



All Bats are Off (Rose City Roasters)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Friends with Benefits meets Ted Lasso in this one-night-stand to lovers, gay baseball romcom set in the Pacific Northwest.

If theres one rule every pro-baller knows, its to avoid the press like the plague. That doesnt stop Johnathan Tuck Tucker, the Rose City Roasters second baseman with a heart of gold (and a hard-on for carbs), from hooking up with Portlands hot-shot sports journalist one summer evening. What starts as a one night stand quickly spirals into a series of steamy hook-ups between Tucker and the vegan-ish blond in khakis he cant resist. Getting involved with the enemy probably isnt the best idea, but a casual situationship couldnt hurt, right?

As a sports journalist and podcaster, Brock Heller is used to being surrounded by buff dudes in tight pants, but none of them make him feel the way Johnny Tucker does. By all accounts, the two of them have nothing in common—whereas Tucker is a twenty-something chaotic ball of energy, Brock prefers the comfort of his home and luxurious bubble baths. And yet, their chemistry is the stuff dreams are made of . . . deliciously dirty, not-suitable-for-the-office dreams. Having a relationship with a pro-athlete could jeopardize his career, but as it turns out, Tucker might be worth the risk.

Keeping things casual might be easier said than done, but as both Brock and Tucker know, the best things are often worth fighting for.

All Bats are Off is a spicy MM novella (20k+ words) set in the Rose City Roasters universe. The events take place between the first and second books in the series. This one night stand-to-lovers romance between a thicc (with two cs) bisexual baseball player who loves bread almost as much as blowjobs, and a gay, long-haired sports journalist with a pierced peen, features drag queen Bingo, braiding hair as a love language, county fair food porn, hotel bathtub hook-ups, and an almost entirely LGBTQIA+ cast of characters.

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Tucker

Roasters 60–31

“Fuck, Chandler peed on me.”

Warm liquid trickled down my left thigh, pooling on the yoga mat beneath me. I sat back on my haunches, careful not to crush the ball of apricot-colored fluff cowering behind my bruised knees.

The All-Star break couldn't have come at a better time. My body had taken one hell of a beating during our last road series and needed time to recover. Six days were barely a “drop in the bucket,” as my teammate, Matty Miller, would say—the Roasters' resident Southern boy had an arsenal of hilarious colloquialisms—but it was better than nothing. I looked more like a bruised banana than a ball player these days.

I reached around my back, scooping the pint-sized terrier up and off the mat.

Holy cuteness, Batman. It's the Piddler.

It was impossible to be mad at anything that adorable. Thank fuck I didn't have any pets or children of my own—I would spoil them rotten. Even now, covered in puppy piss, I was willing to sacrifice my entire net worth for the dog in my palms.

“What did I say about peeing on me, little dude?” I asked him, nuzzling our noses together.

“You know,” Roman interjected from the mat next to mine. “Some people pay good money for that kind of thing.”

I recoiled. “Dude, gross.”

The puppy in Roman’s lap—a hound mix named Hamburger—grumbled when he stopped petting her to whip me across the chest with a Roasters rally towel. “We don’t kink shame here, Tuck.”

I snatched the towel out of his hands, swiped it through the puddle on my mat, and hurled it back at his head.

“Okay, do I need to separate the two of you?” Matty asked, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb the spotted pit bull snoring next to his feet.

Matty had a puppy of his own waiting for him back at his studio apartment, an adorable basset hound named Mo, whose derpy face had won Matty over within seconds. The two of them had been practically inseparable ever since. Coach Ward had nearly blown a fuse when he’d found out that our freckle-faced shortstop had smuggled Mo onto the team bus during our road trip to Salt Lake City.

“Y’all fight like me and my brothers.”

Roman’s smirk matched my own. Brothers? Not quite, but we had been roommates for going on six months now, which was one of my longest cohabitation stints to date, not to mention longer than any romantic relationship either of us had been in.

Unlike most of my childhood friends, my parents had been well into their mid-forties by the time they’d had me—the result of one too many Chardonnays during their annual anniversary cruise to Bermuda, or so the story went—and neither of them had been willing to press their luck with a second “geriatric pregnancy,” so that was that.

Only child club, party of one.

The fact was, aside from trips to summer camp and the occasional overnight tournament during my high school career, I had never split a bedroom with somebody else until after I'd been drafted. The novelty had worn off before I'd finished unpacking my vinyl collection.

Sharing a bathroom sucked ass.

Six teams, seven years, and one original 1967 pressing of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band signed by three of the four Beatles later— fucking Ringo —and I had finally landed a spot as the starting second baseman for the Rose City Roasters, the American League West's newest team.

And I was fucking crushing it.

We all were. We had a real shot at making the playoffs, in our freshman season no less—practically unheard of.

“Do you realize that right about now, Pink and Bennett are sitting in a dugout, sweating their balls off, and we're playing with puppies?”

Laughter shook my chest. “Sucks to suck.”

“Speaking of sucking , I've got plans with the blonde from ticketing after this.” Roman wagged his brows. “And her roommate.”

I snorted.

“Of course you do,” Matty mumbled under his breath.

The whole team knew that Roman's sexual appetite was insatiable and varied. He hardly ever ate the same meal twice, so to speak. Men, women, couples, orgies—my roommate didn't discriminate when it came to his play partners. That was something we had in common, only I was more of a one woman—or man—at a time kind of guy.

That hadn't stopped me from helping him double-stuff our neighbor's pussy on more than one occasion. Or sucking off Chicago's rookie catcher while Roman had fucked his ass after last month's matchup in the Windy City.

"You're welcome to join us," he hedged.

I shook my head. The occasional threesome with my roommate was fun, but that was more Roman's thing. Besides, tonight I had something more sinful in mind.

"I appreciate the invitation, but this is our one week off in months, and I'm going to spend it face-first in deep-fried heaven."

Roman shrugged. "Your loss. You could've spent it face-first in Hillary."

Matty's laugh woke the pittie resting on his shoe and earned us a few harsh glares from our fellow yogis. We probably should've saved the fucking and funnel cake talk until after the class.

It was our second day at the Columbia County Fair, and I, for one, was ready to curl up with a corndog and call it a night. Playing a doubleheader in ninety-degree heat, in front of forty-thousand screaming fans was nothing compared to the mental and emotional exhaustion that came from autographing mitts and tits for hours on end.

Thousands of people had turned out for the annual event held halfway between Portland and Rose City, just west of the Columbia River. For two days, while our

pitcher and catcher represented the Roasters at this year's All-Star game, and the rest of our teammates caught up on their beauty rest, Matty, Roman, and I had schmoozed the crowd, posed for pictures with baseball fans from across the Pacific Northwest, and judged the marionberry pie bakeoff. Oregon's obsession with the marionberry was borderline psychotic, if you asked me, but I never turned down a piece—or nine—of pie.

The three of us had been voluntold to represent the Roasters' franchise by Dani, the team's social media director, though most days she felt more like the team's mom. The last thing any of us wanted was to disappoint her, a fate worse than death.

Officially, Dani had tasked us—three social, eligible, and slightly oversexed bachelors—with representing the team and their partnership with the Rose City Dog Rescue. Hence this afternoon's yoga class with adoptable puppies, our final event for the weekend. Unofficially, I came to cuddle dogs and deepthroat pickles on a stick.

What could I say? I was a simple man.

It didn't take much to make me happy. Bread, baseball, blow jobs and The Beatles . . . preferably in that order.

Carbs were my love language, and nobody did carbs quite like the county fair. I had never met a funnel cake or Cheeto-dusted hot dog or honey-fried chicken sandwich—with donuts for buns—that was anything less than orgasmic. So what if it led to late-night indigestion or heartburn? That was a problem for future me.

Besides, great love meant enduring great pain. That was what my Great Aunt Helga said, at least.

I might not be able to stomach fried dough like I had in my early twenties, but pancake-battered pickles deep fried in oil seemed like a good compromise. Practically

a salad, if you asked me, especially when paired with a mango mule slushie.

Fruits and vegetables. Mom would be so proud.

We buried our noses in our mats for the final few minutes of “stretch and fetch,” until at last, the instructor bowed her head and dismissed the class. After that, we spent another twenty minutes or so fielding the questions—and phone numbers—hurled in our direction. Based on Matty’s sappy smile, it looked like I was the only one going home without a threesome tonight. Fine by me. I was just as happy with my hand, so long as the other one had a potato swirl.

You hear that, Mom? That’s two vegetables.

Just as we finished gathering up the last of the mats and foam blocks, my eyes landed on a familiar face at the back of the dissipating crowd. One head stood above the rest. More specifically, the dirty blond locks piled into a messy bun atop that head.

“Huh.”

“What?” Matty asked.

“I thought it was hot out, but I guess it was just Hell.”

He glanced over his shoulder, smiling when his attention landed on the man walking toward us across the small, grassy field.

Brock Heller.

Better known amongst the locker room as Hell, Heller Skelter, or, my personal favorite, Hades’s lost hellhound.

The man should come with a warning. One that read: “Don’t let the freckles and swagger fool you—I’m a menace.”

It was widely known that the illustrious sports journalist could make or break any athlete’s career with the power of his pen. He also hosted High Cheese , one of the most downloaded baseball podcasts on Spotify. That meant there were two ways he could ruin my life—print and audio.

That hadn’t stopped me from eye-fucking him every chance I’d gotten these past few months.

“Gentlemen,” he said, nodding in our direction.

“Heller,” Matty greeted, extending his hand. Ever the Southern gentleman. “Good to see you again.”

“You too.” He pointed toward Matty’s mop of reddish-orange curls. Whereas Matty wore his hair pulled back with a headband, I let my shaggy mullet fly free. For all I knew, Brock Heller slept in his signature man bun. “Millie did a good job.”

Roman arched a brow. “What, you two share a stylist?”

“ Curl specialist ,” Matty emphasized. “You wouldn’t get it.”

It wasn’t an insult. Roman had kept his hair clipped down to the follicles for as long as we’d known him. That applied to the rest of his body hair, too—the dude’s balls were smoother than dolphin skin.

“I know you’re all probably itching to get back to the city, but could you spare a few minutes for your favorite podcaster?”

“Sure,” I said, earning me an icy glare. “Is she here?”

I regretted the words the second they left my mouth. Not because they weren’t true—High Cheese was in my regular rotation, but it didn’t hold a candle to My Worst Date or Scam Goddess—but because they had seemingly no effect on Brock. He didn’t laugh or smile. Hell, the guy barely blinked. Somebody might want to check his factory settings . . .

“If you want to be on the show, Johnny , all you have to do is ask.”

My heart panged when he practically growled my name. Nobody called me Johnny, not even my parents. For as long as I could remember, I had always been Tuck or Tucker, and I preferred it that way. And yet, there was something about the way he said it that made me feel like I was starring in a 70s porno about a naughty schoolboy and his professor.

Minus the Tom Selleck mustache.

By all metrics, Brock Heller was a good-looking guy. Mid-thirties, well-groomed beard, slender build with broad shoulders—he looked like a goddamn Ken doll. Surfer boys with tousled hair and jewelry had never done it for me before, and yet an image of his fingers—gold rings and all—wrapped around my cock flashed across my brain.

“It’s just a few questions.”

“Shouldn’t you be in Philadelphia?” Roman asked, crossing his arms over his chest. The move accentuated his thick, tattooed biceps. I might have thought he was flirting if it were anybody else, but Roman knew better than to hit on the enemy. And Brock Heller was, without a doubt, the enemy.

Which made my attraction to him even more inconvenient.

“Ashton’s covering the All-Star game,” he answered, referencing Portlandia Press’s junior sportswriter. “I took the week off from the paper.”

“And you decided to spend it sampling the eats and treats of the Columbia County Fair?”

“Nah, I’m not much for sugar,” Brock said flatly. “I came for the poultry show.”

And because I couldn’t help myself, I said, “Got a thing for cock, Brock?”

A muscle in his jaw flickered like a candle. It wasn’t much, but it was a reaction, nonetheless.

“Sorry, man,” Roman said. “You’ll have to count me out. I’ve got a hot date at eight, which means I only have three hours to shower, manscape, and put fresh sheets on the bed.”

Brock scoffed. Little did he know that Roman wasn’t exaggerating. In fact, as his roommate, I had it on good authority that it would take him the full three hours to get ready. The man had a rigorous grooming ritual, and we had the water bill to prove it.

“Same here.” Matty’s attention skated over a curvy brunette waiting next to the water station. “I just made plans. Sorry.”

His rosy cheeks were a clear indicator that he was anything but.

It looked like my friends were booked for the rest of the evening, which meant there was only one other option.

“Guess you’re stuck with me, Hell .”

His lips flattened into a thin line. Clearly, Brock Heller wasn’t used to being challenged, and damn if that didn’t make me feel all warm and tingly—and more than a little turned on, too. There was a sick satisfaction that came from making the confident, hot shit reporter squirm.

“Fine,” he grumbled under his breath.

“On one condition.”

My agent was already going to give me crap for doing an interview without his preapproval, so I might as well have fun with it.

Brock arched a brow. “Name it.”

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Brock

“Y ou’re not really going to eat that, are you?”

My stomach roiled when the infuriatingly handsome man seated across from me winked before shoving another forkful of what could only be described as candy-coated, crispy animal fat between his lips.

The smell alone gave me heartburn.

Seriously, deep-fried bacon blanketed in cotton candy—talk about a crime against gastronomy. Gone were the days of a good, old-fashioned bag of popcorn or soft pretzel drenched in cheese sauce.

Mmm, cheese sauce.

To be fair, it had been a decade or so since I’d frequented a fair of any kind—my work schedule didn’t allow for much beyond the office or podcast studio during baseball season and my social life was nonexistent—and apparently, sometime between then and now, popcorn and pretzels had gotten a makeover.

One that made my eyes roll and stomach churn.

“That’s disgusting.”

“No,” Tucker countered. “That’s delicious.”

I nearly choked when his tongue darted out to catch the sugar granules clinging to his lips, and then mentally kicked myself for responding to him like that. It was hard—and getting harder by the second—not to picture what else that mouth of his could do. If the rumors were anything to go by, most of Portland had experienced the oral delights of Johnathan “Tuck” Tucker.

Tucker might not have been the only Roaster with a reputation, but he was the only Roaster whose ass was my screensaver. Not that he—or my editor—ever needed to know that.

What could I say? I preferred my men thicc —with two cs—and Johnny Tucker had thighs like tree trunks. I would be lying if I said I hadn’t pictured them wrapped around my back while I plowed into him at least once or twice.

“Alright, hellhound.” His thick, heavy voice tore me away from my inappropriate thoughts. “Your turn,” he said, nodding toward the plastic fork on the table.

My stomach lurched.

I should have known better than to blindly accept his “condition” for our interview. It wasn’t unheard of for players to have requests—or even hard limits—when it came to their press interactions. That applied to both the location of the interviews and the subject matter itself. After a decade of professional journalism and over a thousand interviews, I thought I had seen it all.

That was until Tucker had demanded a trade—one bite per question.

“I can’t.”

He smiled. “You can.”

