



One Touch (Austin Aces Hockey Club #2)

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Category: Sport

Description: One touch changed one mans life, and doomed another

Miller

Being on a winning team should feel better than this. But when you barely step onto the ice, feel like a stranger in the city you live in, and only have teammates, not friends, not even the Stanley Cup can make you feel like you belong.

So I recklessly ask for a trade. It's a stupid move career-wise, but the chance to see more ice time and start fresh is pulling me toward the Austin Aces.

It's not until the deal is done that I remember who also plays for Austin... Lathan Silver, the guy who turned my life upside down with one touch.

That was years ago, so surely the magnetic pull has lessened. I can't afford to mess up my new team by falling for my teammate. I might be out in the league, but even that is a stretch on what would be accepted.

Austin is my chance to belong, so I'll stay far away from Lathan Silver.

Lathan

Being the son of a Senator puts a lot of pressure on me, but my discipline, determination, and dedication help me succeed. As a Silver, there is no room for failure—on and off the ice.

I've cultivated myself into the perfect son and player, and at twenty-five, my life is flawless. I'm the youngest alternate captain in team history, and my role on the team is solid. I follow my routine, do my meditations, and avoid attachments at all costs. I don't need any complications.

Enter Miller Fahn—the Austin Aces' newest left winger—the ultimate distraction. With one touch, he turns my world upside down.

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CHAPTER 1

MILLER

Sweat beaded across my brow, dripping into my eyes as I pulled myself forward on the rowing machine. It might only be the start of preseason conditioning, but as the current winners of the Stanley Cup, the Chicago Ice Foxes wanted a repeat. There was no slacking allowed. Especially if I wanted a more active role on the ice and in the win.

Guilt swamped me at the thought. I had a contract in the NHL with a winning team. I should be happy to play the sport I loved, even if the playing time was minimal. I was here. On a winning team. And I had a shot at the first line. Eventually. After some of the starters retired. What was a few years?

I was young, healthy, and living the dream.

So why did it feel so empty? Why wasn't it enough?

My team had won the Stanley Cup, and I was upset I hadn't gotten to play for more than a few minutes of the series. My mom would tell me I sounded like a spoiled brat and to count my blessings.

And there was the guilt again.

Against all odds, I'd made it into the NHL. I had my own apartment and recently bought my first car. Considering where I'd grown up, my life in Chicago was a

drastic change. However, even acknowledging my blessings and hating the guilt that clawed at my throat, I couldn't shake off the melancholy. I wanted more.

I wanted to be an active participant instead of a passenger in my life.

I wanted to share it with someone.

I wanted to feel that all-consuming spark.

I'd only felt that spark once, but it had been world changing. A brief touch of his hand had shifted my world on its axis.

A hand slapped onto my shoulder, and I faltered the pulley with the break in my concentration. One of the trainers stood behind me, his lips moving, but I couldn't understand him. Realization dawned on me that I still had my earpods in. Yanking one free, I turned my head toward him.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

He chuckled. "I said you were going to row the machine into the mirror if you kept pulling it that hard."

My face flamed, but I hoped he thought it was from exertion and not embarrassment. "Oops. Sorry."

"Too nice, Fahn." He shook his head with a sigh. "Go cool down. You've met your quota for today."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he waved me off. "No arguing. I know you want to impress the coaches but overexerting yourself isn't how to do it. Cool down and then shower. You stink." He slapped me on the back and yelled at someone else.

My muscles protested as I climbed off, proving he was right. I was close to overexertion and hadn't noticed. Wiping the sweat off my face, I downed my water and went over to the bikes to cool down. A few of the veteran players nodded as I approached. I wasn't close to any of them, but they were friendly.

I zoned out as I peddled, slowing my heart rate as I cooled down. That was part of my problem with this team. I didn't have a group of friends like I'd had in college. Playing at Carrington had been a dream come true, and the connections I'd made there had been strong. In fact, I still wasn't convinced I hadn't been signed to Chicago as a favor to my friend Reese.

Reese's brother-in-law, Fletcher, owned the team, and I always wondered why Chicago was interested when no one else had been.

Not that I was a lousy player. I wasn't. My stats in college were in the top five of left wingers, and our team had won the Frozen Four back-to-back. I was a good teammate, avoided scandals, and didn't spend a lot of time in the penalty box.

So why hadn't I received offers like my teammates had?

The only thing I could pinpoint was my sexuality.

It had been a risk to disclose it, but I wasn't someone who could deny or hide who they were. The instant I realized I was gay, I came out to my team and, subsequently, the hockey world.

Sometimes, I wondered if things would've been different if I had been able to keep it hidden. But I dismissed that line of thinking. I couldn't turn back time any more than I could lie about who I was. It just wasn't in my nature, so there was no use entertaining the 'what-ifs.'

I slowed my bike as the timer counted down, and the conversation around me filtered through my inner ramblings and piqued my interest.

“Did you hear about Anthony? The dude’s gonna be out the entire season. It will be a miracle if he can play again,” Hector said.

“Dumbass,” Amir grunted as he pedaled. “He was always more concerned about impressing people than the game.”

“No shit.” Hector laughed. “Remember when he tried jumping from the balcony into the pool? Honestly, I’m surprised this is the first time he’s hurt himself.”

“What happened?” I interrupted.

“Anthony Michaels thought he could be a waterskiing stuntman or something. Broke both his legs, pelvis, and his right arm.” Hector shook his head.

“Fudge.” My eyes widened at the injuries mentioned.

Amir snorted. “Don’t feel too sorry for him. He’s living it up with his sexy nursemaids.” He and Hector chuckled together as a thought brewed in my head.

“He was a left-winger, wasn’t he?” I asked.

“Yeah. Austin’s gonna be scrambling to replace him. They were tough last year and have a shot at making the playoffs this season.”

Austin, Texas.

My timer beeped, and I jolted at the intrusion. The guys laughed and returned to their conversation about the last of their off-season plans. I hurried off the bike to the

showers. An urgency brewed within, and I wasn't sure what to do with it. I rushed through my shower, redressed in record time, and was knocking on Coach's door before I could talk myself out of it.

"Come in."

I opened the door and swallowed the panic rising. This was so out of character for me, but I couldn't stop this train now that I was on it.

"Fahn. What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering what the likelihood of me getting moved up a line this season was."

Coach Atkins set down his pen and steepled his hands. He assessed me for a minute before he spoke again. "You're a good player, Miller, and I think you'll be a great player with time. With that being said, I don't see you moving up anytime soon. The guys we have right now work well together, and I have no reason to break that up. That doesn't mean things won't change, so keep playing like you are and be ready. I'm sorry if that's not what you want to hear."

"No. It's fine." I swallowed and took a deep breath. "I figured that was the case, and earlier today, I'd resigned myself to my place. I've loved being part of the Ice Foxes, and I'm glad I've gotten to play with such caliber players and coaches."

"All right. Then do you mind me asking what this visit is about? I have a feeling you have a purpose?"

"Yes." I licked my lips and willed my mouth not to dry out. "I'd like to be considered for a trade." Coach's eyes widened, but he stayed silent. "Austin needs a left-winger, and I want to be that guy."

He stayed quiet as he evaluated me. I stood tall and kept my hands from shaking. Barely.

“You sure about this?”

I nodded. “I know most people will think it’s dumb to leave a winning team, but I didn’t fall in love with hockey just to win. I fell in love with hockey because I love to play the game. The quick-thinking plays, the brutality of the game, and the knowledge that you left everything out on the ice... that’s what I crave about hockey. I want to be part of a team where I can make a difference, and I don’t have a shot here. Maybe I’m being greedy asking for this, but I couldn’t let the opportunity pass me by without trying.”

Coach’s face relaxed at my impassioned speech. “All right. I’ll see what I can do, but I can’t make any promises. The GM and owner are the ones who make all these decisions.”

“I understand. Thank you for asking for me.”

He grunted and picked up his phone but paused. “Miller, if I could give you one piece of advice... this passion you just showed in my office? It’s been missing on the ice. I suggest grabbing hold of it and not letting it go the next time you step out there. That’s what will make you go from good to great.”

My cheeks heated, and I nodded. “Thank you, sir.”

I stepped out of his office, headed back to my cubby, and gathered my stuff. I sat and scrolled through my phone, but I wasn’t seeing anything on the screen, so I shoved it back into my bag. A few of my teammates came and went, giving me nods as they passed. My knee bounced as I waited, and I swallowed the urge to vomit, hoping I hadn’t just ruined my career.

When Coach appeared in front of me, I bolted upright and swayed as the blood rushed to my head. “Easy, Fahn.” He steadied me, and I gave him a sheepish smile. “The GM’s ready to meet with you. Did you call your agent?”

I shook my head. Shoot. I’d forgotten all about that. Coach chuckled and moved me toward the door.

“Might want to give him a heads-up on your way there.”

Dazed, I slung my bag over my shoulder and walked out of the locker room. I pulled out my phone and shot off a text that probably made no sense but hopefully would be enough information for my agent not to kill me.

The floor changed from carpet to marble the closer I got to the head offices, and with it, my anxiety grew. I couldn’t believe I was doing this. Everyone would think I was crazy. Heck, maybe I was. But that feeling of melancholy earlier had been a wake-up call. That wasn’t who I wanted to be. The money and fame weren’t why I played hockey. They were probably my least favorite things. Talking to the coach, I realized how much I missed playing the game. If I could get that back, maybe it wouldn’t matter if I had no friends or someone to go home to.

If I at least got hockey back, then I could be happy again. Hopefully.

The door was opened, and the GM waved me in. He was on the phone but motioned for me to take a seat. I glanced around the opulent office, but despite the finery, I wasn’t taking any of it in. I was too nervous to focus on the details.

“Sounds good, Chris. I have Miller in my office right now. Uh-huh. I’ll call you back once I have Fletcher on the line.” He hung up and looked at me. “I must say, hearing you wanted a trade wasn’t how I expected to end my day.”

“It wasn’t a planned thing, sir. I love playing for Chicago and the team here, but the opportunity to get more ice time is there.”

“Hmm, well, I’m glad to hear you like playing for my team and that your request to leave isn’t because of dissatisfaction. We strive to ensure our facility and team are inclusive, and if you ever felt?—”

I raised my hand to stop him. “No one has ever made me feel anything other than accepted here. This has nothing to do with my sexuality and everything to do with me being a hockey player who wants to play the game.”

“All right.” He held up his hands in surrender. “Coach assured me that was the case, but I had to ask before something blew up in my face. Normally, I wouldn’t entertain a player’s request to be traded, but Coach spoke up for you and pleaded your case. And it just so happens that Austin has a player I’ve wanted to add to our roster for years.”

My breath caught at the news. Did that mean...

“We still need to iron out the details, and Fletcher would like to speak to you before it’s finalized, but Austin has agreed to our preliminary trade offer. So, if everything goes through, your last day as an Ice Fox could be today.”

Excitement mixed with apprehension filled me with the notion.

The next few hours went by in a whirlwind as I spoke with my agent—who only slightly yelled at me for springing this on him—Fletcher, and Coach Mack from the Austin Aces.

By the time I left the arena, I was exhausted but had a renewed energy in my bones. I’d cleaned out my locker, said goodbye to the few players who were still there,

handed in all of my key cards, and said goodbye to the first team who'd given me a chance in the NHL.

My phone buzzed like crazy as I drove home, and when I stepped through my front door, there were several messages and news alerts about the trade. I looked around the apartment, realizing I'd never really made it home despite living here for two years already. I had two days to pack up all my belongings and get to Austin. Not that I would need it. Most of the furniture and decor had come with the apartment.

Deciding to leave it until tomorrow, I fell into bed with my phone in my hand, prepared to ignore everyone. But then I saw my college roommate's text, and everything inside of me froze.

Landon: Are you really being traded to Austin? That's my stepbrother's team. How cool! Do you remember meeting him?

How could I forget the man who not only made me realize I was gay but also that I could feel something so powerful with one touch that no one else had ever compared?

I'd asked for this trade for a chance to feel something again, and somehow, I'd walked myself right into the path of the one man who made me feel too much.

What had I done?

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CHAPTER 2

LATHAN

The day I'd been waiting for had finally arrived—the start of hockey. Life would make sense again for the next six months, hopefully longer. The summer had been hell without hockey. My mother had filled every spare moment with her agenda.

This wasn't new. I'd been playing my mother's puppet my whole life. As a Silver, there were certain obligations and expectations required of me. Except lately, they seemed to strip me of everything that was me.

I'd gotten so used to playing the son my mother wanted that I'd lost sight of the man I was. I no longer knew if there was a difference. But hockey was back, and the strings my mother controlled would slacken. Hockey was the only place I got to be me.

“Good morning, Mr. Silver,” James, my driver, said in greeting.

I nodded hello and slid into the backseat. He'd worked for the family for several years and was used to the fact that I didn't like talking to people. He was discreet and, as far as I could tell, didn't report back to my mother like so many of the other people she employed. That alone was the only reason I allowed him to be my driver. I hated having one, but it was the one concession my mother wouldn't back down on, and I knew how to pick my battles.

Classical music filled the car as he pulled away from my apartment building. I downed the rest of my protein shake before shutting off my phone. I had a set routine,

and I did not deviate. Once I put my phone away, I closed my eyes and rested my head back for my meditation. The drive was fifteen minutes, allowing me time to clear my mind and focus on the only thing that mattered—hockey.

My stepbrother called me rigid, but this routine had served me well over the years. Last season had been the best one of my career, and I'd been made alternate captain for the upcoming season. That meant something to me, and I wanted this season to be the best. Our team had the talent to win the Stanley Cup, but if the antics some of my teammates had pulled during the offseason continued, we'd flop. I couldn't have that, so I would lead by example.

Not many people understood my commitment to the sport, but hockey was the only thing that mattered. Everything else was noise. I didn't have relationships of any kind. They were a distraction I didn't need. My focus was solely on hockey and being the best.

Just as I finished my meditation, the car slowed to a stop outside the practice arena. Adrenaline pumped in my veins, and I wanted to do nothing more than jump out of the car and scream at the top of my lungs that hockey was back. Instead, I calmly opened the door and stepped out with my bag over my shoulder. I still had an image to portray.

"See you in a few hours," James said. I shut the door in answer and strolled toward the back door. I nodded at the guard and flashed my ID card.

"Gonna be an exciting season," he said.

I grunted but didn't elaborate. Bragging and gossiping wouldn't win us games. Instead, I focused on the players returning and our first preseason games. We should beat them easily, but I wasn't one to count my chickens before they hatched.

Several of the Ace's staff greeted me as I entered the arena. I nodded in return and kept my focus on practice. The locker room was empty, which wasn't surprising since I was early. I liked to get here before everyone else, so I had time to go through this part of my routine, undisturbed. I also needed to meet with our captain, Jack—or Vigg, as the team called him—and Coach Mack.

I wouldn't admit it to anyone, but I was nervous about being alternate captain. Hockey was the only thing I cared about. The only thing that was mine. I couldn't mess it up. Without it...

I couldn't even fathom that thought. I'd be nothing.

Stuffing my bag into my locker, I headed to the weight room and started my rotations. A few teammates littered in halfway through. They nodded but didn't interrupt me. I wasn't chatty or chummy with them. I came to play. Not make friends. This wasn't a play date. It was our job.

Thankfully, they respected me as a player and accepted my boundaries. Otherwise, I doubted I'd be the alternate captain. Besides, it wasn't that I didn't want to be friends with them; it just wasn't possible. It wasn't how my life worked anymore.

After my mother divorced my father, her political career began. First, she was mayor, then governor, and now she was a senator. With each position, the rules and expectations increased. The little freedom I had in college was wiped away the moment she became a senator.

Every interaction I had was scripted, and every person in my life was screened. The only safe place was hockey, and even that was becoming less and less. The only way to keep her out of it too was to ensure everything I did was flawless—no scandals, no fights, no gossip.

I'd learned early it was easier to insulate myself. If I didn't interact with anyone off the ice, I didn't have to worry about anything being used against me or my mom.

I had no need for relationships, anyway, so it wasn't a hardship. People complicated things. It was simply easier this way.

By the time I finished, the room was full of loud hockey players. I wiped the sweat off my brow and chugged my water as I surveyed the room. Most of my teammates appeared to be in good shape, but a few had slacked off in the offseason. Taking a mental note, I'd be sure to mention it to Jack later.

Samson Murray, a defenseman and the team dad, caught up to me as I stepped out of the room.

"Hey, Silver. How was your summer?"

"Fine."

He smiled, not deterred by my clipped answers. For this reason alone, he was the one guy on the team I tolerated talking to me.

"What do you think of the new guys?"

His statement stopped me in my tracks. "New guys?"

"Yeah, there's the rookie forward, a goalie, and some wingers."

A gong sounded in my ears, muting everything else as his words took root. How had I missed this? I was the alternate captain, for fuck's sake! Yet, on day one, I was already screwing up. Shit. I was going to lose the one thing I had going for me. If I didn't show my mother I was dedicated, she'd demand I quit. I knew she would. This

was a campaign year, and she wanted me to be on the road with her. I'd spent all summer smiling, waving, and pretending to be the son she wanted.

But I wasn't him. I couldn't be perfect all the time.

My breaths sawed in and out, and I watched as Samson realized something was wrong. His hand gripped my shoulder, grounding me and stopping the spiraling. Sound returned, but it was slowed down and underwater.

"Lathan, you okay?"

Blinking rapidly, I curled my fingers tightly into fists until the bite of pain broke the chokehold anxiety had on me.

"Yeah. Sorry. I didn't hydrate enough. I better grab a sports drink."

"You sure, man?" Samson's brow dipped, and I hated that look of concern.

I was the rock of the team. I was solid. I didn't need his pity.

"Yep. Later." I broke his grip and spun around in the opposite direction. I didn't know where I was walking other than away from him. Turning a corner, I collided with a body and took us both to the floor. Lightning raced up my spine as I tried to capture my breath.

I hadn't felt that since... I shut that down. I didn't think about that .

"What the fuck?" I growled and shoved the guy off me. "Watch where you're going, asshole." I knew I was being unreasonable. I'd run into him, but the panic had turned to anger, and it was easier to focus on.

“Me? You ran into me! Mothertrucker, that hurt.”

Mothertrucker ? Who the hell was this guy? “If you can’t cuss, you can’t be a hockey player.” Standing, I flexed all of my muscles and rotated my wrists and arms to ensure nothing was out of sorts.

“Didn’t realize that was a requirement. Considering I just signed my contract, I can guarantee it stated nowhere that I had to cuss.”

My head snapped up, and my gaze slammed into hazel orbs that burned into me. Chocolate brown curls spilled over his forehead, and despite it being four years since I’d last seen him, there was no mistake about who this was—Miller Fahn.

My heart raced for an entirely different reason this time. For a moment, I just stared, lost in his hazel eyes, until his words hit me dead center.

“Contract?” I croaked.

He nodded, his smile wobbly. “Yeah.” He licked his lips, and my gaze zeroed in on them before remembering where I was. “Traded. I got here today.”

No. No. No. This could not be happening. This was the worst possible news.

“Traded. So you’ll be playing...” I couldn’t finish the sentence mostly because it was redundant. Obviously, he would be playing for the Aces. There wasn’t another team in this city. But I couldn’t wrap my brain around it. Miller Fahn was now my teammate.

My. Teammate. Fuck.

“You’re a left-winger,” I mumbled, and he nodded.

“Yep.”

Silence fell around us, and for once, it was not comforting. Every part of my being vibrated, and I didn’t like it. This guy was too sunshiney and hopeful for my liking. He made me feel things I didn’t want to feel.

“Um, your brother—” he started, but I cut him off. I could not be friends with him. It was too dangerous for too many reasons that I didn’t want to consider.

“Listen, Bambi . We are not friends. I don’t care that you were Landon’s roommate; you’re nothing to me. The quicker you learn that, the better off we’ll be. This is my team, and I plan to win. Get in line, do your job, and we won’t have any problems. Now, stay out of my way, or you won’t like what happens next time.”

It was an empty threat, but I hoped he didn’t know that. I shoved his shoulder as I headed in the direction I’d initially been going before I panicked and fled from Samson.

My hands shook, and I hated how screwed up my first day back had become. This was hockey. This was my safe place. I wasn’t supposed to be bombarded with feelings or things I couldn’t control.

Shoving my earbuds into my ears, I marched to the locker room and took a seat in front of my cubby. I kept my back to everyone and focused on calming my breaths and listening to the voice to calm my thoughts.

I am powerful. I am a force. I am in control of me.

My mind is a safe place. Calmness is my strength.

I repeated the mantra over and over until I felt my body relax, my heart rate slow, and

my breaths even out. With measured breaths, I dressed for practice and ignored everyone around me as I met with Jack and Coach.

I nodded at the appropriate times but offered nothing other than my acquiescence. All of my plans had flown out the window when he arrived. I'd have to try again tomorrow after I shored up my mental walls and prepared. As long as I stayed away from him, I'd be fine. I could get through this and come back stronger tomorrow.

"Oh, I'd like you to take the new winger and show him the ropes."

My throat went dry. "Are you sure that's the best idea?"

Coach Mack stopped and glanced at me. I'd never questioned him before. Even Jack had halted and watched me with a curious look. But I couldn't focus on him right now. I just had to convince Coach it was a horrible idea.

"It's just that I think Han or Cavanagh would be a better fit."

"They're great players, but you're the alternate captain, Silver. Unless we made a mistake putting you in the position?" he asked.

Swallowing, I shook my head. "No, sir. I'll take care of it."

"Good. I expect great things from him. Make it happen."

With that, the two of them exited the room, and I was left with a sinking feeling that everything I'd worked for was about to crumble. The house of cards I'd built was carefully crafted, and this could be the breeze that crashed it to the ground.

Fuck that. I wasn't going to let some guy ruin everything I'd worked for. He had to earn it if he wanted to be part of the team. He thought because he knew my brother,

we were friends, but he'd learn real quick he was enemy number one.

Time to buck up, Bambi.

CHAPTER 3

MILLER

Lowering myself into the ice bath, I both rejoiced and swore at the cold temperature. My body hurt in places I hadn't felt in years, which was saying something. Training camp had been good. We'd just finished our last practice this morning and had the rest of the day to rest before the game tonight.

After the encounter with Lathan on day one, I expected him to avoid me at all costs. Color me surprised when he teamed up with me during practice. Granted, he hadn't said anything other than to bark commands, but it was more than I'd anticipated.

Every grumble from his mouth made my smile brighten. My twisted brain didn't care that the guy hated me for no apparent reason or that he called me Bambi. I was just happy to have his attention.

Like right now... Lathan strutted into the training room, spotted me, and scowled at the mere sight. A wise person would leave him alone as he requested, but I'd never been known for being smart.

"You excited about the game?" I asked.

He ignored me, but I didn't let it stop me. It helped to focus on him instead of the freezing cold and the timer that told me how much longer I had to stay submerged.

"I am. I know it's preseason, but the first game always hypes me up. A whole new

season ahead of us where anything is possible.”

Lathan rolled his eyes, but it didn’t deter me. In fact, it made it more fun to see what reactions I could get from him.

“Anyone coming to the game for you? Not for me. Texas is a bit far from my family, not that they came to a lot of games when they were closer. They don’t really understand hockey but they’re supportive in their own way.”

“Yo, Fahn! You for real made this?” Stryker Bell asked from the open doorway. He was holding up one of the friendship bracelets I’d made the team.

“Uh, yeah. Just something I like to do.” I shrugged and noticed how still Lathan had gone.

“Dope.”

My timer went off, so I pulled myself out of the ice bath. My boxers clung to me, and I took the towel the trainer handed me. When I looked up, I caught Lathan staring before he turned his back and stalked out of the room.

Stryker raised his brow, but I shrugged. I couldn’t explain Lathan’s behavior without getting into our history. Based on his reaction to my arrival, I was the only one who’d been affected by that one touch, so I’d keep that to myself.

Stryker slapped my shoulder as I headed into the locker room. Most of the guys had left, wanting to maximize the time they had off before the game. The few that were still present nodded at us. The team had been welcoming and open so far. There was only one player who seemed to have a problem with having queer players on the team—Chet Doyle.

So far, he hadn't done anything, but if the snide remarks he made under his breath when the coaches weren't around were any indication, it wouldn't be long until he did. I didn't want to be around when he got braver, so I kept a wide berth.

I didn't know if that was why Stryker and I had bonded—both being openly queer players in the league—or if he was just generally a nice guy, but I was happy not to be the only queer guy on the team for once.

“I'll catch you later,” I said to Stryker after I'd dressed. He waved, not looking up from his phone as I headed out. The parking lot was practically empty as I headed over to my rental. My car and all my belongings were due to arrive early next week, and I couldn't wait. I loved my car. It was the first nice thing I'd bought myself after signing with Chicago.

It wasn't flashy or anything, but it was mine, and that was what I loved about it.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice the shadow until it was too late. A body pushed me against my door, and their forearm pressed into my throat. The instant our skin made contact, that familiar electricity I only associated with Lathan raced up my body. His light blue eyes were hard as ice as he stared at me. They were so cold I could almost feel the cold searing into me.

I was a few inches taller than him, and my brain had all kinds of ideas on how to use that to my advantage. The press of his body against mine was sending all the wrong signals, and I willed my dick to stand down.

It did not listen.

“Awww. Did you miss me?” I teased in an attempt to distract him from the thickening cock in my pants.

My words broke his stupor, and he sneered. “Keep your love life out of the locker room, Bambi.”

I blinked in confusion. What the heck?

“Come again?” I gasped.

The blue in his eyes darkened, and I became mesmerized by them. What made them change? And why did I want to test all my theories to see what colors I discovered?

Lathan didn’t say anything else as he shoved off and took a step back. He reached into his pocket, pulled out the bracelet I’d made him, and tossed it at me. My hand came out automatically to catch it, my eyes never leaving his.

Spinning on his heels, he stalked off as quietly as he came and left me reeling. I glanced at the bracelet and the word WINGBUDDY before wrapping my fingers around it. I’d debated what to give him for days and thought that maybe this would be okay since we’d been friendly on the ice. Apparently not.

I’d just have to keep trying.

Shoving it into my pocket, I climbed into my car and started it. My erection had deflated, but the phantom burn of his skin against my throat remained there all the way home.

* * *

“Second line, switch!” Coach bellowed, and I leaped over the wall with Lathan and Cian O’Leary. The first line skated past us as we took their place on the ice. Every time I heard Coach Mack call our line, a thrill ran through me. Much to Lathan’s annoyance, I’d been put on the same line as him. But he couldn’t deny that the three

of us played well together. Or, we had been.

It was the last preseason game, and we were playing St. Louis, who we'd beat at home during our preseason opener. But tonight, we were on their turf, and they were up by one point. Up until this game, we'd been playing well. But tonight, no one could find a rhythm, and it showed. The whole team was off, and we were missing passes everywhere.

Case in point, a play Lathan and I had practiced to almost perfection during training camp was not working tonight. Each time I went to pass back to him, he wouldn't be where I expected, and the puck would go wide. Then he'd look to pass to me, and I'd be too far ahead instead of where he needed.

We were off-balanced, and it was frustrating. The only silver lining was knowing this was only a preseason game, and it was better to get all the kinks out now. When the last buzzer sounded to end the game, our team slinked into the locker room in defeat. It always sucked to lose, but again, at least this one didn't count.

Though, by the look on Lathan's face, he believed it was the last game in the series and we'd just lost the Stanley Cup. Part of me admired his dedication, but the other half knew you couldn't get hung up on the games you lost, or it would consume you.

It felt like forever before I finally left the arena and headed toward the bus. Once we returned to Austin, we'd have a full week off before the regular season started. Granted, we had practice and weight training, but a week of no travel sounded blissful. My stuff had arrived finally, but most everything was still in storage. I'd taken a few boxes to my new apartment, but with our schedule, I hadn't had a lot of time to unpack. I wasn't the world's most organized person, but I hated living out of boxes. I was itching to make my apartment my own, and now I had a week to do it.

"Miller!" a familiar voice called. Turning, I smiled when I spotted my college

roommate and Reese.

“Landon! Reese!” I took off into a jog and hugged them both. They chuckled, returning the gesture. “What are you doing here?”

“We both had a game nearby and decided to surprise you guys,” Landon said. “Cam’s inside with Braden.”

“Let me guess, getting a refill on his popcorn?”

“You know it.” Reese chuckled. Reese, Landon, Braden, and Cam were a polyamorous couple. I’d played college hockey with Braden, Cam, and Landon and had met Reese through them. We’d all become close friends and Reese and I had bonded over our hobby of making friendship bracelets. It was their brother-in-law, Fletcher, who had owned the Chicago Ice Foxes. “How are you doing on the new team?” they asked after we’d stepped back.

“It’s great,” I said, and I meant it. I felt connected to this team in a way I never had with Chicago. It also helped that I got to play more. It had nothing to do with a grumpy right-winger.

“I’m glad it’s working out. You looked great out there tonight.”

“Eh.” I shrugged. “We’ve played better, but it’s preseason.”

“Has Lathan been welcoming? I told him to play nice.”

Before I could respond, the man in question appeared. His face morphed from his grumpy scowl into a genuine smile at the sight of his stepbrother. They embraced, and I watched in fascination how different he looked when he wasn’t grimacing. It was more beautiful than I was prepared for.

“You okay?” Reese asked.

I swallowed and nodded. “Uh. Yeah. Long week, and I’m just tired.”

Reese studied me but eventually nodded. “Okay. But if it’s something else, you can talk to me.”

“I know. Thanks, Reese.” I hugged them again. “I better get on the bus before I crash. It was good to see you.”

“You too. Let’s meet up next time you play one of the guys.”

“Sounds like a plan. Bye.”

I waved and gave one last glance at Lathan as he chatted with his stepbrother. It was almost impossible to believe the two versions of him were the same.

Ten minutes later, he climbed on the bus and ignored me as usual, his face back to his grumpy frown. Everyone was quiet as we headed to the plane. Whether it was from exhaustion or the loss, I couldn’t tell, but it made for a long flight home despite it only being a little over two hours flight time.

It was nearly two in the morning when I climbed into my car, and the familiar smell of clean cotton enveloped me. I took a moment to run my hands over the dash and soaked in the happiness my car brought me. It had arrived right before we’d left so I hadn’t been able to drive it much yet. That would change, starting now.

I took the longer route home despite my tiredness. The city was quiet and peaceful, and I enjoyed the leisurely drive. It was relaxing and helped ease my last bit of frayed nerves from the game.

A block from my apartment building, I noticed a large plume of smoke in the air. Red and blue emergency lights flashed up ahead. Fire trucks crowded the streets, along with police cars and ambulances. As I neared, dread filled my gut, and I had a sinking feeling.

“Sir, you need to turn around. This area is closed,” a police officer said as I rolled to a stop.

“Um, what’s going on?”

“There’s been a fire. It’s not safe to be in the area. We’re moving everyone out until the fire is contained.”

“Fire? Where?”

“It started at the Prestige Pines, but it’s moved to a few other buildings now. Please, sir, I need to clear the area.”

“Wait! I live in Pines.”

The officer halted, his face grim as he stared at me. “Was there anyone home?”

“No. I live alone.”

He exhaled and nodded. “I’m sorry to tell you that your home is gone. The fire moved too fast, and they weren’t able to control it until it was too late. The entire building went up in flames. Thankfully, they were able to get most people out, but they’re still searching for a few. I’m sure if you call the office tomorrow, they can tell you your next steps. Do you have anywhere else you can go?”

I stared at the man as a mix of relief and anguish filled me. My home was gone, but I

was safe. Everything I had in my apartment would be ashes, but I was safe.

I was safe.

So why did it feel like everything was tumbling around me?

CHAPTER 4

LATHAN

The week between preseason and the regular season always felt the longest. It didn't help that my mother had used it to her advantage this year to con me into attending a charity gala last night. It made me wish our schedule wasn't public knowledge so she didn't have such easy access to it. Though I wouldn't put it past her to bribe someone in the front office to give her the information regardless.

Today was our last practice before we had a day off, and I planned to stay in my apartment and not interact with anyone for twenty-four hours. It was as much for their benefit as it was mine. I needed to center myself before the season started, and between all the distractions thus far, my ordinarily calm exterior was cracking at an alarming rate.

I had to stay in control. If I lost it, no telling what horrors would rain down on me. It wasn't something I was willing to risk.

"Pick up the pace, Fahn!" Coach barked, and I crushed the smirk that wanted to grow. I shouldn't be plotting against my teammate, but no part of me wanted Miller on the same line as me. Begrudgingly, I could admit he had talent, but the fact my body knew precisely where he was on the ice at all times was a problem—a huge, distracting problem.

It would be better if he was moved to the third line. Then, I could focus on what I did best—playing great hockey.

“Sorry, Coach. I’ll do better,” Miller said back.

I finished my drills and skated to the bench to grab a drink. The equipment manager handed me a bottle, and I nodded my thanks. I rested against the side while everyone else finished up. Miller and Bell joined me a few minutes later, but I ignored them. Or, I tried to. But Miller spoke so loudly it was hard not to eavesdrop.

Honestly, I didn’t care about their conversation. At. All.

“Still stuck in the rental?” Bell asked.

“Ugh. It’s the worst. The neighbors are either shouting the entire night or, you know, making up for it.”

Bell laughed. “It’s so cute you can’t say fucking.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as Miller’s cheeks turned a deeper red. A pit in my stomach opened, and I turned away.

“Any luck on finding a new place?”

“Not yet. The insurance claim is delayed until they determine the cause of the fire. So, in the meantime, I’m stuck. I’m almost excited about going on the road just to escape this place.”

I’d heard about his apartment building catching fire a week ago. It sucked to be upended from your home, and I was thankful it hadn’t happened to me. Never mind the slight relief I’d felt when I heard he hadn’t been there. It was merely because he was a teammate; losing someone at the start would be bad for the team. I didn’t need anything else disrupting my schedule or routine. That was all.

“Hey, I’m just throwing this out there, but if I can get Coach to lift the stupid babysitting order he’s got me under with Harrison, you wanna look at apartments?” Bell offered.

My insides turned molten at his words.

“Bell!” I interrupted. The two guys jolted and turned toward me, almost like they hadn’t known I was there. “Shouldn’t you be running drills with Harrison instead of gossiping?”

“I wasn’t—” he started with a frown before stopping himself. Was it because my eyes promised death if he continued to talk ? We would never know. “Whatever, dude,” he mumbled and skated off.

“What’s your problem?” Miller asked.

“I don’t have a problem.”

“Sure you don’t. I’m doing what you said and staying away from you, so how about you take your own advice and stay away from me, too?”

“For me to stay away from you would mean you’d have to register on my radar. Newsflash, you don’t.” My eyes trailed over him as disgust pulled at my lips.

Miller’s face turned redder, but this time, it was no doubt from anger and not arousal. The whistle blew before he could respond, and I secretly wished Coach had waited a few more minutes. I was dying to hear what he would have said. There was something about poking the affable guy that lit me up inside.

Except you shouldn’t care about that.

Shoving all my emotions down, I fell back into my routine and followed along with my teammates as we transitioned from the ice to the weight room. I was one of the first there, so I started my rotations without any prompts. I was on my second station when the rest of the team entered. Their laughter and chatter filled the space, so I shoved my earbuds in and tuned them out.

Despite my focus, I couldn't help but watch Miller and Bell. Were they that good of friends already? Or was there something there? They were both out in the league and new to the team. So, was their friendship more than just being the new guys? To each their own, I suppose. I would never date a teammate—not that I was interested in men. But even if I was, a teammate would be the last person I would get involved with. Too messy with too many possible complications for my career to risk it. Thankfully, I would never have to worry about it.

I didn't date, nor was I attracted to men. So it was a moot point.

After finishing my stations, I headed to cool down before hitting the showers. Another advantage of being first in was getting into the showers before everyone else. I washed up and stood under the spray for a few minutes, letting it massage my muscles. At the sound of others coming into the locker room, I turned off my shower and dried off. With my towel wrapped around me, I returned to my locker to dress.

A missed call from my brother halted me, and I immediately pulled out my phone to call him back.

"Is everything okay?" I asked when he answered.

"Hey, bro. Everything's fine."

I sucked in air and sat when my head became fuzzy. It took me a few seconds to realize Landon had continued to speak.

“I’m sorry, repeat that.”

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but I was hoping you could do me a favor.”

“Anything.”

“Thank you. Miller’s not the cleanest roommate, but he’s good.”

“Wait. What does Miller have to do with the favor?” A cold sweat broke out across my bare skin. I glanced down, noticing I was still only in my towel.

“He needs a place to stay, and you have that extra room. I figured he could crash with you until he can find a new place. The rental he’s in is horrible. Not only are his neighbors loud, but the bed is two sizes too small for his tall frame. Plus, it’s an hour drive from the facility.”

“And this is my problem, how?”

Landon sighed. “I know you don’t like people in your space, but like I said, it would be a huge favor to me. He’s a good guy and wants to do well on the Aces, but he’s barely getting any sleep. He was talking to Reese last night, and I thought maybe you could help him. It wouldn’t be forever.”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“Lathan, come on. You’d barely know he was there.”

It was unlikely since my body seemed to know where he was at any time he was within a hundred yards of me.

“I don’t care. My space is my domain, and I can’t have anything messing with my

routine. You know this. He can go to a hotel.”

“It’s not the same, and you know it. Besides, we spend enough time in hotels on the road. No one wants to sleep in one when they’re home.”

“Not happening.” My hands were shaking at the thought of him in my space—the one place I didn’t have to pretend. There was no way I could make it through one day with him there. It just wasn’t possible.

“Okay. I had to ask.”

Thankfully, Landon let it go after that. We chatted for a few more minutes before we hung up. I stared out into the locker room in a daze as it filled with noise. A body sat next to me, and I jumped.

“You good?” Samson asked.

“Yeah. Fine.”

“Hm, then why are you still in a towel?”

I glanced down, somehow forgetting I hadn’t gotten dressed yet. “Fuck.” I jumped up and pulled out my clothes, dressing with jerky movements as I covered myself. I wasn’t shy or body-conscious; I just didn’t like being on display. It was another reason I typically finished first: to be dressed before the rest of the team.

“Anything you want to talk about?”

“Nope. I’m good. See you in a few days.” I grabbed my bag and keys before strutting out of the locker room. I needed to get out of here. There was too much clouding my mind; if I didn’t get time to clear it, there would be no telling what I might do. That

wasn't something I could gamble with. I had to be in control. There was no other choice.

Almost on cue, my mother sent me a message about my performance at last night's gala.

Mom: You were dressed impeccably last night, darling.

Mom: You need to work on your face. Half of the guests thought you were two seconds away from snapping a chair in half and hitting someone over the head with it.

Mom: Considering one of my platforms is anti-violence, that is not a good look for my son to have.

Mom: See you in a few weeks, darling.

Gripping my phone in my hand, I made a detour and opened the first door I came to. It was a dark supply closet and, thankfully, empty. Pressing my fists against the door, I leaned into it as I breathed.

Do better. Be more. Hide who you are.

I knew my mom loved me, but when she got into campaign mode, she made me feel like I'd never measure up. She hated that I played hockey but had been willing to overlook my profession as long as I kept my public image clean.

It wasn't hard to do. I didn't put myself in situations to be taken advantage of. But every now and then, the pressure became overwhelming. This was happening far quicker into the season than usual. If things didn't simmer down, it did not bode well for the rest of the year.

Breathing deeply, I focused on my mantra: “I am enough. I am in control. I can overcome this.” After ten minutes of breathing and repeating the phrases over and over in my head, my heart rate decreased, and the pressure in my chest lessened. I wasn’t one hundred percent in control, but it was better.

Voices filtered toward me, and I paused when I recognized one of them.

“Thanks again for the other night. I know it didn’t end the way we both intended, but I still had fun.”

“What are the odds?” Miller laughed, and my heart picked up speed. “I had a good time though.” What the fuck? Who was this guy, and why was Miller hanging out with him? My hand gripped the doorknob, and my fingers throbbed from how tightly I held it.

“Good. So I hope I’m not out of line when I suggest this, but I heard about your predicament, and I happen to have a spare room you could rent until you find a new place.”

“Oh, really? Yeah, I might?—”

Shoving open the door, I smiled at the two when they jumped at my appearance. I inserted myself between them and peered from Miller to the other guy. Why did he look familiar?

“What are we talking about?” I asked.

“Toby and I were just talking.” Miller glared at me and crossed his arms.

Toby. God, I suddenly hated that name. Slapping my hand onto Toby’s shoulder, I squeezed hard as I stared at the man. Only when I noticed his shirt did I realize who

he was—the equipment manager.

“So, Toby. What are we talking about? Hm?”

“Oh.” He swallowed and looked between me and Miller. “I was just telling Miller how I had a spare room he could use.”

My mouth spoke of its own free will. It was the only reason I could fathom the words that escaped my mouth. No way I would willingly say them.

“No need, Tobs. Bambi’s staying with me. Now, don’t you have blades to sharpen?”

Much to my dismay, he was not scared off by me. He glanced between me and Miller before nodding. “Yeah, sure. I’ll see you, Miller.”

Miller didn’t respond back. He was too busy scowling. It was cute. He looked like a baby deer trying to stare down a lion. He was way in over his head. He just didn’t know it.

That’s okay, Bambi. I’ll remind you.

CHAPTER 5

MILLER

I'd always prided myself on my ability to get along with people. Growing up in a small town in Michigan, you learned how to resolve conflict quickly. If not, facing that person at every turn became uncomfortable, and the whole town would weigh in. There was nothing like trying to buy milk and have five people talk to you about your fight.

"No, Mrs. Johnson, I didn't know your husband liked to clip his toenails in bed. Yes, that must be horrible to wake up to. I'll definitely take that into consideration when making up with my brother."

So, yeah, I avoided that circus and learned how to get along with people for my own sanity. That motto had served me well through four years of college and two years in the league. But it looked like that streak was going to end today. The audacity of this man.

