



# Find Me Again

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**Category:** Romance, M-m Romance

**Description:** BEING A HOCKEY PLAYER COMES DOWN TO CHOOSING RISKS YOU CAN LIVE WITH—AND THOSE YOU CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT.

Neil Hopkins had sacrificed a lot for his dream to play professional hockey, including his first (and only) real relationship. He'd spent years in the closet and didn't think he would ever come out while still playing, but now his former fling was threatening to out him, which meant the career Neil had worked so hard for might go down in flames either way.

To lick his wounds and figure out his next steps, he decided to travel back to his hometown for Christmas. Seeing his former best friend and the only man he'd ever loved was not in his plans.

Ryan Dawson had built a good life for himself—he worked with his friends and liked what he was doing, most of the time. He'd been looking forward to spending a prolonged holiday break with his family, but that was before he came face to face with the man who once broke his heart.

Over the next few weeks, they both might find out that some things you could never truly leave behind.

Featuring: former high school secret boyfriends reuniting in their hometown over the Christmas break, a second chance romance, a hot bodyguard and a mess of a hockey player, and taking the ultimate risk of being who you are.

**Total Pages (Source):** 63

## CHAPTER ONE

Neil Hopkins parked in front of his parents' house and sat there, taking in the same old street, the same pick-up in the Millers' driveway, and the same weird statue in the middle of Bensons' lawn.

To his surprise, he found himself appreciating the familiarity. Those were the immovable forces he had no interest in meeting with anything other than a fond smile, these days.

These days. What did that even mean, now? This year? This Christmas season? Or maybe the end of—

No.

He was not going there. The game didn't end before the last whistle—he'd had it hammered into his head over and over, from his high school practice to the Stanley Cup final earlier this year.

Besides, he had the entire break to figure things out.

But first, he needed to get out of the car.

Neil winced as he stepped out, his knee protesting a weird angle for a second. A few weeks of rest, Doc Sanchez had told him, and he should be fine if he didn't overdo it. She hadn't added "again", but it was heavily implied nonetheless. She did not suffer fools, and the whole team had learned to be a little afraid of her, so Neil had nodded

and taken his pills, and two days later, after the confrontation with Josh, he'd turned it into the perfect excuse for getting the hell out of Savannah.

"If I go down, I'm dragging you with me."

As his heartbeat jumped at the memory, his hand slipped, and he shut the car door too hard.

Shit. That was going to get noticed, so he only had a few short seconds to pull himself together.

He was here to visit his family for the holidays, to recuperate and relax.

Maybe if he repeated that enough times, it would actually stick.

Then the door to the house flew open, and his mother rushed towards him as if she was welcoming him from the war—which, to be fair, was her usual way of greeting him.

Another immovable force, right there.

"Hi, Mom." He dropped his bag to put his arms around her and inhaled the familiar, too sweet scent of coconut as he pressed a kiss on the top of her head.

"Hi, baby." Her voice was muffled by the way she was pressing her face to his chest, but he could still hear her smile in it.

Predictably, because they'd gone through this routine too many times to count at this point, he groaned.

"Not a baby."

"Called dibs on calling you a baby when—"

"Not another birth story, I beg of you."

She pulled back a bit to look up at him.

"Fifteen-hour-long labor means I get to call you whatever I want. Forever."

"There should be a time limit for playing that card, you know," he told her as he stepped away and picked up his bag.

"That ace is staying with me until my dying breath." She turned towards the house.

"Come on, I need to start on dinner. I know how you get after traveling."

Neil wasn't feeling particularly hungry, but he didn't correct her, since that would bring on questions he didn't want to answer. After all, he normally had a big appetite and, for whatever reason, no matter how much he'd eaten before, he was always starving when he got here.

Usually, it worked out fine, because there was no better cook than his mom and she loved feeding people. This time, he'd have to overplay his enthusiasm a bit so she wouldn't get worried.

About this, at least, he thought as he followed her through the entry door. When I tell them the truth, she'll have other reasons to be worried.

Unless they weren't going to worry but instead get angry or—

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"Todd!" his mom shouted towards the stairs to the basement, interrupting his train of thoughts. "Neil's here!"

A minute later he was being hugged by his father, who pulled back only to clap his hand on Neil's shoulder.

"Good to see you, Son."

Neil smiled, relaxing under the weight of that grip. This was probably the truest moment of joy he'd had since... everything.

"Good to see you, too, Dad."

Then Neil heard a noise in the hallway, soft thumping sounds of the family dog, Ken, slowly making his way from the backroom he resided in these days. He was seventeen this year, mostly deaf and struggling to walk longer distances.

"Hey, you." Neil knelt down to greet Ken with a kiss and a proper scratch behind his ears, getting a lick on his neck for his trouble.

"How's your knee?" His mom looked him up and down as if she was checking for any more injuries.

"It's fine," he assured her as he got up slowly. "A few weeks of rest and I'll be ready to go back out onto the ice."

She hesitated. "Don't overdo it, though, okay? You can take all the time you need."

"That's his job, Di." His father gestured them all towards the kitchen. "He's on a break while he's injured, but he has responsibilities there."

"I know what a job is, Todd," she said, exasperated. "I'm just saying, until he's completely healed, he should take his time."

"Yes, thank you," Neil cut in before his parents could really get into it. He loved them dearly, but they tended to bicker for the sake of bickering, and he didn't want them to get into it over his health when he was right there. They'd probably done it enough when he wasn't. "I'm fine, I'm almost done healing, and I'm here for the next three weeks, so tell me your game plan."

This was the fastest way to distract them. His entire extended family loved the holiday season, and the vast number of aunts, uncles, and cousins living in the same town meant a carefully planned calendar of hosting, visiting, and lots and lots of cooking and baking. And both his parents reveled in it, even if his father pretended to be grumpy about it from time to time.

Neil took a seat at the kitchen table, with Ken lying down next to his feet.

He was in for a long story, for sure.

\* \* \*

It wasn't until later, when he was in the shower, that the reality of his situation hit him again.

He might lose everything. All the years of hard work, of being careful, of everything he'd given up to be where he was today—all of that had come down to this moment. His biggest fear was about to be realized, and everything else might ultimately not matter at all.

He wished he could blame it all on Josh, and at times, he did. He had. But when he took in the full scope of every decision—good or bad—that had gotten him to this point, he knew Josh was simply the catalyst. Everything else... That was on Neil.

And it was so stupid, too. A decade and a half of hiding, only one real relationship that he'd destroyed forever ago, and in the end, it was a hook-up arrangement with a teammate that could potentially cost him his career and all he'd worked for.

Leaning forward, Neil rested his hands on the wall as the water cascaded on his back.

He had hooked up with a few fellow hockey players over the years, because it had been the safest option—both sides had things to lose, so it was agreed upon that nobody would find out. He hadn't done it often, but it had happened, each time being a one-off, never to be talked about again.

And then, last year, he and Josh had hooked up after a brutal game away in Seattle, the pent-up energy needing an outlet. They'd roomed together for the first time ever, since both their usual roommates stayed behind in Savannah, and, well, one thing had led to another, and then another, and then Neil had woken up tired and sore in the best of ways.

Which should have been the end of the story, but Josh had followed him out of the locker room after the training two weeks later and suggested a repeat. After that, he'd offered an arrangement of sorts, a friends-with-benefits type of situation, even if Neil would hardly call them friends. Still, the sex had been great, and the convenience alone was enticing, so he'd said yes. From that point forward, one of them would suggest they hung out pretty much every other week.

Then August had come, and Josh had gotten himself a DUI and a few broken bones, which benched him for a long while—most likely until the end of his contract in a few months.

Angry and hurting, and smart enough to know he would soon be unemployed, Josh decided to take it out on Neil for some reason. He'd alternated between telling him to get out when Neil visited and demanding Neil come over there more. They'd never been a couple, but suddenly Josh was trying to make something different out of their arrangement—and not in a normal, "let's talk about it" way, but one that only pressured Neil without taking into account his feelings or wants.

Finally, Neil had told him point-blank that he wasn't interested in anything more, or even in continuing what they'd previously had. A few weeks later, he'd gotten injured himself, so he'd focused on getting better, and Josh had backed off, too, which Neil thought was the end of it.

Up until three days ago, when Josh had called him out of the blue and asked him to come over to talk.

Neil should have said no, probably. Or maybe not—it was difficult to say what might have set Josh off more.



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As it were, Neil had gone to see him, and found him drunk, angry, and bitter. Josh had a problem with everything from the team's management to the unfairness of Neil's injury healing faster than his. He'd talked on and on about how he'd lost everything, but without taking any responsibility for it at all.

When Neil had had enough and gotten up to leave, Josh stopped him with, "I need you to help fix this."

Neil waved his hand at Josh and his cane, restraining himself from pointing at all the bottles, but only just.

"I have no way of fixing this."

"You have to talk to the Coach and the GM," Josh went on as if he hadn't heard him. "Tell them to offer me something. I'm willing to negotiate."

Neil snorted. Unbelievable.

"First of all, I don't have to do anything. But even if I wanted to, I have no input on their decisions and you know it. We don't get to decide such things, and we never did."

"They're taking you back!"

"I'm off the ice until I'm good enough to play, and that's not before the end of the year, at least. And even then, it's their decision as well."

Josh narrowed his eyes. "Such a perfect team player, huh? Toeing the line, never doing anything wrong. I wonder whatthey'd say if the whole world found out you fuck guys."

Neil's stomach clenched so hard he couldn't breathe.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Everything, apparently." Josh leaned forward. He had to look up because Neil was standing now, but he didn't seem to care. "But I'm not the only fuck-up on the team, and I won't give up without a fight. I have nothing left to lose, so I'm warning you. You better talk to whoever you need to talk to, and make it work. Or else, I'm telling everybody who'd listen about what a stand-up hockey star you are not."

"Are you threatening me?" Neil asked in disbelief.

This could not be happening. He'd worked so hard not to ever let this happen.

Josh sat back and gave him a mocking smile, the asshole.

"I'm warning you. Or," he said with a shrug, "giving you a piece of advice."

"You're going to out us both?" Neil stared at the man before him as the anger rolled through him. Then, the words slipped out before he could stop them. "Because you fucked up your own career, now you need to fuck up somebody else's?"

"I'm just upping the stakes for you." Josh shrugged. "If I have a team to come back to, great, I'll be a team player and not say anything. But if I go down, I'm dragging you with me. I'm dragging all of you with me."

Clenching his hands into fists, Neil wanted to hit Josh so badly he could almost see it

happening. He wished he could wipe that smug expression off the face of a man who had never learned to lose gracefully.

But Neil also felt nauseous and on a cusp of falling apart, so he needed to get out of there more than anything else.

He'd gotten out of that house, and then soon after, he'd gotten out of Savannah.

And here he was now, freaking out in the shower in his childhood home, with Josh's final words still ringing in the back of his head.

"I'm gonna give you until the end of the year. After that, if you don't help me, you better have a goodbye press release at the ready."

## CHAPTER TWO

Ryan Dawson hated airports for many reasons, as most people did, but the thing he considered the worst was the baggage carousel. Or, more specifically, the fact that he would go through the security check, the waiting, and the flight itself, with various shenanigans from the fellow travelers, only to come out on the other side and be forced to stand there and wait as the carousel spewed out the baggage in random order until it finally spewed out his.

Because of that, he usually traveled with a carry-on only, but this was the holiday season and he'd be staying until the New Year's, so he needed more room than usual. And so there he was—cranky, tired, and waiting for his suitcase to come out.

When he checked his phone, he found a text from his mom. His parents were already at the airport, so he messaged her back about his status.

Glancing at the small photo of her at the top of the message chain, he smiled. It had

been way too long since he'd last visited. Pennsylvania wasn't far from DC, so he could easily squeeze in one more trip a year—or convince his parents to come to him. His mom loved DC and his dad loved the museums, so it shouldn't be that hard. Dragging them away from the grandkids was more challenging, but since his brother, George, was currently visiting his in-laws for a few weeks with his wife and kids, maybe their parents would learn they could survive the separation.

The sudden tightening of the crowd closer to the baggage carousel was as clear of a sign of the suitcases coming in as the characteristic hum of the belt moving. Ryan straightened but stayed in his place. With his height allowing him to see over some parts of the crowd, he would know when his suitcase appeared, especially since it was bright green and thus hard to miss.

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His niece deserved thanks for throwing a tantrum until her parents gave in and picked that color for his present. Ryan had clearly not appreciated her genius enough at the time, and he should have. Little Beth was as smart as she was stubborn and he loved talking to her, so it was a shame he wouldn't have a chance to see her this time around.

He definitely needed to schedule another visit in a couple of months. Since his boss wasn't stingy with vacation days, Ryan might as well take advantage.

At last, he caught sight of his suitcase and moved through the thinning crowd to claim it. He could see a few people doing a double take of him handling the bright green monstrosity, but he ignored it and headed straight to the arrival hall.

Scanning the crowd, he quickly located his parents a little to the side of the exit. They both grinned, and his mom waved, as she always did. It used to embarrass him a bit whenever they would pick him up after a deployment or simply on leave, but now it just felt nice.

He grinned back. It was good to be home.

Soon enough, after being hugged to death by both his parents, Ryan had to relinquish his suitcase to his dad, so that his mom could link his arm with hers and pull him towards the exit, asking question after question about his flight, the weather in DC, and whether he was missing any assignment involving the president by taking holiday season off this year.

He explained to her numerous times that any private company—KRK Security

included—wasn't usually covering events with the President of the United States in attendance, but since there had been a few in the past, his mom still asked every time.

Once they got into the car and left the airport behind, Ryan allowed himself to relax in the back seat, watching the road fly by. He usually wished for a nap after a flight, but it was unlikely to happen today. His maternal grandparents and aunt were visiting as well, which meant there was going to be a lot of people to catch up with right away.

Holding back a grimace, he closed his eyes.

Thankfully, he was going to stay at his brother's house during this trip, so he could at least plan for an early night.

\* \* \*

Ryan snapped to attention as the car stopped, and he blinked twice until he got his bearings.

They were home.

Glancing up at the rearview mirror, he found his parents looking back at him—there was the amused smile on his mother's face and the raised eyebrow from his father.

Then he heard a child's shriek of laughter and saw his cousin's twin daughters run across the front lawn towards the house.

"A power nap was a good choice," his mom said, and he snorted.

It sure felt like it, even if he wished it had lasted a little longer.

After they'd gotten into the house, what felt like the whole extended family descended to greet him, and between all the hugs from the adults and a slobbery kiss on the cheek from his cousin Vicky's toddler son, Ryan lost the rest of the tension he'd carried from the trip and beyond.

The last few weeks at work had been grueling, dealing with a client who had dragged Ryan and his partner, James, to various meetings at weird hours of the night and who'd given them hell for trying to keep him safe. Because blocking an excited fan from jumping down on the guy from a few feet up could "alienate the fans and create the wrong picture", apparently.

Thankfully, the assignment was over now, and Ryan could celebrate holidays with his family in peace. He was going to sleep in, read some books, help grandpa with his crossword puzzles and grandma with her peanut butter cookies, and do various other little things he did whenever he visited.

And after the New Year's, he'd go back to DC and his life there, rested and ready for another year.

Tonight, though, he got swept up in the conversation immediately after he returned from freshening up and took a seat with everyone in the living room. As he sat on the floor near the beautiful Christmas tree, he smiled at the crooked snowman he noticed hanging on the bottom left. He and George had had an entire set of these figurines, but most of them had broken or gotten lost over the years. Only this little snowman prevailed, and their mom had always put it up on the tree.

Then Ryan heard the name that always sent his heart into a spin, no matter what.

"—Hopkins, she said her son was staying until New Year's," Aunt Susan was telling his mother, who glanced at him just in time to catch his gaze.

Neil was in town.

He was in town, right now. A little more than a mile away.

Ryan turned to stare at the Christmas tree, but he couldn't really see anything anymore.

Damn it.

He'd put it all behind him a long time ago. Neil Hopkins had been a crucial, defining part of Ryan's life, but he was a memory now and had been for over a decade. The famous hockey player Neil Hopkins was somebody Ryan didn't know and only caught glimpses of on TV every once in a while. He'd sworn to never watch any of Neil's games, and he'd kept that promise, with one exception—the last game of Neil's first Stanley Cup finals, which brought his team a victory and a title. Ryan hadn't moved from the couch for that entire game, sat through the televised celebration, and then finished his beer, went to bed, and woke up to go to work the next day as if nothing had happened.

And now Neil was in town, threatening the well-crafted constructs Ryan had built.



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"His injury is healing up, which is great, because, let me tell you, that guy who's the forward now is nowhere near as good," Aunt Susan went on, and a part of Ryan wanted to stay and listen, but the other, bigger part needed a breather.

He got up and excused himself, purposefully avoiding his mother's gaze. She'd never asked and he'd never told, not even after he'd come out, so it was hard to say how much she knew—or thought she knew.

Either way, he wasn't up to talking about this.

The kitchen offered him the respite he needed, since it was empty and filled with little things he could do, like unloading the dishwasher, clearing the countertops, and preparing tea for his grandpa. Still, as he did all those tasks, the thought of Neil being so close after so many years wouldn't leave his head.

As far as Ryan knew, they'd never been in town at the same time after high school. At first, his leave hadn't lined up with Christmas, then there were his two tours, and by the time he'd gotten a chance to spend the holiday break with his family, Neil had been the one who couldn't make it back because of the NHL schedule.

Of course, it was also possible that Ryan had gotten lucky in the past and simply hadn't known about Neil being here at the same time, but with how gossipy this town was, it seemed unlikely. It took, what, an hour for him to find out today?

Hearing the steps down the hall, Ryan straightened. For a second he thought it was his mom coming to check up on him, but the steps were different, slower.

"I hope you're not trying to serve me the tea once it's cold," his grandpa said right as he appeared in the door.

"No, sir." Ryan gestured towards the steaming mug. "I only just poured the hot water in, so it should be perfect for you."

"Har, har. Comedians don't wear suits and carry guns, you know."

"Maybe they should," Ryan said as he watched his grandpa step closer. "Besides, no suit or gun on me now."

"Good." His grandpa patted him on the chest. "You're a good boy, Ryan."

He raised his eyebrows, not knowing what to say. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me. I'm simply stating a fact. You've done well for yourself, and you're an honest, hard-working person. You've made it."

Maybe it was because of the news about Neil or because of the long day of travel, but the words hit Ryan in a way he didn't expect.

"If I have, it's because you all raised me well," he finally said, but his grandpa shook his head and patted him on the chest again before turning towards the door with his mug in hand.

"That was a start. The rest is all you."

Ryan stared after him, leaning heavily against the counter. He'd never had ambitions of becoming a star—of hockey, politics, or anything else. All he'd wanted was to do a good job of whatever he decided to pursue and to lead a happy life like his parents. That dream had shifted and evolved over the years, and he'd found himself far more

successful in that first part than the second, but the core of it hadn't changed and he assumed it never would, at this point.

And even though Ryan was aware that "making it" in the popular sense didn't really mean anything in itself, it was still good to hear his grandpa say those words about him simply living his life.

It might be too little to some, but not to him.

Not to him.

### CHAPTER THREE

It took Neil's parents two days to notice.

Well, to be fair, it had probably taken a few hours, but they'd given him two days to settle in first.

"Honey, listen," his mom started when the three of them moved to the living room after dinner, supposedly to watch something. "We can tell something's wrong. And whatever it is, we'd like you to talk to us—"

"There's nothing to talk about, Mom."

It was a reflex, really. Deny, deny, deny.

"First of all, don't interrupt your mother," his father said from his seat next to her on the couch. "And second of all, we don't lie to each other in this family, remember?"

Neil swallowed back a humorless laughter. If only you knew.

"Sorry, Mom."

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Leaning forward, she rested her elbows on her knees.

"It's fine. I'm more interested in whatever's going on, because pretending like it's nothing is not helping anybody. You don't have to hide stuff from us."

Now, that same laughter got stuck in his throat.

He'd been hiding most of his life—ever since he'd realized there were things to hide. And his mom might think it was so easy to simply talk it out, but it wasn't. It never had been. For all that he believed she was honest when she said it, she didn't know.

She didn't understand.

"Is it the same thing you've been hiding ever since you were a teenager?" she asked quietly, tossing Neil's entire world off balance in one sentence.

She could've easily shouted it at the top of her lungs, with the effect it had on him.

He froze, his heart jumping into his throat.

"What do you—" he started, then hesitated. It couldn't be. Could it?

And then the realization hit him full force.

"You knew," he whispered. "You knew back then, you knew about me and—"

"We didn't know," she told him when Neil stopped in the middle of the sentence,

unable to finish it. "We suspected, but we didn't know. And we thought about asking, but then you... The two of you had a falling out, and we couldn't figure out how to approach it."

"I couldn't," his dad corrected gruffly. "It's on me that we didn't ask, back then. I thought it was best not to, when there was no reason to ask anymore. Which is stupid, I see it now. I completely missed the point, and I'm sorry for that, Son."

"We're both sorry for that." His mom glanced at his dad before turning to Neil again. "That's why we didn't want to wait this time around. Maybe it's about that, maybe it's something else, but whatever it is, we want you to know that you can tell us anything. And I mean anything."

Burrowing deeper into the armchair, Neil lifted his good leg to press his knee to his chest. It was a tight fit, but he felt better like this as he scrambled to make sense of it all.

His parents had known.

He'd thought he'd hidden it well, but they'd somehow always known.

And now they were asking...

Neil swallowed hard. He could tell them. Not everything—especially not the blackmail part—but he could finally admit the biggest, scariest secret of his life.

As he curled his arms around his bent leg, he looked up to see his parents sitting side by side, watching him. Waiting.

Were they holding their breaths, like he was?

"I'm gay."

His voice was barely louder than a whisper, but the words were out there, now.

It happened, and the world didn't end.

"Thank you for telling us." His mom leaned closer to rest her hand on his forearm.

"We love you so much, and we're so proud of you."

He bit his lower lip hard, blinking fast. His eyes were stinging, but he wasn't going to cry.

"Nothing in this world could ever make us stop loving you," his dad added. "And you being gay doesn't change how proud we are."

Now Ryan had to press his fingers to his eyes to hold back the tears.

Fuck. They'd known for years and they didn't care. They didn't care.

"I'm sorry for whatever we did that made you doubt that," his dad continued, and his mom squeezed Neil's forearm. "We should've made you feel secure enough to share, and we didn't. I'm sorry."

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"It's not—" Neil dropped his hand to meet his dad's gaze. "You didn't do anything wrong, it's not about that. I felt like I couldn't tell anyone, not just you."

His dad opened his mouth, but his mom got there first.

"Let's not argue about that now. We have regrets, but they are ours to deal with. Now, we want to focus on you, okay? We want to support you in whatever way we can."

"You're doing that now," Neil told her. "Both of you. And I'm—" He swallowed hard. "I'm more grateful than I can say."

"You don't ever have to be grateful for us loving you." His mom's tone of voice bore no discussion. "That's our job as parents, and you always made it the easiest thing in the world."

"Okay, okay." Neil sat up and cleared his throat. "I love you guys, too, but how about we change the subject now?"

"You didn't tell us what's bugging you, though," she said, withdrawing her hand slowly.

Neil shook his head. He was all talked out for tonight.

"We covered the biggest part of it," he told her, which wasn't even a lie. "The rest is something I have to deal with on my own."

She watched him for what felt like forever before finally sitting back.



"Well, fine, but remember that if it's guy trouble, I know a thing or two about that."  
She nodded towards her husband of forty years, who predictably protested right away.

"Hey!"

Neil snorted, relaxing in his chair as he watched them bicker.

This evening had been nothing like he expected, and although he still had things looming over him, he felt lighter than he'd felt in ages.

He felt safe.

\* \* \*

The next day, he slept in and ate a late breakfast as his mom was working on a pecan pie solely for him. Whenever he'd come to visit, there usually was some kind of a family gathering—or three—but she'd always made sure to make one of his favorites outside of any party. And he loved that, even if he always needed to add extra time in the gym for a while after a trip home.

"Do you have any plans for the day?" she asked.

"No, I figure I'll see how it goes. But if you need me for some errands or something, I'm game."

She hummed in agreement. "I might ask you to drop by Aiden's place later, I've promised to lend him my spare casserole dish."

"Sure. Do you have a spare one, though?" he joked. There were at least four of them in this kitchen, he'd bet his playoff bonus on it, but with how much food his mom

always prepared for the guests, she probably needed every dish and appliance she had.

"I might have more than one if I decide to skip the sweet potato casserole this year," she told him in an innocent voice, and Neil quickly lifted his hands in surrender.

After all, her sweet potato casserole was one of his favorite dishes of all time.

"I'm withdrawing the question."

"Smart move."

They smiled at each other, and he sat there with her until the pie was in the oven and his second cup of coffee was empty. Truth be told, he was tempted to lounge on the couch the whole day, but he'd done that yesterday and he needed to get out of the house or else he would just obsess over Josh's threat and what it meant for his career or life in general. His parents had held back from asking more questions so far, but they would certainly sit him down for another come-to-Jesus talk if he stayed hidden in the house, dressed in sweatpants and an old T-shirt every day.

Finally, he decided to get on with things. He would drop the casserole dish at his cousin's place and then see what to do next. The weather was nice and it might be good to get some fresh air.

It wasn't until he was driving up the familiar path through the forest that he realized he'd planned to come here since the moment he'd woken up this morning, groggy and disoriented, from a dream about that hill and about Ryan and him as they once were, before everything went to shit.

He hadn't had one of those in years.

Neil blamed it on the conversation with his parents and the fact that he had replayed it in his head over and over yesterday, wondering what it would have meant to have it back then, and whether it would have changed anything.

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Which was stupid. Of course it would have changed things—it would've made it easier for all three of them, but especially him, since he wouldn't have to lie and overthink stuff so much.

What it wouldn't have changed, though, was his decision to leave for Chicago, because no matter how difficult it had been at the time, no matter what it had cost him, he'd always known it was the right path for him.

He wasn't proud of how he'd handled it, but he hadn't regretted it.

And yet here he was, driving up the hill he hadn't been on in twelve years.

When he saw the tire tracks, he smiled at the thought of someone else finally discovering this place. Back then, he and Ryan hadn't shared it with any of their other friends, wanting to keep it for themselves, but it was still bizarre to him that the two of them had never seen anyone else up there.

Not anymore, apparently.

He drove slowly, no longer used to driving in the snow, but the path was unchanged from what he remembered. Who knew, maybe he would be able to ride up there with his eyes closed even now, since muscle memory was a hell of a thing.

