



Playing the Man (Watkins Glen Gladiators #6)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: If only getting back into playing shape were as easy as falling in love...

Tanner LaBrie—aka Fossie to his teammates—is feeling every bit of his thirty-eight years. His shoulder aches when it's cold, his arms need to be longer to see the crossword puzzle app on his phone, and his knees are incredibly unhappy about the abuse they've taken. During one of the final games of the regular season, one of his weary joints decides to give way. The need for surgery is not a surprising one for Tanner. He's been putting it off for years, but escaping the knife is not an option now. Post-surgery rehab is a son-of-a-gun, but if Tanner is anything, it's stubborn. Just ask any of his ex-boyfriends. So when his therapist suggests finding a local yoga group, he scoffs at first. Unsure of how he would fit in with the gals in leotards, he nonetheless signs up for a class at his local gym where the teacher is not at all the person listed on the signup form. Not that Fossie is complaining when Keyshaun Williams, the enigmatic and sexy gym owner, shows up with a floral exercise mat, some whale song CDs, and a smile that nearly erases how out of place the defenseman feels.

Keyshaun Williams is living the life he has always dreamed of...for the most part. His new business is a huge success, his family is happy and healthy, and his sister—the only somewhat straight triplet—is a few weeks away from giving birth to twins while his brother is about to open a franchise of Williams Wellness in Buffalo. Yep, life is looking pretty darn great for the former Army dietician/Golden Gloves boxer. Great aside from the quiet house he goes home to every night. Being a few years on the other side of thirty has him seeking someone to settle down with, raise a family, maybe adopt some dogs or raise some goats. Heck, maybe dogs and goats. A man could dream, right? And yes, dreamy would describe the towering, mature, stunningly attractive D-man for the local hockey team who has, it seems, signed up for a senior yoga class that Keyshaun is leading as his sister nests and eats far too many chocolate-covered jalapenos. Tanner LaBrie ticks all his boxes as well as a few he didn't even know he had. Maybe those long looks the hockey player has been shooting his way for months means Tanner is interested in more than achieving the perfect camel pose?

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Chapter One

Tanner

“If you would just chill out for five minutes, I could get to you around the pack of dogs and help you stand up,” Rudy chided as he grasped my arm and I yanked on my walker.

“I don’t need help to get up and go piss,” I replied, giving the contraption a firm tug that freed the front left leg from under the couch while also popping off the tennis ball. The dogs lost their minds. A small war broke out as the four of them battled it out with Bingley, the old pug who thought he was a young Doberman, emerged from the scrum victorious. “You show them whippersnappers,” I whispered to the geriatric dog as he pranced about with his trophy. “You show them we old guys still have some fight left.”

Rudy, my younger brother and caretaker for the next four hundred years, gave me a look that could have melted stone. He flipped his dark hair over his shoulder with a huff. I love my little bro dearly, he was all the family I had left, but him living here with me while I recuperated from knee surgery was going to test the sibling bonds big time.

“And now we have to fetch the ball from the dogs,” Rudy mumbled as he escorted me, his term for helping his grumpy older brother every fucking place, to the bathroom. Thank God this old farmhouse had a toilet on both floors. Climbing to the second story to piss every couple of hours would get really old, really fast. “And it will be slobbery. And I’ll have to wash it.”

“Rudy, my man, it’s an old tennis ball that skids over the hardwoods. It does not have to be washed.”

“The nurse who discharged you said to keep things sanitary around the patient.” He eased around me to open the door to the powder room, his word for the small bath off the living room, not mine, then guided me in with a hand on my back.

“She meant around the incision,” I replied, pushing my walker minus one tennis ball into the tiny bathroom with a grunt. “Fucking hell, why is this room so small? Were people a hundred fifty years ago all tiny little goblins?”

“As a matter of fact, humans have gotten taller over the past two centuries,” he said, easing the walker from me as I tried—and failed—to stand. “They attribute it to better nutrition and overall health. So probably the people who built this old farmhouse were smaller. There is no shame in sitting to pee, Tanner.”

I shot him a glare. “I know, Rudolph , it’s just a pain in the knee having to sit down and then get up.”

“Well, it will only be for a wee bit. Get it? Wee?” He snickered, and I had the urge to call him bad names or tug on his neatly trimmed beard. “Just let me help.”

“I’m good. Go get that damn ball from Bingley before one of the others grabs it. The last time they had a tennis ball with a slice in it, Darcy tried to eat the damn thing.” I jerked my scruffy chin at him. I caught his gaze touching on my scraggly facial hair. Unkempt men gave him hives, he claimed.

I might not be on the ice for the Calder Cup race, but I was not shaving my playoff beard. I’d be at the Schaffer Salt Arena tomorrow night for the first game of the first round against Cayuga come hell or high water. I didn’t care if I had to fucking crawl. This might be my last season— God, please do not let it be —and I was going to be

there for my team. My stupid knee had crapped out on them, but the rest of my worn-out body was showing up to give the Gladiators support in some small way.

“I hope Elinor has taken it from Bingley and has hidden it in your shoe,” Rudy huffed.

I rolled my eyes. He sighed like only a theater queen could then flounced off, his breezy summer shift billowing around him. And yes, my gloriously proud enbee brother flounced. He was one of the most proficient flouncers in Manitoba. I rather envied his skill at being able to tell the world his emotions with a well-executed jounce. I tended to be a little less adept at expressing my feelings. My parents, God rest their souls, used to joke about how they had two queer sons who only had one thing in common: being gay. Rudy was not like me at all.

While I was hip-checking other kids over the boards in pee wee hockey, Rudy, a mere eighteen months younger, was taking tap lessons. When I had to read essays aloud in class I’d throw up in my mouth a little. When Rudy hit the stage, he was the Winnipegger Sir Lawrence Olivier. No puking in his mouth ever took place. So yeah, Rudy was not at all like me. He had a loving partner back in Canada, awaiting his return. I had four dogs and a weedy garden. Rudy believed that communication was key to every relationship. I believed in a cold beer and zipped lips. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to talk to a lover about feelings I just had no idea how to. And when I tried, I sounded stupid. The last time I’d fumbled through what I thought was a heartfelt declaration of my undying love, the guy laughed in my face.

Granted, that guy was a jerk and eighteen years old. Still, the pain went deep. When the memory popped up, usually when I was entertaining telling a man who I was involved with how I felt, the pain reignited in my breast and I would get a beer instead. Whereas my brother would sit for hours discussing sentiments with his partner Wade as if life were some Jane Austen novel. Not that I read a lot of Jane Austen back then, but I saw a show once and that changed everything. Rudy has read

tons of it since he was old enough to have a library card. I used to like to read historical outdoor literature. Books about mountain men, pirates, and adventurers braving the elements and wilds in manly fashion. You'd not find one parasol or primly held tea cup in any of my those reads. But after seeing *Sense and Sensibility* once when Rudy and I were both down the the flu my love for all things Austen was born. You would, if you dug deep into my book and movie shelves, find just about every book Ms. Austen penned.

I may be slightly secretly obsessed with them but they're my clandestine treats. Like the hidden Oreos you pull out when the kids are asleep. I'd named my dogs after the characters in those books, and so far only Rudy had called me on it.

Rudy and I were not at all alike as I previously said.

My sibling was prone to great bouts of effusing, his feelings flowing freely out of him at the drop of a tissue, which worked for him as a theater teacher at the Winnipeg Acting Academy. I, on the other hand, did not effuse. My emotions were more low-key, which was perfect for a hockey defenseman. No one liked a hot-headed gusher on the ice. Unless they were Phil Greco, but Greck was a talkative anomaly. Most hockey players were reserved, polite gentlemen who, on occasion, had to punch an opposing player in the face.

Night and day the LaBrie boys.

Once he was gone, I eyed the elevated toilet seat. I hated that damn thing. It was the first thing to go once I was back on my skates. That and the fucking walker.

"Drop it! Drop it right now, you little shitter, or I will not buy another box of those peanut butter cookies you enjoy so much."

My brother was blackmailing my dog. Good grief. I'd been home exactly four days,

and I was ready to bolt. This old house, huge as it was, felt smaller and smaller every day.

“I thought so. Now go outside the lot of you. Go, shoo. And no digging under the azalea, Elizabeth! I will give you a bath again.”

I closed the door on Rudy and my pack of rescues. Then, because I was recovering from knee surgery, I yanked my joggers down and sat on the raised toilet seat like a toddler learning how to use the crapper. It was humiliating. I’d known this would be a long, trying haul, which was why I’d put it off for so long. Then my knee decided to stage a coup, and that irked me. Lots of things about being an invalid irked me. It has been pointed out to me by several people—my mother, my father, my brother, and a few men I’d been in relationships with—that I was not the ideal patient. That came as no surprise. I despised being laid up. My life was on the ice. If you took that away, then what was there for a thirty-eight-year-old Canuck who had never risen above the minor leagues? Retirement might be a longed-for thing for some guys, but I was terrified of hanging up my skates. I had nothing or no one to turn to once my hockey career ended.

“Do you want to eat before therapy or grab something after?” Rudy called out and sailed by the bathroom door, peeking in to make sure I’d not flushed myself or something. “You look tight. Are you in pain?”

“Sort of yeah. They cut my leg open.” I pointed to the puffy-wrapped mess that was my right knee as I wheeled out of the bathroom, one walker leg scraping over the hardwood floors. Rudy had picked up every throw rug in the house the day before I came home to avoid me falling on my face and my floors were showing the wear already.

“They did? Well, that explains why you were in the hospital,” the smart-ass replied while pulling his hair back into a pert ponytail. “I think there’s that new Chinese

restaurant that opened up a few weeks ago by your gym. We can hit that.”

“After therapy,” I said as we made our way to the living room at a snail’s pace. I was starving, but the first therapy round I had had made me want to barf. The pain was intense. The therapist, a tiny girl named Trish who had a will of pure titanium, questioned if I needed stronger pain meds. I told her I didn’t need any pain meds. I’d take ibuprofen if needed thank you. Course, I’d not told Rudy how much it hurt. He knew I had a pill thing, so he didn’t push me too hard on that. I’d lost an old college buddy, a footballer, to opioids two years ago.

“Okay, after. Let’s get you into the car, then I’ll call the wild beasties back inside.” I nodded, sat down in my recliner, and eased my foot into a pair of bright yellow Crocs with puppy faces on them that Greck had gifted me last summer. Once I had my feet dressed, Rudy followed behind, talking away as the dogs could be heard barking at something in the back. Probably one of about four hundred gray squirrels that bedeviled the pack as well as my bird feeders. Rudy deposited me at the front door where I sat like someone’s grandfather, shorts and socks and Crocs, my ass resting on the wooden bench in my foyer.

The dogs made a run through the house, found me, got a scratch, and then raced off to find Rudy with the treats. They’d spend the few hours we were gone in the dog room, which had once been a mudroom, and still was, to be honest, but now it held their food and water dishes as well as four comfy beds as well as tons of toys.

“Whoever had this last dropped it under the bird feeder.” Rudy sighed as he flicked sunflower shucks off the missing tennis ball. He kneeled down to slide the soggy ball back on the walker, smiling that charming smile of his. “I love the socks and Crocs look. Very fashion-forward. I wager you draw the eye of every gay man in Watkins Glen.”

“Ha. Funny.” I pushed slowly to my feet as Rudy rose and opened the front door.

“For your information, there are no available queer men left in this town. They’ve all been snatched up.”

“I doubt that,” Rudy quipped and slid his little backpack over one arm. The sun was brilliant today. Overhead, the sky was baby blue with a few wispy clouds. A light breeze rustled the leaves on the trees that crowded my farmstead. Old oaks and maples, dozens of white birch in a stand by the barn that badly needed a new roof, and over by the tiny creek that flowed through my property was an apple orchard. I loved trees. And I had put all kinds of care into them. Last year I’d had so many apples I’d given away bushels of them to the local food banks. The whitetails had enjoyed the rest in the evenings when they would visit with ears pricked and tails flagging at the first sound of a dog. “Maybe it’s that beard. If you just let me tidy it up a bit, I—”

“Come near me with a razor and you’ll pull back a bloody stump,” I warned, only half joking. I could add nothing to my team as we made our playoff run physically, but I could add the luck of a full beard to the cosmos.

Rudy sighed dramatically as he gave the key fob to my SUV a squeeze. I knew him. He was in no way, shape, or form done with grooming advice. Like I really had to worry about a ratty beard. No one would see it but the dogs, the physical therapist, and my brother. Wasn’t like I was going to run into Prince Charming while doing my quad sets.

Turns out I ran into Prince Charming at the Purple Lantern Chinese restaurant after doing quad sets. If my damn brother had mentioned that the new eatery was a two-minute walk from Williams Wellness, I might have forced myself into nicer clothes, skipped the Croc and sock combo, and possibly combed my beard. But no, he’d not said a word about our destination, a fact that I pointed out rather furiously when we

parked beside the red brick building with bright purple awnings.

“No, no, you just weren’t listening,” Rudy had clapped back. “I said by your gym.”

Shit. He had said that. Dammit. I glowered anyway, trying my best to save face. “Whatever. Let’s get it to go.”

“Tanner, let’s just check it out inside. It looks charming. I love purple. And the food will be cold by the time we drive back to your farmhouse. Rice does not take microwaving well, and the egg rolls will be soggy. I always get burpy when I reheat egg rolls. I’ll be up all night with the belches, which will then manifest itself into day trotting to the potty.”

“Fine, okay, we’ll eat in, but I need to go home afterward to rest my knee.”

“We’ll ice it inside.” With that, he was out of the SUV and yanking open my door with glee. He chattered nonstop as we crept into the restaurant and found a table by the wide front windows. I’d kind of forgotten how much Rudy loved being out and about with people. Again, polar opposites. He thrived on human interactions. He and Wade were always going out at night, traveling, and visiting friends. I was happiest at home, with a cold brewski, a ballgame on the radio, and the dogs at my feet. Only thing missing from that homey dream was a man sitting in the rocking chair beside me.

Hard to find that man when you stay home with the dogs, Fossil. Oops, Fossie.

Great, my inner voice was riding my ass now. Super. This was why dogs were the best things ever. They never gave you shit about watching the squirrels and just being.

Rudy and I had just been seated and sipping on our tea when the best-looking man in

Watkins Glen walked past the window. Keyshaun Williams, the owner of the gym I frequented, passed by, paused, backed up, and then grinned at me as if I were a long-lost lover.

We wish.

Yes. Yes, we do. Keyshaun was the sexiest male I had ever seen, and I'd seen some damn fine-looking men in my day. Tall, strong, vibrant, with closely cropped ebony hair, big brown eyes with thick black lashes, and a smile that could stop a poor, lonely man's heart. A former Army boxer, he had a physique made for late night fantasies.

Keyshaun waved, then disappeared stage left, only to be seen a second later ducking into the Purple Lantern's front door. Bells rang, the other diners glanced up from their lunches, and my stupid heartrate spiked. God he was pretty. And wearing shorts that showed off his long, muscular legs as well as a T-shirt that clung to his chiseled upper body like a second skin.

"Fossie, hey man, it's good to see you," Keyshaun said as he stopped at our table to visit. "Greck and the guys said your surgery was a success. ACL repairs, right?"

"Right, yeah, ACL," I mumbled into my tea. And that was the last of the words that would exit my stupid pie hole, so I reached for a fried noodle to dip into the bowl of sweet and sour and shoved it into my dumb mouth. Rudy, bright-eyed at the prospect of someone else to talk to who wasn't me, leaped into the rapidly asphyxiating conversation.

"Hello there, I'm Rudy LaBrie, Tanner's younger and much more personable brother." Rudy offered Keyshaun his hand as a dowager would a knight. Key, as everyone but me called him because I generally got tongue-tied around him and said nothing, not even his name, took my brother's hand and bowed gallantly over it,

kissing the back of it. The urge to kick my brother in the shin was strong. “It’s so nice to meet you in person. Tanner speaks of you all the time.” The urge won. I booted him under the table with my good leg. He squeaked but carried right on talking like a fucking magpie. “He praises your gym and the equipment and says he wishes he had your grace and finesse in the boxing ring.” Key gave me a winsome smile that was sweeter than the sauce dripping from my noodle to my beard. “Oops! Look at that. Dribbles.” Rudy dabbed at my beard with his napkin. “Tell me, Keyshaun, what do you say about this playoff beard monstrosity?”

Rudy flicked my beard. Noodle crumbs fell to my lap. I pushed his hand aside as Keyshaun stroked his smooth chin, deep in thought, as he studied me intently. If I could move faster, I’d make a mad dash to the men’s room. Thankfully, my facial hair hid my red cheeks.

“I like it,” Key confessed, his gaze catching mine and holding it as he spoke. “I like big bears with lots of hair.”

Rudy’s eyes flared. My mouth fell open. Oh shit. Did that mean the man was into other men?

“Order for Williams!” a thin, older Asian woman called from the back of the eatery.

“Oh, that’s me. My sister stopped by for a visit. She had a hankering for something spicy and wanted it right now! I’m not man enough to argue with a woman in the final four weeks of carrying twins about one damn thing, so here I am to pick up her double order of Kung Pao shrimp. It was really good to see you, Fossie. Look forward to having you back at the gym.” He slapped me on the shoulder and hustled past several tables filled with patrons to engage the woman at the register. Amiable, friendly, sexy. The man was a walking dream.

“Oops, dribbles again.” Rudy patted my beard. I swatted at his hand. He giggled

madly, waving like a fool at Key when he passed by on his way out. I nodded and got a nod in return. When the bells over the door closed, my brother whipped around in his seat to stare at Keyshaun jogging back to Williams Wellness. After he had gotten his fill, he turned to face me, smiling a smile that spelled trouble in bright flashing neon letters. “So that is why you go to the local gym all the time instead of using the facilities at the rink. He is stunning! Reminds me of Wade.”

“Wade’s Asian and loathes working out as much as you do.”

“I mean, his personality is like Wade’s.”

Okay, yeah, they were both bubbly sorts, which clicked for Rudy and Wade as they could bubble together. Me and Key, on the other hand...

“And just to straighten you out, I go to the gym to help ensure a local Black-owned business stays in business,” I countered smoothly. Almost as if I had told myself that a thousand times.

“Of course, and well you should, but you cannot deny that Keyshaun Williams is eye candy. And he likes bears! You know what that means?!”

“He’s a forest ranger in his spare time?”

Rudy rolled his eyes at the purple paper lantern moving in the AC over our table. “No. It means he’s queer and likes hairy men. You should ask him out. Oh! I can help you plan it all out. We could find some baggy pants, fitted of course, but with room to get up over that brace. Hmm, you’d need a new shirt. All of yours are old Gladiators tees and those tacky floral Hawaiian shirts you love. Oh! Oh! We could go to the mall. Yes, let’s do that tomorrow. I’ll rent a wheelchair and push you! I think they have a nail salon in the mall. I’ll check to see if they can squeeze us in around—”

And it was at this point of his effusing that I zoned out. A man like Keyshaun would have zero interest in an older, crippled, scraggly hockey player in socks and Crocs. Even if I did get my cuticles trimmed and wore something dressy like a polo shirt.

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Chapter Two

Keyshaun

I paused once I was out of sight of the Purple Lantern to steady my racing heart. I rested my ass against the corner of Williams Wellness, willing my half-hard dick to calm the hell down.

Cradling a bag of food, I blew out a long breath to calm my ass. Tanner LaBrie did things to me.

That man was everything I found desirable in a man, plus a few things I didn't know I liked until I saw them on Tanner. Like his Hawaiian shirts. Cute. So cute. And so sexy when the first few buttons were open, offering a tease of thick, dark chest hair. I bet that hair grew in density as it spread out over his chest and belly. To hell with a treasure trail. That man probably had a treasure road that led to a big, fat—

“You plan on bringing that food inside anytime soon, or am I supposed to drop my wide ass to the curb to eat my lunch?”

My sister stood beside me, her dark brown eyes narrowed. Oops. I'd done the unthinkable. I'd delayed her feeding.

“Sorry, I got winded.”

She looked down the street and then back at me. “Winded. From walking five hundred feet. You.”

Dammit. I was a terrible liar. Out of the three of us triplets, my poker face was the absolute worst, which was why my mother always came to me when we were kids and someone had done something bad. Mama knew Key was the one to interrogate. Not that the interrogations lasted long. Generally, I would fib terribly, then Mama would call me on it, and I would crack like a rotten walnut and spill the beans. Or nuts, I guess.

“Toting all this food is a cardio workout all in itself,” I parried and got the Jemetta Williams death glare. She lifted the bag from my fingers.

“You try carrying around two hungry human beings inside your body for nine months before sounding off on the amount of food it takes to sustain three.”

“Sorry,” I whispered and got a curt nod. I loved my sister, truly and deeply as I did my other triplet, Ornell, the eldest of our trio by exactly nine minutes. Etta was the middle, and I was the youngest. And the most special Mama would whisper to me when the other two weren’t around. Course she told my siblings they were the most special when I wasn’t there, so it all worked out. “I forgot Mama’s warning.”

Etta sniffed and rolled her eyes in the way that kids do over their parent’s words of wisdom when they pertain to said child.

“Mama says all kinds of things.”

“Most are dead on,” I replied, leading my grumpy and exhausted-looking sister back into the air-conditioned gym. A gym, I was pleased to say, that was thumping. Every machine was in use, the boxing ring held a couple of guys sparring, and the yoga/aerobic walking room was filled with seniors getting some cardio work in for the day. I loved the senior groups most of all. I noted my uncle Devon in there, sweating, his Black bald head shiny. “She should know about carrying babies. She carried three.”

Etta waved me off before pushing into the sunny office to find a seat behind the desk and flop as well as a woman toting twins could flop.

“I know, and she’s been a lot of help, but Lord does she have to be right all the damn time?” Etta asked while opening the brown tote bag to scope out the takeout containers. “Did you get something for yourself?”

“Yeah, some chicken and rice with a side of broccoli,” I replied as I sat in one of two seats facing our desk. All three of us Williams kids used it as we were all partners in Williams Wellness. “Did you hear from Ornell about the last offer we made on the space in Buffalo?” She pulled out a white box, opened it, and passed it to me. She had dark bags under her eyes, her usually neat bright yellow hair that she took such pride in was showing some black roots, and her quick smile hadn’t shown itself in some time. “You look really tired. I’m not sure you should lead any more classes. What does your doctor have to say?”

“She says that I could do yoga if I do a gentle flow, but Lionel thinks I should just chill for the final month.” I bobbed my head in agreement as I took another box, this one with steamed broccoli. Her boyfriend Lionel was a smart man. I agreed with him wholly. Now we just had to convince Etta to start easing back. Not an easy task. She, like Ornell and myself, is a worker. Mama liked to say we overworked, like our father, and see where that got him in the end.

The pulsating sound of music from the senior walk group leeches through the wall and set my head to bopping along to a Beatles remix that really got the BPM rising. Shauna, a new hire, was leading the group today, but I planned to take it over from here on out. I enjoyed working with the seniors in the neighborhood. Getting folks into shape, no matter their age, was what got me out of bed in the morning. Seeing older people stepping it out, stretching it out, or jogging it out helped ease a little of the pain of seeing my father die at the age of 54 from a heart attack.

Yes, he knew smoking was bad for him. Yes, he knew African Americans had a 30 percent higher chance of dying from heart disease than White folks. Yes, he knew he had to work harder to keep his sugar in check. He knew because my mother, brother, sister, and I had told him all of this, yet he smoked steadily, ate fried foods, and refused to do any kind of cardio exercise. His passing at such a young age, leaving Mama to feed and clothe three sixteen-year-olds, was a real rough road for the four of us. It had lit a fire in me to do my best to try to get people over fifty-five to realize that they could get healthier if they gave it a tiny bit of effort. There is no age limit to changing your lifestyle. A good diet, exercise, and a positive outlook worked wonders. You could lower your cholesterol, your blood pressure, and your glucose levels with smart food choices, regular heart-healthy workouts, and a winning outlook. I'd failed my father, but I could do my level best to help others live longer.

Dad had missed out on so much. He never saw his kids graduate high school. He never saw us open our first gym. He'd never hold his twin grandsons. It broke my heart, but it kept that fire burning in my gut. His brother Devon had been on the same path but losing his elder sibling had opened his eyes to how important taking care of yourself truly was.

Uncle Devon had stepped up big to help shoulder the burden until the three of us had moved out. Etta had gone to a local community college in Elmira to get her certification in yoga, reflexology, and massage. Ornell grabbed a degree in business from Penn State and is using it now to expand our gyms. I joined the Army and saw the world while learning to be a dietician with a GI Bill. I also had some success with boxing while in the service, so I trained a few locals who had dreams of being the next Rocky Balboa.

“Hey, you want your chicken?”

I snapped back to my sister. “Thanks, yeah, I was thinking about Dad.”

Etta grew sad instantly. She had always been my father's little princess and his loss, while devastating to us all, had nearly crippled her.

"I wish he were here to see these two when they make their debut," she softly said, rubbing at the huge stomach hidden under a pink maternity top.

"Yeah, me too." There wasn't much else to say. We all missed him daily, Mom most of all, but we had pushed on as best we could. "He'd be proud of us."

"Well, let's be honest, he'd be confused as hell about us. He'd wonder why I was making babies with a White man after I'd dated a Hispanic woman for two years, why Ornell had a girlfriend who used to be a man, and why you came out of the Army gay as a daisy."

"I went into the Army gay as a daisy," I corrected as I opened my dish of sweet and sour chicken and inhaled the aroma of one of my favorite foods.

"He didn't know that, though. When he passed none of us had come out as bi, pan, or gay, and so he probably figured we were all straight arrows like him." She dove into her shrimp with the kind of hungry ferocity one usually only saw from hyenas at a fresh kill. "Damn, this is so good! I swear..." She paused to swallow, her hand coming up to shield her mouth. "This is the best thing ever after jalapeno poppers dipped in Lionel's comeback sauce."

"Those kids are going to come out sweating," I tossed out. That got a weary giggle from her. "So Ornell? Any word from him?"

"Mm, just a short text. Said the owner of the space was dickering about our latest offer, but Ornell is positive he'll settle soon." She held out a shrimp. I shook my head. "Coward."

I sighed as I chewed some perfectly steamed broccoli. “I’ll have to reach out to him and see if there’s a plan B in case this guy won’t take our offer.”

“Ornell always has a plan B, so you can relax.”

Yeah, he did, which was why he was our expansion man. The three of us had dreams. Williams Wellness Centers all along the east coast. A new house for our mother. A fishing boat for Uncle Devon. Upward mobility for us and our sig others. Well, sig others for my siblings. I went home to an empty apartment in a new community that overlooked Seneca Lake. My place was nice, with lots of room and a gorgeous view. I’d moved in just six months ago and loved the neighbors. It was just...

Well, kind of lonely.

“If they go for the offer, then I’m going to—”

“You’ll stay put and let Ornell handle it. We’re short-staffed already and I’ve not officially taken my maternity leave yet. So just chill and let him do what he does best, and you do what you do best.”

I picked up a floret and froze. “And what exactly is it that you feel I do best?”

“Charm the customers, lead the senior groups, and help me put up more pickled eggs.”

Lord, oh Lord, help us all. “You have four dozen jars of pickled eggs on your shelves in the pantry as we speak, Jemetta. If you pickle one more egg, I will personally take your pickling license away.”

She snorted then sighed. “I need help. This nesting thing is real, brother.”

“Put something else into jars.” I took a bite of broccoli as a new ABBA tune floated into our little oasis of personal space. The seniors loved songs from the 60s, 70s, and 80s.

“Oh you know what? I think Mama’s rhubarb is ready. Lionel can do something on the grill. Or do you have a date?”

No, no, I do not have a date. I wished I had a date, preferably with a big, bad hockey player whose shyness and pretty hazel eyes called to me day and night.

“Sure, yeah, I can do rhubarb.”

Might as well. There was nothing of note happening in my personal life unless hosing down the patio was now considered a big night on the town.

Pulling into the narrow driveway at my mother’s house in Horseheads, I sat in my car and exhaled out a day’s worth of stress. It was major crunch time at the gym. Etta had one week to go of part-time hours, and then she was done, Ornell was in Buffalo, and the hiring process had pushed me to my limits. I’d read over thirty applications and not one had any kind of schooling to be a personal trainer. No, Tina, showing your workouts on IG did not a certified PT make, but thanks for the links to your account. Ugh. I dropped my brow on the steering wheel. I still had the books to do tonight. With Ornell out of town for the foreseeable future, that odious job fell to me. I loathed it. But our bookkeeper, a skinny woman named Irene, had been nipping at my heels like a demented Schnauzer for days now.

The linen company I used for towels had gone on strike at noon, so I’d been stuck at the local laundromat washing towels that other people had sweated on until well after seven at night. Six to seven. Thirteen hours at the gym smiling at customers who

bickered over the increase in our dues I'd instituted last week. Honestly, my peeps, I raised the weekly costs a dollar. One buck. My fees were already low compared to the dues the gyms in, say, Corning and the other larger towns in the area were pulling. One measly dollar. I know times are tough all over, but I have to keep the lights on, pay the staff, and wash stinking sweat towels at the Sudsy Suds when all I wanted was to go home.

"Whiner," I mumbled to myself as I channeled all the Zen vibes I could muster. Oh yes, and starting next week, unless I can find a yoga instructor with credentials, I'd be unrolling the mat for the biweekly sessions. Hopefully, Ornell will be back soon. He could take the Senior Sneakers jogging group out on Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday mornings. Ornell lacked yoga training. I'd just completed mine four months ago, driving all the way out to Penn Yan to a yoga school. Two hundred hours of training crammed into ten weekends. But now I could handle Etta's classes until she could return. Also, it is something that I use now every evening just to de-stress. Lord knows I needed a way to unwind. So yeah, long ass day and it wasn't over yet.

The only bright spot in a long day had been seeing Tanner at lunch. He looked good, considering he'd just gone under the knife. His eyes were bright, and his cheeks—what I could see of them—were pink with good health. His brother was a riot, the exact opposite of his sibling. Maybe I should reach out to Tanner to offer some personal training when he has progressed enough to return to the gym.

Or maybe you should let his team work with him? He is a professional athlete.

Right, yes, he was, and I was being creepy. The sound of a lawnmower firing off nearby pulled me from my daydreams of spotting for a sweaty, grunting Tanner LaBrie. Uncle Devon wheeled my mother's push mower out of her shed, waved at me, and began mowing the grass. I climbed out of my Subaru, inhaled the scent of fresh-cut grass, and made my way into the 50s-style rancher where I'd grown up. The flowerbeds were tidy, and a small rainbow flag sticker was proudly displayed in the

front bow window. Once inside, the smell of something delicious cooking led me through the lived-in house to the kitchen in the back. Mama was at the stove in a summer dress that bared her arms, her silver-and-black curls held back with a green and yellow hair wrap to match her dress.

“Hey, pretty lady,” I called as I entered. She smiled at me and tapped her cheek. I gave her a hug and a kiss right where she had indicated. “What’s in the pot?”

“Corn soup.” That was on track. My mother made soup at least once a week, no matter how hot or cold it was. I made a yummy sound and released her. “Hand me that pepper.” I plucked the shaker from the square table in the corner for her. “You here for rhubarb?”