"Excuse me?"

Lathan's gaze scanned me from head to toe, and I hated how my body reacted to his attention. We do not like his attention! He's the enemy! We hate him.

"I'll text you the address." He turned and stalked off, ignoring my question.

Maybe it was the lack of sleep, the poor performance on the ice, or the stress of

starting on a new team. Heck, it was likely all three. Whatever the reason, at his dismissal, I saw red.

Anger clouded my vision, and I didn't stop to think. I reacted on instinct—something that didn't happen off the ice. Ever. I'd deal with that revelation later.

Reaching out, I grabbed the back of his sweater and spun him around until he hit the wall. My extra height gave me a slight advantage, and I pinned him against the concrete. My body pressed into his, and my hand wrapped around his throat in a matter of seconds.

I didn't know who was more surprised at the move—me or him. Again, I didn't stop to think about it.

“I don't remember asking to stay with you, Silver Spoon. So how about you keep your offer to yourself? I don't need your charity.”

He gritted his teeth and pushed against me, but I didn't budge. “I'm not doing it for you , Bambi. Landon called and asked. It's a favor for him .”

“Favor rescinded then. I'm not taking anything from you .”

“Aw, did I hurt your feelings? Are you sad I didn't accept your friendship bracelet? Have to say, I'm impressed with the level of rejection you're willing to endure. How many bracelets have you made me now, and how many have I returned?” He smirked, and I hated how hot he looked doing it.

I ignored his dig. Because, yeah. It did hurt. I'd made him five bracelets. Each one had a different phrase, and each time, he gave it back. The rest of the team had taken theirs, and several of the guys even wore them. But not Lathan. Nope. He was too good for them. Just another reason why I hated him.

I'd never hated a person before, but there was no doubt that was what I felt for the smug a-hole. I tightened my grip and relished how his pulse sped up at my contact.

"You think that means I want to be friends?" I laughed in an attempt to disguise my hurt. "You're not special. I know you're used to feeling that way, being who you are and all. But I see you for who you are, Silver Spoon. You're just another trust-fund baby bored with his life and playing hockey to pass the time. Or are you trying to get Mommy's attention? Is that what it is, Silver Spoon? Want Mommy to notice you?"

"Shut the fuck up, Bambi." The words were growled, and if I were in my right mind, I'd notice the danger radiating from him. But as I mentioned, I wasn't myself and dove headfirst into all those warning bells.

"You're not the only one who can use a nickname, Silver Spoon." I leaned closer, and my breath ghosted over his face. My body pressed into his more, and when I felt something hard that I hadn't expected, I paused.

Lathan used my distraction to shove me away with force. I fell backward and landed on my butt. The jarring was nothing I wasn't used to, but the twinge in my wrist was new. The pain cleared my earlier fog, and clarity returned. What had I been thinking?

"Don't touch me." Lathan stood over me and glared. His body shook, and shame filled me. I'd done that. I'd crossed a line and made him uncomfortable.

Though, that didn't feel true if what I felt before he shoved me was real. He'd been hard. I'd felt his erection against my thigh. It had been enough to halt the anger and allow him to respond.

Gulping, I cupped my wrist as I stood. His eyes latched on to it, but he didn't comment as he straightened his clothes and returned to the ice-cold version of himself.

“We can both agree things went too far, and I’m willing to forget this ever happened if you are.”

I didn’t respond. I didn’t know how to put everything tumbling in my brain into words.

No, I can’t forget the way my body felt against yours. Or the way your dick imprint will forever be ingrained on my thigh. Do you really not feel the chemistry between us? Why do you hate me?

So, instead, I stayed quiet. It seemed like the safer bet.

“Right. I expect you to arrive within the hour. I follow a strict routine, and I won’t accept any deviation. I’ll leave your name with the concierge, and he’ll give you your own code. I’ll have a list of rules to follow waiting in your room. If there’s anything else you need, the concierge can help you with it.”

He glanced at my wrist again before spinning on his heels and walking away. He was deluded if he believed I’d stay with him after that. I’d rather deal with loud neighbors or Toby than him. Staying with Toby looked like the best option, but I wasn’t sure how I felt about it with how we met.

My first weekend in Austin, I’d matched with Toby on Tinder, and we met up for dinner. It was going great until we both realized we worked for the Aces. While I didn’t know if my contract had a clause about dating Aces’ employees, there was in his, and neither of us wanted to go through the hassle of dealing with HR for a first date. So we decided to be friends instead.

Honestly, that was probably a better option anyway. I needed a friend, and despite my desire to date, I didn’t have the mental bandwidth to give to it right now. Learning a whole new city, team, and playbook was taking its toll, and I rarely had time to touch

my own dick. Adding someone else into the equation wasn't feasible.

It had nothing to do with my body lighting up like a live wire every time a particular hockey player was near. Nothing at all. That was an even worse idea than dating an employee. Not that Lathan was interested or even gay. Regardless of his sexual orientation, he wasn't someone I could ever fathom dating.

No, my time was better spent getting acquainted with the team—even if that meant my dick saw no action.

Sighing, I spun in the opposite direction and headed to the trainer's room. As soon as I turned the corner, other people came into view. I hadn't believed Toby that the location was rarely used and a good place to talk, but no one else had stumbled upon us. Something I was grateful for. Lathan and I didn't need rumors that we were fighting off the ice.

After a weak reason for my injury, my wrist was wrapped, and I was given orders to ice and elevate it when I got home. It was a slight sprain and shouldn't affect my playing in the next game, but they wanted to be cautious. Thankfully, it was my right wrist, and I shot left.

Walking to my car, I ignored the text message on my phone with Lathan's address and returned to the rental the apartment building had put me in. The neighbors were already fighting when I stepped in my door, and I prepared myself for another long night.

* * *

Lathan sent two more text messages that I also ignored that night. The following day, he sent three more that went unread. I spent my day off volunteering at the local LGBTQ+ youth organization—Rainbow Lounge. They were having a party for teens

who didn't have a safe place to go and needed chaperones. While I didn't have the same experience of not having an accepting household when I came out, I'd experienced discrimination in the league since I'd announced my sexual orientation.

It wasn't something people talked about, but it happened. Luckily, a solid group of people accepted and supported me. I knew I was fortunate, so I wanted to pay it forward and hopefully be that person for someone else. It had been a good night, and I'd signed up for a few more events in the upcoming months that worked with our schedule.

I was riding this high when I boarded the team plane the following day. My pocket was full of new bracelets I'd made with the help of new friends—Ace and Wade. They didn't say it, but seeing a big hockey player making jewelry had eased some of their fears about me. I knew from the outside I didn't “look” gay, not that a person's sexual orientation was something you could see outwardly. But it didn't stop people from making assumptions.

“New bracelets, courtesy of some new friends of mine,” I said as I passed them out.

“Thanks, Miller Time!” several guys said. I nodded, trying to hide my grimace at the nickname. I should be happy they were embracing me instead of hating that blasted phrase.

I had nothing against the beer company, but it reminded me of how people saw me on the ice. It wasn't who I was most of the time, so it felt disingenuous whenever someone said it. Another thing I had to pretend to be, and I was tired of pretending. It was why I'd come out despite everyone telling me not to. It was exhausting hiding who you really were, and I'd rather deal with the hate head-on and focus my energy on hockey.

Bell nodded to the empty seat next to him, and I smiled in relief. It was such a small

thing, but having someone save you a seat filled me with warmth. It was no wonder acts of service were my love language.

I took two steps when a hand shot out and clamped down onto my wrist—my sprained one. I was tugged into the empty seat before I could protest. A shout of pain escaped me, and I slammed my lips together to hold it in.

“What the fuck?” a deep voice demanded. “What’s wrong with your wrist? I barely touched you.”

“Barely touched” was a stretch, but I wouldn’t have reacted as dramatically in a normal circumstance.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not your business.”

Lathan came across the seat until our noses practically touched. “If you’re injured and hiding it, it is my business.” He seethed. His blue eyes swirled with so many emotions it was hard to pinpoint which ones.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t push people,” I shot back and stood. I wouldn’t let him rile me up.

This time, he grabbed my other wrist in a gentle hold. “Wait.” He swallowed. “I did that?”

I gritted my teeth but didn’t answer. I cradled my wrist against my chest and bit back the pain his grip had activated. It was throbbing, but if I iced it, it should be fine.

His jaw twitched, and he took a deep breath before releasing my other wrist. “You didn’t show up at my place.”

“I told you I didn’t need any favors. Now, is that all?”

His eyes glanced down to my wrist briefly before returning. “I don’t like being ignored, Bambi. You will return to my apartment after our road game. Disobey me again, and you won’t like the consequences.”

I chuckled, the sound dark and foreboding even to my own ears. “All right, Daddy. Whatever you say.” I rolled my eyes and stalked off. I could feel his eyes burning into me as I got an ice pack from the back and stowed away my bag.

“What was that about?” Bell asked.

“Beats me.” I shrugged and hoped he’d drop it.

He did not.

He chuckled. “He’s giving the loudest ‘fuck me’ eyes I’ve ever seen.”

I snorted. “You’re mistaken. Lathan’s not gay, and he hates me. He’s just trying not to piss off his brother. That’s all.”

“If you say so. But some of the hottest sex I’ve ever had was hate sex, and you don’t have to be gay to like dick.” He lifted his eyebrow, and I sighed. He was right, but there was no way Lathan Silver wanted me, at least not sexually.

I might be a late bloomer, but even I could tell the difference between want and hate, and that man hated me so much he wouldn’t even spit on me if I was on fire.

No, I needed to stay away from him. We weren’t friends. We were barely teammates.

Lathan and I were enemies, plain and simple.

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CHAPTER 6

LATHAN

We were midway through the second period of our first game. I should be worrying about the game and how best to get the puck into the net. Instead, my entire focus was on a six-foot-four sunshiny asshole. Fuck.

Though, based on the scowls he sent my way, his happy-go-lucky nature no longer extended to me. Good. He needed to toughen up. Life would eat him whole otherwise. Not that I cared what life did to him. I didn't care about other people. Especially him.

I just had a promise to uphold, and I took my promises seriously. It had nothing to do with thoughts of him consuming me. In fact, I was sick of that. I needed to fulfill my part so they would go away. He needed to move in and out of whatever hovel he currently resided in and away from Toby and Bell. They would distract him. That was the only reason I cared.

Once I got my way, my focus would return to hockey, and everything would go back to my status quo. I needed my equilibrium back. So, if he wouldn't listen to reason, I'd take matters into my own hands. At the thought, a smile broke free before I could contain it.

"Shit, that's scary," Samson muttered.

"What?" I asked, my smile dropping when I noticed Bell and Miller huddled together

on the bench.

“You smiled. I’ve never seen you smile unless it involved a goal. You okay?” He placed his hand on my forehead, and I jerked away.

“I’m fine. Don’t touch me.” He held up his hands in surrender and frowned.

“Okay, if you’re not sick, what’s with the smile? And why do I have a feeling it’s not a good smile?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Uh-huh. You’re scary when you’re happy.”

“Not happy. Just plotting how to get my way.”

“I feel for whoever is standing in your way.”

That made me smile wider, and Samson shuddered. “Seriously. You’re like that creepy, scary movie Smile.”

I rolled my eyes at his dramatics. A minute later, the line shift was called, and we took to the ice. My focus was back, and I fell into a serenity I only found on the ice. I could sense my teammates around me and intimately perceive their movements. One beat louder than the others, and I could discern him without even looking.

I ignored why and used it to my advantage, passing the puck back to him after one touch.

The movement was so fluid that Nashville didn’t catch it, and Miller absconded with the puck as the defense surrounded me, and our sticks clashed. A second later, the

goal sounded through the arena, and they both froze, looked down, and realized too late that the puck was gone.

“You might want to get your eyes checked. I’ve seen Pee wee teams track a puck better.”

The big defender shoved me into the boards but skated off before it escalated. I smiled the whole way to the bench. Miller got pats as he hydrated, and I took my own bottle and sat right next to him. He ignored me, something I’d typically welcome, but it annoyed me the more he did it.

“You’re welcome, Bambi .”

“Excuse me?” His head whipped around so fast that his helmet knocked into mine, and our gazes locked. I got lost as I stared into his hazel eyes, and the game, team, and fans ceased to exist. A shove to my shoulder as a line changed jolted me out of the trance, and I lifted a brow.

“I gave you that goal.”

“Whatever, Silver Spoon.” He scoffed and rolled his eyes. He turned toward the player on his left and ignored me.

Gritting my teeth, I focused on the game. When the second period ended, I skated into the locker room with a renewed vigor. I’d put him in his place once and for all.

With a few clicks on my phone, I set the ball in motion. Miller thought he was in charge, but he had it all wrong. I’d told him I didn’t like to be ignored. It was time I reminded him of the consequences. I wasn’t someone to be messed with.

A new energy saturated my body as I took the ice for the last period. I felt on fire and

skated faster and cleaner than I ever had. I made two goals and two assists before the period ended, bringing us up to five points and winning over Nashville.

Not even the media or traveling dampened my mood. I was riding high as we stepped off the plane late that night. I watched as Miller climbed into his car and waved.

“See you later, Bambi.”

He rolled his eyes. “Only in your dreams, Silver Spoon.”

Smiling, I practically whistled as I slid into the car. I hadn’t felt this buzzed since my first year playing. I took my time as I unpacked and walked around my place. My phone had been vibrating for fifteen minutes, but I’d disregarded it. He’d figure it out.

I ignored the fact that I was more excited for Miller to submit to me than I had been for anything else in years. It was only because I enjoyed putting him in his place. He was too happy, too friendly, and too trusting. He was going to get eaten alive, and then my brother would be cross with me. It was better I taught him how the world worked first with my safety net in place.

My phone buzzed with another notification, and I smiled as I checked it. Finally, the front desk was alerting me to a visitor.

With bare feet, I padded over to the front door and opened the camera for the hallway. I wanted to see his face the second he stepped off the elevator. Triumph spread through me at the anger radiating off him as he stormed toward my door.

My smile widened, the muscles protesting at their overuse today, but I shrugged it off. I’d deal with the pain later. This was too good.

The thud against the door and the constant press of the doorbell did nothing to steal my smile. I waited for a good thirty seconds before I unlocked and opened the door.

“Bambi. It’s so good to see you. What brings you by this evening?”

Miller’s face was red, and his fists were clenched by his side. I’d never seen this side of him before, and something about that lit a fire in me. I wanted more of this—the raw and hidden parts no one else got to see.

“What did you do?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Cut the crap, Silver Spoon. I went to my apartment, and all of my stuff was gone, and the locks had been changed. So where’s my stuff? I know you had something to do with it.”

“Oh, that. Your stuff is in your room.” I stepped back so he could enter my place.

“You had no right.” He brushed by me, and his arm grazed my naked torso. It was then I realized I’d miscalculated. I’d been so eager for him to arrive that I’d zoned out and gone about my routine, including stripping down to nothing but a pair of boxers.

Suddenly, I was the one off-kilter and about to lose.

He stormed into my place but spun around. “I don’t get you. First, you tell me to stay away from you and pretend like we don’t know each other. Then you interrupt my conversations and demand I stay with you. You’re giving me whiplash!”

“I told you. It’s a favor.”

Miller stalked forward, and I covered my chest and stepped back until I hit the wall. He didn't stop until he pinned me against it and I hated how he towered over me. Those extra four inches gave him a slight advantage.

"I don't need your charity, Silver Spoon. I had it worked out."

The use of that name set my blood boiling, and I unfurled my hands from my chest and pushed him back, but he didn't budge. Fury, confusion, and vulnerability clouded my mind, and my muscles shook. Feeling trapped, I lashed out like the scared porcupine I was.

"Did you? Was sucking Toby's cock for his spare room the price, or was that an added bonus?"

Miller's jaw twitched. "Why do you care whose cock I suck, Silver?"

"I don't," I croaked.

"Uh-huh. Sure seems like you do." He leaned closer and brushed his nose across the sensitive skin beneath my ear before he whispered, "Is that what you expect? Me to suck your cock?"

A shudder rushed through me before I could hold it back. Fuck. Why did those words wreck me?

"You wish," I choked out and prayed he couldn't hear the need in my voice.

My cock was hard and tenting my boxers, the tip leaking and leaving a wet spot. What was going on? I didn't have this kind of reaction. But I couldn't get my dick to listen.

Miller shifted, and that was when I felt it. A hardness brushed against my tip, and I moaned at the absolute pleasure that one move had given me. Miller froze, and he started to move away.

I had to be exhausted from the game because it was the only explanation for what I did next. My hands slid down his chest and gripped his hips. Instead of pushing him away, this time, I pulled him forward. His jean-clad dick rubbed against mine and sent a million tingles racing up my body. I could feel him everywhere, just like I had on the ice. My senses buzzed alive, alighting every atom in my body.

I shifted my hips in a tiny circle, and sent pleasure zipping up my spine. I didn't know what I was doing. I couldn't even remember how we got into this position, much less my name. The only thing on my mind was chasing this. It had me in a chokehold, and I had no intention of letting go.

Miller moaned and pressed harder into me. The contact of our hard dicks against one another was otherworldly. His head fell between my neck and shoulder, and I lost it. His lips brushed against the sensitive skin, and his hot breath ghosted across it was too much.

I was unhinged as all thought left me, and I chased this high.

"More," I gasped and tightened my grip on him. I circled my hips quicker and dry-humped my teammate against my entryway wall. But I didn't care about any of that. The only thing that mattered was seeing this until the end.

"Lath," Miller whispered, and my toes curled. Tilting my neck up, I let my body move with him against the wall as the most intense pleasure ever erupted through me.

Sounds assaulted my ears, but I couldn't tell who they were coming from—me or him. Nonsensical words fell from my mouth, but I didn't care. The only thing that

mattered at this moment was the connection of our bodies.

“Mills,” I moaned.

Quicker than I thought possible, my balls drew up, and an orgasm smacked into me so hard I blacked out at the sheer force of it.

The world around me returned in small doses. First, it was the feel of the warm body pressed into me and rubbing my arms. Second, it was the soft reassurances whispered into my ear as he cradled me against his chest. My body was light and tingly, and it took me a while to realize why.

Miller. Against the wall. Dry humping.

Fucking hell. What had I just done? I wasn't gay! Nor did I cave to sexual arousal! Not once in my life had I ever been led by my dick.

My body tensed, and I pushed him away. I didn't need his coddling. Miller straightened as he assessed me. I didn't like it. He saw too much.

“That didn't happen.”

“Right.” He scoffed and shook his head before running his fingers through his curls. The wet spot on his jeans and my boxers belied my statement, but I couldn't admit it. “Listen, it's late, and I just want to sleep. I don't have the energy to keep fighting with you. So show me where my stuff is, and I'll figure the rest out in the morning.”

I ignored the last part but turned and headed down the hallway. I opened the door and showed him the room I'd had the movers place his stuff in. They'd even unboxed it and organized it.

“What the fudge?” he gasped.

“Everything is there. I only hire the best.”

“Of course you do. You wouldn’t be a silver spoon if you didn’t.”

I ignored his comment. “You have an ensuite through that door. I run at seven and eat breakfast at eight. I expect you to join me. Good night.”

I walked fast to my room and didn’t take a breath until I was enclosed behind my door. I thought having him here was what I wanted, but I wasn’t so sure based on the slip of judgment in the hallway I’d just displayed.

Miller Fahn was dangerous, and there was too much at stake to risk. In the morning, I’d get back to my routine and forget about this lapse in judgment.

It was better that way. Being anything other than enemies would lead to disaster, and like hell, I would lose this close to having everything I wanted.

Then why did it feel like I was losing the wrong thing?

CHAPTER 7

MILLER

I'd had no intention of staying with the stubborn iceman after learning what he'd done. But... but... that was before. Before the electrifying display in the hallway. Before that overwhelming chemistry between us had flared to life.

And for once, I wasn't the only one who felt it. Lathan had been putty in my arms, and I wanted more of that. It had been the most intense orgasm I'd ever had. And we hadn't even touched one another! What would it be like when we did? I had to know. I no longer cared that he hated me or denied the fire between us. I knew it was real, and I was determined to make him admit it, too.

So despite wanting to sleep longer, I dragged myself out of bed earlier than I had on a day off in years and dressed for a workout. The surprised expression on Lathan's face was worth the tiredness when he strolled into the kitchen and discovered me already there.

"You're up."

"Very astute, Silver Spoon. Here." I shoved a protein shake across the bar. "I helped myself to the contents of your fridge and made extra." He frowned at the gesture. I scoffed. "It's not poisoned."

"I wasn't worried about that." He took a hesitant sip.

“Sure.” I chuckled and finished off my shake while I watched him. He was different in his apartment than with the team. He was almost softer and more vulnerable. It intrigued me more than it should. I liked getting to see this secret version of him.

“You made a mess.”

“Oh, that? I’ll get it later.” I waved him off, and his scowl deepened.

“If you do it now, it won’t still be there later.”

“Okay, Daddy.” I rolled my eyes and rinsed out the blender.

“Stop calling me that.”

“Stop acting like you control me, then,” I countered.

I wasn’t usually this confrontational. Typically, I avoided it at all costs. But with Lathan, I got this weird high with each encounter. I wanted to see how far I could push his buttons before he snapped.

“There. Does that meet your standards, Silver Spoon?”

Lathan’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t respond. A fluffy ball of white fur vaulted onto the counter a second later, and I watched a miracle right before my eyes. Lathan’s features softened as he tended to the white furball. He made no move to introduce me as he opened a cabinet and took out a package of food. The cat attacked the plate with vigor, showing me its butt in thanks.

Lathan continued to ignore me and walked toward the front door. It didn’t escape my notice that the protein shake was emptied or that he was kind to his cat.

I loved learning all these layers, Silver Spoon.

Smiling, I followed him out of the apartment. I bounced on my feet and debated what buttons to push next. This would be more fun than I'd anticipated.

I waited a few minutes into the run before I struck. "What's your cat's name? How long have you had it?"

"This isn't chit-chat hour. We're running." His jaw tightened, and I smiled wider.

"Yeah, but talking while running uses more oxygen, so I'm helping you build your stamina."

"My stamina is fine."

"Never took you as a guy who was okay with fine, but each to their own."

"I... that's not... You're annoying."

"Eh. Maybe. Depends on who you ask. Most people find me charming. You're the exception."

"Lucky me."

"What's your favorite color?"

"What?"

"Favorite color. Mine's blue. Gotta say, I was pretty stoked to move to a team with blue as one of their colors. College, as you know, was green, and Chicago was black and red. So, yours?"

I couldn't help the smile that stayed across my face the entire five miles. This was more fun than I'd anticipated. Despite his complaints, Lathan continued to talk to me the entire run. His favorite color was black, his cat's name was Alaska, and he'd had him for two years. It was safe to say I'd won this round. Now, I had to see how far I could push his control before he snapped again.

We returned to our separate rooms to shower, and I took a page out of his book from last night and put on only a pair of boxer briefs. Padding barefoot into the kitchen, I was once again there before him. The mysterious cat was nowhere to be found, so I scanned the contents of his fridge and pantry and pulled out things I could use to put together a breakfast.

Lathan emerged fully dressed and stopped cold in his tracks when he spotted me. I winked and continued to whisk the eggs.

"What are you doing?" His jaw was clenched so tight I was impressed he'd been able to get words out.

I checked the time. "Making breakfast. Is there anything you don't like? I haven't put the omelets together yet."

"You're making me breakfast?" he asked, then shook his head. "No. I mean. Why aren't you dressed?"

I snapped my fingers. "You're right." I reached into the pantry, pulled out an apron I'd found earlier, and tied it around me. "That's better," I said before returning to my task. It took all of my strength not to look up and catch Lathan's expression. Based on the tension radiating off him, I'd successfully pushed his buttons.

Yet, he stayed in control. That perfect facade he portrayed was on full display. It was a massive contrast to the man he'd been last night, and I didn't like the shift. I wanted

the free Lathan back.

We ate our breakfast in silence. I was busy thinking of ways to get under his skin, whereas he was probably planning my death.

“So, what’s on the agenda for the rest of the day?” I asked.

He sipped his black and bitter coffee and eyed me over the rim of his mug. “I’m shocked you’re not putting up more of a fight about being here. I don’t trust it.”

“What’s not to trust, Silver Spoon?” I leaned closer. “You made a persuasive argument in your entryway, and I decided there was nowhere else I’d rather be.”

The flash of heat in his eyes was unmistakable, but he quickly shuttered it. Good gravy. This man was more locked up than Fort Knox.

“Hmm. Fine. There’s a few ground rules I’d like to set.”

I sat back and crossed my arms over my chest. His gaze dropped to my naked torso before quickly snapping back up. “Clothes should be worn at all times.”

“Veto.”

“Excuse me? You can’t veto my rules.”

“Pretty sure I just did. Next?”

He sputtered, his mouth opening and closing in a way so unlike him. I grinned and brought my knee up on the chair to wrap my arms around, and displayed more of my body.

Lathan's nostrils flared, but he kept his fire contained. "Pick up after yourself. I'm not your maid, and I refuse to live in a chaotic environment."

I pouted. "Are you saying I'm messy?" His gaze jerked to the sink full of dishes, but he didn't respond.

"Thirdly, no guests allowed. This is my space, and I don't want to be surprised by visitors."

"And if I don't agree with any of these?" I challenged. He'd wanted me here, so I was curious how far he'd push it.

Lathan stood and towered over me. He braced his arms on the table and leaned close to me. "Test me and find out, Bambi. I promise you won't like my punishments."

A shiver raced over me before I could stop it. Why was that so hot? I didn't like pain in a sexual way, but commanding Lathan was hot. He stalked off before I could respond, and I immediately missed the heat of his body. I shifted the half-chub in my boxers and exhaled.

I had to be careful in this game. I wanted to mess with him, to prove there was an undeniable connection between us, but I couldn't let him get the upper hand. There was no way I would come back from it if he did.

I wasn't great at keeping feelings and sex separate, but with Lathan, I'd have to. It was the only way.

* * *

It had been a few days since I'd moved in, and any advantage I'd initially won had disappeared. Each day, Lathan gained more and more control to the point that nothing

I did rattled him. That wouldn't do. It was time to up the ante.

Thankfully, I had a secret weapon in my arsenal.

"You're sure about this, Reese?" I asked.

"Promise. Lathan spent a week with us this summer, and Cam forced him to fill out a dating questionnaire. His interests were hockey, his cat, Tempurpedic beds, coffee, working out, and sushi."

Yeah, that tracked. The man spent his time working out, watching game plays, or playing with his cat. His beds were divine, so I wasn't going to argue with that one, and he drank so much coffee that I wouldn't be surprised if he bled it at this point. The sushi part was interesting, though, and something I could use.

"Is there any chance Cam still has this questionnaire?" I suddenly wanted to know what else was on it.

"I can check, but he didn't give much info. Lathan doesn't date. He's never had a significant other and doesn't discuss the topic with Landon." I'd gotten the same impression. He was either very good at keeping his hookups private, or he didn't bother. Knowing how much control he liked to have, I'd wager he didn't bother. There were too many unpredictable obstacles in hookups.

"All right. Thanks for the intel."

"No problem." Reese hesitated, and I braced myself for their question. "Is there more to this than wanting to get along as roommates?"

"He hates me. I'm just trying to get him to like me." It wasn't necessarily a lie, but an uneasy pit formed in my gut. I didn't like lying.

“It’s just... remember when Landon was hurt junior year? I saw your face when your hands touched, and I’ve always wondered.”

I swallowed. Well, dang it. “Oh. You saw that, huh?” I rubbed the back of my head. “So what if he was the reason I realized I was gay? He isn’t, so it doesn’t matter. Plus, that was years ago.”

“I knew it! Not that you were gay, but that I’d noticed something. Why doesn’t it matter, though? I actually think you two would be good together.”

Hope swirled in my gut, but I couldn’t latch on to it. Hope was dangerous and made me want things I couldn’t have.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, but it’s not in the cards. Being friends and teammates is my only plan. Listen, I need to go, but I’ll see you in a few weeks?”

“I can’t wait. I’m glad we’ll have more time than just a brief hello.”

“Me too. Looking forward to it. Talk to you later, Reese.”

“Bye, Miller.”

The call ended, and I got to work on researching the best sushi places around. I knew nothing about sushi or what kind he liked, so I could play it conservatively or go all out. Deciding to go all out, I placed an order for more sushi than either of us could eat in one sitting and then changed into black briefs and a new apron I’d ordered online. I had to overnight it, but the look I anticipated would be worth it.

Not only did it show off my butt perfectly, but it also happened to be Lathan’s favorite color. I wasn’t surprised when he finally admitted to black being his color. The guy barely wore anything else, but it had still been nice for him to admit it. To

tell me something personal about himself.

I wiped down the counters and set food out for Alaska. Lathan had been adamant Alaska wouldn't like me, but I was determined to win over both of the ice princes in this apartment.

My phone buzzed to let me know our food was here. I put on a robe to answer the door and carried the bags into the kitchen. The plate on the counter was empty, and Alaska sat there, licking his paws.

I smiled. "You're gonna fall in love with me soon, Alaska." The cat, of course, ignored me, jumped off the counter, and scurried back to wherever it spent its time when it wasn't eating.

Another text came through, and I jumped back into focus. We'd played New York last night, so Lathan was spending the morning with his stepbrother before Landon had to return to New York. Landon had promised to text when they were done. I'd hung out with the guys last night, but Lathan had begged off.

That was when I decided to try a different tactic. I didn't want Lathan to avoid his friends because of me. Hopefully, a sushi peace offering with a side of my sex appeal would be just the ticket to get him to show me that unhinged side of him again.

Good gravy, I wanted to see that side again. I craved it. My dreams were wrought with the images. My dick throbbed in remembrance, begging for another go.

Discarding the robe, I propped myself against the counter just as the door opened. Showtime.

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CHAPTER 8

LATHAN

The happiness I'd gained from hanging out with my brother vanished when I stepped into the kitchen. I blinked, confident I was hallucinating.

"What the fuck?"

"Oh, good. You're home! I made dinner. Or, not really made, but I ordered it. I've never had sushi, so I'm not one hundred percent sure what I got, but this place was highly recommended," Miller rambled. His chocolate curls bounced around his head in a perfect hockey flow. I had the oddest urge to run my fingers through it.

At that thought, I shifted my gaze to the rest of his face and took in his rosy cheeks and plump lips. Plump? Rosy? What the hell was going through my head?

His bare chest wasn't any better, and I considered returning my gaze to his face, but my eyes continued their assessment of their own accord and traveled down the defined pectoral and abdominal muscles. The hard work he put into his body for hockey was impressive, and saliva pooled in my mouth as I admired it.

That was all this was. I understood the hard work and dedication it took to keep your body in shape, regardless of whether I'd ever looked at my other teammates' bodies. They didn't parade half-naked around me. That was why.

The dark hair on the lower half of his stomach pulled my eyes further, beckoning me

to follow that trail. Except it didn't lead to the waistband of his briefs as I expected, but a tiny apron he'd tied around his waist. One that said, "Once you put my meat in your mouth, you're gonna want to swallow."

I jerked my head up and shoved my hands into my pockets. I'd take his tempting curls over the confusing feelings his lower half brought.

"You like?" he asked. I blinked away the fog that had enveloped me and noticed the vulnerability in his question.

Living with Miller wasn't as horrible as I expected. He talked nonstop, left a trail of debris everywhere he went, and refused to wear more than his boxers. Despite that, it was nice having someone else in the apartment. It didn't feel as lonely or as cold, something I hadn't realized until his overwhelming presence took up residence.

He constantly made me food and had a pot of fresh coffee waiting for me every morning. Granted, it had only been three days of us living together, but it was nice.

And that terrified me. I didn't like depending on others and Miller's presence was becoming something I could enjoy instead of tolerate.

So I'd ignored him unless it had to do with hockey. When he'd gone out with Landon and Cam after the game last night, I'd declined and returned home. It hadn't been the reprieve I'd expected, and a hollowness had settled into my heart until I heard him return.

Even his blatant flirting, something I was sure he did only to rile me, hadn't bothered me that much. But this... this was too far.

"Take it off," I grunted.

“If you insist.” His eyes sparkled as he reached back to untie the strings. The instant he didn’t fight, I knew I’d stepped right into his trap. Underneath his apron was the sluttiest pair of briefs I’d ever seen. They were tight and short and barely covered the mounds of his ass.

My heart pounded at the sight and I clenched my fists. I was going to murder my teammate.

“So, did I do good? Do you like?” he asked.

I blinked, convinced he was playing with me. He wanted me to like him ? I needed to up my asshole game if he thought that outcome was possible.

“Why the fuck would I like you?”

His smile fell, and I felt terrible for making him sad for a second. Then he recovered and ignored my question.

“The sushi,” he said, gesturing to the spread across my island.

My cheeks heated when I realized he hadn’t meant himself at all. I took in the impressive spread, and my mouth watered at the sight. I didn’t let myself have too many indulgences, but sushi was definitely one of them. According to Cam, my brother’s polycule member, it was one of my love languages. I hadn’t believed him at the time. But as some of my irritation at Miller dissolved, I had to concede that Cam might be onto something.

“It’s fine,” I said and sat at the island. Miller’s eyes dulled, and I had the sudden urge to change my answer. To make him feel better. What the fuck!

“Cool. So, um, I guess, dig in.”

I watched with amusement as Miller looked at the sushi in confusion. When he grabbed a fork to stab a piece, I reached out and grabbed his wrist.

“No.”

“But... I mean... I know I got it for you, but I thought I could eat it, too.” He pouted.

The corners of my mouth tugged, and I bit back a laugh. Why was that pout so cute? And when did I find anything Miller did cute? Once I had my face schooled, I took the fork out of his hand and replaced it with a pair of chopsticks.

“Oh.” His mouth made a perfect ‘O’ as he stared at the chopsticks. I snapped mine together, expertly picked up a piece of sushi, and set it on my plate. I put a minuscule amount of wasabi on top and then dipped it in soy sauce before placing it in my mouth. I moaned around the flavors that exploded on my tongue.

Once I’d devoured the piece, I moved to select my second but paused when I noticed Miller attempting to hold the chopsticks. His tongue poked out the tiniest bit as he concentrated, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get them to work.

Taking pity on the sushi he was destroying, I stood and walked around the island. “Like this,” I said and took his hand to demonstrate how to hold the two pieces. “Anything you don’t like?” I asked.

“Um, well,” he started, and I knew he would say something smart.

“Food wise,” I added.

He snorted. “Not sure. I haven’t tried many things, so it could go either way.”

The sudden urge to expose him to new things filled me, but I squashed it. I didn’t

have time to teach a puppy, and Miller was the neediest puppy I'd ever seen.

"These are cooked, and these are raw. If it's your first taste of sushi, start with the cooked. Shrimp, salmon, and tuna," I said, pointing to the different rolls he'd ordered.

"What's your favorite?"

"Salmon."

"I'll try that one then."

With both of our hands holding the chopsticks, I showed him how to grab a piece and walked him through the steps to prepare it. Once he had it done, I stepped back and returned to my plate. I flexed my hand, the sudden loss of his overwhelming. I needed to stop getting close to him. It did weird things to my body.

We ate mostly in silence; only the sounds of our moans as we enjoyed the food could be heard. It was entertaining to watch Miller try new things. His face was open as he broadcasted his opinions, and I quickly learned which ones he liked and disliked. I didn't know why I cared, but I stored the information away like a pirate with stolen treasure.

"How am I stuffed from eating bite-sized food?" he mumbled.

"It's more filling than it appears."

I stood and gathered everything up. Miller joined me, and we packaged the leftovers and tossed the trash. He even wiped down the counter, and I became transfixed by how the muscles in his back moved. His legs were thick, and I lost focus as I stared at the tiny briefs. My face flushed, my heart rate picked up, and I suddenly felt dizzy. Odder was how my dick strained against my zipper.

Miller finished cleaning, spun around, and froze when he spotted me. The earlier mischievous glint in his eyes returned, and I gulped as he neared me.

“See something you like, Silver?”

“No.”

He chuckled, not buying my lie. Not that I could blame him. I didn’t either.

“You know, I can’t quit thinking about the greeting you gave me the night I moved in.” He brushed a knuckle down my cheek, and my cock twitched in response. I didn’t understand it or why I was having this kind of reaction to him, but there was no denying my body at least understood.

“Nothing happened,” I choked out.

“You can pretend all you want that it didn’t, but we both know something did.”

I gritted my teeth and bit the inside of my cheek in the process. The burst of pain helped the lust recede enough for me to think.

“It doesn’t matter. If you tell someone, they won’t believe you. I have people who will squash it before it sees the light of day. Besides, I’ve been celibate for years. Your claim is unwarranted.”

His eyes widened at my words. I hadn’t meant to reveal much, but it was out there. Miller stepped back, and he frowned.

“I would never share your business without your permission. Especially regarding your sexuality. No one should ever take that choice away from you.”

I swallowed at the sincerity in his words. I'd been ready for attack, but again, Miller surprised me.

"If you're not going to tell people, why keep bringing it up? I'm not gay, and it's not happening again."

"You don't have to be gay to like dick. There's a whole slew of ways to identify." He moved closer until his chest pressed into mine. "And why can't it happen again?"

"Because I don't want it to."

"Hmm. Is that so?" He ghosted a breath across my neck, and I gripped the counter behind me like my life depended on it. If he touched my dick, I would be a goner.

Please, touch me.

Please, don't.

God, I was a mess.

"Your eyes and mouth don't agree, Silver Spoon. But I'll let it go for now." He stepped back, and I had to grip the counter tighter to not pull him back. What was wrong with me? Maybe I had mercury poisoning? I'd look up the symptoms later.

"You're delusional. That was a fluke and won't be happening again."

"Thou doth protest too much, Silver. So before you go and tell me all the reasons why it won't, how about you hear the reasons why it should." He crossed his arms, and I whined at the loss of the view. Miller smirked but didn't comment on my embarrassing sound. If my mother could see me now, she'd faint at my inability to control myself.

“Deny it all you want, but orgasms feel good, and if the score from the game last night is any indication, it helped you play better.” He lifted an eyebrow, and my smile dropped.

Was he right? I scored three goals last night and got a hat trick on my brother. I assumed it was because Landon was the goalie, and I always played better against him. We were competitive and worked twice as hard to best each other.

But what if Miller was right and my performance was because of him?

No. No. That couldn't be right. He was just getting into my head.

“I don't know why you've chosen to be celibate, but for me, finding a person I trust enough to be intimate with is hard. I've used apps but haven't had much luck in Austin yet.”

Rage bubbled under my skin at the thought of Miller with someone.

“I don't trust you,” I gritted out. If he kept talking, I was likely to do something out of character and kiss him just to prove a point.

What that point was, I wasn't ready to acknowledge.

Miller rolled his eyes. “If you didn't trust me, you wouldn't have let me stay with you. Deny it all you want, but I know that much about you. You're private and like your space. So having me here says a lot. You might not trust me a lot, but you trust me enough to know I won't steal your silverware in the middle of the night or sell photos of you sleeping. We have a basic level of trust as teammates, and maybe more because of our shared history with your brother.”

I wanted to deny his claims, but he was right, so I stayed quiet. It was easier than

admitting the truth.

“We could help each other out, Silver. Roommate to roommate. It stays private and just between us. Nothing more than physical release. I’ll show you how good it can be. I’ll let you relax that control you have and just feel for once. And if it’s an advantage in our games, even better. It’s win-win.”

“Not interested.” I shoved his chest and stormed out of the kitchen.

“You’re welcome for dinner,” he called after me. “Oh, and I fed Alaska earlier in case he tries to act like he’s starving!”

I paused and clenched my fists at my side. Being rude to him on my behalf was one thing, but my cat was my weakness. Taking a deep breath, I turned around and met his eyes.

“Thank you for the sushi and feeding Alaska.” I nodded and pivoted, hoping I could escape the rest of the way before he said anything else. I wasn’t that lucky.

“Invitation is open in case you get your eyes and mouth to agree, Silver Spoon.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I slipped into my room and shut the door. I rested against it and willed my heart to slow. I hated how Miller’s words echoed around my brain, rooting themselves and making me want things.

Things I’d never felt before. Things I wasn’t sure how to control. Things I was beginning to crave.

Why did the notion of letting go and having Miller take control sound so good?

Could I do it? Could it really stay quiet? Could I really have something for myself?

The questions plagued me the rest of the night. I'd been right believing Miller was my enemy. He was dangerous in ways I'd never encountered.

The problem was I no longer cared.

I wanted the escape he offered, but I didn't know if I was brave enough to pursue it.

Fuck. This.

CHAPTER 9

MILLER

I shouldn't be this happy, considering we'd just lost our first game of the season, but I was. I could feel Lathan slipping closer to giving in. I didn't understand why I wanted him so much, but it was fruitless to deny it. I wanted to bend Lathan Silver until he broke. I wasn't usually this dominating when it came to sex. But with him, the same beast that emerged on the ice kept coming out to play.

It wanted to ravage him, and I was helpless to stop it.

"You do know we lost, right?" Bell asked with a chuckle.

I dropped my perusal of Lathan and turned to my friend with a smile. "Yep."

"Then do you have a death wish? Because Silver looks two seconds away from coming over here and ripping your eyes out." He scrubbed his wet hair with his towel as he eyed me.

I grinned wider. "Nah. That's just his way of saying hello." Or foreplay, but I couldn't exactly say that part out loud.

"Whatever you say, man."

We finished dressing and walked out, and the rest of the team followed. We had a four-hour flight ahead of us, and we were all eager to get home. Lathan ignored me as

I passed by his seat, but I could feel his eyes on me. He could pretend all he wanted that he wasn't affected, but I wasn't buying it.

