



love & other
inconveniences

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catherine cloud



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LOVE & OTHER INCONVENIENCES

by Catherine Cloud

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Chapter One

Morgan tries not to have least favorite teammates.

When you have to be around the same guys day in and day out, you need to at least make an effort to get along with them. Not that anyone has ever tried to get along with Morgan.

He doesn't know how to talk to people, never feels like he has anything interesting to say and so his teammates don't usually take to him quickly. He keeps to himself, knows which

of his teammates will at least tolerate him, and Marsh has been trying really hard to keep him involved. Morgan appreciates it, because being on a team means that you have to be... well, part of the team.

The guys used to chirp him, especially when he was a rookie, and he let it all wash over him until they finally stopped and left him alone. Some guys were worse than others. Some of them aren't even on the team anymore. So Morgan tries not to have least favorite teammates, but not all of his feelings towards them are warm and fuzzy.

It's the same when he heads to Sochi to play for Team USA. It's a temporary thing anyway, they'll be a team for a little while and then they'll go their separate ways again. All Morgan has to do is his job, which is scoring goals. Not alienating his teammates in the process would be great, too. Morgan knows his strengths and weaknesses. Scoring goals is one of the former. Not alienating his teammates is one of the latter.

On Team USA, Morgan also tries his hardest not to have least favorite teammates.

Noah Andersson isn't making that easy for him.

He's loud and he tries way too hard to be funny and he's all touchy-feely. He keeps throwing his arm around people and asks them how it's going, which is ridiculous, because the only acceptable answer to that is *good*, so what's the point in even asking? He's also trying to be friends with Morgan, because he's trying to be friends with everyone, and Morgan doesn't want to have least favorite teammates, but Noah Andersson is definitely, unknowingly, fighting for a spot on the list.

The good news is that Morgan won't have to deal with this for long. Noah is a defenseman, so it's not like he'll end up being Morgan's center.

The problem is that he's still everywhere. Sitting down next to Morgan when the team's eating together, slipping into the elevator with him when they head up to their – thankfully mostly finished – rooms, and then he also sits next to Morgan in the locker room, trying to strike up conversations. Morgan just wants to score goals and be left alone, but Noah Andersson simply refuses to leave him alone.

Everything about him is infuriating. It's not that he's cocky, but he's so confident that it comes across as though he

thinks he's the hottest, most talented guy in the world. Okay, maybe he *is* a little cocky.

The thing is, Noah is just blond and has floofy hair. Other than that he looks like any other player in the league. Everyone's extra far up his ass because his dad's number hangs in the rafters in Vancouver. He works for the local broadcast crew now. It's the whole legacy thing that has people groveling at Noah's feet, asking him invasive questions about his dad.

During their first breakfast together in Sochi, Morgan ends up sitting next to Noah and Frankie Jones, who usually plays for the Wildcats. Morgan keeps his eyes on his food and no one tries to talk to him, but he can't help but listen in on the conversation that's going on right next to him.

"I honestly just wanted to start playing hockey because my sister was playing," Frankie is saying when he and Noah slide into the empty spots next to Morgan. "My parents didn't know shit about hockey."

Noah laughs. "I bet they're excited now."

"Yeah, my dad got over me not liking baseball. Like, at all. I guess you never had much of a choice, huh?"

“Not really,” Noah says.

“Must be cool, though, to have a dad who played in the NHL? I bet you got to go to loads of games when you were a kid.”

“Oh, yeah. I basically lived at the arena.”

“Nice. So did he teach you, like, all his secrets?”

“Well, he wasn’t too excited when I decided to play D.” Noah laughs. “He got over it. I think. Haven’t checked with him in a while if he’s still displeased about my life choices.”

Frankie cackles.

Morgan looks up from his breakfast, just because... What Noah said was clearly supposed to be funny, the delivery of it all joking, with a big grin and crinkled eyes, but what he said sort of rubbed Morgan the wrong way. Maybe he’s reading too much into it, but it almost sounded like Noah doesn’t have the greatest relationship with his famous hockey dad.

“What about you, Morgan?” Noah asks when he catches him looking.

“What?”

“How’d you get into hockey?”

Morgan shrugs. “All my brothers were playing.”

“They still playing?” Frankie asks.

“Ben is in the AHL, but he’s the only one who didn’t quit,” Morgan says and turns his eyes back on his plate.

“How many brothers do you have?”

“Three,” Morgan says and gets up before Frankie can ask him any more questions about his family.

“See you later, Mo,” Noah says and winks at him.

Morgan doesn’t know what to do with that wink, so he stares for a moment and then quickly walks away.

#

Winking, as it turns out, is just something that Noah Andersson does. He doesn’t only wink at Morgan, he winks at everyone. It’s probably harassment, but apparently everyone just thinks it’s charming.

Morgan has yet to find someone who isn’t several miles up Noah Andersson’s ass.

Noah, of course, continues to be everywhere, eating pasta and chicken out of a box in the locker room after their

second game, wearing nothing but blue compression shorts. He looks like... a Ken doll. And Morgan doesn't mean that as a compliment. He's too slick, too perfect, with the abs and the hair and the face. Effortlessly handsome. And the scar that cuts through his eyebrow only contributes to that.

Morgan has found Noah after games and practices, hovering in front of a mirror, fixing his hair with a look of utmost concentration on his face.

"The flow doesn't fix itself," Noah said when Morgan stopped behind him to stare in disbelief.

Morgan left, only barely keeping himself from rolling his eyes, livid about Noah Andersson's entire existence. He's so glad that Noah isn't on the Eagles, because he'd drive Morgan insane.

Mostly because he always tries to talk to Morgan.

"So how do you like DC?" Noah asks him as they're taking off their gear after their third game.

Morgan looks over at him. Does Noah really want to make small talk while they're getting undressed? "It's okay," Morgan says. It's his third season in DC and it's going well. He does his job. He sets up goals for Marsh. He scores.

“Wow, that’s some real enthusiasm right there,” Noah says and scrubs his fingers through his sweaty hair.

Morgan has no idea what to say in reply, his brain always too slow to retaliate when he’s being chirped, so he just ducks his head and starts to untie his skates.

“Playing with Jordan Marshall must be nice,” Noah goes on.

Morgan actually thought this conversation was over, but okay. “Yeah,” Morgan says. He enjoys playing on Marsh’s line. He hasn’t always been his winger, he was mostly on the second line for the past two seasons and only got moved up to the first line during the preseason last September. If Marsh wasn’t injured right now, he’d be in Sochi, too.

“Like, he’s one of those guys that I’d thank for punching me in the face,” Noah says. “It’d be an honor and a privilege. Not that Marsh goes around punching people. He’s probably too nice for that.”

It’s true, Marsh doesn’t fight unless he has to. Coach doesn’t like to see him get into scraps, because they need Marsh to score goals for them. They have other guys to do the dirty work. Lips pursed, Morgan nods. Maybe, if he doesn’t say anything, Noah will stop talking to him.

“A true Canadian,” Noah mumbles and then gets distracted by his pads.

After that, he’s blessedly quiet, only to start talking to Martin Hernandez over Morgan’s head a minute later. Marty doesn’t seem to mind Noah’s talkative nature in the slightest and starts joking around with him. Morgan gets out of his pads at light-speed, so he can escape to the showers.

There’s no avoiding Noah, though.

He’s always there, offering him food, tugging at his jersey for him when it gets caught on his pads, saying stuff like, “Good job out there,” whooping and laughing and high-fiving everyone within reach, which usually means Morgan, too, because Morgan’s stall is right next to his.

Morgan does try to be a good teammate, so he offers up his hand. The guys on the Eagles do this, too, and Morgan doesn’t complain about it, but it somehow seems more annoying when it’s Noah Andersson who’s dealing out the high-fives.

The worst thing is that he never wears a goddamned shirt.

He has a tattoo on his lower back, but it's so tiny that Morgan can't tell what it is and he keeps catching himself squinting at it, just to figure out what the hell it's supposed to be. Because Morgan would bet that it's something ridiculous. Everything about Noah Andersson is ridiculous.

One time, Noah catches him looking. He frowns. "All good, Morgan?" The frown morphs into a grin. "Mo?"

Most of his DC teammates do call Morgan Mo, but he doesn't like the way it sounds when Noah says it. "Yeah, all good," Morgan says and forces himself to look away.

He can't just sit here and stare at his teammates. Especially not when it's a teammate's lower back. Because it might look like he's staring at Noah's ass, which he's not, it's just that damn tattoo. Not that... Well, Morgan is pretty sure that every single one of them has snuck a glance at one of the other guys at some point, and then realized what he was doing and quickly looked away.

Before he heads to the showers, he catches Noah's eye on accident and for a second he's scared that Noah will be frowning at him because Morgan was staring. Noah's still smiling, though, cheerful as always, holding out his fist to Morgan.

With the greatest reluctance, Morgan bumps it.

#

“Hey, Morgan, where are you headed?” Noah asks. He’s tugging at his pads, peeling off his shirt.

Morgan is sitting down, so he’s staring right at Noah’s abs. He averts his gaze. He doesn’t usually compare himself to other players, because it doesn’t matter if he’s a little skinnier than the other guys as long as he still scores goals and helps out his team. He was pretty scrawny when he got drafted, but he’s managed to put on some weight.

“To my room,” Morgan says. They just lost the semifinal game, so where the hell would he be headed?

“Some of the guys are gonna hang out after,” Noah tells him.

“Okay?”

Noah laughs. “You wanna come?”

“Uh... no.”

Noah cocks his head, eyes on Morgan, like he’s trying to read his mind or something. “You played well out there,” Noah says, his voice low, soft, like he wanted to make sure Morgan knew that this one was just for him.

Morgan didn't even score. He didn't do shit out there. They got shut out in the end, so they'll be playing for the bronze medal, which does little to lighten his mood.

He leaves, headed back to the building they're all staying in. He's honestly looking forward to getting on the plane that'll take them back home. Of course it's an honor to be here, but he's ready to sleep in his own bed again.

And he misses his dog.

As he waits for the elevator, someone steps up to him, and it takes Morgan a moment to realize that it's Noah.

"Hey," Noah says.

The elevator doors slide open and Morgan steps inside, Noah at his heels.

As soon as the doors are closed again, Noah says, "You okay?"

"Yeah?" Morgan replies.

"It just seemed like you were upset and I wanted to make sure you're fine," Noah says. "Like, I don't want you to... feel bad because we lost."

"How else am I supposed to feel?"

For some reason, Noah laughs. “Okay, maybe you have a point there. Are you sure you don’t wanna come hang out with us?”

Morgan sighs.

“Because we’re—”

“No, thanks,” Morgan says, maybe with a little too much force.

Noah is frowning now. “Hey, I’m sorry.”

Morgan shakes his head, mostly at himself. They still have one more game to play, this is not the time to be a douchebag. “I don’t want to go out,” he says, calmer. “Sorry.” Going out with the team is never fun, because Morgan doesn’t drink and the guys just love to chirp him for it. He’d rather spend the rest of the day in his room and not deal with any of that.

The doors slide open on Morgan’s floor and Noah follows him, hovering in the door. “You want company?”

“What?”

“Well, sure, you don’t wanna go out with the guys, but that doesn’t mean you want to be alone,” Noah says. He smiles

and steps into the empty hallway, the elevator doors sliding shut, like he's already decided that they're going to hang out.

Morgan should say no, *of course* he should say no, because Noah Andersson drives him nuts, but the way Noah is looking at him right now makes him hesitate. His eyes are this weird greenish blue and Morgan can't stop staring at him.

Slowly, Noah's smile grows a little wider. "You know," he says. "I, uh... I couldn't help but notice that you were—"

Morgan glances over his shoulder to make sure no one's around, then he steps closer to Noah, cutting him off. "I wasn't doing anything."

"No," Noah says softly, "you were just looking."

"I wasn't."

"Okay."

"I... wasn't."

Morgan swallows hard. He was. He was definitely looking.

He needs to walk away from this.

Because Noah... He's asking him if he wants to hang out, but that's not what he means. What he *means* is...

Morgan takes a deep breath. He's asking if Morgan wants to—
He doesn't even know what, but he understands the
implication of Noah's offer.

Morgan needs to say no, can't give himself time to
consider it.

He's been wondering what it might feel like to kiss a
guy, late at night when he couldn't sleep. He knows he
shouldn't have, it's not like he's into guys or anything.

One of their neighbors' kids once got caught kissing a
guy and that night over dinner Morgan's dad told them in no
uncertain terms— Morgan doesn't really remember. He was ten.
Maybe eleven. He does remember the gist of it, though. He
wouldn't have been welcome at home anymore if he'd ever
done anything like that, so he tried to not even be curious.
Girls were interested in him, not that he ever brought them
home. Family dinners in the Boyle household were awkward
at best and unbearable at worst.

But now Noah has made him an offer. He's made him
an offer and Morgan could say yes.

“Maybe I misread the situation,” Noah says, still suave.
“I'll leave you to it, then. Have—”

“No,” Morgan says.

“No?”

“You didn’t...” Morgan takes a deep breath. He just wants to know what it feels like. It doesn’t have to mean anything. It won’t make him gay. After this, he’ll know what it’s like and then he can go back to his life and he won’t have to wonder anymore. “My room’s down the hall.”

Noah’s lips twitch. “Okay then. Lead the way.”

Morgan does lead the way, Noah right behind him. And they could just be two guys hanging out. They’re teammates and that’s something that teammates generally do when they’re friends, so no one would even think it strange if they saw them right now. He still tries to get into his room as quickly as possible and ushers Noah inside, impatient.

There’s crap all over the place – food and clothes and chargers and his laptop and more food. It’s a huge mess.

“I love how you, uh, decorated the place,” Noah says as he ventures further into the room.

Morgan snatches a pair of briefs off a chair and hurls them into his open suitcase. Noah probably saw those. He smirks as he leans against the wall, waiting for Morgan to

come closer. Morgan is still hovering by the door, because now that they're here, he's not really sure what to do next.

It's not like he's *ever* done this before.

"Just so we're clear," Noah says, still looking absolutely effortless in every way, "whatever happens here..." He points at Morgan and then at himself. "It all stays here, yeah?"

Morgan nods.

"We're not gonna cuddle and we're not gonna gaze lovingly at each other," Noah goes on. "No strings, no nothing."

Again, Morgan nods.

"Glad we're on the same page," Noah says.

Another nod.

"You wanna come over here?"

"I..." Morgan takes a step closer. He should probably tell Noah that he's never done this before, just so they're *really* on the same page.

Then again, he's twenty-four years old and a virgin and he'd rather not admit that. To anyone. Ever.

He doesn't even know how it happened. He's had girlfriends. They wanted to sleep with him, he's pretty sure. Admittedly, in the beginning he constantly chickened out, felt like he wasn't really ready and the older he got, the more embarrassed he got, too. So he just... didn't do it. With anyone.

"If you don't want to—" Noah starts.

"No," Morgan says. "I do."

Noah tilts his head. "Don't feel like you can't change your mind. I won't hold it against you or anything. We're all good. Everything's peachy over here."

"Do you ever stop talking?" Morgan asks.

"Rarely," Noah replies, still with that easy confidence. "But... there are ways to make me stop."

Morgan takes another step closer and now he's close enough to reach out. He's about to chicken out again. Noah gave him an out and he could take it and kick him out of his room and forget this ever happened.

He knows how to kiss, though, he's done that before. So he leans in and Noah meets him halfway, like he does this all the time.

Morgan was expecting it to be weird, but it isn't. Not at all. Better than he thought it would be. Noah is really gentle about it, too, hands coming up to frame Morgan's face, lips soft, letting Morgan take the lead. Morgan doesn't really know where to go from here, so he just lets his hands settle against Noah's sides and keeps kissing him, coaxing Noah's mouth open.

This is probably the best kiss of Morgan's life. Noah must have kissed a thousand people in his life and that's why he's so good at it. He probably knows it, too. Just goes through life blowing people's minds.

Morgan can't believe this is happening. Here, of all places. God, they're not going to get arrested for this, right?

Nobody even knows they're here.

"Hey," Noah says between kisses and then guides Morgan over to his bed, pushing him down. He straddles Morgan's hips and leans closer, eyes searching Morgan's face. "All good?"

Morgan nods.

He knows he should put an end to this now, say he's sorry and that he changed his mind, because now he knows

what it feels like, and he shouldn't be curious anymore. It feels good. There. He's not really into guys, so it's probably not fair to Noah to keep this going. He doesn't want him to get the wrong idea.

He curls his fingers around the back of Noah's neck, lets them dip into his hair, and then Noah's lips are back on his, their kisses deeper now. Morgan gasps when Noah pulls away, only to put his lips on his jaw, moving down to his throat.

"Noah," Morgan says. He's hard and he's pretty sure that Noah is, too, but he can't do this. He can't take it that far.

Noah presses another kiss to his jaw. "Hm?"

"I..."

Noah's hand is on the hem of his shirt, pushing it up, fingertips touching Morgan's skin and Morgan fucking freezes.

"Oh, hey," Noah says and his hand disappears. "Sorry. I know this is... a weird place for this."

"I don't..." Morgan takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry, I don't think I..." Why can't he just say that he doesn't want Noah's hands in his pants? This is about as far as he's willing

to go and he should have said that earlier, because now it seems like he was leading Noah on.

“You wanna stop?” Noah asks. He looks worried. “It’s okay.”

“No, I...” Did he say *no* ? He doesn’t even know where that came from.

“You wanna just kiss?” Noah asks. Why does it sound so easy when he says that? Like it’s a totally valid option?

Maybe it is.

“Yeah?” Morgan asks.

“Yeah, why don’t we...” Noah rolls off him and leans back, holding out his hand for Morgan, who takes it and carefully climbs into his lap and goes back to kissing him.

Noah’s hands are at his sides now, not moving at all, touches light. They don’t sneak under Morgan’s shirt again. When he’s too tired to hold himself up, Morgan lies down beside Noah, still kissing and Morgan grows lazy with it, breath rushing out of him when Noah sucks on his bottom lip. He kisses him gently after, just a brush of lips and then there’s nothing, but Noah is definitely still there. Morgan isn’t sure if

he wants to open his eyes to look at him. He *feels* him, still next to him, warm, the sound of his breathing unmistakable.

Fingers slip into his hair, brushing it out of his face.

“This okay?” Noah asks.

Morgan only hums in reply. He shouldn't be enjoying this. He sort of wants to kick Noah out and get a hand down his own pants, because he's still hard and it's not exactly comfortable, but he doesn't want to talk right now, so he ignores it and dozes off a little, with Noah's fingers still in his hair.

“I thought we weren't gonna cuddle?” Morgan mumbles after a while.

“We're not,” Noah says. “Come on, this isn't real cuddling. You just have really soft hair and I'm taking advantage.”

“I wouldn't know.”

“Please, you gotta know that your hair is super soft. I'm kinda jealous, not gonna lie.”

“No, I was talking about the cuddling,” Morgan mumbles.

“What, you've never—”

“Whatever,” Morgan says, because they’re sort of slipping into those embarrassing territories that Morgan was trying so hard to avoid.

“Want me to kiss you more?” Noah asks.

“Okay,” Morgan says.

Noah laughs but then he does kiss him some more and it’s even better than it was before.

#

The next day, they pretend it never happened, which suits Morgan just fine. Noah doesn’t act any differently, is still as obnoxious as he was the day before, but Morgan finds himself trying to avoid eye contact even more than usual.

They lose the bronze medal game and go home empty-handed.

Before they part ways, Noah walks up to him and, without saying a word, sticks his hand into the pocket of Morgan’s hoodie.

“What the fuck was that?” Morgan asks.

“My phone number,” Noah says with a wink.

“What?”

Noah shrugs and walks away.

Morgan reaches into his pocket and pulls out a scrap of paper that indeed has a phone number scribbled on it. He doesn't want it. What the hell would he need Noah Andersson's phone number for? He sure as fuck won't want to *talk* to him.

He's had more than enough of that.

Chapter Two

Morgan doesn't know why he didn't throw away Noah's phone number as soon as he got home.

It's sitting on his dresser, just a tiny scrap of paper and it constantly gets blown off when he opens the door and every time it happens, he thinks about throwing it away but he never does. When Bear eventually finds it on the floor and tries to

eat it, Morgan stuffs it into his crap drawer, which is for anything that doesn't have a place elsewhere.

It stays there.

Morgan goes to the rink, gets his assists, scores his goals, goes to Marsh's birthday party, because he can't get away with *not* going, and life goes on. He brings Bear to the rink, because he overheard Austin saying that he's bringing his kids and they love Bear, and Bear loves everyone. Austin keeps saying that the kids want a dog, but his wife is allergic. They both hug him when he tells them that he brought Bear for them to hang out with. Austin pats him on the back after and invites him over for dinner.

Morgan declines.

He says he has plans.

He obviously doesn't have plans, other than cuddling Bear on his couch, but having dinner at Austin's would be awkward. Austin wears an A, so he's always been nice to Morgan, but it's not like they're the best of friends. And Morgan doesn't know how to talk to people and he knows how to talk to children even less. Austin's kids are okay when they're throwing balls for Bear and cooing at him, but without the dog, Morgan doesn't have a buffer.

He would probably say that he's – tentatively – friends with Logan, but Logan's on the farm team right now and has been for most of the season. He's not coming back any time soon.

Other than that, Morgan's not really close with any of his teammates. When Morgan first joined the team, some of the guys pranked him, for weeks, and it wore on him, and maybe he wasn't the most fun person to be around. It was right around when his parents were getting divorced and he was already barely keeping it together. He knows he should have just sucked it up, because now he has a reputation. The fun police, they call him.

He'll never be able to shake it off.

Bear is still excited when they head home thanks to his playdate with two tiny people. Morgan has a small house in Arlington that he only bought so Bear would have enough room, even when Morgan is on the road. Morgan has a dog sitter, but his neighbors also have a Golden Retriever and when he's gone for a while, they'll pick up Bear so the two of them can play together. Morgan gives them free game tickets every now and then to say thank you.

He misses Bear on the road, more than anything. He asked his dog sitter to send him pictures, embarrassed, but she didn't seem to think it was an odd request. Apparently all dog owners are big babies about their dogs.

Morgan does spend the evening with Bear and they turn on a hockey game. It's the Mariners against the Scorpions. And he definitely knew that Noah Andersson is on the Mariners, but it somehow still surprises him when Noah is on his TV, shouting at one of the Scorpions for getting a little too close to the Mariners' goalie.

He gets shoved by another Scorpion, Markström, and Noah loses his bucket when he shoves back. Noah is yelling, the microphones picking up bits and pieces, blond hair everywhere, cheeks blotchy pink. Blood is trickling down his cheek.

Morgan switches to a different game.

He's been dreaming about Noah. About what they did. About Noah's lips, Noah's hands. Only, when he dreams about him at night, Noah's hands are on his skin and when Morgan wakes up it's almost like he can still feel it, even though Noah's never touched him like that.

He hates it.

He needs it to stop, but he doesn't know how. He's been trying to think about everything but Noah before he went to sleep, but it didn't do shit. He keeps dreaming about him. Night after night.

In the middle of March, the Eagles are about to go on a roadie, playing against divisional rivals – the Foxes, the Ravens, then the Mariners. They're practicing in the Mariners' arena in Brooklyn the day before the game, but they have the rest of the day off, and in the week leading up to the roadie, Morgan finds himself opening the crap drawer, looking down at the scrap of paper with Noah's phone number on it.

It's still there.

And it's still there the day after. And the day after that.

Morgan doesn't know what the fuck he's thinking when he stuffs the scrap of paper into his wallet before they head out for the roadie. He says goodbye to Bear for about fifteen minutes, tells him that he'll be back soon, like Bear will understand that he's won't be gone forever. He hates leaving him here, hates that Bear will be waiting for him to come back.

They win against the Foxes in Philadelphia; they lose against the Ravens. The guys go out after the game in New

York, the locker room in good spirits despite the loss.

“Hey, Marsh, are you coming?” Austin asks.

“Nah, it’s Jen’s birthday,” Marsh says, so there’s no further explanation needed there. Marsh and Jen are the most in-love couple Morgan has ever met in his life. Marsh calls Jen every day when they’re on the road, even if it’s just to tell her that he loves her, and he brings her gifts and she makes him playlists for the road.

“Mo, what about you?”

“No, I’ll just...” Morgan shrugs. Go to his room, watch a movie.

When he heads for the showers he hears Bernard say, “Why’d you invite the fun police, Austie?”

“Oh, shut it.”

“What? He’s—”

Morgan walks faster so he doesn’t have to find out what exactly he is. He knows what the guys think anyway. He’s boring, doesn’t know how to have fun, can’t take a joke.

If Morgan wasn’t as good as he is, the Eagles probably would have traded him a while ago for being a problem in the locker room. He worries about that. It keeps him up at night

sometimes. He tries to be social as much as he can, but he'll never be comfortable drinking and he can't really change his entire personality to fit in. He wishes Logan would come back, because Logan is quiet, reads on the plane, doesn't force a conversation on anyone, and Logan has never tried to talk him into having a beer.

When he's curled up in bed in his hotel room that night, Morgan fishes the piece of paper with Noah's phone number out of his wallet. He's not going to call. The Mariners played in Raleigh tonight, so they're probably about to fly home.

He sends a text – *What are you doing tomorrow?*

He then stares at it for about five minutes, wishing he could somehow take that back, because what are they going to do? Hang out? Watch a movie? Catch up over dinner like old friends?

Morgan knows what he wants. Noah's lips back on his. And... Noah's hands.

Texting him was a terrible idea. He could probably take it back. Somehow. Maybe he could say it was a momentary lapse of judgement. Didn't mean to say that. Was

for someone else. What he does say instead is, *It ' s Morgan, by the way .*

Noah doesn't reply.

Morgan goes to sleep and tries not to let the thoughts pile up. If Noah doesn't want to meet him, that's fine. It's the best thing that could happen to Morgan, because he wasn't thinking straight when he texted Noah anyway.

He falls asleep eventually, his phone still next to him on the bed.

As it turns out, Noah did reply, in the middle of the night, said, *I have the day off, come by whenever you want ,* followed by an address.

#

Morgan goes to practice and he tries not to get distracted. He's at work and whatever's going to happen later can't be on his mind right now. He manages. Coach gives him *the nod* , so he has nothing to worry about.

They practice the shootout at the end and Morgan scores on Simon. He lets Marsh sweep him into a hug afterwards and a bunch of the guys pat his bucket when he heads off the ice. Sometimes he sticks around after practice

with some of the guys and Manny, their backup goalie, usually stays as well.

Not today.

Today he goes right back to the locker room and as soon as he's off the ice, there's only Noah on his mind. It's like he flicked some sort of switch.

He checks his phone as soon as he can, but there are no more texts from Noah. Which means that Noah hasn't changed his mind. Morgan goes back to the hotel with the guys and changes his clothes, because he doesn't want to show up at Noah's looking like a total slob.

Then he sits on his bed. For a while.

It's the middle of the afternoon, which is probably a weird time to show up at Noah's place, even though Noah told him to come by whenever he wants. Morgan could cancel. He *should* cancel. He doesn't even like Noah, but he likes kissing Noah and when he's kissing him, he doesn't talk. He's pretty bearable when he's not talking. This might be Morgan's last chance. Noah doesn't seem like the sort of guy who sticks with one person for a prolonged amount of time.

Morgan picks up his phone and stares at the address Noah gave him. He starts typing – *Heading over now if that 's okay* .

Noah replies less than a minute later. *cool* .

Before he can talk himself out of it and back into it another ten times, Morgan grabs his jacket, his wallet, his phone, and heads downstairs to hail a cab. He fiddles with his phone on his way there, wondering what's going to happen, how quickly he can get his mouth on Noah's. Does he need to make small talk? Does he have to say something about the weather? About traffic? Or can he just go for it?

He probably won't get away with just kissing him this time. He doesn't even know if he wants to, his dreams creeping into his thoughts, reminding him how much he wants Noah's hands on him whenever he wakes up. The thought has something burning in the pit of his stomach, but it gets pushed aside by nausea, by the memory of his father at the dinner table, ranting about *that prissy across the street* , and maybe Morgan can't do this after all.

Maybe Noah will let him just kiss him. Kissing doesn't seem too bad. It's not—

His cab pulls over.

So he has to pay, and get out, and ring Noah's doorbell, and get onto an elevator when Noah buzzes him in. With every step he takes, he wonders if he can still turn back and go to the team hotel and pretend that none of this ever happened. But then he's on Noah's floor and when he gets off the elevator, he can see Noah leaning in a doorway down the hall.

Morgan waves.

Noah waves back.

Yeah, it's definitely too late to leave now.

"I honestly thought you threw away my number, like, five seconds after I gave it to you," Noah says and lets Morgan into his apartment.

It's remarkably neat, the shoes by the door all in order, the jackets hung up, keys in a bowl, the floor clean.

Morgan takes off his shoes and says, "Well, I didn't."

"I'm glad you didn't," Noah says, his smile bright and, shit, why does he have to be like that? He probably thinks he's really fucking charming.

Morgan shrugs and Noah holds out his hand for his jacket.

"You want anything? Water? Beer? A snack?"

“I don’t drink,” Morgan says, just because he wants to see Noah’s reaction, wants to see if it rattles him. He seems like the kind of hockey bro who’d take it personally, like some of Morgan’s teammates do. Maybe he’ll be an ass about it and give Morgan a reason to leave.

“Oh. So, water?” Noah asks. “I also have... You know what, I’ll just show you what I have and you can take whatever you want.”

Morgan frowns at him, because Noah didn’t even blink, didn’t ask why, wasn’t weird about it at all, the same way Logan just accepted it, no questions asked. “I’m good,” Morgan says eventually. He can’t take his eyes off Noah. He somehow looks different here, in his own apartment, wearing sweatpants and a shirt that’s a little too big on him, his hair floppy, his socks two different colors. He’s less polished, less perfect. Less like a Ken doll and more like he belongs on a beach somewhere, in the sunshine, maybe with a surfboard.

Noah smirks at him. “So,” he says, “what can I do for you?”

“Uh...” Morgan says, because he doesn’t know if he can answer that question with, *Put your lips on me right now* .

And... that's just not something he'd say. A few months ago, that wasn't something he even allowed himself to think.

“We can watch a movie,” Noah says and steps closer, “or we can play a board game,” another step, “or we can pick up where we left off. It's up to you.”

“Okay,” Morgan says.

“Okay to what exactly?”

Morgan kisses him.

Okay to *that* .

#

Noah is still infuriatingly good at this, lips soft, gentle against Morgan's. He keeps it slow and it's driving Morgan insane. He wants more, but he can't have more, this is it, because everything else... No. He's not... No. None of that.

Teeth grazing against Morgan's bottom lip, Noah pulls away. “You wanna take this somewhere else? I have a couch. And a bed.”

“Uh...” Morgan looks down the hall, where he assumes Noah's bedroom is.

“Or we can just stand here for a few hours and make out, that’s fine with me, too,” Noah says and leans closer again to press a kiss to Morgan’s jaw, lips brushing against his skin when he goes on, “Might be more comfortable somewhere else, though?”

Yes, this would definitely be more comfortable somewhere else, but—

“Morgan,” Noah says. “Talk to me. I can’t read minds. I’d love to learn how to, but they don’t teach you magic tricks in the NHL. Whatcha thinkin’?”

“I...” Morgan takes a deep breath. When they made out in his hotel room, they were on his bed, too, and things didn’t go too far. “Yeah, let’s go...” He nods down the hall.

Noah nods along with him, takes him by the hand, and tugs him all the way down the hall and into his bedroom. It’s pristine. There are no clothes, not on the bed, not on the floor, not on the armchair over by the window.

Morgan thinks of his bedroom in Arlington that looks like his closet exploded all over the room.

Maybe Noah cleaned up because he was coming over.

“All good?” Noah asks.

Morgan really wants to ask him why he keeps asking him that but, then again, he's just standing here, staring at Noah's bed like it's on fire or something. "Your place looks really nice," he says.

"Thank you," Noah replies. "I could give you a tour."

Morgan doesn't want a tour. He wants to kiss Noah again, so he does exactly that.

"Okay," Noah says between kisses. "Got it. No tour." He guides Morgan over to his bed, pushes him down, and Morgan lets himself be pushed, a thrill running through him when he thinks about Noah pushing him down harder, kissing him harder, but Noah seems to be okay with the gentle kisses they started out with, a slow slide of tongues, unhurried, and Morgan can't decide if he wants to keep going like this for several hours or if he wants to take it further, because Noah probably wouldn't mind.

Then Noah's hand is on his chest, slowly making its way down and it distracts Morgan enough that he stops kissing Noah back. Which Noah notices. Obviously.

"Sorry," Noah says. "Not okay?"

"I..."

“You gotta tell me the rules, okay?” Noah says. He doesn’t sound upset. He sounds... something. Morgan can’t place it. Confused? Curious?

“The rules?”

“What’s okay and what isn’t,” Noah says.

Morgan doesn’t really have an answer to that, except that what they’ve been doing is okay and everything that goes beyond that freaks him out so much that he can’t even think about it. When he does, he can practically hear his dad yelling. “I don’t know,” Morgan says.

Noah stares at him for a moment, then he sits back and gets off Morgan.

“Wait,” Morgan says. “This was fine.”

“Okay, good,” Noah says, nodding.

“I know I’m not exactly an expert at this, but you don’t have to be condescending about it,” Morgan snaps.

“I didn’t mean to be,” Noah says, and it’s the first time Morgan sees him look serious. “I’m just trying to understand what... you want. I guess.”

“I’m sorry,” Morgan says and gets up, gets off the bed. “I think... I should go. Because you... I don’t want to—”

“If you don’t want to have sex, that’s fine,” Noah says. And he just says that, without being weird about it, without getting all red in the face. “You just need to tell me.”

“It’s fine? Seriously?” Morgan asks. “Isn’t that what you want?”

Noah shakes his head. “I’m so confused right now.”

“I’m gonna go,” Morgan mumbles.

“No, come on, don’t just run off.” Noah pats the mattress. “Have a seat. Tell me what you want. I’m extraordinarily compliant, you’ll see.”

Morgan sits down, fighting the part of him that wants to take off, just to avoid this conversation entirely. “Kissing was fine,” Morgan says. He can’t look at Noah right now. His face is hot as fire.

“Kissing.”

“Yes.” Morgan bites his bottom lip. “And I’m assuming you want more than that.”

“I mean, sure, yeah, I’m on board with more than that, but if you’re not, we can stick with whatever you wanna do and leave the rest for some other time. Or not. It’s up to you, honestly.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why waste your time on this when I don’t even want to sleep with you?”

Noah lets out a breath and flops back against his pillows. “I wouldn’t say that making out with you is a waste of time.” He runs his fingers through his hair. “Listen, I get it. I don’t wanna make assumptions, but maybe you’re not there yet and, like, I’m the last person to judge you or whatever. It’s cool. It took me a while to get another guy’s hand on my dick.”

Morgan clears his throat. He didn’t need to know that. His heart flutters in his chest, the thought of it, Noah’s hand on his— No.

“Take a deep breath, Morgan,” Noah says. “Mo.” He stretches, his shirt riding up, revealing a sliver of pale skin. “Is that the only nickname you have?”

“Pretty much.”

“There has to be something you can do with Boyle. Boyler.” Noah laughs, his eyes going all crinkly. “Boooy... Boo. That’s cute. Like a ghost.”

Morgan rolls his eyes.

“Come here, Boo?” Noah says.

Morgan goes, reluctantly, lies down next to him, and Noah curls against him, hooks his leg around Morgan’s and leans in, nose brushing against his cheek before he gives Morgan’s chin a tap so he’ll turn his head, and kisses him.

Noah doesn’t try to touch him again, except Morgan sort of wishes he would. His arm ends up wrapped around Noah, fingers splayed on his back. He wants to go lower, but it’s probably not fair if he gets to touch and Noah doesn’t. They’re playing by *his* rules, though. What if he changes them?

Eventually, Morgan pulls away, because there’s nothing gentle about their kisses anymore and he *wants* ... “What time’s it?” he asks, because he should say something, he can’t stare at Noah in absolute silence while he tells his heart to take it down a notch.

“Uh, no idea.”

Morgan pulls his phone out of his pocket and checks the time. Later than he expected, late enough that he’s starting to get hungry. He should head back to the hotel.

“Is that your dog?” Noah asks.

“Oh, yeah.”

“Show me again.”

Morgan lights up his screen again. It’s a picture from last fall, of Bear in a pile of leaves. It’s one of the best ones he’s ever taken.

“What’s his name?”

“It’s Bear.”

“He looks like the best boy ever,” Noah says.

“He’s, uh, very... soft.”

Noah laughs. “He looks so cuddly.”

Morgan hums in agreement, then he gives Noah a poke. “Speaking of that... I thought we wouldn’t.”

“What?”

“Cuddle?”

“We’re not,” Noah says. “You’re lying on my arm. That’s not...” He shakes his head. “So... dinner?”

“Oh, yeah, I should head back,” Morgan says and sits up, freeing Noah’s arm.

“Or you could have dinner with me.”

“No, I think I’ll... go.”

Noah tilts his head. “I honestly can’t figure you out.”

“Too bad,” Morgan says and gets out of Noah’s bed.

Noah slides off his bed, too, probably to take him to the door. “Don’t lose my number.”

“Why?”

“So you can call me.”

“Why would I call you?”

“I don’t know,” Noah says, shrugs lightly. “Maybe one day, when you’re back in the area, you’ll feel like hanging out again...”

Morgan doesn’t reply to that, because he’s pretty sure he’ll never come back here. He *can’t* come back here. This can’t turn into a regular thing.

Noah follows him to the door, holds his jacket up for him, moves to get the door for him, but then stops, leans in and kisses Morgan. He lingers for a long moment, thumb brushing over Morgan’s cheek and then lets go of him.

For some reason, Morgan has a hard time walking out the door after that.

Chapter Three

Ben picks the absolute worst time to call.

It's the night before the Eagles' first playoff game and Morgan is curled up on his couch, Bear snoozing next to his feet, keeping them warm. There's a movie on TV that he's barely even paying attention to and empty plates on the table. He should at least put those in the dishwasher before his cleaner comes by.

He knows he's terrible at cleaning up after himself. Knowing that doesn't really make him better at doing it, though. He only puts away the stuff that Bear isn't supposed to get his paws on. Bear is terrible at putting away his dog toys, too. Morgan is so glad he has a cleaner, because that way he gets embarrassed about all the crap that's lying around and puts some of it away because he doesn't want her to see that he lives like this.

He's halfway through his movie when his phone starts buzzing.

People don't usually call him. He never answers anyway. Waits until it goes to voicemail and then listens to their messages. If he has to, he'll give them a call back. He only actually answers the phone when it's his agent or the team, sometimes when it's Marsh, but by now Marsh has figured out that he'll get a hold of Morgan faster if he just sends a text.

Ben should know that, too. He does. Ben texts. He doesn't call.

Except right now he's calling, so it's either urgent or it's an actual emergency.

Morgan needs to answer the phone, he knows he has to, but he still watches it ring for a few seconds too long before he finally grabs it and picks up.

“Ben?” he says.

“Hey, buddy,” Ben says. It’s all neutral, nothing in his voice to indicate that something’s wrong. Ben’s always been good at that, though. Never let anyone see if there was something bugging him, because whatever he was dealing with probably wasn’t worse than what other people were dealing with.

“What’s up?” Morgan asks. He wants to get this over with, whatever it is about. Ben wouldn’t have called if he didn’t want to have a conversation.

“Danny called me earlier.”

“Okay?”

“He said...” Ben sighs. “I don’t want to get in the middle of this.”

Morgan rolls his eyes. He’s always in the middle of everything. He’s six years older than Morgan and he’s the only one of his brothers that he still talks to on the regular. Danny, ten years older, won’t speak to him. Dave, four years older,

won't speak to him either, but for different reasons. Morgan doesn't hold it against either of them. Ben has always tried to keep them all together somehow, because they're brothers, and aren't brothers supposed to stick together?

He always had this strange hope that things were going to turn out okay.

They didn't, of course, because that's just not how life goes.

"Just tell me," Morgan says.

"He called me earlier to ask me if I could help him out," Ben says, slowly, like he's choosing his words wisely.

"He wanted money?"

"Well, he said that Mom's fridge is old and that she needs a new one and she doesn't have the money to get a new one and neither does he—"

"Ben."

"—and he said that he asked you for the money and you wouldn't help them and, like, I get it, and I can pay for the stupid fridge, but, honestly, you're—"

"Ben," Morgan says again, because he doesn't need Ben to tell him that he's a millionaire and can afford to buy

everyone he's ever met a fridge. Ben's been playing in the AHL since he got drafted. He wears an A for his team. He's staying right where he is, and Morgan is pretty sure that Ben is happy where he is, but he also knows that their salaries are on completely different levels. If someone is buying a fridge for their mother, it should be Morgan, but this is not about a fridge, not really.

“I know you're...” Ben trails off and Morgan can basically see him pinch the bridge of his nose. “Morgan. I know you don't want to go home. I know you don't want to talk to her. I understand, but why won't you buy her the damn fridge? She's our mom, for fuck's sake.”

Morgan takes a deep breath. None of this is Ben's fault. Ben was the one who used to grab him by the hand and told him to hide in the closet when he was little and their dad was in a particular mood. He let him sleep in his bed when their parents were screaming at each other in the kitchen, tugged him out the door and took him to the park so he wouldn't see. When Ben left home, Morgan still saw his fair share, still got caught in the crossfire, no matter how hard Ben tried to protect him all those years, but Morgan didn't stick

around for too long after that either. His grandpa found a way for him to play hockey in Canada, so he left, too.

He spent his summers in Buffalo with his grandpa's brother and he didn't look back.

"Can we talk about this some other time?" Morgan says.

"I know you have playoffs starting soon—"

"Tomorrow."

"—but just explain this to me. She didn't... She never wanted any of us to get hurt."

"She should have left."

"Morgan."

Morgan knows it's not that easy. It's never that easy. But she should have left. They would have been fine if she'd just left. "Listen," Morgan says, "Danny called me about the fridge. I said I'd pay for it."

"That's not what he told me."

"I wasn't finished. I said I'd pay for it, I asked him to tell me what she wants and I'll have it delivered to her fucking doorstep, but guess what?"

“He wanted a check?” Ben guesses, resigned.

“Yep.”

“I see.”

“Do you understand now?”

“Yeah.”

“If I send Mom a check, you know where that money is going?” Morgan says, not waiting for a reply. “Booze. If I send Dan a check, you know where that money is going? Fuck, I don’t even know.”

“He bets on... all sorts of things.”

“Of course he does,” Morgan says.

“I’m sorry, Morgan. I shouldn’t have assumed... I don’t know. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

Ben is quiet for a moment, then he says, “I’ll tell him that you, uh...”

“Tell him my previous offer still stands,” Morgan tells him.

“They’ll just sell the fridge.”

Morgan groans.

“I’m sorry,” Ben says again.

“Not your fault.”

“Not your fault either,” Ben mutters. There’s a beat, then he adds, “Hey, you wanna come see me in the summer? Meet my fiancée?”

Morgan’s first impulse is to say no, but he hasn’t seen Ben in two years and he misses him sometimes. Morgan always loved his big brothers, looked up to them. They did stick together for quite some time. Danny never left home, was always around and when Morgan was little, he’d bring him comic books and candy, and one time he gave him a used Gameboy that survived for a grand total of two weeks until their dad got angry about something that Morgan can’t remember and the Gameboy ended up getting hurled on the kitchen floor.

“Yeah,” Morgan says. “Okay.”

“Good, I’m glad. Good luck with the playoffs, yeah? I’m sorry I called tonight. And I’m sorry I—”

“Please stop saying sorry,” Morgan says.

Ben does stop saying sorry. “Give me a call when you have time and we’ll make plans, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Morgan says.

They say goodbye and he hangs up the phone and his skin is buzzing and his thoughts are a whirlwind and he doesn't know what to do with any of it.

He gives Bear a nudge. “Come on, let's go for a run.”

#

When they walk back in through the door, Bear is happy, but Morgan's skin still feels like it's a size too small and he's restless, already sees himself tossing and turning as soon as he gets into bed.

He's angry and he wishes he wasn't, can't even figure out why exactly he feels like this. Was it Ben calling tonight, of all nights? Was it Danny lying to both of them? Or maybe their entire fucked up family?

Morgan tries to push away the memories that have been nagging at him ever since Ben called, drinks some water, takes a quick shower, puts on pajamas. His head's a mess. As soon as his mind finds a chance to drift, it does, taking him with it, into the bedroom he shared with Dave, into the kitchen where they ate breakfast together, Ben handing out pop tarts, because their mom was already at work and their dad couldn't

be bothered to make sure they had anything to eat, still asleep on the couch.

They liked it better that way, because if he was asleep, he wasn't yelling or breaking their shit.

Sometimes Ben made eggs for them, sometimes even bacon. Always in the middle of it, giving Morgan the biggest serving, because he was the smallest one, glaring at Dave and Danny like he was daring them to complain. They never did.

Morgan squeezes his eyes shut. It's probably too early to go to bed, but he needs a good night's sleep so he can play his best hockey tomorrow. He needs to show up for his teammates, can't afford to squint at his alarm clock all night because his shitty childhood has picked tonight to play catch-up.

It happens every time he thinks he's over it. It never ends.

He picks up his phone, considers calling Marsh, just to hear someone say something nice, but if he calls Marsh, he'll know that something's wrong and he'll be worried and he'll ask questions. Morgan could say that he's nervous about tomorrow, that he just needs a pep talk, but Marsh might figure out that he's lying. Morgan doesn't get so nervous that he

needs to call his captain the night before a big game. That's not the kind of player he is and Marsh knows that, too.

Morgan has no one else to call.

There are just his teammates, some guys on other teams that he ended up exchanging numbers with after that training camp he did in Toronto, people he played with in juniors, and Danny and Ben. He doesn't even have Dave's phone number, just his email address. He stops scrolling through his contacts when he comes across Noah's number.

He can't call Noah right now, though.

Noah has a game tomorrow night, too. Noah would probably talk his ear off, though, would spew a whole lot of bullshit and that's exactly what Morgan needs right now. Anything, as long as it's not even remotely serious, as long as it distracts him.

He pulls up their text conversation, the last text from Noah, a picture of him lying on the ice after practice that one of his teammates must have snapped. Morgan takes a deep breath and writes, *If you have time, could you give me a call?*

Morgan doesn't expect his phone to ring five minutes later.

It's Noah, sounding worried when he says, "Hey, what's up?"

"Nothing," Morgan says.

"Okay? So you didn't text me and ask me to call you? Who was that, the ghost that lives in your house? Your dog? Can he type? He must be real talented."

"He is," Morgan says gruffly.

"So did he want to talk to me? Put him on the phone, I'll tell him that he's a good boy."

"You don't even know him."

"So?"

"So how do you know he's a good boy?"

"All dogs are good boys," Noah says, with conviction.

"Not all dogs are boys."

"Technicalities," Noah says. "So, what's up?"

Morgan can hardly say *nothing* again, so he needs to come up with something plausible, something that's not the truth and something that's not a lie either. He doesn't like lying to people, it doesn't sit well with him. "I..."

"Yes?"

Morgan has no idea what to say. Absolutely no idea.

“Did you miss me?” Noah asks, and Morgan can hear the smile in his voice.

“No.”

“You hurt me,” Noah says, but he doesn’t sound hurt. He sounds like he’s having a great time. “You don’t even miss me a little bit?”

“Why, do you miss me?” Morgan asks. He doesn’t know why. He just can’t deal with that question right now, because if he digs deep enough he might come up with an answer he doesn’t like.

He liked kissing Noah.

He’d do it again.

He can’t do it again, of course, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t think about it. Occasionally. Not all the time, but... those thoughts are prone to sneak up on him at certain times. Fuck, he thinks about Noah way too often.

“I mean,” Noah says, “we certainly had a good time.”

“Did we?”

“Are you saying you didn’t have a good time?” Noah almost sounds offended. “Am I a bad kisser?”

He’s not.

“Am I?”

“No.”

“Wow, okay, thank fuck.” Noah laughs. “That would be—”

“The end of the world?” Morgan guesses.

“Oh, absolutely. Especially since I thought you did enjoy yourself. I don’t like being wrong about that kind of stuff, you know? I don’t want any complaints... or bad reviews.”

“Bad reviews?”

“That was a joke, Morgan.”

“Right,” Morgan mumbles.

“So, is that why you called? Think we’ll see each other at some point? You guys are getting pushed into a different division with that wildcard spot, so I guess Conference Finals is the earliest we could, uh... reconvene.”

“No offense, but if we make it to Conference Finals, I don’t think I’ll have time for that.”

“You should be saying *when* , not if.”

Morgan huffs.

“You guys fought hard this season.”

Morgan hums in agreement. They did. They fought their way back up after they went through a 10-game losing streak in December. They made it with their goalie injured for over a month, they made it without two of their best D-men, they made it without Marsh for a few weeks.

“Are you nervous?” Noah asks.

“No,” Morgan replies. It’s mostly true. “Are you?”

“Hell yeah, I am,” Noah says. “I’m actually glad you texted me, because otherwise I’d just be lying awake, staring at the ceiling, you know how it is. Or maybe you don’t, because you’re not nervous.”

It’s meant to tease. “I’m really not,” Morgan says. He could have just let Noah believe that he was lying.

“You’re the most confusing person I’ve ever met,” Noah says.

Morgan doesn't really know what to say to that.

