust, and I swear my eyes roll back in my head a little as the cinnamon-sweet aftertaste floods my senses. “Holy shit, that’s incredible.” I rush to take another bite. “How’d you get it to rise like an actual pie? I always thought those were hard to make at altitude.”

Noah cocks his head to the side as I take another bite, realizing too late the blunder I just made.

“I didn’t expect a guy who keeps literally no food in his house to know anything about baking.”

“Late night TV,” I say around a mouthful, figuring that’s enough of an explanation to keep him from asking anything more.

“Which show?”

*Dammit.*

“Fuck if I know. Sometimes I just leave the thing on while I fall asleep. Maybe I picked things up by osmosis.”

His wary expression says he doesn’t buy that, but too bad. Just cause I show a guy my cock doesn’t mean I’m gonna tell him all my sordid history

about watching our housekeeper cook since I didn't have friends to hang out with. Fortunately, he doesn't seem to be in a challenging mood.

"I like *'Is It Cake?'*" He carries his plate to the tiny kitchen table and takes a seat.

"What now?" I grab a beer from the fridge and follow him with my dinner.

"People make cakes that look like real objects, and you have to guess which are real and which are cake."

"Pfft. Doesn't sound that hard."

"That sounds like a challenge."

My fork stops midway to my mouth as I cut Noah a suspicious look. *Is he flirting with me? That's new. And kind of intriguing.*

I take my bite and wash it down with a swig of beer, grinning playfully. "Okay big guy. What do you have in mind?"

"I'm not going to bake a cake if that's what you mean. I'll show you an episode and you have to guess which are the cakes."

"And if I guess correctly? What do I get?" My smile turns almost sinister as I imagine the possibilities.

"Bragging rights?" He has the good sense to look a little wary.

"Uh, uh. I want another dinner." I toss him a softball, mostly because if I go straight to the good stuff I won't get a home-cooked meal, but I can be creative in showing my appreciation if he cooks for me again.

"I only know how to make a few things."

"You don't cook like this for yourself all the time?"

His head swivels back and forth. "I have someone make meals for me. Mostly lean proteins that keep me in top shape, not comfort food like this."

I have a brief flashback to sitting at the kitchen island as a kid, a steaming bowl of Rose's homemade ramen in front of me. Most people probably don't

think of Japanese cuisine as comfort food, but to me... Let's just say it's one of the happier aspects of my childhood.

"Tripp?" Noah's voice jolts me out of the memory. "You good?"

"Of course." I take a pull from the bottle to wet my dry throat. "So, even if you only know how to make a few things, that's plenty for one more dinner."

"You're so sure you can spot the cakes?"

I run my fingertip around the opening of the bottle. "I am."

The corner of his lip tugs up with a soft chuckle. "Alright then. What do I get if I win?"

"What do you want?" I tip my chair back and prop my feet on the one next to it, settling in for what promises to be an entertaining conversation.

"Um." He looks at his food and takes a bite, as if that could hide the fact his face is starting to look like a tomato, which on a Thor lookalike is actually not a bad look. Then he takes another bite, clearly struggling with how to say what he wants.

"Oh, my poor, sweet Noah." He glances up just in time to see me lick my lips. "You do know I put out without having to lose a bet first, right?"

He gives a curt nod and looks back at his plate.

"Why go through this whole bet thing then? What is it you're afraid to say?"

"What if... What if last night was a fluke?"

"You think I can't make you come two nights in a row?" I arch a brow as his eyes snap to mine, confirming what I already suspected. *He came last night.*

"Can you?"

"I can sure as hell try." My eyelids get heavy as I imagine getting a glimpse of what I'm sure is a nice, fat cock.

“And if I don’t?”

I purse my lips together with a frown. “I don’t understand the question.”

“If I don’t come, then what?”

“You go to bed with blue balls?” I shrug noncommittally.

“No.” He exhales heavily and shakes his head. “I mean, if I don’t, does that mean I don’t actually like guys?”

*Oh, we’re going deep. Shit, okay.*

Dropping my feet back to the floor, I right the chair with a thud. “I think you’re expecting attraction and desire to be black and white, and in my experience they’re more like a rainbow, and no, that’s not a gay reference, it’s just an analogy.”

“I’m not following.” *Damn those blue eyes are intense when they’re confused.*

“Okay.” I chew on my lip, searching for a way to simplify the complexities of sexuality. “How’s this? Mostly, I like men who are bigger though every once in a while I want to play with someone smaller. I gravitate to white guys but sometimes I’m in the mood for Latin. Or Asian. And I’ve been known to crush on straight guys from time to time. My preferences change with my mood, but my mood swings don’t define me.”

“In every one of those examples you’re still gay,” Noah points out.

“That’s because my rainbow is narrowly focused on men. Yours might be more broad, including men and women.”

“I also don’t have sex nearly as much as you.”

“So what? That just means my rainbow is more vibrant.” I throw my hands up. “The point is, sex isn’t black and white, it’s a gradient. Maybe you won’t like cock as much tonight as you did last night. Maybe you’ll like it more.

Either way, it's not like you have to label yourself afterward, and even if you did, there's no rule that says you have to stay with that label forever."

*Nailed it.*

"I'm not worried about the label." Noah swirls his fork around his empty plate. "I just... For years I didn't give myself time to be confused. I focused on hockey and didn't let myself ask questions I didn't have the answer to. After last night, I can't make the questions stop."

*Oh shit. It's not quite fatal attraction level clingy, but he's trying to solve existential issues of attraction while I'm on more of a 'bang him out of my system so my suddenly picky junk goes back to normal' mission.*

"These questions." I rotate my wrist in a circle like that might help me find the right words. "Are they still along the lines of whether you like cocks or not?"

"Partly."

"Anything else?"

"Whether I'd finish...if a man touched me."

I assume since he said man his questions must refer to *men* in general, not *me* specifically. I can work with that. And hallelujah because I really do want to get my hands on him. "I accept your terms. Show me this cake."

Noah drops his fork with a clatter and sits ramrod straight. "My terms?"

"If you win the cake bet, I'll play with *your* dick this time." I wink and pop out of my chair, heading toward the living room. "Coming?"

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"There's literal stitching on that cake," I protest, because even though I really want to touch Noah's cock, I can't turn off my competitive nature. "She cheated somehow. Leather stitching isn't edible and the whole thing has to be edible, right?"

“The icing is meant to look like leather stitching.” Noah grabs the remote off the coffee table and rewinds the program to the close-up view of the baseball and mitt that a knife cuts through seconds later. And even though I’m well aware that there’s cake inside the mitt, my brain won’t let me accept the fact that it’s actually cake when it looks so real.

“Then you cheated. You’ve seen this one before and knew which was the cake.”

“This episode just got released last night. I haven’t had time to watch it until now.”

“You could’ve watched it while you were making dinner and conveniently suggested this little game knowing you’d win.”

“Right, because I knew we’d be making bets involving sexual favors and household chores.” His eyes have a playful little glint to them that I don’t normally see. *Definitely flirting.*

“You honestly expect me to believe you didn’t foresee this outcome? The way to a man’s dick is through his stomach, and you combined my two favorite things, meat and pie.” I raise my fingers as I list off my weaknesses. “Sneaky bastard.”

“A, I didn’t know meat—” he catches the smirk on my face and connects the dirty dots. “I didn’t know pie was one of your favorite things. And B, the saying is actually ‘the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.’”

“Not this man.” I shake my head vigorously.

“Are you saying you don’t have a heart?” Noah cocks his head to the side as his eyes drift over me.

“If I do it’d take a hell of a lot more than food to find it. My cock on the other hand,” I rush to change the subject, “responds to pretty much anything. But a bet’s a bet so tonight we get to play with yours.”

I drop to the floor and crawl between Noah's thick thighs, noting how he tenses when my palm connects with his bare knee. "Change your mind?"

His head swivels so slowly it's hard to tell whether it's moving, but his mouth stays shut. I let my hand drift higher, fingertips sliding under the thin fabric of his shorts to press against the inside of his thigh. He sucks in a breath of air as his eyes grow wide, seemingly caught between wanting me to retreat or push forward.

"Okay?" I rub my thumb back and forth over the soft skin of his inner leg, hoping that will both soothe and excite him.

"Feels..." He exhales deeply as he relaxes into the cushions behind him. "Feels nice."

Using far more control than I thought I possessed, I linger in the same spot, gently sliding my fingers over his skin as I watch him for signs of distress, another thing I've never tried to do with my hand inches from a guy's junk.

Noah's chest rises and falls with measured breaths, not panicked, but not without tension either. A forced calm, as if he's both anxious and afraid to enjoy what I'm doing.

"Lean back and close your eyes," I say softly.

The twist of his head is less hesitant now. "I want to watch."

"You will. But first you need to relax. Stop thinking about what's happening or what's going to happen and just feel."

The words are meant for him, but I find myself following the same instructions. Whether that's an effort to set a good example, or an attempt to stick to this slow pace, I have no idea. I just know that for the first time in, maybe ever, I'm noticing how soft skin feels on the inner thigh. How hair tickles the pads of my fingers when I barely graze it. How muscles tense when you first touch them and unwind the longer that connection remains.

And while I still haven't seen or touched his cock, mine is enthralled.

## Chapter 9 - Noah

Trusting that Tripp knows what he's doing, I close my eyes and let my head fall to the cushions, focusing on the feel of his hand on my leg rather than what other parts of my body may or may not be doing.

It's warm...heavy, except at his fingertips, which are ghosting over my skin. Down to my knee, up to mid-thigh, occasionally dipping to the inside, Tripp's touch is calming. Except when it inches higher and sparks a tiny little flutter of awareness deep inside my groin. It's a rumble of need that coaxes my dormant sense of desire out of hiding.

And wow—he's only touching my leg, but by concentrating on that point of contact my entire body seems to come alive. A pleasant warmth radiates out from his palm, seeping into my limbs, my extremities, even my chest, which rises in rhythm with the glide of his hand rather than my attempts to force breath. And then his hand slips higher.

The general sense of warmth becomes more acute, settling deep in my stomach. All while subtle, yet persistent, waves stretch toward my balls. A satisfied moan wafts over my ears, though whether it came from me or Tripp I can't say. I don't even really care, since I'm guessing that noise is responsible for Tripp's hand inching higher until his fingers are mere inches away from my nuts.

My answering inhale isn't sharp, but it is deep, filling my lungs with the air needed to steady myself amid the torrent of sensations flooding my nerves from that one, simple advance. That's when I realize Tripp's hand is high

enough to reach my dick, if it were still resting against my thigh. Only it isn't.

It's pushing against the fabric of my shorts.

"There you are." Tripp's voice is thick and sweet, like honey, drizzling over my heated skin. "I've been waiting a long time for this."

My eyes snap open just in time to see the heated gleam in Tripp's as he stares at the slight tent in my shorts. He leans forward without warning, mouthing my cock over my shorts. His warm breath makes me jump against the material between us.

*Oh, God.*

Sparks zing from the base of my shaft all the way to the tip as a steady hum surges to a crescendo. The sheer intensity would have me sinking to my knees if I wasn't already seated on the couch.

My jaw falls open on a silent moan as my cock swells, the tiny pulses of my heartbeat feeling more like beats on a snare drum in my rapidly growing dick.

"So excited," he mumbles between open-mouthed kisses, the heat of his mouth making my shorts damp as my dick twitches again. "You're good for my ego."

My breathing turns erratic as I watch Tripp nuzzle and murmur to my shaft through my shorts. Watching a guy talk to your junk should be unsettling, but once again Tripp manages to make the obnoxious seem normal.

I'm so focused on the way he's making me feel, it's not until Tripp's fingers slide under the waistband of my shorts that I realize his hand is no longer rubbing my leg. I inhale another lungful of air as he lifts his gaze to mine, hooded emerald eyes silently asking for permission. My head bobs once, and cool air hits my heated skin as my shorts are pulled lower.

Tripp taps my hip, and I obediently shift my weight so he can pull the

fabric off completely. Tossing the garment to the floor behind him, he spreads my legs and drags his eyes up my calves, over my thighs, settling on my shaft.

Holding my breath, I let my gaze follow his, coming to rest on my cock. My body shudders as my lungs expel their relieved air.

It's firm. Not as full as I've seen it, but fuller than it's been in a long time.

"Hello beautiful." Tripp licks his lips, and my dick jumps in response.

Looking at me from under thick lashes, Tripp seems to fight for control of his breathing. "I want to do *all* the things. Hold it, suck it, *ride it*." He stretches his arm forward, finger straining toward my tip, then suddenly pulls back. "What do you want, Noah? What am I allowed to do?"

"Honestly, I wasn't sure my body would let us get to this point, so I hadn't considered what I'd be comfortable with."

"Touching then? I'd love to wrap my hands around you." His eyes seem to go a little unfocused before they blink back into control, which seems very un-Tripp-like. *He must be trying to make me feel good about not being all the way hard. That's...pretty cool, actually.*

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "Touching."

Tripp reaches for the base of my cock, eyes fluttering shut with a groan as he closes it in his fist. Then he slides his hand to the crown, gently pinching it between his thumb and forefinger.

*Holy shit.*

He's *holding my dick*. Not pumping it or playing with it the way I did his, just *holding it*, rubbing his thumb back and forth over the tip like I'm some skittish animal he's trying to calm. I guess in a way I am, though not because he's a guy like he implied the other night. Because it's been so long since anyone's touched me.

The last person, a woman, had small, soft hands. And her touch was gentle. Tripp has big, strong hands. They're holding me firmly, covering most of my dick, which is now harder than it's been in ages. Maybe ever. Just from him holding it.

Keeping his grip firm, he slides his hand to the base and gives me a little squeeze. Relaxing his hold on the upstroke, he pumps me several times before once again tightening his fist. Alternating between the two with no discernable pattern, he continues to stroke me, never letting me fully sink into the rhythm before changing it up again.

The constant adjustments are maddening, but only because I'm anxious to find the release I'm still not sure he can give. Truthfully though, if he's able to achieve it after all this teasing, I'm fairly certain it will be the best I've ever had.

Sliding his hand low enough to cup my balls and press them into the base of my cock, my hips surge forward as my head lolls back against the couch and a garbled moan escapes my throat.

Tripp lets go of my dick and palms my sac, giving it a nice, firm tug. "No wonder these are so sensitive. They're ready to burst, aren't they?"

I swivel my hips as he kneads them, too consumed with lust to care that the motion makes it look like I'm fucking the air, which Tripp seems to enjoy.

"Jesus, big guy. What I wouldn't give to be sitting on that beauty right now. I knew it'd be big, but big *and* you know how to use it... *Damn.*" He gives my nuts a final squeeze and spins toward the coffee table, sliding open a drawer I hadn't noticed before.

"What's that?" I heave as he grabs something inside.

"Lube. I don't want to chafe you and risk not getting to have any more fun."

“What sort of fun?” I ask before I can stop myself.

Tripp’s grin turns devious as he squirts the liquid into his palm and wraps it around my shaft, causing me to gasp and buck simultaneously. “Damn that’s cold.”

“I’ll warm it up, don’t worry.” He starts stroking me, twisting his wrist as he reaches the top. As promised, the friction makes the gel warmer as he gets my cock nice and slippery.

I wonder briefly if this is what it feels like to be with a woman bare. I never tried it, but the thought nearly takes me out of the moment, and in a desperate attempt to salvage it I repeat, “What sort of fun?”

“Hand jobs, blow jobs, fucking.” His eyes snap to mine, hooded and heated and full of challenge. I swear the carnal nature of his gaze has my toes curling. “You like that idea?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that while you’re holding my dick.”

Tripp throws his head back with a whoop that turns into a bout of laughter. “I don’t think anyone’s ever made me laugh while I’ve had a raging boner.”

“You’re hard?” With him kneeling before me, only his eyes gave any indication he was enjoying this.

“Wanna see for yourself?” He swipes his thumb over my slit and gives the crown of my shaft a firm squeeze.

Since I kind of know how this goes after last night, I don’t hesitate. “Yeah.”

Tripp lets go of my cock and stands between my legs, holding his hand up. “You have to undress me. My fingers are too slippery.”

With his groin even with my face, I can see the bulge straining for release, and mine jumps in response. Using surprisingly steady hands, I unfasten his pants and shove them down his hips. He steps out of them and straddles my lap, resting his weight on my thighs.

“Shirt too,” he instructs.

Once the excess fabric is out of the way, he scoots forward until our cocks are side by side. The firm skin rubbing against mine steals my breath, and I can do little more than gape as I look at our dicks pressed into one another from root to tip. It’s an image I never expected to see much less appreciate, though there’s no denying I enjoy it.

Tilting his hips, Tripp uses the slippery surface of my skin to glide his erection against mine. Every nerve along the way ignites like a firework, a series of tiny explosions that pop and fizz and render my senses useless as I revel in the obscene amount of pleasure this rigid friction brings.

*Has it ever felt like this?*

Admittedly, it’s been a while since I’ve been intimate with anyone, so my memories about what it was like in the past are fuzzy. What I can recall is having to really concentrate, to visualize what it should feel like rather than experience it, because the reality somehow fell short. And while I could force myself to finish, it never quite felt like the epic encounters I’ve heard my teammates describe. Hell, I’ve even *seen* some of Luca’s encounters, and mine definitely weren’t like that.

What’s happening right now though... I’m not conjuring some scenario as a means to an end. I’m not telling myself what it *should* feel like to revel in some false reality. I’m simply reacting to what’s happening. No imagination necessary. In fact, I doubt my imagination could top what I see with my own two eyes.

Tripp hovers above me, the peaks and valleys of his stomach rippling in a hypnotic rhythm as he pumps his hips. The muscles in his left shoulder are taut as he braces a hand on the back of the couch, and the muscles in his right contract while he works our shafts with feather-light strokes. Glazed

green eyes track his movements, though they drift briefly to my face when he flicks his head to the side to clear away unruly strands of white-blond hair.

*This—Tripp—might be the most erotic thing I've ever experienced.*

My breathing gets more labored with each slide of his solid length against mine. I don't know if that's from the sensation or the view. Maybe some combination of both. All I know is two swollen cocks rubbing together makes my heart race in a way I've only ever felt on the ice. Then Tripp contracts his fist, and my pulse finds another speed.

Tripp cants his hips as he strokes up and down our lengths. "Rub your dick against mine. Fuck my hand."

Mirroring his movements, I punch into his grip, the lube making it impossibly easy to seek out the friction driving me wild.

Tight. Hot. Hard. As soon as I register a sensation it's replaced with a different one, all of them swirling together to create a tornado of ecstasy that drives all rational thought from my brain. Who I like, what I like, what it means... The questions dissolve as the pressure in my balls becomes overwhelming, the need to come all consuming.

My pelvis bucks wildly, a frenzied attempt to spear my length into Tripp's fist as if it's the key to nirvana, which it just might be, considering I've never felt desire of this magnitude.

"Holy shit, big guy," Tripp pants as he tightens his grip. "I can feel your cock twitching in my hand. You're gonna blow like a fucking volcano. Let me see it."

The heat of his palm, the constriction of his fingers, and the slippery slide of our joined dicks combine until all that's left is utter euphoria. A full-body spike of awareness seizes me, causing my limbs to freeze for just a second, long enough to warn me that I've got no control over what comes next. And

then it's gone, along with the ability to feel anything other than the pleasure coursing between my legs.

My head falls back against the couch as a guttural moan rumbles up my throat. Bliss radiates from my groin, up my spine and down my arms, igniting my body with a rush of energy reminiscent of the way lights suddenly and blindingly illuminate the area when flicked on. Fingers clenching the cushions, my dick quivers and quakes as spurts of cum erupt from my tip, joining Tripp's and coating us both with more evidence that my body may not be broken after all.

When my orgasm seems to have run its course, Tripp releases me. "See what happens when you get out of your head."

I open my eyes to his smug grin, and the five sticky fingers he's wagging between us.

*Oh my God. He did it. I came, and it was... Everything.*

Too stunned to move or speak, I watch helplessly as Tripp grabs his shirt from the couch and wipes us both down before hopping off me. "Dibs on the first shower." He winks and saunters toward the stairs, leaving me breathless and—for the first time ever—boneless.

*So, this is what good sex feels like. I can finally see the appeal.*

## Chapter 10 - Tripp

Xander and I have been skating for nearly an hour by the time Luca, Justus and Noah show up, joining Niko on the pool deck to watch while they have a few beers. Usually, I don't mind an audience—I'm a show-off by nature—but Noah's eyes on me have my stomach doing flips. Its a feeling I enjoy—fuck, maybe even crave—but it's typically a result of gravity bringing me back to Earth after soaring over the rim of the pool, not because of Thor.

Last night might have been the hottest encounter of my life, the first night with him a close second, and neither of those progressed to the point where I had to wrap my dick. Or his.

I always thought the best orgasms required sex, and the fact that doesn't seem to be true with him is fucking with my head. So the urge to do it again, to want more of him in every carnal way—more than I did a few days ago—that's not normal for me.

I'm no stranger to chemistry or sexual tension. I live for the chase, but once I get what I want, the desire fades... just not with Noah. Is that because we haven't fucked? Have our little encounters served to tease me? It's possible. Maybe once we've gone all the way, the lust will fade. At least, I'm hoping it will.

By then, Noah will have his answers. He'll know what he likes so he can enjoy sex the way nature intended and I'll get to return to my harmless but enjoyable flirtation. Business as usual.

“Your seven-twenty is looking good,” Xander remarks as I pop out of the bowl and roll to a stop next to him, rescuing me from the thoughts in my

head.

“Thanks. I worked on it while you were gone.” As a tall man, spinning two full circles in the air isn’t the easiest trick to land. Unlimited use of Xander’s pool helped me figure it out. “You know, you still haven’t told me how my favorite half of the egg is doing after your little trip to Sweden.”

“Am I supposed to know what that means?” Xander squints at me.

“One egg, two people, duh.”

“You know boy/girl twins don’t come from the same egg, right?”

“I wasn’t referring to Niko, I was referring to me.” Niko may be his sister's biological twin, but I’m her twin in spirit. “Clearly, Anna and I are the same person in two different bodies. Ergo, half of my egg. Usually, people will be polite and call the other person the better half, but we all know that’s me so to spare her feelings we’ll share the title.”

Xander shakes his head the way he always does when my word vomit frustrates him. “You and Anna both have limited filters and like dicks. I’m pretty sure that’s where the similarities end.”

“Those similarities connect us in a way you can’t possibly understand. She’s my literal soul sister. No one gets me like she does.”

“You met her once.”

“And we bonded instantly. If she had a dick I’d have already proposed. Since she doesn't, I'll settle with her being my best bitch for life.”

Xander visibly shudders—my work here is complete—and changes the subject. “Moving on from that terrifying thought, why does Noah keep glancing at you and looking away like he got caught doing something wrong?”

*Why indeed?*

I can’t admit it’s probably a freak out over whether people will know

another man has held his cock just by looking at him, which pretty much every guy wonders after their first gay experience. Spoiler alert- there's no such thing as flashing neon sign or arrow over your head claiming you like dick.

“He's probably worried I'll fall.”

“Sorry, what?” The whites of Xander's eyes are suddenly very prominent. “Why would he be worried about that?”

“I didn't know he was here the last time I used the pool, and it freaked me the fuck out when he started clapping, which Niko apparently told him to do, by the way. I fell off the board and hit my head. No biggie with the helmet on, but I think it scared him. The big guy probably felt guilty.”

“Oh shit,” Xander groans.

“What?”

“Noah's like the caretaker of the whole team. It's literally part of his DNA to look out for people.”

“So?”

“So, if he felt responsible for you falling, he'd stick around to make sure you're okay, which would give you an opportunity to be...*you*. And with no one around to reel you in... What'd you do to him?”

*Wow Xander's eyes can get dark fast.*

“Nothing.”

“What'd you do *with* him, then?”

Xander's fishing for information I'd normally boast about if my escapade had been with an unknown party, but it's not my place to tell anyone about the things Noah's questioning, or the role I've played to help him figure things out.

“I would think that'd be obvious,” I scoff. “After all, a man that size likely

has an equally sizeable dick, and if I'd been lucky enough to have it in me, I doubt I'd be able to skate flawlessly."

"You're telling me you didn't try to fuck him while he was feeling guilty for making you fall?"

This is probably where I should say Noah's been crashing with me, so it doesn't look like I'm trying to hide anything. I don't, but it doesn't dismiss the fact I should. Since we drove separately—he needed to swing by his place first—there isn't a reason to volunteer that information. I won't deny it if it comes up, but I'm happy to leave that detail out since it'll only make Xander more suspicious of what I may or may not have gotten up to with the big guy.

"I'm always trying to fuck him, but to date, my cock hasn't met his ass. Or vice versa. Happy?" Sadly, it's not a lie.

"Yes, actually."

"Rude," I gasp. "You know, you could be my wingman on this the same way I helped you with your hockey god."

"First, you didn't play wingman. You just gave advice when I needed it. Second, Niko isn't and has never been straight. The situations are totally different."

They're not as different as he thinks, as far as the straight part goes anyway, but I'd never say that without Noah's permission. Even if Xander would understand and be supportive, it's not something I have the right to do.

"Fine. Ignore the fact I arranged for Niko to be your DD, which led to the driving lessons, which led to the hottest sex you've ever had. I'll wear Noah down on my own."

"I'm not encouraging that, but since he keeps looking at you, maybe we should take a break from skating. The team would never forgive us if their star goalie has a heart attack because you fell off your board."

“I only fell because he startled me.” My pride demands I save face. “But if you want to take a break we can.”

When we reach the other side of the pool, Xander sits between Niko’s legs on the lounge and reclines against him—their PDA game has no shame—while I take a seat at the foot of Noah’s because there’s literally nowhere else left. And everyone is used to me trying to get close to him, though I don’t actually help myself to his lap the way Xander does to Niko.

“I still can’t believe there’s no water in that pool.” Luca glances at the cement hole in the ground and shakes his head longingly.

“I wouldn’t swim in it even if there was. It’d be full of their jizz.” I grab a water from the cooler and start chugging.

“They make chemicals for that,” Niko says.

“They make jizz eliminating chemicals? Damn, whoever came up with that must be making bank. I bet they sell that shit in gallons instead of ounces.”

“You don’t need a pool,” Justus says. “You need a hot tub.”

“In this heat?” Luca balks.

“No, for the winter. How nice would it be to soak in a hot tub after a game.”

“Better than an ice bath.” Noah shivers.

“Those ice baths are why you’re still the starting goalie at your age.” Luca reaches over and smacks his arm.

“I’m only two years older than you.”

“But you’re falling apart faster.”

“Goaltending is hard on the knees,” Noah mutters while Luca smirks.

“It’s bad enough camp starts Monday. Let’s not make it worse with talk about ice baths,” Niko groans.

“Weren’t you just talking about how you missed the ice last time I was here?” Noah asks him.

“Yes, but I miss it in an ‘*it’d be fun to coast around the rink and take a few shots way*’ not a ‘*bust your ass till you drop*’ way.”

“You only drop if you’re out of shape,” Luca sniggers.

“I just got back from visiting my family for several weeks, of course I’m out of shape.”

“Does your mom cook all your favorite childhood foods and guilt you if you don’t eat them too?” Justus asks.

“No, I just didn’t exercise.”

“Except for fucking,” I quip as Luca snorts.

“Why are you making us out to be sex-crazed?” Xander asks me.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It’s not all we do.”

“Doesn’t being in a relationship mean you get to fuck regularly? I would’ve thought that’s the biggest perk.” I look around the group for confirmation.

“It’s the only perk.” Luca nods in agreement. “Except for the fact you only get to bang that one person.”

“What’s wrong with only banging one person?” Justus asks.

“Nothing if that’s what you’re into. I like variety, which is why road games are my favorite,” Luca says.

“I’m honestly shocked at how much women adore you when you’re blatantly with a different one all the time,” Niko tells Luca.

“Puck bunny culture is weird, but my God, it’s a wonderful thing.” Luca smiles dreamily.

The look on his face gives me an idea. “The gay crowd needs to get in on that. We could be the puck bucks and we could offer a special welcome to all the visiting teams.”

“A buck?” Justus frowns.

“I mean we could go with puck butts, though that seems a little crass to me.”

Xander snorts. “*You’re* worried about being crass?”

“Not particularly, but bunny has a touch of class to it and gay men deserve the same, even if we are just looking for big hockey sticks.”

“Isn’t a phrase for gay hockey chasers futile since there’s only one gay player in the league and he’s spoken for?” Luca asks me.

“Only one that we *know* of. I bet there are more thinking about following Niko’s lead. If we build it, they will come. Pun intended.”

Niko chokes on a laugh, causing Xander to warn, “Don’t encourage him.”

“I can’t help it, that was funny,” Niko whines, clamping his lips together to contain himself.

“If Tripp was kidding, yes, it’d be funny. But he’s not. Don’t give him any more family passes or he’ll hover by the locker room trying to pick up members of the other team.”

Luca shrugs. “Who cares. If there are any gay players out there, they might appreciate bumping into Tripp after the game.”

“No. Bad idea.” Though Noah’s voice is level, the steely set of his jaw tells me he’s pissed. *What’s that about?*

“What? Why?” Luca gives his teammate a confused look.

“He can’t sleep with the competition.”

“Why not?” Justus asks.

“Because he’s not some random guy whose hookups won’t impact us.”

Niko scratches his head as he squints at Noah. “I’m not really following you, buddy. None of us have a say where our friends stick their dicks.”

“What if he hooked up with Blaise?” Noah asks his teammates.

“That douchebag on the Rockets?” Luca’s smile quickly morphs to a frown.

“Blaise is gay?” Justus looks around, confused.

“I’m just picking him as an example,” Noah says. “Would any of us be okay with Tripp hooking up with him? Or any of the assholes in the league like him?”

“That’s a good point.” Luca chews on his lip.

“How is that a good point?” I ask.

“If he’s as big a turd to you off the ice as he is to us on it, we’d probably end up fighting with him,” Niko responds. “Best case that’s just a penalty, worst an ejection and a fine.”

“So, your hockey season comes before my sex life?” I narrow my eyes in Niko’s direction.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Cock blockers,” I mutter, though I’m not nearly as disappointed as I should be to learn my friendship with the local hockey gods won’t pave the way for me to sample more of them.

## Chapter 11 – Noah

The short drive to Tripp's place didn't take the edge off, so I'm still vibrating when I walk in the door. On some level that worries me—I always shrug off my anger before it festers, even on the ice—yet more than an hour later Tripp's puck buck comments still aren't sitting right.

“Puck bucks, seriously?” I ask as soon as we're in the door.

Tripp tosses his keys on the entry table. “You're right. It doesn't have the same classy ring as *bunny*. What about puck buddies?”

That answer only frustrates me more. “Is it really that important to you to score with one of us?”

He gives me a bemused once-over as he takes a seat on the couch. “I don't have a bingo card I'm trying to fill with sexual escapades if that's what you're asking. although, I probably should cause that'd be hot as fuck.”

Still rooted by the door, I cross my arms in front of my chest. “Wow... Okay.”

“What's wrong with sexual freedom?”

“Why the fixation on hockey players?”

“I'm not fixated on them, I just happen to like the idea of people having sex unapologetically. Like puck bunnies.”

I feel like I'm glaring, though I can't seem to relax my face. “Don't you do that already? Why would you need a fancy name and mission to chase after hockey players?”

“I wouldn't.” He stares right back, head cocked to the side. “What's this really about? I just told you I like the balls on those bunnies. I think gay men

should have sex as unabashedly as they do. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing." I drop my arms and stalk toward the couch, dropping heavily onto the opposite end.

"Then why are you upset?"

"I don't know, maybe because you're talking about picking up other players while you're hooking up with me." It's not until the words are out of my mouth that I realize their implication. *Oh shit, am I jealous?*

A coy little smirk creeps across his face, like he's privy to some secret I'm not. "I said gay men should take a page out of the puck bunny playbook. I didn't suggest that I planned to pick up anyone. The other guys just assumed I meant me."

My mouth drops open in protest though no words come out. I would've sworn he said he wanted to pick up visiting players, but my memory can't definitively put those words in his mouth.

Tripp arches a knowing brow, and I hate that I notice how attractive that makes him look. "You thought I was trying to find a new hockey god while I've been hooking up with you?"

"I...well..." A second ago, I was convinced that was his intent, but as I struggle to justify my thoughts the playful glint in his eye fades, leaving him looking almost wounded.

"I'm a lot of things, Noah Tremblay, but I'm not that big of an asshole. I am a little confused though. You don't want me chasing anyone else, but you also didn't tell your friends you're staying here. Does that mean you don't want them to know what we've been doing the last few days?"

Until just now, my mother was the only person to reprimand me using my full name, and it has the same effect, making me feel both ashamed and defensive. "I don't care if they know," I tell the floor.

“Are you sure about that? A few days ago, you were convinced you were asexual, and before that you thought you were straight. Now you’re into men, something you didn’t admit when you had the chance.”

“It’s not okay to be confused?” I wring my hands together to keep them from shaking, whether from anger or insecurity, I’m not sure.

“I didn’t say that.” Tripp shakes his head while pursing his lips.

“I’m not afraid of being attracted to another man.” I’m afraid of being broken, of not understanding who I am, but not of how attracted I am to Tripp.

“I believe you. That doesn’t mean you’re ready for your friends to know, or that you even know what to tell them.”

“What does that mean?” I find the nerve to look at him, a strange combination of patience and wariness on his face.

“Are you gay, bi, pan, something else? Do you like all men or just me? If you like men, are you a top or bottom?”

I lick my lips nervously. “No one is going to ask if I top or bottom.”

“Not a reporter, but anyone you hook up with will. And you don’t know the answer.”

“Then help me figure it out! Fuck me.” I point my finger at my chest. “Maybe then I’ll know.”

Based on Tripp’s frozen expression, the desperation in my voice surprises him as much as me. I only hope it’s a good sort of surprise, because now that I’ve said it out loud, it doesn’t sound like a bad idea. It sounds...*right*.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” Tripp sighs, “but I think we should just chill tonight. Dicks in our pants.”

“You don’t want to have sex?” I nearly choke on the words, my shock making it hard to breathe. In my wildest dreams Tripp never said no to a

request to fuck, yet he's still sitting on the other side of the couch, not even attempting to undress the way I expected he would.

Tripp shakes his head slowly back and forth. "I always want to have sex, but just sex. No relationship stuff. No *feelings*. I don't want to blur the lines."

*Blur the... Where is this coming from?*

"The only thing that's blurry is you told me how much you want to fuck me, said you wanted to help me figure out if I like guys, and now that we know I do you're backing off. What's changed? Just last night, you were insanely proud to get me off. Now, you're not bragging about doing it again? Why?" I hate the anguish in my voice, yet I can't seem to hold it back. These past few days are the only ones in recent memory when my body didn't betray me during intimate moments, something Tripp's guidance and patience were instrumental in, and the thought of losing that so soon after I found it is terrifying.

"I *am* proud I got you off when no one else could, and I do want to do it again." His voice is disturbingly level, like he thinks a calm tone will calm me. "But you were upset thinking about me with someone else earlier, and that should be a red flag for both of us."

Okay, I admit the thought of Tripp with anyone else set me off. Though, I think that was on principle, not because I want to have a claim on him. *Isn't it?*

"You have a problem with monogamy?" I ask.

"I have a problem with relationships. I don't do them. And you shouldn't do them with the first guy you experiment with. If you want to fuck around no strings attached, I'm your man. I'll even go as far as agreeing to hook up with only you while you explore this if it makes you feel better. But only if

you agree this is strictly a fuck buddy thing. I'm too selfish for a relationship and you're too vulnerable for one."

"Confused isn't the same as vulnerable."

"No, but they do tend to go hand in hand." Tripp runs his fingers through his artfully mussed hair, which only makes it look better. "Look, I think you should figure out what you want from me. If it's just to explore being with a man, I'm all in. If you think it might be something else, something where you don't like the idea of me being with other people when this is over, we shouldn't take it any further."

Though I know his words are meant to protect me, they hurt more than help. Tripp is the first person—the only person—I've confided in about my sexuality, and the thought of losing that terrifies me. So does the idea of experimenting with another man. But if I'm being honest with myself, I know he makes a valid point about the repercussions. I've already questioned whether it's all men or just Tripp I respond to, and if taking things further could ruin the friendship we have, that may be worse than never figuring myself out. After all, at least now I have someone I can talk with openly.

Sighing heavily, I nod my head. "Yeah, okay. I'll think about it."

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The first day of training never fails to kick my ass, no matter how good of shape I think I'm in. Lungs burning, muscles shaking from the strain they're under, I pump my arms and legs until I cross the line with the rest of my teammates, locking my hands behind my head to catch my breath before we have to line up for the next sprint.

Though it all worked out in the end, as a kid I thought goalies would escape the dreaded wind sprints, so I eagerly signed up. That little misconception led to a great career considering I'm far better at blocking shots than I am at

taking them, but it's hard to be grateful for that when my legs feel like jelly. I've been doing this long enough to know my body won't hate me as much in a week. Still, I'm still a little bitter that my off-season discipline isn't paying off right now.

"Fuck this heat, man." Luca wipes the sweat from his brow. "You need to fill that pool with water, Niko."

"You're the one with the movie room, and the game room, and about a dozen other rooms you don't need but still have. Don't tell me you can't afford a pool," he retorts.

"Of course, I can, but why would I go through the trouble of building it when I could just use yours?"

"Except you can't use his," Justus says as Coach shouts at us to line up again.

He blows the whistle, and we take off, running as fast as we can. Thanks to my long stride I don't come in last, but I'm not as close to first as I used to be. Luckily, my job doesn't require me to skate up and down the rink, which means being a little slower isn't the end of the world as long as my reflexes are solid.

Once we're done with sprints people trickle off, but I hang back to do my stretches. Since I squat so much during a game, I'm more likely to get hip or groin injuries than my teammates, and either one could end my season, especially for a player over thirty. Luca won't admit it, but he's in the same boat, so he lingers with me.

"How do you think we're looking?" he asks, same as he does every year.

Though we're nearly the same age, and co-captains, he's always looked at me as the leader, probably because I have the more level head. "When have I ever been able to answer that on the first day?"

“Humor me.”

“The hunger is there. Making it to the playoffs and getting knocked out in the first round is a good driving force.” I drop to my back and pull my right leg toward me to stretch my hamstring.

“Our sprints were a little sluggish.” He mirrors me as I switch to the other leg.

“It’s day one. If we still look like this on day five, I’ll worry.”

“Fair enough.”

I drop into the splits to stretch my groin, and out of nowhere I’m hit with the memory of Tripp spreading his legs wide that first night, giving me an unobstructed view of his hand sliding over his cock. I enjoyed that encounter far more than I expected to, enough that I’d like to repeat it, but can I do that without developing feelings? I’m not usually a casual sex guy, but I also haven’t tried it. And with my demanding hockey schedule, chances are, casual is the only option.

“Earth to Noah. I asked what you thought about the rookies,” Luca says.

“Sorry, I was distracted.” I press my hips lower to deepen the stretch.

“I got that. Where were you just now?”

I’ve never had to ask Luca for advice, personal or otherwise, and I’m not sure how comfortable I am doing it now. At the same time, the only other person I could talk to is Tripp, and since this is about him that’s not an option.

“Is it possible to sleep with someone without developing feelings for them?”

Luca lets his leg crash back to the ground as he sits up to face me. “I thought you preferred to only sleep with people you have feelings for.”

“I thought so, too,” I mumble as I revisit my past partners, most of which I

was dating when we slept together.

“Not anymore?” When I don’t answer, a sly grin spreads across his face. “Okay first, it’s about fucking time you have some fun, so hell yeah. And second, you see me do it all the time. Of course, it’s possible.”

“I see you hook up with different puck bunnies. Maybe a few of them are repeats, but you don’t have a regular...*arrangement*.” I swing my legs in front of me and press the soles of my feet together like a butterfly to get my inner thigh.

“Are you talking a friends with benefits thing or a fuck buddy thing?” Luca runs a hand through his hair, pushing the sweaty strands away from his eyes.

“There’s a difference?”

“Of course. Friends with benefits is someone you’re already friends with and you add sex to the mix. Fuck buddies is someone you just see for sex. So, which situation are we dealing with?”

While I follow that logic, it doesn’t make things any clearer. “It could go either way I think. We sometimes bump into each other socially, so I’m tempted to say friends, but we’ve never made a deliberate attempt to make plans or anything.” Unless you count Tripp extending the invite to stay at his house, but even that came about through a fluke meeting.

“So, this is more like a friend of a friend that you’re attracted to?”

I shift into a low lunge to stretch my hip flexors as I roll that idea around. “I guess you can say that, yeah.”

“Okay, that makes it easy. As long as you don’t get together without your mutual friend—unless it’s for sex—you’ve got the perfect fuck buddy setup. And yeah, I think it’s possible to have that without catching feelings since you’d only need each other for the physical release, not like grabbing a drink together or anything.”

He makes it sound so simple, when the reality is the fact that I'm staying with Tripp could blur the lines a bit. Although, I've only got one night left before I can move back into my place, and after that, things could go back to the way they were. We see each other only when there's a group event, unless we meet up strictly for sex. That seems a little cold and impersonal to me, but I think I'd rather go that route than try to explore this with anyone else. After all, Tripp's the one who helped me open this door, and I already know I can trust him to be honest and patient and even encouraging.

"Hey, I lost you again," Luca interrupts my thoughts. "Are you gonna get yourself a fuck buddy?"

While this conversation didn't go the way I expected, it did end up helping. "Yeah, I think I am."

## Chapter 12 – Tripp

I turned down sex. *With Thor*. A hockey god I've wanted to defile since the first time I saw him, yet when he begged me to do it, I said no. *Who am I right now?*

Noah's emotional state should be none of my concern. He's a hookup, not a boyfriend. It's neither my job nor my place to make him think twice about asking for sex. I should've just bent over and dropped my pants. Let him fuck me to his little heart's content. And if he turned that into something more than just a good time... Not my problem, right?

That's how these things usually go. You screw around, you go your separate ways, end of story. Yeah, having mutual friends complicates matters, which is why I've made some concessions for him I wouldn't make for a random stranger, like lots and lots of talking. But telling him to think on it instead of falling onto his dick when he pleaded for me to... I don't recognize myself right now, and that's a little scary.

I don't want to make changes for Noah. I don't like what that implies—that he's special—or means something to me. And while I genuinely like the big guy, I can't let whatever this is become more than platonic. I can't let him in. Not even Xander has achieved that.

My best friend thinks he has, and he's come closer than anyone to scaling the walls I've put up. But he hasn't reached the top, hasn't realized that I overshare about everything that *doesn't* matter, and lock down everything that *does*.

I'm in a good place right now, and I only got here because I didn't set myself up for failure. I didn't allow anyone to get close enough to hurt me. Mostly. Sometimes I worry I'm too close to Xander, but I think my obnoxious tendencies are just annoying enough to keep him at arm's length. I'm not sure the same can be said for Noah, though. That's precisely why I should stop making concessions for him, mutual friends be damned.

He's sexy as sin and I want a piece of that. So, if he asks again, I'll give him what he wants, and he can figure the rest out himself.

Yup, that's the plan. No more saying no.

God, I hope he asks again. When he gets home in like, two hours. *Fuck that's an eternity. I've gotta burn off some energy.*

I turn on the PlayStation and pull up Rainbow Six Siege, my go-to game when I'm restless. Since I've been playing for well over a decade, I'm not half bad, and I easily fall into the digital world, blasting the enemy and talking shit with the other avatars who make up my team.

Shooting imaginary bad guys is cathartic in its own twisted way. An outlet to expel the feelings I don't share with anyone. My parents used to hate that I could get so lost on the screen. Even today, I feel an extra little jolt of satisfaction knowing I'm doing something they'd hate, despite the fact they'll never know, and undoubtedly couldn't care less. That probably bears some analysis, but I like my petty revenge.

I'm so absorbed, I don't even realize the time until Noah plops onto the couch next to me with a timid, "Hey."

I mute my game mic and nod. "Hey yourself. How was practice?"

"Tiring, but good." He runs his hands over his thighs, whether from nerves or because they hurt after practice, I'm not sure. Regardless, it makes it damn

hard to block the memory of sitting on those beauties while we jerked off. “So, I thought about it, and I’m good. With what you said.”

I assume he’s referring to the sex with no strings rule, and the pang of anxiety I’ve felt weighing on my chest lifts. The sheer relief of it causes me to lose focus and blast my own teammate *dammit*. I shouldn’t be so invested in him, but I desperately want him to say he’s down to fuck.

“Good?” I arch my brow in his direction while battling soldiers on the screen, trying to act indifferent.

“Uh, to be fuck buddies.”

My cock instantly perks up, excited that he’s on board. “Fuck buddies, huh? Is that what we’re calling it?” I bite my lip and waggle my eyebrows to see if I can get him to blush. He doesn't disappoint.

“I mean, isn’t that what we’d be?”

“It is, but I like hearing you say it.” I shoot the last remaining soldier in the level and climb onto those thick thighs, facing the TV.

Noah holds his arms up like he’s been caught red handed. “Uh, what are you doing?”

“Foreplay.” I wink at him over my shoulder.

“This—What now?”

“I’ve still got two levels in this campaign, and I’m not taking the risk of you changing your mind.” I grind my ass over his lap, loving how it makes him inhale sharply. “So, *foreplay*. You just sit back and enjoy while I finish my game.” I turn my mic back on and tell the rest of my team I’m ready, rolling my hips in another circle while Noah’s hands fall limply to the cushions.

The level starts up with all of us on high alert, scoping out potential targets and shouting when we spot enemies. The tension of the game always makes

me wiggle, even when there isn't a hockey god underneath me, and now that there is... I'm playing dirty with the big guy, but the one constant so far is that he's never quite sure how his body is going to react to sexy times, so I'll use every trick in the book to help him get excited.

"On your left, T," a voice echoes in my ear, and instead of turning my head toward the threat I tuck my hips and lean my weight to the left, pressing my ass into the slight bulge underneath me. A sharp gasp tells me Noah enjoyed that, so I do it again for good measure.

"One o'clock, Captain," I tell my teammate, and our little group of soldiers move ahead on the screen. Thrusting my hips in a forward and back motion like I'm urging a horse forward, I earn myself a delicious moan from the beast underneath me, whose fists seem to be getting tighter and tighter by the second.

I give myself a mental pat on the back for being a creative genius and try to concentrate on the game—we're sort of kicking ass right now—while still keeping things interesting for my hockey god.

"Shoot him, *shoot him*," I shout to my teammate as the enemy tries to escape. My frantic bouncing pulls a series of soft grunts from deep in Noah's throat and his legs tense under mine. I twist my head just in time to see his head fall back on the cushions, and I slow my movements so I can put even more pressure on the hard ridge between his legs.

The entire level, I bump and grind and generally torment the man underneath me to a chorus of moans and groans and ragged breathing. Fuck, I love that I can feel how much he wants me, evident in the rigid length beneath me and the labored breath against my back. Honestly, my pride gets a bit of a kick out of it too, seeing as I'm now three for three as far as getting him worked up goes.

A tiny little voice in the back of my mind warns me that might not be a good thing. He may regard me as a fuck buddy now, but his caregiver personality makes me think casual isn't in his wheelhouse. Plus, there are still lots of questions about his sexuality, and if he's more pan or demi than bisexual, being an overachiever in the seduction department might backfire on me. It doesn't stop me from telling the voice to fuck right off, though. Surely, a few weeks of fun isn't pushing it. And I *really* want my fun before we go back to being friends of friends or whatever.

"Ooh, that was close," I tell Noah as I mute my mic and press the pause button on my hips. "We lost half our team and almost didn't make it past that level."

"So, you're done?" His voice is deliciously scratchy.

I take a peek at him over my shoulder, struggling to keep the victorious smile off my face when I see how tightly he's holding his jaw.

"Not yet, big guy." I pat his chest before turning my attention back to the game. "One more level."

"How long will that take?"

"Hard to say." I play coy. "If we play well, thirty minutes or more. If we don't, it could all be over in five."

I'm about to turn my mic back on when a strong arm wraps around my waist, hauling me up just enough that I'm weightless for about two seconds before a blast of cool air hits my semi-hard cock. "What are you doing?" I glance down to see Noah has shoved my athletic shorts down to my thighs.

"Making it so you don't play well." He wraps a warm hand around me and starts gently kneading my dick, coaxing it to attention.

*So, wow. Delayed gratification makes Noah kind of assertive. I like it.*

"T, you there?" a voice crackles in my ear as I suppress an unexpected

tremor.

Turning the mic on, I croak, "I'm here."

"They're trying to flank us. Hold your position."

"Yeah, sure. *Ungh.*" I switch the mic off to conceal my groan as Noah cups my sac, tugging it gently before rolling my balls in his palm.

"Easy there, big guy. I need to concentrate." I grit as I maneuver my avatar to face the oncoming attack.

"I'm not stopping you." Noah presses my balls into the base of my shaft, giving them a final squeeze before they slip from his hand as he wraps it around my length.

"This is a serious game," I scold even as my hips try to chase his hand. "It's the final level."

"Okay." He gives me a few languid strokes before clutching the tip in his firm hold, sending an unexpected jolt through my body as my eyelids grow heavy with lust.

Curses ring through my headset, snapping my focus back to the game. "Dammit, I just killed my teammate."

"That sucks." Noah massages away the sting with more soft strokes, then grips me hard and gives my junk a strong tug, sending carnal little sparks of desire ping-ponging from root to tip.

"You don't even understand how shitty that is, do you?" My ass clenches as he circles his thumb over the crown.

"Nope."

"Team killing people is a big deal. You can get kicked out of the group," I rant even as I rock my pelvis forward to spear my dick through his fist. "It's like stepping out of the goal and letting the other team take a free shot."

"Sounds like maybe you should keep your dick in your pants while you're

playing then.” He releases me from his grip—I totally don’t groan in frustration when he does, it’s because I nearly killed my own guy again thank you very much—and cups my sac.

“I’m not the one who took it out.” I grind down on his lap to take back some control, which is short-lived since it makes his fingers graze my hole, and I shoot Ted. *He’s never going to forgive me for that.*

“What the fuck, T. Get your head in the game.”

I turn the mic on long enough to choke out, “My bad,” and shut it off before I moan.

“Sounds like you’re having trouble concentrating.” Noah slides his big hand up my length, closing it in his fist as he starts to pump. Leisurely at first, feather-light strokes that seem to be more about him learning my body than getting me aroused. Then tighter, faster, as if he wants to see how rough I can take it—what will make me moan the loudest.

Soft and gentle, hard and furious, he alternates between the two with zero warning. Noah’s either a natural at hand jobs or so clueless he doesn’t realize he’s edging me. Either way, it’s damn near impossible to keep my eyes on the game instead of the giant paw holding my swollen cock.

This is not what I had in mind when I suggested foreplay. I thought I’d rub my ass over his covered junk for a minute—or thirty—to get him in the mood. A little friction, a little pressure, nothing that would get him so riled he’d turn desperate. And I definitely didn’t expect him to be so needy he’d pull me out to play. I’m not complaining.

Admittedly, trying to keep my head clear enough to play video games while getting jacked off is kinda hot, but I thought I’d be the one teasing him. Instead, I currently resemble a puddle of goo on his lap... whimpering each

time he changes his rhythm and robs me of the explosive release building in my balls.

“Am I distracting you?” he growls from behind me as he swirls my precum around my crown.

“Like you could keep your eye on the puck with my hand on your dick,” I scoff as I—*finally*—kill a bad guy.

“I can try. Got any hockey video games?”

“Who are you, and what have you done with confused, timid Noah?” I lean back against his chest, partly to see if my eyes will focus better on the game with a little more distance, but mostly to give him more room to maneuver. He’s worked my cock into a steel pipe, and even though I’m sitting down, I’m struggling to hold myself upright.

“I don’t feel confused anymore.”

“So, what are you? Gay, bi, pan?” I use his body for leverage as I thrust into his fist.

Noah’s chest shakes with a soft chuckle. “I’m still confused about that. I mean I’m not confused about being into you.”

Despite the fear that comment ignites, it takes all the strength I possess to stop rutting into his hand. “What about me?”

“You know...what I want.” He pumps me again, twisting his wrist at the top. “And I want to fuck you. Or get fucked by you. I want to find out what I like, and I trust you to help me with that.”

The warning bell pings inside my head. There were a lot of you’s—aka me’s—in that comment, and being comfortable with me probably isn’t too far a leap from developing feelings. The logical part of my brain, which doesn’t come out often but is still there, knows this. However, Noah’s playing with my cock like it’s his new favorite toy, and I really, *really* like that.

“T, look out.”

My eyes find the screen just in time to see my avatar drop to the ground. Game over. *Fucking finally.*

I leap off Noah’s lap, kicking off my shorts and ripping my shirt over my head as I spin to face him. I’m so frantic to get naked it’s a miracle I don’t trip over my own feet. Grabbing my junk, I start pumping. Noah’s hungry, blue eyes grow wide, but other than that he doesn’t move a muscle.

“Foreplays over, big guy. You’ve got about thirty seconds to get your cock inside me.”

Rather than rush to get undressed with me, he stays utterly still and opens his mouth, causing me knees to damn near buckle.

“Is that supposed to be an invitation?” I ask, sounding breathless.

“Isn’t that obvious?” He cocks his head to the side in that adorably innocent way of his. *Adorably innocent? Jesus the need to come must be scrambling my brain.*

“You better shut that mouth before I shove my dick in it because I’m in a fuck your face state of mind and you’ve never sucked a cock before.” A wave of regret washes over me the moment the warning is out, hanging in the air between us. I probably could’ve been nicer, but I don’t think he understands the state he’s worked me into.

“I can take it.”

“Not sure you can, champ. I plan to stick my cock in your mouth repeatedly, but it’d be a bad idea to force feed it to you now and have you tell me you don’t like it.” I squeeze the base of my shaft, trying like hell to keep myself from plunging over the edge.

“Put it in my mouth, Tripp.”

“I’ll come.” Hell, I almost came from that growly order alone. “You don’t

want me to do that during your first time.”

“Why not? You recover fast.”

“Oh, fuck it.” I take the challenge, closing the distance between us and guiding my dick between his parted lips. With shallow thrusts—*look at me exercising control*—I rub the tip over the flat of his tongue, hoping the gentle strokes will both get him used to my girth and satisfy my need for friction without tipping me over the edge. It sort of works, until he closes those plump pink lips over my crown and sucks softly.

“Holy *fuuuccckk*.” My groan is guttural, desperate even. A sound I didn’t know I was capable of until now. Every muscle in my body vibrates with raw need that I’m struggling to contain as a shudder rakes through me. It starts at the base of my spine and pulses through my limbs, and the tremor catches Noah’s attention. His big blue eyes flick curiously to mine, and somehow, I just know he’s asking for guidance.

“Look at you...,” I mumble as I thread my fingers through his silky hair, caressing his scalp with far too gentle a touch. “Swirl your tongue around the tip and give it another good suck. Use your hands if you want. Play with my balls or hold the shaft so I don’t thrust too deep.”

He pulls away and looks at me quizzically. “Isn’t that the point? I thought you were going to fuck my face.”

“Trust me when I say we need to work up to that.” I push in, gnashing my teeth together to keep my hips from spearing further into his slippery, wet heat, or pulling violently on his hair. And somehow, despite a lifetime of evidence that hard and fast and dirty is my jam, I manage to keep myself mostly still while Noah maps me with his tongue.

Licking up one side of my shaft and down the other, sucking my balls into his mouth, slurping me like a straw, the man is enthusiastic in his exploration.

Lips and tongue and fingers work together to investigate every inch of my cock. And by investigate, I mean full-on explore, leaving no stone unturned. You'd think a thirty-something guy giving his first blow job would be hesitant or...neat. Not Noah. He's flat out sloppy, so immersed in the experience he's practically drooling on my cock, and... Damn. I am *here* for it.

His enthusiasm is possibly the hottest thing I've ever seen, which makes it an epic feat for me not to go feral on him. My body literally aches from the effort of holding back. It's only because it's erotic as hell to be the object of such thorough intensity that I manage. Especially, with him fully-clothed while I'm butt-ass naked in my living room.

I bet we look absolutely filthy like this, and while I've never done the filming thing—kind of a shocker since I work in video production—I feel like this would do well on Only Fans. Not that I'm looking for a career change, but seriously, a naked guy getting blown by a fully clothed Norse God would rack up the views. It'd make me blow, for sure.

On that note...

“Pull your dick out, big guy.”

Noah wipes saliva off his swollen lips when I step out of reach. *Why is that hot?*

I pull at the fabric covering his chest. “Shirt off, too. You're gonna fuck your first man.”

He gapes at me, wide eyes blinking in rapid succession, for about three seconds before he whips his shirt off and fumbles with his shorts, shoving them down just enough that his thick cock slaps against his stomach when it springs free.

“God, I love that sound,” I muse, grabbing lube and a condom from the

drawer in the coffee table. Without wasting a second, I kneel between his legs, which can only spread so wide trapped in his shorts. “FYI, I’m clean. I got tested after my last encounter.” I lick a path from root to tip, loving how he tries to chase after my mouth. “And I’m guessing you are too since you haven’t been with anyone in a while. So,” I hold up the condom, “your call. Want to wrap up or not?”

I mentally slap myself for making the offer—I never go bare—but I sort of want to rock his world, and while he doesn’t need to be bare for me to do that, I kind of don’t want to cover up when it’s my turn, so it’s only fair to offer.

“Have you ever gone without?”

The truth might make it seem like he falls into one of those ‘concessions’ categories again, which I don’t want. But I want to feel that beautiful cock raw more than I want my fortified walls. “No. I’ve always wanted to, though, if I thought it’d be safe.”

“If we don’t need it, I’m good.” He tips his head toward the hand holding the condom. I toss it aside with a wicked grin and squirt a glob of lube into my palm to coat his dick.

He flinches from the cold, muscles tensing gloriously beneath his skin. After a moment, he relaxes into the couch as the friction from my hand warms him up. When he’s nice and slippery, and *glistening* I straddle him and line him up to my hole.

“Don’t you have to stretch first, or something?” His brow furrows with concern, blue eyes wary.

“I’ll take it slow for your first time.” He doesn’t need to know that my recent dry spell doesn’t extend to my dildo, or that I used it as recently as last night.

Holding my breath, I sink lower. The big guy didn't get his nickname as a means to boost his ego, it's obnoxiously accurate on all accords. I force my body to relax as I take him inside me, exhaling deeply as he breaches the tight ring of muscle, and groaning with relief when I feel the fullness inside me. "Shit that's good. Still with me, champ?"

Noah's eyes are squeezed shut, jaw locked so tight he almost looks like he's in pain. For a quick second, I wonder if he is, and whether that pain is physical or mental. Sure, he talked a good game about being okay with his attraction to another man, but when it comes to actually fucking one—maybe he isn't as ready for this as he thought.

I'm about to freak out, believing I've overestimated his comfort level, when he finally exhales, whispering, "So tight. God, I... Jesus that's the tightest thing I've ever felt."

"Yeah?" There's no disguising the pride in my voice as I start to rock my hips forward, only to have him clamp his hands on my thighs, *hard*.

"Don't move. Not yet."

"You're killing me, big guy. I'd say going mid-fuck would be kind of the perfect end, but it'd be a tragedy not to bust this nut after you worked it into this state."

"I want to last longer than a few pumps. I want you to enjoy it."

Prying his hand off my leg, I wrap it around my now angry-red length. "Does it feel like I'm not enjoying this?"

Noah flexes and squeezes his fingers, then gives me a slow, firm stroke. "No."

"Okay, good. Now..." I rock my hips slowly, warming him up for what comes next. "I'm gonna ride this fat cock of yours, hard and fast, and the only thing I want you to do is feel it. Get lost in it."

“I don’t want to finish before you.” A glimmer of worry flickers over those baby blues.

“Jack me off when you get close, and I won’t be far behind.” I’m doing it again. Making concessions, spending way too much time making sure his mind is at ease. Caring. I guess that’s okay since it’s his first time, but I can’t make a habit of it.

Noah gives me a terse nod, and I rise up until only his tip is buried inside me before slamming down. His head falls back on the couch with a garbled moan while I take a second to catch my breath—I don’t think I’ve ever felt so full. Then I’m off, riding him like a man possessed because, let’s face it, at this point I probably am.

The clapping of skin echoes around us as I bounce up and down, my heavy cock banging against his abs each time I bottom out. Noah tries to lift his head to watch, but loses the battle, incapable of holding it upright, mumbling a string of curses and moans as I give him a proper fucking.

My thighs, which were already pushed to their limit trying to hold still while he blew me, quiver and shake from the effort of holding my weight. I’ll feel that later, but I don’t give a shit. The absolute euphoria I feel right now will be worth the discomfort later.

It’s cliché—and I’ll deny thinking it as soon as we’re done—but he fits in my body like he was made for it. He’s wide enough that he stretches me without causing pain, just an intense pressure deep inside. And the way his shaft presses against my prostate... I swear my vision goes a little hazy each time he pegs it. My eyelids are almost too heavy to hold open, so I basically can’t see anything. I just writhe on his lap, chasing the orgasm I have no doubt will be epic as his moans spur me on.

“Tripp. Jesus, *fuck*... I” He wraps his big paw around my dick and starts

pumping frantically. It's my signal that he's close, and thank God because my balls are ready to burst.

Upping my tempo—apparently, having Noah's hand on my dick throws me into a higher gear I didn't know existed—I slam my body rhythmically onto his. My panting and groaning hits higher pitches like I'm the star of a cheesy porno. I try to hold it in, but the countdown has started. Liftoff is imminent. And when the hockey god underneath me goes rigid with an animalistic growl of his own, I explode.

My hole clenches around the rod pulsing inside me, my dick shuddering violently inside Noah's palm as my balls unload. A rush of warm liquid fills me, causing more tremors to ripple through my body as the one underneath me twitches and trembles through its own release.

Chest heaving, tendons straining, lips still swollen from their earlier workout, sated Noah is a vision. A wet dream come to life. I want to massage the hard curve of his shoulder, trace the peaks and valleys of his muscles, brush my thumb along his square jaw. But that's not how fuck buddies work.

I can admire during sex, not after. Never after. That's how things go from sex to something more, and I don't do more.

“Still with me, big guy, or did you blow your mind with your load?” I give his nipple a gentle pinch to get his attention.

“That...” His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. “I don't think I've felt anything so intense in my life.”

“That's just the beginning. Wait until I introduce you to your prostate.” I start to lift off him, pausing when he grabs my hand.

“Thank you.”

*Whoa, not good. I wanted to rock his world, and mine, not make him feel grateful.*

“First rule of fuck buddies, there’s no need to be polite. For example, a good host should give you dibs on the first shower since I went first last time.” This time I do lift all the way off his lap. “But I’m the one with cum dripping out of his ass so I call dibs again. I promise to be quick though.” I grab my clothes and jog upstairs, hoping he makes his way to his room before I come back down.

## Chapter 13 -Noah

It's only because of muscle memory that the puck doesn't slip between my legs.

One minute, the other team is working it around our end of the rink, the next, gravity is pulling me to the ice, and I feel it hit my pads. The ones in my shorts instead of the ones on my knees, meaning I just barely stopped its trajectory.

The puck is so buried, no one else knows where it is. All they know is there's no goal since the flashing light isn't going off, but like sharks swimming in chum, players sense its presence, hovering over me to see if there's an opening to get their stick on it. It's not until the ref whistles for a faceoff that I rise and reveal it.

People will praise me for being in good position or claim that my lightning quick reflexes enabled me to make the save, and while there's some truth to that, it's more accurate to say dumb luck stopped that puck. I'm not anticipating the opponent as well as I usually do, especially during the first period when everyone's fresh. Fortunately, my body reacted before my brain made the conscious decision to move so we're still up by one for our home opener.

"All good?" Niko asks as he skates by me while the ref collects the puck for the faceoff.

It still boggles my mind how perceptive he is in his second year, though if anyone can spot when I'm off it's him. And while no one wants to hear that

their goalie's head isn't in the game, I have too much respect for my teammates to blow them off with silly excuses.

"Got lucky on that one," I admit.

"Were we blocking your view?" He knows none of our defenders were in my line of sight, but he's giving me the out anyway in case my pride demands it. That's not my personality, but other guys need that coddling, and Niko's learning how to manage different personalities. He'll make a good captain one day.

"Nope, I was just slow to react on that one, but I'm good."

The ref drops the puck and Luca's on it right away, winning the faceoff and circling around the goal to give it to me so I can slow things down and set up the offense. Most of the players start migrating toward the other end of the rink, though Niko hangs back to take the pass I send him. He takes his time moving the puck, passing it around until a tiny window opens up for Justus.

Niko delivers the puck to him right in front of the goal, but instead of taking the shot Justus spins away from the net, turning one hundred and eighty degrees and flicking the puck over the goalie's shoulder. Lights flash as the crowd goes wild, both because we put another point on the board and because that was one hell of a trick shot.

For the next two periods both teams go back and forth controlling the game, and while they get one by me when I come out of the crease to challenge a fast break, that's the only score they get. Niko is virtually a solid wall between me and the other team, and if they do manage to get off a shot, I time my blocks to land on the puck instead of giving up a rebound opportunity and an easy score. It's a delicate balance, and one I'm typically pretty good at, which is how Niko could tell I was a little distracted in the first period.

He'll probably ask why in the locker room, and I'm man enough to admit the truth. It was a glimpse of Tripp's hair—which is now dark at the root and sort of emerald green at the tip—that got me. What I won't admit is that I suspect the green is because I asked why he chose blonde instead of green or blue when he was writhing naked on my lap.

Normally, Tripp wouldn't catch my attention during a game, but Luca happened to crush one of the opposing forwards into the boards right where he and Xander were sitting. And while that's happened before without causing me to lose focus, this is the first time it's happened since we became intimate.

The fact is, I haven't seen or spoken to him since he took me inside him nearly two weeks ago, and I wasn't mentally prepared for the emotions that accompanied that first glimpse. I'm not talking about the things that plagued me initially, like why he hadn't called or whether he was deliberately avoiding me, I'm talking about the sense of longing that hit me hard enough to steal my breath.

Even from twenty yards away, I could see how the green in his hair made his eyes pop, giving him an even more naughty air than he usually possesses. That alone was enough to take my eye off the game, but when I realized he was wearing *my jersey*... I've never had the urge to stake my claim on anyone, and Tripp certainly isn't the type to let anyone claim him, but in that moment, I liked the idea of him being mine.

I suppose that's why he was so concerned about getting our labels straight, so I wouldn't confuse fucking with something more. That could also be why he hasn't called. I hope that's the reason, anyway. I'd much rather he put a little distance between us to manage expectations than to have him decide

he's not interested. Although, that distance is what got me off track during the game...

"Epic, man. Just epic." Luca is slapping Justus on the back along with half a dozen other guys when I enter the locker room, and the noise in my head instantly fades to nothing as I watch them shower him with praise. This right here, this brotherhood, is what I live for.

There's something about pushing our physical limits together, sharing blood and sweat, battling exhaustion and chronic pain, that binds us on a deeper level. Makes us function as one, like we share the same mind. It sounds corny, but when you see it come together... When you see a guy make a blind pass that he just *knows* his teammate will be there to receive, or you can communicate how you want a play to develop with a single look, the only explanation is that we're mentally connected. We're never truly alone.

I think that's why I never got too hung up on the questions about who I am off the ice. My teammates, my brothers, were always there. Now that I'm edging closer to retirement, closer to the end of that bond... I guess maybe that's part of why I'm asking the question now, although I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be examining things too closely if it weren't for Tripp.

*Dammit, why does it feel like things always come back to him?*

"That's gonna make ESPN's top ten plays for sure." Luca's excitement brings me back to the locker room. "We need to celebrate!"

"Frosty Dog?" Niko suggests our go-to pub. "I'll tell Xander to meet us there."

"Hell yeah." Luca plants his hands on Justus's shoulders, using them for leverage to jump up and down. "The ladies will be lining up to see if this guy's got as much magic in the bedroom as he does on the ice."

Justus turns as red as a tomato—or maybe that's just exertion from the

game—and steps away to start putting stuff in his locker while Niko snorts under his breath. “You’re totally gonna pimp him out to try to score yourself, aren’t you?”

“Duh.” Luca shrugs as if that should be obvious.

Once we’re all showered and changed, we head over to the bar, which as usual, is packed after a home game. The crowd graciously parts as we work our way to the back where the owner reserves a section for us, random hands begging for a high-five or slapping our shoulders as we pass. Since the owner has a policy against asking us for selfies and autographs, we manage to cut through the crowd pretty quickly.

This time I’m prepared to see Tripp, who as usual is sitting across the table from Xander. I’m actually a little grateful that this encounter isn’t the first time I’m seeing him tonight, because the sight of him in my jersey is even more powerful up close. I blink and watch Niko kiss his boyfriend hello so I don’t give off the wrong impression, though when I finally bring myself to look in Tripp’s direction he’s patting the seat next to him with a knowing smirk.

“You like?” He pinches the shoulder of his shirt between his thumb and forefinger.

Across the table Niko whines, “Even Tripp is wearing a jersey. The wrong one, but still.”

“Tripp cannot wear my boyfriend’s number,” Xander says, shaking his head. “Not a chance in Hell.”

“Well, my actual boyfriend isn’t wearing it.”

“You know dating a jock goes against my moral code, don’t ask me to broadcast it.” Xander grins and rolls his eyes.

As the two of them flirt-fight, I angle my head towards Tripp. “Where’d

that come from?" I ask quietly as I tug on the hem of the jersey.

"It was incredibly hard to find." He sighs with mock frustration. "They only carry it at every sporting goods store, online, and at the gift shop at the rink."

"I mean why would you buy it? I'd have given you one if I knew you wanted it."

"How would you know I wanted it when you haven't called?"

"You haven't called me, either." I arch a brow and cross my arms over my chest.

"True, but I'm exceedingly comfortable with having a fuck buddy and you... Well, we don't know that yet. So, I figure it's up to you if I *put my stick in your net*."

Fortunately, Niko and Xander are too busy pretending to be the only ones here to notice me blushing or hear Tripp. "You're the one who has a thing for dark and moody. Wearing a jersey is the opposite," Xander insists.

"What if you wear it while I fuck you? Then no one will see it but me." Niko's proposal has Xander chewing on his lip suggestively.

"I feel the need to point out this isn't a fanboy thing." Tripp interrupts their bickering and plucks his jersey again, which has green numbers on a black background, then points to his hair. "Green just happens to be a difficult color to match."

Niko and Xander pay him no mind and go back to negotiating the terms of wearing a jersey while I try in vain not to reach out and touch Tripp's hair. "So...green. Where'd that come from?"

"I needed a change. And bonus, Bulldogs colors are black and green."

"You just said this wasn't a fanboy thing."

"That's right."

"You didn't pick green since I asked about it?"

“Did you? Hmm, that’s right. But you also asked about blue. I probably should’ve gone that route. Green really is a challenging color. Beers!” he exclaims as Luca and Justus set a pitcher with a half dozen glasses in front of us.

He puts a hand on my leg—his finger dangerously close to my junk—and leans over to reach for a glass. The gesture isn’t at all out of character for him, though instead of pulling back to give him some space like I typically do, I lean toward his ear and lower my voice. “I think it makes you look sort of dangerous. And sexy.”

“What are you blushing about over there, Tripp?” Luca asks as Tripp retreats to his seat.

“I just felt Noah up and I liked it.” He doesn’t miss a beat, and since everyone is so used to his antics, they don’t consider he’s telling the truth. But I know better. He’s blushing because I called him sexy.

“Fine, I’ll wear it for the playoffs. Final games only though, as in playing for the cup, not winning your conference.” Xander takes the focus off Tripp, laying out his terms to Niko like a peace treaty.

I’m not sure how they went from sex to playoffs, but I’m happy for Niko. Having someone you care about wear your jersey, especially one you give them, is a point of pride for most of us. For Niko to see Xander wearing his number in the stands, I’m not sure there’s any greater motivation than winning for the person wearing your name. Except winning for your teammates.

“Guys, we have to play for the cup.” Niko clears his throat and turns a near desperate gaze on all of us.

“Uh, don’t we do that every year?” Justus asks.

“Yeah, but the only way Xander will wear my jersey is if we make it to the

final round.”

“Xander, what would your father say?” Luca scolds, which makes sense since Xander’s dad is our coach.

“He’d pat me on the back for finding a way to motivate Niko.”

“I’d say he doesn’t need that to motivate him.” Justus shoots an apologetic look at Niko. “But knowing how he feels about you, having you wear his jersey is just as meaningful as winning the cup.”

“Cruel but effective.” Luca taps his glass against Xander’s before raising it for a group toast. “Speaking of effective, have you ever seen a shot as brilliant as the one my boy took tonight?”

Now, it’s Justus’s turn to blush. As a fellow forward he idolized Luca for years, and now his adolescent hero is his mentor. I’ve heard the saying that you should be careful about meeting your heroes, but in this case, it seems to be benefiting both of them. They’ve developed a rhythm that’s hard for defenses to stop.

We all toast Justus’s incredible play then start rehashing our favorite moments from the game, while Xander offers his bird’s eye perspective—he’s fairly astute as assessing games given his lineage—and Tripp gushes about fast shots and hard hits.

Though I jump in with my own observations and laugh at all the right moments, my thoughts never stray completely away from Tripp. We’re not touching, but he’s close enough that I *feel* him next to me, like a live wire, crackling with energy. It makes me want to put my hand on his leg, to trail my fingers along the inside of his knee and watch him shudder. I’d do it if I thought it was a fuck buddy gesture, but since that kind of touch is something Niko and Xander started only after coming out to us, I’m pretty sure it falls into boyfriend territory.

Needless to say, by the time everyone's ready to go, I'm feeling desperate and deprived. I'm positively clueless about how to say that to Tripp. I manage to catch his eye a few times as we pay the bill, and again in the parking lot, but when he heads to his car, I can only assume those looks didn't say what I wanted them to. It's not until I'm home, staring blankly at my phone and debating how to start a text asking to see him, when the doorbell makes me realize they worked. Sort of.

"You're lucky you resemble a Norse god because puppy dog eyes don't usually work on me," Tripp declares as he steps inside, green eyes full of mischief.

"Puppy dog eyes?"

"You know, the sad, helpless stare cute little animals give you when they want something. I don't usually consider it a good look on a man but you're sexy enough to pull it off. Besides, if a man misses my cock enough to silently plead for it, it'd be pretty cruel to deny him."

"I wasn't pleading. I was... Trying to gauge your interest."

"Sure, you were." He pats my chest as he brushes past me and sets his keys on the foyer table. "In that case, I'd say you could just ask if I want to fuck, but since I'm always interested you can skip that step and just say your place or mine. Now, show me to your bedroom. I assume you've got a giant bed and I think we should use every inch of it." He walks further into the house.

My body is intrigued by that plan if my rapid heartbeat is any indication, but my mind is stuck on logistics. Do we really just go at it without any *buddy* stuff?

When he's a few paces away Tripp pauses and shoots me a puzzled look over his shoulder. "Fucking against the wall works too if that's what you want..."

Ducking my head, I rub my hand over the back of my neck. "I..."

"Why is timid Noah back?" He faces me, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "I thought you were pretty clear on wanting to explore sex with me."

"Well, yeah. I do, but..."

His eyes soften when I bring mine to meet them. "You need me to seduce you, is that it?"

I shrug sheepishly. With a subtle sigh, he closes the distance between us and starts kissing my throat, his hands roaming over my chest, down my stomach, ghosting over my groin. "What are you in the mood for? A striptease? A lap dance? A massage?"

Threading my fingers through his hair, I capture the strands in a gentle grip and tug his head back so I can see his eyes. "Why are you really wearing my jersey?"

A slight crease forms between his brows. "I told you, it matches the hair."

"I don't buy it. You heard the same conversation I did between Xander and Niko. You know it's not just a jersey when you're sleeping with the person wearing it."

"I'd never heard that until tonight." He makes an imaginary cross over his chest.

"But you wanted me to see you in it. Didn't you?" That's more of a gut instinct than a statement, until I catch his eyes darting away from mine for a brief second.

"It might have occurred to me that you'd want to fuck me in it."

It's an offhand remark, delivered with the same sass he's prone to using when he wants to bait me, but it confirms that he thought of me despite not making the effort to get in touch. And even though he explained that earlier when he implied he's letting me dictate our encounters, it's not until just now

that I understand giving me control doesn't mean he's not interested. Or that he hasn't given me a second thought while we've been apart.

That knowledge sends a bolt of lust coursing through my veins, which I'm guessing Tripp can sense since his hand starts softly kneading my cock. Either that or he noticed my gaze was focused on his lips and decided to distract me.

I'm a little bummed because even though there's lots of things I still haven't done with another man, I sort of assumed kissing would be one of the first, and we haven't done that yet. I'm starting to think Tripp prefers it that way, though I hope I'm wrong about that. I'd love to feel his mouth on mine.

"You like that idea. Pounding into me while I'm wearing your number." It's a confirmation, not a question, as his hand drifts lower, rubbing my balls over the denim of my jeans.

Since it's hard to acknowledge that without sounding as possessive as seeing him in my jersey makes me feel, all I can do is grunt. And grip his hair a little tighter.

Tripp's eyes flutter shut on a sharp inhale, mouth morphing into a sly smile as the breath slowly escapes. "Hard and fast, huh big guy? Is that how you want me?" When I manage only another grunt he rises to his toes and growls into my ear. "Bedroom. Now."

I release his hair and grab his hand, pulling him behind me until we reach my room. But before I can get him on the bed he plants his feet, forcing me to turn and face him.

"This time you get to be the naked one while I'm clothed. *Mostly.*" He reaches for the hem of my shirt and peels it up and over my head without any help from me, which makes my knees go weak. No one's ever been able to undress me on their own—I'm too tall—but since Tripp's only a few inches

shorter he manages with ease, and I find that I really like the act of being undressed instead of doing it myself.

With my shirt out of the way, Tripp kisses a path over my chest, licking my nipples as his fingertips trace the ridges of my abs. This, too, is a new experience. Not in the sense that no one's ever put their mouth on me, just not in the way he does it, with sighs and moans and curses that suggest he has some sort of reverence for my body. Every inch of it.

I've never felt so admired. So *appreciated*. While Tripp has made no secret of the fact he likes my body, up until this point all physical contact seemed geared toward my benefit. My pleasure. Right now, it feels like he's exploring me for his.

Dazed from his touch, it takes me a second to realize he's worked my pants open and is shoving them off my hips, boxers too, leaving my full cock on display. I might be self-conscious about that except for the fact Tripp watches it hungrily, licking his lips like he's stalking prey. Once again, I react to his intense perusal with a full body shiver, my engorged length bobbing eagerly under his feral gaze. He drops to the ground and takes it in his fist, looking up at me with a wicked gleam in his eye.

“Has anyone ever swallowed this gorgeous dick?”

I suck in a surprised breath when he swirls his tongue around the crown. “Swallowed?”

“Mmm.” He licks the underside and seals his lips over the tip, and even though he's sucking gently it feels like he's pulling every nerve ending, every brain cell, all my oxygen into my cock, so that the only thing I'm capable of feeling is his wet heat on my shaft. “Taken this full, fat dick all the way down their throat.”

“I don't think...” I can't get even get the words out before his nose is

brushing against my pelvis, his throat constricting around my length. He pulls back and does it again. And again. Taking me deeper than I thought possible and making gurgling, squelching sounds as he coats me with his saliva.

When he mentioned pounding into him earlier, I assumed he meant the other hole, not the one he needs to breathe. As deep as I am, my cock has to be choking him, yet I can't seem to find the strength to pull away. The sight of him on his knees, mouth stretched wide around me, is more captivating than I expected it to be. The sloppiness of it is carnal even though the act of taking me into his body is beautiful, a contradiction I can't look away from.

Moving on autopilot, my abs flex as my dick spears between his lips while his eyes flutter in some sort of hedonistic bliss... I'm engulfed in a vortex of pleasure and emotion, a fog of ecstasy unlike anything I've ever experienced. I can't tell if I'm floating or falling, groaning or whimpering. All I know is both my body and mind are reeling, overwhelmed by what Tripp's doing to me.

Rocking onto the balls of my feet, I chase his mouth, yelping when he unexpectedly gives my sac a firm tug and pulls off me with a 'pop.'

"Don't be greedy, champ. I want that cock in my ass before you bust that nut." He stands up and takes his pants off as I kick mine away from my feet, crawling onto the bed on all fours. Even with the jersey hanging off his lean frame, I can see his dick hanging between his legs. Before I can take it in my hand, he flicks his head toward the pants crumpled on my floor and says, "There's lube in my back pocket. Get yourself nice and slick."

I fish the lube out and slather it over my dick while Tripp eyes me ravenously, biting his lip to stifle a moan as he watches my fist slide along my length. It's a show he's undoubtedly put on before, but I let myself

indulge in the fantasy that it's just for me. That only I can make him so desperate.

Once I'm coated in the gel, I step behind him, but instead of pushing inside I take his cock in my hand and stroke him slowly, noting how it makes him arch his spine as he pushes into my grip. "Trying to get me to catch up?"

"Not really." I swipe my thumb over his slit and give him a few languid pumps. "You said you like having your dick played with, so..."

"If you hadn't made me wait two weeks for your cock I wouldn't object, but since you deprived me of all cocks except yours, I'm not feeling very patient. Now put your hands on my hips and give it to me."

Though I fully expected Tripp to honor my request not to sleep around while he's sleeping with me, the fact that he basically admitted he's mine—for now—while wearing my name on his back erases all my restraint.

I line myself up, nudging just the crown of my dick inside his hole. Then I grip his hips and thrust forward.

The cry that rumbles from his throat is filled with both need and relief, a strange mix of satisfaction and yearning. I want to savor it, but the pressure that engulfs my dick makes it impossible to think of anything beyond staving off my release.

"God, how are you tighter?" I rasp, chest heaving as I try to fill my lungs with the air they can't seem to hold. I tried to recreate the feeling of Tripp's body with my hand, to recapture the sensations I'm feeling now without being buried inside him. I could never get my fist tight enough. Or hot enough. I'd always end up feeling empty. Unfulfilled.

*Fuck...*, being joined to him, I'm basically in free fall, spiraling uncontrollably as I struggle not to lose control.

"Maybe you're bigger." His voice helps to ground me. "My blow jobs must

agree with you.”

“Ungh,” I half-grunt, half-laugh, fighting back a burst of euphoria that ripples through me when he shifts his weight. “Hold still.”

“Can’t,” he strains.

“Fuck,” I grumble and take a deep breath, holding it as I pull back and tentatively push forward. Despite the give of his warm channel, the easy acceptance of my intrusion, his ass is so tight the pressure is dizzying.

My eyes roll back in my head as my legs quake with the effort to stay upright, which is sort of terrifying, given that strong legs are a basic requirement of my job. Yet, not even the hundreds of pounds I squat make my thighs tremble as much as they are right now.

“Harder, big guy. Don’t hold back.” Tripp taunts me with a daring glance over his shoulder, and as much as I want to savor this encounter, I want to please him even more.

I flex my fingers and grip his hips, widening my stance to the same athletic position I use in goal when I need ready access to speed and power. Then I start to move.

My hips piston forward, spearing my length into his warm, wet hole as I use my arms to pull him to me. The lewd sound of skin slapping against skin is a steady drumbeat around us, and his frantic moans are the melody.

Tremors of ecstasy ripple along my shaft as I give it to him, culminating in a hefty twitch each time I sink to the hilt. My abs blaze as they coil and release again and again, biceps smoldering from the near violent push and pull as I strain to fit my body into Tripp’s.

“Fuck, you’re gonna split me in two. Don’t stop.”

Beads of sweat trickle down my chest, along my abs, pooling at the base of my groin, already damp from the lube dripping out of Tripp’s ass. It occurs to

me not only that sex has never been this messy before, but that I like it this way. Loud and wet and uninhibited.

The only thing that could make it better is seeing Tripp's face. The way his eyes get heavy with lust as his orgasm builds. How his lean chest heaves when he starts panting. How his lips part just slightly when he moans.

Seeing my name on his back is thrilling in its own way, but it can't compete with watching the man come undone in front of me.

That memory has pleasure engulfing me, threatening to tip me over the edge long before I want it to. I run drills in my mind, stopping imaginary pucks in an attempt to convince myself that I'm not about to find heaven. But not even hockey can distract me from the notion that it doesn't just feel good, but *right*, to give my body to Tripp. Like it should belong to him, if he wants it.

That thought makes me falter slightly, not out of fear so much as worry that he wouldn't appreciate such a revelation. But it's enough that he notices the shift in my movement.

"More, Noah. Jerk me. *Please.*"

"How? I'm barely hanging on." I curl my fingers into his skin.

"Pull me up," Tripp gasps. "My back to your front."

Wrapping my left arm under his chest, I heave him up to a groan that sounds a lot like '*fuck that's hot*' as my right hand closes over his cock. His keening cry of relief is like a shot of adrenaline straight to my balls, and I find a second wind, spearing into him ferociously as my fingers slide over his length.

Rocking into him as my fist bottoms out helps me keep a constant rhythm, but it's not until Tripp wraps his arms around me to start fondling my cheeks that I have the leverage to fuck him like he wants, and once I do...

The raspy moans coming from Tripp's mouth spur me onward, encouraging me to plunge deeper, pump faster. My body pushes all rational thought from my brain, its singular focus finding the nirvana that looms... Right. Fucking. There. In that place where Tripp and I are so connected I'd swear we were one. We're moving together without conscious thought so much as intuition. It's an innate sense of what we want...a craving to be closer regardless of the limitations.

My dick throbs with the need for release, the same as his does in my hand. With each thrust we inch toward the precipice, and the friction of Tripp's palms gripping my ass tips me over the edge.

I come, slamming into him, and before I can catch my breath, he clenches around me. The vise-like grip of his body wrings another wave from my tip as his release coats my hand, and a guttural cry rumbles from my throat.

A torrent of sensation crashes over me. Ecstasy, exhaustion, affection, gratitude; wave after wave coming so hard and fast, I can't tell which way is up. My body vibrates like a guitar string, a strange mixture of sated yet spent that keeps my muscles tense despite the fact they can barely hold my weight.

Tripp shudders in my arms as his orgasm finally dissipates, his rapid breath causing my arm to rise with the rhythm of his chest. His head falls back against my shoulder as his grip on my ass relaxes, and it's only then that I realize I'm still holding his dick, stroking it absently. And that he seems just as content to stay like this as I do.

It won't last, and I understand why, but I'm also not going to point out that we're a sticky mess and should probably clean up. I may still be learning about who I am and what I want, but one thing I don't question is the fact that I like the non-sexual contact I have with Tripp as much as I do the sexual kind.. So, if he's happy to let me hold him, I will.



## Chapter 14 – Tripp

Even with my eyes closed, I can tell the room is brighter than usual. And hotter. And...stickier. *Wtf?* I try to roll onto my back, but the wall won't let me. *Wall? Since when is there a wall next to my bed ?*

Cracking an eyelid, the first thing I notice is the floor to ceiling windows across from the bed. Windows that are impressive in scale, and way too big for my small condo. The next thing is the gray comforter underneath me. It's fluffy and soft—high quality—but it's too dark. I prefer lighter colors that don't showcase the evidence of my extracurricular activities if they get a little...*vigorous*.

Okay, so, I'm not at home. I'm at Noah's. Inconvenient, but not the end of the world. I've passed out in a post sex haze before, so I know the drill. Get up quietly, grab my clothes and tiptoe out. Easy peasy.

That's how it's supposed to go, anyway.

The heavy weight draped over my torso is going to make that particular escape a little difficult. So is the half-chub rubbing against my ass, which—hello—seems like it'd be a shame to waste.

Seeing as my prior accidental sleepovers were more of a pass out cold situation than a deliberate plan to stay the night, they didn't involve cuddling. Or waking up to someone's morning wood knocking on my back door. My jury's still out on the cuddling part—although I slept like a fucking baby—but I could get on board with the wake-up sex.

*No, bad Tripp.*

Though I'm happy to confirm the gentle giant behind me is a beast in the sack, I'm not sold on the declaration that he's good with no strings sex. I think he'd like to be—I'd like that too—which is why I followed him home last night. But slip ups like staying over might send the wrong message. So, I need to Houdini myself out of here.

Wrapping my fingers gently around his wrist, I try to lift his arm off me. I move it maybe half an inch before my hand slips and Noah hugs me tighter to his chest. I'm ready to try again when he grumbles, "Trying to sneak out?"

"I don't sneak." *I totally sneak.* "I was trying to be polite and not wake you."

"You didn't."

"So, you're intentionally spooning me?" That not so subtle hint doesn't get him to move his arm.

"I woke up like this. Figured as long as we were both comfortable, I'd stay that way."

*Houston we have a problem.* Snuggles could lead to feelings, and that's a slippery slope to boyfriendville. It's a town I have no desire to visit like *ever*. Why subject myself to the illusion that people give a shit about me when history suggests they only care about themselves?

I scoot away and roll to face him, regretting it the moment I do. *Sleepy, rumped Norse god is HOT!* "So, how did we end up here exactly?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. I remember trying to catch my breath, and I think maybe my legs gave out and I fell on the bed."

"Hmm, sign of a good night. You're welcome." I pat his deliciously hard chest. "Okay then, I should go."

He tugs on the jersey I'm still wearing when I try to sit up. "What's the rush?"

“Um, the rush is you're spooning me. That's against the fuck buddy rules.”

“It's not like I broke the rules on purpose. Or by myself.” He runs a lazy hand through his hair, a loose strand falling back over his face, and my stomach does a little flip.

“Exactly. I broke them too, which is why I should go.”

“It's Sunday and you don't have work.” He scratches his big hand over his perfectly sculpted pec, which makes me notice his chest again, then his abs, then the heavy cock resting on them, and *damn* I need to get away from naked Thor. “Shower and I'll make some breakfast. Then you can take Dorothy over to Xander's if you want.”

*He remembers the name of my most prized possession? And doesn't think it's weird that I named her?*

I'd swoon if I did that sort of thing. Or climb on him and ride like I was making for the border.

*Down, boy.* Morning after sex is definitely not a fuck buddy thing. Neither is breakfast, although I am kind of starving and I'd love to skate. “Can you cook breakfast as well as you cook dinner?”

“I can fry an egg.”

“I guess I'll take you up on that shower then.”

Noah gets me set up in the bathroom and heads off to the kitchen, leaving me the privacy to clean up without an audience, or a partner. That's somewhat disappointing considering his shower would be fun to play in. It's got a bazillion jets and showerheads, and even a little bench that looks like marble in a sea of tiles that resemble wood planks—very masculine and contemporary. Although shower sex is possibly too intimate for what we are, so getting clean solo is probably for the best.

I linger slightly since I haven't been in a shower this nice in nearly a

decade. Wrapping myself in a plush white towel, I hunt down some mouthwash, finding it in the medicine cabinet above the sink, but when I finish and close the mirrored door I freeze.

*What am I doing?*

My image stares back at me, familiar yet not. Running my fingers through my damp hair, the emerald tips taunt me with a truth I don't want to admit.

*I picked green because I thought he'd like it.*

Like he said, the darker color does make me look less playful and more mischievous. Both are accurate representations of my personality, although I went blond as a way to remind myself to focus on the light. To appear approachable rather than inaccessible, at least on the surface. I may have sky-high walls, but I only put them up around the deep, personal stuff I keep to myself. I don't use them to push people away on sight—my obnoxious comments do that so I don't waste time on people who can't handle me—and dark always struck me as the equivalent of saying back off without having to say anything at all.

*I also thought the darkness of the green might warn him away.*

Part of me wanted that to happen. If he backed off, I wouldn't be the asshole for saying, *'thanks for showing me your dick, now lets be friends.'*

Wanting him to like it and hate it is fifty shades of fucked up. I need an intervention, but the only person qualified to set me straight doesn't know his boyfriend's teammate has a hard-on for my hard-ons. Or that mine seems to require that sexy Norse god to make a *full* appearance.

By the time I'm dressed in a plain white shirt—one I'm hoping Noah doesn't realize is his since his jersey doesn't hide cum stains—he's scooping eggs onto a plate with buttered toast and fruit. Only one though.

“Where's yours?” I take the plate he offers and help myself to a seat at an

island so big I could comfortably stretch out on top of it. That is, if it weren't made of rock.

"My breakfast is dictated by the team dietician." He sets a bowl of oatmeal and a smoothie on the counter and takes the stool next to me as I wrinkle my nose. "You aren't a fan of healthy eating?"

"I'm a fan of eating whatever I feel like, and it's never been that." I point to his meal with a grimace. "Does it even have any taste?"

"Not much, but you get used to it. Besides, this is what keeps me fit enough to play at the professional level in my thirties."

My eyes blatantly wander up his now clothed torso, which his snug t-shirt does nothing to hide. "If you're telling me that crap is the reason you're a walking wet dream then I guess I approve."

"Uh, thanks?" He eyes me the same way, cocking his head to the side with a slight frown. "Is that my shirt?"

*Busted.*

"I had a bit of a wardrobe malfunction." I scoop up the runny part of the egg with my toast. "Hope you don't mind."

"You can wear anything of mine you like. Even if it doesn't fit." His baby blues twinkle as he fights a smile.

Glancing down, I have to admit the shirt is a little big. "I'm not so sure your clothes fit you either." I reach over and pinch the fabric of his shirt between my fingers, giving it a gentle tug, though the material barely moves since it's already stretched to the brink. "Maybe you should lay off the protein."

"I wouldn't be able to manhandle you as easily if I did."

"Why would I want you to manhandle me?" I arch my brow in his direction and take another bite of egg toast.

"You call me *big guy*."

“It’s a fitting nickname.”

“And you groaned ‘*fuck that’s hot*’ when I hauled you against me last night.”

“You were pounding my prostate and jerking my dick. Totally hot. And also, fuck buddy etiquette says you can’t hold people responsible for what they say when you’re stroking their cock. It’s like, shit said under duress or something.”

“Would it be against fuck buddy etiquette to say I bet if I toss you over my shoulder that’ll make you hard?”

“That wouldn’t be a stretch since this conversation is making me hard.” I look pointedly at my crotch.

“So, you’re saying I’m right.” He crosses his arms in front of his broad chest.

*Damn those blue orbs shine when he’s feeling frisky.*

“I’m saying there’s only one way to find out.” I shoot off the stool and round the island, putting that big hunk of cabinetry between us. Noah jumps up in a flash, crouching slightly so he’s ready to spring whichever direction I choose to run.

*I probably should’ve put more thought into challenging a professional goalie not to catch me.*

“Think you can outrun me?” Noah smirks.

“I think I’m lighter on my feet than you.” Faking right, I quickly change course and go left, heading for the back door. I twist the handle and throw it open, launching myself over the threshold and clearing the two flagstone stairs before I hit the patio and take off running. But I only make it a few feet before I hear a strangled wail and a heavy thud.

The brat in me wants to believe he’s using some sort of ploy to catch me off

guard, but since I'd be perfectly happy to be caught and tossed over his shoulder I play along, skidding to a halt and turning to face my pursuer. Only he's not pursuing me. He's lying on the ground, reaching for his ankle with a strained grimace on his face.

*Shit.*

*Shit. Shit. Shit.* Not only do I have zero fucking clue what to do with hurt people, I don't do well with guilt, which I'm feeling pretty heavily right now since my stupid game of chase is what's got the big guy writhing on the floor, and not in an *'I just blew the biggest load ever'* way.

I give myself three point seven seconds to freak the fuck out then trot back to Noah and crouch down next to him, patting his shoulder awkwardly. "Are you okay?"

He shoots me an incredulous glare.

"I mean, obviously you're not, but, is this like one of those *'I need a minute'* things or this is a full-blown *'something's broken'* thing?"

"Somewhere in the middle." He closes his eyes, chest rising dramatically on a deep breath that he seems to hold for a few seconds before letting it slowly out.

"Right. And that means what exactly? Do I help you get inside or call a doctor or..." The corner of my lip tries to tick upward, and I press them together to try to keep them flat.

Noah blinks me into focus and cringes. "Why are you smiling?"

"I'm not." I slap my hand over my mouth, which doesn't do anything to stop my lips from twitching except hopefully make it less noticeable.

"Now you're laughing?"

"I... No." I shake my head vigorously back and forth, never taking my hand off my mouth.

“This is funny to you?” Anger and hurt war for dominance in his eyes.

I purse my lips together so hard I bet they’re turning white, which he hopefully can’t see under my hand, and shake my head.

“Jesus Christ,” he mumbles. “You’re fucking laughing.”

The number of swears in that sentence is telling, yet I can’t make my face look empathetic. I’ve never been able to. Until now, I thought that was because I *wasn’t* empathetic, but I do actually care about what happens to Noah, so it must be genetic or something.

“I’m not... Laughing isn’t the right...” *Dammit I’m making it worse.* “It’s a condition,” I finally squeak mid-giggle.

“A condition?” Noah scoffs, wincing when he probes his ankle.

“I promise I’m not being cheeky.” I bite back another impish grin. “Bad things happen, and I laugh. Always have. I used to think that’s because it actually *is* funny when bad things happen to people I don’t like. Only, I like you and this isn’t funny but I can’t stop myself from smiling. I don’t know what to do and it’s sort of unnerving since I know I should be doing *something* I just don’t know what. I’m a horrible caregiver. It’s why I don’t have pets.”

By the time I finish my rambling some of the anger has left Noah’s expression, although he’s still sort of looking at me like I’m every bit the obnoxious little shit most people assume me to be. Even though that’s not an inaccurate perception, he’s never looked at me like that before. I don’t like it.

Pasting a concerned look on my face, or what I hope is concerned, I say, “Tell me what to do.”

I must get it right because the big guy offers me his hand to pull him up, and even though he must have at least sixty pounds on me I manage to get him standing with an arm draped over my shoulders so he can hop inside.

We hobble to the couch where he falls heavily onto the cushions, and I stand frozen waiting for more instructions.

“What?” He sighs.

I shrug helplessly. “Want a beer?”

“It’s ten in the morning.”

“After I banged my head we had beer, and then...”

“I don’t want to watch you jerk off right now.”

“Whoa, I didn’t suggest that.” I was going to, after I got an answer on the beer thing, but now I’ll keep that to myself. “What *do* you want though?”

Noah’s head falls against the back of the couch. “How about an ice pack? There’s one in the freezer. And a dish towel.”

“Coming right up.” *Coming right up? I’ve never even been a server—no one would trust me around the customers.*

After rooting through half a dozen Tupperwares of food his chef person must leave for him, I find one of those gel things that’s technically ice although it’s mushy enough to wrap around a limb, which even comes with a Velcro strap so you can attach it. I make a note to look for one myself since it’s probably better than the frozen veggies I used as a kid. Grabbing a towel off the counter, I head back to Noah, who’s managed to get his foot propped on the coffee table.

I hand him the towel and ice pack, which he tries to wrap around his quickly swelling ankle, but when he can’t get it secure, I take over, even putting a cushion under his foot so the edge of the table doesn’t dig into his calf. *I’m already getting better at this.* Then I hover next to the couch, waiting for instructions since the cushion thing exhausted my ideas.

“Can you just sit?” Noah asks a few minutes later.

“How do you know where I am? Your eyes are closed.”

“I feel you looming.”

“I’m just waiting for you to tell me everything’s fine and it’s a false alarm.”

“It’s not a false alarm.”

“It has to be, because otherwise this is my fault, and you’ll hate me.” It’s not until I say the words out loud that I realize they’re true. Especially the part about him hating me.

For weeks, I’ve been preaching about boundaries, mostly for his protection but also for my peace of mind. It was supposed to ensure he didn’t hate me when the sex part of our buddy plan ran its course. I never anticipated he might have a reason to hate me that didn’t involve dicks and holes, and now that my antics have put his season in jeopardy... He might actually hate me for this, and that’s more unsettling than the idea of never getting to fuck him.

I don’t have feelings for the big guy. That’s not what this is about. But I do like him as a person. I enjoy his company, respect his honesty, and get a kick out of flirting with him. Have I been toying with him... Yes, but only because he allows it, and it seems to be helping him understand himself a little better. Until this little hiccup, it was all a little harmless fun. Now, I’m actually a little surprised he hasn’t kicked me out yet.

“Come here.” Noah holds a hand out to me. I’m not sure what to make of that since, A. we don’t hold hands and, B. the ice on his foot might be sending arctic blood to his head.

“What?”

“Come here,” he repeats, opening his eyes and pinning me with a glance that suggests he won’t take no for an answer.

I take his hand with a furrowed brow, allowing him to pull me toward the empty spot next to him. As I take a seat, he drops my hand and rests his own

on his thick thigh, flexing his fingers as he takes a deep breath. “Me getting hurt isn’t your fault.”

“Um...”

“And I don’t hate you.”

“I don’t understand. You were chasing me when you fell.”

“Right. *I* was chasing *you*. That’s on me.”

“But I basically dared you to do it.”

“And I took the dare.”

“If I hadn’t made the dare, you wouldn’t have taken it. Now look at you.” I point to his foot. “How is that not my fault?”

