



The Hooker

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: Daisy

I've been the assistant physiotherapist for New Zealand's national rugby team for three years and have been carpooling with the star hooker for two of those.

Jamison Atoa brings me matcha in the mornings and he's one of my closest friends. I've never thought of him as anything else before.

Until my puppy goes missing, and he takes charge of the search party.

Has he always had such broad shoulders?

I could lose my licence if anything happens with him, but I'm not sure I can stop myself.

Jamie

I don't know when I started looking at Daisy differently, but now I can't look away. I think I've been in love with her since we started carpooling and she tricked me into drinking matcha.

Unfortunately, I can't tell if she feels anything for me besides lukewarm happiness that I show up for my physio appointments.

But if we do anything together, we could lose our jobs.

I'm not sure I care.

The Hooker is a novella length, friends to lovers, workplace romance, featuring rugby players and a mischievous puppy set in New Zealand.

Total Pages (Source): 34

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CHAPTER ONE

Daisy

I wince when Jamison Atoa is tackled and covered in yellow jerseys. “Jesus. They’re out for blood tonight.”

“They haven’t won the cup in a bajillion years. They’re desperate.” Adam whistles low at what’s happening on the field, and I watch Jamie thrust the ball from under the pileup to Hemi, who sprints for the try line. We hold our breath and groan when he’s taken down too. “And their new coach is insane.”

“You know him?”

“I know of him. Fucking bastard.”

I slump against the hard metal below my butt when Australia manages to intercept the ball and makes a break for it.

I don’t flinch when Adam, the head physiotherapist for New Zealand’s national rugby team, and my boss, yells, “Come on, boys! Get in there!”

I’ve never understood why everyone calls them boys. Jamie launches himself at an opposing player, wraps his arms around their waist in mid-air, and they collapse in a pile of limbs and blood.

They’re men. Generally large and loud men, who lift weights more than I weigh mid-

cycle when I need carbs and sugar to get me through the day. Some of them are older, like Jamie, and have played professionally for years, but a few of them are fresh out of their teens and desperate to prove their worth. Those players I'd call boys. It's odd to call someone like Jamie a boy. He's mid-thirties and the only player taller than him is Suli, our number four lock and captain, who's huge.

Suli tackles an opposing player; his rich brown skin is streaked with grass, and there are green flecks in his thick black beard too.

The stadium groans when Australia gets a try. "Our coach will be a bastard if they lose this game."

"Ah, but they'll deserve it. The boys are playing like shit." Adam stands and moves to talk with the subs, the eight men waiting to swap out with one of the starting fifteen boys to get some minutes in.

Adam isn't entirely wrong. Playing like shit is harsh. I'm more inclined to say they're off their game, but the coaches would use the former. I can almost feel the huffing fury Alex Clark, the head coach, will be sending through the radio to the strength and conditioning coach on the sideline. Who, admittedly, seems to share the fury if his red face is any indication, though he's attempting to hide it and letting the captain try to whip the fifteen into shape.

It's clearly not riveting information if Jamie has time to spy me on the sidelines amongst the medics and subs to wink at me. I roll my eyes and look pointedly at his eyebrow, which is dripping blood down the side of his face. Clearly the ref didn't take issue with the blood, but someone could at least wipe it.

Jamie wiggles his eyebrows with his mouth guard hanging from the side of his mouth, causing the blood to do a gruesome dance, and then his body follows and does a weird shuffle dance thing.

Suli beside him glances at me and shoves Jamie with his tattooed arm mid-pep talk. Jamie winces comically and refocuses.

“Fuck’s sake, he’s gonna get himself murdered.”

“At least he’s playing well,” Adam says, joining me again and crossing his arms. His dark amber skin is on display instead of huddled in the team uniform windbreaker like I am. His black hair blows in the wind, but it doesn’t bother him like it does for me. I always wear a cap and plait my hair to avoid the wind tangling my long hair.

A medic finally joins the huddle and wipes Jamie’s eyebrow roughly and slaps a big white patch over it. Alex must want to keep him on the field.

“If you keep yelling, one of the boys will hear, or worse, the cameras.”

Adam waves the comment away. “The boys know they’re playing like primary school ripper rugby. And if they haven’t figured it out, they’ll know tomorrow.”

Hemi rolls his shoulder and we both narrow our eyes at him. We glance at each other and come to the same conclusion. Something’s wrong with his dominant arm. And he hasn’t brought it up with the physio team, which means we need to approach him, carefully, and discuss an injury. Never a good thing. And not something an elite athlete wants brought up, but the smart ones know they have to if they want to stay on top of their game. If they want to stay on the starting fifteen.

Rain splatters on my hands and my cap barely keeps it out of my eyes, but at least I’m not sprinting through the rain for the white line to dive over—with an entire team chasing behind me, hoping to tackle me to the muddy field below.

I played one game of rugby at university after my friend Liam got me into watching it. Watching someone get tackled and everyone piling on top of them

is extremely different from being the one under the pile. After that, I decided while I love rugby, playing it isn't for me, so I focused on getting my masters in physiotherapy and working my way through the different regional rugby teams before landing assistant physiotherapist for the national team three years ago.

A dream come true, but that doesn't mean rain slipping under my jacket is pleasant. I shiver and cross my arms tightly. So much for being waterproof.

We win by the skin of our teeth, and after everyone's celebrated on the field and shaken the Aussie's hands, we follow our team to the changing sheds. The rowdy sheds where beer is handed out and tight jerseys that stick to wet skin are aggressively tugged off.

Alex helps drag off black jerseys, somehow keeping his crisp suit clean and his brown hair unruffled, but if you know what to look for, you can tell he's frustrated by the tight lines bracketing his pale lips, visible through his beard. His cool ivory skin is paler than usual after the sloppy game. He'll let them have the win today and tomorrow everything will be dissected.

I move through the large room with cubbies for each player to sit in around the perimeter of the wall, and a large table running the length of the room covered in sports drinks, water, fruit, and muesli bars. Most of the boys have collapsed in their cubby, drinking beer or chugging electrolytes. Some are still in their jerseys while others have removed them immediately and sit bare-chested.

I find Hemi in his jersey, his light brown skin glistening with sweat and his chestnut hair cut into a short mullet—apparently the new hairstyle everyone wants—flattened to his scalp from the rain, and nod at his shoulder. “Feeling all right?”

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He purses his lips and nods. “Fine, why?”

“Come to the medic room tomorrow and I’ll strap it for you.”

“Don’t need it strapped.” He glances around the room, his hazel eyes tightening with what I think is panic, but no one can hear our conversation over the noise.

“Come anyway. I’ll tell you about the shenanigans my niece has been getting up to.”

Hemi’s eyes trace my face before he gives a curt nod.

“That try in the last minute was a beauty,” I say, nudging his knee until a small smile appears on his face.

“She’s right. Didn’t record it though, sorry,” a woman’s voice says behind me.

Hemi grins at the woman who appears at my shoulder. Her blonde hair is pulled back in a ponytail and her eyeliner is the sharpest I’ve ever seen. She has the same eye colour as Hemi but hers lean more green, and despite the fact her skin is a few shades lighter than Hemi’s, you can tell they’re siblings as soon as you see them both smile.

“That’s because you only record when I wipe out.” Hemi stands and kisses her cheek, wraps a sweaty arm around her, which she shoves off, and turns to me. “This is my sister Charlotte. Charlie, this is the assistant physio Daisy.”

I shake her hand. “Lovely to meet you, Charlotte. I’ll leave you two to catch up, and I’ll see you tomorrow.” I raise my eyebrows at Hemi until he gives a grudging nod

and turns to his sister.

I face the rest of the room and notice Alex staring at Charlotte but decide to avoid him while he's sporting that intense look in his blue eyes. Entirely too scary to talk to him about Hemi right now.

I do a full round of the room asking about ankles, wrists, hamstrings, and shoulders, and make a mental list of who I want to see tomorrow to ensure nothing turns into an injury. I end up at Jamie's cubby and raise my brows at him.

"You're bleeding again," I tell him blandly.

Jamie grins. "The colour of winners, Daze."

"The colour of someone who needs to make sure it's treated." I stare at him, and he sips beer and shrugs his oversized shoulders.

"I'll find someone in a minute. Help me out of this?" He tugs the tight jersey away from his skin and it snaps back sharply.

I sigh and nod. He sets his drink down and stands, bends at the hips, and sticks his arms out straight. I roll my eyes and reach for the bottom of the jersey. Brushing the heated skin at his lower back, I grab the jersey and tug. I yank as hard as I can while he edges backwards. I manage to tug it to his wrists and stumble as it comes free, catching myself on the table before I crash into someone.

Jamie sighs and shakes himself like a dog removing water from its coat, and collapses in his cubby, taking a sip from his drink.

Now bare-chested, he relaxes and I see the game drain from him. His skin, a medium brown colour that darkens in summer, is damp and his hair is an adorable dark curly

mess from the rain, sweat, and bandage and tape around his forehead to protect his ears in scrums. Being the hooker means he gets bashed around a lot, and it's common practice now to attempt to protect yourself. It also means his chest is thick and wide and his shoulders are broad, and his belly is slightly rounded, covering the muscle it takes to hold off grown men, but that's neither here nor there.

He rips off the ear protection to reveal ears that carry the look of a teenage boy who didn't listen to his mother and wrap them like he should have, and rolls his neck. He scratches at the dark stubble on his cheeks and sighs contentedly.

I suppress a smile. "Better?"

"Yeah."

"How's the knee?" The tape held up, and he was walking fine at the end of the game so hopefully it minimised the pain. He's not injured, but playing for so long, especially his position that takes a lot of hits, takes a toll on your body regardless of injury.

"Feels good."

"And the hami?" The hamstring is more of a concern at the moment. If it turns into a full-blown injury, he'll be out. He stays quiet, his dark eyes skittish and shrugs, raking a hand through his curls instead of answering me. Well, at least I know where he's at. "We'll work on it tomorrow."

He grunts and finishes his beer. Jamie stands and towers over me. My head comes to his shoulder, but he's never made me feel small or less than.

"Can you take the tape off?" When all I do is stare at him, he pouts at me and says, "Please?"

A routine we do after every game. I don't know why, but it works. I enjoy him sticking out his bottom lip, and I also enjoy ripping out his leg hair. I crouch in front of him and look up through my lashes. My eyes meet dark chocolate ones. I grasp the edge of the tape and rip. Jamie tenses and his nostrils flare. I bite my lip to hide my smile.

“You enjoy hurting me, don't you?”

Clearly I don't hide my smile well. “No, but I do enjoy that ripping out leg hair is apparently more painful than having men squash your head and have them pile on top of you.”

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I turn him around and lift his already short shorts higher to reach the tape on his thick hamstring decorated with black ink that runs from the top of his ass to his ankle in a pattern of swirls, triangles, lines, solid black, and dots interspersed throughout, and rip it off quickly. He shakes his legs out, turns, and holds out a hand to help me stand. His hand is twice my size and warm. He's like a portable heater.

"Thanks. And it isn't more painful, I just hate doing it. I can't bring myself to rip it, so it makes the pain worse."

"One day, I'll take you to get your legs waxed and you'll know real pain." I show him the tape. "There's like three hairs. Wait until I slap wax on your hairy leg and you cry when I rip hair off your inner thighs."

He cringes. "Hard pass."

Jamie sits heavily, and I nudge his boots with my sneaker. "Good game. You held them together."

"Don't let the others hear you say that."

"They already know it. If they want to win the Bledisloe Cup, everyone needs to pull themselves together. Especially if they want to win the Freedom Cup against South Africa too." We share a look, knowing what's coming.

Injury, blood, tears, and potentially the best games in The Rugby Championship. We're in the middle of the series and have already played our two test matches with Argentina. We have two games against South Africa, which they're hosting, and one

more game against Australia to close out the series. Two cups to win within the series and the overall championship to win. It's a lot of pressure, and with the amount of injuries around and the newer players Alex is trying out, the boys are flagging earlier than usual. It's my job to make sure they feel good before a game, while hopefully giving them something to talk about other than rugby. A lot of the game is mental. Anyone would need a break, and I make sure to give them that.

"You're right. And thanks." He scratches his chest, right over the hair sprinkled across it, and I avert my eyes from the trail leading below his belly button.

"No worries, it's true."

"Okay, boys, time to cool down and jump in the ice baths," the strength and conditioning coach George says. The red has finally leached from his cheeks, leaving his suntanned skin and deep forehead lines time to recover from the game.

The room groans collectively, including Jamie, who manages to keep it quiet, and they stand and file out of the room. Jamie rises and holds his fist out. I bump it with mine and open my palm for him to slap in a gentle low five.

"I'll meet you by the car when you're done. I need to write some notes and look at Nick's knee."

"Sweet, see you soon." He heads to the exit and drops his empty beer bottle in the recycling bin.

I make sure everyone gets to the pool area and head to the medic room to write up notes and discuss plans with Adam about Nick and Hemi. I pass Charlotte talking to Alex but duck my head to avoid being pulled into whatever they're talking about.

When I wrap everything up for the night, I head to the staff car park and find Jamie

leaning against my car. It's significantly smaller than his, but I always drive on game nights so he can have a drink afterwards. The white patch on his eyebrow is stark on his skin, and his hands are shoved deep in his hoodie pockets. He's wearing shorts despite the wind creeping inside my windbreaker.

"Have you been waiting long? I didn't realise the time." I unlock the car and we dump our gear in the boot and get in the front.

"Nah. I don't mind waiting." He stretches his legs out as much as he can in the front seat—already pushed as far away from the dashboard as possible—and closes his eyes. The generic scent from the soap they use in the sheds spreads through my car, and I inhale deeply.

He crashes after a game. The adrenaline leaves his body in the sheds and then he attempts to stay awake while I drive us from Eden Park across Auckland to the North Shore. Which is a real bitch because all of Auckland comes to the game and then we have to join the traffic to get home. We live on the same street, me in an old seventies house that's drafty in winter and a sauna in summer, Jamie in a renovated villa at the end of the street with blush-pink roses climbing up the outside. His mum likes them. I have no idea how he keeps them alive.

My brother is a florist, and he owns a flower shop near a beach outside of Auckland, but despite our parents calling us plant names, the green thumb only transferred to Sage. I'm great at keeping succulents alive though because I'm fantastic at forgetting they exist.

Jamie and I started carpooling mid-way through my first year when his car needed work and we realised we lived on the same street. Auckland busses aren't reliable to get you anywhere on time, let alone across town in less than an hour. So I drove him. Then, a week later, he showed up at my door and offered to drive me. Now we alternate daily, and when the games are in Auckland, I drive us so he can focus on the

game and fall asleep in the traffic on the way home.

Sometimes he talks, but usually he tucks his chin to his chest and snores softly to the pop music on the radio as streetlights flicker over his face. I don't know how he does it. I can't sleep in cars, especially when I know I'll be home soon, in pyjamas and bed, but then again, I didn't play eighty minutes of rugby.

He snores louder than usual as I turn into our street and jerks himself awake. I laugh under my breath, and he catches my smile. "What?" he asks, his voice husky with sleep and from yelling on the field.

I shake my head and pull into his driveway. "Nothing. Here you are, good sir, your lodging for the night."

He doesn't take my teasing tone. Just smiles at me softly. Lips wide and plump. "Thanks, Daze. I'll see you tomorrow, yeah?"

"Always."

He opens the car door, but before he leaves, he holds out his fist. I tap it with mine and open my palm for him to slap. His callouses scrape deliciously on my skin, but this time after the low five, he grasps my hand and squeezes.

Jamie closes the door and grabs his bags from the boot and waves at me as he climbs the stairs of his veranda, passing his roses to the front door. I stay there until the door closes and then I reverse and drive up the street to my house and into the garage.

He only squeezes my hand like that in the car. Every time we get home, he does it.

But never when we're with anyone else. I don't know why.

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And I don't know why my right hand always feels warmer and tingles until I fall asleep. It doesn't matter if I shower or workout after he does it.

I always fall asleep with one hand warmer than the other.

CHAPTERTWO

Jamie

I don't remember when I fell in love with Daisy. It just kind of...happened.

One night, after a brutal test match against Ireland, she drove me home and smiled at me like she always does. Her pale skin practically illuminated by the streetlights, freckles sprinkled across her nose, brown hair damp from the storm, curling around the edges of her cap, and I squeezed her hand at the end of our handshake. When I walked inside, I closed the door behind me and realised my heart was pounding and my hands were sweaty, and all I wanted to do was go out to the driveway, pull her car door open and kiss her.

She'd left by then.

I stood in the hallway for ten minutes with the lights off, which I hadn't even realised until the next day when she asked why I didn't turn the veranda light on like I usually do. I'd stumbled out an excuse, and she'd looked at me funny and I realised what the feeling was in my chest.

Love.

I'm in love with the assistant physiotherapist for the national rugby team I play for.

To say I'm fucked is an understatement.

If I knew how she felt, it wouldn't be so bad. All we'd need to do is sign the declaration of personal relationship form with management and Adam would treat me instead of her. Unfortunate, because I prefer Daisy, but if it meant I could date her, I wouldn't care.

But...she's never given me any indication of her feelings outside of friendship, and if that's all I can have, then I'll take it. Friends we'll be until she finds someone else to love and leaves me behind to carpool with her partner and forgets I exist.

It's not like we spend much time together outside of work besides texting about TV shows and seeing each other around the neighbourhood.

Not like we get much time to do anything besides footy, which was how I liked it. Until Daisy started driving me home from games and leaving me in my empty house while she went back up the road to her dog.

"Fucking pathetic." I shake my head at my coffee, drink the dregs, and grab my gear to start the day.

It's my turn to drive, and we're dropping her dog at her brother's before we head to training. It's out of the way, and we have to leave earlier, but it means I get more time with her. More time to talk to her and smell her fresh scent and have cuddles with her little ruby Cavalier King Charles spaniel. Cuddles with Daisy would be better, but I'll take cuddles with the dog over nothing.

She got Westley in the off-season and doesn't like leaving him alone for so long. Luckily, her brother's family moved closer and his wife works from home and

offered to look after him when we're overseas or have long training days.