"That's okay, though," Noah goes on. "Well, I'll let you get your beauty sleep. Fuck knows, I need it."

"Oh, okay," Morgan says. "Sure."

"Did you wanna talk about anything else?" Noah asks, amused again.

"I... No. Good night, Noah."

"No, hey, I can stick around if you want me to," Noah says. "I'm all yours."

Morgan can't tell what gave him away, how Noah figured out that he'd rather keep talking, that he just wants to listen to Noah's voice for a little while, wants to listen to him ramble. "Okay," Morgan says.

"So?" Noah says.

"Huh?"

Noah laughs softly. "What do you need?"

"Just talk."

"You're asking me to... talk?" Noah asks. "Are you sure? I remember you being pretty eager to shut me up."

"I..."

“No, it’s okay, I’ll talk.”

He does. He talks for half an hour, some of it the most ridiculous shit Morgan has ever heard in his life, but Morgan isn’t angry anymore and that was the whole point of this.

When he hangs up the phone, he’s actually smiling a little.

#

Throughout the playoffs, they keep texting each other. It starts with Noah asking for pictures of Bear after the Mariners’ first loss, and Morgan sends him half a dozen pictures and Noah sends back about a hundred hearts.

The next time the Mariners lose a game, Morgan sends the pictures before Noah even has a chance to ask. He gets back ten messages about how Bear is the best dog in the world and how soft he looks and how much Noah wants to pet him and *his soft ears, the softest ears in the world probably* . Morgan knows that people really love his dog and people often ask him if they can pet him when he walks him or when he’s at the dog park with Bear, but the way Noah gets so ridiculously excited is something else.

It’s not just dog pictures after that.

Noah won't stop talking shit about the guys the Mariners are playing against and he asks Morgan to rank the insults he came up with and it makes him smile, so he doesn't tell him to stop texting.

He should tell him to stop.

Because he finds himself replying, telling Noah about his own life, and his own team, the occasional picture of Bear mixed in. Morgan would bet that 98% of their conversations are about hockey, but then the Eagles get eliminated in the second round and Noah texts him, saying, *sorry man, get yourself some food from that chinese place u like so much & cuddle the big bear .*

After that, Morgan goes back through their texts. He mentioned the Chinese place seven times. He really does love that place, but he didn't think he was constantly talking about it. So much that Noah picked up on it and somehow knows exactly what kind of food Morgan is going to order after they lost at home.

Going back through the messages, he realizes that there are a lot of things in there that some of Morgan's teammates probably don't even know. There's an extremely long rant

about kale in there, and an even longer reply from Noah about people who name their kids Kale.

i mean do those people hate their children? they 're setting them up for a lifetime of misery , Noah said.

one of my teammates is called cale , Morgan replied.

and is he miserable??

Morgan remembers thinking about it, not sure if he should tell Noah the truth. He didn't need any rumors about Morgan Boyle hating his teammates out there but, despite all the talking Noah does, he actually knows how to keep his mouth shut when it matters. So Morgan said, *he 's an ass* .

Cale is one of those guys who think that Morgan's the party police and gives him the stink-eye whenever Morgan goes out with the team, even if it's just for dinner.

i 'll beat him up for u , Noah replied.

Morgan told him not to, because Cale is a pretty huge dude who wouldn't have any issues whatsoever with breaking Noah's nose.

All Noah had to say in reply was, *awww you 're worried about me* .

Which wasn't exactly the truth. Morgan is worried about everyone who chooses to pick a fight with a guy like Cale, because they probably have a death wish. If they weren't on the same team, Morgan would avoid Cale at all costs. Well, he still mostly avoids him, but sometimes he can't get around interacting with him.

After the Eagles' second-round exit, Morgan does his mandatory interviews, goes to the barbecue at Marsh's house, gets a few appointments in and then drives up to Scranton to visit Ben and his fiancée, Bear in the trunk, enjoying the ride.

He only stays for a few days. Ben's fiancée smiles a lot, loves musicals, and bakes the most incredible cupcakes, and they're clearly happy together, always smiling at each other and teasing each other the way you can only tease people when you know them better than anyone else in the world. Ben doesn't try to talk about Danny or their mom or their dad, only asks if he's heard from David recently. The answer to that is no. It's always no. Dave sends him an email for his birthday every year, but that's about it.

"He's not gonna come to the wedding," Ben says, his eyes on Bear who's running around in the backyard with Ben's black Labrador, Howie.

“He might,” Morgan says. “Did you tell him?”

“I told him I got engaged. He said congratulations. And that was it. I mean, I know we haven’t even set a date yet, we just know that it’ll be next summer, but... I don’t know.”

“I can talk to him,” Morgan says. He knows this is important to Ben, but chances are that Dave won’t even consider coming, not if there’s a chance that Danny will be there. Or their mom. Morgan doesn’t ask him if he’s planning on inviting them, because he probably won’t like Ben’s answer.

He’s not here to fight with Ben, so he doesn’t bring it up. They have different relationships with their parents, with their brothers.

Morgan is still at Ben’s when the Mariners lose the Conference Finals. As soon as he hears, he snaps a picture of Bear and Howie and sends it to Noah.

He doesn’t reply until later, a bunch of hearts and, *wow i just stopped crying for like two seconds* .

Noah probably isn’t actually crying; it took Morgan a while to realize that Noah likes to joke about that kind of stuff.

He makes everything more dramatic than it has to be and refuses to be serious about anything for even just a second.

I ' ll send you a tissue , Morgan says.

Noah replies almost instantly – *lol I tissue* – which is followed by another text – *no actually can u send the dogs?*

Morgan tells him that only one of the dogs is actually his and that his brother wouldn't appreciate it if Morgan kidnapped Howie.

then bring me bear , Noah says.

And, *seriously* .

And, *come to brooklyn with the dog* .

There's no way that Noah is being serious right now.

It doesn't really matter anyway, because the *real* problem here is that Morgan wants to drive to Brooklyn, even though being in a car in the vicinity of New York City is absolute hell. He wants to see Noah. And he can't want to see Noah. He wasn't even going to text him that much, it just sort of happened, and now he can't take it all back. All the things he told Noah, late at night, when he got back from games, when he didn't know what to do with himself and a movie

wasn't distracting enough. All those things that he never let anyone else know.

Before Morgan can reply to Noah his phone starts ringing, and Morgan answers it quickly, because everyone else is already asleep. He doesn't want anyone to ask him who was calling him in the middle of the night over breakfast tomorrow morning.

"Noah?" Morgan says, keeping his voice low. There are two rooms between his and the master bedroom, but he doesn't need anyone to listen in. He pulls the sheets over his head, just to be sure.

"Hey, Boo," Noah says.

Morgan almost wishes he'd told Noah not to call him Boo when he first started calling him that, because it's clearly too late now. "Did you stop crying so you could call me?"

"Yes, Boo, just for you," Noah says and laughs. "You still in DC?"

"No, I'm at my brother's place."

"Which is in...?"

"Scranton."

"Oh," Noah says. "That's not too far away."

“From where?”

“New York,” Noah says, clearly amused. “You wanna swing by for a few days? I, uh... I’m gonna go visit my mom in LA, but I have some time to kill before that.”

“You were serious about that,” Morgan says. It’s not a question.

“I mean... yeah. But, hey, if you have other plans or you don’t want to, no worries. I’ll find ways to entertain myself, I’ll just look at the pictures of Bear you sent and hope that one day I’ll get to pet those soft ears.”

“Why are you so obsessed with my dog’s ears?”

“Soft,” is all Noah says.

Morgan smiles and quickly hides his face behind his hand, even though there’s no one around to see. “You really want me to come to New York?”

“Yeah. Really. Nothing would bring me more joy, I swear.”

Morgan doesn’t say anything. He promised himself that this wouldn’t become a thing. If he goes to New York and spends a few days with Noah, it’ll definitely be a thing. He’s already taken this way too far. It was just... Morgan doesn’t

even know what it was. An experiment? It's not like he'd ever actually date a guy. That's not what this is for him. Noah has got to know that.

Honestly, Noah can have whichever guy he wants, if that's what he's into. He has the face going for him. Also the abs. The whole... Swedish thing. Even though he's technically not Swedish. In any case, he doesn't need Morgan around, it's probably just convenient for him right now.

“Boo?”

“Yeah?”

“You wanna think about it?” Noah asks.

“I'll come,” Morgan replies, because if he thinks about it, he'll confuse himself. He'll go, just for a few days. He's not going to go home and he wasn't planning on staying at Ben's much longer, so he still has some time to kill anyway.

“With Bear?”

“Yes, with Bear.”

“Cool. Okay. I have some stuff to take care of, but...
When do you wanna come?”

“I can come whenever, really.”

“Give me three days to figure some shit out?” Noah says.

“Sure.”

“Okay.” Noah laughs softly. “My apartment is not dog-proof.”

“It’s okay, he doesn’t eat shoes or anything. Although maybe I’ll convince him to eat yours,” Morgan says.

Noah laughs again, louder this time. “That’s okay, he can eat all my shoes. I’ll see you in three days, Boo.”

“Yeah, see you.”

Noah says goodbye and Morgan is quick to hang up, belatedly realizing that they didn’t talk about for how long he’d be staying.

Chapter Four

Driving to Noah's place is an actual nightmare.

Morgan gets into the city in the afternoon, but it's New York so every hour is probably some kind of rush hour, and by the time he has parked his car in a parking garage Noah gave him the address for, a block away from Noah's apartment, Morgan is ready to collapse into bed and sleep for about twelve hours.

He puts Bear on his leash, grabs his suitcase and Bear's bag with his bowls and his toys and some dog food. He won't stay long. Maybe two nights. Then he's going back to DC for the rest of the summer. Bear is excited that they're going for a walk, dancing around him, tail wagging, while Morgan is juggling his suitcase and the other bag on top of it, doing his best not to get tangled up around a lamp post along the way.

It's a short walk, but Morgan is sweating like he just ran a marathon by the time he rings Noah's doorbell.

Noah buzzes him in and Morgan wrestles with his suitcase and Bear. He manages to hit the button of the elevator and when it opens, there's Noah, smiling, soft and ruffled, a red crease on his face, like he was napping and Morgan woke him up. Noah's hair is flat on one side and sticking up on the other and his shirt is creased. He must have slipped into his shoes in a hurry, didn't pull them up in the back.

"Hey," Noah says, his entire face lighting up as he steps out of the elevator and goes in for a hug.

Morgan wasn't expecting that one, so he's slow to hug him back. "Hi," Morgan says and reaches out with one hand, leash still in hand, to pat Noah's back. They're pretty much the same height, Morgan is maybe an inch smaller, so he can hook

his chin over Noah's shoulder when he hugs him. He pulls away quickly, because they're in public and while hockey players tend to be exceptionally cuddly, he doesn't like that anyone could walk in through the door and see them hugging in the foyer.

Bear sits his butt down, like he's the best boy in the world, wiping the floor with his tail, looking up at them with big puppy dog eyes.

"Oh, hey, you," Noah says and kneels down next to Bear. He stretches out his hand to let Bear sniff it, which he does, but then crowds against him immediately, because he has that sixth dog sense that tells him he's in the presence of someone who's dying to pet him. "Wow, I love you," Noah whispers and then pets Bear for a good five minutes.

Morgan waits as patiently as he can. He knows he signed up for this when he decided to come here. Noah laughs when Bear sniffs at his ear and jerks back a little, grinning up at Morgan. He's probably never seen him look so happy. Smiling back down at Noah is like a reflex; he can't help it.

"Let's go upstairs," Noah says and stands up. "Here, let me help you with your stuff."

Morgan hands over the leash. "Just take Bear."

“Of course, it would be a pleasure,” Noah says.

They go upstairs and Noah lets them into his apartment, talking without a pause. “I bought some stuff for dinner, but if you wanna go out, we can do that, too, there’s a bunch of really nice places around here and some pubs and bars, too, if that’s your thing. I know you said you didn’t drink, but I don’t know if that’s just a thing during the season or whatever, so, like, whatever you wanna do is cool with me, and I put sheets on the bed in the guest room if you wanna... you know... sleep there, and if you need anything for Bear, just let me know, I found this really cute toy and I bought it for him, it looks like a taco and if he doesn’t like it I’ll probably cry. And, uh, if you need anything, tell me, yeah? Ohh, and I almost forgot, I—”

“Noah,” Morgan interrupts, because he’s starting to realize that Noah won’t stop talking if Morgan doesn’t make him.

“Yeah?”

“Please stop talking.” That came out rude. That’s exactly why people don’t like Morgan. He says shit like that instead of taking a minute to find a more polite way of putting it. “I mean—”

“No, sorry, I was talking a lot, wasn’t I?” Noah tugs his fingers through his hair. “I was just...” He shrugs and bends down to take off Bear’s leash. “Go wherever you want, buddy, I hid all my shoes.”

Morgan puts down his bag, awkwardly shoving his hands into his pockets.

“Do you want Chinese for dinner?” Noah asks.

“Yeah, that sounds good. And I need to...” Morgan nods at Bear. “He might appreciate going for a walk after dinner?”

“Yeah, for sure,” Noah says, looking genuinely excited. “Can I hold the leash?”

Morgan can’t help but laugh. “Okay.”

“Don’t laugh at me,” Noah says and gives Morgan’s arm a flick. Morgan doesn’t know why he jerks away like he does. He barely even felt it.

Morgan clears his throat and picks up the bag with Bear’s stuff. “I’ll give Bear some water, okay?”

“Yeah, sure, whatever you need,” Noah says, voice quiet now, a small frown creasing his forehead. “I’ll go get the takeout menus?”

Morgan nods and takes a deep breath when Noah wanders away, Bear following at his heels. New best friend.

Maybe he'll just stay the night, spend some time with Noah tomorrow and find a reason why he needs to drive back to DC in the evening.

#

Noah orders Chinese for them and it's not as good as Morgan's favorite place in DC, but still good enough. He eats all the sweet and sour chicken, belatedly realizing that he didn't offer any to Noah.

“What?” Noah asks when Morgan looks over at him.

Morgan shows him the empty box. “Did you want any of this?”

Noah laughs. “Nah, don't worry. Eat whatever you want.”

Morgan actually thought that Noah had ordered way too much food, but they demolish a pretty decent amount, a lot of the containers ending up empty. Bear is sitting next to the couch, looking at Noah, because he knows that Morgan won't let him have any of the leftover food, but his new best friend might not know the rules yet.

“Can I—” Noah starts.

“No,” Morgan replies.

“But he looks so sad.”

“He always does.”

“Just a teeny tiny bit of food?” Noah tries. “He looks so hungry.”

“He’s always hungry,” Morgan mutters and starts stacking empty takeout containers. “You can give him a treat later.”

Bear perks up when Morgan says the t-word.

“Can I give him two?”

“No.”

“You’re mean,” Noah whispers and grabs the boxes that still have food in them.

Morgan tries to help Noah clean up, but he obviously has some sort of system to his kitchen and his dishwasher and apparently also doesn’t leave dishes in the sink, so Morgan eventually shuffles away to get the bag with the dog treats.

“Make him do a trick,” Morgan says when he drops them on the counter.

Bear already has his eyes on them.

“Sit,” Morgan tells him.

“What can he do?” Noah asks as he grabs a treat.

Morgan holds out his hand and Bear’s paw is in it a second later.

“He’s so talented, here, give your new friend Noah a high five, too. Aww, well done, you’re such a good boy,” Noah says and then bends down to pet him, telling him another ten times that he’s such a good boy, and at least Bear is absolutely delighted that they’re here.

Morgan slips out of the kitchen and gets the leash and then Bear is bouncing around them until Morgan tells him to sit again, because otherwise he’s going to end up breaking something. Noah leads the way once they’re out in the street and Morgan tries to remember where they’re going, but he’s pretty distracted by Noah. He hasn’t stopped smiling ever since they left his apartment. Actual ray of sunshine. Morgan knows it’s because of Bear, but it’s technically also because *he* brought Bear and it’s such a strange thought, knowing that Noah is this happy because of him.

Sadness isn't part of Noah's emotional vocabulary anyway, but this is different. It's felt different ever since Morgan got here.

They reach a park and stay there until the sun starts to set. Noah buys ice cream on the way back and Morgan, reluctantly, lets Noah buy him some, too. Bear looks bummed out when they won't let him have any, but Morgan saw that Noah snuck him another treat before they left his apartment, so Bear can deal.

"So," Noah says, "what do you wanna do? Go out? Hang out at home? Watch a movie?" He leans a little closer and whispers, "Make out?"

"Uh..."

"We don't have to," Noah says quickly. "Like, don't think I invited you here because of *that*."

"No, you invited me because of Bear," Morgan says.

Noah laughs, like it was a joke. Morgan wasn't kidding. Bear at the very least played a tiny role in Noah inviting him here. Which is fine. The thing is, now that Noah said that nothing needs to happen between them, Morgan is almost, what, disappointed? Really? He should be relieved.

“Whatever you’re comfortable with,” Noah says.

“Okay,” Morgan says.

Noah smiles at him.

Morgan wants to kiss him right now. They’re still at least a block or two away from Noah’s apartment. He can’t explain to himself why he suddenly feels so drawn to Noah, why he wants to reach out, touch him. When they stand next to each other in the elevator, Morgan does reach for him, pinkie finger brushing against Noah’s hand. Noah’s breath hitches just a little. Morgan stays very still. This is the utmost he will allow himself to do when they’re technically in public, because elevator doors open quickly and you never know if someone’s waiting on the other side.

Noah looks over at him and the smile on his face is one Morgan hasn’t seen before. It’s small and soft and unguarded and Morgan wants to kiss him even more now, wants to kiss that smile and see what it feels like against his lips.

Back in Noah’s apartment, Noah hands back the leash and Morgan takes it off and Bear wanders into the kitchen, where Morgan left his water bowl earlier. Noah is standing by the door, like he’s waiting, smiling again when Morgan steps closer, one hand landing on Noah’s chest, slowly making its

way up to curl around the back of his neck. Noah doesn't move any closer; he waits for Morgan to make his move.

Morgan kisses him, just once, feels that smile against his lips, then he pulls away again to look Noah in the eyes. Next move is Noah's.

Noah leans back in, wraps his arms around Morgan and kisses him like he's been waiting for this ever since the last time they did this, like he was starving, fingers pressing into Morgan's sides, never slipping under his shirt, just holding him, pulling him closer, until he's flush against Noah and they stumble back against the door, Noah's back against it, and Morgan can push his entire body against him, pin him there and kiss him, kiss him, kiss him. It's messy and Morgan can barely catch his breath and Noah's pushing back against him, not hard enough to push him away, just hard enough that Morgan can feel it, can feel that he wants to be closer to him, too.

Morgan's going to lose his mind. He's never wanted someone like this. He didn't know you *could* want someone like this.

When he pulls away, Noah is panting, face flushed, eyelids fluttering.

“Fuck, okay,” Noah says and brushes a few stray strands of hair out of his face. He reaches out, fingers catching Morgan’s wrist. “Hey. Hi.”

“Hi,” Morgan breathes out.

He doesn’t know why he did this. He doesn’t know why he wants to do it again. He doesn’t know anything right now and it scares the shit out of him.

#

Noah tugs him into the living room, sits him down on the couch, gets each of them a glass of water, and then sits down next to him, pointedly leaving some space between them.

Morgan grabs a pillow and hugs it to his chest.

“Okay,” Noah says, “we should talk about this. Because... I’m... Well, I wouldn’t say I’m confused, but I want to avoid future confusions if that makes sense.”

Morgan nods.

“I just want you to know that I honestly don’t want to pressure you or anything, and I don’t want to make assumptions either, but... you like kissing me, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Morgan says. But he shouldn’t. He doesn’t say that, of course, but the thought is still stuck at the back of his

mind, resurfacing in moments like this one. He mostly forgets about it while he's kissing Noah, but once he's pulled away and has taken a few deep breaths, he realizes that he shouldn't have done that.

“And you didn't want to sleep with me last time. Which is fine. Seriously. If you don't want to, you don't want to. I'm just wondering, like, do you... do you not want to *ever* or do you not want to *yet*?”

Morgan blinks at him. Maybe he was expecting this. Maybe he knew this was coming. He still doesn't have an answer to that question.

“And, as I said,” Noah goes on, “no pressure. At all. I know there's people who don't like sex, which is fine, or if you don't want to yet, for whatever reason, that's also fine, I just sort of...” He shrugs. “I just want to do everything right.”

Morgan wants to hide. He doesn't want to have this conversation, and not just because he has no idea what to say. No one's prepared him for this. He doesn't know how to explain this to Noah. That he just wanted to know what it feels like to kiss a guy, that he never meant to end up liking it, that he doesn't understand a single thing he's feeling right now. It's not like he's gay. He can't be.

His entire life he's been told where gay people go, and maybe Morgan hasn't been to church in a long time, because his dad never bothered to get up that early on a Sunday and because his mom had to start working Sunday shifts when Morgan was old enough to be at home alone, and maybe he doesn't even believe that hell is a real thing, but he thinks about it anyway. It sounds like a bad excuse when he thinks about it too long. Nothing makes sense in his head.

"I freaked you out, didn't I?" Noah says. "I'm sorry."

"I just... I'm not gay."

"Okay. You know, it's okay to be into more than one gender. That's cool."

"No, I'm not... *that* either," Morgan says. "I don't know what I am, but I'm not..." He trails off, because Noah is frowning again and that frown doesn't look like it belongs on his face.

"Well, you don't need to stick a label on it, I guess?"

Noah says eventually.

Morgan doesn't reply. Why does he never know what to say?

Noah clears his throat. "So, am I... the first guy?"

Morgan nods. He can't even fucking say *yes* .

“Okay. You know, I'm also pretty new at this. Like, not super new, but...” Noah scrunches up his nose. “It's okay. Whatever you want.”

Again, Morgan only nods, because it would probably sound weird if he said thank you. He chews on his bottom lip. “Can I come over there?”

“Sure,” Noah says and hold out an arm.

Morgan climbs into his lap, straddles his hips and then they're back to kissing, filthy, messy, open-mouthed kisses, and Noah's hands are in his hair and Morgan wants to touch him all over, wants to feel his skin under his fingertips. The thoughts all disappear, it's just him and Noah, and it feels right. “I want to,” he says, wants it so much, but he doesn't know shit, so he needs Noah to lead the way.

He knows he shouldn't. Shouldn't let Noah kiss him breathless, shouldn't let him push him off, shouldn't let him take him to his bedroom. Morgan's been here before. He pushes the door shut so Bear won't come back here and investigate. Noah smiles at him and takes hold of the hem of Morgan's shirt.

“Can I?” Noah asks.

Morgan nods and a moment later his shirt is on the floor.

Noah tugs off his own and it lands next to Morgan’s. “Tell me to stop if you want me to stop. I will, I promise.”

Morgan knows that, because Noah has stopped before when Morgan told him to. He hasn’t forgotten about that.

He feels jittery all over when Noah reaches out and trails his knuckles down Morgan’s chest, down his stomach, a fingertip hooking into the waistband of Morgan’s jeans. “You really want to?” Noah asks. “Because if you just said yes to this because I asked—”

“I didn’t.”

He wanted this before Noah asked, when he was pushing him against the door in the hallway. That’s when he wanted this. Maybe he even wanted it last time and was too scared of it, so he said no. He doesn’t know if he’s scared today, or maybe nervous, he just knows that he wants Noah to undo the button of his jeans and pull them down and touch him.

“It’s okay, touch me,” Morgan says, and maybe that’s too forward, too blunt.

Noah hesitates for just a moment and then kisses him, just a quick brush of lips, getting off his own pants before moving on to Morgan’s. He nudges Morgan into bed, both of them with their briefs still on and then Noah is hovering above him, looking concerned. He dips his head down and nudges Morgan’s nose with his own. “You good?”

“Yeah,” Morgan says. Every single thought in his head is about Noah. The way Noah kisses him, so gently, the hand on his stomach, hot against his skin, all the spots where Noah is touching him, where his nerves are lighting up.

They kiss like they did before, only this time Morgan’s touching skin, palm sliding down Noah’s spine, to the curve of his ass and Noah gasps against his mouth and stops kissing Morgan altogether when Morgan’s fingers slip under the waistband of his briefs. Noah recovers quickly, kisses Morgan’s jaw, his throat, his collarbones and then works his way down and Morgan isn’t thinking anymore at all.

Noah’s lips linger over the scar on Morgan’s stomach, where he fell in the backyard and landed on what was left of a smashed bottle of beer. He moves further down, knows exactly

where he's going, the tip of his nose brushing against Morgan's briefs, and then he's kissing the inside of Morgan's thigh, and that's when Morgan can't take it anymore.

“Can I...” Morgan doesn't know how to ask for this. He wants to touch, too.

Noah looks up and crawls back up, kisses Morgan's lips, and flops down next to him, smiling at him. “You can do whatever you want with me.”

It's a joke, it has to be, an exaggeration at the very least, but Morgan understands what Noah means. He reaches out, not sure where to put his hands first. Noah's skin is soft and he shivers when Morgan touches him. Morgan's fingers find the waistband of Noah's briefs again and he tugs, Noah canting his hips so Morgan can pull them off. After that, he's totally lost, but Noah still has a blissful, lazy smile on his face and Morgan doesn't have time to be insecure.

“Whatever you want,” Noah says again.

Morgan wants to touch, so he does and Noah moans softly, breath hitching when Morgan tightens his grip.

“I have...” Noah nods at his bedside table.

Morgan moves, reluctant, and peers into the top drawer. His face must be bright red right now – there’s condoms in there, lube, and...

“Oh,” Noah says and grins. “Ignore the, uh, dick-shaped items.”

Morgan does, grabs the lube, ducks his head, and nudges the drawer shut again.

He jerks Noah off slowly, eyes on his face, watching his every reaction to find out what Noah likes, what makes his breath hitch, what makes him moan. He’s quieter than Morgan thought he would be, biting his lip when he comes over Morgan’s hand and his stomach, his breathing fast, his hand finding Morgan’s, the one that’s clenched in the sheets.

Noah smiles at him. “Give me one second, I’ll...”

“Wait, no, I...” Morgan gets himself off quickly, hand down his briefs, an afterthought. Noah tugs him back down onto the mattress after, grabs a tissue to clean both of them up, as much as he can at least, and kisses the top of his head.

Morgan curls against him, tucks his face into the crook of Noah’s neck and goes to sleep before his thoughts get a chance to keep him awake all night.

#

Morgan wakes up in the middle of the night.

Noah's bedroom is dark, which means that Noah must have turned off the lights at some point and there's a blanket draped over him that Noah must have gotten for him. When he peers at the alarm clock next to the bed, it tells Morgan that it's just past two in the morning. Noah is, presumably, asleep. Morgan can't tell because he's facing away from him, but his breathing is slow and even, and when Morgan shifts, he doesn't stir.

He should go back to sleep.

He can feel thoughts clawing at him, memories of family dinners, his dad sitting at the head of the table, complaining about the food Morgan's mom cooked after being at work all day, about the salad Morgan made, because he wanted to help out. And then the arguing, about the bills, about the grocery shopping, about Morgan needing a new binder for school, and new shoes because his feet had grown again, and the hand-me-downs from his brothers all had holes, and him being so bad at math, and then Dave saying that Lilianna from across the street did tutoring to earn some extra

money, and his dad's fist slamming on the table, ranting about the kid across the street again.

Dinner was quiet after that, except for their dad's grumbling. It was always the same – that he wished they'd kick the kid's ass out the door, that they should have beaten it out of him while they still could.

Morgan rolls over, tries not to think about it. He tucks himself against Noah's back and listens to his breathing. He just wants his mind to be quiet for once.

It's not.

It's his junior team's locker room now, it's Troy Walters, calling everything and everyone gay like it's the worst insult he can think of, then it's opponents calling him a cocksucker, voice quiet, so none of the refs would hear.

Morgan sits up and gets out of bed, because there's no way he's going back to sleep any time soon. He pulls on his clothes, slips out the door and goes down the hall to the kitchen to get a glass of water. It's where Bear joins him a few minutes later. He was sleeping on a blanket in the living room earlier, cuddling the taco toy that Noah got for him.

Morgan takes his time sipping his water, one hand in Bear's fur, scratching his head.

It's where Noah finds him, wearing a pair of boxers now, rubbing his eyes. "Hey," he says and shuffles over to Morgan, leans against him and hums.

Morgan puts an arm around him instinctively and Noah hums again.

"You coming back to bed?" Noah mumbles.

"Yeah."

"Now?"

"In a minute."

"You okay?" Noah asks. His thumb is slowly tracing little lines on Morgan's back, up and down, up and down. He tilts his head to kiss the side of Morgan's neck.

"Yeah," Morgan says. He's not, but none of that is Noah's fault.

Noah seems to be too sleepy to talk, and also too sleepy to go back to bed, but that's okay. Morgan just holds him right there, finishes his water, and then nudges Noah out of the kitchen and back down the hall. When they're back in bed, back under their blanket, Noah pulls him close, fits

himself against Morgan. He never really saw himself as the little spoon, but this is surprisingly okay with him.

It takes Noah all of three seconds to fall back asleep and his breathing lulls Morgan back to sleep as well, even though he should be way too hot with Noah plastered against him like that.

If he wakes up again during the night when Noah shifts against him, Morgan doesn't remember in the morning. Noah is still next to him, sleeping soundly, fingers curled around Morgan's arm. He wants to get up, just so he's doing something and not lying here, thinking about why he feels the way he feels. Queasy. Ready to run.

Thankfully, Noah wakes up not too much later, making a soft noise when he shifts closer to Morgan.

He mumbles something that Morgan doesn't have a chance of understanding.

“Huh?”

Noah pushes his nose into Morgan's hair.

“I thought we didn't cuddle,” Morgan says.

“We do now,” Noah mumbles.

Morgan is fine with the cuddling for about five minutes, then he starts to get antsy, can't lie still anymore and starts squirming, until Noah huffs and lets go of him, mumbling something about Morgan being too awake. Morgan climbs out of bed, eyes on Noah, who's clearly not ready to get up yet. He rolls into the space Morgan just vacated and hugs his pillow.

Morgan takes a shower, digs through his suitcase for clean clothes, feeds Bear and then grabs Noah's keys to take Bear for a quick walk. He tries not to think about last night, but the thoughts keep pushing at him. He doesn't know if this technically counts as his first time, because he didn't even let Noah touch him – not that he didn't want him to, it just felt like it'd be too much.

Everything feels off, like last night, and he wants to go home, but when he imagines telling Noah, it tears at him somehow and he lets go of it.

When Morgan lets himself back into Noah's apartment, Noah is in the kitchen, making omelettes. He's dressed, his hair still wet, and he smiles when Morgan comes wandering into the kitchen, Bear trying to squeeze past him to say good morning to Noah, who completely abandons breakfast to give

Bear a belly-rub. Morgan steps over to the stove to make sure nothing starts to burn.

“Thank you,” Noah says when he stands back up. He leans over to kiss Morgan’s temple.

“So, uh... I sort of need to head back to DC.”

Noah frowns at him. “Oh. Today?”

Yes, is the answer Morgan was going to give him. But Noah looks disappointed and Morgan can’t stand it. He hasn’t even been here for twenty-four hours yet, so he says, “I’ll drive back tomorrow.”

The frown disappears. “Okay,” Noah says and kisses him again. “What are you doing for the rest of the summer?”

Morgan shrugs. “Training.”

“Right,” Noah says, laughing softly. “Maybe you can come back up here for a weekend before the season starts? Or I can come down there.”

“Um... maybe?” Morgan says. He tries to imagine Noah at his house, maybe sitting by his pool, in his bed. He doesn’t hate it.

Noah changes the topic after that, talking about dinner, even though they haven’t even had breakfast and lunch yet.

It's a nice enough day until the late afternoon when storm clouds start to gather. They take a cab to the restaurant Noah wants to try. It's one of those places with weird furniture and strange food combinations that Austin likes dragging the team to when they have dinner together on the road. Not really Morgan's kind of place. The chicken he gets is fine, but he doesn't know what to do with the fruit on his plate and he wouldn't have said no to a little more sauce.

Noah insists on paying for dinner, kicking Morgan's leg under the table when he moves to grab the check, and they walk home after, the streets wet, and they don't really talk much, which is weird, because Noah always has something to say. Whenever Morgan looks over at him, Noah smiles. And whenever Noah smiles at him, Morgan wonders if he really has to go home tomorrow.

Obviously, he doesn't have to. He's the one who said he had to go tomorrow.

They pick up Bear and take him for a quick walk, Morgan telling Noah that he doesn't have to come, but Noah clearly wants to, reaching for the leash as soon as Morgan has clipped it to Bear's collar.

They watch a movie when they get back, and Noah kisses him, but that's all he does, just kisses him and doesn't complain when Morgan pillows his head on his shoulder and falls asleep. Noah eventually tries to tug him into bed and by the time they make it to the bedroom, Morgan is awake enough to go to the bathroom and brush his teeth. Noah does the same, but when he crawls into bed as well, Morgan is already dozing.

“Sleep well,” Noah whispers.

Morgan only hums at him in reply.

Chapter Five

Morgan goes back to DC, starts training, hangs out at the pool with Bear, and he keeps texting Noah. Sometimes he calls him and Noah talks. For a while. There's something about Noah's voice that calms Morgan down. He doesn't know how that happened, because he distinctly remembers being annoyed whenever Noah even so much as opened his mouth.

They don't talk every day. It's not like that.

Before the Draft, Noah gets traded to the Seals. By the time Morgan hears about it, the Seals have traded Noah to the Philadelphia Foxes.

i wish i didn ' t look terrible in orange , Noah texts Morgan before Morgan has figured out what to say to him. *i mean the jerseys are mostly black with a lil orange and white but still too much orange. don ' t tell anyone i said that .*

I won ' t , Morgan promises.

Noah doesn't seem too broken up about getting traded and heads to Philadelphia a few days later to find a new place to stay. He invites Morgan to tag along, jokingly, sends a bunch of grinning emojis when Morgan says that he'll pass on the house hunting. Later, Noah sends him pictures of a townhouse. After that, there's a lot of messages about Noah packing up his stuff in New York and then unpacking his stuff again in Philadelphia. Morgan almost offers to drive up to Philly to help him out, but they'd just get distracted. His presence wouldn't be helpful in the slightest.

Morgan's thoughts never stray from Noah too long. He'll force them in different directions, but they always circle back to his two nights in Brooklyn.

Noah goes to Los Angeles for the summer, stays with his mom, trains there, sends pictures of the Hollywood Hills and the pier in Santa Monica, beaches and blue skies and palm trees. They go on his Instagram, too, but Morgan gets the real ones, the unfiltered ones. And pictures of the neighbors' dog. Tons and tons of pictures of the neighbors' dog. Sometimes he asks Morgan to send pictures of Bear.

Morgan's summer is a quiet one. Marsh finds out that he's still in town – Marsh is from Canada, but his wife's parents are living half an hour away so they can be closer to the grandkids and Marsh's parents usually come down in the summer, so he's around – and keeps inviting him over to dinner. Morgan can't say no every single time, because he'll eventually run out of excuses, so he swings by every now and then.

They're approaching the end of July when he gets an email from Dave.

#

Morgan,

I know we 're sort of on the same page when it comes to our family, so I guess I don 't have to explain why I haven 't been in touch all that much, but I 'll be in DC for

work for a couple of days next week and I was wondering if you wanted to grab lunch or dinner at some point?

I obviously understand if you don ' t want to.

David

#

Morgan stares at that email for half an hour. His screen keeps turning off and then he turns it back on again, reads the email again.

He doesn't know shit about Dave's life. He doesn't even know what his job is, doesn't know where he lives, if he has a girlfriend, what he's been up to. Dave left when he was eighteen, went to college, and he never came back. When he worked after school, he put all the money aside and then he fucked off. Morgan went home when their parents got divorced and they moved out of the house they all grew up in, picked up the remnants of their childhoods, but Dave excused himself, said he couldn't come. Morgan isn't sure if he'd even recognize him.

He says yes to meeting Dave, because he wants to know what he's up to. And he wants to know why Dave is suddenly getting in touch with him when the only things

they've been saying to each other were *Happy Birthday* and *Merry Christmas* .

They set up lunch on Tuesday, at a place Downtown that Morgan has never been to.

Five minutes later he already has doubts gnawing at him, because what if Dave just asked to meet him because he wants something? Ben is the only one who calls him just to catch up. Dan calls because he needs money. His mom, when Morgan was still answering her calls, wanted him to come home. So what does Dave want? Does he want to catch up, does he want money? The only thing Morgan does know is that Dave won't try to convince him to come home, because Dave doesn't want to go home either.

He's still debating whether or not he should cancel, say he forgot about an appointment or something, when Noah sends him a picture of himself holding up a turtle – *look what my mom 's friend has!!* It's followed by, *his name is sweet potato and i love him* .

Are you adopting a turtle now? Morgan asks.

no i don ' t think i ' m ready for children , is Noah's reply. *u have to remember to feed them and stuff* .

Morgan doesn't have time to reply. At all. Noah types too quickly.

whatcha doin tonight

i ' m in the hot tub with my phone

livin on the edge

my mom ' s out with friends

if u wanna entertain me feel free

After that one, Noah finally stops and Morgan pulls up his contact to call him.

“Hey, Boo,” Noah says.

Morgan can hear the rush of water in the background, the hot tub Noah is sitting in. He's sent Morgan a picture of his mom's terrace, the colors vibrant, an inflatable donut floating in the pool, the pink of it as bright as the blue of the sky.

Morgan can practically see him there, sitting in the hot tub with his phone like the King of the Morons. “Hey,” Morgan says.

“What are you up to?” Noah asks.

“I'm just... you know, hanging out with Bear.”

“Ohhhh. How was dinner with Marsh?”

“It was good.”

“Yeah?”

“Good food,” Morgan mumbles.

“Yeah, Marsh looks like he knows how to work the grill. He’s such a dude. And he’s so big. Like, his thighs are... *large* . And that whole beardy, broken nose, shaggy hair thing he has going on is pretty hot, too,” Noah says.

“Uh...”

“Sorry. Like, I wouldn’t... you know. I don’t think he’s hot in a *I want to bang him* kinda way, it’s more of a *oh, he ’s nice to look at* kinda way. Don’t you ever see guys who are nice to look at?”

Noah is nice to look at. “I guess,” Morgan says.

“You wanna hear about Sweet Potato?” Noah asks.

“She’s my new best friend.”

Morgan can’t help but smile. “Sure.”

Noah talks about the turtle for a good ten minutes. It’s ridiculous. But Morgan doesn’t mind listening to him either, because Noah’s excitement is almost contagious. It’s the same when Morgan sends him pictures of Bear. One time, Morgan

sent him a video, and Noah called him to say thank you in person.

“What’s new in DC?” Noah eventually asks.

“Nothing much.” Morgan’s thoughts wander back to Dave. “I heard from my brother today. Haven’t in a while.”

“Wait, I thought you were at your brother’s place before you came to mine?”

“Different brother.”

“Ah, right. You have three.”

“I... do.”

“You told us in Sochi, remember?”

“Right.” Morgan remembers, but only vaguely. It wasn’t a long conversation. He doesn’t talk about his family, he doesn’t even know why he told Noah about Dave. Now that he thinks about it, Noah never really talks about his family either. “Do you have brothers or sisters?”

There’s a long, long pause before Noah says, “No.”

“Oh,” Morgan says. That’s probably the curtest answer Noah has ever given him. Morgan must have said something wrong

Before he can figure it out, Noah sighs and says, “I had a sister. She died. It was... a couple of years ago.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, don’t worry about it. I just... miss her. But that’s okay. She was a few years older than me and she moved away from home when she was eighteen and she... she never talked to us about anything and, we all thought she was fine, you know?” There’s a moment of silence. “Except she wasn’t. And she... she got involved with the wrong people and...” Noah trails off into another sigh.

Morgan can’t really say *I ’ m sorry* again, but he can’t think of anything else to say either.

“Boo,” Noah says. “You still there?”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“I can stop talking about her.”

“No, you can talk about her if you want to. I just...”

“What?” Noah asks.

“I never know what to say,” Morgan whispers. It’s almost too much to admit it, that he’s so out of his depth when it comes to conversations like this one. No one ever taught him the appropriate things to say.

“That’s okay,” Noah says, “you listen.”

“I’m sorry you lost her,” Morgan says. That seems like the right thing, even though it sounds stilted to his own ears. It hurts, listening to Noah, because he can hear it in Noah’s voice, how much it still hurts him, and there’s nothing Morgan can do to make it better.

“Yeah,” Noah says, and it’s the smallest he’s ever sounded. “Stay on the phone with me for a bit, Boo?”

“I will,” Morgan says. And he does.

#

Morgan arrives early to his lunch meeting with Dave and hovers outside the door, even though he could go in and ask for Dave’s reservation. Because what if he sits down at their table, and waits for his brother, and he doesn’t show up? So he waits outside the door, fiddling with his phone, texting Noah, who’s about to go on a run.

Noon comes and goes and there’s no sign of Dave anywhere.

For how long is Morgan supposed to wait? Dave was always on time when they were kids. Always slipping in through the door right before his curfew. He slipped back out

the window later sometimes, undetected, Morgan pretending to be asleep in the top bunk while Dave stuffed pillows under the covers below him. Morgan never found out what Dave was doing when he snuck out. He asked him once, but Dave snapped at him, told him to mind his own business and Morgan never asked him again. In a house where everyone was angry all the time, having Dave around helped, so Morgan tried not to upset him. Ever.

He waits another five minutes outside the restaurant and then he finally spots Dave, walking fast down the street. He's in a suit, tugging at his tie as he approaches, like he's not used to wearing one. He looks all grown up, taller, his dark hair cropped short.

He smiles when he sees Morgan, waves, and then pulls him into a tight hug.

“Morgan, hey.”

“Hey, Dave,” Morgan says and awkwardly pats Dave's back.

Dave laughs when he pulls away. “Right, uh... This is weird. Everyone back home calls me David.”

“I can call you David.”

“Thank you. You wanna head in there? I’ve never been here, so I don’t know if it’s good, but it’s what everyone recommended, so…”

“Yeah, sure,” Morgan says and follows David into the restaurant.

They’re led to a table by the window and their server rattles off the specials and David smiles up at him while Morgan keeps his eyes on the lunch menu. He’s getting a burger and a salad, and David gets the same, but swaps the salad for fries.

“So, how have you been?” David asks.

“Okay,” Morgan says. “You?”

“I’m good.” David tilts his head. “I’ve been watching a bunch of your games. I mean, it’s been ages since I stopped playing, but it’s still exciting that you get to do this.”

Morgan nods.

“You like DC?”

“Yeah.”

David chews on his bottom lip, pushes around his fork. “I know this is weird. I’m sorry. I feel bad for just disappearing. You never did anything wrong, you were a little

kid, but I just couldn't come home anymore, being there fucking killed me. I needed some time away from everything and figure shit out for myself."

"I get it," Morgan says.

"Have you been home?"

"No, not since..." Morgan shrugs. "Dave... David. I don't even know where you live. I don't have your phone number."

"I know."

"I don't know what your job is. I don't know why you're in town."

"I'll tell you, okay? Right now," David says. "I'm really sorry if you felt like I didn't want to be your brother anymore, because that's not what... I want you in my life, but I also... Seeing you guys always... It brought everything back up."

Morgan nods. Seeing David right now makes him think about their childhood, has him wondering how they ended up here, how they both made it to the other side of everything that happened to them. He's not angry that David didn't want to see him. Not at all. He just doesn't understand what changed.

“Okay, so,” David says, smiling at him, “I live in California. I’m a software engineer. I don’t usually go on business trips, but Mike got sick, so they asked me to come here.”

“Oh,” Morgan says. “Cool.”

Their food arrives and David asks him about hockey, about the Eagles, and Morgan tells him that he can have a ticket for any of their West Coast games whenever he wants.

“Thanks, I’d love to come to one,” David says.

Their conversation dies down while they eat and David offers him some of his fries, which Morgan takes, because he never said no to extra fries when he was a kid and he won’t say no to extra fries now.

“So, Morgan,” David says when he only has a handful of fries left on his plate.

Morgan looks up.

“I... Like, I didn’t... Even if I hadn’t ended up going on this trip, I was gonna get in touch anyway, because there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Ah, here they go. So David did want something. “What do you need?” Morgan asks.

David frowns. “Oh, I don’t...” He shakes his head. “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, because Danny probably asks you for money all the time, because he also asks me for money all the time and I actually... blocked his email address.” David takes a deep breath. “Anyway, I don’t want you to think that I want something from you. I mean, I do, but not... money or anything like that.”

Morgan doesn’t say anything, just waits for David to go on.

“I have a girlfriend,” David says. “Her name is Rina. We’ve been together for four years and she’s pregnant and we’re gonna have a little girl in November and I want that little girl to have a family. If you don’t wanna have anything to do with this, I get it, but I’d love for her to have an uncle.”

“Really?” Morgan says.

“I’m not asking you to, like, go out of your way or anything, I just want you in her life in... whatever capacity you want to be in it.”

Morgan nods.

“And, seriously, I don’t need any money, I have a great job, we have health insurance and we have a house and a car

and I don't need anything from you," David says. "I just want you to be around."

"I will be," Morgan says. He thinks of the tiny Eagles jerseys they sell at their practice rink. "Can I give her presents?"

"You don't have to."

"I want to. I used to get Danny's kids presents. Before he started calling me a bastard whenever I wouldn't send him money."

David pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. "I'm sorry."

"I just... I feel bad for not helping him, but... If I do, he'll just keep asking and he'll never get better. It's the same with mom. If I give her money, she'll buy booze. I offered to pay for rehab. She didn't want me to."

"You're a far better person than I am," David says.

Morgan shrugs. He's a terrible person. Because it's not the kids' fault that Danny is a major douchebag most of the time, but Morgan can't be around Danny, can't even talk to him without getting angry, and he doesn't like himself when he's angry like that.

“Have you been in touch with Ben?” David asks.

“Yeah, I was at his place for a bit,” Morgan says.

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah,” Morgan says. “He’s fine. He’s getting married.”

“Oh, yeah, he sent an email about that. That’s nice.”

“He said he’s not sure if you’ll come to wedding if he asks you,” Morgan says. He doesn’t really want to get involved in that, because it’s none of his business. It’s a choice David has to make and Morgan isn’t here to convince him to do anything he doesn’t want to do.

David ducks his head down. “I’m not sure either. When’s he getting married?”

“I don’t think he knows yet. Probably next summer.”

David nods. “I wish things weren’t so fucked up.”

Morgan shrugs, because there’s not much they can do about it. Things were the way they were and it fucked them all up in some way or other. Now they have to deal with the fallout.

“I’ve been seeing a therapist,” David mutters. “It helps.”

Morgan nods.

“Are you... You have a girlfriend or anything?”

“No,” Morgan says. “Not really.”

David smiles. “Eh, there’s no rush.”

He’s right, but Morgan thinks about his teammates anyway, all those guys who are married, who have kids. Some of them were even younger than him when they got married. Morgan wants that. He wants someone he can come home to, someone he trusts enough that he can tell them the truth about his entire fucked up family, someone who’ll let him be quiet.

He thinks of Noah.

It can’t be him. They don’t have a real future together.

“So, uh, I’m flying back in a couple of hours, so I need to get going soon,” David says. “But... let’s keep in touch?”

“Yeah,” Morgan says. “Will you tell me when... when I have a niece?”

“Oh, yeah, for sure,” David says, and he’s smiling now and Morgan has never seen him smile like that, bright and

happy.

He's glad that at least one of them has figured out how to be happy like that.

#

Morgan's neighbors go out of town for a week and Morgan's in DC, so he offers to take care of their dog, since they always make sure that Bear isn't lonely when Morgan's not in town. So he has two dogs and Noah asks him for pictures ten times a day.

Morgan does send him the pictures, but every time he texts Noah, he feels... a lot of things. Mostly guilt. Mostly like he's doing something wrong. As August goes on, Morgan can't deny that he needs to have a serious conversation with Noah any longer. He knows he has to end it, whatever *it* even is, but he can't bring himself to do it.

He's throwing balls into the pool for the dogs when Noah calls him out of the blue.

"Hey," Morgan says.

"Heeey," Noah says. "How are you?"

"Okay." Bear drops a ball next to his feet and drips all over Morgan. "What about you?"

“I’m great,” Noah says. “Yeah, so, I’m flying to Philly soon and, like, I’ll have to sort out all my crap, but I have a few days before the Foxes need me around, so if you wanna come up or anything...”

“I don’t know if I can,” Morgan says.

“Okay?”

“I can’t...” Morgan takes a deep breath. “Noah.”

“What?”

Morgan walks over to the house and sits down on one of his lounge chairs. “I’m really sorry, but...”

“But?”

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” Morgan says. It doesn’t feel like the truth when he says it, but he doesn’t see another way right now. If it’s a lie, it’s a necessary one.

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I mean, it’s not, but...” Noah is quiet for a moment, then he says, “Did I do something wrong?”

“No.”

“No?” Noah asks. “Listen, I know when we slept together it was your first time and I tried to like... give you space and let you figure things out for yourself, because you’re sort of new to this and I thought that’s what you wanted, because you’re not much into the whole talking business, but maybe you didn’t want that space and I guess I should have asked. I just don’t want you to feel like I don’t care about you or anything.”

“No, Noah, this isn’t about you. I just can’t...” Morgan squeezes his eyes shut, because he can feel the prick of tears. “I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. I’m not gay, so I shouldn’t... we shouldn’t...”

Morgan can hear Noah take a deep breath on the other end of the line.