Then he got to the top and saw the other car, recognizing it right away.

It belonged to Ryan's father.

Neil hit the brakes, overwhelmed by the improbability of it all—the dream, the decision to come here, the chance of Ryan being in town, let alone here, at the same time as he was.

Twelve years he'd avoided this. Twelve long years, only to stumble upon Ryan in the very place where it had all started and then fallen apart.

He could still leave. One turn around on the narrow path and he could pretend it never happened.

A man stepped out from behind the car and all thoughts disappeared from Neil's head as their gazes met.

Jesus Christ.

His heart was beating loudly and his hands were sweating like every time he closed them around his stick right before a big game.

Ryan was taller than Neil remembered, and although he was bundled up in a bulky winter gear, his long legs were on full display in fitted jeans.

And his eyes... They were always the most beautiful part of him, one that had haunted Neil's dreams his freshman year of college and beyond. They still felt familiar, against all odds and reasons.

Then Ryan disappeared behind the car again, and in his mind, Neil could picture him sitting down on the back of his father's truck and staring out onto the forest in front of him.

Neil could still go. He could make that turn, and drive away, and look over his shoulder anytime he ventured into town for the rest of his time here.

Nobody would know but the two of them.

It would be fine.

Clenching his hands around the steering wheel, he stared at where Ryan disappeared for one heartbeat, then another.

It wouldn't be fine. Hewouldn't be fine, because no matter how easy or how hard it had been to not think about Ryan when he hadn't seen him or heard from him for the twelve goddamn years, this was different. Right now, Neil was about a minute away from Ryan he'd never seen before, this older version of theboy he'd loved with all that he'd known how to give, back then.

Fuck, Neil hadn't called it for what it was for so long, and yet now that he'd taken one look at the man, there was no denying it any longer.

There was no driving away, either.

Whatever this was going to be—good, bad, or ugly—it needed to finally happen.

Neil needed it to happen.

He slowly drove up and parked his car next to the other one, facing the opposite direction. Then, after counting to three, he left the safety of the truck.

As the cold air hit him, he zipped up his jacket and pushed his hands into his pockets, curling them into fists as he took the last few steps to see Ryan again, this time from much closer.

And Neil knew all too well how it felt to be slammed hard against the boards by another hockey player colliding with him at high speed, but it still had nothing on the

way he felt the second he met Ryan Dawson's gaze at that very moment.

### CHAPTER FOUR

Ryan had had no intention of coming here today. After he'd last been up the hill with Neil, he'd sought this place only a handful of times over the years—the day Neil had left for Chicago, the day before shipping out for his first deployment, and then right after he was done with the military and was about to start a new job in DC.

Today, he had no big, life-altering decisions he was struggling with. He was in a good place with his job, he had great friends, and he was settled in his life in DC. Yet he found himself taking a turn as he was driving from his parents' house to his brother's, and here he was.

It was around noon and the weather was relatively mild, but he still tucked his scarf tight around his neck before leaving the car. The snow had fallen at night and it crunched under his boots as he walked around the truck to lean against the back of it and take in the view of the forest in the valley below him. He'd always loved the expanse of it, the seemingly endless mass of trees. It was peaceful, and beautiful, and serene.

He'd never understood why it wasn't the most popular spot in town, but then again, having this place for just him and Neil had been very convenient years ago.

Although Ryan might have praised the solitude aspect of the place too early, because in the next second he heard the car engine behind him and the sound was getting closer.

He tensed briefly, but then relaxed and stayed in place. He had nothing to hide, and if



another pair of teenagers had somehow found this place, then he would get out of their way and wish them better luck than he'd had in that regard.

From the sound of it, the driver paused close by but the engine was still running, as if they didn't know what to do with someone else being here, too. Maybe they were considering leaving, but the road was narrow enough that they would have to drive further up to where he was, anyway.

Unless his car was blocking the way.

Ryan didn't think so, but it was enough to get him moving up and around the car to see what was happening.

He registered a rental first, and from that, he instantly knew who it was going to be.

As if in slow motion, Ryan blinked, looked up, and saw Neil Hopkins in the flesh, staring at him from the driver's seat, probably thinking about running away.

Again.

The thought slipped out of a dark corner of his mind where Ryan had thought he'd packed all his old anger and pain away.

There was no use of being angry anymore, though, and there definitely didn't have to be any spite. If he'd managed civility twelve years ago, heart-broken and hardly breathing through it, he could manage it now, too.

After taking a note of the fact that his car wasn't, in fact, blocking the way out, Ryan returned to his seat at the back of the truck. Neil could do whatever he wanted.

He always had.

Okay, so maybe Ryan wasn't handling it all that well, internally. Maybe he was allowed some anger and some spite, if only for as long as he had to deal with the guy being in the same town for the next few weeks. Ryan wasn't going to pick a fight, far from it, but his thoughts were fair game. He would give himself that much.

Hearing the car driving closer, he expected Neil to just make the turn and leave, but to his surprise, Neil parked his rental right next to Ryan's truck and got out of the car.

Ryan's whole body was instantly on high alert, more than it had ever been on any assignment.

Still, he remained in place.

"Hi," Neil said, and Ryan couldn't hold back anymore—he looked at him then.

He was taller and bigger than the last time they'd seen each other in person, obviously, but he wasn't as big as the hockey gear made him seem, especially when he shoved his hands into his winter coat pockets and hunched his shoulders. His short blond hair was sticking out in every direction, probably due to the hat he'd taken off, and yet, it wasn't a bad look.

Of course it wasn't.

"Hey."

What else was there to say?

Neil hesitated for another few seconds, then came up to the front of his car and leaned against it as he took in the view.

"I didn't expect to see you here," he offered quietly after a while.

Would you have come if you had?

Ryan pushed the question away, fairly certain what Neil's answer would be and knowing that his would have been the same.

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"Likewise," he said instead.

He kept his gaze at the snow-covered trees, but he was more aware of the man a few feet away from him than of anything he was staring at.

"God, I forgot how beautiful this view is," Neil said in the same quiet voice. "I haven't been here since... our senior year."

A pang of pain shot through Ryan, but he didn't want to stop and wonder why.

"How's this not the most popular spot in the area, I still don't know," he offered, voicing his earlier thoughts as he scrambled for something to say.

"Well, there's that—"

"—damn patch of gravel right after the turn," Ryan recited with Neil, the reason they'd heard Ryan's grandfather once use when he'd heard them talking about it. They repeated it later on, over and over, until it became another one of their things.

They smiled at each other now and it helped, a bit—not with Ryan's heartbeat, which actually became worse, but with the lingering traces of resentment that had been there, hovering, ready to attack at the slightest provocation.

"Their loss, our gain," Neil said, facing the forest again.

Yes, it was, Ryan agreed silently, not ready to say it out loud.

This place had truly been their gain in so many ways he'd forgotten for a while, burying it under the layers of hurt and loneliness. It had seen several important moments in their lives, but also much more of the silly, lazy, funny moments, these everyday snapshots of teenage life.

"Are you here for the holiday break?" Neil asked, disrupting the silence they'd fallen into.

Ryan glanced at him but found him still staring ahead, so he did the same.

"Yeah, I've managed to get a few weeks off. And you?"

He heard about the healing injury, but it was still polite to ask. Besides, he found himself wanting to prolong the moment—why, he wasn't sure, but he would question himself another time.

"A minor injury took me out of the game for the time being anyway, so I decided to make the most of it. It's been way too long since I've come here for Christmas."

"Is it healing okay?"

Ryan didn't see anything visibly wrong, but he knew better. There was a difference between feeling fine to walk around and being able to perform at work, especially in a physically demanding job like Neil's—or Ryan's.

"Yeah, it's fine." Neil waved towards his left knee. "I should be completely healed by the end of the year."

"Good. That's good."

Small talk wasn't usually an issue for him, which came in handy in various situations,

on and off the clock, but this, right here, actually felt a bit painful. Not bad, exactly, but a far cry from what their never-ending conversations had been, when they would finish each other's sentences and never run out of things to say to each other.

Until their last conversation, at least.

Clenching his teeth against the sudden tightness in his chest, Ryan exhaled slowly.

There was nothing left for him here. There hadn't been for years, and he knew that.

Which meant he should just get up and go—be the one who didn't look back this time.

Could he, though?

## CHAPTER FIVE

Neil couldn't let Ryan leave. Not yet, not now.

"What are you doing, these days?" he asked and, God, the awkwardness of it almost made him choke.

Ryan watched him as if wondering whether to offer him any answer at all, and Neil couldn't even blame him. He could hope, sure, but he couldn't—

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"I'm working in private security." Ryan turned to face the valley forest again. "Nothing as glamorous or exciting as professional hockey, but I enjoy it and the company's great."

Neil frowned, not sure if the dig was aimed at him or Ryan himself. When they were younger, Ryan had felt the need to explain himself from time to time, as if him not having any grand ambitions was somehow bad, but Neil had never cared. Especially since, if things had gone differently, he would have benefited from Ryan's willingness to go wherever Neil wanted and figure it out as they went.

"That line of work seems to be a natural fit after the military, right?"

Ryan glanced at him with his eyebrows raised.

Oh. Well.

While Neil had never asked around about Ryan, it had only taken one accidental run-in with Alyssa and Jim, their former classmates, to learn about Ryan's second deployment six years ago. He stayed up all night, imagining the worst, and it wasn't until the season picked up a few weeks later and offered a distraction Neil could throw himself into that the worry finally started to dissipate.

He'd also asked his mom to tell him once she heard about Ryan's return, which had been one and only time he'd ever made a request like that.

"Are you going to call him?" Her voice had come out tentative and quiet after a few seconds of silence.

Neil had shaken his head, but they'd been on the phone, so he'd had to find words.

"I just want to know."

Another silence. "Okay. I'll tell you when I hear something."

Three weeks later, she'd texted him about Ryan's safe return and a rumor he was ready to leave the Army after his contract was up.

After that, Neil's sleep issues had gone away and he'd been unstoppable for the rest of the season.

"It is a natural progression for many, but the job is actually not that similar to the military," Ryan spoke up now, and Neil startled, coming back to the present.

Thankfully, Ryan didn't seem to notice.

"I mean, of course it's somewhat alike," he went on, "but mostly it's the training that's useful. Actual work is different, at least in my case. I live and work in DC, so it's not the same as working in private security in Afghanistan or Iraq."

"I would hope so," Neil tossed on reflex, but fortunately Ryan snorted.

"Well, there are some days I'd consider switching places, to be honest," he said, and the corners of his mouth lifted up a bit.

"You can always console yourself with the fact that you have a smaller chance of getting blown up, at least."

"At least, yeah." Ryan's smile softened. "But it's honestly fun for the most part. I wouldn't do it if it wasn't."



Simple as that. Ryan had always had the ability to take his life as it was and make a decision. If I want this, I'm going to do this. If I don't—I won't. Neil had never really managed that in his own life, because he'd always wanted too much.

"And how's DC?" he asked, distracting himself from that line of thinking. "Does it live up to everything people say about it?"

"A lot of it is true. There have been days when I thought it should all go down in flames. Money and politics definitely should not mix and it's staggering how much they do." Ryan grimaced briefly. "But I've also seen the opposite. I've seen people try their best, and work hard, and have visions that are bigger than themselves. It's... I don't know. I would never want that job, but it can be inspiring."

His expression changed as he talked, softening at the end, and Neil suddenly wanted to hear all the stories, good and bad—but mostly the good ones, because he wanted to know what put that look on Ryan's face. What inspired him.

"Besides, DC isn't only about politics," Ryan went on. "There are students, and military personnel, and all kinds of regular people. And they're living their lives like in any other big city, I'd say. Well, maybe not the military personnel, but everybody else." He smirked at Neil. "And then there's our hockey team."

"Our"? That hurts," Neil quipped, because bickering about the game was ingrained in him way too deep at this point.

"Don't worry, I have no affiliation. I don't follow any team, I stick with leisure basketball games."

And suddenly, they were on the shaky ground again. There was nothing concrete Neil could put his finger on, but he felt he'd better change the subject or their moment would be over.

"Well, you also have the gazillion museums, if you're into that kind of entertainment," was what he went with.

Ryan chuckled. "As a matter of fact, I have been spending more time in the museums than ever before. It's usually for work, when we cover a benefit gala or something, but I've been dragged to a tour or two as well. And my friend's partner works at the Smithsonian, so I've gained far more dinosaur trivia knowledge than I ever expected to once I passed the age of eleven."

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"That does sound interesting. I could impress my cousin's kids with that kind of ammunition."

"Oh yeah, I'm required to offer a new fact every time I call my nieces."

As they smiled at each other now, sharing small, silly stuff, it almost felt like old times—like somehow, miraculously, they found their rhythm again.

Then Ryan turned away, and so did Neil, and the spell was broken.

Staring ahead at the forest in front of them and breathing in the cold, crisp air, Neil wondered what more was there to say.

For over a decade, facing Ryan again was one of the scariest things that could happen to him. Neil had never called it that, even in his own head, but the fear was there, lodged deep inside him, whenever the possibility of reaching out passed through his mind. He would've most likely never talked himself into doing it, and if they bumped into each other somewhere in town, they wouldn't have this—the space with no interruption and no curious eyes or ears.

Now that they were here, though, he couldn't drag himself out, couldn't get into the car and drive away. It felt like if he didn't move, the world wouldn't move, either. It would pause, solely for the two of them.

But it never actually worked like that, did it? There was no stopping the world from turning and them from drifting apart.

Still, Ryan would need to be the one to move first to break them out of... whatever this was.

And in the end, he did. Hefting himself up onto his feet, Ryan rolled his shoulders before curling them in as if the cold was only hitting him now.

It was suddenly hitting Neil, that was for sure.

"I should get going," Ryan said as he met Neil's gaze, and his clear, warm eyes were like a shot of hot drink, heating up Neil's insides with that jolt of burning pain that happened when one was too cold to react well to the first sip.

I've missed you, Neil thought, and the force of it took his breath away for a moment. He'd known, deep down he'd always known, but it was nothing like this—this visceral longing that seemed to stretch indefinitely like the forest below them.

He nodded, cleared his throat, and straightened from where he was leaning against the rental.

"Okay," he muttered, and then, louder, "sure."

Ryan nodded as well, a sharp move that seemed too final for Neil's liking.

"I..." he started again, with no idea what to actually say. "Stay for a while longer" was out of the question. "I've missed you" even more so, since he didn't have the right. Finally, he settled for, "It was good to see you."

Painful but good. Necessary, even, although Neil couldn't say why.

Ryan stilled at his words, half-turned already.

Fuck, maybe Neil had gone too far, after all. He should've stopped while he was ahead.

But then Ryan looked at him again and nodded.

"It was... good to see you, too," he offered slowly. There was a slight pause there, but he still said it, so Neil would take it.

And maybe it wasn't all that they needed to say to each other, or even wanted to say, but it was something. This whole thing was... something.

Neil would have to go over it in his head, take it apart for a play by play and consider all the angles. He did it with the most important games of his career, and he would do it with this. Because he wanted to study it. To re-experience it. And, with anyluck, he would understand it better after some thought.

For now, however, all that was left was watching Ryan drive away.

## CHAPTER SIX

Then

The fall was firmly upon them and it was getting too cold to stay up on the hill for long, but they were both unwilling to admit that just yet.

Ryan tucked the blanket tighter under his thigh while trying not to tug it off of Neil, who was sitting next to him at the back of Ryan's truck. They were pressed closely against each other to share the heat, which was doing scientifically impossible things to Ryan's heart, but he tried to ignore it.

He'd learned to ignore a lot of things by now, ever since he'd understood what those

weird feelings he'd started to have around Neil meant. Suppressing them wasn't always easy—like right now, when a different kind of heat was making its presence known low in his belly—but Ryan had resigned himself to live with it.

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He didn't have a choice, after all. There was no way he'd risk their friendship for anything, no matter how tempting it sometimes was to reach out and—

No.

Needing a distraction, Ryan turned to Neil, only to find him staring at the valley before them, the trees changing colors into vibrant red and yellows amidst all the green.

"What's with you today?" He nudged Neil with his elbow. "Did something happen at the practice?"

The hockey varsity team had a big game tomorrow, so there'd better not been any last-minute drama.

"Nothing bad." Neil shook his head, glancing at him briefly. "We went through the game plan and we're ready, all we need is not to choke tomorrow. Which we won't," he added rightaway, sounding confident, but Ryan didn't miss the way he was wringing his fingers on his lap.

"You haven't choked since your second game ever last year," Ryan reminded him. "You're going to be fine."

"If we win this, we have a real shot at the state championship. We need better than fine."

"I know, I know. You've been doing great the whole season, though, so your chances

are good. Besides, you have the home game advantage. And I'm going to be screaming my face off in the stands, so, you know. You need to play at least as good as my cheering will be."

Neil snorted. "Will there be pom poms?"

"Nope. I'll only bring pom poms for your Stanley Cup finals, nothing below that."

"High bargain."

"Gives you something to strive for, doesn't it?"

Ryan grinned at the burst of laughter he'd finally gotten out of Neil, but when he turned to him again, he froze, suddenly unsure. Neil's laugh cut off as he stared at Ryan, whose heartbeat kicked up a notch.

"Hey, can I try something?" Neil whispered, untangling his hands.

Ryan nodded, confused his friend would even ask, but then Neil closed the small gap between them, put his hand in Ryan's hair, and kissed him.

Neil kissed him.

On the mouth.

Ryan had very little idea of what to do—more of that—or say—yes, yes, yes—but it only took him a split second to kiss Neil back.

It was softer than he'd ever imagined. And slower. They started and stopped, and then started again, and it took a while before either of them even opened their mouths to deepen the kiss.



Damn, it was good.

For all that Ryan had kissed a few girls, it had never, ever felt like this. After the initial uncertainty, Neil grew more sure, more demanding, and Ryan wanted nothing more than to let him do whatever he desired. The grip Neil had on his hair and the way he pushed his tongue into Ryan's mouth made Ryan hard in record time, and he gasped into the kiss.

Then he wound his arm around Neil's waist and pulled him in, only for them to draw back and inhale sharply as their erections rubbed against each other.

Neil's eyes were shining, his mouth wet, and his hand moved to the back of Ryan's neck, which was apparently a very, very sensitive part of his body.

"Do you want—?" Neil whispered hoarsely, dropping his gaze to Ryan's lips.

Yes. Anything.

"Yeah," he murmured, toes curling in anticipation. "Yes."

Next thing he knew, Neil rolled him onto his back and propped himself up on his elbow as he lay half on top of Ryan.

Despite the cold, hard surface under his back, it felt almost too good. Like whenever Ryan had to wait before jacking off and then finally grabbed his erection—the relief, the pleasure, and the hint of pain all in one.

Neil rolled his hips, and a quiet gasp escaped Ryan's mouth as he clasped his hands on Neil's lower back before sliding them to rest on his sides. To hold on.

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Neil leaned in for another kiss, this time slick and demanding. I'll take it from there, he seemed to be saying, just come with me on this ride, come on.

As if Ryan would say no to that.

As if he hadn't been dreaming about it for months.

Soon enough, they were both rolling their hips, rutting against each other and kissing or panting into each other's mouth. Everything was heightened—the sounds, the taste, the sparks running all over Ryan's body, harder, faster, more—and when the orgasm hit, he whined into Neil's mouth, coming in his boxers because they hadn't even opened their jeans for this.

Neil bit his shoulder as he came a moment later, shuddering until he collapsed, spent, and warm, and increasingly heavy as the seconds ticked by.

Ryan didn't mind the weight, though. Not at all.

He stared at the sky, unblinking.

This really happened. It wasn't a dream, it wasn't a fantasy. It had happened.

Neil had kissed him, they kissed some more, and then they came. Together.

Neil had kissed him.

The guy in question rolled off onto his back, and for a second, Ryan was scared to

look at him, to know what he was thinking.

But when Ryan did finally glance his way, Neil was right there, with a smile expanding into a grin, bright and happy.

Ryan grinned back.

Everything he wanted, right there.

They turned onto their sides to face each other, and Ryan ran his teeth over his lower lip, wondering what came next. Should they talk? Or could they just kiss some more, instead?

"You good?" he finally asked in a whisper.

Neil nodded. "Yeah. Yes. You?"

"Better than." Ryan's cheeks were starting to hurt from all the grinning. "I'm great."

"Me too." Neil moved his hand next to where Ryan's was lying between them and hooked their pinkies together. "I'm great."

"Awesome."

"Yeah."

Swallowing his laughter down, Ryan leaned in and kissed Neil again, lingering there for a minute or two.

"I know we have to go soon, but— Can we stay for a bit longer?" Neil whispered, tugging their joined hands under the blanket and closing his eyes.

"Sure."

Whatever you want.

Neil's hum was his only answer, and Ryan settled in to watch him, his heart overflowing with everything that had been hidden for so long and was now suddenly pushing its way out of the dark.

He couldn't wait to find out how to be in this new way with Neil, on top of everything else they were, and did, and had with each other. They shared almost everything, outside of hockey, and now there was this new, amazing thing for them to have.

And there was no better person to figure things out with than his best friend.

That part had always been true, no matter what.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Then, over a year later

Neil stared at the phone, the busy signal still beeping after they'd disconnected a minute ago.

Andrew Phillips.

Somebody had shown Andrew Phillips Neil's tapes, and he wanted to arrange a meeting if Neil was interested.

If.

As if there was anything that could stop him from going to see the head coach of one of the best college hockey teams in the country.

Neil hadn't even thought about Chicago before, hadn't considered it a viable option. He'd learned to hedge his bets, even though Ryan had repeatedly told him he'd underplayed himself too much. Neil could already hear him—

Oh, shit. Shit, shit, shit.

Ryan had applied to a bunch of schools that were considering Neil, but none of them was in Chicago or even anywhere close. Shit.

Clutching his phone, Neil dropped back onto the bed.

It was only a meeting, nothing final. He could go there, talk to the guy—Andrew!

Freaking! Phillips!—and check out the place. That was it. He wasn't making any decisions yet, or anything.

He and Ryan were going to decide together, as they'd agreed on a long time ago. Neil was simply considering all the options.

His phone pinged in his hand with a new text.

Ready for tonight? ;)

Neil bit his lower lip, doubt creeping in fast. With the rest of Ryan's family away for the weekend, Neil was supposed to go over there for a sleepover, and he'd been looking forward to it the whole week. It had been a while since they'd had so much uninterrupted time to themselves, and Neil had more than a few ideas of what they could use it for.

Still, if he went there tonight, there was no way Ryan wouldn't notice something was up, and if Neil spilled, they would most likely end up fighting instead of having sex and the whole night would be ruined anyway.

I can't tonight :(he finally texted.Headache from hell since noon. :(

He got a string of sad faces in reply, followed by a heart emoji.

Sucks. :( Lmk if anything changes, but get some rest in the meantime.

I'm prob going to go to bed early, Neil wrote back, and it felt like he'd jinxed himself when a shot of pain pulsed through his head as he hit send.

He closed his eyes and put his knuckles against the side of his forehead, hoping to relieve some of the tension. To distract himself, he focused on the trip to Chicago,

and he drifted off after a while to the mental pictures of Andrew Phillips personally giving him a tour of the place and introducing him to the players.

\* \* \*

The reality, as always, had been different, but not by much. He was going to talk to Coach Phillips later on, but for now, it was one of the associate coaches, Coach Pine, who was showing Neil the place.

And it washuge.

The sports center on this campus seemed twice as big as the one he and his parents had gone to see in Boston. He wastrying not to gape like a fish, but this whole thing felt more like a commercial instead of real life.

At least until they were passing the locker room and Neil heard some shouts and hoots, and then—

"Get off, what are you, a fag?"

"Shut your mouth, you asshole."

There was more laughter later on, but Neil still tensed and glanced at the man next to him.

"Boys will be boys, huh?" Coach Pine said with a twist of his mouth Neil couldn't tell was a grimace or a concealed smirk. "Don't worry, we don't allow freshman hazing here or anything like that."

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He did put his head in—hopefully to check if there really wasn't anything worse going on—but didn't say anything more, and Neil could almost hear Ryan's voice in his head, commenting on there being no hazing unless someone was gay, apparently.

It was only a throwaway comment, though. He'd heard plenty already in their high school locker room, it wasn't all that different.

What was different and what made Neil forget the stupid shit talk, was the conversation he had with Coach Phillips. The man was larger than life and just seeing him sitting behind the desk made Neil straighten his back.

He wanted to make the best impression.

Now that he'd gotten here, he needed this to go well.

"Listen," Coach Phillips said, leaning in, after he'd asked a few questions about the trip and Neil's impression of the campus. "I could give you the spiel and the 'here's what we can do for you' speech a mile-long, but I don't want to waste your time or mine. This school and this team is a big challenge, no question about it. I've seen you play, though, and I think you can meet this challenge. You wouldn't be sitting here if I thought any different. But only you can decide whether you believe you're up to the task or not. Whether you believe you have what it takes to be here." He paused and raised his eyebrows. "Do you?"

Neil's heart hammered in his chest.

It all came down to him, now.



So, was he ready for it?

Was he willing to give his all to the impossible dream?

\* \* \*

The silence in Ryan's truck was pressing on Neil, but he couldn't think of anything to say, so he stared out the window at the familiar sights of the road they'd taken hundreds, if not thousands of times before.

Chicago had been a maze, but he'd been excited to explore it. Meanwhile this, here, felt like a shoe that had been too worn out to stay on his foot for much longer. The same streets, the same buildings, the same road... Everything was always the same.

The only part that was right about any of this was having Ryan by his side, but even that was hard today. Why wasn't Ryan saying anything? They hadn't seen each other for a few days, so there should be plenty to catch up on. They'd exchanged texts, of course, but since Neil had to carefully word every one of his, it kind of sucked. He wasn't doing much better in person, either, but he'd hoped Ryan would fill in the gaps and Neil would be able to get lost in it for a bit before...

Well. Before talking to Ryan about Chicago.

Somehow.

He wished he could turn on the radio, at least, but Ryan hadn't gotten around to fixing it yet, which might have been exasperating at any other time, but now Neil had to hold back an irritated huff. Seriously, how hard could it be to get the damn thing fixed?

He rubbed his eyes. Maybe he was more tired from the trip than he'd thought.