“Seriously, man, sugar makes my skin break out, and I haven’t had processed meat in, like, three years.”

“Are you vegan?”

I shrugged. “Vegan-ish.”

“Oh god, you’re one of those ‘my body is a temple’ guys, aren’t you?”

“You know it,” I said around a smirk. “One that deserves to be worshipped.”

His eyes widened with surprise. He wasn’t the only one taken aback by my flirty response. I blamed it on the afternoon heat and overwhelming stench of barbecued pork and . . . caramel?

“Forget me.” I cutting him off before he could come up with some witty comeback. “I don’t know how you can eat all that.”

For his next bite, Tucker flexed his bicep as he lifted the fork to his mouth. “Somehow, I think I’ll be okay.”

We had been at this for nearly twenty minutes—him devouring plate after plate of sweet and salty fair food, barely coming up for air to answer my questions—and that was after waiting in lines for nearly twice as long. Surprisingly, Tucker hadn’t tried to use his local celebrity status to jump ahead. In fact, the only reason it had taken us as long as it had to get our food was because of all the selfies he’d stopped to take with fans.

We had already covered most of my questions about the All-Star break, the team’s philanthropic efforts, and even a few personal questions about Tucker’s rich dating history—there was no topic too taboo for the Roasters’ second baseman—which

meant it was time to hold up my end of our bargain.

“C’mon, Hell,” he goaded. “Pick your poison. There must be something on the table you can eat.”

Damn this man and his sideways smile.

I scoured what was left of our smorgasbord. Tucker had already downed an entire sushirito and chased it with a Fruity Pebbles milkshake. The pickle ice cream was an immediate no, as was the twice-baked potato slathered in garlic butter and lobster. I had the sensitive stomach of a fifty-year-old soccer mom. Unless I wanted to spend the rest of the evening on the toilet—and my friend, Beau, would have my ass if I missed his show tonight—it was best I stay away from all seafood, sweets, and meats.

That left the grilled (macaroni and) cheese.

“It’s the mac and cheese sandwich, isn’t it?”

Arrogant asshole. It was like he’d known the answer to the question before it was asked.

Generally, I didn’t fuck with lactose, but cheese was my kryptonite. That and cocky athletes with dimples made for fucking, and Johnathan Tucker was a dangerous combination of both.

I had dreams about cheese—delicious, naughty dreams guaranteed to make a real vegan weep. Call it a hot take, but I would take a plate of sliced cheddar and crackers or a honey-drenched brie bake over sex any day. Then again, that probably said more about the subpar quality of sex I had been having—or not having, if I was really being honest with myself—as of late.

“Finally.”

Tucker’s grayish-green eyes sparkled with amusement. They reminded me of the sea glass my sisters and I used to pick up from the beach near our family’s cabin on Whidbey Island.

“What?” I asked him.

“It’s good to know that something gets to you, Heller. Even if that something is just cheese.” He sat up, resting his meaty elbows on the table. “For a while there, I thought you might have accidentally wandered out of Westworld. ”

I gritted my teeth, fighting the urge to give him the reaction he clearly craved.

“Sorry, I forgot you’re a millennial. Maybe Terminator is a better reference, or 2001: A Space Odyssey ?”

“Okay, asshole, I’m not that much older than you.”

His laugh reverberated across the table, attracting the attention of every man, woman, and child within earshot. It seemed nobody was immune to Johnathan Tucker’s charms, least of all me.

I had the sweaty palms and hard-on to prove it.

This was the first time we had spent any time together outside of the field or press room—and the only time we had been one-on-one—and yet, there was something about him that made me feel safe and comfortable. Like I could tell him anything, free from judgment, something I had never experienced before with another person—not even my family.

It hadn't taken long to realize that there was something special about Johnathan Tucker, and it had nothing to do with his star status. It was him . His energy was magnetic, a gravitational force that drew in anything and anyone in its path. It was his world; the rest of us were just lucky to be living on it.

Needless to say, it was easy to see how he had garnered the reputation he had. And yet, for the past hour, his focus had never wavered from me. Not once.

“Tell you what,” he said, his voice light and playful. “As much as I would love to see Portland’s favorite podcaster deepthroat a BLT eggroll, I’ll let you off easy this time.”

He did not just mention deepthroating to me. At this rate, my cock might actually bust through my zipper before we made it through dessert.

He slid the cheesy sandwich across the table. “Eat half of that and we’ll call it even.”

I didn't hesitate. “You’re on.”

He watched with rapt attention as I tore into the gooey noodles smashed between grilled sourdough. I didn't overthink it. The embarrassment would kick in any second, but it would have to wait—I hadn't eaten since breakfast.

“Sweet fucking hell.” I moaned between bites.

“Too gouda to be true?”

That was an understatement. I swallowed before answering him. “You feta believe it.”

This time, we both laughed. Fuck. Johnny Tucker was making it unbearably difficult

to resist his charms. The only thing hotter than a jacked dude doing yoga with puppies was a jacked dude with top-notch cheese puns and pop culture references.

“You know, I think it’s my turn to ask a question.”

I should have known there was a catch.

“Um, alright.”

Tucker scrubbed a hand across his jaw, scraping over his whiskers. Every journalist worth their salt knew how to read between the lines—we spoke subtext fluently. The best journalists, and yes, I was one of the best, also knew a little something about body language. Tucker’s told me he had been sitting on his question for a while now.

“You said you were taking the week off from the paper, and I know that you record your podcast in a bougie studio on the east side—”

“You sound like a fan, Johnny.”

“—so, what exactly is this interview for?”

Ah, there it is.

“You know,” I told him. “If baseball doesn’t work out for you, you might make one hell of a journalist.”

I was being honest. It was what I would have asked.

“Answer the question, Heller.”

“Eat your potato, Tucker.”

He raised his bushy brows, issuing a playful challenge. It would take a lot more than that to get me to back down.

“I’m toying with the idea of writing a book,” I told him. Surprisingly, it was the first time I had said the words aloud to anyone.

“About me?”

You wish. To nobody’s surprise, the man’s ego was almost as big as his ass.

“Fiction, actually.”

I could have left it at that, but sometime between ice cream and waffle fries, Tucker had opened a valve. There was no stopping the words that poured out of me.

“It takes place in an alternate universe where aliens and humans coexist, and two baseball players on opposing teams—one human and the other alien—fall in love during an intergalactic tournament that’s basically their version of the Olympics.”

He stared back at me blankly. Apparently, I’d cracked the code—all it took to render Johnathan Tucker speechless was the mere mention of a queer, alien romance novel.

“That sounds fucking awesome.”

I reeled back with surprise. “Really?”

“Fuck yeah. I would read it in a heartbeat.”

“Are you telling me the Johnathan Tucker is a romance reader?”

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Well, this is strictly off the record, but we

have a team book club.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, Pink has a major thing for Rose City’s romance bookstore owner. He got us into reading the store’s book club picks.”

Now that he mentioned it, I had seen the Roasters’ rookie pitcher, Jared Pink, reading in the dugout during more than one game this season—a sports romance novel, no less. I made a mental note to ask him about that after the All-Star break.

“And?” I prompted.

“And even though I’m definitely more of a sci-fi or fantasy kind of guy, I do enjoy the sexy stuff.”

“You know,” I hedged. “There’s plenty of sci-fi and fantasy out there with sexy stuff.”

I had the Kindle to prove it.

“Well, shit, I’ve just been reading the wrong books. Or maybe I was waiting for you to write the right one.”

He punctuated the sentiment with a wink, making my dick twitch. We fell into comfortable silence after that, at least for a few minutes. Long enough for me to regain my wits and polish off the first half of my sandwich. And all the while, I felt the weight of his gaze.

“You should do it.”

My brows pinched together. “Do what?”

“Write your book. I’d love to read it.”

I swallowed past my suddenly dry throat.

“Maybe someday.”

His head cocked to one side. “Why not now?”

“It just . . . isn’t the time.”

And it never will be.

He must have heard something in my tone—avoidance, reluctance, dare I say fear—because he left it at that. Regret soured my stomach. It was either that or the cheese.

I shouldn’t have told him about the book. Talking about it made it real. It created expectations, which led to questions and even worse, inevitable disappointment, that thing I had spent the better part of my adulthood trying—and often failing—to avoid.

Just ask my father.

There was no job title, no award, and no amount of podcast downloads that could absolve me of his criticism. Even now—a decade into my career—he was constantly giving me grief about choosing sports journalism over the “real, hard-hitting” topics like global politics. The very thought of telling him that I wanted to write a book about baseball aliens kissing under the bleachers gave me hives.

“I take it you liked the sandwich,” Tucker said, gesturing toward my now empty

plate.

“It was alright.”

That was a lie. It was the best thing I had ever put in my mouth, and that included a certain movie star’s uncut cock during a summer internship in New York.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “How about I buy you a drink to wash down all that cheese?”

Well, fuck.

There was no doubt about it—Johnathan Tucker was hitting on me and damn, did it feel good. But if the neon “danger” sign flashing through my brain was anything to go off, it was best—for both of us—to make a clean getaway while I still could.

Journalists weren’t accustomed to being in the hot seat. That was a position reserved solely for our victims. Scratch that, our subjects.

“I should get back to the city.” I nearly tripped over my Birkenstocks when I jumped to my feet.

“Hot date?”

“Nah, my friend hosts drag bingo every weekend at the Mayfly in Kenton, and he’s going to kill me if I miss it again.”

He took care of clearing the table while I packed up my notebook and Hydro Flask. I pretended not to notice the way he carefully sorted the soiled paper and plastic before discarding them in the appropriate bins.

Who knew that recycling could be such a turn-on?

“Thanks for this,” I told him as we walked side by side across the parking lot. “I know you guys already had a long weekend. Answering a few dumb questions while force-feeding me food was probably the last thing you were interested in doing tonight.”

Laughter roared out of him.

“Oh, Brock,” he croaked when he finally caught his breath.

“What?”

“You should know by now that I never do anything with anybody I’m not interested in.”

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Tucker

I hadn't planned on driving to Kenton, not consciously at least. On the contrary, I had had every intention of spending the rest of the evening holed up in my bedroom with noise-canceling headphones, catching up on the latest season of Carnival Eats. An afternoon of sampling fair food had inspired me to figure out what other things could be deep fried.

And yet, here I was, parked two doors down from Mayfly, a good twenty minutes from my apartment.

So much for the Food Network.

I swapped out my sweat-soaked T-shirt for a blue, sleeveless tank in the trunk of my Outlander and combed some dry shampoo through my hair. Between workouts, hookups, and late-night hangs with the team, I had taken to keeping a well-stocked "go bag" in the SUV. Spare clothes, an extra pair of sneakers, snacks, toiletries—plenty to last me a week.

I lathered on some deodorant, tucked a strip of condoms into my pocket—for good luck—and made my way to the bar. The gym shorts from this afternoon's yoga class would have to suffice, because there was no way I was throwing on pants in this heat. It was going on ninety-five degrees, and we were still a good hour or so from sunset.

This was only my first summer in Oregon—my second on the West Coast—and despite what my conservative grandmother thought, based solely on what she read on "the Facebook," it wasn't all that different from Maryland. One thing I knew to be

true about both Portland and Ocean City was that when summer rolled around, people flooded the streets, flocking to parks, beaches, and restaurant patios until well after nine p.m., when the sun went down.

Music and laughter leaked through the open windows of the bar and onto the patio. I had been to Mayfly. More than once, in fact. While a few of my teammates had opted to buy property closer to the stadium—our team captain, Soren, had just closed on his house this week—most of us had chosen to stay in Portland, a mere forty minutes south of Rose City. Bennett and Diaz’s house was just around the corner. I had spent enough M the last thing I wanted was to do it again.

Maybe this wasn’t my brightest idea after—

“I had a feeling you might show up.”

His tone was light and easy, a sharp contrast to the heat I felt in his stare. He gestured toward the empty stool beside him.

“Looks like I won’t be needing that table after all, Tyra.”

She smiled knowingly. I waited until she darted back to her post before taking a seat. Our knees brushed and the touch sent a jolt of electricity up my spine.

“I guess I get to buy you that drink after all.”

We sat there side by side, silently sizing each other up for a moment. Like me, he had changed out of his previous shirt, opting instead for a short-sleeved button-down that showed off his sinewy forearms. The gold rings adorning his fingers matched the layered necklaces draped around his neck.

The only thing missing was a pair of silver handcuffs. Then again, he might have

something to say about mixing metals.

“Is that your friend?” I pointed toward the queen with the mic.

He nodded. “Yup, Beau and I go all the way back to freshman year at University of Washington.”

“Is he a journalist, too?”

“Civil rights attorney.” His face lit up as he discussed his friend. It was the first genuine smile I had seen from him all day. “A total shark.”

“And a total fox, too.” Beau had legs for days. “Together, you could take over the world.”

“One of these days, we might.”

“Well, before you get to world domination . . .”

I leaned into him as if I were sharing a secret. Which, I guessed I was. Sort of. Maybe. Or maybe I just wanted an excuse to be closer to him. Who could blame me? The guy smelled like citrus, spice, and everything nice.

“I wanted to apologize.”

He cocked his head to one side. “For what?”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat and gritted my teeth. It was no secret; apologies had never been my strongest suit. Just ask any of my exes. And it wasn’t because of some misplaced pride or arrogance—that was immature, teenage boy shit—but rather because apologies meant next to nothing in my family. They were

empty words, a way for my mom or dad to pacify the other without any level of introspection. Somebody fucked up, they said sorry, and that was the end of it.

Except it wasn't.

It wasn't until my first relationship in junior high that I'd realized I had never really understood what an apology was for. Before then, I had never really felt any genuine remorse or sadness, just deep resentment that burned my chest and left a sour taste in my mouth.

That wasn't something that could be fixed overnight, but ten years and two therapists later and I was more open and communicative than ever before. Which was how I knew I owed Brock an apology, even if he didn't think he deserved one.

"I didn't like how we left things earlier. I'm not sure if it was the food or my blatant flirting or the mention of your book—" His wince was all the answer I needed. "Or maybe some combination of all three, but I know I made you uncomfortable, and that's not okay."

Brock looked like he wanted to argue with me, but I wasn't about to give him a chance. Instead, I held up a hand to cut him off and pressed on, hoping that my voice wouldn't betray me.

"I might be a sarcastic asshole, but that's no excuse, so I hope you can accept my apology."

For a long, agonizing minute, neither of us spoke. Brock sat there, watching me with unreadable eyes as he rubbed the back of his neck, and then somebody behind us shouted, "Bingo!"

Finally, just when I thought my heart might burst out of my chest, Brock broke the

silence. “Apology accepted.”

“Good.”

“On one condition.”

I arched a brow when he echoed my words from earlier. “Name it.”

“Tonight, you drink what I order you.”

It took a second for the request to process, but once it did, there was no stopping the boom of surprised laughter that busted out of my chest.

“Deal.”

Maybe the Tin Man had a heart after all.