I understand why she cracked and got him. It's lonely working long hours and leaving the country for weeks when you don't have anyone to come home to. It makes her life more complicated, but she fell in love with him when she saw a breeder advertisement on TradeMe when she was looking for a car and couldn't imagine her life without him, so here we are making accommodations for her puppy who she essentially co-parents with her brother's family. Thankfully, her niece has learned to pat Westley gently. For a few weeks there, I thought her entire family was going to break apart.

I open the gate to her garden and make sure it's closed firmly behind me so Westley doesn't escape, and knock on the ranchslider.

Daisy appears and gestures for me to come in, and I step into her space. It's decorated in light blue and reminds me of the ocean. Westley skitters on the linoleum floor and yips hello. His tail wags so quickly he falls over. I bend to scratch behind his ears, and Daisy slips his lead on while I'm distracting him.

She's braided her hair away from her face and hasn't put her cap on yet so I can see her whiskey eyes. She's in the uniform the staff wear, a loose black tracksuit in rainproof material. Long sleeves and long pants, the only skin showing are her hands and face; she'd freeze otherwise with how small she is. Unfortunately, it covers her toned arms and round ass, but I shouldn't be looking at her like that, anyway.

I'm wearing the pink jersey and black shorts the players wear to train, unity and all that shit, and always have more skin showing than her. I prefer the cold and overheat easily, especially when I'm pressed against other guys in a scrum. And Daisy always focuses on my arms when I wear short sleeves. Or at least I think she does.

"You ready?"

“Yep.” She grabs her bags by the door, and I take Westley’s lead from her so she doesn’t trample the dog under all her stuff.

I open the boot, keep Westley away from our feet, and take the bags from her, piling them on top of mine.

I round the car to open the passenger door for her, and when she’s seated, I pick up Westley and settle him on her lap.

I pull into the quiet street and turn the corner towards her brother’s. Daisy lifts the takeaway cup I left for her in the cup holder and takes a sip. She drinks a green thing called matcha that tastes like grass before switching to coffee when we get to training. She laughed in my face when I tried it, and if I hadn’t been trying to avoid puking all over the steering wheel, I would have enjoyed her wide smile. If I have time in the mornings, I try to grab her some from our local café.

She’s quiet this morning, staring out the window and absently running her fingers through Westley’s silky coat. Sometimes if she has a restless night, she’s quieter, the same way I’m quieter after a game.

My phone rings through the bluetooth system when we’re ten minutes away from her brother’s, and I glance at who it is. “Do you mind if I answer?” I ask. “It’s Mum.”

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“Go for it.”

I click a button on the steering wheel to accept the call. “Talofa. Daisy’s in the car with me, Mum. How are you?”

She ignores me and says in English, “Hello, Daisy, how are you? Keeping Jamie in top shape?”

I roll my eyes while Daisy replies, “Talofa lava, Mrs Atoa. Of course I’m keeping him in top shape. How else will we win the Freedom Cup? We’re heading to training now.”

Mum laughs. “Good, I’d trust no one else.”

I glance at Daisy and see red creeping into her cheeks and decide to save her before Mum incriminates me or causes Daisy to melt into a puddle of embarrassment. I switch to Samoan and ask, “Is everything okay?”

Thankfully, Mum takes the hint and switches from English too. “Everything’s fine. I wanted to check on you. I didn’t know you were still carpooling with her. Asked her out yet?”

“Mum,” I hiss and check that Daisy isn’t following the conversation. I’m pretty sure she doesn’t know Samoan, but it would be just my luck she decided to learn it to fuck with me.

Mum cackles. “What? Too shy, baby?”

“No! It’s more complicated than that.” I blow out a slow breath before I say something to induce her wrath. “How are you and Dad? Milani said you watched the game and your sisters are flying in for a visit.” My youngest sister, Milani, gleefully texts me while I’m on the field with ways to improve and occasionally asks if I’m still alive when I’m sent off the field for an HIA test. Which has decreased over the years as I get more careful. I do not want the issues that come with constant concussions.

“They’re here for a while so it would be good if you could visit,” Mum says, which translates to find time to visit.

“I’ll come by in a few days.”

“Bring Daisy.”

“I’m not bringing Daisy.”

Daisy looks at me as I pull into her brother’s driveway and raises her eyebrows. She may not speak Samoan, but she knows the sound of her name.

“I’ve gotta go, Mum. Love you.”

“Bring her!”

I end the call and rub a rough hand over my eyes. God love my family, but must they be so interfering? I’m lucky Mum hasn’t demanded access to the sheds to meet Daisy when she attends games. So far, they’ve only spoken on the phone.

“You okay?”

I unbuckle my seat belt and turn to scratch under Westley’s chin. “Is your family as

interfering as mine?”

“You’d think having parents who forget we exist, Sage would be less interested in my life. Yet here we are dropping off my dog, and I’ll get texts from Poppy all day asking about ‘my boys.’” I swear to God, if I’m not one of her boys, I’ll cry. She smiles and it lights up her face. My lips twitch to return it. “It’s the best. Even if for some reason they decided to continue the one family tradition we have of naming kids after plants. Poor Violet.”

I laugh. “You’re right, having family is the best. Even if they name you after flowers you kill within a day.”

“Hey! It took me three days to kill them.”

For her birthday last year, I got her a bouquet of daisies. It was her thirtieth, and I wanted to buy her a present but didn’t want to make her uncomfortable; flowers were my workaround. Two days later it was my carpool day, and when I picked her up they were wilted in a vase without water.

I narrow my eyes at her until she breaks. “Fine, I killed them. Let’s go before we’re late and Alex kills you.” I hold my fist out until she bumps it with hers, low five her hand gently, and squeeze the tips of her fingers before I let go, and leave the heated car for the damp drizzle.

She sets Westley on the concrete who races to the door and tugs against the lead with his tiny body, turning to glare at her when she doesn’t walk quickly enough.

The front door opens before we reach it and Poppy, Daisy’s sister-in-law, appears in front of us. Sage took keeping flora and fauna names in the family to the next level by marrying someone with a flower name.

Westley dives at her, and Poppy crouches to rub his tummy. He preens under the attention. “Hey, Daze. How’s it going, Jamie? Hamstring feel all good?”

“Never better, all thanks to this one.” I nudge Daisy with my shoulder.

“I’m glad she’s earning her keep.” Poppy lets us through the door and envelopes Daisy in a hug, and then tugs me into one. I bend so she doesn’t need to reach as far and pat her shoulder. While Poppy’s hugs are nice, I wish it were Daisy.

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“Where’s my baby?” Daisy demands and lets Westley off the lead to roam around the house.

“Your baby is still sleeping as it’s a teacher only day today, and apparently primary school takes it out of her. Sage is at the shop today.”

Daisy pouts. “I wanted to see her.”

“I’ll let Sage know he wasn’t missed,” Poppy says with a smirk.

The love between the siblings goes without saying. Sage named his flower shop after Daisy when she lent him money to get it started. You don’t do that unless you’re close. I ordered her birthday flowers from his shop, and once you’ve received flowers from Daisy Chains, other florists don’t compare.

“Sage knows I only visit him for his girls.”

Poppy and I lock eyes and smile fondly. Daisy loves her brother, and it’s clear to see whenever she talks about him. When one of the boys asks about her family, she lights up.

“You have time for a coffee?”

Daisy shakes her head. “No, sorry, we’re running a little late.”

We aren’t, but if we stay for coffee, we will be. We only made that mistake once. When they get talking, time ceases to exist.

“Okay, we’ll try find some time before you leave for South Africa to have dinner.” Poppy nods at me. “You’re invited too.”

Daisy’s head jerks to me, but I answer before she panics. “Thank you, but my presence has been commanded for my own family dinner.”

“One day I’ll match up everyone’s schedules.” Poppy sighs and says, “I’ll settle Westley in your garden around four.”

“Thanks, Pop.” Daisy tugs her into a hug and kisses her cheek. “See you in a few days, and Violet better be awake.”

“Your demand is nothing to hers. Have a good training session.” She huddles in a cable-knit jumper and waves us off in the drizzle that’s quickly turning to rain.

When we arrive at the training area, we head straight to the medic room so Daisy can strap my whole body, or what feels like my whole body, and massage my tight hamstring.

“Morning, Adam,” she calls out.

“Hey, Daze. How’s it going, Jamie?”

“Good, mate. Can’t wait for the torture.” I dump my bag by the wall and notice someone in the corner, and I frown. “What are you doing here so early?”

Hemi shoves his hands deeper into his hoodie pockets, which tugs the hood further over his face, and shrugs. “Wanted to talk to Daisy.”

“Hey, Hemi.” Daisy appears beside me, and I jump when she touches a hand to my lower back and murmurs, “I’m going to work on him first since he’s here. That

okay?”

“No worries,” I reply, keeping my voice quiet so I don’t spook Hemi. I don’t know why he’s here, but if he looks that worried seeing me, I’d rather sit back and let Daisy work her magic than demand her time first.

“How’s your sister? She enjoy the game?” Daisy asks, dragging a chair over to him and sits. The questions get him to shove his hood down and give her a smile.

“The company she works for has a corporate box, and she’s started sending me zoomed in videos. Not of me being awesome.” His nose scrunches.

Daisy winces. “Brutal. All right, on the table and I’ll take a look.”

I sit in the corner against the wall with my legs stretched out and grab my phone. The medic room is wide open with multiple tables for Adam and Daisy to work with and room to take us through exercises. No private rooms for physio, need to know how everyone on the team feels and where they’re at. It’s never been an issue, but it’s clear Hemi isn’t comfortable with it.

Daisy takes him to the table in the far corner, and he removes his hoodie so she can massage his shoulder before taping it up. His dominant arm. Not exactly a good sign. Especially knowing we have two games with South Africa. Our most brutal opponents, and they have the home advantage. Don’t want injuries on top of that or we’ll be worse off for the last game with Australia.

Alex is announcing the match day squad and the starting fifteen in a few days. No wonder Hemi is concerned. Fighting against thirty-five men to be one of the twenty-three in the match day squad, let alone the starting fifteen, is stressful enough, put a niggle in your muscles, something that feels off that could turn into an injury if you aren’t careful, and suddenly you second guess everything and have to remember

techniques the team psychologist makes you do for a clear mind. Not letting the little things get in the way, but being aware of your body and listening to your limits is important.

Hard to do when there are always younger guys coming from club and coach mixes things up to see how they do.

I don't blame Hemi for not wanting to confront whatever's happening, but it means it could get worse when it doesn't need to.

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Daisy sends him away with tape on his shoulder and exercises to do after training she'll check in on. "Jamie, up you come." She pats the sanitised bench.

I hop on the bench and lie on my stomach so she can work on my hamstring. It's not injured...yet. But I have a bad feeling and want to take precautions. It's my weight-bearing leg in the scrum, and having that many dudes press their entire weight into my shoulders and down my legs, well, I'm feeling it.

She pushes my shorts up high on my right leg and tucks them under my thigh. The only reason I don't get a semi is because I know the pain that's coming.

Her hands land on my thigh, covered in a cream that smells like honey and herbs. She leaves the scent in my car, and one day I want it in my bedroom. The cream gives her hands slip, and she presses hard, pushing her hands to the bottom of my ass and dragging them back down.

"Ah, fuck," I grunt. How her hands create that much pressure when she barely reaches my shoulders, I don't know.

"One, two, three," she counts down as she digs her fingers into me and then, merciful God, she stops.

My head drops and I breathe deeply like she always reminds me.

"Ready for another?"

"Yep."

Her hands land closer to my knee and sweep up to my upper thigh, and she begins again. “Count for me.”

“One, two, three.” I wipe sweat off my cheek with my shoulder. “I still don’t understand how you make it hurt so much. You’re half my size.”

“Just because I’m not hooker size doesn’t mean I’m not strong.” She sweeps her hands up my thigh, and I tense.

“So you prove every day. Is it weird I like coming here?”

Daisy pauses in her torture. “To have this done?”

“Yeah.” A groan rips from low in my throat.

She huffs a tiny laugh. “It means you’re a masochist.”

I probably shouldn’t tell her I like coming here because it means she touches me. Putting up with her strong hands, literally rubbing out the kinks in my body, is a small price to pay to feel them on my skin.

“Your company makes it palatable.” I decide is a neutral answer and don’t say anything else.

“I’m glad I make it worth it,” she says deadpan, not realising that she does. She makes it worth it, gives me something to look forward to when I need the medic room.

After I don’t even know how long, she tapes me up, takes me through some exercises, and I head to training. I push Daisy into her compartment in my mind and focus on taping my ears to prepare for the day.

CHAPTER THREE

Jamie

Daisy shuts the gate behind her with a wave, bags crashing against her thigh, and when I see her disappear into the house, I reverse out of her driveway and head down the street to park in my garage.

I leave my stuff in the car, too tired to deal with it now, and enter the house through the door in the garage, slipping off my shoes and rolling my neck. To cook or order food? I open the fridge and purse my lips at the offerings. Do I follow the nutritionist's instructions or make my life more difficult tomorrow and go off-book? My phone buzzes in my pocket and I fish it out, expecting the call to be one of my sisters or Mum. I frown when the screen lights up with Daisy's name. Why is she calling me? She never calls me, and I saw her less than five minutes ago when I dropped her off.

I accept the call and don't even get a word out.

Her tear-filled voice gasps, "I can't find Westley."

Tension shoots through me at the sound of her voice so distressed. I've never heard it like that before. Tight and high. "I'm coming up." I grab my keys and slam the front door behind me.

I jog up the dark street and find her waiting by the gate, phone clutched to her ear, even though we haven't said anything since I left and the only sound is our ragged breathing. I end the call when I reach her and take in her face. My chest clenches, and I fist my hands to stop myself from reaching for her. She looks awful. Pale and drawn, almost green, freckles stark against her skin, and her whiskey eyes are wide and glow with unspilled tears.

“I can’t find him, Jamie. He isn’t here. He didn’t say hi when I arrived like usual and wasn’t on his bed where Poppy leaves him.” Her voice grows tighter as she speaks until she can barely talk.

I take her phone from her shaking hands and ask, “Did you check Poppy dropped him off? She didn’t get caught up with anything?”

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“I don’t know!” She tugs a violent hand through her hair, and I frown when she rips strands from her scalp. I take her hand and squeeze it. It shakes in mine.

“I’ll call Poppy and check.” I wait as she puts in her password and finds Poppy’s contact. Right below mine. Apparently we text more than her family, but I realise it vaguely as I click the call button.

“Hey, Daze, everything okay?”

“Hi, Poppy, it’s Jamie.”

“What’s the matter?” she asks sharply. “Is Daisy okay?”

“Everything’s fine, hopefully. We’re having trouble finding Westley and wanted to check you dropped him off.”

“I dropped him off a while ago. I set him up in the outdoor kennel and made sure the gate was closed. He’s gone?”

“Looks like it. Thanks, Poppy, see you later.” I hang up to update Daisy, who’s been clutching my hand the whole time, her glassy eyes fixated on me. “She dropped him off and put him in the kennel.”

Daisy’s chin quivers, and she whispers, “He’s gone?”

“We’re gonna find him,” I promise and hope it’s true. “You’ve checked inside and the garden?”

She nods. “Whenever I come home, he runs up to me. He’s always done it. He’s not here.” She takes a shaky breath and bites her lip. “Once, when he was really little, he escaped under the gate and I found him across the road.”

There’s enough light to see a gap between the gate and the concrete path. Fuck. This is going to be a long night.

“Okay, so we search the streets.”

“Okay.”

I keep hold of her hand and begin the walk to the end of the street and back, keeping an eye out for a small, red body and call his name. Daisy is panicked. I can hear it in her voice and the fact she hasn’t realised she’s still holding my hand.

I hiss when I step on a rock and discover I’m not wearing shoes. Hearing her upset on the phone centred my focus on her, and I left my shoes in the garage. Can’t go back now. I’m not leaving her on her own to search for her missing pet while I find shoes.

The path is damp with rain from a few hours ago and wind tunnels down the street. Streetlights cast shadows on Daisy’s face, highlighting the tightness around her mouth that’s usually quick to spread in a smile.

We reach the bottom of the street and make our way up the other side, checking under trees and peering into dimly lit front gardens.

“What if he’s cold? Or hurt?” she says at the top of the street when we haven’t found him. She’s clutching my arm now, holding on for dear life, and I can’t help tugging her into a hug. Our first hug and it’s an attempt to stop her from crying.

My chin rests on her head and I tuck her into me, enveloping her entirely in my arms.

“He’s smart. We’ll find him, or he’ll find his way home by himself when he gets bored exploring and wants dinner. Is there anywhere he’s particularly interested in?”

She sniffs and rubs her cold nose against my chest and shivers. “Not that I can think of.”

“What about the bush reserve a street over?” I wrap my arms tighter around her shoulders and waist, trying to make sure she’s warm. She’s still in her uniform, but the wind’s clearly burrowing through the material, leaving her skin chilled.

She stiffens and lifts her head so our foreheads press together. “But it’s so big, we’d never find him.”

“We will.” I grab her hand again and tug her towards the next street. To the bush with winding dirt pathways and wooden bridges that need maintenance with rivers below them a puppy could be swept away in. “We’ll find him.”

We reach the entrance to the reserve and wash our shoes, or feet in my case, so we don’t bring unwanted diseases to the native trees, and call for Westley. I flinch when a ruru swoops over us with its eerie screech. Wind whistles through the trees as we move deeper into the bush, careful to stay on the track, and I turn my phone torch on as we leave the streetlights.

As we get to the first fork in the track there’s a faint yip, and Daisy gasps and yells his name. We follow the pathway with the scared yapping and reach a bridge.

“Westley,” she calls and he barks and then whines, high-pitched and panicked. “Westley, where are you?”

I edge around the short bank leading to the water and shine the light under the bridge. “He’s down here.”

His whines get higher when he notices me, and his shaking body topples with the force of his wagging tail.

“Hi, Westley. Hi, baby.” Daisy appears over my shoulder. “Can you reach him?”