The lights dimmed once we were all loaded, changed, and reseated. I spent half the flight sleeping and the other half looking up new recipes to try this week. I'd always enjoyed cooking and trying new things, but it wasn't as fun to cook for one person. Watching Lathan enjoy what I made had unlocked a new kink. I was addicted to earning the little smiles he gave when he liked something.

Descending the steps of the plane, I hugged Bell bye, waved to a few other guys, and headed to my car. Despite us living together and going to the same place, Lathan and I drove separately. Though I suppose in his case, he'd been driven here. I spotted the black monstrosity with his driver idling at the gate and smiled to myself.

He was waiting for me. He would never admit it, but he was.

I'm going to make you like me, Lathan Silver. Just you watch.

While driving, I schemed new ways to push his buttons. I didn't normally antagonize people, so there was a certain kind of freedom in doing it with Lathan.

I could hear the shower running in his room when I entered mine. He was hiding from me, but that was okay. It gave me more time to set my trap.

Changing into a black jock, I wrapped another new apron around my waist and set about making a midnight snack. After the past few games, we'd fallen into a routine when neither of us could sleep. I'd make something yummy for us to eat. Lathan would complain about it not being on his diet plan. Then I'd inform him it was, and he'd pout but eventually give in and enjoy my creation while we watched TV.

We hadn't voiced it out loud, but we'd silently agreed only to watch episodes of Ted

Lasso together. Landon had recommended it, and it seemed we were both invested despite neither saying so. I wasn't sure at this point if it was the show itself I was intrigued by or the man sitting next to me on the couch. Either way, I was firmly in the 'believe' camp.

"How many of those do you have?" Lathan said, gesturing to my apron. This one said, "I'm the special ingredient." It was tamer than the others, but I liked its blue color.

"Why? Want to borrow one?" I teased.

Lathan rolled his eyes but didn't say anything. The timer went off, and I wished I could have seen his expression when I turned. His shocked gasp when I bent over to open the oven was reward enough.

"What the fuck?" he shouted, and I stood with the tray of 'mostly' healthy cookies.

"Chocolate chip oatmeal cookies," I said, pretending not to know what he was referring to.

"That's not. I... What?" His face was red, and I smiled as I set the pan on the cooling rack. I went about my routine, turning off the oven and drying the dishes I'd already washed. My back was to him the whole time, and I was dying to know what he was thinking. Interested, Lathan?

By the time I scooped the cookies off the tray and sat on the sofa, Lathan's face had returned to its usual color, and his eyes were focused on the TV. I hit play and nudged the plate toward him. "It's not 'biscuits with the boss', but I promise they're good. Family recipe."

He cleared his throat. "I'm good."

I shrugged. "Suit yourself." I took a bite and moaned. Was it louder than needed? Of course. Did I care? Not in the least.

Lathan stayed still throughout the entire episode, and I worried I'd broken him. I'd been confident he'd fold and give in to this undeniable chemistry between us, but the man was as unyielding as a toddler refusing to go to bed.

I turned off the TV and stood without saying anything. If he wasn't going to give in, then I needed to take care of the throbbing pressure myself. Some time alone with my favorite dildo and an incognito tab was just what I needed to end the night.

"I won't be joining you for your run tomorrow," I said in lieu of goodnight. I had plans to volunteer at Rainbow Lounge tomorrow and wanted to sleep in as much as I could. Not that Lathan cared if I ran with him or not. I thought our feelings were mutual, but I'd been wrong.

Some space from him while I gathered myself was needed.

His arm snapped out, grabbed my wrist, and stopped my retreat. "Why?" he gritted out. The sound was guttural, and I had to hold myself still so I didn't shudder.

"Because I want to sleep in." No way was I telling him the real reason.

"Not good enough, Bambi."

"Too bad, Silver Spoon. You don't control me; I just let you pretend." I yanked my wrist free and stomped to my room. I sighed in relief when I made it there without further incident. I quickly opened my toy drawer and pulled out my favorite dildo when my door flew open, and an angry Lathan stormed inside.

His blue eyes were stormy, and his body was taut. Dangerous energy radiated off

him, and I wanted to see what he'd do, but I knew it wasn't the time to test his restraint.

"Rude much?"

"We weren't finished."

"You might not have been, but I sure was. Get out of my room." I crossed my arms and realized too late I still held the brightly colored dildo in my hands. I leaned into it and lifted a brow in challenge. Unless he was here to touch my dick, I wouldn't be embarrassed for seeking my pleasure elsewhere.

Lathan advanced with the same speed he showed on the ice and knocked me back into the wall with the dildo pressed between us.

Fire lit up my entire body, and I came alive at the feel of him. Hot skin. Hard muscles. And one pulsing erection digging into my own.

"So mouthy. I can think of better ways for you to use your mouth," he growled.

I smirked before taking control and spinning us so he was pressed into the wall. The dildo fell to the ground, and I shoved his hands above his head to trap him.

Leaning forward, I licked up his neck before whispering into his ear. "Cute, but you're not in charge, Silver." His body relaxed against me, and I smiled into his neck before sucking hard to mark him. "You like that, don't you? Me taking charge?"

He whimpered, and I sucked harder. "I need to hear you say it, Lath. Tell me you want this. That you want me."

It was needy, but I was beyond caring. I'd been pining for him for years, and I wasn't

going to let this opportunity pass me by.

“I want this,” he gritted out like he had glass in his mouth. My free hand traveled down his body, and I gripped his cock. I gave it one stroke before I stopped.

“And?” I prodded.

He groaned and thrust his hips forward, but I held him entirely at my mercy. He couldn’t move without my permission.

“I want you,” he whispered. His blue eyes swirled hot as fire as he stared at me, daring me to use his words against him. But I had no intention of doing that. Now that he’d admitted it, I would give him whatever he wanted.

“Good boy,” I cooed and nibbled on the sensitive skin of his neck and resumed my stroking of his dick. He melted into the wall, and I hadn’t even done anything spectacular yet. When we touched skin to skin, he would lose his mind.

“On the bed. Clothes off,” I ordered.

Lathan swallowed, and his eyes searched mine. When I didn’t relent, he nodded, and I let him go. He stumbled toward my bed but removed his clothes as I asked. When he was utterly bare to my eyes, I couldn’t move. His body was beautiful, an actual work of art.

His muscles were well-defined, and I couldn’t wait to lick every inch of his sinewy skin. His cock was uncut and thick, and my mouth watered at the sight. I’d balked at his statement earlier, but at the mere sight of his dick, I couldn’t wait to wrap my lips around it.

Patience. I had to play this carefully.

My gaze snagged on the tattoos, and I had to grab the base of my cock to stop myself from coming. Holy moly, those were sexy. He had two on his upper thighs that his briefs covered. I stared in awe at them and then the one low on his ribs. Lathan was so private that I hadn't ever seen this much of him. He was either the first in the locker room or the last. He never walked around half-dressed around others, and outside of the first night I'd been here, he'd always been dressed in his apartment, too. I'd been too angry, and that was a crime against humanity.

Seeing all of his naked skin on display was doing things to me—things I hadn't been prepared for.

“If you don't do something in the next second, I'm leaving,” he challenged.

Ah, poor baby was getting self-conscious.

Smirking, I stalked toward the bed and pinned him beneath me. “Don't worry, Silver Spoon. I plan to take excellent care of you.”

Before he could respond, I wrapped my lips around his dick and swallowed him whole. He fell back onto the mattress, and a loud moan tumbled out, unencumbered. I smiled around his dick as I continued to deep-throat him. My sexual experiences weren't vast, but I'd been a quick study with the few partners I had. And blow jobs were my expertise.

Once I had him nice and sloppy, I popped off and tugged my briefs down, and freed my cock. Lathan's eyelids fluttered as he took in my erection. Grinning, I wrapped my hand around us and brought them together. His eyes rolled back, and he rewarded me with another loud moan. Lathan might be quiet in his everyday life, but he was obnoxiously loud in the bedroom.

I loved it.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“Mmhmm,” he moaned.

“Your cock is so pretty, Lath. I have so many ideas I want to do.”

“Do it,” he mumbled and thrust his hips up. He couldn’t stop himself.

“Oh, I plan to. As long as you don’t freak out on me.”

He gave another nonsensical noise as I stroked us faster. I was braced over his thighs, giving me a glorious view of his abs. I watched how they flexed as I shuttled my hand over us. Taking a chance, I reached down and cupped his balls. His immediate groan was all the answer I needed. I palmed them and tugged, giving them attention before I trailed my finger lower. Lathan froze and met my eyes. His gaze was hesitant, so I softened my gaze.

“Just trust me, I promise to stop if you hate it.”

He nodded, and I spit onto our joined erections. My saliva trailed down, and I used it to coat my finger. Lathan’s breathing sped up as I grazed his puckered hole, and I knew when I finally got to breach him, it would be epic. My orgasm built quickly at the sight of him before me. Lathan’s cock leaked precum, his balls drawn up tight, and the look of pure bliss on his face was enough to end me.

The rosy hue painted on his cheeks was my favorite sight. If I were an artist, I’d capture his face right now. It was glorious, and I knew my memory would never recapture it the same. Still, I kept my eyes on him as I brought us both to the edge. The urge to kiss him was so intense I had to distract myself. If I let myself go down that road, I’d lose everything.

“You feel so good in my hand, Silver. I’m going to come all over you and make a mess. I’m going to wreck you, Lath.”

His eyes popped open at my words, and it was the last straw. As we held eye contact, I did exactly as I said and erupted all over our cocks. Lathan followed, his hot cum adding to mine. I didn’t stop stroking us until the last drop. His stomach was covered in both of our cum, and I wished I could take a picture of it.

Instead, I swirled my fingers in our combined cum and lifted it up to his mouth. It was one thing to let another guy jerk you off; it was a completely different level to swallow his cum. I needed to know he wasn’t just using me. That he wasn’t thinking of me as someone else. I couldn’t stand it if he did.

I might not mean anything to him, but he did to me.

“Lick it clean,” I encouraged. Lathan kept eye contact as he sucked my finger clean. My dick twitched at the imagery, trying to rally for another round. “Good boy,” I said before climbing off him and entering the bathroom. I wet a washcloth, cleaned myself off, and then returned to do the same to him. Except when I stepped into the room, my bed was empty.

You can run for now, Lathan, but I will catch you.

CHAPTER 10

LATHAN

Since my night with Miller, I'd realized two things—he was right, and I was a coward. We won our next game, and I had a season-high night with two goals and four assists, two of which were to Miller, who also scored. He gave me a smug smile each time he put the biscuit in the basket, which made my face heat. My only saving grace was knowing my face was red from gameplay, and there was no way he knew how he affected me.

I avoided him that night in the apartment, determined to hold my ground. I couldn't let myself fall into his trap again. He made me reckless, and that was dangerous—too dangerous.

Hence my cowardice.

I'd become a pro at sneaking in and out of the apartment to avoid running into him. Not that it made me think of him less. His presence was everywhere. From the notes on the food he made for me, to the stray sock that Alaska had stolen, or the whiff of his cologne I'd catch around the place, there was no denying his existence.

And in the places I couldn't ignore him—on the ice and in the locker room—I sought him out like the fiend I was. Any glimpse of him I could get, I'd take, even if I hated every second of it. Watching him with Bell or the fucking equipment manager made my blood boil. But I couldn't have him. So I avoided him and soaked up his sunshine in small sips when I could.

It wasn't enough.

Deep down, I knew it would never be enough, but it didn't stop me from avoiding him in public and craving him in private.

We lost our next game against Washington, and I almost caved. I'd stood at my door debating opening it for hours, but I couldn't. If he'd barged in, I wouldn't have fought him, but somehow, I knew he needed me to make the move after leaving his bed like I had. We were locked in a chess match, and I wasn't willing to sacrifice any of my pieces.

By some miracle, we won the next game against his former team, but it wasn't due to our line. I played like shit, and Miller hadn't fared any better. Unfortunately, we carried that funk into the Global series and lost back-to-back against Florida in Finland. We had a few days off before our next game, and I needed to get my head back on hockey.

The problem was, I couldn't untangle thoughts of Miller and hockey anymore, which was the only reason I found myself following him when he left the apartment that evening.

"Sir, some might consider this stalking," James said.

"Thank you for your sage wisdom, but I'm merely ensuring my teammate is safe. I'm a concerned citizen and teammate, not a stalker."

I couldn't be sure, but it sounded like James snorted bullshit, but I was too focused on Miller and the man he'd met up with to care.

Did he have to touch this asshole so much? Fuck. I wanted to rip this guy's hands off for being that close to him. Not that I cared. Obviously, I was only concerned he'd

get sick, and then we'd be down a player tomorrow. Yeah. That was why this rage filled me.

Okay, so maybe there were three things I'd realized: Miller was right, I was a coward, and I was obsessed with him.

Admitting that to myself felt good, and all the energy I'd spent denying it evaporated. Miller and his companion disappeared into the bar, taking them out of my purview. I squared my shoulders, and before I could talk myself out of it, I opened my door.

"Wait here," I ordered a second before I slammed the door.

I didn't know what I was going to do when I got inside, but I'd figure it out like I did any play on the ice—assess, plan, and act.

It had served me well in my career, so I didn't see why it wouldn't here, too.

Except when I stepped into the dimly lit bar and saw Miller's curls dangerously close to the asshole, all logical plans went out the window, and I reacted.

Shoving my way through the crowd, for once, I didn't care if I was recognized. My goal was the sexy brunette with hazel eyes that stole my breath and befuddled my brain with one touch.

His companion noticed me first and lifted his pea-green eyes to mine. Shock and awe flashed in them as Miller clued into my presence.

"You're Lathan Silver," the interloper said.

"Leave," I grunted. The man squeaked and glanced at Miller, making my anger rise. "Don't look at him." His eyes widened, and for the first time in my life, I didn't care

how this looked, how this would affect my mother, or how this might blow back on me.

Miller rolled his eyes at me and took a swig of his drink. “Hello, Roomie . Nice to see you here. What can we do for you tonight?”

“You’re coming with me,” I gritted out. The urge to grab and haul him out of there was strong, but I had enough mindset to know the optics wouldn’t look good. So I curled my hands into fists at my side and exhaled so harshly my nostrils flared.

Miller sighed and leaned too close for my liking to the guy. He whispered something in his ear before standing and stepping closer to me. My breath caught as he peered down at me, a mischievous smirk on his face. He reached into my pocket, and I swallowed at the contact. My eyes threatened to close at my neediness, but I kept them open. Barely.

Miller pulled out a few bills, tossed them onto the table, and then returned my wallet. Once he was done, he patted my pocket and smirked. “Drinks are on you since you ruined my date,” he said.

Date? Fuck that. The ground beneath me swayed, and I reached out to steady myself. Miller’s smile dropped, and he stepped closer, bringing his unique smell with him.

“Are you okay?” he asked with concern.

I shook my head, hating and loving his concern in the same breath. I didn’t want to want him, but I couldn’t deny it any longer. I needed Miller Fahn more than I needed to toe the line. My sanity depended on it at this point. It felt more reckless to keep avoiding him than to give in.

He said goodbye to his date and ushered me out of the bar. I hadn’t looked to see if

anyone else had noticed us. It seemed like the lesser of my worries as I gasped for breath. James had the door open as we approached. This time, I didn't miss the glance that passed between him and Miller, but again, I couldn't find it in me to care.

Miller buckled me in with care before sliding in next to me. I hated how much I liked his attention. Had anyone else ever taken care of me this way? My mother never had. Maybe a maid or staff member, but not anyone who wasn't paid. That much I knew for sure.

My brain wanted to argue he was only doing it because he got something out of it—a place to live. But that argument was flimsy at best. I'd forced him to live with me. He had other options, but I couldn't stomach the thought of him elsewhere. So, no. Miller wasn't being friendly to get something from me. It was just who he was.

It was refreshing and terrifying.

“What happened?” he asked once my breathing calmed.

I glanced up and noticed James's eyes in the rearview mirror watching us. Shaking my head to Miller, I kept myself from speaking until I knew we wouldn't be overheard. Granted, James could already report what he'd seen to my mother, and that alone was damning, but I didn't want to add to it. If I was going to give in to Miller, I needed to keep it between us for as long as I could.

Thankfully, he didn't press, and we sat silently as James drove us back to the apartment. Neither of us spoke as we made our way into the building and rode the elevator. The moment we stepped across the threshold, I knew my time was up.

How did I ask for what I wanted? How did I explain what I needed?

I fumbled with my code on the door and had to enter it three times before I got it

right. I could feel Miller's gaze as we took off our shoes. I walked to the kitchen, grabbed a glass, and filled it with water. I managed a few sips before he broke.

One hand landed on my hip and squeezed, while the other carefully took the glass and placed it in the sink. When it was free, it joined his other hand on my opposite hip. He stepped closer and removed any space between us as he crowded me into the kitchen counter.

I gulped and found the courage to tilt my head up to meet his eyes. Gold swirled in their depths, and the blue and green were so bright that I couldn't look away.

"Talk to me. Tell me why you've been avoiding me when we're alone but watching me like you can't get enough when we're in public. Make it make sense, Silver."

I swallowed. "I... I'm scared. I can't have this, but I want it, and I hate you for that."

"What do you want, Lathan? I need to hear you say it. I need to know I'm not alone in this."

"You're not." I swallowed again and licked my lips. His gaze followed the movement. He groaned and pressed his groin into mine. The contact had my dick perking up instantly. "I want you. I want what we did. I want more of that. I'm..." I swallowed again. This next part was more difficult to admit. "I'm not experienced. Sexual acts don't appeal to me. Or at least they hadn't." The implied until you was loud. "I'm not used to feeling this way. I don't know how to do this."

Miller searched my eyes for a long time before speaking. "You're making it too complicated, Silver. Did you like what we did?" I nodded. "Then we keep doing that, and if we do something you don't like, then we stop."

"And you'd be okay with that?"

“Yes. I’d never make you do something you don’t want. I don’t get off on forcing people.”

“I didn’t think you did,” I rushed to say. “I don’t want to be a disappointment,” I admitted in a whisper.

“Oh, Lath. You have no idea how hard you make me just by looking at me. If what we did was all you’re comfortable with, then I’m good with that.”

“And if I want to try other things?”

“Then we talk about it. No more running away and avoiding me.” He bit his lip, his eyes searching mine. “I want to set some rules.”

“Rules.” I nodded, feeling more at ease. “Okay, I can do rules.”

Miller smiled, and my breath stalled in my chest. “I’d like to revisit that being clothed while in the apartment rule.”

I frowned. “The one you vetoed? I don’t want you to put on more clothes.”

He chuckled. “Not for me. You. I want to have access to every inch of you while I can. Go back to how you were that first night.”

I gulped but nodded in agreement. “I can do that.”

“Good.” He smiled again, and I hated how my heart nearly flipped over itself as if it could reach out to him. Stupid heart. “There’s also no running or hiding, and we talk about things.”

I nodded again. That was mature and acceptable. I’d been acting like a child, and I

knew it.

“Is there anything you’d like to add?”

My mind whirled, but I knew if tonight was any indication, I couldn’t deal with him seeing someone else. “No one else while we’re doing this...” I wavered between us. “Whatever this is.” It wouldn’t be a hardship for me, considering Miller was the first person I’d had a genuine attraction to, but I knew, based on conversations with my teammates, this might be a deal breaker.

“Exclusive situationship. I’m good with that,” he said casually. My heart calmed at his words.

“And it can only be in here. I can’t...” I shook my head. I couldn’t even say the words.

“No one else has to know, Silver. You, me, and this apartment. Sounds like the title of a bad porno.” He laughed, and the rest of my tension receded.

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never watched one.”

His eyes widened, and I wasn’t sure who was more surprised—him at my statement or me at admitting it.

“Oh, the things I have to teach you, Silver,” he purred and leaned forward to kiss me.

Everything felt right the instant our lips touched. The clawing sensation I’d felt inside my chest dissipated and was replaced with calmness.

I hated that I’d given in to this need, that I hadn’t been stronger to resist his pull, but the way his body felt against mine, with his lips making their way down my body, I

couldn't find the strength to care. So I'd enjoy this for as long as it lasted and ignore the dumpster fire it would be when it ended.

Because it would end. That was one thing I knew irrevocably. For the first time, I wanted to enjoy something before it crashed and burned. I would be selfish and take what I wanted, consequences be damned.

CHAPTER 11

MILLER

I hadn't meant to kiss him. But as usual with Lathan, my body gave in to the pull between us before my thoughts could catch up. I acted like I was in control, but that was a lie. It had only taken one touch of his fingers to send my life in a completely different direction. Now, with one touch of his lips, I was irrevocably changed.

It was the way he melted beneath me, like my touch soothed something in him. It was how I couldn't devour the sounds of his little whimpers fast enough. It was pure ecstasy, and it slammed into me like a battering ram. I would never get enough of him.

The brakes in my head yelled at me to slow down and rethink this, but I was already too far gone for this man. I wanted and needed him in a way I hadn't felt for anything besides hockey. Undoubtedly, no one would ever compare to Lathan Silver, and that was a problem.

He wasn't mine, and I would never be his. This could only end in heartbreak for me.

With Herculean strength I didn't possess, I broke the kiss and vowed never to do that again. It was too intimate, too vulnerable for a man like Lathan. I couldn't give him my heart when he barely knew his own. I might be too weak to stay away from him, but I could protect myself in this way.

“Question, Silver Spoon, do you want to get your mind blown in your kitchen or

bedroom? I'm about two seconds away from stripping you naked and having my way with you, so decide now."

He swallowed, and I watched as his Adam's apple bobbed. An image of what it would look like with my dick down his throat flashed across my mind, and I groaned.

"Um," he murmured.

"Time's up." I lifted his sweater over his head, tossed it away, and spun him around. "Hands flat on the counter." When he didn't move to obey, I pressed his back forward and cherished his responding gasp. His back muscles were too sexy to ignore, so I trailed kisses down them and convinced myself this was okay. As long as it wasn't his mouth, I could handle it.

Goosebumps broke out everywhere my lips touched, and I smiled into his hot flesh as I unbuttoned his slacks. I palmed his erection and ate up every little moan he released. I was convinced I could live off his sounds alone. Who needed food when Lathan Silver was around? Not me. I'd gladly gorge myself on the buffet of his body any day.

"Considering who your stepmom was, I'm going to assume you're familiar with the stoplight method?"

Lathan nodded. I squeezed his dick when he didn't elaborate.

"Use your words, Lath. I need to hear them."

"Yes. I know it."

"Good. Consent is important. So if something?—"

“I know how consent works, Bambi,” he barked. “You promised to blow my mind, but all you’re doing is yapping. If I wanted to listen to you talk... On second thought, I don’t want to listen to you talk, so if that’s all you’re going to do?—”

I gripped his shoulders and shoved his chest into the counter. He landed with a hard smack, effectively cutting off his words. I worried for half a second I’d been too rough, but the shudder from his body told me everything. He liked it.

“You forgot who was in charge, Silver Spoon. It’s cute you think it’s you.”

“Fuck you, Bambi,” he grunted and shifted his hips. My dick rubbed between the creases of his ass, and I bit back a moan. Too close. Too soon. I squeezed his throat, and he froze. Good. It seemed the grumpy dick could be tamed.

“Should I remind you, Silver? Hmm?”

Lowering my other hand back to his dick, I squeezed once before shoving his boxers and pants down to his feet. He whimpered as I wrapped my fingers around his thick length and gave him one stroke.

“You’re already leaking for me, Lath. You want this, so stop fighting me. I got you.” Lathan melted into the counter and submitted the last bit of his control to me. “Good boy. Now, give me your color if you want more.”

“Green,” he sighed. It was light and airy; if I hadn’t heard it myself, I would never believe it came from him.

I stroked him again as a reward but also because I didn’t trust my voice and what it might reveal.

Being the more dominant one with sex wasn’t new. Men saw my size and assumed,

especially if they also watched me play hockey. I usually hated it. It became a role I played, but I didn't enjoy it.

With Lathan, it felt as natural as breathing. I loved watching him submit to me—to relinquish the control he white-knuckled onto. It was more than sex; it was a gift of trust. Maybe that was why it filled me differently. To know how difficult it was for him to give over the reins, but craving it at the same time. Lathan needed it, and that made me want to give it to him. It was heady being the one to break through his defenses. It filled my heart with too much hope that this could mean more than a physical release.

But I couldn't depend on hope, and I couldn't let emotions get in the way, no matter how addicting they were.

Keep your head in the game. Focus on the goal in front of you.

Standing, I released his throat and admired the specimen spread out before me. I smoothed my hands over the globes of his ass and squeezed. The urge to pound him against this counter was overwhelming, but he wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

“The things I want to do to you,” I moaned.

“Then do it. So far, you've been all talk,” he grumbled.

I playfully smacked his cheek, and he gasped. I'd never been into spanking before, but watching the pink spread across his cheek was hot in a whole new way.

“I know you're used to getting whatever you want, when you want it, Silver Spoon, but that's not how this works. If you want to test who is more patient, then go right ahead and keep running that mouth of yours.” I paused and blew across his skin. “But we both know I'd win that battle.” I bit into his butt cheek and reveled in the hiss he

struggled to contain.

Smiling, I soothed the sting with a kiss. How did his butt smell and taste this good? It had to be his fancy lotion or body wash. I made a quick plan to sneak into his shower to see what he used. It was intoxicating. I sucked on the plump skin until it turned purple. I had a feeling he wouldn't like me marking him where anyone could see it, but at least this way, he wouldn't be able to forget me so easily. I'd leave hickeys all over him for my eyes only.

Dropping to my knees, I spread his cheeks wide and stared at his hole. It was pink, and the desire to see it gaping after I ravaged it was intense. But not right now. I had to be careful not to scare him off by going too fast. This was where my patience would reward me.

For now, I'd settle for getting my lips on him.

Sitting on the ground, I squeezed between his legs and placed my back against the cabinet so I was facing him. He was startled at my position but I didn't give him the chance to question it.

Wrapping my lips around his tip, I sucked his foreskin and savored every drop of precum. "You taste good, Lath." He moaned, and I wished I could record it so I would never forget what it sounded like. My hands returned to his butt, and I spread him wide. I used the leverage to pull him forward. His dick slid over my tongue, and I moaned around him. Every little twitch and sound he gifted me spurred me on, and soon I was taking him all the way down.

His thigh muscles trembled, and his balls were drawn up tight. He was so close to coming, but I wasn't ready for this to be over. With one final slurp, I popped off his dick and slid between his legs.

“What?” he croaked.

“Ssh. I got you, Lath.” I quickly undressed and stood him up so our naked bodies were flush against one another. He sighed into my touch and dropped his head back onto my shoulder. My cock nestled itself between his cheeks, and I had to count backward to stop myself from coming. Just witnessing myself between him was hotter than anything I’d ever seen.

I gripped his dick hard and stroked him from root to tip. He was nice and wet from my mouth and his precum, making it so I didn’t need any lube.

“That feel good, Silver?”

“Uh-huh,” he murmured. His eyes were closed as he rocked his hips into my fist. It gave me the perfect opportunity to watch him without him knowing it. I drank in his sharp cheekbones and his plump lips. I counted the light freckles and savored how his eyelashes fluttered. I memorized every little tell, sound, and response he made, determined to be an expert in what made Lathan Silver come undone.

Gripping his pec with my free hand, I tweaked his nipple and rolled the bud under my thumb. Lathan’s hips stuttered, and I watched as he came. He moaned loudly as he found his release. Thick ropes of cum spurted out and covered my hand, the counter, and his abs. Watching him come was erotic, and my own orgasm teetered on the edge.

Using my cum covered hand, I stroked my dick and lubed it up with his release before spreading his cheeks and thrusting myself between them.

“You look so hot like this,” I groaned. One, two, three passes was all it took for me to come. It was all too much for me to last any longer. I wrapped my arms around him and held him to me. I wouldn’t let him get away this time. Thankfully, he didn’t fight

me. Not that I believed he could. He was practically boneless in my arms.

“I’m going to release you, but you’re not to run away this time. Understood?”

He nodded, and I bent to help him step out of his pants and shoes. Before he could question it, I took his hand and led him down the hallway. I stopped in front of my door.

“We’re going to shower. Whose do you want to use?”

I wanted to use his just so I could see what his room looked like and get a peek at his hygiene products. But given how private he was, I wanted to be invited into those spaces.

“We can use mine. It’s bigger.”

I nodded and continued to his room. Pushing it open, I held my breath as I took in his space. My eyes couldn’t take everything in fast enough. It was the exact opposite of what I expected. The rest of the apartment was done in white, gray, and black. There was barely even a hint of another color.

So, stepping inside a kaleidoscope of blue, green, and gold was overwhelming. The walls were a pale green, and the bedding was a rich blue. A green, blue, and gold rug lay in front of the bed. The art and curtains followed suit, tying the room together. It was beautiful, and I wished I could spend more time there.

“Wow.”

“It’s just a room,” Lathan said. He took over, leading us to the bathroom and tugging my hand when I didn’t immediately follow. His bathroom was just as incredible. It had a massive walk-in shower with several shower heads along one wall and a soaker

tub on the other. The dual sink covered the other wall and had a wall of cabinets and shelves.

“Is that a coffee machine?” I gasped.

Lathan ignored me and walked into the shower. He hit a few buttons, and the jets and heads turned on like he had a specific program.

“Quit gawking, or I’ll kick you to your own shower,” he complained.

Smiling, I stepped inside so he couldn’t fulfill his threat. It was awkward at first as we stood under the showerheads. He wouldn’t look at me, and I hated it.

“Let me,” I said, stepping forward to take the loofah from his hands. Lathan hesitated but relinquished it to me in the end.

I took my time and washed every inch of him thoroughly, partly because I wanted to see how much I could get away with and also because every second I got to touch him was nirvana.

“I’m clean,” he griped when I went to swipe across his stomach one more time.

“For now,” I teased.

Lathan rolled his eyes and stepped out of my reach. Pouting, I cleaned myself and rinsed off. He turned off the shower, and I knew I’d need a tutorial on how to work it before I could try it on my own.

“Towels?” I asked. He nodded toward the cabinet. I grabbed two, but I dried every inch of him myself instead of giving him one.

“I can do that.”

“I know. But I like it.” I stared up at him from below. “You like it, too.”

He grumbled something under his breath about kicking me out, but I knew he was bluffing. I wrapped the towel around his waist when he was dry and then dried myself.

“Can I dress myself, or will you do that too?”

“Nah, knock yourself out. I need to tame the curls. But don’t forget the new rule... clothing is optional.” I winked and dropped the towel into the basket on my way out the door. When I got to the threshold, I glanced over my shoulder and caught him staring at my butt.

“If you want to touch it, you just have to ask, Silver Spoon.”

“You wish, Bambi.” He rolled his eyes and glared at me in challenge. I scanned his body elevator style and licked my lips.

“Yeah, I do.” His jaw dropped, and the smile that crossed my lips didn’t leave me for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER 12

LATHAN

I'd clearly lost my fucking mind because no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stay away from Miller Fahn. I fought against him, but we both knew it was fake. I wanted everything he was willing to give me.

It had been two weeks since I'd ruined his date, and we'd come to our new arrangement—an exclusive situationship. We'd played three home and three away games, and had only lost one. The Aces were on a hot streak, and I couldn't deny any longer that Miller had a point. Orgasms were good stress relief.

I still had no idea what I was doing. I'd never been led by sexual desire, so to have this sudden awakening was maddening. I was hard all the time, and no matter how many orgasms Miller wrung out of me, I never hit my limit. Not that he seemed to mind. It was almost as if he took it as a challenge to see where my line was.

The other stuff—the constant touching and talking—wasn't as horrible as I'd expected. I'd never been one for physical intimacy or conversation, but Miller didn't let me get away with avoiding it. It was nice to have someone push back and not give in because of my last name. I hadn't realized how rare that was outside of my brother.

But I wouldn't let him know. I couldn't let him have that power over me.

“Good morning, Silver,” he greeted as I strolled into the kitchen. He was grinning way too much for this time of the morning. I grunted and took my spot on the island.

We'd already run our five miles and showered—separately, despite his attempts. I only let him get away with that when I was boneless from orgasms.

Miller always managed to beat me to the kitchen and had already started breakfast. Not that I minded. He was a way better cook than I was. I pretended to hate it, but the way I devoured everything on my plate was probably a dead giveaway to my ruse.

He winked and set a cup of coffee before me before returning to the stove and granting me unfettered access to his backside. Hockey had been good to him. His back muscles should be illegal, and the way his ass looked in his tiny boxers was pornographic. It was plump and perfectly round. It was my weakness, and it never ceased to get me hard.

Staring at it now, my cock thickened in my sweats, and I shifted to press down on it. I didn't want to come across as needy. I was, but I liked to pretend it wasn't that obvious. There were limits to how much weakness I could show others, and Miller saw more than anyone. There was no way I could give him the rest of my power. So, despite my obvious addiction to him, I wanted to delude myself for as long as possible that I had some control.

"Thanks," I mumbled before sipping the liquid gold. This was already my third cup, but the one he made for me always tasted better. The man was a bonafide slob and messier than toddlers on a candy high, but he made the best coffee. Damn him.

"I was thinking, we have today off, so we should go out and do something."

I froze and peered at him over my coffee mug. His back was still to me as he plated a piece of the fluffy frittata. My mouth watered at the sight, and he temporarily distracted me as he passed me the plate and took a seat on the stool next to me. My eyes lingered over his bare skin and the bulge in his boxers.

“Well?” he asked, and I drew my gaze up to his smirking face.

It took me a second to remember the question, and I scowled. “What part of only in this apartment made you think going out together would be okay, Bambi?”

Miller rolled his eyes and took a large bite. A piece of egg and cheese stuck to his chin before falling to the ground. Alaska gobbled it up and didn’t look guilty as he licked his paws. Not that I could blame him. Miller’s table manners were about as good as his cleaning—nonexistent.

“Chill, Silver Spoon. I’m not going to hold your hand or grope you in public. We’ve been on the road half the time since we started this, and I’ve held to our agreement, haven’t I?” He lifted his brow.

“Yes,” I gritted out, and he smiled wide.

“See, nothing to fear.” I scowled harder. While I’d been the one to insist on the rule, I also despised it. I hated how easily he could go from giving me all of his attention when we were in this apartment to pretending I didn’t exist outside of it. It was what I wanted. Except...

No, there was no except . This was all I could have.

“What do you think?” he asked as he finished off his plate of food.

“Huh?” I glanced down and realized I hadn’t even touched mine yet.

“Farmer’s Market and then hitting up a popular food truck.”

I turned to my plate and scooped a large bite into my mouth in lieu of answering. For the first time since he started cooking for me, I didn’t savor the taste. The egg turned

to ash in my mouth as I digested his words. For once, I didn't have a mile-long list of obligations I needed to complete for my mother, meaning my day was wide open. Yet, I hesitated. Why was I hesitating?

Because I really wanted to say yes, and that terrified me.

"Come on, Silver. Just think of all the yummy things I can make for you?"

"Not interested," I mumbled around my next bite.

"Fine," he sighed and stood to take his plate to the sink. His phone rang on the counter, and he smiled as he picked it up. "Hey, good timing. I was just about to head to the Farmer's Market and try out that food truck. Want to?—"

I was out of my seat and across the kitchen faster than I could process what I was doing. One second, I was eating, and the next, I ripped the phone from Miller's hands and hit the disconnect button.

"What the fudge?" he grumbled and reached for the phone. I lifted it over my head, but it didn't do much, considering he was a few inches taller than me. My following action could only be explained by low blood sugar and lack of coffee.

Instead of giving in and returning his phone like a mature adult, I flung it across the room, and it smashed right into my TV.

"Mothertrucker."

I stared, stunned at the sight of the protruding object, and, not for the first time, wondered what in the hell had come over me.

"Get dressed. We're leaving in five," I ordered and stalked out of the room without a

glance back. My hands were shaking when I entered my bathroom. Staring into the mirror, I took several deep breaths, but the anxious restlessness I felt under my skin didn't disappear. Turning on the sink, I splashed cold water on my face. Finally, the jitteriness dissipated enough that I could change into clothes. I texted my driver and checked around the room. It felt like I was forgetting something, but I had everything I needed.

When I couldn't linger any longer, I walked back down the hallway and ignored the TV as I passed it. I'd message someone while we were gone and have it taken care of. I couldn't keep it around. It was an obvious sign of my weakness.

I stumbled to a stop at the sight of Miller waiting by the door. He was dressed casually in shorts and a T-shirt. His ankles crossed as he leaned back against the door, looking the epitome of relaxed. I scowled deeper.

"Move, the car is waiting."

"Not until we talk about it."

"There's nothing to talk about. You wanted to go. I'm going. End of discussion."

He assessed me, his critical eyes observing more than I wanted. To my surprise, he moved away from the door to let me pass. He was quiet as we made our way to the front of the building. Typically, I'd prefer the silence to his incessant questions, but today, it irked me.

He smiled and greeted the doorman and James. My brows deepened at the gesture. So he could talk to everyone else, just not me?

We rode in silence for ten minutes before I broke.

“Why aren’t you talking?” I barked. He merely shrugged and kept his gaze out the window. “Bambi, I swear to God, if you don’t start talking, you’ll regret it.”

“First, you told me to stop talking, and now you’re telling me to talk. Color me confused, Silver Spoon.”

I clenched my jaw. I didn’t get angry. I didn’t let emotion rule me. I wasn’t my father. The mere thought of him had my blood cooling. Outside of bringing my stepbrother, Landon, into my life, he’d been nothing but a disappointment. Emotional and physical abuse were all he knew. I still didn’t understand how he’d convinced the great Evangeline Silver or Ava Sharpe to marry him. One could be considered a fluke, but two great women falling for the likes of him was unheard of.

They’d both wised up eventually, but not before the damage had already been done. I’d felt relieved when hockey had taken me away from him, making it so I only had to do visitation with him on the weekends. He’d lessened the torture, and I’d dumbly believed it was because he was happy with his new wife. Learning he’d only switched from bullying me to Landon was a gut punch. I was still angry with Landon for keeping it to himself for so long, but I understood.

My father had a way of making you feel two feet tall and that you deserved the hatred he poured on you.

Thankfully, he was no longer in either Landon’s or my life. I’d cut him out the second I came home winter break and found him punching my brother.

So, no. I didn’t get angry. I wasn’t my father.

Releasing my fist, I spread my fingers out on my thigh and took a few minutes to count my breaths. I’d been skipping out on my meditation, and it showed.

“I’m sorry for throwing your phone. That was uncalled for. I’ll have it replaced,” I said in a smooth and calm voice.

Miller snorted, and some of my calm facade receded. “Ah, so we’re back to robot Lathan. And here I thought I was finally getting to see the real you.”

“Violence is never the answer,” I barked.

“Not disagreeing. What you did was uncalled for.”

I spun toward him. “Then why won’t you accept my apology?” I seethed.

Miller gripped my jaw in one hand and placed the other on my thigh. Both hands bit into me. Hard.

“I accept your apology, Silver. What I don’t accept is you hiding yourself. Tell me why you threw my phone.”

“It was nothing.”

“Baloney.”

Why did I like it so much that even when he was mad, he didn’t cuss? It was... dare I say... cute?

His eyes flashed, and his hand slipped further up my thigh. The longer he held the pressure, the more my body relaxed into his touch. I didn’t want to think too much about why his touch soothed me when everyone else stressed me out.

“Give me an honest answer, Silver,” he whispered. His breath ghosted across my lips, and I settled even more. All the tension I’d been carrying was gone, and I was two

seconds away from melting into the seat.

I licked my lips and didn't miss how Miller's body trembled when my tongue grazed his fingers. "I don't know," I answered before I could stop myself.

Miller smirked and leaned closer. "I think you do; you're just too scared to admit it. That's okay, Lath. I'm patient, remember?"

I shivered at the use of my shortened name. God, I loved it when he said it all breathlessly. The car rolled to a stop, and Miller let go of me in the next second. He was out of the car before I could protest. I joined him a minute later and hated how far away he was as we walked through the Farmer's Market. He was talking and laughing like nothing had happened, but I couldn't forget the feel of his touch or the way his words burrowed their way into my skull.

I'd been jealous, and he knew it. So why did admitting it feel like everything I'd known up until now would crumble beneath me?

My subconscious urged that Miller would be there to catch me, but my intrusive thoughts shot that out of the sky.

It was too risky, and I was already risking too much. This facsimile of a dream was all I could have. There was no use hoping for more.

Hope was for weak people, and I wasn't weak.

CHAPTER 13

MILLER

The longer we walked through the booths and stalls of the Farmer's Market, the more I wanted to hold Lathan's hand. It was a stupid want, though. He made it clear nothing could happen outside his apartment, so wanting more was a recipe for disaster.

Tell that to my stupid heart.

I still didn't know how to process the incident this morning. Was it wrong that I wanted to push him more to see what else he'd do? Yeah, that screamed toxic, and while it was hot in fictional books, it wasn't in real life.

Not to mention how dangerous it was for my heart. I had to remember that. It didn't matter if he acted like a caveman in his apartment; we were barely buddies outside of it.

On that depressing note, I needed something to take my mind off all the things I couldn't have. I zeroed in on a booth with homemade fudge and bread and beelined for it. The smell assaulted my nostrils the second I stepped under the canopy. It alone settled my frayed nerves.

"That smells amazing," I groaned.

"Baked fresh," the little girl standing behind the table said with a gap-toothed smile.

“My favorite kind!” I rubbed my hands together and returned her smile. “What’s your favorite?”

“Hmm.” She tapped her chin in thought, and the cutest dimple popped out. “The banana chocolate chip bread.” She leaned forward like she wanted to tell me a secret. “Momma doesn’t feel as guilty because it has fruit in it.”

“Ah, that is a good point. I’ll take two loaves!”

“Yes!” She fist-pumped her little fist in the air, and that was when I noticed her bracelets.

“Cool bracelets. Did you make them?” She nodded as her mom bagged up the bread and took my card. “I made these with my little sister.” I showed her my right wrist. “And these, I made for my hockey team.”