For the next two hours, we traded stories about friends and careers—all off the record, of course—while sipping our way through the bar’s cocktail menu. I’d already known that Brock was an easy guy to talk to, but this was the first time we weren’t “on the clock,” so to speak. This was the real him—the K-pop obsessed, vegan-ish introvert with an unpretentious sort of charm that could make the Pope spill his secrets after only a few drinks.

Tyra and Beau took turns calling out numbers, and before we knew it, the game had ended. Not that either of us had been paying much attention to begin with; we were too caught up in each other . . . and the god-awful mojitos Brock had ordered us.

“Dude, I’ve officially reached my limit,” I told him. “I draw my line at pomegranate.”

“I watched you inhale deep-fried butter today. You can stomach a pomegranate

mojito.”

Just then, a shadow—one with larger-than-life hair and Barbie-like curves—fell over our table. “Well, well, well,” she said, her Southern dialect rivaling Matty’s. “What do we have here?”

I pivoted in my seat to face the blonde bombshell.

“Good to meet you, Beau. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“It’s Miss Toxx, actually.” Beau Toxx, nice. “Only my friends call me Beau.”

“How about friends of friends?” I asked, wagging my brows.

Her gaze volleyed back and forth between us before eventually landing on the man seated next to me. “Is that what’s going on here? Is this your friend?”

Beau said it like it was a dirty word. Nonetheless, I was dying to hear Brock’s answer.

“Yeah,” Brock replied, flipping his hair over his shoulder like he was the star of a goddamn rom-com movie. “I guess he is.”

I smiled like an idiot. I also didn’t miss the way Brock’s thigh nudged mine when he made room for Beau to join us at the table. Or, more importantly, the fact that neither of us attempted to put more space between us. Any closer and he would be sitting on my lap, exactly where I wanted him.

We spent another forty minutes talking with Beau until eventually, the bartender told us it was time for them to close. Beau and Tyra stuck around to clean up, leaving Brock and me on our own, in a parking lot, for the second time today.

“Well,” I started, scrubbing a hand through my hair. “This was a lot of fun. Thanks for . . . not inviting me.”

He snorted. “You’re welcome. Thanks for . . . showing up uninvited.”

“That’s what I do best.”

This was the moment I had been both looking forward to and dreading all evening. I had finally worked up the nerve to say something, and now here I was, on the precipice, teetering and about to fall.

I tried to think of some clever reply, a witty quip, a sly remark, but the only thing I could come up with was, Fuck it. What did I have to lose? You know, aside from my career, reputation, and dignity.

I leaned in and kissed him.

It was quick and messy, nothing more than my lips pressed to his for three, maybe four seconds. But just as I pulled away, his lips chased mine, diving deep and demanding more.

Little did he know, I was more than willing to give him everything.

“This is a bad idea,” he rasped between kisses.

His words said one thing, but his body told a different story—one full of unbridled hunger and desire. Need coursed through me thicker than blood when his hands circled my waist, pulling me tighter against him until my cock brushed against his stomach.

I threaded my fingers through his luscious locks and tugged, tilting his head back

until his eyes, clouded with lust, met mine.

“Nothing bad feels this good.”

I swallowed any further protests, taking his lips once again, thrusting my tongue inside his mouth.

There was no doubt that he wanted this—wanted me—as much as I did. Brock’s fervor matched my own, his kisses as delicious as they were desperate. The taste of him made my head swim, the feel of his lithe body against mine enough to make me dizzy.

I wanted him in a way that I had never wanted anyone before, and no job—his or mine—was going to stand in the way of whatever was brewing between us. At least not tonight.

“Let’s get out of here,” I managed through strangled breath, fingers teasing the soft skin beneath the hem of his button-down. “I’m parked right down the street.”

“Johnny—”

“It doesn’t have to mean anything,” I told him, my voice heavy with desperation. “One night, you set the pace, whatever you want.”

Fuck, here comes the begging . . .

“ Please , Brock.”

He blinked, taken back by the sound of his own name.

“One night?”

“One night,” I repeated, the words sour on my tongue. The last eight-ish hours had felt like verbal foreplay, a battle of banter to see who’d give in to their urges first.

Answer: me.

At this point, I would take whatever he was willing to give me. And then, maybe, beg for more.

Brock took me by the hand, lacing our fingers together before giving me a slight tug in the opposite direction. “You see that building across the street? With the green awning.”

I nodded.

“That’s my apartment building.”

Oh, thank Christ.

This wasn’t the end. On the contrary, the night was just getting started. But I needed to hear him say it first.

“Are you saying—”

“I need you, Johnny.” His smile was alluring and sexy. He ran a finger across my jawline. “Is that clear enough for you?”

Fucking crystal.

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Brock

Tucker was on me before the front door slammed shut. His lips tore into mine as his rough hands roved my body, eventually landing on my ass. Not that there was much for him to grab onto—I hadn't been blessed with curves and muscles like him, no matter how many Pilates classes I attended.

“Fuck,” he groaned, trailing his teeth down my neck, chasing my racing pulse. “You don't know what you do to me, Heller.”

“Tell me,” I managed between ragged breaths.

My god.

My body was on fire; my heart pounded in time with my throbbing cock. The fact that I was still able to formulate a coherent sentence was a goddamn miracle. Things were moving too fast, yet I couldn't get enough.

Tucker dug his fingers into my ass, lifting me until my toes barely scraped the floor. Damn. There was something super sexy about being thrown around—consensually, of course—by a dude with thighs made for crushing watermelons. And he had—crushed watermelons, I mean. That TikTok video lived rent-free in my brain.

There wasn't a doubt in my mind that if Johnathan Tucker wanted to fold me in half and fuck me sideways, he absolutely could.

And I would let him.

A deep, guttural moan fell from my lips when he positioned me over his thigh. His answering chuckle sent goose bumps prickling down my spine. I clutched at his biceps, gasping at the solid mass under my palms. I could barely wrap my hands around the top of his arms; they were so thick. He moved my body the way he liked, undulating my cock back and forth across his thigh.

The friction was delicious, but I wanted more, needed more. Needed everything. I didn't care that I was practically humping him in the doorway or that my neighbors would surely give me hell tomorrow for the noise.

"Tell me, Johnny ," I cried. "What do I do to you?"

"Fuck." He growled into my neck like a rabid vampire from one of my favorite movie franchises. "The way you say my name."

"You don't like it?"

"I fucking love it. Too much." He nipped at my neck and reached for my belt buckle. Fuck, maybe he is a vampire. "Nobody calls me Johnathan or Johnny, not even my own mother."

"Mm," I moaned as his fingers undid my belt. "How about we don't talk about your mom while your hand is in my pants?"

He smiled against my skin. "Noted."

I let my head fall back against the door and tried to focus on the feeling of his mouth sucking a bruise into my collarbone while he tugged at my zipper. His fingers curled into the waistband of my briefs, and my breath hitched.

"I'm guessing you bottom?" he asked, voice muffled by the collar of my shirt.

“Vers.”

“Me too.” He lifted his head, fixing me with a pointed glare. “But I would really, really like to fuck you tonight. At least for the first time.”

Oh, fuck.

If the rumors about Tucker’s sexual prowess were anything to go by, tonight was going to be a late one. The devilish glint in his eyes told me he knew exactly what was running through my mind.

“Any objections?” I shook my head. “I’m going to need you to say it, Heller.”

“Fuck me, Johnny.”

“That’s the plan,” he said, shoving his hand into my pants.

The sudden, direct contact of his calloused palm on my cock ripped a guttural groan from deep within. My eyes rolled back into my head as I thrust up into his fist.

“Well, hello. What’s this?”

I didn’t bother asking for clarification; I knew he was talking about the lorum piercing at the base of my dick, a souvenir from my one-and-only rebellious phase in my early twenties.

“I dated an emo raver in college,” I explained. “He talked me into it.”

“Birkenstocks, bracelets, and a pierced cock.” He chuckled and nipped at my chin. “You continue to surprise me, Heller.”

My cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

“Don't be embarrassed,” he said, stroking the sensitive skin of my shaft with the pad of his thumb, lightly toying with petite gold ring on the underside. “I like it.”

“Yeah?”

I moaned, unable to stop myself from pressing into his touch.

“Oh, yeah.” He dropped to his knees, yanking my pants and boxer briefs down to my ankles in one swift move. My cock jutted out, hard and already dripping with precum. “Anything I need to know about handling your hardware?”

“Watch your teeth.”

“Got it. I was just tested last week, by the way,” he said without missing a beat. “You?”

“Six months ago, but there hasn't been anybody.” I trailed off, groaning when he pumped his hand up and down my shaft. “Sweet fuck, Johnny. I need your mouth on me. Now. ”

His chuckle was deep and husky as he leaned forward and swallowed me deep. I cried out, slapping my palms against the door and bucking forward to chase the wet, hot suction.

That would have been too easy.

Tucker's hands closed around my hips, pinning me to the wall as he worked my cock with his lips and tongue. There was never a doubt who was in control here.

He licked and sucked, humming as he swallowed me. I tried to memorize every detail—his lips stretched wide around my girth, his nose brushing my stomach every time he took me all the way down, the way his tongue teased my piercing like a fucking sucking candy. There was no hesitation, no gag reflex, no fear of the size of my cock. Tucker knew exactly what he was doing, and even better, he did it with fervor.

This was just as much about his pleasure as it was mine.

He moaned and whimpered, his hands squeezing my ass and pulling me deeper still.

“Fuck, you’re going to make me come.”

His eyes glazed over with lust and a string of saliva dribbled down his chin. It was a sight to behold—Johnny Tucker, renowned baseball star and acclaimed sex god, on his knees for me—and it was ten times better than anything I had ever conjured up in my fantasies.

I cried out when he abruptly pulled me free and lowered his head, tracing a path down the underside of my cock and around my balls with his tongue. He fisted my shaft, pumping it once, twice, a third time, and all the while his tongue never let up. I was torn between begging him to keep going and pleading for him not to stop.

“Please, Johnny.”

A wicked grin spread across his face. In a heartbeat, I was back in his mouth, his throat fluttering around every inch of my cock. I threaded my fingers through his hair, guiding his head up and down. Not that he needed it. If anything, I was the one who needed something, anything to keep me grounded.

“Are you going to let me come here?”

He didn't answer—he couldn't, not with his mouth overflowing with cock.

A groan built in my chest when his hands curled around my ass, spreading me wide. My thighs burned with the effort of staying upright, and just when I thought I might crumble to the floor, a saliva-slicked finger breached my asshole. It was the spark needed to ignite the flame and send me skyrocketing over a cliff.

I threw my head back, moaning his name as Tucker continued sucking me dry. He didn't let up until the last pulse of cum had spilled down his throat.

When he pulled off, he sat back on his heels and grinned.

“You look pretty proud of yourself.”

He licked his lips.

“Damn right. Best thing I've tasted all day.” His hands kept me anchored against the wall as he stood up to his full height, towering over my five-foot-ten frame. “Do you have a bed?”

“What?”

We had passed the point of rational thinking about two seconds after he'd put his mouth on me.

“A bed,” he said, nipping the spot behind my ear that drove me crazy. “Take me to it.”

“You expect me to move from this spot?”

He nodded. “Unless you would prefer I fuck you right here.”

I eyed the hardwood floors, quietly mulling over my options. It didn't take long for me to decide. An aching asshole was one thing; bruised knees were another. Especially for a thirty-four-year-old man with little-to-no meat on his bones.

“Right. Bed. Down the hall. Let’s go.”

I stepped out of my pants and shoes and tried not to stumble as I led the way to my room. It didn't escape me that Tucker was still fully clothed, whereas I was bare from the waist down. Winnie the Pooh-ing it, I guessed you could say.

“Nice place,” Johnny called from behind me.

“Thanks.”

If he wanted the full tour, he was going to have to wait until later. Much later. For now, I needed to get fucked by the Johnathan Tucker.

I didn't bother with the lights as we entered the bedroom. The glow from the moon illuminated everything like a beacon, calling us to the bed at the center of the space.

Tucker spun me around and kissed me before I had the chance to climb onto the mattress. The taste of beer and pomegranate was surprisingly pleasant. There was nothing delicate or tentative about his kisses. He parted my lips with his tongue and swallowed every moan whole, raw, as if they fed the fire burning between us. As if he wanted to possess me, body, heart, and soul.

And I would let him . . . at least for tonight.

There would be plenty of time for doubts and overthinking tomorrow—I could teach a master class in both—but not tonight. No, tonight was for me. It had been years since I’d done something as impulsive as this. I could count my one-night stands on

one hand, my relationships on the other, and still have a few extra digits to finger my asshole.

One thing I never did, however, was hook up with pro athletes. Yet here I was, breaking all my rules for the baseball player whose ass was my screensaver.

Our tongues danced, tasting, caressing, exploring one another's mouths as I ran my hands along his arms, clinging to the strong, powerful muscles holding me up. Tucker guided me back, his lips never leaving mine, until the backs of my knees hit the edge of the bed.

"Lie back," he ordered.

"Yes, sir."

He shook his head. "Normally, I would be into that. With you, I prefer you use my name."

I nearly swallowed my tongue when he grabbed the hem of his shirt and yanked it over his head before tossing it to the floor. Oh, hell. I had never seen a more perfect specimen of a man. His broad, bare shoulders narrowed to a trim waist and six-pack abs, the kind that made me want to run my hands—or tongue—down every ridge just to feel them.

I sat up on my elbows, watching carefully when he went to work on his shorts. The floor show had been a stunning opening act, but I was beyond ready for the main attraction.

"Take your shirt off, Heller."

He didn't have to tell me twice. I was more than happy to oblige, especially once I

got a look at his impressive cock. It was longer than mine, thicker too, and it hung heavy between his legs. I licked my lips, eager to get a taste.

He kicked his pants to the side and smirked.

“You can suck my cock later.” He climbed on the bed and crawled up my body. “After I have your ass. If that’s what you still want?”

All hail the consent king.

“Fuck yes,” I answered in no uncertain terms.

“Good.” He smacked a wet kiss on my lips. “Now get on your knees.”

“Are you always so bossy in the bedroom?”

I felt the heat of his gaze even as I rolled to my front. It was too easy pushing him like this. Fun, too. In fact, now that I thought about it, that was what had been missing from my past few sexual encounters—fun.

A sharp crack against my ass had me lurching another inch up the bed. “I prefer demanding.”

“Of course, you do,” I mumbled under my breath.

I half-expected a second smack. Instead, a surge of electricity shot up my spine when Tucker pressed his lips against my freshly spanked skin.

“You don't know me well enough to judge, Heller,” he said, his tone firm, and then his lips were on me again, licking and kissing the stinging skin of my ass.

“Now, Johnny. I need you. Now. ”

“Lube?”

“In the bedside drawer,” I answered.

He retrieved the bottle within seconds. The next thing I knew, there was a slick finger prodding at my asshole, never entering me, just teasing. I rocked back, trying to lodge him deeper.

“Damn, Heller.” He groaned when his finger met resistance. “You’re tight. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Please, don’t stop.”

He pressed a quick kiss to the base of my spine. “Don’t worry. I’ll take good care of you.”