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“I think so.” He’s wedged under the bridge on the slight hill before the water. There’s not much of a current, so he could get out if he wanted. Looks like he climbed through the triangle of wood bracing the bridge and hasn’t realised he can get out. I hand the torch to Daisy who shines it directly at Westley so I can see everything.

I reach my hand out to Westley, who licks it enthusiastically. My hand scoops under his tummy, and I slowly carry him out over the water. He stays still as I hold him one-handed, as if he knows he’ll fall in the water if he struggles, and then I have two hands on him and he’s safe in my arms, licking all over my face.

I take my phone back and hand Westley to Daisy, who takes his wriggling body and bursts into tears. Westley licks her tears away, and I can’t stop myself from drawing them both into my arms. My hand rests on her hair and sifts through the escaped strands of her plait, and my other arm wraps loosely around her hips. Westley squirms between us, and when he trembles and Daisy shivers in my arms, I decide we need to make our way back to warmth. They can continue their reunion in a heated house. Walking barefoot through our neighbourhood and into the bush was not on my agenda tonight, and I’m starting to feel the cold now. Shorts, bare feet, and a T-shirt is not a good uniform to find lost puppies and keep short women warm.

“Let’s head back.”

She nods against my chest, and I keep an arm looped around her hips as we walk slowly to my house; her shivers becoming more violent as we get closer. We make a quick stop at her place, and I grab the bags she dropped before she got into the house, food for Westley, and go further down the road to my place. She makes a half-hearted protest when I tell her she’s staying at mine, but when I point out she’s still crying

and trembling, she follows me down the street and into my home without protest.

I quickly rinse off my feet with the freezing hose water before I follow her inside and find her shoes neatly lined up beside mine.

She's standing in the middle of the lounge, holding Westley to her chest, who's turning his head every which way in the new space. "His paws are dirty. Is there somewhere I can wash him?"

Her tears have stopped, which is a good sign, but her cheeks are red and splotchy and her eyes are brighter than usual, almost feverish.

"Yeah. Bring him through here." I take her to the guest room and into its ensuite. I set her bags by the door. "Feel free to use anything in here."

"Do you mind if I shower?" She looks smaller in the large bathroom with tears staining her cheeks.

"Go for it. This is your space. Use it however you want." I tug her into another hug when her chin quivers at the simple sentence. Everything's hitting her at once, and I can't stop myself from touching her, from trying to keep her warm and let her know I'm here if she wants me. "I'll order dinner, okay?"

She nods and pulls away from me. "Thanks, Jamie. I don't know what I would have done without you." She sniffs and says, "I think you're my best friend."

Warmth rushes through me, chasing away the chill from the walk, and I smile at her faintly and swipe a stray tear from her face. "Good, because you're mine." And she is. Even if I have more feelings than her, it doesn't mean she's not also my best friend. I just happen to have extra feelings on top of it. "I'll see you soon."

I change into track pants and a long-sleeved shirt before ordering dinner, deciding we need the comfort of pizza, and ignore what's in my fridge.

The food arrives, and I set everything on the coffee table and turn the TV on to play reruns of a sitcom. Mindless joy for us to calm down to.

Westley reappears first with damp paws and sniffs out the food I put in a bowl for him and scoffs it happily, clearly recovered from his impromptu frolic through native bush. Daisy follows him with tangled wet hair, making her look a little bit like a drowned rat, wearing a bright pink loungewear set and fuzzy white socks that look as soft as her skin. I've never seen her like this, not relaxed exactly, considering everything that's happened tonight, but soft and comfortable, ready to curl up on the couch and go to sleep.

She's never looked more beautiful.

She gives me a tiny smile and collapses on the couch beside me, resting her head on my arm with a sigh. I force myself not to tense in surprise. It's not that I don't want her pressed against me with her head on my arm, her wet hair making my sleeve damp. I just didn't expect it. Didn't expect her to want more physical affection after she calmed down, but if she's comfortable with it, I'm definitely onboard.

"How are you feeling?"

"Tired," she mumbles through a yawn, "but I texted Poppy that we found him."

"Good. Eat some food and then you can sleep. We have an early morning tomorrow." I hand her a plate and she stacks it with food while I do the same.

She relaxes against the couch, keeping herself close enough to touch, and we eat dinner together with the TV on in the background. Something I've dreamed about

before but never thought I'd have. And now it's happening because her puppy ran away and she's traumatised by tonight, not because she wants to be here curled up beside me.

It leaves me disconcerted. I'm happy she's here and want her to stay, but I'm worried she'll feel uncomfortable tomorrow morning when she realises how physically affectionate we've become in such a short span of time.

Yes, we have our handshake, but we don't sit beside each other on couches, and we definitely don't hug each other or eat dinner together.

After we've eaten, we stay on the couch as one episode turns into another and another until her head keeps falling off my shoulder as she shocks herself awake.

"I think you need to go to bed," I say quietly.

"Hmm. You're probably right," she responds, but doesn't move.

I nudge her off me to see her face properly, her heavy eyelids swollen from crying. "Then how come you aren't moving?"

"Because you're warm and the sheets will be cold."

"The sooner you get in them, the sooner they'll warm up." And I ignore the offer I want to make to get in them with her and warm her up. Now is not the time.

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She pouts at me and sighs heavily. “You’re right.”

Daisy stands and takes a step towards the bedroom, but turns back to me. She bends and presses a fleeting kiss on my cheek. “Thank you for tonight.”

The bedroom door clicks shut after Westley skitters inside with her, and I stay on the couch and watch another episode with the feeling of her warm lips on my cheek.

CHAPTERFOUR

Daisy

I push the cold nose off my cheek and squint at the faint light coming through the curtains. “Go away, Westley.” He leaves me with a faint whimper and my eyes fall shut. I press a finger between my eyebrows and attempt to rub away the incoming headache. I shift my head and frown when there’s a tugging sensation at my scalp. Checking over my shoulder, I gasp in outrage when I find Westley chewing on the bottom of my braid.

“Fine, I’ll get up,” I grumble. The clock’s glowing an offensive six o’clock, so it’s time to get ready for work.

I slip out of the soft sheets with a yawn that cracks my jaw, and Westley jumps off the bed and skitters out of the room when I open the door. I find him by the door to the back garden, and he whines when I walk too slow. My eyes roll fondly, and I open the door for him. He launches himself off the deck and onto the grass, prancing through the dew and finding the perfect place to do his business. I close the door

against the crisp air, swiftly sweeping my sleepiness away, and cross my arms as I watch him to make sure he doesn't escape Jamie's garden.

I rub my head again and blow out a slow breath. Jamie. The most helpful and amazing human who kept me significantly calmer than I would have been without him. Who helped me find my puppy in bare feet after a long day of training and then made me stay with him so I wouldn't be alone.

I used his shower.

And he hugged me and wiped tears from my face and ordered food for us and made sure I was comfortable. Something in my stomach flutters as I let Westley inside. He darts past me, claws clicking on the dark hardwood floors, and when I turn, there he is. Jamie, crouched on the floor to rub behind Westley's ears exactly how he likes it. Dressed in the same soft shirt my hair wet last night and baggy track pants I have to concentrate not to look at. His black hair is mussed with sleep and a faint line from the sheets bisects his left cheek.

It's true what I told him last night. He is my best friend. I just didn't realise it until he was the number I called in an emergency. It was Jamie I wanted with me. Not Sage or Poppy or Liam, but Jamie.

He's my most used contact, and it's not even for work. Most of our texts are about interviews we hear on the radio or a new TV show one of us started. I didn't realise until last night. Didn't realise we message every day after work and that it's something I look forward to, something that's turned into more.

I flush when he stands and stares at me, remembering the warmth of his arm around my hips. Of my head on his arm and his large, gentle hand on my face. I swallow harshly and ignore the swirling in my stomach.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better. Tired. Stressed. Annoyed at him, but really glad we found him.” I step closer to Jamie and make a decision.

We broke our unspoken rule of not touching last night, and I could really use another one of his hugs. To be completely surrounded by him. I glance at his dark eyes following me, duck my head, and wrap my arms around his waist, squeezing tight and sighing into his chest. His arms wrap around me, one around my shoulders and the other on my waist, and it feels right.

“Thank you, Jamie. Thank you for helping me find him and making me stay here so I wasn’t alone and—just, everything. Thank you for being you.” My hands run up to his shoulders and back to his waist.

“Of course, Daisy, of course I’d help. I’d do anything for you.” He clears his throat roughly. “I don’t like seeing you upset.” He clutches me closer and rests his cheek on my hair. His breathing ruffles the strands, tickling my scalp and sending shivers down my spine.

I lean back to see his face. “I’d do anything for you too. You know that, right?”

And I would, I just didn’t realise until yesterday. Stupid, not realising someone is so important to you until a crisis happens, but I know now, and I need him to know he’s not alone in this. Whatever this is.

He nods and shifts his arm from my shoulders to tuck a piece of hair behind my ear and rubs a finger over my cheekbone. “Yeah, I know.”

“Good.” I reluctantly step out of his arms and hold my hand out, wiggling my fingers until he slaps it gently, but this time he doesn’t just squeeze my fingertips. He grasps

my hand, turns it over, and presses a kiss to my knuckles like a fucking Jane Austen hero. Our eyes stay locked the whole time, and all I want to do is tug him back into my arms.

He releases my hand and it drops to my side, tingles running from my fingertips all the way to my chest. “Come on, let’s get ready or we’ll be late.”

I follow him to the kitchen, limbs numb, and blink at him. When I kissed him on the cheek last night, it was to thank him, to show some affection after the ordeal. It didn’t hold more meaning than that. But... I want to grab his shirt, pull him to my level, and feel his lips on mine.

What the fuck is happening?

“I don’t have any of that green stuff, but we can buy some on the way.”

I nod and sit on a bar stool. Is he more than my best friend? Do I have more feelings than friendship? My eyes track over his face, his full lips, and messy hair, the crease on his cheek from his sheets, and a strange comforting warmth spreads through my stomach and chest, and I smile at the picture he makes. It fades quickly, and my stomach drops.

I’m so fucked.

* * *

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It's my turn to drive but Jamie does instead claiming I'm traumatised by last night. He's not entirely wrong about the traumatised bit. I cleared it with Adam to bring Westley with me today—he just needs to stay out of the way—and I set him up in a corner away from everyone. I don't want him out of my sight, and I need to figure out how to block the gap in the gate before I leave him in the garden. And also Poppy feels bad about it even though it's not her fault. I don't want to stress her. She doesn't deserve that.

That's how I end up at a café on my break, sitting outside in the wind with grey clouds threatening rain, with Westley at my feet chewing on a toy, and Liam staring at me across the table over his cappuccino.

“He what?”

“He ran away.”

“Not Westley, what did Jamie do?”

“He helped me find him and made me stay with him.”

Liam rolls his eyes. “And the bit about the hugging and wanting to kiss him? What about that?”

“What about it?” I lean down to pat Westley and avoid Liam's eyes.

We've been friends since second year uni when we both ended up living in the same six-person flat that tested the health code. He was doing an English degree while I

studied sports science. And even though I don't read the fantasy books he writes, and he doesn't watch the TV shows and movies I love, we bonded over rugby. He's the one that got me into it.

Before Liam, I was focused on netball and hadn't watched many rugby games despite being born and raised in Auckland. My parents weren't interested in it and neither was Sage, so besides playing a few touch rugby games in PE at school, I hadn't been exposed to it.

Watching that first game with Liam? It transformed me. Caught my attention and it hasn't shifted yet. Not even when I played a game and came away with a sprained ankle and a cut on my knee I still have a scar from.

"You know exactly what. It's taken you this long to realise you treat him differently than your other friends?"

"We work together."

"You have special handshakes with the other players and kiss their cheeks?" Liam stares at me intensely.

"No, but that doesn't mean anything. And I only kissed his cheek once," I mumble.

"It means everything. It means you're comfortable with him. You never kiss my cheek."

"That's because you're my friend, and I don't—" I cut myself off and swear violently.

He sips his coffee. "Exactly. I'm your friend, and in the nearly ten years we've known each other, you've not once kissed my cheek. Because you do that to people

you want to fuck.”

“Hey!” I glance furtively around the café and hope no one’s listening.

“Fine,” he amends. “People you want to be in a relationship with.”

My head drops into my hands, and I rub my temples. “I don’t know what I’m going to do. I work for him.”

He scoffs. “No, you don’t. You both work for NZR. You’d probably only need to sign a disclosure form and stop treating him.”

Technically, Liam’s right. We’re both contracted by New Zealand Ruby, so I don’t work for Jamie, but he is my patient. I’d be breaking the patient code of conduct if we do anything while I’m treating him. I could lose my licence. “But I like treating him.”

“If you stopped treating him, you might be able to date him.”

Also technically true. Though hazy with former patients, if our relationship developed away from the professional environment, which it did with the carpooling, it wouldn’t be as huge of a code of conduct issue.

“I know, but...” I raise my head. “I don’t know if he wants that, and I don’t want to throw him off his game during the championship or make him uncomfortable.”

Liam’s probably right. I’d talk to management and sign something to make sure there wasn’t a power imbalance and Adam would take him on. But I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to make him uncomfortable or assume anything. And I don’t want to talk to him about my newfound feelings in the middle of the championship and throw him off.

“He’s a dude. He’s a dude you carpool with, and he helped you find your dog and made you sleep in his house and probably dried your tears. He wants that.”

“But how do you know that? What if he’s just being nice?”

“Because I’m also a dude, and when I want to sleep with a guy, I do the same thing.”

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I scowl at him. “You’re deliberately nicer to them because you want sex?”

“No.” He rolls his eyes. “I go above and beyond for them because I want them to know I care for them. That they’re on my mind. The same thing you both do. Even if it’s just a friend thing, you clearly care about each other. Just think about telling him. Maybe after the season when you both have more free time?”

“I’ll think about it,” I promise. And I will. This is all new, and it seems like a jump to talk to him when I’ve just started realising my feelings might not be as platonic as I’d thought. “How’d the meeting go?”

“Great. They’re really happy with the pitch, and my agent’s organising everything.”

Liam’s in Auckland to meet with his publisher to discuss his new book. He doesn’t need to come up to meet them, but whenever they call a meeting, he flies up from Wanaka to see me and his family.

“That’s so exciting. Congratulations.” I squeeze his hand. “How many do they want?”

“A trilogy,” he says with a grin.

“Liam, that’s amazing! Another fantasy series to take the world by storm,” I say in a dramatic voice. “Robots and magical planets.”

“I write fantasy, not sci-fi, but thank you. I’m flying back tonight and will hole up with my laptop and probably won’t see you for five months.”

He's a pasty-white colour only reclusive redheads can achieve. He doesn't even have freckles anymore from his lack of sun. And he's not entirely wrong about not seeing him for months when he's in draft mode. He usually responds to his messages on Fridays, and then I don't hear from him for another week. If not longer. I know when he's hit a block by the amount of memes he sends me during the week.

"Want some company for the week to make sure you leave the house?" I ask coyly.

His eyes narrow. "Who? Why? It's not you. You're flying out in a few days."

"Match day squad dropped today."

"Ah. Who was left out?"

"Hemi. He's been given the week off. He's having some issues with his shoulder, but he's not injured. He's overthinking it all." It was announced on the radio on the way to work so it's public knowledge.

We knew Jamie was on the squad because he didn't receive a call from Alex. Alex always calls the boys who don't make the squad before the announcement. If you're on the match day squad, no phone calls are good. Being given the week off though, from the match and training? That means you need a break and everyone's noticed. It also means the coaches are trying out fresh blood, and you better come back better than before.

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"Let him stay with you, away from everyone, and he can get out of his head to relax."

Liam shakes his head. "You think staying with someone he's never met before will help him get out of his head? That wouldn't work for either of us."

“No, but it means he’s away from Auckland and his teammates and will be surrounded by nature to relax. The air’s fresher down there.” Crisper than the pollution in Auckland.

“I don’t think he’ll want that.”

“He already said yes because he’s desperate to sort his head out.” I smile widely at Liam. “Please? He needs some space. He probably won’t even talk to you. And if he does, it’s because I told him to take you out so you don’t die from a Vitamin D deficiency.”

Liam scrubs a hand over his face, and I know what his answer will be, which is the only reason I mentioned it to Hemi. “Fine. Give me his number and I’ll set it up, but I’m only doing this because I love you.”

I laugh. “You’re doing it because you have a crush on him.”

“Who wouldn’t,” he mutters.

I give him Hemi’s details and hug him goodbye, very aware of the fact I don’t have the inclination to kiss his cheek.

“Good luck in South Africa. And think about what I said.” Liam waves goodbye and heads towards his hotel.

As if I’ll be able to think about anything except Jamie, and the fact my brain has apparently decided to acknowledge I’m interested in more than being platonic.

Much more.

CHAPTERFIVE

Jamie

Ever since we found Westley under the bridge and broke our unspoken rule about no physical affection, things with Daisy have been amazing. Not that it isn't always amazing, but I feel like I don't need to hide my feelings as much. She hasn't said anything about me kissing her hand at the end of our handshake, so I keep doing it. Every night, I kiss her hand and go home and jerk off to the sensation of her skin on my lips.

Pathetic, but also the only thing I've got.

At work it's still the same, no hand kisses, and no staying at my place. The guest room doesn't even smell like her because she used my soap and shampoo.

It's wishful thinking, but I swear she looks at me differently. More...attentively maybe? Or with more interest? Or I could be making something out of nothing. But why would she let me kiss her hand the past three nights if she wasn't interested?

I cross the airport lounge we're waiting in to board our next gruelling flight to reach South Africa. Two eleven hour flights is too long to sit in a cubicle and play top game immediately after. Thank fuck management decided to send us early, so we have a free day when we arrive to acclimatise and explore before training starts for the two games coming up.

I shake the plastic cup with ice in front of her face, and Daisy's eyes pop open. "I found some of the green shit you like."

“Thank Jesus Christ, you found some,” she exclaims and takes the sweating cup, wrapping her lips around the straw and hollowing her cheeks.

I glance away and take a seat beside her and sip my coffee. The team, coaches, and medic team are scattered around the lounge, reminding me we are technically at work. “I don’t think Jesus Christ will care I found you matcha.”