Finally, Ryan parked at their spot, the back of the truck positioned so they'd had the perfect view as they lounged there. Hours upon hours they'd spent like that—talking, making out, having sex, and talking some more, with a few beers here and there. Ryan had once said that this was the spot where they'd figured themselves out, over and over, and maybe he'd had a point. It sounded profound to Neil back then, but now it felt more like a weight on his shoulders. An expectation of sorts.

Following Ryan to the back of the truck, where they hopped on to sit, still felt like the most natural thing, though.

It took barely two seconds for Ryan to speak out.

"I bumped into your uncle at the gas station the other night," he said slowly.

The dread sneaked down Neil's back. He knows already.

Ryan nodded as if Neil had said it out loud.

"Never saw that coming, I tell ya. Our Neil heading to Chicago on a college dime." The impression wasn't bad, even if far from Ryan's best. Then he dropped the act. "I thought he was mixing something up, but he was utterly convinced, so... What the fuck, Neil?"

He swallowed. This was it. He'd know it was coming, now he just needed to say it. Get it out in the open.

"Couch Phillips called and invited me." He rubbed his hands over his thighs. "To check out if I might be interested."

"And you went."

It was a statement, not a question. Still, Neil nodded.

"Why?"

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Neil snorted. What kind of a question was that?

"Are you serious? How could I not go?"

"Chicago wasn't even on your list," Ryan pointed out. "I mean, I get it, it must have been cool to get a call—"

"Yes, it's freaking 'cool' when one of the best coaches in college hockey calls you!"

"But why didn't you tell me? What the hell?" Ryan grimaced and shook his head, as if Neil was a ten-year-old who disappointed him by not studying for a test or something. "Why didn't you talk to me about it and—"

"It wasn't your decision to make!" Neil erupted, suddenly no longer tired but angry instead, desperately searching for a way out. He didn't want to have this conversation or make any plans other than leaving this town behind and playing hockey somewhere where his dreams could come true.

Ryan reared back, leaning away from Neil so much he almost dropped his balance.

"It wasn't my decision, but we talked about—"

"You wanted this!" Neil jumped out of the back of the truck and faced Ryan. "You wanted to plan this whole thing out, as if we could predict everything! We couldn't! I didn't expect this, sure, but I'd be damned if I said no to this offer because you don't like it."

"It's true, then." Ryan curled his hands on the edge of the truck and lifted his chin. "You've already decided."

Yes. No.

Shit, maybe he'd decided the second he'd gotten that call.

"This is all I ever wanted!" And the stricken look on Ryan's face should've probably stopped him right there, but it didn't, because his heart was racing, he wanted to jump out of his skin, and Ryan just didn't get it. He'd never gotten it. "You know I want to play in the NHL, and in Chicago I have an actual shot at it, not a pipe dream about some lucky shot about being in the right place at the right time! What would you want me to do, give it up to, what? Go to Boston? Or Richmond? They aren't even in the same league!"

Neil had been the one to put them on the list, and they weren't bad or anything, but they weren't Chicago, that was for sure.

"Does it even matter what I think, now?" Ryan asked quietly, and he was trying to be calm, but his hands were clenched so hard around the edge of the truck and his shoulders so hunched that Neil knew better.

Still, he crossed his arms against his chest and didn't say anything.

What could he possibly say, anyway? Ryan's opinion had always mattered, but in this, Neil couldn't let it overrule his.

"So that's it, huh?" Ryan turned his head away until Neil couldn't see his face anymore. "You've got your dream shot, and you're taking it, and to hell with everything else?"

It wasn't fair. Ryan didn't understand, because he didn't know what to do with his life yet, but Neil did. Was that so bad? That he actually had something to lose here and couldn't solely focus on his high school boyfriend he couldn't even kiss in public and who, most likely, wouldn't want to stay in the closet forever, not like Neil would have to?

Maybe it had all been heading to this point, anyway. Maybe they had been doomed from the start, but neither had wanted to say it before now. Before there was something bigger at stake, a real shot at something.

"I'm sorry," he finally offered, calm now, in that weird, dull way it sometimes got when he was tired of being angry and had to resign himself to reality.

And he was sorry. He hadn't planned on any of this, he hadn't planned on Chicago, he hadn't planned on... dumping Ryan.

Because that was what was happening here. Shit.

His stomach hurt, and the sun was shining right into his eyes, and he wanted nothing more than to go home, crawl into his bed, and not deal with any of this.

It seemed like forever before Ryan turned back, but even then he didn't meet Neil's gaze. He only nodded, a sharp tilt of his head, before he gestured towards the passenger door of the truck.

"I'll get you home," he said, voice tight and hollow, and Neil swallowed, wanting to fix this and knowing that he couldn't.

Not anymore.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Back to now

Ryan held his breath until he no longer saw Neil's rental in his rearview mirror.

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Damn. What was he thinking?

He should've driven away the moment he'd seen Neil. Or maybe after they'd exchanged nods, like two polite people who kind of knew each other and were passing each other on their way.

He shouldn't have stayed and talked with Neil as if everything was fine. As if his stupid, greedy heart had actually learned better.

But he didn't leave, and they did talk, and now Ryan was in deep trouble.

You can't do this to yourself, not again, he kept repeating in his head as he drove off. Neil might have the charisma Ryan found hard to resist—both back then and now—but Ryan was smarter these days.

Hopefully.

He'd better be, because in a few weeks, he was getting on a plane back to DC, to return to his regular life that definitely didn't have Neil Hopkins in it. And Neil Hopkins had his own glamorous life in Georgia, one that had nothing to do with Ryan's. They'd met, they'd talked, and now they were moving on. It could take another twelve years for them to meet again.

Or not, the traitorous voice in the back of his mind suggested. Maybe it didn't have to be like this, maybe they could...

That was a dangerous road to go down, though. Ryan couldn't help the curiosity—a



part of him was, had been, and would forever be curious about the first boy he'd ever loved. But he didn't have to give into it. He didn't need to know more, hear more, or talk to Neil more.

He had his own life, his people, his job. He hadn't found love yet, but he had time, still. He would keep searching, keep hoping, and, with any luck, it was going to happen.

He didn't need to drag old skeletons out of the closet—or into it, as it were.

He didn't.

He just needed to remember that.

\* \* \*

With a sigh, Ryan put the book away and stared at the Christmas tree in the corner of the living room.

Adjusting to extended time off was always weird, but this time, it felt even weirder. For one, he wasn't at his parents' house with the family, but here, at his brother's place, which meant he was alone way more than usual during his visits. Normally, he would have glimpses of alone time here and there, and even those would often be accompanied by the voices coming from down the hall or interrupted by somebody asking for his attention.

Here, like this, it was only him, in a fairly unfamiliar place, left to do whatever he wanted and struggling to figure out what it meant at any given moment.

He read. He watched TV. He texted with James, and Clay, and hung out on the company's internal group chat for a bit. He looked through the photo albums

displayed on the shelves, because he hardly ever saw one these days and there was something special about seeing his brother's family grow. He'd never wanted kids for himself, but he loved his nieces a lot, so seeing their journey from being a few hours old to a couple of weeks ago was amazing. As was seeing his brother and Sally, George's high school sweetheart, still so happy together after all that time.

It hurt a bit, too, of course, but still. High school couples rarely stayed together for the long haul, so it was nice to see George getting his happy ending. Statistically, it was no wonder Ryan hadn't, even without taking into account the whole secret and gay part of his first relationship.

Determined not to wallow in his feelings, he rolled off the couch to go for a run and clear his head. Later, he would drive to his parents again, but getting some exercise before stuffing himself full was definitely the right idea.

The nearby park was a great space for people with kids, with play areas for children of different ages and picnic tables where whole families could spend time outside when it was warmer. There was also a path circling the entire park, though, and a few laps should give Ryan a nice workout. He hadn't ran outdoors in a long while, since he usually worked out in the gym facilities at the company's HQ, which were more convenient and often came with other team members there to keep him in check.

He smiled at the thought of their group at KRK. Not even back in the service had he had a team that gelled so well together. While the guys from his unit were fine, and he would still trust them with his life, there was something that elevated the KRK's bunch to another level. Ryan had never thought that being gay or bi was an important characteristic of a friend, but now that he was a part of a group that had similar life experience as him and knew what it was like to be queer in a military environment, things were different. He felt safe and settled, like he was in the right place for himself.

That feeling hadn't changed even after his field partner had finally started dating Eddie, their comms specialist. Ryan had been rooting for them for a long time—which included trying to push James into finally making a move—but it was still a relief that nothing much had changed in their little group dynamic, since his friends never made him feel excluded.

Even if it might have taken Ryan a while to find his place in the world, he was happy to have it now. And no matter what happened during this break, no matter the nostalgia or whatever this was, he had a home to come back to.

His life wasn't here anymore. He was going to be fine.

\* \* \*

Tonight, the dinner at his parents' house was a quiet affair, with just the three of them, since his grandparents and aunt had gone out to see a movie. As Ryan relaxed into the cushions with a contented sigh, stuffed with two servings of the green bean casserole, he reminded himself for probably the fifth time since he'd gotten here that he should take the home cooking more seriously back in DC. Each time he visited, he always left with a resolution to try harder at this, but then it all fell apart soon after between his job and other stuff.

And yet, he kept hoping that the lesson would finally stick at some point.

"I've talked basically through the entire dinner." His mom sat down next to him on the couch, tucking one foot underneath her as she faced him. "Now it's your turn to entertain me."

Ryan chuckled, but shifted to see her better as well.

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"Oh really? I'm not sure if I'd call a retelling of the entire Marinetta family drama a way to entertain me."

"Liar, you were into it. And I have way more gossip at my disposal, so you better prepare yourself for the weeks ahead. I'm simply doling the stories out."

"How nice of you."

"I know, right?" She rested her chin on her hand, her elbow leaning on the back of the couch. "Since you're stingy with the gossip yourself, tell me about your day after you left this morning."

"That's even less interesting." Ryan shrugged. "I drove... around, took in some sights. Then I went back to George's, read a book, went for a run, went back, showered, and here I am."

Clearly, he should've prepared better. He wouldn't have stumbled if he had done so, especially since it was an obvious question his parents would ask.

"'Some sights' as in that hill up north?" she asked, trying to sound innocent but missing the mark completely.

Which meant she probably knew the answer already.

Still, he wasn't going to make it easy for her. There was still a chance that she didn't know about Neil, at least. Not a big one, but still. A chance.

"Yes. You're all missing out on that place. The valley forest looks..." He shook his head. "It's the most beautiful view around here."

"I know," she said. When he raised his eyebrows, she chuckled. "Believe it or not, I listen to you every once in a while. Your dad and I have made a trip a few times, and it truly is beautiful. We just don't need to see it so often."

"I don't need to, either. Once every few years isn't often."

"You're right, it's not. And even if you went there every other day, that's your right."

He nodded, wanting to change the topic, but if he would do it too quickly, she'd probably get suspicious.

Unless she did know, and then Ryan was screwed either way.

"The only reason I'm asking, actually," she continued, "is that I thought I saw Neil Hopkins driving up there when I went out to drop some paperwork at school."

He was totally screwed.

"Mmhmm," was the only thing he gave her, but she pushed further, undeterred.

"Did you run into him up there?"

"Yes."

She frowned, as if she'd been expecting this answer but didn't quite know what to do with it now.

Welcome to the club, Mom.

"Did you talk?"

Ryan shrugged. "For a bit, yeah. But I'd been there for a while before he got there and the wind was getting colder, so I left him to it pretty quickly."

"Are you okay?"

Her question was soft, not interrogatory at all, which threw him off.

"I'm fine."

And it was true. He wasn't great, since he was a bit out of sorts, but he was fine.

She nodded slowly. "You know, I never asked—"

His snort cut her off, because, seriously. She'd asked plenty, back in the day.

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"I never asked about it after he left," she said, sending him that parental watch it look.  
"Or when you came out to us."

Ryan had to focus hard on not freezing up. Too obvious a reaction and she'd have it confirmed whether he liked it or not.

"Or at any point after that. But I'm wondering if you'd ever gotten a chance to... settle things."

"Today was the first time we've talked in over a decade, Mom. We're not even acquaintances these days, so it was simply a polite conversation of two people who probably won't see each other for another however many years. That's it. There's nothing more to say about it, entertaining or not," he added at the end, trying for humor, but she didn't even crack a smile, instead reaching out and squeezing his hand.

"Well, if there ever is—about any of it, past or present—I'll listen to you, okay? Always."

"Okay." He put his free hand on top of hers. "I love you. Always."

This, at least, was easy to say.

## CHAPTER NINE

The night after seeing Ryan, Neil slept better than he had in weeks. He didn't know why, it wasn't like there was some kind of a breakthrough or anything, they'd had a

normal conversation—

Which, to be fair, could be considered a breakthrough, since they hadn't had one of those in twelve years.

Twelve years. It felt like a lifetime, especially yesterday, when he looked at Ryan and saw both a man he had become and traces of the boy Neil had known and... loved.

Rolling over, Neil hid his face in the pillow. Of course he'd loved Ryan. Of course. Ryan had been his best friend, his secret boyfriend... his first everything. Over the years, Neil had sometimes doubted that love, questioned whether it could've been that, if it had all fallen apart like it had. He'd done it as a way to make it easier for himself, to justify that impossible choice he'd made years ago when he left, but in the end, it was all bullshit. No matter how it had ended, Neil had loved Ryan to a stupid degree.

What was worse, a part of him always would. There was no Neil without Ryan in his past, in some of the things he'd done and choices he'd made.

Seeing him yesterday felt like having a rug pulled out from under him and, at the same time, like being given an unexpected gift. Whatever happened from here on out, their break-up fight wouldn't be the last thing they'd ever said to each other anymore.

And maybe that was the breakthrough that allowed him to sleep so well. Neil didn't have to wonder anymore what it would be like to face Ryan, what he would say or do when it happened. Now he knew. He could question, analyze, and beat himself up over it, but he knew.

Was it any surprise, then, that he also wished he could see Ryan again?

Pushing away that thought, Neil got up and headed to take a shower, where he stared



at the tiles and resolutely did not think about anything specific while dealing with his morning erection. After that, he dressed in his comfiest sweatpants and an old hoodie, and went down to the kitchen, only to see his parents still enjoying breakfast, and Ken raising his head from his place near the oven and thumping his tail at the sight of Neil.

"We waited for you for a bit, but then we were too hungry," his mom said, and he waved her off as he paused to rub Ken's belly.

"Don't worry, I didn't expect you to wait, what with my weird sleep schedule and all." He squeezed her shoulder on his way to the coffee pot. "I thought you'd be finished by now, actually."

His dad shrugged. "Yeah, well, sometimes we have a late start as well. We don't have much on our plates for today, so why hurry."

Neil smiled and toasted him with his coffee mug before sitting down and digging into the bread basket. His parents went back to talking about the holiday fair, which required only minimal input on his part, letting him eat his breakfast in peace.

When he was about done with his food, his phone pinged with a text message notification. Without thinking, he took it out and unlocked it, only to inhale sharply at the sight of a message from Josh.

I heard you left town very mature If you think it changes ath youre wrong youre running out of time but enjoy your fucking holiday while you can

"Neil?" he heard his father as if he was in a tunnel. "Are youokay?"

For several seconds, all he could do was blink. Slowly, he put his phone away and slid his hand under the table so his parents wouldn't see it trembling.

"Neil, what is it?" His mom leaned closer, but he couldn't say anything, his throat too tight.

Then his father curled his hand around Neil's wrist and tightened his grip, snapping him to attention.

"Breathe, Son. Come on, just breathe."

He met his father's gaze and tried to listen, tried to match the rhythm of his breathing to his father's, until he finally got it. Relaxing a fraction, Neil took another shaking inhale.

"I'm good," he said, but it came out more like a croak.

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"You're far from good." His mom ran a hand over his hair. "You're here with us, though, and we'll deal with whatever it is, okay?"

He closed his eyes.

As if it could be that easy.

"Hey." She tugged at his ear gently like she did when he was a kid whenever she wanted to get his attention. "You may be an adult and all, but we're still your parents. We're here to help."

"Here or wherever you need us," his dad said with another, gentler squeeze of his wrist. "Once you tell us what's wrong."

Neil hadn't felt like crying in a long time before coming here, but his parents' support nearly did him in—again.

He cleared his throat and made a decision. For better or worse, it was all it had ever come down to, wasn't it?

"I'm not in any physical danger," he started with, because he could only imagine what kinds of ideas they might have already come up with. "There's this guy, and he's... Well, he's blackmailing me."

His father pursed his lips. "He wants money?"

"No." Neil shook his head. Money would be easier, in a way, but it would also be a

never-ending game until he was left with nothing. "He's a teammate who's about to be a former teammate. It's his own damn fault, but he's not handling it well, at all. He and I, we were never a couple or anything, but we sort of..."

How did one explain hooking up to their parents?

"You were sleeping together," his dad suggested bluntly, and Neil almost choked, prompting his mom to snort humorlessly.

"This is not a modern concept, you know," she told him, but she also gave him another rub on the head, so it was clear she wasn't offended.

"Well, yes. It was out of convenience more than anything else, and we stopped a few months ago. However, now that he's in a mess he himself created, he's angry at the whole world, including me. He wants me to talk to the management and get them to extend his contract." Neil shook his head. "Even if I wanted to do this—which I don't—I don't have that kind of power. I honestly don't. And he has to know that, he knows how things work in the team. These decisions are made above us. I think he's grasping at straws, but it also feels like he wants to drag as many people down with him as possible. He suggested I'm not the only one he'd given this ultimatum to, although I assume he has different things over different people."

"And what..." His mom glanced at his father before looking back at Neil. "What does he have on you?"

Neil frowned. "I told you. We slept together. He's going to tell the world that if he doesn't get his way."

"So he's going to—out you, and himself along the way?" she asked, hesitating there for a second, but Neil was still surprised she even knew the word.

"Yes. I guess he doesn't care about himself any more, since it doesn't matter whether a former player is gay or not. But forme, that's a scandal."

His dad rubbed his chin. "Is it, really?"

Neil sat back at that.

"You know it is."

"It is in a way that any surprising news is considered a scandal these days," his dad said. "And sure, it will ruffle some feathers, but I don't believe it's a career-ending revelation anymore."

Neil snorted. "I'm glad one of us thinks so."

"Two of us, actually," his mom spoke up. "I mean, I'm not saying it would be easy or anything. I'm not. But if being gay is the worst thing someone can throw at you, you're an upstanding man."

That got him right in the chest, and he covered his eyes with his hand, willing the tears back.

"What do you think is best, here?" his dad asked after a minute. "What do you want to do?"

Neil rubbed his eyes and rested his elbows on the table, staring at the flowers in the middle.

"'Want' is not the word I'd use, but I think I should... I think I'm going to come out myself before he can say anything to the public."

There it was. He finally said it out loud.

It had been the only logical solution from the moment Josh had thrown that threat his way, but Neil had been too afraid to say it. Hell, he'd been too afraid to even think about it.

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"That's a good idea," his mom offered quietly, clasping her hand on his shoulder.

When Neil looked up, his dad nodded.

"I think so, too. That way it all happens on your terms."

If it was to happen on his terms, Neil most likely wouldn't come out before the end of his career. He had considered it from time to time, sure, but he'd always talked himself out of it, never feeling ready.

He still wasn't ready now, but he would just have to suck it up.

"We're going to be there for you every step of the way, okay?" His mom squeezed his shoulder. "Whatever you need, we'll help."

Neil swallowed hard. A week ago, he'd had no idea they even knew he was gay, and now, they were rallying behind him and offering full support.

"Thanks," he whispered, then cleared his throat. "Thank you."

"Nothing to thank us for." His dad's voice got a bit gruff. "That's what we're here for, after all."

Neil pressed his fingers over his eyes again to stop himself from crying. He'd known his parents were good people, he'd known they loved him, but he'd never... He'd never been sure how they'd react. He'd hoped, yes. But he'd pictured many different scenarios, and there had been quite a few that had gone vastly different than this.

Once he got himself together again, he glanced between them.

"Still, thank you. It means a lot."

His dad nodded and sat back. "Do you know how you are going to do this?"

Neil shook his head. "I haven't thought that far yet. I mean, I'll have to call Phil and the management—"

"You don't need their permission," his mom cut in, and Neil sighed.

"I do owe them the heads-up, though, so they can prepare. They know about me, which means it's not going to be a shock, at least." He grimaced at the memory of those uncomfortable conversations with his agent and the team management a few years back. "But since they're going to be fielding questions, hatecomments, threats of boycotts, and God knows what else, the least I can do is to let them know."

"We simply don't want you to think you have to do a referendum on it or anything." His dad crossed his arms against his chest. "It's your life and your decision."

"It's not a referendum," Neil assured him. "It's more of a courtesy call."

His dad looked like he wanted to say more, but Neil suddenly felt like he reached his limits. His emotions were all over the place and he would either start crying or shouting any second now.

"I'm sorry, I—" He got up. "I need to be alone right now. Thank you for—all of this, but. Yeah. I'll go."

He quickly walked out of the kitchen, afraid they were going to stop him, then he closed the door to his room and leaned heavily against it, resting his forehead there



with a soft thud and letting himself just breathe for a minute.

Nothing else. Just breathe.

## CHAPTER TEN

"Holidays, vacations, sure, fine, but we miss you," James said, and Eddie nodded next to him on the small screen of Ryan's phone.

"This one is insufferable, really." He nudged James. "You need to come back."

Ryan laughed, even as the warmth spread in his chest at the same time.

"Aww, that's sweet, but no can do. I'm staying here until New Year's."

"Ugh, fine." James sighed. "You could at least tell us you miss us, too, you know?"

"Well, I did miss you... before we started talking." Ryan chuckled at his friends' faces. "Okay, fine, I may be missing you, still."

James leaned back on the couch. "You better."

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"Yeah, remember who handles all your equipment," Eddie added, settling under James's shoulder.

Ryan rolled onto his stomach on the bed and positioned his phone better.

"That's harassment, you know?"

"Nothing more than a friendly advice," Eddie countered, then tilted his head to the side. "Are you doing okay out there? You seem a little off."

Ryan opened his mouth to deny it, but James narrowed his eyes, giving him his don't-bullshit-me look, so Ryan paused and shifted gears.

"I'm fine. It's been weird, a bit, but it's also good. There's a bunch of my family around, folks I haven't seen in a while. And you know how it is, the grandparents may not be around for much longer, so it's extra important to spend time with them."

"That's nice, but there's obviously something else." Eddie paused and pulled back from his boyfriend a bit. "If you want to talk to James alone, I can—"

"No!" Ryan sighed. "No, it's not that, it's... There's nothing wrong, exactly."

James nodded as he pulled Eddie back to lean against him. "So what is it, then?"

"Like I said, weird. Seeing my first boyfriend after twelve years kind of weird."

"Uh-oh," James muttered, and Eddie raised his eyebrows.

"I assume it's not a feel-good story?"

Ryan chuckled humorlessly. He wished.

"Not really, no. We were best friends for years before we got together in high school, although no one knew about that second part. We did almost everything together and had plans to go to the same college, but then he changed his mind and dumped me our senior year, so I lost a boyfriend and a best friend in one swoop."

"That sucks, I'm sorry," Eddie offered softly.

"Yeah, it wasn't pretty. Now we're both here, visiting family at the same time, and I bumped into him in our old spot. Feels surreal, that's all."

"I bet," James said. "Was he alone or—"

"Yeah, he was on his own. And I think he's single, I'd know if he wasn't." The whole country would know, unless Neil had hidden the guy really well, which wasn't an option Ryan wanted to think too much about. "He's still in the closet, either way. That I know for sure."

Eddie scrunched his nose. "At least he didn't do the cliched wife-and-kids thing, right? I know it's no comfort, but..."

"No, that is actually somewhat comforting." Ryan rested his head on his crossed arms. "I'd hate for him to take it to that level, because he's not even bi. Any time I hear a story like that, I find it heartbreakingly sad, and I wouldn't want that for him."

"You're a good guy."

Ryan gave Eddie a crooked smile.

"Nah, I wouldn't wish that for anybody, really."

"Have you talked to him at all? Or simply nodded his way and hightailed out of there?"

There was no judgment in James's tone, which Ryan appreciated.

"I was tempted to run away, but we did have a conversation. It wasn't bad—or particularly good, for that matter. I don't know. It was mostly just weird."

After a few seconds of silence, James asked, "Would you prefer not to see him?"

"No." That, at least, Ryan was certain of. "No, I'm glad it happened. I don't have to wonder anymore what it would be like, you know?"

His friends both nodded.

"But now that it did, I keep replaying it in my head and thinking about him, and that's not—" He shrugged. "Nothing good can come out of it, really."

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"Are you sure?" Eddie asked, then shrugged when James huffed. "I mean, I'm not saying it will, but since it has already happened, maybe it can give you some kind of closure for how things ended back then. Like closing a chapter."

Ryan wasn't sure this particular chapter could ever be closed, but he nodded, because he understood Eddie's sentiment.

"At least we don't hate each other, I guess," he finally said with a shrug. "But enough about me, I want some office gossip. Or client dirt. Give me something."

That wasn't a subtle transition at all, but James and Eddie were gracious enough to go with it and got into the latest news on Noa, the company's COO, who surprised everyone by recently eloping with a guy from New York and temporarily relocating there. The office was apparently buzzing with rumors about a possible new branch of KRK Security in New York, but Ryan was more interested in the sudden marriage part of it all, since Noa had never struck him as a spontaneous guy.

It served as a perfect distraction, too, because that whole story sounded like a plot of a movie.

And who didn't love a Christmas-style happy ending?

\* \* \*

The call with his friends and a full night of good sleep had done wonders for Ryan's mood and energy, so the next morning he ate a quick breakfast and then grabbed a shovel to take care of the driveway. It had been snowing since last night and only

stopped an hour ago, which meant a lot of snow to deal with, but Ryan didn't mind. It was a good workout, and he preferred that over running in this weather anyway.

Once he was done with his brother's driveway, he made his way to his parents' place to do the same, only to be roped into sitting down and having a hot chocolate with the family first.

It turned out to be both good and bad, though, because while the hot chocolate was absolutely delicious—as it always was, thanks to a secret family recipe—it also mellowed him down so much that he was ready to take a nap in his parents' comfortable armchair instead of shoveling snow.

In the end, he did pull himself up and out of the house, and the cold air hitting him as soon as he opened the door was enough to wake him right up. He put on the latest episode of the podcast on ancient history that he loved, and when he got into the groove, shoveling became quite a meditative task.

At least until he noticed a man in his line of vision, barely a few feet away.

Ryan snapped his head up.