Noah’s blue eyes follow my gaze, looking a little sad, but not angry. “Neither of us could’ve known a little game of chase would end like this.”

“Which is why I shouldn’t have started it.” I throw my arms up, exasperated.

“Why are you so determined to think this is on you?”

I start to say ‘*because it is*’ when I realize that’s not really an answer, just a feeling. A deep-seated, inherent belief that when there’s something wrong, I’m to blame. There’s probably some daddy issues to unpack there, but let’s face it—since I enjoy a little bit of trouble, most people wouldn’t call me innocent. He shouldn’t either.

“Poor judgment, not thinking things through, acting like a kid... Take your pick—any of those are reasons to blame me.”

“You can’t single yourself out when I did all the same things.”

I roll my eyes dramatically. “Are you trying to say we’re both to blame?”

“I’m saying neither of us are. Shit happens. Do I wish I could take it back, think it through before doing something reckless?” He runs a hand through his thick blond hair, a nervous tic maybe. “Yeah, of course. I don’t know

what this is gonna mean yet, but I doubt it's good, and I'm dreading what I find out. At the same time, I was having more fun goofing off with you than I have in months. Maybe even years. How could I blame you for that?"

"There's a whole city of people out there who would easily blame me. Not to mention your teammates. And Xander. And his dad... You know his dad might actually come after me. He's never liked me." I recall the way I got booted from one of his team cookouts a few years back when I asked the guys to feel their muscles.

"No one needs to know all the details. I'll just say I tripped."

"Yeah, because people will believe the guy who balances on ice for a living would fall on dry land." I snort.

"Stranger things have happened."

I give him a critical once over, wondering not just why he's being so chill about this, but why he'd spare me from the people's wrath. My dick isn't that spectacular.

"Sure, we can go with that plan. You tripped over your own big feet doing something you probably mastered when you were one. Now what?"

"Now, I find out how bad this is."

"How?"

"I call the team doctor and ask him to make a house call." He pulls his cell from his pocket and selects the doctor from his contacts, pausing to give me a forlorn look before he makes the call. "You should probably head home, just to make sure you aren't linked to this."

He's right—the only way to stay completely out of this is to make myself scarce—but I don't jump up and make my exit the way I should. Even though I'm zero help right now, maybe even less than zero, it feels pretty shitty to leave him hurt and alone. Especially, when he looks so lost.

It goes against everything in my free-spirited, no-strings, me-first persona, but I can't abandon him. Not now.

"What if I just hide until the doctor leaves? Then if you need that beer, I can get it for you." *Omigod did he almost smile? I really am getting better at comforting him or whatever.*

"That won't work if he sees your car in the driveway." Noah's face reverts to the pitiful look he was wearing when he suggested I go home.

"I'll stash it in your garage." I lift a shoulder to my ear. "It looks big enough to be its own car lot."

"It only holds three cars."

"Do you have three cars?" I ask pointedly.

"No."

"Perfect. You have room for mine then. I'll put it away and hide in your bedroom until the coast is clear." *Coast is clear? Great. Now, I've invoked Scooby Doo. Too bad I can't ask Noah's doc for an MRI because something is clearly off with my brain.*

I hop up before my mouth can do any more damage to my totally badass image and head off to find my keys. But before I can make it too far, I hear my name.

"Tripp?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks." Noah offers me a sad smile, and it hits me that he's scared of what comes next.

*You and me both, big guy.*

## Chapter 15 – Noah

Dr. Cutter checks the images he took with the portable x-ray on his laptop while I sit helpless on the couch, trying not to panic.

Given our performance last year, and the way we've been looking so far, I know in my heart we have a shot at the cup this year. Or we did. Not to say our backup goalie can't do the job, or to sound cocky myself, but there's a reason he's the backup. He doesn't have my reflexes. Or my size. He'll give us a fighting chance, but guys like Niko will have to step up, and he's already playing at an elite level at the most elite level there is.

It's not realistic to think we'll get through an entire season without suffering some injuries among the team, but to start the season that way... To get hurt off the ice no less... I fucked up. Put the entire team and our season at risk. And now I'm going to lie about how it happened.

Tripp doesn't deserve the fallout that will come his way if people find out he was here. We were both horsing around, but I'm the only one with a contract that states I won't take unnecessary risks. And while I regret that my decision could affect the team, I don't regret those moments with Tripp. We were flirting, both of us, and it felt natural. I liked it. I want to do it again, without the chasing and the injury, of course.

I knew before I hit the ground that something was seriously wrong. The pain hadn't even come, it was just the unfamiliar motion of my ankle that tipped me off, and I was probably on the ground a full two seconds, knowing I was in trouble, before the agony hit. It's faded to a dull ache now thanks to the ice, which gives me some hope that things might be better than I first

thought. The fact that the doctor hasn't said anything for nearly fifteen minutes isn't helping my mental state though.

*God, I wish Tripp was sitting next to me.*

Knowing he's in the house helps, but if he were *here* he'd probably say something ridiculous to distract me, like, "I wonder what my dick looks like on an x-ray?" to which Dr. Cutter would probably gasp and turn beet red and maybe even have to wrestle the thing away from Tripp when he tries to take his own picture.

I know the man is an acquired taste for most, but I envy his ability to say whatever comes to mind. It's refreshing. And even though it's sometimes obnoxious, I like that he's not afraid to be himself.

"Do you need anything for the pain?" Dr. Cutter interrupts my imaginary scene as he finishes wrapping my ankle.

"No, why?"

"You're wincing, but you're also kind of smiling as if you're trying to ignore the discomfort."

Sounds about right. Tripp does have the unique ability to make people laugh and cringe at the same time. "I'm just trying to think positively," I fib.

"That's an excellent attitude to have. Thinking positively really does help with the healing process."

"Speaking of which, what sort of process am I looking at?" I hold my breath, as if a lungful of air can ward off the bad news.

"You're looking at a mild grade two sprain." When I don't exhale he elaborates. "There looks to be some partial tearing of the ligament. Primarily, in this section here." He points to a spot on the image that doesn't look all that different from the rest, at least to my eye.

"It's quite a small tear, so you aren't looking at extensive downtime. You'll

need to stay off it for seven to ten days, at which point we'll start physical therapy. You'll gradually return to weight bearing, with a full recovery in approximately four to six weeks."

"Seven to ten days? As in, do nothing for seven to ten days?"

"You can do some range of motion exercises, just don't put any weight on it," the doctor says.

Okay, not ideal, but that puts me back on the ice before Thanksgiving, which is well before All-Star week. As long as we aren't in last place going into that break, we should have plenty of season left to make the playoffs. Hopefully, that will soften the blow when I break the news to the team.

"Would you like me to talk to Coach Nydek, or do you want to do it?" Dr. Cutter asks.

Normally, I'd own my own mistakes, but in this case the good doctor will be better able to communicate what my prognosis is. "You go ahead. I'm sure he'll have questions."

Dr. Cutter nods and pulls out his phone—I'd thought he'd leave to make the call instead of doing it here—meaning I've only got a few minutes to come up with a reasonable explanation for what I was doing when I sprained my ankle. I'm still trying to work out what that could be when he passes me the phone. *Great.*

I clear my throat before putting it to my ear. "Hello?"

"What the hell, Noah?" Coach barks. "You chose a shitty time to hurt yourself l, kid. What happened?"

"I'm not sure, Coach. One minute I was fine and the next I was on the ground."

"What were you doing when you fell?"

I look at the doctor as if he might have the answer, but of course he can't

hear what Coach is saying. “I saw a coyote and you’re supposed to scare them off with lots of loud noise, so I was running outside banging on a pot and then I guess I tripped.”

“You tripped?” he shouts. “Why the hell are you chasing off a coyote?”

I can’t stop myself from wincing at the anger in his voice, but at this point I’m committed to my lame excuse. “My neighbors said it’s been lurking around, and they’re worried about their pets. I figured if I was loud enough, I could scare it off for good.”

“It’s a wild animal. If it wants to eat your neighbor’s pets it’ll do that whether you make a ruckus or not. *Jesus!* What am I supposed to tell the press? You jeopardized your season so you could save Fido?”

“Rufus. And he’s a bulldog.” That part is actually legit. My neighbors dress him up in a little doggy jersey with my number for the games.

“That’s supposed to justify your stupidity?”

“No, Coach.”

“What the hell were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t. I just reacted.” I’m familiar with how Coach looks when he’s disappointed, but until this moment he’s never worn that expression because of me. I’m both ashamed and grateful that I can’t see it.

“Of all the... You know this falls outside the team’s coverage, right?”

“I... What?”

“You got injured on your personal time. That means the team isn’t responsible for your medical, your pay while you’re out, or to keep you on the roster.”

Getting cut at my age is like the kiss of death. It’s too soon. I’m not ready to be done with hockey. Or the Bulldogs... The oatmeal I had for breakfast threatens to make an encore appearance. “You think they’ll cut me?”

“No, I think you’re too valuable for that. But I wouldn’t expect them to pay your bills.”

“I understand,” I mumble. “I’ll take care of it myself.”

“Good. Now as for what to say, I obviously can’t lie to management, but as far as the public is concerned you suffered an undisclosed injury during training, and you’re expected to make a full recovery in four to six weeks. When you come back I don’t want anyone targeting what they think might be a weakness, so until you’re mobile you will not so much as step foot outside your house. Have Dr. Cutter run your PT from home. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach.”

“I’ll notify the team. I expect daily updates until you’re cleared to come back to practice.”

“Okay.”

“Good. So help me if I find out you try to fight off another fucking coyote... Are we clear?”

“Yes. Got it.” I hand the phone back to Dr. Cutter and sit with my head bowed like a little kid who’s too ashamed to look his parents in the eye. He speaks to Coach a few more minutes—about what I can’t say since I’m too numb to pay attention—then startles me out of my stupor when he rests a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t get too discouraged. You’ll recover from this in no time.”

Pressing my lips together I give him a curt nod.

“I grabbed some crutches while you were on the phone with Coach Nydek.” He tilts his head toward the corner of the couch where I now see they’re propped. “I’ll be in touch next week to schedule your PT. We’ll go over what equipment you have here and what the therapist will need to bring. In the

meantime, keep that foot elevated, ice for twenty minutes four times a day, and take Advil for any swelling.”

Nodding again, I make a pathetic attempt to smile. “Send me the bill for today please.”

“No need to worry about that right now.” He picks up his bag and grabs the portable x-ray machine. “I’ll see myself out, so you don’t need to get up. We’ll talk soon.”

I watch until he’s out of sight, hearing the click of the front door a few seconds later. Then I collapse against the back of the couch with a shaky breath.

The dull soreness I felt while the doctor was here morphs into a throbbing discomfort, only now it’s not just my ankle but my head that aches in rhythm with my beating pulse. *That couldn’t have gone any worse.*

“Cut you?” I gasp when an angry voice pierces the silence. “They’re going to cut you?”

*Tripp. I forgot he was here.*

“It sounds like they could, but Coach doesn’t think they will.”

“He doesn’t think...? You’re like, the star of the team. They’d really let you go over a sprained ankle?” He paces back and forth, an uncharacteristic look of disgust on his face. “What kind of organization is this? Players get hurt all the time, is this how they treat you when it happens?”

“When you get injured on the ice, no. When you get injured off it...” I realize too late Tripp will do the whole blaming himself thing as those words sink in.

“Ohmigod.” He sinks onto the couch. “I cost you your spot on the team.”

“No, you didn’t. I just told you it won’t come to that.” I’m not sure why since I’m worried about being cut myself, but convincing Tripp that won’t

happen somehow makes me feel better.

“But you told the doctor to send you the bill. That doesn’t mean you’re off the team?” He props his elbows on his knees and rests his head in his hands as if the room is spinning and that will stop it.

“It means the team won’t cover my expenses for injuries I incur on my personal time.”

He looks up at me, open-mouthed “Wow. Even my insurance covers me when I’m not working and I’m just a lowly artist.”

“I’m sure my insurance will cover it, it just won’t be free like it is if I get hurt during a game or while I’m training.”

“Still sounds shitty if you ask me.” His offended look is back, which makes my heart do this strange little flutter.

“It’s a business, and I’m a commodity.”

“That’s a very Thor thing to say.”

I cock my head to the side. “It is?”

“He downplays saving people because that’s his job. You’re downplaying your value because hockey is a business. Same thing, really. Speaking of heroes... You injured yourself trying to save an imaginary dog from an imaginary coyote?” The sly sparkle is back in his eye.

“The dog isn’t imaginary. It lives next door.”

“Uh, huh. You should’ve said you were running on the treadmill and the power went out. I bet they’d have considered that ‘*training.*’” He punctuates that with air quotes.

“I’ll use that excuse next time.” I bite back a smile, my first since getting hurt.

“Next time? Are you crazy? There will be no more funny business where you could get hurt. I’m not going to be responsible for you getting cut from

the team.”

“You aren’t responsible now. We’ve been through this.”

He dismisses me with a wave of his hand. “You need a bodysuit made out of bubble wrap. That way if you fall over there’s no damage, just a cool sound. Ooh…” He looks at me with wide eyes that are a little too green with mischief. “If you wear it while we’re fucking, we could make some pretty cool music. Can’t you hear it? Pop, pop, pop, moan. Pop, pop, grunt. I’d listen to that all day long. I’d probably get fired for having a perpetual boner, or at the very least I’d make an excellent case for why I should be allowed to work from home. Do you have any recording equipment? I have editing software but not recording equipment. Why are you crying?”

“I’m not,” I say as I wipe my eyes. “I’m trying not to laugh.”

“You have the same condition I do where you laugh at inappropriate times?” His brows draw together in confusion.

“This is an inappropriate time to laugh?” I blink away the last of my tears.

“Well, I was being serious.”

I honestly can’t tell if that’s true or not, but either way I feel better than I did a few minutes ago. “Thanks for staying. It helps having you here.”

“About that.” He sighs heavily. “You’re going to need help, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t put any weight on that foot. How are you going to make those fancy frozen meals for yourself or get cleaned up or…whatever else?”

I gnaw on my lip as I turn those words over in my mind. It’s been years, well over a decade, since anyone’s had to take care of me. Sure, I have someone that cooks meals for me to reheat, but minus the use of one leg even that will be hard to manage. And showering… That’s a slip hazard right there.

“Sounds like I’m gonna have to be a bath guy for the next few weeks.”

Tripp cracks a small smile at my lame joke. “Look, as much as you want me to believe I’m not responsible for this, I know better. I’m not saying I take all the blame.” He holds up a hand to stop me from objecting. “But I share the blame. So, it’d be pretty shitty of me to leave you like this. It’d make me no better than those douche canoes you play for.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying if you need someone to stick around and help you with, whatever, I can do that. I need to run home and grab some things, but I can come back.”

“You’d do that?” There goes my heart again, only this time the flutter spreads throughout my entire torso.

“You did it for me. When you thought I might have a concussion.”

“That was one night. This would be a lot more.”

“Spend a few nights in the most luxurious home I’ve seen in years? Twist my arm a little harder.”

“I think I heard you offer to help me shower.” I rub the bridge of my nose to cover my grin.

“Add a big dick on top of it? Now you’re catching on.” Tripp licks his upper lip suggestively. “Just make sure that healthy chef of yours leaves good instructions. Even if I’m only reheating shit that doesn’t mean I can’t still screw it up.”

“Actually, I’m sort of feeling like today would be a good cheat day. Maybe we could order in.”

“I am excellent at ordering delivery.” He shoots me a playful wink and hops off the couch. “I’m gonna run home and get some stuff for a few days, and when I get back, you can tell me what you want for your cheat dinner.”

“What about dessert?” I call after him as he makes his way to the garage.

“That’s where that big dick of yours comes in,” he hollers back.

Even the pulsating burn in my ankle can’t stop the goofy grin from spreading across my face.

## Chapter 16 – Tripp

“I can’t believe you brought your video game system over.” Noah shakes his head as he watches me connect my Xbox to his TV.

“We don’t know how long I’m going to have to play nurse, which I can’t do from my house.”

“You can’t do it here either, if you’re too busy gaming.” There’s a hint of humor in his voice, almost like he’s taunting me. I’m not sure when exactly he transitioned from timid big guy to flirtatious Norse god, but lately he seems to be coming out of his sexual shell, and I am so here for it. Who doesn’t like to flirt?

“I’m an excellent multi-tasker. Besides, Betty offers you one more thing to stay busy when you’re stuck sitting on your butt.”

“Betty?”

“The Xbox.” I finish the connection and turn it on to make sure everything’s working properly.

“Do you name all inanimate objects?”

“Only the ones I can’t live without. I...” The doorbell interrupts my train of thought. “That must be the food. I’ll get it.”

I feel Noah’s eyes on me as I stride to the door, so I put an extra little sway in my hips because...*duh*. Only it’s not the delivery guy standing on the front porch. It’s Niko and Xander, both of whom wear matching expressions of WTF when they see me. *Busted*. It’d be comical if it didn’t also mean I’m about to get my ass chewed.

“I don’t even want to know.” Xander shakes his head.

“Are you sure? It’s a really good story.” Not that I plan to tell him any of it, I’m just being honest. I mean, no one—least of all me—could’ve predicted that *I’d* be responsible for the well-being of another person. That’s quality entertainment right there.

“I want to know,” Niko says.

“Trust me, you don’t. Not unless you want a mental picture of what these two have been getting up to.” Xander shudders. *Rude.*

“Yeah, maybe I don’t then. Is Noah in there?” Niko jerks his head toward the living room, and I step aside so he can enter.

“Your dad called you?” I ask Xander when we’re alone.

“He did. Told us Noah was laid up and to come check on him. Luca and Justus should be here any minute too. He left your name out of the conversation, though.”

“I would hope so since he doesn’t know I’m here.”

“Why are you here exactly? Spare me the salacious details, just the facts.”

*Boring.* “Remember how I said Noah felt guilty about me hitting my head?” When Xander nods I continue. “I left out the part where he stayed at my place to make sure I was okay. I’m returning the favor.”

“You told me, and I quote, my cock hasn’t met his ass or vice versa.” Xander gives me a stern once-over and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“And that was true. *Then.*”

His eyes fall shut as he takes a deep breath, I assume to calm himself although based on the color in his cheeks I don’t think it’s working. “And now?”

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

“You literally do. All the time.”

“Yes, but I haven’t kissed him so there’s nothing to tell.”

“You’ve done something else though.” Xander arches a knowing brow, daring me to deny it.

“Is that a problem?”

“It is when the guy you’re playing with doesn’t play for our team.”

“In my defense, I’m not the first guy to show him my dick.”

Xander chuffs and rolls his eyes. “Locker rooms don’t count.”

“I never said it was in a locker room.”

“You’re telling me he’d already been with men before you started messing with him?”

“Not *with* men, but not a good little straight boy either.”

“What does that even mean?” Xander’s brows draw together.

“That’s up to Noah to share, if he wants. Just know I didn’t corrupt the Norse god. Ooh, dinner’s here. And more company.” I step around Xander to pay the delivery guy and take the pizzas we ordered as Luca and Justus step onto the porch, then strut back inside like my best friend didn’t just assume the worst of me. Even if I sort of deserve it. “Will you guys be joining us?” I ask the group as I make my way to the kitchen.

“Pizza?” Luca asks as he follows me inside. “Oh shit, is your season over?” He turns to Noah with a panicked expression.

“I was just telling Niko it’s not that bad,” Noah says.

“Um, excuse me, but how do we make the leap from pizza to season ending?” I set the boxes on the counter and start opening cupboards, looking for plates.

“Noah’s on a strict diet during the season.” Justus shrugs. “Pizza isn’t on it.”

“I figured a shit day might as well be a cheat day too,” Noah says. “But I’ll be back on the diet tomorrow.”

“Is this one of those ‘you have to eat bland food because you’re old’ things?” I hand Noah a plate with three slices, ignoring how way too many sets of eyes are watching our exchange.

“It’s one of those ‘a good diet ensures I can play a long time’ things,” he answers.

“Oh right. I see the difference.” I manage to keep a straight face even though I snort. “You all better grab some or there will be leftovers and I can’t be held responsible if this guy makes it two cheat days in a row.” I plop down next to Noah and take an oversized bite so I can give my mouth something to do other than talk, which I know they’re all expecting. Normally, I would, but in this case, I need to follow Noah’s lead, and since I don’t know what he wants to share during circle time, I plan to keep my mouth too full to put my foot in it.

One by one, the guys help themselves to a slice and join us on the couch, listening intently as Noah explains his prognosis, and looking slightly less pale when he assures them the timeframe for his return isn’t just getting back in goal, but being one hundred percent.

“Will you be at practice to help get Gauthier ready?” Niko asks.

I assume that’s the backup goalie.

“Coach wants me to lay low until I’m not visibly limping so no one can speculate what my injury is,” Noah says.

“Why?” Justus looks at his teammates in turn, clearly confused.

“Some guys would do anything for an advantage, including targeting someone’s weakness,” Luca says between bites. “Blaise on the Rockets is one of them, and we play them in a few weeks.”

“Seriously? That’s...” Justus trails off with a horrified expression.

“Um, how are you even a hockey player?” I ask him.

“What?”

“You seem genuinely shocked that there might be competitive assholes on the ice with you. How do you get to this level and not realize this is a brutal sport?” I clarify.

“I mean, you can be brutal but still play a clean game.” Justus’s little cheeks flush pink. *For real, how is he a pro?*

“Not everyone has your skill.” Luca bumps him with an elbow, and I swear he gets even redder.

“Gauthier is totally capable.” Noah gets us all back on track. “He doesn’t have my reflexes, but he has good instincts. He plays smart. He’ll obviously lean on you guys more than I do since he doesn’t get as much playing time, but he’ll keep us in contention, and I’ll be back with more than half the season left.”

“You won’t be traveling with the team?” Luca’s voice is steady, but the way his eyes dart to Noah’s is anything but.

So he's the one Noah was talking about...

“Sorry.” Noah looks conflicted as he shakes his head. “We’ll figure something out.”

*Figure something out? Does that mean... Whoa, did I just flare my nostrils?*

“Yeah. Okay.” Luca offers a weak smile.

Noah takes a deep breath and taps my leg, pointing to his crutches. “I need to use the bathroom.”

I grab his oversize walking sticks and offer him a hand to pull him off the couch, making sure he’s steady before stepping out of his way. Then, out of the goodness of my heart with no ulterior motive whatsoever I ask, “Need me to hold your dick for you while you piss?”

Noah chuckles and shakes his head. “I think I’ve got it.”

“Always trying to get in his pants,” Niko laughs, completely oblivious to Xander’s wary gaze.

“I mean he has to take it out and have steady aim all while balancing on one leg. It’s a hazard if you ask me. Holding his dick is a small sacrifice to make sure he heals quickly.”

Niko rolls his eyes. “That sounds like something my sister would say.”

“I told you we’re two halves of a whole.” I point at Xander as I sit back down. “When is she coming back? I need a good night of debauchery.”

“I thought you were gay?” Justus looks at me with wide eyes.

“Not that kind of debauchery. The getting drunk and playing silly games kind. Maybe we’ll do Truth or Dare this time.”

“No one is allowed to fuck my sister,” Niko warns.

“Why would anyone do that?” Justus still looks comically aghast.

“The last time she was here we played kiss, marry, fuck. It’s usually kiss, marry, kill, but we didn’t like the idea of un-aliving anyone, so we amended the rules. Anna said she’d fuck Luca,” I explain.

“And you can’t dare her to do it.” Niko points a finger at me.

“But that’s a guaranteed win,” I protest.

“How do you figure?” Luca asks.

“Easy. You’d never sleep with your teammate’s sister behind his back.”

“You don’t know me that well.” Luca smirks.

“You’d sleep with Anna?” Niko glares at him.

“Of course not.” Luca holds his hands up like he’s innocent. “I’m just saying Tripp shouldn’t bank on other people being honorable to secure his win.”

“Who’s winning what?” Noah crutches back into the room.

“I’m winning Truth or Dare. Did you hit the target?” I smile sweetly up at

him.

“I didn’t get to pick if I wanted truth or dare,” he replies, and the fact that he jumped right into my imaginary game without missing a beat does unspeakable things to my resolve to stay in the fuck buddy zone.

*Bad Tripp! Everyone’s playing your silly game, no need to get feelings about Noah doing it.*

“It’s more of a hypothetical game.” I shake my head to clear it.

“Hypothetically speaking then, I pick truth. I think dare would be a bad idea under the circumstances.” Noah half sits, half falls onto the couch, setting his crutches on the floor.

“Are you really sure about Gauthier?” Niko asks.

“Promise to go back on your game diet tomorrow?” Justus talks over him.

“Are you and Tripp fucking?” *Well, that escalated quickly. I didn’t realize you were paying attention, Luca.*

The questions are asked on top of each other so it’s sort of hard to pick them out, but apparently Noah got the gist. “Yes, to all,” he says. And the room goes quiet.

“You’re... bi?” I’ve never seen Luca look so off-kilter. I suppose learning the guy you’ve jerked off in front of might not have been as impartial to the view as you first thought could be jarring. Especially, if you don’t also know that he really was impartial.

“I don’t know what I am.” Noah lifts a nonchalant shoulder.

“Hello?” Niko points to himself. “I could’ve helped with that.”

Xander slaps his chest with the back of his wrist. “Excuse me?”

“Not like that.” Niko grabs Xander’s hand and threads their fingers together. “I mean you could’ve talked to me,” he tells Noah.

“I appreciate that, but I think this is something I need to work through on

my own,” Noah says.

“Fair enough. Is this something you want to stay in this room?” Niko’s gaze darts between the two of us.

“Don’t look at me. This is his journey of self-discovery.” I jerk my thumb toward Noah. “I’m just the lucky guy who gets to introduce him to the dark side.”

Niko stifles a chuckle—he’s such a sci-fi nerd, I knew my Star Wars reference would get him—but for some reason I have trouble finding the humor in my own joke, which is so wrong since it *should* be funny.

“Sorry,” Noah says sheepishly. “I should’ve asked if you were okay with telling them before I said anything.”

“I don’t care if they know you like my dick.” I wink.

“Do you care if other people know?” Noah asks.

“Hell no. It’s good for my reputation.”

“Tripp,” Xander groans.

“Kidding.” I hold up my hands innocently and stick my tongue out at him before turning to Noah. “I’m an open book, big guy. You can say whatever you want about us, but maybe keep it to this room until you know what you want to tell people about yourself and your personal life.”

“You could always do what Niko did and say nothing at all,” Justus says. “Just live your life and not answer any questions that don’t pertain to hockey.”

“Maybe,” Noah says. “Either way, I think I’d like to understand myself better before I make any decisions.”

“So, uh. Tripp is going to help you while you’re laid up?” Luca breaks his silence for the first time since asking *the question*.

“Yes.”

“No offense, but shouldn’t you have...someone else? Like one of the team doctors or something?” Luca ducks his head, so he doesn’t have to meet my eyes.

“Uh, offense taken. I’m perfectly capable of ordering take out. You’re eating the evidence right now.” I point out.

“He’s got that special diet though.” Justus bites his lip like he’s unsure if he should’ve spoken up.

“And he’s got a chef to make those meals for him, which I can heat up just as well as anyone.” Why I’m defending my caretaking abilities when they’re abysmal at best I have no idea, but I don’t particularly like the thought of anyone else doing it. *Time for that intervention, Xander. I know you’re skeptical, call me out, stop me before I completely lose my sanity.*

“It’s up to Noah who he wants to help him,” Niko says. “And team doctors travel with the team. Tripp doesn’t, so it makes sense to have someone not associated with the team to help out.”

“Not a resounding yes but I’ll take it.” I give Niko a nod of thanks even as I ask myself why I care. “Besides, he can’t get the same healing with the doctors he can get from me.”

“Sexual healing isn’t a thing.” Xander shakes his head.

“Of course, it is. There’s even a song about it.”

“Yeah dude, I don’t think that’s what the song is about,” Luca agrees with Xander.

“Even if it isn’t, who wouldn’t appreciate a toe-curling orgasm when they’re otherwise unable to move?”

“Good point,” Niko says, rubbing his chest when Xander smacks him again. “What? If I couldn’t skate, sex would keep my morale up.”

“Morale is important when you’re injured.” Justus looks around the room

bashfully before adding, “ACL tear three years ago.”

“And sex kept you going?” I ask.

“I didn’t really have anyone for that, but I can’t see it being a bad thing.”

He ducks his head to rub the back of his neck.

“Unless it puts more strain on the injury,” Luca snorts.

I don’t know whether he’s out of sorts about the fact his little pre-game ritual is being threatened, or the fact that *I’m* the one Noah is playing nurse with. Either way, while I’d love to poke that bear, it wouldn’t benefit the big guy, so I’ll be good.

“All kidding aside, the reason I’m here right now is to help Noah. If he wants that to include sex, I’m game as long as we’re careful of his ankle. If all he wants is someone to bring him food and listen to him rant about how much he’d rather be on the ice, I’m game for that too. He gets to decide how I can help him best. Besides, I can’t gloat about sleeping with a hockey player if he’s not actually playing hockey, so…” *Okay so I put my own spin on it. I was still good.*

“Makes sense,” Justus says softly as Luca nods—almost imperceptibly but I’m counting it.

“We should probably all head out. We’ve gotta get up early to catch our flight for the next game.” Niko tugs Xander off the couch with him as he stands, Luca and Justus following suit.

Since Noah can’t see them out, I do it, trailing them all to the door and promising to let them know how their goalie is doing while they’re on the road. I’m about to close the door when Xander pauses and turns back to face me.

“I’m right down the street if you need anything.” The fact that he didn’t issue another warning, but rather offered to help, makes me a little nervous.

Does that mean he thinks I can actually take care of the big guy, or that he doesn't object to me sleeping with him? Both would be a reversal of his initial impressions, which means he saw something just now to make him change his mind. I'm not sure I want to know what that is, so I give him a curt nod in response and shut the door.

## Chapter 17 – Noah

“I really am sorry for blurting that out. About us,” I tell Tripp as he comes back from showing everyone out.

He waves me off and starts clearing the plates the guys left behind. “And I really don’t care if they know you want my dick. I’ve made no secret about wanting yours.”

“That doesn’t make it okay for me to tell them without your permission.”

“I’m already out, big guy, so it’s not like you broke some sort of sacred trust. Besides.” He sets the plates in the kitchen and comes back to sit on the opposite end of the couch, leaning one arm across the back and spreading his legs wide. “I have no shame when it comes to sex. Tell them your cock is my favorite meal, that you like to top, show them one of my dick pics, I literally don’t care.”

“You have dick pics?”

“Spectacular, remember.” He waggles his eyebrows.

“I don’t have any. And if I did, I wouldn’t share them.” Damn, I wish my voice didn’t sound so small, but I’m having a hard time reconciling the fact he wouldn’t care if I showed people such an intimate picture of him.

“You wouldn’t share your dick pics with me?” he pouts.

“I meant I don’t have any pictures of you.” I shake my head back and forth. “And like I said, if I did, I wouldn’t share them.”

“Well, I guess bragging about your fuck buddy’s incredible cock loses some luster when your only gay friend is already spoken for.”

“No, I mean if I had any pictures, they’d be just for me. I wouldn’t want anyone else to see you the way I get to.” Though Tripp doesn’t move an inch, his whole body seems to tense up, and I can tell I’ve said too much. “You know, since you said you wouldn’t sleep around while we’re... I figure that includes dick pics. No sharing.”

“Uh, huh.” His head bobs once, slowly. “Is Luca freaking out because you won’t be around to play voyeur?”

I recognize his attempt to change the subject, but I figure since he’s still here after my slip up I’ll play along.

“You caught that, huh?”

“Kind of hard not to,” I admit.

“Yeah, he probably is.”

“That whole thing seems like a weird superstition, and that’s coming from me.” Tripp points to his chest. “How does that even become a pregame ritual?”

“I never asked. When he first told me about it, he said it was something he’d been doing for years, and that’s all I needed to know. You don’t mess with a guy’s superstition or ask for details, you just accept it.”

“What’s yours?” Curious green eyes meet mine.

“I just told you, you don’t ask for details.” I bite back a grin.

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.” He grins back. “So, why didn’t you ask Niko for advice about...things?” He swivels his wrist to finish the thought. “Is it because he’s so young?”

“He may be young in age but mentally he’s so much more mature than most of our teammates, and it’s clear he’s pretty comfortable with who he is. He would’ve been a good person to talk to if I knew what questions to ask.

Although, asking my rookie teammate to help me figure out my sexuality probably wouldn't have made the best impression."

"Because you're the captain?"

"And one of the older guys on the team. I'm supposed to have my shit figured out by this point in life. That's what the new guys expect."

"I know guys who didn't figure their shit out until their mid-forties." Tripp snorts. "One of them raised two kids before he sorted himself. And it's not just sexuality either. Some people don't find their calling until later."

"I hear you." I play with the hem of my shorts while I get my thoughts in order. "The thing is, it's sort of my job to take care of the new guys. Show them the ropes and make them comfortable and stuff. The coaches rely on me for that. And everyone looks to me as the example of what to do. How to train and what to eat and how to behave. How can I be anyone's good example when I can't even answer a basic question about who I am? That's why I couldn't ask Niko, or any of them, to help me."

"You know when I compare you to Thor that's mostly an appearance thing, right? I'm not actually calling you a god."

"I... What?"

"Gods are perfect. People aren't. Flaws are what make us interesting. Not that having questions about yourself is a flaw, but if you were perfect, all your little hero worshippers would be suffering crippling anxiety from trying to live up to your greatness. Being less than perfect but still trying to set a good example gives them something achievable to work toward."

When I do little more than let my jaw hang open Tripp points to his hair. "Dye job, not a state of mind. Oh wait." He frowns. "I forgot it's not blond anymore."

I can't help but smile at his defeated expression as he realizes his punchline

missed the mark. “I’m not speechless because you said something insightful.”

“Really?” He arches a skeptical brow.

“No. I’m speechless because I just now realized I’ve spent years setting the wrong example. And because that’s the most words I’ve heard you string together without saying dick.” I bite the corner of my lip to temper my grin, hoping that gesture will lighten things up since I know serious Tripp is prone to getting skittish, and I don’t want him to go anywhere.

He grabs a throw pillow and hucks it at me. “Dick.”

“Uh, you ruined it.”

“Not possible. Everything is so much better when dicks are involved.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

He drops to the floor and crawls between my legs, careful not to nudge the one propped on the coffee table, smiling up at me with wicked intent as he reaches for the waistband of my shorts. “Dessert.”

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“Watch the fast break. Come out of the crease, not too far. He’s gonna fake right. He’s gonna fake right. Nice stop.” I punch the air.

We’re tied in the last period of the first game I’m missing—everyone is stepping up to help give Gauthier the best chance of success—and while he’s let one get past him, he’s holding his own. It helps that our forward line is one of the best in the league, keeping the pressure on the other end of the rink. It’s a small comfort under the circumstances, especially since I’m not on the bench with them.

I get why coach wants me to lay low—speculation about my injury is just that—whereas confirmation could put a target on what people perceive as my weak side. But the inability to talk to Gauthier during the game puts us at a disadvantage. Even though it’s still early in the season, losses can add up.

And though I meant what I said about Gauthier being capable, if we end up falling behind that will be on me.

“Ice.” Tripp hovers over me with the pack, and I reluctantly lift my ankle off the cushion on the coffee table so he can wrap the cold pack around it. It’s the fourth time he’s issued this order today, and while I want to appreciate it, I find myself being bothered.

“I thought you said you were a horrible caregiver?”

He flicks his head, clearing the emerald strands of hair from his eyes in a way that’s both casual and sexy as he reaches for his phone. “Turns out it’s not so hard when you program reminders in the calendar.”

“You actually put reminders in there to take care of me?”

“Seemed like the best way to make sure I didn’t fuck up.” He taps away at the screen and sets his phone by my foot so I can see the numbers tick down before joining me on the couch. “Twenty minutes.”

I grunt, not because the ice is cold, but because everything feels wrong. Being here while my team is gone. Being confined to the couch. Being taken care of. I guess if anyone has to do it, I’m glad it’s Tripp, because he’s got a way of putting me at ease when I’m mentally or emotionally uncomfortable. But right now, even though he’s going out of his way to help me, I’m finding it hard to feel grateful. Or calm.

“He’s going around back. He’s shooting. Watch the ricochet.”

“You know he can’t hear you, right?” Tripp says as Gauthier clears the puck.

I lift my shoulder, keeping my eyes glued to the TV as Niko takes the puck across center ice, passing it to Justus, who skates behind the net and fires off a rapid pass to Luca. The tiny opening Luca had closes as soon as the puck

hits his stick, so he passes it off and skates around two defensemen, trying to put himself in position to receive another pass and take a clean shot.

One of the defenders gets a lucky break—the puck hits his skate so the pass to Luca goes off course—rocketing back towards our goal. Bodies scramble to chase it down, and unfortunately the two closest ones belong to the forwards on the opposing team. They pass it back and forth as they drive toward Gauthier, leaving him in a situation where he can't challenge one without giving the other what amounts to a free shot. All he can do is lurk in the goal and hope his reflexes are fast enough to stop the shot that eventually comes.

They aren't.

Lights flash above the goal as the puck hits the back of the net, and I try to talk him down from hundreds of miles away. “Shake it off. You couldn't have stopped it anyway.”

“Why not?” Tripp asks. “The last time he moved out of the circle thingy and blocked the shot. Why didn't he do it again?”

I take the ice pack off and toss it on the floor with ten minutes left on the timer. “Last time was a one-on-one. This time if he came out of the circle to take on the guy with the puck, he'd be leaving the other guy wide open. That's a guaranteed goal. By staying close to the net, he had a fifty-fifty chance of being in the right spot to stop whoever ultimately took the shot.”

“That's not what the TV's saying.”

I turn the volume up so I can hear the commentators. “You're right John. Two on one is hard to defend, but if Gauthier had drifted slightly left to take on Dubois, he could've blocked the pass to Saunders, which would've bought time for his defense to get back in position. Tremblay would've made that play.”

“Blowhards,” I mumble under my breath. “Neither of those two played goalie. They have no idea what they’re talking about. Just stirring up shit.”

“The Bulldogs could really be in a tight spot without Tremblay,” the commentator says. “We still don’t know what’s keeping him off the ice, and if the team falls too far out of the lead before his return, they won’t make the playoffs.”

I grab the remote and hit the mute button, tossing it on the table in disgust and reaching for my phone.

“What are you doing?” Tripp asks.

“Texting the guys not to let Gauthier listen to any of the post-game talk. It’s all bullshit, and it could really mess with his game if he takes it to heart.”

“What’s bullshit? The part about Gauthier or the part about you?”

“All of it. Gauthier’s playing well, and I’m not gonna be out that long. These guys are talking just to talk. None of it’s accurate.”

“So, you couldn’t have stopped that shot like that guy said?”

“If I did it would’ve been luck. I wouldn’t have played it any different than Gauthier did, that’s for sure. I wish I could tell him that in person.” I sigh and collapse into the cushions behind me. *One more week. One more week before I can start rehab and get off this damn couch.* I bolt up and reach for my crutches.

“Where are you going?” Tripp asks.

“I don’t know.” I push myself off the couch and crutch toward the kitchen.

“Are you always this jittery, or only when you’re supposed to be sitting still?” His voice is close enough that I assume he’s following me.

“Asks the guy who literally bounces up and down while he’s playing video games,” I chuff.

“You were holding my joystick, so...”

“That’s...” I shake my head back and forth. “Can’t you ever be serious?”

“When the situation calls for it.”

“You don’t think this is a serious situation?”

“What I think is you’re so used to playing the role of Mr. Perfect that you haven’t let yourself get pissed about your ankle, and you’re starting to buckle under all this pressure of pretending you’re fine.”

“I...what?” My chest heaves as I try to keep myself from shouting.

“You’ve never let yourself feel angry or sad or guilty about getting hurt, which I’m guessing is why you can’t sit still and have been prickly all day. This shit sucks. Get angry.”

“I already told you this isn’t your fault.”

“And I didn’t say to get angry at me, just to *get angry*.”

My nostrils flare as I take a deep breath, preparing to defend myself. Only I can’t, because every bit of what he said is true. I am trying to stay in control, and I don’t know how to handle the fact that I’m not. My skin is crawling due to the overabundance of restless energy, anger and guilt, none of which Tripp deserves to bear the brunt of. That’s hard to remember when he’s smirking at me though, daring me to take his bait.

“Fuck!” I shout.

“There you go.” Tripp winks.

“There I go?” My volume is still abnormally high, but I’m no longer shouting. “There you go, being a brat again.”

“You seem to like it.”

“What?” I seethe.

“You’re reacting. Showing some emotion. That’s good.”

“How would you know? Your only emotion is not giving a shit.”

The wince is so slight I’m not even sure it’s real, though before I can regret

my words, he pastes a blank look on his face. “We aren’t talking about me.”

“We could be, Mr. I don’t do relationships.”

“Yeah, but we’re not. Right now, this is about you, and how it’s okay for you to not be perfect and in control all the time.

“You want me to lose control?” My hands are gripping the crutches so hard my knuckles are white.

“If that’s what’ll get your head right.”

“Don’t bait me.”

“Or what? You’ll throw something. Punch a wall. Fuck me.” He licks his lip suggestively.

“Typical. Always thinking about dicks,” I mutter, shaking my head.

“Have you ever hate-fucked anyone?”

That’s not the response I’m expecting. “What? Why the hell would I do that? Those two things don’t really go together.”

“They do when you need an outlet, and you have a fuck buddy who likes it rough.”

“I don’t need a fuck buddy right now! I need to be on the ice, with my team.”

“But you can’t.” Tripp steps so close our chests are practically touching. “And that’s driving you mad so stop trying to pretend it doesn't piss you off.”

“Of course, it pisses me off.” The damn breaks as I let go of my crutch to grab him by the back of the neck. “I’m here while my team is gone, they’re losing because of me, and you...” The words die on my tongue as I realize our faces are so close, we’re breathing each other’s air.

Time seems to stand still as our gazes lock, Tripp’s green eyes glinting in triumph. Then our chests brush together on a precarious inhale, and the room around us fades away as every lingering noise is drowned out by our heavy

exhales. Trapped in this little bubble, fear and desire ripple through me, fighting for dominance. There's a split second where fear almost wins, where I nearly reign in my aggression and pretend I'm not coiled so tight I'm about to erupt.

I should step away... We have an unspoken rule to never kiss. Yet, as I stand here, like I've been placed under some sort of spell, I can't bring myself to move. Hell, I forget how to blink, and the only understandable thought in my mind is how badly I want to kiss him—to devour him.

Closing the distance between us, I smash my mouth against his, moaning when our tongues meet, and I realize he's not fighting me. He's matching me in desperation and intensity, stealing my breath as he gives me his own.

Whether this is part of his challenge to get me to let loose or because he wants it as badly as I do, I don't know. Don't care. I just know that the rough brush of our lips, the scrape of stubble along my jaw, is the most intoxicating thing I've ever felt.

I want to claim him, to slam him against the wall and wrap his legs around my waist. The urge to make him mine is consuming, but I'm fully willing to give myself over to him in return. I let my other crutch fall to the floor and give him my weight, so we topple onto the couch.

Tripp doesn't miss a beat as I fall on top of him, lips and teeth and tongues tangling in a frenzy of lust. He bites my bottom lip just hard enough to sting before licking away the burn and delving inside my mouth, groaning as his hips rut against mine.

Hands rake through my hair, down my back, groping my ass. Mine are just as eager, clutching at Tripp's arms, chest, and head, trapping his mouth against mine and swallowing the sounds he makes.

I've kissed people before—women—and while it was often soft and gentle,

there were times it became hurried and needy. But it was never passionate. It never consumed me or flooded my senses. It never threatened to drown out the world until the only sensation left was the feel of my partner's lips.

My chest aches with want. My heart beats like it does when the seconds tick down on the clock and I'm desperately trying to hang on for the win. That's never happened with another person—only the game. The game I'm not playing right now.

The anger that had started to dissipate comes roaring back, mixing with the adrenaline and desire. It makes me crave Tripp with an almost feral need.

Somewhere, in the deepest recesses of my mind, a voice tells me to slow down. That I'm too unhinged. Then Tripp slides his hands under my shirt and rakes his nails down my back. "I need you. Now."

We're a tangle of limbs as we race to shed our clothes, miraculously staying on the couch as we contort ourselves to get naked. Then Tripp leans over the arm, sticking his ass toward me, and hands me a small packet of lube.

I lean forward and growl into his ear. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Boy Scout motto. Always be prepared." He rocks back and forth, trying to rub his crease along my length.

"You were a boy scout?"

"Fuck no, but you never know when you might get the chance to play with a fat cock."

I don't know if it's the obnoxious words or the visual of my dick resting between his cheeks. Either way, the thought of anyone but me seeing him like this suddenly has me seeing red, and before my mind can catch up my palm cracks down on his ass.

"Oh fuck," he moans, rocking backward. "I didn't know you had it in you, big guy, but I like it. Again. With your cock in me."

His command has precum practically dripping from my slit. *Have I ever been this hard before?* I rush to get myself nice and slick and line up to his hole.

“Don’t be gentle.” Tripp looks at me over his shoulder, biting the lip that’s still puffy from my kisses.

I punch forward as I grip his hip and pull him toward me, nearly losing it when my intrusion makes his eyes flutter closed in bliss. *God, he’s beautiful.* Then I smack him again.

Tripp’s mouth falls open on a guttural moan as his hole clenches around me, gripping me so tight I have to choke off the air in my lungs to keep my body from tipping over the edge. *Holy...* I smack him again as I thrust my hips forward, and it happens once more, only this time my lungs give out, and I let out an animalistic groan of my own.

Just as before, all my restraint seems to evaporate, and I give in to my baser urges. My hips piston forward relentlessly as I latch onto Tripp’s waist for support, pulling his body over my cock as I drive it deep.

The pleasure is so intense my vision blurs, the slip and slide of our joined bodies engulfing me in a carnal nirvana unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. It’s as if every nerve in my body has gone on vacation, except for the ones cocooned inside Tripp’s body, and they’re on high alert, crackling and zinging over and over again like fireworks as they build toward the finale.

Grunting, I push toward the precipice, the feel of Tripp’s cock slapping my leg driving me forward. Then a sharp tug on my balls turns that grunt to a needy whine. I gasp as I realize he’s squeezing both our sacs in his palm.

“Not yet, big guy. I can still hear the guilty voices in your head. No coming til they’re gone,” he commands.

Planting my right foot on the ground for leverage, I thrust as hard and fast as my body will allow, the smack of skin on skin drowning out the post-game coverage on the TV. The speculation about me, and the team, and our future. All the noise that threatened to send me careening into an abyss of anger and self-pity, before Tripp gave me his body as a lifeline.

*Jesus. How does he understand me so well? How does he know what I need before I do? How does he make me feel whole?*

“Harder.” Tripp's order has me realizing my pace has started to slow. “Get out of your head and fuck me.”

With renewed focus I drive into Tripp's slick hole, losing myself to the friction and pressure that surrounds me as I tunnel into him.

“That's it, big guy. Give me all of you. Everything.” He lets go of our balls and grips his cock with a throaty groan, and I find a rhythm that borders on frantic, pounding into him relentlessly as my mind finally quiets, allowing my body full control.

My abs burn, my thighs twitch, and my cock feels like it's chafing despite the slickness surrounding it. And then his hole clamps down like a pressure cooker, squeezing me to the point of pain. My toes curl and cramp, my balls draw up tight, and I unload like a damn firehose, filling him so fast my cum seeps out and slides down our thighs.

The room goes dark as my release fades, my body too spent to hold my eyelids open, and I collapse against Tripp's back. My weight causes his arms to give out, and as we fall against the cushions. Our sweaty skin is just slippery enough that my torso slides off his, coming to rest between his warm body and the back of the couch, though our legs are still tangled.

“I hope you pay your cleaning lady well because I painted my entire load on your sofa,” Tripp mumbles beside me.

“I’ll just flip the cushion.”

“And leave my jizz there as a memento? First a spanking and now this? Kinky.”

“I didn’t spank you to be kinky. You were talking about always being ready to fuck, but you don’t need to carry hookup supplies around when we’re in *my* house.”

Tripp shifts to lay on his side so he can face me, eyebrow arched impishly. “Hate sex doesn’t go so well if you have to say, *‘please hold while I try to remember where I put the lube.’*”

“Was that hate sex?” I set my hand on his hip, focusing on the way my fingers glide over his skin instead of the look I might see in his eyes.

“What did it feel like?”

“Salvation.”

He snort-laughes. “I know I’m a good fuck, but you’re giving me too much credit.”

“I’m serious.” I swallow thickly, risking a quick glance at his face before I study my hand again. “I was about to spiral, and you stopped it. That doesn’t feel like hate.”

“It’s not. But hate fucking has a better ring to it than get it out of your system fucking,” he says airily.

“Why would you let me do that to you?”

“You needed it.” I feel him shrug. “And in case you didn’t notice, I happen to *really* like it.”

“I was pretty rough. I’m not even sure I was aware of what I was doing half the time. I could’ve hurt you.” My fingers flex and release on his hip as if to punctuate my words.

“You let go of your control, just like I asked you to. Do you feel better?”

“Yes and no.” I swallow again. “I’m not as angry, but I’m a little confused.”

“About what?”

“I’ve never been that way off the ice.”

“What way?”

“Aggressive. Unhinged.”

“I believe you’re saying *hot as fuck* wrong.” Tripp trails a finger between my pecs, making me shiver.

“What?” I half-scoff, half-chuckle.

“I mean, you’re always hot, but wanting me so bad you literally can’t control yourself...” His finger ghosts over my nipple. “Damn.”

“Your ego knows no bounds.” I grab his hand, holding it next to my chest.

“What can I say, I’m blessed.” He shifts again so he’s laying on his back, his hand falling out of my grip, while I’m still on my side, facing him.

“I kissed you.” I press, resting my hand on his lean stomach.

“True.”

“And you kissed me back.”

“Also, true.”

“Why?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Felt right at the time I guess.”

I want to ask if that means we’re more than fuck buddies, but I have a feeling this conversation is already testing his limits, and as long as he’s not saying we shouldn’t do that again I won’t push it.

“I thought the same thing. We should probably clean up.”

“You mean we should see if I really did ruin your couch?” He waggles his eyebrows.

“I don’t give a shit about the couch. Help me up. I dropped my crutches

when I tackled you.”

Tripp hunts down my crutches and holds them steady as I struggle to stand up, frowning slightly as I make my way out toward my bedroom.

“That’s something you don’t see every day,” he mutters.

“What?”

“A naked man hobbling around on crutches. I wouldn’t expect it to be hot but... It makes the muscles in your back ripple all sexy like, and your ass jiggles when you plant your foot.”

“Jiggles?” I huff, rolling my eyes. “I’m already laid up, don’t take the rest of my dignity by saying jiggles.”

“It’s a compliment.”

“It doesn’t feel like one. Walk ahead of me. Go start the shower.”

Tripp pinches my ass and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Brat.” I grumble as I watch his sexy ass strut down the hall, a goofy grin plastered on my face.

## Chapter 18 – Tripp

“What?” Noah asks hesitantly when he catches me watching him from the corner of my eye.

“Nothing.” I glance back at the TV, pretending I’ve been watching it since he plopped down next to me.

“You know how you chew the corner of your lip when you’re dying to say something people might find offensive and you’re wondering if the backlash will be worth it?”

“No.” *Note to self, don’t chew on my lip when I’m debating whether to open my mouth.* “I don’t ever wonder if the backlash is worth it. I don’t care.”

“Depends on how offensive you’re about to get. And toward who. So, out with it.”

“Out with what?” I ask innocently, which Noah answers with a heavy sigh. “Fine. I was just thinking that for a hockey god who’s got possibly the best body I’ve ever had the pleasure of climbing, you’re looking awfully winded after walking ten yards.”

“Crutches are exhausting.”

“You’re only using one. You’re practically walking.”

“I’m mostly trying not to fall.”

“Still, shouldn’t you have more...stamina?”

I totally didn’t mean for that word choice to be so charged, but I can’t say I don’t love the wave of lust that glazes his eyes.

“Noah Tremblay, get your head out of the gutter.”

“You dragged me down there.” His bashful smile damn near makes me crack one of my own. *This man is too gorgeous for his own good.*

“That’s getting easier and easier to do. But as much as I like how your mind immediately conjured an image of me bouncing on your cock, I’m genuinely worried. You look worn out.”

Noah’s smile fades to a strained grin. “The swelling is just... It makes my foot feel tight, like it doesn’t fit in my skin. And that pain makes walking a lot harder than it looks.”

Cocking my head to the side, I study the ankle he has propped on the coffee table. “I guess it does still look pretty puffy. Can they juice it?”

“Juice it?” He wrinkles his nose in disgust.

“Don’t give me that look. I didn’t come up with the term. Willy Wonka did.”

“Willy Wonka?”

“You know, the candy guy in that movie? When that girl turns into a giant blueberry they take her to the juicing room, I think. We should take you to get juiced.”

He laughs, looking at me like I’m both absurd and amusing. “The only way to get swelling down is time. Although, I suppose a massage wouldn’t hurt.”

“A massage?” Now it’s my turn to wrinkle my nose. “You want a foot massage?”

“I mean, if you’re offering—”

“I’m not. Nope. Not offering that.”

“You don’t like giving massages?”

“I don’t like touching feet.” I shudder at the thought.

“Let me get this straight, you’d happily stick a finger up my ass but not touch my feet?” The gleam in his eye says he’s baiting me, but I’m too

grossed out to take it. There's one body part I don't love on anybody, and I don't plan to start now.

"You haven't let me put my finger in your ass yet, but yes. I'd take that over touching your feet."

"What about my swelling?" He adopts this wounded puppy look that's so fucking cute words spill out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"Will that extra fluid go to your dick and make it supersized?"

"No." His lips split into a wide grin as he laughs at my pout.

"Would you let me put my finger in your ass?" *I can't believe I'm playing along with this, but he really does have the nicest, roundest, most beautifully jiggly butt and I desperately want a piece of it.*

"Maybe."

"Fine," I huff. "Give me your foot."

A heavy weight finds its way to my lap, and with my eyes closed I tentatively reach for it.

"If it grosses you out that bad you don't have to touch it." Noah starts to pull his leg back, but I hold it firmly.

"Just... Distract me." I gently knead the squishy skin around his ankle, telling myself it's an ass cheek.

"What made you get into skateboarding?"

"I already told you. It's uncivilized."

"You could say the same thing about hockey."

"I suppose, although if a sport costs thousands of dollars to play, most people would say aggressive or even violent, not uncivilized." *Did he just sigh? Maybe he's pretending I'm rubbing his ass too.*

"So, if it cost money your parents would support it, and if it didn't they'd hate it, so you went with the one they'd hate?"

“And here I thought hockey players were just dumb jocks.”

“Not a dye job, but also not a state of mind.” I open my eyes to see Noah pointing at his hair, and roll my own before getting back to my imaginary butt massage.

“Did you get to pick hockey or did your Canadian roots decide for you?” I ask.

“Both. It was pretty much expected that I learn the game, but when I started growing and realized I have solid reflexes for my size, it became something I wanted to get better at.”

“I bet your parents are psyched about that.”

“They were.”

“Were?” My hands still.

“They passed about eight years ago. Car accident.”

“I’m sorry.” To my surprise I don’t laugh, even though this is a prime example of an inopportune moment. Maybe I’m finally outgrowing that particular personality defect.

“Thank you,” he says, and when nothing else follows I start rubbing again.

“What?” His question brings my gaze to his, and I see him point to his lip. “You’re chewing on it again. What?”

No way. I’m not going to admit I was thinking about my own shitty parents when he’s clearly sad about losing his.

“You really don’t want to know.” I knead his ankle, shoving my family out of my mind and focusing on my salacious daydream. This time I know he sighs in response, which makes me feel oddly content despite the fact I’m touching his foot.

“Of course, I want to know.”

“Fine,” I groan for maximum effect and tell him about my fantasy instead

of the reality he caught me remembering. “I’m pretending I’m rubbing your ass.”

“That’s how you stomach rubbing my foot?” He chokes back a laugh.

“We all have our phobias. And the ass visual worked for me. Or it did.” I nudge his leg away because with him saying *foot* I can’t pretend anymore.

“Well, I didn’t have the same visual, but I think it had the same results.”

“What?” I twist my head to look at him, and see him pointing to his junk, which is standing at full attention. As much as it can be from underneath his track shorts.

“My foot rub did that?”

“I thought it was an imaginary butt massage.” He points to my shorts, which are also tented. *Huh*. “Looks like it worked for you, too. You know what this means?”

“Time to bounce on your cock?” I lick my lips eagerly.

He chuckles and reaches for my hand, dropping his legs to the floor as he pulls me onto his lap. “Only if I get to suck on yours first.”

*Oh, fuck yes!*

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It’s torture sitting at my desk.

Correction, it’s torture sitting here by my lonesome when I’ve spent the last few weeks working at Noah’s kitchen table. It was fun showing him what I do, eating all our meals together, and vegging on the sofa when we were done for the day.

When I volunteered to help him out with his ankle and made arrangements to work from his place, I didn’t think I’d see as much of him as I did. I figured he’d watch TV or read while I was a good little worker bee, and I’d pop up to get him snacks and shit when he asked so he wouldn’t have to

walk. I didn't expect him to take an interest in my projects and sit by my side while I worked on them, oohing and aahing over my designs and even brainstorming ideas with me. The man may be a jock but he's no dud in the creative department, and while I love my job to begin with, he made it more fun.

Now that I'm back in the office, sitting alone, I feel antsy. I can't explain it, but I miss the back and forth we had, and I keep looking at the clock to see when I can leave. Time to bother Xander, since pestering him often rejuvenates me.

"I'm in literal heaven. Noah loves dick," I confess as I plop my ass on the corner of his desk.

Even though he's clearly skeptical about the big guy and I playing footsy with our dicks, it's sort of tradition for me to exploit my exploits, and now that our secret's out I see no reason why I can't gift Xander with some of the saucy details, which... *Dear Lord.*

I've been '*taking care of*' Noah for almost two weeks and he's slightly more mobile now. Even though I've started working in my office again, I'm still staying at his place every night. In his bed. Where he makes sure I'm thoroughly exhausted by the time I fall asleep, and sometimes again when I wake up. It's like I've got my own personal sex doll. Or dildo. Or... Cock worshiper sounds obnoxious, but it's not entirely inaccurate given his fascination with my junk.

"Yes, I sort of assumed that since you're dating," Xander says blandly.

"Fucking," I correct. "But yes, he loves it." Ever since he hate-fucked us into the next universe, he's been greedy for it, coming after me day and night. I suppose a small part of his desperation could be attributed to the kissing, a

slip up on my part but one I can't say I regret. It's led to more sex, and the big guy is a fantastic kisser.

True, I'm breaking the rules I set for myself, which should be concerning. Prior to Noah, neither kissing nor sleepovers were part of my vocabulary. I know in the long run it will prove to be a bad idea that I've let them become habit, but... *Sex!* Lots and lots of it. In every room, on every surface, and in every position imaginable as long as he can do it without putting weight on his foot.

Have we crossed into friends with benefits territory instead of fuck buddies? Probably. However, I refuse to accept that repeated, mind-blowing orgasms shouldn't be enjoyed to the fullest, so that's what I'm doing, even if it means I sometimes, occasionally fall asleep in his arms.

And wake up there.

*Naked.*

"He can't stop touching it," I gush to Xander. "Before we go to bed, first thing when we wake up, in the shower... He even edged me while I was playing video games."

"I don't need to know that." Xander winces slightly and shakes his head.

"Of course, you do, because it's actually super-hot. Noah's not a gamer but he said he needed something to do while I play, so I let him hold my dick, which turned into me riding his while I shot up bad guys. And staying focused on the game while you're getting jerked off *and* pegged is no easy feat, let me tell you. I did pretty well, though. I only team-killed, like, three guys."

"TMI." Xander presses his hands to his ears.

I pull them down with an eye roll. "I listened to all your shit with Niko. The least you can do is listen to mine."

“I literally never told you anything about our sex life.”

“Which is a travesty since that man is fucking glorious, and you’re only forgiven since it led to me meeting Noah. Did I mention he *loves* my cock? The other day, he had his head in my lap while we were watching TV, and for no reason at all he just pulled it out and started sucking on it, and...”

“Tripp!” Xander hisses.

“What?” I blink, leaning back slightly since he sort of yelled at me at whisper volume. Xander's gotten frustrated with me before, but he's *never* yelled. Not once, no matter how much I overshare. Now he'll never hear the juiciest part of that story, which I was tempted to share. That for some strange reason I was fine with Noah's head in my lap. I wouldn't have minded even if blow jobs weren't included.

Xander closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger with a heavy sigh. “Do you think Noah would be okay with you telling me all this?”

“I mean, you’re not some random guy, you're his teammate’s boyfriend. Besides, it’s just sex.”

Xander drops his hand and gives me a withering look. “Is it?”

I’m not usually speechless, but my mouth opens and shuts at least three times before I blurt, “Well, what would you call it?”

“Dating.”

My mouth has trouble forming words again. “It’s not dating if you’ve never been on a date.”

“Semantics.”

“Semantics are pretty important, you know. Critical even. And aside from the fact that we haven’t been on a date, I *don’t* date. So, your definition

doesn't apply." I'm rambling, but since that's normal for me I figure he won't make an issue of it.

"Does *cohabitating* work better for you?"

I gasp with as much disgust as I can muster. "I would never—"

"How many nights have you spent at your place in the last two weeks?"

"I've been playing nurse. You know that." I cross my arms over my chest.

"And how much nursing are you doing? Noah's got a chef and a physical therapist, and he should be walking by now if his recovery is on track. So, what's your role, exactly?"

"I gave him a foot massage the other day," I blurt defensively, realizing a little too late that won't help my case.

"You hate feet." Xander smirks knowingly, forcing me to double down.

"Which clearly demonstrates what a good nursing job I'm doing."

"Or it says you like Noah."

"Of course, I like him. He's a friendly guy and he's got a beautiful cock." I lift a nonchalant shoulder.

"You could say the same thing about most guys you hook up with, but you've never spent the night with them."

Right about now, I'm regretting the extent to which I exploit my exploits to Xander. In my defense, I was pretty certain he wasn't paying attention half of the time.

"We're talking in circles here. You know why I've been spending the night. Stop reading into everything."

"Stop pretending your motives are purely altruistic. You're staying there because you want to, not because you need to."

"He does have a magnificent shower." I snatch a pen off Xander's desk and start spinning it around my fingers.

Xander snatches the pen back. “He’s different, admit it. And while we’re on the topic, so are you, and I don’t just mean your hair color. Since the day I met you, you’ve been hiding in plain sight. You’re loud and obnoxious and outspoken, but you don’t fool me. It’s an act to make people think you’re an open book when really all they see is the cover. Noah sees through it, doesn’t he? And you like it, don’t you? That’s why you haven’t left when he doesn’t, and never really did, need you to take care of him.”

Wow. All this time I thought Xander was too broody and guarded himself to realize there wasn’t much substance behind most of my word vomit. Being sickeningly happy—like a chocolate addict being welcome into Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory—must’ve opened his eyes. I blame Niko. Clearly, he’s at fault here.

“Perhaps the big guy is more interesting than I first thought.”

“Still not willing to admit you might have feelings for him, huh?” Xander narrows his eyes, and while that warrants a saucy retort, I’m embarrassed to say I don’t have one, so I just stare at him blankly. “Fine,” he dismisses me by focusing on his computer, and since I don’t have a retort for that either, I slink back to my own desk, wondering if it’s already too late to say we’re simply friends with benefits.

## Chapter 19 - Noah

“When are you coming back?” There’s an uncharacteristic hitch in Luca’s voice, which I’m not sure can be attributed to a poor connection.

“The doctor says at least two more weeks, if I have full range of motion.”

“Dammit.” He exhales.

“What’s wrong with that? It’s faster than originally projected.”

“I need you back. I’m playing like shit.”

“You guys have two losses. That’s nothing we can’t recover from.” I try to talk him down.

“I’m not talking about the team, I’m talking about me. Everyone else is pulling their weight but I’m flailing out there. I need you back. I’m not myself...” he trails off.

He doesn’t need to say anything else for me to know where this is going, and it’s a direction I’m not as comfortable with as I once was. Still, I have to tread carefully because regardless of what I think, he’s rooted in his beliefs. And if there’s one thing I understand, if something makes you feel like you play better, regardless of how ridiculous it seems, you do it.

“Luca, I’m not the key to your success. You’re still playing great. Just yesterday you scored two goals.”

“That was a home game. I have an arrangement for those.” *He has an arrangement? Huh. I always wondered how that worked.* “It’s the road games where I struggle. I need you to—”

“I’m not cleared to travel,” I interrupt before he can ask what I suspect he wants to ask.

“I know, but maybe we can work something out. I could video chat you or something.”

*Shit.* That’d be a reasonable solution if I was still single, but I’m not. At least, I don’t think I am... Tripp might have a different opinion. We haven’t talked about what we are, and I was hoping not to just yet since I’m pretty sure he’s not ready to label it. But Luca won’t understand my hesitation without a label to explain it, and if I’m going to deny his request after all these years, I owe him an explanation.

“Can we come up with another option? One that maybe doesn’t involve me?”

“One that... *Oh shit.* This is because of Tripp, isn’t it? You’re not just fucking you’re...*fucking.*”

“I don’t understand the difference, but yeah. It’s because of Tripp. I don’t feel right being your audience when I’m sleeping with him.”

“The difference is you’re not just having a little fun between the sheets, you like him.”

“I do. I really do.” I’m suddenly grateful to be on the phone so he can’t see the heat rush to my face with that admission. Not that I’m ashamed to have feelings for Tripp, I just can’t help worrying that those feelings will be our downfall, seeing as we had an agreement. We promised not to let ourselves get to this point. If I’m being honest, I always suspected this would happen, and I secretly hoped it would.

The fact we’ve been practically living together for the past few weeks probably accelerated things, but right from the start I questioned whether I liked all men or only Tripp. Now, I can confidently say it’s only Tripp. Whether I’d be attracted to another man if I gave myself the opportunity to explore that I’m not sure, but I am sure I don’t need to find out.

Tripp makes things fun. Not just sex, but life. He's full of energy, finds pleasure in just about everything, and makes me see things in a new light. For years, all I saw was hockey, and I don't regret that. The sport has given me so much, and it's fulfilled me in a way nothing else could. It's also why I was wary of retirement, which is looming in the not-so-distant future. For the first time in, maybe ever, I can see a future that doesn't revolve around hockey. Tripp gave me that.

When I think of the future, there's only one thing that matters. I just want him in it.

"You know, he'd probably be on board with watching," Luca hints.

"He probably would." I sigh heavily, hating the way that image makes my stomach sink.

"But you aren't." Luca must hear the reluctance in my voice.

"Not really, no." I'm fully conscious that wanting Tripp for myself threatens everything. He might be a willing participant, and I know on some level I'm important to him, but if he came to the realization that this is more than sex to me I'm afraid he'd pack up and leave.

"So, this is serious with you two?"

I rub a hand over my face, as if that will stave off the tension building in my head. "I don't know. It wasn't supposed to be, then this injury happened and... Things feel different now. I haven't acknowledged that out loud. All I know is whatever this is, I don't want it to end."

"You're going to leave me hanging over something you aren't even sure is serious?"

"You're going to give me shit over being confused after I suffered through years of your unconventional pre-game ritual?" I fire back.

"Suffered?" Luca sounds genuinely shocked. "I thought it didn't bother

you?”

“I didn’t mean it like that, sorry.” I apologize. “It didn’t bother me.”

“About that,” he pauses a few seconds before speaking again. “Were you gay this whole time? I don’t care if you were, I just thought that wasn’t your thing.”

“I didn’t think it was either. And I wouldn’t say I’m gay since I’m not attracted to all men. Just Tripp.”

“Pfft. I’m way hotter than Tripp,” he mutters.

“You sound like you want me to be attracted to you.”

“I don’t,” he rushes to clarify. “Having you watch was never about that, it’s a superstition I haven’t been able to shake in...forever. Still, it kinda bruises my ego, anyway. I know that doesn’t make any sense. Maybe I’m just freaking out over what to do...”

I don’t know the origin of his superstition, but I get why he clings to it so fiercely. It makes sense that changing things up would rattle him, especially when that change comes with a healthy dose of *‘I didn’t see that coming’* like the one I just sprung on him about being gay for only Tripp, if that’s what I am.

“What if you video chatted someone else? Whoever you have that arrangement with here?” I don’t have all the salacious details about how Luca’s superstition works, but if he has an arrangement here then there are other options.

“I guess I could try that.” He exhales heavily. “So, what are you gonna do about Tripp? Think you’ll tell him you’re into him?”

“I thought I might ask him on a date.”

Luca coughs and sputters on the other end of the line. “Doesn’t that step usually come *after* you decide you want to date?”

“Hell if I know. I couldn’t even tell you the last time I went on one. But my neighbors are having this charity fundraiser thing and since they invite everyone in the area, I’m sure Niko and Xander will be going, so it’d be more of a group thing.”

“A charity fundraiser? That’s your idea of a date?”

“I guess I doesn't have to be called that. We have to dress up for it, so maybe? I just don’t want to go alone or be the third wheel to Niko and Xander, so I thought it might be okay to ask him and see where it goes.”

“I’d probably have the ‘*are we fucking or fucking*’ conversation first, but yeah. Ask him out.”

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After a grueling PT session where I managed to hit about eighty percent of my mobility, I hit the shower to clean up, paying particular attention to *that* spot. Just in case.

It’s probably silly, but there’s a part of me that feels like I won’t ever find out where this thing with Tripp can go if I don’t let him in. *Physically*. I’ve been getting more and more curious about it, and now that we’ve been sleeping together for nearly a month, it feels like the right time. That and I might have an ulterior motive.

Though Tripp is well-spoken when he wants to be, at his core he’s a physical, sexual guy. I think he’s more comfortable with actions than words, and taking the role of bottom is one way for me to acknowledge I’ve developed feelings for him without putting him on the spot by saying the words. Sort of like that kiss.

I didn’t plan that, I just acted, and he didn’t stop me. He’s even initiated it a few times since then. Only during sex, but considering that was a line between us that’s no longer there... It seems to me the best way to approach

new dynamics with Tripp is to just act. So, tonight, I'll tell him I'm game for more than just a sexual relationship by offering to bottom. If he accepts, I'll know we're getting closer to the point where I can say the words without driving him into a panic.

Tripp's a little jumpy when he gets home, darting back and forth between the kitchen and living room to grab me a drink, himself a drink, clean up, and who knows what else.

"Bad day?" I ask.

"No, why?" Tripp starts to sit, pats his pockets and looks toward the kitchen with a frown before bolting in that direction for his phone.

"You're making me dizzy with all this up and down. Just sit and relax," I tell him.

He sits at the opposite end of the couch, but rather than slouch into it like he usually does his spine is ramrod straight, eyes darting around the room. "Where are you crutches?"

For the last several days, I've used them to take a little of the burden off my ankle while walking, but I've finally made enough progress to ditch them completely. "The therapist said as long as it wasn't uncomfortable, I could walk without them."

"Hmm." Tripp nods. "So, you're better?"

"Getting there. They aren't ready to let me try skating yet, but I have the green light for standing and walking."

"You probably don't need me to help you out anymore then."

*Fuck.* I didn't see that coming, even though it's a logical assessment. Truthfully, I think we both know I never *needed* him to take care of me, we just went along with that ruse since it was a convenient excuse to have him

stay. I could be honest and tell him I like having him around, though I think that would be worse than admitting I can take care of myself.

“Who would rub my ankle when it’s sore?” I ask with mock seriousness, hoping my flirty tone implies there’s a legitimate reason for him to be here.

“Doesn’t your physical therapist do that?”

“It doesn’t have the same results.” I take a page out of his playbook and look pointedly at my crotch. Even though it feels deceitful to use sex to get him to stay, my gut tells me he’ll respond to that, buying me time until he’s ready to hear the truth about my feelings.

A wicked gleam flashes over his eyes. “Are you saying sex is crucial to your recovery?”

“I mean, it can’t hurt. Right?”

“As long as you’re not fucking me up against the wall on that ankle, which is all I can picture now, dammit.” Whatever was on his mind earlier is clearly a thing of the past as he practically vibrates in his seat.

“Or you could fuck me up against the wall.” I hold my breath as I wait for his response.

“You evil bastard,” he whispers, shaking his head slowly back and forth.

My shoulders slump. “You don’t like that idea?”

“I fucking love that idea. I’ve wanted your virgin hole for so long. You know I’d never turn down a chance to get inside that beautiful round ass of yours.” His eyes are so hooded with lust they’re barely more than little slits, which makes my cock swell visibly inside my shorts.

Pulling a packet of lube from my pocket, I toss it to him and arch my brow suggestively.

“Now who’s the boy scout?” he smirks.

“I learned from the best.”

“Get naked,” he demands, and I damn near rip my shorts trying to get them off. “Lie back and put one foot on the floor. The other over the back of the couch.”

Doing as he says, I find myself spread wide open, my thick cock resting against my stomach, rising and falling with each anxious breath. Tripp scoots between my legs and rubs his palm up my thigh, between my pecs, and over my stomach. His finger grazes my shaft in the process and it lurches at the slight touch. Aside from a tiny grin, Tripp doesn’t acknowledge the effect he has on me. He just keeps rubbing his hand over my heated skin, like he’s savoring every contour, committing it to memory.

His touch isn’t overtly sexual, but it makes me tingle everywhere. It wakes up my senses, coaxing me into a state of heightened arousal. And while I’m sure the gentle touch is for my physical comfort, it soothes my heart at the same time.

Whether he intends to or not, he’s caressing me like a lover would, like he cherishes me and wants to take care of me. He’d be mortified to realize the emotions he’s creating inside my soul, but I can’t bring myself to be the bigger man and call this off before I fall for him irrevocably. Even if it leaves me heartbroken in the end, I want to experience this moment with him.

Gradually, he inches lower, fingers grazing over my taint, between my crack. My ass clenches involuntarily, both eager for and leery of the coming intrusion. As usual, Tripp seems to sense how I feel.

“Relax,” he says as he opens the packet of lube and spreads some over his fingers. “This will feel strange at first, maybe even a little uncomfortable. Don’t fight it. I promise it’ll get better, and you’ll love it.”

I gasp as the cool gel on his fingers comes into contact with my skin, exhaling slowly as he draws circles around my puckered hole. It’s not

entirely unpleasant actually. There's a faint quiver deep inside my groin, which makes a bit of precum seep from my slit.

My thighs relax as Tripp probes the area, lulling me deeper into an aura of bliss as a contented moan rumbles from my throat.

“Fuck, that’s a sexy sound,” Tripp rasps as the pressure on my hole suddenly increases. “First finger. Let me hear it again.”

This time I utter more of a groan as my hole strains around the slight disturbance, and while it feels interesting enough that I want him to continue, the fullness of his finger inside me seems similar to... “Oh God. Is it supposed to feel like I have to take a shit?”

“Jesus. And people accuse me of talking without thinking,” he scoffs as his finger pumps leisurely back and forth, which after the initial shock feels pretty good. I don’t want him to stop. “You’re lucky I have a one-track mind,” he continues, “because I’m horny enough to ignore that comment.”

“Sorry, it’s just... I didn’t know how else to describe it.”

“Don’t describe it, just feel it. I’m adding another finger.”

The burn of the stretch takes over and I squirm uncomfortably until I feel a firm grip wrap about my cock. Suddenly, the discomfort is replaced with the familiar tingle of arousal. Tripp’s fist strokes up and down my length, and a wet heat surrounds my crown. Something that’s part moan, part sigh passes through my lips as my body tries to process the torrent of sensations flooding through it. Between the suction on my tip, the pressure on my shaft, and the fullness in my ass, I don’t know which way is up. Torn between the need to fight for control or bucking my hips wildly, my muscles throw in the towel, turning to jelly as I give myself over to the whirlpool of stimulation coursing through me.

My dick falls out of Tripp’s mouth with an audible pop. “There you go.

Nice and relaxed. Now, let's make your cock dance."

Something shifts inside me, and my dick lurches upward as a bolt of pure electricity ricochets throughout my body. "Holy shit!" I cry, propping myself on my elbows so I can look down my body. "What the hell was that?"

"Big guy, meet your prostate." I feel another shift deep in my core—Tripp's fingers—and my cock lurches again as a fresh drop of precum oozes out.

"Jesus." My head falls back onto the cushions as I gasp for air, a wicked laugh the only warning before he nudges it again, and again. I writhe beneath him, realizing that my prior understanding of bliss was sorely lacking.

With each swipe of his finger, my muscles contract, spasms wracking my body to what would be the point of pain if they weren't so euphoric. I've never felt pleasure like this. It's like I'm vibrating on a higher plane of existence. My body is so stimulated it can't contain my consciousness, and I'm so zoned out it's hard to form words.

"Is this...? When I...?"

"That's right, big guy. This is what it feels like when you fuck me. Ready for my dick?"

I can't speak. Can't moan. Can't even move my head. I think I blink though, which earns me a little peck on the lips as Tripp mumbles, "Fuck yeah."

The ecstasy bubble pops as Tripp's hands leave my body, and I whimper at the loss. Then I notice him shedding his clothes and lubing his cock.

Licking my lips, I watch his fist slide over his length. I don't know if he looks so big because of the lack of pubic hair, or because he really is big. Either way, the smooth skin stretched taut over his shaft is a mesmerizing sight. The view is even more enticing with the gel coating his skin, making it

glisten in the light. “It’s gonna be uncomfortable at first.” Tripp lines himself up to my hole. “Breathe through it.”

The pressure is sudden and intense, forcing my eyes to snap shut as I choke on a breath of air.

“Breathe.” His gentle reminder comes as a slippery fist circles my cock. “Focus on my hand. Feel it sliding over your dick, nice and slow. That feels nice, right? The way you fit in my hand. I think this is my favorite cock in the world, besides mine. It’s so big and long and thick.”

“Are you trying to distract me by complimenting my dick?” I grit.

“It worked. I’m all the way in.” Two things register at once. My ass is almost uncomfortably full, and Tripp’s voice sounds off. I open my eyes to find his jaw locked tight, the tendons in his neck visible underneath the skin as he takes shaky breaths. *He’s stunning.*

“Tripp?”

“I need a second. You’re... Fuck, you’re so tight.” In all the times we’ve been together, I can’t say I’ve ever seen Tripp with such a tenuous grip on his control. The sight pushes out all lingering traces of discomfort and fills me with a mixture of gratitude and pride.

Whether this is the start of something real or the end of something fleeting, knowing I have such a profound effect on another person will always be seared in my memory. I’ll forever be marked by this experience, and I’m guessing he will, too.

I’m still staring, admiring the beauty of his tightly coiled features, when his eyes flutter open and lock onto mine.

“Tripp,” I groan, though whether it’s a plea or a warning I’m not sure.

He lets go of my dick and leans over me, trapping it between our bodies as he braces his hands on either side of my chest and ghosts his lips over mine.

“Grab my ass. You control the pace.”

I cup his cheeks in my hands as he starts to move, rocking slowly back and forth to help me adjust. It’s awkward at first, but after a few pumps my channel adapts, welcoming the slide of his cock.

The friction of his stomach on my shaft feels divine, but the weight of his steel length against my prostate is pure heaven. Within seconds, I’m back in that trance-like state, where I’m so overcome with bliss my mind shuts down and my body runs on autopilot.

My carnal urges take control, hips rolling to give Tripp better access as my biceps struggle to pull him closer. Yet even as I strain to bring us together, there’s no urgency behind my movements. No rush to reach the finish. I simply want to feel him *everywhere*.

Dropping to his forearms so we’re chest to chest, Tripp pistons his hips in long, languid strokes, hitting all my pleasure points with each thrust. Sweat pools between us as we rock into each other, the sound of our labored breathing echoing in the room around us.

My hole flexes and contracts as Tripp brushes over my prostate, causing him to groan. “Holy fuck, big guy. Your ass is heaven. I’m not gonna last.”

Gripping him tighter, I help him spear in and out of my channel, increasing our pace as we charge toward the finish. Suddenly we’re face-to-face, breathing each other’s air as we grunt with the effort to get deeper, closer, more.

And then time stops. The tension in my balls explodes through my tip, drenching us both in my cum as I clamp down on the cock pulsing inside me. Mouths hovering above each other, frozen in a silent scream, wave after wave of tremors wrack through us as our hips buck through our release.

Trapped between us, my dick twitches and spurts as we rock against each other, wringing out every last quiver of our orgasm.

Warm liquid gushes out of my hole as Tripp's mouth rests against mine. Not kissing just, breathing, which is more intimate and somehow not at the same time. Then he lifts his chest off mine with shaky arms and gives me a lazy grin. "I'm not gonna have to fight you for the bottom now, am I?"

I know that's supposed to be an offhand comment, nothing to read into. But I read into it anyway, clinging to the hope that it means there's more of this... of *us* in our future. "I know how to take turns."

"Good to know." He winks as he pulls out and offers me a hand to sit up. "Want me to make sure you don't get lost in your shower?"

That's an olive branch, I think. Offering to help under the guise I need it instead of admitting he likes to shower with me. And since tonight was a big step for both of us, I won't press for more. But one day soon I will—I don't want to live in limbo now that I know who I am and what I want—and hopefully he'll be ready to take that step with me.

"Right behind you." I let him pull me up.

## Chapter 20 - Tripp

“I didn’t know you were going blond again,” Noah says when I get home—*home?*

“Green tips are too difficult to maintain. They start to fade pretty quickly, and the boss man doesn’t like me taking an extended lunch every week to get my hair colored, which is really a shame because I wouldn’t mind trying a dark blue next.”

Noah’s eyes dart to mine, telling me he knows exactly where the blue idea came from, just like I intended. “I didn’t realize it was that labor intensive to have colored hair.”

“Depends on the color.” I point to my freshly bleached hair.

“So, I have a question for you,” he says as he takes two of his chef’s premade meals out of the oven.

“You know you don’t have to ask to bottom, right? You can just tell me that’s what you’re in the mood for.” I palm his delectable ass and give it a nice squeeze since I’ve become well-acquainted with it over the last week. Even though we agreed to take turns, he’s still working up to the point where he can take me without a lot of prep, and I am happy to oblige.

“Noted.” He smirks. “But that’s not what I was going to ask.”

“Okay, what’s up?” I snatch a piece of broccoli off one of the plates and pop it in my mouth. *Still can’t believe I actually like the green stuff his chef makes.*

“My neighbors have this charity party every year—they invite the whole neighborhood—and it’s coming up this weekend. I thought maybe you could

come with me?”

The muscles in my body grow instantly heavy, like they've turned to concrete, making it hard to move let alone speak. “You want me to go to a party with you?”

“Yeah.”

My heart feels like it's going to beat right out of my chest. On the one hand...*party!* On the other, I'm not a stranger to these types of charity events, and they aren't the type of thing you bring the guy you're fucking to. “I feel like that's a couple's thing, not a fuck buddy thing.”

To my surprise that statement doesn't seem to faze him. “You've been staying here for weeks taking care of me. Aren't we past fuck buddies?”

“Okay... Maybe we're friends with benefits.”

“I think it's more than that.”

*Oh shit.* I knew I'd overstayed my welcome, but... Hot sex. On the daily. I guess that's bound to happen when two spectacular cocks come out to play, but... *Ugh, focus!*

“Well, what would you call it? We're not boyfriends,” I state plainly. “I don't do that, and we still don't even know if you're gay or bi or what. You can't be anything more than friends with benefits without knowing that.” I'm making this shit up as I go because I can't handle thinking we've crossed into boyfriend land.

*I knew I shouldn't have fucked his hole.*

I knew he was using that as a way to get me to stay, but I listened to my cock instead of my brain. Not that I can't be talked into pretty much anything with the promise of sex, but deep down I suspected the offer to top him was his way of steering us towards something beyond just fucking, and I was too horny to care, *dammit.*

“I think maybe I’m demi.” Noah interrupts my internal rant.

“Ooh, someone used Google.” It’s a childish retort but... *Hello, it's me.* I take my plate and sit at the kitchen table, putting some distance between us.

“I’m serious.” Noah follows me. “I think I’m only attracted to people I feel connected to.”

“And you think you’re connected to me? *Me*, not my cock? I’d understand if you were confused, especially since you’ve been working through some stuff. We should probably make sure though.” I stand to unbutton my pants.

“Do not show me your dick right now. A hard-on doesn’t solve everything.”

“That didn’t even cross my mind.” *It totally crossed my mind.*

“So, what’s that then?” He points to my crotch. “Checking to make sure your zipper works?”

“I had to readjust.” I drop back into my chair and pretend I wasn’t trying to avoid this conversation with sex. “Okay, I can see how you’d feel connected to me after I took care of you, but I could get you going even before that. That’s not demi.”

“Not true. I’ve always found it easy to talk to you. To be myself. I think because you’re so unapologetically...you.” Noah waves his hand over me from head to toe. “You made me comfortable enough to be me.”

*Okay, that’s actually sweet, but still scary since I don’t do sweet.*

“What are you saying?”

“I like you. A lot.”

“Cool.” I spear a piece of chicken and shove it in my mouth. “I like you too.”

“No, I mean I *like* you. As in I want to be with you. Preferably as more than just two friends who fuck each other.”

“Like boyfriends?” I feel my eyes grow wide with panic.

“I mean, yeah.” Noah shrugs bashfully, which is adorable, but not cool.

“Okay. Um...” I scratch my neck.

Then my arm.

Then my side.

Obviously, this is a deal-breaker, but I don't want to hurt the guy, so I have to let him down easy. But that means no more mind-blowing sex. No more sleepovers, either, which I will only admit to myself this one time that I sort of like. Still, cold turkey is the way to go. Clean slate. Full stop.

*Is it hot in here?*

“What's wrong?” Noah's brows draw together in gentle concern as he reaches for my arm.

I pull it away to scratch my neck again. “I feel itchy.”

“Are you having an allergic reaction?”

“Maybe?”

“Did you eat something weird? Or touch something weird?”

I scratch at my forearm when he reaches for it again. “No. I... Can you stand over there?” I point to the far side of the room.

“Where?” He twists to look behind him.

“Just...there. Back. And stop looking at me like you like me.”

“I do like you.”

“Yes, but don't look at me like you do. Look at me like I'm just a piece of ass.”

Noah pulls back with a frown. “You're not just a piece of ass. That's what I'm trying to tell you. You're important to me.”

“I know. I think that's the problem.”

“Why is that a problem?” He shifts his head back and forth, clearly not

following me.

“I’m not important to anyone. And don’t say *you* because you’re fucking me so that doesn’t count.”

“Fine.” He crosses his arms in front of his chest. “What about Xander?”

“I’m pretty sure he wants to strangle me half the time.” I snort as I itch my chest.

“If that were true, he’d have done it by now. Plus, Niko likes you.”

“Niko tolerates me for Xander.”

“His sister loves you.”

“That might actually be true, but only in a drinking buddy kind of way. And that’s fine. It’s better that way.”

“How is that better?” He reaches for me again, but I wave him back.

“There’s no false hope with drinking buddies.”

“False hope? What does that mean?”

“Drinking buddies are for a good time only. They aren’t expected to care about you beyond their stool at the bar. You hang out and have fun, but that’s all it is. I’m good with it.” *I'm getting hives. Great. Just what I need. I'm pretty sure they're making my brain swell, too... Making me say things I normally wouldn't.*

“I don’t think anyone sees you as just a drinking buddy. I don’t. Why are you itching yourself raw?”

“Because you’re messing up the pattern. Fuck around, have fun, say goodbye.” I scratch at my lower back.

“I don’t want to say goodbye.”

I roll my eyes dramatically. “Everyone does. That’s how it works.”

“How what works?”

“Life. You get close to people and they let you down. That’s why I don’t do

boyfriends. Only hookups. Get it?”

He’s looking at me like I’m deranged, and considering I look like a monkey in a zoo, I get it. Only he thinks it’s my reasoning, not my sudden rash, that’s irrational. I know better.

People like to tell you they care all the time, but in my experience it’s just talk. A line people feed you because it’s expected. Since my wake-up call nearly a decade ago, I’ve learned most of that talk isn’t malicious. Friends, colleagues, acquaintances...they get wrapped up in their own shit and forget about yours. I get it. It’s when the people closest to you don’t give a shit that messes with your head, and I figure it’s better to avoid those situations altogether than to give someone the chance to break you.

That’s how I’ve operated for the past ten years, and it works for me. I haven’t had any crushing disappointments because I haven’t put myself in a position to experience them. Given the way Noah’s looking at me right now, like he’s not going anywhere, I have a feeling I’ve already let him get too close.

“Who hurt you?” he asks softly.

*No. Nope. Not going there. I don’t tell anybody that. Ever.*

“Not your concern, big guy. The takeaway here is, I don’t do boyfriends. So, this has been fun and all, but you’re gonna have to find someone else to experiment with.” I stand, ready to bolt out of the kitchen, and find him blocking my path. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re trying to keep me from leaving.”

He crosses his arms in front of his chest, adopting a very Thor-like stance. “I am.”

“I’d say that’s kinky if it didn’t have a kidnappy undertone.”

“Joke around all you want. I’m still not letting you leave until we finish talking.”

“We are finished. Besides, haven’t you missed enough games?” I point to his ankle. “I don’t think you’re prepared to give chase, and I will run if I have to.”

“I’ll risk it.”

“Yeah, right.” I snort, glancing around to plot the best exit route. “You can’t be serious.”

“Deadly.” His calm tone is so unexpected I can’t help looking at him to see his expression, which is nothing short of sincere.

“You’d risk hurting your ankle again just to stop me from leaving?”

“Not my ankle. My career. If I don’t get back on the ice, chances are the Bulldogs won’t have a reason to keep me around. I’m too old for other teams to give me serious consideration. If I have to sacrifice the game to convince you you’re important to me, so be it.”

The itch that had started to fade comes back with a vengeance. *He wouldn’t really do that, would he?* “Nice speech, but I don’t buy it. You’ve been jumping out of your skin to get back on the ice.” I claw at the back of my neck.

“I *was* jumping out of my skin. You helped with that. *You* knew what I needed to calm down and get out of my head, and *you* helped me deal with my fear and frustration.”

“Glad I could be of service, but I think we can agree I’ve exhausted my usefulness.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Downplay what you’ve done for me. Downplay *this*. You’ve been staying

here for nearly a month, sharing my bed *and* my life, and even though I'm not on the ice right now I'm happy. I think you are too. Or you could be if you get out of your head."

That's usually my line, the thing I tell him when he's overthinking. I'm not sure how I feel about him using it on me.

"Have you thought this through?" I change tactics. "We've been in a bubble for weeks, but that will change once you're cleared to play. You'll be gone half the time, so we won't be *sharing* anything. You'll be gone, and unless you plan to keep me here in secret, people will find out you're with a man."

"So."

"So?" I echo. "What do you think people are going to say when not one but *two* players on the Bulldogs are gay?"

"I'm not gay, so who cares." He lifts a casual shoulder.

"Stay in your lane, big guy. I'm the brat in this relationship." I point to my chest. "So don't sit over there acting all smug like it's no big deal if people say... What?" I bark as he collapses into a fit of laughter.

"You said relationship." His lips twitch into a satisfied smile.

"I..." My jaw bobs up and down. *That's not true. I'm morally opposed to them. Even friendships are a stretch. I'd never willingly admit to being in one. So, why can't I deny it?*

Closing my eyes, I try to breathe through the panic and uncertainty that feels like it's crushing my chest, the way it did all those years ago when life pulled the rug out from under me. *In... Out... In... Out...*

It doesn't help. My head starts to spin, and I know I've only got a few seconds to sit down before my legs collapse. Except, they're rooted to the floor like they're glued in place, and I wobble when I finally manage to shuffle a foot forward.

Instead of falling, I find myself pressed against Noah's broad chest, his arms wrapped protectively around me. "I've got you," he whispers as he guides my head to the crook of his neck.

Though my heart is still trying to win a record for the most beats per minute, the dizziness begins to fade the moment my body makes contact with his. If I was in my right mind, I'd probably worry about that, but the only conscious thought in my brain is that I'm safe in his arms. Admittedly, that's a strange thought for a guy who thrives on his independence, but it's turning out to be a weird day.

*Fuck me, I'm a mess. A mess with a...boyfriend?* The thought makes me shudder, or shiver—I'm not sure which—I only know it makes Noah's grip on me tighten, and I lean into his embrace.

The longer he holds me, the calmer I feel. Usually, I feel jittery when people get too close—in a non-sexual way—but Noah's touch seems to ground me. It dulls the warning bells in my head and the anxiety in my limbs, leaving me somewhat stable. And...*content?*

*Is this what dating feels like? This weird sense of peace and comfort that has nothing to do with arousal? That's maybe worth exploring.*

I don't know how long we stay like that, hugging in the kitchen while Noah tenderly sifts his fingers through my hair, but by the time he guides me to the couch to sit down, my pulse is somewhat back to normal and my breathing is steady.

"I'm sorry," Noah kisses the top of my head as he tucks me against his side. "I didn't realize I was pushing you that far out of your comfort zone."

"I didn't realize I was in a...relationship." I wrinkle my nose since that word still feels strange on my tongue. I'm not sure why, since this sleepover thing has been going on awhile, and it hasn't been about taking care of him

for at least a week. Maybe Xander's right and it never was. I just wanted to be around him. God knows, I've opened up to him more than anyone else in my life. I was just too stubborn to admit it to myself.

"We don't have to call it a relationship if you aren't ready for that. We can stick with the friends who fuck thing."

"Well, lightning hasn't struck me down yet so..."

"What if we don't use labels?"

I take a deep breath and let it out with a heavy sigh. "You're a public figure, people will hound you to define this until you do. And really, I'm being silly. Lots of people dream of a hockey god sweeping them off their feet. I should be shouting that shit from the rooftops."

"Not if it makes you uncomfortable." Noah's voice is understanding even though he tenses underneath me, and I feel like an ass for making him confused.

I kiss the shoulder I'm leaning on, which feels surprisingly natural. "You don't make me uncomfortable."

"But dating does." When I only nod, he continues. "Are you willing to tell me why?"

"Not today. I will," I rush to clarify, "but realizing I'm in a...a..."

"Relationship."

"Yeah, that. That's enough for one day."

"Okay," he says, and for the second time since I walked in the door, I'm struck by how sweet my Thor is. *Omigod, it's happening. I called him mine—in my head—but still. Is that normal? One second, you're a proud hedonist and the next you have a...person?*

"You're thinking awfully hard over there." Noah's lips brush over my forehead.

“Yeah, it’s just. I don’t know how to do this. I don’t know how to be with someone.”

“I think we just keep doing what we’ve been doing. Hanging out, helping each other get through the shit we’re dealing with. Maybe with more kissing, though.”

I wait for another bout of panic to hit me, but instead of the cool tingle of anxiety I feel a warm tingle of desire. As much as I don't want to admit it, I've enjoyed the feeling of Noah's mouth on mine. Up until this point, it's only happened during sex, when we're breathless, and desperate, and ravenous for each other. *I wonder...*

Tilting my chin up until our lips are a hairsbreadth apart, I hold as still as a statue, waiting. Watching. Gathering courage and seeking permission. Noah's breath hitches, but he doesn't make a move, giving me the space to do only what I feel comfortable with. *Fuck it.*

Holding my own breath, I lean slowly forward, closing the distance between us until our lips meet in a soft, chaste kiss. The instant we make contact heat blooms deep in my gut, though it's not the familiar heat of arousal. More like the warmth of affection. The promise of faithfulness and honesty and trust.

Gentle hands stroke my face as our lips brush softly together. The tender touch somehow even more intense than the passionate kisses we've shared previously, despite the fact it's not making my dick hard. And the crazy thing is, I don't even care. I'm sort of content to have no ulterior motive, no end goal driving me forward. I just like the comfort of Noah's mouth on mine, giving me the stability and support and care I didn't think I wanted, but now can't imagine going without.

As Noah's tongue meets mine, it occurs to me I've never been kissed like

this before, with reverence and respect. It's so sweet yet so powerful, I feel like I'm melting and flying at the same time. Invincible and vulnerable, but not scared like I was earlier. Not with Noah. He makes me feel...*whole*.

## Chapter 21 - Noah

“Oh ...” I lick my lips and swallow thickly as Tripp emerges from the bathroom in his tux, tugging casually at the cuffs peeking out from under the jacket. It’s a mundane action but his catlike grace makes it look effortless and sexy in a refined, aristocratic sort of way. The blond hair and dark stubble on the other hand, coupled with the bowtie slung around his open collar, gives him a downright sinful air.

“You like?” He smirks impishly.

“I like.” I cross the room to meet him, resting my hands on his hips while I nip at his plump bottom lip. “I like it so much I sort of want to bend you over right here, right now.”

“That sounds better than your stuffy charity party.” He tilts his head to the side so I can kiss along the side of his neck.

“If I didn’t like the cause, I’d skip it.”

He rubs his stubbled cheek against mine. “What’s the cause again?”

“Underprivileged youth.”

“I suppose that’s worthy of delayed gratification.” Tripp sighs heavily.

“I know I should be thinking of the cause.” He groans softly as I pull him to me, rubbing our pelvises together. “But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like the idea of showing up with the sexiest man alive on my arm.”

“Ooh, flattery will get you a blow job.” Tripp’s fingers dance over the back of my neck.

“Give me a blow job and then you can have my ass.” I bite down gently on his earlobe and give it a little tug, which makes him shiver.

“Deal, although if I top, I may have to ruin your man-bun. Even though it’s sexy as fuck, I’ll need something to hold onto while I pound you into the mattress.” He swivels his hips, pressing his semi-hard cock against mine.

“Jesus, we’re never gonna get out of here if we keep this up.”

“You could always just write a fat check and we can get straight to stripping each other down.” Tripp slides my hands to his ass, encouraging me to give it a firm squeeze.

“I wish I could.” I lick into his mouth—he’s been wholly on board with more kissing since our talk last week—groaning when his tongue meets mine. “We have to show up at several of these a year. Might as well get this one out of the way.”

I start to pull away, but Tripp squeezes the base of my neck. “I know you said this already, but are you sure you’re ready for this? Our first outing doesn’t have to be so public.”

“This is only our first outing because I’m finally healthy enough to hide my injury. And the Bulldogs organization already knows about us, so who cares if the rest of the world does.”

*That* was an interesting conversation, not because the top execs objected to me dating a man, but because Tripp and my coach, Xander’s dad, have very different ideas about what classifies as acceptable public behavior. In his defense, Tripp insists the guys gave him permission to feel how strong their pecs were before he touched them during the first team cookout he attended, which was long before my arrival. The act got him banned from all cookouts until Xander got tired of attending on his own and dragged Tripp along last year.

Still, I had to assure Coach that Tripp wouldn’t draw unnecessary attention to himself if we went public. I hate that stipulation—Tripp’s antics are part of

who he is, and I don't want him to have to change since he's dating me. Fortunately, he said—privately of course—that being a little less crass is a small price to pay to have my cock all to himself. His words.

“I guess coming out is one way to take the focus off your injury.” Tripp slides his hand from my neck to my chest, resting it over my heart. “And it might be sort of fun to watch people try to keep a straight face when you introduce me.”

“It's the twenty-first century. I doubt any of them will give it a second thought.”

“Bet?” He arches a sly brow.

“What are we betting?”

“I get to spank *you* this time.” A wicked grin spreads across his face.

“Fine.” I shrug. At this point, there are so many things he's helped me discover, most of which I never expected to like, let alone enjoy. What's one more? I won't say no until I try it. “And if I win, you move in.”

Just like he did during the boyfriend conversation, Tripp freezes, his breath coming in shaky spurts. I'm still not sure what causes him to react this way—I figure he'll tell me when he's ready—but I'm not going to avoid the topic of *us* just because it scares him. We wouldn't be here right now if I did, and aside from not skating, this has been the best week of my life.

I wrap my hand around the back of his neck and lean my forehead against his as I put my other hand on his chest. “You've been staying here a solid month, and nothing bad has happened, right?”

It takes a second, but eventually I feel a small nod.

“That's right. And if you're not ready to move in, then you're not ready. It's okay. But if you are, I'd really like to have you here when I get home

from road trips, and I'd like to be here for you when you get home from work. Whenever you're ready for that step, I want you to know I am too."

Is it odd to put living together on the table before I've told him I love him? If it were anyone but Tripp, I'd say yes, but given his obvious hesitation, I actually think this order of operations makes more sense.

"Can I still spank you if you win?" The request is barely more than a whisper.

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't." I kiss his forehead, then bring my hands to his shirt. "Do you want to go bad boy who cleans up nicely or stick with the roguish I don't give a fuck look?"

"Which do you like?" His emerald eyes are full of trust when they find mine, and I have to swallow down the lump in my throat before I can answer.

"I like roguish, but I'm supposed to get through the evening without mauling you, so we better go with cleans up nice."

A tiny smile pulls at the corner of his lips as I button his shirt and work his tie into a perfect bow. I give it a gentle tug on both ends until it sits straight underneath his angular jaw.