“He should. It means I won’t murder my neighbours.” I roll my eyes at the butchered commandments and tense when her hand lands on mine, resting on my thigh. She brushes my hand quickly and retreats. “Thank you for finding it for me. I appreciate it. I hate flying.”

“I know, but we’re sitting together for the next leg, so we could watch a movie together and distract ourselves. And then, before you know it, you’ll be in a hotel bed with room service on the way.”

She sighs happily and settles deeper in the chair. “That sounds fantastic.”

We aren’t usually seated together, usually it’s random, but I asked management to seat us together. Besides a few raised eyebrows, no one said anything.

Suli keeps staring at me, his mouth buried under his beard, which I’ve decided to ignore and hope he forgets whatever has him looking like that. Pretty sure he’ll jump me as soon as training starts if his frown is anything to go by. Bloody captain knowing everything that goes on with his team.

He stares at the drink Daisy’s sipping and crosses his arms. I thought we’d been acting the same at work—nothing’s really changed—but something must be different if Suli’s dark eyes keep glaring at me whenever I get close to her. What’s worse is his glare is one of confusion and speculation, not of anger. If it were anger, we could work it out on the field. But I have a sinking feeling in my stomach he’s realised I

have feelings for Daisy. Ugh.

Can't a guy buy his physiotherapist a matcha every once in a while? Without anyone questioning his intentions?

I glance at Daisy smiling around the straw at her phone and avert my eyes when her cheeks hollow again. Fuck. Probably not.

I slip my phone out of my pocket and open an ebook to avoid staring at her and pretend everything is normal. I'm not about to have a semi in the airport lounge surrounded by my teammates.

She laughs at something on her phone and nudges my arm. "Sounds like Liam and Hemi are having a great time."

"I still can't believe Hemi went to Wanaka."

"He needs to get out of his head. They went hiking together," Daisy whispers gleefully.

"And that's big news because...?"

"Liam doesn't hike. He hibernates when he's drafting."

"He lives in Wanaka and he doesn't hike?" I hardly ever hike, but if you live by Lake Wanaka in the South Island, surrounded by the beautiful scenery, leading to alpine lakes and glaciers, you have to hike.

She shifts until her leg is on the chair, and her body faces mine. "I dragged him on a hike once when I visited him. Never again," she swears with a laugh.

“Well done Hemi. At least he can check out the filming locations for *The Lord of the Rings* while he’s there if hiking is off the table now.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t think of that! Liam would love that.” She types something on her phone quickly and stashes it in her bag when we’re called to board the plane while I’m still revelling in the sensation of being useful.

It’s an addicting sensation, one that spreads from my chest out to the rest of my body, leaving me hard-pressed to control my grin and the burn in my hand to hold hers. Instead, I busy myself with grabbing my bag and snagging hers. Holding her bag is fine, right? Just being polite.

My eyes scan the boys to see if anyone’s paying attention and cares. The only one who’s noticed is Suli. I sigh. I’m in for it now.

We show our tickets to the flight attendant, and she directs us to business class on the left. I follow Daisy to two seats halfway down the aisle and collapse into the aisle seat while she takes the window. I wriggle in the seat to get comfortable and spread my legs out, happy the aisle seat means there’s more legroom. Flying sucks. Flying when you’re a big guy is even worse, especially when you have to play a rugby game a few days after twenty-four hours of travel.

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At least it's business class. Once on a flight home we were in economy since we didn't have a game for a few days, so would theoretically have time to recover. We lost that game and management decided to shell out more money next time. I'm fine with economy if it's a shorter flight. But twenty-four hours? I'd rather stay at home.

"Comfy?" an amused voice asks me.

"Very."

She pokes her head around the divider between our seats and smiles at me. "Good. Don't want any tight muscles. Or people falling over because of how tired they are."

I snort and look around the seats to see if I can find Johnny. He had a rough go of it last season and did not take well to the long-distance flights. The kid's from Christchurch and had only flown to Aussie before, flying to South Africa was a shock to his system.

The only person who locks eyes with me is Suli, who's noticed Daisy sitting beside me. I look away quickly and ignore the tingling on my neck, letting me know he's still staring.

I'll need to deal with him sooner rather than later to make sure he doesn't cause any issues. He's not the kind of guy to do that, but he's also not the kind of guy who glares at me.

The plane takes off and people stand and move around and swap seats or tug their eye masks down and put noise cancelling headphones on. I pop my head around the

barrier to ask Daisy if she wants to watch a movie together and pause when I see her.

She's curled up in her chair, arms slack in her lap, mouth parted slightly, breathing in and out slowly. A strand of hair escaped her plait and is caught in whatever she's wearing on her lips. Some glossy thing that's hard to look away from. I lean forward and carefully swipe the strand of hair off her lips and behind her ear so she doesn't inhale it. She frowns in her sleep and sniffs, turning towards me, but settles. I shove down the urge to rub my thumb over her lips, deep down, and sit back in my seat to watch a movie to pass the time and pretend I don't want to watch Daisy sleep.

The day after we land is a free day to explore and acclimatise to the new time zone, and I manage to avoid Suli by joining the younger guys' sightseeing adventure. Which means I spent the day convincing them not to do stupid things that could hurt them before a big game. We're here to win the Freedom Cup, not jump off rocks.

I'm not so lucky during training.

I'm lying on my back, panting, when he corners me. He lies on the grass beside me and raises an eyebrow. I gulp water. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"You know like what. What do you want? I'm dying over here." I sit up and brush the grass out of my hair.

"I wanna know what's going on with you and Daisy."

My heart pounds and sweat prickles on the back of my neck. This time it has nothing to do with training. "Nothing."

Suli scoffs. "You've always been close, but not sitting on the plane close."

“The seats are selected randomly.” I don’t know why this is stressing me so much. Nothing’s happened between us, so there’s nothing to hide, but his dark eyes burn holes through me, and I feel like when Mum would catch me doodling on my homework instead of doing it. Dread about the incoming lecture.

“Sure, but usually the boys are put together. Can’t say I remember ever seeing a player sitting beside someone else.”

“Maybe they’re trying something new.” Damn it. Why couldn’t I control myself instead of asking them to seat her beside me? I would have survived without her. But it was calming seeing her face beside mine.

“Are you fucking her?”

“No!” I send a paranoid glance around the field, but no one’s paying attention. “And keep your voice down, you fucker.”

He rolls his eyes. “So what are you doing then?”

“Nothing. Unfortunately,” I mutter glumly.

“Ask her on a date. All you need to do is sign those relationship forms with management so they know there’s no abuse of power.” Suli shrugs and sits up beside me, stretching his legs out.

“I don’t know if she wants to date me. And it’s complicated since she’s my physio.” There’s probably a clause about physiotherapists not dating patients. Are they like doctors?

But she lets me kiss her hand. That’s not a platonic thing, is it?

“She drives you home after games.”

“So? We live on the same street. Any friend would do that.”

“I wouldn’t,” he murmurs.

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“That’s because you don’t like other people in your space. Doesn’t stop you gossiping, though.”

He raises an eyebrow, and I stop myself from slapping my hand over it. “Exactly. She doesn’t mind you in her space. She met your mum yet?”

I avert my gaze and mumble, “No, but they’ve talked on the phone. Mum wants me to bring her to dinner.”

Suli laughs and falls backwards, hitting the grass, messing up his tight curls he’s managed to maintain during training, and clutches his chest.

“If you don’t shut up, I will make you shut up,” I threaten and shove his shoulder. It doesn’t stop his laughter from fucking turning into giggles. Suli isn’t Samoan but his family’s Tongan, so he understands the importance of my mum wanting to meet Daisy. And we aren’t even dating.

“You’re screwed if your mum wants to meet her,” he says breathlessly after he finally stops giggling.

I sigh and lie on the grass again. “I know.”

“Talk to management anyway. So they know you’re in love with her and can cover your asses. It’s better she stops treating you now before they think something happened.”

I rub my chest. “Who said anything about love?”

“You didn’t need to, cuz. You bought her matcha.” Suli stands and drags me up with him. He claps my shoulder. “Talk to management before something happens and you both lose your jobs.”

“I’ll think about it.” I hesitate but decide to ask, “You don’t think what I’m doing is stupid? I thought all the glaring at the airport meant murder.”

“Thought you weren’t doing anything?”

“I’m not...but I want to. And sometimes I think she does too.”

“If all you wanted was to sleep with her, then it would be murder. But that’s not what you want, is it?” Suli asks.

“No, it’s not.”

“Then go about it the right way, so no one takes issue with it. You’ve kind of stuffed yourself falling in love with your medical provider.” He slaps my shoulder and jogs to the field where training’s beginning again and calls over his shoulder, “Good luck!”

I’m gonna need it.

I hadn’t considered involving management until something happens, or she agrees to date me. Don’t see a point in causing issues if there aren’t any. But I don’t want either of us to get in trouble, even if nothing happens. Maybe I should talk to management? Mention my feelings for her and ask for a different physio in case anything happens.

But...what if Daisy doesn’t want that? I don’t want to make her uncomfortable by telling her about my feelings if she doesn’t feel the same and doesn’t think involving

management is necessary. Either way, I still want her to be my friend.

I hold a tackle pad in front of my body and wait for Johnny to run at me. His cheeks are bright red, completely covering his white skin, and his sandy hair is dripping with sweat. I stagger under the impact, but keep my feet under me. Now isn't the time to figure out what to do about Daisy and management. I need to focus on winning the cup. That's what's important right now. When the season's over, I can talk to Daisy.

My new philosophy doesn't last long.

We're given Friday off to relax before the game tomorrow, and I'm in the hotel lounge with Suli and Johnny after dinner, playing go fish to pass the time. Some of the boys found a place to play basketball, others went swimming, but I need to forget about it all and make sure my body isn't too tired tomorrow. It's times like this I remember I'm one of the oldest guys on the team, and next season will probably be my last. My body is begging me to stop throwing myself at people. Doesn't mean I'll stop soon, though.

Daisy trudges through the lobby, head lowered.

If I retired, it would be easier to ask her out without the implications for our careers. I shut the thought down hard. I play for the national New Zealand rugby team, and I'm dreaming of retirement so I can ask out a woman? My sixteen-year-old self would kick me in the balls if he could hear me. A woman over footy? No way.

I track her walk to the lifts and frown when I notice her tightly crossed arms, hand white-knuckled on her phone, and a curtain of hair covering her face. She was more reserved today, didn't talk as much during training and smiled less. You'd only know there was something wrong if you knew what to look for. She doesn't usually have tight lines at the corner of her eyes, which added to everything else, confirms something's wrong.

Suddenly the woman does seem more important than footy. Family and friends last longer than the game I've played over half my life.

"Do you have the four of spades?"

"Go fish, J-boy. I gotta check on something." I drop my cards on the table and stand.

"What?" Suli asks.

"Something. See you tomorrow." I stride to the lifts and click level ten, ignoring Suli's searching gaze and Johnny's confused stare.

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The doors close and the lift dings when it reaches Daisy's level, letting me into the nondescript beige hallway. Somehow, Daisy crept up on the level of importance radar in my mind to surpass rugby to be on par with my family. Footy will end for me one day soon. I don't want to throw an opportunity away for my life after footy because of complications now. I'll make sure she's okay, and then I'll be on my way to prepare for tomorrow and figure out how to talk to management about us. About my side of us, at least.

I reach her room and knock on the door softly.

The door opens and what I see on her face causes me to push the door wider, enter the room, and close it behind me.

CHAPTERSIX

Daisy

The knock on the door forces my gaze from my phone and I open it numbly. Jamie's broad shoulders fill the doorway, and I blink at him. What's he doing here? He's never come to my room on a trip before. And I haven't for him either. It's a line we haven't crossed, going into each other's hotel rooms. We may be close friends, but it seems strange going to a player's bedroom. Especially when there are usually roommates.

He scans me quickly and frowns. Some of the anxiety must show on my face, and I step back when he opens the door wider and enters my hotel room for the first time. The door snaps closed in the quiet room. He's lucky it's my turn for a room to

myself, so we don't need to worry about a roommate.

"What's the matter?" he asks, staying close enough to feel his chest on my crossed arms when he breathes.

"Nothing."

"Then you walking like a zombie to the lift and barely recognising me just now is nothing? Barely able to smile in training, is you fine?"

I shake my head and step away from him to move deeper into the room. The feel of his shirt is distracting. His scent is heady, some sort of bergamot spice thing, different to the generic soap they use after games, and it's going straight to my head. I collapse on the foot of the bed, and he crouches in front of me, on the—probably disgusting—hotel carpet.

"I'm fine, really. Sage called. Apparently, Westley decided now would be a great time to eat a sock." I pinch the bridge of my nose in an attempt to stop the inevitable headache. "He's at the vet. He'll be fine, but..."

"But you want to be with him." Jamie rubs his hands on my knees in soothing circles.

"Yeah. I love this job and still can't believe I work for the freaking national rugby team, but sometimes I miss home."

"I get that. Especially when you miss big family moments. When my oldest sister gave birth, I didn't meet my nephew in person until he was six weeks old." He scrubs a hand through his hair. "She was pissed."

"I bet you made it up to her."

“Yep, but I would have loved to be there to support her and the family. Like you want to be with Westley, even though you know he’ll be okay.”

I pull at a loose thread in my jumper, a large cable-knit in sky-blue Poppy designed for me. I keep forgetting to ask her to fix it. “Sometimes I think about leaving. Joining a physio practice and having a nine-to-five, but this is the dream, you know?” Jamie rises from the floor and sits beside me on the bed and I bounce from the force of it. “But then I feel like an idiot. I’ve wanted this for so long. I don’t want to throw it away because I miss my dog and family.” I huff and cross my arms tightly to stop myself oversharing and ignore the heat in my cheeks. Jamie’s my friend. He would never use what I say against me, but it’s hard telling someone I might want to leave the national team.

“I know exactly what you mean. Don’t tell anyone—” he waits for my promise “—but sometimes I look forward to retirement.”

I swallow a shocked gasp. “You’re retiring?” He is one of the oldest on the team, but he still has a few years left in him if he wants to continue.

“Probably next season or the one after. I think if I do more than another two seasons, my body will cark it.” He looks at me ruefully. “You’re my physio. You know exactly what’s happening to my body and how long it takes to recover when I get injured.”

He’s not wrong. While he hasn’t injured himself in a while, I practically tape his whole body before a game and training. “Getting out before rugby takes your body isn’t a bad idea. Don’t need the concussion effects.” We share a quiet look, filled with the terrifying knowledge of what multiple concussions can do to a rugby player and their family. No one wants that.

“Well, if you leave before I retire,” he says in a bright voice, “I’ll refuse the new

physio and hunt you down at your new practice.”

I laugh and scoot up the bed until I’m leaning against the pillows, already feeling the tight knot of anxiety loosen having him here. “So I’m not allowed to leave until you do?”

“Who would drive me home from Eden Park?”

“A taxi?” I reply in a saccharine voice.

He joins me at the pillows. “But they won’t be as pretty as you. And they won’t know our handshake.”

Breath catches in my throat, and I force myself to inhale. He thinks I’m pretty?

Jamie stares at me. His warm brown eyes are dark and completely focused on me. He leans closer and I hold my breath, staying completely still, waiting to see what he does and if it involves kissing me.

His breath brushes my cheek, and my eyes fall closed. My heart beats through my chest, and my hands shake slightly. His lips land on the corner of my mouth, warm and soft, and then he pulls away.

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“Want to watch a movie? Talking about retiring is depressing, and I don’t want you obsessing about your pup,” Jamie says calmly, as if he didn’t just kiss the corner of my mouth and call me pretty.

With trembling, sweaty hands, I tuck hair behind my ears. “What about your card game?” When we have a game outside of Auckland, he always plays a card game with Suli and whoever else is around.

“Nah. I like it better here.”

“Okay. What do you want to watch?” So we’re ignoring what happened. I can do that. Probably. Maybe not, but if that’s what he wants, I’ll ignore it until he leaves and then remember his lips on the corner of mine. In detail.

“You have your laptop? We could watch Westley’s namesake,” Jamie suggests, getting more comfortable on the bed until he’s propped up with two pillows.

I haven’t been this close to him since he hugged me when we were looking for Westley. I’ve missed feeling him close. Feeling how warm he is and wishing I could burrow into his chest.

“You’d watch The Princess Bride with me?”

“Sure. What’s not to like? Cool swords, revenge.” He smirks. “Hot blondes.”

My lips tip up. “Oh, Jamie, I didn’t know you’re bi. Cary Elwes is definitely a hot blond. And he does whatever Buttercup wants. The perfect man.”

He snorts. “I meant Robin, but Cary has his moments. Totally knew what he was doing with the whole ‘as you wish’ business. Can’t go wrong with that. So, you wanna watch it? I’ll even get off this comfy bed to find your laptop and put it on.”

“I’d love to watch it with you.”

“As you wish, Daisy.” He grins at me and grabs my laptop from the desk.

A shiver runs down my spine when he says that, and I rub my arms briskly to get rid of the goosebumps he inspired. If he wants me to forget the press of his lips, quoting my favourite movie—with a love confession no less—is not the way to dry the wetness between my legs or stop the clenching in my cunt. I’d take Jamie over a blond any day. I’d even take him over Westley, the character not my dog.

Jamie hands me the laptop and lies on the bed beside me. I set the laptop on a pillow between us and click play on the movie and settle into the bed beside him. He wraps an arm around my shoulders and tugs me closer until my head rests on his chest. I sigh and can’t stop myself from nuzzling my face into him and inhaling his intoxicating scent. I ignore the implications of having one of the players in my room and enjoy it.

Sage texts that Westley’s fine, and exhaustion hits me.

My eyes become heavy, and I shut them to the sound of Westley rolling down the hill yelling ‘as you wish.’

* * *

I’m on my side and shift my hips back, wriggling in the tight hold. Heat runs through me and pools between my legs. My hands fist the covers, and I sigh when a hand drifts down my stomach and rests on my pubic bone, fingers spread wide, pinky

finger not quite where I want it but close enough to drive me crazy. An arm is banded around my breasts and there's a wall behind me. A very warm wall. My hips shift restlessly, hoping the fingers will dip lower, and I encounter something hard pressed against my ass. My brow creases, and I roll my hips experimentally.

