



Checked by His Teammate (Hockey Hearts)

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Category: Sport

Description: When veteran defenseman Tyler Bennett gets stranded in Detroit during a freak snowstorm, missing a charity bachelor auction is his biggest concern—until he discovers he’s sharing a hotel room with his D-partner Kevin Kogan.

And there’s only one bed.

A single Grindr notification shatters the ice between them, revealing the attraction they’ve both been fighting since Kevin joined the team. One night of passion ignites a connection neither expected, transforming teammates into lovers.

Back in Boston, their on-ice chemistry explodes—and off the ice, things only get hotter. Between stolen glances, nights spent together, and a first date, Tyler and Kevin fall fast and hard. As the season continues, they’ll have to decide if their connection is just a snowstorm anomaly... or the beginning of forever.

Checked by His Teammate is a steamy, instalove M/M romance novella featuring snowbound hockey players, a one-bed situation that changes everything, and two defensive partners discovering that their perfect chemistry extends far beyond the game.

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ONE

TYLER

Coach Ryan's voice boomed, cutting through the cheers in the locker room. "That's a win, boys! Outstanding effort today!" The clatter of skates and other gear coming off punctuated his words.

I fist-bumped Lawson as he passed, the high of our 3-1 victory against Detroit still buzzing through me. Nothing beat winning on the road, especially against a team that had embarrassed us at home earlier this season. My body screamed from blocking two shots in the third period, but it was the good kind of ache—the kind that validated the grind.

Coach raised a hand, waiting for the noise to settle. His expression shifted, excitement from the win giving way to something serious. "Alright, listen up for a sec. Got some news. The expected flurries have intensified into an all out snowstorm. All flights out for the rest of the day have been grounded."

Groans rippled through the room.

"Sorry, guys. We're stuck at least until tomorrow afternoon, maybe longer, depending on how things develop. The logistics crew is working on accommodations, but there's some convention in town. Most of the hotels are booked up. We're likely to end up out by the airport."

Henderson, our captain, stood in front of his locker, towel around his waist. "So

what's the plan?"

"Most likely, doubling up." Coach's reply was blunt. "We should have details any minute now. Keep an eye on your phones for more in about twenty minutes."

My stomach dropped. The charity bachelor auction. Tonight. In Boston. There was supposed to be more than enough time to get back after the game. Shane was counting on me. I was the main event, the big draw meant to pull in thousands for the Children's Sports Foundation. My brother had poured his heart into helping organize it, and it was important to both of us.

Guys started peeling off gear, heading for the showers. I snatched my phone from my locker. Three missed calls from Shane. He must have seen the weather alerts.

Ducking into the relative quiet of the hallway, I leaned against the cool cinder block wall and hit dial. Team staff bustled past, hauling equipment bags.

"What do you mean, you can't make it?" Shane's voice came through, tight with frustration, after I spilled the news.

"I'm sorry, Shane. We're grounded." My frustration mirrored his. "Snow's coming down so hard they've shut down the entire airport."

His sigh crackled over the line. Guilt twisted in my gut. This foundation gave me my start when Mom and Dad were scraping by and couldn't afford league fees or gear. It meant everything.

"How bad is it?" He already knew the answer. I wouldn't call unless it was impossible.

"Bad enough that the team's bunking at an airport hotel. No flights in or out until

tomorrow at the earliest.” More teammates filed out of the locker room behind me, faces grim, shoulders slumped in resignation.

We talked for another minute with the conversation circling back to apologies and logistics. Hanging up, I clutched the phone in my hand, the weight of letting the charity down settling heavy in my chest.

Back in the locker room, my phone pinged. A text about the hotel.

Airport Marriott room assignment. Bennett & Kogan. Room 1042.

Kevin Kogan was our newest defenseman who we picked up a couple of months back. Coach paired him up with me to mentor him, and we’d developed chemistry quickly. Off the ice, though? Barely knew him. Locker room small talk and how we could improve our game, that was it.

I looked around and spotted him reading his phone. A slight frown creased his forehead. Kevin was tall—an inch over my six-two—dark hair, eyes that crinkled when he smiled. Which wasn’t often. He had a rep: intense, outspoken where the game was concerned, private in all other matters. More likely to study game film than go out after a win. He had a certain contained energy even when standing still.

An image flashed—him pinning Robinson against the boards in the third, efficient and controlled. And kind of hot.

I walked over, aiming for a casualness I didn’t quite feel. “Looks like we’re roomies.”

He glanced up, his expression shuttered. “Guess so.”

“Could be worse.” I offered a tentative grin. “Could be stuck with Henson. Guy

snores like a Zamboni.”

A flicker of amusement shone in his eyes. Almost a smile. “True. And you?”

“I’m told I’m a perfect gentleman of a roommate.” My grin widened.

That pulled a short, quiet laugh from him. Felt like a small victory.

By the time we boarded the team bus, swirling sheets of snow plastered the windows, blurring the city lights into streaks. What should’ve been a twenty-minute drive stretched toward ninety. A muffled silence settled over us, the storm outside dampening the earlier win. Most guys stared at their phones or listened to music.

Kevin sat across the aisle, headphones on, gaze fixed on the white vortex beyond the glass. Something about his profile—strong jaw, straight nose, the focused set of his mouth—held my attention.

I looked away. Now wasn’t the time to check him out, even though it wasn’t the first time his attractiveness had gotten my attention.

* * *

The hotel lobby was pure chaos. Stranded travelers milled around everywhere. Our team was one of many groups caught by the storm. Coach handed out key cards near the front desk, reminding us about breakfast times and a hopeful departure tomorrow.

Kevin and I ended up in an elevator with Lawson and Henderson. Small talk about the game filled the ride until we got off at our stop. The tenth-floor hallway was silent, and we quickly found 1042.

I swiped the key card, the lock clicking as the light went green. Pushing the door

open, I stopped dead.

One bed. King-sized, dominating the room.

Well, hell.

“Uh,” I managed, stepping aside so Kevin could see.

He paused beside me, taking in the bed and the rest of the standard hotel decor—desk, armchair, minibar, wall-mounted TV. His jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. “I can call down, see if they have anything with two queens.”

I shook my head, dropping my overnight bag on the desk. “We’re lucky to have this given all those people downstairs.” A beat of awkward silence stretched. “It’s fine. Bed’s huge. Unless...”

“No.” The denial was quick. Maybe too quick? “It’s okay.”

Another pause settled as we silently claimed our territories. I took the side by the window while Kevin headed for the bathroom.

I sank onto the edge of the bed, pulling out my phone to scroll through Instagram, trying to ignore the tension in the room. Comments about our win filled the feed, a welcome distraction.

Kevin emerged a few minutes later, wearing sweatpants and a faded university hockey t-shirt. The soft cotton clung to his broad shoulders. His damp hair curled at his temples.

He gestured toward the bathroom door. “All yours.”

“Thanks.” I gathered up my toiletries and left him sitting on the edge of the bed.

Even though I showered before leaving the arena, it was good to have another. The hot water eased my aching muscles.

Two months we’d been teammates, playing side-by-side, and what did I know about him beyond the stats, the quiet focus? Was he seeing anyone? Any family in Boston? What did he do on days off? The questions circled as I rinsed the soap off. We’d had only a few conversations outside of the game.

I changed into basketball shorts and a team t-shirt, toweling my hair dry. When I stepped back into the main room, Kevin sat propped against the headboard, tablet in hand and phone on the bed next to him. As I walked toward my side, his phone buzzed and the screen lit up.

A distinctive orange and black logo flashed—Grindr. No mistaking it.

Kevin snatched up the phone, and without checking the details, he turned the device face-down on the nightstand. His neck flushed, gaze darting to mine to see if I’d noticed.

The moment stretched, thick with questions.

“Sorry,” he mumbled finally. “Forgot to turn off notifications.”

I sat down on my side of the bed, keeping my tone light. “No worries. Happens to me sometimes too.”

His eyes widened. “You’re on Grindr?”

“Occasionally.” I shrugged, leaning back against my pillows, mirroring his position.

“Harder these days. Being recognizable is a pain. Had to go faceless after some dude tried selling our chat log to a tabloid.”

Kevin studied me, something shifting in his eyes. A crack in the quiet facade? “I knew you were out, obviously. But... didn’t realize you were, uh, active.” He seemed to wince at his choice of words.

“Wouldn’t call it active .” Another shrug. “Dating’s complicated.” I met his gaze. “What about you? You’re not out to the team, are you?”

His shoulders relaxed a fraction. “I’m not closeted, just... private. Family knows. Close friends and some former teammates.” He picked at a loose thread on the comforter. “Being traded mid-season, still finding my footing here...” He trailed off, lifting one shoulder slightly.

“I get it.” I should’ve mentored him more outside the game, so he’d develop some friendships with our teammates. “No pressure, but it’s a good group of guys.”

Kevin nodded, a small, genuine smile playing across his lips. “I’m starting to figure that out.”

The awkwardness dissipated, replaced by a different energy. He was gay. I was gay. Teammates. Sharing a king-sized bed in a snowstorm.

My stomach growled, providing a welcome distraction. “I’m starving.” I reached for the room service menu on the nightstand next to me. “Want something?”

“Sure.” Kevin shifted closer, leaning over to look at the menu. Close enough, I caught the clean, faintly woody scent of his shampoo.

“Victory meal,” I declared, scanning the options. “Burger and fries sound good?”

“Works for me.” That smile again. It transformed his face, making him look even more attractive than usual.

