



# Hard Check (Lewiston Forge #2)

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**Category:** Sport

**Description:** Holt Carver has been in the minors long enough to see fresh-faced rookies come and go—and long enough to know this season might be his last. He's the Forge's bruising power forward with a sharp tongue and a short fuse, better known for chirps and chaos than locker room speeches. But all he's ever wanted—more than a call-up, more than respect—is a real leadership role. To leave behind something that mattered. Not just his stats, but his voice.

Enter Matsson Pike—second-year winger, last year's breakout star, and a walking sunbeam in skates. He's got an NHL future dangling in front of him, fans who chant his name, and a smile that lights up any arena. But after an off-season injury and mounting pressure to perform, Pike is floundering beneath the surface. And when Coach pairs him with Carver for mentorship? It's like tossing oil on an open flame.

Carver thinks Pike is too bright, too golden, too everything. Pike thinks Carver is a storm cloud in hockey pads. But as the season grinds on—and forced proximity turns into unexpected conversations, lingering stares, and confusing dreams—they start seeing through each other's masks.

They've shared the ice for a year, but neither saw this coming: the quiet thrill of understanding, the slow-burn heat of tension neither of them has language for, and the terrifying realization that this might be more than friendship... and far more than either of them expected.

Because when the season ends, Pike might be heading to the NHL. And Carver might be hanging up his skates. But between the boards and beneath the weight of everything they've never dared admit—what if this is the moment that changes everything?

**Total Pages (Source):** 22

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:18 am*

## Chapter one

### Carver

A ssistant Coach Landon's hand landed on my shoulder as I finished lacing my boots. The locker room had mostly emptied, just a few stragglers gathering gear and trading worn-out jokes about last night's scrimmage.

"Mac wants you." He lowered his voice like he was delivering bad news. "Now."

I kept my eyes fixed on my laces, giving the left one a final, unnecessary tug. "What, did I forget to pay my tab at his daughter's wedding?"

TJ snorted from two stalls down, tossing a ball of tape that bounced off my helmet. "Must be about the net you crashed into yesterday. Those things cost money."

"Or the rookie you traumatized yesterday." Our goalie, Mercier, never looked up from taping his goalie stick with methodical precision.

"Maybe he finally wants my skincare routine," I grabbed my water bottle. "Lord knows his forehead's got more creases than the fucking rulebook."

As I stood, I caught my reflection in the dented metal locker door—hair still damp from practice, the familiar purple shadows beneath my eyes. I was starting my sixth season with the Forge, and the only thing that had changed was the deepening lines around my mouth.

"Twenty bucks says you're getting traded to Moose Jaw," TJ called after me, his laughter chasing me down the hall.

"Twenty bucks says you're getting traded to your mother's basement." I didn't turn and let my voice off the cinder block walls.

As I walked, the joke faded, and the knot tightened. Five completed years in the minors meant I knew how these unexpected summons usually played out—with packed bags and a firm handshake that never lingered.

I might be out before the new season officially started. We were still three days from opening night against Providence.

Coach MacPherson's office was smaller than most penalty boxes I'd occupied—a concrete cube wedged between equipment storage and the trainer's room. The door stood half-open, and I rapped my knuckles against the frame out of habit.

"Enter or exit, Carver. The hallway draft is killing my sinuses."

I stepped inside and froze. Matsson Pike sat in one of the two metal folding chairs, back impossibly straight, like someone had replaced his spine with a hockey stick. His blond hair was still damp from the shower and combed neatly behind his ears. He offered a quick smile and an awkward half-wave when he saw me.

Of course, it's something about Pike.

The fluorescent light buzzed overhead, painting everything in that particular shade of arena gray that made even healthy people look ill: everybody but Pike. Even under the harsh light, the kid glowed like he had his own personal filter—cheeks flushed from exertion, eyes clear and alert.

"You joining us or merely admiring Pike's haircut?" Coach's gravelly voice broke through my hesitation.

I dropped into the empty chair, the metal legs scraping against concrete. The space was so cramped that our knees nearly touched. Pike smelled faintly of that fancy soap he kept in his shower kit—something with cedar and orange. I caught myself leaning slightly closer before straightening in my chair.

The office reeked of Coach's black coffee and the menthol cream he rubbed on his bad knee. Six cork boards covered the walls, layered with lineup possibilities and statistical breakdowns that he updated obsessively.

"I'll keep this brief." He leaned forward. Three coffee cups crowded the edge of his desk, each containing varying levels of what had probably once been drinkable. "Management wants a more structured mentorship program this season. Veteran-rookie pairings."

I glanced sideways at Pike, who nodded with such earnest enthusiasm you'd think Coach had just outlined the blueprint for world peace instead of another corporate-mandated team bonding exercise.

"And you picked us because...?" I let the question hang, my thumb picking at a callus on my palm.

Coach fixed me with a stare that had withered tougher men. "Pike's coming off a breakthrough season. NHL scouts are circling. That means there are expectations."

Pike shifted in his seat.

"And me?" I asked, though part of me already knew the answer.

Coach leaned back, his chair groaning. "You're not getting faster, Holt. This may be your last shot to leave something behind besides penalty minutes and quotes in post-game interviews."

The truth landed hard. I'd felt it coming—my body had been telegraphing it for months with each new creak and twinge—but hearing it spoken aloud hollowed out my chest.

I always thought I'd know when it was ending. That I'd feel something big—some obvious sign. It turns out it's just your coach quietly reminding you that no one will remember your name.

I forced a smirk. "So, what do you want from me, mentoring sunshine over here? You sure he can handle all this charm?"

"I think I can learn a lot from you." Pike spoke up with a steady and sincere voice. There was no sarcasm, no irony—only genuine respect, which somehow made it worse.

To him, I was likely some wise elder statesman instead of a thirty-year-old forward with joints that sounded like popping bubble wrap with every morning stretch.

"Your physical game creates so much space." He leaned forward. "And the way you read defensive positioning—"

"Save the highlight reel," I cut him off, uncomfortable with the naked admiration. "We haven't even started yet."

Coach pulled a clipboard from the mountain of paperwork and handed it to me. The edges were worn smooth from thousands of previous handoffs.

"Schedule's here. Check-ins after practice, one-on-one sessions twice weekly. I want mentorship logs." His eyes narrowed. "Real ones, Carver, not the shit you usually scribble on medical forms."

I flipped through the pages—detailed practice plans, evaluation metrics, and reflection questions. "Jesus, Coach. Did you stay up all night with a scrapbooking club?"

He ignored my jab. "This isn't only about Pike improving. Leadership isn't measured by how loud you yell on the ice."

That stung more than I wanted to admit. I'd always been vocal—the first to call out lazy plays and the one who could energize the bench with the right cutting remark. Still, I'd never be captain material. Dane was gone, and we needed a new one, but I knew it wouldn't be me.

"Pike needs someone who won't blow sunshine up his ass." Coach folded his fingers together. "And you need a legacy that matters." He looked between us. "Make it work."

The dismissal was clear. I rose first, Pike half a second behind me, our chairs scraping in unintentional unison.

Coach called to us as we reached the door. "Tomorrow morning, eight sharp, before team skate."

I grumbled. "Didn't know we opened that early."

"You know it's 24-hour access. Use your key."

After Coach's claustrophobic office, the locker room felt vast. I tucked the clipboard

under my arm and headed across the room, hoping to escape whatever earnest conversation Pike was undoubtedly formulating.

It didn't work. His legs were younger, unburdened by five seasons of minors-level travel and back-to-back games on concrete-hard ice. He matched my stride effortlessly.

"I am looking forward to this," he began. "Been studying your tapes since juniors."

I grunted, scanning the clipboard. Eight mandatory sessions per week. Individual skill development. Leadership modules.

Coach had even included a section labeled "Emotional Intelligence Benchmarks." It would make a good coaster for my next beer.

Pike continued to ramble. "—how you create space in the corners. It's not only physical. It's psychological—like you convince guys you're more dangerous than you actually are."

I looked up sharply. "Gee, thanks."

"That came out wrong," Pike winced. "I meant—"

"Save it for tomorrow," I cut him off, unwilling to watch him backpedal.

As I approached a bench, Pike stepped ahead of me. That's when I caught it—a slight wince as his right foot took weight. It was a barely perceptible hitch in his step that vanished as quickly as it appeared.

I focused my attention on it like a laser. Rumors had circulated all summer—some accident in July, something about a fall on wet pavement—but the official line had

been "minor issue, fully resolved." Watching him now, I knew that was pure, grade-A horseshit.

Pike glanced back, catching me watching him. Something vulnerable flickered across his face before disappearing behind that camera-ready smile.

"Eight AM. Anything specific you want me to prepare?"

I stared at him, mentally calculating how much weight he kept off that right leg. How much pressure it would take before that carefully maintained composure cracked. How many games he might last before the injury resurfaced.

"Yeah." I folded my arms over my chest. "The truth about that ankle."

His smile faltered, guard dropping for a beat. "It's nothing. Summer—"

"Bullshit. You're favoring it. And if you're gonna lie to me before we even start this mentorship charade, we might as well tell Coach it won't work."

Pike glanced around the now nearly empty locker room and then exhaled slowly. His whole expression collapsed for a second—like someone yanked the plug on his public face.

"It's not the ankle." He whispered the answer. "It's the knee. Partial tear of the MCL in July. The team doctor says it's stable enough to play."

"Does Coach know?"

"He knows I'm cleared."

"That's not what I asked."



Pike stared at me. "He knows what the medical staff told him."

Which meant no—Pike had kept the full extent of it quiet. I'd seen it a hundred times: young guys hiding injuries because they were afraid of losing momentum, being labeled fragile, and missing their narrow window of opportunity.

"The doc—" Pike started.

"—wants his bonus for keeping players on the ice," I finished. "Trust me, kid. I've been around this block a few times."

I'd seen that same limp before—on Tyce Emerson, back in my second year. The kid kept it quiet for three weeks until his knee exploded in January.

Never made it back after surgery. Now, he works at his uncle's roofing business. No jersey. No ice.

One wrong turn, and you're... gone.

I looked down at the clipboard again, at the schedule Coach had created with such military precision. Early morning sessions. Extended drills. Video review. All the while, Pike was quietly nursing a knee that could give out at any wrong twist.

"Meet me at seven-thirty instead; we'll need time to adjust the program."

Pike frowned. "I don't need special—"

"It's not special, it's smart." I cut him off. "No one's getting a call-up with a blown-out knee."

A half-smile appeared on Mr. Sunshine's face. "Thanks, Carver."

I grunted, shouldering my equipment bag and turning toward the exit, clipboard heavy in my hand. "Don't thank me yet. Tomorrow's still gonna suck."

He laughed, and the sound followed me down the corridor. He's still hurt, and Coach stuck me with him anyway. Either this is punishment, or Coach was betting I'd give a damn.

Which was funny. Because now I did.

I pushed through the double doors into the parking lot, where the October air hit my face with a bracing slap of reality. The Colisée was a testament to Lewiston's complicated relationship with hockey—weathered and outdated but still the beating heart of local pride.

I fished my keys from my pocket and approached the only vehicle parked in the far corner of the lot—a 2008 Ford F-150 with more rust than paint and a passenger door that refused to open in temperatures below twenty degrees.

The truck had survived three Maine winters with me, its frame salt-eaten but engine still growling to life with stubborn reliability each morning. Like me, it was running on borrowed time, but too damn stubborn to admit it.

I tossed the clipboard onto the passenger seat, where it landed atop yesterday's half-eaten sandwich. The engine coughed twice before catching, the familiar rumble vibrating through the frame like arthritic bones setting into motion.

As I backed out, I saw Pike emerging from the arena doors, his designer duffel slung carefully over his left shoulder to avoid weighting his right side. He moved toward a leased Audi that practically sparkled even under the overcast sky.

"World of difference," I mumbled, shifting into drive and pulling away.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:18 am*

### Chapter two

#### Pike

My alarm jarred me awake at 5:17 AM, three minutes before I'd set it to go off. I'd barely slept anyway—drifting in and out of consciousness, my mind replaying Coach MacPherson's words on a loop: mentorship program, NHL scouts, expectations .

The pre-dawn darkness still lay heavy over my apartment. I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, testing my knee before putting weight on it. It had a dull throb but was manageable—better than the day before.

Outside my kitchen window, the streetlights cast amber pools of light across the empty parking lot, and snow dusted the pavement. Winter in Maine started early and lingered late.

My apartment occupied the second floor of a converted Victorian on Lewiston's east side—one of those buildings with good bones but questionable renovations. High ceilings and original hardwood floors contrasted with kitchen cabinets from a 1990s big-box store and windows that rattled whenever the wind blew from the north.

I'd made halfhearted attempts at personalization. A framed photo of my family at Lake Winnepesaukee sat on the mantel of a non-functional fireplace. My University of Minnesota hockey jersey hung in a shadow box my mother shipped to me, and a vintage Lewiston Forge pennant from the team's 1987 championship season—a flea market find—adorned the wall above my television.

Still, most surfaces remained empty and the walls bare. The place had the unsettled quality of a way station rather than a home.

As coffee brewed, I caught my reflection in the window above the kitchen sink. I looked younger than twenty-three—something about my eyes, maybe, or how I'd never quite grown into the angular jawline that had suddenly appeared when I was sixteen. "NHL material," scouts had started whispering last season, but the face looking back at me still looked like someone playing at adulthood and professionalism.

Standing at the kitchen counter, I ate breakfast and scrolled through my phone. A text from my mother—just a heart emoji, her daily check-in. An email from my agent with another potential endorsement opportunity from a local car dealership. A notification from the Forge's fan page announcing ticket packages for the upcoming home stretch.

For the first time since the injury, I felt something like anticipation rather than dread. Whatever happened on the ice with Carver—however much my inexperience and his criticism stung—at least it would be movement. Forward motion. Something other than the holding pattern of rehab and uncertainty that had defined my summer.

I locked the door behind me, tested the handle twice, and headed for the stairs, each step measured and intentional. Control what you can control. It was what my first coach had taught me and what had carried me from Minnesota high school hockey to the Forge.

The drive to the Colisée took less than ten minutes. I was early. The parking lot was empty save for a maintenance truck, its exhaust puffing out lazy clouds in the cold.

I let myself in through the players' entrance using my access card. Familiar smells washed over me—the sharp bite of refrigeration mixed with decades of sweat and

gear.

Even empty hockey rinks were never truly silent. The building hummed with the constant work of keeping the ice frozen—compressors cycling, pipes creaking, and the distant hiss of dehumidifiers.

When I hit the switch, the locker room lights flickered on with an industrial buzz. Empty stalls lined the walls, and nameplates indicated their owners. I occupied a space between Mercier and TJ, separated from the rowdier end where Carver's stall commanded its corner.

Last season, Dane told me TJ had taped his Wayne Gretzky quote—"You miss 100% of the shots you don't take"—inside his stall the day he arrived three seasons ago. Mercier, by contrast, kept his area pristine except for a single photograph of his daughter, positioned so only he could see it during equipment changes.

I'd watched Holt Carver play since I was seventeen—following his career through highlight reels and game footage, studying how he created space in the corners where none should exist. By my first year with the Forge, I'd built him into something more than a teammate. He was a standard against which to measure myself.

As I pulled out my skates, I remembered his words from a practice session last season:

"If you're not paying attention to the details, you're not playing hockey—you're only skating around looking pretty in expensive equipment."

It wasn't addressed to me specifically, but the words defined him for me. Carver was brutally honest, unapologetically direct, and usually right.

What if I couldn't keep up? What if this mentorship confirmed what had worried me

since July—that my breakthrough season had been a fluke, and the injury was the universe's way of restoring natural order?

The heavy clank of the arena door interrupted my spiral. I turned quickly to see him standing in the doorway. Carver wore faded jeans and a threadbare Lewiston Forge hoodie. He clutched a thermos in one hand. Beneath disheveled hair, his expression was unreadable.

His face wasn't conventionally handsome. It told a different story—a weather map of experience, all hard angles and history. His nose had been broken at least twice, that I could tell. A thin scar bisected his left eyebrow, permanently interrupting the dark arch.

His eyes held my attention. Dark brown, nearly black in certain light. When he fixed that gaze on you during practice, it stripped away pretense and performance.

"Morning, sunshine." His voice was gravelly like he'd just rolled out of bed. "You're early. Did you catch the worm?"

I straightened, trying to appear more at ease than I felt. "Figured I'd get warmed up."

Carver grunted and dropped his bag onto the bench near his stall. "Smart. How's the knee?"

"Good. Fine."

"Try again." He didn't look up as he began unpacking his gear.

I exhaled slowly. "Stiff. It's better once I start moving around."

He nodded once. "Lesson number one—never bullshit me."

The arena opened before us—vast, quiet, and pristine. The empty space magnified every sound: the creak of the boards, whispers of blades against fresh ice, and the percussive tapping of Carver's stick.

"Edges first," he called, gliding backward with deceptive ease. "Let's see what you're working with."

The command was simple enough. Edge work formed the foundation of everything—the alphabet before you formed words. I pushed off, starting with the inside edges, tracing careful arcs from blue line to blue line. The left side felt clean and responsive. The right side made me hesitate, muscles tensing in anticipation of pain.

"Tighter." Carver barked instructions. "Game speed."

I dug deeper on the next pass, forcing myself into sharper turns. My breath fogged in the cold air as I concentrated on maintaining form. Inside edges, outside edges, crossovers, transition turns—the progression moved through a sequence every hockey player knew by heart.

After my third circuit, Carver's voice cut across the ice. "Stop compensating."

I pulled up short, spraying ice. "I'm not—"

"You are." He skated closer to me. "Every defenseman with half a brain will see that hitch and force you right until that knee buckles completely."

Something in his tone pushed me beyond caution. I launched into the following sequence with deliberate force, driving harder into each turn. My knee screamed in protest, but I gritted through it, focusing on proving him wrong rather than protecting myself.

"Better, but still not great."

While executing Carver's puck work drill, I initiated a cutback, and my right blade caught unexpectedly. My weight shifted awkwardly, the puck skittered away, and I barely caught myself before stumbling.

Carver growled. "Jesus Christ, try not to look like a deer on rollerblades next time."

I gritted my teeth and executed the drill four more times. Each attempt was smoother than the last until I projected confidence I hadn't felt since last season.

Through it all, Carver offered nothing resembling praise—only short corrections and minor adjustments. "Not bad," he finally said, retrieving the puck. "You followed instructions well."

A ridiculous surge of pride rose in my chest. "I meant what I said yesterday. I've been watching you since juniors."

"Don't turn it into a hero worship thing. I'm not that guy."

We worked through the remaining pucks. Carver studied me with a penetrating gaze. "Your problem isn't technical skill. It's decision-making under pressure. You panic, get pretty, and forget the fundamentals."

I opened my mouth to object, then closed it. He wasn't entirely wrong. When plays broke down, I sometimes resorted to flashier moves rather than simple solutions.

He pushed me until I was panting for breath. "Break time. Put some ice on it. Not terrible for a first session."

While we skated toward the locker room, I looked at him with new eyes. He read the



game like it was a language he'd grown up speaking while I was still sounding out the syllables.

Most of the team wouldn't arrive for another twenty minutes, leaving Carver and me alone in the weight room. I put ice on the knee and willed it to heal faster. Across the room, Carver made notes on the clipboard Coach gave him.

He broke the silence. "Your functional movement is better than I expected, but you're still compensating."

I nodded. "Better than you expected isn't exactly high praise."

The weight room door swung open as two athletic trainers entered, carrying their morning coffee and conversing about someone's fantasy football lineup. Their presence shifted the atmosphere, introducing an audience to our previously private exchange.

With the trainers fully concentrating on their conversation, I asked a question. "Why do you think Coach paired us? Is it just the difference in experience?"

"Partly." Carver took a long drink from a water bottle. "Mostly, he thinks you need someone who'll call you on your bullshit."

I bristled. "I don't—"

"Everyone has bullshit, Pike. Especially guys coming off breakout seasons with scouts circling." His tone was matter-of-fact. "Success messes with your head faster than failure. It makes you think you've got everything figured out."

The assessment hit closer to home than I wanted to admit. In my rookie season, I'd started to believe my own press—the local articles, attention from fans, and the

whispers about NHL potential. When Dane finally got called up, and I remained in Lewiston, it was a bitter pill. Then, I got hurt.

"I don't think I have it figured out." My voice was soft. "Not anymore."

"Good. That's a start." He studied me for a moment. "You know, most rookies with your skills wouldn't waste time studying a grinder like me."

"You're not just a grinder." The words tumbled out, bypassing any filters. "You create opportunities nobody else sees. That corner play against Hartford last season? When you drew three defenders and still managed to feed Leo for the game-winner? That wasn't only physical. That showed smarts."

"One good play doesn't make me Gretzky."

I continued. "It's not only one play. It's how you read defensive structures, how you—"

"Enough." He cut me off. "Save the analysis for someone who needs the ego boost."

"Fine. I'll find someone else to compliment. Maybe Mercier needs to hear about his glove-side reflexes."

"Christ," Carver muttered. "Don't. His helmet already barely fits his head."

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it, and Carver's mouth twitched—almost a smile.

The team practice that followed our early session had a different energy. It was the controlled chaos of twenty players sharing the same space, with Coach barking instructions and his whistle punctuating drills. I settled into the rhythm easily, feeling

renewed confidence from my one-on-one time with Carver.

Coach pulled me to the side. "Whatever Carver showed you, keep doing it."

Throughout practice, Carver maintained his typical on-ice persona—vocal, demanding, and occasionally profane. He called out lazy backchecks and half-hearted forechecks with equal vigor, holding everyone to the standard he set with his effort.

By the time Coach blew the final whistle, my legs burned pleasantly, and my knee ached but held steady. The session had been my best since returning from injury—not quite pre-accident form, but closer than I'd been for weeks.

"Good work with Pike," Coach said to Carver as we headed to the locker room. I slowed, within earshot.

"Only doing what you asked, Coach."

"No, you're doing more than I asked. The question is why." Something knowing in Coach's tone made me hurry past, suddenly feeling like I'd intruded on something private.

I lingered in the locker room longer than usual, taking time with my cool-down stretches. My normal routine was efficient—practice, shower, protein shake, and out the door. Today, something anchored me in the space, reluctant to break the morning's mood.

Across the room, Carver had already peeled off most of his gear. Unlike some of the younger guys who treated equipment like disposable accessories, Carver handled his gear with practiced care—preserving what he could save, discarding only what was truly spent.

Without consciously intending to, I found my gaze drawn to him. Stripped of pads and practice jersey, his upper body told the story of a hockey career. A network of scars mapped encounters with sticks, pucks, and boards—some had faded to white lines, while others still carried the angry pink of newer damage. A particularly vivid scar curved along his left shoulder blade and disappeared down his back.

He glanced up suddenly, catching me watching. Something flickered in his eyes. For a heartbeat, neither of us looked away.

My pulse quickened unexpectedly. Heat crawled up my neck, and I dropped my gaze, suddenly fascinated by the laces of my shoes.

What was that?

I'd watched countless teammates before—studying techniques and observing routines. This was different. My stomach twisted with an unfamiliar tension.

The unfamiliar awareness wasn't entirely new. I remembered a moment last February—post-game celebrations after Carver's overtime winner against Providence. Amid the locker room chaos was Carver, quietly rewrapping tape around a damaged knuckle while others celebrated around him.

His isolation within the collective joy struck me. The strange pull I'd felt toward him then had been easier to categorize as simple respect.

It's just admiration, I told myself firmly. Professional admiration. It was the natural reaction to someone whose career you've followed.

"Earth to Pike." Mercier's voice cut through my thoughts. The goalie stood nearby, the equipment bag slung over his shoulder. "You planning to grow roots in that stall?"

I blinked, realizing most of the team had already filtered out. "Finishing up."

"Must have been some session with Carver this morning. You looked different out there. More balanced."

"He showed me a few new tricks."

"Huh." Mercier tilted his head slightly. "Wouldn't have pegged him for the teaching type."

"He's got a good eye for mechanics."

Mercier glanced across the room where Carver was now pulling a faded Forge t-shirt over his head. "Carver's got more hockey sense than he lets on; just buries it under that running mouth."

TJ approached from the showers, towel wrapped around his waist, hair still dripping. "Are we talking about the Carver Redemption Tour? I've got money on him making you cry by Friday, Pike."

I raked my fingers through my hair. "Your confidence is touching."

TJ grinned. "Seriously though, you did look better out there today. Whatever the old man's teaching, it's working."

"He's thirty, not sixty."

"Hockey years are like dog years." TJ pulled on a worn Forge t-shirt with the sleeves cut off to showcase the elaborate tribal tattoo covering his right shoulder—the product of his "poor decisions and good tequila" during his first professional season. "By that math, Carver's about 210."

Mercier shook his head. "You understand that puts you at around 175, yes?"

"But I wear it better," TJ shot back without missing a beat.

"The delusions of youth." Mercier sighed, turning toward me.

He patted my shoulder. I nodded and watched them leave. They headed for the exit together, their familiar banter continuing down the hallway. Carver moved toward the shower area, a towel draped over one shoulder.

The flutter returned, stronger this time. I turned away, quickly gathering my things.

As I headed for the exit, a quiet uncertainty took root. Admiration didn't usually feel like this—it didn't usually create an unexplained tension. I told myself it was only professional interest, the natural respect for a veteran player with hard-earned knowledge.

Whatever it was, I didn't have a name for it yet. And maybe that was for the best.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:18 am*

### Chapter three

#### Carver

I arrived at the Colisée three hours before puck drop, though I'd never admit to anyone I was that eager for opening day. The security guard hardly glanced up as I passed.

"Bit early, Carver."

"Your observation skills are why they pay you the big bucks, Phil."

He snorted, returning to his crossword puzzle. "Mercier's already here. Meditating or some shit."

"Of course, he is. Probably communing with his glove hand."

I pushed through the double doors into the locker room. I traced my fingers along the row of dented stall nameplates—mine had a jagged scratch across the middle, courtesy of a stick-throwing tantrum after our playoff elimination last year. Coach had threatened to make me pay for a new one. I'd told him to bill me and add it to my tab of fucks not given.

The room smelled exactly like it always did—liniment, old sweat, and rubber. I spotted Mercier in the corner, eyes closed, headphones in place. His lips moved in silent counts—visualizing saves, no doubt. I'd once replaced his pre-game playlist with a loop of "Baby Shark." He didn't speak to me for two weeks.

"Morning, Zen master," I called. "The spirits say we're winning by three today."

He didn't open his eyes. "The spirits say you're still an asshole."

The door swung open again, and Pike entered. He nodded at me, then started what looked like a pre-established routine: five steps to the whiteboard, pivot, seven steps back to his stall, repeat.

"Christ, are you measuring the room for curtains? Sit down before you wear a trench in the floor."

I startled him. "What? Oh. My... pre-game routine."

"Pacing like a nervous father isn't a routine. It's a cry for help."

Mercier opened one eye. "Leave the kid alone, Carver."

"I'm mentoring, not terrorizing. There's a difference."

The room gradually filled with noise and bodies. Pike continued pacing, his jaw working silently.

I wandered over to Mercier, who'd removed his headphones. "Kid's burning nervous energy like a goddamn bonfire."

"Opening night jitters. Not everyone has your ice-in-the-veins approach."

"Ice in my veins? I hit defrost this morning."

Pike completed three more circuits before I'd had enough. "Pike! Pacing won't change the game. Stick to your habits. Breathe like it's just practice."



He halted mid-stride, swallowing hard. "Right."

"And for fuck's sake, sit down. You're making me tired just watching you."

He finally broke his pacing and sat, unwrapping fresh tape for his stick. "I watched film last night."

"Which means?"

"They make quick decisions. Maybe too fast because the first option isn't always best."

"Look at you, learning words and everything." I tossed him an extra roll of tape. "Their goalie goes down early on his blocker side. Remember that when you're overthinking your shot placement and missing the net entirely."

One of the rookies—Sanders or Samuelson, I couldn't remember which—laughed nervously.

"Something funny, new guy?" I fixed him with a stare.

"No, just—"

"Spit it out. We're all friends here. Except TJ. Nobody likes TJ."

"Hey!" TJ raised his voice in protest.

The rookie straightened. "Just thought it was funny how you always have something to say about everyone's game."

"When you've been here five seasons, you notice things. Like how you're gripping

your stick like it's trying to escape. Loosen up before you snap it in half and have to explain to Coach why you need new equipment before the season officially starts."

The kid flushed but adjusted his grip. Small victories.

Coach MacPherson entered without fanfare, clipboard tucked under one arm. "Providence thinks they're taking a win tonight." His voice was gravelly. "Our job is disappointment. Clear eyes, quick transitions. They're bigger, but we're faster. Pike, Carver—you're starting with TJ. Make it count."

My eyebrows rose. "Starting line? Coach, did you mix up your meds again?"

"If I wanted stand-up comedy, Carver, I'd tune into your post-game interviews. Focus on what matters."

I caught Pike watching me, a mixture of amusement and uncertainty on his face. "What?"

"Just trying to remember whether you talk this much during games, too."

"Depends on who's listening. Ready for your big moment, sunshine?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"Remember to breathe. And try not to throw up on the ice. Zamboni guy hates that."

The game unfolded in its familiar symphony of sound and motion. Skate blades carved crescents into fresh ice, sending up delicate sprays.

I slid in next to TJ on my first shift back to the bench. "Their defense is slower than my grandmother, and she's been dead ten years."

"You think you could maybe call for a pass once in a while? Some of us like assists in our stat column."

"Can't hear you over the sound of your fancy footwork."

Coach leaned over from behind, his voice cutting through our banter. "Less comedy, more backchecking."

As the game unfolded, I realized something new had entered my field of awareness. I watched Pike with the focused attention I usually reserved for opposing defensemen. Each stride, turn, and battle along the boards—I studied it all. The injury didn't seem to hamper him, but there was a caution in certain movements, a calculation that hadn't been there last season.

"Pike!" I shouted with five minutes left in the second period. "Stop telegraphing your crossovers! Their winger has you figured out. Mix it up."

He nodded, face flushed from exertion. "Got it."

"And for Christ's sake, lead with your left shoulder when you go to the corner. They're looking to put you through the boards."

Mercier leaned over as he skated by my side. "Look at you, all mentor-like. It's almost heartwarming."

"Shut up and focus on stopping pucks. Your five-hole's big enough to drive the Zamboni through."

"Love you too, Carver."

Seconds later, we gained possession in the neutral zone. Pike accelerated up the left

wing, exactly where I'd advised earlier—a seam behind Providence's second-line winger. The defenseman committed early, lunging toward Pike with an outstretched stick.

His execution was perfect—weight shift, shoulders faking one way, stick handling the puck through the narrow gap I'd pointed out. Two quick strides put him in the high slot with space. He released a slap shot in one fluid motion that caught the goalie sliding left while the puck went right.

The goal horn blared as the puck hit twine.

Our bench erupted, sticks hammering against the boards.

"That's what I'm talking about!" I hollered over the noise. "See what happens when you listen to me?"

Pike spun in a tight circle, arms raised, face transformed with pure, unfiltered joy. Not the manufactured celebration you see in highlight reels, but something raw and real—like he'd forgotten anyone was watching. His teammates converged on him, gloves slapping his helmet in celebration, but he looked directly at me for a moment before they reached him.

He had a flushed face, eyes bright with adrenaline, grinning so wide it looked like his cheeks might crack from the strain. There was something so damn authentic about his celebration, so unlike the polished interviews or the careful way he managed himself around the team. This was Pike stripped down his essence—a kid who'd just done what he'd dreamed of doing.

That smile hit like a fucking freight train.

We were up 2-1 as the third period began. Providence had a size advantage but

seemed thrown by our pace.

"Carver, what are you seeing out there?" Coach asked, surprisingly deferring to me in front of the team.

I straightened, suddenly aware of all eyes on me. "Their defense is gassed. They can't handle sustained pressure. We keep rolling lines, and they'll crack more in the third."

Coach echoed my observations. "Keep the pressure. They're getting frustrated. Make them chase. Pike, Carver—good chemistry out there. Keep finding each other."

Eight minutes in, Pike made a clean pass at the blue line, head up, textbook form. What he didn't see was their defenseman—Novak, number 44—lining him up from the blind side.

The hit was borderline late. Open ice. Shoulder driving through Pike's chest. It was the kind of collision that shows up on highlight reels or disciplinary review videos, depending on your perspective.

Pike went down hard.

My reaction was instant and visceral. Before I could think anything over, I was across the ice, gloves dropped, shoving Novak with enough force to send him stumbling backward.

I snarled at him. "The fuck was that? You looking for a problem? I'm your fucking solution."

Officials converged, whistles blaring. Linesmen inserted themselves between us as Novak grinned, muttering something in Czech that didn't need translation to understand its contempt.

"Say it in English if you want your teeth to stay in your head." I strained against the linesman's grip.

Coach joined the group. "Carver! Enough!"

As the ref escorted me towards the penalty box, I glanced back to where Pike was pushing himself up to his knees, waving off the trainer who had started onto the ice. Our eyes met briefly. He nodded once—I'm okay—but the tight lines around his mouth told a different story.

Two minutes for roughing felt like twenty. I sat in the penalty box, a fish tank of shame, watching Providence's power play unfold with the detached analysis of someone who'd seen it all before. Their patterns were predictable—overload the strong side, look for the seam pass, collapse on rebounds. Mercier turned away two decent chances, and our penalty kill unit successfully cleared the zone three times.

When I finally escaped the box, the game was intense. Providence's forechecking pressure increased, forcing us into defensive zone turnovers. Coach relied more heavily on experienced lines.

Pike slid onto the bench beside me, breathing hard. His cheeks were flushed, sweat dampening the hair visible beneath his helmet.

"Sorry about the penalty," I muttered as we waited for the whistle.

He glanced at me, surprise on his face. "Why? Guy had it coming."

"Still put the team down a man."

"We killed it." There was something almost like a smile at the corner of his mouth.

"Besides, now they're thinking twice about hitting me."

The shift passed without incident, both teams locking down defensively as the clock wound down. The final horn sounded with us ahead 2-1. A one-goal victory felt more satisfying than it should have.

I snagged Pike on our way to the locker room, pulling him aside in the tunnel. The joy of victory was painted across his face, but I noticed slight stiffness in his movement.

"Ice that shoulder." I kept my voice low. "Right away. Don't wait for interviews."

"It's fine. Just a stinger."

"Sure it is. And I'm running for Miss Maine. Ice. It. Now."

He raised an eyebrow. "You'd look great in a tiara."

"I'd be fucking majestic. Go."

The locker room was already a riot of celebration when we entered—music pumping from TJ's speaker at eardrum-rupturing levels, guys shouting over each other about key plays, and the sweet release of tension that came with the season's first victory.

"Icehouse?" TJ called across the room. He directed his question to everyone and no one in particular.

A chorus of "Yeahs" rose. The Icehouse was our local watering hole—divey enough to feel authentic but clean enough that management didn't worry about health code violations. After home wins, it transformed into an unofficial extension of the arena, packed with fans and players alike.

I hadn't planned on going. My couch and a heating pad had featured prominently in

my post-game imagination, but then Pike looked over.

"You coming, Carver?"

"No" was suddenly the wrong answer. "What, miss the opportunity to watch TJ strike out with the bartender again? Wouldn't dream of it."

