



# Breaking Through the Doubt (Espen Jetties #4)

**Author:** *Haven Hadley*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** A goalie whose temper was legendary, Leslie Knoxton showed the world his tough exterior, but not the man he truly was. They saw the hockey star, not the person inside.

Over the years, he'd watched his teammates find their soulmates while he'd been waiting for his shot. On the ice, he knew the joy of winning, yet Leslie was also aware how much heartbreak could hurt. A chance encounter with a tattoo artist left Leslie wondering if it might be his turn.

Corey Mancini noticed the Jetties' goalie from the moment he stepped through his door. Getting involved with a client was the worst mistake a business owner could make. Corey worked too hard to build his shop into a thriving business to have it go up in flames. Except, he couldn't look away.

To have a chance at love, they needed to overcome the obstacles and break through the doubt. If they could make it past the hurdles in their way, Corey and Leslie could find a love like no other.

Please look inside for the content warnings.

**Total Pages (Source):** 32

# Page 1

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LESLIE

Another season with the Jetties, another way to prove I wasn't the same Leslie I was when we won the Cup. Yeah, I still had a lot of shit on my mind, more than I wanted to.

Over the summer, I trained hard and learned to channel what I was feeling into the game. For me, that worked. It might not for everyone. And there were some days the team just fucking sucked. But others, like tonight, I was in the zone.

The puck slid back and forth between us and Tennessee. I kept my eyes on it, always sure to know where it was. They took a shot. I didn't know if I was going to be able to block it in time. I dove to the left with my arm out and blocked it before it went into the net. It was one of a handful of saves I'd made during the game. I'd only missed one puck and I was still pissed they'd scored. Lucky for us, Devon was on fire tonight and had scored twice.

I loved hockey. It was like the ice, the roar of the crowd, and the energy of the team were flowing through my veins. Everything we did out here, we did as one.

This was a new start for me. No more bullshit of last year. No fighting, no anger all the time. I was a changed man. That didn't mean I didn't get angry from time to time. I hated the way our team was yelled at by some of the fans of the opposing teams. The slurs they threw our way because so many of us weren't straight. We showed them repeatedly our sexuality didn't have a damn thing to do with how we played.

I turned my head, needing to focus and stop this inner rambling. Our team—my friends—were the best of the best and knew how to play. We didn't just go out there to get a paycheck. Hockey was our lives. Or it was for some of us. It was currently all I had and that was okay. I was thirty-two. Not young for the sport. I could have retired but I hadn't been ready. Who was I going to go home to? I had no boyfriend, no husband. It was just me in that big house with no one to talk to. I didn't even have a pet because I traveled so much. There was a plant once. It died a quick death.

The game went on as I pushed thoughts of loneliness away. At least I was playing well, even if my brain wouldn't shut up. I ignored the chirps from the other team, blocked them out, and the way they tried to get to us.

It wasn't much later when the game ended and we fucking won. I celebrated on the ice with my team. There was no better way to start the regular season than with a win.

Of course, the media was there, ready to interview us. We were hot since we were the reigning champions. There was a lot expected of us. Could we go all the way again or would we have a mediocre season? There was no way to know for sure, but with how we played tonight, I could easily say all of our hearts were in the game.

Steam surrounded me as I exited the shower with a towel wrapped around my waist. A hand slapped my back. I turned to find King wearing a grin. Kingston Walker was our left winger on the first line and one of the most energetic guys on the team.

"Great game tonight. What are you doing to celebrate?" he asked.

"I'm not sure yet." I knew what I shouldn't do.

I had to stay out of the bars. Nothing good came from them. I wasn't drinking anymore. I wasn't fighting people for no reason. Well, at the time I thought I had a reason. Needless to say, I was keeping my face out of the media unless they were

going to talk about my stellar skills during the game.

“Come to dinner with us,” Devon said as he started buttoning his shirt while we stepped past him. As our captain, Devon D’Agostino knew how to rally the team. He was all business on the ice and one of the best centers in the league. With his dark-blond hair and blue eyes, he was easy to look at too. “My parents are meeting us at the steakhouse.”

“You know what, I will join you.” It beat going home and crawling into bed for a night of porn and jerking off. God, that sounded so much worse when I thought it in a sentence. Doing it, I was too in the moment. Thinking it, was pathetic as hell.

Devon smiled. “I’m glad.”

Hayes Garner, our right winger, smacked King’s ass as he walked by. They were in a relationship and had a third, Jamie Deary. Everyone, and I mean everyone, was in love around me. All it did was make my heart ache and long for something I hadn’t found. I thought I did once, but it was forever ago, and didn’t work out.

When we were dressed, we filed into the night air and the parking lot where our vehicles were. It didn’t matter I was six foot five. I folded my ass into my Corvette Stingray and started the engine, loving the sound it made. Feathering my foot over the accelerator, I stared at King in the BMW coupe next to me and waggled my eyebrows.

He cupped his hand to his ear as he blasted the music to the point the bass thumped into my car. He mouthed how he couldn’t hear me. Hayes dropped his head back on the passenger seat and closed his eyes. He had to love King to put up with him.

I pulled out of the parking lot before them and pointed my car in the direction of the steakhouse. King kept pace with me, his bass a presence of its own. Devon was in

front of us in his lifted Ford truck. While King and I were showy as hell with our vehicles, Devon didn't flaunt what he had.

We each parked at the curb and waited for the valets to collect our vehicles. Inside, we were led to a big table where Devon's parents stood when they saw us enter.

Natalie D'Agostino was over a foot shorter than me. I returned her hug, soaking in the comfort she provided. She had the same color hair as her son and her glasses were perched high on her nose. Her hand cupped my cheek as she looked me over. "No fights tonight. You look good." She didn't work for the team, but she was a doctor who liked to make sure we were all doing well.

"Thank you. We had a great night."

"We sure did," King said, sidling over. "I know you watched the game, Mrs. D. Did you see me? I was the star of the show." He beamed then hip checked me out of the way so he could hug her. I was a hugger, but King took it to another level.

Natalie rolled her eyes. She hated it when King called her Mrs. D, which was precisely why he did it. "Yes, I saw you. You played well." Leaning back, she looked at us, her son, Noah, Hayes, and Jansen. "All of you did. Now let's eat."

She didn't have to tell us twice. We brought our appetites and were ready for food.

Jansen sat on one side of me while Devon was on the other. Over the summer, Jansen and I talked more often than we usually did. He had a lot going on personally. We bonded over the phone while I was in Pittsburgh training. We were a tight group of friends off the ice, but we did our own things too. As I glanced at Jansen and the way he smiled down at his phone, there was no doubt in my mind he was messaging his boyfriend.

“Stephen?” I asked.

“Yeah. He sent me photos of a few couches. Our furniture isn’t going to look right in the new house. With the season in full swing, Stephen’s been doing some of the legwork. Here, what do you think? You’ve seen our house. Which looks best?”

He handed me his phone and I swiped through different photos. Each one was nice, but I thought the light-colored couch would look best, given their home overlooked the ocean. “This one,” I said and handed it back.

“That’s the one Stephen likes too.”

King took the phone from Jansen’s hand. “It’s a light color. That will stain easily. Sure, some things won’t be as obvious, but a stain is a stain.”

“Jesus,” Hayes muttered and pushed King’s hand toward Jansen. “Take the phone back, Kenna, before he starts telling you how to get certain stains out.”

“Aw, baby, you know just how to talk up my many skills.” King gave Hayes a quick kiss.

“Yeah, stain removal is right up there with how well you cook and how talented you are with a stick. Not that stick,” Hayes was quick to say when King’s eyes lit up. We all knew where his mind went.

Jansen took the phone. “I’ll have you know Stephen and I are great at cleaning up messes off each other. We have tongues for a reason.”

“You know better than to feed into King,” Hayes stated.

“Where’s the fun in that? We should be having a good time. We won tonight.”

“That’s right, Kenna,” King said. “Good man. Also, tongues are great, aren’t they?”

“Kingston Walker,” Natalie chastised quietly. “We’re in a restaurant, not your living room.” Luckily, there were no other people near us. It was late by the time we got here, and Natalie probably called ahead so we had a table away from everyone else.

“If you were, Mrs. D., I’d serve you something other than steak. I found this recipe for a pasta dish I’m itching to try. There’s a creamy sauce made with...”

I tuned him out after that. King cooked like he was born to be a chef, yet he found his home on skates.

We ordered our meals and the conversation flowed like it usually did when we were together. I missed these guys over the summer. I needed the reset, to get back to the reason I played and not for all the shit I got into. Returning to Espen was a fresh start indeed.

I wasn’t letting my reputation, when I left at the end of last season, get to me. Sure, some of the reporters would try to bring up stuff from the past, but I wouldn’t let them get into my head. It was time I focused on not just my career but my personal life too. A positive attitude would hopefully bring good fortune. Possibilities sat on the horizon of every new day.

Devon gently nudged me to get my attention. “Are you doing okay?”

“I am. Thanks for asking.”

“I’m glad. You know, we’re all here for you. You can talk to us.”

I nodded as emotion built in my throat. Now wasn’t the time to get sentimental. If I did, King would hug me within an inch of my life. Natalie would mother me. Jansen

would try to make me laugh, while Devon would find the perfect words to soothe me. Hayes would need to pry King off me, while Noah watched us all like we were crazy. We were, but that was why I loved them.

As we left the restaurant with full bellies, and our lips pulled into smiles from all the laughing we did, I glanced up into the clear night sky and was grateful for what I had. I was damn fortunate and didn't take it for granted.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:07 am*

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### COREY

The measured hum of tattoo guns came from different rooms of the shop. It was a sound that gave me comfort, knowing with each person who walked in the door and left with ink on their skin or jewelry in a new part of their body, the shop had finally become successful.

“What do you think?” I heard Emilio ask from the stall next to me.

I’d tried to make each section of the studio as private as possible without pushing everyone behind closed doors. I wanted people to see the art we did on skin, not only on the drawings in the lobby and in the windows.

His art always left me speechless. Emilio specialized in hyperrealistic tattoos, the ones that looked like a photograph was right there on the skin. I’d seen him do a snake that scared the living shit out of me. It had looked like it was ready to attack at any moment.

The customer’s excited response brought a smile to my face. When customers were that excited about their new work, word of mouth spread. And in this business, word of mouth was worth its weight in gold.

Of course, we appreciated our walk-in customers for their business, but the artist in each of us thrilled at designing something new and beautiful. I glanced down at the flowers I was currently drawing and forced my mind to stop wandering. The woman

who wanted the design for her hip bone would be back in less than thirty minutes.

I put the pen back to the paper and focused on my work.

“Hey, Corey, take a look at this.” I set my pen down and walked over to Emilio’s station, where a man stood facing away from me. On the back of his right shoulder was the image of an infant. The image looked so real, it felt like I could reach out and pinch the baby’s cheek.

“Fucking fantastic, man.” I took a step forward, needing a closer look at the gorgeous design. Hiring Emilio had been one of my best decisions since opening the shop.

It sucked that his last shop didn’t give him the same freedom over his art and flexibility of his schedule. Their loss and my gain. Emilio only worked four days a week and only one night, but the demand to get on his schedule was so high he never had a moment without a client. People were willing to wait for months if it meant they could get one of his tattoos.

The guy looked over his shoulder. “Amazing, right? My little girl is beautiful.”

“She absolutely is.” I clasped Emilio on the shoulder. “Glad Emilio could get you taken care of. Great work.”

“Thanks, Corey.”

I left Emilio to finish up with his client and went back to my drawing. I set my pen down ten minutes later, the flower design in my hand. I wouldn’t create the template for the skin until I was sure the client liked it.

“That’s a simple design.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Lila standing in my doorway. Her long, curly red hair fell in waves down her back. I could see the purple butterfly tattoo peeking out beneath the curtain of her hair.

“Walk-in client. Wants something on her hip.”

“Make sense.”

“No one on your book today?”

“I have someone coming in for a belly button, but you know piercings are very rarely scheduled. People decide to get them in the spur of the moment.”

The ring of the bell from the door turned both our attentions in that direction. The woman from earlier had returned, followed by two younger girls.

I focused on the woman who wanted the tattoo. “I have your design ready. If you want to follow me back, I’ll show you.”

“Sure. Lead the way.”

“Hey,” Lila said in greeting to the two girls. “What can I do for you?”

One girl nudged the other when she didn’t say anything. The first girl spoke up. “My friend wants to get her nose pierced.”

I glanced over at Lila and lifted a brow. “Double-check their IDs.”

“No doubt.” She faced the girls. “I can definitely help with that, but first I need to see your ID.”

I led the woman to my station. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the girl hand it over. Lila looked it over, smiled, then handed it back. “Follow me and I’ll get everything set up.”

I let her handle it from there and showed my design to the client in front of me. “How’s this?”

She took the paper from my hands. “It’s exactly what I wanted.”

“Great. Why don’t you get settled on the table, and I’ll print this on the transfer paper.” I dropped the back so she could lie down on the table. “Just give me a few.”

The printer sat farther back in the studio, where we kept the other supplies like piercing jewelry and ink. I was printing the transfer when Lila popped in behind me.

“I take it she’s old enough?” I asked.

She laughed. “Today is her eighteenth birthday.”

“Now that makes a lot more sense.” She appeared young enough that I wondered if she was seventeen, trying to pass for eighteen on looks. But eighteenth birthday stops in my shop were all too common. Everyone wanted piercings and tattoos their parents wouldn’t let them get before they turned eighteen.

I collected the ink colors the client had requested, mixing the purple to a hue I knew would look great on her skin. After placing the ink and transfer on a tray, I returned to my station and set them on the side table.

“Does this look like the right place?” I set the transfer paper on her skin, then gave her the handheld mirror to check my placement right on her hip.

“Yep. That’s where I want it.”

“Great.” I took the mirror from her hand and set it back down before grabbing a wet rag to activate the transfer ink. Once I was sure everything was in place, I dipped the tip of the gun into the black ink. “Let me know if you need a break,” I reminded her as I moved the gun closer to her skin.

“I will. I should be good though. This can’t hurt nearly as badly as my foot.”

“You have a point.” The skin on the foot was extremely thin, making it one of the most painful places to get a tattoo. I turned on the gun and began pressing the ink into her skin.

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I finished up the color and wiped away the excess ink. After placing some ointment on the new ink, I stood back, appreciating my work. It might have been a simple tattoo, but to me, every piece had my own personal touch. Something to make it stand out from the rest. The bright purple of the flower popped against the woman’s light skin.

“Ready to see?” I asked, holding my hand out to her.

“Yes, please.” She took my hand, and I helped her into a seated position.

She slid off the table and walked to the full-length mirror I kept at the back of my stall for people to inspect my work. A smile pulled up the corner of her lips. “I love it. It’s more than I was expecting.”

“I’m happy we surpassed your expectations. Mind if I take a shot of it for your file?”

“Of course not.” I grabbed the tablet and zoomed in until the tattoo took up most of the screen. I took the picture and added it to her file.

She finished admiring her new tattoo, and I wrapped up the freshly tattooed skin. “I’ll take you up front to get you checked out.”

She followed me to the counter, where I handed her a paper listing the aftercare instructions and a small tube of the same healing ointment I had applied to her skin.

“If you have any problems or questions while your skin is healing, my number is at the bottom. Please don’t hesitate to call the shop.”

“Thank you. I need to tell my friends to switch to this place.”

“We’d really appreciate it.”

She pulled out her wallet, paying for the work, then left after, putting the aftercare instructions into her purse. Without anyone else on my books for this time in the day, I returned to my station and opened the drawing app on my tablet.

Having a large book of designs that could be used or customized helped when people were unsure what they might want for their next piece. I opened the tiger I’d been working on yesterday. I zoomed in on the head and grabbed my stylus pen, focusing on the fur. Emilio had been slowly teaching me the techniques he used to create such realism in his work.

The bell to the shop rang, catching my attention, same as it always did. We’d been open for two years, yet the sound still gave my heart a little stutter in excitement.

What I hadn’t expected was to see the man who had just come through the door. His broad shoulders and tall frame made me take notice, but it was the face I’d seen on

TV during the hockey season that gave it away instantly.

Leslie Knoxton had just walked into my shop.

The sight of him made me slightly nervous. He was notorious for that temper of his. I set my pencil down and stepped around my drawing desk. Whatever he was here for, I'd make this a great service. Happy men didn't throw punches.

I stepped behind the reception desk. "Welcome. I'm Corey. Was there something I could help you with today?"

He looked at me and it was hard not to notice the warmth in his brown eyes. Not exactly what I expected, based on every picture I'd seen of him up until this moment. That probably had more to do with the pictures, which were usually taken in the middle or end of a fight.

"I'm thinking about getting a tattoo."

"Okay. We can do that. Mind coming to my station so I can get more of an idea of what you are looking for?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

I led him around the counter to my station. I took a seat at the desk and grabbed the tablet, pulling up our new client questionnaire form. My stomach fluttered when he sat down. The thought that one of the Espen Jetties had walked into my shop had me on the edge of my seat. I had to do this right. The publicity from this man alone could help skyrocket the business even higher.

"Tell me about the ink you have already." It was a standard question I asked every new client. It gave me a clearer idea of what they did and didn't like, as well as what

body parts were already covered.

“I don’t have any. I’m a tattoo virgin.”

My mouth practically dropped open. I couldn’t believe it. It was more common than not to see athletes with ink gracing their skin. Untouched skin, how much more perfect could this day get?

“You’re surprised?” He grinned.

“Yeah, you caught me off guard. It’s not often you see professional athletes without tattoos.”

“How about another shock then? Most of my teammates don’t have them either.”

“Really?”

“I think it’s time to change that.”

“I’d be happy to make it happen. Let me get a bit more information down.” I selected the correct answers for the questions on the form, then scrolled down to the art section. Once I’d opened the shop, I ordered software, so we’d be able to keep digital records of every client and the art we’d done for them. “Any idea what design you might want or where you might want it?”



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LESLIE

“Any idea what design you might want or where you might want it?”

I really should have thought this through. I saw the sign as I was walking down the street, trying to avoid the bars while keeping my mind busy. There was something about the sign that drew me in. Next thing I knew, I was in the tattoo shop, staring at one of the hottest men I’d ever seen. That said a lot, given the company I kept. Not that I was fucking guys on the team.

Black hair that was longer on the top with the sides cut short, I couldn’t help but be drawn to the way his hair complemented his high cheekbones. His skin was tanned, and his eyes were nearly as dark as his hair. Then there were his tattoos. They covered his forearms, drawing my eyes to intricate designs. I guessed that was what you did when you loved something so much. You put it on your skin.

Making my decision, I said, “I’d like to pay tribute to my family.”

He nodded. “Any specific idea in mind?”

“It might sound old-fashioned, but a tree. There’s this tall tree in my parents’ backyard. It’s higher than the house and provides so much shade in the summer. They built a patio around it. We sit under it and sip the homemade lemonade my mom makes while my dad grills. My younger sisters usually fight while I watch, waiting for someone to intervene, which ends up being my mom.” I pressed my lips together

as I realized I said more than I intended to.

“A tree will work great. Do you want to put their names on the branches or somewhere else?”

“Could you do them in a circle around the tree? My mom’s, dad’s, and sisters’ names?”

“Yeah, whatever you want. Why don’t you find a picture on your phone of the kind of tree you want then I can get to work? I’m going to get my station set up and we can get started.”

I took a seat on the couch near the front window. I didn’t miss the way some of the eyes in the shop kept drifting my way. I was used to it. Sometimes though, I wanted to blend in and not be the Jetties’ goalie. I just wanted to be Leslie, everyday man, like everyone else. That wasn’t a possibility, I knew, but damn did I want it now and then.

Corey came to the front of the shop and stopped a couple of feet away. My face grew hot when I realized I didn’t look up the tree at all. I was lost in my thoughts and scrolling through a text chat with my family.

I pulled up a picture from the summer when I was at the house, with my sisters beside me. The tree was in the photo but only the bottom part. “Those are my sisters, Kara and Tenley. Smart as hell and driven.”

“Like you.”

“Smart? No, I block a net for a living. Driven, yes. I thrive on action. Anyway, that’s the tree. Let me see if I can find a better picture.” I had to have one. We had so many family gatherings out there. Eventually, I found one from a few years ago and handed

the phone to Corey.

“Do you mind if I send this to myself? I won’t do anything with it outside of use it for your tattoo. I take privacy seriously in here.”

“That’s fine.”

He opened the text messages and quickly sent it to himself. “Give me a bit and I’ll be back. Oh, and text me the names so I can add them to the design.”

Did he not realize he just gave me his number? Did he do this with everyone, or was I special? He probably didn’t think me, of all people, would be up late texting him. I valued privacy as well. Still... I had his number.

I quickly typed his first name in the contact information and sent him the text with my parents’ and sisters’ names. My dad’s name was easy—Leslie. Same as my grandfather. We were all Leslie. The difference came in our middle names, so we weren’t senior, junior, the third, or whatever. I was grateful for that. I didn’t want to be Leslie Knoxton the third. It sounded way too pretentious for me. Instead, I was Leslie Seth Knoxton. Seth was my mom’s dad’s name. I got a bit of both sides.

While he was getting the design ready, I started flipping through the books on the side table. There were so many designs in them. Some were on skin as completed art. Others were drawings on paper. The more I flipped through, the more I thought about where I wanted the tattoo.

They were my family and I loved them, but I didn’t want them on my chest. Then there was the fleeting idea of getting the name of someone I loved on my chest. I quickly shook it away. I wasn’t dating anyone, not even close to inking my skin with a boyfriend’s name.

The tree was too big for my arm, and my thigh didn't seem right. If I had to lift my shorts high to show people my tattoo at family gatherings, it was a definite no. The calf didn't appeal to me.

I decided to go with my back. No matter how much my sisters got on my nerves, I knew they'd always have my back. The same with my parents. The number of fights I got in, the trouble I caused the team, my parents and sisters were there for me with phone calls, ready to fly out here, and waiting for me when I traveled to Pittsburgh over the summer for training.

My parents lived roughly forty-five minutes away from the city. It was close enough where I could see them when I wanted to, but far enough away where we weren't in each other's faces all the time. Plus, training was much easier in the city than farther out. I stayed at my condo, busted my ass, and saw my family when I wanted to.

Corey returned and, this time, I looked at his legs encased in denim. My eyes rose from the floor. God, he was beautiful in a way I didn't usually go for. So many times, I was attracted to cleaner-cut men, even the kind wearing suits. Corey wasn't that, and I found myself sucked into his orbit.

"Leslie? I'm ready for you. Do you still want to do this?" I just realized I hadn't given him my name. Of course, he knew it. It would have been polite to introduce myself. Too late for that now.

"Yeah, I'm good." I stood and shook out my arms then pocketed my phone.

"Come on back."

I followed him to his station where there was a table, designs on the walls, and the tattooing equipment. I didn't know what any of it was called outside of the tattoo gun where my eyes settled.

“Nervous?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. I’ve been through a lot with my job, but this is a different kind of pain.”

“Not the same as taking a hit on the ice, huh?”

“I’m going to go with no. I can let you know for sure once you’re done.”

He motioned to where he had the design laid out. “What do you think? It’s a white oak, or at least that was what I could decipher from the photo.”

“It’s perfect.” Not only did he do the names in a circle around the tree, but he also used a thin script that stretched them without looking too long. The detail on the tree was insane. I could see the outline of leaves and the etching of bark in the trunk.

“It will be more intricate once I get it on your skin. This is just a guideline so I have something to start with. Depending on where you want it will determine if I have to shrink it or make it bigger. It’s your call. I should have asked you that before.”

My eyes met his as a slow blush bloomed on his cheeks. Maybe I wasn’t the only one feeling a bit of attraction. It was either that or he loved hockey and was a fan. I didn’t get that impression though. He didn’t get tongue-tied or ask me about the last game, like other fans usually did.

“The center of my back but between my shoulders instead of lower. I wouldn’t mind if it was a little bigger but it’s your call. I don’t want to do anything to change the design.”

“We can go bigger. It will only take a second to enlarge it. I’ll be right back.”

When he stepped away, I took time to look over the walls of his station. There was everything from quick sketches in pencil to fully colored art that could have gone in a gallery, to photos of tattoos he must have done.

I really lucked out, coming in here and getting him to do my tattoo. The skill he had was amazing. It made what I did for a living seem insignificant. It wasn't, but it was nothing like this. He literally created beautiful pictures with needles and ink, permanently putting them on skin. People walked around with his art on their bodies. This was more than getting a tattoo. It was a personal experience. At least, it was going to be for me.

He returned with the design bigger and asked me to remove my shirt so he could look at my skin. I wasn't an overly hairy guy but he still had to take a razor to my back, so he had a smooth canvas to work with. That was new for me. Hell, this whole experience was.

Once he had the design transferred to my skin, he gave me a mirror so I could make sure it was where I wanted it. I nodded and swallowed. It wasn't the pain that worried me. It was Corey putting his hands on me and me not reacting. Just the transfer paper had me breaking out in chills, and he hadn't even touched me with his bare skin.

He had me get into position on a chair that kept me upright with my head cushioned, so I could still see and easily breathe. It felt like I was about to get a massage. Instead, I got him putting his gloved hands on me and the first prick of a needle into my skin.

“Okay?”

“It's not so bad,” I told him.

“You say that now.” He chuckled. “I'll do the outline first.”

Corey went to work on my back. Certain areas were more sensitive than others. I thought it would have felt like getting a shot, since that was my experience with needles, but this was nothing like that. This was more like scraping my knee when I was younger when falling on pavement or a sidewalk. It was small needles raking over my flesh repeatedly. Not awful pain but it was getting sore.

The tattoo wasn't so big he couldn't complete it in one sitting, though he said he would give me a break halfway through or sooner, if I wanted it. I was lucky he didn't have anyone else scheduled for today or I would have had to come back. Having another artist wasn't an option. Once I saw Corey, I had to have him. Ink me, that was. Or more if he wanted it.

How was I even thinking about this while he was putting ink permanently into my flesh? It was insane, yet I couldn't stop wondering what his hands would feel like without the gloves on. Without him running needles along my skin.

We started talking about anything and everything. It made me feel like I was sitting in the chair at a hairdresser, where they spoke to you the whole time. Only with Corey, I didn't want it to end. Talking to him was relaxing. I could do it all night.

### COREY

My hand trembled as I pulled the gun away from his skin to look at the outline of the tree. I still had the names of his family to finish before I started on the colors in the tree. The way he watched me still sat at the front of my mind. I couldn't help noticing the way his eyes followed my every move, or the way his breath picked up when I pressed the transfer onto his skin.

His body was an absolute work of art. Corded muscles in his arms and a strong chest were often hidden behind the pads he wore when he played. Even his back was all muscle. It had been the first time in a long time that I'd paid attention to a man's body.

In my early twenties, I bounced between men and women like a ping-pong ball. I struggled to decide which features I enjoyed most in bed. And let's be honest, it was all about what was happening between the sheets then. I wasn't interested in relationships or even getting to know many of them. Learning to tattoo and building my clientele had been my only focus.

As time went on and I opened my shop, my goals had changed. Picking up random strangers at bars and taking them home became less attractive. I worked hard all day and by the time I finished up for the night, I didn't want to stay out drinking until the early morning hours before I got up and did it again.

Dating became more attractive to me. Finding a person to connect with after work.



The one you could have dinner with or stay in and watch a movie. And almost all the dates I'd been on had been with women recently. It wasn't that I had decided to exclusively date women. Reality was, there hadn't been any men I'd had a desire to explore more with.

At least until Leslie Knoxton walked into my shop.

There was no denying the tightness in my jeans with each heated look he gave me. The man was fucking hot.

He was, however, a client.

Something I had to remind myself of repeatedly. He'd mentioned that none of his teammates had tattoos. This one bit of ink could lead to even more appointments on the books. That was something I couldn't risk by thinking with my dick.

He turned his head to glance in my direction. "How does it look so far?"

The scruff on his chin and cheeks accented the golden brown of his eyes, and I had to tell myself once again to be professional. This was my business. A business I wanted to keep running. I couldn't do that if I mixed business with pleasure.

"I'm almost done with the outline. I just need to finish the names before I start working on the color. Let me do those and we'll take a short break."

With an effort, I went back to work, trying to push away the heat in his eyes. I laid the gun on top of the first name, letting the soothing buzz settle me as I worked. Each name flowed into a pattern I knew well. Draw. Wipe away excess ink. Draw again.

I continued this way until I'd finished the names. I swiped away the last bit of ink. Even with his skin red and a little angry, I'd always had a way of being able to see

past it, knowing exactly how the design would look once it healed. And I knew this would be one of my top designs.

Leslie moved and I realized I'd been staring a bit longer than necessary. I cleared my throat and set the gun down.

"You can sit up for a few moments if you want. I'm going to give my hand a break and grab a drink of water."

"Sounds good." Leslie pushed himself up and I darted from my area.

Forget giving him a break. I was the one who needed to collect myself. I went directly for the bathroom next to the supply room. Forgetting the drink of water, I wanted to splash some water on my face. Somehow, I needed to figure out a way to keep my mind focused on the job and not the man on my table.

I leaned over the sink and stared at myself in the mirror. In my head, I went through all the reasons I had to focus and keep my mind on the job at hand, and nothing else. For that to happen, I had to keep work and pleasure separate.

When I felt more in control, I left the bathroom. I grabbed two bottles of water from the supply room on my way by. Leslie was looking at his phone when I returned to my station. I handed him a bottle of water.

"Thanks." He opened it and took a drink. When my eyes strayed to the way his Adam's apple bobbed, I turned and focused on getting the right colors for the tree.

Once Leslie was resettled onto the table, I dipped the needle into the ink, then positioned the gun above his skin. I moved the needle through sections of the tree. The silence was overwhelming my already strained senses.

“Didn’t seem like you had this planned out before you got here. Can I ask what brought you in tonight?”

I picked the gun up as he started to shrug his shoulders, then seemingly remembered I was permanently putting ink into his skin. “It was one of the designs in your window.”

There were plenty of designs that we put in our display case. Some of the work was Emilio’s, some of it was Andrea’s, but most of it was mine. For me, the display had become a way for me to show the hard work I’d put into getting this place off the ground. That I’d found a way to succeed on my own.

“Which piece was it?” A selfish part of me wanted it to be one of mine, but I knew the most likely one would be Emilio’s.

He was silent for a moment. “The one with the rose splitting in two.”

My hand froze. I knew exactly which design he referred to. My heart stuttered realizing, he had in fact, chosen one of mine.

“I drew that around the time I decided to look into opening my shop. I wanted to venture out on my own. But it would hurt to leave behind the artists I’d worked with for years. The ones who taught me everything I knew about tattoo art. Each side of the rose was a part of me wanting to go in two different directions.”

“And the teardrop?”

“It was the pain and desire pushing me on two paths.” I dipped the needles back into the ink and moved the gun to another part of the tree. “I put it in the window, hoping it would mean something to someone else.”

“It did to me.”

Talking about my art felt like a safe place for both of us to stay. “I’m glad. It’s always been the design that reminds me, even when decisions seem impossible, you will always make the best one for you.”

I continued to shade in the tree before I could add in the accents, bringing the design to life. Leslie was quiet for a long time while I worked. I didn’t want to push him to talk if he didn’t want to.

His deep voice startled me a bit later. “The rose called to me on a base level. Half of my life is my team, the game, and the rush I get from it. The other half is me in search of more. Feeling adrift, yet not, because I have family and friends around. Part of me is still missing though. I watch as my friends fall in love, and I’m left out. Not because I want to be. It’s just...” He blew out a breath. “I don’t know if I’ll ever find what I’m looking for.”

Leslie stopped talking and I didn’t want to pry. Besides, I had a feeling he’d been talking about relationships. I’d seen plenty of news over the last few months about his teammates being in relationships and it felt like very dangerous territory, considering my thoughts about Leslie.

I wiped away the last bit of ink and applied the healing ointment. “Are you ready to see?”

“Hell yeah.” Leslie stood from the table, and I handed him the mirror. This time, I positioned him in front of the full-length mirror. I made sure his back was facing it. This way he could move the small, handheld one into position to see better.

“That’s beautiful. They’ll have my back in every way.”

“That’s exactly what I was hoping to hear. When you’re ready, I’ll wrap you up.” He returned the mirror to me, and turned so his back faced me. “Would you mind if I get a quick picture of the design for your file?”

“Not at all.”

I picked up the tablet, took the picture, then proceeded to bandage his fresh ink. “I have aftercare instructions up front. I’ll meet you there when you’re done gathering your stuff.”

I walked behind the counter and gave Leslie a moment to put his shirt on. I didn’t have any faith I could watch his muscles flex to pull the fabric over his head and not have a reaction.

“Thank you,” he said when he reached the counter. “I hate to even cover it. I want to show it off.”

“I appreciate the compliment.” I handed over the aftercare instructions and some ointment. “Remember to keep your skin covered for about a week, except when you shower. After that you can leave it uncovered, but continue applying this ointment for the next few weeks. After that, you should be good to go.”

Leslie paid, then pocketed the aftercare instructions and ointment. “Thanks, Corey.”

I watched as the door closed behind him. As much as I hoped he would come back through the door so we could talk more, it was for the best that he didn’t.

“So, we’re getting celebrity clients now?” Emilio came up beside me.

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. “Smart-ass. Should we start listing the members of the Sandpipers you already have on your books?”

He chuckled. “Fair enough, but that stems from Maddox. He’s brought them in on his own.”

“Oh, boo hoo, poor you, having to go to high school with the best wide receiver Espen’s ever seen.” Emilio gave me a quick punch to the arm.

“Still... The goalie for the Jetties? That’s some serious star power. The attention he gets is wild.”

“It is. Such a contrast to what I saw. It was like he was almost nervous when he got here.”