“Yeah, Etta wants to put some up.” I yawned as I made my way to the coffee pot which was always filled with rich dark roast. “She’s going to have to rent a storage unit just for her canned goods.”

Mama laughed softly as she sprinkled. “Nothing wrong with getting food laid in for the lean times.”

I found my blue mug with the Army logo in the cupboard over the toaster and poured myself some coffee.

“You sound like Ma Walton,” I teased as I stirred in a spoonful of sweetener.

“You’re not too old for me to paddle you with this spoon,” she said, which always made me snicker. My mother had never raised a hand, spoon, slipper, or flip-flop to her three kids. She didn’t have to. We knew if we crossed the line, we’d be scolded and grounded. Then we’d have to deal with Uncle Devon lecturing us on being hooligans while our sainted mother slaved away to feed her ungrateful brood.

“I’ll behave,” I quickly said and got a wink. “Your coffee is the best in the county.”

“Oh sure, try to sweet talk your way out of a spooning.”

I ambled over, yawned into my coffee, and felt her studying me as I stared out the jalouse window over her old sink. Someday, soon I hoped, we’d get her a bigger house with new windows, a larger garden, and a view of the lake. That’s our plan. Hers, I know, was to have them haul her out of this rundown house in a body bag. Her words, not mine. I preferred not to think about her passing. I wasn’t ready to lose another parent any time soon.

“You look tired. You work too hard, Keyshaun,” she said as she placed her spoon on the watermelon slice spoon rest sitting between the burners. Mama did love fruit motifs. Her curtains were fruity, her tablecloths fruity, and her salt and pepper shakers were fruity.

“No recourse for it, Mama. The place is booming and new hires are hard to find. Now with Etta taking her leave and Ornell being out trying to nail down that location for gym number two, I’m doing what I have to do.”

“I’m more than willing to come in during the day to sign in people,” she offered yet again. “It would be fun. I miss seeing people.”

I pondered on it for longer than I should have. We kids were happy to see Mama retire last year. She’d worked two jobs for close to forty years. Now that we were settled and prospering, we’d pushed for her to slow down, and she did. Begrudgingly. But maybe a few hours over a couple of days a week would be good for her. She did have mad receptionist skills as that had been her day job at the big medical center over in Corning for years.

“Are you sure you want to work again?”

“Yes, I would love to hang out with all the young people and admire all the buff guys.”

“Mama.”

“What? I’m not dead. I like to look.”

“Okay, let me see what Etta and Ornell think.”

“Fine, if that makes you feel better.”

“It does. And thank you.” I pecked her cheek once more, drained my coffee, and headed out back to the rhubarb patch, a plastic dish and a sharp knife in hand.

Uncle Devon’s mower had stalled out front. Probably one of the neighbors had come over to jaw a bit. It was a close-knit community, filled with working-class folks of every color and religion. Mama loved it here, but the crime rate was not where we kids liked, and her living alone worried us deeply. Kneeling in the newly mowed lawn, I began harvesting the pinkish-red stalks, flicking snails away when I would discover them, and just enjoying the satisfaction that came from growing your own food. Well, Mama had grown it. She and Dad had started this patch when we’d just been infants. Now it fed her, us, and half the neighborhood. My phone buzzed with a new text when I was just about done. Checking it I saw it was my sister enquiring where I was and if I had rhubarb.

Lord you are bossy. Yes, I have rhubarb. Does Lionel have steaks on the grill? ~ Key

He does. They’re almost ready. ~ Jemetta

Nice. Give me twenty to wash up. ~ Key

Don't forget the rhubarb. ~ Jemetta

As if I dared. Maybe I could take some home and make a pie. Not that I was great shakes at baking and pie wasn't exactly the most nutritious food, but every once in a while we had to treat ourselves. And since I couldn't drop a dollop of whipped cream on top of Tanner LaBrie, pie would have to do.

Chapter Three

Tanner

The Schaffer Salt Arena looked so damn good.

Like a lost lover that had been on holiday for years.

“You do realize you’ve only been away from the ice for perhaps ten days, right?” Rudy asked as he pulled up to the players’ entrance, parked, and turned on the flashers. “I mean, the way you’re gazing at this ice palace, you’d think it was your runaway dog come home.”

“It’s a beautiful sight, isn’t it?” I asked, ignoring my brother’s silly comment. Of course, I missed the barn and the team. This game was pretty much all I had in my life that meant anything other than my brother.

“It’s gorgeous,” he replied as he exited the SUV to hustle around to my side.

“I can do it,” I said when he reached to unbuckle my seatbelt. “I’m not Mrs. Whipple from down the street.”

Rudy gave me that look but left me to unsnap, then ease my right leg up and out of the car. I pushed up to stand, balancing on my left leg, as he tugged the walker free. The sun was slanting westward but still had a few hours before it would set. Puck drop was at seven. It was now four. I was ready for hockey, even if I could only watch. Yes, it had been a rough day at therapy. My knee ached and my temper was

touchy from the pain. I'd not said a word, though. I'd persevered. Quitters didn't get back on the ice. I'd dealt with painful knees for years. A few aspirin, some ice, and mental fortitude were all that a man needed.

"I wish you would wait for me to get the walker set up before you get to your feet," Rudy snapped, his patience obviously strained as well. I took the walker from him and placed it in front of me.

"Hey," I said. He looked up with tired hazel eyes. "I know I'm a real pain in the ass at times. And that I dump on you when I'm sore. I don't mean to, it's just..."

"I'm the closest one," he said as a weary smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I understand. When I had my wisdom teeth out, I was a living bitch to Wade for a week straight. We'll be fine." He patted my cheek, frowned at the dark rough whiskers, and eased around me to allow me to make my way to the locked door. He knocked. One of the security men opened the steel door, grinned, and extended his hand.

"Fossie man, it is good to see you," Randall said, his smile wide, olive skin glowing in the bright June sun. "You look good. Come to cheer on our boys in red and gold?"

"You know it." I shook his hand as Rudy pulled away to find a place to park. Once we stepped inside, the chill of the rink touched my skin. Oh yes, that was the smell. Crisp cold air mixed with sweat and determination. Hockey. Damn, I wished I was playing tonight instead of sitting in the owner's suite with my foot on a fucking stool like some dowager duchess with a case of gout. "Them Cougars are tough. This series is going to be a dogfight."

Randall nodded, and we jawed for a minute or two before Rudy arrived. My brother had dressed for a night at the rink in tight gold leggings, one of my ridiculously oversized jerseys over a black turtleneck, and red leather boots. His large tote hung

off his shoulder, and he'd done something with his hair that included a curling iron and some sort of gel that set like wall spackle. His lips were painted gold and his eyes were lined in red. Randall gawked openly, his lips pressed flat, as Rudy fell in beside me like the mother hen that he was.

A soccer ball bounced down the cold corridor. Rudy threw up his tote to swat at the white and black ball. I grabbed it out of the air, smiled evilly at Greck jogging toward us, and then whipped it at him. Phil ducked the shot, hooting about hand passing, and kicked the ball to Liam before walking to us.

“Sorry, man, that kid has no control. You two are a sight for sore eyes. Not that my eyes are sore, they’re not. My eyes are fine. I just had them examined when Henri went to Corning for some sort of special exam for his Stargardts, which lasted forever. Not the exam, just the waiting. I got antsy. There was this coffee shop on the first floor of the hospital that I went to after Henri went in to see the specialist. They were selling a white chocolate muffin with a hot cup of vanilla coffee for like three bucks. I know! What a deal, right? I said to the girl, ‘Are you kidding me here with this price?’ and she was like, ‘No, it’s the daily special,’ and I was like, ‘Well then I’ll take two specials,’ and she boxed them up. I took them back to the waiting room, but the receptionist was looking at me funny as I sat down. I figured maybe she was upset that I didn’t get her a muffin and vanilla coffee, so I asked if she wanted me to dash down and get her one. She said no, then told me food wasn’t allowed in the waiting room. So I went out into the hall and sat on the floor to eat my muffin. Got to talking to the guy cleaning the bathrooms. Nice fella. Said he wasn’t much into hockey, but he wished us good luck against the Cougars. I gave him a five-dollar tip for keeping the bathrooms so clean. They’re really sparkling them crappers.”

“Damn, Greck, you could talk the hair off a bull’s ball sack.” I chuckled as he gave me a fast sideways hug. Liam jogged up, green eyes sparkling, cheeks pink from their soccer game in the hall. “You look like you could take on the world, Sunny. Must be either the rush of starting game one or being engaged.”

“Both,” the young goalie replied while offering me a fist to bump. I touched knuckles with Liam. The hall soon filled with my teammates, all of them slapping my shoulder as they welcomed me back to the barn.

“You sure you should be standing so long?” Bean asked. Always the captain, that man.

“To be honest, he should find somewhere to sit. The therapist said short walks of thirty minutes two to three times a day and you’ve already gone way over that,” Rudy chimed in, Greck hanging off his neck like a monkey. Phil liked my brother. All the guys on the team did, even the straight ones. It just took the straight fellows a little longer to adjust to a man who presented as femme while still using he/him pronouns. We’d had a few flubs at first, but after Rudy explained that he used he/him but other enbee folk might use they/them and it was always totally cool to ask first, things ran smoothly. Yes, a few of the guys seemed standoffish. That was not just Rudy, though. A couple of our teammates were cool to all the queer players on the team. Not rude, never that, just a little distant. Which was fine. I didn’t expect every soul on this planet to like me. Straight or gay, there would be some people who did not jibe with me on a personal level. Even if we weren’t bosom buddies, the chilly guys were polite off the ice and demonstrative to a point on the ice. They would knuckle bump but not hug on a celly. Again, totally cool. You do you and all that. As long as they were respectful to me and mine, I had no beef. “If we could get him to a chair and find some ice.”

“If there’s one thing we got plenty of in a hockey rink, it’s ice,” DJ said, slapping my shoulder once more just because. “We’ll get you settled comfy, Fossie.”

I missed DJ. He was more than just my defensive partner; he was a good friend. His boyfriend was a minister, a very cool minister, and had already been secured to marry Liam and Tarcy in August. Now that the goalie and the race car driver had gotten rings on each other they had wasted no time in setting the date. I’d never been

married, obviously, or even lived with another guy, so my knowledge of what led a man to propose and then rush into tying the knot was limited. How could they be sure? I mean 100 percent sure that this man was the man? Was there a questionnaire for a potential spouse to fill out? If so, where was this form found?

“Just get me an ice bag and a beer. I’ll be good,” I replied. The guys laughed. They led me to the dressing room, where I sat in front of my cubicle, walker off to the side, and shot the shit for the longest time. Rudy sat beside me, feeding me tiny penguin cheese crackers while I sipped on a Mountain Dew. An ice bag rested on my knee. I’d never been happier. This team was something special. The men were open, accepting, warm, and loving. A true band of brothers.

I got to enjoy the pregame pep talk from Coach Sanford. I felt like I was a part of the Gladiators, even if I was in loose lounge pants, a Gladiators hoodie, and my old Vans, while the rest of the guys were gearing up. Rudy insisted we head to the owner’s box instead of lingering with the team. Finally, I relented, although I’d much rather be with the men than with the movers and shakers of Watkins Glen. Not that the village was overflowing with millionaires or anything, but I wasn’t much into politicians. I didn’t own a business. I wouldn’t know most of the people gathered to watch the game and would feel like the odd man out. The brace on my knee was a stark reminder that I was doing nothing for this team. Would Fred Gallo, the owner, see that as a reminder not to renew my contract? It was up this year, and at thirty-eight with bad knees, my future was anything but secure. I prayed he would see some good in me and give me a couple more years. I was not ready to quit this game. I knew I had a lot to offer if my knees would stop letting me down.

“Ah, Tanner, how marvelous to see you up and about. Please, come in and have a seat.” Henri’s lovely French-accented voice floated to us as we entered the suite. Greck’s man was smiling widely, blond hair neatly combed, sleek summer suit pressed, and shoes shining like a gold bar. The man’s butler must spend hours buffing his dress shoes. “Rudolph, you look quite into the spirit of the evening. I saved you

two seats by me and a few other local business owners. I hope that is acceptable?”

“Yeah, looks great,” I said as I wheeled my walker over to the tall island. The owner was at the bar talking with the mayor. Servers moved through the crowd of about twenty, refreshing drinks as needed. Along the back wall sat several serving dishes with various finger foods and snacks, like mozzarella sticks, chicken tenders, and sweet Italian sausages from a local meat processor. With my eyes on the legs of my walker, I didn’t see one very special business owner until I’d reached the island.

Keyshaun Williams smiled brightly at me when our eyes met. If not for the fact that I was gripping my walker so tightly, I would have teetered over. Rudy, always ready to engage anyone when I floundered, slid in front of me to offer his hand to Key.

“Mr. Williams! What a joy it is to see you again,” Rudy said as they shook hands.

Key’s dark brown eyes moved over me. I felt a flush of warmth rush through me. Damn it, I should have put more effort into my appearance.

“No one was more shocked than me to get a call from Henri asking if I were available to do some socializing tonight as his guest.” Key released Rudy’s hand and then held his out to me. Leaning on my left arm, I grabbed his hand with my right. Tingles raced through my arm right down to my balls. His long fingers gently tightened around mine as our gazes locked. I wanted to say something witty or classy. Something refined like Henri would toss out or funny like Greck would come up with. My brain was nonfunctioning, it seemed. Made sense since most of my blood was pooling in my groin.

“You look nice,” I coughed out and moaned internally. It was the truth. The man looked amazing. Long legs in fitted dark jeans, a soft yellow shirt that made his dark skin glow, and a blazer sans tie. Even his shoes were stylish black Rockport slip-ons. “I mean, your shoes are nice.”

Oh my God. How many attempts would it take to throw yourself through the safety glass overlooking the ice? Can we use the walker to shatter it? Holy hell, Tanner.

Rudy made a noise like he had swallowed a live goldfish. “Tanner enjoys nice shoes,” he scrambled to say, pulling me off the ledge, but just.

“I do too. You want to sit next to me?” Key asked. Henri and Rudy hung on our every word, both men displaying far too much interest in our interaction.

“We’d love to,” Rudy leaped in, nudging me toward a stool and reaching for my walker. “I was just saying he needed to rest that knee a bit. And here you are, being so gallant. Such a gentleman. Sit, Tanner.”

I sat. What else could I do? Key wiggled into his stool, easing his leg past my left one, the rub of his thigh on mine setting off an uncomfortable reaction in my briefs. I hurried to pull my right leg in, mumbling something about not wanting anyone to bang into it when in reality I was trying to pinch my semi-hard dick into compliance. It sort of worked.

“They have ice at the bar,” Rudy said and skipped off.

“Let me get you something to eat and drink,” Henri said, and then, he, too, skipped off. And there I sat, a bearded bump on a log, sitting beside the best-looking man in Watkins Glen.

“So, how was your therapy session?” Key asked, lifting his glass of pink fizzy liquid to take a sip. My sight lingered on his long neck and how it worked when he swallowed. I wanted to lick a wide stripe from his collarbone to his ear to taste him. I was sure he was delicious. He smelled of green tea and mint, which would now be my favorite tea blend. Bet he tasted just as good as he smelled. Someone slid in beside me, a round man with no hair but sporting a walrus mustache who was

vaguely familiar. He grabbed my hand, pumped it, and thanked me for helping to sell so many raffle tickets for the children's ward at the Corning Hospital. Ah right, that was where I had seen him before.

Walrus Man moved on. Key gave me a puckish sort of smile. "You're in demand."

"Nah, not really."

He leaned in, just close enough that his forearm rested beside mine on the island top. Sparks danced over my skin. The boner that I'd been strangling into submission decided it wasn't giving up the ghost quite yet.

"So humble. That's one thing about hockey players. They seem to lack the egos of other professional athletes. It's refreshing."

"Thanks." I wanted to move my arm so I could focus, but his skin was so warm that I left my arm resting next to his. "So, you're here."

"That I am," he replied with a wink. "And so are you. What are the odds we'd end up running into each other again so soon? You believe in kismet?"

My tongue was unable to form words, so I just bobbed my head. My gaze, however, was on my brother and a certain vineyard owner as they whispered to each other at the bar. It was then that I suspected that kismet might be getting helped along by Rudy and Henri. I'd have to keep an eye on those two. Did they even know each other well enough to plot out matchmaking? Was there some sort of club I didn't know about where people who were...

Wait. The WAGS, or as they were now known, the SIG OTHERS. They had a small group that did things like visiting local charities, planning parties, and rumor has it, liked to ensure no Gladiator was living a lonely life. They'd tried a few times to set

me up with one or two guys. The dating pool for queer men was small in this charming little village, so the attempts didn't go well. But how did my brother figure into the SIG OTHERS? He wasn't my fiancé, boyfriend, or even a steady dating dude. Not that I would object to steady dating Key because hello the man is gorgeous.

"...you'd fit the clothing well. Would you be interested in speaking to him?"

My wandering eye flew from Henri and Rudy at the bar to Keyshaun. "Sure, yes, absolutely."

His smile was so bright it required sunglasses. His one canine was a little crooked, but it added to his beauty instead of detracting from it.

"Great. He's really got a good eye for men's athletic wear. His shop is just outside of Elmira, and while it's still on the small side, it's going to explode soon. Also, Clay is looking for diverse models and spokesmen for his athletic wear, so you should be a perfect rep. I'll text him your contact info now if you want?"

I blinked dully. "Oh sure, yeah, that would be great." What the fuck had I just agreed to? Modeling? "You said modeling?"

Key glanced up from tapping on his phone, dark eyes curious. "I did, yeah, well, not so much modeling per se, but...well, I guess sort of modeling. Mostly just wearing his stuff around and then shooting a small testimonial about how much you like it. That's only if you truly do like his clothing, but I'm sure you will."

"Modeling? Like...modeling?" My brain was stuck on that image. Me, a big doofus hockey player in a knee brace strutting my gimpy stuff on a catwalk. FFS.

"I can see you're freaking out a bit." He laid his phone on the counter and touched my hand, gently, reassuringly. "I misspoke I think. Not modeling like Paris Fashion

Week or anything like that. Just some shots of you being Tanner out and about in his athletic wear.”

“Oh, so like me skating and fishing and shit?”

“Yes, exactly. You know, you looking all rugged and outdoorsy.”

“Okay, yeah, I guess I can do some fishing shots and shit. I’d have to talk to this guy first and then let my agent deal with the contracts and all that legal stuff. What’s this dude’s name?”

“Clay Pendergast. If you give me your number, I can send it to him?”

“Sure, yeah, sorry. I’ll need yours.”

And just like that, we had exchanged numbers. Stupid of me to feel so giddy about something so mundane. It wasn’t like the man had said he wanted to call me and whisper sweet nothings in my ear. It was a business contact. That was all.

“Nice. I’m sure he’ll be in contact soon.” Key sent me a text with a waving hand. I replied with a meme of Forrest Gump waving. “Ah man, what a great movie. What’s your favorite Tom Hanks movie?”

“Shit, that’s like asking me to choose my favorite dog.”

“Oh, you have dogs?”

“Four. Want to see some pics?”

“Hell yeah.”

Ten minutes, and about two hundred dog images later, Henri and Rudy finally returned with drinks. Both of them looked a little suspect as they placed a fresh pink drink in front of Key. Rudy handed me something that smelled and looked like ginger ale.

“They out of beer?” I enquired, pocketing my phone as Rudy wiggled himself up onto a stool and goofily stared at me. “What?”

“Nothing. Nice to see you making friends. So, Keyshaun, do you like dogs, the woods, hiking, fishing, canoeing, and talking to moose?”

“Uhm, sure?” Key answered as he finished off his cocktail and took a sip of his new drink. “I enjoy being outside. Dogs are cool. Never spoke to a moose.”

“I never did either. My brother has been in the sun too long,” I snapped, wishing I could kick Rudy in the shin but unable to. Why were little brothers so damn bratty?

“So tell us about the moose,” Henri said, sliding in smooth as silk. “They are at your cabin in Canada, yes?”

I filled them in about my log cabin. I’d just sold my smaller one and moved to a new place, further into the boreal woods with a bigger dock on a private bass lake outside the remote town of Makwa.

“The town and lake are Cree words for loon,” I informed the threesome at our little island. Rudy knew all of this, but the other two gents seemed to be quite enthralled. “You should come visit over the summer. Bring Greck,” I said to Henri before looking over at Key. “You’re invited too. You can bring your...whoever you’re dating.”

Smooth. Real smooth. Dimwit.

“I’m unattached at the moment,” Key replied, which made my heart skip a beat. Rudy beamed at me over his glass of wine.

“I think we just might do that. It would be worth it just to see my city boy in the wilds of Canada,” Henri snickered. “Perhaps we could all come up for a fishing weekend. Do you fish, Keyshaun?”

“Yes, do you fish? Tanner loves to fish. He’s quite the angler. You should see the walls in his new cabin. Covered with stuffed fish that he’s caught and other outdoorsy things like old poles and those little wicker baskets they wear around their waists.”

“They’re called creel baskets and they’re worn over the shoulder,” I hurried to correct.

“Oh yes, fishing purses,” Rudy slid in right before the lights went down and everyone shot to their feet. Even me, I just had to balance on my left leg and use the island for support. I wobbled a little to adjust my weight and pressed slightly into Key’s side. He smiled at me, the flashing red and gold lights in the suite rolling over his face to make his skin glow ruby and then gold.

“Sorry,” I said as his hand came to rest on my lower back.

He leaned close to be heard over the thumping sound of “Gladiator” filling the arena. “You’re welcome to lean into my side anytime. I enjoy a big man tight to me.”

While the team hit the ice, I stared into the prettiest brown eyes I’d ever stared into. Blood rushed through me at the sound of over ten thousand rabid fans chanting for the home team and his touch warmed me through the back of my hoodie, so I opted to remain where I was. Purely for recovering knee reasons. Not because he smelled so damn good and felt even better with his hip snug to mine. Somehow, and I don’t know how, I managed to keep my cool throughout the anthem. Kind of sucked to

have to sit down afterward and lose that hot man at my side.

The suite grew louder when the very first puck drop brought about the very first check. A rocking shoulder-to-chest explosion from my partner Deandre to one of the Cougars, which made the boards rattle. Nice.

“Damn,” Key shouted over the noise in the suite. “That was lethal.”

“That’s my partner,” I announced proudly and got the funniest look from Key.

“Like your partner in life or...”

Took me a second. “Oh no, no, defensive partner. What do you know about hockey?”

“They play it on ice, hit each other with sticks, and generally are missing teeth,” he confessed sheepishly before giving me a sly little smile. It was a good look on him. “I mostly came to hang out with you.”

A roar went up in the suite. My wide eyes stayed locked on Key until someone behind us pounded on my shoulder with a rubber finger. I looked down at the ice to see a scrum breaking out in the corner to Liam’s right as the goalie, always cool as a summer squash, tossed the puck he had obviously just caught into the air. The zebras were too busy trying to separate Gladiators and Cougars to take the frozen rubber biscuit from our tendie.

Amazing. I’d finally found someone who could pull my attention from a playoff hockey game with only a flirty comment and a twitch of the corner of his mouth.

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Chapter Four

Keyshaun

As I rolled around in bed the following morning, I blinked at the sun streaming through the thin slats of my window blinds. My toes curled under the covers as I stretched to work out some kinks. Funny how before I hit thirty, I had no kinks. Now I was Petty Officer Kink and not the fun kind of kink either.

Sunrise was just occurring as I lay in bed, a ceiling fan moving the warm May air around my room, and reflected on last night. There were quite a few things to ruminate over as I lay there with the cool sheets tickling my bare thighs.

Thought number one: Hockey. Not a sport that I generally paid much attention to, but suddenly found myself wanting to watch more. It was fast, physical, and entertaining. I'd been to a few games here and there over the years but tended to enjoy boxing, followed by basketball. Ice hockey just wasn't a big game in the Black community, and that was a shame because it was one hell of a game. So yeah, I thought I could become a fan of ice hockey.

Thought number two: Hockey players. Now we were talking. Like most jocks—and I felt qualified to comment on those of the athletic persuasion as I was one of them—hockey players were incredibly attractive specimens. Toned, strong, and aggressive. I liked a man who took care of himself. Ate well. Worked out. Didn't do drugs or drink to excess. Had some swagger but not too much. Just enough to make my dick take notice.

Thought number three: A particular hockey player. Damn. Yeah, Tanner LaBrie was one particularly fine man. He possessed that inner knowledge of his skills and talents but wasn't boastful. The most appealing thing about him other than his looks and that fine body was that he didn't see himself as anything other than a regular guy. He was a little shy. Okay, a lot shy. That, in and of itself, was a quality that I generally wasn't drawn to. As mentioned in thought number two, I liked some swagger. His strut was there, it was just softened by his lack of ego. A man who was gorgeous but didn't know he was gorgeous. That did not happen often. I wanted to show Tanner just how pretty I thought he was.

Thought number four: Clay Pendergast was going to freaking lose his guavas when he saw Tanner in some of his athletic wear. Especially anything lacking sleeves. Tanner had amazing guns. I'd seen them up close and personal at the gym. I'd have to text Clay when I got around to it to let him know Tanner was healing from knee surgery so he shouldn't bring any shorts. I didn't know the big man well, but I suspected Tanner would not want to broadcast his injury. Hell, I wasn't even sure Tanner would agree to the modeling job, but I was going to do my best. It would mean more cash and exposure for him as well as a nice boost to his pride. Also, and this was pure me being greedy, if he and his agent signed up, perhaps we could do some shoots together.

"I'd like to see more of him up close and personal," I told the empty pillow sitting beside my head. My alarm went off just as I thought about indulging in a fast hand-job while dreaming of exactly what I'd find if I ever did get my hands on a certain out-of-commission defenseman. "Right, reality arrives."

I pushed up to sit, stretched, and kicked off the sheets. I'd not taken three steps when a text rolled in. Nothing coming in at five after six in the morning could be good. Mom always said any news between eleven p.m. and seven a.m. was bad news.

Key-My brother's dog has a broken toenail so I can't come in to cover the desk.

Sorry. ~ Terrence

Yep, Mom was right yet again. This guy, honestly. He'd been in my employ for two weeks. Two. Weeks. And he had missed four days with some pretty dubious excuses. Terrence and I were going to have a long talk when he showed up tomorrow morning. If he showed up. Honestly, why was it so hard to find good workers?

"Right, well, this is going to sting a bit." I sighed after running through a mental list of people I could contact to cover Terrence's shift. There was nary a damn soul. Everyone had their own classes to lead, so I couldn't pull the trainers from their schedules or personal clients unless I wanted to piss off my members. So, I thumbed over the weekly work schedule on my phone and then called my mother. Called, not texted. Mom was not a fan of texting. "Hey, Mom," I cheerfully said as I yanked some jogging shorts and a tee from my pile of clean clothes atop my dresser. All credit to me, I'd carried the basket that far two nights ago.

"What's wrong?" she asked right off.

"Nothing major. I just got a text from Terrence."

"Oh, he's a shifter."

I paused to mull that over. "Like he changes into an animal?"

"No, Keyshaun, don't be silly. He's shiftless. I pegged him right off the day I met him."

"Oh gotcha." Mom had a nose for shifty, shady, and lazy people. Claimed she could sniff them out like a bloodhound. Oddly enough, she was usually on the mark. "I don't know if he's a shifter or not, but I do know he's left me even more short-staffed on the desk. You mentioned something the other day about—"

“I’ll be at the gym at seven to unlock it and will man the desk!”

She hung up before I could say thanks. That made me chuckle. I’d stop by the little minute mart after my run with the Silver Sprinters in fifteen minutes to get Mom some flowers and a cup of tea. Shaking out my tee with the word GOAT beside a picture of Caitlin Clark, I tugged it on, yanked on some shorts and socks, and bolted downstairs to find my keys, wallet, water bottle, and running shoes.

Without even a cup of coffee or a bagel, I was out the door and in my car. On my way to the Keuka Lake Outlet trail, a gorgeous chunk of natural beauty set aside for hiking, camping, running, horseback riding, fishing, or snowmobiling in the winter. It was a decent run of about seven miles one way. I’d have to cut out early to cover the senior walking aerobics class at nine, but Uncle Devon could lead them back to their cars when I split off to return. Many of the older folks who ran with us were lifelong runners. My uncle had not been, not even close. He’d only signed onto this whole fitness thing when his brother died so suddenly. He’d lost close to a hundred pounds, lowered his sugar and cholesterol, and probably added twenty or more years to his life. If only my father had taken the counsel of his doctors, family, and friends...

My sporty Mustang filled with the latest album from Childish Gambino. Windows down, the cool touch of morning on the air, I hustled my backside to the trail. I arrived late and was told about it not with words but with the disappointed grandma/grandpa look from a dozen seniors in tracksuits.

“Sorry, sorry,” I apologized as I exited my car, grabbing my water bottle and then hitting the fob to lock up things. “I was at the hockey game last night and then went out to have a few laughs with one of the players and his brother.”

Tanya, the self-appointed second-in-command of our running squad, eyed me through her round bifocals.

“About time you had a date,” she said as she did some bent leg swings. Uncle Devon’s gaze flew from his shoelaces to me. I waved both hands in the air.

“No, no, no date. Just a hockey game followed by some laughs at the Yellow Pickle,” I clarified. The last thing I needed was to have twelve gossip-loving seniors spreading around things that weren’t true about me and Tanner.

“I heard that the Yellow Pickle serves curly fries with cheese,” Arthur Ingot piped up and then got a dour look from his wife, Tanya.

“You and your curly fries. The Yellow Pickle is a gay bar, obviously, if the gay boys go there and have laughs,” Tanya countered. A rather loud discussion about the Yellow Pickle—it was not a gay bar but a new trendy little café/bar on the west side of Seneca Lake—broke out and I eventually had to wade in to explain that people of all persuasions were welcome at the Pickle to enjoy cheesy fries and pulled pork sandwiches.

“Now, if we can get going? I’m only making a half run with you all today,” I said as a swarm of gnats flew into Millicent Parks. She had to have Beatrice Lyons, her sister-in-law and retired librarian from the Watkins Glen School District, pluck the black specks out of her silver hair. “Devon will run the whole course with you. Everyone has their phones, water, and emergency contact bracelets?”

They all raised their hands to show their beaded bracelets, courtesy of Tanya the bead crafter, and we began stretching. The woods were cool with beams of sunlight titling through the thick canopy of trees. A few bikers were enjoying the lower temps of early morning as we took a few minutes to warm-up before we set off. I usually let Uncle Devon lead, and I brought up the rear, keeping an eye on the group for anyone struggling. Not that any of them did. They were all in great shape and had been given clearance to join the Silver Sprinters by their doctors. Running was a wonderful way for seniors to build and maintain bone density, keep their joints and muscles healthy,

and improve cardiovascular health. It also provided them with companionship and comradery, something that many in the group needed as they had lost spouses and were living alone.

These runs were no easy jogs. We hustled. But we also took longer to warm-up and then cool down. If I were running alone, I'd be hitting it much harder, but this run was not about ego or who could outrun who. It was to keep these seniors healthy and happy. If I could do that, then I was doing okay. We took shorter strides to ease the impact on older knees, took multiple water breaks, and slowed to a fast walk every fifteen minutes or so to help reduce stress and lower the chance of injury.