Between the promise of his words and the tender kisses dotting my back, I felt the tension ebb away. When he finally slid a finger inside, it felt . . . different. I hadn’t been lying when I’d told him it had been a while, and the sensation was both foreign and exciting.

“More,” I demanded, needing him deeper.

He chuckled.

“Not yet,” he said, slowly adding a second lubed-up finger.

“Now.”

He smacked my ass again. This time, the shock was accompanied by a tingle of pleasure. Fuck, that felt good. It had been way too long since I'd felt the weight of another body against mine.

Tucker slowly scissored his fingers. The slight burn gave way to a fullness that made my cock jerk. My head dropped forward as I concentrated on the incredible sensations flowing through my limbs. He kept a steady pace, playing my prostate like a skilled guitarist, not too fast and not too slow, just enough to drive me insane.

The next smack against my ass came unexpectedly, and I let out a deep, throaty moan. Damn, I was close to coming for the second time tonight and Tucker hadn't even gotten inside me yet. The anticipation was killing me.

I rocked my hips backward, hoping to encourage him, and he slipped his fingers out. "You ready for me?"

"God, yes."

I looked over my shoulder just in time to see him roll a condom down his impressive length, following it up with another squirt of lube. The blunt tip of his cock nudged at my entrance, and my breath caught as he slowly pressed inside, giving me a moment to adjust to the invasion.

"Easy, baby," he crooned against my shoulder, making me shiver. "Breathe."

He worked himself inside me, inch by delicious inch. Our groans filled the room, mingling with the gentle hum of the AC. He fucked me with slow and shallow strokes until eventually, his pelvis pressed flush against my ass. He held himself still, even when I rocked back against him again, seeking some relief for the tension that had built up in my body.

I dropped forward, pressing my forehead against my cotton sheets and taking a second to savor the fullness, enjoying how my ass squeezed against every ridge of his long, thick cock.

It wasn't enough; I needed more.

I wanted to feel him for days, think about him every time I sat down to edit a podcast or pen my latest Substack note.

I glanced over my shoulder, and my lips curled into a smile at the sight of him watching his cock enter me. His eyes strayed to meet mine when I bucked forward until just the tip of him remained lodged in my ass, and then I pressed back again, impaling myself on the full length of his cock in one stroke.

“Fucking Christ,” he cursed, voice guttural and needy. His hands flew to my hips, holding me in place as he let out another string of curses. “That's how you want it?”

My moan was all the answer he needed.

He tightened his grip, reared back, and slammed into me over and over. The slap of skin against skin was punctuated by the dirty sounds slipping past my lips and his harsh pants. I let him move me, fuck me the way he wanted, the way we both needed, enjoying the tight grip of his fingers marking me as his.

He quickened his pace. “You take my cock so well, baby.”

Baby. This man undid me.

I fucked him back, meeting him thrust for thrust. When he shifted his position, I saw stars.

“Oh, fuck ,” I cried.

“Right there?”

I nodded.

He repeated the motion, scraping over that spot that drove me nuts. “You going to come for me?”

Another nod.

I jerked forward when his hand reached around to palm my cock. Our movements grew increasingly erratic. Tucker’s thrusts were so powerful, they forced my arms to buckle, dropping me to my elbows. Still, he continued fucking me into the mattress, one hand tangled in my hair, the other tugging on my swollen cock.

“Come for me, baby. Come for me,” he chanted, jerking me off with a tight grip while he plowed into me from behind.

The friction was too much. His name tore from my lips as the first pulse of ecstasy rocked me, followed by another until, at last, the coil in my belly snapped and I shot a stream of cum over his hand.

“Johnny,” I screamed again, shuddering through my orgasm.

He let out a string of expletives, his pace turning erratic before he slammed inside of me and held his hips tight against my ass. A groan of pleasure echoed around the room as he came, pulsing inside of me and filling the condom with his seed.

When the rush finally passed, Tucker wrapped me up in a bear hug, gently tugging us both down to the sheets. I guess that makes me the little spoon. His sweat-drenched

chest glided over my back as his breathing slowed to match mine.

Fucking. Hell.

Forget Pilates; Johnathan Tucker could make a fortune with his workout regime. My muscles hadn't been this well used in years.

"That was . . ." I struggled to find the appropriate words. Some journalist I was.

"A good fucking start."

I glanced over my shoulder, meeting his devilish grin. "Seriously?"

"Did you think we were done?"

I laughed and then groaned when my muscles rippled around his softening cock. Tucker was still buried to the hilt inside my ass, hairy legs tangled with mine.

"I don't think I can take anymore."

He arched a brow. "That sounds like a challenge."

"I'm serious. You broke my asshole."

"Don't worry, Hell." He speared a hand through my hair, gently pulling it away from where it stuck to my neck. "I can kiss it better."

I don't know if I can survive that.

"Do you really think that's a good idea?" I asked him, acknowledging the elephant in the room. One of us had to.

Tucker was a twenty-seven-year-old pro-baseball player who spent half the year living out of hotel rooms and the other half partying up and down the West Coast. I was a thirty-four-year-old sports reporter whose distaste for flying was second only to club music. It was a match made in disaster, not to mention a conflict of interest. We faced enough public scrutiny as it was. Was another steamy night or two worth the backlash?

And there would be backlash. The “Tucker Fuckers,” aka Tucker’s die-hard fan club, would have my head if I hurt their fearless leader in any way. And my editor—along with the entire journalistic community—would have mine if they had any idea what had gone down tonight.

“Let’s just call this what it was: a one-night stand.”

“What if one night isn’t enough for me, Heller?”

The air between us thickened, and the words caught in my throat. I didn’t have a response for him because truth be told, I didn’t want this to be a one-time thing, either.

“What if that’s all I can offer you, Tucker?”

I could tell by the look in his eyes and the slight drop of his shoulders that he wasn’t happy with my answer, and even less thrilled by me using his last name. It was safer that way; we had already crossed too many boundaries for one night.

His eyes, full of hope, dimmed a little, but his voice held steady. “I guess it’ll have to be enough.” He smirked. “For now.”

There was no time to protest his ominous promise. Not when he trailed a hand down my side, tracing the lines of my body until he reached my cock.

“Tucker—”

“You said one night , Heller. Not one time. ”

Damn this man and the way he made me fumble my words. Something told me our night was just getting started . . . and it sounded a lot like the crinkle of a foil wrapper.

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Tucker

Roasters 80–40

As it turned out, one night with Brock Heller wasn't enough.

“Harder, Johnny. Please.”

“Fuck, I love it when you say my name.” We both groaned when I rocked into him again, plunging deep until my hips were flush with his ass. He shivered when I leaned forward, crowding him against the plush comforter. On my next thrust, I pulled out until just my tip speared his puckered entrance.

“But I like it better when you scream it.”

I jolted forward, driving every inch into him. Harder, faster—just the way he wanted, needed.

And trust, by now, I knew exactly what Brock needed.

Despite his initial hesitation, we had been going at it like rabbits for six weeks now—at his place, in my car, after hours in his podcast studio—and at this point, I knew his body better than my own.

I knew the way his cock—in all its pierced perfection—swelled under his khakis when I teased him. I knew how he smelled—the scent of his leave-in conditioner was permanently etched on my brain—and tasted—like the creamiest, dreamiest orange

popsicle. Mmm, my favorite. Most importantly, I knew the telltale signs of when he was about to come and what it took to get him there.

And I always got him there.

“Fuck,” he rasped. “Right there.”

I was suddenly grateful that Brock had booked a room three floors down from the rest of the team. None of the guys knew about our situationship—and we both planned to keep it that way—which meant sneaky sex wherever and whenever we had the chance.

Except for my apartment. Roman couldn’t keep a secret to save his life, so my place had officially been dubbed a fuck-free zone. Hotel rooms, on the other hand, were the perfect middle ground. I spent half of the season on the road, and Brock typically went where the Roasters did, so it was just as easy—if not easier—for us to hook up during away series as it was during home games.

Plus, everybody knew hotel sex was unmatched.

“Harder , Johnny.” Brock shoved his ass back, meeting my pace with enthusiasm. “Please. ”

“You’ll take what I give you.” My hand came down on his ass, and his muscles clenched around me in response. “Like that?”

“Yes.”

“Want more?”

“ Yes. ”

I spanked him two more times then smoothed a hand over his backside. Damn, who would have guessed that underneath that buttoned-up, vegan-ish exterior would be a sexual dynamo thirsty for my cock?

Best fucking surprise ever.

“Fill me up.”

Okay, second best surprise; number one had to be his cum fetish. We had had a lot of fun exploring that one—safely, of course.

Neither of us were sleeping with anybody else, but we also knew that there were additional risks that came with not using condoms. That hadn’t stopped me from spraying my cum on his chest before yesterday’s game and then feeding it to him by the spoonful like some kind of deviant Mary Poppins.

Three hits, two RBIs, and one doubleheader win later, and I was thinking we might have to make it a regular pregame routine.

“Greedy boy,” I teased. “Beg for it, Heller.”

“ Please, Johnny. Come in me.”

I pushed into him as deep as I could and held myself there. His hole was already red and puffy from taking it all morning—plus once more in the shower last night—and there was just enough slickness to keep him loose enough that he didn’t scream when I bottomed out.

It was like he was made for this, made for me .

And the sentiment went both ways. I didn’t bend over for just any guy. It actually

took a lot for me to relax enough to let somebody inside me, but over the past few weeks, Brock had had me in every imaginable way . . . and even a few beyond my imagination.

“Fuck me back, baby. I want to see you come.”

Brock grunted in reply.

I ran a hand up his back, beyond the cloud-shaped birthmark on his spine, over his well-defined deltoids until I reached those luscious locks. My fingers speared through the mess of blond curls and yanked. Hard.

I hadn’t made a secret of how obsessed I was with his hair, and more specifically how it wrapped around my fists. He had even started to wear it down more often during games, that was until I’d told him that it was a distraction. Plus, there was something sexy—romantic even—about knowing that I was the only one who got to see him this way—unbuttoned, mussed, and greedy for my cum.

That was about as romantic as it got in my book.

I sat up, taking Brock with me until we were both upright, back to chest. He threw his head back and a broken moan ripped from his lips. Fuck, I wasn’t going to last at this rate. Not when he was clenching on me tighter than a velvet-lined vice. The moans, the begging, the lionlike mane dragging across my chest with each demanding thrust—it was like something out of a fucking wet dream.

“Here’s how this is going to go,” I whispered, nuzzling his neck. “I’m going to make you come, and then you’re going to suck me off. Good?”

“God, yes.”

I reached around his body and fisted his cock, swollen and leaking precum. I twisted my wrist, and his hips began to rock in time with mine.

“And swallow every drop.”

This time, it wasn't a question.

“ Yes.”

I continued jerking him off, my movements fast and rough. The sound of his breathing changed, his grunts more urgent. I kept my pace, knowing how close he was. His moans and the tightness of his body sent me hurtling toward the finish line, too. Holding off until he came was going to be torture.

Exquisite torture.

It only took a few more strokes before he came with a loud cry, spilling onto the blanket beneath him. Before I could finish making a mental note to tip the housekeeping staff an extra hundred bucks, he was on his knees again, this time eye level with my throbbing cock.

I nearly leapt off the bed when he wrapped a hand around me and stroked, base to tip.

“Fuck, Heller. Buy a guy breakfast first.”

“You just fucked my ass for an hour.” He carefully removed the condom and lathed his tongue around the swollen head. “I think we're past casual pleasantries.”

And with that, he swallowed me whole. As it turned out, the only thing on the breakfast menu this morning was my dick.

Later, after we'd both cleaned up and I'd spent an embarrassingly long amount of time smelling his hair, we slipped back into our clothes.

"Remind me," Brock said, pausing to button his beige shirt. The man had two modes—button-down or shirtless, nothing in between. "Who do you room with during road series?"

"Matty. Sometimes Bennett, but Sinclair usually snatches him up first." All the guys—especially the single ones—fought over "custody" of Bennett. Our teammate was deaf, which meant he wouldn't be disturbed by his roommates' bedroom activities. "Anybody but Pink."

Brock's smile told me he knew exactly what I was talking about. The rookie pitcher might have been a star—so much so that Brock was currently writing an in-depth article about him—but he was also a fucking loudmouth. Not that I was judging; it took one to know one.

"Not Roman?"

"We already share an apartment," I told him, slipping back into the T-shirt I had worn the night before. "The last thing we need is to spend more time in a room together."

"Sounds like me and my sisters."

My ears perked up. It wasn't the first time that Brock had mentioned his family, but it was the first time he had brought them up without me prodding. Getting any kind of personal information out of the guy—you know, beyond what he wanted me to do to him and how hard he wanted me to do it—was harder than prying open a crab shell with my bare hands. And that was coming from a Maryland boy.

"Wait, you had to share a room with your sisters growing up?"

He nodded. “Until I was thirteen.”

“Brutal.”

“Honestly, though, I wouldn’t have had it any other way.”

My brain turned to mashed potatoes when he started to tie up his loose, wet curls into his signature bun. Especially when I noticed the way his shirt lifted from the movement, exposing the strip of fine blond hair leading from his belly to his cock.

“—and the three of us couldn’t be more different from each other, but somehow we’re closer than ever now as adults.”

Oops.

“And your folks?”

His smile faltered. “What about them?”

I hooked a finger through his belt loop, tugging him closer. “You probably come from one of those families who go on cruises together and sing or some shit.”

“Like the Von Trapps?”

“Or . . . Joe Bros.”

His eyes twinkled with amusement. “Trust me, there’s a reason you haven’t heard me sing.” He stepped away from my grasp before adding, “And my dad would sooner choose death by grizzly bear over forming a family band.”

He might have meant it as a sarcastic comment, but there was a flash of pain behind

his eyes that had me wanting to hug him to my chest and never let go. I wanted to ask him more, but something told me that pushing Brock Heller for too much information would only scare him off.

Then again, maybe if I offered him something in return . . .

“I get it, man,” I said. “It feels like my parents and I speak two different languages ninety-nine percent of the time. I can’t even remember the last time we talked about anything other than baseball. Or John Lennon’s greatest songs.”

Brock’s gaze softened. He took my hand and intertwined our fingers. The gesture felt intimate and foreign, but also made my stomach do a fucking somersault.

“To be fair,” he said. “There are a lot of John Lennon songs.”

I snorted. “True.”

“Which leaves plenty of things for you to talk about.” He swallowed, adding, “You’re lucky.”

I rolled his hand over in mine then lifted it. “Yeah.” I pressed my lips to his knuckles. “I am.”

He blinked, opened his mouth, and then closed it again. As I had learned, this was a classic Brock-ism. It meant he had something important to say but was either afraid to or was having trouble finding the right words.

So, I waited.

Our flight back to Portland didn’t leave for another two hours, so I had time. We both knew my endurance—and stubbornness—knew no bounds.

“You never told me the answer.”

I arched a brow, startled by the sudden change of subject. “Told you what?”

“The best John Lennon song.”

There was no stopping the smile that crept up my face. I should have known he would home in on that. Brock might have been “the enemy,” so to speak, but he was a damn good journalist. He was even better at effortlessly shifting the conversation—any conversation—away from himself.

