



Coaching Prince Charming (Arctic Titans of Northwood U Book 7)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: He's my first and only crush. He's my new coach. Oh, and he was once my dad's teammate and best friend.

I've been in love with Nate Partridge since I can remember. Under my mattress, there has always been a stack of magazine covers with his bare torso and a pearly smile. But that's about the extent of it.

I can never have Nate Partridge. He is a straight guy and twenty years my senior. Neither of which is a dealbreaker for me, but he disagrees.

When a hockey accident forces him to retire, he takes the freshly vacant job of coaching the Arctic Titans. And my life takes an unexpected turn for the better.

Nate is the only person who has ever truly understood me. Where my father's ambition dictates my every waking moment, Nate's kindness and compassion make me feel like there's more to life than hockey. Dad's disregard for my passions makes Nate's encouragement only sweeter.

And my crush reaches all new heights. Especially when I discover his deepest secret.

Nate Partridge is not straight.

But do I stand a chance? To him, I am nothing more than his old friend's kid and a college freshman he's in charge of training.

If I want Nate Partridge, it will take more than hope to make this real.

It's time to shake things up in my life before I can make him mine.

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Page 1

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ONE

Dull, throbbing pain in my left collarbone made me roll my eyes. Would it ever stop? It had been over two months since the goddamn accident, as everyone kept calling it. Accident. As if I would be clumsy enough to slam myself against the boards and break my collarbone. As if the collision had been some unpredictable act of fate. As if it hadn't had all the marking of foul play.

I clenched my teeth and shut the office door. Anger rose from my stomach like acid, searing everything it licked.

Taking deep breaths, I counted to ten, but the higher the number got, the more agitated I was at the fact I even had to count. Stupid exercise, I thought, feeling like a sullen teenager all over again. I hadn't been one in nearly twenty years. Getting your life ripped apart will do that to you.

Silence filled the small office. Yesterday, I had brought in the trophies and accolades when the assistant coaches eagerly suggested it. They cluttered the clean, white shelves of my new office. A framed photo of my old team on the eve of our last national championship semifinals hung on the wall to the left of my desk. To the right, a filing cabinet occupied the space uselessly, as if all of its contents hadn't been digitized a decade ago.

My predecessor hadn't been interested in interior design any more than I was. After retiring — in his proper time, I might add — old Coach Murray took away the few personal belongings from this office and left not a single proof he'd spent his life in here. I intended to do the same.

And soon, if there was any luck in the world.

Great job, Nate, I thought as I sat into my chair. It was an old thing, worn out by my predecessor, never replaced. The springs poking my ass didn't bother me. I didn't plan to stick around for too long. First day on the job, and you're already planning to leave.

I couldn't stop myself from shaking my head. I'd had way too much time to think in the last two months. The only problem was I wasn't much of a thinker. A career in philosophy had never been on my radar. All my life, I had been good at one thing and one thing alone. Hockey. But fate was cruel to me, taking that life away in the blink of an eye.

My fingers drummed against the nearly empty surface of the desk. One computer screen, a notebook, and a handful of scattered pens decorated it. And a framed photo of my ex-sister-in-law and her son, Beckett, my runaway brother's abandoned family and the only treasure in my life.

The drumming intensified. I couldn't keep my fingers still if my life depended on it. Even when the tips began to hurt, I kept tapping the desk. Harder. Harder until my heart was hammering in my chest with the perpetual anger that wouldn't go away. Harder until someone knocked on my door.

"Come in," I barked.

Harvey, a thirty-something-year-old assistant coach with a head of shaggy black hair and piercing green eyes, opened the door. "We're ready for you, Coach," he said in an all-business tone. It was an improvement. A week ago, he had barely managed to speak to me without stammering and looking at me with such wide eyes that I half believed I'd grown a pair of horns.

That was the curse of being one of the best-known hockey wingers in the country. Or, possibly worse, one of the infamous cases of a player in his prime losing everything to an accident.

I held my breath, my heart pounding without a rhythm, as my nerves worked to twist my guts. You were once the nation's darling, Nathan, I snapped at myself. You're not afraid of a bunch of teenage pups who want to chase a puck for a couple of hours. But things weren't so simple. These weren't just any teenage pups. These were the Arctic Titans. This team had filled the ranks of the NHL for years, and the responsibility for forging the raw talent and potential into greatness was now mine. Mine because of a string of unexpected bumps in several roads.

I'm not supposed to be here, I thought with a suppressed sigh. "Get the boys out on the ice," I said in a gruff voice.

Harvey opened his mouth in surprise, then cleared his throat. "They're out. We're waiting for you, Coach."

I shot him a frustrated glare, but my annoyance was with me, not Harvey. The guy was doing his job. And he was doing it better than I could hope to do mine. So I nodded. "I'll be right there."

In the weeks of preparation, I had kept myself away from the ice. I inspected the locker rooms, the hallways, the rink's exterior, a break room for the staff, and my office. In fact, I hadn't stepped on the ice since the evening a freak crash against the boards had ended my career.

Were I a younger man, there might have been a chance for a few more good years, but at thirty-eight, more and more people believed my retirement was long overdue. "He's lost his edge," they said. "And this just goes to prove it." I'd had no choice but to bow out, whether I liked it or not.

Drawing a deep breath, I pushed my chair away from the desk. These were the times when I wished we still kept bottles of whiskey in our desk drawers like some stockbroker in the 1950s. I could use a drink to steady my nerves.

What it was that sent shivers down my arms, I didn't know. A bunch of players with high hopes and brilliant futures still ahead of them? Or the ice I had spent my best years skating on? Or the obvious mistake of accepting a job I didn't know how to do? Perhaps the answer was a little bit of everything.

I stood up like a soldier and marched after Harvey. We went down the hall and into the vast arena that was practically empty. The bright lights in the rink were a stark contrast to the hallway that had led us there, so I blinked twice before taking in the sight. The Titans, lined up in full gear, clacked their sticks against the smooth surface of the ice and hooted and cheered when I stepped out with a small procession of assistant coaches.

The Titans greeted me with admiration I no longer deserved. I wasn't the star winger. I was just a college coach, doing the job for the sake of keeping my sanity and waiting for this year to expire and the real coach to take over. Someone would come. Someone who knew what he was doing.

My muscles tensed as I looked around. Even the assistant coaches applauded and smiles decorated their faces. Three of them flanked me, there to ensure the job was done the right way. In fact, all I had to do was make the calls these experienced people put forward. I had to be the face of Northwood and its Titans.

"Thank you," I said lamely, my throat dry. "Thanks."

The cheers and clacking subsided. The boys were lined by seniority within the team, starting with my nephew, Beckett, who had been selected as the captain a year earlier. His right-hand guy and boyfriend, Caden Jones, stood tall next to him. I didn't

recognize a few of them except from seeing them play around nine months earlier, and a couple were brand-new. The new guys had been accepted on a hockey scholarship at Northwood when old Coach Murray was leaving, and another guy was officially taking over. The decisions had happened before my time.

I'd read their files, however, so I knew that one of the two was Carter Prince. Encountering his name on my computer screen had given me a bit of a shock. In fact, it made me feel old. As old as the fact that my nephew was a senior this year.

Carter Prince was my old buddy's son. Now, with helmets on, I struggled to distinguish him between the two boys at the end of the line. But it felt like it was only yesterday that I had piggybacked him around Dana's backyard while my old friend worked the grill. We'd been young men back then, our careers still far ahead, our futures bright.

"Coach?" Harvey whispered.

I didn't realize my ears had been ringing until Harvey's voice reached me, and the buzzing faded. I cleared my throat and inspected the line again. Beckett wore a smirk I knew well. A few of the boys looked at me like soldiers looked at their general, and the last few were as wide-eyed as if Elvis had entered the building.

"I didn't expect such a warm welcome," I said, pitching my voice a little higher. "Ah...I'm Nate Partridge. Coach Partridge, I suppose." Or just Nate, I thought wistfully. Partridge was someone the world recognized, and that was no longer me.

"Hear, hear," Beckett called, and the rest cheered. He beamed with pride that made my stomach feel hollow. I could have strangled that boy.

I bared my teeth by instinct, forcing a polite smile on my face. "Thank you." Licking my lips, I turned to Harvey. "The drills?"

Harvey murmured a few sentences to remind me of today's agenda. I knew it. I'd devised it. And yet, my mind was coming up blank until Harvey whispered it to me.

I nodded my gratitude and looked at the boys again. Finding some sense of determination in myself, I steeled my voice and put my hands on my hips. "Alright, guys. I know you all had a long summer of growing soft around the edges. It's time to hammer you back to the boys who'd won two Frozen Fours in two years. And in order to do that, I need to assess each and every one of you. Consider this week your second trial. Show me what you're good at, but don't shy away from revealing what you're terrible at. I want to see where the flaws are." You're doing fine, I told myself as a shudder passed through my chest. Briefly, I outlined the drills I wanted to see today. Simple offensive and defensive moves all of them had to perform.

When I was done, I crossed my arms over my broad chest and watched the boys scatter around. All but two had gone through these drills as a team before, at least once, so I could trust them to know what to do. Even so, when my nephew began dictating the opening positions just as Harvey was starting to speak, I needed to get involved.

"Partridge," I called. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, but you will allow Coach Harvey to lead the way for now."

Beckett frowned at me with clear surprise on his face, his lips pursing into something dangerously close to a pout. "But this is how we always..."

"I don't want to hear it," I growled. "You'll let us do our jobs, or you'll watch the drills from here."

Beckett hesitated, almost as if he was stunned. "Yes, sir," he said carefully, possibly after seeing the cold look of determination in my eyes.

That boy had pulled me from the brink of collapse this summer. I had been flirting with the idea of rushing into obscurity and drinking myself into numbness. Had it not been for him and Caden Jones, I would have been drunk already, I feared. But that was personal. Here, Coach Partridge and Captain Partridge were just that — the coach and the captain.

Harvey took over while I observed, and the drills kicked off. Beckett was a fine player if a little rash, and his boyfriend's smooth style on the ice complemented him very well. The two had already formed a way of cooperating that almost included a language only they spoke. Assisted by a quick, fierce young man, the trio was as close to a dream team as they could get.

"Avery Collins," said Margot, the second assistant coach on my team. "He's been on the rise for some time."

I nodded. I had noticed Collins out there when I had last watched the Titans play. That night still lived in my memory so vividly. In the closing minutes of the game, the Titans had scored their winning point and erupted in such celebratory cheers that we all nearly missed the moment when Beckett skated across the rink and kissed Caden publicly for the very first time. It was the night he came out to me, fearing that I would think less of him because... I didn't know why. If anything, I admired him more for his bravery.

My throat tightened, but I narrowed my eyes and appeared absorbed in the drills.

Their goalie, Sawyer Price, was surprisingly small compared to some of his teammates, but he was quick and tricky, seemingly popping up wherever he was needed.

The big guy, Jordan Mitchell, was someone I knew from Beckett's childhood. The two boys had grown up as close friends, and in the days I spent around Beckett, I had

noticed the steady and calm presence that Jordan had radiated even in his boyhood. When it was Jordan's turn, I realized that the steadiness had never left him. He was a tanklike force on the ice, but with precision and the sort of determination ocean waves had when chiseling the cliffs.

Ron Rigby came in to swap with Sawyer Price as the goalie. He was bigger despite being three years younger, but he was also more predictable. I saw room for improvement, especially if paired with Beckett's trio. The kid would have to keep losing in the drills until he recognized his weaknesses and worked out a way to predict the opponents' next moves.

Then came Carter Prince. The boy was built like a hockey player, thanks to the years of practice and conditioning that came with being the son of hockey royalty. In full gear, he was a formidable force. There were bigger guys around him, of course, but Prince appeared ready to face any of them. Playing defense, he showed a great deal of potential. I often wondered if something like that was hereditary or if the kids had a choice.

I made notes for the players as they swapped through various combinations. The things that had been established with my predecessor were working well even today, but I wondered if a year of these tactics was long enough for their opponents to regroup and band against. You could only bait-and-switch so many times on the ice.

Two hours later, I thanked the Titans for their dedication and reminded them that in order to have a shot at greatness, their training didn't stop once they left the rink. Every ounce of alcohol they drank gave their rivals a razor's width of advantage; every gym session they missed pulled them further back. Privately, I reminded myself that these were college students who couldn't — and shouldn't; life was short enough already — be stopped or even persuaded that I was telling the truth. But a firm hand was necessary to keep them in line. A few of them might even outshine their coaches and fathers and such.

It wasn't until I was done debriefing with the assistant coaches that I sank into my worn-out chair and felt the tension leave my muscles. The door of my office was left open, and small groups of guys passed by on their way out. They all paused long enough to greet me or tell me they had long been my fans. It wasn't rational, but anger rarely was, to feel this annoyance with them for reminding me of the person I no longer was.

I wasn't sure who I was now. Who I was becoming. But that hockey star with hordes of fans had died on the ice the night I was slammed against the boards.

Absently, I rubbed the place where my collarbone had been broken. The memory of the sharp pain was vivid enough to put me back into the hospital bed.

The young man with honey-brown hair and warm brown eyes that seemed to always hold a spark of mischief paused at my door, murmuring something to his friend, who proceeded to leave. The smile that stretched across his face punched dimples on each side of his youthful face. "Coach Partridge?" he called, lifting one arm above his head and leaning against the doorframe. He had his duffel hanging from the other shoulder. The late-August weather was so warm that I couldn't blame the kid for wearing a sleeveless T-shirt with long cutouts for shoulders and arms, baring the sides of his rib cage, and knee-length cargo shorts with flappy pockets. The summer tan on his face, arms, and legs was from the month spent in the Dominican Republic, which was my old friend's favorite kind of vacation. Dana Prince didn't go for new adventures once he found a thing he liked.

"Carter," I said.

The young man lifted his eyebrows playfully. "I was wondering if you'd recognize me."

I clicked around the screen for a moment, then turned it around. "I do have your file

here.”

“Not that photo,” Carter cried in protest.

Quirking up one corner of my lips, I pulled the screen back. It was his yearbook’s image, and Carter looked like a preppy kid headed for the Icy League. White shirt buttoned all the way, a dark blue blazer with a red seam, and a tie with inverted colors to match it, his hair styled neatly for the photo day, unlike the post-shower mess he wore now, and a smug smile with the same mischievous look in his eyes. “It looks good,” I assured him. Crossing my arms on my chest, I looked into his big brown eyes. “What can I do for you?”

Carter Prince lifted a finger. “If you have the authority to update the photo, I’d start there.”

I shook my head regretfully. The truth was, I had no idea what my authority was beyond parroting what more skilled coaches like Margot and Harvey told me.

“Oh, well.” Carter pulled his shoulders high into a mock shrug, the T-shirt’s bottom edge dragging up above the low-hanging waist of his shorts and an inch-wide strip of his underwear. “I just wanted to say how happy I am that you’re coaching.”

“Truly?” I asked, my voice flat but not unkind. I didn’t want pity from a guy half my age who had all the glory of hockey still ahead of him.

I wondered what Dana felt like these days. We hadn’t had any serious conversations about retirement. He’d left the NHL four years ago. Even though he was a year older than me, the math suggested my retirement was still overdue. Dana had been facing similar questions about his performance, future, and longevity in the ranks of the NHL for a little while before announcing he would leave.

Was he looking at his son with the same sliver of envy? Or was I just a particularly shitty human?

“Truly,” Carter said. He grinned, his teeth all a pearly perfection. “I don’t know if I could have hoped for a better coach.”

Neither of us knows if I’m even a passable coach, I thought. Shitty human or not, I wasn’t about to unload this baggage on an innocent kid, no matter how much his easy smile was friendly and how loudly it was inviting me to open up. “That’s kind of you.” Even after I’d said the polite thing, Carter Prince was looking at me. Waiting. “How’s Dana? I haven’t heard from him in a while.”

Carter flashed me another grin. “Dad’s good. He was surprised when they announced you as much as I was. He said he didn’t forget about the five bucks you lent him in 1998.”

I threw my head back and laughed despite all the reasons not to. “Jeez. Way to make a guy feel old.”

Carter was all cocky satisfaction. “He said it, not me.”

“What’s that adjusted for inflation, then?” I asked.

He blew out a breath of air. “Do you really think, if I was any good at math, that Dad wouldn’t have pushed me to study astrophysics instead?”

Our gazes met, and Carter must have noticed sympathy in my look. It was uncontrolled. Dana was a great guy, but he could be demanding. And, much like vacationing in one place his entire life, he rarely considered options beyond those he had already decided on. Such as his son’s future. It was lucky that Carter Prince was awfully talented.

“It’s a joke,” Carter said.

I managed a short exhale through my nose and a nod.

Clenching his teeth and keeping the smile on his lips even after it had left his eyes, Carter lowered his arm from the doorframe. It was a tiny little mercy to not have to keep avoiding looking at the generous amount of flesh his ragged T-shirt revealed and the patch of dark brown hair on his armpit. “I, uh...I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, Coach.”

I nodded again.

When Carter left in the direction of the back exit, I inhaled a deep breath of air and held it in my lungs. But I couldn’t even start unpacking the odd sensations that tingled all over my skin and the suffocating pressure that dropped onto my chest before my nephew swaggered into my office. “Coach?” he said.

I gritted my teeth. “Partridge?” My tone called his sarcasm.

Caden paused at the door while Beckett walked all the way to my desk and lowered himself into a chair. “Feeling alright?” Caden asked.

I nodded. On one hand, it was getting old to face all this concern. On the other, Caden was there, witnessing the hell I had gone through this summer. If anyone had the right to check in, it was this kid.

Caden returned my nod. “I’ll wait outside.”

Beckett looked at him over his shoulder. They exchanged a tender look from where I sat, and Caden headed out. When Beckett looked at me again, he leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “I’m not here to throw a temper tantrum. It’s just that...”

“Let me stop you right there,” I said softly, lifting a hand. “I won’t undermine your authority among the guys, Beck. You’ve done a fantastic job in the second half of the last season.” That was enough to soothe my nephew’s bruised ego, I gathered. “I mean for us to work together, but the very first thing we need to root out is any thought of preferential treatment.”

Beckett frowned. He had been plagued by the gossip over nepotism since he’d joined this team. Until last year, he had made quite a few enemies over it. Being the closest kin to someone like me was like wearing a “KICK ME” sign on your back if you wanted to play hockey like a pro. Beckett had felt it more than enough times in the first two years of college. “So what? That was just for show?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know how things worked with your previous coach, but we wouldn’t dream of taking such liberties in the NHL. Your tactics worked in the past. They’re welcome. But remember that we have a chain of command. Disregarding your coaches is the fastest ticket to getting too cocky.”

Beckett lifted his hands in defense. “We normally had pretty standard formations for warm-ups.”

“And you normally had a coach who already knew you all inside and out,” I said. This was as close as I would come to justifying myself. Outside the rink, he was welcome to criticize me however he wanted. And he had. When I had been a moping mess, haunting my sprawling mountain home in nothing but a bathrobe and a generous shot of whiskey in my coffee, Beckett had sat me down and called me out on my bullshit. It had stung, but it had been the right thing to do. And it had woken me up to the fact that I still had to live my life. Even if it wasn’t the way I wanted.

My nephew nodded.

“In here, I’m your coach. Harvey and Margot have the know-how and the authority.

Anything you think any of us could do better, you should bring it up privately. I mean it. Feedback is welcome, so long as you don't disregard your superiors in front of the entire team. It might seem like the right call at that moment, but you're undermining the respect your teammates have for the coaches. It'll have a domino effect." My voice had hardened the longer I spoke.

Beckett straightened his back and sat still. "Understood."

I nodded once. "Go now. Don't let Caden wait for you."

"He's fine," Beckett said, cocking his lips into a soft smile. "How about you, Uncle? Are you really alright?"

"I wish everyone would stop asking that," I said lightly, but it didn't come out very reassuring.

Giving me a small salute and a smile, Beckett got up. "It's good to see you," he said before leaving.

For most of my life, I wasn't there nearly as much as I had wanted to be. It was ironic. I had been too busy rising to stardom after my brother had walked out on them. Julie, my former sister-in-law, would bring Beckett to my ranch in Texas or my home in the mountains for some guy-to-guy bonding. I'd taken care of them when times were tough, but I hadn't watched the kid grow up. I would see him a few times a year, and he would seemingly be twice the height as the last time. And with a mouth on him!

Now I had a shot at being around, but Beckett was focusing on his future, and his life was already better for having Caden by his side.

It was a thing so foreign to me that I could hardly imagine what it felt like.

That stupid envy. Did it ever go away? They were young. They loved each other. They were beautiful together. And they lived in times that were far more welcoming to diversity. For an athlete, that was nearly unimaginable in my time.

Not that long ago, a queer athlete couldn't dream of a happy life. He couldn't hope for more than a string of discreet hotel hookups just to feel another human being next to him.

I should know.

I had let my life fly by without ever giving love a chance.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:00 am

TWO

My fingers plucked the guitar strings independently from my mind. My thoughts drifted, but my hands knew what they were doing. They also knew they would rather be traveling up and down the octaves of my piano, but we'd left that back home. "You won't have time to mess around with that thing," Dad had informed me the first time I had mentioned the possible challenges of transporting my piano. "Dorm rooms don't have enough space for those things. And your roommate won't have the patience to listen to it." He'd told me I would only attract trouble if I took the thing with me.

My roommate, Ron, was far more patient than Dad had predicted. And the room was much more spacious than what he'd described. And, for the win at three in a row, it turned out I had way more time than he'd claimed. In fact, all I had was time.

The weeks of warm-up drills with Coach Partridge and my gym routine were all I had on my agenda until the semester officially began.

So I sat in the shade of an old chestnut tree behind the team house where most of the Titans lived, ass on the stone table and feet on the matching bench, my guitar resting on my knee, fingers working while my mind wandered.

"I bet girls love you at parties," Ron said.

For a moment, I thought he was sarcastic.

"I wish I could play like that," he said.

“Do you play at all?” I asked.

Ron shrugged. “A few chords. Nothing that’ll get me laid.”

I snorted. “Guitar’s not getting me laid, dude.”

Ron leaned back on the flat bench that didn’t have a backrest, his head leaving the shade, sunlight setting his light hair to glow. He closed his eyes and let the sunshine warm him up. “Then you’re doing something wrong.”

“Yeah?” My mouth also worked without any input from my head. My mind was miles away. There had been times I would get like this over dinner, and Dad would wear the most peculiar frown you’d ever seen. “Where did you go?” he would ask. To be honest, daydreaming wasn’t something my dad could wrap his mind around.

“Girls love guys who can play a guitar,” Ron claimed.

I strummed abruptly and looked at Ron. “This guitar player doesn’t love girls, though.”

Ron shrugged without any other reaction. “I don’t think it’s gender-specific.”

I snorted. Hopefully, I wasn’t accidentally seducing my roommate. “I’m not sure I agree,” I mused quietly. For one thing, nobody cared what I did in my free time. So long as I practiced and exercised, ate well and studied, I was free to tinker around with music or doomscroll until my eyes popped out. Nobody said a word. “I prefer piano,” I said for no reason at all. I wasn’t bragging, and it didn’t make me any cooler. In fact, I said it just because it was true.

My fingers worked the strings, and a mournful ballad wrapped itself around us. It was nothing I had composed before. Tunes sometimes came to me in the middle of

practice. It was a great way to unplug and let my head be empty for a bit. I was aware that other people tended to play real music for the same effect. Me? I couldn't sit still for that long without drumming my fingers anxiously against some nearby surface. So I played the music for myself.

"That's nice," Ron said. "Who's that?"

"Huh?" For a moment, I thought he was asking me something else. I blinked and shook my head. "No idea."

My roommate laughed. "Are you kidding me? That's not improv, is it?"

It really wasn't that big of a deal. And I said that to Ron.

"You're so wrong it's not even funny," he said. "Ever played for a crowd?"

The snort that burst out of me was so full of contempt that I reminded myself of my father. "Please."

"I'm not joking, dude," Ron said. "You should do some open-mic night or something."

"Yes, because who doesn't love a sad, slow-burn ballad over their fourth beer following a wannabe stand-up comedian? I think I'll pass." I shook my head dismissively, even though Ron's eyes were still shut, hands folded behind his back.

My friend hummed to the tune I was making up, so I intentionally changed the harmony to mess with him. He opened his eyes and shot me a scolding look. "The way I see it," he said slowly, "we've got four years to get all the embarrassing stuff out of our systems. When we're in the NHL, that shit's gonna have to go away."

I laughed out loud. “As if pros don’t do a bunch of embarrassing shit behind the curtains.”

“You won’t get a shot at playing for a small crowd in a bar when you’re famous,” Ron said. He looked at his phone and hopped onto his feet. “Time to go.” He pressed his fist against my shoulder in passing, picked up his gym bag, and walked away.

I’d done my training early this morning. With several team houses brimming with athletes who hoped to build careers in various sports, the campus gym was often crowded, and I preferred solitude. Early hours were the best, while other students were still snoring in their beds.

My phone vibrated on the stone surface of the table. I picked it up and hesitated for a moment. I had been in such a good mood.

Leaning over my guitar, I swiped the screen and pressed the phone against my ear. The open palm of my right hand pressed the strings to silence the accidental sound I made. “Dad,” I said.

My father called me every few days to check in. “How are things, Carter?” The truth was, he didn’t have much going on since he’d retired. He had never had other interests beyond hockey, so his days were now spent lounging in expensive recliners in pretty locations.

“Not that different from two days ago,” I said, trying for a light tone.

If I’d succeeded, it flew over Dad’s head anyway. “You’re training hard, son?”

“Yep,” I said, my gaze drawn to the bright blue sky of the summer midafternoon. A few puffy white clouds sailed across the vast blue canvas. Fall wasn’t even in our vocabulary yet. These were the best days to be alive.

Dad held his breath for a moment. I could hear the absence of his breathing. Then, as he exhaled, it was almost a sigh. “Are you taking this seriously, Carter? I can never tell.”

“How much more seriously do you want me to take it, Dad?” I asked, my temper soaring. I had to squeeze my eyes shut to rein in the anger. “I’m training every day. Ask Nate if you don’t trust me.”

“That wouldn’t be appropriate,” Dad said in a tight voice.

I wondered if he was telling the truth. Weren’t they each other’s oldest friends? Hadn’t they always been full of stories of their early years as college friends, rivals playing for different NHL teams, and finally teammates for the rest of Dad’s career? I knew Dad had filled Coach Partridge’s ears with his plans for my future. “Then you simply have to trust me,” I said.

Dad’s silence lasted for a few heartbeats. “Very well, Carter. Is there anything you need? Anything you lack?”

My piano, I thought. “Nope.” Why was it so hard to constantly go over the same conversation? Each time we spoke, my answers were shorter, my voice tighter, and my words more clipped. “It’s all good, Dad.”

He lingered a few moments longer, telling me he loved me and was proud of what I’d achieved, and then he hung up. It left me wondering what exactly I had achieved, but I wouldn’t ask him that. All my life, there was a stick in my hands and a puck before my eyes. All my life, my father’s stardom shone so brightly that it made everything in my life pale.

I hopped off the stone table and walked into the house. It was a colonial revival structure with a spacious, open-plan ground floor. A kitchen and a kitchen island took

up the left side from the entrance, and the vast living room that was hardly used was on the right. In the back and upstairs were rooms for Arctic Titans to share, two per room, and downstairs, in the basement, was the true common room. Vintage arcade games, worn-out furniture, a gaming console, a minifridge stocked with beer, and a big soccer table were just the tip of the iceberg. Guys gathered there nearly every evening just to hang out.

I went to my room upstairs. Most of the occupied rooms faced the backyard, but Ron and I were given one of the rooms on the other end of the house, facing the front. We had a view of the campus, one house in a line of many.

The room was pretty big. I could see what things I would move around to make space for my imaginary piano. With annoyance zinging through me, I marched to the window, opened it, and sat over the frame with one leg dangling outside. A part of the front deck's roof extruded a little under my hanging leg. With my guitar on my knee, I plucked the strings loudly.

"You're going to fall out," someone called from a distance.

My nose wrinkled, and I repeated the tune louder. As the hackler neared the house, I realized it was Coach Partridge. Nate. All my life, he had simply been Nate. He was the star winger to others, but to me, they were all just Dad's buddies from when I was small. I rode this guy's back when I was a kid. "I'm really not," I shouted back.

"I wouldn't bet on it," Nate said, pausing a pace away from the lawn. He had to squint against the sun shining directly into his face. The brightness of the sunlight suited him. Even from up here, I could see he was a tall man. His brown hair was cropped short and textured in a way that I could distinguish the locks. The sides were faded so high that a good part of the sides of his head was shaved smooth. I knew that if he were to grow his hair, it would look almost the same as Beckett's thick, wavy locks. "Got a particular reason for pushing your luck?"

“I’m not an adrenaline junkie looking to get high if that’s what you’re asking,” I said. I could speak a little more quietly now that Nate was nearer. I ran my fingers over the strings as if to accompany my words.

Nate lifted his hand to scratch the back of his head. The short-sleeved, well-fitting T-shirt revealed his stiff biceps, muscles contracting as he moved his arms. “You’re giving me anxiety, Carter.”

I snorted but stopped myself when his hand moved away from the back of his head and gently rubbed the area above his pecs. His broken and healed collarbone. I threw my leg back inside the house and set the guitar on the floor before leaning over the window. “Are you looking for Beckett?”

“Yeah,” Nate said. “Uh, thanks for...not falling out.”

I laughed out loud. “Wait there. I’ll tell him you’re here.”

I was sure Nate inhaled sharply to tell me not to bother, but I was gone before he could say a word. I found Caden in their room, who told me Beckett was in the shower. I wasn’t sure why that made me giddy, but I decided to entertain Nate in the meantime.

As I stepped out of the house, Nate was still standing a foot away from the lawn. “Come inside, Coach. Beckett’s gonna need a minute.”

Nate narrowed one eye against the sun and hesitated. “Ah, I don’t think I should...” He stepped forward. “That’s your space, guys.”

“And I’m inviting. It’s scorching there,” I insisted. “I’m pouring a glass of cold water.” Leaving the door open, I walked back to the fridge and filled a tall glass with ice before pouring water over it. By the time I was done, Nate was still hesitating, and

I wondered if I would have to go outside to drag him. I was perfectly comfortable doing that, seeing how he'd carried me on his shoulders in Dad's pool when I was six.

As I took a step toward the door, he showed up. He was a towering presence in any room, especially since I was not particularly tall. I was ever so slightly above average in most ways that didn't matter and very below average in one way that mattered to a lot of people, but it felt good to stand near a man of his size.

With the kitchen island between us, I pushed the glass across and folded my arms on the counter, leaning in. Nate seemed like he was made of tension, but it appeared in the shape of masculine gruffness. He gripped the glass that was wet with condensation and had a few long sips before setting it back on the counter. His biceps bulged with disproportionate exertion. "Thanks," he said in a deep, quiet voice.

I was perfectly comfortable in the silence that followed, unlike our guest. He looked around, turning his head left and right, letting me take the full view of his profile. My gaze dropped to his shoulders. They were broad and round, a perfect example of an athlete's physique. He was still working out, no doubt. It made me wonder what his stomach looked like. It sparked images of his bare back the way it existed in my imagination.

"Nice place," he said. "Do you like it here?"

"It's only been a couple of weeks," I said. "But I do. So far."

"I bet the crowd can be a little too much, huh?" Nate looked into my eyes. His were dark brown, smoldering like hot coals. He was all seriousness and broody looks. It took away nothing from the appearance that had had him on the magazine covers as the world's sexiest man several times throughout his long career. Some of those had come out long before I could be a judge of such things, but others had come out at the

perfect time to solidify this crazy, fluttering feeling in my stomach.

I would never admit this to anyone, but I still had the most recent cover. It was upstairs, and it featured Nate Partridge partially dressed in his hockey gear, except that his torso was all bare flesh, and the look on his face was pure determination, like he would leap off the page and grab you by the throat, then make you his plaything.

Instinctively, my feet moved until my thighs pressed together behind the counter, rubbing against each other.

“I didn’t know you could play guitar,” Nate said, his tone a little more relaxed.

It’s my favorite thing in the world, I thought. “It’s nothing. Everyone needs a hobby.”

Nate raised his eyebrows skeptically. It figured. He was like my dad in that way. I had never known him to have an interest beyond hockey. Sometimes, it felt like they were all part of a cult. The dedication they displayed was otherworldly. Some admired it. Then again, those who admired it blindly had never been strong-armed into following the same path.

“Are you still in touch with my dad?” I asked idly. It had been a long time since the last visit, but Nate still played after Dad had left the NHL.

“We talk,” Nate said, shrugging. It was such a straight-guy gesture that it nearly made me chuckle.

“I used to see you so much more often,” I said.

Nate shook his head. “You know how it is. Life gets in the way. Truth be told, I don’t think there’ll ever be a time when we’re not in each other’s lives.” He meant my dad, but the words sounded way too good not to savor for a moment.

“He’s really worried that I’m not pulling in my weight at drills,” I said.

“There’s nothing he should worry about. I wouldn’t let you slack off any more than I would Beckett.” Nate crossed his arms over his chest. It was a great pose. I wished I could snap a photo for my little hidden gallery.

“How lucky we are, the kids of the greats,” I joked.

“Don’t look at it like that, Carter,” he said. “You have raw talent I haven’t seen in a long time.”

So they keep telling me, I wanted to say, but Beckett showed up at the top of the stairs while I gazed up at his uncle with wide eyes. I couldn’t help it. My eyelids simply knew not to obscure my view when Nate was around.

“Uncle,” our team captain greeted Nate. “Sorry I kept you waiting.”

“Don’t worry. Prince kept me entertained.” Nate shot me a grin, reverting to a more coach-like speech pattern. I felt more like a fool than a prince, no matter my name. “Ready?”

Beckett said he was ready for whatever they had in mind, and the two men walked away. Nate shot me a look over his shoulder, thanking me for the water and company.

I drummed my fingers against the smooth surface of the kitchen island, then dragged my ass back to my room. Crashing into the bed, I swiped and tapped the screen of my phone, found the secret gallery, and scrolled through the images of the single most attractive man I had ever seen. These were all publicly available photos, of course, from his long career and the many, many public appearances.

One after another, I swiped through them. Nate Partridge in full hockey gear like a

young god or Nate Partridge advertising an expensive underwear brand. In winter attire or nothing more than a pair of swimming shorts, it was all my new coach. My dad's best and oldest friend. The gruff, straight dude who had known me since before I could walk.

I'd always had a thing for the unattainable men. Young, cocky guys didn't interest me. Especially not when Nate Partridge was aging like fine wine, growing hotter every year.

I had had a crush on him since I was sixteen, just before Dad left the NHL, and their relationship became more long-distance. In the years that followed, seeing Nate on TV and online never failed to send flutters through me. It also never failed to squeeze my heart with melancholy.

Here was a guy who would never notice me. He was drop-dead gorgeous, tall, broody, hot as the fires of hell in which I'd burn if I tried some foolish thing, and kind on top of it all. Despite witnessing me sprout from a child to a young man, Nate never patronized me. He never spoke to me like I was a foolish kid. Seeing me play my guitar didn't earn me a lecture about wasting my time when I could be doing extra drills.