TJ clapped his hands together. "It's a Hockey Night miracle! Carver's joining the living!"

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Ninety minutes later, I threw open the front door of The Icehouse. Warmth, noise, and the mingled scents of beer and deep fryer oil hit me immediately. Hockey memorabilia covered every available wall space, from faded jerseys in frames to signed pucks in plastic cases. The Forge featured prominently, of course, but there were nods to the Bruins, the old Nordiques, and even a dusty Whalers pennant tucked in one corner.

Dex, the bartender, called out my arrival. "Holy shit, it's the ghost of Carver past. Someone check whether hell's frozen over."

"Your concern for my social calendar is touching. How are the alimony payments, Dex? The fourth wife leave you with anything besides that vintage haircut?"

"Third wife, you jackass. And she didn't take the bar, so I count it as a win." He slid a glass of bourbon my way without being asked. "First one's on the house. For your heroic defense of the golden boy."

I raised an eyebrow. "News travels fast."



"Small town, big hit. Plus, it's already on some hockey highlights account." Dex wiped the counter. "You went full Papa Bear out there."

I corrected him. "Mentor Bear. It's a designated role."

Across the room, my teammates had claimed their usual territory—a collection of scarred wooden tables pushed together near the back. Pike sat with TJ and Mercier, beer in hand, apparently deep in some animated discussion.

"Carver!" TJ's voice cut across the bar noise. "Stop being antisocial and bring your old bones over here!"

Several patrons turned to look. Subtle as a freight train, that one.

"I'm good right here. I'm watching you make a fool of yourself from a safe distance."

Pike added his voice. "At least join us for a toast!"

With an exaggerated sigh, I pushed off the bar stool, bourbon in hand, and crossed to their table.

"To Pike's first goal of the season," TJ declared, raising his beer. "May there be many more, preferably assisted by yours truly."

"To Pike," the group echoed, glasses clinking.

Pike had to add his bit. "And to Carver, for the advice that made it happen."

Attention shifted to me. "Jesus, don't make it weird. I only pointed out the obvious. You did the work."

Conversation began to flow around me. I contributed the occasional barb or observation, but I mostly watched the dynamics unfold. The rookies clustered together, still finding their place. Veterans held court in their established territories. Pike moved easily between groups. Mr. Sunshine was comfortable everywhere.

Pike planted himself on a stool beside me. "The boys are talking about karaoke. Mercier does a surprisingly good Bon Jovi when properly motivated."

"I'm not doing karaoke or wearing funny hats. Or clapping on beat. Or participating in any team-building activity that involves public humiliation."

"You're not even old, but you're already a grump."

"Grump beats golden retriever energy every time." It was a barbed comment, but my voice had little edge.

Pike shifted on his stool, and I saw a brief wince.

"How's the shoulder?"

"It's fine."

"Bullshit."

Pike adjusted his answer. "It's hockey-fine. Nothing broken or torn. Only the latest addition to the collection." He rolled the shoulder as if to demonstrate, but the movement was tentative, carefully controlled.

"Ice it tonight. Anti-inflammatories. Sleep on your other side."

"Yes, Coach."

I ignored the poke. "And for fuck's sake, don't tell me you're fine when you're not. Do you think I can't spot a player hiding pain? I've been doing it professionally for a decade."

He lowered his voice. "I didn't want to seem weak. Not after—"

"After your knee? Kid, there's a difference between playing through pain and being stupid. One of my jobs is figuring out which one you're doing at any given moment."

TJ approached. His shambling walk suggested he was a beer or two ahead of Pike. "Karaoke time! Both of you, no excuses. Pike, you promised to do 'Sweet Caroline' after your next goal."

"I absolutely did not."

"Memory's fuzzy, but I'm certain you did." TJ turned to me. "Carver, what's your go-to song? Wait, let me guess—something dark and brooding. Johnny Cash? Nine Inch Nails?"

"My go-to is leaving before you put my name on a list."

TJ clutched his chest dramatically. "You wound me. I'm only trying to build team morale."

"You're trying to embarrass rookies and get footage for blackmail."

"Those goals aren't mutually exclusive." TJ grinned, then caught sight of someone across the room. "Gotta run—Mercier's about to be convinced he can do the splits."

As TJ departed, Pike turned to me with an amused expression. "You really hate team bonding that much?"

"I don't hate it. I'm just selective about my participation."

"And this?" He gestured between us. "Is this participation?"

The question caught me off-guard. I stared at my half-empty glass, suddenly aware of how unusual this was—me, socializing, having an actual conversation with a teammate that wasn't about line changes or defensive coverage.

"This is..." I searched for the right words. "This is mentorship. Professional development."

"Right. Professional." He drained the last of his beer and stood, wincing again as the movement pulled at bruised muscles. "Better get back before they volunteer me for something worse than karaoke."

He laughed as he walked away—light, easy, perfect, like everything was fine, and I didn't feel something in my gut when I thought he was hurt. And damn it, I didn't know what that something was.

I finished my bourbon, left cash under the glass for Dex, and headed for the door. Mercier intercepted me halfway there.

"Leaving so soon? They're about to start karaoke."

"Which explains my sudden urgency. Some of us value our eardrums."

"Suit yourself." He studied me with that goalie's gaze—too perceptive for comfort. "You did good with Pike today."

"Only doing what Coach assigned." I shifted my weight, suddenly aware I was mimicking Pike's nervous stance from earlier. I stopped immediately.

"Don't give me that shit. I've seen you do what Coach assigns." He tilted his head.  
"This was different."

"Different, how?"

"For one, you're listening to him. For another—" Mercier paused, choosing his words carefully. "—you went after Novak like he'd insulted your mother, not your mentee."

"It was a late hit."

"It was a hockey hit. You've seen worse. Hell, you've delivered worse." A knowing smile played at the corner of his mouth. "Come on, Carver. We've been teammates for what, three seasons now? I can read you better than most."

Heat rose on the back of my neck. "There's nothing to read."

"If you say so." He shrugged, but I hadn't convinced him. "It's an observation. Goalies notice things. Patterns. Changes." He tapped his temple. "Comes with the position."

"You analyzing everyone, or am I special?"

"Everyone. Force of habit, but you've been different since Coach paired you with Pike. More... engaged."

I scoffed. "That your professional diagnosis?"

He clapped my shoulder. "It's okay to care, you know. Won't kill your reputation as team grump."

"I'll keep that in mind when planning my personal rebrand." I stepped around him,

needing to escape before he read something else in my expression. "Don't let TJ try that table-dancing stunt again. Workers' comp doesn't cover stupidity-induced injuries."

Mercier chuckled. "Drive safe, Carver."

"Always do."

I pushed through the door, but Mercier's observations followed me into the night. If he'd noticed something, who else had? And what exactly had he seen?

Outside, the cold Maine air washed away the warm haze of the bar. My truck started on the second try. I considered that a win.

As I drove home through Lewiston's quiet streets, Pike's question echoed. Is this participation?

I didn't have an answer. Not yet.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:18 am*

### Chapter four

#### Pike

The team exited the rink after practice, exhausted but satisfied, equipment bags slung over shoulders and voices bouncing off the concrete walls. TJ led the charge, proclaiming his domination of the final drill.

I hung back, taking longer than necessary to gather my equipment. The trainers hovered near the exit, clipboards in hand, as they performed cursory check-ins.

"Pike, need anything before you head out?"

"I'm good." The half-truth slipped from my tongue with ease. "Just going to work on some edge drills before I leave."

"Don't overdo it. We've got Providence again tomorrow."

"Twenty minutes, tops." That wasn't entirely true either. I'd decided to stay until my knee either improved or gave out completely.

The locker room door swung shut behind the last staff member, leaving me alone on the ice. With everyone gone, I finally allowed myself to acknowledge what I'd been hiding all practice: my knee had worsened overnight.

The pain lingered deeper than before—not the sharp, clean agony of a fresh injury, but something more ominous. It was a persistent throb that radiated outward every

time I turned.

I gritted my teeth and pushed onto the ice anyway.

I carefully set up a row of pucks along the blue line, working through edge transitions. Each turn sent tremors through my leg. I ignored them.

Five more minutes and the pain would recede. It always did, eventually, once the muscles warmed fully.

Except this time, it didn't.

After the tenth repetition, I paused, resting my weight on my left leg while the right throbbed in protest. Sweat beaded along my hairline despite the chill radiating off the ice.

I whispered to no one, "It's fine. I just need to work through it."

I gathered more pucks, setting them up for quick-release wrist shots. The mechanics of the drill required weight transfer that sent shockwaves through my damaged knee, but I pushed onward.

Every puck that hit the back of the net validated my decision to stay. Every miss fueled my determination to continue.

"Your follow-through looks like you're swinging a baseball bat, not a hockey stick."

The voice materialized from nowhere, startling me so completely that I nearly toppled mid-shot. My puck sailed wide, clattering harmlessly into the corner boards.

Carver stood at the entrance to the bench area, one shoulder propped against the



frame, arms crossed over his chest. He'd changed out of his practice gear into worn jeans and a navy henley that had seen better days. His hair was still damp from the showers, pushed back haphazardly from his forehead.

My heart hammered against my ribs. "Fuck, make some noise next time."

"I did. You were too busy grimacing through whatever that was supposed to be." He gestured toward my stance. "You call that a shot?"

I straightened, instinctively shifting weight away from my right leg. "What are you doing back here? Thought you'd be halfway to the Icehouse by now."

"Forgot my phone." He patted his pocket as evidence, though something in his expression suggested that was his little white lie. "The better question is why you're still here torturing that knee."

"Just getting some extra work in."

"Extra work." He repeated the words and pushed off from the doorframe. "That what we're calling self-destruction these days?"

I collected another puck. "It's fine. I'm just—"

"Favoring that knee like it's royalty." Carver stepped onto the ice in his boots. He moved with surprising confidence despite lacking skates. "You think I can't see it from across the rink?"

I opened my mouth to argue, but the words dissolved as he drew closer. I noticed something in his expression—genuine concern.

His voice was surprisingly low and gentle. "How bad is it?"

I'd prepared for mockery or frustration and armored myself against his typical barbs. His uncharacteristic naked concern left me momentarily defenseless.

"It's nothing." I inhaled sharply, hearing the lie echo in the arena.

Carver raised an eyebrow. "Try again."

I offered a reluctant admission. "It's just different today. Like, a little deeper."

"Different, how?"

I searched for words to describe the sensation. "Not sharp. It's more like pressure. Like something's caught beneath the kneecap."

"And your brilliant solution was to keep putting weight on it for another hour?"

"I need to strengthen—"

Carver cut me off. "You need not to be an idiot. You can't strengthen an injury by aggravating it."

We stared at each other, and I drummed the fingers of my right hand against my stick.

"C'mere." He gestured toward the bench. "Let me see what you've done to yourself."

"It's really not necessary." It was a weak protest. I glided toward the bench, and my knee pulsed with each push of my right blade.

"Sit." Carver's voice was soft but firm.

I eased myself down. Usually crowded with teammates, equipment, and nervous

energy, the bench was strangely intimate with only the two of us.

Carver knelt in front of me. It surprised me so much that I pulled back momentarily. After looking me in the eye, he reached toward my right leg.

"May I?"

The question was so considerate, so unlike Carver's reputation. I nodded.

He rolled up the leg of my practice pants, exposing the compression sleeve beneath. After he peeled down the neoprene, my knee appeared swollen, the skin faintly pink around the kneecap.

"You weren't kidding about working through it."

His hands moved with the same precision he used to tape his stick before games as he tested for swelling. I held my breath, hyperaware of each point of contact between us.

"Tender here?" He pressed lightly at the inside edge of the joint.

I winced. "Yeah."

"Here?"

"Not as much."

His brow furrowed as he continued his examination. I studied his face as he worked, seeing new details I'd never noticed. He had faint scar tissue just above his left eyebrow where it had been split open in a game, and his eyelashes were surprisingly long.

He glanced up. "When did it start feeling different?"

"This morning. I woke up, and it felt wrong."

"Wrong, how?" He rubbed small circles around my kneecap with his thumbs.

"Like pressure building. Not really pain, but..." I tried to find the right words. "Like something trying to push out from inside."

He nodded. "Fluid. The joint's retaining fluid. You should've iced this an hour ago." His voice continued to be low and gentle, not accusatory.

"I didn't want anyone to ask questions." It was a sudden moment of truth for me.

"Yeah, well, I am." He shook his head. "And you need to start giving better answers."

I swallowed. "Like what?"

"Like ones that don't end with you washing out of hockey at twenty-three. Some things matter more than looking invincible."

Carver rested his fingers at the edge of my kneecap, no longer probing. "Why are you hiding this?"

His face was so close to mine. There was no way I could hide the truth any longer. The words suddenly spilled out. "Because I can't afford to be the guy who got hurt and never returned. Because one good season doesn't guarantee anything. Because I need to prove I belong here."

He blinked and then glanced down at my knee again. "You won't belong anywhere if you destroy this joint."

The gentle connection lasted a few seconds longer, and then Carver cleared his throat and pulled his hand away. He stood upright. It was like cold air had suddenly rushed in between us.

"You need to ice it properly and give it actual rest. Can the masochistic bullshit you were doing out here."

The gentleness was gone as he crossed his arms over his chest. I rolled the compression sleeve back down. "I know how to treat an injury."

"That's why you were out here making it worse."

He strode off the ice, and I followed. He led me to the trainer's room and grabbed an ice pack and medical tape. He gave me instructions as he shoved them into my hands. "Twenty minutes on. Twenty minutes off. Elevate and take anti-inflammatories when it hurts. And stay off the damn thing until the pre-game skate tomorrow."

I nodded. "Thanks."

Carver shrugged. "Don't thank me. I'm only doing what the team's paying me for."

Something about the comment stung. I found my way to a bench in the locker room and began taping the ice pack to my knee. "Right. The mentorship thing."

He shoved his hands into his pockets as he watched. "Yep, just doing my job."

After a few awkward, silent moments, Carver backed toward the exit. "Make sure you head home soon and elevate that."

My voice sounded soft and weak. "Yeah. I will."

Then, he was gone, footsteps echoing down the concrete corridor until the heavy exit door clanged shut behind him. I remained seated for several minutes, replaying the interaction in my mind.

Coach's words from our first meeting echoed in my mind. "You need someone who won't blow sunshine up your ass. He needs a legacy that matters."

Was that all that was happening? Was it only a veteran player fulfilling his assignment and ensuring his mentee didn't destroy himself before the season got fully underway?

It didn't feel that simple.

And that realization disturbed me more than my knee pain.

I'd dated Amanda for a year in college and Kelsey for three years in high school. I'd never questioned the straightforward clarity of those attractions—comfortable, expected, uncomplicated. Even when they ended, there was no confusion.

This—whatever had just happened with Carver's hands on my knee and his eyes meeting mine—was unmapped territory. It wasn't admiration or respect or even friendship, at least not what I'd experienced from any teammate before.

I mumbled out loud. "This isn't happening." My racing pulse suggested otherwise.

The drive home stretched longer than usual, each stoplight offering another opportunity to replay Carver's touch in my mind. I caught myself running my fingers over the same spot on my knee where his had been as if checking for some tangible evidence of whatever had passed between us.

When I returned home, my apartment greeted me with familiar shadows and silence. I

dropped my equipment bag by the door, not bothering with my usual routine of unpacking and hanging gear to dry. Instead, I headed straight for the couch, propping my leg on a stack of pillows before replacing the mostly melted ice pack with a fresh one from my freezer.

I reached for the remote and flicked on the television, hoping for distraction. I stopped briefly at a hockey game—Bruins vs. Canadiens—but couldn't focus. Instead, I finally found a cooking competition show and silently entertained my cock-eyed dream of being a chef after hockey.

When the show ended, my thoughts circled back to Carver. What exactly had happened between us?

Professional concern was too simple of an explanation to accept. I'd seen trainers check injuries dozens of times—clinical, detached, efficient. What happened with Carver was different.

I whispered to myself. "It's only gratitude. Someone finally noticed."

That didn't entirely explain the gentle tone of his voice. It didn't account for how the shade of color in his eyes seared its way into my memory. I closed my eyes and tried to make sense of the confusion.

Before the encounter after practice, I'd understood my feelings about Carver in straightforward terms: respect for his experience, appreciation for his hockey intelligence, and occasional frustration with his abrasiveness. It was a simple, uncomplicated, professional relationship.

Now, it was different. It was like skating onto a patch of ice with invisible cracks beneath the surface. The ground I'd always trusted suddenly was dangerous and unpredictable.

My phone buzzed on the coffee table—a text from my mother, her nightly check-in disguised as casual conversation. I responded with reassurances about my health and well-being, carefully omitting any mention of knee pain or confusion about teammates.

Carver was right. The elevation and ice chased the pain away. I got up and shuffled to my kitchen, assembling a protein-heavy meal from pre-prepped containers in my refrigerator. While waiting for the microwave, I saw Carver's face in my mind: concerned, caring, and something else I hadn't put my finger on.

What did he see when he looked at me? A troubled rookie? A mentorship obligation? Something else entirely?

As midnight approached, I finally dragged myself to bed, arranging pillows to elevate my knee. On the edge of sleep, my mind conjured up one final image: Carver's brow furrowed in concentration while his fingers carefully moved across my injury.

It followed me into dreams with questions I couldn't answer and feelings I couldn't name.

Yet.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:18 am*

### Chapter five

#### Carver

The bus engine died with a wheeze as we pulled into the Holiday Inn Express parking lot. I'd spent the four-hour drive to Hartford with my headphones blasting Springsteen, pretending to sleep so no one would talk to me. My lower back ached from the bus seat's lackluster support—another reminder that recovery took longer these days.

Coach MacPherson stood at the front, voice cutting through the post-ride haze. "Twenty-six hours, gentlemen. One game, one purpose. Save the tourism for retirement."

I stretched, vertebrae popping in sequence. Three weeks into the mentorship program, I'd settled into a rhythm with Pike. On ice: professional, focused. Off ice: careful distance, minimal interaction. It was a system that worked.

Assistant Coach Landon appeared with a stack of key cards in paper sleeves. "Room assignments at the front."

I shouldered my bag and joined the shuffling line. When my turn came, he handed me a sleeve with "Room 312" scrawled on it. "You're rooming with Pike."

"What? I always room alone." It was one of the few perks I got as the longest-serving player on the team. The solo room came my way when Dane got kicked up to the show.

Landon replied in a business monotone. "Coach's orders. It's part of the mentorship integration."

"Integration? We're mentoring, not merging bank accounts."

Mercier brushed past, catching the tail end of the conversation. "Try not to murder the golden boy in his sleep. We need him functioning tomorrow."

"No promises." I pocketed the key card and headed for the hotel lobby.

Pike stood by the elevators, back straight as always. As I approached, he tracked my movement with careful attention.

I mashed the elevator call button. "Let me guess. You're a morning shower singer and sleep with seventeen pillows."

"Only sixteen." That sunshiny smile lit up his face. "Had to leave one at home."

My mouth twitched involuntarily. The kid could be funny when he wasn't trying to impress everyone.

He walked half a step behind me as we approached the room, right at my shoulder. I muttered under my breath. "This wasn't my idea."

"I figured. I can ask to switch if it's a problem."

"And tell Coach what? That you're scared I'll corrupt your innocent routines?" I waved the card key over the lock. "We're adults. We can handle one night."

"Dibs." Pike dropped his backpack on the bed nearest the door. I always preferred that one when I had to share—easier for middle-of-the-night bathroom trips—but it

wasn't a disagreement hill I was willing to die on.

"Fine." I strolled to the windows and stared at a gorgeous parking lot view.

Kicking off my shoes, I sprawled on my bed and watched him unpack. He didn't toss things around like a normal person. He actually unpacked his backpack.

Pike carefully placed a monogrammed Dopp kit on the corner of the dresser. He arranged his socks and underwear in a drawer like they were display items at a fancy department store.

"What is this? Are you planning on moving in?"

Pink crept up the back of his neck. "My mom was a flight attendant. She taught me how to pack and make things comfortable in a hotel."

I shook my head. "Mine taught me how to swear in three languages, so I guess we all have our skills." I rummaged through my chaotic bag, pulling out a faded Rage Against the Machine t-shirt and basketball shorts that had seen better days. "I'm grabbing a shower."

When I emerged from the bathroom twenty minutes later, I had one towel around my waist and another over my shoulders. Pike sat on his bed, phone in hand. His eyes widened, and he looked down at my chest for a moment before thinking better of it.

"Forgot my underwear." I snatched shorts from my pack and returned to the bathroom.

After I settled on my bed, Pike headed into the steamy bathroom for his shower. I flipped on the TV and tried to ignore the sound of running water. It brought to mind an image of a naked Pike.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I'd seen him in all states of partial dress and undress in the locker room. Why was the idea of him showering fifteen feet away from me making me... uncomfortable?

The bathroom door opened, releasing a cloud of steam scented with pine and something fresher—peppermint, maybe. Pike emerged in flannel sleep pants and a Forge t-shirt that clung slightly to his still-damp shoulders. His hair was darker when wet, curling slightly at the temples.

I'd seen a hundred guys in a hundred locker rooms half-naked, but something about Pike stepping out of steam—flushed, damp, soft at the edges—made my throat too much about.

He placed his toiletry bag precisely on the corner of the dresser, movements deliberate and measured.

When he settled onto his bed, he pulled his hands up behind his head. "So, Carver, any unique pre-game rituals I should know about?"

"Nothing weird. Left skate before right. Same underwear if we're on a streak."

"That's disgusting."

"That's hockey." I turned my head to stare at him. "You're telling me you don't have any superstitions? Mr. Sunshine has to have something."

"I count ceiling tiles. Always do it before I sleep in a new place."

"Seriously?"

"It started when I was a kid. Dad's job had us moving every few years. I had new ceilings above my bed all the time. Counting them helped somehow."

"How many in here?"

He glanced up. "Thirty-six visible from this angle. Probably forty-eight total."

"Huh." I turned back to the TV, uncomfortable with the warm sensation that filled my chest. "My old man's idea of settling in was finding the nearest bar. At least yours taught you math."

I yawned, the day's travel catching up with me. "Should probably turn in. Early skate tomorrow."

"Yeah." Pike reached for the lamp between our beds. "Need anything before I kill the lights?"

I was already turning away, pulling covers up to my shoulder. "Only silence and darkness, Sunshine. Some of us need our beauty sleep."

Morning arrived too soon. I woke to the gentle vibration of my phone alarm, catching it before the sound could fully engage. Pike was still asleep, curled slightly toward me, one arm tucked beneath his pillow.

I slipped out of bed and into the bathroom, where I splashed cold water on my face and stared at my reflection. Dark circles shadowed my eyes—evidence of too much awareness of Pike to get a good night's sleep.

By the time I emerged, he was awake, sitting on the edge of his bed.

My voice was still slightly rough from sleep. "Breakfast downstairs in twenty. Team

meeting at nine."

"Got it." He smiled faintly. "Sleep okay?"

"Like the dead," I lied. "You?"

"Not bad. Counted those tiles three times, though."

I dressed quickly and headed downstairs alone, leaving Pike to his morning routine. The hotel restaurant buzzed with other players and a handful of business travelers. I filled a plate with eggs and bacon, doctored the watery coffee with enough cream to make it palatable, and joined Mercier at a corner table.

"How's cohabitation with the golden boy?"

"Exciting as watching paint dry." I shoved a forkful of eggs into my mouth. "Kid folds his underwear."

"The horror." Mercier's eyes crinkled at the corners. "And yet, you survived."

"Barely."

The team meeting passed in a blur of strategy talk and video clips. Coach drilled us on Hartford's penalty-kill tendencies and their top line's habits. Pike sat near the front, focused entirely on the presentation, occasionally making notes in his small notebook.

After lunch, we returned to the hotel. It gave us a few hours of free time before a bus ride back to the arena. Pike sat cross-legged on his bed, methodically taping a stick. His fingers moved efficiently, wrapping the black tape in perfect, overlapping spirals. What caught me off-guard was the quiet humming that accompanied his work.

"You always hum like that?"

He looked up, startled. "Was I? Sorry."

"Didn't say stop. Only asked if it's a regular thing."

"Oh. Mom says I've done it since I was a kid. Usually don't notice I'm doing it."

"What's the song?"

"Nothing specific. I guess whatever's in my head." He resumed his taping, and the humming was quieter, more self-conscious.

I pulled my worn copy of *The Old Man and the Sea* from my bag—a superstition I'd never admitted to anyone. Before every away game, I read the same five pages. It wasn't for luck, exactly, but for perspective. For the reminder that persistence mattered more than perfection.

"Hemingway?" Pike's voice interrupted my ritual.

I glanced up, already feeling defensive. "What about it?"

"Nothing. Just wouldn't have pegged you for a classics guy."

"As opposed to what?"

"I don't know. True crime? Motorcycle magazines?" His sunshiny smile defused any ill feelings on my part. "What else do you read?"

It was a casual question, but it felt significant—like Pike was genuinely interested in the answer.

"Depends." I closed the book, my thumb holding the place. "Fantasy sometimes. History. Whatever doesn't feel like work."

"Any recommendations? I finished my last book on the bus ride."

I considered for a moment. "You read *The Art of Fielding* ?"

"The baseball novel? No, but I've heard of it."

"It's not really about baseball. It's about... I don't know, pressure. Expectations. What happens when your body betrays what your mind knows you can do." I stopped, suddenly wary of revealing too much through my reading choices.

"That's what I need right now." Pike's phone chimed, and he glanced down at the screen. Whatever he saw there transformed his expression—tension melting away, replaced by a spontaneous, unguarded laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"My sister." He turned the phone, showing me a photo of a toddler covered head-to-toe in what appeared to be spaghetti sauce. "My nephew's first attempt at self-feeding. She says now she understands why our mom always made us eat in the backyard."

At that moment, the sunlight from the window caught in his hair, turning it from blond to gold. At that moment, with his guard completely dropped, he was breathtaking—and the thought hit me with such force that I physically recoiled from it.

"You okay?"

I stood abruptly. "Fine. Leg cramp."



I headed for the bathroom and leaned against the door, breathing deeply. What the hell was happening to me? This was Pike—the kid I was mentoring, a teammate, nothing more.

At the arena, the familiar pre-game chaos enveloped us—equipment managers arranging gear, trainers taping ankles and wrists, and coaches huddled over last-minute adjustments. I settled into my corner stall, methodically gearing up. Left skate first, right skate second. Shin guards secured with extra tape—a habit from juniors when cheaper equipment always threatened to shift. My shoulder pads adjusted until they sat perfectly across my back.

When the buzzer sounded, calling us to the ice for warm-ups. I waited for Pike near the tunnel.

"Ready?"

"Always."

The first period unfolded as predicted. Hartford came out throwing their weight around, finishing checks with extra emphasis, crowding our crease. We weathered the initial surge and answered with speed, transitioning quickly through the neutral zone.

Eight minutes in, Pike slipped a perfect pass between two defenders, finding TJ streaking toward the goal. The red light flashed, and we converged in celebration.

"Fucking beautiful!" I shouted above the noise, giving Pike's helmet a congratulatory smack.

He grinned, cheeks flushed with exertion and pride. "Saw you tying up that defenseman. Gave TJ all the space he needed."

As the game progressed, an increasingly desperate Hartford team started to play dirty. The refs turned their heads and swallowed their whistles, ignoring illegal checks.

Near the end of the second period, a sequence unfolded in slow motion. Pike collected a clearing attempt at our blue line, head up, reading the developing play. Sullivan, Hartford's designated enforcer, approached from his blind side, lifting slightly as he drove his shoulder.

The hit connected with Pike's upper back and sent him sprawling. His body crumpled against the boards, stick flying from his hands. The sound—that sickening crack of body meeting immovable surface—echoed through the arena.

Something in me snapped.

I was across the ice in seconds, gloves already gone. Sullivan turned just as I reached him, a smirk dying on his lips as my first punch connected with his jaw. My world narrowed to a single focus—make him pay, make him hurt, make him understand the consequences.

"You don't fucking touch him!"

Sullivan recovered enough to land a solid hit to my ribs, but adrenaline dampened the pain. I drove forward, taking us both down to the ice, landing on top with enough leverage to connect again.

Officials converged, whistles blaring. Hands grabbed at my shoulders, trying to separate us. I shook them off, landing one final shot before being forcibly dragged away.

"Five minutes for fighting, number 37!"

The penalty box door clanged shut behind me. My knuckles throbbed, blood smearing the tape where Sullivan's teeth had cut through. I gulped air, the rational part of my brain slowly reasserting control.

Across the ice, Pike was back on his feet, waving off the trainer. Our eyes met briefly—his wide with surprise. I couldn't read his expression from this distance, couldn't tell if he was angry at my intervention or grateful for it.

As I sat in the penalty box, a realization settled over me. My action wasn't about protecting a teammate. It was about Pike specifically. Something about him had burrowed under my skin, creating a connection I hadn't asked for and didn't know how to process.

Coach's hand landed heavily on my shoulder when I rejoined the bench. "Smart? No. Necessary? Maybe." He squeezed once. "Just keep your head now."

We finished the game with a 3-2 win, grinding out a late goal despite Hartford's increasingly desperate attempts to tie it up. The locker room buzzed with victory energy afterward—music blasting, guys recounting key plays, and the sweet relief of earning two points on the road.

I sat quietly in my stall, gradually working through my post-game routine. My hand throbbed where the skin had split, and my ribs protested each deep breath—souvenirs from the Sullivan encounter.

Pike appeared at my side, voice low beneath the locker room chaos. "You should get that looked at." He nodded toward my hand.

"It's fine." I continued unwrapping my shin guards, ignoring the sting.

"It's not fine. You're bleeding on your gear."

Before I could protest further, Pike was gone, returning moments later with one of the trainers. With poor grace, I submitted to the examination, wincing as antiseptic hit the open wounds.

The trainer eyed the cut closely. "Might need a stitch or two. Come with me."

Twenty minutes and three stitches later, I returned to find the locker room half-empty. Pike sat in his stall, fully dressed, scrolling through his phone. He looked up when I entered.

"Everyone else headed to the bus. I told them I'd wait for you."

"Didn't need a babysitter."

"Never said you did." He shouldered his bag. "Ready?"

I nodded, suddenly too tired to stay irritated. We walked to the bus in companionable silence, the adrenaline of victory and violence gradually giving way to the bone-deep fatigue that followed every game.

The hotel room greeted us with stale air and rumpled beds that housekeeping had straightened but not fully remade. Pike placed his bag carefully by the closet while I dropped mine unceremoniously on the floor.

I dropped onto my bed, stretching carefully to avoid aggravating my ribs. The TV remote lay on the nightstand, but I made no move to reach for it. Instead, I stared at the ceiling, counting the tiles as Pike had the night before. Thirty-six visible from my angle. The thought triggered an unexpected wave of fondness.

My phone buzzed—a text from Mercier. Mercier: Victory drinks in TJ's room. You coming?

I typed back a one-handed reply: Carver: Pass. Body feels like it went through a wood chipper. Mercier: Smart call. Tell Pike invitation extends to him too.

I turned toward Pike, who was fiddling with his phone. "Team's drinking in TJ's room. You're invited."

Pike considered for a moment and then shook his head. "Think I'll pass. Long day."

"Smart call."

He settled onto his bed, back against the headboard. "How's the hand?"

I flexed my fingers experimentally, wincing. "Functional."

"Worth it?"

The question caught me off-guard. "What?"

"The fight. Worth the pain?"

I studied him, trying to decipher the intent behind his question. "Sullivan had it coming."

"That's not what I asked."

I shifted, uncomfortable with the potential direction of the conversation. "He was targeting one of our players."

"I handled it."

"By letting him knock you into next week?"

"By not letting him get to me." There was an edge in Pike's voice I didn't recognize. "I don't need someone swooping in to defend my honor, Carver. I've dealt with assholes like Sullivan my entire career."

"So I should've just let him run you?" Defensiveness rose hot and heavy in my chest. "That hit could've ended your season."

"That's not—" Pike took a measured breath. "I'm not ungrateful. Just saying I can handle myself."

"Never said you couldn't."

"Then why did you lose it like that? That wasn't a normal response to a teammate taking a hit."

I looked at him too long. I thought about the sound of his body hitting the boards and the hollow silence that followed.

The damn kid was onto something. What could I say? That the sight of him vulnerable had triggered something primal in me? That for a split second, I'd have gladly broken Sullivan in half if it meant erasing the sound of Pike's body hitting the boards?

I reached for the TV remote, desperate for distraction. "You analyze everything this much, or am I special?"

He ignored the question. "What are we watching?"

"Absolutely not we. You're welcome to find another viewing location."

"It's my room, too." He settled against his headboard and crossed his arms over his

chest. "Besides, I'm not leaving you alone to brood and reinjure yourself trying to open a beer with your teeth or something."

I snorted. "That was one time, and I was nineteen."

"Wait, you actually—"

"Focus, Pike." I flipped through channels, landing on a rerun of some mindless action movie—all explosions and impossibly attractive people outrunning them. "This work for you?"

"Sure."

We watched in silence for several minutes. I tried to focus on the plot—something about terrorists and a rogue agent—but my attention kept drifting to Pike. He sat cross-legged on his bed, occasionally shifting position, wincing slightly when he moved too quickly.

"Your back?"

He glanced over, surprised by the question. "Just a little stiff. Nothing serious."

"Ice would help."

"Probably." He made no move to get any.

I pulled myself off my bed, ignoring protesting ribs, and grabbed the ice bucket. "I'll be right back."

"You don't have to—"

"Shut up, Pike."

When I returned, we both applied washcloths wrapped around ice to our game injuries.

"Why'd you do it?" Pike asked quietly.

I knew what he was asking but decided to play dumb. "Get ice? Because you wouldn't."

"The fight." He turned, still holding the ice pack to his shoulder. "I've seen guys take worse hits without you jumping in."

"Maybe I'm changing."

"So it was just... teammate code."

"Something like that."

Pike studied me with those too-perceptive eyes. "You're lying."

"Excuse me?"

"You're lying, or at least not telling the whole truth."

"You've got a real talent for pushing, you know that?" Irritation flared, defensive and sharp.

"And you've got a talent for deflecting."

We stared at each other across the narrow space between the beds. "Fine," I



conceded. "I don't know why I reacted like that. It was... instinct."

"That's the most honest thing you've said all night."

He turned back to the TV, allowing the moment to pass without further probing.

What the hell is this feeling?

It wasn't only attraction—I'd felt that before and recognized its contours. This was something more profound, more consuming—an unexplained pull toward Pike.

The movie droned on, neither of us following the plot. Pike removed the ice pack after twenty minutes, rotating his shoulder experimentally.

"Better?" I asked.

"Yeah. Thanks."

He yawned. "I'm going to turn in."

"Go for it. I'll keep the volume low."

Twenty minutes later, I clicked off the TV, plunging the room into darkness, broken only by the digital clock's red glow. Carefully, I eased under my own covers.

The digital clock displayed 3:17 AM when I jerked awake, disoriented in the unfamiliar darkness. For a moment, I couldn't identify what had pulled me from sleep—the room was silent except for the steady hum of the heating system and the occasional distant sound of a door closing down the hallway.

Then I heard it again: a soft, distressed sound from Pike's bed.