“But you didn’t do anything wrong,” Morgan says. “I promise. This is my fault.”

“So you need space?”

“I need... We’re not doing this anymore,” Morgan says.

“Okay,” Noah says, voice quiet. He’s hurt and it’s Morgan’s fault, but he just can’t keep doing this. It messes him

up.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t... Have a good season, yeah?” Noah says, clearly eager to be done with this conversation.

Morgan can’t blame him and it’s not like they have anything else to say to each other. He bites his bottom lip.

“You, too.”

“Okay. Bye, Morgan.”

“Bye,” Morgan whispers.

He hangs up the phone.

Bear and their neighbors’ dog, Sirius, have both brought back their balls, waiting for him to throw them again. Morgan wipes at his cheek and picks up the balls and hurls them half-heartedly towards the pool.

He wants to call Noah back and tell him that he changed his mind, but it doesn’t work like that.

Another tear rolls down his cheek and he wipes it away. He shouldn’t have said yes to this in the first place, shouldn’t have liked it, liked Noah, liked kissing him, having sex with him, if that’s what that was, liked sleeping in his bed,

liked Noah being the big spoon. He wasn't supposed to like any of that.

Bear returns to him, drops his ball and then paws at Morgan's knee, like he knows that Morgan is not fucking okay right now and needs a friend.

"Hey, buddy," Morgan whispers. He knows that dogs don't like hugs, so he doesn't hug Bear, but he really wishes he had someone to hug right now, because he can't stop crying.

Morgan doesn't cry. Ever. He just doesn't.

His dad always got angry at him when he cried and it wasn't even any of that men don't cry bullshit, he just thought it was annoying, and told Morgan to fuck off and whine somewhere else. Ben, if he was around, would usually find him and give him a hug and tell him to stop so dad wouldn't get even angrier and take it out on the rest of them and Morgan tried, he really did.

Now it doesn't matter. Now he can sit here and cry for however long he wants to, because his dad is somewhere up in New York, probably drunk, probably on his own, probably yelling at no one in particular. Maybe he still throws glasses at

the walls, maybe he only did that to scare Morgan and his brothers.

It doesn't matter. Morgan will never see him again.

So Morgan cries.

Bear licks his knee and Morgan cries a little harder.

Chapter Six

The Eagles have a bit of a rough start to the beginning of the new season. Logan is around for training camp, for a few preseason games, then he gets sent down again. The Eagles call him up when Jasper gets injured, and Logan hangs out at Morgan's place for about two weeks until he gets injured, too, and the Eagles send him back home to make room for another player.

For the first month of the season, there's a lot of coming and going, new people slotting into Marsh and Morgan's line on the right wing. They make it work as best as they can, but their season isn't going well.

They lose three games in overtime in November and then lose a few more in regulation. If they don't start winning soon, they can forget about the playoffs. Their guys keep getting injured and the guys who hurt them don't even get suspended.

Then they head out on the road, visit the Bobcats, the Comets, then the Foxes. They get into Philadelphia two nights before the game, have practice at the Foxes' arena the next day, but then they're free to spend the rest of the afternoon however they want and Morgan finds himself at a loss.

He has nothing to do until team breakfast the next morning. They have a curfew but that's not until midnight, so... Morgan stares down at his phone.

He misses Noah. He hasn't sent Morgan a single text since they broke things off, which is fine, it's what Morgan wanted, but now that he's in Philadelphia, all Morgan wants to do is see him, talk to him, even if it's just for a few minutes.

So Morgan dials Noah's number, surprised when Noah picks up after two rings.

"Boo?" Noah says.

"Yeah, hey," Morgan says.

After a moment of extremely awkward silence, in which Morgan contemplates just hanging up, Noah says, "What's up?"

Fuck it. Fuck all of it. "Can I see you?" Morgan asks.

"Today?"

"Yeah."

On the other end of the line, Noah takes a deep breath, lets it out again, and says, "I'll send you my address. I'll be home in about an hour."

"Okay," Morgan says.

"Okay," Noah echoes and then hangs up without saying goodbye.

Noah doesn't send his address until ten minutes later. By that time, Morgan has convinced himself that Noah won't send it at all and has decided to ignore him. Which he should.

Morgan shouldn't go. But he goes anyway.

#

Noah's townhouse looks exactly like it did in the pictures he sent when he first moved in. Outside the red door is a small wooden hockey stick with the house number carved into it. It's a nice place with big windows, but the blinds are closed, so Morgan can't peek inside.

He rings the doorbell before he can change his mind and Noah opens the door so fast that he must have been hovering close-by. He was probably hanging out on the couch, which is on the right, by the wall, a nest of blankets on it that Noah might have fought his way out of. He's wearing sweatpants and a shirt with a bright orange cartoon fox on it. It doesn't look like official merchandise.

"Come in," Noah says.

Morgan does, hands in his pockets, looking around with curiosity. Noah got new furniture, but he recognizes some of his stuff from the apartment he had in Brooklyn, pictures on the walls, the pucks on the shelf, what's new is all the orange. Especially the bright orange blanket on the couch.

"Team gave it to me," Noah says, following Morgan's gaze. "I know. It's really orange. But it's so soft, it's honestly the best blanket I've ever had."

“You liking Philly?”

“Yeah. I mean, we suck, but I like the guys.”

“Good,” Morgan says. “Your place is nice.”

Noah nods. He keeps his eyes on Morgan, clearly asking him what the fuck he’s doing here. Morgan doesn’t know what the fuck he’s doing here. He just wanted to see Noah.

“So,” Noah says, “how is... everything?”

“I missed you,” Morgan says.

And then they’re closer and then they’re touching and then they’re kissing and Noah’s holding him so tightly that Morgan has nowhere to go, all he can do is press closer. It’s all he wants. Be as close as possible, have Noah’s hands all over him, get his hands on Noah and kiss him until he feels like he’s drowning.

Noah’s hands are at his sides and Morgan’s hands are slipping under Noah’s shirt, soft skin under his fingertips. Noah bites his lip and it shoots through Morgan like lightning. He wants more, always more, always wants to be closer. His fingers are tangled in Noah’s hair and Noah moans softly when Morgan tugs.

“You wanna go upstairs?” Noah asks, breathless.

Morgan nods and they somehow manage to get up the stairs, stumbling, both of them refusing to keep their hands off the other for even just a second. Noah gets Morgan out of his coat at the bottom of the stairs, and his shoes stay down there as well. Halfway up the stairs, Noah tugs off Morgan’s shirt, working on Morgan’s jeans, while Morgan tries to convince Noah to let him take off his shirt first with a few insistent tugs.

By the time they’re in the upstairs hallway, Noah is wearing nothing but his briefs and he’s still trying to get off Morgan’s jeans. He gives up eventually, pushes open a door and pulls Morgan with him, into his bedroom, over to the bed and pushes him down, kisses his chest, works his way up, lips lingering against Morgan’s collarbone before he moves up his neck, then kisses him again, only moving away to say, “Can I blow you?”

“Okay,” Morgan says. He doesn’t care about anything right now, doesn’t care about what this means for them, doesn’t care whether or not this is wrong, doesn’t care what anyone would think if they knew, he just wants Noah to keep touching him.

Noah gives him one more kiss, then he sits back to get off Morgan's jeans, pulls his underwear off with them, and then his mouth is on Morgan's dick and it's the best thing he's ever felt in his entire life. Noah must have done this before, takes him deep, doesn't complain when Morgan pushes into his mouth. He didn't mean to, he just wants more of this, but Noah takes it and hums around Morgan's dick like he *loves* it. Morgan whines, fingers finding Noah's hair, tugging hard when he's close. Noah doesn't pull away, lets Morgan come in his mouth.

Noah gently pats Morgan's thigh and then flops down next to him, moaning when Morgan reaches for him, gets his briefs off and jerks him off, Noah leaning over to kiss him. Morgan is terrible at doing both of those things at the same time, distracted by Noah's lips, his hand forgetting that it was busy getting Noah off. Noah eventually stops kissing him back, breath stuttering when he comes.

They lie there together for a while, Noah's forehead resting against Morgan's, their breathing slowing, Noah's hand coming up to run his fingers along Morgan's jaw, thumb brushing over his cheek. Neither of them says a word. They've barely said a dozen sentences to each other since Morgan

walked in through the front door, and Morgan is starting to wonder if Noah regrets this already.

“Do you...” Morgan whispers. “Was this okay?”

“Of course it was okay,” Noah says. He kisses Morgan but he only barely catches his bottom lip. “All good.”

“I’m sorry,” Morgan says. Because he came here and because they did this and because it felt good and he wants to do it again and again and again, but he doesn’t know how to make himself be okay with this.

“Shh...” Another kiss and Noah’s nose brushes against Morgan’s. “Stop thinking.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can,” Noah says. “You can. Just breathe. Relax.”

Morgan squirms. They’re a mess and they need a shower and he can’t just lie here, but he also doesn’t have it in him to shake off Noah’s hand.

“It’s okay,” Noah says, his voice low, soothing. “I promise. It’s okay.”

Morgan closes his eyes, focuses on where Noah’s thumb is still dragging across his skin. He tries to breathe, tries

to be okay with this. Noah nudges his foot against Morgan's and leaves it there, his skin warm. Morgan is starting to get cold, can't get comfortable when he's lying here without his clothes on, so he forces himself to open his eyes and finds Noah looking back at him.

“Can we take a shower?” Morgan asks.

Noah nods. He kisses Morgan's forehead before he sits up and points at a door on their right. “Bathroom's right there, I'll get you a towel.”

“No, wait...” Morgan grabs Noah's wrist before he can get up.

“Hm?” Noah glances at Morgan, then at the bathroom door, then back at Morgan. “Oh, you literally meant... *we* .” Noah grins. “Okay then.”

#

Noah is making grilled cheese and Morgan is one wrong thought away from freaking the fuck out.

They took a shower and Noah wrapped him in an incredibly soft towel and then he kissed him and didn't even blink when Morgan pulled on the shirt Noah was wearing earlier. He'll have to give it back before he goes back to the

hotel, but for now he's wearing this shirt that smells like Noah and he's wearing a pair of sweatpants that Noah let him borrow. His jeans are still upstairs, next to Noah's bed.

Noah shoots him a sidelong glance, but doesn't say a word. He steps around Morgan and grabs two plates, plops the grilled cheese sandwiches on them and hands one to Morgan.

"Thank you," Morgan says.

They still haven't said much to each other.

Noah nods and reaches for him, pulls him closer, kisses him. It's like Noah doesn't want to stop touching him either. Morgan puts down his grilled cheese and steps closer, lets Noah wrap him up in his arms. Noah has one hand on Morgan's back, his grilled cheese in the other, munching it slowly.

"You not hungry?" Noah asks between bites.

Morgan is, but he can eat in a few minutes, when he's done pressing his face into Noah's shirt. He can hear the rest of Noah's grilled cheese hitting his plate.

"Boo," Noah says. "Are you freaking out?"

Morgan has been freaking out ever since they kissed the first time. He takes a deep breath. "I don't know what to

do.”

“You’re gonna eat your grilled cheese and then we’ll do whatever you wanna do and after you’ll go back to your team. And tomorrow we’ll play the game you’re here for and after you’ll go back to DC. And in two weeks, I’ll come to DC. And if you want me to come ‘round, I will.”

“What if I don’t?” Morgan asks.

“Then, I guess, you know where you’re at and we’ll definitely stop doing this.”

“I’m sorry,” Morgan says. “I shouldn’t have come today.”

“It’s okay. I gave you my address, didn’t I? I could have said no.” Noah nudges him and holds up Morgan’s grilled cheese. “Here, have some of this, I’m good at everything that involves cheese.”

“I know you are,” Morgan says and takes the plate. He eats the grilled cheese while Noah plays with the hem of his shirt.

“You got any plans for tonight?” Noah asks.

“No.”

“So you’ll stay for a bit?”

Morgan shrugs.

“If you wanna leave, that’s fine, too,” Noah says. “I’m just asking.”

“What do you wanna do?” Morgan asks.

“Well, I’ll blow you again if you want,” Noah says, all casual. “I also know how to do some other things.”

Morgan looks away, embarrassed. He doesn’t want to think about what those other things might be. He’s afraid he might want all of them.

“I…” Noah leans a little closer. “You know that I’ve slept with… other people… yeah?”

“Yeah,” Morgan says.

“So if you wanna try something else…”

Morgan’s face must be flaming red right now. He thinks about blowing Noah, the way he did for him, wondering just how terrible he’d be at it.

“Only if you want,” Noah says. “You know, there’s stuff I haven’t done that I, uh… Anyway, no pressure. Tell me what you want.”

“I don’t know,” Morgan says.

“You want suggestions?” Noah asks, his hand sliding down Morgan’s back to his ass, hand slipping into his sweatpants.

“Noah,” Morgan says. He knows what Noah is implying, but he doesn’t know if he wants to say yes or no to that.

Noah’s hand disappears and settles back against the small of Morgan’s back. Morgan ducks his head, because it shouldn’t be this hard to make a decision.

“Can we just...”

“Yeah?”

“Kiss?”

Noah smiles like that’s the best idea Morgan’s ever had and pulls him closer to kiss him. “Come on,” he says, kisses the corner of Morgan’s mouth and nudges him over to the couch.

He sits down and pulls Morgan into his lap, grabs the bright orange blanket and wraps it around the both of them and then goes back to kissing him. Kisses him again and again, the same way he did the first time in Morgan’s room in Sochi, and

there's no rush to anything, and Noah's hands stay right where they are, never trying to wander.

They end up horizontal on the couch anyway, because Morgan pushes Noah down, but he doesn't take it any further than that. Morgan curls against him and Noah tugs at the blanket.

“What's Bear doing when you're on the road?” Noah asks.

“I have a dog sitter and the neighbors check up on him pretty much every day so he can play with Sirius and isn't so lonely.”

“That's nice.”

“I miss him,” Morgan says. Maybe it's weird that he misses his dog like some of the other guys miss their families.

Noah kisses his forehead. “You'll see him tomorrow after the game.”

“Yeah.”

But tomorrow he won't have Noah around anymore, so he'll miss Noah. He missed Noah every single day after he told him that they were done.

“I should get a dog,” Noah mumbles. “But I don’t... I don’t know. Maybe I wouldn’t be a good dog dad. And, you know, right now I don’t even have a backyard. I’m just renting this place, I don’t own it, so I can move next season... if I’m even staying here. I don’t know.”

“What kinda dog do you wanna get?”

Noah laughs. “A fluffy one.”

“Of course.”

“Anyway, that’s not a decision for this season. I need a backyard first. And... a sense of direction. Like, career-wise. I think I’m gonna stay if they want me to re-sign. I like it here.”

“Even though everything’s orange?” Morgan asks.

Noah laughs again and this time Morgan can feel the couch shake. “Hey. It’s okay. I don’t look that bad in orange. And... you know, the jerseys are mostly black. Not like they were ten years ago. Those were... really orange.”

“Yeah,” Morgan says and tugs at the blanket, “really orange.”

“Shh, it’s a good blanket. He grabs a corner and rubs it against Morgan’s face. “Soft. So soft.”

“Yeah,” Morgan says and pushes the blanket away from him. He tucks himself a little closer to Noah. “Can we take a nap?”

“Yeah,” Noah says. “I’m always down for a nap.”

Morgan is asleep within seconds.

#

Morgan always stretches close to the center line before warm-ups. He has his spot, and he likes his spot. The problem with it is that it puts him pretty close to the other team. Most of the other guys just ignore him. Some of his teammates even come over here to talk to guys they used to play with. Morgan doesn’t like talking to people before games, so he keeps his head down.

He breathes.

He looks around, reads the signs. There’s always a bunch of their fans in Philly. It’s an afternoon game, so there’s a lot of kids. Most of the signs are for Marsh. A lot for Simon, too. Their two most important players – their captain and their goalie. And Austin. Everyone loves Austin.

Morgan isn’t exactly popular. Sometimes kids will make signs for him, but he isn’t one of those guys who sticks

around to sign people's stuff after practice. He isn't likeable to begin with and he's even less likeable up close, so he sticks to waving at people from the ice and doesn't otherwise interact with anyone if he doesn't have to. Sometimes the team will organize autograph sessions and Morgan doesn't really get a say in whether or not he attends those, but at the rink, he waves and gets the hell out of there.

Today there's a sign for him behind the goal – *Morgan Boyle, please score a goal for my birthday!* Morgan will try, but he always tries. He tries in every single game. That's why he scores 30 goals a season. Sometimes more. He wants more this year.

“Boo!”

Morgan looks up, and, much to his dismay, so do Jasper and Austin. Noah has knelt down on the other side of the red line, grinning at Morgan.

“Hey,” Morgan says.

The black jersey suits Noah. Every time he sees Noah in pads, he's surprised by how much bigger he looks. Even though they're about the same height, Morgan feels tiny in comparison. He wouldn't like for Noah to check him into the boards.

“How’s everything going?” Noah asks, very formal, his eyes on Austin, who seems to be watching them.

“Okay...” Morgan says.

“Cool,” Noah says. He winks at him. “Please don’t score.”

Morgan only stares at him, because Noah knows that Morgan won’t do him that kind of favor.

Noah grins. “See you in DC.”

Morgan ducks his head until he can’t see Noah’s skates out of the corner of his eyes anymore. When he gets up, Austin skates up to him and jostles him.

“Boo?” Austin says.

“It’s a nickname.”

“Yeah, I got that, but...”

Morgan shrugs and skates faster, over to where the kid with the sign is. He doesn’t usually throw pucks either, because once you do it, you can’t really stop. People come to expect those things from you and to Morgan it’s mostly a distraction. Today, he’s already distracted, so he’s basically trying to distract himself from being distracted.

He taps the glass where the kid is standing with his sign and the kid starts jumping around and banging against the glass. Since they're behind the goal, he can't really toss a puck over the glass, but he picks one up anyway and points at the little hole in the glass they have for photographers. It's big enough for a puck. The kid squeezes past a handful of people, including a little girl, who looks on as Morgan hands over the puck. He doesn't want her to feel left out, so he gives her one as well. She basically throws her entire body against the glass, like she wants to hug him. Morgan taps the glass with his stick in return and then skates away. They still have some time on the clock for warm-ups and he needs to focus.

He gets three assists during the game, but no goal. He almost scores the game winner in overtime, but Noah gets in the way, because of course he does. Once Noah has poked the puck away, their sticks gets tangled, then they get tangled and they both fall, Noah first, Morgan landing on top of him. The whistles goes, not because of them. Someone else got their stick on the puck and it ended up going out of play.

Morgan stays on top of Noah for a few more seconds than strictly necessary, and says, "That was mean."

Noah laughs and wiggles. “Didn’t mean to rain on your parade.”

“Sure you didn’t,” Morgan says. He gets off Noah, pats his bucket and skates away.

The Foxes end up winning the game, but at least the Eagles manage to take home one point.

As he gets dressed, Austin sidles up to him, poking him in the back. “Hey, Boo.”

“No, come on...”

“Yeah. Yeah. We never had a good nickname for you. You’re Boo now.”

Morgan sighs. “Can’t we just stick with Mo?”

“How do you even know Noah Andersson?”

“Sochi,” Morgan says.

“Ahh...” Austin nods, his eyes lingering on Morgan for another moment.

“What?”

“Nothing, it’s just... He’s so outgoing.”

“So?”

“Doesn’t seem like the kind of person you’d hang out with.”

“Why? Because I’m not outgoing?”

“Hey, I wasn’t trying to say—”

“No, I mean, I’m not,” Morgan says. He wasn’t offended. He’s very well aware that he’s not an extrovert. “I don’t know. We just... found a common ground, I guess.” Their common ground is mostly making out. And maybe Bear.

Austin grins. “Cool,” he says and throws an arm around Morgan. “You wanna come over for dinner tomorrow night? Marsh is coming.”

“Uh... maybe,” Morgan says. He’s not really feeling it, but the prospect of not having to cook or order takeout almost has him saying yes. Austin’s wife always makes the best food.

Austin pats his back and grabs his stuff, ready to head to the bus.

Morgan looks down at his phone, wondering what people did in the past when they were embarrassed about a conversation and just wanted to stay off the radar for a couple of minutes. What did they do when there were no phones? Did they just look people in the eye?

He's glad they invented cell phones to give them something to do in awkward moments.

As he fiddles with his phone, he finds a text from Noah
– *that was fun.*

Chapter Seven

They text occasionally after Morgan leaves Philadelphia, but it's not the same as the quick back and forth he remembers from last summer.

The Foxes lose their game in Florida and Noah asks for a picture of Bear. Morgan snaps one – Bear is snoozing next to him on the couch. Morgan had the day off after getting back

from a roadie early this morning and he spent pretty much the entire day in this exact spot.

He did some of his laundry because... there's a lot of laundry. He keeps finding clothes he probably should have put in the laundry a long time ago. There was a shirt under his bed. And socks under the leather armchair he only bought because he thought it looked cool. He never even sits on it, it's just another place for dirty laundry. And sometimes Bear steals socks, too. Not that Morgan would ever blame him, because it's his own fault for leaving socks lying around.

Morgan was going to go grocery shopping, but he couldn't find his car keys, so he ordered lunch and he also ordered groceries, because at that point he wasn't going to leave the house anymore anyway. He now remembers where he put his car keys last night, but he's too lazy to get up and check if they're actually there.

Noah replies to the Bear photo with a smiley face, then he says, *you busy tomorrow?*

Obviously Morgan knew this was coming, because the Foxes are probably about to head to DC for their game the day after tomorrow. Morgan has practice tomorrow, but after that he isn't busy at all.

Since he knew this was coming, he spent pretty much the entire past week thinking about what he was going to say to Noah. If he says yes to seeing Noah, this will keep happening, one way or another, if he says no, they're definitely done this time.

He takes a deep breath and says, *Sorry, I have some stuff to take care of after practice* .

It's not a yes, it's not a no, it's something in between, a way out, a way to buy more time to figure out what the fuck he should do about Noah. This is too hard a question for a simple yes or no answer.

He spends a lot of time thinking about Noah. Too much time. Sometimes, before he falls asleep, he'll think about Noah, curled up next to him, warm against his back, holding him almost a little too tightly. Morgan never had trouble falling asleep with Noah so close to him and now he keeps himself awake just thinking about it. In the shower, he'll think about Noah touching him, kissing him, he thinks about what he wants to do with Noah, things he'd never dare to say out loud, and then he catches himself and forces himself to think about something else, anything else.

Noah replies with a frowny face.

Sorry , Morgan says again. He knows it's a terrible excuse. He could run errands on literally any other given day. It's painfully obvious that he's lying, and yet Noah doesn't call him out on it.

no worries boo , he replies. Another text comes in a few seconds later. *see u on the ice* .

Morgan bites his lip, phone still in hand. He can still take it back and tell Noah that he can run his errands some other day, that he'll make time for Noah, that Noah can come over and play with Bear for as long as he wants, that they can kiss on his couch, that Morgan will order them dinner from his favorite place.

He doesn't text him. He just stares at his phone for about ten minutes, until Bear gets squirmy and wiggles closer to Morgan.

“Hey, bud,” Morgan says and scratches Bear's head. He didn't take Bear on a proper walk today, because he's a crappy human. Everything's fucking horrible, himself included. “I'm a bad dad. I'm sorry.”

Bear doesn't look unhappy, but tomorrow Morgan will take him on a long walk and he'll throw his favorite ball for

him in the backyard. Those are errands. That he needs to run. And that Noah would probably love to join him for.

Bear licks Morgan's hand, probably because he was holding food not too long ago, not because he's trying to convince Morgan that he isn't the worst dog parent ever.

"Tomorrow," Morgan says. "We'll go on a w-a-l-k." He has to spell it out, because if he says the actual word, Bear will think that they're going right now.

Instead of getting excited, Bear just puts his head in Morgan's lap and closes his eyes while Morgan keeps scratching the top of his head. Morgan tries not to unload all of his problems on Bear, because Bear doesn't even know what he's saying and he doesn't want Bear to catch those sad feelings from him. He doesn't want Bear to be sad ever in his life.

"Let's go to sleep, hm?"

Bear lazily wags his tail, sleepy, but realizing that Morgan is talking to him.

"Come on," Morgan says and gets off the couch. "Good boy, Bear, let's go."

Morgan leaves his phone on the table by the couch.

He doesn't text Noah.

#

Morgan thinks about Noah the day before the game.

He thinks about Noah while he goes on a walk with Bear and he thinks about Noah while he makes dinner and he thinks about Noah the next morning, and he thinks about Noah before he gets on the ice for the game.

Noah finds him, because Morgan isn't trying to avoid Noah so much that he'd give up his usual warm-up spot. They say hello, Noah chirps him about the tuft of hair that's apparently sticking out of Morgan's helmet, and then skates away with a wink, cheerful as always.

Morgan doesn't think about Noah during the game. He thinks about how he could get past him, to the net, but he doesn't think about kissing him or falling asleep next to him, or about the way Noah's hands feel on his skin. When he's on the ice, he's on the ice.

When he's off the ice... that's a different story.

It's a win for the Eagles that feels easy and Morgan gets first star thanks to his two goals and two assists and they send him back out onto the ice with a puck to throw to the fans

that stuck around. He gets pulled aside for an interview, then they finally let him go. There'll be more people to talk to in the locker room.

Morgan tries not to say anything controversial, deflects all the questions about himself and talks about the team instead, how he couldn't get off the ice with so many points if they weren't helping him out. The reporters in his scrum are mostly agreeable tonight, don't try to trick him into saying anything that they'd only end up twisting into something he didn't mean. They ask him, jokingly, if he ate anything special for breakfast this morning, and Morgan tells them, no, he did the same thing he always does, which isn't what they wanted to hear, but probably what they were expecting anyway. Morgan isn't one to cause chuckles during interviews. That's Austin's job.

They leave Morgan alone eventually and he starts tugging off the rest of his pads, his thoughts starting to wander far, far away from the game.

He doesn't like how he left things with Noah yesterday.

Not that Noah was angry. That's the problem with him, he's always so... nice. Happy. Cheerful, even. There might be

the occasional frown, but those are worried frowns, not upset frowns.

Morgan doesn't quite buy the charade.

On the ice, Noah looks intense, always so focused, that stare boring into opposing players, like Noah can keep them from scoring by glaring at them. Between whistles, he's all smiles, throwing around chirps, whistling as he glides across the ice. When someone touches one of his teammates, he's fierce, protective.

He must be angry sometimes, he just hides it well.

Morgan needs to talk to him before he leaves town. He could wait outside the visitors' locker room and ask him if he has a few minutes. Morgan just wants to say sorry. For lying. He's not a liar. He just... He doesn't know how to explain this to Noah, what's going on inside him whenever he thinks about them, about what they could be, about what they can't be.

All of this seems to come so easily to Noah. Like he's not scared of this at all, like it doesn't keep him up at night, like kissing other men is a perfectly normal thing to do. Not that it's not normal, it's just not... Morgan isn't homophobic. He doesn't care if people are gay or straight or whatever. People should be able to just live their lives. This is not about

other people. It's about him. And he doesn't know how to explain that to Noah.

Morgan is pretty sure that Noah is gay. He's never asked him. Maybe that's a conversation they should have, just because... No, it wouldn't really change anything.

"Mo, you still with us?" Austin asks. "Was that four-point night too much for you?"

"Huh?"

Austin laughs and claps him on the back. "Boys are heading out for drinks. You wanna come?"

"No, thanks."

Austin's gaze lingers on him for a moment, then he adds, "I'll buy you a Coke."

The way he says it is not malicious, he actually means it. He'd buy Morgan a Coke and he wouldn't chirp him for it. Morgan shakes his head. He has something else to take care of tonight.

"Okay," Austin says. He looks around, turns back to Morgan, and for a moment it looks like he might want to say something else, but he eventually just shakes his head, smiles and gets back to taking off his pads.

Morgan does the same. Before he can stop himself, he says, “Next time.”

Austin looks up again, grinning now. “I’ll hold you to it.”

Morgan is afraid that Austin actually will. He gets changed quickly, pulls his beanie over his damp hair and sneaks down the hall, where a door leads to the visitors’ side of the arena. He waits there, phone in hand, trying to look busy, glancing at the door every time it opens. Some of Noah’s teammates come out, so Morgan’s eyes are mostly on the door now, phone still in his hand, the screen gone dark.

He didn’t even have to keep an eye out for Noah, because when he comes out, he immediately stops in his tracks, looks around and then comes over to Morgan.

“Hey,” Noah says.

“Hi.”

“Uh...”

“I was waiting for you,” Morgan says, just in case that wasn’t clear. It probably was.

“Yeah, I, uh...” Noah trails off when the door behind him opens. Noah’s teammates didn’t seem to know that Noah

is acquainted with the enemy, so they gape a little as they walk by.

“Sorry,” Noah says loudly, “Phil doesn’t know what it’s like to have friends on other teams.”

Phil flips Noah off, the guy next to Phil cackling as they walk away.

“I need to get on the bus,” Noah says once he’s turned back to Morgan. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to...” Morgan quickly glances over his shoulder. No one around. “Sorry about yesterday.”

“It’s okay, Boo,” Noah says, his face never changing.

“Yeah, but... I’m sorry.”

“You—” Noah stops talking when the door behind him opens again. This time Nathan Lewis, the Foxes’ goalie comes out and glares at Morgan.

Morgan ducks his head.

“You kinda ruined his night,” Noah mutters. “Anyway, let’s talk some other time, yeah?”

“Okay,” Morgan says. “Can I call you later?” It’s not late yet. It was a three o’clock puck drop and the Foxes are

about to head home to Philly.

“I meant, like...” Noah shrugs. “Whatever. Sure. Call me later. I’ll text you when I’m home, okay?”

Morgan nods. For the briefest of moments, he wants to reach out and brush his fingers against Noah’s, very quickly, so quickly that it could easily be mistaken for something else. He tells himself to snap out of it. “Get home safe,” Morgan says.

Noah smiles and it’s very, very soft, and some knot in Morgan’s stomach unwinds. “I’ll talk to you later,” Noah says, gives Morgan’s arm a squeeze and walks away.

Morgan makes for his car before anyone else sees him lurking this close to the visitors’ locker room.

He can still feel Noah’s touch, fingers squeezing his arm, as he drives home.

#

Morgan has fallen asleep on the couch twice when Noah finally texts him to tell him that he’s home and that Morgan can call if he still wants to. In all honesty, Morgan isn’t sure if he still wants to, but he asked so he needs to follow through.

Noah answers after two rings and quietly says, “Hey.”

“You made it home.”

“I sure did,” Noah says. “Made it all the way to my bed.”

“And I’m keeping you awake,” Morgan mutters. It probably wasn’t supposed to be a dig at him calling this late, but that doesn’t mean that Noah wouldn’t rather go to bed.

“That’s all right, Boo. Let’s talk, yeah?”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” Noah echoes.

And then Morgan doesn’t know what to say, doesn’t even know where to start. He can’t make sense of it in his head and he can make even less sense of it out loud.

“Boo,” Noah says. “You said you were sorry.”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because... you know.”

“I... Honestly, I don’t know if I do,” Noah says. “Are you sorry because you blew me off yesterday?”

“I mean, I didn’t... I did. I’m sorry.”

“So you said,” Noah says. “Listen, I don’t know what to do. Because sometimes you wanna hang out and sometimes you don’t and I don’t really know where we’re at.”

“I’m sorry,” Morgan says again, because he doesn’t want this to be confusing, although it’s definitely too late for that.

“What do you want? Just tell me. I seriously can’t figure you out.”

“I don’t know,” Morgan says.

Noah laughs, like Morgan just cracked a joke. “Yeah, I... Okay. You know, I’m not saying that you’re supposed to know or anything, but can you... try to figure it out? Because right now I never know if I’m talking to the Morgan who likes hanging out with me or the Morgan who makes up bullshit excuses because he doesn’t want to see me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m not blaming you,” Noah says. He sighs.

“Fuck, I wish we could talk about this in person.”

“I—”

“Morgan,” Noah goes on, “let’s stop going back and forth, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Either we’re in or we’re out.”

“Yeah.”

It’s Morgan’s fault, because it was him who broke things off with Noah and still asked him if he could come over when he was in Philadelphia. He doesn’t apologize this time.

“I’m in,” Noah says, “in case that wasn’t clear. Now you decide. Not right now, but...”

Morgan nods, even though Noah can’t see him. He has no idea how Noah can just talk about this. He wants to ask him, but Noah is literally in bed and just waiting for him to hang up so he can finally go to sleep, so now is not the time. He also wants to ask Noah what he means when he says he’s in. Does it mean he’s *all* in?

“I’m going to sleep now, okay?” Noah says.

“Okay.”

“Say hi to Bear from me.”

“I will.”

“Is he being a good boy?”

Morgan glances at Bear, who's fast asleep on his favorite pillow across the room. "A very good boy."

"Good, that's good," Noah says. He's quiet for a moment, then he says, "I don't wanna hang up yet."

"Then don't," Morgan says.

"I'm literally about to fall asleep."

"I'll hang up."

"No, don't," Noah mutters. "Tell me about your day, Boo. Then you can hang up."

"I, uh..."

"Yeah, I know..." Noah is starting to sound sleepy now. "Tell me about how you destroyed my team. All by yourself."

"It wasn't just me," Morgan grumbles.

"You were involved in four out of five goals. I think I should probably hate you right now."

"Then why don't you?"

"You're too cute," Noah says softly. "You have that nose... cute nose."

Noah touches the tip of his finger to his nose. He never liked it much, because it makes him look too much like his dad. He doesn't even look a little bit like his mom. He has his dad's dark hair, his nose, his eyes. He's as tall as him, too, but skinny, like his mom, which is pretty much the only thing they have in common. His dad always called him the runt.

Wherever Morgan went, everyone always knew instantly that he was Freddie Boyle's son. That's what they all called him. Freddie Boyle's kid. "The little one, right?"

Morgan always nodded and tried to be as quiet and polite as he could so they'd know he was nothing like his father, who was loud and usually at least a little bit drunk, and the drunker he was, the more profanities he tended to spew as soon as someone looked at him the wrong way. And he wasn't like Danny, who got in trouble for stealing shit and smoking weed in the park. His number one goal was always to be invisible.

He doesn't tell Noah any of that, of course, but Noah's quiet, too, which is a novelty.

"Noah?"

"Hm."

“I’m gonna hang up now,” Morgan says. “Sleep well.”

“Hm.”

“Bye.”

Morgan hangs up and closes his eyes. His heart is beating way too fast. He takes a deep breath, but it doesn’t slow down one bit, so he curls himself into a ball and hugs a pillow.

He falls asleep on the couch like that and when he wakes up again, Bear is sleeping right next to him.

Chapter Eight

They don't talk for about a week.

Then Noah goes and fights Pierce Martin.

Morgan has the evening off, so he's at home, watching the game, stomach twisting every time Noah appears on his TV. In the first, his helmet gets knocked off, and he's yelling at one of the refs, because he wants a penalty and his blond hair is shaggy and Morgan wants to sink his fingers into it so badly.

No ten minutes later, Noah slams Ian Grey into the boards. It's a good hit, but Morgan is surprised that Grey is able to just get up and skate it off afterwards.

Presumably, that hit is what leads to the fight in the third, but Morgan would lie if he said he understands why the fuck Noah decides to drop his gloves with a guy like Pierce Martin. Thankfully, Martin doesn't totally murder Noah, but he doesn't look so good when he skates back to the bench, lip split, nose bleeding. They patch him up pretty quickly and he keeps playing, but Morgan still fights the urge to send Noah a billion texts to make sure he's actually okay for the rest of the game.

Morgan knows what they're all like. They keep playing and playing and playing, even when they know they shouldn't. No one stops them unless there's a chance they'll literally drop dead as soon as they set foot on the ice. Morgan played with a cracked rib during playoffs two years ago. It was just for one game and Morgan isn't sure if he'd do it again, but he did it. He wanted to keep going; it was for the Cup.

Eventually, he just sends, *Hope you 're okay*, because they haven't really talked on the phone since that call a little

over a week ago. He adds a picture of Bear, because that's one of the very few things he knows cheer Noah up.

Noah replies over an hour after the game has ended, says, *I ' m all good* , and, *tell bear he ' s the best boy* .

“Bear,” Morgan says and Bear wags his tail in reply. “Noah says you're a good boy. The best boy.” More tail-wagging. “Yeah. You are. He's right about that. You are a very good boy.”

Bear does that thing where he almost looks like he's smiling and Morgan snaps a quick picture of it. It turns out a little grainy and blurry, but he sends it to Noah anyway. Noah replies with a bunch of hearts.

And that's it for their interactions for the month.

Since Noah isn't texting him all that much anymore, Morgan concludes that Noah might not want to get any texts from Morgan either. So he sends the occasional picture of Bear, mostly when he finds himself fiddling with his phone, pulling up Noah's contact, but never hitting call, or staring at their texts, wondering if he should say something.

He wants to talk to Noah all the time.

And then he thinks about what Noah said, that he's all in, and that'll keep Morgan up for hours, because he isn't all in, he knows he isn't, he can't be, because that'd mean that he's—

He was just curious.

He has no idea how this happened. He's not in love with Noah, but he also doesn't want to lose him, but he also can't pretend he's something he's not, but then, on some nights, he isn't even sure who he is anymore, and that'll send his heart hammering again.

Morgan doesn't like that he's getting so used to rolling from one side of his bed to the other before he falls asleep.

#

Morgan is in Dallas when he receives three calls from an unknown number while he's at practice. He recognizes the area code. It's either Danny or his mom. He wouldn't have picked up even if he hadn't been on the ice, because he's not in the mood to fight with Danny about money.

Danny and Morgan were never close, with Danny being ten years older than Morgan. By the time Morgan started playing hockey, Danny had already stopped, not interested in

playing sports anymore. He was more interested in making his own money, so he could get out of their parents' house, but he never really made enough, and then there was their dad, who would swipe whatever money they had hidden in their drawers. Whatever money Morgan had he never kept in obvious places like his and David's sock drawer. He hid it between pages of books sometimes, between his sheets and his mattress, but he never had much to begin with. Their grandparents hardly ever sent them money – they paid for Morgan's hockey gear. He got a lot of hand-me-downs from his brothers, too, but David played goalie, so a lot of his equipment was no use to Morgan and Ben's was too old and never fit Morgan properly.

When Ben got a hockey scholarship for college, their parents were excited, when Ben signed with a team even more so, but Ben never really made the NHL, except for a handful of games here and there. He never got the salary they were hoping he'd get, but he still made enough that they'd ask him for money. By that time, Morgan had already been drafted and had signed his entry level contract with the Eagles. He'd already told his mom that he wouldn't be coming home for Christmas twice, not if their dad was still around. He'd already changed his number so Danny would stop calling him to ask

for money, but for some reason Ben kept passing on his new one, and so Danny kept calling, and Morgan started offering to pay for things instead of just sending checks.

But Dan never wanted *things* . Not if they were things he couldn't sell.

While Morgan stares down at the number with the all-too-familiar area code, another call comes in, phone lighting up in his hand. Same number. He doesn't answer this time either.

Austin shoots him a look that Morgan ignores.

Morgan's phone goes dark with a missed call on the screen.

It starts ringing again a moment later. It must be Danny. His mom would leave a message or she'd send a text, but she hasn't really been in touch since she asked Morgan if she could borrow some money. That's what she said. *Borrow* . Like she was going to pay him back. Morgan asked her what she needed the money for. She said to fix up the house. Morgan told her to have it fixed and he'd pay for the bills. She said it'd be easier if she just had the money.

“What do you really want it for?” Morgan asked then.

He didn't like the prolonged silence on the other end of the line before his mom started rattling off things that needed fixing. Morgan told her again that he'd pay for it, and she told him she'd look into it, and a few days later she called him again, drunk, slurring at him that if he was grateful for all she'd done for him, he'd just give her the money and stop acting so suspicious.

Morgan somehow managed to tell her that if she ever wanted help getting sober, she could give him a call. She yelled at him. Morgan hung up the phone. He still doesn't know how he did it.

"Morgan?" Austin says, voice low. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Morgan says.

Austin's eyes linger on him a moment longer.

"Really, everything's fine," Morgan mumbles and puts down his phone.

Just his brother who wants money and somehow found out his new phone number. No big deal. He's been here before. He almost wants to text Ben to ask him if it was him who gave Danny his number, but Morgan already knows the answer. It must have been Ben, because David wouldn't pass it along

without asking for permission first. Although the last time he talked to David about Danny, it sounded like the two of them weren't in touch at all.

Morgan heads back to the hotel with some of the guys in the afternoon and lies down for a nap. When he wakes up, he has a text from his dog-sitter, telling him that Bear is as well-behaved as always, two more missed calls from the same number as earlier, and a missed call and a text from Ben. *Give me a call when you have a minute*, the text says.

Maybe Danny's been calling Ben all day, too.

Technically, Morgan has a minute now, because later he'll head out for dinner with the guys. He owes that one to Austin and he doesn't want to be completely anti-social. It sounded like a bunch of the guys – particularly the ones who not-so-fondly refer to Morgan as the fun police – were headed elsewhere.

So he gives Ben a call and he picks up on the first ring. “Hey, Morgan.”

“Hey, what's up?”

Ben is quiet for a moment, then he says, “Danny called me earlier.”

“Oh. Yeah. I’ve been getting calls from an unknown number and I guess that must have been him, too.”

“Yeah, he told me you weren’t picking up. Which... I get it. So he told me to give you a call instead.”

“That’s what he said?”

“He had some, uh... choice words. I told him you were probably at practice and he calmed down a little. Anyway... he didn’t have good news.”

“What happened?” Morgan asks. He should probably be scared right now, but he has trouble feeling anything at all.

“Dad had a heart attack this morning. You know, he and Danny are still in touch and Danny’s his emergency contact, so they called him, and Dad doesn’t have insurance and... honestly, I think Danny was freaking out a little. Didn’t really know what to do, so he called you, and me, and he’s been sending emails to Dave, but Dave’s said jackshit, obviously.”

“So is Dad...” Morgan doesn’t finish.

“He’s gonna be fine, apparently,” Ben says. “When it happened, he was at *Jank ’s* and one of the guys who hangs out there a lot is apparently a retired doctor, so...”

Morgan can't help it, he laughs. "Sorry," he says, shaking his head at himself. "It's not funny, but..."

"I know, I get it," Ben says.

They're both quiet for a moment. Morgan can hear Stevie and Pekka laughing in the room next to his. On the other end of the line, someone mutters something to Ben. Ben mutters something back.

"So," Ben says to Morgan, "Danny asked if we were going to come home."

"Why?"

"Because our dad had a heart attack," Ben says.

Right. That's something people might go home for. Morgan is sure that the Eagles would put him on a plane to Buffalo in a heartbeat if he told them what happened. "I'm not going home," Morgan says.

"Okay," Ben says. There's no judgement in it. He might have expected as much.

"Are you?"

"Yeah."

Morgan bites his bottom lip, because he can't say, *Really?* Because that would have definitely come out judgmental.

“Listen,” Ben goes on, “I know you don't want to be involved in this. That's okay. I guess he was just more of a dad for me than he was for you. He still mostly had his shit together when I was younger.”

Morgan highly doubts that their dad ever had his shit together, but he doesn't say so, because that's not a conversation he wants to have right now, or ever. It's not a conversation that has a point. Of course their dad had good days, too. Sometimes he'd take them on trips, sometimes he'd give them presents, sometimes he'd come to their games. But those days were rarities and they didn't make up for what happened in between. Maybe they did when Ben was younger, when Morgan was too young to understand what was even going on.

“In any case, I'll make sure they leave you out of this, okay?” Ben says.

“Okay,” Morgan says. He doesn't protest. If Ben wants to pay for their dad's hospital bills, that's Ben's business. Morgan... he might do it. If there was no one else.

He'd have to do it without thinking too much about it, because what would that say about him? Helping the guy who beat up his brothers, who beat up their mom, who threw plates and glasses at them, who broke their toys when he was having a bad day, who found a million ways to hurt them, day after day after day.

"I'll tell Danny to stop calling," Ben says. "Give me a call if you change your mind about coming home, yeah?"

"Yeah," Morgan says. "I'll tell David."

"Pretty sure Danny tried to get in touch with him, but yeah, he'd probably rather hear from you than from him."

Morgan says goodbye to Ben and tries to keep himself from wondering how Ben can stand going home and seeing their dad.

He calls David, tells him the news. He makes it quick, still doesn't feel a thing when he says it.

"Did he die?" David asks.

"No."

"Hm," is David's reply to that. "Well. Thanks for telling me."

“Sure,” Morgan replies. They don’t linger on the topic of their dad.

He remembers sitting in the closet with David, when he was maybe six or seven, both of them doing their homework, both of them holding flashlights, a towel stuffed against the crack under the door so no one would see the light, while their parents were having a shouting match in the kitchen.

He remembers the sudden silence, he remembers hearing his mother crying, he remembers David saying, very softly, “Sometimes I wish he’d just die.”

Morgan frequently found himself wishing for the same thing in the years to come.

“How’s Emma?” Morgan asks. She’s about three months old now, his little niece. He won’t meet her until January, when the Eagles are on their West Coast roadie.

“Oh, she’s doing great, she’s such a good baby. I’ll send you more photos if you want?”

“Yeah, of course I want them.”

“We watched that afternoon game the other week and she was wearing the shirt you sent for her, I forgot to send you

the pictures I took. She looked adorable. And she was totally cheering for you.”

“I’m glad,” Morgan says. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

“She can’t wait to meet you either. She told me that, in her really weird baby-babbly way.”

“I’m sure she did,” Morgan says.

“She’s smart.”

“Unlike her dad.”

David laughs. “Hey!”

“*David*,” someone says in the background.

“Sorry, sorry, she didn’t wake up, did she?”

She did. Morgan can hear her crying.

“Aw, crap, I gotta go, Morgan.”

“No worries.”

They hang up quickly and then Morgan is alone in his hotel room, alone with his thoughts, alone for another hour until it’s time to leave for dinner. He wishes he could tell someone about this, but if he told one of the guys, if he told Austin, or Marsh, they’d get worried and they’d ask him if he’s sure that he doesn’t want to go home and then he’d have

to explain that his dad is an abusive asshole and that he told lie after lie whenever anyone asked him about his dad or when the annual dads' trip rolled around.

No, he can't tell anyone on the team.

He's still holding his phone. He doesn't know where Noah is today. Not that he'd consider telling Noah, he can't unload all of this on anyone, but he wouldn't mind hearing his voice right now.

Morgan puts down his phone.

He's not calling him.

#

Morgan calls Noah five minutes later.

He doesn't know how to be alone with his thoughts right now, and with every ring that Noah doesn't pick up, he gets a little more antsy.

Morgan doesn't breathe until Noah finally says, "Hey, Boo."

How can Noah make him feel so much better by just saying two words?

"Hey," Morgan says.

“What’s up?”

“I just... wanted to talk to you.”

“Yeah?”

“I... There’s some family drama going on and it’s... really fucked up and it’s a really long story, but... I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Oh,” Noah says. “You okay?”

“I’m fine, just... I don’t even know. It’s like... I’m not feeling the way I’m supposed to be feeling right now.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I don’t know,” Morgan says. “Not sad enough, I guess.”

“Boo,” Noah says softly. “You sure you don’t wanna tell me what happened?”

“No, it’s... it’s all really fucked up.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Do you have time to talk for a little bit?” Morgan asks.

“Yeah, yeah, sure. What do you need?”

“Tell me something that’s not family drama.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to hear about *my* family drama? Because we’ve got some super dumb bullshit going on.”

“Oh, yeah, tell me about that.”

Noah launches into a story about his aunts who apparently got into a fight because one of them said that the other one’s cats were too fat in the family group chat, and apparently she’d meant to say that privately and after that things went ugly quickly, family traditions ended up getting insulted, dead family members got dragged into the mud, and now the only people left in the group chat are Noah and his mom.

“There’s also some more serious drama, but I think I’ll save that for a different day,” Noah says. “It’s not fun drama.”

“No, tell me now.”

“You sure?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Well, I met my dad for lunch the other day and I guess I’ve never told you much about my dad, but he has opinions, you know?” Noah says.

Morgan obviously knows about Noah's dad. He was a good player, he won the Cup with Vancouver, but he doesn't actually know him as a person. "What kind of opinions?"

"Well, the Foxes really want me to stay and my dad says I'll be wasting away my career, because he thinks I won't win a Cup in Philadelphia. Not that I asked for his opinion. I thought he wanted to have dinner to, like, reconnect or whatever, because we haven't really been talking, but no, he just wanted to make sure that I wouldn't make all the wrong choices. You can't see me doing air quotes, but I'm doing air quotes."

"That's, uh..."

"Yeah. And, the thing is, I don't get why he's so sure about the Foxes not winning a Cup in the next, I don't know, ten years. Not that I'll be signing a contract for ten years, but sometimes it's so random who wins the Cup. Once the playoffs start, it doesn't really matter how your regular season went."

"True," Morgan says.

"Anyway, I think I'm gonna re-sign with the Foxes."

"Because your dad doesn't want you to?"

“No, because I want to,” Noah says. “I like Philly. The guys are cool. The blankets are soft. The orange isn’t all over the place like I first thought. It’s not so bad.”

“What are they offering?”

“Eh, we haven’t actually started talking, other than, hey we’re interested in keeping you, and, hey I’m interested in staying here. I’d ask for four years, I guess. I think that’s reasonable. I don’t know about the money... Would be nice to get a raise, but there’s more reasons to stay here than just the money.”