I scrolled through my gallery. Over the years, I had collected more photos than was strictly healthy. I didn't care. Viewing the difference between the photo and the real thing always thrilled me. And coming across some of the hotter photos he'd done for the thirsty fans always turned me on, my legs pressing together on their own, thighs rubbing, fire blazing in my groin. Fuck. The things I would let him do. The things I would do for him...

Despite the fact that my crush on him was only a little over three years old, Nate had had an impact on me since forever. His body, when he was a lot younger and slimmer, had triggered my sexual awakening. A particularly raunchy set of images

had been swirling around the internet for a cologne campaign. Some geniuses imagined that putting Nate Partridge into the bottom half of a Roman soldier's attire would sell the manly scent they had produced. It worked like a charm, making me desperate to own the cologne and, more importantly, slamming me with the realization that I wanted men in all the ways that mattered.

After stumbling through the years of discovery, my heart returned to the man who'd started it all.

Some years later, after a few bad hookups and a tiny number of good ones, I knew nothing would ever cure me of my feelings for this man. He would always be the leviathan in my life. The monument to sex appeal and the embodiment of desire. He would also remain an unattainable wish that I would carry to my grave.

I might as well flirt my ass off around him. It's not like he'll notice me, I thought.

And what if he noticed me making moves? I would look as ridiculous to him as an ostrich, performing my little seduction routine and hoping for a laugh. It wasn't like he would take me off the team. Besides, even if he did, would that be such a loss? I couldn't remember the last time I'd been on ice and loved the game. Not the way all the other guys did. The burning passion to play and win was so visible on their faces. All I had to offer was that raw talent they went on and on about.

For the first time in my life, I was away from Dad and near Nate. For the first time ever, I could dream of shooting my shot, even if I didn't have the balls to do it for real.

Ron was wrong.

I didn't need four years to make bad decisions. I would get mine out of my system by the end of the semester.

THREE

My apartment was sparsely decorated. I'd bought it on a whim, adding the property to a list of places that sparked some kind of an idea on my first viewing, only to be abandoned and gather dust. "Increasing in value," all my financial advisors said.

I didn't care. My lifestyle wasn't lavish. I didn't fly in private jets or spend months globetrotting. If I didn't earn another dime for the rest of my life, I would still live a comfortable life. And there would be something to leave to Beckett someday.

Those were the thoughts that roamed through my head as I sat on the flat black-and-gray sofa, looking at the pitch-black screen of the TV hanging from the wall across. Around it, almost indistinguishable from the soulless light gray walls, were the abstract paintings the previous owner had left behind. Dull hues splattered across the canvas sparked nothing in me except confusion. Perhaps that was the point.

I didn't dwell on the weird art. This was a place near Northwood and more than enough for sleeping in. I did little more than that in here. Mixing myself a drink in the evening was the extent to which I used the state-of-the-art kitchen. Judging by how well maintained it was, I suspected the previous owners weren't chefs either.

My nights were often restless, if not totally sleepless. Every sound would wake me up. My dreams were vivid and brimming with anxiety. My eyelids, heavy throughout the day, would be lighter than feathers in the middle of the night. Closing my eyes would be an invitation to the thoughts that inevitably alerted my senses. The memory of being broken never really left my mind. It lingered and tainted every other thought. And when I entertained it, trying to face the memory full-on, it only tempted worse

things to join it. Is this what you've done with your life, Nathan? That was my own voice speaking. An empty apartment, a cold bed, and a companionless life. Well fucking done.

I wondered why I thought of this so much lately. Perhaps the absence of hockey left a vacuum I didn't know how else to fill. Then again, one in the string of therapists had recently told me that my career might have just been a distraction. Without it, I had nothing else to keep me from facing the things that bothered me my entire life.

I lay in my bed, awake and bored out of my mind. It was well after midnight. I had a staff meeting early in the morning, but it wouldn't be my first meeting after a sleepless night.

More out of boredom than desire, I picked up my phone and swiped through Grindr. I didn't know why I had the damn thing. The few times it had resulted in something had been fun at the time, but they only ever left me feeling empty afterward. They reminded me that a meaningless hookup was the best a guy like me could hope for. I had spent so long in the closet that the daylight burned my eyes whenever I peeked out of it.

There were quite a few active profiles in the area. Swiping up, I was immediately exposed to the countless profiles that looked exactly like mine: no name, no photo, and the undesirable age that ended most conversations before they even started. Those few that moved beyond a polite greeting would end as soon as I shared a picture of myself. Catfish, they'd say. Try passing as someone less known, asshole, they'd say. And so it went like a carousel. The world's sexiest man couldn't get laid. What a fucking joke.

I must have passed out because when I next blinked, my phone was on my bare chest, and the first hints of light against the dark sky were announcing a new day.

After giving up on sleep, I walked out of my big, barren bedroom, passed through the huge living room, turned on the TV for some background noise, found a sports channel running an old hockey game with new, live commentary, and went into the kitchen to prepare some coffee. While it brewed, I showered and shaved, wondering why I bothered, and returned to the kitchen with a towel tied around my waist and wet footsteps on the floor behind me.

When the game blended with the silence of the apartment, becoming just a meaningless buzz, my chest grew so tight that I decided I couldn't spend another minute in here. The compulsion to run away sprouted from the tiny seed instantly. I dressed and stuffed my duffel with gym clothes, grabbed my car keys, wallet, phone, and work stuff, and almost ran out of the apartment.

The nearest gym that was open twenty-four seven was at Northwood's campus, although it was empty through most nights aside from a few insomnia-ridden students from time to time, so I went there to burn off the energy that had once gone into rigorous drills and epic games.

I hurried from the staff's parking lot to the gym as if someone was chasing me, but the campus was devoid of people. At five in the morning, even the partygoers were sprawling on spare couches in fraternity houses.

The silence at the gym meant nothing to me. After changing into workout clothes, I plugged in my earphones and kicked things off with a leg-breaking run on the treadmill. Sweat soon broke out all over my body, my lungs burned, and my vision blurred. After I spent the excess energy running, I made the rounds on the machines. The gym was incredibly well equipped for a college facility. Then again, Northwood was an athlete-printing machine. Each year, their graduates went on to fill the ranks of all the national leagues. From hockey to water polo to the good old football and baseball teams, Northwood forged them all.

I pushed my body to the limit this morning, although my limit was nowhere near what it used to be. The weeks I had spent in recovery had weakened me. It was the longest time I had gone without exercising since college. Maybe even longer. I couldn't remember a time when I hadn't been working out. The vanity that had existed in me in my youth hadn't waned with years. If anything, it had grown stronger.

After my clothes were drenched with sweat and my muscles burning, I returned to the locker room. I peeled off the sweaty clothes and rubbed the spot where my collarbone had been broken. I didn't feel it exactly. There was nothing to feel. It had healed well enough that I could play without any major risks. Plenty of players recovered from similar injuries and continued their careers. Not me, though. Not me, when the injury was not the thing that had plagued me. It was the softness that came with age, the slowing down in reflexes by a millisecond that some commentators who had never held a stick in their hands judged to be crucial. They taunted me loudly to step away, leaving me no choice.

The face that had once adorned the covers was a poster child for overstaying your welcome now.

I tied a towel around my waist after stepping out of the shower. In the silence of the locker room, I never expected someone might be present until I left a wet trail between the shower and the lockers. When I rounded the corner, I saw him from behind. My wet footsteps alerted him a second before I cleared my throat, and Carter Prince turned his head over his shoulder with a little frown that melted away as soon as recognition set in.

"Coach," he said as a greeting.

"Hey, Carter." My voice was deep but soft. "What are you doing here so early?"

The kid had a light hoodie on and a pair of knee-length shorts. His gym bag was on the bench on the far side of the locker room, a key to his locker dangling from his hand. “Looks like you were here first,” he said in a voice so light that I imagined he was teasing me somehow.

“I’m not a college student,” I said.

Carter gave a little snort that was softened by the playful look that followed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I don’t need to sleep that much,” I tried explaining.

Carter crossed his arms on his chest and mock pouted. “Are you suggesting all students party every night and need to sleep in when they can?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I said, allowing a hint of a wolfish grin to reach my face.

Carter’s gaze dropped down my wet torso, and I abruptly realized I was practically naked. I wondered what the locker room etiquette was between college coaches and players. We’d both been in locker rooms all our lives — that was twice as long for me as it was for Carter — but never in this capacity.

When Carter lifted his gaze to my eyes again, there wasn’t a trace of awareness that he had just examined my torso in plain sight. Or, if there was some awareness, there was no shame to point to it. His expression was still the same light smirk he always wore, his eyes were big and brown and warm, and his dimples were there in hints, if not in reality.

“I’m glad you didn’t stop working out,” he said, acknowledging his actions without the slightest trace of guilt. His tone was compassionate, but compassion from a nineteen-year-old kid was possibly the last thing I wanted. “Some guys would have

given up.”

I clenched my teeth and swallowed hard. I had given up. Even now, I wasn’t sure I was working for something. “Old habits,” I said in a much more airy voice than I’d wanted. “When you’re my age, you’ll see how hard it is to unlearn the behaviors that defined your life.”

“Oof,” Carter said as if witnessing someone who’d just stubbed their toe. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’re ninety.”

I narrowed my eyes a little and looked at this guy. “I was older on the day you were born than you are now. You’d be smart to listen to me.”

He cracked a smile again. “Suit yourself, Coach.”

He sounded like I insisted on acting old. Then again, this kid couldn’t know what it was like. He didn’t see the landscape change around him. And he definitely couldn’t imagine the weight of years when your age is dragged through all the magazines that had once touted you as a man in his prime. The thing about being in your prime is that it passes, but you remain. I’d never seen it coming, this life that followed.

Carter looked at the row of lockers, and his eyebrows lifted. He closed the distance to the locker, pushed the key into it, and then opened the door. I stood still. Our lockers were near one another, and I wasn’t about to take my towel off in front of a kid who played on my team. And I wasn’t going to do that silly dance of dragging your underwear up your legs while keeping the towel around your waist, either. I would wait.

The decision bit me in the ass a moment later. Carter grabbed the bottom edge of his hoodie, and it flew over his head, revealing a sculpted torso only the true athletes could achieve. The definition told a story of someone who’d been thrust into this at a

young age. He'd begun his transformation in middle school, I knew, but this guy next to me was nothing like the kid I had entertained at Dana's parties. Turning slightly away from me, Carter showed off his back. His broad shoulders and defined lats made his torso triangular. The trapezoids from his neck to his shoulders were steep enough to attract attention.

I swallowed and held my breath. As Carter pulled his shorts down, I looked away. It was one thing to notice an athlete's definition and another to look at him changing. He'd turned away from me for a reason. I wasn't going to violate that.

As I turned my back to him, I looked for my locker's key in the pockets of the sweaty shorts I held in one hand. When I found it, I faced the lockers and opened mine, acting busy. In the periphery of my vision, however, Carter wasn't moving at all.

Rummaging through my locker, I battled my indecision. To change or not to change? It was almost laughable. My gaze darted briefly to my right, seeing clearly that Carter was now facing me. He stood still in his underwear. Though I didn't let myself look, I couldn't escape noticing that they were dark green with a white waistband.

Following my glance, I turned my head and looked into his eyes, my hands resting on the edge of the locker. Even without looking, I could tell his pecs were rounded and firm, his stomach ridged with abs, and his waist narrow.

"I always thought they photoshopped you a little on those magazine covers," he said. I wasn't sure if he was joking. The frown that creased my brow prompted a laugh from him. "I figured they had to. They do that to models, you know?"

"I'm not a model," I said, voice dry for some reason. The tension that soared in my chest was probably not proportionate to the tension in the room. This was just a kid letting his mouth run wild. It didn't mean anything. Even so, I would rather have avoided talking about my body with a nineteen-year-old guy in the locker room while

wearing nothing but a towel.

“And it looks like they didn’t airbrush you, either,” he said, broadening his smile.

“Carter.” I tried to firm up my voice. Paranoia had been running unchecked in my head since the accident, and I was beginning to worry that Carter had some suspicions. As if anyone would still matter which gender you’re sleeping with. Your career is over, old man. My face stiffened at my own thoughts.

Carter cut me off before I could tell him to stop. “I’m trying to say that it’s inspiring, Coach. You want us inspired, right?”

I licked my lips clumsily. Why was it so hard to get my thoughts in order? I must have dehydrated myself during the workout. “I suppose I do.”

“You’re doing a good job, then.” He put his hands on his hips. Was he showing off his biceps? They constricted even though his gesture didn’t seem to ask for it. “I work out nearly every day, but I don’t think I can look like that. Not with my routine, at least.”

The kid’s just looking for advice, I told myself before letting my gaze run over his body. “What’s your routine?” I asked coolly. If I didn’t act scared of seeing an attractive person, it wouldn’t be weird. I crossed my arms, and Carter looked at my arms.

“Short cardio warm-up, then the three-group split,” he said. “I mostly do free weights unless I have to use the machine. It helps with core strength and stability.” He went on to describe a fairly standard workout routine that any personal trainer might devise for their clients. He tracked the weights religiously and measured the results in an elaborate spreadsheet that he promised to show me, even when I insisted it wasn’t necessary. He targeted particular muscle groups when he felt they weren’t getting

enough attention.

Throughout it all, I struggled to keep my eyes on his face. Often, he would turn around and press his fingers on a certain spot on his back to show me what he felt was wrong. Once, he hooked his fingers at the bottom seams of his underwear and pulled them up, explaining what he disliked about his quads. His hand sometimes moved over his abs, but he didn't seem to notice it. And when he took a step toward me, asking me to put a hand on the outer side of his chest, I leaped back like a demon he sprinkled with holy water.

"It's not necessary," I blurted, my heart rate spiking. "Your routine's fine, Carter. Do you consume enough protein?"

He pulled a step back and took a moment to gather himself. He licked his lips, and I hated how shiny they were afterward. "I do. I track that, too. I try to be in a big calorie surplus every day with the macros the app calculated, but I'm not growing like I used to."

I tightened the grip my arms had on my torso and sighed. "There are a few reasons why the growth slows. I'm not a nutritionist, by the way, but it sounds to me like you're wasting some of your reps. It'd be wiser to cut down on fancy stuff and stick with the basics." After a moment of hesitation, I said the more important thing, not because I wanted to but because he needed to hear it. "There's nothing wrong with the way you look, Carter. You're young and healthy, and you're built like an athlete. Your performance won't be any better if you bulk up, and I don't think you have secret bodybuilding ambitions." If anything, the kid's got artistic ambitions, I thought. "I believe you're imagining most of what you think your body lacks. And purely for aesthetic reasons. Am I right?"

His lips tightened for a moment so brief that I wasn't sure it had even happened.

I let him off the hook and spoke on. “You look fine, Carter.”

“You think?” I wished he didn’t sound so insecure just then. Two words, but they shoved a dagger into my chest. How do you prove to a nineteen-year-old that he’s attractive when he’s convinced otherwise?

“Don’t let your insecurities dictate your life, kid,” I said. “Your body’s perfect as it is.”

I regretted those words when Carter’s face turned a shade more pink. “Don’t call me that, Coach. Not you.” He smiled before turning to his locker and pulling out a pair of very short shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt. As he dressed, we let the silence creep in, and it was a relief. In my imagination, the green training attire combined with his red cheeks made him look like a rosebud.

I didn’t know how to talk to these young guys. I didn’t know which things not to say. Hell, I barely knew the language some of them spoke these days. Carter spoke like an old-school guy, but I’d still embarrassed him.

I had to remind myself that he was, after all, just a college freshman, despite being an old soul with an affinity for the arts. I also had to remember that he was a gay kid who’d come out to a lukewarm reception in his own home. That must have affected the way he saw himself. God knew I had been riddled with insecurities my entire life because I felt this driving need to compensate. The sense of wrongness in my desires had caused a lifetime of fighting to feel like I was good enough.

When he was dressed, he looked at me again. “I better get started before the crowd arrives,” he said.

“That’s why you’re here at the crack of dawn, huh?” I slowly lifted some of my clean clothes out of the locker.

“Not a fan of big groups,” he said and moved to pass by my side. He slowed down, shoulder to shoulder, although he was nearly a head shorter than me. “Thanks for the chat, Coach. It helps.”

As he walked away, I stayed wondering whether I’d embarrassed him at all or if the talk helped. Or was he just polite? I didn’t know much about anything, I decided, and finally put some underwear on. My phone dinged with the unique notification sound that made my heart leap. Fucking idiot! I’d forgotten to silence it this morning after browsing that goddamn app, and now some Grindr user was hitting me up. I looked over my shoulder, but Carter was gone already.

My days were generally uneventful. Today was no different, aside from running into Carter Prince in the locker room, for which I reprimanded myself later. If I had any sense in my old head, I would search for another gym to visit in my insomnia-fueled escape from boredom. Coming to this one was like asking for problems.

And while I kept Carter firmly out of my thoughts for most of the day — charting out this season’s plans with the assistant coaches was a good distraction — it was harder to ignore him during the drills. Seeing him in his full gear, moving swiftly between the players, and exhibiting a great deal of Dana’s unique moves and traits tickled some images from our dawn encounter. Having to keep my eyes on his body as he glided across the smooth ice certainly didn’t help me forget what he looked like in those green boxers.

At the end of the day, I returned to the soulless apartment to mix myself a drink. It wasn’t a cocktail I’d ever tried to make before, but it would do. Based on whiskey and with a few similar smoky flavors and a coffee bean, it wasn’t my favorite. I swiped through my notifications while sitting on a tall chair and leaning against the kitchen island’s counter. The subtle lights in the room were comforting to my eyes, but the blinding blue light of the screen caused a throb of headache in the front of my skull.

One of the notifications was the damned Grindr ping from this morning. Some random guy with a profile as empty of personal information as mine had dropped me a photo that I shouldn't have opened. Rolling my eyes, I blocked the guy and scrolled around. The red dot indicating visitors made me tap on it instinctively, and I scrolled through the profiles that had checked me out. Not that there was anything to look at here. Instead of any dirty or creative nickname, my profile simply displayed my age, height, and weight. I debated removing the latter two because they were pointless identifiers to me. Superficial decisions about not dating anyone under six feet or of a certain weight were the fastest way to bore me to death and kill the conversation. Then again, I wasn't dating anyone, so I couldn't claim to be the authority on how people should do it.

I just knew I didn't care for people who were exclusive about something so irrelevant.

I stopped scrolling and almost choked on a sip of my shitty attempt at a new hobby. My hand jerked away from the phone like it was a venomous viper. I stared at the square picture of a visitor to my profile and counted the hours to get the time stamp.

It was Carter.

Without opening his profile at all, I saw his head and torso photographed in front of a mirror. He had that cheeky grin of his and a daring look in his eyes as if to tempt me to hit him up. Not me, exactly, but the visitors. And he had looked at my profile sixteen hours ago, around when we had been in the same gym. Just the two of us.

My heart pounded, and my mouth burned from whiskey. He could pick me out even if the gym had been brimming with college students. Thirty-eight years old, six foot four, a hundred and ninety pounds. God dammit. I was a tragically stupid man. Had I seriously thought those numbers wouldn't be enough for someone who knew me to put the pieces together? Besides, we had been the only two people in the locker room

and the entire gym, aside from the girl who worked at the desk and was unlikely to pass herself as a middle-aged man on a gay hookup app. Simply seeing that I was ten feet away from him would have been enough for Carter to identify me.

Breathe, I snapped at myself. It was hard to obey that simple command when my chest collapsed. As if a piano dropped on my head, I was completely stunned.

Before I could think about it, I tapped on Carter's profile, forced myself not to hesitate to look at the large gallery of images he had posted, and blocked him immediately. I would not look at a student of mine. Not even if he was the most attractive person I had ever seen. And especially not since his visit to my profile obviously only meant he had discovered the truth about me.

I walked my mind back to the drills. The grins he shot me between his turns were nothing unusual. He hadn't dropped any hints that he knew.

Even so, I didn't want to attract his attention. If he looked for me here, he wouldn't find me. With time, he would begin to doubt if it had even been me. But just to be sure, I removed the remaining information from my profile.

I'd had a lifetime of hooking up discreetly and protecting my name and brand from the truth that would lose me far too many fans.

Envy glimmered deep in me. It soured my insides. These boys were lucky. I was happy for them. I was. But twenty years ago, I couldn't have imagined being so free with kissing a guy in front of a crowd or, God forbid, posting my half-nude photos on a hookup app without an attempt to hide my identity.

Carter should have been smarter than this. There were nasty people out there who'd find a way to use this to embarrass him and belittle him, hinder his rise to stardom, and hurt his father. No, not the last one, I scolded myself. Nobody should change how

they live to suit their parents.

But he still needed to be careful.

He was young and beautiful. He had the best years still ahead of him. If he wasn't careful, he could make a blunder with the wrong person. He risked not just his career or reputation but his health and his mental well-being.

And I was in no place to give him advice. Not only would I not reveal to him that he'd discovered the truth, but I was an aging closet case who was in no position to lecture anyone. I'd let my life run me over. What were my words worth to someone who was living his life on his own terms?

Page 4

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FOUR

He knew that I knew.

My ears had been ringing all day after his naughty little Grindr alert. That rolling little sound of a new message was all too familiar to my ears. Hearing it from the locker room as I left Nate behind felt like getting slammed with a fire extinguisher in the back of my head. I had nearly lost my step and fallen down face-first when Nate's message arrived.

By the time I had climbed upstairs to where the cardio equipment was lined up for use, my phone had been in my hand, and the nearest profile in my normally desired age range was an empty one with just enough info to guarantee that my suspicion was correct.

Nate Partridge was on Grindr.

And he had blocked me an hour ago.

Maybe he deleted his account, I thought fleetingly but decided it was probably the former. Not that I would have hit him up on a hookup site. Screw that. I hated the culture on the app, but having it in a new city was as good a way to dip my toe in as any.

For the better part of the day, the idea that Nate was hooking up with random men off an app was too big and thorny to fit inside my head. Not to mention the blazing jealousy that threatened to turn me into a pile of ash.

Nate Partridge, the world's sexiest man in 2021, as well as three more times in the past, was gay. And he was sleeping around with guys in our area. And none of those guys was me.

I kicked the comforter off my body and punched the pillow to adjust it under my head. Anger boiled in me before I could let some cold reason calm me down.

Luckily, Ron was downstairs with a few of the other guys, and I could throw my tantrum in peace.

If I somehow turned off the rage at the obvious injustice of him not even bothering to check me out when I was all but naked two feet in front of him — and don't get me started on the way he ran away when I asked him to feel my pecs! It wasn't even a sexual proposition — I could see how it all made sense. The most desirable bachelor who had never been in a relationship media reported on turning out to be secretly gay was no big reveal. Sure, he'd had dates for big events, but he'd rarely been seen with the same woman more than once or twice. For a short time, reports swirled around that he was a playboy, but Nate stopped taking girls to heavily publicized events. Especially after he had once been spotted with his former sister-in-law and nephew. Stories of a secret relationship with his brother's ex hit the headlines, and Nate went out of his way to squash that gossip.

So, no, it was not shocking to learn that Nate was on a different team. The shock was that I hadn't even suspected it.

My entire life, Nate Partridge was the image of perfect masculinity, and growing up in my dad's house meant that perfect masculinity couldn't possibly be gay.

I wanted to growl simply by thinking of that. Not that he was a bigot, but Dad drew a line between "men" and "gay men" in ways that harmed everyone involved.

Even when my crush on Nate threatened to rip a hole in my chest, it didn't cross my mind that such a man could be gay. Dad's thoughts were running way too deep. The prejudice was instilled in me, even when I tried to do everything to shake it off. Even when it was the prejudice against my own self.

I sat up and shoved the pillow against the headboard of my bed, pulled my knees up, folded my arms around them, and nestled my head in them. A shudder passed through me as I squeezed my eyes shut so hard that they caused a minor headache.

Too many emotions swirled through me. Contempt for my dad, an ever-present feeling, was emphasized tonight. His way of thinking had never failed to mess with me, but tonight, I felt it harder than most times. The revelation that Nate Partridge was gay triggered this stupid glimmer of hope somewhere deep in me. As if Nate being gay directly resulted in him wanting a scrawny, clumsy kid like me. I knew for a fact that nothing about me sparked any interest in him.

Mostly, though, it was jealousy. I hated being that guy, but I had very vivid ideas of some ripped and shredded men lining up in front of Nate's apartment, and I wanted to scratch their eyes out.

He wasn't dating anyone secretly if he was on Grindr. That much I was sure of. And it couldn't be some long-standing arrangement, either. Nate hadn't lived here until a month ago. He was cruising the app. He was looking at the kinds of guys that were nearby.

Hookups, then. That was what he was out for. And that was where my anger focused. None of the men off the goddamn app deserved him. None of them knew him. None of them had had the years of crushing on him to guide their hands.

Annoyed out of my mind, I dragged myself out of my bed, put on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt, and headed downstairs to the basement. Down there, our

goalie, Sawyer, who lived off campus, was telling Ron how he and his physics tutor had coached one another in their respective areas of expertise — Sawyer's was the art of picking people up — and how they had gotten together a few years ago. Caden was listening to Jordan Mitchell and Asher Sullivan as they told their story in a heated hurry to finish one another's sentences. Phoenix played one of the arcade games on the vintage machine in the corner, and Beckett sat on the edge of the soccer table nobody ever used.

Entering, I made the sign of the cross at the finger-painted nude portrait of a guy who used to live in this house, whose back and ass were vividly depicted against a green-and-orange background of a scenic sunset on some grassy hill. I didn't know what I was doing, except that all the guys made the same gesture to the painting whenever they entered the basement.

"Hey, stranger," Beckett said over his shoulder when I walked in. "Coming out of your den and joining the civilized world, huh?"

I nodded once. The minifridge had cans of cold beer, and I picked one for myself and one for Beckett when he asked for it. Joining him at the soccer table, I handed him the can and opened mine.

"Ron was just saying how college is different from what he'd expected," Beckett said. Like most of the guys down here, he was a senior. Unlike any of them, he was related to a hockey legend, just like me. "How are you finding it?" he asked.

"Erm...good," I said tightly. If only your uncle would notice me when I stood nearly naked in front of him, then everything would be pretty damn neat. "I dunno. It's different from school, that's for sure."

Beckett was silent for a little while, then leaned in and bumped into my shoulder with his. "It helps to have a famous dad, am I right?" I snorted, thinking he was joking

until his brow wrinkled a little. “Nobody’s giving you shit about that, right?”

“No,” I said right away. “It’s not that.”

“Good,” he said. “Some of the guys used to think I was here because Nate’s my uncle. I wouldn’t want to see that happen to anyone else.”

The story had it that the division in the team drove Beckett and Caden to cooperate, leading them to cooperate a little more than anyone had expected. They were now a power couple that held the team together.

“Do you ever feel...?” I stopped myself, my question dangling unfinished in the air. Beckett tilted his head curiously, and I closed my eyes for a few moments. Inhaling a deep breath of air, I went ahead and asked it. “Do you feel any pressure because your uncle is so famous?” When he was quiet for a time, I elaborated. “It’s like there’s no winning. If I’m not as good as Dana Prince, everyone will say I’m just riding on my father’s fame. If I’m better, I guess it’ll just create resentment. And who are we kidding? I’m not gonna be better than my dad. Doesn’t that worry you?”

Beckett bit his lip playfully. “Well, fuck. It didn’t worry me until now.”

“Sorry,” I sighed.

The captain threw his arm over my shoulders and laughed out loud. “I’m messing with you, Prince. But to answer your question: no, it doesn’t bother me at all. It used to, but then I decided I couldn’t let that stop me. There are hundreds of famous players I’ll never be able to beat. Thousands. So why does it matter if one of them is my uncle? The best I can do is to do my best.”

I snorted so loudly that even he chuckled.

“I think I’ll print that on a T-shirt,” Beckett mused. “Anyway, my point is that you’re not your father, and no one expects you to be. Measuring yourself against him will only make you miserable.”

“That’s fucking encouraging,” I joked.

Beckett gave a deep shrug, pulling his arm away from my shoulders. “It’s the best I’ve got.”

“Thanks,” I said. I meant it. It helped in a way, although I couldn’t exactly come out and tell him that hockey had never been the thing I wanted to do with my life. Not when I played on his goddamn team. And definitely not when his uncle, the coach, was my biggest crush in the galaxy and possibly beyond. For Nate, I’d stick around on the off chance that I would run into him in the locker room again. I’d stick around as if I had a choice.

It occurred to me the day after the next that I was doing this wrong. I went to the gym in my usual hour, but Nate was nowhere to be seen. I imagined he had moved his slot to an even earlier hour so we wouldn’t run into each other in the locker room now that we both knew his secret. Yet I struggled to understand why he would. It wasn’t like I’d said or done something to make things weird.

As much as I preferred my gym time to be quiet, I would have rather bumped into the six-plus feet of pure sex in the locker room again. I hadn’t seen Nate Partridge topless in years. Back then, I didn’t know how to appreciate it. I was sure I knew better now. The other morning, standing in front of him, looking up whenever I wanted to meet his gaze, or scanning his torso with all the attention of the steel muscles that guy had even after the injury that had kept him in the bed for weeks, had been the best thrill of this semester.

But I just couldn’t catch him again.

During practice, he was surrounded by assistant coaches and other players. In the mornings, he was always gone before I arrived at the gym. So, by the end of the week, I made a new decision. I would start working out an hour earlier.

The first morning of my brand-new routine was like being splashed with a bucket of icy water while sleeping in a soft, warm bed. I grumbled and dragged my sorry ass out of bed, brushed my teeth, washed my face, and trudged to the gym while only the barest hints of pale golden light were visible in the east. When I got there, more ice water awaited. Nate didn't show up.

"Cut down," he'd told me. He probably wasn't coming every day, but I would have to if I wanted to run into him privately again. And when we met each other again, I would have to act like it was a pure accident and not a carefully concocted plan.

I sighed and did my workout to the psychedelic hits of the last century. They were all bangers that lifted my mood and, at times, made my fingers move as if I were playing the epic guitar solos.

After that first morning, my new schedule didn't get any easier. Juggling gym, drills, studies, and some guitar practice hours was a challenge when all I ever wanted to do was nap, snack, and fuck. The last one was a miserable miss, to be sure, but it did nothing to curb my drive.

After a week of knowing with total certainty that Nate was out there, sleeping with men, my anger simmered perpetually in the daytime, but my dick stirred while I slept. More than before, those annoying mid-sleep hard-ons woke me up. Being a belly sleeper was extra inconvenient. It started feeling as though I was trapped in an enchanted circle; frustration fueled my late-night arousals, which then frustrated me beyond belief. It was only a question of when I would explode.

Some two weeks after the gym encounter, I still hadn't run into Nate in the mornings,

and I suspected that he had changed gyms. That evening, the drills were particularly hard. Coach Partridge, who was a much sterner person than the sweet, sexy Nate I dreamed of, was riding my ass in all the ways that weren't fun. He had me playing center, and the offensive was not my cup of tea; he paired me with different players every time, even though I had a good thing with Ron in drills; he even singled me out for putting on my gear incorrectly one time. The last one was an embarrassing error I couldn't deny. I also couldn't tell anyone the true reason. While putting on the gear, I had been daydreaming about my coach, and some of the straps didn't fit the right way.

In short, the time that followed the greatest discovery of my life was pretty much total misery. I should have been happy that Nate was gay. At least in theory, that should have made me hopeful. But in practice, it made me distracted and jealous. And the worst thing was that Nate's knowing had pushed him even further away from me.

Part of my heart wished he was actually straight. Longing after him and knowing I would never have a chance hurt ever so slightly less than the thought that I had pushed him away.

It crossed my mind once, briefly, that it was possible Nate didn't know I'd found him on Grindr. Perhaps he had just found my profile and blocked me for the simple fact that he found me unattractive. In his eyes, I was probably just his best friend's kid and nothing else. He likely couldn't imagine what a giant he was in my life. He had no idea how deeply he had touched me so many times as I was growing up, and not just by being my awakening but with his kindness, too. When Dad had grumbled about my poor performance on the ice one time, Nate had scolded him for hurting my self-esteem.

Who else could I have fallen in love with after that?

After practice, I showered and waited for others to leave. I put on clean underwear in

the shower, which I always did, and finished dressing up in the locker room. Then, slowly, I carried my duffel down the hallway until I neared Nate's office. His door was partially open, and no sounds came from the other side of the door.

I dared myself to enter his office. It made my heart skip a beat. I stepped inside and found Nate Partridge all alone. He looked away from his computer screen and into my eyes. He was so stiff in his chair that I could tell he was uncomfortable. "Hey, Coach," I said.

"Prince," he replied. "What can I do for you?"

I shut the door behind my back without asking. "I just wanted to say sorry," I said. "You were right to call me out on tardiness."

Nate frowned a little. As he leaned back, he seemed just as uncomfortable. It was crazy how out of place he looked in here. "I never thought of you as amateurish, Prince."

I bit my lower lip and winced. After a moment of hesitation, I said, "I wish you wouldn't call me Prince when nobody's around."

He forced a chuckle. "Now you sound like Partridge." He meant Beckett, of course, and it made perfect sense. "I am your coach, for better or worse."

I crossed my arms on my chest because he didn't invite me to sit down, and I didn't want to presume that much. "I have a sense you're not too happy with that," I said.

Nate snapped his mouth shut and lifted his eyebrows briefly. I wondered if that was a smile he was fighting to hold back. "What gave me away?"

This was a dangerous conversation to get into. My heart thumped faster as I licked

my lips. Did he know what this sounded like? Did he do it on purpose? “You’re doing a great job, Nate,” I said softly.

Nate put his hands on the desk and pushed himself up to his feet. Slowly, he came around the desk and sat on its edge, crossing his arms like me but making it appear a lot more casual. He was so tall that even when he was sitting at the edge of the desk, our gazes were level. “Why are you here, Prince?”

I pressed my lips together for a moment. “I guess I just wanted to say how much I appreciate what you’re doing for this team.”

He nodded slowly, never taking his gaze off my face. His arms were so muscular that he couldn’t hide the biceps under the hoodie. The sight made me work for air against the pressure that mounted on my chest. But Nate just shrugged. “And what are you doing here, at Northwood?”

“What do you mean?” Was that defensive? A little bit. But the question stung. It stung because I knew precisely what he meant.

“You’re immensely talented, Carter, yet you’re making newbie mistakes almost every day.” He wasn’t saying anything. Instead, he let me say it.

I hesitated only a moment, then remembered that Nate was the guy who’d had my back so many times before. Sure, he’d always done it as an adult to a child, but he had to know I wasn’t a child anymore. He had to see me as more than that. If anything, he would understand that my troubles were beyond a child’s. “Maybe you’re not the only one doing something he doesn’t want to,” I suggested.

Nate swallowed and looked at the floor. “Does Dana know you feel this way?”

I snorted with pure contempt. “He does, he doesn’t; it makes no difference.”

“You’re underestimating your old man, kid,” Nate said.

“Don’t patronize me, please,” I said in a tone that wasn’t asking for conflict. It was a step detached from begging. “Not you.” I looked at him with all the honesty clear on my face. He had to treat me like an adult. I couldn’t always be the kid. And if he expected me to embarrass him or tell him I knew his secret, he had to see I wasn’t going to.