Her eyes widened, and her mouth dropped. “You have so many!”

“Want to trade?”

“Really?” she asked.

“Absolutely, that’s my favorite part.” I held out my two wrists so she could see them better. “I’m Miller, by the way.”

“My name’s Savannah.”

“Nice to meet you, Savannah. So, which one is your favorite?”

She scanned them all with a critical eye before picking a pink and purple one with letter blocks spelling out SUNSHINE. “Good choice.” I moved it off my wrist and

placed it on hers. It was a little big, but she didn't seem to mind.

"Your turn," she said and showed me her bracelets again.

"How about you pick for me?" I offered.

Savannah nodded again and looked them over carefully before selecting a green one that spelled out SMILE and a blue one that spelled YOUAREbrAVE. She motioned for me to come closer and leaned in to whisper in my ear. "For your friend. It matches his eyes."

"That it does. He's a bit grumpy today. Let's see if I can get him to wear it," I whispered back.

She giggled, and I put her bracelet on my wrist. Savannah motioned for me to give the other to Lathan. I turned to him, and he lifted a brow.

"Done yet?"

"Just about. Here, this is for you," I said. I placed the bracelet on his wrist. He blinked down at it. "It's from Savannah, not me. So maybe don't be a butthead and take it off until she can't see you."

Lathan swallowed as he glanced at the bracelet. The blue was sparkly in the sunlight and eerily close to the color of his ice blue eyes. He ran the pad of his fingers over the letters. I was surprised when he met Savannah's eyes. "Thank you."

Savannah's mom handed my card back and the bag with my goodies. She smiled in thanks, and I waved bye to my new friend.

Lathan was quieter than usual as we walked through a few more booths. "Why did

she give me one? I didn't have one to trade," he finally asked. His brow was pinched, and I had to stop myself from reaching down and smoothing it out.

"That's not what friendship bracelets are about, Silver. She gave it to you because she wanted you to have it. Simple as that."

"But why? I didn't even talk to her or buy anything."

"Again, that doesn't matter. Friendship bracelets are a form of expression, and everyone's reason can be different. Don't ruin her gift by questioning it to death."

His scowl deepened, but he let it drop. I visited a few more booths and bought peanut butter fudge, strawberry jam, local honey, and goat milk soap. I was just about to leave when I spotted a booth with beads. Lathan hung back as I chatted with the owner and traded a few more bracelets. I ended up buying some new beads and agreeing to stop by their store for one of their bracelet-making nights.

It was odd to think how I already felt at home in Austin despite only living here briefly. I'd struggled in Chicago to connect with the team, and the city had always felt too overwhelming to venture out on my own. Having Lathan with me was more fun, even if he was a grumpy shadow most of the day.

"Are you done yet?" he asked.

"Just about. Come on, the food truck is close by. But first, I got you a treat."

His eyes widened, and butterflies exploded in my gut at the expression. It was nice to catch him off guard for once. Smiling, I led him to a coffee booth I'd spotted. His eyes sparkled at the coffee beans on display.

"Greater Goods Coffee is a woman-owned, small-batch roasting company based in

Dripping Springs, Texas, that I thought you might like to try,” I said.

Lathan’s gaze jumped to mine, and something swirled in the depths, but before I could ask, we were interrupted.

“Good morning! What can I help you with?” the saleswoman asked.

Lathan’s gaze shifted to her, and I instantly missed the connection. I stepped out of the tent to gather myself. I had to remember what this was—a situationship. It wasn’t a relationship.

“Thanks,” Lathan said a few minutes later. His hands were loaded with bulging sacks.

“Buy them out?” I teased and loved how his cheeks reddened.

“No.”

“Sure.” I laughed, and we walked to the food truck. The silence had returned, but it was easygoing this time. We both ordered and took a seat at an empty picnic table. I looked out at the crowd and watched the couples and families as they perused the market. Some people might want expensive dinners and fancy trips, but not me. This right here, doing normal everyday things, was what sang to my soul.

“Thank you for inviting me,” he said, shocking me.

My head swiveled to him. “I get an apology and gratitude on the same day!” I gasped and checked my watch.

“What?”

“Just checking the day.”

“Why?”

“Making sure it wasn’t my birthday and to note it down as the day Lathan Silver acted like a human.”

“Asshole. This is why I don’t have friends.”

I laughed, and despite the grumpy frown he wore, the corners of his lips twitched upward.

“Oh, are we friends now, Silver?”

Lathan’s eyes traveled over me and lingered on my lips. I licked them and noted the heat that grew in his eyes. He lifted his gaze to mine, and the world appeared to stop.

“Yeah, Bambi, we are.”

My stomach somersaulted, and I had to remind myself to breathe. Do not let him know how affected you are . When our food was called, he stood to grab it, giving me enough time to recover.

“I knew you couldn’t hate me forever. I’m irresistible,” I teased as I took a bite. Ketchup fell from my burger onto the table and I just shrugged and kept on eating.

Lathan, on the other hand, snorted, shook his head, and proceeded to cut his burger into four pieces. I bet his table manners rivaled any royal.

I inhaled the burger and fries, enjoying how the flavors melted in my mouth. I understood why this food truck was so popular. The food was delicious.

Once I was done, I sat back and rubbed my belly. Lathan was still eating his with a fork and knife. He was focused on his food, allowing me an unobstructed view of

him. I kept waiting for the day that his utter beauty would not take my breath away. That day was not today.

He turned, and I pretended not to be staring. “You ready, Silver?”

“You got something...” he trailed off as he lifted his thumb up to swipe something off my chin. His touch was gentle, and the brush of his skin on mine in public had tingles racing over me from head to toe. His thumb halted, and his eyes lifted to meet mine. We stared at one another, and I forgot we weren’t in his apartment or that I couldn’t kiss him. That I wouldn’t kiss him.

Thankfully, he came to his senses before I did anything I couldn’t take back and dropped his hand. I cleared my throat and busied myself with picking up my trash. Lathan followed suit, and we walked side-by-side toward where James was picking us up.

The crowd had gotten thicker, so I was glad we were leaving. I didn’t get noticed much in Austin, but Lathan did. It was a miracle we’d been here for hours and hadn’t been spotted yet. I didn’t know if it was because of his family or if Austin just loved him that much for his hockey skills, but it could get rowdy if the wrong people noticed him. Thankfully, we made it to the car unscathed and slipped into the open door without incident.

My mind buzzed as we rode back. What had that moment been? Was it anything or just another thing I was reading wrong? It couldn’t be what I wanted it to be. There was no way.

“Thank you for inviting me,” Lathan said as we stepped into the elevator. I turned to him, my brow lifted. He chuckled and sent my body on high alert. I loved that sound. Each time I heard it felt like a rare gift. “I know I wasn’t excited about it, but I’m glad I went. It was... fun.”

I smiled and knocked his shoulder with mine. “One of these days, you’ll realize I’m all fun, Silver.”

“Hmm, something like that.” He unlocked the door, and I followed him into his apartment. I wasn’t surprised the TV had already been replaced, but I was shocked when a new phone sat on the counter with my name on it. “I had it replaced,” he said in response.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” I shuffled on my feet, unsure what to do now. The dynamic had shifted, and where to go from here was unclear.

“I should put this—” I said.

“Do you want to watch a movie?” he interrupted. “I mean, if you’re free.”

“Oh, um, sure. I’d like that. I’ll just...” I lifted my bag of goodies.

“Yes, of course. And there’s the clothing rule to adhere to.”

I grinned. “Now you’re speaking my language.”

Lathan rolled his eyes, but the smile was evident on his face. “Meet you back here in a few.”

I nodded and put my goodies away before returning to my room. I dropped the new phone onto the bed. I’d set it up later. Pulling my shirt off my head, I dropped it onto the floor and kicked off my shoes and pants. I sniffed my armpits and cringed when the smell wasn’t as fresh as I wished. Turning on the shower, I waited until it was warm and stepped under the spray to wash and rinse off the sweat. It only took me a few minutes, and then I was drying off. I debated not wearing anything, but sitting on the leather couch for that long without clothes would be uncomfortable. So instead, I

opted for my sluttiest pair of boxers. The ones that were so short my butt cheeks practically spilled out and gave my dick a nice bulge.

At the last second, I grabbed the newest bracelet I'd made Lathan and strolled into the living room. Lathan was fiddling with the remote and settled it on something as I entered. He was sitting far away from me, but I wouldn't let that deter me. Once I was settled, I reached over and hauled his big body into mine. I spread my legs and placed him between them so he was leaning back against my chest. He stiffened but didn't move away.

"Don't deny you like cuddling, Lath," I whispered into his ear.

"You wish, Bambi."

If he only knew. The movie started, but I wasn't paying any attention. I was more focused on his wrist and the blue bracelet he still wore. Taking it as a sign, I lifted his wrist and slipped on the one I'd made with black and silver beads.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"New rule. You're to wear that at all times while in this apartment."

"And if I don't?" he challenged.

"Play around and find out, Lath. But I don't think you'll like the consequences," I promised.

"Whatever, Bambi."

I smiled and wrapped my arms around his chest. He tensed at first but relaxed when I didn't do anything more. When the credits rolled, I had no clue what the movie had

been about or who was in it. I'd spent the entire time staring at the bracelet on his wrist. The one that read MINE.

CHAPTER 14

LATHAN

I hadn't watched a second of the movie. My mind had been consumed by the events of the day. First, I'd overreacted to Miller making plans with someone else. Then there was the bracelet the little girl had given me—YOUAREbrAVE. It boggled my mind that a stranger would give that to me. What did it mean? And why that one?

The most confusing thing, though, was the bracelet Miller placed on my wrist—the one that said MINE. I should have ripped it off and given it back like the others. Except each time I reached to do that, my fingers would caress over the letters, and a rush of heat licked down my spine. My heart would race, and the thought of removing it made me ill. Again, why? I'd never experienced anything like this before.

I couldn't find any answers to what was going on with me, and I was tired of fighting this connection between us. Despite my fears of letting go of control, nothing terrible had happened. So maybe the only answer that mattered was that it felt good and I liked it. I didn't need to look any closer than that.

Rolling over, I stared at my once enemy and my now teammate and friend. My eyes greedily drank in the expanse of skin he had on display. I wanted to lick every inch of him.

Fuck. I hadn't ever looked at another person and wanted to devour them before—man or woman. I could recognize when someone was attractive based on their appearance, but it hadn't done anything for me. It was why I'd been celibate. Why go through the

trouble of trusting someone not to sell you out for an awkward experience and lackluster orgasm? It hadn't been worth it.

But Miller... there was nothing lackluster about him.

His body made mine come alive, and I melted like butter when he touched me. The orgasms themselves were otherworldly, and I couldn't seem to get enough. Glancing at the two bracelets spurred me on to make the first move.

"I want to suck you, Bambi."

Miller's eyes widened, and I smiled. I liked that I'd surprised him. He recovered quickly and smirked. Placing his arms behind his head, he shifted until he was comfortable.

"I give you free use, Silver. Show me what you got."

I didn't know what he meant, but I'd ask for clarification later. I didn't want to wait another second without his dick in my mouth. I pushed myself up onto my knees and crouched between his legs. My hands shook as I reached for his underwear, but thankfully, Miller didn't notice, or if he did, was too kind to mention it. Yeah, it was probably that. Fuck, I hated how kind he was, but I also secretly liked it. It was just... so Miller.

His skin was warm and smooth against my hands. The small thatch of hair leading down was too tempting to ignore, so I ran the tip of my fingers through it. Miller moaned and jerked his hips, giving me all the confidence I needed to continue.

Carefully, I lowered the elastic of his boxers. It wasn't the first time I'd seen his dick, but it was the first time he was giving me control. Typically, I gained control of everything in my life out of necessity. If I controlled everything, it wouldn't surprise

me and ultimately hurt me. I had the power.

It was different with Miller. He didn't take my power; I willingly gave it to him.

On my knees before him, he was doing the same. He offered me his trust, and that was... everything.

My mouth salivated at the sight of his cock jutting up and ready for me. The tip was red, and a bead of precum pebbled slowly and rolled down. Without thinking, I bent and flicked my tongue over it before it could get away. Miller hissed as his taste exploded on my tongue. I never thought I'd like the taste of cum, and I had a feeling if it was anyone else, I wouldn't. But I was a glutton for Miller Fahn's.

Continuing down his length, I licked and rolled my tongue over every inch of him. He was smooth as velvet and hard as steel, creating an irresistible combo. I rested my hands on his thighs, loving how they flexed and twitched beneath my palms. Knowing I was affecting him was the biggest ego booster and dissolved my nerves.

I swallowed him and took him as far as I could before my gag reflex triggered. Miller moaned, the sound deep and raw in the back of his throat. "Yes, Lath. So good," he crooned. His hands twitched where they lay above mine, drawing my attention. Without thought, I threaded my fingers with his and left them on his thighs. It was intimate, but it felt right.

Glancing up, I caught his hazel stare as I took him back down my throat. His eyes were hooded, and his pupils were blown wide, almost taking over the color. His lips were parted, and I loved how he gasped every time I swirled my tongue around the tip. I did it again and watched as the puff of air moved between his lips. I ate up every reaction and savored it more than the burger we'd eaten for lunch.

Sucking Miller's cock was more than a sexual act, it was a life experience. I couldn't

decide which part I enjoyed the most—the actual sucking or how he responded to my mouth around him. Knowing I was affecting him and pulling these sounds spurred me on. I dropped my gaze and tightened my grip on his hands. He squeezed back, giving me the encouragement I needed.

With a deep breath, I took more of him into my mouth. When I started to gag, I pulled back, breathed through my nose, and relaxed my throat before I tried again. I was able to take him a little further, and when my nose hit the base of his dick, I smiled in triumph. I automatically swallowed, and his dick spasmed in my throat.

“Holy mackerel!” he shouted, and his hips jerked up, sending him further down my throat. I wasn’t prepared and gagged hard at the intrusion. Miller yanked himself out of my mouth as I gasped for breath.

“Crap. I’m so sorry. Are you okay, baby?”

He released my hands to cup my face as I fought to catch my breath. Tears streaked down my cheeks, and my lungs burned, but I didn’t care. Yeah, it scared me, and coughing hurt, but I didn’t want it to end. His thumbs wiped the tears off in a soft gesture as he waited for me to respond.

“I’m fine.” I coughed one more time but then was able to suck in a deep breath. I cleared my throat and removed his hands from my face. His softness was too much for me to process. I needed to regain control.

“You don’t?—”

“I’m not done,” I argued. “A little deep-throating isn’t going to scare me off.”

He huffed out a laugh, and his shoulders relaxed, but he didn’t lay, so I took matters into my own hands. Sitting on the couch, I shifted until he sat on my lap. Miller

raised his eyebrow in question, but I ignored him. Gripping his hips, I pulled him forward as I laid back.

He was sitting near my shoulders, but it still wasn't close enough. "I want you to fuck my face. I can take it, Bambi."

"Silver, I don't?—"

"Fucking do it, Bambi, or I'm tossing your precious banana bread into the dumpster."

He frowned but scooted further. "What did the banana bread ever do to you? There's no need to get violent."

Grabbing his hips, I positioned him until his balls were resting on my chin. He let out a squeak, and I smiled at its cuteness. Tilting him forward, I wrapped my lips around the tip and took him back into my mouth. I groaned at the feel of him on my tongue and worshiped him with it. Miller was careful not to thrust too deep this time as I gripped his hips and encouraged him to move forward.

He soon relinquished his control back to me, extending that precious gift of trust he so easily gave. My confidence swelled under him, and I took the opportunity to explore his body. One hand caressed over his balls while the other trailed over his crease. Miller's thrusts stuttered at my touch, and he released a long groan.

"Nngh," he grunted, sliding his hands into my hair and losing himself to my endeavors. How had I never realized how much power there was in this act before? Despite the submissive position, every reaction and response was due to me. I was the one in control. I became drunk on that knowledge, and before I could talk myself out of it, I plunged a finger into Miller's asshole. He surged forward, his hands gripping my hair in an almost painful way as he made the most beautiful sound.

“Lath,” he roared, and I wished my name would always sound like that on his lips.

His cum hit the back of my throat a second later, and my overconfidence was tested as I struggled to breathe as rope after rope of cum filled my mouth. I coughed when it became too much, and some of it spilled out of the corner of my mouth. I whimpered at the loss, and Miller took mercy on me and pulled his softening cock out.

“Swallow, baby,” he whispered, reminding me I wasn’t meant to keep it in my mouth forever. Shame. I did as he requested and basked in the warmth of his smile as I followed his order. His thumb wiped up the side, and that awful whimper escaped me again before I could stop it.

“Ssh, I got you.” Miller pressed the pad of his thumb against my lip, and I opened it for him, swirling my tongue around his thumb and sucking it dry. Once I had every drop of his cum accounted for, I relaxed into the couch cushion.

“I never pegged you for a cum slut, Silver,” he teased.

“Shut up.”

He laughed before bending down like he was going to kiss me but stopped before his lips touched mine. “It’s not a bad thing, Lath. I like it,” he said instead before climbing off my chest. He glanced at my boxers, but the tent I’d been rocking was gone, and left in its wake was a wet patch. I’d come untouched just from blowing him.

“I was going to offer to finish you off, but it seems you beat me to it.” He licked his lips, and I almost asked him to lick me clean, but then the fear it would be weird butted in, and I clammed up.

“I had fun today,” he said as he helped me off the couch.

“Mmhm.”

He chuckled. “Would it kill you to admit you like my company?”

“Yes.”

Miller rolled his eyes and then swatted my ass. “Whatever. Night, Silver. I’ll see you in the morning for our run.”

I nodded as he walked to his room. The sound of his door shutting was loud in the quiet apartment. As I tidied up the living room and kitchen, the earlier questions plaguing me returned, and I finally figured out why the bracelets bothered me so much.

Miller and that little girl both gave me something without expecting anything in return. I didn’t know how to process that. Except for my brother, no one in my life was in it just because they wanted to be. My teammates needed me to play well so we could win. The staff that worked for me were here to earn a paycheck. And my mother... the list was too long of the expectations she had of me merely because she’d birthed me.

So why had Savannah given it to me if she didn’t want anything? I didn’t understand it, and that scared me. I didn’t like things I couldn’t understand.

An odd feeling washed over me as I passed Miller’s room, and the almost kiss came to mind. Why hadn’t he kissed me? Except for that one time, we hadn’t locked lips again. It hadn’t bothered me until right now. Was I not a good kisser? And why had I liked it when he called me baby so much? I didn’t think he’d meant to let it slip, but I heard it all the same.

I loitered outside his door for too long before finally forcing myself to my own room.

It wasn't until I was lying under the covers and attempting to go to sleep that I realized what I felt at his door... longing.

CHAPTER 15

MILLER

After that night with Lathan, I'd never been more glad to have three back-to-back road games. I needed space. Things had gotten too real, and I was struggling to remember this was only physical. This was precisely why I didn't do casual hookups. I wasn't great at drawing those lines. I couldn't go backward now, so I'd have to live with the mess I'd made. Thankfully, he was adamant that nothing happened outside the apartment, so it gave my heart six glorious Lathan-free days.

The past two games had been brutal wins, and we were all tired. The only benefit to being on the road was not seeing Lathan everywhere I looked. Everything else about it sucked. I liked having my own space, so living out of a suitcase and in a hotel wasn't my jam. It didn't matter that the bed was king-size; it wasn't my bed. Or Lathan's, to be exact, but his bed was comfy. It was like sleeping on clouds and angel wings.

Tonight was our last road game against New Jersey, and I made plans with Reese for Friendsgiving. There wouldn't be enough time to visit my parents in Washington before I was expected back in Austin for our home game. I was sad to miss my family, so getting to catch up with friends was more than I could have hoped for.

"You played with their right-winger, right?" Bell asked as he stepped up next to me.

"Yeah. Braden Riviera. He's a good player and friend."

Bell snorted. “He won Rookie of the Year. I’d say he’s better than good.”

“Fair.” I chuckled and finished tying up my laces. As it usually did, my gaze lifted to find Lathan across the locker room. He had his head back against his cubby with his headphones in. Even after living with him for a few months, I still didn’t know what he listened to.

Shoot. Had it already been a few months? Time always flew when the season was underway. Not that I’d spent much of my off time looking for a new place. The insurance money had come through at the beginning of November, but the desire to leave had waned. Who cared about finding a place to live when I had a naked Lathan to explore?

“How’s that going?” Bell asked.

“Huh?” I blinked and turned to him, fear crawling up my throat. There was no way he knew something was going on between us.

Bell cocked his brow. “You good? You went all white, dude.”

“Uh, yeah. What did you ask?”

“Oh, how’s it living with Silver? I don’t know how you do it. He seems the type to have the contents of the fridge alphabetized. Though I suppose he’s at least nice eye candy.”

Relief swept through me as his words registered, quickly followed by fierce protectiveness and possessiveness. “What? He’s... No... Don’t talk about him that way.”

Bell held up his hands. “My bad. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

I took a deep breath. “Sorry.” I cleared my throat. “Yeah, things are fine. He’s, um, different off the ice.” It was the most I could give him, and even that felt like too much. I liked knowing things about Lathan that no one else did, and I wanted to hoard his secrets for the precious gems they were.

“Cool.”

Coach walked in, stopping the conversation, and I’d never been more thankful. This was precisely why I needed some time apart from Lathan. I was too hung up on the guy, and if I weren’t careful, I’d ruin the friendships I’d made. I couldn’t afford to be on the outside of a team again. Austin was my chance to belong, and I needed to remember that.

The rustle of twenty hockey players moving roused me from my thoughts, and I stood to join the team as we took the ice. Braden skated over just as I finished my warmups.

“Get ready to lose, Fahn,” he teased.

“Are you looking in a mirror, Riviera? Last I checked, Austin only had four losses, and you’re not going to make number five.”

He chuckled and pulled me into a hug. “Good to see you, man. I’m glad you’ll be joining us after. It’s been too long.”

“Me, too.” I smiled as we pulled back. “Plus, Reese wouldn’t take no for an answer, so I really had no choice.”

“I have no doubt. Things seem to be going well with the new team. You and Lathan are fire on the ice.”

My face heated. “Yeah, we’ve meshed well.”

He snorted. “I’ve watched more films of you two than any other player this week.”

“Then you have no excuse,” I countered.

“Hey, Lathan,” Braden said over my shoulder. “Get ready to add a big fat L to your record. See you two on the ice.”

He skated off, and I turned to head to the box. Lathan frowned at me but didn’t say anything until we were almost to the bench.

“Get your head in the game, Bambi. This isn’t social hour.”

I rolled my eyes but didn’t respond. We both knew his comment was baloney. Hockey wasn’t something I slacked off on.

The game flew by, and despite the amount of film he’d watched, Braden couldn’t stop Lathan and me from scoring. New Jersey didn’t make it easy, though, and Braden matched us a goal for goal. The difference was that our team was good all around, while the Penguins really only had Braden after retirements, trades, and injuries had plagued them this season. In the end, the Aces won 5-3, giving us another W.

Braden skated over at the end of the game to slap my back. “Hell of a game, friend. I’ll meet you at the side entrance?”

“Thanks, and yeah, I’ll see you in a bit.”

Lathan had been selected for media, so he hadn’t returned to the locker room before I left. A pang of sadness at not saying goodbye filled me, but it was for the best. The more I kept my distance, the better my heart would be at the end of this.

There would be an end, that much I knew. I just couldn't make myself walk away until I had to. I'd gone and caught feelings for the one person who could never return them. It wasn't his fault but my own. There was no way I'd end this first, either. I wanted to soak up every second I could, while I could, so I had those memories to last me a lifetime.

Was it pathetic? Maybe. I was too far gone to care. Having boundaries wouldn't be a bad thing, though.

"Have a good holiday, Fahn. See you back in Austin," Bell shouted as I left.

"Same!"

A few of my other teammates echoed his goodbye as I exited the locker room. It was a stark contrast to my last team, and the knowledge I'd done it—found a team to belong to—lifted my spirits, and carried me the rest of the way out.

A stiff body slammed into me as I exited, causing me to drop my bag.
"Mothertrucker."

"Watch it," Chet Doyle shouted.

"Yeah, because I'm the one who ran into you," I muttered as I gathered my stuff.

"You say something?"

"Nope." I stood and ignored him as I moved past. Okay, correction. I felt welcomed by the team, minus that guy.

"Homo," he mumbled under his breath.

I paused and debated whether or not to say anything. In the end, I knew I couldn't let it go, or he'd continue to believe it was okay.

"You should get a new word of the day calendar or a thesaurus."

"Excuse me?"

"Homo isn't very creative. If you're going to throw slurs, you could be more creative. That's all."

His face turned red as he stared at me, and I worried I'd gone too far. Or maybe I'd used too big of words, and his head was about to explode.

"Are you calling me dumb? You can't even cuss properly."

Okay, score one for the brute. Maybe he wasn't as dumb as he appeared, just homophobic.

"My choice not to use foul language has nothing to do with intelligence. You, on the other hand... I was hopeful your use of a slur was due to ignorance and not an actual choice. Seems I was wrong."

He blinked, opening and closing his hands fisted at his sides. Tonight was not the night for education. I rubbed my brow and sighed.

"Call me that or anyone else on this team again, and I'll report you to the Aces organization. Have a good night, Doyle."

I spun and left before he could do anything. I didn't need to add to my already cluttered mind. Braden was waiting for me when I appeared around the corner. He smiled and motioned for me to follow him to the player's exit.

“Reese and the others are already back at the house,” he said as he opened his car.

“How is that going? Is it hard living in different places?”

“It’s better than the alternative. We have a main house in the middle and apartments in New York and Philly. We make sure to see each other as much as possible,” he explained.

Braden was in a polyamorous relationship with Reese, Cam, and Landon. Reese played for Philadelphia, and Landon and Cam played for New York. Trying to juggle three hockey schedules made my head hurt. I was happy they’d been able to make it work, though. They’d been together since junior year at Carrington, where we all went to college.

“And how’s Bri?” I asked.

Braden smiled at the mention of his twin sister. “She’s good. She’s keeping Jack on his toes and is about to finish her master’s degree. I hoped they could make it in, but it didn’t work out. We’re going to try to head to Seattle for Christmas, though. If you’re visiting your parents, you should stop by.”

“Cool. I’ll check the dates and let you know.”

The drive to their house wasn’t far, and we were walking in twenty minutes later. Reese jumped off the couch and ran for me, Cam following.

“Miller!” they shouted as they hugged me.

“Hey, Reese.” I smiled, and the tension I’d gained from Chet disappeared. This was what I needed—people who got me and felt like family.

“Cam,” I greeted once Reese let me go. My old teammate hugged me just as tight and slapped me on the back.

“Great game tonight. You and Lathan are something else together.”

I swallowed. “Yeah, we’ve connected,” I mumbled.

“Where’s Landon?” I asked, looking for my old roommate.

“He was grabbing a drink with Lathan before he left.”

“Ah, yeah, cool.”

Reese warmed up food for Braden and me, and we all chatted about the game and our time in college. It was easy conversation and camaraderie.

I yawned, the second one in five minutes, and Reese noticed. “Come on, I’ll show you to the guest room. We’ll be starting festivities early tomorrow,” they said and rubbed their hands together excitedly.

“I can’t wait. I remember senior year and how fun that was.”

“Oh, that was a good one,” Cam said. “Too bad Henley and the guys can’t make it this year.”

“How is your sister?” I asked.

“Pregnant as all get out, but good.” Reese laughed.

“This their second?”

“Yep. I can’t wait to meet my next nibblet.”

“Sounds fun. I love being an uncle.”

“How many siblings do you have?”

“Four.”

“Seriously? How did I not know this?” Cam asked.

“You never asked.” I shrugged, and he frowned.

“I’m sorry. Tomorrow, tell me all about them.”

“Deal.” We bumped knuckles, and Reese opened the door to the spare room.

“Here you go. Let us know if you need anything.”

“Will do.”

“Night, Miller.”

“Night.”

Cam and Reese waved and left me to settle in. I changed into boxers and brushed my teeth. My gaze kept dropping to my phone, and I debated sending Lathan a text. What would I say? Miss you? Nah. That was too couple-y and we were only a situationship.

I turned it over and plugged it in. I wanted space, so I needed to give myself space.

Climbing into bed, I turned off the light and willed my mind to stop long enough for me to get some rest. I'd finally fallen asleep when a bump sounded in the room, followed by a grunt that stirred me from slumber.

When a body landed on me, I jumped up and turned on the light. "Lath?" I croaked.

His ice-blue eyes landed on me and squinted. "Bambi? Did I dream you into existence?" he slurred. He caressed my cheek, and my eyes closed of their own volition. "I missed you." He sighed and nuzzled my neck.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. He didn't answer and snuggled into me more. "Silver?"

"Sleep, Bambi. If I dreamed you, I don't want to waste it."

Great. He was drunk and somehow ended up in my bed.

"You need to find another bed, Silver."

"Nuh-uh. This one is the comfiest. Plus, you're in it. I don't want to be anywhere else."

My heart surged at the words, but I couldn't trust them. A second later, he snored, and I gave up the fight to get him into another room. I'd regret it in the morning, but he felt too nice right now to change it.

So much for space. Lathan Silver was going to wreck me, and I didn't even want him to stop it.

CHAPTER 16

LATHAN

I was having the most amazing dream and the best sleep I'd had in a week. Being on the road was never easy for me. I liked my routine and my bed. Though, usually I didn't sleep this poorly on the road. I had a sneaking suspicion the change had more to do with who I hadn't seen outside of the locker room than the actual bed. But I was spitballing.

Damn. I snuggled further into the heat of the comforter. I didn't remember this bed being this comfortable. And it smelled amazing. At this rate, I might never get out. I hadn't planned on staying over, but Landon had convinced me to have a beer and then another. As someone who doesn't drink all that often, it only took three for him to persuade me to stay and spend the holiday with them. He'd brought me back after that, and I'd stumbled down to the guest room, where I proceeded to sleep and not toss and turn for hours.

Thank God. Otherwise, I was likely to succumb to the ludicrous ideas floating around my head yesterday—ones that included duct-taping Miller to my side so no one else could talk to him. Yeah, I could hear the red flag, and I was the one who'd thought it.

"I let you stay last night because I was too tired to carry your heavy butt to another room," a deep and familiar voice said. My eyes instantly opened, and I stared at what I'd formerly assumed was my pillow and came face-to-face with the man I couldn't stop thinking about. He smiled, and my heart raced. "But if I'd known you were such a cuddler when you drank, I would've suggested sharing a bed a long time ago."

“No, you wouldn’t.”

He chuckled. “All right, you got me. I wouldn’t, but I don’t hate this side of you.”

My face heated. I couldn’t believe I was draped over him like he was my own personal heater. It was humiliating. Yet I didn’t move. After a week of not touching him, I was desperate. I’d never felt this urge before—the need to touch and feel, to be touched and felt in return.

“Not that I’m complaining, but we weren’t in the apartment last I checked. So…” he trailed off and lifted his brow like he was waiting for me to fill in the blank.

“I’m slightly hungover and haven’t had any coffee yet. You’re gonna need to spell it out, Bambi.”

One second, I stared down at him, and the next, I stared up. He’d wrapped his leg around mine and flipped us so my back was now against the bed. My breath puffed out of me, and I gripped his biceps. Miller ground down into me, and that was when I felt it.

He was hard, but so was I.

At the feel of his erection against mine, I moaned and closed my eyes. His hand gripped my chin, and my eyes snapped back open.

“This, Silver.” He rotated his hips, and I bit my lip to keep the moan contained this time. I still didn’t understand what he was referring to. The only thing I could concentrate on was how long it had been since we’d done this and how amazing it felt.

“What about it?” I asked, my voice way too breathless for my liking.

Miller dipped his head down to my neck and trailed his nose until he reached my ear. He nibbled on the lobe, and my fingers dug harder into his biceps. I was two seconds away from offering him whatever he wanted if he would just touch me.

“Your rule, Silver. No touching outside of the apartment, and considering we’re still in Philly, we’re very far from Austin. So, I hate to break it to you, but no more touching. You made the rule, and I’m a rule follower.” The cold air hit me as I processed his words, followed by the coldness of reality sinking in as I realized the truth of everything he’d just said.

We’d touched outside of the apartment. We’d shared a bed.

Two things I’d sworn we’d never do. To make matters worse, I’d been the one to break the rule. Me . I was being reckless. I knew it. But I couldn’t seem to remember why it mattered.

Miller made me feel good, and if the sleep I’d gotten last night was any indication, he was good for me. All my worries and fears about starting something with him were unfounded. He hadn’t distracted me on the ice. If anything, our closeness had made us better linemates. I could anticipate him, unlike any other player. Together, we were unstoppable.

That had to mean something. It had to.

Jumping out of bed, I didn’t stop to think about my next decision as I barged into the attached bathroom. Miller was in the shower, and the sight of his naked body under the spray momentarily halted me.

Seeing naked men wasn’t a new concept. I’d seen my fair share of them in hockey locker rooms. But no one had ever made me respond the way Miller did. The mere sight of him had my entire body coming alive. I didn’t even need coffee with him

around.

These new urges had been overwhelming and scary at first. I'd tried to ignore them and run away when that hadn't worked. It hadn't mattered since it still led me into Miller's arms. His very muscular arms.

Why was the sight of soap running down his body the sexiest thing I'd ever seen?

The urge to do something unstuck my feet and I stepped into the shower. I pressed my front into his back and wrapped my arms around him. He stiffened at my touch.

"I'm starting to wonder if your drink was spiked last night, Silver."

"It wasn't."

"Did you hit your head during the game?"

"Nope. I'm of sound mind, Bambi."

"Then—"

I gripped his dick, stopping him. "Unless the next words out of your mouth are 'Stroke my dick,' I don't want to hear it."

Miller groaned, his body relaxed, and he leaned back into me. "Stroke my dick, Lath."

I didn't hesitate as I stroked him from root to tip. Over the time we'd been doing this, I'd grown more confident about touching him. I'd become greedy for every sound and reaction. I didn't know I could miss this, but after not touching him for a week, I did. I rubbed my cock between his ass cheeks, relishing the way it slotted between

them. I couldn't help but imagine what it might be like to fuck him. The mere thought almost had me nutting.

"Ahh, yes, Lath. So good."

The praise was music to my ears. I roamed his body with my free hand, loving how his wet skin felt against me. Dropping my mouth to his neck, I sucked and bit as I plucked at his nipple.

"Oh goodness. I'm so close. I'm going to come, Lath."

"Come for me, Bambi. Spray your cum all over the shower wall."

"Nghn," he groaned right as his body tensed up. His cock twitched, and I watched white ropes of cum spurt out of him in amazement. I'd done that. It was enough to send me over the edge without even touching myself.

We were both panting as we came down from our orgasms. Miller turned in my arms and took the soap to wash us both off. I'd balked at him taking care of me in the beginning. It seemed weak. After giving up so much control to him already, I hadn't wanted to spare another crumb. Miller had a way about him, though. He took control without lording it over me. He made it so I could relax and trust him to take care of me. The most surprising part of it all was how much I liked him taking care of me.

I liked him . Period.

"Don't worry. I won't assume that just because you broke the rule in private means the rule is gone. I'll pretend we barely know one another around the others," Miller said as he brushed his teeth.

I froze, a pit of unease settling in my gut. Before I could respond, he was already

dressed and out the door. I rummaged through my suitcase and pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater. My phone was dead, so I plugged it in and left it. I didn't want to talk to anyone who wasn't in this house anyway.

Laughter floated down the hallway as I walked toward the kitchen. This wasn't my first time staying here, but it was my first time feeling nervous. I loved my brother's partners—Reese, Cam, and Braden. They'd become good friends over the years and people I didn't have to pretend to be someone I wasn't when I was around them.

Keeping this thing with Miller from them felt wrong. Not just because I didn't like lying to my brother but also because I didn't want to go backward. I had so few spaces where I could be myself that I didn't want to lose one. Despite knowing all of this, I wasn't sure if I was ready to reveal this piece of me. It had nothing to do with whether or not they would accept me. I knew they would.

It was whether or not I could accept myself.

Revealing my involvement with Miller would force me to label myself, and that meant being vulnerable. I'd finally accepted my attraction to him, but I didn't know what that meant. Was I gay? I didn't find other males attractive, so that label didn't feel right either. Choosing something felt akin to placing myself in another invisible prison.

"Good morning!" Reese greeted me as I entered the kitchen. "Did you sleep okay?"

At their question, my eyes immediately drew to Miller. He was at the island, mixing something in a bowl with Cam. His back was to me, and my eyes traveled over his ass before I remembered Reese had asked a question.

"Oh, yes. I did. That bed is really comfy."

Reese studied me. Their eyes darted from me to Miller, and something flashed behind their glasses. “I’m glad. There’s fresh coffee in the pot for you.”

“Thanks.”

Reese squeezed my arm as they passed and left me to grab a mug and fill it with coffee. I rested against the counter as I took in the room. Braden and Landon were working on the table. They had it pulled apart to add an extra leaf in the center to expand it. Reese was by the stove, and when the timer sounded, they pulled out a pan of biscuits. Cam left Miller and joined Reese at the stove, so I took the opportunity to move.

“What are you making?” I asked.

He glanced over at me, and I watched as his gaze dropped to my lips before returning to my eyes. “Pancakes, but they’re healthy-ish. I promise you can eat them on your diet plan.”

“Are you on my diet plan?” I whispered and moved closer. “Because I want to eat you.”

Miller coughed and spilled batter onto the counter, drawing everyone’s attention. His face turned red, and I smiled as I took a sip of my coffee. My brother eyed me, but I kept my expression blank. Okay, maybe it wouldn’t be too bad keeping our relationship—or situationship—a secret. If I got to tease Miller all day and got him to squirm, it might be worth hiding it.

“If you’re going to stand there, you should help,” Miller shot back. I rolled my eyes but did as he asked. Mostly because I didn’t want to lose my spot and have one of the others swoop in. I didn’t care that they were in a relationship. Miller was mine, and I didn’t want to share.

We fell into an easy rhythm that we'd perfected living together and on the ice. He poured the batter, and I added the toppings. He flipped the pancakes, and I added them to the serving tray. We moved in synchronicity without even having to talk. It was as easy as breathing.

I hadn't noticed that everyone else had stopped what they were doing and was watching us until we were finished. Miller moved to take the pancakes to the table as I placed the dishes in the sink, but we both froze at the eyes on us.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"You're fucking," Landon said, his eyes wide. "Miller's who you're seeing?"

"What? No," I replied on instinct, the denial so ingrained that I hadn't even thought before responding. But the feeling of unease I'd felt earlier multiplied at the lie, and when I looked at Miller, at how my words had affected him, it tripled. I hadn't considered his feelings in all of this. Of what it might mean to him to hide what we did behind closed doors. He deserved better.

Landon crossed his arms and lifted a brow, not buying my lie for one second. "Uh-huh. First, you're a shit liar, bro. Second, I went to wake you up this morning and your room was empty. Third, I've never seen you help make anything, and yet you jumped right in with Miller like it's something you've done a million times. Should I go on because I can."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. Words escaped me.

"Lathan accidentally came into my room drunkenly, and he's too heavy to carry. That's all. Nothing going on here. He's not gay," Miller defended.

I both loved and hated it.

“We all know that’s not the only label available,” Landon argued.

“Maybe we should let them keep their private lives to themselves,” Reese suggested.

“Fuck that, I’m so invested in SilverFahn,” Cam said. “Do we have any popcorn?”

“Cam!” Reese admonished but then giggled as he batted his eyelashes at them.

“Silence!” I shouted and rubbed my temple. “Thank you for the out, Miller, but I don’t need it.” I took a deep breath and met his gaze. His eyes softened, and I let myself soak in the soft blue hue mixed with green. “I don’t know what I label myself as, but I know it isn’t gay.” I took a deep breath and released it slowly while I continued to hold his stare. I could do this. “But it doesn’t matter what the label is. I do know this... I like what Miller and I are. Together.”

Noise exploded around us, but I blocked it all out as I gazed at the man I’d become obsessed with. The man I’d missed more than I’d realized this week.

I once believed telling others would ruin it or be too much for me to handle. It turned out that hiding it had been even more challenging. I was so tired of concealing myself, of not doing the things that made me feel good. Miller smiled, and it was as if a hundred pounds lifted off my shoulders at the gesture. Telling people wasn’t a prison. It was freedom.

CHAPTER 17

MILLER

Oddly enough, it wasn't the knowledge I was in a kitchen with my former college teammates and friends that clued me into this moment being real. It was the words and look on Lathan's face. Not even in my wildest dreams had I believed he'd admit to liking me, or this thing between us. My stupid heart thumped hard in my chest, and I gripped the back of the barstool I'd stopped in front of.

Chaos ensued around us, but it was just Lathan and I staring at each other for a blissful minute. I couldn't tell what his gaze held, but it almost felt like hope. Or maybe that was just me wanting it to be.

I was aware enough to know that coming out to his brother and his partners, and subsequently admitting to our situation, wasn't a declaration of love. It wasn't even a promise that our arrangement would become something else. No. I had to keep myself in check. I couldn't let any romantic notions take foot. I had to remember the score. At the end of the day, we were roommates and fuck buddies, verging on friends. Nothing more.

"All right, how about we eat before the food gets too cold?" Reese asked, halting all the other conversation.

I dropped my gaze from Lathan's and met theirs. "Yeah, I'm starved, and there's a lot of cooking still to do."

“Food!” Cam groaned. He hopped off his perch on the counter, grabbed a plate of food, and deposited it on the table. His plate was already loaded before anyone else moved.

The rest of us followed, more subdued, and filled our own plates. It was quiet as we ate, a drastic contrast to the earlier cacophony of noise that rattled something inside me. Too much quiet gave me too much time to think.