I would let him have the win. This time.

Besides, a Holiday Inn Express outside of Tucson was hardly the place for discussing family trauma.

What came next would either shock or impress him, but it was a risk I was willing to take.

Unleash the nerd.

“That’s easy. ‘Imagine,’ April 1975. John’s final live performance.”

“Wow.”

That’s right, Heller. Your boy knows his Beatles.

“I can’t believe you said that.”

I reeled back. “What?”

“Clearly, the only correct answer is ‘Strawberry Fields Forever.’”

Holy Ringo, I’m in love.

Before I even had a chance to react—or formulate some kind of clever rebuttal—Brock leaned back and laughed, his shoulders shaking. I had no choice but to laugh along with him.

If I thought arguing with him was fun, laughing with him was even better.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:56 am

Brock

Roasters 90–51

If somebody had told me two months ago that come Labor Day, I would be curled up in bed, watching Top Chef reruns with Johnathan Tucker, I would have spat out my kombucha.

Nonetheless, here I was, clothed only in boxer briefs, nestled against Tucker's side like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Like we had been doing this for years.

So much for a casual hookup. There was nothing casual about spooning with the Roasters' second baseman on a rainy Tuesday morning.

Tucker's arm rested across my stomach, his breath, steady and calm, fanning the back of my neck. He had dozed off about an hour ago, after an early morning practice and what I was bold enough to admit—at least to myself—was very enthusiastic sex.

I stared at the muted TV screen across the room, pretending I wasn't memorizing the shape of his hand splayed across my waist, the way his fingers twitched occasionally like he was still gripping a bat. At first glance, Tucker had always seemed like one of those guys who had to be "on"—loud, cocky, the kind of athlete who flirted with the camera and collected first dates like they were baseball cards. And maybe that was who he was to everyone else.

But not here.

With me, he was . . . easy.

Not always, of course. He got grumpy when the team lost, especially since they were only leading their division by a few wins, and anytime the other press pundits hounded him about his less than stellar batting record against left-handed pitchers. Generally speaking, though, Tucker was mature beyond his years.

He listened. He remembered things I said, beyond baseball stats and locker room gossip.

Just last week, he'd asked me about my alien romance novel, which he had taken to calling *Space Blue Balls*, for obvious reasons. One thing had led to another, and before I'd known it, we had outlined the entire plot on index cards—the most progress I had made in nearly a year. To celebrate, we'd reenacted a few of the spiciest scenes, without the double-pronged alien dong that was.

It was getting harder and harder to convince myself that this thing between us was just fun, a few months of casual hookups, quiet mornings, and making out in the shadows of dugouts and hotel elevators.

Tucker gave great elevator.

I wasn't supposed to feel safe with him. And I sure as hell wasn't supposed to feel this—whatever this was. Close. Comfortable. More .

It was that last one that made my stomach churn with both nerves and, dare I say, anticipation?

My phone buzzed on the nightstand. I reached for it, careful not to wake him.

Melody, my editor.

Melody

Still planning to swing by the office today? I've got something big to run by you.

Those words should have been exciting. I'd spent five years grinding out coverage in this city, taking every late-night beat, rain-delay interview, and half-baked locker room quote, just to build a name for myself in the world of sports journalism. And I had. Mission accomplished.

Now "something big" was here, and my stomach clenched like I was waiting on a bad call.

I slipped out of bed. Tucker stirred a little but didn't wake, just rolled onto his back, one hand brushing the spot where I'd been.

I paused for a second, watching him through the light leaking through the blinds. His mouth was parted, his brow smooth for once—no game face, no swagger, just Tucker. The version of him nobody else got to see. I felt something twist in my chest, low and quiet.

Somehow, I forced myself to walk away. It only took a few minutes to rinse off and change my clothes, and another twenty to make it downtown where the Portlandia Press offices were. The entire elevator ride up to the twenty-second floor, I kept replaying Melody's message in my head, trying to decipher the meaning behind her words. "Something big" could mean anything in this business—a surprising trade, sex scandal, catastrophic injury. But I'd been doing this long enough to know opportunity and danger came dressed in the same suit.

The newsroom was quiet when I walked in—just a couple of editors nursing coffee

and glaring at their screens like the headlines had personally offended them. Most of us worked in the field, so it wasn't unusual for the office to be empty.

When I rounded the corner, Melody was already up, standing at the window with a mug in her hand, the skyline stretched out behind her. The corkboard behind her desk was cluttered with game programs and media credentials from a dozen World Series, a credit to her tenure in and passion for the industry.

She looked up when I walked in, eyes bright behind her wire-rimmed glasses. "Well, well, well. Look who finally decided to grace us with his presence."

"Please, I was here last week."

"I remember." She rubbed a hand over her pregnant belly. "Melody Jr. here has been craving more of those beignets you brought back from New Orleans."

I smiled. The Roasters had swept their series in New Orleans, and Tucker and I had celebrated with beignets and blow jobs.

"I got a call yesterday," she said. "Miami Herald. They're on the hunt for a new sports editor. Young blood, someone who knows the players and the politics. Someone with a voice."

I blinked.

"They asked for you by name, Brock."

A laugh stumbled out of me, part disbelief, part panic. "That's . . . that's incredible. I didn't even know they were hiring."

"They weren't. Not officially." Melody's gaze sharpened. "Look, between the paper

and your podcast, you've been turning heads. I knew it was only a matter of time until somebody swept in and made you an offer. And trust me, it's a good offer."

I swallowed.

She leaned forward. "Plus, you'd be running an entire department, which means full editorial control. I think you'd kill it, Brock, but I also think you've got to be honest with yourself about what you want. This job would mean relocating. New city, new league. You'd lose a lot, but you'd gain more."

She didn't need to say it—the thoughts and questions were already racing around my mind at a thousand miles per second. Starting fresh in a new city, three-thousand miles away from friends and family, would be a major change, but I had done it before. Could I do it at thirty-four, though?

Could I do it without him ?

This was everything I had worked for, everything my family expected of me—except for my father; no promotion would ever be enough for dear old Dad. The decision should have been easy, and yet all I could think about was Tucker. More specifically, what this could mean for us.

If there even was an us to speak of.

How was I supposed to walk away from the thing I hadn't meant to fall into, but somehow couldn't stop wanting?

Melody's voice softened. "You don't have to decide today, but they want an answer by the end of the month."

Two weeks wasn't much, but I'd take it.

I nodded. “I appreciate it, Mel.”

Somehow, I made it back to the atrium. The elevator ride down felt like floating underwater—muted, distant, like the world had taken a few steps away from me and left me in slow motion. I barely registered the chime of the doors opening onto the lobby, the polite smile from the security guard, or the gust of wind that hit me the moment I stepped outside.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I should have turned left toward the parking garage. Instead, my feet carried me straight ahead, out onto the busy sidewalk, where the city buzzed around me in complete disregard of the storm raging in my head.

I didn’t know how long I stood there, staring blankly at the passing cars and the blur of people weaving around me. Everything felt too loud and too far away all at once—I longed for the safety of my comforter and Tucker’s arms.

And maybe a honey-drizzled goat brie.

I shoved my hand into my pocket just as my phone vibrated against my thigh.

Of course it was him.

I hesitated, thumb hovering over the green icon. Despite my passion for queer romance novels, I had never been one to believe in fate or . . . cosmic signs from the universe. That was more of my older sister’s, Gwen’s, thing. But there was no denying that Tucker had impeccable timing, like some kind of sixth sense for when my world started to unravel.

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat and pressed answer.

“Hey,” I managed, voice rougher than I expected.

“Hey yourself. I hope you don’t mind, but I commandeered your bathtub.”

He didn’t have to tell me. I could hear him sloshing the water around in the background.

“By the way, why am I only now finding out about your collection of bath salts? It smells like a lavender-chamomile crime scene in here.”

I almost smiled—but the weight in my chest didn’t budge.

“Help yourself.”

“Also,” he added with a dramatic sigh, “your water pressure is objectively superior. I’m jealous. Just thought you should know.”

There was a beat of silence on the line. Then another.

“Heller,” Tucker said, his tone shifting. “You okay?”

I didn’t answer right away. The world kept moving around me, and I just stood there, stuck between one version of my life and another.

“I’m okay,” I choked out. “Just standing on the sidewalk like a moron, trying to get my brain to work.”

Tucker was quiet for a moment.

I heard another faint slosh of water, then his voice again—lower now, softer. “Tell me where you are.”

I looked up at the imposing skyscraper. “Outside the Portlandia Press building.”

“Stay there,” he ordered sternly. But then, he’s pulling out his soft dom bedroom voice. “I’ll pick you up in fifteen minutes.”

“Tucker, no. You’re in my bathtub.”

“Not anymore. I’m already toweling off.”

“You can’t—”

“I can and I will.”

“Johnny .” I swallowed the sob in my throat. “Seriously, I’m in a shit mood. I don’t really feel like I can—”

“I’m not asking you to fuck me, Brock. I just . . .” Cars zoomed past me while I waited patiently for him to gather his words. “I want to make you dinner and then cuddle the shit out of you. Please, just let me take care of you, okay?”

The words settled deep in my ribs. I stood there, traffic rushing past, the scent of roasted coffee and car exhaust in the air, and for the first time, I let myself feel the truth of it—I didn’t want to be alone with this. Not tonight.

I pressed the phone tighter to my ear. “Yeah,” I said, voice quiet. “You can come get me.”

There was no hesitation on the other end. “On it,” Tucker replied. “I’m dripping all over your tile, by the way. You’re welcome.”

A breath of laughter escaped me—small but real.

“Don’t go wandering off. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

I shook my head, the corners of my mouth tugging upward despite everything. “Drive safe.”

“You’re worth speeding for,” he said and hung up before I could argue.

By the time we returned to my apartment, the sky had shifted into a dusky gray-blue, and the city felt quieter than usual, like even the noise knew I wasn’t in the mood.

Tucker shoved my ass into the shower the second we got back, insisting that it would make me feel better.

He wasn’t wrong. The hot water did ease the knot between my shoulders, though it didn’t quite reach the one in my chest. Steam curled around me as I stood under the spray, letting the water beat against the back of my neck like it might wash the indecision away. My forehead rested against the cool tile, my eyes closed, chest tight. I could still hear Tucker’s voice from earlier—teasing, warm, steady—and it made my gut twist tighter.

I needed to tell him about the offer. I knew that. But saying it out loud meant acknowledging what it could mean for us. And I wasn’t sure if I was ready to find out what would happen after that.

By the time I emerged from the bathroom thirty minutes later, the scent of garlic and melted cheese drifted in from the kitchen. I dried off, pulled on a T-shirt and sweats, and padded barefoot into the other room.

Tucker was plating dinner like it was something he did every night—barefoot, shirtless, one dish towel slung over his bare shoulder like he worked the line at a bistro.

A guy could get used to this.

“That smells incredible,” I said.

He looked up and grinned. “I know you eat vegan-ish, but I also know that cheese—along with showers—cures all wounds, so I made eggplant parmesan with a cashew béchamel. Deal with it.”

My chest tightened—not from stress this time, but from something warmer, more dangerous.

“You didn’t have to do all this.”

“Of course I did.” He set the plates down on my dining table set for two. “You had an off day, and nobody wants to cook dinner when they’ve had an off day. Besides, I owe you for the bubble bath.”

I sat down across from him, trying to find something clever to say, but all I could manage was, “Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

We ate in the quiet comfort that only came when someone actually gave a damn. I hadn’t realized how long it had been since someone had made me dinner without expecting anything.

Halfway through the meal, which tasted as delicious as it smelled, Tucker looked over at me. “You gonna tell me what happened today?”

My fork clanked against the plate harder than before. “I don’t think I’m ready to talk about it yet.”

He nodded. “Is there anything I can do?”

I swallowed my pride and tilted my head up, enough to meet his concerned gaze. “Believe me, you’ve already done enough.”

“Okay,” he said gently. “I just want you to know that I’m here if you want to talk.”

I studied him for a moment—barefoot in my dining room, hair still damp from his rushed escape out of my bathtub, eyes steady and patient. Tucker had this way of giving without asking for anything in return. Maybe that was why the guilt pressed so hard against my ribs.

He deserved more than silence. He deserved the truth.

I took a breath, dragging my fingers through my hair. “I don’t have the best relationship with my dad,” I started, staring down at the half-empty plate in front of me.

“I thought this might have been a work—”

“No, today was a work thing, but there’s more to it.” Tucker was quiet, letting me talk. “My dad has always had this . . . idea of who I’m supposed to be, what I’m supposed to do and write, and for as long as I can remember, every time I hit a milestone, he just moves the goalposts.”

Great. I had taken to using football metaphors with a baseball player.

“When I got my job with the Press , he told me not to get comfortable, that I would never make a name for myself doing sports recaps. When I got promoted to head sportswriter, it was, ‘Anyone can do color commentary, Brock. You should be chasing real journalism.’ And now, I’m being offered an editing job—bigger paper, more money—and all I can think is . . . even if I take it, it still won’t be enough for him.”

“You ever tell him that?”

I snorted. “You don’t tell my dad anything. He’s the kind of man who says things like ‘tough love builds character’ and means it.”

Tucker nodded slowly. “Sounds exhausting.”

“It is,” I admitted, voice quieter than I meant it to be.

He reached across the table, brushing his fingers against mine. “Well, for what it’s worth, I think you’re kind of incredible. And not just because of your job or fuckable mouth.”

“Yeah?” I asked, voice catching a little.

He smiled, soft and crooked. “Yeah. Brock, you . . .”

To my surprise, a flush crept up his cheeks—subtle but unmistakable. Tucker, always so bold and unshakable, was blushing, and for a moment, it disarmed me more than anything he’d said.

“You could be writing box scores or hard-hitting political exposés or gay alien romance—I’d still think you’re the best part of my day.”

That did it.

Something shifted in me then—the wall I had built out of instinct and habit had finally, finally started to give.

And in the quiet that followed, I realized I wasn’t afraid of needing someone anymore.

Not someone.

Tucker.

I reached for his hand this time, lacing our fingers together like it was the most natural thing in the world. And just like that, the decision I'd been dreading all day didn't feel so impossible anymore.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:56 am

Tucker

Division Series: Roasters 2–0

It was official, this would go down in history as the longest travel day of my career. When some unsuspecting baseball scholar sat down to write my biography, which would, eventually, be turned into a musical or made for television movie; either was fine by me—they would ask me about this day, and I would tell them it smelled like sweaty ass.

More so than usual, too.

It made no difference that all of us had showered before we'd left Austin. A last-minute gate change had led to us sprinting through the airport to make our flight. As if that wasn't bad enough, we had been rerouted to Vegas for a four fucking hour layover that then took us to Seattle rather than Portland.

We were finally on the last leg of our trip, a chartered coach back that would drop us off outside the Roasters' facilities. Rose City was still a good twenty minutes away, but I could practically taste the late-night nachos calling my name.

I rested my forehead against the cool glass and let my thoughts drift—not to our back-to-back wins or the fact that we were one game away from advancing to the next round of the playoffs—but to the man who was, hopefully, waiting for me when I got home. The one I had fallen head over ass for.