“Alright,” Nate said simply. “I’m sorry, Carter.” He used my name, not my surname. That had to mean some barrier was down. “I know this is partly Dana’s ambition, Carter, but I also know you love hockey.”

Do I still love it? I wondered. A long time ago, I loved it like nothing else. But then, the pressure began piling up. “I’m not so sure anymore. I’m not sure when his ambition became stronger than my love for it.”

Nate was quiet for a long while. I almost believed he wouldn’t speak. But then, he sucked a shallow breath of air through his teeth. “I see that you’re not kidding. It’s as tough as it gets, Carter.”

“Nate?” I asked, expecting him to give me a scolding look for using his first name in his office. He didn’t. He was the same guy that used to entertain me in Dad’s pool. He was the guy that got me roller skates for Christmas because he assumed Dad would want to buy the ice skates. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

I could swear I saw beads of sweat breaking over his brow. The pained expression he shot me was a clear plea not to ask. “If you must.” His deep voice was guarded, emotionless.

“Why did you accept this job?” I said, cutting the torture short. I wasn’t so cruel or so stupid. He didn’t want to talk about Grindr. That much was clear from two weeks of

us not crossing paths, even though we had been running into one another so often in the days before. “Sometimes, you look like you’d rather be doing anything else.”

Nate narrowed his eyes suspiciously, sharing a moment of discreet honesty with me. He came so close to smirking that a laugh tore free from my lips. “What else was I supposed to do?” he asked, his somber tone winning over our little moment of lightness. I’m nearing forty with nowhere else to turn.”

“I dunno. There’s always pottery,” I said.

He chuckled, but his heart wasn’t in it. “Murray asked it as a favor to the team he spent his life coaching. When he retired, another coach was supposed to take over, but he was delayed for personal reasons, and Murray came to me. I was a mess, Carter. You have to understand. They’d just asked me to retire because the pressure was growing too high. I lost my purpose.”

I winced.

“Yeah,” Nate said, nodding toward me. “I hope you never know what it’s like.” After a brief silence, he continued. “Murray knew I would need something to keep me busy, and his word carries weight here.”

“Being one of the most popular hockey players of our time probably helps, too,” I said.

“Don’t get cheeky with me,” he teased. We shared a short laugh. “So now I coach you because pottery’s not my kind of a gig.”

I inhaled a deep breath of air and looked at the floor between us. Though it was only a couple of paces of distance, it felt like miles separated us. It felt like there was an insurmountable wall between us, and hope flickered out of me. How could I ever

imagine him settling for some wimpy kid like me? Those words sounded like my dad to the point that I wanted to laugh. “I think,” I said, lifting my gaze slowly along his muscled legs. He wore black sweatpants that didn’t do such a great job of concealing the bulge, but I didn’t dare let my gaze linger there despite every fiber of my being wanting to. “I think you’re wrong.”

Nate lifted his eyebrows in mild surprise.

“You think there’s nothing left to live for because you retired a year sooner than you planned. I get it. It sucks to see your name next to all the speculation about aging.” I snorted at that. “But did you really let that get to you?”

Nate said nothing. He looked at me, his eyes deep like pools of infinite hurt with only glimmers of hope drowning at the bottom.

“You were named the sexiest man alive three years ago. And that was your fourth,” I said, my voice growing louder to emphasize that point. “Do you really think your life ends with retirement? Purpose...that’s just another way of saying your habits got disrupted.” I challenged myself to take a step toward him with no rewards in mind. “Think about it. We all want to do something we enjoy, right? And if we get to do that often enough, we call it a purpose. But there’s nobody in the world who only likes this one thing, who’s good at one single thing. I meant it when I said you were a great coach, but if you’re miserable...” I shrugged, realizing that we both now knew I was talking about myself as much as I was talking about him. “Maybe it’s not worth it wasting your life on it.” I looked away.

Nate was sitting on the edge of his desk in total silence. I wondered how he did it. Even his breathing was so quiet that I didn’t really hear it. “When did you become so wise, Carter?” The amusement in his voice tickled me, but I focused on staying serious.

I lifted my gaze to meet his. Those glowing chestnuts he had for eyes... “I’m not a kid anymore.”

“No, you’re not,” he agreed, never taking his gaze from my face. “I see that.”

It was hard to describe or even understand the relief I felt when I walked out of his office. It wasn’t the relief at parting ways. If anything, I wished we could spend all evening talking like this. The relief came from the very particular feeling of adulthood and recognition. Nate saw me as an equal. He had known already I was no longer a child, but I didn’t think it had penetrated all the way into his skull until now that we were two adults. He might be my coach and my dad’s friend, but he knew that I was more than a confused college freshman.

That night, for a change, I didn’t stew in jealousy until I passed out. Instead, I struggled to keep the smile off my face.

Page 5

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FIVE

For days, Carter's words followed me. Everything I did, I wondered if it meant anything. I questioned all my actions against the idea of purpose. In theory, the kid — the young man! I couldn't get advice from him on how to live my life and still call him a kid — the young man should have been right.

Collecting stamps crossed my mind, and I wondered if that would give me any less purpose than coaching. I wondered if I could find something to keep me busy without it perpetually poking me where it hurt the most.

The ugly truth was that watching these young men in the rink filled me with envy. I hated being that person, but I couldn't rid myself of that horrible, oily feeling. They got to do something I couldn't. And it was especially pronounced on the night of our first friendly game against Blizzard Breakers, the rival team in the city. Their ranks were filled with talented players, and their captain's energy matched my nephew's. In some ways, young Grayson Reed was a more appropriate fit for the captaincy than Beckett. He had a way of motivating his team simply by his presence. Of course, I didn't know the internal mechanics among them the way I knew how the Arctic Titans functioned. Beckett kept a clean house. It would be hard to pick one over the other if I were to choose, as both captains had unique qualities and weaknesses.

I observed the game with tension coiling my guts. My feet were on fire for a good chunk of the second period while it seemed like my guys were about to get their asses kicked. The battle on the ice was vicious, and the sneaky tactics my boys used were becoming predictable.

When they finally started lagging by a couple of points, the second period ended, and I gathered my guys in the locker room for a quick meeting. The break would last longer while they smoothed the ravaged ice.

“Reed sees through you,” I pointed out, looking at Beckett but speaking to everyone. “It’s time to switch things up. Prince, you’re in. Partridge, do you have an ace up that sleeve? Wipe that smirk off your face.”

“I’m not worried about Reed, Coach,” Beckett said. “We always let them get soft in the second period.”

I demanded to know what he meant, although we had gone over something similar just a week earlier in drills. Beckett laid out his plan, but I disagreed with a couple of points that depended more on luck than skill. After a few minutes, I approved my nephew’s ideas, which was an odd thing for a coach to do, but the Titans had always been a more democratic team than I was used to. It seemed like Beckett had more of the makings of a true captain than I had given him credit for.

Carter didn’t protest having to play. The simple truth was that he was a secret weapon in our defenses. Even if his performance in practice was deteriorating over the last couple of weeks, I gambled on him. And my instincts were right. When the final period kicked off, Beckett’s front line charged mercilessly, engaging the Breakers in key positions, but the star of the period was Carter. When pushed hard, he shone like fireworks and shooting stars. He was especially good when paired with Asher Sullivan, even if he believed his roommate was a better fit. The two boys snatched the puck several times from the opponents, not even letting the Breakers get to Sawyer Price.

With the two teams being deadlocked until the last few minutes, I discovered just how invested I was in the game. My boys were like Roman soldiers on a battlefield. For all the messing around in drills, they were disciplined and aligned. As they

mounted the final push, my heart thundered, and my fingernails dug into the palms of my hands, fists tightening until my knuckles were white.

As much as this game was a test of my team's abilities, it was a lesson for my own coaching skills. I had noticed the rival coaches dictating the flow of the game, which did the opposite of what they wanted. Keeping a tight leash was sometimes inferior to letting the team find their rhythm. At times, my boys were like very skilled jazz players.

And when they scored the two points in close succession that would earn them an undisputed victory, the rink was in uproar of celebrations.

Taking his helmet off, Carter Prince was grinning like this was the greatest thing he'd done in his life, and he had a good reason for it. Seeing how bright his face was with pride, I felt my heart leaping uncontrollably. You did it, I thought. I knew you could.

For all that talk of losing the love for the sport, his body knew what to do in the thick of it. And when he skated across the rink to leave the ice, he seemed a foot taller with the sheer joy lifting him off the ground.

"Well done, Prince," I said with unfiltered pride in my voice. "You were incredible tonight." I put a hand on his shoulder but regretted it immediately. There was no way to jerk my arm back without being suspicious, but touching him sparked far too many feelings that were better left locked up at the bottom of my rotten soul. He's a student. He's your friend's son. He's your Grindr stalker with big eyes full of wonder and awe. "Looks like there's still some passion left in you."

"Thanks, Coach," Carter said in a soft voice pitched for my ears. "That means a lot coming from you." And he hit me with that look of admiration that I didn't deserve.

Whether he knew it or not, that time when he reminded me of being named the

sexiest man alive by some variety magazine rocked me to my core. For days, the words had stuck with me. Not only did he know the year off the top of his head, but he knew I'd been given that title a total of four times.

I was starting to be a little concerned. As if it wasn't bad enough that Carter's proximity often made me feel hot and uncomfortable in my own skin, the things he sometimes said sparked wild interpretations in my mind. Why would he know this about me? Why would that piece of information be so ready to use? Hell, I hardly remembered which year that had been, but Carter knew.

He knew too many things about me, and some were better left alone. Not that anyone cared anymore. The few photographers that had been on my tail recently hadn't expressed that much interest in me coaching a college team, so their editors sidelined the scoops in favor of whatever celebrity gossip was rocking the world at the moment. My name was mentioned a few times in short, uninteresting articles, but nobody was profiling me anymore.

"Coach," the familiar voice called from behind me. I pulled my hand away from Carter's shoulder now that I had a good excuse. As I turned, Beckett's smile broadened. "The boys are having drinks at the ThirstyThinker. Are you joining us?"

Carter's ears perked so abruptly that my gaze darted to his bright expression. He was hopeful; no mistakes there. "Join us," he said, dragging one side of his lips into a crooked, daring smile.

"Ah, I don't know, boys," I said, but Caden Jones appeared next to Beckett and added his plea to theirs. "Fine. Alright. One drink." As if a bunch of college students really wanted to hang out with a boring old guy like me, but I appreciated their politeness in asking. And I had no way to get out of it.

The Titans left the arena and headed into their locker room to shower and change. I

met with the assistant coaches, who chose to skip the drinks in favor of returning to their families. It must have been nice. All three had had someone to come home to.

For most of my life, I didn't care about such things. Living on the go, traveling across the country, and never seeing the place I'd designated as my home had been just fine. Now, though, I wondered if I had missed out on something good.

If you could stop being jealous of everyone around you, that'd be a good start, a small voice told me.

I squared my shoulders and waited until I heard the Titans pass outside my office. For a moment, I entertained the idea of sneaking out and heading to my apartment instead of joining them. I didn't have the time to develop the escape plan, however, as Carter Prince knocked and entered in a busy fashion. "Are you coming?"

"Of course," I said and cleared my throat. I grabbed some papers on my desk. "I just need to tidy up."

Carter crossed his arms on his chest. Once again, he wore a sleeveless T-shirt and denim knee-length shorts, all of which revealed a bit too much flesh to my liking. If he didn't flaunt his sculpted arms, I wouldn't have to avoid looking at him. "Right," he said with plain suspicion coloring his voice.

"I wasn't gonna bail on you," I protested. "I said I would come."

"We'll go together," he said lightly.

I pressed my lips into a tight line, opened the drawer, and shoved the random papers inside. "I don't need a chaperone, Carter." I shut the drawer and locked it as if there were some important documents hiding in there. Tucking the key inside my pocket, I shut down the computer with my other hand and got up.

Carter shrugged. "The guys already left. Don't make me walk alone."

I shook my head slightly but didn't complain. "Let's go, then."

As we walked out, the evening air washed over us. It was still warm, but it carried the air of coming fall. Carter briefly ran his hands over his biceps.

"Are you cold?" I asked. "Maybe you should go home instead."

"And miss the party? Nah, I'm good." Even so, I quickened my pace to get to the Thinker sooner.

I had been there once, almost a year ago, after Beckett had kissed Caden on live television and in front of the crowded rink. Seeing it had felt like getting punched in my stomach. Oh, I was proud of my nephew for his courage, but the moment still shamed me. I hadn't had the balls to do anything like it. Two twenty-year-olds had so casually reached out and made their dreams come true when I never could. Despite all the influence my name carried, I'd always been too cowardly to take what I wanted.

"What are you thinking about?" Carter asked softly.

"The weather."

He chuckled, clearly seeing that I lied. "Wanna talk about it?"

I shot him a warning look, but he only bumped into me like we were playing. I scrambled to find a distraction. "I knew you'd be great if I pushed you out there."

"Please." He waved his hand dismissively. "I wasn't that great. Actually, I was terrified of fucking up." He glanced at me as if I would scold him for foul language.

There was still some of that kid left in him, which was a sobering thought. Unintentionally, I veered a little to the left, making more room between our bodies. Carter continued after a heartbeat. “Asher did great. And Beckett.”

“You should be proud of yourself, Carter,” I said. “You’re way more talented than you admit.”

He said nothing, but his gaze was on my face for so long that I looked away. After a long silence, he said softly, “You showed us some real coaching tonight, Nate.”

I rolled my shoulders in a hesitant shrug. “Eh, I was having fun doing this.”

“Maybe it’s not all that bad,” he suggested. “Maybe you do have a purpose in doing this.”

“And maybe you do, too,” I said.

He winced. It wasn’t subtle, but it wasn’t forced, either. When he next spoke, his voice was tighter. “I don’t think I have a choice.”

That made me halt, and Carter stopped just as abruptly, turning to me but looking down. “Do you dislike it so much, Carter?”

“I keep telling you,” he whispered. “It doesn’t matter what I think.”

By instinct, I grabbed his upper arms, feeling the heat of his bare flesh on my hands and my own guts twisting with feelings I wasn’t supposed to have. “Carter, nobody can force you to do anything.”

“Think again,” he said, lifting his head defiantly. He took a small step toward me, and my body froze. I didn’t move back now when he was despairing, but my muscles

screamed for me to create some buffer between us, some zone of safety. “Would you believe me if I told you I had no control over my life? It’s a little like getting injured and your life changing around it. It’s just that my injury isn’t physical. It’s my dad’s plans for me.”

It was my turn to wince. The phantom pain slashed through my collarbone. “What are you saying, Carter?” I let my hands drop from his arms now that I felt like an appropriate amount of time had passed.

“I’m saying that everything I do was planned by someone else.” His tone was flat and tired. “College, hockey, gym, and practice. I don’t have a say in where my life is headed.”

“These are good things, Carter,” I said, then immediately regretted it.

“You sound exactly like him,” Carter said sulkily. “They’re good for you, maybe. But nobody’s ever asked me if I wanted this, Nate. You never asked me, either.”

I licked my lips to buy myself time. My heart was beating faster, and my palms were growing slick with sweat. “I assumed...” My voice trailed.

Carter closed his eyes. “That’s right. Everyone assumes.”

“Carter, I didn’t realize how strongly you felt this,” I said carefully.

Carter bit his lower lip and lowered his head, shooting me a look from under his eyebrows. His brow creased as his eyebrows dragged up, and he shook his head. “The thing is, I can’t tell that to anyone. Dad wouldn’t listen. The other guys are shaping their lives around hockey. Fuck, man, you’re my coach, and you’re still the only person I can admit this to.” He shuddered. “I feel like a fucking traitor.”

Part of me wanted to hug him and tell him he wasn't a traitor, but I couldn't trust myself to do that. I couldn't trust myself to be near him. He was already digging into my private life — by accident or design — too deep. If I hugged him, he'd either misinterpret it or worse. What if I couldn't control myself at all?

"There has to be a way," I said. "Look, you convinced me. It wasn't that hard. Dana will listen."

Carter shot me a skeptical look. "Dana will not listen, Nate. You two drifted apart for too long. You don't know him like I do. Me being here is all he ever talks about. He doesn't call me to ask how I'm doing. God forbid we mention my piano. All he wants to know is if you think I'm good enough."

"Piano?" I thought Carter played guitar.

He waved his hand like it didn't matter. Blinking fast, he turned his head away from me. "I'm sorry, Coach. I didn't mean to drop all this on you."

"It's alright," I promised him. "I'm glad you told me."

He didn't turn to leave yet. Instead, he looked at me again, his eyes shining a little brighter. Tears, I realized. He wasn't all light and happy. Those were unspilled tears catching the lights from the deserted street. "A bit of honesty can't hurt anyone," he said, his tone too careful not to have a double meaning.

"Some truths are more dangerous than others," I said in a tighter voice.

"Dangerous?" he scoffed. "I can't see how."

"Carter..."

“I get it,” he cut me off. “A kid like me has no reason to know those things, but here we are.”

“What are you trying to say, Prince?” I asked, my voice dropping near to a growl.

He shared a sad smile. “You were Uncle Nate when I was small. I’ll never forget how cool you were. Do you believe me when I say that I used to think you visited us because you wanted to hang out with me?” He laughed out loud, but there was a heavy note of sorrow in there. “You have a way of making people feel special. And you know what? When I came out to Dad, he only worried that it would hurt my chances to make it as a pro. You convinced him those things didn’t matter anymore.”

I clenched my teeth. Yeah, I’d talked some sense into Dana. The very same sense I had lacked all my life. If I had to carry the burden that the patriarchal, heteronormative society had placed on my chest, there was no reason the next generation should, too. “What does that have to do with anything?” I asked coldly.

“Did you ever think you should follow your own advice?” Carter asked.

I stepped away from him, my back pressing against the wall of some student facility near the center of Northwood’s campus. The Thinker was only around the corner, and most people there knew me as their coach or the famed hockey royalty. “We shouldn’t be talking about this, Carter.”

“Why not?” he asked. “We’re sharing secrets.”

“Are you threatening me, kid?” I demanded, my temper flaring before I could rein it in.

“What?” He was horrified, eyebrows rising all the way up, brow creasing, mouth dropping open. “Why would I...?”

“I don’t know. Why would you?” I asked, anger getting the better of me. “Whatever you think you know...”

“I think?” It was his turn to be angry, and I had to admit he had the right. He knew the truth. Running from that wasn’t an option. “Don’t be ridiculous. I only meant to offer you the same courtesy. Now you know what haunts me. And I know what you’re hiding. I thought sharing a secret might help lift some of the burden.”

“It doesn’t,” I said. “And I would rather if we never mentioned this again.”

“Really?” Carter frowned. “And if I tell you I feel a million times better now that I shared my problems with you?”

“It’s not the same thing,” I said, softening my voice at last. “You’re young. Your life is still ahead of you. You should make your choices and not let anyone dictate what you do. This...this is different. I’m too old to change the way I live.” This was as close as I would go in discussing it.

Something about Carter made me want to open up. There was a softness to him and the sort of empathy I hadn’t often encountered in my life. But they were deceptive, even if he didn’t want them to be.

My life was kept together by duct tape and prayers. I couldn’t risk losing what little of my reputation was left by suddenly coming out of the closet. The closet was just fine. I’d spent my best years in there.

“Nate, I just want to help,” Carter said, stepping toward me.

I looked deep into his light brown eyes and wondered what to do with him. He knew everything. He was right about most things. In the end, it was my stubbornness that stopped me. “I’ve been living a double life since I can remember, Carter,” I

whispered. “I don’t mean to change that now.”

As he took another step toward me, I had nowhere else to go. We were inches apart, and Carter was looking up, his gaze locked on mine, his eyes shining bright, his lips slick after he’d licked them. “We’ve got more in common than you want to admit.” After a moment, he looked down. “And I have more secrets than I could tell you in one night.”

My heart clenched hard. He was dancing around something devastatingly dangerous. “Carter, we should...”

In one heartbeat, Carter Prince rose to the tips of his toes, his lips slamming against mine, his hands pressing the sides of my rib cage. In an instant, I was aware of more things than I thought my brain could process. The alarms went off in my head, and I knew I had to stop this. I had to. He was nineteen and in my care. But I could also tell that he wore a scent of amber and sandalwood. I could tell he’d chewed a minty gum recently. I knew his body was warmer than it had been before, and I knew the distinct scent of his sweat, however faint it was. I was aware of my heartbeat speeding and a choked sound dragging out of me.

It lasted less than one whole second, I was sure, but it carried enough information to seem like it had gone on for a year.

Sweet and tender and so close to me, this young man was pressing his lips against mine, parting them in some foolish hope that this would turn into a proper kiss.

I found the control over my limbs somewhere deep in my mind, grabbed Carter’s wrists, and yanked his hands off my torso. Instantly, I lifted my head out of his reach and looked at the star-specked sky. Something burned my eyes like they were sprayed with acid. “Don’t,” I growled.

A whimper tore free from his throat as he leaped back from me. "I'm so sorry," he blurted. "Fuck, Nate, I'm so sorry."

I kept my gaze on the sky. "It's fine."

"It's not. Oh my God. I fucked up. I fucked up so hard." He was having a panic attack, and I was incapable of meeting his eyes.

It hurt too much. The thing he'd made me do felt like ripping my heart out of my chest and throwing it against the paved street. Finally, I forced myself to look at him. "Nothing happened," I told him decisively. "Listen to me, Carter. Nothing happened. You did nothing."

Tears brimmed in his eyes, but he pursed his lips and frowned, meeting my gaze squarely. He nodded once fiercely and opened his mouth.

I cut him off. "Everything is fine," I said. "We don't have to talk about it."

He nodded once again. I realized he was stiff to keep the shaking at bay. His hands trembled, and he balled them into fists. "I should...probably...go home."

"If that is what you want," I said, relieved.

He nodded hastily, taking another step back.

Finally, I allowed myself to look around, relieved that nobody was in sight. "Carter," I said, my voice carrying a command for him to wait.

He looked at my feet and no higher, his lips pressed into a tight line.

"Don't think about it too much," I advised him carefully. "We don't have a problem."

“Sure,” he whispered. “Thanks.” Before I could say anything, he turned away from me and hurried down the street.

I stood still for a while longer, then dragged myself after him until I reached the intersection that led me to the garage and my car. I drove home while my ears rang like mad and my heart pounded like I was about to collapse and die. Part of me wished it was the case.

It wasn’t until I was inside my apartment, sitting with a plain whiskey on ice in my hand, that I allowed myself to think about it. The blazing heat of his lips on mine, the slight wetness of his saliva, and the whimper he produced when I pushed him away. They were more than enough to set fire to my stomach and my groin. These things, combined with the air of lightness he carried wherever he went and those sweet smiles he had for everyone, tugged at my heart.

What did I do to lead him on? I wondered. Walking back through the evening, I examined all my words carefully, as far as I could remember them, and I couldn’t find anything that had encouraged him. But you never discouraged him, either, that critical voice whispered to me.

I didn’t know, I replied to myself harshly. I would have if I’d known.

But I wondered how true that was. In the stillness and deathly silence of my apartment, I allowed myself to take a deep breath of air and hold it, thinking through all the interactions I had shared with Carter.

No. I had never allowed myself to admit that Carter was attractive. I had never allowed myself to look at him. The entire idea was too terrible to consider. He was a student at the place I worked. And Dana...

Fear gripped me out of nowhere. All those things were bad enough, but the worst of

all was knowing I was far too old for him. But to admit that fully and to be honest with myself, I also had to admit that a single kiss from him had made me feel more alive than I'd been since the start of my career when the world was a place full of opportunity, and I was a young man full of hope.

I had to admit that it was a delicious kiss so full of passion despite all the wrongness that had caused it. Despite all the sorrow that surrounded it.

Oh, Carter, I thought sadly, sipping my whiskey. If I were fifteen years younger...

I stopped that train of thought immediately. That wasn't leading me anywhere productive. I would only end up hurting more, and I would still have just as many choices laid out before me. Keep him away. That was all I could do.

And as I set my mind to it, it felt like I was slapping him across his face. It felt like I was stabbing us both in the heart.

My reasons were good enough to swear never to give him another idea like this, but that didn't make it any easier. Not when he was willing to risk everything for a doomed kiss. And not when it was the only good thing that had happened to me in years.

Page 6

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My hands trembled all the way back to the team house. It was thankfully empty when I shut the front door and flicked the light switch to my right. The room lit up, and I marched around the large kitchen island to the sink, pouring myself a glass of water and nearly choking on it. A sob burst from me mid-gulp, and I set the glass on the counter.

After a coughing fit, I wished the ground would open up and swallow me whole. How would I ever show my face at the rink again? Or look at Beckett in this house? Or wake up with that stupid hope that Nate Partridge might notice me someday as more than what I was in his eyes.

Dear God, I was stupid. I was a silly boy with unrealistic dreams who had just gotten his first gut punch of adulthood.

I couldn't fathom going up to my room, but I couldn't sit in this silence anywhere in the house. I hurried upstairs to fetch my guitar, then walked into the basement to be alone and as close to hell as I could physically get on short notice. After I shut the door, I dropped into an armchair and plucked the strings without thinking. Of course, it had to be D minor. I wasn't about to play myself a cheerful tune.

The notes poured out of my fingers with no planning or thought. They filled the room with their bitching and moaning, each chord poking me in my open, bleeding heart.

For a moment there, I had thought we'd found some common ground. I had thought we understood each other on a different level. I had thought, stupidly, that if I did this

one surprising, daring thing, all the rewards would be mine. Ours. I wanted him to know he was safe with me. So you scared the shit out of him by kissing him, I snapped at myself internally. A fucking genius.

Would he tell Dad?

I dismissed that thought a moment later. If there were one thing I knew about Nate Partridge, he would keep his word. He had a code of honor of his own, and he would stick to it. What I'd done would remain between us.

The thought wasn't comforting at all.

Every time we saw each other after tonight, we would both know what a foolish boy I was. Reminders would haunt me for the rest of my life.

If I could turn back time, I knew exactly where I would have taken a different direction. That morning when his phone betrayed him. I wouldn't have searched for him. I wouldn't have identified that anonymous profile on a hookup site for gay men. I wouldn't have betrayed my knowledge to anyone, even Nate. And if I had superpowers, I would have erased it from my mind, too.

I was happiest when Nate Partridge was only a fantasy. Allowing myself to think that I could ever have a chance had cost me everything.

He'd tasted so good. In that single heartbeat, dreams sprang from my soul, possibilities spawned, and ideas took such a deep root in me that I couldn't stop them from swirling around my head now.

I had been in love with him for over two years, but I'd barely seen him in that time. I had found him attractive for much longer than that. In fact, all my life, Nate Partridge was the ultimate man. He was the very definition of what a man should be. Friendly,

caring, understanding, kind, firm, reliable. I could go on forever. All these things had tugged at me until the moment it dawned on me that he was the only person I wanted.

The hookups that had kept me busy in the meantime had only assured me more that I couldn't heal my bruised heart by losing myself in other men. Not when the one I wished to worship was out there, as beautiful as ever.

My mournful ballad came to a sad end, and I wanted to throw the guitar away. It was just another stupid dream. I'd had no true talent or formal education. It was just a whim of a kid who didn't know what rejection felt like until tonight. It was a waste of my time.

Ron pushed the door open. "Why did you stop? I was enjoying that."

"Were you eavesdropping?" I asked flatly.

"Don't bite my head off," Ron said. "It's not like you were admitting to a murder."

No. I had been spilling my heart out instead.

"You have to try playing for a crowd, man," he insisted, walking past me to grab a beer from the fridge.

"Is the party over?" I deflected.

"Wasn't much of a party," Ron replied, bringing me a can. "We had a round of drinks. Then, the captain of the Breakers picked up Avery. I think he's holding him hostage."

"They're dating," I said sulkily. Everyone in this goddamn house was dating. Almost all of them were dating guys, too.

“And so, my joke falls flat,” Ron said casually, cracking the can open. “Sawyer went away with Noah to watch a meteor shower, I think, and Caden whispered something to Beckett that made our captain leap from the table with a thirsty look on his face. Jordan’s mooning over Asher while Paxton watches. I figured I might as well head back here and see what held you back.”

I’m not telling you that, I thought and almost made myself chuckle. I kissed our coach, and it went about as well as you’d expect. Instead of saying anything, I pressed the can against my lips and took a long sip of beer.

“What’s bothering you, man?” he asked.

I shook my head and swallowed. “Nothing.”

He was quiet for a little while. Then, as if I wasn’t getting grilled enough, he returned to the earlier topic. “I found a bar off campus that has open-mic nights for bands, solos, and even karaoke.”

“Are you planning on singing?” I asked, playing dumb. Recent events told me I didn’t need to pretend too hard. I was as thick as it got.

“If you play us a song, I’ll happily get on that stage before you. To lower the expectations.” He gave a proud grin but returned to a more serious expression after a moment. “People should hear you play, man. You’ve got a crazy talent.”

I kept hearing that about a great many things, but I had never doubted myself more than I did tonight. What was the point of my talent if I always made all the wrong choices? “Are you sure you’re not crazy? I’m an amateur.”

“That doesn’t stop every good-looking person on the planet from making a ton of money on OnlyFans,” Ron said with the same old smile. “And it shouldn’t stop you.”

I just shook my head. There was no reasoning with him. My roommate was a stubborn young man.

“And if it’s stage fright, then I think you have to try it. Don’t let your fear hold you back,” he said.

“I’ll think about it,” I sighed.

“Do you promise?” he asked.

I nodded, crossing my heart with my left hand and lifting the can with my right.

Ron wore a little smile while he watched me. The silence rang loudly in my ears, and the heat climbed into my face when I remembered kissing Nate. Fuck. It had felt so good to touch his torso and his lips.

“Are you still thinking?” Ron asked.

“Oh my God, fine!” His eyes widened with surprise just as my heart leaped. Was I actually doing this? “Fine. I’ll do it. Just stop pestering.”

“Yay! I’m so glad you said yes. I booked you for quarter past nine on Tuesday. After my karaoke disaster, as I promised. I expect a small crowd, so that shouldn’t worry you.” He set his beer on the soccer table and crossed his arms, his chest rising with pride. “When you’re rich and famous, I’ll expect a cut for talent discovery.”

“You did what?” I gaped.

He shrugged guilelessly. “You heard me. Five percent.”

While Ron laughed and joked, I shook my head in disbelief. Did he really have faith

in me? It felt like nobody else did. He had no reason to care. He had nothing to win by supporting a foolish fantasy. And yet, he did it because he was nice.

It reminded me of Nate standing up for me. He'd had no reason to care about me back then. He could have just agreed with Dad about my prospects, and that would have been the end of it.

My heart throbbed when Nate's face floated before my eyes. I didn't give a fuck about the ethics or the formal relationship between us. Hell, I didn't even care what Dad would say.

I played a few chords on my guitar, then found a tune to follow. B minor, A minor, D minor. My tunes had nothing happy in them tonight, but Ron still closed his eyes and listened like he was hearing the music of heaven. It was strange to see someone without an agenda supporting me. Mostly, Dad supported whatever would bring our name the most glory, and Coach Partridge, in that capacity, wanted the Titans to advance, for which I was just another tool. Beckett wanted to land on a good team after college, which was helped by having solid captaining experience with a winning team. Not Ron, though. He just wanted me to do something nice for myself.

Later, when we both returned to our room, I felt a little better. There were emotions I kept tightly bottled, of course, but I could hold the lid on them a while longer. I wasn't a total mess.

"Ron," I said quietly from my bed. Across the room, my friend stirred. "Thanks for tonight."

"You're welcome, Carter," he said simply.

It was such an innocent thing to say that my lips dragged down. I wanted Nate to be that person in my life. He had been once, so why couldn't we have that again? That

and more.

Humiliation was the only thing stopping me from sinking into deep sleep with Nate's image before my eyes. Instead, I stared at the ceiling, wondering how I would ever look at him again.

Even in rejecting me, he had played that responsible, caring role. He didn't want me feeling like shit because of the mistake I'd made.

I wanted there to be a way for me to hate him. If he could do just one wrong thing, that would make everything right. I could grip it and hold on to it. I could milk it with spite for the rest of my life. If only he'd done something wrong.

But Nate was incapable of that. He just had to be the knight in that goddamn shining armor.

Somehow, I fell asleep that night. I fell deep and didn't wake until late in the morning, missing the alarm that normally got me to exercise at an ungodly hour for the chance of seeing Nate. I probably wouldn't have woken up had it not been for the dream. It was a wild thriller of a dream, fading abruptly as I regained my consciousness.

I groped after traces, vividly seeing Nate's slick lips, teeth closing around the lower one, his deep purr ringing in my ears when he commanded me to kneel for him. I could recall the softness of his hand on my cheek and the firmness with which he gripped the hair on the back of my head. And I could remember the longing I felt in the moments before I pulled his pants down. The excitement at seeing what he was hiding was the very thing that woke me up.

Pain and pressure in my underwear made me hold my breath. Glancing across the room, I realized I was all alone. My erection throbbed as I pressed my palm against

the tip of my hard cock, pushing it away by a few inches. The trouble was, I wasn't horny at all now that I was awake, but my dick wasn't getting the message. In fact, I was mostly embarrassed.

If I had hoped to wake up with a clearer head, that was just wishful thinking. If anything, I was more embarrassed in daylight. The prospect of seeing Nate at the gym kept me in my bed until half past nine, and the idea that I would have to speak to him tonight at practice kept my guts tied into knots. I couldn't eat anything today. Everything I tried eating smelled bad and made me gag. So I avoided everyone and everything until the moment we all gathered in the locker room. There, I felt weak from not eating.

Sweat broke over me as I pressed my back against the wall in the back of the room, expecting Nate to walk in at any moment. Restlessly, I dragged my palms over my upper legs, and my gaze went everywhere where I wouldn't catch another person's eyes.

If I could just sneak out before Nate arrived, everything would be fine.

My toes curled on the flat floor before I put on my skates. The truth was, I couldn't bend down to put them on because my stomach was heaving at every sound and sight.

When chills ran down my spine and my chin trembled, I felt a wave of such dizziness that I groped for the wall to keep myself standing. That was the exact moment when Nate Partridge strolled into the locker room.

He seemed ten feet tall. He radiated with such unearthly, ageless beauty that it felt like an insult. As if he had been visited by Adonis in the middle of the night and transformed from a gorgeous man to an incredibly beautiful one, Nate let his sharp gaze scan the room. "How are you, boys? I hope your celebrations didn't take you all night." As he inhaled, his chest seemed to puff out. What had rejuvenated him this

much? There wasn't a smile on his face, but a set determination that made him look more alive than I'd seen him before. "A victory is great. A string of victories is better. You're not going to get soft now, are you?"

"No, Coach," several voices called.

My heart dropped into my stomach. Saliva was gathering in my mouth, and I wondered if it was Nate I was drooling over, but I soon realized I was about to be sick.

I must have made a sound because several gazes found me in the back, cowering from precisely that, and stayed on me.

"Prince? Are you feeling alright?" Nate asked. "Did you have a few too many, by any chance?"

"He wasn't with us," Beckett muttered, and Ron vouched for me.

"I'm fine, Coach," I said, but I promptly gagged and revealed the lie.