“So, what’s on the menu for today?” I asked.

“Ah, yes!” Reese grinned and peered over at me. “I was hoping to get your help with a few dishes. The turkey is precooked, thank goodness. I just need to put it in the oven. Then I was thinking...” As Reese listed all the dishes they wanted to prepare, I kept sneaking glances at Lathan. He was quiet as he ate, and I worried he’d regret sharing and abruptly end things. I wasn’t ready to let him go, even if I should.

“What do you think?” Reese asked.

Shoot. I’d totally zoned out. “Yeah, sounds doable. Just point me in the direction of the ingredients, and we’ll knock it out.”

Reese smiled, and I relaxed. I was thankful I hadn’t zoned out too severely. Everyone finished eating soon after, and while Landon and Lathan worked on the dishes, Reese and I began gathering everything we’d need. It didn’t take long for the counter to become covered in cans, spices, and mixing bowls.

The morning went by quickly as everyone pitched in to cook, and I’d barely blinked before it was time to eat again. Lathan and I hadn’t gotten a chance to talk about his confession, but there wasn’t any tension between us, so I was hopeful things weren’t over.

I got my answer after lunch as we all retreated to the living room to relax. I'd just taken a seat on the couch when Cam bombarded me.

"Cuddle buddy!" he shouted, snuggling up to my side.

"Hey, Cam." I chuckled and lifted my arm to wrap it around him but was halted before I could drop it down.

"No," Lathan said, removing my arm from touching Cam. I didn't know who was more surprised, Cam or me, at the action. Before I could respond, Lathan planted himself on my lap.

On. My. Lap.

I froze.

It wasn't uncommon for us to take this position, but typically, we were in his apartment. Alone.

"What?" he asked, turning his head to look at me. "If you're going to cuddle someone, it will be me."

"Ah, no fair. Miller's the comfiest, and I need cuddles," Cam pouted.

"Come here, Camdler," Landon said, opening his arms for his friend. Cam vaulted off the couch onto the big chair Landon was perched in. Reese laughed and snuggled into his other side. Braden rolled his eyes, sat on the chaise, and stretched his legs.

"Scared to cuddle me in front of others?" Lathan whispered, drawing my attention back to him.

“Not scared at all. I’ll cuddle the heck out of you, Silver.” I smiled, and my body relaxed. Lathan melted into me as I wrapped my arms around his waist and rested my head on his shoulder. “I just didn’t take you for PDA. That’s all,” I whispered.

He turned his head, and our lips nearly met. His ice-blue eyes assessed me. “I didn’t think I was either, but knowing the truth is out there... shifted something. If we’re not a secret with them, why should I stop myself from doing what I want?”

I smiled. He was just too cute sometimes. “And the thing you want to do is sit in my lap?”

“I want to do more, but it’s the only family-friendly activity currently allowed.”

I gulped. Confident Lathan was sexy. “Oh. What are these things?” Did my voice sound growly?

His eyes dropped to my lips, and I licked them out of habit. His Adam’s apple bobbed, and I suddenly wished we were alone. “I have a few ideas in mind, but you’ll have to wait.”

My nostrils flared, and I tightened my grip on him. He shifted, and I caught the second he understood what his words were doing to me. Lathan smirked before turning around and leaving me panting after him. I both hated and loved this newfound confidence.

“You know, I didn’t see it earlier, but you’re cute together,” Landon said.

“I don’t believe I asked your opinion,” Lathan countered.

Landon snorted and shook his head. “Miller, are you sure you want to put up with his grumpy ass?”

“It’s part of his charm.”

My college roommate laughed but dropped it. The rest of the afternoon went by in a flash, and for once, I wished we didn’t have a game. Hockey had always been my top priority, but being with friends who accepted and loved me reminded me of what I’d been missing back in Chicago. However, things were different in Austin. Primarily due to the man I was quickly falling for despite my own warnings.

But what if?

No. I couldn’t let myself go down that road.

Telling his brother was different than telling the whole world. He wasn’t ready, and I didn’t know if he ever would be. So, I’d enjoy this little reprieve from the real world and soak in as much of him as I could.

“When’s your flight?” I asked. I wasn’t ready to let him go.

“Soon.” He turned his head. “Are you packed?”

“No. But it won’t take long.”

He nodded in agreement and stood. I instantly missed the warmth of his body pressed against mine.

“No. I don’t want you to leave,” Reese whined. “This has been fun. I miss you both.”

“It has, and we’ll see each other soon,” I promised.

“Ugh, fine.” Reese pouted but hugged me tight. “Are you sure about this?” they whispered.

“Hmm?”

“You’re a relationship guy, Miller. I care about you both and don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I know what I’m doing,” I lied. Reese pulled back and studied my gaze before letting me go.

“I’m here if you ever need to talk.”

“I see the matchmaking streak is still in full swing.”

Reese rolled their eyes and laughed. “Haha. Now go pack. I only have a few hours left with my boyfriends.”

Chuckling, I headed to the room. Lathan was already inside, zipping up his suitcase. His eyes narrowed as I tossed my clothes into mine haphazardly.

He grimaced. “It’s a wonder your clothes aren’t wrinkled all the time.”

“The beauty of wearing hoodies and sweats mostly.”

Lathan’s gaze traveled over me, and heat exploded. If only we had more time. Keeping my hands to myself for the next five hours would be difficult until we were back in the apartment.

“You do wear them well,” he muttered, and butterflies erupted in my belly. I was such a needy slut for his attention, and he had no idea.

“Ready?” I asked as I lifted my suitcase off the bed. “Are we riding to the airport together?”

“Yes,” he said in a tone that brokered no argument.

Smirking, I followed him down the hall where everyone was waiting. After a round of goodbye hugs, we were out the door. A dark SUV idled in the driveway, and a driver in a suit stepped out to take our bags.

“Mr. Silver,” the man said as he opened the door for us. Lathan’s face had fallen back into the impenetrable mask he wore. He didn’t respond as he slid in. I nodded in greeting for us both and joined him in the back. There was a partition up between the seats, and Lathan relaxed against the back once the door was closed.

We didn’t speak again until we were a few minutes away from the airport. Lathan’s body language had morphed from calm to anxious in a matter of seconds.

“Everything okay?” I didn’t sit by him on the team plane, so I had no idea if he was an anxious flyer.

“Of course.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Then why do you look like fire ants are crawling up your butt?”

“I don’t—” I lifted a brow as he shifted again. He halted and let out a breath. “Fine. I did something, and I’m worried you’ll be mad about it.”

“It takes a lot to make me mad, Silver.” He stared at his hands and didn’t answer. “Just tell me. I’m sure it’s not as bad as you’re making it out to be.”

He blew out a breath. “I canceled your flight.”

“Why would you do that? Are you trying to keep me here so I miss the game?”

“What? No.” He shook his head, and his eyes implored me to listen. “We’re flying home together.” He swallowed, allowing me to revel in how ‘home’ sounded coming from him.

“Okay. That doesn’t seem so bad.”

“It’s not. Or at least I hope it isn’t. I, um, we’re taking a private jet.”

“Whoa. Seriously?” My eyes widened.

Lathan turned to me and met my gaze. He seemed to relax and become bolder the longer I didn’t lash out. “It has a bed.” Another swallow. “I want to spend the hours from here to Austin with you prepping my ass.”

“Prepping your...” My mind shut down at the image of me prepping Lathan twenty thousand miles above ground.

“Yes. So when we get home, you can fuck me.”

My cock instantly hardened at the words, and I groaned as I shifted. “I don’t?—”

“You’re not going to talk me out of this, Bambi. I’m ready, and you’ll have plenty of time to get my ass ready. Unless you’re not up for the job.”

I chuckled. Lathan was acting coy, but I could see the fear I’d say no in every inch of his body. Straddling him, I cupped his cock and leaned in close.

“Oh, baby. If you want me to spend hours prepping you, I will. But don’t play coy. We both know I’m the only one allowed in this exquisite hole.” He whimpered as I stroked him over his pants. “Now, tell me who you belong to.”

“You,” he gasped and lifted in an attempt to get more friction.

“That’s right. Me . So don’t try to play this jealousy game. It won’t work. I own your body, and we both know it.”

“Yes.”

The temptation to kiss him hit me hard, and I had to physically repel myself off his lap and back into my seat. Luckily, it was just as we pulled onto the private runway. The car rolled to a stop in front of the plane, and I swallowed down my nerves. Flying wasn’t my favorite thing. I managed to deal with it because of hockey, but that was usually on a bigger plane with all of my teammates. I wouldn’t be able to hide my nerves as easily with Lathan.

The same man who had driven us took our luggage aboard the plane. A pilot stood at the top of the stairs and greeted Lathan as we approached.

“Good evening, Mr. Silver. It’s a pleasure to serve you this evening. Once you’re both on board, I’ll begin takeoff. Is there anything you need before I head to the cockpit?”

“No.”

“Very well. I’ll see you when we land in Austin.”

Lathan nodded and headed to a bar. I took in the cabin while he filled a glass with ice and water. It was small, with a few chairs, a table, and a couch. Our luggage was

placed in a closet off to the side. Two doors faced off from it, which I assumed held the bedroom and a bathroom. The driver handed something to Lathan before making his exit. The cabin door was closed, and the pilot disappeared.

“No flight attendant?” I asked as we took our seats.

“Do you want a witness to the filthy things you’re going to do to me?”

I snorted. “I guess not.” I buckled myself in and gripped the handrests.

“I don’t usually fly with a full staff, but since it’s also a holiday, I didn’t want to pull people away from their families.”

“Except for the driver and pilot?”

“Hmm. Yes, well, I paid the driver a very generous fee, and he would’ve been working regardless of whether I needed him. The pilot’s wife is in Austin, so he was eager to take the shift when it popped up.”

I didn’t know why it surprised me he’d been considerate of their time, but it did. I cleared my throat. “That’s awfully thoughtful of you, Lathan.”

“Hmm.” He didn’t expand as the plane taxied down the runway and lifted off a few seconds later into the air. I gripped the handrests and focused on all the ways I would make Lathan Silver fall to his knees.

Once we leveled out, the overhead speaker came on. “You’re able to move about the cabin now. Our ETA is four hours. I will alert you when we’re thirty minutes from landing.”

Lathan unbuckled his lap belt, stood, and offered me his hand. “Are you ready?”

Was I ready to devour him? Yes. Was I prepared for the turmoil this would cause my heart? No.

Nevertheless, I took his hand and followed him to the room in the back. This would either be my salvation or damnation.

CHAPTER 18

LATHAN

The typical nervous energy that radiated through my body had dulled since I'd uttered my truth. In doing so, it had made me bold. Canceling his ticket wasn't out of character for me. However, using the family jet was. Mainly because I knew it would get back to my mother and then there would be questions. Questions I'd been avoiding for a decade.

I could play them off and focus on Miller being my teammate and a friend of Landon's. But a part of me didn't want to. I was tired of hiding certain aspects of myself. Of portraying the perfect son. The son I'd never been.

Miller granted me freedom from all of it, and I wanted to hold on to this feeling with all of my might.

"Take off your clothes and get on the bed."

I tensed at the command. Warm hands landed on my shoulder, and his body blanketed mine, sending calmness through my body.

"You wanted this, Silver. You bought us four hours to get your glorious backside prepared for me, and I don't plan to waste a second of it. So don't make me repeat myself."

I relaxed into him, and my brain shut off. The intrusive thoughts about needing to be

in control disappeared, replaced by a calm reassurance.

Miller would take care of me.

Miller would make me feel good.

Miller only asked me to be myself.

With my mind quieted, I tugged off my clothes and left them at the foot of the bed. The urge to fold them wasn't a priority. Not when I had Miller staring at me as if I was the best thing he'd ever seen. His hazel eyes were dark and full of heat. They were trained on me as I scooted back onto the bed. I devoured every reaction he permitted me to see.

The flare of his nostrils.

The tightening of his fists at his sides.

The tented fabric at the front of his sweatpants.

The rise of his chest.

I could watch him for hours and never get bored. He didn't even have to touch me. I'd never felt such consuming lust, this urgency and need to absorb every drop of him.

"Did you come prepared?"

"Huh?" I blinked at his question.

"Lube?"

“Oh. Yes.” I swallowed. It wasn’t the only thing I’d brought with me. “Front pocket of my suitcase.”

He unzipped my bag, and I gripped the comforter as I waited. Miller pulled out the bottle of lube and the two other items I’d hidden in the pocket. His eyes flashed with stunned appreciation at the sight of the prostate massager and plug I’d purchased.

“Someone has been keeping secrets.”

“More like I wanted to be prepared,” I countered.

He chuckled, the sound deep and throaty. “Have you been using these on yourself, Silver? Is this what you do when we’re on the road?” He dropped the supplies onto the bed and lifted his shirt over his head. My gaze slid over his form, and I gulped at the sight of him. No one had ever turned me on the way he did. He chuckled again when I didn’t answer and crawled onto the bed.

Looming over me, he gripped my chin and forced my eyes to his. “Answer me, Silver Spoon. Have you been playing with your hole without me?”

Vehemently, I shook my head. “No. No. I got them for you. For you to use them on me. If you wanted,” I stammered. I quit wondering how Mr. Nice Guy always seemed to turn me into a blubbering mess with just the touch of his fingers. If anyone saw me like this, they’d assume Miller had brainwashed or drugged me.

Neither was true, obviously. Even if I did feel discombobulated in his presence, I was a willing participant in everything he did to me.

“Hot fudge sundae,” he murmured, and his gaze snagged on my lips. I wanted him to kiss me. To let me feel the press of his lips against mine again.

He was so close; maybe this would be the time he gave in.

Unfortunately, he pulled away at the last second. Disappointment lingered in my mind but was quickly replaced with desire as he kissed my body. His tongue swirled around my nipples and sent a shot of lust straight to my balls.

“Fuck,” I moaned. Miller smirked at the praise. I loved catching his cocky side. He didn’t show it often despite earning it, but he never failed to make an appearance when we were naked together. It was rightfully earned.

“It’s time to teach you about erogenous zones, Silver.”

I hummed as he licked and sucked me. Everywhere he touched became fire until I was writhing on the bed and pleading for him to touch me. “Please, Mills.”

“I got you, baby,” he crooned as he finally took my aching cock into his hand. Bliss encircled me, and I thrust my hips up, searching for more. Miller grinned at my apparent neediness. I whined, shocked at the sound coming from me.

“This what you want?” he asked a second before swallowing my cock whole.

“Nghn.” Colors swirled together behind my eyelids, and my entire body tensed in preparation for its release. But it didn’t come. I opened my eyes and glared at the man between my legs. “You’re being an asshole.”

He laughed, his eyes alight with mischief. “Speaking of holes.” His finger breached me, wet and warm. It stung, and I tensed. “Deep breath and bear down. It will feel better once you let me in. I promise, Lath.”

God. He got me with that shortened name every time.

I relaxed my body and let out a long breath. Miller pressed further in, just past the knuckle, and once I got over the initial sting, it wasn't as bad. His slick finger moved with expert precision, and I was soon wiggling back on his finger as he slid it in and out.

“Yes, more.”

“Look at you. Already a greedy cock slut, and you haven't even had me in you yet. You're going to be insatiable, Lath. I can already tell.” He groaned, and it made my balls tingle at the eroticism of his words.

Never in my life had I envision myself getting finger fucked in the family jet. But now that I was here, I wondered how I'd travel without it. The team plane would be interesting if I got a boner every time I stepped on board.

Miller withdrew his finger, and I immediately missed the feel of him. I watched as he squirted more lube and positioned himself at my entrance. It was tighter, but I knew what to do this time. I blew out a breath and bore down until I felt the pop of his knuckle passing through. Two fingers were thicker and stretched me wider as he pumped in and out. I had a momentarily thought of panic as I wondered how I'd ever take him if this was too much.

“I got you, Lath,” he whispered.

My eyes opened and locked with his reassuring gaze. His pupils were blown, nearly blocking out the blue and green of his eyes. Eyes that were fixed entirely on me. Miller was so expressive, conveying a multitude of messages in a single look.

They said, are you okay?

They said, we can stop if you want to.

They said, trust me.

His care and concern were my undoing. My body melted into a puddle, and I nodded back in affirmation.

I do trust you. I do.

His fingers picked up their pace, and he tilted them upward. My entire body came alive, and my dick twitched like a live wire had struck it. He did it again, wearing his smirk, and I almost passed out.

“What?” I gasped.

“Meet your prostate.”

I moaned as he continued to swipe against it with each thrust. I pushed back against him, and the need for more came quicker. Luckily, I didn’t have to ask this time. Miller added a third finger, stretching me even wider. He lazily stroked my dick, keeping me on the brink of an orgasm but never letting me get there.

At this point, I was close to begging him to just fuck me now and be done with it. Rational thinking had gone out the window, and I wanted to feel him inside me. I wanted it more than I wanted anything else. I needed to feel connected to Miller in a way I’d never experienced with anyone else.

“Please,” I begged despite knowing it was futile.

Miller continued his ministrations, stretching and stroking me like he had all the time in the world or at least a few hours. I suddenly hated myself and my grand idea to spend the entire time prepping. Screw prepping. Who needed that? Not me. I just wanted to fuck.

“Mills. I need more. I need you.”

“Not yet,” he countered, and I whined. I’d feel embarrassed at the sound later, but right now, I was too far gone to care. A buzzing sounded right before he withdrew his fingers.

“What?” I protested but was immediately silenced when the vibration entered me. “Oh, God.”

The item felt different than his fingers. It wasn’t as personable, but as soon as it hit my prostate, I didn’t care. My entire body locked up, and stars danced behind my eyelids. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck .”

Miller didn’t respond except to take my dick to the back of his throat. He swallowed around me just as the massager hit my prostate, and I was done for. Cum spurted out of my cock at a rapid speed. My muscles tensed and trembled as I came down his throat. Pleasure covered my body, and I curled my toes into the bed.

He licked my dick clean before letting it fall from his mouth. The vibration was turned off and removed, but a cold bulbous object was inserted in its place.

“Huh?” I mumbled.

“Just keeping you nice and open.”

“Okay.”

I didn’t really know what I was saying, but I trusted him to take care of me. Miller had done nothing but stick to his word the entire time I’d known him.

It took me a while to come down from the high. When I did, I noticed the arms

around me and a body pressed into my back. We were spooning. His fingers trailed over my muscles in a soft caress, and my dick twitched in an attempt to rally, but eventually, it called defeat and settled down against my leg.

“How does it feel?” he asked.

I wiggled, the cool press of the butt plug was noticeable, but it wasn't unpleasant. “Okay. It's different but not bad.”

“You look so sexy right now with it in. I have to keep reminding myself to wait.”

“We don't have to,” I argued.

“Yes, we do. As hot as the idea of having you sooner than later, you need more stretching. I won't hurt you, Lath.”

The words were simple and said with such honesty that I wanted to believe him. Not only would he not hurt me physically, but emotionally, too.

“Okay. We'll stick to the plan.” I cleared my throat and rolled over so we could face each other. Miller was naked except for a pair of black boxers.

“Did you take care of yourself?” I asked, disappointed I wouldn't get to touch him.

“No. I came from watching you.”

“Really?”

“Really.” His hands trailed over my arm until he got to the bracelet I wore every chance I could. “The sight of this does dangerous things to me,” he whispered.

I swallowed. I wanted to know more, but the fluttering in my chest told me I wasn't ready. "Why do you make them?" I asked instead.

"My sister, Lottie. She's autistic, and sometimes it's hard for her to express herself. One of her therapists suggested making bracelets as a way to work on her fine motor skills and give her an outlet. She loved it, and I loved how it gave us a way to talk. I started making them for my teammates and friends and liked how it made me feel. Not only to create something but to show people you care about them in a safer way. It started because of her, but I continued because of me."

His words pierced my soul, and I felt like an ass for dismissing them at first. "Wow. That's really beautiful." I searched his gaze and found only acceptance. He didn't hate me for denying him. "Tell me more about your family."

He smiled and dove in without question. I envied his ability to trust explicitly. "I'm one of five kids."

"Seriously?"

"Yup. I'm in the middle. I have an older brother and sister, and a younger brother and sister. The younger two are still at home, though Tomas will be graduating college this year and I see him moving in with his partner soon. Jonah and Ivy are married and live in Pearfolk, where we grew up. I'm the first one to ever leave and not come back."

"Was it hard to do that?"

"Not really. I don't know if it's because I'm in the middle or the only one who liked hockey, but my family didn't get me. Jonah followed our dad's footsteps and works the apple orchard and farm. My mom is a teacher, and Ivy works in a café, part-time. Her true passion is running her small business. She makes goat soap and other

oddities. My mom runs a pie booth, and people come from all over for them. Pearfolk is small, and it wasn't until college that I discovered how different it was from the rest of the world."

"How so?"

"It's hard to explain but it's almost like there's a town understanding to keep things the way they are. For example, the first time I used the internet was when I applied to Carrington, and that was after a scout approached me at a game and told me to apply. I had to go a town over to do it because no one in our town had it, and the library only had a dial-up, and after thirty minutes of using it, I'd given up. Everyone knows everyone, and they all help each other out, but it also means everyone is always in your business. It wasn't until college that I realized how sheltered my life had been. It's why I hadn't considered I was gay until—" He stopped himself, and his face flamed red.

"Until what?"

"It's nothing. But yeah, going home is often like stepping through a time portal. Social media is nonexistent, everyone still has a landline, you barter for most things, and no one cares that I'm a professional hockey player, or gay."

His experience was so different from my own. I'd been in the limelight for so long that I didn't know how not to be constantly on and aware of how everything I did would come across to my mother's voters. Not having to worry about it sounded too good to be true.

But it also gave me insight into Miller and why he was the way he was. He was as good as he presented because he'd never needed to hide who he was. His town might have been behind the times, but they'd been accepting. He was wholesome, and his sunshine outlook wasn't an act. It was real.

“Is that why you don’t cuss?” I asked, needing to distract myself.

“Sorta. It wasn’t common. I didn’t even know what a cuss word was until I was fifteen. I repeated something I overheard at a hockey game and never repeated it after how my momma reacted.” He laughed. “Goat soap is not meant to be tasty.”

I chuckled with him. God. I was becoming more and more enamored with this man each second I spent with him. We lay there, staring at one another, and words were not needed as we basked in the afterglow. His eyes twinkled, and I loved how open they were. I’d happily drown in him if it was sustainable.

“What about your family? I know a little about your dad because of Landon, but what about your mom?”

My throat went dry at the innocent question. I didn’t talk about my mom. Mostly because people knew her, or at least the image of herself she portrayed. But knowing Miller’s history, I’d wager he had no idea who she was. That knowledge was freeing. He wasn’t looking for a soundbite or a juicy secret. He just wanted to know me.

Had anyone outside of my brother and his partners taken the time or effort to do that? No. Miller was one of a kind.

That trust I had in him to take care of my body slowly expanded to my heart. I had two choices here—wall off like I usually did or let someone in.

I free-fell into his eyes and took a chance.

CHAPTER 19

MILLER

This was dangerous territory, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted to know Lathan on a deeper level, and I wanted him to know me, too. His blue eyes bore into me, and for once, I didn't feel frozen by them but warmed. He licked his lips and swallowed once before speaking.

"I no longer have a relationship with my father. After what he pulled with Landon and Ava, I cut all contact with him. He tries to reach out when he needs something, but I have safeguards in place now to avoid any confrontations with him. He's a ghost to me at this point."

"I'm sorry your father was such a sucky human being."

He nodded, and then took a breath. "My mother is an entirely different beast. My grandparents are very wealthy, and my mother grew up with large expectations on her shoulders. Marrying Frank wasn't part of it; it was the one rebellious thing my mother did. Soon after they married, she was pregnant with me, and it gave her more incentive to stay. She finished her law degree and got her first job in County politics. From there, she kept climbing the ladder. Once she was mayor, she knew she would never advance with Frank attached to her, so she divorced him. She waited a few years to let everything settle and then publicly dated a candidate my grandparents approved of. Someone who would look good for her image and career."

I frowned. "I feel kind of sad for your mom. It doesn't sound like she has ever been

married for love.”

Lathan snorted. “The concept of love is foreign in my family. Relationships are all transactional. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“I can’t imagine that was easy growing up with. That there was a lot of love and affection given freely.”

“I didn’t know what it felt like to be hugged until Ava,” he whispered. “My father was an asshole, but he got lucky meeting her. I don’t know how he convinced her he wasn’t a piece of shit, but I’m thankful for the time I got to know what it felt like to be loved by a parent and brother.”

Something in my heart broke at his confession. No wonder Lathan kept people at arm’s length. He didn’t know how to trust them. He’d never been shown. Ava and Lathan were the exception, not the rule.

“What’s your relationship like with your mother?”

Lathan’s brows dipped in concentration. “It often feels like I’m a prop she can use for her campaigns versus being her son.”

“That can’t be easy. Does she approve of hockey?”

“To a certain extent. In her mind, she’s giving me these years to live my life as I wish and be rebellious like she did, but I’ll be expected to fall in line somewhere down the line.”

“Which would mean?”

“Marry the right person, produce heirs, and either join the family business or her

campaign.”

“What is the family business?”

“Something to do with textiles.” He shrugged. “I don’t interact with my grandparents that much. I spent all my time away playing hockey as much as possible. It wasn’t just to be away from my dad, but having to commit to their lifestyle.”

“It doesn’t seem like that’s something you want.”

“No. And I hear how entitled I sound. Growing up, I had the best schools and played on an elite hockey team. I didn’t have to worry about affording hockey equipment or going to camps. But I’m not sure the price for all that is worth the cost of my freedom. Hockey is the only thing I’ve ever loved. The only thing that’s been mine. I’m good at it, and I love to play the game. The day I don’t have hockey anymore...” He shuddered. “I don’t even want to think about it. It’s too depressing.”

“You’re allowed to feel angry that they tied strings to things you loved. You were a kid and trusted them to provide for you, not hold you liable for your future. That’s crap, Lath.” He smiled, and the sight took my breath away. “What?”

“Thank you.” He leaned closer, like he meant to kiss me, but stopped just before our lips touched. “For caring and not making me feel like an idiot.”

“Oh, of course. You don’t have to thank me for that.”

“Hmm. You also called me Lath outside of sexy times.”

“Huh. Did you like it?”

His smile widened. “I like it a lot.” He thrust his hips forward until his hard cock

brushed against mine. “Do you think we have time for one more orgasm before we land?”

“Only one way to find out.” I grinned.

* * *

Our bags were barely across the threshold before I slammed Lathan into the wall and rubbed my hard cock against his backside. He whimpered, and I had to count backward to stop myself from combusting on the spot.

“Get naked,” I ordered. “I’m ready to take what’s mine.” My voice was gravelly, and I’d blush if I stopped to think about the words I was spouting. But there was no place for embarrassment when it came to claiming Lathan Silver.

“Yes,” he moaned, pressing back so he could do as I commanded. I inched back a step, not making it easy for him to slide between me and the wall. My body thrummed with need as he slid against me.

“Lath, I’m barely holding back,” I warned.

He chuckled, and I instantly loved the sound. It was light and carefree, something Lathan often wasn’t.

“Go.”

“Yes, sir.”

He sauntered down the hallway and left his suitcase in the entryway. It was the first time he hadn’t immediately unpacked and started laundry. I guess there were things more important than cleanliness to him, after all.

“Wait.” He paused and pivoted on his feet. “I need to feed Alaska.”

I pressed my hand against his chest. “I’ll take care of it. You have orders to obey.”

“Right.” He nodded and licked his lips. “Get naked.”

“And get on your hands and knees. I want to see my prize as soon as I enter your room.”

He groaned and adjusted himself before sprinting down the hall and into his bedroom. I took a second to calm myself before going to the kitchen and opening the pantry. I grabbed a can of Alaska’s food and opened it, drawing the white cat out of its hiding spot. He purred and wrapped himself around my legs as I dumped the foul-smelling food into a crystal dish—only the best for the spoiled thing.

“Here you go, bud. I’ll sneak you an extra treat if you stay away from the bedroom for a few hours,” I whispered, scratching his head. Alaska purred in response, and I smiled. He pretended he didn’t like me in front of Lathan, but the cat knew how to work people to get what he wanted.

I took a moment to ensure the front door was locked and everything was secured before rolling our suitcases down the hall. I might have been able to distract him temporarily, but eventually, he’d want to unpack. At least this way, I might be able to convince him to do it naked... with my cum dripping down his legs.

Hold up. Where had that thought come from? That would mean forgoing condoms. That wasn’t something I’d ever done. Gulping, I shoved that erroneous thought out of my mind and focused on the task at hand.

I unzipped my bag and retrieved the lube and condoms I’d stashed earlier. Turning, I lifted my shirt off and froze at the sight before me.

Mother of Pearl.

Lathan's bubble butt was on display, presenting his hole with the plug to me. Groaning, I bit my fist in an attempt to quell my desire. This was not going to last long.

"Mills?"

"Yeah. I'm here."

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Everything is perfect, baby. You're perfect."

His body relaxed, and I cursed myself for leaving him for too long. I didn't want any insecurities to taint this moment. Dropping the supplies onto the bed, I shoved my sweatpants and socks off until I was standing naked behind him. Carefully, I caressed and squeezed his cheeks. Gah. His butt was magnificent.

"Take a breath and stroke your cock for me, Lath."

He did as I asked, distracting himself as I removed the plug. He whimpered as it came free, making it my third favorite sound of his.

"Holy cow, Lath. The sight of your gaping hole is otherworldly."

"I need you," he whined.

I didn't hesitate. We'd both been wound tight in preparation for this moment. I slicked my fingers with lube and pushed them in. He was warm and inviting as I coated him. I brushed my fingers over his prostate, and he jerked forward.

“Nghn,” he muttered.

Smirking, I did it one more time before sheathing myself in a condom and lube. I notched myself at his entrance and braced my hands on his hips.

“Same as the plug. Breathe in and bear down as you exhale. It will sting at first, but it won’t last long. Just tell me if it’s too much.”

“It won’t be. Fuck me, Mills.”

Groaning, I tossed my head back and stared at the ceiling as my hands flexed on his hips. Geesh. He was going to be the death of me. Taking my own breath, I peered down as I pressed in. The sight of me entering Lathan was pornographic. The feel of him... that was heaven.

“Oh, wow,” I panted. “You’re so tight, baby.”

He grunted. His body was taut with tension, so I pressed in a little more and smoothed my hand down his back. “Breathe, Lath. Let me in. I’ll make it feel good.”

He did as I said and relaxed. My cock slid in another inch. I steadied myself so I didn’t press in too fast. I wanted this to feel as good for him as it did for me. My hands continued to explore, and I was able to sink a little deeper. I angled my hips, and when the tip of my dick brushed against that fleshy spot, he moaned and allowed me in further.

“That’s it, Lath. You’re doing so well. You okay?”

“Mmhm,” he mumbled into the comforter.

“I’m going to move now. You still green?”

“Green,” he said without hesitation.

Gently, I pulled back and watched in awe as my dick split open his cheeks. No other man had ever felt this good. And I had a suspicion no other man ever would again.

I withdrew before thrusting back in. I slid in much easier this time and felt him relax as I picked up the pace. My movements became quicker, and when I tilted my hips, I knew the instant I found his prostate again.

“Oh, fuck. More. Faster. Don’t hold back now, Bambi.”

Grinning, I gripped his hips harder and did as he requested. Tunneling in and out of him was sublime. A big part of me wished I could see his face, but I knew I wouldn’t survive it if I did. All the emotions I felt would be displayed, and there would be no hiding them. The only way to keep my heart intact was to distance myself. It was all I had left.

The sound of skin slapping skin quickly filled the room as my movements picked up. My balls were already drawn up tight, and I had to recite the Stanley Cup winners to quell the urge to come. Lathan melted into the mattress and eagerly pressed back to match my thrusts. He was better than I’d ever imagined.

“Touch yourself. Come for me, Lath.”

He moaned and wrapped his hand around himself. I watched as he jerked his hand up and down in clumsy strokes before he was erupting all over his hand. His hole tightened around me as he came, and it was all it took to send me over the edge. My entire body locked up, and my vision went black as the most intense orgasm washed over me. Tingles spread across my whole body, and my toes curled into the carpet as rope after rope of cum filled the condom.

Once I was done, it took the last bit of brainpower not to collapse on top of Lathan. I withdrew, tied off the condom, and chucked it into the trash can near the bed. I didn't even watch to see if it made it before I fell onto the mattress. Lathan had rolled over and stared at me. I couldn't read the expression on his face, and there weren't enough brain cells firing yet for me to decipher it.

"So?" I panted, turning my head toward him. "Was it everything you thought it would be?"

"No," he choked out, and my heart sank. "It was more." Oh, thank goodness. He took a deep breath before turning on his side and drawing me to him. "I didn't think anything could ever feel as good as scoring a goal, but that might beat it."

I grinned. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." He licked his lips. "Thank you. I wouldn't have trusted anyone else to do that."

"The honor is all mine. Have you seen your backside?" I teased.

Lathan rolled his eyes and pulled me closer, lifting a leg over me to hold me still. "How soon can we do that again?"

Laughing, I smoothed his hair back. "I knew you'd be a cock slut." He smiled so easily I felt as if I'd won the goal. "But you need to rest. I don't want to hurt you. Once you build up your stamina, good luck keeping me out."

"That's a term I can agree to."

"Good." I smacked his butt. It was becoming too intense, and I was likely to kiss him if I didn't stop. "Come on. The best thing to help with that goal is to soak in the

bath.”

I rolled off the bed and headed toward the bathroom. I didn't look back as I started the water and prepared the bath, mostly because I was scared to see what would be on his face. This had become a dangerous game that I no longer held all the cards to, and I was past the point of caring.

CHAPTER 20

LATHAN

I had sex—really good sex.

I had really good sex with Miller, and I'd enjoyed it—more than enjoyed it, if I was being honest.

It almost felt unreal, but the slight twinge in my ass confirmed it was very real. The oddest aftereffect was how different I felt, and yet no one else seemed to notice. How was it not obvious my entire worldview had shifted? My insides had been rearranged, and I was a different man now.

Or at least it felt like I was. It was a blessing and curse, I suppose.

I didn't necessarily want everyone to know I had sex, but it had been so monumental that not recognizing it lessened its importance. For once in my life, I wanted to shout from the rooftops and declare how Miller's dick had transformed me. I was tempted to believe it had magical powers with how I wanted to wax poetically about it.

But since I couldn't share with people how amazing it felt to get fucked down, and I was slightly worried I'd yell it out loud in the locker room, I turned to the one person I trusted the most—my brother.

“Have you ever had your prostate?—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Listen, bro. I love you, I do. But it’s a hard pass on hearing about you and Miller. I have a very distinct image of my college roommate that I plan to keep, so please, for the love of hockey, do not change that.”

“But... the prostate, Land.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s amazing, but I can’t. I just can’t. Oh, God. I’m going to be sick.” He made a gagging noise, and I rolled my eyes.

“So dramatic.” I sighed. “Fine. Let me talk to Cam.”

“Gladly.”

Luckily, Cam was not squeamish and willingly listened to me proclaim the greatness of gay sex. After getting off the phone, I’d attacked Miller and reminded myself just how wonderful it was. I almost couldn’t believe how I’d been willing to miss out on it, but deep down, I knew it wasn’t so much about the sex; it was the man I was doing it with.

In the blink of an eye, the end of November turned into the beginning of December. We won our two home games before returning to the road. We won against Utah in our first away game, thanks to the rookie goalie shutting them out. However, it wasn’t looking as good against LA. We were tied midway through the third period, and our team was out of gas.

“Second line, get ready,” Coach Mack shouted.

My gaze was on Miller, so I caught his grimace before he covered it. Was he hurt? Tired? Our line had been on the ice a lot tonight. Typically that wasn’t a bad thing, but Eriksson, the defender for LA, had been up Miller’s ass all night, disrupting our rhythm. I didn’t like how focused he was on him, but this was hockey. I couldn’t put

him in bubble wrap and expect him to play that way.

“You got this,” I said, trying for something encouraging. It wasn’t my strong suit, but I wanted him to know I believed in him.

His chuckle was dark and didn’t fill me with lightness like usual. “Yeah, that’s not the problem.”

I tugged on his arm and stopped him. “What do you mean, Bambi?”

“Leave it, Silver. This isn’t the place.”

He broke my grip and moved into position for the face-off. O’Leary was in the center, so I took up my spot. I glanced at Eriksson. His gaze was zeroed in on Miller, but it wasn’t the typical hockey glare. This was more... it was almost lecherous. But why?

I didn’t have time to ponder it as the puck dropped, and the game resumed. O’Leary snagged the puck and zipped it over to Miller. I skated into position to receive, but the puck didn’t make it. Miller was slammed into the boards, and the puck was stolen. I hesitated as I watched the brute shove Miller and whisper something in his ear before skating off with a smug expression.

Miller’s face was red as he skated into play. The longer he played, the more tense his movements became. It wasn’t like him, and it bugged me that he was letting this guy get to him.

“Snap out of it, Bambi.”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll do just that. Thanks for the awesome advice, Silver Spoon.”

I jerked back, his words metaphorically slapping me across the face. Had I done something wrong? Did I mean nothing to him? I thought things had changed between us, but maybe I was wrong. Was I cliché? Confusing sex for emotion?

I sat on the bench and attempted to rein in my temper. Then, I noticed Miller and Bell exchanging glances. I leaned closer to hear their conversation.

“He’s an ass. I wish I could punch him in the nuts,” Bell muttered.

“He’d probably like that. I’d wager the jerk is closeted.”

“Hmm. You might be right. He does get a little too handsy with me when he shoves me into the boards.”

Miller nodded and took a swig of his drink. My mind spun at the news. I was an idiot. The guy was targeting them because they were out, and I’d blamed Miller. Fuck. I wasn’t any better.

But what could I do? Nothing.

And what if my interference caused him to get wind of us?

Panic threatened to overwhelm me at the implications. If I came out, would it be like this for me, too? Probably worse because of my last name. Dread filled my bones, and the high I’d been living on for the past five days evaporated.

A hard shove broke the zombie state I’d fallen into, and I followed my line onto the ice. My movements were mechanical as I skated, and the game whipped by me at a rapid pace.

“My granny skates faster than you,” someone chirped.

“Head in the game, Silver!” Coach shouted, shaking me out of the daze.

I shoved all my fears to the back of my mind and focused on the game—the ice and the puck.

Miraculously, I spotted an opening and stole the puck. I flipped it on my blade and spun around toward the goal. LA closed in, but I could feel Miller’s presence to my right, so with a quick glance over my shoulder, I faked left before shooting it right into Miller’s path. Yes! He drew back to shoot when he was checked from behind and went flying across the ice face-first.

Horror filled my veins as he bounced and red smeared the ice. Sound was replaced with the thumping of my heart as I skated closer. Miller pushed himself up with one hand and used the other to cup his jaw. “Got cut,” he mumbled.

The relief was short-lived as anger took its place. I had never been a violent player. Sure, there were times I shoved players harder into the boards than necessary, but I wasn’t one to fight or resort to cheap tricks. It was beyond a Silver to lower themselves to those standards.

But as the knowledge he was okay filtered through, all my thoughts turned to Eriksson. The game no longer mattered. Being a Silver held no merit. The only pulsing need in my head was making him pay for hurting what was mine.

Mitts and my stick were dropped, and I launched myself at him. I took him by surprise, giving me the opportunity to strike first. My knuckles ached with each punch, but I didn’t dare stop. His fist connected with my eye.

Damn. That stung. Why did people do this?

I hit him one more time before our teammates pulled us apart.

The ref gave us both a major penalty—him for checking from behind and me for fighting. I called bullshit on mine, but it was too late to argue.

Head down, I skated to the penalty box. I hadn't stepped foot in one my entire professional career, and now that was changing. All because I'd had sex and couldn't separate pleasure from feelings. I was pathetic.

I didn't even try to seek out Miller. I was too afraid of what I'd see there. So I sat with my head down in the penalty box for the last five minutes of the game. When the goal sound echoed around the stadium and the home crowd roared, my defeat only grew.

It was my fault. I'd lost us this game. I'd failed the team.

A minute later, the door to the penalty box opened, and I skated after my team as they exited the ice. I kept my eyes averted, not wanting to see the disappointment and anger I was certain to see reflected in their eyes.

"Hell of a hit, Silver," Samson said, knocking my shoulder.

My head flew up. "What? You're not mad?"

His face scrunched up in confusion. "Only that you beat me to it. I was right behind you. Fucker had it coming all game. Homophobic piece of shit."

So, I hadn't been wrong in my assumption. He had been targeting Miller and Bell. Fuck.

To my surprise, several other teammates patted me on my back and up-nodded me as I entered the locker room. I dressed quickly, hoping to avoid any confrontation with Coach. It had nothing to do with wanting to check on Miller.

My attempts at avoidance were thwarted, though, and Coach pulled me into his office before I escaped.

“Have a seat, Silver.”

“Sir, I’m sorry?—”

“Stop. I’m not here to yell at you, but I also can’t condone fighting in front of the whole team.”

“Oh.”

He smirked. “Being a good captain means standing up for your teammates. I can only guess that Eriksson doesn’t like that we have two out players.”

“It’s bullshit?—”

He raised his hand to stop me. “However, unless the two he targeted come forward and draw up a complaint, there isn’t much to be done. The league is firm in its stance, but Miller and Bell must be willing to go through the ordeal. It’s their choice.”

“That’s not fair or right.”

“No, son. It’s not. Which is why we have to protect our own. We can’t change other teams, but we can ensure ours is a safe place.”

I nodded. “We have a good team, sir.”

“We do. There are a few outliers, but I’m working on that. You just keep being the alternate captain the team needs.”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right. Get out of my office. It’s been long enough for everyone to think I ripped into you for fighting.” He smiled, and I chuckled.

“Thanks, Coach.”

