



Breaking Through the Past (Espen Jetties #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: A defenseman who would do anything for his team, on or off the ice, Jansen McKenna thought he was living the dream until his girlfriend left him for the world to see.

He was in his element when he was playing the sport he loved. Outside of it, he drifted. Then he ran into Stephen Forrester. Falling for his ex's father wasn't on his radar. Once he got to know him, Jansen didn't want to let him go.

Stephen knew he should avoid Jansen. Between his troubled relationship with his daughter and his own shortcomings, he thought nothing good could come from spending more time with the hockey star.

If they were going to have a chance at a happily ever after, they'd have to break through their past. Jansen and Stephen would need to put themselves and their relationship first and hope the fallout was worth it.

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JANSEN

Did anything good ever happen in a grocery store? It had food and other items I needed to survive but outside of that, was it a place people loved coming to? I didn't think so. It wasn't like there was any entertainment. A kid running around, knocking down produce while screaming with glee didn't count.

I held my list and pointed the cart to where I wanted to go next. I'd already gotten a bunch of healthy stuff like fruits and vegetables.

Could someone else have done this for me? Sure. Did I want them to? No. I had the money to hire an assistant, but I wasn't that kind of guy. I liked to do things myself when I could. And since it was the offseason, I had more than enough time on my hands.

As I walked around, I noticed how many couples there were in the store. It made me momentarily remember my ex, the woman I loved who couldn't bother to feel the same. I groaned internally. It had been long enough that I didn't still have feelings for her, but I missed having someone. A person to talk to about my day. To hold in my arms at night. Someone who was wholly mine.

The clubs were only good for so long. Sure, they helped me get over Serilda faster. She broke it off with me and started dating soon after. Hookups were great for the night. They ended there though. The woman of my dreams wasn't going to be found under strobe lights while gyrating against my dick.

People smiled at me if they recognized me when I was walking with my cart. Some did a double take. One guy asked for an autograph.

Being a player on the Espen Jetties meant when I was in public, I was always on. I loved it though. Loved that people here enjoyed hockey. And we brought the Stanley Cup home for them last month.

Fuck, it was amazing. The crowd. The win. The parade. Hoisting the Cup. Definitely one of the best days I'd ever had.

Now I was just like everyone else in the pasta aisle, trying to decide between which brand of fusilli I was going to buy and what sauce would work best with it. Yup, I was living the life.

There was a reason I was walking as slow as I was through the store, and no, it wasn't because people knew who I was. It was because my pathetic ass didn't want to return home yet. To an empty place where there was no loved one, no someone special waiting for me.

Yup, pathetic. Here I was at the top of my career, playing my heart out and winning. My mind kept going back to how alone I was, even if I didn't want it to. I wasn't someone who usually dwelled on my personal life. If I was meant to be with someone, I'd find them.

Deciding to push that to the back of mine mind, I kept on moving from aisle to aisle. Eventually, I was in the last one, which held the cold stuff. Why were there so many yogurt options? I had the worst time deciding because I loved them all. Chocolate, strawberry, cheesecake, cookie dough, okay so I loved the extra sweet ones.

"Jansen?" someone said behind me. Not a Holy shit, it's Jansen McKenna! A soft, quiet use of my name instead.

Turning, I saw a man with light brown hair and green eyes. A man who seeing him sent a slight pinch to my chest. “Stephen, hi. What are you doing here?” I pressed my lips together. Did I seriously just ask him why he was in a grocery store?

“Staring at the yogurt like you.”

“You caught me. Damn flavors. I can’t decide.”

He stepped up beside me. “I’m partial to strawberry banana.”

I rubbed my chin. “That is a good one.”

Stephen was my ex’s father. Someone who came to our home games, wore my jersey, and cheered the Jetties on. I instantly felt comfortable with him the first time I met him. And I’d never felt that way before when meeting a girlfriend’s father. Stephen was different. I wasn’t sure why. He just was.

Then Serilda dumped me, and it was like I lost her family too. I enjoyed spending time with her dad and his boyfriend. Being with them made me not so homesick for Michigan. I wasn’t lucky enough to have my parents move here like Devon did. Not that I’d ever knock him for it. It wasn’t like that. I was jealous.

The only time mine came were for playoffs. I bought their plane tickets and paid for the hotel. My parents were both middle-class workers who’d busted their asses all my life to give me everything I needed so I could excel at hockey. But my entire family was back in Michigan. I had aunts and uncles, cousins, and my brother.

God, I missed them.

A hand touched my arm. “Are you okay?” Stephen. I was so lost in thought, I forgot where I was.

I realized I had a yogurt in my hand and was looking at it like it held all the answers of the world. “Yeah, sorry. A lot on my mind.”

“I won’t keep you.” I glanced over at him and really took him in. Dressed in gray slacks and a white button-down, with his tie still firmly in place. If it wasn’t for the heat outside, I was sure he’d still be wearing the suit jacket he no doubt had on all day at his office. Stephen was a man who always had on at least business casual clothes, unless he was at a game, of course. He looked good when he dressed for work. Stephen was the dean at Espen University.

I wasn’t a stupid man, but my knowledge didn’t come close to his. Intelligent as hell, he never made me feel like I wasn’t. He didn’t talk to people like they were beneath him. He was down-to-earth and an all-around great guy.

“No, don’t worry about it,” I told him and smiled. “I like the company.” And there was the pathetic side of me again, latching on to my ex’s dad so I had someone to talk to.

We spoke for a bit while he shopped. I had everything I needed but liked walking around with him. There was no mention of his daughter, which I appreciated. If I wanted to know about her, all I had to do was go on to one of her social media accounts, where she laid her life out like she was trying to find someone to do a movie about her. Dating actors left and right. Living a glamorous, albeit, shallow life.

It wasn’t until after we’d broken up, I realized a lot about her. Hindsight. Getting out while I did was for the best. I could see that now, even if I didn’t before, because I wasn’t lying when I said I loved her... past tense.

As we were nearing checkout, Stephen brought up the Emperors, Espen’s Major League Baseball team. He looked down at his cart. “All the things I need to watch the game Saturday.”

“Aren’t you and Peter going to the game?”

“Oh. I guess you don’t know.” His eyes lifted to mine. “Peter left me a few months ago.”

“Ah, man, I’m sorry about that.” I placed my hand on his shoulder and gave him a gentle squeeze. “That sucks.”

“It’s not something I like to focus on.” The line moved up, but Stephen didn’t. “I have an idea. How about you join me for the game on Saturday? I have two tickets. I’d hate for them to go to waste.” A baseball game that got me out of the house and my boring life? Sign me up.

At least it was a weekend game. A game during the day in the middle of the week wouldn’t work. Training came first in summer.

“Are you sure you don’t want to take someone else?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want you to join me.”

“Then count me in.” I grinned. “I haven’t been to a baseball game in forever.”

I also didn’t know much about the team, outside of who the popular players were. I had just enough knowledge to talk to our team owner about it since he was married to one of the players. I didn’t want to look like a jackass in front of Kasper Warnes-Wilder.

“Great. I’ll send you a message.” Yes, I had his phone number. I had to get him tickets to the Jetties’ games often. We never talked outside of games or meeting for dinner with Serilda and Stephen’s boyfriend.

This was new, different since it would just be the two of us. But I always got along well with him. Stephen was a good man, and I was going to get out of my place and have some fun. Point for McKenna.

We parted ways after Stephen paid for his groceries and agreed to text. What would Serilda think if she knew I was hanging out with her father? Wait, I didn't care. She lost the chance to give a shit about what I did when we broke up. But this was her father, so maybe she would care. Whatever. If Stephen wasn't worried about it then neither was I.

As I was walking to my car, my phone rang. I looked at the screen and a smile lit my face. "How's my brother?" I answered.

He groaned. "Mom is torturing me."

"I am not!" I heard from the background.

"What's she making you do now?"

"She's trying to get me to eat healthy. I seriously need to move out."

I chuckled. "God forbid you eat broccoli."

"Hey, just because you need to stay in shape doesn't mean I do too."

I opened the hatch on my Subaru and started putting my groceries in, while keeping the phone pressed to my ear. "There's nothing wrong with wanting to be fit."

"You sound like Mom."

"That's because we love you," I said in a sweet, high-pitched voice.

“Knock it off.”

“Awww, you know I love you, Gare.”

“Fuck you.” He laughed.

“Gareth!” Mom yelled.

“I’ve said way worse than that,” he called back. “Anyway...” I could hear rustling, letting me know my brother was moving. Then a door closed.

“What’s going on?” I asked seriously.

He sighed. “I’m tired of this town.”

“The offer stands for you to move here. I’d be happy to have you.”

“I know, but I don’t really want to leave. Everyone’s here except you.” My brother was like my parents, he loved being surrounded by family. I was the odd one who left. Hardly anyone in our extended family did.

I closed the back of my car and got into the front seat so I could give him my full attention. “Do you want me to visit again?” I was there for a bit after the season was over. I’d go back in a heartbeat if Gareth needed me. I could find a trainer there. It wouldn’t be ideal, but I’d make it work.

“No, you have to get ready for next season. I’m just in a shitty mood.”

“That’s okay. We all get in those.”

Gareth was twenty, almost twenty-one. When he was in high school, he came out as

bi. It didn't go over well with others. Fortunately, our family was supportive and didn't bat an eye when he came out. He dealt with a lot and my parents found him a therapist. It made a big difference. He only had a few months of high school left when he told us. Not everyone was bullying him, but all it took was one to make his life hell.

After graduation, Gareth was happier, and I loved seeing it. I'd threatened on numerous occasions to return home and talk to the asshole who bullied my brother in school. But he didn't want that. He wanted to handle it on his own.

"I miss you," he told me.

"I miss you too. You could fly out, spend the summer here."

"Nah, can't right now. I gotta work."

"If anything changes..."

"You'll be the first I call."

Gareth and I were really close. It was hard following my dream of playing professional hockey while being away from home at the same time. He saw how much it bothered me being gone. Gareth became my biggest supporter. He watched almost every game on TV. And if he missed one, he caught the highlights after.

"What's going on with you?" he asked. "No new girlfriend yet?"

"Nah, I haven't found anyone. How about you?"

I could practically hear the eye roll. "Sure, the queer scene is bustling here."

“I’m telling you, come to Espen. There are some great clubs my friends love.”

“Yeah, yeah. Tell me more about what you have going on.”

I took the hint and changed the subject. Gareth and I talked about almost anything, but he wasn’t in the mood to chat about romance, which was fine with me. I wasn’t either. “I’m going to an Emperors’ game this weekend with Serilda’s father.”

“No shit?”

“He’s a good guy.”

“And your ex’s dad. Jesus, Jans, you sure know how to mix shit up.”

I laughed. “It’s just a baseball game.”

STEPHEN

The stadium was filled to capacity. People milled around the concourse looking for food or drinks. I, on the other hand, was looking for Jansen. I didn't know what I'd been thinking when I invited him to the game. He'd looked so lonely and lost when I saw him staring at the shelf of yogurt, I couldn't help but approach him.

When Serilda ended her relationship with Jansen, I knew she was making a huge mistake. He'd been so good to her, treated her the way any father would want someone to treat their daughter. Not that my daughter cared much for my opinion. I did my best to give her all the love and support I could, but a father's love could only go so far when their daughter constantly kept him at arm's length away.

I tried talking to her a few times after she left Jansen, attempting to figure out if something had happened or why she would let go of a man who cared for her like he did. Not that I expected her to stay with a man she didn't love, but it seemed more like my daughter was interested in being on the arm of a different celebrity every few weeks. She'd always been more like her mother than me. Indecisive and unsure. I'd been a good way for Gisela to pass the time until Serilda tied our lives together forever, something I still thought Gisela blamed me for.

Tonight was not the time to worry about Serilda and Gisela. This was the first time I'd been to a game in months. Once Peter left, I decided not to use my season tickets. Sometimes I'd give them to one of the professors at the college, while others I let the seats sit empty. If I was going to sit by myself and watch the game, I'd rather do it in

the comfort of my own home than surrounded by strangers in a stadium.

Being here was an experience. One I missed when I stopped coming, and one I was happy to have tonight. The sounds of the crowd, the chants, the cheers, and the smells. I was glad to be back.

I saw the moment Jansen walked up to the gate. It was hard to miss the six-foot three-inch man who stood above most of the crowd. He held out the ticket I'd sent him the night before so the woman could scan it. His eyes darted around the area when he stepped through the gate, until they landed on me. The corner of his mouth kicked up. It seemed like he needed to get out of the house as much as I did.

I offered my hand to him as he approached. "Jansen, I'm so glad you could make it."

He took my hand and shook. "It's nice to get out of the house for something besides training."

"Did you want to get something to eat before we head to the seats?"

Jansen rubbed a hand over his stomach. "I could eat."

I knew Jansen tried to eat healthy most of the time. Whenever he had dinner with Serilda and me, he was conscious about his choices. "There's plenty of junk food, but there's also a green eating place on the second level. I've never had their food before. It's the healthiest option I can think of in the ballpark."

"I don't need to eat healthy tonight. I'm out, having fun. Greasy food goes with that. Show me your favorite place to eat."

I smiled. "That's easy."

I led Jansen to the Emperor's Grill. It was simple, but they had one of the best bacon cheeseburgers in the city. After having theirs, I'd never been able to order it anywhere else. We placed our orders and waited for the food and drinks before heading to our seats.

The season tickets had been a luxury purchase when I first got tenure as a professor at Espen University. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined being the dean. Since then, I'd upgraded my seats to behind home plate.

"These seats are great," he said. "I haven't been here before."

"More into winter sports?"

He chuckled. "You could say that."

It wasn't long before a few of the people surrounding us noticed who sat next to me. The fervor increased until fans got up enough nerve to ask for pictures and autographs. Jansen smiled and gave them what they wanted. He was so down-to-earth, which had probably doomed his and Serilda's relationship from the start. She only loved the attention of being a model when people kept their distance. She wasn't interested in appeasing fans or trying to win their support, while Jansen was the exact opposite.

The Emperors took the field and the excitement about my guest died down. He sat again and looked at me apologetically. "Sorry. I can't tell them no."

"It's all right, Jansen. I understand you want to make your fans smile. It doesn't hurt me if you take a few pictures with them. I'm just happy to be back in the stadium to watch the games."

He grabbed a couple of fries from the cup and lifted them to his mouth. "You really

haven't been to a game since Peter left?"

"No. It isn't the same when you're sitting here alone. No one to talk about bad calls and missed plays with."

"My baseball knowledge is limited." He grinned. "I only know enough to talk about the best players, not what they do on the field."

I pulled the foil back on my burger. "Well, I guess I'll have to teach you."

"Works for me."

"I assume you know who's behind the plate." The catcher happened to be the husband of the man who signed Jansen's paycheck.

He chuckled again and relaxed into his seat, almost like the weight of the world had come off his shoulders. "Yeah, I've met Marcus plenty of times."

"With Ayden pitching tonight, it should be a great game."

"I've met Ayden too, but not as many times as Marcus. Adyen's come to some of the Jetties' functions with his husband."

"Yes, I remember they got married last year." I took a bite out of my burger as the first pitch slid over the plate. The crowd cheered. There was nothing like starting a game with a strike.

I watched Jansen out of the corner of my eye. Hopefully, he enjoyed the game. It was nice to see him smiling again. Something I'd seen him do plenty of times when he had dinner with Serilda and me, but it was also something I noticed was missing after she'd left. He didn't have the same bright, fun spirit when he was on the ice.

He groaned. “Damn, this burger is good.”

Jansen’s excitement pulled me away from thoughts of my daughter. With all the difficulties we’d had of late, I didn’t need to bring my mood down. For tonight, I’d enjoy the company and the game.

“They really are the best. I haven’t found anyone who can make a burger like this outside of the stadium.” I took another bite and washed it down with some water. “How’s training going? Are you still working with Jagger?”

“Yeah, I saw him yesterday. He’s tough as hell on me, but at least I’ll be ready when September comes.”

“Let’s not wish away the summer.”

“Not looking forward to the new semester?”

I sighed. “August and September always bring their own set of problems. Once the school year starts, things settle down a bit.”

“You used to be a history professor, right?”

“Yes. Some days, I miss my time in the classroom. Less problems to solve.”

Jansen smiled. “I’m sure you’re good at solving anything that comes your way.”

“That’s what I’m told. Some of it, I wish weren't problems in the first place.”

The crack of a bat sounded, and my gaze snapped in the direction of the plate. The Redwoods were still at bat.

“Come on, Devlin!” I shouted as Vander Devlin, the Emperors’ left fielder, ran toward the wall, leaping into the air for the ball. It wasn’t easy to see from where we sat, but his giant smile filled the screen of the Jumbotron as he landed with the ball in his glove. “Yes.” I set my burger down and clapped. Those were the kind of plays it was better to be in the stadium for.

“That’s an amazing feeling,” Jansen said, his eyes on the field.

“What is?” That had been the last out in the top of the first, so the teams were switching places.

“When you make a play that not many others would have been able to. Sometimes it’s luck, sometimes it’s skill, but it’s always a burst of adrenaline like no other.”

“I’ve seen you make plenty of plays like that on the ice, as you snatch the puck away from the other team’s center when they’re about to make an impossible shot.”

“And it feels amazing every single time.”

Vander happened to be the first in the lineup who started a hitting spree for the Emperors. By the time the third out was called, four runs had scored. Jansen had finished his burger and was on his feet cheering as each player came across the plate. His enthusiasm was infectious, and I found myself jumping up and down next to him. He high-fived the people sitting near us when Callen Teague, the team’s star, hit a line drive triple into left field. Eventually, the inning came to an end.

We sat down after the last out was called, grabbing a drink, and catching our breath from all the excitement. “I’m glad you’re having fun.”

“It’s way better than sitting home alone.”

I watched him closely for a moment. “You’re still young. What are you doing sitting at home? There are so many things you could be doing rather than hanging out with an old man at a baseball game.”

He turned toward me. “First, you’re not old by a long shot. The last time I checked forty was the new thirty.”

“I’m forty-three.”

“Thirty-three then. Second, the game is great and I’m enjoying your company.” A smile pulled up the corners of his lips.

“I’m glad you’re having fun.”

When I’d invited Jansen the other day, he seemed like he needed a pick-me-up. And maybe it had been a little selfish of me. I missed having someone to talk to who wasn’t an employee at the college. I had friends, but most of them were in the history circles. Their interests didn’t extend to professional sports. Peter had been the opposite. He didn’t enjoy my interest in history or documentaries, something I’d built my entire life and career on.

Tonight was a nice change of pace. Together we watched the game with no more talk about being old or going out. We focused on the plays and the antics of the Emperors’ mascot.

It had been one of the most relaxing and fun nights I’d had at a baseball game in a long time.

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JANSEN

And I was bored. Again. Because I was alone and didn't know what to do with myself.

Yesterday with Stephen was great. I enjoyed the game. It was so different being in the crowd, cheering for those playing, than being the one in the game. I thrived on the excitement of those around me. Cheered with them when the Emperors did well. It was something I wanted to do again.

But it wasn't just the crowd and the feel of being part of it. It was Stephen too. He wasn't like my other friends. Maybe it was because he was older, though I still didn't consider him old. So what if he was sixteen years older than me? When I was with him, it felt like we were much closer in age.

It was just a number, right? No reason to care about the age of the person I was hanging out with.

Would it be weird if I asked him to hang out again? I mean, there were people yesterday who saw me with him. It wasn't like I could fly under the radar in a sea of Espen fans, even if they were there to watch the Emperors and not the Jetties. I had an Emperors hat on, thinking it would help me blend in. It did not.

I wasn't someone who cared what others thought of me. At least in terms of my personal relationships. Who I was friends with was my business. Same with who I

dated. That didn't mean I could go out and do all kinds of wild shit. It always had a way of working back to the Jetties. Management breathing down my neck wasn't something I needed.

My thoughts went to Knox. Leslie Knoxtton was our goalie and, fuck, was he talented. Last season he decided to drink and fight as much as he helped us win games. By the end of the season, he was calming down, more focused, driven. Then at the parade after we won the Cup, he was drinking again. I couldn't chastise him. I was sure Devon and others did that enough.

Deciding I needed to check in with him, I reached for my phone where it sat on the table next to the couch and pulled up his contact information. The phone rang twice before I heard a muffled hello.

"Knox?"

"Kenna, what's going on?" There was rustling in the background.

"Are you in bed? It's almost noon and you're only in Pittsburgh, not another time zone."

At the end of June, he let me know he was heading home for the summer. A lot of hockey players did. Knox was here last offseason though. He wanted a break this year, to get away, and thought it might help with things. His family lived close to Pittsburgh, and Knox had a condo in the city. He got his trainers lined up and was working with a few guys from another team who were also there.

"It's Sunday," he grumbled. "We're supposed to be in bed after a night out."

"Um, no. You might be but I'm not. I was a good boy and didn't go clubbing."

“Yeah, well, my sister decided she wanted to go out and I was going to be her muscle.”

“Kara’s what, twenty-one? Almost the same age as my brother.”

“Going on thirty. Apparently, some of her so-called friends told her she acted too stuck up, not like a college student with the summer off. She took that to mean she has to party her ass off.”

“Sounds a little familiar.” Not the too uptight part but the partying.

“Shut it, Kenna. If you called me to bitch about my behavior, you can shove the phone right up your ass.”

“Damn, you’re grumpy this morning.” I paused. “I was only busting on you.”

“It’s getting old. I’ll have you know I’ve been good since I got here. My sister is the one who needs someone watching over her now. I left her alone so I could take a piss last night and when I came back, there was a guy groping her. She was trying to push him off, but he wouldn’t move.”

“Please don’t tell me you started swinging.” Knox wasn’t always a levelheaded fighter. If he saw someone in trouble, he’d jump right into the fray. He was also as protective over his two sisters as I was over my brother.

“Nope. I did give him a warning and might have threatened his life if he touched my sister again. Then I dragged her out of there. I need to talk to her today. She’s letting these people get in her head that she needs to be someone she isn’t. Kara’s so damn smart. She’s going to be a lawyer someday.” I could hear how proud Knox was in his voice.

I heard loud banging on the other end of the line.

“Come in,” he called.

I couldn’t make out what the other person said.

“In the kitchen, to the left of the stove in the cabinet,” he replied then sighed. “Kara’s hunting through my place for coffee. I didn’t feel like driving her back to my parents’ house last night, so she crashed in my spare room.”

“You should talk to her. Probably about more than just what’s going on with her.”

“Yeah, I get what you’re saying.”

“It’s good that you’re there. I bet your family missed you.”

The grin in his voice was easily heard when he said, “They did. Mom’s been making my favorite meals to coax me out there for dinner. Luckily, it’s only a forty-five-minute drive each way to their house. And it’s quieter, kind of like my place in Espen.”

“Homesick?”

“I’m not sure what feels like home anymore. Did you ever...”

Knox and I weren’t as close as King and Hayes or Devon was with King and Hayes. Devon D’Agostino was our center on the first line. Fuck, was he good. So were Kingston Walker and Hayes Garner who were the wingers. I was a defenseman along with Noah Nordin. I talked to Noah often and the others, but when the offseason came around, I spent so much time training with Jagger I didn’t see the guys as often as I should. Maybe I wouldn’t feel so damn alone if I did.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me,” I said. “I won’t repeat it.”

He let out a breath. “Did you ever feel like you were adrift? I have my house in Espen. The team is there, as is the sport I love to play. Then I come back here to my condo and family. But I don’t have that comfort of home anywhere. I don’t feel like I belong.”

“Knox, are you okay?”

“I’m not depressed if that’s what you’re getting at. I’m just... off. It’s weird.”

“Home isn’t always a place. It can be a person or somewhere you visit.”

He snorted. “Did you take up writing greeting cards once the season ended?”

“No, you ass.” I laughed. “I’m just saying, sometimes home isn’t an actual space.”

“You miss your family, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” But not enough to give up on my dream of playing professional hockey. I meant what I said about home not always being a place. My home was in Michigan, even with my place here in Espen. For a while, I thought home could have been with Serilda, but she stomped on that with her sharp stiletto heels.

“What have you been up to?” he asked. “I have to give Kara time to caffeinate her system before I spring a brotherly talk on her.”

I filled him in on my training, my adventures in grocery shopping—which were sad—and the game with Stephen. The more I talked to Knox, the more I smiled thinking about it. I had fun. Not with my friends. Not with the team. Not winning a game. Just being a guy at a baseball game like everyone else.

That was something I loved. Being a regular person. I didn't always get it, as evidenced by the Emperors' fans who noticed me, but they didn't bother me the whole game. They got photos and signatures and went back to their friends and family.

Unlike my brother, Knox didn't say anything about me hanging out with my ex's father. Then again, Knox was one of the least judgmental people I knew. If his friends were happy, that was what mattered.

After enough time had passed to where Knox thought he could confront his sister, we hung up with a promise to talk again soon. My summer resolution should be to hang out with my friends more. Was that a thing? Summer resolutions? I wasn't a fan of the New Year's ones. They never panned out, so I stopped making them.

Summer was different.

Summer was time for me to be free and do what made me happy.

Outside of training with Jagger, of course. I never knew what he was going to throw at me from one day to the next. He kept me on my toes. He also kept me ready for the next season. We had a lot to prove since we'd just won the Cup. I wasn't the only one busting my ass. From what I heard, King and Hayes were training with Devon. Knox was doing his thing out in Pittsburgh. And Noah had his own stuff planned out.

I sent off a quick text to Knox, even though I just got off the phone with him.

Me: I'm making a summer resolution.

Knox: The fuck is that? Sounds like a fruity drink to sip by a pool while you contemplate life.

Me: I'm making a resolution to spend more time with friends. More doing things that make me happy. You should make one too.

Knox: This is weird, but okay. No fighting.

I'd take that. He didn't say no drinking, but he did mention he was doing good with that. I didn't think he was lying when he said it. He didn't sound hungover before, just tired. I would be too if I had to keep some asshole from grabbing at my brother in a club.

Me: There you go! Summer resolutions!

Knox: You're so weird.

Me: Yeah, but you love it.

I was smiling by the time I was done texting him. I needed this. It was weird. I was weird. This felt like a good thing, a step in the right direction to make my summer more memorable. Not all about training, though I still had to do it. I had time to enjoy life.

My thoughts brought me back to yesterday with Stephen. I wondered if he'd think I was strange if I did text him to hang out again. He seemed to enjoy himself. I certainly relaxed around him.

Just as I was about to text him, my phone rang. My mom's picture popped up on the screen. She worked second shift at a call center as the assistant manager. Today was one of her days off. It wasn't a job she loved or felt passionate about. It was one that helped pay the bills. She'd moved up over the years to where she was now. I had no doubt she'd work there until she was up for retirement. My family didn't rely on me for money, though I'd give it to them if they let me.

The smile I had before stayed firmly in place as I talked to her and then my dad. They filled me in on the goings-on of home and I told them what I was up to. I missed them but when I hung up, I didn't feel so homesick. Because I had a plan. A summer resolution to have fun. To be happy. To not dwell on who wasn't here but who was.

Before I knew it, I'd be back at the arena for preseason. My time would be all about hockey. I needed to take advantage of what I had now.

STEPHEN

The door to my office closed and I breathed a sigh of relief. The first bit of peace and quiet I'd had since I walked in there that morning. Apparently, the issues with the fall semester had already begun and we were at least a month out still.

A text had come through on my phone over an hour ago. I didn't have a chance to check it when three more people needed my help. As I reached for the phone, I wondered if I was about to send my day into another tailspin. I groaned when I opened the message.

Serilda: Dinner at 7 TTYL

Serilda never met a proper sentence or grammar that she actually liked. Thankfully, Gisela convinced her to hire a personal assistant years ago. It wasn't that my daughter hadn't had the best education, she just didn't seem to care if she used that education or not. I set my phone back on the desk. I knew she didn't expect an answer. If I showed I showed. If not, she'd have dinner and do something else with the rest of her night.

I could only guess the reason I heard from her was she felt she needed to get her obligatory parental dinner out of the way before she partied for the weekend. Her assistant told me she'd be in the States for a week before heading back to Europe. I figured Gisela convinced her to have dinner with me every time she came, otherwise, I doubted I'd know Serilda was in town.

I had to give it to Gisela, considering how things began and ended with us, she encouraged Serilda to spend time with me. Although, I had a feeling part of Serilda's attitude toward me was a direct reflection of what she saw growing up.

Gisela and I met when I'd gone to Europe to study abroad for a semester. With only about four hundred years of American history, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to be in places rich with thousands and thousands of years of history. One night, I'd gone out to the local tavern, exciting for a twenty-year-old who wasn't allowed near a bar at home.

Across from the bar sat a woman with long, blond hair and the bluest eyes I'd ever seen. My attraction to her was instantaneous. I'd dated both men and women, but never had one set me on fire the way Gisela did. We spent the night talking and drinking. Next thing I knew, she handed me her number and promised we'd meet up the next night.

On and on it went like that for two months. I kept up with my work, then spent every free moment I had with her. All the years I thought I would end up with a man in my future were tossed to the wind the moment Gisela smiled at me the first time. I loved her smile. Until the day I walked into her apartment, her face streaked with tears and her smile gone, only to be replaced by a heartbreaking frown.

That was the night I found out I was going to be a father at the age of twenty. I didn't know what to do or say. We spent the night trying to find a solution. I held her while she cried.

Gisela had been born into a wealthy family. It was how she afforded a prime apartment in the city. However, along with that, her family was very religious. The only way Gisela could keep living the lifestyle she'd grown accustomed to would be for us to get married. Something neither of us were ready for.

While I wanted Gisela like no person before her, I thought I'd have years to finish my degrees and start a family. Before arriving at Gisela's that night, I'd looked into transferring permanently. Once we decided to marry, Gisela made it clear she wanted to live in America and raise our child there. I had a feeling it was easier for her to mourn the life she'd given up when she was in unfamiliar surroundings.

We held a brief ceremony a few weeks before the end of the semester. While I finished my final papers, Gisela and her parents had taken the time to find and purchase a place for us to live as a family near school. Gisela never smiled much once we arrived home to the condo her parents had chosen. I did my best to make her happy, but how could I? Everything she had ever wanted had been snatched away in one night of passion.

Serilda came along and Gisela found a new passion. Doting on our daughter, who was the spitting image of her. She went shopping constantly, while I did my best to focus on finishing my degree. By the time I'd finished my master's, Gisela had convinced her parents to hire a nanny to give her more time to focus on her other passions.

I worked my way through being a teaching assistant while trying to publish my first academic papers, all while coming home to take care of Serilda. It wasn't ideal, but we were making it work. Somehow, during all of it, I managed to get my doctorate degree. Gisela argued with her parents that we needed more room for Serilda as she got older. Eventually, they purchased a house on the beach. A place we lived in as a family until Serilda was fifteen.

My desire for Gisela may have overridden my common sense when I first met her, but living with her as husband and wife cleared that up quickly. Gisela might have liked the idea of raising our daughter in America, but the idea rapidly lost its shine. Over time, Gisela became more and more withdrawn from me.

We were strangers passing each other, only coming together when it was time to share a bed at night. There was no doubt in my mind that Serilda felt the distance between us. There was never outright fighting, only a lack of interest in the other's life. We were growing apart and as sad as it was, I didn't feel like doing anything to save our relationship. The relationship I cared about was with my daughter. Even if, in the end, that couldn't be saved.

When Gisela announced she was moving back to Europe and I could keep the house here, Serilda was quick to say she wanted to leave with her mother. I thought it had been the connection between a mother and a daughter. As time passed and distance made the past clearer, it was easy to see how our lack of interest in each other would have led to a complete lack of interest in me.

I believed Serilda loved me, but there was always a part of me that questioned it.

At six, I shut down my computer and left the office. This time of year, getting home would take a bit longer. The sheer number of tourists crowded the streets in every direction. If I hadn't known Serilda would be at least thirty minutes late, I might have worried about the time. There would be plenty of time to go home and change before getting to the restaurant.

I arrived at seven thirty on the spot, and there was no sign of Serilda. It shouldn't have surprised me. The bar had a few open seats. I sat down and ordered a scotch on the rocks. It wasn't often that I drank, but I knew dinner would be tense, like it always was. The only time it hadn't been was when she'd dated Jansen. Something about his personality made him easy to talk to. Serilda would join the conversation occasionally, the same as she did when it was the two of us.

Around fifteen minutes later, I heard the murmurs begin and I knew she'd arrived. Beautiful, like her mother, she couldn't go many places without being noticed. She loved the attention. Every moment of it.

I picked up my glass and slid off the stool, turning in the direction of the door. She walked toward me, ignoring everyone around her.

The young host came up to her.

“The upstairs is already booked,” Serilda snapped and my stomach clenched.

While I loved my daughter and would do anything for her, there were times I didn’t like the way she behaved. Especially the way she treated people she felt were beneath her.

She stopped in front of me. “Serilda, good to see you.”

Leaning forward, she did the two-cheek kiss thing and spun on her heel. Not a word left her lips while I followed her from the main room. The poor host she chastised earlier raced ahead to open the door to the stairway.

He swung the door opened and gestured for her to step through. Of course, Serilda blew by him without even a “thank you” or any other type of acknowledgement. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from saying anything in front of the poor guy. Her behavior reeked of a toddler who had yet to learn their manners. Gisela and I did not skip that lesson. This all had to do with her thinking she was superior to the man whose job it was to show her to the table.

The moment the door closed behind him, I turned to her. “Serilda, there is no reason to be rude to the restaurant staff.”

Her gaze snapped up from her phone, brows drawn together. “You’ve been on my case since I broke up with Jansen. When will you accept that he wasn’t the guy for me?” Serilda blew out a breath as she dropped down into her seat.

My gut clenched when she mentioned Jansen. I'd enjoyed my time with him the other night. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her my disappointment in her behavior had nothing to do with Jansen, but rather her treatment of people she didn't deem her equals.

There were two options. I could push her on her terrible attitude toward the host, or I could change the subject and try to enjoy a meal with my daughter since I didn't see her that often. The latter seemed like the best choice. No need to rock the boat. It only led to fighting and months before I might see her again.

I pulled out my chair and took a seat. "How was your latest shoot?"

Her demeanor instantly changed. "Shooting on the beach has to be my favorite type."

Her favorite type of shoot was always the last one she was on, but I sat quietly and listened while she gave me every detail of her last job, from the most minute detail to more important parts of her trip. It made me sad to see her selfishness on display when I saw her, while at the same time it filled me with joy to witness her happiness.

Always a weird place to be in. Which left me sitting there through dinner, listening to Serilda talk about herself and never once ask a question about my life. More often than not, I hoped one day things would change. That she'd turn to me and ask about my day, or my life. It had yet to happen, but I wasn't giving up hope.