Emilio sat down in one of the chairs we kept behind the reception desk. He put his feet up and crossed his arms over his chest. “Yeah, that’s not exactly what I would expect either. I figured he was probably a giant asshole in real life, and his mouth got him into a whole lot of trouble.”

“He’s nothing like that.”

“Just goes to show you that the celebrity gossip sites will post anything for a few clicks.”

It did make me wonder though. I’d seen enough videos of Leslie getting into one bar fight after another. He seemed to attract trouble like no one I’d ever seen before. But the man I’d seen in those videos was nothing like the one I’d met tonight. Leslie was reserved, not flashy. And the story he told about what my rose design meant to him didn’t scream prima donna athlete.

Instead, he felt like a highly misunderstood individual. Someone the media had painted into a villain. The one they could poke until he exploded. They knew exactly which buttons would set him off.

“Well, I hope more people get to see the man who let me design his family tree.”

“Me too,” Emilio agreed. “Too many people forget that professional athletes are people too.”

And I had to remember they were clients, not potential relationship material.

5

LESLIE

“I can’t believe you got a tattoo,” Jansen said as he hovered over me. “I saw it once already but now I get to really look at it. The work is insane.”

The guys saw it when we showered last time we were at the arena. I was so stuck in my head about Corey, I forgot the ink he put on my body. How fucked up was that? I had beautiful art permanently etched into my skin, and I thought more about the man who did it than the tattoo itself.

“You should see the designs and photos he has up in the shop.” I was currently sprawled out on Stephen’s couch with my shirt off, so Jansen could look at my tattoo and put the ointment on for me. It was a bitch to try to do it myself, given the location. Sure, I could reach part of it but not all. Plus, the couch was comfortable.

“Leslie, why is my boyfriend rubbing your bare back?”

Turning my head, I grinned at Stephen. “I can’t reach the tattoo to put the ointment on.”

“I’m just being a good friend,” Jansen said and pressed a kiss to Stephen’s cheek.

“I’ll do it, so you don’t have to touch him.” Stephen tried to grab the little jar, but Jansen quickly spun out of the way. I leveled up onto my elbows to watch them.



“I don’t think so,” my friend replied. “You’re not touching him.”

“Jesus, just put the shit on my back and shut up,” I said, sitting up.

Jansen did so quickly while Stephen watched. Then he kissed his boyfriend’s lips. “I only want you.”

“I know, but still, Leslie’s very attractive.”

I grinned. “Thank you, Stephen.”

“I wasn’t done. But you’re sexier, Jansen.” He put his arm around Jansen’s waist, and I let out a sigh.

My friend deserved all the happiness in the world, but I wondered when it would be my turn. I must have been caught in my head again because when I snapped back to reality, they were both looking at me with concern in their eyes.

“Don’t say it,” I said and stood to put my shirt back on. “I don’t want your pity.”

“It’s not pity,” Stephen told me. “We want you to be happy.”

“I will be.” I left off the eventually.

“Come with me,” Jansen said. “We’re going for a walk.”

They’d just closed on their new house but weren’t fully moved in yet. I was in Stephen’s living room. They bounced between their homes. I should have felt bad about coming by, but Jansen invited me over for dinner. There was an urge to resist, then I thought of how Stephen’s home was closer to where Corey’s studio was than where I lived.

We headed outside and started along the sidewalk. The air was cooling down. Summer was gone, fall taking its place. We were quiet for a bit as we walked. Cars drove by but nothing like they did downtown.

“Tell me,” Jansen said.

“About what?”

“Why did you come for dinner? We’d invited you before, but you blew us off. I know there’s a reason you were willing to drive out here.” He was right of course. I didn’t live in the city, instead choosing to live in a peaceful suburb like Devon did.

“I want to see him again.”

“Who?”

“Corey.”

We stopped at the end of the block but instead of looking both ways before crossing, Jansen put his hand on my arm to turn me toward him. My eyes met his as his dark curls danced on the sea breeze. “The tattoo artist?”

“It’s stupid, I know. I can’t get him off my mind though. There was something about him. This kindness. He was so gentle when he tattooed me, and he was easy to talk to.”

“Did you fall for the guy who cuts your hair too?”

I scrunched up my nose. The guy who cut my hair was very straight and married.  
“No.”

“Okay, so why Corey? He probably talks like that with everyone, kind of like the hair stylist. They chat with the people they’re working on, make polite conversation so you’ll tip them big. And I imagine it keeps the tattoo clients calmer while they’re shoving needles into your skin.”

“Shit,” I muttered. Looking both ways, I crossed the street.

Did Corey only talk to me like that to make conversation? What Jansen said made sense, but it felt like more with Corey. Or maybe I was reaching, which was most likely what this was. Fuck my life. I really needed to find someone who wanted me for more than my dick and money.

“Knox,” Jansen said as he caught up with me. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m just trying to look at this realistically. Did he flirt with you?”

“No, but there was a vibe.”

“A vibe?”

“Yeah, like I wasn’t just another person who came in to get tattooed. Maybe it was all in my head.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. If you felt like there was something between you, then maybe there was.”

“How would I know?” I groaned, second-guessing everything.

“Go down there.”

I stopped short, Jansen went two paces past me before he realized I wasn’t beside him. “You want me to go there? And say what exactly?”

“Tell them your tattoo is sore and you want to know if it’s normal.”

“It is. It says so on the paperwork. Besides, I know how to use the fucking internet. I think I could search that.” I’d look like a moron if I went in there and said that. Or extremely desperate. Well, I was, but I didn’t need to come off that way.

Jansen rolled his eyes. “You need a reason to go back there. Who gives a shit what it is? Say you lost the paper. Whatever. Just go to the shop. You won’t know if there’s something between you unless you see him again.”

“And if he seems standoffish then I’ll know.”

“One way or another. We leave for the road tomorrow. You need your head in the game.” He gripped my shoulder, giving me a little shake. “We’re depending on you.”

I nodded. He was right. I couldn’t let my team down again this year. We won the Cup last season, but I wasn’t on my game for much of it. I was a damn mess. This season I vowed to do better.

We walked for a while longer before we turned and headed back to Stephen’s house. I should have bought a house near the beach. Instead, I went with a more wooded area like where I grew up in Pennsylvania. I didn’t like being in the city all the time, but when I wanted to see my friends, I had to hike it out here. The same with work. The only person I could get to quickly was Devon. He and Lincoln were pretty solitary when we weren’t working. I didn’t want to bother them.

Stephen was tidying up from dinner when we returned. I totally forgot about the meal and was too focused on myself and my tattoo. My attempt to remedy it was met with Stephen’s kind eyes, telling me I didn’t need to worry about cleanup. He just wanted to make sure I was okay. Jansen got lucky with him. Even after the bullshit when the media found out Stephen was Jansen’s ex’s father, they came out stronger. Sure, they

had their ups and downs, everyone did. They were solid now.

Jansen walked me to the door. “Go see him.”

“I’ll look stupid.”

“Since when do you care what others think of you?”

I shook my head. “I don’t most of the time, but this feels different.”

“Then maybe it is.” He pulled me in for a hug, knowing it was what I needed without me having to say anything. “If it all sucks, come back here and we’ll watch a movie or something.”

Leaning away, I said, “I won’t do that. You need to spend time with Stephen before we leave.” Our jobs took us all over. Time home was precious. I’d already wasted enough of their evening. I wouldn’t rob them of more of it.

After hugging Jansen again, I said goodnight to Stephen and thanked him for dinner. My car sat under a streetlight, waiting for me to get in and point it toward the tattoo studio. It took me a solid five minutes once I got inside the car before I started it. I was behaving like an idiot. Jansen was right. I wouldn’t know unless I went there. The worst that could happen would be him acting like everything was just business, and he didn’t feel the connection I did.

The drive to the studio was done in silence. The radio would have done nothing for my nerves. It was all insane. I shouldn’t be nervous, yet I was.

The lights from the windows drew my eyes to it as I walked to the front door. My fingers found the key in my pocket I always kept with me and rubbed for good luck. To say I was superstitious was an understatement. This key had been with me since

the start of my professional career.

I still remembered the day my dad gave it to me as I was about to leave home. He had me open my palm and placed the old key in it. When I glanced down, it looked like any I'd seen before.

"Keep this with you. It will bring you good luck."

"What's it go to?" I asked.

"Nothing that I'm aware of."

I cocked an eyebrow at him in question.

"The night I went on my first date with your mother, I was walking to my car and found it. I tucked it in my pocket, not wanting to be late. The date went on and I found myself reaching for the key every time I was nervous. When I came home that night, I asked around the house and no one was missing it. I even asked my neighbors the next day. I had no idea where it came from, but I told your mom about it on our next date. She jokingly said it was the key to her heart. The thing was, it was in a sense. It kept me grounded and focused on her instead of the butterflies in my stomach. The key has been with me ever since. Even on our wedding day, I had it in my pocket." I couldn't believe he hadn't told me about it before.

"And you want to give it to me?" I asked in shock.

"I do. I've had enough luck for a lifetime. You've had your own, but you could always use more. Keep this with you and may it bring you the same luck it did me."

I'd kept the key with me since. While I'd had a hell of a career, amazing friends, and a loving family, there was still part of my life that wasn't fulfilled. So, as I stared at

the door to the tattoo studio, I rubbed my fingers over the key and hoped for the best. It certainly couldn't hurt to inject a bit of luck into my life. It was the same key I touched before every game, that I kept in my locker while I played, and pocketed as soon as I got dressed after. I could only hope it still had some magic left in it.

I pulled the door open, and the sound of music greeted me. My eyes swept the room, but Corey wasn't out front. There was a woman behind the counter, who smiled when she saw me.

Approaching the desk, I felt my face get a little hot, but I pushed forward. "Hi, I... Um..." Fuck, I didn't usually stumble over my words. "I lost the paper."

"The paper?"

"The one Corey gave me after I got the tattoo."

"Oh, you could have looked up the instructions online. They're on our website."

That time my face turned red. "I didn't think about that," I muttered.

"Here's another copy so you have it."

I took the paper from her and was about to turn to leave when Corey walked toward the front with someone he must have just tattooed. My eyes met his, and I couldn't move. It was like I was stuck in cement.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:07 am*

6

### COREY

Fridays were always something at the shop. As in an all-hands-on-deck kind of way. Between walk-ins and scheduled appointments, we could never catch a break. I loved seeing every station packed with people, even if it left me feeling completely drained by the end of the day.

It was also the one day we had the shop apprentice manning the reception desk. One day, I'd hire someone to sit there permanently, but for now letting Karli handle the calls and appointment books was the best use of her time.

She started with us a few months ago and, at this point, hadn't learned enough to take some of the walk-in clients with simple designs. Once she got to that point, I'd hire another to take her place.

I glanced down at the flower design I'd been working on for the last few hours. The client didn't want any color, only a little shading throughout the design to give the flowers a bit of dimension. I had to admit, I wasn't one to normally pass on color, but I was thoroughly pleased with the way the tattoo looked on her skin.

"One flower left to shade, then we'll get you out of here," I said, reloading the ink into the gun.

"Sounds perfect to me."



I couldn't believe the woman in my chair had barely flinched, even when I ran the gun over some of the most tender points on a person's body. Women were built different when it came to pain levels. I had a quote across my torso and swore it would be the last time I ever put ink anywhere near my ribs. Shit hurt for days.

We'd been so busy the last few hours, I hadn't paid a bit of attention to the bell on the door. The sound of a familiar voice caught my attention. I glanced up and saw Leslie Knoxton standing at the reception desk.

I wanted to talk to him, to ask what he thought of the ink now that he had a couple days to heal, but I couldn't leave the client sitting and waiting in my chair for me. Karli could handle whatever questions he might have until I finished my current job. But I wouldn't lie to myself and admit I wanted to see him for more than just updates on his tattoo.

Nothing I'd done over the last two days had helped me forget about the more reserved man who sat in my chair, getting a tree to represent his family. The look in his eyes as he glanced my way. The heat I felt from his gaze was almost palpable. Even though I tried to will myself to forget him. To remind myself he was a client. I couldn't escape the sound of his voice in my head.

I continued to shade in the final flower, wishing time would speed up and I would be done. After I made the last stroke, I set down the gun and picked up a paper towel, wiping the ink. The work was simple yet elegant. The shading really lent itself to the look of the tattoo. It brought out the design of the flower, without having the bright colors to distract from the art.

"All done."

She practically hopped up from the table and went directly to the mirror to look at my work. "I knew I left my old shop for a reason. The talent between these walls is

impeccable.”

“Thank you. We appreciate the compliments and the business,” I said wrapping her new tattoo. I grabbed my tablet and updated her file with her new ink, while she got dressed.

“Let’s get you checked out. I’ve seen your other work, so I’m sure you’re familiar with the aftercare instructions, but here’s a copy just in case.”

I saw Karli hand Leslie something as we got closer to the reception desk. He took the paper and started to turn until his gaze locked on mine. Time seemed to freeze or maybe it was just Leslie, since my feet continued propelling me forward.

Leslie still hadn’t moved when I reached Karli’s side. I gave her the tablet with the client’s information on it. “Karli will get you checked out. We hope to see you back when you’re ready for more.”

“Oh, I will be. I still have a lot of blank places to fill.”

“Love the sound of that.”

She passed over some cash. “This is for your excellent work for today.”

“Thank you.” Even the small bit of conversation felt too long while I watched Leslie stand there. As much as I wanted to walk right over to him, I couldn’t. I had to wait until my client was fully turned over to Karli.

Karli looked at Leslie, then back at me with a smile. “He lost his aftercare instructions, but I gave him a new copy.”

“Thanks, Karli.” Karli turned her attention to the woman and started ringing her up

for her tattoo. With the client's focus fully on Karli, I stepped around the counter and was finally able to acknowledge Leslie.

"Hi, Leslie. I'm sorry, I should have told you the instructions were on our website. That's my fault."

"It's no problem. I should have thought to look there." Leslie held up the paper in his hand. "I have it now. Thanks again." He turned to walk out the door and I placed my hand on his wrist, stopping him from leaving. I even surprised myself with the action.

He turned to look at me and I snatched my hand away. "Since you're here, how about you let me look at it?" Leslie glanced around the sitting area where a few people sat waiting. One of them was there for me, but I couldn't resist the extra moment to spend with Leslie.

"Are you sure? You look busy."

"We are, but this will only be a minute. Come on back."

I led Leslie to my station. His posture seemed stiff and nervous. I almost laid my hand on his back. I clenched my fist at my side to keep myself from doing something stupid.

"Want me to sit down?"

"You can if you want. Either way. If you just pull your shirt up, I'll take a look."

Leslie proceeded to lift his shirt over his head, and I struggled to keep in my gasp at the tight muscles of his back flexing. This was the exact reason I hadn't stayed with him while he put his shirt on the other night.

The tree came into view and, once again, I had to admire my work. The branches and lettering were spectacular. A few areas were a little red for my liking. I ran my fingers over the spots to make sure they weren't hot to the touch. His muscles jumped reflexively at the feel of my fingertips.

"This is looking great. Although, there is a spot or two that look a little red. Let me reapply some ointment and wrap it up."

"A little red?" He glanced over his shoulder at me, where I could see a bit of the same color in his cheeks.

"Yeah, probably where your shirt rubs against the irritated skin. I would keep a wrap on it for the rest of the week, after that you should be good."

I got out the supplies to rewrap Leslie's tattoo. First, I wiped off the ointment he'd had on it and reapplied a fresh coat. Then, I covered the entire design with a wrap.

As I was taping it down, I asked, "What did your teammates think of it?"

Leslie chuckled. "They were shocked I got a tattoo."

I pressed down the last piece of tape. "All done." Leslie turned around and his gaze locked with mine. "Why were they shocked?"

"They didn't expect me to get one since I didn't have any others. Things have also been a bit all over the place for me. Not on the ice. I'm good there." He shrugged. "I'm glad I got the tattoo though. A fresh start for a new season. One I desperately needed."

His gaze dropped to the floor. The desire to caress his cheek and promise him it would be all right overwhelmed me to the point I took a small step back, out of reach.

Whatever this was between us wasn't going away. I could pretend all I wanted he was a client and that was all he ever would be. Deep down, I knew if given the chance, I'd want more.

It was a chance I was willing to take.

The bell chimed and more voices reached me from the front of the shop. If only it was any other day of the week than Friday. "I'm really glad you came in today. I want to keep talking, but I have a couple of people waiting for their next appointment. Want to get a drink with me when the shop closes?"

Leslie was quiet for a moment. "I..." He shook his head. "I can't. I'm sorry." He pulled his shirt on and walked to the opening of my station. "Thanks for your help."

And before I could say another word, he was gone.

I blinked and tried to figure out what had happened. Maybe I'd read him wrong. The looks. The way his body reacted to the simplest touch. Could I have really imagined it?

In the end, it didn't matter. Leslie made it clear we hadn't seen things the same way the last two days. Wasn't that for the better?

I'd been telling myself since that night, I needed to keep things professional between us. He was here as a client. If I wanted to keep this business going, I had to draw a line in the sand between me and the people who came to me for tattoos.

A part of me still wanted to get to know more about Leslie. It might have been the larger part of me, but the small, rational part of my brain knew this was for the best.

Like my dad had always told me, everything happened for a reason.

This reason could simply have been the universe knew I would be terrible about following my own rules where Leslie was concerned.

I cleaned my station and went up front to the reception desk. “Hey, Karli, who’s next?”

She gestured to a tall, blond man. “He would like to get a jaguar on his bicep.”

“Of course.” I walked up to the man and introduced myself. “Hi, I’m Corey. Karli says you’re looking for a jaguar on your bicep. Did you bring a picture with you?”

“Yup.” He proceeded to pull up the photo on his phone.

“Great. Let’s head back to my station and see what we can come up with.”

And just like that, I returned to work, moving through each new tattoo or design request like a professional. Each hour passed in a blur. There hadn’t been a moment to stop and think. It was one job after the other.

It gave me something to focus on besides the sight of Leslie’s back as he walked out the door. Something that wasn’t so easily done when I pushed through the door of my apartment later that night.

I grabbed a beer from the fridge and dropped down on the couch. Earlier, I told myself that him leaving had been for the best. I’d been wrong. Although, I had a feeling I’d probably never see Leslie walk through the door of my shop again.

LESLIE

Fuck, I was tired. We'd been on the road for two games. It wasn't the longest stretch by any means, but we got our asses handed to us in both games. I had to hope we did better now that we were home again.

King ruffled my hair. "Quit pouting, Knox. We'll get 'em next time." He could say that. King scored our team's only goal in the last game while I let two past me into the net.

This was a shit feeling. Yeah, it happened, and we didn't win every game but when the puck slipped past me, that was on me. It didn't matter that it was a team sport, and we were all responsible for wins and losses. I took each one personally.

He slung his arm around my waist. King was smaller than me by about four inches and twenty-five pounds. "Come home with Hayes and me. Jamie's traveling for work. We have the place to ourselves. All that tech shit Jamie loves is there, like the video games he created. There's a pool and hot tub. Let's go relax for a bit."

I didn't have anywhere to be but home, so I nodded and got into my car to follow them. Soaking in a pool sounded good right about now. It didn't matter that it was October. The air wasn't frigid yet. Besides, the pool was heated.

We pulled up to the tall building they lived in and parked in the garage. A private elevator took us to the top. We all made great money, but Jamie took his smart mind

and money and put it to work in his home. Everything was high tech in here from the motion sensors to the voice recognition that would do a host of stuff.

Hayes spoke to it as we entered, and the lights came on. He said a command to turn the heater on in the pool and get the jets going in the hot tub. Shit, this was crazy. It wasn't my first time here, but I was still in awe.

The furniture was a mix of comfort and style. Even though there was a lot of expensive stuff, it wasn't the kind of home where you couldn't touch anything for fear of breaking it. Everything was replaceable. That was who they were. Nothing was put above family and friends.

King was a family man through and through. Hayes quickly became part of the Walkers when he joined the Jetties. Then there was Jamie who wasn't a hockey player but knew a lot about baseball, given his brother was the owner of Espen's team, the Emperors.

I took my coat off and draped it over the back of the couch.

"Be right back," Hayes said as he climbed the stairs to the second floor.

"Bring mine too!" King called. "The pool is calling our names. Drink?"

"Water." I wasn't drinking anything bad for me or that could get me in trouble. Besides, I wanted to drive home tonight and not spend it crashed out on their couch or in a guest room.

King came back from the kitchen with a reusable bottle in hand, just as Hayes descended the stairs with swim trunks.

"We keep a lot of sizes here, so hopefully these will fit you," he said, handing a pair



to me. Hayes was a bit bigger than King but not my size, so his clothes wouldn't fit me.

"Thanks." I put the water down and went into the bathroom to change quick. When I came out, they were standing close together, talking and smiling, but quickly pulled apart when they saw me. "You don't have to do that. I know how much you love each other. Don't stop what you're doing on my account."

Hayes shook his head. "You don't need our affection in your face."

"He's right," King said and gently slapped my shoulder. "Let's relax in the pool then get into the hot tub."

The pool wasn't heated enough by the time we were in it, but the cool water felt good on my skin. The fact it was on top of a building with sweeping views made it even more spectacular.

"You two really know how to live," I said to them.

"Not us," Hayes replied. "This is all Jamie. Our place was modest."

"It was." King nodded in agreement. "But we wouldn't give this up. It's heaven to come home to this and Jamie."

"When does he return from his trip?" I asked.

"Tomorrow morning. He tries to time it so if we all have to travel, we do so on the same dates. Then we get to spend more time together when we're home. Luckily, he's home more than not. He's running his own business now, so it's more legwork than when he was working for someone else."

“Makes sense.”

“So...” King said with his eyes trained on me. “Tell us about the guy who gave you the tattoo.”

I groaned and dropped my head back. Two nights ago, I made the mistake of bringing up Corey after our game. My mood was shit and I said how the guy who tattooed me was beautiful, and yet, my dumb ass turned him down when he asked me out. Why? Because he asked to go for a drink. I didn’t want to get into why I couldn’t do that. Not only did I not want to go to a bar, but I wasn’t drinking. This season was me doing better. At least until the last two games when I sucked.

“Hey,” Hayes said and nudged my leg with his foot. He was leaning against the pool wall. “You don’t have to tell us.”

“No, it’s fine.” I started talking about Corey and how attractive he was, how he asked me out, and I said no like a moron, which they knew. These were some of my closest friends. It wasn’t hard to talk to them. While King could joke a lot, he could also be a great listener.

“Knox?” Another nudge with Hayes’s foot. I didn’t realize I’d closed my eyes as I floated on my back.

“Yeah?”

“If you like him, ask him out to somewhere you both agree on. And if you feel comfortable, tell him why you turned him down before. If he’s worth knowing, he’ll understand.”

“I know. It’s just... What if he only asked me out because I’m me?” It was a valid question. So many times I got men because of my car or who I was. They loved a guy

with money, especially one who was built like I was and played professional sports. Being on my arm would bring anyone attention. Except once I got to talk to them, they were shallow and after my dick. We'd fuck and move on.

"If you want to know the answer to that, ask him. Did he talk to you like someone who wanted to be with you because you're a Jetties' player?"

"No, it was more like he wanted to get to know the real me. At least, that's what I thought, but then I was talking to Kenna—"

King groaned loudly. "What did he say?"

"He helped me. It was me who got into my head. He was trying to get me to move forward instead of staying stuck where I was."

"Good. I didn't want to have to kick his ass."

Hayes splashed him. "You're not doing any such thing."

"That's right. I have you to kick his ass for us."

Rolling his eyes, Hayes turned and pulled himself out of the pool. "Let's move to the hot tub. I want the jets to beat on my back."

King quickly followed while I took my time. Between Hayes and his easygoing personality and King and his infectious happiness, I loved being here with them. It took a while to get my head around them being together though. For so long they were best friends and teammates. But then I saw them as more, once they told us they were together. The way they looked at each other was obvious. They made sense. Add in Jamie and they were a great match. They balanced each other.

I climbed into the hot tub with them and relaxed in the seat. Okay, this was fucking perfect. I could live here. “I should get one.”

“Hell yeah,” King said. “Then when we skate at D’s house, we can hop over to yours for a soak.” Devon had a skating rink in his backyard. It wasn’t the size of the arena, but it was cool as hell and fun to skate on. When it was just us out there playing, no need to keep score, we had a lot of fun as a group.

We spent more time relaxing before we started to prune. I thanked them for talking to me. King made sure to wrap me in his arms before I left. The man gave the best hugs. And since I was a hugger too, I pulled Hayes in until we were a big circle of friendly love.

With my muscles relaxed and my mind calmer than it was before, the last two games a distant memory for now, I got into my car. Instead of heading home, I pointed it toward the tattoo shop. I wasn’t second-guessing myself this time. Thanks to King and Hayes, I was feeling good and wanted to talk to Corey.

The bell chimed when I opened the door and walked in. Corey was sitting in his station with his feet up, a sketch pad on his lap, and a pencil in hand. His eyes lifted to meet mine. Before the person behind the desk could greet me, Corey stood and walked my way.

“Hey, everything okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, the tattoo’s healing well. Do you have a minute?”

“Sure, let’s go into the back.” I followed to a room where we were away from others, but he didn’t close the door. “What’s up?”

“The other night, you asked me out for a drink. Did you want to go out with Knox the

goalie or Leslie the person?" There, I asked him. Depending on what he said was how I'd proceed.

"I won't lie and say I didn't know who you were the moment you walked through the door, but that doesn't mean I only see you as your job, the same as I don't want people to assume things about me based on mine. You trusted me enough to ink your body for the first time. Please trust that I asked out Leslie the other night, not the goalie for the Jetties."

A smile lifted the corner of my lips. "Will you go to dinner with me?"

His eyes widened. "When I asked you out, you said no."

"I'm fixing that. I could use a friend." Shit, why did I say that? I wanted to be more than friends but for some reason I didn't want to jump into bed with him, like I did everyone else. Sure, I'd gladly get between the sheets with Corey. I also liked talking to him and wanted to get to know him better. I opened my mouth to say more but Corey smiled.

"Sure." I might have been reading into things, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. I fucked up, didn't I? I shouldn't have said the friends thing. I panicked and now I was screwed.

"Great. I'll text you my schedule and we can pick a date." Jesus fuck, what was happening right now? I should have corrected myself and said as more than friends but nope. Instead, I told him I'd text him. I sucked on the ice and in my personal life. Fantastic.

### COREY

Dropping the weights, I stood and wiped the sweat from my brow. I'd spent an extra hour in the gym this morning trying to calm my nerves. The only time I'd seen or spoken to Leslie since Wednesday was the other night when I texted to confirm the restaurant for tonight. Neither of us had been available until Sunday, which left me waiting to figure out what I could use a friend meant.

Nothing about this felt normal. It wasn't the having dinner with a hockey player part, but a more what were we doing part. I swore the first few times he stepped into my shop I sensed an energy of interest from him. I didn't think I had imagined it, but when he showed up last week and asked me to dinner as friends, I had to wonder.

It had taken all the self-control I could muster to keep from making my disappointment obvious. He'd turned me down the first time I asked him out for a drink, and I thought it might have been that he wasn't interested. Then he showed up at my shop a third time. When he questioned why I asked him for drinks, I started to think maybe he'd just been nervous about why I wanted to go out with him.

The entire round robin had been driving me mad for days. At least at work I had other things to focus on. With the shop closed on Sundays, it was only me, my thoughts, and the whole lot of hope he'd change his mind.

If he even wanted to change his mind at all.

What if he really meant what he said about hanging out as friends? Not that it would be a problem, just not exactly what I had been expecting.

I racked up my weights and went into the locker room to grab my stuff. I waved at the few people who were here this early on a Sunday morning. In the car, I tried changing the radio station or turning the volume up to drown out my thoughts.

By the time I entered my apartment, I was more on edge than I was when I left. I went straight into the bedroom and turned on the shower. The hot water calmed my nerves slightly.

The only thing that had ever worked had been my art. The light flicked on in the second bedroom, and I scanned the space. Art hung on every wall. New ones, old ones. Basically, anything I'd drawn since the age of fifteen. Drawing had been the perfect release for me. One that gave me an outlet for any emotions I might be feeling. Journaling was for some people; art was for me.

I sat down behind my desk and pulled out a sketchbook. Pencils of different shades littered the desk in front of me. I picked up the nearest one and began sketching. Whenever I started a new drawing, I never had a plan. I always let my hands and fingers lead. Making line after line until they connected into something beautiful.

The pencil moved across the page in effortless strokes, leaving behind a gorgeous design of a dove flying, with a heart resting on its back. Deciding the piece didn't need any color, I worked on shading the design until the image jumped off the page.

Satisfied, I carefully tore the paper along the perforations out of the book. I grabbed a pushpin and attached it to the display board I had hanging directly behind my desk. I stood looking at the drawing. It was an accurate representation of my feelings. My own heart being unable to settle on someone had taken flight, looking for the perfect match for me.

I smiled at the artwork and picked up my phone to check the time.

“Shit.” I shoved my phone in my pocket and raced to my bedroom to change. I hadn’t realized how much time I’d spent drawing. I didn’t want to be late for dinner.

O’Malley’s pub, where we agreed to meet, was only a few blocks from my apartment building. With the crisp fall night, I decided to walk and hopefully clear my head before I arrived, and I was faced with the confusion of what tonight actually was.

When I walked through the door, I was a few minutes early and didn’t see Leslie anywhere. The crowd inside was already large. Since I didn’t want to wait an hour for a table later, I told the guy at the host stand I needed a table for two. He led me to a booth almost directly across from the bar.

I sent Leslie a quick text about where I was waiting and sat my phone on the table. I couldn’t stop my nervous fingers from spinning it in circles repeatedly. The waiter came over to greet me.

“Are you waiting for someone else?” he asked.

“I am, but can I get a Yuengling while I wait?”

“Draft or bottle?”

“Draft, please.”

He entered it into his handheld tablet. “I’ll be right back with that. Anything for your friend?”

My insides cringed at the word friend. Damn, this was going to be a long night. “I’ll let him choose when he gets here.”



“Great. Let me know if you need anything else.” He walked toward the bar.

The rational part of my brain understood why calling Leslie a friend was necessary. As a service industry employee, how awful would it be to assume whether someone had a date or was simply meeting friends. Yet, as one part of the party, I had no idea what the answer to that might be. The word friend was the safe option under most circumstances. For me, it made the butterflies dance around my stomach more than they had before.

The waiter was back in less than a minute with my beer. I took a sip, hoping it might settle my nerves a bit. But like my phone earlier, I found myself twisting it between my hands after I set it on the table.

I watched the entrance, waiting to see his shoulder-length blond hair when he stepped through the door. Another few sips of the beer and I started to feel settled. It wasn't the beer. A few sips here or there wouldn't have that much impact.

Maybe because the answer to the question of friend or more would finally be answered. Whether he actually meant friends, or it had been another statement to protect himself.

I set the pint glass down and glanced up in time to see Leslie walk through the door. No doubt about his size, but there was something different about the way he looked entering my shop and the way he looked right then. When he stepped into the shop, I thought nothing about the three or so inches of height he had on me, at least not until I was sitting down.

After I got over my shock of seeing how broad his chest was and how tall he carried himself, I gestured to him with my hand, waving him over to the booth.

Leslie slid into the booth across from me. His eyes zeroed in on my pint of beer then

back to me. He didn't say anything and suddenly I felt the urge to explain myself.

"Sorry, I should have waited for you to get here before I ordered." I practically froze in my seat while I waited for his response. Not three minutes in and I was already fucking this up.

"You're fine. I'm sorry I was late."

I shook my head. "You're not late, I just got here early."

That was not how I expected the night to start. I picked up a menu and handed it to him, which left us both in silence. I decided on what I wanted to eat, then set the menu aside. Leslie was still looking at the choices. Did I talk while he was attempting to choose? Did I just sit here and stare at him?

Never in my life had I felt so disoriented when out with someone.

When Leslie set the menu down, I waited for him to say something. Anything. I was an outgoing guy. Someone used to talking to complete strangers. I had to be in my line of work. Yet tonight it felt like I couldn't find my footing.

Why was the easy conversation we had at the shop missing tonight? What happened between then and now? It had to be me. My insecurities about what we were doing here together. About what this was.

Whatever was missing, I wanted to get it back. Which led me to ask the first question that came to mind.

"How was your game the other night? I didn't get done in time to see it."

Leslie looked up from the fork he'd been flipping around on the napkin in front of

him. “Good. Better than our last two games on the road.”

“Yeah, sorry about those.”

“Thanks. It was tough. I must have been in my head too much, otherwise I wouldn’t have let those pucks through.”

“We all can’t have a perfect day, every day.”

He continued to flip the fork around. “What about you? Any other interesting artwork?”

Wow, this was awkward. What I wouldn’t give for a sip of my beer, but based on the way Leslie eyed it up, I didn’t want to remind him how I’d been rude and hadn’t waited for him. So, I left the glass sit there.

“Just a few...”

“Sorry to interrupt.” The waiter approached the table. “I saw your friend was here and wanted to see if I could get you anything to drink.”

Leslie looked up at the waiter. “I’ll have an iced tea please.”

“You’re Leslie Knoxton. Shit. Awesome game last night, man. Great save on that last shot.”

“Thanks.” He grinned, but his eyes shifted to me.

“I’ll go grab your iced tea, unless you’re ready to order.”

“I am,” I said and looked at Leslie. “What about you?”

He nodded and turned back to the waiter. “Grilled chicken sandwich with sweet potato fries.”

The waiter punched the information into his tablet and turned to me.

“Buffalo chicken sandwich, please.”

“Great. I’ll get those in and started for you.”

“Thank you,” I said and handed him both my and Leslie’s menus.

The waiter left the table, and I turned back to Leslie. “You asked about any interesting work?”

He nodded. “Anything down at the shop?”