It was Neil.

Neil was standing there, on Ryan's parents' driveway, and bounced back and forth on his feet as he watched him.

Another déjà vu for the books.

Ryan thrust the shovel into the ground before pausing the podcast and taking out the earbuds.

"Hey," he offered, half a greeting, half a question.

"Hey."

Neil bounced on his feet again and, honestly, it had been silly to watch an eighteen-year-old do this, but a thirty-year-old man with the build and the height of a professional hockey player looked straight-out ridiculous like this.

What are you doing here? Ryan wondered, but preferred not to ask out loud. What's changed now, that you suddenly decided to acknowledge my existence after all those years?

"I was driving by and saw you, and I thought—" Neil paused, glancing behind Ryan towards the house, then back at him. "I was wondering if we could talk. Not here," he added quickly, "but, we could drive somewhere or..."

From the sound of it, Neil didn't have it planned at all.

"It's too cold for the hill today, so we'd have to go somewhere public," Ryan told him. "And most people around here know I'm gay. Fair warning, I guess."

Neil curled his shoulders in.

"I'm not afraid to be seen with you or anyone else who's openly gay, if that's what you're getting at. However, I am worried about people coming up for an autograph or a photo, which still happens even though everybody in this town certainly has one already." Neil grimaced briefly. "Anyway, if you don't want to talk, that's okay. Sorry for bothering you."

He took a step back and seemed ready to leave right as Ryan's careful facade crumbled.

"Wait," he said, stopping Neil in his tracks. "We could drive somewhere, it's fine. If you can think of a place that's quiet, it would be great, but if there isn't one, I guess we can drive up the hill after all and stay in the car if the weather gets too bad."

Ryan could, in theory, invite Neil to his brother's house, but that was a line he wasn't ready to cross. It was already pretty much impossible to stop thinking about the guy after one meeting. To have Neil come to where Ryan had to spend the rest of his break was a recipe for a disaster.

That conversation might end up a disaster anyway, but Ryan should at least try to salvage some of his sanity, if not all.



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Neil grinned, and for a second it felt like no time had passed and they were back in high school, living in each other's pockets. Then Neil's smile softened, and it tugged at Ryan's traitorous heart enough for him to regret accepting the invitation already.

"Great. I could come back in an hour? Two hours? If I don't come up with a place, I'll at least bring a thermos with me to take up there."

Ryan stared at the shovel.

He could still change his mind. He didn't owe Neil anything. He could refuse and go about the rest of his afternoon.

"Let's say two hours," he heard himself say. "I need to finish this, and then I'm sure they won't let me out of here without having a big lunch, so two hours is the safer bet."

"Okay." Neil took a step back. "See you in two hours, then. And... thank you."

Ryan nodded and turned to his shovel, needing to focus on something other than Neil Hopkins' stupidly handsome face.

Still, he listened to Neil leaving and, a minute later, to a car starting and driving away. When it was safe to look up, he leaned harder on the shovel and quietly swore at the way his stomach was doing somersaults.

He was officially in trouble now.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

On his way home, Neil barely managed to drive below the speed limit, because the nervous energy was making him want to jump out of his skin.

He'd approached Ryan and asked to have a conversation—something he hadn't managed to do since the day of the break-up. Back then, for the remainder of their senior year, he'd been too afraid of everything Ryan could throw in his face and mean every word of—which would have been everything Neil had deserved. But now...

Now, he'd actually come up to him and asked. And he had less than two hours to figure out a plan for what came next.

After half an hour of going in circles and dangerously spiraling towards calling this whole thing off, he gave up and went to ask his mom for advice.

"You're looking for a place to talk with Ryan Dawson?" she asked, taken aback. "And he agreed?"

"Yes, Mom, he agreed. I wouldn't kidnap him for this." Neil ran a hand through his hair. "So, is there a café, or a restaurant, or whatever that we could go to and not have people coming up to me? Maybe something that's deserted at this hour?"

She shook her head. "The word would spread in a hot minute and you'd be signing autographs instead of talking to Ryan for who knows how long. I have a better idea."

"What is it?"

"Bring him here."

Neil crossed his arms. "No, that's—"

"Listen, I'm leaving in an hour and I'll come back with your father after dinner. You have the place to yourself, which means you'll have all the peace and quiet that you want. Just bring him here."

He hadn't considered this as an option before. It was a smart one, in theory, but he still wasn't sure, since bringing Ryan here seemed somehow more significant than taking him up to the hill. Maybe because they'd already met there by accident while this would be anything but because Neil was sentencing himself to new memories of Ryan in this space—memories that would stay with him until the day he left, if not longer.

"What are you so afraid of?" his mom asked, and he didn't know what to tell her. She stared at him some more, and then sighed. "Listen, if he said yes to this, he's at least ready to hear you out, right? That's something. It doesn't magically fix everything, but this is your chance to make things better."

"There's no 'making things better' if said things happened twelve years ago."

He'd never actually said he and Ryan had been together back then, but she'd figured it out, so there was no reason to pretend like she hadn't.

"Apologizing can definitely make things better. And so can explaining yourself, if you need to. There's no guarantee, of course, but it's your best bet."

"How do you know I'm trying to apologize?"

She narrowed her eyes. "You'd better. That boy had stood by you for years before the two of you stopped talking right after your first trip to Chicago. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what happened, so if you haven't apologized yet, you should do it now."

"I don't want to talk about it," he muttered, leaning heavily against the counter. The initial excitement had now dimmed, leaving him tired and afraid again.

If Neil's own mother thought that, Ryan had to feel a hundred times worse.

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What was he even doing, agreeing to Neil's invitation?

His mom straightened in her chair and pinned him to his seat with a look alone, just like she'd done when he was a kid.

"Listen, everyone makes mistakes. Everyone has done something that hurt somebody else. It sucks, but that's how it is. You don't have to run away from it for the rest of your life."

Fuck, that hurt. She went straight for the jugular and it hurt.

But could a simple apology ever be enough if Ryan had deserved so much better from him back then? Neil had walked away from everything they'd been building, after all, and chased his own ambitions. While his younger self might have wanted two things above all—to play professional hockey and to be with Ryan—in the end only one of them wasn't solely a dream, but an ambition as well.

And he'd taken that ambition and ran with it, all the way to the NHL and multiple Stanley Cup victories. He was still running with it, and he wasn't ready to stop.

Not yet.

So was his apology even worth anything?

The screeching of the chair brought him out of his head, and he lifted his head to see his mom coming closer.

"Love you," she murmured before pulling him in for a hug.

That was his mom in a nutshell—she might be fed up with him, but she still made sure to remind him what really mattered in the end.

He dropped a kiss onto the top of her head. "Love you, too."

"I meant what I said." She stepped back and headed towards the door. "Bring him here."

With a sigh, Neil rubbed a hand over his chin, the stubble prickling his skin after he skipped the shave this morning.

It seemed like he had the place handled, so now he needed to get through everything else.

No pressure, or anything.

\* \* \*

Parking in front of the Dawson family house was a truly surreal throwback moment. He'd done the exact same thing so many times back in high school, parking in the exact same spot and looking towards the house until he saw Ryan running out, always in a hurry to get to him.

Neil hesitated briefly now, then honked twice in quick succession, using their signal from back in the day.

Sure enough, the door opened about a minute later and Ryan appeared.

He wasn't in any hurry now, though. He wasn't stalling or anything, he simply wasn't

running towards Neil.

Which was understandable. They were two grown men with a complicated history, and Neil hadn't been expecting it. It simply... jarred with his vision of the present recreating the past, that was all.

As he watched Ryan approach, Neil suddenly felt a visceral longing like he hadn't since those first weeks after the break-up. After being so used to seeing, and touching, and even simply existing with Ryan always by his side back then, it had been a shock to suddenly lose it—a shock he hadn't anticipated.

And he certainly hadn't anticipated feeling that loss again now. How could he? Neil didn't know this man in front of him, hadn't seen his Ryan change and grow into this one, right here.

Which was perhaps the point.

Neil had missed all that happened between then and now, all the important and unimportant things that make up a person, and he could never erase that. He'd lost that chance. All he could do was connect to the parts of Ryan he remembered and, if he was lucky, slowly learn about the new ones.

"Hey again," he greeted Ryan when he got into the car.

"Hey." Ryan shifted in his seat—the exact same, familiar move Neil had seen many, many times. "So, where are we going?"

"To my parents' house. They won't be home until late in the evening, and it's both warm and without an audience, so there should be no distractions."

There was a slight frown on Ryan's face, here and gone, and Neil would've probably

never noticed it if he wasn't watching him so closely. He had seen it, though, and he was about to scratch the whole idea and drive them onto the hill, after all, but then Ryan nodded.



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"Sure, okay."

Driving the small distance between their houses took no time at all, and after turning the engine off, Neil glanced at Ryan, only to see him staring at the house, unmoving.

The silence stretched between them, until Neil couldn't take it anymore.

"Come on, let's go," he said, and without waiting for a reply, he stepped out of the car.

Ryan followed after another second.

So far, so good.

Neil led him to the house and, on instinct, went towards the kitchen, because that had been the first place they'd always gone to. It didn't even occur to him until they were already in there that he probably should've picked the living room.

Ryan didn't comment on it, thankfully, so maybe he, too, felt more at ease in the kitchen.

"Do you want something to drink?" Neil gestured at the table for Ryan to take a seat.  
"There's tea, of course, and coffee, juice, water..."

"Tea would be great," Ryan said as he looked around the room.

Probably cataloging the changes, Neil figured. His parents had renovated the kitchen

a few years back, and only the old table remained, along with a winged chair tucked next to the window nook.

Hearing a familiar noise in the hallway, Neil turned around in surprise. Ken hadn't come out to greet any guests in forever, but now he appeared in the doorway and headed straight for Ryan, wagging his tail.

Ryan, for his part, beamed and got down on his knees.

"Hey, boy, hey," he murmured in a soft voice that absolutely didn't tug at Neil's heart hard enough to knock something loose. "Such a good boy." He laughed when Ken licked his neck and jaw. "Ah, yes, I didn't miss this part. I guess you haven't grown out of that, huh?"

Ken lay down on his back in front of Ryan and nudged him with his head any time Ryan would stop petting him for longer than a second.

"Shameless," Neil muttered once he'd gotten his voice back, only to be faced with both Ryan and Ken as they looked up at him—Ryan with a grin that punched Neil right in the chest and Ken with an open-mouthed "smile" of his own.

Ryan's grin disappeared when he seemed to remember where he was and with whom, but he still didn't move from his place on the floor, now sitting cross-legged with Ken's head on his lap.

"Sorry, I—"

"No, no, not you," Neil assured him quickly. "I meant him." He gestured towards Ken. "He spends most of his days in the backroom, only going out when he needs to or when we nudge him, and then the moment he senses you, this happens."

Ryan grinned again.

"Is that true?" he asked Ken, mock-serious. "Am I getting special treatment from such an esteemed senior citizen as yourself? I'm honored, sir."

Ken lapped at Ryan's hands, making him laugh.

Neil snorted, too.

"I see how it is," he said, then turned towards the counter to hide his face, because the sight of the two of them together was—

A lot. It was a lot.

As he busied himself with the kettle and preparing mugs, he kept an ear out for the sweet nothings Ryan continued to bestow on Ken. In the past, those two had gotten along great, but it had been twelve years. How in the world had Ken even recognized Ryan after so long?

Seems like you weren't the only one who missed the man, the sarcastic voice at the back of his head supplied readily, prompting Neil to grimace.

Touché. It wasn't like a part of him wouldn't love to roll around the floor with Ryan as well.

Neil's brain screeched to a halt.

This wasnotwhat he'd intended, at all. He hadn't invited Ryan here for anything other than a conversation. He wanted advice, and he wanted it from a person he could trust, a person who had experience in coming out and all that it entailed.

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But Neil was starting to realize that he'd been kidding himself, thinking that the two of them could manage a conversation—especially one on something as important as this—and nothing else. They'd exchanged mostly pleasantries up on the hill, and yet Neil could barely stop thinking about it. How could he expect that this talk would be better, not worse?

Once again, he hadn't done enough thinking on the issue.

Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

Still, they were here, the tea was ready, and it was time to get them back on track. A wobbly track, Neil could readily admit now, but still, a track.

When he turned, a mug in each hand, Ryan caught his gaze and slowly untangled himself from Ken.

"I'm sorry," he murmured at the unhappy huff from Ken. "I'm not going far, you see? You can totally come with me, if you want. I promise to pet you some more later on."

As Ryan sat down on the closest chair, Ken huffed one more time, but then pushed himself up on all fours and took those few steps to lean against Ryan's legs. Since he wasn't strong enough to stay in a sitting position for long, he would probably end up lying down at Ryan's feet soon.

And Neil wouldn't blame him.

Fuck. He put the mugs down on the table too hard, but thankfully didn't spill

anything. Get it together.

"Okay," Ryan said, prompting Neil to look up. "Let's get to it. What did you want to talk about?"

Neil curled his hands around his too-hot mug.

This was it. This was what he wanted. Now he just needed to open his damn mouth and speak.

He took a deep breath.

Here goes nothing.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Coming to the Hopkins' house had been harder than Ryan had expected, so after taking in everything that had changed and everything that hadn't, he was enormously grateful for Ken's presence. He definitely needed the support, and in turn, was willing to give Ken all the cuddles.

Ryan also needed to push things along, though. He wanted answers, and he wanted them now.

Unfortunately, Neil only tensed further at his prompting. The silence stretched between them again, and Ryan rubbed his free hand over his thigh, unable to sit still.

"What's it like?" Neil finally blurted out, glancing between Ryan and the mug he was holding. "Being out, I mean."

Ryan's heart skipped a beat, then quickened his rhythm right after.

That was... not what Ryan had expected. He'd had some ideas, earlier, about what it could've been about, but he'd clearly guessed wrong.

As his nostrils flared, he needed to consciously relax his grip on Ken before he could hurt him by accident.

"That's what you wanted to talk about?" Ryan slumped back in his chair. He had so many questions, but he also didn't know if he wanted to hear the answers now. "You wanted me to be your fucking coming out buddy?"

Swallowing hard, Neil looked to the side, and Ryan was tempted to call him a coward, to get in his face and remind him that no matter his fame, this, right here, was still something he had no idea how to do.

But it would be stupid, and childish, and Ryan expected more from himself than to lash out when hurt.

He'd grown up. If he could take any solace in this situation, it was the fact that he wasn't the boy he'd been twelve years ago in many ways, including the one where his emotions and self-worth weren't so dependent on the man in front of him anymore.

"No, I— I'm sorry." Neil shook his head before meeting Ryan's gaze. "I should've started with that, but I freaked out." He paused to take a deep breath. "First of all, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what just happened, but I'm also sorry for the way I behaved twelve years ago."

"What exactly are you sorry for from back then?"

Ryan could hear that his tone was harsher than before, but it was too late to change it now.

Neil snorted humorlessly. "Yeah, that's fair. I'm sorry for hurting you. I'm sorry for handling all of what happened so badly."

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"But you're not sorry for going," Ryan said, because he needed to hear it.

Neil tightened his grip on the mug and looked away again.

"No," he finally said. "I'm not sorry for that."

Ryan closed his eyes for a moment, the rush of anger leaving him as quickly as it had come.

"Okay," he whispered.

A second passed, then another, and when Ryan opened his eyes, Neil was staring right at him with a frown.

"Okay?"

"Yeah." Ryan shrugged. "I always knew you weren't sorry for that part. There was a time when I hoped you'd be, but I still knew better."

"Then why ask now?"

"Because I wanted to see if you're being honest with me. About the rest, I mean."

Neil sat back at that. "You didn't believe I was sorry for hurting you?"

"What I believe doesn't really matter, because I've been wrong about trusting you before." Ryan crossed his arms as he rested them on the table. "I learned that it was



better safe than sorry."

"That's—" Neil ran a hand through his hair and leaned forward again. "I can't even argue that, can I? That's completely fair. For what it's worth, I am sorry. I was never proud of the way I acted back then. That was a shitty thing to do, not only to my boyfriend but also to my best friend."

Something unraveled in Ryan's chest, an old, tight knot loosening at last, and the hitch in his breath told him he better change the subject soon or this would become embarrassing.

"I believe your apology now. We can—" He unwound himself and grasped his mug, letting the heat from it slowly spread through his body. "—move on from that."

Can we, really? he wondered a moment later, and the similar sentiment was there on Neil's face, but neither of them said it out loud.

Only time would tell, after all.

What Ryan was sure about, however, was that he didn't want to hold onto that grudge or that pain forever. He definitely didn't want to feel like he was that eighteen-year-old again, wondering why he'd been so easily discarded by the one person who was supposed to never do that.

"So," he finally said when it didn't seem like Neil would. "Are you thinking about coming out?"

He wished he didn't immediately assume there was a man Neil was doing it for, someone who made him happy and safe enough to be open about who he was. But they weren't living in a perfect world, not by a long shot, so Ryan was stuck with the reality in which he assumed exactly that.

"Yeah, it's... complicated. And sudden." Neil pursed his lips. "I wasn't planning on it, not for a long while yet, but I haveno choice now, so I'm trying to mentally prepare myself for it. I didn't want to blurt that out, though, honestly."

"Someone is forcing you to do this?" Ryan sat up straighter. Ken grumbled at that, then lay down at his feet, but Ryan hardly noticed.

It was one thing to want your partner to come out, but to force them—

"Not in that way! I'm not... There's no one..." Neil hung his head and stared at his mug. "I didn't want to get into this, but I guess I can't escape it. There's a guy I slept with who is threatening to out me if I don't do what he wants."

Ryan inhaled sharply.

"No, wait," Neil hurried, looking up again. "It's not, like, dangerous or anything. It's just his Hail Mary for the shit he's gotten himself into. It doesn't matter. What matters is that I decided to come out myself, so he can't touch me."

"It doesn't matter."

As if.

"It does matter, Neil! This shit isn't legal, someone is threatening you—"

"And what am I going to do, go to the police?" Neil snorted. "They won't do anything other than leak the story themselves, and I'm screwed either way. If I do this, at least I have a say in it."

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"Not enough say," Ryan grumbled, but he leaned against the table and took a sip of his tea.

"I thought you were all for coming out," Neil said, then grimaced immediately. "Sorry. Sorry, that was uncalled for."

Ryan rubbed his forehead, forcing down the flare of irritation.

"I'm all for coming out when it's a personal decision a person makes for themselves."

"I know, I'm sorry. I wasn't... I'm stressed out, and I keep saying stupid shit."

"I can imagine." Ryan paused. Could he, really? He wasn't so sure. "I mean, I know how stressful it is to come out when you want to do it, so this has to be ten times worse."

Neil stared down at his mug again before taking a sip of his tea.

"It's not like I've never thought about it. I have. But I've always pushed it far into the future, after I retire and the fallout can't hurt me much. There's no pushing it off anymore, though. While I may lose my career over this either way, him coming forward first would be way worse, so I guess I'm salvaging what I can. If it's the end, I want to at least be prepared and do it right. And if it's somehow not the end, I need to be prepared even more, because everyone's eyes will be on me."

Ryan grimaced. Progress had been made in many different ways, but professional hockey was still a bastion of silence. There were a few guys who came out young or

after they retired, but as far as he knew, there had never been a player who came out at the height of his career. Ryan purposefully didn't follow hockey news, but he would certainly hear about it, if it happened.

"What do you want to know, then?" he asked, returning to Neil's first question.

Over the years, Ryan had talked to a few people about his experience of coming out, but he'd never expected to do it with Neil. Still, no matter how angry he'd been earlier, he would never say no this. He couldn't.

Well, okay, he wasn't a saint. He might have said no if he'd known Neil was doing this for another guy, but only because it would hurt too much. He'd worked hard over the years to learn how not to disregard his own boundaries for other people, after all.

"I'm not sure, actually," Neil admitted after a long stretch of silence, during which Ryan drank his tea and enjoyed the weight of Ken on his feet, even though he knew he'd pay for not moving them for so long later on. "Whatever you want to tell me, I guess."

Since that didn't narrow it down at all, Ryan decided to switch it up a little.

"Okay. Have you ever come out to anybody close to you? Not a sexual partner, but a friend, a family member, a colleague? I'm not judging," he added quickly. "I'm only trying to figure out where to start."

Neil nodded. "I told my parents a few days ago."

Ryan smiled at that. Neil's parents were good people and they loved their son a lot, so that was a good start.

"However, that's not duplicable," Neil went on, "because it turns out they'd figured it

out already, and I didn't have to explain much."

Ryan would have happily heard the details of the story—had they known back in high school? Had they suspected what his own parents suspected about the two of them?—but he pushed it away. This wasn't about him and his curiosity, after all.

"It's still important that they reacted well," he pointed out.

"Yeah, of course. Of course it matters. I can't imagine what I would've done if they reacted badly." Neil looked down at his mug again. "It was... It was good."

"My parents and my brother were the first ones I told in person. It was right before I left for the boot camp, and it really helped to have them be supportive. They were worried, of course, but it was more about me potentially being harassed because of it than anything else."

Neil tilted his head. "Wait, in person? Have you told someone not in person first?"

"Yeah." Ryan ran his teeth over his lower lip. "During the last months of high school, I got involved in an on-line community, and we talked about a bunch of stuff. It turned out quite a few people there were either gay, or bi, or trans, so it was easier to admit that I was gay as well. Their support meant a lot."

And they helped him deal with the heartbreak and the loneliness even more than with the issue of wanting to come out but not knowing how, especially without accidentally outing Neil as well.

Neil opened his mouth, then paused and took another sip of his tea.

Maybe he, too, wanted to ask questions they had no right to ask each other anymore.

Or maybe Ryan was projecting.

"After that, I kept it pretty quiet, since I was on active duty," he went on. "With time, some of my friends found out, too, but mostly by accident or due to their observation skills, not any real plan to share on my part. Then I told my grandparents on Christmas break four years ago, and it went well. I wouldn't say they'd known, but they weren't shocked or anything. After that, I allowed my parents and grandparents to tell other family members, and the news spread quickly. I didn't mind people knowing anymore, I simply didn't want to be the one having to tell everybody and answer questions they might have. From what I heard, there was only a little grumbling and the culprit, my uncle, was quickly shut down by my grandpa."

"It sounds smooth enough," Neil offered quietly.

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"Yeah, I definitely didn't have it bad or anything. Still, it weighs on you. It's stressful. You may think you know how people would react, but until you're going through this, you don't actually know for certain. And it's... I don't know, sometimes I got angry that I had to do it in the first place, just so they were prepared in case I ever brought a guy home or whatever."

Neil frowned briefly, but Ryan only shrugged.

"In the end, I didn't realize how stressful it all really was until I started working at my current job and found out that most of my coworkers were queer, too," he went on and chuckled at Neil's incredulous expression. "I know, right? I didn't expect it, either, but it's true. And it's not, like, a prerequisite to getting the job or anything, but I do believe it's self-selecting on some level. If someone has a problem with it, they don't last long, and those who might need it, hear about the company through the grapevine. At this point, I think the whole industry knows."

"And the clients?"

"I don't know. Either way, they can't argue with our track record. KRK Security is relatively small, and yet we're one of the most sought-after private security companies in DC. I'm sure there are people who would never work with us in a million years, but that's fine, because we wouldn't want to, either. Any prospective client can take us or leave us, and we'll be fine. While there's certain freedom in that, of course, for me the most freedom comes from the company culture. With a bunch of my male friends having boyfriends or partners, nobody cares that I want one as well. Even better, they'll cheer me on." He smiled down at the mug. "I didn't realize how important it would be to have my own little gay tribe, but I love it."

Ryan looked up, only to lose his smile when he took Neil in—he was staring at the table with hunched shoulders and a frown.

Damn it.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hearing Ryan describe his work environment was like hearing something out of a fairytale. Neil had absolutely zero chance for something even remotely similar and the gnawing in his stomach only grew bigger.

"Hey, don't overthink it," Ryan said, prompting Neil to meet his gaze. "I get that you're not going to have that, and that's not your goal. I was trying to share my story, but maybe I focused too much on the good parts. If you want to hear more about the struggles of a closeted gay soldier, I can talk about that, too."

He was almost flippant about it, but there was an undercurrent of sincerity in his words. Yeah, he might have it good now, but he hadn't always. And Neil pretending as if he was the only one who struggled was honestly stupid.

"No, don't worry about it," he told Ryan. "I'm happy for you, I really am. It seems like you found your tribe twice, one on-line and one off. That's cool."

That earned him a big grin.

"I haven't thought about the similarities, but you're right. I've been lucky like that. I'm serious about knowing a thing or two about the darker side of things, too, though. Since most of my friends are former military, we all have shitty stories from our past, so I'm not trying to sugar-coat it for you. Some people are going to be the absolute worst and throw some horrid shit your way, stuff you have never heard before, even after losing a big game. But that's the assholes out there, and you have little control



over that. I'd focus on what's closer—your team, both the players and the management. How do you think they're going to react? Do any of them know?"

"Well, it's in the Vault," Neil said with a grimace, then caught Ryan's frown and quickly explained. "The Vault is where any scandal that a player may cause goes. After signing anyone up, the team's PR people sit him down and ask whether or not he has any shit that needs to be handled or monitored, because they want to be ready—it can be anything from drug or gambling problems, ex-wives or girlfriends, to, well, ex-boyfriends, I guess." He drank the rest of the tea. "It's like 'tell us now, and it's fine, but don't let us find out later' kind of a situation. Then, every once in a while, they ask if there's anything they need to be made aware of, but mostly they expect us to fess up by ourselves."

Ryan stared at him for so long that Neil had to stop himself from squirming in place.

"What?" he finally asked.

"I don't know if that's the safest strategy or the most dangerous one."

Neil snorted. "It can be both, I guess."

"And you— And people really tell them stuff? Without worrying that they'd cut you from the team or bench you or whatever?"

"Well, it is by no means a perfect system. But from what I've seen, it truly is much better when the team already knows than when something blows up and they had no idea."

"So that's why you told them?"

"That, and the fact that I had no intention of coming out which, frankly put, worked

in my favor. If they wanted to keep all the gay or bi guys out of the league, they would have to cut too many players out from their prospects and they know it. Since I planned to stay in the closet until I retire, I was a relatively safe bet, because they knew I'd be careful about my private life for my own good as well."

Neil glanced towards the windows and saw it was snowing again and getting dark already.