Until then, I'd listen to my daughter talk about her job, otherwise we never had anything else to discuss and she'd play on her phone.

As I sat there with my dinner, I reminded myself when your children were happy, you should be happy you did things right.

Sometimes I wondered if that was really the case.

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JANSEN

I caved and was about to text Stephen. It was weird how much he was on my mind. I chalked it up to him being the last person I hung out with. My teammates all had lives. My trainer, who was also my best friend, had a wife and two kids. I was in a sea of my own. Maybe Stephen would want to join me on my boat and enjoy the view.

Only there was no boat, just me and my boring life.

My summer resolution needed to take effect.

Me: Hey, I had fun at the game. Want to get together again?

Dots appeared on the screen.

Disappeared.

Appeared again.

I put the phone down and went to get dressed. I had to be at Jagger's house in thirty minutes. It was the end of July and so damn hot. I grabbed a tank top and basketball shorts and quickly put them on. My phone dinged from the other room, drawing my attention back to it.

Grabbing my toothbrush and toothpaste on the way, I started brushing my teeth while I read the message.

Stephen: Sure. What do you have in mind?

Hmmm, good question. I was winging this new friend thing with him. Maybe dinner would be best. A chance to get to know him better without a bunch of other people around. Sure, I knew him from when I dated Serilda, but that didn't mean I knew a lot about him. Stephen was always nice, and interesting too.

Me: Dinner Friday night?

Stephen: Sounds good. Let me know where and I'll meet you.

Me: Will do.

I didn't want to use an exclamation point and sound too eager. I was because I was getting the fuck out of my condo. I could go to a bar or a club, but I was over that scene.

Two days to kill until then. Well, three since it was Wednesday morning, and I wasn't seeing Stephen until Friday night. That was okay. I had daily workouts until then. It was a good thing Jagger loved me because he got to see a lot of me during the offseason.

Jagger and I didn't meet until after he was retired from playing professional hockey. He was originally from New Jersey but bounced around from Florida to Ohio before playing his final years in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. After that, he retired to New Jersey, this time to Espen. He wanted to be near the ocean. Though the kind of land he wanted, he couldn't get oceanfront.

We met one night soon after I was traded to Espen. We had a home game and Jagger was there hanging out with Kasper, who introduced us to him. It didn't take long before Jagger and I were spending more time together. Then he offered to train me in the offseason, solidifying our best friend status. Yeah, I was cheesy about it and didn't give a shit. Jagger was one of those guys you became friends with for life. He was loyal and never talked shit behind anyone's back. He'd played in the NHL for years, knew the politics, and was enjoying his time off.

But it wasn't time off because he had to deal with me, which was all his doing. I didn't sign him up for this. He offered. Now he was my trainer and mine alone. It also gave him something to do so he wasn't in his wife's business all the time. The kids went off to camp during the day and Jagger was with me. Melanie, his wife, did whatever she wanted.

Living twenty minutes outside the city, Jagger, Melanie, and their two little rug rats had the family life. Something I didn't want. Did I want someone to fall in love with, to spend my time with? Absolutely. Did I want kids? Not in the slightest. I was more than happy spoiling his kids rotten and leaving them there for their parents to deal with.

I pulled into his driveway and parked near the big building off to the side. It was a gym he had put in after the first year of him training me. We'd rented space back then. Jagger didn't want to do that again, so he built one on his property. With the kind of money hockey gave him, he could splurge like this. Jagger said whenever I decided I was done playing, he'd take on another client or two. He enjoyed it a lot.

He appeared in the doorway with his arms crossed. Shirtless with his muscles on display, Jagger utilized the gym he'd built all year. "You're late."

"Uh huh. Bill me extra."

“Morning, Jansen!” Melanie said, sticking her head out the front door of the house.

“Hi, Mel!” I waved.

Jagger and I walked into the building that was one of those all-metal structures. It was painted a light beige to match the house, with a deep red roof. When I said it was big, it was massive. Tons of equipment, open space for other things, and the best part... air-conditioning. Jagger kept it cold in here.

I clapped my hands together. “What are we doing today?”

“Warm up on the treadmill, move to the bike, then we’re doing strongman training.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I stripped my tank off, throwing it on a bench, and went to the treadmill. I started slow, getting my muscles heated up before increasing the speed. I didn’t want to tire myself out. That wasn’t the point of this. It was only the start, so I was ready for the hard work.

Strongman wasn’t my favorite, but it had its benefits by helping with my core and grip. Kept me strong and built muscle, while working my entire body. As a defenseman, I needed a variety of exercises to get me ready for the next season. Since Jagger played the same position, he knew it well and tailored his program for me. We mixed it up, working on a variety of things.

It wasn’t until I was on the bike that he came over and started talking. We usually did that now before things got too intense.

“What’s new?” he asked.

“I just saw you yesterday.”

“A lot could have happened since then.”

“Oh yeah. I’m so popular. Everyone wants to hang out with me.” I rolled my eyes.

“Whatever, asshole.”

“I finally texted Stephen.”

I had told Jagger about Stephen and I going to the game, how much fun I had, and how I wanted to see him again. Of course, Jagger cocked an eyebrow at me in question because Stephen was my ex’s father, but also because he wasn’t the typical type of person I hung out with. Which was probably why I liked it so much. He was different.

“It’s about damn time. I was starting to wonder if we went back to high school, and you were debating on asking someone out.”

“Shut up. You know it’s not like that. He’s a friend.”

“And you’re not into guys.”

I shrugged. “Never have been, but if I were...”

“I wouldn’t care, Jans. You know that.”

“I do.”

“So, you have the hots for teacher?” He waggled his eyebrows.

Picking up the towel I had over the handlebar of the bike, I threw it at him. “He’s my friend, nothing more.”

“Yet you were worried about texting him.”

“I didn’t say I was normal.”

“You definitely aren’t.” He grinned.

He did have a point about the whole guy thing. I wasn’t interested in them. They didn’t get me all hot and bothered like women did. The curves... Fuck, I loved the way a woman’s body was shaped. The sweet sound of their voice. Their long hair I liked to grip when I fucked into them.

Men I never looked at like that. Like I wanted more with them. I had gay, bisexual, and pan friends. The appeal was never there for me.

Stephen was someone I wanted to be friends with. To talk to and enjoy myself. To put the hockey shit aside and just be me without that aspect of my life. He didn’t want to talk about hockey all the time. Sure, he loved going to the games, but he wasn’t a rabid fan who was only hanging out with me because of the publicity it would bring him. Stephen wasn’t like that.

“Come on,” Jagger said. “We have to warm your way up to the deadlift.”

I liked doing this but was also grateful I didn’t have to do it every day. We typically only did this once a week. It was challenging, which I loved, but fuck, my arms and legs would be tired when I was done.

Melanie came in thirty minutes later when I was covered with sweat and breathing hard. She liked to grab my phone and take pictures of me so I could post them on

social media. It was smart. She became good at this stuff while Jagger was playing. Some fans loved getting insight into our lives off the ice as much as they loved watching the games.

She had me pause mid-exercise and she got some candid shots. I didn't post every day. More like once or twice a week, so I didn't fall into oblivion.

Staying for the rest of my session, I finally finished and went into the single shower Jagger had in the back. I wasn't about to traipse my sweaty ass into their house, although the two of them wouldn't mind if I did. They had kids who were mini tornados and left paths of destruction through every room they were in.

Melanie was sitting beside Jagger on one of the benches when I came out. Their shoulders were pressed together, and she was smiling sweetly at him. They had the kind of relationship I wanted. It didn't matter how many years went by, they still looked at each other like they were newlyweds.

I stepped into the room a little louder than normal, so I didn't surprise them. Melanie turned to me with a smile. I knew what that meant. It wasn't the same sweet one she gave to Jagger. No, this was mischievous.

"No," I told her.

She fake pouted. Her dark brown hair fell forward, straight over her shoulders when she dropped her head.

"Now you did it," Jagger muttered.

"I didn't do shit. Mel, I'm not going."

Her gaze snapped up to mine. Fake pout gone. "You don't know what I was going to

even ask you.”

“I don’t? Who is it this time?”

She sighed. I knew her better than she thought I did. “You’ve met my cousin, Lindsey, before.”

“I have and there weren’t sparks flying then. Why would there be now?”

“That was last summer. She’s different now and dumped that jackass she was dating. She looks great.”

“She looked great last year too, but I didn’t hit it off with her.”

“That’s because her ex was hovering around her like he was waiting for someone to take her from him. Such a controlling asshole. I’m so glad she’s rid of him.”

“Mel, no. I don’t want to be set up. Whoever I date, I’ll find them on my own.”

She huffed out a breath. “You’re no fun.”

“Oh, I’m a lot of fun, but not with your cousin. Thanks for the recommendation though.”

“You’re insufferable.” She stood and started walking toward the door.

I ran toward her. She squealed and bolted but I was faster. I had my arm around her waist and was sweeping her feet off the floor before she could say anything else.

“What do you want me to do with her, Jag?” I asked.

He chuckled. "I'm not sure. She did try to set you up, even though she shouldn't have been butting in."

"You're supposed to be on my side!" she yelled. I put her on the floor momentarily so I could pick her up again in a bridal carry. "Put me down, Jansen!" She playfully batted at my arm while laughing. Melanie was like a sister to me. I loved how she could be a mom one second, yelling at her kids, and wrestling with Jagger another, being carefree.

Instead of doing as she asked, I walked out of the building, and toward the back of their house where they had an inground pool.

Melanie started wiggling when she saw where I was heading. "Don't you dare, Jansen. I'm warning you."

"Your threats don't work on me." I smiled while closing the distance to the pool and throwing her in like she weighed nothing.

Melanie spluttered when she broke the surface, hair plastered to her face. "Jerk!"

I was about to say something back but was shoved from behind. I went flying face-first toward the water, trying to position my body so it wouldn't hurt when I made contact. No such luck. The sting of the water sucked. But it was also how the three of us ended up in the pool fully clothed, splashing each other, and laughing our asses off.

STEPHEN

Fridays in the summer near the beach were their own unique brand of complicated. I'd left the college campus an hour ago, but still hadn't arrived home from work. The traffic was horrendous. It always was on Friday nights. I knew better than to stay late on campus. We had summer Fridays for a reason.

It was my own fault I sat bottlenecked in cars for miles. I thought if I finished the last housing report, it would be one less thing on my mind over the weekend. Instead, there I sat in traffic, worried about being late for dinner with Jansen. Although, it wasn't like this was a date and I needed to make a good first impression. We were hanging out as friends.

I liked the idea of being able to spend time with someone, without the expectation of dating them. It was relaxing in a way I hadn't anticipated when I first asked Jansen to join me at the game. There were no expectations about how I should behave or what to talk about. I didn't have to worry about when was the right time for intimacy. We were just two guys hanging out, enjoying ourselves.

Well, we would be once I got out of the awful traffic. Gisela leaving me the beach house when we divorced as she moved back to Germany seemed like a win-win. At least until I had to fight to get home every single Friday night in the summer.

Stopped at another light, I turned up the music. If I was going to have to suffer, I'd let the music keep me company. It was more company than Serilda had been the other

night. Damn, if I didn't wish there was a way to repair our relationship. Not that I thought spending time with her ex-boyfriend was the way back to her good graces, but for once I decided not to worry about it. It wasn't as if Serilda made it a priority to spend the maximum amount of time with me. I had to do something for myself.

Besides me spending time with Jansen didn't mean I wanted them to get married. I actually worried that Serilda couldn't stick with a single man for long. Each one she found a different fault with, and that was only the ones I met. I was sure there were others who somehow didn't make the cut quickly enough to not be noticed by the media.

The car in front of me started forward again. I inched behind them, my turn only two blocks away.

Hopefully, someday, she'd grow out of this selfish streak. The little girl I raised in that beach house was in there somewhere. The one with the kind heart and warm smile. Combine her with the confident, self-assured woman I had dinner with the other night, and she would be unstoppable.

Eventually, I pulled into the alley behind my house and parked in front of the garage. No point in pulling in when I needed to get in and out, then on my way to the restaurant. Jogging up the stairs, I tugged out my phone and sent a quick text to Jansen.

Me: Sorry. Going to be about 15 minutes late.

Jansen: No worries. I'll grab us a table.

If he was going to be mad, I'd find out soon. The only thing I could do now was get changed and get myself back out the door. I tugged off the tie and tossed it on the bed, my button-down shirt quickly following it.

The temperature was through the roof this week. Upper nineties left everything hot, even into the night as the sun set. If it hadn't been for the interview I'd had earlier in the day, I would have gone with my normal, summer Friday, business-casual attire. But I couldn't bring myself to wear that and allow it to be the first impression a new employee had of me.

I grabbed a light blue polo from my closet and pulled on a pair of jeans. With wallet and keys in hand, I was back out to the car to brave the traffic again.

By the time I arrived at O'Malley's, I was only twenty minutes late. A little more than I wanted, but better than it could have been. I immediately scanned the room looking for Jansen, hoping he hadn't gotten pissed and left. Then I reminded myself this wasn't a date. This was two friends having dinner. There was no reason for anyone to get pissed off and leave because someone was late.

His dark curls instantly caught my attention at one of the booths across from the bar. I made my way over to the side of the table.

"Sorry I'm late," I said, sliding into the booth.

Jansen looked up from the menu he'd been reading and smiled. "No worries. Traffic is brutal out there tonight."

I laughed and relaxed back into the seat. "You're not kidding. It felt worse than Fourth of July weekend."

Jansen chuckled. "Damn, that was awful."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have stayed to review the last housing report. I didn't think it would take me as long as it did to go through it."

“It’s not a problem. Besides, the game just started.”

I glanced up at the TV and noticed the Emperors’ game on. Jansen must have picked this booth so we could watch it in the background while we talked. “They seem to be on a winning streak.”

“I’m happy for them.”

“Been watching more baseball since the game?”

He smiled and reached for the beer that already sat in front of him. “I didn’t realize how much I’d enjoy it. I will say that watching it in person is better than seeing it on TV.”

“I can say the same about hockey.”

“Hi. Is there something I can get you to drink while you look over the menu?” the waitress asked when she stepped up to the table. I noticed her eyes straying to Jansen every few seconds. I couldn’t blame her; he was exceptionally attractive. It was one of the first things I noticed about him when Serilda first introduced us. She had always chosen attractive people, but something about his easygoing smile and kind demeanor added to his appeal. The waitress had good taste.

“Yes, please. I’ll take a Sam Adams.” She looked at me for a brief second before turning her attention back to Jansen.

“Sure. And you still need a few minutes, right?”

“We do.”

When Jansen smiled at her, a light flush crept up her cheeks. She smiled back and my

gut tightened for a moment before I reminded myself that Serilda had dumped him. The poor man was free to date whomever he chose. In the end, it was Serilda's loss. These were the things I told myself since I didn't want to examine exactly what was making my stomach so uncomfortable.

His gaze didn't linger for long before he turned back to face me. "What was wrong with the housing?"

My shock at the way he dismissed the waitress had me quiet for a moment. "Did you see the way the waitress was looking at you?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, but I'm not interested. I'm hanging out with you tonight. And I want something serious. Someone to come home to."

I reached for the menu in front of me as the ache in my chest returned. "Don't we all."

Jansen put his finger on the top of my menu and pulled it down. "I don't mean to pry, and you can tell me to butt out, but what happened between you and Peter?"

I sighed. "You're not being nosy. It's a fair question, but let's pick our dinner first before the waitress comes back."

It was probably a little selfish of me, but I didn't want her to have to linger longer at our table than necessary. When we were both ready, we placed our menus at the end of the table. We sat there for a moment in silence while I tried to figure out a way to not make myself look like the most boring person in the world.

"He wanted more than I could give him."

"More?" Jansen's brows drew together. I didn't know whether he was afraid of the

answer or simply curious.

“Let’s just say I’m not the most exciting person. I like sports and documentaries. I enjoy reading and relaxing with a glass of wine or beer. I have fun out at dinner with friends. Peter used to be like that. We always went to the games or spent time watching the sunset on the deck. Then something changed. He wanted to go out more. Clubbing. Meeting new people to hang out with.”

I leaned back and closed my eyes. There was no way to sugarcoat the fact I was boring. “He said I needed to get out more. That I needed a life outside of work, history, and sports.” I opened my eyes again. “We had a fight that night and when I got home from work the next day, he was gone. I haven’t heard from him since.”

“Wow, what an asshole. Fuck him for not appreciating the person you are. Clubbing is great every once in a while, but it’s not something I like to do often. A night relaxing and talking to someone while watching the sunset sounds great to me.” Jansen’s gaze held mine.

“Did you guys decide what you want to order?”

I startled at the sound of the waitress’s voice, when I glanced over my beer sitting on the table. “Sorry. Yes, could I have the bacon cheeseburger and fries, please?”

She nodded and turned back to Jansen; her smile as sweet as it had been earlier. “Wings and fries for me, please.”

She picked up the menus with a wink. “I’ll put those right in for you.”

Once again, Jansen ignored her flirting and turned his attention to me. The unease from earlier settled a bit in my stomach. Jansen now knew how unexciting I was and still wanted to spend time with me. He could have stuck with beer and bolted as soon

as he heard the story about Peter but didn't.

Friendship most definitely won out on an actual date.

But I didn't want to spend the time rehashing what Peter lost out on, so I moved to a happier topic.

"How is your family doing?"

The smile he'd given the waitress had been friendly. This one lit up his entire face.

"They're good. I spoke to my brother the other day. I really miss them."

"Why don't you go home for the summer? I know you need to train, but a lot of players train at home."

"I visited them already. Plus, my best friend is my trainer and he's here. I still call often and check in with them, especially with my brother, Gareth."

"Especially Gareth?"

"Here you go, boys." The waitress slid the plates onto the table. "Anything else?" We ordered another round of drinks, then she was gone.

"I'm from a small town that's not very queer friendly. He got bullied a lot when he came out as bi in high school."

I shook my head as I reached for the ketchup. "I can only imagine. Things have gotten a little better since I came out, but not much."

"It hasn't always been easy for him. If it wasn't for our entire family being there, I'm sure he would have left as soon as he graduated high school."

“Espen is more progressive than other places. If he ever wants to talk, I’d be more than happy to speak with him. You can give him my number.”

He grinned. “Thanks, Stephen. I really appreciate that.”

As I picked up my burger, cheers erupted around the room. My face darted to the TV screen to see Declan Armitage jogging around the bases after hitting a grand slam. “Yes.”

“Think they’ll make the playoffs again this year?”

I looked over to see Jansen watching the screen with interest. We spent the night talking baseball and eating. Jansen made me laugh and smile more than I had in a long while.

It was nice to enjoy the night with no pressure.

JANSEN

My alarm went off, startling me out of a weird dream. I was having dinner with Stephen, much like I was last night, but this one was at my place, and I had lit candles. I didn't think I'd ever lit a candle in my life. There was soft music playing in the background, again not my thing. I was totally wining and dining him. In the dream, I wanted it, wanted him . We enjoyed our meal and smiled as we talked. We were about to kiss when an awful, loud alarm blared through my phone.

“What the fuck?” I muttered to myself.

I'd had a lot of dreams over the years. Most involved sex, especially when I wasn't getting any. It was a way for my brain to torture me. But I didn't try to romance someone.

My dick throbbed. Shit, I was hard too? Was it the thought of Stephen that got me this way or was it simply morning wood? Either way, I was ignoring it. My dick had to deflate on its own.

The day wore on and I couldn't get Stephen out of my head. It was a good thing I didn't have to train today, or I probably would have ended up hurting myself since my concentration was shit. I cleaned my condo, another thing I didn't want to pay anyone to do. I liked the monotony of it. Something I could do and let my mind wander. Which is what happened, and it stayed on Stephen the entire time.

What was it about him I enjoyed so much? His company, yes. He was easy to talk to. I was sure others saw him as a man who didn't like to have fun like his dickhead ex, but I saw that side of him in a different, positive way. No, we weren't out in the club, nor did we need to be. Stephen gave me his smiles, laughed when we talked. He joked too. We watched the Emperors and cheered together when they won. It was so easy being with him. I wanted more.

Jagger's words rattled around in my head still, asking me if I had the hots for teacher. Did I? I hadn't been attracted to a guy before.

I flipped through the channels before I landed on a movie where an actor was stripping his shirt off. It was soaking wet due to him being caught in the rain. His muscles flexed. His scruffy jaw had water dripping off it. I glanced down at my dick. Nothing.

It could just be Stephen. Although, when I thought about the women I was with in the past, I had no problem getting it up for them whether I was in a relationship or not. I groaned and dropped my head back on the couch. I needed to talk to someone, but who?

A week had passed since I checked in with Knox. I guessed he was going to have to listen to me try to work this out. It was almost noon; he'd be up by now.

The phone rang twice before he answered. "Kenna, I'm beginning to think you have a crush on me. I'm going to have to let you down easy. You're not my type."

I snorted. "I'm everyone's type, jackass. You've seen my body. It's irresistible."

"Not what I would call you."

"What are you up to today?"

“Well, Kara didn’t go out, so I got to spend the night in and did absolutely nothing. I liked it.”

“Your hand sore?”

“Fuck you,” he said without any anger. “What about you?”

“My hand is not sore, but I also didn’t jack off this morning.”

“Brought someone home with you last night then?”

“Nah, I asked Stephen to dinner.”

There was a pause before he spoke. “You saw him again?”

“I did. I like hanging out with him. He’s just a normal guy. Not someone who has fans following him around or lives and breathes sports.”

“I get that. Are you going to see him again?”

I let out a sigh. “I don’t know what I’m doing, Knox. I like spending time with him. Then I had this weird dream last night where I was trying to romance him and was about to kiss him when my alarm went off. I’m not sure what to make of it.”

“Could just be a dream.”

“Yeah, or it could be more.”

“Is there more?”

Fuck, I didn’t know how to answer that. Well, I did, but did I want to tell Knox what

I was feeling? He wouldn't breathe a word of it to anyone. And I did need someone to talk to. I must have waited too long to answer him because he said my name.

"It's different," I told him. "I'm not sure I understand it. I've never been attracted to a guy before, but Stephen isn't just anyone. And what if I develop feelings for him? It would end in disaster. He's Serilda's dad, for fuck's sake."

"I'm not saying it's ideal, but you can't help who you like. What you need to find out is if he feels the same about you."

"I don't even know if I have any feelings myself."

"You have something. If you didn't, this would be a nonissue. You brought it up to me, which means you've been thinking about it, about him, in a way you haven't before."

"What if it's just the dream making me think this?"

"If it was the dream, you would have brushed it off and not thought twice about it." He was right. I'd had enough dreams before to know they didn't mean anything. But this one with Stephen stirred something in me. Longing for more time with him. Desire to see if there was anything there.

Shit.

There it was. In my thoughts. That desire.

"How do I do this?" I asked, desperation bleeding through my tone.

He chuckled. "You think I have a clue? My hand might not be sore, but I'm sure getting use out of it."

“You need a sleeve or something to fuck into.”

“Jesus, Kenna, we are not talking about sex toys.”

“Why the hell not? We both have dicks. We both like getting off.”

“And this conversation took a turn I’m not putting my blinker on to follow.”

“Fine, but what the hell do I do with this information? I can’t exactly call him and be like, ‘I think I might possibly have some sort of feelings for you.’ That would go over really well.” I rolled my eyes, even though Knox couldn’t see me.

“Plus, you’d sound like you’re fifteen, so there’s that.”

I laughed. “Shut up.”

“The only advice I have is take it one day at a time. Are you going to see him again?”

“No clue. We didn’t set anything up.”

“Let him come to you now, since you asked him out last time.”

“I can do that.” And drive myself crazy the whole time waiting. Patient, I was not.
“Okay, tell me about your week.”

Knox went on to fill me in on his training, his family, his lack of sex and a love life. I listened and told him I thought his time out there was a good thing. It allowed him to get his priorities straight and maybe by the time he got back to Espen he’d be calmer, more focused, and could look for that happily ever after he wanted.

He was one of the best people I knew. Hell, all the guys on the team were. I was

damn lucky to call them friends. I'd like to think I'd play for Espen for the rest of my career, but I wasn't naive enough to let that thought take root. Hockey players got traded. They got injured. Shit happened. For now, I was proud to be on the Jetties.

"Have you heard from the others?" I asked him.

"Devon checks in on me. He's going to make a great dad one day."

"He definitely has that whole dad vibe. I'm heading out to the rink in a few days to play a game with D, King, and Hayes. I think they're asking Nordin too."

"I'm jealous. I miss you guys."

"Awww, Knoxy, do you want me to fly out and cuddle with you for a bit?"

"Like I'd let you in my bed."

"So, you don't deny you like cuddling?"

"Who doesn't?"

I laughed. Knox was fun to talk to.

We hung up not long after that. I felt a little better about this thing with Stephen, if it was in fact a thing, which I didn't know if it was.

One day at a time. That was how I was going to take this. I'd see if he contacted me to hang out again.

The TV was still playing the movie I had turned on before. The guy was still shirtless, and my dick was still not interested. But then Stephen popped up in my head again.

I'd love to know what it was about him I found so appealing, outside of the obvious. The conversation, his personality, he was a good guy. But I had that kind of stuff with other friends and didn't start thinking about them as anything more. I was surrounded by men the world found attractive.

Yet...

Stephen...

His professional look. The way he talked. I could tell he was educated.

And there was my dick taking interest. Of course.

Fuck it, I needed to take care of it, or it would bother me all day.

Reaching down, I tugged my shorts off. I was commando underneath. My dick rested heavy against my stomach, the tip already leaking. Wedged between the couch cushion and the arm was a small tube of lube I stuck there for instances just like this. I squirted a bit in my hand and moved it around to warm it up.

The moment my hand wrapped around my dick, a moan tore from my lips. It wasn't like it was the first time I touched myself in weeks. Hell, I got off yesterday after I got home from training while I was in the shower. But this was different. My dick was more sensitive than normal.

I started a slow stroke, wanting this to last. I didn't even bother trying to focus on someone other than Stephen. He was at the forefront of my mind. That cute smile of his. Those green eyes. Okay, so apparently Stephen really did do it for me.

My hand sped up, twisting on the way up, rubbing over the head. I increased the pressure, drawing another moan from my lips. A fantasy went through my mind of

that smile of Stephen's looking up at me as I drove into him.

Holy shit, I'd never thought about having sex with a man before. Why was this so hot?

Stephen's smile turned into a gasp as I hit him just right when I pushed into him hard. His eyes squeezed close; his neck arched. I kept fucking him when I was really fucking my fist.

My body tensed, a breath away from coming. It wasn't until fantasy Stephen called out my name as he came that I let go and crashed headfirst into one of the most intense orgasms I'd ever had.

Rope after rope of cum flew from me, landing on my shirt, which I forgot to tuck up. One even hit my fucking chin.

I wrung every bit of sensation before stilling my hand. My breath came fast; my heart raced.

Stephen.

There was no doubt in my mind, he did it for me. What I was going to do with that information, I wasn't sure.

It could be just a crush because I'd hung out with him twice now. Something I was feeling since he was the first person I had an interest in outside of sex or hockey. Then again, I was just thinking about him as I jacked myself off.

I went to scrub a hand over my face but caught myself before I did so and accidentally covered myself with cum. Time to clean up and find something else to occupy the rest of my day, or I was going to be the one with a sore hand and dick.

STEPHEN

The phone on my desk rang for what had to be the millionth time that morning. With freshmen arriving in less than a month, and a few last-minute faculty changes, the list of things I needed to complete continued to grow daily.

My conversation with the president of the university had taken up most of my morning. Thankfully, she and the Board of Governors were on were aligned with my plan for updating our academic programs in the history and business departments. The new upgrades would help us attract more students to those programs, which might also require additional housing. The board was more than willing to expand the university in any positive ways they could. I'd been extremely lucky to get this job with such a progressive group of board members.

I reached for the phone and saw it was the new Dean of Academic Affairs. "Hello."

"Dr. Forrester, I was hoping we could meet later today to discuss the new program and the possibility of shuffling around a few courses for the spring semester."

"First, Shannon, you know you don't have to call me Dr. Forrester. You never did in the ten years we worked together."

"I know, but it's fun to mess with you in your high and mighty tower."

I scoffed. "Like you don't have a high and mighty tower of your own." Shannon had

come to the university a year after me. At one time or another, we'd both been chair of the history department. When I'd moved onto the Dean of Arts and Humanities, Shannon had taken over as chair of the department. It had been a no-brainer to convince the president and the board to offer her the role of Dean of Academic Affairs when the position opened. Shannon was creative and well-researched in more than history education, which would benefit the entire campus.

"Not as tall as yours."

"Well, you're welcome to come over and visit any time you like. Which brings me to number two, if you want to talk about something you can stop by anytime. I always have time to listen to your ideas and plans."

"Thanks, Stephen. I thought about it, but I knew you had an interview today to head the cancer research project."

"I do." I glanced at the clock. "I believe they're scheduled around one." It was already past noon. "How about I call you when I'm done, and we'll sit down to talk?"

"Sounds perfect. I'll see you soon."

I hung up and turned back to my computer, where I had the information up about the latest scientist we were looking to hire to run our research cancer lab. Her credentials were impressive. Now it was just a question of whether Espen University was the right match.

I wanted to be fully versed in the research our candidates had completed before applying to Espen University. To me, it lacked a set of manners when you applied for a job and the person interviewing with you hadn't bothered to see what accomplishments you had that made you worth hiring. As the person doing the interview, I told myself I'd always be what I expected, no matter how busy I was.

As I scanned the information, I found my mind wandering to Jansen. Spending time with him had been more than I anticipated. It was nice to finally be out of the house and not judged for my likes and dislikes. Why couldn't I find a man who treated me the same way? Friends were great, but every man or woman I met over the years wanted me to be something I wasn't. Or be somewhere I didn't want to be. I'd given so much of myself to making other people happy and I was tired of doing it. Something about spending time with Jansen gave me the confidence to not hide my likes and dislikes. I was calm and relaxed in my own skin for the first time in years, but I really didn't want to think about what that might mean.

I'd learned long ago that crushes on straight men never led to anything good. Better off to look for someone else, especially when you were attracted to both men and women.

Lost in my thoughts, it took me a moment to realize someone had knocked on my door and was currently pushing it open. Pam, my assistant, stepped into the room.

Pam had been the backbone of this office from the moment I arrived, probably before that, as she had been the previous dean's assistant. I wouldn't survive without her and begged her to stay a few more years to help me navigate my new responsibilities. She agreed, promising she'd let me know when she was ready to retire so we'd have time to find her replacement together. This way, she'd know her hard work over the years would continue.

Before I even had hello out of my mouth, Pam started talking. "Your one o'clock interview asked if they could move to two. You had nothing on the calendar, and I figured that would give you time to get lunch."

I set my pen down and leaned back in my chair. "Is this your way of kicking me out of the office for a bit?"

“Absolutely. You’ve done nothing but sit in here, barely eating, while you work on staffing and academics for the fall semester. You need a break, and now seems as good a time as any to take one.”

“There’s still plenty to do in the next month.”

Pam walked over and shut off my monitor. “And it will get done, but not if you run yourself down to the bone. Now, go have lunch. I’ll see you an in hour with everything ready for your interview.” She scooped a few files off my desk and out the door she went.

And these were exactly the reasons I kept her. Pam was right, even though I’d spent time hanging out with Jansen lately, I’d also locked myself in my office all day working. Maybe it was the upcoming semester, or maybe it was the fact I didn’t want to work at home any longer, in case Jansen called.

I dropped my head to my hand. Things with Jansen were moving into dangerous territory for me. I couldn’t let myself fall for a straight guy. After everything the last few months, I didn’t need more heartache. This was something I needed to talk through.

With more time now than I anticipated, I picked up the phone and dialed Shannon’s office. The phone barely rang once before it connected, and I heard her laughing in the background.

“Miss me already?”

“Actually, yes. My interview moved until later today, so I wanted to know if you’d like to meet me for lunch?”

She laughed again. “Let me guess, Pam is forcing you to get out of your office for a

bit and eat real food.”

“She is. What better way to spend my lunch than catching up with you?”

“That’s just so you can make it a working lunch without her knowing it.”

I scoffed. “If I called Gene from the science department, that would completely be my goal. But I figured we could talk a bit about the project, then catch up. It’s been forever since we had lunch together.”

“Well, aren’t you lucky I have some free time right now. Normal spot?”

“Of course.”

“Then I’ll see you in ten.”

I grabbed my wallet, leaving my jacket behind, and left the office, waving to Pam on the way out. She tapped her watch. “I don’t want to see you for a full hour.”

I held my hand over my heart. “I promise.”

The heat hit me as soon as I pushed open the doors. Rolling up my sleeves, I made my way across the campus. Shannon’s office was closer to our normal spot, so when I stepped into the café, I glanced around. Sweat beaded on my brow from the heat, the air conditioner blew directly on the door. I was tempted to stay there for a few minutes longer, even after I found Shannon sitting in a booth in the far corner.

She waved as I left the cool breeze and stepped farther into the café. On the table she already had two iced coffees.

I took the seat across from her as she pushed one over to me. “Exactly how you like

it.”

“Perfect.” I wrapped my fingers around the cup and lifting it to my lips, I sipped from the straw, savoring the sweetness as it hit my tongue. I rested my arms on the table. “Let’s hear about this class.”

Shannon smiled and told me the details of the new classes she wanted to include in the spring semester, along with others she wanted to add to the graduation requirements of incoming freshmen. I heard her talking, but my thoughts were drawn back to Jansen when she mentioned a course in the evolution of sports. It was very easy for me to get distracted when it came to him.

She cleared her throat, but before I had the chance to tell her my thoughts or pretend I heard everything she said, her name was called from behind the counter.

“I’ll be right back.” When she returned, she had a sandwich in each hand. “I knew you wouldn’t eat unless I ordered it for you.”

I shook my head, laughing. “You know me so well.”

“That I do. Now, tell me why you zoned out when I was talking to you.”

“I didn’t zone out.”

She lifted a brow and stared me down with a look I knew all too well. One she’d always given me when she knew I was bullshitting her.

I blew out a breath. “Fine, I only heard up until the point you mentioned a course about the history of sports.”

“And? You and I have talked about that course for years. What changed? Did you

finally land yourself a hot baseball player?”

The heat rose to my cheeks before I could do anything to school my features.

“You did, didn’t you?”

“No.” I said a little too emphatically.

“Spill.” She picked up her cup, eyes locked on mine. Silence stretched on while we kept our gazes on each other. It was a battle I couldn’t win, but damn if I wasn’t going to try to use the time to come up with a reason for my reaction.