Talking about our jobs was the last thing I expected us to be discussing tonight. Hopefully, this was the best way to push us into less stilted conversation.

“Mostly walk-ins looking for simple tattoos like flowers or butterflies.” I thought about the work I’d done over the last week. “A few tribal designs.”

“People can be predictable with tattoos, I guess.”

“Mostly, but there are plenty of people who want unique designs. Something that represents someone or something in their lives. Those are my favorite ones to do.”

“Like mine.” He smiled but it was on the shy side.

Our conversation was interrupted again when the waiter returned with Leslie’s iced tea. I took advantage of the moment and picked up my pint glass. I sipped the beer, a

little warmer than I liked, but it would do.

Anything to give me a chance to think of something else we could talk about besides hockey and tattoos. Yes, they were important pieces of our lives, except there was so much more. If we were well and truly going to be friends, I wanted to learn more about him.

“How was your last road trip? Do you enjoy traveling?”

LESLIE

Were we really doing this? Making small talk? It was awkward as hell. I had no one to blame but myself. I was the one who brought up being friends. Now it was one of the worst dates ever. I had to fix it but didn't know how.

My track record wasn't great. I had a relationship forever ago. What I did excel at I didn't want to do with Corey. Fucking was one thing. Building something more was completely different. And I wanted it so much, but with the right person. Finding it with just anyone wasn't the way to go.

There was something about Corey though. Something that kept drawing me back and had me behaving like I didn't know what it meant to go on a date.

"I'm not usually like this," I said and lifted my gaze from my now empty plate.

"Like what?"

"Weird. I mean, I am weird sometimes, like before a game. I have pregame rituals and I'm superstitious, but that doesn't have anything to do with this." Here I was, rambling again. I had to resist reaching for the key in my pocket. It would look too weird if I started feeling around in there. I didn't want to chase him away. Although, at this point, even without the whole pocket thing, I probably had a good chance of doing that.

“I don’t think you’re weird.”

“This isn’t me. It’s because I’m here but I’m not the type who gets flustered or doesn’t know what to say. Yet with you, I turn into a fool.”

A smile tipped his lips. God, it was the hottest thing. I wanted to lean in and taste him, to see if I could savor the bit of heat from his sandwich or the lime wedge that was in the glass of water he drank when he was done with his beer.

I groaned. “I didn’t tell you the complete truth when I asked you out.”

“No?”

Leaning forward, I wanted Corey to hear me, not everyone in the restaurant. There were too many people who kept looking my way, like I was the only professional athlete who liked to kick back and hang out at local places. We weren’t all fancy restaurant, high-end people. I certainly wasn’t. There was something to be said for a great meal. I didn’t care where it was.

“I don’t want to be just friends,” I said softly. “I panicked and it came out. You saw me, not the other part of me everyone else gets. I’m not used to men wanting me for more than a quick fuck. I’m not saying you do, it’s just... This isn’t easy for me.”

“This is a date then?”

I nodded. “I’d like it to be, but I’m screwing it up. It wasn’t my plan to have the world’s most awkward evening with you.”

He chuckled. “It’s fine. I wasn’t sure where we stood but wanted to hang out with you.”

“Do you want to see me as more than a friend? I don’t want to pressure you. I’d just like to know if the feeling is mutual, and you want to date me or if you want to be friends. You don’t have to worry about hurting my feelings.”

“Leslie,” he said, leaning forward as well. His hand moved over the table like he was about to take mine but resisted. “I’m glad it’s a date. I agree that we could have done better. That’s on both of us, not just you.”

I blew out a breath and leaned back, feeling like a weight had been removed from my chest. “What do you say we pay and go talk outside? There are too many eyes on us in here.”

“Sure.”

We ended up splitting the check. Either of us would have covered the whole thing, but this way it kept us on even ground. Corey wasn’t using me for my money, and I wasn’t with him to see how quickly we could get into bed.

The air was cool as we walked to our vehicles. Being later on a Sunday night, the restaurant was more subdued than normal. Most people liked to have fun on Fridays and Saturdays. This worked tonight because Corey didn’t have to be in his shop, and I didn’t have a game.

Our arms brushed as we walked to where my car was parked. He was only a few inches shorter than me. I leaned against the car, my body facing his. Where I’d parked there wasn’t a light shining down on us. It wasn’t completely private, but we weren’t out in the open either. Another great thing about going out tonight, I didn’t see one reporter or anyone trying to get our picture, outside of fans. Granted, one could be hiding here, and I wasn’t aware. That was always a risk I took anytime I left home.



Reaching over, I linked my pinky on his finger and gave him a slight tug to pull him closer, so we were facing each other. “If I’d picked you up, I could have walked you to your door.”

“Or I could have with you.”

I hummed. “Yeah, but then you’d have to drive all the way out to where I live, and we’d have to hike it back to Espen.”

“Where do you live?”

“Almost an hour away with no traffic. I like the quiet and to be able to escape the city.”

“I like the city, but it’s nice to get away from it too.”

“Maybe I’ll invite you out sometime.”

“I’d like that.” Corey leaned closer and put his hand on my hip. “Leslie?”

“Yeah?”

“I like this side of you.”

I fought not to blush. Lifting my hand, I brushed my fingers lightly over the slight stubble on his cheek. “Can I kiss you?”

“Yes.”

It was a slow descent to him as my lips met his and both his hands were on my hips. Mine went from his cheek to his neck while the other found his waist. It wasn’t just a

kiss though. The moment my lips parted, and our tongues touched, it was like all the air punched from my lungs.

I'd heard others talk about kissing and touching and being in love. After only experiencing it once and failing, I wondered if I'd ever feel something like this again. No, it wasn't love with Corey. It was lust and I knew that. He stirred something in me. Something I recognized when I first met him. I had to be careful and not let my heart get involved yet. There was most of the season left and my head had to be in the game. Seeing him again, building on to what we established, was still on the table.

We kissed and kissed some more until we had to part to breathe in much-needed air. Corey's hair ruffled on the evening breeze and, not for the first time, I thought how beautiful he was.

My phone ringing in my pocket had my eyes closing and a groan working from me.

"Expecting a call?" he asked.

"No, but I know that ringtone. It's one of my sisters."

"You're close with them." It wasn't a question. He knew I was or else I wouldn't have tattooed their names on my back.

"I haven't told them about the tattoo yet, but King posted a picture on his account with my bare back in it, and it got a lot of comments. I need to get a better shot and tag you, so you get credit."

"So, she's calling to yell at you?"

"Probably."

He chuckled. "At least you don't hate each other."

The phone went quiet. I'd call her on the ride home. There was plenty of time to waste while I drove. "Can I see you again?"

"I'd like that."

"I'm going on the road. It won't be easy dating me. Between the media and the travel, it's a lot."

"Don't worry about that. I have a business to run. Trust me when I say, I have plenty of my own shit to keep me busy."

"Yeah, sorry." There I was making it about me when Corey had his life to live.

"Don't be. We'll figure it out. Text me tonight when you get home or tomorrow and we'll see when our schedules line up. No worries, Les."

A smile formed on my lips. "I like that. My family calls me Les, but the guys on the team call me Knox."

"I can call you Knox."

"No, don't. That's for them. You're not part of that side of my life and I like it. Not all hockey all the time. There's more to me than that."

"I'm sure there is. I'll enjoy getting to know you."

I swallowed. "I want to get to know you too."

"Can we talk while you're traveling or are you busy the entire time?"

“I have some late nights which could work, since I doubt you go to bed early.”

He laughed. “No, I don’t. We’ll see each other again soon.”

I leaned forward to kiss him, not knowing when I’d get to see him next. The season was hectic. He had his own stuff to do. If we were meant to be together, we would be.

We pulled apart slowly and said goodnight. I didn’t get into my car until he was in his. As soon as I was on the road, I listened to the voicemail Kara left me, where she yelled about how I got a tattoo and didn’t tell her.

I hit the button to call her back. The phone didn’t even get a full ring in before she picked up. “I can’t believe you!”

“Easy. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing and I’ve been busy.”

“Too busy to call me?”

“Kar, I’m working a lot.”

She huffed out a breath. It wasn’t like she didn’t have stuff going on. She was in college with a mountain of work so she could move on to law school.

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “I should have called.”

“Yes, you should have. Mom and Dad know. Expect hugs and tears next time you see them. The only reason they haven’t called you yet is because they don’t want to throw your game off, or whatever.”

“I’ll call them tomorrow.”

“Good, because now I can get a tattoo and don’t have to feel their wrath.”

I snorted a laugh. “If you think Mom won’t have something to say about you getting a tattoo, you’re wrong.”

“I’ll just hide mine.”

“Sure. Let me know how that works out for you.” Kara wasn’t the best liar.

She got quiet for a second then whispered, “You got my name, Les.”

Emotion suddenly built in my throat. I’d do anything for my family, absolutely whatever they needed. I paid for Kara’s school. I paid for Tenley’s too. My parents’ home was paid off. They’d never asked for a dime, but I always gave to them. After all they did for me growing up, it was the least I could have done. “Do you know what I thought about when I was deciding what tattoo I wanted?”

“No.”

“That all of you always have my back, no matter what. Just like I have yours.”

“Ditto, big brother.”

“Get some sleep, Kar. It’s late.”

“I’m still getting a tattoo. Nothing nearly as sweet as yours.”

“We can’t all be the perfect child.”

She laughed. “Oh, whatever. Kick ass in your games.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Night.”

“Night, Kar.”

I disconnected the call and kept driving out of the city toward my home.

The night started out weird, but it was better once I opened my mouth and told Corey what my issue was. We ended on a much better note than we started with. It was only the beginning. We’d talk and see each other again, so I didn’t have to think of lame excuses to go into his shop.

10

COREY

I opened the back door of my Bronco and grabbed the duffel bag off the back seat. There were still a few hours before I had to open the shop. Tuesdays were my long day. Those were the days I had to not only open the shop but close it as well.

Knowing I wouldn't have time to work out when I was done, I'd gotten up early to come to the gym. I tossed the bag over my shoulder and locked the car door. There weren't many cars in the lot, and I figured I'd have the gym mostly to myself.

After changing and storing my bag in a locker, I put my headphones on and went directly for the free weights. Some light lifting would be a good way to get my heart rate up and warm up to the heavier lifting later.

The music played in my ears while I did one rep after the other. But it wasn't the music that had my attention. It was the last time I saw Leslie. It had been two days since we met up for dinner. What an awkward conversation that had started out to be. It was one of the weirdest nights of my life. Never had I been on a date where things had started so badly, and I ended up kissing the person at the end of it.

The night had definitely ended better than it had started. Although we'd shared a few texts here and there since then, we hadn't really had the chance to talk. Leslie had left the next morning for a road trip. He had a few games coming up, and I had a schedule full of appointments this week.

I finished up with the free weights and moved to the next part of my routine. No matter how hard I tried to focus on only my workout, I continued to lose count and forget how many reps I completed. I couldn't think of the last time someone affected every part of my day the way Leslie did.

Somehow, I managed to finish my workout, without any bodily harm or too much extra time. I didn't bother using the gym showers. There were still a few hours before I needed to arrive at the shop.

My phone rang as soon as I climbed into my Bronco. Hoping it was Leslie, I pulled it out of my bag. When I checked the screen, I saw it wasn't Leslie, but I was more than happy to talk to my dad.

"Hey, Dad," I said when I answered the call.

"Corey, how are things going?" His deep, scratchy voice filled me with contentment. It was the same voice that used to read me bedtime stories.

"Things are going really well. The shop's been busy. I'm actually booked all week. At this rate, I'll need to hire another artist to take the walk-ins."

"I thought you hired an apprentice."

My dad had been fully invested in me opening my own shop. He'd been my personal cheerleader my entire life. It had only been the two of us for as long as I could remember. My mom was on and off drugs long before I was born. She'd gotten pregnant with me during one of her sober periods. It wasn't long after I was born that the stress of having an infant led her to using again.

From then on, Dad took care of me. Cleaned my scraped knees, checked my grades, even helped me figure out what I wanted to do with my life when we both realized



school wasn't my thing and college would be out of the question.

She appeared occasionally, when she'd get sober for a short period, usually after court-appointed rehab, then she was gone again. Dad always did his best to shield me from the heartache she caused every time she started using again. There was only so much he could do when she'd waltz in, promising things she would never deliver. By the time I was nine, I stopped caring about my mom's intrusions in our lives. And that was how I saw them... as intrusions.

All she did was disrupt my and Dad's lives for a few weeks, maybe a few months, before she was gone again. I'd always be so happy when she left. Not my dad. Even if he didn't want me to be hurt by her decisions, he always was. He did his best to hide it from me. It was one of the reasons I feared coming to Espen to open my shop. I didn't want to be too far from my dad in case he needed me. Thirty minutes was nothing, but there were times when I missed him, and it seemed like he was hours away.

"I did hire an apprentice, but she's not ready to tattoo on her own yet. I'll probably need to find someone who already knows what they're doing and has been in the business a few years." I started the engine and slowly pulled out of the parking space.

"I'm sure you'll find the right person. You were able to get Emilio into the shop."

"Damn straight." It had been no secret between us how fond my dad was of Emilio's work. He'd always wanted to get a tattoo done by him. Six months after Emilio came to work for me, I was able to make that happen.

"Besides the shop, what's going on in the rest of your life?"

I turned on the street my apartment building sat on and stopped at the red light. "I went on a date the other night."

“What was she like?” My dad always hoped I would settle down with the perfect person for me. He wanted me to have a better life than he had. The guilt would settle in, and he would do everything in his power to remind me he did not have a single regret in life. Even if my mom hadn’t been present for him, she gave him me, and that was worth everything.

“Actually, he’s pretty amazing.”

“He? Really?” he asked, his voice surprised but still caring.

“Really. I know it’s been a while.”

Dad chuckled. “Let’s be honest. You’ve never really dated men. You’ve always taken them home for one night only.”

I laughed, even as I felt my cheeks heating. Not cool when your dad called you out for your one-night stands. He did have a point though. “You’re right. This one is different. I met him when I did his tattoo the other night.”

“Corey...” My dad’s tone said it all.

“I know, I know. I shouldn’t mix business with pleasure. Like you said though, when was the last time you’ve seen me go on a date with a man?”

“I just want you to be careful. Think through your decisions.”

I turned into the parking lot of my building. “Don’t worry, Dad. I am. I don’t plan on risking my business and hard work for anyone.”

“Good. You can’t blame me for worrying about you.”

I turned off the car. “Hey, I just got home. Can I call you in a bit, after I get a shower and get ready for work?”

“You don’t have to call me back. We can talk later. You worry about getting to the shop and keeping that business running.

“I will. Love you, Dad.”

“Love you, too.”

After I ended the call, I climbed out of the car and went straight up to my place for a shower.

Dad’s words never left my mind the entire time I was at home. Even when I left to open the shop, they swirled in my head. Was it really a mistake to go out with Leslie? My gut told me no, while my head screamed something else.

I opened the shop in a trance. Even when my first customer came in, I couldn’t shake off the worry. Talking to Leslie would help. If only he wasn’t away for games. I told myself to focus on the job.

With the transfer done, I picked up my tattoo gun and set it on my client’s skin. The intricate design of the tattoo meant it would take a bit to complete. I pressed the button, and the outline began to form beneath the tip. Wiping the excess ink away, I watched the design take shape. About thirty minutes into the work, I stopped for a moment to reload the ink when I heard my phone buzz.

“Hey, man, if you want to grab that I’ll hit the bathroom,” Jeff said.

“Sure. Grab a drink or snack if you want to.”

I reached for my phone and answered it as soon as I saw it was Leslie on the other end. What timing he had.

“Hey. How’s the road trip?”

“It’s going okay. We had a close game last night and hope to do better tonight.”

I knew Jeff wouldn’t be long, but I didn’t want to miss my chance to talk to Leslie. “Are you around in a couple of hours? My client is in the bathroom, but I can call you when I’m done with his work.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking about you having someone in your chair. I’ll be here for a little while, then I have to head to the arena.”

Jeff was already on his way back down the hall toward my station. “Great. I’ll call you once I’m done.”

Knowing I’d talk to Leslie once I finished the tattoo was exactly the motivation I needed to keep my head in the game and focus on my work, instead of letting my mind wander to the sexy man waiting to speak to me.

It was about an hour later when I finished the outline and the beginning of the shading. That was all I was willing to do on any one person in one sitting. Besides being exhausting for the client and the adrenaline their body was likely producing, to get the perfect color scheme the skin needed time to heal.

Jeff and I set our next appointment time, then I watched him walk out my door with butterflies fluttering through my stomach. As soon as I saw him turn down the street, I practically raced to my station to grab my phone.

It barely rang once before I heard Leslie’s deep voice come through the phone. “All

done?”

“I am. When can I see you again?” I asked the question I’d wanted to know since I parted ways with him at the pub that night.

A sigh came through the phone. “I wish it could be sooner, but we’re on the road for almost two weeks.”

Two weeks? I knew he would be gone for long periods of time, but at the moment, two weeks felt like forever. For him, I could wait.

“Okay, then let’s plan to meet when you come back.”

“I think it’s a Tuesday. Do you have to be at the shop?”

Of course it would be a Tuesday. I was sure with enough notice I could arrange something with Emilio. “Usually, I open and close the shop, but I’ll find a way to make it work.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. After two weeks, I’ll want to see you. Until then, we can talk on the phone at night when either of us has free time.”

“I like the sound of that.” I heard some rustling and loud voices in the background.

“The guys are here. I hate to hang up, but I have to go.”

“Good luck tonight.”

“Thank you. We’ll talk soon.”

We disconnected the call and a sense of contentment washed over me. I might have to wait two weeks for Leslie to come home, but at least when he did, he wanted to see me again. For now, I'd use our time on the phone to get to know him better.

### LESLIE

We didn't win every game. The losses hit hard. Tonight was one of those nights. Yesterday, we rode so damn high. We had a great game. Every one of us performed our best. Tonight, we were off. I thought it was just me at first but as I watched the rest of the team, it was a major flaw.

Coach had torn into us and rightfully so. I kept my head down, absorbing his criticism, slowly sinking lower. I'd take his praise any day over that. But when I lifted my head and looked around the room, everyone was feeling like I was. The worst part was, there was no one to cheer us up when we all felt like shit.

Hockey had been my life for so long. Retiring floated in the background. The more I thought about it, the more my body protested from me constantly pushing myself. I wondered if it was nearing time for me to bow out of the game and find something else to do with my life.

I'd like to think the losses were the driving factor, but they weren't. I used to get pissed and bounce back easily, ready to win the next game. Now, I felt fucking old.

Over the summer, I found a calm I didn't expect. It had me ready and excited about the upcoming season. Playing again, getting our asses handed to us at times, the excitement faded.

My friends let it roll off them after Coach stopped yelling. Not that they didn't take

what he said to heart. They just knew they had to push harder next game. What did it say about me when I was pushing hard already? I didn't know how much more I had to give.

My focus was shifting. My life lay in front of me with no clear path, nothing to look forward to if I gave this up. I didn't have to work ever again, but I wanted to. I wasn't the type to sit around and do nothing. Did I know what I would do once hockey was done? Fuck no.

We headed back to our hotel, back to beds that weren't ours. Some of us didn't care. King and Hayes were home no matter where they went because they had each other. They missed Jamie, but they could video call him and it wasn't so lonely. Devon had Lincoln to call. Jansen had Stephen. Noah had his wife. Hell, even Coach had someone to talk to at the end of the day.

But me, my hotel room always held nothing but stark loneliness.

As I was stepping off the bus that drove us to the hotel, Devon looped his arm through mine and walked with me to the elevators. A lot of us were on the same floor.

"Got something you want to tell me?" I asked, trying to deflect from what I knew was coming. When Devon, our captain, wanted to speak to me, I knew I was in trouble.

He rolled his eyes. "We're going to talk."

"I don't like the sound of that. Are you breaking up with me? I need to prepare myself, so I don't fall apart in front of you. I have some pride I'd like to keep."

King turned and took my hand in his. "It's okay. We'll be there for you when you're done. Don't destroy him too much," he said to Devon.



“Please don’t break his heart,” Hayes pleaded, even putting his palms together like he was begging.

King sniffled. “Knox means the world to us. You can’t... You can’t hurt him.”

“Jesus, what’s wrong with all of you?” Devon asked as a smile teased his lips.

King threw himself at me, wrapping his arms around my neck and bringing a leg up on my hip. He looked me in the eyes. “If he doesn’t want you, we’ll have you. You’d give us what we need.”

King and I didn’t realize the elevator had stopped nor that the door opened. He stayed in my arms as we both looked toward the door to find a bellman with an empty cart waiting for us to exit so he could get on. Huh, we were at our floor.

The man didn’t say a thing, just patiently waited for King to extract himself from me and for us to file out.

Once he was inside with the doors closed, King busted out laughing. “He didn’t even flinch.”

“Can you imagine some of the shit he’s seen working here?” I asked. “That was probably nothing.”

“You know he’s caught someone getting blown in the elevator,” Hayes stated.

“No doubt.”

“Speaking of getting blown...” King waggled his eyebrows at Hayes.

Hayes took it in stride, like he did everything else with King. “Let’s go.” He slung his

arm around King's shoulders and dragged him toward their room.

Devon and I watched them go, me delaying the inevitable talk I had coming my way.

He turned and juttet his chin down the hall. A sigh left me as I shuffled to my door and opened it. We'd lost a game. I'd had worse talks with Devon.

Once inside, I went to the small fridge and grabbed two bottles of water, tossing one to Devon. He browsed the menu on the dresser then handed it to me so we could order room service. Some of the team were going out tonight. I'd noticed the guys who were in relationships didn't seem to go out as much anymore, even King. He went, but not all the time.

I took a seat on the bed and awaited my punishment. Not that Devon had ever punished me, but that was how it felt, especially when I knew I was guilty.

"Are you at least going to finish out the season?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"Leslie, it's me. I see you more than the others do." Devon was always there when we needed him.

"I haven't given it a lot of thought," I said honestly. "It's there, in the back of my mind. Every loss is hitting me harder than it used to. I feel old, D. And tired."

"I'd hate to see you leave, but I hate seeing you like this too. I'm not sure which would be worse."

I ran a hand through my hair, forgetting I pulled it into a bun. "My heart's torn. I love playing and spending time with all of you, but I'm just fucking exhausted. Every

game we don't win, I beat myself up after, play over in my head what I could have done differently. I used to be better about rebounding, but not so much anymore."

"Is it Corey?" Devon didn't ask in an accusatory way. He was curious and trying to get to the root of my issue and help me.

"Not him personally, but the idea of what we could turn into. If not him, then someone else. How long will someone be willing to tolerate dating me when I travel so much?"

"The right person won't care."

"What if I don't want to travel?"

"That's an entirely different question. You have a lot to think about. I won't try to pressure you one way or another. I'd hate to lose you on the team, but I won't lose you as a friend."

"Never."

There was a knock on the door, so I got up to let room service in. We helped spread out the food then gave them a tip. Devon and I sat down to eat. God, I was fucking starving.

"How's Corey with the media attention?" he asked.

Of course, photos from our date hit social media, followed by the local and then national outlets picking up on it. Corey took it in stride, didn't mind it. At least I didn't have to worry about him getting upset by the attention.

"I'm not sure anyone would like cameras in their face, but he's taking it well." He

saw the phones out, just like I did when we were on our date. I trusted if it was something he didn't want to deal with, he would have told me.

Deciding to get the topic off me, I asked Devon about Lincoln. It was an easy change of subject and gave me time to not have to think about what the hell I was doing or going to do in the future. I wouldn't let my decision to retire or not rest on anyone but me. Regardless of if Corey and I worked out, and I really wanted us to, I had to make the decision for me and me alone.

After we ate, Devon and I hugged before he left, which warmed me down to my soul. I found comfort in my team, just like I hoped they did in me when they needed it. I'd see him and the rest of the team tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. It was a good thing we liked each other, or it would be brutal to be with them so much.

With the plates out in the hallway and my body winding down, I dropped onto the bed and grabbed my phone. I debated on texting him but then dropped my phone onto the bed. How could I be with him when I didn't have myself figured out? Then again, I didn't want him to slip through my fingers.

Corey wasn't like anyone else I dated. He stood out in a good way. Of course, I'd worry I'd do something wrong and fuck things up before they started. I got too into my head, not just about hockey but about everything. Yes, Corey knew what it meant to date me, but that was before the reality of my traveling came in, and I was gone more than I was home.

He had his own business. It wasn't like he was sitting around waiting for me to call. That helped alleviate some of my turmoil. Corey had a life outside of me, just like I did away from him. Whoever I ended up with, I didn't want to be in their pocket all day. We had friends and families. There was so much I still didn't know about him.

Picking up my phone again, I decided to search him online. He had a tattoo shop in

Espen which, by the looks of it when I'd been there, did very well. His name came up right away, along with photos of tattoos he'd done and reviews. Everyone loved him. Well, except for this one asshole. He could fuck right off with his bullshit. There was always a critic.

The more I scrolled, the more I wondered what he saw in me. We led completely different lives. Maybe that was part of the draw. We were both immersed in our jobs, so outside of them we could get away and just be ourselves instead of our careers.

A yawn stretched my lips as sleep started to edge in. I put the phone on the nightstand after setting my alarm and grabbed the blankets to pull over me. The room was far too quiet though, so I put the TV on low with an old western movie I had zero interest in. It was enough to have my eyes slipping closed as my mind started to quiet.

Sleep would do me good and tomorrow was another day. I'd play better, be better, and start to decide about not only my career but where my life was headed.

Whatever came my way, I'd handle it. Hopefully, Corey would be there. After all, I wanted a lot more of those kisses and more of his hands on me, preferably when we both had a whole lot less clothes on.

So much for my mind going quiet. Now my dick was perking up. Fuck's sake. Guess I should take care of that before going to sleep.

12

COREY

The lock clicked into place, and I let out a sigh. Today had been an incredibly long day. One client after the other. None of them had overly complicated designs, but that left us with less breaks. Every time it felt like we'd caught up, another person walked in the door. It seemed like my date with Leslie and our picture all over social media sent more people to the shop than normal.

"Fuck, I never thought I'd stop hearing the bell today." Emilio stepped out of his station, drying his hands.

"I think it only did because we closed." I walked around the reception desk. "Don't get me wrong, I love the business, but damn, I'm tired."

"Lila and I are going to grab a drink once we're done cleaning up. You should join us." Karli came out from the back with a clipboard in her hand. "You should come too, Karli," Emilio said.

She glanced up when she heard her name. "Huh? Come where?"

"She's already coming," Lila yelled from her station. "I told her earlier."

"What about you, Corey? Wanna grab a couple of beers?"

I glanced at the clock. Leslie's game had started not long ago. I'd planned on going

home to watch the last period after grabbing a pizza on the way. I didn't have the energy to cook anything. Then again, a beer sounded exactly like what I needed. I'd spent so much time working my ass off since Leslie went out on the road, I hadn't taken any time to relax. Get up, go to the gym, come to the shop, work until close, rinse and repeat.

The cycle had kept me from missing the time I could have been spending with Leslie if he wasn't on the road. At night it was him in my dreams. There was so much I wanted to know about Leslie. We'd talked some nights on the phone. It just wasn't the same.

I looked at my team. A team who worked their asses off for the last few weeks with the rise in popularity of the shop recently.

"Yeah. Let's get cleaned up and grab a beer."

Emilio smiled and went back to his station to finish wiping everything down. It didn't take us long to finish the closing process and count the register.

The three of them were waiting outside while I locked the door. I'd secured the money in the safe for the night. The deposit could wait until Monday. A quick stop by the shop on my way home from the gym wouldn't take any time.

"Let's go." Everyone climbed in their own cars, and we drove to Smitty's Bar.

It was the best sports bar in town. Relaxed and easygoing with multiple TVs. If you were lucky during baseball season, you might run into one of the players on the Espen Emperors. It was one of their usual hangout spots after a game.

I parked on a side street and walked up to the door. When I pulled it open, I saw Lila and Karli already at the bar ordering a drink. I walked in their direction when I heard

the door open behind me. When I glanced over my shoulder, I saw Emilio. He smiled and followed me to the bar.

“Whatcha having, boss?” Lila asked, a smirk curling the side of her lips up.

“Knock that shit off, smart-ass. I’ll have a Yuengling, but first round is on me.”

“Works for me. You make the big bucks anyway.” She laughed.

She knew, as the others did, I paid myself the same percentage of work that I paid Emilio and Lila. Karli only made less because as an apprentice, she couldn’t bring in the money the rest of us could. Once she became a full tattoo artist, I’d pay her the same rate. The rest of the money went into improving the shop.

Our beers were delivered, and we took them to a high-top that had recently been vacated. The TVs above the bar had the Jetties game on. All of them tuned to the same channel. There was one TV on the other wall showing the basketball game. Since Espen didn’t have a basketball team, it made sense that the people would rather watch their own team on the ice, even if they did want to know the score of the basketball game.

My eyes were glued to the screen for a second before I reminded myself I came here to relax with my coworkers. I could follow the game without completely ignoring them. The three of them were talking about how busy the shop had been the last two weeks.

“I’m thinking about hiring another artist,” I said.

All conversation stopped and they looked at me. “Really?” Emilio asked. “Just based on the last two weeks?”



I shook my head. “No, it’s something I’ve been thinking about for a while. The business has been growing. The last two weeks just solidified my decision.”

“Do you have anyone specific in mind?” Lila asked.

“Not really. I thought I might post that we’re looking for an artist. I want someone who works on a variety of styles, like Emilio and I do. We have our specialties, but we can take on any design that comes into the shop.”

Karli began picking at the bottle of her beer. “What does that mean for me?”

Emilio bumped her shoulder. “It means you’ll have another artist to learn from.”

“But will there be enough work for me once I’m ready?”

I picked up my beer. “There will be. I’ve been calculating the number of clients we take and how many walk-ins we have to push off because we’re booked. Even with hiring another artist, who will probably bring their own clients, we’ll still need someone to take most of the walk-ins.”

Lila smiled at Karli. “And that’s how you build your client list. They get one tattoo, get hooked, and keep returning to you.”

Karli smiled. “I like the sound of that.”

“I think by next—” A loud cheer roared across the bar.

My eyes immediately darted to the TVs above. The Jetties were celebrating on the ice. I waited patiently for the replay. The puck came flying across the ice at top speed. For a moment, it looked like there was no way to stop it. Leslie dove sideways across the net, his hand outstretched, landing in a heap on the ice. He stood and

opened his gloved palm, revealing the puck.

“Fuck, yes.”

Emilio clinked his beer bottle with mine. “Nice stop by your guy.”

My cheeks heated. “Who said he’s my guy?”

Lila rolled her eyes. “Whatever, Corey. We’ve seen the pictures. We’ve also seen the way he looked at you in the shop.”

I thought about how that sounded. Leslie Knoxton as mine. I wouldn’t lie, I really liked it. “We’ve only been out once.”

“Why not go out again?” Karli asked.

I nodded toward the screen. “He had to leave on this road trip. We have plans for when he gets back.”

Emilio chuckled. “Like I said, your guy.”

Emilio continued to rib me for a few more minutes about my relationship with Leslie. I wouldn’t expect any less from him. They were good people who worked for me. They knew how to keep me from taking life too seriously by making me laugh when I needed it.

Lila winked at me. “It’s good to see you happy.”

We ordered food and stayed through the rest of the game, which the Jetties won by two goals, and through the press conference afterward. It was weird seeing Leslie sitting behind the table, surrounded by reporters shouting questions at him about his

save during the game.

He sat there calmly, drinking water, directing the conversation to the accomplishments of his teammates. It seemed like he didn't want the attention on himself, rather on what the rest of his team contributed to the win.

When the press conference ended, we paid our tab and left. "I'll see you guys on Tuesday." They waved and headed in the opposite direction to their cars.

I arrived home and went straight to the bedroom, determined to get comfortable under the blankets. My phone sat in my hand. I debated whether I should call him to congratulate him on the win.

I hoped I wasn't interrupting the team's celebrations when I dialed Leslie's number. If I was, I could always talk to him later.

It only rang once before Leslie's deep voice answered, "Hi."

"Hi. Great game tonight. That save was amazing." I was sure he knew the one I was talking about. It was the one all the reporters asked him about.

"Thanks. It felt good to make it."

"I'm sure that had to leave a few bruises."

"Yeah, but it could always be worse." Right then, I couldn't stop the image of Leslie lying on my bed with me kissing each one of his bruises better. "How was your night?"

That was the last thing I wanted to think about with that deep baritone in my ear. I nestled farther into the bed. Unconsciously, my hand slipped under the waist of my

boxer briefs. “Good...Um...busy.” Before I could talk myself out of it, my fingers wrapped tightly around my shaft.

“That’s good,” Leslie said in my ear. His voice was soothing and arousing at the same time.

My breathing picked up with each stroke I took. God, what the fuck was wrong with me that I was jerking off with a man on the phone who I’d only been on one date with? The little voice yelling at me couldn’t stop my hand, almost like it was moving of its own accord.

“How’s the rest of the trip going?” I asked. My brain unable to come up with anything else in the moment.

“Meh. I’d rather be home. Then I could see you.”

“Me too,” I grunted.

“Corey, are you all right?” Even as my brain was beginning to short circuit, I could hear the concern in his voice. I didn’t want him to worry.

“I’m good. Really good,” I moaned. “Your voice is just so fucking sexy. I can’t stop hearing it.”

“You think my voice is sexy?” Gruffness filled his tone.

“Very.” I continued to pull off one stroke after another. My balls were drawing tight to my body.

“Yours is too.” I didn’t have to imagine what Leslie was doing on the other end of the phone. His breathing was labored, and that sexy voice dropped a little bit more.

“Please tell me you’re touching yourself. I can’t be the only one to lose my mind.”