There's a groan above my head. "If you keep doing that, I'll either disgrace myself or shift my hand lower." His voice is husky with sleep.

I blink my heavy eyes open and frown in the darkness. There's some light coming from the bathroom and I'm in bed, under the covers, with Jamie wrapped around me. We must have fallen asleep during the movie. From what I can tell, I'm still in the leggings and jumper I was in when Jamie showed up at my door. I swallow thickly and realise what he said.

And I want it.

I want him to move his fingers. I want to roll over and tug his pants off and feel him between my legs and the heat of his mouth on mine. He's my friend, but he's more than that. He means so much to me. This might be my only chance to kiss him. What with working together and the fact I don't know if he's interested in me long term...

Unless he is? He's the one that changed our handshake to include a kiss and came to my hotel room.

"Sorry, I'll leave. Didn't mean to make you uncomfortable." His hand drifts to my hip, but I catch it.

"You should," I say, and ignore the tremble in my voice.

"Do what?"

“Move your hand lower.” I roll my hips again, teasing his erection pressed against my ass. “Or the other thing.”

Jamie clears his throat and turns his hand under mine to link our fingers. “Really?”

“Yeah.” I shift to my other side so I can see his face, and our chests press together. His arm stays under me and the other grasps my hand as soon as I’m settled. “I’d like that.”

It’s hard to see his face in the dark despite the light from the bathroom. I can see a tiny furrow between his brows and feel his breath on my face. I release his hand to run fingers up his arm to his shoulder and draw back when I encounter hot skin under mine instead of material. “You don’t have a shirt on.”

“No.”

“Why not?” My fingers explore the bare skin, so warm he’s like a heater.

I’m intimately familiar with his body because of my job, but I’ve never touched him like this, just for me and him. Only ever to make sure his body is prepared for a game and isn’t injured. Never just because. Because I can and want to make him feel good. My hand drifts to his chest and rests over his racing heart.

“You fell asleep during the movie and I didn’t want to leave you, but I don’t like sleeping in my clothes so…” he trails off and I feel his shrug under my hand. “I didn’t mean to get so close to you, but I’m kind of glad it happened.” Jamie releases the hand he’s holding and covers my hand on his chest instead. He lifts my hand and kisses my knuckles, and my stomach swoops like I’m falling from a rollercoaster. Excitement mixed with fear.

“So am I,” I whisper. “Are you wearing pants?”

“Just my briefs.”

I hum. “I like the sound of that.” I untangle my hand from his and cup his cheek, rough with stubble, and rest my thumb below his bottom lip. “Thank you for distracting me and spending time with me tonight. I appreciate it.”

“Anything for you, Daze. Anything,” he swears. His lips shift under my thumb while he talks, and I can’t stop myself.

Work is the last thing on my mind as I guide his mouth to mine.

Our lips meet in a soft press and from that touch, I know there's no going back for me. Not that I thought there was, but after feeling his lips on mine, feeling him press gently and catch my bottom lip in his mouth? There's absolutely no going back.

He's it for me.

I surge forward and tease his lips with my tongue, begging him to open and let me in, and when he does, lights flash behind my eyes and he moans into my mouth. The sound urges me on, and my thighs tense when I clench around nothing.

His tongue sweeps into my mouth, and my hand shifts to the back of his head to bury my fingers in his thick hair. When spots appear in my vision, I pull away panting, desperate for breath so I can attach my mouth to his again and never leave.

Jamie heaves for breath like he does on the field and lifts a shaking hand to push hair out of my eyes. His fingers brush the shell of my ear and drift down my neck before sweeping up to brush tantalisingly over my swollen lips.

I inhale sharply, and all I smell is him. He's here beside me and this is real and it's happening. My eyes widen. "I don't have any condoms."

His forehead drops to mine and he groans, but not in the fun way. "Damn it. Neither do I."

I kiss his thumb and sling my leg over his hip. I roll my hips forward, mirroring when he was spooning me, until I feel his bulge pressing against my core. "There are other things we can do."

He thrusts into me. "That's true."

Jamie captures my lips while we adopt a slow roll of our hips into each other. While I was looking forward to having him inside me, and one day I hope I will, the feeling of him nudging my clit through the seam of my leggings every time he rolls forward is driving me insane.

My skin is hot, and my heart races, and I can feel wetness soaking my underwear the longer I rub myself against him. He gasps when I yank him closer with my leg, and my fingers dig into his back when he shifts, so I'm flat on my back and can feel his weight on me.

He drops his hips lower, grinding himself on my clit, the extra weight he dropped on me making it better, making the sensations sparking through me stronger. I lift my legs to wrap around his waist and urge him to drop more of his weight on me, so I'm completely surrounded by him.

He takes the hint until he's grinding me into the mattress and kisses down my neck, pausing to swirl his tongue on my pulse, and dips his head to lick my nipple through my clothes.

He's taller than me and when he bends his head to reach my nipples, he stops hitting my clit, so I drag his head back to my lips and while I'm sucking on his tongue, I reach around my back to unhook my bra and drag it off through the hole in my sleeve. I can't believe I managed to sleep with it on, but it's dulling the sensation and I need it gone.

Jamie breaks the kiss when he realises what I did and his eyes lock on my nipples, poking holes through my jumper. "Impressive."

He ducks his head to suck them, but before he can, I catch his chin in my hand and drag him back to my lips. "As much as I'd like your mouth on me," I pant, "you're too tall, and when you do that you stop hitting the fun spot. Fingers today, okay,

lovely?”

We’ve moved closer to the light with our frantic grinding, and his expression softens when I call him lovely. “I can do fingers.”

He rises to his knees and strokes his thumbs over my nipples, and it’s like I’ve been fucking electrocuted. My body goes taut, and I squeak. He tugs them, and I throw my head back and drag a hand down his chest to rest low on his stomach, right on the trail of hair I constantly force myself not to look at. His muscles flex as he moves into me; the strong body that takes hits on the field working me higher and higher.

“Jamie, you need to come first. And soon.”

“Why?” He frowns, but picks up his pace.

“If I come, I’ll be asleep in two minutes,” I confess. We lock eyes and laugh. Our rhythm falters, and he drops his head to my neck.

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“You’d leave me as soon as you come?”

“I’d try not to.” A high-pitched noise escapes me when he gets the angle just right. “But I can tell this is gonna be good—” which, quite frankly, is a surprise from humping each other like we’re in high school, but something about Jamie gets me halfway there just by kissing him “—and I don’t want to leave you hanging.”

He pants in my ear, “If you’re nearly there, don’t worry. I’ll be there in five seconds.” His sentence ends in a drawn-out moan that sends shivers through me. I turn my head to meet his lips, stubble scrapes my cheeks and he thrusts once, twice, and rips his lips from mine to groan into my skin.

I slip my hand between us to press my clit hard over the seam of my leggings and throw my head back as my mouth falls open and my body shakes.

I sigh in contentment and tilt my head slightly to press a small kiss on Jamie’s lips. He shifts to my side but throws a leg over mine. My forehead rests against his and my eyes fall closed. My breathing evens out and sleep is within my grasp while I’m wrapped around Jamie, but then he speaks.

“Clean up first, then sleep.”

I don’t even have the energy to shake my head, just stay in the same position. Who cares about clean up when you’re this cosy and have a rugby player wrapped around you? When you have Jamie wrapped around you.

“Come on, darling.” Hands slip under my body and hoist me in the air. I blink my

sleepy eyes open and meet Jamie's amused gaze. He kisses my forehead and says, "Clean up will be quick, and then we'll be back in bed. Together."

"Okay," I mumble, "but only because you're staying. Right?" I can't be bothered worrying about our jobs, or that he's my friend, when I'm this warm and want to fall asleep in his arms. There will be time to figure it out later.

"Of course I'm staying."

We sort ourselves out quickly. New underwear for me and Jamie slips into his pants, sans briefs, and lifts me in his arms again and places me on the bed. He climbs in beside me and wraps his arms around me, holding me close. One of his hands rests on my stomach and it rises each time I breathe. It's strangely comforting, and I drift off to sleep with Jamie at my back.

When I wake again, it's because sunlight has entered the room, and I stretch in bed with a yawn. My limbs don't encounter anyone else in the bed, which means Jamie has left. I turn my head to double-check, and all I see is the indent on the pillow. The sheets are still warm, so he left recently. My eyes snag on the glowing clock, and I shove the sheets away.

Shit. That's why he left. Everyone needs to be at breakfast in twenty minutes before we start preparing for the game tonight.

I hop in the shower and am scrubbing my hair with the provided shampoo when what happened last night hits me.

A player stayed in my room.

I got off with the hooker for our national rugby team.

And I'm his physio.

Shit, shit, shit.

I'm extremely lucky it was my turn without a roommate. There's an uneven amount of staff on the medic team, so we rotate who gets a room to themselves for away games.

I tense and stare at the beige tiles. But Jamie has a roommate. I don't know who it is for this stretch of games, but please, god, let it be someone who doesn't gossip.

"Ow, fuck." I slap a hand over my eye that now has shampoo in it, burning the warm, happy feelings away. I flush my eye with water and finish showering.

But it wasn't just any player. It was Jamie. Jamie, my friend, who's always there for me and makes me smile.

Jamie, who I want to be with.

I sit on the bed heavily and run my hands through my tangled wet hair.

I want to be with him. I want to carpool with him forever. Want to live together in his villa and meet his family and adopt another dog so Westley isn't lonely.

My heart beats so fast I feel faint and the room's walls shift in my vision.

Right.

I think I'm in love with him.

I laugh into the silent room and scrub a hand over my mouth. I'm in lovewith Jamie.

The code of conduct just went out the window.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:44 am

This is going to complicate things.

We need a plan. A plan for what happens when we get home to make sure neither of us gets in trouble. But first, we need to survive the games with South Africa, and I need to figure out if Jamie wants more with me or if it was a one-time thing.

It's a plan. Survive the next two weeks and when we're back in NZ, figure out how to avoid being fired and losing my licence.

Okay, so it's not much of a plan, but it's all I've got.

CHAPTERSEVEN

Jamie

The door snicks shut behind me and I tiptoe across the room to my side to dig through my bag for clothes. I need to get ready for breakfast and focus on the game we're playing tonight.

"Where were you all night?"

I jump out of my skin and whirl to the other bed. Squinting in the dark, I can barely see Suli on the bed with his arm behind his head. He flicks the light switch and I cringe at the bright light.

"Couldn't have said you were awake, bro, instead of scaring the shit out of me? What's the team gonna do if I drop dead from fright?"

“Put on Nick.”

I clutch my chest. “Brutal. I’m not even cold yet and you’re putting on my sub.”

Suli shrugs. “It’s how the game works. Where were you?”

“Out.” I avoid the question and go back to finding clothes.

“With Daisy?”

I sigh and face him. Clearly I’m not escaping this conversation. “So what?”

“So, have you talked to management? You know we aren’t allowed anyone in our hotel rooms.”

“Not yet, and I realise that, but it’s Daisy and she was upset.”

“All night?”

I stay silent and stare at him. There might be issues with management if they hear I stayed in her hotel room. But that’s why no one’s going to find out. “Her dog’s sick and she misses him.”

“Like management will give a fuck about that. The married guys aren’t allowed their spouses in their rooms. You think management will like you staying in Daisy’s?”

“She’s part of the staff, so technically, it doesn’t matter. It’s like me staying in Johnny’s room instead of with you.”

“It’s completely different, and you know it. You have to talk to management.”

I fall back on the bed and dig the heels of my palms into my eyes until I see spots. “I know. I know I do. I’ll do it before we leave.” My arms drop to the bed and Suli flings the sheets away and heads to the bathroom.

“And don’t mention last night.”

The door shuts and leaves me in silence to contemplate everything. Management will be fine once we sign documents. They’ll be less fine if they find out we were switching rooms and doing bad things to each other. Especially since she’s my physio. Not exactly a good look for either of us. I groan. Suli’s right. It’ll be easier talking to them sooner rather than later, before anything else happens and they decide to find another physio and hooker. But they’ll be more lenient with me, unfortunately. They always go after the woman, especially in sports when they want to keep the player. I reach for my phone and open my email.

Time to do this the right way.

* * *

Having Daisy tape me up after I’ve seen her face thrown back in pleasure and heard the high moan she releases when she comes is torture. I have to sit still while her fingers touch my skin, in a room full of other guys getting strapped, and I can’t touch her back. Can’t brush the tiny curling strands of hair under her cap, or touch the sprinkle of freckles on her cheeks.

The sooner we get this sorted, the better.

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The day runs like normal and then we're on the field for kickoff and I push Daisy from my mind. Instead, I focus on winning and not getting my body ruined by South Africans.

The stadium's loud, and not in our favour. Especially when we win after a game filled with yellow cards and close calls.

Sitting in the sheds, my body begins to feel the aches and pains. It's possible I'm getting too old for this. I roll my shoulders and drop my head to the back of my cubby and breathe deeply. Am I looking forward to an ice bath? Am I so old that I want the ice bath because I know I'll feel better after it? There is no way I can tell any of the younger guys that.

Something taps my boot, and I open my eyes. I can't help the smile that spreads across my face when I see her serious one, hair braided away from her face, team cap casting shadows on her cheeks.

"You okay? No blood today," she observes.

"All good. Just a bit sore." I lean forward and wait until she comes closer to whisper, "Don't tell anyone, but I can't wait for the ice bath."

Daisy snorts and leans back. "I think you're the only athlete who's ever told me that."

"I'm just too wise."

She makes a rude noise of disagreement, which I choose to ignore. "Want me to

remove the tape?”

I nod and stand so she can remove the tape decorating my body. I removed the tape and gauze protecting my ears already, but was waiting for her to rip everything else off. My face scrunches when the tape on my thigh rips off hair. Maybe she’s right and I am a masochist, because I look forward to this every game.

I had a call with Linda from management before the match to sign the relationship form. She wasn’t as shocked as I expected her to be, just wanted my signature and contacted the PR team in case a statement needs releasing. Daisy doesn’t know it yet, but today is the last day she’ll treat me. Adam’s taking me on now instead, so while I don’t like her ripping hair from my body, I try to enjoy her fingertips brushing my skin while she finds the edge of the tape before ruthlessly pulling it.

“All done.”

I turn to face her. We’ve been in this position thousands of times before. Me standing in front of her, bare-chested, with her hands full of tape, but now that I’ve kissed her, I’m finding it difficult to stop myself from bending down and covering her lips with mine. Her eyes flash when I lick my lips, but she steps back quickly.

“Ready to go?” A hand slaps my back harder than necessary, and I turn to glare at Suli.

“Yep. Let’s get this over with so we can have dinner.”

I leave Daisy in the changing sheds and follow Suli to begin our cool down routine.

Everyone’s heading to a restaurant afterwards to celebrate the win and being one step closer to the Freedom Cup, but all I want to do is show up at Daisy’s room and tell her about my conversation with Linda.

Dinner's a long and rowdy affair. The boys are excited about the win and fired up for the game next week, desperate to win the cup. I want to win the cup too, but gazing at Daisy a few tables away, it doesn't seem as important. Which really no one can find out about. God, if the boys found out I thought a woman was more important than footy, they'd disown me. The single guys would at least, the ones with partners would welcome me with open arms and help me choose a ring. It's too early for rings, though.

I lock eyes with Daisy, and she smiles at me before laughing at something Adam says and throws her head back.

Is it too early for rings?

I shake myself and rejoin the conversation with Johnny and Nick. Hemi will arrive in two days and join us for the last game, but if what Daisy's been saying is true, he'll be glued to his phone, waiting for text messages rather than hanging with the boys.

Dinner finally ends and some of the younger guys head to a club to continue the celebration—we have tomorrow off, and they're taking advantage of it. I return to the hotel and press the button for a level that isn't mine.

Suli rolls his eyes. "You better not sleep there. Just because you signed something doesn't mean it's a free pass to have sex with your girlfriend on a work trip."

"I'm going to tell her about the meeting. And she's not my girlfriend." I grin at him. "Yet."

The lift doors open and Suli steps out and says pointedly, "I'll see you later."

"Later, bro." The doors shut on his unimpressed look. And I will see him later. I'm not about to tempt fate and annoy management when they made my life a lot easier

instead of making everything difficult. I'll sleep in my room after I've told Daisy the good news.

I knock on her door and slip my hands into my pockets, rocking back on my heels while I wait for her. The door opens and I grin. "Hey, baby."

She leans against the doorway and crosses her arms. She's changed into tight leggings that leave little to the imagination and an oversized crop top. She looks edible.

"Hello, lovely. As glad as I am to find you at my door, I'm not sure it's a great idea." Daisy scans the hallway to make sure there's no one around before pulling me inside, despite her words.

"I know, but I wanted to see you."

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Her eyes rake over me, and she bites her lip. “Have I ever told you that suits look fantastic on you?”

“You haven’t, but you should.” I’m wearing dress pants and a button-up shirt in a dark green. Not really a suit, but if she likes the way I look in it, who am I to contradict her?

Her arms slip around my waist, and her chin rests on my chest as she looks up at me. “They do. You look yummy. I love it when you wear green.”

“Yeah?” I gaze down at her. Her whiskey eyes darken to malt and dilate.

“Yeah.”

“I love it when you wear your tight leggings.” My hands drift down her back and land on her ass. I squeeze and lift her slightly until she gets the idea and steps onto my shoes so she’s a bit taller. Everything’s moving so fast, but I can’t bring myself to care. I just want to be around her.

“You do?”

“Mmm. So sexy.” I dip my head to peck her lips but pull back before she can deepen it. “I particularly like the ones with the seam that goes between your cheeks and over your hips.” I trace a finger where I mean, dragging it over her black leggings between her cheeks until I reach the top of her hips and encircle her.

Daisy’s breath catches, and she pushes closer to me. “The navy ones? I don’t wear

them at work. How do you know I have those?”