"Mostly, though," he went on, "it was that 'better safe than sorry' strategy. I knew there was no way somebody from the team wouldn't find out about me sooner or later. Even if I wanted to remain completely celibate—which I didn't—there was a possibility of me sharing too much while drunk or sleep-deprived. In the end, the management keeps a close eye on us. They know things about us that the other players don't." He shrugged. "All I had to do was prove myself on the ice, day after day, so they'd want to keep me around, closet or not."

Ryan looked only slightly less perplexed than before, but finally he downed the rest of his tea and met Neil's gaze.

"Okay, so if I understand correctly, your parents know and are fine with it, your team knows and is civil about it—at least the higher-ups, the ones making decisions. So, what are you most afraid of?"

"Not being able to play anymore."

The answer had been right there all along, at the tip of his tongue, and he did nothing to stop it. What would be the point, after all?

"Figured," Ryan said with a nod. "So, your main problem is how to keep the bosses happy enough so they let you keep playing."

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"Yeah. But once I come out, it's not only me and my behavior or performance. It's also the media frenzy and fans' outrage, because if it's too bad, benching me would be the easiest solution."

"Or they could capitalize on you," Ryan countered. "Listen, I hate how it sounds, but if they can maneuver you into this position, you can exploit it as well. How long do you have left on your current contract?"

"Three years."

It was the only aspect of this whole thing that allowed him to have any sanity left. He was at least going to stay employed for three more years. Hopefully. The team could take him off the ice, or move him somewhere out of sight, out of mind, but it would be an expensive hassle for them, so they might not want to do that, as long as he kept performing well.

"That's good." Ryan tangled his fingers in front of him at the table, and Neil focused on them for whatever reason. "If you want, you can offer them full cooperation in regard to the media fallout as long as they back you up. They can be the ones driving the story and milking it for what it's worth. There are fans who are going to be delighted, and the news outlets that would want a scoop. Hell, I'm sure there are even sponsorship deals to be had out of it. Like it or not, the first NHL player coming out at the height of his career will go down in history—and your team can either be on the right side of it or the wrong one."

"They'd prefer their history to be a record-breaking Stanley Cup win streak." Neil grimaced. "Professional hockey isn't exactly a civil rights movement."

"Haven't noticed," Ryan told him dryly. "And sure, maybe your bosses would prefer for the world to look different and for them to have an easier job. Tough luck. You haven't chosen this, but you're here and this is going to happen, so there's no longer a path for them to sit back and do nothing."

They could probably find one, but it would only prolong the inevitable, as far as Neil was concerned. And Ryan was giving him a clear strategy here—one that Neil had thought of on his own, too, but it had been murky and self-recriminatory. He'd thought the only way out was to be apologetic about this, hat in hand and all that jazz. But if he presented it as a partnership, then...

Well, they could still laugh him off, sure. But maybe they wouldn't.

And if there was one thing he understood about the management, it was that they really liked it when someone offered them a solution to a problem. So if he came to them with a plan, with an idea of doing this with them, not to them, it might actually work.

They could all—including him—prefer to be anywhere than in this situation, and there could be some kicking and screaming along the way, but it might work.

"You're right," he finally said, realizing he'd been silent for a long time. "It's a good strategy to try, at least."

Ryan nodded with a crooked smile. "Pretty good, if I do say so myself."

"Are you sure you're in private security and not in the fixing business?"

"I'm sure." Ryan's smile twisted into a smirk. "But you hear a lot of things when you're protecting someone high enough in the chain of command. I've been to many meetings where people forgot I was there, because they're so used to the security in

the background that I could as well be invisible."

"I imagine you can't indulge my curiosity now?"

"No, the NDAs are longer than my arm. Still, I can use the framework of what I learn, like in this case."

"I appreciate it."

"That's what I'm here for," Ryan said softly, and right when Neil's heartbeat sped up and his gaze wandered dangerously towards Ryan's mouth, Ryan sat up and lost his smile. "Speaking of, I should probably go."

He gestured towards the door, and Neil wanted to protest, to keep Ryan here for longer, but he knew better. He was already feeling things he had no business feeling again and it was just going to get worse if he didn't put a stop to this—whatever it was.

He'd apologized, he'd asked Ryan for help, and Ryan had offered sound advice, even though they'd started on a bad foot earlier.

Neil probably shouldn't push his luck any further.

"Oh, okay." He sat up, looking around as if anything in the kitchen would help him. "I can drive you back—"

"No way, it's not even a ten-minute walk. And it will do me some good, since I'll probably be fed again as soon as I step into my parents' house." Ryan paused and glanced down at Ken, who sat up, probably sensing something was going on. "But hey, let's exchange numbers. I'm in town until New Year's, so if you need to talk or something, let me know."

"Really?" Neil tried not to sound too hopeful, but he probably ruined it by pulling his phone way too fast to be casual.

Ryan, for his part, only smiled when he took it.

"Sure, yeah. Besides, I wouldn't mind finding out how it goes. With the—the coming out and all."

As Ryan tripped over the words, he lowered his head, focusing on the phone, but Neil could still see how red his ears got in a span of a few seconds.

Now it was his turn to smile.

At least he wasn't the only one embarrassing himself here.

Good.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"I wouldn't mind finding out how it goes. With the—the coming out and all."

It probably took the entire walk back to his parents' house before Ryan stopped blushing, but the words were still looping in his head.

"I wouldn't mind finding out how it goes."

And it had been going so well until then. After a rocky start, they'd found their groove and made their way through a hard conversation, and, sure, at the end there they'd been dangerously close to flirting, but for him to—

Damn it.

As the family house came into view, Ryan straightened and forced himself to focus on the facts. This had been a conversation between old friends about something that would have serious ramifications in Neil's life. That was it. Ryan didn't need to toss anything else in there.

Still, he was honestly curious how it was all going to play out. Neil was never going to be simply another person from Ryan's past, or worse, another celebrity. Ryan was going to wonder and worry either way, so it would be best to stay informed, if only to know what to worry about, precisely.

Because Neil was going to come out.

It hit Ryan once again, right as he was clearing the steps to his parents' porch, and he had to grab the railing to steady himself. He leaned against it and stared at the front lawn, unseeing.

Neil was really going to do it. He would no longer have to hide or pretend.

Forget about making history, Neil Hopkins was the first boy Ryan had ever kissed, the first one he'd fallen for and planned the future with. His ultimate One That Got Away.

And while Ryan had every right to be hurt, and angry, and sad—and God knew he'd used that right many times in the past—he would never not want this for Neil, who deserved to be true to who he was, no matter what. Ryan didn't like that it was a forced coming out, of course, but this was a chance for Neil to get this off his chest and prove to the world what had always been true—that he could be an amazing player regardless of who he slept with or loved.

Once the news broke, Neil would get support from many different sources, ranging from his parents to some of the fans out there, and more than likely, Ryan's reassurances would drown in all the rest. But that was okay.

It was way better than the alternative.

Startling at the sound of knocking on the glass, he turned to see his mom on the other side of the window, gesturing for him to get inside.

He nodded and headed to the door, only pausing when he heard the text message come in.

So, a question. Can we talk about something other than my coming out, too?



The wide grin split Ryan's face in half, the giddiness bubbling in his chest.

Sure, he typed with an unsteady hand and hit send before he could start overthinking it.

It was already too late to be careful, anyway.

\* \* \*

His phone stayed silent the rest of the evening, which was probably for the best, because his mom was throwing him enough pointed looks that he was sure she would've dragged him out to the kitchen in order to interrogate him if she saw him texting with a silly grin on his face.

For now, he was safe because of the full house of guests, so he busied himself with entertaining them. Or educating, like with his teenage cousin, who needed some facts about the history of Afghanistan and the US presence there, because apparently the teacher was feeding the class some bullshit straight out of the military recruitment propaganda. But Ryan also played chess with his grandpa, helped his aunt and uncle do some last minute on-line shopping, and made back and forth trips to the kitchen, never staying for long. Since his aunt and grandma were there alongside his mother, he wasn't needed for the prep, which, in this case, definitely worked in his favor.

He knew there was a parental pep talk looming ahead, but he wanted to push it as far away as possible. It didn't even matter if his parents would be pro or against Neil. Ryan would rather not hear either side.

After all, he'd grown smarter over the years and learned to keep his expectations in check, so there was no one better than him at trashing his Neil-related fantasies. On the other hand, he also didn't need any encouragement to start believing in some fairytale scenario where everything was easy and nothing hurt.

And while Ryan did want to see how things would play out moving forward—both with Neil's coming out and with the two of them—he'd prefer not to talk to his family about it. Ever.

Later in the evening, when he was back at his brother's place, showered and getting ready for an early night in bed, his phone pinged with a text notification.

He rushed from the bathroom and grabbed his phone, only to find a text from James.

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Hey, how is it going? Any new sightings of you-know-who?

Ryan tossed the phone back onto the bed and returned to the bathroom to put some clothes on as he thought of a reply. After last night's conversation, the cat was out of the bag, and yet it was still weird, talking about Neil. He'd rarely done that in the past and always made sure not to give out any details, not even a name. It had always been the ex. But now that they'd met again and were most likely going to stay in some kind of contact for the next few weeks at least, Ryan suddenly didn't know what to do.

Not to mention that he'd been pretty maudlin last night, so the sudden one-eighty could be hard to explain.

Or not. There had been quite a one-eighty in James and Eddie's relationship, after all. Sure, they'd been inching towards it for what felt like forever, but the final push was sharp and definitive.

Once Ryan finished in the bathroom, he went back to bed and sat cross-legged against the headboard, putting his pillow behind his back with a sigh of relief. He'd had quite a day, and he was glad he wasn't going to his parents' place until later in the afternoon tomorrow. He could lounge in bed and not care about getting up early.

Staring at the phone, he finally picked it up to reply.

Hey, it's all fine. And yes, there was a sighting, actually. He came over and asked to talk. It was good, so we might talk some more while we're both here. We'll see.

It wasn't the best, but Ryan made sure to keep the expectations low for himself and his friends. He didn't want pity later on if it all blew up in his face.

Did he apologize? came a fast reply.

Yes, Mom.

Good. Eddie says good luck, but I say be careful.

Ryan chuckled. Yeah, okay, thanks, Mom(s). I'm careful and I'm planning to stay that way.

That's the best strategy on and off the clock, I'd say.

As they exchanged a few more messages, Ryan scrolled through the endless offerings on TV, wondering what to watch. Finally, he settled on a new miniseries with Nicole Kidman and repositioned himself until he was lying on his side with the pillow tucked under his head.

He was on the second episode when he got another text alert. This time, it was from Neil.

Is it just me or deciding on what to watch takes longer than actually watching anything?

With a snort, Ryan paused the show.

It's not just you, I have the same problem. Half the time I end up not watching anything, because I get tired of scrolling. The other half is mostly rewatching stuff, and only a small percentage is me actually watching something new.

Neil's reply came right away.

YES, exactly! I tried to restrict myself to one service at the time, but then I suddenly want to watch something on a different one. It's ridiculous, really.

Ryan turned onto his back, the show he'd been watching slipping out of his mind as he continued to text back and forth with Neil. He'd thought earlier that their conversation at the Hopkins' house had gone smoothly, once it got going and they'd found their rhythm, but this, here, was even easier to slip into. It was as if no time had passed and they were back in high school, staying up late and messaging each other even after they'd spent hours together that day.

Not looking at each other definitely helped this time around, too, even if they weren't talking about anything important, instead falling back into the familiar topics. It was nice to learn that their tastes in TV hadn't diverged too much, for example. Neil was still into horror, but appreciated crimedramas the most, the same as Ryan, so they'd spent some time discussing those. Then they switched to movie scores and music in general, which resulted in Ryan downloading a few albums Neil recommended.

All in all, it was... really nice. There was nothing life-altering, nothing dangerous, simply two people rediscovering how easy they got along.

I should go to sleep, because my family owns my time tomorrow. The house will be packed. I'll text you to keep my sanity, but how about we go for a drive the day after?

As he stared at Neil's text, Ryan considered his options.

It was tempting. Perhaps not smart, but really, really tempting.

Sure. I'll need a break from all the family, too, he finally sent.

Perfect, Neil wrote back. Good night!

And just like that, Ryan ended the evening with a smile on his face.

He slept better than he had in days.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"—and then they told me they appreciated me contacting them and that they'd talk it over and get back to me." Neil stared ahead at the forest below them as he spoke, since it was all easier to say without looking at Ryan. "Less than two hours later they called again, and suddenly I'm on the conference call with my agent, the head of PR, the general manager, and the team's president."

"Damn."

"Yeah. With no warning, too, but I'm the one who dropped this bomb on them, so I can't really complain. They certainly weren't expecting it. There were several questions whether I'm sure I want to do this and suggestions they can take care of the blackmail situation, but... I don't know." Neil went to run a hand through his hair, but forgot he had a hat on, so he ended up rubbing his forehead. "They didn't hate the idea."

"That's good, right?" Ryan asked.

"It's great."

"You don't sound like you really believe that."

"It's... complicated."

This time it was Ryan who turned towards the forest, and Neil found himself saying what he was trying really hard not to even think about since that video call ended.

"I'm scared. I'm scared shitless, because what if they're only saying that, what if they're bluffing? They can't be liking this. If they were, they'd have encouraged us—me," he corrected quickly, because anything else wasn't his story to tell, "to come out earlier, and they never had. What if they're only saying that, and then I'm suddenly not fit to play after all, my healed injury needs more time and attention, and the reps ask me if I haven't thought about retirement?"

Ryan met his gaze head-on, his eyes clear like the sky at his back.

Fuck, he was beautiful.

"And what if it's the opposite?" he asked, voice steady and not at all like Neil's nervous babble. "What if they're not elated but still honest about supporting you through this?"

Swallowing hard, Neil dug his fingers into the unforgiving metal of the edge of the truck's bed, too cold for comfort even through his gloves.

What if?

"Then I'm left with figuring out how to come out to the public, which means opening myself to millions of people with their opinions, and their bigotry, and—" He paused. "They're going to boo me at the arenas. They're going to harass me and probably my other teammates, and instead of it being about the winning or losing, it's going to be about how a fag should never be allowed to play the game."

He almost spat the words at the end, and Ryan crossed his arms against his chest.

"Hey, now," he said, half-consoling, half-warning, as if he couldn't decide which way to go.



Neil didn't blame him. He didn't know, either.

"Listen," Ryan went on, "I may not be a hockey fan, but I know this much—they don't matter as much as you think they do. Sure, they're nice to have. You play, you give them a show, and they answer with applause and appreciation. But they don't control your life unless you let them." He paused briefly. "You've given your all to the game, time and time again, and from what I heard, you've been pretty good at this hockey thing for many years now. Some people may make it less fun for you to play it for a while, but you've survived worse."

Had he, though? Had he survive worse? Apart from staying in the closet and all that had cost him, Neil's life had been pretty good—certainly far from a disaster this whole thing could turn it into now.

"Besides," Ryan continued when Neil stayed silent, "if you want to focus on the fans, why not think about those who are queer themselves? Wouldn't they be happy about this?"

"There's not a lot of crossover between the two groups," Neil told him, but Ryan wasn't having it.

"Yeah? And how much of a crossover would be enough? How would you have felt, as a kid, knowing there were players like you out there at the top?"

It wasn't an argument Neil had never thought of before, and yet, for some reason—maybe because of his hometown, this place specifically, or the guy next to him—it hit him differently today.

It hit right where it was aimed at.

Closing his eyes, Neil took a few deep breaths before he opened them again and

crossed his arms against his chest, tucking his hands under his arms as he stared ahead.

"I'm scared," he said once again, in a whisper this time. He sounded exhausted, and he felt like it, too.

"Of course you're scared." Ryan's voice was softer now. "You'd be stupid not to be scared. But fear has never stopped you before—not when you were trying for the team your freshman year, not before your first game, not... You get the idea."

Neil snorted humorlessly as he met Ryan's gaze.

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"We both know it stopped me at least once," he said, forcing himself not to look away.

He was rewarded with seeing Ryan's eyes widen, but then they dimmed.

"Yeah, well."

And it was the first time ever that he'd seen Ryan dismissing what they had, pushing it aside. Back then, he would never do that and would never let Neil do it, either.

Not that Neil had tried to, at least until the very end. They'd both always made sure they could fit them around everything else, the school, hockey, other friends.

It felt wrong to hear Ryan like this now, an echo of that defeated tone Neil had heard only once before, when Ryan had realized what Neil picking Chicago had meant.

"You know I loved you, right?" Neil asked now, the words falling out of his mouth in a desperate rush, because he needed Ryan to know, needed him to understand that it had never been lack of love that had led him to make that decision back then.

Ryan quickly turned his face away.

"I know," he whispered. "I had my doubts at various points over the years, but—I know. I do."

"Good." Neil's voice was gritty, raspy, and he felt hopeless in the face of it all, once again. How could he explain that while he hadn't regretted leaving, it was still a

heartbreaking choice to make? "It's the truth."

Ryan nodded but didn't say anything, and it didn't feel like enough.

Neil got up and rounded on him then, brazenly taking Ryan's face in his hands and slotting between his legs like he'd used to. He held his breath as he did so, half-expecting to be pushed away. Ryan only looked at him, though, his eyes bright and clear—not crying, and yet broken open in a way Neil hadn't realized that he'd missed, but he had.

He had.

Never, not once in the twelve years they'd been apart, had Neil experienced a connection like this with anyone else, never felt the trust ingrained in it to its very core. To be allowed to see someone like that was both scary and beautiful beyond measure.

Ryan had always been beautiful to him, but never more so than in moments like this, even if Neil had never voiced that.

Hell, he'd barely acknowledged it before.

And yet, he felt like a man starving, now. The forgotten hunger reared its head and almost knocked him off his feet.

"Can I—" Neil whispered, glancing from Ryan's eyes to his mouth and back. "Do you want this? I do."

"Yeah," Ryan breathed out almost soundlessly in the small space between them, but it was all Neil needed to lean forward and brush his lips against Ryan's.

It could never have been simply a kiss, even with chapped lips and all the winter clothes getting in the way. And yet, Neil hadn't been prepared for any of this—the want that rushed through him at the first touch of skin to skin, the sound that escaped Ryan's lips, or the weight of Ryan's hands on his sides making Neil weak like a kid who'd never done this before.

He'd forgotten how it could be between them. He'd figured part of it must have been the teenage hormones, the way they'd wanted it so badly and anything could get them going. But at thirty years old, the chemistry was still off the charts and the desire headier than ever.

"Jesus," he muttered against Ryan's lips when they paused to take a breath.

Tightening his grip on Neil's sides, Ryan tried to pull him even closer, but there were way too many layers between them. As Neil nosed at Ryan's neck and inhaled the warm scent of cardamom and something earthy underneath, he wanted to taste the skin there, run his mouth along the edge of the scarf, but he was also content to simply stay like this and breathe.

At least until Ryan didn't press a kiss right under Neil's ear, adding a hint of teeth that felt more like a promise, a tease, than a bite.

It was like a match that caught fire.

Neil tilted his head and pressed their lips together again, licking inside a moment later and letting it overwhelm him.

He didn't need air. He didn't need anything but this, right here.

Ryan was the one who finally pulled back and chuckled warmly when Neil tried to follow.

"Let's get into the car. Backseat, come on," he whispered, breathing fast and blushing. His lips were red and full, and Neil was already picturing taking them between his teeth.

Then the words registered.Backseat.Yes.

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He stepped away only to grab Ryan's arm and pull him with him. They scrambled inside, Ryan first and Neil fast following, and soon he was tugging off his outer clothes and then helping Ryan to get rid of his. When the hats, scarfs, and jackets were discarded, and, even more importantly, so were the gloves, Neil straddled Ryan and pressed close, as close as he could, tangling his arms around Ryan's neck and kissing him again, already missing the taste.

Being well over six foot tall, Neil wasn't used to sitting in anyone's lap, but there was something heady about it, about towering over Ryan while also being kept like this, like he weighted nothing. Like he wasn't more than Ryan could handle—on the contrary, even. Ryan seemed to be giving him a free reign, signaling come on, have at it with enthusiasm and maybe even some of the same hunger Neil was feeling, too.

They kissed as if it was the last time they'd ever be allowed this pleasure. Neil wanted to hear all the sounds coming out of Ryan's mouth forever, he wanted them on a loop anytime he was jacking off. They both whispered things like yes, and god, and fuck, but it was mostly sighs, and groans, and a loud moan he hadn't held back when Ryan gnawed at the shell of his ear, sending shivers down every part of his body.

Neil hit his head on the roof twice before deciding they should move, but he promised himself that when—if—they would get themselves into a bed, he would insist on revisiting this position. For now, they detangled themselves enough to have Neil half-lying, half-sitting sideways on the seats and Ryan hovering above him, pressing his groin against Neil's and rubbing—

"Fuck." Neil clasped his hand hard on Ryan's shoulder. "I'm not gonna last if you keep doing that."

"That's the idea," Ryan told him, lips brushing against his neck, but he pulled back enough to unfasten his jeans, then Neil's.

The moment he ran the back of his fingers along Neil's erection, Neil was arching from his seat, seeking contact.

"Please, just, anything," he panted as he grasped the back of Ryan's neck.

Ryan seemed equally impatient, because he shifted and pressed their naked cocks together before taking them both in hand. He couldn't get a good grip around—another sign that they'd grown since the last time they'd done this—but they were both too desperate to care. They pressed, and pushed, and fell into a rhythm that brought Neil over the edge in no time.

Breathless, he grabbed Ryan's chin to pull him into a kiss right when he came as well, spilling in the small space between them and moaning into Neil's mouth.

Yes. This.

Perfect.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As Ryan fell onto him, completely spent, Neil grunted at the weight, but since he was still coming down from the high, he didn't seem to mind. He might even like it, if the way he slipped a hand into the back of Ryan's jeans and grabbed his ass to keep him close was any indication.

And Ryan let himself enjoy it all for the time being—the pleasure buzzing under his skin, the ease of his relaxed muscles, and the way Neil smelled, like cedarwood and warm skin, tempting Ryan to taste it, to lick into every dip of Neil's body and chase



his scent.

He sighed, pleased with himself and the world, and felt Neil laughing under him before any sound escaped Neil's lips.

"I agree," Neil whispered into his hair and squeezed his ass in a way that really shouldn't be sexy.

And yet.

Scrunching his nose at the mess they were lying in, Ryan finally lifted himself reluctantly on all fours, careful not to fall off the seat, and looked at Neil, who was lying under him without care in the world, smiling softly and openly, as if nothing existed outside of this. Of them.

Which was a nice sentiment, even if completely untrue.

Ryan wasn't willing to snap out of it yet, though, determined to enjoy it while it lasted. He was in it already, after all. He might as well not sour it for himself by worrying and overthinking.

When he leaned in to press a short kiss against Neil's mouth, it turned into a slow and lazy slide of tongues, sloppy because of how wide their smiles were.

Way too soon, the clean-up became a necessity, however, so Ryan pulled away again and considered his options. He didn't want to destroy his hat or scarf, but they needed something to wipe themselves off—

"There should be wet tissues behind you in the door compartment," Neil told him, then added after a pause, "I went with my parents to pick up the Christmas tree a few days ago, and our hands were covered in resin and dirt."

Ah. Made sense. While Ryan had no right to wonder about any of the things—or encounters—his mind had initially pointed him to, it was still a relief to be proven wrong.

He wished it wasn't so, but that was a problem for another day.

Wet tissues definitely helped with the clean-up, even if it took some work to get them out of the packet, which was glued together with the resin. And Neil wasn't helping at all, instead running his hands up and down Ryan's thighs and distracting him.

Then they sat there, cleaned up and tucked back into their jeans, facing each other, and Ryan had no idea what to say.

It was Neil who leaned in, slowly, obviously giving him an out Ryan had no intention of taking. When their lips met again, he sighed into it, and let Neil lead.

There was no urgency in the kiss now, but there was still hunger, still a quest for more.

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And Ryan was happy to give more and take just as much. As they kissed, his head was empty for a change, empty of anything other than this, right here, and the two of them in this exact moment. No past, no future, only here and now.

They kissed, and kissed, and kissed. Parting for breath was a brief pause, spent staring into each other's eyes—which was cheesy but also terrifying, as if they were about to jump from a cliff at any moment—or nuzzling each other's necks before working the skin there with teeth and tongue, not enough to make a visible mark, but enough to shatter any defenses Ryan had left.

When they finally sat back with some space between them, Ryan realized it was getting dark outside, which explained the shadows they'd been slowly engulfed in inside the car.

As he glanced at Neil, he saw him looking back with a smile, so maybe he thought about the same thing Ryan did—about how they used to do it all the time, getting lost in each other and often scrambling to get home to meet their curfew.

"I hope I still remember how to drive this road in the dark," Neil said, basically confirming Ryan's theory.

"You better, otherwise we're in trouble." He smirked. "Or you can let me drive, I'm sure I can manage."

"Uh-oh, now you've done it. There's no way my competitive spirit can let a challenge like that go."

"There was no challenge."

"Oh, please."

They both knew better, of course. Turning something into a challenge had always been the fastest way of getting Neil to do it, and apparently, it still worked.

"Either way," Neil said, growing serious, "I think we should get going before it gets really dark."

Ryan nodded, ignoring how his stomach fell. "Sure, yeah."

"I wish I could invite you to my place, but my parents are there, so it would become really embarrassing really fast."

Neil ran a hand through his hair, mussing it even more, and Ryan made a decision between one breath and the next.

"We could go to my brother's house," he said, trying and failing at nonchalance. "I have the place to myself, so at least we wouldn't give your parents—or mine—any ammunition to embarrass us."

Neil's face brightened. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Ryan dropped his head to hide his grin in response to Neil's enthusiasm, but Neil cupped his face before lifting it up and dropping a kiss on his lips.

"Let's go, then," he whispered, yet instead of moving away, he dove in for another kiss, and another, and it couldn't be comfortable for him at that angle, but if Neil

didn't mind, Ryan wasn't going to, either.

It took another few minutes before they managed to pull themselves apart for long enough to actually move to the front seats and get going. While the drive back was slow, Neil handled it just fine, and he was so proud of himself that Ryan had to laugh, amused.

Some things never changed.

Once they got to George's place, Ryan headed straight to the kitchen to put the kettle on. He'd been too distracted up there to notice, but now he was getting a reminder of how all the winter clothes were fine and good but didn't really change the weather. It was still freaking cold out there.

As he stood facing the counter and rubbing his hands together, Neil came up to him from behind and put his arms around Ryan's middle, fingers tangling low on his stomach.