“You’re not,” Leslie panted. “Tell me what you look like. I want to imagine my hand on your cock.”

“Fuck,” I choked out. Could this really be happening? I glanced down where my hand was firmly wrapped around my dick. “Long and slightly curved.” Each breath became a little harder. “My head is an angry purple, begging for release.”

“Goddamn, Corey. I wish it was my hand pulling off each and every stroke.”

Even through the haze of my thoughts, I had to know what he looked like. “What about you? Tell me.”

“Thick,” he groaned. “Almost too thick to get my fingers around.”

“Jesus.” Leslie was right, imagining his dick in my hands, knowing I’d probably have to use two hands made my own cock jerk. Precum leaked all over, dripping onto my stomach.

“I want to touch you. I can’t wait until you come home.”

“I’ll be there before you know it. Keep stroking. I want to hear you come.”

Soon enough, the only thing coming through either side of the phone was our panted breaths. I imagined Leslie’s hand was the one wrapped around my dick, tugging the orgasm out of me. The muscles of my legs trembled until cum exploded from the tip of my cock, all over my chest.

“Leslie,” I groaned, continuing to run my hand up and down my shaft and riding out the orgasm.

A few seconds later, I heard a drawn out, “Fuck,” from the other end of the line.

The cum began to dry on my stomach, but I didn’t have any desire to move. Not an ounce of energy to clean up.

As our bodies settled, I heard Leslie’s voice from the other end of the line. “Corey?”

“Yeah,” I said, my voice drowsy.

“I can’t wait to see you again.”

“Our date can’t come soon enough. I miss you.” I let the words sit in the quiet air, knowing Leslie felt them too. “Why don’t you get some sleep. I know you have to be on the road again tomorrow.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

“I look forward to it. Night, Leslie.”

“Night, Corey.”

When I ended the call, I settled farther into my bed. Exhaustion from the day and the night’s activities taking its toll. I could change the sheets tomorrow. For now, I wanted to dream about all the ways Leslie could put his hands on me.

13

LESLIE

It felt good to be home. More than that, I was going on another date tonight with Corey.

That night on the road... The first time we got off together... It started a trend. We didn't talk every night, but when we did, one thing led to another, and we were both coming over the phone. We hadn't upped our game to video calls yet, which I was grateful for. The first time I saw Corey naked, I wanted it to be in person, not over a damn screen where I couldn't touch him like I wanted to.

Instead of meeting Corey at the restaurant, we'd decided I'd drive to his place, and then he'd take us to the restaurant. I didn't want to call it a bar because it was more than a place to get drunk. It did have a bar with plenty of options.

I pulled up to his building but there was no place to park, so I circled the block until I found something. Tonight, I left my Corvette at home and decided to drive my truck. It wasn't nearly as pretty but it was a dark-blue Chevy that got the job done. I parked, then locked it when I got out. It wasn't a bad neighborhood Corey was in. He was in a nicer part of Espen. No one should fuck with my truck here. If they did, well, at least it was the truck and not my car.

Taking the elevator, I found his door and knocked. It was a second later when the door swung open, and Corey was revealed on the other side.

His dark hair was styled in that perfectly messy way, making my fingers itch to run through it. Matching dark eyes held mine and we both stood there like we didn't know what the fuck we were doing.

“Get in here.” He chuckled and gripped the front of my shirt to pull me inside. Not many people handled me, but I wanted him to. He could do whatever he wanted to me, and I'd gladly let him.

I stumbled into his apartment so he could close the door, my hands resting on his hips. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he whispered.

This was the first time we were seeing each other in a while and, damn, to have my hands on him again was like a dream come true. “Can I kiss you?” It wasn't like we hadn't done it before, but I still had to be sure.

“You don't have to ask.” He closed the distance between us to press our lips together.

Gasping into the kiss, I opened for him to sweep his tongue in and taste me. My fingers tightened on his hips. Tonight was supposed to be more than this. We were going out, but my body begged me to stay right where I was.

When he leaned back, I couldn't resist and ran my fingers through his hair, down to his jaw, and then to his ear where he had a thick black earring. God, he was beautiful.

“Keep touching me and we won't go anywhere,” he said.

“Believe me, I'd love to touch you all night.”

“That can be arranged.”



“Is it wrong that I want to take things slower? Not glacial or anything, but this feels different between us, and I don’t want to fuck it up.”

“Leslie, you’re not going to. I’ll take this at whatever pace you want.”

“Over the phone was amazing, but having you in front of me again, you deserve more than a quick jerk and come. I want to show you I’m more than a hockey player, or someone who wants sex all the time.”

Corey cupped my cheek, his thumb rubbing over my short beard. I kept my hair pulled back tonight so it wouldn’t get in my face. “You’re much more than that. I see you, remember?”

I blew out a breath. “Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I always want you to talk to me. To be honest with me.”

Nodding, I felt the tension I didn’t realize I was holding bleed out of me. “Ready to go? I’m starving.”

He slid his hand down from my face to my neck then my arm so he could thread his fingers with mine. “There, now we can go.” Grabbing his keys, we went into the hallway so he could lock up. All the while, he kept his hand in mine. It felt more intimate than it should have.

Corey drove us to the restaurant. I’d only been here once before and remembered it being queer friendly. A lot of places were in the city, but there were others I stayed far away from. At least, this version of me did. The Leslie of last year reveled going into them just so I could stir shit up.

The parking lot was packed. It wasn’t until we were inside when I saw the sign for

drink specials and all you can eat wings. No wonder. That brought in everyone. The restaurant's good business meant it was hard to find a table.

Corey and I took a seat in the front to wait for a table to open. A couple of people came up to us, asking for photos with me or my autograph. I kept glancing at Corey, making sure he was okay with it. This was our night, not mine to greet fans.

Luckily, a high-top opened in the bar area that pulled me away from them and had Corey's hand slipping into mine again. That small touch and I was happy. Sure, signing autographs and meeting fans was great, but they didn't compare to spending time with Corey.

We took a seat and browsed the menu. A server stopped by to take our drink order. I'd been doing good and stayed sober all season so far. I didn't want to drink. There was no desire in me. The time in Pittsburgh and with my family helped, as did a hell of a lot of perspective. Drinking didn't get me anywhere but in trouble. That was the last thing I needed.

Conversation flowed easily between us. I was grateful for it. There was a small part of me that wondered if we could talk in person as easily as we did on the phone. I didn't turn into a bumbling idiot, so I was calling it a win.

"You don't mind people coming up to me?" I asked.

"Not at all. It's who you are, and the city loves you."

"It comes with the territory. Not everyone handles it well though. I've been on dates where all they wanted to talk about was my celebrity status. I get it, but that's not me. I'm not after fame and glory. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy it, but I don't need it."

Corey reached across the table to take my hand in his again. "It's fine. If I'm being

honest, I got an uptick in clients once our photos were out there. Before you think that's my angle, it's not."

I shook my head. "I know. If it was, we wouldn't have done things how we did. You'd want to be on my arm all the time, where people could see you. I've been with enough guys like that to spot them a mile away."

The sound of a stool scraping quickly across the floor drew our attention to the bar, where two people were going toe to toe, though it wasn't much of a match. The guy on the left had enough muscle on him to hurt someone and towered over the smaller guy on the right.

"You touched me," the big guy said.

The smaller guy's voice shook when he said, "I was walking past you as you pushed away from the bar. I didn't deliberately touch you."

"That's not how I saw it. You wanted to touch me." He got closer, causing the smaller guy to shrink back, only there was nowhere for him to go in the crowded bar. There was a stool behind him that was occupied, and no one seemed to be standing up for him.

The smaller guy shook his head. The light caught a bit of sparkle on his high cheekbones. "No."

"You're wearing makeup, got a tight shirt on, and your pants, don't even get me fucking started on them."

I scanned the bar and saw everyone had pretty much stopped what they were doing to witness this. Looking at Corey, I said, "I'm just going to..." I nodded toward the bar and stood.

“Hey,” I said as I approached. Not in anger, but with a calm, relaxed gait, not wanting to set the bigger guy off more. I was here for a date, not to fight.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t one of Espen’s own,” the big guy said when he looked my way. “Leslie Knoxtton, goalie for the gayest team in hockey.”

“I’m not sure if you’re trying to insult me, but if you are, you have to do better than that.” Once I was in his space, I had a couple inches on him in height and more weight, but he could definitely injure me if he wanted to.

“So having a girl’s name doesn’t have anything to do with it?”

Jesus, like I hadn’t heard that a million times. The thing was, no matter how often I did, anger licked my veins. It was a family name. One that was passed down and we each carried proudly. I really wanted to deck the guy for saying it, however, I pulled on the calm I felt and urged myself back from the verge of decking him. “Why don’t you take a seat so the rest of us can enjoy our evening?”

“You’re sticking up for him?” He jutted his chin toward the smaller guy. “Typical.”

“What’s typical is the bullshit coming from your mouth. You think by putting others down you make yourself bigger? It’s the opposite, asshole. All it does is show your true colors.” Okay, so I wasn’t as calm as I thought. At least I hadn’t hit him yet.

He pushed into my space, his chest bumping mine. “What the fuck did you call me?”

“Careful. Keep rubbing up against me and I’ll get ideas.” I waggled my eyebrows.

I saw his fist coming and didn’t flinch. Why? Because he hit me first. Now I could lay his ass out.

My head jerked to the side with the force of the punch, but other than that, I didn't move. My arm was up next, and I nailed him on the chin. The fact he thought he could hit me, and I wouldn't retaliate was a stupid move.

He swung at me again, this time aiming for my side. I caught his fist and twisted his arm back until he turned and faced the bar, where I pushed him against it, while holding his arm behind him.

"Try to hit me again, motherfucker, and your world will go dark," I growled low in his ear.

A hand touching my shoulder had me turning sharply, ready to hit someone else but it was only Corey with his hands up.

"Easy, it's just me."

I blew out a breath. "Sorry. I didn't know if there were more like this asshole."

"No worries. Why don't you release him? The cops are on their way."

That was when I saw all the phones out recording the fight. When I was certain I was going to get my ass handed to me by Kasper, Devon, and the whole organization. I knew better than to get into a fight.

This would look bad for the team, for me, and for Corey.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, emotion building in my throat.

I ruined everything tonight. I couldn't just go on a date and have a good time. I had to get into a fight instead of letting the bartender or someone else handle it. The guy was a piece of shit, but I didn't need to fight him like I had. At least I didn't have a drop

of alcohol. That was worth something.

We only stayed as long as it took to give our statements, which I hated every minute of. I just wanted to get out of there and away from the prying eyes around us.

### COREY

The look of anguish that took over every feature of Leslie's face hit me directly in my chest, like the physical force of the punch he leveled on the homophobic asshole at the bar. Phones were facing us from every direction.

Knowing our night was over, I dropped twenty bucks on the table and looped my arm through Leslie's. We hadn't yet ordered but I felt bad for the waiter and the tip he probably lost on our table. It would be a while before the chaos died down enough to get everyone seated again.

Not that I gave a damn what the other people in the room did. My only concern was getting Leslie out of there. He hadn't moved since he snapped out of the rage he'd been in when he goaded the guy into hitting him.

With my arm tightly through his, I turned him around and walked him out the front door. Some of the people on the street had obviously already seen video of the fight on social media. There were people outside of the restaurant with either their phone pointed in our direction, or they were whispering to their friends and pointing at us.

Never in my life had there been such a laser focus on me and what I was doing. It was disconcerting, to say the least, but I tried to push it out of my head and remind myself that getting to the car was the prize. Once we were in my SUV, we'd be out of the limelight, away from prying eyes.

Leslie still hadn't said a word, even as I heard footsteps on the pavement behind us. It amazed me what people were willing to do to get a little bit of fame on the internet, including chasing down a man who had obviously made a mistake he regretted. Could they not see the disappointment and self-loathing all over his face?

It didn't matter to them the athletes who represented their cities had feelings and emotions. Anything to get a picture. Anything to get attention on themselves.

I sped up my pace, tugging the keys from my pocket on the way to the car. As soon as we reached the passenger side door, I pressed the button to unlock it and opened the door. In a daze, Leslie climbed in with a little help from me.

I didn't waste any time shutting the door and darting around the front of the car to the driver's side. As soon as the door closed behind me, I breathed a sigh of relief. The cameras wouldn't bother to follow us when we left. With no cars blocking the path in front of me, I threw the car into drive and sped off, cutting off the car behind me.

Horns blared; I just didn't give a fuck. Getting Leslie home was my only priority at the moment. I watched him from the corner of my eye. He hadn't moved or said a single word. He sat there, staring out the window. Even if I couldn't see his eyes in the dark vehicle, I could see the pain etched in every feature of his body.

I watched as he flinched when a sound came from his phone. He didn't bother to answer it or check to see who had messaged him. At least, I guessed it was a message. He might have had his social media accounts set to notify him when he was tagged in a post or comment. Whatever it was, it couldn't be anything good, based on his expression alone.

We made it to my place quickly. For the briefest of moments, I thought about letting him get into his car and drive home. As quickly as the thought came, I pushed it away. Leslie was entirely too upset, and I wouldn't let him go home like that. I



couldn't let him suffer alone.

Instead, I decided to take him to my place. Once we pulled into the lot and I figured people would finally leave him alone for the night, I turned to look at him.

“Leslie, what can I do to help?”

He didn't even answer. Never acknowledged I said anything. He seemed to be frozen.

Wanting to be a source of comfort when he was ready, I helped him from the car and took him inside, pushing the button for my floor. The elevator was quiet when the doors opened, and we stepped inside. The only sound in the car was my racing heart. I was sure if Leslie hadn't been trapped in his own misery, he would hear it echoing off the walls.

The elevator doors dinged, and I led him out onto the floor and down the hall to my apartment. We reached the door, and I asked anyone who was listening to send the Leslie from an hour ago back to me. The one who didn't have any worries. The one whose warm hands gripped my hips tightly between his hands.

I led him inside and shut the door behind me.

\* \* \*

Leslie hadn't moved an inch since I'd brought him into my apartment and sat him down a little bit ago. His entire body rigid, his spine so straight I was afraid he would snap in half if I moved him in any way.

His eyes were focused on the blank screen in front of him. I'd barely turned on a light in the living room before checking on him. The defeat in those light-brown orbs made my heart ache. I wanted to find a way to help him. A way to bring him back from

what looked like the brink.

When he continued to sit still, I got up and went to the kitchen, hoping maybe a glass of water would help. Honestly, anything to break the trance. All the nights on the phone did not prepare me for this. I didn't know what to do, what to say. I wanted to help him in a way no one else could, except I didn't know how to break through his walls.

I filled two glasses of water and brought them to the living room, where Leslie still sat, his gaze focused on absolutely nothing. He swallowed hard, his eyes becoming glassy. I sat down next to him, but not too close as to startle him.

I held out the glass. "Do you need water?"

Unlike the other questions I asked him in the car when he didn't respond at all, this time, he turned and looked right at me. For a moment it seemed like he was looking right through me. Not really seeing me. Then his gaze came into focus and a long mournful sigh passed over his lips.

"What is it? Is there anything I can do to help?"

He was still quiet, but this time he reached out and wrapped his fingers around mine. We sat there; hands held tight. I realized that patience was what he needed. He would open up and tell me when he was ready to talk.

I continued to hold his hand, offering the comfort he needed, and stared across the room, waiting.

"I have a terrible track record and didn't do my best last year."

I tightened my grip on his hand and turned him to face me. "What do you mean, you

didn't do your best?"

I had a feeling he was referring to the fights. To the times, like tonight, where people pushed and pushed him until his fuse blew. There was only so much he could take. Hell, he was only human.

"Fighting, drinking, fighting on the ice too. I should have had better control." He ran his other hand through his hair, gripping it tightly at the end before dropping his hand back into his lap.

"I've seen some of the videos and it was like tonight where people push, trying to get a rise out of you, but you've always been defending someone else. Someone who couldn't defend themselves."

He dropped back against the couch and closed his eyes. "More than half of those fights happened because I was drinking. Because I couldn't control my temper and keep it together long enough to walk away. One wrong word and I was off."

I leaned back so I could look him in the eye. "But I haven't seen you drink since we met. Even that night at O'Malley's, you didn't order a drink."

He opened his eyes and looked at me. "I had to stop drinking to stop fighting. I had to break the habit. It was a clean break, and one that's been working well until tonight."

"I feel like I'm prying into your personal life right now."

He lightly caressed my cheek. "You're not. I want to tell you, so you understand. I should have explained sooner."

"Explained what? Talk to me, Leslie."

He glanced up, like he was trying to find the courage to admit whatever he wanted me to know. “The drinking.”

“Some people want to drink, others don’t. It doesn’t matter to me.”

“It does to me. You should know who you’re dating. Drinking helped numb some of my pain. It kept me out of my head and not focused on what was going on inside me. My friends were finding love, while all I found were men who wanted to fuck me. No one saw me as more than that. No one bothered to look deeper to see the person I was inside. Instead, I was on the outside looking in when I spent time with my friends.”

“They’re your friends. I’m sure they didn’t want you to feel left out.”

He shook his head. “No, they never would. D is amazing and always there for me. So are King and Hayes. I talked to Jansen quite a bit over the summer. I have good relationships with them, but they’re moving on with their lives while I’m standing still. I know hockey so I still played well, if I took out the hair-trigger temper that is. But everything else was spinning out of control. It took the summer in Pittsburgh and spending time with family for me to get my shit together. For me to realize how fucked up I was.”

He sucked in a breath, and I reached for the glass of water, offering him some before he continued. He took the water from my hand and drank some of it. He handed the cup back to me.

“Better?”

“No, but thank you. Tonight... Well, I fucked up. I’m going to have my ass handed to me in the morning.”

“They can’t be pissed at you for defending someone against a homophobic asshole.”

“No, not for that. For getting in the guy’s face, for hitting him back. That’s on me, and what they’ll focus on.”

“Your emotions were high. You were upset.”

“I wasn’t numb. I felt it all. And those words the guy was spewing, that hatred, I will never understand why people behave that way. Why they care how someone else dresses or who they love. What the fuck kind of world are we living in? But all that aside, what am I doing with my life? This isn’t a singular problem. The drinking, yeah, I’m done. But I’m still fighting. I still feel adrift.”

“Have you considered it’s because you’re still not talking to someone?”

“I don’t want to see a therapist. Talking to you was a big step for me.”

I rubbed my thumb along the top of his hand to soften the blow a bit. “We’ve never talked like this before. We did the getting to know you talking, not the ripping the bandage off and letting it all out.”

He chuckled but there wasn’t any humor to it. “You sure you still want to date me?”

“You don’t have to worry about me. Nothing you could say could scare me away. I’m here because I want to see where this goes. We all have scars. It’s what we do with them that matters.”

Leslie snuggled into my side. Not for the first time, I realized just how much I wanted him to be mine.

All mine.

15

LESLIE

Usually, I looked forward to showing up at the arena. To putting on my uniform and lacing up my skates. To doing all the rituals I found an immense comfort in. Today, I was ready to turn around and hightail it right back out the door.

Kasper texted me early this morning and told me to meet him here an hour before practice. He was always here, a workaholic like the rest of us. But he was also one of us. Not just the team owner. Kasper got in the thick of it. He cheered for our wins and felt our losses. More than that, he was someone we could lean on personally.

Not that I did. I was afraid of him currently. Kasper had a commanding presence. And he could get rid of me. Players were traded. But this... The Jetties were family. I didn't want to leave here. At least, not like that. Retirement was one thing. Being traded to another team where I'd have to move, get to know them, and leave my friends behind, that didn't sound appealing in the least.

Those were fears others had, not just me. When you settled in a place, bought a house, made the city your own, having to uproot what you'd built wasn't exciting. Sure, being traded was for the best sometimes. I had no desire to leave Espen though. Not with my family in the next state over and all the friends I'd made. Plus, I couldn't keep Corey out of the equation. How many men would do what he had? Would make sure I was okay and not judge or chastise me for what happened? Corey cared about me, and damn, I was starting to care about him too. More than I could think about since I was walking into the lion's den.

I got to Kasper's office and was told to go right in. His office was a large, open space. Bookshelves lined one wall. The other had a door which led to a bathroom. This was Kasper's domain and he had everything he needed in here. The whole arena was his, but this was where he spent most of his time.

He didn't stand when I entered the room, just motioned for me to have a seat in one of the chairs in front of his desk. Tall windows were at his back, but the sight outside and the dark clouds brewing for a storm had nothing on the look in Kasper's eyes.

His blond hair was neatly styled, always trimmed, always impeccable. It was rare any of us saw him ruffled without everything in place. His suit jacket was off, and he had his soft blue button-down done all the way up with a navy tie around his neck.

Other teams might have had the coaches talk to me and they still would. Devon as well. But Kasper no doubt wanted to know what happened.

Folding his hands on the desk, his eyes met mine, waiting for me to sit. "You know what this is about, right?" he asked.

I swallowed and nodded; no words able to come out.

"So, I don't need to show you the video footage all over the damn internet of you getting into a fight in a fucking bar?" He wasn't yelling, but his voice was steadily raising. "Dammit, I thought we were past this?"

"We are," I said, finally getting my mouth to work. "I wasn't drinking."

"Don't give me your lies."

"I'm not lying. I have no reason to. You'd be able to look at me and see if I was hungover. More than that, I didn't sway or slur my words on the video." I hadn't seen

the footage, couldn't bring myself to watch it. But I was sober. "I'm sure the video didn't catch what started it all. How the guy was being a bully to someone smaller than him. I couldn't sit there and let it happen. You wouldn't have if you were there."

"Leslie, I wasn't there so I couldn't have known. Just what I saw, what the whole fucking world saw. Too many have watched it by now."

"Do you believe me though?"

He sighed and leaned back. "Yes, but that doesn't change the fact that you fought again. There are other ways to solve things outside of using your damn fists. On the ice, I can excuse. When you leave here, you're a representation of the team. You're out there as one of us and when you punch another, it sends ripples through the team."

"There were witnesses. The cops got our statements and others. I didn't start it."

"No, but you finished it."

I hung my head. Kasper wasn't being unreasonable. If this was my first fight, that would have been different. I had a track record of doing this shit. Of course, Kasper was pissed. If I were in his shoes, I would be too.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Leslie," he said softly, drawing my gaze up. "You understand I'm not mad at you for defending someone, right?"

"Yes. I shouldn't have escalated the problem."

"No, you should have de-escalated it. Was it more than that? Was there something



else going on I didn't get on the video? You can talk to me."

I shook my head. "No, honest. It was his words and how he was treating the other person that set me off. Until then, I was having a good night."

"You're dating someone. I've seen the photos."

"Yeah, he's a great guy. Smart, fun, and so damn hot. He has his own business. I thought I fucked things up with him last night, but we talked... Or I talked and poured my soul out to him while he listened."

"And?"

"He was perfect. He didn't chastise me or get pissed because of what I did."

"You were defending someone. If you hadn't thrown a punch, you wouldn't be in here with me. I need you to learn to handle things without resorting to violence. And don't give me the he hit you first. That only goes so far. You could have done things differently."

"I know."

He nodded. "Now, tell me more about the guy you're dating."

Kasper and I talked about Corey then moved on to my family. The mood lightened. I didn't feel the weight of my actions on me as much after that.

"How's Marcus?"

"Good. Baseball season is over, which means I get my husband home with me instead of traveling or always working."

“And yet you’re here working, just as hard but not in the same way.”

“Yes, but when I leave, I get to go home to him. There’s a lot to be said for finding the person you’re meant to be with. Everyone says to hold on with both hands, but it’s not always that easy. I almost lost Marcus because of my mistakes. Some things need to be learned and some trials must be gone through so you can get to the good parts of life. I think that’s what this is for you, Leslie. You’re finally getting to the good stuff. Don’t get me wrong. You’re an amazing goalie. Fuck, you’re one of the best, but I think you’re learning that’s not all life is. Outside of here, you’re a guy who has so much to offer the world. You just have to believe in yourself enough to let them see it.”

“Confident on the ice but not in love?” I chuckled.

“You’ll get there. Whether it’s Corey or someone else, you’ll find your way.”

Talking with Kasper could be intimidating as fuck. It could also be like coming home and having a conversation with a member of my family. There was an ease with him. It could have been that he was so hands on with us and knew us as people, not just players. Whatever it was, having Kasper to talk to was something I cherished. Except when he was yelling at me.

I was a little late to practice but meeting with the owner was a valid excuse. Down on the ice, ready to go, I focused on the task at hand and didn’t worry about the video any longer, or what the coaches would say to me. I did what I got paid a hell of a lot of money for.

Coach pulled me aside before I could get to the showers. There wasn’t any yelling, but he reinforced what Kasper had said. How I needed to learn to handle things better. It wasn’t like I was fighting for my life or someone else’s. The guy was a bully, but he didn’t lay a hand on anyone until I got involved and provoked him.

Devon waited for me after I got out of the shower. My muscles were tired, although I had a renewed energy. I had faith in myself. The next time shit got out of hand; I could deal with it without getting into a physical altercation.

“You good?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I haven’t been the best role model for the new guys on the team. Plus, there’s the whole whatever I do reflects on everyone else. I shouldn’t have done it.”

“If you think we all haven’t done shit we regret, you’re wrong. The important thing is to recognize it and not do it again. You weren’t drunk. That’s a big change from last season. Now, keep your fists out of it unless you absolutely have to fight.”

“I will. I’m—”

“Don’t apologize again. You already did once and that’s enough. You talked to Kasper, and Coach, we’re all good.”

“Thanks, D.”

I had a lot of wise people around me. Not just my teammates and the others who worked for the Jetties, but my family too. My dad had called me this morning to ask if I was all right. He didn’t give me hell or tell me I shouldn’t have done it. He wanted to check in on me. Dad knew I’d beat myself up over what happened. That was what I’d done time and time again once I sobered up. The regret I felt every time nearly pulled me under.

People could forgive a lot, but when mistakes were repeated, they wouldn’t be so ready to let it go. I was lucky enough to realize when I had to fix shit before it was too late. Who knew it would take into my thirties when I would finally become

mature enough?

Life could be so complicated. I didn't need to make it more so. I had to stop fighting, stop doing what I shouldn't, and focus on living. There was an amazing man in this city who was happy to be with me. Who didn't push me away or tell me he couldn't handle my drama. If only I was around enough to show him what it truly meant to be with me. How I was an all-in kind of guy once I was given the chance.

Corey wasn't a hookup or a friend with benefits. The way he cared for me... I wanted more of that. More of him. Fortunately for me, he wasn't going anywhere, so while I couldn't be who I wanted, where I could take him out nightly, wake up with him in the morning, I could show him I was in this with him. That when I wasn't traveling and not working, I wanted to be with him.

My friends were busy with their partners. My family was on the other side of Pennsylvania. Me spending my free time with Corey wouldn't impact anything but my relationship with him. Now to hope that was what he wanted too.

16

COREY

Ding.

Another one? The thought passed through my mind like a bolt of lightning. It wasn't that I didn't love the extra influx of customers, but with the artists I had, we couldn't handle every tattoo request. Even Lila, who normally focused on piercings only, had done a few simple walk-ins. Her designs were always beautiful. She just preferred to focus on piercings.

Emilio stopped in my station after bringing his last customer up front. Sitting in my chair, I had my head back against the wall, taking a moment to refresh before my next client came in.

"We need to hire someone." The weariness in his voice was all I needed to hear.

"I know." I opened my eyes and lifted my head. "We can't keep going on like this."

The last two days had been out of control. From the moment I walked into the shop yesterday morning, after Leslie's fight at the bar hit the news, I could barely keep my head above water.

Emilio sat down on my tattoo chair and leaned back, putting his feet up. "Don't get me wrong, I love the money."

“It’s too exhausting,” I finished for him. “Starting Tuesday, I’m going to start pushing Karli on simple designs. If we can get her and Lila to take some of the simple walk-ins, we can focus on the longer jobs until we find someone.”

“I’m down for that.” He crossed his arms over his chest and closed his eyes. “The cleaning and prepping before each new client makes those small designs a pain in the ass.”

Lifting a brow at him, I glanced at where he sat in the chair. “Like you leaving me to clean my chair again?”

He laughed and pushed himself up, then stood. “Exactly like that. I’m going to go and clean my station.”

I threw one of my markers at him as he turned the corner laughing. Quickly, I wiped down the chair and went up front to get my next appointment.

One after another, I inked different tattoos into people’s skin until the clock finally hit nine. I locked the door and practically fell against it. Unlike in the past, the energy that everyone normally had for going out and having fun on Saturday night was drained.

Karli sat behind the counter, clicking through the computer, but her eyes were glassy and unfocused.

“Let’s get this cleaned up quick and get out of here.”

Each step took effort. We’d finished cleaning in record time and everyone went directly to their cars, headed for home. I made it to the elevator and leaned against the back wall, gripping the handrails to keep me from sliding down to the floor. All I wanted was a glass of water, a snack, and my bed. A real meal could wait for the

morning. I was too tired to even bother ordering something.

The ding sounded above me, and the doors opened onto my floor. I stepped out of the elevator and looked down the long length of hall to my door.

My feet came to a halt when I realized I wasn't the only one in the hallway. Suddenly, the exhaustion I felt a few minutes before melted away. I stood up straight and picked up my pace.

I hadn't seen Leslie since the night before, when he promised he was okay to drive home. We'd shared a brief kiss then he walked out the door. I'd hoped to learn how things went when he got to the arena today, except I hadn't heard from him, and there had been no time for me to talk.

I didn't waste a second and walked directly up to him, wrapping my arm around his waist. "I was exhausted until I saw you waiting here for me."

His muscular arms embraced tightly around my back. "I hope you don't mind me coming over."

My mind instantly went to our nights on the phone. I pushed those thoughts aside. Leslie had shown up at my door for a reason, and I wanted to know what it was. "Not at all. Come inside and we can talk."

I reached around him and unlocked the door, letting him inside. I dropped my stuff by the door and led him into the living room. Afraid to ask about what happened today, I busied myself. "Did you want something to drink? Water? Iced tea?"

He grabbed ahold of my hand. "I'm good. Sit with me."

I let him lead me over to the seat next to him. His shoulders were relaxed, which gave

me the courage to ask, “How did everything go today?”

He sighed. “Kasper and Coach were disappointed in me, which is what it is. It was my fault. I deserve their anger. Kasper gave me the chance to explain what happened. He didn’t have to. He’s a good guy.”

“So, everything’s okay?”

“It will be. I could have done better, but I also could have been a whole lot worse. I have to remember I’m a reflection of the team. Finding ways to de-escalate rather than fuel the fire is what I should be doing.”

I placed my hand on his thigh to offer comfort, not thinking about the effect it would have on the rest of my body. I swallowed hard. “Maybe you need to find new ways to burn off some of that energy.”

I hadn’t meant to turn our conversation from his struggle to desire. It didn’t stop my dick from perking up at the thought of getting more of my hands on him. I glanced up into those light-brown orbs to see his reaction. What I found there were eyes that were smoldering. His pupils dilated and his breathing picking up pace. Seemed like my hand on his thigh had the same impact on him as it did on me.

Maybe that was the answer. The way for him to relax and stay that way, even when people pushed his buttons. When we talked on the phone, or should I say jerked off together on the phone, he’d become so calm afterward, even when they lost and he thought he hadn’t put his best out on the ice. Maybe what he needed was a release. And not one brought on by his own hand.

With that thought, I pushed a little further. Not too fast to upset him, just enough to see if we were on the same page. I squeezed his thigh and heard him suck in a bit of air.



“Maybe I do.” He closed his eyes as I slid my hand farther up his thigh. He covered my hand with his and I instantly stopped moving. “Touch me.”

I leaned forward and connected my mouth to his. His warm lips invited me in, begging me to taste more of him. I slipped my tongue into his mouth, tasting and teasing his. I tilted my head, deepening the kiss. Lips moving and cocks growing hard, each of us fighting for dominance in the kiss.

This was the fighting Leslie needed to do. Fighting with me for control. I’d give it over gladly, but I could push him first. Make him realize this was a better way to exert his energy.

Wanting more of him, I broke the connection of our lips and stood. I threw my leg over his and settled onto his lap. For the first time since I met Leslie, I felt his hard cock pressed against mine. Even through the fabric of our pants, I could tell he was a large man.

It had been a long time since I had my mouth on a man, but it had to be like riding a bicycle. Once I got on, instinct would take over.

I cradled his face in my hands. “I’m going to keep touching you until I put my warm mouth around your cock, and you come down my throat. Is that enough for you?”

“Please,” he moaned.

I captured his lips once again, thrusting my hips against his. The hard outline of his cock against mine did insane things to my body. I knew the moment I took his dick from his pants I’d lose all control. My tongue darted into his mouth as I continued to grind against him.

Leslie’s hips moved with me until the rhythmic grind became too much. I could feel

the tingling at the base of my spine. There was no way I wasn't getting my mouth around him before I came. I tore my lips from his.

A groan of protest left him, and he reached up, trying to grab my face to bring me back to his lips. It would have worked if I hadn't already been sliding off his lap. I lowered my knees to the floor. I reached for his pants, keeping my gaze on his and watching the wild look in his eyes while I popped the button and slid the zipper down slowly.

I pushed apart the fabric of his pants and could see the outline of a wet spot on his boxer briefs. Fuck. I dipped my fingers beneath the waistband and tugged his cock free. Longer than I originally thought, I practically licked my lips at the sight of the red tip leaking all over the place.

My mouth watered. The salty, bitter flavor on my tongue was one of my favorite things about sex with a man. I leaned forward and glanced up into his gaze while I licked a wet path up the length of his shaft.

"Corey," Leslie groaned.

I did it again, loving the fire that raged in his eyes. I ran my tongue up and dipped it into the slit. The musky flavor of Leslie burst across my taste buds.

I had to have more.