The chit-chat slowed as we ran but picked up when we were in our walking mode. I speedwalked behind the group, enjoying the gossip they were sharing. The trail was gorgeous in early summer. We ran past ponds with sunning turtles on logs and overgrown metal bridges that nature had reclaimed and skirted the beautiful Seneca Mills Falls.

When my smartwatch alarm went off, I called out to the runners, jogging in place to wave goodbye to them. Uncle Devon nodded, shouted to the group to follow him to the turnaround spot about a mile ahead, and then gave me a salute as I passed the baton.

"You all be good," I called out. "I'll see you next Saturday morning over at Punch Bowl Road for a short run followed by a birthday brunch for Charles at the Checkered Flag Eatery by the raceway."

They shouted in agreement and followed Devon around a subtle bend in the trail, disappearing behind some slim, leafy oaks. I spun and headed back to my car, hitting the run back hard. When I arrived at the parking area, I was soaked through with sweat, panting, and feeling fantastic. I took time to stretch—I did not like cramps—and hydrate before checking over the texts that had rolled in while I'd been

running. I did my best to unplug from the world during my runs and sparring bouts in the ring by turning off my phone. Mental health is just as important as physical health. Lord knows the internet can be unpleasant at times.

Sweat ran into my eyes as I leaned on my car's front fender to catch up.

Mom had made it to the gym and was now holding down the fort.

Ornell was meeting with a realtor at nine to check into a second building as the first was being niggled to death by the owner and he was getting tired of the stall tactics.

Etta had reached out to see if I had any plans for the weekend as Lionel needed help to set up the cribs. I loved Lionel to death, but that man didn't know a screw from a lag bolt.

Clay Pendergast had talked with Tanner's agent and was typing up a contract for them to look over this very morning.

All good news for the most part. The seller in Buffalo being a PITA wasn't so great, but Ornell would either get them to come down or he would move on. My brother was not one to suffer fools or people trying to outmaneuver him. He was too smart for his own good at times, but that tenacity was a Williams family trait that had served us all well.

Feeling a little cheeky, and a lot winded, I reached out to Tanner, just to say I'd had fun at the Yellow Pickle with him and Rudy as well as sharing how excited I was to hear he was going to be a Pendergast Athletics rep. My sneaking into his life at the crack of dawn had nothing to do with the fact that I'd awoken thinking about him. Nope. This was purely a professional reach out. And I was one of the Golden Girls.

Morning. So happy to hear that you're coming aboard the PA train! ~ K

Smiling down at how clever I was, my eyes flared when I saw those three dancing dots. Ah, so he was an early riser too. That checked. Being an athlete, I assumed he would be up and at it training when he wasn't recovering.

Personal Assistant? Plum Attendant? Plastic Aerator? Specifics matter. *winky face emoji* ~ T

Oh, so it was like that, was it? Not only was he up with the chickens, as Uncle Devon liked to say, but he was also witty in the morning. Good to know. I was an up-and-at-'em kind of man, and it seemed Tanner was as well.

Ha, ha. Pendergast Athletics. ~ K

Oh, that PA. Yeah, I'm down with it as long as they don't show my scars. ~ T

Nothing at all wrong with a man having scars. Shows you lived life well and played hard. ~ T

A rowdy wind blew in, sweeping up some dust and swirling it around the parking area. The gust felt amazing on my overheated skin.

Are you always this eloquent in the morning? ~ T

Pretty much. ~ K

LOL! Good to know. Off to PT. Have a good one. ~ T

I was so tempted to add something outrageously flirty before I signed off. Something about him finding out just how eloquent I was in the morning by waking up beside me some time. My thumbs were flying, the vampy text, before my brain caught up. I stared at the come-on then deleted it. Most guys tended to be pretty upfront about

hooking up. Tanner seemed more reserved. That could just be he was feeling lost and vulnerable due to his injury, surgery, and a rather long recovery, or he was just a slower-moving sort of man.

Whatever the reason, I'd find out at his time, but I didn't want to come on too strong and discourage the nice relationship we had been building.

Give that therapy hell! ~ K

I forced myself to pocket my phone, smile at the summer sun, and get my sweaty ass to work. Mom was at the desk probably talking the ears off everyone who walked through the front door. She was like that. Guess that's where her kids got that gabber gene.

It took a week for Clay Pendergast, Tanner's agent, and me to get all the paperwork signed and approved by our various attorneys. During that week, Tanner and I had become quite the text buddies. He had a warm, dry wit that I enjoyed and a love of books that bordered on obsessive. Not the kind of books I would ever imagine a professional hockey player reading, mind you. He was shy when it came to discussing himself, but if you touched on his dogs, hockey, or Jane Austen, then he could talk off your ear. Tonight, I moved around my kitchen preparing myself some dinner—I'd been eating takeout far too often this past week. Fourteen-hour days at the gym meant little time to come home and cook, but that was the life of a business owner. I hired two new trainers, thank God, which freed me up to take on the yoga classes that had been on hold. Etta had tried to help out, but she'd been hit with some serious cramping, so her doctor had told her to rest. Rest being resting, not cleaning the house on the daily or canning everything she could shove into a Mason jar or leading yoga classes. She'd not been happy. Poor Lionel. He was getting the brunt of her displeasure. I had told my brother if Lionel could put up with my sister

throughout this pregnancy and the birthing of two little ones, he deserved sainthood. Ornell had agreed wholeheartedly. We loved our sister to bits but carrying twins had shown us the sharp side of her tongue more than once. Course, if I were that pregnant, I'd be snippy too.

My phone buzzed as I chopped up some cilantro to place in the bottom of a beef, cilantro, and lime rice bowl I was making for supper. I glanced at the image of four dogs and Tanner on a sofa, smiled, and read the incoming text.

Me, Bingley, Elizabeth, Darcy, Elinor chilling on the back porch. ~ T

He looked so happy with his dogs all curled up next to him. Funny. I'd swear I knew those names from somewhere.

I stopped chopping greens. No way. A grin broke free. I wiped my hands on the dishtowel, turned down the smooth soul playlist flowing out of Alexa, and grabbed up my phone from where it was lying beside a lime and a bag of brown rice.

I'm calling you. ~ K

I tapped in his number, snickering all the while. He picked up instantly, an old pug dog lying on his chest, tongue lolling. Tanner looked great. His beard had been trimmed up showing more of his chiseled facial features. There were still some thick whiskers so his playoff beard was safe, but I could see Rudy's delicate hand in the shaping.

"Hey," he said as a gray pittie tried to wiggle her way onto his chest as well. A black dog with one eye stuck his face into the camera, blocking out everything but a pink wet nose. "Oh my God, you guys. I can't see...oh shit. Squirrel!" The screen cleared instantly. Barking dogs could be heard. Tanner righted his phone to point at his smiling face. "Works every time. Everything okay? You never call."

“Was there really a squirrel?”

“Nah, but they don’t know that. They’ll be busy staring up into the trees for half an hour. So...”

He sat up straighter, giving me a fine peek at a broad chest barely covered by a tank top. Lots of curly dark hair, tons of muscle, and one thick arm with a beefy bicep. Mm, mm good.

“They’ll get you for lying to them. That old pug looks like he could cook up a fitting revenge.”

“Nah, Eddie’s too old to plot. Elinor is too loveable to entertain revenge, Darcy isn’t devious enough, and Elizabeth is too busy trying to wheedle food to plan retribution.”

“Right, about those names...” I plucked my phone from the counter to watch his reaction up close. A blush crept into his cheeks and nose, then spread to his ears.

“What about them?”

“Are they from something I should know? I feel like I saw a movie about a group of people with names just like those.” I glanced up and to the right while tapping my chin. “The name of it escapes me...”

“You’re an asshole,” he mumbled as yips and yaps flowed into my kitchen. I sorely wished I was there at his big old farmhouse, lounging around with some dogs and a blushing hockey player.

“What? Why would you say something so mean to me? Here I am just trying to recall a movie and you’re all snippy.”

He rolled those expressive brown-green eyes as a snort of amusement broke free. “Okay, yeah, I’m being an asshole.”

“I know you are, that’s why I said it.” He looked fearsome, but his eyes were sparkling with mirth.

“Care to tell me about it?” I turned to lean on the counter, my dinner on hold until I teased the big man a little bit.

“Not really.” I tipped my head and gave him my best drag queen “Gurl” look. “Fine, it’s nothing. They’re good names. I read a few books.”

“You read the books?”

“Yes, books. I read the books. I like to read.” I was enjoying his bumbling ramble of an explanation. “They were...I like...them. There’s nothing wrong with a man enjoying a good romance story.”

“Never said there was. I’ll confess something to you, but you have to keep it a secret.”

“Sure, okay.”

“I’ve seen Notting Hill at least a dozen times.” His smile was brilliant. “And The Proposal . I know most of the dialogue by heart.”

“Cool. So you get it. I like romance. I enjoy watching two souls meet and then slowly fall in love, growing, changing, and accepting each other’s quirks.”

And there it was. That was Tanner LaBrie. A man who liked slow romance that built into something eternal. That I could do. If he’d let me. No time like the present to

find out if he wanted to open the door to his heart just a crack.

“Just to put it out there, I have a few DVDs of my favorite romances on a shelf in my living room. If you’d like, maybe I can bring some over some night?”

“You okay with dogs?” He seemed willing, and that gave me a tingle in all the right places.

“Dude, I love dogs. Wish I could have one, but I’m not home enough and that’s not fair to the dog,” I replied in earnest. He nodded, seemingly pleased with my reply. “I also dig cats, chickens, goats...love goats, to be honest.”

“Well, I only have the dogs right now. They’re enough to worry about when I am traveling with the team and all, but someday when I retire, I’d like to fill up this old farm with animals.”

“Sounds damn fine. So...a movie night?”

“Okay yeah. I’m free tonight. If you want. I mean, I know you were cooking dinner and all, so maybe tomorrow or Friday would be better suited to—”

“If you want, I can bring the ingredients and cook at your place? You and Rudy eat yet?”

“No, not yet. My therapy session was late.”

“Then I’ll come make my lime rice bowls at your place. That sound good?”

A long moment passed, and I was sure he was going to decline.

“Yeah, that sounds really good,” he replied.

“See you in half an hour.” He bobbed his head and smiled, a smile that caused all kinds of additional tingles in all the places. I fist-pumped the air a few times, gathered up my ingredients, and ran out the door with cloth bags filled with food flapping in the wind.

Chapter Five

Tanner

“What the hell have I just done?”

I lowered my phone, my belly jangling with nervous excitement. Key was coming over. To my house. In half an hour.

Bingley farted in his sleep. That ended the giddy romantic fizz in my gullet and opened up a big can of reality.

Thirty minutes. My house looked—and probably smelled—like a kennel and I was lounging around in my oldest ugly workout clothes.

“Shit,” I whispered, grabbing my brand new cane—my brother had gifted it to me just a few hours ago after I had been told by my therapist that I could move on from the walker—and I slowly pushed to my feet. Dogs scattered. I glanced down at my feet to make sure I didn’t step/fall over a canine and saw my socks. Old socks.

“Rudy!” I bellowed, caning my way through the pack, who were now on high alert because I had yelled. Seems yelling about anything is a reason to enter bark mode. Bingley was even in on the ruckus but hadn’t decided if getting up was truly warranted just yet, so he yipped from his reclining position. “Rudy!”

My brother thundered down the stairs in a summer dressing gown, a towel around his neck, and his hair foamy with deep red hair dye.

“What? Did you fall? Is there a fire? Did Elinor piddle on the carpet over seeing a squirrel again?” Rudy asked as he sped down the stairs. The mention of a squirrel sent the foursome into a true chaotic frenzy, racing to every window to add more slobber to the already dried slobber that had been applied since the housekeeping service had washed the windows two days ago. “Good gods, I cannot hear myself think!”

“We have company coming over in thirty minutes,” I shouted above the din, going as fast as a man with a sore knee and a cane could move to reach the back door.

“What? I’ve just started dying my hair. Can we just tell your teammates to come over tomorrow?” He stamped around me, bare feet slapping on the hardwood flooring, in order to get around me and free the dingoes.

“It’s not the guys,” I said as I left him to the dogs and turned to make my way to the stairs.

“Stop, sit, sit! I am not going to open this door until everyone is seated,” Rudy was saying as I hit the stairs. The climb was going to be stupidly slow. Dumb knees. Why did body parts have to wear out? Why did men a sneeze away from forty develop crushes on men much younger than they were? What the hell had I been thinking to say yes to the sexiest man ever to walk this planet to come on over?! “Now you may go.” The pack raced outside, barks and yaps floating skyward as they searched for a squirrel that wasn’t there.

“Shit, why do I own a house with two floors?” I grumbled while scaling the steps, one gimp and a heft at a time. Rudy came up behind me with his hands out as if he was going to be able to stop me if I fell backward. I’d take him down with me and probably flatten him in the process. “I need to shower and change stat.”

“I’m sure your teammates have seen you looking worse.”

“It’s not the guys. It’s Keyshaun.”

When did these steps end? Did they go to heaven?

“Keyshaun? That beautiful man who we had such a lovely time with at the game and who you’ve been text flirting with ever since?”

I threw a dark look over my shoulder. Rudy met it with a cheeky grin. “I have not been text flirting with him. We’re just friends. We talk about recovery methods and how I’ll be able to get back into shape from this surgery.”

“Yes, right, watch that rubber duckie dog toy.” He scooted around me to pick up Elinor’s squeaky duck from my path. “Well, whatever it is you two chat about, it lights you up like a beacon.”

“Oh bullshit,” I muttered, easing my bad leg—or my new and improved leg, as Tiny Trish from PT suggested I call it, to the top riser. I paused to catch my breath and let the ache in my knee subside. I’d for sure gone at that climb too hard. I’d pay for it later. Right now, I needed a shower, a comb, and a change of clothes. “I’m showering. I do not need help. Go pick up dog toys.” He popped a hip as he motioned to the ruby red stuff sitting on his head. “Well, shit. Okay, go finish your hair and we’ll tidy up when we’re both done making ourselves presentable.”

Sadly, picking up after the dogs never took place.

Rudy’s home dye job took longer than he thought it would and I’d just managed to make myself look less grungy when the doorbell rang.

“Damn it.” I sighed while making my way down the stairs in that dumpy cane on step

below, surgery leg, non-surgery leg, cane on step below, surgery leg, non-surgery leg descent that took forever and a freaking day. “Coming!”

“Take your time,” Key shouted from the other side of the front door. Rudy was shouting something to the dogs through the bathroom window. The sound of the bell had set them off in the back yard. It was a good thing I didn’t have any close neighbors or the cops would be at my doorstep daily with noise complaints.

When I yanked open the front door ten years later, there he stood, smiling, brown eyes merry, and cloth totes filled with groceries. He was in black shorts, a sunshine yellow tank top with his gym logo, and leather sandals. The bright sunny color of his shirt looked so damn good against his dark skin.

“You look tropical,” he commented as he stepped inside out of the heat.

“Oh yeah, I just pulled this on for therapy,” I lied, running a hand down the front of my pineapple-print Hawaiian shirt. “This is really nice of you. We were going to order a pizza in town for dinner.”

“As a nutritionist and a fellow jock, it’s my sworn duty to say that my cooking will be far better for you as you work through your recovery than a pizza. But I still love pizza, don’t get me wrong.”

“No, I get what you’re saying. Eating well is a huge part of any athlete’s regime, whether if they’re playing or trying to bounce back from surgery.”

“Exactly! And no trying. Recovering fully from surgery.” He winked and then shuffled his bags.

“Thanks for the reminder to think positive, Yoda.” Key laughed. My belly tickled with what felt like a kaleidoscope of newly hatched butterflies taking to wing. “Let

me show you to the kitchen.”

I led him through the first floor, pointing out the living room, dining room, and mud/laundry room before waving him ahead into the food prep area.

“This is nice,” he said as he took in the huge room that had recently been redone. I was quite proud of it, even if I had only signed the checks to the contractor. Four big windows gave the room plenty of light, which made the Marlboro blue cabinets really pop on sunny days. The center island matched the cupboards and counters and gave four people a place to sit and eat on white wooden swivel stools. A dishwasher sat tucked under the white marble counters. Resting beside the pantry doors was the fridge, an ivory retro beauty that the contractor’s wife—an interior designer—had insisted I buy. And my pride and joy, a deep blue modern woodburning cookstove, sat off to the side. The backsplash was white tile that climbed halfway up a long wall to two lengthy shelves that held old finds I’d picked up at local auctions. Dishes, several pitchers, baskets with ivy, an antique rooster statue, and a blue velvet Kitchen-Aid mixer that had yet to be used. Rudy wasn’t a master chef and my skills in the kitchen ended with scrambling eggs, but I longed to someday take cooking lessons. “Damn, this is massive. My kitchen is a third of the size of this room.”

“Back in the old days, farmers had a dozen kids and needed a large kitchen to hold them all,” I replied, easing myself up onto a stool with a sigh. The dogs were at the back door, whining to be let back in as Key placed his bags on the center island countertop.

“Makes perfect sense. So, that stove. Does it run solely on wood or is there gas?” He began lifting containers out of his cloth bags.

“It’s solely wood. We keep a low fire in it during the day. I can go get a few chunks of wood to—”

“You just sit and rest. Elevate that leg, get some ice on it.”

“Are you related to Tiny Trish at WG Rehab?” I teased and got a chuckle.

“Not to my knowledge. One sister is enough. So,” he rubbed his hands together, “I’m excited to try cooking on a wood stove. Tell me where the wood is and I’ll get things rolling.”

“Just outside the back door is a small room filled with wood. The dogs are in the back yard though, so maybe I should—”

“Nah, I love dogs.” He moved to the fridge, yanked open the freezer, and removed a gel-pack wrap, which he carried over to me. “Elevate and ice. Get to it.”

I took the wrap. “You’re incredibly bossy.”

“Do you like it?” His gaze grew warm.

“Maybe a little,” I confessed as a plaintive howl rolled in the open windows. “That’s Bingley. He’s old and dramatic.”

“Bingley. I love that name. Right, off I go to greet the dogs and fetch wood.” He moved with masculine grace to the mudroom. His back view was just as delicious as his front. His shorts cupped his round ass in a tantalizing manner. I placed the ice pack on my groin as he flung open the back door with a yelp of glee as the pack said hello. Excited barks and laughs filled the kitchen as I smiled like a damn dolt at the sound. Key really did like dogs.

That was evident by the arrival of Keyshaun, arms loaded with dry maple chunks, and four dogs dancing around him.

“Gang, sit,” I barked and got a solid three out of four dogs to plant their butts to the ground. Bingley never had cottoned well to discipline. He’d been an old fella when I adopted him, and his hearing was poor, so I kind of let him slide a bit. Also, he was a small dog who was too old to leap and bound, whereas the others were more sprightly. Even Elizabeth, with three legs, could leap to incredible heights to kiss a person hello.

“They’re a friendly bunch,” Key said as he sidestepped Darcy, who had sat right where he stood, which was right in front of Key. Darcy was a massive dog, pure black, and missing an eye, which did not slow him down in the least.

“Rescue dogs seem to be that way.” I reached down to scrub Elinor’s head. As the youngest of the group at a guesstimated three, the gray pittie was all energy and kisses. She’d been misused, bred, and left behind with her pups after the owners had been arrested and sent to prison. The shelter had fed her and nursed her back to a proper weight, homed her pups, spayed her, and then found it hard to locate a home for such a notoriously mean breed. Mean. PFFT. Elinor wouldn’t harm a fly. She wanted nothing more than to romp and play and cuddle. The moment I saw her picture in the local paper, I went to the shelter to fill out the adoption papers. I’ve never regretted that decision for a second.

“My housing community doesn’t allow pitbulls,” he said and then dumped the chunks in his arms into a small wooden box made to hold fuel for the stove.

“Sadly, the breed has a bad rep. Dogs aren’t born mean, they’re made that way by stupid people,” I snapped. “Sorry,” I tacked on. “I get upset about dumb humans being cruel to animals.”

“Same here,” he said, then turned to gaze at the stove. “So, uhm...yeah. Care to help a city boy out here?”

“Happy to oblige,” I replied, and in no time Key had a fire going and was cooking up a storm. I was happy to sit and ice my knee, my gaze locked on the man creating a feast while chatting about everything under the sun.

Rudy showed up about the time Key was creating the rice bowls. We both glanced over at my brother at the same time.

“Wow, that’s red,” Key and I said simultaneously. Rudy preened and then flipped his hair playfully. He was dressed to the nines in a shimmery skirt, a pink top, and sparkly sandals. Pretty fancy for a meal surrounded by sleeping dogs.

“I know. It’s perfectly me! Wade loves it. Oh, that smells lovely. I wish I could stay, but I have a meeting tonight,” Rudy explained as he stepped over the pooches to get to his shoulder tote hanging off the back of a stool.

“Since when?” I enquired as my brother sailed out the door with a “Ta!” thrown over his shoulder. The back door closed with a snap, and I looked at Key. “I didn’t know he had a meeting.”

“It’s fine. That’s what happens when you just drop by.” He handed me a wooden bowl overflowing with browned beef cubes, florets of broccoli, and a mound of rice. Beef gravy coated the rice and broccoli. The smell was divine. The dogs thought so as well and moved closer to lie down near our stools. Just in case someone dropped some beef.

“Hmmm, I suspect he just ran out to spend a few hours shopping so we could be alone tonight,” I said just as Rudy’s car rolled away, the tires crunching on the gravel drive.

“Would that be all bad?”

No, not at all. Maybe we'd get a kiss if you play your cards right!

Yeah, me and cards do not mix. I lost every hand of poker I've played with the guys on the bus. Remember?

Oh yes, and then there was Atlantic City. Okay, so no cards. Maybe we'd get a kiss if you told him you wanted to be kissed?

"No, that would be nice." I winced inwardly. Ugh, I needed to up my game. And not the one that I played with a stick. I was such a terrible flirt. "No, uhm, not nice."

He glanced up. There was a flash of pain that he quickly covered. "I mean...yes it would be nice, but nice wasn't the right term. Nice is like something that's just okay. When your brother buys you a garish tie and you don't really like it as it's just too bright for you but you don't want to hurt his feelings so you enthuse about how nice of a tie it is. Nice isn't a strong enough word. A night alone with you would be really great."

His smile eased the worry in my breast.

"That sounds like it's happened to you," he said.

"Several times. I have a hanger of Rudy ties I never wear but can't bring myself to donate to Goodwill because I know he spent hours choosing the tie for me."

"That's sweet. You're a good brother, and I feel that in so many ways." He moved around the kitchen as if he had prepared meals here for years. I loved that natural fluency. He moved with confidence and finesse. Very, very sexy. "My sister insists on buying me silly slippers. I mean, yeah, my feet get cold in the winter, but how many yellow duckie or giant bear claw slippers does one man need?"

“How is your sister?” I asked to steer the topic to something far away from my blunder.

“Good. Ready to have those babies. She should go soon. Then the real fun will begin. What do you want to drink with the meal?”

“Oh, I have bottled water and some Gaudion wine in the fridge.” I went to stand. Key placed a hand on my shoulder to stall me. I looked up into sweet brown eyes that held me captive.

“Sit, rest that knee.”

“I feel odd letting people wait on me.”

“Don’t feel odd. I enjoy cooking and entertaining people that I’m attracted to.”

His fingers moved just a few inches, long strong fingers came to rest on the nape of my neck. My blood supply drained from my head for a fast trip south.

“I think you’re really entertaining,” I managed to croak. He gave my neck a soft squeeze.

“I do my best. So let me be in my happy place.” Sadly, he had to remove his hand to get the refreshments, set out the plates and flatware, and return to his food prep. I could not take my eyes off him. His body was long and firm, perfectly sculpted, and possessing power. His muscles flowed smoothly as he plated up our rice bowls. I would love to run my hands over his body, bury my nose in his stomach, and breathe in his scent, touch and taste, and—

“Are you good? Did you want to say grace or something?” Key asked after a moment passed with me just staring at his bare arms.

“Oh, uhm, I’m not really religious, but if you want to do a prayer...”

“No, I’m good. I’m not super into the church scene either. I do go with my family on the big days, but other than that, I tend to take that day for myself. I’m sure the Lord understands, even if my mother doesn’t.”

We dug in. I’d never had a rice bowl like it before. The beef was tender and lean, the rice fluffy, and the taste was bold, just a little spicy. Avocado chunks, shallots, corn, and some jalapeno bits mixed well and tossed over the rice that sat atop a bed of cilantro.

“This is incredible,” I said between mouthfuls. Key beamed at the praise.

“I aim to please,” he replied with a look of pure sin that rivaled the jalapeno for heat. There was a randy comment on my tongue, but I didn’t quite dare let it loose.

“You have pleased with this meal. It’s delicious,” I said instead. We ate slowly, talking about movies and sports in between bites. The dogs were abnormally well-behaved and only Bingley whined for a nibble, which Key dropped to him. So the ex-Army boxer was a softie. That was good to know.

“I think there’s a fruit bowl in the fridge if we’d like dessert,” I offered after our bowls were cleaned and placed in the dishwasher.

“Sounds good. Why don’t you go find a movie to watch and I’ll dish it up,” Key suggested, and so I slid from the stool, grabbed my cane, and made my way to the sofa. The sun was just now sliding behind the horizon, golden shafts of light peeking through the trees before disappearing from sight for the night. I’d always loved this time of day. Sunset was something special. The end of the day. A time to come home and share downtime with family and friends. No sooner had my backside hit the couch than four dogs appeared, tags jingling, toenails clickity-clacking, seeking me.

“I’m right here, you big numpties.” I chuckled as they leaped onto the sofa, taking their usual places. I nudged Darcy over and got a look. “We have to save room for Key,” I explained to the lab mix that, it seemed, cared little about where Key was sitting. For all Darcy cared Keyshaun could sit on the floor. “Over you go.”

He moved, but it was begrudgingly. I found the remote buried under a book I’d been reading. The TV came to life. I began searching through the choices on several streaming sites, finally finding something I thought we both might like to watch. I brought the show up then paused it, taking the time to place my heel on the coffee table with a sigh. I should be icing it, but to heck with it. I did not want Key to think I was an invalid. I wanted him to think of me as the man who I had been before my worn-out knee gave out.

Key arrived with two large bowls filled with rounded balls of watermelon, cantaloupe, and pineapple with some strawberry and orange slices.

“Is that hole for me?”

I nodded, and he wiggled his backside down to sit right beside me. Darcy gave him a dark look as he nestled down on my left. The press of his thigh to mine was nice as was the way he seemed right at home sharing a sofa with four dogs. Bingley was on my lap, the girls sprawled on either end, Elinor with her favorite old sock. Of all the toys they had, she had to bring the old, knotted, holey sweat sock I’d tossed to her two months ago.

“This is cozy. Oh! What is this?” He pointed at the screen with his spoon.

“It’s called Persuasion. I’ve not seen it yet, but I’ve read it several times. Dakota Johnson and Cosmo Jarvis. Says it’s rated well.”

“If it’s got hot men in waistcoats and tight breeches, I’m there.” He poked a cube of

melon, tugged it from his fork with white teeth, and gave me a nudge in the side. With a laugh, I hit play, and we got comfy with our dessert and dogs. The movie was lovely, I was sure, but I couldn't give it the attention it deserved with Key sitting so close to me.

When *The End* arrived, I smiled widely, pleased enough with what I had seen of the film to opine on it if need be. Key would probably want to discuss it, and so I frantically ran through the bits I'd watched when my sight wasn't on his bare calves, forearms, or profile.

The dogs were out cold around us, eight paws in the air, a white poodle snoring, and one old pug drooling on my pant leg. Also, though I wasn't sure, I suspected Darcy had been tooting during the show. Darcy was a big farter.

"Well, what did you think? I always enjoy Dakota in—" I opened with hoping to sound erudite. Seems it didn't matter if I had an opinion of the movie. Key turned as soon as I spoke and plastered his sweet as cantaloupe and strawberries lips to mine. I was shocked, pleasantly so, and put more into the chaste meeting of mouths. His lips were warm, honeyed with fruit juice, and so soft. We tasted each other's lips languidly. Then someone let one rip. I mean a loud explosion that startled three dogs out of a sound sleep. Darcy snoozed on. The stench was horrendous. Eye watering. Ghastly.

Key shot to his feet to get his head above the gaseous cloud, laughing madly, and then offered me a hand. I gratefully took it. He tugged me up and held me, not too tight, but not too loosely, to stare into my eyes.

"That dog needs a new diet," he teased and then grew serious. "I hope it was okay to just kiss you. I probably shouldn't have without consent, but I've been sitting here all night wondering if you tasted of cantaloupe."

“Did I?” He was solid and tall, a perfect fit, our heights nearly the same.

“Mm-hmm. I love cantaloupe even more now.” I stole a chaste kiss. The dogs began to stir, needing to go outside before bed and their sleepy-time biscuits. They had me well-trained. “I should get moving. Your brother will want to come home soon.”

“From his mystery meeting.”

“Yep, and I have to be up early to lead a yoga class at seven for my sister.”

“Let me walk you to the door. Oh, don’t forget your groceries.”

“Why don’t I leave them here so I can come over and cook for you again? If you want, of course. See, I do know about consent.”

“I’d like that a lot.”

“Me too.” He pressed a kiss to my hairy cheek. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, for sure. And I apologize for Darcy. I think that was a planned toxic detonation. He didn’t like you hogging his spot.”

Key chuckled. “He just might have to get used to it.”

“Yeah, he just might.”

I’d buy the dogs their own couch if it meant I could have this man curled under my arm again.

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Chapter Six

Keyshaun

I looked out at the class of seniors chatting amongst themselves.

Today was a full day for me with the addition of the walking group that was stuck indoors due to a line of thunderstorms pelting the area. I had two aerobic classes, a boxing session, two clients to run through their paces, yoga for seniors after lunch, and then a meeting with our banker at three with my brother. Oh, and Etta was now past the stage of mild annoyance with the slow passage of time. She was grumbly as a badger and eating like a grizzly just out of hibernation. I felt bad for poor Lionel. We were all on edge. Her due date was yesterday.

A low roll of thunder moved over Seneca Lake. The rain was badly needed, but not in a great deluge that would just run off. Great, I sounded like Uncle Devon now. Soon I'd be commenting on how the dampness set off my lumbago.

"Okay, gang, let's get this aerobic walk going!" I called out. The chit-chat died down. "Now, I know I'm not my sister, but I think I can coach you through a funky walk to get you sweating, burning some calories, and strengthening your heart."

"When are those babies coming?" Lila asked from the back row by the windows. Ornell was back, thank the gods, and was overseeing the bikes, treadmills, and weights. Mama sat at the desk with her nose in a spy thriller.

"Any day now," I replied and got a happy cheer from the oldsters. "So today we're

going to do a three-mile aerobic walk. Make sure your walking shoes are tied tightly and you have water and a towel close at hand. I'm going to get your heart thumping and your fanny shaking!"

The group giggled. I hit the play button on the remote and the yoga/walking/everything else room filled with an 80s dance playlist. WHAM! led things off with a plea to wake a dude up before you go-go.

The next fifty minutes were spent laughing, panting, sweating, and telling the group to get down into those bootie bumps. Nothing like a good set of hamstring curls to get things rolling.

"You all walked me into the ground," I teased as we ended class. "Next time, I'm going to let Walt here lead the class and I'm going to sit in the corner and sip on some mango juice."