"Alright, guys. Head out. I'll be with you soon." Nate was waving at them to leave the locker room. "Not you, Prince. Stay where you are." I had only shifted so I wouldn't have to face him so openly. "Partridge, tell Margot to get you started. She knows what to do." As he passed through the crowd toward me, I could hear Nate mutter to himself, "Probably knows better than me, anyway."

Could he not see how fucking perfectly matched we were? I felt the same exact thing about myself all the goddamn time.

The locker room was empty save for the two of us, but Nate still didn't manage to reach me. "Carter..."

I lifted a finger to gesture for him to wait a minute, then ran into the bathroom. What left me was only a bunch of embarrassing sounds and saliva because I hadn't eaten a breadcrumb all day. I dry heaved a few times, hugging the toilet, and then pulled myself to my feet. I leaned over the sink and splashed my face a few times, then washed my mouth for no real reason, then stumbled back from the bathroom. Part of me hoped that Nate had gone to the drills instead of wasting his time here, but I knew better than to expect that.

He stood exactly where he had been before. In the middle of the locker room, arms crossing, tall and breathtakingly beautiful, the man I could never have shook his head. "What's the matter, Carter?"

"It must be coffee," I murmured. "I had a few cups on an empty stomach."

"Empty stomach? It's seven in the evening. Christ," he snapped. "Come with me." He turned around, and my gaze trailed the broad upper back, the narrow waist, and the firm, round ass. I unashamedly inspected him from behind, righteous in my deviance simply because I couldn't be more embarrassed, even if he caught me looking.

I followed Nate into his office. He showed me one of the chairs in front of his desk and then shut the door while I sat down. He walked around his desk, opened one of the drawers, moved some stuff around, and pressed a small package on the desk. He pushed it across. "Eat this."

I picked it up and examined the label. A protein bar. My mouth watered again as I peeled off the wrapping and bit off a chunk. From Nate, even a sugarless protein bar was delicious. "Thanks."

He sank back into his chair and exhaled slowly, watching me eat. "Not eating, huh?" He'd waited until I was almost done before he asked this.

“Wasn’t hungry,” I said shortly, not meeting his gaze.

He waited. And waited. When I was done with the snack, I folded the wrapping several times until it formed a little rectangle between my fingers. “Carter, look at me,” he said firmly but not unkindly.

I forced myself to obey.

“You asked me to stop treating you like a kid, and I feel like I need to ask you the same. Don’t think you can fool me. I know more about the ways of human hearts than you’d imagine. Maybe I don’t have a happy family to prove it, but I know what I’m talking about. I’d had my fair share of good times and bad. So when you’re suddenly not hungry the day after what happened, you can’t convince me it’s a coincidence.” Not once did he sound like he was lecturing me.

I didn’t take my gaze off his eyes. I was strong enough to stare at him all night if he wanted. “Did you ever do anything that embarrassing?”

“What do you think?” It was a simple question, but it was suggestive enough to spark my curiosity. “Everyone who’s ever kissed anyone had done something like that, Carter. Was it the right thing to do? No. But that doesn’t make you guilty of some horrible crime.” His voice turned a little cooler as he spoke. After a short while, he cleared his throat. “To be honest, I blame myself. I must have done something that gave off the wrong signal. I apologize, Carter. I never meant to confuse you or lead you on. And I think it’s for the best if I tell you so right away.” He leaned forward and folded his arms on the desk. “I take full responsibility for last night. Do you hear me? If anyone should be ashamed, it’s me. Not you, kid.”

Fucker. He knew what he was doing, calling me that again. “You’re wrong,” I said sourly. “You didn’t do anything at all.”

“Well, I disagree,” he said in such a polite tone that it only fueled my anger.

My heart skipped a beat, and fear turned my legs to stone, but my mouth worked unhindered. “Maybe I’m just into you, Nate.” I could see the color changing on his face, and I wondered if I resembled a red rose in full bloom if he was this pink already. Fire was about to consume me whole. “Maybe I’ve been dreaming about doing that for years. And maybe I looked at you last night and saw how attractive and perfect you are, and I just couldn’t resist it anymore.” My voice cracked, and I wanted to strangle myself for showing such weakness. Resorting to whispering, I continued. “You didn’t need to give me a sign. I was waiting for an opportunity. I didn’t need you to ask for it, Nate. I just needed us to stay alone.”

His blank stare made everything so much worse.

“If you’ll excuse me, I think I’m still a little sick,” I said, rubbing my stomach. I wasn’t lying, either. Seeing how the blush faded from his face and he turned pale was enough to make me nauseous. “I think I’d like to go to bed for the night, Coach.”

“Can you manage on your own?” he asked in a voice that was as hollow as his eyes.

“Yessir.” I stood up before he told me I could leave and walked out of his office.

What the fuck had I done? Why had I said all those things?

The world spun a million miles an hour around me as I tried my best to stay on course. I walked straight from the rink to the empty team house, but with every step, I felt closer to leaving Northwood altogether.

I couldn’t possibly hope to play for Nate again.

Page 7

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SEVEN

For the firsttime in years, instead of burning my emotions through resistance training, I marched through the crowded gym near my building and picked up a pair of boxing gloves. The heavy punching bag was hanging in front of me while I raged like a maniac. I hadn't done any proper boxing in longer than I cared to admit, and my form was hurting because of it. My reputation, too, according to a few strange looks I received.

But I needed it.

I needed to beat the shit out of something. I needed to work through this without getting drunk and passing out in my bed. That was the most tempting choice, but I knew it wouldn't help.

Once the muscle burn reached all the way through my arms and pecs into my abs and sweat was dripping from my head, I ripped the gloves off my hands and went to the locker room shower. This gym was passable. Its proximity to my place was the main draw, next to the solution to my issue of running into Carter, where it was too dangerous for us to stand together.

Especially now, after he had said some mind-altering things, after his words had nestled deep in my heart, I found myself in a hole out of which I couldn't crawl. Fighting punching bags wouldn't help me, either, but at least I was tired enough to sleep tonight.

God dammit, Carter.I couldn't get him out of my head after he'd left my office.

Everything seemed to be crashing around me in the days that followed. Carter didn't show up for drills. Ron promised that Carter was recovering and feeling better, but I was the only one who knew the truth. All the truth.

I wished I didn't know.

Not only did Dana Prince's son grow to resent his father and hate the sport he was born to play, but he was also attracted to me enough to kiss me so carelessly in the middle of a street.

And you loved it, my treacherous conscience reminded me. You loved his lips on yours. You loved the feel of his hands on your body. You loved his youth, didn't you? His innocence. He has never lived in the shadows, twitching and looking over his shoulder like all your other partners. He's never cowered from his true self. You envied his courage, and you loved his innocent soul.

There never seemed to be a time in the next few days when I wasn't acutely aware of Carter being on my mind. Even if it was somewhere in the periphery of my consciousness, I knew he was there. Not seeing him worried me.

I could understand a young man being ashamed after getting rejected, but Carter's behavior wasn't just that. He wouldn't have admitted all those things if he'd only been embarrassed by a silly little kiss.

A silly little kiss that had taken ten years off my weary soul...

Beckett and Caden visited me on Tuesday evening. It was unexpected since I'd given them all a break tonight before the trip. The two young men were dressed fairly casually, but they still looked like they cared about their appearances.

"What, tonight?" I asked after hearing their idea.

“Why not?” Beckett asked.

I scratched the back of my head and walked around the kitchen island to find something to keep my hands busy. “I don’t know, Beck. We’re leaving early tomorrow. Chicago’s a big deal.”

“It’s not our first out-of-town game, Uncle,” Beckett said.

Caden chuckled. “We’re capable of going out without getting shitfaced, Nate.”

“I’d have to put up with people recognizing me,” I said.

“That’s just it,” Beckett said. “This isn’t one of our hockey bars. It’s an underground brewery. Think hipsters, indie kids, nobody who’s into sports, basically.”

“That’s right. Before I came out to the team, I used to go on dates there. That crowd doesn’t know that hockey exists.” He was the reasonable one in their relationship, and he still made no sense to me.

“You always say how you want to spend more time together,” Beckett accused me. “I’m leaving next year, Uncle. You’ll have to wait for me to retire if we miss this chance.”

“Fine,” I sighed. “Fine, just give me a minute to get ready.”

The two boys bumped fists together, and I rolled my eyes. I put my attire together on the go, grabbing a long-sleeved shirt with a small flower pattern to break the monotony and dark pants that emphasized my physique. Despite everything, I knew I was a vain man, and it felt good to wear something custom-made for my body.

Beckett insisted on getting us an Uber from my place. The brewery was a little further

out, and I didn't feel like leaving my car there after caving in and having a drink. It was ironic how Beckett offered to pay, considering that I had loaded his trust fund for academic purposes, but I couldn't tease him too hard. The simple fact was that I never stopped being proud of this kid.

We got out of the car in front of a run-down building. There were descending stairs on the sidewalk in front of the building and music coming from below. A few young guys and girls were standing a few paces away from us, sharing a joint, and one shot us a suspicious look until we moved toward the stairs.

"I'm too old for this shit," I grumbled.

"Keep saying that and it might come true," Beckett warned me.

"He's right," Caden agreed. "I don't think I ever met an older thirty-eight-year-old."

I snorted. "Just get in."

We entered a dimly lit pub with a rugged yet warm interior. Red brick, wood, and industrial themes paired with dark orange lights. Most of the tables were occupied, but there were a few in the back where shadows prevailed over the lights, and we carried our tall glasses of craft beer to one of those. Beckett had, once again, pointedly insisted on paying, but when we sat down, he shot me a grin. "Thanks for the drinks, Uncle."

"My pleasure," I said, and I meant it. It wasn't like I hadn't planned for my nephew to have some fun in college when I established his fund. "I didn't realize there would be live music on a Tuesday night."

"Neither did I," Beckett said. "Surprises are never-ending."

“This indie crowd doesn’t have weekends,” Caden explained.

I tasted my beer and wrinkled my nose.

Beckett scoffed. “You’re as sensitive as a fair maiden, Uncle. It’s just hops.”

“I’m used to more refined flavors, nephew,” I growled. “I shouldn’t trust a college student to pick my drinks.”

“That’s precisely who you should trust,” Beckett argued. “We have the most fun. Don’t we, babe?”

“I can’t disagree with that,” Caden said, glancing so lovingly at Beckett that my heart sank. They were wonderful, and they reminded me of all I had chosen not to have. When I had been their age, I could have taken that path, but it would have cost me everything that made me who I was.

“Are you ready for the big game?” I asked casually.

That was an easy conversation starter for both of them. Beckett and Caden could talk endlessly about hockey. The talk veered off to their futures. They talked about their ambitions, their teammates, and their time together. It was genuinely sweet to see two boys their age function in such a compatible way. They didn’t agree on everything. They hardly ever did. Few things happened without them raising hell, but they rarely made the wrong decision simply because arguing over every detail was their nature and made for a thorough decision-making process.

When a screeching voice from the stage on the far end of the pub pulled all of our gazes, I almost spat my beer. “Is that Ron Rigby?” I asked. “What the hell’s going on, guys?”

Caden was as surprised as I was, but Beckett seemed to be having the best time of his life. He laughed out loud. “This is ‘Bohemian Rhapsody,’” he declared. “Who the hell’s got a gun on this guy to force him out on the stage?”

Ron Rigby trudged through the song, butchering most of it with a shameless grin on his face.

“Did you know about this?” I asked them both. I’d hoped not to run into familiar faces for once. Or faces that found mine familiar.

“Nope,” Caden said.

Beckett shook his head. “The ways the universe works, huh?”

People were paying attention to the stage while Ron Rigby decimated the final verses.

“Did he have to pick such a long song?” Beckett joked.

I leaned in toward them both. “If I hear you teasing this kid once, you’ll answer for it. Understood?”

“Understood,” Beckett said casually.

Caden was more serious when he looked at me. “We wouldn’t do that.”

Rigby bowed elaborately to the cheering, laughing crowd, and I slid lower in my chair to avoid being seen. Not that he could see me. The lights were pointed at the stage, and I was in the shadows.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” Ron said into the microphone. “Now that I’ve lubed you up with my honey voice, I’d like to present my good friend with a guitar

improv. It's better than it sounds. But can it compete with my birdsong? You'll have to be the judges on that." He enjoyed the spotlight as much as anyone, but my vision blurred, and Ron went out of focus.

I knew who his guitar-playing friend was. It couldn't be anyone else.

Timidly, Carter Prince climbed the three steps to the small stage, where Ron was setting up a chair and securing the microphone on the stand.

"No way," Caden huffed.

"Is he seriously doing this?" Beckett asked me as if I knew the answers.

"Way to go, Prince," Caden commented. To Beckett, he said, "I thought he was a lot more stuck-up."

Not Carter. If anyone wanted to be detached from wealth and fame, it was this young man.

My heart was beating in my throat. He was having a string of bad days. The last thing he needed was public humiliation if this went sour. What the hell were they thinking? Fear gripped all my limbs, keeping me seated. It was good because my instinct was to get on that stage and drag him somewhere safe.

But when Ron stalked away, Carter ran his fingers over the strings, testing the sound. In the next instant, he began playing a simple little tune. It was nothing special to those who didn't know what Carter was going through right this minute.

The boy had opened his heart to a much older man only to be coldly refused, then cocooned himself away from the sport his father's ambition had ruined for him, and now he dared to play his music in front of a crowd of unknowns.

Dear Carter, I thought. What possessed you to do this? The murmurs filled the room as people lost interest. Unlike Ron, Carter wasn't ruining his reputation by being showy. He was playing from his heart, however light and slow the music was.

But as the chatter rose, so did his music. As he ran his fingers over the strings, more elaborate tunes rose, quieting the crowd.

My heart lurched. It was a mournful melody only a heartbroken nineteen-year-old could come up with.

"Holy fuck," Beckett said. "'Scuse me, Uncle."

I didn't pay attention to my nephew's teasing. In fact, my focus had narrowed completely on Prince up on the stage and the music he was playing. The melody kept rising to an impossible level, not in volume but in tension. I wondered how he would resolve this. It felt like a total conundrum. He couldn't possibly untangle the motifs he played in a satisfying way. It went up and up and up to new heights, complicating the simple tunes he had opened this show with. And when it felt like all the breaths in the room were held and all eyes were on him, Carter glanced up from the guitar. The shy look now bore all the pride and determination I had never seen on him, not even when he helped the Titans secure their victory against the Breakers. His fingers moved faster, and he brought on total carnage. The themes dissolved into a mad flurry of incredible notes. A bit of an Andalusian melody entered his piece, and he half played the strings and half drummed the wild rhythm against the guitar's body.

I'd never seen anyone do anything like it.

Ovations rose through the crowd as Carter mercilessly drummed the guitar's body and strummed the strings. How he did both at the same time was a total mystery to me, who had never plucked a string in his life. Even as the crowd cheered, Carter wasn't ending. And like I knew he would, he ended on his terms, tiring the pub's

patrons into silence before bringing on an explosive crescendo that stunned us. When he was done, there wasn't a chair with an ass still on it in the entire pub, including ours.

Beckett pushed forward through the crowd, and my heart dropped.

"Where's he going?" I growled.

"To bring them here, I think," Caden said.

Fuck. But Carter took all the breaths away in the room, and he ogled at us all from the stage as if he had no idea what he had done. For all the natural talent he had exhibited on the ice, it was nothing compared to his guitar skill.

Beckett and Ron cleared the way for the undisputed star of the evening as they reached our table. Caden hurried to bring extra chairs, and people tapped Carter's shoulders. He reacted much the same way he had when I had praised his performance on the ice — mainly with confusion that anything he did could be incredible.

He had tried speaking to me, but I hadn't listened. I hadn't understood how deep his passion was for music and how insecure he was.

When the three neared the table, Carter looked from Caden to me, and his face turned red. If that was all, I might have survived it, but the sadness in his eyes was like a dagger stabbed straight into my heart. I had hurt him, I knew, but it was for the best. It was for his own good that I had pushed him away.

If he didn't understand that now, it was alright. He would, someday, when his heart turned to someone appropriate.

And I would be happy for him. This fluttering attraction that I felt was nothing but a

passing whim of a man past his prime. I'd missed out on all the good things, but I wasn't going to use my best friend's son to feel like I hadn't. However appealing the thought was and however beautiful that fleeting touch had been, I wouldn't let my resolve cave in.

Only disaster awaited if I did.

We sat down. Carter was still looking at me while Beckett and Caden went to the bar to fetch more drinks.

"Well done, Prince," I said, mindful of the fact that Ron Rigby was sitting next to me.

"Thanks, Coach," Carter said casually and looked away.

"What? No 'well done' for Rigby?" Ron teased. "Ah, I gotta take a leak anyway. Stage fright." He laughed and got up, then disappeared into the crowd.

"I didn't expect to see you," Carter said to the wall behind me.

"I didn't expect to be here." I leaned forward and waited for him to look at me. When he didn't, I still spoke from my heart. "I see now that you were right, Carter."

He raised his eyebrows a little. I wished he wasn't this beautiful when sweat covered his brow and began tousling his hair.

"You could have a future in hockey, believe me, but that's not what you should do with your life." I couldn't avoid feeling like I was betraying my old friend, but nobody should dictate a child's future. "If it comes to that, I'll talk some sense into Dana."

"Thanks, Nate," Carter said. "I'm not sure I'll ever get there."

“Don’t let yourself be defeated before the fight,” I said.

He met my gaze now. It was as if he was pinning me against the wall with that knowing look. But he smirked after a moment and shook his head. “Does that mean I should keep trying?”

Shivers ran down my spine. “I...don’t think that’s wise.”

“Of course not,” he said. “You don’t want someone like me.”

Deep in my bones, I knew he had already surrendered all his fights. These were the words of someone who didn’t care about the outcome. He spoke freely even if it doomed him. “Carter, there’s twenty years between us.”

“Eighteen and a half,” he corrected me. “The third of August.”

My birthday. “Regardless, your dad’s been my closest friend since before you were born. I’m your coach, for God’s sake.”

Carter nodded. Something about his expression was changing, but I couldn’t tell what it was. “You’ve barely spoken in two years. Besides, I don’t have to be a Titan if that makes all the difference.”

He was tempting me to be cruel, I realized. He wanted to hear me say the vicious words. He wanted me to tell him I didn’t find him attractive, that I would never find him attractive, or he would continue this forever. But I couldn’t bring myself to say it. “I thought you were doomed to play hockey forever,” I said pointedly.

Carter sucked a breath of air sharply to argue with that, but Beckett and Caden reached our table, and the tension disappeared like some magician had taken it away with the sleight of hand. The boys put fresh beers on the table, and I pretended that

Carter was old enough to drink. After all, he was old enough to wow the entire pub. And he was old enough to argue with me about destiny and the ways of the heart, even to leave me jumping through the logical loops just to make a point.

A pleased expression remained on Carter's face for the rest of the night, which didn't last very long at my insistence. We didn't speak much to one another. In fact, I didn't speak a lot at all. Four boys in a bar had a lot more to talk about to each other.

That night, while tossing and turning and waiting for our trip to Chicago, I couldn't get his music out of my head.

EIGHT

We suffered a loss on our first night in Chicago. While Beckett raged in the locker room, Nate was the voice of reason, telling us not to let one failure define us any more than we would let a victory make us complacent. There was a wisdom to that, but the morale in the locker room was at its lowest point.

Personally, I was finding it hard to care. Not that I hadn't done my best in the first period before Nate pulled me in favor of Kieran, who was arguably the better choice between the two of us in the circumstances. I'd missed a few drills over the last week. Even if that hadn't impacted my performance, playing with the team felt odd when I had mentally unplugged for so long.

I didn't want to let the team down, but I preferred other players taking my place. Especially if their hearts were in the game, unlike mine.

Last night, I had experienced something I'd never expected to happen to me. Sure, the crowd was small, and Nate's presence left me feeling all sorts of ways — I couldn't decide between being humbled, embarrassed, and aroused by the admiration in his eyes if I were being honest — but playing on the stage was easily the most alive I had felt in years.

Ron had filmed the whole thing and posted the clip on his Instagram. His following was mostly made up of girls he'd impressed as a high school hockey player, but the video circulated to our team, and the looks I got were flattering. They regarded me a little differently today. They had seen me do something they hadn't realized I could, and it made me more relevant in a way.

I didn't hate feeling relevant. I didn't hate answering questions about where I'd learned to do those things.

The last time I had truly felt this way while playing hockey had been in my first year of high school, but that was partly due to the fact that I was a Prince, and not just any Prince, but Dana Prince's own son.

I had a plain water at the bar after the game. Ron was grumbling about the risks of ordering a beer in an unfamiliar place. To me, it was all the same. I was simply passing the time with the team that was in a rotten mood. So, when I left the guys behind and stalked the streets on my way back to the hotel, I was relieved not to have the chatter filling my ears.

I didn't know what I would do next. I knew what my heart was set on, but I also knew how hard it was. Dad had mentioned more than once how my comfort depended on my performance, but I doubted that performing on a stage qualified me to live off of his wealth. Would he cut me off completely? Send me to make my own way in the world? And was that the worst thing that could happen to me?

By the time I returned to the hotel, the seed of a single thought had sprouted into a compulsion. As I entered the lobby, I was growing more certain of what I couldn't keep doing. I just couldn't. Not for all the money in the world. Not for all of my father's conditional love.

I sat on a small, elegant chair in the lobby and pulled my phone out. After watching the video on Ron's profile, I knew what to do next. And until I began typing it, I didn't realize that the entire message I wanted to write was already penned to the last dot in my brain. It was the easiest email of my life.

I stepped out of the elevator and halted. In front of me, his broad back was packed in a tight black shirt, his narrow waist calling me to wrap my arms around him, and his

firm ass was hugged by the perfectly fitting pair of dark gray pants. Nate Partridge. The man who had a million reasons to push me away, none of which had anything to do with not wanting me.

He was shoveling ice into a metal bucket when I cleared my throat. “Getting our asses kicked is thirsty business,” I said.

He looked over his shoulder, a knowing smirk on his face.

“Are you having champagne?” I asked.

“Whiskey,” he said. “On the rocks.”

I shuddered. “I don’t have what it takes to drink those.”

“Good. I wasn’t going to offer any.” He narrowed his eyes in playful suspicion. “Shouldn’t you be with the team?”

“I quit the team,” I said before I knew I would. Oddly enough, my coach was the only person I could tell this to. He was the only person who would understand, even if he pretended we had nothing in common.

“Carter,” he whispered as he turned to me. The ice bucket was half-full. I doubted he could drink so much whiskey unless he planned to pass out, but that wasn’t the Nate I knew. “Are you sure you wanted this?” He didn’t say it in a way that suggested I was rushing — far from it. He was simply asking, one adult to another.

I nodded. “Absolutely.” The fear that rippled through me must have shown on my face. Nate frowned, but I spoke before he could. “It’s funny. I couldn’t get rid of this need to quit it. So much of it feels wrong to me that I can’t believe I even played tonight.” After a moment of silence, I added, “Thanks for pulling me. I wasn’t

enjoying it.”

“It’s official?” Nate asked, leaning against the wall.

“I emailed the administration office half an hour ago. They’ll see it in the morning, and I’ll be off the team when they process my request for transfer.” I hadn’t realized how detailed my plans had been until I filed the request. I knew which subjects to drop and which to take on. The semester was still only starting, and it wasn’t too late to change subjects with most of the professors. I had checked those dates weeks ago with no clear plan in my mind. It wasn’t just luck. “Your ice is melting, Nate.”

He looked at the bucket and cursed under his breath. “Let me drop this off.” He walked away from me, but I followed.

My fingertips tingled as I walked after him. The floor beneath my feet felt like sponge or wool, like clouds. I walked despite knowing what he would tell me. But how bad could it be? He would send me away. Nothing new there. I was becoming an expert at being rejected.

Tonight was the night to reach for all the things I doubted could be mine.

Nate must have heard my footsteps trailing him, but he didn’t look over his shoulder. His slow trodding down the hallway only added to the suspense, but it wasn’t the scary kind. My chest felt light, as if someone had filled my lungs with helium, and I teetered on the verge of floating away.

He swiped his card key, and the lock clicked on the heavy wooden door. He pushed it, his arm flexing in the tight shirt, and stepped inside. When he pushed the card key into the slot by the door, dim lights came on.

My fingers trembled when I held the door and let myself inside. Any moment now,

he would sigh and tell me to go away. He would remind me who my father was to him, act like he was a hundred years old, and tell me how inappropriate this was. I didn't care. I was quitting things left and right. I might as well quit listening to Nate's faulty logic. Plenty of guys a decade older than him dated girls my age. Nobody cared. What was so different about us, then?

Until he told me he didn't want anything to do with me, I held on to hope.

The door shut behind my back. "Nice room," I said, looking around. The room was not a room at all but an apartment. Students had their quarters on the same floor but in another wing. Each room had two beds and the bare necessities. Not Nate's. And I knew this wasn't coming from Northwood's budget but his own pocket. No college coach would want this.

The elegantly decorated interior of the living room was lit by discreetly placed lamps. Armchairs and a sofa surrounded a sleek coffee table made of dark wood. A large, black TV was mounted onto the wall to my left, and around it were shelves holding various pieces of decoration and books. Two doors were on each side of the wall to my right, one open, revealing a neatly made large bed, and the other shut. I assumed it was the bathroom unless Nate Partridge had a private sauna.

The idea made my heart skip. I wouldn't have minded going into a sauna with him.

"It's much nicer than my own place," Nate agreed. "I keep forgetting to decorate."

"That doesn't surprise me," I said.

He put the bucket of ice into the minifridge after tossing a couple of cubes into a glass. He didn't look at me once while pouring himself a shot of whiskey. After his drink was ready, he bent down to the mini fridge and produced a Diet Coke for me. Finally, he turned to face me as he handed me the can.

“What’s your plan?” he asked.

I knew he wasn’t asking me about my plans for the evening. And if he had, I wouldn’t have revealed them. They depended on each decision we made and each word we shared from now until later. “General courses this semester. I’ll study hard and make the professors notice me. I’ve never been classically trained, so I’ll take some music theory classes privately to prepare myself for next semester. Hopefully, I can impress someone enough to bend the rules a little. If not, I’ll just wait for next fall and start over. I don’t mind losing a year.” I cracked the can open and sipped my soda while Nate carried his glass to the coffee table and seated himself on the sofa. I followed carefully, wondering if sitting next to him was too forward. What else can he do to me? I risked it even as my heart lurched. “I’ll play any gig I can get.”

Nate listened to me. He didn’t poke holes in my plan, even though we both knew a lot depended on luck. He didn’t discourage me. He didn’t act like I was sharing some childish dreams with him. “Rigby did well with that video,” he suggested after a time, his gaze on my eyes so intense that I swore I could feel its weight.

“That, too,” I agreed. “We’re nothing without a little bit of online whoring.”

Nate barked a laugh and shook his head, and it was scary how proud I was that I’d made that happen. I rubbed my open palm against my pants, wiping off the sudden slickness of perspiration.

I could sense his proximity in more ways than one. He was there, next to me, with all his glorious beauty and the heat radiating from his body. He was mostly facing me aside from one leg that he stretched away from me.

“I hate to lose a good player,” Nate said carefully. “But it would be worse to cage you and force you to play against your will.”

I bit my lip and looked into his eyes. The quiet moment that followed made me aware of my own heartbeat. “On the upside, you’re not my coach anymore.”

A tremor passed over his brow, his eyebrows curving for an instant before he smoothed his expression. I could see the tension in the way he gripped his knee with one hand. “I’m still college staff, Carter. It changes nothing.”

“I’ll drop out,” I offered.

“Why would you do that?” he demanded in a tone that was abruptly loud and frustrated.

His voice triggered my annoyance, and I held nothing back. “Don’t act like you don’t know.”

Hastily, Nate lifted his hand from his knee and rubbed his face. “This is wrong, Carter. All of this is wrong. You’re putting me in an impossible position.”

“Because you like me, too?” I asked, my voice thin and high.

He pressed his lips tightly. I saw now that the anger this caused wasn’t simply because I was annoyingly forward. He did like me. The sparks flaring from his eyes weren’t fueled by hate. They were sad, in part, but they were also lustful. I had always wanted him to look at me this way.

“Because you know we are the two sides of the same coin,” I said, putting my Coke on the table and shifting to face him with my whole body. In doing so, I gained an inch or two of space between us. “We keep running from the truth, Nate. But I’m done running. It’s fucking liberating to tell you this.”

“Carter, I’m...”

“If you say you’re too old one more time, Nate, I swear to God...” I rolled my eyes at him and still leaned in a little closer.

“But I am,” he said firmly. I wondered what it cost him to keep doing this. The beads of sweat on his forehead were telling enough that his resolve was beginning to crack.

“And Dana’s your oldest friend. I know, I know.” I pouted for only a second. “You keep flinging these reasons at me, Nate, but I’m done playing by anyone’s rules.”

“Even if they’re my rules?” he asked in a voice slightly louder than a whisper. He closed his eyes while a frown creased the space between his eyebrows.

“I would if they were really yours,” I admitted. “But they’re not. It’s your loyalty to my dad and some foolish idea that you’re doing me a favor. I don’t believe it.”

His lower lip trembled, and I could feel my heart splitting for him.

I put my hand over his, expecting him to jerk it back and send me away at any moment, but he didn’t. He was still and silent, not even breathing.

“If you tell me there’s no chance at all, I’ll believe you,” I said. It was a gamble, but I would respect the outcome. “Not even the slightest chance. If you really think that, I’ll get up and go away. I won’t bother you again.”

“You’re not bothering me,” he whispered.

I needed a second to still my heart a little. “So you don’t think it’s totally doomed.”

He opened his eyes, and a storm of emotions was raging in them. “Do you have any idea how hard you’re making this?”

“Tell me,” I dared him.

He flipped his hand over, suddenly controlling my wrist. It made my stomach leap to be at his mercy. “If you can think that I’m immune to someone as sweet and good-looking as you, Carter, then you don’t consider me human. But that’s not what you actually think, right? You think I’ll cave in if you push hard enough.”

I nodded. My breaths were too shallow to let me speak at all.

His grip on my wrist tightened, and he leaned closer. “You keep teasing me, flirting with me, torturing me.” His face was getting closer to mine. His smooth, clear skin still had a bit of that summer tan. His cologne crawled into my nostrils, reminding me of a forest breeze in the mountains. “Do you have any idea what that does to me? I’m trying to do the right thing, Carter. I’m trying to be a good person, but even I have a limit to what I can take.”

I bit my lip hard. With every word he said, the distance between us closed. I realized that I was leaning in, too. The room was getting hotter every second. Or it was my body that was heating up. I gazed into his eyes and read the pained expression as the full admission. “I don’t want you to obey the rules, Nathan,” I whispered. Where he gripped my wrist, my skin burned.

“We’re screwed, Carter,” he whispered and looked at me as if he was asking me for one final confirmation.

I don’t care, I might have said. At this point, I no longer knew where the line was between dreams and reality. I only knew that I was questing with my other hand to feel the bulging pec under the black shirt, my torso leaning in, head looking up. When I brought my lips a fraction of an inch away from his, I paused. This moment before the contact, the suspense of something incredible about to happen, turned me on as hard as the act itself.

But when Nate released my wrist and pressed his hand against the back of my head, my world turned upside down. In the time it took my heart to beat once, the suspense reached an unbearable height, only to snap like a rubber band when Nate smashed his mouth against mine.

My heart beat so hard I half expected it to break out of my rib cage. Nate's hand was firm on the back of my head, fingers dragging up the cropped hair on the back and rising into the longer hair on top. His lips were heated, and the faint scent of whiskey made him ten times sexier. The warm, wet tongue that ventured from his mouth into mine was sexy enough to make me want to pass out. I welcomed it, parting my lips and letting my tongue brush against his, battling him playfully while he kissed me hard enough to suck the soul out of my body.

I shifted on the sofa to be closer to him, my chest touching his, and I moved my hands to feel his upper back. His muscles were tight and hard, his breath like a shudder when he pulled his head away to exhale. His deep, rumbling voice was like a distant thunder as he pressed his brow against mine. At that moment, I pushed his upper back hard to make our bodies press closer.

“What are we doing, Carter?” he whispered.

“Whatever the hell we want,” I said, lifting my ass off the sofa and pushing Nate back until we tumbled down flat. He sprawled on the sofa, and I lay on top of him. I wiggled my hands from under his torso and pressed them against his chest. I could feel his pounding heart under my right hand when I leaned down and kissed him again.

He didn't fight me. Instead, his muscular arms wrapped around my body, pressing me tightly against him. If I had doubted him being attracted to me before, I couldn't doubt it any longer. My crotch pressed against his, and I felt his excitement bulging in his pants. He was hard as marble when he pushed his hips up, rubbing his crotch

against mine.

It dragged a moan out of me when I felt how stiff his cock was.

“Fuck, Carter,” he whispered. “You’re killing me.” He quickly pressed his lips against mine again, rubbing himself from beneath me, kissing me, sighing over my lips while I moaned and groped to feel as much of his body as I could.

Since the moment I realized I had tripped and fallen hard for this man, I had only the big library of photos that online magazines shared. And aside from running into him in the locker room that one time, I had never had a chance to truly admire his physique. I was hell-bent on drinking it all in now.

Before I knew it, I had undone the top button of his tight black shirt. The next one popped a moment later as I crawled against him to sit on his crotch. It dragged a growl from his throat when I settled my weight against his hard cock. I only wished we were naked already, but I could be patient for a few more minutes.

As I ran my fingers down the middle of his torso, revealing his smooth skin and chiseled body, I became light-headed. My focus narrowed to exclude everything else in the room. All I saw was Nate’s body; his flesh was revealed in inches until I dragged the hems of the shirt out of his pants and spread it over his torso.

Nate sat up, nearly tipping me onto my back, and shrugged his shirt off. His bare arms wrapped around me to support my torso while I hooked my fingers under my T-shirt. As I pulled it over my head, my heart stumbled. Was this really happening? Was I making out with my biggest crush and the man who had acted like he would rather die than give in? It felt like taking a deep dive into warm water and then swimming freely toward the surface.

When I threw my T-shirt onto the floor, Nate moved around and was on top of me

before I could yelp. I fell back on the sofa, and this gorgeous man towered over me. He lowered his hips until they rested over mine, his abdomen only lightly touching my bare body, and he pressed his fists into the seat of the sofa on either side of my head. Looking into my eyes, he paused. The sadness was gone. Anger, too. What was left was pure attraction with only a sliver of concern. “Are you sure about this, Carter?”

“I’ve never been so sure about anything in my life,” I said, and it wasn’t a lie.

“Oh, God,” he whispered. “I want you.”

“I want you,” I echoed quietly as our bodies melted into one another. His torso pressed against mine as he lowered his head and kissed me as passionately as I had never been kissed. Somehow, I knew a moment of pride that I had been right when I imagined that Nate was a good kisser. He could pace it so perfectly that I was never bored. He kissed me gently and passionately in turns, thrusting his tongue to explore my mouth when his lust ran wild, then pulling back and feeling my lips and face with his mouth.

“You’re such a beautiful young man,” he whispered while my hands traveled the length and width of his back. And when I dared to reach lower to grab his ass, he grunted he slammed his mouth over mine, kissing me harder.

More, I thought. I want so much more.