"You're stunning." I place a chaste kiss on his lips.

"And you're learning."

"Hmm?"

"I might've just found another adjective for my dick."

I chuckle against his mouth as I recall his rule about making sure the descriptor you choose sounds good next to the word 'dick.'

"So, since you're going to be coming out this evening, we should probably talk about what that looks like," Tripp says.

"What do you mean?"

"Private little bubble, remember?" He clutches my hips and leans into me.

“We don’t have any idea what it’s like to exist outside the walls of this house. As boyfriends.”

My brows draw together as I try to piece together what he’s saying. “Do we really need to make an announcement?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I need to know what you’re comfortable with in public. Do I hold your hand? Sit on your lap? Stick my tongue in your mouth?”

“Can’t we just do what feels right?”

“Well, sitting on your lap and sticking my tongue down your throat would feel right to *me*, but maybe not to *you*.”

“If I say affectionate touches not sexual ones does that work?” I rest my hand on his hips, the same way he’s holding mine.

“I mean, I still don’t see how those aren’t related, but yes, I get your point. No swapping bodily fluids in public.”

I can’t stop the small chuckle from rumbling up my throat. “I would’ve said that differently, but yeah. Now, let’s pick up Niko and Xander before they start pinging us to ask where we are.” I reach for Tripp’s hand as his chest starts to vibrate.

He pulls his phone from his pocket and checks the screen. “Too late. At least they said to get our pants on instead of telling us to fix our hair. If I’m going to be accused of being late I’d much rather it be assumed my tardiness is from having a dick in one of my orifices.”

Tripp pockets his phone and takes my hand, letting me lead him to the car, and even though this isn’t what I’d have chosen for our first date, I can’t remember the last time I felt this excited off the ice.

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The line of cars inches forward until we’re parked in front of a sprawling

entry where a valet takes my keys. The Cooper's go all out for this event every year. While there isn't a red carpet—it is a private residence—there is a photographer snapping candid pictures of the guests as they arrive. If I remember correctly, they aren't allowed inside, but the pictures will be accompanied by a write up of who hosted the event and how much it made, which I'm sure is equally as important to Charles Cooper as the cause he's supporting. Politicians.

Niko, Xander, Tripp and I enter together, none of us holding hands because the reality is, that would get more attention than the event itself. We want the charity to be the main focus. I don't plan to be as discreet once we're inside, so I reach for Tripp's hand the moment we cross the threshold just as a tiny Asian woman with graying hair in a maid's uniform brings her hands to her mouth with an astonished gasp.

“Mr. Preston?” Her voice trembles as she stares at the man next to me.

Tripp stands statue-still, eyes blinking in rapid succession. Then without warning he breaks into an ear-splitting grin, the biggest I've ever seen on him as he steps toward the woman, scooping her up in his arms and spinning her around in delighted hug.

“What happened to your hair?” The woman laughs as he puts her down. Niko, Xander and I exchange confused looks.

“Mine? What happened to yours?”

“I got old.”

“Well, I got daring.”

“You were always daring. That's why you got into so much trouble.” She pokes at his chest.

“We both know that wasn't the only reason.” He rolls his eyes playfully, catching mine as he does, and waving me over.

“Rose, meet my boyfriend, Noah,” he says when I reach them. “Noah, the old lady who raised me.” He slings an arm around her shoulder and lowers his head to her ear, and even though they’re slightly turned away from me, I can just barely make out the words, “You finally found a good family to work for, huh?”

“Mr. Preston—”

“I don’t go by that anymore. Call me Tripp.”

“Mr. Tripp—”

“Rose, kindly let our guests make it all the way into the house.” A stern baritone voice cuts into their conversation, and though it’s quiet enough not to be heard across the room, both Tripp and Rose visibly stiffen. Then Tripp takes a deep breath and drops his arm from Rose’s shoulders as he spins around to face the voice. Following his gaze, I locate the man just in time to see his jaw fall slack as his face goes white.

Charles Cooper casts a wary glance to either side before pasting a composed look on his harsh features, speaking with an obviously forced calm. “Preston. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“That makes two of us, Pop.” Tripp’s voice holds an air of disdain and mocking as he over enunciates the ‘P.’

“Pop?” I mouth to Niko and Xander, both of whom shrug helplessly. *Is this...?*

“You know I don’t appreciate that name,” Charles says, his disapproving gaze bouncing between Tripp and Rose.

“I don’t appreciate mine either. I prefer Tripp.”

“What sort of a name is that?” He looks down his nose at my boyfriend, despite the fact he’s no taller.

“You don’t recognize it? It was your doing actually, since you always made

a point to tell me how much I was tripping up.” Tripp’s grin borders on maniacal as he stares his father down, which garners a few curious looks from the guests trickling in.

“Uncivilized as always,” Charles mutters as Rose retreats to the far wall, out of the line of fire, it would appear.

“So,” Tripp spins around, taking in the ornate entry, with its curved staircase and expensive artwork. “Nice digs. I’d say I wondered where you went after you ditched the old place, but I really didn’t. Although, I am flattered you went to such lengths to make sure I couldn’t find you.”

“Evidently, not enough. If you wanted to speak you should’ve called my office.”

“As if your staff didn’t have strict orders to turn me away,” Tripp huffs.

“Yes, well. This is a private event.” Charles runs a hand over his silver hair despite the fact not a single strand is out of place.

Tripp’s eyes find mine, and for the first time since this exchange started, I get the sense he’s not sure what to say.

“Actually, Tripp’s here as my guest.” I step in.

Charles looks in my direction, his demeanor smoothly shifting from cold and callous to warm and inviting when recognition hits. “Noah, I’m sorry I didn’t see you there. It’s been years since I’ve seen my son and I was momentarily distracted. Welcome.” He holds his hand out, though I make no move to take it, having no desire to after the exchange I just heard.

The purpose of this event is to help underprivileged youth, and based on the way the man’s treating his own son, I’m starting to question how charitable he really is.

“I saw you suffered an injury earlier this season,” he lowers his hand and continues as if I didn’t just slight him. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better. Tripp’s been helping me with my recovery.”

“That’s what doctors are for, right?” Another silver-haired man appears out of nowhere, placing a hand on Tripp’s shoulder.

“Judge Calahan.” The smile Tripp offers is slight yet genuine.

“Uncle to you. Finally back stateside, I see.” The judge returns the grin. “I’ve gotta say, I never pegged you for the Doctors Without Borders sort, but your parents said you’re really making an impact. Good for you. Are you back to make some real money now?”

Tripp cocks an eyebrow toward his father as he bites the corner of his lip, and I have only a brief second to wonder which will win out, the brat or the good boy. As if it was ever really a question.

“Doctor, huh? And an international one. I suppose the altruistic son angle might get you a few votes. I expected you to go with a kid who died tragically young, but I guess there’s really no explanation for someone coming back from the dead in awkward little run-ins like these, so, good choice not killing me off in your fantasy world.”

“Fantasy world?” The judge casts a wary gaze between father and son. “What’s going on here?” he asks as his hand slides off Tripp’s shoulders.

“Nothing,” Charles replies. “A misunderstanding.”

“You’re saying disowned wrong, Pop.”

Before Charles can respond, a middle-aged woman in a floor-length gown with perfectly coiffed blond hair glides into the foyer. “There you are Charles. The guests have been asking—” Her voice drops off as her gaze lands on Tripp, and like her husband, she expertly pivots direction after only the slightest pause. “Preston, darling. What a lovely surprise. I didn’t know you’d be here for this event.”

Anticipating the need for a quick exit, I meet Niko’s eyes and toss him my

keys. He and Xander slip away as Tripp's mother strides toward him, leaning forward to place a kiss on his cheek, which he steps away from. "Don't let the clothes fool you. I'm still a filthy gay man, mother. The streets didn't scare it out of me."

"Preston?" She shoots lost looks between father, son and the judge, and if I hadn't witnessed the exchange with his father, I admit I might've been fooled by her feigned confusion. My new insight makes her act hard to miss. Apparently, the judge agrees.

"Just where exactly has my Godson been for the last decade?" The judge's eyes are little more than narrow slits.

"Overseas," Charles digs his heels in.

Tripp snorts. "I've never even left the country since you had my passport. Plus, it's kind of hard to get another one without the proper identification."

"Without... Why in the hell would you not have proper identification?" The judge's voice rises an octave, drawing the attention of some of the guests.

"I only had my driver's license on me when they kicked me out."

"They kicked... And you didn't come to me?" the judge asks.

Tripp looks at the man who apparently considers himself an uncle, a contrite look on his face. "They said you'd be obligated to put me in juvie for a drug offense they'd un-bury if I tried to reach out to you or come home. Sixteen-year-old me believed it."

The judge wheels on Tripp's parents, but I don't hear his angry words. I'm too focused on my boyfriend.

My stomach roils at the thought of a young Tripp, cast out by the people who were supposed to love him. No wonder he's so terrified of relationships. The one that's supposed to be unconditional failed him, bringing him nothing but pain and disappointment. And rather than respect his fear, I've been

pushing him to face it without ever understanding the magnitude of what I was asking.

I'm known for being level-headed, even on the ice. But right now, I'd like nothing more than to drive my fist into Charles's face. Instead, I hold my hand out to Tripp, pulling him to my chest when he takes it.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper in his ear as I wrap my arms around his shoulders. "I never would've brought you here if I'd known."

"It's okay." Tripp wraps his arms around my waist.

"No, it's not. You have the same last name for God's sake, and I didn't think twice about it."

"Cooper's pretty common. And it's not like I told you enough about my past to make you think there'd be a connection."

Pulling back, I cup his face in my hands. "I knew you had a past though. Something you didn't want to talk about. And because of me you had to face it without warning."

"It was a long time coming." He gives me a tight smile.

"Is this the first time you've stood up to him?"

"More or less. I was good at being a disrespectful shit, but I never challenged him outright over the way he treated me. Or Rose."

I pull him to me and whisper in his ear. "I'm proud of you. And I'm so sorry I pushed you about the dating thing. I shouldn't have done that without knowing where you were coming from."

"If you hadn't pushed me, I wouldn't have a boyfriend right now." I feel a tug on the lapel of my jacket.

"Yes, but do you want one?" I take a half-step back so I can see his face, letting my hands drop to his waist. "I'll understand if it's too soon for that."

I'm vaguely aware there's a murmur in the gathering crowd as I wait for his

answer. Between the way I'm looking at Tripp and the tongue-lashing the judge is giving his parents, I'm sure they're getting quite the show.

Tripp rises on his toes to give me a quick peck on the lips before taking my hands in his. "No take backs. You're stuck with this hot mess."

"Good answer." I can't stop the goofy grin from spreading across my face as a relieved warmth seeps through my chest. "Xander and Niko are waiting in the car. Let's see if we can't salvage the rest of this evening."

"By salvage do you mean I get to spank you?" He bites his lip playfully.

"Are you claiming you won the bet?"

"I mean, people were clearly surprised to see me."

"Fine, I'll concede. But only because you're sexy in a tux, not because I think you won." I give him a quick kiss and keeping his left hand in my right, I step toward the door only to have him tug me back.

"Rose." He casts a worried glance toward his parent's housekeeper, still cowering by the far wall. "I couldn't take her with me the first time, but I can't leave her."

The two of us approach the woman whose eyes are darting nervously around the room as the judge, fresh off his rant at Tripp's parents, finds us. "Between the three of us we're creating a bit of a scene. You two should get out of here before the gossip spreads to the rest of the guests and they come running to see the show."

"We aren't leaving without Rose," Tripp says. "When the guests are gone and they don't have to keep up the act anymore, my parents will lash out at her."

"Are you saying they'll get physical with her?" The judge pales, and I feel a twinge of sympathy for the man who clearly just learned he never really knew the people he thought were his friends.

“I don’t think so. They haven’t before that I’m aware of, but they’ve never suffered this level of embarrassment before either. Will you come home with us, Rose?” Tripp puts a gentle hand on her arm.

“I can’t leave.” She looks at him with teary eyes. “They took my green card after I helped you before. They’ll have me thrown out of the country.”

“They most certainly will not,” the judge booms. “It seems I’ve got something else to discuss with them this evening after all. Rose, go get your things while I deal with this. You can stay at my house until this is sorted out. You two.” He looks at me and Tripp. “The cat’s probably out of the bag, but you might be able to limit the damage if you leave now.”

“Damage?” I frown.

“I haven’t seen anything in the press, so I assume you wanted to keep this thing between you off the public’s radar.” He tips his head toward our joined hands.

“We wouldn’t be here together if we were trying to hide anything,” I tell him.

“We didn’t plan to put on a show either,” Tripp says, his wary gaze telling me he’s concerned about what the Bulldogs might have to say when this gets out.

“It’s settled then. You two take off and I’ll make sure Rose gets out safely,” the judge declares.

But Tripp doesn’t budge. “Rose, are you okay with that? I understand if you’re not. Even after I realized my parents were probably bluffing about what the judge would do if I went to him for help, I was afraid to trust him because he was friends with them. After tonight I know differently, but if you don’t want to go with him we’ll wait for you to get your things.”

She glances between the two men, finally relaxing a bit when her

affectionate gaze settles on Tripp. “He’s right, you should go now. I’ll be okay, Mr. Tripp.”

My boyfriend, who’s still skittish about showing affection without the promise of sex, hugs Rose, and then the man who calls himself Tripp's uncle, which almost makes me tear up. If the one good thing that comes from tonight is Tripp learning that this guy has always been in his corner, and isn’t going anywhere, then this shitshow of an evening will have been worth it.

The judge pats Tripp on the back and lets him go. “Good to have you back, son. Now get out of here. And call me this week. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

His hand locked in mine, I lead Tripp out the front door and past the photographer who clicks away as we get into the car and drive off.

## Chapter 22 – Tripp

“Damn, the press are fast. It hasn’t even been a full hour and the pictures are already up.” Niko holds his phone so we can see the snaps of Noah leading me hand-in-hand to the car, opening the door for me, and the four of us driving away.

Huddled in a back booth of a club all the Bulldogs have an exclusive membership to, we’re able to drink in peace. It’s not our preferred scene—to uppity—but tonight the rich dark atmosphere, and the discreet staff, is sort of a godsend. Even if people recognize us here, they won’t approach us or put us on the spot, and after the night I’ve had, I’m grateful for whatever privacy I can get. Not that I give two shits about my parents’ downfall or the role I ended up playing in it, I just don’t want to be drawn into it any further before the evening ends. There’s plenty of time for that later.

“Cute pictures, though,” Justus says offhand. Why he and Luca showed up, I’m still not sure. I suspect it’s because they were some of Niko’s biggest supporters when his personal life went public, so they must be playing the same role for Noah. “Noah looks very protective of you, Tripp.”

Not too long ago, that statement would’ve freaked me the fuck out—and in some ways it still does. I’m new to this whole relying on and trusting other people thing, but as far as Noah’s concerned, I have to agree with Justus. It’s cute.

“Have they figured out who I am yet?” I ask Niko.

Niko scrolls down the page. “They’re going with Mystery Man.”

“Mystery Man?” I wrinkle my nose. “That makes it sound like I belong on Scooby Doo. It should be Man of Mystery.”

“You’ve got the wrong hair color for that, Freddy,” Luca snorts, and everyone at the table, including me, bursts into laughter.

“You’re funnier than you let on, hockey boy,” I tell him.

“Maybe you were just too preoccupied with getting in Noah’s pants to notice my sparkling personality.”

“True. I’m single-minded like that.” I’m not sure what brought it on, but after his initial concern over Noah and I playing show me yours and I’ll show you mine, Luca seems less skeptical tonight, which is cool. I just hope this isn’t an olive branch to keep using my man as his audience for his pregame mumbo jumbo. Before we were boyfriends, I didn’t care about that, but now my feelings are more complicated. We’ll probably need to talk about it before Noah goes back to traveling with the team.

“Will they even connect the dots?” Xander steers us back to the identity issue. “I mean, you’ve changed your name and your appearance, will they put it together?”

“You changed your name?” Justus asks.

“I always hated the name Preston. And yeah, since Tripp didn’t exist until ten years ago people will dig around to see who did. My name change record will come up.”

“Preston?” Luca snorts as he swirls the liquid in his tumbler. “I can see why you hated that. It doesn’t fit you at all.”

“Ten years ago... You were sixteen when they kicked you out?” Niko asks. “What’d you do?”

This isn’t a story I share, and with the exception of one man, no one actually knows it. Not even Noah. But the reassuring hand he rests on my

thigh keeps my heartbeat calm as I recount the events that led to me becoming Tripp.

“The last time I saw my parents, before tonight, was ten years ago when they kicked me out with nothing but the clothes on my back. Fortunately, I had my wallet and car keys on me, so I had a little money and a place to sleep. And when I snuck back the next day, Rose gave me what she could gather of my clothes and other belongings.” Noah gives my leg a squeeze when he hears her name. “I spent the first month in my car, grabbing a meal from a shelter when I could, out of a dumpster when I couldn’t. Eventually this guy who owned a tattoo shop got curious about this nice car that was perpetually parked on the street—it wasn’t a bad area, but a brand new BMW was out-of-place—and he confronted me.”

“This is the guy who gave you the tattoos you designed?” Noah asks softly.

I give him a slow nod and continue. “I’d been trying to work up the courage to ask for a job—that’s why I was always parked there—but I kept talking myself out of it because I wasn’t sure what would happen if anyone found out I was a homeless teen.”

“When he finally cornered me, he first thought I stole the car, but I had the title in the glove box. I was supposed to put it in a safety deposit box, but I was a lazy kid who got a kick out of doing the opposite of what my parents told me to do and never got around to it. That ended up being sort of a life saver since it backed up the story I gave Jim. He owned the tattoo shop.”

Noah gives my leg another reassuring squeeze.

“Anyhow, Rose had smuggled out my sketchbooks, and after he looked at them, he said he could hire me as an office assistant, but he paid me for any designs I gave him too. He even paid me under the table and helped me find a little studio apartment so I could stay off the authorities’ radar as long as I

promised to get my GED. Once I was eighteen a trust fund my grandfather left me kicked in. Fortunately, my parents couldn't touch it, and I bought my condo. I didn't need a guardian to get certified copies of my birth certificate and social security card, so I was finally able to get all the documents to go through the name change process and officially disappear."

"Your parents never even tried to look for you in those first few years?" Justus seems truly baffled that such a thing is possible. He must have a close-knit family.

"They didn't care where I went, and they didn't want to be found. They put the house on the market the day after they kicked me out and were gone within a month—Jim looked them up even though I told him it was pointless. I'm actually surprised my dad didn't move his office too, but I guess he figured security was tight enough I wouldn't get past them. Not that I tried."

"Why'd they even kick you out, if you don't mind me asking?" Luca broaches the subject I'm sure they're all dying to know but are too polite to bring up. I actually respect the fuck out of the fact that he asked. I would've.

"They caught me kissing a boy." The expressions around me range from disbelief to anger, but not surprise. I guess they all had an inkling where my parents drew the line. "There were years of disappointments before then—I didn't like the sports they approved of, I liked art instead of business or math, I resented that they tried to mold me into their image—you name it we didn't see eye-to-eye. But being gay is what really sealed the deal. My dad hauled me up by my shirt, tossed me out the front door and locked it in my face."

Xander curses as Noah takes my hand in his and brings it to his lips for a soft kiss. I flash a weak smile to let everyone know I'm okay.

"To this day I'm not sure if I kissed that kid because I wanted to get caught or because I actually liked him. I'd known I was gay for years, and I'd also

known my parents wouldn't approve of it. I remember being tired of hiding, and when this cute new kid moved to town, I saw an opportunity to explore the thing I'd been hiding for years. I could've done that anywhere but my house, and I didn't, even though I knew it was reckless. The only thing I remember clearly is watching that door slam and promising myself I'd never be ashamed of liking men, no matter the consequences. Sorry I never told you this," I tell Xander, who is the closest thing I have to a real friend, probably shouldn't be hearing this for the first time.

"You don't have to apologize," he says. "I wasn't exactly forthcoming with all my issues until recently. And if being gay has taught me anything, it's that no one has the right to judge how other people deal with the scars from their past. I understand why you wouldn't want to talk about that period of your life."

"Thanks. Although I should clarify, I talk about that period all the time. Not my evil parents but the time period once I left their house. It was the start of my sexual awakening, which is absolutely worth sharing." Not to make light of his words, but we've had enough heavy stuff for one night.

"You can apologize for that if you want to. It won't erase the images in my head," Xander snorts, "but it's a start."

"Please," I huff. "That was good material, and you know it. I bet you've even re-enacted some of it with the hot piece of ass sitting next to you."

"We don't need to re-enact anything." Niko slings his arm around Xander's shoulder. "Our sex life is awesome."

"How about we leave sex out of the conversation tonight." Xander gives him a wry look.

"Fine." Niko kisses Xander's temple. "So, what do you think will happen to your folks after this?" He asks me.

“No idea. Don’t really care.” I sip the whiskey in front of me. *My boyfriend’s springing for the good stuff.*

“Can he get kicked out of... What kind of politician is he again?” Justus asks.

“A senator,” Noah replies for me when I don’t answer. “He can’t get kicked out but he’s up for re-election next year so he could get voted out.”

“You had to learn that for a citizenship test, didn’t you?” I nudge his shoulder, and he smiles bashfully.

“I’m still not clear on something,” Luca says. “This charity thing was for underprivileged kids, which you basically were for a while.” He points a finger at me. “And aren’t a lot of those kids gay or bi or whatever? Why support a charity if you don’t like the people impacted by it?”

“Denver skews Democratic and he’s a Republican. I assume it makes him more appealing to Independents or moderate Democrats if he seems supportive of the LGBTQ+ community,” Noah says.

I nudge him again. “I’m the bad boy dating the teacher’s pet, aren’t I? That’s kinda hot.” Noah’s hand finds mine under the table and he threads our fingers together.

“What a douche.” Luca wrinkles his nose in disgust.

“He could be facing some legal trouble if what Rose said about holding her green card is true,” Noah muses aloud.

I’d forgotten about that until he mentioned it, and as much as I’d enjoy seeing the man squirm, my guess is it would turn into a big headache for her. “I’m guessing Judge Calahan will get that worked out without involving the authorities. Hopefully, with some sort of big payout for her so she doesn’t have to work again.”

“We’ll make sure she doesn’t.” Noah gives my hand a squeeze as my air

gets lodged in my chest. While the big guy has done some pretty sweet things for me, this is the one that tips my world off its axis. Being boyfriends, moving in, those things are stages in a relationship that may or may not last. Committing to take care of the only mother I've ever known... That's *permanent*.

“Hey.” Luca suddenly perks up. “You’re out in public and walking just fine. That means you’re coming back to the team, right?”

I try not to tense—it’s not like I didn’t know this was coming—but I’m even less thrilled about Noah traveling with Luca than I realized. *Apparently, having a boyfriend makes me possessive.*

Noah rubs his thumb over the back of my hand, sensing my distress, I think. “I’ll start practice Monday, but it’ll still probably be a few weeks before I’m in a game, just to be safe.”

“Gauthier’s killing it and all,” Niko starts, “but it’ll be nice to have you back. His reflexes are a hair too slow for my liking.”

“Slower than mine maybe, but not slow. He’s a big part of the reason we aren’t too far out of first in the conference,” Noah points out.

“Agreed.” Niko nods vigorously. “I just feel a little more at ease with you.”

The guys dissolve into a conversation about cold stuff while I sip my drink and marvel over the fact that I just shared what I did. It’s not that I was ashamed of what happened, lots of kids have shit parents that make their lives miserable. It was more about not wanting to put myself in a vulnerable position again by trusting people who could eventually hurt me. And rather than be offended I didn’t open up, the people at this table accepted it without question.

I didn’t expect that.

Given the way they acted when Niko and Xander came out to them, and

even Noah, I probably should've realized they'd accept me too. But I'm not on their team, and I kept Xander at arm's length for years. I didn't give any of them much reason to be so tolerant of me. Hell, I probably baited them to push me away instead, but they're still here.

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By the time we get home it's nearly midnight, and we're both exhausted. That doesn't stop Noah from pinning me against the door the second we get inside.

"Do you have any idea how hard it was to keep my hands off you when you look this sexy?" He licks up my neck, over my jaw, and takes my mouth in a searing, possessive kiss.

I bite my lip suggestively when he pulls back to look at me. "The un-tied tie and open collar really do it for you, huh?"

"You have no idea." He nuzzles my chest, just above the open shirt.

"Oh, I think I do. Just remember, you're the one who made the PDA rules, not me. I'd have happily played with your cock under the table." I reach for it now, palming the hard bulge over his pants.

"I'm a patient man. I don't mind waiting for the things I really want."

"And what is it you really want?" I flex my fingers around him, enjoying the way he fills my hand. Nice and long and thick.

"You... In my mouth." He nibbles along my jaw as he works my pants open, dropping to his knees when he has them parted just enough to pull my boxers off my dick, but not so much that they fall from my hips. When I start to take off my shirt—being naked while he's clothed seems to be my new favorite kink—he reaches up to stop me. "Leave it on. I like seeing you so polished and so dirty at the same time."

*When he puts it that way...*

Keeping my hands trapped in his, Noah leans forward and places a feather-light kiss on my tip as his eyes flutter closed. He repeats the gesture again and again, peppering my skin with tiny little waves of pleasure that fan over my length the way water ripples when it's disturbed by a stone. This might be the first time anyone's actually kissed my dick, and it's more enticing than I could've imagined.

When he's covered every inch with his soft lips, Noah parts his mouth and gives me his tongue, leisurely swirling it around my crown a few times before sucking gently on the head. Releasing our hands so he can hold me in his grip, mine find their way to his hair, undoing the tie that holds it back so I can thread my fingers through the silky strands. A soft sigh sends a wave of hot air over my damp skin, and we both shudder.

Using the flat of his tongue, Noah laps at my slit like he enjoys my taste, then takes me into his mouth. Closing his lips around my crown, he slurps me delicately, swiping his tongue over my sensitive flesh with each pull. Despite the fragile treatment, my thighs quake, pent up desire and adrenaline threatening to unleash within me and take control.

Though the gentle pace is completely foreign, it's satisfying as hell, and my restraint starts to wane. I flex my fingers against Noah's scalp, guiding him over me as I push forward. Slow and steady, the wet slide of his tongue lavishes every inch of my length. The gentle glide of his mouth is both teasing and tender, like he enjoys taking me as much as I enjoy him doing it. That's... Hot seems too common a word to describe it. More like mesmerizing.

As he takes me to the back of his throat, Noah's hooded eyes lock with mine. He watches my chest rise with each breath, and my lips part on a soft moan. With strong hands, he guides my pants off my hips and runs his

fingertips up and down my thighs. My balls ache as he palms them, a lone finger applying the slightest amount of pressure to my hole. I flatten myself against the wall to keep upright as a torrent of sensations bombards me. The tenuous grasp on my self-discipline is ready to snap.

My cock glistens with Noah's saliva as he unhurriedly bobs his head over my length, a satisfied groan rumbling around it as he pushes deeper. Watching it sink gradually into his mouth, it occurs to me, I've never had such a gentle blow job. Never had a gentle encounter period until the big guy, but getting sucked off all sweet-like... Even guys who love sucking cock tend to rush, slurping and slobbering all over the place. Don't get me wrong, a messy, wet blow job is an excellent way to get my dick hard, but to get hard while making me feel like I'm important... Treasured even. That's some lovey-dovey...

*Holy shit!*

*Is that what this is? Does Noah love me? I know he likes me—he's said that much—but does he love me? Do I love him?*

The man did just publicly claim me, and hint that he'd take care of Rose, and when I think of the coming weeks, months, years... For the first time in my life, I don't like the thought of spending that time alone. I want him to be there. And since the L word doesn't appear to be giving me hives...wow!  
*Shit!*

*I think I love him.*

It could be the impending orgasm making my brain all fuzzy, but I feel like this is something I need to tell him. Something he needs to know. Probably not while my dick's in his mouth, though.

Using strength I didn't know I possessed, I yank Noah off my cock and slam our mouths together, plunging my tongue against his. The kiss is urgent,

desperate, like I need it more than I need my next breath. Like the force of it could fuse us together forever or some shit like that, so neither of us will be alone again. And then I taste myself on his tongue, mixed with his musky flavor, and my frenzy starts to wane. Something about the two of us together softens the kiss, morphing from feverish need into this overwhelming sense of peace and belonging.

This would be the perfect time to confess how I feel, and it's on the tip of my tongue to do just that. But I can't get the words out. I've never said them to another person. Never heard them in return. Not even from my parents, who weren't the affectionate type even before I was old enough to really piss them off. It makes me question whether I can trust my emotions, so instead of saying something profound, I say, "Bedroom. Now."

When we get to his room Noah sets me gently on the bed and tugs my shoes and pants off before undoing my shirt. He pauses to look at me when I'm gloriously naked but he still resembles Thor dressed up as James Bond.

"Take your dick out and fuck me," I rasp breathlessly.

Noah starts to remove his jacket and I shake my head vigorously. "Just your dick. Like you're in the middle of something super important and don't have time to get naked but you have to be inside me."

"Some fantasy of yours?" He arches a brow but pulls his cock out like I asked.

"I'm making this up as I go." I pull the lube from the nightstand and drizzle some in my hand, rubbing my palms together before wrapping them around Noah's cock and slicking him up while he hovers over me in his sexy tux. "I just really like the idea of getting fucked by a man dressed like a billionaire."

"Millionaire," he corrects as I stroke over his length, getting him nice and slippery. "I don't have that much money."

“Humor me, big guy.” I lay on my back and spread my legs, hooking them behind my knees. With an exaggerated sigh, Noah lines himself up and pushes into me. His head falls back as he bottoms out, his prominent Adam’s apple bobbing when he swallows thickly. *I don’t think I’m supposed to need a spank bank anymore now that I have a boyfriend, but for the times he’s traveling, this right here is going in it.*

Holding my breath, I wait for him to move. To start pounding into me like a man on a mission, but he doesn’t. He just stands there, balls deep like I’m some sort of cock warmer. It’d be pretty hot if I wasn’t desperate for the friction of movement.

“Remember, you don’t have a lot of time,” I prompt. “Get to the fucking.”

“No.”

“*No?*”

“You heard me. I’ll keep the tux on like you asked, but I’m not rushing this.” To emphasize his point, he pulls out excruciatingly slow, then presses back in, rotating his hips when he’s fully seated so his crown rubs all over my prostate.

“*Holy fucking mother of god,*” I groan. “Where did you learn how to do that?”

He pummels me with a series of short, rapid pumps, jackhammering that sensitive bundle of nerves before retreating and pressing back in leisurely. “I didn’t learn it. I’m making it up as I go.” He steals my line, but I’m too blissed out to comment on it.

*All this time I thought I was well acquainted with my prostate, but it turns out the real key to nirvana is my boyfriend’s dick.*

“Can you reach your dick like that?” Noah asks as his pelvis tilts forward.

Though I’m bent like a pretzel, it’s not a stretch. I nod.

“Good. Wrap your hand around it.”

I do as he says with a soft groan. “Can I jerk it?”

“No, just hold it. Squeeze to keep yourself from coming if you need to, but nothing else.”

I want to huff in displeasure. Instead, another moan passes through my lips as Noah circles his hips, the fat head of his cock kissing my pleasure center before pounding it and disappearing...*again*. Over and over, he teases me to the brink and backs off, the slight frown of concentration completing the image of a sophisticated man getting ready to bust a nut in his favorite hole.

It’s sinful, and beautiful, and it makes me near delirious with ecstasy as the tension in my groin coils tighter and tighter. It’s the single hottest moment of my life, pushing me toward what could be an epic orgasm. But I can’t help feeling like something’s missing.

Hockey god looking extra sexy in his suave tux... Check.

His thick dick filling me to the brink... Check.

Full lips slightly parted, gasping for air as he tries to maintain control... Fuck, that’s it.

“Kiss me,” I blurt.

“What?”

“I’m about to come, and I want your mouth on me when I do. Kiss me.”

Noah pins my wrists above my head as he collapses on top of me, trapping my swollen cock between us. With our fingers laced together, he drives into me long and deep as his mouth gently meets mine.

Our tongues slide together, giving and receiving the love we confessed only moments ago, and making my heart thump in my chest. *This is what I needed. His lips on mine, sharing our air as our bodies tumble into heavenly oblivion.... It's perfect.*

The orgasm starts as a series of tiny quakes, short but powerful bursts that make me gasp from their intensity. It quickly morphs into a full body tremor, trapping my breath in my lungs as my body bucks upward. My ass clenches around Noah's cock as if it could somehow take him deeper.

I breathe a soundless cry against his lips as he shudders inside me, his warm cum filling me as my own spreads between our joined stomachs. And while it's every bit as filthy as I hoped it would be, it's also hauntingly beautiful. The way our heartbeats pulse in sync as our eyes manage to lock together in the dark room... I'll never forget it.

Tentatively, I tilt my chin up, so my lips brush against Noah's.

"Yes," I whisper between kisses.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I want to move in with you." I bite my lip, waiting for his reaction.

He pulls my lip away from my teeth with his thumb and gives me a lingering kiss. "Good, because this is where you belong."

I know this makes me the world's biggest cheeseball, but even though I still have to go through the whole moving thing, hearing him say that makes me feel like I'm already home.

## Chapter 23 - Noah

“Will you build me a pool?” Tripp asks as we’re packing up his room.

“If I build a *swimming* pool I’m going to use it to swim.”

“Who said anything about swimming?”

I’ll build this man whatever he wants, but I see no reason why I can’t have a little fun at his expense first. “As far as I’m concerned there’s only one use for a pool, and that’s to put water in it. Besides, there’s a perfectly good *empty* pool down the street. You and Xander can skate in that and swim in ours.”

“There’s a major flaw in your plan.” He stuffs a pile of t-shirts into a duffel bag sitting open on the bed. “If our pool has water we’ll have Xander, Niko, Luca and Justus hanging around all the time.”

“Where’s the flaw in that?”

“If they’re always around it will really cut into our sexy times.”

“How much sex are you planning to have?” I empty his sock drawer into the bag sitting on his dresser.

“Noah Tremblay, do not pretend to be ignorant about this. Live-in boyfriends get sex morning, noon and night. It’s the most important requirement.”

I lift my brows in mock surprise. “There are requirements for living together?”

“Several.” He raises his forefinger. “First, do *not* wake me up at the ass crack of dawn if you have to go to practice or catch a flight or something. Second,” he raises another finger. “If you do wake me up at the ass crack of dawn, the only acceptable way to do so is with a complimentary blow job.”

Third, I get to wear your clothes but you can't wear mine because they're too small, boxer-briefs excluded because your cock will look fantastic in my smaller underwear. Fourth, the aforementioned sex, and fifth," he lifts a final finger, "while it's not a rule per se I propose we don't need clothes in the house."

"I accept your terms." I hold my hand out for him to shake it. "Except for the last one. If you're naked all the time I'll be hard all the time, and there are some things it's not smart to do with an erection."

"Name one."

"Cooking."

"Pfft. You have a chef for that."

"True, but you like when I cook for you and neither of us wants me to burn my dick because I'm distracted by your sexy ass."

Tripp purses his lips as he seems to consider my point, finally taking my hand when he relents. "I suppose preserving your manhood is an acceptable reason not to be naked all the time."

Once I have his hand in mine I pull him toward me and slam our mouths together, swiping my tongue against his as I tease the hair on the back of his neck. "I'm glad you agree," I rumble. "Now let's finish packing."

"So bossy." He stuffs more shirts in the bag, concentrating for about two minutes before he speaks up again. "Can I have an office?"

"Don't you have one of those already?"

"Not for my *job*, job, although I'm not giving up on the work from home idea. For my hobby job, helping local bands."

I've been so focused on my recovery I forgot all about that passion of his, which makes me feel like shit. I know how much he likes working with bands—one of the first conversations we had was when I ran into him at a

concert and he showed me what he was doing with his video equipment—and he hasn't been to a concert since he started crashing at my place.

“You haven't missed any work because of me, have you?”

“It's not work, it's a hobby. And no, I haven't missed any. I've missed several shows while I was taking care of your ass, but since that ass is now mine I'll forgive you.” He cracks one of those shirts on my backside before tucking it into the bag.

I throw a pair of socks at his head. “Yes, you can have an office. If you take me to the concerts with you.”

“Um duh. My famous boyfriend is my backstage ticket, so of course you're going with me. I might even add that to my list of live-in-boyfriend requirements. It'd be a shame for me not to meet fancy people because my fancy boyfriend isn't there to flex his name.”

“So, you're just using me for my celebrity access?”

“And your big fat cock.” He flings the socks at my crotch, but I catch them before they hit the target and put them in the bag. “Fucking goalies,” he mutters.

“Hey now. It's a good thing my reflexes are so fast, otherwise with your aim you might jeopardize the morning, noon and night sex you're counting on.”

“Omigosh” Tripp's eyes go comically wide. “I don't know why I never thought of this before, but you literally put your body in front of flying objects. What happens if you take a puck to the dick?”

*Of course that's his biggest concern.* “I wear protection.”

“Yes, but how much can those pads really protect you? I don't like the idea of my most prized possession being in the line of fire. I mean, I'm happy to kiss it all better if it gets hit, but I don't think my kisses can fix a bent carrot.”

“Bent carrot?” I arch an eyebrow.

“Haven’t you ever seen the commercials?” He rolls his eyes. “Penile trauma is a thing. They can give you medicine, but I’m not sure that’s a cure. Your cock fits in me perfectly, and I’d prefer not to mess with perfection.”

“Perfection, huh?” I stifle a laugh. “And here I thought *your* cock was your most prized possession?”

He waves a hand dismissively. “It’s more of a tie at this point. I mean, I guess I could exclusively top, but I really do like to switch. How close are you to retirement? I’m not sure how long I can live with the stress of you suffering permanent damage.”

Knowing Tripp, I have no doubt he’s legitimately concerned about the well-being of my penis. But I suspect that pales in comparison to what’s really going on in his head, and this little rant is his way of coping with whatever’s on his mind.

“Are you having second thoughts about moving in?” I ask.

“What?” He feigns ignorance.

“You’re rambling even more than usual. Why are you freaking out?”

“The fact that you know I’m freaking out, for starters,” he mumbles.

“And?” I take a seat on the bed and pull him onto my lap.

Tripp rests his head on my chest, I think so he doesn’t have to look at me. “Since running into my parents, I’ve been remembering little things about living with them. Like how they’d complain that I was too loud. Or too messy. Or always in the way. And I know that I was probably just a normal kid and not doing anything wrong, but... I haven’t lived with anyone since then...”

“You’re worried I might say the same things?” I rub my hand along his spine.

“Yeah. And I know that’s stupid because I’ve been staying with you for a month already and you haven’t said anything like that, but if you did I could always come back here.”

I kiss the top of his head. “And you’re afraid of not having a place to retreat to if something goes wrong.”

He relaxes against my chest. “Yeah.”

“You know moving in with me doesn’t mean you have to give this place up. I never want you to feel trapped.”

“I don’t feel trapped. Not consciously. And this sucks because I know you’re nothing like them, but their shit keeps popping into my head.”

In some ways I get what Tripp’s going through. Every once in a while I’ll remember something about my parents out of the blue, and it’ll paralyze me. The difference is those memories are happy, and the paralysis is almost welcome because it forces me to relive a good time in my life. It keeps me from forgetting them. In Tripp’s case the memories are traumatic, and the paralysis is borne of fear of being abandoned or homeless. I don’t know how to help him get through that except to give him time and space. And if the space part of that equation is keeping this condo, even if that’s just a mental security blanket, I’ll give that to him. With a twist.

“What if you give this place to Rose?”

“Like put it in her name?” Tripp sits up straight, glancing at me with the softer expression I’m starting to see more and more of.

“If you want. Or leave it in your name but have her move in. Either way, it’ll be here if you need it, so you never have to worry about not having somewhere to go.”

“She does deserve a place of her own after all the shit she put up with from my parents.”

“What sort of shit was that?”

Tripp fiddles with a hangnail as he answers. “Emotional abuse mostly, same as me. Telling her her work wasn’t good enough, that she cooked things wrong, that it was her fault I was a handful. I always wondered why she put up with it. I know now she stayed because of the green card thing, at least after they kicked me out, but before that I think she stayed for me.” He brings his glassy eyes to mine, and I wrap him in my arms.

“So, what do you think?” I sift my fingers through his hair to comfort him. “Keep this as a safe place for the two of you?”

“I think we’d both like that.”

“We’ll make it happen, then.”

Tripp pulls back and places the sweetest kiss on my lips. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“So.” A sly smile spreads across his face. “Where did we land on the whole pool thing?”

I lift him off my lap and playfully smack his ass. “Finish packing. Then maybe we’ll talk.”

“Yes, Daddy.” He quips, and I can’t even correct him since he’s too fucking cute.

## Chapter 24 - Tripp

The bell echoes on the other side of the door, and while I wait for the judge—Uncle Callahan—to answer. I briefly wish I'd taken Noah up on his offer to come with me, but he has practice, and deep down I know this is something I need to do on my own.

Seeing my parents rattled me more than I'd like to admit, and the hardened exterior I'd honed to perfection over the years started to crack. I know that's not all bad, I was too isolated and independent before, but I'm too wary and unsure of myself after coming face-to-face with my past.

Noah has been exceptionally patient and understanding while I sort through the things I never really dealt with, and while I don't think he minds taking care of me—that's kind of his personality—I don't want to be the kind of man who needs to be coddled. Prior to the run-in with my folks, I wasn't, and I want that back. No, scratch that. I want to find a balance between taking care of myself and letting him take care of me.

“Preston,” Uncle Callahan booms as he opens the door.

“Tripp, actually,” I correct him as I step inside.

“Right. Sorry. That might take a little getting used to.”

“It's okay.” I follow him as he leads us to his office, a room in dark cherry wood with an ornate desk and a wall of books. It's everything I imagined a judge's office would look like. Even though this is a friendly visit, I can't help feeling a little like I'm in a principal's office, about to be interrogated.

He gestures to one of the wingback chairs as he takes a seat behind the desk. “Rose is packing her bags. I thought we might catch up until she's ready.”

“Sure.”

“First off, I’d like to say I’m sorry.”

“What?” I balk. “Why are you sorry?”

Uncle Callahan props his elbows on the armrest and steepled his fingers together. “I always knew your parents weren’t really the parental type. They were both rather ambitious, even back in college, and in truth I think that’s why we became friends since I was the same way.” A wistful smile flashes across his face before he becomes serious again. “You were a bit of a surprise, and while I knew they continued to put your father’s career first even after you arrived, I did think you were being treated well at home.”

He takes a deep breath before continuing, “I knew you and your father butted heads of course, but that was no different than any other father and son relationship. At least not that I saw, and having no child of my own, I didn’t feel qualified to second guess my friend. Not even when they shipped you off to a military academy for getting caught up in drugs.”

My eyes widen on their own accord as my jaw drops.

“Yes, I knew about that. A few joints clearly intended for personal use wouldn’t have landed you in too much trouble, but I stepped in to help make that go away at your father’s request. They told me it was because of the drug incident that they sent you to school, although I now know they kicked you out.”

“Then they told you I became a doctor.” I put the pieces together. “And you believed that?”

“I did find it strange since I knew you to be an artistic kid, but military schools aren’t exactly known for their art programs, so I thought it was possible you discovered an aptitude for science.”

“You didn’t think it was strange that I never came home?”

“Since I knew you weren’t overly close with your parents, no. Plus, they spend half their time in Washington, so I had no reason to think they were making up stories that you visited them there.”

I chew my lip, considering his words. “The lack of family photos wasn’t a clue?”

“Are there *any* family photos in their house?”

“Good point.” I laugh without any humor. “Still, you’re their closest friend.”

“*Was*. We haven’t been close in years. Your father’s ambition out-paced mine a long time ago. While we kept in touch sporadically, that was more out of a sense of obligation than desire. We’re both prominent men in the community, and our decades-long friendship has been well-documented. It was easier to go through the motions than to sever ties. That’s why I owe you an apology. Your parents and I may have drifted apart, but I was still your Godfather, and I failed you.”

This is a lot to take in, and while part of me wishes he had done more when I was a kid, I can see how my parents manipulated him the same way they did me.

“*They* failed me, not *you*.”

“I’m a grown man, son. I can admit when I’ve screwed up, but I’d like to do better going forward. If you’re open to that.”

Not that long ago it was just me. And maybe Xander in a platonic way. Now I have a boyfriend, several friends, the only mother I’ve ever known and possibly an uncle in my life. It’s been a weird several weeks.

“Um, yeah. I’m open to that.”

“Wonderful.” His smile is almost blinding. “Maybe you and that young man of yours can come over for dinner. I’d love to hear more about how you

helped him after his injury.”

“You remember the part about me not being a doctor, right?”

“Of course, but he said you helped him get through it.” Uncle Callahan’s brow wrinkles.

“Yeah, you probably don’t want the details on that.” *Omigod am I blushing? I don’t blush. What is happening?*

“Perhaps not.” Uncle Callahan clears his throat. “He’s special to you though, yes?”

“I—” It’s on the tip of my tongue to downplay my feelings since they still terrify me, but I can’t get the lie out.

Somewhere in the midst of helping Noah sort his shit, he helped me sort mine. Not that either of us realized I was the bigger mess when we made our little arrangement, but he’s taking it in stride, and while I still have my moments of panic, deep down I know he’ll be there to help me get through it. That my man will do anything for me, because he loves me.

*He loves me.*

And I totally, completely, unequivocally, love him.

“Yes. He’s special to me.”

Uncle Callahan gives me a warm smile. “I’m happy to hear that, son. You deserve it.”

“It doesn’t bother you that I’m with a man?”

Now, *he* seems to turn a little pink in the cheeks. “There’s a reason I never married, son.”

“You... You’re gay?” When he doesn’t say anything I continue. “And you’re still in the closet.”

“You’re a lot braver than I ever was. Than I am.” Uncle Callahan looks at me like... *Wow, this is... Is he proud of me? It sort of feels like he is. I...*

“I’m ready, Mr. Tripp.” Rose pokes her head into the office right before I can spiral into unfamiliar emotional territory. *Good timing.*

Uncle Callahan stands when I do, stepping around the desk to give me a hug. I know we did this at my parent’s party, but it still feels weird. Not bad, just different. I don’t hate it though, so I return the embrace.

“I’ll uh... I’ll call you. About dinner?”

“Please do.”

He escorts us out and helps us get Rose’s bags into the car. There are only a few since it seems my parents kept her on a pretty tight leash the last few years, but if the smile on her face is any indication, she’s not concerned about the lack of personal items. She’s just happy to be out of their house.

I’m not sure we’ll ever talk about them—I get the sense we’d both rather move on—but I’ll listen if she ever needs me to. I do have one question though.

“What are you going to do with all your free time?” Between the condo I’m giving her and the cash Uncle Callahan got her in exchange for not pressing charges, at Rose’s request, she doesn’t need to work anymore.

“Nothing, Mr. Tripp. Absolutely nothing.”

“I think that sounds perfect. Can I ask you one favor though?”

She looks at me curiously, but like any mother would, she says. “Of course.”

“Teach me how to cook your ramen? I want to introduce Noah to the comfort food I had growing up.”

Rose bobs her head slightly. “I’d be honored.”

## Chapter 25 - Noah

It's been heaven to be back on the ice.

Honestly, just walking is paradise after not being able to for several weeks. You never realize how much you move throughout the day until you suddenly can't. Everything from cooking to going to the bathroom, to just trying to find the damn TV remote, becomes a whole production when you have to do it on one leg. Don't even get me started on how hard it is to actually stand up off the couch with one leg and a set of crutches.

Finally putting my skates on and taking the goal, even just for practice, was like having this oppressive weight lifted off my chest. It didn't just make me feel independent again the way walking did, it was the difference between a wheezing breath and filling your lungs full of air. Feeling whole. If I'm being honest, the void I felt from not getting on the ice was considerably smaller than it would've been if I didn't have Tripp. So much so, a part of me is kind of dreading this road trip we're about to go on.

I'm excited to play again, but for the first time in my professional career, I'm not amped about the travel part of playing hockey. After years of staying in hotels, I prefer my own bed, but hotels aside, I usually look forward to seeing new places. It can be grueling, yet it can also be a great way to bond with my teammates. That was when I had no one to say goodbye to, no one waiting for me at home. Now, I do.

Between getting back on the ice and having Tripp move in, I'm privileged to say there's nothing I could want that I don't have, which makes it difficult to admit I'm a little sad about leaving for this road trip.

I'm practical enough to realize that means my love for Tripp might surpass my love of the game, and given my age... Let's just say, I'll have some deep thinking to do at the end of the season. For now, I just need to get through the next four days.

I toss some sweats, similar to the ones I'm wearing, in my duffel and open the dresser drawer to find some t-shirts while Tripp watches me from his perch on the bed.

"Don't you have to be all fancy and shit when you travel?" he asks.

"We have to dress up to go to the arena, but we can be comfortable the rest of the time. Fortunately, we go straight to the hotel when we land so I don't have to travel in a suit."

"Do you have to travel in gray sweatpants, though?"

"What's wrong with gray sweatpants?"

Tripp's jaw nearly drops to the floor. "They're the equivalent of kryptonite for anyone who likes cock, man or woman."

"Really?"

"Yes." He gives me an exasperated look. "Plus, I don't think they're very conducive to hiding that monster between your legs, and I definitely don't want people posting pictures of my second favorite cock all over social media."

"I follow the second favorite thing since yours is obviously your first, but you lost me at social media."

"Omigod, seriously? You don't know that people will take pictures and zoom in on the crotch and talk about how big the package behind the zipper is? Since those sweats don't have a zipper they won't leave nearly as much to the imagination."

I glance down my body, noting that from different angles he may have a

point. Still, it seems crazy to me that people might take such an interest in how I look in my pants. The cross look on Tripp's face tells me I'm the one who's under-reacting.

"Should I wear a pair of jeans?"

"You'll probably still look hot as fuck, but I suppose that's better than broadcasting your assets," he grumbles as he reclines against the headboard.

"Help me understand this," I say as I ditch the sweats and pull on a pair of jeans. "You've been speculating about the size of my cock for the better part of a year, yet you're worried about other people doing that same thing? Why?"

"That cock is *mine* to ogle, no one else's."

"Oh my gosh." I pause with the pants resting on my hips, still unfastened. "You're possessive."

"What? Am not."

"You totally are." A giant grin spreads over my face as I cross the room to sit on the bed, right at his hip, and lean in to nip at his chin. "You want me all to yourself."

"That doesn't make me possessive." He tilts his head so I can kiss his neck.

"No? What does it make you?"

"Protective," he says resolutely. "You wouldn't believe some of the comments people make. Depending on the angle, people could imply that you're woefully inadequate or hiding a can of Pringles. I'm saving you from rampant mischaracterization."

"You know the only opinion that matters is yours, right?" I cup the back of his head and tease my fingers through his hair as I give his earlobe a playful bite. "I don't care what people say about me or my body."

"Yes, well a man's penis is sacred. It shouldn't be seen by just anyone."

That statement gives me pause, and I pull back to look him in the eye. “I know you believe that first part, but the second is a little out of character. If you could legally do it, you’d charge admission to let people take a peek at yours. What’s this really about?”

Tripp rolls his eyes with an audible huff. “I wouldn’t do that *now*. And nothing’s going on.”

“Tripp,” I prod, resting my palm on the back of his neck.

“Ugh, fine. I know what happens on these little *road trips*.” He makes air quotes to emphasize that last part. “And I’m not a fan.”

Tilting my head to the side I search his face for some clue about what he’s trying to say and come up empty. “I’m not following.”

He exhales a frustrated breath. “You and Luca and the peek-a-boo pregame nonsense.”

*Me and... Oh shit! I never told him we ended that.*

“Tripp.” I rest my forehead against his. “I told Luca I can’t do that anymore.”

“I... You... When?”

“Weeks ago. He was getting in his head about a bad game and said he couldn’t wait for me to get back so he could get back on track, and I told him we needed to find another option.”

“Why?” It’s barely a whisper.

It’s hard to see with our heads so close together, still I do my best to lock eyes with him. “Because I didn’t feel right being in that situation with him when I’m with you.”

“We weren’t even together then. We were just—”

“I know.” I sigh, closing my eyes.

“But, aren’t superstitions a big deal? Like it could mess up your season,

kind of big deal?”

“Yes.”

“And Luca’s okay with this?” Tripp pulls back to look at me, a wary expression on his face.

“He was nervous at first, but he understood where I was coming from, so he made other arrangements.”

“Where were you coming from?” he whispers.

“I think you know.” I hold his gaze, praying I haven’t spooked him with that implication.

Tripp inhales deeply, holding his breath for what feels like an eternity. Then he leans forward to brush his lips over mine. “I love you.”

Now it’s my turn to suck in a startled breath, though I recover much faster since I’ve been ready to say this for weeks, and was just waiting for him to catch up. Cupping his face in my hands, I lean my forehead against his. “I love you, too.”

Tripp’s body visibly relaxes just before his lips meet mine in a tender kiss. Then the spike of adrenaline from admitting his feelings catches up with him and he starts rambling. “That’s really cool of Luca to let you off the hook because of me. Seriously though, where’d that ritual even come from? I know people do lots of weird shit in the name of good luck or whatever, but that’s got to be the weirdest superstition I’ve ever heard.”

“I always figured Luca would tell me if he felt like it, and he never did, so your guess is as good as mine. I’m just glad he found a way to make the arrangement he has for home games work for the away ones too. At least I assume that’s what he did since he’s been playing well these last few games.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t suggest I watch, too.” Tripp snorts.

“He did.” I stroke his stubbled cheek with my thumb. “I ruled it out because

the only person I want to share that kind of intimacy with is you.”

Tripp gives me a relieved smile and leans forward like he’s going to kiss me before pulling back abruptly. “Wait. If you told him to figure something else out a few weeks ago then you told that dick how you felt about me before telling me?”

“I thought you liked Luca?”

“I called him a dick, *right?*”

“And you like dicks,” I finish for him.

“Exactly. I still don’t want him seeing yours, though. I also don’t like that he knows stuff about you I don’t.” Tripp crosses his arms in front of his chest and puffs out his bottom lip.

“And you’re not possessive?” I fight back a smile.

“Nope.” He shakes his head firmly back and forth.

“Brat.”

“That’s been well established. And you love it.”

I lean forward until our lips are just barely touching. “I really do.”

Tripp’s lips meet mine for the sweetest, most perfect kiss. And then he squeals when I scoop him into my arms.

“Um...lover. If you want to carry me, I recommend tossing me over your shoulder. It’s more dignified than treating me like a damsel.”

“Lover?”

“We said the ‘L’ word. Besides, it’ll make Xander gag, so it can’t be all bad.”

“I’m gonna ignore the fact you brought up someone else’s name while I’m carrying you to bed and say I’m more comfortable with boyfriends. But I still love you.”

He flashes a bashful smile, which is a new look for him, but might just be

my favorite. “I love you, too.”

*I will never get tired of hearing that.*

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“How long have you been dating Preston Cooper?” The reporter asks when I point to him.

“I don’t know a Preston Cooper.” Honestly the question doesn’t bother me—I expected it since Tripp’s identity was finally unearthed yesterday—I just want to poke a little fun at the press for asking me about my boyfriend before they bring up the first game I’ve played in six weeks. And since my boyfriend is a brat, I have a pretty good idea how to make my point.

“Preston... Changed his name to Tripp ten years ago,” the guy prompts.

“Why didn’t you say Tripp then? I mean, I assume if someone changes their name, they’d like to be known by the new one instead of the old one. Isn’t that reporter 101? Getting the facts straight?”

“How long have you been dating Tripp Cooper?” he rephrases.

“Can we really call it dating? We’ve only been out in public once, and I feel like the term dating implies multiple outings, not just one.”

“How long have you been seeing him?”

*Damn, he’s persistent. I knew two out and proud men on the same team would get attention, but jeez.*

“Since I first looked at him. Just like I’ve been seeing you since the first time I looked at you. Recognition is pretty cool like that. Did you know there’s a condition where you don’t recognize people’s faces? I can never remember what it’s called—I don’t have it obviously—but I’ve always wondered about it.”

I point to the next reporter since that one’s out of questions.

“Did you know Tripp was the son of Senator Charles Cooper when you met

him?”

“Is that customary? I wasn’t aware that was something I should know about people I just met. I’ll probably need to make a list because I know a lot of people, and this could get confusing.”

She, too, sits with a harumph, and I point to the next.

“Bit of a rocky start this season, first the injury then the drama with Senator Cooper after the charity event, are you a distraction for this team?” He tilts his recorder so the microphone is pointed at me.

*Ouch. That’s not the direction I thought this would go, but at least now we’re talking about hockey.*

“Both of those things are in the past, so I don’t believe they’ll be a factor going forward.”

“Maybe not, but you’re also one of two openly gay men on the same roster, and that’s a unique scenario that might take the focus off the team.”

“I’m not overly concerned, seeing as the only people focusing on it are members of the press.”

“You don’t think two gay players on the same team is newsworthy?” he follows up.

“Statistically speaking, one in every eight men identifies as gay, which doesn’t include anyone identifying as bi or pan or demi, and there are twenty on this roster, so... If there are two gay men on the team, I’d say we’re right in line with the national average.” If there’s one thing travel gives me plenty of time for, it’s reading, and I may have brushed up on a few facts in preparation for the questions I knew would come my way.

“*If* there are two gay men?” He arches a skeptical brow.

I look to the players and coaches lining the wings of the room. “Did I miss an announcement that I’m gay? I don’t remember making a statement like

that.”

“You’re dating a man,” the reporter presses.

“When was that established?”

“You don’t think this exchange will be distracting to your teammates?” He changes tactics.

“I’m only answering the questions you ask.” I hold my hands up like I’m innocent.

“You’re not answering, you’re evading.”

“Ask me a question about hockey and I’ll answer.”

“This team fell short in the playoffs last year and is already four games out of first. Can you turn things around?” He studies me critically.

“Considering we just won today, I’d say so.”

“That’s only one win.”

“I have faith in us.”

“Why?”

“Because if we fall seven times, we’ll get up eight.” I wink, just for Tripp, who I know is watching.

Later that night, my phone beeps with an incoming video call, and before I can even say hello, Tripp bombards me. “I don’t know a Preston. Is that customary? Statistically speaking. Omigod I about came in my pants. You make one sexy brat.”

“Well, I learned from the best.” I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

“Damn right. Now flip the screen and show me your gorgeous cock. It’s been way too long since I’ve seen it.”

“You saw it yesterday,” I remind him while doing what he says.

“Exactly. That’s entirely too long.”

# Epilogue

TWO YEARS LATER

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” I grumble, wincing as the tattoo gun hits my skin.

“Oh, come on, it’s not that painful. I’m sure you’ve taken a puck that hurt worse.” Tripp rolls his eyes.

“It’s not the pain I’m complaining about.”

“You don’t like my artwork?”

“I love the artwork. Or I did until you told me about its alternative meaning.”

Despite having rings that say we belong to each other, Tripp wasn’t satisfied with something that could be removed, so he talked me into matching tattoos. He drew up a design with two hockey sticks framing a skateboard like a heart, and our initials in an elegant old English-style text. Then he shaded it to look sort of vintage.

“I mean, it’s not inaccurate.” He smirks mischievously as the second hockey stick gets inked onto my skin, crossing over top of the first.

“The rings on our fingers already say we’re crossing swords. We don’t need a literal picture of crossing swords on our arms.”

“Technically it’s crossing hockey sticks.” Tripp points to the blade as evidence while Jim tries to hide his laughter and ends up snorting instead.

“Did you know he was sneaking hidden meanings into the design?” I ask the man who helped Tripp get off the streets.

“It’s Tripp.” He shrugs as he gets more ink on the needle. “I sort of assume there’s always a double meaning to anything he does.”

“The guys are never gonna let me live this down.” My head thunks against the back of the chair as I try to remind myself that I asked him to marry me because I knew life would never be boring.

“We could’ve put them on our asses, like I first suggested,” Tripp unhelpfully says.

“Yeah, because when I’m old and decrepit I want the equivalent of a wrinkled raisin on my ass.”

“But they’d be *matching* wrinkled raisins.”

“I thought the whole point was to show that we’re together.” I sigh heavily.

“These do, and personally I think I nailed it. I mean, look at all the little Easter eggs in this design. Your hobbies, my hobbies, all bundled up in a little heart that screams *gay pride* to boot. Tell me that’s not poetic.”

“Still not gay,” I remind him.

“For me you are.” He bites his adorable bottom lip like the little brat he is, and my agitation fades instantly.

“Yeah, Tripp.” I smile affectionately. I stopped trying to figure out what label fit me best once I realized that didn’t change how I felt about him. Still, he’s never been more right. “For you I am.”



# Chapter Five

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# Noah

Tripp's made no less than three sex jokes in the last thirty minutes, so he's either really good at acting "*normal*" or he doesn't have a concussion.

Truthfully, I didn't think he'd given himself a head injury, but it made for a good excuse to stick around. I only wish I knew why I had a minor panic at the thought of him leaving. It's not like I'm unaccustomed to being alone, and Tripp's company often leaves me with questions I don't know how to answer. Yet, when he offered a room in his place... That felt like a lifeline.

Am I lonely enough that even Tripp's lewd company seems appealing, or am I lonely for Tripp? Given that any one of my teammates could offer lewd company, I have to consider the possibility it's the latter. I'm still not sure why that is: entertainment, curiosity, fascination. Maybe some combination of the three. I only know I like being around him. I prefer it to being alone, even if he tries to rile me with his shameless flirting.

Speaking of, he's watching me expectantly, waiting for my reply. "Why are you so determined to show me your dick?" I ask him.

"That bothers you?" He arches a suggestive brow.

“No. I sort of expect it now. I just don’t know why you keep offering.”

“Because you’re so curious to see it.” He reclines into the couch and takes another sip of his beer like he didn’t just make an outlandish assumption.

Since he’s so nonchalant, I act the same. “What makes you say that?”

His eyes gleam as though I’ve walked right into his trap. I probably have. “First, I see the way you look at me when you think I’m not paying attention. Spoiler alert, I’m always paying attention. And second, you don’t discourage my lame attempts to touch you. You totally play along.”

“I don’t ask you to touch me,” I say reflexively.

He casts me a sly grin. “You don’t stop me either. I mean, measuring your biceps? Asking whether you can flex your pecs independently of each other and telling you I need to feel it since I can’t see it? All excuses to put my hands on you, and you oblige every time.”

*Huh*, I guess I don’t discourage him. I’m not sure that makes me eager to see his dick, though truthfully, my own seems to wake up a little when he touches me. It hasn’t become hard, but it didn’t stay flaccid either.

I lift my gaze back to his, not realizing I dropped it. “I don’t mind humoring you.”

“You don’t, do you?” He smirks like we’ve just shared some private joke, though I’m not sure what it is. “Like I said, I’m always paying attention.”

“About that, what did you mean when you said you see how I look at you? *How* do I look at you?”

“With desire, obviously. You may think it’s because I’m *pretty* or whatever, and it may have started that way, but now you want to do more than look.”

Once again, my first instinct is to object, but before I can get the words out his start to sink in. I *do* think he’s pretty—I’ve admitted that to him—and

I've admitted to myself that I like looking at him. Watching him move, especially on that skateboard. *Does that mean I want to do more than look? Does it mean I'm physically attracted to him?*

Considering my body does seem to be more alert around him, I suppose it's possible. Hell, the first time I saw him I suspected that the unknown feeling I got was attraction, though in the months since I convinced myself it was affection since I genuinely like him. It does surprise me that I might be attracted to Tripp since he's so loud and brash and deliberately obnoxious, and I'm...*not*. Although there's no denying it's hard to keep my eyes off him. Touching him though... Is that why I look?

"Are you short-circuiting over there? All I did was imply that you might not be as straight as you think." Tripp's blunt assessment, though slightly off the mark, is a welcome interruption.

"I'm not freaking out if that's what you're asking. I'm just not sure you're right."

"Because you're so clearly attracted to women?"

"Because I'm not sure I'm attracted to anyone at all. Man or woman." The retort is out of my mouth before I can decide whether it's a good idea or not. Though, I have to admit watching Tripp's jaw bob comically up and down is pretty satisfying. He's used to delivering shocking statements, not receiving them.

I pop the top of my beer and take a sip to hide my proud smirk, indulging in a little liquid courage before the inquisition begins.

"You... I... Seriously? You're..." He swivels his hand in the air as if that will help his brain process information. "You're asexual?"

*I guess I have to walk through this door now that I opened it.* "Maybe."

"What do you mean *maybe*? How do you not know?"

“I don’t really dwell on it. Hockey is sort of all-consuming, and I figure I’ll have plenty of time after I retire to focus on other things.”

“Other things being sex.” His jaw still doesn’t shut all the way, which is starting to make me feel uncomfortable. *It’s not that strange to be indifferent about sex, is it?*

“Sex, hobbies, travel,” I rattle off the first things that come to mind.

“Hold up.” He raises his hand like it’s a stop sign. “Have you ever had sex?”

“Of course, I have.”

“Then you’re not asexual.”

“I don’t think it works that way.” I pull my brows together.

“How does it work then?” He tilts his head to the side, giving me a critical once over.

“I don’t know. If I feel the need to have sex, I do, I just don’t feel the need often. I’m not sure if that makes me asexual or...something else. Like I said, I’ll have more time to figure that out when I’m done with hockey.”

“Still not following.” He shakes his head. “If you’re not interested, why do you rake your eyes over my body when you think I’m not looking?”

“I didn’t know I was.” Tripp rolls his eyes, forcing me to protest. “Seriously. I admire the way you move on a skateboard, I think because it’s similar to skating on ice in some ways. But guys on the ice are covered in pads so they’re kind of a solid blob whereas you’re usually shirtless so I can see how your body moves.”

“So, you’re watching *a* body in motion, not necessarily *my* body?”

I sip my drink while I consider the question, feeling my face heat slightly as I answer. “I don’t watch Xander the same way I watch you, and I’m not sure

if that's because he's my friend's boyfriend and I deliberately avoid focusing on him, or because he doesn't hold my interest. I've never really analyzed it."

Tripp studies me as he chews on his lip like he's mulling over what to say next. "Why do I hold your interest? And don't say that I'm pretty, you know how I feel about that word."

This isn't a conversation I expected to have today, or ever really, though it's not as embarrassing as I expected. A little awkward maybe, but not embarrassing. Plus, I half wonder if sharing my thoughts aloud might give me some clarity.

"The first time I saw you, I wondered if you were a model. You have the angular bone structure and lean physique the industry looks for, and you project this confidence that reminded me of a model I once dated."

"You watch me because I remind you of an old girlfriend?"

"At first."

"And now?"

My brows draw together as I search for the right words. "That's harder to answer. Obviously, you're an attractive—"

"Hot," he interjects.

"Hot man." I try not to smile. "And I like your confidence. It makes you seem authentic, not superficial, which I respect."

"Oh my God. Are you about to give me the '*it's not you it's me*' line? I have all these great qualities, but I don't get your dick hard?" He huffs out a breath of air and drops his gaze to his lap, muttering softly, "You better snap the fuck out of it because I am way too young to be celibate."

Now it's my jaw that drops. "Celibate?"

"I'm sorry, what?" Tripp sets his drink on the coffee table and looks at me like he didn't say anything at all, but the flush creeping up his neck says

otherwise.

“I just confessed something I’ve never told anyone because I don't even understand it. I was willing to tell you since you’re the only person I know who might be able to help me figure this out. You're open-minded and aren't afraid to say anything. Don't change that now. What did you mean by celibate?”

Tripp’s eyes narrow just a fraction, making me think he’s about to clam up, but his features seem to soften as he flops back against the cushions. With a groan, he drapes an arm over his eyes and gestures to the bulge his shorts are doing little to hide. “This only happens around you, big guy.”

My chest suddenly feels tight, like it’s too small to hold my lungs. “What only happens around me?”

Tripp lifts his arm just enough for me to see his exasperated look. “You stop pucks at a hundred miles an hour, don’t tell me you can’t see what you do to my cock.”

“I mean, yeah, of course I can. But I thought that happened around lots of people.”

“It used to.” His arm falls over his face again.

“That’s... You mean that’s specifically for me?” I point to his junk even though he can’t see me. “You actually want to sleep with me? That’s not just you being an outrageous flirt?”

“Of course, I’m being an outrageous flirt, that’s kind of my thing. Only with everyone else it’s empty words.”

“I don’t understand.” I shake my head to clear it. “Why me?”

Tripp turns his head to face me as his arm drops to his side, his hazel eyes sullen instead of roguish, which causes a strange ache in my chest. “You do realize you look like the Norse God of legend only hotter, right?”

“Uh...”

“And you’re pushing six-and-a-half feet tall, which I’m assuming means you’ve got a big, *gorgeous* cock.”

“Um...”

“Not to mention you look at me like you want to touch but are too shy or confused to make a move.”

“Oh shit. Have I been leading you on?” My stomach flips, making me queasy at the notion I may have instigated this whole thing by being ignorant of my actions and the fact they were sending a signal I didn’t mean to project. What’s worse, for an overly sexual guy like Tripp, rejecting him physically might be just as bad as rejecting him emotionally, something I’d never want to do.

Tripp looks at the ceiling and inhales deeply, holding the breath for several seconds before he lets it out. “To be fair, I knew you thought you were straight. I suspected you were questioning that, so maybe I mistook your confusion for sexual tension.”

“Maybe I mistook sexual tension for confusion,” I confess, though whether that’s for his benefit or mine I’m not sure.

His gaze snaps back to mine. “What are you saying?”

Taking a deep breath of my own I recline against the couch, resting the beer on my thigh as I drag a finger around the metal rim. “I feel *something* around you. I’m not sure what it is exactly because it’s always different. Sometimes it’s in my stomach, sometimes my chest. That day in my driveway I think it was...”

“Did I make your cock hard? Please tell me you had blue balls after I left because you damn sure gave me a set that was a bitch to drive with.”

“I’m not sure hard is the right word—”

“Oh fuck, now you’ve done it.” He groans and palms the bulge between his legs, and this time I’m excruciatingly aware of the tingle between mine.

“What did I do?” I blink, as if that will help me see what the heck I did wrong.

“You said hard. Even if you weren’t, just imagining it is... Damn that’s a nice visual.”

“Do you need a moment?” Though I’m offering him an escape, I might be the one who needs it, considering the tingle is only getting stronger the longer I sit here, watching his hand cover his dick. *Do I sit here and see what happens, or make an excuse to get up?*

“I’ve got an idea.” Tripp bolts upright. “You said you’ve seen your teammates beat off and it didn’t do anything for you, right?”

“Yeah,” I say warily.

“But you feel something around me that you don’t feel around them?”

“I don’t know what that is,” I remind him, though he waves me off.

“I’m not asking you to classify it, just acknowledge it.” His fist seems to clench around his shaft over his shorts, and another twinge of *something* surges along mine.

“Yeah,” I exhale heavily, letting my eyes drift closed as I brace myself for the words I know are coming.

“Watch *me*.”

I open my eyes to find the vigor back in his, and while I’m happy to see Tripp acting like himself, I don’t want to lead him on any more than I already have, however unintentional.

“This doesn’t usually have the results I think you’re looking for.”

“We won’t know until we try, will we?” He licks his lips suggestively. “But just to be sure, we’ll change it up. Tell me how you ended up watching your

teammates? Was there a big circle jerk?"

I rear back. "What? Of course not."

"Too bad." He waggles his eyebrows. "I bet that'd be hot. Did they know you were watching?"

I set my half-empty can on the table and run my hand through my hair. "It was just the one guy, and yes. He knew. It was his idea. The release is something he needs before a game, and he gets there faster if someone is watching."

"Did he stand in front of you? Or lay on the bed?" I swear Tripp's eyes go hazy, like he's imagining himself in the room.

"He'd either lay down or just sit on the bed, facing me."

"Naked?"

"No. Usually he'd pull his boxers down just enough to, you know, hold it."

"So, you didn't really see much?"

"I mean, I saw enough. And remember, my teammates are like my brothers, so the whole thing was more about him reacting to another body in the room than either of us reacting to the other."

"Hmm, okay. Sounds like maybe things are different with me since I'm not a *brother* but that doesn't tell us whether you like cock or not. You need to see one to be sure." He stands up and whisks his shirt over his head, flashing those tight abs as he hooks his thumbs in the waistband of his shorts and guides them below his hips. When they're low enough, his cock springs free, slapping against his stomach and bobbing in midair as it comes to a rest, pointing directly at me.

*Oh. That's... I've never seen that before.*

Even after all the hints that he'd do it, I never actually expected Tripp to whip it out, and the quiver between my legs suggests I don't hate it. Still, my

eyes ping pong between Tripp and the coffee table, unsure of where they're supposed to be focused in this scenario.

“Don't be afraid to look. Hell, you can touch if you want.”

He steps out of his shorts and comes closer, placing his cock directly in my line of sight, no more than two feet away. And while my brain hasn't consciously decided to look, my eyes seem to have a mind of their own. Slowly, tentatively, I let myself take in the man before me.

He's got a great body, lean and lithe yet still cut, sinewy limbs sporting a soft golden hue from his time in the sun. And the part of his body he likes to tell me is spectacular... It's long and thick, with skin fair enough that I can see the blue vein pressing against the otherwise smooth surface. *Smooth.*

*Smooth?*

“You don't have any pubes.”

“Nope.” He pops the 'P' and grins mischievously. “Things are so much more *sensitive* without hair. Want to feel?”

I blink up at him, trying to get my bearings as the pressure between my legs seems to increase. “No. Uh, no.” I shake my head and avert my eyes.

“That's not how this is gonna go.” Leaning down, he hooks a finger under my chin, forcing me to look at him. “You're supposed to watch. Actually, scratch that. You're going to direct.”

“I ... What?” I swallow thickly. “I said I didn't want to touch.”

“You don't have to. But you do have to tell me what to do.” He backs up a few paces and clasps his hands behind him.

“I'm not... I don't...”

“See this?” He swipes a finger over the tip and holds it up for my inspection. “I need to come. I'm desperate for it. But until you give me some direction, I'm just going to stand here. Waiting. *Hoping.*” He tucks his hands

behind his back again, rocking his hips forward like he'd fuck the air if he could. "Take pity on my poor swollen cock, Noah. Tell me what to do."

Despite the playful pout, Tripp has a daring look about him, as though he enjoys being on display. Thrives on issuing a challenge. Whether it's my competitive nature that refuses to back down, or my desire to understand what's happening, I can't stop myself from taking the bait.

"Fine." I exhale heavily. "Stroke yourself."

"How?" He sways his hips, showing off his length. "Fast, slow, gentle, hard?"

"Whatever you want."

"No, it's whatever *you* want." His hazel eyes meet mine, gleaming with challenge.

A memory of Luca jerking himself furiously comes to mind, and for reasons I can't explain, that dictates what comes out of my mouth.

"Hold it gently. Go slow, root to tip."

I see the shiver travel up Tripp's body as my words sink in, and a similar one washes over me as I watch his eyes flutter closed when he takes himself in a loose fist. With a relieved moan he moves his hand along his length, back and forth, skin stretching taut as his fist hits his pelvis, and bunching up as he moves to the crown.

The motion is fluid. Languid. Yet his muscles strain beneath the surface as if it takes tremendous restraint to handle himself with such care.

His chest rises and falls with long, deep breaths, a tempo you could set a watch to, though when he abruptly rocks to the balls of his feet, chasing his fist, the rhythm falters, and he seems to gasp. Then moan, trapping a plump lip between his teeth in an effort to contain it. *That's... God, he's beautiful like this. Coiled. Primed. Aroused.*

Tripp's fist slides leisurely along his length, over and over again, the occasional thrust the only indication he wants it harder. Faster. I'll let him have that, later. Right now, I appreciate how the slow pace allows me to see his entire, engorged cock, and how that's making my body hum with an awareness that's both familiar and foreign.

As his hand strokes toward the tip, I notice it's purple, and glistening slightly in the dim light of the room. "You're dripping."

"So, you are watching?" He opens his eyes, bringing his gaze to mine, and the primal lust I see there has me licking my suddenly dry lips. "You got so quiet I was starting to wonder."

"You didn't give me much choice."

"You could've left me hard. It wouldn't have been the first time." His breath catches as his fist reaches the swollen head. "And as for the choice you made, are you happy with it? Do you enjoy driving up my need by making me go slow, or do you just want to savor the moment? Look your fill?" He drags his hand back to the base, palming his sac and giving me an unobstructed view of his steel length.

I do like looking my fill, I think, but since I can't make sense of that right now I bark out another command before he can jumble my mind any further. "Swipe your thumb over your slit. Spread your precum around the crown."

"Mmm, it's slippery." His eyes flick to mine, watching me from under thick lashes. "Makes my cock tingle everywhere I touch it." He sighs as he circles his finger around his tip, rocking his hips forward to increase the pressure, and a sharp zing ricochets through my length. *Holy shit. I think... I think I'm getting hard.*

"Cup your balls," I rasp. "Roll them around your palm."

His head falls back as he massages his sac, which makes his dick bob from

the motion of his hand. “Fuck, that’s good.” Tripp spreads his legs, giving himself more room to work, plumping his balls in his hand as he rocks his hips, rigid cock spearing the air.

My own presses against the fabric of my shorts, the zing having faded to a pleasant warmth that leaves a faint hum simmering between my legs. I can’t help shifting in my seat to see what it feels like to have the material brush against my skin, which doesn’t go unnoticed.

“Those shorts getting a little tight?” Tripp bites back a moan as he tugs on his sac, his bold gaze tracking over me like a predator savoring its prey. Blatant. Unabashed. Hungry. I can’t remember the last time anyone desired me so openly before, if ever, and the way it makes my cock stir is both exciting and embarrassing.

I don’t recognize my body right now. The sensations I’m feeling, the thoughts running through my head. They’re echoes of a distant memory, things I’m vaguely aware of having experienced before, though not recently enough to know what comes next, and certainly not in this context. I have a sudden urge to bring this to fruition, to end it before I lose the tenuous grasp on my control, if only to maintain my dignity in front of Tripp.

“Grab your cock,” I bark. “Jerk it hard and fast.”

“Fucking finally,” he exhales, wrapping a tight fist around himself and pumping firmly, slamming his pelvis against his hand with each stroke. “Jesus those thirsty blue eyes of yours are killing me. I’ve never been this hard from my own hand before.”

Tripp’s abs contract under the power of his thrusts, the tendons in his forearm flexing as he vigorously works his shaft, which is now a dusty pink under the pressure of his grip. “Holy... Keep your eyes on me. Don’t look away until I’ve spilled every last drop.”

The warning isn't necessary. Even if I could divert my eyes, I don't think I would. The image of Tripp on the cusp of euphoria is too captivating to ignore. Chest heaving, lips glistening, eyes fluttering—his pleasure is hypnotic, a siren song I'm helpless to look away from. I only hope I can witness it without falling apart.

“Oh God. Oh fuck.” Tripp doesn't even try to contain his release, letting milky white ropes of cum bubble from his slit, coating the fingers that grip his cock like a vise. A sharp cry pierces the air around us as he snaps his hips back and forth, spreading his cum over his length until it stops seeping from his crown. Only then does he slow his thrusts to a gentle roll, stroking through the last of the tremors as he brings his gaze to mine.

# Chapter Six

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# Tripp

It takes a minute—or three—for my vision to return to normal, and when it does, there’s no denying Noah’s got a tidy little bulge between his legs. I doubt he’s fully hard, but he’s not unaffected, and that’s all the incentive I need to keep pushing.

“Looks like you enjoyed the show.” I wipe my hand over my stomach, loving the way his eyes track the movement.

“I...” He licks his lips. “I guess.”

“You guess? I’d say the answer is between your legs.”

He glances down for a nanosecond and shakes his head. “That’s... It’s not really...”

“Don’t hold back.” I’m playing dirty, using his perception of me against him, but I have a feeling this whole experiment will be for nothing if I let him take the easy way out. “Are you hard?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” I rest my hands on my hips.

“No. Sort of.”

“Which is it?”

“I don’t know,” he shouts, eyes growing wide as if his own volume takes him by surprise, and I get the sense I need to tread carefully because he maybe *doesn’t* know. Or doesn’t know what it means.

Rather than ask if he was affected by watching me, I operate under the assumption he was. “Noah, are you ashamed to get hard for another man?”

“No.”

That’s promising, but it raises another question, one I’m almost afraid to ask. “Are you ashamed to get hard for *me*?”

He shakes his head firmly as a pink flush creeps up his cheeks. “No. I’m... I’m embarrassed.”

“Um, I’m standing here naked with my dick going soft and *you’re* embarrassed?”

“It’s...” He licks his lips as he runs a hand through the blond waves that hang just below his ears. “I don’t know what’s happening. I don’t know what to expect. You’re...confident and proud and experienced and I’m... I told you this might not have the results you wanted.”

Before I can weigh whether it’ll comfort him or spook him, I straddle Noah’s legs and sit my naked ass on his lap. He goes stiff at first, leaning away to put some distance between our faces as he sucks in a breath of air. But he doesn’t make any attempt to get me to move. Then he relaxes into the couch with a slow exhale.

I rest my hands on his chest, noting the strong yet erratic heartbeat underneath them. “These are exactly the results I wanted. I showed you my dick, and you didn’t hate it.” I wiggle my hips slightly over the semi I feel underneath me. “Maybe you even liked it a little.”

“But I didn’t—I don’t even know if I can—and...” The poor guy looks so confused I’m tempted to take him in my arms and just hold him, which I

might've done if a cringe-worthy scratch didn't reverberate between my ears like a needle dragging over the surface of a record. *Oh, thank God for imaginary warning bells. I don't do the whole nurturing thing.*

“My cock may be a work of art, but as far as I know it's never made anyone come just from looking at it.” Noah cracks a timid smile, but of course I need to go bigger. “We can try if you want, though. I'm not shitting you about how magnificent that orgasm was. Apparently, showing off for a Thor-lookalike really does it for me, so I will gladly jerk off in front of you any time you want. Fuck, I'm getting excited just thinking about it.”

He chuckles softly, which was the original goal, but I've already taken it too far.

“That's not an exaggeration. Look.” I lift my brows and drop my gaze. “Of course, it could be that I'm naked and sitting on top of a sexy as fuck man, but,” I clench my jaw as I try to keep my hips from rocking, “I like having your eyes on me.”

“Is this normal? For you?”

“Which part? Wanting to be watched or sitting naked on a man who's fully clothed, which is also really doing it for me by the way.”

Noah let his eyes fall to my lap briefly before bringing them back to my face. “The ah, getting excited again part.”

I bite the corner of my lip and stare into his baby blues. “I've been known to recover quickly.”

“So, um. Does that mean you need to jerk off again?”

“I can.” I shift my palms from his chest, over his shoulders and down his arms until I find his hands, and set them on my thighs. “Or you can do it for me.”

His fingers clench my legs as he gasps.

“You’ve never touched another man’s cock before, right?”

He shakes his head firmly but lets his gaze drift downward.

“Do you want to?” I rock my hips slightly, so the tip of my shaft brushes over the shirt covering his stomach.

Timid eyes meet mine for a fraction of a second before they dart away. “Would you...want that?”

“I would love that.” I take one of his hands in mine and hold it between us, tracing my fingers over his. “I would love to feel these long, strong fingers wrapped around me. Squeezing and rubbing and pulling my cum out of me.”

“I’m not sure I can do that.”

I set his hand back on my thigh, loving how the warm weight of it feels on my skin. Loving even more that he lets it rest there. “You can just watch again, if you want.”

“No, I mean I’m not sure I can do that for you, since I’ve never... I don’t know what you like.”

“I like having my dick played with.” I prop my hands on his legs and lean back slightly, giving him plenty of room to ogle, touch, even dump me off his lap if that’s what he wants. But considering he hasn’t shoved me off yet, I’m betting he’ll let me sit here until I come again. I’m also betting he’ll join in for this round.

That’s maybe a little presumptuous of me. I don’t have any experience with asexuality—if that’s what we’re dealing with here—so it’s possible I’m pushing him too far too fast. However, I’m a pretty observant fucker, good at reading what people say with their expressions, and Noah’s tells me his curiosity hasn’t been sated. Still, I’m caught a little off guard when one of his large hands slides along my leg, up my torso, and starts rubbing my chest.

The pressure is firm, not hard, though not as tentative as I would’ve

expected. His palm slides between my pecs, gliding over one before moving to the other, fingertips grazing a nipple that perks up obediently, and I find myself closing my eyes as I sink into his touch, my steady breathing the only audible sound in the room.

My cock is standing at attention, begging to be touched, but this slow perusal of my body feels just as heavenly as having my dick pumped. Who knew?

“Why blond?” Noah interrupts the silence.

“What?”

He tips his chin up, indicating he means my hair. “Why blond? Why not blue? Or green?”

“Blond goes with my eyes.” I arch into his hand, a silent plea for him to keep stroking. He does, dragging his fingers down to my rose tattoo and tracing the lines almost reverently.

I don’t typically let people do that—most guys treat ink as a sex symbol when it’s the one thing on my body that I don’t flaunt for sex—but the gentle giant admiring them now isn’t doing it to turn me on. Not deliberately. I can tell by the awed expression on his face, the same one he wore when he first asked about them. He appreciates the art, respects the words, and for that I’ll let him look as long as he wants.

Noah’s finger brushes over the petals, but when it hits the stem, which hovers just above my hip, my stomach clenches as I gasp. He pulls his hand back abruptly, mumbling a hasty, “Sorry.”

I take his hand and put it back, holding it to my torso. “Don’t stop. Just be ready for me to jump if you tickle me again.”

Using a firmer touch, Noah slides his hand to my hip, fingers grazing where my pubes would be if I had them, and I groan softly.

“It’s really more sensitive?” he asks, referring to my smooth skin.

“You ever shave that stubble off your face?” A faint line divides Noah’s brows but he nods his head even though he clearly doesn’t follow why I’m asking. “Then you know without that hair your nerves seem to wake up. They’re so alert you can actually feel the air on your face.” His expression softens as he connects the dots. “That’s how I feel *everywhere*.”

Noah’s Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows, and his hand shifts lower, fingertips ghosting along the base of my cock, which bobs expectantly. Blue eyes riveted between my legs, he traces a path up my length, licking his lip when that finger catches the precum pooling at the crown.

While I have the presence of mind not to spook him with jerky movements, I’m helpless to stop my hips from tilting upward, chasing after his touch. The barest of friction puts my entire body on edge, like I’m a star on the verge of becoming a supernova, the energy within me too unstable to contain.

Why his slow, curious touch has me so riled when I’m usually a fan of enthusiastic fucking, I have no idea, but with my cock as hard as a steel rod, there’s no denying I like being the object of his sexual exploration. That’s not new—I enjoy the opportunity to corrupt men who think they’re straight—although it doesn’t usually go like this. Sure, they might be a little hesitant at first, but there comes a point where they either strike like a rabid animal or nope the fuck out. I’ve never had a guy embrace the experience in such a prolonged way, mapping my body with awe.

I may boast about my spectacular dick, and I’m proud to say no one’s ever expressed disappointment. Still, Noah’s fascination is hot and mind-blowingly erotic, yet unexpected.

Circling the head, Noah spreads my precum over the tip, heightening the already delicious friction and making me keenly aware of his delicate touch.

Then he slides his damp finger down my length to my heavy sac, cupping it in his large palm.

I rock my body over his with a heady moan, trying to stifle a gasp when I feel a firm ridge of pressure underneath me. This is getting him hard. Really hard. I give myself an imaginary pat on the back before shoving the thought from my mind. He'll say something if he wants to acknowledge it. Instead, I let my body take control.

"I didn't know men could feel so smooth." He kneads my balls slowly, dragging his thumb over the somewhat taut skin.

"Do you like it?"

He gives them a firm tug, causing my cock to twitch with a ragged jolt, and resumes rubbing them with a distant, almost contemplative look. "Yeah. I like that you feel soft."

"We need to work on your vocabulary. Nothing about me is soft."

"I suppose not." He slides his hand from my sac to my shaft, trapping it in his vice-like grip, and my vision goes hazy while my soul jumps out of my body.

*Holy mother of God, have I entered Heaven?*

"Damn that's an iron grip," I stutter when my senses return and I realize my hips are bucking and swiveling and straight up humping his hand completely of their own accord, because the fucker's just holding my dick, not jerking it.

"Too much?" He relaxes his grip as he angles his head to the side like he actually thinks he might be hurting me.

"Fuck no. Keep doing that."

The pressure returns, and I start thrusting into his fist, grinding my ass against his erection with each pass.

Jaw locked tight, Noah grumbles as I slam onto his lap, but he makes no

effort to move. Whether that's because he's too afraid or too engrossed by the feel of my dick in his hand I don't know, but the way his baby blues darken under hooded lids suggests any fear he might have is trumped by lust.

*And I am here for it.*

Though my limbs are straining with the effort to hold myself up while thrusting into his hand, I fucking love the imagery of writhing naked on top of a fully clothed man. It's so...filthy, so primal and debauched. I'm ready to blow just picturing it, yet before I can Noah loosens his grip, and the explosion I almost reached fades into a quiet hum.

"Oh fuck. That's... I need... Don't stop." Random words fall out of my mouth as I press my groin into his hand, straining to reclaim the bliss I almost found. When I can't find it, my tortured gaze meets Noah's.

"Can I?" He gives a leisurely pull on my cock.

*He doesn't want to stop, he wants to take over.* The relief is so potent my arms struggle to support my weight.

"Fuck yes," I pant. "Do whatever you want to me."

Once again, he starts slow, with feather-light strokes from root to tip. It's not enough, my chest heaves with the effort to restrain myself from bucking wildly, but my hips don't move, giving him the freedom to explore at his own pace.

Back and forth, his hand travels over my shaft, gradually getting faster, squeezing harder, learning what makes me gasp or moan or roll my eyes back in my head. And while I try to limit my reactions to what he's doing to me, sometimes it's what I do to him that gets me.

Brow furrowed in concentration, blue eyes dark with desire, Noah is one sexy motherfucker. Add his slightly parted lips, his staggered breathing, and

the hard dick pressing against my ass, and before long the pressure of impending release is back.

“Don’t stop. Please, *God*, don’t stop.” My hips swivel in earnest, alternately pushing my dick into his grip and rubbing my ass over his. Mercifully, he gets the message, pumping me harder. Faster. Until we’re a tangle of squirming, wriggling limbs lost in a frenzy of lust that couldn’t be contained even if we wanted it to. I’m on the verge of detonation. But it’s the astonished look on Noah’s face as he quivers beneath me that tips me over the edge. *Oh. My. God.*

My earlier restraint dissolves as my body takes over, rearing almost violently as my dick pulses out its release. Toes curling, fingers gripping Noah’s thighs hard enough to bruise, my muscles go into lockdown as a tsunami of pleasure tears through me, robbing me of the ability to do anything but hang on as I coat us both in the sticky aftermath of my bliss.

It’s a savage orgasm. Untamed. And even before my limbs stop sizzling, I know I’ll want more. Much more. As much as Noah’s willing to give.

As my dick stops weeping, I try to take stock of whether I can move only to come to the conclusion that I can’t. I’m boneless, incapable of standing, and I’m strangely content with that. Using the last of my energy I pull myself upright only to collapse on Noah’s chest, resting my forehead on his shoulder as my breathing slowly returns to normal. *It’s not cuddling, it’s recovery. There’s a difference.*

Noah’s hand releases me, sliding over my hip and coming to rest on my thigh as his own breathing slows, and for a moment there I swear I hear a breathless “*thank you,*” although I’m too dazed to give it much thought.

When I’m finally capable of movement it’s dark out, and I’m still on the couch, covered by a blanket. Noah is nowhere in sight.



# Chapter Seven

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# Noah

I like dick.

Or at least, my body does. I wouldn't have guessed that about myself until Tripp pushed me to examine the possibility of it. Even knowing I felt something different around him, I'm not sure I'd have done anything about it without his influence, and for that I'm grateful. I'm also still confused as hell.

Am I bi? I have to acknowledge that's possible since I can now say I've done sexual things with both women and men, although since a woman hasn't piqued my interest in quite a while bi doesn't feel right. Have I been gay and not asexual all along, and just didn't realize it? And if I really am gay, how come seeing Luca pleasure himself didn't do anything for me while seeing Tripp do the same got me hard? I assume the difference is because I see Luca as more of a brother, but if I imagine watching anyone else, Xander for example, that doesn't do anything for me either despite the fact I can objectively say he's good-looking.

Does that mean last night was some sort of anomaly—a right place, right time sort of thing—or that I only react to Tripp? Is it even possible to respond to one particular person and not a gender? If I didn't think that'd freak him

out, I'd ask Tripp, but I don't want to imply he's the key to my sex life. Especially not after the way the night ended.

Neither of us mentioned it—he passed out pretty quickly after coming a second time, thank God—but I'm pretty sure he could tell I came, too. That wouldn't matter except for the fact I warned him it probably wouldn't happen, and while I'm pretty sure he'd be proud of succeeding where others have failed, I highly doubt he'd want to consider the fact he's the *only* person who can do so. I don't even want to consider it. Still, it's hard not to, given my history, and the fact that I can't substitute any man for Tripp in my mind and feel the same level of excitement.

God, he was a vision—confident and sexy. Tripp unabashedly showcased himself for my pleasure then used me to chase his own. The way his body contorted. The heat in his eyes. The mixture of delight and relief on his face as he painted us with his cum. I didn't know seduction could be so filthy yet still so beautiful, much less that I could find release from that alone.

For a brief moment afterward, I didn't have the presence of mind to bite my tongue, and I thanked him for giving me what I thought I'd lost. I think he was already asleep at that point because he didn't react, and fortunately he'd already left for work by the time I got up, so I have time to get my shit together before facing him. And by getting my shit together, I don't mean freaking out about what we did since I clearly enjoyed it, I mean figuring out whether my body likes men, or just Tripp.

However, I have no idea how to go about figuring that out. I could engage in a little more experimentation while I'm here, though that wouldn't answer the question of whether my body can respond to anyone else. And that's hardly a question I can ask the man I'm fooling around with to help answer. It doesn't feel right to ask Niko or Xander since they're friends with Tripp,

and even if Luca and I had the kind of relationship where I asked him for advice, I couldn't in this scenario since he's as straight as they come. Besides, I wouldn't know where to start.

Aside from Tripp, who I inexplicably find myself opening up to, I haven't hinted to anyone that I've been questioning whether I'm not cut out for sex. After all, locker rooms are more of a '*share your exploits*' than a '*confide your secrets*' environment, and as the last line of defense on the ice, it's better that I appear focused on the game instead of my own internal conflicts. To burden my teammates with my questions now... Even if I could, I doubt any of them are equipped to give me sound advice.

Restless yet mentally exhausted, I revert to the one and only thing that's ever quieted my mind – physical exertion.

Usually, hockey practice is my outlet, and it's so rigorous it's no wonder I don't spend time dwelling on my inactive sex life. But during the off season running typically does the trick, and in a new neighborhood I figure the scenery alone will be enough of a diversion. And it is, though not in the way I'm expecting.

Rather than flowers and trees, of which there are plenty, I find myself noticing people. Specifically, other men who are running. Only, I'm not noticing them the way I notice Tripp. I don't see the shape of their legs, the swing of their hips, or the cut of their jaw. Instead, I see only the whole person, which is no more or less appealing to me now than it was before I met Tripp.

After a grueling seven miles, my mind is as restless as ever, and it's apparent nothing but puzzling out this mystery will give me any relief. So, I collapse onto the nearest bench and just sit, searching every face, every figure, to see if one of them might hold my attention the way Tripp does.

Physically, there are several. Men and women alike, with the lean physique indicative of an active lifestyle that would be compatible with my own. I'm able to discern that several have attractive faces, though none have the charisma that Tripp exudes. None of them are so alluring I can't look away. In fact, they sort of blend together, becoming indistinguishable the harder I try to recall any of them specifically.

I think there's some sort of condition to describe that. The inability to recognize peoples' faces. I don't have it, obviously, since I can tell who's who, although in terms of sex appeal, I don't seem to be able to pinpoint my interests. It feels a little like there's everyone else, and then there's Tripp.

*What does that mean?*

"Noah Tremblay?" A deep voice startles me out of my trance.

"Yes." I look up at a man who matches me in size, with wavy black hair and ocean blue eyes.

"I thought I recognized you. I'm sorry to intrude, it's just that I jog this path regularly, and I've never seen you before. I couldn't pass up the chance to say hello. I'm Justin."

The man holds out his hand, and I grip it for a handshake. *Classically attractive, athletic, firm grip. Do I feel anything?*

"I've been a Bulldogs fan for years. Never been lucky enough to bump into anyone on the team before now. Do you live around here?" He lets go of my hand and gestures to the surrounding area.

*Nope, nothing. Not a single thing.*

"No, just wanted a change of scenery during my run." Pro athlete 101, don't tell people where you live. Or where you're staying temporarily.

"Oh, nice. So, um, I don't mean to pry or anything, but you looked kind of...dazed just now. Are you okay?"

*Shit*—I can't afford to zone out where people can see me, they'll start questioning my health and I'll get stuck talking to doctors every week.

"Yeah, man. I'm good. Just visualizing a game."

"Always in training, huh?" Justin smiles brightly, as if I've given him some special insight into my pre-game process.

"Something like that, yeah."

*This guy is handsome, polite... No idea if he's into men or not, but even if he isn't I could still be attracted to him. So why aren't I?*

"Mind if I get a picture?" he asks.

"Sure." I stand up and smile for the selfie he takes, and with another quick handshake I say my goodbyes and head out before anyone else can recognize me, feeling a little disheartened that because of my celebrity, answering the question of whether I'm attracted to anyone beyond Tripp is going to be much harder than I anticipated.

# Chapter Eight

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# Tripp

I'm nervous.

That's not an emotion I'm familiar with, especially considering I'm about to walk into my own house. But for the first time since moving in, that house isn't going to be empty when I get inside, and I'm not sure how to feel about that.

On the one hand, last night was hot as fuck, and I want to do it again. And *again*. And many more agains, after that. On the other, I've never had anyone stay the night. *Ever*. Not once. So, I'm not sure what to expect. Complicating things even more, Noah isn't exactly experienced in the hookup department, much less the hooking up with *men* department, so I don't know whether he'll be freaked out, casually curious, or clingy.

Considering I'm pretty certain he said '*thank you*' last night, my money's on clingy, but I hope I'm wrong. I wouldn't mind getting carnal with the big guy since he really gives my junk a hard on, but emotions are not my jam. If he goes fatal attraction on me, I wouldn't just lose him, I could lose Xander, as well.

I might've pushed the boundaries of our budding friend group last night,

and Xander won't hesitate to castrate me for it if it backfires. He'll claim I should've known better—which I did—as if he doesn't know I'm unlikely to stop chasing a dick I want.

Usually, I have no shame in the pursuit of a good fuck, but I also don't usually pursue acquaintances, or people I genuinely like. Noah just does things to me I can't seem to ignore. I should make sure he's on the same page though.

Shoving all the 'what-ifs' from my mind, I push through the door with my trademark coy smile, only to have it turn into a gasp when I'm hit with the most divine aroma I've ever experienced inside my little sin bin. *Hockey terminology is so appropriately filthy.*

I round the corner into the kitchen and find Noah bent at the waist—showcasing a deliciously round ass—and pulling some sort of pan out of the oven. “What kind of foreplay is this?”

“Foreplay?” Noah arches a curious brow as he sets the dish on the stove.

“You know, stuff that makes your dick hard.” I point to the steaming plate. “What is it?”

“Tourteire,” he says with a little French flare. “Beef inside a pastry crust.”

“I didn't know pot pie was such an aphrodisiac.”

“Not pot pie. Tourteire,” he clarifies as if I didn't just try to make things inappropriate. *Our normal dynamic still applies. That's a good sign.*

“Which restaurant delivers these? If it tastes as good as it smells, I'm gonna have to put it on my favorites list.”

“I didn't order this. I made it.” He helps himself to the cupboard and pulls out two plates that have probably never held actual food, only takeout containers.

“With what? I don't have any groceries here.”

“You do now.” He pulls a knife from the drawer and starts slicing the pie while I open the fridge to find that I do, in fact, have food. A lot of it. Fruit and vegetables and eggs, stuff I don’t eat unless I order it.

“So, this is like a frozen thing? Where’s the box? I’ll take a picture, so I know what to get.”

“No box, I made this from scratch.” He scoops a slice onto a plate and hands it to me.

“For real?” I twist and turn the plate, inspecting it from all angles. It looks just like a heaping slice of apple pie, only with ground beef instead of apples, but with the same golden flaky crust you’d expect in a dessert. “You can cook?”

“Sometimes. When I’m bored, or…” He lifts a casual shoulder then dishes a piece for himself.

“Hmm.” I close my lips around a forkful of pie, and an explosion of savory flavor hits my tongue. The meat is so tender it practically melts right along with the flaky crust, and I swear my eyes roll back in my head a little as the cinnamon-sweet aftertaste floods my senses. “Holy shit, that’s incredible.” I rush to take another bite. “How’d you get it to rise like an actual pie? I always thought those were hard to make at altitude.”