Old Walt, at seventy-five, was in great shape and could probably outwalk me. I loved seeing it. If only my dad had put in the work to change his habits, he might still be here with us. I know there's little you can do about genetics, but you can change how your body works with the genes you have. Uncle Devon is a prime example. He lost weight, started working out, ate better, and is now living a fine life. If one counts taking care of my mother and her house, as well as his, a fine life. The man needed to get out and date. He'd never been married or even seemed inclined to search for a lady. If I didn't know for a fact he was straight, I'd think he was playing on the rainbow team.

The class meandered off, leaving me free for a whole five minutes. I hit the men's room, grabbed some water, and checked my messages all while Ornell was blabbering in my ear about loan rates and square footage. We stood behind the register, Mama in her official welcome to Williams Wellness stool.

“...should make sure we get the bank to get the final commercial property inspection done before the end of this month. They always tend to drag their damn asses—”

“Language,” Mama said while never once looking away from her book.

Ornell rolled his eyes while I tittered. “They tend to drag their backsides, but I need those final inspection notes in my hand no later than mid-July.”

“Okay, good, yep.” I was reading over a text from Tanner thanking me for a lovely meal last/kiss last night. I felt a fizziness in my belly, thinking of that kiss. I had wanted way more but was willing to chill for a few more dates.

“Then the guy who owns the building told me about the fourteen dead bodies hidden in the basement. Said he would take ten grand off the asking price if we just ignored them.”

“Cool.” I hit Tanner back with some hearts and kissy face emojis. Mama tapped me on the head with her paperback. I glanced up from my phone. “What?”

“I’ve seen that look before,” Ornell teased as he craned his neck to try to spy my texts. I jerked my phone to the side while glowering at my brother. Seemed no matter how old we got, siblings just have to pick. “That’s your twitterpated look.”

“Keyshaun, is there a new man in your life?” Mama asked, laying her book on the counter to hit me with that laser-eyed, nosy mother look.

“Hey, Key,” Pernell Kincaid, my sparring partner and boxing student, smiled at me as he walked past. He’d been working on his drills before coming to find me for his time in the ring.

“Oops, got to go. Customers before gossip.” I jogged after my nine o’clock, giggling

madly at the dark looks from my brother and mother. They could just chill the hell out a bit. Yes, I was possibly wearing a goofy look when I chatted with Tanner. We had a great vibe, but he was a little shy, and I didn't want to start mentioning names. While my client climbed into the ring, I hurried to ask Tanner about the next game and was thrilled to find out it was this evening against Wilkes-Barre. I'd not been keeping a close eye on the playoffs and admitted so to Tanner. He filled me in that the Calder Cup was best of three, best of five, best of five again, and then best of seven. The Gladiators had won two to beat the Cougars and were now embroiled in a tense showdown with the Comets for a game five winner takes all.

I have an invite to sit in the Schaffer Salt box. Would you like to be my plus one. ~ T

Count me in! I need to up my hockey game fanship. Does kissing a hockey player boost my score? ~ K

It so does. ~ T

Then I'll have to kiss you twice as much to catch up! ~ K

"I'm ready whenever you are," Pernell called down to me from the ring. Oh shit. Right. It's time to roll. I sent Tanner a heart and a TTYL then shook the twitterpated look from my face and replaced it with my boxer who missed the bus look. Pernell's blue eyes widened. "Okay, maybe I need another minute."

"Too late, you let loose the kraken already." I gloved up and climbed into the ring. Pernell, whom I'd sparred with for months now, grinned like Satan had given him a cookie and held up his gloves. We tapped. He moved back, and I moved in, jabbing at his gloves, moving up to my toes, my shoulders swaying as I shifted my weight back and forth, knees nice and loose, left foot forward as I was righthanded. "Get ready to get bit!" I bragged before putting my mouth protector in and giving him a nod.

His stance was tight, movement quick, but his recurring problem was he tended to drop his fists when he got tired, not much, but just enough that I could always end the match with an uppercut. He blocked me a few times, easy soft hits as we warmed up, feeling each other out. I moved right, he countered, and I threw a quick couple of lead hooks that glanced off his left glove. Pernell was good. He could have been a contender with some intense training and lots of cash invested in him, but life and his baby mama kept him in Watkins Glen, driving a delivery truck for the salt factory. I respected his decision to stand by his girl and baby son and provide.

We went around and around. I kept him moving, steadily wearing him down until that left glove fell just a few inches. I clocked him with a lead hook just as the bell chimed. Ornell stood at the turnbuckle with water for both of us. Several clients were now watching us spar, which happened quite often. My brother tossed me some water and a towel, then did the same for Pernell across the ring. I rinsed and spat, turned from the corner, and waited for my student to shake off the hook to his jaw.

“You good?” I called and got a nod of Pernell’s yellow head. He was a tough son-of-a-gun with a sharp mind and a real feel for the sport. I shoved my mouthpiece back in and met him in the center of the ring. “You need to keep those gloves up when you’re within my reach. And remember not to drop your hand so low when you go for the hook. I’m reading that before you even throw the punch. Keep that hand up or you lose power.”

“Got it.” He then showed me just how quick a student he was. The next bell found me panting and feeling a quick hook he had landed when I’d whiffed on a series of jabs I’d been hoping to land on his midsection.

Ornell was cornerman again, and the onlookers were calling out to the combatants in the ring.

“He’s fast,” Ornell said while I wiped sweat from my eyes. “Watch that right cross of

his. If he connects, he's going to knock you on your ass."

"Damn kids shouldn't out-learn the teacher," I muttered and was about to shove my mouth guard back in when Mama came racing across the gym nearly bowling over a young woman in pink shorts and matching crop top getting off one of the ellipticals.

"Etta's water just broke!" Mama yelled at the top of her lungs.

Ornell and I exchanged looks. I turned to make my excuses to Pernell.

"Dude, just go. I'll beat you next time."

"You can try, Padawan." We bumped gloves and within fifteen minutes the doors were locked. I hated to lose cash but money was just money. This was my sister giving birth to my two new nephews. Nothing came before family.

It was just a few minutes after four a.m. when a nurse stuck her head into the waiting room to inform Mama, Uncle Devon, Ornell, and me that we had two new members of the family.

It was well after six the next morning before we got to visit with Etta, Lionel, little Oscar, and Orwen. The babies were beautiful, healthy, and hungry. After we all got to hold them and fawn over them, we kissed Etta, hugged Lionel, and exited to go to the hospital café to grab a bite. It was a pleasant place, clean, with lots of booths and little tables. Lots of dark browns and greens with splashes of soft yellow here and there. The smell of coffee and bacon lured me into line with haste. After pulling an all-nighter, you'd think I'd be filled up on coffee, but one more cup was required to wash down my bacon, egg, and cheese on a bagel sandwich.

We'd lingered for a bit, slugging back coffee and filling up on surprisingly good breakfast sandwiches while we discussed the new arrivals. They were hands down the most adorable little men I had ever seen. I might be biased, but uncles were allowed to be. It's in the new uncle handbook.

"I'm going to open up a savings account for the babies," Mama informed us over breakfast, her eyes showing her exhaustion. "I can add a little every week, then when they graduate high school, they can buy a flying car or something. Lord knows what the world will look like in eighteen years."

She chuckled into her coffee and lowered her cup, her thin brows tangled as someone stepped up beside our booth. I glanced up to see Tanner standing at our table, cane in one hand, a bouquet of blue and white flowers in the other. We'd texted during the night until he'd gone to sleep around one in the morning. I'd apologized profusely a dozen times easily. He'd been more than understanding, and had, now that I was blinking up at his handsome face blearily, promised he would visit in the morning before his PT session.

"I'm sorry to interrupt but I was on my way to the maternity ward and saw you as I passed the café entrance," he softly said, leaning lightly on the bright yellow sunflower cane Rudy had bought for him a few days ago.

"Hey, you," I finally said, a warmth settling into my soul just looking at him. He was one fine man, and not just fine to look at, but fine in many other ways as well. "Mama, Uncle D, this is Tanner LaBrie. He plays for the Gladiators and works out at the gym. You know this clown." I jerked my head at my brother.

"Ma'am, sir, nice to meet you. I hope I wasn't interrupting a family meeting of some sort?" Tanner looked so rugged in a form-fitting gray tee with the Gladiators logo on the front, charcoal jogging shorts, and short socks with some running shoes. His hair was shiny, his cheeks covered with whiskers, and his mouth ridiculously kissable.

Took all the determination I had to keep my bottom on the bench. “Nice to see you again, Ornell.”

I felt Mama’s eyes on me. Pulling my gaze from Tanner, I found her looking at me the same way she used to look at Etta and Lionel when they were dating.

“Nice to meet you, Tanner. Oh my, look at the time!” She glanced at her bare wrist and then wiggled out of the booth to stand. She came up to Tanner’s wide shoulder. “We have to get moving, and uhm...buy diapers. Yes, diapers.”

Uncle Devon, always the wisest man, simply did as told without question. My brother, who was pinned between me and the wall, smirked and stirred more sweetener into his coffee, playing, unaware of what my mother was doing.

“You too, Ornell,” Mama firmly said.

“Takes three people to buy diapers?” Ornell asked and got the evil mama’s eye. He sighed. “Fine. I have to open the gym, anyway. You got four hours to get a nap, then come relieve me or I will not be happy with you.”

“I live in fear of your frowns,” I countered, got up, and let my brother wiggle free of the booth. He grabbed his mug of coffee.

“I’m asking for a to-go cup,” Ornell mumbled before clapping Tanner on the shoulder and heading off with my mother, who was whispering madly with my uncle and brother.

“Have a seat.” I waved at the now-empty bench across from me. Soft cello music was playing from speakers hidden behind some fake ivy plants in the corners of the eatery. “Fair warning, Mama is probably planning our wedding as we speak.” Tanner froze with his ass about six inches from the bench, hazel eyes wide. “I’m kidding,” I

hurried to tack on so he could finish sitting his tasty rump down. “Mostly,” I added just to tease. But not really. Mama loved to matchmake. It was one of her favorite things to do. Right up there with reading, gardening, and making honey-do lists for Uncle Devon even though he wasn’t her honey. “Sorry, I missed the game last night. I’m glad to hear that they won!”

“Yeah, they did good. The Comets are crazy skilled.” He looked at my family leaving the café. “It’s good to know you’re mostly kidding. I mean, not that I have a thing against marriage,” he replied as he lowered himself down and eased his leg under the table. “Speaking of which, an invitation to Liam and Tarcy’s wedding arrived in the mail yesterday.”

“Oh right, that is coming up. July right?” He bobbed a yes. “Those two are so in love that watching them together is like eating a dozen donuts in one sitting.”

“They are pretty goopy.” He chuckled. “Are you looking to get married one day?” His eyes flared. “I know it’s really early in our...uhm, well, in our...what do you call what we’re doing? Is there a new hip word for it?”

“I call it dating. Not sure what the kids are calling it these days. Probably something like entering a situationship. Who knows? Once I hit thirty, I lost all my cool.”

“I disagree, you are plenty cool. So, can we ignore my last question about marriage and just talk about you being my date guy when time permits?”

He looked so tense. Bless this man. “I would love to be your date guy, but on one condition,” he leaned over the table, “I get to show you my new nephews before we leave.”

“That is a deal.” He leaned up further, and I met him halfway. The kiss was chaste. We were in a busy cafeteria after all, but I could feel the heat just from the light brush

of lips on lips. We sat there for a while longer. Just talking, playing footsie under the table. It was silly. Maybe it was just me that was silly. Exhaustion did make a man slaphappy, but I was grinning like a toad on a warm log when we left the booth to visit the family.

Etta was napping, but Lionel was awake, rocking one baby while the other little guy dozed in his bassinet.

“Hey,” I whispered as I crept into the room, pulling Tanner along like a reluctant mule. “I wanted to show the boys to Tanner.”

“Oh sure, they’d love to see Uncle Key again,” Lionel said with a tired smile as he passed over Oscar...or was it Orwen? Didn’t matter. I loved them both. “Can you hold him for like ten minutes? I need to go to the bathroom so damn bad. He’s fussy and Etta is toast.”

“Go, I got this,” I bragged as I eased the tiny newborn into my arms. Lionel nodded at Tanner and then slipped into the bathroom, closing the door quietly. My sister was out, like snoring and drooling out. She had better get rested up now. Come this time tomorrow, she will be home with two new babies to care for. Course Mama would be there as well to help out the new parents. “Did you ever see such a pretty baby in all your life?”

Tanner made his way closer, his gaze soft, as he ran the back of a big, scarred finger over Oscar’s or Orwen’s smooth cheek.

“He is beautiful. How did they come up with those names? They’re really old-fashioned sounding.”

“Right? I teased Etta about Lionel going through his family tree, finding the whitest names he could, and tossing those two names into the hat.” I cooed at the baby who

was staring up at me with big brown eyes.

“Was there really a hat?” Tanner asked, pulling the babe’s attention from me to him.

“No, they fussed and stewed over names for months and then settled on those two. I think they were Lionel’s paternal grandfather’s middle names, but I could be wrong.”

“Well, they’re fine names for fine boys.” Tanner made a boop noise that made the little one in my arms smile. Or maybe it was a gas grimace. Hard to tell, but the baby seemed to like it, so he did it again and got a belch in reply. “Hearty. I’ve not heard a burp that loud since the last time Greck chugged a six-pack of seltzer water on a dare. We thought he might explode or float to the moon.”

“That sounds like Greck,” I replied. Etta snored herself awake, saw me and Tanner, and then went right back to sleep. “Guess she’s too tired to worry about the strange man with a cane in her room.”

“She saw you. She knew she and the little ones were safe.”

Okay, that there was going to get him more than kisses the next time we were together and I wasn’t holding a baby.

Chapter Seven

Tanner

“So, Myron,” I opened with, pulling a look from the physical therapist I was seeing today. Myron was an old hand with a gruff style that I liked. Many other patients found him to be too abrasive, but not me. He reminded me of one of my coaches back in high school. He said what he said, and that was that. Sometimes it was cruel, but it was always honest. “It’s been a month since surgery. What can I do to help push this recovery along? I’d like to be on the ice by August, if at all possible.”

He rubbed his bald head as I did some miles. Another guy was here, and he was working on coming back from carpal tunnel surgery, bringing the pulleys over his head as he sat with his back against the wall. An older woman was getting some time in on a bike after hip surgery. Her name was Mona. She had told me as we waited for our appointments. She was seventy and had a new bionic hip that she was quite happy to talk about with a total stranger.

“I’d be okay with you taking more time on a treadmill, elliptical, and step machines. Your range of motion is good, and you’ve done well with light weights.”

“What about yoga?” I chanced and got a small nod of a glistening dome.

“Light restorative yoga. No kneeling. Use of props to ease you into the positions. I’d like to talk to the teacher you’d be practicing under to ensure she knew your limitations and medical history.”

“It would be a he,” I corrected as I pedaled along a scenic country lane in France. “I’ll have him contact you here.”

“Sounds good. Now give me another mile or two, then we’re going to cool down and work a massage in before you go.”

Smiling like a jack-o-lantern, I pushed myself through another two miles. Four weeks into my recovery, and I was feeling good. I could drive now. Walking was coming along well for the most part with a little stiffness after I sat for too long, but my gait was strong and normal. It would be another week or so and I was confident that we’d start ramping up things in terms of getting me back on the ice next season. I could do it, I was sure, but my surgeon was being a stickler and kept pulling me back when I started chomping at the bit. I knew that most athletes could return to their sport anywhere from six to twelve months, but some came back at five. So August was probably not a realistic goal, I know, but I was using it as a marker of sorts. My surgeon was giving me a maybe-of-possibly-returning-to-the-ice date of late December if he and my team felt I was healed well enough.

I was ready to go full gangbusters and get released from this general rehab to a sports-related one that would focus on my recovery in terms of returning to play. My doctor had wanted me to go this route fearing I would push too hard too fast in a sports- dictated regime. He also had dropped a nugget about my age, which I had pretended not to hear. Yeah, I knew I’d not bounce back at thirty-eight like I would have at twenty, but I wasn’t doddering quite yet.

No lie, I loved the rubdowns after a hard therapy session. Feeling good and full of myself, I left the medical center in Corning, slid behind the wheel of my SUV, and chucked my cane to the passenger seat. I barely required it anymore, but Rudy insisted I take it along when I went out. I think my brother knew his time as my nurse and personal groomer was coming to an end. He had to be thrilled. I knew Wade was ready to have him home as well.

When I pulled up in front of Williams Wellness, I was walking on sunshine. Actually, I was limping on sunshine but okay. Improvement was lifting my spirits. I'll confess to being pretty sour over this injury. It cost me the chance to help my team battle for the championship. No matter what we say to the press, it is not the same as sitting on the sidelines. We want to be on the ice. The whispers from the media that this surgery might just be the kiss of death to my career as a Gladiator floated around me like ghostly whispers in the night. I'd be damn if I retired without reaching that milestone. I'd never once been part of a championship team in all my years. We'd come close. Damn close. But close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades to quote Frank Robinson.

June had started off pleasant but now was a humid monster. Over the course of two days, the moisture in the air had climbed. Making my way into the air-conditioned gym cooled me instantly. The place was hopping. I caned my way to the front desk, smiling at Mrs. Williams as I neared. She seemed to have made the reception area her new home. Key was doing his best to gently nudge her back to retirement as he was slowly but surely filling in his meager employee roster. Mrs. Williams was not having it.

"Well, look at you moving like a cheetah," she said as I reached the check-in to smile down at her.

"If cheetahs moved like I do, they'd starve. The gazelles would be laughing and pointing their hooves at me, lumbering along."

"Oh now, you stop that. Keyshaun tells me that you're doing well and should be skating in no time."

"From his mouth to the hockey god's ears," I replied just as the phone rang. I motioned for her to answer it and leaned on the counter. Key was nowhere to be seen as he had left yesterday with Ornell to see the proposed site for the Buffalo Williams

Wellness in person before finalizing the deal.

The door opened and four guys walked in and came to the check-out desk. I moved aside, out of the way, and took a seat on a stationary bike to wait it out. Twenty minutes later, Mrs. Williams rolled her eyes at me. I got to my feet and returned to her desk.

“Good lord that was a run. I swear people come in packs. So, did you need anything, honey?”

“I wanted to sign up for some yoga lessons with Keyshaun.” She gave me a raised eyebrow. “I have clearance from my therapist, but he wants to talk to Key, anyway. I’ll clear this all up with him as soon as I talk to him, obviously, but since the classes fill up so fast, I wanted to get into the next one.”

“Etta likes to keep the classes small so she can observe and instruct each student, also the room only holds so many.” She looked around. “What did I do with my glasses? Well, pooh. I must have left them at home. That’s fine. Let’s open up the document thingy here.” She bent down low. Her nose was nearly resting on the screen of the desktop. “All these lines want to run together. Oh, we have one opening Monday morning at nine?”

“Perfect. Put me in for that class.”

“Will do.” She typed away and got a ping from the computer. “Guess I did that right!”

I chuckled, chatted for a bit, and eased out of the gym to go home, shower, and rest. The Gladiators were back in town after tying up the best of the seven series with the Boulder Badgers. They were playing game seven tomorrow night in Watkins Glen. Tonight, they had a night of rest and a bachelor party planned for Liam. Not sure how

resting and carousing fit together, but when you left party planning up to Greck, you had to expect chaotic results. None of us knew where we were going or what we were doing, which had Bean, Sunny, and Basky in fits. Me? I was just along for the ride and the laughs.

I sent off a text to Key to tell him I missed him and dropped my phone in the cup holder for the ride home. Man, was it nice to be mobile again. No relying on Rudy to haul me around or help me into the shower. My brother was heading north in two days. He wanted to do the party tonight and the game tomorrow night before returning to his beloved to resume his life. I'd never be able to repay him for his nursing skills and companionship during a rough time.

Walking in the door at home was a joyous event for the dogs.

"Okay, calm it down," I said as I waded through bouncing canines, tails wagging madly, working my way to the kitchen for some lunch before I sat with some ice on my knee. "You'd think I'd been gone for months. It was only two hours."

Elinor ran off to find a toy while Bingley snorted/snuffled in indignation until I bent over to rub his wrinkled head. Darcy and Elizabeth raced off in glee.

Bingley trotted along behind me as I entered the kitchen. Rudy was prepping some tuna salad for lunch. I'd miss having someone cook for me, that was for sure. Maybe I could sweet talk Key into filling my belly. That man knew his way around a kitchen.

"Okay, so can you please text Greck one more time and ask him where the hell we're going tonight? How can I know what to wear if I don't know the venue?" Rudy slapped a spoonful of mayo into the bowl of tuna with attitude. "Do I dress up or down or pull out some glam?"

“He’s not going to tell us. Can you find something that works for most occasions?” I plunked my butt down on a stool at the island. “Maybe something middle of the road?” He threw me a scathing look over his shoulder. He’d put his bright red hair up into curlers. “Right, okay, sorry. I forgot you don’t do middle of the road.”

“I do not. Now, text that chatty friend of yours and demand to know what we should wear.”

With a roll of my eyes—thank God I was a low-maintenance guy—I sent a message to Greck. “Done. Now, can we talk about cabin time?”

“What about it? I assumed you’d be spending more time here since you and Keyshaun are seeing each other.”

“Well...yeah, I think I’ll be hanging here longer than usual. Do not say a word.” He moved to the island, smirk in place, and slid a bowl of tuna salad with celery to me. “I like him. I know I’m probably putting my cart so far in front of the horse that the poor nag can’t even see it.”

“No, honey, I think you’re doing the right thing. That old cabin—”

“It’s new.”

“Yes, whatever. That new cabin will be sitting there when you want to spend some time there. I can ask Wade if he wants to spend some time there. I know he likes to paddle around on the lake. This new place does have a decent shower and screens in the windows, right? You know how I feel about cold baths and biting bugs.”

He fished a loaf of bread out of the fridge along with some bottled water, pickles, and a bag of chips from the cupboard before climbing up beside me.

“Yes, yes, and yes.” I spread the tuna on a slice of wheat and then plunked another slice on top of it. “Maybe I could ask Key if he wanted to go, but then that would look pushy. And he’s busy now with the new place and—”

He slapped me on the back of my hand with his mayo-covered butter knife. “Stop it. And do not lick that off.” I licked it off. “Oh my gods, you are such a beast.” He tossed a napkin at my face and swung around to look at me. “I know you’re fond of him, and he is feeling all the feels over you. Don’t let your past lovers and your shyness keep you locked up in this big, empty house with only dogs for company.” Bingley farted at my feet. “Case in point.”

“Dogs are man’s best friend,” I countered quickly and dove into my sandwich in the hopes that if I had a mouthful, he’d stop preaching.

“I know, and I adore them, but you need someone to talk to.”

“The dogs talk to me. They’re just as much company as a man and they won’t break your heart.”

Darcy ambled in with a sock in his jowls. Elizabeth was attached to the loose end. The sock was one of my good ones or had been. Elinor arrived in a flurry with a bookend. Rudy leaped up, removed the bookend from her slobbery mouth, and then washed it and his hands.

“When was the last time you had to remove a brass bookend from a lover’s mouth?” Rudy asked, and when I had no reply, he sniffed in supremacy and then began cutting his sandwich into fours. “Case two in point. I’m not nagging—”

“Sounds like nagging to me,” I mumbled as I tossed a crust to Darcy, who inhaled it. Chewing was for cats.

“It’s not. It’s brotherly advice.”

“Uh-huh.”

“All I’m saying is that you and Keyshaun fit quite handsomely.” My phone buzzed. “That might be Greck. Check.” He tapped the battered cell with his quarter of a sandwich.

“He’s not going to tell us. It’s a secret surprise.” I sighed but picked up the phone and read the text. It was from Key, not Greck, and I grinned at the image of him in the middle of a vacant building holding a piece of paper reading FUTURE SITE OF WILLIAMS WELLNESS BUFFALO in one hand and a hot wing in the other.

His smile was megawattage bright. My heart did this funny, twisty thing in my chest.

Congrats to the Franchise King! I can say I knew him when. *winky emoji* ~ T

You can say you kissed him when. *winky emoji* ~ K

Mm, kissing Key sounded great. I wished he was here now so I could taste those sweet lips of his, but I’d have to wait another day. We chatted for a few minutes before he had to get his serious businessman face on for the signing of the papers. Then he and his brother were going out to celebrate with a late dinner and cocktails at a comedy club. He’d be back in the Glen tomorrow around noon, just in time for game seven.

“Nothing from Greck?” Rudy asked. I shook my head. He mumbled and grumbled, then went up to find something fitting for a night out doing who knew what.

When we pulled up in front of the Schaffer Salt Arena about thirty men were milling about outside a charter bus. All the players and several of the coaching staff had shown up. Not the head coach or the higher-level assistants, but a few trainers were here.

“Hey, Fossie and Rudy! We were wondering if you were coming.” Greck peeled from the crowd of players clad in shorts and a bright purple T-shirt with a hockey stick and a checkered flag on the front. Above the stick and flag, bright yellow letters read POLKMAN-HAYES BACHELOR PARTY ZOOM ZOOM!

“Oh gods, that is terrible,” Rudy whispered as Greck raced at us, T-shirts in his hand. “Whoever thought of matching tees should be criminally prosecuted.”

“I think I got the right sizes for you two. If you’d a been here earlier, you would have gotten first dibs on sizes, but I think a medium should fit Rudy and I know an XXXL will go over your fat head, Fossie!” Greck slapped the shirts into our chests. “Don’t you love them shirts? I ordered them from my third cousin, Veronica. She does T-shirts in her house. She gave me a big discount since we’re family and all. Sunny said he loves them, and Tarcy said he ain’t never seen a purple so purple and then blessed my heart, which is Southern for he loves them too. Once you get dressed, we’ll get on the bus.”

He clapped me on the shoulder and headed back to the throng of men. Most were still holding their shirts, but after some encouragement from Bean, the guys tugged on the shirts. Henri looked a little uptight in his T-shirt while Pastor Gabe was beaming. Seeing as my defensive partner’s clergyman boyfriend was here, I had to assume no strippers or drunken tomfoolery were on the agenda, which was fine. The guys had a huge game tomorrow. This party was a double sort of win as it would release some tension over the final game of the season while affording the guys who would split after we ended this season a chance to party with the groom-to-be.

“Okay, you garbanzo beans, all need to get on the bus!” Greck yelled at the top of his lungs while waving madly. We all filed onto the charter, enjoying the AC and plush seats.

Liam and Tarcy were in the front behind the driver, each clad in purple shirts and matching purple and yellow ball caps that read GROOM and GROOM.

They both smiled at me. Rudy was muttering about trying to make purple match his bright green sundress with flowery leggings.

“There is no matching it,” I said and dropped down beside the good pastor while DJ was two rows back jawing at Basky, who was going solo as Marcus was at a charity fundraiser for the Comets tonight. Rudy threw his bright red hair over his shoulder before leaning up to speak with Bean and his man, Criswell.

“You look like you’re feeling much better than you did when I visited you in the hospital,” Pastor Gabe pointed out.

“I am, and thanks for stopping by. I was kind of out of it, but Rudy said you and him had a nice talk about Christ’s healing powers, and it made him feel far less anxious.”

“I’m glad. As it says in Jeremiah, ‘I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security.’ Hearing that the words of our Lord bring those worrying or suffering some small bit of calm in a trying time warmed me. That’s my job. Spreading the gospel, counseling those in my flock who are sick or sad, and enjoying a mystery bus ride with my boyfriend and his teammates.”

“Bachelor parties are part of your job?” I teased and got a hearty chuckle from the handsome pastor.

“No, not really, but I so wanted to get a purple T-shirt.” He winked just as Deandre

returned. I went to stand, but my friend placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Sit,” DJ said as he flopped down next to Rudy after my brother scooted over. “We don’t want to make the elderly give up their aisle seats. You may need to get to the bathroom when the prune juice kicks in and with that cane...”

“If I weren’t sitting next to a reverend, I’d tell you what you can do with your prune juice,” I snarled playfully. Man, it was good to be back on a bus with these yahoos.

Greck finally climbed on after the last player was seated and with a grin told the driver to get this party bus rolling. With a lurch, the bus pulled out of the parking lot. Laughter and manly chatter carried us along for over an hour. As soon as we saw that big sign announcing we were at a casino, a cheer went up. For three hours, we enjoyed some light gambling. I broke even, which was about the norm for me at the poker tables. Rudy was splitting his time between the bar where they had, and I quote my brother, ‘The best mango mojitos on the planet. Oh my God, I want to marry this mojito!’ and the slot machines. Tipsy he may have been, but he won over two hundred bucks before it was time to roll onto the next stop.

We pulled up to a waffle house. Tarcy was ecstatic.

We dug into some mighty fine waffles, the server hustling her backside off to feed a large group of hungry puck pushers. We tipped her incredibly well.

After we had filled our bellies with waffles, we were off to our final destination, a cigar shop in Corning with an outdoor smoking lounge. Part of the package was that we each got to choose one cigar. Knowing nothing about cigars, I got what everyone else was getting, a fat stogie from Cuba, and made my way to the veranda. There were tables set up with four chairs each, umbrellas, and huge glass ashtrays. Small lights in the wooden floorboards illuminated the porch. I took a seat with my now giddy brother, DJ, and Pastor Gabe. Rudy was a gabby thing when he was drunk, so

he only sat with us for a few minutes then went off to chit-chat with Henri and Greck.

I sat back, lit my stogie, and took care not to inhale the smoke. The cigar shop staff had been adamant about that.

DJ did the same. We both made yucky faces. Pastor Gabe, one of the few smart ones, had declined to smoke and was happy just sitting here among the team in his purple T-shirt.

“So this is something different,” I tossed out after sniffing my cigar. That’s a thing, right? I’ve seen people in movies do it.

“Yeah. I’m not sure we should allow Greck to do web searches anymore.” DJ struck a match and began puffing to get his cigar lit. Gabe wrinkled his nose at the cloud of smoke before leaning back in his chair to find some fresh air. DJ made a terrible face. The owner of the shop had snipped ends, so I followed suit, striking a match and then making like a steam engine. The taste was not pleasant at all.

“I second that. Still, he did dig up something other than bouncing boobies and gin joints, so stick taps for the originality?” I blew out some smoke as the sound of masculine conversation filled the patio. It was rather relaxing, to be honest. Gabe nodded. DJ made a smoke ring that floated over his head like a halo.

“It’s all good,” DJ said. “Well, the vibe is good. This cigar? I’m not sure about.”

Gabe leaned up to look around his boyfriend. “So, rumor has it that you and Keyshaun are dating. How’s that going?”

I stared at DJ. Hard. He shrugged. “What? I talk to my man. Sue me. And since the topic has come up, how is it going with Key?”

“Well. It’s going well.” I stared at the glowing end of my cigar. A soft wind blew into the patio, lifting the thick gray smoke, and DJ’s halo, up and away.

“Just well?” DJ asked, tapping an ash into the ashtray. Gabe said nothing, just sat there, face soft and open, listening. “That’s kind of…” he lifted a shoulder, “blasé?”

“It’s not blasé. He’s hot. We’re all into each other big time. We’re just…” And here I faltered because a big tough man should not be mincing around with hand holding and watching Sense and Sensibility when he could be rutting like a bull elk in the fall. Emma Thompson though, I mean, who cannot watch her on repeat? “We’re just taking our time as we move through the courtship phase.”