I threw my hands up as my eyes shot down to the table. “He’s not a baseball player.”

“Okay, then what’s the big deal?” She laid her hand over mine. “It’s about time you moved on from that asshole.”

“I’m not actually seeing this guy. We’ve only spent some time together lately.”

“That sounds like dating to me.” I lifted my eyes as Shannon took a bite of her sandwich.

“It’s definitely not dating. First, he’s straight, and that’s not the biggest complication.”

Shannon reached for her coffee. “Okay, straight guy sounds like a pretty big complication. What could be worse than that?” She took a sip of her coffee.

“It’s Jansen McKenna, Serilda’s ex.”

Coffee sprayed all over the table. Shannon’s eyes were wide while she sat there

sputtering. I went to the counter and grabbed a few napkins to clean things up. By the time I returned, Shannon had gotten her bearings.

“Jensen fucking McKenna?” she whisper-yelled. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

I dropped back into the seat. “I wish I was. I ran into him one night and before I knew it, I was asking him to go to the Emperors’ game with me.” I didn’t stop there and told her about when we had dinner.

“You didn’t kiss him, did you?”

“No.” I shook my head to get the point across.

Her eyes narrowed. “Okay, but you want to, don’t you?”

“What I want doesn’t matter. Besides the fact that he’s straight, I can’t even think about my daughter’s ex that way.”

“Even if you can’t, you already are.”

I didn’t want to admit to myself, Shannon was right. She usually was. I dropped my head into my hands. Here I was, a forty-year-old man, having a midlife crisis, crushing on my twenty-three-year-old daughter’s ex. What was my life coming to? “And what am I supposed to do about it?”

“You don’t want my advice, because you’re determined to not want him.”

“Not helpful.”

“Fine. Go for it. Stop letting the reasons it won’t work get in the way of it possibly working.”

“Did you miss the part when I said he was straight?”

She chuckled. “No, but from what you’ve told me, it sounds like he may not be so straight after all.”

I sighed. “That’s ridiculous. Why would a successful athlete, who has always been with women, suddenly want a man who is a nerd on his best day?”

She finished her sandwich and pushed the wrapper to the side. “What makes you think you’re such a nerd? Because you work in academia?”

“A little, but also when my nightly plans include watching a documentary about Pearl Harbor and the USS Oklahoma .”

“Oh, I saw a preview for that. I planned on watching it this weekend. Does that make me a nerd too, because I don’t see myself that way at all.”

“No...well, I...but no.”

Shannon laughed. “You can’t even get your words out.”

I finished my coffee and set the cup back on the table a little harder than necessary. “I’m glad I could give you a good laugh.”

“I have to mess with you, but in all seriousness, invite him over to watch the documentary. Trust me. You’ll get your answer.” Shannon finished her coffee and began collecting the trash.

I pushed out of my seat, grabbing my cup and wrapper. “I’ll think about it.”

She gave my arm a light squeeze on the way out. “Don’t think too hard. And I want

to know what happens.”

“Nothing is going to happen, but I’ll be happy to report to you later. I’ll get your courses approved as soon as you send them over to me for the board.”

Shannon leaned up and pressed a kiss to my cheek as we walked out the door. “Thank you and good luck today.”

We parted ways outside the café. Her office was in the opposite direction of mine. The entire walk back, I couldn’t get her words out of my head, even once I’d promised Pam I’d had a great lunch and sat in front of my computer. It wasn’t until she knocked to tell me my interview was there that I got brave enough to send the text.

Me: Would you like to watch a documentary with me tonight at my place?

His answer came before the door opened again.

Jansen: Absolutely

If only I didn’t have to stress myself out for the next few hours before he showed up.

JANSEN

I put my phone down and laced up my skates with a big smile on my face. Stephen made the next move. I hoped he would. And he did. Score for McKenna.

I wasn't a stupid guy but didn't think I'd ever watched a documentary. It wasn't my go-to when I was watching TV. Not that I had a lot of spare time, most of the year, when hockey was my life. I texted my brother earlier in hopes of getting some advice. Instead, I got a video call with Gareth. Wide eyes, hair a mess. He was freaking out more than I was. He couldn't believe I was dating Stephen. I had to remind him again and again that there was nothing going on between us. Just me and my wild imagination of what could be.

Then Gareth reminded me I had feelings for Stephen. Yeah, yeah, he was telling the truth, I thought anyway. I had these emotions rolling inside me and only Knox and my brother to talk to about them. The guys on the team would understand if I opened my mouth. They had their own shit going on though. Training. Personal lives. Shit, Knox and Gareth did as well. I hated bothering them with this. Knox was training too. Gareth was busy back home. Once I asked Gareth for help, I couldn't get him to stop.

Not only did he help me narrow down outfit choices, which he said I was being crazy about. It was a documentary being viewed on Stephen's couch not fine dining at a fancy restaurant. Gareth also gave me a stern—I used that term loosely since he was my younger brother—lecture about how just because I was feeling some things didn't mean Stephen was too. And since I'd let him lead the way with this evening together,

I should do the same going forward with everything.

Could I? What if Stephen felt something for me and had no idea I wanted him too? What if I never made a move and was left to wonder what could have been?

Of course, Gareth talked me off the ledge. We couldn't both freak out. He became the voice of reason, calmed me, and then I got excited about tonight again.

I wasn't like this before. I was always the confident guy. The one who knew what he wanted. And yet, I had more questions than answers. One thing remained the same. I was spending tonight with Stephen.

"What are you grinning at?" Hayes asked as he playfully bumped his shoulder against mine. We were sitting on the bench with a smooth ice rink in front of us. The lights gleamed off it. The smell infiltrated my lungs. It felt a lot like home. Not quite, since my family held that honor, but close.

The rink by Devon's house was pretty nice. Well-kept and we had it all to ourselves this afternoon.

"Nothing," I replied. "Just happy to be here." It wasn't a complete lie. I loved hanging out with these guys. They were my friends and teammates, men I celebrated the Stanley Cup win with.

"I'm not buying it."

"Can't I smile? I'm a pretty happy guy."

"You are. If you ever need someone though, I'm here. Good or bad. Hockey or not. Our relationship doesn't revolve around our careers."

I gasped. “It doesn’t? Why didn’t you tell me? I could have been texting you all hours of the night with every one of my minuscule issues.”

Hayes laughed. His eyes crinkled. Happiness looked good on him.

I glanced up and saw King watching Hayes with an expression I couldn’t decipher. Maybe a little like love? No, that couldn’t be right. Right? He saw me looking and gave me that easygoing smile of his. I returned it.

“In all seriousness,” I replied to Hayes, “I might take you up on that one day.” Hayes was a solid friend. Not as much of a jokester as King. I liked that about them, the differences.

Hayes finished lacing up his skates and slapped me gently on the shoulder. “Any time. I’m here for you. We all are.”

“I appreciate it.” I grinned again.

King skated out onto the ice, followed by Devon. Hayes went out there next. I took a little longer, lost in my head about Stephen. That damn smile on my face didn’t falter. Because I knew I’d be comfortable with him tonight. I could be myself, and he could be his. We were going to watch a documentary, which wasn’t my thing, but Stephen was. I could sit on his couch and watch paint dry for all I cared. If the two of us were spending time together, that was what mattered.

Maybe I could sneak a few looks at him to see if my attraction solely rested in my imagination, thanks to my relentless dreams, or if it was tangible, a real life crush.

I shook my head. I shouldn’t be crushing on anyone. I wasn’t in high school. I was supposed to be more mature than that. Fuck it, who was I kidding? I was mature when I needed to be and other times not at all.

Skates came into my view. I still had my head down, laces in hand.

“Did you forget how to do that?” Noah. He smiled down at me when I looked up. Blond hair, blue eyes, a little bit of an accent. If my dick was taking notice of any man, it should have been him. He was the complete package. Women lusted after him like crazy. The man was happily married to an amazing woman. And my dick didn’t give a shit how attractive he was.

“Earth to Jansen.”

“Sorry.” I cleared my throat. “I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“Put it to the side. We’re going to spend some quality time together.”

I chuckled. “Quality time?”

“You know what I mean, asshole. We don’t do this often. It’s good for all of us. Skate time when we’re not training. Just to have fun.”

“Who are you kidding? This counts as training. Jagger might not be here but I’m calling it that, so he’ll go easy on me tomorrow.”

“That man is never gentle with you.”

“You’re right. I’m sore from this morning.”

Noah’s brow furrowed. “Did you stretch before coming here?”

“Is this my first time playing? Of course, I did.”

“Just checking.”

We both skated onto the ice. We were uneven on my side. It was me and King while Hayes, Devon, and Noah were on the other.

“Don’t sweat it,” King said. “We’re far superior.”

“What was that?” Hayes asked from the other side of the center line.

“Nothing, sweetness!” King responded.

Hayes narrowed his eyes while the rest of us laughed. King was an affectionate guy. Always hugging us, teasing us. Too bad he was slow this afternoon. Devon skated right past him and scored before either of us could blink.

“What the fuck?” I yelled.

“Way to play defense, Kenna,” King chirped.

“Excuse me? You’re supposed to be on their asses, not mine.”

Devon skated by again. “King couldn’t handle my ass.”

I couldn’t help it. I busted out laughing. Devon wasn’t usually quick to throw a comeback like King or I were but when he did, they were great.

We kept playing, Devon switching sides every once and a while to keep it fair. He was the Jetties’ star center. One of the best in the league. It was only fitting he shared those skills equally during our game.

King and Hayes both scored. I focused more on what I needed to work on, things Jagger was helping me with. I had fun too. When I got time to really watch the others, I wasn’t the only one fitting in some training.

Fuck, I loved hockey. Everything about the game made me happy. Even though it was only a handful of us today, it didn't take away from our joy or how hard we worked to get to where we were. Each of us had hockey pulsing through our veins, beating through our hearts, running through our limbs until we were powerful players who wanted nothing more than to get another run at the Cup.

When we were done, we were sweating our asses off. I literally had it down my crack. The poor bar of soap I used in the shower got a workout. So what if I scrubbed just a little more than normal? I had a man to see tonight. It wasn't a date. We were just two friends hanging out. That didn't mean I wanted to show up smelling like a fucking locker room with my hair plastered to my forehead.

My muscles ached in the best way. I didn't get to see the other guys on the team a lot during the offseason. Sure, we got together when we could, but we didn't actively hang out like King and Hayes did. Then again, they lived with each other so that couldn't be helped. I had a feeling they could live and breathe each other and wouldn't care.

Not for the first time I wondered if there was anything going on between them. They both seemed to look at each other and smile more than normal today. Like they had a secret the rest of us weren't privy to. Hayes was straight though.

Yet so was I.

And I was beyond excited about hanging out with a guy tonight. Someone I jacked off to on the regular the past few days. One time doing it and all bets were off. Stephen had free rein in my head. It was like once I gave myself permission to think about him, no one else would do.

God, what would he say if he knew I liked to fuck my fist while those gorgeous eyes of his peered up at me in bed? Or when I got to drag my palms over his skin? There

were so many things I'd never experienced. I mean, I did with women, but I had a feeling everything with Stephen would be different and not just in the whole anatomy way.

By the time I got home, showered, and lay down on the couch, I gave my body a chance to rest. Too bad my heart didn't get the memo. It kept racing in my chest from nerves. Fuck, what had I turned into? This wasn't me.

With an internal shake, I tried to relax. It didn't matter what Stephen and I did tonight. Hopefully, I got to learn more about him. There must have been a lot of things I didn't know.

I had to figure out what I was feeling. That was all me. I was attracted to Stephen. A man. A nerdy, sweet man I wanted to cuddle and hear all about. Could it be more than that? He was a friend, someone I enjoyed talking to. Could the two be combined into a relationship?

I draped my arm over my face. I was getting way ahead of myself. Relationship. I scoffed.

One foot in front of the other, McKenna. Stop trying to race toward the goal.

That seemed to be my mantra lately. My imagination was ten steps ahead of my reality.

When I was playing, there was only one goal: to win. This wasn't hockey though. This was something I had no footing in, no experience. My confidence was nonexistent. And that unnerved me to no end.

10

STEPHEN

One hour.

Only one hour until Jansen arrived, and I found myself flitting around my house like a nervous butterfly. Each room I stopped in, I moved one thing and left. When I reached the bedrooms upstairs, I'd known I had lost my mind. Jansen was only coming over to watch a documentary.

That. Was. It.

At least that was what I kept reminding myself. It seemed the fantasy part of my brain had taken over since I'd left my office for the night. It kept fluctuating from excited to questioning my judgment.

I stirred the sauce in the pan. Hopefully, Jansen liked the dinner I was making. I loved cooking, but it wasn't often I had someone to cook for. At least not in a while. Since Peter left, cooking for one wasn't the same. I set the spoon down and found my eyes straying to the clock for the millionth time.

What had I been thinking when I let Shannon talk me into texting him? He was going to think this was stupid. Peter always complained any time I wanted to stay home and watch a documentary. He would ask me to wait until he had to work. It took me a while after he left to figure out Peter pushed my interests aside with ease. Something I never did to him.

Maybe, deep down, this was my way of testing the waters with a friendship outside of my academic friends. Would Jansen share my interests? Even if he didn't, would he be willing to indulge in the things I loved because he was my friend?

When I caught myself redusting the coffee table in the living room, I finally forced myself to sit down. There was no reason for me to continue to act like a nervous fool about to go on a first date. This was not a date. Just two friends having dinner and watching a show.

I found something to keep my attention on the TV. I moved back and forth between the show and making sure the sauce didn't burn.

With about twenty minutes left until Jansen arrived, my phone buzzed. My hands shook as I reached for it, wondering if Jansen decided a night in with a documentary and dinner was too boring for him. I rolled my eyes at myself when I saw it wasn't him, but Shannon.

Shannon: Get out of your head.

Me: How did you know?

Shannon: Because I know you.

Me: Fine, I'm stuck in my head. A night in with a documentary isn't for everyone.

Shannon: It should be. If they want to be in your life, they need to do things you like too.

Friendships were a two-way street. It couldn't just be about one person and their desires.

Me: You're right.

Shannon: You deserve people who want to be in your life because of you. Not what they can get from you.

It was the one thing she'd tried to drill in my head since Peter left. The only time he was interested in things I liked was when it came to my interest in sports. Specifically, that my daughter was dating a member of the Jetties. It hadn't been lost on me Peter left after Serilda left Jansen behind. It had been a hard pill to swallow.

I'd been so caught up in the conversation and my thoughts, I jumped when the doorbell rang.

Me: Have to go. Jansen's here.

I tossed my phone onto the couch cushion as I stood to answer the door. Shannon wouldn't text back. There was no doubt she'd call my office first thing in the morning.

Jansen stood on the other side of the door in a simple gray T-shirt and black shorts. He glanced down at himself and gestured to his clothes.

"I hope this is okay?"

I opened the door wider so he could come in. Even though I wore a polo and khaki shorts, I wanted Jansen to be comfortable. It was only fair, considering I asked him to do something different. Khaki shorts and a polo were comfortable to me. That didn't mean they were for everyone. It wouldn't be fair for me to ask him to dress a certain way. "It's absolutely fine. I hope you're hungry. I made dinner."

"It smells great. I wasn't sure what we were doing, but I'd have been fine ordering a

pizza.”

“No need.” I started toward the kitchen. “Come on. We’ll grab a drink and I’ll get everything on the table.”

We entered the kitchen. To the right I had the small breakfast nook already set with two plates and wine glasses.

“A nice red will match with dinner, but I also have water, beer, and tea too.”

“Wine works.” He grinned.

I pulled the bottle from the rack. Jansen held out a hand to me. “I can open it while you get dinner ready.”

“Thank you.”

I handed him the bottle and corkscrew, watching as he expertly popped the cork and poured two glasses, swirling the liquid around before tasting it. I couldn’t help but notice as his Adam’s apple bobbed with each swallow and mentally smacked myself. This was Jansen. Not some guy I was hooking up with. It went a long way to show I needed to get myself back out there. How could I build a friendship with this man with my brain focused on sex and kissing?

I turned off the burner and paid extra special attention to the pot as I stirred. Anything to clear my head for the rest of the evening. It had been two months since Peter left and it had become apparent it was way past time I put myself back out there.

There had to be someone in this city who would accept me for who I was and not want to change things because it didn’t suit them. Then maybe I could stop projecting my needs and desires on my friend. A friend who was almost half my age.

I ladled the sauce on top of the chicken and carried the platter to the table. Jansen had taken a seat on the bench along the wall, leaving me the chair on the other side. He took a deep inhale the moment I set the platter down between us.

He moaned. “I can’t wait to dive into that.”

I glanced around the table, knowing something was missing. “Damn, I almost forgot the salad.”

“Is it in the fridge? I can grab it.” Jansen moved to stand, but I stopped him.

“It is, but I’m already up. Why don’t you start filling the plates instead?” If there was one thing I remembered about Jansen the other times he ate in my home, he always liked to be helpful. Unlike my daughter, he didn’t prefer to be waited on hand and foot. Something she only got when she was with her mother.

With the salad on the table, I sat down across from Jansen and served the salad into the bowls I’d set out next to the plates.

“Training today?” I asked.

“This morning, then I played a game with the guys.”

“The guys?” I asked, cutting into the chicken on my plate.

“D, King, Hayes, and Nordin were there.” He took another bite. “Damn, I missed your cooking.”

I smiled. “I’m glad you like it. I’ve missed cooking.”

“You don’t cook for yourself?”

I shook my head. “Not usually. Cooking for one isn’t the same.”

Jansen lifted his glass. “I can agree on that. I hate cooking for just me.”

We continued chatting through our meal. Jansen was quick to jump up when we were done to help clear the table and load the dishwasher. With everything from dinner taken care of, we made our way to the den where the larger TV was set up.

“What are we watching?” Jansen asked, taking a seat on the couch.

I picked up the remote from the table and turned on the TV. “It’s a documentary about Pearl Harbor and the USS Oklahoma.”

“Okay,” he said, nodding his head.

I chuckled. “Have you heard of it before?”

He smirked. “I know what Pearl Harbor is, but I don’t know any of the ship names.”

I scrolled through the app until I found the program, then turned to Jansen before I hit start. “The USS Oklahoma was one of the ships that was sunk during the attack on Pearl Harbor, but because it didn’t explode like the Arizona, it doesn’t always get the recognition it deserves.”

“Some background is probably good.”

“I haven’t seen this one yet, but I’m sure they’ll have a little bit in the beginning as well.”

He pointed toward the remote with a smile. “Then what are we waiting for?”

I hit play and settled back into the couch, ready to see what new facts I could learn about that day in Pearl Harbor.

The screen faded to black when it was over before returning to the main menu of the app. I looked over at Jansen, nervous I might find him with his head lolled back on the couch, sound asleep. I'd been so engrossed with the show, I hadn't stopped to make sure Jansen was enjoying himself and not completely bored to tears.

What I found instead was Jansen still staring at the screen. Had he zoned out completely?

"Jansen?"

He turned his gaze to me and smiled. "That was interesting as hell. Are all documentaries like that one? The ones I watched in school as a kid sucked."

I laughed. "I wish I could say they're this well done. Not much money was put into the ones schools usually choose to show and the technology didn't exist." I rested my hand on his arm. "I'm also pretty sure you've matured a lot since then."

Something in his eyes flashed for a moment. "I'm not so sure about that."

Heat burst under my collar, but I shoved it back down. There was no way I saw desire slipping into Jansen's gaze. It was a product of my sex-starved imagination. I didn't actually see him leaning forward, or his eyes dropping to my lips moments before he covered my mouth with his.

What. Was. Happening?

Shock held me immobile. It wasn't until Jansen's tongue slid across the crease of my lips that I snapped out of it. I brought my hands to his chest and pushed him back.

Our eyes locked instantly.

“What was that?” I asked.

Jansen ran a hand through his hair. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.” He stood from the couch and bolted for the door before I could stop him.

I heard the front door close before I got my head on straight enough to go after him. By the time I opened the door, he was already gone.

I shut it and leaned against it, closing my eyes.

Did that really just happen?

My mind had moved between reality and fantasy so often when I sat alone in my home, I wasn’t sure what to think.

Only a few hours ago, I’d thought about what Jansen’s lips would taste like and on my first chance to find out, I froze and pushed him away.

What else was I supposed to think? The man was straight. He’d dated my daughter, for crying out loud. Yet tonight I saw desire in his eyes. Desire, I thought I’d made up in my head.

I pushed off the door, turning the lights out as I made my way to the stairs. A shower and some sleep might help clear my head enough to determine dreams from reality. Not that I thought I had much of a chance of sleep tonight.

There would be only one question on my mind.

Why had Jansen kissed me?

JANSEN

Sweat poured down my face. Even with the air-conditioning on, I still sweated my ass off. Jagger wasn't doing his job unless I was soaked from our workouts.

"You're sulking," Jagger said and sat on the floor where I was rehydrating. I couldn't tell him I wasn't sulking, because I was. I needed someone to talk this shit through with.

"I fucked up."

He cocked his head slightly. "How?"

"I went over to Stephen's last night. We hung out, had dinner, watched TV, then I kissed him."

"What?" he yelled. I was pretty sure Melanie heard him inside the house.

I'd be shocked if she wasn't out here soon, asking what was going on. She loved a good gossip session with me, even if I usually didn't have much to say. The thing was, Melanie would never tell anyone.

I picked up the towel and wiped my face. "I'm attracted to him. I've never felt that way about a guy before. When I think about him, there's something special."

“I knew you were being weird.”

“I was not.”

“I don’t mean it in a bad way. Just that you’ve been quieter this week when we worked out. I figured I’d let you be, and you’d eventually talk to me. But then today you came in with a look on your face, and I knew something had happened. So, I’m guessing the kiss wasn’t good?”

I sighed. “He pushed me away.”

“Ouch.”

“I can’t blame him. I sprung it on him. No talking beforehand. No finding out if he even wants me that way. It was so stupid, and now I’m stuck worrying if I lost a friend.”

I was up most of the night. I kept playing it over in my head. I’d like to think by now I could read a person and tell if they wanted more. The way Stephen was looking at me, the cute as hell flush that worked over his skin, I thought he wanted me too.

Nope. Wrong again. I apparently didn’t know anything. It was amazing I made it this far in life with the relationships I’d had. Although, they weren’t successful, seeing how I was still single, so there was that. I was a real catch.

“Obviously you regret doing it,” Jagger said.

“I regret the way I did it.” God, did I ever. “I shouldn’t have leaned in and gone for it. But actually kissing him, I don’t, because I was thinking about it for a while now and I wanted to see what it would be like with him.”

“He might have been surprised and that’s why he pushed you away.”

I scoffed. “Surprised would have been a gasp then him pressing his lips to mine again.”

“Jans, not everyone reacts the same way to being kissed by someone for the first time. I know you realize that. You’re too caught up in overanalyzing this to see the reality of it. People are different. They do things you might not.”

“The reality is that I fucked up.”

“You should give him a chance to explain.”

My phone sat on top of my bag nearby. I lifted it and there were no new notifications. I couldn’t bring myself to text him. What would I say? I had to apologize but texting felt wrong. I wanted him to see my face and know I was sincere. So much got lost in text.

“I’m giving him space,” I said. “I’m not sure what else to do. Texting him is too impersonal.”

“You could stop by and see him tonight to apologize in person. The longer you let this go, the worse you’re going to feel.”

“Not tonight. If I don’t hear from him by Sunday, I’ll talk to him.” That would give me three days if I counted today. By then I was sure to be a mess.

“At least you have a plan.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, it’s solid.”

“Come on. Break’s over.”

Right. I was here for a reason, not to pour my heart out to my best friend.

We returned to it until my muscles burned and we were finally done. I stripped out of my shorts, leaving my boxer briefs on and jumped into the pool. It was the best way to cool off. I was on my back on a pool float, letting the sun kiss my skin when Melanie walked out.

“Did you shower before you got in there?” I didn’t need to open my eyes to know she was giving me her best stern mom look with her hands on her hips and her shooting daggers at me.

“Absolutely not.” I couldn’t fight the grin which spread over my lips. It was a welcome feeling after moping all morning.

“I don’t want your sweaty ass in my pool.”

This time I looked and put my hand up to shield my eyes so I could see her. Like I thought, her hands were on her hips. “My ass was probably the sweatiest place on me.”

“Ewww.”

“Please. Your husband gets just as sweaty.”

“Yeah, and I don’t go rubbing my hands all over his ass when he is.”

“Maybe you should,” Jagger said walking over. He was freshly showered.

Melanie laughed. They were cute together. I wanted that. Someone to be sweet with.

Someone who I could joke with, and they'd joke back, but as more than friends. I had plenty of fun with the guys on the team, Jagger, and Melanie. But I wanted inside jokes with a loved one. Someone who got me on a level no one else did.

"You're sulking again," Jagger called out.

"What's the matter, Jans?" Melanie asked.

"He kissed Stephen."

"What?" She had the exact same reaction as her husband did.

Jagger filled her in on what happened while I floated around in the pool until I felt a tap on my side.

I glanced over and saw Melanie hitting me with the leaf skimmer. I pushed it away.
"What are you doing?"

"I need you to come over here so I can talk to you and not have you drift around the damn pool."

Grabbing the pole of the skimmer, I let her drag me to the pool's edge. I wasn't getting off the float though. I was comfortable.

She sat on the edge and put her legs into the water. "I want you to see me when I tell you this. You think you fucked up. I get it. I would feel the same way. You don't truly know if you did until you talk to him though. If he says he doesn't want anything to do with you, we'll deal with it together. I hate to think of you beating yourself up over it. But you might not have destroyed anything. Maybe he was just shocked and didn't know what to do."

“You sound like Jag.”

“He is right some of the time.” She patted Jagger’s leg where he stood beside her. “Anyway, you left before either of you could talk.”

“Not my best moment.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s done and you can’t go back. You reacted and that was that. I understand you not wanting to text him but waiting for him to reach out to you, he might not. You fled the scene, Jans. That wouldn’t give me all the warm and fuzzy feelings.”

“You’re saying he might be waiting for me to come to him?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. I’m not sure. I don’t know him. I think giving him a bit of space will help, like you suggested.”

“Okay.”

Melanie had a point. I didn’t know if I fucked up beyond repair until I talked to Stephen. Still, the thought of going to him and apologizing was daunting. I wanted him to see me so I could apologize in person but if he rejected me, I might break.

How bizarre was that? Stephen had a hold over me I didn’t even realize, yet we weren’t dating. We weren’t having a casual fling. We were friends. And I was so wrapped up in my head, imagining different scenarios, that I was overthinking the whole thing. It wouldn’t be the first time that happened.

I sighed and pushed off from the wall to float again.

“You can drift around this pool for another thirty minutes,” Melanie told me. “Then I

want you to shower and come in the house for lunch.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She kicked her feet, sending splashes of water my way. She hated when I called her that. She told me she was too young to be a ma’am. I disagreed. There was no age for that. It was polite. Although I did say it to rile her up.

Eventually, the two of them went into the house, leaving me with nothing but the sounds of nature and my overwhelming thoughts. One relaxed me while the other stressed me. Just what I needed.

I had to try to calm my mind and just let things be for a few days. I would go to him on Sunday. I would apologize and hope I didn’t ruin our friendship. Until then, I had to let it go, which was easier said than done. Tomorrow, I had training again with Jagger. Maybe Saturday night I would see if one of the guys wanted to go out for a drink or dinner. Something to keep me occupied. If not, I could wander around the grocery store. I was due to go shopping anyway.

I had lunch with Jagger and Melanie. They tried to keep me there longer. Melanie said I could go with her to pick the kids up at camp. That was all she needed to say. I wasn’t turning down an opportunity to see two of my favorite people. I loved their kids. When they saw me, they ran to me and took flying leaps. Luckily, I was ready for them since it wasn’t the first time they’d done that. We laughed as I dramatically fell back to the ground while they tickled my sides. They were just what I needed.

Around late afternoon, I dragged myself home, even though they told me to stay for dinner. I’d imposed on them enough today. I’d see them tomorrow and might take an extra-long dip in their pool again. It was somewhat soothing.

Collapsing down onto my couch, I grabbed the remote and started flipping through

the channels until I landed on local sports, of course. There was Knox's mug on the screen. The sportscaster spoke about the Jetties and highlighted off-season training. He must have gone out to visit Knox. After all the shit media he'd had lately, it was good to get positive attention. I was sure Kasper and the others would love it, especially Katie. She had a tough job doing our PR, but she was the best at it.

I grabbed my phone and opened a text to Knox.

Me: Look at my boy on TV!

I took a picture of the screen with him on it and sent it to him.

Knox: I do look pretty handsome.

Me: You always do.

Knox: You're just jealous you don't look that good.

Me: Pfftt. I'm much better looking than you.

Knox: Then why did they put me in the story and not you?

Me: I declined. Said I was too busy.

I didn't. I just liked fucking with him.

Knox: You're such a liar.

Me: You'll never know.

He sent me the middle finger emoji, making me laugh.

Even if things with Stephen didn't go as I hoped, I had to remember I still had people who cared about me. Friends and family who would always be there for me. That counted for a whole hell of a lot.

STEPHEN

The sweet smell of cinnamon rolls filled my nose as I stepped through the front door of Sunrise Café, a small place that sat on the corner a few blocks from my house. Quaint and quiet, it was the perfect place to settle my thoughts from the week and relax. The last few days would send any man running.

The place was simple. A variety of chairs surrounded wooden tables in the middle of the room, while along the sides stood booths with a couple of different colored pillows sitting on the benches. The walls were covered in paintings done by local artists—some for sale, others for decoration. It had a hometown feel that welcomed everyone. The kind of connection I needed after a very lonely week.

In my normal booth in the back, I waited for Rose to come and take my order. While there had been a lot of turnover throughout the years, Rose had been the one constant. The one person I could always guarantee would be here Sunday mornings.

Only about ten years older than me, Rose walked toward me in her usual jeans and café T-shirt. She already had a mug of steaming hot coffee in her hand and a small pitcher of creamer in her other. She was an attractive woman. One I'd considered dating more than once when we first met, but it didn't take me long to realize it would ruin the friendship we'd built.

The same concern I'd had since Jansen pressed his lips to mine earlier in the week. The heat that seeped through me before I'd pushed him back. Not only were we

friends, and he was straight, he was also my daughter's ex. A land mine I wasn't willing to get near as a possible experiment for a straight man.

Over the years, Rose watched as I sometimes brought whoever I dated with me to breakfast. When I didn't, she made sure to sit across from me after her shift ended to chat and catch up. She'd been there for me the morning after Peter left me. I'd sat in this same booth up until the lunch rush and not once did she make me feel like I needed to leave so she could turn over the table.

"Stephen, I haven't seen you look so down in months," she said, setting the coffee and creamer down on the table.

Immediately, I reached for the sugar packets. "It's been something of a week."

"Want to talk about it?"

I knew Rose would listen and give me judgment-free advice, I just had to figure out where to begin. "Yeah, but let me get some coffee in me first."

"Don't I know you need your caffeine. Tell me what you want to eat, and I'll get the order in while you drink your first cup."

"Western omelet with no mushrooms and a side of hash browns please."

She laughed. "You are nothing like my other regulars, except for your coffee. They like the same every time. You constantly change it up. I'll go put this in and be back with another cup." She eyed the way I gripped the cup like a lifeline. And maybe it was.

I lifted it to my lips, taking that first sweet sip. Something had to distract me from the last few days. The chaos at work helped, at least until I went home, the silence from

my house descending over me instantly.

The quiet was more than I could handle. The den was the worst of them all. I'd avoided the room as much as I could. Every time I sat on the couch, I could feel Jansen's lips on mine, the taste of them. I shook my head, trying to break the hold the memories had on me.

It had been three days since I heard a word from Jansen.

Nothing. Not a call. Not a text. Absolute silence. Just like my house.

By the time Rose came back a bit later, I'd finished more than half of the first mug.

She sat down across from me, her dark hair in a messy bun on the top of her head. She pushed a new mug across the table. "Talk to me. What happened that has you looking lost this morning?"

I wrapped my suddenly cold fingers around the warm mug. "It happened a few days ago, but I think this is the first time this week I've really had a chance to process it."

She reached across the table and put her hand on my arm. Her eyes were warm. "Talk to me, Stephen. What happened? I haven't seen you like this since Peter left."

I sighed. "I kissed someone, or I should say they kissed me."

Rose lifted her hands in the air. "And that's a bad thing? I'm confused. If I'm interested in someone, I like when they kiss me."

"It is when the man isn't gay." I wasn't ready to focus on the fact this was Serilda's ex, at least not with anyone else yet. For now, that wasn't important. I needed to figure out how to get our friendship back on track, then the issue with Serilda

wouldn't exist.

Even as I told myself that, deep down I knew our friendship was irrevocably altered. Nothing would be the same, no matter how much I wanted it to be. A sliver of hope we could salvage something penetrated my mind, and I held on to it with both hands.

“Are you sure he’s not hiding something?”

After all the years I’d known him, could I really imagine Jansen being gay, or even bi, and deep in the closet? Serilda’s image appeared in my head. “Nope. I knew his last girlfriend. If it wasn’t for her, they’d still be together.”

Her eyes grew a little wider, but she pressed on. “Maybe it’s something he’s just discovering about himself. There are plenty of people who realize they aren’t straight later in life.”

“Maybe.” I halfheartedly shrugged my shoulder.

She patted my hand. “Think about it.” She stood. “I’m going to see if your food is ready. I’ll be right back.” She smiled and walked toward the kitchen.

I tapped my fingers on the side of the mug, letting Rose’s words run through my head. Could she be right? Even if she was, did it really matter? It had been three days.

A shadow passed over my table and I glanced up, wanting to help Rose with my plate. I almost did a double take when I saw it wasn’t Rose standing next to my table, but Jansen.

“Hi, Stephen.”

I stopped myself from getting up and giving him a hug, reminding myself he’d been

the one to walk out of my house without talking to me. “Jansen, what are you doing here?”

“I remembered you had breakfast here every Sunday, so I...” He glanced around the café before focusing on me again. “I figured it would be the best place to find you.”

“Sure. Okay. Did you want to have a seat?” I gestured to the spot across from me, intrigued by what he came here to say.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. Then he pulled his hands out and scratched the back of his neck. “Are you sure?”

“Please.” Even though I wished he hadn’t left that night, I couldn’t explain how happy I was to see him.