I called down the order, adding a couple of beers. While we waited, the conversation started to find a rhythm. He told me about growing up and starting his career in Minnesota, the hockey obsession running in his family, his older sister—his rock when he came out at nineteen.

“What about you?” he asked. “When did you come out?”

“High school.” I reached behind me to adjust pillows. “I was already out to my family before that. But by then I knew I was done hiding it. Figured if my play was good enough, the rest wouldn’t matter.”

“Brave move,” Kevin commented quietly.

I shook my head. “Not really. There was an out guy on the football team when I was a freshman. I was kind of like you are here. You’re not closeted, you’re private. I was private, but I also denied nothing. If someone asked me who I thought was hot, they found out I was into guys.”

Room service arrived, faster than I’d expected, given the chaos of the storm. We spread the containers out on the bed between us—burgers, a combined pile of fries, ketchup packets, napkins. A makeshift picnic. We sat cross-legged, facing each other.

We kept up our conversation as we ate. I noticed a few things about Kevin. The way his laugh started in his eyes. The happiness in his voice when he talked about his family. The small, faded scar near his left eyebrow from a high stick in college.

I snagged one of the last fries, aiming for casual. “No boyfriend back in Minnesota?”

Kevin shook his head. “Broke up about six months ago. He couldn’t handle the schedule. The travel, the attention, all of it.” He rolled his eyes slightly. “Called himself a hockey widow . Whatever. I suppose it was good it happened before the trade. What about you? Anyone special in Boston?”

“Nah.” I chased the fry with a swallow of beer. “Single about a year. It’s tough. Meeting guys who want me, not the jersey number.”

Kevin nodded, his expression understanding. “That’s why I keep a low profile. Simpler.”

I hummed in response. We finished up the food in comfortable silence.

I stood, gathering the trash onto the room service tray.

“Another beer?” I asked.

“Sure.” Kevin watched me cross to the mini fridge, his gaze steady, seeming to study me in a way I hadn’t noticed before. Or maybe I just hadn’t been looking closely enough.

Handing him the beer, our fingers brushed.

Was that a spark?

I settled back against the headboard, closer than before. The air crackled. The storm outside felt like a shield, creating this pocket outside normal rules.

“To unexpected roommates.” I raised my bottle.

Kevin clinked his against mine. His dark eyes held mine for a beat too long. “To

unexpected connections.”

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TWO

KEVIN

Tyler's hands commanded my attention. Strong, calloused from years of gripping a stick and working out, yet surprisingly elegant as he moved them while he talked about the fundraiser he was missing. We'd shifted position again, back to cross-legged on opposite sides of the king bed.

Teenagers at a sleepover came to mind, not two hockey players stranded by a blizzard.

"Sorry, I keep rambling about charity stuff." Tyler ran a hand through his sandy blonde hair. "Hazard of being raised by my parents. They drilled into us the importance of giving back."

"It's fine. I like hearing about it." Truth was, listening to Tyler Bennett talk about anything was enjoyable. Since the trade two months ago, a hopeless crush—that's exactly what my sister Meg would call it—had taken root. And grown. Fast.

It wasn't just the blue eyes or the smile that could light up a room, though those certainly didn't hurt. He was genuinely kind. The first guy to welcome me, showing me the ropes at the facility, offering neighborhood tips when I mumbled something about apartment hunting. On the ice, our communication was seamless, a silent language developing faster than any pairing I'd ever had.

Now this. Beers. One bed. And the shared, startling revelation about Grindr. I

regretted we hadn't become friends sooner. Of course, that was on me for keeping to myself.

“What are you thinking about?” Tyler tilted his head, his gaze curious. “You got quiet.”

I took another swig of beer, the cool liquid a stark contrast to the heat building in my chest. “Just... processing, I guess.” I looked everywhere but at him for a moment. “When I was traded to Boston, I never imagined I'd end up... here.”

“Stuck in Detroit during a snowstorm?”

A corner of his mouth lifted.

“Sharing a hotel room with Tyler Bennett.” The words tumbled out. “Finding out you're on Grindr, too.” A nervous laugh escaped me. “Definitely wasn't in the trade agreement.”

Tyler's eyes crinkled with amusement. “An unwritten bonus.”

The third beer, or maybe the storm raging outside, had loosened me up. Normal boundaries felt blurred, with the combination of forced proximity and unexpected connection. Or was it just Tyler, relaxed and approachable, looking less like a star defenseman and more like someone...

My empty bottle hit the nightstand with a soft clink. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

My heart hammered. “Your profile? Blue tile background, torso shot—it's you, right? BeantownBen?”

Surprise flashed in his eyes. “You’ve seen my profile?”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. Damn it. “Wasn’t sure. Looked familiar.” I forced myself to hold his gaze. “That chest... I’ve seen you in the locker room enough to have suspicions.”

“So you recognized me by my pecs?” His smile turned playful, curious. “I’m flattered. Why didn’t you message if you thought it might be me?”

A shrug. “Seemed like a terrible idea. Hitting on a teammate.” I stumbled over my words. “Especially one who’s... you know my D partner. Plus, you’re Tyler Bennett. Half the city wants your attention.”

“And yet you never gave any indication.” Tyler leaned forward, the space between us shrinking. His calm confidence radiated warmth. “Not even a hint.”

My turn to lean in. “Would you have responded? If I had messaged?”

Something else flashed in his blue eyes. “In a heartbeat.”

My pulse pounded in my ears as Tyler shifted closer.

“For the record.” His voice was softer now, intimate. “You’re selling yourself short, Kogan. You’ve caught my eye more than once these past couple of months.”

My breath hitched. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” His voice got rougher. “Especially after that Montreal game. When you laid out Rousseau with that clean hit, keeping him off me so I could get a pass to Lawson.” A ghost of a smile touched his lips. “That was sexy as hell.”

A nervous laugh bubbled up. “Just looking out for my D-partner.”

“Is that all it was?”

Close now. So close. Close enough that I saw the darker flecks in his irises, smelled the faint hops on his breath.

My throat tightened. “No.” I admitted, the word barely a whisper. “That wasn’t all it was.”

Time stopped. Then Tyler’s hand lifted, calloused fingers warm against my jaw, thumb brushing over my cheek. The simple touch sent a jolt straight through me.

“Tell me if I’m reading this wrong,” he murmured, his gaze locked on mine.

Words failed. Action didn’t. I closed the remaining distance, pressing my lips to his. Tentative at first, then his fingers slid into my hair, cupping the back of my head, and a small sound escaped my throat. Need surged, sharp and undeniable.

The kiss deepened. Tyler’s mouth opened, a low groan vibrating against my lips. My hands found his shoulders, gripping the solid muscle beneath the worn cotton of his t-shirt.

I wanted more.

He shifted, pulling me closer, maneuvering until I was practically in his lap. The heat of his body seared through my clothes.

“Been wanting to do this.” He breathed against my neck, the words sending shivers down my spine. “Since the third when you put Robinson into the boards.”

I pulled back slightly, dazed, breathless. “Today’s game?”

A mischievous glint sparked in his eyes. “Yeah. I told you. Watching you get physical with our opponents is a turn on.”

Laughter escaped me, quickly silenced as I kissed him again, harder this time. No hesitation left. His hands slipped under my t-shirt, palms scorching against my skin, mapping trails of fire across my back, my sides.

“Is this okay?” Tyler asked. His fingers traced the hem of my shirt, thumbs brushing the sensitive skin just above my waistband.

“More than okay.”

I lifted my arms so he could remove it. Then I went for his shirt, pulling it up. Fair was fair.

Skin against skin. Raw electricity. Tyler’s chest was broad, defined, dusted with light hair that narrowed downward. My hands roamed, taking in the shape of his shoulders, the strength in his arms.

This was real.

“You have no idea.” I confessed, the words tumbling out unfiltered. “How many times I’ve wanted to touch you like this.”

His smile turned softer, intimate, devastating. “Show me.”

We fell back against the pillows, legs tangling, mouths fused. His weight pressing me into the mattress was perfect, grounding. One of his thighs slid between mine. A sharp gasp slipped from me as he bumped the bulge in my sweats.

“God, Kevin.” He breathed against my ear, sending a fresh wave of shivers down my spine. “You feel amazing.”

What followed blurred into heat and urgency. My hands found the waistband of his shorts, fingers hooking under the elastic.

“Can I?” I asked, voice rough with need.

Tyler nodded, lifting his hips. “I’ll be mad if you don’t.”

I tugged the shorts down, my breath catching as his erection sprang free. He wasn’t wearing anything underneath. The sight of him—hard, ready, drop of precum forming at the tip—sent a surge of desire through me so intense it was almost painful.

“Your turn,” he murmured.

I lifted my hips, letting him strip away the sweats that formed the last barrier between us. His eyes darkened as he took me in, a soft “fuck” escaping his lips.

We were exposed to each other now, nothing left to hide. It was different than catching a fleeting glimpse in the locker room.

My heart hammered against my ribs as Tyler’s eyes traveled slowly up my body, appreciation clear in his hungry smile.

“Better than I imagined,” he said, voice husky.

His honesty emboldened me. I reached for him, wrapping my hand around his length. The weight of him, hot and solid in my palm, drew a groan from my throat. Tyler’s head fell back, eyes fluttering shut as I stroked him.

He moaned as his breathing quickened.