DJ stared at me as if I had a tambourine playing porcupine on my head. “Courtship? Are you two courting like…like this is Bridgerton ? Ouch! What?!” He threw a look at Gabe who, it seemed, had kicked him under the table. “Thou shalt not pinch your boyfriend’s booty. That’s one of the commandments of love.”

“It was a small pinch. An affection tweak,” Gabe neatly parried. A young man moved through the cigar smokers, asking if they needed another cigar or a light. Some took him up on the offer. Henri, I noted, seemed to be quite into his cigar. “I think courting someone is a wonderful way to glide into a possible relationship. Not everyone has to jump and hump on the first date.”

“Wow, that’s quite the terminology from a pastor,” I said after the shock wore off. Did I know Gabe and DJ got jiggy with it? Yep. I tried not to think about that, though. DJ was my defensive partner and Gabe was…well…a man of God. Stupid, yes, I know, but trying to visualize them doing it was like trying to visualize my brother and Wade getting down and dirty. No thanks. Just no.

“I try to stay fresh and hip,” Gabe teased.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have been so judgy. If you’re not comfortable with casual sex without a bond that is totally cool. You do Tanner and don’t worry about what other guys are doing when and with whom. Gabe and I took a long time sorting stuff out until things got physical.”

“Well, yeah, I mean, he’s a pastor. I didn’t think he’d be jumping your bones on the first date. But I’m not clergy. I’ve just...well, I’ve always had to have a bond first, then the sex felt right. That’s weird, eh?”

“No, you’re not weird at all, but you might be demi. Ever think of that?” DJ was now trying to scrape the taste of the cigar from his tongue with his teeth.

“No.” I puffed on my cigar, unsure if I was really enjoying it or not. The taste it left in my mouth was not pleasant. And even though we were seated outside the cigar shop, the smoke was lingering again. “I’m not really into this whole thing,” I commented with a wave of my Havana.

“Nah, me either.”

“Anyone else’s mouth taste like you licked the underbelly of a ’77 Plymouth?” Greck called out and just about every Gladiator answered in a positive. Liam was looking a little green around the gills, but Tarcy seemed to be enjoying his puff. I bet he had smoked a few stogies in celebration over the years. Birth of kids, winning races, that sort of thing. “Okay, well, if you’re not feeling the cigars, feel free to extinguish. This was on an internet list of fun things to do for a bachelor party that didn’t include naked titties. Shit, I said titties. Sorry, pastor!”

“No apologies required. I have nothing against breasts,” Gabe shouted from the other side of Deandre. The straight guys all snickered naughtily. “My wife had them,” he added as an aside to our private little conversation. “And just to back up what Deandre said about sexual relations, it’s fine to move at your own pace, Tanner. Each

of us is a beautiful and unique person, and trying to live our lives to fit a cookie cutter of what the world thinks is proper masculine behavior is not only exhausting but crippling. If you and Keyshaun are exploring each other emotionally before diving into a physical relationship, that's the perfect way to proceed. Better is a poor person who walks in his integrity than one who is crooked in speech and is a fool."

I blinked at the pastor. DJ beamed and then smooched Gabe on his cheek. "What he said," DJ added. "That's why I knock people around for a living and my man gives sermons."

"Well, that last bit wasn't me. That's found in Proverbs. I just borrowed it. I don't think the Lord will mind," Gabe replied with a soft smile. The man was so serene. Talking to God on the daily probably did that for a soul.

"Thanks, I really appreciate you guys talking this out with me," I confessed while grinding my cigar out in a fancy glass ashtray.

"Anytime. You and I are partners. Come to me whenever." DJ held up a fist. I rapped it.

"The same goes for me. My door is always open. Feel free to come to the Tabernacle or our home if you have need of counsel. It matters not if you come to church every Sunday or never come at all. My services are for the entire community, not just the chosen few who drop coins into the plate," Gabe said.

"You're a good pastor. Wish more were like you. If they were, I bet the number of people going to church would be rising instead of falling," I said, leaned up to bump fists with the good pastor, and then looked up to see Rudy swaying my way. I sighed. "I told him to go light on the mango mojitos at the casino, but would he listen? Nope. Pardon me while I steer my brother to the bus."

Rudy was giggly the entire way back to Watkins Glen. Then he got morose, which was standard drunken Rudy behavior, and ended up crying to Wade over the phone. I put him to bed after taking off his sandals. He'd be mad that he had worn makeup to bed. His pillowcase would be a mess of lipstick and eyeliner. He could blame that on the mojitos.

When I crawled into bed, weary, stinking of cigar smoke, but smiling over the night spent with my team, I found a short but sweet text waiting for me from Keyshaun.

Had some laughs, ate a decent meal, and am in bed. I wish you were here. The laughs are deeper, the food better, and the wine sweeter. See you tomorrow. ~ K

My dick got hard instantly. Now that there was the kind of stuff that got me randy. Emotions did me in every time. Maybe I was sort of demi. I'd never really looked into anything past being gay, but perhaps I should research it more. Not that I cared about the labels. I knew what I wanted and needed from a man. A connection that went beyond getting your rocks off.

I can't wait. Kisses and cuddles with the dogs are great but they're greater with you.
~ T

I turned off the light, tossed my phone to the table, and had a hand on my prick before the room went dark. Then, I stalled. Nope, I was going to wait. I could hold out another day. My dick was surly about that about-face but soon gave up and went to sleep. After I moved a few dogs, I followed suit, drifting off to dreams of kissing Keyshaun.

Chapter Eight

Keyshaun

The Schaffer Salt Arena was lit.

Game seven of the finals. The intensity in our small arena—in comparison to bigger venues, our eight to nine-thousand-seater was tiny—was palpable. I'd only recently come into this sport having set up a business where a hockey team was located and now I'm dating one of those players, so I had no clue hockey fans were this rabid. It was chaos, loud, madness, and amazing.

I could barely hear Tanner speaking to me as the Gladiators were about to take to the ice for this deciding game.

Everyone was up, the thumping pump-up music vibrating the very concrete under our feet.

“We play until we have a winner,” Tanner shouted beside my ear. I nodded in understanding. I'd just watched a brutal NBA finals series that went to game seven. “If we win, I might get called down to the ice.”

“You better!” I yelled back, grinning at him among a horde of fans and family members of the players. He'd been invited to the owner's box but had chosen to get us some seats among the players' spouses and close family. Just about an entire section, five rows behind the Gladiators' bench was cheering on their loved ones.

“I wish I was down there with them,” he said, his words getting lost as the volume rose, but the yearning in his gaze was unmistakable. I leaned over to press my lips to his hairy cheek. That eased a bit of his sadness. It had to be a crazy mixture of joy and loss for him. He’d devoted so much to this team, not just this season, but for close to twenty years, and he was sidelined.

“They wish you were too,” I managed to reply right before the roof about lifted off the rink. The Gladiators’ song began to play. Everyone in gold, red, and black was stomping along to the killer beat, bellowing the words, and then erupting when the team hit the ice. Tanner looked so proud as he clapped madly. Rather like a father watching his children leap onto stage or step up to bat. He loved these men, this game, and this sport. I prayed he could find something he loved as much as hockey to fill his time when he hung up his skates. Whenever that may be.

Rudy and Wade, a charming Asian man with the sweetest smile, sat on Tanner’s left, and I was on his right. Behind us were most of the sig others that I had come to know from my time with Tanner. Henri returned to his seat on my right, carrying a box of caramel corn and a giant cup of soda. He was dressed casually. A white sweater over a red shirt and ebony slacks. Everyone else was in Gladiators jerseys or hoodies, but for Henri that was dressed down. The Boulder Badgers in their slate gray and blue away sweaters—a term for a jersey that I’d been informed of by the sexy man on my left—skated out to boos.

“They got any pretzels left?” I asked as the arena announcer asked everyone to remain standing and remove their hats.

“Several hundred. Would you like me to go back and get you one?” Henri asked. The singer down on the ice began to belt out the national anthem. Once it was over, I replied to Henri.

“I’ll get us some. You sit. Hey, I need some pretzels,” I told Tanner, who was deep in

conversation with Wade. Rudy was bundled up in so many coats and blankets all you could see was the top of his cherry red head and his pink nose. “Who wants some soft pretzels?”

“Oh me,” Tanner said before digging into his back pocket. I waved him off.

“You can get the next food run bill,” I said as I took the order for eight pretzels and a cup of cocoa.

“How about eight pretzels and four cups of cocoa,” Tanner shouted over the din of excited fans as the players on the ice skated to the Gladiators’ logo at center ice. I glanced down at Liam in the net. He was rocking back and forth, just slightly, his attention seemingly on the faceoff about to take place.

“Okay, and what do the others want?” I teased my date. Tanner chuckled. I climbed over Henri, taking care not to scuff my sneakers over his fancy dress slacks. Two of the players’ wives called me over and I lost about ten minutes talking to them about my aerobics walking classes. They were interested in signing up next fall when they returned from Canada with their husbands. I gave them some business cards and took a moment to watch the Badgers make a run at the Gladiators net which was met with a poke check from Liam that sent the puck into the corner where Carson, the captain, cleared out of the Gladiators zone. The whistles blew for icing, so I scurried off to get some pretzels, one of my weaknesses, and some hot drinks.

As I was making my way to the pretzel stand, my phone buzzed in the front pocket of my jeans. I hiked the hem of my LaBrie #6 sweater—an unexpected gift from Tanner that he’d given me with a few dozen kisses when he had picked me up tonight—out of the way to find my phone. The video call was from Etta. I slipped into a long line as my sister opened our conversation with a whimper.

“Why do they never sleep?” Etta asked as a baby cooed in the background.

“I told you all them jalapeno poppers you wolfed down while carrying the boys would have consequences.”

“I blame you,” she parried, yawned, and moved one baby to her shoulder. She held the phone up at a terrible angle. She looked exhausted.

“I only went to get them when Lionel couldn’t. If you want someone to blame, I’d say blame the man who helped make them, not the innocent sibling delivering the poppers.”

“I’m blaming everyone from God right down to Mama for making me have a uterus,” Etta replied with more sass than I’d have expected from someone with such huge bags under their eyes. “Where the hell are you? What’s all the yelling about?”

I went to my toes to try to see the ice, but I couldn’t. Hopefully, I didn’t miss a Gladiators goal.

“At the hockey game,” I told her as I moved up a step closer to the pretzels. Mm, I may need some cheese to dip them into. Sure, I knew soft pretzels weren’t exactly nutritious, but a man had to treat himself now and again. “Hey, if they win, they’re going to hold a parade, I imagine. Think we could enter a float?”

“In two days? Has finding a new boyfriend turned your brains to mush?” One of the baby’s gurgled. I needed to get over and snuggle my nephews tomorrow if not sooner. Traveling and dating were cutting into baby hug time. “No, we can’t make a damn float in two days.”

“Could be three.” I took another step closer. “Maybe four.”

“Keyshaun, I don’t have time to shower, let alone make a float for some hockey bowl game.”

“Woman, you blaspheme. It’s not a bowl game, it’s the cup game.”

“The only cups I care about are the two swollen ones in my bra.”

“Okay, I do not want to hear about your boobs. I’ll leave you off the float committee roster then. So why did you call me?” I moved ahead a foot. Another cheer rolled around the food stands like a tsunami of sound. “Damn it.”

“I called to see if you were doing anything tomorrow, but you already said you were coming over. Mama and Uncle Devon are bringing her lasagna and his sponge cake. Lionel will be here. I may be sleeping through the visit, no offense. Also, while I’m thinking about it, why don’t men have to lactate? I could use a spare hand. Or teat.”

“I don’t know. Something about an apple in a garden maybe? Ask Mama. I’ll have to see what happens with hockey. If the team wins...well, I don’t know what they’ll be doing. If they lose, I might just chill with him.”

“Please, anyone who tastes Mama’s lasagna perks up instantly no matter what, win or lose. Tell him he has to come. I said so. He’s scared of me.”

“Everyone is scared of you, Etta.” I stepped up to the counter. “Eight pretzels, hot cheese dipping sauce in the jumbo cup, and four hot chocolates, please,” I said to the frazzled purple-haired pretzel seller behind the counter. His striped smock was smeared with cheese, he had salt granules stuck to his eyebrows, and he appeared to be one more order away from laying down on the ground to weep. I’d make sure to tip the guy well. Working with the public was a joyless job at times. I knew that all too well.

“Are you feeding the whole hockey team?” she asked as a little baby burped loudly. “There we go, now you’ll sleep. God, let him sleep.”

“No, just Tanner and three others. Do not say a word. I like pretzels. I’ll run them off tomorrow.” The crowd booed. Uh-oh. “I should get my food and get back to the game. I’ll let you know about tomorrow. Try to get some rest, honey.”

“I’m going to try. Lionel has the other one, whatever his name is, rocking in the nursery, so God willing they’ll both nod off for a few hours. I would stab a bitch for a shower and a nap.”

“Try not to stab anyone. I love you. Kiss those boys for me.”

“I will. And I love you too. Go make hockey.” She blew me a kiss. The screen went blank.

The crowd roared. I paid for my food, swept up the boxes containing pretzels and cocoa, and dashed to the nearest stairwell. Scanning the ice, I couldn’t see much, but I took a second to watch the scoreboard and saw a late hit on Liam when he was behind the net trying to get the puck. The refs were all huddled together as Carson and someone for the Badgers were milling around the men in black and white. Liam seemed fine. Mad as hell, but fine. Greck was in front of Liam, his hand on his chest, talking him down. Well, Greck was talking up, but he was also talking down. I hurried to our seats.

“You missed some shit,” Tanner told me as I stepped around Henri to pass out hot chocolate and pretzels. “We almost scored. Then Greck got into a conversation with the Badgers captain that ended in Greck curtsying center ice. The Badgers’ captain took a swing. He missed. Greck, thank God, let him come at him without retaliating. The Badgers got a penalty and during the penalty, Wilts, one of the Badgers’ defense took Liam out while he was in the trapezoid, which got him into a tussle with DJ, who got called for roughing while the asshole who railroaded our goalie got nothing. I wish I was down there. Wilts would be too busy looking over his shoulder to plow into a goalie.”

“Wow, I did miss a lot.” I sat down, tore off a hunk of pretzel after settling my cocoa between my sneakers on the floor, and dunked my chunk of salty goodness into my cup of cheese. “Looks like DJ is having words.”

“Yeah, he has his number, don’t you worry. I mentored him well.” Tanner ripped off a piece of pretzel like a lion tearing off the hindquarters of a kill. Talk about passion. It made me kind of stiff in the boxers, to be honest. I shifted just enough to take the pressure off my cock. Tanner LaBrie was slowly turning all my knobs to high flame. “Thanks for the food. Oh, okay, here we go. They had better have decided on a penalty for someone in gray, or I might just have to step onto the ice to settle a few scores. I have a cane, and I know how to use it.”

That made me snicker.

“Excuse us, I think we are on the other side of Tanner?” I looked up to see a small group of incredibly good-looking people. Three men, a woman, and a teen boy of about sixteen or so.

“I was wondering where you were,” Tanner said, easing to stand.

“Our flight out of Pittsburgh was delayed due to storms,” the pretty blonde woman informed us.

“Yeah, the east coast is stormy this time of year,” Tanner replied. “Key, this is Liam’s family. His mother and father and brother.” The woman smiled and yes, I could see the similarity between her and our goalie. “And his uncles Mike and Bryn.” I shook all the men’s hands as the crowd around us began to shift. Fans and family were closing in around the handsome dark-haired man in a sleek designer coat. Fans were calling out ‘Bryn! Bryn!’ and said good-looking man lifted a hand to the chanting Gladiators’ backers. “Bryn used to play for the Ravens as a goalie. He was okay,” Tanner teased with a wink.

“I made do,” Bryn said as his gaze went to the scoreboard. “Oh, that’s going to ruffle a few feathers. I’m assuming the Gladiators will argue for goaltender interference, but the Badger player was attempting to move between Liam and the boards when the incidental contact occurred. That will not be seen as a penalty, even though I would certainly argue for it as well.” We sat there, quiet, as the referee addressed the crowd with the exact same explanation to the fans Bryn had just made. The booing grew in intensity but play was moving on without a call.

“Wow, you do know the game,” I said and got a concurring nod from a blond man with eyes the same green as Liam’s.

Everyone shook hands and then Liam’s family found their seats.

The jeering grew. The refs were called bad names. Tanner was furious, so I fed him another pretzel. Bryn was shown on the scoreboard and the arena went wild with applause.

“So, I take it Liam’s uncle was a big thing,” I whispered beside Tanner’s ear.

“Oh yeah, huge star. Won the Vezina, took the Ravens to a couple Stanley Cup wins, captured best-dressed player in the NHL like ten years in a row.”

“Ah, that sounds like something big. He’s handsome and all, but he ain’t got nothing on you.” I nipped at his earlobe. His nose turned bright red.

“Are you trying to seduce me, Mr. Williams?”

“Is it working?”

“Yeah, it really is.” He shoved his spare coat into his lap. I leaned back in my seat, pleased to see that I had that kind of profound effect on him. God knows he made me

hot with just a look.

Deciding that sitting in a packed hockey rink with a raging hard-on would not be cool, I turned my attention back to the game. Things started to get a little rougher after that incidental contact with Liam. The checks were harder, the elbows higher, and the tempers shorter. Leading the charge was Greck, the mouth almighty, who in the space of ten minutes had taunted one of the Badgers into taking a swing that put the Gladiators on a power play. A foolish mistake for the Badgers, Tanner informed me.

“Our power play is insanely good,” he bragged.

My knowledge of hockey, and what made things good or bad was limited, but I could understand the basic advantage of having one more player than the other team. The Gladiators were like a swarm of hornets with a one-man advantage. They moved into the Boulder offensive zone in a tight cloud and began shooting at the goalie from every angle. Left, right, center. The passing and shooting were intense. I fought to keep up with the puck as it was being shuttled around with such high speed. The four Badgers were throwing themselves in front of pucks. One got a slapshot off the ankle that dropped him like a bag of bricks. And yet, after a second, he somehow got back to his skates. That there was some dogged determination. Sadly, his delay in getting up opened up a small hole in the defenders and Carson found a slot. Right in front of the Badgers’ goalie. He parked his big body there and then, when Deandre took a shot from the blue line, Carson lifted his stick just enough to deflect the puck over the goalie’s left hand. It hit the back of the netting. The red light lit. The Schaffer Salt Arena shook from the cheers.

“Holy shit!” I yelled while pumping my fist into the air. “Holy shit that was epic!”

Tanner swept me into his arms and kissed me so hard I nearly blacked out. I didn’t though and clung to him as his lips moved over mine. When we broke apart, panting,

I stared into his hazel eyes. Oh boy, there was fire in his gaze.

“Holy shit,” I whispered. “I hope they score a few more goals.”

“Hockey makes me horny,” Tanner confided with a devilish grin before releasing me. Everyone in our row was gawking and smirking. Tanner blushed as he sat back down. I took my seat, wobbly from that smooch, and took a sip of lukewarm cocoa.

“You will find that a good game will get you all kinds of benefits in the bed,” Henri confided, leaning over to share that naughty secret, before returning to nibbling on a cold pretzel.

Good to know. “And if they lose?” I dared to ask as the first period ticked down and then ended.

“Then you will be massaging shoulders and bruised egos.”

Ah, also good to know. “Okay, my treat this time. Who wants what from the food stands?” Tanner yelled as he pushed to his feet. Criswell and Pastor Gabe went with him to help carry the large amount of food. Bryn was mobbed by fans and the local press. I watched Tanner making his way up the stairs as fans shouted or high-fived him, slowly, with his cane, his face alight with joy. It was obvious he adored this game, this town, and these fans. I had no idea what the future held for his return to hockey, but I hoped I would be present to share it with him, no matter what road his path took.

“Okay, what the hell is going on here now?” I yelled to be heard over the deafening crowd. Tanner pointed at the scoreboard. The Gladiators had somehow held onto that one goal lead through the second and third periods. The clock read a minute forty and the Badgers’ goalie had left his net. Just skated off, leaving it wide open as some other Badgers took his place, only not in the goal. Had they all lost their marbles?!

“They’re getting an extra attacker on the ice to try to score a goal to take the game to overtime. Buckle up, baby, this is going to be the most intense thing you’ve ever experienced outside of your bedroom.”

Well, damn. I was down for that. The puck was dropped. The Gladiators went on the defensive, doing their all to keep the puck from Liam in goal. I joined in the bellowing when the Badgers crowded around the net, poking and prodding at a puck in front of Liam. Bodies were shoved, checked, and swatted. Men fought like wild hyenas. The Badgers were well named, for they dug in around the Gladiators’ net and would not budge, a six-pack of snarling beasts that were now beyond desperate as the clock ticked past forty seconds remaining.

Somehow, and I will never know how, Liam managed to swat the puck free from the madness around his net before someone fell on him. The puck slid to the waiting stick of Phil Greco, who took a shot from the far end of the ice. Everyone in the Schaffer Salt Arena was on their feet, eyes glued to that little frozen bit of rubber as it slid almost nonchalantly down the ice and into the empty net. Everyone in the rink lost their shit. The red light flashed. The Gladiators’ goal horn sounded so loud it made my ears cringe. Tanner swept me into his arms, his mouth coming down over mine, and I held on for dear life. His tongue swept into my willing mouth, the kiss so demanding and fierce that I lost touch with the chaos around us. All I knew was this moment, his lips on mine, as madness erupted.

“Holy shit!” I gasped when we came up for air. Tanner held me tight, his eyes bright with so many emotions I couldn’t keep track. Joy, sadness, and lust.

“It’s going to be one hell of a night,” Tanner told me before taking one more bone-melting kiss. We high-fived everyone around us and remained standing. The players in red, black, and gold were electrified. Liam was moving to and fro in his crease, stick tapping on the ice, as the puck was dropped yet again. This time there were five to each side, with the Badgers’ goalie back in his net. We all watched spellbound as

the Gladiators played balls to the wall defense, keeping the Badgers in their own zone until the clock was rolling down to the final four seconds. Three seconds. Two seconds. One second. The buzzer sounded. The fans lost their minds. Red, black, and gold confetti fell from the rafters as the players on the ice fell on Liam at mid-ice. The rest of the Gladiators rolled over the bench like a wave of sheer joy. I turned to Tanner and saw him weeping. Partly, I assumed, in happiness and partly perhaps in loss. He'd not been down there to share in the revelry. I took his hand. He pulled his sight from the men on the ice, celebrating a hard-won victory to look at me.

"You won," I shouted over the din.

"Yeah, they did."

"No, baby, you did. They won because of how hard you played to help them get here." He seemed unconvinced. Then someone from security arrived to escort him to the ice. That made his melancholy lift. "Go, get with them boys. We'll meet up in a bit." I kissed his scarred knuckles.

"I'm so glad you're here." He gave my fingers a squeeze. The path to the exit was a long one for him as every fan within touching distance wanted to slap his back, shake his hand, or get him to sign something. When he paused at the top of the long concrete stairs, he looked down at me. I waved. He smiled and raised a hand, his face alight.

"Welcome to the Gladiators' family," Henri yelled as the lights rolled round and round. Down on the ice, the losers were shaking hands with the winners. I loved that. Good sportsmanship was a dying thing in this world. If you lose, you lose with grace and dignity. If you win, the same.

We waited for the Badgers to leave the ice. A long red carpet was rolled out as the Gladiators milled about near their bench. I spied Tanner as soon as he hit the ice as

did his teammates. They moved in mass to swallow him up, leading him to the bench where he shook hands with the coaching staff as the big silver cup was carried to the ice where it was placed on a long table with a black cloth covering. The press was everywhere, cameras snapping images, some trying to speak with the Gladiators.

The crowd clapped when an older man in a blue suit emerged from the dark recesses of the rink. He had some thank you speeches to make to the owners, the city, the team, etc. Carson met him at the table, the captain and the older man exchanged a few words as they both lifted the cup from the table. Flashbulbs popped off by the hundreds. The fans cheered loudly when Carson hoisted the silver trophy over his head. He moved to his team then, and every player on the roster closed in around him. They all touched the trophy, even Tanner, who was so emotional that he was unable to speak properly when a young lady with a microphone tried to pull him aside for an interview.

Then it was over. On the ice anyway. Everyone in our small group filed out of the stands, heading to a waiting area where we milled around, talking and being fed lovely little sandwiches and chips while the team met with the press in the locker room. Our little suite was warm, friendly, and packed full of loved ones, from grandmothers to newborns. Henri led me through the crowd and introduced me as Tanner's boyfriend, a term that we'd not really broached yet. I shook hands, passed out business cards, and ate far too many finger sandwiches.

When the players finally emerged, all in ball caps toting them as the Calder Cup Champions, Tanner found me among the crowd. I broke free from Pastor Gabe to wrap myself around my...well, my date for the night, I supposed, but dang, this man felt like more than a mere date.

"Congratulations," I said as we hugged it out.

"Thanks. There's a party at the marina if you want to go?" He held me to his side, his

cane in his other hand. I noticed his limp was pronounced now. Too long on his healing leg. I suspected he would hang in with the other players late into the night as was his due as part of the winning team. He bent down to put his cheek to mine. “Truth be told, my knee is killing me. If you’re not too upset, we can split now, use my old age as an excuse, and maybe celebrate privately somewhere?”

“My place?” I knew Rudy and Wade would be at his house. “But only if I get a hat.”

He plunked his down on my head. “Yeah, let’s go to your place and pop open a bottle of sparkling water and have our own celly.”

Now that sounded way more promising than more finger sandwiches.

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Chapter Nine

Tanner

By the time we arrived at Key's neat little home in his tidy little neighborhood, my rush of adrenaline was waning. Worry was trying its best to take its place.

"Come on in," Key said after unlocking his front door. The inside of his home was pretty much the complete opposite of mine. Everything had its place. The walls were pristine white, the hardwood floors were unmarred by dog toenails, and the furniture was free of dog hair. There were no squeaky toys thrown about or rumpled doggie beds.

"It's really nice," I said because it was. Much nicer than my old farmhouse with the creaky floorboards, loose shutters, and rattling pipes. This place was so new you could still smell the paint. All you smelled in my house was dog.

"You must feel like you walked into a museum," he commented while dropping his keys into a clay dish atop a long table by the front door. "I don't spend as much time here as I should. Workaholic. Plus, my time in the military drummed into me the need to be tidy."

"Hey, this place is beautiful. You don't have to make excuses for being neat or having a clean house. Probably I should be the one trying to explain why my house is so..." Slovenly was the term that popped into my head.

He took a step that got him so close I picked up the subtle undertones of his cologne.

“Homey. Lived in. Loved.” He moved even closer, his chest now brushing mine. My body began to react as if I’d stepped into a pool of water that had been electrically charged. “I love your place. It’s where I feel like I can be the truest Keyshaun. I bought this place as an investment. It’s nice and new and shiny, but it lacks the things your home has.”

“Dog nose prints on the windows and a dripping bathroom faucet?”

His lips found mine. A soft little peck that made me forget what we were talking about. Oh right, my house.

“Those add to the charm,” he whispered, his mouth brushing mine time and again. I reached for him, shifted to the side, and let my hand travel up his side. The movement tweaked my knee, sore from being on my feet for so long after the win. I must have made a sound of discomfort because Key moved back quickly. “Why don’t we sit down somewhere? I can get you some ice. Maybe rub down your calf if it’s tired?”

And here we were. That moment where I had to decide if I was ready for more than a few kisses. Given how hard my dick was becoming, I was pretty sure I had my answer. Key was special to me. I wanted to lie down with him on a soft bed and explore each other as well as a possible future together. Looking into his soft brown eyes, I felt the trepidation ease away.

“Can we sit down on your bed?” I boldly asked.

“Are you sure? I’m good with us still taking things slow.”

“I am as sure as sure can be.”

“Then come with me.” He held out his hand. I slipped mine into it and we climbed to the second floor, the stairs lit by a small nightlight. The second story was dimly lit, a

soft light from a bath falling into the hallway. Two doors stood open. He led me to the one on the right, pausing as we entered the main bedroom. His gaze found mine. “At any time you can say whoa, okay? Even if we just lie here and watch something properly Austen, I’ll be happy with that.”

“I’m ready for more with you.”

His smile was genteel. It stole more of my already captured heart. “Then let me give you some more of me.” He steered me to the bed. The room was cool, the AC churning strongly enough to shuffle the sheers on the windows. I liked the vibe in here. Lots of space with minimal furnishings, all modern, all without dings or mars. The bed was huge, the coverings a pale green with white swirls. An abstract painting hung over the metal headboard, something with lots of dark green and white splashes. It fit the color scheme well. “Sit, you look tense.”

“I think I overdid it,” I confessed, easing my heft down onto a soft as a cloud mattress. “Soft,” I commented, my nerves returning even as desire raced through me. “My bed is harder. For my back. I kind of have a trick thing from a back injury in college. You’d think from hockey, right? Nope, I crashed a dirt bike coming down a steep hill in Samuel D. Champlain Park. Boogered up my chin and torqued my back. I have a scar under my chin from...oh.”

Key had gone to his knees as I had been blabbering about that stupid old Kawasaki KX60 that I’d ridden all over Canada. He placed my cane to the side and was unlacing my sneakers. It shouldn’t be so erotic. I mean, I don’t get stiff when a shoe store clerk fits me for shoes. My cock was all about the man removing my Converse and socks.

“Okay?” he asked, and I bobbed my head. He wiggled my pant leg up to the brace, baring my hairy calf, and then began kneading it. Hand to Christ, I nearly blew apart just from a leg rub. His fingers were strong, working the tired muscles until they felt

like limp noodles. I locked my arms behind me, my sight pinned on him. He never looked away from me unless it was to move from the left leg to the right. “I remember getting killer cramps in basic training. I’d never run so far or for so long in my life. I’d thought I was in good shape until the Army proved me wrong.” He smiled fondly at the memory. “I learned really fast how to massage sore legs. One day, I’d like to take a course to become a licensed massage therapist.”

“In your spare time,” I teased, and he laughed. “That is amazing. I should look into massages now that I’m getting back to some training. Oh shit, that is...damn that is good.”

He winked, lowered my leg gently, and slowly rose from the floor. I fell back onto the bed, arms over my head, bare feet on the plush area rug under his bed. Key straddled me, long legs on either side of my hips, and fell forward, his strong arms catching him.

“This is good as well,” I whispered before his mouth slanted over mine. I palmed his ass, pulling him down onto me so that not even a whisper could pass between us. Looked like any reservations that had been lingering about us were gone. I’d dreamed of feeling this toned ass, and now it was in my hands. Mostly. Fabric was in the way. The cotton barring me from his skin had to go. “We need less clothes.”

“Yeah, yeah, we do,” he concurred as he worked his way from my lips to my throat, rubbing his cheek in my beard and purring like a cat in an anchovy factory. “I love how hairy you are. Damn, it makes me hard.”

I could feel that. His cock was like an iron bar pressing into my hard prick. Using my good leg, I rocked up. Our dicks rolled left and right. I groaned out loud. Key hissed and moaned. My fingers dug into his buttocks. We were quickly losing all measure of restraint, and I fucking loved it.

“Clothes...” I huffed as he feasted on my neck, his groin moving over mine in a rhythm that made me unable to think. Parrots could form longer sentences than me right now.