He sat, but near the edge of the booth, almost like he was ready to take off at any moment. He moved his fingers over the lines in the wood table, his gaze glued to his hand. It was quiet for a few moments before his eyes darted up to meet mine. “I’m just going to say this and put it out there. I’m sorry for the other night. I shouldn’t have done what I did, and I definitely shouldn’t have run away afterward. It was a shitty thing to do, as was not calling. I suck and I’m sorry.”

I didn’t necessarily need an apology, just an explanation, but I had a feeling Jansen needed to apologize. If I didn’t recognize that, he’d leave again. “Thank you, Jansen. I accept your apology. Is there a reason you left instead of staying to talk?”

“You pushing me away...” He looked down at the table for a moment before his eyes met mine again. “It confirmed that I fucked up. It was stupid of me to do, especially without talking to you first. I’m your daughter’s ex. Why would you be interested in me?”

“Jansen.” I shook my head. “Me pushing you away had nothing to do with whether or not I’m interested in you. It had everything to do with me.”

His brows drew together slightly. “What do you mean?”

I fiddled with the napkin where it still sat on the table. “Let’s just say, I don’t have the best track record with dating, especially straight men.” I picked the corner off the napkin and rolled it into a ball between my thumb and finger. I looked back up at him. “I didn’t want to lose our friendship.”

Jansen sighed and leaned back into the booth. “So, your reaction had nothing to do with you wanting me or not.”

“It didn’t. I’ve enjoyed the friendship we’ve built and given my history of relationships with both sexes; I was scared to ruin it.”

“Umm, hello,” Rose said. “Stephen, you didn’t tell me you were expecting someone else; I would have set another place.”

Jansen started to stand. “No, I’m getting ready to leave. I just wanted to stop by and apologize.”

Rose’s gaze snapped to mine. “Him?” she mouthed.

I reached out and wrapped my hands around Jansen’s wrist.

This could have been the worst decision ever, but I couldn’t watch him walk away. Not when there was so much more we needed to talk about, like why he’d kissed me in the first place. Because if Rose was right and this happened to be something Jansen was just discovering about himself, I needed to know.

“Please don’t go. Stay and have breakfast with me.”

His gaze searched mine. I had a feeling he was trying to decide whether my invitation was for pity or maybe something more. After a few heavy beats of my heart, he nodded. “Okay.” Jansen sat back down in the booth.

“I’ll grab a menu for you. Coffee?” Rose asked, her smile even brighter than before.

“Yes, please.”

“You’ve got it.” She winked at me as she turned to walk away.

“Thank you for staying.”

“We need to talk, but are you sure I’m not intruding on your breakfast?”

“I’m positive. It’s been kind of lonely the last few days.”

“Is that what you meant about being afraid to ruin our friendship?”

I picked the napkin up and took great care to set it in my lap perfectly. I knew I couldn’t stall any longer.

“A little bit.” I looked to the ceiling, unable to watch while I admitted the truth. “I’m not an exciting guy. I like documentaries about history and going to sporting events. I’m not a partier. I don’t enjoy hitting up the clubs. Let’s face it, I’m boring and I was afraid if we got close, you’d figure it out even quicker.”

“You’re not boring. I don’t think that at all.”

“Being friends and spending some time together and being more and spending all of

your time together are two different things.”

“It still wouldn’t make you boring. Being exciting has nothing to do with going out every night.”

Rose returned with the menu. “I’ll give you a few minutes to decide.”

And once again, she was off. Even when I brought others to have breakfast with me, she’d never disappeared that quickly before.

Jansen picked up the menu, but I couldn’t stop the question I’d been dying to know from leaving my lips.

“Why did you kiss me?”

JANSEN

Wasn't that the million-dollar question? I mean, I knew why I did it but to answer him while sitting in a booth in a café where it felt like everyone was watching me, there might as well have been a big spotlight on me, the heat from it making me sweat. Only there wasn't and I was just a mess because he was talking to me again, and I didn't want to fuck this up more than I already had. Or maybe hadn't since he asked me to stay.

“Why did I kiss you? Because I wanted to. Because being that close to you, feeling what I thought was a connection between us was too much to bear without knowing if there could be more.” Was that too honest? It was obvious the lack of me saying anything before I kissed him was the wrong move, so being honest was probably a better option.

Stephen stared at me, blinking, like he wasn't sure what to say. I decided to fill the gap with mindless rambling.

“What's good here?” I asked, glancing down at the menu. I'd never been here before, but it must be good if Stephen came here every week. “The omelets look appetizing but so does a big stack of pancakes with fruit on top and a heaping dose of syrup.”

“Jansen.”

“Oooh, Belgian waffles. I haven't had those in a while. They're even better with

confectioners' sugar on them. Bacon on the side. That's always a solid choice."

"Jansen, stop." He wasn't loud and his tone wasn't commanding per se, but it was enough to get my eyes to meet his.

I swallowed thickly, wondering what he was about to say. Would it be about the kiss, my confession, or would he talk about breakfast?

"I wish you would have spoken to me first about it. I was surprised."

"You didn't hate it?"

"I told you I was surprised."

"So, what now?"

He leaned forward to rest his arms on the table. "Am I an experiment?"

"You couldn't be that."

"But you're straight."

"I'm not sure what I am. I've never been attracted to a man before, and then you were there like no one else I'd ever met. I didn't expect to feel something toward you. It's been brewing inside me since we started hanging out. I shouldn't have sprung the kiss on you like I did. As you can tell, I have no experience with men."

He gave me a small smile. "You've been with women."

"They're not like you though. I mean, outside of the whole anatomy thing. Fuck, I'm screwing this up again, aren't I?"

“I wouldn’t say that.”

The waitress returned with a big smile while I ordered my food. Was she a Jetties fan or just overly happy all the time? Then I caught her wink at Stephen and wondered what they’d talked about before I got here. Whatever. It wasn’t my business. I was just happy Stephen was talking to me and not trying to make me leave.

Coming here today was a leap, but I couldn’t let things stay the way they were. I gave it time, like I thought I should, even though I was about to come out of my skin from not talking to him.

“What next?” he asked.

“Beats the hell out of me. I’m in over my head. I’d like to see you, Stephen. Romantically.” I scrubbed a hand over my face. “Fuck, that sounded awful.”

“It was sweet.”

“I’m glad you thought so.” I chuckled nervously.

“I told you I’m not good at relationships. I’m not sure how this is going to work. You and I are very different.”

“Opposites attract, right?”

“Yes, but is that enough? We have nothing in common.”

I decided to take another leap and leaned across the table to lay my hand down, palm up, hoping he’d take the invitation I was offering. He glanced at my hand then up at me. I was giving him my best charming smile. Not that I was only here to charm him. I wanted more than that. Nothing about what I was doing was easy or familiar. I

didn't approach women like this. I didn't feel like my head was underwater and I was trying to tread to breathe.

Stephen threw me a lifeline and placed his hand hesitantly in mine. I wrapped my fingers around his. Of course, that was when the waitress came over with our food and a smile in place. Stephen and I had to let go of each other to eat.

"I'm not good at this either," I said while I put a dash of salt on my omelet. I got a side of pancakes and a few strips of bacon. Now I knew Stephen wasn't mad at me, my stomach growled, and my appetite was in full force. "I don't exactly have a great track record."

"That wasn't your fault." He didn't have to say her name for me to know he was talking about his daughter.

"Still." I shrugged. "We can figure it out together."

"As in?"

"I want to exclusively date you."

He coughed around a mouthful of food. I almost got up to Heimlich him, but he waved me off. After he took a drink of his coffee and was able to breathe properly, he asked, "You want to date me?"

"I'm not as refined as you and not nearly as smart. I get my body knocked around on the ice for a living, but I'd like to think I'm a good guy who has a lot to offer."

"Jansen, you're selling yourself short. You are a great guy. I'm trying to wrap my head around you wanting to date me. I don't want you to get bored with me."

“I’m nothing like your ex.”

“No, but the fact remains.”

“Can we at least try?” I was close to begging him. Even my stomach had to put its attitude on hold while I waited for him to give me the green light. I wanted this with him. I’d thought about it more than was probably healthy.

“People will see us together.”

“They will, especially in Espen. I don’t exactly blend in well.”

Stephen’s gaze traced over my shoulders down to my chest and then to my arms. I had to stop myself from preening under his attention. It made me happy. I busted my ass to look like this.

“How about we spend the day together?” I offered. “Let me take you on a date, starting with this meal. My treat.”

He opened his mouth, most likely to refuse, but I held up my hand.

“I want to make it up to you, show you I can be a gentleman.”

“I didn’t say you had to do that.” A blush quickly crept over his cheeks like he hadn’t meant to say that out loud. I decided not to draw attention to it or what he said.

“We can go anywhere you want.”

“I don’t want you to always do things I like.”

I nodded. “Fair enough. Let’s agree on something we can do together today. We’ll

take this one date at a time.”

We talked for a bit about our interests. I liked sports, no shock there, but that wasn't all I was into. Stephen had this way to pull me into his interests and make me want to learn more. There was this thirst for knowledge within me, but only if he was the one showing me. If I sat down to try and watch a show about history, it would bore the shit out of me. Stephen being next to me when we were together the last time, how he'd fill in gaps and answer my questions patiently, it brought things to another level.

His eyes lit up when he mentioned the museum and how he hadn't been there in a while. That was where we should go on our date and knew he was going to put up a fight about it, since it was something that interested him and not necessarily me.

“The museum is where we should go,” I told him once I swallowed my next mouthful of food.

He sat his coffee mug on the table. “No, that's not something we'll both enjoy.”

I didn't hesitate this time to reach across the table and take his hand into mine. “The things you think are boring to others, aren't to me, because they interest you. And you make them exciting. You have a gift, Stephen. It's no wonder you're in the job you are.” I gave his hand a squeeze and went back to my pancakes. Stephen was delicious in his own right, but I couldn't exactly nibble on him here in front of other people, so the pancakes won as I stuffed more into my mouth.

Stephen still seemed hesitant. I had to make him see how this was what I wanted to do for not only our date, but for him. It was obvious how much he missed going to the museum. I didn't think it would be boring, not with him as my guide.

“Here's a scenario for you,” I began. “It's August, obviously. That means my time is a lot more freed up than it will be come later in September, and from that point on. I

travel a lot. I play a lot. Hockey is what I know and I'm damn good at it. If we're going to date, which I really want, then it's going to be a lot of nights of us talking on the phone when I'm on the road. Or being too tired when I'm home to do much other than cuddle on the couch. Let us do what you want now before I start living and breathing hockey again."

"I love watching you play."

I grinned like a damn fool. "And I always loved it when you came to my games." I leaned forward and dropped my voice to a whisper. "But I'm going to love it even more when we're a couple and you come to watch me. To see you there and know you're mine... Fuck, I'm going to play better with you there. So, let's do something fun that you want to do because there are going to be a lot of times I won't be able to do that for you."

This time he was the one reaching for my hand. "You make a good point."

"I can be very convincing."

"Are you certain you want to go to the museum?"

"I'd sit and watch paint dry with you, Stephen."

"That shouldn't sound romantic."

I shrugged one shoulder and smiled. "I have a gift. And this is just the start. What do you say? Let me pay for breakfast and take you to the museum. You can wow me with your knowledge, fill my brain with things I never knew, and hopefully I can show you I want this between us. Not as an experiment. Not as a game. But because I want you. And I'll be sure to keep my lips to myself unless you invite me into your space."

He sucked in a quiet breath while his eyes dropped to my mouth. I smirked and leaned back but kept my hand in his while I sipped my coffee.

I was going on a date with Stephen. I didn't fuck everything up beyond repair. McKenna with the win!

14

STEPHEN

Is this really happening?

Jansen walked next to me as we climbed the steps to the New Jersey Natural History Museum. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been there, and never had I imagined being here with Jansen. At least not with Jansen on my arm as my date. The moment at breakfast when he said he wanted to date me had been surreal. Thankfully, I found the words to respond when most of my brain was a jumbled mess. When he started to put himself down, I had to step in, which helped me focus on the conversation, not on the thoughts that tried to take over.

Throughout breakfast, we talked more. Nothing too serious. Mostly about his training schedule for the rest of the summer before things really picked up again in September. There wasn't much time before he'd be on the road again. I might not be ready to jump into a relationship with both feet.

I wanted to be extra cautious here. I didn't want to end up with a broken heart if, or when, he decided he was actually straight. And somehow, that wasn't even the biggest worry in all of this. We had so much more we had to figure out, including the one thing we hadn't talked about at all.

Serilda.

Even without her presence, she hung over our heads, holding us slightly captive. I

figured that was a conversation I could have with him later when there weren't so many ears listening in.

By the time we'd reached the highway, I found myself unable to hold the thought in any longer. I glanced over at Jansen out of the corner of my eye. "We didn't talk about Serilda while we were at breakfast."

Even with my gaze on the road, I noticed him stiffen beside me. "What about her?"

If we weren't on the highway, I would have pulled the car over so we could talk about this. We were heading out on a date. A date with a man who used to date my daughter. I didn't think this was a conversation that could wait anymore. This wasn't a topic we could sweep under the rug and pretend it didn't exist.

"We can't ignore the fact that you once dated her."

A long sigh left his lips. "I don't really know what to say about it. We dated, she dumped me, end of story."

Whether or not it was the right move, I reached over with my free hand and covered the top of his where it rested on his leg. "I know, but she's my daughter. It's not like we can avoid her forever."

"Maybe a few years?" he half joked, then immediately quieted.

I let the silence linger for a few minutes. "Are you going to be okay with dating her father?"

He flipped his hand under mine, lacing our fingers together. "I don't look at you and see Serilda's father. The question is, are you okay being with me who used to date her?"

“We wouldn’t be in the car right now if I wasn’t. Not that I have a single idea of how to tell her. The benefit is that she’s in Europe for the next few months. Depending on where this goes, we have time to think about it.”

He tightened his grip. “We can cross that bridge when we come to it. But you need to have faith in me. I want to see where this goes.”

I wasn’t sure I had faith in either of us, but I was willing to give it a shot. Time with Jansen had been the most fun, relaxing time I’d had in years. Something I never had with Peter. Conversation and time together might be easier, but dating him had pitfalls of its own.

It wasn’t a secret the press followed Jansen. They followed all of the professional athletes in town. They didn’t need to know about our connection before this date. It would only serve as gossip for the tabloids. That minefield would have to be navigated, but only after we determined what there was between us.

In Jansen’s mind, he couldn’t stop thinking about me and wanted to date a man for the first time in his life. As for me, I still wasn’t so sure this wasn’t an experiment or loneliness. Everyone concluded about their sexuality in their own time, but Jansen showed no sign of being interested in men before, which made me a little skeptical of my own luck.

The fact we were heading to a museum was just another sign of the lack of excitement I brought to a relationship. As I reached for the door, I racked my brain, trying to think of a way to make this trip interesting for him. Or at minimum, one he didn’t regret suggesting.

A warm hand landed on my back as we reached the top of the stairs. “We’re going to have a great time.”

Without a word, I nodded and pulled open the door. I wished I had the confidence he did in my ability to be an excellent tour guide.

When we reached the reception desk, just as Jansen handed his credit card over for the tickets, I pulled my membership card from my wallet. I could feel the heat rise in my cheeks, doubting any of Jansen's teammates or previous dates had ever had a membership to the museum.

"I didn't know you're a member. That's cool."

With a smile on his face, he handed over his card and paid for a yearly membership for himself. I had no doubt my mouth hung open watching him sign the slip. The receptionist printed his pass and handed it over, neither of them acknowledging my shock.

Jansen slid his card and pass into his wallet and turned to face me. "What?"

"You bought a year pass?" I knew Jansen made plenty of money playing hockey. It didn't explain why he wouldn't simply buy a day pass for the museum.

"It makes sense. You have one so I'm sure we'll be spending more time here."

I shook my head as I walked farther into the entrance area. The entire room was lit from the high windows letting the sun in on the bright paint. Bronze statues of important figures in history lined the outer edge of the circular space.

Jansen followed me into the center of the room. "Where should we start?"

I was still trying to process the idea Jansen wanted to spend more time at the museum with me when Peter would have thrown a fit about more than one day a year. Often, I came here on my own, on days Peter worked or when I just needed a place to think.

I wandered forward toward one of my favorite statues. The only one that was shorter than the others. A man who overcame his own fears to lead our country through one of the hardest times in the nation's history.

I felt Jansen's presence next to me before I heard his voice. "Isn't that Franklin Roosevelt?"

I glanced down at the statue sitting poised in his wheelchair. "It is."

"He was president during World War II."

I glanced up at Jansen, a small smirk on my face. "See, you do know some history."

He laughed. "I did pass my high school history classes. I'm pretty sure most people would recognize him."

"Actually, you'd be surprised. Many people still don't know he was in a wheelchair."

"Seriously?"

"Probably for the same reason they didn't know Eleanor was his fifth cousin." I shrugged, as if the little bit of information hadn't caught Jansen off guard.

"Wait... What?"

"Franklin and Eleanor were related. Eleanor was Teddy Roosevelt's niece."

"Dammnn," he said, staring at the statue.

"Irony, isn't it?"

Jansen placed his hand on my shoulder, turning me to face him. “Not even close. I dated Serilda. Not married her. I never had kids with her. And I can tell you that just being here with you is miles away from being on a date with any of the women I’ve been in a relationship with. I love spending time with you.”

“We haven’t even left the atrium yet.”

He lifted his hand to cup my cheek. “Yeah, but it’s being with you that makes the difference.” Our eyes locked and, for a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. This time I was ready. This time I wanted his lips on mine. But then he broke the connection.

“Show me more than the atrium.”

I sucked in a breath, trying to get my bearings and not let my disappointment show. I turned toward the section where the Native American collections were kept. A few steps through the door and Jansen slipped his hand into mine.

Warm breath blew on my ear. “I told you, the next time I kiss you, I’ll ask for permission first.”

His words settled the fear that rose inside me. It might take time for me to not think the worst about Jansen’s actions and words, but hopefully he had enough patience with me to work through it.

“I’ll be waiting for the question.” I tightened my grip. “Until then, I want to take you to my favorite part of the museum.” I led him up the winding staircase to the third floor. We could have taken the elevator, but then we wouldn’t have been able to walk past the giant pendulum hanging from the ceiling. The piece was fascinating in its movement.

“How does it swing if no one is pushing it?” Jansen asked when we hit the landing of the third floor.

“The movement of the Earth keeps it going. It doesn’t need an outside force. The rotational axis of the Earth does the work for us.”

“Interesting.” He kept turning back to look at the wire connecting the pendulum to the ceiling as we walked.

We stopped at the sign above the entrance. “Native Americans?”

“Yes. It’s my favorite place to come when I’m here. The multitude of different tribes throughout the regions is fascinating to me. And I manage to learn something new every time I come.”

Jansen stepped into the room. “Let’s learn something new together.”

I walked him through the Native American exhibit, showing him the differences between the regions and tribes, before we moved on to the Asian-Pacific, and eventually European sections of the museum. Throughout each exhibit, Jansen asked a ton of questions. Not the type of questions one would ask when they had to complete a report of something they didn’t even find mildly interesting, but questions that showed a sincere interest in my knowledge and information.

It was refreshing to be able to discuss my favorite parts of the museum with someone who wanted to understand what made it my favorite.

At some point, we went down to the cafeteria for a quick lunch, then we were off to the planetarium show about the Big Bang.

I couldn’t believe how quickly the day had passed. Never had I enjoyed a trip to the

museum so much.

The bright sun a little lower in the sky, and the heat of the day as we stepped outside, reminded us the day might be over, but the early evening had just begun.

Honestly, I didn't want it to end.

JANSEN

Just being in Stephen's presence made me feel smarter. Like every word he said seeped into my head and took root. I wasn't the kid in school who was thirsty for knowledge. No, I wanted to play hockey and have fun. Now I got to play as a career and while it wasn't as fun as it used to be, it was more rewarding because it was my job. I got to do what I loved and wasn't stuck behind a desk in an office with a bunch of people I didn't like but had to pretend to so I could get through the day. On the ice, I told the people I hated to kiss my ass and a multitude of other things. It was fantastic.

I wasn't sure how long we spent in the museum because time with Stephen wasn't boring. Everything he said interested me. And the way his eyes lit up when he took in some of the exhibits, hell, I'd bring him here every chance I could, just to see him that happy.

We walked outside of the building into the hot and humid August day.

"Where to now?" I asked.

He looked at me like he was confused. "You want to spend more time with me? I didn't bore you?"

"One day I'm going to prove to you how much fun I have when we're together. I learned all kinds of shit today. It was great." I grinned. Nothing I said was a lie. And

if Stephen and I were dating, I was going to be honest with him. No games, no bullshit.

He offered me a small smile. "I'm glad."

It was after lunch but not quite dinnertime yet. I didn't want the day to end so I had to think of something for us to do, or I had a feeling he was going to leave. "Want to go back to my place?"

His eyes widened.

"I mean, not in the way that sounded. Not that I don't want that too, but I wasn't pushing for it or rushing things." Oh my god, shut the fuck up, McKenna! "Anyway, we could have a snack, watch TV, or we could do something else. Just throwing options out there."

The blush creeping over his cheeks was adorable. I wanted to kiss him but held back. The last time I did so was a huge mistake on my part by springing it on him. Though we were standing here. We did go on a date. I did something right today.

"Coffee? Cake?" I suggested. "King's sister brought me a chocolate cake yesterday. Said she was trying out recipes and was handing them out to his friends. D got a cherry pie. Nordin ended up with a chocolate cheesecake. I'm not sure why she's on this kick, outside of craving sweets, but I'm not complaining." And that cake... holy hell, it melted in my mouth with an explosion of chocolate decadence.

"That sounds good."

"Cool. How about we head back to the café first, so I can get my car, then we can go over and indulge in chocolatey heaven?"

He chuckled. “Let’s go.”

The drive to the café was quiet but it was the good kind where I didn’t feel like I had to fill it with senseless chatter. I could have, since I was so on point with my rambling today. But I liked the quiet too. Even better was the feel of Stephen’s soft hand in mine. He worked with his brain all day while I worked with my body. We were night and day, opposites like I’d said. I thought that was part of the reason this could work.

We returned to the café, and I drove ahead of him to my condo. It was in one of the smaller buildings in Espen with only ten floors. I was on the top and shared the floor with a guy who was always in suits when I saw him with his ear pressed to his phone. I couldn’t remember his name. He looked down at me a lot of the time, except when I got into the elevator with him while I was in a suit. Why? Because mine cost a fuck ton more than his. I wasn’t a smug man who liked to flash what I owned but the guy thought he was the best, even though I looked way better than him.

The garage was adjacent to the building where I had two spots. I slid into one and Stephen took the other. It felt effortless to go to him and take his hand into mine. More than that, it felt right.

We walked next door and got into the elevator. The doors were about to close when a hand shot through them. There he was, Mr. Executive himself, not on the phone. He wasn’t in a suit today, though he did have on shorts that looked so starched I wondered how he could sit, and a shirt that was so white I was surprised I could look directly at it. A pair of brown suede loafers completed his terrible look. In other words, he looked douchey. Don’t get me wrong, I loved the casual boating look and had rocked it a few times on King’s family’s boat. But I didn’t sneer at people who were near me like they were scum on my shoe. Like Mr. Executive was currently doing.

And just to fuck with him. I smiled. “Good afternoon.”

He sneered at my casual clothes. He was such a tool.

Stephen caught on and asked him, “What do you do?”

The man was shocked for a moment then said, “I’m the vice president at one of the largest banks on the East Coast.” Any chance to talk about himself, I was sure this guy took. Plus, Stephen always dressed better than I did. He looked damn good right now. Mr. Executive probably felt more even with him.

“Ah.”

“What about you?” So, he could be polite. What a revelation.

“I’m the dean at Espen University.”

Well, that perked Mr. Executive up. His eyes brightened and he turned to give Stephen his full attention. That was also when the doors opened.

I tugged on Stephen’s hand, but he didn’t seem to be done talking to the guy. I stood in the doorway to keep them open.

“I went to EU. Great college.” Mr. Executive wasn’t an Ivy League man. Interesting.

“Do you watch sports?” Stephen asked.

The elevator started that annoying buzzing sound since the doors were still open. We all stepped out so the elevator could be on its way.

“Sports?” Mr. Executive asked. “I’ve enjoyed the polo tournament in the Hamptons when I’m able to make it.” Jesus, this guy. Not that there was anything wrong with polo. It was the snotty way he said it.

“You don’t recognize him then?” Stephen looked toward me and gave me a wink. I nearly melted.

“No, should I?”

“You’re neighbors, right? I gather that’s why you rode up to this floor.”

“Yes.”

“Well, while you were sneering at him, thinking you’re better, he was winning the Stanley Cup with the Jetties. I’m sure since you went to EU that you’d recognize the name of the NHL team here in Espen.”

Mr. Executive looked me up and down then focused back on Stephen. “I don’t follow hockey.” It wasn’t a sneer this time, more like he was trying to save face.

“You should. Maybe you could learn a thing or two about who you live next door to. Not only is he paid much, much better than you, but if you’d see him on the ice, you’d understand he could crush you in seconds flat.”

Mr. Executive’s eyes were on me again. I grinned and nodded, probably looking more insane than sincere. I honestly didn’t care what the dickhead thought of me. I was positively beaming over Stephen coming to my defense in the best way. Not a raised voice. Not a fraction of anger. Calm and well-spoken, stating the facts. I could crush Mr. Executive. I wouldn’t. I was a lover not a fighter when not playing.

Before the guy could say anything else, Stephen added, “You should get to know your neighbors. He did buy the same size condo as you. He obviously has money. I wouldn’t blame him if he didn’t help you if you needed it. Why would he when you look down your nose at him, which is funny considering he’s over six foot and you’re barely brushing five eleven, if I had to guess.”

If we were at the point in our relationship where we were having sex, I'd totally push Stephen against the door once we were inside my place. Apparently, what was happening was a kink of mine. Who knew?

"If you'll excuse us," Stephen said while the guy gawked. "Jansen has tired muscles that need a massage... among other things." Where did I sign up for that?

I had enough blood flowing in my head to turn us toward my door. Neither of us looked back as I unlocked it, and we went inside.

The moment the door was closed, I spun to face Stephen. "That was amazing! I'd kiss you right now but I'm trying to be respectful of your boundaries. Unless you say you want to kiss me, then I'm going for it because, holy shit, that was hot. The way you cut him down, I didn't—"

My words were cut off by Stephen stepping up to me and pressing his lips to mine. My smile turned into a moan as he swept his tongue over my lips. I wasn't sure what to do with my hands since I didn't want to push this farther than he wanted to go. Stephen wrapped his arms around my neck, so I settled my hands on his hips, and we kissed. Full of tongue, heat, and everything the last kiss was missing.

We were both breathing heavy by the time we pulled apart.

I rested my forehead on his. Words wouldn't come. Nothing I could say would be enough to encompass what I felt. "That was..."

"Perfect," Stephen finished. He leaned back to look into my eyes. "You shouldn't let him look at you like that, Jansen."

"I like fucking with him. He thinks he can be a bully because he's wealthy and flaunts it. I counter it with my infectious personality and piss him off even more."

“I don’t think he’ll sneer at you any longer.”

“Meh.” I shrugged. “If he does it with you around, I’ll like it very much. You have no idea how turned on I am right now.”

Stephen shifted a bit on his feet. “I have a clue.” A sweet blush rose over his cheeks.

I gave him a quick peck then went toward the kitchen. My condo was an open space. The entryway opened into the living room, which was completely open to the kitchen and dining room. The appliances were stainless steel and high end. It was my personal touches that made it special. The comfortable couch, the dining table that had a big dent in the middle from one night when the guys were over, and we were arm wrestling. It got out of hand and that dent was from Knox’s head. Every time he came over, I laughed when his eyes settled on it.

The kitchen cabinets were a dark mahogany while the countertop was a beige quartz. And sitting on it in a plastic cake dish was chocolate heaven.

“Cake?” I asked when Stephen came into the room.

He nodded. “This is very nice.”

“Thank you.” I smiled.

I brewed coffee while we talked then plated two big slices of cake. Stephen and I sat at the island talking some more. This day was great, better than I could have hoped for when I woke up this morning a nervous wreck about going to see him. I hoped we had many more dates as wonderful as this one was.

STEPHEN

“That restaurant was better than I expected,” I said to Jansen as we exited Cena di Famiglia , a small downtown place I hadn’t been to before, but Shannon suggested it when we’d had lunch earlier today. The name literally meant family dinner, and that was exactly how we were treated eating there—like family.

I told her I wanted to take Jansen somewhere new. A place neither of us had been to before. She’d been quick to suggest Cena di Famiglia .

The restaurants around my house were very familiar to me. I’d frequented them quite often to avoid cooking. This one happened to be much farther down the beach block. After a long day at work, I usually preferred to walk somewhere close. It made life easier.

However, since Jansen and I’d started dating, I was trying to broaden my horizons. He’d convinced me to go up to the pier to play games, something I’d never done in all the time I’d lived here. And I wanted to find something else new for us.

“Their chicken piccata was the best I’ve ever had.” He rubbed his hand over his stomach.

I slipped my hand in Jansen’s as we walked back to his car. “I don’t think I’ll be able to eat Italian again without comparing it.”

We reached the front of his car. He pulled me to a stop when I turned to head to the passenger side. He tugged me until I was pressed up against him, the heat of his body seeping through our clothes and into mine. “Or we could skip the other places and keep going there.” He briefly pressed his lips to mine. “Stay for a while when we get back to my place.”

Nothing could make me say no to the invitation. Whether it was simply sitting on the couch and watching TV, or spending the night devouring each other’s mouths, I was more than happy to spend time with him.

“Of course.” He let go and I moved around to the side of the car and climbed inside. Jansen wasted no time exiting the lot.

When we arrived, Jansen pulled into next to my car, where I’d left it earlier when we left for the restaurant. As we walked up to the elevator, Jansen’s neighbor was just stepping off the elevator. His eyes darted all around the garage, avoiding eye contact with us. The way he’d looked down his nose at Jansen made my blood boil. At least he was smart enough to not do that anymore. Now he simply avoided any kind of interaction.

“Hi,” Jansen said with a cheery wave. That made the man scurry even faster to his car. “Enjoy your evening!”

I chuckled as the elevator door closed. “Still haven’t given up?”

“Nope.” A bright smile lit his face. “It’s fun to watch him squirm after all the years he’s been rude to me.”

The entire ride up, I could feel Jansen’s eyes on me. Forget watching TV. Tonight, I wanted to taste him.

Even with the cool air of the hall, I could feel the sweat trickle down my neck when we stepped off the elevator.

He closed us into his condo, dropped his keys by the door, and walked inside, but I wasn't letting him get far. I stepped around him and slipped my hand around the back of his neck.

I pressed my lips to his, immediately dipping my tongue into Jansen's mouth. The wine from dinner still lingered on his lips. His hands were burning as he cupped my cheeks, tilting my head to deepen the kiss further.

My dick throbbed behind my too tight pants. After almost two weeks of scorching nights kissing Jansen on my couch or his, my cock begged for more. Some friction. Some heat. Really anything.

More than that, I wanted to wrap my lips around his hard dick. I'd brushed my hand over it through his slacks. Tonight, it wasn't enough.

There was no doubt in my mind Jansen had been waiting for a sign from me. From that first kiss after the museum, he'd let me lead.

Well, tonight I planned to lead us into new territory. Otherwise, I was going to die of unsatisfied lust.

With our lips still firmly connected, I pressed Jansen back until he sat on the couch, then I straddled his lap. I quickly divested us of our shirts. His strong chest and muscles were a sight to see. Our dicks rubbed against each other, and I couldn't help but relish in the soft moan that rumbled from his throat.

"God, that feels so good," he said when he tore his mouth away, lifting his hips to create more friction between us.

Knowing I was pushing a line, I reached for the waist of his pants, hoping I wasn't pushing too far and popped the button. I stopped there. Just like he waited for me, I wanted permission before I went any farther. "More?" I asked searching his gaze.

"Yes."

Sliding back on his thighs a bit, I dipped my finger beneath his clothes to find him hard and already leaking. Jansen's hands moved to my hips, tightening their hold while I ran the pad of my thumb over his cock.

Oh god.

My dick surged in my pants, begging to be freed. I pulled my fingers from his pants and brought them to my lips, tasting the saltiness of him on my tongue.

Jansen grabbed my hand, pulling my fingers from my mouth and bringing them to his own lips, sucking hard.

A zap of electricity ran from my fingers straight to my cock.

I pulled my finger free and captured his lips with mine. My tongue dived deep into his mouth, tasting every inch, savoring every flavor.

I ran my lips along his jawline. The feel of his hard dick beneath me like a brand on my body.

"I want to taste you. Please tell me you'll let me," I whispered before sucking the lobe of his ear into my mouth.

Jansen cupped his hand around my neck, bringing my face in front of his. "Anything you want, you don't have to ask." He pressed a brief kiss to my lips then sprawled

back against the couch. “I’m dying to see your lips wrapped around me.”

I slid from his lap to the floor, between his legs. The heat from his thighs alone had sweat trickling down my back. With trembling fingers, I grabbed the waist of his jeans and tugged. Jansen took the cue and immediately lifted his hips, letting me pull his jeans below his knees. His boxer briefs were next.

My hands continued to shake, but not from nerves or fear. I wanted this more than I’d ever wanted a man before. And didn’t that say a lot?

Hard, swollen, and begging for attention, Jansen’s cock lay waiting against his stomach. Each inch of him would feel perfect sliding deep in my body. But there was no need to push him farther than he might be ready to go.

It was one thing to think you were ready to be with a man for the first time, the reality was very different.

With my eyes still focused on his, I leaned forward and ran my tongue up the length of him. Jansen’s eyes fluttered closed for a second then opened right back up.

“Do that again.”

I did, except this time, I didn’t stop. Opening wide, I sucked the tip of him into my mouth. Strong fingers sank into the hair on the back of my head, painfully tugging on the ends, which only made me suck harder.

Salty precum hit my tongue. I dropped my head and took him all the way to the back of my throat.

“Fuck!” Jansen’s shout echoed throughout the room.

His hips started bucking up into my mouth. I moved back a bit, giving him the room he needed to use my mouth as he wished.

With one hand, I reached down and palmed my own aching cock. Nothing got me harder than when a man took control during a blow job. They weren't supposed to be pretty and sweet. Messy and rough always won out for me.

I gripped him with my other hand as I bobbed my head up and down, meeting his thrusts. The way his dick throbbed in my mouth; I knew it wouldn't be long.

"Oh god, Stephen. Don't stop," he moaned.

His grip in my hair tightened even farther, right before the first jet of cum hit the back of my throat.

I sucked down every drop while Jansen rode out the waves of his orgasm.