I explored him slowly, learning what made him shudder, what made his hips lift, seeking more. His hands weren't idle either. Strong fingers wrapped around my cock, the perfect pressure making my world narrow to just sensation.

"I want to taste you," he said, eyes locked on mine.

Before I could respond, he shifted down my body, trailing kisses across my chest, my stomach. His tongue traced the line of my hip, causing me to shiver with anticipation. When his mouth closed around me, warm and wet, I gasped, fingers clutching the comforter.

"Tyler, Jesus—" Words failed me as he took me deeper.

He knew exactly what he was doing, alternating between teasing licks and taking me all the way. My hand found his hair, not guiding, just needing to touch him, as pleasure built. He looked up, and the intimacy of his gaze, as his lips were wrapped around me, nearly pushed me over the edge.

"Stop, I'm too close?—"

He pulled off with a final, lingering lick. "That's kind of the point," he said, a wicked smile playing on his lips.

"I need you too," I admitted.

Tyler's eyes darkened. He moved up to kiss me deeply before settling on his back, an invitation I eagerly accepted. I took my time learning his body, tracing the defined muscles of his chest, the sensitive skin of his inner thighs with my mouth.

When I took him between my lips, his sharp intake of breath was the most satisfying sound I'd ever heard. His taste, his scent, the way his legs tensed under my palms—it was intoxicating. I'd thought about this more times than I cared to admit, but reality put every fantasy to shame.

“Kevin, fuck—” His voice was strained, desperate.

I pulled back, panting. “I want to try something.”

Tyler's eyes met mine, pupils blown wide. “Anything.”

I shifted my position, turning my body around while still keeping my mouth close to him. “This way we can both...”

His expression transformed as he understood. “God, yes.”

I moved, placed my knees on either side of his head, lowering my hips as his hands guided my cock. The first touch of his tongue made me nearly collapse forward.

“Oh, fuck.” My voice broke as he enveloped me.

The dual sensation was overwhelming—his hot mouth around me while I took him between my lips again. Different angle now, deeper. He gripped my thighs, pulling me to him.

We found a rhythm, awkward at first, then perfect. His fingers dug into my ass, encouraging me. Every moan he made sent vibrations through my core, spurring me to take more of him.

Tyler pulled away briefly, breath hot against my sensitive skin. “You taste so fucking good.”

The praise sent a surge of heat through me. I redoubled my efforts, swirling my tongue around his tip before taking him all the way.

His hips bucked upward. I steadied myself with one hand on his thigh, the other wrapping around the base of his shaft.

Time dissolved into pure sensation. The wet heat of his mouth, the weight of him on my tongue, the small sounds escaping our throats.

He slipped a finger in my crack and brushed my hole. My entire body shuddered with the new sensation. I arched my back, lifting my head for just a moment. “Yes. Fuck yes, Tyler.”

I returned to his swollen cock, devouring it to the base as I worked him with my tongue. He continued to tease at my entrance.

All at once, the telltale tightening signaled there was no going back.

“Tyler, I’m...” My voice was muffled with his dick between my lips.

All I heard was a mmm-hmmm. He didn’t let up.

I returned to him with renewed focus, matching his rhythm, feeling him swell in my mouth.

His thighs tensed.

The first pulse of his release hit my tongue just as my orgasm crashed over me. The timing was perfect—his pleasure triggering mine. I moaned around him as we both shuddered through it, neither of us stopping, drawing out every last sensation.

The intensity was blinding. My whole body tensed, then surrendered as waves of bliss washed through me. I felt Tyler swallowing, his throat working, even as I struggled to do the same.

When the last aftershocks subsided, I carefully shifted position, collapsing beside him on the bed. We lay there, catching our breath, skin slick with sweat, limbs heavy. I longed to kiss him, but I didn't have the energy to move.

"That was..." Words failed me. Nothing felt adequate.

"Yeah." Tyler agreed, his voice rough. He pressed a kiss to my hip, warm lips against damp skin. "It was."

"Not how I expected this snowstorm to go," he murmured, his voice sounded relaxed, contented.

"It's a definite improvement on my usual road game routine."

We cleaned up, navigating the shared bathroom with little awkwardness, the charged air now thick with comfortable intimacy. Stolen kisses against the cool shower tile, lingering touches. Back in bed, Tyler pulled me against him, my back fitting naturally against his solid chest, his arm secure around my waist.

* * *

I woke slowly, aware first of the steady warmth against me, Tyler's even breathing near my ear. The distant scrape of snowplows echoed from the street below.

Staying, I took it in, Tyler holding me close. Enjoying the feeling of waking up with someone.

Reality crept around the edges of my thoughts. The snowstorm bubble would dissolve soon.

He stirred, tightening his hold on me. “Morning.” His voice sent a flutter through my stomach.

“Morning.”

He stretched, muscles shifting against me, warm and solid. “Sounds like they’re clearing the roads.”

“Yeah.” Hesitation crept back. How did we do this? “I’m sure we’ll hear something about travel soon.”

Tyler’s hand found mine under the covers, fingers lacing through mine, a simple, grounding gesture. “You okay?” He paused. “With... last night?”

“More than okay.” I released his hand and moved so I could face him. “Just... wondering what happens next.”

“You mean when we get back to Boston?” His thumb brushed over my knuckles.

I nodded, my heart rate picking up again.

“Well.” Tyler’s expression turned thoughtful. “I was thinking we might see where this goes. If you want to.”

Excitement washed through me, swift and potent. “I’d like that.”

He leaned in, pressing a gentle, promising kiss to my lips.

Buzz. Buzz. Our phones vibrated on the nightstands, the team group chat coming to life.

Tyler reached for his. “Weather clearing. Bus departing for airport at 1 PM. Breakfast available until 11.” He glanced at the hotel clock display—9:17 AM. “We’ve got some time.”

I raised an eyebrow, my earlier tension replaced by a different kind of anticipation. “Any ideas how to spend it?”

His answering grin was pure wickedness. “Several, actually.” His hand slipped inside my boxers where my cock was already hard.

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THREE

TYLER

The puck slid onto my stick, right in the sweet spot. A quick head fake left, then a sharp pass zipped across the crease to Lawson. Tap in. In my head, the goal horn blared. Perfect.

“That’s it! Good timing, Bennett! Do it again!” Coach Ryan’s voice echoed off the boards.

Circling back, my skates cut grooves in the freshly surfaced ice. Across the rink, Kevin caught my eye. A fleeting glance before we focused on the next drill, but enough to send a jolt straight through me.

In the couple of days since we’d been back, trying to play it cool on the ice was turning into an Olympic sport.

Hyper-aware. That was the only way to describe it. Every time he moved into position, every sharp stop spraying ice, every crisp pass—I noticed. He looked my way again, a ghost of a smile touching his lips before his game face slid into place.

For the rest of practice, I focused on executing the drills with all I had. Henderson noticed, as captains always do. During a water break, he glided over, bumping my shoulder.

“Someone’s fired up today.” His eyes crinkled under his helmet.

I forced a grin, tipping my water bottle back for a long pull. “Just feeling good. Everything’s clicking.”

He nodded, already skating backward. “Maybe getting stuck in Detroit was good for you.”

If only he knew. The memory—Kevin’s mouth, his hands on me, the low groan against my lips—hit me hard. I shook my head sharply. This wasn’t the time for thoughts like that.

* * *

After practice, and back home, the silence of my condo pressed in. Normally, I didn’t mind the quiet, needed it even. Since I got back, though, it was lacking.

Standing in the kitchen, I debated. Give Kevin space? Let him set the pace? That was the smart play.

Patience wasn’t my strongest stat, though.

Before the rational part of my brain could stage a comeback, my phone was in my hand, thumbs flying across the screen.

Tyler: Any dinner plans tonight? Join me for stir fry?

I put my phone on the counter face down. I refused to watch it. Opening the fridge, I surveyed the contents, forcing my mind onto chicken, vegetables, sauce. The chicken needed marinating first.

Buzz.

My hand snatched the phone before the vibration stopped.

Kevin: No plans. Your place?

Relief hit me. I couldn't fight the grin playing at my lips.

Tyler: 7 PM? I'll text the address.

Kevin: See you then.

Okay. I took a deep breath to try to not go out of my mind before he got here.

The next couple of hours were a blur of activity fueled by nervous energy. Straightening cushions. Chopping onions with maybe a little too much force. Marinating chicken, setting the table. Changing the sheets. Not assuming anything. Just being prepared. Checking the phone. Still an hour. Pacing the living room. Checking the phone again.

By six forty-five, I'd showered, changed into dark jeans and the blue henley, and worked on dinner so it would be ready shortly after he arrived. I checked my reflection. Hair okay? Casual enough? Not trying too hard?

The clock ticked, each second stretching.

The doorbell chimed two minutes early. My heart kicked against my ribs. Taking a breath, I pulled open the door.

Kevin stood there. Charcoal sweater that made his eyes look impossibly dark, jeans that fit just right. Hair slightly styled. A bottle of wine in one hand. He looked... devastating.

“Hey.” His gaze swept over me, appreciative, sending a jolt straight down my spine.

“Hey yourself.” I stepped back so he could enter. “Come on in.”

He crossed the threshold, close enough now that the faint, woodsy scent of his cologne wrapped around me. “Brought wine. Hope it’s okay. Wasn’t sure what kind of stir fry we were having.”

“Perfect.” I reached for the bottle, our fingers brushing. Electric. Heat curled low in my stomach. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

We stood there, a beat of silence stretching, the air thick with unspoken things. Then I set the wine down. The hell with awkwardness. I closed the distance, one hand finding the back of his neck, warm skin beneath soft hair, and pulled him in.