Noah cocks his head to the side as I take another bite, realizing too late the blunder I just made.

“I didn’t expect a guy who keeps literally no food in his house to know anything about baking.”

“Late night TV,” I say around a mouthful, figuring that’s enough of an explanation to keep him from asking anything more.

“Which show?”

*Dammit.*

“Fuck if I know. Sometimes I just leave the thing on while I fall asleep. Maybe I picked things up by osmosis.”

His wary expression says he doesn't buy that, but too bad. Just cause I show a guy my cock doesn't mean I'm gonna tell him all my sordid history about watching our housekeeper cook since I didn't have friends to hang out with. Fortunately, he doesn't seem to be in a challenging mood.

“I like *‘Is It Cake?’*” He carries his plate to the tiny kitchen table and takes a seat.

“What now?” I grab a beer from the fridge and follow him with my dinner.

“People make cakes that look like real objects, and you have to guess which are real and which are cake.”

“Pfft. Doesn't sound that hard.”

“That sounds like a challenge.”

My fork stops midway to my mouth as I cut Noah a suspicious look. *Is he flirting with me? That's new. And kind of intriguing.*

I take my bite and wash it down with a swig of beer, grinning playfully. “Okay big guy. What do you have in mind?”

“I'm not going to bake a cake if that's what you mean. I'll show you an episode and you have to guess which are the cakes.”

“And if I guess correctly? What do I get?” My smile turns almost sinister as I imagine the possibilities.

“Bragging rights?” He has the good sense to look a little wary.

“Uh, uh. I want another dinner.” I toss him a softball, mostly because if I go straight to the good stuff I won't get a home-cooked meal, but I can be creative in showing my appreciation if he cooks for me again.

“I only know how to make a few things.”

“You don't cook like this for yourself all the time?”

His head swivels back and forth. “I have someone make meals for me. Mostly lean proteins that keep me in top shape, not comfort food like this.”

I have a brief flashback to sitting at the kitchen island as a kid, a steaming bowl of Rose’s homemade ramen in front of me. Most people probably don’t think of Japanese cuisine as comfort food, but to me... Let’s just say it’s one of the happier aspects of my childhood.

“Tripp?” Noah’s voice jolts me out of the memory. “You good?”

“Of course.” I take a pull from the bottle to wet my dry throat. “So, even if you only know how to make a few things, that’s plenty for one more dinner.”

“You’re so sure you can spot the cakes?”

I run my fingertip around the opening of the bottle. “I am.”

The corner of his lip tugs up with a soft chuckle. “Alright then. What do I get if I win?”

“What do you want?” I tip my chair back and prop my feet on the one next to it, settling in for what promises to be an entertaining conversation.

“Um.” He looks at his food and takes a bite, as if that could hide the fact his face is starting to look like a tomato, which on a Thor lookalike is actually not a bad look. Then he takes another bite, clearly struggling with how to say what he wants.

“Oh, my poor, sweet Noah.” He glances up just in time to see me lick my lips. “You do know I put out without having to lose a bet first, right?”

He gives a curt nod and looks back at his plate.

“Why go through this whole bet thing then? What is it you’re afraid to say?”

“What if... What if last night was a fluke?”

“You think I can’t make you come two nights in a row?” I arch a brow as his eyes snap to mine, confirming what I already suspected. *He came last*

night.

“Can you?”

“I can sure as hell try.” My eyelids get heavy as I imagine getting a glimpse of what I’m sure is a nice, fat cock.

“And if I don’t?”

I purse my lips together with a frown. “I don’t understand the question.”

“If I don’t come, then what?”

“You go to bed with blue balls?” I shrug noncommittally.

“No.” He exhales heavily and shakes his head. “I mean, if I don’t, does that mean I don’t actually like guys?”

*Oh, we’re going deep. Shit, okay.*

Dropping my feet back to the floor, I right the chair with a thud. “I think you’re expecting attraction and desire to be black and white, and in my experience they’re more like a rainbow, and no, that’s not a gay reference, it’s just an analogy.”

“I’m not following.” *Damn those blue eyes are intense when they’re confused.*

“Okay.” I chew on my lip, searching for a way to simplify the complexities of sexuality. “How’s this? Mostly, I like men who are bigger though every once in a while I want to play with someone smaller. I gravitate to white guys but sometimes I’m in the mood for Latin. Or Asian. And I’ve been known to crush on straight guys from time to time. My preferences change with my mood, but my mood swings don’t define me.”

“In every one of those examples you’re still gay,” Noah points out.

“That’s because my rainbow is narrowly focused on men. Yours might be more broad, including men and women.”

“I also don’t have sex nearly as much as you.”

“So what? That just means my rainbow is more vibrant.” I throw my hands up. “The point is, sex isn’t black and white, it’s a gradient. Maybe you won’t like cock as much tonight as you did last night. Maybe you’ll like it more. Either way, it’s not like you have to label yourself afterward, and even if you did, there’s no rule that says you have to stay with that label forever.”

*Nailed it.*

“I’m not worried about the label.” Noah swirls his fork around his empty plate. “I just... For years I didn’t give myself time to be confused. I focused on hockey and didn’t let myself ask questions I didn’t have the answer to. After last night, I can’t make the questions stop.”

*Oh shit. It’s not quite fatal attraction level clingy, but he’s trying to solve existential issues of attraction while I’m on more of a ‘bang him out of my system so my suddenly picky junk goes back to normal’ mission.*

“These questions.” I rotate my wrist in a circle like that might help me find the right words. “Are they still along the lines of whether you like cocks or not?”

“Partly.”

“Anything else?”

“Whether I’d finish...if a man touched me.”

I assume since he said man his questions must refer to *men* in general, not *me* specifically. I can work with that. And hallelujah because I really do want to get my hands on him. “I accept your terms. Show me this cake.”

Noah drops his fork with a clatter and sits ramrod straight. “My terms?”

“If you win the cake bet, I’ll play with *your* dick this time.” I wink and pop out of my chair, heading toward the living room. “Coming?”

“There’s literal stitching on that cake,” I protest, because even though I really want to touch Noah’s cock, I can’t turn off my competitive nature. “She cheated somehow. Leather stitching isn’t edible and the whole thing has to be edible, right?”

“The icing is meant to look like leather stitching.” Noah grabs the remote off the coffee table and rewinds the program to the close-up view of the baseball and mitt that a knife cuts through seconds later. And even though I’m well aware that there’s cake inside the mitt, my brain won’t let me accept the fact that it’s actually cake when it looks so real.

“Then you cheated. You’ve seen this one before and knew which was the cake.”

“This episode just got released last night. I haven’t had time to watch it until now.”

“You could’ve watched it while you were making dinner and conveniently suggested this little game knowing you’d win.”

“Right, because I knew we’d be making bets involving sexual favors and household chores.” His eyes have a playful little glint to them that I don’t normally see. *Definitely flirting.*

“You honestly expect me to believe you didn’t foresee this outcome? The way to a man’s dick is through his stomach, and you combined my two favorite things, meat and pie.” I raise my fingers as I list off my weaknesses. “Sneaky bastard.”

“A, I didn’t know meat—” he catches the smirk on my face and connects the dirty dots. “I didn’t know pie was one of your favorite things. And B, the saying is actually ‘the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.’”

“Not this man.” I shake my head vigorously.

“Are you saying you don’t have a heart?” Noah cocks his head to the side as his eyes drift over me.

“If I do it’d take a hell of a lot more than food to find it. My cock on the other hand,” I rush to change the subject, “responds to pretty much anything. But a bet’s a bet so tonight we get to play with yours.”

I drop to the floor and crawl between Noah’s thick thighs, noting how he tenses when my palm connects with his bare knee. “Change your mind?”

His head swivels so slowly it’s hard to tell whether it’s moving, but his mouth stays shut. I let my hand drift higher, fingertips sliding under the thin fabric of his shorts to press against the inside of his thigh. He sucks in a breath of air as his eyes grow wide, seemingly caught between wanting me to retreat or push forward.

“Okay?” I rub my thumb back and forth over the soft skin of his inner leg, hoping that will both soothe and excite him.

“Feels...” He exhales deeply as he relaxes into the cushions behind him. “Feels nice.”

Using far more control than I thought I possessed, I linger in the same spot, gently sliding my fingers over his skin as I watch him for signs of distress, another thing I’ve never tried to do with my hand inches from a guy’s junk.

Noah’s chest rises and falls with measured breaths, not panicked, but not without tension either. A forced calm, as if he’s both anxious and afraid to enjoy what I’m doing.

“Lean back and close your eyes,” I say softly.

The twist of his head is less hesitant now. “I want to watch.”

“You will. But first you need to relax. Stop thinking about what’s happening or what’s going to happen and just feel.”

The words are meant for him, but I find myself following the same

instructions. Whether that's an effort to set a good example, or an attempt to stick to this slow pace, I have no idea. I just know that for the first time in, maybe ever, I'm noticing how soft skin feels on the inner thigh. How hair tickles the pads of my fingers when I barely graze it. How muscles tense when you first touch them and unwind the longer that connection remains.

And while I still haven't seen or touched his cock, mine is enthralled.

# Chapter Nine

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# Noah

**T**rusting that Tripp knows what he's doing, I close my eyes and let my head fall to the cushions, focusing on the feel of his hand on my leg rather than what other parts of my body may or may not be doing.

It's warm...heavy, except at his fingertips, which are ghosting over my skin. Down to my knee, up to mid-thigh, occasionally dipping to the inside, Tripp's touch is calming. Except when it inches higher and sparks a tiny little flutter of awareness deep inside my groin. It's a rumble of need that coaxes my dormant sense of desire out of hiding.

And wow—he's only touching my leg, but by concentrating on that point of contact my entire body seems to come alive. A pleasant warmth radiates out from his palm, seeping into my limbs, my extremities, even my chest, which rises in rhythm with the glide of his hand rather than my attempts to force breath. And then his hand slips higher.

The general sense of warmth becomes more acute, settling deep in my stomach. All while subtle, yet persistent, waves stretch toward my balls. A satisfied moan wafts over my ears, though whether it came from me or Tripp I can't say. I don't even really care, since I'm guessing that noise is

responsible for Tripp's hand inching higher until his fingers are mere inches away from my nuts.

My answering inhale isn't sharp, but it is deep, filling my lungs with the air needed to steady myself amid the torrent of sensations flooding my nerves from that one, simple advance. That's when I realize Tripp's hand is high enough to reach my dick, if it were still resting against my thigh. Only it isn't.

It's pushing against the fabric of my shorts.

"There you are." Tripp's voice is thick and sweet, like honey, drizzling over my heated skin. "I've been waiting a long time for this."

My eyes snap open just in time to see the heated gleam in Tripp's as he stares at the slight tent in my shorts. He leans forward without warning, mouthing my cock over my shorts. His warm breath makes me jump against the material between us.

*Oh, God.*

Sparks zing from the base of my shaft all the way to the tip as a steady hum surges to a crescendo. The sheer intensity would have me sinking to my knees if I wasn't already seated on the couch.

My jaw falls open on a silent moan as my cock swells, the tiny pulses of my heartbeat feeling more like beats on a snare drum in my rapidly growing dick.

"So excited," he mumbles between open-mouthed kisses, the heat of his mouth making my shorts damp as my dick twitches again. "You're good for my ego."

My breathing turns erratic as I watch Tripp nuzzle and murmur to my shaft through my shorts. Watching a guy talk to your junk should be unsettling, but once again Tripp manages to make the obnoxious seem normal.

I'm so focused on the way he's making me feel, it's not until Tripp's

fingers slide under the waistband of my shorts that I realize his hand is no longer rubbing my leg. I inhale another lungful of air as he lifts his gaze to mine, hooded emerald eyes silently asking for permission. My head bobs once, and cool air hits my heated skin as my shorts are pulled lower.

Tripp taps my hip, and I obediently shift my weight so he can pull the fabric off completely. Tossing the garment to the floor behind him, he spreads my legs and drags his eyes up my calves, over my thighs, settling on my shaft.

Holding my breath, I let my gaze follow his, coming to rest on my cock. My body shudders as my lungs expel their relieved air.

It's firm. Not as full as I've seen it, but fuller than it's been in a long time.

"Hello beautiful." Tripp licks his lips, and my dick jumps in response.

Looking at me from under thick lashes, Tripp seems to fight for control of his breathing. "I want to do *all* the things. Hold it, suck it, *ride it*." He stretches his arm forward, finger straining toward my tip, then suddenly pulls back. "What do you want, Noah? What am I allowed to do?"

"Honestly, I wasn't sure my body would let us get to this point, so I hadn't considered what I'd be comfortable with."

"Touching then? I'd love to wrap my hands around you." His eyes seem to go a little unfocused before they blink back into control, which seems very un-Tripp-like. *He must be trying to make me feel good about not being all the way hard. That's...pretty cool, actually.*

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "Touching."

Tripp reaches for the base of my cock, eyes fluttering shut with a groan as he closes it in his fist. Then he slides his hand to the crown, gently pinching it between his thumb and forefinger.

*Holy shit.*

He's *holding my dick*. Not pumping it or playing with it the way I did his, just *holding it*, rubbing his thumb back and forth over the tip like I'm some skittish animal he's trying to calm. I guess in a way I am, though not because he's a guy like he implied the other night. Because it's been so long since anyone's touched me.

The last person, a woman, had small, soft hands. And her touch was gentle. Tripp has big, strong hands. They're holding me firmly, covering most of my dick, which is now harder than it's been in ages. Maybe ever. Just from him holding it.

Keeping his grip firm, he slides his hand to the base and gives me a little squeeze. Relaxing his hold on the upstroke, he pumps me several times before once again tightening his fist. Alternating between the two with no discernable pattern, he continues to stroke me, never letting me fully sink into the rhythm before changing it up again.

The constant adjustments are maddening, but only because I'm anxious to find the release I'm still not sure he can give. Truthfully though, if he's able to achieve it after all this teasing, I'm fairly certain it will be the best I've ever had.

Sliding his hand low enough to cup my balls and press them into the base of my cock, my hips surge forward as my head lolls back against the couch and a garbled moan escapes my throat.

Tripp lets go of my dick and palms my sac, giving it a nice, firm tug. "No wonder these are so sensitive. They're ready to burst, aren't they?"

I swivel my hips as he kneads them, too consumed with lust to care that the motion makes it look like I'm fucking the air, which Tripp seems to enjoy.

"Jesus, big guy. What I wouldn't give to be sitting on that beauty right now. I knew it'd be big, but big *and* you know how to use it... *Damn.*" He gives

my nuts a final squeeze and spins toward the coffee table, sliding open a drawer I hadn't noticed before.

"What's that?" I heave as he grabs something inside.

"Lube. I don't want to chafe you and risk not getting to have any more fun."

"What sort of fun?" I ask before I can stop myself.

Tripp's grin turns devious as he squirts the liquid into his palm and wraps it around my shaft, causing me to gasp and buck simultaneously. "Damn that's cold."

"I'll warm it up, don't worry." He starts stroking me, twisting his wrist as he reaches the top. As promised, the friction makes the gel warmer as he gets my cock nice and slippery.

I wonder briefly if this is what it feels like to be with a woman bare. I never tried it, but the thought nearly takes me out of the moment, and in a desperate attempt to salvage it I repeat, "What sort of fun?"

"Hand jobs, blow jobs, fucking." His eyes snap to mine, hooded and heated and full of challenge. I swear the carnal nature of his gaze has my toes curling. "You like that idea?"

"I'm not sure how to answer that while you're holding my dick."

Tripp throws his head back with a whoop that turns into a bout of laughter. "I don't think anyone's ever made me laugh while I've had a raging boner."

"You're hard?" With him kneeling before me, only his eyes gave any indication he was enjoying this.

"Wanna see for yourself?" He swipes his thumb over my slit and gives the crown of my shaft a firm squeeze.

Since I kind of know how this goes after last night, I don't hesitate. "Yeah."

Tripp lets go of my cock and stands between my legs, holding his hand up.

“You have to undress me. My fingers are too slippery.”

With his groin even with my face, I can see the bulge straining for release, and mine jumps in response. Using surprisingly steady hands, I unfasten his pants and shove them down his hips. He steps out of them and straddles my lap, resting his weight on my thighs.

“Shirt too,” he instructs.

Once the excess fabric is out of the way, he scoots forward until our cocks are side by side. The firm skin rubbing against mine steals my breath, and I can do little more than gape as I look at our dicks pressed into one another from root to tip. It’s an image I never expected to see much less appreciate, though there’s no denying I enjoy it.

Tilting his hips, Tripp uses the slippery surface of my skin to glide his erection against mine. Every nerve along the way ignites like a firework, a series of tiny explosions that pop and fizz and render my senses useless as I revel in the obscene amount of pleasure this rigid friction brings.

*Has it ever felt like this?*

Admittedly, it’s been a while since I’ve been intimate with anyone, so my memories about what it was like in the past are fuzzy. What I can recall is having to really concentrate, to visualize what it should feel like rather than experience it, because the reality somehow fell short. And while I could force myself to finish, it never quite felt like the epic encounters I’ve heard my teammates describe. Hell, I’ve even *seen* some of Luca’s encounters, and mine definitely weren’t like that.

What’s happening right now though... I’m not conjuring some scenario as a means to an end. I’m not telling myself what it *should* feel like to revel in some false reality. I’m simply reacting to what’s happening. No imagination

necessary. In fact, I doubt my imagination could top what I see with my own two eyes.

Tripp hovers above me, the peaks and valleys of his stomach rippling in a hypnotic rhythm as he pumps his hips. The muscles in his left shoulder are taught as he braces a hand on the back of the couch, and the muscles in his right contract while he works our shafts with feather-light strokes. Glazed green eyes track his movements, though they drift briefly to my face when he flicks his head to the side to clear away unruly strands of white-blond hair.

*This—Tripp—might be the most erotic thing I've ever experienced.*

My breathing gets more labored with each slide of his solid length against mine. I don't know if that's from the sensation or the view. Maybe some combination of both. All I know is two swollen cocks rubbing together makes my heart race in a way I've only ever felt on the ice. Then Tripp contracts his fist, and my pulse finds another speed.

Tripp cants his hips as he strokes up and down our lengths. "Rub your dick against mine. Fuck my hand."

Mirroring his movements, I punch into his grip, the lube making it impossibly easy to seek out the friction driving me wild.

Tight. Hot. Hard. As soon as I register a sensation it's replaced with a different one, all of them swirling together to create a tornado of ecstasy that drives all rational thought from my brain. Who I like, what I like, what it means... The questions dissolve as the pressure in my balls becomes overwhelming, the need to come all consuming.

My pelvis bucks wildly, a frenzied attempt to spear my length into Tripp's fist as if it's the key to nirvana, which it just might be, considering I've never felt desire of this magnitude.

"Holy shit, big guy," Tripp pants as he tightens his grip. "I can feel your

cock twitching in my hand. You're gonna blow like a fucking volcano. Let me see it."

The heat of his palm, the constriction of his fingers, and the slippery slide of our joined dicks combine until all that's left is utter euphoria. A full-body spike of awareness seizes me, causing my limbs to freeze for just a second, long enough to warn me that I've got no control over what comes next. And then it's gone, along with the ability to feel anything other than the pleasure coursing between my legs.

My head falls back against the couch as a guttural moan rumbles up my throat. Bliss radiates from my groin, up my spine and down my arms, igniting my body with a rush of energy reminiscent of the way lights suddenly and blindingly illuminate the area when flicked on. Fingers clenching the cushions, my dick quivers and quakes as spurts of cum erupt from my tip, joining Tripp's and coating us both with more evidence that my body may not be broken after all.

When my orgasm seems to have run its course, Tripp releases me. "See what happens when you get out of your head."

I open my eyes to his smug grin, and the five sticky fingers he's wagging between us.

*Oh my God. He did it. I came, and it was... Everything.*

Too stunned to move or speak, I watch helplessly as Tripp grabs his shirt from the couch and wipes us both down before hopping off me. "Dibs on the first shower." He winks and saunters toward the stairs, leaving me breathless and—for the first time ever—boneless.

*So, this is what good sex feels like. I can finally see the appeal.*

## Chapter 10 - Tripp

Xander and I have been skating for nearly an hour by the time Luca, Justus and Noah show up, joining Niko on the pool deck to watch while they have a few beers. Usually, I don't mind an audience—I'm a show-off by nature—but Noah's eyes on me have my stomach doing flips. Its a feeling I enjoy—fuck, maybe even crave—but it's typically a result of gravity bringing me back to Earth after soaring over the rim of the pool, not because of Thor.

Last night might have been the hottest encounter of my life, the first night with him a close second, and neither of those progressed to the point where I had to wrap my dick. Or his.

I always thought the best orgasms required sex, and the fact that doesn't seem to be true with him is fucking with my head. So the urge to do it again, to want more of him in every carnal way—more than I did a few days ago—that's not normal for me.

I'm no stranger to chemistry or sexual tension. I live for the chase, but once I get what I want, the desire fades... just not with Noah. Is that because we haven't fucked? Have our little encounters served to tease me? It's possible. Maybe once we've gone all the way, the lust will fade. At least, I'm hoping it will.

By then, Noah will have his answers. He'll know what he likes so he can enjoy sex the way nature intended and I'll get to return to my harmless but enjoyable flirtation. Business as usual.

“Your seven-twenty is looking good,” Xander remarks as I pop out of the bowl and roll to a stop next to him, rescuing me from the thoughts in my

head.

“Thanks. I worked on it while you were gone.” As a tall man, spinning two full circles in the air isn’t the easiest trick to land. Unlimited use of Xander’s pool helped me figure it out. “You know, you still haven’t told me how my favorite half of the egg is doing after your little trip to Sweden.”

“Am I supposed to know what that means?” Xander squints at me.

“One egg, two people, duh.”

“You know boy/girl twins don’t come from the same egg, right?”

“I wasn’t referring to Niko, I was referring to me.” Niko may be his sister's biological twin, but I’m her twin in spirit. “Clearly, Anna and I are the same person in two different bodies. Ergo, half of my egg. Usually, people will be polite and call the other person the better half, but we all know that’s me so to spare her feelings we’ll share the title.”

Xander shakes his head the way he always does when my word vomit frustrates him. “You and Anna both have limited filters and like dicks. I’m pretty sure that’s where the similarities end.”

“Those similarities connect us in a way you can’t possibly understand. She’s my literal soul sister. No one gets me like she does.”

“You met her once.”

“And we bonded instantly. If she had a dick I’d have already proposed. Since she doesn't, I'll settle with her being my best bitch for life.”

Xander visibly shudders—my work here is complete—and changes the subject. “Moving on from that terrifying thought, why does Noah keep glancing at you and looking away like he got caught doing something wrong?”

*Why indeed?*

I can’t admit it’s probably a freak out over whether people will know

another man has held his cock just by looking at him, which pretty much every guy wonders after their first gay experience. Spoiler alert- there's no such thing as flashing neon sign or arrow over your head claiming you like dick.

“He's probably worried I'll fall.”

“Sorry, what?” The whites of Xander's eyes are suddenly very prominent. “Why would he be worried about that?”

“I didn't know he was here the last time I used the pool, and it freaked me the fuck out when he started clapping, which Niko apparently told him to do, by the way. I fell off the board and hit my head. No biggie with the helmet on, but I think it scared him. The big guy probably felt guilty.”

“Oh shit,” Xander groans.

“What?”

“Noah's like the caretaker of the whole team. It's literally part of his DNA to look out for people.”

“So?”

“So, if he felt responsible for you falling, he'd stick around to make sure you're okay, which would give you an opportunity to be...*you*. And with no one around to reel you in... What'd you do to him?”

*Wow Xander's eyes can get dark fast.*

“Nothing.”

“What'd you do *with* him, then?”

Xander's fishing for information I'd normally boast about if my escapade had been with an unknown party, but it's not my place to tell anyone about the things Noah's questioning, or the role I've played to help him figure things out.

“I would think that'd be obvious,” I scoff. “After all, a man that size likely

has an equally sizeable dick, and if I'd been lucky enough to have it in me, I doubt I'd be able to skate flawlessly."

"You're telling me you didn't try to fuck him while he was feeling guilty for making you fall?"

This is probably where I should say Noah's been crashing with me, so it doesn't look like I'm trying to hide anything. I don't, but it doesn't dismiss the fact I should. Since we drove separately—he needed to swing by his place first—there isn't a reason to volunteer that information. I won't deny it if it comes up, but I'm happy to leave that detail out since it'll only make Xander more suspicious of what I may or may not have gotten up to with the big guy.

"I'm always trying to fuck him, but to date, my cock hasn't met his ass. Or vice versa. Happy?" Sadly, it's not a lie.

"Yes, actually."

"Rude," I gasp. "You know, you could be my wingman on this the same way I helped you with your hockey god."

"First, you didn't play wingman. You just gave advice when I needed it. Second, Niko isn't and has never been straight. The situations are totally different."

They're not as different as he thinks, as far as the straight part goes anyway, but I'd never say that without Noah's permission. Even if Xander would understand and be supportive, it's not something I have the right to do.

"Fine. Ignore the fact I arranged for Niko to be your DD, which led to the driving lessons, which led to the hottest sex you've ever had. I'll wear Noah down on my own."

"I'm not encouraging that, but since he keeps looking at you, maybe we should take a break from skating. The team would never forgive us if their star goalie has a heart attack because you fell off your board."

“I only fell because he startled me.” My pride demands I save face. “But if you want to take a break we can.”

When we reach the other side of the pool, Xander sits between Niko’s legs on the lounge and reclines against him—their PDA game has no shame—while I take a seat at the foot of Noah’s because there’s literally nowhere else left. And everyone is used to me trying to get close to him, though I don’t actually help myself to his lap the way Xander does to Niko.

“I still can’t believe there’s no water in that pool.” Luca glances at the cement hole in the ground and shakes his head longingly.

“I wouldn’t swim in it even if there was. It’d be full of their jizz.” I grab a water from the cooler and start chugging.

“They make chemicals for that,” Niko says.

“They make jizz eliminating chemicals? Damn, whoever came up with that must be making bank. I bet they sell that shit in gallons instead of ounces.”

“You don’t need a pool,” Justus says. “You need a hot tub.”

“In this heat?” Luca balks.

“No, for the winter. How nice would it be to soak in a hot tub after a game.”

“Better than an ice bath.” Noah shivers.

“Those ice baths are why you’re still the starting goalie at your age.” Luca reaches over and smacks his arm.

“I’m only two years older than you.”

“But you’re falling apart faster.”

“Goaltending is hard on the knees,” Noah mutters while Luca smirks.

“It’s bad enough camp starts Monday. Let’s not make it worse with talk about ice baths,” Niko groans.

“Weren’t you just talking about how you missed the ice last time I was here?” Noah asks him.

“Yes, but I miss it in an ‘*it’d be fun to coast around the rink and take a few shots way*’ not a ‘*bust your ass till you drop*’ way.”

“You only drop if you’re out of shape,” Luca sniggers.

“I just got back from visiting my family for several weeks, of course I’m out of shape.”

“Does your mom cook all your favorite childhood foods and guilt you if you don’t eat them too?” Justus asks.

“No, I just didn’t exercise.”

“Except for fucking,” I quip as Luca snorts.

“Why are you making us out to be sex-crazed?” Xander asks me.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It’s not all we do.”

“Doesn’t being in a relationship mean you get to fuck regularly? I would’ve thought that’s the biggest perk.” I look around the group for confirmation.

“It’s the only perk.” Luca nods in agreement. “Except for the fact you only get to bang that one person.”

“What’s wrong with only banging one person?” Justus asks.

“Nothing if that’s what you’re into. I like variety, which is why road games are my favorite,” Luca says.

“I’m honestly shocked at how much women adore you when you’re blatantly with a different one all the time,” Niko tells Luca.

“Puck bunny culture is weird, but my God, it’s a wonderful thing.” Luca smiles dreamily.

The look on his face gives me an idea. “The gay crowd needs to get in on that. We could be the puck bucks and we could offer a special welcome to all the visiting teams.”

“A buck?” Justus frowns.

“I mean we could go with puck butts, though that seems a little crass to me.”

Xander snorts. “*You’re* worried about being crass?”

“Not particularly, but bunny has a touch of class to it and gay men deserve the same, even if we are just looking for big hockey sticks.”

“Isn’t a phrase for gay hockey chasers futile since there’s only one gay player in the league and he’s spoken for?” Luca asks me.

“Only one that we *know* of. I bet there are more thinking about following Niko’s lead. If we build it, they will come. Pun intended.”

Niko chokes on a laugh, causing Xander to warn, “Don’t encourage him.”

“I can’t help it, that was funny,” Niko whines, clamping his lips together to contain himself.

“If Tripp was kidding, yes, it’d be funny. But he’s not. Don’t give him any more family passes or he’ll hover by the locker room trying to pick up members of the other team.”

Luca shrugs. “Who cares. If there are any gay players out there, they might appreciate bumping into Tripp after the game.”

“No. Bad idea.” Though Noah’s voice is level, the steely set of his jaw tells me he’s pissed. *What’s that about?*

“What? Why?” Luca gives his teammate a confused look.

“He can’t sleep with the competition.”

“Why not?” Justus asks.

“Because he’s not some random guy whose hookups won’t impact us.”

Niko scratches his head as he squints at Noah. “I’m not really following you, buddy. None of us have a say where our friends stick their dicks.”

“What if he hooked up with Blaise?” Noah asks his teammates.

“That douchebag on the Rockets?” Luca’s smile quickly morphs to a frown.

“Blaise is gay?” Justus looks around, confused.

“I’m just picking him as an example,” Noah says. “Would any of us be okay with Tripp hooking up with him? Or any of the assholes in the league like him?”

“That’s a good point.” Luca chews on his lip.

“How is that a good point?” I ask.

“If he’s as big a turd to you off the ice as he is to us on it, we’d probably end up fighting with him,” Niko responds. “Best case that’s just a penalty, worst an ejection and a fine.”

“So, your hockey season comes before my sex life?” I narrow my eyes in Niko’s direction.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Cock blockers,” I mutter, though I’m not nearly as disappointed as I should be to learn my friendship with the local hockey gods won’t pave the way for me to sample more of them.

## Chapter 11 – Noah

The short drive to Tripp's place didn't take the edge off, so I'm still vibrating when I walk in the door. On some level that worries me—I always shrug off my anger before it festers, even on the ice—yet more than an hour later Tripp's puck buck comments still aren't sitting right.

“Puck bucks, seriously?” I ask as soon as we're in the door.

Tripp tosses his keys on the entry table. “You're right. It doesn't have the same classy ring as *bunny*. What about puck buddies?”

That answer only frustrates me more. “Is it really that important to you to score with one of us?”

He gives me a bemused once-over as he takes a seat on the couch. “I don't have a bingo card I'm trying to fill with sexual escapades if that's what you're asking. although, I probably should cause that'd be hot as fuck.”

Still rooted by the door, I cross my arms in front of my chest. “Wow... Okay.”

“What's wrong with sexual freedom?”

“Why the fixation on hockey players?”

“I'm not fixated on them, I just happen to like the idea of people having sex unapologetically. Like puck bunnies.”

I feel like I'm glaring, though I can't seem to relax my face. “Don't you do that already? Why would you need a fancy name and mission to chase after hockey players?”

“I wouldn't.” He stares right back, head cocked to the side. “What's this really about? I just told you I like the balls on those bunnies. I think gay men

should have sex as unabashedly as they do. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing." I drop my arms and stalk toward the couch, dropping heavily onto the opposite end.

"Then why are you upset?"

"I don't know, maybe because you're talking about picking up other players while you're hooking up with me." It's not until the words are out of my mouth that I realize their implication. *Oh shit, am I jealous?*

A coy little smirk creeps across his face, like he's privy to some secret I'm not. "I said gay men should take a page out of the puck bunny playbook. I didn't suggest that I planned to pick up anyone. The other guys just assumed I meant me."

My mouth drops open in protest though no words come out. I would've sworn he said he wanted to pick up visiting players, but my memory can't definitively put those words in his mouth.

Tripp arches a knowing brow, and I hate that I notice how attractive that makes him look. "You thought I was trying to find a new hockey god while I've been hooking up with you?"

"I...well..." A second ago, I was convinced that was his intent, but as I struggle to justify my thoughts the playful glint in his eye fades, leaving him looking almost wounded.

"I'm a lot of things, Noah Tremblay, but I'm not that big of an asshole. I am a little confused though. You don't want me chasing anyone else, but you also didn't tell your friends you're staying here. Does that mean you don't want them to know what we've been doing the last few days?"

Until just now, my mother was the only person to reprimand me using my full name, and it has the same effect, making me feel both ashamed and defensive. "I don't care if they know," I tell the floor.

“Are you sure about that? A few days ago, you were convinced you were asexual, and before that you thought you were straight. Now you’re into men, something you didn’t admit when you had the chance.”

“It’s not okay to be confused?” I wring my hands together to keep them from shaking, whether from anger or insecurity, I’m not sure.

“I didn’t say that.” Tripp shakes his head while pursing his lips.

“I’m not afraid of being attracted to another man.” I’m afraid of being broken, of not understanding who I am, but not of how attracted I am to Tripp.

“I believe you. That doesn’t mean you’re ready for your friends to know, or that you even know what to tell them.”

“What does that mean?” I find the nerve to look at him, a strange combination of patience and wariness on his face.

“Are you gay, bi, pan, something else? Do you like all men or just me? If you like men, are you a top or bottom?”

I lick my lips nervously. “No one is going to ask if I top or bottom.”

“Not a reporter, but anyone you hook up with will. And you don’t know the answer.”

“Then help me figure it out! Fuck me.” I point my finger at my chest. “Maybe then I’ll know.”

Based on Tripp’s frozen expression, the desperation in my voice surprises him as much as me. I only hope it’s a good sort of surprise, because now that I’ve said it out loud, it doesn’t sound like a bad idea. It sounds...*right*.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” Tripp sighs, “but I think we should just chill tonight. Dicks in our pants.”

“You don’t want to have sex?” I nearly choke on the words, my shock making it hard to breathe. In my wildest dreams Tripp never said no to a

request to fuck, yet he's still sitting on the other side of the couch, not even attempting to undress the way I expected he would.

Tripp shakes his head slowly back and forth. "I always want to have sex, but just sex. No relationship stuff. No *feelings*. I don't want to blur the lines."

*Blur the... Where is this coming from?*

"The only thing that's blurry is you told me how much you want to fuck me, said you wanted to help me figure out if I like guys, and now that we know I do you're backing off. What's changed? Just last night, you were insanely proud to get me off. Now, you're not bragging about doing it again? Why?" I hate the anguish in my voice, yet I can't seem to hold it back. These past few days are the only ones in recent memory when my body didn't betray me during intimate moments, something Tripp's guidance and patience were instrumental in, and the thought of losing that so soon after I found it is terrifying.

"I *am* proud I got you off when no one else could, and I do want to do it again." His voice is disturbingly level, like he thinks a calm tone will calm me. "But you were upset thinking about me with someone else earlier, and that should be a red flag for both of us."

Okay, I admit the thought of Tripp with anyone else set me off. Though, I think that was on principle, not because I want to have a claim on him. *Isn't it?*

"You have a problem with monogamy?" I ask.

"I have a problem with relationships. I don't do them. And you shouldn't do them with the first guy you experiment with. If you want to fuck around no strings attached, I'm your man. I'll even go as far as agreeing to hook up with only you while you explore this if it makes you feel better. But only if

you agree this is strictly a fuck buddy thing. I'm too selfish for a relationship and you're too vulnerable for one."

"Confused isn't the same as vulnerable."

"No, but they do tend to go hand in hand." Tripp runs his fingers through his artfully mussed hair, which only makes it look better. "Look, I think you should figure out what you want from me. If it's just to explore being with a man, I'm all in. If you think it might be something else, something where you don't like the idea of me being with other people when this is over, we shouldn't take it any further."

Though I know his words are meant to protect me, they hurt more than help. Tripp is the first person—the only person—I've confided in about my sexuality, and the thought of losing that terrifies me. So does the idea of experimenting with another man. But if I'm being honest with myself, I know he makes a valid point about the repercussions. I've already questioned whether it's all men or just Tripp I respond to, and if taking things further could ruin the friendship we have, that may be worse than never figuring myself out. After all, at least now I have someone I can talk with openly.

Sighing heavily, I nod my head. "Yeah, okay. I'll think about it."

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The first day of training never fails to kick my ass, no matter how good of shape I think I'm in. Lungs burning, muscles shaking from the strain they're under, I pump my arms and legs until I cross the line with the rest of my teammates, locking my hands behind my head to catch my breath before we have to line up for the next sprint.

Though it all worked out in the end, as a kid I thought goalies would escape the dreaded wind sprints, so I eagerly signed up. That little misconception led to a great career considering I'm far better at blocking shots than I am at

taking them, but it's hard to be grateful for that when my legs feel like jelly. I've been doing this long enough to know my body won't hate me as much in a week. Still, I'm still a little bitter that my off-season discipline isn't paying off right now.

"Fuck this heat, man." Luca wipes the sweat from his brow. "You need to fill that pool with water, Niko."

"You're the one with the movie room, and the game room, and about a dozen other rooms you don't need but still have. Don't tell me you can't afford a pool," he retorts.

"Of course, I can, but why would I go through the trouble of building it when I could just use yours?"

"Except you can't use his," Justus says as Coach shouts at us to line up again.

He blows the whistle, and we take off, running as fast as we can. Thanks to my long stride I don't come in last, but I'm not as close to first as I used to be. Luckily, my job doesn't require me to skate up and down the rink, which means being a little slower isn't the end of the world as long as my reflexes are solid.

Once we're done with sprints people trickle off, but I hang back to do my stretches. Since I squat so much during a game, I'm more likely to get hip or groin injuries than my teammates, and either one could end my season, especially for a player over thirty. Luca won't admit it, but he's in the same boat, so he lingers with me.

"How do you think we're looking?" he asks, same as he does every year.

Though we're nearly the same age, and co-captains, he's always looked at me as the leader, probably because I have the more level head. "When have I ever been able to answer that on the first day?"

“Humor me.”

“The hunger is there. Making it to the playoffs and getting knocked out in the first round is a good driving force.” I drop to my back and pull my right leg toward me to stretch my hamstring.

“Our sprints were a little sluggish.” He mirrors me as I switch to the other leg.

“It’s day one. If we still look like this on day five, I’ll worry.”

“Fair enough.”

I drop into the splits to stretch my groin, and out of nowhere I’m hit with the memory of Tripp spreading his legs wide that first night, giving me an unobstructed view of his hand sliding over his cock. I enjoyed that encounter far more than I expected to, enough that I’d like to repeat it, but can I do that without developing feelings? I’m not usually a casual sex guy, but I also haven’t tried it. And with my demanding hockey schedule, chances are, casual is the only option.

“Earth to Noah. I asked what you thought about the rookies,” Luca says.

“Sorry, I was distracted.” I press my hips lower to deepen the stretch.

“I got that. Where were you just now?”

I’ve never had to ask Luca for advice, personal or otherwise, and I’m not sure how comfortable I am doing it now. At the same time, the only other person I could talk to is Tripp, and since this is about him that’s not an option.

“Is it possible to sleep with someone without developing feelings for them?”

Luca lets his leg crash back to the ground as he sits up to face me. “I thought you preferred to only sleep with people you have feelings for.”

“I thought so, too,” I mumble as I revisit my past partners, most of which I

was dating when we slept together.

“Not anymore?” When I don’t answer, a sly grin spreads across his face. “Okay first, it’s about fucking time you have some fun, so hell yeah. And second, you see me do it all the time. Of course, it’s possible.”

“I see you hook up with different puck bunnies. Maybe a few of them are repeats, but you don’t have a regular...*arrangement*.” I swing my legs in front of me and press the soles of my feet together like a butterfly to get my inner thigh.

“Are you talking a friends with benefits thing or a fuck buddy thing?” Luca runs a hand through his hair, pushing the sweaty strands away from his eyes.

“There’s a difference?”

“Of course. Friends with benefits is someone you’re already friends with and you add sex to the mix. Fuck buddies is someone you just see for sex. So, which situation are we dealing with?”

While I follow that logic, it doesn’t make things any clearer. “It could go either way I think. We sometimes bump into each other socially, so I’m tempted to say friends, but we’ve never made a deliberate attempt to make plans or anything.” Unless you count Tripp extending the invite to stay at his house, but even that came about through a fluke meeting.

“So, this is more like a friend of a friend that you’re attracted to?”

I shift into a low lunge to stretch my hip flexors as I roll that idea around. “I guess you can say that, yeah.”

“Okay, that makes it easy. As long as you don’t get together without your mutual friend—unless it’s for sex—you’ve got the perfect fuck buddy setup. And yeah, I think it’s possible to have that without catching feelings since you’d only need each other for the physical release, not like grabbing a drink together or anything.”

He makes it sound so simple, when the reality is the fact that I'm staying with Tripp could blur the lines a bit. Although, I've only got one night left before I can move back into my place, and after that, things could go back to the way they were. We see each other only when there's a group event, unless we meet up strictly for sex. That seems a little cold and impersonal to me, but I think I'd rather go that route than try to explore this with anyone else. After all, Tripp's the one who helped me open this door, and I already know I can trust him to be honest and patient and even encouraging.

"Hey, I lost you again," Luca interrupts my thoughts. "Are you gonna get yourself a fuck buddy?"

While this conversation didn't go the way I expected, it did end up helping. "Yeah, I think I am."

## Chapter 12 – Tripp

I turned down sex. *With Thor*. A hockey god I've wanted to defile since the first time I saw him, yet when he begged me to do it, I said no. *Who am I right now?*

Noah's emotional state should be none of my concern. He's a hookup, not a boyfriend. It's neither my job nor my place to make him think twice about asking for sex. I should've just bent over and dropped my pants. Let him fuck me to his little heart's content. And if he turned that into something more than just a good time... Not my problem, right?

That's how these things usually go. You screw around, you go your separate ways, end of story. Yeah, having mutual friends complicates matters, which is why I've made some concessions for him I wouldn't make for a random stranger, like lots and lots of talking. But telling him to think on it instead of falling onto his dick when he pleaded for me to... I don't recognize myself right now, and that's a little scary.

I don't want to make changes for Noah. I don't like what that implies—that he's special—or means something to me. And while I genuinely like the big guy, I can't let whatever this is become more than platonic. I can't let him in. Not even Xander has achieved that.

My best friend thinks he has, and he's come closer than anyone to scaling the walls I've put up. But he hasn't reached the top, hasn't realized that I overshare about everything that *doesn't* matter, and lock down everything that *does*.

I'm in a good place right now, and I only got here because I didn't set myself up for failure. I didn't allow anyone to get close enough to hurt me. Mostly. Sometimes I worry I'm too close to Xander, but I think my obnoxious tendencies are just annoying enough to keep him at arm's length. I'm not sure the same can be said for Noah, though. That's precisely why I should stop making concessions for him, mutual friends be damned.

He's sexy as sin and I want a piece of that. So, if he asks again, I'll give him what he wants, and he can figure the rest out himself.

Yup, that's the plan. No more saying no.

God, I hope he asks again. When he gets home in like, two hours. *Fuck that's an eternity. I've gotta burn off some energy.*

I turn on the PlayStation and pull up Rainbow Six Siege, my go-to game when I'm restless. Since I've been playing for well over a decade, I'm not half bad, and I easily fall into the digital world, blasting the enemy and talking shit with the other avatars who make up my team.

Shooting imaginary bad guys is cathartic in its own twisted way. An outlet to expel the feelings I don't share with anyone. My parents used to hate that I could get so lost on the screen. Even today, I feel an extra little jolt of satisfaction knowing I'm doing something they'd hate, despite the fact they'll never know, and undoubtedly couldn't care less. That probably bears some analysis, but I like my petty revenge.

I'm so absorbed, I don't even realize the time until Noah plops onto the couch next to me with a timid, "Hey."

I mute my game mic and nod. "Hey yourself. How was practice?"

"Tiring, but good." He runs his hands over his thighs, whether from nerves or because they hurt after practice, I'm not sure. Regardless, it makes it damn

hard to block the memory of sitting on those beauties while we jerked off. “So, I thought about it, and I’m good. With what you said.”

I assume he’s referring to the sex with no strings rule, and the pang of anxiety I’ve felt weighing on my chest lifts. The sheer relief of it causes me to lose focus and blast my own teammate *dammit*. I shouldn’t be so invested in him, but I desperately want him to say he’s down to fuck.

“Good?” I arch my brow in his direction while battling soldiers on the screen, trying to act indifferent.

“Uh, to be fuck buddies.”

My cock instantly perks up, excited that he’s on board. “Fuck buddies, huh? Is that what we’re calling it?” I bite my lip and waggle my eyebrows to see if I can get him to blush. He doesn't disappoint.

“I mean, isn’t that what we’d be?”

“It is, but I like hearing you say it.” I shoot the last remaining soldier in the level and climb onto those thick thighs, facing the TV.

Noah holds his arms up like he’s been caught red handed. “Uh, what are you doing?”

“Foreplay.” I wink at him over my shoulder.

“This—What now?”

“I’ve still got two levels in this campaign, and I’m not taking the risk of you changing your mind.” I grind my ass over his lap, loving how it makes him inhale sharply. “So, *foreplay*. You just sit back and enjoy while I finish my game.” I turn my mic back on and tell the rest of my team I’m ready, rolling my hips in another circle while Noah’s hands fall limply to the cushions.

The level starts up with all of us on high alert, scoping out potential targets and shouting when we spot enemies. The tension of the game always makes

me wiggle, even when there isn't a hockey god underneath me, and now that there is... I'm playing dirty with the big guy, but the one constant so far is that he's never quite sure how his body is going to react to sexy times, so I'll use every trick in the book to help him get excited.

"On your left, T," a voice echoes in my ear, and instead of turning my head toward the threat I tuck my hips and lean my weight to the left, pressing my ass into the slight bulge underneath me. A sharp gasp tells me Noah enjoyed that, so I do it again for good measure.

"One o'clock, Captain," I tell my teammate, and our little group of soldiers move ahead on the screen. Thrusting my hips in a forward and back motion like I'm urging a horse forward, I earn myself a delicious moan from the beast underneath me, whose fists seem to be getting tighter and tighter by the second.

I give myself a mental pat on the back for being a creative genius and try to concentrate on the game—we're sort of kicking ass right now—while still keeping things interesting for my hockey god.

"Shoot him, *shoot him*," I shout to my teammate as the enemy tries to escape. My frantic bouncing pulls a series of soft grunts from deep in Noah's throat and his legs tense under mine. I twist my head just in time to see his head fall back on the cushions, and I slow my movements so I can put even more pressure on the hard ridge between his legs.

The entire level, I bump and grind and generally torment the man underneath me to a chorus of moans and groans and ragged breathing. Fuck, I love that I can feel how much he wants me, evident in the rigid length beneath me and the labored breath against my back. Honestly, my pride gets a bit of a kick out of it too, seeing as I'm now three for three as far as getting him worked up goes.

A tiny little voice in the back of my mind warns me that might not be a good thing. He may regard me as a fuck buddy now, but his caregiver personality makes me think casual isn't in his wheelhouse. Plus, there are still lots of questions about his sexuality, and if he's more pan or demi than bisexual, being an overachiever in the seduction department might backfire on me. It doesn't stop me from telling the voice to fuck right off, though. Surely, a few weeks of fun isn't pushing it. And I *really* want my fun before we go back to being friends of friends or whatever.

“Ooh, that was close,” I tell Noah as I mute my mic and press the pause button on my hips. “We lost half our team and almost didn't make it past that level.”

“So, you're done?” His voice is deliciously scratchy.

I take a peek at him over my shoulder, struggling to keep the victorious smile off my face when I see how tightly he's holding his jaw.

“Not yet, big guy.” I pat his chest before turning my attention back to the game. “One more level.”

“How long will that take?”

“Hard to say.” I play coy. “If we play well, thirty minutes or more. If we don't, it could all be over in five.”

I'm about to turn my mic back on when a strong arm wraps around my waist, hauling me up just enough that I'm weightless for about two seconds before a blast of cool air hits my semi-hard cock. “What are you doing?” I glance down to see Noah has shoved my athletic shorts down to my thighs.

“Making it so you don't play well.” He wraps a warm hand around me and starts gently kneading my dick, coaxing it to attention.

*So, wow. Delayed gratification makes Noah kind of assertive. I like it.*

“T, you there?” a voice crackles in my ear as I suppress an unexpected

tremor.

Turning the mic on, I croak, "I'm here."

"They're trying to flank us. Hold your position."

"Yeah, sure. *Ungh.*" I switch the mic off to conceal my groan as Noah cups my sac, tugging it gently before rolling my balls in his palm.

"Easy there, big guy. I need to concentrate." I grit as I maneuver my avatar to face the oncoming attack.

"I'm not stopping you." Noah presses my balls into the base of my shaft, giving them a final squeeze before they slip from his hand as he wraps it around my length.

"This is a serious game," I scold even as my hips try to chase his hand. "It's the final level."

"Okay." He gives me a few languid strokes before clutching the tip in his firm hold, sending an unexpected jolt through my body as my eyelids grow heavy with lust.

Curses ring through my headset, snapping my focus back to the game. "Dammit, I just killed my teammate."

"That sucks." Noah massages away the sting with more soft strokes, then grips me hard and gives my junk a strong tug, sending carnal little sparks of desire ping-ponging from root to tip.

"You don't even understand how shitty that is, do you?" My ass clenches as he circles his thumb over the crown.

"Nope."

"Team killing people is a big deal. You can get kicked out of the group," I rant even as I rock my pelvis forward to spear my dick through his fist. "It's like stepping out of the goal and letting the other team take a free shot."

"Sounds like maybe you should keep your dick in your pants while you're

playing then.” He releases me from his grip—I totally don’t groan in frustration when he does, it’s because I nearly killed my own guy again thank you very much—and cups my sac.

“I’m not the one who took it out.” I grind down on his lap to take back some control, which is short-lived since it makes his fingers graze my hole, and I shoot Ted. *He’s never going to forgive me for that.*

“What the fuck, T. Get your head in the game.”

I turn the mic on long enough to choke out, “My bad,” and shut it off before I moan.

“Sounds like you’re having trouble concentrating.” Noah slides his big hand up my length, closing it in his fist as he starts to pump. Leisurely at first, feather-light strokes that seem to be more about him learning my body than getting me aroused. Then tighter, faster, as if he wants to see how rough I can take it—what will make me moan the loudest.

Soft and gentle, hard and furious, he alternates between the two with zero warning. Noah’s either a natural at hand jobs or so clueless he doesn’t realize he’s edging me. Either way, it’s damn near impossible to keep my eyes on the game instead of the giant paw holding my swollen cock.

This is not what I had in mind when I suggested foreplay. I thought I’d rub my ass over his covered junk for a minute—or thirty—to get him in the mood. A little friction, a little pressure, nothing that would get him so riled he’d turn desperate. And I definitely didn’t expect him to be so needy he’d pull me out to play. I’m not complaining.

Admittedly, trying to keep my head clear enough to play video games while getting jacked off is kinda hot, but I thought I’d be the one teasing him. Instead, I currently resemble a puddle of goo on his lap... whimpering each

time he changes his rhythm and robs me of the explosive release building in my balls.

“Am I distracting you?” he growls from behind me as he swirls my precum around my crown.

“Like you could keep your eye on the puck with my hand on your dick,” I scoff as I—*finally*—kill a bad guy.

“I can try. Got any hockey video games?”

“Who are you, and what have you done with confused, timid Noah?” I lean back against his chest, partly to see if my eyes will focus better on the game with a little more distance, but mostly to give him more room to maneuver. He’s worked my cock into a steel pipe, and even though I’m sitting down, I’m struggling to hold myself upright.

“I don’t feel confused anymore.”

“So, what are you? Gay, bi, pan?” I use his body for leverage as I thrust into his fist.

Noah’s chest shakes with a soft chuckle. “I’m still confused about that. I mean I’m not confused about being into you.”

Despite the fear that comment ignites, it takes all the strength I possess to stop rutting into his hand. “What about me?”

“You know...what I want.” He pumps me again, twisting his wrist at the top. “And I want to fuck you. Or get fucked by you. I want to find out what I like, and I trust you to help me with that.”

The warning bell pings inside my head. There were a lot of you’s—aka me’s—in that comment, and being comfortable with me probably isn’t too far a leap from developing feelings. The logical part of my brain, which doesn’t come out often but is still there, knows this. However, Noah’s playing with my cock like it’s his new favorite toy, and I really, *really* like that.

“T, look out.”

My eyes find the screen just in time to see my avatar drop to the ground. Game over. *Fucking finally.*

I leap off Noah’s lap, kicking off my shorts and ripping my shirt over my head as I spin to face him. I’m so frantic to get naked it’s a miracle I don’t trip over my own feet. Grabbing my junk, I start pumping. Noah’s hungry, blue eyes grow wide, but other than that he doesn’t move a muscle.

“Foreplays over, big guy. You’ve got about thirty seconds to get your cock inside me.”

Rather than rush to get undressed with me, he stays utterly still and opens his mouth, causing me knees to damn near buckle.

“Is that supposed to be an invitation?” I ask, sounding breathless.

“Isn’t that obvious?” He cocks his head to the side in that adorably innocent way of his. *Adorably innocent? Jesus the need to come must be scrambling my brain.*

“You better shut that mouth before I shove my dick in it because I’m in a fuck your face state of mind and you’ve never sucked a cock before.” A wave of regret washes over me the moment the warning is out, hanging in the air between us. I probably could’ve been nicer, but I don’t think he understands the state he’s worked me into.

“I can take it.”

“Not sure you can, champ. I plan to stick my cock in your mouth repeatedly, but it’d be a bad idea to force feed it to you now and have you tell me you don’t like it.” I squeeze the base of my shaft, trying like hell to keep myself from plunging over the edge.

“Put it in my mouth, Tripp.”

“I’ll come.” Hell, I almost came from that growly order alone. “You don’t

want me to do that during your first time.”

“Why not? You recover fast.”

“Oh, fuck it.” I take the challenge, closing the distance between us and guiding my dick between his parted lips. With shallow thrusts—*look at me exercising control*—I rub the tip over the flat of his tongue, hoping the gentle strokes will both get him used to my girth and satisfy my need for friction without tipping me over the edge. It sort of works, until he closes those plump pink lips over my crown and sucks softly.

“Holy *fuuuccckk*.” My groan is guttural, desperate even. A sound I didn’t know I was capable of until now. Every muscle in my body vibrates with raw need that I’m struggling to contain as a shudder rakes through me. It starts at the base of my spine and pulses through my limbs, and the tremor catches Noah’s attention. His big blue eyes flick curiously to mine, and somehow, I just know he’s asking for guidance.

“Look at you...,” I mumble as I thread my fingers through his silky hair, caressing his scalp with far too gentle a touch. “Swirl your tongue around the tip and give it another good suck. Use your hands if you want. Play with my balls or hold the shaft so I don’t thrust too deep.”

He pulls away and looks at me quizzically. “Isn’t that the point? I thought you were going to fuck my face.”

“Trust me when I say we need to work up to that.” I push in, gnashing my teeth together to keep my hips from spearing further into his slippery, wet heat, or pulling violently on his hair. And somehow, despite a lifetime of evidence that hard and fast and dirty is my jam, I manage to keep myself mostly still while Noah maps me with his tongue.

Licking up one side of my shaft and down the other, sucking my balls into his mouth, slurping me like a straw, the man is enthusiastic in his exploration.

Lips and tongue and fingers work together to investigate every inch of my cock. And by investigate, I mean full-on explore, leaving no stone unturned. You'd think a thirty-something guy giving his first blow job would be hesitant or...neat. Not Noah. He's flat out sloppy, so immersed in the experience he's practically drooling on my cock, and... Damn. I am *here* for it.

His enthusiasm is possibly the hottest thing I've ever seen, which makes it an epic feat for me not to go feral on him. My body literally aches from the effort of holding back. It's only because it's erotic as hell to be the object of such thorough intensity that I manage. Especially, with him fully-clothed while I'm butt-ass naked in my living room.

I bet we look absolutely filthy like this, and while I've never done the filming thing—kind of a shocker since I work in video production—I feel like this would do well on Only Fans. Not that I'm looking for a career change, but seriously, a naked guy getting blown by a fully clothed Norse God would rack up the views. It'd make me blow, for sure.

On that note...

“Pull your dick out, big guy.”

Noah wipes saliva off his swollen lips when I step out of reach. *Why is that hot?*

I pull at the fabric covering his chest. “Shirt off, too. You're gonna fuck your first man.”

He gapes at me, wide eyes blinking in rapid succession, for about three seconds before he whips his shirt off and fumbles with his shorts, shoving them down just enough that his thick cock slaps against his stomach when it springs free.

“God, I love that sound,” I muse, grabbing lube and a condom from the

drawer in the coffee table. Without wasting a second, I kneel between his legs, which can only spread so wide trapped in his shorts. “FYI, I’m clean. I got tested after my last encounter.” I lick a path from root to tip, loving how he tries to chase after my mouth. “And I’m guessing you are too since you haven’t been with anyone in a while. So,” I hold up the condom, “your call. Want to wrap up or not?”

I mentally slap myself for making the offer—I never go bare—but I sort of want to rock his world, and while he doesn’t need to be bare for me to do that, I kind of don’t want to cover up when it’s my turn, so it’s only fair to offer.

“Have you ever gone without?”

The truth might make it seem like he falls into one of those ‘concessions’ categories again, which I don’t want. But I want to feel that beautiful cock raw more than I want my fortified walls. “No. I’ve always wanted to, though, if I thought it’d be safe.”

“If we don’t need it, I’m good.” He tips his head toward the hand holding the condom. I toss it aside with a wicked grin and squirt a glob of lube into my palm to coat his dick.

He flinches from the cold, muscles tensing gloriously beneath his skin. After a moment, he relaxes into the couch as the friction from my hand warms him up. When he’s nice and slippery, and *glistening* I straddle him and line him up to my hole.

“Don’t you have to stretch first, or something?” His brow furrows with concern, blue eyes wary.

“I’ll take it slow for your first time.” He doesn’t need to know that my recent dry spell doesn’t extend to my dildo, or that I used it as recently as last night.

Holding my breath, I sink lower. The big guy didn't get his nickname as a means to boost his ego, it's obnoxiously accurate on all accords. I force my body to relax as I take him inside me, exhaling deeply as he breaches the tight ring of muscle, and groaning with relief when I feel the fullness inside me. "Shit that's good. Still with me, champ?"

Noah's eyes are squeezed shut, jaw locked so tight he almost looks like he's in pain. For a quick second, I wonder if he is, and whether that pain is physical or mental. Sure, he talked a good game about being okay with his attraction to another man, but when it comes to actually fucking one—maybe he isn't as ready for this as he thought.

I'm about to freak out, believing I've overestimated his comfort level, when he finally exhales, whispering, "So tight. God, I... Jesus that's the tightest thing I've ever felt."

"Yeah?" There's no disguising the pride in my voice as I start to rock my hips forward, only to have him clamp his hands on my thighs, *hard*.

"Don't move. Not yet."

"You're killing me, big guy. I'd say going mid-fuck would be kind of the perfect end, but it'd be a tragedy not to bust this nut after you worked it into this state."

"I want to last longer than a few pumps. I want you to enjoy it."

Prying his hand off my leg, I wrap it around my now angry-red length. "Does it feel like I'm not enjoying this?"

Noah flexes and squeezes his fingers, then gives me a slow, firm stroke. "No."

"Okay, good. Now..." I rock my hips slowly, warming him up for what comes next. "I'm gonna ride this fat cock of yours, hard and fast, and the only thing I want you to do is feel it. Get lost in it."

“I don’t want to finish before you.” A glimmer of worry flickers over those baby blues.

“Jack me off when you get close, and I won’t be far behind.” I’m doing it again. Making concessions, spending way too much time making sure his mind is at ease. Caring. I guess that’s okay since it’s his first time, but I can’t make a habit of it.

Noah gives me a terse nod, and I rise up until only his tip is buried inside me before slamming down. His head falls back on the couch with a garbled moan while I take a second to catch my breath—I don’t think I’ve ever felt so full. Then I’m off, riding him like a man possessed because, let’s face it, at this point I probably am.

The clapping of skin echoes around us as I bounce up and down, my heavy cock banging against his abs each time I bottom out. Noah tries to lift his head to watch, but loses the battle, incapable of holding it upright, mumbling a string of curses and moans as I give him a proper fucking.

My thighs, which were already pushed to their limit trying to hold still while he blew me, quiver and shake from the effort of holding my weight. I’ll feel that later, but I don’t give a shit. The absolute euphoria I feel right now will be worth the discomfort later.

It’s cliché—and I’ll deny thinking it as soon as we’re done—but he fits in my body like he was made for it. He’s wide enough that he stretches me without causing pain, just an intense pressure deep inside. And the way his shaft presses against my prostate... I swear my vision goes a little hazy each time he pegs it. My eyelids are almost too heavy to hold open, so I basically can’t see anything. I just writhe on his lap, chasing the orgasm I have no doubt will be epic as his moans spur me on.

“Tripp. Jesus, *fuck*... I” He wraps his big paw around my dick and starts

pumping frantically. It's my signal that he's close, and thank God because my balls are ready to burst.

Upping my tempo—apparently, having Noah's hand on my dick throws me into a higher gear I didn't know existed—I slam my body rhythmically onto his. My panting and groaning hits higher pitches like I'm the star of a cheesy porno. I try to hold it in, but the countdown has started. Liftoff is imminent. And when the hockey god underneath me goes rigid with an animalistic growl of his own, I explode.

My hole clenches around the rod pulsing inside me, my dick shuddering violently inside Noah's palm as my balls unload. A rush of warm liquid fills me, causing more tremors to ripple through my body as the one underneath me twitches and trembles through its own release.

Chest heaving, tendons straining, lips still swollen from their earlier workout, sated Noah is a vision. A wet dream come to life. I want to massage the hard curve of his shoulder, trace the peaks and valleys of his muscles, brush my thumb along his square jaw. But that's not how fuck buddies work.

I can admire during sex, not after. Never after. That's how things go from sex to something more, and I don't do more.

“Still with me, big guy, or did you blow your mind with your load?” I give his nipple a gentle pinch to get his attention.

“That...” His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. “I don't think I've felt anything so intense in my life.”

“That's just the beginning. Wait until I introduce you to your prostate.” I start to lift off him, pausing when he grabs my hand.

“Thank you.”

*Whoa, not good. I wanted to rock his world, and mine, not make him feel grateful.*

“First rule of fuck buddies, there’s no need to be polite. For example, a good host should give you dibs on the first shower since I went first last time.” This time I do lift all the way off his lap. “But I’m the one with cum dripping out of his ass so I call dibs again. I promise to be quick though.” I grab my clothes and jog upstairs, hoping he makes his way to his room before I come back down.

## Chapter 13 -Noah

It's only because of muscle memory that the puck doesn't slip between my legs.

One minute, the other team is working it around our end of the rink, the next, gravity is pulling me to the ice, and I feel it hit my pads. The ones in my shorts instead of the ones on my knees, meaning I just barely stopped its trajectory.

The puck is so buried, no one else knows where it is. All they know is there's no goal since the flashing light isn't going off, but like sharks swimming in chum, players sense its presence, hovering over me to see if there's an opening to get their stick on it. It's not until the ref whistles for a faceoff that I rise and reveal it.

People will praise me for being in good position or claim that my lightning quick reflexes enabled me to make the save, and while there's some truth to that, it's more accurate to say dumb luck stopped that puck. I'm not anticipating the opponent as well as I usually do, especially during the first period when everyone's fresh. Fortunately, my body reacted before my brain made the conscious decision to move so we're still up by one for our home opener.

"All good?" Niko asks as he skates by me while the ref collects the puck for the faceoff.

It still boggles my mind how perceptive he is in his second year, though if anyone can spot when I'm off it's him. And while no one wants to hear that

their goalie's head isn't in the game, I have too much respect for my teammates to blow them off with silly excuses.

"Got lucky on that one," I admit.

"Were we blocking your view?" He knows none of our defenders were in my line of sight, but he's giving me the out anyway in case my pride demands it. That's not my personality, but other guys need that coddling, and Niko's learning how to manage different personalities. He'll make a good captain one day.

"Nope, I was just slow to react on that one, but I'm good."

The ref drops the puck and Luca's on it right away, winning the faceoff and circling around the goal to give it to me so I can slow things down and set up the offense. Most of the players start migrating toward the other end of the rink, though Niko hangs back to take the pass I send him. He takes his time moving the puck, passing it around until a tiny window opens up for Justus.

Niko delivers the puck to him right in front of the goal, but instead of taking the shot Justus spins away from the net, turning one hundred and eighty degrees and flicking the puck over the goalie's shoulder. Lights flash as the crowd goes wild, both because we put another point on the board and because that was one hell of a trick shot.

For the next two periods both teams go back and forth controlling the game, and while they get one by me when I come out of the crease to challenge a fast break, that's the only score they get. Niko is virtually a solid wall between me and the other team, and if they do manage to get off a shot, I time my blocks to land on the puck instead of giving up a rebound opportunity and an easy score. It's a delicate balance, and one I'm typically pretty good at, which is how Niko could tell I was a little distracted in the first period.

He'll probably ask why in the locker room, and I'm man enough to admit the truth. It was a glimpse of Tripp's hair—which is now dark at the root and sort of emerald green at the tip—that got me. What I won't admit is that I suspect the green is because I asked why he chose blonde instead of green or blue when he was writhing naked on my lap.

Normally, Tripp wouldn't catch my attention during a game, but Luca happened to crush one of the opposing forwards into the boards right where he and Xander were sitting. And while that's happened before without causing me to lose focus, this is the first time it's happened since we became intimate.

The fact is, I haven't seen or spoken to him since he took me inside him nearly two weeks ago, and I wasn't mentally prepared for the emotions that accompanied that first glimpse. I'm not talking about the things that plagued me initially, like why he hadn't called or whether he was deliberately avoiding me, I'm talking about the sense of longing that hit me hard enough to steal my breath.

Even from twenty yards away, I could see how the green in his hair made his eyes pop, giving him an even more naughty air than he usually possesses. That alone was enough to take my eye off the game, but when I realized he was wearing *my jersey*... I've never had the urge to stake my claim on anyone, and Tripp certainly isn't the type to let anyone claim him, but in that moment, I liked the idea of him being mine.

I suppose that's why he was so concerned about getting our labels straight, so I wouldn't confuse fucking with something more. That could also be why he hasn't called. I hope that's the reason, anyway. I'd much rather he put a little distance between us to manage expectations than to have him decide

he's not interested. Although, that distance is what got me off track during the game...

"Epic, man. Just epic." Luca is slapping Justus on the back along with half a dozen other guys when I enter the locker room, and the noise in my head instantly fades to nothing as I watch them shower him with praise. This right here, this brotherhood, is what I live for.

There's something about pushing our physical limits together, sharing blood and sweat, battling exhaustion and chronic pain, that binds us on a deeper level. Makes us function as one, like we share the same mind. It sounds corny, but when you see it come together... When you see a guy make a blind pass that he just *knows* his teammate will be there to receive, or you can communicate how you want a play to develop with a single look, the only explanation is that we're mentally connected. We're never truly alone.

I think that's why I never got too hung up on the questions about who I am off the ice. My teammates, my brothers, were always there. Now that I'm edging closer to retirement, closer to the end of that bond... I guess maybe that's part of why I'm asking the question now, although I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be examining things too closely if it weren't for Tripp.

*Dammit, why does it feel like things always come back to him?*

"That's gonna make ESPN's top ten plays for sure." Luca's excitement brings me back to the locker room. "We need to celebrate!"

"Frosty Dog?" Niko suggests our go-to pub. "I'll tell Xander to meet us there."

"Hell yeah." Luca plants his hands on Justus's shoulders, using them for leverage to jump up and down. "The ladies will be lining up to see if this guy's got as much magic in the bedroom as he does on the ice."

Justus turns as red as a tomato—or maybe that's just exertion from the

game—and steps away to start putting stuff in his locker while Niko snorts under his breath. “You’re totally gonna pimp him out to try to score yourself, aren’t you?”

“Duh.” Luca shrugs as if that should be obvious.

Once we’re all showered and changed, we head over to the bar, which as usual, is packed after a home game. The crowd graciously parts as we work our way to the back where the owner reserves a section for us, random hands begging for a high-five or slapping our shoulders as we pass. Since the owner has a policy against asking us for selfies and autographs, we manage to cut through the crowd pretty quickly.

This time I’m prepared to see Tripp, who as usual is sitting across the table from Xander. I’m actually a little grateful that this encounter isn’t the first time I’m seeing him tonight, because the sight of him in my jersey is even more powerful up close. I blink and watch Niko kiss his boyfriend hello so I don’t give off the wrong impression, though when I finally bring myself to look in Tripp’s direction he’s patting the seat next to him with a knowing smirk.

“You like?” He pinches the shoulder of his shirt between his thumb and forefinger.

Across the table Niko whines, “Even Tripp is wearing a jersey. The wrong one, but still.”

“Tripp cannot wear my boyfriend’s number,” Xander says, shaking his head. “Not a chance in Hell.”

“Well, my actual boyfriend isn’t wearing it.”

“You know dating a jock goes against my moral code, don’t ask me to broadcast it.” Xander grins and rolls his eyes.

As the two of them flirt-fight, I angle my head towards Tripp. “Where’d

that come from?" I ask quietly as I tug on the hem of the jersey.

"It was incredibly hard to find." He sighs with mock frustration. "They only carry it at every sporting goods store, online, and at the gift shop at the rink."

"I mean why would you buy it? I'd have given you one if I knew you wanted it."

"How would you know I wanted it when you haven't called?"

"You haven't called me, either." I arch a brow and cross my arms over my chest.

"True, but I'm exceedingly comfortable with having a fuck buddy and you... Well, we don't know that yet. So, I figure it's up to you if I *put my stick in your net*."

Fortunately, Niko and Xander are too busy pretending to be the only ones here to notice me blushing or hear Tripp. "You're the one who has a thing for dark and moody. Wearing a jersey is the opposite," Xander insists.

"What if you wear it while I fuck you? Then no one will see it but me." Niko's proposal has Xander chewing on his lip suggestively.

"I feel the need to point out this isn't a fanboy thing." Tripp interrupts their bickering and plucks his jersey again, which has green numbers on a black background, then points to his hair. "Green just happens to be a difficult color to match."

Niko and Xander pay him no mind and go back to negotiating the terms of wearing a jersey while I try in vain not to reach out and touch Tripp's hair. "So...green. Where'd that come from?"

"I needed a change. And bonus, Bulldogs colors are black and green."

"You just said this wasn't a fanboy thing."

"That's right."

"You didn't pick green since I asked about it?"

“Did you? Hmm, that’s right. But you also asked about blue. I probably should’ve gone that route. Green really is a challenging color. Beers!” he exclaims as Luca and Justus set a pitcher with a half dozen glasses in front of us.

He puts a hand on my leg—his finger dangerously close to my junk—and leans over to reach for a glass. The gesture isn’t at all out of character for him, though instead of pulling back to give him some space like I typically do, I lean toward his ear and lower my voice. “I think it makes you look sort of dangerous. And sexy.”

“What are you blushing about over there, Tripp?” Luca asks as Tripp retreats to his seat.

“I just felt Noah up and I liked it.” He doesn’t miss a beat, and since everyone is so used to his antics, they don’t consider he’s telling the truth. But I know better. He’s blushing because I called him sexy.

“Fine, I’ll wear it for the playoffs. Final games only though, as in playing for the cup, not winning your conference.” Xander takes the focus off Tripp, laying out his terms to Niko like a peace treaty.

I’m not sure how they went from sex to playoffs, but I’m happy for Niko. Having someone you care about wear your jersey, especially one you give them, is a point of pride for most of us. For Niko to see Xander wearing his number in the stands, I’m not sure there’s any greater motivation than winning for the person wearing your name. Except winning for your teammates.

“Guys, we have to play for the cup.” Niko clears his throat and turns a near desperate gaze on all of us.

“Uh, don’t we do that every year?” Justus asks.

“Yeah, but the only way Xander will wear my jersey is if we make it to the

final round.”

“Xander, what would your father say?” Luca scolds, which makes sense since Xander’s dad is our coach.

“He’d pat me on the back for finding a way to motivate Niko.”

“I’d say he doesn’t need that to motivate him.” Justus shoots an apologetic look at Niko. “But knowing how he feels about you, having you wear his jersey is just as meaningful as winning the cup.”

“Cruel but effective.” Luca taps his glass against Xander’s before raising it for a group toast. “Speaking of effective, have you ever seen a shot as brilliant as the one my boy took tonight?”

Now, it’s Justus’s turn to blush. As a fellow forward he idolized Luca for years, and now his adolescent hero is his mentor. I’ve heard the saying that you should be careful about meeting your heroes, but in this case, it seems to be benefiting both of them. They’ve developed a rhythm that’s hard for defenses to stop.

We all toast Justus’s incredible play then start rehashing our favorite moments from the game, while Xander offers his bird’s eye perspective—he’s fairly astute as assessing games given his lineage—and Tripp gushes about fast shots and hard hits.

Though I jump in with my own observations and laugh at all the right moments, my thoughts never stray completely away from Tripp. We’re not touching, but he’s close enough that I *feel* him next to me, like a live wire, crackling with energy. It makes me want to put my hand on his leg, to trail my fingers along the inside of his knee and watch him shudder. I’d do it if I thought it was a fuck buddy gesture, but since that kind of touch is something Niko and Xander started only after coming out to us, I’m pretty sure it falls into boyfriend territory.

Needless to say, by the time everyone's ready to go, I'm feeling desperate and deprived. I'm positively clueless about how to say that to Tripp. I manage to catch his eye a few times as we pay the bill, and again in the parking lot, but when he heads to his car, I can only assume those looks didn't say what I wanted them to. It's not until I'm home, staring blankly at my phone and debating how to start a text asking to see him, when the doorbell makes me realize they worked. Sort of.

"You're lucky you resemble a Norse god because puppy dog eyes don't usually work on me," Tripp declares as he steps inside, green eyes full of mischief.

"Puppy dog eyes?"

"You know, the sad, helpless stare cute little animals give you when they want something. I don't usually consider it a good look on a man but you're sexy enough to pull it off. Besides, if a man misses my cock enough to silently plead for it, it'd be pretty cruel to deny him."

"I wasn't pleading. I was... Trying to gauge your interest."

"Sure, you were." He pats my chest as he brushes past me and sets his keys on the foyer table. "In that case, I'd say you could just ask if I want to fuck, but since I'm always interested you can skip that step and just say your place or mine. Now, show me to your bedroom. I assume you've got a giant bed and I think we should use every inch of it." He walks further into the house.

My body is intrigued by that plan if my rapid heartbeat is any indication, but my mind is stuck on logistics. Do we really just go at it without any *buddy* stuff?

When he's a few paces away Tripp pauses and shoots me a puzzled look over his shoulder. "Fucking against the wall works too if that's what you want..."

Ducking my head, I rub my hand over the back of my neck. "I..."

"Why is timid Noah back?" He faces me, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "I thought you were pretty clear on wanting to explore sex with me."

"Well, yeah. I do, but..."

His eyes soften when I bring mine to meet them. "You need me to seduce you, is that it?"

I shrug sheepishly. With a subtle sigh, he closes the distance between us and starts kissing my throat, his hands roaming over my chest, down my stomach, ghosting over my groin. "What are you in the mood for? A striptease? A lap dance? A massage?"

Threading my fingers through his hair, I capture the strands in a gentle grip and tug his head back so I can see his eyes. "Why are you really wearing my jersey?"

A slight crease forms between his brows. "I told you, it matches the hair."

"I don't buy it. You heard the same conversation I did between Xander and Niko. You know it's not just a jersey when you're sleeping with the person wearing it."

"I'd never heard that until tonight." He makes an imaginary cross over his chest.

"But you wanted me to see you in it. Didn't you?" That's more of a gut instinct than a statement, until I catch his eyes darting away from mine for a brief second.

"It might have occurred to me that you'd want to fuck me in it."

It's an offhand remark, delivered with the same sass he's prone to using when he wants to bait me, but it confirms that he thought of me despite not making the effort to get in touch. And even though he explained that earlier when he implied he's letting me dictate our encounters, it's not until just now

that I understand giving me control doesn't mean he's not interested. Or that he hasn't given me a second thought while we've been apart.

That knowledge sends a bolt of lust coursing through my veins, which I'm guessing Tripp can sense since his hand starts softly kneading my cock. Either that or he noticed my gaze was focused on his lips and decided to distract me.

I'm a little bummed because even though there's lots of things I still haven't done with another man, I sort of assumed kissing would be one of the first, and we haven't done that yet. I'm starting to think Tripp prefers it that way, though I hope I'm wrong about that. I'd love to feel his mouth on mine.

"You like that idea. Pounding into me while I'm wearing your number." It's a confirmation, not a question, as his hand drifts lower, rubbing my balls over the denim of my jeans.

Since it's hard to acknowledge that without sounding as possessive as seeing him in my jersey makes me feel, all I can do is grunt. And grip his hair a little tighter.

Tripp's eyes flutter shut on a sharp inhale, mouth morphing into a sly smile as the breath slowly escapes. "Hard and fast, huh big guy? Is that how you want me?" When I manage only another grunt he rises to his toes and growls into my ear. "Bedroom. Now."

I release his hair and grab his hand, pulling him behind me until we reach my room. But before I can get him on the bed he plants his feet, forcing me to turn and face him.

"This time you get to be the naked one while I'm clothed. *Mostly.*" He reaches for the hem of my shirt and peels it up and over my head without any help from me, which makes my knees go weak. No one's ever been able to undress me on their own—I'm too tall—but since Tripp's only a few inches

shorter he manages with ease, and I find that I really like the act of being undressed instead of doing it myself.

With my shirt out of the way, Tripp kisses a path over my chest, licking my nipples as his fingertips trace the ridges of my abs. This, too, is a new experience. Not in the sense that no one's ever put their mouth on me, just not in the way he does it, with sighs and moans and curses that suggest he has some sort of reverence for my body. Every inch of it.

I've never felt so admired. So *appreciated*. While Tripp has made no secret of the fact he likes my body, up until this point all physical contact seemed geared toward my benefit. My pleasure. Right now, it feels like he's exploring me for his.

Dazed from his touch, it takes me a second to realize he's worked my pants open and is shoving them off my hips, boxers too, leaving my full cock on display. I might be self-conscious about that except for the fact Tripp watches it hungrily, licking his lips like he's stalking prey. Once again, I react to his intense perusal with a full body shiver, my engorged length bobbing eagerly under his feral gaze. He drops to the ground and takes it in his fist, looking up at me with a wicked gleam in his eye.

“Has anyone ever swallowed this gorgeous dick?”

I suck in a surprised breath when he swirls his tongue around the crown. “Swallowed?”

“Mmm.” He licks the underside and seals his lips over the tip, and even though he's sucking gently it feels like he's pulling every nerve ending, every brain cell, all my oxygen into my cock, so that the only thing I'm capable of feeling is his wet heat on my shaft. “Taken this full, fat dick all the way down their throat.”

“I don't think...” I can't get even get the words out before his nose is

brushing against my pelvis, his throat constricting around my length. He pulls back and does it again. And again. Taking me deeper than I thought possible and making gurgling, squelching sounds as he coats me with his saliva.

When he mentioned pounding into him earlier, I assumed he meant the other hole, not the one he needs to breathe. As deep as I am, my cock has to be choking him, yet I can't seem to find the strength to pull away. The sight of him on his knees, mouth stretched wide around me, is more captivating than I expected it to be. The sloppiness of it is carnal even though the act of taking me into his body is beautiful, a contradiction I can't look away from.

Moving on autopilot, my abs flex as my dick spears between his lips while his eyes flutter in some sort of hedonistic bliss... I'm engulfed in a vortex of pleasure and emotion, a fog of ecstasy unlike anything I've ever experienced. I can't tell if I'm floating or falling, groaning or whimpering. All I know is both my body and mind are reeling, overwhelmed by what Tripp's doing to me.

Rocking onto the balls of my feet, I chase his mouth, yelping when he unexpectedly gives my sac a firm tug and pulls off me with a 'pop.'

"Don't be greedy, champ. I want that cock in my ass before you bust that nut." He stands up and takes his pants off as I kick mine away from my feet, crawling onto the bed on all fours. Even with the jersey hanging off his lean frame, I can see his dick hanging between his legs. Before I can take it in my hand, he flicks his head toward the pants crumpled on my floor and says, "There's lube in my back pocket. Get yourself nice and slick."

I fish the lube out and slather it over my dick while Tripp eyes me ravenously, biting his lip to stifle a moan as he watches my fist slide along my length. It's a show he's undoubtedly put on before, but I let myself

indulge in the fantasy that it's just for me. That only I can make him so desperate.

Once I'm coated in the gel, I step behind him, but instead of pushing inside I take his cock in my hand and stroke him slowly, noting how it makes him arch his spine as he pushes into my grip. "Trying to get me to catch up?"

"Not really." I swipe my thumb over his slit and give him a few languid pumps. "You said you like having your dick played with, so..."

"If you hadn't made me wait two weeks for your cock I wouldn't object, but since you deprived me of all cocks except yours, I'm not feeling very patient. Now put your hands on my hips and give it to me."

Though I fully expected Tripp to honor my request not to sleep around while he's sleeping with me, the fact that he basically admitted he's mine—for now—while wearing my name on his back erases all my restraint.

I line myself up, nudging just the crown of my dick inside his hole. Then I grip his hips and thrust forward.

The cry that rumbles from his throat is filled with both need and relief, a strange mix of satisfaction and yearning. I want to savor it, but the pressure that engulfs my dick makes it impossible to think of anything beyond staving off my release.

"God, how are you tighter?" I rasp, chest heaving as I try to fill my lungs with the air they can't seem to hold. I tried to recreate the feeling of Tripp's body with my hand, to recapture the sensations I'm feeling now without being buried inside him. I could never get my fist tight enough. Or hot enough. I'd always end up feeling empty. Unfulfilled.

*Fuck...*, being joined to him, I'm basically in free fall, spiraling uncontrollably as I struggle not to lose control.

"Maybe you're bigger." His voice helps to ground me. "My blow jobs must

agree with you.”

“Ungh,” I half-grunt, half-laugh, fighting back a burst of euphoria that ripples through me when he shifts his weight. “Hold still.”

“Can’t,” he strains.

“Fuck,” I grumble and take a deep breath, holding it as I pull back and tentatively push forward. Despite the give of his warm channel, the easy acceptance of my intrusion, his ass is so tight the pressure is dizzying.

My eyes roll back in my head as my legs quake with the effort to stay upright, which is sort of terrifying, given that strong legs are a basic requirement of my job. Yet, not even the hundreds of pounds I squat make my thighs tremble as much as they are right now.

“Harder, big guy. Don’t hold back.” Tripp taunts me with a daring glance over his shoulder, and as much as I want to savor this encounter, I want to please him even more.

I flex my fingers and grip his hips, widening my stance to the same athletic position I use in goal when I need ready access to speed and power. Then I start to move.

My hips piston forward, spearing my length into his warm, wet hole as I use my arms to pull him to me. The lewd sound of skin slapping against skin is a steady drumbeat around us, and his frantic moans are the melody.

Tremors of ecstasy ripple along my shaft as I give it to him, culminating in a hefty twitch each time I sink to the hilt. My abs blaze as they coil and release again and again, biceps smoldering from the near violent push and pull as I strain to fit my body into Tripp’s.

“Fuck, you’re gonna split me in two. Don’t stop.”

Beads of sweat trickle down my chest, along my abs, pooling at the base of my groin, already damp from the lube dripping out of Tripp’s ass. It occurs to

me not only that sex has never been this messy before, but that I like it this way. Loud and wet and uninhibited.

The only thing that could make it better is seeing Tripp's face. The way his eyes get heavy with lust as his orgasm builds. How his lean chest heaves when he starts panting. How his lips part just slightly when he moans.

Seeing my name on his back is thrilling in its own way, but it can't compete with watching the man come undone in front of me.

That memory has pleasure engulfing me, threatening to tip me over the edge long before I want it to. I run drills in my mind, stopping imaginary pucks in an attempt to convince myself that I'm not about to find heaven. But not even hockey can distract me from the notion that it doesn't just feel good, but *right*, to give my body to Tripp. Like it should belong to him, if he wants it.

That thought makes me falter slightly, not out of fear so much as worry that he wouldn't appreciate such a revelation. But it's enough that he notices the shift in my movement.

"More, Noah. Jerk me. *Please.*"

"How? I'm barely hanging on." I curl my fingers into his skin.

"Pull me up," Tripp gasps. "My back to your front."

Wrapping my left arm under his chest, I heave him up to a groan that sounds a lot like '*fuck that's hot*' as my right hand closes over his cock. His keening cry of relief is like a shot of adrenaline straight to my balls, and I find a second wind, spearing into him ferociously as my fingers slide over his length.

Rocking into him as my fist bottoms out helps me keep a constant rhythm, but it's not until Tripp wraps his arms around me to start fondling my cheeks that I have the leverage to fuck him like he wants, and once I do...

The raspy moans coming from Tripp's mouth spur me onward, encouraging me to plunge deeper, pump faster. My body pushes all rational thought from my brain, its singular focus finding the nirvana that looms... Right. Fucking. There. In that place where Tripp and I are so connected I'd swear we were one. We're moving together without conscious thought so much as intuition. It's an innate sense of what we want...a craving to be closer regardless of the limitations.

My dick throbs with the need for release, the same as his does in my hand. With each thrust we inch toward the precipice, and the friction of Tripp's palms gripping my ass tips me over the edge.

I come, slamming into him, and before I can catch my breath, he clenches around me. The vise-like grip of his body wrings another wave from my tip as his release coats my hand, and a guttural cry rumbles from my throat.

A torrent of sensation crashes over me. Ecstasy, exhaustion, affection, gratitude; wave after wave coming so hard and fast, I can't tell which way is up. My body vibrates like a guitar string, a strange mixture of sated yet spent that keeps my muscles tense despite the fact they can barely hold my weight.

Tripp shudders in my arms as his orgasm finally dissipates, his rapid breath causing my arm to rise with the rhythm of his chest. His head falls back against my shoulder as his grip on my ass relaxes, and it's only then that I realize I'm still holding his dick, stroking it absently. And that he seems just as content to stay like this as I do.

It won't last, and I understand why, but I'm also not going to point out that we're a sticky mess and should probably clean up. I may still be learning about who I am and what I want, but one thing I don't question is the fact that I like the non-sexual contact I have with Tripp as much as I do the sexual kind.. So, if he's happy to let me hold him, I will.



## Chapter 14 – Tripp

Even with my eyes closed, I can tell the room is brighter than usual. And hotter. And...stickier. *Wtf?* I try to roll onto my back, but the wall won't let me. *Wall? Since when is there a wall next to my bed ?*

Cracking an eyelid, the first thing I notice is the floor to ceiling windows across from the bed. Windows that are impressive in scale, and way too big for my small condo. The next thing is the gray comforter underneath me. It's fluffy and soft—high quality—but it's too dark. I prefer lighter colors that don't showcase the evidence of my extracurricular activities if they get a little...*vigorous*.

Okay, so, I'm not at home. I'm at Noah's. Inconvenient, but not the end of the world. I've passed out in a post sex haze before, so I know the drill. Get up quietly, grab my clothes and tiptoe out. Easy peasy.

That's how it's supposed to go, anyway.

The heavy weight draped over my torso is going to make that particular escape a little difficult. So is the half-chub rubbing against my ass, which—hello—seems like it'd be a shame to waste.

Seeing as my prior accidental sleepovers were more of a pass out cold situation than a deliberate plan to stay the night, they didn't involve cuddling. Or waking up to someone's morning wood knocking on my back door. My jury's still out on the cuddling part—although I slept like a fucking baby—but I could get on board with the wake-up sex.

*No, bad Tripp.*

Though I'm happy to confirm the gentle giant behind me is a beast in the sack, I'm not sold on the declaration that he's good with no strings sex. I think he'd like to be—I'd like that too—which is why I followed him home last night. But slip ups like staying over might send the wrong message. So, I need to Houdini myself out of here.

Wrapping my fingers gently around his wrist, I try to lift his arm off me. I move it maybe half an inch before my hand slips and Noah hugs me tighter to his chest. I'm ready to try again when he grumbles, "Trying to sneak out?"

"I don't sneak." *I totally sneak.* "I was trying to be polite and not wake you."

"You didn't."

"So, you're intentionally spooning me?" That not so subtle hint doesn't get him to move his arm.

"I woke up like this. Figured as long as we were both comfortable, I'd stay that way."

*Houston we have a problem.* Snuggles could lead to feelings, and that's a slippery slope to boyfriendville. It's a town I have no desire to visit like *ever*. Why subject myself to the illusion that people give a shit about me when history suggests they only care about themselves?

I scoot away and roll to face him, regretting it the moment I do. *Sleepy, rumped Norse god is HOT!* "So, how did we end up here exactly?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. I remember trying to catch my breath, and I think maybe my legs gave out and I fell on the bed."

"Hmm, sign of a good night. You're welcome." I pat his deliciously hard chest. "Okay then, I should go."

He tugs on the jersey I'm still wearing when I try to sit up. "What's the rush?"

“Um, the rush is you're spooning me. That's against the fuck buddy rules.”

“It's not like I broke the rules on purpose. Or by myself.” He runs a lazy hand through his hair, a loose strand falling back over his face, and my stomach does a little flip.

“Exactly. I broke them too, which is why I should go.”

“It's Sunday and you don't have work.” He scratches his big hand over his perfectly sculpted pec, which makes me notice his chest again, then his abs, then the heavy cock resting on them, and *damn* I need to get away from naked Thor. “Shower and I'll make some breakfast. Then you can take Dorothy over to Xander's if you want.”

*He remembers the name of my most prized possession? And doesn't think it's weird that I named her?*

I'd swoon if I did that sort of thing. Or climb on him and ride like I was making for the border.

*Down, boy.* Morning after sex is definitely not a fuck buddy thing. Neither is breakfast, although I am kind of starving and I'd love to skate. “Can you cook breakfast as well as you cook dinner?”

“I can fry an egg.”

“I guess I'll take you up on that shower then.”

Noah gets me set up in the bathroom and heads off to the kitchen, leaving me the privacy to clean up without an audience, or a partner. That's somewhat disappointing considering his shower would be fun to play in. It's got a bazillion jets and showerheads, and even a little bench that looks like marble in a sea of tiles that resemble wood planks—very masculine and contemporary. Although shower sex is possibly too intimate for what we are, so getting clean solo is probably for the best.

I linger slightly since I haven't been in a shower this nice in nearly a

decade. Wrapping myself in a plush white towel, I hunt down some mouthwash, finding it in the medicine cabinet above the sink, but when I finish and close the mirrored door I freeze.

*What am I doing?*

My image stares back at me, familiar yet not. Running my fingers through my damp hair, the emerald tips taunt me with a truth I don't want to admit.

*I picked green because I thought he'd like it.*

Like he said, the darker color does make me look less playful and more mischievous. Both are accurate representations of my personality, although I went blond as a way to remind myself to focus on the light. To appear approachable rather than inaccessible, at least on the surface. I may have sky-high walls, but I only put them up around the deep, personal stuff I keep to myself. I don't use them to push people away on sight—my obnoxious comments do that so I don't waste time on people who can't handle me—and dark always struck me as the equivalent of saying back off without having to say anything at all.

*I also thought the darkness of the green might warn him away.*

Part of me wanted that to happen. If he backed off, I wouldn't be the asshole for saying, *'thanks for showing me your dick, now lets be friends.'*

Wanting him to like it and hate it is fifty shades of fucked up. I need an intervention, but the only person qualified to set me straight doesn't know his boyfriend's teammate has a hard-on for my hard-ons. Or that mine seems to require that sexy Norse god to make a *full* appearance.

By the time I'm dressed in a plain white shirt—one I'm hoping Noah doesn't realize is his since his jersey doesn't hide cum stains—he's scooping eggs onto a plate with buttered toast and fruit. Only one though.

“Where's yours?” I take the plate he offers and help myself to a seat at an

island so big I could comfortably stretch out on top of it. That is, if it weren't made of rock.

"My breakfast is dictated by the team dietician." He sets a bowl of oatmeal and a smoothie on the counter and takes the stool next to me as I wrinkle my nose. "You aren't a fan of healthy eating?"

"I'm a fan of eating whatever I feel like, and it's never been that." I point to his meal with a grimace. "Does it even have any taste?"

"Not much, but you get used to it. Besides, this is what keeps me fit enough to play at the professional level in my thirties."

My eyes blatantly wander up his now clothed torso, which his snug t-shirt does nothing to hide. "If you're telling me that crap is the reason you're a walking wet dream then I guess I approve."

"Uh, thanks?" He eyes me the same way, cocking his head to the side with a slight frown. "Is that my shirt?"

*Busted.*

"I had a bit of a wardrobe malfunction." I scoop up the runny part of the egg with my toast. "Hope you don't mind."

"You can wear anything of mine you like. Even if it doesn't fit." His baby blues twinkle as he fights a smile.

Glancing down, I have to admit the shirt is a little big. "I'm not so sure your clothes fit you either." I reach over and pinch the fabric of his shirt between my fingers, giving it a gentle tug, though the material barely moves since it's already stretched to the brink. "Maybe you should lay off the protein."

"I wouldn't be able to manhandle you as easily if I did."

"Why would I want you to manhandle me?" I arch my brow in his direction and take another bite of egg toast.

"You call me *big guy*."

“It’s a fitting nickname.”

“And you groaned ‘*fuck that’s hot*’ when I hauled you against me last night.”

“You were pounding my prostate and jerking my dick. Totally hot. And also, fuck buddy etiquette says you can’t hold people responsible for what they say when you’re stroking their cock. It’s like, shit said under duress or something.”

“Would it be against fuck buddy etiquette to say I bet if I toss you over my shoulder that’ll make you hard?”

“That wouldn’t be a stretch since this conversation is making me hard.” I look pointedly at my crotch.

“So, you’re saying I’m right.” He crosses his arms in front of his broad chest.

*Damn those blue orbs shine when he’s feeling frisky.*

“I’m saying there’s only one way to find out.” I shoot off the stool and round the island, putting that big hunk of cabinetry between us. Noah jumps up in a flash, crouching slightly so he’s ready to spring whichever direction I choose to run.

*I probably should’ve put more thought into challenging a professional goalie not to catch me.*

“Think you can outrun me?” Noah smirks.

“I think I’m lighter on my feet than you.” Faking right, I quickly change course and go left, heading for the back door. I twist the handle and throw it open, launching myself over the threshold and clearing the two flagstone stairs before I hit the patio and take off running. But I only make it a few feet before I hear a strangled wail and a heavy thud.

The brat in me wants to believe he’s using some sort of ploy to catch me off

guard, but since I'd be perfectly happy to be caught and tossed over his shoulder I play along, skidding to a halt and turning to face my pursuer. Only he's not pursuing me. He's lying on the ground, reaching for his ankle with a strained grimace on his face.

*Shit.*

*Shit. Shit. Shit.* Not only do I have zero fucking clue what to do with hurt people, I don't do well with guilt, which I'm feeling pretty heavily right now since my stupid game of chase is what's got the big guy writhing on the floor, and not in an '*I just blew the biggest load ever*' way.

I give myself three point seven seconds to freak the fuck out then trot back to Noah and crouch down next to him, patting his shoulder awkwardly. "Are you okay?"

He shoots me an incredulous glare.

"I mean, obviously you're not, but, is this like one of those '*I need a minute*' things or this is a full-blown '*something's broken*' thing?"

"Somewhere in the middle." He closes his eyes, chest rising dramatically on a deep breath that he seems to hold for a few seconds before letting it slowly out.

"Right. And that means what exactly? Do I help you get inside or call a doctor or..." The corner of my lip tries to tick upward, and I press them together to try to keep them flat.

Noah blinks me into focus and cringes. "Why are you smiling?"

"I'm not." I slap my hand over my mouth, which doesn't do anything to stop my lips from twitching except hopefully make it less noticeable.

"Now you're laughing?"

"I... No." I shake my head vigorously back and forth, never taking my hand off my mouth.

“This is funny to you?” Anger and hurt war for dominance in his eyes.

I purse my lips together so hard I bet they’re turning white, which he hopefully can’t see under my hand, and shake my head.

“Jesus Christ,” he mumbles. “You’re fucking laughing.”

The number of swears in that sentence is telling, yet I can’t make my face look empathetic. I’ve never been able to. Until now, I thought that was because I *wasn’t* empathetic, but I do actually care about what happens to Noah, so it must be genetic or something.

“I’m not... Laughing isn’t the right...” *Dammit I’m making it worse.* “It’s a condition,” I finally squeak mid-giggle.

“A condition?” Noah scoffs, wincing when he probes his ankle.

“I promise I’m not being cheeky.” I bite back another impish grin. “Bad things happen, and I laugh. Always have. I used to think that’s because it actually *is* funny when bad things happen to people I don’t like. Only, I like you and this isn’t funny but I can’t stop myself from smiling. I don’t know what to do and it’s sort of unnerving since I know I should be doing *something* I just don’t know what. I’m a horrible caregiver. It’s why I don’t have pets.”

By the time I finish my rambling some of the anger has left Noah’s expression, although he’s still sort of looking at me like I’m every bit the obnoxious little shit most people assume me to be. Even though that’s not an inaccurate perception, he’s never looked at me like that before. I don’t like it.

Pasting a concerned look on my face, or what I hope is concerned, I say, “Tell me what to do.”

I must get it right because the big guy offers me his hand to pull him up, and even though he must have at least sixty pounds on me I manage to get him standing with an arm draped over my shoulders so he can hop inside.

We hobble to the couch where he falls heavily onto the cushions, and I stand frozen waiting for more instructions.

“What?” He sighs.

I shrug helplessly. “Want a beer?”

“It’s ten in the morning.”

“After I banged my head we had beer, and then...”

“I don’t want to watch you jerk off right now.”

“Whoa, I didn’t suggest that.” I was going to, after I got an answer on the beer thing, but now I’ll keep that to myself. “What *do* you want though?”

Noah’s head falls against the back of the couch. “How about an ice pack? There’s one in the freezer. And a dish towel.”

“Coming right up.” *Coming right up? I’ve never even been a server—no one would trust me around the customers.*

After rooting through half a dozen Tupperwares of food his chef person must leave for him, I find one of those gel things that’s technically ice although it’s mushy enough to wrap around a limb, which even comes with a Velcro strap so you can attach it. I make a note to look for one myself since it’s probably better than the frozen veggies I used as a kid. Grabbing a towel off the counter, I head back to Noah, who’s managed to get his foot propped on the coffee table.

I hand him the towel and ice pack, which he tries to wrap around his quickly swelling ankle, but when he can’t get it secure, I take over, even putting a cushion under his foot so the edge of the table doesn’t dig into his calf. *I’m already getting better at this.* Then I hover next to the couch, waiting for instructions since the cushion thing exhausted my ideas.

“Can you just sit?” Noah asks a few minutes later.

“How do you know where I am? Your eyes are closed.”

“I feel you looming.”

“I’m just waiting for you to tell me everything’s fine and it’s a false alarm.”

“It’s not a false alarm.”

“It has to be, because otherwise this is my fault, and you’ll hate me.” It’s not until I say the words out loud that I realize they’re true. Especially the part about him hating me.

For weeks, I’ve been preaching about boundaries, mostly for his protection but also for my peace of mind. It was supposed to ensure he didn’t hate me when the sex part of our buddy plan ran its course. I never anticipated he might have a reason to hate me that didn’t involve dicks and holes, and now that my antics have put his season in jeopardy... He might actually hate me for this, and that’s more unsettling than the idea of never getting to fuck him.

I don’t have feelings for the big guy. That’s not what this is about. But I do like him as a person. I enjoy his company, respect his honesty, and get a kick out of flirting with him. Have I been toying with him... Yes, but only because he allows it, and it seems to be helping him understand himself a little better. Until this little hiccup, it was all a little harmless fun. Now, I’m actually a little surprised he hasn’t kicked me out yet.

“Come here.” Noah holds a hand out to me. I’m not sure what to make of that since, A. we don’t hold hands and, B. the ice on his foot might be sending arctic blood to his head.

“What?”

“Come here,” he repeats, opening his eyes and pinning me with a glance that suggests he won’t take no for an answer.

I take his hand with a furrowed brow, allowing him to pull me toward the empty spot next to him. As I take a seat, he drops my hand and rests his own

on his thick thigh, flexing his fingers as he takes a deep breath. “Me getting hurt isn’t your fault.”

“Um...”

“And I don’t hate you.”

“I don’t understand. You were chasing me when you fell.”

“Right. *I* was chasing *you*. That’s on me.”

“But I basically dared you to do it.”

“And I took the dare.”

“If I hadn’t made the dare, you wouldn’t have taken it. Now look at you.” I point to his foot. “How is that not my fault?”