“It’s good that you like it there,” Morgan says. It’s not a given to have a team that makes you feel like you belong.

For Morgan it’s a bit of a half-and-half situation, because half the team thinks he’s boring and the other half is trying desperately to find ways for him to fit in. It works for Morgan. If Morgan wasn’t scoring so many goals for them, if he wasn’t setting up so many for Marsh, the guys would probably like him a lot less.

“Do you want me to keep talking?” Noah asks.

“Uh...” Morgan glances at his watch. Austin will probably knock on his door soon, so he should get out of his

sweatpants, but now that he has Noah on the phone, he doesn't want to hang up. "Five more minutes?"

"Sure, Boo."

Noah talks about... nothing in particular. A new bakery he tried, a restaurant in Montreal that he and his teammates found, how much he loved the picture of Bear that Morgan sent him the other day.

"Thank you, Noah," Morgan mutters.

"Sure. Anytime. If you, uh... you know, if you want to talk about what happened... I'm here, okay?"

"Okay," Morgan echoes. He adds another, "Thank you," just for good measure.

"Of course," says Noah.

#

Maybe Morgan calls Noah a little too often. Especially since they never really talk about anything in particular. They just... talk. Actually, Noah does most of the talking, but that's what Morgan wants anyway.

It's usually when Ben sends him updates on their dad that Morgan calls. Ben isn't home anymore, was just there for a couple of days, but it seems that Danny is keeping Ben

updated and Ben dutifully passes it all on to Morgan. And David. Morgan doesn't usually reply. What is he supposed to say when Ben tells him that their dad got released from the hospital? What is he supposed to say when Ben tells him what the doctors said? It's not like their dad will actually stop drinking or adopt different eating habits or change anything at all about his lifestyle, so what the doctors said is pretty irrelevant.

He should tell Noah what's going on his life and why he keeps calling him, one time in the middle of the night, because he couldn't sleep, one time as he was driving home after a game, because Danny had tried to call him again that day, one time in the morning, on what turned out to be Noah's day off.

Morgan knows he shouldn't be calling Noah that often.

At this point they've basically broken things off, a wordless agreement that nothing else will happen between them. Noah comes back to DC in December, but they don't meet up. It's a back-to-back game for the Foxes. They arrive the day of the game and leave for Boston right after they murder the Eagles. Noah says hello during warmups, but that's all.

Christmas comes and goes.

Morgan spends the day with Bear, puts a Santa hat on him, gives him extra treats all day and then goes to bed early. He lets all calls go to voicemail. He doesn't reply to any texts, save for Noah's *Merry Christmas* text in the morning.

He thinks about calling him all day, but he knows that Noah's mom is visiting, so he puts his phone away and doesn't look at it, not until the next morning. No texts from Noah, which shouldn't surprise him. They both have the day off, everyone does, and then it's back to work tomorrow. It's only eight, and Noah likes to sleep in, and why would Noah text him anyway?

Morgan gets out of bed to go to the bathroom, takes out Bear, feeds him, and then flops back into bed, because it's not like he has anywhere else to be. He replies to a few texts from yesterday, checks the news, and falls asleep again.

When he wakes up, he grabs his phone, stomach dropping when there is once again nothing from Noah, which is still... Why would Noah call him? He has family visiting, so Morgan is probably the last person on his mind. Morgan closes his eyes again. He can hear Bear padding past his bedroom door. He could get up and open it, snuggle with Bear, maybe

watch a movie. He turns over and pushes his face into his pillow.

He sleeps for another half hour, just dozing, then he grabs his phone again, squints at the time, scrolls through Instagram. He's never posted anything, he just made it because everyone had one and he mostly uses it to like his teammates' photos. He follows Noah, because... well, it's Noah. He posts a lot of pictures of food. And sunsets. Cities. Funny signs. Workout pictures. More food. His teammates' dogs. Noah at the beach, shirt off, feet in the sand. Noah hugging a palm tree. Noah grinning down at a very blue cocktail. He posted a picture about an hour ago, of his breakfast table – eggs, bacon, pancakes, fruit.

Morgan doesn't actually mean to call him, and the second Noah picks up, he says, "I know, I have to stop calling you."

"I..." Noah sighs. "At least you're self-aware."

"I can hang up."

"No, don't do that. You owe me at least fifteen minutes of your time now," Noah says. "How was your Christmas? Do you even do Christmas? I never asked."

“I do Christmas.”

“Cool. Was it good? Did Santa get something nice for Bear because he’s been the best boy?”

“Of course.”

“Good, it’s what he deserves. Were you in DC or did you go home?”

“DC.”

“Did you...” Noah trails off. “Boo, the stuff that’s been going on... with your family... were you alone yesterday?”

“Bear was here.”

“But you were... Boo.”

“What?”

“You could have come up, it’s not that far of a drive.”

“You really would have wanted me there?” Morgan asks. “Even though I don’t even... I can’t even...” He squeezes his eyes shut. “You now. Everything’s so messed up.”

Noah is strangely quiet for a moment, then he says, “Do you need me to come down?”

“ *What?* ”

“I’m just asking, because... I don’t want you to be alone if you don’t want to be alone.”

“Your mom is there.”

“She’d understand. I could drive back tonight and she’s here for a few more days to watch some games and stuff. She can be on her own for a bit, she honestly won’t mind.”

“I...” Morgan almost tears up at the thought of having Noah here with him, even if it’s just for a few hours. “No. Don’t. It’s okay. I’m okay, really. You should spend time with your mom.”

“Okay,” Noah says. Something that Morgan doesn’t recognize has snuck into Noah’s voice. “Well, I should... I made a huge mess in the kitchen earlier and I need to get that cleaned up. You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Give Bear a hug from me?”

“Dogs don’t like hugs.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll give him a belly-rub.”

Noah laughs. “Sounds good. I’ll see you around,
yeah?”

“Yeah,” Morgan says, “see you around.”

Chapter Nine

To Morgan, the All Star Game isn't exactly a joyous occasion. It's the second time he's going and it obviously speaks for the season he's having – he has more goals than Marsh for the first time in his career. The first time they sent him, he was a rookie and he was an emergency replacement for Marsh.

It's a media circus from beginning to end and if there's anything Morgan tries to avoid as much as possible, it's

talking to the media. He'd just rather... not. They always twist whatever he said and make him look like a huge asshole. And, okay, maybe he isn't always the politest guy in the Eagles' locker room, but it's not like he's actively trying to be rude. He just doesn't show as much enthusiasm as some other guys do.

Marsh is way better with the media, and he's not even one of those guys who joke around with the reporters and smile, he's pretty serious most of the time, but he somehow doesn't come off as rude. Morgan should ask him to teach him his ways. Everything Marsh says sounds genuine. He also seems to be genuinely happy for Morgan when he gets selected for the All Star Game. And he seems to genuinely mean it when he tells Morgan to have a good time.

Morgan will do his very best, which probably won't be good enough.

Noah is going, too.

They're both going.

They'll be in the same place for an entire weekend. They'll see each other. They'll talk to each other. They might even end up on the same team. Morgan can't decide if he's excited to see him or if he'd rather not see him at all.

Somehow, Noah is one of the first people he runs into as he checks in and Noah smiles at him and Morgan smiles back and his feet carry him over to Noah, even though he had no intention to walk over there at all.

“Hey,” Noah says and throws an arm around him.

“How was your flight?”

“Okay,” Morgan says. “Yours?”

“I took an excellent nap,” Noah tells him, “and I bought a really good sandwich at the airport. Shit. I wonder what they put in there. I kept the wrapper with the ingredients list, but it’s like fucking hieroglyphics.” He turns away to wave at the Mariners’ captain, Nolan West. “I gotta go say hi to him, I’ll see you later, okay, Boo?”

Morgan nods and watches him flit away to tackle-hug Nolan West.

They’re only a few hours into the All Star Weekend and the more Morgan watches Noah – and he really needs to stop watching him – the more convinced he is that Noah is actually friends with everyone in the league. When they’ve all gathered for drinks after Morgan – and Noah – got drafted by Josh Roy’s team, Noah is standing with Blake Samuels.

Incidentally, Morgan was talking to David the other day and David literally wouldn't stop talking about Blake Samuels and how great he is. He shipped a hockey card and a Sharpie to Morgan so he can ask Blake Samuels to sign it. Apparently Noah and Blake Samuels are the best of friends, which Morgan didn't know anything about. Noah is leaning close to Blake, touching his arm.

Morgan doesn't like it.

Elliot Cowell, the captain of the Ravens, joins them and says hello, which is probably a good time for Morgan to jump in there as well. He'll just ask Blake for his signature real quick, and he'll talk to some of the other guys and then he'll sneak away to his room. People keep offering him drinks and he's starting to get tired of turning them down.

Noah is saying something when he spots Morgan, quickly falling silent when Morgan sidles up to their little group.

Morgan doesn't really know Blake and Elliot, just knows them as players. They're good at what they do. Elliot Cowell is probably one of the most popular players in the league and definitely one of the most beloved captains in Ravens history. And Blake Samuels is... well, he's Blake

Samuels. Morgan hates playing against him and doesn't mind at all that they're on the same team this weekend.

"Hey, Boo," Noah says.

Morgan wishes Noah would stop calling him that. He knows it's just because Noah was trying to find something to go with his last name, but it sounds too much like something it's not.

Morgan nods at Noah. "I don't want to barge into your conversation," he says. "I just..." He pulls out the card David sent to him and turns to Blake Samuels. "My brother used to be a goalie and you're his favorite..."

"Oh," Blake says. He doesn't look mad that Morgan is asking him for this right now, which is great. Elliot Cowell seems to think something is really funny.

"Would you sign this for him?" Morgan asks. "I promised him I'd at least try."

Blake takes the card from him, mumbling, "Of course."

Morgan hands over the Sharpie, too. He sure as hell hopes that David will appreciate Morgan's sacrifice.

"He literally talked about how great you are for ten minutes when he called me the other day," Morgan tells him.

For some reason. Blake Samuels probably didn't need to know that. David would kill him if he knew that Morgan just said that.

Noah laughs.

“What's his name?” Blake asks, thankfully keeping this from getting too awkward.

“It's David.”

Morgan watches Blake as he signs the card and adds his number and a little fish, because he can't possibly look at Noah right now.

“Do you always do the fish?” Elliot asks.

“Yeah, it's not like my signature takes up too much space.” Blake holds out the card and says, “Hey, I'll get you a stick for him after the game, okay?”

“Really?” Morgan asks. David is going to drop dead when he tells him. It's not like Morgan usually has these sorts of connections, because he doesn't have friends all over the league like Noah.

“Yeah, for sure,” Blake says.

Morgan tries to smile like a normal person would.

“Thank you. He'll love that.”

“No problem.”

Morgan wonders if he can just walk away now or if it's expected of him to politely talk about hockey for a few minutes. It seems that no one really has anything to say right now. He doesn't miss that Noah shoots him a sidelong glance.

“How are Angus and Squid?” Elliot asks.

Whoever Angus and Squid are, Noah seems to get really excited at the mention of them. “Yes, how are the children?”

“You have kids?” Morgan asks. “Are they here?” He only belatedly realizes that Squid would be a really strange name to give a child.

“They're my cats,” Blake says, shooting a glare in Noah's direction, because Noah is fucking wheezing.

Morgan glares in Noah's direction as well, because it wasn't *that* funny. “I have a dog,” he says just so they can all stop laughing about what he said.

Noah is beaming now. “Yeah, how's Bear?”

“He's doing fine.”

Blake leans closer to him. “You have a picture?”

Morgan has about a billion pictures, he's just not sure why anyone would be so excited to see them. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and opens up the last picture he took of Bear before he left DC. He got him a new toy; it was an apology for leaving again.

Noah leans over his shoulder. "I love Bear."

"Here, this is my cats," Blake says and shows Morgan a pictures of a huge orange cat and a slightly smaller black one.

"They have a very successful Instagram account," Noah says. "You know, I bet people would love to look at pictures of Bear all the time, too."

"I'm not making an Instagram account for him," Morgan grumbles.

"But you never use yours."

"So?"

"I want to see all the pictures of Bear."

"I basically send you every picture of Bear that I take," Morgan says.

Noah gives him a pat. "And I appreciate it." His hand lingers on Morgan's shoulder for a moment.

Morgan definitely needs to leave. As he looks around, he finds Tyler Chopra, who might be his ticket to get out of this conversation. He and Tyler used to play together; they were rookies together in DC before Tyler got traded.

He ends up on his own again a few minutes later, gets another Coke, and stands in a corner, wondering if it's too early to go back to his room.

He's just staring down at his phone and not really doing anything with it when someone next to him says, "Hey."

"Hey," Morgan says and looks up to find Elliot Cowell smiling at him.

"You're having a great season," Elliot says.

"Thank you," Morgan says. "You, too." Elliot Cowell has a great season every season, but sadly his team doesn't have a great season every season.

Elliot smiles at him again. He's very smiley, but not in an awkward kind of way. It puts Morgan at ease. They talk about hockey, which is great, because Morgan actually has things to say about hockey and doesn't have to awkwardly stammer something like he does when someone asks about his family or his personal life.

Morgan understands pretty quickly why everyone loves Elliot Cowell that much. He tries so hard. Morgan might find it annoying if it was anyone else, but he makes sure to keep Morgan in conversations when other guys come over to them, occasionally throws a question his way, but doesn't expect him to say much either.

As soon as the first person slips out of the room, Morgan sees his chance to escape. "I'll head back to my room," he says. "It was nice talking to you, Elliot."

He's surprised that he really means that.

#

Once Elliot has wandered off, Morgan looks around before he takes off as well, catches Noah's eye across the room and Noah won't look away. Morgan looks back at him. For at least a minute. Which is a long time to be looking at someone in public without talking to them. Morgan looks away, looks up one more time, finds Noah still staring in his general direction, and then walks out of the room.

He waits by the elevators, staring at his phone and Noah joins him about a minute later without saying a word.

Morgan looks up.

Noah looks back.

“You wanna hang out for a bit?” Morgan asks.

“Okay,” Noah says and reaches around him to hit the button for the elevator. His hand brushes against Morgan’s side and Morgan can’t decide if he wants to take a step back or if he wants to lean into it. He stays right where he is, peering around Noah to see if there’s anyone else around.

It’s just them.

“Let’s take the stairs,” Morgan says anyway, because he doesn’t want to keep standing here.

Noah looks like he wants to protest for a second, but follows Morgan to the stairs. It doesn’t take them too long to get up to his floor. Morgan’s room isn’t far down the hall. He swipes his key card and pushes the door open, steps inside, Noah following at his heels, and as soon as the door is closed again, Morgan wraps his arms around Noah and he doesn’t even kiss him, he just hugs him and doesn’t let go.

“Hey,” Noah says.

Morgan holds on tighter.

“Okay...” Noah gently pats his back. “Guess you needed a hug?”

Morgan gives him a squeeze.

Noah laughs softly and keeps holding him, hand slowly running up and down Morgan's back. He didn't even know he needed a hug this much.

Now he can't let go.

Literally, he can't.

Noah just stands there with him, like it isn't weird as hell, one of his hands now on the back of Morgan's neck, rubbing tiny circles at the back of his skull. Morgan ducks his head down, wishing he could tuck his head under Noah's chin, but he's too tall.

"Hey, Boo? I really don't mind standing here, I promise, and we can stand here for as long as you want, but we could also... you know, sit down or something?"

"In a minute," Morgan says.

"Okay, you are still talking to me. That's great. I was getting kinda worried, because you weren't saying anything."

"Sorry."

"No, it's okay." Noah hugs him close. "It's okay. I missed you."

Morgan missed him, too, he just doesn't know how to say that, so he gives Noah yet another squeeze. He can hear – and feel – Noah draw in a deep breath. Morgan pulls away the tiniest bit to look at him. He missed seeing Noah's face, that scar that cuts through his eyebrow and that little birthmark at the side of his jaw and his pale eyelashes. He has a small cut on his chin, probably took a stick to the face recently. Morgan reaches up, touches the tip of the finger to Noah's jaw, right next to the cut.

“It happened during practice the other day,” Noah says with a shrug. “Phil was getting a bit rowdy.”

Morgan doesn't know what to say to that, so he kisses Noah, which works just as well. He missed kissing Noah, too. Noah kisses him back, and goes with him when Morgan takes a step back, hand caught in Noah's shirt, taking him over to his bed, fingers working on the buttons of Noah's shirt and Noah shucks it off impatiently, getting caught at his wrists. Morgan helps him tug it off, kissing Noah again while Noah starts working on Morgan's shirt. His hands are everywhere, lips on Morgan's mouth, then his jaw, then his throat, then back on his mouth, and Morgan's shirt comes off and he walks right into his bed, Noah following, pushing him down. Morgan doesn't

even care what happens next, he just wants Noah to keep touching him.

Okay, maybe a tiny part of him does care, but that part is quiet right now, has taken a backseat to the urge to get closer to Noah, to kiss him harder, Morgan's fingers in his hair, on his back. Noah grinds down against him, and Morgan can feel him, hard in his pants, and it's already so much, and Morgan still wants more. He should get Noah's pants off, but then he'd have to move one of his hands and he likes where his hands are right now. Noah stops kissing him for a second and Morgan tugs at his hair to complain.

"Fuck, Morgan," Noah says. He stills, breath hot against Morgan's neck. "We gotta stop. I'm sorry, but..."

"You okay?" Morgan asks.

"Yeah, yeah..." Noah lets out a deep breath and gets off Morgan, only to flop back down right next to him, fingers slowly running up and down Noah's upper arm.

"Did I—" Morgan bites his lip. He's always so scared that he'll do something wrong, because he has no experience with this, but then Noah would tell him, right? Or maybe this is him telling Morgan. He fucked up.

“It’s okay,” Noah says and pulls Morgan closer. “No need to look all freaked out.”

Morgan curls against him with a sigh.

“Morgan,” Noah says, his voice soft, “I need to talk to you, okay?”

“Oh,” Morgan says. “Okay.”

“Can we?”

“Okay.”

“You can have another minute.”

Morgan will take that minute, because he doesn’t want to talk yet. He doesn’t know how. It’s weird to cuddle like this, when they were on their way to something else, but Morgan will take it.

After more than just one minute, Morgan pulls away, because he knows he can’t get away with this for much longer, even though Noah seems inclined to let him. He gets up and grabs a t-shirt he was wearing earlier. Noah gets his shirt, too, buttons it up. He misses one and it ends up getting buttoned lopsided, but Morgan doesn’t tell him. Noah only closes up three buttons anyway and then sits back down on the edge of Morgan’s bed.

Morgan sits next to him, their thighs touching. Noah's are... huge. They're *huge*. And Morgan wants to touch him more than anything, but that's not what they're doing. It's what they were doing ten minutes ago. How did Morgan go from being so sure about wanting Noah to not being sure about anything anymore in the span of those ten minutes? Now that they're sitting here, Morgan's stomach has started churning again. It always happens when he actually has time to think about this, about why he wants Noah so much, about what it means for him, what that says about who he is.

He's so torn between wanting this and pushing it as far away from him as possible and he doesn't know how to make a choice.

"Morgan," Noah says.

"I know," Morgan says and hides his face behind his hands, because he knows, *he knows*. He's been fucking up all over the place, stringing Noah along, calling him all the time, even though they're not really anything to each other. Friends, tentatively. But there's so much else there, too, so they're not *just* friends, but they're also not more than that. And still, all the while, Morgan can't stand the thought of not being with Noah.

This, whatever it is, has been going on for a year now, and it went absolutely nowhere.

“I’m not trying to...” Noah trails off. “Hey.” He gently ruffles Morgan’s hair, but Morgan still can’t look up. “So... can I tell you the way I see things?”

“Yeah,” Morgan says, because that means he won’t have to talk.

“So, the way I see things is... I keep trying to have this conversation with you. And you never... want to have this conversation. And we keep saying we’ll think things through and we’ll figure it out, but then we don’t. And then I think, okay, maybe you don’t want this to go anywhere. Maybe it’s not what you want. Which is fine. But then you also keep calling me, so I’m not sure what you want. And if you just want a friend, that’s fine, too, but I don’t think I can be that friend.”

“No?”

“No. Because I like you too much to just be your friend and it would kill me. I swear. I can’t do it. So I need you to tell me. Now. Tell me what you want.”

Morgan takes a deep breath. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you know.”

“I don’t.”

“No, but, you do,” Noah says. “You know what you want. Maybe you’re afraid of it, because you’re too scared of turning me down, but I won’t be offended or anything, I get if you—”

“No,” Morgan says.

“No?”

“That’s not what I’m scared of.”

“Then what?” Noah asks. “Just tell me.”

Morgan doesn’t know how to say it. Even if he was good with words, this would be too complicated to put in a sentence. It’s a lifetime of amassed prejudices and hatred and Morgan doesn’t know how to get past that. He doesn’t know how to like Noah and not hate himself for liking him at the same time. “I just wish I wasn’t so fucked up,” Morgan says to his knees. And to Noah. Maybe. He doesn’t know if his voice was loud enough.

“I hate to break it to you, but everyone’s fucked up in one way or another.”

“But I’m...” Morgan trails off when Noah’s hand settles on his back. He doesn’t move and neither does Noah, and he doesn’t say a word and neither does Noah. Morgan breathes, in and out, in and out, because that’s how breathing works and he’s scared that he’ll forget. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Noah says. His hand disappears, then it’s in Morgan’s hair. He wants this all the time. He wants Noah and he wants that hand on his back, and in his hair, and he wants someone who’ll talk him through all of this crap.

Noah has been so patient with him and Morgan doesn’t deserve any of this. Noah shouldn’t be nice to him right now.

“I don’t know how to say this,” Morgan mutters.

“Try.”

“You’re...” Morgan shakes his head. Nope. “I don’t...” He takes a deep breath. “I want this. But I don’t want this. And I can’t decide. I don’t know how to... I can’t be...”

“Gay?” Noah asks.

“I’m not saying it’s bad to be...”

“Gay,” Noah says again. “I didn’t think that was what you were saying.”

“I don’t even know what I’m saying. I thought I was...
you know.”

“Straight?”

“Yeah. But then you happened.”

Noah huffs softly. It might have been a laugh he didn’t
want Morgan to hear. “Okay.”

“I just thought I wasn’t... I don’t know. I was never
that interested in girls. And when we... In Sochi, when we... I
just wanted to know what it feels like.”

“Oh.”

“And I really liked it. And then it just... kept
happening. And I kept wanting to see you. But...”

“But?” Noah says.

“My entire life, everyone always said this was wrong.
You know, being...”

“Gay.”

“I don’t know how to be... that.”

“It’s not that hard, honestly,” Noah says.

But it is. It’s so fucking hard.

“And now,” Morgan goes on, “I want to talk to you all the time. I want to... I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

Noah goes back to running his fingers through Morgan’s hair. “Keep talking.”

“I don’t know how to... I’m doing everything wrong. All the time. I can’t be your... whatever. I don’t know how and I can’t ask you to put up with this. I’m such a mess. Everything about me is... so messy.”

“What if I don’t mind?”

“You’d mind.”

“How do you know?”

“I just... know.” Morgan is too much for himself sometimes. “There’s so much you don’t even know about me.”

“That’s okay. You can tell me.”

“What if you don’t like me anymore after that?”

Morgan asks.

“Morgan,” Noah says softly.

“How are you so good at talking about all this?”

Morgan asks.

“We’re different people. Which is fine. I wasn’t always good at talking about this either. It takes time.” Noah’s fingers still in Morgan’s hair. “Maybe what I said came out wrong. I’m not saying you need to be fine with everything that’s going on immediately and I’m not saying you need to define your identity or anything like that. I just want to know where we’re headed.”

“Okay,” Morgan says. “Can we...”

“Yes?”

“Can we keep seeing each other?”

“Yes. But, Morgan?”

“Hm?”

“Will you look at me?”

Morgan nods and sits up and looks at Noah, whose eyes are wide open and sincere.

“If you want to keep this going, I don’t want any of that bullshit where you... I don’t know, tell me you have errands to run. I’ll run errands with you. I don’t care. Just—”

“I’m sorry,” Morgan interrupts, “that I lied about that. I just felt so... I didn’t think I could do it anymore.”

Noah puts his arm around him. He doesn't say anything, which is weird, and he's looking down at the floor now.

"Noah? You okay?"

"Yeah." Noah pulls him closer and kisses his temple.

"Thanks. For trying."

Morgan nods. He probably didn't do a very good job explaining any of this. He feels like he's shaking all over, even though he isn't. His hands are completely still in his lap.

"Honestly," Noah goes on, "you should talk to me more often."

"I'm bad at talking."

"I don't care." Noah leans back in, nose bumping against Morgan's temple. "I like it when you talk to me."

#

Noah stays with him until three in the morning.

They lie back on Morgan's bed and they talk for a little while longer, about nothing in particular, nothing important, and they go back to kissing and the shirts come back off, and they get each other off slowly, and Noah falls asleep next to him, curled against Morgan under the sheets. Morgan doesn't

wake him up. His brain won't let him go to sleep, but he doesn't mind looking at Noah.

His mouth is open. It shouldn't be charming, but it is. Noah's arm is slung around Morgan's waist and his breath is tickling the top of Morgan's shoulder.

Morgan eventually dozes off, just for a little while, the lights still on, jerking awake again when someone laughs in the hallway. He must have bumped into Noah, because he's blinking at him, slower to wake up, sighing as he hides his face in Morgan's pillow.

“What time's it?”

Morgan grabs his phone. “Just past one.”

Noah groans in reply, but stops quickly when Morgan reaches out to touch his back, fingers slowly running down his spine, down towards where the sheets are slung around him, taking a detour to the tattoo on Noah's lower back. He remembers getting distracted by it in Sochi, never able to look long enough to figure out what it was. He honestly still isn't sure.

“What is it?”

“Stingray.”

“A stingray?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because I like them,” Noah mutters. “They’re... funky little dudes.”

“Little?”

“Maybe not little.” Noah turns over and reaches for Morgan’s hand, smiling lazily. “Anyway. They were my favorite when I was a kid. They’re really smooth.”

Morgan laughs.

“Aw,” Noah says.

“What?”

“Made you laugh.”

Morgan doesn’t know why that is something to *aw* about, but Noah is just like that sometimes. “So you’ve touched one?”

“Yeah. Sea World.”

“Huh.”

“You ever been there?”

“No? Aren’t they, like, treating their whales really badly?”

Noah pulls a face. “I know. But... stingrays.” He scrunches up his nose. There’s a lot happening on that face. “I don’t really drive down a lot when I’m home for the summer. I always go to Disney, though.”

“Seriously?”

“Don’t judge,” Noah says gruffly.

“I’m not. I just wasn’t expecting that.”

“You ever been to Disney?”

“No,” Morgan says. It’s not like his parents had the money to take them to Disney. They might have liked the rides, but something like Disney was never even on their radar. Some of the guys go when they have a day off in LA, but Morgan’s never tagged along.

“I’ll take you.”

“You don’t have to, it’s not...” Morgan shrugs. If they really keep going with this, if Morgan doesn’t chicken out again, they might spend some time together in the summer.

“You don’t wanna go?”

“I... No. I mean. I don't know. I don't know what it's like.”

“I'll take you. If you hate it, we'll just buy food and go on rides and shit. And we'll take a picture with Mickey. And... Morgan?”

“Yeah?”

“Stop making that face.”

“What face?”

“Why is Disney freaking you out?” Noah asks. “It's the happiest place on Earth.”

It's not Disneyland that's freaking him out, it's going there with Noah, like they're... boyfriends. Morgan shakes his head. Chances are that none of this will ever happen. Morgan leans over to kiss Noah, so he doesn't make him talk about why he's looking freaked out.

Noah hums and kisses him back, maybe for a minute, until he pulls away and says, “I can't sleep here, you know that, right?”

“Stay a little while longer, though?”

“Yeah,” Noah says and winks, “and I'll come back tomorrow night.”

“Good,” Morgan says.

Noah closes his eyes, smiling, a little slow to react when Morgan gives him another kiss.

“Hey, Noah?” Morgan says.

“Hmm?”

“Are you...” Morgan keeps his eyes on Noah, who looks like he might be about to fall back asleep. “Do you only like guys?”

Noah cracks an eye open. “Yeah. Gay. Very gay.”

Morgan nods.

“Why?”

“Just curious,” Morgan mutters. “Did you...”

“Hm?”

“Never mind.”

“Just ask,” Noah says. His eyes are open again. “I don’t mind.”

Morgan doesn’t even know where to start, but it’s late and it somehow seems easier to talk about these things when the sun isn’t out. He almost wants to turn off the lights, but it’s only the lamp next to the bed that’s on, so his room is mostly

doused in shadows. “When I was at your place,” Morgan starts, “you had... in your drawer, you had...”

“Ah, yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you feeling threatened by my dildos?” Noah asks.

“No,” Morgan says with a little too much force. “I was just wondering... if you... like... that.”

“That.”

“Yeah.”

“Do I like... that,” Noah repeats, a smirk appearing on his face.

“Forget I asked,” Morgan says.

“I mean, I do like that. I don’t know if you’re trying to ask something else here, but—”

“What else would I be asking?”

“Nothing, Boo,” Noah says and reaches out to touch the tip of Morgan’s nose. “Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

Noah laughs softly. “I just thought you might want to fuck me, which is fine, by the way, if you want to, my ass is all

yours. Maybe not right now, but, like, generally speaking. All yours.”

Morgan is well aware that he’s just staring at Noah with his mouth slightly ajar right now.

“Because I do like *that* . I think. I’ve never done it with an actual person.”

“Oh,” Morgan says. “You haven’t?”

“No. There was this guy I was seeing, but we never really... I don’t know. I thought about asking him a couple of times, but shit was complicated and I didn’t want to make it more complicated.”

“But you want to?”

Noah nods.

“With me.”

“If you want,” Noah says. “Honestly, Boo, there’s no rush.”

“Okay, but...” But Morgan will be thinking about this. Every day. Right now he doesn’t even know if he wants to, terrified of doing it wrong. He’s pretty sure that there’s *a lot* that can go wrong there.

“Please don’t overthink this, yeah?” Noah says. “It’s just... an option.”

Morgan makes a non-committal noise and tucks himself against Noah. It’s all peachy now, but there’s no way of telling how he’s going to feel about all this tomorrow morning.

He wishes he could just turn it off. The thoughts. The guilt. The fear.

They stay awake until three, mostly kissing, hands wandering, but never taking things further than that, and then Noah slips out of bed and pulls his clothes back on, and his shirt is buttoned wrong again.

They’ll both have to sneak in a nap at some point tomorrow.

Before Noah slips out into the hallway, he bends down and gives Morgan a kiss. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Morgan nods. He knows that Noah’s not talking about seeing him on the ice for the skills competition.

Chapter Ten

Noah comes down to DC when he has a day off in February. Noah suggests it during a phone call after a game, long after midnight, both of them exhausted, both of them in bed.

Morgan called him on the phone at first, then Noah said, “You wanna turn on your video? I haven’t seen you in eight days, I kinda forgot what you look like.”

So now Morgan can see Noah, a little blurry, the light too low, leaning back against a tower of pillows. Noah's sheets are dark. Soft sheets. Morgan remembers them and wonders when he'll get to go back there. They have one more game in Philadelphia, their last road game of the season. They'll end the regular season a few days later in DC.

"Fuckin' Rosie nearly killed me when he hugged me after the game," Noah mutters as he shifts in his bed. The Foxes won their game in overtime and Noah scored the game winner. Jeff Rosenberg must have hugged him a little too hard. He's been on the Foxes for a while and Noah seems to like him a lot, at least going by how much he talks about him. There's three Rosenberg brothers and Noah keeps calling Jeff the Main Rosie, since there are so many of them and Noah seems to think that his Rosenberg is the superior one. And apparently he's a pretty fierce hugger.

"Are you hurt?" Morgan asks.

Noah laughs. "No, Boo, don't worry, I'm okay."

"Good," Morgan says. He shifts so Noah can see Bear, who's snoozing next to him.

"Oh."

“He missed me,” Morgan says and reaches out to pet Bear. Gently, so he won’t wake him up. Morgan was only home for a night after the All Star Game before the Eagles went on the road.

“I’m sure he did, poor baby.”

Morgan looks down at him. He’s been thinking about getting a friend for Bear, so he’s not alone when Morgan goes on the road, but getting another dog is a big commitment and it’s not something he’d do during the season. Not a good time for a puppy if you don’t have anyone to help you out. He knows guys who’ve put puppies under the Christmas tree for their kids, but they had their wives to help out.

Noah, on his phone, yawns.

“You should go to bed,” Morgan says.

“I am in bed.”

“What I mean is... you should sleep.”

“But we’re talking.”

“We can stop.”

“No.” Noah sticks out his bottom lip. “I don’t wanna stop.”

Morgan is pretty sure that he'll fall asleep on Noah if they keep talking, but he doesn't really want to stop either, so Morgan just leans back and listens while Noah talks about a really good taco he ate the other day. Morgan really wants to hear all of it, because Noah is so excited about it, but his eyelids start to flutter anyway.

“Aw, babe, I think *you* need to go to sleep,” Noah says.

“Did you just call me babe?”

“Y...eah? I can stop?”

“Uh...” Morgan honestly isn't sure if he liked it. No one's ever called him anything like that. He's never been someone's... something. They're not even really in a relationship. All they have is the deal they made the night before the All Star Game – it'll just be the two of them for each other for now and they'll see what they can make of this during the next couple of months.

“It's okay if you don't like it,” Noah says. “I swear. I'll call you Morgan, okay?”

“Okay.”

“What about Mo?”

“Mo is fine.”

Noah grins. “What about Boo?”

“It sounds weird,” Morgan says.

“I’ve been calling you that for ages, are you telling that all this time you didn’t really like it?”

“Would you have stopped calling me Boo if I’d told you that I don’t really like it?”

“I mean, if you really, really hate it...”

“I don’t *hate* it.”

“But you don’t like it either.”

Morgan shrugs.

“Let’s revisit the issue some other time,” Noah says cheerfully. “Let’s sleep. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And... hey, I have the day off next Monday, we have back-to-backs over the weekend. Want me to come down? You don’t have a game, right?”

“I... don’t. I have practice, though.”

“So we could hang out after practice.”

“I guess.”

“And we can have dinner and then I’ll drive back home.”

“Really, you’d drive down here just to hang out with me for a couple of hours?” Morgan asks.

“I mean... yeah.” Noah smiles. “I would do that. Only if you want me there. If you have errands to run, I—”

“I don’t,” Morgan says gruffly. That dig wasn’t even subtle.

Noah laughs. “So, what do you think? I don’t wanna invite myself to your place, so you have the last word on this, but I figured I should mention that our schedules happen to line up that day.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s an inconclusive reply, Morgan.”

“Why?”

“Use more words.”

Morgan sighs. “Yes, come by if you want.”

“Wow, you sound so enthusiastic.”

“I want you to come,” Morgan says. He really does, he’s just bad at showing it. “Bear wants you to come, too.”

Bear blinks at him when Morgan says his name.

“We can take him on a,” Noah lowers his voice, “*walk*.”

Morgan laughs.

Noah grins, clearly proud of himself for some reason.

“So I can come?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“Noah.”

“Just making sure,” Noah says. “Cool if I get there around three?”

“I can probably get away earlier.”

“Two?”

“Yeah, that should work.”

“Yeah?” Noah says.

“Yeah,” Morgan replies.

“Ye—”

“Not again.”

Noah cackles. “Go to sleep, Morgan. Sweet dreams. Pet the soft boy, tell him I love him and all that and I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Good night,” Morgan says, because he can’t possibly be expected to reply individually to all the things that Noah just said.

Noah is still smiling when he hangs up and disappears from Morgan’s screen.

#

Morgan leaves practice as early as possible on the following Monday and drives straight home. He bought food yesterday so he could make them dinner later. It wouldn’t be anything fancy, but chances are that they’ll end up ordering food anyway. They only have a couple of hours together, so investing time in cooking dinner seems like a waste.

Noah pulls into Morgan’s driveway about half an hour later. Morgan has never actually seen his car. It’s a black Mercedes and it’s less flashy than Morgan was expecting.

He doesn't usually let Bear run out into the driveway to greet visitors, but it's Noah, so an enthusiastic dog slobbering all over him as soon as he's opened the car door and keeping him from even getting out is probably exactly what he wants. Morgan follows Bear outside slowly and walks around the car to where Noah is petting Bear, who looks like he's about to climb into the car with Noah out of sheer excitement.

"Hey," Morgan says.

"Hiii." Noah grins up at him before he turns back to Bear. "This is quite the welcome committee."

Morgan doesn't say anything, because he doesn't want to admit that the closer it got to two o'clock, the closer he was inching to the front door, waiting for Noah's car to appear. Noah is actually ten minutes early. "How was the drive?"

"Pretty good," Noah says and gently nudges Bear away from the car so he can get out. "How are you?"

"Okay."

Noah's eyes flicker to the cut right under Morgan's eye. "Yeah?"

Morgan nods. The Eagles had a rough game last night. A 7-4 loss, Pekka got injured in the first period, and they didn't score on the four-minute power play they got for Morgan getting high-sticked in the face. Pekka will be out for a couple of weeks.

Noah pushes his car door shut and Morgan takes him into the house, Bear following at their heels. "You want some water? Something to eat? Or—"

"Morgan," Noah says and reaches for him, "hey." His thumb brushes across Morgan's cheek, careful to avoid the cut. "Come here."

Morgan hugs him tightly, Bear bouncing around them. He clearly needs something to do and taking him on a walk would be the best option, but a lot of Morgan's teammates live in this neighborhood and if they see them, they'll have questions. Morgan tugs Noah into the backyard with him and grabs a tennis ball to throw for Bear. Better than nothing, definitely better than having to answer awkward questions. Noah is happy to throw balls for a while, laughing when one of them ends up on the pool cover and Bear starts barking at it, eventually turning to Noah with the saddest face, like he's asking him to please, please get it.

Morgan goes and pokes at it with a stick until he can reach it. He tosses it for Bear and Bear, of course, brings it back to him.

“Hey,” Noah says. “I’m still here.”

Morgan laughs. “Okay,” he says and throws the ball to Noah, who does a terrible job catching it. “A few more times and then we’re going back in.”

It’s not that cold, but Morgan wants to kiss Noah now, and he sure as hell isn’t doing it in his backyard. He doesn’t know why they didn’t kiss when Noah arrived. Why didn’t Noah kiss him? They hugged. And it was a good hug. A long one, too. One where Noah turned his head and nuzzled into Morgan’s hair and his hand ran up and down Morgan’s back and Morgan wrapped both his arms around Noah’s waist and held him for as long as Noah let him. Which was a long time.

“So, what’s the plan?” Noah asks as they head inside. “You got anything you need to take care of? Need to go to the Home Depot or something? I’m good with furniture and shit. One of our kids got his own apartment this season and I put together all his furniture. I don’t know if I’ve ever told you this, but when I was a kid I had this phase where I really wanted to build boxes, like, treasure chests, and I ended up

making at least a dozen. They were pretty ugly in the beginning, but I sort of... got the hang of it. My mom kept a bunch of them.” Noah blinks at him. “Anyway...”

Morgan laughs. “Sorry. You built boxes?”

“I know it’s weird as shit hobby, okay?” Noah says. He wipes his feet on the mat by the door as he steps back into the house. “I really liked it, though. I still do it during the summer. Maybe one day I’ll get a house with a garage. For building boxes.” Noah narrows his eyes at him. “Stop looking at me like that.”

Morgan ducks his head to hide his smile. “Sorry.” He didn’t think it was funny, but building boxes and treasure chests is not something he’d immediately think of when he looks at Noah. “I just thought...”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“No, do tell me.”

“I don’t know, that you’d, like, go surfing or something.”

Noah snorts. “I fucking hate surfing, I’m so bad at it. I like going to the beach, though, you know, we have this little

house close to the beach, a little further down the coast and I sometimes just go there for a week and hang out there. Maybe we can go together.”

“Oh,” Morgan says. The summer seems ages away and fuck knows if they’ll still want to see each other then.

“If you want,” Noah says with a shrug. “Anyway…”

Morgan uses Noah’s silence to reach for his wrist and pull him closer until Noah is right in front of him and he can easily lean in to kiss him.

“Oh, hey,” Noah says between kisses. “That one was overdue.”

“Why didn’t you kiss me earlier?”

“I didn’t realize that making the kissing happen was my job,” Noah mumbles and leans in to kiss Morgan, just once before he pulls away again. “But in all seriousness, sometimes I’m not sure if you want certain things, so I figured I’d just let you take the lead there.”

“Certain things?” Morgan asks.

“Yeah. Like kisses. And sex.”

“I like… those things.”

“Okay, but...” Noah shrugs. “You can’t really deny that you’ve been reluctant about some of that. Which is okay. And I was just trying—”

“Okay.”

“—to make sure you feel comfortable and—“

“Okay.”

“—didn’t want to make assumptions. Stop saying *okay*, Morgan.”

“Sorry.”

“No, don’t say sorry either.”

“I...” Morgan throws his hands up. “What do you want me to say?”

Noah takes a deep breath. “I don’t know. See, I have this problem with you, where I’m never really sure if you’re actually telling me what you want or if you’re just going along with stuff because—”

“I’m perfectly capable of saying no to you.”

“I know that. I know.”

“But?” Morgan asks, because he can tell, just by looking at Noah’s face, that he wasn’t done yet.

“You’re not exactly vocal about what you want or what you need. And this is... new to you, I guess. It’s not like we’ve ever really talked about it, which we probably should, you know?”

Morgan folds his arms across his chest. It’s a no from him. He doesn’t want to talk.

“Morgan.”

“I know,” Morgan says. “But can we talk later?”

“Yeah, okay,” Noah says and goes easily when Morgan pulls him into another kiss.

#

“Tell me.”

Morgan sighs. “What exactly do you want me to tell you?”

“Tell me about... I don’t know. Tell me who you’ve kissed. I know I’m the only guy you’ve slept with but... tell me what you like, maybe? Tell me what you want to do.”

This is not really the direction Morgan thought they were going in. They’re doing the dishes. Because they did end up cooking together and Noah is putting the dishes Morgan is handing him in the dishwasher. And here Noah is, asking him

what he wants to do. Morgan swallows hard and keeps his eyes on the dirty pans in the sink. “With you?”

“Yeah, or... in general.”

“I don’t know,” Morgan says and hands Noah a very sharp knife. “Careful with that one.”

“I won’t cut my hand off, no worries,” Noah says.

“Okay, so... you don’t know.”

“Well, what do *you* like?” Morgan asks, because he doesn’t want to be on the spot like that anymore. He can literally count the number of times he’s had sex on one hand.

“Uh, like, in particular? I like blowing you. I really, really like that.”

“Okay,” Morgan whispers.

“And I like, you know... I mean, I’ve mentioned this before, but if you ever want to, like, fuck me, I’m all yours. And, just to be clear, I’m not asking you to or anything. I’m just saying if you want to...”

Morgan has stopped handing Noah dishes; he’s just moving cutlery around. “But last time we talked about this you said you’d never...”

“No, I’ve never done it with anyone, like, I did consider it, because there was this guy that I really liked, but he was in love with someone else and it just wasn’t—”

“He was in love with someone else?” Morgan asks. That came out more offended than he was going for. He looks up to see if Noah is okay, because he just mentioned it like it was no big deal at all and his face is also saying that it was no big deal at all and Morgan doesn’t get it.

“Oh, it wasn’t... I knew. Like, pretty much from the start. I did that to myself, you know? He didn’t, like, cheat on me or anything.”

“You knew and you still started dating him?” That makes even less sense to Morgan. “Why?”

“Because... I just wanted to be with someone, I didn’t wanna... I was so lonely, Morgan. You have no fucking idea. It was just me for such a long time and then I met this guy, like, properly met him and he was nice to me and I knew he was gay, too, so it was safe to tell him the truth about me. It was good. For a long time. It worked for both of us. And we weren’t boyfriends or anything and I never meant to have feelings for him, but sometimes that happens and... it was my fault. He didn’t do anything wrong.”

“How did that end?”

“I met you,” Noah says.

“Oh.”

“I mean, I was going to break up with him anyway, because he was never going to love me back. It was always that other guy for him. But... I don't know, when I met you, I sort of realized that...” Noah shrugs. “You changed things for me.”

Well, Noah most certainly changed things for Morgan, too. “Oh,” Morgan says again.

“Yeah.”

Morgan has to look away. “But with him, you never...?”

“Nope. But, like, he's a good guy and we're still friends.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. Oh. Morgan. Hey.”

“What?”

“Really just a friend.”

“But isn’t it weird that you’re still friends with a guy you used to be in love with?”

“Okay, maybe *love* is a bit of a strong word.”

“You used that word,” Morgan says.

“I know. It wasn’t... like that. I swear. Anyway, he’s up in New York, so it’s not like he’s in the picture. Unless I’m, like, on a roadie to New York and even then we don’t always hang out.”

Morgan frowns, despite himself. He knows that Noah would never cheat on him, not after Noah was the one to suggest that they wouldn’t see other people – not that Morgan has anyone else to see – but Noah is this really handsome, really charming guy. It took Morgan about five seconds to forget all about how annoyed he was with Noah when they first met. And, now that he thinks about it, he was probably mostly annoyed because Noah was so attractive and he didn’t know how to deal with finding another guy attractive.

“You did hear the part where I said that he’s in love with another guy, right?” Noah says.

“Right,” Morgan says, glancing up at Noah. He did hear that. “How do you know? Did he tell you?”

“Uh...” Noah looks down at his feet. “It’s kinda complicated. And I’m not sure if I’m allowed to tell you the whole story. But, like, I found out about them when they were still together and they broke up and when we were hooking up we talked about the other guy and it was... super obvious.”

Morgan hums.

“I swear there’ll never be anything going on with me and him ever again.”

“Okay,” Morgan says. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to... I wasn’t trying to say that there would ever be anything going on or anything. You’re not that kinda guy.”

Noah smiles.

“So, was he the only one you were ever with?”

“No, not really. There was one other guy, but with him it was... like, the guy in New York and I weren’t exclusive. So I met this other guy and I slept with him twice and it was okay and afterwards we both moved on with our lives.”

“Did the guy in New York know about him?”

“No, we didn’t talk about that kinda stuff. The way that whole thing started was, like, hey, I’m gay and you’re also gay, so let’s be gay together, because it’s not like we have too

many options, since we're both very comfortable in our respective closets."

Morgan blinks at him. Maybe that's how they started, too. Noah caught him looking and thought he might be interested, and here they are.

"That's it from me, though. Two guys."

Morgan nods.

"What about you?" Noah asks.

Morgan definitely knew this question was coming, but he's still too embarrassed to answer it. He looks down again, at the two dirty pans that won't fit in the dishwasher. He can't still pretend that he's doing the dishes, so he grabs a towel and starts drying his hands. "You know you were the only one," Morgan mutters.

"Yeah, but, like..." Noah takes a step closer. "I thought maybe you'd kissed someone? I kissed someone. Doesn't mean it didn't happen just because I didn't sleep with him"

Morgan shakes his head.

"I was your first kiss, too?"

Again, Morgan shakes his head.

“So you did kiss someone?”

“Yeah. Her name was Lisa.”

“I see.”

“It wasn’t... a real kiss.”

“What do you mean?” Noah asks. “Was it a kiss on the cheek or something? Because if we’re counting that, I have more stuff to tell you.”

“No, it just wasn’t... good. It didn’t feel right.”

“Oh.”

“So maybe it doesn’t really count,” Morgan whispers. “What do you think?”

“I think that if you don’t want it to count, it doesn’t have to count.” Noah leans closer, his nose bumping against Morgan’s temple. “I don’t mind being your first kiss.”

Morgan’s heart gives a flutter. He leans against Noah and Noah leans back into him, too.

“Let’s make a deal, okay?” Noah says.

“Huh?”

“If there’s ever anything you want... or anything you want to do or anything you want me to do... you’ll tell me,

okay?”

“Okay?” Morgan says. What, he’s just supposed to tell him? Say it out loud and not be embarrassed?

“What’s the problem with that?” Noah asks, because of course he can read Morgan like a book.

“What if I want something you don’t want to do?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well,” Noah says, “I’ll say no.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Morgan, seriously,” Noah says, “you can say things to me. Even if they’re about sex, or whatever. I don’t mind talking about sex.”

Clearly.

“So,” Noah goes on, “what do you wanna do now?”

Morgan nods at the sink. “Finish doing the dishes?”

Noah laughs. “Okay.”

“And after...”

“Yes?”

“Can we...?”

Noah presses closer. “What?”

“Go upstairs?” Morgan says.

“And have sex?”

“Yeah.”

“Absolutely,” Noah says. He kisses Morgan’s cheek.

“Hey, Morgan?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I give Bear a treat? He looks sad.”

Morgan glances at Bear, who’s hanging out by his empty food bowl, looking tragic, but he’s watching them, because Noah said the t-word. “Fine,” Morgan says.

Noah grins and goes straight for the treat drawer. He’s possibly as excited about the treat thing as Bear is when he realizes that he is, in fact, getting one.

Morgan smiles at him and only looks away when Noah catches him looking.

Chapter Eleven

The Eagles are in Boston for Morgan's birthday in early March. It's a game day, so they have their morning skate at the Grizzlies' arena and Austin shows up in the locker room with a cupcake that has a candle stuck in it. He hands it to Morgan with a quiet, "Happy birthday, make a wish."

Morgan blows out the candle and wishes for a birthday goal tonight.

“Here,” Austin says and produces a plastic container from behind his back. “Guess you might wanna save that for later.”