I propped myself on one elbow, eyes adjusting to the darkness. He lay on his side, blankets twisted around his legs, one arm flung outward. He contorted his face, brows drawn together in a pained expression.

"No, please... don't..."

I sat up fully, uncertain of what to do. Every instinct urged intervention, but waking someone from a nightmare sometimes left them more disoriented than the dream itself.

I whispered his name. "Pike?"

He didn't respond.

"Stop," he mumbled, head turning restlessly on the pillow. "Can't... I can't..."

The raw distress in his voice broke something in me. I pushed back my covers and crossed the narrow space between our beds, careful movements in the darkness. Up close, I saw a sheen of sweat on his forehead and the rapid flutter of his eyelids.

I tried again. "Pike. Matsson. Wake up."

Nothing.

He suddenly thrashed and then tensed before his eyes flew open. For a moment, he stared at me without recognition, pupils dilated in the darkness.

"It's okay." I kept my voice low and steady. "You were having a nightmare."

He pushed himself up onto his elbows, looking almost embarrassed. "Sorry, did I wake you?"

"It's fine. Sounded rough. You okay?"

He ran a hand over his face. "Yeah. A dream."

"Some dream."

He sat up more fully, drawing his knees toward his chest like he needed to make himself smaller. "It's stupid."

"Try me."

"I keep dreaming about the injury. Except in the dream, I can't skate afterward. I can't even walk. Everyone's watching while I try, and... nothing works right."

I heard the bald fear in his admission.

"That's not stupid," I said. "That's normal."

"Is it? You ever have dreams like that?"

For a moment, I considered lying, but the truth came out instead. "All the time. I had one where I showed up to a game and couldn't remember how to put on my equipment. Just stood there while everyone watched."

"What did you do?"

"In the dream? Panicked. In real life? I reminded myself it's only brain garbage. Our minds are assholes sometimes."

A small, surprised laugh escaped him. "That's... oddly comforting."

"Happy to provide philosophical wisdom at three in the morning."

We were silent in the darkness for several moments.

"Try to get some sleep," I finally said, "early bus tomorrow."

He nodded, settling back against his pillow. "You, too."

I only slept in fits and starts for the rest of the night. Six seasons in professional hockey had taught me to compartmentalize, to keep my personal life walled off from the team's dynamics. Relationships—romantic or otherwise—introduced complications and created vulnerabilities. I'd seen careers derailed by less.

Most didn't have fairytale endings like Dane and Leo in the season before.

Pike was a complication of unprecedented magnitude. Not only was he a teammate, but he was younger, with an NHL future glittering on his horizon. He was my assigned mentee, for Christ's sake. The professional impropriety alone should have been enough to slam the door on whatever feelings welled up inside me.

Yet there I was, lying awake at four in the morning.

I'd never defined myself by who I was attracted to. In my limited relationship experience—most of it hurried and forgettable—gender had mattered less than connection. However, I'd gravitated primarily toward women simply because it was easier in the hockey world. The idea of seeing Pike *THAT* way didn't trigger an identity crisis.

What terrified me wasn't that Pike was a man. It was that he was Pike—sunshine personified, talent unbridled, future unlimited. And I was... what? A veteran on his last legs and a grinder with more penalty minutes than goals.

The gap between us yawned like an unbridgeable chasm.

Sleep finally claimed me as the first hints of dawn lightened the edges of the curtains.

My last conscious thought was of Pike, grinning after scoring a goal, radiant and reckless, turning his head like he'd always meant to share it with me.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:18 am*

### Chapter six

#### Pike

I pushed through the double doors of the arena forty minutes before scheduled practice. My knee throbbed in dull protest—not pain exactly, more like a conversation my body insisted on having despite my attempts to ignore it.

I'd learned to translate the dialect: stiffness meant caution, sharp twinges demanded rest, but this steady pulse was manageable. It was a reminder rather than a warning.

I expected to be alone. Instead, I found Carver sliding across the ice in practiced figures, his breath clouding around him. He wasn't performing drills so much as working through movements that looked almost meditative.

I paused at the bench. The usual tension was lacking in his face.

He spotted me and pulled up, spraying ice against the boards. "Early bird gets the fresh ice, or were you hoping to avoid my charming company?"

"Came to work on transitions." I stood and glided toward him. "Didn't expect anyone else to be here."

"Transitions." He raised an eyebrow. "Sure, let's see them."

I launched into the series of crossovers and direction changes I'd been drilling for three days. It felt good—clean and controlled, my knee cooperating through each

weight transfer.

Carver observed with arms crossed, his assessment more valuable than I cared to admit. "Your outside edge is still weak on the right side. You're compensating with your upper body."

"No, I'm not."

"Show me again."

I repeated the pattern, intensely aware of my form as I transitioned from inside to outside edge. He was right. I felt it—the subtle shift of my shoulders taking weight that my knee should have handled.

I muttered under my breath. "Damn it."

"It's not bad." He skated closer. "Still, in a game situation, that split-second adjustment gives away your next move."

I challenged him. "Show me your version."

He smirked but obliged, executing the transition sequence with economical grace. His movements weren't flashy, but he executed them with a brutal efficiency that I suddenly envied.

"You make it look effortless."

"Nothing about hockey is effortless when you hit thirty." He rotated his shoulder with a barely perceptible wince. "It's about making the pain worthwhile."

We fell into parallel drills, occasionally offering observations or adjustments. By the

time the rest of the team arrived, we had progressed to passing drills—quick exchanges that required minimal communication. Coach nodded approvingly as he skated onto the ice, clipboard in hand.

"Good to see the mentorship paying off. We'll all head to the video room after practice. We're breaking down Providence's forecheck."

The full practice unfolded with its usual controlled chaos—line drills, system work, and conditioning that burned my lungs in the cold air. Throughout, I tracked Carver, aware of his movements even when focusing on my own tasks.

In the video room afterward, we all slouched in padded chairs as Coach dimmed the lights. Footage of our last game with Providence appeared on the screen.

"Their forecheck relies on overloading the strong side." Coach froze a frame. "Pike, you drew the defender here, but the timing was off."

I nodded, recalling the sequence—a broken play where I'd hesitated a fraction too long.

Carver's raised voice cut through the room. "Actually, the timing wasn't the problem."

Coach turned. "Enlighten us, Carver."

"Pike held the puck exactly long enough." Carver leaned forward, gesturing toward the screen. "Look at their defenseman's positioning. If Pike moves earlier, that lane never opens. He manipulated the coverage by being patient."

Coach studied the footage, and then he nodded slowly. "Good eye. Pike, that's the kind of puck protection we need more consistently."



The session continued, but I replayed Carver's comment in my mind. His validation shouldn't have mattered more than Coach's approval or the stats that showed I was one of our leading scorers. Yet, somehow, it did.

As we filed out of the darkened room toward the locker area, my shoulder brushed Carver's—casual contact that happened dozens of times in hockey. This time was different. The brief pressure lingered like a handprint, warm through the fabric of my shirt.

"Nice read, Sunshine." His voice was low enough that only I could hear.

When we returned to the locker room, the team nutritionist had left behind the usual array of recovery options. I reached for a protein shake, then patted my pockets for the energy bar I could have sworn I'd tucked away earlier. Empty. My stomach protested with another audible rumble.

"Forget something?"

I turned to find Carver holding out a wrapped bar—one of the chocolate peanut butter ones that tasted less like cardboard than the others.

"How did you—"

"You burn too hot to skip fuel." He tossed it to me. "Watched you give yours to that new kid when he looked pathetic after sprints."

I hadn't realized anyone had noticed that small exchange with Monroe. He was our newest defenseman, drafted straight from college with a frame still too lean for professional hockey.

"Thanks. I would've grabbed another."

Carver shrugged, already turning away. "Can't have my winger passing out mid-drill. Makes me look bad."

The comment was classic Carver—any kindness immediately undercut with practicality or self-interest—yet something in his tone lacked the usual edge. I watched him walk away, noting how carefully he distributed weight with each step.

That evening, most of the team gathered at The Icehouse. Strings of mismatched Christmas lights gave the room a warm glow year-round, illuminating decades of hockey memorabilia that adorned the walls.

We occupied our usual long table in the back corner, a space unofficially reserved for the Forge. A classic rock playlist competed with two dozen conversations, creating a comfortably chaotic noise.

I sat between Carver and TJ at the center of the table—the top line holding court. TJ was in rare form, animated beyond his usual exuberance.

"So, Pike..." TJ's voice carried throughout the bar, drawing everyone's attention with the tone that signaled incoming mischief. "When's the wedding? I see those dreamy looks you keep tossing at Carver like he's a damn romance novel cover."

My stomach dropped as heat flooded my face. The table erupted in laughter, including Carver beside me. Despite feeling suddenly exposed, I forced myself to laugh along as if TJ had somehow read thoughts I'd barely acknowledged to myself.

"You mean the smolder?" Mercier joined in, leaning forward with exaggerated seriousness. "That slow-burn intensity. Gets me every time."

More laughter. I needed to respond before the silence stretched too long and transformed simple teasing into something uncomfortable. I marshaled my features

into an expression of amused indifference.

"Guess I have a type." I carefully calculated my response. "Angry and old."

The table exploded with renewed laughter and a chorus of "Ohhhhh!" Someone slapped the table. Monroe nearly choked on his drink. Even Carver shook his head, the corner of his mouth lifted in what might have been genuine amusement.

"Watch it, Sunshine," he growled. "Old enough to remember all your rookie mistakes."

The conversation mercifully shifted to other targets, but something fundamental had altered. I fixed my gaze on my plate, suddenly aware that I couldn't risk meeting Carver's eyes again—not when TJ's teasing hit so unexpectedly close to a truth I'd been circling.

Only when the evening drew to a close, and my teammates began shifting toward the exit, did I finally permit myself a sidelong glance at Carver. He was listening to something Mercier was saying, profile illuminated by the amber glow of the Christmas lights.

Something caught in my throat. It wasn't mere admiration or respect. Something else made my pulse quicken when our eyes finally met across the table as the evening wound down.

The drive home was too quiet after the noisy camaraderie at The Icehouse. The radio played softly—some late-night DJ's attempt at mellow vibes—but I couldn't focus on the music.

Instead, I replayed moments from the evening in my mind: Carver's rare laugh, the intensity in his eyes when our gazes briefly connected, and the casual brush of his

hand against mine when he reached for his drink. They were details I shouldn't have noticed but somehow couldn't forget.

By the time I pulled into my apartment complex's parking lot, my knuckles were white on the steering wheel. I sat there for a moment after killing the engine, watching my breath cloud in the rapidly cooling air.

Get it together. I pushed open the car door and stepped into the night.

In my apartment, I dropped my keys on the counter, where they skidded across the surface before coming to rest against yesterday's coffee mug. The clock on the microwave displayed 11:37—not particularly late by usual standards, but enough to make my body protest after the day's exertion.

I should have gone straight to bed. Instead, I collapsed onto my couch, one arm flung over my eyes as TJ's words echoed in my head. Those dreamy looks you keep tossing at Carver. Had I been that transparent? Or was that TJ's default setting—finding opportunities for teasing without actual observation behind it?

My laptop sat on the coffee table, still open from the searches I'd done while wolfing down breakfast. I reached for it without fully deciding why.

Our team's internal video system was accessible from home, with a library of game footage available for players who were obsessive enough to study during off-hours. I typed in my credentials and navigated to our most recent games.

"This is stupid," I muttered, even as I clicked through to find specific sequences.

I found our power play against Springfield last week. After scrolling to the timestamp I remembered, I hit play. The footage showed our set formation with Carver positioned near the right boards as the puck cycled through our rotation. A

Springfield defender lunged toward him, trying to break up our play.

What happened next was pure hockey instinct. Carver absorbed the contact, using his entire body to shield the puck while maintaining possession.

He didn't appear flashy or elegant; he was immovable, a force that refused to yield despite the pressure. Then, without looking, he slid a perfect backhand pass directly to my stick, where I waited in the slot.

I paused the video on the frame where the puck connected with my blade. My expression on the screen was focused, and I was already calculating the shot.

Next, I rewound the tape to watch Carver's movement again—the strength in his stance and precision in his pass.

I played it twice more, studying the sequence with an intensity that went beyond professional analysis. When I caught myself about to replay it a fourth time, I shut the laptop abruptly and pushed it away.

"What are you doing?" The room didn't respond. I only heard the gentle hum of the refrigerator and the occasional car passing on the street below.

I no longer looked at Carver how teammates were supposed to look at each other. Somehow, he'd begun to occupy more space in my thoughts than made sense.

I pushed myself off the couch, shedding clothes as I headed toward the bedroom. A hot shower did nothing to quiet my mind, which continued to cycle through moments in the day. Sleep claimed me eventually, but my subconscious refused to grant peace.

My dream began on familiar ice, but it was a transformed arena. The ceiling had vanished, exposing a night sky where pucks rather than stars traced silver trajectories.

I was alone with Carver, working through the transition drill from that morning, but the boards had disappeared—the ice extended endlessly in all directions.

As I positioned myself to repeat the drill, Carver stepped behind me, his hands firm on my waist. "Weight on the outside edge," he instructed, his voice low near my ear. "You're still favoring the knee."

The arena scoreboard flickered to life overhead, displaying numbers that kept changing—my stats, age, and time remaining in the season. I tried to focus on the drill instead.

I adjusted my stance as directed, fully aware of his proximity. His hands remained steady, guiding my movement as we glided together in perfect synch.

"Better," he murmured, and the approval sent a shiver through me.

Without making a conscious decision, I turned. Carver was closer than I expected—too close. Close enough to the rink. Behind him, the penalty box had transformed into something that resembled a bed, red-lit like a sin bin but unmistakably intimate.

I froze. Not from fear exactly, but from confusion, maybe awe. Something unspoken passed between us, as real as any puck drop and just as irreversible.

His hands still rested on my waist, and when I didn't step back, he didn't either. My heart pounded. It told me I stood there.

And then I did what I never imagined: I leaned in. Hesitantly. Barely moving. Barely enough for my lips to brush his.

It was awkward. Clumsy. There was too much pressure at first, and I pulled back immediately, mortified—only to find his eyes still on me. Steady. Unshaken. Maybe

even a little... amused? The scoreboard above us suddenly displayed 37 + 12, our jersey numbers, with a flashing red heart between them.

Then he kissed me—not tentative this time, but firm. Commanding, so unlike Amanda's softness or Kelsey's smooth cheek—this was unexplored terrain, all friction and heat.

And holy hell, it felt—wrong in all the right ways, like something I shouldn't want but couldn't resist.

I gasped into his mouth, shocked by the weight of his body as he pulled me closer. My hands fumbled—one gripped the fabric of his hoodie like a lifeline, the other hovered awkwardly near his chest, unsure where to land.

The stubble on his jaw was rough against my skin. I felt overwhelmed. Off-balance. And so damn alive.

When his hands slid beneath my jersey and settled against the bare skin of my back, I jolted awake with a gasp, my heart hammering against my ribs.

My entire body flushed, face burning, chest tight, and cock hard in the tangle of sheets.

I lay there staring into the dark, every breath sharp and fast, like I'd just sprinted the length of the rink.

I'd never kissed a man and never wanted to. Not consciously. Not until now.

I groaned into my pillow and whispered, "What the actual fuck."

I ran a hand through my sweat-dampened hair, fingers trembling slightly. My first instinct was to dismiss it—just a dream, meaningless imagery, nothing to analyze.

The same way I'd dismissed that flutter in my chest when Anderson, my college teammate, had hugged me too long after our championship win. The same way I'd ignored how I sometimes found myself watching certain players during NHL highlights with an attention that went beyond studying technique.

"This isn't me," I whispered, but the words sounded hollow even to my ears.

Part of me felt almost angry at Carver—for being Carver, for getting under my skin, for making me question things I'd carefully avoided examining. Another part felt something closer to relief, like finally identifying the source of phantom pain.

I couldn't un-know it now. I couldn't pretend what I felt was only admiration or professional respect. I couldn't file it away as simple friendship.

I reached for my phone, thumb hovering over my text history with Rachel, the girl I'd dated last summer—our relationship had been pleasant but ultimately lukewarm. I'd attributed the lack of spark to poor timing, hockey season looming, and a dozen other external factors. Now, I wondered if there had been another explanation all along.

The realization felt like stepping onto thin ice—that momentary vertigo when you hear the first creak underfoot but keep moving anyway.

It was attraction—visceral, complicated, and profoundly inconvenient. Attraction to a teammate, my mentor, someone who represented everything stable about my hockey identity while simultaneously threatening to upend it.

I sat up, suddenly restless, and moved to the window. Hockey had been my constant, my framework for understanding myself. Every decision I'd made since I was nine had been filtered through a single question: Will this help or hurt my career?

I'd built my identity around the game's expectations—be tough but not brutal,



confident but not arrogant, close to your teammates but not too close.

And where exactly did wanting to kiss your grumpy veteran mentor fit into that framework?

Part of me—the part raised on hockey culture and locker room codes—recoiled from the thought. But another part, a quieter voice gaining strength, wondered if this feeling was worth facing down that fear. After all, Dane and Leo found each other last season.

I pressed my forehead against the cold glass, thoughts pinballing between extremes. One moment, I planned to maintain strict professional distance; the next, I imagined what might happen if I simply acted on this feeling.

Pride and shame, excitement and dread, recognition and denial—all coursed through me simultaneously, none winning out.

"What am I doing?" I whispered to the empty room.

The silence offered no answers. Only the distant hum of my refrigerator and the sound of my uneven breathing—the soundtrack to a realization that couldn't be unlearned.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:18 am*

Chapter seven

Carver

Coach MacPherson's office smelled of coffee grounds and dry-erase markers. Not the worst combination at five forty-five in the morning, but not exactly what I'd hoped to inhale before sunrise. He'd called me in early—earlier than our usual pre-practice meetings.

I knocked twice on the scarred wooden door.

"Enter."

He hunched over his desk beside a mountain of paperwork threatening an avalanche. The cramped space barely accommodated his weathered desk and two chairs, let alone his broad shoulders and the ghosts of all the players he'd counseled over the years.

"Sit." Coach gestured without looking up.

I folded myself into the chair opposite him, my knees practically hitting the desk. "If this is about that hit on number twenty-two from Worcester—"

"It's not." He closed the folder he'd been examining and finally met my gaze. It was the look he reserved for conversations nobody wanted to have.

My stomach knotted.

He leaned forward, elbows on the desk. "Situation's like this, Carver." Three clipped words, then a pause—classic MacPherson.

"We're in the rebuilding phase. Still filling those holes, Whitaker and Campbell left. Need to develop leadership in the younger players." He delivered each sentence as a separate mission objective without unnecessary words—military efficiency in everything, including bad news.

Younger players—that didn't mean me.

"This is my final season, isn't it?" The words erupted without consideration. My filters weren't awake yet.

Coach didn't flinch. He looked at me and nodded in a way that answered louder than words could have.

My lungs seized. It was like someone had packed ice against my ribs from the inside.

I'd known—of course, I'd known. I was in my sixth season with the Forge. Thirty-one years old. My body took longer to recover after each game. Still, knowing and hearing occupied entirely different territories in my brain.

"The front office hasn't made final decisions yet." Coach exhaled. "But I thought you deserved to know which way the wind's blowing."

I nodded mechanically, fingers digging into my thighs under the desk.

"You're not being pushed out, but the league's getting younger, faster. The salary cap isn't changing. And your contract—"

"I get it." I cut him off, not trusting myself to hear the rest.

Coach leaned back, and the ancient chair protested beneath him. In the half-light of his office, the lines around his eyes deepened.

"Carver, you've been the spine of this team longer than most realize."

The unexpected warmth in his voice threatened to crack something inside me. I couldn't respond. Couldn't even nod. I only stood, my body moving before my brain caught up.

As I turned to leave, he spoke again. "Your mentorship with Pike. Critical mission now. More than ever."

I paused with my hand on the doorknob, not turning back. "Yeah."

When I pulled the door shut behind me, the click echoed down the empty corridor like a full stop at the end of the last sentence in a novel.

I didn't realize I'd left the arena until the cold slapped me awake. No jacket. No gear bag. Only me in a worn Forge hoodie and training pants, walking without direction through streets still bathed in the pre-dawn darkness.

My feet carried me toward the river—the Androscoggin. It was always present in Lewiston, like a pulse beneath the town's skin.

The footpath along the riverbank stretched empty before me—no joggers or dog walkers—only the occasional yellow lamp casting pools of light on frost-stiffened grass. Above, clouds hung low and heavy, threatening snow by afternoon.

The roar grew louder as I approached the falls. In spring, they thundered; in winter, they grumbled, parts of them frozen in mid-plunge. Today, they sounded like white noise, heavy static drowning out the thoughts battering against my skull.

I stopped at the guardrail overlooking the churning water below. The metal bit cold through my palms, but I barely registered it. Six seasons. Soon, I'd approach two thousand days spent in Lewiston—all wearing Forge black and silver.

What would happen when they took that away?

Memories of specific players slid through my mind like photographs scattered across a table. Marcus Deveraux, defenseman, invited me for beers when I first arrived. He was gone after his contract expired and disappeared back to Quebec.

Ray Alvarez had his shoulder give out in his fourth season. Last I heard, he was installing HVAC systems outside of Bangor. Cooper Jennings, our backup goalie for two seasons, now coached JV hockey at his old high school.

I was on the verge of joining them. No jersey. No cheers. Only a fade to grey.

My fingers tightened around the railing. The cold metal burned against my skin, but the pain was distant, separate from me.

A truck rumbled over the bridge, vibrating the boards beneath my feet. The world kept moving, indifferent to my private earthquake. That's what terrified me most—not the ending, but the ease with which everything would continue without me.

What happens when they stop needing me?

The falls offered no answers.

I stood there until my fingers numbed and the eastern sky lightened from black to slate. Then, I turned back toward the arena, toward the only certainty I had left—today, at least, they still expected me on the ice.

The locker room buzzed with pre-practice energy when I returned. I slipped through the chaos, heading straight for my stall.

"Well, well, well!" TJ's voice boomed across the room, three syllables stretched into nine. "Look what the hangover dragged in. Seriously though, bro—thought you might be taking a personal day. Old. Man."

The barb hung in the air, waiting for my return volley. Instead, I grunted and dropped onto the bench, reaching for my skates.

The absence of my response created a small pocket of silence that rippled outward. A few heads turned.

TJ tried again. "Earth to Carver. Is your comeback generator broken this morning?"

I focused on my laces, pulling them tight enough to hurt. "Save your breath for practice, Jameson."

From the corner of my eye, I caught Mercier watching me, his goalie's observant gaze missing nothing. He offered a slight nod—acknowledgment without intrusion—before returning to his meticulous pre-practice routine.

When I finally looked up, Pike stood frozen by the equipment rack, a roll of tape dangling forgotten from his fingers. His forehead creased, eyes narrowed with unmistakable concern.

Coach's whistle pierced the locker room chatter ten minutes later. "Ice in five, gentlemen."

The familiar rhythm of practice should have been comforting—the scrape of blades on fresh ice, the percussive snap of pucks against boards, and the controlled chaos of

drills. Instead, each movement was mechanical, emphasizing the disconnection between my body and brain.

Coach barked from the bench. "Carver! Set the screen on the power play!"

I planted myself, bracing as the defenseman attempted to move me. My body performed its assigned task while my mind drifted above the ice, observing rather than participating.

"Talk to your wings!"

I called out positions automatically, my voice echoing in the cavernous arena. The words were empty.

During a water break, TJ skated past, bumping my shoulder. "You planning on joining us today, or are you just renting ice space?"

I squirted water into my mouth, not bothering to answer.

Pike kept his distance during drills, but I couldn't escape his attention. It was like a spotlight trained on me. His concern was unmistakable.

By the end of practice, the team had adjusted to my silence, flowing around it like a stream's water moving around a stone. I wasn't the only one who had bad days. They'd forget by tomorrow, and I'd find the energy to be the Carver they expected—loud, biting, present.

The locker room emptied in stages—first the rookies with their eagerness to please, then the veterans with girlfriends and families waiting. I moved slowly and deliberately, stretching each task.

I'd nearly convinced myself I was alone when a shadow fell across my stall.

"You planning to spend the night here?" Pike's voice was quieter than usual.

I glanced up. He stood with one shoulder pressed against the row of lockers, already showered and changed into jeans and a faded blue henley. His damp hair curled at his temples.

"Organizing," I said, gesturing vaguely at my gear.

"Right. Did you sit through a lesson from Marie Kondo?"

Despite everything, his question amused me.

"Did you need something?"

Pike pushed off from the lockers and dropped onto the bench beside me, close enough for me to smell the clean scent of his soap. "You're not okay. That's obvious."

"Christ, Pike. Not now." The edge in my voice was reflexive, a cornered animal's warning.

Pike didn't flinch. He sat there, patient, watching.

The silence stretched between us until it snapped something in my chest.

"What do you want me to say? That I'm having a shitty day? That I'd like five minutes without someone needing something from me?"

"I don't need anything," Pike's voice was so gentle that it started sneaking past my defenses. "I only thought... maybe you shouldn't be alone with whatever this is."



The simple truth hollowed me out. I stared at my hands—callused, scarred, the knuckles still red from gripping the railing by the falls.

I had to be honest with the kid. "Coach confirmed it. This is my last year. After this, I'm done."

I didn't look at him; I couldn't bear to see pity or, worse, relief cross his features.

"You scared?"

The question was so direct that it crumbled all my remaining walls. I swallowed against the sudden tightness in my throat.

"Yeah, not of being done. Of being forgotten."

Pike angled his body toward mine. "You've still got so much to give. On the ice. Off the ice. This season. Whatever comes after."

I forced myself to look at him. Raw sincerity filled his eyes. No calculation there. No platitudes. Only sunshiny Pike, who somehow still believed the best about everything—even me.

"You're too damn earnest." The words lacked any sort of bite.

Pike's mouth curved into a half-smile. "Maybe, but I mean it."

He hitched his bag over his shoulder. "Some of us are grabbing food at Perk & Pine. If you want to join."

"I'll think about it." I knew I wouldn't go.

Pike nodded, understanding. He paused at the door, looking back. "See you tomorrow, Carv."

He'd created a nickname for me, and it hung in the air long after he disappeared down the hallway.

Silence settled over the locker room after Pike left. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting harsh shadows across empty stalls and abandoned equipment. The smell of sweat and rubber and athletic tape permeated everything. It was the most familiar scent of my entire adult life.

I remained seated, suddenly unable to summon the energy to move. I was in the sixth season in this exact spot. The worn wooden bench beneath me had absorbed fragments of every version of Holt Carver that had existed during those years.

And soon, none of them would matter.

I spotted the small table by Coach's office where the mentorship materials lived—binders, clipboards, and the other assorted detritus of his latest team-building experiment. Without quite deciding to, I crossed the room toward it.

Pike's clipboard sat on top of the stack, his name printed in Coach's blocky capitals across the label. I picked it up, weighing it in my hands before flipping it open.

The first pages contained the standard stuff—practice logs, skill assessments, and development goals. Coach's handwriting appeared occasionally with brief notations beside specific drills or performance metrics.

As I turned the pages, I found notes in a different hand—Pike's looser, more rounded script.

Footwork drill—C. demonstrated pivot that creates extra half-second. Huge difference on breakaways.

Work on protecting puck along boards. Watch Carver's shoulder position.

I continued reading. Each entry methodically documented something I'd shown him. The final page contained a single line, written only yesterday:

Mentor: Carver. Still learning from him every day.

Something hot and uncomfortable pressed behind my eyes. My vision blurred momentarily, the words swimming on the page. I blinked hard, the burn of unshed tears unfamiliar and unwelcome.

"Damn, kid," I muttered out loud.

I closed the clipboard and replaced it precisely where I'd found it, my fingers lingering on the worn plastic cover momentarily before pulling away.

Back at my stall, I gathered my things with mechanical efficiency. As I shouldered my bag, I stared at the row of framed team photos lining the corridor—years of Forge players, some faces recurring, and others appearing only once before disappearing into the oblivion of forgotten careers.

I'd be just another face in those photographs soon. Another name slipping from memory as new players claimed the ice. But maybe...

Pike's words echoed back to me. You've still got so much to give.

If this was the end—and it was—maybe it didn't have to mean disappearing. Maybe what I left behind could be more than statistics and fading recollections of broken

Forge penalty minutes records.

Maybe it could be Pike, carrying something of me forward toward a career peak I could never reach.

I hit the lights as I left, plunging the locker room into darkness. Tomorrow, I'd find my voice again. Tomorrow, I'd be the mentor the kid deserved for whatever time I had left.

After all, someone had to ensure that golden boy didn't burn himself out before getting his shot at something bigger than Lewiston.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:18 am*

### Chapter eight

#### Pike

The aluminum bench beneath me had long since leached the warmth from my thighs, but I didn't have the energy to move. Around me, the visitor's locker room in Springfield breathed defeat—a low hum of muffled sighs, equipment packed with too much force, and the occasional curse whispered into towels.

Forty-seven minutes since the final buzzer. Two goals to our one. It was not a blowout or a major disaster, but somehow worse for how winnable it had been.

I unlaced my skates methodically. My mind replayed the third-period power play where I'd fumbled the pass from TJ. It should have been routine, something I'd converted in practice a thousand times before. Instead, the puck skittered off my blade like a living thing trying to escape.

"You still with us, Pike?" Mercier's voice cut through my spiral.

I glanced up, realizing I'd been staring at my half-untied skate for an uncomfortably long time. "Yeah. Just... processing."

"Process faster. Bus leaves in fifteen."

The outcome of the game had disrupted Mercier's usual calm demeanor. The goal that had slipped past him in the final four minutes was perfectly placed—a shot nobody could reasonably blame him for—but goalies processed losses differently. They

quantified them and wore them like a second skin.

Across the room, Carver hadn't spoken a word since we'd left the ice. No outbursts or cutting remarks about defensive lapses. He didn't even share his usual sardonic observations about the referee's questionable eyesight.

He was silent as he packed his gear.

TJ waited by the locker room door, bag slung over his shoulder. "You don't want to miss the bus. Everyone's sulking like we lost the cup in game seven instead of a regular season match in fucking November."

I nodded, too drained to muster a more substantial response. TJ hesitated, then shook his head and disappeared down the corridor.

On the bus, I stared out the window as Springfield's streets slid past—convenience stores, closed restaurants, and a park shrouded in late-night darkness. TJ made valiant attempts to resurrect the team's spirit from the back of the bus.

"Anybody want to hear about the time I accidentally messaged Coach's daughter instead of this girl I was seeing?"

A few half-hearted laughs bubbled up. Someone told him to shut up. The conversation sputtered, caught briefly, and then died again.

I watched my breath create expanding circles of fog on the window that shrank and vanished with each exhale. Carver's voice was missing. The seat beside me, where he usually sprawled, knee jutting into the aisle, remained conspicuously empty.

I turned, scanning the bus—once, then again more carefully.

"He's not here," Monroe said from across the aisle, noticing my search. "Carver didn't get on. Saw him talking to Coach as we were loading."

Something about that information raised goosebumps on my forearms. Carver always rode with the team, regardless of his mood. Even after his worst game last season—a match where he'd collected three separate penalties and broken his stick against the boards in frustration—he'd slouched in the back, radiating annoyance but still present.

Back at our home arena, I showered again—a habit my mother called obsessive and I called necessary. Most of the team scattered quickly, eager to put distance between themselves and the loss. I took longer, moving slowly and dwelling on Carver's absence.

What had kept him behind? Why hadn't he rejoined us?

Without thinking about it, I walked back toward the arena proper instead of the exit. The building was different without the press of bodies and the roar of fans—larger somehow, and impossibly old. My footsteps echoed against concrete floors worn smooth by decades of skateguards.

I had no plan, only some inexplicable force that pulled me forward.

The home bench gate stood propped half-open. Through it, I saw a section of the ice, glossy under the solitary spotlight that always remained on overnight.

And there, in the first row of the stands directly across from the penalty box, sat Carver. Alone, unmoving, his silhouette was familiar even in deep shadows. He hunched forward with elbows on his knees, still wearing his team-issued hoodie with the hood pulled up and his gear bag abandoned at his feet.

I hesitated at the mouth of the tunnel, suddenly uncertain. I wasn't sure what to do

next.

Carver didn't move, though he must have heard me approach. His attention remained fixed on the empty ice as if deciphering messages on its scarred surface.

I spoke softly. "Hey," and my voice echoed in the emptiness.

Carver didn't flinch. I wondered whether he'd heard me at all.

His voice was gravelly when he responded minutes later. "You lost too, you know. Don't expect a pep talk."

I climbed the three steps from the rink and settled near him, leaving exactly one seat between us. Not too close and not too far.

Above us, the rafters disappeared into the darkness where championship banners hung like sleeping bats, years of history suspended over our heads. Below, the ice gleamed under the solitary spotlight, a perfect circle of white surrounded by deepening shadow—like us, I thought suddenly, illuminated at this moment while everything else receded.

Pulling words out of thin air, I spoke about memories. "I used to do this as a kid. Sit in empty rinks. Sometimes for hours."

"Because you're weird?"

"Probably." I smiled. "My dad coached youth teams. We'd get to the rink at five in the morning, and I'd sit. I listened to the building waking up—the compressors humming and the first scrape of the Zamboni."

"Poetic."



Another stretch of silence filled the space between us.

I finally spoke up. "You weren't on the bus."

"Observant, too. Talented and perceptive—what can't Matsson Pike do?"

I didn't rise to the bait. "Did Coach keep you behind?"

"No. Just didn't feel like being trapped in a metal tube with twenty guys trying to convince themselves they don't care about losing."

"But you care."

Carver's shoulders tensed. "Everyone cares. Some hide it better."

"Is that what you're doing? Hiding?"

He turned, and the hood fell back slightly, enough that I could see his eyes catch the distant glow from the ice. "That what you think this is?"

"I think..." I paused, choosing my words carefully. "I think there's more eating at you than tonight's game."

"Got your psychology degree while I wasn't looking?" His words were suddenly harder, more defensive.

"No. But I've been watching you. All season."

"Pike, you should go."

"Probably."

Neither of us moved.

He spoke so softly I could barely understand the words. "It wasn't supposed to end like this."

"The game?"

"My career." He continued to whisper. "Six seasons grinding it out in this town. Never made it further. Now it's almost over, and what the hell do I have to show for it?"

The raw honesty stunned me. I'd suspected his early-morning meeting with Coach had been about retirement, but hearing the confirmation—and the wounded pride beneath it—raised a lump in the back of my throat.

"You have plenty to show. You've been the backbone of this team longer than—"

"Spare me the greeting card version." He cut me off, but he didn't display any anger. "Save it for the retirement video they'll play on the scoreboard during my last home game. Three minutes of grainy highlights over sad music, and then everyone moves on."

I turned toward him, our knees almost touching. "That's not fair."

"Life's not fair, Pike. I thought hockey would've taught you that already."

"It's taught me plenty." Something in his dismissive language ignited a rare spark of frustration. "It taught me that everyone thinks they know who you are before you step on the ice. It taught me that one good season means nothing if you can't repeat it. It taught me—" I stopped, realizing my voice had risen more than I intended.

Carver looked at me, narrowing his eyes. "Taught you what?"

I exhaled slowly, suddenly feeling exposed. "It taught me that nobody sees what's inside. They only see what you show them."