His response was immediate, arms locking around my waist. The kiss deepened, a mutual surrender against the entryway wall. My hands tangled in his hair, while his leg slid between mine, pressing close. Solid muscle, undeniable heat.

“Missed you,” I murmured against his mouth, the words raw, honest.

Kevin pulled back just enough, his pupils blown wide, breath coming fast. “Missed you too. Been thinking about you.”

“Yeah?” Joy shot through me, warm and sharp.

His thumb brushed my lower lip, a featherlight touch that made me quiver. “Had to actively not stare during practice.”

A laugh escaped me, and I pressed my forehead against his. “Same. Henderson asked why I was so fired up.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“That everything was clicking.” My grin widened. “Wasn’t exactly a lie.” Reluctantly, I stepped back, threading my fingers through his. “Come on. Stir fry waits for no one.”

My kitchen opened into the living area, modern and maybe a little too clean right now. Kevin leaned against the island, watching me as I brought the meal together.

“Nice place.” His gaze swept over the skyline visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows. “Great view.”

“Thanks.” I handed him a glass of the wine he’d brought, pouring one for myself. “Took forever to find. I wanted somewhere that felt like... mine. Not just a crash pad between road trips.”

“It feels personal.” He nodded toward the photos. “I think you succeeded.”

“Tried to.” I stirred in some final seasoning. “What about your place? Getting settled?”

Kevin took a sip of wine, leaning back against the counter. “It’s getting there. Still navigating boxes. The trade, the road trips... it’s been a whirlwind.”

“Need help unpacking?” The offer slipped out, easy and genuine. “My rates are reasonable—usually involve beer and pizza.”

A soft smile touched his lips. “Might take you up on that. Fair warning, though—it’s not this nice.”

“Don’t care about nice.” I slid a plate piled high with chicken, rice, and vegetables

across the island. “Just looking for any excuse to see you.”

The honesty hung there. A faint flush crept up his neck. “You don’t need excuses, Tyler.”

We ate at the dining table, sitting across from each other with the platter of food between us. Conversation flowed between bites of food and sips of wine. He told me more about Minnesota—hockey coach dad, teacher mom, older sister running her own graphic design business. I shared stories about growing up with Shane, how we navigated going from brothers to him being my agent.

Kevin stabbed some chicken and vegetables with his fork. “So he ran the auction you missed?”

I nodded, swirling the wine in my glass. “He didn’t organize it, but he helped a lot. The Children’s Sports Foundation helped me out big time when we were kids. They covered equipment, fees, everything.” Another sip. “We’re both on their board, and he does a lot with them. They do amazing work around the city.”

“That’s really cool.” Kevin’s enthusiasm was genuine.

“What about you? Any causes close to your heart?”

He set his fork down, leaning back slightly. “Volunteered with an LGBTQ+ youth group back home. Hoping to find something similar here.”

“I need to connect you with Lawson. He does a lot of work with queer youth groups. Me and some of the other guys join him sometimes.”

“I’d like that.” His smile reached his eyes, creating those little crinkles at the corners that made my heart flutter.

When dinner was finished, and the plates cleared, we migrated to the couch with refilled wine glasses.

“This is nice,” Kevin said. He settled beside me, closer than strictly necessary. “Wasn’t sure... you know... what it’d be like back here.”

“Thought Detroit might have been a snowstorm anomaly?” I turned, stretching one arm along the back of the couch.

“Maybe.” He shrugged, his gaze steady on mine. “Things happen. Weird circumstances, forced proximity... doesn’t always translate back to the real world.”

“And now?” My voice was lower than intended.

He set his wine glass on the coffee table, shifting closer still. “Now I think Detroit was just the start.” His hand rested on my knee, warm through the denim. “This feels real. Is that crazy?”

My hand covered his, fingers lacing together. “If it’s crazy, we’re both losing it. This is already more real than most of the relationships I’ve had.”

Surprise flickered in his eyes.

“I’m not usually this direct,” I admitted. The words felt true as they left my mouth. The charged air, the way he looked at me... it pulled the honesty right out. “But life’s short. Especially this life. Could get traded tomorrow.”

He chuckled. “Don’t jinx it. I just got here.”

“All the more reason.” I leaned in, our faces inches apart, his breath warm against my skin. “I like you, Kevin Kogan. A lot.”

“I like you too,” he murmured. His gaze dropped to my lips before snapping back to my eyes.

That was all the invitation I needed.

The kiss started soft, but grew urgent. I couldn't get enough of him. His hand slid under my shirt, palm flat against my stomach. I pulled him still closer, deepening the kisses.

Somehow, we made it to the bedroom. This wasn't like Detroit's frantic energy. This was slower, deliberate. An exploration. Appreciating each other.

His skin was smooth, soft over hard muscle. The sounds he made were quiet—intimate sighs and muffled groans—that undid me.

Once we were spent, Kevin rested his head on my chest and I caressed his arm, the simple contact grounding.

“Definitely not a Detroit anomaly.”

He laughed, a low rumble against my ribs. “Definitely not.”

“I can't believe just a few days ago you were the quiet new guy. Now you're the guy I think about all the time and whose head is using my chest as a pillow.”

His expression softened into something incredibly warm. It'd be easy to lose myself in his eyes. “Same here. What's your schedule tomorrow?”

“Team meeting at 10. Nothing before.”

“Same.”

My fingers continued their slow exploration of his back. I had a necessary question.
“Stay the night?”

Kevin lifted his head, his dark eyes meeting mine. No hesitation. “I was hoping you’d ask.”

I pulled him closer. He settled in with a contented sigh, pressing a soft kiss to my hand. The simple trust in the gesture warmed me.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:24 am

FOUR

KEVIN

“Kogan! Eyes up!” Coach Ryan barked from center ice.

His voice jolted me. Heat flared in my cheeks. Damn it. My focus snapped back, heart thudding against my ribs. Tyler. I’d been watching Tyler again—the effortless way his edges carved into the ice during the drill.

“Sorry, Coach.” I scrambled back into position along the blue line. The cold air burned my lungs despite the sweat cooling on my skin.

Need to focus. No sloppy mistakes.

Henderson glided past, shooting me a curious look. “Head in the game, rookie.”

A flicker of annoyance. Fourth season in the league, but still the rookie here. I gave a sharp nod, gripping my stick tighter. Defensive zone coverage was all that mattered.

When Coach blew the whistle, ending the day’s practice, sweat plastered my hair to my forehead. My muscles screamed, less from exertion and more from the mental strain of not looking at Tyler every five seconds.

“Kogan, Bennett—a word.” Coach Ryan flagged us over to the bench.

Tyler skated up beside me, helmet off, expression neutral. But his eyes met mine for a

brief second before landing on Coach.

Shit. Did he see something? My gut clenched. Were we that obvious?

“Whatever you two are doing, keep it up.” Coach’s directness caught me off guard. “Your defensive pairing is clicking better than I’ve seen since you got here, Kogan. That sequence in the penalty kill drill? Textbook communication and positioning.”

The tension in my shoulders eased. Textbook communication. He’d noticed. Of course, he did. Our chemistry was practically screaming across the ice.

Tyler nodded beside me. “We’ve been working on our timing.” His voice was steady, professional.

Coach Ryan’s gaze moved between us, shrewd. “Well, it shows. Chemistry like you’ve got is what makes successful D pairings. Build on it. But—” he looked directly at me—“always keep your focus out there. When you’re distracted, Kogan, it all falls apart.”

“Yes, Coach. Understood.”

He nodded. “I’ll see you two tomorrow morning, nine sharp.”

As we skated toward the tunnel, Tyler bumped my shoulder. A small smile played at his lips. “Chemistry, huh?”

I focused straight ahead. I couldn’t chance the look at him because then I might have to kiss him right here. “Shut up. He’s talking about hockey.”

“Sure he is.” Tyler winked as we reached the locker room. “See you inside.”

I paused, sucking in a deep breath before pushing through the door after him. The usual post-practice chaos hit me—loud chatter, Velcro loosening from chest protectors and shin guards. I took a seat at my stall and kept my head down, keeping my attention on getting out of my gear.

“That no-look pass to Bennett was sick, Kogan,” Petrov yelled from across the room. “You guys been practicing that?”

My neck felt hot. “Something like that.” I avoided Tyler’s eyes when I replied.

“Whatever it is, it’s working.” Petrov pulled off a skate. “You two are suddenly reading each other’s minds out there.”

How long until someone connected the dots? The ease with which Tyler deflected the attention, joking as he peeled off his jersey, only highlighted my awkwardness. He moved through the locker room, comfortable in his skin. Damn him for being so effortlessly cool.

The hot spray of the shower eased my tired muscles, but not the knot in my stomach. I leaned my forehead against the tile wall. This was getting complicated. We’d been careful—separate arrivals, no texting during team meetings, acting like nothing had changed.

But hockey players notice everything. Shifts in energy, the on-ice synergy Coach mentioned. How long could we keep this between us? Not that I wanted to hide it. But this was Tyler. A teammate. The stakes seemed impossibly high. If this went wrong...

* * *

Back at my apartment, I collapsed onto the couch. The lingering buzz from practice,

the anxiety from the locker room—swirled inside me. My mind replayed Tyler’s wink at the tunnel entrance. That calm confidence. The heat that flared between us with just a glance.