And Brock gave good ass and head.

Something had shifted in our (gulp) relationship the day he'd told me about his dad, almost as if it were the final piece of the puzzle that was Brock Heller. That had been the day I'd seen the real him, all of him—raw, hurting, brave. Ever since, I'd been thinking less about sneaking around and more about what it would feel like to hold his hand in public.

To claim his as mine.

And then somewhere between Vegas and Seattle, I'd decided that tonight was the night—it was time for me to lay all my cards on the table and tell Brock how I really felt.

A low snore came from the seat behind me. Roman. He was the only person I knew who could sleep anywhere, anytime, and still look like he'd walked out of a GQ spread when he woke up.

I reached across the aisle and nudged his side with the back of my hand.

“Sleeping Beauty,” I whispered. “You awake?”

He cracked one eye open. “I am now, asshole.”

“We'll be there in a few minutes.”

He yawned, stretched, then turned in his seat to face me. “Do you still want to crash at Sinclair's?”

“Actually, there's something I should tell you.”

Roman raised an eyebrow. “You don't want to crash at Sinclair's?”

I rolled my eyes. It was a wonder that the two of us were such good friends. We were constantly volleying to out smartass the other.

“No. Not that. It’s, um—” I paused, searching for my words. “I’ve kind of been seeing somebody.”

I braced myself, half-expecting teasing or a dramatic gasp, some kind of reaction. But all he did was nod, like he’d just solved a math problem.

“Fucking finally.” He grinned like an idiot. “Does that mean you’re ready to talk about how you’ve fallen for the enemy?”

I blinked. “What?”

“I’m not an idiot,” he said, smirking. “You’ve been smiling at your phone like a teenager with a crush for weeks, not to mention spending almost every free night in Kenton.”

“How did you—”

“We share a Life360 account, dude. It wasn’t hard to put two and two together once Bennett and Diaz mentioned a certain reporter who lived around the corner from them.”

I ran a hand through my hair, suddenly shy. “It’s Brock Heller.”

Roman let out a low whistle then grinned. “Yeah, I got that.”

Fuck, he made me feel like an embarrassed teenager. Like the time my mom had caught me sneaking in past curfew and decided the punishment would be public humiliation. Instead of grounding me like normal parents, they’d made me wear a

custom shirt to school that said: “I should have listened to my mother—now I’m grounded.” My mom had even added glitter to the letters, just to make sure it caught the light and the attention of literally everyone, including the girl I had snuck out to meet that night.

To this day, glitter still gave me PTSD.

I groaned and dropped my face into my hands. “Am I that obvious?”

“To me, yeah.” Roman lowered his voice, careful to make sure this conversation was just between the two of us. “But I’m your best friend. I know when you’re into someone.”

“Are you pissed?”

He snorted. “Of course not. I’m happy for you, man.”

I exhaled, something loosening in my chest.

He leaned in with a sly grin before adding, “But just so we’re clear, I don’t care if he’s the best lay of your life; he’s still the enemy.”

I laughed with him, but inside, my pulse was still uneven. It felt good—relieving, even—to say it out loud. But that didn’t stop me from feeling like I’d just opened a door that could never be shut again.

Roman clapped a hand on my shoulder. “And don’t go telling him about my bad elbow. That’s classified team information.”

Up ahead, Rose City’s lights flickered through the tinted bus windows like little promises. I let myself imagine walking into Brock’s place tonight, maybe cooking

something shitty together, finally saying the words out loud that I had been thinking about for weeks.

I want this. I want you.

All thoughts of a quiet evening together fell to the wayside, however, when the bus pulled to a stop outside the stadium. I grabbed my bag from the overhead, cheered with the others when Pink got off the bus, walking into the arms of the bombshell he had been pining over for months now, and then, finally, exited the bus myself.

“Later, dude,” Roman said, slapping my back.

“You sure you don’t want a ride home?”

“Nah.” His eyes drifted to something—or someone—behind me. “Something tells me you might have other plans.”

My chest tightened.

When I turned around, I saw Brock right away—standing alone under one of the parking lot lights, hands in his pockets, looking like a scene from one of the rom-com movies he refused to admit he loved. He was wearing my shirt, the one I had picked up at a brewery last month in Milwaukee and then left at Brock’s apartment.

“Hey,” I said, jogging over, away from the chatter and jostling of my teammates. “Fancy meeting you here.”

He gave me a small smile, one I couldn’t quite read. “I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I’d come meet you.”

“Did you miss me?” I asked, stepping close enough to finger his belt loop.

He hesitated, eyes darting briefly toward the bus behind me then back. “Listen, I’ve been trying to figure out how to tell you something for a while now, and frankly, it’s been eating me alive, so I’m just going to say it.”

The words flowed out of him like lava. Something about his tone made my stomach twist. It also didn’t escape me that he hadn’t answered my question either.

“Okay.”

“I was offered a job,” he said. “A big one.”

I racked my brain. “The sports editor gig, right? You mentioned that a few weeks ago.”

“Right, but what I didn’t mention is that it’s with the Miami Herald. ”

I blinked. “Miami. As in—”

“Florida.”

His delivery landed in my chest like a line drive straight to the dick. He opened his mouth like he wanted to say something more, but I was already reeling.

I should have seen this coming. Brock had always been bigger than Rose City and the Portlandia Press , bigger than sharing kisses in the shadows with me. Here I was thinking that there might be something more between us—something I had only ever read about in romance novels—but no. I was just the guy between bylines, a secret Brock kept safe while waiting for his next chapter to start. And now it had.

In fucking Florida, of all places.

Sticky air, mosquitoes the size of golf balls, the kind of heat that felt like you were being strangled by a damp, musty towel. I had played a year in Double-A down there and swore I would never go back unless I had to. Everything smelled like sunscreen and regret.

But this wasn't about the weather. Not really.

This was about him being there and me still being here . And the space between those two things suddenly felt so much bigger than geography.

I searched his face. "So, what does that mean for us?"

He looked up at me then, eyes soft but distant. "I don't know yet."

Wrong answer. Brock must've seen something shift in my face because he stepped in closer, voice softer. "Tuck, I didn't expect this. Us. Not like this."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't.

He rubbed the back of his neck, eyes flicking away for a second. "When we started this, I thought maybe it'd be fun, or light, or . . . I don't know. I was thinking about myself for once and what I wanted. You ."

His voice cracked a little on the last part, and I hated that it made something ache behind my ribs.

"And then you were so much more. I haven't said anything because I've been scared to make it real." He paused to catch his breath before adding, "And now this offer shows up, because of course it does. Right when things are starting to matter."

There were a thousand things I could have said.

Tell me we'll figure it out. Say this isn't the end. Pick us over the job.

But none of them felt right. None of them felt fair.

Instead, I fell back on my usual pattern and did what I did best when I was hurting: I lashed out.

"So . . . I guess that's that, huh?"

My voice came out harsher than I meant it to.

"What? No, that's not—"

"Hey, I get it." I stepped back, forcing a shrug. It was better he thought I was unaffected by his words, when really I was dying inside. "You'd be crazy not to take the job; it sounds like a great opportunity."

"Johnny, wait—"

"It's fine," I lied, pulling my duffel strap tighter over my shoulder. "Really. I'm happy for you."

I didn't let him finish. I couldn't. Because if I stood there another second, I knew I'd ask him to stay or, worse, beg him—and I wasn't sure I could handle hearing him say no.

So, I turned away from him.

"Good luck in Florida, Heller," I called back over my shoulder.

I walked back toward the bus—toward the noise, the distraction, the safety of being

just another one of the guys—before he could say something kind that would crack me open.

There were no footsteps behind me, just silence.

And that was worse.

I wanted to hear him call my name. I wanted him to grab my arm and tell me not to go, to say that his new job wouldn't change anything. That we were still us, whatever that meant.

Instead, all I heard was the soft rumble of an engine and the buzz of tired voices drifting from just beyond the bus.

I didn't look back.

Didn't trust myself to.

I veered toward the far side of the lot, past the team and the bus, needing distance to think, or maybe to not think at all. I kept walking, past the shadows of the loading bay, past the players' entrance to the stadium, toward nothing in particular. Just moving.

Standing still felt too much like waiting, and waiting felt too much like hope.

And right now, I couldn't afford to do either.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:56 am

Brock

Championship Series

How many mojitos does it take to confess your feelings?

It sounded like a bad riddle, one that I would, hopefully, have an answer to before the evening ended. Or before the rum ran out—whichever came first.

The Buns of Steel bachelor auction was in full swing—live music, glittery auction paddles, a farm-to-table dinner experience—but all I could focus on was the rapid pom-pom-pom of my heart. The kind of pulse that came from waiting for something you weren't sure you deserved.

Fuck, maybe this was a mistake.

I was already on my second mojito of the night, nursing it like it owed me rent. The whole room thrummed with charged, unfiltered joy—the kind that only happened when a city's team punched their ticket to the World Series for the first time in, well, ever .

People were lit up, buzzed not just from booze, but from the kind of hope that made strangers high-five in line for the bathroom and dance to '90s pop music like it was the national anthem. Roasters jerseys and playoff merch were everywhere—some crisp and new, others soft with wear and superstition.

The entire scene was loud, bright, and a little chaotic—in the best way possible. But

underneath it all was that collective hum of we've got this, that rare, beautiful moment when an entire city—no matter how small it was—let itself believe in something.

It wasn't unusual for me to cover baseball-adjacent events like this—especially since Melody was a sucker for “celebrities in the wild” kind of content—but for the first time in a long time, I wasn't holding a press badge, but rather my breath.

It had been two weeks since Tucker and I had spoken, and not for lack of trying, at least on my behalf. I'd texted, called, and even dropped by his apartment unexpected like a fucking creep.

Radiohead had nothing on me.

At one point, I'd even typed out a long, messy email that I'd (thankfully) deleted before sending—something about how I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew I didn't want to do it without him.

Nonetheless, all my efforts had gone unanswered.

Which was why I was here, at a ridiculous, slightly unhinged public fundraiser where Roasters players were being auctioned off like steaks at a butcher counter.

“You always sulk in corners, or is tonight special?” an imposing figure boomed from my side.

I turned.

Roman Garcia, first baseman and Tucker's roommate, stood a few feet away, a drink in his hand, his expression relaxed—but not careless.

“I was going for brooding,” I told him. “But sure, sulking works too.”

It had been a few months since I’d last seen Roman, but he looked exactly the same—like a big, friendly bouncer at a family cookout. Broad-shouldered, easy smile, and the kind of presence that made people instinctively relax around him . . . unless you pissed him off. Lurking under that teddy bear vibe was a monster, one who could probably deadlift a small car and who was fiercely loyal to his friends.

Especially Tucker.

He offered a wry smile and joined me at the bar. “I noticed you hanging back here. Figured you didn’t come for the wine spritzers and charcuterie spread.”

“You’ve never seen me tear into a baked brie.”

He sipped his drink and surveyed the crowd. “You know, I had to talk him into doing this thing.”

I raised an eyebrow. We both knew who he was talking about.

“The auction?”

He nodded. “He didn’t want to. Said he wasn’t in the mood to flirt with strangers. But I guilt-tripped him, you know, for charity and all that.”

That pulled a laugh out of me, even if it felt uneven.

Roman glanced sideways at me. “Call me an asshole, but I was also a little curious to see what you might do.”

I didn’t say anything. Every explanation I could think of sounded like an excuse.

Instead, I just stood there, the silence stretching between us like thread pulled too tight, waiting to snap.

Roman pivoted to face me fully. Surprisingly, there was no malice in his eyes, just a seriousness that sat quietly underneath the surface.

“I know you’ve been trying to reach him,” Roman said. “And I know he hasn’t made it easy.”

I nodded. “He hasn’t made it anything .”

Roman studied me for a second. “Can you blame him?”

Not one bit.

“No,” I said quietly.

“He’s still hurt, or maybe just scared. It’s hard to tell with Tuck. He’s good at hiding both.”

He took a sip of his beer, then set it down carefully on the bar. “Look, I don’t hate you, Brock. I even like you . . . some days, so I’m just going to say this once. If you’re here because you want him back— really want him back—then I’m rooting for you. But if you’re here to ease your guilt or write some poetic ending to a summer fling, walk away now. My friend might seem like a fuckboy, but he’s not built for that.”

My chest tightened. This was a first for me—being read the riot act by a guy’s roommate and friend. And yet, I couldn’t help but be grateful for it.

Roman’s warning wasn’t about ego or territory; it was about love, the kind that ran

deep and quiet, the kind that said “if you hurt my friend, you will answer to me.” It meant Tucker was cared for, and if I was going to have any place in his life, I would have to earn my way back through that kind of fire.

Bring it on, boys.

“I’m here because I can’t stop thinking about him,” I told Roman, laying it all on the line. “Because I miss him. And because I was a coward for not saying that sooner.”

Roman studied me for a beat longer, then nodded once. “Glad to hear it because he’s up next. So, if you’re planning to do something dramatic, now’s the time.”

With that, he patted me on the shoulder and disappeared into the crowd.

I directed my attention toward the makeshift stage, just in time to see Jared Pink gyrate his way off and into the arms of the elder gentlemen who had bid on him. The young gun pitcher was a showman, for sure, but as I had learned while writing an in-depth profile on him, there was a lot more lurking beneath the surface.

Kylani, the event’s auctioneer, banged her gavel. Her voice rang out, smooth and unapologetically flirty. “Alrighty, folks! Up next, you know him as number two on the field, but he’ll always be number one in our hearts. Give it up for the Roaster’s second baseman, Johnathan Tucker.”

The crowd exploded. Men and women whistled and cheered when Tucker stepped into the light. I was too focused on regulating my breathing.

There he was, tall, solid, and in desperate need of a haircut. His fluffy mullet had grown out long enough to reach the tops of his shoulders. He had traded in his typical tee for a charcoal blazer and black button-down, dark jeans, and a pair of well-worn boots I had seen him kick off at my place more than once. His mullet looked like it

had grown out a few inches in a matter of weeks, and the curve of his mouth— fuck, that mouth —was twisted in a half-smile that didn't reach his eyes.

It hit me all at once. How much I missed him. Not just the look of him, but the feel of him. The quiet steadiness, the way he used to lace his fingers through mine without thinking and braid my hair after a bubble bath. The way he always listened more than he spoke, like he wanted to understand me even when I didn't make any sense.

I hated that I couldn't read him now.

He looked . . . guarded, more so than usual. Like someone who had built up a wall and was still testing its strength from the inside. And now, he was standing on a literal stage being auctioned off to the highest bidder.

It should've felt ridiculous.

Instead, it felt like my last shot.

Kylani waited for the crowd to settle, her grin practically carved from starlight. "We'll start the bidding for this World Series-bound bachelor at a modest five-hundred dollars."

A hand shot up near the front. "Five hundred," someone called out, followed quickly by a shout of, "One thousand!" from another.

Damn, that was fast.

Not that I could blame them; Tucker was a fucking catch.