Carver leaned back, focusing on some distant point beyond the ice.

I broke the silence. "The first time I lost a game that mattered, I was nine. It was regional championships in Minnesota. My line was up when the other team scored in overtime."

"Let me guess—you cried in the locker room."

"Right in front of everyone." I smiled faintly at the memory. "Couldn't stop. My dad was coaching, and all these other kids watched me fall apart. I kept thinking I'd let everyone down."

Carver glanced sideways. "And?"

"And my dad pulled me aside. He didn't yell, and he didn't tell me to toughen up. His only comment was, 'You've got to grow into the pain, Matsson.' Like it was a sweater that was too big."

I paused, remembering the weight of his hand on my shoulder. "Took me years to understand what he meant."

"Which was?"

"That the loss was supposed to hurt. I needed to let it hurt instead of trying to outrun it." I traced an invisible pattern on the armrest between us. "But I think I misunderstood because I spent the next decade trying to be perfect so I'd never feel

that way again."

Carver nodded slowly. The arena creaked around us like bones settling after a long day.

"My first coach in juniors—a guy named Winslow—had a system." Carver's voice sounded far away, like he was excavating a long-buried memory. "Every week, he'd pick two players who'd exceeded expectations. They'd get the good stalls, extra ice time, and his personal attention."

He leaned forward, shadows deepening the lines around his mouth. "Week after week, I pushed myself into the ground. Hardest hits, extra drills, first on, last off. Nothing. Not once in two seasons."

"He never picked you?"

"Came close once. Scored a hat trick against our biggest rivals. Thought for sure..." He shook his head. "Found out later, he told the assistant coach I already had enough natural confidence and needed to learn humility."

"That's messed up."

"That's hockey." Carver laughed a mirthless laugh. "I was fifteen when I realized no one was coming to fight for me. If I wanted recognition, I'd have to force them to see me—be louder, hit harder, and make myself impossible to ignore."

"And now?"

"Now I've spent so long being that guy, I don't know how to be anyone else." He rubbed a hand across his jaw. "You know the worst part? I don't think anyone's ever really seen me. Not without the gear, the mouth, and the role I play."

I studied his profile—the sharp angle of his jaw and the furrowed concentration between his brows. He was allowing me a peek beyond the facade he presented to the team.

"I see you, Carver, even when you're doing your best to stay hidden."

"Do you?"

"I see how you stay late to work with Monroe on his wrist shots when you think no one's watching. I see how you memorize everyone's coffee orders for early practices and how you carry the weight of losses for the whole team, even when everyone else has moved on."

His expression changed, defensiveness giving way to something that looked almost like relief. As if he'd been carrying something heavy for miles and finally had permission to set it down.

"You've been paying attention."

"More than I probably should have."

We were both silent again for almost five minutes.

"Why are you here, Pike? Really?"

I gave him an honest answer. "I don't know. Somehow, I knew you would be. And I couldn't leave you alone with it."

"With what?"

"Whatever's been weighing on you since that meeting with Coach. I guess it's

everything that goes with retirement."

He nodded slowly. "It feels like drowning. The thing that's defined me is ending, and there's nothing I can do to stop it."

"It's not ending tonight."

"No, but soon enough."

"Then what happens next?"

Carver exhaled. "Coach mentioned coaching, staying with the organization, working with rookies, and developing new talent. Not sure I have the temperament for all of that."

"I think you'd be amazing." The certainty in my voice surprised me. "You see things others miss and know how to push without breaking people."

"That what I've done with you? Pushed without breaking?"

I gave him a simple answer. "You've made me better, on the ice and off it, too, maybe."

Carver studied me. The light from the ice reflected off his eyes, turning them from their usual dark brown to something more complex—amber flecks in burnt umber.

"You shine too bright to waste, Pike."

He wasn't speaking as my mentor or teammate but as someone watching me with the same careful attention I'd given him. My breath caught in my throat. The sensation wasn't like missing a pass or taking a hit—it was closer to the suspended moment

before a puck drop.

"I'm not—" I started, unsure how to continue.

He interrupted me. "You are. You've got this light that doesn't dim, even when it should. Even after losses. Even with that knee. It's fucking annoying sometimes."

There was the Carver I knew, wrapping sincerity in a protective layer of gruffness.

"Thanks," I said. "I think."

"Not a compliment. An observation."

I became acutely aware of how close we'd drifted—our shoulders nearly touching, knees angled toward each other. Something shifted in his expression—a subtle change I might have missed if I hadn't watched so intently. His gaze dropped to my mouth for a fraction of a second before returning to my eyes.

My heart hammered against my ribs. The dream from a few nights ago resurfaced with vivid clarity—his mouth on mine, the texture of his stubble, and the weight of his body. This wasn't a dream. It was Carver, real and solid before me, watching me with an expression I couldn't fully decipher.

I leaned forward—barely—testing the boundary of this new, uncharted space between us. I wasn't bold enough to rush into anything, but intentional enough that he would notice if he were paying attention.

He was paying attention.

Time seemed to stretch and slow, each heartbeat an eternity. I found myself staring at his mouth—the pronounced curve of his upper lip and how it parted slightly as if preparing to speak or—

A tremendous clatter echoed from the service corridor—metal against concrete, followed by muffled cursing. We jerked apart instinctively, our moment shattering like thin ice under unexpected weight.

"What the—" Carver stood.

A maintenance worker appeared at the tunnel entrance, wrestling with an overturned cart of cleaning supplies. She glanced up, startled to find the arena occupied.

"Sorry 'bout that. Didn't know anyone was still here."

I answered reflexively. "It's fine. We were just leaving."

Carver shouldered his gear bag with mechanical efficiency. "We should go."

We descended the steps in unison. Neither of us spoke. What was there to say?

As we approached the separate hallways that would lead to our respective parking areas, Carver hesitated.

"Pike—" he started, then stopped, the thought hanging incomplete.

I waited.

"Thanks," he finished finally. "For finding me."

It wasn't what he'd started to say—it wasn't even close. The substitution hung between us, a lesser thing replacing what neither of us was ready to name. I nodded anyway, accepting it for what it was: a beginning.

"Anytime." It might have sounded flippant, but I didn't intend it that way.



He adjusted the strap of his bag. "See you tomorrow. Early practice."

"Yeah. Tomorrow."

He turned then, disappearing down the east corridor without looking back. I stood frozen for several seconds before heading in the opposite direction toward the player lot where my car waited.

The night air hit me when I pushed through the exit door—crisp, clarifying, and painfully real after the charged atmosphere inside. My breath clouded in front of me.

I hadn't meant to lean in. I hadn't meant to want it, but I did. More than I knew. More than I was ready for.

And the worst part? I didn't regret it. Not one bit.

Tomorrow we'd be teammates again, mentor and mentee, maintaining the careful distance of professional obligation. But tonight, for seventeen seconds in an empty arena, we'd almost been something else entirely.

And I couldn't un-know that truth now if I tried.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:18 am*

### Chapter nine

#### Carver

Carver: Just tape. Promise.

I ran my hand over my face, feeling the stubble I hadn't bothered to shave in the last two days. What the hell was I doing?

Inviting Pike over to "watch tape" was the thinnest excuse I'd ever manufactured, and I'd once tried to convince a ref that my stick had broken itself out of frustration with his call. The weather forecasters promised a blizzard. It canceled our evening game.

The knock on my door announced a visitor as I pulled a second beer from the fridge. I wiped my suddenly damp palms against my jeans and forced myself to count to five before moving toward the door.

I peered out the peephole and was blasted with a ray of sunshine. When I opened the door, Pike stood there with snow caught in his eyelashes, cheeks flushed crimson from the cold, and a grocery bag clutched to his chest.

"Blizzard party guest of honor reporting in." A playful smile spread across his face. He's killing me . The careful distance we'd maintained since that night at the arena—four days, seventeen hours—was suddenly dangerously fragile.

"Almost thought you'd changed your mind." I moved to the side, farther than necessary, to avoid an accidental brush of our shoulders.

"Nah, it just took forever at the store. People are buying bread like the apocalypse is coming." He shrugged out of his coat, revealing a faded University of Minnesota hoodie. "Didn't know what snacks you like, so I bought options."

"As long as there're no kale chips in there, we're good."

"That was my first choice. Healthy fuel for healthy bodies." His expression remained so earnest I nearly believed him.

"You're a terrible liar, Sunshine."

He laughed. "Fine, it's all garbage. Salt, sugar, and preservatives." He pulled out a bag of salt and vinegar potato chips—my favorite, though I couldn't remember mentioning that. "So, where's this Providence tape you were so eager to study?"

"Right." I gestured vaguely toward the television. "I've got it queued up."

That was a lie. I hadn't touched my laptop since sending the text, and I had no intention of subjecting either of us to game footage for the entire evening. It was a pretense designed to give us both something to hide behind.

Pike settled onto the couch, his long frame making my secondhand furniture look even shabbier than it was. I sat on the opposite end, far enough away to avoid accidental contact.

I found the Providence game, and it soon filled the screen as I mirrored my laptop to the television. The players moved with those mechanical, practiced motions they repeated thousands of times a season.

"That forecheck is brutal." Pike pointed at the screen. "It makes me feel better about how they bottled us up in the third period."

"Mmm." I was hardly listening. The floor lamp in the corner cast shadows across Pike's profile, highlighting the sharp edge of his cheekbone and the slight furrow that appeared between his brows when he concentrated.

"You're not watching."

I blinked. "What?"

"The tape. You're not watching it." He glanced sideways at me.

"I was thinking about the penalty kill." It was another lie, only twenty minutes into his visit.

"Right." He was quiet for another moment and then asked a question. "Is this weird? Me being here?"

"No. Why would it be weird?" I reached for my beer without looking at him.

"Because of what almost happened. At the arena."

My grip tightened around the bottle. He was going there . "Nothing happened."

"But it almost did."

I fixed my gaze on the television, where number 27 from Providence lined up a slap shot from the blue line. "We don't need to talk about it. It was a moment. We were both... I don't know. Neither of us was thinking clearly."

Pike's shoulders tensed. "Right. Not thinking clearly. That's one explanation."

Another stretch of silence followed, punctuated only by the television and the

increasing howl of wind outside.

I was grateful for the opportunity to talk about the weather. "Storm's picking up."

"Yeah. They're saying it might be the biggest since—"

Suddenly, the room plunged into darkness, cutting Pike off mid-sentence. The television died, along with every lamp and the reassuring hum of my ancient refrigerator. Only the ghostly blue light of my laptop running on batteries remained.

I growled. "Perfect timing."

"You have candles? Flashlights?" Pike spoke from the shadows cast by the ambient glow from my laptop.

"Yeah. Hold on." I stepped carefully across my apartment toward the kitchen junk drawer, where I kept emergency supplies. My fingers closed around a heavy-duty flashlight, and I clicked it on.

The harsh white light exposed Pike's face. His eyes were wide, and his hair slightly mussed from where he'd run his hand through it.

He squinted against the brightness. "You look like you're about to interrogate me."

"Sorry." I lowered the beam. "There're some candles in the bathroom cabinet. Give me a minute."

"I'll help." He followed me down the short hallway.

The bathroom was almost claustrophobic, with two hockey players crammed into it. Pike's shoulder pressed against mine as I rummaged through the cabinet, locating

three thick emergency candles and a half-empty pack of matches.

He accepted one from my hand. "Didn't take you for a candle guy."

"I'm not. Power goes out in this building at least once every winter." I struck a match, the sudden flare creating a warm, golden glow. We were too close. My hand cupped around the flame, and his face was only inches from mine.

I cleared my throat. "Let's get back to the living room."

The apartment cooled rapidly without heat from the furnace. "Are you cold? I'll grab some blankets."

I grabbed a pile of worn family throws and joined Pike on the couch. We settled under a shared quilt stitched by my grandmother.

Pike pulled the fabric up to his chin. "This is cozy."

"Better than watching Providence's penalty kill?"

"Infinitely. Though I'm guessing the tape was always an excuse."

I considered pulling back and standing. He'd cornered me. "What's that supposed to mean? This is honestly better."

The warm, amber glow of the candle grew stronger. Outside, snow pressed against the windows, and the wind moaned. Without electricity, the constant background hum of modern life had vanished, leaving only our breathing.

"How about something to eat?"

Pike turned his head to face me. "Okay, if that will make it easier to talk."

I didn't say anything as I crawled out from under the quilt to head to the kitchen. There, I retrieved a bag of chips from Pike's groceries and settled back onto the couch.

We sat in silence, passing the bag back and forth. The silence didn't last long. "Can I ask you something?"

I swallowed, knowing whatever followed wouldn't be about hockey or the storm. "Yeah. Go ahead."

Pike flexed his fingers as if testing them after a hard practice. "I don't know what I'm doing." His voice caught slightly. "With you. With me. I've never felt like this around anyone, let alone a guy."

It was a brave confession. My pulse accelerated, but I stayed silent, afraid any response would shatter whatever courage had prompted his words.

"I used to think I was straight. Or at least..." He exhaled slowly. "I never questioned it, but now I'm sitting here, sharing a quilt, and I don't know what I want except..." His eyes locked on mine. "I keep looking at you like..."

My throat tightened. I didn't know whether to be excited or panic. I fumbled for something familiar to say—a deflection, joke, or anything to diffuse the intensity of the moment.

"Like I'm some kind of science experiment?" My attempt at humor fell flat.

Pike didn't smile. "Like I want to kiss you." His voice was soft, barely a whisper. "And I'm scared of what that means."

I stared at him. Not because I didn't want it—damn, I did—but because that sentence was a sparking wire, and my brain nearly short-circuited trying to process it.

I said the only thing I could. "Thendoit, orIwill."

Hehesitated."Shit.Okay."

Andthenhekissedme.

Except it was less of a kiss and more of an accidental nose bump with an awkward brush of lips. Pike's landed somewhere half on and half off my mouth. It would've been a disaster if it weren't so us.

Webothpulledbackslightly,blinking.

I grinned. "Ithinkthatwasmyeyebrow."

"No,prettysureitwasmycheekbone."He started to laugh.

Mynervesmelted into ridiculously giddy laughter. "Wannatryagain?"

"Fuck,yes.Slower.Like... 80%lessnose."

The next time, we got it right. Our mouths met in a soft, shy, and electric kiss. I didn't hear any orchestral swell of music or see fireworks streaking across the sky. It was only two guys mashing lips mid-blizzard on a worn couch under a hand-stitched quilt.

Pike'sslipswerewarm.Alittledry.He tasted like salt and vinegar, and something I couldn't quite identify, but I would probably crave forever.

When I angled my head and deepened the kiss slightly, his breath caught. It was a



tiny sound that nearly undid me.

When we finally broke apart again, we were both breathing hard. I couldn't look away from him. With lips slightly parted, he appeared stunned.

Neither of us knew what to say. I looked down at my hands, suddenly fascinated by the scar across my right knuckle— a souvenir from a fight in juniors that I'd never properly let heal. Across from me, Pike's lip trembled slightly.

Finally, he whispered, "That didn't feel wrong."

Four more honest and straightforward words. They landed with more impact than any hit I'd taken on the ice.

"No, it didn't."

Still, neither of us moved to kiss again. The distance between us remained. What came next? What did this mean for his career, or mine, or the team? Were we something now, or only two people who kissed once during a power outage?

Pike shifted on the couch, drawing one knee up toward his chest in a posture that made him look younger and more vulnerable than his twenty-three years. He waited for his mentor to guide us through this uncharted territory.

Unfortunately, I had no map. No playbook. No veteran experience to draw from.

I retreated to the familiar—deflection, observation, and anything to avoid the raw, exposed feeling in my chest. I turned toward the window, where snow had completely covered the lower pane and was working its way up the second.

"Guess we're snowed in."

Pike nodded slowly, understanding what I wasn't saying. The kiss was something we couldn't resolve right away. It was too big.

He agreed with my assessment of the weather. "Probably until morning at least."

Silence stretched between us, not uncomfortable but charged with an awareness that hadn't existed before. Eventually, I stood, moving toward the kitchen to create some breathing space. "You want water? Or there's still some beer."

"Water's good."

I filled two glasses from the filter pitcher in my refrigerator, grateful for the mundane task. When I returned, Pike sat forward with his elbows on his knees, staring into the candle flame.

"Thanks." He took the glass from me, careful to avoid touching my fingers. "I should apologize."

"For what?"

"For making this complicated. You're my mentor. My teammate. And I just..."

"I kissed you back," I interrupted. "If anyone should apologize, it's me. I'm older. I should know better."

Pike shook his head. "Don't do that. I'm not some kid who doesn't know his own mind."

"I didn't say you were."

"But you're thinking it." He turned to look at me. "You're thinking that this is some..."

I don't know, phase or experiment or confusion."

"Is it?"

"No, it's not. I don't know what it is exactly, but it's not that."

Outside, the wind picked up again, howling around the corners of the building with renewed fury. We both glanced toward the window, where snow continued accumulating against the glass.

Pike turned back to me. "What happens in the morning? When the power's back on and the roads are clear. What then?"

It was the question I wanted to avoid. I had no clear answer. What were we in the locker room, on the ice, and in the real world beyond our snow-insulated bubble?

"I don't know. This wasn't in my plans."

Pike smiled, and I saw a hint of his usual sunshine in his eyes. "What, the veteran player doesn't have contingencies for everything?"

"They didn't cover the protocols for what to do if you kiss your second-season mentee during a blizzard in orientation."

He laughed softly. It dissipated some of the tension. "We could pretend it never happened."

I shook my head. "Too late for that."

"Yeah." He twisted the glass between his palms. "Too late." After another long pause, he asked, "Can I stay?"

The question was practical—the roads were impassable.

"Yes, but Pike... I need time to figure this out. We both do."

He nodded, understanding what I meant. Whatever was happening between us needed space to breathe before we defined it.

"I've got a spare room, and the sheets are clean."

He delivered a genuine smile. "Didn't have you pegged as someone who'd have a guest room."

"It's not by choice. It came with the place." I stood, stretching muscles stiff from sitting too long in one position. "I'll grab you something to sleep in."

Whether I was ready for it or not, Pike had worked his way under my armor. And despite all the complications, uncertainty, and potential for disaster, I couldn't bring myself to regret it.

Not the kiss.

Not the confession.

Not any of it.

### Chapter ten

#### Pike

The bedsheet tangled around my ankles, unfamiliar in texture and weight. For a disoriented moment, I couldn't remember where I was until I spotted a battered stereo system perched atop a scratched wooden side table.

Beside it stood a precarious tower of CDs—Springsteen's weathered face on one, the angry red lettering of Rage Against the Machine on another, and between them, a blank disc with "Summer '16" scrawled across it in black Sharpie.

It was Carver's guest room. I lay on my back, absorbing the details in the early morning light.

The room was neither neglected nor particularly cared for—only existing in a state of suspended animation. A tattered Soundgarden poster clung to the far wall. Near the window, a hockey gear bag had been shoved beneath a dresser, its contents probably forgotten seasons ago.

It was like opening a time capsule to parts of Carver he didn't share with teammates. I was getting glimpses of preferences and phases of his life that existed outside the arena.

From beyond the partially open door came the soft, rhythmic sounds of his breathing. It wasn't quite a snore—more like the ocean waves at low tide, persistent and strangely soothing.

I slid from beneath the covers and padded across the room. The morning stretched between us, blank and unwritten. What would we say when his eyes opened? Would he look at me with regret or, worse, with nothing at all?

The warmth of our connection the night before felt fragile in the cold morning light. Maybe that kiss was an anomaly, somehow connected with the blizzard.

I dressed and gathered my belongings, slipping them into my pockets. In the kitchen, I located a notepad with a local hardware store logo and a pen that barely worked.

Thanks for the shelter. You're a surprisingly decent host. -P

The words were insufficient—almost unbearably small compared to what happened between us. But what else could I say? That I couldn't stop thinking about his mouth? That I was terrified of what it meant? That I wanted more and didn't know how to ask for it?

I placed the note on the counter where he'd find it, propped against a half-empty bottle of bourbon. From down the hall came another soft exhale. I paused, listening to that steady rhythm one last time, before slipping out the front door and into the cold.

When I arrived at The Colisée after lunch and a nap at home, it loomed against the late afternoon sky. I trudged across the parking lot, my boots carving dark impressions in the otherwise pristine blanket of snow.

I was three hours early for pre-game warmups. That would give me plenty of time to sort through the mess in my head before facing opposition on the ice.

Inside, the arena's familiar scent greeted me—refrigeration chemicals, rubber mats, and that indefinable metallic tang that permeated every hockey rink I'd ever known. The corridors echoed with my solitary footsteps. This far ahead of game time, the

building was like a church hours before Sunday services—reverent, expectant, waiting to be filled with noise and purpose.

In the locker room, I found Monroe already taping a stick with a methodical focus. He glanced up.

"Heard you got stranded in the storm."

My pulse quickened. "Yeah. Power went out at Carver's place."

"At Carver's? That's where?" Monroe raised an eyebrow. "Mentorship program's really working out then."

"Just reviewing tape." I dropped my bag at my stall. "Providence's forecheck patterns."

"TJ said he tried calling you. Wanted to know if you'd drowned in a snowbank."

The mention of TJ sent a dart of anxiety through me. He noticed everything and made jokes about everything. He must have been the one who figured out I was stranded. If anyone could read the shift between Carver and me, it would be him.

I began my pre-game routine with deliberate precision, arranging each piece of equipment in its designated spot. The familiarity of the actions soothed my jangled nerves. Stick. Skates. Pads. Jersey.

Mercier arrived next, nodding silently before claiming his corner stall. The goalie's presence steadied me. He never demanded conversation to fill the silence.

The room gradually populated with bodies and voices. Warm-up music thumped through portable speakers. Someone complained about road conditions. Another

voice debated tonight's starting lineup.

Suddenly, Carver's voice cut through the chatter from the doorway.

"Hope you boys skated this morning. The ice is garbage after the power outage."

I kept my head down, pretending to be absorbed in my pre-game stretching. From the corner of my eye, I kept an eye on Carver. His body language didn't hint at what had happened between us.

When he settled into his stall, he turned his head to watch me. The expression was unreadable. He didn't smile or nod. Only observed.

TJ stepped between us, blocking my view. "Pike! Thought the snow swallowed you whole."

"Almost." I forced a grin. "Car nearly got stuck three times on the way back from Carver's."

"Carver's?" TJ's expression brightened. I feared what mischief he was planning. "You two are having slumber parties now? Do you braid each other's hair?"

Carver interrupted. "We were watching tape. You might try it if you want your assists to improve."

The engagement wasn't unusual. Carver often shut down TJ's teasing with precision strikes.

Coach entered with his clipboard, and the room's energy shifted into pre-game focus. He outlined matchups and key points, voice gruff and certain.



I tried to concentrate on his words instead of my awareness of Carver ten feet away. It was nearly impossible to drive the memory of his mouth out of my mind.

When Coach dismissed us for individual preparation, I exhaled—thirty minutes until warmups.

I retreated to my corner as my teammates dispersed to finish their preparations. I needed to center myself and focus on the upcoming game.

Looking for solitude in the weight room, I balanced on one leg near the training tables, stretching my hamstrings. My knee was solid—no warning throbs or whispers of instability.

I heard footsteps behind me as I headed into the hallway to return to the locker room. It was the familiar cadence of Carver's stride.

He passed me without stopping or speaking. He only delivered a subtle nod and slightly tilted his head toward a back corridor leading to a janitor's closet.

I counted three seconds and then followed.

The back hallways of the Colisée were a labyrinth in need of maintenance. The concrete walls were painted in fading Forge colors, and exposed pipes ran along low ceilings.

Carver led me past the trainer's office and through the narrow passage where broken sticks accumulated in barrels until we reached the equipment room's rear entrance. The space smelled of grinding metal and leather conditioner. Skate sharpeners lined one wall. Jerseys awaiting repair hung from hooks nearby.

He stopped in the shadow of a tall shelving unit loaded with spare helmet visors and

gloves. The distant mechanical hum of the Zamboni vibrated through the walls, a reminder of the game waiting for us.

Carver turned toward me and backed up to the cinder block wall. He grumbled, "Your note was garbage."

"I didn't know what else to say."

"How about 'Goodbye'? Or 'See you at practice'? You could have said literally anything instead of sneaking out like it was a one-night stand."

My face flushed. "I thought you might want space."

"Space." He exhaled sharply through his nose. "If I wanted space, I wouldn't have invited you over."

"For tape review."

"Right. Providence's forecheck. Very educational."

We stood close enough for me to detect the faint scent of his soap—something with sandalwood, masculine but not overpowering. My skin prickled.

I'd expected strategy talk. It would be something about a return to professional boundaries. He might even backpedal or share regrets.

Instead, Carver's gaze dropped to my mouth, and my heart skipped.

He whispered, "Tell me to stop."

I didn't.

Wrapping his right hand around the back of my neck, he pulled me forward with surprising gentleness. When our lips met, it wasn't hesitant or fumbling like the night before. Carver's Kiss was warm and confident.

I reached out for him, gripping his sides. He tasted like the spearmint gum he always chewed before games.

Our tongues brushed, and something electric shot up my spine. It wasn't exploration anymore. It was acknowledgment.

When Carver pulled back, his pupils were dilated, and his breathing had quickened. My heart hammered against my ribs like it was trying to break free.

He exhaled slowly, his hand still warm against my neck. "We need to talk."

Icy fear raced through my veins. "I know."

A burst of laughter echoed from somewhere down the corridor—teammates were approaching. We separated instantly, and our professional space reasserted itself.

Carver's expression shifted back into his familiar public persona. With a slight nod, he slipped past me and disappeared around the corner.

I remained frozen, trying to reorganize my thoughts into some coherent pattern. The taste of him lingered on my lips, and the shape of his hands still burned against my skin.

When I returned to the locker room, it buzzed with pre-game energy. I moved through it like a sleepwalker, present but separated by an invisible barrier.

TJ intercepted me as I reached my stall.

"Earth to Pike." He narrowed his eyes. "Where'd you disappear to? Was about to send a search party."

"Stretching. My knee felt tight."

"Right." TJ leaned against the adjacent stall. "Nothing to do with why Carver's suddenly acting like someone stole his favorite chew toy?"

"What?"

TJ jerked his chin toward the far side of the room. Carver sat methodically, lacing his skates. There was something tightly coiled in his posture—a contained energy that wasn't a usual part of his pre-game routine.

"Man's wound tighter than Mercier's goalie pads. Did you two have a mentor-mentee squabble during your blizzard bonding?"

"Everything's fine."

"Sure." TJ clapped my shoulder before retreating to his own preparation, but the interaction left me feeling exposed as if my skin had thinned to transparency.

Coach's whistle cut through the pre-game chatter. "Five minutes, gentlemen. Channel that energy where it belongs—on the ice, not in your mouths."

I mechanically completed my equipment check—the rhythmic pattern of securing each piece and testing each strap. I carried it out on autopilot while my mind replayed the moment in the equipment room with unsettling clarity.

Carver's mouth. Carver's hands. Carver's voice, low and certain: We need to talk.

What did he want to say? That it was a mistake? That we needed to stop before it affected the team? Or something else entirely?

I pulled my jersey over my head, the familiar weight settling across my shoulders. Number 12 in silver and black. A concrete identity when everything else was uncertain.

As we lined up for the walk to the ice, Carver fell into position three players ahead of me. I stared at his broad shoulders.

When he glanced back over his shoulder, our eyes connected. Something passed between us—not a message, more like a current.

The muffled roar of the crowd filtered through the tunnel as the doors opened. Cold air rushed in off the ice. Our world would contract to a slick sheet and a six-ounce puck for the next three periods. Everything else—questions, kisses, confusions—would have to wait.

I followed my teammates toward the light and noise, but with each step, I considered what happened in the hallway. I'd followed Carver, thinking he'd advise me about the game ahead. Instead, he'd given me something that made the solid ground beneath my skates feel precarious.

And now, I didn't know how to play the game we'd started.

### Chapter eleven

#### Carver

I showed up half an hour before anyone else usually did, desperate for empty echoes and the scrape of only my skates against fresh ice. Instead, I found him. Of course, he would be there. We couldn't escape each other.

Pike cut across the rink in tight figure-eights, each stride precise and controlled. His breath hung in white clouds behind him like breadcrumbs marking his path. He wasn't practicing anything specific—only moving, testing the edges of his skates against the ice with unconscious joy.

I stood in the shadows of the tunnel, my bag heavy on my shoulder. Last night's win should've left me floating. Instead, I felt leaden, uncertainty tugging at my joints.

That kiss in the storm had changed something. The brash second one in the hallway shifted everything.

Pike spotted me, and his whole body brightened. It wasn't only his face—though that megawatt smile could've powered the entire Colisée. He lifted his stick in greeting.

I grunted something meaningless and turned away, retreating to the locker room instead of joining him. The concrete walls steadied me.

My stall looked the same as yesterday and the five-and-a-half seasons that came before. My nameplate was slightly crooked from where TJ knocked into it last week.

I started lacing up, fingers working numbly while my mind raced. Pike's trajectory pointed up. He was young—twenty-three. He had hands soft enough to settle pucks like they were spooked birds.

And me? I was thirty-one with knees that creaked on cold mornings. I had a body that required twice the maintenance it did at twenty-three. Each new bruise faded slower than the last, and each muscle recovery took a day longer than the year before.

Forty minutes later, I was finishing an impromptu workout in the weight room when the door opened. I didn't need to look up to know it was Pike. The air changed when he entered a room.

He tested me with an attempt at clever rapport. "Thinking of starting a one-man bench press competition?"

I kept my eyes on the clipboard where I'd been tracking sets and reps. "Finishing up."

"Here, I thought you were avoiding me." It was a weak joke, but it had an edge of truth.

After the last rep, I looked at him. His hair was damp at the temples, cheeks flushed from exertion on the ice. He was only eight years behind me, but he appeared so young.

"Not everything's about you, Pike." The words came out sharper than I'd intended.

His smile faded.

"Got it." He nodded and turned toward the door. "See you at practice, then."

He left, and I sat there feeling like I'd just slammed myself into the boards.

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Practice was halfway through when Coach blew his whistle with three short, decisive blasts. We gathered at center ice. I deliberately positioned myself between Mercier and TJ, across the circle from Pike.

Coach's voice sounded like he'd been eating gravel. "Gentlemen, we've got a visitor today."

He gestured toward the stands where a man in navy blue team gear sat with a clipboard balanced on his knee. The logo was unmistakable—Syracuse Sentinels, a recent NHL expansion club.

"Mr. Halloran's keeping tabs on a few of you," He paused. "But mostly Pike."

A murmur rippled through our team huddle. I kept my face blank, but my stomach collapsed like a poorly constructed dock in a hurricane. I listened to reactions from the team:

"About damn time—"

"—NHL money, baby—"

"—Pike's gonna buy the first round when—"

Pike himself stood silent, glancing from Coach to the scout and then to me. I looked away.

"Alright, back to work," Coach barked. "Two-on-one rush drills. Mercier is in the net, and Jameson and Carver are defending first. Pike and Lambert, you're up."



My legs moved automatically, skating backward to position. Defense wasn't my natural spot, but I'd played it enough in practice to know the angles. TJ slid beside me, tapping my shin guard with his stick.

"You good? You look like someone pissed in your protein shake."

"I'm fine." I executed the drill on autopilot.

It wasn't enough to stop the golden boy. Pike accelerated past me like I was standing still. I pivoted hard, overcorrecting, and slammed into TJ, who'd come over to help. We crashed into the boards with a sickening crack that silenced the rink.

"What the fuck, Carver?" TJ shouted, shoving me back.

Coach's whistle pierced the air. "Goddamnit, Carver! Watch your positioning!"

I untangled myself from TJ, muttering apologies. Pike skated over with concern etched across his features. He stopped just short of touching my arm but leaned toward me like a compass finding north.

"You okay? That looked rough."

The genuine worry in his voice scraped against my raw nerves. I straightened my helmet.

"You've got bigger eyes on you today. Go impress them."

Pike's expression shifted—surprise, confusion, hurt—before hardening into something I couldn't read. He backed away without another word, rejoining our teammates at the blue line.

Coach assigned me to the bench for the remainder of the drill. I watched Pike score twice more, each goal more impressive than the last. The scout made notes, his finger dancing across his tablet.

When practice wrapped up, and we returned to the locker room, I sat in my stall, a towel draped over my head like a monk's cowl. Water from my shower dripped down my spine in a cold trail.

I knew that I should do something other than sit there, marinating in my circling thoughts. When I tried, my limbs were heavy, anchored to the wooden bench.

I wanted Pike to succeed. I wanted him to have his debut in the show, but that meant—

Movement at the periphery of my vision caught my attention. Pike stood at his stall, still in his base layers, hair askew from where he'd tugged his practice jersey off. He wasn't talking to anyone—unusual for him. He wasn't even moving, just standing there, half-turned toward me, clearly waiting.

I kept my head down and pretended to concentrate on unwrapping the tape from my socks. My fingers worked methodically while my ears strained to hear any sounds of him approaching.

None came.

By the time I'd stripped the last of the tape away and balled it up, most of the team was gone. Pike remained, now dressed in street clothes, perched on the edge of his stall. He was patient.

I took my time gathering my things, moving slowly, hoping he'd give up. Take the hint. Celebrate his impending ascent with people who deserved to share in it.

Finally, Pike stood. He didn't look angry—maybe some disappointment. Then, I saw his eyes. Unshed tears glistened in the corners.

Damn! He opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it again. A muscle in his jaw twitched. He finally turned and walked away, his footsteps echoing in the concrete corridor beyond the locker room.

I sat alone in the empty locker room, hating how much it ached to watch him leave. How many times had I seen teammates walk away before? Dozens. Hundreds, maybe, over the years. Players moved up or out constantly in the minors. It was the natural order of things.

This one time felt different. It was like watching someone take a piece of me with them.

Almost-made-it guys like me were cautionary tales in locker rooms across the league. We were the veterans who hung on too long and turned bitter watching kids leap past us on their way to the show.

I'd sworn I'd never become that guy—clutching at younger players' jerseys, trying to drag them down to my level out of spite or fear. And yet, there I sat. Alone by choice. Pushing away the one person who'd made me feel something other than resignation about my final season.

I told myself it had to be that way. It was better to push Pike away now before I became the mistake in his past that scouts whispered about during evaluations.

I'd give him the one gift I could offer. I'd make it easy for him to leave.

I was on my way down the hall toward the exit when the door ahead of me opened. I knew who it was before I saw him.

The sunshine had left Pike's face, but he returned. He stood with his legs shoulder-length apart and folded his arms over his chest.

"Are you going to talk to me, or will you keep pretending I don't exist?"

I shoved my hands in my pockets. "Didn't realize we had anything to discuss."

"Bullshit." The word wasn't loud, but it hit hard.

I tried to be casual in my response and missed by a mile. "Look, we won the game. We're doing fine on the ice. Let's just—"

"You've been a ghost since the storm."

He took a step forward and unfolded his arms. For a split second, I thought Mr. Sunshine might hit me.

"One minute we're..." he faltered, then regrouped, "and the next you won't even look at me. What changed?"

"Nothing changed. That's the point." I gestured vaguely between us. "This—whatever happened—it was a mistake."

"A mistake?"

"I'm not what you need right now."

He clenched his jaw. "You don't get to decide that."