Knowing there was no way I could take all his length, being so out of practice, I wrapped my hand around the base of his shaft, then parted my lips and took him deep into my mouth, close to hitting the back of my throat. Sliding down, I tightened my lips and sucked hard as I lifted my head.

"Again."

I popped my mouth off him and leaned up, pressing a brief kiss to his lips. “Gladly. I told you; I’m going to keep doing that until you come down my throat.”

“Yes.”

I lowered my head again. This time, Leslie sank his fingers into my hair, tugging on the ends. I hollowed my cheeks and began moving my mouth up and down his shaft in earnest. Each time I reached the top, I swirled my tongue around the tip before sucking hard on it, then dropping my mouth back down again.

Leslie’s hips started to thrust up. Deeper and deeper I took him with each pass of my lips. My own balls were tight against my body. His warm cock sat heavy on my tongue.

“I’m going to come.”

I tightened my lips around him, telling him without words I couldn’t wait. I kept moving, taking him into the back of my throat. At the same time, I reached down and popped the button of my jeans and tugged out my own cock. Each stroke of my hand matched the movement of my lips.

The grunts and groans above me only made the need to come worse. He shouted out into the room. The moment the first bit of cum slid down my throat, I couldn’t hold on any longer. My balls tightened and I came all over my hand.

His hips thrust forward with each spurt, and I swallowed every bit of it down. I kept sucking from him until he used the grip on my hair to tug me off.

“I can’t take anymore,” he panted.

Somehow, I managed to leverage myself up off the floor and onto the couch next to

Leslie. He was lying back with his eyes closed, trying to catch his breath.

I lay there next to him, letting my own body settle. I reached up and caressed his cheek. “I think that could be a great way to get you to relax from now on.”

“You might be on to something.”

“Well, feel free to come and see me anytime.”

Leslie smiled and kissed my lips. “I think I will.”

I snuggled in closer to him, letting him recount his conversations with Kasper and Devon. I listened while he aired his fears and desires. Even with the talks we had while we were apart, these two nights of conversations made me feel closer than ever to Leslie. It was a path I wanted to continue to explore.

### LESLIE

Goalies could be weird. There were rituals, superstitions, and other things we did. Some were more over-the-top than others. Some were more subdued and hardly noticed. I was somewhere in between.

Before every game, I stood in front of my locker, put my head down, and thought about my family, my team, and the fans. I pictured myself going through the game, calming my nerves, getting into the right frame of mind. Almost like meditation but not fully because the locker room was loud, so there was no way I could fully get into the zone.

I wasn't only playing for me and the Jetties. I was playing for everyone. There were people who hated sports or thought it was just a game. For a lot of fans, it was much more than that. They followed their teams through their highs and lows. They leaned forward in their seats, watched with bated breath, every move, every play, in hopes the team they loved would come out on top.

Fans had superstitions too. If their team was winning, maybe they didn't leave the couch or they didn't put down the bottle of beer they were holding. They wore a certain shirt or jersey.

Other players had them as well. How they wrapped their sticks or what they wore. Maybe they didn't shave. All over were players and fans doing things in the hopes of helping their team win.

The guys left me alone so I could have my silence. It didn't end there though. I had a necklace I took off and hung in my locker. I held it in my hand, projected into the universe I wanted us to stay safe and healthy. Yes, I wanted to win and hated when we lost. Getting hurt, possibly not being able to play again, that was something I never wanted for any of us.

The necklace wasn't anything elaborate or crazy. It was a simple silver chain that once belonged to my grandmother on my mom's side. She'd given it to me when I was younger. Now I wore it when I wasn't playing but took it off when I was. If it broke, I'd die a little inside. The locker kept it safe, like it was there waiting for me, no matter what happened when I played. I knew when the game was over, I could put it back on and feel a little bit of my family with me.

When it was time to lace my skates, that had an order. There was only one way to do it and it had to be perfect. If the laces were done wrong because someone interrupted me and I lost concentration, I had to start over.

Getting out onto the ice, I did a single lap around the net then caressed my hand over the crossbar, silently hoping it treated me well and kept the pucks from going over the goal line.

It didn't matter where we were or who we played against. My rituals stayed the same. Sure, the guys liked to rib on me about what I did, but it was all in fun. We were in this together.

Steel gray and white were the main colors in the stands. Tonight, we were in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania where it was a little colder than home, but the city greeted us like they had other times we'd visited. There were some Jetties fans cheering us on, which I always appreciated. Die-hard fans who came to our games when we played here.

As I took in the arena, let my eyes go over the crowd, the lines on the ice, the players, I silently calmed my mind and my breathing. No matter how the game ended, we were here for each other. But I really wanted to fucking win.

“Ready, Knox?” King asked, skating over to me.

“Always.”

“They won’t go easy on us.”

“They never do, nor would I expect them to.”

Jansen stopped in front of us, a smile on his lips. These two were perpetually happy. They had down moments, but they bounced back fast. They also had the world at their fingertips like the others on the team did.

“Is Stephen watching tonight?” I asked. No, his boyfriend wouldn’t be here, but like King’s and Hayes’s, I was sure they were watching at home. I wondered if Corey would be able to catch the game.

“Yeah, his friend, Shannon, is over tonight. They’ll be cheering us on.”

“Good, we’ll take all of the good vibes we can get.”

He nodded and greeted Noah when he skated toward us.

I tuned them out, focused on my breathing and calming my mind and body again. I couldn’t let more outside influence in. This was my area to defend, and I was going to do so with everything in me.

The first period went by without a goal on either side. A fight broke out, there were

penalties, but the game went on. During the second period, Devon scored a goal and Hayes got the assist after a hell of a fight for possession.

Then the other team got through our guys and headed right for me. I wasn't fast enough. The puck sailed by, tying the score. I wanted to beat myself up over it, but I had the rest of the night to do that. There was more of the game to go, and I had to be my best.

Time was ticking down. I was tired, although not ready to give up. I'd push myself as hard as I had to so we would come out of here with the win. Just a little longer. Just a little more.

I was steady on my skates, watching the puck as it slid across the ice. Every movement, every time it connected with a stick, I watched it, waiting for the moment when it would sail toward me.

It was coming for me fast now. They followed through, aiming and slapping it. My reflexes kicked in and I was able to slide my leg out to block it.

The clock ran as we were in possession again. Devon was so damn strong, so quick. He aimed but didn't make it. Hayes got a shot and it went in.

We just had to hang on a little longer to our one goal lead. I had to keep blocking, keep doing my job. I couldn't let anything get through.

My heart pounded like the weight of the world was on me, even though I knew it wasn't true. This was on all of us. I stood between the opposing team and the net. I took it personally because this was my domain.

They were back in my direction, racing toward me. I tracked their movements, followed the best I could.



They shot.

I dove.

But I couldn't stop it in time.

Fortunately, the shot was off and flew past the net, not going over the goal line. Thank fuck. I wanted to celebrate the small win, but there wasn't time for that.

Men slammed into the boards, fighting for possession while I got on my feet, ready to defend the crease again.

The crowd was on their feet, their roars becoming louder, cheering with everything in them. I loved how passionate they were. However, I couldn't focus on them, not right now. We were so damn close to ending this game.

Time ran down. It crawled, like I felt every second go by at a glacial pace.

Then it was finally over.

And we'd fucking won.

A smile lifted my lips, quickly followed by overwhelming relief. Jansen slammed into me, and we started cheering with the other guys. I reveled in this feeling. It felt good to be here. To not lose. To not wonder what I could have done differently. There was always something to be improved upon. That was a problem for later.

The locker room was filled with great energy when we filed in. I let it soak into me as I got my gear off and took a seat and a drink.

Hayes sat next to me; his smile infectious. "You did good tonight."

“Thanks, man. You did amazing.”

He hummed as his eyes found King where he laughed while talking to Noah. “I love winning, don’t get me wrong. But seeing him this happy, I’d play my heart out every game to keep that smile on his face.”

“And here I thought you liked seeing me smile too. I’ve been told I have a stunning face.”

King walked over just as I was saying it. His palm met my face in a gentle shove as he pushed my head away from Hayes. “Stop hitting on my man, Knox.”

Gripping his wrist, I pulled his hand away then tugged him down, so he fell onto my lap. His arm went around my shoulders instinctively to hold on.

Laughter bubbled up out of him. “Awww, Knoxy, do you want some of my attention too? You only have to ask. There’s plenty of me to go around.” He dropped his head to my shoulder and lifted his legs, so they rested on Hayes’s thighs. “You’ll share me with Knox, won’t you, baby?”

“Not on your life.” Hayes grabbed King’s free hand, pulling him from my lap until he was on Hayes’s. “That’s better.”

King batted his eyelashes. “I love how big and strong you are. Will you show me more later... when we’re alone?” he whispered the last part loudly enough for me to hear him.

I couldn’t help but be drawn to them. Not in a sexual way, but in a way where I wanted to be in their orbit. I was enjoying my time with Corey and could feel myself falling for him. Could we have what King and Hayes did? What they found with Jamie? No, I didn’t want a third, but I wanted that kind of love. The big kind where I

knew the other so well, yet it never got old. I wanted to laugh and joke and have fun. I also wanted to crawl into bed at night and wrap my arms around Corey or have him do the same to me. What I wouldn't give to have him here tonight so I could celebrate with him.

The urge to call him was strong but I resisted, instead staying present with my team and not burying my face in my phone. Corey had proven he'd be there for me. I'd do the same for him whenever he needed me to.

The team and I went through the motions, like we did after every game. All the while, I kept wondering how it would feel to give this up. I'd have to eventually. But the more I thought about it, the more I let the word retire float through my mind, the more I leaned that way.

Life outside of this could be amazing but it was also beyond words to play for the Jetties. Playing professionally, earning a big salary, it wasn't easily achieved. I proved to myself and everyone out there I had what it took. Since then, I'd played with my heart every game.

I soaked in the laughter, the camaraderie, and the happiness everyone felt, etching this moment into my mind, alongside many others. One day, I wouldn't do this anymore and when that day finally came, I wanted to know I didn't take the years spent playing for granted. That I loved and lived every minute of this insane ride.

I cherished the friends I'd made too. Even after I was out of the game, I would still have them. It was something I knew without a doubt. These weren't casual friends. They were friends I'd have for life.

18

COREY

“Thank you for staying,” I said to Emilio as I finished up the last bit of cleaning on my station. “I owe you one.”

He clasped his hand on the back of my shoulder and squeezed. “No, you don’t. You deserve to have a night to yourself. When was the last time you took off for a date?”

“It’s not exactly a date.” I tossed the leftover ink cups into the trash and wiped down the table. “I’m going to watch the game; not like I’ll actually get to spend one-on-one time with him.”

“Riiight. You’re telling me that after the game, you’re going to go home with the rest of the crowd?”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do after the game, but I’m not going to assume I’m going home with him. I just won’t say no if he asks.”

The simple thought of going home with Leslie sent a wave of heat through me. Memories of the last time we’d had the chance to be together had played on repeat in my dreams for the last week. The weight of him in my mouth, the taste of him on my tongue. It was all so much, yet not enough at the same time.

“Somebody’s getting lucky tonight,” Emilio said in a teasing singsong voice.

I laughed. “Wouldn’t mind it one bit.”

He walked around behind me. “Then get your ass out the door and go get ready.”

I continued laughing as Emilio kept giving light shoves to my back until I reached the reception desk.

“All right. I’m going. I’m going.” I stepped behind the reception desk. Emilio followed me and wrapped his arm around my shoulders, getting ready to lead me to the front door. “I have to get my keys before I can go anywhere.”

The bell chimed and I looked up to see Emilio’s next appointment walking in the door. He glanced over at me. “You promise to get your ass out of here without me needing to push you if I go and help my client?”

“Cross my heart,” I said, giving him a mock salute.

“Dick.” He chuckled. He started in the direction where his next appointment had taken a seat while they waited. He led the guy toward the stations. As he passed me, he said, “Have fun tonight.” He leaned a little closer. “And make sure you get some.”

Emilio darted off before I could say anything more. I grabbed my keys from the drawer of the reception desk and yelled bye to Karli and Lila, who were in Lila’s station, then stepped out the door into the darkening fall day.

The air was cool, verging on cold. It was early and the sky was almost dark, making it clear the crisp days of fall would be behind us soon, leaving us only with the frigid days of winter. Something I could wait for.

I climbed into my SUV and immediately called my dad. It had been a while since we had the chance to catch up. He knew I was busy with the shop and never made me

feel guilty for putting everything I had into building my business, even if it meant we had less time to spend together than before. But it had been longer than normal, with most of my free time going to spending time with Leslie.

“Hello?” It always made me laugh that my dad would answer his phone without looking at the caller ID. Then I remembered why he did that and sobered up pretty quickly.

“Hey, Dad, how are things going?”

“Corey! It’s been a bit. Things are good. Been doing odd jobs around the apartment complex to keep busy.”

Dad was never good at sitting around when he wasn’t working. As a kid, we were always going different places. Most didn’t cost a lot of money, since we didn’t have much. But a trip to the beach, or the free local zoo used to make my day. Anything to spend extra time with my dad.

“That’s good. I know you don’t like lazing around. We could grab a late dinner one night.”

“Yeah. I can do that. Were you thinking here or out somewhere?”

“How about we go out. We can go somewhere near the shop. This way you’re not waiting even later for me to drive to you.”

“All right. Let me know when and where.”

“I will. How is everything else?”

“Good. Good. I’ve seen you on social media a lot lately.”

I had a feeling this part of the conversation was coming. He was rightfully worried about the impact of being with Leslie would have on my business. He mentioned it every time I talked to him.

“I know, Dad. And you’ll probably see more tonight while I’m at the game. I don’t let it bother me. Being with Leslie is more important than worrying about who’s taking a picture of me.”

“Except it does matter. What happens if it doesn’t work out? What happens to all the new clients you said it brought in?”

I turned into the parking lot of my apartment complex. “It’s just like anything that brings a new client in. Once they’re through the door, it’s my job to make them want to come back. If we do shitty work, they won’t return. If we do excellent work, they’ll come back no matter who I might be dating.”

Dad sighed. “I’m sorry. I worry about you.”

“I know, and I love you for it.” All my life, he’d been the only one who worried about me all the time. “I just pulled up to my building and need to get ready to head over to the arena. I’ll see you later this week.”

“Love you too. I’ll see you then.”

I disconnected the call and jumped out of the car. There was very little time for me to shower and get to the arena in time for the game.

\* \* \*

I pulled up to the arena and showed the gate attendant the parking pass Leslie had given me. The attendant directed me to the left, where I was waved into the Preferred

Parking area. I'd always parked in the lot across the street, never having the opportunity to park so close.

When I found a space in the section, I turned off my car and waited for a moment. Leslie had warned me that more attention might be on me now that my picture had been linked to his online. I steeled myself for people to notice me. It happened often because of my tattoos and piercings, but most of the time, they never had the balls to come up to me. Not unless it was to admire my work.

This was completely different. I'd seen the brazen way Leslie's fans had gone up to him. Asked for autographs, or even followed him down the street. How would they react to me? Our pictures had been in The Espen Gazette , the biggest gossip paper in the city.

I pushed open the car door. If they wanted to take my picture, they were more than welcome to. There was nothing I needed to hide from the world. I was a successful businessman in the city.

I walked to the doors of the arena and couldn't help but notice the increase of eyes on me and the whispers that followed. I ignored it all. If there was something Leslie wanted the media to know, it was up to him to tell them.

The seat for the game was in the lower level. It had surprised me to find out that by lower level, it meant practically on the ice right behind the plexiglass barriers, and next to the home goal where I could watch every move Leslie made.

I took my seat and waited for the game to begin. I was glad I got there early, so I had the opportunity to watch the team come out onto the ice for warm-ups. My eyes connected with Leslie's the moment he stepped out onto the ice without his helmet on.



He skated toward me and gave a light rap on the barrier as he skated past. The moment did not go unnoticed by the crowd or the cameras. The game hadn't yet started on the TV, but when I looked up, there was my face on the Jumbotron, smiling as Leslie skated by.

The voices around me picked up and I heard the distinct chatter of "Corey" and "Dating." They meant nothing to me as I focused on the man who was quickly becoming my entire world. After a little bit of skating around and passing the puck between the players, the team members went back to the locker room for the team introductions.

The moment they called Leslie's name, I couldn't stop my eyes from following him as he took his position in the goal. Helmet on, his entire being focused on the puck sitting in the ref's hand. I watched as the puck dropped and the game began.

I'd watched plenty of hockey from my couch at home, even a game or two from the upper-level stands, but nothing could compare to the excitement of sitting practically on the ice. The way the players would fly into the boards, colliding together, fighting for their chance to get the puck. Even more exciting was watching Leslie protect the goal.

Back and forth, the puck slid down the ice. I couldn't take my eyes off it. The two teams battled it out. It wasn't until the third period when the right wingman, Hayes, was able to get the puck across the goal line. The crowd went wild. What a rush it was to be swept up in the excitement.

The celebrations continued as the crowd made their way from their seats, up the stairs, and out of the arena. Leslie had asked me to wait for him. He needed time for post-game interviews and changing. When I reached the top of the stairs, there was a security guard waiting for me.

“Mr. Mancini?”

“That’s me. Did I do something?”

He shook his head. “No, sir. I’ve been asked to take you to where you can wait comfortably for Mr. Knoxton.”

I nodded and let him lead me to an elevator. When we arrived, he opened a private room that was practically empty. Across the room was a woman. I had seen her before, but I couldn’t place where.

Not wanting to make an ass of myself, I sat on the opposite side of the room and played on my phone while I waited for Leslie. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine waiting here. I figured I’d sit in my car until he came out.

“I’m glad you made it.”

My head snapped up the minute I heard his smooth voice. I stood and shoved my phone into my pocket. A smile lifted the corner of my lips as I watched Leslie saunter over to me. The happiness from winning the game radiated from every inch of his body.

His hair was still damp from his shower. I walked over and wrapped my arms around his waist and let him capture my lips in a steaming kiss.

“Missed you too,” I said when our lips parted.

A clearing throat grabbed my attention. Leslie rolled his eyes and turned to face the woman and the player who had joined her.

“Need something, Nordin?”

“Just waiting for you to introduce us.”

I heard Leslie mutter, “Fucker” under his breath before wrapping his arm around my waist and leading me to where they stood.

“This is Corey. Corey, this is the pain in my ass, Noah Nordin, and his beautiful wife, Emily.”

I reached out a hand to Noah, who put his in mine. “It’s nice to meet you,” I said acknowledging both of them.

“Finally—” Noah started when his wife elbowed him in the ribs. “It’s so nice to meet you. We’ve heard a lot about you.”

“And that will have to do because we’re getting out of here.” Leslie winked at Emily. “We’ll see you another time.”

### LESLIE

It was my turn to drive Corey tonight. I picked him up at his place—him and his bag. We'd been apart more than we were together. There was no game tonight. No game tomorrow either. Yes, I had to go to the arena, but I could sleep in a little. I was taking this night for all it was worth.

Corey let me pick the restaurant. It was a charming inn with fireplaces and tables, which had been around for a while, with nicks in the tops. I was certain they held hundreds of stories. I'd been there repeatedly. It was a favorite place for me to bring my family when they visited. Corey seemed to enjoy the atmosphere and the food.

Me, well, I enjoyed the view. The way the warm glow from the fire kissed his skin. How he put his feet between mine under the table and would absently reach for my hand without much thought. It was the little touches that heated me more than the fire did.

Now we were on our way back to my place. It was the first time Corey would see it. I cleaned today and stocked the fridge. We were full from dinner, but I made sure there was plenty there in case we got hungry.

Tall trees lined the windy road on either side, the light from the moon peeking between the trees to cast its glow on the road every so often. From the street, my house couldn't be seen. There were two stone pillars and a remote activated gate I hit the button on a remote for it to swing open. With the gate shutting behind us, I

followed the solar lights that lit the driveway to the home.

Two stories with cream-colored stucco and a slate-blue roof, the house was more than I needed, although I enjoyed the space. Mature trees stood tall near the house and surrounded the property. I had a good ten acres here. With the way the houses were spaced and the trees between them, I couldn't see my neighbors on either side.

The garage door opened, and I eased my car inside and shut it off as the door closed behind us. We were together all night but now, in here with the rest of the world closed out, it was better, more intimate.

"Thank you for dinner," Corey said.

"You're welcome."

"You could have just brought me here for takeout. I'm an easy yes for tonight."

I grinned. "I know, but I wanted to show you the place that feels a bit like home. They know me in there and don't treat me any different than their other customers."

He ran his hand over my cheek. "I'm glad we had dinner there."

Leaning my head into his hand, I closed my eyes just to soak him in. When I opened them again, he was watching me with a soft smile. "Are you going to invite me in, or are we sleeping in the car? While I like it, I'm not sure it would be easy to do the kinds of things I'd like to do to you in it."

I hummed. "What do you have in mind?"

"Why don't you show me to your bedroom, and you can find out."

I wasn't always a smart man, but I was definitely not a foolish one when it came to Corey. I hightailed it out of the car and was rounding the hood by the time his door opened. He chuckled at my eagerness. I grabbed his bag out of the trunk so we could move inside.

The tour of the house consisted of only the rooms we had to go through to get to my bedroom on the second floor. Corey walked around once we were in it, taking the space in. Sure, it was nice with its reading area near the tall windows off to the side and the king-sized bed and furniture. There was an en suite and a walk-in closet big enough to fit a bed and then some, but none of it mattered. Not when I had Corey standing in the middle of it

He crooked his finger, drawing me closer. I didn't stop until our socked toes touched on the plush carpet. His fingers threaded into my hair to let it out of the bun I'd pulled it back into. The strands brushed my shoulders, falling forward as I peered into his dark eyes. The lights in the room were dimmed low, allowing me to see him while also lending to the intimacy of the moment.

"Tell me what you want, Leslie. We've only gone so far. I want all of you, but I need you to tell me what you want."

Licking my lips, my eyes locked on to his as I spoke. "I want... I want to ride you while you touch me. So many times, men wanted me to fuck them. I would, but it wasn't what I needed. I want to be filled."

"I can do that. What else?"

"Never stop touching me. I want to feel you everywhere."

He leaned forward to press his lips to my jaw. "Whatever you want," he murmured low.

My hands went to his hips to work under his shirt so I could feel his skin against mine. I couldn't wait until we were both bare and nothing separated us. There were already condoms and lube on the nightstand. I knew better than to think we were just going to sleep tonight. We'd been building up to this. The image in my head of me lifting and lowering onto him got me so hard. But it was the way he kissed down my neck and pulled my shirt to the side so he could pay attention to my collarbone that got me hotter.

Gentle fingers went under my shirt to lift it from my body. Corey touched the hair on my chest as he got to my nipple to kiss and bite it, sending a jolt of pleasure to my dick.

"God, do that again," I moaned, pulling his hips flush against mine to give me some much-needed friction.

Corey went from one nipple to the other, as he worked my jeans open and pushed them and my boxer briefs down my legs. I had to pull back to step out of them. While I was doing that, ridding myself of the remainder of my clothes, he was taking his off until there were no barriers, and I got to take in the beauty that was him. Not just the gorgeous art on his skin, but Corey as a whole. He was so damn beautiful; my eyes went over every inch of him.

Taking my hand, he brought me to the bed and lay down on his back, pulling me with him so I crawled over his body. I lowered my hips down, my dick slotting against his as my lips found Corey's. Every part of us lined up from head to toe, although it wasn't nearly enough. I was burning for him from the inside out.

My palm met the wood of the nightstand as I searched for the lube with my eyes closed. When I found it, I leaned away from Corey enough to pop the top and coat my fingers. My finger found my hole to begin stretching myself.

Corey propped himself up on his elbow while his other hand reached behind me so his finger could join mine. Together, we stretched me until my eyes slipped closed and a moan built in my throat. God, we'd only gotten this far, and I was ready to combust.

"I'm good," I panted shortly after. I'd played with myself earlier to make tonight not all about prep.

Corey lay back down on the pillow and took one of the condoms to roll it down his dick. A decent dose of lube was added, then I was positioning myself over him.

"Go as slow as you want," he whispered. "We're in no hurry."

I nodded, unable to say anything as his dick pressed to my hole and slowly slid inside me. My breath stuttered in my chest. The burn was there, but nothing I couldn't handle. I'd gone with far less prep before, but it had been a while since I had someone in me. Not a toy, not my fingers, but another person. With Corey, I knew he wasn't a warm body in a line of other men. This meant something to me. He meant something to me.

When I was able to fully rest on him, I kissed his lips and sat up. His hands immediately went to my thighs to coast over my skin, leaving chills in their wake. I sat there for a few seconds, breathing through the lust riding me.

His hands went around to my ass and my legs lifted me enough so I could rise up, his palms helping guide me. Together, I lifted and lowered again and again. The distance between us became too much though. I wanted to breathe the same air, feel every moan against my lips. I wanted to taste his tongue when he came.

Leaning over him, I braced my arm to keep most of my weight off him. "I know I said what I wanted, but it's not enough. I need you to take over."



“I’ve got you.”

He rolled us so I was on my back, and he was on top. My body was folded in half the best I could, so Corey got a view of my hole and his dick sliding in and out.

“So hot, Leslie. So fucking good.”

He picked up the pace, slamming his body against mine until the breath was punched from my lungs with every thrust. Our eyes locked and I knew in that moment there was no going back. I was gone for him. Probably way faster and way deeper than I should have been, however, I didn’t care. Nothing else mattered right now except the two of us.

Corey took one of my legs and hooked it onto his waist, his fingers splaying over my thigh to power into me. My hand went to my dick to jerk it in time with his thrusts.

“Oh my god,” I moaned. “Close.”

“Come for me. Let me feel you tense around me.”

I shot long and hard, my cum splashing my stomach and chest, a jet of it hitting my neck. I kept working myself as he went faster until his hips faltered and he leaned forward, our mouths meeting while he came.

Three words sat on the tip of my tongue, pushed forward by the emotion welling in my throat. I didn’t say them. It wasn’t the right time. When I finally told him how I felt, I didn’t want him to mistake it for words spoken during sex that weren’t meant.

“Fuck, Leslie,” he panted when he broke our kiss. His forehead rested on mine. We shared the same air, just like I wanted. He was about to slide out when I moved to hold him in place.

“Not yet.”

“Okay.” Gently, he rolled us to our sides so he could stay within me a little while longer.

We had to get up and clean ourselves off, but I wasn’t ready for that yet. I wanted to live in this moment longer. Soon enough there would be a rising sun, which brought me having to leave this bed and drive him home, putting space between us once more. I didn’t want to think about that. For now, I wanted to stay in his arms where I felt complete.

20

COREY

The scent of sex and Leslie surrounded me when I woke up the next morning. I refused to open my eyes at first, simply enjoying the feel of his warm body. Contentment settled over me. I could lay there forever, if only I didn't have to go into the shop today.

Just thinking about the way Leslie had submitted every inch to me, had me growing harder under the sheets. My morning wood no longer still a morning problem.

I willed my body under control. Leslie would be sore from last night and I knew he had practice today. His arm tightened around my waist, and I felt the press of his lips on the back of my neck.

"Morning," I said, my voice hoarse.

"Good morning." He pressed another kiss to the back of my neck. "Let's go out for breakfast. My treat."

I rolled over to face him, both of our heads lying on the same pillow. "Don't you have practice today?"

He laid his hand on my hip. "Yeah, but not for a bit. We could have an early breakfast, then I'll drop you off at home."

“I like the sound of that.” His hand was doing all sorts of wicked things to my body. I could barely form a rational thought, much less more than a simple sentence with his warmth seeping into me.

I took hold of his hand, moved it lower, and wrapped it around my cock. He didn’t waste a second before slowly moving his hand up and down. The erection I’d manage to suppress earlier was back with a vengeance. His calloused fingers bringing extra friction that had me thrusting my hips.

I circled him with my fingers, matching the movements of his own hand. We lay there, our eyes locked as we brought each other to the brink, then falling over the precipice.

The first jet of cum hit my chest and I wasn’t sure whose it was. We’d both cried out into the room at the same time.

Coated in cum, I stared at Leslie, his breathing just as heavy as my own. “We need a shower,” I muttered.

“In a minute.” He closed his eyes, trying to catch his breath.

I followed suit. “A minute sounds good.” No matter what part of his body touched me, each orgasm was more explosive than the last.

Somehow, we forced ourselves out of bed and into the shower. Taking turns, otherwise we never would have made it out of the house for breakfast. Dressed and ready for the day, Leslie drove us into the city. He took us to a small café on the beach, Sunrise Café. I’d never been there before. The food and the atmosphere were perfect.

It wasn’t large and didn’t even have matching chairs at each table, but that only added

to the unique charm of the place. On the walls were paintings for sale. We sat at a corner table with a chair on one side and a bench with colorful pillows on the other.

By the time we left, I was completely stuffed and already disappointed about our day ending. With no game today and one tomorrow, our time was limited before he would need to head out on the road again.

We reached my apartment to grab my car before work, and I stopped with my hand on the door handle. “Will you have dinner with me at my place tonight? I know it’s late, but I want to see you as much as I can before you leave again.”

“I’d love to. I’ll meet you here after you’re done.”

I smiled and kissed him. “Have fun at practice today.” I stepped out of the car and shut the door, feeling completely at peace. A feeling that could only be found by falling for the right person.

\* \* \*

That feeling stayed with me through my entire day, making the hours pass quickly until I stepped off the elevator and found Leslie waiting for me at my door. I hiked up the bag of takeout I’d picked up on the way when it started to slip through my arms.

“I hope Thai food is okay?” I asked when I reached him. “I meant to call and ask what you wanted but we were so busy I never got the chance, then I didn’t want to wait any longer to see you.”

Leslie took the bag from me. “I like it.” He kissed me.

I opened the door and let us inside, taking the food to the small kitchen table. I grabbed a couple of plates and utensils, while Leslie unloaded the boxes onto the

table.

“I got a variety. I wasn’t sure which one you would like.”

“I’ll eat just about anything.”

We each took a plate and loaded food from different containers onto them. Famished, I dug right into my food.

“I take it the shop is still getting a lot of new business.”

“It is. I need to start looking for a new artist to take on more of the walk-ins. It’s hard finding someone who gets along with everyone.”

“I’m sure you’ll pick the right person.”

I chuckled. “I’ll do my best.”

We talked a little bit about his family, but mainly focused on the food on our plates. It seemed that Leslie was as hungry as I was.

“You said you grew up in Espen, but what about your family?” he asked.

I pushed the food around my plate. This conversation was the one I dreaded when I started dating someone. There was always the question about how much to tell them about my childhood. As a rule, in my own life I tried not to focus on what went wrong and instead focus on what went right.

“It was just me and my dad growing up.”

I waited for it.

“What about your mom?” And there it was. People who grew up in two parent households were always curious about why a mother wouldn’t be in the picture. Why a person would be raised by a single dad, through no fault of their own. Dad’s leaving and never being heard from again were more common in society. A mother’s instinct to care for her child being absent was unheard of. I thought like some men, some women were born without the desire to be a good parent.

Leslie wouldn’t be judgmental, but I’d faced enough of that in life when people found out about my mom, so I usually kept most of it close to the chest.

“My mom was never really in my life.”

Leslie’s hand froze where he was piercing a piece of chicken. “What happened? If you want to tell me, that is. You don’t have to.”

I shrugged. “Don’t know.” Not a complete lie. “About a month after I was born, she disappeared in the middle of the night. Dad woke up and she was gone. Her getting pregnant had been an accident, and I guess she didn’t really want to be a parent.”

“I’m so sorry, Corey.”

My head snapped up from where I’d been staring at the table. “Please don’t be. My dad was and is an amazing man. He moved us closer to my grandparents. My grandma took care of me while Dad and Grandpa went to work. But every night my dad was home with me. Every night after dinner he would give me a bath and read me a story.”

“Are your grandparents still around?”

I shook my head. “No, my grandma passed away about ten years ago and my grandpa about two years ago. I wish he could have remembered me opening the shop. But I

hadn't lived with them since I was ten. Dad had moved us closer to his work so it would be easier to get me for after school activities."

"Your dad sounds like a wonderful man."

I thought about the man who pushed me to never give up on my dreams. Who listened and never tried to make his dreams my own. "He is absolutely the best. I would never have opened the shop without his encouragement."

"Did you ever see your mom again?" When I didn't answer after a few moments, Leslie jumped in, "Like I said before, you don't have to answer if you don't want to."

It wasn't that I didn't want to tell him, but how to explain what life was like with my mom without bringing up the nitty-gritty details I didn't like to remember.

"It's fine. Just a little complicated. I've seen my mom over the years, not that I ever considered her to really be my mom. She would reappear every two or so years, claiming she was ready to be a mom." I shrugged, trying to push away the memories of her breezing in like everything would be fine, until it wasn't. "Things would be great for a couple of weeks, sometimes a couple of months, then it would go downhill quick. She'd start ignoring us, especially me. She wouldn't show up for meals until she'd leave again. The last time I saw her I was fourteen and it had been four years since she'd shown up. That time my dad wouldn't let her in. Told her he still cared about her, but I had to be his priority and her continued jumps in and out of our lives only caused me more pain."

I remembered the way she sobbed at our door, falling to her knees in the hallway. My dad's back had stiffened as he tried to keep his resolve. He loved her and, honestly, I think it hurt him more when she left than it hurt me. By the time I was ten, I'd grown resentful of the woman. Of the pain she caused my dad. The moment I heard the click of the door, I'd watch my dad walk to his room and shut himself inside. From that



moment on, I'd resolved to never let her into my life.

Leslie reached across the table and covered my hand with his. "I'm sorry it came to that."

"We were better off without her. She hurt us repeatedly."

"Thank you for sharing that with me."