Noah’s blue eyes follow my gaze, looking a little sad, but not angry. “Neither of us could’ve known a little game of chase would end like this.”

“Which is why I shouldn’t have started it.” I throw my arms up, exasperated.

“Why are you so determined to think this is on you?”

I start to say ‘*because it is*’ when I realize that’s not really an answer, just a feeling. A deep-seated, inherent belief that when there’s something wrong, I’m to blame. There’s probably some daddy issues to unpack there, but let’s face it—since I enjoy a little bit of trouble, most people wouldn’t call me innocent. He shouldn’t either.

“Poor judgment, not thinking things through, acting like a kid... Take your pick—any of those are reasons to blame me.”

“You can’t single yourself out when I did all the same things.”

I roll my eyes dramatically. “Are you trying to say we’re both to blame?”

“I’m saying neither of us are. Shit happens. Do I wish I could take it back, think it through before doing something reckless?” He runs a hand through his thick blond hair, a nervous tic maybe. “Yeah, of course. I don’t know

what this is gonna mean yet, but I doubt it's good, and I'm dreading what I find out. At the same time, I was having more fun goofing off with you than I have in months. Maybe even years. How could I blame you for that?"

"There's a whole city of people out there who would easily blame me. Not to mention your teammates. And Xander. And his dad... You know his dad might actually come after me. He's never liked me." I recall the way I got booted from one of his team cookouts a few years back when I asked the guys to feel their muscles.

"No one needs to know all the details. I'll just say I tripped."

"Yeah, because people will believe the guy who balances on ice for a living would fall on dry land." I snort.

"Stranger things have happened."

I give him a critical once over, wondering not just why he's being so chill about this, but why he'd spare me from the people's wrath. My dick isn't that spectacular.

"Sure, we can go with that plan. You tripped over your own big feet doing something you probably mastered when you were one. Now what?"

"Now, I find out how bad this is."

"How?"

"I call the team doctor and ask him to make a house call." He pulls his cell from his pocket and selects the doctor from his contacts, pausing to give me a forlorn look before he makes the call. "You should probably head home, just to make sure you aren't linked to this."

He's right—the only way to stay completely out of this is to make myself scarce—but I don't jump up and make my exit the way I should. Even though I'm zero help right now, maybe even less than zero, it feels pretty shitty to leave him hurt and alone. Especially, when he looks so lost.

It goes against everything in my free-spirited, no-strings, me-first persona, but I can't abandon him. Not now.

"What if I just hide until the doctor leaves? Then if you need that beer, I can get it for you." *Omigod did he almost smile? I really am getting better at comforting him or whatever.*

"That won't work if he sees your car in the driveway." Noah's face reverts to the pitiful look he was wearing when he suggested I go home.

"I'll stash it in your garage." I lift a shoulder to my ear. "It looks big enough to be its own car lot."

"It only holds three cars."

"Do you have three cars?" I ask pointedly.

"No."

"Perfect. You have room for mine then. I'll put it away and hide in your bedroom until the coast is clear." *Coast is clear? Great. Now, I've invoked Scooby Doo. Too bad I can't ask Noah's doc for an MRI because something is clearly off with my brain.*

I hop up before my mouth can do any more damage to my totally badass image and head off to find my keys. But before I can make it too far, I hear my name.

"Tripp?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks." Noah offers me a sad smile, and it hits me that he's scared of what comes next.

*You and me both, big guy.*

## Chapter 15 – Noah

Dr. Cutter checks the images he took with the portable x-ray on his laptop while I sit helpless on the couch, trying not to panic.

Given our performance last year, and the way we've been looking so far, I know in my heart we have a shot at the cup this year. Or we did. Not to say our backup goalie can't do the job, or to sound cocky myself, but there's a reason he's the backup. He doesn't have my reflexes. Or my size. He'll give us a fighting chance, but guys like Niko will have to step up, and he's already playing at an elite level at the most elite level there is.

It's not realistic to think we'll get through an entire season without suffering some injuries among the team, but to start the season that way... To get hurt off the ice no less... I fucked up. Put the entire team and our season at risk. And now I'm going to lie about how it happened.

Tripp doesn't deserve the fallout that will come his way if people find out he was here. We were both horsing around, but I'm the only one with a contract that states I won't take unnecessary risks. And while I regret that my decision could affect the team, I don't regret those moments with Tripp. We were flirting, both of us, and it felt natural. I liked it. I want to do it again, without the chasing and the injury, of course.

I knew before I hit the ground that something was seriously wrong. The pain hadn't even come, it was just the unfamiliar motion of my ankle that tipped me off, and I was probably on the ground a full two seconds, knowing I was in trouble, before the agony hit. It's faded to a dull ache now thanks to the ice, which gives me some hope that things might be better than I first

thought. The fact that the doctor hasn't said anything for nearly fifteen minutes isn't helping my mental state though.

*God, I wish Tripp was sitting next to me.*

Knowing he's in the house helps, but if he were *here* he'd probably say something ridiculous to distract me, like, "I wonder what my dick looks like on an x-ray?" to which Dr. Cutter would probably gasp and turn beet red and maybe even have to wrestle the thing away from Tripp when he tries to take his own picture.

I know the man is an acquired taste for most, but I envy his ability to say whatever comes to mind. It's refreshing. And even though it's sometimes obnoxious, I like that he's not afraid to be himself.

"Do you need anything for the pain?" Dr. Cutter interrupts my imaginary scene as he finishes wrapping my ankle.

"No, why?"

"You're wincing, but you're also kind of smiling as if you're trying to ignore the discomfort."

Sounds about right. Tripp does have the unique ability to make people laugh and cringe at the same time. "I'm just trying to think positively," I fib.

"That's an excellent attitude to have. Thinking positively really does help with the healing process."

"Speaking of which, what sort of process am I looking at?" I hold my breath, as if a lungful of air can ward off the bad news.

"You're looking at a mild grade two sprain." When I don't exhale he elaborates. "There looks to be some partial tearing of the ligament. Primarily, in this section here." He points to a spot on the image that doesn't look all that different from the rest, at least to my eye.

"It's quite a small tear, so you aren't looking at extensive downtime. You'll

need to stay off it for seven to ten days, at which point we'll start physical therapy. You'll gradually return to weight bearing, with a full recovery in approximately four to six weeks."

"Seven to ten days? As in, do nothing for seven to ten days?"

"You can do some range of motion exercises, just don't put any weight on it," the doctor says.

Okay, not ideal, but that puts me back on the ice before Thanksgiving, which is well before All-Star week. As long as we aren't in last place going into that break, we should have plenty of season left to make the playoffs. Hopefully, that will soften the blow when I break the news to the team.

"Would you like me to talk to Coach Nydek, or do you want to do it?" Dr. Cutter asks.

Normally, I'd own my own mistakes, but in this case the good doctor will be better able to communicate what my prognosis is. "You go ahead. I'm sure he'll have questions."

Dr. Cutter nods and pulls out his phone—I'd thought he'd leave to make the call instead of doing it here—meaning I've only got a few minutes to come up with a reasonable explanation for what I was doing when I sprained my ankle. I'm still trying to work out what that could be when he passes me the phone. *Great.*

I clear my throat before putting it to my ear. "Hello?"

"What the hell, Noah?" Coach barks. "You chose a shitty time to hurt yourself l, kid. What happened?"

"I'm not sure, Coach. One minute I was fine and the next I was on the ground."

"What were you doing when you fell?"

I look at the doctor as if he might have the answer, but of course he can't

hear what Coach is saying. “I saw a coyote and you’re supposed to scare them off with lots of loud noise, so I was running outside banging on a pot and then I guess I tripped.”

“You tripped?” he shouts. “Why the hell are you chasing off a coyote?”

I can’t stop myself from wincing at the anger in his voice, but at this point I’m committed to my lame excuse. “My neighbors said it’s been lurking around, and they’re worried about their pets. I figured if I was loud enough, I could scare it off for good.”

“It’s a wild animal. If it wants to eat your neighbor’s pets it’ll do that whether you make a ruckus or not. *Jesus!* What am I supposed to tell the press? You jeopardized your season so you could save Fido?”

“Rufus. And he’s a bulldog.” That part is actually legit. My neighbors dress him up in a little doggy jersey with my number for the games.

“That’s supposed to justify your stupidity?”

“No, Coach.”

“What the hell were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t. I just reacted.” I’m familiar with how Coach looks when he’s disappointed, but until this moment he’s never worn that expression because of me. I’m both ashamed and grateful that I can’t see it.

“Of all the... You know this falls outside the team’s coverage, right?”

“I... What?”

“You got injured on your personal time. That means the team isn’t responsible for your medical, your pay while you’re out, or to keep you on the roster.”

Getting cut at my age is like the kiss of death. It’s too soon. I’m not ready to be done with hockey. Or the Bulldogs... The oatmeal I had for breakfast threatens to make an encore appearance. “You think they’ll cut me?”

“No, I think you’re too valuable for that. But I wouldn’t expect them to pay your bills.”

“I understand,” I mumble. “I’ll take care of it myself.”

“Good. Now as for what to say, I obviously can’t lie to management, but as far as the public is concerned you suffered an undisclosed injury during training, and you’re expected to make a full recovery in four to six weeks. When you come back I don’t want anyone targeting what they think might be a weakness, so until you’re mobile you will not so much as step foot outside your house. Have Dr. Cutter run your PT from home. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach.”

“I’ll notify the team. I expect daily updates until you’re cleared to come back to practice.”

“Okay.”

“Good. So help me if I find out you try to fight off another fucking coyote... Are we clear?”

“Yes. Got it.” I hand the phone back to Dr. Cutter and sit with my head bowed like a little kid who’s too ashamed to look his parents in the eye. He speaks to Coach a few more minutes—about what I can’t say since I’m too numb to pay attention—then startles me out of my stupor when he rests a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t get too discouraged. You’ll recover from this in no time.”

Pressing my lips together I give him a curt nod.

“I grabbed some crutches while you were on the phone with Coach Nydek.” He tilts his head toward the corner of the couch where I now see they’re propped. “I’ll be in touch next week to schedule your PT. We’ll go over what equipment you have here and what the therapist will need to bring. In the

meantime, keep that foot elevated, ice for twenty minutes four times a day, and take Advil for any swelling.”

Nodding again, I make a pathetic attempt to smile. “Send me the bill for today please.”

“No need to worry about that right now.” He picks up his bag and grabs the portable x-ray machine. “I’ll see myself out, so you don’t need to get up. We’ll talk soon.”

I watch until he’s out of sight, hearing the click of the front door a few seconds later. Then I collapse against the back of the couch with a shaky breath.

The dull soreness I felt while the doctor was here morphs into a throbbing discomfort, only now it’s not just my ankle but my head that aches in rhythm with my beating pulse. *That couldn’t have gone any worse.*

“Cut you?” I gasp when an angry voice pierces the silence. “They’re going to cut you?”

*Tripp. I forgot he was here.*

“It sounds like they could, but Coach doesn’t think they will.”

“He doesn’t think...? You’re like, the star of the team. They’d really let you go over a sprained ankle?” He paces back and forth, an uncharacteristic look of disgust on his face. “What kind of organization is this? Players get hurt all the time, is this how they treat you when it happens?”

“When you get injured on the ice, no. When you get injured off it...” I realize too late Tripp will do the whole blaming himself thing as those words sink in.

“Ohmigod.” He sinks onto the couch. “I cost you your spot on the team.”

“No, you didn’t. I just told you it won’t come to that.” I’m not sure why since I’m worried about being cut myself, but convincing Tripp that won’t

happen somehow makes me feel better.

“But you told the doctor to send you the bill. That doesn’t mean you’re off the team?” He props his elbows on his knees and rests his head in his hands as if the room is spinning and that will stop it.

“It means the team won’t cover my expenses for injuries I incur on my personal time.”

He looks up at me, open-mouthed “Wow. Even my insurance covers me when I’m not working and I’m just a lowly artist.”

“I’m sure my insurance will cover it, it just won’t be free like it is if I get hurt during a game or while I’m training.”

“Still sounds shitty if you ask me.” His offended look is back, which makes my heart do this strange little flutter.

“It’s a business, and I’m a commodity.”

“That’s a very Thor thing to say.”

I cock my head to the side. “It is?”

“He downplays saving people because that’s his job. You’re downplaying your value because hockey is a business. Same thing, really. Speaking of heroes... You injured yourself trying to save an imaginary dog from an imaginary coyote?” The sly sparkle is back in his eye.

“The dog isn’t imaginary. It lives next door.”

“Uh, huh. You should’ve said you were running on the treadmill and the power went out. I bet they’d have considered that ‘*training.*’” He punctuates that with air quotes.

“I’ll use that excuse next time.” I bite back a smile, my first since getting hurt.

“Next time? Are you crazy? There will be no more funny business where you could get hurt. I’m not going to be responsible for you getting cut from

the team.”

“You aren’t responsible now. We’ve been through this.”

He dismisses me with a wave of his hand. “You need a bodysuit made out of bubble wrap. That way if you fall over there’s no damage, just a cool sound. Ooh…” He looks at me with wide eyes that are a little too green with mischief. “If you wear it while we’re fucking, we could make some pretty cool music. Can’t you hear it? Pop, pop, pop, moan. Pop, pop, grunt. I’d listen to that all day long. I’d probably get fired for having a perpetual boner, or at the very least I’d make an excellent case for why I should be allowed to work from home. Do you have any recording equipment? I have editing software but not recording equipment. Why are you crying?”

“I’m not,” I say as I wipe my eyes. “I’m trying not to laugh.”

“You have the same condition I do where you laugh at inappropriate times?” His brows draw together in confusion.

“This is an inappropriate time to laugh?” I blink away the last of my tears.

“Well, I was being serious.”

I honestly can’t tell if that’s true or not, but either way I feel better than I did a few minutes ago. “Thanks for staying. It helps having you here.”

“About that.” He sighs heavily. “You’re going to need help, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t put any weight on that foot. How are you going to make those fancy frozen meals for yourself or get cleaned up or…whatever else?”

I gnaw on my lip as I turn those words over in my mind. It’s been years, well over a decade, since anyone’s had to take care of me. Sure, I have someone that cooks meals for me to reheat, but minus the use of one leg even that will be hard to manage. And showering… That’s a slip hazard right there.

“Sounds like I’m gonna have to be a bath guy for the next few weeks.”

Tripp cracks a small smile at my lame joke. “Look, as much as you want me to believe I’m not responsible for this, I know better. I’m not saying I take all the blame.” He holds up a hand to stop me from objecting. “But I share the blame. So, it’d be pretty shitty of me to leave you like this. It’d make me no better than those douche canoes you play for.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying if you need someone to stick around and help you with, whatever, I can do that. I need to run home and grab some things, but I can come back.”

“You’d do that?” There goes my heart again, only this time the flutter spreads throughout my entire torso.

“You did it for me. When you thought I might have a concussion.”

“That was one night. This would be a lot more.”

“Spend a few nights in the most luxurious home I’ve seen in years? Twist my arm a little harder.”

“I think I heard you offer to help me shower.” I rub the bridge of my nose to cover my grin.

“Add a big dick on top of it? Now you’re catching on.” Tripp licks his upper lip suggestively. “Just make sure that healthy chef of yours leaves good instructions. Even if I’m only reheating shit that doesn’t mean I can’t still screw it up.”

“Actually, I’m sort of feeling like today would be a good cheat day. Maybe we could order in.”

“I am excellent at ordering delivery.” He shoots me a playful wink and hops off the couch. “I’m gonna run home and get some stuff for a few days, and when I get back, you can tell me what you want for your cheat dinner.”

“What about dessert?” I call after him as he makes his way to the garage.

“That’s where that big dick of yours comes in,” he hollers back.

Even the pulsating burn in my ankle can’t stop the goofy grin from spreading across my face.

## Chapter 16 – Tripp

“I can’t believe you brought your video game system over.” Noah shakes his head as he watches me connect my Xbox to his TV.

“We don’t know how long I’m going to have to play nurse, which I can’t do from my house.”

“You can’t do it here either, if you’re too busy gaming.” There’s a hint of humor in his voice, almost like he’s taunting me. I’m not sure when exactly he transitioned from timid big guy to flirtatious Norse god, but lately he seems to be coming out of his sexual shell, and I am so here for it. Who doesn’t like to flirt?

“I’m an excellent multi-tasker. Besides, Betty offers you one more thing to stay busy when you’re stuck sitting on your butt.”

“Betty?”

“The Xbox.” I finish the connection and turn it on to make sure everything’s working properly.

“Do you name all inanimate objects?”

“Only the ones I can’t live without. I...” The doorbell interrupts my train of thought. “That must be the food. I’ll get it.”

I feel Noah’s eyes on me as I stride to the door, so I put an extra little sway in my hips because...*duh*. Only it’s not the delivery guy standing on the front porch. It’s Niko and Xander, both of whom wear matching expressions of WTF when they see me. *Busted*. It’d be comical if it didn’t also mean I’m about to get my ass chewed.

“I don’t even want to know.” Xander shakes his head.

“Are you sure? It’s a really good story.” Not that I plan to tell him any of it, I’m just being honest. I mean, no one—least of all me—could’ve predicted that *I’d* be responsible for the well-being of another person. That’s quality entertainment right there.

“I want to know,” Niko says.

“Trust me, you don’t. Not unless you want a mental picture of what these two have been getting up to.” Xander shudders. *Rude.*

“Yeah, maybe I don’t then. Is Noah in there?” Niko jerks his head toward the living room, and I step aside so he can enter.

“Your dad called you?” I ask Xander when we’re alone.

“He did. Told us Noah was laid up and to come check on him. Luca and Justus should be here any minute too. He left your name out of the conversation, though.”

“I would hope so since he doesn’t know I’m here.”

“Why are you here exactly? Spare me the salacious details, just the facts.”

*Boring.* “Remember how I said Noah felt guilty about me hitting my head?” When Xander nods I continue. “I left out the part where he stayed at my place to make sure I was okay. I’m returning the favor.”

“You told me, and I quote, my cock hasn’t met his ass or vice versa.” Xander gives me a stern once-over and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“And that was true. *Then.*”

His eyes fall shut as he takes a deep breath, I assume to calm himself although based on the color in his cheeks I don’t think it’s working. “And now?”

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

“You literally do. All the time.”

“Yes, but I haven’t kissed him so there’s nothing to tell.”

“You’ve done something else though.” Xander arches a knowing brow, daring me to deny it.

“Is that a problem?”

“It is when the guy you’re playing with doesn’t play for our team.”

“In my defense, I’m not the first guy to show him my dick.”

Xander chuffs and rolls his eyes. “Locker rooms don’t count.”

“I never said it was in a locker room.”

“You’re telling me he’d already been with men before you started messing with him?”

“Not *with* men, but not a good little straight boy either.”

“What does that even mean?” Xander’s brows draw together.

“That’s up to Noah to share, if he wants. Just know I didn’t corrupt the Norse god. Ooh, dinner’s here. And more company.” I step around Xander to pay the delivery guy and take the pizzas we ordered as Luca and Justus step onto the porch, then strut back inside like my best friend didn’t just assume the worst of me. Even if I sort of deserve it. “Will you guys be joining us?” I ask the group as I make my way to the kitchen.

“Pizza?” Luca asks as he follows me inside. “Oh shit, is your season over?” He turns to Noah with a panicked expression.

“I was just telling Niko it’s not that bad,” Noah says.

“Um, excuse me, but how do we make the leap from pizza to season ending?” I set the boxes on the counter and start opening cupboards, looking for plates.

“Noah’s on a strict diet during the season.” Justus shrugs. “Pizza isn’t on it.”

“I figured a shit day might as well be a cheat day too,” Noah says. “But I’ll be back on the diet tomorrow.”

“Is this one of those ‘you have to eat bland food because you’re old’ things?” I hand Noah a plate with three slices, ignoring how way too many sets of eyes are watching our exchange.

“It’s one of those ‘a good diet ensures I can play a long time’ things,” he answers.

“Oh right. I see the difference.” I manage to keep a straight face even though I snort. “You all better grab some or there will be leftovers and I can’t be held responsible if this guy makes it two cheat days in a row.” I plop down next to Noah and take an oversized bite so I can give my mouth something to do other than talk, which I know they’re all expecting. Normally, I would, but in this case, I need to follow Noah’s lead, and since I don’t know what he wants to share during circle time, I plan to keep my mouth too full to put my foot in it.

One by one, the guys help themselves to a slice and join us on the couch, listening intently as Noah explains his prognosis, and looking slightly less pale when he assures them the timeframe for his return isn’t just getting back in goal, but being one hundred percent.

“Will you be at practice to help get Gauthier ready?” Niko asks.

I assume that’s the backup goalie.

“Coach wants me to lay low until I’m not visibly limping so no one can speculate what my injury is,” Noah says.

“Why?” Justus looks at his teammates in turn, clearly confused.

“Some guys would do anything for an advantage, including targeting someone’s weakness,” Luca says between bites. “Blaise on the Rockets is one of them, and we play them in a few weeks.”

“Seriously? That’s...” Justus trails off with a horrified expression.

“Um, how are you even a hockey player?” I ask him.

“What?”

“You seem genuinely shocked that there might be competitive assholes on the ice with you. How do you get to this level and not realize this is a brutal sport?” I clarify.

“I mean, you can be brutal but still play a clean game.” Justus’s little cheeks flush pink. *For real, how is he a pro?*

“Not everyone has your skill.” Luca bumps him with an elbow, and I swear he gets even redder.

“Gauthier is totally capable.” Noah gets us all back on track. “He doesn’t have my reflexes, but he has good instincts. He plays smart. He’ll obviously lean on you guys more than I do since he doesn’t get as much playing time, but he’ll keep us in contention, and I’ll be back with more than half the season left.”

“You won’t be traveling with the team?” Luca’s voice is steady, but the way his eyes dart to Noah’s is anything but.

So he's the one Noah was talking about...

“Sorry.” Noah looks conflicted as he shakes his head. “We’ll figure something out.”

*Figure something out? Does that mean... Whoa, did I just flare my nostrils?*

“Yeah. Okay.” Luca offers a weak smile.

Noah takes a deep breath and taps my leg, pointing to his crutches. “I need to use the bathroom.”

I grab his oversize walking sticks and offer him a hand to pull him off the couch, making sure he’s steady before stepping out of his way. Then, out of the goodness of my heart with no ulterior motive whatsoever I ask, “Need me to hold your dick for you while you piss?”

Noah chuckles and shakes his head. “I think I’ve got it.”

“Always trying to get in his pants,” Niko laughs, completely oblivious to Xander’s wary gaze.

“I mean he has to take it out and have steady aim all while balancing on one leg. It’s a hazard if you ask me. Holding his dick is a small sacrifice to make sure he heals quickly.”

Niko rolls his eyes. “That sounds like something my sister would say.”

“I told you we’re two halves of a whole.” I point at Xander as I sit back down. “When is she coming back? I need a good night of debauchery.”

“I thought you were gay?” Justus looks at me with wide eyes.

“Not that kind of debauchery. The getting drunk and playing silly games kind. Maybe we’ll do Truth or Dare this time.”

“No one is allowed to fuck my sister,” Niko warns.

“Why would anyone do that?” Justus still looks comically aghast.

“The last time she was here we played kiss, marry, fuck. It’s usually kiss, marry, kill, but we didn’t like the idea of un-aliving anyone, so we amended the rules. Anna said she’d fuck Luca,” I explain.

“And you can’t dare her to do it.” Niko points a finger at me.

“But that’s a guaranteed win,” I protest.

“How do you figure?” Luca asks.

“Easy. You’d never sleep with your teammate’s sister behind his back.”

“You don’t know me that well.” Luca smirks.

“You’d sleep with Anna?” Niko glares at him.

“Of course not.” Luca holds his hands up like he’s innocent. “I’m just saying Tripp shouldn’t bank on other people being honorable to secure his win.”

“Who’s winning what?” Noah crutches back into the room.

“I’m winning Truth or Dare. Did you hit the target?” I smile sweetly up at

him.

“I didn’t get to pick if I wanted truth or dare,” he replies, and the fact that he jumped right into my imaginary game without missing a beat does unspeakable things to my resolve to stay in the fuck buddy zone.

*Bad Tripp! Everyone’s playing your silly game, no need to get feelings about Noah doing it.*

“It’s more of a hypothetical game.” I shake my head to clear it.

“Hypothetically speaking then, I pick truth. I think dare would be a bad idea under the circumstances.” Noah half sits, half falls onto the couch, setting his crutches on the floor.

“Are you really sure about Gauthier?” Niko asks.

“Promise to go back on your game diet tomorrow?” Justus talks over him.

“Are you and Tripp fucking?” *Well, that escalated quickly. I didn’t realize you were paying attention, Luca.*

The questions are asked on top of each other so it’s sort of hard to pick them out, but apparently Noah got the gist. “Yes, to all,” he says. And the room goes quiet.

“You’re... bi?” I’ve never seen Luca look so off-kilter. I suppose learning the guy you’ve jerked off in front of might not have been as impartial to the view as you first thought could be jarring. Especially, if you don’t also know that he really was impartial.

“I don’t know what I am.” Noah lifts a nonchalant shoulder.

“Hello?” Niko points to himself. “I could’ve helped with that.”

Xander slaps his chest with the back of his wrist. “Excuse me?”

“Not like that.” Niko grabs Xander’s hand and threads their fingers together. “I mean you could’ve talked to me,” he tells Noah.

“I appreciate that, but I think this is something I need to work through on

my own,” Noah says.

“Fair enough. Is this something you want to stay in this room?” Niko’s gaze darts between the two of us.

“Don’t look at me. This is his journey of self-discovery.” I jerk my thumb toward Noah. “I’m just the lucky guy who gets to introduce him to the dark side.”

Niko stifles a chuckle—he’s such a sci-fi nerd, I knew my Star Wars reference would get him—but for some reason I have trouble finding the humor in my own joke, which is so wrong since it *should* be funny.

“Sorry,” Noah says sheepishly. “I should’ve asked if you were okay with telling them before I said anything.”

“I don’t care if they know you like my dick.” I wink.

“Do you care if other people know?” Noah asks.

“Hell no. It’s good for my reputation.”

“Tripp,” Xander groans.

“Kidding.” I hold up my hands innocently and stick my tongue out at him before turning to Noah. “I’m an open book, big guy. You can say whatever you want about us, but maybe keep it to this room until you know what you want to tell people about yourself and your personal life.”

“You could always do what Niko did and say nothing at all,” Justus says. “Just live your life and not answer any questions that don’t pertain to hockey.”

“Maybe,” Noah says. “Either way, I think I’d like to understand myself better before I make any decisions.”

“So, uh. Tripp is going to help you while you’re laid up?” Luca breaks his silence for the first time since asking *the question*.

“Yes.”

“No offense, but shouldn’t you have...someone else? Like one of the team doctors or something?” Luca ducks his head, so he doesn’t have to meet my eyes.

“Uh, offense taken. I’m perfectly capable of ordering take out. You’re eating the evidence right now.” I point out.

“He’s got that special diet though.” Justus bites his lip like he’s unsure if he should’ve spoken up.

“And he’s got a chef to make those meals for him, which I can heat up just as well as anyone.” Why I’m defending my caretaking abilities when they’re abysmal at best I have no idea, but I don’t particularly like the thought of anyone else doing it. *Time for that intervention, Xander. I know you’re skeptical, call me out, stop me before I completely lose my sanity.*

“It’s up to Noah who he wants to help him,” Niko says. “And team doctors travel with the team. Tripp doesn’t, so it makes sense to have someone not associated with the team to help out.”

“Not a resounding yes but I’ll take it.” I give Niko a nod of thanks even as I ask myself why I care. “Besides, he can’t get the same healing with the doctors he can get from me.”

“Sexual healing isn’t a thing.” Xander shakes his head.

“Of course, it is. There’s even a song about it.”

“Yeah dude, I don’t think that’s what the song is about,” Luca agrees with Xander.

“Even if it isn’t, who wouldn’t appreciate a toe-curling orgasm when they’re otherwise unable to move?”

“Good point,” Niko says, rubbing his chest when Xander smacks him again. “What? If I couldn’t skate, sex would keep my morale up.”

“Morale is important when you’re injured.” Justus looks around the room

bashfully before adding, “ACL tear three years ago.”

“And sex kept you going?” I ask.

“I didn’t really have anyone for that, but I can’t see it being a bad thing.” He ducks his head to rub the back of his neck.

“Unless it puts more strain on the injury,” Luca snorts.

I don’t know whether he’s out of sorts about the fact his little pre-game ritual is being threatened, or the fact that *I’m* the one Noah is playing nurse with. Either way, while I’d love to poke that bear, it wouldn’t benefit the big guy, so I’ll be good.

“All kidding aside, the reason I’m here right now is to help Noah. If he wants that to include sex, I’m game as long as we’re careful of his ankle. If all he wants is someone to bring him food and listen to him rant about how much he’d rather be on the ice, I’m game for that too. He gets to decide how I can help him best. Besides, I can’t gloat about sleeping with a hockey player if he’s not actually playing hockey, so…” *Okay so I put my own spin on it. I was still good.*

“Makes sense,” Justus says softly as Luca nods—almost imperceptibly but I’m counting it.

“We should probably all head out. We’ve gotta get up early to catch our flight for the next game.” Niko tugs Xander off the couch with him as he stands, Luca and Justus following suit.

Since Noah can’t see them out, I do it, trailing them all to the door and promising to let them know how their goalie is doing while they’re on the road. I’m about to close the door when Xander pauses and turns back to face me.

“I’m right down the street if you need anything.” The fact that he didn’t issue another warning, but rather offered to help, makes me a little nervous.

Does that mean he thinks I can actually take care of the big guy, or that he doesn't object to me sleeping with him? Both would be a reversal of his initial impressions, which means he saw something just now to make him change his mind. I'm not sure I want to know what that is, so I give him a curt nod in response and shut the door.

## Chapter 17 – Noah

“I really am sorry for blurting that out. About us,” I tell Tripp as he comes back from showing everyone out.

He waves me off and starts clearing the plates the guys left behind. “And I really don’t care if they know you want my dick. I’ve made no secret about wanting yours.”

“That doesn’t make it okay for me to tell them without your permission.”

“I’m already out, big guy, so it’s not like you broke some sort of sacred trust. Besides.” He sets the plates in the kitchen and comes back to sit on the opposite end of the couch, leaning one arm across the back and spreading his legs wide. “I have no shame when it comes to sex. Tell them your cock is my favorite meal, that you like to top, show them one of my dick pics, I literally don’t care.”

“You have dick pics?”

“Spectacular, remember.” He waggles his eyebrows.

“I don’t have any. And if I did, I wouldn’t share them.” Damn, I wish my voice didn’t sound so small, but I’m having a hard time reconciling the fact he wouldn’t care if I showed people such an intimate picture of him.

“You wouldn’t share your dick pics with me?” he pouts.

“I meant I don’t have any pictures of you.” I shake my head back and forth. “And like I said, if I did, I wouldn’t share them.”

“Well, I guess bragging about your fuck buddy’s incredible cock loses some luster when your only gay friend is already spoken for.”

“No, I mean if I had any pictures, they’d be just for me. I wouldn’t want anyone else to see you the way I get to.” Though Tripp doesn’t move an inch, his whole body seems to tense up, and I can tell I’ve said too much. “You know, since you said you wouldn’t sleep around while we’re... I figure that includes dick pics. No sharing.”

“Uh, huh.” His head bobs once, slowly. “Is Luca freaking out because you won’t be around to play voyeur?”

I recognize his attempt to change the subject, but I figure since he’s still here after my slip up I’ll play along.

“You caught that, huh?”

“Kind of hard not to,” I admit.

“Yeah, he probably is.”

“That whole thing seems like a weird superstition, and that’s coming from me.” Tripp points to his chest. “How does that even become a pregame ritual?”

“I never asked. When he first told me about it, he said it was something he’d been doing for years, and that’s all I needed to know. You don’t mess with a guy’s superstition or ask for details, you just accept it.”

“What’s yours?” Curious green eyes meet mine.

“I just told you, you don’t ask for details.” I bite back a grin.

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.” He grins back. “So, why didn’t you ask Niko for advice about...things?” He swivels his wrist to finish the thought. “Is it because he’s so young?”

“He may be young in age but mentally he’s so much more mature than most of our teammates, and it’s clear he’s pretty comfortable with who he is. He would’ve been a good person to talk to if I knew what questions to ask.

Although, asking my rookie teammate to help me figure out my sexuality probably wouldn't have made the best impression."

"Because you're the captain?"

"And one of the older guys on the team. I'm supposed to have my shit figured out by this point in life. That's what the new guys expect."

"I know guys who didn't figure their shit out until their mid-forties." Tripp snorts. "One of them raised two kids before he sorted himself. And it's not just sexuality either. Some people don't find their calling until later."

"I hear you." I play with the hem of my shorts while I get my thoughts in order. "The thing is, it's sort of my job to take care of the new guys. Show them the ropes and make them comfortable and stuff. The coaches rely on me for that. And everyone looks to me as the example of what to do. How to train and what to eat and how to behave. How can I be anyone's good example when I can't even answer a basic question about who I am? That's why I couldn't ask Niko, or any of them, to help me."

"You know when I compare you to Thor that's mostly an appearance thing, right? I'm not actually calling you a god."

"I... What?"

"Gods are perfect. People aren't. Flaws are what make us interesting. Not that having questions about yourself is a flaw, but if you were perfect, all your little hero worshippers would be suffering crippling anxiety from trying to live up to your greatness. Being less than perfect but still trying to set a good example gives them something achievable to work toward."

When I do little more than let my jaw hang open Tripp points to his hair. "Dye job, not a state of mind. Oh wait." He frowns. "I forgot it's not blond anymore."

I can't help but smile at his defeated expression as he realizes his punchline

missed the mark. “I’m not speechless because you said something insightful.”

“Really?” He arches a skeptical brow.

“No. I’m speechless because I just now realized I’ve spent years setting the wrong example. And because that’s the most words I’ve heard you string together without saying dick.” I bite the corner of my lip to temper my grin, hoping that gesture will lighten things up since I know serious Tripp is prone to getting skittish, and I don’t want him to go anywhere.

He grabs a throw pillow and hucks it at me. “Dick.”

“Uh, you ruined it.”

“Not possible. Everything is so much better when dicks are involved.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

He drops to the floor and crawls between my legs, careful not to nudge the one propped on the coffee table, smiling up at me with wicked intent as he reaches for the waistband of my shorts. “Dessert.”

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“Watch the fast break. Come out of the crease, not too far. He’s gonna fake right. He’s gonna fake right. Nice stop.” I punch the air.

We’re tied in the last period of the first game I’m missing—everyone is stepping up to help give Gauthier the best chance of success—and while he’s let one get past him, he’s holding his own. It helps that our forward line is one of the best in the league, keeping the pressure on the other end of the rink. It’s a small comfort under the circumstances, especially since I’m not on the bench with them.

I get why coach wants me to lay low—speculation about my injury is just that—whereas confirmation could put a target on what people perceive as my weak side. But the inability to talk to Gauthier during the game puts us at a disadvantage. Even though it’s still early in the season, losses can add up.

And though I meant what I said about Gauthier being capable, if we end up falling behind that will be on me.

“Ice.” Tripp hovers over me with the pack, and I reluctantly lift my ankle off the cushion on the coffee table so he can wrap the cold pack around it. It’s the fourth time he’s issued this order today, and while I want to appreciate it, I find myself being bothered.

“I thought you said you were a horrible caregiver?”

He flicks his head, clearing the emerald strands of hair from his eyes in a way that’s both casual and sexy as he reaches for his phone. “Turns out it’s not so hard when you program reminders in the calendar.”

“You actually put reminders in there to take care of me?”

“Seemed like the best way to make sure I didn’t fuck up.” He taps away at the screen and sets his phone by my foot so I can see the numbers tick down before joining me on the couch. “Twenty minutes.”

I grunt, not because the ice is cold, but because everything feels wrong. Being here while my team is gone. Being confined to the couch. Being taken care of. I guess if anyone has to do it, I’m glad it’s Tripp, because he’s got a way of putting me at ease when I’m mentally or emotionally uncomfortable. But right now, even though he’s going out of his way to help me, I’m finding it hard to feel grateful. Or calm.

“He’s going around back. He’s shooting. Watch the ricochet.”

“You know he can’t hear you, right?” Tripp says as Gauthier clears the puck.

I lift my shoulder, keeping my eyes glued to the TV as Niko takes the puck across center ice, passing it to Justus, who skates behind the net and fires off a rapid pass to Luca. The tiny opening Luca had closes as soon as the puck

hits his stick, so he passes it off and skates around two defensemen, trying to put himself in position to receive another pass and take a clean shot.

One of the defenders gets a lucky break—the puck hits his skate so the pass to Luca goes off course—rocketing back towards our goal. Bodies scramble to chase it down, and unfortunately the two closest ones belong to the forwards on the opposing team. They pass it back and forth as they drive toward Gauthier, leaving him in a situation where he can't challenge one without giving the other what amounts to a free shot. All he can do is lurk in the goal and hope his reflexes are fast enough to stop the shot that eventually comes.

They aren't.

Lights flash above the goal as the puck hits the back of the net, and I try to talk him down from hundreds of miles away. “Shake it off. You couldn't have stopped it anyway.”

“Why not?” Tripp asks. “The last time he moved out of the circle thingy and blocked the shot. Why didn't he do it again?”

I take the ice pack off and toss it on the floor with ten minutes left on the timer. “Last time was a one-on-one. This time if he came out of the circle to take on the guy with the puck, he'd be leaving the other guy wide open. That's a guaranteed goal. By staying close to the net, he had a fifty-fifty chance of being in the right spot to stop whoever ultimately took the shot.”

“That's not what the TV's saying.”

I turn the volume up so I can hear the commentators. “You're right John. Two on one is hard to defend, but if Gauthier had drifted slightly left to take on Dubois, he could've blocked the pass to Saunders, which would've bought time for his defense to get back in position. Tremblay would've made that play.”

“Blowhards,” I mumble under my breath. “Neither of those two played goalie. They have no idea what they’re talking about. Just stirring up shit.”

“The Bulldogs could really be in a tight spot without Tremblay,” the commentator says. “We still don’t know what’s keeping him off the ice, and if the team falls too far out of the lead before his return, they won’t make the playoffs.”

I grab the remote and hit the mute button, tossing it on the table in disgust and reaching for my phone.

“What are you doing?” Tripp asks.

“Texting the guys not to let Gauthier listen to any of the post-game talk. It’s all bullshit, and it could really mess with his game if he takes it to heart.”

“What’s bullshit? The part about Gauthier or the part about you?”

“All of it. Gauthier’s playing well, and I’m not gonna be out that long. These guys are talking just to talk. None of it’s accurate.”

“So, you couldn’t have stopped that shot like that guy said?”

“If I did it would’ve been luck. I wouldn’t have played it any different than Gauthier did, that’s for sure. I wish I could tell him that in person.” I sigh and collapse into the cushions behind me. *One more week. One more week before I can start rehab and get off this damn couch.* I bolt up and reach for my crutches.

“Where are you going?” Tripp asks.

“I don’t know.” I push myself off the couch and crutch toward the kitchen.

“Are you always this jittery, or only when you’re supposed to be sitting still?” His voice is close enough that I assume he’s following me.

“Asks the guy who literally bounces up and down while he’s playing video games,” I chuff.

“You were holding my joystick, so...”

“That’s...” I shake my head back and forth. “Can’t you ever be serious?”

“When the situation calls for it.”

“You don’t think this is a serious situation?”

“What I think is you’re so used to playing the role of Mr. Perfect that you haven’t let yourself get pissed about your ankle, and you’re starting to buckle under all this pressure of pretending you’re fine.”

“I...what?” My chest heaves as I try to keep myself from shouting.

“You’ve never let yourself feel angry or sad or guilty about getting hurt, which I’m guessing is why you can’t sit still and have been prickly all day. This shit sucks. Get angry.”

“I already told you this isn’t your fault.”

“And I didn’t say to get angry at me, just to *get angry*.”

My nostrils flare as I take a deep breath, preparing to defend myself. Only I can’t, because every bit of what he said is true. I am trying to stay in control, and I don’t know how to handle the fact that I’m not. My skin is crawling due to the overabundance of restless energy, anger and guilt, none of which Tripp deserves to bear the brunt of. That’s hard to remember when he’s smirking at me though, daring me to take his bait.

“Fuck!” I shout.

“There you go.” Tripp winks.

“There I go?” My volume is still abnormally high, but I’m no longer shouting. “There you go, being a brat again.”

“You seem to like it.”

“What?” I seethe.

“You’re reacting. Showing some emotion. That’s good.”

“How would you know? Your only emotion is not giving a shit.”

The wince is so slight I’m not even sure it’s real, though before I can regret

my words, he pastes a blank look on his face. “We aren’t talking about me.”

“We could be, Mr. I don’t do relationships.”

“Yeah, but we’re not. Right now, this is about you, and how it’s okay for you to not be perfect and in control all the time.

“You want me to lose control?” My hands are gripping the crutches so hard my knuckles are white.

“If that’s what’ll get your head right.”

“Don’t bait me.”

“Or what? You’ll throw something. Punch a wall. Fuck me.” He licks his lip suggestively.

“Typical. Always thinking about dicks,” I mutter, shaking my head.

“Have you ever hate-fucked anyone?”

That’s not the response I’m expecting. “What? Why the hell would I do that? Those two things don’t really go together.”

“They do when you need an outlet, and you have a fuck buddy who likes it rough.”

“I don’t need a fuck buddy right now! I need to be on the ice, with my team.”

“But you can’t.” Tripp steps so close our chests are practically touching. “And that’s driving you mad so stop trying to pretend it doesn't piss you off.”

“Of course, it pisses me off.” The damn breaks as I let go of my crutch to grab him by the back of the neck. “I’m here while my team is gone, they’re losing because of me, and you...” The words die on my tongue as I realize our faces are so close, we’re breathing each other’s air.

Time seems to stand still as our gazes lock, Tripp’s green eyes glinting in triumph. Then our chests brush together on a precarious inhale, and the room around us fades away as every lingering noise is drowned out by our heavy

exhales. Trapped in this little bubble, fear and desire ripple through me, fighting for dominance. There's a split second where fear almost wins, where I nearly reign in my aggression and pretend I'm not coiled so tight I'm about to erupt.

I should step away... We have an unspoken rule to never kiss. Yet, as I stand here, like I've been placed under some sort of spell, I can't bring myself to move. Hell, I forget how to blink, and the only understandable thought in my mind is how badly I want to kiss him—to devour him.

Closing the distance between us, I smash my mouth against his, moaning when our tongues meet, and I realize he's not fighting me. He's matching me in desperation and intensity, stealing my breath as he gives me his own.

Whether this is part of his challenge to get me to let loose or because he wants it as badly as I do, I don't know. Don't care. I just know that the rough brush of our lips, the scrape of stubble along my jaw, is the most intoxicating thing I've ever felt.

I want to claim him, to slam him against the wall and wrap his legs around my waist. The urge to make him mine is consuming, but I'm fully willing to give myself over to him in return. I let my other crutch fall to the floor and give him my weight, so we topple onto the couch.

Tripp doesn't miss a beat as I fall on top of him, lips and teeth and tongues tangling in a frenzy of lust. He bites my bottom lip just hard enough to sting before licking away the burn and delving inside my mouth, groaning as his hips rut against mine.

Hands rake through my hair, down my back, groping my ass. Mine are just as eager, clutching at Tripp's arms, chest, and head, trapping his mouth against mine and swallowing the sounds he makes.

I've kissed people before—women—and while it was often soft and gentle,

there were times it became hurried and needy. But it was never passionate. It never consumed me or flooded my senses. It never threatened to drown out the world until the only sensation left was the feel of my partner's lips.

My chest aches with want. My heart beats like it does when the seconds tick down on the clock and I'm desperately trying to hang on for the win. That's never happened with another person—only the game. The game I'm not playing right now.

The anger that had started to dissipate comes roaring back, mixing with the adrenaline and desire. It makes me crave Tripp with an almost feral need.

Somewhere, in the deepest recesses of my mind, a voice tells me to slow down. That I'm too unhinged. Then Tripp slides his hands under my shirt and rakes his nails down my back. "I need you. Now."

We're a tangle of limbs as we race to shed our clothes, miraculously staying on the couch as we contort ourselves to get naked. Then Tripp leans over the arm, sticking his ass toward me, and hands me a small packet of lube.

I lean forward and growl into his ear. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Boy Scout motto. Always be prepared." He rocks back and forth, trying to rub his crease along my length.

"You were a boy scout?"

"Fuck no, but you never know when you might get the chance to play with a fat cock."

I don't know if it's the obnoxious words or the visual of my dick resting between his cheeks. Either way, the thought of anyone but me seeing him like this suddenly has me seeing red, and before my mind can catch up my palm cracks down on his ass.

"Oh fuck," he moans, rocking backward. "I didn't know you had it in you, big guy, but I like it. Again. With your cock in me."

His command has precum practically dripping from my slit. *Have I ever been this hard before?* I rush to get myself nice and slick and line up to his hole.

“Don’t be gentle.” Tripp looks at me over his shoulder, biting the lip that’s still puffy from my kisses.

I punch forward as I grip his hip and pull him toward me, nearly losing it when my intrusion makes his eyes flutter closed in bliss. *God, he’s beautiful.* Then I smack him again.

Tripp’s mouth falls open on a guttural moan as his hole clenches around me, gripping me so tight I have to choke off the air in my lungs to keep my body from tipping over the edge. *Holy...* I smack him again as I thrust my hips forward, and it happens once more, only this time my lungs give out, and I let out an animalistic groan of my own.

Just as before, all my restraint seems to evaporate, and I give in to my baser urges. My hips piston forward relentlessly as I latch onto Tripp’s waist for support, pulling his body over my cock as I drive it deep.

The pleasure is so intense my vision blurs, the slip and slide of our joined bodies engulfing me in a carnal nirvana unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. It’s as if every nerve in my body has gone on vacation, except for the ones cocooned inside Tripp’s body, and they’re on high alert, crackling and zinging over and over again like fireworks as they build toward the finale.

Grunting, I push toward the precipice, the feel of Tripp’s cock slapping my leg driving me forward. Then a sharp tug on my balls turns that grunt to a needy whine. I gasp as I realize he’s squeezing both our sacs in his palm.

“Not yet, big guy. I can still hear the guilty voices in your head. No coming til they’re gone,” he commands.

Planting my right foot on the ground for leverage, I thrust as hard and fast as my body will allow, the smack of skin on skin drowning out the post-game coverage on the TV. The speculation about me, and the team, and our future. All the noise that threatened to send me careening into an abyss of anger and self-pity, before Tripp gave me his body as a lifeline.

*Jesus. How does he understand me so well? How does he know what I need before I do? How does he make me feel whole?*

“Harder.” Tripp's order has me realizing my pace has started to slow. “Get out of your head and fuck me.”

With renewed focus I drive into Tripp's slick hole, losing myself to the friction and pressure that surrounds me as I tunnel into him.

“That's it, big guy. Give me all of you. Everything.” He lets go of our balls and grips his cock with a throaty groan, and I find a rhythm that borders on frantic, pounding into him relentlessly as my mind finally quiets, allowing my body full control.

My abs burn, my thighs twitch, and my cock feels like it's chafing despite the slickness surrounding it. And then his hole clamps down like a pressure cooker, squeezing me to the point of pain. My toes curl and cramp, my balls draw up tight, and I unload like a damn firehose, filling him so fast my cum seeps out and slides down our thighs.

The room goes dark as my release fades, my body too spent to hold my eyelids open, and I collapse against Tripp's back. My weight causes his arms to give out, and as we fall against the cushions. Our sweaty skin is just slippery enough that my torso slides off his, coming to rest between his warm body and the back of the couch, though our legs are still tangled.

“I hope you pay your cleaning lady well because I painted my entire load on your sofa,” Tripp mumbles beside me.

“I’ll just flip the cushion.”

“And leave my jizz there as a memento? First a spanking and now this? Kinky.”

“I didn’t spank you to be kinky. You were talking about always being ready to fuck, but you don’t need to carry hookup supplies around when we’re in *my* house.”

Tripp shifts to lay on his side so he can face me, eyebrow arched impishly. “Hate sex doesn’t go so well if you have to say, *‘please hold while I try to remember where I put the lube.’*”

“Was that hate sex?” I set my hand on his hip, focusing on the way my fingers glide over his skin instead of the look I might see in his eyes.

“What did it feel like?”

“Salvation.”

He snort-laughes. “I know I’m a good fuck, but you’re giving me too much credit.”

“I’m serious.” I swallow thickly, risking a quick glance at his face before I study my hand again. “I was about to spiral, and you stopped it. That doesn’t feel like hate.”

“It’s not. But hate fucking has a better ring to it than get it out of your system fucking,” he says airily.

“Why would you let me do that to you?”

“You needed it.” I feel him shrug. “And in case you didn’t notice, I happen to *really* like it.”

“I was pretty rough. I’m not even sure I was aware of what I was doing half the time. I could’ve hurt you.” My fingers flex and release on his hip as if to punctuate my words.

“You let go of your control, just like I asked you to. Do you feel better?”

“Yes and no.” I swallow again. “I’m not as angry, but I’m a little confused.”

“About what?”

“I’ve never been that way off the ice.”

“What way?”

“Aggressive. Unhinged.”

“I believe you’re saying *hot as fuck* wrong.” Tripp trails a finger between my pecs, making me shiver.

“What?” I half-scoff, half-chuckle.

“I mean, you’re always hot, but wanting me so bad you literally can’t control yourself...” His finger ghosts over my nipple. “Damn.”

“Your ego knows no bounds.” I grab his hand, holding it next to my chest.

“What can I say, I’m blessed.” He shifts again so he’s laying on his back, his hand falling out of my grip, while I’m still on my side, facing him.

“I kissed you.” I press, resting my hand on his lean stomach.

“True.”

“And you kissed me back.”

“Also, true.”

“Why?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Felt right at the time I guess.”

I want to ask if that means we’re more than fuck buddies, but I have a feeling this conversation is already testing his limits, and as long as he’s not saying we shouldn’t do that again I won’t push it.

“I thought the same thing. We should probably clean up.”

“You mean we should see if I really did ruin your couch?” He waggles his eyebrows.

“I don’t give a shit about the couch. Help me up. I dropped my crutches

when I tackled you.”

Tripp hunts down my crutches and holds them steady as I struggle to stand up, frowning slightly as I make my way out toward my bedroom.

“That’s something you don’t see every day,” he mutters.

“What?”

“A naked man hobbling around on crutches. I wouldn’t expect it to be hot but... It makes the muscles in your back ripple all sexy like, and your ass jiggles when you plant your foot.”

“Jiggles?” I huff, rolling my eyes. “I’m already laid up, don’t take the rest of my dignity by saying jiggles.”

“It’s a compliment.”

“It doesn’t feel like one. Walk ahead of me. Go start the shower.”

Tripp pinches my ass and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Brat.” I grumble as I watch his sexy ass strut down the hall, a goofy grin plastered on my face.

## Chapter 18 – Tripp

“What?” Noah asks hesitantly when he catches me watching him from the corner of my eye.

“Nothing.” I glance back at the TV, pretending I’ve been watching it since he plopped down next to me.

“You know how you chew the corner of your lip when you’re dying to say something people might find offensive and you’re wondering if the backlash will be worth it?”

“No.” *Note to self, don’t chew on my lip when I’m debating whether to open my mouth.* “I don’t ever wonder if the backlash is worth it. I don’t care.”

“Depends on how offensive you’re about to get. And toward who. So, out with it.”

“Out with what?” I ask innocently, which Noah answers with a heavy sigh. “Fine. I was just thinking that for a hockey god who’s got possibly the best body I’ve ever had the pleasure of climbing, you’re looking awfully winded after walking ten yards.”

“Crutches are exhausting.”

“You’re only using one. You’re practically walking.”

“I’m mostly trying not to fall.”

“Still, shouldn’t you have more...stamina?”

I totally didn’t mean for that word choice to be so charged, but I can’t say I don’t love the wave of lust that glazes his eyes.

“Noah Tremblay, get your head out of the gutter.”

“You dragged me down there.” His bashful smile damn near makes me crack one of my own. *This man is too gorgeous for his own good.*

“That’s getting easier and easier to do. But as much as I like how your mind immediately conjured an image of me bouncing on your cock, I’m genuinely worried. You look worn out.”

Noah’s smile fades to a strained grin. “The swelling is just... It makes my foot feel tight, like it doesn’t fit in my skin. And that pain makes walking a lot harder than it looks.”

Cocking my head to the side, I study the ankle he has propped on the coffee table. “I guess it does still look pretty puffy. Can they juice it?”

“Juice it?” He wrinkles his nose in disgust.

“Don’t give me that look. I didn’t come up with the term. Willy Wonka did.”

“Willy Wonka?”

“You know, the candy guy in that movie? When that girl turns into a giant blueberry they take her to the juicing room, I think. We should take you to get juiced.”

He laughs, looking at me like I’m both absurd and amusing. “The only way to get swelling down is time. Although, I suppose a massage wouldn’t hurt.”

“A massage?” Now it’s my turn to wrinkle my nose. “You want a foot massage?”

“I mean, if you’re offering—”

“I’m not. Nope. Not offering that.”

“You don’t like giving massages?”

“I don’t like touching feet.” I shudder at the thought.

“Let me get this straight, you’d happily stick a finger up my ass but not touch my feet?” The gleam in his eye says he’s baiting me, but I’m too

grossed out to take it. There's one body part I don't love on anybody, and I don't plan to start now.

"You haven't let me put my finger in your ass yet, but yes. I'd take that over touching your feet."

"What about my swelling?" He adopts this wounded puppy look that's so fucking cute words spill out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"Will that extra fluid go to your dick and make it supersized?"

"No." His lips split into a wide grin as he laughs at my pout.

"Would you let me put my finger in your ass?" *I can't believe I'm playing along with this, but he really does have the nicest, roundest, most beautifully jiggly butt and I desperately want a piece of it.*

"Maybe."

"Fine," I huff. "Give me your foot."

A heavy weight finds its way to my lap, and with my eyes closed I tentatively reach for it.

"If it grosses you out that bad you don't have to touch it." Noah starts to pull his leg back, but I hold it firmly.

"Just... Distract me." I gently knead the squishy skin around his ankle, telling myself it's an ass cheek.

"What made you get into skateboarding?"

"I already told you. It's uncivilized."

"You could say the same thing about hockey."

"I suppose, although if a sport costs thousands of dollars to play, most people would say aggressive or even violent, not uncivilized." *Did he just sigh? Maybe he's pretending I'm rubbing his ass too.*

"So, if it cost money your parents would support it, and if it didn't they'd hate it, so you went with the one they'd hate?"

“And here I thought hockey players were just dumb jocks.”

“Not a dye job, but also not a state of mind.” I open my eyes to see Noah pointing at his hair, and roll my own before getting back to my imaginary butt massage.

“Did you get to pick hockey or did your Canadian roots decide for you?” I ask.

“Both. It was pretty much expected that I learn the game, but when I started growing and realized I have solid reflexes for my size, it became something I wanted to get better at.”

“I bet your parents are psyched about that.”

“They were.”

“Were?” My hands still.

“They passed about eight years ago. Car accident.”

“I’m sorry.” To my surprise I don’t laugh, even though this is a prime example of an inopportune moment. Maybe I’m finally outgrowing that particular personality defect.

“Thank you,” he says, and when nothing else follows I start rubbing again.

“What?” His question brings my gaze to his, and I see him point to his lip. “You’re chewing on it again. What?”

No way. I’m not going to admit I was thinking about my own shitty parents when he’s clearly sad about losing his.

“You really don’t want to know.” I knead his ankle, shoving my family out of my mind and focusing on my salacious daydream. This time I know he sighs in response, which makes me feel oddly content despite the fact I’m touching his foot.

“Of course, I want to know.”

“Fine,” I groan for maximum effect and tell him about my fantasy instead

of the reality he caught me remembering. “I’m pretending I’m rubbing your ass.”

“That’s how you stomach rubbing my foot?” He chokes back a laugh.

“We all have our phobias. And the ass visual worked for me. Or it did.” I nudge his leg away because with him saying *foot* I can’t pretend anymore.

“Well, I didn’t have the same visual, but I think it had the same results.”

“What?” I twist my head to look at him, and see him pointing to his junk, which is standing at full attention. As much as it can be from underneath his track shorts.

“My foot rub did that?”

“I thought it was an imaginary butt massage.” He points to my shorts, which are also tented. *Huh*. “Looks like it worked for you, too. You know what this means?”

“Time to bounce on your cock?” I lick my lips eagerly.

He chuckles and reaches for my hand, dropping his legs to the floor as he pulls me onto his lap. “Only if I get to suck on yours first.”

*Oh, fuck yes!*

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It’s torture sitting at my desk.

Correction, it’s torture sitting here by my lonesome when I’ve spent the last few weeks working at Noah’s kitchen table. It was fun showing him what I do, eating all our meals together, and vegging on the sofa when we were done for the day.

When I volunteered to help him out with his ankle and made arrangements to work from his place, I didn’t think I’d see as much of him as I did. I figured he’d watch TV or read while I was a good little worker bee, and I’d pop up to get him snacks and shit when he asked so he wouldn’t have to

walk. I didn't expect him to take an interest in my projects and sit by my side while I worked on them, oohing and aahing over my designs and even brainstorming ideas with me. The man may be a jock but he's no dud in the creative department, and while I love my job to begin with, he made it more fun.

Now that I'm back in the office, sitting alone, I feel antsy. I can't explain it, but I miss the back and forth we had, and I keep looking at the clock to see when I can leave. Time to bother Xander, since pestering him often rejuvenates me.

"I'm in literal heaven. Noah loves dick," I confess as I plop my ass on the corner of his desk.

Even though he's clearly skeptical about the big guy and I playing footsy with our dicks, it's sort of tradition for me to exploit my exploits, and now that our secret's out I see no reason why I can't gift Xander with some of the saucy details, which... *Dear Lord.*

I've been '*taking care of*' Noah for almost two weeks and he's slightly more mobile now. Even though I've started working in my office again, I'm still staying at his place every night. In his bed. Where he makes sure I'm thoroughly exhausted by the time I fall asleep, and sometimes again when I wake up. It's like I've got my own personal sex doll. Or dildo. Or... Cock worshiper sounds obnoxious, but it's not entirely inaccurate given his fascination with my junk.

"Yes, I sort of assumed that since you're dating," Xander says blandly.

"Fucking," I correct. "But yes, he loves it." Ever since he hate-fucked us into the next universe, he's been greedy for it, coming after me day and night. I suppose a small part of his desperation could be attributed to the kissing, a

slip up on my part but one I can't say I regret. It's led to more sex, and the big guy is a fantastic kisser.

True, I'm breaking the rules I set for myself, which should be concerning. Prior to Noah, neither kissing nor sleepovers were part of my vocabulary. I know in the long run it will prove to be a bad idea that I've let them become habit, but... *Sex!* Lots and lots of it. In every room, on every surface, and in every position imaginable as long as he can do it without putting weight on his foot.

Have we crossed into friends with benefits territory instead of fuck buddies? Probably. However, I refuse to accept that repeated, mind-blowing orgasms shouldn't be enjoyed to the fullest, so that's what I'm doing, even if it means I sometimes, occasionally fall asleep in his arms.

And wake up there.

*Naked.*

"He can't stop touching it," I gush to Xander. "Before we go to bed, first thing when we wake up, in the shower... He even edged me while I was playing video games."

"I don't need to know that." Xander winces slightly and shakes his head.

"Of course, you do, because it's actually super-hot. Noah's not a gamer but he said he needed something to do while I play, so I let him hold my dick, which turned into me riding his while I shot up bad guys. And staying focused on the game while you're getting jerked off *and* pegged is no easy feat, let me tell you. I did pretty well, though. I only team-killed, like, three guys."

"TMI." Xander presses his hands to his ears.

I pull them down with an eye roll. "I listened to all your shit with Niko. The least you can do is listen to mine."

“I literally never told you anything about our sex life.”

“Which is a travesty since that man is fucking glorious, and you’re only forgiven since it led to me meeting Noah. Did I mention he *loves* my cock? The other day, he had his head in my lap while we were watching TV, and for no reason at all he just pulled it out and started sucking on it, and...”

“Tripp!” Xander hisses.

“What?” I blink, leaning back slightly since he sort of yelled at me at whisper volume. Xander's gotten frustrated with me before, but he's *never* yelled. Not once, no matter how much I overshare. Now he'll never hear the juiciest part of that story, which I was tempted to share. That for some strange reason I was fine with Noah's head in my lap. I wouldn't have minded even if blow jobs weren't included.

Xander closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger with a heavy sigh. “Do you think Noah would be okay with you telling me all this?”

“I mean, you’re not some random guy, you're his teammate’s boyfriend. Besides, it’s just sex.”

Xander drops his hand and gives me a withering look. “Is it?”

I’m not usually speechless, but my mouth opens and shuts at least three times before I blurt, “Well, what would you call it?”

“Dating.”

My mouth has trouble forming words again. “It’s not dating if you’ve never been on a date.”

“Semantics.”

“Semantics are pretty important, you know. Critical even. And aside from the fact that we haven’t been on a date, I *don’t* date. So, your definition

doesn't apply." I'm rambling, but since that's normal for me I figure he won't make an issue of it.

"Does *cohabitating* work better for you?"

I gasp with as much disgust as I can muster. "I would never—"

"How many nights have you spent at your place in the last two weeks?"

"I've been playing nurse. You know that." I cross my arms over my chest.

"And how much nursing are you doing? Noah's got a chef and a physical therapist, and he should be walking by now if his recovery is on track. So, what's your role, exactly?"

"I gave him a foot massage the other day," I blurt defensively, realizing a little too late that won't help my case.

"You hate feet." Xander smirks knowingly, forcing me to double down.

"Which clearly demonstrates what a good nursing job I'm doing."

"Or it says you like Noah."

"Of course, I like him. He's a friendly guy and he's got a beautiful cock." I lift a nonchalant shoulder.

"You could say the same thing about most guys you hook up with, but you've never spent the night with them."

Right about now, I'm regretting the extent to which I exploit my exploits to Xander. In my defense, I was pretty certain he wasn't paying attention half of the time.

"We're talking in circles here. You know why I've been spending the night. Stop reading into everything."

"Stop pretending your motives are purely altruistic. You're staying there because you want to, not because you need to."

"He does have a magnificent shower." I snatch a pen off Xander's desk and start spinning it around my fingers.

Xander snatches the pen back. “He’s different, admit it. And while we’re on the topic, so are you, and I don’t just mean your hair color. Since the day I met you, you’ve been hiding in plain sight. You’re loud and obnoxious and outspoken, but you don’t fool me. It’s an act to make people think you’re an open book when really all they see is the cover. Noah sees through it, doesn’t he? And you like it, don’t you? That’s why you haven’t left when he doesn’t, and never really did, need you to take care of him.”

Wow. All this time I thought Xander was too broody and guarded himself to realize there wasn’t much substance behind most of my word vomit. Being sickeningly happy—like a chocolate addict being welcome into Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory—must’ve opened his eyes. I blame Niko. Clearly, he’s at fault here.

“Perhaps the big guy is more interesting than I first thought.”

“Still not willing to admit you might have feelings for him, huh?” Xander narrows his eyes, and while that warrants a saucy retort, I’m embarrassed to say I don’t have one, so I just stare at him blankly. “Fine,” he dismisses me by focusing on his computer, and since I don’t have a retort for that either, I slink back to my own desk, wondering if it’s already too late to say we’re simply friends with benefits.

## Chapter 19 - Noah

“When are you coming back?” There’s an uncharacteristic hitch in Luca’s voice, which I’m not sure can be attributed to a poor connection.

“The doctor says at least two more weeks, if I have full range of motion.”

“Dammit.” He exhales.

“What’s wrong with that? It’s faster than originally projected.”

“I need you back. I’m playing like shit.”

“You guys have two losses. That’s nothing we can’t recover from.” I try to talk him down.

“I’m not talking about the team, I’m talking about me. Everyone else is pulling their weight but I’m flailing out there. I need you back. I’m not myself...” he trails off.

He doesn’t need to say anything else for me to know where this is going, and it’s a direction I’m not as comfortable with as I once was. Still, I have to tread carefully because regardless of what I think, he’s rooted in his beliefs. And if there’s one thing I understand, if something makes you feel like you play better, regardless of how ridiculous it seems, you do it.

“Luca, I’m not the key to your success. You’re still playing great. Just yesterday you scored two goals.”

“That was a home game. I have an arrangement for those.” *He has an arrangement? Huh. I always wondered how that worked.* “It’s the road games where I struggle. I need you to—”

“I’m not cleared to travel,” I interrupt before he can ask what I suspect he wants to ask.

“I know, but maybe we can work something out. I could video chat you or something.”

*Shit.* That’d be a reasonable solution if I was still single, but I’m not. At least, I don’t think I am... Tripp might have a different opinion. We haven’t talked about what we are, and I was hoping not to just yet since I’m pretty sure he’s not ready to label it. But Luca won’t understand my hesitation without a label to explain it, and if I’m going to deny his request after all these years, I owe him an explanation.

“Can we come up with another option? One that maybe doesn’t involve me?”

“One that... *Oh shit.* This is because of Tripp, isn’t it? You’re not just fucking you’re...*fucking.*”

“I don’t understand the difference, but yeah. It’s because of Tripp. I don’t feel right being your audience when I’m sleeping with him.”

“The difference is you’re not just having a little fun between the sheets, you like him.”

“I do. I really do.” I’m suddenly grateful to be on the phone so he can’t see the heat rush to my face with that admission. Not that I’m ashamed to have feelings for Tripp, I just can’t help worrying that those feelings will be our downfall, seeing as we had an agreement. We promised not to let ourselves get to this point. If I’m being honest, I always suspected this would happen, and I secretly hoped it would.

The fact we’ve been practically living together for the past few weeks probably accelerated things, but right from the start I questioned whether I liked all men or only Tripp. Now, I can confidently say it’s only Tripp. Whether I’d be attracted to another man if I gave myself the opportunity to explore that I’m not sure, but I am sure I don’t need to find out.

Tripp makes things fun. Not just sex, but life. He's full of energy, finds pleasure in just about everything, and makes me see things in a new light. For years, all I saw was hockey, and I don't regret that. The sport has given me so much, and it's fulfilled me in a way nothing else could. It's also why I was wary of retirement, which is looming in the not-so-distant future. For the first time in, maybe ever, I can see a future that doesn't revolve around hockey. Tripp gave me that.

When I think of the future, there's only one thing that matters. I just want him in it.

"You know, he'd probably be on board with watching," Luca hints.

"He probably would." I sigh heavily, hating the way that image makes my stomach sink.

"But you aren't." Luca must hear the reluctance in my voice.

"Not really, no." I'm fully conscious that wanting Tripp for myself threatens everything. He might be a willing participant, and I know on some level I'm important to him, but if he came to the realization that this is more than sex to me I'm afraid he'd pack up and leave.

"So, this is serious with you two?"

I rub a hand over my face, as if that will stave off the tension building in my head. "I don't know. It wasn't supposed to be, then this injury happened and... Things feel different now. I haven't acknowledged that out loud. All I know is whatever this is, I don't want it to end."

"You're going to leave me hanging over something you aren't even sure is serious?"

"You're going to give me shit over being confused after I suffered through years of your unconventional pre-game ritual?" I fire back.

"Suffered?" Luca sounds genuinely shocked. "I thought it didn't bother

you?”

“I didn’t mean it like that, sorry.” I apologize. “It didn’t bother me.”

“About that,” he pauses a few seconds before speaking again. “Were you gay this whole time? I don’t care if you were, I just thought that wasn’t your thing.”

“I didn’t think it was either. And I wouldn’t say I’m gay since I’m not attracted to all men. Just Tripp.”

“Pfft. I’m way hotter than Tripp,” he mutters.

“You sound like you want me to be attracted to you.”

“I don’t,” he rushes to clarify. “Having you watch was never about that, it’s a superstition I haven’t been able to shake in...forever. Still, it kinda bruises my ego, anyway. I know that doesn’t make any sense. Maybe I’m just freaking out over what to do...”

I don’t know the origin of his superstition, but I get why he clings to it so fiercely. It makes sense that changing things up would rattle him, especially when that change comes with a healthy dose of *‘I didn’t see that coming’* like the one I just sprung on him about being gay for only Tripp, if that’s what I am.

“What if you video chatted someone else? Whoever you have that arrangement with here?” I don’t have all the salacious details about how Luca’s superstition works, but if he has an arrangement here then there are other options.

“I guess I could try that.” He exhales heavily. “So, what are you gonna do about Tripp? Think you’ll tell him you’re into him?”

“I thought I might ask him on a date.”

Luca coughs and sputters on the other end of the line. “Doesn’t that step usually come *after* you decide you want to date?”

“Hell if I know. I couldn’t even tell you the last time I went on one. But my neighbors are having this charity fundraiser thing and since they invite everyone in the area, I’m sure Niko and Xander will be going, so it’d be more of a group thing.”

“A charity fundraiser? That’s your idea of a date?”

“I guess I doesn't have to be called that. We have to dress up for it, so maybe? I just don’t want to go alone or be the third wheel to Niko and Xander, so I thought it might be okay to ask him and see where it goes.”

“I’d probably have the ‘*are we fucking or fucking*’ conversation first, but yeah. Ask him out.”

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After a grueling PT session where I managed to hit about eighty percent of my mobility, I hit the shower to clean up, paying particular attention to *that* spot. Just in case.

It’s probably silly, but there’s a part of me that feels like I won’t ever find out where this thing with Tripp can go if I don’t let him in. *Physically*. I’ve been getting more and more curious about it, and now that we’ve been sleeping together for nearly a month, it feels like the right time. That and I might have an ulterior motive.

Though Tripp is well-spoken when he wants to be, at his core he’s a physical, sexual guy. I think he’s more comfortable with actions than words, and taking the role of bottom is one way for me to acknowledge I’ve developed feelings for him without putting him on the spot by saying the words. Sort of like that kiss.

I didn’t plan that, I just acted, and he didn’t stop me. He’s even initiated it a few times since then. Only during sex, but considering that was a line between us that’s no longer there... It seems to me the best way to approach

new dynamics with Tripp is to just act. So, tonight, I'll tell him I'm game for more than just a sexual relationship by offering to bottom. If he accepts, I'll know we're getting closer to the point where I can say the words without driving him into a panic.

Tripp's a little jumpy when he gets home, darting back and forth between the kitchen and living room to grab me a drink, himself a drink, clean up, and who knows what else.

"Bad day?" I ask.

"No, why?" Tripp starts to sit, pats his pockets and looks toward the kitchen with a frown before bolting in that direction for his phone.

"You're making me dizzy with all this up and down. Just sit and relax," I tell him.

He sits at the opposite end of the couch, but rather than slouch into it like he usually does his spine is ramrod straight, eyes darting around the room. "Where are you crutches?"

For the last several days, I've used them to take a little of the burden off my ankle while walking, but I've finally made enough progress to ditch them completely. "The therapist said as long as it wasn't uncomfortable, I could walk without them."

"Hmm." Tripp nods. "So, you're better?"

"Getting there. They aren't ready to let me try skating yet, but I have the green light for standing and walking."

"You probably don't need me to help you out anymore then."

*Fuck.* I didn't see that coming, even though it's a logical assessment. Truthfully, I think we both know I never *needed* him to take care of me, we just went along with that ruse since it was a convenient excuse to have him

stay. I could be honest and tell him I like having him around, though I think that would be worse than admitting I can take care of myself.

“Who would rub my ankle when it’s sore?” I ask with mock seriousness, hoping my flirty tone implies there’s a legitimate reason for him to be here.

“Doesn’t your physical therapist do that?”

“It doesn’t have the same results.” I take a page out of his playbook and look pointedly at my crotch. Even though it feels deceitful to use sex to get him to stay, my gut tells me he’ll respond to that, buying me time until he’s ready to hear the truth about my feelings.

A wicked gleam flashes over his eyes. “Are you saying sex is crucial to your recovery?”

“I mean, it can’t hurt. Right?”

“As long as you’re not fucking me up against the wall on that ankle, which is all I can picture now, dammit.” Whatever was on his mind earlier is clearly a thing of the past as he practically vibrates in his seat.

“Or you could fuck me up against the wall.” I hold my breath as I wait for his response.

“You evil bastard,” he whispers, shaking his head slowly back and forth.

My shoulders slump. “You don’t like that idea?”

“I fucking love that idea. I’ve wanted your virgin hole for so long. You know I’d never turn down a chance to get inside that beautiful round ass of yours.” His eyes are so hooded with lust they’re barely more than little slits, which makes my cock swell visibly inside my shorts.

Pulling a packet of lube from my pocket, I toss it to him and arch my brow suggestively.

“Now who’s the boy scout?” he smirks.

“I learned from the best.”

“Get naked,” he demands, and I damn near rip my shorts trying to get them off. “Lie back and put one foot on the floor. The other over the back of the couch.”

Doing as he says, I find myself spread wide open, my thick cock resting against my stomach, rising and falling with each anxious breath. Tripp scoots between my legs and rubs his palm up my thigh, between my pecs, and over my stomach. His finger grazes my shaft in the process and it lurches at the slight touch. Aside from a tiny grin, Tripp doesn’t acknowledge the effect he has on me. He just keeps rubbing his hand over my heated skin, like he’s savoring every contour, committing it to memory.

His touch isn’t overtly sexual, but it makes me tingle everywhere. It wakes up my senses, coaxing me into a state of heightened arousal. And while I’m sure the gentle touch is for my physical comfort, it soothes my heart at the same time.

Whether he intends to or not, he’s caressing me like a lover would, like he cherishes me and wants to take care of me. He’d be mortified to realize the emotions he’s creating inside my soul, but I can’t bring myself to be the bigger man and call this off before I fall for him irrevocably. Even if it leaves me heartbroken in the end, I want to experience this moment with him.

Gradually, he inches lower, fingers grazing over my taint, between my crack. My ass clenches involuntarily, both eager for and leery of the coming intrusion. As usual, Tripp seems to sense how I feel.

“Relax,” he says as he opens the packet of lube and spreads some over his fingers. “This will feel strange at first, maybe even a little uncomfortable. Don’t fight it. I promise it’ll get better, and you’ll love it.”

I gasp as the cool gel on his fingers comes into contact with my skin, exhaling slowly as he draws circles around my puckered hole. It’s not

entirely unpleasant actually. There's a faint quiver deep inside my groin, which makes a bit of precum seep from my slit.

My thighs relax as Tripp probes the area, lulling me deeper into an aura of bliss as a contented moan rumbles from my throat.

“Fuck, that’s a sexy sound,” Tripp rasps as the pressure on my hole suddenly increases. “First finger. Let me hear it again.”

This time I utter more of a groan as my hole strains around the slight disturbance, and while it feels interesting enough that I want him to continue, the fullness of his finger inside me seems similar to... “Oh God. Is it supposed to feel like I have to take a shit?”

“Jesus. And people accuse me of talking without thinking,” he scoffs as his finger pumps leisurely back and forth, which after the initial shock feels pretty good. I don’t want him to stop. “You’re lucky I have a one-track mind,” he continues, “because I’m horny enough to ignore that comment.”

“Sorry, it’s just... I didn’t know how else to describe it.”

“Don’t describe it, just feel it. I’m adding another finger.”

The burn of the stretch takes over and I squirm uncomfortably until I feel a firm grip wrap about my cock. Suddenly, the discomfort is replaced with the familiar tingle of arousal. Tripp’s fist strokes up and down my length, and a wet heat surrounds my crown. Something that’s part moan, part sigh passes through my lips as my body tries to process the torrent of sensations flooding through it. Between the suction on my tip, the pressure on my shaft, and the fullness in my ass, I don’t know which way is up. Torn between the need to fight for control or bucking my hips wildly, my muscles throw in the towel, turning to jelly as I give myself over to the whirlpool of stimulation coursing through me.

My dick falls out of Tripp’s mouth with an audible pop. “There you go.

Nice and relaxed. Now, let's make your cock dance."

Something shifts inside me, and my dick lurches upward as a bolt of pure electricity ricochets throughout my body. "Holy shit!" I cry, propping myself on my elbows so I can look down my body. "What the hell was that?"

"Big guy, meet your prostate." I feel another shift deep in my core—Tripp's fingers—and my cock lurches again as a fresh drop of precum oozes out.

"Jesus." My head falls back onto the cushions as I gasp for air, a wicked laugh the only warning before he nudges it again, and again. I writhe beneath him, realizing that my prior understanding of bliss was sorely lacking.

With each swipe of his finger, my muscles contract, spasms wracking my body to what would be the point of pain if they weren't so euphoric. I've never felt pleasure like this. It's like I'm vibrating on a higher plane of existence. My body is so stimulated it can't contain my consciousness, and I'm so zoned out it's hard to form words.

"Is this...? When I...?"

"That's right, big guy. This is what it feels like when you fuck me. Ready for my dick?"

I can't speak. Can't moan. Can't even move my head. I think I blink though, which earns me a little peck on the lips as Tripp mumbles, "Fuck yeah."

The ecstasy bubble pops as Tripp's hands leave my body, and I whimper at the loss. Then I notice him shedding his clothes and lubing his cock.

Licking my lips, I watch his fist slide over his length. I don't know if he looks so big because of the lack of pubic hair, or because he really is big. Either way, the smooth skin stretched taut over his shaft is a mesmerizing sight. The view is even more enticing with the gel coating his skin, making it

glisten in the light. “It’s gonna be uncomfortable at first.” Tripp lines himself up to my hole. “Breathe through it.”

The pressure is sudden and intense, forcing my eyes to snap shut as I choke on a breath of air.

“Breathe.” His gentle reminder comes as a slippery fist circles my cock. “Focus on my hand. Feel it sliding over your dick, nice and slow. That feels nice, right? The way you fit in my hand. I think this is my favorite cock in the world, besides mine. It’s so big and long and thick.”

“Are you trying to distract me by complimenting my dick?” I grit.

“It worked. I’m all the way in.” Two things register at once. My ass is almost uncomfortably full, and Tripp’s voice sounds off. I open my eyes to find his jaw locked tight, the tendons in his neck visible underneath the skin as he takes shaky breaths. *He’s stunning.*

“Tripp?”

“I need a second. You’re... Fuck, you’re so tight.” In all the times we’ve been together, I can’t say I’ve ever seen Tripp with such a tenuous grip on his control. The sight pushes out all lingering traces of discomfort and fills me with a mixture of gratitude and pride.

Whether this is the start of something real or the end of something fleeting, knowing I have such a profound effect on another person will always be seared in my memory. I’ll forever be marked by this experience, and I’m guessing he will, too.

I’m still staring, admiring the beauty of his tightly coiled features, when his eyes flutter open and lock onto mine.

“Tripp,” I groan, though whether it’s a plea or a warning I’m not sure.

He lets go of my dick and leans over me, trapping it between our bodies as he braces his hands on either side of my chest and ghosts his lips over mine.

“Grab my ass. You control the pace.”

I cup his cheeks in my hands as he starts to move, rocking slowly back and forth to help me adjust. It’s awkward at first, but after a few pumps my channel adapts, welcoming the slide of his cock.

The friction of his stomach on my shaft feels divine, but the weight of his steel length against my prostate is pure heaven. Within seconds, I’m back in that trance-like state, where I’m so overcome with bliss my mind shuts down and my body runs on autopilot.

My carnal urges take control, hips rolling to give Tripp better access as my biceps struggle to pull him closer. Yet even as I strain to bring us together, there’s no urgency behind my movements. No rush to reach the finish. I simply want to feel him *everywhere*.

Dropping to his forearms so we’re chest to chest, Tripp pistons his hips in long, languid strokes, hitting all my pleasure points with each thrust. Sweat pools between us as we rock into each other, the sound of our labored breathing echoing in the room around us.

My hole flexes and contracts as Tripp brushes over my prostate, causing him to groan. “Holy fuck, big guy. Your ass is heaven. I’m not gonna last.”

Gripping him tighter, I help him spear in and out of my channel, increasing our pace as we charge toward the finish. Suddenly we’re face-to-face, breathing each other’s air as we grunt with the effort to get deeper, closer, more.

And then time stops. The tension in my balls explodes through my tip, drenching us both in my cum as I clamp down on the cock pulsing inside me. Mouths hovering above each other, frozen in a silent scream, wave after wave of tremors wrack through us as our hips buck through our release.

Trapped between us, my dick twitches and spurts as we rock against each other, wringing out every last quiver of our orgasm.

Warm liquid gushes out of my hole as Tripp's mouth rests against mine. Not kissing just, breathing, which is more intimate and somehow not at the same time. Then he lifts his chest off mine with shaky arms and gives me a lazy grin. "I'm not gonna have to fight you for the bottom now, am I?"

I know that's supposed to be an offhand comment, nothing to read into. But I read into it anyway, clinging to the hope that it means there's more of this... of *us* in our future. "I know how to take turns."

"Good to know." He winks as he pulls out and offers me a hand to sit up. "Want me to make sure you don't get lost in your shower?"

That's an olive branch, I think. Offering to help under the guise I need it instead of admitting he likes to shower with me. And since tonight was a big step for both of us, I won't press for more. But one day soon I will—I don't want to live in limbo now that I know who I am and what I want—and hopefully he'll be ready to take that step with me.

"Right behind you." I let him pull me up.

## Chapter 20 - Tripp

“I didn’t know you were going blond again,” Noah says when I get home—*home?*

“Green tips are too difficult to maintain. They start to fade pretty quickly, and the boss man doesn’t like me taking an extended lunch every week to get my hair colored, which is really a shame because I wouldn’t mind trying a dark blue next.”

Noah’s eyes dart to mine, telling me he knows exactly where the blue idea came from, just like I intended. “I didn’t realize it was that labor intensive to have colored hair.”

“Depends on the color.” I point to my freshly bleached hair.

“So, I have a question for you,” he says as he takes two of his chef’s premade meals out of the oven.

“You know you don’t have to ask to bottom, right? You can just tell me that’s what you’re in the mood for.” I palm his delectable ass and give it a nice squeeze since I’ve become well-acquainted with it over the last week. Even though we agreed to take turns, he’s still working up to the point where he can take me without a lot of prep, and I am happy to oblige.

“Noted.” He smirks. “But that’s not what I was going to ask.”

“Okay, what’s up?” I snatch a piece of broccoli off one of the plates and pop it in my mouth. *Still can’t believe I actually like the green stuff his chef makes.*

“My neighbors have this charity party every year—they invite the whole neighborhood—and it’s coming up this weekend. I thought maybe you could

come with me?”

The muscles in my body grow instantly heavy, like they’ve turned to concrete, making it hard to move let alone speak. “You want me to go to a party with you?”

“Yeah.”

My heart feels like it’s going to beat right out of my chest. On the one hand...*party!* On the other, I’m not a stranger to these types of charity events, and they aren’t the type of thing you bring the guy you’re fucking to. “I feel like that’s a couple’s thing, not a fuck buddy thing.”

To my surprise that statement doesn’t seem to faze him. “You’ve been staying here for weeks taking care of me. Aren’t we past fuck buddies?”

“Okay... Maybe we’re friends with benefits.”

“I think it’s more than that.”

*Oh shit.* I knew I’d overstayed my welcome, but... Hot sex. On the daily. I guess that’s bound to happen when two spectacular cocks come out to play, but... *Ugh, focus!*

“Well, what would you call it? We’re not boyfriends,” I state plainly. “I don’t do that, and we still don’t even know if you’re gay or bi or what. You can’t be anything more than friends with benefits without knowing that.” I’m making this shit up as I go because I can’t handle thinking we’ve crossed into boyfriend land.

*I knew I shouldn’t have fucked his hole.*

I knew he was using that as a way to get me to stay, but I listened to my cock instead of my brain. Not that I can’t be talked into pretty much anything with the promise of sex, but deep down I suspected the offer to top him was his way of steering us towards something beyond just fucking, and I was too horny to care, *dammit.*

“I think maybe I’m demi.” Noah interrupts my internal rant.

“Ooh, someone used Google.” It’s a childish retort but... *Hello, it's me.* I take my plate and sit at the kitchen table, putting some distance between us.

“I’m serious.” Noah follows me. “I think I’m only attracted to people I feel connected to.”

“And you think you’re connected to me? *Me*, not my cock? I’d understand if you were confused, especially since you’ve been working through some stuff. We should probably make sure though.” I stand to unbutton my pants.

“Do not show me your dick right now. A hard-on doesn’t solve everything.”

“That didn’t even cross my mind.” *It totally crossed my mind.*

“So, what’s that then?” He points to my crotch. “Checking to make sure your zipper works?”

“I had to readjust.” I drop back into my chair and pretend I wasn’t trying to avoid this conversation with sex. “Okay, I can see how you’d feel connected to me after I took care of you, but I could get you going even before that. That’s not demi.”

“Not true. I’ve always found it easy to talk to you. To be myself. I think because you’re so unapologetically...you.” Noah waves his hand over me from head to toe. “You made me comfortable enough to be me.”

*Okay, that’s actually sweet, but still scary since I don’t do sweet.*

“What are you saying?”

“I like you. A lot.”

“Cool.” I spear a piece of chicken and shove it in my mouth. “I like you too.”

“No, I mean I *like* you. As in I want to be with you. Preferably as more than just two friends who fuck each other.”

“Like boyfriends?” I feel my eyes grow wide with panic.

“I mean, yeah.” Noah shrugs bashfully, which is adorable, but not cool.

“Okay. Um...” I scratch my neck.

Then my arm.

Then my side.

Obviously, this is a deal-breaker, but I don't want to hurt the guy, so I have to let him down easy. But that means no more mind-blowing sex. No more sleepovers, either, which I will only admit to myself this one time that I sort of like. Still, cold turkey is the way to go. Clean slate. Full stop.

*Is it hot in here?*

“What's wrong?” Noah's brows draw together in gentle concern as he reaches for my arm.

I pull it away to scratch my neck again. “I feel itchy.”

“Are you having an allergic reaction?”

“Maybe?”

“Did you eat something weird? Or touch something weird?”

I scratch at my forearm when he reaches for it again. “No. I... Can you stand over there?” I point to the far side of the room.

“Where?” He twists to look behind him.

“Just...there. Back. And stop looking at me like you like me.”

“I do like you.”

“Yes, but don't look at me like you do. Look at me like I'm just a piece of ass.”

Noah pulls back with a frown. “You're not just a piece of ass. That's what I'm trying to tell you. You're important to me.”

“I know. I think that's the problem.”

“Why is that a problem?” He shifts his head back and forth, clearly not

following me.

“I’m not important to anyone. And don’t say *you* because you’re fucking me so that doesn’t count.”

“Fine.” He crosses his arms in front of his chest. “What about Xander?”

“I’m pretty sure he wants to strangle me half the time.” I snort as I itch my chest.

“If that were true, he’d have done it by now. Plus, Niko likes you.”

“Niko tolerates me for Xander.”

“His sister loves you.”

“That might actually be true, but only in a drinking buddy kind of way. And that’s fine. It’s better that way.”

“How is that better?” He reaches for me again, but I wave him back.

“There’s no false hope with drinking buddies.”

“False hope? What does that mean?”

“Drinking buddies are for a good time only. They aren’t expected to care about you beyond their stool at the bar. You hang out and have fun, but that’s all it is. I’m good with it.” *I'm getting hives. Great. Just what I need. I'm pretty sure they're making my brain swell, too... Making me say things I normally wouldn't.*

“I don’t think anyone sees you as just a drinking buddy. I don’t. Why are you itching yourself raw?”

“Because you’re messing up the pattern. Fuck around, have fun, say goodbye.” I scratch at my lower back.

“I don’t want to say goodbye.”

I roll my eyes dramatically. “Everyone does. That’s how it works.”

“How what works?”

“Life. You get close to people and they let you down. That’s why I don’t do

boyfriends. Only hookups. Get it?”

He’s looking at me like I’m deranged, and considering I look like a monkey in a zoo, I get it. Only he thinks it’s my reasoning, not my sudden rash, that’s irrational. I know better.

People like to tell you they care all the time, but in my experience it’s just talk. A line people feed you because it’s expected. Since my wake-up call nearly a decade ago, I’ve learned most of that talk isn’t malicious. Friends, colleagues, acquaintances...they get wrapped up in their own shit and forget about yours. I get it. It’s when the people closest to you don’t give a shit that messes with your head, and I figure it’s better to avoid those situations altogether than to give someone the chance to break you.

That’s how I’ve operated for the past ten years, and it works for me. I haven’t had any crushing disappointments because I haven’t put myself in a position to experience them. Given the way Noah’s looking at me right now, like he’s not going anywhere, I have a feeling I’ve already let him get too close.

“Who hurt you?” he asks softly.

*No. Nope. Not going there. I don’t tell anybody that. Ever.*

“Not your concern, big guy. The takeaway here is, I don’t do boyfriends. So, this has been fun and all, but you’re gonna have to find someone else to experiment with.” I stand, ready to bolt out of the kitchen, and find him blocking my path. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re trying to keep me from leaving.”

He crosses his arms in front of his chest, adopting a very Thor-like stance. “I am.”

“I’d say that’s kinky if it didn’t have a kidnappy undertone.”

“Joke around all you want. I’m still not letting you leave until we finish talking.”

“We are finished. Besides, haven’t you missed enough games?” I point to his ankle. “I don’t think you’re prepared to give chase, and I will run if I have to.”

“I’ll risk it.”

“Yeah, right.” I snort, glancing around to plot the best exit route. “You can’t be serious.”

“Deadly.” His calm tone is so unexpected I can’t help looking at him to see his expression, which is nothing short of sincere.

“You’d risk hurting your ankle again just to stop me from leaving?”

“Not my ankle. My career. If I don’t get back on the ice, chances are the Bulldogs won’t have a reason to keep me around. I’m too old for other teams to give me serious consideration. If I have to sacrifice the game to convince you you’re important to me, so be it.”

The itch that had started to fade comes back with a vengeance. *He wouldn’t really do that, would he?* “Nice speech, but I don’t buy it. You’ve been jumping out of your skin to get back on the ice.” I claw at the back of my neck.

“I *was* jumping out of my skin. You helped with that. *You* knew what I needed to calm down and get out of my head, and *you* helped me deal with my fear and frustration.”

“Glad I could be of service, but I think we can agree I’ve exhausted my usefulness.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Downplay what you’ve done for me. Downplay *this*. You’ve been staying

here for nearly a month, sharing my bed *and* my life, and even though I'm not on the ice right now I'm happy. I think you are too. Or you could be if you get out of your head."

That's usually my line, the thing I tell him when he's overthinking. I'm not sure how I feel about him using it on me.

"Have you thought this through?" I change tactics. "We've been in a bubble for weeks, but that will change once you're cleared to play. You'll be gone half the time, so we won't be *sharing* anything. You'll be gone, and unless you plan to keep me here in secret, people will find out you're with a man."

"So."

"So?" I echo. "What do you think people are going to say when not one but *two* players on the Bulldogs are gay?"

"I'm not gay, so who cares." He lifts a casual shoulder.

"Stay in your lane, big guy. I'm the brat in this relationship." I point to my chest. "So don't sit over there acting all smug like it's no big deal if people say... What?" I bark as he collapses into a fit of laughter.

"You said relationship." His lips twitch into a satisfied smile.

"I..." My jaw bobs up and down. *That's not true. I'm morally opposed to them. Even friendships are a stretch. I'd never willingly admit to being in one. So, why can't I deny it?*

Closing my eyes, I try to breathe through the panic and uncertainty that feels like it's crushing my chest, the way it did all those years ago when life pulled the rug out from under me. *In... Out... In... Out...*

It doesn't help. My head starts to spin, and I know I've only got a few seconds to sit down before my legs collapse. Except, they're rooted to the floor like they're glued in place, and I wobble when I finally manage to shuffle a foot forward.

Instead of falling, I find myself pressed against Noah's broad chest, his arms wrapped protectively around me. "I've got you," he whispers as he guides my head to the crook of his neck.

Though my heart is still trying to win a record for the most beats per minute, the dizziness begins to fade the moment my body makes contact with his. If I was in my right mind, I'd probably worry about that, but the only conscious thought in my brain is that I'm safe in his arms. Admittedly, that's a strange thought for a guy who thrives on his independence, but it's turning out to be a weird day.

*Fuck me, I'm a mess. A mess with a...boyfriend?* The thought makes me shudder, or shiver—I'm not sure which—I only know it makes Noah's grip on me tighten, and I lean into his embrace.

The longer he holds me, the calmer I feel. Usually, I feel jittery when people get too close—in a non-sexual way—but Noah's touch seems to ground me. It dulls the warning bells in my head and the anxiety in my limbs, leaving me somewhat stable. And...*content?*

*Is this what dating feels like? This weird sense of peace and comfort that has nothing to do with arousal? That's maybe worth exploring.*

I don't know how long we stay like that, hugging in the kitchen while Noah tenderly sifts his fingers through my hair, but by the time he guides me to the couch to sit down, my pulse is somewhat back to normal and my breathing is steady.

"I'm sorry," Noah kisses the top of my head as he tucks me against his side. "I didn't realize I was pushing you that far out of your comfort zone."

"I didn't realize I was in a...relationship." I wrinkle my nose since that word still feels strange on my tongue. I'm not sure why, since this sleepover thing has been going on awhile, and it hasn't been about taking care of him

for at least a week. Maybe Xander's right and it never was. I just wanted to be around him. God knows, I've opened up to him more than anyone else in my life. I was just too stubborn to admit it to myself.

"We don't have to call it a relationship if you aren't ready for that. We can stick with the friends who fuck thing."

"Well, lightning hasn't struck me down yet so..."

"What if we don't use labels?"

I take a deep breath and let it out with a heavy sigh. "You're a public figure, people will hound you to define this until you do. And really, I'm being silly. Lots of people dream of a hockey god sweeping them off their feet. I should be shouting that shit from the rooftops."

"Not if it makes you uncomfortable." Noah's voice is understanding even though he tenses underneath me, and I feel like an ass for making him confused.

I kiss the shoulder I'm leaning on, which feels surprisingly natural. "You don't make me uncomfortable."

"But dating does." When I only nod, he continues. "Are you willing to tell me why?"

"Not today. I will," I rush to clarify, "but realizing I'm in a...a..."

"Relationship."

"Yeah, that. That's enough for one day."

"Okay," he says, and for the second time since I walked in the door, I'm struck by how sweet my Thor is. *Omigod, it's happening. I called him mine—in my head—but still. Is that normal? One second, you're a proud hedonist and the next you have a...person?*

"You're thinking awfully hard over there." Noah's lips brush over my forehead.

“Yeah, it’s just. I don’t know how to do this. I don’t know how to be with someone.”

“I think we just keep doing what we’ve been doing. Hanging out, helping each other get through the shit we’re dealing with. Maybe with more kissing, though.”

I wait for another bout of panic to hit me, but instead of the cool tingle of anxiety I feel a warm tingle of desire. As much as I don't want to admit it, I've enjoyed the feeling of Noah's mouth on mine. Up until this point, it's only happened during sex, when we're breathless, and desperate, and ravenous for each other. *I wonder...*

Tilting my chin up until our lips are a hairsbreadth apart, I hold as still as a statue, waiting. Watching. Gathering courage and seeking permission. Noah's breath hitches, but he doesn't make a move, giving me the space to do only what I feel comfortable with. *Fuck it.*

Holding my own breath, I lean slowly forward, closing the distance between us until our lips meet in a soft, chaste kiss. The instant we make contact heat blooms deep in my gut, though it's not the familiar heat of arousal. More like the warmth of affection. The promise of faithfulness and honesty and trust.

Gentle hands stroke my face as our lips brush softly together. The tender touch somehow even more intense than the passionate kisses we've shared previously, despite the fact it's not making my dick hard. And the crazy thing is, I don't even care. I'm sort of content to have no ulterior motive, no end goal driving me forward. I just like the comfort of Noah's mouth on mine, giving me the stability and support and care I didn't think I wanted, but now can't imagine going without.

As Noah's tongue meets mine, it occurs to me I've never been kissed like

this before, with reverence and respect. It's so sweet yet so powerful, I feel like I'm melting and flying at the same time. Invincible and vulnerable, but not scared like I was earlier. Not with Noah. He makes me feel...*whole*.

## Chapter 21 - Noah

“Oh ...” I lick my lips and swallow thickly as Tripp emerges from the bathroom in his tux, tugging casually at the cuffs peeking out from under the jacket. It’s a mundane action but his catlike grace makes it look effortless and sexy in a refined, aristocratic sort of way. The blond hair and dark stubble on the other hand, coupled with the bowtie slung around his open collar, gives him a downright sinful air.

“You like?” He smirks impishly.

“I like.” I cross the room to meet him, resting my hands on his hips while I nip at his plump bottom lip. “I like it so much I sort of want to bend you over right here, right now.”

“That sounds better than your stuffy charity party.” He tilts his head to the side so I can kiss along the side of his neck.

“If I didn’t like the cause, I’d skip it.”

He rubs his stubbled cheek against mine. “What’s the cause again?”

“Underprivileged youth.”

“I suppose that’s worthy of delayed gratification.” Tripp sighs heavily.

“I know I should be thinking of the cause.” He groans softly as I pull him to me, rubbing our pelvises together. “But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like the idea of showing up with the sexiest man alive on my arm.”

“Ooh, flattery will get you a blow job.” Tripp’s fingers dance over the back of my neck.

“Give me a blow job and then you can have my ass.” I bite down gently on his earlobe and give it a little tug, which makes him shiver.

“Deal, although if I top, I may have to ruin your man-bun. Even though it’s sexy as fuck, I’ll need something to hold onto while I pound you into the mattress.” He swivels his hips, pressing his semi-hard cock against mine.

“Jesus, we’re never gonna get out of here if we keep this up.”

“You could always just write a fat check and we can get straight to stripping each other down.” Tripp slides my hands to his ass, encouraging me to give it a firm squeeze.

“I wish I could.” I lick into his mouth—he’s been wholly on board with more kissing since our talk last week—groaning when his tongue meets mine. “We have to show up at several of these a year. Might as well get this one out of the way.”

I start to pull away, but Tripp squeezes the base of my neck. “I know you said this already, but are you sure you’re ready for this? Our first outing doesn’t have to be so public.”

“This is only our first outing because I’m finally healthy enough to hide my injury. And the Bulldogs organization already knows about us, so who cares if the rest of the world does.”

*That* was an interesting conversation, not because the top execs objected to me dating a man, but because Tripp and my coach, Xander’s dad, have very different ideas about what classifies as acceptable public behavior. In his defense, Tripp insists the guys gave him permission to feel how strong their pecs were before he touched them during the first team cookout he attended, which was long before my arrival. The act got him banned from all cookouts until Xander got tired of attending on his own and dragged Tripp along last year.

Still, I had to assure Coach that Tripp wouldn’t draw unnecessary attention to himself if we went public. I hate that stipulation—Tripp’s antics are part of

who he is, and I don't want him to have to change since he's dating me. Fortunately, he said—privately of course—that being a little less crass is a small price to pay to have my cock all to himself. His words.

“I guess coming out is one way to take the focus off your injury.” Tripp slides his hand from my neck to my chest, resting it over my heart. “And it might be sort of fun to watch people try to keep a straight face when you introduce me.”

“It's the twenty-first century. I doubt any of them will give it a second thought.”

“Bet?” He arches a sly brow.

“What are we betting?”

“I get to spank *you* this time.” A wicked grin spreads across his face.

“Fine.” I shrug. At this point, there are so many things he's helped me discover, most of which I never expected to like, let alone enjoy. What's one more? I won't say no until I try it. “And if I win, you move in.”

Just like he did during the boyfriend conversation, Tripp freezes, his breath coming in shaky spurts. I'm still not sure what causes him to react this way—I figure he'll tell me when he's ready—but I'm not going to avoid the topic of *us* just because it scares him. We wouldn't be here right now if I did, and aside from not skating, this has been the best week of my life.

I wrap my hand around the back of his neck and lean my forehead against his as I put my other hand on his chest. “You've been staying here a solid month, and nothing bad has happened, right?”

It takes a second, but eventually I feel a small nod.

“That's right. And if you're not ready to move in, then you're not ready. It's okay. But if you are, I'd really like to have you here when I get home

from road trips, and I'd like to be here for you when you get home from work. Whenever you're ready for that step, I want you to know I am too."

Is it odd to put living together on the table before I've told him I love him? If it were anyone but Tripp, I'd say yes, but given his obvious hesitation, I actually think this order of operations makes more sense.

"Can I still spank you if you win?" The request is barely more than a whisper.

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't." I kiss his forehead, then bring my hands to his shirt. "Do you want to go bad boy who cleans up nicely or stick with the roguish I don't give a fuck look?"

"Which do you like?" His emerald eyes are full of trust when they find mine, and I have to swallow down the lump in my throat before I can answer.

"I like roguish, but I'm supposed to get through the evening without mauling you, so we better go with cleans up nice."

A tiny smile pulls at the corner of his lips as I button his shirt and work his tie into a perfect bow. I give it a gentle tug on both ends until it sits straight underneath his angular jaw.