“Thank you,” Morgan says.

“Hey, happy birthday,” Marsh says, appearing behind him to pat his back.

The guys all wish him a happy birthday during the course of their morning skate. Simon comes over to cover Morgan’s entire head with his catching glove and then pulls him into a hug. It’s kinda weird to be hugged by a goalie when it’s usually the other way around.

Austin and Marsh tell him that they’re inviting him out for dinner in New York tomorrow. “And drinks after the game if you want,” Austin says with a wink.

“Only if you want,” Marsh adds, ruffles his hair and wanders away.

Even the party police squad wishes him a happy birthday today. Morgan thanks them. He keeps his head down for most of the day and sneaks away with his cupcake. He has a pregame routine, so he still has some time before he lies down for his nap. Noah seems to have that figured out as well,

because he calls Morgan when he's halfway done eating his cupcake.

Morgan answers, belatedly realizing that he has bright red icing on his face. "Hey," he says, quickly wiping at his face.

"Morgan," Noah says, "it's your birthday. Why didn't you tell me that it's your birthday?"

"I—"

"Happy birthday," Noah says. "I didn't get you a present."

"That's okay."

Noah pulls a face.

"Seriously, I don't need a present."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"What, did you want me to send you a text, like, a week in advance... oh, by the way, it's my birthday soon?"

"Yeah," Noah says.

"This wasn't an issue last year."

"Last year we weren't—" Noah's video freezes. His mouth is still open. "—trying to say is that it would have been

good to know. You called me to say happy birthday last summer. You knew when my birthday was.”

“Yeah, because you were talking about it.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Noah complains. “I found out on *Twitter* . Anyway, I’ll get you a present and I’ll give it to you when you’re in Philly.”

“I don’t need a present.”

“Okay, but... what if I get you one anyway?”

“Will it make you feel better if you get me one?”

Morgan asks, because he suspects that’s what this really is about.

“Yes.”

“Okay, fine. But don’t get anything expensive.”

“Don’t worry, I’m good at gifts,” Noah says with a confidence that tells Morgan that Noah will definitely get him something expensive.

“I’m honestly not that...” Morgan shrugs. Whatever. Noah clearly wants to get him a present, so maybe Morgan should just let him.

“What?”

Morgan shrugs. “Birthdays weren’t that big of a thing in my family.”

Noah tilts his head, like he’s trying to figure him out, which means it’s time for Morgan to change the subject. He’ll have to tell Noah about his fucked-up family at some point, but now is not the time. Now is not the time to tell Noah that half of the birthdays in their family were either overshadowed by screaming parents or their drunk father threatening to whoop someone’s ass or everyone forgetting entirely. Of course there were birthdays with cakes and presents, too, but those were rare and you never knew what you’d get.

“Anyway,” Morgan says, “thanks for calling.”

“Sure, of course. Do you want me to sing *Happy Birthday* to you? I will.”

“No, I’m good.”

“Yeah, I figured. You’ve heard me sing in the shower, so it’s probably for the best that I keep my mouth shut right now. I would have done it, though. Just for you.”

“I appreciate it,” Morgan says.

Noah blows him a kiss. “I need to head out in a bit, but... have a good day and score a lot of goals and...” Noah

shrugs. "I miss you."

Morgan presses his lips together and nods, which is about as close to an *I miss you, too* as he can get. They don't have time to see each other in person that often. Morgan will have a day off once the Eagles get home from this roadie, but then Noah will be on the road, and then Noah will have a day off, but it'll be a game day for Morgan, so they won't see each other until the Eagles go up to Philly for their last road game of the season.

He thought this would be easier. He thought hockey would be distracting enough that he wouldn't be thinking about Noah that much when he's on the road, but he thinks about Noah all the damn time.

In the morning, the first thing he does is grab his phone to see if Noah sent a text after Morgan had already fallen asleep, because sometimes Noah will send him a picture or some really not funny joke after they've said good night. He thinks about Noah before he falls asleep at night, wondering if it would bother him if Noah was curled around him right now, if he'd be too hot or if Noah would hog the covers, and then he usually gets lost thinking about Noah cuddling up to him and

forcing him to be the little spoon, and how much he actually wouldn't mind being the little spoon.

“I'll call you tomorrow?” Noah says.

Morgan nods. They'll find a time.

After they hang up, Morgan lies down for his pre-game nap, hugs a pillow while he sleeps, and gets two birthday goals later on, one in the second period, and the empty netter that is literally a gift from Marsh, because he could have just scored that one himself, but he looked around to find Morgan instead.

He heads to a bar with the guys after the game, for once not that reluctant to go with them, especially when Marsh pulls him aside and promises him that he'll get him whichever drink he wants, even if it's just a fucking water. Morgan finds that a lot easier to deal with, because that way he doesn't have to deal with other people's expectations regarding whether or not he should be drinking.

Morgan is feeling somewhat adventurous, so he tells Marsh that he'll have anything non-alcoholic and Marsh presents him with some sugary and creamy cocktail abomination that actually turns out to be delicious. Austin seems to be drinking the same thing, only with alcohol.

Morgan can deal with this. He actually can. No one forces him to drink shots. Austin buys them a round of mozzarella sticks.

And, probably for the first time in his playing career, Morgan actually gets back to the team hotel right for curfew, and not at least an hour earlier.

Austin is in the elevator with him and when they get off on their floor, Austin bumps into him and says, “Did you have a good time? Did we get it right?”

“Yeah,” Morgan says. He knows they tried a lot harder than usual for him tonight and he almost wants to give Austin a hug for that, but Morgan doesn’t just hug people, so he keeps his hands in his pockets.

“Cool. You know, we wouldn’t mind if you hung out with us more often.”

“I know.”

“I swear no one will ever call you the party police again.”

Morgan sighs.

“We like you.”

“Maybe *you* do,” Morgan mutters. And fuck knows why. But they both know that Austin isn’t exactly speaking for

the entire team right now.

Austin throws an arm around him as they wander down the hallway. “I sure do. You’re a good kid. You know you’re a good kid, right?”

Morgan nods, smiling down at the ugly carpet. Austin is definitely the affectionate type, but he probably wouldn’t be saying all that if he wasn’t drunk.

Austin gives him another squeeze and then stumbles over to his room. Morgan goes another three doors down and flops straight into bed, wiggling out of his clothes and then curling up under the covers.

He squints at his phone before he falls asleep.

Noah has sent a text – *did u have a good bday? those goals were hella nice .*

I did , Morgan tells him.

Probably the best birthday in a while.

#

The day before their last road game in Philadelphia, they have some time off after their practice and Morgan heads straight to Noah’s. The guys – mostly Austin – ask him if he wants to hang out with them, but Morgan declines quickly.

“You sure?” Austin asks. “I’m gonna go hang out with two of my buddies from juniors. They play for the Foxes and they know some really nice places.”

“I can’t, sorry.”

“You got plans?”

Morgan shrugs.

“Oh, wait,” Austin says, “you’re friends with Andersson. I forgot. You guys have fun.”

Morgan blinks at him, because he also forgot that him and Noah being friends was public knowledge. “Thanks,” Morgan says.

Austin grins and then wanders off, half-naked, shouting about Philly cheesesteak.

On the way to Noah’s, Morgan sends him a text to tell him what he wants for dinner tonight, because he doesn’t want to miss out on the cheesesteak. Noah sends back a thumbs-up and says that he knows a place.

When Morgan gets to Noah’s, the door opens quickly once Morgan has rung the doorbell and Noah is shirtless.

“Hey, you,” Noah says. “Come on in.”

Morgan does, eyes on Noah.

“I just spilled tomato sauce all over my shirt, hence the...” He vaguely waves at his abs. “I was just trying to take some stuff out of the fridge, you know, because some of the food in there is really old and that’s what I got for my troubles. A tomato sauce shirt. It smelled really bad, too.”

“Oh,” Morgan says. He doesn’t mind the view.

“Anyway... Hi.”

“Hi,” Morgan says and inches closer to kiss Noah.

Noah squeaks. “Shit, why are your hands so cold?”

“Sorry,” Morgan says and puts his hands on Noah’s ass instead, because his ass is in jeans.

“Oh, okay, sure, that works,” Noah says with a grin.

Morgan laughs, because... he doesn’t do that. Except he just did. And Noah clearly didn’t mind, because he’s back to kissing Morgan and Morgan honestly hasn’t been taking full advantage of being allowed to put his hands on Noah’s ass.

“So,” Noah says, and tilts his head down to kiss the line of Morgan’s jaw, “I guess maybe I don’t need to find a shirt right now?”

“No, this is fine,” Morgan says.

“Oh, but... Morgan.” Noah kisses him again, so whatever he was going to say apparently wasn’t that urgent. “I have...” He hums as he wraps his arms tightly around Morgan, nipping at his neck. “I have your birthday present.”

“Oh.”

“You want it?”

“Um...”

“Or,” Noah’s fingers tug at the waistband of Morgan’s sweatpants, “I can blow you first?”

“Okay. Yeah. That.”

Noah does that, pushes Morgan down onto the couch, grabs a pillow, and gets on his knees. Morgan’s entire brain shuts down as soon as Noah gets his mouth on his dick. Morgan pats Noah’s hair when Noah is done with him, because that’s pretty much all he’s capable of. He knows he should reciprocate, but he’s not physically capable of even lifting his hand right now.

Noah kisses his thigh and smiles up at him. “You want your present?”

“I...”

Morgan doesn't even have time to piece together a proper reply, because Noah has already darted away and returns with a shirt on and with a box in his hands.

"I promise it wasn't expensive," Noah says when he hands it over.

Morgan pulls up his pants properly first and then tugs at the bow. It falls away and Morgan opens up the box. It's two ties, one dark blue, the other one covered with a blue flower pattern, which is maybe not something he'd pick for himself, but it's unmistakably a gift from Noah.

"So, I thought the blue one was probably more your style," Noah says.

He's not wrong.

"And, honestly, I was only gonna get that one at first, but then I saw the flower one, and you'd just look so good in it that I had to get it, and you don't have to wear it or anything, but... yeah."

"I like them," Morgan says. He would have picked the blue one, for sure, but somehow the flower one... well, maybe it's not what he'd go for, but he doesn't hate it either.

“I just want you to put the flower one on one time. Just for me,” Noah says. “I just wanna see how it looks and if I was right.”

“Okay,” Morgan says. “Thank you for these.”

Noah smiles and kisses the tip of his nose. Which is weird. And Morgan wants him to do it again. He doesn't say that, only reaches out and pulls Noah against him and they topple over and Noah ends up lying on top of him, with his head pillowed on Morgan's chest.

“You know,” Noah says and grabs his very, very orange blanket from the back of the couch, “I'm not a cuddler.”

Morgan drops his hands.

“But,” Noah goes on and grabs one of Morgan's hands and puts it back on him, “I like this.”

“You really don't like cuddling?” Morgan asks.

“I don't know. I never liked it with...”

“Your ex?”

“He isn't really my ex.”

“Anyway,” Morgan says. “You didn’t like it with him?”

“Not really. It just seemed... I don’t know, like I was getting too close.”

“But you like it... now?”

“Yeah,” Noah says. “I like it with you.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Morgan laughs, softly, bites it down quickly. It’s like he finally figured out a puzzle he has never been able to put together before.

This is new to Morgan, having Noah’s head on his chest, because Noah is usually very much the big spoon and everything else doesn’t fly. With them lying down like this, though, Morgan can run his fingers through Noah’s hair easily. It’s soft between his fingers and Noah makes a happy little sound when Morgan keeps going. It’s a bit like petting Bear.

“I won’t see you for such a long time,” Noah mumbles. “It’ll be terrible.”

“We can still talk.”

“I don’t wanna play against you.”

“Maybe you won’t.”

Noah laughs. “Because neither of our teams will make it to the third round? It would be the third, right? Unless... Well, we still have three games left to play, so maybe we won’t stay in the spots we’re in now. I mean, we haven’t even clinched yet. Maybe I’m not gonna be in the playoffs at all.”

“Oh,” Morgan says.

Noah taps his fingers against Morgan’s chest. “We’ll see. I guess we’ll figure it out, but one way or another, I guess we won’t see each other until playoffs are over for both of us.”

“Yeah.”

“Which might be a long time,” Noah mumbles. “And I wanna say *hopefully*, but also... Promise we’ll talk?”

“We will.”

“A lot?”

“As much as we can,” Morgan says, and adds, “I promise,” because Noah told him to promise.

“Good,” Noah says and pats Morgan’s chest. “Good. Nap now, then dinner?”

“Sounds good.”

“Sex after dinner. If you want.”

Morgan hums and tries not to think about all that time they won't be able to spend together.

#

They don't see each other for a few weeks.

It's just phone calls that grow shorter and shorter and usually end with one of them falling asleep. Which is okay. There'll be an end to this sooner or later. Morgan wears the ties Noah gave to him, mostly the one with the flowers. Because Noah wanted to see him wear it, so he put it on for the game in Philly and it grew on him quickly.

Every time he wears it, it reminds him of Noah.

And Noah seems to be genuinely surprised that Morgan wears it so often and tells him that he doesn't have to, but now Morgan wants to. It's his luckiest tie. So he keeps wearing it and Noah sends him a kissy face whenever he does.

After the first round, they're both done with hockey for the season.

Noah will come to DC, so Morgan doesn't have to drive up to Philly with Bear and Morgan is weirdly nervous

about it. Noah will eventually go to California for the summer, like he does every year, but he'll be at Morgan's for about two weeks and Morgan suspects that Noah will be dreadfully bored about two days after his arrival. Morgan isn't a born entertainer, but at least he'll have Bear around to keep Noah on his toes.

Morgan has a couple of days to rest before Noah arrives, but dutifully participates in Marsh's team barbecue and goes to a baseball game with the guys. After that the team slowly disperses, some of them going to Worlds, some going home. Two of the guys need surgery after the season, one of them Austin. Morgan is mostly okay, except for a few nasty bruises. He said no to Worlds, though. He knows himself; he knows when it's better to get some rest.

Noah will likely show up covered in bruises, too. When he called yesterday, the cut on his face still hadn't healed, but his eye didn't look so bad anymore. Noah's season ended a few days after Morgan's and he only stays in Philadelphia long enough to go to the Foxes' team brunch and then he drives down, smiling brightly when Morgan opens the door for him.

This time, Morgan gets a kiss before Noah bends down to pet Bear, and then Morgan gets another kiss, and another one and then Morgan takes him upstairs to his bedroom and gets him out of his clothes. Noah has bruises everywhere, a few of them looking much worse than Morgan's, so Morgan keeps his touches light, kisses him carefully.

They take a nap, but Morgan wakes up when Bear starts pawing at his bedroom door.

“Can we take him for a walk?” Noah asks. “Short one, though. Moving hurts.”

“What the hell happened?”

“Just a bunch of bad hits and, you know, blocking shots, getting slammed into the boards. They pulled me for concussion protocol, remember?”

“Yeah, but... you don't have one, right?”

“I'm okay.”

“*I ' m okay* and *I don ' t have a concussion* are two very different statements, Noah.”

“I didn't have symptoms,” Noah says. “Don't worry, okay?”

“Okay,” Morgan says, but he’s worried anyway. “So, walk?”

“Yeah.”

“We should go grocery shopping, too. Or have groceries delivered. Might be better. Because if we both go...” People sometimes recognize Morgan when he goes grocery shopping and they usually don’t bug him too much, because people do realize that he has a private life that is none of anyone’s business. He goes when it’s already late and the stores are mostly empty, but if someone sees him with Noah—

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that,” Noah says as he climbs out of bed. He winces when he bends down to pick up his shirt. “Wow, I can’t wait to not be in pain whenever I move anymore.”

“Did they check you out bef—”

“Yeah, Morgan, I’m totally okay, it’s just that there’s bruises on my bruises. But they’ll go away. I’m just sore all over, but don’t worry, okay?” Noah comes over to him to give him a nudge. “Don’t worry.”

Morgan nods.

Yeah. He’s still worried.

“Come here,” Noah says and pulls Morgan against him. It’s a bit weird, considering they’re both half-naked, but he also doesn’t want to let go. “Okay, put on your shirt, because we need to take a selfie.”

“We... do?”

“Yeah, because if we announce to the world that we’re hanging out, no one will care,” Noah says. “I do that all the time. When I meet old friends, I post pictures. You’re my Sochi bro.”

Morgan raises his eyebrows at him. He’s not entirely sure what to think of that plan, but maybe Morgan has a point. They all have friends on other teams. They go on vacation together, they see each other when they happen to be in the same town. It’s not a big deal. So Morgan gets dressed and Noah snaps ten pictures of Bear and then takes a selfie with Morgan and he lets Morgan read over the caption before he posts his pictures – three of Bear and then the one of the two of them.

“Hey,” Noah says as he puts on his shoes, “I wanna go touch the moon.”

“What?”

“At the Smithsonian.”

Morgan shakes his head. “You wanna touch the moon at the Smithsonian.”

“They have a moon rock,” Noah says. He sounds giddy, like a little kid. “Can we go?”

“Today?”

“No, just... at some point.”

“Yeah, sure,” Morgan says and grabs Bear’s leash. “We can go wherever you want.”

Noah grins.

They take Bear for a quick walk and Noah holds the leash and Morgan worries about running into Marsh or Austin – they don’t – and then Noah takes Bear into the backyard to throw the ball for him while Morgan starts writing his grocery list.

“Anything you want?” Morgan asks.

“Um, I usually just go to the store and grab whatever I feel like eating.”

Morgan laughs.

“What?”

“That sounds very... you,” Morgan says and adds bread to the list, because it’s the off-season and he’s never made French Toast for Noah. It’s one of the very few things he’s actually good at making. He’s never scared that he’ll mess it up somehow. He doesn’t really care when he cooks for himself, but as soon as other people are involved, he gets really anxious about cooking.

“Can you buy eggs and bacon?”

Morgan nods. He already has those on his list.

“Orange juice? Strawberries. And... I can pay for that, by the way.”

Morgan waves him off. “Do you want beer or anything? I don’t usually have any at home, but we can get some.”

“Nah...”

“You sure?”

Noah turns around while Bear is over in the bushes, trying to get his ball. “I don’t want to... You don’t drink.”

“I don’t.”

“So... I don’t need to.”

“I honestly don’t mind,” Morgan says. He’s around people who drink all the time and it doesn’t bother him, just as long people don’t try to talk him into drinking. He thinks a *no, thanks* should be good enough, but for some people it isn’t and they start bugging him, at which point Morgan usually stops being pleasant company.

Noah looks at him for a moment, hands jammed into the pockets of his shorts. “Why do you... Do you just not like it or...?”

Morgan doesn’t reply right away, because there’s no easy answer, at least not if he wants to give Noah the full story.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Noah says when Morgan doesn’t reply. “But you...” He shrugs. “I know you don’t like talking about stuff. And that’s okay and I’m not gonna make you, but we sort of have a thing going on here and when you have a thing going on with someone you just... talk to them... about stuff.”

Morgan sighs. “My dad used to drink a lot. Actually, he probably still does, I wouldn’t know. And then my mom started drinking and...” He trails off, because going by the look on Noah’s face, he gets the picture. Morgan didn’t want to be like his parents, and the one thing that he knew made his

dad lash out and made his mom forget to buy them food and pay the electricity bill was all the beer and wine and vodka. So he's not touching any of that.

“Oh,” Noah says.

“Yeah. Anyway. I don't drink because I... I'd rather not. But you can. I don't care.”

Noah shakes his head.

“I really don't—”

“Morgan,” Noah says, his voice very, very soft, in a way that makes Morgan want to turn away and leave, “I don't need any.”

“Okay,” Morgan says and looks down at his grocery list.

He can see Bear return with his ball. He drops it at Noah's feet, but Noah isn't paying attention. He comes over to sit down next to Morgan, their thighs and arms touching.

“Morgan.”

“Yeah?”

“Can I hug you?”

“You don't usually ask,” Morgan mutters.

“I feel like this is a situation where I should ask. I don’t want you to... I don’t want to overstep.”

“It’s okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Morgan knows that it’s a pity hug and Noah doesn’t even know the whole story and Morgan is too scared to tell him, because if that little scrap of truth has Noah hugging him the way he is now, hard and close and like he’s trying to protect him from all the bad things in the world, Morgan doesn’t want to see how Noah would react if he told him everything.

“It’s okay,” Morgan whispers, because Noah is still hugging him and they’re still outside and even though they’re in this little nook close to the house where no one can see them, Morgan is getting antsy.

Noah lets go of him, probably sensing his restlessness, but he stays close. “Is it, though?”

Morgan shrugs.

“You never really talk about your family.”

“Yeah. And now you know why.”

Noah bumps his shoulder against Morgan's. "You know, family stuff sometimes isn't so... pleasant, but if you ever wanna talk about it... I'm here."

"I know," Morgan says.

"I'll kiss you as soon as we're in the house."

Morgan bumps his shoulder back against Noah's. They're not going to talk about his family, and there's nothing that makes him feel better than knowing that Noah will never ever make him.

#

Somehow, they don't get bored.

They do spend almost an entire day in bed, both of them dozing off again and again, sometimes at the same time, sometimes one after the other. Morgan reads while Noah sleeps, then Morgan falls asleep and Noah is scrolling through Instagram when he wakes up.

Noah blows him, then he gets some lube from his bag and shows Morgan exactly what he likes, Morgan's fingers in him, slowly coaxing him over the edge. Two years ago, he would have sworn that he'd never do something like this, would have hated the thought of it, but now that he sees what

it does to Noah, how good it is for him, he wants to do it again and again and again.

At night, they curl up in Morgan's bed together, both of them naked, and they talk about meaningless stuff until they fall asleep. They nudge each other occasionally during the night, but that's all right. They can sleep in the next morning and Morgan likes waking up and seeing Noah's sleepy face.

The next day, they take Bear on an extra-long walk to make up for the day they didn't leave the house.

They go and touch the moon rock at the Smithsonian and Noah makes Morgan take a thousand pictures of it and then insists of taking a thousand pictures of Morgan touching it, too.

"Do you think it's like the Cup?" Noah says as they walk away. "If you touch it, you'll never go to the moon?"

"Do you want to go to the moon?"

"I mean, maybe. I like the moon. Don't you like the moon?"

Morgan shrugs. The moon is just... the moon.

They spend a few hours at the museum and then what seems like a few more hours at the gift shop and Noah buys

two magnets, one of which ends up on Morgan's fridge later that day.

Most days, they go out for lunch or dinner, they go to Eastern Market so Noah can buy a gift for his mom, and they take a walk with Bear to look at all the monuments. Noah makes Morgan take a photo where it looks like he's touching the tip of the Washington Monument.

Time flies by.

When Noah has been at his place for a week, it feels like it's been two days. Morgan is making French Toast for breakfast and Noah is making coffee. It's almost noon. They stayed up late last night and Morgan got up for about ten minutes this morning to let Bear out, only to crawl back into bed with Noah for another three hours.

Morgan is too busy making sure that his French Toast will be perfect to notice that his phone is ringing. He doesn't look up until Noah says, "Hey, Morgan, your phone..."

It's Ben.

"Hey," Morgan says when he picks up. He sincerely hopes that this isn't about their dad. "What's up?"

“Hey, man,” Ben says, sounding too cheerful to be calling about something unpleasant. “I just wanted to check in and ask if you’re planning on coming by? I know you’re coming for the wedding, but if you wanna swing by at some other point... Just wanted to make sure you knew you were welcome to come by whenever.”

“Thanks, Ben. I think I might not have time to come up there before the wedding, but I’ll let you know if anything changes.”

“Oh, okay. You going anywhere?”

“It’s sort of up in the air right now,” Morgan says. He glances at Noah, who’s trying very hard to look like he isn’t listening. It’s not like Noah actually invited him to California, but he was talking about it a few weeks ago and while it freaked Morgan out at the time, he’s actually not opposed to the idea now. They only have another week together and Morgan doesn’t want Noah to leave.

“With the team? Some of our boys are going to Mexico together. Inseparable, all of them, but Frankie and Derek are the worst, like a bunch of homos,” Ben laughs. It was definitely meant to be a joke, but Morgan isn’t laughing.

“Anyway,” Ben goes on, “I guess you know what some of the guys are like. All have their besties.”

“Right,” Morgan says.

Noah looks up.

“Anyway, let me know if you wanna come by at some point. Or if you’re coming early for the wedding. Dave might come, you know? He sent me an email, said he didn’t know if he could get time off work yet, but it wasn’t a no. I hope he comes.”

“Me, too,” Morgan says, mostly because it’ll make things easier for him. He’ll enjoy being there a lot more if he can hang out with David and doesn’t have to spend the entire day avoiding Danny and their mom.

They exchange a few more pleasantries and Morgan eventually says he needs to go, because he burned a slice of French Toast, and he can’t focus on cooking and being polite on the phone.

“Who was that?” Noah asks when Morgan wordlessly sets down a piece of French Toast – unburnt – in front of him.

“My brother. Ben.”

“Which one is he?”

“He’s in the AHL. The one who’s getting married.”

Noah nods, eyes on Morgan.

“What?” Morgan asks.

“You just don’t seem so excited, s’all.”

“My family is a fucking mess, I’m never excited when too many of us are in the same place.”

Noah reaches out and runs his fingers along the inside of Morgan’s arm. “Was he asking about the wedding?”

“Nah, he just... I sometimes go to his place for a couple of days in the summer.”

“But not this summer?”

“No. You’re here.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize I was getting in the way of your plans.”

Morgan frowns. “You’re not.”

“But you said—”

“I’d rather spend time with you,” Morgan says and nudges Noah’s plate. “Here.”

“Thank you,” Noah says. It somehow sounds like a question.

Morgan frowns at him.

Noah's fingers are still on the inside of Morgan's arm, gently tapping against his skin. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

Noah's lips twitch downwards.

Morgan steps closer to him and wraps his arms around him, so Noah will stop looking at him like that and Noah pulls him in tight.

"You should eat your breakfast," Morgan mumbles, but he doesn't let go of Noah and Noah doesn't let go of him.

He doesn't pull away until Bear shows up, tail wagging, making sure that they know that he'll absolutely eat Noah's breakfast if Noah doesn't want it. Morgan gets him a treat so he'll leave Noah alone and coaxes him out of the kitchen.

They eat a ridiculous amount of French Toast for breakfast and Noah doesn't go easy on the syrup.

"So," Noah says as he starts putting away dishes. Morgan has quickly learned that Noah is deathly allergic to leaving dishes in the sink. "Are you gonna come to California for my birthday?"

Noah's birthday is in late June. By that time, Morgan will be back to training, will have a set schedule, but if Noah wants him to be there for his birthday, there's no way Morgan isn't going.

And Morgan doesn't want to go all summer without seeing Noah.

So he nods.

"Yeah? You wanna come?"

"If you want me there."

Noah smiles brightly. "It'll be great, I promise."

Morgan nods. "I—" He doesn't finish because Noah pulls him into another hug.

"Thank you," Noah says softly.

Chapter Twelve

Morgan has been to California, but he's only been to California with the team.

He's never been picked up at the airport in a black convertible, Noah's hand on his thigh as they left LAX behind them, wind in their hair. Noah clearly loves this car. It's spotless, no trash in sight. Morgan's car back home is littered

with empty coffee cups and food wrappers, half-empty water bottles, dog treats, an extra pair of skates.

But Noah's car somehow fits right in here with the palm trees, and the endless, cloudless sky, and the sun shining down on them. Noah's in shorts and a turquoise shirt, sunglasses on his nose. He has an iced tea in the cup holder and he drives like he's taken this exact route a billion times. To Noah, this is home.

Morgan spends a lot of time looking out the window while Noah rambles about the Knights' Cup win. He has a friend in Newark from when he used to play for the Mariners. The New York area teams seem to be mortal enemies during the season and cozying up to each other in the summer. Morgan's pretty sure that Noah's talking about Blake Samuels; he saw them talking a few times at the All Star Game.

"You wanna stop somewhere to grab a bite?" Noah asks. "There's a bunch of good places coming up."

"Oh, sure, yeah."

Noah gets off the highway five minutes later and takes him to a diner and they have burgers and share onion rings, because, "If we both eat them, we'll cancel each other out," says Noah, and Morgan can't really argue with that.

He's nervous.

He's always nervous in new places. It'll just take him a day to properly settle in. He'll be here for ten days and he has no idea what exactly they're going to do. It's Noah's birthday next Tuesday and they'll go to Noah's mom's house for that, but that's literally all Morgan knows. He's terrified of meeting Noah's mom, even though Noah's mom doesn't even know that they're together. The lack of itinerary doesn't help calm his nerves either, but Noah has clearly made plans.

“I bought some food and veggies to put on the grill,” Noah tells him when they're back in the car, “and I bought some of the stuff you were eating at your house and I wanna take you out for breakfast tomorrow morning if you don't mind.”

“Sounds good.”

“And there's this really cute place not too far away from the house that we could go to for dinner at some point and... Am I talking too much? Sorry, you've been here for, like, an hour.”

“It's okay,” Morgan says.

Noah takes his hand. “Thank you for coming.”

Morgan nods. If Noah hadn't invited him, he might have just hopped on a plane anyway. He's been training, was trying to keep busy, but he still missed Noah, even though they talked pretty much every single day.

The beach house Noah takes him to really is right next to the beach, other houses crowding around it.

“My mom usually rents out the house when I'm not home. There's this writer who sometimes stays here for a few months during the winter. And, like... I don't know, she has her regulars, but she makes sure I can have it in the summer,” Noah says as they get out of the car.

The house is painted light blue and the breeze is salty and Morgan finds himself smiling.

“You like it?” Noah asks, sounding weirdly hopeful.

Morgan nods.

The inside of the house is cozy, the leather couches worn, the shelves covered in books and seashells, paintings of lighthouses and ships on the walls. It's not a huge place, just the big living room, the kitchen, two rooms upstairs.

Noah is sleeping in the bigger one, so that's where Morgan puts his suitcase, too.

“Balcony’s really nice,” Noah says and nods at the balcony in question. With the curtains pulled back, Morgan can see the beach and the endless ocean, the waves rolling in gently.

Morgan steps outside. On his right, the house cuts further outwards, blocking the view of the houses on that side, on the left, crisscrossed wooden planks block the view, flowers growing upward to the roof that hangs over the balcony. He can feel Noah behind him, looking over his shoulder, out at the beach, teeming with vacationers.

“It gets quieter in the evening,” Noah says. “Once the sun goes down there’s barely anyone out there.”

Morgan takes a careful step back, smiling when he bumps into Noah.

“Well, hello there,” Noah says.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” Noah whispers and pulls him back into the house and kisses him until Morgan is dizzy with it.

He pulls away, but keeps his hands on Noah. He missed touching him. Missed feeling Noah’s breath against his skin. Missed just being in the same room as him. Morgan

closes his eyes and lets Noah hold him close, or maybe he's the one who's holding Noah close.

“What do you wanna do?” Noah asks. “We can head out there and go for a swim or we can—”

“Stay here?” Morgan suggests. If they leave the house, he has to take his hands off Noah and that'll happen soon enough, so maybe they can delay it, just a little bit.

Noah smiles and tugs him over to his bed and they kiss for a while, until Morgan dozes off, tucked safely against Noah. Afterwards they kiss a little more and the afternoon trickles away, faster than Morgan thought it would. Noah cooks them dinner and Morgan helps him do the dishes and then he pushes him against the kitchen counter and kisses him until he's lost track of time completely.

They watch the sunset.

They curl up in bed together.

Morgan isn't nervous anymore. He falls asleep seconds after his head hits the pillow, Noah tucked against his back, the big spoon again. Morgan doesn't protest anymore.

“I'm so happy you're here,” is the last thing Morgan hears before he falls asleep.

#

“Do you know that you have incredible eyelashes?” is the first thing Morgan hears when he wakes up.

“Huh?”

“Your eyelashes,” Noah says.

“What about them?”

“They’re... making me feel some kinda way.”

Morgan squints at Noah, who seems to be weirdly awake. Maybe Morgan slept longer than he thought he would. There is a bit of a time difference between here and DC, and they stayed up late, so he might have been more tired than usual.

“Anyway,” Noah goes on, “I’d go for a run now, I don’t know if that’s your thing, but...”

“I’ll come,” Morgan says.

“Okay.”

“In ten minutes.”

Noah laughs and then plops himself down on top of Morgan to plant a bunch of kisses on his face.

They go for a run and go through a bunch of exercises they don't need to go to the gym for and afterwards Noah takes him to a small bakery for breakfast. Morgan's existing in a bubble right now, a happy, sunshiny California bubble, and he stays in it for two entire days.

Then it's Sunday evening and they sit on the balcony to watch the sunset, both of them ready to crawl into bed when the light has faded. Morgan has just stepped back into the house when Noah says, "Uh, Morgan, about Tuesday..."

Noah's birthday.

"Yeah?"

"When we go to my mom's place..." Noah sits down at the end of the bed, looking at Morgan. "What are we..."

Morgan turns to look at Noah.

"I want to tell her," Noah says.

"You want to tell her... what exactly?"

"That you're my..." Noah shrugs, because they're technically not anything, which seems to occur to Noah right then, too. "I want to tell her that we're together."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

“Why not?”

“Because...”

“Because you’re afraid that she’ll tell someone?” Noah asks. “She won’t. I swear.”

“No, it’s not that.”

Noah tilts his head. “Because this isn’t serious for you?”

“I... No.” Morgan takes a deep breath. “Noah. Stop.”

“Stop what? Talking about us?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s—”

“Scary?” Noah asks. “Fucking terrifying? Hell yeah, it is. But I like you, Morgan. You know that. You know that this isn’t casual for me, so can we please fucking talk about it?”

Morgan chews on his bottom lip, eyes on his hands, picking at his fingernails. This is too much. He wasn’t prepared for a conversation like this. He probably should have seen it coming, but it took him off guard and now all he can think of is finding a way out.

“Morgan.”

“What?” Morgan snaps.

“I don’t know how to say this, but I’ll try. You don’t even have to look at me. We don’t have to tell my mom if you don’t want her to know. I can’t keep her from drawing her own conclusions, but I’ll keep my mouth shut if that’s what you want. But, Morgan... I don’t know what the fuck you’re doing here if this isn’t serious for you. I don’t know why the fuck you spent half a year jerking me around and blowing me off and then calling me all the time and then blowing me off again. I don’t know why the fuck you wanted me to come to DC. I don’t know what the fuck you’re doing here if it doesn’t mean anything.”

Morgan takes a deep breath to force the tears down, but it’s too late for that. “I’m sorry,” he chokes out.

“No, Morgan, I’m not... This is not about you being sorry or whatever. This is not about... I don’t want to make you feel bad about this, I know this wasn’t easy for you. But it... It fucked me up, the whole back and forth, and... Morgan, hey...” Noah reaches out to take Morgan’s hand, thumb brushing against the inside of Morgan’s palm. “Morgan.”

Morgan closes his eyes, like it’ll make him disappear.

“Can you just tell me? Please just tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Just tell me everything. Everything you’re thinking, why it’s so hard, why it’s so scary. Just tell me.”

Morgan shakes his head.

“Why not?”

“It’s not...” Morgan wipes at his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Noah keeps holding his hand. He doesn’t ask him again. He just waits. Morgan doesn’t know for how long he’ll wait, but Morgan has a feeling that it’ll be a while.

He tries to get his thoughts in order. All the thoughts that have been stuck somewhere at the back of his mind. The first time he looked at a boy and wondered what it might be like to kiss him. He was thirteen and he was at the local library to work on a school project. He didn’t know the guy, had never even talked to him, but Morgan remembers watching him, a few tables over, hair falling into his eyes as he read. The first time he saw the neighbors’ kid and his boyfriend kiss at the bus stop down the street. He remembers the day the entire neighborhood found out. After that, he didn’t think so much

about it anymore, pushed the thoughts away, didn't let them in anymore. And then Noah happened.

Quietly, with his eyes on their interlaced hands, Morgan tells Noah about the neighbors' kid.

He tells Noah that a few weeks after the whispers had died down a little, the neighbors' kid got beaten up on his way home from school.

Then things quieted down.

Then it happened again.

"They moved away. I don't know what happened to him, but my dad kept saying how his parents should have beaten the gay out of him a long time ago," Morgan says. "If he'd known that I was even just thinking about..." He shakes his head. "He would have killed me."

Noah squeezes his hand.

"My mom always said that God wouldn't..." Morgan sighs. "I don't even believe in God. I don't... Hell isn't a real thing."

Again, Noah gives his hand a squeeze.

"I don't know why I care what they'd think. They're not... It doesn't matter, right?"

“They’re your parents,” Noah says softly, “of course it matters. It hurts when they hate part of who you are.”

“I don’t even know what I am.”

Noah is quiet for a long moment, then he says, “You’re my Morgan. If you want to be.”

Morgan nods. He wants to be that. He wants to be here. But he doesn’t know how to stop being scared. It was okay for a while, but being here and meeting Noah’s mom is reminding him that this is more than a casual thing, and if Noah tells his mom about them, it’ll be real and when it’s real... Morgan takes a deep breath. And another one. And then another one.

Noah clears his throat. “I might have been a bit... harsh there.”

Morgan shakes his head. Wipes his eyes again. It wasn’t harsh, it was just the truth. A few more tears fall down Morgan’s cheeks. He tells himself that he can stop crying now, but the tears just keep on coming.

Noah scoots closer and pulls Morgan into his arms.

“He was...” Morgan doesn’t know what words to use to describe his dad.

“Did he hurt you?” Noah asks.

“Not usually.”

“Your mom.”

Morgan nods. He doesn't know if Noah can tell what he's doing with how he's holding Morgan against his chest.

“I'm so sorry,” Noah says. He kisses the top of Morgan's head.

“I'm okay.”

“Yeah, but... you said not usually.”

“Sometimes I was in the wrong place at the wrong time when he was mad,” Morgan says. It's funny how that is so easy to say now. Just something that happened. Not a big deal. “I got pretty good at reading the signs, though. And David... he always told me to hide in the closet when Dad was getting mad.”

Noah's fingers on Morgan's back twitch.

“I'm okay,” Morgan says again.

“You didn't deserve that.”

“I'm really okay.”

“Morgan,” Noah says and runs his fingers through his hair. “Have you ever talked to someone about this?”

“No, why?”

“It might be... I don't know. It helps.”

“I don't need help.”

“But...” Noah shifts against him, pulls at Morgan until his head is on Noah's chest. “Maybe you don't need help, but I don't think it'd hurt to talk about it either.”

Morgan doesn't reply. He doesn't know how to explain to Noah that it wasn't as bad as it sounds. Terrible things happen to people all the time. Really terrible things. Their mom is the one who actually got hurt. And there was that family down the street... Morgan went to school with one of their kids. Her dad pulled a gun on her mom one evening. He ended up shooting himself. That's way worse than what happened to Morgan. He's fine.

“When Josefin killed herself, I was a fucking mess,” Noah says. “I went to therapy. It doesn't mean there's something wrong with you.”

“I know. I'm just saying I don't need that. Nothing bad happened to me.”

“But you saw a lot of bad things happen,” Noah says.

Morgan sighs.

“But... Morgan?”

“Yeah?”

“You want to be here, right?”

“Of course I want to be here.”

“Okay.”

Morgan closes his eyes. “I’m trying really hard.”

“I know,” Noah says. He starts to tug the sheets up around them, even though they probably don’t need them.

Morgan doesn’t mind getting tucked in, though. He doesn’t mind that Noah is holding him like he’s never going to let go of him again. Because now Noah knows more about him than anyone else does and he apparently still wants him around.

#

In the morning, Morgan’s on the other side of the bed, not curled against Noah anymore. He can hear Noah sneak away to go to the bathroom when it’s still mostly dark in their bedroom. Morgan drifts off again, but wakes up again when he needs to go to the bathroom. It’s just past eight now and Noah is snoring softly.

Morgan's restless, the conversation they had last night replaying itself in his head over and over, doesn't want to go back to bed, because he won't be able to fall asleep again anyway, but he also doesn't want Noah to wake up in an empty bed. So he climbs back in and scoots closer to Noah, who wraps an arm around him with a hum.

Morgan makes an effort to go back to sleep, but Noah's hair tickles his skin and Noah's fingers are on his back, under his shirt, slowly drawing patterns. Maybe Noah is half awake, maybe he doesn't even realize that he's doing it. For a while, Morgan keeps his eyes shut, his lips finding Noah's jaw. Noah hums quietly, tilts back his head so Morgan can kiss his neck. He's stubbly, even more than usual, hasn't been shaving, but Morgan doesn't mind so much right now. He'll complain about it again later.

Morgan's hands wander.

He loves touching Noah so much, the way he reacts, the way his breath hitches, the way he moans. Noah grinds against him and Morgan pulls him closer, hand on his ass.

"Do you have lube?" Morgan asks.

Noah freezes, eyelids fluttering. "I... do?"

“Can I have it?”

Noah’s lips twitch and then twists away to bend over and pull a box out from under the bed. He tosses Morgan the lube with a wink. “You have plans?”

Morgan sits back, looking down at Noah, his shirt ridden up, a crease on his cheek from his pillowcase, hair flat on one side and sticking up on the other. The smile on his face is soft.

For weeks now, Morgan has been thinking about what Noah asked him, if he wanted to fuck him, the mere thought making his cheeks heat up. He wants to. He wants it so badly, but he doesn’t know how to bring it up now, doesn’t know how to talk about it without stammering and going red in the face.

Morgan has been thinking about it so much. Mostly in the shower, sometimes when he was going to sleep. Sometimes when he was putting on his gear for practice, sometimes on the plane with the team. He quickly pushed those thoughts away whenever he was in public, but when he was home, when it was just him... The more he thought about it, the more he wanted it, but he still hasn’t worked up the courage to talk to Noah about it.

It's somewhat reassuring to know that Noah has never done it before, so he likely doesn't have the highest expectations, but Morgan doubts that he'll be good at it. Who knows, he might mess it all up.

"You're fucking killing me," Noah says.

Morgan realizes then that he's just been sitting here, staring down at Noah, so he gets a move on quickly and pulls down Noah's boxers, gets him off with his fingers, taking his time, slowing down when Noah gets close, until he's panting, fingers curled into the sheets, whining whenever Morgan slows his pace.

There's no way to describe it, being allowed to see Noah like this. Morgan has barely put his mouth on Noah's dick when he comes.

"Fuck, I think you broke me," Noah whispers.

Morgan laughs.

"Oh, you think that's funny, huh? You won't think it's funny when I can't lift my hand to jerk you off."

"It's okay, I can do it," Morgan says.

"Shit, that was..." Noah squints at him. "I think my soul left my body for a second there."

Morgan bends over to kiss him, Noah's hands at his sides, pulling him down against him. Noah is still wearing his shirt, sticky now, and Morgan hasn't even taken off his briefs. He grinds down against Noah's thigh, getting a little desperate, not even caring if he comes in his underwear.

Noah tugs at his hair, whispers, "Are you close?"

And Morgan is so fucking close, he just needs— He doesn't know what he needs. It drives him crazy, getting Noah off like this, makes him wonder if it would feel the same to him. Noah gets a hand on him eventually, jerks Morgan off hard and fast.

They lie next to each other for a while, Morgan still half on top of Noah, both of them just breathing.

"No run this morning," Noah says.

Morgan agrees. He pats Noah's chest, which is the closest to a yes that he can manage right now.

"Morgan?"

"Hm?"

"All good?"

"Yeah."

“Morgan?”

Morgan looks up, unwilling to move more than half an inch.

“About yesterday...” Noah says. “I won’t say anything to my mom, okay? You’re just a friend.”

“Thank you.”

“A friend, who just fucking destroyed me with an orgasm,” Noah says cheerfully. “Don’t worry, I won’t say that to my mom either.” He turns his head and nudges Morgan’s temple with his nose. “Sorry if I was... impatient. I wasn’t trying to push you into something you don’t want. Like, I wasn’t thinking... You don’t even know my mom. She’s nice, though, I promise. But I won’t say anything.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” Noah echoes. “I’m sorry.”

Morgan shifts a little closer and closes his eyes. He really needs a shower, and so does Noah, but a few more minutes of lying next to Noah won’t hurt.

#

That night they go to the beach, half an hour before midnight, each with a flashlight. The sky is cloudless and the stars are

twinkling happily.

Noah is clearly one of those people who get ridiculously excited for their birthday, so Morgan will go along with whatever Noah wants to do. It's his birthday; he gets to make the rules.

They sit down close to where the waves are crashing against the shore, sand already making its way into Morgan's clothes. The breeze is cool and Morgan is glad that he accepted the sweater that Noah handed to him before they left the house. Noah is sitting right beside him, arm pressed against Morgan's, legs stretched out in the sand.

"I love it so much out here," Noah says. "There are so many people here during the day, but at night..."

Morgan hums. He likes the beach better when it's deserted. No one's looking at them. He couldn't sit this close to Noah during the day and he couldn't reach out to pat Noah's thigh, his hand tucked into the sleeve of Noah's oversized sweater.

"Do you think you might wanna come back here next summer?" Noah asks.

Morgan bumps his shoulder against Noah's. This is more than Noah asking, *Hey, do you like it here, do you want to come back?* If Morgan says yes, it means that he thinks they'll still be together a year from now, that he thinks he'll still want to be with Noah. "Yeah," Morgan says.

Noah nods. "I'll find a trainer in Philly next summer."

"Wait, I thought—"

"We'll come here," Noah says, "and then we'll go back and we can see each other on weekends. Or maybe we can train together. I don't know. We'll figure something out."

"Okay," Morgan says. His skin feels tight, his stomach churning at the thought of that future they have yet to figure out. They'll be hiding this for the rest of their lives. Maybe, when they're not playing anymore— In fifteen years? Maybe then—

"What's going on in your head right now?" Noah asks.

Instead of telling him that he's having a crisis about how the weight of the future is threatening to crush him, Morgan says, "What do you want to do when you retire?"

"Oh... uh..." Noah laughs. "Is this a dig at how old I'm getting? I'm not *that* old, okay?"

“I know,” Morgan says. “I was just wondering.”

“Well,” Noah says, “one day... I want to adopt an alpaca.”

“A *what* ?”

“Please tell me that you know what an alpaca is,” Noah says.

“I mean, I know what it is but...”

“They’re soft.”

“Okay?”

“I want one.”

Morgan shakes his head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“They’re so cute, Morgan.”

“Okay, so when you retire, you’re gonna get an alpaca? You know that you’re supposed to get them in pairs, right?”

“Guess I’ll get two,” Noah says. “Do you think Bear would get along with alpacas?”

“Um... Considering that you’re getting those hypothetical alpacas when you retire, which will probably be over ten years from now, Bear might not be—”

“*Morgan* .”

“What?”

“What the fuck, man?”

“Dogs don’t get as old as humans,” Morgan says. He doesn’t want to think about a day when Bear isn’t around anymore, but he won’t pretend that he’ll never die either.

“But did you have to say that?” Noah grumbles.

“That’s so sad.”

Morgan puts his arm around Noah. “He’s gonna be around for a long time.”

Noah sighs. “Can I come visit you when I’m back in Philly? I wanna hug Bear.”

“Dogs don’t like hugs.”

“Morgan, come on.”

Morgan laughs. “Sorry.”

“Oh, this is funny?”

“A little bit,” Morgan says. “He’ll let you hug him, though, he’ll just be confused about it.”

“No, I don’t wanna confuse the good boy.”

“You like my dog better than me, don’t you?” Morgan teases.

“Just a little bit.”

Morgan tuts and pulls his arm away.

“Hey,” Noah says. “It’s my birthday. Don’t be mean.”

“We’re probably still a few minutes away from your birthday.”

Noah huffs and pulls his phone out of his pocket. The screen is offensively bright when Noah turns it on. It’s 11:58. “Guess you were right,” Noah says. He turns his head, voice quiet when he asks, “Will you kiss me at midnight?”

“It’s your birthday, not New Year’s Eve.”

“Is that a no?”

“We’re in public.”

“We’re on a deserted beach.”

On Noah’s phone screen, the clock switches over to 11:59.

Morgan glances over his shoulder. The houses behind them are mostly dark, the lights dimmed in some. There’s nobody around. If someone happened to walk past them, they likely wouldn’t be able to see their faces.

He pulls up the hood of his sweater, reaches out, curls his sweater-covered hand around the back of Noah's neck and kisses him, just once, but long enough that he's reasonably sure that the clock on Noah's phone has switched to midnight.

"Happy birthday," Morgan says once he's pulled away.

"Thank you," Noah says. He pillows his head on Morgan's shoulder and they sit in the sand for a while, the stars twinkling overhead.

They're going to drive up to LA to see Noah's mom in the morning and they'll probably spend the night there. Morgan doesn't have it in him to be nervous about it right now.

"I think," Noah says quietly, "this is already the best birthday I've ever had."

Chapter Thirteen

Noah's mom lives in one of *those* houses.

It's not one of the ones where everything is white and shiny, but one with stone arches and wood and big windows and a red front door and there are flowers everywhere. The shrubbery around the house doesn't really hide how massive it is. It has three garage doors and there's a white BMW in the driveway and it's... a lot.

“This is it?” Morgan asks, like Noah might have accidentally pulled into the wrong driveway.

“This is it,” Noah confirms and starts getting out of the car, but quickly slides back into his seat when he realizes that Morgan hasn’t moved. “What?”

“Your family is rich.”

“Yeah.”

“Like... really, really, rich.”

“Morgan,” Noah says, “I swear my mom’s a really nice person. And she’s not... Like, my mom’s side of the family is all movie producers and screenwriters and directors and stuff like that, they’re all weird creative people who happened to start making a lot of money way back in the day.”