When he finally let go of my hair, I pulled off and looked up at him. Splayed out in post-sexual bliss was a good look for Jansen.

I cupped my dick in my clothes, not wanting wet pants for the rest of the night.

Slowly, his eyes fluttered open. "I don't think I can move, but I want you to come too."

Deep breath in. Deep breath out. I wanted to come too. "I'm okay."

"No, you're not. Get up here."

I stood and moved to sit beside him, when Jansen's hands shot out and tugged me onto his lap. I found myself in the same position as when we started, straddling

Jansen's lap with my cock hard as steel.

Jansen reached for the button of my shorts. "I want to see what you look like when you come."

I whimpered, unable to form words when he popped the button and pulled down the zipper. With my legs spread wide there was no way I could get my shorts under my ass. Jansen was quick to take matters into his own hands and pulled my cock free of my black briefs. "This tiny underwear is sexy as hell, but what's underneath is much better."

For a man who had never been with another man, he knew exactly how to stroke my dick to make my eyes roll into the back of my head. His grip perfectly tight. The strokes just the right pace.

It wasn't long before I was thrusting into his hand. After one of the hottest blow jobs I'd ever given, that shouldn't have been a surprise.

"Make me come," I begged.

I grabbed hold of his shoulders, using them to increase my thrusts.

"That's it. Come all over me."

That was all it took. My balls tightened and sensation raced down my spine as jet after jet painted Jansen's chest and chin.

Drained, I let go and slumped forward, right into his arms. My release coating both of us now. I could feel Jansen's heart slow while mine continued to race for a little longer.

We stayed like that until my eyes grew heavy. As much as I wanted to stay, it was time to leave before I got too tired to drive. I pushed back slightly. Jansen's grip on my waist tightened.

"Stay," he whispered in my ear.

"If I don't go now, I'll fall asleep on the way home."

"I meant with me all night."

I didn't let myself weigh the pros and cons of that decision and took a page out of Jansen's book. I jumped without looking, hoping I'd land on both feet. "Yes."

The moment I agreed, he let me sit up. "I think we both need to get cleaned up," he said, eyeing the drying cum on my chest."

I stood and held a hand out to him. "Then let's go."

He took my hand and let me pull him up off the couch, his pants and boxer briefs falling to the floor. He stepped out of them. "Shower with me? I want my hands all over you again."

I dropped my pants and let the sexiest man I'd ever been with lead me from the room to the steamiest shower I'd ever taken.

17

JANSEN

There was no hiding the smile on my face the next day when I showed up for training with Jagger. He saw it immediately.

“Every day you’re happier and happier. I love seeing it.” He clapped me on the shoulder and steered me toward the pool. I was in such a joyous fog, I forgot we were training in the water today.

Melanie was there, sitting in one of the lounge chairs with her tablet in one hand and coffee in another.

“No kids today?”

“Nah,” Jagger replied. “Mel’s parents have them. They picked them up early this morning and they’ll stay there until Sunday to give us a long weekend.”

“You know, we could skip our workout today and tomorrow and give you and Mel a four day fuckfest. No kids. Lots of sex.” When I looked up, I saw Melanie watching us. I winked.

Jagger shook his head. “No, you don’t. You’re going to bust your ass today and tomorrow. Mel and I are just fine on the fucking front.”

“Could you two stop talking about our sex life?” she asked.

“We could.” I smiled. “But where’s the fun in that?”

I used their bathroom to get changed into my swim trunks. I always had them in my bag, even if I didn’t wear them every time I went into the pool. Boxer briefs worked just fine too.

Jagger was doing laps when I came out of the house. Melanie had her tablet on her lap, her mug to her lips, as her gaze tracked her husband going from one side of the pool to the other in powerful strokes.

I snuck up behind her and leaned in close. “See something you like?”

She squeaked and jumped. “You’re lucky this mug isn’t full.”

When Jagger was at the other end of the pool, I did a cannonball just to splash Melanie, which I did. A little bit of a shower, nothing more. I didn’t need to see her eyes behind her sunglasses to know she was glaring at me. She couldn’t stay mad though. Not at me.

Jagger was quick to get me warmed up in the pool, then we started the real work. If I hadn’t been in the water already, I would have been sweating my ass off. It wasn’t all fun and games in here. Jagger knew just what to do to get me working hard. By the time we were done, I threw myself onto one of the lounge chairs like a fish flopping on a boat deck, water splashing, making a mess.

My bottle of water appeared above me. “Drink,” Jagger said.

There was decent cloud cover today to prevent the full heat of the sun from beating down on us. A summer storm seemed to be rolling in.

I hung out with them for a bit then dragged my ass home. I hadn’t talked to my

brother yet this week and wanted to check in on him. Opening the video chat on my laptop, I kicked my feet up on the couch with the computer on my stomach.

“You look comfortable,” Gareth said when he answered the call. He was on his phone. I watched him walk through the house I grew up in.

“I’m tired. Jagger worked me hard today.”

“He does that every day.”

“You’re right. So, what’s new with you? Anyone of interest in your life?”

He sat on his bed, leaning back on the pillows. “You share and so will I.”

“Juicy. How much are we sharing? Because while I love you, I don’t want to hear about you getting it on, outside of making sure you’re being safe.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, Dad, I know how condoms work.”

“Touché. Now, fill me in.”

Gareth went on to tell me about a guy he met. Someone new to town, which was a rarity, since it wasn’t a big city where people moved in and out often. It was a small place where everybody knew everybody else.

“He’s gorgeous, Jans. Lean but not skinny. Blond hair, green eyes. He had my attention the first time I saw him.”

“And he likes you too?”

A blush rose over his cheeks. I loved seeing my brother happy. I wished he could

always be like this. Maybe this was a turning point. I found someone I really cared about. Gareth could have too.

“He does,” he replied. “We’ve only been on two dates. We’re going out again tomorrow night.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“Me too. Now, fill me in on you.”

“Well, I don’t want to brag or anything, not that you need details, but I totally understand why men fall for other men.”

“Got a blow job from your guy, huh?”

“How did you know that?” I didn’t even bring up sex, but of course Gareth went there with the conversation.

“There’s something about having a guy’s mouth wrapped around—”

I held up my hand. “Nope, this went into I don’t need that visual territory.”

“You and your dean, huh?”

I’d been filling things in with Gareth when we talked. I didn’t tell him everything but, outside of Jagger, Gareth was my next best friend. We had the kind of relationship not all siblings did. One I didn’t take for granted.

“I’ve never felt like this before,” I told him. “It’s different with him.”

Gareth snorted. “Yeah, because he’s a guy.” If my brother was in front of me, I would

have thrown a pillow at him.

“I know that, asshole. But it’s more than that. Everything is just... better.”

“I don’t think his gender has anything to do with it. It’s him. You’ve found someone you really click with. It’s a good thing.”

“It’s an amazing thing.” I grinned. “Look at us. Both finding good men.”

“Yeah, except I’ve always liked dick. This is new for you. Have you two gone out on a date in public yet? And don’t say yes, you eat and go to the museum. That can look like friends. I mean the kind of date where you hold hands, kiss, let everyone see you’re together.”

“Not yet, but we have plans to tomorrow night. I’m not ashamed to be with him.”

“I know that. You’re going to face scrutiny though. Not only because you’re seen with a guy, but this is the guy whose daughter you fucked.”

“Seriously? You had to say that?”

Gareth shrugged. “Just speaking the truth.” He sighed. “Jans, it’s me.”

I scrubbed a hand over my face. “I don’t expect it to be smooth sailing. As long as I have Stephen, nothing else matters. You guys know. My teammates won’t care if I’m with a guy or if he’s Serilda’s dad. I mean, it will be shocking since I’ve never been with a guy before, but they’re the supportive type. I’m not worried about them.”

“The fans though. You have to be ready. You’ve seen the hate Devon gets sometimes. Not everyone is queer friendly.”

“I’ll be fine. And most people won’t know Stephen is Serlida’s dad. It’s not like they were seen together a lot.” At least I didn’t think. It didn’t matter though. Anything that popped up would be worth it if I kept getting to have his kisses, his touches, just him.

The fans weren’t all great. I’d deal. The Jetties wouldn’t care. Not with Kasper as their owner. He’d made his point that he would accept every and any player, regardless of their sexuality.

I had a great job I loved and a man I wanted to spend more time with. Everything else would fall into place. I had to believe that.

When I was with Stephen, I was on top of the world. I wanted to bottle that feeling and hold on to it forever.

“So...” I decided a subject change was in order. “Does your boyfriend know your brother is famous?”

Gareth rolled his eyes. I laughed. “He’s not into hockey.”

I gasped and put my hand to my chest. “Say it isn’t so? How is that even possible?”

“I know! The horror!” Another eye roll.

Gareth and I stayed on the phone a while longer. I missed him and my parents so much. I’d see them again soon. Being able to witness my brother smile a lot, obviously excited about his new relationship, meant everything to me. I felt more settled when I knew my family was doing well.

I spent the rest of the afternoon lounging around my place, not doing much, giving my tired muscles a chance to relax. Stephen was working. There was nothing on TV.

For once, I just was. I didn't need to do anything. I simply lay there with a smile, knowing I had someone special in my life. Someone I wanted to spend more time with. Who I couldn't wait to see tomorrow night.

Depending on if the media caught on to us, which I figured they would, it would be a test of our relationship. Stephen would get a taste of what it was like to date someone in the public eye. I couldn't lie and say I wasn't nervous. I was. I didn't want to lose him. Not that I thought he was the kind of guy to bail if things got heavy. It was also new for me. I'd be under more scrutiny since I'd be with a guy.

Jansen McKenna wouldn't be seen as straight any longer.

I didn't care about labels, though the media would push for them. I just wanted to be happy. Be with someone who I could make smile in return. I had that with Stephen. And I was going to hold on to it however tightly I needed to.

What I felt for him, it was growing into something big. Something I wasn't even close to putting a name to, but it was there, in the back of my mind. This little flame of hope saying maybe, just maybe, this could be it.

No, I wasn't going to get ahead of myself. I wouldn't snuff out that flame, but I wouldn't add gasoline to it either. It could grow bigger on its own. Only time would tell what was going to happen between Stephen and me.

We both deserved this win. Something that had nothing to do with hockey and everything to do with two people who just fucking fit together, no matter how much they shouldn't. Stephen reentered my life at the perfect time. I was ready for a big love. He was the person I wanted to be with.

I sighed wistfully and closed my eyes. The sight in my mind of Stephen with my dick in his mouth. I would always remember it, the first time we were together like that.

Hopefully, it would be the first of many. What we'd experienced together so far wasn't nearly enough. I was an addict craving another taste, unsure I'd ever be able to quench the thirst for him.

Tomorrow night, we were going to show the world we were together. Not that everyone would give a shit, but some would. And I would put blinders on and try to block out any bad comments. None of it mattered. Only how Stephen and I felt. We were important. He was important.

Did he like flowers? Should I buy him flowers? Maybe I'd pick him up some tomorrow after training. I could shop around for the best. Nothing else would do. Stephen deserved it.

STEPHEN

I paced in front of the full-length mirror in my bedroom. The light gray of the edges matched the furniture. When we first moved in, Gisela preferred the warm oaks and cherrywoods. After she left, I felt like both the house and myself needed something new, something fresh. A beach theme throughout the house seemed like the obvious choice, and I hadn't regretted the color scheme since.

Tonight, however, the color of my furniture was the last thing on my mind. Jansen was on his way over to pick me up for our first official date. He wouldn't tell me where we were going, only to dress casually. I looked over my khaki shorts and polo shirt. Not one to normally stress so much, I did one last glance then forced myself to walk away from the mirror.

If it wasn't for Peter's voice in the back of my head, I wouldn't have worried about what I'd chosen to wear. Even when he told me to dress casually, he would complain about the collared shirts or button-downs. Clothes I was comfortable in. I'd never been big on the gym shorts and T-shirt look. It just wasn't me.

Would Jansen be offended I'd chosen to not dress more casually? No. No he wouldn't.

I had to remind myself over and over again, he'd made it clear my interests and likes were okay. That we didn't need to enjoy the same things all the time. Our differences made our time together more fun. We both got to try things we hadn't before.

The doorbell rang as I was halfway down the stairs, interrupting my pep talk. Hustling down the last few stairs, I went directly to the door and pulled it open. Jansen stood on the other side with flowers in his hand and a pink stain on his cheeks, something I'd never imagined seeing. I stepped back to let him in.

"For you." He held the flowers out to me, looking a little sheepish.

"Thank you."

"I wasn't sure if you would like them. Or if I should get them because you're..." he trailed off. His nerves were written on his face.

I pressed my finger under his chin, lifting his gaze and pressing my lips to his. "They're perfect. I take it my daughter wasn't so appreciative of flowers."

"Not exactly." He smiled, but it was brief.

I set the flowers on the table next to us and took his hands in mine. "I had you back for a second, then you disappeared again. Where did you go?"

"You know we're going to be photographed tonight, right?"

"I imagined it would come with the territory of being on a date with you." I'd thought a lot about it over the last few days. A little publicity wouldn't stop me from seeing where this would go.

"You're not worried that I very publicly dated your daughter?"

I sighed. "The media doesn't know me as Serilda's father. As much as it pains me to say, she hasn't wanted to acknowledge me in public. She's my daughter and I love her. I also understand she's spoiled and sees the world from a place of how she can

benefit from it, instead of the love she could receive.”

Jansen frowned. “It took me a long time to realize that. I’m sorry I helped her with that.”

I shook my head and moved my hands down his arms, slipping my fingers through his. “You didn’t. To those she takes an interest in, she knows how to show them the side she wants them to see. It’s why she spends most of her time in Europe. Her mother is usually focused on her family’s company, while I’m the one who calls out Serilda’s poor behavior.”

“That explains why it was so easy for her to sell her condo in the city.”

I briefly pressed my finger over his lips. “We’re not going to let Serilda ruin our night. She made her choices and now we get to make ours. Let me put the flowers in water, then we’ll enjoy our date.”

Jansen pressed his lips lightly to mine. “Sounds good.”

With the flowers safely in a vase on the kitchen counter, I let Jansen lead me to his car. I leaned back in the seat and let Jansen take me wherever the night was going to bring us. I was surprised to see him pull into a space a little way down from O’Malley’s pub.

He must have noticed the surprise on my face because that sheepish smile was back. “I thought a night of Quizzo would be fun.”

He was right, it did sound fun. “I think it’s a great idea.”

I climbed out of the car and waited for Jansen on the sidewalk. He stepped up next to me and slipped his hand into mine. Searching his face, I looked for any signs of

discomfort. His smile was nothing short of incredibly happy.

“I’m counting on you to help us win.” He winked and started toward the door.

The smell of fries and burgers hit my nose as soon as we walked inside. My stomach growled loud enough for Jansen to hear it.

“Hungry?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t really have time for lunch. Too many meetings today.”

We found a high-top in the bar area, close to the table where the game would be held. “You need to make time to eat during the day. It’s not good to skip meals.”

“Maybe next time you can come by and have lunch with me?” I’d never known myself to be so bold, but something in Jansen brought it out in me.

“I like the sound of that.”

We’d barely picked up our menus when I saw a phone out of the corner of my eye, no doubt raised to take a picture. Jansen might have let go of my hand to sit down, but he immediately covered it on the table. I pushed the phone out of my head. We were going to enjoy our night, no matter what people thought.

It wasn’t long before a server came to take our order. After beers and burgers were ordered, I watched Jansen.

“How was training?”

“The same as it always is. I’m more interested in hearing what happened that kept you from eating lunch today.”

“Well, it started with a phone call that one of our professors wanted to drop a course they were teaching and have another professor pick it up.”

“Why would they want to do that? What would they teach instead?”

The server came back with our drinks. I waited for Jansen to finish swallowing before I answered his question.

“Apparently, he started dating one of the students over the summer. The student needs the course to graduate.”

Jansen’s eyes widened. “Wait... Isn’t dating a professor against policy or something?”

I chuckled. The entire situation wasn’t even close to funny and had taken up most of my day. I didn’t know how else to react. The whole thing was insane. I’d been so absorbed with our date after I got home, I’d pushed the day out of my mind. “Not exactly.”

“It’s not? I figured they’d lose their job.”

I took a sip of my own drink. “Well, that’s the point. The student is not his student. It’s a student at the college but he’s never taught them. After hours on the phone, scouring the faculty handbook and contracts, it turns out that it’s only against the rules to date your own students.”

Jansen chuckled. “I’m sorry,” he said shaking his head. “I don’t mean to laugh at your day, but what a loophole.”

“Tell me about it.” The server brought our food, which made my stomach growl again. When we assured them we didn’t need anything else, they left us to our food.

“I’m sure there will be a rule change soon. But for now, I switch his and another professor’s classes load.”

“Lots of crazy dating stories lately, but I guess when you meet the right person, it doesn’t matter how you know one another.”

It wasn’t hard to see the line Jansen had drawn from my day to our own unique connection. A smile still graced his face as he picked up his burger. I followed suit, my empty stomach dictating food was more important in the moment.

The buttery brioche bun and melted cheddar hit my tongue, making me moan. Jansen’s gaze snapped to mine, his pupils dilating. Instantly, I was transported back to the other night when I had his dick in my mouth. I swallowed hard, trying to get my dick, that was very much trying to spring itself to life, under control.

The corner of Jansen’s mouth kicked up; his eyes still locked on me. “Later,” he mouthed.

With promises of not going home alone, I focused on my meal. We ordered another drink each when we finished, while we waited for the game to begin. When the announcer sat down at the table, Jansen jumped up before I could say a word to sign us up.

He came strolling back and I knew I was in trouble. Trouble that was confirmed when he set down the answer sheet with our team’s name on it.

“Bed, Bar, and Beyond?” I lifted a brow.

“If you’re lucky, all three.”

I laughed. Jansen knew how to make me forget about everyone in the room but him. I

almost jumped when the quiz host announced the category for the first round. Wars.

“Well shit, I’m a damn expert.”

“Then we better win this round, Professor.”

I picked up the pencil and waited.

“Question one. Who were the Axis powers in World War II?” the quiz host announced.

When I started to write Japan, Jansen took the pencil from my hand. He scribbled an answer onto the paper. I glanced down and saw Japan, Germany, and Italy.

“I remembered it from that documentary.” His cheeks pinked, like they had when I first opened my door tonight.

I leaned over to whisper in his ear, “That’s sexy as hell.”

The chatter around us increased. I thought it might have been the next question, but when I sat up there were people around us taking pictures. There was no longer a doubt that we’d end up all over social media before the night was over.

Who gave a shit?

I was done pleasing other people. We ignored the cameras and continued playing, winning the round with ease.

It wasn’t until the next category popped up that we paid any attention to the people around us.

“The next category”—the quiz host started—“local sports.”

“No fair.” Someone from the table next to us called out while laughing. “Jansen McKenna is playing.”

The quiz host shrugged. “Guess he gets all the Jetties questions right.”

Everyone in the bar laughed.

“I sure as hell hope I do, otherwise it’ll be embarrassing.”

I nudged him with my elbow. “Just a little bit.”

Between the two of us, we were able to answer most of the sports questions. The questions about the Sandpipers were a little harder.

But it was the final bonus question that had Jansen jumping out of his seat.

“Who scored the final goal in game five of the Jetties’ Stanley Cup win this past season?”

Jansen had Hayes Garner written down before the host even finished the question.

He turned our paper in, and we waited.

“With the extra points from the bonus question, the winner is Bed, Bar, and Beyond!”

Jansen grabbed my hips, pulling me to him, and pressed his lips to mine.

I lost myself in the kiss, even as the voice in the back of my head told me this was only the beginning.

JANSEN

Last night was amazing. Not only did I have fun at the bar with Stephen, but I also had fun back at his place with him. This time it was me on my knees. I was far from good at blow jobs, but the end result was the same—Stephen coming down my throat and me swallowing as much as I could. I had to work on my skills though. Like hockey, the more I practiced, the better I'd become, and damn, did I want to be a master at sucking dick. Stephen's dick to be precise.

I was hard just thinking about him while still pushing the edges of sleep away. My bed was warm and comfortable. It would have been much more so if Stephen was in it with me. I couldn't rush this though. I didn't want to push for more if he wasn't ready. Whatever he wanted, I would do. He was too important to me to fuck things up with.

My phone vibrated on my nightstand. By the amount of light coming into the room, I figured it was around eight. One guess who it was messaging me. I almost didn't reach for it. After all the pictures taken of us last night, it could only be one thing. Okay, maybe more than one. More likely it was Katie with links to articles that mentioned me. The guys on the team were probably texting me too.

Groaning, I gave in and picked up my phone. I ignored the guys and Katie to open Kasper's text first. No one ignored him when he reached out.

Kasper: I saw the news and wanted to say I'm happy for you. If you need anything,

I'm here, as well as the entire Jetties organization.

Me: Thank you. I appreciate that more than you know.

Kasper: Remember, I've been there. Not in the same sense since everyone knew I was gay, but having a relationship the public follows isn't easy, especially one with a man. If there are any issues with the media, fans, you name it, let me know.

Me: Will do and thanks again.

Man, Kasper was one of the best people. I really lucked out joining the Jetties. Hopefully, I stayed with the team for a long time to come. I'd have to be at the top of my game, but I could do that, especially with my best friend kicking my ass in off-season training.

Next, I clicked on the text from Katie and quickly went through the links. Most were talking about me being on a date. Some of the shit publications were making a big deal of me being with a guy. Whatever. They weren't ones the Jetties cared about. Katie said she only sent them so I knew what was going on. The Jetties never gave them the time of day otherwise.

She also told me it was up to me whether I wanted to release a statement or not. If I did, I could do it on my own or Katie could work something up. I texted her and said I'd handle it. It was my relationship with Stephen. It should come from me.

Last night, before I left Stephen's place, we talked about the potential media circus coming our way. He knew I'd have to say something publicly and said whatever I chose to write was fine with him. He trusted me. That meant a lot. I couldn't fall right to sleep last night so I drafted something, knowing I'd end up posting it instead of having the team say it.

I decided to record a video instead of a text post. I wanted the fans to see how sincere I was. So, I got out of bed, handled my usual morning business, and made myself look presentable. I set my phone up, so I had a good shot, and had my tablet below it with what I'd written down for reference. I hit record.

“Hey, everyone. It's your favorite defenseman coming to you on this beautiful Saturday morning. I saw the media coverage and wanted to address my romantic situation. First, I'd like to say that my sexuality isn't up for discussion. Who I choose to spend my time with shouldn't matter, yet it does.”

I paused to rub my hand over my face.

“The thing is, it's really no one's business but mine and the person I'm with. I'm just a guy who happens to enjoy spending time with another guy. I didn't stop liking women. Right now, I'm with him though. I get that I'm in the public eye. So, here's the thing.”

I took a deep breath and let it out.

“By now you know the name of the guy I'm dating. He's the best. Smart as hell, too smart for me. He's sweet and funny too. Just... be kind to him. He deserves the world and I'm hoping I can give it to him. We're still new and I want to see how far we go. I really care about him. I'm going to ask for privacy while we continue to get to know each other.”

I chuckled. “Okay, that's enough of this sappy shit. Have a great weekend. Enjoy the weather. Give someone you care about a hug. Let them know how special they are. Also, get ready because preseason will be here before you know it.”

I ended the recording and relaxed my shoulders. With Stephen and Serilda not sharing the same last name, people wouldn't be quick to put them together. Serilda

changed her name before she started modeling. She said her mother's maiden name was more sophisticated.

Grabbing my phone, I played the video. I was my usual fun self, not too serious but I got my point across. I loved my fans and hoped they loved me still, even though I was dating a guy. If they didn't, that was their loss. I wouldn't give up Stephen for them. I deserved to be happy, and he was the person who made me so.

With the video done, I posted it on my social media sites and went back to my text messages. I had a bunch from the guys on the team, offering their support and wishing me and Stephen well. It meant a lot to me.

My stomach started growling, reminding me I hadn't eaten yet, so I put my phone down and started whipping up breakfast. As I was taking biscuits from the oven, there was a knock on my door. Not many could just walk up here. I hoped it wasn't one of the guys. I definitely didn't make enough to feed multiple players. We had huge appetites.

When I opened the door, Stephen was on the other side. I lit up like a damn firework. "Hey, what are you doing here?"

He stepped closer and kissed me hard and fast. Hell yeah, I could get on board with this.

I wrapped my arms around him, pulled him inside, and closed the door behind him, making sure to lock it. I was so happy I decided to add him to the list of people who could come to my door.

His tongue swept into my mouth, and I drank down his minty flavor. It was easy getting lost in him.

The sound of a timer going off drew me back to reality, where I was making breakfast.

I quickly leaned away and said, “Give me a minute. I’m in the middle of cooking.”

He smiled and followed me to the kitchen. Luckily, nothing was burned. It was the timer for the biscuits, which I had taken out early because they were a nice golden brown. I stirred the creamy sausage gravy to make sure it was good too. This was something my mom taught me to make. I loved the taste of it but didn’t indulge too often.

I was in a good mood, had a great man, and decided to cook. That reminded me, I needed to call my parents and tell them about Stephen. Although, they’d see my posts and probably question Gareth before calling me. That should buy me some time.

I turned everything off and covered the food so it would stay warm because there was no way I was going to turn down having Stephen in my arms again. Food could wait.

Stephen leaned against the counter, looking cute as hell in his well put together outfit, like he always did.

“I saw your post,” he said. “Nicely done.”

I shrugged. “I spoke from the heart.”

“You want to give me the world?”

“Yeah, I do.” I stopped in front of him and put my hands on his hips, peering into his green eyes.

“What if I want to give it to you as well?”

“Then we’re going to be really happy together.”

My lips found the spot below his ear, and I started pressing kisses down his neck and back up the other side before working my way to his mouth. My fingers found the front of his pants and started working them open. Stephen was doing the same to me. I moaned the moment his palm touched my dick.

I didn’t expect him to put our dicks together and grip us at the same time. I moaned. Again. Holy hell, why did this feel so good? He was hard as steel against me, but his hand was so soft.

I slapped around the side of the kitchen island until I found the drawer handle and pulled it open, grabbing the tube of lube in there. I quickly uncapped it and dropped a bit on top of us so Stephen’s hand could glide easier.

“You keep lube in your kitchen?” he asked against my lips, his breath coming faster.

“Ever since you came into my life like this, I’m horny all the fucking time.”

“Let me help you with that.”

We became panted breaths, drawn out moans, parted lips, and tongues. I ran one hand under his shirt to tease his nipple while my other hand worked his pants lower, and I took his balls into my palm. I loved the feel of him. He was different than what I was used to but so perfect.

His grip tightened on us, and he picked up his pace. I was strung tight, about to blow.

With a quick pinch of his nipple, Stephen cried out against me and shot over us both. It was all I needed to follow him, splintering apart as my orgasm rushed through me.

We kept kissing as he slowly released us, his hand no doubt covered in our joint mess. I leaned back and pulled my shirt off to clean us both, but it wasn't good enough. He hiked up his pants enough for us to walk to my shower, where we quickly stripped and let the steam from the water wrap around us. We couldn't stop touching one another, couldn't stop kissing. Even when I was rubbing shampoo through his hair, I had my lips on him. At least until I got soap in my mouth. That did not taste good.

Stephen laughed as I spit it onto the shower floor. That laugh was quickly cut off as I dropped to my knees and took his dick into my mouth. I had to practice, right? I wanted this man to come harder with me than he ever had with anyone else. I wanted him to remember who made him feel like this. I wanted him to always desire me.

Maybe I was becoming a bit possessive. So what? I'd never felt like this before and would be damned if I changed anything about what Stephen and I had. I was going to hold on to him with both hands and not let go until he wanted me to. Everything was so good with him, beyond what I could have imagined.

There was no doubt in my mind I was falling for him. A man I never expected to have feelings for and be with like this. Yet here we were.

Stephen threaded his fingers into my hair and started pumping his dick in my mouth. My eyes teared, blending with the water falling over us. I couldn't breathe, but I didn't care. The look on his face as he came was worth it.

20

STEPHEN

Files were strewn atop my desk and all I wanted to do was shove them in a drawer, and forget about them for the rest of the day. If the semester wasn't starting on Monday, I'd probably do exactly that.

Late nights with Jansen over the last week had taken a toll on my sleep, but I wouldn't have given up a single one of them. I planned on taking advantage of any time I had with him before the season started. The hockey schedule could be crazy, and knowing there might be a week or two at a time that I wouldn't see him, I wanted to get my fill of him now.

The phone on my desk rang for the millionth time that morning. I glared at the damn thing before picking it up.

"Stephen Forrester," I answered without even thinking.

"Very formal today, are we?"

I slumped back into my chair. "Shannon, you're probably one of the few people I can talk to today without wanting to throw something across my office."

"Don't speak too soon."

"Whatever it is, I don't want to know."

“Well, you need to. I’ll be over in a minute. I just wanted to make sure you were in your office.”

She hung up before I had the chance to question her further. Shannon knew I’d ask twenty questions until I got the answer. Whatever it is, it couldn’t be remotely good if she needed to talk to me about it in person.

My cell rang. I gave it a quick glance and saw it was Serilda. As much as it pained me to do so, I sent the call to voicemail. I had to deal with whatever issue Shannon was bringing me first.

About ten minutes later there was a knock on my door. Pamela knew Shannon was one of the few people who didn’t need to be announced first. The door opened and Shannon stepped into the room, two iced coffees and a paper bag from the coffee shop in her hands.

“This really can’t be good if you’re bringing me coffee and snacks,” I said, eyeing the bag in her hand.

Ignoring me, she brought the bag over to the coffee table on the side of my office. “If we weren’t less than a week from the start of school, this wouldn’t be a big deal, but right now it might be.”

Sighing, I joined her at the table and dropped down onto the couch. “At least let me have a sip of coffee before you drop whatever it is on me.”

“Someone needs more sleep.” If she only knew.

She handed me the cup and opened the bag, showing me the chocolate croissant. I took it from the bag and after a bite and sip of the coffee, I braced myself for the problem. “All right. Lay it on me.”

“Apparently, Professor Marks wants to use a textbook he’s written for his calculus classes this semester.”

“ This semester? As in next Monday? And he didn’t think to mention this at the start of the summer when we ordered new textbooks for the store?”

She fidgeted with the strands of hair that hung around her face. “That’s what I asked. According to him, he wanted to make sure he finished it in time.”

“And he doesn’t understand that in time would have been July, not the end of August?” I set the croissant down and rubbed my eyes with my finger and thumb. “Tell him absolutely not. We do not have the time or budget to print new books. He should have thought of this before we placed the book order at the beginning of the summer.”

Shannon’s face scrunched up. “I already told him that.”

“And?” Now, I really felt like I was dealing in twenty questions.

“He’s refusing to teach the class with the current book. He said if we won’t use his, he’ll teach without one.”

I groaned. Teaching a college level course without a book never ended well. Even as most textbooks had moved online, there was still a format for students to follow and study from. Classes without consistent texts caused too many variations from course to course. “If he does that and make his courses simpler than the other professors teaching calculus, we’ll have a million drops and adds and even more student complaints.”

Shannon picked up her coffee and pulled a sugar-topped blueberry muffin from the bag. “Which is exactly why I came over in person. I figured between the two of us,

we could figure out a solution.”

And right to work we went. I ignored multiple calls from both my cell phone and desk phone. Of all the issues I had to take care of, this happened to be the most pressing at the moment. Two months ago, this would have been much simpler.

By the time we had a solution Professor Marks was willing to accept, the coffee and bakery treats were long gone. I leaned back in my desk chair and looked at Shannon, who peered at me from the chair across from my desk, weariness in her expression.

“Well, that was one way to make the day go fast,” she said, glancing down at her phone.

I looked at my own phone and saw it was almost two in the afternoon. There were a ton of missed texts and calls, mostly from Jansen. I swiped the phone open, wanting to apologize for not responding sooner when the buzz of my desk phone distracted me.

I hit the speaker button. There wasn’t anyone on the other end whose conversation Shannon couldn’t hear.

“Hello?”

“I’m sorry to bother you,” Pamela’s voice came over the line, “but, Mr. McKenna is here to see you.”

Shannon sat straight up in her chair; her eyes fixed on me.

“You can send him back. Thank you, Pamela.” It had never occurred to me to put Jansen on the list of people she could let back automatically.

“You’re dying over there, aren’t you?”

Shannon pressed her hand to her chest. “Me?”

“Yes, you.” I stood and opened the door to see Jansen making his way down the small hall. He had a bag in his hand.

“Hi.”

“Hi.” I smiled and stepped back to let him in.

Jansen stopped in his tracks; his eyes trained on Shannon. “I didn’t mean to interrupt a meeting.”

Shannon stood up. “Nonsense. We just finished what we were working on. I’m Shannon.”

I placed my hand on his back and ushered him farther into the room. Even with our size difference, he moved easily at the slightest touch.

“And this is Jansen McKenna. Jansen, Shannon was my partner in crime when we both taught history.”

“You don’t teach history anymore?”

Shannon gestured toward me. “Not since this guy made me the Dean of Academic Affairs.”

“I’m guessing you miss teaching as much as Stephen does then.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close.

She eyed me knowingly and laughed. “You have no idea.” She collected her bag. “I’ll make sure everything is taken care of. You two enjoy the rest of your afternoon.”

“It was nice to meet you,” Jansen said as Shannon waved, walking out the door.

She shut it behind her. I turned to Jansen, pulling his face down to mine and stealing his lips. The taste of him was exactly what I needed after the almost disaster this morning.

“Hello to you too,” he said when I pulled back. “Rough day?”

“That’s an understatement. What brought you over here?”

He took my hand, leading me toward the couch. “I figured you might not be having a good day when you didn’t answer my call or texts, so I brought you lunch.” He set the bag on the table. *Cena di Famiglia* was written on the side.

I rubbed my thumb over the top of his hand. “You’re the most kind, thoughtful man I have ever met.” I kissed him again. “Lunch sounds fantastic.”

We sat down on the couch and Jansen began pulling the take-out containers from the bag. “Have you eaten today?”

I reached for the one he handed me. “If you count two iced coffees and a chocolate croissant, then yes.”

“I guess you could.”

I opened the box and the scent of Bolognese hit my nose. “Compared to this, it definitely does not. This smells delicious.” I went to the mini fridge next to my desk and grabbed two bottles of water. After setting them on the table, I sat down and

picked up my fork.

“Why haven’t you eaten much?” Jansen asked, digging into his food.

“Just a professor who thinks that changing the curriculum and textbook the week before classes start is a great idea.”

Jansen stopped with his fork halfway to his mouth. “He actually tried?”