Sliding my hands under the waistband of his underwear and pants, I felt the warm skin of his ass, but that wasn’t where my interests lay. I could appreciate a nicely shaped peach, but it was his cock I lusted after.

And when I succeeded in moving my hands over his hips and to the front, Nate’s breathing sped up.

Flutters exploded all through my body when my fingers found his thick cock, and he throbbed. When I wrapped my hand around it, my pulse doubled, and I moaned in a high-pitched voice with all the desperation rocking my body.

Nate pushed himself away, and my hands fell out, but only briefly. He unbuckled his belt and pulled it out, tossing it on the floor. As he pulled the zipper down and undid the top button, my mouth watered with desire. All my dreams were coming true in the span of a single hour. If only I were brave enough to demand what I wanted, I could get it. If I had the courage to fight for it and the patience to fail at it, it would ultimately be mine.

He pulled his pants down to reveal a pair of black boxer briefs. His dick pitched a tent of intimidating size, lifting the fabric off his right hip. He wore a determined expression on his face as he lifted each knee and pulled his pants down, then yanked them off completely.

My heated breaths made my chest rise and fall quicker than I would have liked.

“Are you nervous?” Nate purred, his hands resting on my legs.

I undid my zipper and button, too, and slowly peeled the pants down my legs. When they were around my knees, Nate took over, dragging the denim all the way down. “I’m not,” I said. But as he threw my pants on the floor and began dragging his hands up my smooth legs, I knew a moment of anxiety. Please don’t be a size queen, I prayed silently in an instant that filled me with worry. It was not a thing that ever bothered me unless it bothered him. But when his finger hooked inside the waistband of my underwear, I decided I had nothing to worry about. Whatever happened next was out of my control.

Nate pulled my briefs down, and his eyes widened with interest, his face hard and neck stiff. “Carter,” he whispered. “You are so perfect.”

At just over four inches, my dick stood at full mast, throbbing with desire, leaping at his sweet, sexy voice. I had gone through periods when I totally lacked confidence because of it, but the older I got, the less it mattered. The real fun for me wasn't in playing with my dick at all. But I had never heard anyone call me perfect quite like this. "You like this?"

He gave a firm nod. "I like it very much," he said, unrestrained lust rippling across his face and riding his voice. He dragged my briefs off my legs and tossed them onto the back of the sofa while I clawed for his boxer briefs. It wasn't fair that I was the only one naked. Not when seeing him without any clothes was the wish I'd had for the longest time.

Nate didn't fight back. He let me sit up and pull his boxer briefs down, but I chose to do it slowly, applying tension much the same way I had done with my guitar last night. The waistband pulled his big cock down until he hissed, his abs growing even more pronounced as he flexed them. And when the waistband slipped over his cock, it sprang up, swinging under its own weight for one delicious moment before pulsing and stiffening.

My hand was around it in an instant. It was twice my size, if not more, thick and with a slick head. The short-cropped hair around it was dark and coarse, and Nate's balls were thick and heavy, making my mouth water hard.

It took me a moment to force my gaze away from his crotch and to his face. "You're perfect, too."

Nate swallowed and cupped the right side of my face with his left hand. His thumb brushed my cheek, then dragged over my lips. "What do you want me to do to you?"

The words ran through me like an electric current. "Everything."

He swung his hips slowly forward, pushing his dick through my fist. With his hand, he lifted my chin, and our gazes locked on one another. "I'm not going to fuck you tonight," he said firmly. "Not because I don't want to." The throbbing thickness in my fist assured me he was telling the truth. "I just don't like rushing things."

It sounded as close to a promise of another time as I would get from this man. But it was more than enough. "Let me suck it, then," I said.

Nate bent down and kissed me hard, his hands finding my hips. He pulled me down the length of the sofa and pressed his mouth against mine so hard that it made me lean back until I was lying flat on the sofa.

I inhaled a deep breath of air, puffing out my chest, as Nate pulled away from me. He stood up, his cock swinging above me and torso towering over me. His underwear fell around his ankles, and he stepped out of it, then approached the sofa again. When he stopped, I knew what we were doing, and my heart hammered harder than ever in anticipation.

I wrapped my right hand around my dick, holding it in a tight grip as if to force it to calm down. It wouldn't. The tightness in my balls and the almost painful erection were holding me on the very edge of an orgasm, and I still hadn't even licked him. Fuck. I wanted to lick him so much that I was sure I would die if I didn't get a chance.

Nate lowered himself by my head, one hand reaching over to pull my right hand away from myself. As he knelt on the edge of the sofa, I opened my mouth wide and found his gaze. For a few moments, I breathed deeply through my mouth, my left hand rising to hold him just as he leaned in.

At the exact instant when the swollen tip of his precum-slicked cock touched my lips and slipped into my mouth, I held my breath. The flavors of his precum exploded

over my taste buds; their sweet and salty quality, combined with Nate's faint musk, enchanted me and made me willing to fight the whole world for him.

As Nate sank into my mouth, he shifted so that he knelt on each side of my head, slightly above. And when he dipped deeper into me, grunting with tension, he also lowered his head and torso. "Such a perfect cock," he purred. "So beautiful."

His words turned me on nearly as much as his dick in my mouth did. He pulled his hips away from me, letting me inhale before he sank into me deeper. I needed a few moments to relax my throat, but I was confident in my skills, and Nate was patient enough, probing me lightly, testing the limits.

Simultaneously, he pressed his lips against my lower abdomen, his hot breath washing over my bare skin until his mouth dragged over my shaved private area and found my small cock. Exhaling over it, Nate wrapped his lips around me and swallowed me whole.

The wet warmth of his mouth sent the most incredible sensation through my body. My throat relaxed, loosening enough to let his cock slide deeper into me. In turn, it made Nate grunt when he impaled my head like this, and the vibration of his voice ran through my groin.

My thighs pressed together, rubbing against one another while I made my head move up, mouth gaping to swallow as much of his as I could.

My throat constricted now and again by sheer reflex, making Nate shudder hard enough that I could feel it on my body. And as I wrapped my arms around his waist, I forced him to stay inside of me for longer than he would have. He was careful still, not expecting that I knew precisely what I wanted.

His warm mouth worked my cock slowly as if he knew I was moments away from

blowing up. He sucked me, his soft tongue rubbing against the sensitive tip of my dick, his lips sealed around the base. I couldn't do that to him. He was too big for my lips to seal so tightly and for me to suck the air out of my mouth. Instead, I pulled him down on me, making him fuck my throat in short, jerky motions. It made a strangely loud noise, wet, sloshing, making me choke and gag now and again.

As his breathing sped up, I only tightened my arms harder around his waist, pulling him in to torture myself in the sexiest way I could imagine. His balls pressed against my nose as he rammed himself deep into me, sending me into the wild frenzy of my orgasm.

I managed to move a hand along his back and tap his shoulder in warning, but Nate's acknowledgment was to suck me harder.

I whimpered in short bursts of noise while he swung his hips back and forth, sucking me faster until my dick pulsed and cum filled his hot mouth.

I pressed my thighs harder together, wiggling under his carefully placed weight and thrusting my hips up to stuff his mouth. And when my dick calmed down, he kept sucking it, only pulling his mouth away to groan and growl. "Fuck," he said hoarsely after swallowing. "You're making me..." He grunted, and I wrapped my arms around his waist again to make sure he didn't ruin this by playing a gentleman. I wanted him to feed me, and I was going to get it.

Nate moaned and cried in a tight, deep voice, his body stiffening all over as he hurriedly thrust his dick down my throat. And when he pulsed, the heat of his cum flooded my body. It spilled into me, over my tongue, and down my throat as he emptied himself to the last drop.

He pulled out hurriedly, his strength outmatching mine, and I had no choice but to release his waist. As he slid off me, he knelt completely on the floor by the sofa. The

speed with which he did was almost like he was panicking, but when he brought his face close to mine, his eyes didn't seem worried at all. He gazed at me, his breathing quick like mine, and licked his lips.

For a moment, I wondered if some kind of clarity would kick in and if he would tell me this was all a mistake. But I should have known better than to doubt him, even if it was for half a heartbeat. Instead of ripping my heart out, Nate simply leaned in and pressed his mouth against mine.

I wished I knew if tasting himself on me excited him as much as it did me.

His kiss was still passionate, wet, and sloppy, and it gave me life. His breathing was calming down, and he rose slowly to the sofa. I scooted to make room for him, but Nate still wrapped himself around me like the hard, protective shell around a nut. He cuddled me while kissing my cheek.

"So," I whispered, barely able to produce sounds while my soul drifted through the skies. "That happened."

"It was..." His voice trailed in favor of a particularly affectionate kiss on my left eye just as I closed it.

"It was," I agreed. I struggled to find the right word to say, but the tightness with which we held one another spoke loudly enough. It said clearly just how pleased we both were. It had been incredible. It felt right in all the ways. And it was good enough for us to risk so much. Or perhaps the risk was just another spice.

When we turned around so that Nate lay on his back and I sprawled over him, I ran my fingers up and down his body. Even soft, his dick was big. Mine was even smaller.

“You really didn’t mind my...” I stopped, finding it suddenly hard to say it. “Some guys...”

“Some guys are assholes,” Nate said with more heart in it than I’d expected. He was otherwise appearing pretty drowsy in that irresistible laziness that set in after all the passion. “And if you point me to them, I’ll break their noses.”

It wasn’t surprising that his words turned me on. It was somewhere deep in my chest that the sensation unfolded.

“And I, uh...” He turned to look into my eyes. “I prefer your size. I think it’s hot.” The redness rose in his cheeks.

I laughed out loud. “You’re really struggling with the fact that I’m me.”

He shook his head. “It’s not like that.” Still, he pondered on it for a short while. “I know you’re not the same Carter I used to know. But this is still a dangerous game we’re playing.”

I folded my lips and licked them. “Nobody needs to know.”

He gave me a gentle look that said no secret was ever kept secret forever. But if anyone could keep a secret, it was Nate Partridge. I knew that from all the years when I didn’t know he was gay.

Still, he said nothing to dispel the magic of the moment. We both knew it was time for me to leave, but I wanted to cling to him forever. And since I couldn’t get forever, I chose to cling to him for another heartbeat.

And another.

We lay there in silence, naked, in the mess that we made and didn't regret. His gentle caressing of my arm and the side of my rib cage made me coil against him until a few minutes passed.

"This isn't the last time, is it?" I asked, knowing I had to get up. It felt like leaving a happy home forever.

"No," Nate said. "I really don't think it is." What he didn't say was that it would make no difference whether it was or wasn't. We had breached the codes and broken trusts for the sake of the most beautiful night of my life.

I hoped he would agree that it was all worth it.

Page 9

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NINE

Dana Prince visited me in my dreams. Even when I jerked awake, covered in sweat in a hotel bed, I could see him clearly. I could see his hard features and penetrating gaze. He hadn't said a word to me, but he didn't need to. All he had to say to me had already crossed my mind.

My heart pounded like I'd run a marathon as I got out of bed and dragged myself to the bathroom. Scalding water stung my skin and loosened the knots in my muscles. The bathroom filled with suffocating steam as I scrubbed my body in the shower. I wasn't gentle about it, either. I rubbed my fingers and dragged my fingernails over the reddening skin, my lips suddenly flashing with pain and the taste of blood on my tongue alerting me that I was biting myself too hard.

I stepped out of the shower and held a balled towel on my mouth where I'd split my lip. It throbbed painfully, spreading the metallic flavor into my mouth until the bleeding slowed and stopped.

When I looked into the steam-fogged mirror, I found my blurry shape. Tall, broad, defined by a lifetime of exercise. Attractive to a college freshman. Attracted to him, too.

My heart sped for a short time, stumbling every so often, and I held my breath. When a wave of trembling passed through my hands, I used the towel to wipe the hot water off my body. By then, the mirror was drying, clearing my reflection for me bit by bit.

Last night flashed before my eyes in the briefest of moments, but the memory

unfolded in the back of my mind slowly, thoroughly, with every irresistible detail living so vividly in my brain. His perfect, youthful body, his innocent eagerness, his big eyes full of gratitude and, unmistakably, lust. I could have spent the night simply watching him.

A pang of guilt squeezed my heart.

Dana's son had quit the Titans and marched into my room. And I broke every rule I lived by. I severed my oldest friendship without giving it a second thought. I tore down the walls that had been my last defense. Not that I had been defending myself from Carter. It was precisely the opposite. I had tried to protect him from myself.

A youthful infatuation with someone like me was nothing new. I'd had hordes of fans who'd once called me a heartthrob. And I had never given in to using my celebrity status and their fogged vision of me as a way to get laid. Never.

I rubbed my eyes and face and stared at the mirror. The guy on the other side looked tired but not as ancient as I had thought. Not as lifeless.

Am I really feeding off a college freshman to feel young again? The thought made me wince, and I left the mirror and the bathroom behind. Naked and with wet hair, I walked through my hotel suite until I'd made too many circles in the living room and had to sit. I dropped my tired body into the armchair and looked at the sofa.

The definition of his muscles returned to my mind. The redness of his slick lips and the warmth of his mouth, his little moans, his beautiful, small cock in my mouth...

My dick stirred, and I killed the oncoming arousal by deliberately getting angry with myself.

That day, it seemed I saw Carter more times than ever. In the hotel restaurant, over

breakfast, he was sitting with Ron, Avery, and Sawyer, laughing at something. Only when I saw him laugh did I realize how rare that was. I hadn't seen him this cheerful around his teammates before. Quitting seemed to be a much bigger relief than I had imagined.

Carter greeted me the same way everyone else did. I didn't fear him spilling the truth to anyone — not like that, anyway. I knew it couldn't stay hidden forever, especially if we gave in again, but I didn't think Carter would be the one bragging about sleeping with me.

Even if my heart leaped at seeing his smile that morning, I reminded myself that I was the one with all the power. I was the one who had charmed him, impressed him, made him fall for me, and then allowed him into my hotel room.

I saw him again in the lobby waiting for the ride back, and I saw him throughout that trip. The entire day, Carter was permanently in the periphery of my vision and almost always looking away at the very moment I glanced at him.

That night, I returned to my apartment, hoping to catch a few hours of sleep without being plagued by Dana's judgmental and furious looks. The morale among the Titans was low throughout the day after suffering a defeat, which coated my mood black, too.

Carter didn't reach out to me with the juvenile patience that wouldn't have surprised me. It was a reminder of his maturity, or so I told myself in hopes to relieve some guilt from my rotten soul. Throughout the next day, he was on my mind even if he wasn't around me.

The drills that evening were odd. I met the boys in the locker room minutes before we kicked things off, wondering if Carter would be there. His absence wasn't a surprise, considering he had pulled out. "As you probably know by now," I announced after a

round of greetings, “Prince decided to step away from hockey. I think it’s a good reminder for you all. Talent is never enough if you don’t love the sport. If you’re not driven by passion, your talent might even be a hindrance. You all saw where Carter’s passion is, I’m sure, so I’d like to ask you to respect his wishes. Alright?”

“Hear, hear,” Beckett called, and the others echoed.

Now that I knew Carter wouldn’t return to practice, his absence was more obvious than when he’d taken a leave last week. I noticed myself scanning the rink for him more than once. The boys did well in drills, going over some of the weaker areas that had cost us the game in Chicago. We had a few friendly matches lined up before the competitive games began, and I found that I cared more and more about the outcome.

Perhaps there was some kind of future for me doing this. Arctic Titans were a team any coach could wish for. Of course, my future with them was still in the air, considering I hadn’t been the first choice to coach them.

I should have expected it, but it still surprised me. After the players left the rink, I packed my things and walked through the back door as usual. The air was cooler than on any of the nights so far, bringing fall closer every day. As I strode down the path leading away from the rink, the movement in the shadows started me. “Nate,” he said in a light tone.

My heart skipped a beat at the sound of his voice. “Hey.”

Carter stepped into the light, hands tucked into his pockets, his youth glimmering on his face. It was joy, actually. He was truly happy for the first time since the semester had started. “I knew I’d find you here.”

“I’m a predictable man, it seems.” We kept a decent distance between ourselves, but my feet were itching to step closer to him. Nothing was stopping me anymore.

Nothing in my heart, at least, even if I still didn't want anyone seeing us together.
"We missed you tonight."

"All of you?" he teased.

I nodded and corrected that. "I missed you."

"That's better," he said and stepped a little closer to me. My arms tensed with the need to hold him. Once I had allowed it to myself, the desire dominated all my other feelings. The longing to pull him in made all my reservations fade away.

But I reminded myself that, at the very least, we needed to have a conversation. "Got plans tonight?"

"This was my plan," Carter said cheerfully. "Mission accomplished."

I inhaled a deep breath and held it for a moment. His light brown hair caught the light of the streetlamp, his eyes twinkling like stars, and his lips stretched into such an innocent smile that I found him utterly irresistible. "Did you mention wanting to play the piano, or am I hallucinating?"

Carter chuckled. "I'm dying for my piano, but I can't talk Dad into sending it over."

I scratched the back of my neck. "I happen to have a dusty old piano at my place if you want to practice."

His grin widened, and he shot me a daring look. "You can just ask me over. You don't have to buy a piano as a bait."

I couldn't hold the laugh that welled in me. "Is that what I did?"

Carter shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I'd love to see your piano."

"Why do I feel like that's an innuendo?" I whispered.

"Because it is," Carter said, shamelessly winking at me. "Also, I was waiting for this invite."

"I'm not avoiding you," I said firmly. "In fact, I was going to look for you tonight." I gestured with my head toward the parking lot, and Carter skipped after me. The night was the obvious time to see him. The reduced visibility, the free time, and the lack of suspicion from his housemates made it ideal. The fact that it suggested romance and passion was risky but also a plus, considering we were past the point of no return.

Even so, I had to talk to him about sensitive things. We couldn't do it in a bar or in front of the rink. I wouldn't use him again until I drew some firm lines we couldn't cross. I didn't mean to use him, I thought apologetically, but I knew that things simply didn't work that way. My intentions were irrelevant when the facts were what they were. Fame and wealth could easily blind an inexperienced person. The momentary attraction could look like something more to someone so young.

We drove in companionable silence. The old rock music from my speakers filled the car, and Carter occasionally said how much he liked the song that came on. Each time, he surprised me. I would have imagined these songs being totally foreign to him. And if he wasn't humming and mouthing and even singing along, I might have suspected he was only saying it to give us things in common. By the end of the ride, I knew without a doubt that our tastes in music were a match.

"It's timeless," Carter pointed out when I expressed my surprise. "Besides, these songs are twenty years older than you, and you like them."

I had to laugh.

“They are,” he said. “You keep pretending you’re old, but you were a kid yourself ten years ago.”

“I was twenty-eight ten years ago,” I said as we walked through the underground garage in my building toward the elevator. “And at the height of my popularity.”

“Not true,” Carter said. “You peaked in the last couple of years, according to every source I ever read. We’re not talking about those shitty online blogs, by the way. Just this morning, The Metropolitan Observer published a piece questioning if your retirement had come too soon. I don’t know if you’re paying attention, but your old team isn’t doing so great.”

I hadn’t been paying attention. It hurt too much to know what was happening. It hurt that I was out if they were losing, but it hurt the same if they were winning without me.

“You’re a real little stalker, aren’t you?” I accused him as we entered the elevator.

He shot me a pout. “I’m not little.”

My eyebrows moved up and down playfully before I could stop them, and Carter easily read the suggestion off my face. He was little in one particularly delicious way. And the closer we were to total privacy, the harder it was to keep that out of my thoughts.

“And I’m not a stalker,” Carter said, his voice a little more airy and his face flushed. “I’ll admit, I have all the magazines with you on the cover, but how’s that different from any other pop star or actor or sports celebrity?”

It was different in that he had slept with me, but I didn’t say it. I was stunned that he had those as much as by the fact that he would so readily admit it. “Even the...”

“The underwear ones? Hell yeah.” His heated tone and pink cheeks revealed more than he planned, I was sure.

The elevator dropped up in the elegant hallway that led to my spacious apartment. We walked there, and Carter observed how nice the building was. I hadn’t exactly paid much attention to where I lived. I owned properties across the country, vacation homes, luxury apartments, office spaces, and more. Those I lived in from time to time were all the same to me. I’d spent most of my life on the go, living in hotel rooms. Before that, I had been dirt-poor and sharing one small room with my big brother.

I unlocked the heavy door and pushed it open, letting us into my apartment.

“You weren’t kidding” were the first words from Carter’s mouth.

“About what?” I asked before I remembered.

He simply gestured at the apartment. “It’s like those viewing models. Very clean.”

I chuckled. “You’re getting cheeky.”

“I take liberties after sixty-nining someone,” he replied with a guileless shrug.

His words made me heat up, but I hurried into the kitchen to get us something to drink. Carter followed me all the way to the fridge, where I searched for Coke. When his gaze grew too heavy, I pulled a can out and set it on the island, finally turning to look into his eyes. He was patient, but there were expectations in that look.

“I want us to talk about things,” I said.

He pulled his lower lip between his teeth. “After you kiss me.”

My heart thumped so loudly that it felt like it had climbed into my skull. I took a step forward and cupped the boy's cheek, looking into his big, warm eyes. He was daring, far braver than I had ever been, and the desire to be kissed was painted across his entire face.

It lured me in so easily that I didn't even consider not doing it.

When my lips grazed against him, he sucked in a shallow breath of air, then pushed himself up onto his toes. He rose and pressed his mouth against mine just as I leaned in a little lower, kissing him deeply and carefully as if I would never get another chance.

When I pulled away from him, he had that glazed look in his eyes and a silly smile on his lips. After a moment, he blinked and nodded. "That's better."

My chest was tight with all the feelings I wouldn't let run wild. Even if we talked and found a way to see one another, he was still nearly twenty years younger. I couldn't let myself feast on all the good things he made me feel. I couldn't do that to him.

I stepped away, keeping my hands busy by putting ice into two glasses. Carter filled his with Coke, and I searched for something stronger for myself.

"Was that whiskey you had the other night?" Carter asked.

The fact that I feared he would ask me for a glass of whiskey was a terribly pointed example of the age gap between us. "Yes," I said carefully.

"You should have some," Carter said matter-of-factly. "I really like the smell of it."

A shudder passed through my chest, but as it calmed down, I realized it wasn't anything other than the flutters of anticipation. I wanted him again. This brief,

brilliant kiss was enough to seduce me into obedience to a nineteen-year-old. It was enough to make me want to give everything up just to have him again.

I poured myself two fingers of whiskey over the ice and turned to Carter. “Let’s get comfortable.”

He grinned. “You don’t have to tell me twice.” He reached for the top button of his light gray shirt, which had a small, dark pattern splattered over the fabric. When I laughed and shook my head, he shrugged and lifted his glass instead.

We settled in the living room on the long sofa. Despite so much room, we found ourselves inches apart, turning so that we faced one another. The entire right side of my torso was leaning against the back of the sofa, my eyes on Carter, my right leg folded under my ass.

“You wanted to talk about things,” Carter reminded me gently. I could hear a tiny note of anxiety in his tone.

I nodded. The fact that I made him nervous was killing me, but we had to establish some rules and clear some things up. “I’m thirty-eight,” I said clumsily, and Carter rolled his eyes.

“I’ve read your Wikipedia, Nate. I know how old you are.” He took a sip of his Coke while looking at me. After he swallowed, he spoke again. “I have never been attracted to someone my age, okay? You can be fifty for all I care. I like men who had some time to find themselves.”

If he thought I’d found myself by this age, he was in for a disappointment, but I didn’t digress. “And you see nothing wrong with this?” I asked instead.

“Not a thing,” he assured me. “If it weren’t you, it would be someone like you.”

I breathed in and out slowly. “That doesn’t solve the real issue.”

“My dad?” Carter asked.

It felt like a needle stabbed me right through my heart, but I shook my head. “It’s not that, Carter. Don’t get me wrong, Dana wouldn’t be happy.” Won’t be, I corrected myself. I hesitated, wondering how to approach this.

Carter watched me anxiously, sipping his Coke twice in the time it took me to find the right way to start.

“Let me be absolutely honest with you,” I said. “I like you, Carter. I find you attractive. I think you’re hella smart and funny. And your talent for music is breathtaking.”

“That’s a good start,” Carter said with a small smile. “But there’s a ‘but.’”

I clenched my teeth and watched the rising disappointment in his eyes. I would have told him immediately that we didn’t need to give this up, but I couldn’t go in that direction. He had to have a clear way out after I said the things I had to say. I continued as gently as I could. “I’m not a regular guy. You know that. I’ve been famous for longer than I had been an anonymous nobody. Being in the spotlight is like saying hello. And turning up the charm for others to admire is second nature to me. You have to know this, Carter, because you wouldn’t be the first person to be blinded by the things I wanted everyone to see. It’s what I was taught to do. When I was much younger, I had an entire team of advisors teaching me exactly how to smile to take a breath away. They wanted me to break a million hearts because I was young, good-looking, and had a camera-friendly face. My first manager put me in front of every microphone and camera he could find.” I paused. Carter’s expression grew ever so slightly darker, his lips pressed a little tighter, and his gaze never moved from my face. “What I’m trying to say is that I can’t control this. My instinct is to hide a lot of

things about myself and only show the stuff people want to see. Stuff that makes people like me and admire me..." Crush on me and fall in love with me. I avoided saying those words. "But there's more to me than that. I flirt with alcohol when times are tough. I'm not a drunk, but I don't shy away from a few shots of whiskey when I sit here all alone. And this summer's been the hardest in my life since I was a broke kid getting bullied for wearing my hand-me-downs from my big brother." I snorted to conceal how badly the taste still lingered in my mouth from thirty years ago.

Carter nodded slowly and licked his lips as if he would speak.

I hurried to take away his chance. "I also know that I've been sold to generations of people as something everyone wanted, Carter." My voice was regretful, even after I tried to make it firm. "Countless girls were infatuated with me over the years. Just check my inboxes and you'll see for yourself. They saw this popular, beloved athlete who cracked jokes at press conferences and acted like he had his shit together. But that was what we wanted to show to the world. It's not real."

Carter sighed audibly enough to make me stumble over my words. "Are you done?"

"As a matter of fact, no," I said, annoyed that he was so dismissive. I should have controlled myself a little better than that because the words that followed were far less diplomatic. "I don't want to use you just because you find that guy from the magazine covers attractive, Carter. I'm not him. I'm a fucked-up man with more regrets than he can count. And I don't plan to add you to that pile."

Silence.

Carter frowned at me like I'd said something terrible. I didn't want to give him up, but I wouldn't drag him by the nose on account of my old, neatly curated glory. If he wanted me, he would have to have the whole messy package.

Finally, Carter set his glass on the coffee table and cocked his head in a judgmental way. “You’re doing it again,” he said without bothering to keep the accusation out of his voice. “You’re acting like I’m some stupid kid who doesn’t know how these things work.”

I opened my mouth to disagree.

“Let me talk now,” he said, and I snapped my mouth shut. “Did you forget where I grew up, Nate? You spent a lot of time at my dad’s place. You have to remember the vultures waiting outside his gates to snap any photo of him that they can to unravel the mystery that Dana Prince used to be. I’m not blind. I know what fame is like, and I know who you are. Not the sexiest man of the year, nor the winger, Nate Partridge. But Nathan. The poor kid, the upstart, the one who got lucky to strike a friendship with my dad that opened all those doors early on. Do you think I don’t remember you crediting my dad with all your success? I know you.”

Even if he gave me a chance to speak now, he had left me speechless.

“I know that you’re shy, actually, and that you’re humble. I know how much you doubt yourself. And I absolutely know the ugly side of fame. So, no, Nate. I’m not blinded by the inflated brand image. And screw you for thinking that I am.” He paused for only a heartbeat for this jab to land. It punched me in the stomach, almost kicking all the air out of me. “I like you. I like the way you look, the way you smell, and the way you stand up for me, even when you think you’re just doing the right thing and that it doesn’t mean anything. I think you’re the hottest guy ever, and not because I have some wrinkled old magazine cover to look at.” He blinked faster, his cheeks heating up. “If you really think I’m so empty-headed that I fell for the things your agents wanted everyone to see, then you don’t know the first thing about me, and you don’t remember who my dad is. Did you forget how sweet he was to every journalist when there were cameras around? How friendly he was to all his fans? And how he yelled at me for putting the rollerblades on before I tried the skates?”

My heart sank so low that it was beating from my stomach.

“You haven’t seen him shout at me for playing the guitar after practice because it wasted my energy, and I should be watching hockey to study what professionals did.” He said those words before his breath hitched, and he looked away, blinking furiously. “I want to be with you,” he whispered hurriedly. Then I noticed he was trying to blink the tears away. He swiped at his eyes angrily and turned his head even further away from me, his chest rising and falling quickly until he abruptly stopped breathing.

“Fuck, Carter,” I whispered. “You’re right. You’re right about everything. I apologize.”

His jaw stiffened, chest still not moving.

“I underestimated you,” I admitted. “I’m sorry. I should have realized that you, of all people, were immune to fame.” Of course he was. Maybe not completely and maybe not to all kinds of fame, but a hockey star was unlikely to seduce him after he’d witnessed the two sides of his father.

His lower lip quivered for a moment before he forced his head back, and his gaze met mine. “Yes?” he whispered fearfully.

“Yes,” I said, finding his tight fist on the sofa between us. I wrapped my hand gently around it until he relaxed his hand. His fingers threaded through mine. “Okay, yes.”

“Really?” His pupils dilated, tears vanishing from his big, warm eyes.

“We can be together, Carter,” I said. Somewhere in the depths of my heart, I knew I was signing my own execution warrant, but it didn’t matter. I wanted this guy. He was the most refreshing, invigorating addition to my life that I could remember. He

was the perfect companion, the ideal partner, and the most attractive person I'd ever met. He was beautiful in every way. "If you truly want me, I'm all yours."

He visibly fought the incredible smile that stretched his lips. "Drop the 'if,' Nate, or I'll make you regret you ever met me."

A laugh burst out of me, and I felt like a boy on the verge of falling in love. I leaped forward, slamming my mouth against his, feeling like I was twenty years younger. Hope filled me as I kissed Carter. For one glimmering moment, he was all I knew. Nothing else mattered as much as making this young man as happy as I could. In doing that, I was making my heart whole. I was discovering the purpose I'd thought I had lost. The sad truth was I had never had a purpose. I had only had a career. But the true happiness that came with kissing someone so passionately had always been a mystery to me. Until him.

I kissed him and pushed him so far back that he sprawled on the sofa, and I lay on top of him, our bodies coiling and our souls colliding.

Carter's hands traveled all over my back, and the heat of the moment carried us into the realm of all the irresistible possibilities. We let our passion run wild. I pleasured him with my mouth carefully until our naked bodies were covered in sweat and our hearts were beating twice the normal speed. We reveled in the mess of lust, holding on to one another as our heartbeats slowed down and our lungs filled with air.

He nestled his head in the fold of my arm, the side of his face pressed against my chest. "I hear your heart," he whispered.

I kissed the top of his head for a long time.

After, he looked up at me with a drowsy expression that carried a spark of mischief. "One of these nights, you'll have to do more to me than that."

I laughed softly. “Hush, baby. There’s time for everything.” I wasn’t in any hurry to fuck him. And Carter would have to be patient. I wanted to experience much more of him before I claimed his body so completely. I wanted to make him feel special, not just in the hours of lovemaking. I wanted us to wait. I wanted us to know so much more about each other before merging our bodies like that.

For a man who had spent months moping about the way his life had ended, it was a relief to feel like there was time for everything. I didn’t lie to him. In my heart, there was only hope. The days could only bring more of the good things.

After all this time, I felt like I had been climbing an endless staircase to something larger than I could have imagined. And I was here at long last. The doorstep I finally found was clearly only just the start of my life, not the end.

Carter moved away from me and sat up. Naked and beautiful, he sat with his back turned to me. I pressed my fingers against the top of his spine, dragging my hand down and feeling his body’s rhythm. And when my hand found his hip, he looked at me over his shoulder. His head tilted briefly in the direction of the far window and the concert piano stationed there and closed against the dust. “May I?”

I cleared my throat to stifle a laugh. “That’s why I brought you here, right?”

Carter laughed out loud. “Yes, of course. That’s why I’m here.” He leaned down and pressed his lips against mine for a long moment, letting us both savor the beauty of it. When he moved away from me, he stood up and strolled across the large living room wearing nothing but a happy smile on his face.

He sat down on the piano stool, lifted the lid off the pristine keys, ran his fingers softly and silently over them, thought for a moment, and then shredded my heart with the beauty of his music.

TEN

It was the usual rapport. I lied my ass off into the phone, fearing what Dad would say if he knew I had quit the Titans three weeks ago. Lying was becoming too easy, but part of it was Dad's fault. He wasn't listening. Not really. I was weaving the same old story about drills and games, rehashing the things Ron had told me over the weeks.

I kept seeing my friend several times per week. He would tell me what the team was up to, share anecdotes from the team house, and enrich the fake stories I told Dad.

If he were listening to me, Dad would have noticed that I was repeating some details by accident, but he didn't care about any of that.

"And Nate's happy with you?" he asked gruffly.

I swallowed a chuckle. "I think so. He's not unhappy."

In these turbulent weeks, Nate had been the only real constant in my life. He never walked back on his word after the time he'd tried lecturing me, and I felt his respect whenever we were together. That was often, but not nearly often enough for my appetite. I wanted to be near him all the time. It wasn't enough to see him a few times a week or to have him accompany me to a live gig and hide in the shadows. That happened once because the gigs were harder to find than I'd hoped. Still, I was trying my best.

What my father didn't know was that I had moved out of the team house two weeks ago. I'd found a small room in a shared apartment three blocks away from campus,

where four music students lived and practiced. The place was a little shabby, but that only meant I could afford it without raising alarms. Dad could see my bank account if he bothered to, but he luckily forgot all about me as soon as things weren't about hockey.

"We're proud of you, Carter," Dad said in the end. It was never "I love you," but "We are proud of you." And that pride depended on the lies I spun. It would be short-lived if he knew about the Titans.

Last weekend, something surprising had happened. I was on my way to surprise Nate when I passed the city rink. Some kind of longing unfolded in me so instantly that it caught me off guard. I missed the ice. I missed it until the next heartbeat when I remembered that the ice was all my father cared about.

I might still have loved it had he not made the entire idea of hockey a condition of his love and support.

Nate could see I was upset even when I tried to be casual. He kept asking until I told him, and then he hugged me in silence for what felt like a sweet eternity.

As I hung up, I drifted back into that hug in my mind. He didn't know the extent to which he had improved my life. Cheering me on all the time, kissing me when I finished practicing, and even leaving the apartment twice to let me use the piano in case I wanted privacy — he acted like he had an important errand, but he would return an hour later with chocolate for me — were only a few things he did in such a short time to cement my adoration.

Tonight, Nate picked me up two streets away from my new place. He couldn't see me last night because he had made arrangements with Beckett, but I was patient. I could always wait until tomorrow. I had waited for him even when he'd been nothing more than a fantasy.

“Hey, baby,” he greeted me in his deep purr when I dropped into the passenger seat of his car. “How are you?”

“Better now that I’m here,” I said right away. At a questioning look from him, I explained that Dad had called. “He has no clue yet,” I said, then reluctantly added, “It’s kind of sad.”

Nate let his silence last a little while. “I’m sorry, Carter.”