"You're stunning." I place a chaste kiss on his lips.

"And you're learning."

"Hmm?"

"I might've just found another adjective for my dick."

I chuckle against his mouth as I recall his rule about making sure the descriptor you choose sounds good next to the word 'dick.'

"So, since you're going to be coming out this evening, we should probably talk about what that looks like," Tripp says.

"What do you mean?"

"Private little bubble, remember?" He clutches my hips and leans into me.

“We don’t have any idea what it’s like to exist outside the walls of this house. As boyfriends.”

My brows draw together as I try to piece together what he’s saying. “Do we really need to make an announcement?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I need to know what you’re comfortable with in public. Do I hold your hand? Sit on your lap? Stick my tongue in your mouth?”

“Can’t we just do what feels right?”

“Well, sitting on your lap and sticking my tongue down your throat would feel right to *me*, but maybe not to *you*.”

“If I say affectionate touches not sexual ones does that work?” I rest my hand on his hips, the same way he’s holding mine.

“I mean, I still don’t see how those aren’t related, but yes, I get your point. No swapping bodily fluids in public.”

I can’t stop the small chuckle from rumbling up my throat. “I would’ve said that differently, but yeah. Now, let’s pick up Niko and Xander before they start pinging us to ask where we are.” I reach for Tripp’s hand as his chest starts to vibrate.

He pulls his phone from his pocket and checks the screen. “Too late. At least they said to get our pants on instead of telling us to fix our hair. If I’m going to be accused of being late I’d much rather it be assumed my tardiness is from having a dick in one of my orifices.”

Tripp pockets his phone and takes my hand, letting me lead him to the car, and even though this isn’t what I’d have chosen for our first date, I can’t remember the last time I felt this excited off the ice.

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The line of cars inches forward until we’re parked in front of a sprawling

entry where a valet takes my keys. The Cooper's go all out for this event every year. While there isn't a red carpet—it is a private residence—there is a photographer snapping candid pictures of the guests as they arrive. If I remember correctly, they aren't allowed inside, but the pictures will be accompanied by a write up of who hosted the event and how much it made, which I'm sure is equally as important to Charles Cooper as the cause he's supporting. Politicians.

Niko, Xander, Tripp and I enter together, none of us holding hands because the reality is, that would get more attention than the event itself. We want the charity to be the main focus. I don't plan to be as discreet once we're inside, so I reach for Tripp's hand the moment we cross the threshold just as a tiny Asian woman with graying hair in a maid's uniform brings her hands to her mouth with an astonished gasp.

“Mr. Preston?” Her voice trembles as she stares at the man next to me.

Tripp stands statue-still, eyes blinking in rapid succession. Then without warning he breaks into an ear-splitting grin, the biggest I've ever seen on him as he steps toward the woman, scooping her up in his arms and spinning her around in delighted hug.

“What happened to your hair?” The woman laughs as he puts her down. Niko, Xander and I exchange confused looks.

“Mine? What happened to yours?”

“I got old.”

“Well, I got daring.”

“You were always daring. That's why you got into so much trouble.” She pokes at his chest.

“We both know that wasn't the only reason.” He rolls his eyes playfully, catching mine as he does, and waving me over.

“Rose, meet my boyfriend, Noah,” he says when I reach them. “Noah, the old lady who raised me.” He slings an arm around her shoulder and lowers his head to her ear, and even though they’re slightly turned away from me, I can just barely make out the words, “You finally found a good family to work for, huh?”

“Mr. Preston—”

“I don’t go by that anymore. Call me Tripp.”

“Mr. Tripp—”

“Rose, kindly let our guests make it all the way into the house.” A stern baritone voice cuts into their conversation, and though it’s quiet enough not to be heard across the room, both Tripp and Rose visibly stiffen. Then Tripp takes a deep breath and drops his arm from Rose’s shoulders as he spins around to face the voice. Following his gaze, I locate the man just in time to see his jaw fall slack as his face goes white.

Charles Cooper casts a wary glance to either side before pasting a composed look on his harsh features, speaking with an obviously forced calm. “Preston. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“That makes two of us, Pop.” Tripp’s voice holds an air of disdain and mocking as he over enunciates the ‘P.’

“Pop?” I mouth to Niko and Xander, both of whom shrug helplessly. *Is this...?*

“You know I don’t appreciate that name,” Charles says, his disapproving gaze bouncing between Tripp and Rose.

“I don’t appreciate mine either. I prefer Tripp.”

“What sort of a name is that?” He looks down his nose at my boyfriend, despite the fact he’s no taller.

“You don’t recognize it? It was your doing actually, since you always made

a point to tell me how much I was tripping up.” Tripp’s grin borders on maniacal as he stares his father down, which garners a few curious looks from the guests trickling in.

“Uncivilized as always,” Charles mutters as Rose retreats to the far wall, out of the line of fire, it would appear.

“So,” Tripp spins around, taking in the ornate entry, with its curved staircase and expensive artwork. “Nice digs. I’d say I wondered where you went after you ditched the old place, but I really didn’t. Although, I am flattered you went to such lengths to make sure I couldn’t find you.”

“Evidently, not enough. If you wanted to speak you should’ve called my office.”

“As if your staff didn’t have strict orders to turn me away,” Tripp huffs.

“Yes, well. This is a private event.” Charles runs a hand over his silver hair despite the fact not a single strand is out of place.

Tripp’s eyes find mine, and for the first time since this exchange started, I get the sense he’s not sure what to say.

“Actually, Tripp’s here as my guest.” I step in.

Charles looks in my direction, his demeanor smoothly shifting from cold and callous to warm and inviting when recognition hits. “Noah, I’m sorry I didn’t see you there. It’s been years since I’ve seen my son and I was momentarily distracted. Welcome.” He holds his hand out, though I make no move to take it, having no desire to after the exchange I just heard.

The purpose of this event is to help underprivileged youth, and based on the way the man’s treating his own son, I’m starting to question how charitable he really is.

“I saw you suffered an injury earlier this season,” he lowers his hand and continues as if I didn’t just slight him. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better. Tripp’s been helping me with my recovery.”

“That’s what doctors are for, right?” Another silver-haired man appears out of nowhere, placing a hand on Tripp’s shoulder.

“Judge Calahan.” The smile Tripp offers is slight yet genuine.

“Uncle to you. Finally back stateside, I see.” The judge returns the grin. “I’ve gotta say, I never pegged you for the Doctors Without Borders sort, but your parents said you’re really making an impact. Good for you. Are you back to make some real money now?”

Tripp cocks an eyebrow toward his father as he bites the corner of his lip, and I have only a brief second to wonder which will win out, the brat or the good boy. As if it was ever really a question.

“Doctor, huh? And an international one. I suppose the altruistic son angle might get you a few votes. I expected you to go with a kid who died tragically young, but I guess there’s really no explanation for someone coming back from the dead in awkward little run-ins like these, so, good choice not killing me off in your fantasy world.”

“Fantasy world?” The judge casts a wary gaze between father and son. “What’s going on here?” he asks as his hand slides off Tripp’s shoulders.

“Nothing,” Charles replies. “A misunderstanding.”

“You’re saying disowned wrong, Pop.”

Before Charles can respond, a middle-aged woman in a floor-length gown with perfectly coiffed blond hair glides into the foyer. “There you are Charles. The guests have been asking—” Her voice drops off as her gaze lands on Tripp, and like her husband, she expertly pivots direction after only the slightest pause. “Preston, darling. What a lovely surprise. I didn’t know you’d be here for this event.”

Anticipating the need for a quick exit, I meet Niko’s eyes and toss him my

keys. He and Xander slip away as Tripp's mother strides toward him, leaning forward to place a kiss on his cheek, which he steps away from. "Don't let the clothes fool you. I'm still a filthy gay man, mother. The streets didn't scare it out of me."

"Preston?" She shoots lost looks between father, son and the judge, and if I hadn't witnessed the exchange with his father, I admit I might've been fooled by her feigned confusion. My new insight makes her act hard to miss. Apparently, the judge agrees.

"Just where exactly has my Godson been for the last decade?" The judge's eyes are little more than narrow slits.

"Overseas," Charles digs his heels in.

Tripp snorts. "I've never even left the country since you had my passport. Plus, it's kind of hard to get another one without the proper identification."

"Without... Why in the hell would you not have proper identification?" The judge's voice rises an octave, drawing the attention of some of the guests.

"I only had my driver's license on me when they kicked me out."

"They kicked... And you didn't come to me?" the judge asks.

Tripp looks at the man who apparently considers himself an uncle, a contrite look on his face. "They said you'd be obligated to put me in juvie for a drug offense they'd un-bury if I tried to reach out to you or come home. Sixteen-year-old me believed it."

The judge wheels on Tripp's parents, but I don't hear his angry words. I'm too focused on my boyfriend.

My stomach roils at the thought of a young Tripp, cast out by the people who were supposed to love him. No wonder he's so terrified of relationships. The one that's supposed to be unconditional failed him, bringing him nothing but pain and disappointment. And rather than respect his fear, I've been

pushing him to face it without ever understanding the magnitude of what I was asking.

I'm known for being level-headed, even on the ice. But right now, I'd like nothing more than to drive my fist into Charles's face. Instead, I hold my hand out to Tripp, pulling him to my chest when he takes it.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper in his ear as I wrap my arms around his shoulders. "I never would've brought you here if I'd known."

"It's okay." Tripp wraps his arms around my waist.

"No, it's not. You have the same last name for God's sake, and I didn't think twice about it."

"Cooper's pretty common. And it's not like I told you enough about my past to make you think there'd be a connection."

Pulling back, I cup his face in my hands. "I knew you had a past though. Something you didn't want to talk about. And because of me you had to face it without warning."

"It was a long time coming." He gives me a tight smile.

"Is this the first time you've stood up to him?"

"More or less. I was good at being a disrespectful shit, but I never challenged him outright over the way he treated me. Or Rose."

I pull him to me and whisper in his ear. "I'm proud of you. And I'm so sorry I pushed you about the dating thing. I shouldn't have done that without knowing where you were coming from."

"If you hadn't pushed me, I wouldn't have a boyfriend right now." I feel a tug on the lapel of my jacket.

"Yes, but do you want one?" I take a half-step back so I can see his face, letting my hands drop to his waist. "I'll understand if it's too soon for that."

I'm vaguely aware there's a murmur in the gathering crowd as I wait for his

answer. Between the way I'm looking at Tripp and the tongue-lashing the judge is giving his parents, I'm sure they're getting quite the show.

Tripp rises on his toes to give me a quick peck on the lips before taking my hands in his. "No take backs. You're stuck with this hot mess."

"Good answer." I can't stop the goofy grin from spreading across my face as a relieved warmth seeps through my chest. "Xander and Niko are waiting in the car. Let's see if we can't salvage the rest of this evening."

"By salvage do you mean I get to spank you?" He bites his lip playfully.

"Are you claiming you won the bet?"

"I mean, people were clearly surprised to see me."

"Fine, I'll concede. But only because you're sexy in a tux, not because I think you won." I give him a quick kiss and keeping his left hand in my right, I step toward the door only to have him tug me back.

"Rose." He casts a worried glance toward his parent's housekeeper, still cowering by the far wall. "I couldn't take her with me the first time, but I can't leave her."

The two of us approach the woman whose eyes are darting nervously around the room as the judge, fresh off his rant at Tripp's parents, finds us. "Between the three of us we're creating a bit of a scene. You two should get out of here before the gossip spreads to the rest of the guests and they come running to see the show."

"We aren't leaving without Rose," Tripp says. "When the guests are gone and they don't have to keep up the act anymore, my parents will lash out at her."

"Are you saying they'll get physical with her?" The judge pales, and I feel a twinge of sympathy for the man who clearly just learned he never really knew the people he thought were his friends.

“I don’t think so. They haven’t before that I’m aware of, but they’ve never suffered this level of embarrassment before either. Will you come home with us, Rose?” Tripp puts a gentle hand on her arm.

“I can’t leave.” She looks at him with teary eyes. “They took my green card after I helped you before. They’ll have me thrown out of the country.”

“They most certainly will not,” the judge booms. “It seems I’ve got something else to discuss with them this evening after all. Rose, go get your things while I deal with this. You can stay at my house until this is sorted out. You two.” He looks at me and Tripp. “The cat’s probably out of the bag, but you might be able to limit the damage if you leave now.”

“Damage?” I frown.

“I haven’t seen anything in the press, so I assume you wanted to keep this thing between you off the public’s radar.” He tips his head toward our joined hands.

“We wouldn’t be here together if we were trying to hide anything,” I tell him.

“We didn’t plan to put on a show either,” Tripp says, his wary gaze telling me he’s concerned about what the Bulldogs might have to say when this gets out.

“It’s settled then. You two take off and I’ll make sure Rose gets out safely,” the judge declares.

But Tripp doesn’t budge. “Rose, are you okay with that? I understand if you’re not. Even after I realized my parents were probably bluffing about what the judge would do if I went to him for help, I was afraid to trust him because he was friends with them. After tonight I know differently, but if you don’t want to go with him we’ll wait for you to get your things.”

She glances between the two men, finally relaxing a bit when her

affectionate gaze settles on Tripp. “He’s right, you should go now. I’ll be okay, Mr. Tripp.”

My boyfriend, who’s still skittish about showing affection without the promise of sex, hugs Rose, and then the man who calls himself Tripp's uncle, which almost makes me tear up. If the one good thing that comes from tonight is Tripp learning that this guy has always been in his corner, and isn’t going anywhere, then this shitshow of an evening will have been worth it.

The judge pats Tripp on the back and lets him go. “Good to have you back, son. Now get out of here. And call me this week. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

His hand locked in mine, I lead Tripp out the front door and past the photographer who clicks away as we get into the car and drive off.

## Chapter 22 – Tripp

“Damn, the press are fast. It hasn’t even been a full hour and the pictures are already up.” Niko holds his phone so we can see the snaps of Noah leading me hand-in-hand to the car, opening the door for me, and the four of us driving away.

Huddled in a back booth of a club all the Bulldogs have an exclusive membership to, we’re able to drink in peace. It’s not our preferred scene—to uppity—but tonight the rich dark atmosphere, and the discreet staff, is sort of a godsend. Even if people recognize us here, they won’t approach us or put us on the spot, and after the night I’ve had, I’m grateful for whatever privacy I can get. Not that I give two shits about my parents’ downfall or the role I ended up playing in it, I just don’t want to be drawn into it any further before the evening ends. There’s plenty of time for that later.

“Cute pictures, though,” Justus says offhand. Why he and Luca showed up, I’m still not sure. I suspect it’s because they were some of Niko’s biggest supporters when his personal life went public, so they must be playing the same role for Noah. “Noah looks very protective of you, Tripp.”

Not too long ago, that statement would’ve freaked me the fuck out—and in some ways it still does. I’m new to this whole relying on and trusting other people thing, but as far as Noah’s concerned, I have to agree with Justus. It’s cute.

“Have they figured out who I am yet?” I ask Niko.

Niko scrolls down the page. “They’re going with Mystery Man.”

“Mystery Man?” I wrinkle my nose. “That makes it sound like I belong on Scooby Doo. It should be Man of Mystery.”

“You’ve got the wrong hair color for that, Freddy,” Luca snorts, and everyone at the table, including me, bursts into laughter.

“You’re funnier than you let on, hockey boy,” I tell him.

“Maybe you were just too preoccupied with getting in Noah’s pants to notice my sparkling personality.”

“True. I’m single-minded like that.” I’m not sure what brought it on, but after his initial concern over Noah and I playing show me yours and I’ll show you mine, Luca seems less skeptical tonight, which is cool. I just hope this isn’t an olive branch to keep using my man as his audience for his pregame mumbo jumbo. Before we were boyfriends, I didn’t care about that, but now my feelings are more complicated. We’ll probably need to talk about it before Noah goes back to traveling with the team.

“Will they even connect the dots?” Xander steers us back to the identity issue. “I mean, you’ve changed your name and your appearance, will they put it together?”

“You changed your name?” Justus asks.

“I always hated the name Preston. And yeah, since Tripp didn’t exist until ten years ago people will dig around to see who did. My name change record will come up.”

“Preston?” Luca snorts as he swirls the liquid in his tumbler. “I can see why you hated that. It doesn’t fit you at all.”

“Ten years ago... You were sixteen when they kicked you out?” Niko asks. “What’d you do?”

This isn’t a story I share, and with the exception of one man, no one actually knows it. Not even Noah. But the reassuring hand he rests on my

thigh keeps my heartbeat calm as I recount the events that led to me becoming Tripp.

“The last time I saw my parents, before tonight, was ten years ago when they kicked me out with nothing but the clothes on my back. Fortunately, I had my wallet and car keys on me, so I had a little money and a place to sleep. And when I snuck back the next day, Rose gave me what she could gather of my clothes and other belongings.” Noah gives my leg a squeeze when he hears her name. “I spent the first month in my car, grabbing a meal from a shelter when I could, out of a dumpster when I couldn’t. Eventually this guy who owned a tattoo shop got curious about this nice car that was perpetually parked on the street—it wasn’t a bad area, but a brand new BMW was out-of-place—and he confronted me.”

“This is the guy who gave you the tattoos you designed?” Noah asks softly.

I give him a slow nod and continue. “I’d been trying to work up the courage to ask for a job—that’s why I was always parked there—but I kept talking myself out of it because I wasn’t sure what would happen if anyone found out I was a homeless teen.”

“When he finally cornered me, he first thought I stole the car, but I had the title in the glove box. I was supposed to put it in a safety deposit box, but I was a lazy kid who got a kick out of doing the opposite of what my parents told me to do and never got around to it. That ended up being sort of a life saver since it backed up the story I gave Jim. He owned the tattoo shop.”

Noah gives my leg another reassuring squeeze.

“Anyhow, Rose had smuggled out my sketchbooks, and after he looked at them, he said he could hire me as an office assistant, but he paid me for any designs I gave him too. He even paid me under the table and helped me find a little studio apartment so I could stay off the authorities’ radar as long as I

promised to get my GED. Once I was eighteen a trust fund my grandfather left me kicked in. Fortunately, my parents couldn't touch it, and I bought my condo. I didn't need a guardian to get certified copies of my birth certificate and social security card, so I was finally able to get all the documents to go through the name change process and officially disappear."

"Your parents never even tried to look for you in those first few years?" Justus seems truly baffled that such a thing is possible. He must have a close-knit family.

"They didn't care where I went, and they didn't want to be found. They put the house on the market the day after they kicked me out and were gone within a month—Jim looked them up even though I told him it was pointless. I'm actually surprised my dad didn't move his office too, but I guess he figured security was tight enough I wouldn't get past them. Not that I tried."

"Why'd they even kick you out, if you don't mind me asking?" Luca broaches the subject I'm sure they're all dying to know but are too polite to bring up. I actually respect the fuck out of the fact that he asked. I would've.

"They caught me kissing a boy." The expressions around me range from disbelief to anger, but not surprise. I guess they all had an inkling where my parents drew the line. "There were years of disappointments before then—I didn't like the sports they approved of, I liked art instead of business or math, I resented that they tried to mold me into their image—you name it we didn't see eye-to-eye. But being gay is what really sealed the deal. My dad hauled me up by my shirt, tossed me out the front door and locked it in my face."

Xander curses as Noah takes my hand in his and brings it to his lips for a soft kiss. I flash a weak smile to let everyone know I'm okay.

"To this day I'm not sure if I kissed that kid because I wanted to get caught or because I actually liked him. I'd known I was gay for years, and I'd also

known my parents wouldn't approve of it. I remember being tired of hiding, and when this cute new kid moved to town, I saw an opportunity to explore the thing I'd been hiding for years. I could've done that anywhere but my house, and I didn't, even though I knew it was reckless. The only thing I remember clearly is watching that door slam and promising myself I'd never be ashamed of liking men, no matter the consequences. Sorry I never told you this," I tell Xander, who is the closest thing I have to a real friend, probably shouldn't be hearing this for the first time.

"You don't have to apologize," he says. "I wasn't exactly forthcoming with all my issues until recently. And if being gay has taught me anything, it's that no one has the right to judge how other people deal with the scars from their past. I understand why you wouldn't want to talk about that period of your life."

"Thanks. Although I should clarify, I talk about that period all the time. Not my evil parents but the time period once I left their house. It was the start of my sexual awakening, which is absolutely worth sharing." Not to make light of his words, but we've had enough heavy stuff for one night.

"You can apologize for that if you want to. It won't erase the images in my head," Xander snorts, "but it's a start."

"Please," I huff. "That was good material, and you know it. I bet you've even re-enacted some of it with the hot piece of ass sitting next to you."

"We don't need to re-enact anything." Niko slings his arm around Xander's shoulder. "Our sex life is awesome."

"How about we leave sex out of the conversation tonight." Xander gives him a wry look.

"Fine." Niko kisses Xander's temple. "So, what do you think will happen to your folks after this?" He asks me.

“No idea. Don’t really care.” I sip the whiskey in front of me. *My boyfriend’s springing for the good stuff.*

“Can he get kicked out of... What kind of politician is he again?” Justus asks.

“A senator,” Noah replies for me when I don’t answer. “He can’t get kicked out but he’s up for re-election next year so he could get voted out.”

“You had to learn that for a citizenship test, didn’t you?” I nudge his shoulder, and he smiles bashfully.

“I’m still not clear on something,” Luca says. “This charity thing was for underprivileged kids, which you basically were for a while.” He points a finger at me. “And aren’t a lot of those kids gay or bi or whatever? Why support a charity if you don’t like the people impacted by it?”

“Denver skews Democratic and he’s a Republican. I assume it makes him more appealing to Independents or moderate Democrats if he seems supportive of the LGBTQ+ community,” Noah says.

I nudge him again. “I’m the bad boy dating the teacher’s pet, aren’t I? That’s kinda hot.” Noah’s hand finds mine under the table and he threads our fingers together.

“What a douche.” Luca wrinkles his nose in disgust.

“He could be facing some legal trouble if what Rose said about holding her green card is true,” Noah muses aloud.

I’d forgotten about that until he mentioned it, and as much as I’d enjoy seeing the man squirm, my guess is it would turn into a big headache for her. “I’m guessing Judge Calahan will get that worked out without involving the authorities. Hopefully, with some sort of big payout for her so she doesn’t have to work again.”

“We’ll make sure she doesn’t.” Noah gives my hand a squeeze as my air

gets lodged in my chest. While the big guy has done some pretty sweet things for me, this is the one that tips my world off its axis. Being boyfriends, moving in, those things are stages in a relationship that may or may not last. Committing to take care of the only mother I've ever known... That's *permanent*.

"Hey." Luca suddenly perks up. "You're out in public and walking just fine. That means you're coming back to the team, right?"

I try not to tense—it's not like I didn't know this was coming—but I'm even less thrilled about Noah traveling with Luca than I realized. *Apparently, having a boyfriend makes me possessive.*

Noah rubs his thumb over the back of my hand, sensing my distress, I think. "I'll start practice Monday, but it'll still probably be a few weeks before I'm in a game, just to be safe."

"Gauthier's killing it and all," Niko starts, "but it'll be nice to have you back. His reflexes are a hair too slow for my liking."

"Slower than mine maybe, but not slow. He's a big part of the reason we aren't too far out of first in the conference," Noah points out.

"Agreed." Niko nods vigorously. "I just feel a little more at ease with you."

The guys dissolve into a conversation about cold stuff while I sip my drink and marvel over the fact that I just shared what I did. It's not that I was ashamed of what happened, lots of kids have shit parents that make their lives miserable. It was more about not wanting to put myself in a vulnerable position again by trusting people who could eventually hurt me. And rather than be offended I didn't open up, the people at this table accepted it without question.

I didn't expect that.

Given the way they acted when Niko and Xander came out to them, and

even Noah, I probably should've realized they'd accept me too. But I'm not on their team, and I kept Xander at arm's length for years. I didn't give any of them much reason to be so tolerant of me. Hell, I probably baited them to push me away instead, but they're still here.

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By the time we get home it's nearly midnight, and we're both exhausted. That doesn't stop Noah from pinning me against the door the second we get inside.

"Do you have any idea how hard it was to keep my hands off you when you look this sexy?" He licks up my neck, over my jaw, and takes my mouth in a searing, possessive kiss.

I bite my lip suggestively when he pulls back to look at me. "The un-tied tie and open collar really do it for you, huh?"

"You have no idea." He nuzzles my chest, just above the open shirt.

"Oh, I think I do. Just remember, you're the one who made the PDA rules, not me. I'd have happily played with your cock under the table." I reach for it now, palming the hard bulge over his pants.

"I'm a patient man. I don't mind waiting for the things I really want."

"And what is it you really want?" I flex my fingers around him, enjoying the way he fills my hand. Nice and long and thick.

"You... In my mouth." He nibbles along my jaw as he works my pants open, dropping to his knees when he has them parted just enough to pull my boxers off my dick, but not so much that they fall from my hips. When I start to take off my shirt—being naked while he's clothed seems to be my new favorite kink—he reaches up to stop me. "Leave it on. I like seeing you so polished and so dirty at the same time."

*When he puts it that way...*

Keeping my hands trapped in his, Noah leans forward and places a feather-light kiss on my tip as his eyes flutter closed. He repeats the gesture again and again, peppering my skin with tiny little waves of pleasure that fan over my length the way water ripples when it's disturbed by a stone. This might be the first time anyone's actually kissed my dick, and it's more enticing than I could've imagined.

When he's covered every inch with his soft lips, Noah parts his mouth and gives me his tongue, leisurely swirling it around my crown a few times before sucking gently on the head. Releasing our hands so he can hold me in his grip, mine find their way to his hair, undoing the tie that holds it back so I can thread my fingers through the silky strands. A soft sigh sends a wave of hot air over my damp skin, and we both shudder.

Using the flat of his tongue, Noah laps at my slit like he enjoys my taste, then takes me into his mouth. Closing his lips around my crown, he slurps me delicately, swiping his tongue over my sensitive flesh with each pull. Despite the fragile treatment, my thighs quake, pent up desire and adrenaline threatening to unleash within me and take control.

Though the gentle pace is completely foreign, it's satisfying as hell, and my restraint starts to wane. I flex my fingers against Noah's scalp, guiding him over me as I push forward. Slow and steady, the wet slide of his tongue lavishes every inch of my length. The gentle glide of his mouth is both teasing and tender, like he enjoys taking me as much as I enjoy him doing it. That's... Hot seems too common a word to describe it. More like mesmerizing.

As he takes me to the back of his throat, Noah's hooded eyes lock with mine. He watches my chest rise with each breath, and my lips part on a soft moan. With strong hands, he guides my pants off my hips and runs his

fingertips up and down my thighs. My balls ache as he palms them, a lone finger applying the slightest amount of pressure to my hole. I flatten myself against the wall to keep upright as a torrent of sensations bombards me. The tenuous grasp on my self-discipline is ready to snap.

My cock glistens with Noah's saliva as he unhurriedly bobs his head over my length, a satisfied groan rumbling around it as he pushes deeper. Watching it sink gradually into his mouth, it occurs to me, I've never had such a gentle blow job. Never had a gentle encounter period until the big guy, but getting sucked off all sweet-like... Even guys who love sucking cock tend to rush, slurping and slobbering all over the place. Don't get me wrong, a messy, wet blow job is an excellent way to get my dick hard, but to get hard while making me feel like I'm important... Treasured even. That's some lovey-dovey...

*Holy shit!*

*Is that what this is? Does Noah love me? I know he likes me—he's said that much—but does he love me? Do I love him?*

The man did just publicly claim me, and hint that he'd take care of Rose, and when I think of the coming weeks, months, years... For the first time in my life, I don't like the thought of spending that time alone. I want him to be there. And since the L word doesn't appear to be giving me hives...wow!  
*Shit!*

*I think I love him.*

It could be the impending orgasm making my brain all fuzzy, but I feel like this is something I need to tell him. Something he needs to know. Probably not while my dick's in his mouth, though.

Using strength I didn't know I possessed, I yank Noah off my cock and slam our mouths together, plunging my tongue against his. The kiss is urgent,

desperate, like I need it more than I need my next breath. Like the force of it could fuse us together forever or some shit like that, so neither of us will be alone again. And then I taste myself on his tongue, mixed with his musky flavor, and my frenzy starts to wane. Something about the two of us together softens the kiss, morphing from feverish need into this overwhelming sense of peace and belonging.

This would be the perfect time to confess how I feel, and it's on the tip of my tongue to do just that. But I can't get the words out. I've never said them to another person. Never heard them in return. Not even from my parents, who weren't the affectionate type even before I was old enough to really piss them off. It makes me question whether I can trust my emotions, so instead of saying something profound, I say, "Bedroom. Now."

When we get to his room Noah sets me gently on the bed and tugs my shoes and pants off before undoing my shirt. He pauses to look at me when I'm gloriously naked but he still resembles Thor dressed up as James Bond.

"Take your dick out and fuck me," I rasp breathlessly.

Noah starts to remove his jacket and I shake my head vigorously. "Just your dick. Like you're in the middle of something super important and don't have time to get naked but you have to be inside me."

"Some fantasy of yours?" He arches a brow but pulls his cock out like I asked.

"I'm making this up as I go." I pull the lube from the nightstand and drizzle some in my hand, rubbing my palms together before wrapping them around Noah's cock and slicking him up while he hovers over me in his sexy tux. "I just really like the idea of getting fucked by a man dressed like a billionaire."

"Millionaire," he corrects as I stroke over his length, getting him nice and slippery. "I don't have that much money."

“Humor me, big guy.” I lay on my back and spread my legs, hooking them behind my knees. With an exaggerated sigh, Noah lines himself up and pushes into me. His head falls back as he bottoms out, his prominent Adam’s apple bobbing when he swallows thickly. *I don’t think I’m supposed to need a spank bank anymore now that I have a boyfriend, but for the times he’s traveling, this right here is going in it.*

Holding my breath, I wait for him to move. To start pounding into me like a man on a mission, but he doesn’t. He just stands there, balls deep like I’m some sort of cock warmer. It’d be pretty hot if I wasn’t desperate for the friction of movement.

“Remember, you don’t have a lot of time,” I prompt. “Get to the fucking.”

“No.”

“*No?*”

“You heard me. I’ll keep the tux on like you asked, but I’m not rushing this.” To emphasize his point, he pulls out excruciatingly slow, then presses back in, rotating his hips when he’s fully seated so his crown rubs all over my prostate.

“*Holy fucking mother of god,*” I groan. “Where did you learn how to do that?”

He pummels me with a series of short, rapid pumps, jackhammering that sensitive bundle of nerves before retreating and pressing back in leisurely. “I didn’t learn it. I’m making it up as I go.” He steals my line, but I’m too blissed out to comment on it.

*All this time I thought I was well acquainted with my prostate, but it turns out the real key to nirvana is my boyfriend’s dick.*

“Can you reach your dick like that?” Noah asks as his pelvis tilts forward.

Though I’m bent like a pretzel, it’s not a stretch. I nod.

“Good. Wrap your hand around it.”

I do as he says with a soft groan. “Can I jerk it?”

“No, just hold it. Squeeze to keep yourself from coming if you need to, but nothing else.”

I want to huff in displeasure. Instead, another moan passes through my lips as Noah circles his hips, the fat head of his cock kissing my pleasure center before pounding it and disappearing...*again*. Over and over, he teases me to the brink and backs off, the slight frown of concentration completing the image of a sophisticated man getting ready to bust a nut in his favorite hole.

It’s sinful, and beautiful, and it makes me near delirious with ecstasy as the tension in my groin coils tighter and tighter. It’s the single hottest moment of my life, pushing me toward what could be an epic orgasm. But I can’t help feeling like something’s missing.

Hockey god looking extra sexy in his suave tux... Check.

His thick dick filling me to the brink... Check.

Full lips slightly parted, gasping for air as he tries to maintain control... Fuck, that’s it.

“Kiss me,” I blurt.

“What?”

“I’m about to come, and I want your mouth on me when I do. Kiss me.”

Noah pins my wrists above my head as he collapses on top of me, trapping my swollen cock between us. With our fingers laced together, he drives into me long and deep as his mouth gently meets mine.

Our tongues slide together, giving and receiving the love we confessed only moments ago, and making my heart thump in my chest. *This is what I needed. His lips on mine, sharing our air as our bodies tumble into heavenly oblivion.... It's perfect.*

The orgasm starts as a series of tiny quakes, short but powerful bursts that make me gasp from their intensity. It quickly morphs into a full body tremor, trapping my breath in my lungs as my body bucks upward. My ass clenches around Noah's cock as if it could somehow take him deeper.

I breathe a soundless cry against his lips as he shudders inside me, his warm cum filling me as my own spreads between our joined stomachs. And while it's every bit as filthy as I hoped it would be, it's also hauntingly beautiful. The way our heartbeats pulse in sync as our eyes manage to lock together in the dark room... I'll never forget it.

Tentatively, I tilt my chin up, so my lips brush against Noah's.

"Yes," I whisper between kisses.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I want to move in with you." I bite my lip, waiting for his reaction.

He pulls my lip away from my teeth with his thumb and gives me a lingering kiss. "Good, because this is where you belong."

I know this makes me the world's biggest cheeseball, but even though I still have to go through the whole moving thing, hearing him say that makes me feel like I'm already home.

## Chapter 23 - Noah

“Will you build me a pool?” Tripp asks as we’re packing up his room.

“If I build a *swimming* pool I’m going to use it to swim.”

“Who said anything about swimming?”

I’ll build this man whatever he wants, but I see no reason why I can’t have a little fun at his expense first. “As far as I’m concerned there’s only one use for a pool, and that’s to put water in it. Besides, there’s a perfectly good *empty* pool down the street. You and Xander can skate in that and swim in ours.”

“There’s a major flaw in your plan.” He stuffs a pile of t-shirts into a duffel bag sitting open on the bed. “If our pool has water we’ll have Xander, Niko, Luca and Justus hanging around all the time.”

“Where’s the flaw in that?”

“If they’re always around it will really cut into our sexy times.”

“How much sex are you planning to have?” I empty his sock drawer into the bag sitting on his dresser.

“Noah Tremblay, do not pretend to be ignorant about this. Live-in boyfriends get sex morning, noon and night. It’s the most important requirement.”

I lift my brows in mock surprise. “There are requirements for living together?”

“Several.” He raises his forefinger. “First, do *not* wake me up at the ass crack of dawn if you have to go to practice or catch a flight or something. Second,” he raises another finger. “If you do wake me up at the ass crack of dawn, the only acceptable way to do so is with a complimentary blow job.”

Third, I get to wear your clothes but you can't wear mine because they're too small, boxer-briefs excluded because your cock will look fantastic in my smaller underwear. Fourth, the aforementioned sex, and fifth," he lifts a final finger, "while it's not a rule per se I propose we don't need clothes in the house."

"I accept your terms." I hold my hand out for him to shake it. "Except for the last one. If you're naked all the time I'll be hard all the time, and there are some things it's not smart to do with an erection."

"Name one."

"Cooking."

"Pfft. You have a chef for that."

"True, but you like when I cook for you and neither of us wants me to burn my dick because I'm distracted by your sexy ass."

Tripp purses his lips as he seems to consider my point, finally taking my hand when he relents. "I suppose preserving your manhood is an acceptable reason not to be naked all the time."

Once I have his hand in mine I pull him toward me and slam our mouths together, swiping my tongue against his as I tease the hair on the back of his neck. "I'm glad you agree," I rumble. "Now let's finish packing."

"So bossy." He stuffs more shirts in the bag, concentrating for about two minutes before he speaks up again. "Can I have an office?"

"Don't you have one of those already?"

"Not for my *job*, job, although I'm not giving up on the work from home idea. For my hobby job, helping local bands."

I've been so focused on my recovery I forgot all about that passion of his, which makes me feel like shit. I know how much he likes working with bands—one of the first conversations we had was when I ran into him at a

concert and he showed me what he was doing with his video equipment—and he hasn't been to a concert since he started crashing at my place.

“You haven't missed any work because of me, have you?”

“It's not work, it's a hobby. And no, I haven't missed any. I've missed several shows while I was taking care of your ass, but since that ass is now mine I'll forgive you.” He cracks one of those shirts on my backside before tucking it into the bag.

I throw a pair of socks at his head. “Yes, you can have an office. If you take me to the concerts with you.”

“Um duh. My famous boyfriend is my backstage ticket, so of course you're going with me. I might even add that to my list of live-in-boyfriend requirements. It'd be a shame for me not to meet fancy people because my fancy boyfriend isn't there to flex his name.”

“So, you're just using me for my celebrity access?”

“And your big fat cock.” He flings the socks at my crotch, but I catch them before they hit the target and put them in the bag. “Fucking goalies,” he mutters.

“Hey now. It's a good thing my reflexes are so fast, otherwise with your aim you might jeopardize the morning, noon and night sex you're counting on.”

“Omigosh” Tripp's eyes go comically wide. “I don't know why I never thought of this before, but you literally put your body in front of flying objects. What happens if you take a puck to the dick?”

*Of course that's his biggest concern.* “I wear protection.”

“Yes, but how much can those pads really protect you? I don't like the idea of my most prized possession being in the line of fire. I mean, I'm happy to kiss it all better if it gets hit, but I don't think my kisses can fix a bent carrot.”

“Bent carrot?” I arch an eyebrow.

“Haven’t you ever seen the commercials?” He rolls his eyes. “Penile trauma is a thing. They can give you medicine, but I’m not sure that’s a cure. Your cock fits in me perfectly, and I’d prefer not to mess with perfection.”

“Perfection, huh?” I stifle a laugh. “And here I thought *your* cock was your most prized possession?”

He waves a hand dismissively. “It’s more of a tie at this point. I mean, I guess I could exclusively top, but I really do like to switch. How close are you to retirement? I’m not sure how long I can live with the stress of you suffering permanent damage.”

Knowing Tripp, I have no doubt he’s legitimately concerned about the well-being of my penis. But I suspect that pales in comparison to what’s really going on in his head, and this little rant is his way of coping with whatever’s on his mind.

“Are you having second thoughts about moving in?” I ask.

“What?” He feigns ignorance.

“You’re rambling even more than usual. Why are you freaking out?”

“The fact that you know I’m freaking out, for starters,” he mumbles.

“And?” I take a seat on the bed and pull him onto my lap.

Tripp rests his head on my chest, I think so he doesn’t have to look at me. “Since running into my parents, I’ve been remembering little things about living with them. Like how they’d complain that I was too loud. Or too messy. Or always in the way. And I know that I was probably just a normal kid and not doing anything wrong, but... I haven’t lived with anyone since then...”

“You’re worried I might say the same things?” I rub my hand along his spine.

“Yeah. And I know that’s stupid because I’ve been staying with you for a month already and you haven’t said anything like that, but if you did I could always come back here.”

I kiss the top of his head. “And you’re afraid of not having a place to retreat to if something goes wrong.”

He relaxes against my chest. “Yeah.”

“You know moving in with me doesn’t mean you have to give this place up. I never want you to feel trapped.”

“I don’t feel trapped. Not consciously. And this sucks because I know you’re nothing like them, but their shit keeps popping into my head.”

In some ways I get what Tripp’s going through. Every once in a while I’ll remember something about my parents out of the blue, and it’ll paralyze me. The difference is those memories are happy, and the paralysis is almost welcome because it forces me to relive a good time in my life. It keeps me from forgetting them. In Tripp’s case the memories are traumatic, and the paralysis is borne of fear of being abandoned or homeless. I don’t know how to help him get through that except to give him time and space. And if the space part of that equation is keeping this condo, even if that’s just a mental security blanket, I’ll give that to him. With a twist.

“What if you give this place to Rose?”

“Like put it in her name?” Tripp sits up straight, glancing at me with the softer expression I’m starting to see more and more of.

“If you want. Or leave it in your name but have her move in. Either way, it’ll be here if you need it, so you never have to worry about not having somewhere to go.”

“She does deserve a place of her own after all the shit she put up with from my parents.”

“What sort of shit was that?”

Tripp fiddles with a hangnail as he answers. “Emotional abuse mostly, same as me. Telling her her work wasn’t good enough, that she cooked things wrong, that it was her fault I was a handful. I always wondered why she put up with it. I know now she stayed because of the green card thing, at least after they kicked me out, but before that I think she stayed for me.” He brings his glassy eyes to mine, and I wrap him in my arms.

“So, what do you think?” I sift my fingers through his hair to comfort him. “Keep this as a safe place for the two of you?”

“I think we’d both like that.”

“We’ll make it happen, then.”

Tripp pulls back and places the sweetest kiss on my lips. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“So.” A sly smile spreads across his face. “Where did we land on the whole pool thing?”

I lift him off my lap and playfully smack his ass. “Finish packing. Then maybe we’ll talk.”

“Yes, Daddy.” He quips, and I can’t even correct him since he’s too fucking cute.

## Chapter 24 - Tripp

The bell echoes on the other side of the door, and while I wait for the judge—Uncle Callahan—to answer. I briefly wish I’d taken Noah up on his offer to come with me, but he has practice, and deep down I know this is something I need to do on my own.

Seeing my parents rattled me more than I’d like to admit, and the hardened exterior I’d honed to perfection over the years started to crack. I know that’s not all bad, I was too isolated and independent before, but I’m too wary and unsure of myself after coming face-to-face with my past.

Noah has been exceptionally patient and understanding while I sort through the things I never really dealt with, and while I don’t think he minds taking care of me—that’s kind of his personality—I don’t want to be the kind of man who needs to be coddled. Prior to the run-in with my folks, I wasn’t, and I want that back. No, scratch that. I want to find a balance between taking care of myself and letting him take care of me.

“Preston,” Uncle Callahan booms as he opens the door.

“Tripp, actually,” I correct him as I step inside.

“Right. Sorry. That might take a little getting used to.”

“It’s okay.” I follow him as he leads us to his office, a room in dark cherry wood with an ornate desk and a wall of books. It’s everything I imagined a judge’s office would look like. Even though this is a friendly visit, I can’t help feeling a little like I’m in a principal’s office, about to be interrogated.

He gestures to one of the wingback chairs as he takes a seat behind the desk. “Rose is packing her bags. I thought we might catch up until she’s ready.”

“Sure.”

“First off, I’d like to say I’m sorry.”

“What?” I balk. “Why are you sorry?”

Uncle Callahan props his elbows on the armrest and steepled his fingers together. “I always knew your parents weren’t really the parental type. They were both rather ambitious, even back in college, and in truth I think that’s why we became friends since I was the same way.” A wistful smile flashes across his face before he becomes serious again. “You were a bit of a surprise, and while I knew they continued to put your father’s career first even after you arrived, I did think you were being treated well at home.”

He takes a deep breath before continuing, “I knew you and your father butted heads of course, but that was no different than any other father and son relationship. At least not that I saw, and having no child of my own, I didn’t feel qualified to second guess my friend. Not even when they shipped you off to a military academy for getting caught up in drugs.”

My eyes widen on their own accord as my jaw drops.

“Yes, I knew about that. A few joints clearly intended for personal use wouldn’t have landed you in too much trouble, but I stepped in to help make that go away at your father’s request. They told me it was because of the drug incident that they sent you to school, although I now know they kicked you out.”

“Then they told you I became a doctor.” I put the pieces together. “And you believed that?”

“I did find it strange since I knew you to be an artistic kid, but military schools aren’t exactly known for their art programs, so I thought it was possible you discovered an aptitude for science.”

“You didn’t think it was strange that I never came home?”

“Since I knew you weren’t overly close with your parents, no. Plus, they spend half their time in Washington, so I had no reason to think they were making up stories that you visited them there.”

I chew my lip, considering his words. “The lack of family photos wasn’t a clue?”

“Are there *any* family photos in their house?”

“Good point.” I laugh without any humor. “Still, you’re their closest friend.”

“*Was*. We haven’t been close in years. Your father’s ambition out-paced mine a long time ago. While we kept in touch sporadically, that was more out of a sense of obligation than desire. We’re both prominent men in the community, and our decades-long friendship has been well-documented. It was easier to go through the motions than to sever ties. That’s why I owe you an apology. Your parents and I may have drifted apart, but I was still your Godfather, and I failed you.”

This is a lot to take in, and while part of me wishes he had done more when I was a kid, I can see how my parents manipulated him the same way they did me.

“*They* failed me, not *you*.”

“I’m a grown man, son. I can admit when I’ve screwed up, but I’d like to do better going forward. If you’re open to that.”

Not that long ago it was just me. And maybe Xander in a platonic way. Now I have a boyfriend, several friends, the only mother I’ve ever known and possibly an uncle in my life. It’s been a weird several weeks.

“Um, yeah. I’m open to that.”

“Wonderful.” His smile is almost blinding. “Maybe you and that young man of yours can come over for dinner. I’d love to hear more about how you

helped him after his injury.”

“You remember the part about me not being a doctor, right?”

“Of course, but he said you helped him get through it.” Uncle Callahan’s brow wrinkles.

“Yeah, you probably don’t want the details on that.” *Omigod am I blushing? I don’t blush. What is happening?*

“Perhaps not.” Uncle Callahan clears his throat. “He’s special to you though, yes?”

“I—” It’s on the tip of my tongue to downplay my feelings since they still terrify me, but I can’t get the lie out.

Somewhere in the midst of helping Noah sort his shit, he helped me sort mine. Not that either of us realized I was the bigger mess when we made our little arrangement, but he’s taking it in stride, and while I still have my moments of panic, deep down I know he’ll be there to help me get through it. That my man will do anything for me, because he loves me.

*He loves me.*

And I totally, completely, unequivocally, love him.

“Yes. He’s special to me.”

Uncle Callahan gives me a warm smile. “I’m happy to hear that, son. You deserve it.”

“It doesn’t bother you that I’m with a man?”

Now, *he* seems to turn a little pink in the cheeks. “There’s a reason I never married, son.”

“You... You’re gay?” When he doesn’t say anything I continue. “And you’re still in the closet.”

“You’re a lot braver than I ever was. Than I am.” Uncle Callahan looks at me like... *Wow, this is... Is he proud of me? It sort of feels like he is. I...*

“I’m ready, Mr. Tripp.” Rose pokes her head into the office right before I can spiral into unfamiliar emotional territory. *Good timing.*

Uncle Callahan stands when I do, stepping around the desk to give me a hug. I know we did this at my parent’s party, but it still feels weird. Not bad, just different. I don’t hate it though, so I return the embrace.

“I’ll uh... I’ll call you. About dinner?”

“Please do.”

He escorts us out and helps us get Rose’s bags into the car. There are only a few since it seems my parents kept her on a pretty tight leash the last few years, but if the smile on her face is any indication, she’s not concerned about the lack of personal items. She’s just happy to be out of their house.

I’m not sure we’ll ever talk about them—I get the sense we’d both rather move on—but I’ll listen if she ever needs me to. I do have one question though.

“What are you going to do with all your free time?” Between the condo I’m giving her and the cash Uncle Callahan got her in exchange for not pressing charges, at Rose’s request, she doesn’t need to work anymore.

“Nothing, Mr. Tripp. Absolutely nothing.”

“I think that sounds perfect. Can I ask you one favor though?”

She looks at me curiously, but like any mother would, she says. “Of course.”

“Teach me how to cook your ramen? I want to introduce Noah to the comfort food I had growing up.”

Rose bobs her head slightly. “I’d be honored.”

## Chapter 25 - Noah

It's been heaven to be back on the ice.

Honestly, just walking is paradise after not being able to for several weeks. You never realize how much you move throughout the day until you suddenly can't. Everything from cooking to going to the bathroom, to just trying to find the damn TV remote, becomes a whole production when you have to do it on one leg. Don't even get me started on how hard it is to actually stand up off the couch with one leg and a set of crutches.

Finally putting my skates on and taking the goal, even just for practice, was like having this oppressive weight lifted off my chest. It didn't just make me feel independent again the way walking did, it was the difference between a wheezing breath and filling your lungs full of air. Feeling whole. If I'm being honest, the void I felt from not getting on the ice was considerably smaller than it would've been if I didn't have Tripp. So much so, a part of me is kind of dreading this road trip we're about to go on.

I'm excited to play again, but for the first time in my professional career, I'm not amped about the travel part of playing hockey. After years of staying in hotels, I prefer my own bed, but hotels aside, I usually look forward to seeing new places. It can be grueling, yet it can also be a great way to bond with my teammates. That was when I had no one to say goodbye to, no one waiting for me at home. Now, I do.

Between getting back on the ice and having Tripp move in, I'm privileged to say there's nothing I could want that I don't have, which makes it difficult to admit I'm a little sad about leaving for this road trip.

I'm practical enough to realize that means my love for Tripp might surpass my love of the game, and given my age... Let's just say, I'll have some deep thinking to do at the end of the season. For now, I just need to get through the next four days.

I toss some sweats, similar to the ones I'm wearing, in my duffel and open the dresser drawer to find some t-shirts while Tripp watches me from his perch on the bed.

"Don't you have to be all fancy and shit when you travel?" he asks.

"We have to dress up to go to the arena, but we can be comfortable the rest of the time. Fortunately, we go straight to the hotel when we land so I don't have to travel in a suit."

"Do you have to travel in gray sweatpants, though?"

"What's wrong with gray sweatpants?"

Tripp's jaw nearly drops to the floor. "They're the equivalent of kryptonite for anyone who likes cock, man or woman."

"Really?"

"Yes." He gives me an exasperated look. "Plus, I don't think they're very conducive to hiding that monster between your legs, and I definitely don't want people posting pictures of my second favorite cock all over social media."

"I follow the second favorite thing since yours is obviously your first, but you lost me at social media."

"Omigod, seriously? You don't know that people will take pictures and zoom in on the crotch and talk about how big the package behind the zipper is? Since those sweats don't have a zipper they won't leave nearly as much to the imagination."

I glance down my body, noting that from different angles he may have a

point. Still, it seems crazy to me that people might take such an interest in how I look in my pants. The cross look on Tripp's face tells me I'm the one who's under-reacting.

"Should I wear a pair of jeans?"

"You'll probably still look hot as fuck, but I suppose that's better than broadcasting your assets," he grumbles as he reclines against the headboard.

"Help me understand this," I say as I ditch the sweats and pull on a pair of jeans. "You've been speculating about the size of my cock for the better part of a year, yet you're worried about other people doing that same thing? Why?"

"That cock is *mine* to ogle, no one else's."

"Oh my gosh." I pause with the pants resting on my hips, still unfastened. "You're possessive."

"What? Am not."

"You totally are." A giant grin spreads over my face as I cross the room to sit on the bed, right at his hip, and lean in to nip at his chin. "You want me all to yourself."

"That doesn't make me possessive." He tilts his head so I can kiss his neck.

"No? What does it make you?"

"Protective," he says resolutely. "You wouldn't believe some of the comments people make. Depending on the angle, people could imply that you're woefully inadequate or hiding a can of Pringles. I'm saving you from rampant mischaracterization."

"You know the only opinion that matters is yours, right?" I cup the back of his head and tease my fingers through his hair as I give his earlobe a playful bite. "I don't care what people say about me or my body."

"Yes, well a man's penis is sacred. It shouldn't be seen by just anyone."

That statement gives me pause, and I pull back to look him in the eye. “I know you believe that first part, but the second is a little out of character. If you could legally do it, you’d charge admission to let people take a peek at yours. What’s this really about?”

Tripp rolls his eyes with an audible huff. “I wouldn’t do that *now*. And nothing’s going on.”

“Tripp,” I prod, resting my palm on the back of his neck.

“Ugh, fine. I know what happens on these little *road trips*.” He makes air quotes to emphasize that last part. “And I’m not a fan.”

Tilting my head to the side I search his face for some clue about what he’s trying to say and come up empty. “I’m not following.”

He exhales a frustrated breath. “You and Luca and the peek-a-boo pregame nonsense.”

*Me and... Oh shit! I never told him we ended that.*

“Tripp.” I rest my forehead against his. “I told Luca I can’t do that anymore.”

“I... You... When?”

“Weeks ago. He was getting in his head about a bad game and said he couldn’t wait for me to get back so he could get back on track, and I told him we needed to find another option.”

“Why?” It’s barely a whisper.

It’s hard to see with our heads so close together, still I do my best to lock eyes with him. “Because I didn’t feel right being in that situation with him when I’m with you.”

“We weren’t even together then. We were just—”

“I know.” I sigh, closing my eyes.

“But, aren’t superstitions a big deal? Like it could mess up your season,

kind of big deal?”

“Yes.”

“And Luca’s okay with this?” Tripp pulls back to look at me, a wary expression on his face.

“He was nervous at first, but he understood where I was coming from, so he made other arrangements.”

“Where were you coming from?” he whispers.

“I think you know.” I hold his gaze, praying I haven’t spooked him with that implication.

Tripp inhales deeply, holding his breath for what feels like an eternity. Then he leans forward to brush his lips over mine. “I love you.”

Now it’s my turn to suck in a startled breath, though I recover much faster since I’ve been ready to say this for weeks, and was just waiting for him to catch up. Cupping his face in my hands, I lean my forehead against his. “I love you, too.”

Tripp’s body visibly relaxes just before his lips meet mine in a tender kiss. Then the spike of adrenaline from admitting his feelings catches up with him and he starts rambling. “That’s really cool of Luca to let you off the hook because of me. Seriously though, where’d that ritual even come from? I know people do lots of weird shit in the name of good luck or whatever, but that’s got to be the weirdest superstition I’ve ever heard.”

“I always figured Luca would tell me if he felt like it, and he never did, so your guess is as good as mine. I’m just glad he found a way to make the arrangement he has for home games work for the away ones too. At least I assume that’s what he did since he’s been playing well these last few games.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t suggest I watch, too.” Tripp snorts.

“He did.” I stroke his stubbled cheek with my thumb. “I ruled it out because

the only person I want to share that kind of intimacy with is you.”

Tripp gives me a relieved smile and leans forward like he’s going to kiss me before pulling back abruptly. “Wait. If you told him to figure something else out a few weeks ago then you told that dick how you felt about me before telling me?”

“I thought you liked Luca?”

“I called him a dick, *right?*”

“And you like dicks,” I finish for him.

“Exactly. I still don’t want him seeing yours, though. I also don’t like that he knows stuff about you I don’t.” Tripp crosses his arms in front of his chest and puffs out his bottom lip.

“And you’re not possessive?” I fight back a smile.

“Nope.” He shakes his head firmly back and forth.

“Brat.”

“That’s been well established. And you love it.”

I lean forward until our lips are just barely touching. “I really do.”

Tripp’s lips meet mine for the sweetest, most perfect kiss. And then he squeals when I scoop him into my arms.

“Um...lover. If you want to carry me, I recommend tossing me over your shoulder. It’s more dignified than treating me like a damsel.”

“Lover?”

“We said the ‘L’ word. Besides, it’ll make Xander gag, so it can’t be all bad.”

“I’m gonna ignore the fact you brought up someone else’s name while I’m carrying you to bed and say I’m more comfortable with boyfriends. But I still love you.”

He flashes a bashful smile, which is a new look for him, but might just be

my favorite. “I love you, too.”

*I will never get tired of hearing that.*

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“How long have you been dating Preston Cooper?” The reporter asks when I point to him.

“I don’t know a Preston Cooper.” Honestly the question doesn’t bother me—I expected it since Tripp’s identity was finally unearthed yesterday—I just want to poke a little fun at the press for asking me about my boyfriend before they bring up the first game I’ve played in six weeks. And since my boyfriend is a brat, I have a pretty good idea how to make my point.

“Preston... Changed his name to Tripp ten years ago,” the guy prompts.

“Why didn’t you say Tripp then? I mean, I assume if someone changes their name, they’d like to be known by the new one instead of the old one. Isn’t that reporter 101? Getting the facts straight?”

“How long have you been dating Tripp Cooper?” he rephrases.

“Can we really call it dating? We’ve only been out in public once, and I feel like the term dating implies multiple outings, not just one.”

“How long have you been seeing him?”

*Damn, he’s persistent. I knew two out and proud men on the same team would get attention, but jeez.*

“Since I first looked at him. Just like I’ve been seeing you since the first time I looked at you. Recognition is pretty cool like that. Did you know there’s a condition where you don’t recognize people’s faces? I can never remember what it’s called—I don’t have it obviously—but I’ve always wondered about it.”

I point to the next reporter since that one’s out of questions.

“Did you know Tripp was the son of Senator Charles Cooper when you met

him?”

“Is that customary? I wasn’t aware that was something I should know about people I just met. I’ll probably need to make a list because I know a lot of people, and this could get confusing.”

She, too, sits with a harumph, and I point to the next.

“Bit of a rocky start this season, first the injury then the drama with Senator Cooper after the charity event, are you a distraction for this team?” He tilts his recorder so the microphone is pointed at me.

*Ouch. That’s not the direction I thought this would go, but at least now we’re talking about hockey.*

“Both of those things are in the past, so I don’t believe they’ll be a factor going forward.”

“Maybe not, but you’re also one of two openly gay men on the same roster, and that’s a unique scenario that might take the focus off the team.”

“I’m not overly concerned, seeing as the only people focusing on it are members of the press.”

“You don’t think two gay players on the same team is newsworthy?” he follows up.

“Statistically speaking, one in every eight men identifies as gay, which doesn’t include anyone identifying as bi or pan or demi, and there are twenty on this roster, so... If there are two gay men on the team, I’d say we’re right in line with the national average.” If there’s one thing travel gives me plenty of time for, it’s reading, and I may have brushed up on a few facts in preparation for the questions I knew would come my way.

“*If* there are two gay men?” He arches a skeptical brow.

I look to the players and coaches lining the wings of the room. “Did I miss an announcement that I’m gay? I don’t remember making a statement like

that.”

“You’re dating a man,” the reporter presses.

“When was that established?”

“You don’t think this exchange will be distracting to your teammates?” He changes tactics.

“I’m only answering the questions you ask.” I hold my hands up like I’m innocent.

“You’re not answering, you’re evading.”

“Ask me a question about hockey and I’ll answer.”

“This team fell short in the playoffs last year and is already four games out of first. Can you turn things around?” He studies me critically.

“Considering we just won today, I’d say so.”

“That’s only one win.”

“I have faith in us.”

“Why?”

“Because if we fall seven times, we’ll get up eight.” I wink, just for Tripp, who I know is watching.

Later that night, my phone beeps with an incoming video call, and before I can even say hello, Tripp bombards me. “I don’t know a Preston. Is that customary? Statistically speaking. Omigod I about came in my pants. You make one sexy brat.”

“Well, I learned from the best.” I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

“Damn right. Now flip the screen and show me your gorgeous cock. It’s been way too long since I’ve seen it.”

“You saw it yesterday,” I remind him while doing what he says.

“Exactly. That’s entirely too long.”

# Epilogue

TWO YEARS LATER

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” I grumble, wincing as the tattoo gun hits my skin.

“Oh, come on, it’s not that painful. I’m sure you’ve taken a puck that hurt worse.” Tripp rolls his eyes.

“It’s not the pain I’m complaining about.”

“You don’t like my artwork?”

“I love the artwork. Or I did until you told me about its alternative meaning.”

Despite having rings that say we belong to each other, Tripp wasn’t satisfied with something that could be removed, so he talked me into matching tattoos. He drew up a design with two hockey sticks framing a skateboard like a heart, and our initials in an elegant old English-style text. Then he shaded it to look sort of vintage.

“I mean, it’s not inaccurate.” He smirks mischievously as the second hockey stick gets inked onto my skin, crossing over top of the first.

“The rings on our fingers already say we’re crossing swords. We don’t need a literal picture of crossing swords on our arms.”

“Technically it’s crossing hockey sticks.” Tripp points to the blade as evidence while Jim tries to hide his laughter and ends up snorting instead.

“Did you know he was sneaking hidden meanings into the design?” I ask the man who helped Tripp get off the streets.

“It’s Tripp.” He shrugs as he gets more ink on the needle. “I sort of assume there’s always a double meaning to anything he does.”

“The guys are never gonna let me live this down.” My head thunks against the back of the chair as I try to remind myself that I asked him to marry me because I knew life would never be boring.

“We could’ve put them on our asses, like I first suggested,” Tripp unhelpfully says.

“Yeah, because when I’m old and decrepit I want the equivalent of a wrinkled raisin on my ass.”

“But they’d be *matching* wrinkled raisins.”

“I thought the whole point was to show that we’re together.” I sigh heavily.

“These do, and personally I think I nailed it. I mean, look at all the little Easter eggs in this design. Your hobbies, my hobbies, all bundled up in a little heart that screams *gay pride* to boot. Tell me that’s not poetic.”

“Still not gay,” I remind him.

“For me you are.” He bites his adorable bottom lip like the little brat he is, and my agitation fades instantly.

“Yeah, Tripp.” I smile affectionately. I stopped trying to figure out what label fit me best once I realized that didn’t change how I felt about him. Still, he’s never been more right. “For you I am.”



# Chapter Ten

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# Tripp

**X**ander and I have been skating for nearly an hour by the time Luca, Justus and Noah show up, joining Niko on the pool deck to watch while they have a few beers. Usually, I don't mind an audience—I'm a show-off by nature—but Noah's eyes on me have my stomach doing flips. Its a feeling I enjoy—fuck, maybe even crave—but it's typically a result of gravity bringing me back to Earth after soaring over the rim of the pool, not because of Thor.

Last night might have been the hottest encounter of my life, the first night with him a close second, and neither of those progressed to the point where I had to wrap my dick. Or his.

I always thought the best orgasms required sex, and the fact that doesn't seem to be true with him is fucking with my head. So the urge to do it again, to want more of him in every carnal way—more than I did a few days ago—that's not normal for me.

I'm no stranger to chemistry or sexual tension. I live for the chase, but once I get what I want, the desire fades... just not with Noah. Is that because we haven't fucked? Have our little encounters served to tease me? It's possible.

Maybe once we've gone all the way, the lust will fade. At least, I'm hoping it will.

By then, Noah will have his answers. He'll know what he likes so he can enjoy sex the way nature intended and I'll get to return to my harmless but enjoyable flirtation. Business as usual.

“Your seven-twenty is looking good,” Xander remarks as I pop out of the bowl and roll to a stop next to him, rescuing me from the thoughts in my head.

“Thanks. I worked on it while you were gone.” As a tall man, spinning two full circles in the air isn't the easiest trick to land. Unlimited use of Xander's pool helped me figure it out. “You know, you still haven't told me how my favorite half of the egg is doing after your little trip to Sweden.”

“Am I supposed to know what that means?” Xander squints at me.

“One egg, two people, duh.”

“You know boy/girl twins don't come from the same egg, right?”

“I wasn't referring to Niko, I was referring to me.” Niko may be his sister's biological twin, but I'm her twin in spirit. “Clearly, Anna and I are the same person in two different bodies. Ergo, half of my egg. Usually, people will be polite and call the other person the better half, but we all know that's me so to spare her feelings we'll share the title.”

Xander shakes his head the way he always does when my word vomit frustrates him. “You and Anna both have limited filters and like dicks. I'm pretty sure that's where the similarities end.”

“Those similarities connect us in a way you can't possibly understand. She's my literal soul sister. No one gets me like she does.”

“You met her once.”

“And we bonded instantly. If she had a dick I'd have already proposed.

Since she doesn't, I'll settle with her being my best bitch for life.”

Xander visibly shudders—my work here is complete—and changes the subject. “Moving on from that terrifying thought, why does Noah keep glancing at you and looking away like he got caught doing something wrong?”

*Why indeed?*

I can't admit it's probably a freak out over whether people will know another man has held his cock just by looking at him, which pretty much every guy wonders after their first gay experience. Spoiler alert- there's no such thing as flashing neon sign or arrow over your head claiming you like dick.

“He's probably worried I'll fall.”

“Sorry, what?” The whites of Xander's eyes are suddenly very prominent. “Why would he be worried about that?”

“I didn't know he was here the last time I used the pool, and it freaked me the fuck out when he started clapping, which Niko apparently told him to do, by the way. I fell off the board and hit my head. No biggie with the helmet on, but I think it scared him. The big guy probably felt guilty.”

“Oh shit,” Xander groans.

“What?”

“Noah's like the caretaker of the whole team. It's literally part of his DNA to look out for people.”

“So?”

“So, if he felt responsible for you falling, he'd stick around to make sure you're okay, which would give you an opportunity to be...*you*. And with no one around to reel you in... What'd you do to him?”

*Wow Xander's eyes can get dark fast.*

“Nothing.”

“What’d you do *with* him, then?”

Xander’s fishing for information I’d normally boast about if my escapade had been with an unknown party, but it’s not my place to tell anyone about the things Noah’s questioning, or the role I’ve played to help him figure things out.

“I would think that’d be obvious,” I scoff. “After all, a man that size likely has an equally sizeable dick, and if I’d been lucky enough to have it in me, I doubt I’d be able to skate flawlessly.”

“You’re telling me you didn’t try to fuck him while he was feeling guilty for making you fall?”

This is probably where I should say Noah’s been crashing with me, so it doesn’t look like I’m trying to hide anything. I don’t, but it doesn’t dismiss the fact I should. Since we drove separately—he needed to swing by his place first—there isn’t a reason to volunteer that information. I won’t deny it if it comes up, but I’m happy to leave that detail out since it’ll only make Xander more suspicious of what I may or may not have gotten up to with the big guy.

“I’m always trying to fuck him, but to date, my cock hasn’t met his ass. Or vice versa. Happy?” Sadly, it’s not a lie.

“Yes, actually.”

“Rude,” I gasp. “You know, you could be my wingman on this the same way I helped you with your hockey god.”

“First, you didn’t play wingman. You just gave advice when I needed it. Second, Niko isn’t and has never been straight. The situations are totally different.”

They’re not as different as he thinks, as far as the straight part goes anyway, but I’d never say that without Noah’s permission. Even if Xander would

understand and be supportive, it's not something I have the right to do.

“Fine. Ignore the fact I arranged for Niko to be your DD, which led to the driving lessons, which led to the hottest sex you've ever had. I'll wear Noah down on my own.”

“I'm not encouraging that, but since he keeps looking at you, maybe we should take a break from skating. The team would never forgive us if their star goalie has a heart attack because you fell off your board.”

“I only fell because he startled me.” My pride demands I save face. “But if you want to take a break we can.”

When we reach the other side of the pool, Xander sits between Niko's legs on the lounge and reclines against him—their PDA game has no shame—while I take a seat at the foot of Noah's because there's literally nowhere else left. And everyone is used to me trying to get close to him, though I don't actually help myself to his lap the way Xander does to Niko.

“I still can't believe there's no water in that pool.” Luca glances at the cement hole in the ground and shakes his head longingly.

“I wouldn't swim in it even if there was. It'd be full of their jizz.” I grab a water from the cooler and start chugging.

“They make chemicals for that,” Niko says.

“They make jizz eliminating chemicals? Damn, whoever came up with that must be making bank. I bet they sell that shit in gallons instead of ounces.”

“You don't need a pool,” Justus says. “You need a hot tub.”

“In this heat?” Luca balks.

“No, for the winter. How nice would it be to soak in a hot tub after a game.”

“Better than an ice bath.” Noah shivers.

“Those ice baths are why you're still the starting goalie at your age.” Luca reaches over and smacks his arm.

“I’m only two years older than you.”

“But you’re falling apart faster.”

“Goaltending is hard on the knees,” Noah mutters while Luca smirks.

“It’s bad enough camp starts Monday. Let’s not make it worse with talk about ice baths,” Niko groans.

“Weren’t you just talking about how you missed the ice last time I was here?” Noah asks him.

“Yes, but I miss it in an *‘it’d be fun to coast around the rink and take a few shots way’* not a *‘bust your ass till you drop’* way.”

“You only drop if you’re out of shape,” Luca sniggers.

“I just got back from visiting my family for several weeks, of course I’m out of shape.”

“Does your mom cook all your favorite childhood foods and guilt you if you don’t eat them too?” Justus asks.

“No, I just didn’t exercise.”

“Except for fucking,” I quip as Luca snorts.

“Why are you making us out to be sex-crazed?” Xander asks me.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It’s not all we do.”

“Doesn’t being in a relationship mean you get to fuck regularly? I would’ve thought that’s the biggest perk.” I look around the group for confirmation.

“It’s the only perk.” Luca nods in agreement. “Except for the fact you only get to bang that one person.”

“What’s wrong with only banging one person?” Justus asks.

“Nothing if that’s what you’re into. I like variety, which is why road games are my favorite,” Luca says.

“I’m honestly shocked at how much women adore you when you’re

blatantly with a different one all the time,” Niko tells Luca.

“Puck bunny culture is weird, but my God, it's a wonderful thing.” Luca smiles dreamily.

The look on his face gives me an idea. “The gay crowd needs to get in on that. We could be the puck bucks and we could offer a special welcome to all the visiting teams.”

“A buck?” Justus frowns.

“I mean we could go with puck butts, though that seems a little crass to me.”

Xander snorts. “*You’re* worried about being crass?”

“Not particularly, but bunny has a touch of class to it and gay men deserve the same, even if we are just looking for big hockey sticks.”

“Isn’t a phrase for gay hockey chasers futile since there’s only one gay player in the league and he’s spoken for?” Luca asks me.

“Only one that we *know* of. I bet there are more thinking about following Niko’s lead. If we build it, they will come. Pun intended.”

Niko chokes on a laugh, causing Xander to warn, “Don’t encourage him.”

“I can’t help it, that was funny,” Niko whines, clamping his lips together to contain himself.

“If Tripp was kidding, yes, it’d be funny. But he’s not. Don’t give him any more family passes or he’ll hover by the locker room trying to pick up members of the other team.”

Luca shrugs. “Who cares. If there are any gay players out there, they might appreciate bumping into Tripp after the game.”

“No. Bad idea.” Though Noah’s voice is level, the steely set of his jaw tells me he’s pissed. *What’s that about?*

“What? Why?” Luca gives his teammate a confused look.

“He can’t sleep with the competition.”

“Why not?” Justus asks.

“Because he’s not some random guy whose hookups won’t impact us.”

Niko scratches his head as he squints at Noah. “I’m not really following you, buddy. None of us have a say where our friends stick their dicks.”

“What if he hooked up with Blaise?” Noah asks his teammates.

“That douchebag on the Rockets?” Luca’s smile quickly morphs to a frown.

“Blaise is gay?” Justus looks around, confused.

“I’m just picking him as an example,” Noah says. “Would any of us be okay with Tripp hooking up with him? Or any of the assholes in the league like him?”

“That’s a good point.” Luca chews on his lip.

“How is that a good point?” I ask.

“If he’s as big a turd to you off the ice as he is to us on it, we’d probably end up fighting with him,” Niko responds. “Best case that’s just a penalty, worst an ejection and a fine.”

“So, your hockey season comes before my sex life?” I narrow my eyes in Niko’s direction.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Cock blockers,” I mutter, though I’m not nearly as disappointed as I should be to learn my friendship with the local hockey gods won’t pave the way for me to sample more of them.

# Chapter Eleven

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# Noah

The short drive to Tripp's place didn't take the edge off, so I'm still vibrating when I walk in the door. On some level that worries me—I always shrug off my anger before it festers, even on the ice—yet more than an hour later Tripp's puck buck comments still aren't sitting right.

"Puck bucks, seriously?" I ask as soon as we're in the door.

Tripp tosses his keys on the entry table. "You're right. It doesn't have the same classy ring as *bunny*. What about puck buddies?"

That answer only frustrates me more. "Is it really that important to you to score with one of us?"

He gives me a bemused once-over as he takes a seat on the couch. "I don't have a bingo card I'm trying to fill with sexual escapades if that's what you're asking. although, I probably should cause that'd be hot as fuck."

Still rooted by the door, I cross my arms in front of my chest. "Wow... Okay."

"What's wrong with sexual freedom?"

"Why the fixation on hockey players?"

"I'm not fixated on them, I just happen to like the idea of people having sex

unapologetically. Like puck bunnies.”

I feel like I’m glaring, though I can’t seem to relax my face. “Don’t you do that already? Why would you need a fancy name and mission to chase after hockey players?”

“I wouldn’t.” He stares right back, head cocked to the side. “What’s this really about? I just told you I like the balls on those bunnies. I think gay men should have sex as unabashedly as they do. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing.” I drop my arms and stalk toward the couch, dropping heavily onto the opposite end.

“Then why are you upset?”

“I don’t know, maybe because you’re talking about picking up other players while you’re hooking up with me.” It’s not until the words are out of my mouth that I realize their implication. *Oh shit, am I jealous?*

A coy little smirk creeps across his face, like he’s privy to some secret I’m not. “I said gay men should take a page out of the puck bunny playbook. I didn’t suggest that I planned to pick up anyone. The other guys just assumed I meant me.”

My mouth drops open in protest though no words come out. I would’ve sworn he said he wanted to pick up visiting players, but my memory can’t definitively put those words in his mouth.

Tripp arches a knowing brow, and I hate that I notice how attractive that makes him look. “You thought I was trying to find a new hockey god while I’ve been hooking up with you?”

“I...well...” A second ago, I was convinced that was his intent, but as I struggle to justify my thoughts the playful glint in his eye fades, leaving him looking almost wounded.

“I’m a lot of things, Noah Tremblay, but I’m not that big of an asshole. I

am a little confused though. You don't want me chasing anyone else, but you also didn't tell your friends you're staying here. Does that mean you don't want them to know what we've been doing the last few days?"

Until just now, my mother was the only person to reprimand me using my full name, and it has the same effect, making me feel both ashamed and defensive. "I don't care if they know," I tell the floor.

"Are you sure about that? A few days ago, you were convinced you were asexual, and before that you thought you were straight. Now you're into men, something you didn't admit when you had the chance."

"It's not okay to be confused?" I wring my hands together to keep them from shaking, whether from anger or insecurity, I'm not sure.

"I didn't say that." Tripp shakes his head while pursing his lips.

"I'm not afraid of being attracted to another man." I'm afraid of being broken, of not understanding who I am, but not of how attracted I am to Tripp.

"I believe you. That doesn't mean you're ready for your friends to know, or that you even know what to tell them."

"What does that mean?" I find the nerve to look at him, a strange combination of patience and wariness on his face.

"Are you gay, bi, pan, something else? Do you like all men or just me? If you like men, are you a top or bottom?"

I lick my lips nervously. "No one is going to ask if I top or bottom."

"Not a reporter, but anyone you hook up with will. And you don't know the answer."

"Then help me figure it out! Fuck me." I point my finger at my chest. "Maybe then I'll know."

Based on Tripp's frozen expression, the desperation in my voice surprises

him as much as me. I only hope it's a good sort of surprise, because now that I've said it out loud, it doesn't sound like a bad idea. It sounds...*right*.

"I can't believe I'm saying this," Tripp sighs, "but I think we should just chill tonight. Dicks in our pants."

"You don't want to have sex?" I nearly choke on the words, my shock making it hard to breathe. In my wildest dreams Tripp never said no to a request to fuck, yet he's still sitting on the other side of the couch, not even attempting to undress the way I expected he would.

Tripp shakes his head slowly back and forth. "I always want to have sex, but just sex. No relationship stuff. No *feelings*. I don't want to blur the lines."

*Blur the... Where is this coming from?*

"The only thing that's blurry is you told me how much you want to fuck me, said you wanted to help me figure out if I like guys, and now that we know I do you're backing off. What's changed? Just last night, you were insanely proud to get me off. Now, you're not bragging about doing it again? Why?" I hate the anguish in my voice, yet I can't seem to hold it back. These past few days are the only ones in recent memory when my body didn't betray me during intimate moments, something Tripp's guidance and patience were instrumental in, and the thought of losing that so soon after I found it is terrifying.

"I *am* proud I got you off when no one else could, and I do want to do it again." His voice is disturbingly level, like he thinks a calm tone will calm me. "But you were upset thinking about me with someone else earlier, and that should be a red flag for both of us."

Okay, I admit the thought of Tripp with anyone else set me off. Though, I think that was on principle, not because I want to have a claim on him. *Isn't it?*

“You have a problem with monogamy?” I ask.

“I have a problem with relationships. I don’t do them. And you shouldn’t do them with the first guy you experiment with. If you want to fuck around no strings attached, I’m your man. I’ll even go as far as agreeing to hook up with only you while you explore this if it makes you feel better. But only if you agree this is strictly a fuck buddy thing. I’m too selfish for a relationship and you’re too vulnerable for one.”

“Confused isn’t the same as vulnerable.”

“No, but they do tend to go hand in hand.” Tripp runs his fingers through his artfully mussed hair, which only makes it look better. “Look, I think you should figure out what you want from me. If it’s just to explore being with a man, I’m all in. If you think it might be something else, something where you don’t like the idea of me being with other people when this is over, we shouldn’t take it any further.”

Though I know his words are meant to protect me, they hurt more than help. Tripp is the first person—the only person—I’ve confided in about my sexuality, and the thought of losing that terrifies me. So does the idea of experimenting with another man. But if I’m being honest with myself, I know he makes a valid point about the repercussions. I’ve already questioned whether it’s all men or just Tripp I respond to, and if taking things further could ruin the friendship we have, that may be worse than never figuring myself out. After all, at least now I have someone I can talk with openly.

Sighing heavily, I nod my head. “Yeah, okay. I’ll think about it.”

The first day of training never fails to kick my ass, no matter how good of shape I think I'm in. Lungs burning, muscles shaking from the strain they're under, I pump my arms and legs until I cross the line with the rest of my teammates, locking my hands behind my head to catch my breath before we have to line up for the next sprint.

Though it all worked out in the end, as a kid I thought goalies would escape the dreaded wind sprints, so I eagerly signed up. That little misconception led to a great career considering I'm far better at blocking shots than I am at taking them, but it's hard to be grateful for that when my legs feel like jelly. I've been doing this long enough to know my body won't hate me as much in a week. Still, I'm still a little bitter that my off-season discipline isn't paying off right now.

"Fuck this heat, man." Luca wipes the sweat from his brow. "You need to fill that pool with water, Niko."

"You're the one with the movie room, and the game room, and about a dozen other rooms you don't need but still have. Don't tell me you can't afford a pool," he retorts.

"Of course, I can, but why would I go through the trouble of building it when I could just use yours?"

"Except you can't use his," Justus says as Coach shouts at us to line up again.

He blows the whistle, and we take off, running as fast as we can. Thanks to my long stride I don't come in last, but I'm not as close to first as I used to be. Luckily, my job doesn't require me to skate up and down the rink, which means being a little slower isn't the end of the world as long as my reflexes are solid.

Once we're done with sprints people trickle off, but I hang back to do my stretches. Since I squat so much during a game, I'm more likely to get hip or groin injuries than my teammates, and either one could end my season, especially for a player over thirty. Luca won't admit it, but he's in the same boat, so he lingers with me.

"How do you think we're looking?" he asks, same as he does every year.

Though we're nearly the same age, and co-captains, he's always looked at me as the leader, probably because I have the more level head. "When have I ever been able to answer that on the first day?"

"Humor me."

"The hunger is there. Making it to the playoffs and getting knocked out in the first round is a good driving force." I drop to my back and pull my right leg toward me to stretch my hamstring.

"Our sprints were a little sluggish." He mirrors me as I switch to the other leg.

"It's day one. If we still look like this on day five, I'll worry."

"Fair enough."

I drop into the splits to stretch my groin, and out of nowhere I'm hit with the memory of Tripp spreading his legs wide that first night, giving me an unobstructed view of his hand sliding over his cock. I enjoyed that encounter far more than I expected to, enough that I'd like to repeat it, but can I do that without developing feelings? I'm not usually a casual sex guy, but I also haven't tried it. And with my demanding hockey schedule, chances are, casual is the only option.

"Earth to Noah. I asked what you thought about the rookies," Luca says.

"Sorry, I was distracted." I press my hips lower to deepen the stretch.

"I got that. Where were you just now?"

I've never had to ask Luca for advice, personal or otherwise, and I'm not sure how comfortable I am doing it now. At the same time, the only other person I could talk to is Tripp, and since this is about him that's not an option.

"Is it possible to sleep with someone without developing feelings for them?"

Luca lets his leg crash back to the ground as he sits up to face me. "I thought you preferred to only sleep with people you have feelings for."

"I thought so, too," I mumble as I revisit my past partners, most of which I was dating when we slept together.

"Not anymore?" When I don't answer, a sly grin spreads across his face. "Okay first, it's about fucking time you have some fun, so hell yeah. And second, you see me do it all the time. Of course, it's possible."

"I see you hook up with different puck bunnies. Maybe a few of them are repeats, but you don't have a regular...*arrangement*." I swing my legs in front of me and press the soles of my feet together like a butterfly to get my inner thigh.

"Are you talking a friends with benefits thing or a fuck buddy thing?" Luca runs a hand through his hair, pushing the sweaty strands away from his eyes.

"There's a difference?"

"Of course. Friends with benefits is someone you're already friends with and you add sex to the mix. Fuck buddies is someone you just see for sex. So, which situation are we dealing with?"

While I follow that logic, it doesn't make things any clearer. "It could go either way I think. We sometimes bump into each other socially, so I'm tempted to say friends, but we've never made a deliberate attempt to make

plans or anything.” Unless you count Tripp extending the invite to stay at his house, but even that came about through a fluke meeting.

“So, this is more like a friend of a friend that you’re attracted to?”

I shift into a low lunge to stretch my hip flexors as I roll that idea around. “I guess you can say that, yeah.”

“Okay, that makes it easy. As long as you don’t get together without your mutual friend—unless it’s for sex—you’ve got the perfect fuck buddy setup. And yeah, I think it’s possible to have that without catching feelings since you’d only need each other for the physical release, not like grabbing a drink together or anything.”

He makes it sound so simple, when the reality is the fact that I’m staying with Tripp could blur the lines a bit. Although, I’ve only got one night left before I can move back into my place, and after that, things could go back to the way they were. We see each other only when there’s a group event, unless we meet up strictly for sex. That seems a little cold and impersonal to me, but I think I’d rather go that route than try to explore this with anyone else. After all, Tripp’s the one who helped me open this door, and I already know I can trust him to be honest and patient and even encouraging.

“Hey, I lost you again,” Luca interrupts my thoughts. “Are you gonna get yourself a fuck buddy?”

While this conversation didn’t go the way I expected, it did end up helping. “Yeah, I think I am.”

# Chapter Twelve

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# Tripp

I turned down sex. *With Thor*. A hockey god I've wanted to defile since the first time I saw him, yet when he begged me to do it, I said no. *Who am I right now?*

Noah's emotional state should be none of my concern. He's a hookup, not a boyfriend. It's neither my job nor my place to make him think twice about asking for sex. I should've just bent over and dropped my pants. Let him fuck me to his little heart's content. And if he turned that into something more than just a good time... Not my problem, right?

That's how these things usually go. You screw around, you go your separate ways, end of story. Yeah, having mutual friends complicates matters, which is why I've made some concessions for him I wouldn't make for a random stranger, like lots and lots of talking. But telling him to think on it instead of falling onto his dick when he pleaded for me to... I don't recognize myself right now, and that's a little scary.

I don't want to make changes for Noah. I don't like what that implies—that he's special—or means something to me. And while I genuinely like the big

guy, I can't let whatever this is become more than platonic. I can't let him in. Not even Xander has achieved that.

My best friend thinks he has, and he's come closer than anyone to scaling the walls I've put up. But he hasn't reached the top, hasn't realized that I overshare about everything that *doesn't* matter, and lock down everything that *does*.

I'm in a good place right now, and I only got here because I didn't set myself up for failure. I didn't allow anyone to get close enough to hurt me. Mostly. Sometimes I worry I'm too close to Xander, but I think my obnoxious tendencies are just annoying enough to keep him at arm's length. I'm not sure the same can be said for Noah, though. That's precisely why I should stop making concessions for him, mutual friends be damned.

He's sexy as sin and I want a piece of that. So, if he asks again, I'll give him what he wants, and he can figure the rest out himself.

Yup, that's the plan. No more saying no.

God, I hope he asks again. When he gets home in like, two hours. *Fuck that's an eternity. I've gotta burn off some energy.*

I turn on the PlayStation and pull up Rainbow Six Siege, my go-to game when I'm restless. Since I've been playing for well over a decade, I'm not half bad, and I easily fall into the digital world, blasting the enemy and talking shit with the other avatars who make up my team.

Shooting imaginary bad guys is cathartic in its own twisted way. An outlet to expel the feelings I don't share with anyone. My parents used to hate that I could get so lost on the screen. Even today, I feel an extra little jolt of satisfaction knowing I'm doing something they'd hate, despite the fact they'll never know, and undoubtedly couldn't care less. That probably bears some analysis, but I like my petty revenge.

I'm so absorbed, I don't even realize the time until Noah plops onto the couch next to me with a timid, "Hey."

I mute my game mic and nod. "Hey yourself. How was practice?"

"Tiring, but good." He runs his hands over his thighs, whether from nerves or because they hurt after practice, I'm not sure. Regardless, it makes it damn hard to block the memory of sitting on those beauties while we jerked off. "So, I thought about it, and I'm good. With what you said."

I assume he's referring to the sex with no strings rule, and the pang of anxiety I've felt weighing on my chest lifts. The sheer relief of it causes me to lose focus and blast my own teammate *dammit*. I shouldn't be so invested in him, but I desperately want him to say he's down to fuck.

"Good?" I arch my brow in his direction while battling soldiers on the screen, trying to act indifferent.

"Uh, to be fuck buddies."

My cock instantly perks up, excited that he's on board. "Fuck buddies, huh? Is that what we're calling it?" I bite my lip and waggle my eyebrows to see if I can get him to blush. He doesn't disappoint.

"I mean, isn't that what we'd be?"

"It is, but I like hearing you say it." I shoot the last remaining soldier in the level and climb onto those thick thighs, facing the TV.

Noah holds his arms up like he's been caught red handed. "Uh, what are you doing?"

"Foreplay." I wink at him over my shoulder.

"This—What now?"

"I've still got two levels in this campaign, and I'm not taking the risk of you changing your mind." I grind my ass over his lap, loving how it makes him inhale sharply. "So, *foreplay*. You just sit back and enjoy while I finish

my game.” I turn my mic back on and tell the rest of my team I’m ready, rolling my hips in another circle while Noah’s hands fall limply to the cushions.

The level starts up with all of us on high alert, scoping out potential targets and shouting when we spot enemies. The tension of the game always makes me wiggle, even when there isn’t a hockey god underneath me, and now that there is... I’m playing dirty with the big guy, but the one constant so far is that he’s never quite sure how his body is going to react to sexy times, so I’ll use every trick in the book to help him get excited.

“On your left, T,” a voice echoes in my ear, and instead of turning my head toward the threat I tuck my hips and lean my weight to the left, pressing my ass into the slight bulge underneath me. A sharp gasp tells me Noah enjoyed that, so I do it again for good measure.

“One o’clock, Captain,” I tell my teammate, and our little group of soldiers move ahead on the screen. Thrusting my hips in a forward and back motion like I’m urging a horse forward, I earn myself a delicious moan from the beast underneath me, whose fists seem to be getting tighter and tighter by the second.

I give myself a mental pat on the back for being a creative genius and try to concentrate on the game—we’re sort of kicking ass right now—while still keeping things interesting for my hockey god.

“Shoot him, *shoot him*,” I shout to my teammate as the enemy tries to escape. My frantic bouncing pulls a series of soft grunts from deep in Noah’s throat and his legs tense under mine. I twist my head just in time to see his head fall back on the cushions, and I slow my movements so I can put even more pressure on the hard ridge between his legs.

The entire level, I bump and grind and generally torment the man

underneath me to a chorus of moans and groans and ragged breathing. Fuck, I love that I can feel how much he wants me, evident in the rigid length beneath me and the labored breath against my back. Honestly, my pride gets a bit of a kick out of it too, seeing as I'm now three for three as far as getting him worked up goes.

A tiny little voice in the back of my mind warns me that might not be a good thing. He may regard me as a fuck buddy now, but his caregiver personality makes me think casual isn't in his wheelhouse. Plus, there are still lots of questions about his sexuality, and if he's more pan or demi than bisexual, being an overachiever in the seduction department might backfire on me. It doesn't stop me from telling the voice to fuck right off, though. Surely, a few weeks of fun isn't pushing it. And I *really* want my fun before we go back to being friends of friends or whatever.

"Ooh, that was close," I tell Noah as I mute my mic and press the pause button on my hips. "We lost half our team and almost didn't make it past that level."

"So, you're done?" His voice is deliciously scratchy.

I take a peek at him over my shoulder, struggling to keep the victorious smile off my face when I see how tightly he's holding his jaw.

"Not yet, big guy." I pat his chest before turning my attention back to the game. "One more level."

"How long will that take?"

"Hard to say." I play coy. "If we play well, thirty minutes or more. If we don't, it could all be over in five."

I'm about to turn my mic back on when a strong arm wraps around my waist, hauling me up just enough that I'm weightless for about two seconds

before a blast of cool air hits my semi-hard cock. “What are you doing?” I glance down to see Noah has shoved my athletic shorts down to my thighs.

“Making it so you don’t play well.” He wraps a warm hand around me and starts gently kneading my dick, coaxing it to attention.

*So, wow. Delayed gratification makes Noah kind of assertive. I like it.*

“T, you there?” a voice crackles in my ear as I suppress an unexpected tremor.

Turning the mic on, I croak, “I’m here.”

“They’re trying to flank us. Hold your position.”

“Yeah, sure. *Ungh.*” I switch the mic off to conceal my groan as Noah cups my sac, tugging it gently before rolling my balls in his palm.

“Easy there, big guy. I need to concentrate.” I grit as I maneuver my avatar to face the oncoming attack.

“I’m not stopping you.” Noah presses my balls into the base of my shaft, giving them a final squeeze before they slip from his hand as he wraps it around my length.

“This is a serious game,” I scold even as my hips try to chase his hand. “It’s the final level.”

“Okay.” He gives me a few languid strokes before clutching the tip in his firm hold, sending an unexpected jolt through my body as my eyelids grow heavy with lust.

Curses ring through my headset, snapping my focus back to the game. “Dammit, I just killed my teammate.”

“That sucks.” Noah massages away the sting with more soft strokes, then grips me hard and gives my junk a strong tug, sending carnal little sparks of desire ping-ponging from root to tip.

“You don’t even understand how shitty that is, do you?” My ass clenches as

he circles his thumb over the crown.

“Nope.”

“Team killing people is a big deal. You can get kicked out of the group,” I rant even as I rock my pelvis forward to spear my dick through his fist. “It’s like stepping out of the goal and letting the other team take a free shot.”

“Sounds like maybe you should keep your dick in your pants while you’re playing then.” He releases me from his grip—I totally don’t groan in frustration when he does, it’s because I nearly killed my own guy again thank you very much—and cups my sac.

“I’m not the one who took it out.” I grind down on his lap to take back some control, which is short-lived since it makes his fingers graze my hole, and I shoot Ted. *He’s never going to forgive me for that.*

“What the fuck, T. Get your head in the game.”

I turn the mic on long enough to choke out, “My bad,” and shut it off before I moan.

“Sounds like you’re having trouble concentrating.” Noah slides his big hand up my length, closing it in his fist as he starts to pump. Leisurely at first, feather-light strokes that seem to be more about him learning my body than getting me aroused. Then tighter, faster, as if he wants to see how rough I can take it—what will make me moan the loudest.

Soft and gentle, hard and furious, he alternates between the two with zero warning. Noah’s either a natural at hand jobs or so clueless he doesn’t realize he’s edging me. Either way, it’s damn near impossible to keep my eyes on the game instead of the giant paw holding my swollen cock.

This is not what I had in mind when I suggested foreplay. I thought I’d rub my ass over his covered junk for a minute—or thirty—to get him in the mood. A little friction, a little pressure, nothing that would get him so riled he’d turn

desperate. And I definitely didn't expect him to be so needy he'd pull me out to play. I'm not complaining.

Admittedly, trying to keep my head clear enough to play video games while getting jacked off is kinda hot, but I thought I'd be the one teasing him. Instead, I currently resemble a puddle of goo on his lap... whimpering each time he changes his rhythm and robs me of the explosive release building in my balls.

"Am I distracting you?" he growls from behind me as he swirls my precum around my crown.

"Like you could keep your eye on the puck with my hand on your dick," I scoff as I—*finally*—kill a bad guy.

"I can try. Got any hockey video games?"

"Who are you, and what have you done with confused, timid Noah?" I lean back against his chest, partly to see if my eyes will focus better on the game with a little more distance, but mostly to give him more room to maneuver. He's worked my cock into a steel pipe, and even though I'm sitting down, I'm struggling to hold myself upright.

"I don't feel confused anymore."

"So, what are you? Gay, bi, pan?" I use his body for leverage as I thrust into his fist.

Noah's chest shakes with a soft chuckle. "I'm still confused about that. I mean I'm not confused about being into you."

Despite the fear that comment ignites, it takes all the strength I possess to stop rutting into his hand. "What about me?"

"You know...what I want." He pumps me again, twisting his wrist at the top. "And I want to fuck you. Or get fucked by you. I want to find out what I like, and I trust you to help me with that."

The warning bell pings inside my head. There were a lot of you's—aka me's—in that comment, and being comfortable with me probably isn't too far a leap from developing feelings. The logical part of my brain, which doesn't come out often but is still there, knows this. However, Noah's playing with my cock like it's his new favorite toy, and I really, *really* like that.

“T, look out.”

My eyes find the screen just in time to see my avatar drop to the ground. Game over. *Fucking finally.*

I leap off Noah's lap, kicking off my shorts and ripping my shirt over my head as I spin to face him. I'm so frantic to get naked it's a miracle I don't trip over my own feet. Grabbing my junk, I start pumping. Noah's hungry, blue eyes grow wide, but other than that he doesn't move a muscle.

“Foreplays over, big guy. You've got about thirty seconds to get your cock inside me.”

Rather than rush to get undressed with me, he stays utterly still and opens his mouth, causing me knees to damn near buckle.

“Is that supposed to be an invitation?” I ask, sounding breathless.

“Isn't that obvious?” He cocks his head to the side in that adorably innocent way of his. *Adorably innocent? Jesus the need to come must be scrambling my brain.*

“You better shut that mouth before I shove my dick in it because I'm in a fuck your face state of mind and you've never sucked a cock before.” A wave of regret washes over me the moment the warning is out, hanging in the air between us. I probably could've been nicer, but I don't think he understands the state he's worked me into.

“I can take it.”

“Not sure you can, champ. I plan to stick my cock in your mouth

repeatedly, but it'd be a bad idea to force feed it to you now and have you tell me you don't like it." I squeeze the base of my shaft, trying like hell to keep myself from plunging over the edge.

"Put it in my mouth, Tripp."

"I'll come." Hell, I almost came from that growly order alone. "You don't want me to do that during your first time."

"Why not? You recover fast."

"Oh, fuck it." I take the challenge, closing the distance between us and guiding my dick between his parted lips. With shallow thrusts—*look at me exercising control*—I rub the tip over the flat of his tongue, hoping the gentle strokes will both get him used to my girth and satisfy my need for friction without tipping me over the edge. It sort of works, until he closes those plump pink lips over my crown and sucks softly.

"Holy *fuuuccckk*." My groan is guttural, desperate even. A sound I didn't know I was capable of until now. Every muscle in my body vibrates with raw need that I'm struggling to contain as a shudder rakes through me. It starts at the base of my spine and pulses through my limbs, and the tremor catches Noah's attention. His big blue eyes flick curiously to mine, and somehow, I just know he's asking for guidance.

"Look at you..." I mumble as I thread my fingers through his silky hair, caressing his scalp with far too gentle a touch. "Swirl your tongue around the tip and give it another good suck. Use your hands if you want. Play with my balls or hold the shaft so I don't thrust too deep."

He pulls away and looks at me quizzically. "Isn't that the point? I thought you were going to fuck my face."

"Trust me when I say we need to work up to that." I push in, gnashing my teeth together to keep my hips from spearing further into his slippery, wet

heat, or pulling violently on his hair. And somehow, despite a lifetime of evidence that hard and fast and dirty is my jam, I manage to keep myself mostly still while Noah maps me with his tongue.

Licking up one side of my shaft and down the other, sucking my balls into his mouth, slurping me like a straw, the man is enthusiastic in his exploration. Lips and tongue and fingers work together to investigate every inch of my cock. And by investigate, I mean full-on explore, leaving no stone unturned. You'd think a thirty-something guy giving his first blow job would be hesitant or...neat. Not Noah. He's flat out sloppy, so immersed in the experience he's practically drooling on my cock, and... Damn. I am *here* for it.

His enthusiasm is possibly the hottest thing I've ever seen, which makes it an epic feat for me not to go feral on him. My body literally aches from the effort of holding back. It's only because it's erotic as hell to be the object of such thorough intensity that I manage. Especially, with him fully-clothed while I'm butt-ass naked in my living room.

I bet we look absolutely filthy like this, and while I've never done the filming thing—kind of a shocker since I work in video production—I feel like this would do well on Only Fans. Not that I'm looking for a career change, but seriously, a naked guy getting blown by a fully clothed Norse God would rack up the views. It'd make me blow, for sure.

On that note...

“Pull your dick out, big guy.”

Noah wipes saliva off his swollen lips when I step out of reach. *Why is that hot?*

I pull at the fabric covering his chest. “Shirt off, too. You're gonna fuck your first man.”

He gapes at me, wide eyes blinking in rapid succession, for about three seconds before he whips his shirt off and fumbles with his shorts, shoving them down just enough that his thick cock slaps against his stomach when it springs free.

“God, I love that sound,” I muse, grabbing lube and a condom from the drawer in the coffee table. Without wasting a second, I kneel between his legs, which can only spread so wide trapped in his shorts. “FYI, I’m clean. I got tested after my last encounter.” I lick a path from root to tip, loving how he tries to chase after my mouth. “And I’m guessing you are too since you haven’t been with anyone in a while. So,” I hold up the condom, “your call. Want to wrap up or not?”

I mentally slap myself for making the offer—I never go bare—but I sort of want to rock his world, and while he doesn’t need to be bare for me to do that, I kind of don’t want to cover up when it’s my turn, so it’s only fair to offer.

“Have you ever gone without?”

The truth might make it seem like he falls into one of those ‘concessions’ categories again, which I don’t want. But I want to feel that beautiful cock raw more than I want my fortified walls. “No. I’ve always wanted to, though, if I thought it’d be safe.”

“If we don’t need it, I’m good.” He tips his head toward the hand holding the condom. I toss it aside with a wicked grin and squirt a glob of lube into my palm to coat his dick.

He flinches from the cold, muscles tensing gloriously beneath his skin. After a moment, he relaxes into the couch as the friction from my hand warms him up. When he’s nice and slippery, and *glistening* I straddle him and line him up to my hole.

“Don’t you have to stretch first, or something?” His brow furrows with concern, blue eyes wary.

“I’ll take it slow for your first time.” He doesn’t need to know that my recent dry spell doesn’t extend to my dildo, or that I used it as recently as last night.

Holding my breath, I sink lower. The big guy didn't get his nickname as a means to boost his ego, it's obnoxiously accurate on all accords. I force my body to relax as I take him inside me, exhaling deeply as he breaches the tight ring of muscle, and groaning with relief when I feel the fullness inside me. “Shit that’s good. Still with me, champ?”

Noah’s eyes are squeezed shut, jaw locked so tight he almost looks like he’s in pain. For a quick second, I wonder if he is, and whether that pain is physical or mental. Sure, he talked a good game about being okay with his attraction to another man, but when it comes to actually fucking one—maybe he isn’t as ready for this as he thought.

I’m about to freak out, believing I’ve overestimated his comfort level, when he finally exhales, whispering, “So tight. God, I... Jesus that’s the tightest thing I’ve ever felt.”

“Yeah?” There’s no disguising the pride in my voice as I start to rock my hips forward, only to have him clamp his hands on my thighs, *hard*.

“Don’t move. Not yet.”

“You’re killing me, big guy. I’d say going mid-fuck would be kind of the perfect end, but it’d be a tragedy not to bust this nut after you worked it into this state.”

“I want to last longer than a few pumps. I want you to enjoy it.”

Prying his hand off my leg, I wrap it around my now angry-red length. “Does it feel like I’m not enjoying this?”

Noah flexes and squeezes his fingers, then gives me a slow, firm stroke.  
“No.”

“Okay, good. Now...” I rock my hips slowly, warming him up for what comes next. “I’m gonna ride this fat cock of yours, hard and fast, and the only thing I want you to do is feel it. Get lost in it.”

“I don’t want to finish before you.” A glimmer of worry flickers over those baby blues.

“Jack me off when you get close, and I won’t be far behind.” I’m doing it again. Making concessions, spending way too much time making sure his mind is at ease. Caring. I guess that’s okay since it’s his first time, but I can’t make a habit of it.

Noah gives me a terse nod, and I rise up until only his tip is buried inside me before slamming down. His head falls back on the couch with a garbled moan while I take a second to catch my breath—I don’t think I’ve ever felt so full. Then I’m off, riding him like a man possessed because, let’s face it, at this point I probably am.

The clapping of skin echoes around us as I bounce up and down, my heavy cock banging against his abs each time I bottom out. Noah tries to lift his head to watch, but loses the battle, incapable of holding it upright, mumbling a string of curses and moans as I give him a proper fucking.