Miller was the last one on the plane, so I didn’t get a chance to talk to him before we taxied down the runway and flew toward Vegas. It was a quick flight, just a little over an hour, but it felt too long to know how he was doing. I’d have to be patient and hope I got a chance once we landed.

Luck was not on my side.

Since he was the last one on the plane, he was the first one off and caught the first van to the hotel. The second van took forever to arrive, and I was two seconds away from ordering my own ride when it finally pulled up. My knee bounced the whole drive to the hotel. I just wanted to know if he was all right. I fiddled with my phone, but before I could send a message, the fucker died.

Seriously? Was the universe out to get me? I got laid, and this was my punishment.

Fuck. This was why I didn’t care about people. They complicated things.

Even knowing that, I couldn’t stop worrying and needing to ensure he was okay. He could hate me all he wanted for punching that guy. I didn’t care. I wouldn’t apologize for it, but I didn’t want him to ice me out.

The van pulled up to the hotel, and I rocketed out of the door. I was halfway across the lobby before anyone else had entered the hotel, so I didn’t feel bad when the elevator door shut in their faces. Oops.

The second I entered my room, I threw my suitcase onto the bed and pulled out my charger. While my phone charged, I tugged off my tie and jacket and tossed them onto the bed. I couldn't even hang up my clothes until I knew he was okay.

A minute later, my screen came alive, and I dove for the device. Pulling up his contact, I typed out the first message that came to mind. I was tired of second-guessing myself.

Come to my room. Number 545

CHAPTER 21

MILLER

My jaw ached, and the last place I wanted to go was to Lathan's room. I didn't have the strength to face him and see the resignation in his eyes.

We were over.

He'd gotten into a fight because of me! He was going to end things. I'd caused too much disruption to his perfectly crafted life, and now he would kick me to the curb.

I'd hoped he'd wait until we returned to Austin, but it didn't appear I was that lucky. Instead, I'd have to wallow in my misery in an empty hotel room and try not to let it ruin my game. Crap. I'd need to find a new place to live.

I'd submitted a few applications to leasing offices, but nothing had felt right yet. I hadn't found a place that felt like home.

That's because you already found it.

It was stupid to hope I could stay with Lathan forever, but my mushy heart had latched on while I wasn't paying attention. All the boundaries in the world hadn't been able to keep me from catching feelings. The only person I had to blame was myself.

"Better get it over with," I muttered, shoving my key card into my sweats. I'd just

changed out of my suit when his message had come through. Shoving my feet into a pair of shoes, I ran my fingers through my curls as I walked down the hall. We were on the same floor but at opposite ends. There weren't any other players out as I strolled, and I relaxed at that small mercy. I didn't want to lie about my whereabouts tonight.

With a deep breath, I rapped my knuckles against the door. It opened instantly, and I was pulled through before I had time to blink.

"Fuck, Mills." Lathan's hand bracketed my face in a tender gesture, and he tilted my head to and fro as he inspected me. "I was so worried. I kept envisioning the worst possible outcome." His fingers trailed lightly over the stitches lining my jaw. Goosebumps broke out across my skin, and I sucked in a breath.

This wasn't what I'd expected when I'd trudged down here. "I'm okay," I whispered and gripped his hand. If he kept doing that, I would lose my mind.

Lathan's ministrations froze, and his eyes lifted to mine. The blue swirled with an intensity I wasn't used to seeing in their depths. I searched his face and my body heated at the black eye blooming on his face.

"What the hell?"

Lathan jerked back in shock. "You just cussed."

I ignored him and brought my own hand up to his face. I gently traced the bruise forming with the pad of my thumb. "Eriksson's dead the next time we play."

He laughed. "You're cute when you're feral, Mills. I'm fine. You should see his face."

My heart rate slowed, and I took a deep breath. “You should ice this. I’ll go get you some.” I turned to leave, but he stopped me with a hand on my bicep.

“Don’t go. I got some.”

I glanced down at his hand and noticed how red his knuckles were. Pushing my insecurities to the back of my mind, I went into the bathroom and grabbed two washcloths before locating the ice.

“Sit on the bed,” I ordered and unzipped his bag. Lathan always traveled with baggies and portable ice packs, so I grabbed both and placed the ice in the freezer before making two ice packs. Turning, I stumbled at the sight of him half-dressed on the bed.

“And here I expected to take care of you,” he teased.

I rolled my eyes and ignored the rush of arousal. We weren’t in the apartment. Nothing sexual could happen here. Reese’s house was an exception, but I couldn’t expect that rule to apply everywhere else. We were away and on the road. I had to respect his rules. They were for me just as much. If I let myself have him whenever I wanted, I’d never want to stop.

I placed an ice pack on his hand and held the other to his face. We sat quietly on the bed next to one another, and the air became thick with all the things left unsaid. I needed to go. I couldn’t stay here any longer.

“I should go.” I stood and managed to take one step.

“Stay.” Lathan’s free hand grabbed ahold of me and stopped my retreat.

“We’re on the road,” I said in case the punch to his head had jostled that factoid

loose.

“I’m aware, Bambi.” He licked his lips, and my eyes fell to his luscious mouth. How I wanted to kiss that plump flesh. But if I did, I’d be a goner. Like you already aren’t ...

“The rules,” I reiterated. I needed him to spell out what this was. Too many other things were unclear between us, and I needed this to be crystal clear.

“I’m aware.” His eyes bored into mine, and I felt them all the way to my soul. My hand was still on his face, and he covered my own. It should be weird to be standing over him, but it wasn’t. “It’s come to my recent conclusion that some of our rules are dumb.”

“Oh.” It was the only word I could get out. The rest escaped me as my heart took off like a million galloping horses, their hooves threatening to crush my lungs with their urgency.

“So, will you stay?”

“I... Are you sure?”

“Yes. I want you here. I need you here if I’m honest.”

“Okay.” My answer was simple, but it was all he needed. He smiled and pulled me into his lap. The move was smooth and took me by surprise.

“That’s better.” He snuggled into my neck and tightened his arms around me. For someone who had loathed all physical contact initially, Lathan had become a snuggler. He’d been touch starved and hadn’t known it. Pride bloomed in my chest that I’d been the one to fulfill his need. His body relaxed the longer he held me, and I

felt mine do the same.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ll be able to play as long as it’s covered. It’s a dull ache. Nothing Advil can’t cure. What about you?”

“I’ll be fine. Might help my ruggedness factor, actually.”

I chuckled and pulled back. “Did Lathan Silver just make a joke about his pretty face?”

“You’re the one calling it pretty.” He smiled, and a lightness bloomed in my chest. His smiles could power energy plants.

“You are pretty. Gorgeous, really.”

This time, he blushed. “Shut up. You’re the one turning heads everywhere we go.”

I rolled my eyes. “Take a compliment, Silver. You’re a beautiful man. Own it.”

“Whatever. I don’t care what I look like. It’s distracting, actually. I’d prefer to be ugly so people would leave me alone.”

“You’re not just beautiful on the outside, Lath. You hide behind scowls and your grumpy disposition, but anyone who spends time with you sees the cinnamon roll that you are.”

“Cinnamon roll?”

I smiled. “Yeah. You’re hard on the outside but gooey in the middle.”

He barked out a laugh, flipped us to the bed, and hovered over me. “You’re ridiculous, Mills. But I happen to like ridiculous.”

I stuck out my tongue like the mature adult I was. He snorted another laugh and rocked his hips into me. My laughter turned to a moan at the feel of his hard dick against mine.

“Why don’t we kiss?” he asked, freezing me.

“What?” My breath sawed out of me, and I flexed my fingers against him.

“You kissed me once in the kitchen but haven’t since. Was I... not good at it?” He dropped his eyes, and I couldn’t take the look of insecurity on his face.

“No!” I shouted, and he flinched. Crap. I was messing this up. I licked my lips. “No, I mean, the kiss was perfect. It has nothing to do with your skill.”

“Then why?” he whispered.

“I didn’t think you wanted to,” I lied. “It’s intimate and seems more boyfriendly.” Okay, that part was true.

“And if I did?” he asked.

I relaxed into the mattress and spread my arms out at my side. It was too tempting to grab hold of him and kiss him as if my life depended on it. Maybe it did with the way my heart was pounding.

“Then take what you want, Lath. If you want to kiss me, then kiss me.”

I hated and loved the words coming from my mouth. I wouldn’t survive it if he kissed

me, but I was also convinced I couldn't go another second without his lips on me. It was a dichotomy of epic proportions, but I was too gone to care. My heart already belonged to him. I might as well douse myself in kerosene along the way to my destruction.

Slowly, he lowered his lips to mine. He was tentative at first, only pressing our lips together. It didn't matter, though. It was still one of the best kisses of my life. As he got more comfortable, he moved his lips and parted his mouth open. The mere hint of his tongue lit me on fire, and my composure broke.

Surging up, I gripped his hair as I took control and devoured his mouth. Every little moan and whimper were mine. I captured them like a greedy pirate, not letting him go as I plundered his mouth.

His fingers raked through my hair, and I groaned at the sensation. My jaw was throbbing, and each time our jaws touched, a bolt of pain speared me, but I was too consumed by him to care.

Eventually, we broke apart for air and stared at one another. The air was heated, and arousal was thick between us. Neither of us spoke as we moved to shed our clothes. Skin to skin, we rolled on the bed until I was the one to hover over him this time. Grasping his hands, I stretched them over his head and clasped them in mine.

Lathan bucked, pushing his cock against me and begging with his body. I gripped him tighter, needing him to say the words. My heart was on a crosswire and dangerously close to falling completely over the edge.

"Please," he begged.

"Say what you want, baby. I need to hear you say it," I rasped.

“Fuck me, Bambi. I need to feel you.”

Growling, I lunged forward and kissed him until my head spun from lack of oxygen.

“Supplies?” I asked when I broke apart for air.

“Inner pocket.”

It was torture dragging myself off him, but it was the reward of being inside him that spurred me on. I found the bottle of lube and condom in the pocket and returned to the bed. Squirting the liquid onto my finger, I pushed his legs back and breached his hole. I wasn't as gentle as I'd been the first time, but he didn't seem to notice. Both of us were too far gone to care at this point. My cock was red and leaking already, and if I wasn't inside him soon, I was likely to die from too hard of a dick. Was that a thing? With Lathan, it felt like it could be a thing.

“More,” he demanded, and I obliged with a second finger. I added a third when he felt loose, and he rocked back on my fingers in no time. I withdrew and opened the condom, my fingers fumbling with the slick packaging. Grumbling, I bit the corner and yanked it open in my haste. Only, I was a little too overzealous and caught the condom in the process.

“Dang it.”

“What?” Lathan asked and braced himself on his elbows.

“I ripped the condom. Do you have more?” I asked.

Lathan shook his head. “No. And that one has been in there for a while.”

“Great.” I sighed. “I didn't bring any either. I wasn't expecting...” I trailed off as I waved at the two of us. Lathan gulped, his eyes dropping to the ripped latex and then

back at me.

“We could go without. We’re both clean and since we’re exclusive...”

I gulped. My hands shook, and I dropped the destroyed condom onto the bed. “Are you sure?” I asked.

“I’m sure. I trust you.” His blue gaze held mine, and I couldn’t deny the conviction present.

We came together in a blur of body parts as we resumed our frantic making out. I debated having him roll over to keep that final separation between him and my heart, but I was so tired of denying myself what I wanted. So, despite knowing it was a bad idea, I plunged inside him while staring deep into his eyes.

There were no words to describe the intense pleasure that wrapped around me. A slick heat greeted me as I bottomed out, and I had to hold my breath to stop myself from exploding.

“Dear God,” Lathan moaned.

“So good, baby. You’re so tight. I can barely move.”

“I need you to. Please, Mills. Move.”

Taking a deep breath, I pulled back and lunged forward. Our bodies rocked together as we found a rhythm. Our skin slapped together, and pleasure coursed through every pore. Nothing had ever felt this good, and no one else ever would. This was us.

“Touch yourself,” I ordered. My balls were drawn up tight, and it wouldn’t take long before I blew.

“Don’t need to.”

I pegged his prostate one more time and watched as Lathan came untouched. His cum covered his belly, and his hole clenched around me as his orgasm took over. That was all it took, and I was coming. My cum spurted out in thick ropes, and I’d never forget the feeling of filling him up. It was intoxicating.

Our bodies twitched as we came down, and our breaths mingled between us as we stared at one another. That hadn’t just been sex; that had been so much more, but I wasn’t sure if he knew that.

“I’m going to move,” I whispered, and he nodded. Slowly, I withdrew and instantly missed the feel of him around me. But the sight of my cum dripping from him was a nice consolation prize. “That’s hot,” I breathed.

“Is it weird I don’t want it to escape?” Lathan asked.

“No,” I answered immediately.

He smiled and then frowned. “Unfortunately, not practical. And a bit messy.”

“I got you.” I snagged the washcloth from the ice pack, cleaned him up, and stared awkwardly at him. He’d asked me to stay, but was that only for sex? Should I go now?

“Quit overthinking it. Let’s shower and then sleep. We both need it.”

Not one to argue the facts, I followed him into the shower and tried to stop my heart from picturing all the lovey-dovey things my brain was formulating.

Stop it. Lathan Silver was not my boyfriend. Not now, not ever. And I had to be okay

with that.

CHAPTER 22

LATHAN

I used to believe that waking up with someone else in my bed would be my worst nightmare. Mostly because I liked my space and didn't want to be touched; a person in my bed would interfere with both. But waking up to Miller was becoming my favorite thing.

It had nothing to do with the wake-up blow job, frotting, or sex, either. Mostly.

I liked having him near. Knowing that he was safe and warm next to me. I could touch him whenever I wanted and be touched in return. It was a comfort I hadn't known I needed.

We'd won our game against Vegas and returned home a few days later to play Calgary, which we also won. Now, we had a few days off before a long stretch of home games, and I planned to use my time judiciously.

"I'm beginning to doubt your whole celibate thing," Miller muttered as I wrapped my lips around his cock.

I hummed but didn't respond as I took him deeper. I still couldn't take him all the way, but I'd gotten a lot better since my first attempt.

"Oh, God," Miller moaned. His thighs tensed, and his hands fisted the sheets. "Your mouth is divine, baby. I dream about it."

The first time he'd used baby, I'd wanted to smack the word out of his mouth. I wasn't anyone's baby.

But now... it made my heart flip over and my stomach bottom out.

I craved the soft way he gasped it like I was his last meal and I'd become a glutton for the term of endearment. I hadn't thought I was capable of being anyone's anything, but with Miller, I was beginning to believe I could.

"Yes, just like that. Right there. So good," he cooed as his thighs tightened around my head. I slid my hand over his sack and caressed his perineum. I hadn't gotten up the courage to go further after that initial blow job, but maybe today was the day. Swirling my tongue and sucking on his tip, I pushed the worry I wouldn't do it right out of my mind and passed over his hole.

Miller twitched in my mouth and released a loud moan. So I did it again, this time pressing more on the tight ring of muscles. His hips jolted forward, and his cock slid down my throat. I gagged and then remembered to relax. My throat contracted around him, and his fingers fisted my hair as he came down my throat. I greedily drank down every drop.

"What the heck?" he gasped as he came to.

I sat up, wiped my hand across my mouth, and smiled. "Good morning, Mills."

He huffed a laugh. "I'll say. Geez, Lath. I think you just blew my mind."

Grinning, I leaned forward and kissed him. Now that I knew I could, I couldn't seem to stop. Every minute we were in this apartment, some part of me was touching him. My lips. My hands. My body. If I could play hockey with him attached to me, I'd do it. It was becoming harder to keep myself in check outside of this apartment than I

ever expected.

Thank fuck I didn't have to on the road anymore. Those days had become torture, and I dreaded the time apart from him. I should have been worried about how addicted to Miller Fahn I'd become, but I was too happy to care.

Happy .

I hadn't felt truly happy in years.

Again, another red flag waved in my face, but I couldn't bring myself to turn around and run in the opposite direction. Miller had transfixed me, body and soul.

"What do you want to do today?" I asked after breaking the kiss. It was rare to have a day off, and I hoped his plans revolved around being naked all day.

"I've got a meeting later, and I wanted to finish up some bracelets so I could send them off for Christmas."

I frowned. "What meeting? Is it about the team?"

He chuckled and climbed out of bed. "Nah. It's for the Rainbow Lounge, the youth organization I volunteer with." My heart rate slowed at the news, and I followed him into the bathroom. He turned on the shower and eyed me while waiting for it to warm. "You could come with me?" he asked with a hopeful look.

The air around me froze. Okay, not the air. Just me. I blinked, a million excuses flooding my mind. But it was already too late. Miller's face had fallen, and he stepped into the water.

"I—"

“Never mind. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

My heart threatened to break free of my rib cage with how hard it pounded. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to spend time with him. But would people know I liked dick if I joined him? Would it get back to my mom? The team? There were too many unknowns, and I wasn’t ready for any questions coming my way.

“It’s not...”

“It’s fine, Silver. I get it. I would never force you to do something you’re not ready for.” He smiled, but it didn’t meet his eyes. An anvil sat heavy on my chest, but this time for a different reason. The thought of losing Miller, of him not being proud of me, felt worse than all the unknowns.

The rest of the shower was quiet as we washed and rinsed, and though we fell into our normal routine of making breakfast together, it felt off. The big elephant I’d been ignoring had finally made its appearance, and we could no longer shove it into the corner.

Miller got dressed, and I put on gym shorts and a shirt. There was no way I could stay home while he was out and not go bonkers with my thoughts, so it was better to get a workout in.

“I’ll pick up something for dinner on my way back,” he said before he kissed me. I nodded and watched him walk out, my heart following him.

Something had shifted between us, but it wasn’t the blissful happiness I’d been feeling earlier this morning. No, this was pure dread, and I hated it.

* * *

The four days between games were not spent as I'd hoped—naked and in bed. After his meeting—where I learned that fucking asshole Toby had been present—Miller returned and tried to act as if everything was the same, but the easy air between us was gone. We were both more cautious and tip-toed around the other.

I hated it. Loathed it, actually.

We lost the next two home games, and I couldn't help but take the blame. On the outside, everything was the same. We fucked. We kissed. We cuddled. We played hockey.

But inside, it was all wrong.

The safety and comfort that had existed evaporated and had been replaced with a more sinister energy. How long would he be okay with hiding this? How many events would he go to while I stayed home? Would it be enough if we could only be open around our friends?

The questions plagued me to the point that I wasn't sleeping. My routine was off, and that meant my game was off, too.

"Get your head in the game," Viggy shouted, slapping me on the helmet. "You're acting like we already lost this game. The team needs you to show them we haven't."

I nodded. We were up by one goal with half a period left. We just had to keep our lead, and we'd turn this losing streak around.

Miller laughed at something Bell said, and I lost my focus. Does he like him? Would he rather be with him ?

I grimaced and shot daggers at Bell, not that he noticed. His eyes were glued to

number five. Huffing, I turned and caught the flirty equipment manager handing Miller a stick. His fingers grazed Miller's mitt as he released it, and I didn't miss the suggestive look in his eyes. Thankfully, Miller was focused on the ice and not the asshole who dared to flirt with him in my presence, saving the man from meeting my fists.

Fuck. I couldn't go around punching everyone who touched him. Though, at this moment, it felt like a solid solution.

"Stop it," he whispered to me, knocking me on the side with his elbow.

"What?"

"You're glaring."

"This is my normal look."

He laughed, and it felt like I'd won something. Miller shook his head, and I watched transfixed as the sweaty curls attempted to move off his forehead. When they got like that during sex, I'd run my fingers through them and smooth them off. God. I wanted to do that right now. My dick hardened in my cup, reminding me this was not the time.

Miller smirked and dropped his eyes to my crotch, and everything felt right with the word again.

"Line change," Coach called, and we sprang into action. Five minutes to go, and we'd have a win. We just had to hold it for five minutes.

Luckily, the hockey gods were in our favor, and we won. The team celebrated in the locker room, and the talk of the Christmas party the next night floated around the

room.

“Yo, Silver. You giving a speech?” someone shouted.

“Fuck that,” I grumbled, and everyone laughed, so I tossed the middle finger over my shoulder, garnering more laughter.

Once I gathered my belongings, I turned and looked for Miller, but I couldn’t find him anywhere. Bell was still at his cubby, so I stalked over there.

“Where’s Miller?”

His head was bent over his phone, and upon my arrival, he quickly hid it from view. His face blanched when he spotted me towering over him.

“Hm?”

“Miller. Did he leave?”

“Oh.” He turned to look around him. “I guess.”

Growling, I stalked off. This was why I didn’t talk to people. I searched the weight room, training room, and equipment office, but he wasn’t there. I pulled out my phone to see if he’d texted, but there was nothing from him. Shooting one off, I begrudgingly headed for the exit. If he didn’t want to ride home together, fine. He could find his own ride.

However, the closer I got to the parking lot, the more I knew I wouldn’t leave until I knew he was safe. I might be angry he hadn’t told me about his plans, but I would never leave him.

I scowled at the driver despite knowing it wasn't his fault. He ignored me and opened the door. I slid into the car and instantly spotted Miller's phone. Well, at least I knew he wasn't ignoring me. Sliding down the window, I opted to try one more time to ask for help.

"Yes, Mr. Silver?"

"Did Mr. Fahn say where he would be?"

He blinked and turned to face me. "He was doing a meet and greet after for some of the youth from Rainbow Lounge."

Shit. That's right. He'd told me, but it went in one ear and disappeared like everything to do with the center.

"Right. I knew that. How long is he going to be? He left his phone."

"Uh, I believe he said he'd get a ride home."

"Of course." And if I had to guess, Toby had quickly volunteered for the job. Fucking hell. "Do you happen to know where they were meeting? I don't want him to be without his phone."

"I believe it was in one of the family rooms."

"Yes, good. Okay, I'll be right back."

I slid out of the car before he could open the door for me. I had Miller's phone clutched in one hand and my ID tag in the other. My heart thudded loudly in my chest, and an urgency I wasn't used to off the ice encouraged me to hurry.

The guard nodded at my arrival, and some teammates headed out as I re-entered the facility. I clumsily hurried down the hallway, peeking into rooms as I passed. When I came upon their room, my heart lurched to my throat. Toby was in there, but Miller paid him no attention despite the asshole's preening.

His focus was on a teenager with a purple streak in his hair as he talked a mile a minute. Miller smiled and nodded like he didn't mind at all that the kid was talking faster than was humanly possible to understand. When the kid took a breath, Miller easily slipped off a bracelet and slid it onto his arm.

"So you don't feel so alone," he said just as he spotted me hovering in the doorway. The room turned at his gaze, all eyes on me.

It's just kids, I reminded myself.

"Hey, you forgot your phone." I held up the device and stepped forward.

"You're Lathan Silver," the kid with the purple streak said with awe.

"Uh, yeah. You like hockey?"

"Do I like hockey?" he gasped. "It's the only sport that matters. I play for a rec team but hope to make a junior league one day."

"Ah, that's cool. Um, do you have something you'd want me to sign?"

His eyes lit up, and he nodded like a bobblehead. He shoved a jersey in my hands, and I took the marker Miller handed me. The kid stared at me in silence as I uncapped it and signed my name next to Miller's.

"Here you go."

“Thanks,” he whispered, and Miller smiled fondly at the boy.

“I gotta go, Ace, but I’ll see you next week at the center.”

““Kay,” he said, but his eyes hadn’t left my signature.

Miller snorted and squeezed his shoulder before directing me out of the room. He waved to a few people, but no one stopped him, and we were soon headed out of the stadium.

“Thanks for doing that,” he said once we were inside the car. “Ace is a big fan and loves the game. You just made his year.”

“It’s no problem.” I cleared my throat. “Do you get to interact with a lot of the kids?”

“It depends on our schedule. I met Ace my first day there, and we connected. He’s kind of shy until you get to know him. Since we met, he’s been coming back more. He’s a foster kid and doesn’t feel safe being himself at home, but the center allows him the space. Tonight was his first NHL game.”

My throat was clogged with emotion. I understood what it was like to hide who you were all too well.

“I’m glad I could be a part of it.”

Miller glanced to make sure the divider was up before he leaned over and kissed my cheek. It wasn’t lingering or passionate, but it might have been the best kiss I’d ever received. Miller being proud of me was worth more than I’d realized.

CHAPTER 23

MILLER

The last place I wanted to be tonight was the team Christmas party, but considering I was still the new guy, I needed to show I was part of the team. It was crazy to remember how when I arrived, I wanted nothing more than to ingratiate myself so deeply with the team. I wanted my teammates to love me so they couldn't imagine the team without me on it. But now, the thought of being in a room with them where I couldn't touch the man who'd captured my heart was pure torture.

"What are the odds there are any single guys here tonight?" Toby asked next to me.

"Huh?" I broke my stare with Lathan and turned to Toby. He smirked and flicked his eyes to Lathan. Why was he looking at my man? Wait. He wasn't mine. Cool your jets. I took a sip of my seltzer water. The bubbles tickled my lip and calmed me slightly. "Oh, um, not sure. I'm not really focused on that now that the season has started."

"Or because you have your eyes on someone else," he said knowingly, flicking his attention to Lathan. He really needed to stop doing that.

"What? No. No interest there."

"Hmm." He leaned close and patted my chest. "I'd believe you if you hadn't been eye-fucking the alternate captain since the moment he walked into the room."

I gulped. Shit. “It’s nothing. Just a one-sided crush.”

His face morphed into one I didn’t like—pity. “Oh, honey. It’s cute you think that, but he’s been eyeing you right back.”

“You’re ridiculous. There’s nothing going on.”

“It’s not my business what’s going on, so I’ll leave it be, but if you’re trying to keep this under wraps, you both might want to work on the heated looks you send each other. I’m getting a contact boner from the sexual tension emanating from you two.”

I chuckled; the sound high-pitched and slightly deranged. “You need to get your eyes checked.”

“Sure thing, Miller.” Toby laughed, patted my chest once more, and leaned closer. “I’m going to go before I discover if laser eyes are real. I’m afraid I won’t have a hand if they are. Good luck, friend.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but it was no use. He’d already walked away, and my gaze swung back to Lathan of its own accord. We were like magnets, and I couldn’t fight the pull any longer. My feet took me across the room until we were standing across from one another. The woman he’d been talking to excused herself at my arrival.

“Enjoying yourself?” he asked. I didn’t miss the harshness of his tone or how my body relaxed at his proximity. This was a serious problem. I needed to distance myself before I got too addicted to him. Except it was already too late.

“Not really, no. You?”

Lathan’s expression shifted from anger to surprise. “Uh. But...”

“Toby is just a friend, so whatever your mind is conjuring, it’s not true. Besides, if you don’t know I only want you, you haven’t been paying attention. Excuse me.”

I left him gaping as I hurried out of the room. I couldn’t believe I’d just admitted that. I was losing control of my sanity. Any second now, I was likely to wipe the tortured look off his face with a kiss. It wouldn’t help, though. It would only make things worse. So, it was better to remove myself so I wasn’t tempted to blow everything up.

“Miller time!” one of my teammates shouted. I nodded and headed toward the group.

“Hey. How’s it going?”

“Good, man. Have you met my wife, Lexi?” Samson asked.

“No, I haven’t. It’s lovely to meet you,” I said, shaking her hand.

“You, too. How do you like Austin? You’re new to the team, right?”

“I am.” I smiled. “Austin’s lovely. I already feel more at home here than I ever did in Chicago.”

“Have you found a new place yet? Yours caught on fire, right?” Samson asked.

“Yeah. It did. That was shocking coming home to.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “I’ve been staying with Lathan for the time being. I have a few feelers out, but nothing has been right.” Mostly because none of them came with a six-foot blond with ice-blue eyes.

“Oh, no! That’s terrible. Real estate in Austin can be overwhelming. It took us two years to find the right place.”

“Even if it wasn’t, we’re not moving now. We have too much stuff.” Samson chuckled.

Lexi smiled and slapped his stomach. “Half of it is your hockey stuff, mister,” she teased before turning back to me. “Any location you’re looking at? I might know some hidden gems from our search.”

“Something close to the stadium and the Rainbow Lounge. Those are really the two places I spend the most time at.”

“I haven’t heard of the Rainbow Lounge. What is it?”

“It’s a non-profit organization for LGBTQ+ youth. I volunteer there as much as the schedule allows.”

Her eyes widened, and she smiled. “That’s amazing. I didn’t know there was something like that in Austin.”

“Yeah. It’s a great organization. I’m helping them prepare for a gala to raise enough money to start a hockey club.”

“Really? That sounds awesome,” Samson said.

“Yeah. They’ve got me helping with some of the promotions.”

“Does the team know? I bet several others would attend, and the Aces organization itself would contribute.”

“I hadn’t wanted to pressure people.”

Samson nodded and gave me a kind smile. “It’s not easy being the new guy, but

you're a big part of the team, Miller. You and Silver are fire together. I've never seen anything like it. I'd almost believe the two of you have been skating together for years instead of months."

Was it warm in here, or was my face just heating on its own?

"Uh, thanks. It's been great clicking with him on the ice. We've known each other since college, so maybe that translates on the ice."

"Hm. Perhaps," Samson mused, his gaze assessing.

"Hey, don't forget about me," Lexi interrupted, and I could kiss her for taking her husband's all-too-knowing gaze away from me. "I want to help. Does the Rainbow Lounge need regular people volunteers?"

"I can pass along your information if you want. They do background checks for all volunteers since there are youth involved, but I'm sure they'd gladly take any help they can get. There's a secret guest attending that they're keeping hush-hush, but it's increased the size and security of the event."

"Ooh, sounds fun! Count me in. It will be great to do something outside of the house once in a while. I'm an interior designer, but I haven't done anything in years." She sighed and settled her hands on her stomach. "Three kids is not for the faint of heart. I'm not sure I'm going to survive the fourth one."

"You'll be fine, babe. You're a great mom and wrangle us all just fine." Samson kissed her cheek, and she blushed.

"Stop it. You just like the baby-making process a little too much."

Samson chuckled and wrapped his arms around her waist. "What can I say? I'm a

hockey player. We're a different breed. When I find the one for me, I claim them over and over." He nuzzled her neck and longing to do the same to my man, smacked me upside the head. Samson wasn't wrong. I wanted to do nothing but claim Lathan over and over.

"And that's my cue to get a refill," I joked, but neither Samson nor Lexi heard me.

I chatted with a few other players and met their girlfriends and wives. Everyone was friendly and cheerful as I made my way across the room. By the time the speeches were over, I was ready to leave. I'd lost track of Lathan thirty minutes ago, so I could only hope he was ready to go. I pulled out my phone and shot off a text, telling him to meet me at the coat check-in. He thumbed up my message, and I sighed in relief. Finally.

Samson and Lexi were also gathering their coats when I approached, but their attention was lost to one another as they shared a deep kiss. I handed the attendant my ticket and waited quietly to the side.

"Here you go, sir," the attendant said. The couple broke apart at the words. Samson looked smug, while Lexi appeared slightly embarrassed.

"Good night," I said and retrieved my own coat.

"It was lovely meeting you," Lexi said.

"You too."

"Oh! I thought of the perfect apartment for you. I'll send you the details," she said.

"Uh, thanks." I slid on my jacket and turned to find myself on the receiving end of another Lathan glare. "You ready?"

He didn't answer and headed out the door. Sighing, I followed him out and slid into the waiting car. The second my door was shut, it took off, and I relaxed into the backseat. The party had been fun but exhausting.

Lathan didn't speak to me the whole drive, and his body language grew increasingly agitated the closer we approached his place.

"Are you going to tell me why you're so upset?" I asked once we were in the elevator. "Is it Toby?"

He didn't answer and stormed out of the elevator once it opened. Rolling my eyes, I followed behind him and prepared myself to sleep alone. I couldn't deal with the whiplash tonight. I felt strung out from holding myself back from the man I'd fallen in love with.

Puck a duck. What the what.

I froze in the doorway as the realization hit me.

I was in love with Lathan Silver.

Holy moly.

There wasn't any time to process it before my back was slammed into the door. The breath was knocked from my lungs as Lathan glared at me.

"You want to know why I'm angry, Bambi ? Then let me tell you." Lathan's motions were jerky as he unbuckled my belt and shoved my pants as far down as possible. His hand wrapped around my cock, and he squeezed. Hard. "You claim I'm yours, yet you flirt with everyone else all night. Then I hear from someone else how you're fucking moving out. So, yeah, I'm fucking angry."

I blinked at his words. It was so far from the truth I was tempted to laugh, but even I knew that wouldn't be helpful right now.

If I were the betting kind of man, I'd put a lot of money on the fact that Lathan was feeling out of control and experiencing new emotions he had no clue how to handle. So if he needed to feel in control, I could give him that—the emotions he'd have to figure out himself.

"I am yours."

"Doesn't seem so."

"Then make me yours. Show me how good you'll feel inside me ," I taunted.

Lathan's jaw ticked for one second before he launched into action. I was spun around until my front was pressed into the door. His hot breath ghosted over my neck and he rubbed his hard cock between my cheeks.

"I don't know how to be gentle. Not right now."

"Who said I needed gentle? Take me hard and fast, Silver."

He growled, and the sound traveled straight to my dick. His hand tightened around my length, and I was already so close to painting the door with my cum.

"Bedroom. Now." His hands fell away, and coldness hit my back as he removed himself. I didn't hesitate and shucked my suit as I jogged to the bedroom. My limbs were trembling, but I hoped he wouldn't notice.

"Prep yourself," he said, tossing the lube onto the bed. I did as he asked and kept my eyes from him as he watched me stretch myself. The hunger in his eyes would be

enough to do me in, and I didn't want to come until he was inside me. I needed it more than I needed to breathe.

"I'm ready."

"Roll over."

My butt was pulled to the edge of the bed and his cock was notched at my entrance. He tunneled in one thrust, and I would never be the same. Lathan categorically changed me from the inside out.

"Holy shit, Bambi. You're so slick and tight. I... I don't think I can last."

"Don't hold back. Give me everything. I can take it."

"I don't want to waste it."

I chuckled, and then we both groaned. "What makes you think this will be the only time? Do your worst, baby. Then do it again. And again. And again. I'm not going anywhere, Lath."

"Fuck."

The word was the last sound before he unleashed himself, and everything changed right before my eyes.

CHAPTER 24

LATHAN

The earlier tension dissipated as the most incredible feeling in the world took over. At this moment, nothing seemed to exist outside of Miller and me—not the party, not the phone call I had with my mother, not the conversation I overheard.

“Yes, right there, Lath.”

I had no idea what I was doing, but it didn’t seem to matter. My brain shut off, allowing passion and instinct to take over. I knew Miller’s body better than my own, and that intrinsic connection between us on the ice seemed to multiply in the bedroom. I could feel him everywhere. Every touch, caress, and thrust connected us on a level so deep that I no longer knew where the top was.

Not that it mattered. He was all I needed.

My thrusts quickened, and I tightened my grip on him as I shuttled in and out of his tight channel. Holy fuck. This was amazing. On some level, I could understand the world’s obsession with sex, but on the other, nothing else could feel as good as him. I didn’t need to have a high body count to know that.

“I’m going to come, Lath.”

I grunted in response, on the brink of orgasm myself. My nerve endings were all firing, overloading my senses, and erasing my ability to speak. Tingles ran down my

spine, my muscles clenched, and my orgasm barreled through me. White stars blanketed my eyelids, and the world stopped as the most intense pleasure poured from me. When it returned, I fell forward and collapsed on top of Miller.

He chuckled and shifted so we were lying side by side. I hated my cock leaving him, but I could see his face and touch him now, so it wasn't all bad.

“Shit. Did you come? I blacked out.”

The most beautiful smile graced his lips. “I did. How are you?”

I grunted. It seemed I'd used up all my words again. Miller pulled me closer and cradled my head on his chest. He ran his fingers through my hair as I rested on his pec. He didn't rush me, and that gave me the space to pull myself together. I didn't know how to start talking about what happened earlier, but I could check in with him.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No, baby. You didn't. Did you enjoy it?” He kissed my forehead, and that simple gesture made my heart swell.

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “I did. But I don't want to... I'm not...” Dammit. Why was it so hard to ask for what I wanted?

“You don't want to give up your bottom privileges?” he hedged.

I licked my lips and nodded. “Yeah. I like it when you take charge. I just... maybe sometimes...”

“Of course, Lath. I'm vers, so I like both, too.”

I sighed in relief. Thank God he wasn't making this into a big deal, that he could understand my nonsensical grunts and incomplete sentences.

"Do you want to talk about what was upsetting you?" he asked sometime later.

"Not really, but I suppose that's not very mature of me, is it?" I turned to rest my hands on his chest and meet his eyes. He smiled and waited for me to continue. He was one of the few people who did that. He gave me the space to do it when I was struggling to make sense.

"I think I was jealous." He lifted an eyebrow, and I huffed. "Fine. I was. I didn't like you talking to Toby."

"He's just a friend."

"I know. And I know you won't break our agreement. I wasn't jealous that you were talking to another guy... not in the typical sense. I was jealous you could openly do it. I hated not being able to touch you. Not being by your side and talking with you about all the shit the other players were doing. I hated that he could do the things I wanted to but couldn't."

Miller's hands cupped my face, and he smoothed his fingers over it in a soft caress. My eyes fluttered close.

"I'm sorry you were hurt, baby. I wished for all the same things. But I would never pressure you to come out before you're ready. It's not an easy decision; if anyone understands that, it's me. People will look at you differently, and it's not always in a good way."

"I hate it. Why do people get to have an opinion about me? My whole life, the opinion of others has governed every action, and I'm sick of it. I swear, half of my

conversations with my mother are about how my behavior influences voters. I'm tired of pretending. Of wearing this mask. I'm... just so tired."

Tears splashed down on Miller's chest. He sat up and scooped me into his arms. "Hey. I'm here."

His words opened a floodgate, and my tears turned to sobs. He wasn't telling me to stop or that everything would be okay. He simply told me he was here. It was profound. He made me feel safe.

I'd worked so hard to keep control of everything, to be a perfect Silver. And for what? My life was a controlled waste. It had been void of color until Miller and his chaotic nature crashed into it.

He brought flavor and liveliness into my apartment. He'd taught me it was okay to feel things. That I could laugh. That there was more to life than hockey. There were cuddles on the couch, shopping in Farmer's markets, and sharing a meal. There were bubble baths, hand-holding, and kisses. It was absurd to think how I'd initially convinced myself I hated him. It was the furthest thing from the truth. In fact...

My tears slowed, and I drew back. Miller handed me a tissue, and I wiped my sodden face. "I'm sor?—"

"Don't you dare apologize for finally feeling something! You're allowed to have feelings, Lath."

I wanted to believe him, but I'd been told something different my whole life. "Objectively, I know that, but it's hard to rewrite everything I've learned in one night."

"Fair. Just promise me you'll start letting yourself feel."

“I’ll try.”

“All right.” He nodded like he was finalizing something inside his mind. “How about a bubble bath, hot chocolate, and then cuddles on the couch? I’m sure Alaska misses me and needs to get in some cuddles, too,” he teased.

“You wish.”

He chuckled, pulled me from the bed, and led me to the bathroom. I was too in awe of him to help. I stared at him as the magnitude of my feelings re-emerged. I wanted to keep my promise, but these emotions felt almost too big to be real. Maybe I just needed to practice in small doses. So, while he filled the tub, I let everything I felt for him surface. It was effervescent, swoony, and overwhelming.

“There. Now, climb in. I want to be the little spoon tonight.”

Smirking, I followed his commands, slid into the tub, and placed my back against the cold porcelain. He slotted himself between my legs and leaned back against me. It was nice, and I wanted more of this. I wasn’t ready for him to leave.

“Are you really moving out?” I blurted.

“That’s always been the plan.” His voice was small, and his movements halted. He wasn’t wrong. His moving in had been temporary. So why did it feel like my heart would break if he left?

“You don’t have to.”

“I can’t mooch off you forever, Lath. I need to have my own space.”

“Just... don’t rush into anything. Promise me you’ll talk to me before you finalize

anything.”

“Okay. I promise.”

At his promise, I relaxed into the tub and pulled him closer. I wasn’t ready to let him go. I didn’t know if I ever would, honestly.

We didn’t bring it up the rest of the night, but it sat heavy on my recently vacated shoulders. We watched a movie, but I couldn’t remember what it was about. My mind had turned the whole time thinking of solutions. I wouldn’t lose Miller. I couldn’t.

* * *

We lost our next two home games. I didn’t want to point fingers, but something was off between Miller and me. The skeptical part of me wondered if my vulnerability was the cause. The instant I shared something real with him, we started to lose. It could be a coincidence, but my cynical soul didn’t believe in coincidences.

“Want to run some drills?” I asked.

“I have a better idea.” He smiled, and my heart matched that of a hummingbird’s wings.

We were in Utah for an away game, so I wasn’t sure what he had in mind, but being with Miller was always fun.

However, thirty minutes later, when we pulled into a school, I was no longer sure that held true.

“You brought me to school?”

Miller laughed but didn't elaborate. The car wound around the campus before stopping at a huge building. I climbed out of the car and shielded my eyes as I took in the view of the mountains and snow.

"We could've run drills back at the arena," I muttered as I followed him to a door on the side.

Miller spun and pinned me to the wall. "I told you, I have a better idea. Now, are you going to trust me, or should I leave you out here?"

His grip on me soothed the anxiety that had plagued me for days, and the weight of his body comforted me. I stared into his hazel eyes. They appeared more blue today with only a smidge of green and brown, and while that usually meant mischief was afoot, I did trust Miller.

I kissed him in response, loving the way his lips felt against mine. Soft and smooth with that bit of stubble.

"Okay. I trust you. Lead the way, Bambi."

Miller rolled his eyes but took my hand and led me inside. The sound of skates and sticks hitting the ice filled my ears, and excitement skirted my spine. I didn't have to be playing the game to get excited. Hockey was in my soul, and I enjoyed every aspect of it. Okay, I might not enjoy the grueling training until you puked aspect, but who did?