While people scattered amongst the room called out their bids, Tucker stood onstage with his hands in his pockets, shifting slightly from foot to foot. His smile was polite,

careful, the kind you might practice in a mirror. Gone was the cool confidence I was used to, and I hated the fact that I was the one who had stripped that from him.

“Two thousand,” a raspy voice shouted from the back of the room.

Kylani fanned herself. “Whew, things are heating up faster than a summer doubleheader!”

Tucker’s eyes scanned the crowd, sweeping across the audience like he was checking for familiar faces. Or maybe the quickest way to make a clean escape.

My fingers clenched around my drink as the auction continued, and the dollar amounts skyrocketed.

“Twenty-four hundred.”

“Twenty-six.”

“Three thousand!”

The crowd fucking loved it, drunk on playoff fever and artisanal cocktails.

And then Kylani asked, “Do I hear thirty-one hundred?”

I stepped forward without thinking.

“Four thousand.”

There was a sharp gasp, followed by a ripple of murmurs across the crowd—disbelief, curiosity, maybe even a little awe.

But I barely noticed.

All my attention was fixed on Tucker.

His expression didn't change much, not at first. Just a tiny shift—his brow twitched and his lips parted like he had forgotten how to breathe for a second. That makes two of us. But his eyes . . . they found mine and held .

No flinch or flicker. It was quiet chaos, that look.

Like we were saying everything we hadn't said in weeks, all without uttering a single word. And for that one impossible, electric second, the noise, the auction, all of it dropped away.

It was just us.

Still tethered, unfinished.

Kylani banged her gavel again. "Sold to the gentleman by the bar. Come and claim your man." Gladly. "And while you're at it, be sure to give me the name and number of your hair stylist."

I sidestepped the applause and wolf whistles and made my way toward the stage.

Roman gave me a wink as I passed him at the foot of the steps. I could barely acknowledge it—my eyes were already locked on Tucker as he descended.

Up close, he looked exactly the same and totally different. Same Tucker—same easy posture and stubborn tilt to his mouth—but there was something new in his eyes. Like he was still trying to believe I was standing here in front of him.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” he echoed, shoving his hands into his pockets when, really, all I wanted was to feel them on me. “Congratulations.”

“On?”

“On your win.” He winked cheekily. “Quite the prize, if I do say so myself.”

I huffed out a laugh. “You don’t have to tell me.”

That earned me the tiniest twitch of a smile. Not his full, toothy grin—just a corner of his mouth lifting, like he was still deciding whether it was safe to let it out. We stood like that for a beat longer, both of us waiting, hoping for the other to say something first.

“Listen,” I finally started. “I owe you an apology, and one hell of an explanation.”

“Brock—”

“No, Johnny,” I cut in gently. “Please let me get this out before I lose my nerve and remember that people are probably watching.”

I could already feel the heat crawling up my neck. Too many eyes, too many voices blurring around us. My pulse was loud in my ears, and the words I’d been rehearsing all week suddenly felt clumsy and too big for my mouth. I didn’t do well with the spotlight or crowds or vulnerability in public.

There was a reason I wrote about athletes.

My hands tightened around the auction paddle I still hadn’t let go of, like I could

anchor myself with it. I shifted my attention toward our feet. Tucker's fingers brushed just beneath my chin, gentle and familiar. He tilted it up, just enough for me to meet his hooded gaze.

"Focus, Heller," he said, voice low, steady. "It's just me."

Just me. Just us.

Something about the way he said it—soft but certain—cut through the noise around us. It was the kind of touch that didn't ask for anything, didn't push, just was. Like he wasn't trying to rush me, but rather remind me that I didn't have to do it alone.

I nodded, barely, and he dropped his hand—but not before his thumb lingered for the briefest second against my jaw.

"I didn't take the job," I told him, my voice steadier now. "Florida. I didn't accept it. With the Miami Herald, I mean—I turned down their offer. I should've told you that night by the fucking bus, but I was scared."

His expression softened, but he didn't interrupt. Not this time.

I kept going because for once, I wasn't going to leave things unsaid.

"I told myself it was better to say nothing than something that might hurt you more, but that was bullshit. I was just afraid. Afraid you'd hear the truth and . . . still walk away." I shifted my weight, the nerves tightening again. "The truth is, I've never felt the way I felt with you. Not with anyone. And that scared me more than the job, more than disappointing my dad, more than any headline I've ever written. But the distance between us didn't fix that; it just made me miss you more."

Tucker's expression softened. His shoulders eased, and something in his jaw

unclenched. He was quiet for a moment, long enough that I started second-guessing everything I had just said.

Then he spoke.

“You should’ve told me,” he said softly.

I nodded. “I know.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I was hurt and, yeah, a little scared. You were the first person I let in for a long time. And then, when you dropped the Florida bomb, it felt like maybe I’d been stupid to believe it meant something.”

My chest tightened.

He shook his head, mostly at himself. “But I also didn’t give you a chance to explain. I just . . . cut you off, cold tofurkey. Like that would somehow make it easier.”

His dry, rueful laugh gave me hope. “Spoiler alert, it didn’t.”

For the first time in weeks, my smile reached my eyes.

“I missed you,” he said, eyes steady on mine now. “Every fucking day.”

I swallowed the knot in my throat and gave him a half-shrug. “We both kinda suck at this, huh?”

“Yeah,” he replied, in between nervous laughter. “Real bad.”

We stood there toe to toe, both of us radiating nerves. The air between us sizzled with everything we hadn’t said, everything we’d been too afraid to risk. But I was done

holding back. I'd spent weeks wondering if I'd blown my shot with Tucker—if I'd ruined my chance at love.

And now here he was, standing in front of me, open, imperfect, and still somehow mine.

Neither of us knew what would happen tomorrow. But I knew how I felt here and now, and I wasn't going to waste the moment.

"But there's nobody I would rather suck at love with than you, Johnathan Tucker." His eyes flared with desire when I stepped forward. And before I could talk myself out of it, I added, voice low and sure, "I love you."

There, I said it. Out loud.

No hiding, no edits.

The silence between us stretched, just long enough to make my stomach twist. Then, after what felt like forever but was probably only a few seconds, his lips parted.

"I love you, too."

His voice cracked, like the words had been sitting in his chest too long, too heavy to carry alone anymore.

"I never stopped."

And just like that, I could breathe again. Hell, I felt like I could fly, knowing that Tucker would be there to catch me if I fell.

He rocked forward on his toes, brushing the weight of his erection against my thigh.

My eyes nearly rolled back into my head when he dragged his fingers over my ear, scraping my scalp in that delicious toe-curling way that only he and the woman who cut my hair could do. The shit-eating grin on his face told me he knew exactly how much his touch affected me.

“Well, now that we’ve gotten that out of the way . . .,” he murmured, his grin crooked and knowing, like he’d just hit a walk-off and was still rounding the bases in my head.

I opened my mouth to fire back something witty, but then he leaned in, close enough that his breath grazed my cheek.

“Wanna come home with me?”

I froze for half a second, not because of what he’d asked, but because of how he’d asked it. This wasn’t just about sex—though, there would be sex; we had a lot of catching up to do—and we both knew it.

Tuck’s eyes searched mine, like he needed me to understand the real question he was posing: are you in this with me fully? Thankfully, and perhaps for the first time, we were both on the same page.

I stepped in until we were chest to chest, his heartbeat echoing against mine.

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “I do.”

He reached for my hand, and I let him take it. And then, before I could say another word, Tucker tugged me closer and kissed me.

Not a shy, testing kiss either.

His lips crashed against mine with a kind of urgency that sent sparks down my spine. My hand found the back of his neck, pulling him in deeper, and he sighed into my mouth like he had been aching for this moment as much as I had.

The kiss deepened, not driven by urgency but by a mutual understanding that this wasn't just about the moment. This was something lasting, something we were both ready to fully explore.

I couldn't help but respond, leaning into him, my fingers running through his hair as I kissed him back with everything I had. It felt like we were balancing on the edge of something unknown, something simultaneously terrifying and exciting. And I knew, in that moment, that whatever happened next, we would face it together.

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Tucker

The World Series: Game Seven

“S trike three.”

I was already in motion before the umpire finished pumping his fists, glove flying from my hand, legs burning as I sprinted toward the mound like it was the only place in the world I wanted to be.

The stadium erupted. A wall of sound slammed into me—cheers, screams, laughter, crying, all of it crashing together into one beautiful roar that shook the ground beneath my cleats.

We were World Series champions. I was a World Series champion.

And in that split second—my arms wrapped around Pink and Roman, teammates piling on, Champagne arcing through the air like liquid gold—I knew every minute of pain, every bruise and blister, every early-morning weight session and late-night ice bath . . . they had all been worth it. It had all led to here.

“We did it!” Roman screamed, throwing his arms around me in the tightest of bear hugs. “We fucking did it, man.”

“Pass the Champagne,” Matty cried.

My heart was pounding so hard it felt like it might rip through my chest, but I didn’t

care. I could taste sweat and dirt and joy in the back of my throat. I couldn't stop laughing, shouting, grabbing my teammates like they were extensions of myself. We'd done the impossible—in our first season, no less—and we'd done it together.

And still, in the middle of my elation, I knew something was missing. I scanned the crowd, heart still jackhammering, eyes cutting through the chaos like a man starved for something he couldn't name.

Until I saw him.

Front row, just behind the dugout, in the section reserved for friends and family. Loved ones. And fuck, did I love Brock Heller.

Every vegan-ish inch of him.

His hands were braced against the railing; his pink lips were slightly open like he couldn't believe what he'd just seen. Or maybe he could —after all, he was always telling me how much he believed in me.

The moment our eyes locked, everything else fell away. The noise, the confetti, the cameras—it all just blurred into white noise. All I saw was him. He smiled slowly and so full of pride it damn near knocked me over.

I didn't think. I just moved .

We had come a long way in the last few weeks. From cautious texts and closed doors to handholding in public and sleepy mornings tangled up in each other on my sofa.

My teammates knew about us now, and much to my surprise, none of them had given me shit for it. All of them had welcomed Brock into the fold as if he were part of the team, including our coach, who had taken to exchanging vegan recipes with Brock

via text.

I didn't even have Coach Ward's phone number.

Brock, for his part, had taken a step back from his job at the Portlandia Press . Not because of me or our relationship, but because he'd finally admitted that there was something he liked writing about more than baseball—alien sex. And like a good partner, I'd encouraged him to go for it. He still had his podcast, which was raking in record numbers, so it couldn't hurt to take some time off from the paper to pursue his dreams.

“Don't put off your passions,” I'd told him late one night while stroking his hair strewn across my chest. “It took me ten years to make it to the major league, and that could go away in a nanosecond. You owe it to yourself to try now .”

He had smiled at me like I'd handed him permission to want more. In that moment, I'd known—I'd felt —we were building something real. Something worth protecting.

Something worth winning for.

My feet carried me toward the dugout wall. When I finally got to the divider, I reached up, grabbed a fistful of Brock's Roasters jersey, and tugged him toward the railing. He barely had time to react before I crushed my mouth to his.

The kiss was rough with joy, messy with months of pent-up want and relief and love, and it didn't matter who saw it. It didn't matter that the cameras were probably getting it from every angle or that forty-thousand people were still screaming around us.

I kissed Brock like he was mine. Because he was .

Brock's hands gripped my arms like he needed something to hold onto, like he was still trying to catch up to the moment. But then he melted into it, kissing me back just as fiercely.

When I finally pulled back, we were both breathless, grinning like idiots in love.

"You won," he said, voice rough, eyes glittering with unshed tears.

"We won," I told him.

I pulled him in again, this time for a hug. It was fierce and tight; the kind you give someone who never stopped believing in you, who made the pain, sweat, and tears worth it.

All around us, the celebrations raged on, but in that moment—in Brock's arms—I felt like I had already won the biggest prize of all.

As it turned out, there was no trophy or diamond-crusted ring that measured up to the sublime pleasure of my boyfriend's lips straining around my cock.

"That's right, baby," I cooed, gently guiding his head up and down my throbbing length. "You feel so fucking good."

I tipped my head back against the edge of the tub. The warm, soapy water lapped around my chest and splashed over the side with each thrust of my hips. To think, I had almost gone to the club with the rest of the guys. Fuck that. This was by far the best post-game celebration I could have asked for.

My fingers tangled in his wet hair, holding him still while I thrust deeper into the heat of his mouth. The sound of him gagging around my length made me tighten my grip, pushing his head down farther.

“That’s right. Take it all.”

He met my eyes, and his lips curved in a smirk around the rigid flesh filling his mouth. The sight of his pink, swollen lips stretched wide sent a jolt through me, and my balls tightened, drawing up against the base of my dick.

Brock Heller was a world-class cocksucker, but I had other plans for him this evening, none of which included coming down his throat.

I stood up, pulling myself free from his mouth. He groaned low at the sudden movement, like an animal who had just been deprived of his favorite meal.

“Don’t worry, baby,” I said, voice thick with desire. “You’re going to get all of me, but I want this gorgeous ass first.”

I punctuated my words with a slap to his bare cheek, and the sound reverberated off the bathroom tiles. Fuck, I had already come once tonight and I still wanted more.

“Stand up,” I ordered.

He licked his lips and got up off the floor of the tub. He watched, mesmerized, as I tore open a condom packet and rolled the latex onto my length. I stroked myself a few times before turning him to face the wall, positioning him just where I wanted him.

“You’re unbelievable,” he muttered.

I nudged his legs wide. “No, you’re unbelievable.” He moaned when my finger prodded his puckered entrance. I coated my cock with lube and spread the excess around his hole. “The way you take my cock, the way you love me.”

I pressed my finger inside him, past the tight ring of muscles.

“ Yes, ” he hissed.

His eyes closed and he dropped his head forward.

“Fuck, Brock, I could eat you again right now.”

His breath caught. “Then do it.”

I didn’t need to be told twice.

I knelt behind him and leaned in, licking up the mess between his cheeks like it was dessert—groaning at the taste of the lube and bubble bath mixed together. My tongue dipped inside him, swirling around his asshole, slow and deep, while my hand fisted the base of my cock.

He reached down to stroke himself too, but I slapped his hand away. “Not yet.”

I stood back up to full height and guided my cock between his cheeks. He let out a ragged groan as I started to push inside him.

“Oh my god,” I rasped against his neck, thighs trembling as I sank another inch deeper. “You feel so fucking good.”

I held still, long enough for him to adjust before I was pulling back and slamming into him again.

Time ceased to exist while we moved together, like the world had narrowed down to this. The angle was devastating. I thrust up and into him—slow, deep strokes that dragged my cock across his prostate. One hand gripped his waist, the other wrapping

around his cock, jerking him in time with my thrusts. My mouth never stopped—kissing, biting, licking over every inch of his throat and shoulders I could reach.

And all the while, Brock moaned my name like it was the only word he knew.

“Fuck, Johnny.”

His fingers scraped against the tile wall as his knees went weak. I reached around his hips and grabbed his dick, already slick with precum. I circled my thumb over the tip before sliding my fist over him in slow, agonizing strokes.

He whimpered loudly.