God, I was falling hard. And fast. Too fast?

My phone buzzed on the coffee table. A text from Meg. Maybe talking to her would help. I hit call.

“There’s my baby brother! I was beginning to think you’d forgotten about me.”

“Hey, Meg.” I sank deeper into the cushions. “Sorry I’ve been MIA. I’ve been busy.”

“Hmm.” Her suspicion radar went on high alert. “Busy with what, exactly? You sound different.”

I laughed despite myself. “How can I sound different? I’ve said like a dozen words.”

“I have big sister superpowers. Spill it, Kev.”

I hesitated, the words catching in my throat. But it was Meg. “I met someone.”

Her squeal nearly deafened me. “Tell me everything! Who is he? How’d you meet? Is he cute? Of course, he’s cute. You have excellent taste.”

“Slow down.” Laughter bubbled up. “It’s... complicated.”

“Complicated how? Oh god, he’s not married, is he?”

“No! Nothing like that.” Taking a deep breath, I steeled myself for her reaction. “It’s Tyler Bennett.”

Silence lingered. Worry crept in about what she was thinking.

“Tyler Bennett? As in your teammate Tyler Bennett? All-Star defenseman Tyler Bennett?”

“That’s the one.”

“Holy shit, Kevin.” Another pause. “Wait, isn’t he gay too? I remember hearing something about that years ago.”

“He is, yeah.”

“So how did this happen? When did this happen?”

I recounted the story—Detroit, the blizzard, the single bed, the Grindr notification that broke the ice. The easy intimacy that followed. The connection between us.

“You realize this could be a rom-com, right?” She sounded way too excited about this. “Stranded in a snowstorm with a hot hockey player who likes you back? I’m jealous.”

A reluctant smile touched my lips. “It is kind of unbelievable.”

“And?” She knew me too well. That single word held a weight of unspoken fears.

“He’s also a teammate, Meg. Someone I have to work with every day. Not just on the same team, he and I are paired up every shift. If it goes south...”

“Hold up.” She interrupted. Her voice was firm. “You’re already thinking about something happening? It literally just started.”

“I know, but?—”

“No. Look, I get the teammates concern. Really, I do.” Her voice softened slightly. “But from what you’ve told me, this sounds like something more than a hook up. And I haven’t heard you this excited about someone in...” She paused longer than necessary. “Well, ever.”

It did feel special. That was the terrifying part. A warmth spread through my chest hearing her say it.

“Kevin Michael Kogan, you listen to me.” She switched to full big-sister mode. “Yes, dating a colleague has risks. Yes, if it ends badly, things could get awkward. But what if it doesn’t? What if this is the real deal? Are you going to let fear stop you from finding out?”

Her question resonated, echoing the turmoil inside me.

Tyler’s easy laugh. The intensity in his blue eyes when he looked at me. The way my hand seemed to automatically go to his when we were near each other. Was I really going to let fear win?

“You’re right.” The admission loosened something tight in my chest.

“Of course I am. I’m always right.” The smile was back in her voice. “So what’s next? Are you guys actually dating or just messing around?”

“We’ve been hanging out. His place, mine. It’s low key.”

“So... that’s a no on dating? Just private indoor activities?” The suggestion hung heavy in her tone.

Heat crept up my neck. “Not just that. We text and talk. A lot.”

“But have you been on a proper date? Like, in public, eating food that one of you didn’t cook? Going to a movie? Maybe even dressed up a little?”

“No.” The admission was weak.

“Then that’s your next move, little brother. Ask him on a proper date.”

After hanging up, I stared at the phone lying on the cushion beside me. Meg was right. It wasn’t sustainable to keep the secret. It wasn’t fair to either of us, or to whatever this was becoming. If this was real—and god, I hoped it was—we needed to go on a date.

My mind immediately went to Vesuvio. The cozy warmth, the incredible carbonara, the kindness of the owner, Mirco. It was personal, a place I’d discovered on my own. A place I wanted to share.

My thumb hovered over Tyler’s contact. Nerves tightened my throat. After a couple of deep breaths, I tapped out the message, forcing myself not to overthink it.

Kevin: Any plans tomorrow night?

I hesitated on the send button for a second before tapping it.

The phone buzzed before I could put it down.

Tyler: Nope. What’s up?

Okay.

My fingers flew across the screen.

Kevin: Want to have dinner with me? There's this Italian place in the North End I've been wanting to take you to. Vesuvio.

Send.

The typing bubbles appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again. The wait was agonizing.

Tyler: Like a date date?

Kevin: Exactly like that. Unless you'd rather not.

Waiting again. Seemingly longer. Then?—

Tyler: Are you kidding? I'd love to. What time?

Yes!

A grin stretched across my face, sharp and sudden. I almost dropped the phone from my excitement.

Kevin: 7:30? I can pick you up.

Tyler: Great. I'll be ready.

A date. I'm going out with Tyler Bennett.

My pulse hammered—a mix of pure terror and giddy anticipation. Nothing, not even stepping onto NHL ice for the first time, compared to this. Relationships had come and gone, but this connection with Tyler felt like finding a missing piece I hadn't

known I was searching for.

My phone buzzed again.

Tyler: Just to be clear, I'm really looking forward to tomorrow. And not only for the food.

A laugh escaped me.

Kevin: The food is pretty life-changing. But yeah, me too.

Tyler: Good. And just so you know, I clean up pretty nice for a date.

Kevin: Can't wait to see.

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FIVE

TYLER

My reflection stared back—navy button-down, dark jeans. I'd told Kevin that I cleaned up good for a date. But I second guessed myself as I looked through the clothes in my closet. I didn't need a game day suit. Casual dressy was the answer.

After consulting with Shane, we'd decided on this shirt. He said it made my eyes pop, and he wouldn't steer me wrong.

Tonight was a big deal. Our first real date. Not stir fry here. Not pizza at Kevin's place. Not a rushed coffee before practice.

Dinner. Out. Where people who were not our teammates would see us.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand.

Kevin: On my way. Be there in 10.

A grin stretched across my face, involuntary and immediate.

Kevin: Door's open when you arrive.

Anticipation hummed under my skin as I stood in the kitchen, scrolling through sports headlines and not paying attention to any of them.

A soft knock and the door opened. My heart sped up as I pocketed the phone.

Kevin stepped inside. “Hey.” His smile set off flutters in my chest.

He was handsome decked out in charcoal slacks, a forest green sweater that set off his dark eyes. His hair was styled just slightly different, like he’d spent more time than usual getting it the way he wanted.

His gaze traveled over me as he approached, slow, appreciative.

“Hi.” I paused, continuing to take him in. “You look amazing.”

A faint flush climbed up his neck. “So do you.”

We stood there. Staring.

Then he closed the distance. His hand cupped my jaw. His mouth met mine. It was familiar and comfortable, and I needed it more than I expected.

Home.

He was home.

The thought blindsided me. I couldn’t tell him that. At least not yet.

Instead, I sank into the kiss, hands finding the soft wool of his sweater, the solid muscle beneath.

“I’ve been looking forward to doing that all day.” His lips brushed mine.

“Just that?” My hands slid under the sweater, along his back, hungry for the contact.

He laughed, a low sound that vibrated against my chest. “We have reservations. We start anything else, we won’t get to dinner.”

“Tragic.” Reluctantly, I stepped away, grabbing my keys and wallet. “Let’s go. This life-changing pasta better live up to the hype.”

The drive to the North End was easy. We talked practice, tomorrow’s game, bullshit jokes. Kevin navigated the narrow cobblestone streets like he’d lived here longer than two months. He found a parking spot a couple of blocks away.

“Mind walking?” He killed the engine. “Parking’s hell.”

“Not at all.” I fell into step beside him, our shoulders brushing. The neighborhood buzzed—couples arm-in-arm, conversation, and laughter all around.

He stopped before a small storefront. Vesuvio. Simple sign. Soft light spilled from the window, the scent of garlic and rich tomato sauce hitting me as Kevin pulled open the door.

“Kevin!” A short, round man with flour dusting his apron greeted us. Thick Italian accent. “Good to see you! You’ve been away too long.”

“Mirco! It has been.” Kevin’s smile was genuine, easy. “I’ve got a reservation for two.”

Mirco’s eyes flickered to me. Recognition dawned, but his professional demeanor didn’t waver. Zero fuss. “Of course, of course. The table you requested is ready.”

He wove us through the packed, intimate space. Low chatter hummed, soft Italian music drifted underneath. Warmth radiated from the wood panels and glowing lamps. We followed him to a corner booth, tucked away, partially screened by a wrought-

iron wine rack.

“Your server will be with you in a moment.” Mirco set down menus. “Enjoy, gentlemen.”

He bustled off. I slid onto the worn leather banquette, raising an eyebrow at Kevin. “Special table?”

He shrugged. A hint of color rising on his cheeks again, even in this low light. “Might have called ahead and asked for something... out of the way.”

Contentment bloomed in my chest as I picked up the heavy menu. “Most places try to seat me by the window so the passersby can see that someone from the Blizzard is having a meal in their establishment.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m usually sitting up front when I’m here.” Kevin met my gaze across the small table, his expression serious. “Tonight’s about us. Not about being Blizzard players.”

My throat tightened. “Appreciate that.”

Our server arrived, took our drink order. Kevin selected a bottle of Sangiovese.

I was transfixed on Kevin, taking in every aspect of him, from how the candlelight reflected in his eyes to how his sweater clung to his shoulders and chest.