The lights in the stands were dimmed, masking our arrival. We leaned against the boards and watched the kids pass the puck. They were divided into groups of four and spread out around the ice, with an instructor going over a different skill.

We fell into a trance as we watched them. I had no idea what level they were, but

they weren't half bad. Much better than I was at their age.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"Lux Brumalis."

"Wait. Isn't that where Reese went?"

"Yep." Miller smirked, but before I could question him over it, a loud whistle sounded, and everyone stopped.

"Take a fifteen-minute break. Be sure to recharge and come back ready to play. I got a surprise for you all!"

"Wait..."

Miller snorted next to me as the kids left the ice, and the whistle-blower skated right for us with a big smile.

"Miller! You made it!" Reese exclaimed as they hugged him over the board.

"Of course. And I brought a guest."

Reese broke their hug to give me one. "That you have. Good to see you, Lathan."

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Filling in for Henley. This pregnancy is kicking her ass. She's been holding these mini-camps for kids every year since she left. They're open to anyone in the area, giving kids who don't attend Lux opportunities as well."

“Wow. That’s a cool idea. I wonder if we could set something like that up in Austin?” I asked.

Miller smiled at me like I’d just given him the world, and my breath caught. “That’s one of the things I’m working on with Rainbow Lounge and why I reached out to Reese.”

“Oh. That’s, um, wow,” I stammered. Miller had been in Austin for less than six months and was already more involved with the community than I was. My involvement had always been forced upon me to the point it felt disingenuous. But Miller inspired me to do more. To get involved. It wasn’t a publicity stunt or something to make his image look good. He got involved because he cared.

I could support his version. I also had a lot of knowledge about community service that I could provide.

“So, are you both in?”

“In?” I asked, having tuned out while I stared at Miller.

“Pick-up game.”

“Won’t people recognize us? And we don’t have our gear,” I asked.

“I got it covered,” Reese said with a grin.

And that they did. In borrowed gear and a wig, Miller and I were unrecognizable by the time the kids returned. I noticed one of the other instructors was Braden, and he hugged me when he returned.

“Looking good with long hair, Silver,” he teased.

I chuckled. I hadn't seen myself, but I only imagined how ridiculous I looked if Miller's appearance was anything to go by. His wig was curly and fashioned into a mullet. Somehow, he was still the sexiest man I'd ever seen.

Reese introduced us as M and L and gave us both a team.

"All right, guys. Do you like the Austin Aces?" I asked. There were a few head nods and some shakes.

"Utah is my team," one kid said.

"Fair. How about this... if we beat M's team, I will get you tickets to tomorrow's game?" Their eyes lit up, and I prayed it wasn't a sold-out one.

"Deal."

"All right, so here's what I'm thinking..." I shared what I'd seen from them on the ice, listened to their strengths and weaknesses, and formed a game plan.

The next hour wasn't all pretty, but it was fun—the most fun I'd had playing hockey in forever. The kids tried their best but didn't get upset if it didn't work out. They encouraged each other and cheered on from the sidelines. It reminded me of how hockey used to be.

In the last period, our teams were tied, and Miller and I faced off.

"Having fun?" he asked.

"With you, always."

He blinked just as the puck was dropped. I hadn't meant to distract him but took

advantage of it. He wasn't frozen for long before he snapped back into motion. I could feel him on my heels, so I passed to the left-winger. Miller's body connected with me, and he held me against the boards.

"I should punish you for that," he teased.

"Why? It wasn't a lie."

He growled and pressed his nose into my neck. "If a bunch of kids didn't surround us, I'd kiss you until you couldn't breathe."

Before I could respond, the goal sounded, and the kids cheered. We pulled away from the boards, and I beamed as my team celebrated. "I won."

"Oh, does that mean something?" he asked.

"Yep. It means I get to pick how I want to be fucked," I said before skating away with a smile.

This had been more fun than running drills.

CHAPTER 25

MILLER

After our Utah game—which we’d won—Lathan and I had gone in different directions to visit our families for the holidays. The sappy, romantic part of me had hoped he’d invite me with him. He knew my family didn’t celebrate Christmas big, but I’d made plans to visit Washington when the invitation hadn’t come. We had four days between games, so it was a good time to see them. Plus, staying in the apartment without him would be too hard.

It was official. A foregone conclusion. I was completely in love with Lathan Silver. I was so screwed.

“Miller! Are you paying attention to me?” Ivy, my sister, shouted from across the kitchen counter. It was always so weird being back in my parents’ house. It was the same, but I wasn’t.

“What?” I shook my head and focused. She narrowed her gaze, and I felt the mom stare. “Oh, right. Yeah. You’re getting a new type of chicken and made a new scent of soap.”

“Hmm. Okay, you’re off the hook, but seriously, what’s going on with you? You’ve been spacey since you’ve arrived.”

I opened my mouth but closed it. I didn’t know how to talk to my family about Lathan. There was so much I couldn’t say.

“Ah, I see. It’s a guy.”

My cheeks heated. “What? No.” I shook my head, but my sister didn’t buy it. She was the closest to me, only a few years older, and had a wisdom about her that sometimes scared me.

“Mmhm.” She smiled and took a sip of her tea. “When I met Mark, I told him he wasn’t marrying material, but if he wanted to try proving me wrong by dating me, I’d give him the chance.”

I snorted. “Sounds like something you’d say.”

Ivy shrugged unapologetically. “I had big plans for myself. I was going to move out of Washington and be a fashion model.”

“A model?”

Ivy slapped me. “Hey! I’m not ugly.”

I laughed. “It’s not that. I just never took you to care about fashion.”

Ivy rolled her eyes. “I’d become obsessed with reruns of America’s Next Top Model and was convinced I was America’s next hidden gem.”

“But you met Mark and stayed?”

“Oh, I went.” She chuckled. “I even got signed by an agent.”

“No way! I can’t believe I don’t know this.”

“You were busy with hockey, and I didn’t want to tell anyone until I made it.”

“So, what happened after you were signed?”

Ivy leaned across the counter and held my gaze. “I realized all the things I’d left behind. I thought I wanted out of this town, but it turned out I didn’t hate this place as much as I believed. The big city was exciting, but it was lonely. I didn’t know every person, and no one helped out their neighbor. I missed trading soaps for pastries, growing our own food, and celebrating the small things just as big. This place is me, and I could run from it all I wanted, but I’d inevitably end up back here. Mark knew that, too. We were inevitable from the moment we met. Nothing would’ve kept us apart. It just took me longer to realize it. I fought it hard, but in the end, I knew he was my forever.”

I swallowed. “What’s that have to do with me?”

“You’re different from me, than all of us Fahn siblings. Jonah was meant to take over the orchard and farm. It’s who he is at his core. Same for Tomas. And I’m sure Lottie will commandeer Mama’s pie booth once she’s old enough. But you were always dreaming off in the distance, and once I saw you on the ice, I understood. You fly when you’re skating. Hockey is who you are, Miller. We all knew that.”

I swallowed, but my throat was thick with emotion. I’d always felt invisible amongst my siblings, but to know they saw me for who I was... was more than I’d anticipated.

“I don’t know what the story is between you and your guy... but I can offer you my perspective as someone who loves you dearly.” Ivy came around the counter, wrapped her arms around me, and rested her head on my shoulder. “I’ve always believed that when you find your person, it will be like Mark and me. Inevitable. You love big, and you’re all in. It’s who you are. So if you have big feelings for someone, give them the chance to catch up. It took me almost a year before I could admit I didn’t want to be admired by the world but just by one man. So don’t despair, little brother. Not all of us are as solid as you, but we get there. How could we not when

someone as amazing as you is waiting on the other side?”

I sniffed and wiped my eyes. “Thanks, Ivy.”

“Anytime, Miller. I mean it. You can call me more, too. We might not be as hip as the rest of the world here in Pearfolk, but we do have phones.”

I laughed. “All right. I promise.” She kissed my cheek just as the door opened, and her two kids ran into the kitchen, clambering for her attention.

Finishing my glass of orange juice, I slid off my stool and padded into the living room. Lottie, the youngest of the Fahn siblings, was perched on the couch with a folding table in front of her. The new beads I’d gotten her were spread out, and she cut the string.

“Can I join you?” I asked.

“Miller! Yes. Come see,” she said and patted the space next to her. Feeling lighter, I joined her in bracelet making. I didn’t realize the words I was spelling until I was halfway through...

Gulping, I finished it off with shaky hands and a hope that Ivy was right. That Lathan and I would be inevitable. So, I would hold on to this bracelet until I could give it to the man it belonged to.

I love you.

* * *

It was late, and the house was quiet. A few hours ago, Jonah and Ivy’s families had returned to their own homes, and Tomas had left to spend time with his partner’s

family. My parents and Lottie had retired to bed, but I couldn't seem to fall asleep. My head was full of a blond, blue-eyed man I missed. I checked my phone, but I still hadn't received any messages. Not that Lathan was a massive texter, to begin with, but the total silence was hard to swallow.

Did he not miss me? Was I not as important to him as I'd believed?

Ugh. I hated these thoughts. I wasn't this type of person. So what if he didn't miss me? I missed him and could take the first step to reach out.

Picking up my tablet, I settled back against my bed and hit the call button before I could talk myself out of it. The trill of the ringing was loud in my room. Just before it was set to time out, the ringing cut out, and the screen came alive.

"Miller?" Lathan asked with a yawn. His room was pitch black, and he squinted at the camera. Oops.

"Hey. Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"No. It's fine. Everything okay?" he asked. Lathan sat up, and I got a glimpse of his naked chest.

"Yeah. I was just bored and thought I'd see what you were up to. It's dumb. I'll go so you can go back to sleep."

Lathan smiled. "It's not dumb. And I wasn't asleep. It seems I have a difficult time without someone octapussyng themselves to me."

I laughed and settled lower into my pillows. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm more of a koala than an octopus. If that's anyone, it's you, Silver."

He grinned and shook his head. “How’s your family?”

“They’re good. Lottie loved her beads and forced me to make bracelets with her. Ivy bored me with chicken talk, and Jonah and Tomas spent most of their time trying to convince me to play rugby. Apparently, it’s the new sport around here, and they’re building a team.”

“Did you tell them you’re too pretty for rugby?”

“You think I’m pretty?” I asked with a smile.

“For rugby. It’s not the compliment you think, Mills.”

“You think I’m pretty,” I sang.

Lathan blushed and rolled his eyes. “I have not missed how impossible you are.”

“Too bad. I’ve missed you,” I said before I could stop myself.

His eyes lifted up, and we held contact. “I’ve missed you, too.” He blew out a breath. “I should’ve made you kidnap me away to Pearfolk.”

“Oh, yeah? You want to come and visit the folksy town I grew up in?”

“It can’t be too bad if you’re from there.”

My insides warmed. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s not too bad. It’s quirky and charming in its special way, and no one would know you or care that you’re a hot shot hockey player.”

“Sounds like bliss.” He chewed his lip before blurting, “Why didn’t you ask me to

come with you?”

I gasped. “You wanted me to?”

“Yeah. I was hoping you would.” He lowered his eyes, and I stared at his blond eyelashes.

“Funny. I was hoping you’d invite me to join you.”

His eyes widened. “What? Why? You’d hate it here. It’s horrible.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. But at least I’d be with you.” It was quiet between us as we stared at one another. “Besides, I’ve never experienced a real Christmas before. It could’ve been fun.”

“I dunno. It’s overrated. I was in a tux all night, had to make small talk with a billion people, and pretend like I didn’t hate them all.”

“Ah, poor baby. That must’ve been miserable for you.”

“It was.” He smiled. “Though you would’ve made it better, but I like you too much to ever expose you to the likes of my mother.”

“She can’t be that bad.”

He huffed. “Take my word for it. Evangeline Silver looks like a sweet woman, but she’s a viper in designer clothing. Plus, I don’t trust her not to try to use you to some political advantage.”

“How? I’m not that interesting.”

“I disagree, Mills, but that’s beside the point. My mother finds a way to leverage everyone. It’s better if you stay far away from her.”

“Duly noted. Now, can we circle back to the fact that you admitted you like me? Lathan Silver likes Miller Fahn! And here I thought we were destined to be enemies forever.”

“Shut up.” He laughed, and the sound filled my whole body.

“It was the friendship bracelet that finally won you over, wasn’t it?”

“Nah. It was just you, Mills. Just you.”

How could I not fall in love with this guy? He was such a sweetie when he let himself open up to others. I was grateful to be in the minority that got to know him.

“You heading back tomorrow?” he asked, pulling me from my musings.

“Yeah. You?”

“Yes. Thank God. I can only handle my mother in short doses. It’s exhausting being the perfect son under her roof.”

“Have you tried just talking to her? Telling her how much her pressure stresses you out?”

“It wouldn’t matter. I’m a Silver. We rise above and push through. We don’t let anything, even our own humanity, bring us down. It’s not worth it. Nothing will ever change with her.”

“I’m sorry. That’s gotta be hard, and a heavy burden to carry.”

“Yeah. It is.” He cleared his throat. “How do you think we’ll do against Minnesota?”
Ah... subject change.

“It’s gonna be a tough game, but it’s at home, so hopefully that gives us the advantage.”

Lathan hummed, and we talked a little more about hockey before I started yawning so big that you could see all of my molars.

“Sorry. I guess the sleepiness is catching up with me.”

“What if we didn’t hang up?” Lathan asked.

“Hmm?” I asked and snuggled down under the covers.

“It seems I can’t sleep without you snoring in my ear, so what if...” he trailed off, but I understood his meaning.

“Yeah, okay. Let me grab my charger.” I climbed out of bed, searched for my iPad charger, and turned off the lights.

“Wait, is this your childhood room?” Lathan asked.

“Yes. Why?”

“I want to see. Give me a tour.”

Laughing quietly, I turned the lights back on and gave him the nickel tour. I showed him my hockey posters. The collection of sticks I’d outgrown in the corner. The stack of pucks with tape, each representing a moment in my life. Then, lastly, I showed him my corkboard where I’d tacked pictures from college.

“Wait. Was that my college hockey card?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I hurried to turn off the lights and climbed into bed. Crapola. I’d forgotten all about that. I’d impulsively taken it from Landon’s desk one night.

Lathan squinted at me but thankfully let it go. I snuggled under the covers and propped the iPad up on the pillows. We stared at one another for a while until neither of us could keep our eyes open. And I slept better than I had since I’d left him.

When I woke up the next morning, the screen was black, but a message was waiting for me.

Lathan: I can’t wait to see you today. I’m going to spend all evening kissing, licking, and fucking you. Be ready.

Lust shot through my veins, and I packed my bag in a haste. I had a plane to catch.

CHAPTER 26

LATHAN

I zipped up my suitcase and lowered it to the floor. If I timed it correctly, I should be able to sneak out of the house without seeing my mother. The past two days had been hell, and I was past ready to get out of here. The only solace was my mother had been too busy entertaining to interrogate me. If I wanted that trend to continue, I needed to escape before she had time to get her claws into me today.

Knowing Miller would return to the same state as me today was also an incentive to get out of here.

Opening the door, I peeked out into the hallway. No one was lurking around, so I slipped out into the hallway. My feet were silent on the plush carpet as I padded down the stairs. The house was quiet. Too quiet. Living with Miller, I'd become accustomed to a lot of noises: the sound of the espresso maker, Miller tapping on any surface he could, and Alaska's claws as they clicked on the floor.

The only sound here was the clock ticking on the wall. It was so empty. There was no life in this house. Something I never would have noticed before Miller. He'd changed my life in ways I hadn't expected.

"Leaving so soon?"

"Fuck!" I spun around and barely kept my suitcase from sailing through the air. I clutched my chest and fought to slow my breathing. "Jesus! Mother."

“Language, Lathan. Silvers don’t use such foul words.”

“Then don’t sneak up on me.” I lowered my hand and tried to regain my composure.

“I wouldn’t have to if you weren’t trying to sneak out like a dirty secret.”

“I wasn’t.”

Evangeline Silver raised her perfectly sculpted brow and sipped her coffee. I squirmed under the look. I was a six-foot hockey player, but my mother could still make me wither with one look.

“When are you going to introduce me to your boyfriend?”

I sputtered. If I’d been drinking something, it would be all over the floor. “What? Boyfriend? I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Lathan, these games are tiresome. Why didn’t you tell me you were gay? I don’t care what your sexuality is. In fact?—”

I held up a hand to stop her. “I’m not gay, and I know precisely what you would’ve done with the knowledge.”

“So this is just a phase? This teammate of yours?”

Fuck. I thought I’d been so careful. I knew using the private jet was a risk, but I hadn’t expected her to learn so much so quickly. That had been foolish.

“It’s nothing.” The words soured my stomach. It was a lie, but I couldn’t let her know that.

“I see.” She stepped forward and leaned toward me so I could kiss her cheek. I sighed in relief when she didn’t say anything else.

“Bye, Mother.”

I was almost out the door when she shot her parting words. “I’ll be in Austin next week for a gala. Your attendance is required, Lathan.”

“It’s during the season,” I protested.

“It’s not a game night; I already checked. You’ll want to be there, son. I’ve let you entertain this career of yours, so you will show up as a Silver when needed. I’ll have my assistant send you the details. Wear your navy suit.”

She didn’t wait for a response before she left. There wasn’t one needed. We both knew I’d be there. It was what a Silver did.

* * *

I spent the first hour at home deep cleaning until the smell of lemons and the silence overwhelmed me, and then I donned workout gear. I went for a run, but when that still didn’t quell the anxiety pumping through my veins, I headed to the rink. Dripping with sweat and my muscles sore, I prayed it had been long enough.

I used to love my alone time. The quiet was my haven. But now I missed the space a curly brown-haired man with the prettiest eyes took up. The quiet was now suffocating, and if I had to spend another second alone with myself, I would adopt a million more cats. Alaska might have accepted Miller into his domain, but he wouldn’t tolerate another feline friend. It was better that I convinced Miller to never leave than to go down that road.

The locker room was dark, but the message lighting up my phone was enough to propel me forward.

Bambi: I'm home.

Home . That was what Miller was for me.

The notion scared the fuck out of me, but it was scarier imagining my life without him. I'd already proved I couldn't function alone anymore. Motivated by his arrival, I hurried through a shower and redressed. James awaited me when I emerged from the building and opened the door.

I smiled at him. "Thanks, James."

His step faltered before he corrected his posture. "You're welcome, sir."

That was odd. He shut the door, and I shrugged. I didn't have the bandwidth to ponder his strange behavior. In a few minutes, I'd get to touch Miller again. Images of what I wanted to do to him filled my mind, and I had to cover my lap as I climbed out of the car a few minutes later.

The doorman nodded in greeting, and I smiled in return. He stumbled and almost smashed the door in my face but caught it before it made contact. Frowning, I hurried past him to the elevator. What was going on with everyone today? I checked out my reflection in the mirrored surface, but I hadn't grown horns, and there wasn't anything on my face. Weird. The elevator chimed, and I forgot about everyone's behavior and hurried to my door.

The second I stepped inside, I could feel the difference. The place no longer felt like a mausoleum but was alive with sound, smells, and a presence that was fully Miller.

Music played from the kitchen, so I headed there. I stopped abruptly at the sight before me. Miller was swaying back and forth to the song as he mixed something in a bowl. But it was the sight of his ass that stopped my heart. He had one of his frilly aprons on, but it did nothing to cover his taut backside.

Prowling toward him, I covered his back with my front and placed my hands on the counter, effectively trapping him. His singing stopped, and his breath hitched at my proximity.

“Hi.”

“What are you making?”

“Cookies.”

“Mm. Can the batter keep?”

“Maybe. Why?”

“Because I promised to kiss, lick, and fuck you all night. I plan to keep that promise and I want to start right now.”

Miller shuddered against me, and my dick responded in kind. A steel force behind my athletic pants was begging to enter its favorite place.

“You’re so hot like this.” I kissed his neck and licked up the column.

“Fuuuudggee,” he groaned.

I chuckled. “What will it take for you to say fuck, Mills?”

“I dunno. Total loss of my mind, I guess.”

“Challenge accepted.”

My hands roamed over him, eager to reacquaint themselves with his body. Need vibrated through my body, and I was close to losing my sanity.

“Bed. Now,” I grunted.

Miller picked up the bowl of batter, shoved it into the fridge, and ran down the hallway, laughing. Seeing him sprint from me ignited a primal part I hadn’t known existed. I gave him a few seconds head start before I took off after him.

Our feet slapped against the hardwood as I gave chase. His laughter floated down the hallway, spurring me on. He entered the bedroom first, and I shucked my clothes as I crossed the threshold. Miller smiled as he untied the apron and dropped it to the floor. I watched in a daze as he kneeled on the bed and presented his ass to me.

“Fuck.”

Hidden between his cheeks was a pink heart. Stalking to the bed, I spread his cheeks wider and gaped at the sight.

“You said to be ready,” he taunted.

Words didn’t exist any longer. I grunted my agreement as I smoothed my hands over the globes of his soft skin. He was perfect. With careful hands, I removed the plug and tossed it onto the floor. I’d deal with it later. His hole contracted now that it was empty, and Miller moaned at the loss.

“I got you.” I covered my cock in lube, grabbed his hips, and pressed in. His channel

was warm and tight. Nothing had ever felt this good before. I didn't care what anyone said, there was no way all sex felt this way. This thing between us was special. I didn't need to have sex with anyone else to know it would only be this good with Miller.

"Yes," he groaned. "Fill me up, baby."

I didn't need to be told twice. I pressed the rest of the way in and didn't let him adjust before pulling out and slamming back in. The sensations were overwhelming, and I was hopeless about slowing down. I pistoned in and out, thrusting as if our lives depended on it. Miller moaned and whimpered beneath me each time I brushed his prostate. I was lost to the feel of him, the sounds of our skin slapping, and the ecstasy of being inside of him again.

This was what I'd been missing—the feel of him, the way our souls connected and intertwined every time we came together. When we connected, it wasn't just a physical thing but on a soul level. We'd become intertwined, and I wasn't sure how to function without him anymore. If these past few days were anything to go by, it wasn't pretty when I did.

Tingles spread over my body, and my orgasm barreled toward me before I could stop it. Gripping him harder, I held on as I came unglued. White sparks erupted behind my eyelids, and I came so hard that I blacked out for a second. When I came to, I was leaning over Miller on the bed. He was a solid mass beneath me.

"Fuck. Sorry." I rolled off him and instantly missed my cock filling his ass. When did I become such a needy slut? The sight of my cum dripping out of his ass was too much, and I yearned to keep a part of me inside him.

"Squeeze your cheeks together," I demanded.

“Huh?”

I didn't answer as I hopped off the bed, grabbed the butt plug, and stepped into the bathroom. I rinsed it off with soap and water, grabbed a rag, and wet it before returning to bed. Miller hadn't moved, and his cheeks were squeezed tight. The sight made my heart skip a beat, and warmth spread through my body.

Carefully, I slid the plug in and trapped my cum there. That primal part of me that had been unlocked growled in satisfaction. I didn't understand it, but I was beyond questioning it at this point. I rolled him over and cleaned off his abs and the bed. Once we were both clean, I pulled him into my chest and ran my fingers through his hair.

“Never took you for the caveman type.”

“You bring out new sides of me, Bambi. Is it okay?” I asked.

“It's hot, Lath. I like you being all possessive.”

His words made my heart race. I wanted to be possessive with him, but the thought of doing it outside of these walls still made my skin crawl. Would I ever be comfortable with people knowing about my personal life? It was hard to imagine based on my past history.

“Now it's my turn to play,” Miller said, pulling me from my thoughts. He straddled my legs and kissed his way down my stomach. He covered every inch of my skin in kisses and love bites. I was a withering mess by the time he touched my dick. His fingers were heaven as he stretched me, and when he slid inside, it felt like home.

“Wow, that feels good. You got to try this next time,” he said as he slowly thrust.

“My needy bottom can get his ass filled while he's plowing mine.”

My brain tripped over the thought, and I moaned. Miller laughed and then cursed as the plug shifted and pressed against his prostate. His lips sealed to mine as his pace quickened. My legs wrapped around him, and I pulled him to my chest. I held him tightly to me as he thrust in and out. We were one as we found our orgasms in a tangle of arms and legs. I didn't know where he ended, and I began. I was no longer sure it was just physical, either.

Miller had entwined himself in my heart, and I never wanted to let him go. Now, I just had to figure out how to keep him.

CHAPTER 27

MILLER

Since returning from Christmas break, things between Lathan and I have been good. No, they had been great—perfect, even. No longer was I the only one who initiated touch or affection. Each time he walked into a room, his eyes would seek me out, and his smile would capture my heart.

“You leaving already?”

“Yeah. I told the Rainbow Lounge I’d help set up.” I zipped my tux into a garment bag and draped it over my arm. “Last chance to bail on your mom and join me.”

Lathan sauntered over and cupped my face. “If I didn’t think she’d find some way to infiltrate your life, then I would. I’d much rather spend the night with you than at whatever stuffy event she has planned.”

I swallowed. “That’s all it is? Not because it’s an LGBTQ+ event?”

Lathan’s brow furrowed. “Is that what you believe?”

“I wouldn’t blame you if so. It’s not easy to be out in the league, and you should make that choice for yourself when you’re ready.”

Lathan’s hands dropped from my face, taking his heat with him. “If I knew what label fit, maybe it would be easier, but all I see is my mom using this as another stepping

stone for her career. Nothing outside of hockey has ever been my own. I'm not ready to give you up. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You're right. It's not the right time, and no one should force you, much less use you to make some point." I stepped forward and grabbed his neck, this time with my free hand. "And you don't have to worry. I'm not going anywhere." I didn't have to think before my lips touched his and captured his mouth in a languid and deep kiss.

We were panting by the time we broke apart, and I seriously debated being late. But the center was counting on me. It had become a second home to me, and for once, I felt like I belonged—in this city, on this team, with this man. My life was moving in the direction I wanted, so if that meant I had to spend an evening apart from the man I loved, it was worth it.

"I'll text you when I'm on my way home. Good luck with your mom."

Lathan grimaced, stepped back, and let me go. I turned one last time at the door and drank him in. Yeah, he was worth all the secrecy.

* * *

"Miller, do you have the contact information for the caterers? I need to verify if one of the appetizers is gluten-free," Lexi asked.

"Uh, yeah. It's on my phone. One second." I patted my pocket but didn't find my phone. I mentally scanned when I last had it. "Fudge. I left it at home."

"Can you ask Lathan to bring it? You're still living at his place, right?"

"Um. Yes. But he's not coming tonight."

“No? Why not?”

“He, um, had another event to attend. But he might be able to drop it off. I just need to find a way to text him.”

“Find Samson and use his phone. He’s in the main room.”

“Perfect. Thanks, Lexi. I’ll be right back.”

She smiled and returned to talking with some volunteers while I jogged into the main room. The gala was set to start any minute now, and the venue was full of bodies dressed to the nines. I hoped the number of people boded well for the Rainbow Lounge. It was a good organization and deserved the recognition.

Security nodded at me as I stepped back into the room. They were posted at every door, and there were even metal detectors for the guests to go through at the front. It was a little overkill, but I suppose there were a lot of high-value items in the auction. I spotted Samson and headed toward him. When I neared, I stumbled when I noticed who he was speaking with.

“Ah, the man of the hour,” Jack, our captain, said, clapping me on the back.

“Hi, um, thanks for coming.”

“Wouldn’t miss it. You’re family, and I’m an ally. Wasn’t a hard choice.”

Warmth flooded me at his words. Bell approached next and gave me a hug and a smile. I nodded hellos to Wyatt Whitney and Ethan Harrison, who were also gathered. Though the latter looked like he wanted to murder the hand I still had clasped on Bell’s shoulder. Dropping it, I remembered my reason for seeking Samson.

“Can I use your phone to call Lathan? I left mine at the apartment, and I need something off it. I want to catch him before he leaves.”

“Sure.” He pulled his out and unlocked it, opening up the contacts for me.

“Thanks.” I turned away, dialed the number, and prayed I wasn’t too late.

“Samson, aren’t you with Miller? Is something wrong?”

I smiled. “Hey, it’s me.”

“Mills? Why are you calling me from Murdock’s phone?”

“Are you still at the apartment?”

“Technically, James is waiting for me to get into the car.”

“Can I ask for a favor?”

“Anything.”

I smiled wider. This man had my heart in a chokehold.

“I left my phone in my room. It’s probably on my desk or dresser. Or maybe even my bed. Shoot. I can’t remember. Someone distracted me when I was leaving,” I teased.

Lathan chuckled. I heard the sound change and knew he was headed back into the building. “I’ll find it. Do you need it or something off it?”

I grimaced. “Both. Thank goodness Lexi needed to ask the caterers a question, or I’d be screwed when it came time for my introduction speech.”

“Jesus, Bambi. This place is a mess.”

“Uh, yeah. Sorry. I spend most of my time...” I suddenly remembered where I was and stopped myself before admitting to our teammates that I slept in his bed. “Elsewhere.”

“Fuck, yeah, you do. Okay, I’ll find it. Send me the address on Samson’s phone, and I’ll let him know when I’m there.”

“I’m sorry to make you late for your mother’s.”

“Seriously, it’s no hardship. The later, the better, in my opinion. I’ll find it and see you shortly.”

“Thanks, Lath.

“Anytime, Bambi.”

I hung up and shot the address over to him before I handed Samson back his phone. “Thanks. He’s on his way. Can you let me know when he’s here? I told some of the kids I’d listen to them warm up before their performance.”

“Yeah, sure. If I can’t find you, I’ll text Lexi.”

“You’re the best.”

“Nah. Just what friends do, Fahn.” He smiled and squeezed my shoulder.

Friends . It had been a long time since I’d made new friends. I nodded at the rest of the guys before I left. Moisture welled in my eyes, and I quickly wiped it away. I wouldn’t cry openly in front of all these people. No, I’d wait until I was home and in

the privacy of my home before I did that.

Last summer in Chicago, I'd felt adrift and wondered if I'd ever belong. It was wild that five months later, not only did I have friends but a solid place on the team. Having the Rainbow Lounge and Lathan almost felt like too much.

Was I being greedy? Would I have to give something up?

I shook the fear away that I would. Reese had taught me that love wasn't finite. I would believe that goodness wasn't either.

As I entered, the group was finishing their song. They sounded great, and I was so impressed by their ability to get up in front of a crowd and perform. I hated being the center of attention unless I was on the ice. The rules were simple there, and I knew my role.

Clapping, I drew the teen's attention. "That was amazing. You all are going to be great."

"Thanks, Miller," Ace said. I ruffled his hair and spoke with a few of the others until a knock on the door drew my attention. Lexi poked her head in and motioned for me.

"I'll see you all out there. You've got this," I encouraged. My steps quickened at the thought of catching Lathan in a tux.

Lexi pointed in the direction Lathan was. I squeezed her arm in thanks and headed there. I pushed through the doors, my heart racing more than it should. It had only been a few hours since I'd seen him, but I missed him.

His profile came into focus, and my heart stuttered at the sight of him. I'd seen him in a suit hundreds of times now, but this was something else. The tux was fitted and

tailored to his body perfectly. I took my time memorizing every line of his body wrapped in Italian silk. Was it possible to be jealous of a fabric?

His jaw flexed, and I faltered at the hard line of his face. It wasn't a look I'd seen in a while, and the sudden arrival had my heart galloping for a different reason.

"Hey," I greeted, hoping the look wasn't for me. His gaze swept to me, and the ice-blue that filled his iris was staggering. "Lath?" I choked out in a whisper, on the verge of breaking my earlier promise to wait until I was home to cry.

"When were you planning on telling me?" he barked.

"Tell you what?" I asked, pleading with my eyes to give me a chance to fix whatever it was.

"I found them in your room. I know."

I shook my head. "I don't know what you're talking about. Lath, baby, talk to me." I reached for him, but he stepped away before I could make contact. "Just tell me, and we can fix this. I don't know what I did." My heart pounded, and the fear I'd already lost my entire world clogged my throat.

"Don't play dumb, Bambi. It's not becoming."

"I honestly have no idea what you're referring to. Please, just tell me," I begged. I was tempted to drop to my knees and throw myself at his feet for mercy. He was slipping through my fingers, and I had no idea why.

"If you had only talked to me like I asked," he choked out, part of his cold indifference cracking before he covered it. He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I was just an easy bed mate, and apparently, I've outused my welcome."

Tears fell down my face, and I no longer cared if anyone saw them. My heart was breaking, and I had no idea why. “Lath, please, I don’t?—”

“There you are, son. I’ve been looking for you. I told you to meet me outside so we could get our picture together.”

Lathan’s head snapped up to the person behind me, and any trace of emotion he’d allowed was wiped clean.

“Mom, what are you...” he started but stopped. “This is the gala you’re attending? What the fuck?”

“Language. I didn’t spend all that money on your education, for you speak to me like a common hooligan.”

The realization of who was behind me had me straightening up. I wiped my face before I turned and stood beside Lathan. He might not want me, but I wouldn’t abandon him against his mom.

“Ah, you must be the boyfriend,” she said.

“Hello, Senator Silver. It’s a pleasure to meet you, but I’m only the roommate,” I said right as Lathan cut in.

“Teammate. Miller is moving out.”

“What?” I gasped and turned toward him, but it was useless. His mask was fully present, and there was no way to penetrate the man I’d come to know.

“Well, it’s lovely to meet you regardless, Mr. Fahn. I’ve been impressed with your philanthropic efforts. I’ve told Lathan he needed to get more involved, but he eats,

sleeps, and breathes hockey. I hope you'll be a good influence on him." She smiled over at her son. I scanned her and caught a few similarities between them...the ice-blue eyes, the white-blond hair, and a similar shape to their eyes and nose, but that was about where it ended. She was short and lithe to his tall and muscled frame.

I had no words for her, so I just nodded. My heart was breaking in front of the man I loved's mom. It was too much.

She tilted her head toward her son. "If you didn't know this was the gala, how did you end up here?"

"Miller forgot his phone. I was dropping it off before heading to you."

"How considerate and lucky for you then they're the same place or you'd be late." She smiled, but it felt more forced than genuine.

"Speaking of, I should get ready." I turned toward Lathan. "Thanks for bringing my phone." He withdrew it from his pocket and placed it in my palm. His touch set my nerve endings off, and I sucked in a breath while trying to soak in every second.

Lathan held on to my hand longer than needed. He swallowed hard, his throat clicking loudly in the small bubble where only the two of us existed. When he dropped my hand, it felt like more than his touch left me. I held his gaze for a microsecond longer before turning and walking away.

My hand tingled and I held it close to my chest like a prized possession. I didn't know what had sent him running scared, but I vowed to get to the bottom of this. I wouldn't let him push me away.

No, not after the look in his eyes. That look told me everything I needed.

He loved me.

So I'd do what every good left-winger did when his right-wing was heavily guarded: I'd use the defense's distraction to find my opening and score.

The first time we'd touched, it had set off a chain reaction that neither of us had foreseen. But now that I was here, I'd be damned if I let him walk away like I meant nothing to him.

He could try to push me out of his life but I wouldn't have it.

CHAPTER 28

LATHAN

My mother's stare narrowed on me. Her blue eyes were calculating and full of curiosity, but surprisingly, they did not display the judgment I expected.

"It seems I walked into something."

I snorted. "Why are you really here?"

She came closer and took my hand. Her touch was foreign and held no warmth like Miller's did. It only made me miss him more. Fuck. Why had I let myself fall for him? I only had myself to blame for my current state.

"Lathan, I'm here for you. Or at least that was my intention."

"Bullshit. You only do things that benefit you."

She sighed and stepped back, giving me space. "I'm sorry."

I jolted at the words. It was akin to touching a live wire. My mother had never apologized before. "What?"

"It seems I made a grave error somewhere along the way, one where my son believed he was less important to me than my career. For that, I'm sorry."

Blinking at her words, I surveyed her from head to toe. She had the same blonde hair, smoothed back at the nape of her head in perfection. She had the same blue eyes lined with kohl and mascara. Her lips were a dark red that matched her expensive dress. Everything about Evangeline Silver was perfect, from the thousand-dollar blowout to the airbrushed makeup, but there was a new softness around her eyes and mouth.

“I don’t understand.”

“I see that now, and I’m sorry.”

“You keep saying that, but it doesn’t make sense. I...”

“Lathan, you are my son, and I love you more than words can describe. After the divorce, I was a shell of myself. It’s not an excuse, but I clung to the idea of proving my worth. If I could become mayor, then I would be worthy. If I could be governor, then we wouldn’t have to worry. If I had become senator, it would’ve all been worth it. I can see that my ambition and need to forget made me blind to how it affected you. I believed I was protecting you, giving you a legacy you could be proud of, but it seems I missed the mark.”

I laughed dryly. “You think? Mom, this isn’t really the place to discuss all this. There’s... a lot going on right now.”

She stepped closer. “That much is clear. I’m just afraid if we don’t talk now, I’ll lose you forever.”

“That’s...” I couldn’t bring myself to finish the sentence. Everything felt too out of control.

“I went about this all the wrong way. The gala. It felt like I was losing you, and I wanted to support your boyfriend while showing you I was receptive to however you

identified. I never meant to make you feel like you couldn't talk to me about this stuff."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Fine." My mother rolled her eyes and I was certain I was hallucinating. "Your 'teammate', but we both know that fight I walked in on was more than a teammate squabble." She stepped closer. "Is everything okay?"

"I don't know. I feel so lost and confused."

"How about we skip the gala, have James take us to a hole-in-the-wall diner, and talk like we used to over milkshakes?"

I swallowed. Could it be that simple? Could Evangeline Silver actually turn off her campaign soapbox for one night and be my mom? "What will the press say when you don't show up? It could be bad for the polls."

"I'll tell them I ate some bad clams. I know I haven't been great at showing it, but I want to change that. Starting now. If you'll let me."

Part of me wanted to ignore the offer, shove my mom away, and wallow in my lonely and dark apartment. But Miller had changed me. He might be gone from my life soon, but he'd made me softer around the edges, and I knew I could no longer hide from attachments. As scary as it was to trust people, it was worth it. Starting with my mom seemed like a good first step.

"Okay."

My mom smiled and wrapped her arm through mine. We walked out the double doors toward the back entrance, where James stood waiting.

“Mrs. Silver, Mr. Silver,” he greeted.

“Hello, James, darling. Lathan and I need the best burgers and shakes around. Do you know of a place?”

James blinked but jumped into action. “Of course, ma’am.” He opened the door, and I slid in first, followed by my mother. She typed something on her phone before turning it off and sliding it back into a small purse.

It was quiet as we rode to the diner, both of us silently agreeing to wait until we were there to talk. The complete one-eighty of the night made me dizzy as if I’d just been smashed into the boards by a two-hundred-pound defender. At this point, I needed to simply ride it out and see where it took me. Nothing had gone as planned, so maybe a detour was what I needed.

The car came to a stop but it was a few minutes before our door was opened. It didn’t surprise me that the diner was empty except for the few staff loitering inside. My mother could pretend this was like when I was younger, but the logistics of a senator dining out required a lot more forethought. The man in a black suit and earpiece at the door said it all. Regardless, I’d take the private space and pretend like it hadn’t been cleared just so we could have a mother-and-son moment.

We took the farthest booth from the window, ensuring no one could snap a photo if they managed to make it past the bodyguard wall. I had to give credit to my mother where it was due; she was attempting to make this as normal as possible, given our occupations. The length she’d gone to in the amount of time given softened me, and I dropped the barrier I’d kept up. She wasn’t making this into a publicity stunt. I could give her the chance to be my mom without all my asshole snarkiness.

The waitress handed us menus, eyeing us like she wanted to ask questions, but ultimately decided whatever my mom was paying her to keep quiet wasn’t worth her

curiosity. Once our orders were placed, we stared at one another for a few seconds, weighing where to start. Or at least I was.

“Tell me about Miller.”

My shoulders dropped, and I swallowed around the bile that wanted to climb up my throat. “I... he’s the best. He’s smart, funny, and kind. He knows how to cook and doesn’t put up with my attitude. He’s also messy, has never used an iron, and if I didn’t tell him where to be, he’d be late to almost everything.”

My mother smiled. “He sounds perfect for you.”

I snorted. “Yeah, well, like I said, we’re not together.”

“Is that because you don’t want to be, or something else?”

“Well, I don’t want the entire world to talk about my sex life, especially when I don’t even know how to classify myself. Not that it matters. He’s moving out.”

The reminder of those brochures I’d found earlier tonight sliced through my heart, and I hung my head. My eyes burned, and I pinched my leg to stop the tears from falling. I would not cry in front of my mom.

“You can love him without being gay. Maybe you’re asexual or demisexual? There are numerous ways to identify yourself, Lathan.”

My head snapped up. “Huh?”

She chuckled. “Hey, I’m hip! I’m on the gram. I’m a proud ally.”

“The gram? Who are you?” I shook my head. “I know that, but if I were to tell

people, then they would have questions. I don't want to talk about it. It's none of their business."

"And did Miller say you had to tell people?"

"No. But it's not fair for him to live in the shadows."

"Hmm. I think you're so used to monitoring yourself for me that you've forgotten that not everyone is an asshole. Again, I'm sorry I never realized how much of a toll it took on you."

"Who are you? I've never heard you say sorry this much."

She laughed. "Another thing I should apologize for. Parents aren't infallible, Lathan. I've failed you in all the ways that matter. I might've given you the best tools to succeed but I forgot what counts the most."

"Perhaps, but it's a moot point. He's moving out, and our arrangement is over."

"I think you should talk to him. The man I saw tonight didn't look like someone who was over you. Please don't make the mistakes I did and assume. Ask the questions and fight for what you want. You deserve to be with someone who loves you, and from what you've told me, I think Miller does. Don't push him away because you're scared, son."

"But the press..."