The sound only spurred me on, and I increased the speed of my thrusts, driving into him so fiercely that his whole body trembled around me.

“Ah, you’re fucking close,” I rumbled against his throat. “You gonna milk my cock, Heller?”

“ Yes. ”

“You want me to fill you up?”

“ Yesss. ”

He turned his head slightly, brushing my lips with his. “Make me yours, Johnny.”

His back arched and his thighs shook. I slammed into him one last time and he was done. Brock came hard, spurting hot cum all over the shower wall, his ass clenching tight around my dick. The sensation was enough to pull me over the edge right behind

him. I groaned as my cock pulsed, filling the condom with everything I had.

I stayed like that, still buried deep inside him, until my legs started to shake and Brock made a small noise. I pulled out, and he winced.

“I got you,” I said, gathering him back against my chest.

He turned, and I caught him around the waist and brought our mouths together in a long, lazy kiss.

After we were both satisfied, I pulled back and looked at him, grinning. His eyes were glazed over, his face flushed and sweaty. His bottom lip was raw and swollen from my kisses.

My eyes roamed lower, past the dark patch of hair on his chest and the ridges of his abs, all the way down to his dick. It was softening, nestled among a patch of wiry curls.

He sucked in a harsh breath when I slid a hand up his shaft, gathering his cum onto my fingers and lifting it to my lips. He groaned when I licked the sticky substance off my hand.

“You want a taste, baby?”

His cheeks warmed as he bobbed his head. “Please, Johnny.”

I pressed him back against the tile wall, pinning his arms above his head and kissing him, letting him taste the remnants of his cum on my tongue. He moaned into my mouth, kissing me back eagerly, desperately.

He whimpered softly when I released him. My eyes scanned over him, taking in his

flushed, wet skin. Hot damn. Buttoned-up, man bun Brock was a sight to behold, but bare and needy Brock brought me to my knees.

Literally.

He looked like the perfect mix of innocent and debauched.

“Don’t be embarrassed, Heller.” I pressed another kiss to the corner of his lips, soft and lingering. “Isn’t it obvious by now? I would do anything for you.”

His brows furrowed as he stared back at me, brow still slightly furrowed in confusion. I smirked, brushing my thumb along the edge of his jaw.

“I love it when you let go like that,” I told him.

A flush crept up his neck, but this time he didn’t look away. “Even when I lose control?”

“Especially then.” I leaned in close enough for our noses to brush. “But only when you lose control with me.”

His breath hitched, his body still humming under my touch. And in that quiet look he gave me—part awe, part disbelief—I saw it. The trust. The surrender. The same thing I’d felt the moment I’d realized loving him didn’t scare me anymore.

He kissed me again then—slower, deeper, full of everything we didn’t have to say out loud.

And I kissed him back like I never wanted the night to end.

Brock

Thanksgiving Day

W hidbey Island had a way of looking like a postcard even in November. Brown and red leaves clung to the madrona trees, chimney smoke curled into the air, and that quiet kind of calm that only came from being surrounded by salt water settled into my bones.

Along with deep-seeded anxiety, but that had less to do with the ocean and everything to do with seeing my family.

Tucker leaned against the window of the rental car, taking it all in. “It’s like if Deadliest Catch and Practical Magic had a baby.”

I snorted. “You know they filmed that here, right?”

“Which one?”

“ Practical Magic. Mom was an extra.”

His big, beautiful eyes lit up. “Shut up.”

“It’s true. Sandra Bullock still sends her a holiday card every year.”

He grinned at me, the kind that made my chest ache in the best way. And then, like he could sense the nerves under my skin, he reached across the center console and

squeezed my hand.

The cabin came into view just after dusk settled in, golden light glowing softly behind the windows like the house itself had been waiting for us. It was the same as it had always been—weathered cedar siding, chipped white trim, wind chimes clinking lazily from the porch. A pair of Adirondack chairs were still out front, even though it was too cold now to sit in them for long, and the old horseshoe nailed to the beam above the door tilted slightly to one side, exactly how I remembered.

It was one of those places where nothing ever changed, not really—where the wallpaper still held faint traces of long-ago Thanksgivings and the creaky floorboard in the hallway still caught your heel if you forgot to step over it.

Tucker let out a low whistle beside me. “You grew up here?”

“Yup,” I said, trying not to sound self-conscious. “Still happy you came home with me instead of jetting off to New York with Roman?”

“C’mon, Heller,” he said. Even after nearly two months together, he insisted on calling me by my last name. Except when we were in bed. “You know I’d follow you anywhere.”

I blinked at him, a lump rising in my throat before I could swallow it down. We hadn’t even gotten out of the car yet, and somehow he’d already made it feel like coming home.

“Besides, just think of the ways we can defile your childhood bedroom tonight.”

And just like that, the moment was over. I busted out laughing and grabbed for the door handle.

The front door swung open before we cleared the gravel driveway, and my mom

stepped out, dish towel still in one hand.

“There you are!” she exclaimed, eyes lighting up as she pulled me into a quick hug that smelled like butter and rosemary. Then she turned to Tucker, who barely had time to introduce himself before she was pulling him in too.

“You must be Johnathan,” she said, grinning up at him like she already knew all his stats. “Sandra Heller. We’ve heard so much about you.”

“Hopefully just the good stuff,” Tucker replied with an easy smile, but I caught the tiny flicker of nerves in his eyes. “And please, call me Tuck or Tucker.”

“Of course.” She slipped her arm through his like they were already best friends. “Come on in where it’s warm. Mulled cider is on the stove, and Laurel’s roasting enough vegetables to feed an army.”

The house smelled like Thanksgiving had exploded—in the best way. Nutmeg, cloves, caramelizing onions, cinnamon baked into the air itself. The old tile floors were warm beneath our feet, the same checkered, black-and-white pattern I’d tiptoed across as a kid.

By the time we reached the kitchen, both of my sisters had already surrounded him like a bachelorette contestant. Tucker handled it like a pro—laying on the charm, telling them stories about dugout pranks and the best stadium hot dogs. I might have rolled my eyes once or twice, but it didn’t matter. Watching him win over anybody in every room he walked into was one of my favorite things about him.

“Geez, Louise,” Laurel exclaimed while plating a tray of olives. “You sure know how to pick them, little brother.”

“He’s even taller than I expected,” said Kyla, circling around him like a shark.

To his credit, Tucker didn't flinch one bit. "You should know, I come with a warning label." He smiled sheepishly. "Loud snorer. Hogs the bathtub. Eats an offensive amount of carbs. Oh, and I once wore socks with sandals in public."

My sisters exchanged impressed looks.

"He's a keeper," Laurel praised, and Kyla just nodded.

I caught my dad lingering near the fireplace in the adjoining room, arms folded across his chest. He gave me a small nod. Reserved, watchful, but not unfriendly. Like he was waiting to make his judgment once the dust had settled. That was his way. Always had been, always would be. It was one of the only things we had in common—we were both creatures of habit.

Tucker noticed him too and extended his hand. "It's really nice to meet you, sir."

"Keith Heller." Dad's grip was firm, his brow slightly raised. "Congratulations on your big win last month. You boys played a hell of a series."

Tucker shrugged modestly. "Had to impress someone."

I bit back a smile as everyone chuckled, even my dad. And just like that, some of the tension in my chest started to melt away.

Dinner was a warm, noisy blur of second helpings and overlapping stories. Mom's stuffing was legendary around these parts, full of sweet peaches, toasted pecans, and cubes of sourdough so soft they nearly melted into the gravy. The cranberry sauce was homemade—my sisters would mutiny otherwise—and the green beans were sautéed with lemon and almonds the way my dad swore he didn't like but devoured, nonetheless.

My plate was a patchwork of all the side dishes: roasted root vegetables, vegan mac

and cheese my sister Laurel had made just for me, and mashed potatoes with oat milk and olive oil that somehow still tasted like the real deal.

Tucker, of course, had everything—and seconds of most. His appetite had already endeared him to my mother, who kept placing more rolls near his elbow like she was trying to fatten him up for winter.

The only real hiccup came when my dad carved the turkey.

“You sure you don’t want any?” he asked, holding up a slice and glancing at me across the table. “It’s just the way you used to like it.”

“I’m good, Dad. I don’t eat meat anymore, remember?”

He huffed a little under his breath and set the slice down. “Seems a bit dramatic.”

The room quieted—not fully, but just enough for me to feel the words land.

Before I could come up with something diplomatic, Tucker jumped in, all easy charm and warmth. “Sandra, that stuffing is unlike anything I’ve ever had,” he said, nudging me with his knee under the table. “And I don’t know how any of y’all could pass up the sweet potato casserole. I’m going to have naughty dreams about those bad boys tonight.”

My mom laughed, tension dissipating like steam from one of her pies. “Finally, someone who appreciates my love of marshmallows.”

Tucker’s eyes met mine from across the table, and I mouthed a silent thank you. He just winked and stole the last crescent roll off my plate like the smug little shit he was.

Throughout our meal, my dad kept circling back to Tucker like he just couldn’t help

himself. Like Tucker was the son he had always hoped for.

“That slide into home during game four?” He pointed his fork like it was part of the replay. “Split-second decision-making like that—you can’t teach it.”

Tucker smiled, but instead of soaking it in, he shook his head. “Brock wrote this whole breakdown of the play for his column. He called it ‘a study in controlled chaos.’ Honestly, it made me sound like I had a PhD in base running.”

My dad chuckled but didn’t let up. “Still. That final inning—hell of a clutch performance.”

Tucker gave a modest shrug and gestured across the table. “I was just trying to live up to the hype. Your son’s articles have the whole city thinking we’re some kind of superheroes.”

It kept going like that. With every compliment, statistic, and memorable play my dad brought up, Tucker volleyed back.

Each time he did it, my mom smiled a little softer, my sisters exchanged knowing looks, and my dad, to his credit, started looking at me a little longer. Differently, even. Like maybe I wasn’t just the guy sitting beside the star athlete—but someone who mattered to him, too.

“Brock’s the one with the real discipline,” Tucker added at one point, resting his hand on mine. “He wakes up at dawn, writes until his fingers cramp. Anyone can train for a game. Sitting with yourself long enough to write a book, though? That’s a different kind of endurance.”

“A book, huh?” Dad asked.

“Yeah, I was going to tell you about that,” I said, my voice rough with nerves. I

wiped my palms across my thighs. “I, um— I’ve taken a leave from the paper. I’ve had this book in me for a while, and now I finally have a chance to write it. And before you say anything, I’ve already found a great literary agent, and she thinks I show a lot of promise.”

I glanced over at Tucker, who was watching me like I’d hung the moon. Our eyes met, and for just a second, the hum of conversation around us faded. His gaze didn’t waver—steady, warm, like an anchor in open water.

He reached across the table and brushed his fingers lightly against mine. Nothing big. Nothing dramatic. Just a simple touch that said I’m here. I’ve got you.

“ And I’ve got someone who makes me believe I can actually do this,” I finished, my voice steadier now with his quiet reassurance wrapped around me.

My dad didn’t say anything right away. Nobody did.

He just sat there, hands folded on the tabletop, gaze pinned to the half-empty glass of cider in front of him. For a second, I thought he hadn’t heard me. Or worse, that he was figuring out how to frame another polite dismissal.

Then he looked up.

“You think I don’t understand what you do,” he started, his voice low but even. “You’ve always been . . . different. Not the kind of kid who wanted to talk about fishing lines or football. You had your head in books. You asked questions I didn’t know how to answer.”

He got up slowly and crossed to the old wooden cabinet beside the fireplace. He opened one of the drawers and pulled something out—a thick scrapbook, worn and softened at the corners, the cover faded from sun and time.

He walked it back to the table and set it down in front of me.

“I kept all of them,” he said. “Every article you ever published. From the local school paper to the Tribune stuff. Hell, even that op-ed you wrote in college about banning plastic water bottles. I didn’t always get it, but I read every damn word.”

My fingers curled around the edge of the cover, my heart thudding like it might beat out of my chest.

Dad looked me in the eye. “I’m proud of you, Brock. Always have been. Even if I didn’t say it. And if writing this book is what makes you happy, then that’s what I want for you. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

The room had gone completely still. My sisters were quiet. My mom dabbed at her eyes. Even Tucker, who had seen me at both my best and worst, looked like he was holding his breath for me.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

So instead, I just reached for the scrapbook, slid it closer, and laid my hand on top of it like it was some holy treasure from an Indiana Jones adventure.

“Thank you, Dad.”

Later, after the leftovers had been packed into mismatched Tupperware and my sisters had disappeared to their bedroom—the one they’d moved into when I’d been thirteen, leaving me in peace—Tucker and I slipped quietly upstairs.

My room was exactly as I had left it—gray-blue walls that made my teenage self feel more mature, bookshelves sagging slightly with dog-eared paperbacks, a bulletin board littered with faded Polaroids and scribbled notes. The bed was smaller than either of us were used to, much too small for whatever nefarious activities Tucker had

been planning.

The thinning of his lips told me he had the same thought, and my smile stretched a little wider.

“You know,” he said, pulling his sweatshirt over his head, “I half-expected posters of boy bands or anime girls with swords.”

“Oh, those are in the closet,” I deadpanned, tossing a pillow at him.

He caught it easily then crossed the room and sat beside me on the edge of the mattress. We both stared out the small window, the faint glow of the porch light casting shadows across the familiar furniture.

“You okay?” he asked eventually, his voice soft.

I nodded. “I think so. I didn’t expect . . . any of that.”

He leaned into me, shoulder to shoulder. “Your dad might be stubborn, but he’s proud of you.”

“I know,” I said, my throat tight. “I just— I didn’t realize how badly I needed to hear him say it.”

Tucker reached across my lap and traced the edge of my hand with his thumb, slow and steady. “Well, I needed to hear that your sisters think I’m charming. So, I guess we’re both getting what we need tonight.”

I laughed, the sound muffled by the emotion still thick in my chest. “You’re a menace.”

“But I’m your menace.”

“Yes,” I agreed softly, my tongue darting out to wet my lips. “You are.”

He smiled then leaned in and kissed me, soft and slow. There was nothing urgent about this. Instead, we kissed like we had all the time in the world. Like we weren’t in my childhood bedroom with the creaky floorboards and the slightly-too-small bed, but somewhere entirely our own—somewhere only we could go.

When we broke apart, I let myself sink back into the pillows, Tucker following me down, curling around me like we belonged there. Like we always had.

“Don’t you think it’s time you tell me more about your family?” I spoke into the quiet room, illuminated only by a nightlight—a baseball, of course. “You know, since you’ve met mine.”

Tucker’s chest rumbled against my back, his arm draped heavy and warm across my waist. “On one condition.”

I craned my neck slightly, just enough to catch the curve of his grin in the faint light. “Name it.”

“One kiss per question,” he proposed, voice low and smug.

I snorted. “That’s extortion.”

“No,” he corrected, already leaning in. “That’s love.”

This time when he kissed me—soft and smiling with his hand sliding up under the hem of my T-shirt—I decided I didn’t really need all the answers. Not now, at least.

Tonight, I’d happily keep paying the price.

Over and over and over again.