“Okay,” Morgan says. He has no idea what that even means.

“Do you want to leave?”

Morgan looks up and it dawns on him that Noah actually would start up the car and drive right back to his beach house with Morgan if that’s what he wanted. But it’s Noah’s birthday, so Morgan needs to get it together. “No,” he says.

“All right.”

Noah really gets out of the car this time and Morgan follows with some reluctance. Noah has already pulled his and Morgan’s suitcases out of the trunk and beckons Morgan to follow him to the front door.

“Mom likes it when I ring the doorbell and don’t just walk right in,” Noah says as he pushes the doorbell. “She likes to throw the door open and be really dramatic about it. You’ll see.”

The door is thrown open about half a minute later and a woman who looks very much like Noah – blonde hair and bright blue eyes, just a lot smaller – says, “Baby, you’re here,” and pulls Noah into a tight hug. “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks, Mom. This is Morgan.”

“Morgan, so nice to meet you. I’m Mylene,” she says and turns to Morgan. “Hug or handshake, dear?”

“Uh... either one is fine.”

Mylene laughs and pulls him into a hug as well. “Come on in, both of you. Noah your room is ready, and then, Morgan, I got the big guest room ready for you.”

The big guest room is... *ginormous* . It's a bit like walking into a fancy hotel room and the view from his window, looking out behind the house, down on a pool and all the hills and houses below, is ridiculous.

“What do you think?” Noah asks as he comes waltzing back into Morgan’s room after dropping his bag off in his own room.

“Are we...” Morgan waits until Noah has come closer so he can lower his voice. He doesn’t want to make a complete fool of himself in front of Noah’s mom ten minutes after they’ve arrived. “Is this Hollywood?”

Noah laughs. “We’re close. You wanna go look at the sign? It’s not that far. I know the way. We can drive there.”

“I... No. We don’t have to go.”

“But do you wanna see it?”

“Maybe tomorrow when we head back to your house?” Morgan says. Because he does want to see the sign. He’s *dying* to see the sign. It seems silly and unimportant, but now that they’re here, now that they’re so close to it, it would be a waste not to do it.

“About that—”

“All good, boys? Are you ready to head out?”

“Sure, you can tell Morgan all about the Hollywood sign on the way.”

“Oh, we should swing by on the way back. Have you ever been to LA, Morgan? I mean, other than for work?”

“No,” Morgan says. “Just for games against the Lions. I’ve seen some things, but...”

“We’ll show you around,” Mylene says, clearly delighted to do so. “Come on, boys, time for lunch.”

“Where are we going?” Morgan asks.

“Aw, shit, I forgot to tell you... So, there’s this diner we always went to when I was a kid, and it’s a little grubby, but they have great food, I promise. Also... pie.”

Morgan certainly isn’t going to say no to pie. “Sounds good.”

They’re halfway down the stairs when Morgan’s eyes get caught on a small golden statue on a shelf. “Is that...”

“Oh, yeah, one of our relatives won it in the sixties, he was a screenwriter,” Noah says. “You wanna touch it? He died a couple of years ago, he’s actually the one who used to own

this house and then he died and it sort of stayed in the family and then Mom moved in.”

“I just leave it there for people to hang out with it,” Mylene says. “I hide it during parties, though. Don’t want it to disappear. Arthur was a very nice man. Never got married.”

“He was gay,” Noah says.

“Noah.”

“What? He was.”

Mylene makes a face at him. “We don’t know for sure,” she says. “Let’s not assume.”

“He was gay,” Noah whispers to Morgan.

Morgan laughs.

Noah beams.

#

On the drive to the diner, Noah spends ten minutes telling his mom about the pizza-shaped blanket that Morgan got him, to which Mylene only says, “He knows you well.”

They have lunch – burgers and fries and milkshakes, which has Noah promising that they’ll go on a run tomorrow morning. They get pie for later and afterwards Mylene takes

them to the Hollywood sign and they take pictures and Noah asks her to drop them off at the Walk of Fame, where Noah insists on taking a photo with Winnie the Pooh's star.

“Do you wanna do a star home tour?” Noah asks and waggles his eyebrows at him.

“That's seriously creepy.”

Noah laughs. “What kind of LA madness would bring you joy, then?” he asks. “I can buy you an Oscar.”

“I really don't need an Oscar,” Morgan says.

“Doesn't mean you don't deserve one.”

Morgan shakes his head at him.

“No, but, seriously, what do you wanna do?”

“It's *your* birthday.”

“I just wanna hang out with you,” Noah says. “I don't care what we do. Although...”

“Yes?”

“Morgan.”

“Yes?”

“Tomorrow...”

Morgan tilts his head, wondering how many more times he'll have to say this. "Yes?"

"Can we go to Disney?"

"You wanna go to Disney," Morgan says. "Seriously?"

"We don't have to, but... I told you, I go every year and it's the happiest place on Earth, Morgan, it really is, they weren't kidding. It's so much fun. We can take pictures with Mickey. And eat Mickey-shaped food. And we can go on rollercoasters."

"I don't like rollercoasters," Morgan says. He nearly throws up every time and it's for the best if he just stays away entirely.

"Oh."

"But we can take a picture with Mickey."

"Really?"

"Sure."

"I don't want you to have a bad time," Noah says. "Honestly, if you don't absolutely, one hundred percent want to go, we don't have to."

"No, let's go. I've never been."

Noah leans closer and says, “If we weren’t, like, surrounded by people, I’d kiss you right now.”

Morgan nudges him with his elbow.

“So, do you mind if we stay the night at my mom’s place tomorrow?”

“That’s okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“But... really?”

“Noah.”

“I just don’t want you to...” Noah shrugs. “I want you to like it here.”

“I do,” Morgan says.

“Can we go home so I can kiss you a lot?”

“Sure,” Morgan says.

They get a cab back to Mylene’s house and Mylene has apparently not returned home yet, so after Noah has shouted *Mom* three times up the stairs and no one has answered, Noah pulls Morgan closer and kisses him, and kisses him, and kisses him, until he has Morgan with his back against a wall, just

around the corner from the front door, which turns out to be a great place, because they hear when the front door opens and Mylene comes back, keys jangling, bags rustling.

“Hey, mom,” Noah shouts and reaches out to smooth down Morgan’s hair. He gives him a thumbs-up.

Morgan is definitely half-hard and Noah just looks fucking messy and there’s no fixing that before Mylene turns the corner.

“You boys are back already?”

“Yeah, we were just gonna... you know...” Noah glances at Morgan, then looks over his shoulder for inspiration. “Uh, have a smoothie and maybe hop in the pool.”

“Oh, sounds lovely. I’ll find you the good towels for the pool,” Mylene says and sets down a bunch of shopping bags on the kitchen counter before she wanders away.

“Oh, and, Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“Morgan wants to come to Disney with me tomorrow.”

“I’ll get you both tickets, then.”

Morgan opens his mouth to protest, but Noah's hand is on it within half a second. "Shh."

"But—"

"She gives me tickets for my birthday every year," Noah whispers. "It's okay."

"Oh. Is that why you asked...?"

"Yeah."

"What if I'd said no?"

"Then I would have just gone next week. Without you." Noah shrugs. "Honestly, she doesn't mind getting you a ticket, too. She constantly buys Disney tickets for people she barely knows. I wouldn't be surprised if she was driving around town and throwing Disney tickets out her car window once a week."

"I could pay for mine, though."

"I know you could. But you won't. Just accept it."

Morgan sighs.

"Wanna hop in the pool with me? It has a hot tub."

"Yeah, okay."

“I’ll make smoothies, too. You want one?” Noah looks away when his phone starts ringing. “Sorry, I gotta get that, but if you wanna go ahead...” He nods at the back of the house, presumably talking about the pool.

Morgan nods and sneaks away, because maybe Noah was very subtly trying to tell him that he didn’t want Morgan to listen in on that phone call.

He goes upstairs, finds his bathing suit and heads back downstairs. Mylene has put out towels for him and joins him in the back a moment later to hand him a smoothie.

“He’s still on the phone,” Mylene says. “You need anything else, hon?”

“No, thank you,” Morgan says.

Mylene smiles at him. “You and Noah seem to be really good friends. How’d you meet? I don’t remember you being on the Mariners.”

“We met in Sochi,” Morgan says and tries not to go bright red.

“Oh, of course. So, which team do you play for? I try to keep up, but I’m not exactly an expert.”

“I play for the Eagles,” Morgan says. “In DC.”

“DC is nice, isn’t it?”

“I like it.”

Mylene smiles at him. “Good, I’m glad. Noah seems to like Philadelphia, too. I’d love to have him closer to home, but if he’s happy there...” She shrugs. “I can always visit.”

“Mom,” Noah says when he joins them in the back. “You’re not asking Morgan inappropriate questions, right?”

“I’d never,” Mylene says.

“When she came to Philly for Christmas she met some of the guys and she was asking all of them about their girlfriends.”

Mylene laughs. “Morgan, do you have a girlfriend?”

“No, Mom, he doesn’t.”

Mylene shoots Noah a look and ruffles his hair before she heads back into the house.

“Okay, so... she totally knows that I like you,” Noah says. “But that’s okay. She probably thinks I’m just quietly pining for you. Don’t worry about it.”

“She, uh...”

“I’m kinda transparent, I guess,” Noah says and pulls off his shirt. He must have gone upstairs to change and Morgan wonders why he didn’t just leave his shirt in his room. Not that he doesn’t appreciate the sight of Noah taking off his clothes. “She’s my mom, she knows what my face does when I like someone.”

“Oh.”

“As I said,” Noah tells him, “don’t worry about it. She probably just thinks I’m being tragic.”

Morgan pulls a face.

“Come on...” Noah nods at the pool. “Can I throw you in?”

“If it brings you joy,” Morgan says and takes off running, Noah close at his heels. Whenever they go for a run in the morning, Morgan is usually just a little faster than Noah, but today he makes sure that Noah can catch up with him, can throw him in the pool after a brief chase and jump in behind him.

“I got youuu,” Noah shouts when they resurface and comes paddling over to Morgan with a grin.

Morgan splashes him and takes off again, Noah right behind him, but this time he doesn't let Noah catch him for a while.

#

Morgan knocks on the frame of the door before he walks into Noah's room. The door is wide open and Noah is digging through his duffle bag, shirtless, only in a pair of boxers.

“Yeah?” Noah says and glances over his shoulder.
“Hey, you.”

“Hey,” Morgan says. “Can I come in?”

“Yeah, yeah, for sure. Close the door, okay?”

Morgan does and shuffles over to him, right into Noah's arms. He didn't even notice until today, when Noah only touched him a handful of times, only kissed him for a few minutes in the afternoon, just how much Noah was touching him when they were still at the beach house. All those casual little touches, his feet resting against Morgan's under the table, fingers brushing against his arm in passing, wrapping his arm around Morgan when they were sitting next to each other.

He stopped doing all that when they came to LA, like he flicked a switch. And it's what Morgan asked for, but now

he really misses touching Noah.

“Aw, hey,” Noah says and kisses the top of Morgan’s head. “Here...” He tugs Morgan into bed with him and kisses him, gently, definitely not interested in taking this further, but content to just keep kissing him for a little while.

Morgan can be okay with that, especially with Noah’s mom sleeping downstairs.

“Morgan,” Noah whispers, “tomorrow, when we go to Disney, I’m going to buy you mouse ears.”

“No.”

“It’s my birthday.”

Morgan sighs. “It’s not your birthday tomorrow.”

“You only have to wear them for two minutes so we can take a picture. And then you can take them off. Deal?”

“Deal,” Morgan says.

Noah kisses Morgan, and then smiles against his skin, and kisses him one more time, lips lingering against Morgan’s cheek.

“I should go back to my own room,” Morgan mumbles.

“No,” Noah says and throws an arm around Morgan.

“But—”

Noah hugs him tighter. “Nooo.”

“Noah.”

“No,” Noah says, quiet now, and kisses Morgan’s cheek.

“I’ll stay a few more minutes.”

Noah hums.

“Because it’s your birthday,” Morgan says. It’s exactly what Noah wants to hear right now. It’s his birthday and the birthday boy can have whatever he wants.

Noah curls against him and sticks his hand under Morgan’s shirt and closes his eyes.

While Noah mumbles softly about his favorite things at Disney, Morgan looks around his room. There’s hockey memorabilia on the shelves – old pucks and trophies, pictures of junior teams, pictures of Noah’s family, and on top of the shelf, a picture of little Noah, maybe twelve, and a girl, a few years older, with the same blue eyes and the same blonde hair and a smile just as bright.

It must be Noah’s sister.

She looks happy in the picture. Noah looks happy.

Noah snuffles, kisses him, and looks up. “What are you... Oh.”

Morgan looks away from the picture, back at Noah.

“I miss her a lot,” Noah mumbles.

“I’m sorry.”

“It never made sense to me. She was... I wouldn’t say we were the closest of siblings, but we were a team when we had to be, and now part of the team is gone and it’s... I don’t know. She would have known how to deal with Dad, she was always trying to protect me.”

Morgan isn’t sure if there’s a way to hold Noah tight enough right now.

“She was really interested in fashion,” Noah says.

“Is that where all the funky suits came from?”

“Morgan,” Noah says, “you think my suits are funky?”

“I mean, they’re... different.”

“Not as boring as all the other guys’ suits. But you also looked nice with that flower tie.”

“I like the flower tie,” Morgan says. It quickly became his favorite, but he just wears it with his regular blue suit. Noah is a lot more daring in the suit department and Morgan has very secretly been looking up game day pictures of him, just to see the suits he’s wearing.

“Good,” Noah says. “She always had an eye for those things and I guess it rubbed off on me. She picked my suit for when I got drafted, too. I still looked like a baby in a suit, but, you know...”

Morgan laughs. “I looked terrible when I got drafted.”

“No, you were cute.”

“You weren’t there.”

“There’s evidence all over the internet,” Noah says. “I know how to use Google. You were cute.”

“I really wasn’t.”

“No, you were.” Noah turns his head to kiss the tip of Morgan’s nose. “You still are.”

“Stop,” Morgan says.

“I will, don’t worry. I was just trying to change the subject, so sad Noah could take a break,” Noah says. He pulls

a face, but leans in to kiss Morgan before he can even think about saying anything comforting.

They kiss for a while, slowly, Noah's fingers running through his hair, Morgan's on Noah's lower back, skin soft and warm under his fingertips.

Morgan sticks around until Noah has fallen asleep, then he goes back to his own room, down the hallway, and slips into his cold bed. He almost wants to go back to Noah's room and sleep next to him instead.

#

They head back to the beach house on Thursday evening.

They stayed at Disneyland until it closed the day before and they watched the fireworks after spending the entire day eating candy, Noah dragging Morgan into stores, putting ridiculous headwear on him. They did whatever Noah wanted to do, Morgan going along with it, smiling all day, even when Noah wouldn't stop humming songs from his favorite movies on the way back to the car.

Today Morgan is wearing a shirt Noah insisted on buying him yesterday and he's still smiling. They have brunch

with Mylene in the morning and she gives them both a hug goodbye before they get into Noah's car.

"Your Mom was nice," Morgan says once Noah has pulled out of the driveway.

"Yeah, she's... good at the mom thing, isn't she?"

Morgan gets why Noah wanted to tell her about them. He's almost at a point where he wants to tell Noah to just do it, but whenever he wants to say it, he suddenly feels like he can't breathe, so he never does.

"Noah?" he says.

"Yeah?"

"I'll probably never introduce you to my family."

Morgan needs him to know that. They won't have brunch with his mom. Morgan will never take him back to his hometown and show him his favorite places. He wants Noah as far away from his family as possible.

"You don't have to," Noah says.

"I know, but—"

"I probably won't introduce you to my dad either,"

Noah mutters. "He's scared of gay people. Thinks we have the

cooties or something. I don't know. He wasn't happy when I told him and he... kept asking me if I was sure and kept saying that I might have not met the right girl yet and that I'd change my mind and after that he just... He didn't call so much anymore."

Morgan reaches out to take Noah's hand.

"It's okay, I have my mom."

"I'm glad you do," Morgan says.

Noah glances over at him. "And I have you."

Morgan smiles at him, quickly, before he ducks his head and looks down at their intertwined fingers. He should let Noah have his hand back, but they only have a few days left until Morgan goes back to DC and they both go back to training and they won't see each other until... "When are you going back to Philly?"

"I don't know yet."

Morgan lets go of his hand. "Will you tell me when you know?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Maybe I can come visit you with Bear."

“That’d be nice,” Noah says softly, lips curling into a smile as he speeds up, taking them back to his beach house.

They stop for a snack on the way and by the time Noah unlocks the door for them, Morgan can barely keep his hands off Noah. Noah’s had his hand on Morgan’s thigh for the last fifteen minutes of the drive and Morgan thought about road safety for one minute and about tearing Noah’s clothes off for the other fourteen.

They wordlessly decide to leave their stuff by the door and Morgan chases Noah upstairs, tumbles into bed with him, Noah on top of him within seconds, kissing him like they haven’t seen each other in weeks.

They had time to sneak in some kisses during the course of the day, but nothing like this. Last night, after walking around all day, they were too exhausted for more than a goodnight kiss, and this morning, Noah snuck into Morgan’s bed to wake him up, quickly scrambling back out when they heard his mom’s footsteps on the stairs.

Now it’s just them, now Noah can push up Morgan’s shirt, kiss his stomach, and Morgan doesn’t have to hold back a moan when Noah gets his shorts open and pulls them down

far enough that he can suck a bruise into Morgan's skin, down low, where no one else will see.

“What do you want?” Noah asks.

“Uhhh...” Morgan never knows how to answer that question. He's liked what they've done so far, but he doesn't know what else he might like and is honestly not experienced enough to come up with any ideas of his own.

“Think about it,” Noah says and pulls off Morgan's pants. He scrambles off Morgan to strip off his clothes, all of them, slowly, Morgan watching him with unabashed interest, because Noah clearly likes that he's looking. He returns to tug off Morgan's shirt and goes back to kissing him, hands wandering slowly, soft against Morgan's skin, and doesn't ask again what Morgan wants until they're both panting, both desperate.

“Lube?” Morgan says, because he knows what he wants, just doesn't know how to say it.

Noah grins. “Yeah, okay.”

“Lie back.” Morgan gives Noah a nudge and Noah goes easily, eyes wide, lips parted. Morgan stares down at him for a moment, at the flush on Noah's cheeks, at his chest,

rising and falling fast. Morgan takes a deep breath. It's just Noah. Morgan doesn't have to be embarrassed. Noah wants him, he wants this. Morgan leans down, kissing Noah quickly, and mumbles against Noah's jaw, "Do you have condoms?"

Noah doesn't reply for a moment, so Morgan pulls back.

"You still want to?" Morgan asks.

"I... yeah. Yeah. Do you?"

Morgan shrugs, because he's pretty sure he was making himself clear.

"Morgan..."

Maybe that shrug wasn't the right way to go, because Noah took it for uncertainty, rather than a, *Well, duh*. Morgan knows that his face is going bright red when he says, "I've been thinking about it."

"I've got condoms in the box," Noah says. "But, Morgan, only if you really want to."

Morgan nods. He really wants to.

"Go slow, yeah?"

"Yeah."

Morgan takes his time, because Noah asked him to, and because he doesn't really know what he's doing, and because he's scared of doing it wrong, watching Noah's face closely, every flutter of his eyelashes, every quirk of his lips. He could probably make Noah come with just his fingers if he wanted to. He's done it before.

He doesn't actually take a condom out of the box until Noah grabs him by the arm and gives him a nod. He helps Morgan with the condom, because Morgan's hands are shaking, just a little bit, just enough that Noah takes pity on him. Noah asks him if he's okay about five times and Morgan tells him yes every time.

Morgan goes slower than he probably has to, Noah mumbling to him that he's okay, that he can move, that he wants this so much.

It's unlike anything Morgan has ever felt. He was fully prepared to find this strange, at the very least, but all he can think about is how close he is to Noah, closer than he's ever been, that he's the one who's drawing those little noises from Noah, that Noah trusts him enough to let him do this.

Everything is always so much with Noah, but Morgan wants it, all of this. He loses track of time, can't tell if they last

long or if it's over embarrassingly fast. It doesn't really matter. Noah is totally out of it after, holding on to Morgan like he couldn't possibly move his arms right now, so Morgan stays close for a bit until Noah moves his hands, pats his back, and lets him go.

“You okay?” Morgan asks.

Noah nods.

Morgan grabs a handful of tissues to clean Noah up, throws away the condom, and then climbs back into bed. Noah still hasn't said anything. He wasn't exactly quiet until a few minutes ago.

Noah thought it was terrible.

That must be it.

And now he's trying to find a way to say it nicely.

Morgan firmly tells his brain to shut the fuck up, because this isn't helping. He clears his throat. “Noah?”

Noah's eyelids flutter. “Yeah?”

“Say something.”

Noah laughs. “Sorry, I think you killed me. But that's okay. Feel free to kill me again whenever the hell you want.”

“It was good?”

“You have no idea,” Noah mutters. “Or maybe you do.” He squints at Morgan. “Did you like it?”

Morgan nods, face hot, and leans back in to kiss Noah.

He kisses him for a long, long time.

Chapter Fourteen

Morgan drives to Scranton for Ben's wedding. He almost wants to take Bear for moral support, but decides against it eventually. He'll be gone for three days; Bear will be fine without him, although Morgan isn't sure if he'll be fine without Bear.

David isn't coming to the wedding.

Danny will be there, and their mom. Not their dad.
Morgan wouldn't have been able to even look him in the eye.

He arrives the night before the wedding, checks into his hotel just after nine and goes straight to bed. He wakes up early the next morning, has a disgusting breakfast, and puts on his blue suit and the tie Noah gave to him. He isn't a groomsman, because Ben knows him well enough to understand that it would be torture for him. He's got one of his teammates next to him.

Morgan spends most of the wedding avoiding Danny and their mother, who are both doing Ben a favor and aren't confronting him. Morgan didn't expect that kind of restraint from them, but Ben assured him that they'd promised to be civil. Danny keeps shooting him dark looks, though. Morgan hides by the bar, of all places, sipping a Coke that could have rum in it, not that anyone's asking, and talks to Ben's teammates, who are loud and happy and, in that way, exactly like Morgan's teammates.

When the first people start to leave, Morgan resolves that he'll stay for another half hour before he heads back to his hotel. He says goodbye to Ben, who thanks him for coming,

and Morgan makes the mistake of thinking that it wasn't so bad when he makes for the door.

Which is where his mom is waiting for him.

“Morgan, sweetheart.”

Morgan slows down, because she's his mom and he can't just walk past his mom without saying a word.

He should have known that this would happen.

She smiles at him. She's wearing a turquoise dress, her hair twisted into a bun, and she looks... okay. Like she's keeping it together, but today might just be *one* good day. Their dad had good days, too. Once in a blue moon.

“How are you?” Morgan asks, because she did raise him to be polite.

“I'm doing really well, baby,” she says and reaches for his arm. “Look at you, so grown up. You only said hello earlier, tell me what you've been up to.”

“I actually need to head out soon. I'm leaving early tomorrow morning,” Morgan says. “I'm okay, though. All good.”

“Morgan,” his mom says. “Won't you come home for a couple of days? I promise I'm better.”

“I can’t. I’m training for next season in DC. It’s... important.”

“I know, you were always so serious about your hockey. But I miss you, Morgan. You were always such a sweet little boy. Give me a call every now and then?”

“Mom,” Morgan says, voice low. He doesn’t want to drag their family drama into this wedding. It wouldn’t be fair. “Are you sober?”

“Oh, you know, I have a glass of wine here and there, but I’m fine, baby, I promise. I have things under control.”

Which means she definitely doesn’t have things under control. Morgan only nods. “I should head out.”

“If that isn’t itsy-bitsy Morgan.” Danny throws an arm around him and squeezes his shoulder. It’s not a companionable squeeze. “Haven’t heard from you in a while. Can’t be bothered to show your face at home, huh?”

“I had other stuff going on,” Morgan says. Maybe he can just talk to Danny the way he talks to the media. He’ll be as bland and unemotional as humanly possible.

“Right. I guess when you’re some rich big-shot hockey player you don’t have time for family anymore. That’s cool.”

“Danny,” their mom says, “this is not the time.”

“Oh, this is definitely the time, because the second our little golden boy Morgan here walks out that door, he’ll go back to pretending that we don’t fucking exist.”

“I’m gonna go,” Morgan says. He can’t listen to this any longer. David was right when he decided not to come.

“Yeah, go you little—”

“Danny.” Their mom gives him a stern look. “Be nice.” She reaches for Morgan and he lets her give him a hug. “Have a good season, sweetheart.”

She tugs Danny away with her and Morgan is finally free to leave. Instead of making a run for it, he watches them go for a moment. Then he shakes it off, that weird nostalgia that crept up on him, that made him miss those days when everything was fine. There were a few. Three. Maybe four.

He drives back to the hotel, curls up in bed and can’t go to sleep. He thought he was too tired to even read the texts people have been sending him all day – the Eagles’ group chat has been unusually active for the past couple of days and Noah has been checking in with him – but now he’s wide awake.

Noah is still in California, so he’s a few hours behind.

Morgan calls him and Noah answers on the first ring, like he's been waiting for this phone call for hours. "Hey, you," Noah says.

"Hey," Morgan says.

"What's up?"

Morgan curls up on his side and pulls the sheets up to his chin. "I just wanted to talk to someone I like."

"Why'd you call me, then?"

"Noah."

"Sorry. Not the time for jokes, I get it. I'm sorry," Noah says. "You okay?"

"No."

Noah lets out a soft breath. "Can I help?"

"No."

"Wanna tell me what happened?" Noah asks. "Or we can talk about something else? Or we can... not talk?"

"Well," Morgan says, "I was trying really hard to avoid my mom and Danny all day. And then they found me right before I left. And my mom was..."

"Hm?"

“She was trying to guilt-trip me into coming home, I guess. Like, just to visit. Not permanently.”

“But you don’t want to?” Noah asks.

Morgan never gave him the full story, not in a coherent way, just mentioned bits about his brother, about his dad, but that was just about all Morgan could bring himself to do. It doesn’t hurt, talking about them, he’d just rather not, because it’s easier not to think about his family at all.

He’s not close with any of them, not even Ben or David. He and Ben never talk, only see each other during the summer sometimes, and he and David never see each other and only text, sometimes call, maybe once a month.

“The thing with my mom is...” Morgan takes a deep breath. It seems impossible to explain; he doesn’t even know where to start. “She doesn’t... She drinks. And sometimes she’s doing better and sometimes she’s doing worse, and, like, she’ll say she’s doing okay and that it’s not a problem, but it is. She just had a good week and maybe she didn’t drink as much, but she always starts again. It’s hard to explain, because... on some days she really is okay. But she’s not actually... I don’t know.”

Noah hums.

“And it’s not... I don’t wanna say it’s not her fault, but she’s been through so much with my dad, he was... He was horrible to her. And I guess she started drinking so much because she didn’t know how else to deal with him.” He grabs one of his pillows to hug. It seems easier to say this over the phone, but he wishes Noah was here with him right now.

“That must have been hard,” Noah says. “For you, too.”

Morgan sighs. “I offered to help. But she says she has it under control. I can’t make her go to rehab or anything, so...”

“No, you can’t... You tried.”

“Yeah,” Morgan says. He did try. “I’m gonna sleep now. And I’ll drive back to DC tomorrow morning.”

“Make sure you get enough sleep, okay?”

“I will.”

“Call me when you’re home.”

“Okay.”

“Be safe.”

“Yeah.”

“Morgan.”

“Yeah?”

A short pause, then Noah says, “Nothing. Just... sleep well.”

“You, too,” Morgan says. He almost tells Noah that he misses him, but it hasn’t been that long since they last saw each other, so he doesn’t.

#

“Bad time?” Morgan asks when Noah answers his phone, probably two seconds before it’s about to go to voicemail. Recently there’s been nothing but bad times to call. It’s the beginning of November and they’ve only managed to see each other once since the preseason.

“Uhh, no, it’s fine, I’m just—”

“Okay, so I have two different menus for that place and I can’t tell which one is the current one. Oh, sorry, didn’t realize you were on the phone,” someone says. Some guy. One of Noah’s teammates?

There’s often someone else hanging out with Noah when Morgan calls him while he’s on the road, and most of the time it’s Philipp König, but this is definitely not Philipp

König. Morgan has heard Philipp's voice in the background so many times that he'd be able to recognize it in his sleep.

Anyway, with Noah's teammates, there's usually no talk of takeout menus.

"It's fine," Noah says, but not to Morgan. "Sorry, can I call you back later? I'm hanging out with a friend and we're about to get lunch."

"Oh, yeah, sure," Morgan says. He wasn't thinking. Obviously Noah would be hanging out with friends on his day off in New York. He used to live there, for fuck's sake. "Are you hanging out with one of your Mariners guys?"

"No, actually, I'm hanging out with Blake... Samuels."

"Oh."

"Yeah. We've known each other for a while and we usually hang out when I'm in the city. I'll give you a call when I'm back at the hotel in a couple of hours, okay?"

"Okay," Morgan says.

"Cool, talk to you later," Noah says quickly and hangs up.

Which is exactly what he should have done, because he's hanging out with a friend and it's not like he can talk to

Morgan the way he usually talks to him, with all the teasing and the *I miss you* s. It still throws Morgan off. It's like he just talked to some random person and not his boyfriend.

He doesn't exactly wait for Noah to call him back all day, but he keeps his phone closer than usual. David texts him – Morgan asked him if he wanted tickets for when Morgan is in California with the Eagles. They've been talking a little more since David called him after the wedding to ask how it went. Morgan told him exactly how it had gone and David didn't seem surprised but also didn't tell him that he should have expected as much.

Morgan is still waiting for David to say something that'll show him just how much he's like the rest of their family, but David is always kind and David doesn't lie to him, David doesn't ask him for money, and David doesn't call him a homo. Not that Ben called him that, he just seems to think that it's an okay word to use to describe other people.

He hates thinking about it, because he knows he should have said something. He remembers all the times he didn't say anything because he was scared that someone might wonder why he cares so much, why he cares at all.

There are actually plenty of people around the league who care, but Morgan can't be one of them. He can't stand out in that way. So he looks away and says nothing, like most of the guys.

Morgan has just finished eating dinner when Noah calls him back, greeting him with a cheerful, "Hey, there, whatcha doin'?"

"Just had dinner," Morgan says and dumps his dishes in the sink. Noah would be appalled that he's not putting them in the dishwasher. "Are you back at the hotel?"

"Why, yes, is there a reason why you're asking?" Noah says. "Wanna know what I'm wearing? It's not a lot."

"*Noah*," Morgan splutters.

"I'm just kidding. I think. How was your day?"

"Okay. How was yours?"

"Pretty good," Noah says. "That picture of Bear you sent earlier was so cute. Best thing to wake up to, honestly."

Morgan glances at Bear, who's dozing on his pillow. "Oh, yeah," he says. He really doesn't want to talk about Bear right now. "How was hanging out with your friend?"

"Uhhh, good?"

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Noah says.

“For how long have you been friends?” Morgan asks. He knew that they’re friends, he saw them at the All Star Game and they seemed to be close, but it never occurred to him to ask.

“A while?”

“How’d you– I mean, you were on the Mariners, didn’t you guys have a clause in your contract about hating the Ravens and the Knights?”

Noah snorts. “Not really.”

Maybe Morgan is imagining things, but Noah’s answers are a lot shorter than they usually are. Sometimes he’ll ask one question and then Noah will talk for five minutes, but today he’s barely getting more than two words. “Everything okay?” Morgan asks. “Like, do you have somewhere to be or...?”

“What, no. Why?”

“You’re just sort of... I don’t know.”

Noah sighs. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like... I wasn’t saying that you’re doing anything wrong.”

“I know, that’s not why I’m saying sorry, it’s just that Blake... He knows me really well. Better than most people. And when you called, he took, like, one look at my face and knew that there was something going on there, so I told him about the boyfriend situation. Which is fine. He doesn’t know that it’s you and he wasn’t gonna ask, he’s not—”

“You told him you had a boyfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“He knows that you’re...”

“Yeah,” Noah says when Morgan doesn’t finish that sentence. “He’s known for a while. It’s okay, I trust him.”

“Oh,” Morgan says. “You never told me that.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s not?” Morgan asks. It sounds like a pretty big deal to him. If Blake Samuels has known for a while, Noah must have had a pretty good reason to tell him. Morgan might be reaching here, but... “Is he... the guy—”

“Morgan, please don’t ask me.”

“Why not?”

“Well, because if he is the guy, I obviously can’t say yes, because I can’t just go around telling people stuff like that, but if I said no, I might be lying to you, do you see where this is going? It’s not a good place to put me in.”

“Okay, but...”

“But?”

“It’s just... weird.”

“Why?” Noah asks. He doesn’t sound like his usual cheerful self anymore. It’s crept in slowly, that hint of exasperation.

“I don’t know,” Morgan says, because he knows full well that it’s time to backpedal like hell.

“No, you do know. Tell me.”

Morgan could backpedal some more, but then Noah might get even more annoyed with him. “Well,” he says. He’ll try to choose his words carefully, but he already knows that it’ll come out all wrong. “If he was that guy, wouldn’t it be weird that you’re still hanging out with him?”

Noah doesn’t say anything for a moment. “Why?”

“Because... it just seems weird to me.”

“It’s not.”

“You were in love with that guy,” Morgan says.

“I...” Noah sighs. “Okay. Yes, I was in love with that guy. But that guy wasn’t in love with me. And I’m not in love with that guy anymore. That guy is my friend and that’s it. And if you can’t deal with that, then...”

“Then what?”

“Then... maybe...” Noah trails off. “Don’t you trust me?”

“I do,” Morgan says.

“Really, though? Because it sounds like you don’t. It sounds like you think I’d go on the road with my team and forget all about you and fuck another guy like some douchebag—”

“I don’t think that,” Morgan says. “I don’t.”

“Then what do you think?”

What does he think? It’s a lot. Too much to put it in a coherent sentence. “I think that you were in love with him.

And I think that maybe it wouldn't be hard to fall back in love with him."

"Why would I?"

"No, why *wouldn't* you?"

"Because I'm with you, Morgan. Because I love *you*. And I don't want anyone else. Just you. And that was definitely not how I was planning on saying that. And now I'm mad. Please forget that I said that."

Morgan doesn't reply. How the hell is he supposed to forget that Noah just said that?

"Morgan?" Noah says.

"Yeah?"

"Are you forgetting it?"

"No," Morgan whispers.

"Please forget it. Just... don't be jealous, okay? There's nobody else in the world that I'd rather be with. I swear."

"Okay," Morgan says. Did he honestly, for even just a second, think that Noah would cheat on him? Of course he wouldn't, but Morgan doesn't like that nagging feeling, that maybe, one day, Noah will realize that Morgan isn't all that

great of a boyfriend, that he could be with someone much better, someone who isn't so reluctant, someone who will give Noah exactly what he wants without thinking it through for three months first.

“I miss you,” Noah says. “So much. And I can't wait to see you.”

Just a few more weeks until Thanksgiving, then Noah will come down for the day.

It's an eternity away.

#

Morgan has practice on Thanksgiving, an early one, but since Noah has the entire day off, he'll be the one to drive down to DC. He has a game the evening before, as does Morgan.

The Eagles go into overtime and eventually win the game in the shootout. Morgan scores when it's his turn. He usually doesn't. He hasn't seen too many shootouts during his career; plenty of overtimes, some of which he ended, but when it comes to shootouts, Coach sometimes doesn't even send him out. Today, he gets to go for the sixth round, but the Bobcats score as well when it's their turn, and so they're going for round number seven. It's thankfully the last one. Morgan

couldn't have taken the suspense. He started gnawing on his stick as they went from the fourth shooters to the fifth.

He doesn't have to talk to the media after the game, which is probably his favorite thing about today.

Neither does Marsh, which gives him enough time to come over to Morgan, who's only just started getting out of his pads. "Hey, Mo," Marsh says, "Nice goal there. Just wanted to double-check if you really don't wanna come over tomorrow? Meg told me to ask you again. It really wouldn't be an issue. We'll have plenty of food." He nods at Pekka and Cale. "Kids will be there, too."

"No, sorry, I really can't," Morgan says. The first time Marsh asked, Morgan just said *no, thanks* without offering an explanation and he thought that would be it.

"Wait, you got family visiting?"

"Something like that," Morgan says. "Sorry."

"No, hey, no worries. I just wanted to make sure you're not by yourself."

"I won't be." Morgan ducks his head before Marsh can see the smile on his face. "Thanks, though."

"Sure thing."

Austin, in the stall next to him, is looking at him like he just solved a murder case. “Morgan,” he whispers, very loudly, “do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Morgan has a girlfriend?” Charlie asks. “I didn’t know that.”

Morgan actually liked Charlie. Up until now. He got traded to DC this summer; he’s their new back-up goalie. Round-faced and happy and always willing to share his food. He sometimes sits next to Morgan on the plane and he’s pleasant to have around, because he mostly minds his own business and only talks to Morgan to ask if he wants to try his snacks.

“I don’t have one,” Morgan says, now in Charlie’s direction.

Austin reaches over to ruffle his hair. “Hey, relax, we’re just teasing, it’s okay.”

Morgan sighs and makes for the showers before anyone else can get involved in this conversation. Some of the guys have tried to set him up on dates and that never ended well. He knows it’s not the best idea to turn down literally

every woman he meets, because people are bound to notice, but for now he might still be able to get away with it. And he can't just go out with a girl when he's dating Noah.

He drives straight home after the game, going past the grocery store wondering, for the hundredth time, if he forgot anything important. He bought a small turkey the other day, trusting Noah when he said that he knew how to cook it, and potatoes and readymade gravy, because Noah does not know how to make that and they decided that it's not the time for either of them to learn. He's got stuffing and green beans and a billion other things and he's pretty sure that he'll have leftovers for two weeks.

Bear is waiting for him by the door when he gets back and Morgan pets him for about ten minutes, even though he's exhausted. He takes him out back and then watches the recap of Noah's game, a 7-2 win against the Comets. Noah scored a goal and Morgan wants to see it.

He texts Noah after, but Noah doesn't reply. Maybe he's already asleep. Morgan's game did go longer than Noah's. And it's not like they send good night texts *every* night. They're not that codependent. Sometimes they – mostly Noah – go out with the guys after games, or there's other stuff going

on, especially when they're on the road, and they just want to go the fuck to bed, and then there's no good night text. And that's fine.

He'll see Noah tomorrow anyway.

He gave him a key to the house in September, so Noah can just let himself in tomorrow, in case Morgan is still at practice, although he doubts that anyone will stick around for too long.

Morgan goes to bed, almost considers letting Bear sleep in his bed with him, but he shouldn't let him get used to it. He was feeling lonely the other day, so he let him, but Bear always takes up so much space that it sometimes gets hard to actually sleep. He moves around a lot, too, and then licks Morgan's face at the crack of dawn to convince him that it's time for food when it is, in fact, not time for food for another hour or two.

He passes out quickly, totally dead to the world until Bear starts barking downstairs.

Morgan squints at his clock. It's just past two.

It's not the first time Bear has barked at something in the middle of the night, but he usually settles down pretty

quickly. Not tonight, though.

Morgan gets out of bed and goes down the stairs. He finds Bear by the door, barking at whoever is currently unlocking Morgan's door. He goes down two more steps, then he can see a head of blond hair, and he hears Noah's voice a moment later when the lock clicks and he opens the door a crack.

"Shhh, you silly baby, it's just me, don't wake up Morgan, okay?"

"It's too late for that, sorry," Morgan says and scares the crap out of Noah, which is great, because Noah also scared the crap out of him.

"Shit, I'm sorry," Noah says as he pushes in through the door. He closes it gently and drops his bag to pet Bear, who's stopped barking now that he knows who came to visit. "Sorry, Morgan, I was gonna be so stealthy and sneak in and just... I don't know."

"Call next time?" Morgan says.

"Yeah, I will, I swear. I'm sorry." Noah gives Bear a nudge. "Go to bed, buddy. You, too, Morgan. Go back to bed."

"Aren't you coming to bed with me?" Morgan asks.

“Right, yeah.” Noah comes over to him to give him a kiss, and a hug, and another kiss, and then lets Morgan tug him up the stairs. “I figured I’d drive down right after the game instead of really early tomorrow morning, because... no traffic, you know? It was a great idea.”

Morgan agrees, because now he gets to go back to bed, and his bed will have Noah in it. It’s been so long since one of them was able to spend the night.

Noah takes off his clothes and crawls into Morgan’s bed with just his boxers and then bullies Morgan into being the little spoon, and it seems that Noah falls asleep as soon as his head hits the pillow. Morgan is awake for a few more minutes, listening to the sound Noah’s breathing.

He lets Noah sleep in the next morning, sneaks out of bed, makes coffee, and writes a note for Noah and tells him to feel free to use whatever he needs in the kitchen. He makes sure there’s enough coffee for Noah and tells Bear to take good care of him while he’s gone.

Practice crawls by today, even though everyone’s in a good mood, the coaches not too hard on them, everyone wishing each other a happy Thanksgiving before they disperse. Noah has texted him – *got started on the turkey and most of*

the other stuff is ready to go, can't wait to see you – and Morgan finds him in the kitchen when he gets home, Bear watching Noah's every move.

“Hey,” Noah says and literally drops everything to kiss Morgan, a lot more thoroughly than he did last night.

“Did I get all the right stuff?” Morgan asks when he pulls away. Noah was really specific with the shopping list he sent Morgan. Morgan's Thanksgiving dinners usually weren't that special and he's not too fussed about the holiday as a whole, but Noah seems to be taking this pretty seriously.

“Yes, you did, all good.”

“Can I do anything to help?”

“Not right now.” Noah nods at the oven. “I got the turkey going, but it'll take a while and everything else won't take as long, but I totally have a plan, don't worry. Wanna match up schedules while we have nothing else to do?”

“Sure,” Morgan says. He was about to suggest that they could just make out for a while, but they do need to have a look at their schedules and figure out when they can see each other next.

They sit at the breakfast bar, their legs touching, both with their phones out.

“I have the day off on the fourth,” Noah says.

“I’m in Montreal.”

“Okay, yikes, we’re not off to a good start.”

“I have a day off when we get back from that roadie, though,” Morgan says. “On the... eighth.”

“That’s the day we leave for California, and then I’m not back until the eighteenth.”

“So... Christmas?” Morgan asks.

“I could come down on the nineteenth? And then we’ll do Christmas at my place? Or we can do Christmas here, that might make things easier with my mom, because I’ll have to tell her why she can’t come visit me this year and if I say I’m invited to a friend’s house...”

“But then you have to drive down twice,” Morgan says.

“I don’t mind.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Noah says. “And I know you hate driving to Philly.”

“I don’t.”

Noah nudges his knee.

“Okay, maybe I do,” Morgan mutters. “But...”

“I know, you’ll do it for me.” Noah winks at him. “But, seriously, let’s just do that, okay? I’ll come on the nineteenth and I’ll come for Christmas?”

“Yeah?”

Noah nods. “And then... you know, the All Star Game’s in January.”

“Yeah, but...”

“We both went last season,” Noah says with a shrug.

“We’ll see.”

Morgan nods. “Okay.”

“Hey...” Noah reaches up to tap the tip of Morgan’s nose. “Why are you looking sad right now?”

“December is gonna be long,” Morgan mumbles.

“I know.” Noah leans over to kiss him. “I’ll call you all the time.”

Morgan slides off his chair and plasters himself against Noah. He needs to take advantage of being in the same room with him, because after tonight he'll have to go another few weeks without having him around.

Chapter Fifteen

Before the holidays, the Eagles usually visit one of the local animal shelters to promote shelter adoptions. Some of Morgan's teammates have been actively campaigning for a puppy calendar and Morgan has heard some whispers that they might be doing one next season.

The shelter event is one of Morgan's favorites, because all he has to do is play with dogs and maybe look at a camera

every now and then. Usually they won't ask the entire team to go, but Morgan volunteers every year.

He is way better with dogs than he is with people.

It takes him less than five minutes to find a new best friend at the shelter, a huge fluffy dog with soft brown fur. He probably has a bit of German Shepherd in him, except he's much fuzzier. His ears are big and sticking up, and when Morgan kneels down next to him to say hello, he's immediately all over him and then flops down for a belly rub.

One of the shelter volunteers is making the rounds and eventually comes over to Morgan, smiling broadly when she says, "Oh, you've met Moose."

"He's great," Morgan says.

"He's not exactly shy, but he seems to really like you."

"For how long has he been here?"

"He's been here for less than a week. His owner died and they didn't have anyone to take care of him."

"Oh," Morgan says and scratches Moose's head. He sees the Eagles' photographer out of the corner of his eye, but he doesn't look up. They probably don't care; they'll post candid pictures, too.

He usually comes here having firmly promised himself that he won't adopt any dogs. Every year, there'll be a dog that almost convinces him to change his mind, but he's never been as weak as he is right now, with this big fluffy boy who lost his owner and seems to love him so much.

“How old is he?” Morgan asks.

“He's almost five.”

“And how is he with other dogs?”

“He gets along really well with the other dogs. Kids aren't a problem either, the previous owner had the neighborhood kids walk him a lot. He's really well-trained.”

Morgan nods and thanks her and she moves on, but he stays with Moose, and only moves when they try to gather them all in the same place to take a picture with the people who work at the shelter.

After that, they're technically allowed to leave, but Morgan sticks around and looks around for the woman he talked to earlier.

“Mo,” Austin says, “we're gonna go grab a bite, you wanna come?”

“I, uh... I’m gonna stick around for a bit longer, I wanted to ask a couple of questions.”

“About what?”

“A dog,” Morgan says, keeping his voice low.

“Mo,” Austin coos, “are you in love?”

“Shh, I just wanna ask them a few things.”

“Yeeaaaah,” Austin says with a wink. “Which dog is it? The big one you were hanging out with?”

Morgan nods.

“Wow, please adopt him.”

“I shouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I already have a dog.”

“Okay, but if you adopt him, you’ll have two dogs. And *two* dogs are definitely better than one dog.”

“Thanks for the input,” Morgan says and gives Austin a look that’s supposed to shoo him away, but Austin only grins, whips out the finger guns and then backs off, nodding, like he knows that Morgan has made up his mind already.

The guys take off one by one and Morgan goes and asks his questions about Moose. He explains his situation – that he already has a dog at home, that he’s often on the road, sometimes for over a week, that he has a dog sitter he trusts and neighbors who check in every now and then as well.

When he drives home, he has Moose in the back of the car with his favorite toy.

Bear loves him as soon as they get in through the door, always happy to make a new friend. Morgan takes them into the backyard and lets them run together for a bit. As he watches them, he calls Noah, because if there’s one person who’ll want to hear about this, it’s him.

He’s in California with the Foxes and he has the day off today, so there’s a chance that he’s out doing something with his mom right now.

Noah answers quickly, though, says, “Light of my life, how are you?” Which means he’s probably in his hotel room, by himself.

“Good,” Morgan says and follows that up with, “I did something kinda stupid.”

“That’s funny,” Noah says, “Me too.”

Morgan frowns. “What did you do?”

“No, you first,” Noah says.

“No, *you*,” Morgan says.

“It’s not that exciting, I just went to In-N-Out Burger with a bunch of the guys and ate everything. Like, literally everything. And now I feel dead,” Noah says. “So... what did you do, then?”

“Well...” Morgan says, glancing over at Bear and Moose. Those two definitely won’t have any issues with each other. “We did this thing at the shelter today, I told you about that, right? And I... took home a dog.”

“A real dog?”

“As opposed to what? A fake dog?”

“No, come on, you know what I mean,” Noah says, excitement sneaking into his voice. “But... Okay... Start from the beginning. Don’t leave anything out.”

“So, we do this thing with a local shelter every year and—”

“Wait,” Noah says. “Tell me what the dog’s name is first.”

“It’s Moose.” Moose seems to hear him, because he looks up and comes bounding over to Morgan. “And he’s a very good boy,” Morgan adds, bending down to pet him. “Such a good boy.”

“Is he there right now?” Noah says. “Oh my God, Morgan, I want to see him, let’s turn this into a video call, yeah?”

Morgan does. He’ll get to tell the story when Noah is done cooing.

#

The one day that Noah spends at Morgan’s before he comes back for Christmas a couple of days later is enough for Noah to become best friends with Moose.

When Noah does come back for Christmas, he drives down again after his game on the 23rd, crawls into bed with Morgan in the middle of the night, so they can have three nights together instead of two, and gets up with Morgan in the morning to have breakfast with him. He’s fast asleep again two hours later, napping on the couch with Moose, who’s draped himself over Noah like a large, fuzzy blanket.

Morgan takes a picture of them, just for himself, and then takes Bear outside to throw a ball for him for a little while. Dogs probably know nothing about jealousy, but Morgan doesn't want Bear to think that anyone loves Moose more than him. He's got more than enough love for both of them.

Noah joins him outside when he's awake again, Moose bouncing past Morgan as Noah sneaks up behind him and wraps his arms around him.

"Hey," Morgan says.

Noah lets go of him before Morgan can even start to worry about anyone seeing them. "So, tonight..."

"We'll order Chinese."

Noah laughs. "Okay. Sounds good. Glad you have a plan. Sorry I fell asleep, I was actually gonna spend that hour making out with you."