"Don't I?" My voice rose despite my efforts to keep it level. "You've got scouts watching you now, actual NHL scouts, Pike. You're twenty-three with your whole

career ahead of you, and you're... what? Kissing a washed-up has-been during a snowstorm? What the hell kind of future is that?"

Pike stood his ground. "Is that really what this is about? My future?"

"Of course it is," I snapped. "You think I don't know what happens to guys like me in this league? We fade out. Our bodies give out before our hearts are ready to quit. Every morning brings a new ache, and the pain settles deeper into our bones. Everyone forgets about us. And the only thing worse than that is turning into the guy who tried to take someone else down with him."

"That's not what you're doing."

"Isn't it?" My voice cracked. I cleared my throat, trying to recapture my resolve. "You deserve your shot, Pike. A real one, without complications."

"Don't patronize me. I'm not some kid who needs protection from his own decisions."

"Maybe not, but I've seen how this works." I leaned toward him, and he didn't back away. "Best case scenario? You get your call-up, and whatever this is becomes a distraction you don't need. Worst case? Someone finds out, and suddenly, you're not the golden boy anymore. They see you as a potential problem."

"It's not your call to make."

"It is when I'm afraid I'm the guy that will hold you back!"

Silence fell. Pike stared at me, his expression unreadable for perhaps the first time since I'd known him.

The silence stretched long enough that I wondered if he'd simply walk away. I almost

hoped he would. It would be easier than whatever came next.

But the easy thing never happened to me.

His expression shifted, determination replacing the hurt I'd seen earlier. He moved deliberately, each step measured as he closed the distance between us.

I backed up instinctively until my shoulders ran into the wall. Pike entered my personal space.

His voice was low and steady. "Let me be clear: you don't get to decide what I need." He paused just long enough for the weight of it to land, and then he pulled out the love story from the season before. "Dane and Leo didn't hide when it got complicated. Look how that turned out."

Then, he kissed me.

He was a quick learner. This one was intentional and confident, as if he'd made a decision and was now executing it with the same precision he had brought to a penalty shot.

His hands came up to my chest, palm flat against my pecs. They anchored us in the moment. He splayed his fingers.

I remained frozen until something inside me unraveled. I reached out for his waist, drawing him closer, surrendering to the inevitable.

When we broke apart, he didn't retreat. His face hovered inches from mine, close enough that I could count individual eyelashes and see the flecks of amber in his otherwise hazel eyes.

He whispered, "Don't decide what's best for me."

The confidence in his voice stunned me more than the kiss. At twenty-three, I'd been all bravado and bluster, using volume and aggression to cover the fact that I was navigating blind. Pike, though... he was already a man on a mission.

"I'm not..." I started, then tried again. "This isn't simple."

"Did I say I wanted simple?" He pulled back slightly, studying my face. "Look, I get that you're scared. So am I. But I'm not afraid of this. I'm afraid of walking away from it without even trying."

"The scout—" I began.

"Is one of the dozens who might come looking for me. My career's important to me. You know that, but it's not the only thing that matters."

I searched his face for any signs of doubt. Instead, I found clarity that made my own fears seem weak and flimsy.

I sighed. "You make everything sound so simple."

A small smile played at the corner of his mouth. "It's not, but some things are worth figuring out, even when they're complicated."

He finally retreated half a step. "Think about it." He pulled his hands back. "But don't think too long."

I watched him turn back toward the exit. He glanced at me over his shoulder. "By the way, that scout? He told Coach he was impressed by our chemistry on the ice. Said we brought out the best in each other." A gentle version of the sunshine smile

returned. "Funny how that works."

Then, he was gone.

I slung my bag over my shoulder and headed for the exit, my mind quieter than it had been all day. As I fumbled with my keys, the realization settled over me with strange clarity: Pike wasn't afraid.

If he, with his whole career stretching before him, could be brave enough to step into uncertainty... maybe I could, too.

I climbed into my truck and sat motionless behind the wheel, watching my breath form clouds in the unheated cab. For years, I'd defined myself by what I hadn't achieved—the call-up that never came and the NHL career that remained tantalizingly out of reach.

He's not afraid. So maybe it's okay if I am.

The thought settled in my chest, not a revelation so much as a permission. I could be uncertain. I could worry. I could want the best for Pike while also wanting him for myself. Those things weren't mutually exclusive.



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### Chapter twelve

#### Pike

The Forge's equipment room smelled of rubber, leather, and the metallic tang of recently sharpened skates. Carver leaned against the grinding bench, arms folded across his chest. The whirl of the building's ventilation system drowned out any sound that might leak from the hallway.

I closed the door behind me, heart drumming against my ribs. Three days had passed since our kiss in his apartment, two since he'd pulled me into the dark corridor outside the weight room.

"Anybody follow you?"

I shook my head. "No. TJ's trapped Monroe in a conversation about proper tape application." I stepped closer, narrowing the gap between us. "I told them I forgot something in my car."

"How long before they notice we're both missing?"

"Fifteen minutes. Twenty, if Mercier decides to tell that story about his cousin in Manitoba again."

Carver pushed off from the grinding bench. "I've got something to say."

"I'm listening."

He tapped his fingers against his thigh. "What happened in my apartment—"

"—and the hallway," I added, unable to resist a slight grin.

"And the hallway, yeah. It all changes things."

"Good or bad?"

"Complicates things."

I stepped closer, my t-shirt brushing against his. "Sometimes, I like complicated things."

"No, you don't. I saw how you pack for road games. You like everything neat and organized. Your locker's like a fucking department store display."

I couldn't stop a grin from forming on my face. "And then some things are worth the mess."

His eyes darkened, but I didn't detect any anger. "If we're going to do this—whatever this is—we need ground rules."

The statement surprised me. I'd expected him to still be hesitant. I didn't think he was ready for a contract negotiation.

"Ground rules. Like what?"

He held up one finger. "Nobody knows. Not TJ. Not Mercier. Not a single person in that locker room."

"Total secrecy." I nodded. That request wasn't unexpected or unwanted. The idea of

the team finding out made my skin crawl.

"Second," Carver continued, "hockey comes first. We're professionals. On the ice, in practice, during games—none of this exists."

"Agreed."

"Last rule." He exhaled deeply. "We're honest with each other. About everything. Especially the hard stuff."

That one caught me off guard. Carver wasn't known for his emotional transparency.

"Honesty?"

"Yeah. If we're risking this much, lying to each other makes it worse. I want to know when you're frustrated or scared or when your knee feels like it will collapse. And I'll tell you—" He looked at the floor for a moment. "I'll tell you when retirement is eating me alive."

His requests were startling in their simplicity—three rules to navigate our uncharted territory.

"I can do that," I said.

"You sure? Because once we start this, backing out is messier."

I studied his face—the shadows beneath his eyes and the stubble along his jaw. I'd never wanted anything the way I wanted something to work with Carver.

"I'm sure. Are you?"

He nearly laughed. "No, but I'm doing it anyway."

Footsteps in the hallway sent us springing apart. My heart nearly exploded as I scrambled for something to look at. I grabbed a roll of stick tape from a nearby shelf as the door swung open.

Coach stood in the doorway, clipboard in hand. His eyes narrowed as he took in the scene—me clutching random tape and Carver suddenly fascinated by a skate blade.

"Gentlemen, are we taking inventory after hours?"

Carver recovered first. "Pike needed specific tape. Monroe's been hoarding the good stuff."

I held up the roll, praying my face wasn't as flushed as it felt. "Found it."

Coach's gaze lingered on us a moment longer. "Team bus leaves at seven tomorrow. Don't be late." He turned to go and then paused in the doorway. "Pike?"

"Yes, Coach?"

"That's goalie tape. Wrong pattern for stick handles."

The door closed behind him, leaving us in stunned silence until Carver's shoulders began to shake with suppressed laughter.

"Smooth. Real smooth."

I stared at the wide, padded tape in my hand and felt ridiculous. "So much for secrecy."

"Hey." Carver stepped close again. "It's okay. He didn't see anything."

"I should get back before TJ sends a search party."

"Yeah."

For a flicker of a second, Carver's hand brushed mine again, a deliberate touch so slight it might have been imaginary. Then, he was gone, slipping through the door and back into the realm where we were only teammates, mentor and mentee, nothing more.

I waited thirty seconds before following, counting breaths to slow my racing pulse. Three rules. It was the structure meant to contain whatever was burning between us.

It wouldn't be enough, but it was a beginning.

The road between Lewiston and Springfield curved like a slumbering snake, endless and hypnotic. Our team bus hummed along the interstate, most guys dozing with headphones clamped over their ears or buried in game footage on tablets.

I pressed my forehead against the cool window glass, watching my breath fog the surface in expanding circles. Sleep had proven impossible despite the gentle rocking motion. My thoughts circled back to Carver, our rules, and the electricity that seemed to arc between us, even across the crowded bus.

He sat three rows ahead, his dark hair barely visible over the seat back. We'd boarded separately, careful not to disrupt our usual routines. I always sat mid-bus; he preferred the back corner, where fewer people bothered him. Today, though, he'd chosen a spot closer to the front, breaking his pattern.

When most of the bus had fallen asleep, I saw movement in the aisle. Carver

appeared, water bottle in hand, making his way toward the bathroom at the rear. As he passed my row, his shoulder bumped mine.

"Sorry." He pitched his voice loud enough for others to hear.

"No problem," I answered, equally loud.

He continued past, but the warmth of his touch lingered on my arm. Looking back at the window, I watched my reflection smile.

Springfield's ice gleamed under bright arena lights, freshly resurfaced for our warmup skate. Coach divided us into lines for passing drills, barking instructions that echoed in the empty building.

For forty-five minutes, we were purely professional, focused entirely on the task at hand. I settled into the rhythm of practice. My knee was solid, with no warning twinges or phantom pains.

Near the end of the session, Coach called us together for a five-on-five scrimmage. I found myself on Carver's line, the two of us paired with TJ, Monroe, and Mercier against the second line.

"Keep it clean," Coach instructed. "Game speed, but no contact."

The whistle blew, and we scattered into position. Carver hovered on the blue line while I circled deep, drawing the defense toward me. Without looking, I knew exactly where he'd be—just as he seemed to know my trajectory before I moved.

"Jesus," TJ muttered as we regrouped. "Did you guys practice that?"

I shook my head, unable to explain the connection unfolding between us. It wasn't

only chemistry. It was choreography. Like we were writing something together, and only we knew the steps.

After the third time we connected for a scoring chance, Coach blew his whistle, bringing the scrimmage to a halt. "Pike, Carver." He beckoned us over. "Whatever you two are doing, bottle it. That's the kind of anticipation I want to see tonight."

Carver nodded. "Just working on the mentorship stuff you assigned, Coach."

"It's paying dividends. Keep it up."

As we skated back to position, Carver's glove brushed mine—another touch that could be dismissed as accidental but wasn't. It was so subtle that no one else would notice, yet it shot through me like lightning.

We were playing two games now: hockey and whatever lay beneath it. The currents ran parallel, sometimes merging and sometimes diverging—both required concentration.

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The Rusty Puck was the kind of dive bar that seemed to exist outside of time—neon beer signs with burnt-out letters, dark wood worn smooth by decades of elbows, and a jukebox that hadn't updated its playlist since the early 2000s. It smelled of spilled beer and ancient fryer oil.

For The Forge, it also smelled like victory.

We'd beaten Springfield 4-2, snapping their six-game home winning streak. My goal in the second period tied the game, and Carver's assist on TJ's rocket from the point in the third gave us the lead. The rest of the team stormed the ice when the final buzzer

sounded, mobbing Mercier for his thirty-eight saves.

Wedged into a semicircular booth with half the team, I sipped a beer and soaked in the rare, uncomplicated joy of a road win. Everyone was buying rounds. TJ had commandeered the jukebox, feeding it quarters for songs that made Coach wince from his corner seat at the bar.

Monroe raised a glass. "To Pike's filthy fucking deke that made their defenseman look like he was skating in cement!"

A chorus of cheers erupted. I grinned, accepting the praise while trying not to seem too pleased with myself.

TJ added his praise. "And to Carver for not getting tossed into the penalty box for once." He clinked his beer bottle against Carver's. "Your assist was almost as pretty as your face."

"Careful, Jameson. Keep complimenting me, and I'll start to think you care."

The table erupted in laughter. I allowed myself to look at Carver, really look, for the first time since we'd left the arena. His hair was still damp from his post-game shower, pushed back from his forehead in careless waves. A day's worth of stubble darkened his jaw, and his eyes reflected the colored lights from the neon signs above the bar.

He caught me looking and held my gaze for a beat. Then, he lifted his beer in a small salute meant only for me before turning his attention back to the group.

The party expanded as the night wore on. Several local fans had recognized us, sending over pitchers and asking for autographs on napkins and coasters. I signed a few, smiling for photos and doing the good-sport routine that came so naturally to



me.

When I returned from one such interaction, Carver had vanished from our table.

I scanned the bar, finding no trace of him. Mercier caught my confused expression and jerked his chin toward the hallway leading to the restrooms.

"Think he went to call his mom."

The statement was plausible—Carver did call his mother after games, though usually from the privacy of his hotel room. He told me he used to talk to his brother all the time, but that ended after a brutal car accident.

I waited three minutes before excusing myself to use the bathroom.

The hallway behind the bar was considerably darker than the main room, lit by a single bulb with a yellowed glass shade. The men's room door stood slightly ajar on the left, while the women's remained firmly closed on the right. Beyond them, the corridor hooked sharply right, leading to a fire exit and what appeared to be a storage closet.

I glanced back toward the main bar, ensuring no one had followed, before proceeding past the bathrooms. Around the corner, the lighting dimmed further, casting the narrow space in deep shadows.

"Took you long enough."

Carver's voice emerged from the darkness as his hand closed around my wrist, tugging me forward. He'd positioned himself in the recessed doorway of the storage room, deep in the shadows.

"Had to wait. Mercier's watching."

"Mercier's always watching." He pulled me closer until my chest brushed his. "It's the goalie in him. Notices everything."

"You think he knows?" I asked, suddenly anxious.

Carver's hand released my wrist to settle on my hip, firm and possessive. "No, but he notices patterns. We need to be careful."

He rubbed small circles with his thumb. "I've been thinking about this all day. Watching you on the ice, the way you move..." He exhaled sharply. "Driving me fucking crazy, Pike."

My heartbeat thundered in my ears. Anyone could walk down the hallway—a teammate, bartender, or a random patron looking for the bathroom.

I challenged Carver. "Then do something about it."

He gripped the back of my neck and pulled me into a kiss that stole my breath. Unlike our previous kisses, this one was hungry and sure.

Carver kissed the way he played hockey—with intensity and precision, paying attention to what worked and adjusting accordingly. When I gasped as his teeth grazed my lower lip, he did it again, harder.

A burst of laughter from the main room dragged me back to awareness. I broke the kiss, breathless and dizzy.

"What if someone sees?"

"Then I guess we move faster." There was just enough ambient light to watch his mouth curve into a smile. "But no one's coming this way. TJ just started karaoke."

As if on cue, TJ's voice bellowed through the bar's sound system, a mangled version of "Sweet Caroline" that would make Neil Diamond weep.

I laughed softly, forehead dropping to rest against Carver's shoulder. "This is insane."

"Completely, and we should get back before they notice."

"Probably."

I turned to head back to the rest of the team, and Carver gripped my wrist again. "I switched rooms," he whispered.

"Switched?"

"Told Coach I had some more mentoring pointers to share. Mercier's going to stay with the Jameson zombie."

The revelation that Carver had orchestrated room changes—that he'd planned for us to be together—made my spine tingle.

He kissed me once more, softer but no less intense. "Later."

When I rejoined our table, TJ was finishing his butchered rendition of "Sweet Caroline" to thunderous applause. I settled back into my seat, accepting a fresh beer from Monroe and forcing myself to focus on the conversation around me. But beneath the surface banter, my mind remained fixed on a single thought:

Later.

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Carver shut the door behind us and dropped the key card on the table like it weighed a hundred pounds. Then, he just looked at me. He didn't smirk or try to act suave. Only looked.

I wanted to say something clever, but my brain was running on empty. I blurted out, "Mentorship check-in?"

Carver smiled. "Yeah, let's go over your goals. See where you need hands-on support."

I groaned. "That was terrible."

"I've had worse lines." He took a step closer. "You okay?"

I nodded too fast. "Yeah. I mean. Nervous. But...yeah."

"You sure?"

"No, but I want this. You. I just—" I laughed, sharp and awkward. "I've never done this before. With a guy. So, if I, like, put my elbow in your eye—"

"I'll survive. Do you think I've got a perfect playbook for this?"

"I don't know. You walk around like you do."

He wrapped his hands around my waist. "We figure it out together. Deal?"

"Deal," I whispered.

The first kiss wasn't graceful. I turned my head too much, and he kissed half my cheek. We laughed against each other's mouths and tried again.

That one landed.

We broke apart long enough to breathe, and Carver pulled his shirt over his head in one fluid motion. "If I'd known I'd be stripping under fluorescent motel lighting someday, I'd have prepared better."

"You're doing fine." I reached out to touch his bare chest and stared at the dark trail leading down into his jeans.

When I tried to take off my shirt, I somehow got tangled in the sleeves, flailed for balance, and fell backward onto the bed.

Carver laughed—really laughed, no this usual grunt-laugh—and climbed over me. "You good down there?"

"Eventually."

He helped me out of the shirt with exaggerated gentleness, like I might break.

His hands slid up my arms, slow and reverent. "You're beautiful, you know that?"

"Nope," I said, voice too high and tight.

"Well. You are."

It wasn't frantic or like in the movies. There was no swelling music or seamless choreography—only skin against skin and more laughter than I'd ever expected.

We fumbled through it.

Carver's hands were warm and sure on my back, then my shoulders, and then hesitating at the waistband of my shorts. I made a sound between a gasp and a chuckle because I realized I still had one sock on.

We both stared at it silently before Carver declared, "Bold move."

"Shut up." I kicked it off and nailed him in the shoulder with it by accident.

He retaliated by trying to yank my sorts down with all the finesse of a hockey player untying their skates with their mitts still on. My foot caught in the fabric, and I lost my balance, flopping hard onto the mattress.

My elbow swung wide and clipped the side of Carver's face. It wasn't painful, but it was enough to make him grunt and roll off me.

"Damn, I thought you were the coordinated one." He sprawled like roadkill across the bed.

"I am! It's your fault. You were in the way."

"Uh-huh."

He reached for me again, kissing the corner of my mouth and jaw like he was mapping new territory.

I explored him with my fingers, tracing the curve of his spine.

At one point, he caught my wrist and guided it between us. For the first time in my life, I wrapped my fingers around another guy's cock. It was soft, silky, and veiny.

Carver grabbed a small bottle of lube he'd placed on the side table and squirted some into my hand. My heart fluttered in my chest.

We shifted until our hips aligned. He stroked me, and then he stroked us together. I nearly leaped out of my skin.

I closed my eyes, reveling in the intense pleasure. Suddenly, Carver froze.

"Ohgod," he hissed.

"What?" I whispered, halfway to panic. "What's wrong?"

"Cramp. Thigh. Shit—"

He flopped backward like he'd taken a sniper shot, clutching his leg, groaning, and rolling off the bed.

I blinked and then cracked up. "You literally injured yourself in bed?"

"Don't make me laugh, I swear to God—"

It was too late. I laughed so hard I had to bury my face in the pillow while Carver cursed and pounded his foot on the carpet.

When he finally climbed back into bed, all the tension was gone. He looked younger, happier, and perfect.

"You okay now?"

"Gimme a second, and I'll be MVP again."

"YouwereneverMVP."

"Please.You'rejustmadIbeatyoutothethighcramp."

I rolled my eyes and kissed him before he could get another jab in. It was softer, slower—our bodies moved together like we'd kicked the awkwardness to the curb.

There was nothing fancy. No script or plan. Just two guys in a cheap motel bed, figuring each other out with hands, mouths, laughter, and heat.

And damn, it was good.

Real. Like we'd both pulled off our armor and said, "This is how I really am. Still want me anyway?"

Andtheanswer,frombothofus,wasyes.

Therewasn'tpenetration.Justenough.Justus.

Somewhereinthemiddleofit,Iwhispered, "Isitsupposedtofeellikethis?"

Hepulledbackjustenoughtolookmeintheeye. "Likewhat?"

"LikeIcouldcry.Orlaugh.Orclimboutofmyskin."

"Yeah,"hesaid. "Exactlylikethat."

When release finally came, Carver swallowed my gasp with a kiss, his hand never faltering in its steady motion. He came moments later, face buried against my shoulder, a string of half-formed words vibrating against my skin.



After, we sprawled out in tangled motel sheets, breathing like we'd run sprints, Carver reached over and wove his fingers through mine.

We were silent for a few minutes, and then he cleared his throat. "If Coach asks how our mentorship session went..."

"I'll tell him we covered core development."

Carver chuckled. "You're getting cocky."

"Not yet, but I'm getting there."

When the first rays of morning sunlight filtered through the motel blinds, I lay flat on my back, staring at the ceiling. My heart hammered with every nerve on edge.

Because everything—and I mean everything —itched.

My skin felt tight and sticky in that horrible post-sweat, post-sex, maybe-post-apocalyptic kind of way. I hadn't showered after. Why hadn't I showered? I always did when I had sex with women.

Do men shower right after? Was that a thing I was supposed to do?

Carver didn't shower. He fell asleep within minutes.

Fuck.

Is this how you get crabs? Do people even still get crabs?

I tried to shift under the covers without scratching, which was as successful as it sounded. I groaned. Nope. Nope, nope, nope.

Then, from beside me.

"Jesus Christ, Pike."

Carver's voice was loud, like a slap shot to the forehead. I flinched.

He rolled out of bed. "What the fuck is wrong? I thought you wake up with a sunshine smile on your face."

I clutched the sheet tighter, still trying to squirm subtly. "Do you... do you feel itchy?"

"What?"

"I just woke up, and it's like... my whole—down there—area is... itchy." I winced.

There was a beat of silence between us.

Carter snorted, and then he exploded. Like full-on, bent-over, wheezing laughter.

"Are you—fuck—are you asking me if sex is contagious?"

"No, but the itch—"

"What the fuck, Pike? You never jacked off to fall asleep and woke up the next morning scratching like a motherfucker?"

I blinked. "I always clean—that's a thing?"

"It's dried jizz, man. Welcome to manhood. Your royal highness has encountered the terrible affliction of crusty balls."

I buried my face in the pillow.

"I thought maybe I was allergic to something. Latex. Lube. You."

Carver grinned like he was watching the best sitcom rerun of his life.

"You're allergic to being too uptight. That's all. Take a piss, wash your junk, and let's call it even."

He paused for dramatic effect, and then he wagged his brows

"...Unless you want me to inspect the damage. Professionally."

He threw a pillow at his head. He dodged it, still smug as hell.

But yeah—I got up and went to shower. Fast.

Because love might be blind, but it shouldn't be itchy.

### Chapter thirteen

#### Carver

The depression in the mattress remained where Pike had abandoned his side of the bed. I blinked awake, disoriented by his absence, my hand reaching across sheets still warm from his body. Six-thirty, according to the clock—hours before either of us needed to be at the rink.

We'd spent enough nights together that Pike's absence felt wrong, like missing the last step on a familiar staircase. It hadn't taken long to grow accustomed to his particular breathing rhythm and how he radiated heat as we edged toward a Maine winter.

On the nightstand, a folded scrap of paper propped against my phone caught my attention. I recognized the back of a gas station receipt; Pike's hasty scrawl covered the blank side. Early call with my agent. Didn't want to wake you—your growling is scarier before coffee. Left protein shakes in your fridge. The ones you pretend to hate but always drink. See you at practice. -P

I snorted, tucking the note into my nightstand drawer where I'd stashed the others—little breadcrumbs of evidence marking whatever trail we were blazing together. The drawer was my little archive of Pike's peculiar mix of thoughtfulness and humor.

I pushed myself upright, rolling shoulders still pleasantly sore from the night before. The memory of Pike's mouth and grazing of teeth against my collarbone sent a shiver

up my spine.

In the bathroom, evidence of him remained—a damp towel hung with military precision and his toothbrush leaning against mine in the holder. I'd never allowed those kinds of intrusions into my space before. Pike had a way of slipping past barriers I'd spent years constructing, making himself at home in corners of my life I'd kept empty.

I'd had sex before. Rough, fast, sometimes even good, but never like this. It never felt like someone was seeing inside me, not only taking something from me. The intimacy of it caught me off-guard.

In the kitchen, I found the protein shakes he'd mentioned arranged in a neat row in my refrigerator. Chocolate peanut butter—the ones I complained about but always finished. It had only been a week and a half, and the thought of returning to mornings without him already sounded impossible.

The Colisée greeted me with familiar sounds—the mechanical hum of cooling systems, rubber-soled footsteps echoing off the concrete, and the distant scrape of the Zamboni finishing its morning pass. Rink sounds had been the soundtrack to my life for over two decades. Still, lately, they'd taken on a different quality—expectant, almost, as if the building anticipated Pike's arrival as much as I did.

I exchanged nods with Phil at security and a grunt with Coach, who was hunched over lineup cards in the corridor. My gear bag hung heavy on my shoulder, a comfortable weight I'd miss when retirement kicked in.

The locker room buzzed with pre-practice energy. I claimed my stall and began the ritual of unpacking.

"Morning, sunshine."

I heard Pike's voice before I spotted him entering from the trainers' room. His skin glowed from exertion, suggesting he'd already spent time with his physical therapist. Our eyes met across the crowded space, and something electric passed between us.

"Productive agent call?"

He grinned. "Very. We discussed my exceptional development this season. I might have mentioned my excellent mentor."

"Subtle."

As practice began, Coach divided us into lines for positioning drills, and Pike and I found ourselves paired with TJ for rush sequences against the second defensive unit. In the past, I'd have bristled at being used as a practice punching bag for the younger defensemen, but now I welcomed any excuse to share the ice with Pike.

From the first whistle, we moved like we shared a single nervous system. He anticipated my cuts before I made them, finding seams in the defense that shouldn't have existed. I feathered passes to spaces he hadn't reached yet, knowing instinctively where he'd be three strides later. We connected on plays that would have required months of practice with anyone else.

During a water break, we found ourselves on the bench, shoulders almost touching as we caught our breath.

Pike's eyes were bright. "That backhand sauce through Lambert's legs? Filthy."

"Your finish wasn't half bad. They didn't even see you coming off the half-wall."

"That's because you drew both defenders. Perfect decoy."

Coach's whistle cut through our exchange, summoning us back to center ice for scrimmage assignments. As we skated toward the group, TJ sidled up between us; his voice pitched for our ears only.

"Get a room, you two. The rest of us are getting jealous of whatever telepathic shit you've got going on."

Everything inside me went cold. TJ's smirk carried no malice, only his usual needling humor, but panic flared hot in my chest.

"You want to run your mouth or play hockey?" I snapped.

TJ's eyebrows shot up. "Easy, old man. Only saying you guys are clicking."

But the damage was done. Pike's expression dimmed. He drifted away from me, putting three teammates between us as Coach outlined the scrimmage parameters.

When we resumed play, the magic was gone. Pike's next pass came hard and slightly off-target, zipping past where I should have been if I'd read him correctly. The puck skittered into the corner, and Coach's whistle blasted across the ice.

"Carver! Pike! Did you two lose your connection in the water break? Get it together!"

Pike nodded stiffly. I wanted to take the words back and explain that my reaction wasn't aimed at him—it was the fear of being seen, really seen, by people who'd known me only as the guy with the sharp tongue and the penalty minutes. But the ice was neither the time nor place to discuss it.

After practice, steam billowed from the showers, cloaking the locker room in a humid fog. I lingered at my stall, postponing my shower as I followed Pike through peripheral vision.

He peeled off his practice jersey and under-armor with methodical precision; his back deliberately turned toward me. Around us, teammates traded the usual post-practice banter—complaints about Coach's conditioning drills, debates about lunch options, and plans for evening activities.

I waited until the locker room had mostly emptied, most guys having showered and departed for afternoon commitments. Pike returned from his shower with a towel slung low around his hips, water droplets on his shoulders. He'd taken longer than usual, probably hoping I'd be gone by the time he emerged.

I pitched my voice low. "Need to talk to you."

"Nothing to talk about."

"Five minutes. Equipment room."

His jaw tightened, but he nodded before pulling the shirt over his head.

The equipment room smelled of leather conditioner and metal shavings from the skate sharpener. I positioned myself near the grinding bench. When the door finally opened, Pike slipped inside, closing it carefully behind him.

He wore street clothes—jeans and a Minnesota Gophers sweatshirt that had seen better days. He leaned against a shelving unit of spare visors and kept his distance.

"I'm sorry. I just—TJ hit a nerve."

"You think I don't get that?" Pike's voice was tight. "But don't take it out on me. We agreed to the secrecy, Carver. I'm not the one who made it an issue."

"I know." I dragged a hand across my face, feeling the stubble rasp against my palm.



"I panicked."

"And I got to be the punching bag."

That stung, mostly because he was right.

"It won't happen again."

Pike crossed his arms. "Until the next time someone comments. Or gives us a look. Or notices that we're actually—" he gestured vaguely between us, "—whatever this is."

My defensive part wanted to fire back and remind him how much we both had to lose if the wrong people found out. The look on his face—wounded pride—deflated my anger.

My voice was rough as I pushed out words I needed to say. "I think I'm falling and don't know how to land."

Pike's arms slowly uncrossed, his expression shifting from hurt to something more complex.

"We're in this together. If we're going to crash, at least we'll crash together."

He didn't say, "Me, too," but he didn't back away either.

After a sigh, he added, "I shouldn't have pulled away on the ice, but when you snapped like that—"

"I know." I reached for him cautiously. I wrapped my fingers around his wrist, tracing the network of veins beneath his skin. "I'm shit at this, Pike. The whole..."

letting someone in thing."

A gentle smile appeared. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

"Smart ass." I tugged him closer until our chests almost touched. "We good?"

"We're good. Just... remember, I'm on your team. Literally and figuratively."

"Hard to forget when you keep leaving your protein shakes in my fridge."

He chuckled. "You drink them."

"Only because they expire."

The equipment room door rattled suddenly, and we sprang apart like guilty teenagers. Mercier's voice filtered through: "Anyone in there? Looking for a replacement chin strap."

"It's open," I called back, moving to put appropriate distance between Pike and me.

Pike caught my eye as Mercier entered, a silent acknowledgment passing between us. We hadn't fixed it all, but we'd started the repair process.

As darkness pressed against my bedroom window that night, the night air had a damp chill that promised more snow by morning. Pike had left an hour ago—reluctantly, after I reminded him we'd agreed not to spend too many consecutive nights together to avoid creating patterns teammates might notice.

I lay in bed, staring at ceiling shadows cast by passing cars. My body ached pleasantly from practice—and Pike's hands afterward. Our equipment room conversation had evolved into something more physical once we'd returned to my

apartment. Despite the physical relaxation, my mind refused to power down.

The near-miss with TJ had scraped against old wounds, memories I'd buried under years of careful avoidance. I rolled onto my side, punching the pillow into submission. Sleep remained elusive.

A memory rose in the back of my mind—Ryan Kovacs, sixteen years old to my seventeen, sharing a dorm room at senior hockey camp outside Minneapolis. He'd been all gangly limbs and quick laughter, dark hair falling across his eyes. We'd bonded over identical tastes in music and similar backgrounds—hockey dads who pushed too hard and mothers who pretended not to worry every time we hit the ice.

I remembered late-night walks around the campus and breaking curfew to hang out behind the equipment shed. We bumped our shoulders together as we walked, and neither of us pulled away.

One night in particular surfaced with unexpected clarity—our last evening at camp. We'd wrestled over the one remaining Gatorade in our mini-fridge, a tussle that started as horseplay and transformed into something else entirely when Ryan pinned me to the floor. His weight pressed against mine, breath warm against my cheek, and fingers circled around my wrists.

Time froze. His eyes dropped to my mouth, raising a question that terrified and thrilled me in equal measure. For three heartbeats, there was a possibility.

Then, I twisted away, cracking a joke about his weight and turning the intimate moment into competition. "Get your fat ass off me before I suffocate." I spoke in a deliberately harsh voice to mask the tremor beneath it.

The following weekend, back home, I'd taken Jessica Campbell to the lake house her parents owned. She'd been trying to catch my attention for months. I'd slept with her

almost spitefully as though proving something to myself. Afterward, lying in her pink-sheeted bed, I'd felt nothing but hollow victory and lingering shame.

Ryan and I exchanged a few texts that summer, but they grew increasingly sporadic. By the time senior year started, we'd drifted into different social orbits. Last I heard, he coached high school hockey somewhere in Wisconsin and was married with two kids.

I stared at my bedroom ceiling, the weight of two decades' worth of deflection and denial pressing against my chest. "I never gave myself a chance to know," I whispered to the empty room.

It wasn't self-loathing that accompanied the realization—only the weight of having buried something too deep to recognize until Pike dug it up with his earnest eyes and unguarded smile.

The fierce protectiveness I felt toward him wasn't only about shielding him from the potential fallout of our relationship. It was about protecting myself, too.

My phone screen lit up as a text arrived. Pike: Found your missing sock under my car seat. Holding it hostage until you admit protein shakes are actually good.

I laughed and typed a message back. Carver: Enjoy your trophy. I have a drawer full of identical socks.

Three dots appeared immediately. Pike: They miss their brother. Tragic sock separation. I'm sending ransom photos tomorrow.

I smiled at the screen. It was Pike—bright and ridiculous, fearless in ways I was only beginning to understand.

My thumbs hovered over the keyboard as I considered responding with something equally flippant. Instead, I typed: Carver: I miss you too.

It was as close as I could come to articulating the revelation still settling over me. After decades of carefully controlled emotions and relationships maintained at arm's length, Pike made me want to take the risk to know myself.

### Chapter fourteen

#### Pike

My phone buzzed against the kitchen counter as I stood barefoot, waiting for the coffee to finish brewing. The email notification sat there like an unexploded grenade—sender: Kevin Morrison, Agent . Subject line: Call me. Good news.

I knew what good news meant. In hockey, only one kind made agents wake up early on a Tuesday.

My thumb hesitated over the screen. The coffee maker gurgled behind me, filling my apartment with the rich scent of dark roast—the expensive kind Carver had started buying after discovering my caffeine standards.

Evidence of him was everywhere: his backup phone charger coiled by the toaster, yesterday's Lewiston Sun-Journal folded to the sports section he'd been reading aloud to me in bed.

I opened the email.

Pike—NHL Rookie Camp invitation came through. Syracuse Sentinels. September 5-12, 2026. This is it, kid. Call me when you're vertical.

The words blurred, then sharpened, and then blurred again. Syracuse Sentinels. Rookie Camp. The phrase I'd been chasing since I was nine years old, stick-handling tennis balls in my parents' basement.

I should have felt lightning in my chest. I should have whooped loud enough to wake the neighbors. I should have called my parents, my sister, and everyone who'd watched me grind through junior leagues, college, and my current purgatory of professional hockey.

Instead, my stomach clenched like I'd swallowed ice water at 2 AM.

The coffee maker beeped its completion, but I couldn't move. My bare feet were rooted to the floor, toes curling against the hardwood grain. Outside, early morning Lewiston stretched gray and quiet under November clouds.