“I saw you jogging one morning, and you were wearing them.” I groan low in my throat. “You were in a sports bra that wasn’t very supportive—” I quiet her giggle with a kiss and continue, “I had to stop myself from joining you and watching everything up close.”

“When was this?”

“A few months ago.”

“I’ll have to buy more then. Now kiss me.”

I listen to her command and lean down to capture her lips. She opens for me, and I stroke into her mouth, tongues tangle together, and I lift her higher to reach her better. To experience the heat of her tongue on mine, to feel her teeth tugging my bottom lip, to roll my hips into hers as her hands thrust in my hair and grip tightly, tilting my head to the side so she can get her preferred angle.

I stride deeper into her room and set her on the bed. Daisy grabs my shoulders and manhandles me until I’m sitting on the foot of the bed. I raise my eyebrows at her. “Is this where you want me?”

She nods and runs her hands up and down my arms. “Perfect. You played amazing today.”

My chest lights up with warmth, and a smile tugs at my lips. “Yeah?”

Hearing the woman I love tell me I did good at my job is one of the best feelings. And Daisy knows how much work I put in and everything I put my body through—nothing could stop me from wrapping my arms around her waist and

tugging her onto my lap.

“Yeah, you did.”

The simple confirmation solidifies everything. I don't remember how long I've been in love with her, but Daisy telling me simply I did good today, no running through stats or improvements or what I should have done, just 'you played amazing today,' means there's no going back. Sheseesme.

“Thank you.”

“So, I was thinking.” She threads her fingers through my hair and massages my scalp. My head drops back at the feeling. Kind of makes sense why Westley always wants her hands on him. “I refuse to buy condoms in South Africa surrounded by rugby players, and I know you're tired after the game and probably don't want to do much.” My head jerks upright. Is she about to throw me out? She's right. I am tired, and I'm not sure my thighs would survive thrusting, but I'd make it work. “I thought I could suck you instead.”

I tense at her suggestion, and my dick takes particular notice, chubbing up and pressing against her.

She moves her hips in a slow figure eight and smirks. “Interested?”

My throat bobs. “Very. But I resent the implication I wouldn't be able to get you off.”

“My lovely, I've been your physio for three years, and I've worked with rugby players since I was twenty-three. I know you're tired.” I try to protest, but she talks over me. “You could totally make me come if you wanted to, but as your physio I don't want you to overexert yourself, and as us together,” she stumbles over the words, “I want to make sure you're comfortable. So, want me to blow you? Or cuddle

instead before you need to head back to your room?" she offers.

I drop my forehead to hers and breathe her in. Honey and herbs and home. "I like it when you think of me. It makes me feel good in here." I capture one of her hands and press it to my chest, right over my racing heart. "I'm not gonna stop you going down on me. In fact, I can't wait, and when we get back to NZ, I'll do the same for you."

"I look forward to it. We probably shouldn't do anything else after tonight. Don't want to get in trouble with anyone," she says regretfully.

"I know." I kiss the skin above her eyebrow on one of her freckles. "And we probably need to talk about this, but just know I'm serious about it. I have been for a while."

"Really?" Her voice is shocked, and she pulls back to see me better.

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“Really. But enough about feelings. Let’s do feelings in Auckland, and you can get to sucking me.” I push her off my lap playfully until she’s standing in front of me, but she’s laughing so hard she has to clutch my shoulder to stay upright.

“Eager now, are we?”

“Look, he’s all lonely.” I point to the tent in my dress pants and pout at her.

“Well, I don’t want that.” And she gets to her knees in front of me and it’s not so funny anymore.

Daisy glides her hands up my thighs, over my sore muscles, and finds the zip of my pants. She drags it down carefully, and I suck in a breath when her fingers graze me.

She taps my thigh and says, “Up, please.”

I lift myself, so she can yank my pants to my ankles and sit back on the bed, thighs spread wide with Daisy between them, black briefs still on, hard dick attempting to push through the fabric.

We lock eyes, hers like warm golden syrup, soft and sweet. Daisy slips her fingers under the elastic of my briefs and that small touch causes muscles to tense and my dick to throb. She taps my thigh again and I lift up, and she tugs my underwear down to join my pants.

My dick slaps against my stomach, and I scrunch my nose at the obvious eagerness. We couldn’t be cool, could we? Daisy purses her lips, but her eyes light up with

laughter and she can't stop the curling at the corner of her lips.

"This won't last long," I say ruefully, staring at my swollen dick with pre-come already leaking at the tip. I swear I can see the vein on the left side fucking throbbing.

"That's okay. I like how excited you are."

She's so close to me I can feel her breath on my skin, and I flinch at the sensation but shift my hips closer to her. "Don't judge me if I only last ten seconds. I'll be better back home." I hope.

Daisy shrugs. "We'd figure it out."

She leans into me and licks a strip up my swollen dick. I moan and my whole body tenses. Aches from the game are forgotten, and I can't remember why I came to her room besides wanting to see her. Daisy stares up at me and wraps her lips around my tip and sucks me into her mouth. Warm and hot, she swirls her tongue around the tip, dipping into my slit, and bobbing her head down to take more of me.

"Ah, fuck."

She swallows around me, and I reflexively thrust into her mouth.

Hands wrap around my base to guide how deep I can thrust, but she doesn't push me away, just stares up at me and raises an eyebrow. Urging me on.

She does something with her tongue, and my hips rise off the bed and a breathy, needy moan escapes me. I didn't know I could be breathy. What is she doing to me? My hand drops to her shoulder and clutches her close. Something low in my gut twists. My hands shake, and my balls draw tight.

“Daisy—Daze, I’m gonna—” I can’t even finish my sentence from what she’s doing to me, but she gets the message.

Her hand drops to cup my balls, and she rolls them in her hand while she sucks my tip. I pulse into her mouth and groan low in my throat but manage to keep my eyes open. No way am I going to miss her throat convulsing around me or her bright eyes scanning my face.

She draws off me with a pop and grins, wiping the corners of her plumped mouth. I pant hard and grab her with shaking hands and haul her on top of me as I fall back onto the bed. I kiss her swollen lips and dip my tongue into her mouth. Pulling away before I pass out from lack of oxygen, I drop my head to her shoulder and breathe her in, arms wrapped around her waist. Fingers sift through my hair, and I sigh in contentment. I ignore the fact my limp dick is hanging out, and my pants and briefs are tangled at my ankles.

When I catch my breath and the cold starts to shrivel my balls, I pull away from her shoulder to see her face. I shift hair from her eyes and kiss her softly.

“You sure you don’t want me to do the same?” I ask, even though it’s difficult to keep my eyes open and lethargy has spread through my body. I just want to wrap her in my arms and fall asleep. But if she says yes, I’ll jump at the chance to go down on her. It probably won’t be my best work, but still. Enthusiasm has to count for something.

“I’m sure.” The skin around her eyes crinkle when she smiles. “I kind of like being the one not falling asleep. You’re adorable.”

I gasp in false offence. “I’m manly.”

“You’re manly on the field. When you’re with me, you’re adorable. Especially post-

orgasm with your dick out.” We glance at my shrivelled dick, and she giggles. “It looks a bit mournful.”

“That’s not mournful, that’s fulfilled.”

Daisy huffs a laugh and kisses my cheek. She runs a hand down my thigh and taps my ass, causing me to jump. “Off you go before we both fall asleep and make our lives difficult tomorrow.”

I pout at her but know she’s right. I stand and fix my clothing while she stays lying on the bed watching me. I sit beside her and lean down, bracketing her head with my arms and kiss her again, keeping it soft and slow so it doesn’t turn into anything else.

“All right. But when we’re home, it’s gonna be you and me in bed without the distraction of work.”

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“I like the sound of that.” Daisy pushes my shoulders gently. “Now go away before I keep you here forever.”

Like I’d complain about that. But I hold my fist out for her to tap, grasp her hand after the low five, and turn it to press a small kiss on her palm. And with a kiss on her nose, and a soft goodbye, her hotel door shuts behind me.

I’m in the lift when I remember why I originally went to her room. My hand reaches to click her floor number, but I decide to wait until we have more time to talk and aren’t dead on our feet. It might be easier to wait until we’re back in New Zealand.

Either way, I can’t wait to tell her and take her out on a date.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Daisy

We won the Freedom Cup, mostly because Hemi returned for the second game and played like he was trying to break records. When he wasn’t training, he was on his phone. Wanaka had been good for him.

We’re finally back in New Zealand after two weeks in South Africa, and I’m excited about my own bed. And I wouldn’t mind if Jamie was in it with me. I’ve never been so glad to live in Auckland than now when Jamie and I can walk out of the airport to head straight home, instead of catching another flight to Christchurch or Wellington like some of the other guys. Or Wanaka, in Hemi’s case, who will reach Queenstown and then have an hour’s drive—if it’s good weather. The boys have a few days off

and everyone's taking advantage of it to return to their families and relax before the last game of the series with Australia.

Jamie hauls our bags into my car, and I hop in the driver's seat and turn on the heating. It's dark and cold and I can smell the rain that will arrive later tonight. But we're home.

I breathe deeply and massage the tightness in my neck. Jamie collapses in the passenger seat and strong fingers replace mine, digging deeply into the tight tissue.

I moan softly, dropping my head back and turn to face him. "You're good at that."

"We need to get you your own physio. Or a massage therapist." Jamie trails a finger down my neck and brushes my collarbone. "We could get a massage together tomorrow."

"That sounds amazing. Flying that long is awful." I pull out of the car park and follow the confusing signs to exit the airport. Once I'm on the motorway, I say, "Do you know why Adam treated you this week? They wouldn't tell me, just said they shuffled everything around."

It's weird he was taken off my roster since I've been treating him so long, especially when there wasn't a meeting about it. Adam pulled me aside and said he was taking Jamie from now on, said it came from the higher-ups, but he said it with a strange glint of excitement in his eyes. While odd, it does mean there's less conflict of interest, especially after my moment of weakness blowjob, so I decided to wait to figure out why it happened.

Jamie shifts in the seat to face me better, but I keep my eyes on the road and indicate to change lanes, so we're in the right exit lane once we're over the bridge to the North Shore. I hate changing lanes on the bridge; I feel like I'll accidentally drive myself off

it.

“I do know.”

I glance at him in surprise. I didn't think he'd know unless he requested it. It could have been a random shuffle, but Adam acted weird, so I thought I'd ask. “What happened?”

“Remember when I came to your room after we won the first game?” He waits for my nod, and I shove the image of looking up at his dark brown eyes and the weight of him in my mouth out of my mind. “I came to tell you something, but got sidetracked.”

“Really? Did something happen?”

“I had a meeting with Linda before the game.”

I frown at the name, and my hands clench the steering wheel. “Linda from management?”

“I wanted to discuss the development in our relationship with her. Make sure everything was okay.”

“Our relationship,” I respond flatly and indicate left to exit the motorway.

“Yeah. I signed the declaration of personal relationship form. Adam's taken me on so that everything's all good for us to date.”

“You signed the form.”

“Yeah,” he says, drawing out the word as apprehension enters his voice.

“Without talking to me.”

“I was going to talk to you that night, but we got distracted, and I thought it would be easier to talk about it when we got home.”

I pull into his driveway, park the car, and turn to face him. “So you signed the form declaring we’re in a relationship, everyone in management and Adam knows, and I was removed as your physio, and all of this happened without you discussing it with me.” What if I lose my licence?

Jamie’s throat bobs and his brow furrows. “I guess? But I was going to tell you tonight so we could talk about it.”

“But you already signed the form!”

He draws back at my hard tone. “I did. I didn’t want either of us to get in trouble and wanted to discuss it with Linda so we can explore our relationship without the threat of losing our jobs hanging over us.”

“What if I don’t want a relationship? We weren’t even in a relationship when you signed it. We aren’t in one now. What if they decide to take me to the disciplinary board because they think something happened?” I can’t stop the words flying out of me, and I hardly know what I’m saying.

All I can focus on is that he made a decision involving my job without me. He took that choice from me. It doesn’t matter that I would have signed the form too. He signed it behind my back without a discussion first. Didn’t discuss what we’d do about my licence, and whether or not we tell them about the bad choices I made in my hotel room.

“We aren’t? You don’t want one?” Jamie crosses his arms and the hurt in his voice finally penetrates the haze of worry and anger.

“Of course I want a relationship with you, Jamie.” And I do. He’s been my closest friend for years. I just didn’t realise it was something more until recently. It is the most natural thing in the world kissing him, talking to him. Being with him. “But why did you sign anything without me there? Without talking to me?”

“Because I was telling them about my change of feelings, not yours. I didn’t mention anything about you, Daisy, besides the fact I want to be with you and want the chance

to have that, so requested a shift to Adam's roster." Jamie scrubs a hand through his hair and sighs sharply. "You still need to sign something if the feelings are returned. At the moment, they have a record of me declaring I want a relationship and removing myself from the situation before any power imbalance can enter it. Or issues with code of conduct." He sighs again and glances at his villa. "Look, let's go inside, order food, and talk some more."

I shake my head quickly. "No. No, I—I want to think and need some space."

"Daisy—"

"Jamie, please. Just let me think." My limbs are shaky, and I feel weak, like I could barely hold a glass of water, but I squeeze his hand fleetingly. "I'll text you, yeah?"

"Yeah, okay. If that's what you want." He opens the door and the chilly night air invades the car, and I shiver. Jamie turns back to me. "I promise I didn't do it to ruin your job or go behind your back. I wanted to make sure nothing bad would happen to either of us. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner or speak to you before I signed it."

I nod and blow out a breath. I clench my shaking hands on the wheel. "Okay. I'll text you."

Jamie nods and gets out of the car, snags his bags from the boot, passes his roses, and gives me a small wave before he enters his villa and flicks the lights on. He doesn't hold his fist out for me to bump before he leaves and for some reason it causes my throat to tighten, making it difficult to breathe.

I pull out of his driveway and park in my garage. I drop my head to the wheel and dig my nails into my palms.

The worst part is, he's not wrong.

We do need to sign stuff with management to make sure everything's fine, but I was under the impression we'd have a discussion about it first. Talk about what we want and if it's long term, because if it isn't there's no point in getting anyone involved, and we can stay friends instead.

I want it to be long term. Want to be there when he retires, to move in with him, and maybe adopt a dog together.

I finally enter the house, and my shoulders slump when no skittering claws come to greet me. It's too late to pick up Westley, so I won't see him until tomorrow. My house feels empty. No Westley. No Jamie.

Only my stupid thoughts to keep me company, going around in my head and questioning if I overreacted. It's not signing the form I have an issue with, it's the lack of discussion. What if they took it badly and I lost my job and my licence? I thought we'd talk and figure out how to approach management without implicating anyone.

But I suppose if he doesn't know how I feel, he wouldn't want to involve me. But why would he want to sign the form if he doesn't know how I feel? There would be no need to sign anything. Unless he doesn't want to be friends anymore if I don't feel the same? But that's not like Jamie.

It was strange this past week, not treating him without knowing why with odd looks from Adam to make it worse. I groan and collapse on the couch. Linda must have told Adam why Jamie wanted to be on his roster. Adam knows about us, or at least about Jamie's feelings, and that's why he kept shooting me smug looks.

I guess it was naïve to expect no ribbing or gossip when it got out that Jamie and I are...whatever we are. Dating? I think? Still friends, at least. Probably.

I change into pyjamas and tug the covers over me, too tired to shower the plane off me, let alone wash my hair. I'll wash the sheets tomorrow and face the shower and conversation later.

* * *

My day off passes in a blur of visiting family, showering Westley with love, and buying groceries so I don't starve. A day after our argument, Jamie texts me about a new show he's watching that he thinks I'll enjoy. I click on the show and settle in to watch the first episode. And he's right. I do like it. And I'm reminded that he knows me. He gets me.

Even though he didn't talk to me before discussing us with Linda, usually we're on the same wavelength.

I chew on my cheek and grab my phone to text him back and the night passes with messages back and forth with Jamie, who's only a few doors away from me, and I have to stop myself from walking down the road and knocking on his door.

Work the next day is slow without the boys around, filled with meetings and treatment plans to prepare for our last game with Australia. It's a lonely drive without Jamie. I miss him. I've never missed him before and I realise it's because we've never really been apart, not that two days without seeing each other is apart, but I feel the distance in the heaviness in my chest.

But I'm still angry at him. I can spend time with him and be angry. Right?

I know exactly what my decision will be as soon as I've sorted my thoughts out and it involves him being in my life. I'm just not ready to talk about it yet.

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The day the team is set to begin training again, there's a knock on my door. I frown and head down the hall. Technically, it's Jamie's day to drive, but I figured we'd probably put a hold on carpooling until we fix everything. The knock came from my front door not the ranchslider he usually uses, anyway.

I open the door, and my eyes widen in surprise. It's Jamie. Holding a clear plastic cup filled with ice and green liquid, and wearing a serious, drawn look on his face. "Hi, Jamie."

"Hey, Daze." He hands me the drink and I take it with numb fingers. He bought me matcha.

"What are you doing here?"

He shrugs his oversized shoulders. "My turn to drive. I can take you if you like, or I'll see you at work later if you prefer I don't."

I hesitate and bite my lip. In the time I make my decision, Jamie nods and rakes a hand through his hair, messing up his curls, and steps away from the door. "You can drive me," I say in a rush.

A tiny smile forms on his face. "Yeah?"

I nod and head back to the hallway to grab my bags and lock everything behind me.

"No Westley today?"

“Nah, dropped him off yesterday.” Jamie pouts as he gets in the car, and I can’t help the smile tugging at my lips. “You can see him in a few days.”

Jamie clears his throat and pulls out of my driveway. “I can?”

And I realise I’ve inadvertently told him he’s welcome back to my house. Even if it’s just to carpool, saying he’ll see my dog again means he’ll see me again. “Yeah, he misses you.”

A proper smile spreads across his face and we settle in for the drive. We talk about everything except our disagreement, instead deciding to focus on discussing family and spoiling the TV show for each other.

When we reach the training area, he parks the car and shoots me a tight smile. He doesn’t hold out his hand like he usually would and reaches for the door, and I can’t take it.