"Despite what I've taught you, you can't live your life for the press. Hiding who you are robs the world of the real you. It doesn't mean they won't try to ask questions, but you don't have to answer them. I'll do my best to shield the hate; eventually, they will move on. If anything, Miller can help you. He's been out in the league his whole

career; he'll know how to navigate it. And if it's a huge concern, then we can get a PR team on it, and I'm sure the Aces will back you. No one is forcing you to tell anyone; I just don't want you to hide either."

Her words gave me a modicum of hope, but the fear was still present. Was it that simple? Should I tell Miller how I felt and let the rest sort itself out?

Our food arrived shortly after. While we ate, I told her about the friendship bracelets Miller made, his work with the Rainbow Lounge, and how my own cat preferred him over me. My mother nodded and smiled the whole time I spoke, allowing me to talk. It was nice, and I'd forgotten how much I'd enjoyed our talks like this in the past.

"I know it might not be worth much, but if you'd like my opinion, I think I know a way you can show Miller how you feel."

"But what if..."

She shook her head and smiled. "No what-ifs... nothing in life is guaranteed, sweetie. You know this. You can plan and try to control every aspect, but life has a way of, what's the word... deking you out. Did I use it right? It's been a while since I've used the lingo."

I smiled at her attempt to connect with me. And she was right. Hadn't Miller taught me that too? Sometimes, the best things in life are unpredicted. But the one thing I'd become certain of, with one touch, on and off the ice, he had become my person. He could try to move out, but I wanted a chance to fight for him first. I wouldn't let him walk away.

"All right, what's your idea?"

My mother smiled, leaned closer, and told me the most ridiculous idea ever. But it

could work. It was worth a shot, at least. By the time our check was paid and James was driving me back to the apartment complex, I had everything I needed to win my man.

Because he was. Miller was mine. It was time I showed him he was more important than fear and hockey.

As I entered the apartment, it was quiet, and dread weighed me down as I lumbered to the room Miller used. The door was opened a crack. Without opening it, I knew what I would find behind it: emptiness—just like my heart before I met Miller, just like my life, just like me.

Still, I had to see. I had to know.

With a featherlight touch, I pushed open the door. The hinges were silent as they revealed the room's contents—or lack thereof, to be more precise.

Every piece of clothing that had been strewn across his bed was now gone. The desk that contained the brochures for apartments was barren, not a scrap of paper in sight. There wasn't even a piece of hockey gear left in the closet. Everything he'd brought with him had vanished like he'd never even been here.

Alaska threaded his lithe body between my legs, but not even the sudden appearance of my cat could change the hollowness seeping through my bones.

He'd left. Miller was gone, and I was once again alone.

Only this time, I wasn't sure I would survive it.

CHAPTER 29

MILLER

I wiped my sweaty palms against my pant leg, which did nothing to dry them. Maybe I was making a mistake? No. I had to take a chance. The look of hurt on Lathan's face had haunted me throughout the gala. I'd given my opening speech, listened to Ace and Wade in the choir, and smiled as I talked to teammates and donors. But I hadn't been present. How could I when my heart was still standing in that hallway with Lathan?

I'd looked for him everywhere, but he'd never reappeared. Nor had his mother. I couldn't shake the feeling that something big had happened and I was going to lose him.

That wasn't an outcome I was ready to accept.

As soon as it was socially acceptable to leave, I'd bolted. Thank goodness I wasn't on cleanup duty. There was no way I'd be able to focus. It was a miracle I'd been as present as I had, considering my mind had been whirling with a plan. It had taken me too long to realize what had set Lathan off, but now that I did, I knew what I had to do.

The goal was open. The shot was clear. I just had to take it.

So I'd come home, packed up my room, and tossed those darn brochures into the trash.

I hadn't expected to wait this long and was beginning to worry I had a bigger issue to deal with. Thankfully, the door opened and put me out of my misery.

It was soft, but I heard it. How could I not when everything in my being was laser focused on it? My heart pounded as I waited. His feet shuffled on the floor, pausing midway down the hallway, and I had to plant my feet into the carpet to stop myself from going to him. Alaska didn't have the same qualms and jumped off the bed and slipped out the small crack in the door.

The time between Alaska leaving and Lathan coming closer seemed to last a lifetime. When the door swung open, and I saw him for the first time in hours, my heart stopped, free-fell, and restarted.

He wasn't looking up, so he didn't notice me right away. It gave me the chance to take him in. His hair was mussed, and his shirt was untucked. It was the most disheveled I'd ever seen him. He ran his fingers through his hair before looking up. His blue eyes widened when he spotted me.

"Miller... what are you... I thought you..." he rambled, unable to finish his sentence. He swallowed, and I could no longer hold myself back. With two long strides, I stood before him, cupping his face.

"I know what you thought, Lath. It was wrong. I'm not going anywhere. I belong here with you."

"But your stuff," he argued, like he couldn't let himself believe what I was saying.

I smiled, stepped back, and took his hand to lead him to the walk-in closet. I opened the door and revealed my haphazard attempt to integrate my clothing with his. "Surprise! I moved in."

Lathan choked, but it sounded more like he was trying to stop himself from laughing and crying. “This won’t do.”

My heart sank. There it was. I thought he was on the same path, but I was wrong.

“Oh. Okay. Give me a few hours, and I’ll?—”

“It’s a good thing I put a deposit down on the other apartment on this floor. We’re going to need a bigger room and closet. I love you, Mills, but you’re a slob.”

My heart lurched forward, giving me whiplash. “You fucker! That was my line.”

“Did you just cuss, Bambi? That’s not very becoming,” he teased. Lathan stepped closer and wrapped his arms around me.

“Well, it’s warranted when you steal my thunder by declaring your love first.” I pouted.

“The things you do to me,” he said, ignoring my petulance. He trailed his nose up my neck, leaving a trail of goosebumps. My dick perked up, and my fingers curled into him as he pressed kisses to my heated skin.

“Lath, wait, I...” I trailed off as he slid his hand into my pants and cupped me.

“I’m taking what I want, Bambi, and that’s you.”

Groaning, I quit fighting his touch and fell into it. I needed to feel him. I needed to touch him. I needed him.

“Shirt off,” I ordered, pushing him back against the wall. Lathan obliged as I dropped to my knees and made quick work of his pants. It was tempting to stay down here and

show him how much I loved him, but Lathan had other ideas. He pulled me up and slammed his mouth to mine.

The kiss was heated and full of power. His hands gripped my hair and tugged on my curls. I moaned into his mouth and swirled my tongue with his. He opened deeper, and I gripped his naked flesh in my hands, sure to leave marks behind.

It was a mad flurry as he shoved my clothes off and fell onto the bed. His skin against mine was everything. Hot, hard, and smooth. We gripped each other, almost like we both wanted to be as close as possible. My cock was already leaking, leaving a trail of precum as we rutted against each other.

“Need you,” he grunted and reached for the lube. I didn’t need to be told twice. I was all on board for this plan.

I slicked my fingers and reached around him. His lips continued to assault me as I stretched his hole. It was hard to breathe, but the thought of not kissing him was worse. Our bodies were slick with sweat, and I was jittery as I pressed three fingers inside him.

“Now,” he groaned.

Lathan slipped off my fingers and notched my cock at his entrance. Slowly, he lowered himself onto me. Our eyes never left one another, telling each other everything.

I’m with you. You’re it for me. I love you.

It was exquisite pleasure and torture as my cock filled him. His tight heat wrapped around my bare cock had to be the world’s greatest joy. I’d fight anyone for the claim because I was the lucky man to have it all to myself.

He rose, and I moaned at the loss of him. It only lasted a second before he sank down. We lost ourselves in the slip and slide of our bodies, our hearts connected on a deeper level. I watched in amazement as his powerful thighs lifted him up and down, giving me the most erotic show as his cock slapped against my stomach with each pass. His dick was begging for me to touch it, but I wouldn't yet. Everything felt too good for it to be over so soon.

Surging upward, I wrapped my arms around him and banded us together. Our foreheads touched, and we watched as I pumped up from the bottom. His dick rubbed against my abs, causing his eyes to roll back. Dropping my hands to his ass, I spread his cheeks apart and used them to thrust deeper and harder. Our bodies were fused together. Every part of us that could touch, was. I'd never felt more connected to a person than I did him right then.

Lathan groaned, and the sound undid me. I thrust upward, and the world exploded around me. Tingles raced over my body as my balls emptied themselves. Lathan's walls gripped me tight as he came, his release coating both of our stomachs. Fireworks exploded throughout my body, and I felt sore all over. We panted together, our hearts beating hard as we came down from our high.

"That was wow."

"Yeah. You know... you never actually said it."

"Huh?" I rubbed his back and threaded my fingers through his hair. My cock was already slipping out of him, but I didn't want to move or lose the closeness.

"You said I stole your line. What line was that, Mills?"

I blinked. Had I really not said it? Rewinding back the conversation, I realized I hadn't.

“Lath, baby, I love you wholeheartedly. I have for a long time. I’m sorry I was too scared to tell you until now. You claimed my heart from the moment you entered it.”

“Say it again,” he whispered.

“I love you.”

He smiled and pressed a soft kiss on my lips. “I love you.”

“Let’s clean up before we make a bigger mess.”

Together, we showered and changed the sheets. “Bold of you to move your stuff in,” he teased.

“Don’t lie, you’ve wanted me here since the moment I moved in.”

He snorted. “Yeah, you’re right. I just wasn’t ready to admit it yet.”

We climbed into bed and I pulled him into my arms. He settled on my chest. “What happened after I left? I kept looking for you and your mom, but neither of you showed up.”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s the craziest part.”

“Crazier than us declaring our love for one another?”

“Believe it or not, yeah. My mom and I went to a diner, had cheeseburgers and milkshakes, and talked. She apologized for a lot of things.”

“Wow. I don’t know what’s harder to believe in that sentence. That your mom and you had a conversation or that you ate a cheeseburger.”

“Haha. But seriously. I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t been there.”

“Was it a good talk?”

“Yeah, it was. A really good one. I, um, told my mom about us.”

I squeezed him tighter. “How did she react?”

“Better than I expected. Not that I thought she would disown me, but I always feared she’d use me for a platform. Instead, she said you sounded perfect for me and told me not to give up if I loved you.”

“Wow. Guess I have your mom to thank for that mind-blowing sex,” I teased.

“Gross. Don’t ever use the word mom and sex in the same sentence again.”

“Yeah, okay.” We chuckled, and he turned and stared up at me.

“I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you about what I found before I jumped to conclusions. That wasn’t fair. I guess all of my childhood shit reared up, and I didn’t give you a fair chance.”

“I get it, but I hope you will in the future. Our relationship won’t work if we both assume things without talking.”

He blew out a breath. “Fair. I’ll work on it.” He dropped his gaze to my chest and his fingers, tracing imaginary shapes. “I’m not ready to come out to the world.”

“I’m not asking you to,” I interrupted.

“I know, Bambi. Let me finish.” I blushed, and he smiled. “But I think I’d be okay

telling the team. I'm sick of hiding how I feel around them."

My heart picked up. This was a big step. "Are you sure? Not everyone will be on board with this."

"That's their problem. Besides, outside of a few guys, I'm not Mister Sociable."

"The team respects you more than you know, baby. Why do you think you were named the alternate captain so young?"

"No one else wanted it?"

I searched his eyes. He truly believed that. "Fuck that noise, Lath. You're the most amazing man I've met. You're an incredible hockey player, and the team respects the hell out of you. And not for your last name," I tacked on, seeing the retort on his lips. "But because of you. You're going to win the Stanley Cup one day, and we all hope to be there when you do."

"Says the man who has already won one."

I smiled. "Don't you get it? Winning one with you tops everything. Besides, I barely played in those games. My team won, but it didn't feel like I earned it."

"Only you would say that." He laughed. I rolled my eyes, and we chuckled together. It was quiet as we stared at one another. "I don't need to win the Stanley Cup to be happy. I already am."

I thought hearing him tell me he loved me was the most romantic thing in the world, but in true Lathan fashion, he showed me how wrong I was.

This time, when we came together, he was inside of me. We lay panting together, his

arms tight around me, and he kissed my shoulder.

“I might be a bad influence on you.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“You’ve cussed at me twice tonight.”

“It’s not that I don’t cuss, just that most situations don’t call for that level of vigor. Tonight, did.”

“Whatever you say, Bambi. I like the idea of corrupting you.”

“Don’t forget who corrupted who here,” I retorted, rolling over and taking him to the bed.

“Hmm, I think I need to be reminded.”

Laughing, we wrestled in the sheets until we remembered we were both still messy. After another shower and change of bedding, we settled under the comforter and turned off the lights.

“So does this mean we’re boyfriends?”

“We’re whatever you want to be, baby. Linemates, roommates, friends... it doesn’t matter what label you put on it because you’re mine, and I’m yours.”

“I like that. I love you.”

“I love you.”

I fell asleep with the best smile.

CHAPTER 30

LATHAN

APRIL

“Bambi, we’re going to be late!” I checked the time on my phone and cursed under my breath. Miller strolled out of the walk-in closet on the right, and I swallowed my tongue. No matter how often I saw him in a suit, I still lost my ability to speak at first glance.

“No, we won’t. You purposefully build in an hour to avoid any complications.” He smirked at me when he realized I’d lost my ability to speak.

“Yeah, well...” I lost the rest of the sentence when he stepped closer, and the smell of his cologne invaded my senses. He nuzzled my neck and nipped at the sensitive flesh. My hands instinctively reached out for him and pulled him closer. “Maybe...”

“Nope. You’ll have to wait for your dessert until after we beat my former team. It’s the last game in round one, baby. Remember?” he teased. “Someone has a one-track mind.”

Laughing, I shook off the lust stupor and grabbed our bags off the bed before taking his hand. “That someone being you.”

“Nonsense. I’m all about hockey.” We exited our new bedroom and walked down the hallway toward the front of our apartment. The construction had finished earlier this

month on the renovations. We were now the proud owners of the entire top floor. We'd doubled the space of our bedroom, closets, and bathroom in the primary room. Then, there was the gear room, workout space, and Miller's craft room.

I'd surprised him with a custom room to store his beads for all of his friendship-making bracelet dreams. He'd also taken up crocheting, so now there was a space for all the yarn so Alaska couldn't get into it. Miller had insisted that we build Alaska his own cat domain, so now the spoiled thing had his own room, complete with cat towers, tunnels, and a cat litter robot that Miller was obsessed with. He spent most of our away games checking on the cat through the cameras and giving him extra treats. I pretended to hate it, but secretly, I loved how much he loved my cat.

"Any word from your mom?"

"She's going to meet us after the game. Your family make it in okay?"

"Yep. The whole brood is here. Are you sure you're up for meeting them?" he asked as we stepped into the elevator that now opened directly into our apartment.

My relationship with my mom wasn't the only change in the familial department, Miller's had as well. I turned toward him and pulled him close. "They're your family. I can't wait to meet them."

His cheeks turned pink, and I leaned in and kissed him. Over the past four months, I'd become more comfortable displaying affection to him regardless of where we were. After the dinner with my mom, a weight had been lifted, and I was free to be myself without worrying about her disappointment. I thought I was past needing my mother's approval in my mid-twenties, but I hadn't been. Now I knew it wasn't based on the things I did for her career, but who I was. That was a freeing lesson to learn.

The door opened and we broke apart as we stepped into the lobby. I took his hand and

held it as we headed toward James. A few people waved at Miller, but no one cared that we were holding hands. It took me longer than I wanted to admit to get comfortable holding his hand in public. Miller had been patient with me, never demanding more than I could give, and allowing me not only to acclimate to not caring what others thought, but realizing people didn't give a flying fuck what I did. It was an eye-opening experience that had shifted my worldview.

“Good luck tonight, gentlemen. Go Aces!” the doorman said.

“Thanks, George. We've got this in the bag.” Miller fist-bumped him, and I nodded. The amount of people who fell in love with Miller Fahn never ceased to amaze me. He was just too likable not to. And now all of these people knew he was mine. Caveman kink unlocked.

We both fell into our pregame routines as we drove to the arena. The meditation app lulled my mind into a place of peace, and I repeated my affirmations.

I am strong. I am capable. I will do my best.

By the time we pulled up to the arena, I was ready to win this game, beat Miller's former team, and advance to the playoffs. I was confident we would do all three tonight.

“Did you see that Chet's new team got swept?” Miller asked as we entered the tunnel, swiping through news articles on his phone.

“I'm not surprised. His special brand of toxicity is a killer to a team. I'm just glad we're rid of him.”

“Same. He creeped me out and constantly made comments. It was exhausting.”

“What did he say?” I asked but we were intercepted before he could respond.

“Hey, Miller, did you get my message about the Rainbow Lounge?” Toby asked. Miller’s head lifted from his phone, and he paused briefly to answer him. He didn’t let go of my hand the entire time, the only thing keeping me from humping his leg in clear view of Toby. Turned out, once I let myself be free, I went all in. I wanted everyone to know Miller was mine.

I glanced around the tunnel as they chatted. Personnel and teammates moved around me, nodding when they caught my stare. I’d come out to the team as asexual. It was the closest label that fit right. Really, I was just Millersexual. Could that be a thing?

It hadn’t been the ordeal I’d made it in my head, either. The owners told us to keep our relationship off the ice, and that was it. A few of our teammates were initially skeptical, but they let it go once we kept winning games. It helped that we weren’t the only couple on the team now, either. Another couple had also revealed their relationship, and the team rolled with it. Chet had been the only one who made comments, and he was now gone. Coincidence? I didn’t believe in those.

“All right, I’ll touch base with Lexi and get back to you.”

“Later,” Toby said and nodded to me. I still didn’t like the dude, but I tolerated him for Miller’s sake.

“It’s cute you still get possessive around him,” Miller said, tugging me toward the locker room.

“He wanted you.”

“Nah. We never had any chemistry. We’ve always only been friends, especially once we realized we both worked for the Aces organization. Queer people just find each

other and stick together.”

“Is there a secret handshake for this club?”

“Yep. I’ll teach you after we win.” He winked.

Chuckling, I shook my head and stepped into the locker room. We were early, so there weren’t that many people here yet. We separated our hands and went to our lockers to change into our gear. I smiled at the three bracelets I wore on my wrist—MINE, YOUAREbrAVE, and ILOVEYOU—before carefully securing them in my locker.

The closer it got to game time, the more the vibe in the locker room became electric. We were going to win this game. I could feel it in my blood.

* * *

“Don’t look at the time. Focus on the puck and only the puck!” Coach yelled.

Chicago was not going out easy. The former Stanley Cup winners had something to prove, but so did we. Miller glanced over at me, and I nodded. It was go time.

Miller deked around the Ice Foxes’ defense and stole the puck. He flew down the ice, touched the puck once, and sent it soaring to me. I instinctively knew where to be, that force that connected us like a taut string between us. The biscuit slid right onto my blade, and I spun around and smacked it toward the goal. The crowd held their breath as the buzzer sounded to end the game, and the puck slid right through the five-hole. The cherry on top of the goalie net lit up, giving us the win.

Noise erupted all at once. The crowd cheered, the canons exploded confetti, and every single Ace poured onto the ice. I was wrapped in arms from behind and sank

into his embrace.

“You did it, baby!”

I spun around and kissed him without thought. I didn’t care that a million cameras were on us. That I’d just outed myself on live TV. This moment with him was worth more than anything else. Our teammates surrounded us, breaking the kiss and jumping on us as they celebrated.

“I can’t believe you just did that.”

“Believe it, Mills. I fucking love you, and I don’t care who knows it.”

He smiled, which was ten times more potent than winning that goal. He was my everything.

Coach gave me a look, shook his head, and laughed as we skated off the ice. He smacked my back and picked someone else to do media tonight. Miller and I showered, changed into our suits, and avoided the reporters the best we could as we made our way to meet our families. Due to my mom’s security needs, the Aces had set up a separate room for us. A guard nodded as we approached and opened the door for us.

“Ready?” Miller asked.

Smiling, I took his hand in mine. “Let’s do this.”

The sight we encountered wasn’t what I’d expected. Miller’s family was loud and chaotic—I had known this. What surprised me was my mom, right in the center of it, holding a baby, chatting like she’d known these people forever.

Reese was the first to notice us. “Great game, guys!”

Everyone turned, the sound decreasing to only the children chasing each other around the room. Landon swooped in for a dual hug, followed by Braden, Reese, and Cam. Once they were clear, I broke free and kissed my mother on the cheek.

“Son, you played wonderfully.”

“Thanks, Mom. Not going to say anything about the kiss?”

“What kiss?” she teased. True to her word, she hadn’t used my relationship with Miller to her advantage. It seemed she was going to stick with it. “It’s lovely to see you again, Miller.”

Miller kissed her other cheek and gave her a big hug. Evangeline Silver was no match for the loveable man and had fallen under his spell.

“Lovely as ever, Evangeline.” My mother preened under his praise before turning to his parents. “Mom, Dad, so glad you could make it. Have you met Lathan’s mother?”

Miller introduced everyone, though it seemed they had bonded in the box during the game. I loved that hockey had the power to do that.

“Hell of a shot,” a deep voice said behind me. I turned and almost choked on my tongue.

“Reed Cole. Um, thanks.”

Reese snorted at my reaction and smacked the brute in the stomach. “Stop scaring my friends.”

“I didn’t do anything,” he protested.

“Daddy!” a little girl squealed as she ran into him. He scooped her up into his arms, and his whole demeanor changed. Henley Henshaw, Reese’s sister, strolled over with the baby my mom had been holding in her arms.

“Sorry to dip out, but this one needs to be fed and then put to bed,” she said, motioning toward the baby boy.

“Thanks for coming,” Miller said, hugging Henley, Reed Cole, and Fletcher Cromwell. Another blond guy walked out with them, laden down with more bags than two kids seemed to need, but what did I know?

“We’re going to head out, too. Braden has to be in Seattle for tomorrow.”

“Good luck,” I said, clapping him on the back. Cam and Landon hadn’t made the playoffs this year, but Braden’s team was still in it. The room became quieter after a round of goodbyes to my brother and his family.

Miller and I stood together, chatting with everyone until the yawns caught up with us.

“We should let you both go. We’ll see you in the morning for brunch.”

“Thanks for coming,” Miller said to his parents.

“Of course, honey. We don’t know much about what is going on, but we love watching you play,” his mom said.

“Reese was teaching us the rules. They have a way of making it make sense,” his dad added.

“And I traded bracelets with them,” Lottie said, showing off her arm.

“Oh! I got one for you,” I said, remembering the one Miller had helped me make.

I pulled it out of my pocket and handed it to her. In block letters, it read “LILSIS.” She squealed when she read it and threw her arms around me.

“Yay! Another brother.”

Miller chuckled and tugged on her braids. “Hey! He’s mine first.”

“We can share,” she said, not backing down.

“Not happening,” he teased, wrapping his arms around my middle so I was bound by two Fahns.

I turned my head and kissed his cheek. “I’ve never had a little sister,” I said. Miller smiled and relented.

“All right, you can share mine.”

“Yay,” she cheered.

As a group, we headed out of the arena. Thankfully, most of the crowd had died down, and no reporters were lurking around waiting for us.

The next morning, we opened our doors to the Fahn clan and my mother. Miller made a feast worthy of any chef, and our home was full of laughter and family.

I wrapped my arms around him and rested my chin on his shoulder. Together, we stood there and watched our two families interact. Despite their differences, our

parents seemed to have endless topics to discuss, and my mom was enamored with Miller's nieces and nephews.

“Why do I feel like your mom will start asking when we'll give her grandchildren?”

I chuckled. “Is that something you want?”

“Maybe someday. What about you?”

“I never thought I'd have even this,” I admitted honestly. “But I'd do any adventure with you, Bambi. You changed my life with one touch, so I'm here for it all.”

He tilted his head back and kissed me deeply. If we had been alone, I would have bent him over the counter and shown him exactly how much I loved him, but I had some decorum.

We entered round two of the playoffs with high hopes, but it wasn't meant to be, and we lost to the Richland Renegades in game seven, kicking us out of the playoffs. And just like that, the hockey season was over.

At the beginning of the year, I'd hoped this season would be the one. And while it didn't end with a cup, I did win the heart of the best man I knew.

That was the year's true win.

The End

CHAPTER ONE-VIGGY

Hockey Rule #1: Play for the crest on the front, not the name on the back

Media Rule #1: Personal brand is everything

Two weeks until the last playoff run of my career.

The thought settled like cement in my gut as I stared through my truck's windshield at the circus unfolding below. A petting zoo and canoe regatta—apparently team management figured my farewell tour needed more family-friendly photo ops. Like watching their captain paddle around Lady Bird Lake would somehow make up for seventeen years of almost-but-not-quite. Fan-fucking-tastic.

My knee screamed in protest, every twinge a stark reminder that I couldn't afford to waste a single moment of rest. Not now. Not with everything on the line. But here I sat, white-knuckling my steering wheel while some PR genius decided nothing said "Stanley Cup Contender" like a fuckin' dog and pony show.

The instant I stepped out of my truck, I'd need to be "on." Captain Jack Vignier, face of the franchise, leader of men.

Not a beat-up warrior skating on borrowed time and sheer stubbornness.

One stupid move, a hit I should have seen coming, took my knee out from under me and put me in my current position—violating my contract with the Aces by not reporting the truth about my knee.

The same knee I'd torn a meniscus in years ago and which liked to flare up now and then. Hockey was physical; aches and pains came with the territory. Usually, a little TLC and rest did the trick. After seventeen years in the league, I knew how to take my hits and keep on moving.

But this time felt different. The pain hadn't faded—if anything, it burned hotter with each passing day. Two weeks from playoffs, from my last shot at the Cup, and my body was betraying me in the worst possible way. If I'd torn something—or worse, and the grinding in my knee definitely felt worse—they'd pull me from the lineup faster than a rookie's first fight.

The lot had filled while I sat brooding, fans streaming past in their Aces gear. No more time to hide. I flicked my sunglasses down over my eyes and hauled myself out of the truck, each movement calculated to hide the weakness in my leg. The sun-warmed concrete at the lot's edge became my anchor as I leaned against the railing there, taking in the scene below.

Lady Bird Lake stretched out like some demented summer camp fever dream. Canoes and paddleboards dotted the water like floating Skittles, Austin's skyline towering behind like a disapproving ref. Paddle for the Playoffs—an excuse to parade the team in front of sponsors. Canoe races, yappy dogs, and more cameras than a Habs-Leafs playoff game.

Christ, my knee throbbed.

“Great weather, eh, Viggy?” Some fan's chirpy voice cut through my dark thoughts. “Can't ask for better than blue skies for a day on the lake!”

I nodded, even managed a twitch of a smile as the woman passed. The area teemed with a sea of fans decked out in Aces gear, all buzzing with a pre-playoff excitement. The kind of excitement that had the Aces organization seeing dollar signs.

A year ago, I'd have been right there with them, my body humming with that electric charge that only came with playoff season bearing down. Even beat to hell like we all were—bodies mapped with bruises from eighty-two games of grinding it out—I'd have found that spark. Would have turned it on like flipping a switch.

This year, that switch felt broken. Rusted shut. And the smile that used to be second nature had all but disappeared. Or, at least, buried beneath a landslide of pain and pressure and the weight of a career spent chasing something that kept slipping through my fingers.

The fans deserved better. They wanted their piece of the captain—the good attitude, the autograph, the competition I was known for. Even at something as ridiculous as Paddles for the Playoffs. And I got it, I did. But Christ, my whole future balanced on this knife's edge of pain, and here I was playing circus ringmaster.

God forbid the Aces organization miss out on a chance to schmooze with the season ticket holders.

God forbid they lose that perfect social media moment—their captain pretending this publicity stunt mattered more than the playoffs looming ahead.

God forbid we put our energy where it belonged—on the ice.

Maybe this was why the team always struggled in the playoffs. Maybe I was the only one around here taking it seriously. Sure as fuck wasn't management. For them, fan attention trumped all.

As if we could afford to lose our focus at this point in the season.

As if I hadn't been chasing the Stanley Cup for years, a cup that always seemed just out of reach.

As if a photo op with an excited fan could make up for the empty space on my list of accomplishments.

If I could power through this knee injury, the least management could do was not fuck with my time off.

I shoved away from the cement barrier and forced myself down the steps. Took my time about it, like I had nowhere better to be. Like each step didn't feel like someone holding a blowtorch to my knee. Like I couldn't feel the grind of bone on bone with every downward stride.

Bodies packed the deck and picnic areas, event staff trying to control the flow between stations like refs managing line changes. Then I caught sight of the camera guy, his lens already tracking movement in the crowd. My jaw clenched while I counted out a slow breath.

The damn Unleashed crew. All season long they'd been shadowing my team, hunting for their precious viral moments. A pack of vultures masquerading as content creators, ready to descend like vultures on any hint of drama they could milk for views.

Sure enough, there stood the head vulture, Ms Hollywood herself. Lily Sutton. Effortlessly cool in a flowing shirt and jean shorts that—dammit to hell—looked fantastic on her. Just what I needed, to be attracted to the woman determined to make my last season as miserable as possible.

Lily Sutton, drop-dead gorgeous with her wavy dark brown hair, painted red lips, and blue-green eyes held a disconcerting sort of power. The whole NHL combined couldn't match the threat she wielded with that camera crew of hers. They'd arrived at the start of the season, filming our every move for their “near-live” show. Every practice, every game, every damn moment dissected for the world to see.

I stepped past her on my way to where the team's PR people had set up. And because this season had pegged me as the target in a punishing game of whack-a-mole, she fell into step beside me.

The breeze reeked of dirty lake water and cheap sunscreen. But damn if even the polluted wind failed to mask her scent. Citrus and something sharper, spicier. It hit me like a shot of whiskey, cutting through the surface crap to settle in my bones. The woman smelled too good. The kind of good that made my gut clench. That set my pulse to pounding. That triggered a primal urge to find the source, despite her presence being everything I didn't need.

No dainty floral bullshit for Ms. Hollywood. Citrus and spice. Sharp, like her. Why the hell did she have to smell so damn interesting? And since when had I ever noticed the way a woman I wasn't fucking smelled?

"We have cameras mounted to cover the dock, vendors, the pet station, picnic area, and crowd. Please stay in these locations. And the canoes and paddleboards are outfitted with remotes. The paddleboards were a little trickier to outfit, but my team tried to make the camera as unobtrusive as possible."

"I'll be in a canoe," I growled, cutting her off. "Not that it matters. You vultures are about as subtle as a foghorn." It had been a circus from the moment they'd invaded the Aces' locker room—cameras in our faces, microphones picking up volatile tempers as well as private conversations. Intrusive. Distracting. Hell, it was a miracle we'd made it this far. Seventeen years, five Selkies, likely even a spot in the Hall of Fame—I'd poured my blood, sweat and tears onto the ice. But the Cup? I straightened my shoulders. This year, that big, shiny bastard was mine.

And Lily and her crew wouldn't wreck my last shot.

This was it. My final season. The last time I'd wear the Aces jersey, feel the bite of the ice in fierce competition. I'd hoped to walk away quietly, on my own terms.

Instead, management had turned my retirement into a spectacle, a chance to wring every last dollar out of my fading career.

Nothing like a little bonus pressure.

“The canoes have cameras at the front and on the benches in the middle. Still a little awkward, but you should be able to paddle fine and the footage should be great.”

“Well, as long as the footage is good.”

She snorted, not missing my sarcasm, and I risked a glance down. Instead of her usual power suit, she wore a thin white shirt that pulled taut over her chest. I could just make out the faint outline of lace beneath the fabric. Damn her. She wore a tiny pair of jean shorts. Ripped, with the frayed threads dangling along her lush thighs and spiking my blood pressure.

A feline growl interrupted my fixation on Lily Sutton’s legs. I dragged my gaze upward, my eyes skimming over the taut fabric of her shirt—damn those backpack straps—before settling on her face. “Are you hiding a cat?”

She twisted, revealing a backpack with a large clear bowl window in the middle. A fluffy white feline perched inside. He eyed me like I was a mouse and he was a breath away from demonstrating his predatory predilections. “He looks pissed.”

“That’s his permanent expression. He’s just complaining now because of the bounce.”

She wiggled in place, demonstrating. Her cat gave a protesting yowl. Her backpack shifted with her movements, her shirt tightening across her chest until the fabric gaped between the buttons, flashing me a glimpse of pretty white lace.

Focus, Vignier. I dragged my eyes back to her face, heat burning the back of my

neck. “Right,” I said, “the bounce.”

“Be mindful of the cameras but act natural out in those canoes, okay?” If she caught my distraction, she didn’t let on, but her voice returned to the brisk business-like tone I’d come to expect from her. The one that grated on my nerves and challenged me to push her just to see what she would do. “I think that footage is going to be the centerpiece of the next episode.”

I nodded like I cared and she finally cut away, swerving between picnic tables with the grace of a skilled skater. I pictured her on skates. Did she even know how? Or would she flounder like a fish out of water on the ice?

The damn woman oozed confidence and somehow the image of her floundering just wouldn’t form.

Her crew had set up a temporary base at the back of the picnic area. My gaze fixed on her until a motion dragged my attention from the gorgeous showrunner. Adele, the director of the bunch, waved. Heat tingled up the back of my neck at being caught ogling Lily’s ass.

I navigated my way through the swarm of people, eager faces and Aces gear everywhere I looked. The bright Austin sun beamed down. I should have worn a hat, let the brim hide the brittleness of my smile.

A blur of blue shot through the crowd toward me, dodging legs like a caffeinated pinball. I braked hard, to avoid a collision, but the jolt sent a searing pain up my bad leg. The world tilted, and I gripped the railing at the side of the path. Don’t fall. Don’t fucking fall. One stumble, and the gig would be up. Everyone would see how close I was to breaking.

An older girl clamped a hand onto the kid’s shoulder, twisting his shirt into her fist to yank him back. “Sorry, Mr. Vignier. My brother’s excited.” She held out an Aces cap

and Sharpie, her eyes wide with her own hero-worship. “Could you sign this?”

I pushed out a smile and signed through gritted teeth. “You got it.”

“Are you getting a dog?” Her brother bounced on the balls of his feet. “They have a bunch of dogs over there. And cats and kittens and puppies and a bird !”

“That right? Let’s hope they keep the bird on land. Can’t imagine it’d be much help with paddling a canoe, can you?”

The kids’ beamed up at me, their enthusiasm taking the edge off my discomfort. “You think they’ll assign me the bird? How’d I look with a bird on my shoulder, eh?”

They laughed and more of my tension eased. “Nah,” said the girl with a shake of her head. “You need a big, scary dog.”

“Big and scary, huh?” I puffed out my chest. “Am I scary?”

The boy giggled. “Yeah!”

They left me with a grin and I made my way to the tent set up by the local Austin Animal Allies group.

The Aces organization, in their infinite wisdom, had decided to partner with some local animal shelter—Austin Animal Allies or some such nonsense—for this year’s Paddle for the Playoffs. Each player would be saddled with an adoptable pet for the canoe race. As if paddling a damn canoe wasn’t challenging enough on its own.

Luck finally on my side, though, as the adoption volunteers assigned me a young Lab. Black as pitch, sleek muscle and boundless energy. She sniffed my hand, then nudged it, big brown eyes begging for a treat. “Sorry, girl. I’m a terrible human. I didn’t bring anything.”

Just then, Lily emerged from the throng of people, her voice a cool contrast to the surrounding cacophony. “What kind of man doesn’t bring dog treats to a dog event?”

“The kind that doesn’t have dogs.”

“I don’t either, but lookie here.” She knelt beside the Lab, her hand extended. The dog wiggled, thwapping her tail so hard her body rocked from side to side as she scarfed down whatever Lily had in her palm.

“What happened to the grumpy cat?”

“He’s monitoring the video feed from the shade.”

Video feed. Another reminder to guard my game. “Are you carrying iguana treats, too?”

“Huh?” She looked up at me, her bright blue-green eyes sparkling as brightly as the sun off the lake.

I motioned toward one of my players, Whitney. He’d already climbed into a canoe, but the iguana wouldn’t move from the edge of the deck.

Lily stood. My gaze snagged on the curve of her calf, the smooth line of her bare leg disappeared beneath the frayed denim of her shorts. Focus, Vignier. Lizard. Not legs. “That iguana’s the size of a Komodo dragon. I don’t think one of your tiny crackers is going to tempt it.”

Her laughter rolled over me, soft and sensual, rounding the edge of my annoyance.

“You might be right.” She turned her face up to mine with a conspiratorial smile. Her eyes, a mix of blues and greens, held my gaze with a directness when most would have looked away. They were a storm brewing over a sun-drenched meadow, a

captivating blend of serenity and chaos, a puzzle I needed to solve.

Just then, Adam Riley, the rookie sensation with the energy of a squirrel on a sugar high and a knack for attracting chaos, bellowed my name across the deck. He barreled through the crowd, his energy exhausting even at a distance. A bright red and blue parrot perched on his shoulder.

“I’m with you, Cap!” he said as he reached me, vibrating with the sort of enthusiasm that could curdle milk. “I picked up a pirate copilot! Polly wants a paddle, eh? Gonna bring us luck, am I right?” The bird squawked, ruffling his red and blue feathers and fixing me with a beady, intelligent eye.

Fuck my life. “Right.”

Riley sidled past me, chattering away to the bird like the animal was his new best friend.

Lily pressed a handful of little round dog treats into my palm. “Good luck, Viggy.”

My palm tingled and I resisted the urge to flex my fingers. I’d need more than luck to survive the day, but my fingers closed over the treats and I gently tugged the leash to get the Lab moving toward the canoes. More of the players gathered around the dock, an assortment of dogs at their feet. Several stood over Whitney as he maneuvered the iguana into the canoe.

Riley stood next to me. “Alright, Captain. We’re winning this thing, right?”

“You ever paddled a canoe before?”

He grinned. “Nah. But, boss, how hard can it be?”

Over the next few minutes, volunteers outfitted the animals with life jackets and

harnesses. As the volunteer helped me into my own life jacket, showing me where to attach the dog's leash and how to operate the quick release mechanism in case the canoe flipped, I couldn't help but get into the spirit of the competition.

We got a quick lesson in how to steer and then we loaded up. I craned my neck around to catch sight of Whitney done up in his neon orange life jacket along with Bell and the iguana, somehow managing to look proud in his own bright yellow lizard jacket.

On the bench in front of me, Riley settled into the front seat, the bird dipping and fluttering with his every movement, loudly narrating Riley's every move. Its squawks echoed across the lake as we lined up with the rest of the team at the start of the race.

Bell jockeyed for better position, knocking into our canoe and setting the Lab in front of me to barking. The canoe rocked with her lunging, but the harness she wore kept her from going overboard. "No cheating, Bell. Get your ass in line behind me."

"How's that not cheating, Vigg?"

"Captain's privilege."

"Fuck that," Bell said.

On the deck, a woman outfitted in Aces gear from head to toe raised a flag in one hand and an airhorn in the other, her voice barely audible over the barking dogs and cheering fans. "Racers, get ready!"

I dug the paddle into the water, pushing against Bell's pressure at our side. The airhorn blasted, the sound sending a jolt of adrenaline through me, and we lurched forward.

Riley started with a frantic splash of paddling, the parrot erupting into a racket of

shrill whistles and ear-splitting screeches, getting us exactly nowhere. “Riley,” I barked. “Get it together.”

He found his groove and we settled into a blur of synchronized strokes. I did my best to keep us straight, but the effort put a strain on my knee. Bell side-swiped us and from his grin, it was intentional. I snarled at Riley to row faster and we powered ahead of him toward the finish line.

We found our rhythm, paddles slicing through the water in sync. The parrot, however, seemed to think it was a one-bird cheering squad, its whistles loud enough to wake the dead. The Lab, a black blur of wagging tail and excited yips, added her own commentary, barking at the canoes behind, her rabid barks mimicking canine trash talk. The bird chimed in with a bizarre chorus of cockney insults and parroted barks. I tossed the dog a treat—courtesy of Ms. Hollywood. The dog had earned it. As long as the rest of the team stayed behind us, I could handle the damn zoo.

The roar of the crowd welcomed us as our canoe slammed against the dock, the vibration rattling my teeth.

“Heck yeah!” Riley bellowed, waving his paddle over his head to the calls of his squawking parrot.

I unbuckled the Lab from my jacket and she launched herself onto the deck. Up ahead, Riley vaulted out of the canoe, oblivious to the rocking wake that nearly tossed me into the lake. My knee shrieked in protest as I straightened, every joint aching, every muscle screaming. Feeling every one of my thirty-seven years, I gripped the gunwale and hauled myself onto the dock.

The crowd roared, a jumbled mess of cheers, barks, and that damn parrot’s ear-splitting whistle. The team’s social media guru snapped pics like a paparazzi on the red carpet. I smiled, slapping high-fives with Riley and fans. After seventeen years, I knew my role well. Captain Jack “Viggy” Vignier, always in control, always leading

the charge.

The irony burned like a shot of cheap whiskey. A hollow victory, celebrated by a man on the verge of collapse. My gaze swept over my teammates, some already on dock, others still paddling in circles on the lake. One of them would be taking my place next season.

Today's victory felt like a lie, a manufactured pretense hiding the cracks in the ice. Those damn cameras were everywhere, their lenses as sharp as a vultures', waiting for any sign of weakness. I straightened my spine, ignoring the throbbing in my knee, the ache in my muscles, the bone-deep exhaustion that threatened to drown me. Not just physical exhaustion, though that was bad enough. It was the mental grind, the constant pressure, the second-guessing, the knowledge that my body was a ticking time bomb.

Just a few more weeks. Just a little longer. Hold out, win the Cup, then who cared if the whole damn thing crumble.

I glared into the nearest lens and plowed through the crowd. There would be no wincing, no limping, no sign of vulnerability. Not for the cameras, not for the fans, and especially not for Lily Sutton and too-perceptive eyes.