It was supposed to be the moment. It was the payoff for every 5 AM practice, every hit that left me dizzy, and every summer spent in stuffy training facilities instead of at the lake with friends.

So why did it feel like someone was pulling the floor out from under me?

I thought about Carver's face in sleep—how the perpetual tension around his eyes finally relaxed, making him look younger than his thirty-one years. His hand found mine sometime during the night, fingers weaving together like we'd been doing it for decades instead of weeks.

I've wanted this my whole life, s o why does it feel like I just got benched?

The phone rang. Kevin's name flashed across the screen. I let it buzz twice before answering.

"There's my future NHL star." Kevin's voice boomed through the speaker, impossibly cheerful for seven-thirty in the morning. "How's it feel to be living the dream, kid?"

"It feels..." I swallowed, searching for words that wouldn't sound ungrateful. "It feels

incredible. Surreal."

"As it should. Syracuse has been watching you all season. That chemistry you've got with Carver? That's what caught their attention. They want to see how you adapt to higher-level talent."

"When do they need an answer?"

"Already gave it. You're going, Pike. This isn't a maybe—this is your ticket to the show."

After I hung up, I stood in my kitchen clutching my phone, surrounded by the scraps of a life I might be leaving behind. I had a framed photo of last season's team resting on my counter. Carver's scowl was visible even in celebration.

A Lewiston Forge magnet attached my lease renewal form to the refrigerator door. I'd signed it last month when the future seemed more predictable.

As I sipped my coffee, all I could think about was how I would tell Carver that his mentorship had been so successful it might cost us everything we'd built together.

When I reached The Colisée, it felt entirely different from the day before. It had the same concrete corridors and smell of rubber and refrigeration, but the walls seemed to press closer like the building itself knew I was keeping secrets.

The locker room buzzed with its usual pre-practice energy. TJ regaled anyone within earshot about his disastrous attempt to cook dinner for his latest girlfriend, while Monroe methodically taped his stick with the focus of a monk illuminating manuscripts. I claimed my stall and began the ritual of suiting up.

Mercier was observant as always. "You look like someone pissed in your protein



shake, Pike."

"Rough morning."

Carver entered as Coach blew his whistle for ice time. Our eyes met across the crowded room—a split second of connection that warmed my entire body. He nodded and fell into his usual preparation routine.

On the ice, something inside me shook loose. Maybe it was the guilt gnawing at my ribs, but I flew through drills with an edge that bordered on violence. Every stride had extra bite, and every pass snapped with unnecessary force. When Coach set up two-on-one rushes, I attacked the defense like they'd hurled personal insults at me.

I couldn't dial it back. I drove to the net with reckless abandon. My stick blade found every seam and every gap between the defender and Mercier in the goal.

Coach's whistle pierced the air. "Pike! Reel it in before you hurt someone."

I coasted to a stop. The rest of the team stared—some impressed, others wary, like they'd watched a nature documentary where the predator got a little too enthusiastic about the hunt.

Carver skated over as we rotated lines, positioning himself close enough that his shoulder brushed mine. The contact lasted maybe two seconds, but it was enough to slow my hammering pulse.

"You okay?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Carver searched my face, looking for everything I was trying to hide. I thought he might demand answers I wasn't ready to give. Instead, he bumped my shin guard with his stick—a tiny gesture of support.

"Whatever it is, we'll figure it out." He skated away before I could say anything.

When practice ended, I returned to the locker room and peeled off my gear with mechanical efficiency. Mercier appeared beside my stall.

"You've been clearer lately." He settled onto the bench. "You're more dialed in."

The observation caught me off guard. Not clearer, I thought. Just... less alone.

"Guess I'm finally catching my stride." I forced a hint of lightness into my voice.

Mercier nodded. "Just don't go getting called up and leave us behind. Some of us are getting used to having competent wingers."

The words landed like a wickedly aimed uppercut. "Not going anywhere," I lied, the taste of deception bitter on my tongue.

"Good." Mercier stood and shouldered his enormous goalie bag. "Some things are worth staying for."

He headed toward the exit and left me with the weight of his words. I couldn't shake the knowledge that I was about to disappoint everyone who mattered most.

Across the room, Carver finished packing his gear. When he glanced my way, I saw something in his expression—not suspicion exactly, but awareness. He could sense the storm gathering beneath my carefully maintained surface.

I needed to tell him. Tonight. I had to speak before the secret ate me alive from the inside out.

Later that evening, snow clung to my eyelashes as I climbed the steps to Carver's

building. I knocked twice, our established pattern, and heard his footsteps approaching. When the door swung open, he stood there in worn jeans and a henley that had seen better days. The sight of him—solid, real, mine for however long we lasted—took my breath away.

"You look like hell," he said.

"Charming as always." I stepped inside, shaking snow from my jacket. "Your customer service skills need work."

"Good thing you're not a customer."

Before I could respond, he gripped my waist, pulling me close enough to smell the sandalwood soap he used and count the amber flecks in his dark eyes. The kiss that followed was immediate and hungry like he'd been saving it up all day.

I laughed against his mouth when my snow-cold nose made him flinch. "Sorry. Winter casualty."

"I'll survive." His hands were already working on the buttons of my coat. "Been thinking about this since practice."

"Just this?" I helped him push the coat off my shoulders, letting it fall to the floor in a damp heap.

"Among other things." He backed me toward the couch. "Your aggressive streak today was... distracting."

"Distracting how?"

"Made me want to see what you'd do with all that energy in a different context."

My face flushed. Even after a couple of weeks of intimate connection, Carver's directness still caught me off guard.

I collapsed onto the couch, arms spread wide across the back cushions. "Well then. Consider this your opportunity to find out."

He raised an eyebrow. "You're ridiculous."

"But you like that about me."

"Jury's still out." He was already in motion, settling between my legs.

He rubbed my inner thighs through denim, thumbs tracing patterns that made my breath catch in my throat. When he looked up at me, something electric passed between us.

"You sure about this?"

Instead of answering with words, I reached down to rake my fingers through his hair. The gesture said everything I couldn't put into spoken words: Yes. Always. For as long as you'll have me.

Carver's response was to press his mouth to the denim covering my hip bone, a kiss so gentle it felt like reverence. His hands worked at my belt with practiced efficiency, and I lifted my hips to help him ease my jeans down.

The first touch of his mouth was a shock of heat that made me gasp and grip the couch cushions. Carver paused, breath warm against sensitive skin, waiting for me to adjust before continuing his careful exploration.

"Fuck," I managed, head falling back against the cushions.

He hummed in response, the vibration sending sparks up my spine. He grabbed one of my hands as his tongue slowly slid up my shaft with patience that bordered on torture.

My free hand tangled deeper in his hair, holding onto him like he might disappear if I let go.

"Hey." Carver's voice pulled me back to the present. "Where'd you go?"

"Nowhere. I'm here." I tugged gently at his hair. "Very much here."

"Good." His mouth curved into that rare, genuine smile that transformed his entire face. "Because I'm not done with you yet."

What followed was a masterclass in focused attention. Carver had learned what made me arch off the couch and drew helpless whimpers from my throat.

We hadn't actually fucked yet, but I knew we'd get there on our schedule—if we lasted that long. He applied suction and tugged on my balls with his free hand.

Every time my belly tensed, the tell-tale sign I was on the edge, he'd pull back and stare up at my eyes. I fought to keep them open and focused.

When I finally came, it was with Carver's name on my lips and my fingers twisted in his hair, pleasure crashing over me in waves that left me breathless and shaking.

He pressed one last kiss to my hip before crawling up my body, settling against me with his head on my chest. There, we collaborated on stroking his thick cock until he came with a thick, molten flow.

I wrapped my arms around him instinctively, feeling his solid weight and the steady

rhythm of his breathing as it gradually slowed.

"You okay?" he murmured against my collarbone.

"More than okay." I pressed my lips to the crown of his head. "That was..."

"Adequate?"

I snorted. "Fishing for compliments?"

"Maybe." He lifted his head to meet my eyes, expression soft in the lamplight. "Did it work?"

"You're ridiculous," I echoed his earlier words, but there was no heat in it. Only affection so profound that it made my entire body ache.

He settled back against me, one arm draped across my waist in casual possession. I kneaded his shoulder through the thin cotton of his shirt, gathering courage for what came next.

The rookie camp invitation pulsed in my mind like a neon sign, impossible to ignore. Each passing minute was another minor betrayal, another moment of dishonesty layered between us.

"Carver."

"Mmm?" He didn't lift his head from my chest but surfaced from his drowsy contentment.

"I need to tell you something."

That got his attention. He propped himself up on one elbow, dark eyes searching my face with sudden alertness. "That sounds ominous."

"Not ominous. Just..." I swallowed hard, my mouth gone dry. "I got invited to a rookie camp."

For a heartbeat, maybe two, Carver's expression remained unchanged. Then, something changed. It was a subtle rearrangement of features that I might have missed if I hadn't been watching so intently.

He offered a carefully constructed smile. "That's incredible, Pike. Fucking incredible."

His response was genuine but also tense.

"Syracuse Sentinels," I continued. "July fifteenth through twenty-second."

"Rookie camp." He sat up fully, running a hand through his hair. "That's... Christ, that's huge. One step from the team's training camp. How long have you known?"

"This morning. Kevin called after the email came through."

Carver nodded, processing. When he looked at me again, his expression settled into something I recognized from team meetings—professional pride and mentorly satisfaction. It was all the right emotions arranged in all the right proportions.

"You earned this. No surprise here. You're ready for this level."

"Am I?"

"Are you kidding? Pike, you've been playing like you belong in the show since the

second week of the season. This camp is just Syracuse catching up to what everyone else already knows."

He reached out to squeeze my shoulder. "I'm proud of you." He meant it. That was the worst part—every word rang with genuine emotion, but underneath it all, I sensed he was already building new walls.

I wanted to shake him, to demand he stop being so fucking reasonable about it. I wanted to rage, argue, or do something other than smile like his world hadn't tilted off its axis.

Before I could stop myself, I asked, "What happens to us?"

It was like I'd lobbed a grenade with the pin pulled. "I don't know," he said quietly. "But Pike, you can't pass this up. Not for anything. Not for me."

"I didn't say I was going to—"

"You better not even be thinking it." There was an edge to his voice. "This is your shot. It's your real-life shot at everything you've worked for since you were a kid."

"And what about this?" I gestured between us. "What about what we've been building?"

Carver's jaw worked silently for several seconds. When he spoke, his voice was carefully neutral. "We always knew this was temporary. That was the whole point—no expectations, no promises. Just... this."

The words hit like a body check I hadn't seen coming. "So that's it? I get good news about my career, and we're suddenly temporary?"



"We were always temporary." It was his brain talking, but something in his tone suggested he was trying to convince his heart as much as me. "You're twenty-three with an NHL future. I'm thirty-one with—" He shook his head. "This was never going to be forever."

I stared at the man who'd just worshipped my body with the reverence of someone who had all the time in the world. He was now talking like he'd always knew a breakup was inevitable.

I sat up fully, suddenly aware of my nakedness in a way I hadn't been moments before. "You don't get to hear about my camp invitation and immediately start writing our obituary."

"I'm being realistic—"

"You're scared." It was a brutally true accusation. "You're terrified that maybe this thing between us is real enough to survive me having options."

"Don't."

"Don't what? Don't point out that you're already pushing me away before I've even left? Don't notice that you've gone from 'I'm proud of you' to 'we were always temporary' in two minutes?"

He stood abruptly, retrieving his discarded shirt from the floor and pulling it over his head. "You should go."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. You've got a new life to work out. There are big decisions to make." His voice was flat and professional. It was only November, and the camp was in July, but he

was already walking away. "I don't want to complicate any of it for you."

I dressed in stunned silence. At the door, I paused with my hand on the knob. "For what it's worth, this morning, when I got the news? My first thought wasn't about the NHL or my career or any of that. It was about how I was going to tell you. How we were going to figure out our future together."

He didn't turn around, but I saw his reflection in the window—his eyes were closed, and his shoulders slumped forward.

"That was my first thought," I repeated. "Not how to leave, but how to stay. Remember that when you're lying awake tonight, convincing yourself this was always just temporary."

The door closed behind me with a soft click that sounded far too final.

Outside, I sat in my car for several minutes, hands gripping the steering wheel, watching Carver's window for any sign of movement. The light stayed on, but he never appeared.

Why does this feel like the beginning of the end instead of a new beginning?

The question followed me home through empty streets. I'd gotten everything I'd always wanted—the invitation, the opportunity, and the chance to prove I belonged at the highest level.

So why did it feel like I'd just lost the only thing that really mattered?

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:19 am*

### Chapter fifteen

#### Carver

I leaned against the tunnel entrance post-practice, miming checking my cell phone, but really watching the usual controlled chaos unfold. Then, the info leaked.

It started with Monroe suddenly straightening and turning toward Pike's stall. Then Mercier's voice cut through the ambient noise. It was a rare deviation from his stoic tone.

"Holy shit, Pike. Syracuse? For real?"

The words hit me like a puck to the solar plexus. Of course, I knew before the rest of the team, but it struck me differently.

A ripple of congratulations started spreading outward like rings in disturbed water. NHL rookie camp. I forced myself to keep staring at my phone screen, scanning meaningless text messages and weather updates.

Mercier wrapped Pike in one of those awkward hockey hugs—all shoulder pads and a careful stance to avoid catching equipment on equipment. "Knew you were going places. The question was never if, only when."

Pride was my first reaction. It always was with Pike—that instinctive surge of satisfaction when someone I'd invested time in succeeded. He'd earned the invitation. The kid deserved his shot.

Next was a second wave, the emotional one that left me gripping my phone hard enough to crack the screen.

He's leaving.

Not immediately, not tomorrow, but the trajectory was clear. Rookie camp would lead to training camp, training camp would lead to a roster spot, and a roster spot would lead to Pike disappearing into a world I'd never be invited to enter.

I looked up, drawn by some masochistic need to watch his face during his moment of triumph. He stood surrounded by teammates, accepting handshakes and backslaps with that megawatt smile.

When he spotted me across the crowded room, his smile wavered for a moment before he turned back to TJ, who was already launching into some story about a buddy who'd made it to rookie camp. The guy returned with tales of facilities that made our setup look like a beer league operation.

I should have walked over and added my congratulations to the chorus. Instead, I remained frozen in the tunnel entrance, watching Pike soak up praise while carefully avoiding participation.

"Hey, Carver."

I turned to find Sanders, one of our newer defensemen, hovering at my elbow. The kid couldn't have been more than twenty, still baby-faced enough that he probably got carded at gas stations.

"You ever do one of those rookie camps?"

The question was innocent enough, a natural part of the curiosity that came with

being new to professional hockey. He probably figured I had wisdom to share, war stories from my own brush with NHL attention.

"Yeah." My voice was clipped and harsh. "Once."

He waited for more, but I had nothing else to share. What was I supposed to say? That I'd been twenty-four when the Colorado Avalanche invited me to their camp? That I'd spent three sleepless nights preparing, convinced I was finally getting my break? That I'd been cut on day four after a scrimmage where nothing went right, and everything I touched turned to garbage?

"Cool." Sanders sensed he'd stepped into territory he didn't understand. "That's... cool."

He drifted away, leaving me alone with memories I'd worked hard to bury. That camp had been my shot—my one real chance to prove I belonged at the highest level. When it ended with a handshake and a "thanks for coming out," I'd told myself there would be other opportunities.

There weren't.

Seven years later, while I watched Pike's genuine excitement, that old wound cracked open again. The difference this time was that Pike had the talent to survive the cut. He had the pure skill that scouts drooled over.

He was everything I'd never been.

Stop it, I told myself. This isn't about you.

The bitter taste in my mouth suggested otherwise.

It was a Friday, and that meant The Icehouse would be crowded, perfect for drowning my mood in beer and my trademark sarcasm. I claimed a booth in the back corner with TJ and a couple of the older guys, positioning myself where I could see most of the bar without appearing to follow anyone in particular.

TJ launched into a story. "So I told her, if you're gonna criticize my parallel parking, you better be prepared to demonstrate the proper technique." He gestured with a chicken wing for emphasis. "Next thing I know, she's got my keys, and she's showing me up in front of half the neighborhood."

Mercier snorted. "How's that working out for your ego?"

"My ego's fine. It's my passenger side mirror that's having issues."

I should have listened more closely and contributed some cutting remarks. Instead, I kept glancing over to where Pike sat with a different cluster of teammates.

He was at a high-top table near the bar, surrounded by our backup goalie and two of the younger forwards. From my angle, I saw his profile when he turned to respond to whatever story Monroe was telling. He was laughing too loudly and frequently, like someone trying very hard to prove he was having a good time.

He'd been avoiding looking in my direction since I arrived.

The deliberate avoidance stung more than I wanted to admit. We'd perfected the art of stolen glances over the past few weeks. Now, there was nothing. Pike threw himself into conversations with theatrical enthusiasm while I sat twenty feet away feeling like a ghost.

TJ snapped his fingers in front of my face. "Hey, Carver, are you gonna join us for this round?"

"I'm here." I reached for my beer; it was lukewarm.

"Could've fooled me. You've been somewhere else all night." TJ looked across the room and connected the dots. "Ah. Rookie camp blues."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come on, man. Pike gets his big break, and suddenly, you're brooding like someone stole your favorite stick. It's not subtle."

I forced myself to look at TJ instead of checking Pike's table again. "Kid worked for it. He deserves the shot."

"Sure he does. That doesn't mean you have to be thrilled about losing your best winger to the big leagues."

If only that's all I was losing.

That thought was the kind I said I would avoid. Pike's invitation had nothing to do with me and everything to do with his own talent and dedication.

So why did it feel like someone was slowly pulling my chest cavity open with rusty pliers?

"I'm already thinking about line combinations for next season. It's gonna be a different team." That last part wasn't a lie, but I knew I wouldn't be around to see the new line combinations.

TJ signaled for another pitcher. "Different doesn't have to mean worse. Besides, who knows? Maybe the kid will flame out and come crawling back to us lowly minor leaguers."

The words were meant as a joke, but I wanted to defend Pike and point out that he wouldn't flame out because he was too smart and fundamentally good at hockey to wash out of a rookie camp. Saying any of that would reveal more than I wanted to show.

I settled for a noncommittal grunt and took another sip of terrible beer.

"You okay?" TJ studied my face. "You look like you just bit into something rotten."

"Fine." I pushed back from the table. "Just need some fresh air."

"Carver—"

"Five minutes."

I reached the parking lot before my carefully maintained composure started to crack. The November air bit at my face and hands, sharp enough to cut through the fog of alcohol and regret that had been building all evening. Snow was starting to fall in fat, lazy flakes that melted the instant they hit the asphalt.

I fished my phone out of my pocket more for something to do with my hands than because I expected any messages. The screen was blank except for the time—9:47 PM—and a weather alert warning of snow mixed with freezing rain overnight.

This is temporary, I'd told Pike just days ago. We were always temporary.

The words had been meant as protection, reminding us that whatever we'd built had an expiration date. I'd thought I was being realistic, practical, and maybe even kind by acknowledging the inevitable before it blindsided us.

Now, it felt like the stupidest thing I'd ever said.



Standing in a parking lot, watching snow fall while Pike celebrated his future inside, I realized that temporary didn't make it hurt less. If anything, knowing our time was limited made every moment of distance feel like a countdown to something I wasn't ready to lose.

I stayed outside until my fingers went numb, and my breath formed clouds thick enough to obscure my vision. When I finally headed back inside, Pike's table was half-empty. The celebration was winding down.

Our gazes met for the first time all evening. For a heartbeat, neither of us looked away. Something passed between us—recognition, regret, maybe even longing—before Pike turned back to a story from Monroe, and I retreated to my corner booth.

The rest of the evening blurred together in a haze of forced conversation and foul-tasting beer. By the time the last call came around, half the team had already drifted away to cars or girlfriends.

I was gathering my coat when someone brushed against my shoulder. It was Pike, finally close enough to touch, leaning in like he was going to say something.

He didn't. He straightened and walked past me toward the exit, leaving only the faint scent of that citrusy shampoo.

The silence in my apartment was like a living thing pressing against my eardrums. I'd left the Icehouse without saying goodbye to anyone, slipping out through the back exit like a coward.

Now I sat on my couch in the half-darkness, with the only light coming from the television. I'd tuned it to some silly sitcom rerun, but I couldn't summon enough interest to care about the plot.

My beer sat untouched on the coffee table. The apartment felt smaller than usual as if the walls had crept inward while I wasn't paying attention.

He's leaving.

The thought had circled my brain for hours, wearing a groove like skate blades on fresh ice. Pike was leaving—not tomorrow, not next week, but eventually, inevitably, as surely as winter followed fall in Maine.

The rookie camp was just the first domino in a sequence that would end with him in a different league, city, and life that had no space for a washed-up minor-league veteran.

I picked up my phone, thumb hovering over Pike's contact. Three different messages sat in my drafts folder—variations on apologies and explanations that I'd typed and deleted over the past hour. Each one sounded either too desperate or too casual, missing some essential element that would bridge the chasm I'd helped create.

We need to talk.

Delete.

About tonight—I didn't mean to

Delete.

I'm sorry.

Delete.

What could I say that delivered some version of the truth? That watching him

celebrate felt like a preview of my funeral?

None of it was his fault. He hadn't asked to be twenty-three with hands that could make pucks dance, or vision that could thread passes through microscopic gaps in defensive coverage. He hadn't chosen to be everything I'd wanted to become when I was his age.

I set the phone aside and scrubbed my hands through my hair, suddenly aware of how thoroughly I'd fucked up the evening. Pike had gotten the biggest news of his career. Instead of celebrating with him or even pretending to be happy, I'd spent the night brooding in corners like some emotionally stunted adult who'd never learned how to process feelings like a functional adult.

Get your shit together.

### Chapter sixteen

#### Pike

The locker room greeted me with its familiar cocktail of eucalyptus balm and stale coffee, but everything felt wrong. My clothes from yesterday clung to my skin—same jeans, same wrinkled henley that still carried the ghost of that sandalwood smell Carver loved. I'd managed maybe two hours of sleep, mostly staring at my ceiling and replaying his words on an endless loop.

We were always temporary.

The phrase continued to burrow under my skin like a splinter for two nights now, working deeper with each passing hour.

I rounded the corner to find him already at his stall, methodically threading laces through eyelets with the precision of a surgeon. His shoulders hunched forward, creating a wall of muscle and silence that screamed stay away .

My feet carried me closer before my brain could intervene. I blurted out the question that haunted me. "Was this just... exploration? A phase you're gonna forget the second I'm gone?"

Carver's hands froze. He didn't look up.

"It wasn't nothing."

The non-answer provided zero comfort. "Then what the hell was it?"

He looked up, dark circles under his eyes. "Pike..."

"No." I stepped close enough to smell the mint toothpaste on his breath. "You don't get to do that. You don't get to look at me like I'm some naive kid who doesn't understand how the world works."

His back straightened. When he spoke, each word was calculated. "The timing's shit. You've got this opportunity, and I won't be the thing that distracts you from—"

"You already let it mess with everything." A sharp, brittle laugh escaped me. "You think pretending none of this happened will make it easier? You think I can flip a switch and forget?"

Carver's knuckles went white around his skate laces. "We agreed—"

"We agreed to honesty. Remember that rule? The one about telling each other the hard stuff?" My voice cracked, showing more emotion than I wanted.

He stood then, towering over me in the narrow space between stalls. For a second, I thought he might reach for me. Instead, he grabbed his helmet and stick.

"I need to get on the ice."

He brushed past me, with his shoulder grazing mine with enough force to send me stumbling back a step. It was a brutal reminder of everything we'd built that he was determined to tear down.

I stared at the empty space where he'd been.

Coach had us running two-on-one drills, the kind Carver and I could execute blindfolded on a good day. Now, we moved like strangers forced to dance to music neither of us could hear.

He fed me a pass at the blue line—too hard, too high. It sailed over my stick and into the corner boards with a hollow clang. I retrieved it without looking at him.

"Communication!" Coach barked from the bench. "I want to hear voices out there!"

The following sequence was worse. Carver held the puck longer than I expected. When he finally released it, I'd already committed to a different path. The puck skittered harmlessly to Mercier, who gloved it with an expression that combined confusion and concern.

"What the hell was that?" TJ skated over during the brief whistle, gesturing between us. "You two having a lovers' quarrel or something?"

The blood drained from my face. TJ meant it as a joke—his usual needling—but the words were harsh. I caught Carver's reaction in my peripheral vision: a barely perceptible flinch, followed by the careful reconstruction of his public mask.

I rattled off nothing words. "Just off our timing. Happens to everyone."

TJ wasn't buying it. Neither was Mercier, who'd been watching us with those sharp goalie eyes that missed nothing. Even Monroe kept glancing our way; his brow furrowed with the particular concern of someone witnessing a car accident in slow motion.

Coach reset the drill and paired us with Lambert for a three-man rush. Simple. Basic. The kind of play we'd converted in our sleep.

Carver carried the puck up the left wing, Lambert filling the middle lane. I positioned myself on the right, timing my acceleration to create the perfect triangle. The defense bit on Carver's fake, opening a lane that should have been automatic.

He passed to Lambert instead.

The puck sailed clean. Lambert buried it, and Mercier fished it from his net with theatrical frustration, but I knew—and Carver knew I knew—that the pass should have been mine. He'd chosen the safe option that avoided a connection between us.

When we regrouped for the next rush, I cut inside earlier than planned, forcing Carver to adjust his approach. He tried to thread a pass through traffic. It deflected off a defender's skate and trickled weakly toward the corner.

"Pike!" Carver's voice cracked like a whip across the ice. "What the fuck was that?"

I spun to face him, years of practiced restraint evaporating instantly. "What was what? Me trying to create space while you're playing like we've never met?"

"You jumped the play—"

"I jumped nothing! You're the one passing like I've got the plague!"

Suddenly, the rink was silent except for the mechanical hum of refrigeration units. Twenty pairs of eyes fixed on us, watching our professional facades crumble in real time.

TJ's mouth hung open. Mercier was still. Even the assistant coaches stopped their clipboard scribbling.

Coach's whistle pierced the air with three sharp blasts. "Carver! Pike! Off the ice.

Now."

I followed Carver toward the bench, each stride feeling like a march toward execution. The other players gave us a wide berth. No one wanted to witness whatever was about to happen in Coach's office.

The office was always small. Today, it felt tiny as he barked at us in a gravelly voice. "I don't know what's happening with you two, but it ends now. You're off the line together until you figure it out."

I nodded, jaw clenched so tight my molars ached. Carver sat statue-still beside me, close enough that I could smell his deodorant, but he might as well have been on another planet. When Coach dismissed us, we filed out silently, careful not to brush shoulders in the narrow doorway.

Neither of us spoke. What was there to say? We'd torched our professional relationship in full view of the team, confirming every worst-case scenario we'd whispered about in dark moments.

My drive home passed in a blur of gray November streets and traffic lights that lingered too long on red. The apartment building sat like a monument to loneliness.

Inside, I dropped my gear bag by the door and shuffled to the couch, still wearing my practice clothes. The fabric clung to my skin, damp with sweat.

My phone sat on the coffee table; the screen was dark and accusatory. No messages. No missed calls. No sign that Carver was wrestling with the same demons as me.

I picked up the device, thumbs hovering over the keyboard.

Started typing:



Are you really done?

Deleted it.

We should talk.

Deleted that too.

I'm sorry for—

Gone before I could finish the thought.

What was I apologizing for? Caring too much? Wanting something real? Believing that what we'd built together was worth fighting for?

A protein shake bottle caught my eye from across the room—one of Carver's fancy chocolate peanut butter ones, sitting forgotten on my kitchen counter. He'd left it there three days ago when my apartment felt like a place where two people lived.

The sight of it made the dam break. A raw and animal sound—half sob, half growl—escaped me. My shoulders shook, and my vision blurred as the tears suddenly rained down.

I'd cried after losses before and cried when my grandfather died. I cried the night before leaving home for college, but this was different. This was the sound of something fundamental breaking.

I grabbed the nearest thing—my practice hoodie balled up on the arm of the couch—and hurled it across the room. It struck the protein shake bottle with a hollow thunk, sending it tumbling to the floor, where it rolled in a lazy circle before coming to rest against the refrigerator.

Freezing rain began pattering against my windows as evening deepened into night, each drop matching the rhythm of my unraveling. I sat in the growing darkness, surrounded by the debris of a life that had felt full only twenty-four hours ago.

My phone remained silent. The bottle stayed on the floor. And somewhere across town, Carver was probably sleeping peacefully, already moving on from whatever temporary thing we'd been.

Sleep refused to come. I tried everything—counting ceiling tiles like Carver taught me, deep breathing exercises from my college sports psych class, even scrolling mindlessly through social media until my eyes burned. Nothing worked. Whenever I closed my eyes, I saw his face in Coach's office: blank, professional, and already a stranger.

At one-thirty, I gave up and pulled on yesterday's jeans and a thick hoodie. The rain had intensified, drumming against my windows with the persistence of an interrogation. Ice was gathering on the sidewalks below. It was perfect weather for bad decisions.

The streets were nearly empty. More intelligent people were staying home. When I fishtailed halfway to Carver's, I thought for a moment that perhaps I should turn around.

Then, his building rose before me like a fortress, all red brick and narrow windows. A single light glowed in what I knew was his living room. He was awake, too.

I stood on the sidewalk in the pelting rain for five minutes, considering the wisdom of what I was about to do. It wasn't some casual conversation we could laugh off later. It would define everything—whether we fought for what we'd built or let it die in the wreckage of professional expectations.

The rain intensified, driving into my face with enough force to blur my vision. My hoodie had transformed into a waterlogged anchor, dragging at my shoulders with every step, but I climbed the concrete steps anyway.

At Carver's door, I hesitated. My hand hovered inches from the painted wood, trembling from the damp cold. What if he didn't answer? What if he did answer, but his expression told me everything I needed to know before I could get a word out?

I knocked once.

Nothing.

I knocked again, harder this time. The sound echoed in the narrow hallway.

Footsteps approached from inside—heavy, cautious. A pause. Then, the soft click of a deadbolt turning.

The door swung open to reveal Carver in gray sweatpants and a worn Forge t-shirt, hair sticking up at odd angles like he'd been running his hands through it. His eyes were red-rimmed and shadowed with a kind of exhaustion that mirrored my own. He took in my soaked appearance without surprise as if he'd been expecting this moment since I'd left his apartment the night before.

"Jesus Christ, Pike." His voice was rough. "You're drowning out there."

I didn't move from the threshold, rain dripping from my hair onto his doormat. We stared at each other across the space of eighteen inches that might as well have been an ocean.

My words came out in a rush. "Was I a mistake—or were you just scared?"

He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. No sound emerged.

His dark eyes searched my face intensely. I stood there dripping on his doorstep, heart hammering against my ribs, waiting for an answer that would either save us or destroy the last fragile thread holding us together.

### Chapter seventeen

#### Carver

The wind screamed around my building like a banshee with unfinished business, rattling windows and sending debris skittering across the parking lot below. I'd given up on sleep hours ago, settling instead for pacing between my kitchen and living room while nursing a mug of chamomile tea, that weak garbage that was supposed to help me nod off.

My shoulder throbbed where I'd collided with Monroe during the disastrous practice session, but the physical pain was nothing compared to the mental loop playing on repeat. It was Pike's face when I'd brushed past him in the locker room.

His voice had cracked when he'd asked if this was just exploration. Then, he maintained careful distance on the ice like I'd become radioactive.

I'd fucked everything up. Spectacularly. Publicly. In front of the entire team.

A knock on my door cut through the storm's symphony like a gunshot. Sharp, urgent, desperate. I froze mid-pace. Who the hell would be out in this weather at—I glanced at the microwave clock—two-seventeen in the morning?

I crossed to the door and peered through the peephole, my heart skipping a beat. Pike stood there, soaked through to the bone, with hair plastered to his skull in ribbons.

Water dripped from his jacket sleeves, forming puddles in the hallway. His eyes were

wild and raw like he'd been running from ghosts.

I yanked the door open. "Jesus Christ, Pike. You're drowning out there."

He didn't speak at first. He only stood there shivering, staring at me.

He lobbed a verbal bomb into my apartment. "Was I a mistake—or were you just scared?"

I studied his face until something inside me snapped. I reached out, fingers closing around his jacket sleeve, and pulled him across the threshold.

He stumbled slightly, and we were standing close in the narrow entryway. Steam rose from his soaked jacket like morning fog as the icy night air clung to his skin.

"You're gonna get hypothermia."

"I'm fine." His teeth chattered.

"You're not fine. You're—" I stopped, interrupted by how he looked at me. He was like a drowning man who saw me as the only solid thing in the world.

"I couldn't let you believe I was a mistake. I couldn't walk away thinking that's what you believe."

My throat constricted. "Pike..."

"I tried." He took a shaky breath, shoulders trembling. "I sat in my apartment for hours telling myself I could do it. That I could pretend none of this mattered, but I can't. Fuck, Carver, I can't pretend you don't matter."

I'd convinced myself that I was protecting his future from the wreckage of my limitations. Looking at him, soaked and shivering, I realized I'd been protecting nothing but my own cowardice.

"You think I wanted to say that?" The confession tore from my throat like broken glass. "You think it didn't kill me to watch you walk away?"

"Then why—"

"Because I'm terrified." It was a weakness I hated to admit. "I'm terrified that I'll be the thing that holds you back. That in five years, when you're playing in the show and living the life you've earned, you'll look back and realize I was just... dead weight."

Pike stepped closer. "You're not dead weight. You're—"

His hands came up to frame my face, cold fingers pressing against my jaw. "You're everything," he whispered.

Then, he kissed me.

His lips were cold, but they warmed quickly in the kiss. He backed me into the wall hard enough to rattle the coat hooks. One gave way, and a Forge ball cap bounced off my shoulder.

Pike laughed. I stared at him, dazed, trying to memorize how he looked mid-laugh with water still dripping off his chin.

I kissed him again, slow and sensual, dragging my tongue across his bottom lip to feel him shiver. He groaned—low and rough—and it vibrated in my spine.

Somehow, we made it to the bedroom without falling over the coffee table. I yanked

off his jacket, tossed it toward the laundry basket, and missed. He peeled off my shirt with a wet smack, then made a face.

"What the hell? You sleep in tactical cotton?"

"It's a thermal. It's warm."

"It's oppressive." He kissed my chest anyway. "Take it off, or I'll tear it off."

I took it off. Fast.

We were a mess of limbs on the bed, trying to get out of damp clothes and into each other's space at the same time. I elbowed him in the ribs at one point, and he hissed, "Ow," right before yanking me down into a kiss that smothered the apology in my throat.

There was nothing choreographed about it. At first, I didn't know where to put my hands—his shoulder? His waist? His face? Everywhere felt right, so I tried all of it.

He made a sound when I slid my hand under the waistband of his briefs, something between a gasp and a laugh, and said, "Okay, yeah, definitely not done figuring this out."

"Should I stop?"

"Do you think I want you to stop?"

That made me smile—really smile—for the first time in days.

We moved together like people who knew the stakes and knew the clock was running down but didn't care. He pulled me in like he wanted to memorize the weight of me.