“What?” He caught me staring. That half-smile quirked his lips.

I traced the condensation on my water glass. “It’s nice being here. Seeing you like this. Off the ice. Away from our places.”

His smile widened. He reached across the table to brush his fingers against mine. Goosebumps formed up my arm. “Same.” His eyes sparkled. “Gotta admit, though, I like all the versions of you so far.”

The wine arrived. The server poured, swirled, offered the cork. Kevin did the honors of sampling the selection. Once he approved, I got a taste. He’d picked an excellent one. Rich, dark cherry notes, along with some rosemary and sage.

I settled back against the banquette. “So you’re a regular? Mirco seems to adore you.”

“Found it my first week in the city. Came in alone, starving after unpacking all day.” His eyes lit up. “I got the carbonara. Swear to god, I almost proposed.”

I nearly choked on my wine, laughing. “High praise. Especially from a Minnesota boy raised on hotdish.”

“Hey now, don’t knock the best comfort food. Excellent food is universal.” He lifted his glass, the dark liquid catching the light. “And excellent company.”

We ordered. His legendary carbonara, naturally. Veal saltimbocca for me. Mirco swept by again, depositing a platter overflowing with cured meats, olives, sharp cheese. “On the house! For my friends!”

Waiting for the entrees, the easy silence as we nibbled sent comfortable vibes through me. But something nagged, needing to be said. I set my glass down.

“Can I ask you something?” My fingers ran along the stem of the glass.

“Anything.”

“This.” I gestured around us. “Being out. Together. You okay with it? I hope I didn’t

do something to push you into this.”

He considered it, gaze thoughtful. Watching him think was becoming a favorite pastime. He leaned forward, elbows resting on the table. “Honestly? It’s more than okay.” His eyes held mine. “Remember what I told you? I’ve never been closeted, just private.”

“I know.” Relief washed through me. “Just needed to be sure?—”

“That you weren’t forcing me.” His smile softened the interruption. “You’re not. If I wasn’t ready for this, I wouldn’t have suggested dinner out.”

“Good.” The single word felt inadequate. “That’s... really good.”

“In fact...” He reached across the table again. This time he didn’t brush my fingers, he took my hand. “I’m already glad we did this.”

Our food arrived, forcing us to release each other. My veal was incredible, tender with sauce. The sound I made earned a look from Kevin.

“That good?” His voice dropped, rougher.

“So good.” I speared another piece and savored it. After a sip of wine, I pointed at his plate with my fork. “Can I steal a taste of yours to see what all the fuss is about?”

He grinned, twirling thick noodles coated in sauce around his fork. He held it out across the table. It was a simple gesture that felt huge. Couple-y.

I leaned in, catching the fork between my lips. Creamy, peppery, salty pancetta. Holy shit.

Eyes closed for a second. “Okay.” I swallowed. Pure bliss. “You weren’t kidding. It is life-changing.”

He looked ridiculously pleased.

“So I had brunch with Shane today,” I said, since it seemed like a good time to share. Kevin needed to know what I’d revealed. “I hope it’s okay... I should’ve asked you first... I told him about us.”

Kevin chuckled, which wasn’t what I’d expected. “It’s fine. I told my sister yesterday. She’s the one who encouraged me to ask you on an official date.”

I raised my glass. “Heres to our siblings. Shane helped me figure out what to wear.”

“Meg did the same for me.” We clicked our glasses together. “I texted her way too many options.”

“Turns out I wasn’t the only one with relationship news either. My friend Damien was there too. Shane and him are officially a couple.”

“Damien Roth? The tech billionaire?”

“One and the same.” I watched his reaction, the slight widening of his eyes. “I got to hear about their Paris trip. Shane took my place at the auction and Damien dropped twenty grand on him, then flew him off on a private jet.”

Kevin let out a low whistle. “Seriously? That’s... wow.”

“Right? Shane was happier than I’ve seen him in ages. It’s about damned time, too. I’ve tried to set those two up for years.”

Kevin's leg rested against mine under the table. "So your brother falls for your best friend, you fall for your teammate." He paused. "All roads lead back to that snowstorm."

"Pretty much. If I hadn't been grounded, I'd have been at the auction. Shane wouldn't have filled in. Damien wouldn't have bid."

"And we wouldn't have shared that hotel room." His voice was soft. "Fate?"

"Maybe." A smile played on my lips.

He chuckled. "What did Shane say? About us?"

"He's thrilled. Said it was about time I found someone."

"Shane and Meg can never meet. They'll talk about us way too much. Meg essentially said the same thing to me."

We shared bites, and talked about a lot of things. Books. Dream vacation destinations. Awful road trip hotels. There was a lot of laughter, too. It was surreal how quickly a comfort settled between us. Like we'd been doing this for years, not days.

"Off-season?" I swirled the last of the Sangiovese in my glass. "Back to Minnesota?"

"Yeah, for a couple of weeks at the beginning." He nodded. "My parents expect a sighting. Meg guilt trips me if I'm not there to check out her latest project." He hesitated. "No firm plans after that, though."

My turn to hesitate. "Maybe... we could do something? Together? If you wanted."

His eyes lit up. “Yeah? Like what?”

“Shane and I have a place in New Hampshire.” I shrugged, trying to keep things casual, without expectation. “Nothing fancy. It’s quiet. We can take the boat out, fish, swim, whatever. Could be... a getaway? A week? Two?”

“That sounds amazing.” His smile was soft and filled me with joy. “I’d love to see it.”

Wow. We’d just made a plan that was more than a few days out.

A new idea formed, even though I’d told Shane earlier in the day that Kevin and I were going slow. “The team’s spring barbecue is coming up at Henderson’s place.” I looked at him. “If you want, we could go together.”

The question hung there. The barbecue was a big gathering with significant others, kids, even parents sometimes. It would signal to the team we’re more than D partners.

Kevin didn’t hesitate. “I think it’s a great way to let the team know, in a chill way, that we’re a thing.”

Relief hit me like a clean check into the boards.

As if he knew a celebration was needed, Mirco reappeared, bearing two small, chilled glasses. “Limoncello! From my cousin in Sorrento! For my friend Kevin, and his guest!” He beamed.

We declined dessert, but accepted the sweet, potent liqueur. A perfect finish.

As we were leaving, Mirco clapped Kevin on the back, then took my hand in both of his, warm and firm. “I hope you both come back soon!”

We promised we would. Back out on the cobblestones, we walked closer this time, hands brushing deliberately.

“Thank you for the best first date ever.”

He fully took my hand in his as we walked. “I’m looking forward to many more dates, and just as many quiet nights on the couch.”

At the car, he unlocked it but didn’t open the door. Turning to face me under the old-fashioned streetlamp, he spoke softly. “I had an incredible night, too. I loved being with you.” His free hand came up, rested flat on my chest over my heart. “You looking at me... like you are right now.”

“How am I looking at you?” My voice dropped.

“Like you want to kiss me.”

I leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss. After all, we were on the sidewalk and not in a bedroom. It didn’t keep him from wrapping his arms around my waist, pulling me tight, and deepening the kiss.

When we came up for air, I kept my forehead resting against his. “We should go. Before we scandalize the passersby.”

Kevin laughed softly against my neck. “Yes, we should.”

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:24 am

SIX

KEVIN

The sleeve of my light blue button-down felt suddenly too tight as I fidgeted with the cuff. Tyler parked his SUV in the street. Henderson's sprawling suburban property buzzed, with cars filling the driveway, and some on his lawn.

"You okay?" Tyler's voice was low, his gaze searching mine. His hand found mine across the center console, warm and steady.

"Yeah." I forced a breath past the tightness in my chest. A nervous energy pulsed under my skin. "This is a big step. It's like we're meeting dozens of parents all at once."

It'd seemed like both an eternity and no time at all since Detroit. Now, we were about to introduce ourselves as a couple to the team. This wasn't just nerves. It was the weight of something real, something I didn't want to screw up.

"Now you've got me nervous." Tyler winked at me and squeezed my hand. "We can still go in separately."

"No." My head snapped up, meeting his eyes. "I want to do this. With you."

His smile bloomed, slow and genuine, sending a familiar flip through my stomach. He leaned across the console, and I met him in the middle. His lips pressed against mine for a quick kiss.

“Then let’s go.”

We climbed out. The spring sun was warm on my skin. Tyler came around to my side, his fingers lacing through mine again. The simple, public gesture sent a jolt through me, grounding me as we walked toward the party.

Rounding the corner of the house, Petrov spotted us first. “There they are!” His eyes dropped to our linked hands, then back up, a wide grin splitting his face. “About damn time, boys!”

Heads turned. This was it.

There were calls of hello, head nods, and smiles all around.

“Bennett! Kogan!” Henderson materialized, a cold beer in each hand, navigating the crowd with ease. “Grabbed these for you when I saw your car pull up.”

Tyler accepted the beers. “Thanks, Cap.” He passed one to me, the glass cool against my palm.

Henderson’s gaze moved between us, his expression warm, direct. “Glad you guys could make it.” He paused for a beat. “Together.”

The emphasis landed, clear and intentional. A wave of relief washed over me that it was that simple. One of the team’s parents just gave their blessing.

I took a swig of the beer, the slightly bitter taste sharp on my tongue. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

He clapped a hand on my shoulder, then Tyler’s. “Food’s laid out over there.” He gestured across the yard to a buffet set up next to the grill. “My wife made her

famous potato salad—better get some before Petrov eats it all.”