I smiled at him. The man had the heart of a teddy bear. Looking at him across from me and thinking about the man who had walked into the shop that night, the man who had been on every media outlet I could think of for getting into fights in bars, I couldn't see him anywhere in the striking features of the man who was very quickly stealing my heart.

I stood from the table, determined to put the memories of my mom back into the box they lived in. I walked over to Leslie's chair and encouraged him to push back a bit. When he did, I straddled his lap and took his face between my hands. The words for how I felt about him weren't fully ready, but I could show him how I felt with my body.

Lowering my head, I tasted his lips, nibbling at the edges. Leslie's fingers dug into my hips while I teased the corner of his mouth with my tongue. He lifted his hips from the chair, and I could feel he was already hard.

On and on I kissed his lips, lightly grinding down onto him, making myself dizzy with need. My balls were growing tight when I stood and held my hand out to him. Without a word, I led him from the kitchen down the hall to my bedroom, where I could once again make him mine.

LESLIE

Fuck, I felt good. I didn't let a single puck past me tonight. We'd scored three goals and were still flying high from the win. That was even with Noah getting into a fight and Jansen jumping in as well. No one got really hurt and it was quickly broken up.

I wasn't seeing Corey tonight and I didn't want to go home. "Come out with me," I begged, tugging on King's sleeve as we walked to our vehicles. If there was anyone I could get to have some fun, it was him. Once he was in, he'd rally more of the team, and we could have a fun night out.

He stopped to peer at me over his shoulder. "No boyfriend tonight?"

"No, it's late, plus he worked all night. And we have to leave tomorrow. I didn't want to rush away from him. It's better to say goodbye slowly." With a lot of kisses and some cum. But I kept that part to myself.

"You're in loooovvveee." Of course he had to drag out the word. He wouldn't be himself if he didn't. He was also right. I'd well and truly fallen for Corey. I wanted to make sure this was going to last, that we were in it with our whole hearts before I said those words. The last thing I wanted was to say them and for Corey to walk away. I'd shatter if that happened.

I put my hand over King's face and shoved him away instead of saying anything back.

King playfully slapped my hand. “Keep pushing me and I won’t grace you with my company tonight.”

“So that means you’ll go?” I was behaving like an eager puppy and not at all sorry for doing it. If it meant I didn’t have to go home yet and could spend time with my friends, I was all for it. This good mood could live a little while longer.

“I will, on one condition.” Here we go.

“What?”

“Answer this. Who’s sexier? Me, D, or Kenna?” By the grin he wore, I knew he was fishing for a compliment, as well as wanting to start a friendly fight. Of course, our whole group was gathered around now, waiting for me to reply.

I took King’s face between my palms, smooshing his lips in the process. “You, King. You’re just so damn adorable.”

He shoved me off. “Adorable? Ha! I’m fucking sexy. Right, baby?” he asked Hayes.

“Oh, no. You’re not dragging me into this craziness. This is between you and Knox. Not the rest of us.”

“Speak for yourself,” Jansen cut in. “I’m hot. Not cute or adorable. I win this hands down.”

Devon didn’t bother to say anything, just stood near us and shook his head. He wasn’t easy to wind up.

“Okay, D’s out,” King stated. “It’s just me and Kenna. I don’t know how you can look at me and not appreciate what I have.” He turned, bent slightly at the waist to

stick out his ass, and shook it a little. “You see this?” He pointed down at it. “This is a work of art. My ass is fucking beautiful.” He looked toward Hayes again.

“Don’t. I’m not talking about your ass or anyone else’s.”

“That’s okay. You tell me enough behind closed doors.” He winked.

“Jesus,” Hayes muttered. “I’ll be in the car. When you figure out where we’re going, drive us there.”

“So, you’re going then?” I asked Hayes.

“Yeah, why the hell not?” He took the keys from King’s hand and turned for the car. Hayes was used to King.

King faced me again, crossing his arms. “Who will it be?”

I looked at Jansen. “Is there a chance you’re coming out tonight?”

“Nah, I have to head home. Stephen has a late-night snack planned.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“Sure he does.” I grinned. “King, you’re the hottest. Can we go now?”

“I don’t want to win by default.”

“A win’s a win. Take it or don’t. Where are we going?”

He lifted his chin. “Fine. I get to choose. We’re going dancing.”

“Don’t think you can grind all over my dick.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I have Hayes for that.”

We got into our cars, as did Devon. I was surprised he wanted to go with us, although Lincoln was spending a long weekend with his family in Massachusetts, so that had to be why. A few of the other guys on the team tagged along. I was sure it was just so they could get a front row seat to the drama they thought would happen. That was in the past though. Unless someone punched me out of nowhere, I was avoiding all fights. No drinking, no punching, no nothing. I was going to be a model player and make the team proud.

King turned out of the parking lot, and I followed farther into downtown until we got to the club. This wasn’t a trashy place with all kinds of bad shit going on. It was nice in there with a stage for dancers and a large deejay area. They even had live bands sometimes and guest deejays.

After parking our cars close to the club, since it wasn’t a weekend packed with people, we went to the front door where a bouncer stood. I didn’t worry about anyone breaking into my vehicle here. Not this close with the streetlights aimed down and people everywhere.

The bouncer smiled when he saw us. I didn’t know him, but he obviously recognized us. “Go right in. It’s great to have you guys here. Nice win tonight.”

“Thanks, man,” King said and clapped the stacked guy on the shoulder.

Inside, the bass thumped, quickly vibrating through my body as we made our way to the bar. The less people in here, the less chance of trouble. Though I wondered if trouble was going to find us. I saw a few guys at the far end of the bar with jerseys on from the team we played tonight. Not players, but fans. And damn, they could get rowdy as hell when we were out, especially if we won.

We ordered drinks, me sticking with soda, and found a couple of tables to push together so we could talk when we weren't dancing. It was only minutes before the Espen fans came up to us, asking for autographs and photos, offering to buy us drinks. They were as excited about the win as we were.

The younger, single guys on the team didn't linger, instead heading right for the dance floor, toward a group of women who looked like they were having fun. I was content to sit back and watch.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I took it out and saw a text from Corey.

Corey: Great game tonight.

Me: Thanks!

I put my arm around Devon and pulled him close to take a photo of us and sent it to Corey. We said we wouldn't spend the evening together but after watching King pull Hayes to the dance floor, and the way they were close, I really wished Corey was here. Maybe he would be if I was home all the time instead of playing games and traveling so much.

Me: I wish you were here. We're having a good time, but I'm a little lonely.

Corey: I'm home in bed, wishing you were with me. I wonder which one of us will fare better?

Me: You win. I'd rather be there in bed with you. But leaving would be torture.

There it was again. Me wishing for something that wasn't. As I looked around the club, at the people out dancing, I thought about what I could be doing if I didn't have to travel tomorrow. If I didn't have to rush off to the next city for the next game. I

could be in bed with Corey, and we could wake up in each other's arms.

Yes, I got I was rushing shit with him, but I didn't say what I thought to him. Not yet anyway. Scaring him off wasn't part of the plan. Damn, if I didn't picture a life with him though. After he poured his heart out to me about his family, god, my heart broke for him. I couldn't imagine not having my mother in my life. At least he had his dad. From the sound of it, he was an amazing man.

My family was my backbone at times. When I fucked up, didn't know what to do, I knew—no matter what—they'd be there for me. It sounded like Corey had that with his dad.

Corey sent me a photo. I had to quickly turn the phone away from Devon so only I could see it. It was of Corey in bed, a sheet covering him to his waist. The bare skin of his stomach was visible, and he was reaching beneath the fabric to grip his dick.

My mouth watered. I wanted my lips wrapped around him. For him to come down my throat while I swallowed everything he had to give me.

Me: Jerk.

How dare he tease me when I couldn't do anything about it. I mean, I could. I could drive to his apartment and do exactly what I thought. Then I wouldn't want to leave, and it would suck walking out his door again.

Corey: That's what I plan on doing.

I locked my phone and returned it to my pocket. Getting hard in the club was a hell no. My luck, someone would see it, take a photo and I'd be called into Kasper's office for a whole other reason.

Devon leaned close so I could hear him over the music. “Doing okay?”

“Yeah, just thinking.”

“I’m proud of you.”

Turning, I asked, “Why?”

“You stopped drinking. You turned everything around.”

“Yeah, but I still fought and got my ass chewed for it.”

“We both know Kasper could have been way worse than he was.”

I nodded. “Still though.”

“You’re doing good.”

I was about to reply when I caught a flash of a jersey out of the corner of my eye. Of course. The guys with the opposing team’s colors on were going to start shit. Just what I needed.

The biggest of the three planted his hands on the table and leaned in. If he thought I was intimidated by him, he truly didn’t know anything about me. It was hard for me to be put in my place. Very few could do it. My mom and dad, Devon, Kasper, and the coaching staff. That was it.

“I hear you like to fight,” the guy said.

“Excuse me, coming through!” King yelled, pushing between the guys, separating the two from the one leaning on the table. “Hi.” King grinned in his typical King way.



But I saw the edge of irritation to that smile. “Is there something we can help you with?” Hayes stood at his back. King could handle himself, but Hayes was no one to fuck with, especially not when it came to King. While Hayes wasn’t a fighter, he would if need be.

“Your team got off easy tonight,” the guy said. “You shouldn’t have won. We had you.” This was hands down the worst argument that ever was. He was trying to get us to fight them.

Hayes cocked an eyebrow. “Is that all you’ve got?”

The guy stepped closer, his chest bumping with King’s, putting King in between Hayes and him.

“Nope, hell fucking no,” Devon said and stood. “This isn’t happening. You and your friends, leave. You want a fight, but you’re not getting one. Your day on the news or whatever gossip shit you read won’t happen with us. Find somewhere else to go.”

That was when one of the guy’s friends pulled out his phone to record us. A little late for that.

King took it as a moment to shine. He turned toward the phone. “Oh good, you love us so much you want a video.” He plucked the phone out of the guy’s hand and turned the screen, so it was on their faces. “Hey, everyone. I’m here with....

“Kevin,” the guy muttered.

“Kevin, and we’re celebrating the Jetties’ win. Go us! Sorry your team lost, man. Good game though.” He hit the button to end the recording and handed the phone back. Kevin didn’t know what to do except mutter a thank you.

A bouncer had worked his way to us, thanks to Devon raising his hand and waving the bouncer's way. He quickly ushered the guys out of our space.

When Devon was back in his seat again, he said, "See. You're doing good. You didn't even get up."

"Sometimes it's more fun to watch."

Hayes put his arm around King's waist and drew him close. "Don't do that again."

"Awww, were you jealous, baby? I've only got eyes for you and Jamie."

"Damn right." Hayes leaned in and kissed King hard.

Lifting my drink, I smiled. It was a good idea to come out tonight. And I didn't even take the bait to fight. I was proud of me too.

### COREY

The bell on the front door chimed. With thirty minutes left before we opened, I wasn't sure if it was Emilio or Karli coming in for the day. Saturdays were always busy as hell. I'd been able to interview a couple of people yesterday afternoon. Leslie had left for an away game so I figured I'd use the time to interview.

I walked out of the stockroom, clipboard in hand and found Emilio entering his station to get set up for the day.

"Do you have a lot of people scheduled today?" I asked.

I could go onto the computer and see what his day looked like, but I also had to handle my own jobs. I trusted Emilio with his schedule and how much time he needed for each job.

"Back-to-back all day," he said, shrugging off his jacket and hanging it in the small closet in the back of the area.

"Did you at least give yourself time for lunch?"

"I did. I can't do that to myself again."

The last time Emilio scheduled himself for back-to-back jobs, he didn't eat the entire day and almost passed out as he was cleaning up from his final client of the day.

After that, I told everyone in the shop they were required to block out a minimum of thirty minutes a day to eat. We had a long talk about me not wanting to get my ass handed to me by the Department of Labor because of overscheduling.

“Good.” My phone rang in my pocket. I pulled it out and walked toward my station.

I saw my dad’s name on the screen and answered immediately. It wasn’t like him to call me this close to the shop opening. He usually called first thing in the morning or later in the afternoon.

“Hey, Dad, everything okay?” I couldn’t keep the worry from my voice.

“Yeah. Sure. Everything is great.”

His voice was higher than normal. “Dad, I can hear it in your voice. Tell me what’s wrong. You never call me this time of the day.”

“What if I just wanted to check on my son?”

“I’d say you were full of shit.”

“Language,” he scolded, exactly like when I was a kid.

“Dad,” I said. “I’m not ten anymore and you’re stalling. What happened?”

He sighed. “I got a text or two from a couple of guys from work saying they saw your mom in Espen the other day.”

I covered my eyes with my hand and ran it down my face. This was the last thing I wanted to talk about. “And? I’m sure she was high.”

“Corey, please don’t be so harsh on her. She’s sick.”

My dad and I didn’t fight often, but this was one area of life we were never going to agree on. He still saw the woman he fell in love with all those years ago, even if she hurt him repeatedly. I saw the woman who chose drugs over us time and time again.

“That excuse might have worked years ago, but she’s had plenty of time to get help. Time to get clean and back into our lives. She doesn’t want us dad. She never will.” It was a hard truth to throw at my dad, but over the last few years, I’d been trying to give him the reality that my mom was never coming back into our lives. She would never want us as much as she wanted the drugs.

“This time could be different. Maybe she’s looking for us,” Dad, ever the optimist said, hope filling his voice.

It killed me to say the next words. He needed to understand, even if my mom had somehow gotten herself clean, something I very much doubted happened, that his feelings and mine weren’t the same. “Even if that were the case, that ship sailed a long time ago. I will never see her as a mother. To me she is just an egg donor.”

“Corey, don’t say that,” he pleaded with me. “She wanted you so much when she got pregnant. Even stopped doing drugs the entire time.”

It was the same old story. She may have stopped taking drugs for that nine-month window, yet it only took her a few weeks after I was born to choose drugs over us for the first time.

“Promise me, you’ll let me know if you see her around the city.”

If there was one thing I couldn’t do, it was not giving my dad that. He’d given me so much. How was I supposed to tell him no when his request was simple? Telling him

didn't mean I had to interact with her myself. I hoped like hell I didn't see her ever again. It had been more than twenty years since the last time I saw her, and I was perfectly fine with it being the last.

"I promise only if you promise that if she does appear, you won't force me to try to see her."

"Oh, Corey. I wish I could change your mind. Maybe someday I will. For now though, I promise."

I looked up and saw the first appointment of the day standing at the door. "Dad, our client is here. Can I call you later?"

"Of course. I'm sorry to have bothered you at work." The hurt lingering in his voice hit me square in the chest. As much as I hated the woman who had brought me into this world, it killed me to upset the man who had been with me through it, even at one point giving up his own happiness for me.

"Dad, you never bother me, and you can call me whenever. I'm sorry I made you feel that way."

"It's all right, Corey. I know you're busy. Go take care of those clients so they come back for more."

"I will. I'll talk to you later." I hung up with my dad and immediately went to the front door to unlock it. "Sorry for the wait. Let me take you back to Emilio."

The woman smiled and I led her back to his station. I returned to the front and my first client of the day waited in one of the chairs. Rolling my shoulders, I tried to push the conversation with my dad out of my head. It wasn't as easy as I thought it would be.

Through every piece of art I did in the early afternoon, my dad's voice kept repeating in my head. They saw your mom in Espen .

"Fuck," I muttered to myself as I pulled the different ink colors off the shelf.

"It's early to be in that bad of a mood."

I glanced over my shoulder and found Emilio standing in the doorway, most likely waiting for me to get out of the way.

"It is. My dad called before we opened this morning." I took a step to the side, letting him look through the shelves.

"Bad news?"

I scoffed, "Depends on how you look at it." I grabbed the last color I needed from the shelf. "Someone he knows called him the other day and said they saw my mom in Espen."

His eyes went wide. "Your mom? I thought you hadn't seen her in years?"

"I haven't." One slow night when it was just the two of us in the shop, we had a long heart-to-heart about our lives growing up. Something about Emilio made me feel comfortable telling him about my mom and what had happened during my childhood.

Maybe it had been a similar story from Emilio about his uncle. It hadn't impacted him as deeply as it had me, but his cousins had been abandoned for drugs. He saw the damage it had done. Very few people knew the whole story and I hadn't let Leslie be one of them.

"I don't even know if it was her. Hell, would anyone really know what she looks like

after so long?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Are you okay?”

I shook my head. “Not really.”

He glanced behind him, then back at me. “I have someone waiting, but let’s get a drink after the shop closes and we’ll talk.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Emilio clamped his hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. I knew he was in my corner. He would help me work out exactly what I was feeling.

I went back and finished the work on the latest person in my chair. It wasn’t easy to keep focus, the little voices in my head trying to make themselves heard. I managed to keep them at bay and work through each person I had scheduled.

When we locked up, I breathed a sigh of relief, not sure how I’d made it that far without losing my shit. By the time we finished cleaning up and I settled the register, my brain had created an entire scenario in my head about what it would mean if my mom had really shown up in Espen.

Emilio practically pushed me out the door. I walked next to him toward the bar in a daze. We grabbed a high-top in the corner. Emilio stood at the bar to grab our first round. I couldn’t help noticing the eyes on me or the people who pointed in my direction.

Thankfully, none of them approached me or Emilio as he set the two bottles on the table. Each nerve ending felt like a firecracker waiting for the right spark to set me off.



“Talk to me.” He lifted his beer to his lips and swallowed a bit down before continuing, “Why does someone possibly seeing your mom have you so on edge? Would it really matter if she was back?”

I ran a hand through my hair and picked my beer up with the other one. “No. It would change absolutely nothing.”

“That doesn’t make a damn bit of sense.” He pointed the neck of the bottle toward me. “There’s something you’re leaving out.”

I lifted the beer to my lips, swallowing the cool liquid, and trying to find the words to explain how I’d fucked up. I set the bottle down and looked Emilio in the eye. “When I told Leslie about my family, I left out the part about my mom being an addict.”

“You told him about your childhood and left out the biggest reason your life happened the way it did?”

I leaned against the back of the chair and picked at the label on the bottle. “Not my finest moment. He’s got this wonderful family and he tattooed their names on his body. Explaining my mom didn’t want me was difficult enough.”

“You can’t let him keep thinking she just didn’t want you. Her addiction is much more than that.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Is it really? Seems pretty clear to me that she wanted to take drugs more than she wanted me.”

“I didn’t say it was a good reason to abandon you.”

“I know. And you know I don’t talk about my mom often. I couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

“You can’t not tell the person you’re dating. That’s not something to hide because people always find out in the end.”

As much as I hated the thought of talking about my mom to anyone, Emilio was right. Leslie deserved to know. And it had nothing to do with knowing my mom could be wandering around Espen somewhere.

“You’re right. It’s just not easy talking about her.”

“It never will be. My cousins still struggle to talk about their dad, but anyone you’re in a relationship with deserves to know.”

Emilio might usually be the jokester. He also knew when a serious conversation was needed.

“Thanks, man.”

“Anytime.” He lifted his beer to me. “Now, get me another round.” He laughed. I grabbed both bottles and took them up to the bar, ordering more.

When Leslie came home from his latest away game, I’d sit him down and tell him about my mother, even if it hurt.

23

LESLIE

Every time with Corey was better than the one before. That saying about absence making the heart grow fonder... What they meant was the dick growing harder. It was like the longer I was away from him, the more I wanted him. I couldn't wait to get my hands on him and his on me.

I was home and there was no game. Corey's shop was closed. That meant we had an uninterrupted night ahead of us and neither one of us was exhausted. This win felt bigger than when we won a game. Sex with the man I was in love with while I wasn't tired or getting ready to leave right after? I was all for it.

Tonight, I went to his place, so he didn't have to drive from my house tomorrow morning. The traffic was light, and it was easy to find a parking spot. My knuckles rapped on the door, anticipation building in my body, my dick already hard. It was the reason I chose a longer coat to wear tonight. My dick wasn't to be seen by anyone but Corey. And the guys in the locker room, but they weren't after me or trying to get photos.

Corey looked sexy as hell when he opened the door. A T-shirt revealed just enough of his tattoos to make me crave him even more. I wasn't big into them before. On Corey, everything was amplified. Turn-ons I didn't have prior bloomed.

"Get in here and stop eye-fucking me," he chuckled and took my wrist to draw me inside so he could shut and lock the door.

The moment he was done, he pushed against it and pressed his body to mine. There was no time for words, no need. Not when I had him in front of me and we could talk with our bodies. A lot could be said with a touch or a kiss. With breathy moans or the way his body shook when he liked what I did to him.

My bag dropped to the floor with a thud as I turned all my attention on him. He quickly stripped his shirt off then dove back for my lips while I started working his pants open. We shared breaths, but I didn't want to have sex here against the door. With Corey, I wanted to be in bed where we could take our time and not have to worry about balancing ourselves.

Bending slightly, I gripped him by the backs of his thighs and lifted him, grateful for the training I did. He wasn't a small guy, although he was easy for me to pick up. Corey's legs and arms wrapped around me while I took the hallway toward his bedroom, not stopping until my legs hit the bed and I could place him onto it.

It was like we were fused together. The only time we broke apart was to shed the rest of our clothes, then we were right back where we were supposed to be.

Very few things in my life felt as right as I did with Corey. When I decided to pursue hockey as a kid. When I got to play professionally. When I learned I was going to play with the Jetties. That was like coming home. A second home really.

Then there was Corey. If I hadn't been playing in Espen, living near the city, I wouldn't have met him. I was put on his path for a reason. Every single part of me felt right when I was with him. He was a different version of home. There was comfort, an ability to be myself. However, it was so much more than that. The way he touched and cared for me. How he felt safe telling me about his past, knowing I wouldn't judge him.

And I couldn't forget the sex. Never had it been like this. A raw need to touch him, to

be with him, to wrap myself around him, or him around me, and just breathe him in. He was everything I wanted but thought I wouldn't have.

"Hey," he whispered, pulling me from my thoughts. Dropping his forehead on mine, he asked, "Are you okay?"

"More than. Just thinking about how right it feels to be with you. How much I love spending time together and can't keep my hands off you."

"The feeling's mutual." He rolled us over then kissed below my ear, his warm breath skating over my skin, sending goosebumps in its wake. "Do you want me to fill you again, Leslie? Do you want me to stretch you open and make you feel so fucking good you'll see stars?"

My answer was a long, low moan.

"Words. Tell me what you want."

"You. Everything you're willing to give me."

He leaned back so his eyes held mine in the low light of the room. "All of me. I'm giving you everything."

"Fuck," I breathed and gripped the back of his neck to bring his mouth to mine. I had to taste him again, had to take as much of him into me as I could.

We started rutting against each other, building the pleasure but not to the point of coming. Corey reached toward the nightstand for the condom and lube. He only lifted his body enough to find my hole and work his finger inside, seeming to not want to part from me anymore than I did from him. That he felt it too, this need to be as close as possible, made me want him more.

Once I was ready for him, he rolled on the condom and positioned himself. With his gorgeous dark eyes holding mine, he slid in inch by delicious inch until he was fully seated, and my body took a moment to get used to him.

“Leslie,” he whispered. “Fuck, you feel so good holding me tight.”

“I never want to let you go.”

He pulled back and slammed in hard. “Then don’t.”

My blunt nails dug into his back as I held on while he slowly slid out, only to push in faster. He did it repeatedly until I was pulling him in, trying to get him to give me more. Corey was determined to drive me out of my mind with need.

“Give me your words again,” he said.

“Please.” It was all I could get out. Coherent thought had no place in the equation. Not when he was fucking me so damn good, hitting the perfect spot where it felt like lightning was rocketing up my spine.

“More, Leslie.”

“Corey, I...” I couldn’t say the words yet, no matter how much I wanted to. Not during sex. At least I had enough sense for that.

“What?”

I landed on, “Make me come.”

“Mmm, just what I want to hear.”

Corey worked his hand between us and started jerking me while he fucked me. It was sensation overload. I started coming within seconds, my eyes squeezing shut, the world going dark. Pleasure whipped through me.

When I finally floated back to reality, Corey had slowed but hadn't come yet. Putting my arms around him, I rolled us once more. My hands went to his chest so I could push myself up. Then it was my turn to make him feel good.

I moved this way and that, leaned forward then back, until he moaned and his eyes slipped shut. Using my legs, I did the work now and let him enjoy what I could do to him but, damn, I wanted to do more. My body felt so good. He had to fly too.

I lifted, his dick slipping from inside me. Corey whimpered at the loss, but I quickly rid him of the condom and wrapped my hand around his dick. With my free hand, I pushed his leg toward his chest so I could expose his hole. Fuck, he was gorgeous everywhere. This was proof of it. No part of him wasn't delectable.

Diving forward, my tongue lapped around his hole, taking in his taste, his musk. God, I loved this man.

My hand was slow, as was my tongue. He liked to drive me crazy. It was only fair I returned the favor. Corey writhed on the bed while I speared my tongue inside him, tasting him, loving him.

It didn't take long before he gripped my hand and made me move faster. His back arched as cum shot from him.

"Leslie!" he cried.

I didn't let up, wanting to draw this out for as long as I could. Witnessing him come apart was one of my favorite visuals. Not much could compare.

He finally stilled my hand while his other reached for my head to grip my hair and pull me away. “Enough,” he panted. “I can’t take any more. Holy shit.”

A smile formed on my lips. Damn right. I was skilled with my tongue.

“Why haven’t we done that sooner?”

I crawled up the bed so I could lay beside him and shrugged. Then because I wasn’t close enough, I put my cheek on his chest. His heart beat rapidly beneath my ear, a beautiful sound I wouldn’t tire of hearing. If only he knew how my heart beat for him. How every moment I was with him was so fucking special I never wanted it to end.

A gentle caress went down my spine and back up. “You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.” I put my arm around him to hold him close. “I just want to stay like this.”

“Me too.”

Corey didn’t push me for more words this time. Maybe he felt something similar to me, something that was too big to discuss right now. Or maybe he didn’t have the words to put into how he felt. Either way, I was content to lay with him, simply breathing him in. When he was ready to talk, I would too. I wouldn’t confess everything, but I could tell him more about how it felt to be with him. How everything in my world clicked into place and was perfect.

The best part of this night was I didn’t have to leave. No rushing off to the next location for another game. That made me smile.

It used to be hockey that made me grin. Getting ready for the sport I loved as much as life. But I’d lived and breathed it for so long, that if my smile for Corey was bigger



than it was for hockey, it was time for me to move on. Hockey was great, but it was no longer everything.

And no, I wasn't going to give it up for him. It was wholly for me. Corey and I could break up a month or a year from now. While I hoped we wouldn't, I couldn't predict the future. What I could do was my best this season and have a talk with Kasper about my future with the Jetties. Maybe he would find a spot for me in the organization doing something else.

Life could be fucked up sometimes. How many fights had I been in? How long did it feel like I was spiraling out of control? I got my shit together over the summer and met Corey when I came back to Espen for the season. Everything happened the way it was supposed to. Now all I had to do was put the wheels in motion so I could plan my future outside of hockey. Even if Kasper didn't have a position for me with the team, I'd find something else. I could even do what Jagger did for Jansen. Find a player and train them in the off-season. Anything was possible.

That meant anything was possible with Corey too.

My smile grew and I suddenly felt like the Grinch when his heart started growing. I was a happy man who was ready to embrace all life had in store for me.

24

COREY

“Scrambled or over easy?” I called down the hall.

Leslie had just gotten out of the shower and was getting dressed in my room. We’d agreed to shower separately if we wanted the chance to leave the house today. As much as I wanted to have my hands all over Leslie, I also wanted to spend some time with him outside of the bedroom before he left on the long road trip. Especially considering I still hadn’t worked up the courage to come clean about my mother. I wanted to tell him when he arrived last night, but the moment I saw him standing on the other side of the door, I lost all train of thought. Having my hands on him was more important than dredging up the past.

If I was being honest, I used that as an excuse. I hadn’t even tried to start the conversation. I led right in with a line about sex. A part of me still wasn’t ready to talk about her, even if I needed to. Now, I had to figure out how to bring it up.

“Scrambled,” I heard him call down the hall.

I began cracking eggs into the bowl. Coffee was already brewing in the pot on the counter. Scrambling the eggs, I thought through all the possible ways I could approach the conversation. How should I begin? Hey, I forgot to tell you my mom is a junkie. Or maybe, My mom chose crack over me .

I shook my head and dumped the eggs into a hot pan. Everything that came into my

head sounded ridiculous. This was something I should have mentioned in the beginning.

His footsteps sounded in the hall, and I shook off the thoughts running through my head. Warm hands wrapped around my waist, and I remembered very quickly why we decided to shower alone. With my free hand, I reach down and adjusted my hard dick in my pants.

“Coffee’s ready if you want some. Mugs are in the cabinet next to the fridge.”

I picked up the pan and divided the eggs equally onto each plate. Leslie poured us each a cup of coffee. “Sugar?”

“Black, please.”

He added a little sugar and cream to his and took both mugs to the table. I followed behind him with the eggs. Sitting across from him, having a simple breakfast, felt better than any date we’d been on. Don’t get me wrong, those were amazing. There was just something intimate about sharing my morning with someone else when no one was doing the walk of shame.

I picked up my mug of coffee. “Anything specific you want to do today?”

“I was thinking about another tattoo, and I was hoping we could design it together.”

I couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across my face. “I’ll do you one better. How about I take you to the shop and we can work on your tattoo today?”

He stopped with his fork halfway to his mouth. “I don’t want you to have to work on your day off.”

“It’s not work if I’m spending the day with you. Any ideas what you want?”

“I was thinking of a pocket watch on my inner forearm.”

“Good choice. A little tender area, but you didn’t even flinch when I did your back. Let’s finish breakfast and head over to the shop.”

An hour later, Leslie and I were walking down the block from where we’d parked my car. We reached the shop, and I unlocked the door. The place seemed eerily quiet when no one else was working for the day.

“Let’s get the design drawn up and I can start working.”

We sat in the chairs in the front, which were much more comfortable than the ones in my station, while I drew what he’d described to me. We talked and I made changes he suggested. With the perfected design, I printed it on the transfer and collected the colors we needed.

I placed the transfer on his arm, letting the temporary ink mark his skin. The paper hit the trash can as soon as I removed it. The dark lines of the outline were where I planned to start.

I dipped the gun into the black ink and looked at Leslie. “Ready?” He nodded and I lowered the gun to his skin.

A shadow across the floor of the front window caught my attention. It didn’t move quickly across like a person passing by, instead it lingered in the same spot. When the shadow grew larger, I knew someone had stepped closer to the window. I glanced up to see what was happening. If I had to, I could have a conversation with the person about not being open today but scheduling them for when we did open.

A woman stood with her hands up against the glass. Her face gaunt and her clothes, if that was what I could call them, barely covered much of her skin. The material was torn and had obviously been worn longer than it should have been. The woman had to be homeless. Maybe looking for someone to give her money or food. The least I could do was give her a bit of money.

I set the gun down, standing from where I'd gotten ready to start Leslie's new ink and froze the moment the woman's eyes lifted from the ground.

"Corey? Hey, are you okay?" Leslie asked.

What the fuck was she doing here?

Rage poured through me like boiling lava. I couldn't...No I wouldn't let this woman ruin everything I'd built. Without a thought I raced to the front door, unlocking it and yanking it open in seconds.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Her lip curled, revealing teeth mangled from years of drug abuse and god only knew what else. It looked more like a sneer than a smile. There were dark circles around her eyes and the sockets were sunken in. None of it drew any compassion from me. She made her choices and now she needed to face the consequences of those decisions.

"My baby, Corey." She tried to reach out and put her hand on my arm, but I recoiled away from her touch.

"I'm not your any goddamn thing. What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Is that any way to talk to your mother?" She took a step forward and I took a

matching step back, with no desire to be any closer to her than I needed to be in the moment.

“Mother? Not fucking likely. You’re nothing to me except a drug addict standing outside my shop.”

She glanced inside where I could see Leslie watching us. He hadn’t moved from his seat, but I could still see the concern on his face. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?” she asked, ignoring everything I said to her.

I rolled my shoulders and clenched my hands into fists at my sides to keep from losing my temper. I leaned forward. “I’m going to say this once,” I growled in a low voice. “Leave me the fuck alone. Stay away from me and stay away from the shop. You are nothing to me. Now leave.”

I whirled around on my heel and stormed back into the shop, not even bothering waiting for a reaction from her. Snapping the lock into place, I stormed past my station and into the back bathroom. I turned on the cold water and splashed some on my face.

What was she doing here? How did she even find me? I could tell by the look in her eyes that she’d come there specifically looking for me. I highly doubted she wanted to finally be a mother to me. Not with the scent of alcohol still wafting off her skin or the fresh track marks in her arm.

More than likely, she wanted money. Money for more drugs that her “son” would happily provide to his mother. She was delusional enough to actually think that.

Fucking hell.

Leslie saw the entire interaction. I’d told Emilio I would talk to Leslie about my

mother, but up until this point, I'd actively avoided it. I didn't even know what to say. How did you bring up to the person you were falling in love with that your mother was a derelict of society?

I shut off the water and looked into the mirror. The happy light that had been in my eyes when we left my apartment this morning was now dimmed. One interaction with that woman had ruined my entire day. One of the few I had with Leslie before he was back on the road.

Straightening my shoulders, I stood and used a paper towel to wipe the last bit of the water from my face. I couldn't stay in the bathroom forever. The sooner I stepped out, the sooner I could rip the bandage off.

The moment the door opened, I saw Leslie standing at the end of the hall, his brows creased in concern. He didn't move. He waited and let me walk farther down the hall before taking a step toward me.

"Is everything okay?"

I shook my head. "Not even close."

When I reached him, I took his hand in mine and relaxed a bit when he gave me a slight squeeze. It said all the things he didn't need to. He was there and ready to listen whenever I was ready to tell him.