"I swear, if you even think of putting your cold hands under my clothes, I'll put you down so fast," Ryan told him, even as he leaned back into the embrace. "Not a challenge, only a fair warning."

Neil laughed against his neck, huffing warm air onto his skin.

"I wouldn't dare."

"Smart." Ryan tilted his head so that Neil had more access. "This is good, though."

"Yeah." Neil kissed the tendon between Ryan's shoulder and neck. "This is great."

Closing his eyes, Ryan put his hands over Neil's, and they stood like that until the

kettle was done.

They separated slowly—reluctantly, Ryan would dare to say—but not for long. Once they each had a big mug of tea, they headed towards the living room and nested on the couch with their backs to the opposite armrests and tangling their legs in the middle.

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Neil went as far as tossing a blanket over them both, to Ryan's amusement.

"It wasn't that cold," he teased, although he still tucked the blanket on both his sides.

"Yeah, well." Neil pressed his mug close to his chest. "I spend most of the year in Georgia, so I pretty much forgot what true winters even are—or any normal seasons, really."

"DC definitely has seasons," Ryan said, pretending to ignore Neil's foot working his way under his ass. "But I'm not usually seeking out windy hills."

Neil smiled softly. "Only this one."

"Yeah." Ryan's heartbeat sped up at the mere look from this man. Jesus. He was so screwed. "Only this one."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Neil didn't want this day to end. He wished they could suspend time and he could simply stay with Ryan like this—cuddling in the kitchen, sharing the couch and teasing each other endlessly, eating leftovers from one plate and kissing against the counter because the fridge door was too full with magnets, notes and drawings to risk messing it up.

He wished he could stay and relive the next part as well, over and over, in many and all variations.

They both had known he was going to spend the night here as soon as Ryan had issued the invitation. There was no question, no conversation about it, no need to hash it out.

So when Ryan pulled away from their kiss after they'd put the dishes in the sink and gotten lost in each other again, it came as no surprise that he took Neil by the hand and led him down the hall to his room.

Once there, Ryan turned on the side lamp with a warm, soft light that made him even more beautiful—and Neil had already considered him pretty damn gorgeous. Back in high school, Ryan had been a handsome boy with a heart-melting smile and stormy eyes Neil didn't want to look away from. But now, Ryan was simply beautiful, there was no other way to say it. His eyes were still the same, but his shoulders were broader, his frame stronger, and his smile even more devastating, because it had an edge to it now, as if experience had made its mark on him but hadn't managed to break him.

Neil wanted to kiss every inch of this man, trace every line, and taste every nook. And he might be lucky enough to get the chance.

For now, he put his hands on Ryan's chest and slowly pushed them up, towards his shoulders and neck, before leaning in for a kiss. Because while Neil wanted him naked immediately, he also wanted this—the slow play of tongues that warmed him in the best possible way.

It was Ryan who tugged at Neil's sweater impatiently, slipping his fingers under it but keeping his touch light and teasing, until it quickly wasn't enough anymore.

They pulled back to get rid of their clothes, and maybe—hopefully—one day Neil would get a chance to undress Ryan, slowly and deliberately, kissing every inch of uncovered skin, but for now he could only stare as he hurried to tug his own clothes



off.

Once they were naked, watching each other across the small space, Neil took a step, then another, and pressed himself against Ryan's body, shivering with pleasure.

He hadn't exaggerated anything in his memories. If anything, it seemed even more intense, sharper, breathtaking in a way that a beautiful view could leave one stunned.

He pressed his mouth against the nearest scrap of skin—Ryan's collarbone—and licked it, chasing the taste he wanted to learn all over again.

In response, Ryan pulled him towards the bed, keeping his grip on Neil's hips as he sat down on the edge of it, and suddenly Neil was watching him from above, Ryan's face so close to his erection that he would need so little to—

Fuck.

Neil had to catch himself on Ryan's shoulders, because his knees buckled the moment Ryan leaned in and brushed his lips along the hot skin of Neil's cock. The softest of touches almost sent him to the ground, but he held on, breathing harsh and heavy, still barely believing he got to have this. To experience it with Ryan, who trusted him like that again, because he was a braver person than Neil had any hope of being, now or ever.

After Ryan dropped another kiss on his cock, he moved towards Neil's hip bone and licked the dip of the skin there, as if hearing Neil's earlier fantasies. Then he started kissing along Neil's stomach, and Neil tilted Ryan's head to make him look up.

"You're gorgeous," he whispered, and, God, Ryan could still blush so easily. "Would you lie down for me?"

Ryan did as asked, and Neil followed, kneeling in the middle of the mattress in between his spread legs. Running his hands over Ryan's thighs, he enjoyed the feeling of hard muscles and soft hair under his fingertips. Then he closed his fist around Ryan's cock and tugged, making Ryan arch off the bed and toss his head back, a quiet curse leaving his mouth in a breathless moan.

Beautiful.

Emboldened, Neil leaned down and took the head of Ryan's cock into his mouth, fitting his lips around it as if they'd never stopped doing this. He licked and sucked, quickly falling into a rhythm, his hand and mouth working to drive Ryan out of his mind as fast as possible.

"I'm not eighteen anymore," Ryan breathed out, resting his hand on Neil's head. "Thread carefully, here."

For a second, Neil ignored the warning, still overwhelmed by the need to make Ryan come like this. But then he remembered the backseat of the car and his desire to find himself in Ryan's lap again, in better conditions.

He sat up, but not before leaving one last kiss on the head of Ryan's cock.

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"Fair point," Neil admitted. "We're not kids anymore."

Ryan's eyes flashed with something—a longing, maybe—and Neil could almost taste the bittersweetness of it all.

For better or worse, they were different people now.

"Can we...?" he whispered, unsure how to say it, but Ryan smiled up at him, with that soft and understanding smile Neil hadn't seen in twelve years and thought he never would.

"Yeah," Ryan offered in a whisper, too, and Neil's heart threatened to give out.

"You don't even know what I'm asking."

Ryan lifted one eyebrow. "It's still a yes."

Neil had to kiss him for that. He had to. His chest was aching, overflowing, and he'd never—

He'd thought he lost his chance for such easy trust the moment he'd broken them by turning his back on everything they'd built and everything they'd been.

And here Ryan was, trusting him anyway.

"It's still a yes."

Breathless, Neil pulled away from the kiss, resting his forehead against Ryan's.

"You're a marvel."

"Don't you forget it."

Ryan's tone was flippant, joking, but Neil shook his head.

"Never," he said, a promise that felt bigger than just this, but he couldn't quite tell what he meant.

He sat back instead, and leaned towards the nightstand to get lube and a condom before remembering that this wasn't Ryan's usual bed but a guest room in someone else's house.

"Oh, they're there," Ryan told him with a roll of his eyes. "My brother left them for me to find. He thinks he's funny."

"Well, I can't say I hate the results." Neil took out the supplies before shifting to straddle Ryan instead of kneeling between his legs. "This okay?"

"Better than." Ryan put his hands on Neil's thighs and ran them up slowly until he settled them on Neil's hips. "You'll look amazing on my cock."

Flashing Ryan a grin, Neil got lube on his fingers. "It's going to feel amazing, too."

"I have no doubts about that."

Then there was no more talking, only harsh breaths and quiet moans getting louder as the time went on. Neil stretched himself as fast as he could, but he lowered himself on Ryan's cock slowly, needing to get used to the stretch.

It had been a long time, after all.

"I was right," Ryan finally said, as Neil leaned in for a kiss and gasped at the change of angle. "You do look amazing like this."

"I was right, too." Neil tightened his muscles around Ryan, earning himself another moan. "And then some."

Because "amazing" wasn't really enough to describe it—to encompass how good it felt to be with Ryan like this, fall into a rhythm right away, and get lost in the pleasure that stretched beyond what Neil had thought was possible.

The rush of it was like nothing he'd ever felt—on or off the ice.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ryan woke up slowly, and a part of him wished to slip right under, but the feeling of being too hot nagged him into consciousness. It wasn't the covers, since he kicked them lower at some point, but there was something—

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Someone, Ryan realized. A very specific someone.

Neil was currently plastered all along his back, with his arm resting around Ryan's waist and his head pressed to Ryan's nape. Their legs were tangled together, and as Ryan shifted, he smiled at the simple pleasure of feeling the brush of skin against skin, coarse and soft, and the hard muscles in Neil's thigh keeping him down.

They'd spent twelve years apart, but even before that, whenever they'd slept over at each other's houses, they'd stayed on their sides of the bed. And yet, for whatever reason, it felt both unreal and the most real thing ever to wake up with Neil like this—to be anchored with him to this bed, this place, and this moment that could, possibly, stretch into an untold length of time.

Or end the moment Neil freaks out.

Ryan opened his eyes and stared at the nightstand, focusing on the crooked knob of the drawer as he fought the unease in his stomach. It could all end in a minute, or a week, or whenever one of them would board the flight back home, so he definitely shouldn't waste his time wondering about anything long-term. That had never served him right.

Besides, it would be way too early—twelve years late in some respects, but also too early.

For all that he felt drawn to Neil and to the ease of their connection once they'd let each other back in, Ryan didn't know Neil's life right now. He didn't know who Neil was, who he was friends with, what he did in his spare time. Had fame changed him

in ways Ryan wouldn't find acceptable? And what would happen once Neil came out? Would Ryan even want to get involved in all that?

He had no easy answers, but when he lay there and stared at the knob as the light coming from the window expanded into the room more and more, he remembered the answer he'd given Neil last night.

"Yeah."

"You don't even know what I'm asking."

"It's still a yes."

And it was. An ongoing agreement, one that Ryan could back out of at any point but also didn't have to, if he didn't feel like it.

For now, he was in, whether it was for today or for the next week and a half. He was in, whether they were going to say goodbye to each other for good or keep their options open for something long distance.

As long as Ryan got to have this, right now, he was going to be fine. So he might as well enjoy it.

In the next second, he felt Neil shifting against him, his grip tightening briefly around Ryan's waist as a soft kiss landed on the back of Ryan's neck.

Oh yeah, he was going to enjoy this.

He smiled into the pillow as Neil slid his hand down the hair trail on Ryan's stomach right into his boxers before cupping Ryan's already hardening cock.

"Good morning," Ryan murmured, angling his hips to push towards the light grip.

Neil squeezed him gently and dropped another kiss on his nape.

"Good morning, indeed."

Soon enough, Ryan was alternating between pressing forward into Neil's hand and then back to where Neil was sliding his cock between his ass cheeks as he whispered dirty nothings into Ryan's ear. Their rhythm was slow, almost lazy, and Ryan got swept into it, closing his hands into fists as he clutched his pillow. While he didn't say anything, little shaky moans left his mouth every once in a while, especially when Neil did that thing with his thumb that made Ryan's cock almost hurt from how good it felt.

"Just like that, huh?" Neil was saying. "You like it, don't you?"

"Yeah." Ryan's voice came out shaky, too, and he had to swallow hard. "How about you?" he asked, pressing back.

A part of Ryan wanted Neil to slip right into him, even though it was a bad idea. His ass ached, he wasn't stretched enough, and he didn't want to deal with the cleanup—all valid reasons not to do it.

Still, it would've been—

Fuuck.

Neil tightened his grip on Ryan's cock right before he came against Ryan's ass and lower back, and Ryan hid his face in the pillow as he snapped his hips twice more, then followed Neil over the edge, splashing come all over his hand.



He was still catching his breath when Neil pulled away, murmuring, "Be right back."

Ryan blinked his eyes open right in time to see Neil heading for the bathroom, naked and unselfconscious. Relaxed.

Good.

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Ryan felt it, too, down to his bones. The euphoric hum of his orgasm was still pulsing through his body, and there was nowhere he'd rather be than right here, right now.

Soon, he would happily get up for some pancakes and first cup of tea, but for now, this was good.

Close to perfect, really.

Neil came back with a wet towel in hand, and instead of tossing it to Ryan, he insisted on cleaning him up.

The smile Ryan gave him was probably pretty soppy, but he could always blame it on the orgasm. His brain wasn't truly back yet.

Once Neil disappeared into the bathroom again, Ryan rolled over on the bed, with his arms and legs spread out as he lay on his back.

Damn, he missed mornings like this. Starting the day with a shared orgasm was the best way to spend any given morning, period. Everything else was just gravy after that.

Neil chuckled from the bathroom entrance, but before Ryan could ask, Neil crossed the small distance between them and crawled back onto the bed until he was hovering over Ryan and resting on his elbows on both sides of Ryan's head.

Which was really hot.

Then again, everything about Neil like this was hot, and if Ryan hadn't come barely minutes ago, he would be getting hard, for sure.

As it were, he made do with tugging Neil down and kissing him, slow and deep. There was no doubt in his mind that he had Neil's full attention—it was simply too much, too overwhelming, too heightened. Ryan was clutching at Neil's sides in fear of falling apart under the force of it.

They paused at some point to catch their breaths, and Neil closed his eyes, resting his forehead against Ryan's. And as Ryan watched him—his short lashes, the uneven line of his nose, the outline of his lower lip—his heart thumped in his chest while his mind was clear.

He would be happy to do nothing but stare at this man for the rest of the day.

And maybe he would, if not for Neil's phone, suddenly ringing somewhere in the room.

Neil grimaced, but then he was up and heading towards the armchair where they'd tossed their clothes last night.

"Sorry," he offered over his shoulder. "That's my agent's ringtone."

Ah.

"Sure." Ryan quickly rolled out of bed to head towards the bathroom. "Take your time."

Their break from the world was over, at least for now.

\* \* \*

Ryan was showered, dressed, and almost done with the big batch of pancakes by the time Neil appeared in the kitchen looking tired and tense, but not like he was about to run for his life.

Small mercies.

Figuring Neil might not be ready to talk, Ryan pointed a spatula towards the coffee maker that had more buttons than his car.

"I have no idea how to deal with that, so if you want coffee, you're on your own. Water and juice are in the fridge, and the pancakes are ready. Have at them."

To his surprise, Neil headed for him first, and looped his arms around Ryan's waist from behind before dropping his forehead to rest on the back of Ryan's neck with a sigh that tickled Ryan's skin.

"You okay?" Ryan asked quietly, putting an empty bowl away and covering Neil's hands with one of his as the last pancakes sizzled at the stove.

"Yeah, just... You know."

The words were muffled, but Neil didn't sound defeated, so Ryan patted his hand and let him be, focusing back on the pancakes.

As he stood there, he grabbed a small one from the top of the stack and shoved it in his mouth, only to hum in satisfaction a moment later. He might not be a particularly skilled cook, but he could make a few dishes that were to die for, and pancakes were one of them.

He chewed slowly as the two of them stood there in silence, neither pressed to fill the air with words, happy—at least in Ryan's case—to continue as they were.

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Flipping the pancakes when necessary, he let his brain move between topics, never staying on anything for long—Neil, Ryan's parents, their possible trip to DC, then Neil again, as Ryan wondered if he would be up for making the trip as well.

Finally, all the pancakes were ready, and as he slid them onto the plate, adding to the stack, it was time to move.

Neil, who was apparently paying attention after all, slowly stepped back before heading to the fridge, so Ryan took the plate with all the pancakes to the table where he'd set everything else earlier.

Since he still didn't feel the need to say anything, he started on the pancakes for real after pouring an extravagant amount of maple syrup on his plate.

He wasn't going to his parents until dinner tonight, after all. He could indulge a little.

"I think I'm going to do it over Christmas."

Ryan was grabbing another pancake when Neil spoke up, and he almost dropped his fork as his heartbeat sped up, unsure what that meant.

"It?"

"My agent talked it over with the team's PR again, and they'd prefer not to make it into a big thing coming from them, which I agree with. If I have to talk about something this private, I'd prefer to do it in a casual setting."

Neil paused to put a pancake on his plate, but he didn't start eating it.

"I thought I'd have to do a big press conference, because that's what I'm used to whenever we talk to the press, but apparently everyone said that a small one-on-one interview is more than fine. And it fits with me wanting to... minimize the splash, so to speak." He grimaced. "I know it's not going to work for long, but I much prefer when the reporters lose their shit in their studios than in the room with me."

Since Ryan was all for whatever solution would make Neil more comfortable, he nodded.

"And you would do it over Christmas?" he asked after swallowing another piece of the pancake.

"On Boxing Day, I think." Neil picked up the bottle of maple syrup and poured some of it onto his plate. "A small station from my hometown getting the scoop is a nod towards local journalism, but also a way to break the news slowly and gently, if there's even such a thing these days. It will hit national news on the same day, no doubt about it, but it's not going to be the story for the entire day."

"And maybe the fans will be high up on the Christmas spirit, too."

Neil shrugged. "It's likely they're going to lose their good spirits pretty fast, but maybe not as fast as they otherwise would. Or not all of them, at least."

"And you'll be here for a few more days after that, right? Staying out of the spotlight."

"We'll see. If anybody comes after me here, I'll probably go back to Savannah, because I don't want my family to get dragged into it. But I'm hoping nobody would do that, if I promise some more interviews later on."

"Will you?" Ryan took a sip of water, trying to squash the flash of disappointment at the idea of Neil leaving town sooner. "Do more interviews, I mean."

"That's pretty much a given. Like you said, the first NHL player coming out at the peak of his career will garner a lot of attention, and that includes various media outlets I'll have to play nice with. Still, we have games to play and the Stanley Cup finals to win, so the sooner I'll get it done, the better—both for myself and the team."

Ryan stared at Neil—the man who had spent his entire life in the closet and who was only getting out of it now because he had no choice—sitting here, in this kitchen, telling him "the sooner, the better".

What a turn.

Still, Ryan was by no means a PR expert, so he only cared that Neil would have a final say in whatever decision was ultimately made. If this was what Neil wanted, Ryan would support him.

There was nothing else for him to do here, after all, other than to sit back and watch, even as his heart was making a racket in his chest.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

When Neil had arrived in Pennsylvania earlier in the month, he'd resigned himself to spending the entire break stressed, anxious, and overthinking everything he had to lose. He'd felt more like a cornered animal than a son visiting his parents for the holidays.

And sure, there was still some of that, since he'd spent way too many hours envisioning the end of his career for that fear to go away completely.

But, at the same time, he'd come to terms with that whole situation, too. He was even starting to see the good in it— most notably, the opportunity to start living openly and his parents' acceptance and support that he wouldn't have known about if he'd stayed quiet. Also, while Neil didn't consider becoming a poster boy for gay rights an upside in any way, he could at least acknowledge that for some people, especially young queer kids who dreamed of being where he was, seeing someone like him would be validating.

Years ago, it would've been validating for him.

At some point over the last two weeks, this whole thing had stopped being so black and white and instead started to feel like another challenge he had to overcome. If he got to keep hockey at the end of it, he would be fine.



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Still, for all that his parents, his agent, and the team's management had rallied behind him, Neil knew perfectly well that he wouldn't feel anywhere close to this good if it wasn't for Ryan. He was the surprise that shone brightly enough to push Neil from the bleak, moody state he'd been, where he could only see doom and gloom that was going to become of his life once he inevitably lost everything he cared about.

Somehow, in the span of days, Ryan had become the focal point of his everyday life once again. They spent several nights together, and texted throughout the day, and there didn't seem to be an end to the topics they could talk about without getting bored.

There didn't seem to be an end to all the great sex they'd been having, either.

They'd always had incredible chemistry, which had made everything easier years ago, when they were two teenagers trying to figure things out as they went. Now, they were two grown men who knew what they wanted and how to get it, so adding their chemistry to the mix made for some of the best sex Neil had ever had.

There was the intense sex that made him feel stripped down and seen, but there was also the funny and sloppy sex, or the hot beyond measure, up against the wall because the bed is too far, kind of sex.

And he enjoyed the variety in other ways, too. Neil loved to fuck Ryan and, on occasion, use his muscles for the greater good, but he also loved to be fucked, and he'd gone without it for entirely too long. Letting Ryan take him apart the night before last had resulted in Neil coming harder than he ever remembered doing.

"I sent you here to make sure everything was ready, not to admire the Christmas tree, you know."

Wincing, Neil turned to his mother, who was standing in the entrance with her hands on her hips.

"I'm sorry, I got distracted for a minute." He looked around the room—the coffee table filled with pies and cakes that would count as the breakfast for today, the small mountains of gifts under the Christmas tree, and pretty much every possible chair tucked into various places to make sure there was enough space for everyone and then some. "But I do think we're ready."

"That's good, because the first guests are—" The doorbell rang and echoed through the house. "—here."

Neil glanced down at himself, still in his pajama pants and a threadbare T-shirt.

"I may need a minute, after all."

"Yeah, yeah." She waved him off. "But make it a minute, and don't get distracted this time."

Chuckling, Neil kissed her cheek and headed upstairs to get dressed.

Some things never changed, and his mother's warnings were one of them. He wouldn't be able to tell how many times he'd heard that as a teenager, whenever he'd gotten distracted by texting or talking to Ryan in his room when he was supposed to be right back.

Even now, his fingers itched to grab his phone and text him. They'd spent the night separately, and while they had plans for tonight, Neil found himself missing him.

Fuck, it had been so easy to get used to having Ryan close again. Not smart—since they were both here temporarily, getting addicted to each other's presence was outright stupid—but easy.

A loud rumble of laughter from downstairs reminded Neil why he'd gone up to his room, so he finished changing quickly before tucking his phone in his pocket and pushing everything else aside for the time being.

It was fun to get swept into the unmistakable energy of Christmas morning with his extended family—the shouts, and laughter, and the avalanche of presents.

Neil would readily admit that he'd contributed to that avalanche by a lot this year. It had been a while since he'd visited for Christmas, which meant he might have overdone it, but frankly, he didn't care. He loved seeing everyone's happiness as they unpacked their gifts—the kids and adults alike.

His mom hugged him for the longest time when she followed him into the kitchen where he went to refill the coffee pot.

"You didn't have to," she told him, voice muffled by the fact she had her face pressed against his chest. "You really didn't."

Neil rocked her back and forth, surprisingly choked up all of a sudden.

"I wanted to," he whispered. "You loved that last cruise, so I thought it was a safe bet to try again."

"Yes, but it's so expensive—"

"Mom, your son is rich, it's high time you got used to it and started to enjoy it."

She snorted, then pulled back. "I only ever wanted you to be healthy and happy. Nothing else mattered to me."

It was that earnest tone of hers that almost did him in.

He really needed that second coffee, stat.

"Yeah, well, adding rich to the list isn't bad, though," he joked in an attempt to redirect the sudden shift in the mood.

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"Hey, listen." She put a hand on his cheek and looked him straight in the eye. "Nothing on that list is bad, okay? Nothing."

"Mom," he whispered, voice rough, and he tried to step back, but she didn't let him.

"I love you with all my heart and I always have," she went on. "Nothing about who you are would ever change that, and I'm so sorry I didn't show you that enough—"

"That's not true—"

"Twelve years, Neil." She shook her head. "And who knows how many years before that. You've been keeping a secret that I should've taken off your shoulders a long time ago. I'm sorry I didn't."

He had to blink fast a few times, throat tight. "It was never yours to carry."

"I would have helped carry it either way, if you choose to," she argued. "Or not, if you decided to put it down earlier."

Neil opened his mouth to tell her it wouldn't have mattered, that it wouldn't have made him come out any sooner, or made him stay, or—

But he couldn't be sure, could he?

So he gave her the next best thing.

"Whatever choices I've made along the way, I'm happy with where I am. I know it

didn't seem like that a few weeks ago when I got here, but I like my life."

Especially now. He didn't say that part, but there had to be something on his face, because she nodded as if she heard it.

"You've only ever made one choice I completely disagreed with, and you seem to be making up for the lost time now, so—"

"No, absolutely not." Neil pulled away then, and she let him, taking a step back herself. "We're not talking about this."

"Fine." She grinned at him, the serious spell broken. "We don't have to. I am happy, though."

He nodded, turning away to the coffee maker.

Yeah, Neil thought as he listened to her leave the kitchen. So am I.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

As the door closed after the last of his cousins, Ryan turned back to the living room with a relieved sigh. Only his grandfather was still there, settled with his tea in the armchair, his knees covered in a blanket and the books he received as gifts still in his lap.

"I love them all, but boy, am I glad Christmas is only once a year," he said before taking a sip of his drink. "And that I'm too old to be pestered into cleaning up after them."

Snorting, Ryan took a seat on the couch close to him.

"They largely cleaned up after themselves, so there's that, at least."

While his parents were sorting things out in the kitchen, everything that needed to be taken care of in here had been dealt with.

As his grandfather only hummed, Ryan let himself relax into the seat and picked up his own mug. He'd eaten too much, yet again, which meant he would have to work harder after the break to get back into shape, but for now he could enjoy being stuffed with delicious food and not thinking about work.

The time was running out on that, but it was a worry for another day.

"Rumors have it you've been spending time with the Hopkins boy again."

The mug almost slipped out of Ryan's hand.

Spending time. He could only hope there was no double meaning intended in that, because no matter what would happen after Neil's coming out, Ryan didn't want to give anybody any ideas.

Especially himself. Just in case.

"Rumors have it, huh?" He shook his head. "I swear, this whole town has a gossip phone tree nobody ever added me to."

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His grandfather raised his eyebrows. "Well, we wouldn't be able to talk about you if we did, would we?"

"So you're not denying it exists."

"I'll neither confirm, nor deny."

"But you want me to confirm or deny?"

"Too many people have seen the two of you to deny anything, so don't bother."

Not knowing what to say to that, Ryan took a sip of his tea. It wasn't like he and Neil were doing anything in public that could be suspicious, but he figured with Neil's fame and their history of a sudden falling out nobody ever understood, everything they did could be interesting to some.

"I'm glad you reconnected," his grandfather said after a minute.

Ryan nodded. This, he could admit to. "Me, too."

"When you're young, certain things can feel like the end of the world, but as you get older, you realize that's actually never true. The life goes on, always." His grandfather paused. "And yet, it's good to get a do-over once in a while."

It was tempting to protest, to say that it wasn't a do-over, because they could never get back everything they'd lost. Then again, they weren't the same people anymore, and Ryan wouldn't want to return to being that naïve boy who had sometimes been



too passive for his own good.

What he missed the most wasn't even about that, though. It was the certainty of having his person, his best friend and his love, right there with him through thick and thin.

For years now, he'd been hoping that he would find that feeling again, and yet, he wasn't sure if that was even possible.

If he could get a do-over with that...

Well, it would probably be one Christmas miracle too many, wouldn't it?

\* \* \*

Neil pressed him against the door as soon as the door closed behind him, and Ryan sank into the kiss, slipping his arms under Neil's jacket right away.