As Henderson moved toward the throng of guests, Tyler leaned close, his breath warm against my ear. “If only every family introduction went that well.”

“Right?”

Tyler’s hand found the small of my back, a light pressure guiding me as we navigated through knots of people. We filled plates—burgers, grilled vegies, a generous scoop of the legendary potato salad—and took seats at a picnic table occupied by Petrov and his wife, Mara.

“So,” Mara said, gesturing between Tyler and me with her plastic fork, “how long has this been going on?”

Tyler glanced at me, a small, private smile playing at his lips. “Since the Detroit trip.”

Petrov nearly choked on his beer, sputtering. “Bullshit. You guys have been circling each other for months.”

My fork paused halfway to my mouth. “We have?”

“Dude.” Petrov rolled his eyes. “The way you two are around each other. The stares you think no one else notices. Then there are the accidental shoulder bumps during practice? We had a bet going on about how long it would take you to figure it out.”

Heat climbed my neck, burning under my collar. “You did not.” I took a large gulp of beer.

“Oh, they absolutely did.” Mara patted my arm, her eyes kind. “Don’t worry, I think it’s sweet. And for what it’s worth, this one said you’d get together after the season

ended, so he lost the bet.”

Tyler burst out laughing beside me, a rich, easy sound that warmed me all the way through. “And who won?”

“Lawson,” Petrov grumbled, shaking his head but grinning. “Bastard said it would happen by the Detroit trip. So he’s the closest one. You just confirmed his win.”

I caught Tyler’s eye, the shared memory flashing between us—the hotel room, the falling snow, the first kiss, the blow jobs. I couldn’t contain the smile that spread across my face.

Petrov stabbed a piece of potato salad. “Well, I’m happy for you guys. And not just because you’ve been playing like you share a brain lately.”

As we finished eating, more teammates and friends drifted by. Every interaction felt... normal. Supportive. Entirely unsurprising to anyone but us, apparently. I’d thought we’d done a better job of acting like nothing had changed.

“Want to grab another beer?” Tyler’s fingers brushed mine as he stood.

I nodded, pushing my empty plate aside. We headed toward the coolers near the main grill. Coach Ryan stood there, deep in conversation with one of our goalies. He spotted us, raising his bottle in a casual salute.

“Bennett, Kogan. Good to see you.”

“Coach.” Tyler nodded, reaching into the icy water for two more beers.

Coach Ryan watched us as we stood close, then to the casual way Tyler passed me a bottle, our hands brushing again. That brief contact sent a familiar spark straight

through me. A knowing smile touched Coach's lips.

"Like I said the other day—chemistry. On and off the ice, apparently." He raised his bottle again, a silent toast. "Keep it up."

He turned back to his conversation. Tyler bumped his shoulder against mine as we walked away. "That's Coach-speak for congratulations."

Laughter bubbled up. "Yeah, I'm getting pretty good at speaking coach."

We wandered through the backyard, the sounds of kids shrieking with delight mixing with classic rock from unseen speakers.

"Hey guys, thanks for helping me win the pool." Lawson approached us, all smiles.

We all fist bumped.

"I don't think you should've been allowed to participate," Tyler said, and I couldn't imagine why he'd feel that way. "You've got an unfair advantage since your boyfriend writes romance novels."

Lawson laughed. "I do recognize couple energy pretty easily these days."

"Wait. What?" I was confused.

"Come on, Shawn's over there." Lawson pointed to a small gathering across the yard.

"Oh wow, he's here. It's been way too long since I've seen him."

"Yeah, he's not on deadline right now. Plus, it's the middle of the afternoon, so it turned out to be a perfect day for him to come with me." Lawson turned to me as we

headed over. “Shawn’s not much of a go out person anyway, and he’s gotten in the habit of writing at night. Put those two things together and he doesn’t come to a lot of team events.”

It was also cool to know that someone else on the team had a boyfriend. I guessed I would’ve known that if I had started making friends sooner.

“Tyler,” Shawn said, breaking away from the people he was talking to. He wrapped Tyler in a back slapping hug. “Good to see you.”

“You too. I’m so glad you came.” They released each other. “Shawn, this is Kevin Kogan, our newest player and my...” Tyler gave me a questioning look and I nodded, suspecting what he wanted to say. “My boyfriend.”

“Good to meet you.” He held his arms out and waited for me. I stepped into the embrace. It wasn’t as enthusiastic as the one Tyler got, but it was a good one for our first meeting. “Nick’s told me about you, and I’ve seen you play. You and Tyler make a great pairing. And congrats on your coupledom too.” He turned to Lawson. “Does this mean you won?”

“Yup. They confirmed it earlier with Petrov.”

“I’ve trained him well,” Shawn said. “That, and the fact he reads a lot of romances anyway.”

“My sister told me that our story could be a rom-com when I told her about us the other day.” I looked forward to telling Meg about this conversation. She’d love it.

“You should check out Shawn’s books. They’re fantastic.” Tyler leaned in and lowered his voice. “Plus, Lawson here is the inspiration behind one of the characters.”

“Oh, come on, the new guy doesn’t need to know that.” Lawson covered his face with his hand. “Anyway.” He stretched the word out, clearly looking to change the subject. “I was thinking we should go out for drinks and dinner sometime.” Lawson slipped his arm around Shawn’s waist. “Seems only fair to spend some of my winnings on you guys.”

“That’s a great idea,” Shawn said.

“Sounds fun,” I said as Tyler nodded.

We hung out talking with Lawson and Shawn and learned about how they met, also because of a snowstorm. It seemed an odd coincidence and made me wonder if other Blizzard couples also got together in part because of snow. Was there something magical about the team’s name? I made a mental note to talk to Shawn about that over dinner.

Eventually, we retreated to a quiet spot beneath the sprawling branches of an old oak tree, the late afternoon sunlight filtering through the leaves. The noise of the party was muted a bit here, even though we could still see the crowd. Tyler leaned against the rough bark, pulling me close until my back rested against his chest, his arms circling my waist.

“How are you doing?” he asked softly, his head resting against mine.

I nodded, leaning into him. Overwhelmed, yes, but in the best possible way. “More than okay. I can’t imagine announcing that we were a couple could’ve gone any better. I thought at least someone might bring up the fact that we’re on the same team. That we’re co-workers. What about you?”

He wrapped his arms around me. “I’m good. Though I’m a little offended that our mutual pining was obvious to everyone except us.”

I laughed, tilting my head back to catch a glimpse of his face. “Were we really that transparent?”

“It seems so.” Tyler’s smile softened, his hold tightening slightly. “I wish I’d known sooner. That you were interested, I mean. We could’ve had this weeks ago.”

“Maybe we needed Detroit,” I mused. “Maybe we needed to be stuck together to figure it out.”

“Or maybe we would’ve found our way here eventually.” He paused, his gaze holding mine. “Some things just feel inevitable, you know?”

Sitting against this tree, wrapped in his arms, the certainty resonated deep within me.

“I’ve been thinking.” My pulse hammered against my ribs. “These days we’ve been together have been some of the best ever for me.”

Tyler’s eyes softened, mirroring the emotion swelling inside me. “For me too.”

“And I know it’s fast. Ridiculously fast. But...” I took a deliberate breath, and adjusted so I could face him.

His hand found mine, his thumb brushing over my knuckles.

The truth, sharp and clear, broke through. “I love you, Tyler.”

His eyes widened, surprise flashing before melting into something warm. His smile was the widest I’d ever seen it.

“I’m in love with you.” I said it again. “And I know it’s probably too soon to say it, but?—”

“I love you, too,” he interrupted, his voice thick with emotion. His hands came up, framing my face, thumbs stroking my cheekbones.

He leaned in, his mouth finding mine. The kiss was soft at first, tender, then deepened, his lips moving against mine with a certainty.

A wolf whistle pierced the air. We broke apart, laughing, breath catching in our throats. Petrov was near the dessert table and raised his beer bottle in our direction.

Tyler’s eyes sparkled. “We should probably rejoin the party and save the rest for when we’re alone.”

I nodded, stood, and offered him a hand up. I didn’t know this barbecue would do so much to help cement our future.

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SEVEN

TYLER

We stayed at the party until after dark, enjoying the easy going vibe of hanging out with our team family. Our ride home was relaxed, and had a peaceful silence, no doubt because we'd talked ourselves out earlier.

"You know," Kevin eventually said, "I can't believe I said 'I love you' under Henderson's oak."

The memory still buzzed through my brain, something I'd never forget. "Definitely wasn't on my bingo card for the team barbecue." I pulled into my designated spot in the garage of my building.

We got out of the SUV and met behind the car. His hand came up and cupped my jaw. Then his mouth found mine. What started gentle ignited fast, heat flaring through me.

"Upstairs." he breathed against my lips, the word a ragged command. "Now."

I nodded.

The elevator ride was an exercise in excruciating restraint as we shared it with a quiet older couple. Kevin's eyes met mine over their heads, dark pools of promise that sent a shiver tracing down my spine.

The lock of my door clicked behind us when we were finally inside.

My back hit the entryway wall as Kevin threw his body against me, hard and urgent. This was what it was like to get checked against the boards by him. Except he didn't run his hands over our opponents, or give them fiery kisses like he was with me.

“God, all day I've wanted this.” I gasped as he nibbled at the sensitive skin of my neck. “Watching you. Touching you, but not enough. Not like this.”

Kevin's eyes blazed as he looked at me. “You have me now.”