I led him back to my station. After he took the seat on my chair again, I sat on the rolling one I used to do tattoos. I fiddled with an imaginary speck of dirt on my pants. Leslie, with all the patience of a saint, waited for me to be ready.

Tension stretched my muscles tight, but I looked up at him and started talking. "The woman you saw me talking to outside was my mother."

He frowned. “Your mother? I thought she disappeared when you were fourteen. That she didn’t want to be a mom.”

I sighed. “Well, that’s mostly true. She didn’t want to be a mom. Mostly because she preferred drugs and alcohol over her family.”

“Corey...” The concern I heard in his voice almost became my breaking point.

I reached out and laid my hand on his thigh, hoping beyond hope he wouldn’t push my hand away. “I’m sorry I lied to you.”

The room was silent for a moment then he covered my hand with his. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s not exactly easy to talk about the mom who abandoned you for her next high.”

“Do you want to talk now?”

“I never want to talk about her, even when my dad does, but you deserve to know everything. Especially after seeing that.”

“I don’t deserve—” I shook my head, cutting him off.

“You do.” I sucked in a deep, calming breath. “My mom and dad had been part of a party crowd. They weren’t married, but still lived together at the time. Mostly low-key stuff. Drinking, marijuana, maybe some ecstasy. She always pushed the boundaries. One night they weren’t as safe and suddenly she was pregnant with me.”

Leslie rubbed his thumb along the top of my hand, giving me the courage to continue.

“They both gave up the drugs and alcohol while she was pregnant. Made it all nine



months, but a few weeks after I was born, she was out partying again. Dad had used those nine months to pull it together. He didn't follow my mom out the door and stayed to protect me. Every time she came home, she was sober, but it never lasted. And the drugs got stronger and stronger. Dad, my grandparents, everyone tried to get her help. She didn't want it."

I looked up at Leslie's blurry image. It always hit me hard whenever I talked about her.

"Drugs were everything and I was nothing."

25

LESLIE

I could have pressed him, asked for more, but I wouldn't do that to him. And the reality was, it didn't change anything between us. If one day Corey wanted to tell me more, I'd be here for him. I'd listen and console him the best I could, because having a mother like her ... Fuck no. It made me want to fly home and hug my mom. I was lucky to have her and the rest of my family.

"You're not nothing," I told him. "You're everything. You matter. I know I don't say it and I apologize for that. You deserve to hear how special you are, how much you mean to me."

"Thank you," he whispered. The tension seemed to bleed out of him the longer he held my gaze, and I held his hand. Any bit of comfort, I was happy to offer. "What do you say we get back to your new ink?"

"I'd like that."

Corey took his time with the tattoo, giving it insane detail as he did so. When he asked for the time I wanted to put on the clock, where the hands would go, I chose seven thirty-five. It was the time I was born, when my life began. This life I led; I didn't want to forget a moment of it. It wasn't like I could remember being born or even those first few years, but what I did remember from my childhood, I wanted to hold on to.

When he was finished, he wiped down the tattoo carefully, mindful of my tender skin. It didn't feel great getting inked this time, but it also wasn't as big as the one on my back.

"What do you think?" he asked.

I couldn't take my eyes off the tattoo. The watch was silver, and the way he added various shades gave it so much depth. Then with the face and the chain, it was stunning. I knew Corey was talented, but every time I saw more of his work, it really drove home how amazing he was. He found a career doing something he loved. That was special. If only everyone could be so lucky.

Which reminded me how I couldn't spend the night with him. I had to go to the arena in the morning and being late wasn't an option. Lying in bed with Corey where it was warm and I was surrounded by his scent, I wouldn't want to leave. I was addicted to him.

We sat close with our knees touching. I reached for his hand, needing more contact. "I hate leaving. It's the worst part of us spending time together."

"I know. I hate it too."

"I... I think I'm going to retire."

His eyes went wide. "What? Really?"

I nodded. "It's something I've been thinking about. When I'm with you, I don't want to rush off or travel and be gone for days on end."

"It's not solely based on me though, right?"

“No. As much as I care about you, I made the decision for me. There’s a whole future out there for me that doesn’t revolve around playing hockey. I want to do more and take time to relax and enjoy life. Year in and out, it’s hockey all the time. There’s more to life. And I’m so fucking tired. My body aches at times. So yeah, while being with you does factor in, I wouldn’t end my career on it. This is for me.”

He nodded. “I understand and will be here for you in whatever way you need.”

“Thank you, Corey.”

Lifting my free hand, I clasped the back of his neck and drew him close. We didn’t kiss right away. We simply shared the same space, the same breath. There was comfort and contentment in it. This feeling of being right where I was supposed to be.

Corey was the one to close the remaining distance. The kiss he graced me with was sweet and chaste. If we did more than that, I’d want him naked. There wasn’t enough time.

“I should go,” I said, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do.

Corey had already cleaned his station. “I’ll walk you out.”

Together, we got up and Corey turned the lights off, sure to turn on the alarm and lock the door on the way out. We shared another kiss then went our separate ways. I was parked a bit down from him on the street, unable to find a spot closer when we showed up. His car door closed, and his engine started before I got to mine.

A sound from the alley drew my attention before I could get in my vehicle. It was whimpering or crying. I wasn’t certain. If someone was hurt, I could try to help them. At least call for an ambulance.

With my phone in hand, I rounded the corner and drew up short when I saw Corey's mom there with an eye half swollen shut and an angry red mark around it. She wasn't a kind woman, hadn't been there for her son, but I couldn't in good conscience walk away when she was like this. I could put her in a cab and send her to the hospital.

"Are you okay?" I asked. It wasn't the brightest question with the obvious answer being no, but it was a way for her to talk to me.

"You're him. You were with my Corey."

I nodded. "Who hit you?"

Before she could reply, a man emerged from the other end of the alley. "Hey!" he called. "Stay the fuck away from her. She works for me." The closer he got, the easier it was for me to make him out. He was tall, almost level with me, but had a lot less mass on him. He gripped her by her hair and wrenched her back. A soft whimper escaped her at the motion. His eyes held mine. "Get out of here. This isn't any of your fucking business."

My fists clenched by my side, my nails digging into my palms. "Let her go."

I gave up fighting, didn't want to have any bad publicity for the team. This wasn't about them though. And I wasn't in the middle of a crowded bar. I was in an alleyway watching a woman be abused. None of my teammates would stand for it. It didn't matter that she was an addict or that she treated others like shit. No one deserved to be beaten.

"You can't tell me what to do. She's my property to do with as I please. When she disobeys, there are consequences." The way his hand shook let me know he was on something too. I had no doubt Corey's mom was as well with her dilated eyes and strung-out appearance. She'd been using for a long time. Her health had declined to

where she was now, a shell of a human.

“Please stop,” she begged. “You’re hurting me.”

“Shut the fuck up,” he growled and jerked her body, causing her to cry in earnest.

That was enough of this. I had to put a stop to it. I stepped closer, watching for cues of what the guy would do. He held his ground until I was mere feet away, then he tossed her to the pavement where she fell on her side with her hands stopping her head from hitting the ground. He pushed up his sleeves, revealing arms full of track marks.

Before I could say or do anything, he swung for me. It barely grazed my cheek. After playing hockey for years, and being a drunken idiot when not, I knew how to take a punch. This was more like a gnat running into me. But if I let him try to hit me again, he would land it. High or not, he realized he was short of the distance required to do damage.

Leaning in for the next swing, I ducked before he could get me, then landed an uppercut to his stomach. I really didn’t want to do more than knock this guy out so I could get her away from him. Either the drugs in his system were fueling him or he was good at fighting because every hit I landed, he bounced back and swung for me again and again.

I hadn’t been giving it my all until that point. If I did, he would have been on the ground already. I was done with this shit though. He’d only landed one solid punch to my side and that annoyed me.

Pulling my hand back, I punched him in the cheek, hard enough to knock him backward where he fell to the ground. He wasn’t out yet, so he lifted up and tried to stand, but I was on him, punching him again.

“Stay the fuck down,” I told him as I hit him once more.

His cheek had split open and there were bruises already forming from where I’d punched him. Twice more I got him, then he was out. His head was down, his body lax. I hadn’t killed him, just rendered him immobile for the time being.

When I got to my feet, I saw another man there, one I didn’t see previously. He had a phone out and was obviously filming the entire encounter. Corey’s mom stood by his side, an arm tightly around her waist to hold her in place.

“If you don’t want us to send this to every media outlet then you’ll hand over ten grand,” the new guy said.

“I’m not paying you shit,” I bit out. I flexed my hands, working out the pain in them. I didn’t think I did any damage to myself, outside of splitting a couple of knuckles and some swelling. That would go away.

“Yes, you are,” Corey’s mother said, her voice much steadier than it was before. “You care about my son, and we know who you are. Pay us or it goes public.” It wasn’t that I didn’t think she was vile before, but this was proof of her ability to be an awful person.

I knew right from wrong. I knew I was being blackmailed. But that didn’t change the reality of the situation. They could easily send that video to every media outlet, and I would royally get my ass handed to me along with a much harsher punishment. Who was to say if I did pay, they wouldn’t do it anyway? Did I really want to take the chance?

The money would go to drugs. They wouldn’t take it and use it to better themselves. I’d be feeding their addiction. There was my career to think about though. I didn’t want to retire on a scandal. I wanted to go out on my own narrative.

The guy holding her moved his hand to fist her hair. He put the phone in his pocket and pulled out a knife to press it to her neck. “Pay us or I kill her.”

She cried, “Please.”

I bit back a curse. “Don’t do anything.” I had to pay them. To see her hurt like this, no, I couldn’t watch. At least they didn’t ask for more. Ten grand was a lot of money though.

“Fine,” I said through clenched teeth.

The guy told me where to send the money. I had to send it in smaller increments, so it wasn’t flagged by the service I used. I also split it between two accounts.

I was able to look at his phone, watch as the video was deleted on it and in the cloud. It was the best I could do. They might still have it somewhere else on the phone, possibly in email or text, but the decision was made. The damage done.

Now I had to live with the pit in my stomach and boulder on my back as the weight of my decision crashed down on me.

I could have called the cops. Could have done other things, but instead, I knocked a guy out and was blackmailed into sending a large sum of money to keep more of my fighting from going public.

Lovely, just how I wanted this fucking day to go.



26

COREY

“Ready for tonight’s game?” I asked, juggling the phone on my shoulder while I began setting up my station for my day of clients.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Leslie said in a nonchalant voice, which seemed strange.

“Leslie, is everything all right?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Just collecting my things to head over to the arena.” His answers came too quickly.

I thought about asking if it had anything to do with what happened yesterday, but Leslie had told me how special I was to him and I pushed the thought aside. It was all in my head, based on the interaction with my mom. There was a reason I kept thoughts of her buried deep in a box in the back of my mind. The times I managed to let her out, it always distorted my reality.

“You’re going to have a great game tonight. I’ll watch as much as I can between clients.”

“Thanks, Corey. Listen, I have to go. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye.” The word was barely out of my mouth before the call disconnected.

I told myself he was nervous and wanted to play his best game. It had nothing to do with me.

By the time the first client stepped through the door, I'd managed to push those thoughts out of my head and focus on the job at hand.

During one of the few breaks I had in my schedule for the day, I found Emilio sitting in the back room shoveling a sandwich into his mouth. I didn't think he bothered breathing before taking the next bite.

"Did you forget to eat during your days off?"

He forced himself to swallow. "Nah, just didn't have time to eat breakfast."

"I'm not sure you're even tasting it at this point."

He chuckled and picked the sandwich back up again. "Probably not." He took another bite, this one smaller than the last.

I walked past him to the side closet where the security equipment was kept. The closet didn't have a door, but the small alcove gave me the right amount of space without having to use our supply shelves to house it. I'd gotten the security system at the encouragement of my father. Never in a million years would I have thought I'd be using it to protect my shop from my mother.

"Did you talk to Leslie?" Emilio asked. When I turned around, at least half of his sandwich was gone. He sat there, watching me closely. He didn't have to mention about what for me to remember our conversation the other night.

I sat in one of the chairs and glanced around to make sure Karli and Lila weren't around.

“I did, but not until yesterday.”

“Yesterday? I thought you were going to talk to him as soon as he came home.”

“I planned on it. Then, every time I tried, everything that came to mind made me sound like an asshole.”

He picked up the other half of his sandwich. “Okay, then what changed yesterday?”

I ran a hand through my hair. “She showed up at the shop.”

Emilio stopped with the sandwich halfway to his lips and set it back on the table. “What do you mean she showed up here?”

“Leslie wanted another tattoo, so we came here, and I saw her outside.”

“Shit,” Emilio said, glancing back at the security equipment. “Explains why you’re messing with that stuff.”

“Yeah. I want to make sure the shop is safe from anything she does. I went outside and told her to fuck off, but my gut is telling me she won’t go away that easily.”

He shook his head. “Probably not. Did she ask you for money?”

“Thankfully, no. I wouldn’t have given her a goddamn dollar, even if she had asked.”

Emilio played with the corner of the wrap his sandwich had come in. “You may have to tell Lila and Karli about her.” I opened my mouth to protest, and he continued quickly, “I’m not saying you need to tell them who she is. You can tell them there’s been a woman hanging around out front. If they know what she looks like, they can keep their eye out for her.”

I knew Emilio was right. If I was back here checking on the security equipment, the least I could do was give my employees the information they needed to keep themselves safe. I honestly didn't think she would do anything to them. I felt confident what she wanted was money to buy drugs.

"You're right. I'll pull up the camera footage and let them see." I could use the video right before I went outside. There was no audio on the cameras, but I wasn't taking a risk that people could read lips.

\* \* \*

I walked into my apartment and dropped my bag on the floor. The emotional drain of the last few days had taken its toll. My eyes felt heavy and all I wanted to do was grab a beer and watch the highlights of Leslie's game.

Before I did that, I needed to call Dad and tell him what happened the day before. I refused to waste any more time on her yesterday, when my time with Leslie had been so limited with his road schedule.

I sat on the very edge of the couch. If I sat back, there was no way I'd get up later for bed. It was early enough that Dad would still be awake. God, I really didn't want to have this conversation. It was bad enough I'd seen her yesterday, let alone talk about her two days in a row.

Closing my eyes, I dropped my head. Thinking about the way she looked, how she'd tried to pretend like everything was right in the world, gave my stomach a good turn. I grabbed my phone and hit call on Dad's number, determined to get this over with sooner rather than later.

It didn't take him long to answer. A small part of me was hoping it would go to voicemail, and I could avoid this conversation for another day, even if I knew how

unlikely that was.

“Corey, is everything okay?”

Dad knew I never called after work unless I told him I would beforehand.

“Not really.”

“What happened?” The concern in his voice made it harder for me to tell him the story. He wouldn’t see this as a bad thing, but as a chance to find and help her.

“She’s in Espen.” I let him put two and two together.

It didn’t take Dad but a second to figure out who I meant. “Did you see her? Where is she? Where is she staying? Did you get a chance to talk to her?”

His questions came rapid-fire with no time in between for me to answer them. Not that he would actually approve of my answers.

“Slow down, Dad.”

“Sorry. It’s just been so long since anyone has seen her that it seems surreal.”

“Well, it’s not. It was very, very real.” Disgust bled through my tone. I couldn’t stop it, nor did I want to. “She showed up at the shop yesterday.”

“Did you get a good image of her on the security cameras?”

“No, Dad. Leslie and I were at the shop. I was giving him new ink. I saw her myself.”

“You did?” His pitch jumped up a notch.

“Unfortunately.”

“Corey! How could you say that?”

The anger swept unbidden through me. “She’s no mother of mine. You’re the only one who thinks she can still be saved.” I thought about the woman who stood before me and got up from the couch, my feet moving of their own accord back and forth across the living room. “She wants to pretend that everything is fine, that we should ignore the past.” My voice rose. “And maybe if she’d attempted to get clean in the last few years, I might be willing to listen to you, but she hasn’t. She reeked of alcohol. I could see fresh track marks on her arm. Why in the hell would I let her into my life? So she can get money from me, then disappear again? I won’t fall into that trap.”

Once my anger was spent, my heart ached. These were things I’d never said to my father. I’d let him think for years I didn’t know why she’d come back. It was only when my dad told her no that she stayed away for good.

“She’s sick.”

“I might have agreed if she tried to stay sober. Hell, I don’t think she ever got sober.”

“What do you mean by that?” Dad’s tone was defensive. I hated hitting him with the truth, but I felt like it was the only way for him to understand my side. To really see why I didn’t want to find or save her.

“I think she only came home when she ran out of money. Pretended to play family to get cash. When she got what she wanted, she raced off into the night. You didn’t think I saw it, but I did.”

“You knew?”

“Of course, I also knew you cut her off from the money when I was fourteen.”

“Corey,” Dad sighed. “She was sick. I thought by giving her the money she’d want to stay. Eventually, I realized that wasn’t helping her and if I really wanted to help her, I had to cut her off.”

“And now you want to save her again.”

“If she’s back in Espen, it means she came for our help. She wants to get better to be a family.”

“Bullshit. She wants money, nothing else.”

“Don’t say that. We need to work together to find her. I can start calling around to motels and shelters. Maybe there’s something on your security cameras that will give us a hint.”

I tightened my grip on the phone, afraid if I squeezed anymore I might break it. “I have no intention of helping to find her. I told her to fuck off and get lost.”

“Corey,” Dad reprimanded. “I will not let you talk about your mother that way.”

I froze. “Then I don’t think there’s anything else for us to say to each other.” And for the first time in my life, I hung up on my dad without saying goodbye.

My heart ached. Like someone had taken a shot with a puck directly at my chest with no padding. With the heel of my hand, I rubbed the area, hoping to ease the pain, but nothing helped.

I wanted to call Leslie, talk it through with him, but I knew they had another game tomorrow. I didn’t want to mess with his concentration when he needed sleep.

Emotionally, I didn't think I had anything left in me.

If he was here, I wouldn't need to talk. I could lay against him and let his strong arms hold me tight. Since it wasn't an option, I trudged to the bedroom. Undoing my pants, I let them fall to the floor, followed by my shirt. I didn't bother with showering.

The sheets were cool as I slipped beneath them. I lay my head on the pillow and closed my eyes, trying to sleep. The conversations with my dad, Leslie, and my mother ran through my head on repeat.

I did my best to shut the voices off and get some sleep.



LESLIE

I used to be able to block out what I was thinking, to focus solely on the game. More and more, I let my thoughts and emotions follow me onto the ice. My playing suffered for it. Coach must have seen it in me tonight and decided to put in another goalie. I wasn't even upset about it. All I could think about was what happened before I left and how I wanted to be home with Corey. Telling him that over the phone wasn't ideal so I'd kept it to myself and kept our conversations short, which fucking sucked.

God, I missed him. There was a pain in my chest whenever I thought of him. It was quickly engulfed by how awful I felt over giving his mother and those men money. Fuck, I was stupid, but when I thought of it, I would have done the same thing again. She was hurt. I wanted to help.

"Come on," Jansen said, looping his arm through mine, pulling me toward the elevators in the hotel.

"What are you doing?"

"You obviously have something weighing you down. I told D I'd talk to you to give him the night to hang out with King, Hayes, and Nordin."

"I'm not sure I—"

He stopped and turned toward me as the doors opened. “I’m sorry. Did I give you the option of not going with me?” He didn’t let me finish. Grabbing my arm again, he pulled me into the elevator and hit the button for the floor we were staying on.

My lips pressed closed, even after we were in his room and he gave me the menu. Stomach churning, I wasn’t sure if eating would do me good. If I didn’t order, Jansen would make a fuss over it, so I picked something lighter than normal.

Once he placed the call, we sat on one of the beds in his room. “Okay, out with it.”

“I really don’t—”

He placed his hand on my knee and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I know what it’s like to keep things inside. Talking about it will make you feel better. I won’t breathe a word of what you tell me. Promise.”

“It’s not that. I know you won’t tell anyone. It’s just... I don’t look great in this story.” We’d talked repeatedly about what we were going through but this, this was personal and it had to do with Corey’s mother. Jansen wouldn’t tell a soul. Still, voicing what happened wasn’t easy.

“I’m here for you. No matter what.”

“It’s not only about me, but something that happened to me and another. It’s a lot and none of it is good.”

“Did you kill anyone?”

I reeled back. “What? No. Why would you ask that?”

“Just checking if I had to find a way to keep you out of prison.”

“Is paying someone who’s blackmailing you illegal?”

Jansen’s eyes went wide. “Start from the beginning.”

I told him about the day and how we went to Corey’s shop so he could tattoo me again. The guys had already seen it and loved the work. Some were even thinking about getting ink of their own. Then I had to tell Jansen about Corey’s mother and how she was far from what a parent should be.

“When Corey was tattooing me, she showed up at the door,” I said. “Fuck, she looked awful. There was no doubt she was either on something or coming down from a high. She’d been using for so long. You hear stories about people using and what it does to their bodies, but to see it wasn’t easy. And that was just me. I saw the way it tore Corey apart. I wanted to shield him from her, tell him it was okay, but I couldn’t. How could it be okay when she obviously didn’t give a shit about him, and only came around when she wanted money?”

“Damn,” Jansen muttered. “I feel terrible for him.” He shook his head.

For Jansen and me, it was unfathomable to think of a mother doing that. We were both close with our families and looked forward to seeing them. Corey didn’t have that with his mother. At least he had his father.

“That’s not the worst of it,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow.

“When I left the shop, Corey and I went our separate ways due to where we were parked. As I was walking to my truck, I heard crying. In the alley was Corey’s mother. She was bruised, obviously had been just hit but I didn’t see anyone else right away. It didn’t take long for a guy to show up. He hurt her again. It was more

than I could take so I fought him.”

“I don’t blame you. I would have done the same thing.”

“Yeah, but would you have done what I did next? I got him knocked out on the ground, still breathing, but at least he was down. There was another guy there I didn’t see until it was too late. He got it all on video with his phone.”

Jansen gasped. “No.”

“She was by his side. They asked for money in exchange for not leaking the video. Then when I didn’t answer fast enough, he put a knife to her throat and threatened to kill her.”

“Holy shit. What did you do?”

“I didn’t have long to think about it. I paid them. I didn’t know what else to do. Her being murdered wasn’t an option. That was Corey’s mother. And if that video got out, it would have been out of context to paint me in the worst light. Plus, I wouldn’t want the world to know about Corey’s mother like that. I did what I thought was the right choice in the moment.”

“But now?”

“I wonder if they played me, and I created a bigger problem.”

Jansen leaned back onto his hands. He was about to talk but the food showed up, so he went to let them in. The room was silent while she was there and after she was gone. What could I say? The decision was done and over with. Now I wondered if Jansen was judging me though.

“Hey,” he said, sitting beside me again. “I would have done the same thing. You were stuck in an impossible position. You did what you thought was the best option.”

“I could have called the cops.”

“When you were seeing if she was okay or when the guy confronted you? How about when he swung first? It seems like everything happened so fast you didn’t get much time to react. At least you didn’t kill him.”

“No, but what if they pull this shit again?”

“Don’t fall for it a second time. Call the cops right away. I’d tell you to just get in your car, call, and leave, but I don’t think I’d be able to not help if it were me. Did you tell Corey?”

I shook my head. “I’m a fucking coward. What if I tell him and he leaves me?”

“I know you don’t want to hear this but if he leaves, then let him. He has to process what you tell him”

“He’d be justified. I gave in to the blackmail.”

“Corey can feel whatever he wants. He might be hurt or upset, but you have to tell him, so he understands your side. He’s already aware of the whole fighting thing and everyone being on your ass about it. This won’t come as a shock to him that you’d want to keep it from getting out. While he doesn’t like his mother, and rightfully so, he can’t expect you to stand by while she’s hurt.”

“I need to talk to him.”

“Don’t put it off once you get home. Meet up with him in private and tell him. The

longer you keep it from him, the worse it will get. Plus, if she sees him again and tells him what happened before you do, he'll be pissed you didn't let him know first."

I scrubbed a hand over my face, dread sitting heavy in my stomach. Jansen was right. It didn't make the idea of telling Corey any easier.

We moved to the table to eat. I picked at my food, eating a few bites. My stomach was a mess. Jansen changed the subject to try to get me to laugh. I did but didn't really feel it.

By the time we were done, I figured I'd already confessed a lot, why not tack some more on.

"Another thing," I said.

"What's up?"

"I'm going to retire at the end of the season."

He paused, wiping his mouth with the napkin. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah."

"Did you think about it? Like really, really think about it?"

"I have. No one on the team knows I made the decision yet. Devon knows I'm considering it. I did tell Corey."

"Wow." He finally wiped his mouth and dropped the napkin to the table. A slow grin spread over his lips. "I'm the first on the team to know you decided for certain. The guys are going to be so jealous you told me before them."

I raised my eyebrows. “You’re not going to try to talk me out of it?”

“Do you want me to? You said you’ve thought about it. You wouldn’t have brought it up if you weren’t serious. Besides, your heart isn’t in it this year. I thought maybe you were just slowing down, your body tired from years of playing.”

“That’s part of it. I’ve done everything I set out to do. I want to move on with my life. Start a new chapter. See what’s out there for me.”

“But you’re not going to stop talking to all of us, right? I don’t want to have to get clingy. It won’t go over well. Plus, Stephen might have something to say about me wanting to hang out you with all the time. It’ll be a delicate balance.”

For the first time all day, a real smile lifted my lips. I could picture Jansen becoming like that, although he’d have nothing on King. He’d be the one who’d take it the worst. I didn’t look forward to telling him. King was a family man through and through. He’d want to make sure I wasn’t going anywhere, like back to Pittsburgh. While I would keep my place there, I wanted to stay where I lived now. At least for the time being. I couldn’t predict where the future would take me.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said. “Especially not if Corey and I get through this latest shitstorm.”

Jansen clasped me on the shoulder. “You will. Corey’s a good guy, who sees the real you. He sees the man we know and love. He’ll understand why you did it.”

I hoped so. If he didn’t, it would gut me. Hell, it already was. Maybe some of the weight would lift once Corey knew. If not, that was on me. I was the one who agreed to handing over the money. I should be the one to carry the cost of my actions.

This season had been a roller coaster of emotions, and I still had much more of it to

go. Between playing, trying to be better about not fighting, and making the decision to retire, it was a hell of a lot. More than that, I found Corey. I was so damn in love with him. If he didn't hate me for what I did, if he didn't walk away, I'd tell him how I felt. Until then, I needed to stop shutting him out over the phone. It wasn't right to make him feel bad for something I did. It wasn't his fault. Until we could talk face-to-face, I'd take his sweet words over the phone.



28

COREY

The ringing of my phone from the other room caught my attention. I shut off the burner on the stove and went in search of it. I'd finish making lunch in a minute. I wasn't that hungry in the first place. Hadn't been in a week since the fight with my dad.

When I picked it up off the table, I froze at the sight of my dad's name on the screen. My hand shook while holding the phone. It had been the first time I hadn't talked to my dad for longer than a twenty-four-hour period. The anger and frustration stayed with me the first few days, then as it drained from me, I realized I didn't know what else to say. Dad and I truly were at an impasse when it came to my mother.

I would always hate her, no matter how much he tried to defend her. But he'd been there for me through every challenge I'd faced. I couldn't push him aside when he was trying to reach out first.

I lifted the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"I'm really glad you answered."

I sighed and sat on the couch. "I'll always answer when you call."

"Would you be willing to meet for lunch so we can talk?"

My stomach rolled at the slightest thought of food. Even if I wasn't hungry, I'd endure the smell of food to see him. "Yeah. I think that would be good. I can meet you at Sunrise Café in thirty minutes."

"I'll be there."

Dad ended the call. I stared at the phone for a minute before standing up to get ready. For the first time in my life, I didn't know what to say to my dad.

\* \* \*

I opened the door of Sunrise Café and glanced around the small space. Dad sat in the far corner, fiddling with the menu. From the side, I could see the dark circles beneath his eyes.

Squaring my shoulders back, I tried to keep my stomach from rolling. Being this disoriented around my dad was not a feeling I was accustomed to, nor one I wanted to feel again. His head snapped up the moment I reached the table. His eyes were wide with surprise, almost like he hadn't expected me to show.

He leapt up and immediately wrapped his arms around me. I couldn't help but melt into his embrace. My nerves settled and I knew, no matter what he wanted to say, our relationship would be okay. He held on to me a little longer than normal before finally letting go.

I looked into eyes so similar to my own. "Thank you for coming," he said

"I will always come. You are one of the most important people in my life."

The fine lines that the years had put on his face crinkled as his lips pulled up into a slight smile. "I'm sorry for the way I acted the other day." He stopped and pointed to

the chair. “Let’s sit down and order, then we’ll talk.”

“Okay.” I took the seat across from him. We perused through the menu while waiting for the waitress to take our order.

Once she walked away after dropping off our drinks, silence filled the table.

“Dad—” I started, and he lifted his hand to stop me.

“You don’t have to say anything. I called because I owe you an apology.” He dropped his gaze to the table and shook his head. When he lifted it again, his eyes were shiny with tears. “I thought I did my best to protect you from the fallout of your mother’s addiction.”

“You did. You—”

He interrupted me once again. “No, I didn’t. Not when I let the love I had for the woman she used to be interfere with what was best for you. I never wanted to let myself believe she only came back for money.” He drummed his fingers lightly on the table. “I guess I always hoped the woman I fell in love with would show up and we could be together once again. That she truly loved me.”

I felt the stinging in my own eyes. Dad wasn’t used to admitting weakness to anyone. It was like an electric jolt to my system to hear. “Dad... I’m sure she loved you.” I didn’t know whether she did or didn’t but considering she was wasting her life on drugs; a little white lie wouldn’t hurt anyone.

“Maybe she did. Maybe she didn’t. You were and are right, she loved drugs more than she ever loved either of us. But that doesn’t stop me from loving her.”

And this was the crux of the issue. Our differing thoughts about the woman who gave

birth to me.

I blew out a breath. “I don’t expect it to stop you from loving her. It’s understanding that I don’t have the same feelings for her. You knew her before the drugs had taken control. The only woman I knew was the one who left us time and time again for her next high.”

He reached across the table and patted my hand. “I understand that now. It’s why I called you. It’s not fair for me to expect you to have the same feeling for your mother. You’re right, we know a very different woman. Hell, I might be naïve to think someday she’ll come back. It doesn’t stop me from hoping.”

He stopped talking, his gaze glued to the table. “Dad?” I waited until he lifted his eyes. “I love you with all my heart. You have been the person who has supported me my entire life. The one I can count on. I would never take away how you feel about my mother, even if I don’t feel the same.”

“I’ve messed up until now, but I promise to never push you to see her the same as I do again.”

“We all screw up. I still think you’re a pretty perfect dad.”

Dad brushed a tear from his cheek, a sad smile turning the corner of his lips. I didn’t want to see him upset any longer, yearning for our relationship to return to what it was. Knowing he finally understood why I felt the way I did went a long way to soothing any fears I’d arrived at the café with.

“Now, where is our food?” I said, glancing behind me.

Dad chuckled. “Why don’t you tell me more about how things are going with Leslie while we wait.”

“I’d love to.”

We spent the rest of lunch talking about Leslie and how I missed him while he was away. Dad said out loud what I’d been thinking for a while. “You’re falling in love with him.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I think I am.”

His words stayed with me the entire time back to my apartment and in the hours I waited for Leslie to arrive. He’d promised to come directly to my place once they got home.

There was a knock on my door, and I raced to yank it open. There Leslie stood looking as gorgeous as ever. I reached into the hall and grabbed his shirt, tugging him forward. “Come here.” The moment his lips met mine, I ceased to think about anything else.

\* \* \*

Warm heat surrounded me. I never thought I would see the day when I preferred to wake up in the arms of another person. It wasn’t that I didn’t see myself settling down. I just didn’t imagine myself as a cuddler.

His hard chest muscles were strong against my back. I nestled farther into his embrace, enjoying my time with Leslie before I had to once again let him go. Soft lips left kisses along the back of my neck.

“Mmm. This is my favorite part about waking up with you in my bed.”

He kept placing kisses along the back of my neck, his arm tightening around my waist. I let myself get lost in the feeling until I heard a knock on my front door. I did

my best to ignore it and simply enjoy the moment.

The knocking became more insistent. Groaning, I reluctantly pulled away from Leslie. “Let me get rid of whoever this is,” I said as I threw my legs over the side of the bed. I leaned back and gave him a quick kiss. “We’ll pick up where we left off when I return.”

I pushed up from the bed.

“Corey?” I glanced over my shoulder.

“What’s up?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. Just hurry back.”

His tone seemed slightly off, but when the knocking got louder, I decided I needed to deal with whoever was on the other side of the door before I could figure out what was wrong with Leslie.

Grabbing a pair of sweats, I tugged them on and left the bedroom. The knocking continued.

“Fuck, I’m coming,” I called.

I reached the door and yanked it open. My entire body went rigid when I saw two police officers standing on the other side. “Officers, can I help you?” There was a light tremble to my voice.

“We’re sorry to bother this early, sir. Are you Corey Mancini?”

“That’s me. Did something happen? Is my dad okay?” We’d left lunch, but I hadn’t

heard from him for the rest of the day.

“Can we come in?” I opened the door wider and gestured inside. I needed them to start talking. “I can’t answer about your dad, but we’re here about your mother,” the taller of the two officers said.

A boulder settled in the pit of my stomach. This was the type of visit I always imagined, ever since becoming an adult. As the years passed, the fear subsided, even if it sat quiet, buried in a small part of my mind.

“As her next of kin—” the officer started, but I cut him off.

I sighed. “Where did you find her?”

“I’m sorry that this doesn’t surprise you. We found her in one of the back alleys near fifteenth.”

I closed my eyes. Breaking this to my father was going to tear me apart. “Overdose or something else?”

“At this time, we believe it was an overdose, but the coroner’s office will need to verify that. They will also need you to come down and officially identify her.”