It wasn't perfect. Our teeth knocked once. I couldn't find the lube immediately and ended up fishing for it in the drawer like I was playing a game show challenge.

Then, when I finally touched him, and I thrust into him, wearing a condom, for the very first time, it nearly overwhelmed both of us. His mouth went slack, and he whispered, "Fuck." To me, it sounded like a prayer.

We didn't speak much once we found our rhythm—only breath, motion, and the way Pike kept whispering my name. His legs were tight around my hips, heels hooked behind me.

I'd slowed down to hold the edge there and draw it out, but he pulled me back in with a groan so full of need that it made my legs shudder.

I gripped his cock, my fingers wrapping tight, and pressed my forehead to his. His skin was slick with sweat, flushed in the low light. Every nerve in my body lit up.

"Carver," he gasped.

I pushed in deeper, slower, and the little whimpers... fuck, they undid me. He arched up, meeting me, and I felt it—his whole body tightened, and his legs began to shake. We were close, both of us, teetering.

"Look at me."

He did

His eyes were wide and glassy, pupils dilated, mouth slack. He looked wrecked—in the best way. Wrecked and radiant and mine.

There was a silent beat before his body jerked and his back arched, and he let go with

a cry he tried to muffle against my neck. I held him through it.

I didn't last long after that.

It took three more thrusts. Maybe two. His name spilled out of me in a ragged breath, not because I meant to say it but because there was nowhere else for it to go. My body locked up, the orgasm tearing through me hard and fast.

I collapsed onto him, not all at once, carefully, breathing hard into the crook of his neck. Pike wrapped his arms around my back and held me tight like he didn't care how much weight I dropped onto him.

For a while, the only sounds were the wind outside and the thump of our hearts against each other's chests.

When I finally lifted my head, he was watching me. Dazed. Smiling.

"I can't believe I almost walked away," he murmured.

"You still can," I said. My voice cracked on the second word.

"Don't make me kick your ass after sex, Carver."

I barked out a laugh and kissed the top of his head.

We lay there listening to the rain. He started to drift. I didn't.

I stared at the ceiling and whispered so quietly that I wasn't sure I meant for him to hear: "We've got nine months. I'll figure something out."

Pike's fingers found mine under the blanket. He didn't speak, just squeezed—once,

firm and sure.

That was enough.

When Pike's breathing finally evened out against my chest, and his grip on my shoulders relaxed into something softer, I pressed my lips to the crown of his head and whispered the truth I'd been too afraid to speak.

"You're not a mistake. You're the best thing that's happened to me in years."

He lifted his head to look at me, eyes bright in the darkness. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Pike slept like the dead, curled against my side with one arm flung across my chest, his breathing deep and even. The storm had quieted, the freezing rain turning to light snow, but I still didn't fall asleep.

I lay still, aware of every point where our bodies connected—his knee pressed against my thigh and fingers splayed across my ribs. His face had gone slack in sleep, and the tension around his eyes had finally released.

The digital clock on my nightstand read 4:17 AM. I'd need to be at the rink for morning skate in three hours. Pike would probably sleep until noon if I let him, exhausted from whatever emotional marathon had driven him through the storm to my door.

I thought about the rookie camp invitation and the timeline that felt both infinite and impossibly short. Nine months until July. Nine months to figure out what the hell we were doing and whether whatever burned between us could survive the pressure of divided loyalties and competing dreams.

The math was brutal in its simplicity: Pike's future lay somewhere else, somewhere bigger than Lewiston and the Forge and everything that had defined my adult life. I'd known that from the beginning, and I had told myself I could handle it when the time came to let go.

Looking at him now—face soft with sleep and body trusted completely to my protection—I realized I'd been lying to myself.

I didn't want to let go. I didn't want to be noble, selfless, or any other virtues that required sacrificing what I'd found with him. I wanted to be selfish and wanted to fight for every day and week and month until someone forced me to choose between his happiness and my own.

"You've got nine months until rookie camp," I whispered to the darkness. "We'll figure it out."

Pike's breathing remained steady, undisturbed by my quiet vow. I closed my eyes and finally allowed myself to drift off to sleep.

The Colisée felt three times as big when it was empty at six-thirty in the morning. Every tiny sound echoed in the cavernous space. I'd left Pike sleeping in my bed, a gentle smile on his face.

Phil nodded from behind his security desk, barely looking up from his crossword. "Early bird today, Carver."

"Couldn't sleep." It was the truth, though not for the reasons he'd assume.

I claimed my stall and began the familiar ritual of gearing up. Left skate first, laces pulled tight but not cutting circulation. Shin guards positioned just so.

"Thought I might find you here."

I looked up to see Coach MacPherson, arms crossed over his chest. He stood in the doorway clutching a steaming travel mug.

"Couldn't stay away."

He approached slowly, settling onto the bench across from me, his knees lightly creaking. The intensity in his gaze told me he was about to say something that mattered.

"We need to talk about what comes next."

"If this is about yesterday's practice—"

"It's not." He waved a dismissive hand. "Pike's good for you. You're good for him. Whatever's happening between you two, talk it out and move forward."

The casual comment hit me hard. Coach knew. Of course, he knew. He'd been reading players for decades.

"Coach—"

"I'm not asking for details." He leaned forward, elbows on knees. "But I've got eyes, Carver. I see how you light up when he's around and how he settles down when you're talking him through plays. That's not mentorship—it's chemistry."

I stared into Coach's eyes and saw no judgment. He was a vision of practicality, and he'd seen everything in the hockey world.

"What I want to discuss is your future. Post-retirement."

Realistically, I knew there were a lot of options, but whenever I tried to envision something, all I saw was either an empty void or sitting behind a desk trying to sell insurance.

"I'm offering you an assistant coaching position. Start next season, learn the systems, and work with young players coming up through the pipeline." His weathered face creased into something approaching a smile. "I've watched your instincts on the ice with Pike. You've got the brain for it and the respect."

My mouth opened, closed, opened again. No sound emerged.

"Think about it," Coach said, rising from the bench with a grunt. "No rush, but I need an answer before Christmas."

He headed toward the door, then paused. "For what it's worth, coaching's a job that travels. Development camps, scouting trips, guest positions with other organizations." His eyes met mine with knowing intensity. "Flexible schedule for someone who might need to be in two places at once."

Then he was gone, leaving me alone with the possibilities I'd never dared imagine.

An assistant coaching position. A future that didn't end with my playing career but transformed it into something new—the chance to stay connected to hockey while building something beyond the ice.

For the first time since my first meeting with Coach about retirement, I could picture life after my final game, not as an ending, but as a beginning.

Pike's rookie camp invitation didn't have to be the end of our story. It could be a new chapter, one where we figured out how to build a life that honored both our dreams instead of sacrificing one for the other.

### Chapter eighteen

#### Pike

My phone buzzed against the nightstand, dragging me from sleep that had been more restless than restorative. I woke in the middle of a dream. I'd been skating through my childhood home, but the hallways kept shifting, doors appearing where walls should be. Carver had been there too, somehow both teammate and stranger, and I'd been trying to explain something important that kept dissolving before I could say it.

It was Thanksgiving. A text from my mother glowed on the screen: Mom : ETA 45 minutes. Dad's driving, so maybe an hour. Love you.

I set the phone down carefully, trying not to disturb the warm weight pressed against my side. Carver's arm lay heavy across my belly, his palm flat against my ribs.

I felt the steady rhythm of his heartbeat through his chest, where it pressed against my shoulder. In sleep, he looked younger—the permanent furrow between his brows smoothed away, mouth slightly open.

We'd been up until nearly two, talking about nothing and everything. The rookie camp invitation. His coaching offer. Whether The Colisée's vending machine actually dispensed edible food or just hockey puck-shaped cardboard. The everyday things felt enormous when whispered in the dark.

My parents were almost here. The same parents who still thought my relationship with Carver was purely professional. They believed the Forge was just a stepping

stone, a "good hockey opportunity" that would lead to bigger things. They had no idea that the bigger thing might be the man sleeping beside me.

My stomach clenched. I hadn't seen them since preseason and hadn't talked to them beyond weekly check-ins that skimmed the surface of my life.

I crawled out of bed carefully and padded to the kitchen. My hands trembled as I measured the grounds. Through the window, November in Lewiston was gray, with bare trees creating skeletal patterns against an overcast sky.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and sent a text: Matsson: Buzz when you get here. Parking sucks.

An ache settled in my chest. It was the dissonance between what was real and what I could share. I loved my parents, but my life had become complicated in ways I'd never anticipated.

From the bedroom came a soft groan, followed by the rustle of sheets. Carver was waking up. "Pike? You okay?"

I poured coffee into two mugs, adding sugar to mine and leaving his black. "Fine. Parents will be here soon. Remember?"

"Shit." The bed creaked as he sat up. "Want me to disappear for a while?"

The offer was practical and considerate. "No. You don't have to. They're taking me to dinner, but..." I paused, stirring my coffee with unnecessary force. "I told them I might bring a friend. A hockey buddy."

Carver appeared in the doorway wearing yesterday's jeans and nothing else, hair sticking out at odd angles. He accepted the coffee mug I offered, wrapping both



hands around it.

"A hockey buddy." He tried to hide his amusement. "Is that what we're calling it this week?"

"It's what they think you are."

He was quiet for a moment. "And what do you think I am?"

The question caught me off guard. I knew what he was—what we were—but I didn't have the right words to say it out loud.

"I think you're someone I don't want to hide anymore."

My phone buzzed. Mom: Pulling up now. Dad found a spot right out front—Thanksgiving miracle!

"They're here. I know it's early, but Dad likes to beat the crowds."

I set down my mug, suddenly painfully aware of everything—the rumpled state of my hair, the fact that Carver was half-dressed in my kitchen, and how my apartment probably smelled like the two of us.

Carver read my panic. "I should grab a shirt and make myself presentable for the parents."

Three sharp buzzes from downstairs made my stomach lurch. I grabbed the intercom, trying to inject enthusiasm into my voice. "Come on up. Third floor."

As footsteps echoed in the stairwell, I caught my reflection in the hallway mirror. I looked exactly like what I was—a guy who'd spent the night with someone he cared

about and was now terrified his parents would somehow figure it out.

The knock on my door was my mother's signature—two quick raps followed by a longer one. I opened it to find her beaming at me, arms already reaching for a hug.

"There's my boy." She squeezed me tight enough to crack ribs, her familiar perfume—something floral and expensive—enveloping me. "You look thin. Are you eating?"

"I'm eating, Mom."

My father hung back, grinning. He was wearing his "good" polo shirt and khakis. He'd dressed up for me. When Mom finally released me, he stepped forward for one of his careful half-hugs—the kind that acknowledged affection without lingering too long on emotion.

When Mom reached for me again, he chastised her. "Let the kid breathe, Linda."

"It's been two months," she protested. "Two months since we've seen him in person."

She examined the apartment, straightening magazines and adjusting throw pillows along the way. My father followed, carrying two paper bags that clinked softly as he set them on my counter.

"Brought cranberry sauce. It's the good stuff your mother makes, not the canned garbage."

"Dad, we're going to a restaurant."

"For after." He began unpacking the bags with methodical precision. "She also insisted on bringing pie, even when I pointed out that restaurants typically provide

dessert."

Mom was busy examining the framed team photo on my bookshelf. "Apple and pumpkin. I couldn't decide, so I made both. This is from last season, isn't it? You look so young."

"That was eight months ago."

"Yes. Boys grow so fast at your age."

Dad settled onto my couch with the ease of someone who belonged there. "How's the season going? Team keeping you busy?"

"It's good. We're second in the division." I perched on the edge of the coffee table, maintaining careful distance. Too close, and Mom would start fussing; too far, and she'd worry I was pulling away.

"That's wonderful, honey." She claimed the spot next to Dad. "And that mentor we talked about? What's his name—Carver? How's that working out?"

Heat crept up my neck. "It's been helpful. He's... he knows the game."

"Good. You need someone with experience showing you the ropes." Dad leaned forward, coffee mug balanced on his knee. "Your mother looked him up online after we talked last month. Impressive penalty minutes."

"Dad."

"What? I'm just saying it's good to have someone tough in your corner. Hockey's not a cakewalk."

From the bedroom came the soft thud of a drawer closing, followed by footsteps. My parents' heads turned toward the sound.

Mom glanced back at me. "Someone else here?"

My throat went dry. "Yeah, actually. That's Carver. He's, uh—" I scrambled for an explanation that wouldn't sound rehearsed. "He's coming to dinner with us and got here a little early. If that's okay."

"Of course, it's okay." Mom's face brightened. "How wonderful! We'd love to meet him properly."

Carver appeared in the hallway, now wearing a clean Forge t-shirt that stretched across his chest in a way that definitely didn't help my concentration. He'd tamed his hair and wore his trademark carefully neutral expression as if meeting his mentee's parents was the most natural thing in the world.

"Sorry to interrupt. I was just getting ready to head out."

Mom rose from the couch. "Don't you dare. You're Carver, aren't you? Holt Carver? Matsson's told us so much about you."

He stepped forward, extending his hand with the kind of old-fashioned politeness my parents would appreciate. "Ma'am. You must be Pike's mother. I can see where he gets his persistence."

Mom practically glowed. "Oh, aren't you charming? Linda Pike. And this is my husband, Tom."

My father rose from the couch, accepting Carver's handshake. "Tom Pike. A pleasure to meet you. We've heard you've been looking after our boy."

"He makes it easy." Carver was exceedingly smooth. "Smart player. Good instincts."

"That's what we like to hear." My father's chest puffed out slightly with parental pride. "You know, I played a little hockey myself back in the day. Nothing serious, only a college club team, but I appreciate good fundamentals when I see them."

"Matsson's got excellent fundamentals." My face flushed, and I fought to contain the color. "Strong foundation to build on."

Mom clasped her hands together. "Well, this is just perfect. You simply must join us for dinner. I insist."

I'd already told them he'd join us, but Carver continued down his politeness path.

"That's very kind, Mrs. Pike, but I wouldn't want to intrude on family time."

"Nonsense." It was the tone of voice that ended all family discussions. "You're important to Matsson, which makes you important to us."

If only she knew how important.

Dad nodded enthusiastically. "Absolutely. Besides, it's Thanksgiving. No one should eat alone on the holiday." He turned toward me. "What do you say, Matsson? Room for one more?"

All three of them looked at me expectantly. Having Carver at dinner with my parents was asking for trouble—too many opportunities for something to slip and for them to read more into our dynamic than they should. Still, I'd already told them he was coming.

"Sure," I heard myself say. "If you want to come, that would be great."

A priceless smile spread across Carver's face.

As Dad and Carver headed toward the door to retrieve their coats, Mom immediately turned to me, lowering her voice to what she probably thought was a whisper. "He's lovely, Matsson. Really. So polite. And those eyes—very kind eyes."

"Mom."

"What? It's nice to see you have good people around you. He clearly cares about your development."

Carver reappeared wearing the dark wool coat that made his shoulders look even broader. "Ready when you are."

We filed out of my apartment in a small parade—Mom leading the way while peppering Carver with questions about his playing career. Dad brought up the rear. I walked between them, noticing every glance and every gesture that might give us away.

The November air nipped at our faces as we emerged onto the sidewalk. Dad insisted on driving despite Mom's protests about his parallel parking abilities.

"Shotgun," she announced, already heading for the passenger door. "You boys can chat hockey in the back."

I slid into the backseat next to Carver. His thigh pressed against mine as Dad adjusted the rearview mirror. I concentrated on keeping my breathing steady.

Dad pulled away from the curb. "So, Holt, what's your take on Matsson's development this season? We don't get to see many games, unfortunately."

"He's exceeded every expectation." Carver didn't hesitate with his praise. "His hockey IQ has improved dramatically. The way he reads defensive schemes now compared to the beginning of the season is night and day."

Mom turned in her seat to beam at us. "That's what we want to hear. We always knew he had the talent, but talent only takes you so far, doesn't it?"

Carver agreed. "Talent without work ethic is only potential. "But Pike—Matsson—he's got both.

Mom leaned to the left to examine her face in the rearview mirror. "You should come to visit us sometime. In Minnesota. We'd love to show you around. Wouldn't we, Tom?"

"Absolutely. Got some great hockey history there. Could show you where Matsson learned to skate."

I nearly choked. The idea of Carver meeting my extended family, seeing my childhood bedroom, and sitting at my parent's kitchen table while my mother fed him homemade cookies was simultaneously terrifying and oddly appealing.

Carver was diplomatic. "That's very kind of you. I'd like that."

"Here we are," Dad announced, cutting the engine. "The Riverside Inn. Best turkey dinner in Lewiston, according to the internet."

I had no idea how I was going to survive the next two hours.

The Riverside Inn had transformed itself for the holiday, with autumn leaves scattered across white tablecloths and small pumpkins serving as centerpieces.

"This is lovely," Mom announced, spreading her napkin across her lap as we were seated. "So much nicer than trying to cook for only the three of us."

"Four." Dad smiled at Carver. "Glad you could join us, Holt. Makes it feel more like a proper celebration."

Mom turned her full attention to Carver, "Tell us about yourself. Are you from a hockey family?"

His fingers drummed lightly against the table. "Not really. My dad worked in construction, and my mom was a nurse. I was the only one who played seriously."

"How did you end up in professional hockey then?" Dad leaned forward. "That's quite a jump from a non-hockey household."

"Scholarship to Providence College. Played four years there and did well enough to get some attention from scouts. The path kind of chose itself after that."

"And you've been with the Forge for...?"

"Six seasons now. Longest I've stayed anywhere."

Mom smiled warmly. "It must feel like home by now."

"Yeah," Carver glanced at me. "It does."

We ordered turkey dinners all around because anything else would have felt like sacrilege. Mom immediately resumed her gentle interrogation.

"Do you have family nearby? Parents, siblings?"



Carver's expression turned more serious. "My mom's still in Massachusetts. Dad passed away a few years ago. I had a brother, but..." He exhaled slowly. "Car accident last year."

Mom's hand immediately went to her chest. "Oh, Holt. I'm so sorry."

"Thank you. He would have liked this, actually. Big family dinners and good food. Ryan always said the best hockey stories happened around kitchen tables."

Dad nodded. "Sounds like he was a wise man."

"He was two years younger than me and twice as smart," Affection blended with grief in his low tone. "Kept me honest."

Mom reached for Carver's hand. "It's important to have people looking out for you. Good influences. People who care about more than just your performance."

Dad nodded. "That's what we've always told Matsson. Find people who see you as more than just what you can do for them. Matsson's lucky to have you in his corner. Not every young player gets that kind of mentorship."

"I'm lucky to have him, too." Carver's comment made my heart flutter. "He's taught me as much as I've taught him."

As we finished our meal and waited for dessert, Mom reached across the table to squeeze my hand.

"We're proud of you." Her voice was suddenly thick with emotion. "I know we don't say it enough, but we are. You've grown into such a fine young man."

"Thanks, Mom."

"We just want you to be happy. That's all we've ever wanted. For you to find your place in the world and be happy."

I stared at our joined hands, fighting the sudden burn behind my eyes.

I managed to squeeze out, "I am happy." It was true. Complicated, terrifying, and uncertain, but true.

"Good. That's all that matters."

When I looked up, Carver watched me with an expression I couldn't quite read. Understanding, maybe. Or recognition. He knew exactly what those words meant to me and why they mattered so much.

For the first time all evening, I allowed myself to imagine what it might be like if they knew the truth. If I could tell them that yes, I was happy, and here was the reason why sitting right across from them, charming them with stories about hockey and making them laugh with his dry humor.

When we returned to my apartment, my parents didn't stick around. They were on their way to do sightseeing in Boston and Vermont.

The apartment felt strangely quiet after hours of conversation and laughter. Carver shrugged out of his coat, hanging it on a hook by the door. I kicked off my shoes and sank onto the couch, suddenly exhausted.

Carver sat beside me. "That went well. Your parents are good people."

"They liked you." I turned to study his profile. "Really liked you. My mom's already planning their next visit."

"About the conversation..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "The stuff about my brother. I don't usually—"

"You don't have to explain." I shifted closer until our knees were almost touching. "But thank you for sharing that with them."

"He would have liked them. Ryan always said you could tell everything about someone by how they talked about their kids."

On the television, some mindless holiday special was playing—animated reindeer dancing across a snowy landscape while cheerful music swelled in the background. Neither of us really watched it, but the soft glow provided just enough light to see each other's faces.

I rubbed Carver's forearm. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Today, at dinner... when my mom said that thing about being happy. You got this look on your face. Like you understood something I didn't even know I was feeling."

He was quiet for a long moment, his fingers picking at a loose thread on the couch cushion. "My parents never said that to me. Never asked if I was happy and never seemed to think it mattered as long as I was performing."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's not your fault, but hearing your mom say it and seeing how much it meant to you, I realized what I'd missed. That was what love is supposed to look like."

Without thinking, I reached for his hand, lacing our fingers together. His skin was warm, slightly rough from years of handling hockey sticks and gym equipment.

"My parents love each other. Twenty-seven years, and they still hold hands in the car."

"I noticed." His thumb traced across my knuckles. "They love you, too. It's obvious."

"Yeah." I swallowed hard. "Which makes this harder, in some ways."

"This?"

I gestured between us with my free hand. "Hiding. Pretending you're just my mentor when you're..." I trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

"When I'm what?"

"There was no reason to keep it from Carver anymore. I'd carried it around for so long it was starting to burn a hole through me.

"You're the one I—" My words faltered, so I shook my head and started again. "Every morning, before I even open my eyes, it's you. Then, at practice, sometimes I catch myself smiling like an idiot just because I remembered something you said."

I bit my lip. "And at night, when the lights are off, you're still in my head. Every damn night, whether we're together or not."

I forced myself to meet his eyes. "I don't know what that means, not fully. But I think... I think it means I'm falling for you."

His fingers tightened around mine.

I rushed on, afraid I'd lose the nerve. "I know it's complicated. I know there are rules and lines and everything in between, and I know this isn't easy for either of us. Still, sitting there today, watching my parents like you, and realizing they could... they could know you—really know you—and maybe still love me just the same..."

My throat closed. I coughed and tried again. 'I want that. Not now. Not tomorrow. But someday. I want them to know. I want everyone to know.'

He didn't say anything; he just looked at me like he saw through every layer I'd ever tried to keep hidden.

'You're not just a mentor or a teammate. You're not just a friend. You're... shit, Carver, you're the best thing that's ever happened to me. And yeah, maybe that's a cliché, but I don't care. It's the truth.'

The silence that followed was complete except for the soft sounds from the television and the distant hum of traffic outside. Carver stared at me, his thumb still moving in gentle circles across my skin.

For a terrifying moment, I thought I'd said too much and crossed a line we couldn't uncross. Then his free hand came up to cup my face, fingers warm against my jaw.

The words continued to tumble out. "I think I want the whole world to know, and not because I need validation or because I want to make some grand statement. But because hiding this feels like lying about the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"Someday," Carver said, his voice rough with emotion.

It wasn't a promise exactly, but it wasn't a rejection either. It was acknowledgment, possibility, and hope wrapped in a single word.

"Someday," I agreed.

We stayed on the couch like that for a long time, hands clasped, while animated characters celebrated the holiday on the screen. The fear wasn't gone—might never be completely gone—but something steadier was growing in its place.

Something that felt like courage.

When Carver finally kissed me, it was soft and slow.

"Your parents really did like me," he murmured against my lips.

"They loved you," I corrected. "Just like I do."

### Chapter nineteen

#### Carver

The tunnel at Augusta Memorial Arena reeked of stale beer and decades-old sweat. It made my stomach churn more than usual.

I pressed my shoulder against the cinder block wall and watched my teammates file past toward the ice—TJ adjusting his helmet strap for the third time and Mercier muttering what sounded like prayers or curses under his breath.

Through the gap between bodies, I glimpsed Pike warming up. He moved with that fluid precision that made everything look effortless. When he fired a shot that rang off the crossbar with a metallic clang, a cluster of Augusta fans pressed against the glass applauded.

The kid had that effect on people. Made them believers.

I experienced a swell of pride as I watched him move around the rink. He'd absorbed everything I'd taught him about reading defensive gaps, and he turned awkward early drills into poetry on ice. Still, underneath that pride lurked something uglier.

Fear.

Augusta had a reputation. They loaded their roster with players who'd never sniff the NHL but could deliver hits that ended careers. Guys like Tommy Kozlov, their left winger, collected concussions like trading cards and wore each suspension like a

badge of honor.

Pike glided past our bench during his next lap. He caught my eye through the glass and flashed that sunshine smile. I set my jaw.

Don't get hurt, kid. Not tonight. Not ever.

I pushed off the wall and began pacing, my skate guards clicking against the concrete in an agitated rhythm. Coach MacPherson appeared at my elbow, clipboard tucked under one arm. "Are you planning to wear a trench in the floor?"

"Just getting loose." I flexed my fingers inside my gloves, trying to work out the tension that had settled there like ice.

"Uh-huh. Pike looks good out there. Sharp. Confident."

"Yeah." My voice was rough and edgy from the fear. "He's ready."

"Question is, are you?"

Before I could respond, the horn sounded—end of warmup. My teammates began filtering back through the tunnel, faces flushed from exertion and their conversation buzzing with pre-game energy. Pike was among the last to return, helmet tucked under his arm.

"How's the ice?" I asked as he passed.

"Fast. Clean." He paused, studying my face. "You okay? You look like you're about to spontaneously combust."

"I'm fine."



"You're not getting it past me." He spoke quietly, meant only for me. "What's got you wound up?"

I glanced around the tunnel, making sure we weren't overheard. "Augusta plays dirty. Watch your back out there."

"Always do."

"No, Pike. I mean it." I stepped closer. "These guys will try to hurt you. They see talent and want to break it."

"I can handle myself."

"I know you can. That doesn't mean I won't worry."

"Then I guess I better not give you anything to worry about."

The second period unfolded like a chess match played at breakneck speed. Augusta came out swinging after intermission; their forecheck was more aggressive, and their hits landed with the kind of force that rattled teeth. I'd already taken two solid checks that left my shoulder singing, but Pike was untouchable—dancing between defenders like smoke and making plays that had the scattered Lewiston fans in the stands jumping to their feet.

Thirteen minutes in, he picked up a loose puck at our blue line. It caught the Augusta defense in transition, gaps opening like fault lines in their coverage.

Pike accelerated.

What followed next was a slow-motion train wreck that I could not stop. Pike committed to the outside lane, head up, stick protecting the puck with casual

confidence.

Tommy Kozlov materialized from his blind side like a heat-seeking missile.

The hit arrived with the sound of thunder—shoulder to chest, perfectly timed to catch Pike mid-stride with his head down. The impact lifted him off his skates and sent him crashing into the boards with a sickening thud that echoed through the arena.

Augusta fans roared their approval while our scattered fans screamed for a penalty. All I heard was silence—the terrible, empty quiet that follows when someone you care about goes down hard.

Pike lay crumpled against the boards, motionless.

I was off the bench before conscious thought kicked in, one skate already on the ice when Coach's voice cut through the chaos.

"CARVER!"

I froze, balanced between the bench and the ice, every muscle in my body screaming to move. I wanted to get to Pike and make Kozlov pay for what he'd done.

On the ice, Pike stirred. Slowly, carefully, he pushed himself up to his hands and knees, helmet twisted but still conscious. Relief flooded through my system.

Our eyes met. He was pale and shaken but alert as the trainers crowded around him.

What I saw was understanding in his expression. He knew I wanted to tear Kozlov's head off.

And he trusted me not to.

I forced myself to step back and sit on the bench; hands clenched so tight around my stick that the tape started to tear under my gloves. The rage was still there, pulsing like a second heartbeat, but self-control rose to meet it, fueled by the knowledge that Pike needed me to be better than my impulses.

The referee's arm shot up, whistle shrieking through the arena. Kozlov raised his hands in mock innocence, skating backward toward his bench.

"Charging, number twenty-seven, Augusta," the ref announced over the PA. "Five-minute major."

Kozlov skated to the penalty box like he was taking a victory lap, tapping his stick against the glass where Augusta fans pressed their faces. The bastard enjoyed every second.

Pike accepted help from our trainers, skating slowly toward the bench with one hand pressed to his ribs. When he collapsed onto the seat beside me, I heard a sharp intake of breath that told me he was hurting more than he'd let on.

I whispered, "You good?"

"Been better." He pulled off his helmet, revealing a cut above his left eyebrow that would need attention. "But yeah. I'm good."

Coach leaned over from behind us. "Pike, you're done for the period. Get looked at."

"Coach, I can—"

"No arguments. Carver, you're up next shift."

As Pike stood to follow the trainer down the tunnel, he paused beside me. He briefly

gripped my shoulder.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "For staying."

At the end of the second period, I sat in my stall in the locker room, methodically retaping my stick while conversations swirled around me. The usual post-period analysis mixed with something sharper and more personal.

"Did you see Carver when Pike went down?" Monroe's voice carried from across the room. "Thought he was gonna launch himself over the boards like a fucking missile."

TJ grinned. "Would've paid money to see that. Kozlov would've needed a stretcher."

"And Carver would've needed a lawyer." Mercier's goalie pragmatism came through loud and clear. "Smart play, staying put."

I kept my head down. The kind of praise lobbed in my direction was still relatively unfamiliar. For most of my career, restraint hadn't been my strong suit. I was the guy who collected penalties like souvenirs.

"Serious growth there." Lambert, a veteran defenseman in his fifth season with the team, sat beside me. "Takes balls to hold back when someone lights up your linemate like that."

Before I could respond, our head trainer pushed through the crowd with Pike in tow. The kid's face was flushed, and a butterfly bandage covered the cut above his eyebrow, but he also flashed a smile like he'd just scored a hat trick.

"Cleared for the third," he announced. A chorus of relieved cheers and stick taps rang through the locker room.

"How's the ribs?" I asked.

"Sore as hell, but nothing's broken." He pulled a fresh jersey over his head, wincing slightly as the fabric stretched across his torso. "Doc says I'm lucky Kozlov caught me square. If I'd been turning, it could've been a lot worse."

"Lucky." The word tasted bitter in my mouth. "Right."

Coach entered, clipboard in hand. "Gentlemen, we're up two-one, but that doesn't mean shit if we come out flat in the third. Augusta's gonna push. They'll try to goad us into retaliation and taking stupid penalties."

He fixed his gaze on me. "We don't take the bait. We'll play our game and stay disciplined. Follow Carver's lead."

The words hit like a shot to the chest. My lead? I was the guy with the notoriously short fuse.

"Carver showed us something out there," Coach continued. "Showed us what it looks like to put the team first when everything in your body is screaming to do something else."

Every head in the room turned toward me. I wasn't used to respectful attention. I'd come to expect the eye-rolls that followed another unnecessary penalty.

TJ spoke up. "That's captain shit, Carver."

The words nearly knocked the breath from my lungs. Captain shit. Coach had instituted a rotating Captain system since Dane got called up the season before. I never considered myself in the running.

Mercier added his voice. "Agreed. Been saying it all season—Carver's the guy we look to when things get ugly." He pushed up his goalie mask to reveal a rare smile.

Before I could process the wave of positive sounds and stick taps, Pike stood. "He's right. What Carver did out there wasn't about being soft or backing down. It was about knowing what mattered more than his feelings. That's the kind of leader this team needs."

A murmur of agreement rippled through the group. For the first time in my six seasons with the Forge, I felt like more than a role player filling space between the real stars.

Coach clapped his hands, breaking the spell. "Alright, enough group therapy. The third period starts in three minutes. Pike, Monroe, Jameson—you're line one. Carver, be ready. Let's finish this thing."

As the room emptied toward the tunnel, Pike stepped to my side. "You okay?"

I nodded. "Processing. Not used to being called leadership material."

"Get used to it. Some of us have been waiting for you to figure it out."

We won 3-2, grinding out the kind of ugly victory that felt more satisfying than any blowout. I sat in my stall, slowly working through my post-game routine.

Around me, my teammates celebrated in their own ways. TJ was already on his phone, probably texting some girl about his assist on the game-winner. Mercier methodically cleaned his mask, the way he did after every game, win or lose. Monroe sprawled across the bench, still catching his breath from a shift that had left him gasping.

Pike emerged from the trainer's room, freshly showered and changed into street clothes. The butterfly bandage above his eyebrow had been replaced with a smaller strip, barely visible unless you knew to look for it. He moved carefully, favoring his left side where Kozlov's shoulder had found its mark.

"Clean bill of health?"

"More or less." He began packing his gear with methodical precision, the way he did everything. "Doc wants me to ice the ribs tonight, but nothing's broken or displaced."

"Good." I turned back to my skates, working at laces that had somehow tangled themselves into an impossible knot. "Scared the shit out of me when you went down."

"Yeah, well, welcome to my world every time you drop the gloves."

From across the room, Sanders—the rookie defenseman—snorted. "Speaking of dropping gloves, what was that about, Carver? Thought you were gonna hop the boards and murder Kozlov right there on the ice."

The comment was casual, meant as ribbing, but something in his tone rubbed me wrong. There was an edge to it, suggesting that my restraint had been weakness rather than strength.

"Probably should have," Sanders continued, pulling on a clean shirt. "A guy like that needs to know he can't just run our skill players without consequences."

I felt my jaw tighten. "Like Coach said, the game was more important than my ego."

"Sure, but—"

Pike's voice cut through the conversation. "But nothing. You don't get to talk about

him like that."

Sanders blinked, caught off guard. "I wasn't—I mean, I was just saying—"

"You were just running your mouth about something you don't understand." Pike took a step forward. "Carver's more than just a linemate, and he made the right call out there. The smart call. It was the kind of call that wins games instead of losing them to stupid penalties."

The locker room was silent. Everyone paused to listen.

"You think fighting Kozlov would've helped me? Would've made my ribs feel better or gotten me back on the ice faster?" Pike's gaze pinned Sanders to the wall. "Or would it have put our best penalty killer in the box for five minutes while Augusta scored twice on the power play?"

Sanders opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. No sound emerged.

"That's what I thought." Pike shouldered his bag. "Carver's got more hockey sense in his pinky finger than you've got in your entire body. Show some fucking respect."

Everyone stared at Pike, stunned by the ferocity of his defense. He was Mr. Sunshine 99.5% of the time, but he'd stepped between me and criticism like a bodyguard protecting his principal.

In six seasons with the Forge, I'd fought my own battles, deflected my own criticism, and built my own reputation through force and sarcasm. Nobody had ever defended me like that. Nobody had ever thought I was worth protecting.

TJ was the first to break the silence, letting out a low whistle. "Well, damn. Sunshine's got claws."



Looking around, I realized our secret wasn't a secret anymore. Not entirely. Our teammates understood now, even if they couldn't cite a specific definition. Pike and I were something more than mentor and student.

And the world didn't end.

The locker room had mostly emptied by the time I finished my post-game routine. A few stragglers remained—Mercier organized his goalie gear with obsessive precision.

I sat on the bench in front of my stall, working at the knots in my skate laces with fingers that felt clumsy and thick. The adrenaline from the game was finally wearing off, leaving behind a familiar ache in my shoulders and the more profound exhaustion from playing with every nerve on high alert.

Pike appeared at the edge of my vision, moving quietly across the concrete floor. He'd changed into dark jeans and a faded Minnesota Gophers sweatshirt, his gear bag slung over one shoulder. He settled onto the bench beside me.