“Not your fault,” I said curtly. I was simply cursed with uncaring parents. “Does he ever call you?”

Nate shook his head.

“Did something happen between you?” I asked. It was a random thought, but it struck me as odd that they never spoke.

Nate rolled his shoulders. “We drifted apart a few years ago. He retired, and I kept playing, so we weren’t around each other as much. It happens in life.”

He wasn’t telling me everything. What could have gone down to cool their relationship so much? They spoke of each other with respect, but they didn’t speak to each other. That wasn’t entirely true, either, but it was especially noticeable now that Nate was supposedly my coach. I tried to form the right question to ask, but then something distracted me. “Where are we going?”

Nate chuckled. “It took you long enough.”

“This isn’t the way to your place,” I pointed out, confusion swirling around my head.

“You are correct, baby,” Nate said, mock patronizing me. It earned him a pout and a

glare, especially because he was wearing a pleased smile instead of answering my questions. He drove us in the opposite direction of his building, toward the outskirts of the city.

“Alright,” I muttered. “Keep your secrets.”

“You keep surprising me,” he said. It was true. I visited him unannounced a few times already, and he was always happy. I could expect the same from him.

What I expected to be a quick ride to his apartment turned into forty-five minutes of Pink Floyd pouring from the speakers. I didn’t complain about the duration or his music choice, but it was messing with my plans for the evening. The thing was, I had been naughty this evening, and Nate had no idea.

His reluctance to take our bedroom fun to the next level was admirable, of course, except that it was driving me nuts. He was the sexiest man on the planet, and yet he kept postponing it as if I were a virgin who had no idea what sex was.

The other night, I’d told him so, and he just laughed it off. “Where’s the hurry?” he had asked.

It was hard to explain, but a sense of urgency was filling me more and more as time went by.

When we arrived at our mysterious destination, it only turned me on harder. And the fact that I had been naughty earlier made me more desperate for something serious. Positioned on the narrow path that directly looked over the endless body of water I identified as Lake Huron, the small Eagleton Bed and Breakfast house was the stuff dreams were made of. It was easily as charming as any vacation home I had ever seen, with pots overflowing with flowers and deep yellow lights pouring from the windows. The house was a quaint fantasy of small-town appeal with a little front yard

dotted with bushes and decorated with healthy flowerbeds.

Nate got out of the car and paused by the short wooden stairs. He waited for me to join him. He didn't know what made me squirm after spending an hour sitting here and simmering with desire, but he didn't seem to mind waiting for me. As I slowly got out of the car, a mixture of pain and pleasure spread through my lower abdomen.

"What did you do?" I whispered, but it was impossible to keep the awe out of my voice.

Nate shrugged. "We never go out together," he said as if it explained everything, then bent his arm for me to take.

It was true. We couldn't be seen together in public. The performance he attended was an exception, and he wore a baseball cap and dark shades to hide his face while watching me perform on the stage. We couldn't have dinner in a restaurant or drinks at a bar without people noticing him. And that would be a disaster for many reasons, least of which was the fact that Nate had never come out of the closet.

I didn't mind. My guiding principle was to give him all the time he needed. The fact that we had gotten together at all was enough to keep me satisfied for a long time.

We climbed the few short stairs to the front porch when the door opened. A kindly man stood on the other side with a warm smile under a thin mustache. "Welcome to Eagleton. I hope your drive here went well."

"Terrific," Nate said while the man who introduced himself as Eric led us through. The interior was as charming as the exterior of this house. It looked like a historic inn, all wood and red brick, traditionally decorated and made so warm that I wanted to live here for the rest of my days. How wonderful would that be?

Eric showed us briefly the staircase that led to the upper floor where our apartment was but led the way into the secluded restaurant. Light, soothing classical music filled the empty dining room that was lit by countless candles and only offered a single table with two chairs.

My hand tightened around Nate's elbow. "Are you kidding me?"

"Nope," Nate said. "Thank you, Eric." That was to the man who just pulled a chair out for me. I murmured my thanks while Nate pulled his own chair back and sat down.

"The inn is yours, Mr. Partridge," Eric said politely as he retreated.

I looked around once again. The dining room's walls were painted dusty yellow, and ornate frames with paintings of lakes and landscapes were hanging from all sides. Large windows let the candlelight create a reflection against the night outside. My gaze went over the table, where there was a decanter, wineglasses, and neatly stacked plates. On them, elaborately folded napkins made me feel slightly out of place. It had been a while since I'd been exposed to high standards. Dad's resort vacations didn't entail a lot of luxury and often included bottomless mimosas for breakfast.

"You could have warned me to put something fancier on," I muttered, but the joy I felt at being treated like a prince was too much to keep out of my voice. I lifted my gaze and found his kind, handsome face glowing.

"You look absolutely perfect. I wouldn't change a thing," Nate said. He wore a very nice dark blue shirt and a pair of cream pants paired with a brown belt and classy brown sneakers. I should have suspected something was up if he dressed so nicely for a quick ride.

"The guy knows your name," I pointed out.

Nate wasn't concerned. "I would imagine he read it on the NDA."

I chuckled politely, but it was a scary reminder of who we were. He was a famous winger, even if he was retired, and NDAs were his everyday occurrence.

Footsteps approached us lightly from somewhere behind me, and a middle-aged woman with black hair and dark eyes paused by our table. "Good evening, Mr. Partridge," she said. "Would you like to order?" She scanned the table and lifted the decanter. She had a timeless beauty to her that made me want to watch everything she did.

As I gazed up at her, I didn't notice Nate's expression until he spoke. "Ana? God, how are you?"

The woman visibly lit up. "Very well, sir, thank you for asking."

I looked at Nate with a curious frown on my face, but he went on. "How's Suzie? Has she made it into Everett Hills?" He lost me there. I had no idea what was going on.

Ana smiled broadly as she finished pouring wine. "Made it and graduated from it, sir."

Nate blew out a breath of air. "Time flies. I bet you're a proud mom."

Judging by the way she beamed, that was a safe bet to make. She thanked Nate again and then wrote down our orders. We each picked very light starters and easy main courses. Eating wasn't high on the list of things I wanted to do.

Ana went away with the orders, and I stared at Nate. "You know each other?" Why would he bring me to a place where he personally knew someone? Was he coming out?

Nate simply shrugged. “I’ve been here before, oh, four or five years ago. I didn’t expect to see a familiar face.”

He didn’t know it then, but that was the moment when I pulled my heart out of my chest, put it in a nice little box, and gave it to him for good. “You remember a server from four years ago,” I whispered. And the server’s daughter and the name of some school I had never heard of.

Nate looked bewildered that I would even talk about it.

“Does being recognized worry you?” I asked gently, just to make sure.

Nate sucked his teeth and shook his head. “It’s alright. This is a discreet establishment. Why else do you think they rent out the entire house to just one couple? Many more popular people have stayed here, I’m sure. Not that anyone here would tell me if that’s true.”

“I’m going to go on a limb and say you had a date here,” I teased him.

Nate flushed and waved his hands nervously, explaining how it should have been a date, but the guy was a no-show, probably scared off by the fact that this wasn’t some back-alley hostel but a fine inn. “That’s how I met Ana. I was a loser who got stood up.”

I moaned with sympathy. “Oh, poor baby.” It made him laugh.

Our starters arrived. Feta cheese baked in crusty dough and drenched in honey was the greatest thing that had ever come from an oven. After that, we each had a very good salad, followed by a chocolate cake that was nearly as good as orgasms.

We devoured everything on the table while I questioned Nate about his dating life. It

was pretty much what I had already guessed. His dates had been few and far between, always discreet, never serious, and never, ever in public. He spoke about never hoping to have something real, but his eyes dazzled like he believed he had it now.

I wanted it to be true. This was the realest thing I had ever had, too, but my experience was limited. It was similar to what he told me, aside from the need to keep it all hidden.

Nate leaned over abruptly, cupped my chin, and dragged his thumb over the corner of my lips. He pulled his hand back and licked his thumb playfully, shooting me a naughty look as if he were eighteen years old and about to raise some hell. “Chocolate,” he said with a pleased smile.

A fire roared in me. I fought hard not to wheeze. When I managed to inhale, I whispered, “If you don’t take me upstairs right now, I’ll break something.”

Nate pushed his chair back promptly and stood. I followed his lead, happy to play chicken with him if that was what he wanted. I had my eye on the prize, but I wasn’t sure if he’d finally give in. I needed him more than I needed air in my lungs or that chocolate cake in my mouth.

We slowly went upstairs, where the entire floor was converted into a suite. A sitting room had a door that led into the spacious bedroom. As we entered it, more candles were burning, giving the room its cozy feel. Rose petals were scattered all over the bed, and the see-through white silk canopy had more rose petals sprinkled over it.

I lost my breath when we entered. The bed was straight in front. To my right was another door leading to the bathroom, and to my left was a fancy vintage dresser with many candles of various colors and a large mirror hanging above it.

“Do you like it?” Nate asked.

I turned on my heels to face him, slid my arms around his torso, and rose on my toes to kiss his lips. “I love it,” I whispered after the kiss. “It’s like you’re reading my mind.”

Nate’s hands rested on my lower back, our bodies pressing together. “You haven’t exactly been subtle.”

I laughed. “What changed your mind?” I gazed at him as if I would never get to see him again and wanted to absorb every detail of his face. His short hair showed signs of thick curls, and beautiful lines spread subtly from the outer corners of his eyes. I looked at his perfect teeth and his full, sexy lips.

“Nothing,” he said. “I wanted this as much as you, baby.” That word made me his as much as I could be. “I just wanted us to get to know each other better.”

“You mean you wanted to make sure I’d still like you after a month.” I didn’t need him to confirm that, so I didn’t let him. Instead, I kissed him again, thrusting my tongue into his mouth shamelessly and exploring its warmth.

Nate kissed me back just as hotly, shutting the bedroom door with one hand while lowering the other to my ass. The chocolate lick had turned me on already, but the proximity and pressure made me wild with lust.

We stumbled across the room, groping for each other’s clothes until I tripped over the edge of the bed and fell flat on the soft mattress.

Nate laughed, undoing the buttons of his shirt and revealing his beautiful body. When he shrugged his shirt off, I took a moment to admire those big, round shoulders. I never got used to the way my heart leaped at seeing him undress.

I put my fingers to good use, too, ridding myself of my shirt and starting the work on

my pants. These weeks we had spent together had been the most magical time of my life. I was doing the things I loved, and I had the undivided attention of the man I had coveted for years. He made me his. He cared for me. And he opened up to me.

I knew he'd stalled with this because he wanted me to know what life had been like for him. I knew how scared he was of coming out both to the public and to his family. I knew that hiding it from them made him feel like a liar, but I didn't think so harshly of him at all. And now that he knew how little his past mattered to me and how much I saw him for who he was, he wasn't holding back.

Nate bent down and grabbed my pants, pulling them all the way down my legs while I hurried to kick my shoes off. When all I had left on me was a pair of black briefs with red hearts printed all over them, Nate knelt on the bed between my legs.

"You sexy thing," he purred as I wrapped my legs around his waist. My bare, smooth thighs met his naked torso, and pure fire roared to life between us. He kissed my lips while swinging his hips back and forth, his cock trapped inside his pants but hard enough to let me feel it against my crotch. His lips dragged down from mine, crossing my chin and trailing my throat, then covering all of my torso from my collarbones to my belly button. When he reached the waistband of my briefs, I was shaking with lust and anticipation.

Nate's fingers hooked under the waistband of my briefs on the small of my back, and he gently pulled my underwear down. As he pulled them over my ankles, I spread my legs for him and waited for the gasp.

"Oh, you naughty boy," he purred, his chest rising as he inhaled.

Nate bit his lip hard as his right hand traveled between my cheeks, his fingers touching the flat end of my plug and applying a bit of pressure that made my toes curl.

“You’ve had this all night, you dirty little...” He moaned as he pressed the plug harder and watched my eyes roll back.

I grabbed his wrist before he could pull his hand away. “Keep doing that.”

He rubbed it slowly but not gently, each thrust of his hand making me wince and gasp. My dick was so hard that it ached when it throbbed, and my hole was tight around the plug that Nate was pulling and pressing in turns.

My eyes shut, and I grabbed the comforter under me, closing my fists around its soft fabric. Another moan broke out of me, and I couldn’t hold myself back anymore. “This feels so fucking good,” I hissed as he toyed with my plug. “But I want you in there.”

Nate took the plug firmly and tugged it as if to test me. I was tight after having it in all night, and the plug was wide where it was inside of me. It took Nate a few gentle pulls before I dared to relax enough to give it a chance.

My arms shot from the back, and I grabbed his shoulders, forcing my hole to loosen and feeling the ball-shaped lower side of the plug drag out of me. I cried out with pleasure and pain, the former being much more dominant.

Nate dropped the plug aside on the bed and pressed his soothing fingers against my bruised hole, rubbing gently while bringing his face close to mine. He kissed the quiet whimpers off my lips while massaging me. The lube I’d used for the toy left me slick for his finger, and it entered me so smoothly that I moaned into my lover’s mouth.

Nate’s kisses grew more passionate and ferocious as he probed me with his middle finger. “You’re so warm and wet,” he whispered, dragging his lips from my mouth to my ear. He kissed and licked and bit me everywhere he wanted, and I moaned louder as his finger worked its magic. My arms wrapped around his upper torso, and our

chests pressed together.

“I want you,” I begged. “I want your dick.”

He said nothing, but he pulled his finger out. When he straightened his torso to tower over me, he wore a smug smile and watched the mess that I was. My face was hot, my small dick was standing upright with precum dragging down its short length, and my panting was bordering hyperventilation.

“Stay like that, gorgeous,” he purred as he got off the bed. From his pocket, he tossed a condom and a small packet of lube, then undressed completely.

My heart stumbled when I saw his big dick swinging with every move he made. I wanted it so deep inside me. I wanted it all.

Nate slipped the condom on as soon as he knelt back on the bed and poured the entirety of the small pack of lube onto his fingers. When he was slick, he brought the rest between my legs as if I needed more.

I didn't object, but I shook with impatience.

He lowered himself over me, my legs around his waist and his right arm sliding under my head. As he looked into my eyes, his dick touched my hole, making it close up by instinct.

I relaxed all of my body, my lips parting to let me breathe when my nose wasn't enough. Our gazes locked onto one another. I nodded, and Nate applied pressure. The first sensation was always pain, searing, tearing pain, but it never lasted longer than a few seconds, and when it passed, even its memory faded.

He inserted himself into me, and my heart upped its pace. I threw my arms around his

upper back and smashed my mouth against his, moaning into him as he entered me. No more pain existed. The heated stretching sensation was all pleasure now, although my body wasn't letting him get nearly as deep as I wanted him just yet.

When he nestled himself inside of me, his hips swung back and forth, and I knew he was testing my body's limits. But I also knew I could pleasure him in every way he could imagine. Each careful thrust of his hips made him enter me deeper by a fraction of an inch. And each time I made a sound, he asked me if I was feeling good, if I wanted him to stop, if it hurt.

Instants of pain followed when he impaled me deeper, but none mattered because I loved this in its entirety.

At once, Nate pulled his torso up, sliding deeper into me when my body allowed it. His hard abs lifted off my dick, and he pressed his fists into the mattress around my head. I held onto his biceps, moving my hips to match his pace, bringing our bodies closer together and making our souls merge into one.

He whispered how beautiful I was and used his right hand to move the unruly locks of my hair away from my brow, wiping off the sweat that was gathering on my forehead.

My senses heightened, but they excluded everything other than us. I no longer heard the murmurs of the wind outside the window and smelled the rosy scents of the candles around us. I only knew his touch and the sweet scents of our sex. I only heard the grunts and moans and wetness between us. I only saw his brown eyes and the desire that burned in him brighter than anyone other than me could know.

My hands traveled down his arms, and he twined his fingers with mine. As he lifted my arms above my head, his pace quickened, and he rammed into me harder, urged by my panting and pleas for more.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Fuck me, please. Fuck me just like that.”

Even our breaths synchronized. His dick filled me and rubbed perfectly against my prostate, making precum leak from me in crazy amounts. I could feel the wetness as it cooled on my abdomen.

Nate released my arms and knelt straight up, pulling me on himself by my hips and grinding me up and down his crotch and abdomen. The angle was perfect to make me lose my mind. He took me to hell and back, and I discovered that the eternal flames weren't as hot as the passion we had for one another.

He fucked me harder, ravaging me and making me moan like I was getting paid for it. And when he put one big hand around my small dick, I was ready to blow. “Play with me,” I grunted. “Play with my little cock.”

The words made him moan as he obeyed my command. “It's so pretty,” he said, the word itself implying its small size. In phrasing it so, he touched something so deep in my heart that made me lose all control. And then, as if he knew of this hidden desire, he said, “Such a cute little dick, baby.”

His words were barely over his lips when I throbbed hard, and my cum squirted onto my chest, the second wave flowing over his fingers as he gripped me harder.

Nate's hips moved faster, and he choked as he jerked me off.

My eyes rolled back, and my toes curled so hard that a cramp threatened my foot. I couldn't make a sound. All my muscles were tensing; my hole clenched hard around his dick.

He cried out, pulling his dick out of me and slipping the condom off in one incredible move. As he stroked himself twice, cum sprayed me and the bed around me, Nate's

muscled body glowing with sweat and candlelight.

He collapsed next to me, pressing his lips against mine as we both panted for air and swam through the bottomless ocean of lust, driven by the hormones injected into our bloodstreams, fogging our minds.

I clutched him and held him close, shaking and trying to say how incredible that was. His attempts at speaking had the same result, and we abandoned the unintelligible gibberish in favor of kissing.

How could anything be this perfect?

And how could life ever get any better than this?

I didn't bother looking for answers. I didn't need them. Simply being in this moment, in this room, with this man, was enough. I would truly have to be a greedy, insatiable monster to wish for more.

And I kissed him again, hard, hoping that he understood what it meant. You are more than enough for me. I am yours for as long as I breathe. Whether it translated or not, I didn't know, but Nate seemed happy enough to keep the kiss going.

ELEVEN

Carter's fingers glided along the piano keys, and magic swirled around the vast living room. I had once told him how incredible the melody he'd improvised was, and Carter had blinked at me, all confused. "That's just warm-up," he'd said, a cocky smirk on his sexy lips.

I stood by the floor-to-ceiling windows with a whiskey on ice in my hand. The city lights lit the night sky, glimmering far around. People, cars, and the sounds of life were all outside our little universe. Here, Carter and I ruled and made all the wonders come to life.

Carter's melody was pure improv. He wasn't in the habit of writing his music down. He swore he would remember it if it was good enough. But it was his low opinion of his music that made a lot of the sounds fade from his memory.

I often wondered what his future might look like. Most commonly, when Carter practiced piano or guitar — which had a place of honor on one of my armchairs as of late since Carter split his time evenly between his place and mine — I gazed out the window and imagined the incredible life that awaited him. Would I have a role to play in it? Selfishly, I wanted to. I wanted to witness his rise to fame. I wanted to be the person he came home to and popped a bottle of champagne with. I wanted to wait for him backstage and be the first to kiss him after a performance.

Silly old romantic, a voice whispered from the back of my head. But that was the thing about Carter. He made me feel much younger than I was. And when I felt my years, they didn't weigh so heavy. Lately, I sometimes thought of myself as only

thirty-eight.

My thoughts jumped ahead. I could see him doing anything under the sun. Scoring movies, performing in front of crowds, joining a band, or going at it solo. I could imagine him succeeding at anything so long as his fingers were near an instrument and the passion for the art burned bright in him.

I had once floated the idea of helping him out. It had been an admittedly stupid idea, but I had thought to help him get ahead of the line. Carter had simply shaken his head. “No way I’d let you do that. If I can’t make it happen, I don’t want it.” I never mentioned it again because my feelings for him doubled in that instant, and I understood exactly what he wanted.

There were better ways to support him than to offer my contacts or my money, which he adamantly refused as well. Carter was doing gigs in restaurants and bars a few times a week, which was enough to cover his rent but not much else. He feared Dana would discover the regular expense and put the pieces together, so he avoided spending more than he had while living in the Titans’ team house.

The only kind of support he needed was the emotional one. He loved practicing in front of me, so I made sure to listen. And I loved listening to his music nearly as much as I loved being kissed by him.

I often found a way to watch his performances as days got cold and short. And I often found bits of time to run away somewhere new with him. Those were the best days.

Elsewhere in my life, the Titans had felt the sting of a loss and were determined never to let that happen again. They couldn’t win every game, but they never lost due to the lack of trying. Coaching them became another kind of pleasure. It kept me busy, and, truth be told, seeing the boys win was far more gratifying than I had expected.

“Do you like this?” Carter asked from behind the piano.

I swirled the whiskey in my glass and smiled. “Do you need to ask?”

Carter grinned, then waggled his eyebrows at me. “What are you thinking about?”

“Everything,” I said softly. Rain began pattering against the huge windows. The drops caught the city lights, twinkling and blurring the world.

“Everything?” Carter repeated, mock impressed.

I nodded slowly. “I’m thinking about how different my life is from what I expected.”

“Or what you were used to,” Carter offered.

“That, too.” I took a lick of my whiskey and set the glass on the small round table near the corner of the room.

Carter got up and crossed the space between us. He put a hand on my face and looked up at me. “You stopped bitching about those four gray hairs on the back of your head.”

I narrowed my eyes at him as if to thank him for reminding me. “Bitching?” I asked, incredulous.

“And moaning,” Carter said decisively.

He was being smug with me, but he knew what that earned him. In the two months of being with me, he had studied this lesson well. In this one thing, Carter seemed to deliberately be a slow learner. So I had to teach him again.

He didn't see it coming, judging by the yelp that burst from his mouth when I bent and swept him off his feet. Tossing him over my left shoulder like a sack of beans, I didn't mind his flailing or pleading for mercy. I smacked his peachy ass with my right hand, my left arm wrapped around his legs, and turned to carry him into the bedroom. "You've got a mouth on you, kid," I said.

The slap on the back of my head was well deserved. He hated it when I called him that, even if I was only teasing, which made it that much more interesting. As I neared the wide arch between the living room and the kitchen, my doorbell rang.

We froze instantly, and I carefully dropped Carter to his feet. "That's got to be Beckett."

Carter agreed. "Someday, he'll have to learn I'm in the running to be his new uncle."

"Don't I know it?" I mused as I walked over to the front door. Before I could look at the feed from the downstairs camera, Carter's sharp inhale stopped me in my tracks.

"Shit, Nate. Shit," he hissed.

"What is it?" My heart dropped. Something bad, judging by his tone.

"I've got seventeen missed calls from Dad," Carter said, his voice thin and almost childish with anxiety. It made me want to wrap my arms around him and let him know I would make everything alright.

The doorbell rang again, and I hurried to let my nephew in. Carter would have to slip into the bedroom, and we would deal with this once I found a way to send Beckett away. Why on Earth would he be here unannounced? Unless something bad had happened to him, too. My own anxiety flared to life, but then I stumbled as I saw the screen by the door.

“He’s here,” I whispered. “Carter, Dana’s downstairs.” My old friend had a hard, cold expression on his face, distorted by the angle of the camera.

“What?” Carter gasped. “My dad?”

Carter was growing more pale by the second. I crossed the room and grabbed his forearm, pulling him close to my body and wrapping one arm protectively around him. “It’ll be fine,” I said as he looked up into my eyes. I bent down to kiss him softly and gently and savored it like a drop of water when I was lost in a desert. After kissing him, I stepped back. “Go to the bedroom, Carter. Don’t come out.”

My heart was hammering, but I wouldn’t show that to him. Right now, I needed to be the strong one, the calm one, so that Carter could be as brave as he had to be. Dana was here, which couldn’t mean anything good. Even the fact that he was in the city was a bad omen, let alone standing outside my door.

Carter blinked once, slowly, and nodded. His gaze was on me as he retreated around the kitchen and dining area, through the door, and into the bedroom. He shut the door quietly as if any sound might give him away.

Why would Dana seek me out in the city unannounced? I didn’t know. I didn’t want to think about it. The first thought that crossed my mind was the most terrible one. But as he impatiently shifted the weight from one leg to the next, I knew I had to let him in. I could pretend I wasn’t home, but that could only make things worse if he were onto something.

“Dana?” I spoke in a surprised tone after pressing the speakerphone button. “What the hell are you doing here, man?”

“Nate, buddy, sorry to come so suddenly, but I need your help,” Dana said, his gaze searching and finding the camera. “Would you let me in?”

“Come right up,” I said, wondering if something in my tone had already betrayed me. I’d had a lifetime of practice in the art of lying. I had lied to everyone I had ever met. Hell, I’d lied to myself more often than anyone, but those lies had only been about me alone. This was about Carter, now.

My heart lurched, and I snatched Carter’s warm jacket from the coatrack and rushed into the bedroom. “Take this and stay here,” I reminded him, making my voice as composed and calm as I could. “It’s gonna be fine.”

Carter’s expression was all but cool. He bit his lip, his face growing pale and eyes white with fear. “Promise?”

“I promise,” I said. “I’ll make everything right.” I pulled the door shut as I stepped back, regretting not stealing one more kiss before having to face my old friend. My lover’s father.

I walked over to the front door and balled my fists. Tingles crashed against each other in my arms as I forced myself to stand still. Every part of me wanted to pace with worry, but I wouldn’t give in to that.

When the elevator dinged, I unlocked and opened my door. Dana’s footsteps rushed up the hallway in a businesslike manner and with urgency. When he reached my door, he seemed relieved. “I’m so glad I found you here,” he said.

To that, I had no idea what to say. “Come in.”

Dana entered my apartment and glanced around, thrusting his hand out. It was an awkward shake, considering how long it had been since we’d last spoken to each other. Things weren’t exactly sour between us, but some words had been exchanged that made all our future interactions a little more challenging. He’d always felt like I had overstepped, but I had felt like I hadn’t done enough.

I closed the door after the handshake, and we stood in silence for a heartbeat too long. My mind raced, and I remembered to use my lips and tongue. “Wanna drink?” I asked.

“Sure, I could use a drink,” he said.

The way he phrased it gave me an opening. “Is everything alright, man? You come here after all these years, not a word to give me a heads-up. What’s chasing you?” We moved into the kitchen, and I avoided looking at my bedroom door. Acting as naturally as I could, I picked up two clean glasses, poured a couple of ice cubes inside, and splashed a bit of whiskey over them.

After I pushed one across the island, I lifted mine to my lips, watching my old friend curiously. We were the same height, but Dana had always been broader than me. The creases on his forehead were full of concern. His thinning hair was a little wet from the rain, as were his shoulders, packed tightly inside his coat.

“This place didn’t change a bit,” Dana said, glancing around the apartment. “How long since that party? Four years? Five?”

“Something like that,” I said in a flat voice. I waited for him to state the reason for this visit, but his reluctance worried me. I watched him intently until he returned his gaze to my face. The friendliness winked out, and steel determination set in his eyes.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked, his voice rising a little.

“What do you mean?” I wanted to clear my throat, but I knew it would make me extra suspicious. How did people without secrets speak? What kind of tone? Which inflection? I seemed to have forgotten how to be a regular person.

“When I left,” he said as if that explained something. He was a good-looking man.

Suddenly, I saw some of Carter's features in Dana, but it was the mother's beautiful genes that dominated in my boy. Dana brought the glass to his lips and sipped his drink. "Did I insult you?"

"Dana, I don't know what you're..."

"Because if I did, I would apologize. Just tell me what it is, Nate," he said, accusation so subtle in his tone that I might have imagined it. Until he went on. "I would rather know what you think I did to you than to have you backstab me like this."

My hand tightened around my glass. My heart was pounding inside my skull. "Whatever you think..."

Anger flared on his face. "My son dropped out," he snapped. "Over two months ago, Nate. Over two goddamn months."

I hoped relief wasn't showing on my face. For a moment, I had forgotten where Dana's priorities always were. "That's why you're here?" I asked, keeping my voice as composed as I could. It took physical strength to do that, and the grip on the glass made my knuckles hurt.

"You're his coach, dammit," Dana spat. "How is it possible that he left your team, and I don't know about it?"

I narrowed my eyes, unable to resist it. "Well, how is it possible, Dana?"

"Don't you dare," he hissed, his finger lifting off the glass that he was bringing to his mouth, pointing at me warningly. He'd ignored his son in all the ways, only ever caring about his name and reputation, about his legacy. He was a man so in love with what he had accomplished in his youth that he had never considered there might be anything else in life he needed to know or do. "Don't you fucking dare, Nate. I'm not

listening to another lecture. Do you hear me?"

I kept my lips sealed, but my gaze pierced him nonetheless.

He set the glass down after taking another sip. He exhaled and drummed his fingers against the counter. "Get this. I have to have my manager show me how my son embarrasses himself on TikTok with that stupid guitar, all behind my back and against my approval..." His voice cut off abruptly, and he looked at me. "I came here as soon as I could. I looked for him where he was supposed to be living. And what did I find? Carter moved out of the house in September."

I clenched my teeth and cocked my head to one side. "Why exactly are you here, Dana?" I asked.

He shot me an accusing look. "You know goddamn well why I'm here. You should have called me, Nate. When my son got this stupid idea to walk away from everything he's worked for, you should have called me."

"If Carter wanted you to know, he would have told you," I said.

"Don't give me that bullshit. He's a child, for fuck's sake. What does he know about these things? He threw away his one ticket to success, and you let him. I'm sure you encouraged it. Didn't you? You always had a soft spot for his silly fantasies, Nate." Dana pushed himself away from the island and paced around. "I swear to God, Nate, if I find out you had anything to do with this, I'll sue your ass."

I barked out a laugh. The man obviously needed someone to blame. "Sue my ass for what? Not calling?" I finished my whiskey in a bigger gulp than I'd meant and put the glass down louder than I'd intended. "You told me not to meddle, didn't you?"

"I told you not to encourage him," he all but shouted. "When he wanted to be gay,

you fucking applauded him. I told you to stay the fuck out of it. Oh, I see. It hurt your feelings.” His mocking tone didn’t bother me. What broke my heart was the fact that Carter could hear his father’s words loud and clear behind that door. “I told you to back the fuck off, so you waited until you had a chance. Tell me I’m wrong, Nate. Tell me this isn’t your doing.”

“Jesus Christ, Dana, you’re deranged,” I growled. “Carter’s old enough to choose what he wants to do with his life.”

“Even if that means throwing his life away?” Dana demanded. “You had a moral obligation to stop him, you fuckwit.”

I clapped my hands together and walked around the island. “We’re done here, Dana.”

The man paced just the same. “We’re done here when I say so.”

“No.” The strength of my voice made him pause. “I’m done listening to your bullshit. I’ll tell you this only once. If you push that young man to follow your dream, you’ll do more damage than he could ever do to himself. He has the right to choose his career as much as you and I did.”

“We went through hell to get to where we are,” Dana said. If he weren’t seething, I would have thought he was reminiscing. “And he had it served on a silver fucking platter. Is that why you let him go? Why you didn’t try to stop him? Because he had a shortcut, unlike you.”

I narrowed my eyes. He was luring me into a fight that could end badly for all three of us. I didn’t want to punch my lover’s father, not after giving Carter my heart and pledging to be his for as long as he wanted me. Not after walking barefoot over the sharp rocks that formed the path that had brought us together. “Carter’s got talent. I’ll give you that. But if he doesn’t want it, nothing you say will change his mind.”

“My money will,” Dana said. “If I don’t find him tonight, I’ll cut him off. We’ll see how long he’ll last before he comes to me with his tail between his legs.”

I wouldn’t tell him that Carter would be just fine without his money.

“Where did he go?” Dana demanded. “Where does he live now?”

I shrugged. “How the hell should I know?”

“Don’t lie to me, Partridge,” he snapped louder. “Carter listened to me until you started coaching him. It’s so like you to whisper into his ear and tell him he can do whatever he sets his mind to. It’s like you don’t even know what kind of world you live in. Silly little dreamers die in drug dens every day.”

“You need to leave, Dana,” I said coolly.

The man shook his head and walked around, nearing the hallway. His head turned left and right, and he stopped abruptly at the arch between the kitchen and living room. “What’s that?” he asked, urgency in his voice as if an Eldritch monster had appeared in my apartment. “What the fuck is that, Partridge?”

“What?” But as I asked, I remembered.

Dana rushed into the living room and returned even faster. “This is his guitar, you son of a bitch.”

I fought against my eyes closing in surrender. My heart sank so low that my stomach throbbed with each heartbeat. Fuck. “Dana...”

“Don’t you fucking say a word to me,” Dana yelled. “Is he here? Does he live with you now? What the fuck is going on, Partridge?”

“Calm down,” I said firmly, but Dana was off the rails. “Calm the fuck down, or I’ll get the security to drag your ass out.”

Dana held the guitar by its neck as he stormed toward me. He stopped two feet away. “You can try,” he said venomously, “but they won’t get here in time. Truth, Partridge. I want the truth. Now.”

“Truth?” I asked. “The truth is that you’re bullying your son, and you’re going to break him. And I won’t fucking let you. Not on my watch, Dana.”

His eyes widened as he looked from me to the guitar. Anger faded as something far worse came over his face. Horror. The slow realization opened the doors to blind rage that contorted his face. “You’re sleeping with him,” he said, almost breathless.

I should have acted offended, put up a fight, but the accusation seemed so impossibly undeniable that I only pressed my lips tighter.

It was as good as a confirmation. A moment too late, I knew that for a fact.

“I’m going to kill you!” Dana swung the guitar before I could lift my arms or leap away. The hollow instrument hit the side of my right arm, and my elbow bent to take the brunt of it. Wood splintered, and a horrible crashing sound was mixed with the strings that briefly vibrated on impact.

Before I knew it, I was hurtling to my left, arms reaching to grab onto something. I wasn’t even aware of the pain in my elbow as I grabbed the back of a chair by the kitchen island. It tipped under my weight, only complicating my fall as I tangled my arm around it.

Tossing the guitar’s neck aside, Dana leaped after me, his weight crashing against my body as a fist met my cheekbone.

No, I thought as I realized there was a third voice in the cacophony of misery in the room. Between my grunts and Dana's curses, Carter's pleading voice cut through the air as he grabbed his father's arm. "Stop, Dad. Stop! Don't hurt him."

Dana's broad chest heaved with every breath as he looked furiously from me to his son.

Carter had never looked more beautiful. The defiant way he held his chin high as if he could stand up to Dana, the mournful look in his eyes, the knowledge that everything we'd had was gone... I hated how pretty he was when sadness dominated his face.

He had walked out of the bedroom to stop his father. And my heart discovered new depths to sink into.

If there had been any way to use Dana's overreaction and anger against him, to deny and lie and save Carter from this, it was all gone now. He offered himself to Dana in order to protect me.

That wasn't how it was supposed to be.

He was the beautiful one, the vulnerable one, the one in need of a protector. And I had failed him.

TWELVE

“Please,” I whispered, tears blurring my vision.

Dad’s red face darkened, his fist trembling as I held on to his forearm. I tugged him back, and he stood up, freeing Nate, who sprawled on the floor and grunted.

I didn’t dare let go of Dad’s arm, but I had to if I were going to help Nate up. My entire body screamed with the need to go to him. A cut on his cheekbone was bleeding, but not too much. I’d gotten worse from a misplaced stick. Even so, seeing him on the floor broke my heart.