It had been barely twenty-four hours since they'd seen each other last, so this level of hunger should be ridiculous. They weren't teenagers anymore, after all.

"I want to ride you," Neil murmured when they parted for breath. "Want to drive you crazy with how slow I can go."

Damn. "Yeah, okay." Ryan started to push the jacket off of him. "Come on, then. Get to it."

Neil tilted his head to look at him, and Ryan could see his smile, soft and yet with a hint of a challenge there.

The deadly combination, as far as Ryan's heart was concerned.

"Impatient already?" Neil teased, even though he did tug his jacket off. "Perfect."

"You're the one who kissed me the moment you walked in."

"Oh, I know I'm impatient. But I thought you wouldn't be so easy."

You have no idea how easy I am for—

Ryan stopped himself right in time, pulling Neil into another kiss as he started to walk him backwards towards his bedroom.

"You want to tease me, huh?" he whispered. "Seems like you may be the one who won't stand going slow."

Neil's hands clenched on Ryan's sides. "Challenge accepted. Let's get naked."

Ryan didn't often laugh during sex, but with Neil, it was the most natural thing, especially during foreplay—the teasing and the back and forth came so naturally to them that there was no thought involved, no plans.

Then came a switch, sometimes subtle and sometimes not, and the mood shifted right into that intense, narrow focus that took Ryan's breath away.

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Tonight, it came when they were both naked, with Ryan on his back on the bed and Neil covering him from head to toe, pressing him down, and staring at him with his eyes so dark they were almost black.

And Ryan melted into the mattress, completely letting himself go—even his thundering heart eased up a little, and he closed his eyes at the sudden rush of emotions escaping him all at once.

Neil, in a move that threatened to shatter Ryan into a million pieces, brushed their noses together before leaning down for another kiss. This time it was slow, and yet deep and thorough, as if they had all the time in the world for this.

As if nothing else mattered.

Then one of them shifted slightly—Ryan wouldn't be able to say who—and their erections brushed against each other, making them both inhale sharply at the friction.

The heat that had been simmering blew up into a raging fire, and Ryan gripped Neil's sides hard, suddenly desperate to get inside him.

"Come on, I was promised a ride."

With his bulk, it shouldn't be possible for Neil to move so smoothly, so fast, and yet, barely a few seconds later, he was straddling Ryan with a bottle of lube already in his hand.

All that agility training sure came in handy for more than just hockey.

Ryan ran his hands up and down Neil's thighs as he watched him stretch himself.

"You're gorgeous like this," the words slipped out without his permission, but they earned him a bright smile from Neil, so Ryan didn't mind.

"I'll look even better when you're all the way inside," Neil told him, withdrawing his fingers and shifting a little to position himself.

There was no air left in Ryan's lungs by the time Neil slid all the way down, tight, and warm, and perfect.

"Ryan," Neil breathed out. "God, that's so good."

It was.

Damn, it was so much better than good.

It took everything he got not to move, not to buck his hips and try to press even deeper. He was digging his fingers into Neil's thighs hard enough to hurt, but he couldn't do anything else.

He was hardly breathing as it was.

Finally, finally, Neil rolled his hips—slowly at first, then again, a little faster—and tossed his head back, giving Ryan the perfect view of his long neck.

"I hate to say it, but you might have been right."

Halfway out of his mind with how good this felt, Ryan couldn't think straight.

"Was I?" he breathed out, voice barely audible. "About what?"

Neil tightened around him, making Ryan swear and curl his toes, then rolled his hips once again.

"I really won't stand going slow."

Ryan closed his eyes. "Thank God."

They didn't so much as settle into a rhythm, but they chased it with a frantic abandon, faster and harder—hard enough that the slapping of their bodies coming together again and again echoed through the room while the words failed them completely.

The orgasm hit Ryan like a punch to the entire body, and he moaned loudly as the pleasure rolled through him, igniting every last piece of him and leaving him shaking.

Neil came a second later, falling forward onto Ryan as if he'd used every bit of energy he had and now there was nothing left.

They were both sweaty and shaking, an absolute mess, and yet, Ryan couldn't imagine anything better.

He didn't even try.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Neil was tapping his fingers over the wheel as he drove to the radio station. Because of scheduling issues, they were going to do a pre-recording for later in the day, so he should have enough time to get back home and forget about the rest of the world for a while. Let the internet explode without him.

He was good. He was fine.

Nervous, too, obviously, but he'd thought he'd be a total wreck at this point, and yet... he wasn't.

His phone rang, and when he saw the GM calling, his heart sped up. Fuck. Now he was rapidly sliding towards a wreck. Would Bednarski shut him down at the last minute? Was the team pulling out their support?

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Neil was glad nobody was there to see his hand shaking a little as he accepted the call.

"Hey, boss," he said, hoping the speaker phone would help his voice appear somewhat normal. "Wait a second, I want to pull over."

"Hey, Neil. Take your time."

He didn't sound too bad. Neil had heard him give come-to-Jesus speeches a few times

and they hadn't started off like that, so maybe it would be fine.

Please, let it be fine.

Neil turned the engine off. "I'm good. What's up?"

"Well, we have some good news," Bednarski said, and Neil's eyebrows shot up. "But first, let me assure you that whatever you decide is ultimately up to you and we'll stand by you, as we said."

"Okay?" Neil swallowed hard. "I mean, thank you, again. I really appreciate that."

"And we appreciate you, so that works out nicely. Thankfully, we are able to actually give you a real choice today. You can still go through with the plan, but you don't have to. Josh has been dealt with."

Neil froze. "What?"

"Two more players came to us, and when we went digging, we found another two who were hesitant to contact us about this but spilled the beans when asked. To be honest, I was surprised Josh had so much stuff on so many people, but, well. That's the locker room for you."

Yeah. Neil would never do something like that, but he could name several people on the team he could create problems for if he wanted.

"Anyway, we decided to go to the source and put an end to it. And we did." The GM's voice grew harder. "You don't have to worry about him anymore."

Neil didn't know what to say. He heard the words, but they weren't making much sense, and his heart was still pounding in his chest.

"Is he—" he started, then stopped, unsure if he really wanted to know.

Bednarski huffed. "I'm not a Godfather, Neil, relax. I simply know his language and I used it against him, that's all."

Which could mean either paying Josh off or holding something even bigger over him.

Neil decided not to press any further.

"Okay," he said instead. He honestly didn't know what else to say—his life had been turned upside down once again, and he was left hanging on the edge, unsure what to think, let alone do.

"For what's it worth, I'm sorry this is so last minute. I was hoping we'd have good news for you on Christmas' Eve, but things were stalled for a bit there. I'm glad I caught you before the recording, at least."

"Yeah, I'm... Thank you."

"Neil, I feel like I should say it again—this doesn't change anything on our end. We're ready. We're ready for the press, and the shitstorm, and whatever else. We'll deal with it. Or not, if you decide otherwise. But I wanted to tell you, not only as a boss, but from me, personally. Your place on the team has always been about how good you are on the ice, and I'm standing by it."

Jesus, Neil was not going to fucking cry on the side of the road.

He wasn't.



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"Okay," he said again, but this time it came out quiet and raw. He cleared his throat. "I appreciate it more than I can express."

Bednarski chuckled. "Yeah, well, you can pay us back by winning another Cup. Just saying."

Neil snorted. "Yes, sir."

"That's what I like to hear. Okay, I'm not keeping you any longer. Go do your thing, but please message me once you decide, so I know where we stand."

"I will."

And that was it. The call ended, leaving Neil to make one of the biggest decisions of his life. Again.

No pressure or anything.

When he'd gotten into this car earlier, the decision had already been made, for better or worse. And now, without the blackmail hanging over his head, he was free to make a different one.

Or not.

Two weeks ago, Neil would've given anything to get that phone call, a solution that magically appeared and took care of everything, leaving him to enjoy his life as always.

But now, he'd grown used to the idea. He'd come out to his parents, he'd reconnected with Ryan...

God, Ryan.

The mere idea of going back home and telling Ryan that he hadn't come out after all made the knots in Neil's stomach tighten even more. His parents, they would stand by him no matter what, but Ryan... Ryan would say all the right things and be supportive of Neil making choices for himself, but then he would disappear from Neil's life and never come back. Neil was sure of it.

He couldn't make this decision based solely on Ryan, though, given that they still hadn't even had a conversation about what would happen after the holidays. With Ryan in DC and Neil in Savannah, it would be nearly impossible to make a real go at something between them.

And yet...

And yet, it felt like a second chance. Twelve years ago, Neil had made an impossible decision, and now he was faced with another one. Circumstances were different, his experience was different, but that one part hadn't changed—it was once again about him and Ryan, and whether or not Neil could live with the choice he'd made.

Closing his eyes, he rested his forehead over his hands on the steering wheel.

In a bizarre way, he was almost angry about the team handing the choice back to him. He'd gotten used to the idea of having the hardest part decided for him, and now here he was, more than half-way down the path of coming out, only to be given an escape route.

He wished it wasn't so tempting. He wished he was as certain of his choice now as

he'd been half an hour ago. He wished—

Well, if wishes were horses, and all that.

Neil had only ever had to deal with the real world.

He sat up and rolled his shoulders. He briefly thought of calling his parents, or Ryan, or even his agent, but he dismissed it all. At the end of the day, just like twelve years ago, it was his decision to make. Nobody else's.

He took a deep breath and started the car.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ryan was in his parents' kitchen, making coffee and tea for everybody, when he got a call from Neil. Ignoring the way his heart skipped a beat—they were usually texting, not calling each other—he picked up right away.

"Hey."

He almost asked if Neil was okay, but it didn't feel right. Neil had probably answered a bunch of questions today already, so the least Ryan could do was to give him space.

"Hey, I'm about to drive back and thought... Are you busy?"

From the sounds of it, Neil had him on a speaker phone in his car, and Ryan pictured him sitting there, alone and still reeling from the interview, no matter how it went. As Ryan glanced around the kitchen, the question must have hung between them for too long, because Neil spoke up again.

"Shit, sorry, of course you're busy, it's Boxing Day, for fuck's sake, and I'm— Sorry. I

guess I'm—"

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"Hey, hey, it's fine," Ryan told him. "It's fine. Tell me what you have in mind."

"They're airing it in, like, an hour and a half, and I was planning to listen to it at home with my parents, but I thought that, maybe, you and I could..." Neil's voice grew hesitant and quiet. "This is stupid."

It wasn't stupid at all, not to Ryan. Neil wanting to share this with him felt important in ways Ryan couldn't quite explain.

"It's anything but," he told Neil, staring at the counter in front of him as his heart fluttered in his chest. "At least not the part that I heard so far, okay? So give me the rest and let me decide."

"I had this idea of the two of us up on the hill, listening to the interview together," Neil admitted slowly after a bit of silence. "Dramatic, huh?" he added with a chuckle, obviously trying to cut it with a joke, but Ryan wasn't having it.

"Yeah, well, you're entitled to some dramatics on a day like this. I'm in."

"You are?"

The disbelief in Neil's voice made Ryan shake his head. This was not the time to get into it, but, honestly, how could this moment not be important to Ryan as well? If only for the teenage version of himself, who would've loved it so much.

"Of course," he said instead.

"Shit, okay, I'll—I'll pick you up at your parents' place?"

Ryan looked down at himself. "At my brother's. I'm not dressed for the occasion right now, so I need to change."

"Okay," Neil whispered, still in disbelief, but maybe everything was hitting him just now.

It was definitely hitting Ryan.

He stared at the counter after they disconnected, full of cups and mugs in different colors and sizes, willing himself to move, yet feeling stuck in place.

"Ryan?"

His mom's voice pulled him out of his stupor, right before he saw her walk up to the dishwasher with another small stack of empty plates.

They'd never seemed to run out of those during the holidays.

"Are you leaving?"

"Yes, I need to go, but I promise I'll be back for dinner, okay?"

"Honey, it's not that I'm trying to tell you what to do," she said with a sigh, in a tone signaling she was about to do exactly that, "but are you sure spending so much time with Neil is actually good for you?"

"I wouldn't do it if I thought it was bad for me, Mom."

Dangerous, yes. But not bad.

"I worry he's going to hurt you again."

Ryan hung his head for a moment. It wasn't like that thought hadn't crossed his mind, but...

"We're not the same people, now, and our situation is different. And even if it weren't, I don't want the fear of something going wrong stop me from living my life."

It was almost funny how Ryan had never actually admitted to either of his parents that him and Neil used to be a couple, and yet they were now talking about it as if they'd gone over that part already.

"Besides," Ryan added, fiddling with a mug decorated with a reindeer nose, "this is a really big day for him. I wouldn't skip out on the Boxing Day if it wasn't important, I promise."

The whole world would know soon enough, but Ryan wasn't going to be spilling the story to anyone, even his mom.

"Okay," she said with a shake of her head. "I hope it turns out well for you."

Me too, he thought. Me too.

\* \* \*

As soon as Ryan got into Neil's car, he could tell Neil was calmer than he sounded over the phone. Not calm, exactly, but still far from the nervous wreck he could've been.

"I feel like I'm about to play the last game in the finals, and I suddenly have no idea how to even get onto the ice," Neil said in greeting, and Ryan took a moment to consider his reply.

"I'm pretty sure most of the hard work is behind you now, so it's the last period of that game, if anything."

Neil snorted as he headed towards the hill. "I wish."

Not wanting to discuss the semantics, Ryan changed gears.

"How was it? The interviewer, I mean, and the others?"

"They did not see that coming, that's for sure. They were ready with the usual 'hometown idol returning for Christmas' kinds of questions, not this. They were professional about it, though. Even thanked me, after, for choosing their platform to share." Neil shook his head. "It was weird but fine, so I'm counting that as a win."

"It sounds like a win, yeah."

They got up onto the hill less than ten minutes before the interview, but then they



simply sat there, waiting. Once again, Ryan was taken aback with how much calmer Neil seemed—as if most of the tension he'd been carrying for weeks suddenly disappeared. Could that be only from the weight of his secret no longer dragging him down?

"Listen, for what it's worth—" Ryan started, but the song on the radio ended and the intro to the afternoon show began playing.

"Hello, everyone, welcome to our show. I'm your host, Gabriel Ferrera, and I hope you're having a good time and you're not in a food coma yet, because today's show may be the biggest surprise you've got this holiday season. We're talking to one of our local sport heroes, Neil Hopkins, and, in his own words, he's been more honest in this interview than ever before. You do not want to miss it. But first, the word from our sponsors—"

"This is weird," Neil muttered, staring at the radio. "It's not like I don't know what happens, and the suspense is still killing me."

"Do you listen to your interviews often?"

Neil shook his head. "More like never. I tried, at first, so I could learn from it, but I couldn't sit through them for long."

"No wonder you find this weird, then. It is weird."

Before Neil could say anything, the interview started, and they both tuned in to listen.

The first few questions were easy—the holidays, the hockey season so far, his injury. Neil had a good flow with the interviewer, and there were a few laughs here and there.

"Do you have any plans for the rest of the break?" the guy said and, from the way Neil's hands tightened on the steering wheel so hard it squeaked under his palms, Ryan knew this was it.

"Well, I think I'm going to be busy after this interview airs."

"Oh? And how's that?"

"You see, I've spent the last few weeks thinking about my life and my career, and what it may look like going forward. I've talked to the people around me, my family, my team, and I've received an enormous amount of support which makes it... maybe not easy, I'm not going to lie, but easier to open up about the fact that I'm gay."

Ryan inhaled sharply. He'd known it was coming, he'd known, but hearing it...

He glanced at Neil, who had his eyes closed and his head tilted back to lean against the headrest.

Over the radio, the host seemed to get his voice back.

"Okay, I think I heard it right, but I'm making sure—did you just say you're gay?"

"Yeah." Neil sounded half-amused, half-disbelieving. "Yeah, I did. For years, I thought it's my business and mine alone, and, truth be told, I still think it's my business. But we live in a world where it matters, and I'd be lying if I said that my decision to stay silent until now wasn't dictated at least partially by how much it may matter to some, in a bad way."

"What changed?"

"I guess I finally realized what I could gain and stopped focusing so much on the

things I may lose."

"Nice," Ryan murmured. It was a good line, even if it was only that, given how Neil had been forced into it.

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"Thanks," Neil whispered. "It's the truth, if not the entire truth."

Over the radio the host tried to dig a little deeper into why Neil was doing it now.

"Because now is the time," came Neil's reply. "I understand it's probably cryptic for everybody else, but it's true for me. Over the years, I heard so many times that everyone has their own timeline for coming out, and I wasn't so sure about that, but now I can finally say that I agree. I'm as ready as I could be, in ways that I weren't before."

"You said that your decision to stay in the closet was dictated by you knowing there would be backlash. Do you not worry about that anymore?"

"Of course I worry. I love hockey, I love the game, my team, and the fans. However, I'm also aware that there are people out there who won't be happy to cheer for or play against a gay man. This is the world we live in, unfortunately, and it will be a challenging time for me. But I figured I can face it like I've faced any other challenge in my career—with the tenacity I bring to every game, and also with the incredible support of my team, my family, and, I hope, the vast majority of our fans. What I want people to understand is, I was always a gay hockey player. Every win and every loss, that's me winning and losing as a gay man. I'm not going to play any differently from now on, because I'm not becoming somebody else. This is who I've always been. So if some people see me differently after today, that's on them, not on me."

"I think that's a perfect place to end for today—"

The host was still talking, but Ryan stopped listening, too busy pulling Neil in for a

kiss. There was a rush flowing through him, buzzing under his skin, and he didn't know what to do with it other than channel it into this, right here—the connection that cracked him open all over again, healing most of the woundshe'd still carried, and making room for something new.

"That was amazing," he whispered against Neil's lips, then leaning away to see him grinning.

"The interview or the kiss?"

They both laughed, all the joy and the pent-up stress needing a release.

"Both, of course," Ryan said after they calmed down, and Neil offered him a softer smile.

"I agree about the kiss, at least. The interview... could have been much worse."

"The host seemed okay, especially caught off guard like that. He avoided the most cringe-worthy questions."

"Well, I have a general list of topics the interviewers aren't supposed to ask me about, so that helps. And with how vague that list is, I didn't have to add anything to it for today. It's more 'don't ask about any romantic and/or sexual relationships', not 'don't ask me if I have a gay lover'."

Gay lover. Breath caught, Ryan turned away to stare at the valley below them, his emotions all over the place.

"Or a boyfriend," Neil added, unsure, and Ryan had to look back at him. "Listen, this is probably..." Neil ran a hand through his hair. "We should probably talk. About things. Us. What we're doing."

A small part of Ryan expected Neil to jump out of the car trying to escape this conversation, not to actually initiate it.

Now Ryan was the one caught completely off guard.

"Okay," he finally said, but didn't add anything else, wanting Neil to speak on that first.

Which might not be fair, given that Neil had already gone through one very difficult conversation today, but Ryan felt like he deserved not to be the one doing the harder work here.

"I—" Neil stared at the steering wheel. "Fuck, how does anyone actually do these things?" he muttered, which prompted a small laugh out of Ryan, breaking some of the tension in the car.

"How about you tell me what you want and we'll go from there," Ryan offered gently.

As if his own heart wasn't trying to escape through his chest.

"What I want and what is actually possible may be two very different things," Neil said, letting go of the steering wheel and curling his hands in his lap.

Ryan stared ahead, his heart sinking. He'd heard this song before. He could already tell what came next.

"I guess it depends on whether or not you still want me on the other side of the blowout that's about to happen," Neil continued, and Ryan turned back to him so fast, his neck protested painfully. "I don't even know what I can offer you right now, let alone later."

Neil wasn't looking at him, but Ryan heard the sincerity in his voice and the words that were an invitation—to the unknown, yes, but still an invitation.

"Your call," Ryan told him quietly, and when Neil glanced up, Ryan gave him a half-smile. "It's not really about the wanting part, I think we have that covered. But it's one thing when we take a Christmas trip down the memory line, and another when it's real life. And I can't afford to confuse the two." Or hope for too much. "So what I need is for you to figure out what you can—and want to—give me, and we can go from there. It doesn't have to be today," he added quickly, when Neil opened his mouth. "I know you have a million things to do and a million people to talk to. I'm sure your phone is going to explode any second now. But I can't say yes or no when I don't know what we're talking about, here."

Neil swallowed hard.

"But you're not... completely against it."

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Ryan might have put forward all the safety precautions he could think of, but at the end of the day, he still needed to decide whether to take this shot or not.

And there was only one answer, really.

"I'm not against it, no."

This time it was Neil who rushed forward to kiss him, and Ryan welcomed him happily.

Maybe hope was going to kick him in the ass and leave him bruised and broken all over again.

Or maybe it was going to make things exactly right.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Neil's world, as expected, erupted quite spectacularly.

He'd had to turn off his phone two hours after the news had broken, and he only turned it back on for short periods of time in the next couple of days, to talk to his agent and the team's management, all of whom were braving the media storm in a pretty impressive manner while he was hiding out at his parents' house.

A part of him wished he could stay for longer surrounded by people who loved him and who didn't care about him being gay, but Neil knew it wasn't really an option. If he didn't want the press to come knocking on his parents' door, he needed to fly back



to Savannah and take it from there.

He figured that flying first class after midnight was his best chance to escape the attention, but someone stepped up to him within five minutes of him arriving at the airport.

"Hello, there."

Ryan's voice made him spin around quickly enough to almost collide with his own suitcase, which would have been terribly embarrassing.

"How?" Neil asked in disbelief. Last time they'd texted earlier in the day, Ryan was heading to DC on a much earlier flight.

"A hat and a big jacket aren't enough to fool someone who observes for a living. Still, a pretty good disguise."

Neil chuckled. "Thanks, I guess. What are you doing here?"

"There's a snowstorm over DC, so we've got delayed twice so far." Ryan grimaced. "I hope we're in the air before dawn, but who knows."

"That sucks. I'm glad I got to see you one more time, though," Neil offered with a small smile.

It had been... tentative between them the last few days. They'd talked a bunch about what it would be like for Neil to be even more in the spotlight, and what it would mean to be long distance, but there had been times when it felt like it was all abstract, not any real plans.

One moment, Neil was coming unglued over the paparazzi, the media, and the on-line

vitriol, and another, he needed the reassurance that yes, there could be a place for him in Ryan's life, even if they spent the majority of their time separate, since they both had careers they loved.

They both seemed to alternate between hoping they could have it all and fearing that they were bound to get hurt, which hadn't been the easiest, especially with everything else Neil had going on.

On the other hand, that hope had also been the shining light when things had gotten really hard. The mere idea that they could keep what they had and work on creating something lasting, made it easier for Neil not to lose himself in a downward spiral.

The soft smiles he'd gotten from Ryan, like this one right now, helped with that as well.

God, Neil wanted him so bad.

"I wish I could kiss you," he whispered, only to watch Ryan's eyes widen for a second.

"I wish you could kiss me, too," Ryan whispered back, glancing down at Neil's lips.

If they weren't in public...

But they were, so Neil had to resist the temptation. Somehow.

"And if I did, in theory, you wouldn't mind the possible media storm that followed?" he asked, like he'd asked about twenty times before.

With a sigh, Ryan shook his head. "It's not me we have to worry about."

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Which,ouch, even though it was true.

"I'm sorry," Neil offered quietly, for yet another time, only for Ryan to shove his hands into his pockets and square his shoulders.

"It's after midnight and I'm tired, so I'll simply come out and say it all once again. I'm in this if you're in, but only if it's for real. I can handle paparazzi or whoever, if it's about them finding out about us. What I don't want is to live my life in fear of them learning that I l—like to put my mouth on you as often as possible," he finished on a lighter note, obviously softening the blow, and Neil loved him for that.

Loved.

He inhaled sharply, scrambling for something to say while his mind was blown away bythatbombshell, but then the last boarding call announcement for his flight came over the speakers.

"I've got to go," he blurted out, only to watch Ryan's face shut down as he took a step back.

No, that wasn't right.

"I'll figure out how we can move on from me worrying about this," Neil hurried to add. "I promise."

Lifting his eyebrows, Ryan stared at him for a few long seconds before nodding.

"Great. I'm looking forward to hearing more about that."

"Okay." Neil's heart was still going way too fast because of his revelation, but he was relieved that they were parting on a good note despite his blunder. "I'll text you when I land."

"Right back at you. Unless I'm stuck here for all eternity."

"Then text me to come rescue you."

"You would, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Neil said with all the conviction he had in him. This, he had no doubts about.

"You need me to rescue you from anything, I'm there."

Ryan bit his lower lip and glanced away.

"Go now or I'm kissing you no matter what."

Neil's fingers curled over the straps of his backpack out of their own volition, stopping him from reaching out.

"Okay, okay, I'm going."

He turned and walked towards his gate without looking back, but the image of Ryan standing there, staring after him, was imprinted in his mind now.

They would have to get used to the goodbyes like this if they were going to be together, which sucked, but—

Not if, he corrected himself. They were already together, after all, and since they

were going to stay like that, they would have to get used to the goodbyes.

Neil wasn't accepting anything else from this point forward.

He loved Ryan. He'd fallen fast and hard, but the sudden realization actually gave him a clear answer about where he stood.

It was everything else that needed figuring out.

\* \* \*

Money and fame could buy a lot of things, and one of them was a driver waiting for Neil at the airport, courtesy of his management. And it was especially nice after a night flight without any sleep. At first it was the storm they'd encountered, but then he started thinking, and planning, and freaking out over some of his plans, backing out and then coming back to them again and again.

By the time they'd finally landed in Savannah, he was exhausted, so he flopped onto the backseat of the car with a sigh of relief. At this hour it shouldn't take long to get him home, where his bed was waiting for him.

It was a few hours later, after he'd showered, napped, and drunk two big cups of coffee, that he was sitting in front of his bosses for the first time since he'd told them about Josh's threats and everything that came with it. There had been a bunch of calls and video conferences since then, but a small part of Neil had been afraid that actually meeting them in person would reveal that his coming out had changed things, after all. He'd expected at least one person would struggle to hide a grimace or refuse to shake his hand or... something.

Nothing like that happened, though.

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It seemed like his life-changing decision had been nothing else but a situation to manage for them—and manage it they had.

Neil was, by far, mostly relieved, but he also found it a little disconcerting.

The head of PR, Rowena Swisher, walked them all through the media storm so far, with the analysis of trends and shifts of the conversation, which was sometimes going over his head, but he appreciated the way she summarized it into "shitty in parts, but also overwhelmingly positive in other parts, with the club's standing netting in the positive column". Neil would take that any day, and, hopefully, so would the bosses.