I reach across the centre console and tap his shoulder before he can get out of the car. Jamie turns back to me, and I hold out my fisted hand. He tilts his head, and to answer his unspoken question, I shake my fist.

He bumps his fist against mine gently, a baffled but pleased look on his face, and I open my hand, holding my palm out to him, facing up. Jamie taps it quietly and before he can remove his hand, I close my fingers around his and squeeze. I press a fleeting kiss to his thumb.

“I’m not ready to talk about it yet, but when I am, you’ll be the first person to know,” I say softly.

He squeezes my fingers and nods, gets out of the car, but ducks his head back down. “I’ll be here when you’re ready to talk. No matter the outcome.”

I smile at him and grab my stuff from the car and head to the medic room for my first appointment.

Suli is waiting on my bench when I enter the room. He was put on my roster when Jamie was removed. He's quieter than Jamie and has issues with his shoulder and back, being one of the locks for the team. He's older and has been in the game professionally for years, but I don't know much about him. He keeps to himself and so far prefers it when I keep quiet during our sessions instead of chatting like so many of the others prefer.

So it takes me completely off-guard when he starts a conversation. About Jamie, no less. "I'm the one that told him to talk to management."

I pause with my hands digging into his shoulder, but continue sweeping them forward after the surprise. "Oh?"

"Didn't want anything bad to happen to either of you, so when you got together in South Africa, I told him to get management involved."

I glance around the room to make sure no one's listening, but we're the only ones here. "You know about that?"

"We roomed together."

"Right."

Suli looks over his shoulder at me. "Don't be mad at him. I'm the one that bugged him to do it until he did."

"But he signed it without talking to me. What if they decided to fire me?" No one's said anything to me since Jamie was taken off my roster, so I'm assuming I still have

a job for a little longer.

“You know that’s not what would have happened. He told them about his feelings, not yours. Besides, they wouldn’t fire you without proof of misconduct, which is why I told him to sign the form.” He watches me unwaveringly. “Before there was.”

I grimace and dig my thumbs into muscle again when Suli turns back. “I know. I just wanted a conversation about it first.”

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“That I agree with.” He snorts and shakes his head. “Don’t know why he didn’t text you about it, at least. Too excited maybe.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I smile. In a way, it’s almost flattering that he tried to organise it. He must have done it after we fell asleep together. From that one moment, he decided he wanted Adam as his physio so we could continue.

“Just think about it. He didn’t do it to be malicious. He’s just an idiot.”

I laugh and shake my head. “I’ll think about it.”

I’ve already been thinking about it, and I need a meeting with Linda.

CHAPTERNINE

Daisy

The day before our final test match with Australia, an email lights up my phone with a meeting request for later today with Linda.

Everything has been hectic preparing for the last game of the championship, and I keep forgetting to contact her to request a meeting. Somehow, she’s managed to find the only free spot in my schedule. I chew on my lip and click add to calendar. Did she know I wanted a meeting through osmosis and her bloodhound nose? Or is it a direct result of her discussion with Jamie? My stomach swoops. I don’t think it will be anything bad. If I’m fired, she wouldn’t be the one telling me. I think. Would someone higher than Linda tell me if I’m fired or would Adam do it? Or Alex?

I shudder at the thought of Alex firing me.

There's no point in worrying until I'm in the meeting and know what it's about. And I can always mention Jamie and request the form while I'm there. If I'm not about to lose my job.

I've worked for the national team for three years, an opportunity of a lifetime... But if I am fired, I could still be with Jamie. Even though rules about dating former patients are hazy, it should be fine. Unless my licence is revoked, I could open my own practice and treat athletes on my own schedule and not fly internationally every few weeks. I could spend more time with Westley and wouldn't miss Violet growing up. But it would also mean I left my dream job. With a shit ton of gossip following me.

But if Jamie was there, it would be worth it.

If they ask me to leave, I will absolutely fight for my job, but if I lose and have to leave, it doesn't seem as scary anymore. As long as my licence isn't revoked. I grind my teeth and leave the medic room to attend the meeting.

Technically, as soon as something happened, I was removed as his physio, so there was a minimal breach of conduct. Admittedly, it's not great the line was crossed—especially since I was stupid and gave him a blowjob the next day when I thought he was still my patient—but Jamie and Suli were right. Because Jamie removed himself as my patient the day after something happened and signed the form, we're both somewhat protected.

He was right to sign them.

Am I frustrated there wasn't a discussion first? Yes. But because the form is signed on his end as I walk into Linda's office, it means I'm more protected and less likely to lose my job. He was right, and when this meeting is over, I need to have a

conversation with him. No matter what happens.

I will have a conversation.

“Hi, Daisy. How are you today?” Linda asks, pushing her glasses higher up her nose. The beaded glasses strap clinks against her gold hoops and she smiles softly at me. She’s wearing a blue-grey blouse that compliments her lightly tanned skin and blonde highlights.

It’s a good start if she’s smiling. I sit in the leather chair in front of her tidy desk. “I’m good, thank you. Yourself?”

“Making sure people sign contracts and disclosure forms before they do something idiotic like usual.” She puts a ream of paper down with a crack and leans forward, crossing her arms on the desk. “Now, I’ve called this meeting to discuss Jamison Atoa with you. You’ll have noticed he was switched off your patient roster and Suliasi Uhi was given to you instead.”

I nod. “In South Africa, yes.”

“Yes, I wanted to discuss with you why it happened.”

I swallow harshly. “All right.”

Linda frowns gently and purses her lips. “Jamison requested the declaration of personal relationship form to sign and wanted to be removed as your patient so he could potentially pursue a relationship with you. He didn’t mention your feelings. I want to know if you’re aware of this and if he has at any time made you uncomfortable,” Linda says seriously, her voice hard and unyielding.

I shake my head quickly. “No, no, he hasn’t. He’s one of my closest friends. He’s

never done anything to harm me. He wouldn't." This was not the direction I thought the meeting would go.

Linda's icy eyes narrow and scrutinise me. "Good. If anything changes, you let me know. About anyone. My second question is if you want to sign the relationship form? If you don't, that's fine. He was removed as your patient to protect you both and it will stay that way regardless of your feelings. There is zero pressure. This meeting is to ensure you're aware of what's happening and give you an opportunity to speak."

"If I sign the form, it means we can have a relationship without penalty?"

"Correct. It's a little dicey considering you were one of his medical providers, and I swear to god if anything happened more than a few days before at least his form was signed, we'll have a real shitshow on our hands, and your licence will be up for debate with the disciplinary board."

"It didn't." Not really. Jamie signed the form the day after we fell asleep in my hotel room, and I was rightly removed as his physio. The blowjob after they won is more of a grey area, but it helps I wasn't his physio by then.

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“Good. When this gets out, PR will spin it in the positive, and consensual, light that it is and do it carefully so no one loses their licence. I suspect they’ll carefully leave out details about when your relationship started, and when you stopped treating him.” She watches me carefully. “Jamie’s a star rugby player. No one will care about you if we spin it the wrong way. Your relationship better be for the long haul. There’s no point going through this for a fling.”

“It is. For me at least,” I finish quietly.

Linda cracks a smile. “That’s exactly what Jamie said. Right then, let’s sign some forms and organise a meeting with Diana in PR to get this sorted.”

The forms are signed quickly, and I’m warned to keep everything on the down-low so PR can work on a statement to release after The Rugby Championship is complete. They’ll have a meeting with us both before they release anything. But other than that, we’re now free to date—to have a relationship. To tell whoever we want.

I shut Linda’s door behind me and cover my mouth when a giddy laugh escapes. Somehow, everything’s fine. I stride down the hall with a grin, determined to find Jamie.

* * *

I don’t manage to tell Jamie before the game. After I signed the form, I couldn’t find him—we didn’t carpool yesterday since I visited Sage last night—and now it’s game day and everyone’s preoccupied with winning the Bledisloe Cup. I drove him today like usual but decided to wait and tell him after the game about signing the form. I

don't want to distract him before the last test of the series when the team's fighting to win everything.

I grin at Jamie when I spy him across the room getting taped by Adam, and he returns the smile with a dramatic wiggle of his eyebrows. No matter what happens tonight, I'm going to tell him I want to be with him.

The crowd's louder than usual. It started with roaring cheers after the haka and the sea of black jerseys in the stands have continued to yell and scream as the clock ticks down.

It's been a violent game so far since the cup's on the line. Not that Australia would win the cup if they won the game. Since they lost the first game, it would be a draw and we would retain the cup as the current holders. Blood and bruises have already started appearing and we haven't reached halftime yet.

I scrunch my nose when Hemi tackles someone in a not totally legal way, but the ref doesn't see, so the game continues.

"So, you and Jamie?" Adam asks beside me out of the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah, me and Jamie," I reply softly. I glance at Adam, who has a smug grin on his face. I narrow my eyes. "What?"

"I knew it."

I scoff. "You did not. You only know something because you switched my roster around."

"Not true."

“Care to explain?” I turn back to the game and lean forward when Johnny intercepts a sloppy pass and makes a run for the try line.

“You guys have always been close. Clicked right away. I figured it would happen one day. And you both stare at each other all the time.”

“We do not.”

“You totally do. All sappy and moon-eyed. It’s disgusting.” Adam nudges my arm, and my glare softens when I notice his teasing smile. “I’m happy for you. And for code of conduct reasons, will not be asking any more questions.”

I nudge him back and jump off the hard metal bench when I see Jamie with the ball.

He sprints for the try line with the opposition right behind him. He’s tackled and tucks into himself to protect the ball and passes it to one of our forwards. But I don’t notice who. Jamie’s not moving right. And when the boys get the ball over the try line, he’s still lying on the field.

And he doesn’t get up.

My heart races and I can’t hear the crowd over the sound as I frown and walk to the sideline. My hands shake and adrenaline rushes through me, leaving me breathless. “Something’s wrong.”

Adam follows me to stand by the sideline. “Yeah, he does not look good.”

The players crowd around him and the stadium becomes eerily quiet. Our team doctor runs on the field as Jamie begins to stir and clutches his arm.

My trembling hand clenches my cap and the other covers my mouth. My foot crosses

the white line.

A hand tugs me back. “What are you doing? You can’t go on the field.”

“I can’t just leave him.” My voice breaks, and I rip my arm from Adam’s grip. Why isn’t he moving properly? He wasn’t having any issues with his shoulder last I heard.

“Daisy, they haven’t released the statement announcing your relationship yet,” he mutters urgently by my ear. “If you go out there, it will make everything more complicated for you both.”

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“I don’t care.” I don’t look at him as I step over the white line and onto the playing field. My sneakers squeak on the damp grass as I jog to the medical team surrounding him.

He’s sitting up now, face leached of colour. His brown skin has lost its healthy glow and turned dull, and the corners of his eyes are tight and lines bracket his mouth.

Our team doctor, Mark, frowns at me. “Daisy, what are you doing here?”

“I just—I wanted to—” I shake myself and force a coherent sentence out of my mouth. “Is he all right?”

“Dislocated his shoulder. Should be fine, but we’ll get some scans done once I’ve popped it back in.” I cringe and nausea rolls through me. “You don’t need to be here, Daisy.”

“I know. I?—”

“Daisy?” A pain-filled voice interrupts me, slurring slightly around his mouth guard, and we turn to Jamie.

I ignore the odd looks everyone is giving me and crouch beside him. “How are you feeling?”

He spits his mouth guard out and I take it from him, barely clocking that it’s covered in spit. “Like a fucking Australian dislocated my shoulder.” He smiles at me, but it looks more like a grimace. “Stay with me? I’m out of the game now and going to

hospital.”

“Of course I’ll stay with you.”

He takes my hand and squeezes it harder than usual, probably not realising his strength while he’s in pain. “Good. Pop it in, doc.”

Mark takes Jamie’s right arm, angles it, and pops it in with a sickening crunch.

“Motherfuckingcunt. Jesus.” Jamie brings my hand to his mouth and wheezes, his grasp tight, almost too tight, but I don’t say anything.

Mark’s assistant wraps Jamie’s arm in a sling and then we’re all standing. I try to drop Jamie’s hand so we don’t draw more attention to ourselves, but he holds tight and refuses to let go as we walk across the field to the sidelines.

Adam meets us there and Jamie says, “She’s taking me to hospital. Sorry.”

“Somehow, I don’t think you are,” Adam responds and nods at me with soft eyes. “I’ll see you in a few days.”

We ignore all the cameras and flashing lights and pass Nick getting ready to go on. His olive skin is pale, and his brown eyes are narrowed in focus. Jamie drops my hand to slap his shoulder. “Good luck, mate. Make ‘em sweat for it.”

Nick nods, a concentrated frown on his face, and runs onto the field. Jamie grabs my hand again and the game begins behind us as we walk to the sheds.

Mark frowns at our clasped hands. “I’m assuming you want to drive with her?”

“Yes,” Jamie says.

“I’ll meet you at Auckland Hospital where the ambulances come in.” He strides off before I can respond.

“Okay, my lovely, let me grab your stuff and then we’re off to hospital for medicine and some tests.” A dislocated shoulder is better than something tearing, but we won’t know everything until the scans come back.

Jamie stares at me blankly and nods along to everything I say. I slip his mouth guard into its case and run around the sheds, finding his stuff and mine before we walk slowly to my car.

He gets in with a wince, and I reach over him to gently click his seatbelt on without jostling his shoulder. I kiss his cheek, already rough with stubble. “Once we’ve got you fixed, we’re talking.”

I shut the door and round the car to the driver’s seat and we leave for the hospital. But what I meant as reassurance has done the opposite, and while I drive, I’m haunted by the dark look that entered his eyes when I told him we’re going to talk.

CHAPTERTEN

Jamie

“Think it’ll take much longer?” Daisy asks from the plastic chair beside the bed they made me lie on.

It’s frankly ridiculous they put me in a private room when all I’m waiting for is the scan results, but it stops anyone taking photos of me. My black jersey was cut away from my shoulder so the doctors could assess it properly, leaving me in my sweaty shorts, now clinging to me uncomfortably, and my jersey hanging half off me. There were sneakers in my bag I could change into thankfully, so I didn’t walk through the

hospital in my boots.

“I hope not. I want to sleep.” My eyes close and a heavy sigh escapes me.

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Daisy brushes my hand. “Are you still in pain?”

“Nah. It’s just dislocated.” I open my eyes in time to witness her scoff and roll her eyes.

“‘Just dislocated.’ Rugby boys, I swear you’re built different.” She smiles at me fondly.

Her hand rests on the bed beside mine, and I nudge my fingers against her until she holds my hand. “I’m fine. Truly. A little sore, but no more than usual after a game.” I pause and think. “Maybe slightly more than usual, but you’re here to distract me, so it’s okay.”

Daisy plays with my fingers and looks at me from under her lashes. “I’m sorry I ran onto the field. PR will be having a nightmare. We won the game though, so retained the cup. At least the public has something other than us to focus on.”

“Don’t worry about that.” I shrug my shoulders, forgetting I recently dislocated one, and wince. The fact we won doesn’t even sink in. I’m too worried about what Daisy’s thinking. “You know that’s what I want. To be with you. For everyone to know.”

“I know. I’m sorry if I made it more complicated.”

Hope bursts through me, and I turn my hand to link our fingers together and squeeze. Jitters set up camp in my tummy like they do for the first game back after the off-season or an injury. “I’m sorry I signed the form without telling you.” Her head comes up and serious eyes meet mine. “I was trying to be sensible with the urging of

Suli, but I should have spoken to you about it first. I shouldn't have assumed anything."

She stops me talking by running her other hand across my good arm. "I shouldn't have taken so long to figure out what I want."

"But you do...want this?" I ask cautiously. The warm hope in my chest waiting to shatter.

"I do. Of course I do."

I blow out a long breath and grin at her. "Sign the form whenever you want. I didn't mean to rush you or?—"

"I signed it yesterday. I was going to tell you after the game, but then you went and dislocated your shoulder." She mock glares at me, but her face quickly softens. "PR had a plan and were going to have a meeting with us next week about how to break it to the public." She grimaces. "I kind of ruined that."

"Who cares? Everything's been signed and now everyone knows and we can go home together." I shake her hand excitedly. "We'll figure out the aftermath later."

Her eyes crinkle and her cheeks plump with her smile. "I like the sound of that."

We fall silent and sit with giddy grins until Daisy says, "I'm sorry it took me the week to talk to you about it. I overreacted." She goes back to fiddling with my fingers, tracing the nail beds, and smoothing over callouses. "I don't like people making decisions for me without me, but I understand why you did it. It was smart, and I should have realised that sooner. It won't take me so long next time."

I tug her hand until she climbs on the bed with me, her hip pressed against mine.

“Sweetheart, it won’t happen again. We both learned something about the other, and we spoke the entire time. So we need cooling off after a fight, so what? Next time we’ll be better.”

“Yeah?” she asks quietly.

“Yeah. Now kiss me,” I demand.

She leans forward and our lips meet softly. The gentle kiss of knowing someone else, the comfort of their skin on yours, the warmth that spreads through my chest, and the feeling of home.

Daisy pulls away but doesn’t go far. “I love you.”

My lips quirk and I let her words wash over me, wash away the doubt and stress of the week, and now my injury. None of it matters, not with Daisy beside me, not with Daisylovingme.

“I love you too, Daisy. You’re my best friend, but you’re so much more than that. You’re everything to me,” I choke out.

She drops her forehead to mine. “It’s the same for me. You’re my home, Jamie. You’re it for me.”

I swallow the emotion clogging my throat and kiss her, nipping her bottom lip. “Good. You should move in, so carpooling is easier.”

She purses her lips against the laugh she’s struggling to hold in. “Driving five houses up the street makes it hard?”

“No, but being away from you does.”

“I’ll think about it. The hardwood floors in your villa are to die for.”

“You only love me for my villa, don’t you?”

“Of course not. I love your car as well.” I dig my fingers into her waist until she laughs. “And I love you the most.”

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I urge her back to me so I can kiss her and whisper against her lips, “Good. Now get me out of here so you can ravish me.”

“So I can ravish you?”