I had no doubt that Nate could have defended himself if he had chosen to. The fact that he hadn’t only cemented my feelings for this man. It wasn’t something my dad could ever understand.

When Dad pulled a few steps back, I released his arm and hurried to Nate. Helping him up, I wanted to touch his cheek, but he recoiled.

“I could kill you now,” Dad growled with so much hatred that it scared me. Part of me believed he was telling the truth, even as I tried to convince myself it was just a hyperbole.

“Stop,” I pleaded again. “Can we talk about this like adults?”

Dad’s eyes flashed with anger. “We cannot. Carter, go downstairs and wait for me.”

“No,” I said flatly. That was not an option. I wasn’t leaving Nate.

Dad pressed his lips tightly together and glared from me to Nate and back.

My left hand moved slightly through the air, seeking Nate’s, but he had pulled himself against the kitchen island and clutched its edge for support. Looking at him hurt me in ways that had nothing to do with cuts and bruises.

“There’s no reason for violence,” I said tightly.

“You don’t get to talk, Carter,” Dad snapped. His voice had always had a way to control me. He used that now, taking away my words, tying my tongue with the firmness in his tone. “You,” he said to Nate. “I should have known. All those years we played together, lived from one hotel to the next, and you never had a girl over like the rest of us. I should have realized. And now, you’re sleeping with my child. You’re his coach, you perverted motherfucker.” The fact that my father had cheated on my mother didn’t fly over my head, but it was also something there had been whispers about for ages. Mom had spent most of Dad’s time with the NHL selectively blind, just happy to be the big guy’s wife. “Oh, I see,” Dad said, nodding to himself. “You’re not technically his coach, are you? You got him to drop out so you could f...” He choked on his words, probably remembering he was talking about his own son. “How could you do this?”

“He didn’t do anything,” I insisted.

“Shut up, Carter. It’s not your turn.” That tone again, the dominance and the command. But I distracted him, and he looked at me now. Hurt, angry, ready to punish me. He’d already smashed my guitar and beat the man I had given my heart to. He couldn’t punish me much more than this. “You’re coming home with me, Carter. After flying here to discover what the hell you’ve been doing in bars like a goddamn clown, I found out that you’ve walked away from everything we gave you.

No team will take you this late, but I'll find you a coach to keep you sharp until next fall."

I shook my head. He was getting it all wrong, but that shouldn't have surprised me. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll study music, and I'll see whoever I want. You can't stop me."

That was a mistake. A childish thing to say. I should have known better.

Dad nodded to himself, lips pursed as his cold glare cut from me to Nate. "Tell him to leave, Partridge."

Nate stood straight, all his muscles bulging with tension.

"I know you can control him," Dad said as if I weren't even here. As if I hadn't heard all the bullshit while I was in the bedroom. How I had wanted to be gay. Why was my heart still breaking over the fact that my father didn't love me? "Tell him to come with me, and he'll listen. Tell him," Dad taunted Nate, but he didn't step any closer. Frankly, few people would have dared to stand in Nate's way now. The darkness that gathered in his eyes and on his face was scary enough without the smeared blood and the spreading bruise. "Tell him you used him, Nate. Tell him it means nothing. Tell him it was a mistake."

I wouldn't believe a word of it. Nate was too noble and too kind to use me. It had taken me weeks of struggle to even get a shot at him. And he knew I wouldn't believe it, his lips tightening.

Dad shrugged. "Alright. If I can't convince you, your ethics board might. Or the press. It can't be that hard to find paparazzi near your building, huh? Think about it, you sick fuck. A washed-up forty-year-old coach seducing a student..." Dad shook his head, and my heart hammered. He wouldn't dare. Not with the amount of whoring

around he'd done in his day and was probably still doing on those long trips to resort hotels. Not with his boozing up and all the flirting with cocaine everyone whispered about. He wouldn't talk to those fucking vultures. "I'll tell them everything, Partridge, and you can kiss your clean name goodbye. When will they stop? When they bring you down? Your nephew?" Dad glanced at me. I would be caught in the crossfire. He was threatening with the nuclear option. If he didn't have it his way, we would all suffer the consequences. "Carter, too," Dad said. "You must think it's fun getting exploited by a man in power, just like Bill Clinton's staff. Is that what you want for him?"

"I can take that," I said. He brought up the example of the worst of human impulses. The worst of the exploitation that our media had done for profits. I doubted I would be nearly as strong as Monica Lewinsky if all the world mocked me the way they had bullied her. I doubted I would have her courage, but I wouldn't bow to my dad either. And I would stand with Nate till the end. He wouldn't abandon me to the press like that.

"It's your call, Partridge. Give me the boy, or I'll serve you to the paparazzi on a silver platter. Your job, your reputation, your legacy — all gone. I'll burn you to the ground, fucker." When he spat the last word out, Dad stepped back as if he didn't care either way.

This was no longer about me. This was pure spite.

I looked at Nate, but he didn't look at me. His gaze was on my father, then on the floor. A moment ago, his eyes had been wide open with anger, but his eyelids drooped down as something went out of him. "Carter..."

"No," I protested. "Don't. Don't do this." Panic spiked in me so abruptly that I could almost taste the sudden injection of adrenaline on my tongue. "Nate, don't listen to him."

He shook his head, his downcast gaze hollow, the corners of his lips dragging low.
“Carter, he’s right.”

“You don’t mean that,” I said, anger concealing the fear.

Nate still didn’t look at me.

“You’re just saying that to protect me,” I accused.

Nate clenched his teeth and lifted his gaze to meet me. He looked scary, for sure, but I wasn’t afraid of him. The beastly appearance he and my father had worked together to create on his face couldn’t deter me. “It’s not just you,” he said in a voice so cold that it raptured my chest. “It’s Beckett, too. And me.” He added the last bit selfishly, lifting his quivering chin up. “I’m nothing without hockey, kid.”

I snapped my fists closed and stood my ground. He was just hurting me to make this easy. I didn’t believe him. I didn’t.

“Hockey’s all I have, Carter,” he said tightly. “If they take that away from me, I’ll be no one.”

Could he be serious? I hated that the worm of doubt drilled into my heart.

Nate took a step back, shaking his head regretfully. “I’m sorry, kid. I didn’t realize how much I couldn’t lose that until now.”

“Shut up,” I threatened him in an airy tone that wouldn’t have scared a kitten.

“We risked too much,” he said, almost like it was nothing. It wasn’t worth it, he implied.

“You heard the man, Carter,” Dad said victoriously. “He used you, son. And he won’t trade his fame for you.”

I ignored Dad and took a step toward Nate. “You’re lying.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m not lying.” He swallowed and moved further away from me, searching for the bottle and the glass. When he found them, he poured himself a double shot. “It was fun, Carter, but I wasn’t thinking straight. I...” He shrugged again, pressing the glass against his open mouth and taking an unhealthy sip. After swallowing, he exhaled tightly. “I shut it all out for a while, but your father’s right, kid. I can’t lose all I’ve worked for.”

“He’s blackmailing you,” I squeezed through clenched teeth.

Nate looked at me blankly as if I had just stated that the sky was blue. Was blackmail and backstabbing so normal among the rich and famous? It seemed they had still protected me from some truths when I was a child. “Checkmate,” Nate said. “It’s too much to risk, Carter.”

Hot, angry tears brimmed in my eyes. “Swear that you mean it.”

For the briefest moment, I thought there was a ripple of emotion on his face. It might have been the trick of the light through the tears that made the world smudged and blurry.

I thrust my chin out. “Swear on my rollerblades.” He wouldn’t. He would never.

He stared at me for the shortest of moments, then put his right hand over his heart. “If that’s what you want...I swear on your rollerblades.” He said that in a voice as if he wasn’t sure what the hell I was talking about.

I could almost hear my heart breaking. It wasn't a shatter of an antique vase on the concrete floor or the smashing of a glass window. The sound that went through my head was that of a deep crack, as if I were standing on the ice in the middle of a bottomless lake, and the only thing keeping me alive had just split. The suspense before the inevitable crash and death should have lasted only an instant, but it went on. I wasn't on the ice. There was no plunging into my cold grave. It was just this. The world lost a hint of its brightness. Life got a little sadder. And I had to go on.

There was no cut-to-black for me. There was no numbing coldness of death or the crushing pressure on my chest that would prevail and make me fill my lungs with water.

There was just Nate, turning a little away from me, swirling the alcohol in his glass, keeping his mouth shut, and wearing a regretful look as if he'd just stepped onto some random child's hamster. He was sorry for politeness' sake, but he couldn't fathom how deep the pain ran.

"Come along, Carter," Dad said, crossing the room and putting an arm around my shoulders. I shrugged him off as if he'd put a snake around my neck and marched toward the hallway. Behind me, Dad's voice was muffled. "The best thing you can do for your career is to die, Nate."

"Get out of my home," Nate replied grimly. I was already at the door, and I knew the way. The last thing I heard from the apartment was Nate opening the bottle.

A chauffeur I didn't know waited in a car I didn't recognize. I was soaked by the time Dad showed me in. He sat next to me in the back, telling the chauffeur to take us back to the airport. "I'll wait in the plane for the approval to take off."

He was silent while the car glided out onto the street, the wipers barely managing to clear the windshield for long enough so the chauffeur could see where we were

going.

I didn't care if a train split us in half.

Dad didn't seem to care either. He wanted to get to his jet or die trying, but he wasn't paying attention to anything beyond the tablet in his hands. On the screen, a list of Google alerts regarding his name.

It wasn't until we were inside his jet that he met my look for the first time. I was rubbing my wet hair with a soft towel a flight attendant had handed to me. "You think I'm cruel," Dad said in a voice that was almost offensively soft. Its sweetness made me think of rotting flesh.

I sank deeper into the comfortable seat and looked out the window at the downpour that was keeping us grounded.

My father dabbed his hair with the towel and threw it on the floor for the attendant to pick it up. I sighed as I bent over and lifted the discarded towel, folding it twice before placing it on the small, foldable table near me.

Dad sat on the right side of the cabin, and I had strategically chosen the left. Still, when he turned his head to me, we faced one another. "Think what you want, Carter," he said calmly. "And when you're old enough, you'll thank me."

The flight attendant was a red-haired girl with corkscrew locks falling over her pretty face. She was new. Or, at least, she hadn't worked here when I'd last flown with Dad this summer. I wasn't in the habit of flying to the closest Starbucks and back and only came along when it was absolutely necessary. The woman, whose name I didn't know, was trying to open a new bottle of something light brown with an elaborate black label on it. Dad didn't pick and choose. She was struggling with it in my father's sight.

Dad glanced at her trying. “Of course, you don’t believe me now, but you’ll understand in time. What I’m doing is for your best, son. Even if... Will you give that to me?” he snapped and yanked the bottle from the woman’s hand.

“I apologize, Mr. Prince,” she blurted.

Dad was ignoring her already. I looked at her face, but she wouldn’t seek comfort in my eyes. Instead, she apologized again and asked if he needed anything else.

“If I need anything, I’ll get it myself,” he grunted, twisting the bottle open and pouring himself a drink.

The flight attendant reached for the bottle when he was done.

“Leave that here,” Dad snapped, and the woman walked away, still apologizing. He turned his forcibly softened gaze to me. “Everything we have will be yours, Carter. And with your talent and name, you’ll double it. Triple it.”

“So I can bully underpaid flight attendants until my liver is pickled and my nose explodes,” I spat.

Dad slammed the glass against the foldable table in front of himself and pointed a threatening finger at me. “I have been more patient with you than any sane person would have been. You betrayed me, you stole from me, and you lied to me. Not only that but you got involved with a man twice your age, a man I used to call my friend, just to hurt me. I’m trying to be a bigger man, Carter, but you’re making it very difficult.”

“Not everything’s always about you, Dad,” I said in a voice so hollow and devoid of emotions that I might have been speaking from beyond my grave. “But if you want to talk about the things you’ve done, be my guest. It’s not like I have something to do.”

“You are an ungrateful little brat. Do you hear me?” He wagged his finger like a TV housewife. It was better than the alternative, where he was waving his fist. His knuckles were red, and I hoped they hurt. “First, I’m putting a stop to this guitar nonsense. You have the talent you need and the easiest shot at the NHL because of me, so you can say goodbye to being some rich asshole’s entertainment.”

I wondered if he was aware that he was the definition of a rich asshole. I hadn’t allowed myself to see him that way before, but I really had nothing else to do with myself. Recontextualizing my father’s image was as fun as eating salted peanuts while the plane was grounded. Not that. I was not doing this on purpose. What was happening here was me becoming aware that my father was not a very good man.

“I’ll coach you myself if I have to,” he droned on as if I would ever believe he was capable of spending time with me. Even if it was on guard duty with me as his prisoner. He had relegated that task to Nate Partridge throughout my life. When they were off, Dad did whatever the hell he liked, and Nate was the one telling me the stories from the ice, from the trips, and from his vivid imagination.

Nate’s big heart had forged me into the person I became. Could I have fallen in love with anyone else? Had I even had a chance?

“...confiscate that piano. You have no need for it. It’s a distraction, and your mother never should have encouraged you to have a hobby.” He said that with a straight face.

A laugh burst out of me. Only my father could imagine a life without a hobby was the preferable choice. “Dad, you can stop talking,” I said. “You’re getting tired.”

He glared at me.

“If you need to refuel, the bathroom’s that way.” I pointed to the front part of the plane.

Dad stood up furiously and bent down, bringing his face close to mine. The stench of alcohol was nothing like that faint, sweet aroma I loved on Nate's lips. This one was like the fermenting rot in a tooth cavity. "I'll teach you some fucking manners if I have to beat them into you."

I gazed at him, unimpressed. "It's true, right?"

The anger it dragged out of him was more than enough to confirm even the wildest tales I'd read. "What are you talking about? Shut your mouth, boy."

"I heard you snorted cocaine off a hooker's ass in Belize," I said with a sinister note of amusement.

Dad grabbed my wet shirt and yanked me out of the seat. "I should have left you there so he could do whatever the hell he wants with you."

He should have. I wouldn't have minded being Nate's anything, his everything. "Let go," I said politely, pushing his fists off my shirt. I dropped back in my seat, and Dad fell into his. "Just...leave me alone," I said. The thought of being back with Nate and letting him do whatever he wanted made my throat constrict and my eyes sting. "I'll do what you want. You won, Dad. You threatened him, and he chose himself." My voice quivered slightly, but Dad was too selfish to notice anyone's feelings. "You can tell me what to do, and I'll do it. I don't care. But you can't make me enjoy it."

I closed my eyes and sank lower into my chair. Dad said nothing. It was an agreement we could both respect and hold on to. He would shove me back into the rink, and I would hate my life. He would take away my music, and I would hurt.

Hurting would remind me I was still alive.

And I will be alive, I thought spitefully. I'll be alive when we hear that your heart

exploded. And on that day, I'll be free. Without Nate for the rest of my life, yes, but I would eventually be free of the warder of my prison, too.

I shut Nate out of my thoughts. He had tossed me aside, and I couldn't do anything about that. I was on my own. If I wanted to cry, I wouldn't do it in front of Dad. So I bottled it all up. I pressed it down, all my rage and sadness and the dust that remained from my shattered heart, and I pushed it all the way to the pit of my stomach.

I wouldn't let it out even if it killed me.

I wouldn't be weak.

I wouldn't give him the pleasure.

THIRTEEN

Beckett put his hands on his hips while a frown contorted his face. “What the fuck happened to you?”

I turned away from him, sauntering from the front door to the nearest armchair in the living room. Wearing pajamas from two nights ago and cloaked in a bathrobe, I knew I wasn’t the prettiest sight. “Don’t make me regret buzzing you in.”

My nephew shut the door and followed me into the living room. “I would have called the cops if you hadn’t.”

I extended my arm to the plain, glass coffee table to pick up my half-finished drink. I’d waited until five in the afternoon to pour myself the first one. Admittedly, I hadn’t left the bed since last night except when the delivery of Chinese takeout had arrived. “What do you want, Beckett?”

He stood in the middle of the living room, in front of me, with the piano a little further behind his back. My nephew was a tall young man, taller still when he did that trick of inflating his chest and straightening his back.

If he was trying to intimidate me, it was laughable.

“I wanted to know why you’re missing work,” he said in a worried tone before sighing. “But now I’m more concerned about the bruise on your face, Uncle.”

I swirled my whiskey in the glass. The ice had melted long ago, and I couldn’t be

bothered to fetch some more. “Get me some ice, could you?” I handed him my glass.

“Get your own ice,” he snapped. “Or, better yet, stop drinking that shit. It reeks in here.”

I moved my gaze over the large window where the darkness of the night ate all the light from the world. The faint orange glow of lights far below my apartment was barely noticeable. “Fine. I don’t need the ice.”

Beckett rubbed his face. “I gotta call Caden,” he said in a huff. “I can’t deal with this shit alone.” As he stepped to pass by me and move into the hallway, I caught his wrist and looked up at him.

Beckett shot me a questioning frown.

I didn’t want to ask for favors, but I absolutely didn’t want Caden to see me like this. Someday, that kid would be part of our family, and unless I tripped down a flight of stairs very soon, I would have to look into his eyes and be reminded of the state in which he’d found me here. As if it wasn’t bad enough that Beckett was inside. Had he not been leaning against the doorbell for five minutes straight, I wouldn’t have let him in.

“Can you...wait?” I asked in a low murmur.

Beckett’s expression didn’t change. “If you can’t talk to me, I need him to lecture you.”

I closed my eyes. “Beckett, I can’t...” I went quiet, releasing his wrist, but my nephew remained where he was.

The silence dragged on for a while. I opened my eyes and directed my hollow gaze at

the piano just to let him know I hadn't fallen asleep in the middle of the sentence. I wished I had. I wished I could sleep for a whole year until the worst of it passed.

"If you don't want Caden seeing you like this, then you'll give me that glass," Beckett said. "Nothing's gonna happen until you do that."

"I'm not...drunk," I said. I was tipsy, admittedly, but I had some self-control. It was simply that I didn't care enough to get drunk. Or, to be precise, I didn't care about numbing my feelings like that. Just now, it felt disloyal to pour all the booze into myself and forget what it felt like to break that young man's heart.

I needed to feel it as sharply as I could take it, but I couldn't take it completely sober, either. It was a fine line I had to walk.

"Give it," Beckett said without leaving any room for compromise.

I thrust the glass to him, and he pried it from my fingers.

"It's like raising a goddamn child with a midlife crisis," he muttered as he walked away from me.

I exhaled in frustration and got up from my armchair. Scratching the two-day stubble that had a few too many gray hairs on my chin, I decidedly avoided looking in the mirror as I followed Beckett into the kitchen.

By the time I got there, he had already cursed several times about the smashed guitar pieces and the overturned chair in the middle of the room. Empty food containers littered the kitchen island.

Beckett sloshed the whiskey down the drain and picked up the containers from the countertop. He tossed them into the trash can and put water to boil. He didn't look at

me or the mess on my side of the kitchen island. Instead, Beckett went through the cabinets until he found a jar of instant coffee and a mug. He put more powder into the mug than was advisable, but I understood what he was trying to accomplish.

“I’m not drunk,” I said, barely louder than a whisper.

“You’re drinking it,” Beckett said without looking over his shoulder. He poured the boiling water over the coffee powder and stirred roughly, spilling some over the counter before bringing the mug to the marble surface of the island. His body seemed all taut with tension. He looked me over and shook his head. “What happened, Uncle?”

“This? It’s nothing,” I said, waving over the bruise. It barely even throbbed. It was hardly hot. It would go away.

“For a moment, I thought you had one of your I’m-getting-old fits, got drunk, fell somewhere. But that can’t be true. Not with the king of cut you have. And not with Carter’s smashed guitar on your kitchen floor.” He crossed his arms on his chest.

My heart hammered as if panic was about to give me a heart attack. I wouldn’t have minded one just about now. I stared at the mug. “How did you...?”

“The rainbow strap,” Beckett said tightly. “You have no idea what kind of things are going through my head, Uncle. Did he rob you? Did he punch you? He’s a kid, and you’re a grown-ass man with over twenty years of conditioning and exercise.”

“He’s not a kid,” I said grimly. He wasn’t a kid, but he was still too young to have his future wrecked. No matter which industry he chose, he couldn’t break through with a stain like this on his resume. What else could I have done? I didn’t doubt Carter’s ability to still play music and work on making his dreams come true. He would get there. And he would get there sooner without the burden of a sex scandal.

“So, what happened?” Beckett asked. “You can drink that.”

I shot him a frustrated look and picked up the coffee. It was so bitter that it sobered me up just by firing my defense systems. I swallowed a few sips, burning my tongue in the process. “Nobody robbed me, Beckett.”

His expression was unchanged, and I realized he had floated that idea simply to force me to speak. It was too ridiculous to be even close to the truth, but now that I had denied one option, I had to continue.

“It’s something I can’t talk about,” I said, careful not to slur any of my words. “Not with you. And not with Caden.” It was over. I just had to crawl out of this hole somehow, and nobody needed to know a thing. We’d kept it a secret for months. And if I told the truth now, what was the goddamn point of giving him up?

Beckett put his hands on the marble countertop and leaned in slightly. “Uncle, if you think I’m going to accept that, you’re insulting me. I thought we finished with these mood swings last summer. I thought you were doing better.” He shook his head hurriedly. “I even thought you were enjoying coaching.”

I had been. Briefly.

“You’re going to tell me the whole truth, or I’ll leave,” he said. His tone was so threat-laden that I didn’t dare call his bluff. If he had only meant that he would leave now and let me work through this on my own, I would have leaped at the opportunity. But we both knew how serious he was. He would leave for good. He would give me up.

You’re all the family I’ve got, I thought as the remains of my heart clenched hard in my chest. A growl rose from my throat, and my eyes stung. I would have preferred doing this part drunk. “Beckett, if you really mean that, it makes no difference

whether I tell you or not. Son, I'm asking you to let go. Just once."

"The truth's so bad that it'll make me abandon you, huh?" The sarcasm in his voice was unmistakable. "Maybe you should let me be the judge of that, Uncle."

I met his face with my cold, tired stare. "What if I told you I've been living a lie my whole life?" I shuddered as I came close to admitting the truth. A year ago, Beckett had stood before me, trying not to tremble, and lifted his chin bravely, expecting me to disown him for kissing another guy after winning a big game. He'd expected everything to change that night, and he'd still been brave enough to take what he wanted the most. But we stood on the opposite ends of the equation now. And I didn't have anything to gain by telling the truth. And lying to him his entire life — especially since he'd come out to me — was far worse than a young adult fearing his uncle's reaction.

"Go on," Beckett said carefully.

I rubbed my forehead and slurped more of this terrible coffee. "Beckett, I lied to you. To everyone. I've been hiding the truth because my career depended on it. The clues are there, son, if you want to put them together. Nearly forty, never married, never dated. Hell, kid, half the trashy magazines had already written about it."

Beckett closed his eyes. "You've gotta be kidding me," he whispered.

"I'm not kidding, Beck. I've been hiding it since I was a teen." I'd had to escape that crappy small town. I'd had to see the world and become the person I had dreamed of being. I'd always thought the rest would come naturally, but the reality of my life had been far different. The closer I was to making my dreams come true, the lesser my chances were to have a family and be myself. So I watched from the sidelines as men, young and old, married their partners, adopted kids and pets, and lived the life I could never have. "I'm gay."

Beckett looked at me, the expressions shifting on his face from hurt to angry to welcoming. He couldn't settle on one, so he moved back and forth between them. "Uncle Nate, I don't...know..." He expelled a frustrated breath of air. "I don't know how to..." Inhaling, he held his breath now as if he was counting to ten. When he spoke again, he pushed himself away from the island and leaned against the counter behind his back. "Did you really think that would make a difference? To me? I'm in a serious relationship with a dude. How did you...? You know what? You're an asshole for thinking I would flip, which makes me flip anyway, making you right all along." He put his hands on his face and cleared his throat. "Alright. First things first, I love you."

My chin quivered. "I'm sorry I didn't trust you."

"That's the second thing. Fuck you for not trusting me," Beckett said, but his tone was not severe. It was the gentlest fuck you I'd gotten in a long time.

Despite all the mess I was in, I couldn't restrain the chuckle that erupted from me. Relief? It felt ever so slightly like it. "The longer I hid it, the harder it was to tell you."

Beckett looked me over and let himself smile a little. "Does Mom know?"

I shrugged. "I think she suspected, but she decided it didn't matter." Beckett's mother had dropped a few hints now and again, a long time ago, that I could talk to her about anything. It had been so subtle that it might have meant anything.

"That's Mom for you," Beckett mused, a note of pride making me uncomfortable with myself. He had no reason to be that proud of me, my nephew. "Look, Uncle, I'm not angry. I'm not hurt. I think...mostly, I'm sad. That you didn't tell me, yeah, but also that you didn't have the chance I did. It's not fair."

I shook my head. You live your life in the closet, the closet becomes your home. I didn't know any different. "I should have trusted you and your mother, Beck. You're my family."

"Yeah," Beckett said without any trace of grudge. "But I understand." He put his hands together and rubbed them slowly. "Uh...still, being gay doesn't cause random face punches. Not around here, at least. Or smashed guitars."

I shuddered. If I'd thought I had done the hard part, I was mistaken. But when I looked at Beckett, a great deal of the story was obviously already fitting into place in his head. Inhaled a deep, painful breath of air, I told my nephew the whole wretched story. I made him swear to never tell anyone a thing for Carter's sake. I told him about Carter's flirting and the gym encounter, about the confrontations and admissions, about the night he performed in the bar where Beckett and Caden had dragged me, and about the trip to Chicago. One after another, I admitted everything to my nephew, never finding it even a little easier to look him in the eyes as my story unfolded. If anything, it was harder now the closer I was to the way things ended.

The hardest thing of all was poring over the fresh memories of Carter and keeping myself convinced that this was a good deal. His future was worth more than a heartbreak. He was young, I told myself, and he would get over it. And me? I was getting old, older than my years, and a heartbreak I would carry for the rest of my life was fine with me. I could do that much for him. If I felt anything good and wonderful about Carter Prince, I could carry this with me for as long as I breathed.

"Christ, Beck, but he made me feel young," I said, rubbing the healthy side of my face and scratching the stubble. "He made me feel alive."

Beckett was staring at me. "And you chose yourself? Your reputation?"

I closed my eyes and slouched. I hadn't told him what I had been thinking the other

night. I had only told him, in short, what had gone down.

“Let me get this straight, Uncle,” my nephew said, anger unchecked. “You spent over two months having the greatest love affair of your life, never once thinking about the worth of your brand, and suddenly, that’s more important to you when some asshole threatens you with talking to the press? You must be crazy if you think I’ll believe that.”

“But it’s my name,” I growled. “And it’s your name, too.”

“Don’t you dare,” he snapped, his hands slapping against the top of the island. “Don’t you dare tell me I’m the reason. I don’t want to be the reason, Uncle. And it doesn’t bother me what someone might think. All my life, I’ve been trying to be my own person, to earn things based on merit and not the fact I share your name. So don’t tell me how it’s different now. It’s not.”

“It’s his future, then,” I all but shouted. “If the press flocks when I lose my job, if they discover it’s all because I was sleeping with a freshman, a player on my team, do you really think they’ll leave him out of it? Haven’t you seen how ready they are to take someone down? When the tabloids start digging through my past, do you really think they’ll have the decency to stop there?”

“That’s it,” Beckett said as if he scored some win, his grin spilling immediately. “That’s the truth, Uncle.”

“What is?” I asked, hands shaking even as I gripped the edge of the counter.

Beckett’s grin faded and was replaced by a gentle smile. “You love him.”

My heart leaped before crashing again.

“You love Carter, and you don’t want him to get caught in the crossfire. I get it, Uncle, but...is that choice really yours to make?” He frowned in thought, but his lips still curled a little at the edges. He looked deep into my eyes when I met his gaze. “I mean this in the most loving way possible, Uncle Nate. You are an idiot.”

The rusty cogs in my brain ground and turned. My heart fluttered. More regrets than I could face suddenly poured into my consciousness, and a sense of urgency made my stomach tingle.

Had I made a mistake?

Had I made the wrong decision?

Had I broken his heart for nothing?

FOURTEEN

My dishonorable behavior had driven Dad crazy by the time we had landed. He escorted me to the house, forbade me from leaving, told Mom he had arrangements he'd previously forgotten to mention — as if! — and disappeared for three days straight.

I was certain that Mom knew what Dad's arrangements meant. There was no doubt in me left. He had all but admitted to whoring around when he was playing, and the way he had raged in the plane at the mention of his cocaine benders confirmed my suspicions. He wasn't an addict as much as he was a party-going asshole. He wasn't an employer as much as he was paying people so he could bully them. And he wasn't a husband and father so much as he was a jailor standing outside our gilded cage.

Mom had taken it with her head held high, but the moment the car glided away, she visited me. Patting my head, she asked, "Couldn't you talk to him? He needs time to process things, and talking helps."

I shook my head at that. "He's a man-child, Mom. I'm not gonna negotiate with him." And what would I have bargained for? In his absence, I immediately found my piano and poured all my feelings into my music. That was good enough, even if I couldn't make the music into a career with him watching over me.

And Nate had sent me away. He had sworn to me that his priority was his good name. He had sworn on the funniest gift I had ever gotten and one I had cherished more than the blades Dad had given me. Dad's gifts had always come with a price attached. Nate's had simply been to allow me to be a child while I could have been one.

Clearly, it meant more to me than it had meant to him. I had attached meanings to the gift beyond reality. And I had fallen in love with a man who wasn't at all the knight in shining armor.

On the third day, Mom found me in bed. My drills with a private coach hadn't been arranged, and Dad was still missing. Mom's attempts to talk to me often resulted in one-sided conversations where I listened to her tactics for getting what she wanted from her husband. She loved him, she admitted, even though she knew how hard a man he could be. "He values his family," she said once, sitting on the edge of my bed, her hand holding mine. The sadness in her eyes didn't match her words, and she knew it. She smoothed her expression after a moment. She was a calm, steady woman with the kind of outward pride that said she would never put up with Dana Prince's bullshit, yet she still did it.

They had both come from money. They had both been part of the elite machinery that brought their children up to hide their feelings, to hide the truth, and to pretend like their lives were ever so perfect. To leave my father was unimaginable to her, as much as it was impossible from his point of view.

"I know it hurt, baby," she whispered to me then. In the three days of asking and talking, she had gotten enough of the story out of me to know what had happened. "But it will pass if you give it time."

Why was she tugging on the stitches, then? Besides, what other answer could I have expected from someone who had been trained to act like nothing at all was wrong in her life? I loved my mother, I did, but she wasn't the authority on these things. Nobody seemed to know how anything in life worked, including me.

It was possible that I hadn't completely left my childhood behind until all of this had happened. I hadn't become an adult at eighteen. I hadn't grown up the night I'd lost my virginity. And shaving the few dark hairs above my lip once a week hadn't made

me a man. What killed the child in my soul was the realization that adults didn't have their shit together. The people I had looked up to my entire life were all screw-ups in their own right. Adulthood was a lie told to children to make them behave in not necessarily a better but a more tolerable way.

That evening, I played my piano in the room I had long ago turned into a music room. The sprawling house had way too many empty rooms and never enough warmth, so I had carefully chosen my bedroom and my hobby room. This one was warm, its floor was dark hardwood, and the thick, antique carpet was from Dad's storage. The piano was a small one, nothing like the concert thing at Nate's place, and it was pushed against the brown-painted wall with an adjustable desk lamp on top of it to shine its light on my sheet music. I hadn't used any sheet music in years. Often, I could just crack the code by listening to music intently for a day or two.

I played some tunes from my heart. None were familiar to me from before. And if I had gone over them at some point in my life, I had forgotten all about them. Now, I played the requiem-like melody that fit my dark mood to perfection. And it was appropriate because the person who opened my door around eight in the evening was the death-bringer himself.

"Haven't I told you to quit this nonsense?" Dad growled.

I stopped playing, but my hands remained on the keys. "You'll have to cut off my fingers."

He scoffed. "You still insist on looking at me like I'm the bad guy."

I would have laughed if there was any laughter left in me.

The silence drove Dad mad more than my music. "I don't need to cut anything off. I just need to lock this goddamn room."

I looked at Dad over my shoulder. He was rumpled like he hadn't slept last night. He had partied, of course. "Don't you realize that I can hear music in my head? In my dreams? I can tap it out on my desk. I can write it in my mind."

Dad's jaw stiffened before he forced it to relax enough so he could speak. "You're starting drills tomorrow, Carter. You'll be too busy to think, let alone tap shit."

I wasn't sure what I was about to say. I knew for a fact I wasn't going to fuss about it and give him the pleasure of exercising his power over me. Before I could even breathe in, Mom appeared in the doorway. "Dana?"

"Not now, honey," Dad said sourly, the last word clashing with his tone, almost like he was mocking her, but he was oblivious to that.

"You should come," Mom said.

"What is it?" With impatience, he turned from me to Mom. A look passed between them. I didn't know what it was, but Dad believed it was important enough to put lecturing me on hold. And since lecturing me was becoming his favorite activity, I also considered the disruption significant.

As Dad followed Mom, I hesitated, but half a minute later, when hushed voices reached me, I hurried outside the room.

As soon as I crossed five paces and was in the gallery overlooking the entrance hall of the house, I felt a jolt of anger that Mom had fetched Dad instead of coming for me. The man standing in our lobby was wet from the pouring November rain, but it only helped to make him look better.

Nate Partridge wore a dark gray wool coat, water dripping from it all over the fine tiles in our entrance hall. His gaze was intently on my dad while Mom had her hand

on Dad's shoulder.

I stopped walking abruptly, watching in disbelief. My first thought was that they had some unresolved business in order to make that horrible agreement binding, but that was not what was happening. I knew it in my heart before I knew it for a fact. Nate wasn't here to dance to my dad's tune. And if I hadn't hit my head and dreamed this up, then he was here for me.

As if he could hear my thoughts, he lifted his piercing gaze to me, the house growing dark around us. Thunder rolled distantly across the sky while Dad's voice increased in volume. "...out of my house. You have no right..." He stumbled over his angry words, and I noticed in the periphery of my vision that he had followed Nate's gaze and was looking at me. "Go back to your room, Carter."

Nate watched me expectantly as if he didn't know what I would do next. As if he expected me to turn away and leave, to confirm his fear that he had lost me. But he was here. He was here, and he was waiting for me to do something.

And even if I was absolutely wrong about everything, I was willing to take one more risk for this crazy thing. Could my life get any worse if I disobeyed Dad?

"No," I said softly without looking at Dad.

Nate swallowed, and I made a few slow steps toward the staircase. His gaze followed me even as Dad took a sudden step toward him as if to physically remove him from the house. He watched me descend slightly curving stairs, my left hand dragging over the smooth wall where a normal family might have their framed photos hanging, but ours only had a coat of faded yellow paint.

And when I reached the bottom of the stairs, Nate had shifted away from my furious father to face me. "Hi," he said or mouthed. I wasn't sure. His voice was so present

inside my head that I could hear him even if he didn't make a sound.

"Hi," I replied.

"Back to your room, Carter. Now. I swear to God, if I have to tell you one more time, you'll regret it, young man." Dad's failed attempt made me chuckle.