My thighs, which were already pushed to their limit trying to hold still while he blew me, quiver and shake from the effort of holding my weight. I’ll feel that later, but I don’t give a shit. The absolute euphoria I feel right now will be worth the discomfort later.

It’s cliché—and I’ll deny thinking it as soon as we’re done—but he fits in my body like he was made for it. He’s wide enough that he stretches me without causing pain, just an intense pressure deep inside. And the way his

shaft presses against my prostate... I swear my vision goes a little hazy each time he pegs it. My eyelids are almost too heavy to hold open, so I basically can't see anything. I just writhe on his lap, chasing the orgasm I have no doubt will be epic as his moans spur me on.

“Tripp. Jesus, *fuck*... I” He wraps his big paw around my dick and starts pumping frantically. It's my signal that he's close, and thank God because my balls are ready to burst.

Upping my tempo—apparently, having Noah's hand on my dick throws me into a higher gear I didn't know existed—I slam my body rhythmically onto his. My panting and groaning hits higher pitches like I'm the star of a cheesy porno. I try to hold it in, but the countdown has started. Liftoff is imminent. And when the hockey god underneath me goes rigid with an animalistic growl of his own, I explode.

My hole clenches around the rod pulsing inside me, my dick shuddering violently inside Noah's palm as my balls unload. A rush of warm liquid fills me, causing more tremors to ripple through my body as the one underneath me twitches and trembles through its own release.

Chest heaving, tendons straining, lips still swollen from their earlier workout, sated Noah is a vision. A wet dream come to life. I want to massage the hard curve of his shoulder, trace the peaks and valleys of his muscles, brush my thumb along his square jaw. But that's not how fuck buddies work.

I can admire during sex, not after. Never after. That's how things go from sex to something more, and I don't do more.

“Still with me, big guy, or did you blow your mind with your load?” I give his nipple a gentle pinch to get his attention.

“That...” His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. “I don't think I've felt anything so intense in my life.”

“That’s just the beginning. Wait until I introduce you to your prostate.” I start to lift off him, pausing when he grabs my hand.

“Thank you.”

*Whoa, not good. I wanted to rock his world, and mine, not make him feel grateful.*

“First rule of fuck buddies, there’s no need to be polite. For example, a good host should give you dibs on the first shower since I went first last time.” This time I do lift all the way off his lap. “But I’m the one with cum dripping out of his ass so I call dibs again. I promise to be quick though.” I grab my clothes and jog upstairs, hoping he makes his way to his room before I come back down.

# Chapter Thirteen

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# Noah

**I**t's only because of muscle memory that the puck doesn't slip between my legs.

One minute, the other team is working it around our end of the rink, the next, gravity is pulling me to the ice, and I feel it hit my pads. The ones in my shorts instead of the ones on my knees, meaning I just barely stopped its trajectory.

The puck is so buried, no one else knows where it is. All they know is there's no goal since the flashing light isn't going off, but like sharks swimming in chum, players sense its presence, hovering over me to see if there's an opening to get their stick on it. It's not until the ref whistles for a faceoff that I rise and reveal it.

People will praise me for being in good position or claim that my lightening quick reflexes enabled me to make the save, and while there's some truth to that, it's more accurate to say dumb luck stopped that puck. I'm not anticipating the opponent as well as I usually do, especially during the first period when everyone's fresh. Fortunately, my body reacted before my brain

made the conscious decision to move so we're still up by one for our home opener.

"All good?" Niko asks as he skates by me while the ref collects the puck for the faceoff.

It still boggles my mind how perceptive he is in his second year, though if anyone can spot when I'm off it's him. And while no one wants to hear that their goalie's head isn't in the game, I have too much respect for my teammates to blow them off with silly excuses.

"Got lucky on that one," I admit.

"Were we blocking your view?" He knows none of our defenders were in my line of sight, but he's giving me the out anyway in case my pride demands it. That's not my personality, but other guys need that coddling, and Niko's learning how to manage different personalities. He'll make a good captain one day.

"Nope, I was just slow to react on that one, but I'm good."

The ref drops the puck and Luca's on it right away, winning the faceoff and circling around the goal to give it to me so I can slow things down and set up the offense. Most of the players start migrating toward the other end of the rink, though Niko hangs back to take the pass I send him. He takes his time moving the puck, passing it around until a tiny window opens up for Justus.

Niko delivers the puck to him right in front of the goal, but instead of taking the shot Justus spins away from the net, turning one hundred and eighty degrees and flicking the puck over the goalie's shoulder. Lights flash as the crowd goes wild, both because we put another point on the board and because that was one hell of a trick shot.

For the next two periods both teams go back and forth controlling the game, and while they get one by me when I come out of the crease to challenge a

fast break, that's the only score they get. Niko is virtually a solid wall between me and the other team, and if they do manage to get off a shot, I time my blocks to land on the puck instead of giving up a rebound opportunity and an easy score. It's a delicate balance, and one I'm typically pretty good at, which is how Niko could tell I was a little distracted in the first period.

He'll probably ask why in the locker room, and I'm man enough to admit the truth. It was a glimpse of Tripp's hair—which is now dark at the root and sort of emerald green at the tip—that got me. What I won't admit is that I suspect the green is because I asked why he chose blonde instead of green or blue when he was writhing naked on my lap.

Normally, Tripp wouldn't catch my attention during a game, but Luca happened to crush one of the opposing forwards into the boards right where he and Xander were sitting. And while that's happened before without causing me to lose focus, this is the first time it's happened since we became intimate.

The fact is, I haven't seen or spoken to him since he took me inside him nearly two weeks ago, and I wasn't mentally prepared for the emotions that accompanied that first glimpse. I'm not talking about the things that plagued me initially, like why he hadn't called or whether he was deliberately avoiding me, I'm talking about the sense of longing that hit me hard enough to steal my breath.

Even from twenty yards away, I could see how the green in his hair made his eyes pop, giving him an even more naughty air than he usually possesses. That alone was enough to take my eye off the game, but when I realized he was wearing *my jersey*... I've never had the urge to stake my claim on

anyone, and Tripp certainly isn't the type to let anyone claim him, but in that moment, I liked the idea of him being mine.

I suppose that's why he was so concerned about getting our labels straight, so I wouldn't confuse fucking with something more. That could also be why he hasn't called. I hope that's the reason, anyway. I'd much rather he put a little distance between us to manage expectations than to have him decide he's not interested. Although, that distance is what got me off track during the game...

"Epic, man. Just epic." Luca is slapping Justus on the back along with half a dozen other guys when I enter the locker room, and the noise in my head instantly fades to nothing as I watch them shower him with praise. This right here, this brotherhood, is what I live for.

There's something about pushing our physical limits together, sharing blood and sweat, battling exhaustion and chronic pain, that binds us on a deeper level. Makes us function as one, like we share the same mind. It sounds corny, but when you see it come together... When you see a guy make a blind pass that he just *knows* his teammate will be there to receive, or you can communicate how you want a play to develop with a single look, the only explanation is that we're mentally connected. We're never truly alone.

I think that's why I never got too hung up on the questions about who I am off the ice. My teammates, my brothers, were always there. Now that I'm edging closer to retirement, closer to the end of that bond... I guess maybe that's part of why I'm asking the question now, although I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be examining things too closely if it weren't for Tripp.

*Dammit, why does it feel like things always come back to him?*

"That's gonna make ESPN's top ten plays for sure." Luca's excitement brings me back to the locker room. "We need to celebrate!"

“Frosty Dog?” Niko suggests our go-to pub. “I’ll tell Xander to meet us there.”

“Hell yeah.” Luca plants his hands on Justus’s shoulders, using them for leverage to jump up and down. “The ladies will be lining up to see if this guy’s got as much magic in the bedroom as he does on the ice.”

Justus turns as red as a tomato—or maybe that’s just exertion from the game—and steps away to start putting stuff in his locker while Niko snorts under his breath. “You’re totally gonna pimp him out to try to score yourself, aren’t you?”

“Duh.” Luca shrugs as if that should be obvious.

Once we’re all showered and changed, we head over to the bar, which as usual, is packed after a home game. The crowd graciously parts as we work our way to the back where the owner reserves a section for us, random hands begging for a high-five or slapping our shoulders as we pass. Since the owner has a policy against asking us for selfies and autographs, we manage to cut through the crowd pretty quickly.

This time I’m prepared to see Tripp, who as usual is sitting across the table from Xander. I’m actually a little grateful that this encounter isn’t the first time I’m seeing him tonight, because the sight of him in my jersey is even more powerful up close. I blink and watch Niko kiss his boyfriend hello so I don’t give off the wrong impression, though when I finally bring myself to look in Tripp’s direction he’s patting the seat next to him with a knowing smirk.

“You like?” He pinches the shoulder of his shirt between his thumb and forefinger.

Across the table Niko whines, “Even Tripp is wearing a jersey. The wrong one, but still.”

“Tripp cannot wear my boyfriend’s number,” Xander says, shaking his head. “Not a chance in Hell.”

“Well, my actual boyfriend isn’t wearing it.”

“You know dating a jock goes against my moral code, don’t ask me to broadcast it.” Xander grins and rolls his eyes.

As the two of them flirt-fight, I angle my head towards Tripp. “Where’d that come from?” I ask quietly as I tug on the hem of the jersey.

“It was incredibly hard to find.” He sighs with mock frustration. “They only carry it at every sporting goods store, online, and at the gift shop at the rink.”

“I mean why would you buy it? I’d have given you one if I knew you wanted it.”

“How would you know I wanted it when you haven’t called?”

“You haven’t called me, either.” I arch a brow and cross my arms over my chest.

“True, but I’m exceedingly comfortable with having a fuck buddy and you... Well, we don’t know that yet. So, I figure it’s up to you if I *put my stick in your net.*”

Fortunately, Niko and Xander are too busy pretending to be the only ones here to notice me blushing or hear Tripp. “You’re the one who has a thing for dark and moody. Wearing a jersey is the opposite,” Xander insists.

“What if you wear it while I fuck you? Then no one will see it but me.” Niko’s proposal has Xander chewing on his lip suggestively.

“I feel the need to point out this isn’t a fanboy thing.” Tripp interrupts their bickering and plucks his jersey again, which has green numbers on a black background, then points to his hair. “Green just happens to be a difficult color to match.”

Niko and Xander pay him no mind and go back to negotiating the terms of

wearing a jersey while I try in vain not to reach out and touch Tripp's hair.  
“So...green. Where'd that come from?”

“I needed a change. And bonus, Bulldogs colors are black and green.”

“You just said this wasn't a fanboy thing.”

“That's right.”

“You didn't pick green since I asked about it?”

“Did you? Hmm, that's right. But you also asked about blue. I probably should've gone that route. Green really is a challenging color. Beers!” he exclaims as Luca and Justus set a pitcher with a half dozen glasses in front of us.

He puts a hand on my leg—his finger dangerously close to my junk—and leans over to reach for a glass. The gesture isn't at all out of character for him, though instead of pulling back to give him some space like I typically do, I lean toward his ear and lower my voice. “I think it makes you look sort of dangerous. And sexy.”

“What are you blushing about over there, Tripp?” Luca asks as Tripp retreats to his seat.

“I just felt Noah up and I liked it.” He doesn't miss a beat, and since everyone is so used to his antics, they don't consider he's telling the truth. But I know better. He's blushing because I called him sexy.

“Fine, I'll wear it for the playoffs. Final games only though, as in playing for the cup, not winning your conference.” Xander takes the focus off Tripp, laying out his terms to Niko like a peace treaty.

I'm not sure how they went from sex to playoffs, but I'm happy for Niko. Having someone you care about wear your jersey, especially one you give them, is a point of pride for most of us. For Niko to see Xander wearing his number in the stands, I'm not sure there's any greater motivation than

winning for the person wearing your name. Except winning for your teammates.

“Guys, we have to play for the cup.” Niko clears his throat and turns a near desperate gaze on all of us.

“Uh, don’t we do that every year?” Justus asks.

“Yeah, but the only way Xander will wear my jersey is if we make it to the final round.”

“Xander, what would your father say?” Luca scolds, which makes sense since Xander’s dad is our coach.

“He’d pat me on the back for finding a way to motivate Niko.”

“I’d say he doesn’t need that to motivate him.” Justus shoots an apologetic look at Niko. “But knowing how he feels about you, having you wear his jersey is just as meaningful as winning the cup.”

“Cruel but effective.” Luca taps his glass against Xander’s before raising it for a group toast. “Speaking of effective, have you ever seen a shot as brilliant as the one my boy took tonight?”

Now, it’s Justus’s turn to blush. As a fellow forward he idolized Luca for years, and now his adolescent hero is his mentor. I’ve heard the saying that you should be careful about meeting your heroes, but in this case, it seems to be benefiting both of them. They’ve developed a rhythm that’s hard for defenses to stop.

We all toast Justus’s incredible play then start rehashing our favorite moments from the game, while Xander offers his bird’s eye perspective—he’s fairly astute as assessing games given his lineage—and Tripp gushes about fast shots and hard hits.

Though I jump in with my own observations and laugh at all the right moments, my thoughts never stray completely away from Tripp. We’re not

touching, but he's close enough that I *feel* him next to me, like a live wire, crackling with energy. It makes me want to put my hand on his leg, to trail my fingers along the inside of his knee and watch him shudder. I'd do it if I thought it was a fuck buddy gesture, but since that kind of touch is something Niko and Xander started only after coming out to us, I'm pretty sure it falls into boyfriend territory.

Needless to say, by the time everyone's ready to go, I'm feeling desperate and deprived. I'm positively clueless about how to say that to Tripp. I manage to catch his eye a few times as we pay the bill, and again in the parking lot, but when he heads to his car, I can only assume those looks didn't say what I wanted them to. It's not until I'm home, staring blankly at my phone and debating how to start a text asking to see him, when the doorbell makes me realize they worked. Sort of.

"You're lucky you resemble a Norse god because puppy dog eyes don't usually work on me," Tripp declares as he steps inside, green eyes full of mischief.

"Puppy dog eyes?"

"You know, the sad, helpless stare cute little animals give you when they want something. I don't usually consider it a good look on a man but you're sexy enough to pull it off. Besides, if a man misses my cock enough to silently plead for it, it'd be pretty cruel to deny him."

"I wasn't pleading. I was... Trying to gauge your interest."

"Sure, you were." He pats my chest as he brushes past me and sets his keys on the foyer table. "In that case, I'd say you could just ask if I want to fuck, but since I'm always interested you can skip that step and just say your place or mine. Now, show me to your bedroom. I assume you've got a giant bed and I think we should use every inch of it." He walks further into the house.

My body is intrigued by that plan if my rapid heartbeat is any indication, but my mind is stuck on logistics. Do we really just go at it without any *buddy* stuff?

When he's a few paces away Tripp pauses and shoots me a puzzled look over his shoulder. "Fucking against the wall works too if that's what you want..."

Ducking my head, I rub my hand over the back of my neck. "I..."

"Why is timid Noah back?" He faces me, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "I thought you were pretty clear on wanting to explore sex with me."

"Well, yeah. I do, but..."

His eyes soften when I bring mine to meet them. "You need me to seduce you, is that it?"

I shrug sheepishly. With a subtle sigh, he closes the distance between us and starts kissing my throat, his hands roaming over my chest, down my stomach, ghosting over my groin. "What are you in the mood for? A striptease? A lap dance? A massage?"

Threading my fingers through his hair, I capture the strands in a gentle grip and tug his head back so I can see his eyes. "Why are you really wearing my jersey?"

A slight crease forms between his brows. "I told you, it matches the hair."

"I don't buy it. You heard the same conversation I did between Xander and Niko. You know it's not just a jersey when you're sleeping with the person wearing it."

"I'd never heard that until tonight." He makes an imaginary cross over his chest.

"But you wanted me to see you in it. Didn't you?" That's more of a gut instinct than a statement, until I catch his eyes darting away from mine for a

brief second.

“It might have occurred to me that you’d want to fuck me in it.”

It’s an offhand remark, delivered with the same sass he’s prone to using when he wants to bait me, but it confirms that he thought of me despite not making the effort to get in touch. And even though he explained that earlier when he implied he’s letting me dictate our encounters, it’s not until just now that I understand giving me control doesn’t mean he’s not interested. Or that he hasn’t given me a second thought while we’ve been apart.

That knowledge sends a bolt of lust coursing through my veins, which I’m guessing Tripp can sense since his hand starts softly kneading my cock. Either that or he noticed my gaze was focused on his lips and decided to distract me.

I’m a little bummed because even though there’s lots of things I still haven’t done with another man, I sort of assumed kissing would be one of the first, and we haven’t done that yet. I’m starting to think Tripp prefers it that way, though I hope I’m wrong about that. I’d love to feel his mouth on mine.

“You like that idea. Pounding into me while I’m wearing your number.” It’s a confirmation, not a question, as his hand drifts lower, rubbing my balls over the denim of my jeans.

Since it’s hard to acknowledge that without sounding as possessive as seeing him in my jersey makes me feel, all I can do is grunt. And grip his hair a little tighter.

Tripp’s eyes flutter shut on a sharp inhale, mouth morphing into a sly smile as the breath slowly escapes. “Hard and fast, huh big guy? Is that how you want me?” When I manage only another grunt he rises to his toes and growls into my ear. “Bedroom. Now.”

I release his hair and grab his hand, pulling him behind me until we reach

my room. But before I can get him on the bed he plants his feet, forcing me to turn and face him.

“This time you get to be the naked one while I’m clothed. *Mostly.*” He reaches for the hem of my shirt and peels it up and over my head without any help from me, which makes my knees go weak. No one’s ever been able to undress me on their own—I’m too tall—but since Tripp’s only a few inches shorter he manages with ease, and I find that I really like the act of being undressed instead of doing it myself.

With my shirt out of the way, Tripp kisses a path over my chest, licking my nipples as his fingertips trace the ridges of my abs. This, too, is a new experience. Not in the sense that no one’s ever put their mouth on me, just not in the way he does it, with sighs and moans and curses that suggest he has some sort of reverence for my body. Every inch of it.

I’ve never felt so admired. So *appreciated*. While Tripp has made no secret of the fact he likes my body, up until this point all physical contact seemed geared toward my benefit. My pleasure. Right now, it feels like he’s exploring me for his.

Dazed from his touch, it takes me a second to realize he’s worked my pants open and is shoving them off my hips, boxers too, leaving my full cock on display. I might be self-conscious about that except for the fact Tripp watches it hungrily, licking his lips like he’s stalking prey. Once again, I react to his intense perusal with a full body shiver, my engorged length bobbing eagerly under his feral gaze. He drops to the ground and takes it in his fist, looking up at me with a wicked gleam in his eye.

“Has anyone ever swallowed this gorgeous dick?”

I suck in a surprised breath when he swirls his tongue around the crown.  
“Swallowed?”

“Mmm.” He licks the underside and seals his lips over the tip, and even though he’s sucking gently it feels like he’s pulling every nerve ending, every brain cell, all my oxygen into my cock, so that the only thing I’m capable of feeling is his wet heat on my shaft. “Taken this full, fat dick all the way down their throat.”

“I don’t think...” I can’t get even get the words out before his nose is brushing against my pelvis, his throat constricting around my length. He pulls back and does it again. And again. Taking me deeper than I thought possible and making gurgling, squelching sounds as he coats me with his saliva.

When he mentioned pounding into him earlier, I assumed he meant the other hole, not the one he needs to breathe. As deep as I am, my cock has to be choking him, yet I can’t seem to find the strength to pull away. The sight of him on his knees, mouth stretched wide around me, is more captivating than I expected it to be. The sloppiness of it is carnal even though the act of taking me into his body is beautiful, a contradiction I can’t look away from.

Moving on autopilot, my abs flex as my dick spears between his lips while his eyes flutter in some sort of hedonistic bliss... I’m engulfed in a vortex of pleasure and emotion, a fog of ecstasy unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. I can’t tell if I’m floating or falling, groaning or whimpering. All I know is both my body and mind are reeling, overwhelmed by what Tripp’s doing to me.

Rocking onto the balls of my feet, I chase his mouth, yelping when he unexpectedly gives my sac a firm tug and pulls off me with a ‘pop.’

“Don’t be greedy, champ. I want that cock in my ass before you bust that nut.” He stands up and takes his pants off as I kick mine away from my feet, crawling onto the bed on all fours. Even with the jersey hanging off his lean frame, I can see his dick hanging between his legs. Before I can take it in my

hand, he flicks his head toward the pants crumpled on my floor and says, “There’s lube in my back pocket. Get yourself nice and slick.”

I fish the lube out and slather it over my dick while Tripp eyes me ravenously, biting his lip to stifle a moan as he watches my fist slide along my length. It’s a show he’s undoubtedly put on before, but I let myself indulge in the fantasy that it’s just for me. That only I can make him so desperate.

Once I’m coated in the gel, I step behind him, but instead of pushing inside I take his cock in my hand and stroke him slowly, noting how it makes him arch his spine as he pushes into my grip. “Trying to get me to catch up?”

“Not really.” I swipe my thumb over his slit and give him a few languid pumps. “You said you like having your dick played with, so…”

“If you hadn’t made me wait two weeks for your cock I wouldn’t object, but since you deprived me of all cocks except yours, I’m not feeling very patient. Now put your hands on my hips and give it to me.”

Though I fully expected Tripp to honor my request not to sleep around while he’s sleeping with me, the fact that he basically admitted he’s mine—for now—while wearing my name on his back erases all my restraint.

I line myself up, nudging just the crown of my dick inside his hole. Then I grip his hips and thrust forward.

The cry that rumbles from his throat is filled with both need and relief, a strange mix of satisfaction and yearning. I want to savor it, but the pressure that engulfs my dick makes it impossible to think of anything beyond staving off my release.

“God, how are you tighter?” I rasp, chest heaving as I try to fill my lungs with the air they can’t seem to hold. I tried to recreate the feeling of Tripp’s body with my hand, to recapture the sensations I’m feeling now without

being buried inside him. I could never get my fist tight enough. Or hot enough. I'd always end up feeling empty. Unfulfilled.

*Fuck...*, being joined to him, I'm basically in free fall, spiraling uncontrollably as I struggle not to lose control.

"Maybe you're bigger." His voice helps to ground me. "My blow jobs must agree with you."

"Ungh," I half-grunt, half-laugh, fighting back a burst of euphoria that ripples through me when he shifts his weight. "Hold still."

"Can't," he strains.

"Fuck," I grumble and take a deep breath, holding it as I pull back and tentatively push forward. Despite the give of his warm channel, the easy acceptance of my intrusion, his ass is so tight the pressure is dizzying.

My eyes roll back in my head as my legs quake with the effort to stay upright, which is sort of terrifying, given that strong legs are a basic requirement of my job. Yet, not even the hundreds of pounds I squat make my thighs tremble as much as they are right now.

"Harder, big guy. Don't hold back." Tripp taunts me with a daring glance over his shoulder, and as much as I want to savor this encounter, I want to please him even more.

I flex my fingers and grip his hips, widening my stance to the same athletic position I use in goal when I need ready access to speed and power. Then I start to move.

My hips piston forward, spearing my length into his warm, wet hole as I use my arms to pull him to me. The lewd sound of skin slapping against skin is a steady drumbeat around us, and his frantic moans are the melody.

Tremors of ecstasy ripple along my shaft as I give it to him, culminating in a hefty twitch each time I sink to the hilt. My abs blaze as they coil and

release again and again, biceps smoldering from the near violent push and pull as I strain to fit my body into Tripp's.

“Fuck, you're gonna split me in two. Don't stop.”

Beads of sweat trickle down my chest, along my abs, pooling at the base of my groin, already damp from the lube dripping out of Tripp's ass. It occurs to me not only that sex has never been this messy before, but that I like it this way. Loud and wet and uninhibited.

The only thing that could make it better is seeing Tripp's face. The way his eyes get heavy with lust as his orgasm builds. How his lean chest heaves when he starts panting. How his lips part just slightly when he moans.

Seeing my name on his back is thrilling in its own way, but it can't compete with watching the man come undone in front of me.

That memory has pleasure engulfing me, threatening to tip me over the edge long before I want it to. I run drills in my mind, stopping imaginary pucks in an attempt to convince myself that I'm not about to find heaven. But not even hockey can distract me from the notion that it doesn't just feel good, but *right*, to give my body to Tripp. Like it should belong to him, if he wants it.

That thought makes me falter slightly, not out of fear so much as worry that he wouldn't appreciate such a revelation. But it's enough that he notices the shift in my movement.

“More, Noah. Jerk me. *Please.*”

“How? I'm barely hanging on.” I curl my fingers into his skin.

“Pull me up,” Tripp gasps. “My back to your front.”

Wrapping my left arm under his chest, I heave him up to a groan that sounds a lot like *'fuck that's hot'* as my right hand closes over his cock. His keening cry of relief is like a shot of adrenaline straight to my balls, and I

find a second wind, spearing into him ferociously as my fingers slide over his length.

Rocking into him as my fist bottoms out helps me keep a constant rhythm, but its not until Tripp wraps his arms around me to start fondling my cheeks that I have the leverage to fuck him like he wants, and once I do...

The raspy moans coming from Tripp's mouth spur me onward, encouraging me to plunge deeper, pump faster. My body pushes all rational thought from my brain, its singular focus finding the nirvana that looms... Right. Fucking. There. In that place where Tripp and I are so connected I'd swear we were one. We're moving together without conscious thought so much as intuition. It's an innate sense of what we want...a craving to be closer regardless of the limitations.

My dick throbs with the need for release, the same as his does in my hand. With each thrust we inch toward the precipice, and the friction of Tripp's palms gripping my ass tips me over the edge.

I come, slamming into him, and before I can catch my breath, he clenches around me. The vise-like grip of his body wrings another wave from my tip as his release coats my hand, and a guttural cry rumbles from my throat.

A torrent of sensation crashes over me. Ecstasy, exhaustion, affection, gratitude; wave after wave coming so hard and fast, I can't tell which way is up. My body vibrates like a guitar string, a strange mixture of sated yet spent that keeps my muscles tense despite the fact they can barely hold my weight.

Tripp shudders in my arms as his orgasm finally dissipates, his rapid breath causing my arm to rise with the rhythm of his chest. His head falls back against my shoulder as his grip on my ass relaxes, and it's only then that I realize I'm still holding his dick, stroking it absently. And that he seems just as content to stay like this as I do.

It won't last, and I understand why, but I'm also not going to point out that we're a sticky mess and should probably clean up. I may still be learning about who I am and what I want, but one thing I don't question is the fact that I like the non-sexual contact I have with Tripp as much as I do the sexual kind.. So, if he's happy to let me hold him, I will.

# Chapter Fourteen

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# Tripp

**E**ven with my eyes closed, I can tell the room is brighter than usual. And hotter. And...stickier. *Wtf?* I try to roll onto my back, but the wall won't let me. *Wall? Since when is there a wall next to my bed ?*

Cracking an eyelid, the first thing I notice is the floor to ceiling windows across from the bed. Windows that are impressive in scale, and way too big for my small condo. The next thing is the gray comforter underneath me. It's fluffy and soft—high quality—but it's too dark. I prefer lighter colors that don't showcase the evidence of my extracurricular activities if they get a little...*vigorous*.

Okay, so, I'm not at home. I'm at Noah's. Inconvenient, but not the end of the world. I've passed out in a post sex haze before, so I know the drill. Get up quietly, grab my clothes and tiptoe out. Easy peasy.

That's how it's supposed to go, anyway.

The heavy weight draped over my torso is going to make that particular escape a little difficult. So is the half-chub rubbing against my ass, which—hello—seems like it'd be a shame to waste.

Seeing as my prior accidental sleepovers were more of a pass out cold

situation than a deliberate plan to stay the night, they didn't involve cuddling. Or waking up to someone's morning wood knocking on my back door. My jury's still out on the cuddling part—although I slept like a fucking baby—but I could get on board with the wake-up sex.

*No, bad Tripp.*

Though I'm happy to confirm the gentle giant behind me is a beast in the sack, I'm not sold on the declaration that he's good with no strings sex. I think he'd like to be—I'd like that too—which is why I followed him home last night. But slip ups like staying over might send the wrong message. So, I need to Houdini myself out of here.

Wrapping my fingers gently around his wrist, I try to lift his arm off me. I move it maybe half an inch before my hand slips and Noah hugs me tighter to his chest. I'm ready to try again when he grumbles, "Trying to sneak out?"

"I don't sneak." *I totally sneak.* "I was trying to be polite and not wake you."

"You didn't."

"So, you're intentionally spooning me?" That not so subtle hint doesn't get him to move his arm.

"I woke up like this. Figured as long as we were both comfortable, I'd stay that way."

*Houston we have a problem.* Snuggles could lead to feelings, and that's a slippery slope to boyfriendville. It's a town I have no desire to visit like *ever*. Why subject myself to the illusion that people give a shit about me when history suggests they only care about themselves?

I scoot away and roll to face him, regretting it the moment I do. *Sleepy, rumped Norse god is HOT!* "So, how did we end up here exactly?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. I remember trying to catch my breath, and I think

maybe my legs gave out and I fell on the bed.”

“Hmm, sign of a good night. You’re welcome.” I pat his deliciously hard chest. “Okay then, I should go.”

He tugs on the jersey I’m still wearing when I try to sit up. “What’s the rush?”

“Um, the rush is you're spooning me. That’s against the fuck buddy rules.”

“It’s not like I broke the rules on purpose. Or by myself.” He runs a lazy hand through his hair, a loose strand falling back over his face, and my stomach does a little flip.

“Exactly. I broke them too, which is why I should go.”

“It’s Sunday and you don’t have work.” He scratches his big hand over his perfectly sculpted pec, which makes me notice his chest again, then his abs, then the heavy cock resting on them, and *damn* I need to get away from naked Thor. “Shower and I’ll make some breakfast. Then you can take Dorothy over to Xander’s if you want.”

*He remembers the name of my most prized possession? And doesn't think it's weird that I named her?*

I’d swoon if I did that sort of thing. Or climb on him and ride like I was making for the border.

*Down, boy.* Morning after sex is definitely not a fuck buddy thing. Neither is breakfast, although I am kind of starving and I’d love to skate. “Can you cook breakfast as well as you cook dinner?”

“I can fry an egg.”

“I guess I’ll take you up on that shower then.”

Noah gets me set up in the bathroom and heads off to the kitchen, leaving me the privacy to clean up without an audience, or a partner. That’s somewhat disappointing considering his shower would be fun to play in. It’s

got a bazillion jets and showerheads, and even a little bench that looks like marble in a sea of tiles that resemble wood planks—very masculine and contemporary. Although shower sex is possibly too intimate for what we are, so getting clean solo is probably for the best.

I linger slightly since I haven't been in a shower this nice in nearly a decade. Wrapping myself in a plush white towel, I hunt down some mouthwash, finding it in the medicine cabinet above the sink, but when I finish and close the mirrored door I freeze.

*What am I doing?*

My image stares back at me, familiar yet not. Running my fingers through my damp hair, the emerald tips taunt me with a truth I don't want to admit.

*I picked green because I thought he'd like it.*

Like he said, the darker color does make me look less playful and more mischievous. Both are accurate representations of my personality, although I went blond as a way to remind myself to focus on the light. To appear approachable rather than inaccessible, at least on the surface. I may have sky-high walls, but I only put them up around the deep, personal stuff I keep to myself. I don't use them to push people away on sight—my obnoxious comments do that so I don't waste time on people who can't handle me—and dark always struck me as the equivalent of saying back off without having to say anything at all.

*I also thought the darkness of the green might warn him away.*

Part of me wanted that to happen. If he backed off, I wouldn't be the asshole for saying, *'thanks for showing me your dick, now lets be friends.'*

Wanting him to like it and hate it is fifty shades of fucked up. I need an intervention, but the only person qualified to set me straight doesn't know his

boyfriend's teammate has a hard-on for my hard-ons. Or that mine seems to require that sexy Norse god to make a *full* appearance.

By the time I'm dressed in a plain white shirt—one I'm hoping Noah doesn't realize is his since his jersey doesn't hide cum stains—he's scooping eggs onto a plate with buttered toast and fruit. Only one though.

"Where's yours?" I take the plate he offers and help myself to a seat at an island so big I could comfortably stretch out on top of it. That is, if it weren't made of rock.

"My breakfast is dictated by the team dietician." He sets a bowl of oatmeal and a smoothie on the counter and takes the stool next to me as I wrinkle my nose. "You aren't a fan of healthy eating?"

"I'm a fan of eating whatever I feel like, and it's never been that." I point to his meal with a grimace. "Does it even have any taste?"

"Not much, but you get used to it. Besides, this is what keeps me fit enough to play at the professional level in my thirties."

My eyes blatantly wander up his now clothed torso, which his snug t-shirt does nothing to hide. "If you're telling me that crap is the reason you're a walking wet dream then I guess I approve."

"Uh, thanks?" He eyes me the same way, cocking his head to the side with a slight frown. "Is that my shirt?"

*Busted.*

"I had a bit of a wardrobe malfunction." I scoop up the runny part of the egg with my toast. "Hope you don't mind."

"You can wear anything of mine you like. Even if it doesn't fit." His baby blues twinkle as he fights a smile.

Glancing down, I have to admit the shirt is a little big. "I'm not so sure your clothes fit you either." I reach over and pinch the fabric of his shirt between

my fingers, giving it a gentle tug, though the material barely moves since it's already stretched to the brink. "Maybe you should lay off the protein."

"I wouldn't be able to manhandle you as easily if I did."

"Why would I want you to manhandle me?" I arch my brow in his direction and take another bite of egg toast.

"You call me *big guy*."

"It's a fitting nickname."

"And you groaned '*fuck that's hot*' when I hauled you against me last night."

"You were pounding my prostate and jerking my dick. Totally hot. And also, fuck buddy etiquette says you can't hold people responsible for what they say when you're stroking their cock. It's like, shit said under duress or something."

"Would it be against fuck buddy etiquette to say I bet if I toss you over my shoulder that'll make you hard?"

"That wouldn't be a stretch since this conversation is making me hard." I look pointedly at my crotch.

"So, you're saying I'm right." He crosses his arms in front of his broad chest.

*Damn those blue orbs shine when he's feeling frisky.*

"I'm saying there's only one way to find out." I shoot off the stool and round the island, putting that big hunk of cabinetry between us. Noah jumps up in a flash, crouching slightly so he's ready to spring whichever direction I choose to run.

*I probably should've put more thought into challenging a professional goalie not to catch me.*

"Think you can outrun me?" Noah smirks.

“I think I’m lighter on my feet than you.” Faking right, I quickly change course and go left, heading for the back door. I twist the handle and throw it open, launching myself over the threshold and clearing the two flagstone stairs before I hit the patio and take off running. But I only make it a few feet before I hear a strangled wail and a heavy thud.

The brat in me wants to believe he’s using some sort of ploy to catch me off guard, but since I’d be perfectly happy to be caught and tossed over his shoulder I play along, skidding to a halt and turning to face my pursuer. Only he’s not pursuing me. He’s lying on the ground, reaching for his ankle with a strained grimace on his face.

*Shit.*

*Shit. Shit. Shit.* Not only do I have zero fucking clue what to do with hurt people, I don’t do well with guilt, which I’m feeling pretty heavily right now since my stupid game of chase is what’s got the big guy writhing on the floor, and not in an *‘I just blew the biggest load ever’* way.

I give myself three point seven seconds to freak the fuck out then trot back to Noah and crouch down next to him, patting his shoulder awkwardly. “Are you okay?”

He shoots me an incredulous glare.

“I mean, obviously you’re not, but, is this like one of those *‘I need a minute’* things or this is a full-blown *‘something’s broken’* thing?”

“Somewhere in the middle.” He closes his eyes, chest rising dramatically on a deep breath that he seems to hold for a few seconds before letting it slowly out.

“Right. And that means what exactly? Do I help you get inside or call a doctor or...” The corner of my lip tries to tick upward, and I press them together to try to keep them flat.

Noah blinks me into focus and cringes. “Why are you smiling?”

“I’m not.” I slap my hand over my mouth, which doesn’t do anything to stop my lips from twitching except hopefully make it less noticeable.

“Now you’re laughing?”

“I... No.” I shake my head vigorously back and forth, never taking my hand off my mouth.

“This is funny to you?” Anger and hurt war for dominance in his eyes.

I purse my lips together so hard I bet they’re turning white, which he hopefully can’t see under my hand, and shake my head.

“Jesus Christ,” he mumbles. “You’re fucking laughing.”

The number of swears in that sentence is telling, yet I can’t make my face look empathetic. I’ve never been able to. Until now, I thought that was because I *wasn’t* empathetic, but I do actually care about what happens to Noah, so it must be genetic or something.

“I’m not... Laughing isn’t the right...” *Dammit I’m making it worse.* “It’s a condition,” I finally squeak mid-giggle.

“A condition?” Noah scoffs, wincing when he probes his ankle.

“I promise I’m not being cheeky.” I bite back another impish grin. “Bad things happen, and I laugh. Always have. I used to think that’s because it actually *is* funny when bad things happen to people I don’t like. Only, I like you and this isn’t funny but I can’t stop myself from smiling. I don’t know what to do and it’s sort of unnerving since I know I should be doing *something* I just don’t know what. I’m a horrible caregiver. It’s why I don’t have pets.”

By the time I finish my rambling some of the anger has left Noah’s expression, although he’s still sort of looking at me like I’m every bit the

obnoxious little shit most people assume me to be. Even though that's not an inaccurate perception, he's never looked at me like that before. I don't like it.

Pasting a concerned look on my face, or what I hope is concerned, I say, "Tell me what to do."

I must get it right because the big guy offers me his hand to pull him up, and even though he must have at least sixty pounds on me I manage to get him standing with an arm draped over my shoulders so he can hop inside.

We hobble to the couch where he falls heavily onto the cushions, and I stand frozen waiting for more instructions.

"What?" He sighs.

I shrug helplessly. "Want a beer?"

"It's ten in the morning."

"After I banged my head we had beer, and then..."

"I don't want to watch you jerk off right now."

"Whoa, I didn't suggest that." I was going to, after I got an answer on the beer thing, but now I'll keep that to myself. "What *do* you want though?"

Noah's head falls against the back of the couch. "How about an ice pack? There's one in the freezer. And a dish towel."

"Coming right up." *Coming right up? I've never even been a server—no one would trust me around the customers.*

After rooting through half a dozen Tupperwares of food his chef person must leave for him, I find one of those gel things that's technically ice although it's mushy enough to wrap around a limb, which even comes with a Velcro strap so you can attach it. I make a note to look for one myself since it's probably better than the frozen veggies I used as a kid. Grabbing a towel off the counter, I head back to Noah, who's managed to get his foot propped on the coffee table.

I hand him the towel and ice pack, which he tries to wrap around his quickly swelling ankle, but when he can't get it secure, I take over, even putting a cushion under his foot so the edge of the table doesn't dig into his calf. *I'm already getting better at this.* Then I hover next to the couch, waiting for instructions since the cushion thing exhausted my ideas.

"Can you just sit?" Noah asks a few minutes later.

"How do you know where I am? Your eyes are closed."

"I feel you looming."

"I'm just waiting for you to tell me everything's fine and it's a false alarm."

"It's not a false alarm."

"It has to be, because otherwise this is my fault, and you'll hate me." It's not until I say the words out loud that I realize they're true. Especially the part about him hating me.

For weeks, I've been preaching about boundaries, mostly for his protection but also for my peace of mind. It was supposed to ensure he didn't hate me when the sex part of our buddy plan ran its course. I never anticipated he might have a reason to hate me that didn't involve dicks and holes, and now that my antics have put his season in jeopardy... He might actually hate me for this, and that's more unsettling than the idea of never getting to fuck him.

I don't have feelings for the big guy. That's not what this is about. But I do like him as a person. I enjoy his company, respect his honesty, and get a kick out of flirting with him. Have I been toying with him... Yes, but only because he allows it, and it seems to be helping him understand himself a little better. Until this little hiccup, it was all a little harmless fun. Now, I'm actually a little surprised he hasn't kicked me out yet.

"Come here." Noah holds a hand out to me. I'm not sure what to make of that since, A. we don't hold hands and, B. the ice on his foot might be

sending arctic blood to his head.

“What?”

“Come here,” he repeats, opening his eyes and pinning me with a glance that suggests he won't take no for an answer.

I take his hand with a furrowed brow, allowing him to pull me toward the empty spot next to him. As I take a seat, he drops my hand and rests his own on his thick thigh, flexing his fingers as he takes a deep breath. “Me getting hurt isn't your fault.”

“Um...”

“And I don't hate you.”

“I don't understand. You were chasing me when you fell.”

“Right. *I* was chasing *you*. That's on me.”

“But I basically dared you to do it.”

“And I took the dare.”

“If I hadn't made the dare, you wouldn't have taken it. Now look at you.” I point to his foot. “How is that not my fault?”

Noah's blue eyes follow my gaze, looking a little sad, but not angry. “Neither of us could've known a little game of chase would end like this.”

“Which is why I shouldn't have started it.” I throw my arms up, exasperated.

“Why are you so determined to think this is on you?”

I start to say ‘*because it is*’ when I realize that's not really an answer, just a feeling. A deep-seated, inherent belief that when there's something wrong, I'm to blame. There's probably some daddy issues to unpack there, but let's face it—since I enjoy a little bit of trouble, most people wouldn't call me innocent. He shouldn't either.

“Poor judgment, not thinking things through, acting like a kid... Take your

pick—any of those are reasons to blame me.”

“You can’t single yourself out when I did all the same things.”

I roll my eyes dramatically. “Are you trying to say we’re both to blame?”

“I’m saying neither of us are. Shit happens. Do I wish I could take it back, think it through before doing something reckless?” He runs a hand through his thick blond hair, a nervous tic maybe. “Yeah, of course. I don’t know what this is gonna mean yet, but I doubt it’s good, and I’m dreading what I find out. At the same time, I was having more fun goofing off with you than I have in months. Maybe even years. How could I blame you for that?”

“There’s a whole city of people out there who would easily blame me. Not to mention your teammates. And Xander. And his dad... You know his dad might actually come after me. He’s never liked me.” I recall the way I got booted from one of his team cookouts a few years back when I asked the guys to feel their muscles.

“No one needs to know all the details. I’ll just say I tripped.”

“Yeah, because people will believe the guy who balances on ice for a living would fall on dry land.” I snort.

“Stranger things have happened.”

I give him a critical once over, wondering not just why he’s being so chill about this, but why he’d spare me from the people’s wrath. My dick isn’t that spectacular.

“Sure, we can go with that plan. You tripped over your own big feet doing something you probably mastered when you were one. Now what?”

“Now, I find out how bad this is.”

“How?”

“I call the team doctor and ask him to make a house call.” He pulls his cell from his pocket and selects the doctor from his contacts, pausing to give me a

forlorn look before he makes the call. “You should probably head home, just to make sure you aren’t linked to this.”

He’s right—the only way to stay completely out of this is to make myself scarce—but I don’t jump up and make my exit the way I should. Even though I’m zero help right now, maybe even less than zero, it feels pretty shitty to leave him hurt and alone. Especially, when he looks so lost.

It goes against everything in my free-spirited, no-strings, me-first persona, but I can’t abandon him. Not now.

“What if I just hide until the doctor leaves? Then if you need that beer, I can get it for you.” *Omigod did he almost smile? I really am getting better at comforting him or whatever.*

“That won’t work if he sees your car in the driveway.” Noah’s face reverts to the pitiful look he was wearing when he suggested I go home.

“I’ll stash it in your garage.” I lift a shoulder to my ear. “It looks big enough to be its own car lot.”

“It only holds three cars.”

“Do you have three cars?” I ask pointedly.

“No.”

“Perfect. You have room for mine then. I’ll put it away and hide in your bedroom until the coast is clear.” *Coast is clear? Great. Now, I’ve invoked Scooby Doo. Too bad I can’t ask Noah’s doc for an MRI because something is clearly off with my brain.*

I hop up before my mouth can do any more damage to my totally badass image and head off to find my keys. But before I can make it too far, I hear my name.

“Tripp?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.” Noah offers me a sad smile, and it hits me that he’s scared of what comes next.

*You and me both, big guy.*

# Chapter Fifteen

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# Noah

**D**r. Cutter checks the images he took with the portable x-ray on his laptop while I sit helpless on the couch, trying not to panic.

Given our performance last year, and the way we've been looking so far, I know in my heart we have a shot at the cup this year. Or we did. Not to say our backup goalie can't do the job, or to sound cocky myself, but there's a reason he's the backup. He doesn't have my reflexes. Or my size. He'll give us a fighting chance, but guys like Niko will have to step up, and he's already playing at an elite level at the most elite level there is.

It's not realistic to think we'll get through an entire season without suffering some injuries among the team, but to start the season that way... To get hurt off the ice no less... I fucked up. Put the entire team and our season at risk. And now I'm going to lie about how it happened.

Tripp doesn't deserve the fallout that will come his way if people find out he was here. We were both horsing around, but I'm the only one with a contract that states I won't take unnecessary risks. And while I regret that my decision could affect the team, I don't regret those moments with Tripp. We

were flirting, both of us, and it felt natural. I liked it. I want to do it again, without the chasing and the injury, of course.

I knew before I hit the ground that something was seriously wrong. The pain hadn't even come, it was just the unfamiliar motion of my ankle that tipped me off, and I was probably on the ground a full two seconds, knowing I was in trouble, before the agony hit. It's faded to a dull ache now thanks to the ice, which gives me some hope that things might be better than I first thought. The fact that the doctor hasn't said anything for nearly fifteen minutes isn't helping my mental state though.

*God, I wish Tripp was sitting next to me.*

Knowing he's in the house helps, but if he were *here* he'd probably say something ridiculous to distract me, like, "I wonder what my dick looks like on an x-ray?" to which Dr. Cutter would probably gasp and turn beet red and maybe even have to wrestle the thing away from Tripp when he tries to take his own picture.

I know the man is an acquired taste for most, but I envy his ability to say whatever comes to mind. It's refreshing. And even though it's sometimes obnoxious, I like that he's not afraid to be himself.

"Do you need anything for the pain?" Dr. Cutter interrupts my imaginary scene as he finishes wrapping my ankle.

"No, why?"

"You're wincing, but you're also kind of smiling as if you're trying to ignore the discomfort."

Sounds about right. Tripp does have the unique ability to make people laugh and cringe at the same time. "I'm just trying to think positively," I fib.

"That's an excellent attitude to have. Thinking positively really does help with the healing process."

“Speaking of which, what sort of process am I looking at?” I hold my breath, as if a lungful of air can ward off the bad news.

“You're looking at a mild grade two sprain.” When I don't exhale he elaborates. “There looks to be some partial tearing of the ligament. Primarily, in this section here.” He points to a spot on the image that doesn't look all that different from the rest, at least to my eye.

“It's quite a small tear, so you aren't looking at extensive downtime. You'll need to stay off it for seven to ten days, at which point we'll start physical therapy. You'll gradually return to weight bearing, with a full recovery in approximately four to six weeks.”

“Seven to ten days? As in, do nothing for seven to ten days?”

“You can do some range of motion exercises, just don't put any weight on it,” the doctor says.

Okay, not ideal, but that puts me back on the ice before Thanksgiving, which is well before All-Star week. As long as we aren't in last place going into that break, we should have plenty of season left to make the playoffs. Hopefully, that will soften the blow when I break the news to the team.

“Would you like me to talk to Coach Nydek, or do you want to do it?” Dr. Cutter asks.

Normally, I'd own my own mistakes, but in this case the good doctor will be better able to communicate what my prognosis is. “You go ahead. I'm sure he'll have questions.”

Dr. Cutter nods and pulls out his phone—I'd thought he'd leave to make the call instead of doing it here—meaning I've only got a few minutes to come up with a reasonable explanation for what I was doing when I sprained my ankle. I'm still trying to work out what that could be when he passes me the phone. *Great.*

I clear my throat before putting it to my ear. “Hello?”

“What the hell, Noah?” Coach barks. “You chose a shitty time to hurt yourself, kid. What happened?”

“I’m not sure, Coach. One minute I was fine and the next I was on the ground.”

“What were you doing when you fell?”

I look at the doctor as if he might have the answer, but of course he can’t hear what Coach is saying. “I saw a coyote and you’re supposed to scare them off with lots of loud noise, so I was running outside banging on a pot and then I guess I tripped.”

“You tripped?” he shouts. “Why the hell are you chasing off a coyote?”

I can’t stop myself from wincing at the anger in his voice, but at this point I’m committed to my lame excuse. “My neighbors said it’s been lurking around, and they’re worried about their pets. I figured if I was loud enough, I could scare it off for good.”

“It’s a wild animal. If it wants to eat your neighbor’s pets it’ll do that whether you make a ruckus or not. *Jesus!* What am I supposed to tell the press? You jeopardized your season so you could save Fido?”

“Rufus. And he’s a bulldog.” That part is actually legit. My neighbors dress him up in a little doggy jersey with my number for the games.

“That’s supposed to justify your stupidity?”

“No, Coach.”

“What the hell were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t. I just reacted.” I’m familiar with how Coach looks when he’s disappointed, but until this moment he’s never worn that expression because of me. I’m both ashamed and grateful that I can’t see it.

“Of all the... You know this falls outside the team’s coverage, right?”

“I... What?”

“You got injured on your personal time. That means the team isn’t responsible for your medical, your pay while you’re out, or to keep you on the roster.”

Getting cut at my age is like the kiss of death. It’s too soon. I’m not ready to be done with hockey. Or the Bulldogs... The oatmeal I had for breakfast threatens to make an encore appearance. “You think they’ll cut me?”

“No, I think you’re too valuable for that. But I wouldn’t expect them to pay your bills.”

“I understand,” I mumble. “I’ll take care of it myself.”

“Good. Now as for what to say, I obviously can’t lie to management, but as far as the public is concerned you suffered an undisclosed injury during training, and you’re expected to make a full recovery in four to six weeks. When you come back I don’t want anyone targeting what they think might be a weakness, so until you’re mobile you will not so much as step foot outside your house. Have Dr. Cutter run your PT from home. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach.”

“I’ll notify the team. I expect daily updates until you’re cleared to come back to practice.”

“Okay.”

“Good. So help me if I find out you try to fight off another fucking coyote... Are we clear?”

“Yes. Got it.” I hand the phone back to Dr. Cutter and sit with my head bowed like a little kid who’s too ashamed to look his parents in the eye. He speaks to Coach a few more minutes—about what I can’t say since I’m too numb to pay attention—then startles me out of my stupor when he rests a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t get too discouraged. You’ll recover from this in no time.”

Pressing my lips together I give him a curt nod.

“I grabbed some crutches while you were on the phone with Coach Nydek.” He tilts his head toward the corner of the couch where I now see they’re propped. “I’ll be in touch next week to schedule your PT. We’ll go over what equipment you have here and what the therapist will need to bring. In the meantime, keep that foot elevated, ice for twenty minutes four times a day, and take Advil for any swelling.”

Nodding again, I make a pathetic attempt to smile. “Send me the bill for today please.”

“No need to worry about that right now.” He picks up his bag and grabs the portable x-ray machine. “I’ll see myself out, so you don’t need to get up. We’ll talk soon.”

I watch until he’s out of sight, hearing the click of the front door a few seconds later. Then I collapse against the back of the couch with a shaky breath.

The dull soreness I felt while the doctor was here morphs into a throbbing discomfort, only now it’s not just my ankle but my head that aches in rhythm with my beating pulse. *That couldn’t have gone any worse.*

“Cut you?” I gasp when an angry voice pierces the silence. “They’re going to cut you?”

*Tripp. I forgot he was here.*

“It sounds like they could, but Coach doesn’t think they will.”

“He doesn’t think...? You’re like, the star of the team. They’d really let you go over a sprained ankle?” He paces back and forth, an uncharacteristic look of disgust on his face. “What kind of organization is this? Players get hurt all the time, is this how they treat you when it happens?”

“When you get injured on the ice, no. When you get injured off it...” I realize too late Tripp will do the whole blaming himself thing as those words sink in.

“Ohmigod.” He sinks onto the couch. “I cost you your spot on the team.”

“No, you didn’t. I just told you it won’t come to that.” I’m not sure why since I’m worried about being cut myself, but convincing Tripp that won’t happen somehow makes me feel better.

“But you told the doctor to send you the bill. That doesn’t mean you’re off the team?” He props his elbows on his knees and rests his head in his hands as if the room is spinning and that will stop it.

“It means the team won’t cover my expenses for injuries I incur on my personal time.”

He looks up at me, open-mouthed “Wow. Even my insurance covers me when I’m not working and I’m just a lowly artist.”

“I’m sure my insurance will cover it, it just won’t be free like it is if I get hurt during a game or while I’m training.”

“Still sounds shitty if you ask me.” His offended look is back, which makes my heart do this strange little flutter.

“It’s a business, and I’m a commodity.”

“That’s a very Thor thing to say.”

I cock my head to the side. “It is?”

“He downplays saving people because that’s his job. You’re downplaying your value because hockey is a business. Same thing, really. Speaking of heroes... You injured yourself trying to save an imaginary dog from an imaginary coyote?” The sly sparkle is back in his eye.

“The dog isn’t imaginary. It lives next door.”

“Uh, huh. You should’ve said you were running on the treadmill and the

power went out. I bet they'd have considered that '*training.*'" He punctuates that with air quotes.

"I'll use that excuse next time." I bite back a smile, my first since getting hurt.

"Next time? Are you crazy? There will be no more funny business where you could get hurt. I'm not going to be responsible for you getting cut from the team."

"You aren't responsible now. We've been through this."

He dismisses me with a wave of his hand. "You need a bodysuit made out of bubble wrap. That way if you fall over there's no damage, just a cool sound. Ooh..." He looks at me with wide eyes that are a little too green with mischief. "If you wear it while we're fucking, we could make some pretty cool music. Can't you hear it? Pop, pop, pop, moan. Pop, pop, grunt. I'd listen to that all day long. I'd probably get fired for having a perpetual boner, or at the very least I'd make an excellent case for why I should be allowed to work from home. Do you have any recording equipment? I have editing software but not recording equipment. Why are you crying?"

"I'm not," I say as I wipe my eyes. "I'm trying not to laugh."

"You have the same condition I do where you laugh at inappropriate times?" His brows draw together in confusion.

"This is an inappropriate time to laugh?" I blink away the last of my tears.

"Well, I was being serious."

I honestly can't tell if that's true or not, but either way I feel better than I did a few minutes ago. "Thanks for staying. It helps having you here."

"About that." He sighs heavily. "You're going to need help, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You can't put any weight on that foot. How are you going to make those

fancy frozen meals for yourself or get cleaned up or...whatever else?"

I gnaw on my lip as I turn those words over in my mind. It's been years, well over a decade, since anyone's had to take care of me. Sure, I have someone that cooks meals for me to reheat, but minus the use of one leg even that will be hard to manage. And showering... That's a slip hazard right there.

"Sounds like I'm gonna have to be a bath guy for the next few weeks."

Tripp cracks a small smile at my lame joke. "Look, as much as you want me to believe I'm not responsible for this, I know better. I'm not saying I take all the blame." He holds up a hand to stop me from objecting. "But I share the blame. So, it'd be pretty shitty of me to leave you like this. It'd make me no better than those douche canoes you play for."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying if you need someone to stick around and help you with, whatever, I can do that. I need to run home and grab some things, but I can come back."

"You'd do that?" There goes my heart again, only this time the flutter spreads throughout my entire torso.

"You did it for me. When you thought I might have a concussion."

"That was one night. This would be a lot more."

"Spend a few nights in the most luxurious home I've seen in years? Twist my arm a little harder."

"I think I heard you offer to help me shower." I rub the bridge of my nose to cover my grin.

"Add a big dick on top of it? Now you're catching on." Tripp licks his upper lip suggestively. "Just make sure that healthy chef of yours leaves good

instructions. Even if I'm only reheating shit that doesn't mean I can't still screw it up."

"Actually, I'm sort of feeling like today would be a good cheat day. Maybe we could order in."

"I am excellent at ordering delivery." He shoots me a playful wink and hops off the couch. "I'm gonna run home and get some stuff for a few days, and when I get back, you can tell me what you want for your cheat dinner."

"What about dessert?" I call after him as he makes his way to the garage.

"That's where that big dick of yours comes in," he hollers back.

Even the pulsating burn in my ankle can't stop the goofy grin from spreading across my face.

# Chapter Sixteen

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# Tripp

“I can’t believe you brought your video game system over.” Noah shakes his head as he watches me connect my Xbox to his TV.

“We don’t know how long I’m going to have to play nurse, which I can’t do from my house.”

“You can’t do it here either, if you’re too busy gaming.” There’s a hint of humor in his voice, almost like he’s taunting me. I’m not sure when exactly he transitioned from timid big guy to flirtatious Norse god, but lately he seems to be coming out of his sexual shell, and I am so here for it. Who doesn’t like to flirt?

“I’m an excellent multi-tasker. Besides, Betty offers you one more thing to stay busy when you’re stuck sitting on your butt.”

“Betty?”

“The Xbox.” I finish the connection and turn it on to make sure everything’s working properly.

“Do you name all inanimate objects?”

“Only the ones I can’t live without. I…” The doorbell interrupts my train of thought. “That must be the food. I’ll get it.”

I feel Noah's eyes on me as I stride to the door, so I put an extra little sway in my hips because...*duh*. Only it's not the delivery guy standing on the front porch. It's Niko and Xander, both of whom wear matching expressions of WTF when they see me. *Busted*. It'd be comical if it didn't also mean I'm about to get my ass chewed.

"I don't even want to know." Xander shakes his head.

"Are you sure? It's a really good story." Not that I plan to tell him any of it, I'm just being honest. I mean, no one—least of all me—could've predicted that *I'd* be responsible for the well-being of another person. That's quality entertainment right there.

"I want to know," Niko says.

"Trust me, you don't. Not unless you want a mental picture of what these two have been getting up to." Xander shudders. *Rude*.

"Yeah, maybe I don't then. Is Noah in there?" Niko jerks his head toward the living room, and I step aside so he can enter.

"Your dad called you?" I ask Xander when we're alone.

"He did. Told us Noah was laid up and to come check on him. Luca and Justus should be here any minute too. He left your name out of the conversation, though."

"I would hope so since he doesn't know I'm here."

"Why are you here exactly? Spare me the salacious details, just the facts."

*Boring*. "Remember how I said Noah felt guilty about me hitting my head?" When Xander nods I continue. "I left out the part where he stayed at my place to make sure I was okay. I'm returning the favor."

"You told me, and I quote, my cock hasn't met his ass or vice versa." Xander gives me a stern once-over and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

"And that was true. *Then*."

His eyes fall shut as he takes a deep breath, I assume to calm himself although based on the color in his cheeks I don't think it's working. "And now?"

"I don't kiss and tell."

"You literally do. All the time."

"Yes, but I haven't kissed him so there's nothing to tell."

"You've done something else though." Xander arches a knowing brow, daring me to deny it.

"Is that a problem?"

"It is when the guy you're playing with doesn't play for our team."

"In my defense, I'm not the first guy to show him my dick."

Xander chuffs and rolls his eyes. "Locker rooms don't count."

"I never said it was in a locker room."

"You're telling me he'd already been with men before you started messing with him?"

"Not *with* men, but not a good little straight boy either."

"What does that even mean?" Xander's brows draw together.

"That's up to Noah to share, if he wants. Just know I didn't corrupt the Norse god. Ooh, dinner's here. And more company." I step around Xander to pay the delivery guy and take the pizzas we ordered as Luca and Justus step onto the porch, then strut back inside like my best friend didn't just assume the worst of me. Even if I sort of deserve it. "Will you guys be joining us?" I ask the group as I make my way to the kitchen.

"Pizza?" Luca asks as he follows me inside. "Oh shit, is your season over?" He turns to Noah with a panicked expression.

"I was just telling Niko it's not that bad," Noah says.

"Um, excuse me, but how do we make the leap from pizza to season

ending?” I set the boxes on the counter and start opening cupboards, looking for plates.

“Noah’s on a strict diet during the season.” Justus shrugs. “Pizza isn’t on it.”

“I figured a shit day might as well be a cheat day too,” Noah says. “But I’ll be back on the diet tomorrow.”

“Is this one of those ‘you have to eat bland food because you’re old’ things?” I hand Noah a plate with three slices, ignoring how way too many sets of eyes are watching our exchange.

“It’s one of those ‘a good diet ensures I can play a long time’ things,” he answers.

“Oh right. I see the difference.” I manage to keep a straight face even though I snort. “You all better grab some or there will be leftovers and I can’t be held responsible if this guy makes it two cheat days in a row.” I plop down next to Noah and take an oversized bite so I can give my mouth something to do other than talk, which I know they’re all expecting. Normally, I would, but in this case, I need to follow Noah’s lead, and since I don’t know what he wants to share during circle time, I plan to keep my mouth too full to put my foot in it.

One by one, the guys help themselves to a slice and join us on the couch, listening intently as Noah explains his prognosis, and looking slightly less pale when he assures them the timeframe for his return isn’t just getting back in goal, but being one hundred percent.

“Will you be at practice to help get Gauthier ready?” Niko asks.

I assume that’s the backup goalie.

“Coach wants me to lay low until I’m not visibly limping so no one can speculate what my injury is,” Noah says.

“Why?” Justus looks at his teammates in turn, clearly confused.

“Some guys would do anything for an advantage, including targeting someone’s weakness,” Luca says between bites. “Blaise on the Rockets is one of them, and we play them in a few weeks.”

“Seriously? That’s...” Justus trails off with a horrified expression.

“Um, how are you even a hockey player?” I ask him.

“What?”

“You seem genuinely shocked that there might be competitive assholes on the ice with you. How do you get to this level and not realize this is a brutal sport?” I clarify.

“I mean, you can be brutal but still play a clean game.” Justus’s little cheeks flush pink. *For real, how is he a pro?*

“Not everyone has your skill.” Luca bumps him with an elbow, and I swear he gets even redder.

“Gauthier is totally capable.” Noah gets us all back on track. “He doesn’t have my reflexes, but he has good instincts. He plays smart. He’ll obviously lean on you guys more than I do since he doesn’t get as much playing time, but he’ll keep us in contention, and I’ll be back with more than half the season left.”

“You won’t be traveling with the team?” Luca’s voice is steady, but the way his eyes dart to Noah’s is anything but.

So he's the one Noah was talking about...

“Sorry.” Noah looks conflicted as he shakes his head. “We’ll figure something out.”

*Figure something out? Does that mean... Whoa, did I just flare my nostrils?*

“Yeah. Okay.” Luca offers a weak smile.

Noah takes a deep breath and taps my leg, pointing to his crutches. “I need

to use the bathroom.”

I grab his oversize walking sticks and offer him a hand to pull him off the couch, making sure he’s steady before stepping out of his way. Then, out of the goodness of my heart with no ulterior motive whatsoever I ask, “Need me to hold your dick for you while you piss?”

Noah chuckles and shakes his head. “I think I’ve got it.”

“Always trying to get in his pants,” Niko laughs, completely oblivious to Xander’s wary gaze.

“I mean he has to take it out and have steady aim all while balancing on one leg. It’s a hazard if you ask me. Holding his dick is a small sacrifice to make sure he heals quickly.”

Niko rolls his eyes. “That sounds like something my sister would say.”

“I told you we’re two halves of a whole.” I point at Xander as I sit back down. “When is she coming back? I need a good night of debauchery.”

“I thought you were gay?” Justus looks at me with wide eyes.

“Not that kind of debauchery. The getting drunk and playing silly games kind. Maybe we’ll do Truth or Dare this time.”

“No one is allowed to fuck my sister,” Niko warns.

“Why would anyone do that?” Justus still looks comically aghast.

“The last time she was here we played kiss, marry, fuck. It’s usually kiss, marry, kill, but we didn’t like the idea of un-aliving anyone, so we amended the rules. Anna said she’d fuck Luca,” I explain.

“And you can’t dare her to do it.” Niko points a finger at me.

“But that’s a guaranteed win,” I protest.

“How do you figure?” Luca asks.

“Easy. You’d never sleep with your teammate’s sister behind his back.”

“You don’t know me that well.” Luca smirks.

“You’d sleep with Anna?” Niko glares at him.

“Of course not.” Luca holds his hands up like he’s innocent. “I’m just saying Tripp shouldn’t bank on other people being honorable to secure his win.”

“Who’s winning what?” Noah crutches back into the room.

“I’m winning Truth or Dare. Did you hit the target?” I smile sweetly up at him.

“I didn’t get to pick if I wanted truth or dare,” he replies, and the fact that he jumped right into my imaginary game without missing a beat does unspeakable things to my resolve to stay in the fuck buddy zone.

*Bad Tripp! Everyone’s playing your silly game, no need to get feelings about Noah doing it.*

“It’s more of a hypothetical game.” I shake my head to clear it.

“Hypothetically speaking then, I pick truth. I think dare would be a bad idea under the circumstances.” Noah half sits, half falls onto the couch, setting his crutches on the floor.

“Are you really sure about Gauthier?” Niko asks.

“Promise to go back on your game diet tomorrow?” Justus talks over him.

“Are you and Tripp fucking?” *Well, that escalated quickly. I didn’t realize you were paying attention, Luca.*

The questions are asked on top of each other so it’s sort of hard to pick them out, but apparently Noah got the gist. “Yes, to all,” he says. And the room goes quiet.

“You’re... bi?” I’ve never seen Luca look so off-kilter. I suppose learning the guy you’ve jerked off in front of might not have been as impartial to the view as you first thought could be jarring. Especially, if you don’t also know that he really was impartial.

“I don’t know what I am.” Noah lifts a nonchalant shoulder.

“Hello?” Niko points to himself. “I could’ve helped with that.”

Xander slaps his chest with the back of his wrist. “Excuse me?”

“Not like that.” Niko grabs Xander’s hand and threads their fingers together. “I mean you could’ve talked to me,” he tells Noah.

“I appreciate that, but I think this is something I need to work through on my own,” Noah says.

“Fair enough. Is this something you want to stay in this room?” Niko’s gaze darts between the two of us.

“Don’t look at me. This is his journey of self-discovery.” I jerk my thumb toward Noah. “I’m just the lucky guy who gets to introduce him to the dark side.”

Niko stifles a chuckle—he’s such a sci-fi nerd, I knew my Star Wars reference would get him—but for some reason I have trouble finding the humor in my own joke, which is so wrong since it *should* be funny.

“Sorry,” Noah says sheepishly. “I should’ve asked if you were okay with telling them before I said anything.”

“I don’t care if they know you like my dick.” I wink.

“Do you care if other people know?” Noah asks.

“Hell no. It’s good for my reputation.”

“Tripp,” Xander groans.

“Kidding.” I hold up my hands innocently and stick my tongue out at him before turning to Noah. “I’m an open book, big guy. You can say whatever you want about us, but maybe keep it to this room until you know what you want to tell people about yourself and your personal life.”

“You could always do what Niko did and say nothing at all,” Justus says. “Just live your life and not answer any questions that don’t pertain to

hockey.”

“Maybe,” Noah says. “Either way, I think I’d like to understand myself better before I make any decisions.”

“So, uh. Tripp is going to help you while you’re laid up?” Luca breaks his silence for the first time since asking *the question*.

“Yes.”

“No offense, but shouldn’t you have...someone else? Like one of the team doctors or something?” Luca ducks his head, so he doesn’t have to meet my eyes.

“Uh, offense taken. I’m perfectly capable of ordering take out. You’re eating the evidence right now.” I point out.

“He’s got that special diet though.” Justus bites his lip like he’s unsure if he should’ve spoken up.

“And he’s got a chef to make those meals for him, which I can heat up just as well as anyone.” Why I’m defending my caretaking abilities when they’re abysmal at best I have no idea, but I don’t particularly like the thought of anyone else doing it. *Time for that intervention, Xander. I know you’re skeptical, call me out, stop me before I completely lose my sanity.*

“It’s up to Noah who he wants to help him,” Niko says. “And team doctors travel with the team. Tripp doesn’t, so it makes sense to have someone not associated with the team to help out.”

“Not a resounding yes but I’ll take it.” I give Niko a nod of thanks even as I ask myself why I care. “Besides, he can’t get the same healing with the doctors he can get from me.”

“Sexual healing isn’t a thing.” Xander shakes his head.

“Of course, it is. There’s even a song about it.”

“Yeah dude, I don’t think that’s what the song is about,” Luca agrees with

Xander.

“Even if it isn’t, who wouldn’t appreciate a toe-curling orgasm when they’re otherwise unable to move?”

“Good point,” Niko says, rubbing his chest when Xander smacks him again. “What? If I couldn’t skate, sex would keep my morale up.”

“Morale is important when you’re injured.” Justus looks around the room bashfully before adding, “ACL tear three years ago.”

“And sex kept you going?” I ask.

“I didn’t really have anyone for that, but I can’t see it being a bad thing.” He ducks his head to rub the back of his neck.

“Unless it puts more strain on the injury,” Luca snorts.

I don’t know whether he’s out of sorts about the fact his little pre-game ritual is being threatened, or the fact that *I’m* the one Noah is playing nurse with. Either way, while I’d love to poke that bear, it wouldn’t benefit the big guy, so I’ll be good.

“All kidding aside, the reason I’m here right now is to help Noah. If he wants that to include sex, I’m game as long as we’re careful of his ankle. If all he wants is someone to bring him food and listen to him rant about how much he’d rather be on the ice, I’m game for that too. He gets to decide how I can help him best. Besides, I can’t gloat about sleeping with a hockey player if he’s not actually playing hockey, so…” *Okay so I put my own spin on it. I was still good.*

“Makes sense,” Justus says softly as Luca nods—almost imperceptibly but I’m counting it.

“We should probably all head out. We’ve gotta get up early to catch our flight for the next game.” Niko tugs Xander off the couch with him as he stands, Luca and Justus following suit.

Since Noah can't see them out, I do it, trailing them all to the door and promising to let them know how their goalie is doing while they're on the road. I'm about to close the door when Xander pauses and turns back to face me.

"I'm right down the street if you need anything." The fact that he didn't issue another warning, but rather offered to help, makes me a little nervous. Does that mean he thinks I can actually take care of the big guy, or that he doesn't object to me sleeping with him? Both would be a reversal of his initial impressions, which means he saw something just now to make him change his mind. I'm not sure I want to know what that is, so I give him a curt nod in response and shut the door.

# Chapter Seventeen

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# Noah

“I really am sorry for blurting that out. About us,” I tell Tripp as he comes back from showing everyone out.

He waves me off and starts clearing the plates the guys left behind. “And I really don’t care if they know you want my dick. I’ve made no secret about wanting yours.”

“That doesn’t make it okay for me to tell them without your permission.”

“I’m already out, big guy, so it’s not like you broke some sort of sacred trust. Besides.” He sets the plates in the kitchen and comes back to sit on the opposite end of the couch, leaning one arm across the back and spreading his legs wide. “I have no shame when it comes to sex. Tell them your cock is my favorite meal, that you like to top, show them one of my dick pics, I literally don’t care.”

“You have dick pics?”

“Spectacular, remember.” He waggles his eyebrows.

“I don’t have any. And if I did, I wouldn’t share them.” Damn, I wish my voice didn’t sound so small, but I’m having a hard time reconciling the fact he wouldn’t care if I showed people such an intimate picture of him.

“You wouldn’t share your dick pics with me?” he pouts.

“I meant I don’t have any pictures of you.” I shake my head back and forth. “And like I said, if I did, I wouldn’t share them.”

“Well, I guess bragging about your fuck buddy’s incredible cock loses some luster when your only gay friend is already spoken for.”

“No, I mean if I had any pictures, they’d be just for me. I wouldn’t want anyone else to see you the way I get to.” Though Tripp doesn’t move an inch, his whole body seems to tense up, and I can tell I’ve said too much. “You know, since you said you wouldn’t sleep around while we’re... I figure that includes dick pics. No sharing.”

“Uh, huh.” His head bobs once, slowly. “Is Luca freaking out because you won’t be around to play voyeur?”

I recognize his attempt to change the subject, but I figure since he’s still here after my slip up I’ll play along.

“You caught that, huh?”

“Kind of hard not to,” I admit.

“Yeah, he probably is.”

“That whole thing seems like a weird superstition, and that’s coming from me.” Tripp points to his chest. “How does that even become a pregame ritual?”

“I never asked. When he first told me about it, he said it was something he’d been doing for years, and that’s all I needed to know. You don’t mess with a guy’s superstition or ask for details, you just accept it.”

“What’s yours?” Curious green eyes meet mine.

“I just told you, you don’t ask for details.” I bite back a grin.

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.” He grins back. “So, why didn’t you ask Niko for advice about...things?” He swivels his wrist to finish the thought. “Is

it because he's so young?"

"He may be young in age but mentally he's so much more mature than most of our teammates, and it's clear he's pretty comfortable with who he is. He would've been a good person to talk to if I knew what questions to ask. Although, asking my rookie teammate to help me figure out my sexuality probably wouldn't have made the best impression."

"Because you're the captain?"

"And one of the older guys on the team. I'm supposed to have my shit figured out by this point in life. That's what the new guys expect."

"I know guys who didn't figure their shit out until their mid-forties." Tripp snorts. "One of them raised two kids before he sorted himself. And it's not just sexuality either. Some people don't find their calling until later."

"I hear you." I play with the hem of my shorts while I get my thoughts in order. "The thing is, it's sort of my job to take care of the new guys. Show them the ropes and make them comfortable and stuff. The coaches rely on me for that. And everyone looks to me as the example of what to do. How to train and what to eat and how to behave. How can I be anyone's good example when I can't even answer a basic question about who I am? That's why I couldn't ask Niko, or any of them, to help me."

"You know when I compare you to Thor that's mostly an appearance thing, right? I'm not actually calling you a god."

"I... What?"

"Gods are perfect. People aren't. Flaws are what make us interesting. Not that having questions about yourself is a flaw, but if you were perfect, all your little hero worshippers would be suffering crippling anxiety from trying to live up to your greatness. Being less than perfect but still trying to set a good example gives them something achievable to work toward."

When I do little more than let my jaw hang open Tripp points to his hair. “Dye job, not a state of mind. Oh wait.” He frowns. “I forgot it’s not blond anymore.”

I can’t help but smile at his defeated expression as he realizes his punchline missed the mark. “I’m not speechless because you said something insightful.”

“Really?” He arches a skeptical brow.

“No. I’m speechless because I just now realized I’ve spent years setting the wrong example. And because that’s the most words I’ve heard you string together without saying dick.” I bite the corner of my lip to temper my grin, hoping that gesture will lighten things up since I know serious Tripp is prone to getting skittish, and I don’t want him to go anywhere.

He grabs a throw pillow and hucks it at me. “Dick.”

“Uh, you ruined it.”

“Not possible. Everything is so much better when dicks are involved.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

He drops to the floor and crawls between my legs, careful not to nudge the one propped on the coffee table, smiling up at me with wicked intent as he reaches for the waistband of my shorts. “Dessert.”

“Watch the fast break. Come out of the crease, not too far. He’s gonna fake right. He’s gonna fake right. Nice stop.” I punch the air.

We’re tied in the last period of the first game I’m missing—everyone is stepping up to help give Gauthier the best chance of success—and while he’s let one get past him, he’s holding his own. It helps that our forward line is one of the best in the league, keeping the pressure on the other end of the rink. It’s a small comfort under the circumstances, especially since I’m not on the bench with them.

I get why coach wants me to lay low—speculation about my injury is just that—whereas confirmation could put a target on what people perceive as my weak side. But the inability to talk to Gauthier during the game puts us at a disadvantage. Even though it’s still early in the season, losses can add up. And though I meant what I said about Gauthier being capable, if we end up falling behind that will be on me.

“Ice.” Tripp hovers over me with the pack, and I reluctantly lift my ankle off the cushion on the coffee table so he can wrap the cold pack around it. It’s the fourth time he’s issued this order today, and while I want to appreciate it, I find myself being bothered.

“I thought you said you were a horrible caregiver?”

He flicks his head, clearing the emerald strands of hair from his eyes in a way that’s both casual and sexy as he reaches for his phone. “Turns out it’s not so hard when you program reminders in the calendar.”

“You actually put reminders in there to take care of me?”

“Seemed like the best way to make sure I didn’t fuck up.” He taps away at the screen and sets his phone by my foot so I can see the numbers tick down before joining me on the couch. “Twenty minutes.”

I grunt, not because the ice is cold, but because everything feels wrong. Being here while my team is gone. Being confined to the couch. Being taken care of. I guess if anyone has to do it, I'm glad it's Tripp, because he's got a way of putting me at ease when I'm mentally or emotionally uncomfortable. But right now, even though he's going out of his way to help me, I'm finding it hard to feel grateful. Or calm.

“He's going around back. He's shooting. Watch the ricochet.”

“You know he can't hear you, right?” Tripp says as Gauthier clears the puck.

I lift my shoulder, keeping my eyes glued to the TV as Niko takes the puck across center ice, passing it to Justus, who skates behind the net and fires off a rapid pass to Luca. The tiny opening Luca had closes as soon as the puck hits his stick, so he passes it off and skates around two defensemen, trying to put himself in position to receive another pass and take a clean shot.

One of the defenders gets a lucky break—the puck hits his skate so the pass to Luca goes off course—rocketing back towards our goal. Bodies scramble to chase it down, and unfortunately the two closest ones belong to the forwards on the opposing team. They pass it back and forth as they drive toward Gauthier, leaving him in a situation where he can't challenge one without giving the other what amounts to a free shot. All he can do is lurk in the goal and hope his reflexes are fast enough to stop the shot that eventually comes.

They aren't.

Lights flash above the goal as the puck hits the back of the net, and I try to talk him down from hundreds of miles away. “Shake it off. You couldn't have stopped it anyway.”

“Why not?” Tripp asks. “The last time he moved out of the circle thingy

and blocked the shot. Why didn't he do it again?"

I take the ice pack off and toss it on the floor with ten minutes left on the timer. "Last time was a one-on-one. This time if he came out of the circle to take on the guy with the puck, he'd be leaving the other guy wide open. That's a guaranteed goal. By staying close to the net, he had a fifty-fifty chance of being in the right spot to stop whoever ultimately took the shot."

"That's not what the TV's saying."

I turn the volume up so I can hear the commentators. "You're right John. Two on one is hard to defend, but if Gauthier had drifted slightly left to take on Dubois, he could've blocked the pass to Saunders, which would've bought time for his defense to get back in position. Tremblay would've made that play."

"Blowhards," I mumble under my breath. "Neither of those two played goalie. They have no idea what they're talking about. Just stirring up shit."

"The Bulldogs could really be in a tight spot without Tremblay," the commentator says. "We still don't know what's keeping him off the ice, and if the team falls too far out of the lead before his return, they won't make the playoffs."

I grab the remote and hit the mute button, tossing it on the table in disgust and reaching for my phone.

"What are you doing?" Tripp asks.

"Texting the guys not to let Gauthier listen to any of the post-game talk. It's all bullshit, and it could really mess with his game if he takes it to heart."

"What's bullshit? The part about Gauthier or the part about you?"

"All of it. Gauthier's playing well, and I'm not gonna be out that long. These guys are talking just to talk. None of it's accurate."

"So, you couldn't have stopped that shot like that guy said?"

“If I did it would’ve been luck. I wouldn’t have played it any different than Gauthier did, that’s for sure. I wish I could tell him that in person.” I sigh and collapse into the cushions behind me. *One more week. One more week before I can start rehab and get off this damn couch.* I bolt up and reach for my crutches.

“Where are you going?” Tripp asks.

“I don’t know.” I push myself off the couch and crutch toward the kitchen.

“Are you always this jittery, or only when you’re supposed to be sitting still?” His voice is close enough that I assume he’s following me.

“Asks the guy who literally bounces up and down while he’s playing video games,” I chuff.

“You were holding my joystick, so...”

“That’s...” I shake my head back and forth. “Can’t you ever be serious?”

“When the situation calls for it.”

“You don’t think this is a serious situation?”

“What I think is you’re so used to playing the role of Mr. Perfect that you haven’t let yourself get pissed about your ankle, and you’re starting to buckle under all this pressure of pretending you’re fine.”

“I...what?” My chest heaves as I try to keep myself from shouting.

“You’ve never let yourself feel angry or sad or guilty about getting hurt, which I’m guessing is why you can’t sit still and have been prickly all day. This shit sucks. Get angry.”

“I already told you this isn’t your fault.”

“And I didn’t say to get angry at me, just to *get angry.*”

My nostrils flare as I take a deep breath, preparing to defend myself. Only I can’t, because every bit of what he said is true. I am trying to stay in control, and I don’t know how to handle the fact that I’m not. My skin is crawling due

to the overabundance of restless energy, anger and guilt, none of which Tripp deserves to bear the brunt of. That's hard to remember when he's smirking at me though, daring me to take his bait.

"Fuck!" I shout.

"There you go." Tripp winks.

"There I go?" My volume is still abnormally high, but I'm no longer shouting. "There you go, being a brat again."

"You seem to like it."

"What?" I seethe.

"You're reacting. Showing some emotion. That's good."

"How would you know? Your only emotion is not giving a shit."

The wince is so slight I'm not even sure it's real, though before I can regret my words, he pastes a blank look on his face. "We aren't talking about me."

"We could be, Mr. I don't do relationships."

"Yeah, but we're not. Right now, this is about you, and how it's okay for you to not be perfect and in control all the time.

"You want me to lose control?" My hands are gripping the crutches so hard my knuckles are white.

"If that's what'll get your head right."

"Don't bait me."

"Or what? You'll throw something. Punch a wall. Fuck me." He licks his lip suggestively.

"Typical. Always thinking about dicks," I mutter, shaking my head.

"Have you ever hate-fucked anyone?"

That's not the response I'm expecting. "What? Why the hell would I do that? Those two things don't really go together."

"They do when you need an outlet, and you have a fuck buddy who likes it

rough.”

“I don’t need a fuck buddy right now! I need to be on the ice, with my team.”

“But you can’t.” Tripp steps so close our chests are practically touching. “And that’s driving you mad so stop trying to pretend it doesn't piss you off.”

“Of course, it pisses me off.” The damn breaks as I let go of my crutch to grab him by the back of the neck. “I’m here while my team is gone, they’re losing because of me, and you...” The words die on my tongue as I realize our faces are so close, we’re breathing each other’s air.

Time seems to stand still as our gazes lock, Tripp’s green eyes glinting in triumph. Then our chests brush together on a precarious inhale, and the room around us fades away as every lingering noise is drowned out by our heavy exhales. Trapped in this little bubble, fear and desire ripple through me, fighting for dominance. There’s a split second where fear almost wins, where I nearly reign in my aggression and pretend I’m not coiled so tight I’m about to erupt.

I should step away... We have an unspoken rule to never kiss. Yet, as I stand here, like I've been placed under some sort of spell, I can’t bring myself to move. Hell, I forget how to blink, and the only understandable thought in my mind is how badly I want to kiss him—to devour him.

Closing the distance between us, I smash my mouth against his, moaning when our tongues meet, and I realize he’s not fighting me. He’s matching me in desperation and intensity, stealing my breath as he gives me his own.

Whether this is part of his challenge to get me to let loose or because he wants it as badly as I do, I don’t know. Don’t care. I just know that the rough brush of our lips, the scrape of stubble along my jaw, is the most intoxicating thing I’ve ever felt.

I want to claim him, to slam him against the wall and wrap his legs around my waist. The urge to make him mine is consuming, but I'm fully willing to give myself over to him in return. I let my other crutch fall to the floor and give him my weight, so we topple onto the couch.

Tripp doesn't miss a beat as I fall on top of him, lips and teeth and tongues tangling in a frenzy of lust. He bites my bottom lip just hard enough to sting before licking away the burn and delving inside my mouth, groaning as his hips rut against mine.

Hands rake through my hair, down my back, groping my ass. Mine are just as eager, clutching at Tripp's arms, chest, and head, trapping his mouth against mine and swallowing the sounds he makes.

I've kissed people before—women—and while it was often soft and gentle, there were times it became hurried and needy. But it was never passionate. It never consumed me or flooded my senses. It never threatened to drown out the world until the only sensation left was the feel of my partner's lips.

My chest aches with want. My heart beats like it does when the seconds tick down on the clock and I'm desperately trying to hang on for the win. That's never happened with another person—only the game. The game I'm not playing right now.

The anger that had started to dissipate comes roaring back, mixing with the adrenaline and desire. It makes me crave Tripp with an almost feral need.

Somewhere, in the deepest recesses of my mind, a voice tells me to slow down. That I'm too unhinged. Then Tripp slides his hands under my shirt and rakes his nails down my back. "I need you. Now."

We're a tangle of limbs as we race to shed our clothes, miraculously staying on the couch as we contort ourselves to get naked. Then Tripp leans over the arm, sticking his ass toward me, and hands me a small packet of lube.

I lean forward and growl into his ear. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Boy Scout motto. Always be prepared.” He rocks back and forth, trying to rub his crease along my length.

“You were a boy scout?”

“Fuck no, but you never know when you might get the chance to play with a fat cock.”

I don’t know if it’s the obnoxious words or the visual of my dick resting between his cheeks. Either way, the thought of anyone but me seeing him like this suddenly has me seeing red, and before my mind can catch up my palm cracks down on his ass.

“Oh fuck,” he moans, rocking backward. “I didn’t know you had it in you, big guy, but I like it. Again. With your cock in me.”

His command has precum practically dripping from my slit. *Have I ever been this hard before?* I rush to get myself nice and slick and line up to his hole.

“Don’t be gentle.” Tripp looks at me over his shoulder, biting the lip that’s still puffy from my kisses.

I punch forward as I grip his hip and pull him toward me, nearly losing it when my intrusion makes his eyes flutter closed in bliss. *God, he’s beautiful.* Then I smack him again.

Tripp’s mouth falls open on a guttural moan as his hole clenches around me, gripping me so tight I have to choke off the air in my lungs to keep my body from tipping over the edge. *Holy...* I smack him again as I thrust my hips forward, and it happens once more, only this time my lungs give out, and I let out an animalistic groan of my own.

Just as before, all my restraint seems to evaporate, and I give in to my baser urges. My hips piston forward relentlessly as I latch onto Tripp’s waist for

support, pulling his body over my cock as I drive it deep.

The pleasure is so intense my vision blurs, the slip and slide of our joined bodies engulfing me in a carnal nirvana unlike anything I've ever experienced. It's as if every nerve in my body has gone on vacation, except for the ones cocooned inside Tripp's body, and they're on high alert, crackling and zinging over and over again like fireworks as they build toward the finale.

Grunting, I push toward the precipice, the feel of Tripp's cock slapping my leg driving me forward. Then a sharp tug on my balls turns that grunt to a needy whine. I gasp as I realize he's squeezing both our sacs in his palm.

"Not yet, big guy. I can still hear the guilty voices in your head. No coming til they're gone," he commands.

Planting my right foot on the ground for leverage, I thrust as hard and fast as my body will allow, the smack of skin on skin drowning out the post-game coverage on the TV. The speculation about me, and the team, and our future. All the noise that threatened to send me careening into an abyss of anger and self-pity, before Tripp gave me his body as a lifeline.

*Jesus. How does he understand me so well? How does he know what I need before I do? How does he make me feel whole?*

"Harder." Tripp's order has me realizing my pace has started to slow. "Get out of your head and fuck me."

With renewed focus I drive into Tripp's slick hole, losing myself to the friction and pressure that surrounds me as I tunnel into him.

"That's it, big guy. Give me all of you. Everything." He lets go of our balls and grips his cock with a throaty groan, and I find a rhythm that borders on frantic, pounding into him relentlessly as my mind finally quiets, allowing my body full control.

My abs burn, my thighs twitch, and my cock feels like it's chafing despite the slickness surrounding it. And then his hole clamps down like a pressure cooker, squeezing me to the point of pain. My toes curl and cramp, my balls draw up tight, and I unload like a damn firehose, filling him so fast my cum seeps out and slides down our thighs.

The room goes dark as my release fades, my body too spent to hold my eyelids open, and I collapse against Tripp's back. My weight causes his arms to give out, and as we fall against the cushions. Our sweaty skin is just slippery enough that my torso slides off his, coming to rest between his warm body and the back of the couch, though our legs are still tangled.

"I hope you pay your cleaning lady well because I painted my entire load on your sofa," Tripp mumbles beside me.

"I'll just flip the cushion."

"And leave my jizz there as a memento? First a spanking and now this? Kinky."

"I didn't spank you to be kinky. You were talking about always being ready to fuck, but you don't need to carry hookup supplies around when we're in *my* house."

Tripp shifts to lay on his side so he can face me, eyebrow arched impishly. "Hate sex doesn't go so well if you have to say, *'please hold while I try to remember where I put the lube.'*"

"Was that hate sex?" I set my hand on his hip, focusing on the way my fingers glide over his skin instead of the look I might see in his eyes.

"What did it feel like?"

"Salvation."

He snort-laughes. "I know I'm a good fuck, but you're giving me too much credit."

“I’m serious.” I swallow thickly, risking a quick glance at his face before I study my hand again. “I was about to spiral, and you stopped it. That doesn’t feel like hate.”

“It’s not. But hate fucking has a better ring to it than get it out of your system fucking,” he says airily.

“Why would you let me do that to you?”

“You needed it.” I feel him shrug. “And in case you didn’t notice, I happen to *really* like it.”

“I was pretty rough. I’m not even sure I was aware of what I was doing half the time. I could’ve hurt you.” My fingers flex and release on his hip as if to punctuate my words.

“You let go of your control, just like I asked you to. Do you feel better?”

“Yes and no.” I swallow again. “I’m not as angry, but I’m a little confused.”

“About what?”

“I’ve never been that way off the ice.”

“What way?”

“Aggressive. Unhinged.”

“I believe you’re saying *hot as fuck* wrong.” Tripp trails a finger between my pecs, making me shiver.

“What?” I half-scoff, half-chuckle.

“I mean, you’re always hot, but wanting me so bad you literally can’t control yourself...” His finger ghosts over my nipple. “Damn.”

“Your ego knows no bounds.” I grab his hand, holding it next to my chest.

“What can I say, I’m blessed.” He shifts again so he’s laying on his back, his hand falling out of my grip, while I’m still on my side, facing him.

“I kissed you.” I press, resting my hand on his lean stomach.

“True.”

“And you kissed me back.”

“Also, true.”

“Why?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Felt right at the time I guess.”

I want to ask if that means we’re more than fuck buddies, but I have a feeling this conversation is already testing his limits, and as long as he’s not saying we shouldn’t do that again I won’t push it.

“I thought the same thing. We should probably clean up.”

“You mean we should see if I really did ruin your couch?” He waggles his eyebrows.

“I don’t give a shit about the couch. Help me up. I dropped my crutches when I tackled you.”

Tripp hunts down my crutches and holds them steady as I struggle to stand up, frowning slightly as I make my way out toward my bedroom.

“That’s something you don’t see every day,” he mutters.

“What?”

“A naked man hobbling around on crutches. I wouldn’t expect it to be hot but... It makes the muscles in your back ripple all sexy like, and your ass jiggles when you plant your foot.”

“Jiggles?” I huff, rolling my eyes. “I’m already laid up, don’t take the rest of my dignity by saying jiggles.”

“It’s a compliment.”

“It doesn’t feel like one. Walk ahead of me. Go start the shower.”

Tripp pinches my ass and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Brat.” I grumble as I watch his sexy ass strut down the hall, a goofy grin plastered on my face.



# Chapter Eighteen

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# Tripp

“**W**hat?” Noah asks hesitantly when he catches me watching him from the corner of my eye.

“Nothing.” I glance back at the TV, pretending I’ve been watching it since he plopped down next to me.

“You know how you chew the corner of your lip when you’re dying to say something people might find offensive and you’re wondering if the backlash will be worth it?”

“No.” *Note to self, don’t chew on my lip when I’m debating whether to open my mouth.* “I don’t ever wonder if the backlash is worth it. I don’t care.”

“Depends on how offensive you’re about to get. And toward who. So, out with it.”

“Out with what?” I ask innocently, which Noah answers with a heavy sigh. “Fine. I was just thinking that for a hockey god who’s got possibly the best body I’ve ever had the pleasure of climbing, you’re looking awfully winded after walking ten yards.”

“Crutches are exhausting.”

“You’re only using one. You’re practically walking.”

“I’m mostly trying not to fall.”

“Still, shouldn’t you have more...stamina?”

I totally didn’t mean for that word choice to be so charged, but I can’t say I don’t love the wave of lust that glazes his eyes.

“Noah Tremblay, get your head out of the gutter.”

“You dragged me down there.” His bashful smile damn near makes me crack one of my own. *This man is too gorgeous for his own good.*

“That’s getting easier and easier to do. But as much as I like how your mind immediately conjured an image of me bouncing on your cock, I’m genuinely worried. You look worn out.”

Noah’s smile fades to a strained grin. “The swelling is just... It makes my foot feel tight, like it doesn’t fit in my skin. And that pain makes walking a lot harder than it looks.”

Cocking my head to the side, I study the ankle he has propped on the coffee table. “I guess it does still look pretty puffy. Can they juice it?”

“Juice it?” He wrinkles his nose in disgust.

“Don’t give me that look. I didn’t come up with the term. Willy Wonka did.”

“Willy Wonka?”

“You know, the candy guy in that movie? When that girl turns into a giant blueberry they take her to the juicing room, I think. We should take you to get juiced.”

He laughs, looking at me like I’m both absurd and amusing. “The only way to get swelling down is time. Although, I suppose a massage wouldn’t hurt.”

“A massage?” Now it’s my turn to wrinkle my nose. “You want a foot massage?”

“I mean, if you’re offering—”

“I’m not. Nope. Not offering that.”

“You don’t like giving massages?”

“I don’t like touching feet.” I shudder at the thought.

“Let me get this straight, you’d happily stick a finger up my ass but not touch my feet?” The gleam in his eye says he’s baiting me, but I’m too grossed out to take it. There’s one body part I don’t love on anybody, and I don’t plan to start now.

“You haven’t let me put my finger in your ass yet, but yes. I’d take that over touching your feet.”

“What about my swelling?” He adopts this wounded puppy look that’s so fucking cute words spill out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“Will that extra fluid go to your dick and make it supersized?”

“No.” His lips split into a wide grin as he laughs at my pout.

“Would you let me put my finger in your ass?” *I can’t believe I’m playing along with this, but he really does have the nicest, roundest, most beautifully jiggly butt and I desperately want a piece of it.*

“Maybe.”

“Fine,” I huff. “Give me your foot.”

A heavy weight finds its way to my lap, and with my eyes closed I tentatively reach for it.

“If it grosses you out that bad you don’t have to touch it.” Noah starts to pull his leg back, but I hold it firmly.

“Just... Distract me.” I gently knead the squishy skin around his ankle, telling myself it’s an ass cheek.

“What made you get into skateboarding?”

“I already told you. It’s uncivilized.”

“You could say the same thing about hockey.”

“I suppose, although if a sport costs thousands of dollars to play, most people would say aggressive or even violent, not uncivilized.” *Did he just sigh? Maybe he’s pretending I’m rubbing his ass too.*

“So, if it cost money your parents would support it, and if it didn’t they’d hate it, so you went with the one they’d hate?”

“And here I thought hockey players were just dumb jocks.”

“Not a dye job, but also not a state of mind.” I open my eyes to see Noah pointing at his hair, and roll my own before getting back to my imaginary butt massage.

“Did you get to pick hockey or did your Canadian roots decide for you?” I ask.

“Both. It was pretty much expected that I learn the game, but when I started growing and realized I have solid reflexes for my size, it became something I wanted to get better at.”

“I bet your parents are psyched about that.”

“They were.”

“Were?” My hands still.

“They passed about eight years ago. Car accident.”

“I’m sorry.” To my surprise I don’t laugh, even though this is a prime example of an inopportune moment. Maybe I’m finally outgrowing that particular personality defect.

“Thank you,” he says, and when nothing else follows I start rubbing again.

“What?” His question brings my gaze to his, and I see him point to his lip. “You’re chewing on it again. What?”

No way. I’m not going to admit I was thinking about my own shitty parents when he’s clearly sad about losing his.

“You really don’t want to know.” I knead his ankle, shoving my family out

of my mind and focusing on my salacious daydream. This time I know he sighs in response, which makes me feel oddly content despite the fact I'm touching his foot.

"Of course, I want to know."

"Fine," I groan for maximum effect and tell him about my fantasy instead of the reality he caught me remembering. "I'm pretending I'm rubbing your ass."

"That's how you stomach rubbing my foot?" He chokes back a laugh.

"We all have our phobias. And the ass visual worked for me. Or it did." I nudge his leg away because with him saying *foot* I can't pretend anymore.

"Well, I didn't have the same visual, but I think it had the same results."

"What?" I twist my head to look at him, and see him pointing to his junk, which is standing at full attention. As much as it can be from underneath his track shorts.

"My foot rub did that?"

"I thought it was an imaginary butt massage." He points to my shorts, which are also tented. *Huh*. "Looks like it worked for you, too. You know what this means?"

"Time to bounce on your cock?" I lick my lips eagerly.

He chuckles and reaches for my hand, dropping his legs to the floor as he pulls me onto his lap. "Only if I get to suck on yours first."

*Oh, fuck yes!*

It's torture sitting at my desk.

Correction, it's torture sitting here by my lonesome when I've spent the last few weeks working at Noah's kitchen table. It was fun showing him what I do, eating all our meals together, and vegging on the sofa when we were done for the day.

When I volunteered to help him out with his ankle and made arrangements to work from his place, I didn't think I'd see as much of him as I did. I figured he'd watch TV or read while I was a good little worker bee, and I'd pop up to get him snacks and shit when he asked so he wouldn't have to walk. I didn't expect him to take an interest in my projects and sit by my side while I worked on them, oohing and aahing over my designs and even brainstorming ideas with me. The man may be a jock but he's no dud in the creative department, and while I love my job to begin with, he made it more fun.

Now that I'm back in the office, sitting alone, I feel antsy. I can't explain it, but I miss the back and forth we had, and I keep looking at the clock to see when I can leave. Time to bother Xander, since pestering him often rejuvenates me.

"I'm in literal heaven. Noah loves dick," I confess as I plop my ass on the corner of his desk.

Even though he's clearly skeptical about the big guy and I playing footsy with our dicks, it's sort of tradition for me to exploit my exploits, and now that our secret's out I see no reason why I can't gift Xander with some of the saucy details, which... *Dear Lord.*

I've been *'taking care of'* Noah for almost two weeks and he's slightly more mobile now. Even though I've started working in my office again, I'm

still staying at his place every night. In his bed. Where he makes sure I'm thoroughly exhausted by the time I fall asleep, and sometimes again when I wake up. It's like I've got my own personal sex doll. Or dildo. Or... Cock worshiper sounds obnoxious, but it's not entirely inaccurate given his fascination with my junk.

"Yes, I sort of assumed that since you're dating," Xander says blandly.

"Fucking," I correct. "But yes, he loves it." Ever since he hate-fucked us into the next universe, he's been greedy for it, coming after me day and night. I suppose a small part of his desperation could be attributed to the kissing, a slip up on my part but one I can't say I regret. It's led to more sex, and the big guy is a fantastic kisser.

True, I'm breaking the rules I set for myself, which should be concerning. Prior to Noah, neither kissing nor sleepovers were part of my vocabulary. I know in the long run it will prove to be a bad idea that I've let them become habit, but... *Sex!* Lots and lots of it. In every room, on every surface, and in every position imaginable as long as he can do it without putting weight on his foot.

Have we crossed into friends with benefits territory instead of fuck buddies? Probably. However, I refuse to accept that repeated, mind-blowing orgasms shouldn't be enjoyed to the fullest, so that's what I'm doing, even if it means I sometimes, occasionally fall asleep in his arms.

And wake up there.

*Naked.*

"He can't stop touching it," I gush to Xander. "Before we go to bed, first thing when we wake up, in the shower... He even edged me while I was playing video games."

"I don't need to know that." Xander winces slightly and shakes his head.

“Of course, you do, because it’s actually super-hot. Noah’s not a gamer but he said he needed something to do while I play, so I let him hold my dick, which turned into me riding his while I shot up bad guys. And staying focused on the game while you’re getting jerked off *and* pegged is no easy feat, let me tell you. I did pretty well, though. I only team-killed, like, three guys.”

“TMI.” Xander presses his hands to his ears.

I pull them down with an eye roll. “I listened to all your shit with Niko. The least you can do is listen to mine.”

“I literally never told you anything about our sex life.”

“Which is a travesty since that man is fucking glorious, and you’re only forgiven since it led to me meeting Noah. Did I mention he *loves* my cock? The other day, he had his head in my lap while we were watching TV, and for no reason at all he just pulled it out and started sucking on it, and...”

“Tripp!” Xander hisses.

“What?” I blink, leaning back slightly since he sort of yelled at me at whisper volume. Xander's gotten frustrated with me before, but he's *never* yelled. Not once, no matter how much I overshare. Now he’ll never hear the juiciest part of that story, which I was tempted to share. That for some strange reason I was fine with Noah’s head in my lap. I wouldn't have minded even if blow jobs weren't included.