“He did and then threatened to alter the class without the book, which leads to an entirely different set of problems.”

He shook his head. “I can’t believe you wouldn’t fire him after that.”

“College and tenure doesn’t exactly work that way. His book is good, according to the other professors, but printing it and making students rebuy books isn’t really an option. He’s one of the favorite math professors in the department. Shannon and I were able to come up with a compromise that makes everyone happy.”

“Good. Then I guess I showed up at the right time.”

“You really did.” In more ways than one.

Jansen and I continued to eat, the food extremely delicious, especially for takeout. More often than not, food lost something when it was transported from one place to another.

“This is just as good as when we ate there.”

“I heard their takeout was as good, if not better, than their in-house menu.”

Finished, I set my fork and container down and leaned back against the couch. Jansen followed suit a few moments later. “Feeling better?”

“Much.” I lifted my fingers and ran them over his cheek. With the stress of the day settled, I realized I didn’t know why he’d called earlier. “You never told me what you were calling about.”

“We’re having a team dinner and I was hoping you’d join me.”

“Just me?” I might be older than Jansen, but the thought of sitting down for dinner, surrounded by only his teammates, made me a little nervous.

“Everyone is bringing their significant others.” He took my hand in his. “I want you to meet my friends. They already know about us.” He grinned.

I tried to push my nerves aside with a joke. “I guess I shouldn’t pull out any of my jerseys that aren’t yours.”

“Nope. You’re only allowed to wear mine from now on.” He tried to keep the serious line to his lips, but a smile crept in.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” The thought of meeting everyone at once had the pressure caving in on me. I knew Jansen saw these men as his family. Would they think I was too old for him? Or maybe that it was weird he was dating his ex’s father?

Jansen’s concerned gaze locked on to mine, bringing me back to my office. “We don’t have to go if you don’t want to. It’s not mandatory.”

I lifted my hand and cupped his cheek. “It’s not that. I worry they’ll think I’m wrong for you.”

“No, they won’t. I’ve already talked to the guys and none of them care about you being Serilda’s dad. You can’t help who you’re attracted to.” He leaned forward, kissing me. “Besides, there’s no way you didn’t see the news about King and Hayes. Their relationship with Jamie will get more attention than anything the two of us could be doing.”

“Well, it has kept us out of the media since then.”

“Of course it has. What do you say? Want to join me for dinner?”

“Count me in.” I said it with much more confidence than I had. Hopefully, I was worried for nothing.

JANSEN

Having dinner with the team was like having dinner with family. I loved every second of the rowdy, crazy shit that happened. Not everyone would be there, some were still traveling for the offseason, getting the most out of their time at home. But a good chunk of them would be.

Stephen was quiet by my side as we walked into one of the larger conference spaces at the arena. We used it for a variety of things, including pregame meetings. Today, there were tables set up inside for dining and more tables around the perimeter of the room filled with covered dishes with burners under them. The little flames danced slightly, drawing my gaze to them briefly. The room had a decent number of people already in it.

“You okay?” I whispered to Stephen.

He squeezed my hand. “Yes. It smells good in here.”

My stomach agreed as it growled. The scents wafting through the air had my mouth watering. The Jetties never skimped out on a good meal. I pushed that away so I could turn and face the man by my side. “If at any point you want to leave, just say the word and we’ll go. This is an informal dinner. Something Kasper likes to do to get us together in the offseason. It’s his way of checking in with us and the rest of the staff at the Jetties.”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me. Have fun and introduce me to your friends.”

I grinned. “That I can do.”

We walked farther into the room. There were no place cards on the tables, no fancy shit outside of the nice dishes, glasses, and silverware. Kasper knew no one would want that, not for this meal.

King came toward us first. He smiled wide. His dark auburn hair had grown out more. And that beard he had for playoffs was still in place, though not unruly. “Kenna,” he greeted, pulling me in for a hug. “I’m glad your ugly mug could make it. I wasn’t sure you’d emerge from bed now that you’ve finally got some dick in your life.” He was obviously joking. This was King and how he behaved when he was happy. I still tensed, wondering if Stephen would see it that way.

“Jesus,” Hayes muttered, coming up behind him. Jaime Deary was there too, currently quieter than his partners. “Can you not be an ass the first time we get to hang out with Stephen like this?”

“I could be well-behaved, but where’s the fun in that?”

Stephen chuckled by my side. “It’s fine. I like this much better.” He extended his hand. “Stephen Forrester.”

King looked down at his hand and back up, then pulled him in for a hug. “You’re family now. We hug.”

Hayes grinned. “The Walkers love to hug. You’re getting a taste of it. Be glad the rest of them aren’t here or you wouldn’t be able to breathe from how tight they’d grip you.”

King pulled back. “Yeah, and then my ma would look at the food here and declare she could make something better and try to mother us all. It’s a good thing it’s Saturday and not Sunday, or she’d take issue with the three of us missing dinner.” King was lucky he had his family so close. I missed mine something fierce.

Devon and his partner, Lincoln, came over next. They weren’t lively like King was. Devon smiled and Lincoln shook hands with Stephen. I let them talk for a minute while I slung my arm over Devon’s shoulders and steered us away. It was easy to do since I was a little taller than him.

“How are things, D?” I asked. “You and Lincoln doing good?”

“We’re great, couldn’t be happier.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

“So, how are things with you and Stephen? I’m surprised the media hasn’t caught on to him being Serilda’s father yet.”

I sighed and looked over my shoulder. Stephen and Lincoln seemed to be hitting it off. They were talking and Stephen laughed. Lincoln’s shoulders looked a little tight. This wouldn’t be his ideal scene, but I was sure he did it for Devon. “That’s Stephen’s biggest worry tonight. He thought all of you would think he’s wrong for me because he’s older, or that him being Serilda’s dad would be an issue.”

“That’s not us.”

“I know. He has to get used to you, then he’ll see you’re the most accepting bunch on the planet.”

We talked for a bit more before Stephen and Lincoln walked our way. Stephen leaned

into my side. I loved feeling his weight there as I wrapped my arm around him. I saw Kasper making his way through the crowd. Kasper's husband wasn't here though. It was baseball season. Marcus was a busy man this time of year.

Lincoln and Devon eventually drifted toward Noah and his wife.

Stephen tensed beside me. "Kasper's coming over here."

I rubbed my thumb over his hand where I held it now. "You'll see how great he is. The whole team is amazing."

He gave me a small smile. "I'm glad it's going well."

"You're doing great." I pressed a quick kiss to his lips. "After we talk to Kasper, let's get some food. I'm starving and don't want King to eat it all."

That got a chuckle out of Stephen. "He likes food, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, and he cooks damn good too. He's not all about eating. The man is talented in the kitchen."

Kasper stopped in front of us. He had a big smile like everyone else did who greeted us. Man, I loved Kasper. He was the best to work for. He was involved but not overly so. He was supportive and always there if any of us needed him.

"Jansen, I'm glad you came. And you must be Stephen. It's nice to meet you. I'm Kasper." He extended his hand, and they shook.

"It's nice to meet you too. Thank you for inviting me."

"Of course. You're part of the Jetties family now. Hopefully we don't scare you off."

Some of us can be a bit much.” He said the last part louder which perked up King’s ears, who slid toward us.

“I know you weren’t talking about me.”

“You’re such a whore for attention,” I said and put my hand on his face to shove him away.

King being King licked my palm then pulled back while making a face. “I shouldn’t have done that. I don’t know where that thing’s been.”

“And I don’t know where your tongue has been. Keep that shit inside your mouth.” I dramatically wiped my hand on his shirt.

Jamie stepped close to take King’s hand in his with a wink before dragging him away.

“He’s good for him,” I said.

Kasper nodded. “Jamie’s a good guy. Both he and Hayes help balance King out. Stephen, I understand you’re the dean of EU. That must be a challenging job.”

“It’s nothing compared to what you do.”

“I love my work, even if some days are more difficult than others.”

Stephen nodded. “You have to love it or it’s not worthwhile.”

Being here with him, listening to him and Kasper continue to talk, I fell harder for him. Stephen was so damn smart, so damn good. I hoped some of it seeped into me. I didn’t think I was a bad guy, but I wasn’t Stephen. Our jobs were night and day, and

yet we fit together perfectly.

We walked around the room, me introducing Stephen as we went. Everyone was warm and welcoming. I hoped I never got traded. I loved what I had here. Not only the team but Stephen too. Though I had to hope if I needed to move, he and I would still be solid.

We took our seats, sitting next to Noah and his wife, Emily, who was a teacher. I wasn't sure why I didn't think about it beforehand, but seating her near Stephen was smart. They talked and laughed throughout dinner while Noah and I lobbed insults at King and Hayes, who sat across from us.

I had to admit, I enjoyed watching my teammates with their significant others. Noah would talk to me, but he kept his hand on his wife's. King, Hayes, and Jamie would occasionally give each other a quick kiss or a simple touch. It made my heart happy.

Now I had someone too. A man I'd fight for. Who I'd give everything I could to. Stephen was worth it.

Like he knew I was thinking about him, he placed his hand on my thigh and leaned close to whisper, "I like your friends."

"I'm glad." He was much more relaxed now that we'd sat down, and people didn't keep approaching us.

I meant it when I called the Jetties' organization family. We had each other's backs. We celebrated when there was great news. We mourned together when something awful happened. That kind of support wasn't easily found. I knew how special it was. How lucky I was to be in the middle of this room with some of the best people on the planet. If only my parents and brother were here.

Yesterday, I had a video call with them. We talked for almost an hour. I told my parents about Stephen, who was at work so I couldn't introduce him. My family had plans to fly out for a game early in the season. They could meet Stephen then. And yes, I was planning to be with him for a long time. I didn't want to consider the possibility of not being with him. That might be odd or seem too fast, but I didn't care. When it felt this right to be with someone, I didn't want to ever let him go.

There was a lot for me to be thankful for—my career, my family, friends, and Stephen. I sat back in my seat and took in the room full of people who were simply amazing.

God, I couldn't wait for the season to start. I was ready to get back out there. Training during the offseason sucked. The regular season wasn't easy either, but I thrived on the ice when we were breathing down the necks of the opposing team. My blood was pumping just thinking about it. To know Stephen would be at some of the home games cheering me on, I was going to perform better than I ever had before.

“What are you grinning about over there, Kenna?” King asked then threw a piece of a dinner roll at me. I caught it and put it in my mouth. He could have at least put some butter on it first.

“Just happy is all.”

“It looks good on you,” Hayes added.

“It does on you too.”

“You're all gross,” Noah said.

Emily lightly smacked his chest. “You're not happy with me?”

“You know I am.” He leaned toward her and kissed her hard. When he pulled back, Emily’s eyes were bright and only on her husband.

“I’m hot, not gross.”

“If it’s gross to be sappy about how fucking happy I am, then fine by me,” I stated with my smile still firmly in place. I turned to Stephen and pressed my lips gently to his. “Thank you for making me happy.”

“Never thank me for that. You do the same for me.”

I would have suggested we get out of here because my dick decided to enter the equation, and I really wanted my hands on Stephen’s naked body. Too bad dessert was brought out and interrupted our moment. That was okay. It was better not to be hard at a table full of my teammates and their significant others. I had plenty of time tonight to get Stephen naked and writhing beneath me.

His hand went to my thigh again as he put a bite of a soufflé into his mouth. His fingers gently rubbed over my leg. I had to still his hand, so I didn’t do something indecent like crawl under the table and blow him.

Instead, I licked the chocolate from his lips and whispered a promise of later. One I would certainly deliver on.

STEPHEN

Never in my life did I have to sit with a perfect smile on my face and pretend I didn't want to tear every inch of clothing from Jansen's body. I discreetly adjusted myself more than once under the table, waiting for the moment we could leave without question or comment.

The dinner had been delicious, and his teammates were welcoming. It was the last thing on my mind. The warmth of his leg, even if it wasn't touching mine, seeped through the fabric of my pants. It radiated through me until I couldn't breathe.

I spent the last bit of dinner in a haze of desire, trying to control myself. The guys laughed and joked, but I struggled to pay attention to a single thing that was said. I almost breathed a sigh of relief when Jansen began his goodbyes.

By the time we reached the car, I was afraid I might combust. Not a word had left my lips. I took deep calming breaths; afraid I'd jump him on our way to where we'd parked. When we climbed inside, Jansen turned in his seat to face me, a look of concern on his face.

"Is everything okay?" He reached his hand out to cup my face, but I knew I couldn't handle his touch in that moment. And the last thing he needed was his bare ass exposed on some trashy media site.

I moved out of his reach. Hurt instantly filled his eyes. "Don't be upset. I want you to

touch me, but if your skin comes in contact with mine right now, I'm going to tear your clothes off right inside this car."

Fire blazed in his widening pupils. "Where to?" he asked, his voice strained.

"My house is closer."

Jansen started the car and took off down the street. The interior was quiet besides the thumping rhythm of the blood pounding in my ears. Each panting breath made my cock throb, begging to be released from the confines of my dress pants.

We made it to my house in record time. The car barely came to a stop before we jumped out and ran for the door, our jackets falling to the floor the moment we stepped inside. It hadn't even closed when Jansen slammed me up against it, his strong body crowding me back against the solid wood.

His mouth came down on mine, hard and demanding. I didn't waste a second, parting my lips and letting his tongue slip inside. The friction between our hard cocks combined with the way his tongue plunged in and out of my mouth made the room spin. I wanted him, all of him.

I tore my lips from his and glanced up into wild eyes. Fire blazed in those blue depths. I reached down and cupped his hard cock. "I want more than your lips and hands tonight."

"Stephen," Jansen said on a moan.

Jansen bent at the waist, throwing me over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. Up the stairs we went. The friction of his shoulder rubbing against my cock had me twisting in his hold, which only made my dick ache more.

When we reached my bedroom, Jansen tossed me on the bed, climbing over me and straddling my hips. “You have no idea how badly I want that.” He captured my lips with his, immediately pushing his tongue deep into my mouth.

The rhythm was erotic. Each pulse of my cock hit with each plunge of his tongue. I reached for the knot of his tie, tugging it loose and pulling it over his head. By the time my fingers found the buttons of his shirt, he had my own tie off and began to undo my shirt. I parted the fabric and ran my hands along his tight pecs, loving the way the muscles jumped when my fingers grazed his nipples.

I didn’t have long before he pushed my shirt over my shoulders, trapping my arms down by my sides. He bent his head and sucked one of my nipples into his mouth, biting the little nub at the same time. My hips shot off the bed. Jansen scooted his ass back, holding my cock tight against himself while he ravished first one nipple, then the other. I was sure he’d left marks by the time he picked his head up to watch me.

My breaths came in sharp pants as I tried to regain control of myself. I should have known Jansen wouldn’t give me a chance. The way he’d pulled down my shirt left me little room to move when he started on the buttons of my pants. Not that I wanted him to stop in any way. He slid down my body, taking my pants and boxer briefs with him.

He used his foot to kick them to the floor. The way he eyed me made my pulse leap and my cock throb.

“Jansen, touch me,” I begged.

He lowered his mouth, running his tongue along the underside of my cock. Precum coated the tip. I watched as his tongue darted out and licked up every inch of it.

A guttural groan tore from my lips. “Stretch me. I need your cock in me.”

Jansen thrust his hips forward. His need matched my own. He pushed himself from the bed and stood, dropping the rest of the clothing on the floor. While he grabbed the lube and condoms, I extricated myself from my shirt, tossing it over the side of the bed. By the time Jansen returned, I'd already reached down to cup my balls, rolling them in my hands. He opened the bottle of lube and spread some on his fingers.

When I glanced up, Jansen's eyes still held the heat from before, but his brows were drawn closer. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't." I guided his hand to my taint, then down to my hole. "I want to feel every inch of you."

He pushed his finger forward. The stretch... The burn... Exactly what I loved about a strong man's cock. Feeling it for days later. His finger moved in and out of me.

"Another," I begged.

"You're so fucking tight."

This time when he pulled his hand back and pushed forward, he added another finger. My hips moved with his thrusts. I lifted them slightly. He was so close to the right spot. Stars danced in my vision.

Fingers weren't enough, I wanted... No, I needed all of him. "I'm ready."

He removed his fingers from my body, leaving me empty. With heavy-lidded eyes, I watched as he tore open the condom and rolled it down his cock. He leaned forward, pressing the tip to my hole. I lifted my knees to give him better access.

Slowly, he pressed inside, the burn growing with each thrust. "I don't know if I can hold on," he moaned and pushed in a little farther.

“Fuck.” Words were not my strength at that moment.

I felt Jansen’s balls hit my ass. He froze, holding himself above me. Lines crinkled his forehead as he took long, slow breaths.

I pushed myself up the best I could and nipped his earlobe before whispering, “We have all night. Don’t hold back.”

That was all it took. Jansen’s hips pulled back and he thrust forward once more. I grabbed handfuls of his strong, hard ass, pulling him into me with each of his hips.

Grunts and groans filled the room. We moved in sync. Our mouths connected, tongues battling, all while he took me to heights of desire I never once imagined in my life. My balls pulled up tight. The muscles in my thighs and back trembled, begging for release.

I couldn’t hold on any longer. Cum shot all over my stomach. Jansen cried out as my hole quivered around his cock, squeezing tight.

His eyes shut and he threw his head back. Bliss lined his features. Boneless, he dropped on top of me. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, holding him close to me.

“I never imagined...” I heard him whisper.

I held him tighter, never wanting this moment to end.

I snuggled into the warm body behind me. The slight twinge in my ass brought memories of the way Jansen turned me inside out the night before to the surface. His arm tightened against my waist, keeping me close. He mumbled something softly, too quiet for me to hear. Then his soft snores started again.

Reluctant to leave the cocoon of my bedroom, I reached to the nightstand for my phone. Normally, I wouldn't worry about work on a Sunday, but with move-in happening this past week, I had to make sure there weren't any more issues. The moment I saw the multiple texts from Shannon, I worried I'd been right to check.

I opened her first message and instantly realized the problems weren't with the dorms. Instead, she'd sent me link after link of stories about me and Jansen being together at the Jetties' team dinner last night. Taking a deep breath, I opened the first one, knowing full well this was the price I'd pay for dating a professional hockey player.

The first article wasn't that bad, only mentioning the author's desire to find out more about me. All they could come up with was about my academic career. With more confidence the information out there wouldn't be that bad, I opened the second article. It was filled with more of the same. This time the tone came off a bit harsher.

By the time I reached the fourth article, the anger and judgmental nature had become clear. I closed the link and decided not to read anymore. Their opinions only mattered if it bothered Jansen. Being a gay man my entire life, I'd heard it all, especially when I'd been hired as the Dean of Espen University. News article after news article had dug deep into my private life, as if who I slept with made a difference on how I did my job.

I set my phone down and leaned against Jansen.

"How bad is it?" A deep voice behind me startled me from my thoughts.

"What do you mean?" I didn't want Jansen to worry yet. Hell, I'd already let the outside world intrude on my space, I wouldn't give it any more time.

He moved away, letting me fall to my back. Before I had a chance to protest, his

strong body covered mine. He reached up and ran his finger along the crease in my forehead. “Don’t hide things from me. We’re in this together.”

I sighed. “How did you know?”

He pressed his lips briefly to mine, then pulled back to look me in the eye. “The longer you looked at your phone, the more tense you became. Since I’ve seen how calm you stay dealing with things at the university, I assumed you were reading articles about us.”

I reached for my phone, holding it out to him. “Shannon sent me a bunch of links this morning.”

He took the phone from my fingers and set it back on the bed. “Not all of them are in our favor, are they?”

“Some of them don’t care. Others wonder whether I’m just a phase for you before you start dating your next supermodel.” Somewhere deep in the back of my mind, this was my biggest fear.

Jansen cupped my jaw, rubbing his thumb along my cheekbone. “You know that’s not the case. You’re the only one I want.”

I pushed the thoughts away and smiled. “I know. It’s still nice to hear.”

He bent down, his lips only inches from mine. “It’s you I’m with. You I want to spend my time with. No one else.” His lips pressed to mine slowly. I savored the connection, bringing my hand to the back of his head and threading my fingers through his curls.

When our mouths separated, I looked up at him, taking in his bright eyes. I traced my

finger down the curve of his jaw to his lips. He pressed a soft kiss there. “The media attention doesn’t bother you, does it?”

“I’ve had my life torn apart before. It’s not the first time. And if it means I get you all to myself, I’m happy to ignore it.” I moved my hand down, pressing my fingers below his chin, and bringing his gaze to mine. “Are you okay with it?”

“I don’t care what they say about me. If they’re saying shit about you, that’ll piss me off.”

“Jansen, don’t start trouble with the media. That never ends well.”

He lowered his body, connecting his hips fully with mine. I sucked in a sharp breath. He shuffled his hips side to side. “I have better things to do.”

His lips met mine. After that, nothing mattered. Not the media, not the links Shannon sent me.

The only thing that mattered was him.

JANSEN

How long was long enough? How long would it take people not to say we were rushing things? Also, why the hell was it anyone's business but ours?

If I was happy with Stephen and he was happy with me, who cared how we got to where we were or how many days had passed since we'd started dating? There was no question in my mind I loved him. It was a soul deep, would do anything for him, I was in it with all of me, kind of love. The kind that made me feel like I could do anything. Sure, it lifted me up and made me feel good, but it was more than that. More than I'd ever experienced before.

Tonight, I was cooking him dinner. Hopefully it would be a memorable one and not because of the meal I was currently plating. I couldn't keep inside any longer how much I loved him. The words wouldn't stay trapped in my chest. They were bursting to be said. In saying them though, I would be as terrified as I was excited.

All these thoughts went through me like: what if he didn't say them back or what if he didn't feel close to the same for me that I did for him?

If he didn't get here soon, I would talk myself out of saying anything at all, even if I was about to combust.

I did my best to set the table perfectly and try to keep my mind off the big emotions. Of course, once I did that, other stuff crept in, like the shit I read online about Serilda.

Not that she said anything about her dad and me. She had her reputation, after all. Someone from her team was no doubt coaching her on how to handle the news her dad was in a relationship with her ex who, last she knew, was straight.

Sexuality wasn't what it used to be. It was more fluid now. But my life wasn't the same because I didn't have the opportunity to hide or keep things private. Not that I wanted to hide anything about Stephen or how I felt. While being in the spotlight wasn't always the best, I also made enough money where I didn't give a fuck what most people said about me. I had a supportive team, friends, and a family who loved me. To have every aspect of my life online, that could be a lot to swallow at times, but I'd learned over the years how to handle it.

It was Stephen I worried about. He was tense when he read the articles about us. While his sexuality wasn't changing, his life was because I was in it. It wasn't just that he was dating me. His daughter factored into the equation.

Groaning, I dropped onto the couch and put my head back with my eyes closed. He'd be here any minute. The last thing he needed to see was me too caught in my head to focus on what should be an amazing night.

I love you wasn't said lightly, at least not by me. When I said it to Stephen tonight, I'd mean it with my whole heart. Every part of me felt the love for him pumping through my veins, wrapping around me like the warmest blanket on a cold winter night. He was everything I could ever want and more.

There was a knock on my door, causing me to jump to my feet. I rushed into the bathroom quick to make sure I looked good. I mean, it wasn't like I put a suit on or anything like that, but I needed my hair not to be sticking up and my shirt to be on straight.

Calling it good, I went to the door and opened it to reveal the man who held my heart

on the other side. Just seeing him and his sweet smile had me instantly relaxing as a smile of my own bloomed on my lips.

Instead of using words, I reached for him, drawing him into my arms so I could hold him close and soak in the warmth he provided. His arms came around me as his lips pressed to my throat in a soft kiss.

“Jansen? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, just needed to feel you.” Once I had him inside, I used my foot and kicked the door shut. I wanted to lock the world out, have it just be the two of us.

Stephen leaned back to peer into my eyes. I could swim in the hazel depths of his and never come out. With him, it felt like anything was possible. Like it did when I was playing. To have that surety in another aspect of my life was taking some getting used to. After tonight, I hoped it was cemented. That he was permanent with me.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m just glad you’re here. I made dinner, but first, can I tell you something?”

His hands went to my hips, concern creasing the corners of his eyes. “Of course. You can say anything to me.”

“I love you.” Shit, I didn’t mean to blurt it out like that. Way to be smooth, Kenna. Fuck’s sake. “I do, Stephen. I love you so much that if I didn’t say it, I was going to burst. Please don’t feel like you have to say it back. That’s not why I told you. I just thought you should know what’s going on with me.”

He leaned forward to brush his lips over mine in a quick kiss. I could feel his grin

forming and saw it when he pulled back. “Can I talk now?”

I smiled. “Yeah. Sorry I was rambling.”

“Don’t apologize for that. It’s cute. But, Jansen?” Here it was. The truth was coming. How he really felt for me.

“Yeah?” I held my breath, waiting for the moment when I would either breathe easy or feel like there was a knife in my heart.

“I love you too.”

My shoulders loosened and my muscles relaxed. Was it possible to smile any bigger than I was? I didn’t think so. “You do?”

“Yes, I do.”

My arms went around him again, this time lifting his body from the floor in an embrace. “Fuck yeah!” I put him down, but didn’t give him a chance to respond before my lips met his so we could really kiss this time.

When we parted, we were both breathless. And happy, so fucking happy I wanted to tell the world. I wouldn’t because this wasn’t their business, but the urge was there to let everyone know this man loved me above everyone else out there he could have been with. He chose me and I chose him back.

He laughed. “I’m glad you told me. I wouldn’t want you to keep something like that in. Or anything, for that matter.” His hand went to my cheek in a gentle caress. “Always give me your words. I want to hear them.”

“Even when they’re a bit out there and probably fueled by emotion?”

“Especially then.”

“I don’t like being apart from you. Now that I have you and know you love me, I never want to let you go.”

His eyes went wide. “Jansen, I…”

I chuckled. “I’m not proposing. At least not now. I don’t want to rule it out for the future. What if we take the next step and live together? Would that be crazy?”

“No crazier than me falling for a hockey player from my favorite team.”

“So, what do you think?”

“I want to be with you all the time too. It might be fast, but damn if I care.”

“This is romance movie level shit right here.”

“It is, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. Dinner’s getting cold. You spent your time making it. Let’s eat before it’s ruined.”

I hummed. “Not yet.”

Dropping to my knees in front of him, I opened his jeans with deft fingers and pulled his half-hard dick out. It was heavy and hardening more in my hand.

Stephen’s fingers wove into my hair. “Jansen,” he murmured.

I peered up at him. “I want to taste you.”

He nodded and kept his hand on my head, not to push or make me do more than I

wanted. It was like he had to touch me just as much as I had to do the same with him.

With lust coursing through me and need making me hard as steel, I dove forward and took him to the point I choked. I was too wired for slow right now but, apparently, my brain thought trying to deep throat him was smart when I didn't have that kind of skill yet. So, I reined myself in and sucked, licked, moaned, and did everything I could to drive him wild.

The sounds that slipped from his lips, the way his fingers tightened in my hair, it drove me on until I had to take my dick out and fist myself. It was either that or I was going to rub one out through my shorts. Skin on skin was always preferable.

I pulled off him long enough to spit on my fingers then put my lips around him again. My finger found its way to his hole so I could tease around the rim before slowly pushing in. I tongued his dick under the head then slid off. His balls needed attention too. I devoured him while my finger played with him. It didn't take long before I found that spot inside him that had his cries getting louder. It was just how I wanted him, begging for me to send him soaring.

When I sucked him between my lips the next time, he thrust, pushing farther than I thought I could take him, but I didn't back off or shove him away. I choked as spit came from the corners of my mouth. Stephen was beautiful above me, letting his need take over.

My fist moved faster on my dick, jerking myself to the point I tipped over the edge with a long, low moan around his dick. Cum shot from me in a never-ending stream as I kept working myself, doing the same to him.

Stephen called out my name a moment before his cum flooded my mouth and his body trembled against my touch.

If I got this amazing view for the rest of my life, I'd be a happy man. Stephen was everything I didn't know I needed until I had him. Now that I did, I let his words of love for me sink deep into my chest and fill me with joy.

I worked him through the last of his orgasm until he stilled, and I swallowed as much of his cum as I could. Standing, I licked my lips and grinned.

His finger swiped over my chin. "I like this look on you." Stephen pressed his lips to mine, immediately parting them so he could lick along me and taste his release. Fuck, it was sexy as hell and the perfect ending to the orgasms we shared.

By the time we finally got around to dinner, it was cold but nothing a quick warm-up in the oven couldn't remedy. Stephen and I sat close while we ate, trading kisses every now and then. It was perfect. Everything about tonight was.

Love like we shared was big. So big, I wasn't sure if I could fully put into words all the things it made me feel. What I knew for certain was, there would never be another in my life like him and I didn't want there to be.

It was fast, crazy, and I loved every second of it. If I had it my way, I would make him mine one day and have us pledge our lives to each other. That was a bit too far for today though. We were in love and going to live together. I couldn't wait to see where the future took us.

24

STEPHEN

“I didn’t think we’d be able to get an appointment this quickly,” I said as we pulled up to the curb of the first property we were looking at today.

We decided finding a place of our own was the right move for us. Something we picked out together. After dinner a few nights ago, we researched different houses in the area with both of us agreeing we’d prefer to still be near the beaches, especially with hockey season taking up a large portion of the year. Being near the beach would be like a vacation itself.

I was also reluctant to leave the place I’d been for so long. A new home would be good, but one change at a time.

“Was she able to get us into all the places we sent her?”

I opened my phone and checked the email the real estate agent had sent the night before. “All but one.”

“Which one?”

“The four bedroom that was closer to the mainland.”

Jensen nodded. “The last one we put on the list. That’s okay.”

Neither of us had been very sure about that house in the first place, but the online pictures never did the actual place justice.

I climbed out of the car and stepped up onto the curb where Jansen waited for me. Before we could walk to the door, Jansen wrapped his arm around my waist and brought me flush against his body. He placed a brief kiss on my lips and pulled back, a huge smile on his face.

“I’m so excited to be doing this with you.”

I lifted my hand to his face and rubbed my thumb along his cheek. “Trust me. I know.” I gave him another brief kiss and took his hand in mine. Hand in hand we walked to the front door. It swung open wide before we had the chance to knock.

A woman in her early fifties stood on the other side. Her straight, dark hair stopped at her shoulders. She wore a navy-blue suit with heels to match.

Immediately, she held her hand in my direction. “Mr. Forrester?”

I took her hand in mine. “Please call me Stephen. You must be Kelly.”

“That’s me.” She turned to Jansen. “Kelly Weaver.”

Jansen shook her hand. “It’s nice to meet you.” When he let go, he took my hand back in his.

She smiled. “My husband is a huge fan of the Jetties.”

“I’m happy to hear it.”

She stepped back and gestured into the house. “Should we take a tour?”

I nodded. “That would be fantastic.”

Kelly shut the door behind us, and the foyer practically plunged into darkness. It wasn’t pitch-black, but the natural sunlight that had brightened the room in the pictures had completely disappeared with the door shut. It gave the room a cold feeling.

I glanced at Jansen to see if he had the same reaction. His eyes darted around the large space, then landed on me. “It’s darker than I expected.”

I squeezed his hand. “You read my mind. It’s not as bright and warm as the pictures made it seem.”

“This room doesn’t have a lot of natural lighting.” She walked to the side wall and flipped a switch. The light above us came on, bringing the room back to life. “This gorgeous light fixture can easily take care of that. Most of the other rooms have much more natural light.”

The light fixture was a beautiful modern-style chandelier. The lights curved around, accenting the arch of the staircase that led to the second floor.

“It is gorgeous, but I’m not sure I want to always leave the light on to brighten the entry.”

Jansen took a step forward. “Let’s look at the rest of the house. Maybe the other rooms will make up for this one.”

He had a point. I didn’t want to give up on the house yet. Especially considering it was only the first of five different houses we were seeing today. “Lead the way.”

Kelly smiled and walked to the next room, taking us to each one in the home. The

primary bedroom had a small balcony that could only be accessed from the door in that room. There was enough space for two chairs. And because the primary bedroom faced the back of the house; we'd be able to sit outside and watch the sun rise over the beach.

The house had potential, yet there was something about it holding me back. I liked it. I didn't love it. The darkness of the foyer and the tightness of the kitchen worried me. The area between the island and the counter along the wall didn't leave a lot of room for two people to work comfortably.

The hardest part was the way Jansen reacted to every other part of the house. The only room that made him second-guess this house was the foyer. Although, listening to him in the rest of the house, I didn't think it was a big enough objection for him to not love it. I thought we'd be on the same page when we left the foyer. I'd been wrong.

Would he be upset I didn't love it the way he seemed to?

I stood at the railing, breathing in warm, salty air. When I came outside, Jansen had been checking out the shower in the en suite. The scent of Jansen's cologne hit my nose a second before his strong hands settled on my hips.

"I think we could be happy here." He pressed a soft kiss to my neck.

"This balcony is perfect."

I looked over my shoulder and saw Jansen looking around the area. "I can see us spending summer nights out here. Just the two of us."

I leaned back against his hard chest. "I like the sound of that."

He put his finger under my chin and tilted my face up to him. “Then why don’t you sound convinced?”

“Not to sound cliché, but it has nothing to do with you.”

He stepped back and I turned around to face him. “What don’t you like?”

I gripped the railing behind me. “The entryway is so depressing. It’s dark and feels like it’s closing in on me.”

“I agree. I’m used to the welcome entrance at your place. I’m sure that could be easily fixed.”

“I’m also not a fan of the kitchen. The island is the center focus, taking up more room than necessary for a kitchen that size.” Jansen smiled and I lifted a brow at him. “Why does that make you happy?”

“Because this is just the first house. We still have four more to go.” I should have known my opinion would matter to him. That he wouldn’t bulldoze my feelings because he liked something more than I did.

“And while I agree with you on those things, I’ll be happy anywhere you are.”

“You’re right. This is only the first house. We still have plenty more to look out.”

“Yes, we do.”

“Let’s go look at the second one.”

I followed Jansen back into the room, locking the balcony door behind us. “I haven’t ruled this one out yet. I still love most of it, but if we can find something that has

everything we're looking for, that will be better than having to change what we don't like."

We reached the bottom of the stairs and Kelly was waiting for us. "So, what do we think?"

"There's a lot that we like, but a few things we don't," Jansen answered. "We'd like to move on to the next one."

"We can do that. Should I add this house to the no list, or could it still be a maybe?"

Jansen and I looked at each other, and it was as if our minds were connected. "It's a maybe," we both said at the same time.

She smiled. "I'll keep it on the list. Let's head over to the next house."

"We'll follow you."