"You can't tell me what to do," I said without taking my eyes off Nate. He was so beautiful. The lines around his mouth were gentle, and the hints of crow's feet around his eyes spoke of a man who had earned these lines by smiling. His forehead wasn't creased with worry when his face wasn't relaxed. His clear face and big, brown eyes radiated warmth that no rain and cold could ever extinguish.

"I'll tell everyone," Dad yelled. "I'll tell everyone what he did to you."

Nate didn't wince at that. Not even a little. His lower lip quivered, his eyes twinkled, and raindrops trickled from his soaked hair over his face. It didn't worry him that he might get crucified by the tabloids.

Dad tore free of my mom's hold and pulled the door open, grabbing Nate by the elbow. Nate, for his part, didn't resist. If anything, I might have seen a hint of amusement on his lips as Dad dragged him toward the exit.

Nate never broke eye contact with me, and his mouth spread into a smile when I bit my lower lip, holding back a smile of my own. But Dad slammed the door in his face, and I hurried across the hall to join my love outside.

Dad pressed his back against the door, making my heart leap. He wouldn't stop me now. He wouldn't. "You're not going anywhere," he growled.

"I really am," I said, my tone so light and casual that it must have offended him.

“Over my dead body, boy,” he said, slurring the words in anger.

“Let me out,” I demanded. My tone left no room for debate. “I need to talk to him. Let me out.”

“You need to respect your father. You need to do what you are told, or you’ll lose...”

“Enough!” Mom’s voice was far louder than either of us had expected. “Dana, enough. Let him out.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he hissed.

I was too stunned to speak as Mom stepped forward, putting her arm protectively around my shoulders. To my dad, she said, “I’ve put up with you for twenty years. I let you do whatever the hell you want to do. I looked away from every girl you slept with. I said nothing when you couldn’t even bother to hide it. I washed their perfumes out of your shirts. And I pretended I didn’t know what the powder you left in the closet under your folded pants was. But I’m not going to let you do this, Dana. I’m not going to stand silently while you ruin our boy’s life.” Her voice quivered for only a moment. She had an inexhaustible strength stashed somewhere deep within her. When she spoke again, her voice was as peaceful as dying in your sleep. “Let him go, or I will leave you. I swear to God, I will.”

Dad gaped at her, then turned his furious gaze to me.

Mom kissed my cheek and whispered into my ear. “Go, baby.”

I mouthed thank you before taking a step toward the door.

“I could have protected you,” Dad said in a harsh whisper, stepping away from the door but standing in my path. “If you walk out, Carter, you’ll never be able to come

back to me.”

I looked into his eyes and discovered that all the love I’d once had for the man I thought I knew was gone. It had been misplaced. “What you did to us all makes this the easiest choice I ever had to make.”

“You’ll regret it,” Dana warned me.

“And he can come to my house whenever he damn pleases, Dana,” Mom squeezed through clenched teeth.

With another glance over my shoulder, I blinked at Mom, hoping she understood my gratitude. It was impossible to put it into words. And it was impossible to wait with this feeling rocking my chest. I reached for the door and stepped out into the pouring rain.

Nate was a few paces away from the door, cold rain pelting his head and shoulders, hands in the pockets of his coat, eyebrows knitted to protect his eyes from the trickling raindrops. “You got out,” he said over the faraway rumble of thunder and the murmur of rain on the ground.

The light above the front door suddenly went out, and I laughed out loud. That was my father’s consolation prize, turning the lights off as if Nate’s heart wasn’t a glowing beacon, a lighthouse in stormy waters guiding my way.

Even Nate’s lips stretched into a little smile at that.

I took a couple of steps toward him, pausing before we were too close. The crack that had split my heart seemed to tear wider now that I faced him. The pain felt fresher, the disappointment more bitter. I looked at him and decided this couldn’t be easy for either of us. Not if it was real. So I grabbed my feelings with all my strength, and I

shoved them deep into the abyss where my soul had once been. I would find them later if I had any need for them.

“You hurt me,” I said bluntly over the rain, glad that my face was already wet so he couldn’t see the tears when they rolled down my cheeks.

Nate pulled his hands out of his pockets. He spread his arms bravely as if he was getting ready for a firing squad. “I did.”

“Why?” I demanded, the embers in me fanned by my desire to hear the right answer, kindling and growing into flames. “Why did you do it?”

Nate stepped closer, but I didn’t move. “Quite simply, because I’m a fool, Carter.”

“I know that.” You are my fool, Nate. You were always supposed to be my fool.

“I thought I was protecting you,” he said loudly as the wind sent chills into my bones and a stronger wave of rain came down on us. “I thought that keeping you safe was more important. I thought...” He shook his head, aware that he was inexcusable. “I thought the choice was mine.”

Good, I thought but pressed the lid on my feelings harder. They battered against it like furies from hell, wanting to get out at any cost, wanting to go to him. “And now?”

Nate took the last step toward me and looked into my eyes. The heartbroken expression on his face convinced me that he could tell the difference between rain and tears on my cheeks. “And now I want you to forgive me, Carter. I came to beg if that’s what you want. I know...I know you don’t have a reason to trust anything I say. I would swear on your roller skates and your guitar’s rainbow strap and on every kiss you gave me that made me feel like life was worth living, but that won’t erase

what I did.”

It will do something better, I thought eagerly. It will break the bonds I put around my love for you.

His arms moved toward me, but he didn’t touch me. Not yet. I could see the effort with which he was holding back. “The truth is really simple, Carter. I love you. I love you so much that it scares me. And to think that loving you could cause harm to you is worse than death.”

Had my heart not already felt whole for the fact that he knew the worth of my roller skates, these words would have healed me. But now, they only made my chest rise higher and my heart lift with it. “You love me?” I asked, my voice barely louder than the lashing storm.

“I do, baby. With all my heart. With every fiber of my being. I love you.” He bit his lip hard, and I realized he was crying, too, concealing his sobs as if he were shivering with the cold. “I should have let you make the call. I should have let you choose whether you wanted to risk the torture of being exposed. And if you come with me, I will never play the adult. I promise, baby. God knows I barely keep my shit together. But you make me a better person. You know you do.”

I realized I had been holding my breath since asking the question. Now, as happiness welled in me like a river that was about to break the dam, I grinned and shuddered with the effort not to shout. “I love you too.” The words came out even if my voice was shaky with excitement. “I love you, Nate.”

His eyes widened as though this was the least likely thing he would hear. But when his hands rose and closed around my face, his kiss was determined and steady. For all the storms that thundered through our lives, his more than mine, Nate Partridge was still the anchor that kept me safe and sound. He was the monolith I had fallen in love

with and who somehow, miraculously, loved me back.

I rose onto the tips of my toes to kiss him back. All the love I had bottled down and trapped was now soaring out of me, warming up everything in its path. It rose wildly from my chest, traveled to my lips, and poured into him. He was mine in all the ways: my soul, my life, my love. He was here, taking me away, taking a chance on us.

I kissed him hot enough that our bodies no longer shivered in the cold, but Nate still pulled his head back and looked into his eyes. "Carter," he said excitedly. "You're making me so happy, Carter."

Chills ran through me despite the fact that this feeling heated my body.

"Shit," Nate blurted as if he only just realized we were outside in pouring rain. "Come inside the car. Hurry." And he grabbed my hand, leading me away. It never crossed his mind to ask if I wanted to return inside either to say something or take something with me. And it didn't occur to me that I might until we were inside his fancy, comfortable, heated car, shuddering and waiting to warm up a little.

Nate looked at me from the driver's seat. "I love you, baby," he said. "I...never said this to anyone before. I love you." It was like he was trying to get used to the feel of those words in his mouth. He said it three more times before I laughed.

"I love you, too," I promised.

After a moment of silence in which we let our gazes feast on each other's faces, Nate pressed the gas pedal and drove. Shaking his head clear, he said we needed to go to the nearest mall, or we would freeze to death.

I beamed as I listened to his words.

“It’s not important,” he said. “We’ll buy clothes. We’ll change into something dry. We’ll be fine. You’re with me, Carter. You’re really with me.”

I put a hand on his thigh, grinning despite myself. “Should I be driving, baby? You seem a little...”

Nate laughed out loud. “Happy? Because I am. I don’t remember when I was this happy.”

My heart fluttered, and I realized I hadn’t felt this way in ages. If ever. I had been terrified the first time I had kissed him. I was thrilled when I kissed him again. He had made me feel all the best things with his words and his gestures, with his lips and with his fingers, but I had never felt as happy as this.

We did what Nate said we should. Shivering and leaving wet footsteps on the floor while apologizing to everyone in our path, we hurried into the nearest store and shopped for clothes while the storm raged outside. We ate junk food like two teenagers who were just released from their parents’ leash. We tried each other’s milkshakes like boys on their first date ever. And when we returned to the car, Nate drove into the night.

He told me how Beckett had made him realize what a fool he had been. And he told me that nothing he had done in his life felt as right and as important as what he had done tonight.

Driving on the highway and through the waning rain, he glanced at me. “This is what I have been looking for all my life.” He looked at the road, then glanced at me again. “You, Carter.”

And I knew he was telling the truth. I felt very much the same way. Being next to him was the most important thing to me. We were headed somewhere, though I didn’t

even ask where. One of his homes, maybe even back in Detroit, driving across the country through the night or elsewhere in some roadside motel. It hardly mattered where we would stop along the way or where we would end up so long as we were together on the journey.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:00 am

Twenty Months Later

I stepped onto the deck of my summer home with a champagne bottle in a bucket of ice. My Hawaiian shirt was brighter than anything I had ever worn before because Carter had looked at it and decided he had to see me in it. Something about me in a Hawaiian shirt amused him so much that it never failed to put him in a good mood. The light cream shorts I wore were hanging low around my waist.

I placed the bucket on the small table between the deck loungers, and Carter stirred, opening his beautiful chestnut eyes to look at me. “Is that all for me?”

“Easy there, soldier,” I teased. “You might be twenty-one, but that doesn’t mean you have to make up for all the sober years.”

He pouted, sitting up on the recliner. “I love it when you talk dad to me.”

I stepped around the table and stood straight in front of him, my hand cupping his chin and lifting his head so he would look at me. His gaze, however, lingered on my crotch for a moment longer. Considering I was about to turn forty in August and the love of my life had turned twenty-one this year, I couldn’t help it if I sounded like a smart-ass now and then.

The daring look in Carter’s eyes made my heart warm and my stomach fiery. The heat spilled through me as I pinched his chin between my thumb and index finger. He had been sunbathing on the deck with the view of the pool, his skin slick with sunscreen, his body almost naked except for a pair of yellow briefs. “Be snarky, and you might get spanked, Carter.”

He squared his shoulders. "If you want me to be snarky, this is the way to do it." His gaze dropped to my shorts again. As he observed my crotch, I felt the tingling in my groin turn into something hotter. The sensation was quick to soar into my chest.

I swept my hand from his chin to the back of his head, cupping it gently, but he didn't hesitate. His hands touched my hips and quickly dragged up under the vibrant fabric he had made me wear.

As Carter's hands felt my tensing abs, I leaned in a little, my crotch pressing against his face. A shudder passed through me as every move my love made turned me on harder. I throbbed inside my underwear, my shorts tenting on my right side.

Simply seeing Carter's sexy body laid on the sun lounger had been enough to plant the seed of desire deep in me. Every word that left his lips since, every sigh and every time he batted his eyelashes, was just fuel to an already bright wildfire.

Carter rubbed his face carelessly against my hardening dick while his hands slipped out from under my shirt, fingers busily searching for buttons to undo, revealing my flesh a few inches at a time. And when he reached the top button, I shrugged the shirt off, allowing him to kiss the happy trail under my belly button and to rise all along my torso until his lips were pressing searing kisses on mine.

Standing against him, I embraced his hips, rubbing our bodies against each other, turning us on when his torso pressed tightly against mine.

When he slipped a hand inside my boxer briefs, I practically moaned into his open mouth, yanking him closer still. He stroked me in the confines of my tight underwear without showing me any mercy. And when the pressure was too much to take, I let go of his hips so I could take my shorts off. They fell around my ankles, soon followed by my boxer briefs. Now, he could stroke me freely, and I could relax and let my hands explore his body.

Dragging my fingers from the top of his spine, I felt all of his back and cupped his peachy butt. My tongue ventured into his mouth, and Carter welcomed it excitedly, licking it with the tip of his own and smiling wildly, his fist tightening around my cock.

He was greedy for my kisses, but he also whimpered when I squeezed his firm ass, moving the seams of his briefs between the cheeks and letting my hands slap his bare flesh gently, then a little more firmly.

Carter grabbed one of my hands from his ass, his other hand working my cock, and navigated it up and under the fabric of his briefs until my fingers felt the flat bottom of a plug, making me smirk. I pulled my head slightly back and spoke over his lips. “Do you wear this all the time?”

Carter pulled his lower lip between his teeth. “Only when I plan for you to fuck my brains out.”

“Dirty boy,” I purred.

He squeezed the base of my cock, making my voice crack. Looking into my eyes fiercely, he pulled his head further back. “Are you gonna give it to me?”

I put my free hand around his face and held his head still. “What do you want, baby?”

“You know what I want.” The sweet, seductive tone made my heart burn like the fires of hell.

“Only if you ask nicely,” I said.

His eyes widened as if I had dared him to a challenge he couldn’t resist. “Make me.”

I grabbed his hips sooner than he could follow, slipped his briefs over his ass and down until they fell to his ankles, and pressed my hand against the plug to make him whimper. It was the sweetest sound I could make him produce.

And when we were both on our knees, Carter crawled on all fours to wrap his sexy lips around me, taking me down his throat until he drove me blind with lust. He swallowed me as deep as he could before gagging while I leaned in and pressed my hand against the plug between his cheeks. He bobbed his head back and forth, his voice cutting off and his breaths quick and shallow, his moans coming in bits whenever I pressed the plug a little harder.

He would have driven me to the edge of my orgasm if I weren't careful. I knew that about him. Few things made him happier than making me lose control. He would wear a smug smirk for the rest of the day if I let that happen, so I had to push his head away.

He knew what he had been trying to do. And he knew I had stopped it. He shot me a fiery look as he sat back on the bare polished wood of the deck. As I bent down to kiss him, picking up my own scent on his lips, he leaned so far that he lay on his back.

My hand was between his cheeks in no time, massaging him around the plug until I felt like going further. Fingers catching the bottom disk of the plug, I tugged it gently, making my love wince and hiss.

"Pull me out," he moaned and held his breath.

The toy was bigger than it looked, its bottom part making a thick curve before slimming down to a fine, soft tip. Pulling it made Carter pant for a few moments, but the plug dropped out of him, and the slickness of lube he had used warmed my fingers as they entered him.

Soothing the pain, I penetrated him with two fingers, all while I kissed the soul out of his mouth. I was never less than ravenous for his body, and Carter offered himself to me whenever he could. Nearly two years of him, and I never felt like I was close to having enough of it.

He worshipped my body the same way I worshipped his. And when I lowered my lips from his mouth to his nipples, they tightened and grew small between my teeth. Teasing him with gentle bites, I worked my fingers in and out of his slick hole until I felt his fingers digging into my bare shoulders. “More, baby, please,” he whimpered.

I liked it when he begged so politely.

My fingers slipped out of him, and I decided to make his dreams come true. Sliding into him and having his legs coil around my waist, my right hand went for his crotch. My thumb slipped under his smooth balls, and the rest of my hand was under his beautiful small cock. As I slowly closed my fist, sliding deeper into him with every thrust of my hips, Carter shuddered and moaned without restraints. My thumb and index finger closed around his cock and balls like a rubbed ring, tugging gently so as not to hurt but still enough to keep him on the edge of his seat.

His glowing face grew slick with sweat as I teased his little cock and rammed my big dick deep into him, filling him balls-deep and savoring each instance when his hole clenched around me. Since we’d left the protection behind, Carter’s particular kink was something that always left me flustered and heated, never failing to turn me on.

I released his crotch and wrapped my hand around his slender throat, ramming deep into him and grunting with each thrust. He cried out with joy every other time, catching his breath whenever he could. And when tingling shot from my feet through my entire body, focusing on my hammering heart, I warned him I was close. In reply, Carter’s hole tightened around my dick, hugging me deep into him until my cock throbbed and spilled my hot cum inside of him.

His body writhed under me as sweat dripped from my brow onto his smooth, taut skin. His muscles tensed, the definition so sexy and pronounced in every inch of him. “Fuck,” he whimpered. “Yes, yes, just like that.”

I moved in slower motions now, creaming him like he wanted.

“Please,” he dragged through his teeth. “Now.”

I let my still-throbbing dick slip out, tingles crashing through it and through my abdomen, and quickly lifted the plug from the deck.

Carter spread his legs as I leaned low and let spit land on the big plug while pressing its tip against my boy’s tight hole. His small dick throbbed twice while the plug was sinking into him, trapping my cum inside his body until I decided to pull it out again.

As the toy settled inside of him, his hole closed tightly, pulling the flat disk close against itself, and my mouth embraced Carter’s dick. When he was completely inside my mouth, his tip reached my throat. Barely. My lips sealed around the base, and I sucked him firmly and slowly until he shook on the wooden deck and grabbed fistfuls of my hair, thrusting his hips madly off the floor to spill himself as deep into my throat as he could.

The sweet flavor of his cum coated my mouth as I drank all of him in. Every drop he offered, I swallowed and then sucked him for a few long moments until he squealed and pushed me away. As soon as my mouth freed his cock, Carter reached for me and pulled me into his arms.

I lay next to him, eyes closed, while we both heaved air into our burning lungs. Lazily, we basked in the sunshine, naked and deeply in love. Carter ran his fingers through my hair continuously and I looked at him through narrowed eyes. “Are you counting my grays, baby?” I teased because I had once realized he had been doing

precisely that.

“I love your grays,” he said softly. There were a few more gray hairs in all the browns since we had first fallen in love. “My wise man.”

I snorted. Wise. Between the two of us, Carter was the wise one. He was a sweet, kind soul who proved to me I still had a life to live. Not only that, but he showed me that a far greater life existed after the things I had once thought were all I could have. That was why there was a small black box on the mantelpiece in the living room. Inside that box was a gold ring. I would make him mine tonight.

I would offer him all my years and all my time. I would offer him my heart on a string, and I knew, deep down, that he would take it. He had already taken it on the night I had come for him. And he had given me his heart for safekeeping just the same.

In the two years that we were together, I discovered more joy and more life than in the twenty years that preceded him. When I coached the Titans, he cheered me on. When I decided to leave that job with an entire generation of players who were going out to make their dreams come true, he held my hand. And when he performed for the ever-growing crowds, I was in the front row. When gossip columns speculated about us, we came out to the public and were met with nothing but love. Times had changed, but my love for Carter never lost its edge or its immense power.

Yes. I knew we were meant to be.

Offering him the ring was only a reminder of a promise I repeated every day of our lives. “You are my love. You are everything I could possibly want. You are the person I live and breathe for.”

And every day, he blinked slowly and pressed a kiss to my lips, sealing the promise

anew.

The End.

LUKE

Le Labyrinthe Littéraire, Paris

Summer, 2014

My mother fixed her dark red lipstick and snapped the small round mirror shut, thrusting it into her purse a moment later. “That’s settled, then.”

My heart leaped. It was all I could do not to grin like a little boy who was promised he could eat as much ice cream as he wanted. You are eighteen, Luke, I reminded myself in a voice that did not sound eighteen at all. It would get there. I had only been eighteen for three days.

“And don’t be late for dinner,” Mother warned me.

“Of course not,” I promised. I had never been late for anything in my adult life, not that it was a particularly large dataset. Well, I had never been late for school, at least. Or dinner, for that matter.

“We will have to get extra luggage, I think,” Mother said in a quieter voice, making a note to herself. “And with Lucy’s shopping, I dread to think.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “You’re letting Luke search for books he can find back home.”

It’s not the same, I wanted to say. I had an entire shelf of books from every city I ever visited. Almost all of them were from independent little bookstores, and one from a

small town in Kansas was a guidebook I picked at a gas station after our brief trip. I never returned from a trip without a book.

“It’s his birthday, darling,” Mother explained. “And I never said we wouldn’t shop, did I?”

Lucy rolled her shoulders in the nondescript way of a sulky sixteen-year-old who got her way but wasn’t ready to give up the fight. It would have annoyed me at another time, but I was too excited about my gift to let this get in the way.

I drained the remains of my iced coffee with cream through a wide black straw, wiped my lips with the back of my hand, and gave in to the urge to kiss my mother hard, my left arm wrapping around her shoulders and pulling her in. “Thank you.” The words were too small to match what I felt.

As I stood up, Lucy thrust her tongue at me behind a hand protecting her from our mother’s lecture. The spark of mischief in her big blue eyes was a call for a truce, so I winked my acceptance and waved at them both.

As I navigated the busy Parisian sidewalk, dodging cafés, bakeries, and cocktail bars with chairs set up along the streets, I allowed myself a deep, victorious breath. As far as birthday gifts went, a no-questions-asked visit to a bookstore easily climbed to the top spot.

The aromas of coffee and croissants mixed in the air and tickled my nostrils invitingly, but I resisted. I was not an impulsive person. Even through the wild years of puberty, I had always been the quiet, calm, unproblematic one. The last time I got into trouble was in eighth grade when I was caught letting other students copy my homework. “In life, we reap what we sow,” my mother had taught me. After that, I never let myself be caught again. But aside from letting friends get away with not doing their homework, I could hardly be labeled a rebel.

My pace picked up when I passed the most crowded parts of the sidewalk along Avenue Franklin Delano Roosevelt. I turned into Rue du Colisée, a one-way street with cars parked along one side and traffic moving in a slow, clogged-up manner down the other side. The heat of the day made the scent of dust and dryness fill the air, and some less than pleasant, stuffy smell of mold and piss made me glad to reach the other end of the narrow street.

I had passed a nearby bookstore yesterday, lingering at the window while Lucy and Mom waited for me to catch up. To know Mom had remembered how inviting the window had been made me happier than I strictly should have been. And as I walked, I calculated how long I would stay. It would take me slightly over fifteen minutes to get back to our hotel. A few minutes of gushing over my new book haul, fifteen minutes in the shower, ten minutes of putting on my clothes, changing my mind, and putting on something else, fifteen to get to the restaurant...

I decided I had well over two hours to inspect every shelf, every hidden, secondhand copy, every rare first edition, and all the latest, hottest titles. With this in mind, I slowed down, my light cream hemp shirt sticking to my back. As I caught my breath, I looked around. Corner buildings with narrow fronts expanded along the organically built streets, trees provided the much-needed shade, and the hum of traffic from several streets away faded to mere background noise.

When I found Le Labyrinthe Littéraire, I paused at the window, not unlike an urchin on a cold winter night gazing at the unreachable warmth on the other side in some Hans Christian Anderson story. My eyes grew big with wonder, and my heart tripped several times. The window itself was framed with dark wood along the bottom third. The name of the bookstore was pasted across the glass in blocky, aged gold lettering. Inside the window, the scene was richly decorated with a dark brown drape as a background to a plethora of things one might find in a Victorian library. From a faded brown globe to a library stool to a lineup of clothbound hardcovers, I could have spent the entire two hours I had daydreaming about my future home office. Not that I knew what exactly I would be doing in said office. Or why I would have one at home.

My mother didn't love the idea of my studying English literature. I switched my phone to silent mode so I wouldn't be disturbed while I was in heaven.

I triggered an antique bell above the door when I entered Le Labyrinthe Littéraire. I found myself blinking like a mole at the dim interior after the bright daylight outside. It took my eyes a few moments to adjust. To my right, extending from the corner near the door three long paces out, was the heavy wooden counter with an old-fashioned cash register I swore was there for decorative purposes. The wooden paneling made the counter feel completely solid, immovable, built into the store's very skeleton. It was cluttered with sepia postcards, expensive pens, and bookmarkers of various sizes and designs. I had my eye on the particularly interesting clip-on bookmarker with a magnet to secure it to the page. It bore a print of Van Gogh's self-portrait.

Behind the counter were shelves with literary magazines, books waiting to be shelved elsewhere, and various notebooks and merchandise with the store's aged gold lettering on them. Finally, there was movement on the curtain, which concealed what I imagined was a storage room behind an arched doorway. A middle-aged man with black hair combed back and a touch of silver on his temples pulled the curtain aside and stepped behind the counter. "Bonjour," he greeted me.

I replied, my French bearing more than a little of my American accent. It made me wince to hear myself, but the man smiled politely.

"Welcome," he said, his French accent sounding much more pleasant to my ears than the other way around. "Ah, are you lookin' for anythin' in particular?" I could have listened to the way words rolled over his lips for a day and I wouldn't get bored.

"No. Nothing specific." I glanced ahead to where the riches of the bookstore were. "I'd like to explore for a bit."

"By all means," the man said. He tapped a bell on the counter, illustrating the exact way in which I should use it. "If you need me, I will be right 'ere." He gestured at the

curtain and the arched doorway behind his back. With another smile, he turned away from me and disappeared into the back room.

I turned on my heels, inhaling a deep breath rich with the scent of leather, cedar, ink, and paper. Hints of bergamot and orange peel were also present, and I picked out the faintest notes of sea breeze and pine cones. My gaze flickered across the ground floor, where the small foyer with gift items led to a long rectangular room with bookcases from wall to wall. In the center of the room were long, low tables with the same deep brown cloth covering them, stacked with more clothbound hardcovers. The classics of French literature in their native language as well as dozens of translations from various publishers across the world. I entered the room and dragged my gaze carefully across them all, folding my left arm for the lack of a shopping cart. One by one, I failed to resist the books, aware that even the no-questions-asked policy had its limits. Besides, I had only spent twenty minutes in here so far. So I carefully picked up one book after another, weighing, measuring, judging, imagining them on my shelves, and, as discreetly as I could, inhaling their scents.

I lost track of time in this wonderland.

After returning two-thirds of the books I had, at one point or another, swore I couldn't live without, I carried the must-buys with me up a wooden spiral staircase to the loft, where even more titles awaited. I had picked up *Le Père Goriot* bound in beautiful burgundy cloth with gold details, a trade paperback of *Madame Bovary*, and a massive hardcover of *Les Misérables* with a glossy dust jacket to start with.

Up in the loft, the scent of pines was a little stronger, but the dominant aromas were something resembling a reclusive wizard's home in the woods. There was, I noticed, someone else up there, and a strong scent of coffee drew my attention to the person sitting in a corner, his back turned to me. Lamps were the only source of light up here, and they were especially sparse in the reading nook. The patron was in a low armchair with a book in his hand and a coffee in a small cup on the table in front of him. Dark, cropped hair and a long, tanned neck were all I saw of him before slipping

between the bookcases. As I stalked between the shelves, I marveled at the editions of familiar titles and those I had never seen before.

I was often precise and methodical in the things I did. Piling books into the fold of my left arm was not one of them. As my burden grew heavy and so tall that I could press it safely in place with my chin, I spotted a very vintage copy of *The Iliad* in English on the top shelf. Holding my haul as firmly as I could, I lifted my right hand to the top, rising to my toes. The pile in my arm was starting to wobble when someone appeared next to me, frightening me instantly with French words spoken in a soft tone.

“Ah!” I jumped back, bumping into the stranger with my right side as I protected my left against an avalanche of books that tumbled out of my hold.

“Excusez-moi,” the stranger said hurriedly. “Je suis désolé.”

“I’m so sorry,” I blurted, moving away from the person I had just leaned against. As I stepped away from him, my heel landed on one of my hardbacks, and I tripped backward, yelping in panic until a pair of strong arms grabbed me.

“You speak English,” the stranger stated in a native-like accent. “God, I apologize. I only meant to get that book for you. I didn’t want to scare you.” His arms were still around my torso, and my legs were numb as the adrenaline wore off. With his help, I straightened a little and stood on my two feet. It was only when I was safely upright and the other guy backed one pace from me that I realized several things. Firstly, the pine cone and sea breeze scent I had been following throughout the bookstore belonged to him. Secondly, he was not French. And thirdly, he was the best-looking person I had ever seen in my life. From the stylishly cropped, nearly black hair to his big, dark eyes to the perfect nose and defined lips, this person was crafted by angels in heaven. With strong eyebrows that matched his hair and ears pierced twice each, not to mention the fact that he was taller by a couple of inches, the stranger had the good looks that intimidated me more than anything else. It took me a moment to

process the fact that he was smiling, eyes wide and pupils dilated in the dimness of the loft, his body language open and a little awkward. “Let me help you with that,” he offered in my stunned silence.

Bending down, he began picking my books one by one, handing them to me while crouching, and later kneeling, by the pile. When he finished, he held my copy of *Le Père Goriot* instead of adding it to my armful. “Ah, I remember this one. Such a frustrating read.”

I resisted narrowing my eyes at him, but I strongly disagreed. In fact, I could do very little between holding the books and fighting the urge to moon over him like a frog-eyed, smitten boy. He must have noticed me bristling at his unsolicited review of De Balzac’s classic novel. With another toothy smile, the heartthrob wiped away whatever sting his comment had left.

“I only mean that those daughters needed a good spanking.” He surrendered the hardcover over to my pile. “That’s a lot of books.”

“It’s my birthday.” I blinked and imagined that explained everything.

The angel-faced book critic arched his eyebrows. “Is it? Happy birthday.” He had a soft way of speaking as if every word was precious and worth saying. “This is your birthday gift to yourself, then?”

“Sort of,” I replied.

His eyes narrowed in thought. “It’s a very deep collection. Don’t you want to have fun while reading?”

Now he was just getting on my nerves. He might be heart-stoppingly handsome, but I wouldn’t stand for rudeness. “I have lots of fun.” My voice had dropped an octave lower from the last time I spoke.

The stranger's lips formed an O, and his eyebrows quirked upward. "I've struck a chord, eh? Let me make that right." He turned away from me and slipped between the bookcases and out of sight. If it was some kind of game, he won because I couldn't resist following him. I trailed the fresh, exciting scent of his cologne and found him inspecting a row of graphic novels.

He picked up a few, measured them against each other, replaced them, and repeated the process a few times. At one point, he considered the fantasy aisle, murmuring something like, "Not there yet," while holding a pristine copy of Assassin's Apprentice in his right hand. He looked at the cover of that book so lovingly that I felt something in the pit of my stomach that couldn't possibly be jealousy.

I was sure it was a practiced look. It must have worked on girls all the time. He had probably broken a million hearts.

His sun-kissed face pulled on a satisfied expression. When he directed his warm brown gaze at me, I was light-headed. Pull yourself together, I snapped at myself internally. I had come across countless good-looking guys since first realizing that guys were the ones that made my heart grow. Nobody knew the truth, of course, and I was very good at keeping my head cool around attractive boys. In school, at the pool, at the beach, or on any trip Mom had taken Lucy and me, I could ignore the fact that pretty boys made me want to look twice.

And yet, this confident, smiling guy looked at me, and I wanted to giggle behind my hand.

"That's the one," he said with a pleased nod, returning the rest of his options to their places on the shelves. He hurried away from me again, the sea breeze and pine cones washing over my face. I couldn't lie; I drew a deep breath just as he passed me.

I followed, as that seemed to be the role he had assigned to me.

He dropped into his chair, picked up a ballpoint pen, stuck it between his teeth, and pulled the pen out of the lid, which he bit firmly while scribbling inside the book.

“What are you...?” My breath hitched as he underlined something sharply and handed me the graphic novel.

Happy birthday! This will sprinkle some joy throughout your reading list.

P.S. Sorry about scaring the soul out of you.

Rafael

He took the book back. “It’s a birthday gift.”

“I don’t read comics,” I said in no particular tone.

Rafael grinned. “You’re a bit of a snob, aren’t you?”

The frown that creased my brow made him chuckle.

“God, you’re adorable. I’ll forgive it.” After those words left his curved, red lips, his gaze dropped to the cover of *The Sandman* graphic novel. He looked at me again, a little more guardedly, and winced. “Was that too forward?”

The heat that soared into my face must have been a telltale sign. And if it hadn’t been, then the choked breath I dragged into my burning lungs was.

“I usually speak without thinking,” Rafael said. “It’s very off-putting, they say.”

“I don’t think it’s off-putting.” The soft tone I used was out of my control. My ears were still ringing with the word he used to describe me. Straight guys didn’t tell other guys they were adorable, right? The fondest words a straight guy had directed at me

had been “You’re kinda cool, man.” Not this. Never this.

“It’s my lucky day, then,” he said and hesitated, possibly waiting for me to say something else. I wanted to, but I wasn’t exactly sure how to bridge the gap between my heart and my tongue. “Well...” He rolled his shoulders. “It was nice meeting you.”

I pressed my lips into a tight smile and nodded. I had this distinct feeling of standing on the precipice; either step forward and claim the gift fate had given me or step back and forget this had ever happened. Years later, in a hotel room on Piazza Navona, I would gaze out at the crowds of people who looked for some respite in the cool evening air. Standing on the edge of the abyss, I would remember this moment. Though a decade had passed since he scribbled his name inside a book I had no plans on reading, I felt the same sense of gravity and fate and sheer importance of having run into Rafael. There, in a hidden bookstore in Paris, I was knocked out of my orbital path by a fraction of a degree, and the impact rippled throughout my life.

I blinked. “Won’t you buy me that book?”

“Oh.” His smile broadened as visible relief washed over him. “Right. I would love to. Not that you read comics, of course. They are for children, am I right? Not for serious people like you and me.” He wore a cheeky grin that morphed into a genuine one when he offered to take some of the books from my armful as we neared the dangerously swirly stairs.

Although I wasn’t in the habit of being teased, it didn’t bother me coming from Rafael.

“I’m Luke, by the way. Whitaker.” I looked at him, then at the stairs, and began descending them.

“It’s nice to meet you, Luke Whitaker. I’m Rafael Santos.” His voice was softer

again, words a little more measured. He seemed to move between blurting out big statements about someone's adorableness and carefully constructed phrases like a qubit in a state of superposition; both things were true at the same time.

We found the middle-aged man writing something down in a large, leather-bound notebook on the counter. He looked up at us and exchanged a few words in French with Rafael, whose accent, to my ear at least, was indistinguishable. "And for you, monsieur?"

Rafael and I unloaded the pile of very important literary masterpieces onto the counter. The man scanned them using a modern cash register, packed them in two paper bags with the store's unique lettering, and gave me the change. As I started for the door, my heart tripped. Rafael was following me. He had his own copy of *Royal Assassin* by Robin Hobb under his arm, and he carried *The Sandman* for me. The bell above the door escorted us, and we stood in the bright sunlight of the outside world on the sidewalk. Here, he was even more beautiful, the tawny complexion lighting up under the sunshine.

"Listen," he said, fiddling with the copy of *The Sandman*. "Since it's your birthday and I basically knocked you over, called you a snob, and made you blush, I was wondering if you'd let me make it up to you."

I swallowed. "Um...how?"

Rafael pointed down the street in the opposite direction from which I had come. "There's an ice cream parlor around the corner. You can't leave Paris without trying it."

I only had a little over an hour until dinner. Ice cream was not a great appetizer. I had to get back to the hotel to unpack, shower, and change. Mom didn't like tardiness. I knew it then, just like I knew it ten years later when I remembered the events of this evening—I had already crossed the precipice.