“Yeah, shit...” He had to move from atop me, which sucked, but as he stood in front of me and stripped, all was forgiven. His body was divine. Hard muscle under dark skin, a broad chest with some light curls that thickened into a plush line. His nipples were mahogany nubs, hard as glass, that I planned to lavish attention on.

Then his pants dropped. His cock sprang up to slap his flat belly. Okay yeah, that prick of his was also getting all the lavishing. His cock was long, thick, and cut. Weeping now, the fat head slick. His pubes were neatly trimmed, his balls heavy and full. I lie there spellbound as he stepped out of his pants.

“I want to taste you,” I croaked, pushing up to sit on the edge of the bed. I reached for his cock, took the velvety shaft in hand, and wet my lips.

He stepped forward, silently, his fingers moving into my beard to rake through it as he led my mouth to his prick. I opened for him, eager and starved, and let him glide into my mouth. The salty taste of his precum hit my tongue. I groaned. He shuddered and fed me more. I took all he had and wanted more. He rocked in and out, cradling my face, easing his cock between my tender lips.

“You look so good with my cock in your mouth,” he huffed. I hummed and got a low moan that made my balls draw up. “Okay, baby...” He eased out and gripped the base of his cock. “That was close.”

“I would have taken it,” I breathlessly replied and tugged my shirt over my head. Key made a sound akin to a hungry predator spotting prey. He pressed me back into the bed after I whipped my shirt over my head with abandon. His lips closed around a dark pink nipple. I jerked and twisted in pleasure. He suckled one tiny bud, then

licked a wet trail to the other, all the while fumbling with the zipper on my pants. When he had it down, he popped off, pressed a kiss to my nipple, and slid off to peel down my pants and boxers. He had a moment when my underwear snagged the Velcro on my knee brace. Once that was rectified, I was freed. He took a moment to drink me in splayed on his bed, cock stiff, and nipples slick with his spit.

“You are the sexiest thing ever,” he purred, his dick leaking steadily. “We still good? Anytime you want to apply the hand brakes, just say so.”

I took my cock in hand. “I am so hard for you. I want to lick you all over.”

“Mm, now that sounds like a dream I had the other night,” he replied, his voice now a raspy thrum. “Let’s get you comfy.”

I hauled my backside around and up. Key plumped and rearranged pillows, his touch gentle when he tucked a pillow under my healing knee.

“Do you want this off?” he asked with a nod at my brace. Yeah, I did, but I didn’t want to gross him out looking at my bright scar. The swelling would be bad as well since I’d way overdone today and tonight. “I’ve seen my share of scars, so if you want it off, I won’t be upset.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” I’d never had a sexy naked man tending to my surgery site before. I must say that the sight of his big dick bobbing around as he removed the brace, found another pillow, and then jogged off to find an ice bag made things much less awkward. By the time he had me situated to his specifications, my dick was soft. His, I noted, was still rock hard. “See what happens when you get to my advanced age?” I waved a hand at my limp cock and pointed at his as he shimmied onto the bed, taking care not to wiggle the pillows under my sore leg. “You’re still hard as a fence post.”

“Okay, first thing, I didn’t just have my recently operated on leg jostled about by an incompetent wanna-be nurse.”

“You never jostled it.”

He laid down beside me, his nose brushing the hinge of my jaw as his hand moved through the thick fur on my chest.

“I probably jostled. Second, there’s not ten years between us, so this advanced-age stuff is bogus.” He kissed down my throat while his fingers curled around my wilted prick. “Third, I think we’ll have him back to attention in no time.”

“If you say so,” I replied and got a smug little smirk from him before he began licking a hot wet path down to my now perky peter. The man had confidence, that much I knew. It was one of the things that made him so appealing. He moved down slowly, nipping and sucking at me, leaving tiny red marks that I would wear proudly for the next few days.

His touch was magical. The strokes working me perfectly. By the time the tip of his pink tongue dipped into my cock’s slit, I was rigid and leaking.

“Mm, I love your taste,” he cooed, lapping each pearly drop that appeared. He released my cock to swallow it, taking it deep, the wet head hitting the back of his throat making him gag. He hummed softly, pulled off, and then went down again. This time he took me fully. My hips jerked. His free hand now crept between my parted legs. I spread them wider, letting my good leg flop open. He palmed my balls as he suckled loudly, his lips tight around my dick, the suction incredible. He gave them a squeeze while tonguing my frenum, his eyes on me lying propped up on a dozen throw pillows panting like a racehorse.

“Fuck, you are good at that,” I panted and got a wink before he went back to driving

me delirious. One finger crept under my balls. His name burst out of me when that fingertip found my hole. He brought it back, sucking loudly on my prick, gathered some spit from my soggy balls, and then pushed the tip in. “Key, shit, shit!”

My hips were rolling like an angry sea. He pressed into me, one long finger rubbing over that magical spot deep inside. I exploded. No warning for the poor guy. My fingers ripped at the sheets, pulling them up to my side as he enthusiastically drained my cock. His finger pushed on my prostate, making me howl like a demented coyote. By the time he eased off my cock, I was spent. Done. Kaput.

“My bones...are gelatin,” I panted, arms akimbo. Key spread over my good side, his finger now easing out of my ass. As soon as it was gone, I wanted it back inside me. That finger and more. Two more, at least. Followed by his cock, the same cock that lay on my hip, solid as a digging bar. “God above...your mouth.”

He wiggled up to steal a kiss. I ran my tongue over his to gather up the taste of myself. The kiss grew into something rabid in no time, his dick thrusting into my hipbone.

“Let me help you,” I whispered over his lips. I slid my hand down between us, found his achingly hard prick, and fisted it. “You feel good.”

“Mm, shit, that’s perfect.” He humped madly, his mouth capturing mine with heated kisses until he inhaled sharply as his orgasm claimed him. He buried his nose into the side of my throat, riding out his release with soft grunts as he painted my hip and hand with hot cum. The thick spunk ran between my fingers. His body went soft, his huffs dampening my shoulder and neck. He lifted his head, his gaze soft and lazy. I released his cock, brought my fingers to my mouth, and sucked them clean.

“Damn it, Tanner, that’s hotter than jalapeno poppers.”

“Tastier too,” I replied around my fingers. He snorted in amusement before his nose found my thumping pulse under my ear. With a sigh of contentment, he melted into me and the bed, his thick thigh resting over my leg while one arm lay on my chest.

“We’re a mess,” he mumbled into my throat. I concurred but neither of us seemed to be in a rush to leave the sticky little love nest we’d made among the rumpled covers.

“I truly think I could lie here like this for years,” I admitted a moment or two later, the cool air blowing over my overheated skin.

“Yeah, this is nice. Real nice. Even if my hip is glued to yours with cold spunk.”

I laughed softly as I trailed my fingers over the swell of his bicep. My eyes lingered on the ceiling, looking at the sliver of light from the street lamp on the fan unmoving above us.

“My mother always said that almost everything a boy gets into will wash off. I always came home filthy as a kid. If there was a pond or mud wallow to be found, I’d be in it.”

“Yeah, I was that way too. Never could pass up a puddle. Mama still calls me the dirty triplet. Ornell was never into digging in the dirt. Etta was one of those girls who would sooner die than touch a bug, which made for fun times when we were little.”

“What is that like exactly? Being one of three? I have a younger brother, but that must be a different dynamic.” He moved slightly, rolling to his back to stare at the ceiling as well, his hand skimming down my arm to find my hand. His fingers meshed with mine.

“It’s cool. Sometimes it’s difficult. School was hard at times as everyone wanted to compare us to each other. The teachers would comment when I’d not ace a test that

Ornell passed with ease, or when Etta would star in the school play while I was happier doing anything that consisted of any kind of physical activity. I was that kid who lived for field day.”

“Yep, that was me too. I spent my childhood on the ice or outside fishing, swimming, and canoeing. Never was one to sit around inside when there was so much to do outdoors. Now this leg is keeping me inside more than I would like.” I sighed aloud.

“Before you know it, you’ll be back outside.” He pressed a kiss to my shoulder before easing away from me with a reluctant moan. “Guess we should clean up.” He looked down at me spread over his bed as if I owned it. “Do you want to head home, or are you going to stay?”

Oh. I’d not thought I’d get an invitation to spend the night. “If you’re okay with me staying...”

His smile nearly blinded me. “I would love for you to stay.”

So, I stayed. All night. We woke up with me spooned up behind him. We made out in the shower, hands roaming until both of our cocks were in our joined fist. The slip and slide of soapy water had us both blowing apart quickly.

When I finally rolled out after a big breakfast of eggs, turkey bacon, and some fresh melon followed by some steamy goodbye kisses, I had a skip in my step and was whistling a happy song. Okay, so the skipping thing wasn’t really true, but the whistling thing sure was.

I assumed that Rudy and Wade were probably still asleep when I drove up to my farmhouse. But not for long because the dogs had used their super dog hearing sense and were now announcing to the world that Daddy was home. Glorioski he was home after eons of being away!

They met me at the door, leaping about in sheer glorious joy. The dogs, not my brother and his sig other. I made it to the kitchen, plugged in my nearly dead phone, and handed out doggie treats to the delirious mob before turning them out into the large back yard. The notifications began rolling in at a steady rate, my phone buzzing like a demented bee. I started a pot of coffee and then began perusing my messages. Ninety-nine percent were from the team, players, staff, and upper management. A parade was in the works in four days, the route starting at the end of the main drag and proceeding past the western side of Seneca Lake, making a loop at the Schaffer Salt Factory, and then coming back to its end at the Watkins Glen Marina. Local businesses were already going berserk trying to ensure they had extra help for the influx of fans and hungry parade enthusiasts.

“I thought that sounded like happy barking, but Rudy said to check.” I glanced up from a text from Liam to find Wade schlepping into the kitchen. His dark hair was a rat’s nest, his brown eyes puffy. Other than that, he was a handsome man with the patience of Job. He had to be easygoing to live with my brother. Wade Jue was taller than Rudy but not me, lean, with a soft smile.

“Is my brother functioning?” I asked, waving at the coffee pot with my free hand.

“That depends on what you term to be functioning. He’s breathing.” Wade slipped past me to get a mug from the cupboard. The dogs began barking their mailman bark.

“Those mojitos will get you every time,” I tossed out, then caned my way to the front step to fetch the mail. Junk, junk, a bill, a card from the vets telling me that Bingley was due for shots. What else was new? Someone was always due for shots around here. Amid the usual flotsam was a pale white envelope, very thick paper, addressed to Rudy and Wade but with my address. The edge of the flap was colored blue. I carried it back into the kitchen, handed it to Wade, and let the dogs in.

“What’s this?” Wade asked, with coffee in one hand and posh envelope in the other. I

shrugged while doling out a dog treat to each pathetic starving pup. They had this begging thing down pat. “Oh, huh. It’s an invitation to Liam and Tarcy’s wedding down in Georgia.”

Well, that was unexpected. And also explained where I knew that soft blue edge on the back of the envelope. I had one just like it upstairs. I’d sent in my RSVP already. “There’s a note apologizing for the late invite, but they assumed you would be taking Rudy. Did you put down your brother for a plus one?”

“No, I simply marked down a one with no plus.”

Wade’s mouth twisted into a shit-eating smile. “Hey, no shame in taking your brother to a wedding.” I flipped him off. “It’s cute. I like that you’re so close. I wish I had siblings to force into things.”

Bingley laid down at my feet with an exhausted huff, his morning complete now that Dad was home and the mailman had been put in his place.

“I didn’t ask him to be my date. I’m not that pathetic.” Wade sniggered. “I mean, if he wants to go, he can. Since you won’t be around for a few weeks when the wedding is taking place, he’s more than welcome to come, but he’s not my date.”

“Yeah, I hate leaving him alone so much. I wish I could find a way to peel off some of the family business over in Seoul for more time stateside, but my father won’t allow anyone else to step in, even though my cousins are his chief advisors and live a block from Jue Energy Solutions. I mean, that trip is just to attend a convention in Buson.”

I understood. Rudy disliked flying. Like a lot. Like he had to be medicated to even get onto a plane, so flying to South Korea was out sadly. A weak little sound pulled us from our discussion to a washed-out Rudy in the doorway.

“I’m never drinking again,” Rudy vowed and wobbled his way into the kitchen right into Wade’s open arm. He burrowed into his man’s side and whined. The dogs all cocked an ear at the sound.

Wade and I exchanged looks. We’d heard that before. Mojitos were Rudy’s kryptonite.

My phone buzzed. A text from Liam.

So we sent an invite to Rudy and Wade since we figured you’d want your +1 to be Key. We cool? ~ L

I had to snicker. Honestly, there were no secrets with this team. Not that Key and I were being secretive.

We’re cool. I’ll talk to Key. Wade won’t be able to make it. ~ T

Oh crap. Bummer. Okay, well Rudy can come stag or bring a friend. Just let us know for the head count. ~ L

I looked over at my peaked brother. “So, Liam sent you and Wade an invitation to his wedding since I had marked just one and they assumed I’d want to bring Key.”

“Aww, that is so sweet. Are you taking Key?” Rudy asked, steering Wade’s cup of coffee to his lips with both hands over his boyfriend’s. Wade, as ever, was eager to let Rudy have whatever he wished, even if it was his first cup of Joe. That there was true love.

“I have to ask him. I know Wade can’t go so—”

“You know what? I just might cut that trip short and go to the wedding. I’ve never

been to Georgia and my father will just have to rely on my cousins to ride shotgun at the energy convention they're attending. Might do him good to rely on someone other than me on occasion."

Rudy glowed. Well, as much as a hungover person can glow. Wade seemed set now, so all there was left for me to do was discuss it with Keyshaun.

"So, you never came home last night. Spill the tea," Rudy said into his—I mean, Wade's—mug.

"The tea is that I have a yoga class in thirty minutes." I left him sputtering as I went to find some stretchy bottoms and a comfy top. Yoga with Key. I couldn't wait to have him help me with all those sexy, bendy moves. It would be like foreplay for our next date.

It was not going to be like foreplay. At all.

The room was filled with senior citizens and one rather smug-looking Keyshaun, mat under his arm, tight leggings, and a tank top that put my joggers and tee with Captain America's shield on the front to shame. Key was color coordinated. What the hell?

"Welcome to the I'm Bendy Like Gumby Dammit senior yoga class," Key called to me as I stood at the door like a bewildered twit. This was not at all the gay fantasy that had been rolling in my head for a few days. This was a bunch of seniors in floral tights and no shoes. Key seemed to be enjoying this moment a bit too much. "Come on in, Tanner. Everyone, this handsome man is Tanner LaBrie, my new squeeze. His teammates call him Fossie."

"He's Captain America, so I'm calling him Cap," an older Black man in the front row

of four announced. The older gals giggled. My face grew hot. Key grinned.

“Uncle Devon. Stop teasing my man.” The group giggled. “Will you get Tanner a mat? Millie, can you scoot over to make room for Tanner? He’s a big one, so he’ll need lots of leg room.” Key went about setting up. The room filled with harp music as everyone sat down cross-legged. Devon handed me a pink mat and motioned for me to sit down. I did, but it wasn’t pretty. How I’d get up, I had no clue. Maybe this was a bad idea. I mean, sure, Key had talked with my therapist and they’d both agreed this would be beneficial to my recovery. But I was having second, third, and fourth thoughts now that I was here, and it was obvious that my dirty mind had led me astray.

“Okay, everyone, let’s take a few minutes to center and find our breathing,” Key called, yanking me back to the present situation and away from my horny brain. Stupid brain. I was never listening to it again.

Chapter Ten

Keyshaun

“No, put the chairs closer to the shade from that overhang,” Etta dictated, bouncing little Oscar on her hip as Mama cradled Orwen. Or was it the other way around? My sister was going to have to start dressing the twins differently or something. Maybe write their names on their foreheads with a Sharpie? “Now back. Lionel, did you bring the headphones for the boys?”

Lionel, the pack camel, rifled through two diaper bags, a backpack, and the storage area on their twin-size stroller. “I think I left them in the van.”

“We’ll need them. The noise from the marching bands will be too loud,” Etta stated as Oscar drooled white milky froth onto the shoulder of her pretty pink top. I pointed at it. She sighed wearily. “Can you take him?”

“Of course. Come here, little man.” I lifted my nephew from my sister and got a funny little gas bubble smile. Mama said they were too young to genuinely smile yet, but I discounted that. “Are you happy to see your favorite uncle?”

“Sorry, but I’m their favorite. I set up their college funds, and their names start with O like mine in homage to me being the favorite uncle,” Ornell chimed in as Uncle Devon futzed with his fave lawn chair—the one he used when he fished on Seneca Lake back in the late 90s that day he caught a fourteen-pound brown trout up by Salt Point. The thing was mouse-chewed, stank of his garage, and had a funny stain on the seat that he claimed was root beer spillage, but we thought maybe it was from shitting

his pants the day he'd caught that monster trout. We teased him unmercifully about that discoloration. "Does anyone know if any of the coffee shops are selling iced coffee? It's already too damn hot." Mama hissed. "Sorry, Oscar."

"This is Orwen," Mama corrected. How she could tell I had no clue. Guess raising triplets had given her some sort of divination about such things, although Etta didn't count as she had girl plumbing, so it was easy to tell her apart. "These are great spots. I'm so glad you got spaces so close to the ice cream parlor."

"I need to state, for the record, that I am the favorite uncle by virtue of the fact I am better looking, much cooler, and am dating a Calder Cup winner." I made a face at the little baby drooling all over himself. He was so pretty, his skin a soft tan like a fawn, his eyes wide, and his cheeks round and chubby. They were growing like weeds. Etta was a fantastic mother. "Isn't that right, my man?"

Orwen burped up some milk. I looked in the stroller for a rag and found a tiny green muslin burp cloth mashed in with some cloth diapers. Etta was giving cloth a try, and so far, so good. Yay for the environment! After dabbing his chins, I lifted him to my shoulder so he could watch the people passing by behind us. I'd opted to close the gym today. No one would be working out for starters, plus the side streets had barricades put up by the WGPd to keep traffic from trying to get onto the parade route. Pretty much the whole village was shut down for the next few hours. After the parade, we were all heading to my sisters for a cookout. It would be the first time Tanner would be attending a family affair as the man I was dating, which added a new kind of vibe to everything. We'd not settled on titles yet, and I was fine with that. Tanner was opening up in amazing ways, both sexually and emotionally, and I did not want to fuck it up. He offhandedly mentioned reading up on demisexuality this morning over eggs and coffee at his place. That felt right the moment he mentioned it. I encouraged him to do so but try not to cram himself into a set category. Just be him. He'd assured me that he had no inkling how to be anyone else.

Lionel appeared flustered and sweaty but with two sets of yellow baby earmuffs. “This town is insane. I think the entire populations of Schyler and Chemung counties are rolling in.”

It was a pretty big thing for a small town like ours to have a championship team. We settled the muffs on Oscar—or did I have Orwen?—and then I passed him over to his father to help get Mama situated. The parade was slated to have started ten minutes ago, but the local fire department’s Dalmatian decided to investigate one of the food trucks parked in the town hall parking lot. We all laughed at the black and white dog as it dashed down the sidewalk with a string of pilfered Italian sausages in its mouth.

Mama and Uncle Devon sat side-by-side, whispering, and at one point her hand rested atop his. I thought nothing of it. Mama always touched people when she was talking. My attention swept from my mother and uncle to the parade. The first band of many marched by, followed by floats from local businesses.

“See, there, see! We should have rented a fancy convertible to drive around in to pump up the gym’s name,” I shouted at my sister. She rolled her eyes.

“We had three days, Keyshaun. Three. Days.” She held up three fingers in a fashion that looked like a rude gesture. I let it drop. For now. Next parade we were getting a convertible and I would be in the back seat, lifting hand weights as Missy Elliott’s “Work It” blared out of the speakers while Ornell threw discount cards to the crowds. Lionel could drive. Etta was not allowed to drive among this many pedestrians. Her special awareness was terrible. Just ask her insurance company.

The parade moved on, slowly, with more bands leading the way. Then the Gladiators arrived atop a charter double-decker bus with an open top and banners with their red, black, and gold Roman warrior logo on the sides. Everyone cheered as they crept past, the huge silver trophy being held up high by Baskoro as they passed. Tanner’s sight found us in the crowd. I blew him a kiss. He smiled sheepishly, nodded, and

then the bus was moving away.

“What a shy thing. Totally opposite of my children,” Mama said, appearing beside me out of the blue. There was no arguing with her. None of her three were what one would call bashful. Not that his brother was timid, though. Rudy was a firecracker so that reticent nature was pure Tanner. I loved that part of him. “We’re heading out to help with the boys. You’re going to that gathering at the winery, then coming over to Etta’s, right?”

“Yes, Mama, we’ll be there by six.” I kissed her cheek. Uncle Devon smiled at me, placed a hand on my mother’s back and led her off into the crowds that were starting to disperse. I stared at that hand of his for the longest time before turning to my brother, who was gathering up chairs. “You see that?” Ornell looked up and down the street, then shrugged. He resumed battling with the trout chair. “You have to lean on the left side. It’s bent.” He did, and the thing folded down. “And I meant the way Mama and Uncle Devon are acting.”

My brother sighed. “Okay, just so you know, simply because you’re all gooey in love with—”

I poked a finger at his face. “I am not gooey in love with Tanner.”

“Never said a name, my brother.” Oh he was smug. “Just because you’re all in your feelings doesn’t mean other people are doing the same. Uncle Devon and Mama are like brother and sister. He’s always been fond of Mama, you know that. And now that Dad is gone, he’s just helping out with the man stuff.”

Hmm, maybe, but then again...

“Excuse me, but did I just hear you say man stuff as if there are things only those who have testicles can do?” Etta snapped.

“Uh-oh, Keyshaun, you’re in trouble now,” Lionel teased as he hoisted a diaper bag to his shoulder, the boys having conked out an hour ago.

“Back up. First of all, Ornell said the sexist thing,” I pointed out.

A family of four skirted around us, the mother stopping to ooh and ahh over the twins. I used the diversion to head out, leaving my brother to get chewed out. I had to meet the team at the lake, so I called goodbye and hightailed it away from the impending blast site. The walk was a short one, just a few blocks. I’d just gotten to the marina when I ran into Marcus Newley and his daughter. She’d lost a balloon, it seemed, and was in tears. Marcus and Baskoro were boyfriends. I’d spoken to him a few times when he’d been in the Glen and accompanied Basky to my gym to work out.

Marcus was kneeling on the ground in front of his little girl. I jogged into the nearby waterfront gift shop. It was packed full of the required touristy items like T-shirts, caps, and mugs, all with Seneca Lake printed on them. Bins of rocks were sitting beside a window, all smoothly polished and all with motivational words on them. Most wouldn’t work for a child lamenting her lost balloon. I pawed in the bin, tossing aside KINDNESS, JOY, RELAX, HOPE, and PEACE, the stones clacking together as people shopped around me. Then, down near the bottom, I found a brownish-white rock that said STRENGTH on it. That seemed perfect to me. Any loss required strength to get through, so I bought it. Then I jogged back to the crying child.

“Hey,” I called as I neared. The charter bus was just creeping into the parking area for the gift shop. Gulls cried out as they took to wing, disturbed from their usual perches atop the roof of the shop by the huge bus.

“Key, how you doing, man?” Marcus asked, rising to shake my hand.

“Better than this poor child.”

“I lost my Gladiators balloon,” she whimpered, pointing to the air where a tiny red speck could be seen floating over Watkins Glen proper.

“Man, that stinks.” She nodded and sniffled. I went down to one knee and opened my palm. “I bought this for you. It says strength, and I thought you might need a little extra right now.”

Her dark eyes went from the rock to Marcus. He nodded. She scooped it up and gave me a shaky smile.

“Thank you. I know what it says. I am a professional reader,” she whispered, tears stalling. She sat down on one of many benches, the wind off the lake rustling the ribbons in her braided hair.

“Thanks, man, that was kind of you,” Marcus said as we sat on either side of Kyleen, who seemed mollified now.

“Sometimes we all need just a little more fortitude. Speaking of perseverance, how are you holding up? Must be tough having your boyfriend’s team win the championship after beating your team.”

He chuckled dryly. “Not going to lie, it stings. But Baskoro worked his ass off, as did the whole Gladiator team, and I’m proud of him. That being said, next year the Comets are going to run over the Gladiators, so he best enjoy it.” He gave me a wry wink.

I could see how it might be tough playing the same sport in the same division as your lover. They’d work it out, though. They seemed solid. Same as the other queer players on this team as well as the Comets. Sure, there were bigots still lurking around. Being Black and queer gave Marcus and me an extra heaping helping of hate to deal with, but the majority of people had been welcoming. Even in small towns

such as this, love and acceptance seemed to outshine the hate.

The bus rolled up, and the door opened. Players began filing out one-by-one, most chatting to someone behind them. I got to my feet when Tanner exited, his cane in hand and a grin a mile wide on his face. He found me right off, and his smile grew even brighter.

“Wow, that is one hell of a grin. Fossie just saw the most important thing in his life.” Marcus gave me a clap on the shoulder. “Just chirping. Although that man has it bad for you, no doubt.”

He led his daughter to the bus. They both hugged Basky. I made my way to where the players were lingering around talking. The hotel was having a reception for them thrown by the town council. Then it was over to Gaudion Winery for a more informal gathering.

“You look like you’re ready to float,” I said as I walked into Tanner’s embrace, hugging him close while inhaling his warm skin.

“Seeing you does that to me,” he whispered beside my ear. Yep, this man had me right where he wanted me. In his arms, and now in his bed. Life was pretty sweet.

What a difference twenty-one days makes.

Not that my life wasn’t sweet yet. It was, and in no small part thanks to Tanner, who was healing at an astronomical rate. He credited his rapid recovery to my kisses and our not-so-sensual yoga classes. That was incredibly generous of him. It was Tanner who was putting in the work. I was just there to cheer him on and show him how to ease into a seated warrior variation. Or I had been. For the past ten days, I’d been

stuck in Buffalo. It was a great city, truly, and I was excited to be able to have it be the home of the second Williams Wellness Center, but just not right now.

Ornell chided me daily—sometimes hourly—about my lack of interest in our expansion. Our sniping was growing as we worked together with bankers, carpenters, more bankers, plumbers, more bankers, and electricians to get a basic idea of costs and when we would be able to open the doors. The cost was enough to make even an ex-soldier weep in to his fruit smoothie. We'd not think too much over how long things were going to take. Ornell and I wanted to open before Christmas. When we said that to the contractor, he laughed until he could barely breathe. Then he patiently explained—as if we'd never opened a business before—about permits, red tape, lack of suitable employees, critical shortages in supplies, etcetera. All were long lead in times. Oh, and the HVAC system was substandard to the new coding that had taken effect last week, so that would also have to be added to the list.

Which led me to the first stress migraine I'd had in forever.

Between the new site, the old gym, and my female family members—and my brother who was cruising for a bruising if he mentioned tax deductions one more time—I was at my limit. Mama and Etta were essentially running the Watkins Glen gym now, something that I was not thrilled with. My mother was supposed to be retired, and my sister was supposed to be home doting over my nephews. When I made the monumental mistake of pointing those two points out to them, I got my ass ripped. In my defense, I had been extremely tired, stressed, and only thinking of them, but man did women dislike being told to go home and tend to the babies or clean the pantry. Not that I said it like that, but somehow my kind and loving words got twisted in the airwaves between here and Watkins Glen, so when they entered feminine ears they sounded sexist.

“...looked at the second quarter expenditures yet? We need to have them to Ken in two days.”

I glared at Ornell, who had come striding into my hotel room as if he had a key. The fact that he did was neither here nor there. One room, two queens, saved money. A good thing as we were going to be coughing up huge amounts of cash in the near future. I might end up having to finance any future children just to pay for the damn HVAC system. I made a note in my mind to call someone and bitch. Loudly. The realtor was the first person on my ever-expanding tear-a-new-one list.

I took a deep breath, tried my best to block out my sibling, and re-centered on my meditation. Etta had suggested mindfulness to lessen the creases on my brow.

“I know you hear me,” Ornell added and stomped around me seated on the floor with my back to my bed. “This is important, Keyshaun.”

A nerve in my left eye began to twitch. “I’m trying to meditate here, O. Can this wait until I get done?”

“Fine, fart around on the floor. I’ll fly home to get things in order for Ken to work.”

“Okay, have a nice flight.”

He left after saying some words that Mama would have washed his mouth out with soap. I blew out a breath, opened my eyes, and stared at an ugly ottoman where my suitcase sat open. He’d be back. He was in his boxer shorts and a robe. My phone buzzed. I was loathe to even pick it up. My eye was still twitching when I glanced at the cell resting beside me, the guided meditation session still playing. I paused it, smiled at the incoming call, and let my head fall back to the bed as I placed the cell to my ear.

“Hey there, sexy man,” I said to Tanner.

“Hey yourself,” he replied, his deep voice like a cool balm to sunburned flesh. “I was

just getting ready to head to the gym for yoga class. How's things going for you in Buffalo?"

"Things here are making my eye twerk."

Tanner laughed hard. "Now that is something I need to see. Sorry, things are so tense."

"It's all part of being a business mogul," I teased, rubbing at my eyelid to try to calm it the hell down.

"Sounds like you could use a break from moguling. I'm heading to my cabin in four days. Why don't you join me?"

My eyelid stilled. Oh. Oh man. That sounded nice. Really nice. Me. Tanner. A cabin in the woods. No brother, no bankers, no sisters and mothers, no brothers, and no contractors. Just me, Tanner, and trees.

"Key, are you still there?"

"Yeah, sorry, I was just lost in the fantasy of what you just suggested." I stretched out my legs and wiggled my toes. Mindfulness was going to have to wait.

"Not a fantasy at all. Brand new cabin. Canadian wilderness. No neighbors."

Damn, that did sound good. But I had so much going here and back home that—

The door opened and Ornell stalked in, carrying two large cups of coffee from the coffee station in the hotel lobby.

"Okay, so I have coffee for us. Now, can we get some paperwork done and off to Ken

before the IRS crawls up our asses?” Ornell asked as the hotel door snicked softly shut behind him.

Camel meet straw.

“Can we meet at the cabin sooner than four days?” I asked Tanner. Ornell looked down at me as if I had just said Beetlejuice three times. His face grew tight with horror.

“Sure, I can meet you there this evening. I have to load up the dogs and their paperwork. Pack some shit. I can meet you in Makwa say by eight tonight?”

“Makwa. Yeah, I’ll meet you in Makwa by eight. Where is this Makwa?” Ornell’s mouth was falling open wider with each sentence I spoke.

“Up near James Bay. Quebec. There’s a small airfield in Makwa. If you fly out of Buffalo to Sudbury and hop a charter to Makwa, I can pick you up there.”

“Okay, Quebec. I can get to Quebec by nightfall,” I said as my brother’s jaw hit his chest. “Yep, I’ll book the flights now.”

“Amazing! I’m so...this is really spur of the moment. Are you sure you can get away? Are you sure you want to do this?” Tanner was talking with such excitement I could hear his pack whining as they picked up his happy vibes.

“I have never been more sure of anything in my life.”

“Then I’ll see you in Makwa tonight. I’ll have the home fires burning as they say.”