Jansen and I waited in the car for Kelly to lock up the house. Jansen turned to me. "These houses don't need to be the only ones we look at." He caressed my arm. "If we don't love any of them, we'll wait and keep looking. I want us both to be happy."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

All of my worries faded away as Kelly climbed into her car. We followed her to the next house, ready to see what else waited for us.

By the time we finished walking through the fifth house of the day, I felt like I had a million decisions to make. None of the houses were exactly what we were looking

for. They had potential to be the perfect house. It would be hard to decide on which one had the features we liked the best.

“Do you have any thoughts on the houses we looked at today?” she asked.

“I think there are definitely things we liked...” I started.

“...But none of them had everything we wanted,” Jansen finished.

He described it perfectly. If I could take pieces of each house and put them together, we’d have the perfect home.

“Good to know. I will keep my eye out for anything similar and give you a call if I find something.”

“That would be wonderful.” I shook Kelly’s hand once again. “We haven’t ruled any of these houses out yet. I think we were both hoping we’d find the perfect house today.”

Jansen wrapped his arm around my waist and brought me tight to his side. “We’ll talk about the ones we saw today. If you do see anything else, we’d be happy to see them as well.”

“I’ll start looking when I get back to the office.”

We said our goodbyes to Kelly and told her we looked forward to hearing from her. Once she pulled away from the curb, we climbed into the car, and I started us in the direction of home.

I dropped down onto the couch the moment we stepped into the living room. We hadn’t done anything but walk through the different houses and yet my brain was

completely tapped out for the day. Analyzing each and every pro and con of the houses had taken its toll.

Jansen plopped down next to me. He closed his eyes, and he slid his head back against the cushions. “That was exhausting.”

“I don’t even know where to start on explaining how tired I am. And we still haven’t decided on one.”

Jansen rolled his face toward me and opened his eyes. “Tomorrow, when my brain feels like functioning again, we can make a list of what we like and dislike about each. That’ll help us decide. What did you want to do with the rest of the night?” Jansen’s gaze lingered on me. His strong jawline and stunning eyes snapping me out of the haze.

I moved over on the couch and swung my leg over Jansen’s lap. “I think I have a couple ideas.”

A smirk lifted the corner of his lips. “I thought you were tired.”

“I said I don’t want to think anymore.” I dipped my hands beneath the hem of his shirt and ran them up the warm skin of his chest. “What I want to do doesn’t require my brain to do anything. All we need to do is feel.”

Jansen’s blue eyes smoldered. He cupped the back of my neck, pulling me forward. “I like the way you think.”

He captured my lips and any ability I had to think disappeared completely. We were all lips and tongues. No thinking required.

25

JANSEN

I was warm, so damn warm, and it had everything to do with the man draping his body over mine. Who needed a blanket when I had a sexy man I loved covering me?

Yesterday had been amazing. The houses weren't all great, but it was more than that. Stephen and I were taking the next step in our relationship. We were building something wonderful together. The excitement that ran through me couldn't be contained. This was it. This was where my life was headed... with him.

For a long time, I focused everything I had on hockey. Not to dismiss it, but hockey was my job. It was where I did something I loved. But one day, I wouldn't have hockey anymore. Who knew what would happen then? The point was, I wanted more than my job. I wanted to know, at the end of the day, I had somewhere to go. A place that was home. It didn't matter where it was because home wasn't an actual house. I was realizing it was Stephen. He moored me, showed me where I belonged.

We needed to find the house we could grow old in together. Where we could sit on the porch and rock in chairs with our gray or white hair, still in love as much as we are now. That was the dream. A well-lived life with the man I loved by my side.

Wrapping my other arm around him, I started to shift my hips to wake him up in a very sinful way when I heard a door slam.

The noise jolted Stephen awake. He looked around, disoriented, until his eyes landed

on me. They softened as a slow smile formed on his lips. That was until heels clicking on the stairs had us both whipping our heads toward the bedroom door.

We didn't get to do more than make sure we were covered from the waist down before my ex-girlfriend, Stephen's fucking daughter, entered the room like a bat out of hell. Her hair wasn't perfectly styled like usual, with every strand just so. It was over her shoulders, limp and lifeless. Her eyes had bags under them like she hadn't slept in days. There was no makeup on her face, which was far from normal with her.

"What the fuck?" she screeched.

"Serilda, calm down—" Stephen started to say but she quickly cut him off.

"Don't!" She pointed at him. "Don't tell me to calm down when you're in bed with Jansen!"

"Not for nothing," I said. "But this isn't new. Why wait until now to barge in here, which by the way, wasn't the nicest thing you could have done." There was a saying about not poking the bear. Well, my proverbial stick was long, and I was hitting her right between the ribs. I wasn't a fan of hers, hadn't been since shit went down between us.

"Do you have any idea where I was? I couldn't just rush over here, Jans."

"No, but I also didn't give a shit." I shrugged.

Stephen shot me a glare before focusing on her again. "Could you step out of the room so we can put clothes on?"

She huffed and spun but stood right outside the door with her back to us so she could continue her tirade about us being together. "How could you both think this was a

good idea? Do you have any clue what this has done to my career, to the way people see me? My ex-boyfriend dating my father? You're straight, Jans!"

"Not anymore," I muttered as I put on my jeans and slid a shirt over my head.

Stephen hopped on one leg while he pulled up the pair of jeans he had on before we stripped to nothing and had a good time last night. At least, we were happy until Serilda showed up. "Honey, if you'll give me a minute to speak, I'll tell you what happened." He put a hand on her shoulder, which was akin to startling a pissed off cat. I was surprised she didn't hiss at him. I also wondered what I ever saw in her. Sure, I thought I loved her but now that I knew what love really was, I was certain I hadn't felt an ounce of what I feel for Stephen for her.

Her eyes narrowed on him. "I can't believe you would do this to me. Did you not think about me at all as you went after Jansen? I can only fault him so much. But you, my father who's smart, how could you?" Her eyes began to well with tears as anger turned to misery. "Of all the people in the world, you and Mom should have my back. You know how my industry is, how much I've struggled. It's not easy but my parents, you two were always there. And now this?" Tears ran down her cheeks. "I can't even look at you."

Stephen reached for her, but she stepped back. And did so again. Then she turned on her heel and went down the stairs.

"Don't leave," he called after her.

"I'm not. But I need a few minutes to myself." I watched as she retreated out of sight, listening to her heels carry her over the floor below until she was out of earshot.

"Stephen, I..." I didn't know what to say. I made it worse when she got here but didn't think she'd lash out like she did. In reality, I should have. I knew her. This was

par for the course, though the crying was unexpected.

When Stephen turned to face me, he had tears swimming in his eyes. My knees nearly buckled at the sight. He should never look like this, so broken and upset.

It was my fault. I did this. If Stephen and I weren't together, he wouldn't be in tears, and neither would Serilda. How did I think this was going to play out? That she was going to throw a fucking party for us and celebrate her dad falling for me? That was never going to happen. I was an idiot, a fucking fool. And here I stood, getting in between Stephen and his daughter, his only child. No, I couldn't do this. I couldn't be the reason they fought.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean for this to happen. I'll go downstairs and talk to her, explain things. I'll let her know this isn't a fling for me, that I have feelings for you."

"She won't listen, not when she's like this. I have to be the one to talk to her."

"But maybe I could—"

"Jansen, it needs to be me." It was like a knife to my chest. He didn't want me to help or be involved. What was I supposed to do? Wait upstairs while they talked and hoped for the best?

I nodded while swallowing the lump in my throat. "I understand. She's your daughter. You have to speak to her and make things right."

"I'm not sure I can. We already had a rocky relationship." And here I was making it worse.

Turning, I reached for my socks to slip them on and gathered my phone where it fell

to the floor when my jeans hit it last night. “I’m gonna go.”

“Okay, that will give us some time to talk.”

When I faced him again, it was my turn to fight tears. “I can’t put you through this. You have a daughter who I dated. She’s your child, Stephen, and I’m just the guy you’re with. She should come first. I wouldn’t expect her not to. But I can’t let your relationship with her come to ruins over me. I never want to put you through that.” And I was. Serilda was downstairs, pissed off and crying over me being in their lives, in her father’s life. “I did this and now I’m going to make it right.” It was the least I could do for the trouble I’d caused them.

“What are you saying?”

Reaching up, I let myself have one last moment with the man who held my heart. There was nothing left for anyone else. Stephen owned me. My fingers grazed his cheek a moment before I leaned forward and pressed a chaste kiss to his lips. “I will always love you,” I whispered.

My eyes shut, not wanting to see the pain I’d caused. It was better this way. He could mend what he had with Serilda. I stepped around Stephen and took the stairs carefully, so I didn’t slip and fall. That would be the icing on this awful cake.

“Jansen!” I could hear him coming down the stairs behind me.

If I were to stay, it would get worse. Serilda could walk away from him for good. It didn’t matter their relationship wasn’t on great terms as it was. At least they spoke and saw each other. With me in the middle, they couldn’t repair things.

This was for the best.

I kept telling myself that as I grabbed my sneakers and keys, walking out the door before he could reach me. Stephen had picked me up yesterday, so I had no way to get home. Once I was outside and down a few houses, I put my shoes on and pulled up the app to call a car. The screen wavered in front of me, thanks to the tears I couldn't blink back. But I put one foot in front of the other and started walking again. I had to put distance between us, or I'd run back in there and beg him to forget what I said.

There was no going back though. Stephen and Serilda needed to fix their relationship. With me out of the picture, they had a shot at doing it.

"Fuck," I muttered, swiping at the tears that fell. Looking up, I saw cars drive past and remembered I was easily recognizable. My fingers flew over the phone to order the car. They were only five minutes away.

I tucked my chin to my chest and stared at my phone, suddenly wishing I had a hat. My feet carried me along the sidewalk slowly, trying not to draw attention to myself. It wasn't until I was in the car that I breathed a sigh of relief. Then I saw the widening of the guy's eyes behind the wheel and cursed myself because I was sure I looked like shit.

"Thanks for the ride," I muttered.

"Of course. Listen, whatever you have going on isn't my business. I won't breathe a word of this, okay?" I didn't know him, therefore couldn't trust him, but I thanked him anyway.

Dropping my head back on the seat, I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing. Falling apart in front of a stranger was not in the cards. I had to hold it together until I got behind the safe walls of my home, then I could let it out.

And that was just what I did. The minute I was behind my door, I sagged against it and slid down until my ass met the floor. Tears ran down my cheeks as I relived what happened.

God, what did I do? I knew it was the right thing but that didn't mean it didn't rip a fucking hole in my chest. My heart might still beat there, but it was hollow, left back in Stephen's home with him.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone, dialing someone I knew would listen and be there for me.

"Hey, I was just thinking of you," he answered on the second ring. "I figured you'd be in bed with your hot man."

"Gareth," I whispered brokenly.

"Jans, what happened?"

I poured my heart and soul out to my brother. He wouldn't judge me. Instead, he let me get my emotions out, offering me words of comfort along the way, even saying he'd fly out here. I told him that wasn't necessary. He had commitments at home. I suddenly missed my family more than ever.

STEPHEN

I stood here, watching as the door closed behind him. Watching as he took my heart with him. How could a morning so perfect turn into such a disaster?

I'd only meant for him to go home for now and come back later. He shouldn't have to deal with Serilda's temper. He'd dealt with it enough when they were together. She was my responsibility. I had to talk to her, not him. He didn't deserve her wrath. I did. I would move heaven and earth for him.

And then he was gone.

Heels clicked on the floor. Her voice reached my ears from directly behind me. "He better be gone for good."

My chest ached. Any comfort I'd had when I woke up this morning in the warmth of Jansen's embrace disappeared. The light that kept my life bright was gone.

My gaze dropped. "Leave." The word was barely a whisper on my lips, but I had no question when I heard her shriek.

"What?" In that moment, her voice was like nails on a chalkboard. Grating and annoying.

Slowly, I turned to face her. "You heard me. I said leave."

Her eyes widened. “You’re telling me to leave when you’re the one who decided to fuck my ex-boyfriend? My straight ex-boyfriend.”

She thought her words could hurt me. Nothing could cause more pain than that closed door, knowing Jansen was on the other side. She spent years upon years pushing me away. Everything had always been about her. Her needs. Her desires. Her career.

Not today.

I was done letting her use me as a doormat, only seeing me when it would do something for her. Words paraded through my head. Angry, terrible words. Ones I’d never be able to take back once they left my lips.

Every ounce of energy had drained from my body. I needed Serilda to leave before I said things we would both regret.

“This is my house and you need to leave it. I have nothing to say right now.”

She screamed and yelled. I ignored every single word from her mouth and climbed the staircase. Back to my room. To the last place I was happy. Her screeching followed me until I reached my room and shut the door.

The front door slammed shut and I let out the breath I’d been holding. I leaned against the door, gazing around the room. The rumpled sheets of the bed broke my heart all over again. Every hope and dream I’d had for our future had ended in this room.

I walked to the side of the bed Jansen slept on the night before and ran my fingers over the sheets. His scent still lingered in the room, enveloping my senses. I couldn’t stay in here with it like this any longer.

My eyes burned and the room blurred as I ripped the sheets from the bed. In a daze, I carried then down to the laundry room. I trusted him. Once again, I let a man in. Gave him a part of my heart, only for him to throw it back in my face. When would I learn?

I knew from the beginning I was going to get hurt. The little voice in the back of my head screamed at me not to do it. To keep my distance. Did I listen? No. Apparently, I was a glutton for punishment. Putting myself out there, time and time again, only to have everything I offered trampled to the ground.

As a smart man, it seemed like there was one place I was dumber than dumb. If I really was smart when it came to relationships, I'd avoid them all together. They weren't worth the heartache. The pain that came when they ended. And they always ended.

I thought things would be different this time. I always thought that. They never were.

I sighed and brushed the tears from my face. I started the machine and went to the living room. Memories of the night before assailed me when I went to sit on the couch. I'd sat in his lap, tasting every inch of him. Just another painful reminder now. I moved to room after room. Each one held different memories than the last.

At least until I walked into my study. The one room we'd never spent any time in. It was a place for work. I wanted to give Jansen all of me. To not give another person the opportunity to leave me because I worked too much. I'd left work there and never spent any time in my study when Jansen had been here. I'd been determined to prove I could give my entire self to the person I was with.

What a mistake that had been.

I sat down at my desk, the pain eating at my chest. There were no memories everywhere I looked in this room. Only the reminder he didn't have the chance to

spend any time here. Leaning back in my chair, I closed my eyes and let the pain overwhelm me.

The tears spilled down my cheeks and I didn't bother trying to stop them. I thought I found happiness, found my happily ever after. At this point in my life, I didn't think I was destined to be anything but alone.

A notification sounded on my computer. I ran my fingers across the touchpad. Maybe work would take my mind off Jansen.

I clicked to open my email and saw it wasn't my work email, but my personal one. An email sat there from Kelly Weaver, the real estate agent who had taken us house hunting yesterday. It was another knife to the chest.

Why not get all the pain out of the way at once? I opened the email, reading her words with a lump in my throat.

Stephen and Jansen,

Thank you so much for letting me take you on the tour of those houses yesterday. I know you weren't completely in love with any of the choices. This morning, a new listing came on the market. As soon as I saw it, I knew it would be perfect for you. I believe it fits every requirement you have. I've attached a few pictures and a link to the listing. Take a look and let me know if it's one you'd like to walk through.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kelly Weaver

A sob left my throat. With trembling fingers, I clicked on the link. The house was gorgeous. Long black railings on both the upper balconies and the lower, covered

porches. It practically sat on the beach, and the kitchen could easily hold ten people working in there. Each room was bright and welcoming, exactly like we wanted.

I should tell the real estate agent we wouldn't be purchasing anything. My fingers wouldn't move over the keys. I didn't have it in me to put the words in writing.

I picked up my phone and tried calling Jansen. After the way he left, I didn't expect him to answer. The little bit of hope made me continue to punish myself. It went directly to voicemail, and I dropped the phone onto the desk.

There was no need to talk to anyone on a Sunday. Being perfectly honest, there was no one I wanted to talk to.

The morning sun still brightened the sky as I reached for the decanter I kept on the bookshelf and one of the tumblers. I poured two fingers of the amber liquid and took the glass to the table that sat in front of the small couch. I looked at the glass, running my finger along the rim. Alcohol wouldn't solve problems, even if it might numb a bit of the pain.

I pushed the glass away and lay down on the couch. Sleeping the day away seemed like a better alternative. Then I wouldn't have to think about anything. All I had to hope was that my dreams wouldn't torture me as well.

I closed my eyes and let the exhaustion the morning had brought settle over me and pull me into sleep.

My eyes snapped open, and I looked around, trying to figure out where I was. The bed beneath me was completely uncomfortable. As the room came into focus, I noticed my desk across the room. When I glanced down, I realized I'd slept on the couch in my study.

The loud shrill sound of my phone drew my attention back to my desk. I jumped up and raced over to it. The drumming in my head muted by the hope Jansen had decided to call me back. I answered it without looking at who was on the other end.

“Hello?”

“Stephen, what do you think you’re doing?” Gisela’s thick German accent came over the line.

“Gisela?”

“Do not be coy with me. Serilda called me crying that you kicked her out of your home.”

I looked at the clock on the wall, realizing it was only two in the afternoon. I was surprised she waited that long to tell on me to her mother. I took a seat in my desk chair and pinched the bridge of my nose. “I’m not being coy.”

“So, you did throw your own daughter out of your home.”

After a lifetime of holding back, of putting on the perfect facade, I broke. I couldn’t keep pretending my wants and needs didn’t matter. “I did. The better question is, did you ask her why I threw her out?” I snapped.

“I didn’t have to. She told me about Jansen. For god’s sake, Stephen, what were you thinking?”

“What was I thinking?” I leapt from my chair, unable to sit still any longer. My feet moved back and forth across the room, unable to keep still. “I was thinking that for once I deserve to be happy.”

“With Serilda’s ex?” she yelled.

“It doesn’t matter who I was with. For once I thought about myself and my happiness. Our daughter bursts into my home, then into my room. Without knocking, she screamed until Jansen left.”

“Good.”

“No, not good,” I snapped. “She throws men away when they can’t do any more for her, including me. Except, I’m the one being thrown away by everyone. You, her, Jansen, and every other man I’ve ever dated. I’m done being tossed aside. And I’m done with this conversation.”

For the first time in my life, I hung up on Gisela, not caring about the ramifications. I was tired of everyone’s needs coming before my own.

When my phone rang again, and I saw it was her, I sent it directly to voicemail. I opened my contacts and dialed the one person I knew I could talk to about anything.

“Shannon, can you meet for coffee?”

“Stephen, what happened?” Her voice was instantly on alert. She didn’t know how much I appreciated her. One of the few people who was there for me, no matter what I could do for her. She was my rock and right now I needed her more than anything.

“Serilda showed up and Jansen left me.”

“Left you at your house, or left for good?”

“For good.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes. Be ready to leave and pack an overnight bag. You’re staying with me tonight.”

“Thank you,” I said, holding back tears.

“Anytime. I’ll be there soon.”

I set the phone down. With dreaded steps, I walked to my room to pack a bag. I kept reminding myself that in a few minutes I wouldn’t have to see him everywhere. I would only have to worry about his memory haunting me.

JANSEN

The couch cushion had to be putting a mark on my face. I didn't care. Not about it, about the way I looked, or about much of anything. It was my fault. I was the one who walked away from Stephen. How could I stay, knowing I was the reason the relationship he had with his daughter was worse because of me?

I didn't regret being with Stephen, not for a second. But I did feel an immense amount of guilt because of Serilda. We could have handled it better. I could have. I could have reached out to her and explained things. She might not have wanted to talk to me, but it would have been worth a try. Maybe we could have avoided the whole ugly situation yesterday.

Serilda wouldn't have listened to me after I got the initial sentences out. Once she heard I was dating her father, in love with him, she would have flown off the handle. At least she would have been far away and not screaming in the same room. Then when the media frenzy hit, she wouldn't have been taken off guard.

I had no love for her. She was the one who left me. What a fucking blessing that was. Though now I felt like the lowest of the low, miserable without Stephen. God, he must hate me. Not only did I make shit worse with his family, but I left. I walked away from the man I loved beyond reason.

A knock on my door had me lifting my head but not getting up. "What?" I yelled.

“Let me in, Jansen.”

I groaned. How did Devon find out? Then it occurred to me—Gareth. He must have called the guys when I wouldn’t answer the phone earlier. My brother worried about me. Since he couldn’t be here to check on me himself, he’d call in reinforcements. He had Devon’s number as well as King’s.

Getting up from the couch, I looked down to make sure I at least had clothes on. I honestly couldn’t remember. Shorts and a shirt, both wrinkled. My dick was covered, so that was good. I opened the door to find Devon on the other side. His eyes held so much emotion, like he knew exactly what I was going through. He did because things weren’t always easy between him and Lincoln.

“Come here,” he said and pulled me in for a hug.

I fell forward more than moved. Devon easily caught me and held me up while tears I didn’t think I had left fell down my cheeks as soft sobs racked my body.

“Let’s get you to the couch.” He moved inside with me against him and pushed the door shut. Devon helped me to the couch and sat down, bringing me with him so I could lean against him. “Gareth called me. He didn’t give me the details; just said I should come over. He also called King, but he’s out on the boat.” I had no idea what time it was. The sun was still out so at least it wasn’t night yet. “What happened?”

“I fucked up,” I mumbled. “I should have told Serilda about her dad and me, but I selfishly kept him to myself until we went public. Now she knows and she’s back to raise hell. She showed up at Stephen’s house yesterday and tore into us. She was so pissed. The look on Stephen’s face when she was yelling... I hated seeing him upset.”

“She probably would have behaved the same if you told her before.”

“Yeah, but at least when the news broke it wouldn’t have been a big surprise. Or I could have walked away before my heart was fully in it. Now, fuck, I feel like there’s a knife in my chest.”

“I know and I hate that for you. Are you sure leaving him was the right move? You could have given him space to talk to Serilda without ending things?”

“And then what?” I asked. “He’s going to choose me over her?” I scoffed. “There’s no way she’s going to accept us and be calm about the whole thing. She doesn’t care about me in the slightest. As for Stephen, I’m not sure how much love she has for him either. He’s her dad, but they aren’t close. That’s all the more reason I had to leave. This could be the final straw in their relationship. I don’t want to be the reason they don’t speak anymore. That’s his daughter and I’m...” Fuck, I didn’t even know. Stephen loved me, yes, but we weren’t married. We didn’t live together. He could find someone else his family would approve of. He couldn’t find another daughter.

“You’re the man he loves,” Devon filled in. “Don’t discount what you mean to each other. It’s clear to anyone who sees you two together how much you love one another. Shit, Jansen, what the fuck are you even doing on the couch like this? Have you tried calling him to find out what happened between them?”

“No. I’m disposable. Serilda’s not.”

He gently pushed me until I sat up, no longer leaning on him. “If he would have pushed you away, I’d be all for you being like this, but this was your own doing. You’re the one who walked away, not him. Have you thought about how he feels? What he’s going through now that you’ve left him in a time when he probably needs you most?”

“Oh my god.” I put my head in my hands as tears welled in my eyes again. “But I did the right thing. I left so they could repair what they had.”

“Is that what Stephen wants? Did you ask him, or did you leave without letting him talk to her and you first?”

What did I do? Should I have stayed and let Stephen decide whether he wanted me to go? I took the matter into my own hands when it was between them, and I left. Yes, I thought I was doing it for the right reason, but now Devon was spouting all kinds of logical shit.

“Serilda is for Stephen to handle, not you,” he said. “If he wanted her to know about you two beforehand, he could have reached out to her. This isn’t all on you, Jansen. I get you thought you were doing the right thing, but for who? You, or everyone? Don’t forget, Serilda’s an adult. She didn’t need to behave the way she was.”

“Like the spoiled woman she’s always been,” I muttered and lifted my head to wipe away the tears.

“You know her better than I do. From what you’ve told me, she’s selfish. You weren’t there enough for her, so she left you. Now she’s making the relationship you have with her father about her. Yes, I agree she has a right to be upset, but showing up unannounced and yelling at you both didn’t need to happen.”

“I should have seen it coming.”

“Hindsight.”

“I could have stayed yesterday and not bailed.”

“Mmhmm.”

“I fucked up even more, didn’t I?”

“You love him. Fight for him. Don’t let him go so easily. God, Jansen, where do you think Linc and I’d be if we gave up on each other? When you love someone, you don’t let them go without a fight.”

I turned to face Devon, knowing I looked as awful as I felt. “I can’t go over there now. She could still be there. He could hate me.” I’d really screwed up and didn’t know how to begin to fix it.

“Give him time. Give it to both of you. He’s upset, probably with you. I’m sure he’s with her. Let them figure shit out.”

“You’re right. That’s smart.” How much time though? I didn’t want to ask Devon. I’d poured enough of my heart out and cried on him. Everything only happened yesterday. Stephen had tried calling me afterward, but I couldn’t answer. I was so in my head and didn’t want to make things worse. Jesus, I was a mess. Devon had a life, a man he loved, but he was also an amazing friend to check in on me.

“You’ll know when the time’s right. Just speak from the heart when you see him next. Tell him how you feel about him and what he means to you.”

“And apologize.”

He gave me a soft smile. “That too. He’ll forgive you once you explain.”

“I hope so.” If he didn’t, I... Well, I didn’t know what the fuck I would do. I didn’t want to lose him, but that ship might have already sailed.

I dropped my head back and groaned. God, how was I so fucking good on the ice and such a disaster of a human off it? All because of love. If I hadn’t fallen in love with Stephen, I wouldn’t be sitting here like this. I also wouldn’t know what it was like to be loved by him. To have him touch me and care about me. To make me feel like I

was the luckiest man alive, just to have him in my life.

And I threw it away yesterday. Sure, I thought I was doing the right thing, but hindsight like Devon said. I had to hope Stephen forgave me. That he could see I was trying to do the right thing for them. Not for me. The right thing for me would have been to shove her ass out the door after telling her to fuck right off with her bullshit. But it wasn't bullshit. She had a right to be angry, just not to behave the way she had.

"You're good for each other," Devon said. "You fit so well. I've never seen you this happy. Gareth either. He said that when he called. How he wished he was here so he could help you through this because you deserve this kind of love. This big, all-encompassing feeling that not everyone experiences. You do, Jansen. You deserve Stephen and much more."

"We went to look at houses together."

"You did?" His smile grew. "That's great."

"Yeah. We didn't find any we loved but there were some possibilities."

"You'll find the right one."

"If he takes me back."

"He will." I wished I had Devon's certainty. Instead, I let his words sink in and keep me from going under again.

Devon's phone rang. He dug it out of his pocket and looked at the screen then showed it to me. Knox was calling him.

"How many people know about me?"

“Me, Linc, King, Hayes, and Jamie.”

“Of course. King would have told them.”

“Leslie and Noah.”

“Gareth doesn’t have their numbers though.”

“King does, and he hated you weren’t doing well so he decided to rally everyone around you since he’s out on the ocean and couldn’t get here fast enough. Expect Noah to be here in a bit.”

I smiled for the first time since yesterday morning. My teammates were amazing. King had a heart of fucking gold. “I’m surprised he didn’t call Kasper.”

“I’m sure he wanted to, but Hayes probably talked him out of it. You know Kasper would have shown up at your door, ready to help.” He would have. That was Kasper. We weren’t just a way for him to earn more money. He genuinely cared about everyone in his organization.

“Too bad he can’t fix this.”

“No, but he’s not the one who needs to. Only you can make it right.”

“Yeah.” I would. I’d get down on my fucking knees if I had to and beg for Stephen’s forgiveness. I’d do whatever it took to have him back in my arms.

28

STEPHEN

One week.

One week of sleepless nights.

One week of working myself into the ground to keep from coming home to my empty house and bed.

In that week, I hadn't heard from anyone beside Shannon and the people I worked with. No word from Jansen or Serilda. I held out hope Jansen would come back or simply return my call.

Nothing.

I didn't know what to do with myself. After spending time drowning in my sorrows, I went to work on Monday and kept busy every moment of the day, never stopping or giving my mind a chance to catch up. A chance to think or remember the fallout of Serilda showing up. I kept pushing until I could come home and pass out from sheer exhaustion.

Now that the weekend arrived, I didn't have anything to keep me occupied. I tried reading but couldn't find something that would grab my attention. I even tried watching a documentary I'd been waiting for. Thirty minutes in and I realized I hadn't paid attention and had no idea what they were talking about.

I shut off the TV and dropped my head back on the couch. I couldn't spend all day torturing myself. The only place I didn't feel so completely and utterly broken was in my office at the university. If it took going in on a Saturday to keep me from swimming in regret and sadness, then that was what I was going to do.

With effort, I forced my butt off the couch to change into something more presentable for being on campus.

Dressed in a pair of jeans and a polo, I left the house, and a little bit of the weight that made it hard to breathe lifted from my chest. I didn't think I'd ever be free of the pain of losing Jansen, but being outside of my house, hell of any place we spent time together, made it a little easier to breathe.

The drive to campus was quiet. Not many people out and moving around this time of the morning on a Saturday.

I pulled into my parking space; the rest of the lot practically empty except for a handful of cars scattered throughout. My favorite coffee cart wouldn't be open on the weekend. It was a blessing I kept a coffee machine in my office for these types of occasions.

The first thing I did after I shut my office door was to make a cup of coffee. With the steaming mug in hand, I took a seat behind my desk and opened my laptop. It was early enough in the semester that I had plenty to keep me busy. I settled in and opened the first document that needed my attention.

My office door flew open, and I practically jumped out of my chair. Shannon stood there with her arms crossed. "How did I know I'd find you here?"

I moved my laptop to the side. "It's not like I have anything else to do."

“You have plenty you can do, like go talk to the man who holds your heart.”

I reached up and closed the laptop. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin. He hasn’t returned my calls. I think he’s too afraid to come between me and Serilda.”

Shannon sat down across from me. “Stephen, I haven’t said this yet for fear of hurting you. I think you being apart from Jansen is hurting you more.”

“What haven’t you said?”

“Be honest with yourself. I know Serilda is your daughter, but is there really any relationship between the two of you that Jansen and you being together could actually harm?”

“I can’t lose him, and I can’t give up on her either.”

“I know you don’t want to give up on her. Just think about the way she treats you. How much you’ve missed out on because you want to improve your relationship with her. If you keep making decisions based on what will make her happy, you’re going to be miserable. Life is going to pass you by.”

Shannon’s words made me think about the times, the years of frustration, and the things I gave up on, hoping I could get Serilda back, only to have nothing change. I’d spent years and years trying and nothing made a difference. The first time I was truly happy was in Jansen’s arms. He made me feel whole and loved.

I looked up at Shannon, whose image blurred before my eyes. “What do I do?”

“You tell Serilda Jansen is here to stay. Lay it out for her and let her decide.”

“Then?”

“Then you stop trying to call Jansen and go see him. Tell him, Serilda may be your daughter but you won’t let her come between the two of you.”

I started to shake my head. “I can’t...”

Shannon came around the desk and took my hands, pulling me up to stand. “Yes, you can.” Her gaze locked on to mine, giving me the courage to do what I needed to.

“And if it doesn’t work?”

“If it doesn’t work, you call me, and we’ll get drunk.”

That made me chuckle since her suggestion was so far from what we normally would do. I grabbed my keys and left to hunt down Serilda at her hotel before I lost my nerve.

The concierge directed me to the correct elevator. I stepped inside and pressed the button for Serilda’s floor. It was long past time for this conversation to happen. For years, I let Serilda push me aside. To treat me as if I was less than her mother. She couldn’t have it both ways. Either I mattered to her, or I didn’t.

The door whipped open before I even had the chance to knock. Serilda stood there, her hair pulled off her face, dark circles under her eyes.

“You expect me to let you in after you threw me out of your house to run after your little side piece?”

“That’s enough, Serilda.”

She pushed the door forward, trying to shut me out once again. I threw my hand up to stop it from closing.

“You have two choices. One, you either invite me in and we have this discussion behind closed doors, or two, you shut that door in my face, and I still say everything I came to say through the door for anyone to hear.”

Her eyes narrowed. For the briefest of moments, I wondered if she would actually shut the door. Hopefully, she realized I would not back down this time. She was used to the father who let her behave however she wanted without repercussions, simply so she wouldn't push me further away.

Not anymore.

That ship had sailed. She would listen to what I came to say. After that, what happened to our relationship was up to her. I would no longer allow her spoiled temper tantrums to control my life.

She whirled on her heel and stormed down the small hall, leaving the door open. Probably as close to her inviting me in as I was going to get. What I didn't expect to find on the other side was Gisela sitting on one of the couches with her legs crossed and a cup of tea in her hands

“Stephen, what are you doing here?” Gisela exclaimed when I stepped into the room.

I didn't know how having her mother here would make her react to what I wanted to say, but it wouldn't change it. Maybe it was time they understood how both of their behaviors over the years had impacted me and everyone around them.

“I'm here to—”

“He threatened to embarrass me in the hallway if I didn't let him in!” Serilda yelled, cutting me off before I could finish my sentence.

Gisela stood. “How dare you speak to our daughter—”

“Enough!” I bellowed into the room, loud enough to stop them both in their tracks. “I came to talk and for you to listen.” I moved my gaze to Gisela. “Since you’re here, I think it’s something both of you need to hear.”

Gisela had the grace to sit down, while Serilda crossed her arms over her chest like a petulant child. One I was tired of indulging. “Then talk so I can go back to enjoying my day.”

“Trust me, this is not going to improve your day by any stretch of the imagination. Now sit down.”

She at least had the grace to listen this time, even if she did it with a snarl curling her lip. “I should throw you out of my room.”

“You will do nothing of the sort. You’re lucky that throwing you out of my house last week was the only thing I did when it came to the way you treated me and Jansen.”

“He’s worthless.”

“No,” I snapped. “What’s worthless is your attitude. I never imagined a world where I would have raised such a self-entitled brat.”

Serilda’s mouth dropped open at the same time Gisela began to chastise me from behind. I ignored every word she said and continued directing all my pent-up anger and hurt to Serilda.

“You don’t get to be shocked,” I continued. “You treat people like garbage. As if they’re beneath you and not worth the dust on the soles of your shoes. I won’t stand for it any longer.”

“You don’t get to lecture me,” she argued.

“Yes, I most certainly do, because it seems your mother has allowed you to behave this way and since you didn’t live with me—”

“I didn’t live with you because you made Mom miserable. She hated living with you, and it made me want to get away from you as soon as I could. You didn’t care about me or her. The only thing that mattered to you was your job.”