"We still can," Morgan says and pushes back against Noah for a moment. He's not wearing a jacket. No hat, no gloves. Morgan almost wants to tug off his own and put them on Noah so he won't be cold. "Let's go inside."

Noah kisses him as soon as they're back in the house, but Moose clearly doesn't like that he doesn't have their undivided attention anymore and circles around them, tail hitting their legs. Noah makes a valiant effort to kiss Morgan and pet Moose at the same time, but it only goes well for about a minute before Noah stops kissing Morgan and bends down to pet Moose properly.

“Getting another dog was a mistake,” Morgan says.

Noah gently covers Moose's ears. “Shhh, he'll hear you.”

“He doesn't speak human.”

“How do you know?” Noah says and scratches Moose under his chin, which is something Bear doesn't care about at all and that Moose can't get enough of. “Maybe he understands what I'm saying. Maybe he knows exactly what I'm telling him when I say that he's the most excellent boy ever. Yes, the best boy.”

“He'll be excited about whatever you say just as long as you sound happy,” Morgan says.

Noah continues to coo at Moose and Morgan watches him for a minute or two, absent-mindedly scratching the top of

Bear's head. Morgan was joking when he said that getting another dog was a mistake. Bear is clearly happy to have a friend that never leaves and Moose hasn't been any trouble at all, except for when he found one of Morgan's old flip-flops in his closet and started chewing on it. Morgan will have to remember to keep the door to his closet shut.

Noah is still muttering to Moose when Morgan's phone starts ringing.

It's Ben.

Morgan briefly considers not answering the phone at all, but he hasn't talked to Ben since the wedding. He never even called, so he does pick up this time and sneaks away as quietly as he can. Noah notices his retreat, his eyes following Morgan out the room as Morgan says, "Hey, what's up?" He stops in the hallway and sits down on the stairs.

"Morgan, hey," Ben says. "I don't know if you even care, but Danny called me and he told me that Dad's been admitted to the hospital again. It's his liver this time."

Morgan sighs. "Are we surprised?"

"Morgan, come on."

“What?” Morgan says. They are not surprised. He isn’t and Ben sure as fuck isn’t either. Their dad has been drinking ever since before Morgan was born. Ben would know, he was already around to see it.

“Not the time,” Ben says.

Morgan doesn’t reply, doesn’t care if he’s being insensitive. “So what’s going to happen?”

“Well, Danny said they can’t, like... You know how liver transplants work? They don’t actually need a dead person or anything, just someone whose blood type matches or something? Or... something has to match... I don’t know.”

Morgan hums noncommittally. He does know how these things work and he knows that relatives are the first people who get tested. He doesn’t know what he’d do if they asked him.

“Anyway, they can’t do a transplant,” Ben goes on, “because his heart is too weak. He probably wouldn’t survive it.”

“Oh,” Morgan says. It almost like they’re talking about a stranger’s life right now, not their father. Just some random person he’s never even met. “So...?”

“They’re doing some tests, but he probably... you know, I don’t know for how long he’ll be able to survive like this. I guess his liver will just fail at some point.”

Morgan doesn’t know what to say. He isn’t sad. He isn’t angry. He isn’t relieved. Ten years ago, he might have been. When he was wishing and wishing for his dad to just disappear, no matter how, so it would finally be quiet. But now it’s almost like his dad died a long time ago and he barely has any memories of him, and the ones that he has... Well, none of them are particularly fond.

“I just thought you might want to know,” Ben says. “I’ll drive home to see him, I have time. You know, if you want me to tell him anything.”

“No,” Morgan says. “No, thanks.”

“Okay. Well... Merry Christmas, Morgan.”

“Yeah,” Morgan replies. “Merry Christmas.”

They hang up and Morgan remains on the stairs for a little while longer. It’s where Noah eventually finds him, the dogs nowhere in sight.

“Hey,” Noah says, forehead creased. “Everything okay?”

Morgan gets up quickly. “Yeah, everything’s fine,” he says. “You wanna watch a movie?”

“Uh, sure?”

Morgan nods and makes for the living room. Bear and Moose are sleeping on the old pillow that Bear has been sleeping on ever since Morgan first got him, Moose using Bear as a pillow.

“Who called?” Noah asks as they flop down on the couch.

“Just... my brother,” Morgan says slowly. He doesn’t know why Noah cares and he’s not in the mood to talk about why Ben called.

“Which one?”

“Does it matter?” Morgan asks, maybe a little too gruff.

“I mean, no, but I know that you don’t feel about all of them the same way.”

Morgan shrugs.

“O *kay* ,” Noah says.

“What?”

“No, I get it, you don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Yeah.”

“So why don’t you just say that?” Noah asks. “It’s not like you can’t say stuff like that to me.”

Morgan shoots him a look.

“Morgan, come on,” Noah says. “We’ve been together for... how long? I don’t even know. It’s been a while. You know you can talk to me.”

“Yeah,” Morgan says. But the whole point is that he doesn’t want to talk about anything right now.

“Okay, whatever.”

“Don’t be mad,” Morgan says.

“I’m not.”

“Yeah, right. I just don’t want to talk about my brother right now.”

“And that’s fine.”

“Then why do you sound so mad?” Morgan snaps.

“Because it’s so fucking hard to get you to talk to me about stuff that matters,” Noah says. “You only give me bits and pieces and that’s it.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yeah, Morgan, it is. You tell me stuff, sure, but it’s like you never want to fully let me in.”

“So, what, I have to tell you every single thing that’s ever happened in my life? Every single thought I’ve ever had? You want me to call you when I go out to buy toilet paper and tell you about it?”

“That’s not what I meant and you know that.”

“Maybe sometimes I don’t want to talk about stuff,” Morgan says. His voice is trembling with how angry he is. What the hell does Noah want from him? “And you know that. You know I don’t... If you want someone who tells you every fucking thing, then maybe you should find yourself a different boyfriend, you know? A boyfriend who’s good at talking about things and who doesn’t mind that you tell your mom about him and who isn’t scared of being gay.”

Noah doesn’t say anything. That’s probably bad, because Noah always has something to say.

“I...” Morgan stands up. He can’t be in this room anymore, because at some point he’ll say something he doesn’t mean. “I’m gonna go for a walk.”

“A walk,” Noah whispers.

Morgan nods, grabs his jacket and a hat, and walks out the door without looking back.

#

Morgan circles around his neighborhood, his steps quick at first, hands jammed into the pockets of his coat because he forgot to bring his gloves.

He didn't bring his phone either. He doesn't even have his house keys. He has no idea for how long he's been out here. He usually takes the dogs on walks out here, he knows how long it takes, but he's been walking so fast that he's lost track of time. It might have not been as long as he thinks.

He should head home, but what if Noah isn't there anymore when he gets back?

Morgan shouldn't have walked out like that.

Maybe he should have gone and sat in the backyard for a few minutes and he would have calmed down, too. Morgan just doesn't understand what the hell Noah wants from him. Noah knows him. He knows that Morgan isn't much of a talker to begin with and that he doesn't like talking about his family. He thought Noah understood, because Noah never

pushed him, always let him say what he was willing to say and never asked for more.

Morgan turns around when his steps have slowed to a normal pace, heads back towards his house, slowing down even more as he gets closer. He's not sure what he'll do if Noah's car isn't in his driveway anymore. He's not sure what he'll say to Noah if he's still there.

Morgan doesn't want to get angry again. It's Christmas Eve. He just wants a happy Christmas for once in his life.

He can see Noah's car from afar through the bare shrubbery in front of his house and he feels impossibly lighter than he did just a moment ago. He slips back into the house and Bear is waiting for him by the door, nose bumping against Morgan's freezing hand.

Morgan gives his head a quick scratch, like he always does, takes off his coat, his shoes, forgets about his hat, and shuffles into the living room.

Noah is exactly where he left him, only now he has Moose's head in his lap.

"Hey," Noah says.

Morgan stares at him. “I was thinking you might have left.”

Noah stares at him, opens his mouth, closes it again, and then stares for another moment before he says, “Why would I leave?”

Morgan shrugs.

Noah keeps staring at him.

“I’m sorry that I just left,” Morgan says.

“No, I mean, you needed a break and you took it, which is probably... good. And you didn’t just fuck off, you said you were going for a walk, which usually implies that you’re gonna come back, which is also good, but... Can you sit down? And we’ll talk?”

Morgan sits down. But he doesn’t talk.

“So, for the record,” Noah says, “I really don’t want another boyfriend.”

“Okay,” Morgan says. He might have overreacted there, but it didn’t come from nothing. He knows Noah could have it easier.

“But can we...” Noah wiggles, gently patting Moose’s head when he stirs. “I think talking about things is important.

And I get that sometimes you're not in the mood to talk and that sometimes it's not a good time, but—"

"Yeah, but then you got mad at me for not talking to you. After I told you that I didn't want to."

"Okay, you know what... you're right," Noah says. "That's on me. I'm sorry. All of that didn't come out right."

Morgan looks over at Noah. There's not even a trace of a smile on his face.

"What I'm trying to say is, I want you to feel like you can talk to me whenever you need to, but..." Noah tugs his fingers through his hair. "The thing is... I don't know how you really feel about me and it drives me crazy sometimes. Because I love you, but I have no idea where you're at in this relationship. And... that was also not how I was planning on saying that. Why do I keep saying it in, like, the worst possible moments? Forget that I said that."

"Noah..."

"No, really, I want to say it to you when it's all romantic and stuff. Not when we're in the middle of a fight."

Morgan tries not to smile, because they *are* in the middle of a fight.

It does make his heart clench when Noah says these things so easily, and sometimes he remembers that Noah has said it before, in the weirdest of moments, while he's making breakfast, or when he's taking the dogs for a walk.

“So, where are we at?” Noah asks.

Morgan chews on his bottom lip. “It was Ben who called me.”

“Okay.”

“He told me that our dad's probably gonna die soon. And... I'm not sad about it. At all. I don't even care. It's like... There's nothing there. There has to be something wrong with me, right?” Morgan glances at Noah, who's watching him, expression unreadable. “And now you know that and you probably think I'm the most horrible person on the planet.”

“No, Morgan, I don't think that,” Noah says. “I think that your dad probably wasn't the best dad and that it's complicated. And this is exactly the kind of stuff that you can just tell me.”

Morgan shakes his head.

“Why not?”

“Because... What if you...”

“What if I *what*?”

“I’m already a terrible boyfriend and all that isn’t gonna make me... any less terrible.”

“You’re not a terrible boyfriend,” Noah says. “You’re a person. I’m a person. We’re not perfect. I know I’m not being perfect right now. We’re trying, okay?”

Morgan nods.

“Are we okay for now?” Noah asks.

“For now?”

“There’s more stuff I wanna talk about, but I don’t wanna push it, so maybe we should order food and watch a movie.”

Morgan smiles. “Yeah, sounds good.”

Noah scoots closer to him and kisses his cheek. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Morgan says and lets himself slump against Noah.

#

Morgan falls asleep on the couch about ten minutes after he’s done eating dinner, with his head on Noah’s chest and Noah’s

hand on his back, warm and heavy, easing Morgan's anxiety just enough that he dozes off.

He couldn't have been asleep for long when Noah gives him a gentle shake.

"Hm?"

"You wanna go to bed?"

"Time's it?" Morgan asks.

"Nine."

"Too early."

"We can just make out. Or... whatever you want."

Morgan groans. He wants to stay right here and never move again. They're approaching the halfway point of the season and he's already so exhausted. He shouldn't be this exhausted.

"Hey," Noah says and scrubs his fingers through Morgan's short hair.

"I'm so tired. Like... this season is so... long."

"Aw, Morgan."

"I'm not having a good season."

"You're doing fine."

“Yeah. *Fine* .”

“You’re consistent.”

“Consistently *fine* ,” Morgan grumbles. “I don’t know. I shouldn’t complain, because it’s not like I’m so bad that I’m in danger of getting traded or whatever.”

“No, it’s okay,” Noah says. “See, this is exactly what I mean... You can tell me this stuff.”

“But... it’s boring. And whiny.”

“Okay, but I also wanna hear about the boring and whiny stuff, and, honestly, I don’t think it’s whiny to say that you don’t feel like you’re at your best. Some seasons are just slower, I guess. I was having a slow season when the Mariners traded me.”

“They should have kept you.”

“But then I’d be in New York,” Noah says. “And I couldn’t just come down for the day.”

Morgan hums. Even now, Noah coming down for only a day is pretty ridiculous with how traffic can be between Philly and DC. And Noah has to drive down to Arlington, it’s not like he’s there once he’s made it to DC. Morgan hates

driving up, as Noah knows, and he's been looking into train tickets to go up in January so he won't have to drive.

“Come on, let's go to bed.”

“I have to take the dogs out, though.”

“I'll do it. I know how.”

“Really?”

Noah kisses the top of his head in reply and then, with more enthusiasm than Morgan has ever been able to muster for this, takes Bear and Moose out back to their spot in the backyard.

Morgan makes the tiniest effort to clean up some of the stuff that's on his coffee table, but eventually gives up and waits for Noah to get back. They trudge up the stairs together – Morgan trudges and Noah trails behind him, nudging Morgan's back – and shuffle down the hall to Morgan's room. Noah gives him a few kisses along the way and then starts climbing out of his clothes, throwing his sweatpants and his shirt on the armchair by the window before he slips into the bathroom. Morgan knows that Noah will come back and probably fold his clothes, but Morgan is keenly interested in the shirt Noah just took off.

It's old and soft and a little big on Noah, which means it would be even bigger on Morgan. He quickly tugs off his own shirt and pants and pulls on Noah's shirt. It even smells like Noah. He might let Morgan keep it.

He could ask.

Noah would probably want him to ask, wouldn't think it was silly. Although maybe it's a shirt he really likes and would never let Morgan have it. Morgan smooths his hand down the soft fabric.

"Hey, Noah?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I have your shirt?"

Noah comes out of the bathroom, toothbrush in his mouth. "Huh?"

Morgan tugs at the shirt he's already wearing.

"All yours," Noah says around his toothbrush, winks at him – it's a really terrible wink – and disappears back into the bathroom.

Morgan definitely considers not brushing his teeth tonight, because his bed is right there and going to sleep immediately seems like the best idea ever, but Noah would

judge him to hell and back, so he joins him in the bathroom. He grabs his toothbrush and tries not to look at Noah, who seems to be busy staring at himself in the mirror.

If Morgan looked like Noah, he'd probably keep staring at himself, too. He can tell that Noah has lost some weight since the beginning of the season, but he still looks huge compared to Morgan. He's one of the smallest guys on his team. He did put on some weight during the summer, but he can't do it like some of the other guys. Which is fine. They're not all the same and this way Morgan is the fastest skater on the Eagles.

“Like what you see?” Noah asks.

Because of course he caught Morgan staring.

“Yeah,” Morgan says. No need to lie about that. He's always liked what he saw. Ever since he first had trouble keeping his eyes off of Noah in Sochi, but that was mostly because of the tattoo.

He can just look at it now, can reach out and touch it whenever he wants.

Morgan finishes brushing his teeth, Noah hanging around until he's done, sneaking glances at him every now and

then. This is what it would be like if they lived together, maybe not every day, but they'd be in here brushing their teeth together and they'd go to bed together and sometimes, like tonight, they wouldn't even think about sex, they'd just lie down and kiss for a while until Noah bullies him into being the little spoon again.

“Why can't I be the big spoon?” Morgan complains.

“Because you're...”

“Go ahead,” Morgan says, “finish that sentence. Say that I'm little.”

Noah laughs and rolls onto his back, letting go of Morgan. “You're not *little*, but you, like, fit against me so well like that.”

Morgan huffs.

“Go ahead, then,” Noah says and turns over, facing away now.

Morgan does go ahead and plasters himself against Noah, tucks himself as close as he can. They're basically the same height, so it works well enough. Noah hums and wiggles his butt.

“Stop it,” Morgan grumbles.

Noah cackles, but he does stop. Morgan kisses his shoulder to thank him for his cooperation. They usually don't fall asleep like this, unless they're just taking a nap. Most of the time one of them will tug himself away, because it gets too hot and uncomfortable like this, but it's nice for a little while.

“Hey, Morgan?” Noah says after a while.

“Yeah?”

“There's something you said earlier... and I don't have to ask you about it right now, I can ask you tomorrow or the day after, but I do wanna ask you about it.”

Morgan squeezes his eyes shut. “Ask me right now,” he says, because then he doesn't have to worry about it for two days straight.

“Okay, so...” Noah slowly turns around so he's facing Morgan. Luckily, it's dark enough that he can barely see him. “I don't want to overstep, but what you said about being gay... that you were scared...”

He did say that, didn't he?

“Morgan?” Noah says when Morgan remains silent. Technically, Noah didn't ask him anything.

“Yeah?”

Noah's hand settles on his side. "Can we talk about that?"

"What do you wanna talk about exactly?"

"Why are you scared?"

"Because..." Morgan can't even think of all the reasons why he's scared. "Aren't you?"

"Not of being gay. Of someone finding out? Yeah. Definitely. But not... I don't mind being gay."

"I don't mind either, but... I do. I don't know."

"Is it because your parents said it was wrong?" Noah asks. "You know, to be gay?"

"Wrong is not the word they usually used."

"What then?"

"More like... disgusting. I mean, I told you... my mom used to say it's a sin. She never went to church or anything, didn't really care about religion, but..." Morgan chews on his words for a moment, not sure how to explain the looks on his parents' faces when there was talk of gay people, how revolting it was to them, how they would have hated to have a gay son. "If they'd known... I don't know, they probably would have kicked my ass out the door."

“Not everyone out there is like your parents, you know? There are... so many people who are on our side.”

“I know.”

“But?”

Morgan already knows that this will come out wrong, but he doesn't know another way to explain this. “Sometimes I just wish I wasn't gay, because then everything would be so much easier. But then I also wouldn't have you. So it's not... I don't really want that. I don't know how to explain it.”

“Yeah, I... I can't say I get it, because I never... For me it was always like, okay, I guess I'm gay and I'll deal with it somehow.”

Morgan is starting to get to that point, but for a long time it was just him trying to not even think about whether or not he might be attracted to men. He didn't want to deal with it at all. And it worked.

Until he met Noah.

“You know...” Noah says. “When we first started hooking up you kept telling me that you're not even really gay.”

Morgan sighs. “I know.”

“That wasn’t a criticism or anything. I’m just saying. Look at us, talking about gay stuff.”

“Gay stuff,” Morgan echoes.

“You and I, we’re the real gay stuff.”

“Oh my God, stop,” Morgan says, trying not to laugh, and swats at him. “You’re the worst.”

“I know, I know. The absolute worst. But you still like me.”

“I guess,” Morgan says.

Noah laughs. “You doooo.”

“Shh.”

Noah wraps his arm around him and just like that Morgan is the little spoon again. “I don’t want you to be scared. You don’t deserve that.”

“The thing is...”

Noah doesn’t say anything, his breath hot on the back of Morgan’s neck.

Morgan doesn’t want to say this, not really, because it’ll tell Noah more than Morgan is willing to share, but this is what they were talking about earlier. Noah wants to hear these

things. “Whenever we were together, I wasn’t scared. It was just when I was alone and I had time to think about it. I’m not scared when you’re here.”

“Oh,” Noah says and squeezes him a little.

“Is that weird?” Morgan asks.

“No,” Noah mumbles and kisses the back of his neck, “not weird at all.”

Chapter Sixteen

Morgan is saying goodnight to Bear and Moose when his phone starts ringing, Noah's name lighting up the screen. They saw each other three days ago, when they were at the All Star Game together. On the same team again, despite the different format.

“Hey,” Morgan says and slowly starts walking up the stairs.

“You picked up,” Noah shouts.

“Yeah.”

“Wow, you’re the best.”

“What’s up?” Morgan asks. As far as he knows, Noah is at a teammate’s birthday party. Phillip König, Noah’s D-partner. The Austrian kid that they call the King. Noah seems to like that guy a lot.

Noah laughs. “The sky.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Come on,” Noah says. “I’m really funny.”

“Not even a little bit.” Morgan puts him on speaker and takes him into the bathroom, brushing his teeth while Noah prattles on about how funny he is and tells him knock-knock jokes. “You’re insane,” Morgan eventually tells him as he snuggles into bed, “and not funny at all.”

“You’re so mean, hey, Nate, hey... *Nate* . Smoking is bad, go away.”

“I smoke like one cigarette a year,” someone mutters.

“Are you still at the party?” Morgan asks.

“Yeah, I sure am still at the party. I just snuck away to say hello to you, because I miss you and I knew you were gonna go to bed soon and I just wanted to hear your voice, because we won’t have time to talk tomorrow, because I’ll be hungover like hella and you’ll have your own shit to do, so...”

Noah takes a deep breath. “Anyway, thought it might be a good time to say I miss you and I love you and all that.”

Morgan clears his throat. “Hey, uh, Noah... is... is Nate still there?”

“Yeah, Nate’s still here, but he won’t chirp me, because when he talks to his cat he’s way more embarrassing, isn’t that right, Natie-babe?”

“Okay, but...”

“It’s okay, Nate won’t tell anyone that I’m hiding out here. He’s my bro. Right? Bro? You’re my bro. Stop smoking, you’ll die.”

“Shut up and go back to sweet-talking your boy.”

“Shhh, Nate, keep your voice down.”

“Um. Noah?”

“Yeah, so, Nate kinda knows that I’m gay? Also, I told you that I love you again, didn’t I? Again, not really how I

meant to say that...”

“But, Noah, can we go back to your bro Nate knowing about you being gay?” Morgan says. He loves how calm he sounds, because he’s actually two seconds away from throwing up. His face is hot and his fingertips are weirdly tingly. He doesn’t like this at all.

“It’s fine. Nathan is a very nice guy. He has a rainbow flag on his mask. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, but—”

“I’ll see you inside,” someone, presumably Nate, says in the background, “don’t stay out here for too long, okay? You’ll get cold.”

“I know, Dad,” Noah says. “Anyway, hey, don’t freak out, okay? This has nothing to do with you. He knows about me, not about you. And he’s totally minding his own business. I swear.”

“Okay,” Morgan says.

“You’re still freaking out, aren’t you?”

Morgan clears his throat. “A little bit.”

“I swear he has no idea who you are. Like, not even a clue. Not even... He doesn’t even know... what you do. Or

where you're from. Not a thing."

"Oh. So you didn't tell him anything about me?"

"He just knows that there's a guy I love a lot, that's literally it," Noah says, and then, "Fuck, I just said it again, didn't I?"

"It's okay."

"I'm sorry. One day I'll say it, like, in this super romantic way, I promise. Like, you know when we're sitting next to a fireplace, or when it's snowing outside and we're all cozy, or maybe at the beach, or... you know. You get the picture. I won't be drunk, I swear."

"Okay," Morgan says, which is definitely not an appropriate response, but it makes Noah laugh.

"You're so cute," Noah says. "Honestly, just the cutest ever."

"Stop."

"Are you embarrassed?"

"No," Morgan says. He's not embarrassed. It's hard to put into words what exactly he is. He never tells Noah that he's cute. Not that he doesn't think that Noah is cute, but Morgan has such a hard time saying those things, so he

doesn't, and every time Noah does, Morgan gets a reminder that he's not exactly excelling at the whole boyfriend thing.

"You are," Noah says, "very handsome. Really. I mean it. A real hottie."

"Noah, please."

"Wow, I wish I could see your face right now."

"No," Morgan says.

Noah laughs.

"Noah?" someone says. "Dude, what the fuck are you still doing out here, it's fucking freezing. Oh, wait, are you on the phone?"

"I'll come in soon. Two minutes. Three."

"Don't freeze," says Noah's teammate that Morgan wholeheartedly agrees with.

"Seriously," Morgan says. "Go inside."

"But I miss you."

"You'll see me soon."

"In three weeks."

"Yeah."

“That’s not soon,” Noah complains. “That’s in three weeks.”

“Please just go inside. I don’t want you to get sick.”

“Okay, but... do you think you can call me before you fly to California?”

“I’ll try. If not, I’ll call you when I’m there, okay?”

Morgan says. “I promise.”

“Yeah?” Noah says.

“Yeah,” Morgan replies.

#

Morgan meets up with David the night before their game in LA. David’s wife apparently told him to make a trip out of it, because he’ll spend a weekend with their kid when she goes on a trip with her friends in two weeks.

“She says we need to keep things balanced,” David says with a grin. “Honestly, I had such a hard time leaving. Like, babies do so much stuff, you look away for two seconds and you miss everything.”

“I bet,” Morgan says.

In all honesty, he doesn't know a thing about babies or what they do and when they're supposed to do certain things. When he sees little kids he can't even guess how old they are most of the time. Children scare him. There's so much you can do wrong with them. Morgan still remembers stuff people said to him when he was little, mean stuff mostly, so he's always extra careful about what he says to kids.

"But you guys are all good?" Morgan asks.

"Oh, yeah, no worries. And Rina loves the little jersey you sent for Emma. She's thrown up on it a couple of times, but it's nothing personal, I swear."

"Tell me when she's grown out of it and I'll get you a new one."

"Thanks, man. And for the ticket, too. And, like... everything. I still feel terrible that I was such a bad brother."

"Don't worry about it, I wasn't... I'm still not the best brother," Morgan says. "Ben keeps sending me updates on Dad and I... keep ignoring them."

David sighs. "Yeah, I get it. He sends me emails, too."

Morgan stares down at his half-empty plate. "We don't have to talk about... Dad. Or... you know. Any of them. We

don't exactly have too many happy memories.”

“I just kinda...” David shrugs. “I feel bad for Emma, because there’s two grandparents out there that she’ll never even meet. And I’m wondering if I should try harder, you know, to make up with them. Or at least with Mom, but... She’s still drinking, isn’t she?”

“As far as I know. When I saw her at the wedding...” Morgan trails off. “Well, you know how it is. They say they have things under control, and maybe they do, twice a week or whatever. But you remember how it was with Dad. He had good days.”

David nods at what’s left of his burger. “What I’m thinking is— Shit, this is gonna sound terrible.”

Morgan shrugs, because he’s thought and said the most terrible stuff about their family. Whatever David is going to say, Morgan has likely been there. He raises his eyebrows at David.

“Well, I guess not having those grandparents is better than having shitty, unreliable grandparents.”

“Yeah, probably.”

It's weird, the thing with the grandparents. Most of theirs are dead, but without their mom's parents, Morgan would have never been able to afford to go to Canada to play hockey. One of the first things he did when he signed his contract with the Eagles was to pay them back, even though they didn't want his money. Morgan told them to give it to charity if they didn't want to keep it, but he didn't like the feeling of owing them anything.

They never came to visit, never invited them to Buffalo. They weren't too happy when their mom decided to marry their dad, but they clearly cared enough to make sure that their grandchildren would be okay. Or as okay as they could be. Morgan doubts that they knew what their son-in-law was really like. He assumes they mostly didn't like him for the company he kept and because of his lack of manners.

Even now, Morgan has no idea what his mom saw in him. He must have been different when they were younger, before they got married, before they had kids. Sometimes, when he was hiding in the closet, Morgan wondered why they'd decided to have kids at all when the four of them were nothing but trouble for them. His mom loved them, he knows

that, and she tried, she tried hard for a long time. Apparently, after she had Morgan, she was done trying.

She didn't want him. He knows that. He was an accident, she told him that once, when she'd had too much wine, and no matter how many times she told him that she loved him, Morgan never forgot.

"You know," David says, "Dad's mom is still alive. As far as I know."

"Yeah, but they... Didn't she disown him?"

"I mean, yeah, but..." David shrugs. "I've been wondering if I should find her and tell her that she has a great-granddaughter."

Morgan hums.

"But then I'd have to..."

"Yeah." Then he'd have to reach out to their mom. Maybe their dad, if he even knows what his own mother is up to. Morgan wouldn't be surprised if she'd died and no one had bothered to tell them.

"Anyway, she has a cool uncle."

Morgan grins. "I'll come say hi to her in the summer, okay?"

“That’d be great.”

He nods. He’ll be in California anyway, to visit Noah.

“We have a guest room and everything,” David goes on. “It’s, you know, a suburban neighborhood, so it’s not that exciting, but we can have a barbecue or something.”

“Sounds good,” Morgan says.

“Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I can’t really believe that I live in that house, you know? And that I have a wife and a kid and... Rina wants to adopt a cat. So I guess at some point we’re adopting a cat. And we have neighbors and—”

Morgan snorts.

“What?”

“You have neighbors? Are those only a thing in California? I had no idea.”

“No, I mean, like... neighbors like in the movies. Who bring over food and who wave at you when they’re walking their dogs. There’s this gay couple across the street and they have this huge white dog. It looks like a cloud. Emma loves that dog, her eyes always get so big when she sees it.”

Morgan doesn't mean to stop chewing the bite of steak he just ate when David started talking about his gay neighbors. But the way he said it was just so normal, like it isn't a big deal at all.

"Morgan, come on," David says. "They're great guys. They gave us a gift when we moved in and they offered to mow our lawn when Emma was born, because we just didn't get around to it. Like... they're just people."

"I know," Morgan only says.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to imply that you had an issue with it or anything. I just know that Dad was always sort of weird about gay people..."

"Yeah, that's one way to put it."

David rolls his eyes and grabs the rest of his burger.

"So you don't mind?" Morgan asks, which definitely doesn't come out the way he intended. Sort of judgmental. Almost like he would mind having gay neighbors, even though he is the gay neighbor.

"No."

Morgan nods. He fidgets in his chair and almost drops his knife. He shouldn't have asked, because now everything is

awkward and he can't wait to leave, go back to the hotel, and call Noah to tell him that he has once again put his foot in his mouth. "And their dog is..." Really, maybe not the best way to change the subject, but he needs to push this conversation in a different direction somehow. "Is it a Samoyed or something?"

"Oh, yeah, I think that's what they're called. You know, I think Emma would love to visit you, since you have the dogs. I guess she thinks they're big stuffed animals or something. I don't even know. She's still so tiny, so she probably doesn't have a ton of coherent thoughts."

"You should come by sometime," Morgan says. "Bear is great with kids. Moose, too, but he always licks everyone."

"Maybe when she's a little older."

Morgan nods. Looks like he managed to talk his way out of that one. Who would have thought?

#

The last stop on their roadie is Edmonton, and Edmonton is covered in snow.

Their flight is delayed and by the time they land in DC, Morgan has about a million texts and a few missed calls from Noah waiting for him on his phone.

Morgan drives home first, exhausted, glad that they have the day off, and then calls Noah back when he's in his bed, in comfortable clothes, with both of his dogs.

“Hey, did you make it home okay?” Noah asks.

“Yeah,” Morgan says.

“Hey, Noah,” someone says. “Is that your booooyfriend?”

“Yeah, can you like...”

“Yeah, yeah, already on my way out.”

There are some kissy noises, then Noah says. “Sorry about that, Phil just loves me a lot, but he's super straight, don't worry.”

“I wasn't worried,” Morgan mumbles.

“You wanna do a video call? I haven't seen your face in, like, a year. I miss your face.”

“Do we have to?” Morgan asks. He hates saying no, but on some days, like today, he also hates video calls. Sometimes it's so much easier to talk to Noah when he knows that Noah can't see his face. He doesn't know why, but Noah usually doesn't push him on it.

“No, we don’t have to.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Noah says. “Really.”

Morgan takes a deep breath and pulls at the sheets.

Bear shoots him a dirty look, because Morgan was tugging on the part he was sleeping on. “So, uh...” He clears his throat.

“Does your entire team know that you have a boyfriend, or...”

“No, just like... five of them. Six. Six of them.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“But... you’re not...” Morgan didn’t think it was something Noah would joke about, but he also had a hard time believing that Noah told six people. When Morgan can’t even imagine telling one. “They were okay with it?”

“I picked them very carefully,” Noah says.

“And you told your mom.”

“That I’m seeing someone, yeah.”

“Okay,” Morgan says. He told him it was okay as long as he didn’t mention Morgan’s name. He just didn’t realize that Noah would go and tell so many people.

“Yeah?” Noah says. “Because it sort of sounds like it’s... not?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s fine,” Morgan snaps.

“Yikes, Morgan, okay.” Noah is quiet for a moment, then he says, “How was California?”

“It was okay,” Morgan says. It comes out sullen. They won half of the games, lost the other half, so it wasn’t good, wasn’t bad, it was just okay.

“And you saw your brother?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s doing well?”

“Yeah.”

“You wanna take a nap, Morgan?” Noah says.
“Because you sound... tired.”

“No, I mean, yeah, but I wanna talk to you first, because you have to go to practice in a bit, so...”

“Yeah, but I don’t wanna keep you awake if you’re really tired.”

“It’s fine.”

“Okay, so... your brother?”

“Yeah. He was there. It was good to see him.”

“Good,” Noah says. “That’s good.”

Morgan nods, even though Noah can’t see him. He wants to talk to him so badly, but he somehow has nothing to say right now. Maybe he should take a nap first and then call Noah back later, because his brain clearly isn’t up to speed. He reaches out to scratch Moose’s head. “It’s nice to see the boys again. I think they missed me.”

“I bet they missed you loads,” Noah says.

“You know...” Speaking of the dogs, that sort of brings him back to the conversation he had with David. “David said he has gay neighbors.”

Noah laughs. “Okay?”

“Oh, he told me about their dog and you and I were also talking about dogs, so I sort of... Sorry. That probably didn’t make much sense.”

“But he has gay neighbors?”

“Yeah. And... I don’t know, it sounded like he was okay with it.”

“With having gay neighbors?”

“And with them being gay,” Morgan says. “You know... I almost...”

After a long stretch of silence, Noah says, “You almost what?”

“I was thinking about telling him that I’m... you know.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know? I can’t just tell him, right? Because what if it’s not okay? And what if he tells someone? What if someone had overheard our conversation? Like... I can’t... I don’t know how you do that, you know, going around and telling... everyone.”

“It’s hardly everyone,” Noah says. “Anyway, you just gotta say it if you want to say it. It’s never easy to say.”

“I don’t know, you clearly have no problem telling people.”

“But you clearly have a problem with me telling people,” Noah says. He doesn’t sound so cheerful anymore.

“I don’t.”

“No? Because it sounds like you do.”

“I don’t care if you tell people, it’s...”

Noah huffs. “Go on.”

“No, because...”

“Because?”

“Nothing. Just drop it.”

“I will, but only if you drop it, too. I’m telling people. I asked you if you were okay with it and you said yes, as long as I keep your name out of it. And I have. Nobody knows it’s you. They all think you’re some guy I met while I was still on the Mariners. They have no idea who you are. So what do you want from me? Do you want me to stop telling people? I can’t take it back, though. They already know.”

“No, that’s not...”

“Fuck, Morgan, just finish one sentence and tell me what you’re thinking.”

Morgan responds to that by not responding at all.

“Or don’t,” Noah says. “Fine. Take a nap, Morgan. A long one. Call me when you... I don’t know. Take your time.”

Whatever.”

Morgan should tell him not to hang up. He’ll find the right words, he will, he just needs to... His brain is a little slow right now.

“Bye, Morgan,” Noah says, and then the line goes dead before Morgan can figure out what to say.

Morgan almost calls him back, but Noah might not appreciate that right now. He sounded angry, in the Noah way. He wasn’t yelling and screaming, but there was something about his voice, all the warmth gone, that tells Morgan it might be for the best if he gives him a break.

He’ll take a nap and he’ll figure out how to make this right with Noah.

#

Morgan sleeps for a while, eats a late lunch and takes Bear and Moose for a walk – past Austin’s house, because his kids had Austin pass on a note to Morgan, asking him to please come by with the dogs. He’ll have to stay in the driveway, because Austin’s wife is allergic, but he can definitely spare a few minutes for them to pet the dogs.

Bear and Moose are ecstatic when two small people want to pet them, but they don't stick around for too long. It's not freezing, but he doesn't want the dogs to get cold.

Austin gives him a pat on the back before he leaves and tells him that he owes him one. He tells Austin that they can come by literally whenever and that Bear and Moose will be happy to play with them.

When he gets home, it's too late for him to call Noah – he has a game tonight and he's probably on his way to the arena now.

Morgan hasn't figured out what to say anyway.

He should start with an apology, because he was too tired to have a real conversation and he was cranky and freaked out by the ease with which Noah tells people about their relationship. Morgan wasn't really thinking when he told Noah that he's okay with him telling people. He figured it wouldn't matter, since Noah promised he'd never even mention Morgan's name, but now Morgan realizes that people will start asking questions eventually, and maybe someone will notice that Noah calls him all the time.

He should have asked Noah to give him some time to think about it.

He just wanted to make things easy for Noah for once. He wanted things to be easy for him, too, he thought he could not overthink things this one time.

Morgan turns on Noah's game in the evening and watches it with Bear and Moose. He considers texting Noah a couple of times, but they had a fight this morning and he doesn't want Noah to think that he's trying to gloss things over by texting him, *Nice play*, or something like that. He could text an apology, but he also doesn't want Noah to think that Morgan doesn't care enough to call and apologize.

It doesn't occur to him that Noah might be genuinely mad at him until he wakes up in the morning for practice and Noah hasn't texted him.

Noah always texts.

Morgan heads to morning skate, wondering if he should call Noah now or if he's at practice already. He nearly runs a red light. After that he forces himself to stop thinking about anything.

After morning skate, there's still no texts from Noah. Maybe he needs a break. Morgan isn't angry, he knows this is his fault too, but that doesn't mean that Noah isn't mad at him. So Morgan will stay out of his way for a bit.

He doesn't like it, though, the radio silence.

He plays his game that night, gets two assists, and usually Noah would text him, at the very least to chirp him because he fell on his ass for absolutely no reason during the third, but there's nothing at all.

"You okay?" Marsh asks after the game.

Morgan was about to head out. He literally has his coat and his hat on. He was leaving. That's what Marsh does, though, he catches guys when they least expect it. "Yeah," Morgan says.

"Okay. Good. Just wanted to check," Marsh says, hand on Morgan's back, gently steering him out of the locker room. "You look like you're... moping."

"I'm not."

"Anyone on the team giving you a hard time?" Marsh asks.

"No."

"You sure? I don't want anyone—"

"No, it has nothing to do with the team," Morgan says.

"Don't worry."

“Oh, so there is something going on, though?”

“It’s...” Morgan shrugs. “It’s nothing.”

Marsh pats his back. “Tell me if you need help with anything, okay?”

“No, it’s not... that kinda thing. I’ll sort it out.”

“Okay, kid,” Marsh says, gives the top of Morgan’s hat a quick boop, and walks him to his car in silence.

When Morgan gets home, he lies down on the floor in the living room, on the rug in front of the fireplace he never uses, and cuddles with Bear and Moose for a little while, then he grabs his phone and types up a good night text.

He deletes it.

Retypes it. Works an apology into it.

Then he deletes it again.

#

“Hey, Mo,” Austin says when Morgan sits down in his stall before practice the next morning. “You wanna come to my place tonight? I’ll make food, we’ll watch a game. Marsh is coming, too. Just us guys. Wife’s out of town with the kiddos for the weekend.”

“Oh,” Morgan says.

“Let me know, okay?”

“Sure,” Morgan says, “I’ll come.”

Austin looks delighted and holds up his fist. “Nice, dude, see you later.”

Morgan nods and belatedly realizes that Austin is waiting for him to bump his fist.

He still hasn’t heard from Noah. He knows he needs to call, but he’s not sure if he’s ready for how mad Noah will be at him. Because he’s clearly a lot angrier than Morgan thought he was.

He’ll call him tomorrow. That’s his deadline. By tomorrow night, he’ll do it.

Morgan goes to Austin’s house in the evening and Austin cooks for them. Marsh is having his third beer when Morgan arrives. The good news is that Marsh lives about a five-minute walk away from Austin’s place.

“Morgan, can I get you anything?” Austin asks as he pours a generous amount of rum in his coke. “I bought Sprite.”

“Oh,” Morgan says. He likes Sprite and he’s been chirped into the beyond because of it. He hasn’t been getting it

so much anymore.

And now Austin is getting a can out of the fridge for him and sets it down in front of his nose. “I can get you something else, too.”

“No,” Morgan says and grabs the can. “Thanks.”

Marsh grins at him. “Who would have thought that it’s so easy to make you happy,” he says and winks at Morgan. “All right, which game are we watching? We have... Comets-Foxes, Sailors-Ravens, and Hawks-Grizzlies. Everything else starts later.”

“No Canadian teams?” Austin asks.

“Not until later.”

Austin shakes his head and mumbles something about how the league hates him personally.

“Morgan, any requests?”

Morgan shrugs, even though he definitely wants to watch the Foxes game. He’s a guest here, so Austin should get to pick.

“Guess we’re watching the Comets,” Marsh says.

“Why, because we’re playing against them next week?”

Marsh shrugs.

“I didn’t invite you to do *work* .”

“It’s not work.”

“It’s like watching tape,” Austin says. “That’s work.”

Marsh throws a baby carrot at him. “Watching tape isn’t *work* .”

“In his free time,” Austin says and turns to Morgan, “Marsh locks himself away in the basement and watches tape. Probably makes popcorn and has a beer and parties hard.”

Morgan laughs.

“Anyway. So we’re watching the Comets. That okay with you Mo, or do you think the Foxes’ jerseys are gonna sear our eyes out.”

“They’re not even that orange anymore,” Marsh mutters.

“It’s true, they’re not that orange,” Morgan says, trying not to think of that extremely orange blanket Noah has at home.

“You,” Marsh says and throws an arm around Morgan, “are the best guy on this team. You are my rock. A bright light in the darkness. You know what’s up.”

“No more beer for Marsh,” Austin says and ushers them all into the living room.

They have homemade pizza while they watch the game and Marsh has another beer, even though Austin threatens to call his mom. Apparently, Austin actually does have her number saved in his phone.

The game has already started when they turn it on and the Foxes have eight shots on goal, but the score is still 1-0 in favor of the Comets.

“It’s scary how good the Comets are all of a sudden,” Austin says when the Comets score their second goal. It’s their third shot on goal in the game. “Like, weren’t they terrible a month ago?”

“They were,” Morgan says.

The broadcast cuts to the Foxes’ bench, where everyone is looking a bit glum. Their captain is swearing. Morgan can only see half of Noah’s face – he’s all the way on the left, glaring at the scoreboard.

After the Comets' fourth goal, early in the second period, the Foxes put their backup in goal. When the score is 7-2 at the start of the third, there's no way the Foxes are coming back from this.

Morgan is looking down at his phone, wondering, once again, if he should text Noah, maybe even just a sad face, or some sort of encouragement, when Marsh says, "Aw, shit, that's... Oh, that looks bad."

"What happened?" Morgan asks.

"I think Andersson fell on a skate blade," Marsh mutters.

Noah's on TV and there isn't really that much blood, but he's clutching his neck and there's blood on the ice and a smear of blood on his face and Morgan can't breathe.

"Oh, fuck, you're friends with him, aren't you?" Austin says.

"He'll be fine," Marsh says softly. "Don't worry, look they got him to the bench and they got a towel on it and they'll stitch him up."

"Right," Morgan says.

The announcers are talking about how Noah's injury could have been a lot worse. They're guessing whether or not he'll come back. They show the replay – Noah getting pushed, a scramble behind the net, a few of the guys falling over and Noah tripping straight onto a Comets' skate. One of his teammates was right next to him, picked him right up, and Noah got his hand on there.

There's no way to see how bad it really was, but since there wasn't that much blood, Noah will probably be fine.

“Morgan,” Marsh says. “He's okay. I'm sure he is. Don't worry.”

Morgan isn't worried. He's terrified.

And he has to sit here and pretend that he's worried about a friend. He sends Noah a text, asks him if he's okay, but he obviously doesn't get a reply.

“I should head home,” Morgan says right when the game is over. “Gotta take the dogs out.”

There's a good chance that both Austin and Marsh know that Bear and Moose would be okay for a little while longer, but they don't call him out on it.

He glances at Marsh. “You want a ride back to your place?”

“Nah, I’ll bug Austin for a little while longer,” Marsh says. “Gotta watch one of those Canadian games.”

Austin takes him to the door, thanks him for coming, and Morgan belatedly remembers to thank him for inviting him. He yells it over his shoulder on his way down the front steps and Austin waves him off.

He gets in his car and slowly makes his way home. It’s freezing and it might be getting icy. A few snowflakes sail down onto the streets as he drives, but he hits the breaks hard when his phone starts ringing. It’s in the cupholder, Noah’s name on the screen.

Morgan grabs it, nearly drops it in the progress, but finally manages to pick up. “Noah?”

“Uh, hello,” says someone who’s definitely not Noah. “This is Noah’s teammate Nate. He asked me to give you a call and he said you might not want to talk to me... No hard feelings, by the way. I get it. He asked me to give you a call because, I guess you might know what happened? Do you know what happened?”

“Yeah,” Morgan says. His voice sounds foreign to his own ears and he’s glad about it, because the last thing he needs right now is for Nate Lewis to recognize his voice.

“Okay, well, he said to tell you that he’s fine and that he’ll give you a call as soon as he can and that you shouldn’t worry. And he didn’t say to tell you that he loves you, but let me just add that, yeah?” Nate says. “Oh, and he did say that he’s gonna have a really hot scar, so be ready. But I guess you’re aware of the risks, since you’re dating a hockey player. Kinda part of the business. He still has all his teeth if that helps.”

“Thank you,” Morgan whispers.

“Sure thing. And, since I have you on the phone and you didn’t immediately hang up on me, which Noah thought you would do, can I just say... I’m totally on his side, okay? And we don’t know each other, but I’m on your side, too. Unless you break his heart. But, like, I have a lot of friends who are gay and bi and trans and, like... I’m on your side.”

“I...” Morgan takes a deep breath. What the hell does he say to that?

“We’re all good, Noah’s boyfriend whose name I saw but I’ll pretend I don’t know it,” Nate says. “Noah will give

you a call once they've stitched him up, okay?"

"Okay," Morgan says.

"Bye, boyfriend."

"Bye."

Morgan hangs up and takes a deep breath. It doesn't help one bit. He sits in his car for ten minutes and Noah still hasn't called, but at least he knows he's okay. Morgan breathes a little more. Again, it doesn't help.

He eventually manages to drive the rest of the way home, his phone stubbornly silent.

Morgan goes inside, and he takes out Moose and Bear and then he sits on the couch and waits, one dog on each side, until his phone finally rings and it's Noah's name on the screen again.

"Noah?" Morgan says.

"Hey, it's actually me this time," Noah says. He sounds okay. He sounds alive. "Sorry if you didn't want to talk to Nate, but I figured it might be better if he called you instead of just... nothing."

"Yeah," Morgan says, "yeah, he was... nice."

“Okay.”

“And you’re... Noah.”

“Yes, I’m Noah.”

“Stop being funny,” Morgan says. Which was not what he meant to say. He was trying to tell him to stop joking around.

Noah laughs. “Aw, Morgan. I’m sorry. I swear I’m okay. I thought I was gonna fucking die for a second there, but I’m totally fine, it wasn’t even... It’s not a deep cut. It, like, got me on the jaw and on my neck, but they cleaned it and stitched me up and now I’m all good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Please don’t ever get injured again,” Morgan says.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Morgan says. “I just... I’m sorry I snapped at you the other day and I get it if you’re still mad and if you want to... I don’t know. Please don’t be mad anymore.”

“I’m not mad,” Noah says.

“You’re not?”

“No, Morgan, we’re fine. We’re... Just for the record, I didn’t get injured just so you’d call me, but I’m glad you did.”

“I meant to call you way earlier, but I thought you were mad and didn’t even want to talk to me, so I didn’t.”

“I always want to talk to you,” Noah says.

“Really, always?”

“Yeah,” Noah says, “all the time.”

“Okay. I...” Morgan breathes in and out. Why is it that Noah keeps telling him that he loves him and Morgan can’t even say it now? He wants to. So why can’t he just do it?

“Morgan,” Noah says. “I really scared you, huh?”

Morgan tries to reply, but all that comes out is a quiet sob.

“No, no, hey, I’m okay.”

“I know.”

“But...?”

“I don’t know,” Morgan says. He wipes at his eyes, mad at himself, because he’s not the one who got hurt tonight.

“I’m sorry.”

“I really want to hug you right now,” Noah says. “I will in two weeks, okay?”

“Okay,” Morgan says.

“Good and now tell me that you’re surrounded by good boys who love you and who’ll keep you company because I can’t.”

“Yeah, they’re both here,” Morgan says. He adds, “And they’re both being very good,” because he knows that’s exactly what Noah wants to hear right now.

“I’m delighted to hear that,” Noah says.

“And you’re really okay?”

“I’m really okay.”

“Good,” Morgan says. Maybe he can go to sleep now.

Chapter Seventeen

“So,” Noah says and tilts his head. “Do you think it’s hot? It still looks a bit rough, but it’s—”

“It, uh, makes you look...” Morgan has been thinking about words. Words that will make Noah happy. He walked into Noah’s house five minutes ago and he knew this was coming. “Rugged, like, in a tough way.”

“Yeah?”

“And... sexy.”

“Oh my God, *Morgan* .” Noah leans back against the kitchen counter and laughs. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Sorry,” Morgan says and leans against Noah so he can hide his face. “I’ll never say it again.”

“No, say it all the time. Tell me how sexy I am, Morgan, please.”

“No.”

“I will never feel joy again,” Noah says.

“Shhh...”

“I’m injured. It’ll make me feel so much better if you tell me that I’m sexy. Or even just hearing you say the word sexy will do. You don’t even have to mention me in the sentence.”

“You’re mean. I was just trying to be nice.”

“Oh, it was very nice,” Noah says. “Made me feel real... special. And sexy.”