"Need help with those?" He nodded toward my skates, where I still wrestled with laces that seemed determined to stay knotted. Without waiting for a response, Pike reached over and began working at the knot with steady patience.

"You scared the shit out of me tonight," he said quietly. "When Kozlov hit me, I mean. Not the hit itself—I've taken worse—but watching you almost come over the boards like that."

I studied his profile as he concentrated on my skate.

"Thought you were gonna lose it completely," he continued. "And then you didn't. You... stopped. Stepped back. I've never seen anything like it."

"Didn't feel like stopping. Every instinct I had was screaming to get out there and tear his fucking head off."

"But you didn't." The knot finally yielded to Pike's persistence. "You stayed on the bench because that's what the team needed. That's what I needed."

Mercier finally finished his rituals and headed for the door. We were alone except for the distant sound of Augusta's maintenance staff beginning cleanup.

"I saw you hold back," Pike said. "I know what that cost you."

"You were worth it."

Pike rested his hand on my knee. It wasn't sexual. It was a simple connection acknowledging what we'd been through earlier in the night.

He spoke softly. "Thank you for defending me out there without throwing a punch. For showing me what real strength looks like."

"And thank you for what you did with Sanders. Nobody's ever..."

"Nobody's ever what?"

"Had my back like that. Not in a locker room, anyway."

Pike smiled. Mr. Sunshine had returned. "Better get used to it." He squeezed my knee. "We should probably get out of here before security comes looking."

"Yeah." I bent to finish removing my skates. "Pike?"

"Yeah?"

"What you said to Sanders... about us being something more than linemates. The whole room heard it."

"I know."

"You okay with that? With them knowing?"

He looked at me. "Are you?"

I thought about it. The idea of the team knowing should have terrified me. Instead, all I felt was relief. I was relieved at not having to pretend anymore and not having to maintain careful distance or hide the way Pike had become vital to me.

"Yeah, I think I am."

"Good."

As we stepped into the cold night air, Pike bumped his shoulder gently into mine.

"So," he said, "Captain Carver, huh?"

I snorted. "Don't start."

"Too late. I'm already picturing the speech. You'll grunt twice and threaten to punch someone, and the team'll eat it up."

I smiled despite myself.

I was no longer walking out of arenas alone. And maybe I never would again.

### Chapter twenty

#### Pike

Coach's shrieking whistle announced the end of practice, and I immediately knew. It wasn't from anything Coach said or did—he stood at center ice with the same weathered expression he wore whether we'd scored or blown a two-goal lead. It was the way his eyes found mine across the rink. It set off a flock of birds in my gut.

"Carver. Pike. My office."

The words echoed off the arena walls. Around me, my teammates focused on gathering equipment and leaving the ice, but they also watched me with furtive glances.

I skated toward the bench. Each stride carried me closer to whatever reckoning waited behind Coach's door, and my fertile mind came up with a wide range of potential disasters: suspension, trade, or someone had seen Carver and me together and reported it to the suits. The rookie camp invitation could vanish with a single phone call.

Carver fell into step beside me as we headed toward the tunnel. He'd already set his jaw preparing for battle.

TJ called across the locker room. "You two look like you're walking the last mile. What'd you do, burn down the equipment room?"

I managed what I hoped passed for a casual shrug. "Guess we'll find out."

When we reached Coach's door, I hesitated. I wasn't sure I was ready for what waited inside.

Carver knocked once—sharp, decisive.

"Enter."

Coach sat behind his desk, arms crossed over his chest, studying us carefully. "Close the door," he said.

The click of the latch sounded like a cell door slamming shut.

He wasn't angry. He didn't have a white-knuckled grip on his clipboard. Coach looked tired, maybe.

"Sit." He gestured to two metal folding chairs.

I perched on one, and the office was small enough that Carver couldn't sit on the other without our thighs brushing. He assumed his default position—spine straight, face blank, and ready to take whatever punishment was coming.

Coach leaned back in his chair. It creaked in protest. For a long moment, he said nothing.

Finally: "You think you're hiding it. You're not."

My throat suddenly went dry. A prickly sensation crawled up the back of my neck.

Coach continued to speak. His tone was straightforward and matter-of-fact like he

was discussing line changes. "I want you both to know what you do off the ice is your business. On the ice, I think we have a playoff shot this season, so I need your heads in the game. Can you give me that?"

Relief suddenly washed over me. It wasn't suspension or a trade. It wasn't the end of everything. Only acknowledgment with a question I could answer.

I nodded. "Yes, sir. Absolutely."

Carver offered a blank expression. "Yes, sir."

Coach studied us for another beat, and then he nodded. "We're done here."

We stood in unison. I turned toward the door, legs still unsteady, when Coach's voice stopped us.

He didn't look up from the papers on his desk. "For what it's worth, I've seen worse matches."

We were halfway back to the locker room before either of us spoke.

I grinned. "Well, that went better than expected."

Carver snorted. "Bar was pretty fucking low."

The locker room had mostly emptied by the time we returned. TJ was still there wrestling with a particularly stubborn piece of tape wrapped around his shin guard. He looked up as we entered, eyebrows raised in theatrical concern.

"So? Firing squad?"

"No," I said, dropping onto the bench in front of my stall. "Just lineup stuff."

"Lineup stuff that required a closed-door meeting?" TJ raised an eyebrow.

Carver added, "Coach likes his privacy."

I focused on unlacing my skates, grateful for something to do with my hands. Coach knew. Had probably known for weeks, to be honest. He didn't care. Or, he cared more about wins and losses than what his players did in their own time.

I rode with Carver back to his place. He was quiet. I slumped in the passenger seat, watching Lewiston slide past the window—strip malls and gas stations giving way to residential streets lined with triple-deckers that had seen better decades.

I finally broke the silence. "Coach practically gave us his blessing. I didn't expect that."

"Coach said he's seen worse matches. That's not exactly a ringing endorsement."

I examined his profile as he drove. "You know what I think?"

"Enlighten me."

"I think you're looking for reasons to worry because the alternative—that this might actually work out—scares you more than getting caught ever did."

He drummed his fingers against the steering wheel as he navigated the turn into his parking lot. "Maybe it does."

We ordered Chinese from the place down the street—nothing fancy, only cardboard containers of lo mein and sweet and sour chicken that we ate straight from the cartons

while a Bruins game played on mute in the background. The commentators gestured soundlessly at replays while we conducted our own quiet conversation about everything and nothing.

I speared a piece of broccoli with my plastic fork. "Mercier's been giving me looks ever since Augusta. I think he knows something."

"Mercier gives everyone looks. It's his job." Carver sprawled at one end of the couch, sock feet propped on the coffee table. "Goalies notice everything. Comes with the territory."

"They've been different. More... knowing."

"Well, now he can know all he wants." Carver gestured at the TV with his beer bottle, where a Bruins player was arguing with a referee. "Look at this idiot. Two minutes for being stupid."

A commercial came on—something absurd involving a dancing insurance gecko—and Carver laughed. It wasn't his usual snort of derision. It was a playful laugh. I stared with a goofy smile on my face.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just..." I shook my head, still smiling. "You know what's weird? I feel lighter. Like, physically lighter."

He considered my comment, rolling his beer bottle between his palms. "No big surprise. I've been dragging around guilt like a Zamboni. I think we just cut the towline."

The metaphor was so perfectly Carver that I laughed out loud. "Did you compare



your emotional baggage to ice maintenance equipment?"

"If the analogy fits." He grinned, and that laugh bubbled up again. "Have you seen how much those things weigh? I've been carrying that weight around for weeks."

I set my container on the coffee table and shifted closer until my knee pressed against his thigh. "So what happens now?"

"Now we finish this terrible Chinese food and watch hockey players make questionable life choices."

"I meant—"

"I know what you meant." He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me in close. "Now we stop hiding."

"Carver?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. For being brave enough to let Coach see us."

He squeezed my hand. "Pretty sure you were the brave one. I was only trying not to shit myself."

I laughed, and the sound echoed off the walls of his small apartment.

The transition from couch to bedroom wasn't dramatic. Carver didn't put on any sultry music, and we didn't leave a trail of clothes down the hall.

Carver just stuffed the rest of the sweet and sour chicken into his mouth, while I tried

to pretend that wasn't weirdly hot. We traded sleepy smiles as we cleared takeout cartons and flicked off the TV.

"Guess we're doing this," he said, wiping his hands on a napkin like we were about to settle a poker debt.

"We've done this," I reminded him as I wove my fingers together with his and tugged him toward the bedroom. "But tonight, we're doing it with ambiance."

He snorted. "Is that what we're calling my dusty-ass bedroom now? Ambiance?"

I kissed the edge of his jaw, where stubble met soft skin. "You're not gonna be able to hide how romantic you are forever, old man."

"Who says I'm trying?" He promptly tripped over his laundry basket.

I caught him by the waistband of his jeans. "You always this clumsy when someone's trying to seduce you?"

He braced a hand against the wall. "Only when it's working."

I walked him backward until his knees hit the edge of the bed. "You gonna fall for me again?"

"Oh, I'm already falling." He playfully toppled back onto the mattress like a fainting Victorian heroine. Arms flung wide. Sigh included.

I climbed on top of him. "Wow, that was dramatic. Do you need smelling salts or a rescue inhaler?"

"Shut up and take your shirt off." He grabbed me by the belt loop.

We collapsed into a heap of knees and elbows and increasingly inappropriate giggles. It took five minutes to get his jeans off because we kept getting distracted by things like ticklish spots.

Eventually, I ended up straddling him, shirtless, one hand pressed on his muscular pecs, the other slapping his already stiff cock against mine. I stretched out my index finger to touch a scar on his shoulder. "Tell me about this one. Sword fight with a pirate?"

He rolled his eyes. "Boarding call that wasn't. Kid from Springfield. Thought he was—" His voice caught as I rubbed our cocks together, "—tough."

I kissed the scar. "Was he?"

"He cried when they stitched me up. Said he didn't mean to hit me that hard."

"A gentle soul." I lowered my body onto his and kissed a nipple while I touched a thin line near Carver's ribs. "And this one?"

"Skate blade. Rookie year with the Forge. Practice accident."

"Did you cry?"

"I bled all over the ice and yelled at Mercier for saying I looked like a Red Wedding extra."

I pressed a kiss just below the scar. "Well, I think you look more like a very sexy lumberjack who survived a tragic forest fire."

He laughed. "God, you're weird."

"And you let me undress you, so what does that make you?"

"A man with questionable judgment and excellent taste."

"Exactly." I kissed my way down his stomach, slow and deliberate. His breath hitched, and his fingers tightened in the sheets. "Pike."

"What do you need?" I looked up at him as my tongue touched his shaft, cradled in my fingers when I started to lick.

"You and whatever you're about to do."

What I was about to do made him curse, laugh, moan, and go nearly cross-eyed. I teased, then soothed. Explored, then claimed. He gave back just as much—mouth, hands, and heat, all generous and open and his.

At one point, he tried to flip us over and got tangled in the sheets. We both nearly hit the floor.

I laughed hard. "We're graceful as hell."

He groaned while I swallowed his cock up to the hilt.

We found new ways to touch each other and turned curiosity into a shared sport. I discovered that if I traced slow circles along the inside of his knee with my thumb, he made a startled little noise—half gasp, half laugh—that sent shivers up my spine. He figured out that kissing the edge of my jaw just right could make me forget how to form coherent words.

Somewhere around round two—when we were already sweaty, breathless, and halfway under the covers we'd given up trying to keep in place—Carver opened the

nightstand drawer and pulled out a bottle with a raised eyebrow.

"Maybe I can add some of that ambiance." It was a bottle of massage oil, and he held it up to my face like a magician revealing his final trick.

"I suppose it was either that or light a scented candle and summon our ancestors." I reached for it. "Hand it over."

I pushed until he rolled over onto his belly, and I squeezed the oil onto the small of his back, letting some of it run down between those muscular ass cheeks.

By the time we were approaching another round of orgasms, we were both so slippery it was less like foreplay and more like adult Twister. We had to pause at one point because my thigh squeaked against his side, and we both broke down laughing.

Eventually, we gave up pretending we were civilized and let everything get messy—hands everywhere, oil coating our skin, and our laughter dissolving into moans and whispered names.

By the end of it, we were tangled in a nest of kicked-off sheets, covered in glistening streaks and pools of cum, smelling like eucalyptus and victory and at least a little bit like the inside of a fancy spa that horny hockey players had ransacked.

My chest heaved. "Okay, this was at least one and a half orgasms better than a spa day."

A lazy grin spread across Carver's face. "And here I thought I'd have to start charging you by the hour."

I flopped onto my back. "Oh, puh-leeze, if this was a massage, you missed a whole bunch of pressure points. Very unprofessional."

He rolled onto his side and poked me just beneath the ribs—precisely where he knew I was ticklish. "You saying I need more training?"

I yelped and twisted away. A brief, flailing wrestling match ensued—half-hearted grappling and giggling threats. Carver pinned my wrists above my head and leaned in like he was about to deliver a dominant proclamation.

Instead, he kissed the tip of my nose.

I blinked up at him. "What the hell was that?"

"Intimidation tactic. Did it work?"

"Hard to say. It might require further testing."

Carver released my wrists only and slid his hands down my arms. He whispered in my ear. "I like this version of us—the one that laughs."

"We always laughed, even when we were pretending not to fall for each other."

He dropped a kiss onto my collarbone. "Yeah, but now I don't feel like I'm gonna get benched for liking you too much."

"You like me?"

"Oh, shut up."

"No, seriously. You like me—in that way?" I batted my lashes. "Are we gonna hold hands in the hallway tomorrow? Pass notes? Write each other's numbers on our sticks?"

He rolled his eyes and reached for the massage oil again. "You keep talking, and I will find out what happens when I use this on your feet ."

I gasped. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh, I would. And you're ticklish. Remember that."

I tried to scramble away, but he caught me again, and before I knew it, we were tangled up in another burst of fingers teasing and lips finding places we hadn't gotten to yet.

Later—when the laughter had quieted, and the room had gone still except for our breathing—we lay facing each other, noses almost touching.

"You good?" Carver asked, voice thick with sleep.

"More than," I whispered. "We're not hiding anymore."

"Damn right, we're not. Took us long enough."

I traced the line of his jaw with one finger. "No more shadows."

"Not with you."

Carver drifted, breathing deeply and even against my shoulder, but not quite asleep. One arm remained draped across my chest, fingers splayed over my ribs. Every few minutes, his thumb would move in a lazy circle as if he were reassuring himself that I was still there.

"You're thinking too loud," he mumbled against my collarbone.

"Can't help it. My brain won't shut up."

"What's it saying?"

I considered the question, trying to sort through the jumble of thoughts and emotions that had been churning since we'd left Coach's office. "That this might be real. We might actually have a shot at something lasting."

His arm tightened around me, pulling me closer until there was no space between us. "Scared?"

"Terrified, but for once, I feel like I'm beginning to plan for success."

"Success," he repeated. "What does that look like?"

"I don't know yet, but maybe that's okay. Maybe we can figure it out as we go."

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "You realize this is the opposite of your usual approach. Mr. Contingency Plan is suddenly okay with winging it?"

"Only with you. I'm learning to trust the process."

"The process." I heard amusement underlining Carver's words. "You make it sound like a hockey drill."

"Maybe it is. Maybe that's how we get good at this—practice, repetition, doing it over and over until it becomes instinct."

Carver's laugh was soft. "Leave it to you to turn a relationship into a training regimen."



"Is that what this is? A relationship?"

"Yeah," he said with no hesitation. "I think it is."

I chuckled softly. "Good. Because I was starting to run out of creative ways to describe you to myself."

"What have you been calling me?"

"Everything but your name, mostly. My mentor when I needed professional distance. My secret when I was feeling dramatic. My person when I was being honest." I traced the scar along his shoulder, following its path across his collarbone. "But I like boyfriend better."

"Boyfriend." He tested the word like he was tasting something new. "Haven't been anyone's boyfriend since college, and she was female."

"How does it feel?"

"Pretty damn awesome, to be honest. Like jumping out of a plane without checking if the parachute's packed properly."

I kissed his chest, right over his heart. "For what it's worth, I think your parachute's in pretty good shape."

We weren't hiding anymore. The thought circled through my mind like a mantra, each repetition making it feel more real. Coach knew. The team would figure it out soon enough if they hadn't already. And maybe, eventually, my parents would know, too. Perhaps someday, I could bring Carver home for Christmas and introduce him as more than just my mentor.

Maybe someday we wouldn't have to qualify anything at all.

The digital clock clicked over to 2:34 AM, and I finally felt sleep beginning to pull at the edges of my consciousness. Carver's arm remained heavy across my chest, his breathing deep and even. Safe. Content. Mine.

### Chapter twenty-one

#### Carver

The locker room should have been empty on Tuesday morning at eleven-thirty on a game day. Instead, I found Pike wearing a new, black winter coat, standing between the equipment racks with his phone pressed against his ear.

His free hand gestured wildly while he paced three steps toward the showers, pivot, and three steps back toward the exit. He was all restless energy and barely contained electricity.

I dropped my gear bag beside my stall. Pike's head snapped toward me, eyes wide and slightly glassy. He mumbled something into the phone and ended the call.

"You're early." I settled onto the bench. "Way early. The on-ice warmup isn't for five hours."

"I know." He resumed pacing. "I couldn't sleep. I wished you were with me because I couldn't sit still. Kevin, my agent, called and—" Words failed him in the middle of a sentence.

I looked up at him. "Talk to me."

He stopped pacing and turned to face me. "They're having me skip rookie camp. Straight to the show. Syracuse needs bodies now. I'll be on the plane tomorrow."

Tomorrow. Not July. Not after months of preparation and long goodbyes. Tomorrow, as in twenty-four hours from now.

I stared at him. He was the kid who took over my final season and rearranged every assumption I'd made about endings. He waited for my reaction like a defendant awaiting a verdict.

A wave of fierce satisfaction in a job well done hit me first and nearly knocked me sideways. Of course, they were skipping camp. It made perfect sense that they wanted him now before some other team realized what Syracuse had in their back pocket.

Next was the realization that it was all happening now—today.

"Fuck, Pike." I managed to keep my voice steady. "That's... that's incredible."

"Is it?" He resumed packing. "I feel like I might throw up. Or pass out. Or both simultaneously."

"It's exactly what should happen." So far, I meant everything I said. "You've earned it. Syracuse knows talent when they see it."

It was what I'd wanted for him. Every drill we ran and every adjustment I suggested had been building toward this moment.

He sat beside me, our thighs touching. I gripped his knee without conscious thought. He turned to look at me. "We should tell the team before it leaks."

He was right. The news would be out in the media in a matter of hours.

Mercier and TJ arrived together and headed to the equipment room first. I looked at Pike. "It won't get any easier."

"Will you—?"

"Yeah. I'll be there."

We entered the equipment room, hearing the pair bantering about the latest stick technology. Pike called, "Mercier, TJ, got a minute?"

The conversation stopped. TJ dropped his voice low. "Are we planning a coup?"

Pike didn't hesitate. "I got called up. This isn't rookie camp. It's tomorrow with Syracuse."

TJ's mouth dropped open, then stretched into a grin so wide it threatened to split his face in half. "Holy shit, Pike! Are you serious?"

Mercier's reaction was quieter but no less profound. He stepped forward to clap Pike on the shoulder firmly. "You earned it. Go show them what we taught you."

The we was unexpected. Not what I taught you or what Carver taught you. What we taught you. Like Pike belonged to all of us, this makeshift hockey family.

TJ launched himself forward, wrapping Pike in one of his signature enthusiasm-fueled embraces. "About damn time, golden boy. I was starting to think Syracuse's scouts were legally blind."

He pulled back, hands on Pike's shoulders, then executed some complicated fist-bump sequence that involved at least three directional changes and ended with jazz hands. Pike laughed. It was a good break and the first genuine smile I'd seen on his face all day.

TJ turned toward me, extending the fist-bump ritual in my direction. "Carver, you

must be bursting with pride. Your little mentee's all grown up."

I accepted the ridiculous handshake and allowed TJ's infectious joy to crack through some of my trepidation about the future. "He did the work. I only pointed him in the right direction."

TJ sat on an overturned equipment crate. "So, I guess this means I need a new excuse for my shit passing. Can't blame you for not being where I expected anymore."

"Your passing was shit before Pike got here," I pointed out.

"Details." TJ waved dismissively. "The important thing is, I had a scapegoat. Now, I'll have to take responsibility for my failures. It's very inconvenient."

Pike laughed again. He needed some levity. Mercier retrieved his mask from a shelf, signaling the end of our impromptu gathering. "When do you fly out?"

"Tomorrow morning. Early."

"Then we better make tonight count," TJ said. "Post-game at the Icehouse? Celebration drinks? I'm buying the first round in honor of our newly minted NHL prospect."

Pike glanced at me. I nodded slightly. He needed to enjoy it and be twenty-three and invincible for one more night.

He changed his mind. "I think I'll have to take a rain check. I've got calls to make, and I need to pack. Parents and probably at least a dozen others need to hear this before it hits the internet. I can do a lot of them this afternoon, but I don't know what to take with me."

TJ stood, brushing invisible dust from his jeans. "Fair enough. But when you score your first goal up there, you owe me a beer."

"Deal."

As we filed back into the main locker room, I caught Mercier's arm. "Thanks for how you handled that."

He studied me with his perceptive goalie gaze. "The kid's got good instincts. He'll be fine. You, on the other hand..."

"I'm okay."

"Sure you are. Just remember—letting go doesn't mean losing. Sometimes, it means trusting what you've built to last."

The team set up a pre-game presser to announce Pike's good fortune. I was asked to appear for moral support. I positioned myself against the back wall, arms crossed, watching the controlled chaos unfold.

Pike sat behind a small table draped in Forge colors, hands folded atop a stack of press releases that somebody from the front office had prepared in record time. He wore his good suit—navy blue, sharp-shouldered. It was one his parents bought him to celebrate his first professional season. The Syracuse jacket draped across his shoulders looked foreign as if he were trying on an alternate identity.

Camera flashes popped rapidly, each burst illuminating Pike's face in stark relief. He'd mastered the art of the media smile—polished, confident, hiding the nerves I knew were churning beneath his composed exterior.

"Matsson, how does it feel to bypass rookie camp entirely?" The question came from

Janet Morrison, the Lewiston Sun-Journal's sports reporter. She'd covered the Forge for fifteen years and had probably written more words about my penalty minutes than I cared to contemplate.

Pike leaned into the microphone, voice steady. "It's incredible, obviously. An honor. Syracuse has been watching our team all season, and I'm grateful they see potential in what we've built here."

Behind the cameras, our teammates had gathered in a loose semicircle—TJ bounced on his toes like an excited poodle. At the same time, Mercier appointed himself the sergeant-at-arms with his arms crossed. Monroe and Lambert whispered back and forth about whether they'd get called up next.

It felt like family. Messy, chaotic, fiercely protective family watching one of their own step into the larger world.

"Carver." A voice at my elbow made me turn. It was Brad Hutchins from the Portland Press Herald with his recorder already running. "Care to comment on Pike's development this season? You've been his mentor. This has to be a proud moment for you."

The room's attention shifted toward me. I cleared my throat, suddenly aware of how many microphones had materialized in my vicinity.

It was easy to spit out a few words. "Pike's got the hockey sense, work ethic, and the character for the show. Syracuse isn't taking a chance on him—they're getting exactly what they think they're getting."

"Any specific moments that stand out? Breakthrough moments in his development?"

I could have told them about the early morning sessions when Pike pushed through



pain that would have sidelined lesser players. Instead, I kept it simple. "He belongs there. Always has. Just took the right opportunity for everyone else to see it."

The press conference ended with logistical questions about travel arrangements and roster moves. As the room emptied, teammates surged forward to offer final congratulations. TJ managed to work in one more elaborate handshake sequence. Mercier gripped Pike's hand briefly, whispering something that made the kid's eyes glisten.

The kid was ready. More than ready. And if that meant butterflies crowded my gut as I watched him step into his future, well—that was a small price to pay for being part of something significant.

He caught my eye again as the room cleared and mouthed a "thank you" across the diminishing crowd. I nodded once.

Tomorrow he'd be gone, but tonight, he was still ours.

The news traveled fast, and The Colisée sold out for the game. Signs dotted the stands—"Good Luck Pike!" scrawled in marker on poster board, and a few fans already wore Syracuse jerseys.

Coach gathered us at the bench before the puck drop. "Gentlemen, this is Pike's last game in this uniform. Let's make sure he remembers it."

The first period passed in a blur of controlled chaos. Pike created chances, but the puck bounced wrong, or Worcester's goalie made saves that defied physics. By the first intermission, we were down 2-1, and frustration was beginning to creep into our bench chatter.

"Relax," I told Pike as we filed toward the locker room. "Game's got sixty minutes."

We're only getting started."

The second period opened with renewed intensity. Coach had shuffled the lines, putting Pike and me together with TJ, betting that our chemistry could crack Worcester's defensive shell. The gamble paid off immediately—Pike and I moved like we shared a nervous system, anticipating each other's movements.

Midway through the period, the play that would live in my memory forever began innocuously enough. Worcester dumped the puck deep into our zone, a routine clearing attempt that should have resulted in a standard defensive zone face off.

Instead, I got there first. The safe play was a quick chip around the boards to our defenseman. The smart play was a safe clear out of the zone.

But Pike was moving.

In my peripheral vision, I saw him accelerate through the neutral zone, timing his break perfectly to avoid the offside call. He read the developing play three seconds before it happened, positioning himself where logic said he shouldn't be.

I threaded the pass through a forest of legs and sticks. Three Worcester players tried to intercept it. All three were a half-step too slow.

Pike gathered the puck at full speed, one smooth motion that carried him from the red line into Worcester's zone. Their defenseman committed to the body check, exposing the net's far side. Pike could have shot.

Instead, he made a no-look pass back across the crease.

The puck arrived at my stick as I crashed the net; Worcester's goalie was still sliding across his crease, trying to follow Pike's movement. I had six inches of open net and

all the time in the world to bury it.

Twenty-three hundred people rose to their feet with noise that rattled the rafters. I watched Pike's face as our teammates mobbed us. He'd set up the goal with the vision that separated good players from great ones, and he was grinning like he'd scored it himself.

TJ crashed into us, helmet knocking against helmets. Monroe and Lambert piled on from behind.

Through the chaos, I caught Coach's reaction—arms crossed, nodding once with the satisfaction of someone who'd just watched his game plan executed to perfection. If it were the last goal I ever scored in this building, I'd remember it for the pass that came before it.

The pass. Pike's pass. The trust it represented and the understanding it required. It was the perfect climax to everything we'd built together.

As we skated back to center ice for the face-off, Pike bumped my shoulder with his glove. "Nice finish, old man."

"Nice pass, kid."

From that point forward, the win seemed inevitable.

As the third period wound down with the score still tied, Pike cut across the neutral zone and drew both defensemen toward him. Without looking, he flicked the puck backward, right into my path.

I didn't think. I just ripped it.

The sound of the puck hitting the net, that sharp, glorious twang , rang through the arena like a gunshot.

Game over.

Our bench exploded. The crowd surged to its feet. All I saw was Pike, skating toward me, helmet already off, grinning like he'd just rewritten the ending of our story.

He leaped into my arms, and for a second, nothing else existed—not the scouts, the call-up, or the future—only us.

While the rest of the team filed off the ice, I grabbed Pike's wrist. "Stay behind for a minute?"

He turned toward me. "Sure."

Together, we glided to center ice.

The overhead lights had been dimmed, casting everything in shadows that softened the arena's harsh edges. I turned to face Pike, close enough to see the questions in his eyes.

"This place," I started, then paused, searching for words that could carry the weight of what I wanted to say. "This was never only a job for me. Other guys, they punched the clock and collected paychecks and moved on when something better came along."

Pike waited with patience.

"But you?" I exhaled slowly. "You changed everything. Even the way I end."

Pike's eyes opened wide. "Carver—"

"No, let me finish." I stepped closer. "I thought I knew what retirement looked like. Fading out, being forgotten, and watching from the sidelines while the game moved on without me."

I ran my fingers down from his wrist to his hand. "Instead, I got to be part of something that matters. I got to help build something that will last long after I hang up my skates." I gestured toward the empty seats and the banners hanging in the rafters. "You're taking pieces of this place with you. Pieces of all of us."

Pike nearly lost it, and a single tear rolled down his cheek. "I don't want to leave."

"I know, but you have to."

"What if I'm not ready?"

I smiled softly. "You've been ready since the day you walked into that locker room. You just needed time to grow into what you already were."

"Thank you," Pike whispered.

"For what?"

"For seeing me and believing in me before I believed in myself."

As we walked off the ice for the last time as teammates, Pike bumped my shoulder.

"This isn't goodbye."

"Of course, it's not."

Pike invited me to help with the final packing. We finished around 3 AM. Cardboard boxes sat in neat stacks against one wall, labeled in his careful handwriting:

"Clothes," "Books," "Kitchen Stuff."

When we finally crawled into bed together, we both lay staring at the ceiling.

"Can't sleep?" I asked.

"Brain won't shut up. What if the team chemistry is terrible? What if I can't keep up with their system? What if—"

"What if you're precisely what they need?" I propped myself up on one elbow. "What if Syracuse knows what they're doing?" I'm scared, Carver."

"Good. Fear means it matters."

"Is that your professional opinion?"

"Professional and personal. Fear keeps you sharp. Complacency gets you cut."

Pike reached out for my hand. "What about us? What happens when I'm playing eighty-two games, and you're coaching twenty-three-year-olds who remind you of me at my most annoying?"

It was the question I'd been avoiding, but it was essential to address.

"I'll be in Syracuse. On the road half the time, probably sleeping in hotels that smell like industrial disinfectant and broken dreams."

"Sounds glamorous."

He continued to speak with determination. "I'm not walking away from us. I won't do that. Whatever this costs, and whatever it takes—I'm not walking away."

"Then neither am I," I said simply.

After several more silent minutes, Pike spoke up again. "Logistics. We need to figure out the actual mechanics of this."

"Logistics," Pike said finally. "We need to figure out the actual mechanics of this."

"We'll have FaceTime calls when our schedules align. Texts when they don't. I'll watch your games on whatever streaming service carries Syracuse's regional broadcasts."

He issued a warning. "I'll probably be terrible for the first month, shell-shocked and homesick and overthinking everything."

"I'll remind you to breathe. And eat. And that Lewiston's still here when you need it."

Pike rolled onto his side to face me fully. "What about visits? Syracuse isn't exactly around the corner, but it's not impossible either."

"Six-hour drive. I could manage that on weekends when our schedules line up. Coaching comes with more flexibility than playing, too. We'll make geography work."

Pike's eyes opened wide. "You'd do that? Drive six hours to watch me probably ride the bench for sixty minutes?"

I brushed a strand of hair back from his forehead, "I'd drive to Buffalo to watch you practice if that's what it took."

"What about the off-season? Assuming I don't get sent back down to the minors in disgrace."

"You won't."

"But if—"

"You won't," I repeated firmly. "But hypothetically, if Syracuse decides they're run by idiots and release the best prospect they've had in years, Lewiston will welcome you back with open arms."

"And you'll be here. Coaching."

"I'll be here. Coaching young players who'll probably never be half as good as you were at their age."

Pike laughed. "You'll make them better. Just like you made me better."

"We'll figure it out." I meant it. "Day by day, game by game. No grand promises, just... persistence."

"Persistence. I like that. It's better than promises. They assume you know what's coming. Persistence just means you're willing to keep trying."

We finally fell asleep that way—no grand gestures or desperate clutching at moments we knew were finite. Just his hand in mine and the steady rhythm of breathing that had become as familiar as my own heartbeat.

And for the first time in forever, I wasn't scared of tomorrow.



*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:19 am*

The Lewiston Forge rink looked smaller than I remembered.

Maybe it was me. Perhaps it was a dizzying year of NHL arenas and away-game adrenaline that had changed the scale of things. Or it was just that time has a funny way of shaving the sharp edges off memory.

I parked in my old spot—third row, two spaces from the light pole. It was the one Carver always teased me about, saying I was a creature of ritual. I wasn't. Not really. But this place? This town? Him?

Some rituals are worth keeping.

Inside, the arena smelled the same—rubber mats, stale popcorn, fresh-sharpened steel. My chest tightened as I stepped into the stands. On the ice below, a dozen kids in Forge practice jerseys flailed through a zone-entry drill, their limbs going in eight directions at once.

And at the center of it all—Carver.

He hadn't changed. Still wore that battered Forge jacket like armor. Still barked instructions like a drill sergeant one second and offered a high-five the next. One kid biffed hard into the boards, and Carver skated over, crouched down, and whispered something that made the boy grin through watery eyes.

I felt the now familiar tug in my chest again, sharper this time.

After the drill ended and the kids shuffled off the ice, Carver spotted me in the stands

and lifted his chin. "You planning to lurk all night or gonna say hi like a civilized person?"

I grinned and headed down.

In Coach's office, we hugged and kissed, and he handed me a paper cup of cocoa without asking.

"You're coaching full-time now?"

"Mostly," he said, leaning back against the desk. "I consult with The Forge, and Coach lets me in this office as a perk. Mercier and TJ are the old men now. Can you believe it?"

I choked on a sip of cocoa. "TJ's an elder statesman?"

"He wears it like a crown. Mercier just sighs a lot and glares. It's leadership, Forge-style."

"And the kids?"

"Honestly, Pike, I love the kids. They listen to me."

We fell into an easy silence, the kind that only happens when distance hasn't done any damage.

Carver tossed a pair of skates onto the desk between us. "Lights are staying on for a bit. You game?"

The first glide onto the empty rink was a slide into memories. The ice whispered under our blades, and the boards echoed with the ghost of past games.

We didn't talk much. We didn't need to.

After a few laps, we coasted to center ice and leaned on our sticks like old-timers. Carver's breath came in slow, visible puffs.

"I put in for a trade," I said. "East Coast. Nothing is confirmed, but... it's in motion."

He didn't flinch. Only nodded once. "Good."

I raised a brow. "You're not surprised?"

"Well, I'm working us into my contract, too." He smiled. "One week a month off during the regular season. Travel if I want. They didn't even blink, but that's why I got the consultant label." He added, "I'm not doing another year of waiting by the phone for your voice at midnight for months on end."

"Carver—"

"I'm not saying it was all bad," he added quickly. "We made it work. But I don't want to survive us anymore. I want to live us."

I reached for his hand. "Me, too. I should have a few good years left in me with retirement in my 30s."

We ended up sitting cross-legged at center ice, sipping the last of the cocoa.

"Remember that dive motel in Manchester with the vibrating bed?" I asked.

He groaned. "Worst sleep of my life. Best morning, though."

We traded stories like cards—my first NHL goal, his first youth championship, the time I flew in just to watch him run drills in a snowstorm. He still had the puck I

mailed him with "MISS THIS?" scrawled across it with a Sharpie.

"I kept it on my desk," he said. "Right under the roster. It's a reminder."

"Of what?"

"That the heart of my game isn't always on the ice."

We were quiet after that.

The scoreboard above us blinked once, then settled on HOME in bold red letters.

"You did that?"

He chuckled. "All for you. I love you."

"Whatever it takes. I love you, too."

Carver turned his palm up, and we laced our fingers together. He proclaimed, "We're doing this."