Xander closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger with a heavy sigh. “Do you think Noah would be okay with you telling me all this?”

“I mean, you’re not some random guy, you're his teammate’s boyfriend. Besides, it’s just sex.”

Xander drops his hand and gives me a withering look. “Is it?”

I'm not usually speechless, but my mouth opens and shuts at least three times before I blurt, "Well, what would you call it?"

"Dating."

My mouth has trouble forming words again. "It's not dating if you've never been on a date."

"Semantics."

"Semantics are pretty important, you know. Critical even. And aside from the fact that we haven't been on a date, I *don't* date. So, your definition doesn't apply." I'm rambling, but since that's normal for me I figure he won't make an issue of it.

"Does *cohabitating* work better for you?"

I gasp with as much disgust as I can muster. "I would never—"

"How many nights have you spent at your place in the last two weeks?"

"I've been playing nurse. You know that." I cross my arms over my chest.

"And how much nursing are you doing? Noah's got a chef and a physical therapist, and he should be walking by now if his recovery is on track. So, what's your role, exactly?"

"I gave him a foot massage the other day," I blurt defensively, realizing a little too late that won't help my case.

"You hate feet." Xander smirks knowingly, forcing me to double down.

"Which clearly demonstrates what a good nursing job I'm doing."

"Or it says you like Noah."

"Of course, I like him. He's a friendly guy and he's got a beautiful cock." I lift a nonchalant shoulder.

"You could say the same thing about most guys you hook up with, but you've never spent the night with them."

Right about now, I'm regretting the extent to which I exploit my exploits to

Xander. In my defense, I was pretty certain he wasn't paying attention half of the time.

“We’re talking in circles here. You know why I’ve been spending the night. Stop reading into everything.”

“Stop pretending your motives are purely altruistic. You’re staying there because you want to, not because you need to.”

“He does have a magnificent shower.” I snatch a pen off Xander’s desk and start spinning it around my fingers.

Xander snatches the pen back. “He’s different, admit it. And while we’re on the topic, so are you, and I don’t just mean your hair color. Since the day I met you, you’ve been hiding in plain sight. You’re loud and obnoxious and outspoken, but you don’t fool me. It’s an act to make people think you’re an open book when really all they see is the cover. Noah sees through it, doesn’t he? And you like it, don’t you? That’s why you haven’t left when he doesn’t, and never really did, need you to take care of him.”

Wow. All this time I thought Xander was too broody and guarded himself to realize there wasn’t much substance behind most of my word vomit. Being sickeningly happy—like a chocolate addict being welcome into Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory—must’ve opened his eyes. I blame Niko. Clearly, he’s at fault here.

“Perhaps the big guy is more interesting than I first thought.”

“Still not willing to admit you might have feelings for him, huh?” Xander narrows his eyes, and while that warrants a saucy retort, I’m embarrassed to say I don’t have one, so I just stare at him blankly. “Fine,” he dismisses me by focusing on his computer, and since I don’t have a retort for that either, I slink back to my own desk, wondering if it’s already too late to say we’re simply friends with benefits.



# Chapter Nineteen

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# Noah

“**W**hen are you coming back?” There’s an uncharacteristic hitch in Luca’s voice, which I’m not sure can be attributed to a poor connection.

“The doctor says at least two more weeks, if I have full range of motion.”

“Dammit.” He exhales.

“What’s wrong with that? It’s faster than originally projected.”

“I need you back. I’m playing like shit.”

“You guys have two losses. That’s nothing we can’t recover from.” I try to talk him down.

“I’m not talking about the team, I’m talking about me. Everyone else is pulling their weight but I’m flailing out there. I need you back. I’m not myself...” he trails off.

He doesn’t need to say anything else for me to know where this is going, and it’s a direction I’m not as comfortable with as I once was. Still, I have to tread carefully because regardless of what I think, he’s rooted in his beliefs. And if there’s one thing I understand, if something makes you feel like you play better, regardless of how ridiculous it seems, you do it.

“Luca, I’m not the key to your success. You’re still playing great. Just yesterday you scored two goals.”

“That was a home game. I have an arrangement for those.” *He has an arrangement? Huh. I always wondered how that worked.* “It’s the road games where I struggle. I need you to—”

“I’m not cleared to travel,” I interrupt before he can ask what I suspect he wants to ask.

“I know, but maybe we can work something out. I could video chat you or something.”

*Shit.* That’d be a reasonable solution if I was still single, but I’m not. At least, I don’t think I am... Tripp might have a different opinion. We haven’t talked about what we are, and I was hoping not to just yet since I’m pretty sure he’s not ready to label it. But Luca won’t understand my hesitation without a label to explain it, and if I’m going to deny his request after all these years, I owe him an explanation.

“Can we come up with another option? One that maybe doesn’t involve me?”

“One that... *Oh shit.* This is because of Tripp, isn’t it? You’re not just fucking you’re...*fucking.*”

“I don’t understand the difference, but yeah. It’s because of Tripp. I don’t feel right being your audience when I’m sleeping with him.”

“The difference is you’re not just having a little fun between the sheets, you like him.”

“I do. I really do.” I’m suddenly grateful to be on the phone so he can’t see the heat rush to my face with that admission. Not that I’m ashamed to have feelings for Tripp, I just can’t help worrying that those feelings will be our downfall, seeing as we had an agreement. We promised not to let ourselves

get to this point. If I'm being honest, I always suspected this would happen, and I secretly hoped it would.

The fact we've been practically living together for the past few weeks probably accelerated things, but right from the start I questioned whether I liked all men or only Tripp. Now, I can confidently say it's only Tripp. Whether I'd be attracted to another man if I gave myself the opportunity to explore that I'm not sure, but I am sure I don't need to find out.

Tripp makes things fun. Not just sex, but life. He's full of energy, finds pleasure in just about everything, and makes me see things in a new light. For years, all I saw was hockey, and I don't regret that. The sport has given me so much, and it's fulfilled me in a way nothing else could. It's also why I was wary of retirement, which is looming in the not-so-distant future. For the first time in, maybe ever, I can see a future that doesn't revolve around hockey. Tripp gave me that.

When I think of the future, there's only one thing that matters. I just want him in it.

"You know, he'd probably be on board with watching," Luca hints.

"He probably would." I sigh heavily, hating the way that image makes my stomach sink.

"But you aren't." Luca must hear the reluctance in my voice.

"Not really, no." I'm fully conscious that wanting Tripp for myself threatens everything. He might be a willing participant, and I know on some level I'm important to him, but if he came to the realization that this is more than sex to me I'm afraid he'd pack up and leave.

"So, this is serious with you two?"

I rub a hand over my face, as if that will stave off the tension building in my head. "I don't know. It wasn't supposed to be, then this injury happened

and... Things feel different now. I haven't acknowledged that out loud. All I know is whatever this is, I don't want it to end."

"You're going to leave me hanging over something you aren't even sure is serious?"

"You're going to give me shit over being confused after I suffered through years of your unconventional pre-game ritual?" I fire back.

"Suffered?" Luca sounds genuinely shocked. "I thought it didn't bother you?"

"I didn't mean it like that, sorry." I apologize. "It didn't bother me."

"About that," he pauses a few seconds before speaking again. "Were you gay this whole time? I don't care if you were, I just thought that wasn't your thing."

"I didn't think it was either. And I wouldn't say I'm gay since I'm not attracted to all men. Just Tripp."

"Pfft. I'm way hotter than Tripp," he mutters.

"You sound like you want me to be attracted to you."

"I don't," he rushes to clarify. "Having you watch was never about that, it's a superstition I haven't been able to shake in...forever. Still, it kinda bruises my ego, anyway. I know that doesn't make any sense. Maybe I'm just freaking out over what to do..."

I don't know the origin of his superstition, but I get why he clings to it so fiercely. It makes sense that changing things up would rattle him, especially when that change comes with a healthy dose of *'I didn't see that coming'* like the one I just sprung on him about being gay for only Tripp, if that's what I am.

"What if you video chatted someone else? Whoever you have that arrangement with here?" I don't have all the salacious details about how

Luca's superstition works, but if he has an arrangement here then there are other options.

"I guess I could try that." He exhales heavily. "So, what are you gonna do about Tripp? Think you'll tell him you're into him?"

"I thought I might ask him on a date."

Luca coughs and sputters on the other end of the line. "Doesn't that step usually come *after* you decide you want to date?"

"Hell if I know. I couldn't even tell you the last time I went on one. But my neighbors are having this charity fundraiser thing and since they invite everyone in the area, I'm sure Niko and Xander will be going, so it'd be more of a group thing."

"A charity fundraiser? That's your idea of a date?"

"I guess I doesn't have to be called that. We have to dress up for it, so maybe? I just don't want to go alone or be the third wheel to Niko and Xander, so I thought it might be okay to ask him and see where it goes."

"I'd probably have the '*are we fucking or fucking*' conversation first, but yeah. Ask him out."

After a grueling PT session where I managed to hit about eighty percent of my mobility, I hit the shower to clean up, paying particular attention to *that* spot. Just in case.

It's probably silly, but there's a part of me that feels like I won't ever find out where this thing with Tripp can go if I don't let him in. *Physically*. I've been getting more and more curious about it, and now that we've been sleeping together for nearly a month, it feels like the right time. That and I might have an ulterior motive.

Though Tripp is well-spoken when he wants to be, at his core he's a physical, sexual guy. I think he's more comfortable with actions than words, and taking the role of bottom is one way for me to acknowledge I've developed feelings for him without putting him on the spot by saying the words. Sort of like that kiss.

I didn't plan that, I just acted, and he didn't stop me. He's even initiated it a few times since then. Only during sex, but considering that was a line between us that's no longer there... It seems to me the best way to approach new dynamics with Tripp is to just act. So, tonight, I'll tell him I'm game for more than just a sexual relationship by offering to bottom. If he accepts, I'll know we're getting closer to the point where I can say the words without driving him into a panic.

Tripp's a little jumpy when he gets home, darting back and forth between the kitchen and living room to grab me a drink, himself a drink, clean up, and who knows what else.

"Bad day?" I ask.

"No, why?" Tripp starts to sit, pats his pockets and looks toward the kitchen with a frown before bolting in that direction for his phone.

“You’re making me dizzy with all this up and down. Just sit and relax,” I tell him.

He sits at the opposite end of the couch, but rather than slouch into it like he usually does his spine is ramrod straight, eyes darting around the room. “Where are you crutches?”

For the last several days, I’ve used them to take a little of the burden off my ankle while walking, but I’ve finally made enough progress to ditch them completely. “The therapist said as long as it wasn’t uncomfortable, I could walk without them.”

“Hmm.” Tripp nods. “So, you’re better?”

“Getting there. They aren’t ready to let me try skating yet, but I have the green light for standing and walking.”

“You probably don’t need me to help you out anymore then.”

*Fuck.* I didn’t see that coming, even though it’s a logical assessment. Truthfully, I think we both know I never *needed* him to take care of me, we just went along with that ruse since it was a convenient excuse to have him stay. I could be honest and tell him I like having him around, though I think that would be worse than admitting I can take care of myself.

“Who would rub my ankle when it’s sore?” I ask with mock seriousness, hoping my flirty tone implies there’s a legitimate reason for him to be here.

“Doesn’t your physical therapist do that?”

“It doesn’t have the same results.” I take a page out of his playbook and look pointedly at my crotch. Even though it feels deceitful to use sex to get him to stay, my gut tells me he’ll respond to that, buying me time until he’s ready to hear the truth about my feelings.

A wicked gleam flashes over his eyes. “Are you saying sex is crucial to your recovery?”

“I mean, it can’t hurt. Right?”

“As long as you’re not fucking me up against the wall on that ankle, which is all I can picture now, dammit.” Whatever was on his mind earlier is clearly a thing of the past as he practically vibrates in his seat.

“Or you could fuck me up against the wall.” I hold my breath as I wait for his response.

“You evil bastard,” he whispers, shaking his head slowly back and forth.

My shoulders slump. “You don’t like that idea?”

“I fucking love that idea. I’ve wanted your virgin hole for so long. You know I’d never turn down a chance to get inside that beautiful round ass of yours.” His eyes are so hooded with lust they’re barely more than little slits, which makes my cock swell visibly inside my shorts.

Pulling a packet of lube from my pocket, I toss it to him and arch my brow suggestively.

“Now who’s the boy scout?” he smirks.

“I learned from the best.”

“Get naked,” he demands, and I damn near rip my shorts trying to get them off. “Lie back and put one foot on the floor. The other over the back of the couch.”

Doing as he says, I find myself spread wide open, my thick cock resting against my stomach, rising and falling with each anxious breath. Tripp scoots between my legs and rubs his palm up my thigh, between my pecs, and over my stomach. His finger grazes my shaft in the process and it lurches at the slight touch. Aside from a tiny grin, Tripp doesn’t acknowledge the effect he has on me. He just keeps rubbing his hand over my heated skin, like he’s savoring every contour, committing it to memory.

His touch isn’t overtly sexual, but it makes me tingle everywhere. It wakes

up my senses, coaxing me into a state of heightened arousal. And while I'm sure the gentle touch is for my physical comfort, it soothes my heart at the same time.

Whether he intends to or not, he's caressing me like a lover would, like he cherishes me and wants to take care of me. He'd be mortified to realize the emotions he's creating inside my soul, but I can't bring myself to be the bigger man and call this off before I fall for him irrevocably. Even if it leaves me heartbroken in the end, I want to experience this moment with him.

Gradually, he inches lower, fingers grazing over my taint, between my crack. My ass clenches involuntarily, both eager for and leery of the coming intrusion. As usual, Tripp seems to sense how I feel.

"Relax," he says as he opens the packet of lube and spreads some over his fingers. "This will feel strange at first, maybe even a little uncomfortable. Don't fight it. I promise it'll get better, and you'll love it."

I gasp as the cool gel on his fingers comes into contact with my skin, exhaling slowly as he draws circles around my puckered hole. It's not entirely unpleasant actually. There's a faint quiver deep inside my groin, which makes a bit of precum seep from my slit.

My thighs relax as Tripp probes the area, lulling me deeper into an aura of bliss as a contented moan rumbles from my throat.

"Fuck, that's a sexy sound," Tripp rasps as the pressure on my hole suddenly increases. "First finger. Let me hear it again."

This time I utter more of a groan as my hole strains around the slight disturbance, and while it feels interesting enough that I want him to continue, the fullness of his finger inside me seems similar to... "Oh God. Is it supposed to feel like I have to take a shit?"

"Jesus. And people accuse me of talking without thinking," he scoffs as his

finger pumps leisurely back and forth, which after the initial shock feels pretty good. I don't want him to stop. "You're lucky I have a one-track mind," he continues, "because I'm horny enough to ignore that comment."

"Sorry, it's just... I didn't know how else to describe it."

"Don't describe it, just feel it. I'm adding another finger."

The burn of the stretch takes over and I squirm uncomfortably until I feel a firm grip wrap about my cock. Suddenly, the discomfort is replaced with the familiar tingle of arousal. Tripp's fist strokes up and down my length, and a wet heat surrounds my crown. Something that's part moan, part sigh passes through my lips as my body tries to process the torrent of sensations flooding through it. Between the suction on my tip, the pressure on my shaft, and the fullness in my ass, I don't know which way is up. Torn between the need to fight for control or bucking my hips wildly, my muscles throw in the towel, turning to jelly as I give myself over to the whirlpool of stimulation coursing through me.

My dick falls out of Tripp's mouth with an audible pop. "There you go. Nice and relaxed. Now, let's make your cock dance."

Something shifts inside me, and my dick lurches upward as a bolt of pure electricity ricochets throughout my body. "Holy shit!" I cry, propping myself on my elbows so I can look down my body. "What the hell was that?"

"Big guy, meet your prostate." I feel another shift deep in my core—Tripp's fingers—and my cock lurches again as a fresh drop of precum oozes out.

"Jesus." My head falls back onto the cushions as I gasp for air, a wicked laugh the only warning before he nudges it again, and again. I writhe beneath him, realizing that my prior understanding of bliss was sorely lacking.

With each swipe of his finger, my muscles contract, spasms wracking my body to what would be the point of pain if they weren't so euphoric. I've

never felt pleasure like this. It's like I'm vibrating on a higher plane of existence. My body is so stimulated it can't contain my consciousness, and I'm so zoned out it's hard to form words.

“Is this...? When I...?”

“That's right, big guy. This is what it feels like when you fuck me. Ready for my dick?”

I can't speak. Can't moan. Can't even move my head. I think I blink though, which earns me a little peck on the lips as Tripp mumbles, “Fuck yeah.”

The ecstasy bubble pops as Tripp's hands leave my body, and I whimper at the loss. Then I notice him shedding his clothes and lubing his cock.

Licking my lips, I watch his fist slide over his length. I don't know if he looks so big because of the lack of pubic hair, or because he really is big. Either way, the smooth skin stretched taut over his shaft is a mesmerizing sight. The view is even more enticing with the gel coating his skin, making it glisten in the light. “It's gonna be uncomfortable at first.” Tripp lines himself up to my hole. “Breathe through it.”

The pressure is sudden and intense, forcing my eyes to snap shut as I choke on a breath of air.

“Breathe.” His gentle reminder comes as a slippery fist circles my cock. “Focus on my hand. Feel it sliding over your dick, nice and slow. That feels nice, right? The way you fit in my hand. I think this is my favorite cock in the world, besides mine. It's so big and long and thick.”

“Are you trying to distract me by complimenting my dick?” I grit.

“It worked. I'm all the way in.” Two things register at once. My ass is almost uncomfortably full, and Tripp's voice sounds off. I open my eyes to

find his jaw locked tight, the tendons in his neck visible underneath the skin as he takes shaky breaths. *He's stunning.*

“Tripp?”

“I need a second. You're... Fuck, you're so tight.” In all the times we've been together, I can't say I've ever seen Tripp with such a tenuous grip on his control. The sight pushes out all lingering traces of discomfort and fills me with a mixture of gratitude and pride.

Whether this is the start of something real or the end of something fleeting, knowing I have such a profound effect on another person will always be seared in my memory. I'll forever be marked by this experience, and I'm guessing he will, too.

I'm still staring, admiring the beauty of his tightly coiled features, when his eyes flutter open and lock onto mine.

“Tripp,” I groan, though whether it's a plea or a warning I'm not sure.

He lets go of my dick and leans over me, trapping it between our bodies as he braces his hands on either side of my chest and ghosts his lips over mine. “Grab my ass. You control the pace.”

I cup his cheeks in my hands as he starts to move, rocking slowly back and forth to help me adjust. It's awkward at first, but after a few pumps my channel adapts, welcoming the slide of his cock.

The friction of his stomach on my shaft feels divine, but the weight of his steel length against my prostate is pure heaven. Within seconds, I'm back in that trance-like state, where I'm so overcome with bliss my mind shuts down and my body runs on autopilot.

My carnal urges take control, hips rolling to give Tripp better access as my biceps struggle to pull him closer. Yet even as I strain to bring us together,

there's no urgency behind my movements. No rush to reach the finish. I simply want to feel him *everywhere*.

Dropping to his forearms so we're chest to chest, Tripp pistons his hips in long, languid strokes, hitting all my pleasure points with each thrust. Sweat pools between us as we rock into each other, the sound of our labored breathing echoing in the room around us.

My hole flexes and contracts as Tripp brushes over my prostate, causing him to groan. "Holy fuck, big guy. Your ass is heaven. I'm not gonna last."

Gripping him tighter, I help him spear in and out of my channel, increasing our pace as we charge toward the finish. Suddenly we're face-to-face, breathing each other's air as we grunt with the effort to get deeper, closer, more.

And then time stops. The tension in my balls explodes through my tip, drenching us both in my cum as I clamp down on the cock pulsing inside me. Mouths hovering above each other, frozen in a silent scream, wave after wave of tremors wrack through us as our hips buck through our release. Trapped between us, my dick twitches and spurts as we rock against each other, wringing out every last quiver of our orgasm.

Warm liquid gushes out of my hole as Tripp's mouth rests against mine. Not kissing just, breathing, which is more intimate and somehow not at the same time. Then he lifts his chest off mine with shaky arms and gives me a lazy grin. "I'm not gonna have to fight you for the bottom now, am I?"

I know that's supposed to be an offhand comment, nothing to read into. But I read into it anyway, clinging to the hope that it means there's more of this... of *us* in our future. "I know how to take turns."

"Good to know." He winks as he pulls out and offers me a hand to sit up. "Want me to make sure you don't get lost in your shower?"

That's an olive branch, I think. Offering to help under the guise I need it instead of admitting he likes to shower with me. And since tonight was a big step for both of us, I won't press for more. But one day soon I will—I don't want to live in limbo now that I know who I am and what I want—and hopefully he'll be ready to take that step with me.

“Right behind you.” I let him pull me up.

# Chapter Twenty

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# Tripp

“I didn’t know you were going blond again,” Noah says when I get home— *home*?

“Green tips are too difficult to maintain. They start to fade pretty quickly, and the boss man doesn’t like me taking an extended lunch every week to get my hair colored, which is really a shame because I wouldn’t mind trying a dark blue next.”

Noah’s eyes dart to mine, telling me he knows exactly where the blue idea came from, just like I intended. “I didn’t realize it was that labor intensive to have colored hair.”

“Depends on the color.” I point to my freshly bleached hair.

“So, I have a question for you,” he says as he takes two of his chef’s premade meals out of the oven.

“You know you don’t have to ask to bottom, right? You can just tell me that’s what you’re in the mood for.” I palm his delectable ass and give it a nice squeeze since I’ve become well-acquainted with it over the last week. Even though we agreed to take turns, he’s still working up to the point where he can take me without a lot of prep, and I am happy to oblige.

“Noted.” He smirks. “But that’s not what I was going to ask.”

“Okay, what’s up?” I snatch a piece of broccoli off one of the plates and pop it in my mouth. *Still can’t believe I actually like the green stuff his chef makes.*

“My neighbors have this charity party every year—they invite the whole neighborhood—and it’s coming up this weekend. I thought maybe you could come with me?”

The muscles in my body grow instantly heavy, like they’ve turned to concrete, making it hard to move let alone speak. “You want me to go to a party with you?”

“Yeah.”

My heart feels like it’s going to beat right out of my chest. On the one hand...*party!* On the other, I’m not a stranger to these types of charity events, and they aren’t the type of thing you bring the guy you’re fucking to. “I feel like that’s a couple’s thing, not a fuck buddy thing.”

To my surprise that statement doesn’t seem to faze him. “You’ve been staying here for weeks taking care of me. Aren’t we past fuck buddies?”

“Okay... Maybe we’re friends with benefits.”

“I think it’s more than that.”

*Oh shit.* I knew I’d overstayed my welcome, but... Hot sex. On the daily. I guess that’s bound to happen when two spectacular cocks come out to play, but... *Ugh, focus!*

“Well, what would you call it? We’re not boyfriends,” I state plainly. “I don’t do that, and we still don’t even know if you’re gay or bi or what. You can’t be anything more than friends with benefits without knowing that.” I’m making this shit up as I go because I can’t handle thinking we’ve crossed into boyfriend land.

*I knew I shouldn't have fucked his hole.*

I knew he was using that as a way to get me to stay, but I listened to my cock instead of my brain. Not that I can't be talked into pretty much anything with the promise of sex, but deep down I suspected the offer to top him was his way of steering us towards something beyond just fucking, and I was too horny to care, *dammit*.

"I think maybe I'm demi." Noah interrupts my internal rant.

"Ooh, someone used Google." It's a childish retort but... *Hello*, it's me. I take my plate and sit at the kitchen table, putting some distance between us.

"I'm serious." Noah follows me. "I think I'm only attracted to people I feel connected to."

"And you think you're connected to me? *Me*, not my cock? I'd understand if you were confused, especially since you've been working through some stuff. We should probably make sure though." I stand to unbutton my pants.

"Do not show me your dick right now. A hard-on doesn't solve everything."

"That didn't even cross my mind." *It totally crossed my mind*.

"So, what's that then?" He points to my crotch. "Checking to make sure your zipper works?"

"I had to readjust." I drop back into my chair and pretend I wasn't trying to avoid this conversation with sex. "Okay, I can see how you'd feel connected to me after I took care of you, but I could get you going even before that. That's not demi."

"Not true. I've always found it easy to talk to you. To be myself. I think because you're so unapologetically...you." Noah waves his hand over me from head to toe. "You made me comfortable enough to be me."

*Okay, that's actually sweet, but still scary since I don't do sweet.*

“What are you saying?”

“I like you. A lot.”

“Cool.” I spear a piece of chicken and shove it in my mouth. “I like you too.”

“No, I mean I *like* you. As in I want to be with you. Preferably as more than just two friends who fuck each other.”

“Like boyfriends?” I feel my eyes grow wide with panic.

“I mean, yeah.” Noah shrugs bashfully, which is adorable, but not cool.

“Okay. Um...” I scratch my neck.

Then my arm.

Then my side.

Obviously, this is a deal-breaker, but I don’t want to hurt the guy, so I have to let him down easy. But that means no more mind-blowing sex. No more sleepovers, either, which I will only admit to myself this one time that I sort of like. Still, cold turkey is the way to go. Clean slate. Full stop.

*Is it hot in here?*

“What’s wrong?” Noah’s brows draw together in gentle concern as he reaches for my arm.

I pull it away to scratch my neck again. “I feel itchy.”

“Are you having an allergic reaction?”

“Maybe?”

“Did you eat something weird? Or touch something weird?”

I scratch at my forearm when he reaches for it again. “No. I... Can you stand over there?” I point to the far side of the room.

“Where?” He twists to look behind him.

“Just...there. Back. And stop looking at me like you like me.”

“I do like you.”

“Yes, but don’t look at me like you do. Look at me like I’m just a piece of ass.”

Noah pulls back with a frown. “You’re not just a piece of ass. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. You’re important to me.”

“I know. I think that’s the problem.”

“Why is that a problem?” He shifts his head back and forth, clearly not following me.

“I’m not important to anyone. And don’t say *you* because you’re fucking me so that doesn’t count.”

“Fine.” He crosses his arms in front of his chest. “What about Xander?”

“I’m pretty sure he wants to strangle me half the time.” I snort as I itch my chest.

“If that were true, he’d have done it by now. Plus, Niko likes you.”

“Niko tolerates me for Xander.”

“His sister loves you.”

“That might actually be true, but only in a drinking buddy kind of way. And that’s fine. It’s better that way.”

“How is that better?” He reaches for me again, but I wave him back.

“There’s no false hope with drinking buddies.”

“False hope? What does that mean?”

“Drinking buddies are for a good time only. They aren’t expected to care about you beyond their stool at the bar. You hang out and have fun, but that’s all it is. I’m good with it.” *I’m getting hives. Great. Just what I need. I’m pretty sure they’re making my brain swell, too... Making me say things I normally wouldn’t.*

“I don’t think anyone sees you as just a drinking buddy. I don’t. Why are you itching yourself raw?”

“Because you’re messing up the pattern. Fuck around, have fun, say goodbye.” I scratch at my lower back.

“I don’t want to say goodbye.”

I roll my eyes dramatically. “Everyone does. That’s how it works.”

“How what works?”

“Life. You get close to people and they let you down. That’s why I don’t do boyfriends. Only hookups. Get it?”

He’s looking at me like I’m deranged, and considering I look like a monkey in a zoo, I get it. Only he thinks it’s my reasoning, not my sudden rash, that’s irrational. I know better.

People like to tell you they care all the time, but in my experience it’s just talk. A line people feed you because it’s expected. Since my wake-up call nearly a decade ago, I’ve learned most of that talk isn’t malicious. Friends, colleagues, acquaintances...they get wrapped up in their own shit and forget about yours. I get it. It’s when the people closest to you don’t give a shit that messes with your head, and I figure it’s better to avoid those situations altogether than to give someone the chance to break you.

That’s how I’ve operated for the past ten years, and it works for me. I haven’t had any crushing disappointments because I haven’t put myself in a position to experience them. Given the way Noah’s looking at me right now, like he’s not going anywhere, I have a feeling I’ve already let him get too close.

“Who hurt you?” he asks softly.

*No. Nope. Not going there. I don’t tell anybody that. Ever.*

“Not your concern, big guy. The takeaway here is, I don’t do boyfriends. So, this has been fun and all, but you’re gonna have to find someone else to

experiment with.” I stand, ready to bolt out of the kitchen, and find him blocking my path. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re trying to keep me from leaving.”

He crosses his arms in front of his chest, adopting a very Thor-like stance.

“I am.”

“I’d say that’s kinky if it didn’t have a kidnappy undertone.”

“Joke around all you want. I’m still not letting you leave until we finish talking.”

“We are finished. Besides, haven’t you missed enough games?” I point to his ankle. “I don’t think you’re prepared to give chase, and I will run if I have to.”

“I’ll risk it.”

“Yeah, right.” I snort, glancing around to plot the best exit route. “You can’t be serious.”

“Deadly.” His calm tone is so unexpected I can’t help looking at him to see his expression, which is nothing short of sincere.

“You’d risk hurting your ankle again just to stop me from leaving?”

“Not my ankle. My career. If I don’t get back on the ice, chances are the Bulldogs won’t have a reason to keep me around. I’m too old for other teams to give me serious consideration. If I have to sacrifice the game to convince you you’re important to me, so be it.”

The itch that had started to fade comes back with a vengeance. *He wouldn’t really do that, would he?* “Nice speech, but I don’t buy it. You’ve been jumping out of your skin to get back on the ice.” I claw at the back of my neck.

“I *was* jumping out of my skin. You helped with that. *You* knew what I

needed to calm down and get out of my head, and *you* helped me deal with my fear and frustration.”

“Glad I could be of service, but I think we can agree I’ve exhausted my usefulness.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Downplay what you’ve done for me. Downplay *this*. You’ve been staying here for nearly a month, sharing my bed *and* my life, and even though I’m not on the ice right now I’m happy. I think you are too. Or you could be if you get out of your head.”

That’s usually my line, the thing I tell him when he’s overthinking. I’m not sure how I feel about him using it on me.

“Have you thought this through?” I change tactics. “We’ve been in a bubble for weeks, but that will change once you’re cleared to play. You’ll be gone half the time, so we won’t be *sharing* anything. You’ll be gone, and unless you plan to keep me here in secret, people will find out you’re with a man.”

“So.”

“So?” I echo. “What do you think people are going to say when not one but *two* players on the Bulldogs are gay?”

“I’m not gay, so who cares.” He lifts a casual shoulder.

“Stay in your lane, big guy. I’m the brat in this relationship.” I point to my chest. “So don’t sit over there acting all smug like it’s no big deal if people say... What?” I bark as he collapses into a fit of laughter.

“You said relationship.” His lips twitch into a satisfied smile.

“I...” My jaw bobs up and down. *That’s not true. I’m morally opposed to them. Even friendships are a stretch. I’d never willingly admit to being in one. So, why can’t I deny it?*

Closing my eyes, I try to breathe through the panic and uncertainty that feels like it's crushing my chest, the way it did all those years ago when life pulled the rug out from under me. *In... Out... In... Out...*

It doesn't help. My head starts to spin, and I know I've only got a few seconds to sit down before my legs collapse. Except, they're rooted to the floor like they're glued in place, and I wobble when I finally manage to shuffle a foot forward.

Instead of falling, I find myself pressed against Noah's broad chest, his arms wrapped protectively around me. "I've got you," he whispers as he guides my head to the crook of his neck.

Though my heart is still trying to win a record for the most beats per minute, the dizziness begins to fade the moment my body makes contact with his. If I was in my right mind, I'd probably worry about that, but the only conscious thought in my brain is that I'm safe in his arms. Admittedly, that's a strange thought for a guy who thrives on his independence, but it's turning out to be a weird day.

*Fuck me, I'm a mess. A mess with a...boyfriend?* The thought makes me shudder, or shiver—I'm not sure which—I only know it makes Noah's grip on me tighten, and I lean into his embrace.

The longer he holds me, the calmer I feel. Usually, I feel jittery when people get too close—in a non-sexual way—but Noah's touch seems to ground me. It dulls the warning bells in my head and the anxiety in my limbs, leaving me somewhat stable. *And...content?*

*Is this what dating feels like? This weird sense of peace and comfort that has nothing to do with arousal? That's maybe worth exploring.*

I don't know how long we stay like that, hugging in the kitchen while Noah tenderly sifts his fingers through my hair, but by the time he guides me to the

couch to sit down, my pulse is somewhat back to normal and my breathing is steady.

“I’m sorry,” Noah kisses the top of my head as he tucks me against his side. “I didn’t realize I was pushing you that far out of your comfort zone.”

“I didn’t realize I was in a...relationship.” I wrinkle my nose since that word still feels strange on my tongue. I’m not sure why, since this sleepover thing has been going on awhile, and it hasn’t been about taking care of him for at least a week. Maybe Xander’s right and it never was. I just wanted to be around him. God knows, I’ve opened up to him more than anyone else in my life. I was just too stubborn to admit it to myself.

“We don’t have to call it a relationship if you aren’t ready for that. We can stick with the friends who fuck thing.”

“Well, lightning hasn’t struck me down yet so...”

“What if we don’t use labels?”

I take a deep breath and let it out with a heavy sigh. “You’re a public figure, people will hound you to define this until you do. And really, I’m being silly. Lots of people dream of a hockey god sweeping them off their feet. I should be shouting that shit from the rooftops.”

“Not if it makes you uncomfortable.” Noah’s voice is understanding even though he tenses underneath me, and I feel like an ass for making him confused.

I kiss the shoulder I’m leaning on, which feels surprisingly natural. “You don’t make me uncomfortable.”

“But dating does.” When I only nod, he continues. “Are you willing to tell me why?”

“Not today. I will,” I rush to clarify, “but realizing I’m in a...a...”

“Relationship.”

“Yeah, that. That’s enough for one day.”

“Okay,” he says, and for the second time since I walked in the door, I’m struck by how sweet my Thor is. *Omigod, it’s happening. I called him mine—in my head—but still. Is that normal? One second, you’re a proud hedonist and the next you have a...person?*

“You’re thinking awfully hard over there.” Noah’s lips brush over my forehead.

“Yeah, it’s just. I don’t know how to do this. I don’t know how to be with someone.”

“I think we just keep doing what we’ve been doing. Hanging out, helping each other get through the shit we’re dealing with. Maybe with more kissing, though.”

I wait for another bout of panic to hit me, but instead of the cool tingle of anxiety I feel a warm tingle of desire. As much as I don't want to admit it, I've enjoyed the feeling of Noah's mouth on mine. Up until this point, it's only happened during sex, when we're breathless, and desperate, and ravenous for each other. *I wonder...*

Tilting my chin up until our lips are a hairsbreadth apart, I hold as still as a statue, waiting. Watching. Gathering courage and seeking permission. Noah's breath hitches, but he doesn't make a move, giving me the space to do only what I feel comfortable with. *Fuck it.*

Holding my own breath, I lean slowly forward, closing the distance between us until our lips meet in a soft, chaste kiss. The instant we make contact heat blooms deep in my gut, though it's not the familiar heat of arousal. More like the warmth of affection. The promise of faithfulness and honesty and trust.

Gentle hands stroke my face as our lips brush softly together. The tender

touch somehow even more intense than the passionate kisses we've shared previously, despite the fact it's not making my dick hard. And the crazy thing is, I don't even care. I'm sort of content to have no ulterior motive, no end goal driving me forward. I just like the comfort of Noah's mouth on mine, giving me the stability and support and care I didn't think I wanted, but now can't imagine going without.

As Noah's tongue meets mine, it occurs to me I've never been kissed like this before, with reverence and respect. It's so sweet yet so powerful, I feel like I'm melting and flying at the same time. Invincible and vulnerable, but not scared like I was earlier. Not with Noah. He makes me feel...*whole*.

# Chapter Twenty-One

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# Noah

“Oh ...” I lick my lips and swallow thickly as Tripp emerges from the bathroom in his tux, tugging casually at the cuffs peeking out from under the jacket. It’s a mundane action but his catlike grace makes it look effortless and sexy in a refined, aristocratic sort of way. The blond hair and dark stubble on the other hand, coupled with the bowtie slung around his open collar, gives him a downright sinful air.

“You like?” He smirks impishly.

“I like.” I cross the room to meet him, resting my hands on his hips while I nip at his plump bottom lip. “I like it so much I sort of want to bend you over right here, right now.”

“That sounds better than your stuffy charity party.” He tilts his head to the side so I can kiss along the side of his neck.

“If I didn’t like the cause, I’d skip it.”

He rubs his stubbled cheek against mine. “What’s the cause again?”

“Underprivileged youth.”

“I suppose that’s worthy of delayed gratification.” Tripp sighs heavily.

“I know I should be thinking of the cause.” He groans softly as I pull him to

me, rubbing our pelvises together. “But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like the idea of showing up with the sexiest man alive on my arm.”

“Ooh, flattery will get you a blow job.” Tripp’s fingers dance over the back of my neck.

“Give me a blow job and then you can have my ass.” I bite down gently on his earlobe and give it a little tug, which makes him shiver.

“Deal, although if I top, I may have to ruin your man-bun. Even though it’s sexy as fuck, I’ll need something to hold onto while I pound you into the mattress.” He swivels his hips, pressing his semi-hard cock against mine.

“Jesus, we’re never gonna get out of here if we keep this up.”

“You could always just write a fat check and we can get straight to stripping each other down.” Tripp slides my hands to his ass, encouraging me to give it a firm squeeze.

“I wish I could.” I lick into his mouth—he’s been wholly on board with more kissing since our talk last week—groaning when his tongue meets mine. “We have to show up at several of these a year. Might as well get this one out of the way.”

I start to pull away, but Tripp squeezes the base of my neck. “I know you said this already, but are you sure you’re ready for this? Our first outing doesn’t have to be so public.”

“This is only our first outing because I’m finally healthy enough to hide my injury. And the Bulldogs organization already knows about us, so who cares if the rest of the world does.”

*That* was an interesting conversation, not because the top execs objected to me dating a man, but because Tripp and my coach, Xander’s dad, have very different ideas about what classifies as acceptable public behavior. In his defense, Tripp insists the guys gave him permission to feel how strong their

pecs were before he touched them during the first team cookout he attended, which was long before my arrival. The act got him banned from all cookouts until Xander got tired of attending on his own and dragged Tripp along last year.

Still, I had to assure Coach that Tripp wouldn't draw unnecessary attention to himself if we went public. I hate that stipulation—Tripp's antics are part of who he is, and I don't want him to have to change since he's dating me. Fortunately, he said—privately of course—that being a little less crass is a small price to pay to have my cock all to himself. His words.

“I guess coming out is one way to take the focus off your injury.” Tripp slides his hand from my neck to my chest, resting it over my heart. “And it might be sort of fun to watch people try to keep a straight face when you introduce me.”

“It's the twenty-first century. I doubt any of them will give it a second thought.”

“Bet?” He arches a sly brow.

“What are we betting?”

“I get to spank *you* this time.” A wicked grin spreads across his face.

“Fine.” I shrug. At this point, there are so many things he's helped me discover, most of which I never expected to like, let alone enjoy. What's one more? I won't say no until I try it. “And if I win, you move in.”

Just like he did during the boyfriend conversation, Tripp freezes, his breath coming in shaky spurts. I'm still not sure what causes him to react this way—I figure he'll tell me when he's ready—but I'm not going to avoid the topic of *us* just because it scares him. We wouldn't be here right now if I did, and aside from not skating, this has been the best week of my life.

I wrap my hand around the back of his neck and lean my forehead against

his as I put my other hand on his chest. “You’ve been staying here a solid month, and nothing bad has happened, right?”

It takes a second, but eventually I feel a small nod.

“That’s right. And if you’re not ready to move in, then you’re not ready. It’s okay. But if you are, I’d really like to have you here when I get home from road trips, and I’d like to be here for you when you get home from work. Whenever you’re ready for that step, I want you to know I am too.”

Is it odd to put living together on the table before I’ve told him I love him? If it were anyone but Tripp, I’d say yes, but given his obvious hesitation, I actually think this order of operations makes more sense.

“Can I still spank you if you win?” The request is barely more than a whisper.

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t.” I kiss his forehead, then bring my hands to his shirt. “Do you want to go bad boy who cleans up nicely or stick with the roguish I don’t give a fuck look?”

“Which do you like?” His emerald eyes are full of trust when they find mine, and I have to swallow down the lump in my throat before I can answer.

“I like roguish, but I’m supposed to get through the evening without mauling you, so we better go with cleans up nice.”

A tiny smile pulls at the corner of his lips as I button his shirt and work his tie into a perfect bow. I give it a gentle tug on both ends until it sits straight underneath his angular jaw.

“You’re stunning.” I place a chaste kiss on his lips.

“And you’re learning.”

“Hmm?”

“I might’ve just found another adjective for my dick.”

I chuckle against his mouth as I recall his rule about making sure the

descriptor you choose sounds good next to the word ‘dick.’

“So, since you’re going to be coming out this evening, we should probably talk about what that looks like,” Tripp says.

“What do you mean?”

“Private little bubble, remember?” He clutches my hips and leans into me. “We don’t have any idea what it’s like to exist outside the walls of this house. As boyfriends.”

My brows draw together as I try to piece together what he’s saying. “Do we really need to make an announcement?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I need to know what you’re comfortable with in public. Do I hold your hand? Sit on your lap? Stick my tongue in your mouth?”

“Can’t we just do what feels right?”

“Well, sitting on your lap and sticking my tongue down your throat would feel right to *me*, but maybe not to *you*.”

“If I say affectionate touches not sexual ones does that work?” I rest my hand on his hips, the same way he’s holding mine.

“I mean, I still don’t see how those aren’t related, but yes, I get your point. No swapping bodily fluids in public.”

I can’t stop the small chuckle from rumbling up my throat. “I would’ve said that differently, but yeah. Now, let’s pick up Niko and Xander before they start pinging us to ask where we are.” I reach for Tripp’s hand as his chest starts to vibrate.

He pulls his phone from his pocket and checks the screen. “Too late. At least they said to get our pants on instead of telling us to fix our hair. If I’m going to be accused of being late I’d much rather it be assumed my tardiness is from having a dick in one of my orifices.”

Tripp pockets his phone and takes my hand, letting me lead him to the car, and even though this isn't what I'd have chosen for our first date, I can't remember the last time I felt this excited off the ice.

The line of cars inches forward until we're parked in front of a sprawling entry where a valet takes my keys. The Cooper's go all out for this event every year. While there isn't a red carpet—it is a private residence—there is a photographer snapping candid pictures of the guests as they arrive. If I remember correctly, they aren't allowed inside, but the pictures will be accompanied by a write up of who hosted the event and how much it made, which I'm sure is equally as important to Charles Cooper as the cause he's supporting. Politicians.

Niko, Xander, Tripp and I enter together, none of us holding hands because the reality is, that would get more attention than the event itself. We want the charity to be the main focus. I don't plan to be as discreet once we're inside, so I reach for Tripp's hand the moment we cross the threshold just as a tiny Asian woman with graying hair in a maid's uniform brings her hands to her mouth with an astonished gasp.

"Mr. Preston?" Her voice trembles as she stares at the man next to me.

Tripp stands statue-still, eyes blinking in rapid succession. Then without warning he breaks into an ear-splitting grin, the biggest I've ever seen on him as he steps toward the woman, scooping her up in his arms and spinning her around in delighted hug.

"What happened to your hair?" The woman laughs as he puts her down. Niko, Xander and I exchange confused looks.

"Mine? What happened to yours?"

"I got old."

"Well, I got daring."

"You were always daring. That's why you got into so much trouble." She pokes at his chest.

“We both know that wasn’t the only reason.” He rolls his eyes playfully, catching mine as he does, and waving me over.

“Rose, meet my boyfriend, Noah,” he says when I reach them. “Noah, the old lady who raised me.” He slings an arm around her shoulder and lowers his head to her ear, and even though they’re slightly turned away from me, I can just barely make out the words, “You finally found a good family to work for, huh?”

“Mr. Preston—”

“I don’t go by that anymore. Call me Tripp.”

“Mr. Tripp—”

“Rose, kindly let our guests make it all the way into the house.” A stern baritone voice cuts into their conversation, and though it’s quiet enough not to be heard across the room, both Tripp and Rose visibly stiffen. Then Tripp takes a deep breath and drops his arm from Rose’s shoulders as he spins around to face the voice. Following his gaze, I locate the man just in time to see his jaw fall slack as his face goes white.

Charles Cooper casts a wary glance to either side before pasting a composed look on his harsh features, speaking with an obviously forced calm. “Preston. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“That makes two of us, Pop.” Tripp’s voice holds an air of disdain and mocking as he over enunciates the ‘P.’

“Pop?” I mouth to Niko and Xander, both of whom shrug helplessly. *Is this...?*

“You know I don’t appreciate that name,” Charles says, his disapproving gaze bouncing between Tripp and Rose.

“I don’t appreciate mine either. I prefer Tripp.”

“What sort of a name is that?” He looks down his nose at my boyfriend,

despite the fact he's no taller.

"You don't recognize it? It was your doing actually, since you always made a point to tell me how much I was tripping up." Tripp's grin borders on maniacal as he stares his father down, which garners a few curious looks from the guests trickling in.

"Uncivilized as always," Charles mutters as Rose retreats to the far wall, out of the line of fire, it would appear.

"So," Tripp spins around, taking in the ornate entry, with its curved staircase and expensive artwork. "Nice digs. I'd say I wondered where you went after you ditched the old place, but I really didn't. Although, I am flattered you went to such lengths to make sure I couldn't find you."

"Evidently, not enough. If you wanted to speak you should've called my office."

"As if your staff didn't have strict orders to turn me away," Tripp huffs.

"Yes, well. This is a private event." Charles runs a hand over his silver hair despite the fact not a single strand is out of place.

Tripp's eyes find mine, and for the first time since this exchange started, I get the sense he's not sure what to say.

"Actually, Tripp's here as my guest." I step in.

Charles looks in my direction, his demeanor smoothly shifting from cold and callous to warm and inviting when recognition hits. "Noah, I'm sorry I didn't see you there. It's been years since I've seen my son and I was momentarily distracted. Welcome." He holds his hand out, though I make no move to take it, having no desire to after the exchange I just heard.

The purpose of this event is to help underprivileged youth, and based on the way the man's treating his own son, I'm starting to question how charitable he really is.

“I saw you suffered an injury earlier this season,” he lowers his hand and continues as if I didn’t just slight him. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better. Tripp’s been helping me with my recovery.”

“That’s what doctors are for, right?” Another silver-haired man appears out of nowhere, placing a hand on Tripp’s shoulder.

“Judge Calahan.” The smile Tripp offers is slight yet genuine.

“Uncle to you. Finally back stateside, I see.” The judge returns the grin. “I’ve gotta say, I never pegged you for the Doctors Without Borders sort, but your parents said you’re really making an impact. Good for you. Are you back to make some real money now?”

Tripp cocks an eyebrow toward his father as he bites the corner of his lip, and I have only a brief second to wonder which will win out, the brat or the good boy. As if it was ever really a question.

“Doctor, huh? And an international one. I suppose the altruistic son angle might get you a few votes. I expected you to go with a kid who died tragically young, but I guess there’s really no explanation for someone coming back from the dead in awkward little run-ins like these, so, good choice not killing me off in your fantasy world.”

“Fantasy world?” The judge casts a wary gaze between father and son. “What’s going on here?” he asks as his hand slides off Tripp’s shoulders.

“Nothing,” Charles replies. “A misunderstanding.”

“You’re saying disowned wrong, Pop.”

Before Charles can respond, a middle-aged woman in a floor-length gown with perfectly coiffed blond hair glides into the foyer. “There you are Charles. The guests have been asking—” Her voice drops off as her gaze lands on Tripp, and like her husband, she expertly pivots direction after only

the slightest pause. “Preston, darling. What a lovely surprise. I didn’t know you’d be here for this event.”

Anticipating the need for a quick exit, I meet Niko’s eyes and toss him my keys. He and Xander slip away as Tripp’s mother strides toward him, leaning forward to place a kiss on his cheek, which he steps away from. “Don’t let the clothes fool you. I’m still a filthy gay man, mother. The streets didn’t scare it out of me.”

“Preston?” She shoots lost looks between father, son and the judge, and if I hadn’t witnessed the exchange with his father, I admit I might’ve been fooled by her feigned confusion. My new insight makes her act hard to miss. Apparently, the judge agrees.

“Just where exactly has my Godson been for the last decade?” The judge’s eyes are little more than narrow slits.

“Overseas,” Charles digs his heels in.

Tripp snorts. “I’ve never even left the country since you had my passport. Plus, it’s kind of hard to get another one without the proper identification.”

“Without... Why in the hell would you not have proper identification?” The judge’s voice rises an octave, drawing the attention of some of the guests.

“I only had my driver’s license on me when they kicked me out.”

“They kicked... And you didn’t come to me?” the judge asks.

Tripp looks at the man who apparently considers himself an uncle, a contrite look on his face. “They said you’d be obligated to put me in juvie for a drug offense they’d un-bury if I tried to reach out to you or come home. Sixteen-year-old me believed it.”

The judge wheels on Tripp’s parents, but I don’t hear his angry words. I’m too focused on my boyfriend.

My stomach roils at the thought of a young Tripp, cast out by the people

who were supposed to love him. No wonder he's so terrified of relationships. The one that's supposed to be unconditional failed him, bringing him nothing but pain and disappointment. And rather than respect his fear, I've been pushing him to face it without ever understanding the magnitude of what I was asking.

I'm known for being level-headed, even on the ice. But right now, I'd like nothing more than to drive my fist into Charles's face. Instead, I hold my hand out to Tripp, pulling him to my chest when he takes it.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper in his ear as I wrap my arms around his shoulders. "I never would've brought you here if I'd known."

"It's okay." Tripp wraps his arms around my waist.

"No, it's not. You have the same last name for God's sake, and I didn't think twice about it."

"Cooper's pretty common. And it's not like I told you enough about my past to make you think there'd be a connection."

Pulling back, I cup his face in my hands. "I knew you had a past though. Something you didn't want to talk about. And because of me you had to face it without warning."

"It was a long time coming." He gives me a tight smile.

"Is this the first time you've stood up to him?"

"More or less. I was good at being a disrespectful shit, but I never challenged him outright over the way he treated me. Or Rose."

I pull him to me and whisper in his ear. "I'm proud of you. And I'm so sorry I pushed you about the dating thing. I shouldn't have done that without knowing where you were coming from."

"If you hadn't pushed me, I wouldn't have a boyfriend right now." I feel a tug on the lapel of my jacket.

“Yes, but do you want one?” I take a half-step back so I can see his face, letting my hands drop to his waist. “I’ll understand if it’s too soon for that.”

I’m vaguely aware there’s a murmur in the gathering crowd as I wait for his answer. Between the way I’m looking at Tripp and the tongue-lashing the judge is giving his parents, I’m sure they’re getting quite the show.

Tripp rises on his toes to give me a quick peck on the lips before taking my hands in his. “No take backs. You’re stuck with this hot mess.”

“Good answer.” I can’t stop the goofy grin from spreading across my face as a relieved warmth seeps through my chest. “Xander and Niko are waiting in the car. Let’s see if we can’t salvage the rest of this evening.”

“By salvage do you mean I get to spank you?” He bites his lip playfully.

“Are you claiming you won the bet?”

“I mean, people were clearly surprised to see me.”

“Fine, I’ll concede. But only because you’re sexy in a tux, not because I think you won.” I give him a quick kiss and keeping his left hand in my right, I step toward the door only to have him tug me back.

“Rose.” He casts a worried glance toward his parent’s housekeeper, still cowering by the far wall. “I couldn’t take her with me the first time, but I can’t leave her.”

The two of us approach the woman whose eyes are darting nervously around the room as the judge, fresh off his rant at Tripp’s parents, finds us. “Between the three of us we’re creating a bit of a scene. You two should get out of here before the gossip spreads to the rest of the guests and they come running to see the show.”

“We aren’t leaving without Rose,” Tripp says. “When the guests are gone and they don’t have to keep up the act anymore, my parents will lash out at her.”

“Are you saying they’ll get physical with her?” The judge pales, and I feel a twinge of sympathy for the man who clearly just learned he never really knew the people he thought were his friends.

“I don’t think so. They haven’t before that I’m aware of, but they’ve never suffered this level of embarrassment before either. Will you come home with us, Rose?” Tripp puts a gentle hand on her arm.

“I can’t leave.” She looks at him with teary eyes. “They took my green card after I helped you before. They’ll have me thrown out of the country.”

“They most certainly will not,” the judge booms. “It seems I’ve got something else to discuss with them this evening after all. Rose, go get your things while I deal with this. You can stay at my house until this is sorted out. You two.” He looks at me and Tripp. “The cat’s probably out of the bag, but you might be able to limit the damage if you leave now.”

“Damage?” I frown.

“I haven’t seen anything in the press, so I assume you wanted to keep this thing between you off the public’s radar.” He tips his head toward our joined hands.

“We wouldn’t be here together if we were trying to hide anything,” I tell him.

“We didn’t plan to put on a show either,” Tripp says, his wary gaze telling me he’s concerned about what the Bulldogs might have to say when this gets out.

“It’s settled then. You two take off and I’ll make sure Rose gets out safely,” the judge declares.

But Tripp doesn’t budge. “Rose, are you okay with that? I understand if you’re not. Even after I realized my parents were probably bluffing about what the judge would do if I went to him for help, I was afraid to trust him

because he was friends with them. After tonight I know differently, but if you don't want to go with him we'll wait for you to get your things."

She glances between the two men, finally relaxing a bit when her affectionate gaze settles on Tripp. "He's right, you should go now. I'll be okay, Mr. Tripp."

My boyfriend, who's still skittish about showing affection without the promise of sex, hugs Rose, and then the man who calls himself Tripp's uncle, which almost makes me tear up. If the one good thing that comes from tonight is Tripp learning that this guy has always been in his corner, and isn't going anywhere, then this shitshow of an evening will have been worth it.

The judge pats Tripp on the back and lets him go. "Good to have you back, son. Now get out of here. And call me this week. We have a lot of catching up to do."

His hand locked in mine, I lead Tripp out the front door and past the photographer who clicks away as we get into the car and drive off.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

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# Tripp

“Damn, the press are fast. It hasn’t even been a full hour and the pictures are already up.” Niko holds his phone so we can see the snaps of Noah leading me hand-in-hand to the car, opening the door for me, and the four of us driving away.

Huddled in a back booth of a club all the Bulldogs have an exclusive membership to, we’re able to drink in peace. It’s not our preferred scene—to uppity—but tonight the rich dark atmosphere, and the discreet staff, is sort of a godsend. Even if people recognize us here, they won’t approach us or put us on the spot, and after the night I’ve had, I’m grateful for whatever privacy I can get. Not that I give two shits about my parents’ downfall or the role I ended up playing in it, I just don’t want to be drawn into it any further before the evening ends. There’s plenty of time for that later.

“Cute pictures, though,” Justus says offhand. Why he and Luca showed up, I’m still not sure. I suspect it’s because they were some of Niko’s biggest supporters when his personal life went public, so they must be playing the same role for Noah. “Noah looks very protective of you, Tripp.”

Not too long ago, that statement would’ve freaked me the fuck out—and in

some ways it still does. I'm new to this whole relying on and trusting other people thing, but as far as Noah's concerned, I have to agree with Justus. It's cute.

"Have they figured out who I am yet?" I ask Niko.

Niko scrolls down the page. "They're going with Mystery Man."

"Mystery Man?" I wrinkle my nose. "That makes it sound like I belong on Scooby Doo. It should be Man of Mystery."

"You've got the wrong hair color for that, Freddy," Luca snorts, and everyone at the table, including me, bursts into laughter.

"You're funnier than you let on, hockey boy," I tell him.

"Maybe you were just too preoccupied with getting in Noah's pants to notice my sparkling personality."

"True. I'm single-minded like that." I'm not sure what brought it on, but after his initial concern over Noah and I playing show me yours and I'll show you mine, Luca seems less skeptical tonight, which is cool. I just hope this isn't an olive branch to keep using my man as his audience for his pregame mumbo jumbo. Before we were boyfriends, I didn't care about that, but now my feelings are more complicated. We'll probably need to talk about it before Noah goes back to traveling with the team.

"Will they even connect the dots?" Xander steers us back to the identity issue. "I mean, you've changed your name and your appearance, will they put it together?"

"You changed your name?" Justus asks.

"I always hated the name Preston. And yeah, since Tripp didn't exist until ten years ago people will dig around to see who did. My name change record will come up."

"Preston?" Luca snorts as he swirls the liquid in his tumbler. "I can see why

you hated that. It doesn't fit you at all.”

“Ten years ago... You were sixteen when they kicked you out?” Niko asks. “What'd you do?”

This isn't a story I share, and with the exception of one man, no one actually knows it. Not even Noah. But the reassuring hand he rests on my thigh keeps my heartbeat calm as I recount the events that led to me becoming Tripp.

“The last time I saw my parents, before tonight, was ten years ago when they kicked me out with nothing but the clothes on my back. Fortunately, I had my wallet and car keys on me, so I had a little money and a place to sleep. And when I snuck back the next day, Rose gave me what she could gather of my clothes and other belongings.” Noah gives my leg a squeeze when he hears her name. “I spent the first month in my car, grabbing a meal from a shelter when I could, out of a dumpster when I couldn't. Eventually this guy who owned a tattoo shop got curious about this nice car that was perpetually parked on the street—it wasn't a bad area, but a brand new BMW was out-of-place—and he confronted me.”

“This is the guy who gave you the tattoos you designed?” Noah asks softly.

I give him a slow nod and continue. “I'd been trying to work up the courage to ask for a job—that's why I was always parked there—but I kept talking myself out of it because I wasn't sure what would happen if anyone found out I was a homeless teen.”

“When he finally cornered me, he first thought I stole the car, but I had the title in the glove box. I was supposed to put it in a safety deposit box, but I was a lazy kid who got a kick out of doing the opposite of what my parents told me to do and never got around to it. That ended up being sort of a life saver since it backed up the story I gave Jim. He owned the tattoo shop.”

Noah gives my leg another reassuring squeeze.

“Anyhow, Rose had smuggled out my sketchbooks, and after he looked at them, he said he could hire me as an office assistant, but he paid me for any designs I gave him too. He even paid me under the table and helped me find a little studio apartment so I could stay off the authorities’ radar as long as I promised to get my GED. Once I was eighteen a trust fund my grandfather left me kicked in. Fortunately, my parents couldn’t touch it, and I bought my condo. I didn’t need a guardian to get certified copies of my birth certificate and social security card, so I was finally able to get all the documents to go through the name change process and officially disappear.”

“Your parents never even tried to look for you in those first few years?” Justus seems truly baffled that such a thing is possible. He must have a close-knit family.

“They didn’t care where I went, and they didn’t want to be found. They put the house on the market the day after they kicked me out and were gone within a month—Jim looked them up even though I told him it was pointless. I’m actually surprised my dad didn’t move his office too, but I guess he figured security was tight enough I wouldn’t get past them. Not that I tried.”

“Why’d they even kick you out, if you don’t mind me asking?” Luca broaches the subject I’m sure they’re all dying to know but are too polite to bring up. I actually respect the fuck out of the fact that he asked. I would’ve.

“They caught me kissing a boy.” The expressions around me range from disgust to anger, but not surprise. I guess they all had an inkling where my parents drew the line. “There were years of disappointments before then—I didn’t like the sports they approved of, I liked art instead of business or math, I resented that they tried to mold me into their image—you name it we didn’t

see eye-to-eye. But being gay is what really sealed the deal. My dad hauled me up by my shirt, tossed me out the front door and locked it in my face.”

Xander curses as Noah takes my hand in his and brings it to his lips for a soft kiss. I flash a weak smile to let everyone know I’m okay.

“To this day I’m not sure if I kissed that kid because I wanted to get caught or because I actually liked him. I’d known I was gay for years, and I’d also known my parents wouldn’t approve of it. I remember being tired of hiding, and when this cute new kid moved to town, I saw an opportunity to explore the thing I’d been hiding for years. I could’ve done that anywhere but my house, and I didn’t, even though I knew it was reckless. The only thing I remember clearly is watching that door slam and promising myself I’d never be ashamed of liking men, no matter the consequences. Sorry I never told you this,” I tell Xander, who is the closest thing I have to a real friend, probably shouldn’t be hearing this for the first time.

“You don’t have to apologize,” he says. “I wasn’t exactly forthcoming with all my issues until recently. And if being confused has taught me anything, it’s that no one has the right to judge how other people deal with the scars from their past. I understand why you wouldn’t want to talk about that period of your life.”

“Thanks. Although I should clarify, I talk about that period all the time. Not my evil parents but the time period once I left their house. It was the start of my sexual awakening, which is absolutely worth sharing.” Not to make light of his words, but we’ve had enough heavy stuff for one night.

“You can apologize for that if you want to. It won’t erase the images in my head,” Xander snorts, “but it’s a start.”

“Please,” I huff. “That was good material, and you know it. I bet you’ve even re-enacted some of it with the hot piece of ass sitting next to you.”

“We don’t need to re-enact anything.” Niko slings his arm around Xander’s shoulder. “Our sex life is awesome.”

“How about we leave sex out of the conversation tonight.” Xander gives him a wry look.

“Fine.” Niko kisses Xander’s temple. “So, what do you think will happen to your folks after this?” He asks me.

“No idea. Don’t really care.” I sip the whiskey in front of me. *My boyfriend’s springing for the good stuff.*

“Can he get kicked out of... What kind of politician is he again?” Justus asks.

“A senator,” Noah replies for me when I don’t answer. “He can’t get kicked out but he’s up for re-election next year so he could get voted out.”

“You had to learn that for a citizenship test, didn’t you?” I nudge his shoulder, and he smiles bashfully.

“I’m still not clear on something,” Luca says. “This charity thing was for underprivileged kids, which you basically were for a while.” He points a finger at me. “And aren’t a lot of those kids gay or bi or whatever? Why support a charity if you don’t like the people impacted by it?”

“Denver skews Democratic and he’s a Republican. I assume it makes him more appealing to Independents or moderate Democrats if he seems supportive of the LGBTQ+ community,” Noah says.

I nudge him again. “I’m the bad boy dating the teacher’s pet, aren’t I? That’s kinda hot.” Noah’s hand finds mine under the table and he threads our fingers together.

“What a douche.” Luca wrinkles his nose in disgust.

“He could be facing some legal trouble if what Rose said about holding her green card is true,” Noah muses aloud.

I'd forgotten about that until he mentioned it, and as much as I'd enjoy seeing the man squirm, my guess is it would turn into a big headache for her. "I'm guessing Judge Calahan will get that worked out without involving the authorities. Hopefully, with some sort of big payout for her so she doesn't have to work again."

"We'll make sure she doesn't." Noah gives my hand a squeeze as my air gets lodged in my chest. While the big guy has done some pretty sweet things for me, this is the one that tips my world off its axis. Being boyfriends, moving in, those things are stages in a relationship that may or may not last. Committing to take care of the only mother I've ever known... That's *permanent*.

"Hey." Luca suddenly perks up. "You're out in public and walking just fine. That means you're coming back to the team, right?"

I try not to tense—it's not like I didn't know this was coming—but I'm even less thrilled about Noah traveling with Luca than I realized. *Apparently, having a boyfriend makes me possessive.*

Noah rubs his thumb over the back of my hand, sensing my distress, I think. "I'll start practice Monday, but it'll still probably be a few weeks before I'm in a game, just to be safe."

"Gauthier's killing it and all," Niko starts, "but it'll be nice to have you back. His reflexes are a hair too slow for my liking."

"Slower than mine maybe, but not slow. He's a big part of the reason we aren't too far out of first in the conference," Noah points out.

"Agreed." Niko nods vigorously. "I just feel a little more at ease with you."

The guys dissolve into a conversation about cold stuff while I sip my drink and marvel over the fact that I just shared what I did. It's not that I was ashamed of what happened, lots of kids have shit parents that make their lives

miserable. It was more about not wanting to put myself in a vulnerable position again by trusting people who could eventually hurt me. And rather than be offended I didn't open up, the people at this table accepted it without question.

I didn't expect that.

Given the way they acted when Niko and Xander came out to them, and even Noah, I probably should've realized they'd accept me too. But I'm not on their team, and I kept Xander at arm's length for years. I didn't give any of them much reason to be so tolerant of me. Hell, I probably baited them to push me away instead, but they're still here.

By the time we get home it's nearly midnight, and we're both exhausted. That doesn't stop Noah from pinning me against the door the second we get inside.

"Do you have any idea how hard it was to keep my hands off you when you look this sexy?" He licks up my neck, over my jaw, and takes my mouth in a searing, possessive kiss.

I bite my lip suggestively when he pulls back to look at me. "The un-tied tie and open collar really do it for you, huh?"

"You have no idea." He nuzzles my chest, just above the open shirt.

"Oh, I think I do. Just remember, you're the one who made the PDA rules, not me. I'd have happily played with your cock under the table." I reach for it now, palming the hard bulge over his pants.

"I'm a patient man. I don't mind waiting for the things I really want."

"And what is it you really want?" I flex my fingers around him, enjoying the way he fills my hand. Nice and long and thick.

"You... In my mouth." He nibbles along my jaw as he works my pants open, dropping to his knees when he has them parted just enough to pull my boxers off my dick, but not so much that they fall from my hips. When I start to take off my shirt—being naked while he's clothed seems to be my new favorite kink—he reaches up to stop me. "Leave it on. I like seeing you so polished and so dirty at the same time."

*When he puts it that way...*

Keeping my hands trapped in his, Noah leans forward and places a feather-light kiss on my tip as his eyes flutter closed. He repeats the gesture again and again, peppering my skin with tiny little waves of pleasure that fan over my length the way water ripples when it's disturbed by a stone. This might be

the first time anyone's actually kissed my dick, and it's more enticing than I could've imagined.

When he's covered every inch with his soft lips, Noah parts his mouth and gives me his tongue, leisurely swirling it around my crown a few times before sucking gently on the head. Releasing our hands so he can hold me in his grip, mine find their way to his hair, undoing the tie that holds it back so I can thread my fingers through the silky strands. A soft sigh sends a wave of hot air over my damp skin, and we both shudder.

Using the flat of his tongue, Noah laps at my slit like he enjoys my taste, then takes me into his mouth. Closing his lips around my crown, he slurps me delicately, swiping his tongue over my sensitive flesh with each pull. Despite the fragile treatment, my thighs quake, pent up desire and adrenaline threatening to unleash within me and take control.

Though the gentle pace is completely foreign, it's satisfying as hell, and my restraint starts to wane. I flex my fingers against Noah's scalp, guiding him over me as I push forward. Slow and steady, the wet slide of his tongue lavishes every inch of my length. The gentle glide of his mouth is both teasing and tender, like he enjoys taking me as much as I enjoy him doing it. That's... Hot seems too common a word to describe it. More like mesmerizing.

As he takes me to the back of his throat, Noah's hooded eyes lock with mine. He watches my chest rise with each breath, and my lips part on a soft moan. With strong hands, he guides my pants off my hips and runs his fingertips up and down my thighs. My balls ache as he palms them, a lone finger applying the slightest amount of pressure to my hole. I flatten myself against the wall to keep upright as a torrent of sensations bombards me. The tenuous grasp on my self-discipline is ready to snap.

My cock glistens with Noah's saliva as he unhurriedly bobs his head over my length, a satisfied groan rumbling around it as he pushes deeper. Watching it sink gradually into his mouth, it occurs to me, I've never had such a gentle blow job. Never had a gentle encounter period until the big guy, but getting sucked off all sweet-like... Even guys who love sucking cock tend to rush, slurping and slobbering all over the place. Don't get me wrong, a messy, wet blow job is an excellent way to get my dick hard, but to get hard while making me feel like I'm important... Treasured even. That's some lovey-dovey...

*Holy shit!*

*Is that what this is? Does Noah love me? I know he likes me—he's said that much—but does he love me? Do I love him?*

The man did just publicly claim me, and hint that he'd take care of Rose, and when I think of the coming weeks, months, years... For the first time in my life, I don't like the thought of spending that time alone. I want him to be there. And since the L word doesn't appear to be giving me hives...wow!

*Shit!*

*I think I love him.*

It could be the impending orgasm making my brain all fuzzy, but I feel like this is something I need to tell him. Something he needs to know. Probably not while my dick's in his mouth, though.

Using strength I didn't know I possessed, I yank Noah off my cock and slam our mouths together, plunging my tongue against his. The kiss is urgent, desperate, like I need it more than I need my next breath. Like the force of it could fuse us together forever or some shit like that, so neither of us will be alone again. And then I taste myself on his tongue, mixed with his musky flavor, and my frenzy starts to wane. Something about the two of us together

softens the kiss, morphing from feverish need into this overwhelming sense of peace and belonging.

This would be the perfect time to confess how I feel, and it's on the tip of my tongue to do just that. But I can't get the words out. I've never said them to another person. Never heard them in return. Not even from my parents, who weren't the affectionate type even before I was old enough to really piss them off. It makes me question whether I can trust my emotions, so instead of saying something profound, I say, "Bedroom. Now."

When we get to his room Noah sets me gently on the bed and tugs my shoes and pants off before undoing my shirt. He pauses to look at me when I'm gloriously naked but he still resembles Thor dressed up as James Bond.

"Take your dick out and fuck me," I rasp breathlessly.

Noah starts to remove his jacket and I shake my head vigorously. "Just your dick. Like you're in the middle of something super important and don't have time to get naked but you have to be inside me."

"Some fantasy of yours?" He arches a brow but pulls his cock out like I asked.

"I'm making this up as I go." I pull the lube from the nightstand and drizzle some in my hand, rubbing my palms together before wrapping them around Noah's cock and slicking him up while he hovers over me in his sexy tux. "I just really like the idea of getting fucked by a man dressed like a billionaire."

"Millionaire," he corrects as I stroke over his length, getting him nice and slippery. "I don't have that much money."

"Humor me, big guy." I lay on my back and spread my legs, hooking them behind my knees. With an exaggerated sigh, Noah lines himself up and pushes into me. His head falls back as he bottoms out, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing when he swallows thickly. *I don't think I'm supposed to need*

*a spank bank anymore now that I have a boyfriend, but for the times he's traveling, this right here is going in it.*

Holding my breath, I wait for him to move. To start pounding into me like a man on a mission, but he doesn't. He just stands there, balls deep like I'm some sort of cock warmer. It'd be pretty hot if I wasn't desperate for the friction of movement.

"Remember, you don't have a lot of time," I prompt. "Get to the fucking."

"No."

"No?"

"You heard me. I'll keep the tux on like you asked, but I'm not rushing this." To emphasize his point, he pulls out excruciatingly slow, then presses back in, rotating his hips when he's fully seated so his crown rubs all over my prostate.

"*Holy fucking mother of god,*" I groan. "Where did you learn how to do that?"

He pummels me with a series of short, rapid pumps, jackhammering that sensitive bundle of nerves before retreating and pressing back in leisurely. "I didn't learn it. I'm making it up as I go." He steals my line, but I'm too blissed out to comment on it.

*All this time I thought I was well acquainted with my prostate, but it turns out the real key to nirvana is my boyfriend's dick.*

"Can you reach your dick like that?" Noah asks as his pelvis tilts forward.

Though I'm bent like a pretzel, it's not a stretch. I nod.

"Good. Wrap your hand around it."

I do as he says with a soft groan. "Can I jerk it?"

"No, just hold it. Squeeze to keep yourself from coming if you need to, but nothing else."

I want to huff in displeasure. Instead, another moan passes through my lips as Noah circles his hips, the fat head of his cock kissing my pleasure center before pounding it and disappearing...*again*. Over and over, he teases me to the brink and backs off, the slight frown of concentration completing the image of a sophisticated man getting ready to bust a nut in his favorite hole.

It's sinful, and beautiful, and it makes me near delirious with ecstasy as the tension in my groin coils tighter and tighter. It's the single hottest moment of my life, pushing me toward what could be an epic orgasm. But I can't help feeling like something's missing.

Hockey god looking extra sexy in his suave tux... Check.

His thick dick filling me to the brink... Check.

Full lips slightly parted, gasping for air as he tries to maintain control... Fuck, that's it.

"Kiss me," I blurt.

"What?"

"I'm about to come, and I want your mouth on me when I do. Kiss me."

Noah pins my wrists above my head as he collapses on top of me, trapping my swollen cock between us. With our fingers laced together, he drives into me long and deep as his mouth gently meets mine.

Our tongues slide together, giving and receiving the love we confessed only moments ago, and making my heart thump in my chest. *This is what I needed. His lips on mine, sharing our air as our bodies tumble into heavenly oblivion.... It's perfect.*

The orgasm starts as a series of tiny quakes, short but powerful bursts that make me gasp from their intensity. It quickly morphs into a full body tremor, trapping my breath in my lungs as my body bucks upward. My ass clenches around Noah's cock as if it could somehow take him deeper.

I breathe a soundless cry against his lips as he shudders inside me, his warm cum filling me as my own spreads between our joined stomachs. And while it's every bit as filthy as I hoped it would be, it's also hauntingly beautiful. The way our heartbeats pulse in sync as our eyes manage to lock together in the dark room... I'll never forget it.

Tentatively, I tilt my chin up, so my lips brush against Noah's.

"Yes," I whisper between kisses.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I want to move in with you." I bite my lip, waiting for his reaction.

He pulls my lip away from my teeth with his thumb and gives me a lingering kiss. "Good, because this is where you belong."

I know this makes me the world's biggest cheeseball, but even though I still have to go through the whole moving thing, hearing him say that makes me feel like I'm already home.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

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# Noah

“Will you build me a pool?” Tripp asks as we’re packing up his room.

“If I build a *swimming* pool I’m going to use it to swim.”

“Who said anything about swimming?”

I’ll build this man whatever he wants, but I see no reason why I can’t have a little fun at his expense first. “As far as I’m concerned there’s only one use for a pool, and that’s to put water in it. Besides, there’s a perfectly good *empty* pool down the street. You and Xander can skate in that and swim in ours.”

“There’s a major flaw in your plan.” He stuffs a pile of t-shirts into a duffel bag sitting open on the bed. “If our pool has water we’ll have Xander, Niko, Luca and Justus hanging around all the time.”

“Where’s the flaw in that?”

“If they’re always around it will really cut into our sexy times.”

“How much sex are you planning to have?” I empty his sock drawer into the bag sitting on his dresser.

“Noah Tremblay, do not pretend to be ignorant about this. Live-in

boyfriends get sex morning, noon and night. It's the most important requirement."

I lift my brows in mock surprise. "There are requirements for living together?"

"Several." He raises his forefinger. "First, do *not* wake me up at the ass crack of dawn if you have to go to practice or catch a flight or something. Second," he raises another finger. "If you do wake me up at the ass crack of dawn, the only acceptable way to do so is with a complimentary blow job. Third, I get to wear your clothes but you can't wear mine because they're too small, boxer-briefs excluded because your cock will look fantastic in my smaller underwear. Fourth, the aforementioned sex, and fifth," he lifts a final finger, "while it's not a rule per se I propose we don't need clothes in the house."

"I accept your terms." I hold my hand out for him to shake it. "Except for the last one. If you're naked all the time I'll be hard all the time, and there are some things it's not smart to do with an erection."

"Name one."

"Cooking."

"Pfft. You have a chef for that."

"True, but you like when I cook for you and neither of us wants me to burn my dick because I'm distracted by your sexy ass."

Tripp purses his lips as he seems to consider my point, finally taking my hand when he relents. "I suppose preserving your manhood is an acceptable reason not to be naked all the time."

Once I have his hand in mine I pull him toward me and slam our mouths together, swiping my tongue against his as I tease the hair on the back of his neck. "I'm glad you agree," I rumble. "Now let's finish packing."

“So bossy.” He stuffs more shirts in the bag, concentrating for about two minutes before he speaks up again. “Can I have an office?”

“Don’t you have one of those already?”

“Not for my *job*, job, although I’m not giving up on the work from home idea. For my hobby job, helping local bands.”

I’ve been so focused on my recovery I forgot all about that passion of his, which makes me feel like shit. I know how much he likes working with bands—one of the first conversations we had was when I ran into him at a concert and he showed me what he was doing with his video equipment—and he hasn’t been to a concert since he started crashing at my place.

“You haven’t missed any work because of me, have you?”

“It’s not work, it’s a hobby. And no, I haven’t missed any. I’ve missed several shows while I was taking care of your ass, but since that ass is now mine I’ll forgive you.” He cracks one of those shirts on my backside before tucking it into the bag.

I throw a pair of socks at his head. “Yes, you can have an office. If you take me to the concerts with you.”

“Um duh. My famous boyfriend is my backstage ticket, so of course you’re going with me. I might even add that to my list of live-in-boyfriend requirements. It’d be a shame for me not to meet fancy people because my fancy boyfriend isn’t there to flex his name.”

“So, you’re just using me for my celebrity access?”

“And your big fat cock.” He flings the socks at my crotch, but I catch them before they hit the target and put them in the bag. “Fucking goalies,” he mutters.

“Hey now. It’s a good thing my reflexes are so fast, otherwise with your aim you might jeopardize the morning, noon and night sex you’re counting

on.”

“Omigosh” Tripp’s eyes go comically wide. “I don’t know why I never thought of this before, but you literally put your body in front of flying objects. What happens if you take a puck to the dick?”

*Of course that’s his biggest concern.* “I wear protection.”

“Yes, but how much can those pads really protect you? I don’t like the idea of my most prized possession being in the line of fire. I mean, I’m happy to kiss it all better if it gets hit, but I don’t think my kisses can fix a bent carrot.”

“Bent carrot?” I arch an eyebrow.

“Haven’t you ever seen the commercials?” He rolls his eyes. “Penile trauma is a thing. They can give you medicine, but I’m not sure that’s a cure. Your cock fits in me perfectly, and I’d prefer not to mess with perfection.”

“Perfection, huh?” I stifle a laugh. “And here I thought *your* cock was your most prized possession?”

He waves a hand dismissively. “It’s more of a tie at this point. I mean, I guess I could exclusively top, but I really do like to switch. How close are you to retirement? I’m not sure how long I can live with the stress of you suffering permanent damage.”

Knowing Tripp, I have no doubt he’s legitimately concerned about the well-being of my penis. But I suspect that pales in comparison to what’s really going on in his head, and this little rant is his way of coping with whatever’s on his mind.

“Are you having second thoughts about moving in?” I ask.

“What?” He feigns ignorance.

“You’re rambling even more than usual. Why are you freaking out?”

“The fact that you know I’m freaking out, for starters,” he mumbles.

“And?” I take a seat on the bed and pull him onto my lap.

Tripp rests his head on my chest, I think so he doesn't have to look at me. "Since running into my parents, I've been remembering little things about living with them. Like how they'd complain that I was too loud. Or too messy. Or always in the way. And I know that I was probably just a normal kid and not doing anything wrong, but... I haven't lived with anyone since then..."

"You're worried I might say the same things?" I rub my hand along his spine.

"Yeah. And I know that's stupid because I've been staying with you for a month already and you haven't said anything like that, but if you did I could always come back here."

I kiss the top of his head. "And you're afraid of not having a place to retreat to if something goes wrong."

He relaxes against my chest. "Yeah."

"You know moving in with me doesn't mean you have to give this place up. I never want you to feel trapped."

"I don't feel trapped. Not consciously. And this sucks because I know you're nothing like them, but their shit keeps popping into my head."

In some ways I get what Tripp's going through. Every once in a while I'll remember something about my parents out of the blue, and it'll paralyze me. The difference is those memories are happy, and the paralysis is almost welcome because it forces me to relive a good time in my life. It keeps me from forgetting them. In Tripp's case the memories are traumatic, and the paralysis is borne of fear of being abandoned or homeless. I don't know how to help him get through that except to give him time and space. And if the space part of that equation is keeping this condo, even if that's just a mental security blanket, I'll give that to him. With a twist.

“What if you give this place to Rose?”

“Like put it in her name?” Tripp sits up straight, glancing at me with the softer expression I’m starting to see more and more of.

“If you want. Or leave it in your name but have her move in. Either way, it’ll be here if you need it, so you never have to worry about not having somewhere to go.”

“She does deserve a place of her own after all the shit she put up with from my parents.”

“What sort of shit was that?”

Tripp fiddles with a hangnail as he answers. “Emotional abuse mostly, same as me. Telling her her work wasn’t good enough, that she cooked things wrong, that it was her fault I was a handful. I always wondered why she put up with it. I know now she stayed because of the green card thing, at least after they kicked me out, but before that I think she stayed for me.” He brings his glassy eyes to mine, and I wrap him in my arms.

“So, what do you think?” I sift my fingers through his hair to comfort him. “Keep this as a safe place for the two of you?”

“I think we’d both like that.”

“We’ll make it happen, then.”

Tripp pulls back and places the sweetest kiss on my lips. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“So.” A sly smile spreads across his face. “Where did we land on the whole pool thing?”

I lift him off my lap and playfully smack his ass. “Finish packing. Then maybe we’ll talk.”

“Yes, Daddy.” He quips, and I can’t even correct him since he’s too fucking cute.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

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# Tripp

The bell echoes on the other side of the door, and while I wait for the judge—Uncle Callahan—to answer. I briefly wish I’d taken Noah up on his offer to come with me, but he has practice, and deep down I know this is something I need to do on my own.

Seeing my parents rattled me more than I’d like to admit, and the hardened exterior I’d honed to perfection over the years started to crack. I know that’s not all bad, I was too isolated and independent before, but I’m too wary and unsure of myself after coming face-to-face with my past.

Noah has been exceptionally patient and understanding while I sort through the things I never really dealt with, and while I don’t think he minds taking care of me—that’s kind of his personality—I don’t want to be the kind of man who needs to be coddled. Prior to the run-in with my folks, I wasn’t, and I want that back. No, scratch that. I want to find a balance between taking care of myself and letting him take care of me.

“Preston,” Uncle Callahan booms as he opens the door.

“Tripp, actually,” I correct him as I step inside.

“Right. Sorry. That might take a little getting used to.”

“It’s okay.” I follow him as he leads us to his office, a room in dark cherry wood with an ornate desk and a wall of books. It’s everything I imagined a judge’s office would look like. Even though this is a friendly visit, I can’t help feeling a little like I’m in a principal’s office, about to be interrogated.

He gestures to one of the wingback chairs as he takes a seat behind the desk. “Rose is packing her bags. I thought we might catch up until she’s ready.”

“Sure.”

“First off, I’d like to say I’m sorry.”

“What?” I balk. “Why are you sorry?”

Uncle Callahan props his elbows on the armrest and steepled his fingers together. “I always knew your parents weren’t really the parental type. They were both rather ambitious, even back in college, and in truth I think that’s why we became friends since I was the same way.” A wistful smile flashes across his face before he becomes serious again. “You were a bit of a surprise, and while I knew they continued to put your father’s career first even after you arrived, I did think you were being treated well at home.”

He takes a deep breath before continuing, “I knew you and your father butted heads of course, but that was no different than any other father and son relationship. At least not that I saw, and having no child of my own, I didn’t feel qualified to second guess my friend. Not even when they shipped you off to a military academy for getting caught up in drugs.”

My eyes widen on their own accord as my jaw drops.

“Yes, I knew about that. A few joints clearly intended for personal use wouldn’t have landed you in too much trouble, but I stepped in to help make that go away at your father’s request. They told me it was because of the drug

incident that they sent you to school, although I now know they kicked you out.”

“Then they told you I became a doctor.” I put the pieces together. “And you believed that?”

“I did find it strange since I knew you to be an artistic kid, but military schools aren’t exactly known for their art programs, so I thought it was possible you discovered an aptitude for science.”

“You didn’t think it was strange that I never came home?”

“Since I knew you weren’t overly close with your parents, no. Plus, they spend half their time in Washington, so I had no reason to think they were making up stories that you visited them there.”

I chew my lip, considering his words. “The lack of family photos wasn’t a clue?”

“Are there *any* family photos in their house?”

“Good point.” I laugh without any humor. “Still, you’re their closest friend.”

“*Was*. We haven’t been close in years. Your father’s ambition out-paced mine a long time ago. While we kept in touch sporadically, that was more out of a sense of obligation than desire. We’re both prominent men in the community, and our decades-long friendship has been well-documented. It was easier to go through the motions than to sever ties. That’s why I owe you an apology. Your parents and I may have drifted apart, but I was still your Godfather, and I failed you.”

This is a lot to take in, and while part of me wishes he had done more when I was a kid, I can see how my parents manipulated him the same way they did me.

“*They* failed me, not *you*.”

“I’m a grown man, son. I can admit when I’ve screwed up, but I’d like to do better going forward. If you’re open to that.”

Not that long ago it was just me. And maybe Xander in a platonic way. Now I have a boyfriend, several friends, the only mother I’ve ever known and possibly an uncle in my life. It’s been a weird several weeks.

“Um, yeah. I’m open to that.”

“Wonderful.” His smile is almost blinding. “Maybe you and that young man of yours can come over for dinner. I’d love to hear more about how you helped him after his injury.”

“You remember the part about me not being a doctor, right?”

“Of course, but he said you helped him get through it.” Uncle Callahan’s brow wrinkles.

“Yeah, you probably don’t want the details on that.” *Omigod am I blushing? I don’t blush. What is happening?*

“Perhaps not.” Uncle Callahan clears his throat. “He’s special to you though, yes?”

“I–” It’s on the tip of my tongue to downplay my feelings since they still terrify me, but I can’t get the lie out.

Somewhere in the midst of helping Noah sort his shit, he helped me sort mine. Not that either of us realized I was the bigger mess when we made our little arrangement, but he’s taking it in stride, and while I still have my moments of panic, deep down I know he’ll be there to help me get through it. That my man will do anything for me, because he loves me.

*He loves me.*

And I totally, completely, unequivocally, love him.

“Yes. He’s special to me.”

Uncle Callahan gives me a warm smile. “I’m happy to hear that, son. You

deserve it.”

“It doesn’t bother you that I’m with a man?”

Now, *he* seems to turn a little pink in the cheeks. “There’s a reason I never married, son.”

“You... You’re gay?” When he doesn’t say anything I continue. “And you’re still in the closet.”

“You’re a lot braver than I ever was. Than I am.” Uncle Callahan looks at me like... *Wow, this is... Is he proud of me? It sort of feels like he is. I...*

“I’m ready, Mr. Tripp.” Rose pokes her head into the office right before I can spiral into unfamiliar emotional territory. *Good timing.*

Uncle Callahan stands when I do, stepping around the desk to give me a hug. I know we did this at my parent’s party, but it still feels weird. Not bad, just different. I don’t hate it though, so I return the embrace.

“I’ll uh... I’ll call you. About dinner?”

“Please do.”

He escorts us out and helps us get Rose’s bags into the car. There are only a few since it seems my parents kept her on a pretty tight leash the last few years, but if the smile on her face is any indication, she’s not concerned about the lack of personal items. She’s just happy to be out of their house.

I’m not sure we’ll ever talk about them—I get the sense we’d both rather move on—but I’ll listen if she ever needs me to. I do have one question though.

“What are you going to do with all your free time?” Between the condo I’m giving her and the cash Uncle Callahan got her in exchange for not pressing charges, at Rose’s request, she doesn’t need to work anymore.

“Nothing, Mr. Tripp. Absolutely nothing.”

“I think that sounds perfect. Can I ask you one favor though?”

She looks at me curiously, but like any mother would, she says. “Of course.”

“Teach me how to cook your ramen? I want to introduce Noah to the comfort food I had growing up.”

Rose bobs her head slightly. “I’d be honored.”

# Chapter Twenty-Five

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# Noah

**I**t's been heaven to be back on the ice. Honestly, just walking is paradise after not being able to for several weeks. You never realize how much you move throughout the day until you suddenly can't. Everything from cooking to going to the bathroom, to just trying to find the damn TV remote, becomes a whole production when you have to do it on one leg. Don't even get me started on how hard it is to actually stand up off the couch with one leg and a set of crutches.

Finally putting my skates on and taking the goal, even just for practice, was like having this oppressive weight lifted off my chest. It didn't just make me feel independent again the way walking did, it was the difference between a wheezing breath and filling your lungs full of air. Feeling whole. If I'm being honest, the void I felt from not getting on the ice was considerably smaller than it would've been if I didn't have Tripp. So much so, a part of me is kind of dreading this road trip we're about to go on.

I'm excited to play again, but for the first time in my professional career, I'm not amped about the travel part of playing hockey. After years of staying in hotels, I prefer my own bed, but hotels aside, I usually look forward to

seeing new places. It can be grueling, yet it can also be a great way to bond with my teammates. That was when I had no one to say goodbye to, no one waiting for me at home. Now, I do.

Between getting back on the ice and having Tripp move in, I'm privileged to say there's nothing I could want that I don't have, which makes it difficult to admit I'm a little sad about leaving for this road trip.

I'm practical enough to realize that means my love for Tripp might surpass my love of the game, and given my age... Let's just say, I'll have some deep thinking to do at the end of the season. For now, I just need to get through the next four days.

I toss some sweats, similar to the ones I'm wearing, in my duffel and open the dresser drawer to find some t-shirts while Tripp watches me from his perch on the bed.

"Don't you have to be all fancy and shit when you travel?" he asks.

"We have to dress up to go to the arena, but we can be comfortable the rest of the time. Fortunately, we go straight to the hotel when we land so I don't have to travel in a suit."

"Do you have to travel in gray sweatpants, though?"

"What's wrong with gray sweatpants?"

Tripp's jaw nearly drops to the floor. "They're the equivalent of kryptonite for anyone who likes cock, man or woman."

"Really?"

"Yes." He gives me an exasperated look. "Plus, I don't think they're very conducive to hiding that monster between your legs, and I definitely don't want people posting pictures of my second favorite cock all over social media."

"I follow the second favorite thing since yours is obviously your first, but

you lost me at social media.”

“Omigod, seriously? You don’t know that people will take pictures and zoom in on the crotch and talk about how big the package behind the zipper is? Since those sweats don’t have a zipper they won’t leave nearly as much to the imagination.”

I glance down my body, noting that from different angles he may have a point. Still, it seems crazy to me that people might take such an interest in how I look in my pants. The cross look on Tripp’s face tells me I’m the one who’s under-reacting.

“Should I wear a pair of jeans?”

“You’ll probably still look hot as fuck, but I suppose that’s better than broadcasting your assets,” he grumbles as he reclines against the headboard.

“Help me understand this,” I say as I ditch the sweats and pull on a pair of jeans. “You’ve been speculating about the size of my cock for the better part of a year, yet you’re worried about other people doing that same thing? Why?”

“That cock is *mine* to ogle, no one else’s.”

“Oh my gosh.” I pause with the pants resting on my hips, still unfastened. “You’re possessive.”

“What? Am not.”

“You totally are.” A giant grin spreads over my face as I cross the room to sit on the bed, right at his hip, and lean in to nip at his chin. “You want me all to yourself.”

“That doesn’t make me possessive.” He tilts his head so I can kiss his neck.

“No? What does it make you?”

“Protective,” he says resolutely. “You wouldn’t believe some of the comments people make. Depending on the angle, people could imply that

you're woefully inadequate or hiding a can of Pringles. I'm saving you from rampant mischaracterization."

"You know the only opinion that matters is yours, right?" I cup the back of his head and tease my fingers through his hair as I give his earlobe a playful bite. "I don't care what people say about me or my body."

"Yes, well a man's penis is sacred. It shouldn't be seen by just anyone."

That statement gives me pause, and I pull back to look him in the eye. "I know you believe that first part, but the second is a little out of character. If you could legally do it, you'd charge admission to let people take a peek at yours. What's this really about?"

Tripp rolls his eyes with an audible huff. "I wouldn't do that *now*. And nothing's going on."

"Tripp," I prod, resting my palm on the back of his neck.

"Ugh, fine. I know what happens on these little *road trips*." He makes air quotes to emphasize that last part. "And I'm not a fan."

Tilting my head to the side I search his face for some clue about what he's trying to say and come up empty. "I'm not following."

He exhales a frustrated breath. "You and Luca and the peek-a-boo pregame nonsense."

*Me and... Oh shit! I never told him we ended that.*

"Tripp." I rest my forehead against his. "I told Luca I can't do that anymore."

"I... You... When?"

"Weeks ago. He was getting in his head about a bad game and said he couldn't wait for me to get back so he could get back on track, and I told him we needed to find another option."

"Why?" It's barely a whisper.

It's hard to see with our heads so close together, still I do my best to lock eyes with him. "Because I didn't feel right being in that situation with him when I'm with you."

"We weren't even together then. We were just—"

"I know." I sigh, closing my eyes.

"But, aren't superstitions a big deal? Like it could mess up your season, kind of big deal?"

"Yes."

"And Luca's okay with this?" Tripp pulls back to look at me, a wary expression on his face.

"He was nervous at first, but he understood where I was coming from, so he made other arrangements."

"Where were you coming from?" he whispers.

"I think you know." I hold his gaze, praying I haven't spooked him with that implication.

Tripp inhales deeply, holding his breath for what feels like an eternity. Then he leans forward to brush his lips over mine. "I love you."

Now it's my turn to suck in a startled breath, though I recover much faster since I've been ready to say this for weeks, and was just waiting for him to catch up. Cupping his face in my hands, I lean my forehead against his. "I love you, too."

Tripp's body visibly relaxes just before his lips meet mine in a tender kiss. Then the spike of adrenaline from admitting his feelings catches up with him and he starts rambling. "That's really cool of Luca to let you off the hook because of me. Seriously though, where'd that ritual even come from? I know people do lots of weird shit in the name of good luck or whatever, but that's got to be the weirdest superstition I've ever heard."

“I always figured Luca would tell me if he felt like it, and he never did, so your guess is as good as mine. I’m just glad he found a way to make the arrangement he has for home games work for the away ones too. At least I assume that’s what he did since he’s been playing well these last few games.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t suggest I watch, too.” Tripp snorts.

“He did.” I stroke his stubbled cheek with my thumb. “I ruled it out because the only person I want to share that kind of intimacy with is you.”

Tripp gives me a relieved smile and leans forward like he’s going to kiss me before pulling back abruptly. “Wait. If you told him to figure something else out a few weeks ago then you told that dick how you felt about me before telling me?”

“I thought you liked Luca?”

“I called him a dick, *right?*”

“And you like dicks,” I finish for him.

“Exactly. I still don’t want him seeing yours, though. I also don’t like that he knows stuff about you I don’t.” Tripp crosses his arms in front of his chest and puffs out his bottom lip.

“And you’re not possessive?” I fight back a smile.

“Nope.” He shakes his head firmly back and forth.

“Brat.”

“That’s been well established. And you love it.”

I lean forward until our lips are just barely touching. “I really do.”

Tripp’s lips meet mine for the sweetest, most perfect kiss. And then he squeals when I scoop him into my arms.

“Um...lover. If you want to carry me, I recommend tossing me over your shoulder. It’s more dignified than treating me like a damsel.”

“Lover?”

“We said the ‘L’ word. Besides, it’ll make Xander gag, so it can’t be all bad.”

“I’m gonna ignore the fact you brought up someone else’s name while I’m carrying you to bed and say I’m more comfortable with boyfriends. But I still love you.”

He flashes a bashful smile, which is a new look for him, but might just be my favorite. “I love you, too.”

*I will never get tired of hearing that.*

“How long have you been dating Preston Cooper?” The reporter asks when I point to him.

“I don’t know a Preston Cooper.” Honestly the question doesn’t bother me—I expected it since Tripp’s identity was finally unearthed yesterday—I just want to poke a little fun at the press for asking me about my boyfriend before they bring up the first game I’ve played in six weeks. And since my boyfriend is a brat, I have a pretty good idea how to make my point.

“Preston... Changed his name to Tripp ten years ago,” the guy prompts.

“Why didn’t you say Tripp then? I mean, I assume if someone changes their name, they’d like to be known by the new one instead of the old one. Isn’t that reporter 101? Getting the facts straight?”

“How long have you been dating Tripp Cooper?” he rephrases.

“Can we really call it dating? We’ve only been out in public once, and I feel like the term dating implies multiple outings, not just one.”

“How long have you been seeing him?”

*Damn, he’s persistent. I knew two out and proud men on the same team would get attention, but jeez.*

“Since I first looked at him. Just like I’ve been seeing you since the first time I looked at you. Recognition is pretty cool like that. Did you know there’s a condition where you don’t recognize people’s faces? I can never remember what it’s called—I don’t have it obviously—but I’ve always wondered about it.”

I point to the next reporter since that one’s out of questions.

“Did you know Tripp was the son of Senator Charles Cooper when you met him?”

“Is that customary? I wasn’t aware that was something I should know about people I just met. I’ll probably need to make a list because I know a lot of people, and this could get confusing.”

She, too, sits with a harumph, and I point to the next.

“Bit of a rocky start this season, first the injury then the drama with Senator Cooper after the charity event, are you a distraction for this team?” He tilts his recorder so the microphone is pointed at me.

*Ouch. That’s not the direction I thought this would go, but at least now we’re talking about hockey.*

“Both of those things are in the past, so I don’t believe they’ll be a factor going forward.”

“Maybe not, but you’re also one of two openly gay men on the same roster, and that’s a unique scenario that might take the focus off the team.”

“I’m not overly concerned, seeing as the only people focusing on it are members of the press.”

“You don’t think two gay players on the same team is newsworthy?” he follows up.

“Statistically speaking, one in every eight men identifies as gay, which doesn’t include anyone identifying as bi or pan or demi, and there are twenty on this roster, so... If there are two gay men on the team, I’d say we’re right in line with the national average.” If there’s one thing travel gives me plenty of time for, it’s reading, and I may have brushed up on a few facts in preparation for the questions I knew would come my way.

“*If* there are two gay men?” He arches a skeptical brow.

I look to the players and coaches lining the wings of the room. “Did I miss an announcement that I’m gay? I don’t remember making a statement like that.”

“You’re dating a man,” the reporter presses.

“When was that established?”

“You don’t think this exchange will be distracting to your teammates?” He changes tactics.

“I’m only answering the questions you ask.” I hold my hands up like I’m innocent.

“You’re not answering, you’re evading.”

“Ask me a question about hockey and I’ll answer.”

“This team fell short in the playoffs last year and is already four games out of first. Can you turn things around?” He studies me critically.

“Considering we just won today, I’d say so.”

“That’s only one win.”

“I have faith in us.”

“Why?”

“Because if we fall seven times, we’ll get up eight.” I wink, just for Tripp, who I know is watching.

Later that night, my phone beeps with an incoming video call, and before I can even say hello, Tripp bombards me. “I don’t know a Preston. Is that customary? Statistically speaking. Omigod I about came in my pants. You make one sexy brat.”

“Well, I learned from the best.” I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

“Damn right. Now flip the screen and show me your gorgeous cock. It’s been way too long since I’ve seen it.”

“You saw it yesterday,” I remind him while doing what he says.

“Exactly. That’s entirely too long.”

# Epilogue

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” I grumble, wincing as the tattoo gun hits my skin.

“Oh, come on, it’s not that painful. I’m sure you’ve taken a puck that hurt worse.” Tripp rolls his eyes.

“It’s not the pain I’m complaining about.”

“You don’t like my artwork?”

“I love the artwork. Or I did until you told me about its alternative meaning.”

Despite having rings that say we belong to each other, Tripp wasn’t satisfied with something that could be removed, so he talked me into matching tattoos. He drew up a design with two hockey sticks framing a skateboard like a heart, and our initials in an elegant old English-style text. Then he shaded it to look sort of vintage.

“I mean, it’s not inaccurate.” He smirks mischievously as the second hockey stick gets inked onto my skin, crossing over top of the first.

“The rings on our fingers already say we’re crossing swords. We don’t need a literal picture of crossing swords on our arms.”

“Technically it’s crossing hockey sticks.” Tripp points to the blade as evidence while Jim tries to hide his laughter and ends up snorting instead.

“Did you know he was sneaking hidden meanings into the design?” I ask the man who helped Tripp get off the streets.

“It’s Tripp.” He shrugs as he gets more ink on the needle. “I sort of assume there’s always a double meaning to anything he does.”

“The guys are never gonna let me live this down.” My head thunks against the back of the chair as I try to remind myself that I asked him to marry me because I knew life would never be boring.

“We could’ve put them on our asses, like I first suggested,” Tripp unhelpfully says.

“Yeah, because when I’m old and decrepit I want the equivalent of a wrinkled raisin on my ass.”

“But they’d be *matching* wrinkled raisins.”

“I thought the whole point was to show that we’re together.” I sigh heavily.

“These do, and personally I think I nailed it. I mean, look at all the little Easter eggs in this design. Your hobbies, my hobbies, all bundled up in a little heart that screams *gay pride* to boot. Tell me that’s not poetic.”

“Still not gay,” I remind him.

“For me you are.” He bites his adorable bottom lip like the little brat he is, and my agitation fades instantly.

“Yeah, Tripp.” I smile affectionately. I stopped trying to figure out what label fit me best once I realized that didn’t change how I felt about him. Still, he’s never been more right. “For you I am.”

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