My world spun. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t expected this day to come, nor did I feel the true pain of a loss. My mother was someone I’d grieved for a long time ago. “Does it have to be today?”

I didn’t want to seem heartless, but nothing would change the fact my mother was dead. There was, however, a man in my bed who seemed to need me.

“It doesn’t have to be right now. Sometime in the next forty-eight hours is all we

need.”

“I can do that after I let my dad know.”

The smaller of the two officers handed me a business card. “This is the address, name, and number of the city coroner.”

I took the card from his hand. “Thank you.”

“Is there anyone you’d like us to call for you?”

While it would have been easier to let someone else tell him, my dad needed to hear the news directly from me. “No, but thank you for offering.”

“Of course. Once again, I’m sorry to have to deliver this news to you,” the taller officer said before turning to walk out the door.

“Thank you.”

Once both officers had walked out of the apartment, I pushed the door closed and stood staring at it. My brain running through a million scenarios. What was I supposed to do now?

“It’s my fault.”

I turned around and found Leslie standing at the end of the hall, tears streaming down his face.



LESLIE

My throat felt like it was closing. That weight I'd carried around was suddenly crushing my lungs. She was dead, and it was all my fault. I gave them money. They bought drugs with it. She overdosed. If I hadn't, she would still be alive.

Tears ran down my cheeks and I didn't try to brush them away. Words wouldn't leave my lips until the police were gone. "It's my fault."

Corey stepped closer but each step he took toward me, I walked backward until my spine hit the wall and I couldn't go any farther. "What do you mean?" It wasn't accusatory, but curious.

"I should have told you sooner, but I was on the road, and we didn't see each other until yesterday. Then we were together. The rest of the world fell away like it always does. I wanted to tell you. The right moment hadn't come yet. Now we're here and..." My bottom lip trembled. The rest of the words wouldn't come out.

"Leslie, come sit on the couch and start from the beginning."

I shook my head, unable to bring myself within touching distance of him. I didn't want to be that close when he ended it between us. If he touched me, I'd sob and beg for him not to leave me. Instead of moving toward him, my body slid along the wall until my ass met the floor. I brought my knees up and wrapped my arms around them, making myself as small as possible, trying to protect what was left of my heart before

he took it from my chest.

Corey stepped closer, but stopped at the other end of the hallway, keeping a measurable distance between us. He took a seat across from me. “I’m not sure what has you so scared, but tell me. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.” He said that now. How quickly would his mind change when he heard what happened?

“Remember the last time we were together, and you tattooed me?” I absently ran my finger over my inner arm, over the skin that was still healing.

“Yes.”

“When we parted ways after, you got into your car and left. I was on my way to mine, but I heard a noise, a cry. I went to the alleyway and there... there was...” A sob left me. I couldn’t hold it back. “Your mother was there with an angry mark on her face. She’d been hit and was crying.” The whole night had been living on a loop in my mind. Now it was ten times worse because she was gone. Corey’s mother was dead.

“Okay. What happened next?”

“I went to help her when a guy appeared and started shouting at me. He reached her fast and started hurting her again. I told him to let her go and things went downhill even more. He... he shoved her to the ground and took a swing at me. I didn’t hit him first. I wanted to but I didn’t. He was the one who came for me.” Corey had to understand I didn’t instigate it.

I sucked in a deep breath and pushed on, needing to get it out before he could speak again. I was purging my soul, laying everything bare for him. “We fought and I didn’t stop until he was out cold. I didn’t kill him; he was just out. When I stood, there was another guy there, filming the whole thing and he was holding on to your mother.”

Corey shook his head. "I can see where this is going."

"But I was the stupid one. I fought and then they blackmailed me. They told me if I didn't pay them, they'd go to the police, and I'd be plastered all over the news. Not only did I not want that for my team, but I didn't want that for you and your dad."

"How much?"

"Ten thousand."

"Shit," he bit out. "You paid them?"

I nodded. "I didn't know what else to do. When I didn't give him an answer fast enough, he threatened her with a knife to her throat. I wanted to protect everyone, and the only way I thought I could do it was by giving them what they asked for. He released her and deleted the video while I stood there. The moment I walked away, my stomach sank, and I felt like shit. I wanted to tell you, but I was leaving. It wasn't the kind of thing you say over the phone. Then I got back, and you know the rest."

"Leslie..."

"It was my fault. If I hadn't given them the money, they wouldn't have been able to buy the drugs and she'd still be alive."

"That's not how it works. She would have found another way to get high, another way to get the money. You didn't force the drugs on her. You didn't make her take more than she should have."

Burying my face in my arms, I kept my head down as tears continued to flow. I couldn't look at him. He was defending me, but I was the bad guy here. I was the enabler. "I'll go to the police," I mumbled. "I'll tell them it was my fault. They

should know why this happened.” I’d do whatever it took to make things right.

“Hey, look at me,” he said in a soft voice. When I ignored him, he got closer. I heard him stand and pad up the hallway before dropping down in front of me. He clasped my biceps and gave me a gentle shake. “Leslie, I need you to look at me.”

I finally lifted my tear-stained face.

Corey reached up to brush my tears away. “It wasn’t your fault. I need you to hear me. You were in a bad spot and did what you thought was right. You were looking out for your friends, and me and my dad. I’m not mad at you. If anything, I’m mad at her for what she did to you.”

“You shouldn’t be. They were abusing her.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure she was using them to get drugs. She wasn’t innocent. I bet if you found that guy again and asked him how many other people he swindled out of money, he’d have a fucking list. That’s what they did, got money for drugs any way they could. Leslie, you did nothing wrong.”

I heard his words, although they didn’t sink in and take root. They floated with other words I’d said, and what the police did. With everything that happened. Memories, good and bad. It didn’t change that he lost his mother. He lost the woman who brought him into this world.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered. “Please let me make it right.”

“There’s nothing to do. You’re not going to the police. Even if you did, they wouldn’t fault you. You didn’t commit a crime. They wouldn’t even be able to find the men who did that. They could be on to another city, another woman or man to take advantage of. All of them are users. You were a victim in this.”

“No, I knew what I was doing.”

“You did, but so did they. When they chose to buy drugs and get high, they knew the risks. This is on them. Not you.”

“We should find them to get justice for your mother.”

“Justice?” He scoffed. “There’s no justice to be had here. She abandoned me. Left me while she went to find her next high. I wasn’t anything more than an inconvenience to her.”

“Corey...”

“No, Leslie, you have to listen. There is nothing to be done about any of it now. She’s gone. She went down this road of her own choosing. Not you. Not me.”

“You still lost your mom.”

“Can you really lose someone you never had?”

“I’m—”

“Don’t. Please don’t be sorry. Thank you for telling me, but I need you to know none of this is on you.”

I wouldn’t go to the police unless he wanted me to. His words made sense. I didn’t buy her drugs or shoot her up. I didn’t force pills down her throat or whatever drug she did. I was responsible for my actions and my actions alone. They blackmailed me. That didn’t mean I didn’t feel like the lowest of the low for what happened. A life was still a life.

“Look at it this way,” he said. “Say I had a brother, and he was using. He didn’t have the money, but I did. He begged me for cash to get a meal because he was broke or for something else, and I gave in. I handed him what money I had. Would it be my fault if he turned around and used that money to get his next fix? What if it killed him? I didn’t sell him the drugs. I didn’t find the dealer for him. Those were his actions. My mom was a known addict, had been for a long time. She didn’t want to get help. One day, this was bound to happen.”

“I’d still like to go down there and tell the police what happened.”

“Let this lie. For me. I need closure and won’t get that if we make it more than it is. Besides, there won’t be any proof that you supplied the money to her. The guys you paid weren’t even there. Just her. All you have is the random account you sent the money to that, by now, could be shut down. And even if they find them, there will be no proof they’re the ones who gave her the drugs. You’re a victim. End of story.”

Corey leaned forward and fully pulled me into his arms. I held on to him as my tears dried. I shouldn’t be the one upset, he should. Although I understood why he wasn’t. She was a stranger to him. He didn’t have good memories of her or a need for justice. To him, justice was her finally passing from the drugs she put above him and his dad. Oh god, his dad.

I leaned back. “Your dad.”

“I know. I’ll tell him but I’m leaving you out of it. Dad will remember her how he wants. Not how she was at the end. I want to preserve that for him.”

I understood that. Why ruin his dad’s memory of her. If I did go to the police, that would do the same. It would also open things up and the closure they both needed would be out of reach. Logic was finally settling into my mind. I had to let this go for Corey and his dad.

I wasn't the dealer. I wasn't her pimp or whoever that was with her. It wasn't me beating her or handing her drugs. I was simply their target, one with a lot of money and a reputation for fighting that they used against me.

Fuck, when did everything get so messed up?

It was my turn to bring Corey into my arms. He held me tight, his body fitting between my legs as I spread them. We still sat on the floor in the hallway for a while as we both calmed and soaked in each other's warmth.

"Corey?"

"Yeah?" His face was nestled in the crook of my neck.

"I love you."

He slowly sat up and gazed at me with those dark eyes I could sink in to. "You love me? Even after all this shit?"

"I loved you well before this, but didn't tell you right away. It was building until I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, I had truly fallen for you."

"I love you too."

A smile teased my lips. "Yeah?"

"Hell fucking yeah." He gripped the back of my neck and brought our lips together.

Corey loved me. He wasn't ready to kick me out. He didn't tell me to go and never return. He fucking loved me. I was going to do whatever it took to make myself worthy of him.

Today had been fucking awful, but it had also given way to me telling him the truth. I didn't have anything left to hide from him, not even how I felt. He had all of me now.



### COREY

I broke the connection of our lips and stared into his light-brown eyes. I couldn't imagine how Leslie could think for a moment my mother dying of an overdose was his fault. She made her choices and she paid for them with her life. There was nothing he could have done to change that outcome. Like I'd told him, she would have found the money somewhere, whether it was from him or someone else.

I told him how I felt, but deep down I knew it was time to show him. We needed that physical touch to connect. Pushing myself to stand, I held a hand out to Leslie. He slipped his hand into mine and let me pull him up from the floor. Taking his lips once again, I backed him toward my bedroom door.

The ugliness of the conversation with the police still invaded my living room space, and I wanted to be as far away from it as possible. Once I stepped over the threshold, I kicked the door shut. No need to let anything in between me and Leslie.

I grabbed ahold of his waist and, breaking the connection of our lips, I spun him around until his back was to me. Using the grip I still had on his hips, I tugged him backward, let him feel how hard I was for him.

"Corey..." Leslie groaned, pushing his ass back even farther into my hips.

Our height difference didn't matter much when I was able to press my lips against his neck. I ran my tongue along his skin, tasting the little droplets of sweat he left behind.

It was musky and raw, and all Leslie.

“I love you,” I whispered against his neck, watching as a shiver raced down his spine. I couldn’t say the words enough. It had been one thing to talk about it with my dad. It was something else entirely hearing the words come from Leslie’s lips.

“I love you too.” This time a shiver wracked my body.

Leslie had grabbed a pair of sweats before coming out to the living room. I ran my finger along the seam of his pants, dipping below the fabric.

“You’re always so hard for me.”

I grazed my fingers along the tip of his cock and his hips bucked. The subtle submission every time I put my hands on him sent my body into overdrive. Gripping his chin, I turned his head to the side.

I captured his lips, sucking his tongue into my mouth. The heat from a moment ago went molten. My skin tingled. I reached back down, beneath the fabric of his pants, and cupped his balls. He grew harder as I rolled them between my fingers.

Pushing him forward on the bed, I yanked his pants down, exposing his tight, round ass to my eyes. I ran my hand down the hard globes, running my finger along his crack, until I finally found the small pucker. He was hot there. Hot and waiting.

“Fuck, I can’t wait to slide my dick deep inside you. Tell me you want that too,” I said, bending over his back and taking a small nibble of his ear.

“Yes.”

I pushed myself onto him. “I told you to use your words.”

“Corey, fuck me... please.”

Little noises left his lips the longer I ran my finger down his crack. My own dick begged me to take him, to bury itself in that warm, tight hole. I held back and removed my finger. A long groan, muffled by the bedding, left his lips.

“Don’t stop.” A raspy edge had taken control of his voice.

I thrust my hips against his ass once again. Nothing on this earth would make me want to stop. “I have no intention of stopping until you scream my name.”

Leslie thrust his hips back once more, his ass cradling my cock through the fabric of my pants. I lowered myself to the floor. His small pucker begged to be touched, tasted. I slid my finger in my mouth, then circled the rim before pushing inside.

After a few times pushing my finger in and out, I leaned forward and ran my tongue around the edges of my finger.

“Jesus,” Leslie cried, gripping the sheets into his fist.

Over and over, I taunted and teased him with my fingers and my tongue. Running it down to his taint, then back up to sink inside his tight hole. He cried out each time, hips moving faster on the bed.

When I thought he might come, I stood and looped my arms under his shoulders, pulling him up until his back met my chest.

“You’re going to come when I’m deep inside you,” I whispered in his ear.

I guided him around until he was facing me and divested him of the rest of his clothes. Naked and gorgeous standing before me, I lowered him to the bed, following

behind. I stole a kiss, then got off the bed to strip and get the supplies we needed.

I climbed back on top of Leslie and popped the cap. I poured some of the cool liquid on my hand. Shutting the lid, I tossed it on the other side of the bed and reached between his legs. Everything left my head in a rush.

“Holy hell,” I breathed. “I love how tight and warm you are for me.”

“More,” he begged.

I circled his hole, even as he continued to beg. I crooked my finger. His ass bucked off the bed. He gripped the base of his cock like he was holding on for dear life.

My dick throbbed. I couldn’t hold out any longer. I reached around the bed and picked up the condom. I tore the package with my teeth and pushed the latex down my shaft.

Leslie’s eyes stayed focused on me. His eyes full of love and awe. And while I loved seeing those things, I also wanted to witness him lose control.

“Now,” he mouthed, gripping my ass and forcing me forward.

“Now, what?” I held my body with just the tip of my dick touching his hole.

“Fuck me, Corey.”

I pressed into his tight hole. If I could have, I would’ve stayed there forever.

“Too slow,” he breathed. “I need you to fuck me.”

I smiled down at him. “My pleasure.”

Without any other warning, I slammed into Leslie. He shouted out into the room. I loved that he could take my strength and power.

My balls tightened and I froze for a minute. When I felt like I had my body back under my control and the shock of the moment wore off, I pulled back and shoved my hips forward. Sex had never been like this. There was something about being with a person you were in love with.

“Harder,” he begged, taking hold of his dick, but I smacked his hand away and wrapped my own fingers around him.

“As you wish.”

I sat back on my knees and holding his legs against my shoulders, I pounded into his body harder than I’d ever done before. I jerked his cock in time with my thrusts, cum leaking from the tip. I lifted his hips slightly and thrust.

“Fuck!” Leslie screamed. White jets of fluid landed over his chest and stomach. His ass clenched around me; all my attention was centered on my own dick. Nothing could have stopped my dick from exploding in that moment.

My entire body shuddered. Pins and needles ran down my arms and legs. Black spots danced in my vision. Unable to hold my weight, I collapsed onto Leslie’s chest, his arms banding around me, holding me tight as we both panted for breath.

We lay there; our bodies still entwined. As our breathing calmed and the silence continued to settle over us, the weight of the morning’s events started to settle on my chest. I wanted to lay there with Leslie. Shut out the world. Pretend none of it existed. The only way I could do that would be to avoid talking to my father.

Dad didn’t deserve to be left in the dark for so long.

I propped my head up onto my hand and looked down at Leslie. After everything we'd been through this morning, I hated to ask this of him. I didn't want to hurt him again. Yet, the thought of telling my father alone, watching him face a world where he lost the only woman he ever allowed himself to love, was horrible.

Honestly, I didn't know if I had the strength to sit there alone. Leslie had been away while my dad and I weren't speaking, and that had been its own version of hell.

He lifted his hand and caressed my cheek with his knuckles. "What are you thinking?"

"A question I'm afraid to ask you."

His hand froze and he turned a bit more to face me. "You never have to be afraid to ask me anything."

The back of my eyes started to burn. "I don't know if I can face my father alone. I don't know if I have the strength. But I promised you I'd leave you out—"

He covered my mouth with his finger. "You want moral support."

He said it so matter-of-factly. I wrapped my fingers around his and brought his hand away from my mouth. "I meant it when I said I would leave you out. I don't plan on telling him about the money. It wouldn't have mattered where it had come from anyway. I just don't know that I can sit by, trying to comfort my dad alone, when his heartache will cause my own. I don't—"

"We're a team. I'll come with you, to be there for you, so you can be there for your dad."

"Thank you." I gave him a kiss. "I know today is your day off, but would you be

okay going there now? I don't want this hanging over my head for the entire day."

"We can go whenever you're ready."

Leslie and I took showers, getting ourselves in order the best we could. When we arrived at my dad's apartment building, Leslie took my hand and intertwined our fingers as we walked from the car.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked.

"About my mother? Yeah. I made peace with her inevitable death a long time ago."

"What about your dad?"

"Not in a million years. He's hoped and prayed my entire life that she'd get clean and come home. This is absolutely going to crush him and there's not a damn thing I can do about it."

He stopped, tugging on my hand to stop with him. "You can be there for him. That's what he's going to need. You be there for him. When it's too much you say the word, and I'll be there for you."

I lifted our joined hands and kissed the back of his. "I love you."

"I love you too."

I glanced up at the building, dread filling my veins with ice water as we reached the elevator. I could barely make myself push the button.

The trembling in my legs only got worse when we reached his floor, and I stepped out. It grew quickly enough that I wasn't sure if I would make it down the hall. Leslie

pressed his hand firmly against my back, infusing me with strength I didn't know I had.

This was the first time I'd brought home someone to meet my dad in longer than I could remember. If only it were under better circumstances.

I lifted my hand to knock and stared at it. Leslie watched me for a bit before he lifted his own hand. He stayed there, waiting for me to give him permission to knock on the door. I nodded and his fist rap lightly on the wooden door.

"Coming," I heard my dad call from the other side. A sharp intake of breath proceeded the door opening. "When?"

There was no preamble. No hello. Nothing.

"Today." Dad stepped back and gestured for us to step inside.

Leslie tightened his grip on my hand, and we walked in to deliver the hardest news I ever had to give.

At least I had the love of my life there for support. We stayed with my dad, letting him tell stories about my mother. It hurt, but having Leslie there holding my hand made it more bearable. I took strength from the warm feel of his hand. And Dad took strength from finally being able to tell me the things I always put walls up against.

Knowing I had him by my side was enough to know that we'd be okay. Even in the face of all we'd have to deal with, everything was going to be all right.



31

LESLIE

It was my second to last night home for a long stretch. I wanted to spend tonight in Corey's arms. Leaving was the worst part. I used to love it, loved to travel. That got old a long time ago, but it wasn't bad because I had my teammates, my friends, with me. Now, well, I still had them but going with them meant leaving Corey and that was the worst fucking feeling, especially after everything that happened with his mother.

Corey was sprawled out on the bed, blissfully naked, half on me. His finger drew circles over my stomach.

"Corey?"

"Hmm?"

"Can we talk about what happens after I retire? I have a meeting with Kasper tomorrow and will tell the guys too. I don't need a solid plan in place. Just... I want to know—"

"Where we stand?"

"Yeah."

"What does your ideal future look like? And don't tell me what you think I want to

hear. You can factor me into it, but I want your vision.”

Swallowing, I closed my eyes and let everything fall away. The bed we were on, Corey on top of me in all his glory. I focused on my dreams. What I pictured when I couldn’t fall asleep when I was on the road.

“I’d like to keep my house here and my condo in Pittsburgh. This way if I visit family, I don’t have to stay with them. I want to work for the Jetties, but I’m not sure in what role. Something that doesn’t require me to travel with the team. Kasper might not have anything for me. If he doesn’t, maybe I could train players in the off-season. Kenna’s best friend does that. He was a player for a long time. Now he focuses his summers on helping Kenna.”

“Okay, what else?”

“I want to spend every night in my own bed and...”

“And?”

“I want you there. In bed with me. I want to fall asleep with my arms around you and wake with you beside me. On our days off, we could maybe fix up the backyard when it’s nice out. It’s pretty sparse out there. Maybe we could put in a pool. I have a lot of money set aside. We could travel too. Go anywhere in the world.”

“Keep going.”

I paused, knowing this next part was too far.

“Leslie, say it. This is your dream. I won’t judge you for it.”

“I want to get married. To stand before my family and friends and pledge my love to

another. I want to spend my life with love wrapped around me.” I didn’t say him, because again, it was pushing it. We’d only just said we loved each other. I decided to switch back to Corey and me. “We could go out on King’s boat or have dinners at their house. We could invite the guys over to my house and the people you work with. Big backyard barbecues. I can picture people laughing and enjoying themselves.”

“You want to be happy and have everyone around you feel the same.”

“I do. Is that weird?”

“No, it shows how much you care about others. I love that about you.”

“In a perfect world, we would all be together and doing well, loving life.”

He propped his chin on my chest. “It’s a good dream, but what if we could make it a reality?”

My eyes opened to find Corey’s latched on to them. “What are you saying?”

“I’m not making promises, but this dream of yours, I want to be part of it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, Leslie. Really.” He pushed up so he was hovering over me, his lips a breath from mine. “You made me crave it like I crave you. I’m here, with you, for whatever ride you want to go on.”

“I know we can’t move far. I wouldn’t ask that of you. You have your shop and it’s doing amazing. Would you want to move in with me?”

His lips kicked up on one side. “Are you asking me or is this part of your dream?”

“Both?”

He chuckled. “It’s not an ideal commute, but I also don’t drive there and home during normal rush hour.”

“What if we bought a small condo in the city for days when the weather is bad or you’re too tired to drive out?”

“We could do that. You know, there’s an apartment over my shop. It’s currently empty.”

“Why don’t you stay there now?” I asked.

“I already had my place when I opened the shop, so I rented it out for extra income.”

“Smart.”

“Even smarter now since it plays right into your plan.”

“Our plan. Make any changes you want as long as it includes you.”

He pressed a kiss to my lips. “To our future.”

I lightly gripped the back of his neck, not wanting him to move, so I could whisper, “To us,” against his neck.

\* \* \*

“Leslie, take a seat,” Kasper greeted as I entered his office.

I sat in a chair on the opposite side of his desk. “Thank you for seeing me.”

“I’m always here for you and the team. What’s going on?”

“I’d like to retire at the end of the season. My contract is up. It’s a good time to make a transition.”

“You know it’s not easy to go from doing this for as long as you have to not being out there every day.” I’d heard this before, about guys who retired and suddenly didn’t know what to do with themselves and their free time.

“That’s another thing I wanted to speak to you about. I’d like to stay on as part of the organization.”

Kasper rubbed his chin. “Have you thought about in what capacity?”

I grinned, an idea forming in a lightbulb moment. “I just had an idea. I like talking to people. Not as much as King, but I like to think I’m a friendly guy. I’m not cocky.”

“No, you’re not. And you can stay calm as long as you’re motivated to do so. This season has been a welcome improvement.”

“What about me working in PR with Katie?” It was a wild idea but one that once I thought of, started taking roots.

“PR?”

“I could go to college. Maybe ask Stephen about attending Espen University. I want to be an asset to the team. Plus, I know what it’s like to be on the receiving end of having cameras shoved in my face. This would be a way for me to help coach the guys who need it.”

“We have been thinking about bringing on another person to her team.”

“That could be me.” I pointed to myself. “Just let me get through college or even basic courses. I have no idea what’s involved.”

Kasper leaned forward, putting his forearms on the desk. “We’d pay for your education if you’re going to work for us.”

“I have enough money to do it myself.”

“Let us do it. We like to invest in our people. I like to invest in them.”

I couldn’t stop smiling. “Did we just have a full circle conversation where I said I was retiring, and you offered to send me to college so I could work for you in another capacity?”

He chuckled. “We did. I like to retain the talent we have if I can. I think with your experience, you could offer a unique perspective in that department. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“I’ve been thinking about retiring a lot, so yes, it is.”

“Okay. I need to speak with Katie, but I’m sure she’d love to have you on her side rather than causing her more work.” He winked then stood, holding out his hand, which I accepted. “Thank you for coming to me first. I’ll be in contact after I speak with Katie.”

“Thank you, Kasper.”

\* \* \*

How long could I delay telling the guys what I was doing? We were in the hotel, all of us getting our rooms. They were joking around. It was the perfect time to gather them and tell them, but damn, I was nervous.

Deciding to just get it over with, I sent a quick group text to the guys, asking them to come to my room. It wasn't long before they piled in, asking me what was going on.

Devon shut the door, ensuring it was just us who would hear, no one else.

"Okay," I said when all eyes were on me. "I've decided I'm retiring."

Devon offered a soft smile, already knowing I was thinking about this.

King, on the other hand, threw himself at me to hug me with all his might. I embraced him back. It took Hayes prying him off me so we could talk.

Hayes clapped me on the shoulder. "Congrats. That's a big deal."

"You're not shocked?"

"Nah. We know you. We play with you. You've changed for the better. I figured this might be coming. Besides, your contract is up at the end of the season. I would have been more shocked if you signed on for longer."

"Huh," I muttered. I guess this wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be.

"Are you moving?" King asked. "Going back to Pittsburgh?"

"No, I'm staying where I am, but also keeping my condo there. I want to be able to visit my family without needing to stay in a hotel or in a spare bedroom at my parents' house."

There he was, launching himself onto me again. “You’re going to come to family dinner night at my ma’s house once a month. Bring Corey.”

“King, you’re still going to see me at the arena.”

That got him off me. His eyes were wide. “What do you mean?”

“I talked with Kasper first, wanting to let him know.” After I was done speaking with him, I went to Coach and others. Would other teams handle things that way? No, probably not, but Kasper wasn’t a regular team owner either. “I’m going to attend college so I can work in PR for the team. Kasper spoke with Katie and it’s a done deal. I’m not going anywhere.”

Jansen grinned. “That’s fantastic. Hey, I’ll talk to Stephen. If you want to go to Espen U, that is.”

“I do. It’s close and won’t take time away from my personal life.”

“Things are going good with Corey then?” He was the only one who knew about what happened with Corey’s mom.

“We’re great.”

“Wait, you are going to do PR?” Noah asked. “You, the man who hates the press.”

“I don’t hate them unless they’re digging into my life or show up when I do shit I shouldn’t. The reporters at the games are fine.”

Noah rolled his eyes.

“I’m growing,” I said. “I want to stay with the Jetties, and this is the best way I



thought to do that. Actually, I didn't know what I wanted to do when I walked into Kasper's office, but it came to me. I'm a nice fucking guy. I could easily work in PR."

King patted my chest. "That's right. You can do anything you want. Oh, maybe now I can get some of these ideas I have for social media pushed through Katie. You'll be on her good side and can convince her." He grinned while looking past everyone like he was peering into the future.

"No," Hayes said. "Knox isn't going to try to get your ridiculous ideas through Katie."

King turned and glared at his partner. "My ideas aren't ridiculous."

"Not all of them, but most of them are."

"Whatever," he muttered. I was sure Hayes was right, knowing King like I did.

They kept bickering back and forth. All it did was warm my heart. I loved these guys. No matter what, they'd always have my back and I'd do the same for them.

Jansen hugged me tight, telling me he couldn't wait to see me as a student and would have Corey and me over to his house. Devon embraced me next, letting me know how proud he was of me, and that I'd still have to visit and skate on his rink at home. Noah said he'd invite me for dinner with him and his wife. King, well, he was King. I would be going to dinner with his family and also seeing him and Hayes at their home with Jamie.

These guys accepted and loved me as I did them. They'd been with me through all my shit and still stood by my side. I was beyond grateful for them.

There was a lot of love in this room. I was lucky to be part of it.

Corey

I took the stairs down, two at a time, to the bottom. There was still a lot of work left to do at the shop and I wanted to get an early start. I opened the door and looked at the left side of the space, completely covered by construction plastic. Behind it was going in two state-of-the-art tattoo station setups for Emilio and myself. Once this was complete, we'd begin working on the other side for Karli, Lila, and Freddy, the artist I'd hired a few months ago to help take on the extra clientele.

It hadn't been easy being down a few stations, but it had become more than necessary to remodel. If we were going to continue to supply the high level of experience and expectation, then we needed to meet that demand. It didn't help that the first time Leslie took me to King and Hayes's place, their husband, Jamie, talked to me all night about the different ways to incorporate tech without losing the true tattooing process.

From then on, I hadn't been able to get the idea out of my head. After many weeks of talking to Leslie about it and how it might affect our time together, we agreed that it was the right time to complete it. I could focus on the concept with Jamie while the guys were on the road, then bring in an architect to create the vision we were looking for.

Even with the construction going on during the early mornings and days off, the demand for our services hadn't lessened. If possible, we'd gotten even busier, having to stagger sessions for Karli and Freddy.

I lifted the construction plastic and smiled. The stations were everything I wanted

them to be, and I couldn't wait to use them.

"Looking good." I glanced over my shoulder to see Leslie standing right behind me.

I laughed. "How did you get in here without me hearing you?"

A smirk lifted the corner of his lips. "I have my secrets."

I laughed even harder and wrapped my arm around his waist. "I have my ways of getting them out of you. But, yes, it looks fantastic."

"Will it be done soon?"

"Should be ready to go this weekend. At least the station will be, not everything Jamie has planned. The construction company told me they would have the work completed on Wednesday, and I can start moving things over Thursday before the shop opens and after it closes."

Leslie lifted his arms over his head, stretching. "Does that mean we can spend the weekend at the house?"

He'd been so patient the last two weeks with me spending more time at the apartment above the shop than at the house. Depending on how much work he had for school, some nights he would stay with me and others he'd stay at the house. I missed sleeping next to him, but it was only temporary.

"Yes, it does." I turned and placed a kiss on his lips. "Thank you for being so patient."

"Anything for you." Leslie's phone beeped. He pulled it from his pocket. "King wants to meet for lunch after my morning class."

I smiled. “Tell him I said hi.” Then I smacked Leslie on the ass. “Don’t be late for class.”

He gave me another quick kiss. “I’ll see you later tonight.” He gave me a wink and walked out the door.

I gave the area one last look, then grabbed my tablet and went to check my schedule for the day.

A few hours later, I heard loud, boisterous voices coming from the front of the shop. I left the storeroom and went up front to see what the commotion was about. It shouldn’t have surprised me to see King, Hayes, Noah, Jansen, Devon, and Leslie standing in the waiting area.

Leslie came over and wrapped his arms around my waist. “I missed you,” he said, giving me a quick kiss.

“I missed you too.” I squeezed him tighter. “Is that what this visit is all about?”

“Nope,” King said. “We want ink.”

I leaned back in Leslie’s arms and looked him in the eye. “We do, do we?” Leslie had gotten another piece of work from me before the season was over, but this was the first time the entire team had come in.

He nodded. “We want to get matching sticks and pucks, but not all in the same spot.”

“I can do that.”

The Jetties had won the Stanley Cup again for the second year in a row. Between that and Leslie announcing his retirement, the parties had been endless. It wasn’t long after that Leslie had started working on his degree in public relations.

“Let me draw something up.”

I grabbed the tablet and got to work.

“This place is looking great. Jamie is really excited about the technology aspect. He’s been busy working on it,” Hayes said.

“I can’t wait to see the final product.” I added a few finishing touches and showed the picture to the guys.

“That’s perfect,” Devon said. “Exactly what we were thinking.”

“No one besides Leslie has any tattoos yet?”

“Not me,” Jansen and Noah said in unison, while the others shook their heads.

“Okay, you’re all putting them in different places, right?”

“Yes,” Leslie answered, placing his lips on my neck.

“Give me a few minutes to mix the ink and you decide who is going first. I’ll be back.”

I went to the back and started mixing the right colors. When I returned, King was sitting in my chair.

“I’m going first. I have to prove to these guys how easy this is.”

“Fuck you,” Jansen laughed.

King parted his lips to keep going when Hayes covered King’s mouth with his hand. After a second, a soft groan left his lips.

“Nope. Not in here,” I shooed Hayes away. King smirked and I pointed at him. “I have duct tape if we need it.”

The guys busted out laughing. I ignored their ribbing and grabbed the gun, getting ready to start King’s piece. King flinched a few times, so of course the guys gave him shit for it. One by one, I tattooed each of them until I got to Leslie, who decided to go last.

“I’ll be the final one of these fools you put your hands on for today.” I picked up my gun and pressed it to Leslie’s skin. It wasn’t the first time, and I doubted it would be the last.

When I finished, all six of them stood together, letting me get a picture of their matching tattoos.

“They look great. Thank you, Corey,” Devon said.

“Anytime.”

Jansen looked down at his calf, then back at Leslie. “Now, I see why you have more than one. I think I’ll be back after this heals.”

“I can design anything you want,” I said.

“Dinner at our place next week?” Hayes asked.

The guys all agreed, and one by one filed out of the shop after I gave them their care instructions.

“Sorry to wreak havoc on your day,” Leslie said.

I reached up and cupped his cheek. “You never do that. In fact, I like being able to

see you every day.”

“I guess me not traveling hasn’t really sunk in for you either?”

“Nope, but I’m excited about all of the things we’ll get to do together without having to worry about the next time you have to hit the road.”

He dropped his forehead to mine. “I love you. Thank you for being there for me through everything.”

“Always. I love you too. How about we go back to the house tonight?”

He glanced over at the construction plastic. “But you still have a lot going on here.”

“I do, but you have work to do and I’m tired of being apart at night. The drive is nothing as long as I get to spend the night with you in my arms.”

“Sounds perfect to me.”

I pressed my lips to his. This was home. It didn’t matter how far I drove or where I came from, this man in my arms would always ground me. Wherever he was, I wanted to be.

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