Four words. Pure combustion. I pushed off the wall and guided us toward the bedroom, shedding clothes—his shirt landing on the couch, my button-down dropped near the kitchen. Pants shed just inside the bedroom, somehow without us tripping over them.

We tumbled onto the mattress, down to our boxers. His skin, smooth and warm beneath my palms. He rolled us, pinning my wrists lightly above my head, taking the control. Fuck. This was beyond any fantasy I'd had about him.

His mouth trailed down my chest, over my abs. My breath hitched. A low groan rumbled in my core when his lips brushed the waistband of my boxer briefs.

“Tyler.” My name—a desperate, fractured sound that made my pulse hammer.

I looked up, finding his eyes dark with something more than just desire. He sat up, pulling me with him until we were face to face, his hands cupping my jaw with surprising tenderness.

“I want you.” His thumb traced my lower lip. “All of you.”

My breath caught. “I'm yours.”

“I want to be inside you.” The words came out hushed, reverent. His gaze never left mine, searching for my reaction. “If that’s something you?—”

“Yes.” The word escaped before I could even think. “God, yes.”

Something shifted in his expression—relief, hunger, determination. He kissed me, deep and possessive. His hands slid down my sides to the waistband of my boxers.

“These have got to go,” he commanded, voice rough.

I laid back on the bed, lifting my hips so he could slide the fabric down my legs. The cool air hit my overheated skin, making me shiver as I lay exposed before him. His eyes raked over me with unmistakable appreciation.

“Your turn,” I whispered.

Kevin rolled off the bed and stood. He pushed his boxers down in one fluid motion, stepping out of them with athletic grace. My mouth went dry at the sight of him—hard, ready, beautiful.

“There’s lube in the nightstand,” I managed to say. “Top drawer.”

He moved with purpose, retrieving the bottle. When he turned back to me, the look in his eyes made my heart stutter—hunger mixed with something more profound.

“Come here.” I reached for him.

Kevin crawled on to the bed. His hands caressing up my legs and chest. “I’ve thought about this.” His voice was quiet, intimate. “Having you this way.”

He laid over my body and captured my mouth in a kiss that flared hot. His tongue slid against mine, claiming, exploring. All the while, our cocks rubbed against each other,

precum slicking us up.

When he pulled back, we were both breathing hard.

“Turn over,” he murmured against my lips.

I hesitated. “I want to see you.”

“All right.”

I shifted, arranging myself against the pillows as Kevin settled between my thighs. The sound of the cap clicking open sent anticipation racing through me.

The first touch of his slick finger made me gasp. He took his time, circling, teasing, before pressing in. The intrusion burned slightly since it'd been a while since I'd played with myself this way.

“Okay?” His eyes never left mine.

I nodded, unable to form words as he worked me open with deliberate care. One finger became two, stretching, exploring. When he curled them just right, sensations shot through me like lightning.

“Fuck!” My back arched off the bed.

A smile crossed his lips as fire flashed in his eyes.

“Yes. Right there.”

He did it again, watching intently as I writhed beneath him. I'd never felt so exposed, or so pleased. Three fingers now, the stretch more pronounced, but more pleasure than pain.

“Kevin.” My voice broke. “I need you. Now.”

He withdrew his fingers, leaving me empty and aching. I watched through half-lidded eyes as he slicked his thick cock generously.

“Tell me if I need to stop.” His voice was strained with the effort of control.

He positioned himself, the blunt pressure against my entrance making me tense involuntarily. His hand found mine, fingers intertwining.

“Breathe,” he whispered.

I inhaled deeply, forcing myself to relax as he pressed forward. The initial breach burned, my body resisting the intrusion. Kevin froze, waiting.

“Easy,” I managed.

He pushed in slowly, inch by inch. The burn gave way to a sensational sense of fullness. When he was finally seated, completely inside me, we both stilled, breathing hard.

“You’re fucking incredible.” His voice was ragged, strained. “So tight.”

My hand found his face, drawing him down. Kissing him while he was deep in me intensified all the feelings. “Fuck me. Please.”

He started with gentle, shallow thrusts, each one sending sparks through me. All discomfort faded, replaced by mounting ecstasy as he found a rhythm. When he shifted the angle, he hit the spot that made my vision blur.

“That’s it. Right there. Need more.”

Kevin's pace increased, each thrust finding its target with devastating accuracy. I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper, needing more. His hand slipped between us, encasing my cock, stroking in time with his thrusts.

"Tyler." His tone was almost reverent. "Look at me."

I forced my eyes open, meeting his. The raw emotion there pushed me to the edge. Our bodies moved together, finding a perfect rhythm.

"I'm close," I gasped, feeling the pressure building at the base of my spine.

"Me too." His pace faltered, becoming more erratic. "Come for me. I want to feel you."

His words pushed me over. The orgasm crashed through me, white-hot and overwhelming. I cried out as I spilled over his hand and shot onto my stomach and chest. My body clenched around him, drawing a guttural moan from his throat.

"Fuck. Gonna shoot, Tyler!" He thrust once, twice more before stilling deep inside me, his body shuddering with release.

For a moment, we existed in perfect suspension, connected in the most intimate way possible. Then he carefully withdrew, both of us wincing a bit at the sensation. He got up and headed to the bathroom, returning with a warm washcloth, cleaning me with tender care.

When he stretched out beside me, I turned into him and laid my head on his chest, his heartbeat slowing beneath my ear.

"Damn, I needed that so much." I planted a kiss on his chest and then adjusted so I could see him. "Remember how I told you it was hot when you checked people? I think I just sampled what it's like. And fuck, it was good."

He nudged me forward so we could kiss. “It was damn hot. I didn’t know I had that streak in me, but getting a little bossy, shoving you in to the wall when we got in the door...” His nostrils flared. “I’d be happy to check you anytime, as long as you want it.”

A low, guttural hum escaped me. “I have a feeling we’re going to enjoy figuring out what we both like.” He kissed me again, and I rested my chin on his chest so I could still look at him. “I love you. So much.”

“I love you too. More than I thought possible.”

Silence settled as we caressed whatever we could reach of each other.

My phone buzzed from the pocket of my jeans. It was a text from Shane. I didn’t move to get it, too content with where I was.

It sounded off again. What on earth could he want?

“You can pick that up. I recognize that pattern. It might be important.”

I groaned, but since it buzzed again, I rolled off the bed to get it.

“Hmmm.” I turned to find Kevin watching me. “You should walk around naked more often. It’s a good look.”

“That might be arranged, especially if you do it, too.” I grabbed my phone and found multiple messages. I read as I headed back to the bed. “Oh.”

“What?”

Kevin sat up, which pulled my attention as his muscular body moved.

“The team posted some candid pics from the barbecue, including some of us that make it clear we’re a couple.” I clicked the links Shane had included. “Aww, we’re kinda cute.”

I looked at Kevin, and he was wide-eyed.

“Really?”

I handed him the phone so he could see one image where he had his arm around me while we were talking to Petrov. “If you swipe a few to the right, there’s another where we were in a group that also includes Lawson and Shawn. In that one we’re holding hands.”

“Wow. I hadn’t expected that. Are you okay with it?”

I sat back on the bed, next to him. “It’s probably the easiest way to go public. The team didn’t make a big deal out of it, so maybe no one else will either. There are plenty of queer couples in the league these days.”

“But not on the same team as far as I know.” He handed the phone back to me.

“It’ll be a different take from the stories that came out about Ackerman and Robinson dating while on opposing teams.”

“That’s true.” He sat back against the headboard and I snuggled up next to him. “You know, I feel like I should be more worried about this, but I’m not.”

“Right? I was more into how good we looked as a couple.” I swiped back to the messaging app. “Let me write back to Shane really quick.”

“I suppose I should let my agent know about those, and my sister, too.” Kevin kissed me on the forehead and got up to get his phone. I enjoyed watching him move across

the room, just like he had with me.

Tyler: Thanks for the heads up. Those were some good pics.

Shane's response was quick.

Shane: This isn't exactly taking it slow. But it's awesome.

Tyler: Yeah, we just decided to go for it. The team was great. They kind of already knew. Had a betting pool on us and everything.

Kevin and I both texted for a bit with our siblings, and then settled back into cuddling, even though we should've headed for the shower.

"Damien invited us for dinner next week when we get back from playing down south," I said, updating him on my conversation.

"I'd like that." Kevin's fingers glided across my chest, the touch sending pleasant shivers across my skin.

"How's Meg?" I asked, needing to know.

A grin touched his lips. "She's threatening to fly out here to help us celebrate."

"That would be outstanding. Maybe everyone can come visit at the lake house this summer, too."

His face lit up, pure happiness. "You still want to do that?"

"Of course." My hand cupped his cheek, thumb stroking the line of his jaw. "Already picturing it. You, me, doing whatever we want. Having our friends around."

“Sounds perfect.” He shifted, leaning in, trailing soft kisses up my neck toward my ear. “You might get sick of me, though.”

I caught his face gently between my hands. “Not possible.”

He kissed me, slow and deep. When we broke apart, he settled against me again, his body comforting against mine.

“You know,” he said, “We should do something for your foundation this summer too. Just because you missed the auction doesn’t mean we can’t organize something. A skills clinic or equipment drive. After all, I’ve taken you off the bachelor market, so we need to find other ways to help.”

The offer went straight to my heart. Kevin knowing that part of me, wanting to share it. “I’d love that.”

THE END