I heard Gisela’s intake of breath behind me. “Is that what you think?”

“America is what made your mother unhappy,” I said.

“I watched how unhappy you were. He”—Serilda pointed at me—“forced us to stay here. He forced you to move here, even though you wanted to stay in Germany.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Gisela shake her head. “No. I moved to America because I wanted to be with your father, I didn’t realize how much I would miss home. It had nothing to do with him. Your father did everything in his power to take care of us.”

Serilda scoffed, “Yeah, he’s great at taking care of our sloppy seconds.”

I took a step toward her. “That’s enough. I did not come here to defend myself to you. Nor will I do so after all these years. I came here to tell you how the future will play out from now on.”

She crossed her arms over her chest again. “And that’s supposed to mean what to me?”

“Maybe nothing, but I will no longer be your punching bag. You’re right, I should

have told you about Jansen. He's a good man. A man I love and one you will not treat like a piece of garbage."

She couldn't keep her ass seated any longer and jumped up. "He didn't have any time for me." She stomped her foot on the ground.

"You think if a man doesn't spend twenty hours a day paying attention to you that he doesn't have time for you. And even when they do, you toss them to the side like they're worthless objects. No more." I fisted my hands at my sides, trying to control the anger coursing through my body.

"I love that man," I continued. "A man who was just another conquest to you. Well, he means more to me than anyone else. Even you. Because Jansen loves me too. You have never even bothered to treat me with an ounce of respect. If I had to guess, it's not my relationship with Jansen that caused problems with your career, but your reputation catching up to you."

Serilda's eyes were wild. Not used to being confronted about her behavior, she didn't know how to deal with criticism.

"So, this is how things are going to go from now on. I will no longer take the blame for your mother's unhappiness, nor will I let you interfere with mine. If you want a relationship with me, you will treat me with the same respect I've shown you throughout your life. You will also realize Jansen and I come as a package. If that's something you can accept, you know where to find me."

I spun on my heel and stormed back down the hall, slamming the door behind me. When I stepped into the elevator, I leaned back against the wall. My heart raced in my chest. I'd never spoken to my daughter like that. But Shannon was right, I couldn't continue to live my life trying to make Serilda love and care more about me. My life was passing before my eyes while I tried to appease her. I needed to do

something for me. I needed Jansen.

I lifted my hand but dropped it almost immediately. Was this really the best idea? I might be setting myself up for more heartache, and I didn't know how much I could handle. I almost turned around to leave when I reminded myself, I wouldn't be able to have any peace if I didn't find out for sure. I'd always question whether we could have salvaged what we had together. I couldn't leave with the question hanging over my head.

Once again, I lifted my hand. This time, I rapped my knuckles on the solid wood. Butterflies took flight in my stomach while I waited to see if Jansen would answer the door. When I heard footsteps approaching, I braced myself for his reaction when he saw me on the other side.

The door opened.

“Stephen?”

JANSEN

Holy fuck. Stephen was standing on the other side of the door, and he looked so good. I wanted to grab him, wrap myself around him, and never let go. But I held back because I didn't know where we stood.

It had been days since I'd seen him. Devon suggested giving him space to figure things out with Serilda, and I did just that. Today was the breaking point for me. I woke up this morning with an ache in my chest, the worst it had been in days. There was no more waiting around for me. I went through the motions every day and did what I needed to on the ice to get ready for the upcoming season, but today was mine. I was going to head over to Stephen's to beg for him to take me back.

He showed up here instead. At least I looked good. I wanted to put my best self forward. My clothes were relaxed, though not wrinkled. I'd smoothed my hair down and shaved my face. If I was going to win him back, I needed to be presentable.

"Stephen?"

"Is there a way to save us?"

I blinked at him and blinked some more.

"I love you, Jansen."

Was this really happening or was I still asleep, dreaming this amazing moment? Because Stephen was here, at my condo, saying words I longed to hear.

“Jansen?”

“Sorry.” I shook my head then pinched my nipple. The skin on my arm would have worked too but the nipple was more sensitive. I needed the pain that went with it to ground me and solidify this was really happening. “I wanted to make sure I was awake.”

His lips tilted up. “So, you pinched your nipple?”

“If I’m going to do it, I might as well get a bit of pleasure out of it. You’re really here.”

“I am. Can I come in?”

“Shit, yes, of course.” I moved out of the way so he could step inside then shut the door behind him. I didn’t have nosy neighbors, but I also didn’t want the dick next door to hear what Stephen and I said to each other. In here, we were in our own little cocoon.

He looked around, and noticed the mess my place had become. There were take-out containers on the counter in the kitchen and on the dining table. I kept eating through my misery. I had to so I could keep up my strength. The season was about to start. There was no way I was slacking off. But I wasn’t fucking cooking. Instead, I ordered the healthiest shit I could find and a lot of it.

“Uh...” I quickly grabbed a garbage bag from under the sink in the kitchen. After I shook it out, I went to work, swiping all the garbage into it. “I don’t usually live like this,” I told him as I kept picking stuff up. “You know that though.” What the fuck

was I even saying? Stephen didn't need me to explain to him what I was doing. He came here to tell me he loved me, and I was acting like an idiot, running around the condo instead of finding my way back into his arms.

Turning, I walked into the kitchen, sat the bag down, washed my hands, and went to him again. I didn't get close enough where I could reach him, but I needed to be near him. There was this invisible pull when he was in the same room as me. I had to have him in my orbit, close enough where I could see every move of his lips, the way his eyes held mine, the depth of the green in them.

He hadn't moved from where he stopped when he came inside. His eyes held so much concern. Did he think I didn't love him because I didn't say it back? Shit, I was fucking this up all over again.

"I'm sorry," I told him. "I shouldn't have said what I did or left. I thought I was doing the right thing, then Devon came over and made me realize what I did wrong and should have done differently. But by then a day had passed and the damage was done. He suggested I give you time to work things out with your daughter. Did I give you too much time?" I was rambling but couldn't seem to stop. "Today I knew I needed to see you, but you beat me to it and showed up here. I love you too, by the way. More than I've ever loved anyone. I was such an asshole. You were dealing with shit with Serilda and I made things worse. The thought of you not having her in your life didn't sit well with me. I doubted she would want me anywhere near you, so I took myself out of the equation. She's your daughter, Stephen. I didn't want to be the reason you didn't get to spend time with her. But then I was walking down the sidewalk upset, trying to order a car. The drive home sucked. Being alone here sucked. Devon telling me I made a mistake was the icing on the horrible cake. And then it was days of torture without you with me. So yeah. I'm terrible. I love you. And I never want to go through anything like this again." My lips finally pressed closed. If they didn't, I would have kept talking like I didn't have an off switch.

“Is that all?” He tried not to smile but I saw it trying to break through.

“I mean, I could keep going. I have a never-ending commentary in my head of all the ways I want to apologize.”

“It hurt when you left. I didn’t want you to go.”

“God, Stephen, I’m so—”

“I know. It was a bad situation made worse, but I’m hoping it will get better now.”

“I’ll do anything. Just tell me and it’s yours.”

He closed the distance between us until he could put his hand gently on my cheek.

“Never walk away from me again.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Tears built in my eyes. “Does this mean you forgive me?”

“There wasn’t a question of whether I would or not. I need you. I want you in my life today and always.”

“Thank god.” I wrapped my arms around him, holding on for dear life as tears slipped down my cheeks. “I don’t want to fight with you ever again.”

“I can’t promise that, but what I can say is I won’t walk away. We’ll talk it out every time.”

“Me too. Never again. I can’t lose you. This week has been awful, and it’s all my fault. I created this hell.”

He leaned back and peered into my eyes. “No, Serilda created it. You reacted to the

situation. Not in the way I would have liked, but you did what you thought you should have for me and her.”

I nodded. There was a lump of emotion in my throat I tried to swallow but it wouldn’t move.

“I talked to her today. She won’t come between us again. She knows where you stand in my life and that she has to treat me with respect, like she should have done all along.”

“Where do I stand?”

“Next to me, in front of me, never far away.”

My lips met his. I had to kiss him, to touch him more. My hands skated over his back, over his shirt, to press him as close as he could be with our clothes on. “Underneath you?” I asked.

“Anywhere you want to be as long as I have you again.”

“You do.”

I shook against him from emotion, from need, I couldn’t be certain. Every part of me was calling out for him, even though I had him in front of me. It was like nothing would be enough. No matter how close I got, I still craved more.

“I love you, Stephen. You’re stuck with me now. There’s no getting rid of me.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Good. Can we get naked now because if I don’t get my hands on your body soon,

I'm going to combust. I have to make sure this is real, and I got my second chance. That I didn't fuck everything up."

Stephen's hands cupped my cheeks as he pressed his forehead to mine. "If this isn't really happening, I never want to wake up."

Then he kissed me. It wasn't rushed. He settled in and parted his lips so his tongue could sneak out to taste mine. He gave me the kind of kiss movies couldn't portray on screen because you had to be in the moment to experience it.

I readily opened for him, letting our tongues touch and my body sink into everything this man had to give me. His love was enough, always would be. But his touches, his kisses, the way he accepted me so completely, that was what made him special. We weren't in it for sex, although that was a hell of a perk and something I needed now. What we had would hopefully stand the test of time. Stephen was my future. I couldn't and didn't want to imagine being with anyone else.

Stephen didn't hurry to rid me of my clothes. He backed me to my bedroom where he carefully eased us onto the bed, so he was over me just like I wanted. He kissed from my lips to my jaw, slowly down my neck to the collar of my shirt, where he lifted it over my head so he could continue his trail south, taking his time, loving me with his lips and tongue. When he got to the waistband of my shorts, he undid them and worked them over my hips and ass, pressing more kisses, showering me with attention I didn't feel I deserved, but accepted, nonetheless.

My shorts and boxer briefs slid down my legs, Stephen following them until he was kneeling on the floor. I propped myself up on my elbows to watch him. This was one of the hottest encounters of my life, and we hadn't even done much yet. Every time I was with him was amazing, but there was something special to this. We had all the time in the world and Stephen was taking advantage of it.

When my clothes were completely off, he peered up at me with eyes full of yearning and so much love I wanted to drown in them. He stood to slip his clothes off, going at a leisurely pace. I was hooked in his snare, my eyes tracking every movement. When his shirt was gone, I etched every inch of his chest, arms, and stomach into my memory. With his body bare to me from the waist down, I licked my lips at the sight of his dick and the drop of precum that formed at the tip. He was the perfect package.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I’m going to come before we get started,” he said.

I sat up and reached for his hips to pull him close. “We wouldn’t want that, now would we?” My lips met his stomach, kissing along his flesh, tasting him, thanking every fucking deity that I got to have this again with him.

I’d never take him for granted. I wouldn’t put anyone above us again. He’d made it clear to his daughter I was his and there was no coming between us. Now I’d do the same. No one would be able to split us apart. I knew the error I made. There was no way I’d do it again.

Stephen was mine, now and forever. And I was going to show him what it truly meant to be loved by me and cherish him every day we had together.

STEPHEN

Jansen moved lower, licking across the head of my cock, dipping into the slit. I sank my fingers into the back of his hair, tugging lightly on the ends. He opened his mouth and sank down my shaft. I tightened the hold I had on his hair, willing myself not to come yet. He sucked, bringing his lips up then taking me back in again.

He kept up the pace, driving me wild, until I couldn't take it anymore and used the grip I had on his hair to pull him off.

"If you keep it up, this is going to be over before we really get started," I panted. I barely had control of myself.

Jansen turned to the nightstand, grabbing the supplies we needed. It didn't take him long, but it gave me the chance to get my body back under control and onto the bed. At least as close to under control as I could get myself.

He opened the lube and spread some on his fingers, rubbing them together. I lifted my knees and pressed my feet into the mattress. Jansen bent down and captured my mouth, dipping his tongue between my lips. His finger ran down between my cheeks, finding my hole, and slipping inside.

The burn ignited every nerve ending in my body. I held his mouth to mine, tasting the man who would always be mine. A week ago, I didn't know if I would ever feel this man's hands on me again. We'd overcome the biggest hurdle of us being together.

Now it was time for us to enjoy every inch of each other.

He opened me up with his fingers. First one, then two, then three. When the pad of his finger ran over my prostate, my hips bucked up begging for more.

“Jansen, I need you. Please,” I begged.

His fingers slipped out and the emptiness settled into me. That was until I felt the press of his hard shaft against my entrance.

“Fuck,” he moaned, slipping deep inside.

I lifted my knees, wrapping my legs around his back. The deeper penetration made the edges of my vision blur. He pulled out and thrust forward again. The angle was perfect, each time nailing my prostate. It set me on fire. My cock throbbed, begging me to take it in my hand, but I knew if I got anywhere near my dick, I’d come all over my hand.

“I miss the feel of you. The way you clench tighter around me when you moan.”

I’d been so lost in the pleasure I hadn’t even noticed the sounds I was making. “It’s only for you.”

He took my lips in a quick kiss. “Then let me hear it.”

Jansen locked his gaze with mine and picked up his pace. Thrusting over and over until my moans became shouts. My balls tightened and I couldn’t keep my hands off my cock any longer. I reached down and wrapped my fingers around the base. Jansen placed his hand above mine and together we stroked my dick. Sensation overwhelmed me. I thought I might combust.

I couldn't hold back anymore.

"I love you!" I shouted as I released between us.

"So good," Jansen moaned. His pace became more erratic. He pushed into me one last time, his release filling me. I held him tight to me when he collapsed on top of me.

We lay there, panting out each breath until our heart rates finally slowed. We turned to our sides and lay with our heads on one pillow, facing each other. His dick slowly slid out of me. Jansen's eyes fell closed. The sheer fact I was in his arms again filled me with joy. I wanted to forget the last week. To move on and enjoy the future we'd planned together.

"I have something to show you."

Jansen opened his eyes. "You do?"

"Yes." I rolled over and leaned toward the floor, reaching for my pants. My phone was still in my pocket. Somehow, I managed to pull myself back onto the bed.

I settled next to Jansen and opened my email. The listing the real estate agent sent still sitting there, along with the email I never sent about not needing to look any longer.

Letting out a breath, I deleted the draft and opened the listing. "I think this could be the perfect house."

I handed him the phone, but he kept his eyes on me. "You kept looking?"

My eyes dropped from his gaze. "No. The agent sent this to me the day you left. I

started an email, letting her know we were no longer looking.”

He covered my hand where I held the phone. “You didn’t send it, did you?”

“I couldn’t bring myself to do it.” I shrugged my shoulder halfheartedly. “I guess I hoped we’d end up here at some point. I didn’t want to accept it was really over.”

He moved his hand from mine to cup my cheek. “I love you too much to let you go.”

“I love you too.” I smiled.

He took the phone from my hand. He was quietly flipping through the pictures. So quiet, in fact, my heart picked up its pace. There was no expression on his face. His eyes focused on the phone. Did he like it as much as I did? I thought this could be the perfect place for us. When he lowered the phone and simply stared at me, I couldn’t take his silence any longer.

“You hate it, don’t you?” I didn’t want to give away how disappointed I was. There were plenty of houses for us to look at. With everything that had happened between us, the fact she sent this house seemed like it might have been destined to be ours.

Jansen ran a finger down between my brows. “Get out of your head. I love it. When do you think we can see it?”

The breath I’d been holding passed my lips in a rush. “What time do you have to be at the arena on Monday? Maybe we could go after work?”

“I should be done before your day at the university is over.”

“Great, I’ll see if she’s available. It’s still early. What should we do for the rest of the day?”

A smirk lifted the corner of his lips as he tossed my phone to the end of the bed. "I'm sure we can think of a few things."

He rolled his body on top of mine and I stopped thinking at all.

"We need to hire another professor to teach early American studies. There are too many students on the waiting list," Shannon said, handing me a folder. "I've included a list of possible candidates who have applied in the past."

I set the folder in the center of my desk and made a note on my calendar to take care of the issue tomorrow. "Thanks, I'll look through these first thing in the morning."

She sat back in her seat. "Not working late tonight?"

I put a few folders into my bag. "No, I'm not. I have an appointment." There was a knock on my door. "Come in."

"Am I interrupting anything?" I looked up at the sound of Jansen's voice.

"Nothing at all. I was getting ready to meet you at the car."

"I got here early so I thought I'd come up." He walked over and stood chest to chest with me.

I pressed a kiss to his lips. "You can always surprise me."

A throat clearing caught our attention. "Don't mind me," Shannon's amused voice filled the space.

Jansen chuckled. He turned to face Shannon. "Sorry. He's addictive." He shrugged.

“It’s good to see you again, Jansen.”

“You too.” Jansen gave her his easy smile that made women at the games scream, but I knew that wasn’t the same one he saved for me.

Shannon collected her things. “I’m returning to my office. Stephen, I’ll check in with you tomorrow about those candidates.”

I tapped the folder. “First thing tomorrow, I promise.”

“Have a good night, boys,” Shannon said, closing the door behind her.

“Ready?” Jansen held his hand out to me.

I pushed the strap of my bag onto my shoulder and took his hand. “Absolutely.”

Jansen had dropped me at the office this morning. We hadn’t left each other’s side the entire weekend.

He pulled up in front of the house we were interested in, where Kelly waited for us. The pictures hadn’t done the exterior justice. It was much more than I expected.

“Wow, those pictures weren’t the best.” Jansen’s gaze was glued to the house. The white exterior practically glowed in the beginning of the sunset.

“Not even close. Let’s see if the interior is as beautiful as the exterior.” I placed my hand on Jansen’s back and led him up the front stairs.

“Jansen, Stephen, it’s wonderful to see you again. Hopefully, this is the place you’re looking for.” She opened the door and gestured for us to go in first.

I walked in and almost agreed to buy it right then and there. The large window above the front door brought in ample amounts of light, and the curved staircase immediately to the right of the door gave the room a much more open feel than the houses we'd seen previously.

“Let me show you the rooms on the second floor, then we can come back down and look around the first floor.”

We followed Kelly up the stairs to the primary bedroom. There was a large space for a king bed with a set of glass French doors directly across from where the end of the bed would sit. We could easily open the doors and lie in bed to enjoy the morning breeze in the summers and watch the moonlight on the water in the winter.

“This shower is huge. I’m never letting King see it,” I heard from the en suite. I followed the sound of his voice. I found Jansen standing in the middle of a large glass shower that took up an entire wall. It had two showerheads, one at either side.

“Damn.” It was the only word I could think of, considering the images that were conjured in my head of me and Jansen in the shower together.

“There are three other bedrooms on this floor. Two of them also have en suites, but only one besides the primary have walk-in closets.”

Kelly showed us the other bedrooms. I knew as soon as I saw Jansen’s face light up the rooms would be perfect for when his family came to visit. It made my chest ache a bit, but I pushed it away. Serilda made her choice, and I wouldn’t give this man up for someone who considered me to be unimportant. Not even my daughter.

There were only two other things that were important to us. “What about the kitchen? Is there a balcony downstairs?”

“There’s a view of the beach with plenty of room for company.”

“Lead the way,” Jansen said.

We followed Kelly through the house. We passed the kitchen, which was large with plenty of room for family and friend dinners, on our way out the back. The moment we stepped out, I felt like I’d been transported into one of those romance movies. The one where the characters get their happily ever after, standing in the sunset on the beach.

“This is...”

Jansen wrapped his arms around my waist from behind. “Perfect,” he whispered in my ear.

I turned to face him. “It really is.”

“Let’s make an offer and go home so we can celebrate.”

“I like the way you think.” I turned to face the real estate agent, who’d stayed inside to give us a moment. “We’ll take it.”

31

JANSEN

There was only one other place I'd rather be than a preseason home game, but burying myself inside of Stephen wouldn't be appropriate given the crowd at the arena. At least he was here to watch me play, just as excited as I was.

My eyes found him in the stands. My jersey sat on his shoulders. The best part, even though I couldn't see it, was my name on the back. I'd claimed him. Stephen Forrester was mine and we were buying a house together. Now all I needed was another run for the Cup and I'd be a happy man.

A shoulder bumped into mine. Turning, I found King had skated over to me. "Get your head out of the clouds, Kenna. We have a game to play."

"Please, like you're not going to look at Jamie today. Or follow Hayes around while we play."

He lifted his chin. "I will do no such things."

"Uh huh, keep telling yourself that."

"Telling himself what?" Hayes asked, joining us. Now there were three of us staring into the crowd like idiots.

"Kenna thinks I can't keep my eyes to myself and not stare at you or Jamie."

“It’s a solid concern,” Hayes said. “But we’ll be watching you too, so it’s all fair.”

“I do have a nice ass. Too bad I can’t show it off like this. Later though...” He waggled his eyebrows.

“Yeah, yeah.” Hayes chuckled.

Devon was the next one to come over to us and glance up. “What am I missing?”

“We’re all looking like lovesick fools, staring at our men,” I told him.

He hummed and found Lincoln. He was near the end of a row in the back, not wanting to be in the thick of things with a rowdy crowd. Right now, they were somewhat calm. Once the game started that would change. A smile formed on Devon’s lips.

“Hey, fuckers,” we heard from behind us. Turning in unison, we saw Knox watching us. “Are you going to play or is this what I can expect every time we’re home?”

“You’re just jealous,” King said.

“I’m not disputing that, but I’d really like to focus on the game and you’re distracting me.”

I rolled my eyes but skated away from the others so Knox could get into his zone.

Once the game started, it was nothing but focus. The crowd no longer existed; Stephen wasn’t here watching me. Everything I did was with the sole focus of winning. These were games for the coaches to evaluate us and figure out if they had to change the roster and shit like that. I was solid in my position, so I didn’t worry about it. Plus, all the work I did with Jagger offseason made me more powerful on the

ice. I wasn't cocky, just damn sure of what I did.

Jagger was in the stands too today, probably critiquing every move I made. I loved him though. His feedback was always valuable to me. Not once had he steered me wrong, so I would take any criticism he had at the same level I would my coach's.

Every time my ass hit the bench, I stayed focused on the game, not wanting to let my eyes drift to Stephen. It was tempting though, I knew myself. If I wanted to play well, I had to keep my gaze trained on the game in front of me.

We made it through the periods, winning the game without any injuries, though there was plenty of chirping from both teams, which was to be expected. Luckily, none of the homophobic slurs were present. Maybe they were learning we didn't deal with that shit here, or anywhere, for that matter. Or maybe more of the players were either keeping their mouths shut or becoming more accepting of players who weren't straight. Either way, I was glad for it. If we had to hear that shit again this season, there would be multiple fights.

Knox had been calmer during the game, more laser focused. When he got back from Pittsburgh, he said he had a lot of time to clear his head. That he wouldn't be pulling the same shit this season he had during the last one. He'd given up drinking, which we were all grateful for. I didn't think his troubles mysteriously went away, but if he was able to find a way to keep calm and handle things better, I was all for it. Knox was a great man. I hated seeing him hurting. He wanted what I'd found, and I couldn't blame him for it. Now that I knew what it was like to fall as hard as I had, I would fight with everything in me to always have that kind of love.

After we got done in the showers, Knox sat with his head in his hands, a towel wrapped around his waist. I dressed and crouched in front of him. "Knox, man, what's up?"

Tortured eyes met mine. So much for thinking he was doing better. “I want it too.” I didn’t need to ask what it was.

Reaching out, I put my hand on his knee. “You’ll find it. I never thought I would in the way I had or with who. It’s easy for me to say everything happens for a reason, but it does. Look how far you’ve come since you left at the end of last season. Shit, your skin looks better, your eyes are brighter.”

“But in here...” He put his hand over his chest. “In here it hurts.”

“I know. I wish I could take it away. Hey, what do you say we head down to the beach after this? We’ll walk around and decompress.”

He shook his head. “You’re going out with Stephen.”

“He’ll understand. He’s a good man, not the kind who demands all of my attention.” Like a certain woman whose name I was no longer thinking or speaking. She hated me. I hated her. What the fuck ever. All I cared about was how she treated Stephen. She still hadn’t spoken to him since the last time he saw her. Stephen was okay with it, not just saying that to make me feel less guilty. He’d proven I was important to him. “Come on. Get dressed. We’ll talk to Stephen on the way out.”

“He doesn’t have any friends who’d like to meet a goalie, does he?”

“Men, no. Women? Maybe, but you like dick so that won’t work.”

That got a half smile from him. “You’re so eloquent when you speak.”

I grinned. “I try. Now get moving.”

Grabbing my phone, I sent a message to Stephen saying I’d be out in a minute. I also

gave him a quick rundown about Knox. Stephen was one of the most understanding men I'd ever met. If he knew Knox was feeling down, he'd want me to be there for my friend. In return, I'd do my best to be there for Stephen tonight while naked and willing for whatever he had in mind.

Sure enough, the text I received told me it was fine, and he'd be waiting for me when I was done.

Knox dressed and together we walked out. I hugged Stephen and whispered I'd like him to wear the jersey and nothing else when I saw him later. He whimpered so only I could hear it. My dick twitched, though I willed it to calm down. Now wasn't the time. Knox hung back but after I pulled away from Stephen, he went to Knox to congratulate him on a great game.

I hated watching Stephen walk away, but it was for a good reason. What I didn't expect when we went outside was to find Hayes, King, Devon, and Noah waiting for us.

"What are you guys doing?" I asked. "Is there a dinner we're late for?"

"There's always a dinner," Devon said, "But we wanted to hang out with you two." When his eyes landed on Knox, I understood one of them overheard me talking to him and decided we all needed to support our friend.

Instead of going to the beach like I originally suggested, Devon thought it would be best to hang out at his place. Lincoln wouldn't be there. While Devon didn't elaborate, I had a feeling he asked his partner if he could give us a bit of space. When one of us was down, the others rallied, just like we were tonight.

"C'mon, Knox, let's get you in a better mood," King said, slinging his arm over Knox's shoulders. "You can ride with me while Hayes drives your Corvette to D's

house.”

“Works for me!” Hayes called. “You can have your eardrums damaged while I get a quiet ride out of the city.”

King shot him a glare. “You love my music.”

“I love you. The music, not when it shakes my fucking organs loose.”

King flipped him off and dragged Knox to his BMW. Knox threw the keys to Hayes, who caught them with a grin. If there was anyone who would lighten Knox’s mood, it was King. He was one of the happiest men on the team, always ready to make anyone smile. Just being around him had his energy bleeding into who was nearby.

It took us longer than the usual forty minutes to drive to the middle of nowhere that Devon called home. This also put us closer to Knox’s house. He lived about ten minutes from Devon. If Knox wanted to go home, it wouldn’t take long. One of us could easily take him too.

Another good part about going to Devon’s, there was a lack of alcohol. Lincoln didn’t drink and Devon wasn’t a partier. There wouldn’t be temptation staring Knox in the face.

When we pulled into the driveway, it was still light out. Our game was an afternoon one today, which meant we had the whole night to spend with Knox. King walked into Devon’s kitchen and started working on a meal for us. We were usually hungry after a game. King would know just what to cook.

The rest of us grabbed water and sat in the living room. It was quiet, too quiet. I kept trying to think of something to say to get the mood lighter but failed at every turn. No one else was coming up with anything either.

“Okay,” Knox said. “Enough of this feeling sorry for Leslie shit. Listen, I know I was down after the game. It’s not easy when I see how happy all of you are. But that’s for me to figure out. I’m a big boy and will handle it on my own. You don’t have to worry about me. I’m not drinking anymore. I do appreciate what you’ve done though. It means a lot that you’d put your evenings on hold to make sure I was all right.”

“You mean a lot to us,” Devon told him. “If one of us needs something, the others are here for them.”

“I appreciate it. I’m good though. It was a momentary thing. I need to stay positive and hope it’s my turn soon.”

“That’s the spirit!” King called from the kitchen. “Put out into the universe what you hope to receive.”

“So, I should start thinking about dick more often?” Knox joked. I loved seeing the smile on his face.

“Wouldn’t hurt.” King never missed a beat. “Maybe add some details like a hairy sac if that’s your thing. Or a piercing. Oh, maybe a tattoo down below. That could be hot.”

It was just what we needed to lift Knox’s spirits and have us laughing. King made a dinner that was more like fine dining, yet we ate it like a pack of animals who didn’t have proper manners.

Hours later, we were yawning. Knox was more relaxed with a smile on his face. “Thank you,” he said as we were leaving. “I missed you assholes this summer.”

“Lucky for you, the season’s only starting,” I said. “You’ll be sick of us by the end of it.”

“Never.”

STEPHEN

One Month Later

“We’re going to be late,” I called up the stairs.

“Be down in a second,” Jansen replied.

I glanced at my watch again. We couldn’t miss this appointment. Otherwise, we’d have to wait another three weeks before we’d have time again. Fitting in a house closing during hockey season wasn’t the easiest thing to do. The season had only begun two weeks ago, and it seemed like Jansen had already been on the road more than he’d been home.

Over the last two weeks, we’d bounced back and forth between our two places. Not because we didn’t want to stay in the same house while we waited to close, but we both agreed that moving things twice was not ideal. There was no point in taking my clothes to Jansen’s with him having a bunch of road games, and him loading up his own clothes to bring to my house just seemed like extra work. As it was, we had two sets of movers scheduled for the same day, one to each home.

I couldn’t wait.

Having a place that was ours would make it easier for us to see each other. This way when he was playing at home, no matter how late he was at the arena, he’d always slip into bed with me at the end. We wouldn’t have to worry about whose stuff was where. Everything would be in our home.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs grabbed my attention and I looked up to see Jansen bounding down them. Like each time he entered my space, I wondered how I got so lucky to have this man want me above all others. I'd pinched myself enough over the last few months to know that this was well and truly reality.

"Ready?" Jansen asked, grabbing his keys from the table by the door.

He either hadn't noticed the way I stared at him, or he'd simply gotten used to it. "Yes."

Jansen stepped out first and I locked the door behind me. As we walked to the car, my phone started to ring in my pocket. I tugged it out and glanced at the screen, worried there might be a delay with the closing. Instead, the name I saw on my screen stopped me in my tracks. Gisela.

It had been over a month since I walked away from the two of them, after letting out years of pent-up anger and hurt. I honestly hadn't expected to hear from them for a long time, if ever. I'd made my choice to stay with Jansen, the same man Serilda had discarded like an old shirt. The same way she'd treated me, like me and my feelings didn't matter an ounce to her. Well, no longer was I doing anything for others unless it made me happy. For the first time in my life, I was putting my wants and needs above everyone else. Except for maybe Jansen.

As if I conjured him out of thin air, he appeared at my side. "What's wrong?"

I tilted the phone in his direction and let him see the screen. His mouth dropped open the moment he recognized the name.

"Are you going to answer it?"

I glanced at the time. Whatever it was that Gisela might want, I didn't have time to deal with it now. "No."

“Stephen...” He gave me a look that clearly said he thought I needed to see why she’d called.

“Not right now,” I continued. “I don’t want to miss this closing. The next time you’re home without a game is weeks from now. We’re lucky we got them to agree to the later closing time so you could get to practice.” I took his hand and led him to the car. The call went to voicemail.

I lifted it to my ear as I climbed into the car.

“Stephen, I know we didn’t leave things on a good note the last time we spoke. When you get a chance, I would appreciate it if you could return my call so we can talk.”

There was no malice, no anger in her voice. Not exactly what I expected. “She wants me to call her back.”

We both got in and he started in the direction of the office building we were meeting everyone in. I noticed him glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. Concern was etched in the crease of his brow.

“I promise I’ll call her back once we have the keys to the house in our hands. I need to focus on this right now and not be distracted by whatever Gisela has to say.”

“Okay.” He laced his fingers with mine.

The paperwork took a little over an hour to complete. It was worth it when they handed over the keys. I couldn’t keep the smile from my face when we stepped out into the crisp fall evening.

The perfect night to go to our new home. “Let’s go to the new place, then we’ll order in and take it back to mine,” I said. The movers weren’t due to come for another two days. Two more days until we were settled in.

Jansen gave me a nod and walked to the driver's side of the car. I knew what was bothering him. The question of whether that call would change our relationship. He had nothing to worry about, nothing either Serilda or Gisela could say would alter the way I felt about him.

"How about I call her now and relieve some of the tension?"

He gave another nod and climbed inside. Before he could start the car, I placed my hand on his, stopping him. "Please know there is nothing anyone could say that would make me change my mind about you. You're it for me. This is forever." I lifted his hand to my lips and kissed the back of it.

He smiled, even though I could see the strain behind it. Ignoring the time difference, I dialed Gisela's number, wondering if she would already be asleep.

"Hello? Stephen?" Her voice was sleepy on the other end.

"It's me. I got your message, but Jansen and I were signing the paperwork for our new home."

"That's good. I'm really happy for you." Her voice held genuine happiness.

"Thank you."

Silence filled the other end of the phone line while I waited to hear what she had to say. "I called earlier because I wanted to tell you I'm happy for you and Jansen. Happy you both found someone who loves you like you deserve to be loved." The shock of her words must have registered on my face because Jansen froze in his seat, watching me.

"Thank you for that. You don't know what it means to me."

“Serilda is slowly coming around, but you were right that day. She’s never treated you the same as she treated me. I know I’m partially to blame for that. Even though I never said anything about being in America or told her it was your fault, I also never went out of my way to tell her that it wasn’t. She heard you, and we’ve talked a lot about those early years. It will take time, but I believe she’ll come around.”

“And Jansen?”

“We both know Jansen was a prize to her. Something she didn’t want anymore but didn’t want anyone else to have either, especially her father. I’ve gotten her to agree to therapy to work through these things, and I hope one day you’ll be able to have the relationship with her that I’ve had all these years.”

“Thank you, Gisela.”

“You’re welcome. It’s late here. Do you mind if I call you in the morning so we can talk more?”

“Not at all.” I glanced at Jansen, knowing exactly how we were going to celebrate. “But how about late morning?”

“Of course. Good night, Stephen, please give Jansen my love.”

“I will. Good night.”

I looked over at Jansen, whose smile lit up the dim car. The call was loud enough for him to hear the entire conversation.

“Let’s go home.”

Jansen turned in the direction of our new house. When we pulled up in front, I sat for a moment in awe of the place. Hand in hand, we walked to the door where Jansen

used our new key to unlock it.

I led him directly to the balcony overlooking the beach. The sun had already started to set, giving an orange glow to the sky and water below.

I took Jansen in my arms and cupped his face in my hand. “Here, in our new home, is the beginning of our forever.”

“I love you.” His eyes grew misty in the fading light.

“I love you too.”

Our lips met, sharing the moment as the sky grew dark above us. It was more than this place, but the man before me who gave me a feeling of home. A place where I belonged and where I always would.

Our short history together was just beginning. There were many more chapters to write and I looked forward to every single one of them.