“See you then.” I blew him a kiss, hung up, found a plane, booked it, and then stared at my stunned sibling. “Say what you have to say. I need to pack, shower, and catch

my flight to Quebec.”

“ Quebec ?!” That was the first of about ten thousand words that rained down on my back as I threw my clothes back into my suitcase. When Ornell was winded from his tirade, I zipped my carry-on, turned, and looked him in the eye.

“I love you, and I love this business we’re building, but I haven’t had a vacation in over three years. I’m going to Quebec to spend a week with Tanner. If I don’t get a break, I’m going to end up with an ulcer or something worse. Look what stress did to Dad.” He was about to argue. Then his jaw snapped shut. “Mental health is just as important as physical.”

“I know, but now ?”

“If not now when?” He made like a fish, mouth opening and closing before it finally closed softly. He nodded. “You should go somewhere too. Now. Today. You look like something one of Tanner’s dogs rolled in.”

“Thanks, that’s really kind of you. Jerk.”

“Truth hurts.” I grabbed the back of his neck and pulled his brow to mine. “Take some time off. The books will be there when we get back. The banks will be there, the renovations will be there. We’ll just be in better places to handle them all.”

He exhaled robustly, eyes closing for a moment, then opening to catch mine. “Fine, I’ll go somewhere, but it is not going to be in some forest in the woods with no cell service or Uber. I know you know that the Black dude always dies first in horror movies.”

“This is a vacation in the woods, not some foolish movie . ” I laughed, kissed his cheek, and made my way to the bathroom to shower and shave.

“I got one word for you. Cocaine Bear !”

“That’s two words and I doubt there are any bears in Quebec,” I shouted through the door.

Tanner never once mentioned bears. Just moose.

I paused, pulled out my phone, and Googled moose mauling statistics. Oh, okay, so not many, but a few. Unsettling, but I’d just steer clear of moose. Then I looked up what kind of bears lived in Canada.

Oh shit, well, certainly not Care Bears. I kind of wished there had been a stuffed teddy with a big old red maple leaf on its tummy on that stupid web page.

Maybe Ornell had a point. I’d buy some bear spray and douse myself with it when I got to Makwa. Nothing was going to keep me away from Tanner and all that romance.

Chapter Eleven

Tanner

We sat in my truck, watching the little single-engine Cessna bounce along the aged runway at the Makwa Airport. All five of us were beyond excited to know that soon Key would be among us once again. Bingley was on my lap. The other three sat in the back seats of the king cab, staring at the plane as it taxied to the one and only hangar. To say the Makwa airport was small would be making it sound bigger than it was. The Elmira-Corning airport that we flew out of frequently was small. The Makwa Airport was a lone hangar built in the 50s that housed Tammy Laroque's crop-dusting plane. The same plane that had graciously picked up my man.

"Okay, so one final run of manners," I said to the four canines. Darcy tilted his head and stared at me with one big brown eye. Elinor wiggled with anticipation at what she did not know but she had faith something fun was going to happen. "When we see Key, we do not bark." Elizabeth yipped a high poodle yip. "Right, like that. That is what we don't do. We do not bark at Key. Nor do we bounce, leap, or lick his face when he gets into the truck. Are we clear?"

All four panted. I took that as a yes. Foolish of me for the moment Key exited the terminal—aka the hangar where Tammy parked her plane—my manners talk was for naught. Those dogs nearly turned themselves inside out. I could only chuckle. I felt the same way. It had only been a week since I'd kissed on the man, but a week was too damn long.

"Stay. Sit. Stay. No, Bingley, you sit. Darcy, sit. Sit. S.I.T. Sit. Asses on seats." I

spoke firmly, and they sat. Just. Tails were lashing, bottoms were barely on the seats, but I'd take it. I slipped out of the truck. Key spied me, waved, and jogged over the muddy field.

I swept him into my arms, catching his laugh with a kiss that left us both winded and stiff as fireplace poker. My hands caressed his cheeks, the roughness of his late-day stubble on my fingertips making my breath hitch.

"Damn, it is good to see you," Key breathlessly said, his hands resting on my lower back. "This is going to be a great week. Just you and me."

Someone—Bingley—pawed at the driver's side window. We both looked. Four noses were pressed to the glass.

"They missed you almost as much as I did," I confessed, stealing one more kiss. "I gave them a lecture on dog greeting manners, but they forgot it all when they saw you. Probably it would be less crazed to just let them out instead of trying to let them greet you inside the truck."

The rutted pasture that served at the Makwa runway and airport was empty save for a woodchuck peeking out of his hole a few hundred yards away.

"I missed them too. Let them out. It will be fine," Key said, hoisting his carry-on bag higher on his shoulder.

"Brace yourself." I opened the back door. Three out of four exploded out of the truck. Bingley tried to leap into the back but fell on his face. I reached in to lift up the old dog and cradled him during the melee. Key was close to hysterics with the greeting. The dogs were so happy to see him they ran in circles, leaped into the air like gazelles, and made fools of themselves. Then Darcy spied the woodchuck and the pack took off.

“Guess I’m easy to forget,” Key playfully lamented. I passed him Bingley, who washed his face as I whistled for the other three who were trying to dig the woodchuck out of his burrow. Either that or they were trying to reach the Earth’s core.

“You are not easy to forget,” I assured him. Tammy stepped out of the hangar to wave at us. I lifted a hand and made a mental note to send her a tip. She would send it back with a note saying neighbors helped neighbors here in Makwa, and then I’d send it back saying to donate it to the indigenous peoples’ shelter for domestic violence. That she would do. “I’ve been thinking of you every minute of every day. Oh guys, really?”

The dogs arrived, feet and faces coated with dirt. “This is why I carry towels. Give me a few minutes and we’ll roll.”

“Take your time. Me and Bingley are reconnecting.” I looked over my shoulder while digging in the cloth tote of dog towels I carried to see Bingley snuffling Key’s ear as if he were whispering something sweet to the man. I planned to fill Key’s ears with love words as soon as we were alone. I had other plans too but thinking of those would make me hard, so I’d stick to love words. And muddy dogs. “Okay, paws and noses, please.”

Ten minutes later, the six of us were on our way.

Key was buckled in, smiling, and holding my hand as we bumped along out of the pasture and toward the tiny town of Makwa. Sadly, it was almost dark by the time his plane had landed, so his views of the small village would be hampered. No bright lights per se, just a few streetlights on the block that constituted the heart of Makwa. We passed a small food store, Makwa Mart, where everyone shopped, a bar, Pop’s Place, where everyone drank, and a sporting goods store, Tim’s Tackle Shop, where everyone bought their ammo and bait. Guns and ammunition were available in

Canada but much more strictly regulated than in the States. I did own a rifle, for I did like to hunt when possible, which sadly wasn't often anymore due to my hockey schedule. The gun was also for protection from the critters that roamed the forest where my cabin sat. It was not uncommon to hear wolves baying at the moon here in Quebec. There were also grizzlies, cougars, coyotes, and wolverines. Oh, and polar bears, although they were further north than we were located. Still, plenty of things to chomp a person or dog caught unawares.

"And that was Makwa," I joked as we rolled out of town. Key snickered. "Did you blink and miss it?"

"Almost," he said and squeezed my fingers. "I'll be honest and admit that this is the first time I've been anywhere that had animals that will eat you."

"City boys," I teased. "You'll be fine. Just stay close to me. The dogs will let you know if something is nearby. Most of the time, the wildlife will dart off before you even suspect something was there. They're scared of us."

"I was going to buy bear spray in Makwa."

"Oh, okay, well, Tim's is closed. He has to be home at five for dinner or his wife gets angry. We'll make a run to town tomorrow for you. I packed in lots of food but forgot to buy extra paper towels. We could make a run over to Algonquin Park if you want?"

"To be honest, I'd be happy just hanging out at your cabin for a few days."

"Then that's what we'll do." I lifted his hand to kiss his knuckles. His smile was warm, but his gaze was sleepy. He did look stressed. The fine lines around his pretty brown eyes were much deeper than just a few weeks ago. "When you get bored from watching me fish or drying off wet dogs, just let me know. There's plenty to do

around here. Hiking is always fun.”

“With that knee?”

“Oh, well, yeah, I forgot. Well, small walks then. Walks, swims, maybe some canoeing. Just us and the wild mob back there.” I jerked a thumb toward the dogs in the back, taking Key’s hand with me.

“Sounds perfect.”

Yeah, it did.

The woods swallowed us up completely. Key’s chatter about how he still could not fully believe he was doing this fell off as his sight touched on the Canadian wilds engulfing us. I was happy to drive, with his fingers meshed with mine, and let him drink in the beauty of my country. The air was sweet here, thick with the smell of rich loam and pines, the birds just now settling to roost. The sun was deep in the west, the sky a swatch of purple and black, a few bright planets now showing.

As we drove, the high beams touched on all sorts of wildlife. Whitetail deer, a raccoon darting across the road, and an opossum carrying her young alongside a drive to a camp. Key, lethargic from his mad dash to reach me as well as the stress of being a successful tycoon, smiled softly at the sightings. These animals were nothing new to him, even if he had spent his early childhood in Philly.

We left the main road for a two-lane dirt one. Then we followed that deeper into the woods until it shrank to one lane. With the windows down, we could now smell Makwa Lake. Fog began to filter through the trees, the high beams slicing through the low clouds that gathered on the freshwater lake. There were four camps out this far, three were strictly hunting camps, and then there was mine. We pulled around a crooked oak, the tires crunching over the gravel drive of my second home, for that

was how I thought of it.

“Okay, that is damn pretty,” Key whispered when we pulled up in front of the A-frame cabin. The lights were on inside, tossing a soft golden glow on the sloping yard that led to the water’s edge. I’d strung some fairy lights along the dock just a few hours ago, knowing we’d be spending time out here in the evenings. I wanted the place to be magical for him so he would want to come back. “Bigger than I thought it would be.”

“It’s pretty spacious. My older summer home was really small, so when I went looking for a new place to hold me and the dogs, I wanted something with some room.”

He looked at me, the lights from the dash shining blue green on his face. “Did you buy this place with the hopes of someday bringing a special man here?”

“I did, and I have.” I leaned over the console to kiss him. A tender brush of lips that could have led to more but someone in the back had to piddle. The whine was not to be ignored, especially if it had come from Bingley. His bladder control was not what it used to be. “Let’s get inside and get you settled. I threw some stew together in the crockpot and have some of those pop-and-bake buns for us to dip with.”

Both of our stomachs rumbled. “Guess that’s a yes to it all!” Key laughed and patted his flat belly.

The dogs dashed about, smelling and marking territory, as we waited. When they were done, we herded them inside. Key stood in the middle of my living room, bag dangling off his shoulder, a look of pure joy on his face.

“Damn, Tanner, this place is really nice.” I preened a bit. I did love it here. The first floor held an open living area/kitchen set up with a utility room/powder room and

what the designers called an owner's suite. I had turned what had been the primary bedroom on the first floor into a den to hold all my athletic crap. The second story contained a loft bedroom, which I used, a large bath, and a walk-in closet. A small deck on the front that looked out over the lake and a small patio in the rear. I had plans for an attached garage, but that would be an addition for next summer. He padded to the spiral staircase leading to the second floor. A warm fire crackled in the wood stove in the living room, for ambiance mostly, although with the fog coming in the air got damp, so a little dry air always felt good.

"Mind if I take a peek at the loft?"

"No, of course not. Feel free to unpack. I emptied a drawer for your clothes in the dark cherry dresser." His look said that I had done something big, which I sort of had nickered with myself over for some time after arriving. Yes, making room for his clothes had connotations for sure. I'd stewed over that empty drawer, placing my good tees—and yes, I had a drawer for good tees and scruffy tees—in and out five times until I crammed them in with the scruffy tees and shut the drawer. It was foolish to be anxious over a drawer. He was here on vacation. He'd need to unpack. Simple. Nothing more to it. A few of my exes would call me out on that, saying that they'd have liked a drawer for whatever reason, but I'd been too distant and stubborn about my precious self to offer them one. Actually, it was two exes. I'd only felt this kind of draw with two other men, but even with them, the attraction hadn't been powerful enough to empty drawers. Not that I was clearing drawer space for him at my home. Not that this wasn't my home, for it was. In the summer. In the fall I was in—

Good Lord, Tanner, stop! Not one more mention of the word drawer unless it has to do with stripping Key's off his gorgeous body.

"Cool, thanks." He climbed the stairs and disappeared from view. I thunked myself on the forehead with the heel of my hand. Then I stood there, staring upward, just as

he peeked over the railing. “Okay, this is pretty spectacular. I mean, that skylight is amazing!”

“Thanks. I like it here.”

“I can see why. I’ll toss my clothes into my drawer and be down.”

I nodded. He began humming. The dogs followed me into the kitchen area, hoping for a handout. I popped the tube of biscuits, placed them on a cookie sheet, and slid them into the oven. The stew was bubbling slowly in the crockpot, the venison chunks falling apart when I forked them as did the carrots and taters. My belly rumbled. The dogs laid down near the breakfast nook which served as a meal nook for me. I loved sitting in my little corner every morning watching the sun rise while I planned my days. My days generally revolved around fishing and hiking. The hiking was still a push, but I was now doing a slow jog on the treadmill at my sports rehab appointments. The yoga really was helping, although I had missed a class to come here early. Maybe I could get the sexy instructor/gym owner upstairs to give me some personal mat time. My dick twitched at the notion. The timer buzzed, shaking me from dirty yoga thoughts.

I pulled the buttermilk biscuits out, slid them into a wicker basket, and placed that in the center of the table to the left of the salt and pepper shakers. I whistled a little ditty as I set the dishes out, bright blue ceramic plates that Rudy had found at a potter’s shop in some Maine resort town he’d visited last year. Rudy had an eye for such things. I’d eat off paper plates forever if I could. Once the table was set, I found some potholders—also gifts from my brother—and carried the navy stoneware liner to the table and set it on a dishtowel. I poured some ice water into the glasses that matched the plates and waited. Five minutes passed. I made my way to the stairs, cocking my head like one of my dogs, to see if I could hear him moving around. Nothing.

“Key, baby, dinner is ready,” I softly called. My voice floated upward. No reply.

Huh. Maybe he had found the shower. Randy notions popped up in my dirty mind. Curious as to what he was doing, I climbed the circular stairs, my knee reminding me that while it was healing well, it was still healing. I'd overdone for sure. I'd ice it down a bit after we had dinner. Unless we were engaged in hot sweaty downward dog stuff.

I found him sprawled out on my bed, sound asleep, his bag open but full. Looked like no naughty pigeon poses were taking place tonight. Not that I could do a pigeon pose. I was lucky to be able to touch my toes during a forward bend. Flexible I was not. Damn, he looked good in my big bed, though. I crept closer, removed his sneakers, and threw a blanket over him. His face was smoother in rest, the tension furrows on his brow and the tightness around his eyes had eased.

The dogs arrived, toenails clacking, and tags jingling. "Come on, gang, down we go. Let him sleep. He's worn out."

I herded them back down to the kitchen where I ate while reading a queer retelling of "Northanger Abbey" that had been recommended in one of my Austen fan groups on Facebook. After the meal, I fed the dogs, loaded the dishwasher, and clipped the invisible fence collars on the foursome. I let them out to do their business, cup of coffee in hand, as I stood on the back porch watching the dogs fiddle about. The light from the porch was bright enough to view the whole of the back area. It paid to supervise. We'd had more than one run-in with skunks—all Darcy sadly—and did not wish to deal with that again. Also, last summer a porcupine had decided to visit nightly. He chewed through the siding of one of my sheds and then moved onto the hoses under my truck. Two thousand dollars that prickly bugger ended up costing me. I called a wildlife service who came out and live trapped him, saving me from more cost and, worse yet, a run-in with the dogs and the porcupine. I had no doubt that Darcy, the big, loveable goof that he was, would dive into a porcupine.

After I whistled them back, I locked up, checked the fire in the stove, and climbed the

stairs. Key was snoring lightly, his arm over his head, his long legs spread. Very naughty thoughts percolated inside my brain, but I was a gentleman. I stripped down to my briefs, eased under the covers, and turned off the light. My knee was sore. I should have taken some ibuprofen before coming up. Now I'd lie here for an hour before having to get up and find the bottle down in the kitchen. Dumb place to keep them. I'd have to bring them up here. Then I'd need them on the first floor. That was life, wasn't it? A log in the stove snapped. One of the dogs was up to drink. An owl hooted nearby, the call coming in through the cracked window facing the water.

Key's warmth seeped through the throw into the bedding, and I wiggled toward it. Even though he was on top of the covers, I could snuggle. So I did. I draped my arm over his back, breathed in his scent, and fell asleep in seconds.

I came awake at dawn to the press of a man slipping closer to me under the covers. Skin to skin, Key wriggled into my side, his lips finding the hinge of my jaw as his hand skimmed down over my belly. I sucked in a sharp breath when he found my rapidly hardening cock through my briefs.

"Morning," he mouthed into my skin, his tongue a hot, wet flick against my ear. I shivered in delight. "Sorry, I fell asleep." Nip to my lobe. "I was going to just lay down for a minute." Kiss to my throat. "I'll eat stew for breakfast." Stroke of my dick through cotton.

"The stew will reheat for dinner," I managed to say before his mouth settled on mine. I cared not one whit about us having morning breath. I was too hot for the man to give a shit. I licked into his mouth as he worked me into a froth with his skilled hand. "Key, I want to suck you off."

"You will, and I'll repay the favor, but right now, I want to ride you hard. I'm happy at playing both positions but seeing you here, in this big bed, looking ready for loving...damn, Tanner, I just want to feel you stretching me wide."

Jesus H. Christ. That sounded amazing. I was vers. I'd take this man anyway I could get him.

"That needs to happen," I growled, tugging on my dick now with fervor. "Lube in the nightstand," I huffed while wiggling free of my underwear after kicking off the covers. He took a moment to rummage in the drawer of the side table.

"Can you move up on the bed?" he asked, working lube over his long fingers until they glistened. I hauled my hairy ass up over the bed and got settled like a man who had never had knee surgery. Any discomfort would soon be forgotten. "Leg okay? Need a pillow?" I shook my head. Right now, the only part of my anatomy that needed attention was my penis. Knee? What's a knee? The man was such a worrier. "There we go." He crawled up onto the bedding, easing a leg over me, and then kneeled there, eyes locked with mine as he reached around to find his hole. My cock twitched as he began working himself open.

"You're a vision," I said, my voice throaty and low. "Let me help." I slipped a hand around him, found his fingers, and slid one of my own in beside the two he had worked inside himself. He was hot and tight around my digit.

"I need your cock in me now," he panted, easing his fingers out. Mine came along with his, and I wiggled my hips eagerly, moving my cock in a circle. His slippery entrance passed over my cockhead. A shiver ran through me. "Okay, we should...shit, okay, this is..." He lifted his ass up, cold air wafted over my nuts. "I'm negative and on PrEP"

"Same, clear medical. Just had surgery. On PrEP as well."

"Okay, cool, good." And with that awkward talk out of the way, Keyshaun sat down on my dick. Slowly, and with an intake of breath that only eased after I pushed past that ring of resistance. "Damnation, you have a fat dick."

I rubbed his sides as he took a moment to adjust. His lower lip pulled between his teeth as his body stretched. I lie still as a statue, my cock enveloped in heat. I was beginning to think he was not enjoying this when that plump lower lip fell free and his hips began to gyrate. Hands splayed on my chest, he moved in slow, sinuous circles, his nails biting into my pecs. Small beads of sweat formed on his brow despite the cool air coming in from the lake.

“You okay?” I asked this time. His heavy lids lifted. He looked punch drunk.

“Oh, Tanner, baby, I am just fine,” he replied and lifted himself up an inch or two. The glide down made my brain sputter. “You good?”

“Great. Super good. Key, you need to do that again.” And so he did, picking up momentum, his channel gripping me so firmly I was at the brink in no time. “Slow...I’m close.”

“Uh-uh, no slowing down now,” he panted, his ass slapping my thighs soundly. He arched his back. A yelp broke free from deep within him. His dick spurted hot pearls of cum over my belly and chest. The sight of his cum coating the coarse hairs on my stomach shoved me off the ledge. Using my good leg, I dug my heel into the bed, rocking up, and buried my cock as far into him as I could. My fingers gripped his hips, his cock bouncing and spewing as I pumped every drop of spunk I possessed deep inside him. He fell forward, his body shaking leaflike and damp, his chest on mine. I found his mouth and licked into it as our cocks kicked. Moist air huffed out of us as we sloppily made out, his prick slowly softening, pinned between us while mine continued to pulse.

My hands began to move over his back, rubbing circles on his ribs, then down to where his thighs cinched my hips. I ran my lips over his face, kissing his nose and eyelids, his stubbly cheeks and brow. Then back to his mouth. We lingered there, joined for the longest time, touching and tasting, until he eased off my now flaccid

cock. He moved to the side of the bed, taking care of my knee, his back slick with sweat. Mesmerized, I lie there enjoying the play of muscle under his skin while he rose.

“You rest. I’ll be right back,” he said, giving me a contented smile that made my toes curl in joy. He looked like a very happy man. Knowing that I made him that happy made me an extremely happy man. All I wanted in life was a happy lover, a house full of dogs, and some golden sunsets spent fishing on calm Canadian waters. Looked like I was about to have a week filled with all those things.

The dogs were at the base of the stairs, whining, and no matter how long I wished to lie here, the animals needed attention. As I heaved myself up and out of the warm bed, I recalled something that my surgeon said to me when he’d discharged me. He’d mentioned that having pets was a good thing. It would ensure that I would get up every few hours. And that had panned out. Even though Rudy had been with me to help, having to care for the dogs did indeed get me up and moving which, I assumed, had played a part in my recovery going so well.

“Hey, where you going?” Key called as he exited the bathroom. “I thought we could maybe shower and—”

A plaintive howl rose from the first floor. His eyes flared.

“That’s Elinor being a drama queen.” My gaze moved over his naked body. I felt a tingle down yonder. Huh, imagine that. A man sneaking up on forty acting like a randy teenager. “Let me take care of the poor, mistreated souls, and then we can take that shower.”

“I’ll be here,” he replied breathily, his hands moving over all that beautiful dark skin. All alone and in need of a backwisher.

I'd not moved that fast since buggering up my knee. The dogs, of course, wanted to sniffle at their leisure while I danced about, naked, in the doorway beseeching them to pee faster. Elizabeth found a toad to pester by the back stairs while Darcy kept glancing at the lake like a long-lost lover. If I ever doubted that he had Lab in him, his love of water would have cleared that doubt. Normally, I'd take my coffee down to the dock and let the water lovers play. Darcy and Elinor would splash about while Bingley and Elizabeth lounged in the morning rays next to my redwood rocker. This morning, though, was not a normal morning. Darcy came inside, but his hangdog look did not go unnoticed. I gave them all extra treats, then darted—or what I now called a dart, which was more of a wobbly old man jog—back upstairs. Key was in the bathroom now, the water running, and I wasted no time heading in to join him. The room was thick with steam. He opened the sliding glass shower door, offered me his wet hand, and pulled me under the stream.

That blowjob I had so desperately wanted to give him took place, awkwardly, since kneeling on the hard tile shower floor was not really advised. We pulled in the shower chair that Rudy had insisted I have at both homes. I hated that damn thing. We'd fought over it every day after my stitches had come out. I'd sooner fall on my head than sit on a plastic stool in the shower like some old doddering coot. Yes, I was bullheaded at times.

But this reason was a good reason. With me sitting on the shower seat, Key could merely stand in front of me and feed me his delicious cock. Inch by inch, I took him until his fat cockhead hit the back of my throat. Then he slowly began fucking my mouth. My lips were stretched to their limits, and my jaw ached. I was in heaven. Gripping his tight ass, I urged him to use my mouth with more speed. He pumped away, fingers now tight to my head until he shot a load down my throat. I swallowed and moaned as his salty spunk filled my mouth.

"Damn, you have mad oral skills," he panted, easing his cock out from between my lips and bowing to kiss me hard and deep. "Let me show you what I can do." He

kneeled between my legs, water pounding down over us, and sucked me so well and so artfully that had I not been seated I would have buckled like a rotten floor joist.

“I like vacations,” I huffed. He snorted in amusement and eased me to my feet. We kissed until the water in the small heater grew chilly. We hurried to wash and shampoo, exiting the shower just as the cold water was pelting our asses. The first day of our holiday was splendid. Breakfast on the back porch, a simple spread of bagels and coffee, as the dogs wore off some energy. After our fill of onion bagels, we secured the dogs into their crates and hit the big city of Makwa. Tim’s Sporting Goods was open, the Canadian flag outside his door snapping in the brisk wind. I bought some new spinner baits and Key found the last can of bear spray.

With his shades resting atop his short curls, he read the can intently as I perused a new reel and rod combo. Not that I needed a new fishing rod, but Key obviously did.

“Okay, so the directions are shit. How long does this last?” Key enquired over the sound of four old men in the front of the shop talking about what colors the speckled trout were hitting this time of year. I had yellow spinners because the fishing gods had whispered to me to buy yellow. I glanced at my man. Yeah, he was now considered my man, even if we’d not officially said it was so. He was all dressed up for a day in the wilds right down to a borrowed camouflage shirt of mine.

“I don’t know what you are asking.”

He handed me the can. A laugh rolled back from the old men. “It says nothing about reapplying it after swimming.”

I held back my guffaw as long as I could, but at his wrinkled brow I sort of lost it. “No, honey, you don’t put this on your skin like bug repellent. You spray it in the bear’s face.”

“Pardon me now?”

“Yeah, you spray the bear, not yourself.”

He stared at me as if I had just said romances featuring the ton were garbage. As if.

“That’s far too close to a bear for my liking.” He placed the can back on the dusty shelf. I had to hug him. How could I not? I pecked his cheek, warm with embarrassment. The old coots quieted for a moment. Let them gawk. When we paid, they watched us with mild interest, trying to gauge how two big, tough guys could be queer. You could see it did not compute for them. “So,” Key asked once we were back in the truck. “Is there anything you can wear that will keep bears, and I guess moose since they kill people, from doing bodily harm to me?”

“Uhm, well, a suit of armor might work.” He rolled his eyes, then settled his shades back on the bridge of his nose. “Sorry. I’ll stop teasing.”

A tweak of a smile pulled at the corner of his mouth. “Nah, that’s on me. I’m a city boy. So no spray to repel a bear or moose. Got it.”

I gave his leg a pat. “I’ll keep you safe. Any mad bear or wild moose will have to come through me.”

“You’re kind of slow with that knee yet.”

“My knee is fine. When we get home, I’ll show you just how good my knee is.”

We spent the next few hours in the lake with the dogs, swimming, playing fetch with a soggy as shit tennis ball, and generally larking about. When we were pruned properly, we climbed up the short ladder to the dock, laid down on beach towels, and let the sun dry us as we napped. The dogs laid down with us. Key’s fingers meshed

with mine. It was the closest to heaven that this battered puck pusher was likely to find here on Earth.

The rest of the week ran along that heavenly path. We drove to Lake Huron for a day, us and the dogs. We visited Algonquin Provincial Park. We lazed around for a few days, fishing and catching nothing but sunfish that we threw back. I got burned on the shoulders. Key got eaten alive by mosquitoes and midges. It was my job to dab calamine on all of his bug bites, which led to us rolling around, grinding on each other, and coated head to toe in pink. The boards of my dock would be rose-toned for months, and that was just fine. On our last night, we decided to stay home, cook out, and just be. Both of us had maintained a very low social media presence while gone. I'd shared two pictures on IG with Key and myself walking in the woods—no bears were spotted—and a shot of a cow moose and her calf taken the morning after our trip to Lake Huron. I used only two hashtags: #lifeisgood #ocanada

We'd spread some towels out on the still warm dock, stripped down to our birthday suits, and dared the bugs to find us. They did, and in rapid order. So we fired up the citronella candles, laid down, curled around each other, and gazed at the stars so clear and bright.

"I never thought of myself as outdoorsy other than a run through a well-tended park, but I have to say this life is really appealing," Key said, his voice sleepy and soft. "My dad used to try to take us kids fishing all the time. Said we'd catch catfish as big as him in the Delaware River, but we never wanted to go. Sounded boring to us and buggy." His fingers lay on my belly, moving in torpid circles over the rough curls of dark hair. "I wish I'd gone now."

"All of us look back after a loved one passes and wish we'd spent more time with them. You were a child, Key. Don't be hard on yourself. I did the same thing, turned

my folks down when they proposed something they thought was fun. Then they died, six months apart, when Rudy was in college. Suddenly those shopping trips to the mall with Mom seemed like great ideas.”

“I know it’s just...” His body was like putty resting on mine, half on and half off, Bingley curled up behind him as the other dogs snoozed away in a triangle of protection around us. “I guess I’m just feeling my emotions. I think Dad would have liked you. Uncle Devon does and he and Dad were two peas in a pod.”

“How did you end up in Watkins Glen?” My fingers moved over his smooth, bare back.

“Uncle Devon lived here. He’d moved out of Philly years before to work at the salt factory. Became a shift supervisor and then shift manager. When Dad passed, Mama was left with three kids, a massive hospital bill, and no way out. Uncle Devon had a rental property and moved us up, rent-free, so he could help Mama and us kids.”

“Wow, that’s pretty giving of him.”

“Yeah, he is a good man. Took us on as his own. Loved us when we did good, corrected us when we did bad. He was firm in the belief that young Black children—boys especially—needed good fatherly influence. And since our father was gone, he would do his best to fill the void. He never married. Hell, I don’t even recall ever seeing him with a girlfriend. Seems his whole life has been spent with Mama trying to make her happy.”

“He does. You can see that when they look at each other.”

His fingers stalled on my stomach. “I’ve been wondering...”

“About what?”

“Nothing. Just my head being busy.” He sat up, looked back at me lying on the dock like a dead fish, and touched my cheek. “I hope you never shave any of this off.”

“It’s getting scraggly again. I should neaten it up a bit.”

“Don’t neaten too much. I like the way it feels when we kiss.”

“Oh yeah? I seem to be having memory issues. Probably too many knocks to the bean. It’s been at least an hour since your lips were on mine. Remind me of what kissing you feels like.”

He chuckled warmly, spread himself over me, and slid his tongue into my mouth. His lips held the rich flavor of the mixed berry pie we’d had for dessert after our steaks and grilled potatoes. There was nothing more dear to me than Keyshaun. That elated and terrified me.

“I think I may have fallen in love with you,” I meekly confessed when the kiss ended.

“You scared of that?”

“A little.”

“I’m a little scared too.”

“There are no bears nearby. I don’t think.” The dogs were chill, so yeah, no bears. They’d let us know.

“I’m not scared of bears. Well, okay, I am a little, but the scare I’m talking about is how deeply in love I am with you, Tanner.”

I slid my fingers around his neck and eased him back down for another long, tender

kiss that led us to the big bed in the loft, where we showed each other just how much we cared well into the night.

Afterward, when Key was sleeping at my side and the dogs were dozing peacefully, I offered a small prayer to the gods who lived in these boreal woods to thank them for this place and the man who meant so much to me. I felt much like Ms. Austen had described in *Pride and Prejudice* . My heart did whisper that he had done it for me as well.