“I can hardly do the ravishing with a dislocated shoulder.” I smirk at her. “And you’re not allowed to come first and leave me hanging.”

She slaps my hand playfully. “Be good for the doctors, and I’ll think about it. I’m not sure my hips are up for a ride.”

I groan at the image, and she slips off the bed to the plastic chair with a satisfied smile.

We’re sent home an hour later when everyone’s satisfied nothing tore and I’ll be as good as new in six weeks after rehab. Can’t say I expected the game to put me on the injured list, but hopefully I’ll be fine for the last few games of the Northern Tour around the UK and the end of the season. I’m given strict instructions not to move my shoulder and keep the sling on but other than that, we’re home free and parked in front of Daisy’s house to get Westley before we spend the night at mine.

Both our phones have a million messages from Alex, Linda, and Diana from PR, but apparently they’re handling everything. I have two days off before I’m scheduled for interviews about the dislocation and when I’ll be back playing, and my relationship with the assistant physiotherapist. Daisy was given time off too while we wait for everyone to lose interest and PR does damage control. But according to Suli, it’s going well and they’ve managed to spin it so her licence isn’t up for debate.

Westley scrambles into the car and launches himself on my lap, puts his paws on my chest, and wags his tail until he falls over.

“Hey, buddy. How was your day? Eat any socks?” I scratch behind his ear and settle him on my lap for the short drive to my house.

“He better not have. He has strict instructions to only eat toys from now on, don’t you, baby?” Daisy reaches a hand out to pat Westley and encounters my hand. She gives me a condescending pat and parks in my driveway.

She rounds the car to open the door for me, since I have one arm in a sling and the other wrapped around Westley, and helps me out of the car before snagging our bags.

We enter my villa with the hardwood floors she likes so much, and I flick the lights on while Daisy gets Westley settled. She turns to me, crosses her arms, and looks me up and down.

“Like what you see?” I try to pose but don’t manage much with the sling.

“You need a shower, my lovely.”

“Rude,” I respond, despite the feeling racing through me when she calls me lovely. Like someone poured hot chocolate into my veins on a stormy day. Comforting, and I never want it to end.

“You really want to stay in your playing clothes I know for a fact are covered in sweat? Not to mention your jersey is barely clinging to you.” She tilts her head and scans me again. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“I would love a shower.” Nothing beats a steamy shower after a game to wash away the sweat, mud, and sometimes blood. “I’m not sure I can manoeuvre properly,

though. Or if I need to wrap this or something.” I gesture to the sling. The doctor probably told me, but either I’ve forgotten or was too distracted by Daisy holding my hand to listen.

“It’s a good thing I’m here then. I’ll help you shower.”

My throat convulses. “You will?” Is that my voice all squeaky?

“Yes,” she says with amusement tinging her voice. “You’ll be more comfortable when you’re clean and you need help doing it. I want to help. Maybe do other things too.” She bites her lip to cover her smile.

“My bedroom’s at the end of the hall.”

She turns and strides down the hall and pauses at the doorway. “You coming?”

My legs remember how to work, and I reach her in three paces and pass her to enter the attached bathroom. I flick the lights to illuminate the warm grey room and open the glass shower door, turning the water on hot.

“How are we doing this?” I ask, frowning at the sling.

Daisy puts her hands on her hips and analyses the shower. She nods and says, “Okay, here’s the plan. I’ll undress you, take the sling off while you make sure not to move your arm, and then I’ll help you shower.”

“If I’m going to be naked, you better be as well.” I eye her black rainproof uniform.

“Obviously.” She unzips her jacket to reveal a tight black tank top, but doesn’t remove anything else. “But you first.”

Daisy comes closer and carefully removes my sling, giving me strict instructions not to move the position of my arm until she tells me to, and then she grasps the rip in my jersey and tugs. Fabric rips and a tiny frown of concentration mars her face, and she huffs when the fabric stops at the hem. She yanks more forcefully and smiles triumphantly when the jersey rips all the way.

My mouth dries. “I shouldn’t have found that sexy.”

She removes the destroyed jersey from me, careful not to jostle my arm. “I’ll rip clothes off you any time.” Her eyes scan me, and her tongue darts out to wet her lips when her eyes track the hair trailing from my belly button and disappearing into my shorts.

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Maybe I was hit harder than I remember because all I manage to say is, “Okay.”

She shoots me an amused look and gets to her knees. Daisy slips my socks off, and it’s more intimate than I anticipate. I swallow hard when she carefully sets them to the side and doesn’t even comment on the smell. Fingers tuck into the elastic of my shorts and she guides me out of them. Daisy pauses and glances at me as she pulls my briefs off and waits for my nod before she lifts my foot out of each hole and adds them to the small pile of clothes in the corner. She stands without looking at my limp dick.

“Get in the warmth, but don’t move your arm,” she commands, and I follow without question.

I sigh when the hot water hits my back, and my eyes fall closed. The water washes away the hospital and sweat, soothing aches and pains. When I hear clothes hit the floor, my eyes pop open, and I turn to watch Daisy. She’s down to her black sports bra and underwear.

“Do you always wear all black to games?”

“I do. It’s habit. Not really a lucky charm, but I feel weird if I don’t wear all black.” As she talks, she unravels her plait and piles her hair on top of her head in a bun.

“I didn’t peg you as someone with game day rituals.”

Some of the guys have super specific rituals, but I always just show up and play. Don’t want to rely on anything but myself and the team to win. Eating a specific food

or wearing certain underwear never seemed helpful to me, but watching Daisy struggle out of her sports bra, I can see the appeal.

She manages to yank it over her head and her breasts bounce free and the bun on her head goes lopsided. She's beautiful. Standing there, red-faced from the struggle with her bra, and hair frizzing slightly in the steam. My heart clenches.

Finally, she steps out of her underwear to reveal neatly trimmed hair and ducks into the shower to join me. I turn to the side so the water hits both of us, and she grins. "Ready to try this?"

"Let's do it." Anything to feel her hands on me. The comfort of her skin on mine.

It's the first time I've seen her naked, and although I'm intensely attracted to her and want her in my bed immediately, there's something about standing in the water together, feeling her hands stroke suds over my skin and knowing there's no rush. She's here, and she's not going anywhere. There's time to be frantic later. I can enjoy the slow movements of her hands now.

She grabs more soap and runs her hands down my thick chest, my rounded belly, and around to my lower back before she crouches at my feet. We shift the shower head so it doesn't wet her hair, and she washes grass and mud off my tattooed leg. She moves to my other leg before carefully cleaning my feet, so I don't lose balance with only one arm.

"Do you want me to wash your hair?"

I nod, incapable of speech. Having Daisy take care of me, matter of fact, with quiet questions asking what I want and being careful of my shoulder, I fall more in love with her. I feel her love with her gentle touches and small smiles, and I don't think I've ever felt as content as I do now, standing in the shower with her, a recently

dislocated shoulder and put on the sidelines until I recover. None of it matters when she's here. When we're both here.

"Are you okay sitting on the floor? I can't reach without getting shampoo in your eyes and that's the worst feeling in the world." She helps me sit on the tiles and squirts shampoo in her hand.

"I don't think it's worse than being tackled."

"It's a different kind of bad. You never expect to get shampoo in your eye until it happens and you can't see and you feel like your eyeball is being burned out." Her fingers dig into my scalp and massage slowly through the strands.

My head falls back against her tummy and a soft groan escapes me. The last of the tension melts from me, and I nuzzle her skin as my eyes fall shut. Water smooths over my scalp, and her hand cups my forehead so shampoo doesn't get in my eyes.

She repeats the process and taps my good shoulder. "Now for the hard part, my lovely. Up you get, and I'll explain what we'll do."

I stand, and she turns my back to the water so she's blocked from it. Goosebumps spread across her skin and her pink nipples tighten, but she doesn't let me shift to allow warm water to hit her body.

"I'll wash your good side first and then we'll tackle the other." She wiggles her brows at me until I roll my eyes at her pun and she continues, "You're going to straighten your arm until it hangs at your side and bend over. Then I'll do a super quick clean and back into sling position you'll go. Ready?"

"Go for it."

She grabs more soap and rubs from my wrist to my arm, lifts it, and rubs soap briskly under my arm, which is slightly humiliating but weirdly makes me want to kiss her. The bright lights highlight her freckles, and the damp hair around her face is frizzing more and I want to curl it around my finger and smooth it down.

“Okay, let’s try this.”

We slowly move my arm into the position she wants it with minimal pain and she washes my injured side quickly. Then I’m back in sling position and there’s only one place she hasn’t cleaned. Just thinking about it turns the comforting atmosphere hot with tension and heat spreads through me as I take in her slick, naked body.

“I don’t have to. You could try with your good arm,” she suggests and finally slides her eyes down my body to take me in.

“No, you can do it.” I wait until she looks at me again. “And then we could do the fun stuff you mentioned.”

“You feeling up to that?” She bites her lip and glances at my shoulder.

“I’m fine. Won’t be able to move much, though,” I say regretfully, but the thought of her moving above me, sinking down on me while I watch, is enough for my dick to stir with interest.

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The flush on her cheeks darkens, and she slicks her hands with soap. Hands grasp me, and my muscles tighten. One hand rubs up to my head and down to the base of me, soap left in her wake, clinging to hair and skin. I thicken and can't tear my eyes from her hands holding me, weighing me, exploring me as soap drips to the tiles. Daisy grabs more soap and rolls my balls in her hand, and I can't control my groan. I'm fully erect now and thrust into her hand lightly, unable to stop myself from moving and feeling more of her around me.

She twists her hand at my tip and I jerk, good hand flying to her shoulder to hold on. "Oh, shit."

My eyes land on her face with her dilated whiskey eyes as she pants into the steamy bathroom. The image she makes, all wet and soft from the shower while she jerks me off, twists my insides pleasantly, and I tense as heat rushes to my groin. I must make some sort of noise because her hand falls from me and she steps away.

"Let me get clean," she starts breathlessly, "and then we'll put the sling back on so you don't accidentally hurt it while I make you come."

"Daisy," I groan and drop my head to her shoulder.

She turns me so the water hits her, grabs the soap and washes herself quickly, not lingering anywhere, but that doesn't mean I don't enjoy it. Her ass looks as good as it does in those tight leggings she wears. Even better, I decide with soap trickling down it.

Daisy rinses herself as I stand behind her, attempting not to touch my erection and

enjoy the show. She turns the water off, steps out of the shower, and grabs a towel from the shelf. We stand on the bath mat and Daisy hastily dries herself, and I watch a missed droplet of water glide down her chest to rest on her nipple. She crouches and slides the towel up my legs and pats my body dry. She gently squeezes water out of my curls and drops the towel on the floor haphazardly; the complete opposite of how she treated my clothes. I don't think I'm the only one affected by the shower.

“Let's get your sling on.” She wraps the sling around me quickly and walks through the door to the bedroom.

I follow behind her, mesmerised by the sway of her hips, and barely blink when she tells me to get on the bed with my back against the headboard.

The wood is cool on my shower-heated skin, and I stretch my legs out in front of me. Daisy climbs over me and straddles my lap, and we both gasp at the sensation of our bare skin touching. She's warm and damp and slick between her legs despite the shower.

She settles against my dick and shifts closer to me to claim my lips in a heady kiss. Our tongues tangle, and she's careful not to touch my arm. One hand threads through my wet hair carefully and the other strokes over scars from rugby and scrapes I got into as a kid and lands low on my stomach, brushing through the hair leading to my groin.

My good hand smooths the tiny curls that appeared on her hairline, and I kiss down her throat, swirling my tongue on her pulse point and sucking hard where her shoulder meets her neck. She pulls back and my hand drifts to her nipple, tweaking it lightly before giving the other some attention. Daisy sways in my lap, grinding down, but forcibly stops herself before I can match her movement.

“Where are the condoms?”

“Top drawer.”

She leans over and digs around in my bedside table drawer. I stroke her back and clutch her ass, massaging it and moving between her cheeks. She falters while digging through the drawer. Daisy reappears with red splashed on her face and rips open the foil packet.

Shifting back on my lap, she rolls the condom down my length, and I hold my breath at the feeling of her hands on me. She rises to her knees and sinks down on me without warning, and my mouth drops open. My head falls back and hits the headboard, but I recognise the pain dully, too focused on Daisy rolling her hips forward and back. Her slick heat encompasses me, and she tightens around me every time she slides forward. She keeps away from my chest and the sling strapped across it. She grinds against me, and I put my feet flat on the bed so I can thrust into her, slightly unbalanced without the use of my arm, but I make it work.

“For someone who said their hips weren’t up to it, you’re doing extremely well,” I say through broken breaths.

She clenches her cunt around me with a grin. “I had some good inspiration.”

I grunt when she picks up her pace and heat coils in me, ready to burst. “Really. What was it?”

“There’s this fucking handsome rugby player that let me shower with him. Really sexy with his shoulders and wavy hair.”

My fingers dig into her hip. “Yeah? He treat you good?”

“The best. I love him.” She shudders and leans forward for a messy kiss. “How close are you?”

“Very.” She clenches around me hard, and I drop my forehead to hers. “Fuck, I love you.”

“Come. Now,” she demands in a throaty voice, and when she slips a hand between us to rub circles around her clit, I let go.

My head hits the headboard again, and my fingers dig into her hips, hopefully not enough to bruise, and when my vision clears, I nudge her hand away from her clit and replace it with mine. I rub in slow circles, mimicking her, and watch her go rigid against me. Her eyes close, and a high-pitched moan escapes her.

My hand falls away from her and her eyes open, already looking sleepy. I press soft kisses across her face, my stubble scraping over her soft skin, and end at her lips. Daisy slips off me and takes care of the unsexy before returning to bed and pulling back the covers for us to get under.

“I’m surprised you’re still awake,” I tease.

“I thought falling asleep and leaving you to fend for yourself with the use of one arm wouldn’t be the nicest thing.” Her head rests beside mine on the pillow. “No promises when we get you fixed up, though,” she says, finishing with a yawn. “Then you’re on your own. Sorry, lovely.”

“As soon as I’m cleared, I’ll do all the work until you’re so satisfied you can’t even move.”

“That won’t be hard. I just did that,” she says with a laugh and kisses my nose.

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“Don’t tear down my dreams, darling.”

“Sorry, sorry. I look forward to it.” Her eyes close, and I scan her face slowly, taking in the strands of hair escaping her almost completely unraveled bun, the freckles decorating her nose, and her breathing already deepening as sleep takes her.

I couldn’t be more in love with her if I tried. And now I don’t have to worry about anything else. I can enjoy being with her, feel her warm body against mine, and wake up beside her.

Westley trots into the room and launches himself on the bed and noses around the sheets until he curls up at the foot of the bed.

Nothing else matters but them. I can get through the injury, through retiring, through anything, with Daisy and her puppy by my side.

My own little family.

I kiss Daisy’s nose and close my eyes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Daisy

Three months later

I drop the box on the hardwood floor in the lounge and groan. I lean forward to crack

my back, and it gives a satisfying crunch. When I stand straight, arms loop around my waist and pull me back into a chest. I tilt my head to receive the kiss I know is about to come over my shoulder. I smile tiredly at him when he pulls away.

“Back sore?” Jamie asks.

“A little.”

Jamie shifts his hands to my back and starts massaging the muscles, sore from carrying boxes from my house to his all day. I thought moving day would be simple since we only live a few houses away. I was wrong.

I sigh when I look around the lounge. Boxes cover the floor and clothes and coat hangers are strewn over the couch.

But we’re here. Together.

I’m finally moving into his villa now that the season’s over after the Northern Tour. Jamie recovered from his injury to play the last two games and shocked the team after they won the last game by announcing his retirement.

While he was recovering, it was all he could talk about. If he should retire. He’s lucky he didn’t have many injuries in his career and recovered beautifully from the dislocation, but he decided he didn’t want to risk himself anymore so late in his career. Wanted to go out with a great season and retire with his body still intact. He’s still deciding what he wants to do now.

“I’m going to miss you when the season starts.” I turn and sling my arms around him, resting my head on his chest.

“I am too. But now I can pick you up, and we can come home together. We don’t need to wait to see each other at work.” He kisses my forehead, and I smile.

“It’ll be hard leaving you, but I’m glad I get to come home to you now.” I’m dreading next season. So many international games away from Jamie and Westley, but I’m not ready to leave the game yet. Maybe after the World Cup in a few years I’ll start my own practice, but until then, I’ll dream of coming home to him.

There was a minor scandal when I ran onto the field when he was injured, but it mostly blew over. Weirdly, his injury helped since he didn’t play for six weeks. It gave everyone some distance. Our relationship wasn’t a surprise to anyone we knew personally, to both our surprise and chagrin, and we were lucky with how quickly the public got used to it. PR pulled through for us big time. And now we don’t need to worry about any of that.

“Are there any more boxes?”

I scan the room, attempting to count, but lose track quickly. “I don’t think so? I don’t have to be out of the house until Friday, so we have time.” I pout at him. “Let’s order pizza and ignore the boxes.”

“Already ordered.”

I brighten and the fatigue melts away with the promise of melted cheese and a spot to curl up on the couch. Once I move all the clothes. “That’s why I love you.”

He grins. “Because I order pizza?”

“Because you’re thoughtful and have a fantastic ass.” My hands drift down and I give him a playful squeeze.

“I love you too.” He clears his throat and suddenly looks nervous and shifty. He takes a large breath, and my eyes narrow as he grabs my hands. “Daisy, I’ve loved you for years, as a friend, as a partner, and I want to marry you.” His eyes slam shut, and his nose scrunches as he laughs shakily. “Fuck. Shit. I said it wrong. Hold on, let me do

this right.”

I giggle and grin at him so hard I can see my cheeks in my peripheral vision. Jamie tucks a shaking hand in his pocket and gets on his knee.

“Daisy, will you marry me?”

I fall to my knees in front of him and fling my arms around him. “Yes.”

I turn his head to kiss him messily. He grabs my left hand and slips the ring on with shaking fingers. He misses my finger, and I have to hold both our hands steady to get the ring on. But we get it on, and I’m never taking it off.

We finish unpacking with a ring on my finger and Westley darting between our legs.