“You’ll never let me forget this, huh?”

“Never,” Noah whispers and kisses Morgan’s temple. “I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make you say that

again.”

“Too bad. I won’t.”

“What if I ask you to say it on my birthday?”

Morgan hesitates, because he knows that if Noah asks him on his birthday, he might say it.

“Ah- *ha* ,” Noah says. “For my birthday, Morgan, pretty please, will you tell me how sexy I am?”

“I don’t wanna hear that word ever again.”

“I wanna hear it all the time,” Noah says, “and if—”
Noah’s phone starts ringing, saving Morgan from any further embarrassment. “It’s Nate, do you mind if I pick up?”

“No, go ahead.”

Morgan stays plastered against Noah while Noah talks to Nate. He closes his eyes for a bit, Noah’s hand running up and down his back. Morgan could probably fall asleep like this. He’s so fucking tired.

Noah kisses his head as he listens to whatever Nate is saying and starts running his fingers through Morgan’s hair. Morgan was definitely about to doze off, but then Noah says, “I can’t tonight, sorry,” and Morgan perks up. “Boyfriend’s come to visit, so... No, I don’t think he’d want to come... Yes,

I'll ask him... Yeah, I'm sure he knows that you're not a terrible person, he just doesn't want to... Nate, he doesn't know you, but yeah, I'll tell him... Okay, bye."

Morgan tugs himself away from Noah, so he can look up at him. "What was that all about?"

"Nate wanted to hang out and he wanted to meet you."

"And what did he want you to tell me?"

"That he's a nice person who loves the gays," Noah says. "I'm paraphrasing, but... you know."

Morgan nods.

Noah tilts his head. "What?"

"Nothing."

"No, your face it doing a thing. Something's up. What is it?"

"My face isn't doing anything," Morgan says.

"Morgan."

"Fine," Morgan says. He folds his arms and looks down at his shoes. He didn't want his face to do *a thing*, because he's been trying to be more relaxed, but being relaxed

just isn't a thing he's very good at. "I'm just thinking... What if he figures out that it's... me."

"Why?"

"Because he's seen my name and maybe also my area code when he called me and, well, you just told him I'm in town and guess who else is in town? The Washington Eagles."

"I mean..." Noah shrugs. "I guess maybe Nate has enough brain cells to figure it out, but even if he does, he'd never say anything. Like, he's really good at minding his own business."

Morgan nods. It doesn't make him feel much better.

"I know this probably isn't helpful," Noah goes on, "but I trust him."

"Okay," Morgan says. Noah was right. It wasn't helpful.

"Anyway, I don't think he knows," Noah says. He reaches out to run his thumb along Morgan's cheekbone. It's a move that Morgan is sort of weak for and Noah clearly knows that.

When Morgan was younger and thought about kissing boys – before he caught himself and tried his hardest to think

about girls instead – he wasn't sure what it would feel like, what kissing was like, because it couldn't be that great to just mash your lips together, right? But when Noah kisses him there's this heat, this feeling in the pit of his stomach. He thinks it sort of feels like what jumping off a cliff might feel like. That rush of having Noah's lips on his, a little chapped, and the heat of Noah's body against his and Noah's hands, touching the back of his neck, and his chest, the small of his back, twining into his hair. When he imagined it, he never thought it would be this good, but Noah had him right from the start.

There was a time when Morgan thought he might have experienced all the ways in which Noah could kiss him, but Noah always seems to find a new way when Morgan thinks he's felt everything.

It's like that today, when Noah comes closer and pins him against the counter, thigh between Morgan's legs, and he doesn't kiss Morgan on the lips, he kisses the corner of his mouth instead, and then his jaw, and his temple, his cheek. Then he dips his head down and Morgan closes his eyes and grips the edge of the counter, breath hitching when Noah sinks down onto his knees.

Morgan should tell him not to, because the tiles are going to fucking kill his knees, but he can't even say anything right now. The part of him that was able to speak has left the building. All he can do is hold on to the counter and do his best to remember how to breathe.

Noah looks beautiful on his knees.

Maybe he says that out loud. He doesn't know. He doesn't care if he does, doesn't care if Noah chirps him about it later.

When Noah gets back up, and pulls Morgan's pants back up in one swift motion, he grins and says, "Hey, Morgan, you wanna go out for dinner with me tonight?"

"I..."

"I'll give you a minute," Noah says and now he does kiss Morgan on the lips.

"Can we..." Morgan takes a deep breath. He should offer to reciprocate, but he'll need another minute for that, too. "Can we just order food and stay in? I'm exhausted. I don't even know why, it's only February, so I shouldn't be this tired, but—"

“No, hey, no worries,” Noah says, but his face is telling a different story. Maybe he’s disappointed, but it disappears quickly and it’s replaced by a gentle smile. “We’ll order whatever you want and we can eat on the couch and we can just... hang out, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Morgan says. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

Morgan tugs at Noah’s shirt. “You wanna go upstairs?”

“Why?”

“Uh...” Morgan was sort of counting on Noah getting what he was hinting at. “You know. I just thought we could...” Morgan shrugs. “Go upstairs.”

“Oh, you want to *go upstairs*,” Noah says and gives him an exaggerated wink. He leans closer, and whispers, “You want to go upstairs and have more sex.”

Morgan’s face is burning. “Well...”

“It’s okay,” Noah says and takes both of Morgan’s hands. “I’ve been told that I look really sexy. I understand.”

“I think I changed my mind.”

Noah laughs and takes a step back, taking his shirt off as he makes his way to the stairs. “No, you didn’t.”

Okay, maybe he didn’t.

#

“Are you asleep?”

“No,” Morgan says.

Noah hums. “You still watching the movie?”

“No.”

“Wanna do something else?”

“No.” Morgan is lying on top of Noah right now and he hasn’t been this comfortable in ages. This is probably what Bear feels like when he cuddles with Morgan in front of the TV.

Noah laughs and Morgan can feel it. “You just wanna lie here?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” Noah says. His fingertips are light on the back of Morgan’s neck. They have that offensively orange blanket tucked around them and Morgan can hear Noah’s heartbeat.

After today, they won't see each other for a while, not until the beginning of March. Noah will come down to visit Morgan on a day off, four days later Noah will be in DC for a game, and a few more days later, Morgan is going to Philadelphia on his day off. Best week of the season.

But right now March seems ages away and Morgan has to leave in about two hours to head back to the team hotel for curfew. He misses Noah already.

"You know," Noah says, "I was gonna take you out tonight and show you to this place I really like. We've never been there, because the guys and I found it not too long ago, but it's great. And I was gonna, like, ask you if you wanna share a dessert or some romantic shit like that, because, you know, it's Valentine's Day in two days and I thought that would be nice and—"

"I'm sorry," Morgan says. Noah had this whole plan and Morgan squashed the whole thing because he didn't feel like going out. Noah didn't even mention it.

"No, wait, I wasn't done," Noah says. "So, where was I? Dessert? And then I was gonna walk home with you and *then* I was gonna tell you that I love you, you know, the way I've been meaning to say it all along. But maybe it doesn't

have to be this huge thing, maybe I can just tell you that I love you right now, because I do love you right now. And, like... yeah. I love you. And please don't think you have to say it back. Because that's not... I don't want you to feel pressured or anything. Because that's a big thing to say. So. I love you. You can just say thank you, I won't take it the wrong way, I promise."

"I..." Morgan should sit up and actually look at Noah, but it's easier this way. He knows he loves Noah back. He didn't think he'd recognize the feeling, because he's never been in love with anyone, he didn't think he'd know, but he does. He doesn't know how to say it, though. And Noah told him that he didn't have to and he believes him when he says that he won't be mad, but he has to say something and *thank you* won't cut it. "I've never said it to anyone," is what he settles on.

"Never?"

"Not to... I mean, I must have said it to my mom," Morgan says. He doesn't remember ever saying it to his mom, doesn't remember her ever saying it to him, but he's convinced that it happened. "But other than that..."

“You know, I mean, I can’t say that I’ve never said it, because I just did and I also said it to you before, but you’re the first person I said it to. You know, the first... boyfriend.”

Something complicated happens in Morgan’s chest and he has no idea what to say in reply, so he just grabs Noah’s shirt and holds on.

“Please don’t freak out,” Noah says.

“I’m not.”

“Okay.”

Morgan sighs. “How are you so...”

“What?”

“You said it’s okay if I don’t say it back,” Morgan says. “How are you okay with that? Don’t you... I don’t know.”

“Do you think I might be scared that you don’t like me?”

“I mean...” Morgan trails off. If he told Noah that he loved him and Noah didn’t say it back, that’s definitely what he’d think.

“Well, Morgan, my darling, you’re currently lying on top of me and if I remember correctly you told me earlier that

you think I'm really sexy, so, you know, I at least assume that you like me a little bit."

"Yeah," Morgan says.

"And I'm sorry I called you darling."

"No, it's okay."

"Oh, it is?"

"Just don't do it all the time," Morgan says.

"I'd never, you're still my Morgan," Noah whispers and gently pets down Morgan's hair.

"And, you know... if you wanna call me Boo again..."

"Oh, Boo, but only if you want me to."

Morgan laughs. "Just don't--"

"Do it all the time? No, I'll use my Boos sparingly, don't worry."

They don't talk so much more afterwards and the movie's still on, but Morgan isn't paying attention, because Noah is touching him, fingers on his neck and then in his hair and then on his back, following his spine.

Morgan has an alarm set for when he has to call a cab and he knows it'll ring soon. When it does start ringing, it's

Noah who grabs Morgan's phone and turns it off. Quickly, like maybe Morgan might not hear it.

"I gotta..."

"No," Noah says. "Five more minutes."

"Yeah," Morgan says, because he has another alarm set for five minutes from now. He's come to know Noah pretty well.

Noah turns that one off, too, but he doesn't try to keep Morgan on the couch with him. He knows how these things work. He just makes a face and Morgan is *weak*. He doesn't want Noah to look like that. Ever.

"I know," Morgan says and leans back down to kiss him. "I..."

Noah raises his eyebrows. "Hmm?"

"I miss sleeping in the same bed as you."

"Aw."

Morgan shrugs. He doesn't know why it matters, because when they sleep in the same bed, they're asleep and it's not like anything exciting happens. It's probably the bit where he falls asleep next to him and wakes up next to him

that he really misses. It's not the same when they take a nap together.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Noah says.

"Play fair," Morgan says.

"Always."

"And try not to fight anyone."

"Hey, I don't fight people that much," Noah says.

"Although now that I'm all rugged and... *sexy* ... I guess I should learn how to knock a bitch out."

"No," Morgan says.

"Fine, I'll be good." Noah smiles. "Because I love you."

"Okay," Morgan replies and gives him another kiss and then he really does get up and calls a cab, because if he takes any longer and misses curfew, he might not play tomorrow at all.

#

Morgan has always had a little list of teams he hates playing against, but the Foxes only made it on there when Morgan started seeing Noah. They're on the ice at the same time a lot,

and it's not like Morgan is holding back, but Noah still slams Morgan into the boards like he's just some other player and Morgan will have the bruises to show for it.

It's a clean hit, Noah isn't a dirty player, but Morgan loses the puck and the Foxes take off with it. That was obviously the point and he wouldn't expect Noah to go easy on him, but he still gives Noah the stink-eye for it. Morgan is a team player and he usually passes the puck if he sees an opportunity for one of his teammates, but now that he's mad at Noah, Morgan singlehandedly needs to tie up the game again.

Noah only stares blankly when Morgan scores two minutes later. At least it didn't take long.

Morgan grins.

He scores another goal in the third and puts the Eagles up 4-3. He doesn't look Noah's way this time, because he's not trying to rub it in or anything.

Morgan is clearly the only one who's trying not to be an asshole tonight, though, because one of Noah's teammates straight up punches Austin in the face when he gets a little too close to the Foxes' goalie. Morgan isn't much of a fighter and right now he's the only one on the ice who'd rather stay out of this.

Marsh is always happy to get involved when things get chippy and grabs the closest Fox. Morgan stays back and looks for a Fox to grab himself, not to fight him, just to keep another guy from jumping into the scrum. He sees Noah, who's pinning Pekka against the boards, but is quickly distracted when a Fox tumbles backwards into his arms.

It turns out to be Philipp König.

Morgan catches him.

“Hey, hey,” Philipp says, once Morgan has pulled him upright.

Morgan nods at him and keeps his hand on Philipp's arm, just in case he tries to throw himself into the fray again. The refs still haven't managed to pull the others apart, so Morgan just watches.

“All this violence,” says Nate Lewis, who's been chilling over by his goal. It's weird to stand next to this guy who called him when Noah got injured, his voice full of concern, and now they're on the ice together and Nate is all snarky, entirely unconcerned when Austin gets thrown onto the ice.

Philipp sighs.

“Good catch, though, Boyle,” Nate says. “I’ll make sure that Phil writes you a thank you note.”

A bunch of the guys get escorted to the penalty box and they end up playing four-on-four. Morgan doesn’t stay on the bench too long and they send him out there again with Pekka and Nikita, because Marsh is in the box with a five-minute major. It’s weird to play with Nikita on center – Morgan is way too used to the way Marsh plays. Nikita dishes Morgan the most impossible pass and the goal Morgan scores right after is probably the most beautiful one he’s scored all season. Through his legs. Five hole.

He doesn’t even realize that it’s a hat trick until Pekka starts screaming into his ear about it.

They’re on the road, but they’re not too far away from home, so some of their fans end up throwing their hats on the ice for him. Morgan helps the ice crew pick them up, lifting them into a bin with his stick.

When he gets on the ice for his next shift Noah skates past him and says, “Did you have to?”

“Yeah,” Morgan says.

After the game he somehow already has a text from Noah waiting for him – *in case u didn ' t hear, they made u 1st star, as ur boyfriend I ' m v proud of u, but as ur opponent ... fuck u morgan* – which was then followed by another text – *I still love u though* .

Thank you , Morgan replies.

Noah's *ur welcome* text doesn't come in until Morgan gets on the bus, which is where Austin immediately shoves his phone in Morgan's face.

“Look at this,” Austin says. It's a video of Morgan catching Philipp König. “Your *face* . Incredible. People are saying that they didn't realize you were so nice. You know, since you're saving guys that aren't on your team.”

“Well, it was either catch him or have him fall *on* me.”

“Yeah, well, you're officially our resident Nice Boy now.”

Morgan sighs.

“It's okay, just punch someone in the face tomorrow in New York.”

“Or you can have a nice-off with Elliot Cowell,”

Marsh says.

Austin snorts.

“He *is* really nice,” Morgan says.

That only makes Marsh and Austin laugh more.

Morgan shrugs. He doesn't mind being known as a nice guy for once.

Chapter Eighteen

When they're back in DC, Morgan is welcomed at their first practice back home by two girls with a huge sign they made to congratulate him on his hat trick. Apparently they drove up from Alabama.

Morgan smiles at them in passing and they bang against the glass.

"Morgan, your fan club is big today," Marsh says.

Morgan ducks his head to hide his smile.

His fan club, as Marsh called them, start screaming every time Morgan passes by. Morgan waves at them once and they lose it. He skates over to the bench and waves over one of their guys.

“Can we get them hats?” Morgan asks. “I’ll pay for them.”

“The two girls from Alabama?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure. You wanna sign the hats?”

Morgan nods.

He doesn’t usually do this stuff, doesn’t go over to sign, parks in an area where no one will bug him when he leaves, but it’s such a little thing, so easy to do.

Morgan doesn’t know who gets sent out to bring them the hats and he doesn’t know if they’re happy about them either, because he’s already in the locker room, but Austin shows him a picture that got posted on the Eagles’ Twitter page later.

The girls are at their game the next day, too, and they’ve made another sign to say thank you for the hats.

“You gave them *hats* ?” Noah asks when Morgan calls him after the game.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, it’s actually kinda cute,” Noah says.

“They drove up from Alabama.”

“Aw, and they love you,” Noah says. “I’m so glad that you’re getting the love you deserve.”

“Noah...”

“No, hey, don’t be embarrassed.”

“I’m not.”

Noah hums. “I’m just happy. Because... and don’t take this the wrong way... but you’re...”

“Unapproachable?” Morgan asks. He’s heard that one before.

“No, you’re just quiet. Which is fine,” Noah says.

“People just don’t bother to get to know you. You’re such a good guy, Boo. And I’m happy that more people are seeing that now.”

“I just gave them hats, it’s not a big deal.”

Noah laughs. “I love you a lot.”

“I...” Morgan closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

“You know.”

“Oh, hey, that’s a new approach,” Noah says. “I like it.”

“Yeah?”

“And for the record,” Noah goes on, “I do know.”

“Good,” Morgan says. He’s glad that Noah knows, because Morgan really isn’t getting any better at saying what he really wants to say.

They talk for another five minutes, say goodbye for five minutes, and Morgan falls asleep still thinking about Noah. He’d pay good money to have Noah here and to be the little spoon. He has the dogs to cuddle with, but it’s not the same.

His Alabama fan club isn’t at practice the next day, but there’s a little kid who’s wearing his jersey and he starts bouncing up and down when Morgan skates in his direction. After practice, he gets put on media duty and they ask him about the hats – he tells them that all the boys do nice things for their fans all the time and that they’re happy to find a way

to give back to the community in different ways. He rehearsed that one at home.

A few days later, when he gets off the ice and one of the girls over by the gate yells, “Morgan, it’s my birthday,” he hesitates. There’s only six or seven people over there. He’ll be done quickly, even if he signs something for all of them.

He puts away his sticks and heads to the gate. The girl who called his name just stares when he wishes her a happy birthday. He signs some pucks, some jerseys, and he leaves his stick with the birthday girl, who thanks him about ten times before he walks away.

It wasn’t as exhausting as he thought it would be.

In the afternoon, Noah sends him a screenshot of a tweet – Morgan recognizes the birthday girl, who’s wearing his jersey and is posing outside the Eagles’ practice rink with the stick Morgan gave her. She’s written a whole extra note about how nice he was and how he made her birthday so special. He obviously can’t give a stick away every day, but maybe he’ll do it more often.

He didn’t realize that it made people so happy or that they’d even want his autograph. He was never a fan favorite, not the way Austin and Marsh are.

A few minutes later Noah sends him another screenshot. It's a tweet from a mom – *Morgan Boyle made this little kiddo 's day at practice this morning* – and a photo of a little girl wearing one of the jerseys he signed today.

the people adore u , Noah says.

shush , Morgan replies, but he can't stop smiling at the photo either.

#

“Morgan, could you sign this birthday card for my friend?”

It's an odd request, but when he talked to Marsh the other day, Marsh told him that he's been asked to sign the weirdest shit, including a shoe and a water bottle, so a birthday card for someone else is probably not out of the ordinary. “Tell me your friend's name?” Morgan says.

“It's Amber, A-m-b-e-r, thank you so much for doing this.”

“Sure,” Morgan says and tries to make his *Happy Birthday, Amber* somewhat legible. It's not like they have a table over here, they're just handing stuff back and forth over a gate. He does his best.

Austin sidles up to him, which isn't surprising because barely a day goes by that Austin doesn't come over here.

There's probably not a single fan in the area who hasn't had something signed by him. Morgan doesn't sign on game days and he doesn't sign when there's more than ten people, so on weekends he usually goes straight back to the locker room. It's not like tons of people show up for their practices, but on the weekends the stands are definitely fuller.

He goes back to the locker room with Austin. They got roped into taking tons of selfies today and Morgan is sure that he looked awkward in all of them. He hates it when PR force him to do a signing session, because people always want pictures as well and Morgan has never been confident in front of a camera. They don't film a ton of social media bits with him because he always messes them up.

After practice, he works out for a bit, has lunch with the team, then there's a couple of meetings and by the time he heads out it's almost two in the afternoon. He has a bunch of errands to run – Moose has destroyed yet another dog toy, so he needs to get two or three new ones and he needs to pick up a few things at the grocery store for when Noah visits in a couple of days.

They haven't talked about it yet, but Morgan is hoping that Noah will drive down after his game again and that he'll slip into bed with Morgan at three in the morning and that he'll wake up next to him a few hours later.

Morgan won't ask him to, though. If Noah's tired after the game, he should sleep at home, but Noah's a stubborn little shit, too, so if he promised Morgan, he'd definitely drive down. Morgan wants to avoid that Noah will feel like he's breaking a promise if he doesn't come down during the night. Morgan can wait a few hours if it means that Noah makes it to him safely.

His errands don't take too long, but when he gets home, Moose and Bear are waiting by the door, definitely trying to convince him that it's time for food, even though it most certainly isn't. "We can go for a walk, though," Morgan says. "I just need to put away all this stuff, okay? And I got you presents."

They obviously don't understand what a present is, but Morgan is using the excited voice, so they follow him to the kitchen, and Bear immediately sits his butt down, looking up at him with his best boy face.

Morgan grabs the toys he got, makes sure there's no packaging left and throws one to Moose and one to Bear and that way they're preoccupied while he puts away the groceries. He's almost done when his phone starts ringing.

It's Ben.

"Hey," Morgan says.

"Hey," Ben says. "Are you home?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I, uh... I need to tell you something."

Morgan puts down the last bag of groceries. It can wait. "Everything okay?"

Ben takes a deep breath.

"Did Dad die?" Morgan asks. It's just a hunch.

Ben doesn't reply.

"Did he?"

"Yeah," Ben finally says. "This morning."

"Okay," Morgan says.

"Are you—"

"I'm not going home," Morgan says. "I'm sorry."

“You’re not,” Ben says flatly. It was a question, probably.

“I can’t.”

“If you tell your team, they’ll let you—”

“I know,” Morgan interrupts. “But I can’t. Like, *I* can’t. I’m not going home.”

“Seriously?”

Morgan sighs. He shouldn’t have to explain this to Ben.

“You’re not even gonna come to the funeral?” Ben goes on. “I know that he wasn’t always the best dad, but he was still our family. He was our dad.”

“Ben...” Morgan says. He’s not changing his mind about this. He knew this was coming when Ben called him to tell him that their dad’s liver was failing, it was only a matter of time, and here they are. Morgan knew from the start that he wouldn’t go to the funeral. He thought Ben knew that, too.

“That’s cold, even for you. I know you’ve sort of taken yourself out of this family and I get it, I honestly do, and I’m not blaming you, but this is different. He’s *dead* .”

“I can’t,” Morgan says again. “He wasn’t a dad to me, okay? He was just the guy who beat up my mom and never anything else.”

“You’ll regret this,” Ben says. “You and Dave. Both of you.”

“I’m sorry,” Morgan says, because he wishes he didn’t have to leave Ben alone in this, but Morgan wouldn’t be any help to anyone if he was there.

“Yeah, well...” Ben says. “Bye.”

“Ben, don’t be mad.”

“I’m not. I just can’t fucking believe you.”

Morgan sighs.

“I gotta go,” Ben says and the line goes dead.

“Fuck,” Morgan mutters. He puts the phone down and takes a deep breath. He doesn’t know how he’s supposed to be feeling right now. When your parents die, you’re supposed to be sad, but what kind of parent was their dad anyway? Morgan doesn’t feel like crying, he feels like punching a wall.

Something squeaks by his foot.

He looks down and finds Moose who's dropped the squeaky penguin toy that Morgan got him at his feet.

"Thanks, buddy," Morgan says.

He sits down on the floor next to him and he stays there for a while.

#

Eventually, Morgan reaches up to the counter and grabs his phone.

He'll call Noah, even though Noah can't do a thing about this. He won't be able to make Morgan feel better about... about the fact that Morgan just isn't feeling anything right now.

Noah doesn't pick up.

As far as Morgan knows, Noah doesn't have a game tonight. Maybe he's taking a nap. He'll call him back when he can.

Or maybe he just didn't hear his phone.

Morgan tries again.

This time Noah does pick up after the second ring and says, "Hey, uh, it's sort of a bad time right now, I'm out with

the guys, can I call you back in, like, a couple of hours?”

“Oh, yeah,” Morgan says. He wasn’t even considering that Noah might be out with friends and that he didn’t have time for this right now. “Yeah, sure. Sorry.”

“Hey, wait,” Noah says. “Everything okay? You kinda sound off.”

“No, it’s fine, just call me later.”

“Tell me what happened,” Noah says.

“No, really—”

“Please tell me.”

Morgan gets it over with quickly. “My dad died,” he says and it sounds like he’s telling Noah that he bought a new shirt or that he spilled his coffee this morning.

“Oh, shit...” Noah says. He’s quiet for a moment. “When?”

“This morning.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“But... really?” Noah asks. “You don’t sound fine.”

“No, I am, don’t worry.”

“Do you need me to come down there?”

“What?”

“I don’t know,” Noah says, “I’m just saying stuff.”

“You can’t come down here,” Morgan says, “you have a game tomorrow.” They both have games tomorrow. Morgan will just go on with his life like nothing at all happened. He hasn’t seen his dad in literal years, he might have not even recognized him if he’d seen him a week ago.

“I know that I have a game, but...”

“I mean, what would you do? Drive down, give me a hug and drive back home?”

“Do you want me to?” Noah asks. “Because... I’ll figure it out somehow, honestly. If you need me to come, I’ll come.”

Morgan does want him to come. He wants Noah here, even if it’s just for five minutes and he wants a hug and he doesn’t want to be alone right now. He wants the distraction, because otherwise he’ll spend the rest of the day wondering if there’s something wrong with him. But he can’t ask Noah to drive three hours – maybe longer, because it’s the middle of the afternoon and traffic will be insane – spend an hour here

and then drive back home and be ready to play a game tomorrow.

So Morgan tells him not to worry. “I’ll just hang out with the boys,” he says. They’re already sitting with him anyway. He’ll take them for a walk and he’ll actually try to cook dinner tonight and he’ll–

“Hey, tell you what,” Noah says, “I’ll ditch the guys and I’ll go home and I’ll call you back and we can just... hang out. But, like, not in the same place.”

“No, you don’t have to.”

“Yeah, I kinda do, because I don’t want you to be alone right now.”

“Noah. I’m really okay.”

“Yeah, but... your dad died. So I have some trouble believing that. I’m gonna head home now, okay? I’ll call you in half an hour or something.”

Morgan doesn’t try to argue with him.

He stays on the floor with Moose and Bear for the time being, but he moves to the couch when Noah calls him back.

They talk for ages.

Both of them end up getting their chargers, Morgan brings his phone when he takes Bear and Moose outside, then Noah orders food and Morgan does the same, and they eat dinner together. It's eight when they eventually hang up the phone, but Noah tells him to send a text when he goes to bed – “I want to talk to you again before you fall asleep, okay?” Noah says.

“Okay,” Morgan replies. “Thank you. This probably wasn't how you wanted to spend your day.”

“No, hey, this was an excellent way of spending my day,” Noah says. “Honestly, we should do this more often, it was nice. Even though the occasion wasn't... nice. Although next time...”

“What?”

“Nothing, I was just about to make a dumb joke, but then I realized that this is so not the time.”

“No, it's okay.”

“Yeah? Well, I was gonna say if we do this again, next time I might ask you to take off your shirt to make the view even better.”

Morgan hides his face behind his hand so Noah won't see that he's smiling. "No."

"Are you saying you wouldn't take your shirt off for me?"

"No," Morgan says.

"Well, just so you know, I'd take my shirt off for you," Noah tells him. "Whenever you want."

"Shush," Morgan says.

"Anyway... enough jokes," Noah says. "Are you okay for now?"

"Yeah."

"It's okay if you're not, I don't have to go."

"No, but you have stuff to take care of," Morgan says. He's already taken up way too much of Noah's time.

Noah frowns at him. "So does that mean you're not actually okay?"

"I don't know," Morgan mumbles. "You're expected to react in a certain way when something like this happens and..." He shrugs. "It's a weird situation, because my dad was..."

“Yeah.”

“And I’m not... It’s like someone I don’t even know died. Or, even worse, someone I didn’t like.”

“You know,” Noah says, “I think whatever you’re feeling right now is totally okay to feel and there’s, like, no *right* way to feel, because it *is* a weird situation and there’s nothing wrong with you, okay?”

Morgan nods. He doesn’t know how Noah knew what to say, but that was exactly what he needed to hear.

“And give me a call before you go to bed, yeah? I just wanna say goodnight, I won’t ask you to take off your shirt.”

Morgan can’t help but smile. “I will.”

“Good, okay,” Noah says. “Hey, and next week I’ll come by and hug you.”

It tickles another smile out of Morgan and Noah looks pleased with himself.

#

It’s the middle of the night when Moose and Bear start barking. This time Morgan knows that Noah is coming, so it doesn’t scare the crap out of him when the dogs start going crazy.

He stumbles out of bed, foot getting caught in the sheets and nearly face-planting on the floor, but makes it to the door before Noah has made it up the front steps. Morgan unlocks the door for him and pulls him inside. Noah is all bundled up, cold all over when he wraps his arms around Morgan.

“Hey,” Noah says and kisses his forehead. “Hey...”

Morgan holds on to him like his life depends on it.

The last couple of days were... They weren't terrible. He just felt off. Like he was forgetting something.

Morgan didn't tell anyone about his dad, didn't even mention that anything was going on. Marsh definitely noticed, but didn't say anything, which Morgan appreciated. He still felt Marsh's eyes on him all the time and Marsh sat next to him on the plane when they flew down to Tampa Bay for a road game.

Yesterday, Marsh brought him a bag full of cookies that his wife made with the kids.

“Why are you getting cookies?” Austin asked.

Instead of giving him an answer, Morgan offered him one of the cookies.

He saved one for Noah, too. He ate the rest.

“Hey,” Noah says again. He’s still holding Morgan, but he’s so fucking cold, so Morgan pulls away and unbuttons Noah’s coat so he can hug him under the coat.

Noah hums approvingly and kisses the top of Morgan’s head.

“Let’s get you back into bed,” Noah says. “You have to get up for practice tomorrow morning.”

“In a minute,” Morgan mutters. The floor is cold under his bare feet, but Noah is pleasantly warm under his coat and it’s been so long since they last had a chance to be this close.

“Do you think that maybe at some point we’ll actually have the day off on the exact same day?” Noah says. “Like, maybe the stars will align and we’ll get super lucky and we can just... have that entire day?”

“In the summer,” Morgan says.

“Yeah... well...”

“Or they’ll schedule our bye weeks on the same days.”

“Hm, you’re full of great ideas,” Noah says and gives him a quick kiss. “Come on. Bed.”

Noah gives each of the dogs a quick pat and then they curl up in bed together. Noah takes off his clothes and throws them on a pile in the least Noah way possible and crawls into bed with Morgan in his shirt and his boxers.

Morgan turns off the lights and wiggles against Noah, tucks himself as close as he can and breathes in. Noah's shirt smells like coffee. He might have had one after the game so he wouldn't fall asleep on the drive down.

"How are you?" Noah mumbles. He nuzzles into Morgan's hair.

"I talked to David the other day."

Noah hums.

"He didn't go to the funeral either."

Another hum.

"It's like our family is split in half. Ben sent me the date for the funeral, but I didn't go and he hasn't talked to me ever since," Morgan says. "I think he's mad at me. Maybe I should have gone."

"No, no, you did what you thought was right for you and that's okay," Noah says. He tugs at the sheets and makes sure that Morgan is all tucked in. "You're not a bad person for

not going. You didn't... You didn't have a good relationship with your dad and you didn't want to be there and that's okay."

"He was different with Danny and Ben," Morgan whispers. "He wasn't as bad when they were little. Danny doesn't get it, he never... I mean, Dad always blew up when he got mad, but I guess he didn't take it out on them as much, he just went to the pub and got drunk and that was it, but when David and I were around, he got drunk at home and it was... it was so much worse."

"I'm so sorry, Morgan."

"It was a long time ago, but..." Morgan closes his eyes. It's dark anyway, but he's still embarrassed about this. "I still dream about it sometimes. About him yelling and about hiding in the closet."

Noah's fingers twitch against his back.

"I'm okay," Morgan says.

"I know, but..." Noah trails off into a snuffle and hugs him a little tighter.

Morgan hugs him back. He's pretty sure that Noah is crying and it's all Morgan's fault. "I'm sorry," he says.

"No, hey..." Noah kisses his forehead. "It's all good."

Morgan keeps his eyes closed. He doesn't say *I love you* , even though there's nothing else in the world that he'd rather say to Noah right now.

“Go to sleep, okay?” Noah says.

“Okay.”

Noah rearranges them a little so they're more comfortable. “I'll be here when you wake up.”

“Thank you,” he says. It's still not an *I love you* , but it's the best he can do right now.

Chapter Nineteen

Winnipeg isn't kind to them.

Neither is Chicago.

Nor is Las Vegas.

They're headed to San Diego for the last game of this roadie, their last game in the Western Conference this season. They're all hoping that it'll go better than the three other games.

They have some time off and Morgan goes to the beach with the guys and it makes him think of Noah. He wouldn't have considered himself a beach person before Noah took him to that beach house of his. It's strange how places suddenly mean more when they remind you of a person.

The water's too cold to go in, but they buy food and some of the guys start playing volleyball. Morgan doesn't join them, because he's hilariously bad at all sports that aren't hockey. The Eagles once did a golf game for charity and Morgan had to go plead with the PR team to keep him out of it.

He joins the guys for dinner, too, sits between Austin and Simon and quietly eats his steak and orders a soda and no one says a fucking word to chirp him about it.

The guys are squabbling about who's paying for dinner when Marsh reaches over Austin and nudges Morgan's shoulder. "Hey..."

"Yeah?"

"Come outside with me for a second?"

Morgan frowns at Marsh, and he's not the only one, because Austin is frowning, too, but Marsh only gives him the

Captain Glare that won't allow any arguing, so Morgan gets up and follows Marsh out the door.

“What’s going on?” Morgan asks.

“Okay, listen...” Marsh reaches for him, his hand landing on Morgan’s shoulder, “this isn’t exactly my area of expertise, but I was checking the scores for the games tonight and I saw that... Well, I know you’re friends with Noah Andersson and I would have felt bad if I hadn’t said anything. Looks like he got injured. I think he’s, uh... he was conscious, they didn’t have to carry him off, but he was down for a bit.”

Morgan isn’t sure if he understood what Marsh was trying to say to him. “You... He got hurt?”

“I’m not sure what happened exactly, I just saw it on Twitter.”

Morgan tries to fish his phone out of his pocket, but it’s not there. He left it inside. “I don’t have my phone.” He needs to see what happened. And he needs to call Noah. And his hands are shaking and he doesn’t know how to make them stop.

Marsh squeezes his shoulder. “Hey, Morgan, listen... He skated off by himself. That means whatever injury he has

is—”

“You said it took him a while to get up.”

“It looked like he was in pain, but he—”

“Can I have your phone? I left mine inside and I need to... I just want to see what happened.”

“Are you sure you want to see that?” Marsh asks.

Morgan nods and Marsh pulls it up for him on his phone. It’s a video from the broadcast – Noah gets tripped and goes into the net hard. He definitely goes against the goalpost with his arm and he stays down for a while, but he is conscious the whole time, like Marsh said. Noah skates off with the Foxes’ trainer and goes straight down the tunnel and that’s where the video ends.

Marsh squeezes his shoulder. “You okay, kid?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. He’s clearly... He’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, he will be,” Marsh says. “Are *you* okay?”

“Sure,” Morgan says. He nods down the road, “I think I’ll, uh...”

“I’ll grab your phone for you, yeah?”

“Thanks, Marsh. Here, I’ll give you some cash for my for my food and—”

“No, hey,” Marsh says, “don’t worry about it.”

Marsh comes back with his phone and his jacket a few minutes later and offers to walk him back to the hotel, but Morgan declines.

Marsh nods, like he was expecting as much. “Okay. I told the guys it’s a family thing. And... Morgan? He’ll be okay.”

Morgan nods.

He tries not to worry about what Marsh might be thinking, how much he might have figured out, since he felt the need to pull Morgan out of a restaurant to tell him that his friend got injured. And he told the guys it’s a *family thing* .

Doesn’t matter. He needs to get a hold of Noah.

Morgan texts Noah as he walks back to the hotel, but he doesn’t get a reply.

He’s barely sat down on his bed, wondering what the hell to do now, because Noah wasn’t replying and Twitter wasn’t giving him too many clues either, when an unknown number calls him.

The area code is for Philadelphia, PA, so Morgan picks up. “Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Nate. Noah gave me your number. Are you... Did you watch the game?”

“No,” Morgan says. “I know what happened, though. Is he okay?”

“Well, he was capable of texting me your number and telling me to call you, even though I have nothing to tell you other than that he’s at the hospital and that they’re evaluating him.”

“Do you think it’s broken?” Morgan asks.

“I don’t know, man. It might be and if it is, I have no idea how bad it is. I’ll tell him to give you a call but it’ll be a while. Don’t wait up for him.”

“Okay,” Morgan says, but he’ll definitely keep the volume high on his phone tonight.

“I’m sorry we keep meeting like this... Well, not *meeting*, but you know what I mean. I’d love to just have a conversation about... I don’t know, what you had for dinner and not about your injured boyfriend.”

“Yeah,” Morgan says.

“Listen, we don’t know each other, but this must be tough for you, so if you need anything, call me, okay?”

“Thank you.”

“Sure, no worries,” Nate says. “Noah is clearly stupidly in love with you and he’s a really good guy and he’s helped me a lot, so... You know, if you’re planning on visiting and you need a ride to Noah’s or whatever, let me know.”

“Thanks, but...” Morgan trails off. He doesn’t want Nate to know who he is, so he definitely won’t be asking him to pick him up anywhere. He also won’t tell him that he’s currently in California and that he can’t just pack up his shit and leave.

“Yeah, I get it. You’re probably not introducing Noah to your... friends either.”

“No. It’s not that easy.”

Nate hums. “I figured. But, seriously, if you ever wanna hang out with us, you’re very welcome here and we’d love to meet you. Whenever you want.”

“Yeah. But it’s not that easy.”

“Because we’re all mean, homophobic hockey bros?”

“Well, clearly not all of you,” Morgan says. “But I know what sort of shit gets said in locker rooms.”

“Yeah. So you, uh...”

“I should go,” Morgan says, because he’s having a whole conversation with Noah’s teammate here and that’s just fucking weird, because Nate doesn’t know a thing about him. Other than that he’s Noah’s boyfriend.

“Okay, sure,” Nate says. “And, honestly, if you need anything at all, please call me.”

“Okay,” Morgan says and then says goodbye and sits on his bed for a little while longer, waiting for Noah to call.

He doesn’t.

#

Morgan doesn’t hear from Noah until the next morning. It’s like Noah timed it exactly, knew when Morgan would be getting up and called him a minute later.

“Noah,” Morgan says when he picks up the phone.

“Please stop getting injured.”

“I’m so sorry,” Noah says. “I swear I wasn’t trying to.”

“You okay?”

“Arm’s fucked. Like, not completely fucked and definitely not as fucked as it could be, but fucked enough that I won’t be playing for a while.”

“Is it broken?”

“Yeah, but it’s a clean break, so I won’t need surgery and I’ll get back to it in a couple of weeks.”

“Okay. That’s good, I guess.”

“I’m sorry,” Noah says. “You know, if you were scared. I don’t want you to be scared because of me.”

“Well, I was, but we all get injured, it happens,” Morgan says. It wasn’t Noah’s fault, no matter how often he tells him that he needs to stop getting injured, it’s not like Noah has any control over these things. He isn’t a reckless player, he’s just been extraordinarily unlucky this season.

“Well, this season was a bit...” Noah sighs. “Anyway. Nate says he called you?”

“He did.”

“I’m surprised you picked up, but I figured it was faster than my one-handed typing. They didn’t even want me to have my phone. Anyway, I’ll be calling you a lot,” Noah

says. “Or I’ll dictate my texts and then you’ll get a bunch of gibberish.”

“Call whenever you want,” Morgan says.

“Good. I’ll have a lot more free time. I mean, I’ll still go in to skate, there’s nothing wrong with my legs, but that’s about it. I’m definitely done for the regular season and then... who knows about playoffs.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nah, it’s... As you said, it happens. Nothing I can do about it. Anyway, I’m in good hands, Nate stayed with me last night and I think he might stick around for a couple of days, because he thinks he’s my mom or something,” Noah says.

“Well, I guess you need to get ready for team breakfast, so I’ll hang up now. Give me a call when you’re back home.”

“I will,” Morgan says.

Marsh sits next to him during team breakfast and Morgan tells him that he talked to Noah but makes it sound like it might have only been a text, a brief *I ’ m fine* .

He feels marginally better than he did last night when he was still waiting for Noah to call, even though he

technically knew that he wouldn't because he was at the hospital.

He's still restless.

He tries to skate it out at morning skate, but he's jittery all morning and he's jittery when they go back to the hotel. He lies down for his pregame nap and he doesn't sleep.

He sends Noah a text to ask him how he's doing.

Noah sends back a thumbs-up emoji.

Morgan does sleep a little after that, but once he gets up again, he's frazzled. He almost forgets to put on his tie, accidentally tries to put his right shoe on his left foot and ends up sprinting down the hallway to the elevators because he's running late.

He makes it through the game, gets an assist on the goal that ends up winning them the game and is polite enough during his post-game interview that he thinks he won't get in trouble with their head of PR, but when he's back in his clothes he's also back to feeling jittery.

So Morgan sidles over to Marsh when he leaves the locker room and Marsh grins at him, today without the front tooth. "All good, Morgan?"

“Can I sit with you on the plane?” Morgan asks.

“Yeah,” Marsh says and gently claps him on the back.

“Sure, yeah.”

“Thank you,” Morgan says, like it was a business transaction.

Marsh sits next to him on the bus, too.

No one would think it particularly strange, because Marsh doesn't have much of a plane buddy or anything. He sits next to the new kids, he sits next to the guys whose plane buddies are injured, he sits next to guys who fucked up during a game to make sure they don't think the entire team hates them and he sits next to guys who are having a rough time, on or off the ice. And then sometimes he sits by himself, like he's just waiting for someone to need him.

Morgan was never one to run to the captain with his issues, but he doesn't want to sit by himself today.

They fly home during the night and Morgan tries his best to sleep. He nods off with his head on Marsh's shoulder and wakes up sometime during the night and moves off of Marsh, curls up on his side and sleeps a little while longer.

Usually he wouldn't mind not getting too much sleep, because they'll have the day off and he can take a nap as soon as they're home, but once they're back in DC, Morgan won't be going back to his house. He'll drive up to Philadelphia.

Marsh invites him for dinner once they've landed in DC, but Morgan says he can't come. "I have... errands. You know."

"Right, of course," Marsh says. "Be safe, yeah?"

"Yeah?" Morgan says.

Marsh nods, looks at him for a moment, almost like he might want to lean in for a hug, but then he just nods again and wanders away to his truck.

Morgan wasn't going to go to Noah's place today, they don't hang out after roadies as long as this one. They need some time to rest, too. Morgan likes spending a day alone after a long roadie. If they're close to home, sometimes they don't even get a day off when they come back. Morgan's least favorite games are the ones where they play on the road and then at home the next day.

Today he gets off the plane thinking he'll drive straight to Philadelphia.

But he does the reasonable thing, goes home first, checks on the dogs, asks his dog sitter to swing by later, takes a quick nap, makes a gigantic pot of coffee, takes a shower and then he buys a train ticket because he's way too worked up to drive all the way to Philadelphia right now. Hell, he's too worked up to drive to the fucking grocery store.

He calls a cab to take him to Union Station and heads out with his coffee in a gigantic coffee-to-go cup. At the station, he buys a breakfast sandwich and a frosted donut with sprinkles for Noah. He's there early enough that he's not in a rush and as soon as he's on the train, he falls asleep again. He should always take the train. Driving to Philadelphia is a pain in the ass, mostly because Morgan hates driving that far in general, but also because traffic is a fucking nightmare most of the time.

Morgan takes another cab in Philadelphia and they're stuck in traffic for a while, so by the time he actually gets to Noah's it's almost three in the afternoon. He'll be here for about five hours and then he'll have to head back to the station to catch his train back to DC.

He rings the doorbell because he forgot to bring his key, knowing full well that he might see Nate Lewis on the

other side of the door.

That's all right, he tells himself.

He just wants to see Noah.

#

As soon as Morgan has rung the doorbell, someone yells, "I'll get it, just stay right there."

"My legs work fine, dude."

Morgan could have called Noah, could have told him to tell Nate to go home if he's there, but he didn't. He's not sure why.

Maybe it doesn't really matter if Nate Lewis knows that he's Noah's boyfriend. He's talked to him on the phone several times and he'll figure it out sooner or later anyway. He already knows his name, the area code of his phone, knows what his voice sounds like. He might recognize it the next time Morgan says even just a single word to him. Of all the people who could find out, Nate Lewis is probably a good person to know.

The door swings open and there he is, Nate Lewis, looking not in the least surprised to see him.

"Morgan," Nate says. "We meet again."

“Hey,” Morgan says. “Is Noah here?”

“He sure is, come on in.”

Going by the nest of blankets on the couch, that’s probably where Noah has been hanging out all day, but now he’s on his feet so Morgan can pull him into a hug before anyone has had a chance to close the door.

It’s Nate who does them the courtesy of not exposing them to the entire world outside and kicks the door shut while Noah squeezes Morgan so tightly that Morgan can barely breathe.

“You didn’t tell me you were coming,” Noah says.
“Also Nate is right there, you know that, right?”

“Yeah, he opened the door,” Morgan says. He keeps his arms around Noah, because if he lets go, he might have a panic attack.

“Okay,” Noah says. “Cool. Nate, can you...”

“Yeah, sure, totally on my way out the door,” Nate says. “I’ll come back later. Morgan, when are you leaving?”

“My train leaves at nine.”

“I’ll come back and I’ll take you to the station,” Nate says. “See ya.” And with that he slips out of the house, only to

come back two seconds later to grab his keys from the coffee table. He waves at them before he takes off a second time.

“He knew,” Morgan says.

“I didn’t tell him.”

Morgan nods. “I know.”

“I told you, he minds his own business.”

Morgan pulls away and takes a good look at Noah. His arm is in a cast and he has some cuts on his face, some of them older, almost faded. He has dark circles under his eyes and his cheeks are scruffy. Morgan reaches out to run his fingers through Noah’s hair.

“What are you doing here?” Noah asks.

“I just wanted to make sure you’re okay,” Morgan says.

“I am.”

“Yeah, I know, I just wanted to... see for myself, I guess. I don’t know.” Morgan hugs him close again. “I was worried about you.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” Noah says. “I’m so sorry.”

“You’re...” Morgan holds him very, very tightly. He needs Noah to understand just how worried he was. “I don’t have anyone else.”

“No, hey, don’t say that. You have David. And Bear and Moose. And Marsh. And Austin.”

“That’s not the same,” Morgan says. And Noah knows that it’s not the same. He knows that Morgan’s never had a real family and that he’s only just starting to realize what it could be like to have someone who really loves him.

Noah nuzzles into his hair. “I’m okay.”

“I know, but for a little bit I didn’t know if you were and, you know, this could have been way worse, but I was in fucking California and if this had been worse, I wouldn’t have been able to get to you, because what would I have told them? That my boyfriend got injured?”

“But I’m okay.”

“No, you’re not. Your fucking arm is broken.”

“Okay, good point,” Noah says. “Good point.”

“What if—”

“No, don’t go there.”

“I’m just worried that at some point something worse is going to happen and maybe you’ll be hurt and I won’t even be able to see you, either because I’m on the road with the team or because I have a game in DC or because... You know, at the hospital you can’t just go visit someone, they don’t tell you anything if you’re not family.”

“Morgan.”

“I know. It’s just your arm.”

“Yeah, and I didn’t need surgery and I’ll be okay.”

Morgan nods. Obviously Noah isn’t close to death or anything, but that’s not the point at all. He closes his eyes and tucks his face into the crook of Noah’s neck.

“Boo,” Noah says softly.

“I’m sorry, there’s nothing you can do about it either. We play hockey and stuff like that just happens,” Morgan mutters. “I just...” He takes a deep breath. “You’re so important. You know.” He squeezes his eyes shut. He can say it. “To me.”

Noah hums. “I know,” he says.

“And... Noah?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t wanna lose you,” Morgan says.

“You won’t.”

“And I want you to be happy,” Morgan goes on, because if he’s saying this stuff, he might as well say it all. Hell knows when he’ll rack up the courage to say something like this again.

Noah sways them back and forth a little. “I am happy.”

“Good,” Morgan says. “Sometimes I feel like I’m not very good at this.”

“That’s okay. We’re not perfect, remember?”

“Yeah.”

“Everyone’s a little bit clueless,” Noah says. “We do what we can. And I promise I’ll be as careful as I can be. Like, I won’t start shit, okay?”

Morgan can’t help but laugh. “Okay. And... Noah?”

“Hm?”

“You’re, like... my family. And I... I always wanna be with you. And I know we’re not really far apart, but... I miss you so much all the time. And I’m sorry that I never tell you that. I... I’m not as good at saying things as you are.”

And now he's just talking his way around what he really wants to say.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is..." Morgan grabs a fistful of Noah's shirt and holds on. He can do it; he's said all these things. "I love you, too."

Maybe he didn't need that *too*. But Noah has already said it, so he's basically saying it back. Belatedly.

Noah laughs. "And I love you, too," he says. "Too."

"I'm sorry if I don't say that a lot either, but I... think it a lot."

"Thank you," Noah whispers. "For coming. And for saying all that. I know that was hard. And, for the record? I always wanna be with you, too. All the time."

Morgan nods. He's never felt this grown up.

Right now, he feels like he could do anything.

* * *

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