Chapter Twelve

Keyshaun

“Next is bootie bumps,” I shouted over the thumping sounds of MC Hammer to the sweaty group of aerobic walkers who had packed into our far too small private room. Well, not so private as there were glass walls but away from the grunts and pants of people lifting weights or working on their boxing moves. Etta stood on the other side of the glass, tapping her smartwatch in full yoga regalia. “We’ll go to bumps in four, three, two, and one.”

The class followed me into some kickbacks, then we progressed into some high-speed kicks, and I eased them into the start of the cooldown sequence. Ten senior yogis were now standing with my sister, mats in hand, but since I didn’t want anyone to cramp, I refused to speed up the cooldown or stretch. Ten minutes later, I dismissed the twenty sweaty aerobic walkers. My sister walked into the room, her bright yellow leggings, top, and hairband looking amazing with her complexion.

“You look good in yellow,” I said while wiping the perspiration from my face.

“Don’t try to sweet talk me,” Etta fired back with a soft shoulder knock to my bicep. “We really need to expand. Sharing this one room is not working.”

“I know, but my head is tied up in Buffalo right now.” I gave the seniors a wave as they unrolled their mats in their preferred spots. Woe to those who took someone’s favorite spot. The oldsters could get touchy about such things.

“Mm-hmm. Buffalo isn’t the only thing that’s got your mind tied up,” Etta teased. A few of the older gals nearby tittered.

“Yes, well, I am head over heels for Tanner, that’s true. Oh man, I have to get home and pack. Are you sure you can handle things for the long weekend?”

“I’ve been handling things here for weeks now. Go get a shower and pack. Tell Tanner that I expect him to show up at the Labor Day cookout at our place. And while you’re gone, would you be down with me maybe calling in some contractors to see about adding on a few rooms for the growing clientele?”

I blew out a breath. She was right, totally, and I knew we were going to have to add on soon. It was more a matter of juggling the expense here with what we were about to dump into WW 2 in Buffalo. Then there was all the paperwork, permits, and other bureaucratic bullshit that would come with a simple addition. Still, it was going to have to happen. The membership roll was growing by leaps and bounds, and it was still summer. When the Gladiators that had left for the off-season returned in September—just next month—they would also add to the numbers along with their sig others. I was not complaining, I was just fretting as Mama would say.

“I assume that translates into you have already contacted some local contractors and were just waiting for me to leave town again to sneak them in and get some offers lined up?”

She drew back, right hand to her throat, and batted her long lashes. “Me? Why, Keyshaun, I am appalled that you would think me capable of such underhanded shenanigans.”

Her Southern belle was perfection. I smiled and shook my head. “Right, as I thought. Fine, bring in a few and get some estimates, but we will all decide as a trio on which offer we take, okay?”

“Of course. Now, go shower, you stink. And tell Tanner we loved the little Gladiators hoodies he sent for the boys.”

“Will do. Hey, keep Mama in line, and don’t let Ornell forget to check into that fall festival that’s coming in—”

“The fall. Yep, we’re on it. Go, I need to align my chakras and then go pick up the twins from daycare. Shoo. Get. Enjoy the wedding.”

She rose to her toes, pecked me on the cheek, and shoved me out the door. A few folks on stationary bikes were chuckling as I walked past. The members loved the playful back-and-forth between my family and me, which was good because I wasn’t going to be anyone but Keyshaun Williams: successful businessman, loving uncle sibling and son, and boyfriend of Tanner LaBrie.

Williams Wellness towel around my neck, I made my way to the front desk where Mama and Uncle Devon were deep into a whispered conversation. When I cleared my throat, they both startled like Tanner’s dogs the time we caught them blissfully scattering trash around his yard, unaware that the back door had even opened.

“Oh, Keyshaun!” Mama fanned her face. “You scared me.”

Uncle Devon smiled sheepishly, his gaze flitting from one corner of the gym to the other. The sound of feet pounding treadmills mixed with the steady thumpa-thumpa-thumpa of someone working a weight bag in the far corner.

“Sorry, Mama. Did I interrupt something?” They both looked at each other. Mama launched into a rambling tale about the linen service bill, which I neatly delegated to Ornell since I was taking four days off, starting about six hours ago. It was hard to relearn how to disengage from the working man striving to make a name for himself. I’d get there. Someday. Me taking more time off for Liam and Tarcy’s wedding was

big for me, so I call that progress. Uncle Devon studied me as Mama went on and on about the towels not smelling the way they used to and if she should ask if they changed detergent.

“Did you want to speak to me, Uncle Devon?”

His eyes flared. “Oh, well, not right now. Maybe when you get back from Georgia?” He seemed sketchy to me. I was about to press when my phone buzzed. It was Tanner reminding me that our flight was leaving Elmira-Corning airport in two hours if I wished to be on it. I hit him back with a fast note saying I was leaving the gym now.

“Okay, when I get back then. That was my man. He’s probably pacing. I have to go.” I pecked Mama on her cheek, gave my uncle a nod, and raced out the door like my ass was on fire.

Stepping off the plane in Georgia in the middle of August, I felt as if my ass really was aflame. Along with the rest of me.

“Good Lord,” I groaned as the heat and humidity of the Deep South slapped me in the face like a wet towel. “I will never complain about how hot it gets up north ever again.”

Tanner gave my sweaty neck a squeeze and then led me to the rental car lot. Rudy, who had wilted into Wade the moment he exited the terminal at the Lee Gilmer Memorial Airport, was fanning himself with his straw hat. Seemed the rental agency was short-staffed—a notion I was familiar with—and therefore had no one to bring the car to us.

“I hope that it’s cooler by the lake,” Rudy grouched while we searched for our car.

“I’m sure it will be,” Wade cajoled as he pulled both suitcases along behind him. One was a small carry-on and the other a massive suitcase that had exceeded the weight limit and therefore cost extra to check. He never said a word, probably because he accepted Rudy’s love of clothes—and the need to change for every outing—as part of the man he loved.

Tanner pushed the button on the fob. The lights flashed as the car beeped. He looked back at me shamefacedly. “Should have done that right off,” he confessed. Rudy darted for the car, eager to get out of the sun and humidity. The sedan was spacious and cooled off quickly, something we were all happy about, especially after loading our luggage into the trunk. “Okay, so let me feed the directions in and we can be on our way.”

“I can navigate if you want,” I offered and got a nod from Tanner. “I’m good at telling you what to do and where to go.”

“I know,” he teased as he handed me his phone. “Can you do a quick peek at the dogs at the vet’s office?”

“Sure.” I knew he was feeling uneasy about boarding the dogs, especially old Bingley, but they were in good hands and if God forbid, something came up with the geriatric pug, he was right at the veterinarian’s office. I pulled up the app, fed in the code, and had access to cameras in all the kennels. The dogs were all napping at the moment. When I showed him, some of the worry left his face. “Looks like everyone is comfy and cozy.”

“They do look happy. Okay, let’s find the hotel, check in, freshen up, and then meet the rest of the guests for dinner at the seafood restaurant,” Tanner announced, looking at me. I bobbed my head, told him to go right, and off we rolled. Our hotel was a plush high-rise that was a mere five minutes from Lake Lanier and about thirty minutes from Tarcy’s cabin. Check-in was a breeze, and our rooms were spacious,

clean, and cool. The pool five floors down looked incredibly alluring.

“You think we could sneak in a swim when we get back from dinner?” I asked, closing the privacy drapes and turning to spy Tanner trimming his beard. “Oh honey, don’t take too much off.”

“If I don’t do it, Rudy will. You heard him commenting about scruffy scruff as opposed to tailored scruff.” He lowered the electric razor with a smile. “I won’t take it all off. I might want to tickle your taint with it after our swim.”

“You keep talking like that and we won’t make dinner on time.” He waggled a brow just as someone rapped on the door.

“That’ll be Rudy.” He tossed the razor to the bed, took my hand, and tugged me into his arms. “Midnight in the pool.” His lips moved over mine with such delicacy and promise, that I had to step into the bathroom for a moment before I could leave the hotel.

When we arrived at Pete’s Seafood Shanty, it was like old home week for the Gladiators. Most of the roster had shown up, including the coaching staff. Hand to God, it was like walking into Cheers for a loud shout of “Fossie!” met us as we entered. Four long tables were pushed together in a wonky sort of semi-circle triangle. The eatery was brightly lit with blue walls, soft oak tables, and various stuffed fish hung on the white walls.

“We saved you a seat at the end near the men’s room, given your bad knee and advanced age,” Carson said, trying for deadpan but failing miserably. “Not that I think you’re old or that you’re beyond playing well due to your age, far from it, I just—”

“I told him to say that,” Greck chimed in as the team captain’s boyfriend patted his

humped back.

“Yeah, I kind of assumed you had a hand in it,” Tanner said, walking to his seat with barely a limp now visible in his gait. He was dead set on playing as soon as he could, his fire for the game burning brightly since he’d missed such a pivotal moment. I suspected he wanted to be on the ice if—or when, according to Tanner—the Gladiators won the Calder again next season.

I shook hands on my way to sit beside Tanner. Most of the men I knew pretty well now, the coaching staff I’d met a few times, but they tended not to take part in chats online like the players did. And yeah, I’d been added to the Gladiators chat. An honor indeed. Tanner had said that made us official, which was okay with me. I was so gaga over the man I’d fly a plane over Seneca Lake with a banner flying behind it that read **KEY LOVES TANNER** so the whole town could see it, point, and ask who the hell Key was.

“Hey, man, good to see you again,” Deandre said when I plopped down beside him. We shook hands. “What have you been up to?”

“Taking over the world,” I fired back. He laughed, clapped my back, and poured some cold beer into a glass.

“So I read. A new place in Buffalo. I like seeing that, brother.”

“It’s exciting,” I said, sat back, and took a sip. The brew was strong and yeasty, refreshing. The steady bubbling of a lobster tank a few feet away filtered in to the din of male voices, servers, and the clatter of dishware being bussed off dirty tables. “And exhausting and expensive. The three Es. So if you and your man are looking to invest in a Black and queer-owned business that will easily double your money in a few years...”

DJ rubbed his chin. “I just might be. We’ll talk later for sure. Gabe is with the grooms and their families doing the whole rehearsal and dinner thing, but I’ll mention it to him when he gets home.”

“Oh, cool. I like that he’s officiating.” I smiled over my glass at Rudy, who was sipping on a mojito, much to the dismay of Wade. I hoped he only had one or he would be a wreck for the wedding tomorrow.

“Yeah, he was so honored when they asked.”

I liked Gabe. And Criswell. And Marcus. And Henri. The Gladiators had good taste in men, not unlike me because I had the best man out there. Tanner’s soft gaze caught mine. I slid my fingers through his and we sat that way until our food was served and two hands were required for eating. The night was a fun one, filled with loud laughter, brotherhood, and some of the longest stories from Phil Greco that I had ever heard. Get a few beers in Greck and his mouth ran twice as fast for twice as long. Still, he had the table in stitches for the entire evening. When the servers began to not-so-discreetly begin placing chairs on the tables around us, we took the hint, paid, tipped well, and exited. After saying goodbye in the parking lot, Wade, who had been the designated driver, slid behind the wheel. Rudy was a little giggly as he buckled himself in the front passenger seat. Tanner was Mr. Chill, the beer and good food lulling him into a soft, mellow place. We climbed into the back with long sighs and full bellies.

“That was the first beer I’ve had in months,” he admitted as we made our way back to our hotel. “My belly is full of burps, lake trout, and hops.”

I rubbed his tummy. He sighed just like Bingley when his stomach was getting scratched. All Tanner needed to do was kick his leg and drool. When we arrived at the hotel, we all went to our separate rooms, Wade and Rudy to do whatever they were doing, and Tanner and I to pull out our swim trunks.

The hotel pool was empty at midnight. We slipped into the water, the temperature a little warmer than I'd have liked, but it was refreshing just the same. Tanner and I did a few laps. Swimming was one of the best exercises for his healing knee. Our strokes were lazy, as were we, and when we completed two we lounged in the shallow end, smiling up at a hotel employee when she approached us to ask if wanted anything from the bar.

"Maybe just some lemon-lime soda?" Tanner asked as he reclined on the cement steps leading into three feet of crystal blue, highly chlorinated water. His beard was wet as was his hair and the curls on his chest were sodden. The water blurred any peeking further south. I nodded at the suggestion before swimming up to join him on the steps. We shared a short kiss, his hand coming to rest on my thigh. I drew in a deep breath, let it out through my nose, and looked skyward. There was a sliver of a moon in the sky, a few sleepy clouds floating past, and a hundred thousand stars. Tension seeped from me as we lay about, growing wrinkled and sipping cold soda.

"Penny for your thoughts," Tanner said.

I glanced over at him. "To be honest, I'm kind of just having a moment of utter brain clearance. Like when you meditate and you slip into that space that's not sleep, but not total awareness either."

"Hmm, I have trouble finding that place, to be honest. The only time I feel that light is right after we make love." I smiled and stole a wet kiss. He tasted of pool water.

"So you're saying I take you to heaven?" He bobbed his head. "Always nice to hear. You whisk me to the stars as well."

"I like to know that. I do my best. How do you feel about heading to our room to find the escalator to the nirvana?"

“And who is driving this spacecraft to the cosmos?” Not that I cared who topped, or even if we didn’t fuck at all. His mouth was divine.

“We’ll co-pilot.”

That sounded amazing. We left the pool with towels around our waists, our wet feet making squeaky noises in blue hotel flip-flops that sounded loud and crude in the silent hallways. Like a couple of teenagers, we were doing our best to make the rudest sounds we could with our feet, giggling like fools until we slipped into our room. Then we shed our towels, the cheapo flip-flops, and our trunks to fall into bed. He shifted around under me, heaving me up and around until I caught on. With a heated huff, I slung my leg over his head, settling my tummy to his as his cock rested on my lips. His lips slid over my dick, the hot wet pull making me groan before I repaid the favor. We were on the cusp in no time.

His release was powerful, flooding my mouth and leaking out of the corners. My balls drew up a second later, his middle finger rubbing my ass, then pushing in just an inch. My prick pulsed. Tanner moaned around my shaft, using that finger inside me to tease several more spurts. Finally, when I resembled a bowl of ramen noodles, he withdrew his finger. I slithered off to the side, my bones rubbery, and laid at his side with spunk drying on my chin and cheeks.

“Houston, we have reached maximum orgasm,” I panted. Tanner laughed, patted my heaving chest, and then rolled out of bed. I moved to my side, head resting in my hand, to watch him walk to the fridge. His ass was so round. So meaty. I had a newfound adoration for hockey player booty.

“I think my booster rocket has deflated,” he quipped as he pulled two bottles of cold water from the refrigerator, his cock hanging limp along his thigh. “We might have to rely on your missile to get us home.”

I gave my flaccid cock a shake. “Sorry, this rocket is not blasting us back to Earth anytime soon. Guess we’re stuck out here among the stars.”

He crawled back into bed, cracked open a bottle, and handed it to me. “I can’t think of another person who I would want to spend the rest of my days in heaven with.”

And people say hockey players are big, dumb brutes who do nothing but fight.

“I think I need a kiss,” I whispered. He was more than happy to oblige.

Dressed in our wedding finery of suits and ties—Rudy was in a pretty red and yellow sundress with lacy leggings—we were following the directions to Tarcy’s cabin.

“Are you sure this is the way?” Tanner asked for the tenth time as we crawled along a tree-lined road that had been going on for miles. Every so often a tasteful drive would appear, most with fancy gates with discreet mailboxes set into stonework walls.

“The map app says so,” I replied for the tenth time, showing him the phone.

“Huh.” Tanner seemed perplexed. “This don’t look like the road to my cabin.”

No, it did not. As we followed the map, making a turn off the oak-shaded road onto a driveway that crawled through thickly wooded yet landscaped property, we began to see why. Coming around a sharp bend, Tarcy’s cabin appeared.

“Holy shit,” Rudy gasped from the back seat. “That looks nothing like your cabin!”

“No kidding,” Tanner said, blinking in shock at the mansion sprawled out in front of us. Lake Lanier was just visible behind a gazebo decorated with white and purple

streamers and flowers. We rolled up behind a dark green SUV. A valet appeared at Tanner's door, smiling, wearing a dark blue vest with some logo stitched in gold.

"I demand valet parking the next time we come to your place," Rudy teased. Tanner sat stupefied, his eyes on the two-story tan and stone facade that greeted guests. My man lowered his window. The valet grinned.

"Hello and welcome to the wedding of Tarcy Hayes and Liam Polkman. If you'd like to exit the car now, you can follow the other arrivals around back where there are tents set up near the horse stables or you can settle under the shade trees or take a left by the stables to spend some time at the small racecourse Tarcy and Liam have set up for their guests."

Tanner glanced at me. "He said a racecourse."

"You really need to step up your cabin game," I teased.

"I'm guessing being a world-famous stock car driver pays better than being a minor league hockey player," Tanner lamented.

Staring at the massive home, I could only agree. It obviously paid better than being a gym owner.

I opened my door and stepped out into the heat. Seemed everyone in front of us was doing so and I didn't want to not do as directed. With a grunt, Tanner followed suit. Within seconds, a smiling young woman appeared to lead us along a well-tended path, chatting away about the amenities awaiting us. She explained that swimming was allowed by the double-decker dock but only in the corded areas. People may visit the horses but not feed them or enter their pastures. Guests were welcome inside the home but were asked to remain on the first floor where they could find bathrooms, a game room, and a lounge overlooking the lake.

“This is insane,” Wade mumbled when we cleared the western side of the mansion. I was not calling this multi-million dollar home a cabin. A cabin was what Tanner had up in Canada. This was not a woodsy little A-frame with porcupine chew marks. This was tasteful elegance for the jet set. Or I guess that would be race set.

We milled around for a while, sipping mimosas that were carried around on silver trays by what looked to be a hundred servers working for the catering service. We found Greck and Henri seated under a robust oak a few hundred feet from the gazebo. Henri fit right in with the upper crust feel with his cool summer suit and dark eyeglasses.

“Can you imagine this joint? I thought we’d be pulling up to a place with moose shit on the yard like your shack, Fossie,” Greck stated as he nursed a cold beer. “I been looking and there ain’t no piles of shit nowhere. Like, not even goose shit, and you know them geese are always shitting all over the place. One time I was out on Fire Island with my seventh cousin on my father’s side, Lita Forde. Not the rocker Lita Ford obviously, but the hairdresser from Bedford Park. Actually, her real name is Conchita Forde, but she didn’t feel as if that suited her so after a bad marriage to a dry cleaner over on Jerome Avenue who always scorched her mother’s shirts, she changed her name to Lita but kept the last name of the bad dry cleaner. I told her when she did it that most people generally changed last names when they dumped a loser spouse, but she said she always wanted to be a Lita. So I was like, cool, you be you then. Right, so me and Lita was on Fire Island. She had found out through some experimentation that she liked gals as well as guys and was renting a tiny house with her girlfriend. Funny story, Lita and Monique got married so now Lita is Lita Forde Mahoski. Oh hey, Bean!”

“Was there a goose-related anecdote coming?” Wade asked.

“The world may never know,” Tanner answered as the Gladiators captain arrived with his boyfriend. Small talk was made, and people-watching commenced.

The hockey players seemed to congregate around us, sipping sweet tea while pointing out famous race car drivers or equally famous goalies when Liam's uncles appeared dressed to the nines. A soft hush fell over the guests when a lovely young woman in a soft pink dress began moving through the small groups, directing them to the gazebo.

Tanner and I followed Deandre across the yard to sit a few rows back from the front on the hockey-playing groom's side. Each seat had a paper fan, purple, with the grooms' names and dates printed on them. I snapped mine open with all the flair of a drag queen and started fanning, much like every other soul here. I spied Liam's mother and father, brother, and uncles in the front row. There were two young women seated next to Bryn, holding hands, and whispering to Liam's lovely mother.

"You know who that is?" Tanner whispered in my ear when a tall lanky man in a soft gray suit carrying a guitar arrived.

"Not a clue."

"That's Prescott Doorman. He's one of the top five stock car drivers of all time. And one of a few that are openly queer. He's been retired for about ten years now and came out right after he stopped driving. I didn't know he was musically inclined."

The silver-haired man took a seat on a lone stool beside the gazebo, nodded at the assembled, and began playing some soft background tunes until all the seats were filled. Once people were seated, the music changed to something sweeter, a tune I wasn't familiar with but was melodious and fit the mood.

The guests quieted when Pastor Gabe arrived, stepping into the gazebo, his curls fluttering in the wind of the lake. He battled to keep the rainbow stole around his neck from slapping him in the face.

He smiled out at the guests, his hands clasping a black bible.

“Hello, friends and family. Welcome to the wedding of Liam and Tarcy.” Several of the hockey players gave a woof-woof-woof that made everyone chuckle. “I see the holy spirit is alive and well in you all today. That’s glorious to see for a wedding is a celebration of love and joy. The grooms have asked that I lead this short ceremony with a prayer and a reading that they have picked out. Those who wish may pray, those who do not wish may simply sit and watch my robes try to swallow me whole.” We all laughed, then fell into respectful quiet as Gabe spoke.

“Blessed Jesus, you embody all the colors of the rainbow, your love spreads across the world to touch all, old, young, short, tall, those of all colors, queer and straight, heaven and earth, those who worship in your name, the names of others, as well as those who do not worship at any alter. May your divinity shine down upon us today as we celebrate love in your name for you inspire us to seek glory. Amen.”

A soft reply floated up to be blown out over the water.

The guitarist played a lively song and a young boy, perhaps five, marched down the middle aisle, two golden rings on a small velvet pillow.

“That’s Tarcy’s grandson,” Tanner whispered as the boy stomped to Pastor Gabe and then stood at his left. A pretty young woman then walked down the aisle, tossing purple flower petals this way and that, her gown lilac. “And that’s Tarcy’s daughter.”

I gave Tanner’s hand a squeeze in reply. The flower girl—woman—person gave her son a kiss on his cheek, which he wiped off to everyone’s amusement. With a word from the man of the cloth, the racecar driver/musician began singing “And I Love Her” by the Beatles, only the pronouns had been changed to reflect the two men about to say their vows. It was a beautiful choice, I thought.

Gabe nodded off to the left and from the copse of thick trees, Liam stepped out followed by his younger brother, his best man. They were in dark suits with deep

purple ties. Liam's mother, a few rows ahead, could be heard sniffing. From the right, Tarcy and his son emerged from a clump of tall maples, both also in dark gray suits with purple ties.

They met in front of Gabe, eyes glowing with love and excitement. When the song ended Pastor Gabe took the grooms' hands and joined them before looking out at the people gathered under the warm Georgia sun.

"The grooms have a short reading from Shelley for you that they have chosen for this most special day," the reverend said, his voice carrying clearly to even those in the back, I was sure. Guess holy men had to learn to speak out to make sure the word of God reached the last pew. When all eyes were on him, he began to read from a slip of paper stuffed into his bible.

"The fountains mingle with the river

And the rivers with the ocean,

The winds of heaven mix forever

With a sweet emotion;

Nothing in the world is single,

All things by a law divine

In one another's being mingle—

Why not I with thine?

See the mountains kiss high heaven,

And the waves clasp one another;

No sister-flower would be forgiven

If it disdain'd its brother;

And the sunlight clasps the earth,

And the moonbeams kiss the sea—

What is all this sweet work worth

If thou kiss not me?"

Liam and Tarcy then faced each other. The ring bearer held up his pillow to Pastor Gabe who took it, smiled at the toe-headed lad, and then made a symbol of the cross over the thin bands of gold.

"If you two are ready?" Gabe asked. The grooms both nodded, eyes only for each other now. "Then please recite your vows."

Tarcy went first. "I, Tarcy, take you, Liam, to be my spouse and these things I promise you: I shall be faithful to you and honest with you. I shall trust, help, respect, and care for you. I shall share my life with you. Through the best and the worst of what is yet to come, and as long as we both shall live, this is my troth to you."

Liam, looking emotional, recited the same vows with only the names changed. Tanner's fingers tightened on mine. I glanced over to see him looking at me as if I were some fine artwork he'd found at the Louvre. I lifted his big, rough hand to my lips, kissed his scarred knuckles, and let my head drop to his shoulder as the rings were placed on shaking fingers.

“I now pronounce you partners for life. You can kiss any time,” Gabe teased. Tarcy and Liam’s kiss was soft, sweet, and perfect for the moment. The guests clapped as the grooms stared adoringly at each other. Pastor Gabe beamed and whispered to the besotted newlyweds to face the guests. They did but with pink cheeks. “I now have the privilege to present to you for the first time ever, Mr. and Mr. Liam and Tarcy Hayward.”

The grooms’ smiles were as bright as the Georgia sun as the guests rose and applauded. They walked down the aisle, nodding and grinning, only to be led away by the wedding planner to have the required ten thousand pictures taken.

“Liam and Tarcy have asked me to relay that there is a ferry running to one of the larger islands where the reception will be taking place, so if you’d all follow the men and women in purple shirts, we’ll all meet up there!” Pastor Gabe called out to the guests.

We did as told, eager to get out of the sun. “Remind me never to complain about snow and ice this winter,” I told Tanner as we made our way onto a large ferry decorated with white and purple streamers. The paddleboat pulled away from the dock with a slight lurch and splash of paddles hitting the water.

“I’m so very excited to hear that you’re looking at winter and seeing me as part of it,” he whispered, moving us to the front of the paddleboat. I turned to look at him with the cooler air off the lake touching the back of my sweaty neck. A shiver of pleasure ran down my spine.

“This winter and many others to follow,” I confessed, leaning in to steal a kiss as we paddled toward a life filled with future snowfalls enjoyed together.

Tanner

Funny how fast the time goes when you're in love.

Sure, the same could be said about time slipping by because you're getting older, but since I was trying not to focus on my creaky joints or that new odd thing where I needed to hold the remote at arm's length to find the volume button, I'd say it was love.

"You good?" I nodded at the man who held my heart. Key's smile warmed me inside and out, not that I was chilly. Sure, it was now late September, and the trees were showing signs that fall was just around the bend. The leaves here on the running path that the group had chosen for the weekly seniors' run were just starting to turn scarlet or yellow. Yes, I was taking my debut after-surgery jog with the old folks. No, I did not need to hear Greck commenting about Geritol in my Gatorade bottle again. The man was a pest. But, as they say, he was our pest.

"I'm good." I'd progressed well in my PT, exceedingly well to be honest, and the team trainers were slowly letting me get back to running. Skating? Well, that was probably a ways off yet. Maybe January they cautiously said. I said October. I'd been given a one-year extension by the Gladiators, probably because they'd felt bad for me missing out on the championship run in June. Whatever the reason, I planned to make the most out of this final year on ice. Key and I, well, we had plans of a sort. Plans that included my farmhouse, his moving in someday, and the purchase of a few goats. Maybe even tying the knot. I'd seen how happy Liam was with his hubby and I kind of thought that looked real nice. Together forever. Yeah, I could see that for me and Key. But that was in the future. He was busy with being a mogul, and I was busy

trying to squeeze one final year out of my battered body. “It’s just a two-mile course.”

“Yep, two miles. You got this. I saw you do four on the treadmill yesterday.”

He was right. I had done four. I’d not told the trainer about that. I wasn’t supposed to be cranking out that kind of distance yet, but if I didn’t push myself, I’d never get back to the game.

I tugged down my Captain America shield tee, worn just for Uncle Devon. He had yet to call me Tanner, or Fossie. It was always Cap since that first day in yoga class. So, to make sure he had lots of chances to be an imp, I may have bought a few more tees with that famous design on them.

“I feel those four miles today,” I confessed as I stretched.

“Good thing you had me there to rub those sore muscles,” Key whispered with a randy wink that made me feel a little lightheaded. The man always made my blood flow south. All it took was seeing him and my dick was perking up. Not exactly what I wanted to take place here with the gray-haired runners.

“You need to stop talking that way,” I softly replied. “You know what you do to me.”

“I do, and I love that I do that to you.” He pecked my cheek before turning to address the runners. “Okay, listen up. We’re doing this small run today because so many of us are planning to attend the fall festival and kite extravaganza up at the Gaudion Winery. We’ll stay on the main paths today. No veering off like the last time we were here.”

“I thought I saw a deer,” one of the old gals called out.

“It was a cow, Beatrice. How do you mistake a cow for a deer?” Millicent questioned

her sister-in-law.

“I saw a white butt,” Beatrice fired back.

“Okay, well, deer and cow are lovely but no diversions off the running path. Now, let’s get moving. I have a kite at home that is going to whip the competition!” Key led the seniors out of the parking area. I fell in behind Key, the pace slow and easy to start. My knee felt good, solid. No pain or twinges. Yeah, I was for sure going to be skating by October.

“On your left!” I heard just as Uncle Devon jogged past.

Key could be heard laughing up ahead, his pace smooth and steady. “Uh-oh, looks like Cap just got left in the dust,” he called over his shoulder.

“Both of you are too funny,” I shouted, huffing a little now as the path began to snake uphill. Nothing that I couldn’t handle. Key and Devon shared a chuckle, at my expense I was sure, but it was nice to see. A few weeks ago, Key had confronted his uncle at a cookout for Devon’s birthday. My man had been polite, always, but he came right out and asked his mother and Devon if they were involved. Both said yes, they were, and they would appreciate no comments from the peanut gallery unless they were congratulations.

I sat at the picnic table with Lionel with my mouth closed. Sure, we were partners of Williams’ siblings, but that did not give us leeway to voice thoughts. I personally felt that the two older folks looked amazing together. Devon doted on Key’s mother and she on him. If they were happy, then that was all that mattered. Key, Etta, and Ornell needed to digest things for a bit, but by the time the burgers were cooked and the potato salad was brought out, the kids were hugging the lovebirds. It had all worked out well even if one of the baby boys—I could not tell the twins apart—puked all over himself and the person who had been holding him, which was me. I was growing accustomed to being spit up on.

“Hey, baby, you okay back there?” Key asked, falling back, pulling me from the fog of memories to the present. “Your knee good?”

“I’m keeping up with Beatrice,” I replied, which got me a thumbs up from the octogenarian at my side.

Key nodded. “Okay, as long as you’re feeling fine, we’ll keep going. I don’t want you to go lame and miss flying kites with me.”

I stopped jogging. Key did as well, waving the others on with Uncle Devon leading.

“Your knee?” Key asked as we stood in the middle of a wooded running path, sweaty and out of breath.

“Is fine. I just wanted to let you know that I don’t want that either.” His eyebrow arched. “To miss flying kites with you even though kite season is in the spring, but no one wanted to ruin Henri’s joy about a kite festival. One reason I don’t want to miss it is because I have the coolest kite ever kited and will whoop you soundly in our fighter kite category.”

“Dream on.”

“Secondly, because I never want to miss a single minute being with you, you wonderful man, that I am so entirely and rapturously in love with.”

“I think all the nights watching Ms. Austen’s movies are rubbing off.” He cradled my head and kissed me thoroughly. I leaned into the kiss, my arms circling him. “That wasn’t too bad of a proclamation of devotion from an old Gladiators D-man.”

“You bring out the romantic in me.”

“Aw, my own big, burly bear of a Mr. Darcy. Now all you need is a cravat and a posh

British accent.”

“Not sure about that. I think you might be stuck with me in a hockey sweater with a Canadian accent.”

“Sexiest romance hero ever.”

Now he was just being giddy. As if a banged-up hockey player in the minor leagues could ever be romance hero material.

THE END