"Now, we should really start putting Neil out there," she said next. "Holiday break was all and good, but if you stay hidden, it's going to come across like you're hiding on purpose."

Which wouldn't be incorrect, but also wasn't what they were trying to showcase here. They'd already gone over that before.

"Who is interested in an interview?" he asked, curling his hands around the mug he'd been offered.

The third coffee wasn't the smartest choice—he didn't need another reason to be jittery today—but he appreciated any small comfort in that moment.

Rowena snorted. "Who isn't? Every network has called, most of them with multiple offers, but we also have podcasts, radio, newspapers, magazines... You name it, they're interested. So it's more about who we want first, what's the order after that,

and who we could cut without making it into a big thing." She paused. "I wish I could give you only fully supportive options, but you know I think you should do a range of outlets."

Neil knew. He'd heard the spiel before. They had fans all over the place, and they couldn't simply ignore those they didn't agree with, no matter what Neil might want.

However, he did have boundaries.

"I can do a few shows, but with restrictions we discussed," he said. "I'm not going where they would happily slaughter me and the team as the viewers cheered. I'm not trying to be an asshole," he added, looking around the room. "I'm really not. I just... I'm right about this."

"Yes, you are." Rowena gave him half a smile when he raised his eyebrows. "If you expected me to fight you on that, I'm sorry to disappoint. I'm all for choosing our targets and being smart about the diversification."

Fortunately, everyone else agreed, too, so they moved on to "clarifying the message", which was more like being probed with a bunch of invasive questions.

"Any relationships, past or present, that we should know about?"

Neil stilled. All the hours of thinking, and talking, and more thinking, only for him to end up back here—knowing the answer, but still struggling with articulating it.

Rowena had been right, before. He was going to need a lot of interview prep.

"Yeah," he finally said, sitting up and leaning with his elbows on the table. "There is one. Past and present, as it turns out."

\* \* \*

Neil watched people filling out of the office while he stayed back, pretending to check something on his phone until he could stand up and approach the general manager, who hadn't moved from his seat at the top of the conference table.

"Boss, I—" He hesitated. Maybe it was just his lot these days, repeating himself over and over. "I know I said it before, but I really appreciate you sticking with me."

Bednarski motioned for him to take the seat next to him and waited until Neil sat down before speaking.

"You did say it, and, really, you don't have to thank me again. It's not always easy to do the right thing, as you well know, but in this case, my decision actually was easy." The man sat back in his chair. "I'm sorry for ever giving you the impression that I would make it hard for you."

"No, I—" Neil paused and shook his head. It had never been about any one thing, any one person who would think badly of him or make his life hard. It had been all these things and all these people. "It's complicated."

The GM nodded. "I bet. Still, for what it's worth, while there are some secrets in the Vault that I hope never come out and I'd work hard that they wouldn't, yours has never been one of them. Never."

Staring down at the table, Neil prayed that his voice would not waiver or break.

"That's good to know," he finally said, only slightly hoarse.

"One more thing." Bednarski clasped his hands over his stomach. "I haven't heard any shit from your teammates so far and I hope it stays that way. But if you hear anything



or, God forbid, experience anything even remotely homophobic, I want to know about it. And," he went on as Neil opened his mouth, "it's not only about you. It's about the team, as well. I don't want anyone spitting hate in the locker room, because that's only one bad day away from spitting shit out to the press. So no self-sacrificing bullshit, am I clear?"

"Crystal clear, sir."

"Good." Bednarski stood up. "Now go and get some rest before Rowena drags you out onto the media tour."

Neil said his goodbyes and left, feeling lighter than before and already planning on texting Ryan once he got home, but he only managed to take a couple of steps out of the building before there was a tall woman with a recorder, an envelope, and a determined look on her face right in front of him.

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"Fans were shocked to hear your statement about being gay. What would you say to them?"

"No comments for now."

He tried to sidestep her, only to notice a man with a camera to his left.

Fucking hell.

"And what about the mysterious man you were photographed with?" She shoved a photo she was hiding behind the envelope at him. "Any comment on who he is?"

Neil couldn't help himself—he glanced at the photo, his heartbeat already picking up.

Someone had caught the two of them talking at the airport, Neil smiling and leaning close.

Ryan's face wasn't visible, at least, but Neil's stomach still rolled at the thought of people showing up at Ryan's house—or worse, at his work.

"Who is he?" the reporter pressed.

"A bodyguard," he blurted out, regretting it as soon as the words left his mouth.

While that was what Ryan did for a living, it shouldn't be the first thing Neil said about him to the press.

Once he was ready to talk to them about Ryan.

Which he still wasn't.

"He's your bodyguard?" The reporter raised her eyebrows. "So you're afraid something will happen to you now? Were there any threats against you?"

And for a split second, Neil was tempted, exactly like he'd been tempted on Boxing Day, on his way to tape the interview. It would be so easy to use the excuse now, to bluff his way through it and leave anything else for later.

The second passed, though, and he imagined Ryan watching it later on, which was bad enough. Then a realization hit him.

His instincts might still be in the closet, but he wasn't.

The cat was out of the bag, Ryan was ready to do this thing with him, so what did Neil have to lose?

He straightened his stance and met the reporter's gaze head on.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Ryan arrived home exhausted, his flight getting delayed by over six hours in the end, but at least he was finally back. For all that he enjoyed staying at his brother's place, nothing topped his own bed and his own space.

Well, Neil would be a most-welcomed addition, but still. Home was home.

When Ryan got up from the well-deserved nap around noon, he busied himself with getting his place into shape after a long absence, which was supposed to provide a

distraction from wondering about what Neil was doing, what he was thinking, and—most importantly—what he might decide about their future.

And yet, the distraction wasn't really working, because Ryan kept coming back to their conversation at the airport. It had looked like they were on the same page at first, but then Ryan had said he was in and Neil sort of... froze there for a moment. He'd snapped out of it quickly, and they'd ended on a good note, but now that they were apart, Ryan couldn't help but wonder what it meant.

It wasn't until his phone rang on the kitchen counter and he saw Neil's ID that Ryan felt his shoulders drop a fraction.

"Hey, there." He lowered the heat under the stir-fry he was preparing for dinner. "Missing me already?"

It was a joke, but also wasn't, and he rolled his eyes at himself.

What was he, fourteen?

"Of course." Neil's smile was evident in his voice. "How could I not? It's been, what, fifteen hours?"

"Something like that."

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"And I'm guessing you haven't, during that time, and more specifically during the last two hours, watched any TV?" Neil asked in a more serious tone.

Ryan paused. "Should I?"

"Well, I don't think it has made national news yet, but someone spotted us at the airport. Your face isn't visible," Neil hurried to add as Ryan froze, staring at his stir-fry without really seeing it. "It's basically me talking and laughing with a guy."

"Okay," Ryan said slowly, even though he had no idea if it was actually okay, because he wasn't fully processing what was happening. Sure, they'd talked about it at length, but Ryan hadn't expected for them to be caught on camera so soon. "I'm guessing it made news in Georgia, at least?"

"That, and my, uhm, less than stellar response when I was cornered as I was leaving the office."

Ryan had so many questions now, and yet, no real answer.

"How about you send me the link, I watch it, and then we'll talk? Because I don't know what you're trying to say, here."

There was a moment of silence on the other end, and then, "Yeah, that makes sense. I'll send you the link, but call me right after you watch it, okay? Please?"

"I will," Ryan promised, hoping there wasn't anything in that clip that would make him not want to talk to Neil.

Really, really hoping.

They hung up, and when Neil sent him a link ten seconds later, Ryan sat at the kitchen island and clicked play.

On the screen, Neil had gotten cornered by a journalist who seemed to be blocking his way on the front steps of a building—the team's headquarters, most likely. The camera was to the side, so Ryan could see both of them.

"Fans were shocked to hear your statement about being gay," the reporter said without any preamble. "What would you say to them?"

"No comments for now."

As Neil tried to sidestep her, he turned and looked directly into the camera. Ryan could clearly see the realization of being caught on Neil's face, probably accompanied by some internal swearing.

"And what about the mysterious man you were photographed with?" The reporter shoved a photo at him, which Ryan did not appreciate. Neil should have a personal detail if this was how people thought they could treat him. "Any comment on who he is?"

Ryan bit his lip as he watched Neil stare at the photo.

"Who is he?" the reporter insisted.

"A bodyguard," Neil told her, making Ryan's heart clench painfully.

Of course. Of course Neil had said Ryan was a bodyguard. After all, it was a lie without really lying. But why did he think Ryan would like to see it?

Then the reporter's question brought his attention back to the video.

"Were there any threats against you?"

Neil visibly hesitated there for a moment, but then he straightened to his full height and looked back at her, determined.

"He's not my bodyguard. He's much more than that."

Ryan almost dropped the phone. He had to pause the video to get himself together, his heart hammering in his chest and his palms sweaty, because, damn, this was happening.

Neil was actually doing this.

Not only had he come out, he was also telling the world Ryan was an important person in his life.

He rewound the last few seconds of the video and hit play again.

"He's not my bodyguard. He's much more than that."

"A secret boyfriend?" the reporter said.

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Neil snorted. "Not much of a secret, since we were photographed in a public place and I'm telling you about him. Now excuse me, I have to go."

The video cut off there, but Ryan hit a replay and stared in disbelief at the scene before him. His throat was tight, and he was honestly close to crying at this point, because his eighteen-year-old self would have wanted this more than anything. Had wanted it. That boy had wanted them both to have their dreams and be together, and now... now they seemed to be getting there.

After he watched the whole thing two more times, he remembered Neil was waiting for his call and he got up quickly. He stopped by the bathroom first, making sure he didn't look as if he'd actually cried, then he stared at his reflection for another minute.

Neil had admitted to being in a relationship with him on TV.

They didn't have to hide anymore.

After leaving the bathroom, Ryan sat on the floor in front of the couch and placed his phone in the stand so he could video chat with Neil and not worry about dropping the phone again.

His leg was bouncing as he waited for the call to come through.

It was going to be fine.

The hardest part was over now. They were fine.



Neil did not seem fine on the small screen, though. He was frowning and biting his lip, and he crossed his arms over his knees as he leaned forward to the camera.

"Listen, I'm sorry," he started right away. "I know we haven't talked about it—I mean, we did, but in theory, we didn't discuss any details—and I went and did this. I'm truly sorry."

"Hey, hey," Ryan cut in, shaking his head. "I'm not angry."

Neil stared at him, closing his mouth and then opening it again.

"You're not? I know the bodyguard part was stupid, but that honestly slipped out because I was thinking about you at work and the potential repercussions of somebody recognizing you. I didn't want for it to sound like that's all you are to me, so I said the rest, but I should've asked first. Fuck, I spent hours beforehand discussing strategy with a whole team of people, and then I go and do this."

"Neil, stop." Ryan leaned forward as well. "Take a deep breath, it's fine. On my end, it's all fine."

Doing as he was told, Neil visibly relaxed a fraction. "Really?"

"Yeah. Sure, I didn't expect it so soon, but I'm also..." Ryan ran his teeth over his bottom lip. "Well, I'll admit it. I'm happy. It felt great to watch you say what you said."

A tentative smile appeared on Neil's face.

"Good. That's good. I was mostly stressed, but saying that... It felt freeing, in a way. Everything's now in the open. There's going to be backlash, for sure, but in the meantime, I can live my life and not worry about any secrets coming out."

Ryan could feel himself grinning. There was nothing like finally saying one's truth, and he was so, so happy Neil was getting to experience that.

And apparently, they were going to experience it together now.

"I'm glad," Ryan offered softly.

While he didn't want to overwhelm Neil on this already emotional day, Ryan figured he needed to make it clear he was totally fine with what had transpired. Sure, he would have to talk to his boss in case it could potentially interfere with his work, but Kalei, for all that he led the company with a straight-forward, military manner, was pretty laid back about their personal lives as long as they did their job right.

Besides, some of the guys at KRK had partners who were arguably more newsworthy than a hockey player, even a very popular one. Ryan should be fine.

"You sure?" Neil asked. "You got quiet on me."

"I was just thinking that you're not going to be the most famous boyfriend or partner at my job."

"Oh, really? Who have you gotten there, then?"

Sitting back, Ryan smirked. "How about a senator and one of the Chief Justices?"

Neil stared. "You're kidding."

"Nope."

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"That's... hilarious, actually." Neil laughed and rubbed his forehead. "And it does make me feel better, in a weird way."

"Whatever works," Ryan told him with a shrug. He couldn't stop grinning, but Neil seemed to have a similar problem, so they were fine. "Honestly, we're all pretty used to the rich and famous by now. We covered a few events where POTUS was in attendance."

"Okay, now you're bragging," Neil teased.

"I haven't even started yet!"

"Fine, but take it easy, or I'll end up feeling totally inadequate and refuse to ever meet your friends."

Ryan wanted to make some joke about how a bronze medal in the most famous partner category wasn't so bad, but he got struck by the idea of actually introducing Neil to people as his boyfriend.

A few weeks ago, Neil Hopkins had been little more than a memory of a badly-healed broken heart Ryan couldn't even talk about too much. And now, here they were, with Neil not only talking about him in public, but also wanting to become more integrated into his life.

Neil's smile softened, and he tilted his head. "You know I was joking, right?"

"Yeah, I..." Ryan chuckled and nodded. "I guess I got overwhelmed by all the

possibilities."

"Me, too. But it's good to be positively overwhelmed instead of creating doom scenarios. I hope you know that—" Neil glanced down before meeting his gaze again. "It's not only that I'm happy to be with you, although I am. I'm also incredibly grateful that you made this difficult time in my life so much better. You actually turned it into something positive."

Damn, Ryan wanted to kiss him so badly right now.

"You are the one who turned it into something positive for yourself," he said. "I was there and I offered support, sure, but you were the one who took the shitty situation and owned it. I know you were forced into it, and that sucks, but—"

"I wasn't."

Ryan frowned. "What?"

"I mean, I was, Josh did blackmail me and he forced me to put the whole thing in motion, but at the end there, I had a way out."

As Ryan listened to the story of that last-minute phone call that could've changed it all, could've pushed Neil back into the closet, he sagged against the couch in disbelief.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

For a long moment, Neil didn't say anything, staring to the side, but then he looked into the phone camera again.

"I guess I needed to figure out what I was willing to let myself have, first. Wanting

you was the easy part, but I didn't know what I could offer you, if anything. I was afraid that telling you it was ultimately my decision would send a signal I wasn't ready to send." He grimaced. "If that makes any sense."

"It does," Ryan told him with a nod and an aching, tender heart, because for all that Neil had mishandled their relationship and Ryan's feelings all those years ago, he was trying to do the exact opposite now.

And since Ryan had already fallen all over again, he appreciated that more than he could say.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

As the driver parked outside of Ryan's place, Neil stared at the four-story building, with its windows full of light.

He should get out of the car and go in there, but he was so fucking tired.

After completing a tour of what felt like every late show, morning show, and everything in between in New York, he'd disrupted his entire schedule to come to DC. Now he was here, and he wished he could muster some energy for Ryan, but there didn't seem to be anything left.

Ignoring the pointed look the driver was giving him in the rearview mirror, Neil pulled out his phone and texted Ryan.

Outside.

He'd sent numerous texts like that back when they were two kids obsessed with each other and it was too late to use a horn, and every time, Ryan would come out and join him in his car. Everything was as it should be in those small windows of time, no

matter what else was going on.

Shit, all this talking on TV was making Neil sentimental.

He should probably shape up, and quickly.

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Which he would. Any second now. He just wanted to try this, first.

It took a minute and a half for the front door to open, but then Ryan was there—tall enough to take up most of the space in the entrance, where he paused.

Waiting for Neil to come to him.

And Neil felt it, now—that unmistakable, gravitational pull.

He wanted to be where Ryan was.

Suddenly, getting out of the car and grabbing his suitcase took no effort at all, and Neil quickly crossed the small space to where Ryan was standing.

"Hey," he whispered, curling his fingers tighter around his suitcase's handle so he wouldn't reach out and touch.

It had only been two weeks. They were going to be apart for longer periods of time than this, so he needed to get used to it.

But not quite yet.

"Hey." Ryan stepped back, letting him in. "Come on up."

They went up onto the third floor, and soon enough, Neil was dropping his suitcase in the entryway and looking around Ryan's place as he took off his jacket.

There was the kitchen area to his left and the hall to his right that probably led to the bedroom and whatever else, but Neil's attention was stolen by the living room—an open space with a long couch and very few furniture pieces besides that. Instead, there was a series of framed photos on the walls, most of them black and white, with a splash of color here and there. At first he assumed they were art pieces Ryan had bought, but then he recognized Ryan's grandparents on one of them.

He stepped closer to that one as soon as he took his shoes off.

"Are those yours?"

"Yeah," Ryan said from behind him. "I wanted something more personal than the generic landscape posters."

"These are really good."

Neil walked around the room, taking the photos in. Most of them were portraits, although smaller than the one of Ryan's grandparents, but there were also a few landscapes, including—

"That's the view from the hill," Neil whispered. He would recognize that tree line everywhere.

"Yeah," Ryan repeated, this time from right next to Neil. "I have a fall version of it up in the bedroom, but the winter one looked better here."

At that, Neil had already started towards the bedroom before stopping himself and glancing at Ryan, who chuckled.

"It's not how I thought I'd introduce you to my bedroom, but sure, go ahead."



If Neil wasn't so curious and so tired, he'd probably have some witty comeback to that, but as things were, he simply headed down the hall.

The photo was a panoramic shot, much bigger than any of the ones in the living room. Hanging above the bed, it stood out against the dark green wall with its deep reds and yellows among the black and white edges.

Neil wanted a copy of it for his apartment in Savannah, too.

After taking in the rest of the room—the large bed with wooden headboard, the floor-to-ceiling window with dark curtains, and the big yellow winged chair in the corner—he headed back out, only to find Ryan searching for something in the fridge.

"Are you hungry?"

"I could eat." Neil paused a few feet away. "But not before I shower."

"You can take your things to the bedroom," Ryan offered, turning around and leaning against the counter as he met Neil's gaze. "Towels are in the bathroom."

Suddenly, it hit Neil that this was his life now—these small moments of domesticity, of making space for each other in their lives. Something he hadn't known he wanted so badly until now, when he got to have it.

He crossed the room and pulled Ryan into a kiss.

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It was hard at first, almost desperate, but when Ryan opened up to him and wound his arms around Neil to bring him closer, something in Neil eased up a bit and he slowed down. It became the hello kiss they'd skipped earlier, one that said "it's so good to be here, with you".

They kissed for a long time, and when they parted, neither of them seemed in any hurry to pull away. Ryan nuzzled against his jaw, and Neil pressed his face against Ryan's neck, breathing him in.

Then a yawn escaped him, big enough that there was no way he could hide it, and Ryan chuckled right into his ear.

"How about you shower, I order food, and after we eat, you sleep for at least eight hours?"

"Not exactly what I had in mind for tonight," Neil grumbled, but he knew his body couldn't deliver on those plans anyway when he was this tired.

Ryan's expression, when he pulled back, told him the same thing.

"Okay, okay." Neil stepped away reluctantly. "Show me to the bathroom, then."

\* \* \*

They made good on Neil's plans on Saturday morning, so it was pretty late by the time they settled in on the couch after breakfast, facing each other from their places against the opposite armrests. Their legs were brushing against each other every once

in a while, but Neil would never admit he was responsible for most of those accidental touches.

"You've heard me talk about the interviews and stuff, but I don't know how you've been with all the circus," he said instead. Over the phone, Ryan was quick to brush off his side of the story, but Neil hoped being together in person would make it easier to actually talk about it.

"I told you I was good," Ryan protested, but deflated at Neil's huff. "Honestly, I'm good. Nobody found me yet, but even if they do, I can handle it. I talked with my boss and I told a few friends I trust, but that's about it."

Neil ran a hand through his hair, afraid to ask the question, but needing to, anyway.

"So, no second thoughts about doing this with me?"

"No," Ryan said in a tone that bore no discussion. "I told you I'm in if you are, so if you're having second thoughts—"

"I don't. I have absolutely no second thoughts about you," Neil assured him. "Hell, you're firmly at the top of the positives column whenever I feel like complaining about how invasive this whole thing has been."

Ryan winced at that. "Some of those quote-unquote journalists should be fired on sight, honestly. But as I told you, I think you've been handling it well."

"Thanks. All the prep has paid off, I guess."

Neil grimaced at the memory of the brutal sessions with the team's PR people, when they'd thrown some awful things at him. He was glad they brought someone from the outside for the worst of it, because he didn't think he'd be able to look them in the eye

after this, even if all they would have done was play pretend.

"Do the higher-ups still think it's going okay?"

Neil nodded. "As good as it could be expected. There are some haters out there, of course, but most of the fans have moved on to the hockey part of it all, and that's what counts. All the players have been good about it, too," he added. "They're only teasing me about suddenly being the media darling."

A few of the guys had known about him already, but the rest had been a worry. Fortunately, it seemed that he'd lucked out, because the reactions varied from positive to civil. If someone had a problem with him, it hadn't come up yet.

He knew it all depended on how well he would play, though, so there was now this additional pressure to give his absolute best out there on the ice.

Good thing he always tried to, no matter what.

"Tell them you're more camera-friendly than all of them combined," Ryan offered with a smirk which then softened to a real smile. "I'm glad you got to get away for the weekend."

Neil nudged Ryan's leg with his, warmth spreading through him.

"I'm glad, too. Especially since it will be a while before I have another one free." He paused. "How do you feel about coming to Savannah when your schedule allows?"

"Well, since I heard these flying machines are actually capable of going both directions, I'd say I feel pretty positive," Ryan said dryly, nudging him back. "I don't expect you to be the only one making an effort, you know."

"I know, I know, but..." Neil shrugged. "I guess I feel like with you giving me another chance and accepting the media attention, you're already making an enormous effort, so I'm trying to catch up. And to give you what you deserve."

Ryan sighed. "It's not a competition. And for me, these things you mention were the prerequisites to having a relationship with you at all. Just like you being out was a prerequisite for me," he pointed out. "Your coming out wasn't for me or anything, but without it, we wouldn't be here. So, from where I'm standing, we're both starting from the same place. Yes, we have history, and I'm sure we're going to bump into some problems because of that along the way, but I have no interest in using it against you. Feel free to call me out if I ever do."

"Feel free to call me out if I ever make you feel like I did back then."

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"Oh, I will," Ryan assured him. "I can't see this working in the long run without proper communication, so I'll tell you whenever there's something wrong, and I hope you will, as well. And since we both need to make an effort, we're both making the trip whenever our schedules allow. Simple as that."

Neil breathed out slowly.

"Okay. That sounds... It all sounds good to me."

Hell, he was already planning to come to DC for a longer stay after the end of the season. He didn't say it, though. Not yet. They were only beginning, and he didn't want to overwhelm Ryan with long-term plans.

Still, there was one thing that needed to be said, no matter what.

He sat up and put his hand around Ryan's calf.

Communication is important, he told himself. Not easy, but important.

"I want you to know that I feel like I've fallen for you already. I know it's fast, but... That's the truth."

Ryan sat up as well and then pressed forward until Neil was on his back and Ryan was leaning over him, his eyes clear, and bright, and beautiful like always.

"I've fallen for you, too," Ryan whispered, right before kissing him.

And here it was, the moment Neil had thought would never come—he finally had everything he'd ever dreamed of.

## EPILOGUE

A few months later

"Noo," Ryan moaned when the covers were unceremoniously tugged off of him. "We're staying in."

Neil snorted. "No, we're not."

"I'll blow you if we stay in."

The few seconds of silence let him hope he might have won, especially when his partner pressed himself against his back a moment later.

"Tempting, I have to admit." Neil dropped a kiss on the back of Ryan's neck. "But I'm pretty sure I can convince you to blow me anyway. Missing your friends' engagement party, though, you might not forgive me for, even if it would have been your idea."

"What if I sign a waiver that says otherwise?" Ryan asked, leaning back into Neil's embrace. This was how he should've been woken up in the first place.

"Nope," Neil told him after sucking what would end up being a mark on the top of his shoulder. "I may, however, be willing to blow you in the shower as long as you get up on time. Which means right now."

Ryan sighed, hopefully making it clear how much of a sacrifice it was. Then he sat up, disentangling himself from Neil.

"Fine. Come on, then."

After the prolonged shower—where they both got to come, because Ryan was nice like that—they still had time to eat their breakfast in peace, as they always tried to.

It had become one of their things, a custom established months ago—whenever they were in the same place, breakfast was their time and their time alone. Only later could they go out and spend time with other people.

And with this being the first weekend since Neil had come to DC for the prolonged stay, it was doubly important to make it right.

Logically, Ryan knew they were now going to have a lot of mornings like this one, but for now, it was all still new.

Neil had unpacked his suitcases this time, for one. And there wasn't going to be a goodbye later tonight.

"You're smiling at those eggs harder than you did at me after I gave you a blowjob," Neil complained, dragging him back to Earth. "Something is terribly wrong here."

Ryan grinned. "Well, now that you mention it—"

"Don't you dare."



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm*

"—you make excellent eggs."

"That's it, romance is dead." Neil sighed, even though there was a smile tugging at his lips.

"I wouldn't say so, well-prepared eggs are a clear sign of romance to me." Ryan laughed at Neil's face. "Fine, fine, your skills in both sex and cooking are very much appreciated and applauded. Happy now?"

"Happy-ish."

"For what it's worth, these eggs aren't giving me an orgasm, so—"

"Okay, okay, forget it," Neil cut him off. "I'm happy, full stop."

"Yeah. I'm happy, full stop, too," Ryan told him, more honestly than their joking required.

Neil's smile turned gentle, and he nodded. "Good. That's good."

And it was good. Great, even. They'd been making it work, and while it hadn't always been easy, they'd hung in there, flying back and forth, brushing off the media attention, and talking every day. And now, here they were—Neil with another StanleyCup victory to his name and Ryan with his partner home with him for the entire post-season break. All they had to worry about was how to handle all the small stuff, like the fact that Neil still hadn't learned to put the milk back in the fridge after taking it out, or that Ryan refused to go running with him in the morning.

Problems like that, Ryan could deal with any day.

"Hey," he said, and when Neil looked up to meet his gaze, he winked at him. "I love you."

And there it was, Neil's most beautiful smile.

"I love you, too."

For that, Ryan could deal with anything.

THE END