







# Reckless On Ice (Gods Of The Ice #1)

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**Category:** Sport

**Description:** Ryder Kingston

Acting on impulse is my specialty, but hey, I'm a man of action.

My reckless words land me in hot water when some jerk captures a moment meant for my teammates ears only.

Unfortunately, the video goes viral and turns me into public enemy number one.

To rehabilitate my image, my agent demands I undergo sensitivity training—whatever the heck that is. With my new hockey team thinking I'm not worth the trouble considering trading me, yet again, I'm forced to agree.

The biggest issue? My golden boy of a tutor and new housemate is none other than my childhood best friend-turned-enemy, Knox Contraire...who probably still hates my guts.

Forcing us together is bound to teach me a lesson, I'm just not so sure it's the one I'm meant to learn.

Knox Contraire

You think you know a guy until he turns on you and makes your life a living hell.

In a twist I didnt see coming, my best friend became my biggest enemy, and I lost the person closest to me.

Hurt, fear, and betrayal pushed me into the closet. My career as a tight end in the NFL has kept me there. Now, I live quietly to keep others comfortable, even if it means missing out on the life I really want.

In an unexpected turn of events, I'm thrown into the spotlight when my past shows up on my literal doorstep. If I want to keep my job, I have to take him in and teach him how to control his troublemaking mouth.

# Page 1

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Ryder

“Kingsy, my man, I have news for you. It’s good and bad, so I’ll rip the Band-Aid off. Boston traded you to Atlanta. You’re going to that new team those billionaires bought.”

My head swims at the worst news my agent could have given me. I grip the phone tightly and pace across my living room, passing the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook Boston Harbor. How the fuck could this happen? They named me one of the league's best goalies, and we just finished a seven-game playoff run for the Stanley Cup. I was supposed to be signed for another four years in Boston. I spent this season showing the team why they needed to keep me. I’ve given ten years of my life to Boston. How could they do me dirty like this after everything?

“Tell me this is a fucking joke, Mark,” I growl, my mind still spinning down a dark tunnel to my personal hell.

“I’m shooting straight with you like I always do. They’re negotiating with Upton to keep him instead. They couldn’t have two number-one goalies forever, and unfortunately, you had the bigger target on your back with this series run and that devastating loss,” Mark says.

His words burn like acid and remind me of failures that are never far from my mind. We were so close to the cup, in the conference finals, game seven against Dallas, and the deciding factor if we would advance to the Stanley Cup finals. We lost, three-to-two, and those three goals were my fault. I let them past my glove, and we lost our shot, again. The enormous weight hanging on my shoulders, and one of the biggest

black marks against me in contract negotiations last year, was not being trustworthy during playoffs. I let the team down again by not performing when it counted, and look where it got me, traded to a brand-new team in fucking Atlanta.

“I’m going to the hellhole of the South? Hot-fucking-lanta? This is a fucking nightmare.”

“It’s a thirty-three-million-dollar, three-year nightmare. That’s the upside. We got you far more than Boston would’ve given you if they’d kept you. You’re now the highest-paid goalie in the NHL. That should help make up for the trade at least a bit, and you get to help shape a brand-new team with an unlimited budget. These billionaires aren’t sparing a single penny and are pulling in the best talent in the league for this team. I’ve heard rumors of their moves, and it’ll be good. They even got Lyle Kennedy to coach. That man’s a fucking legend. You’ll be skating for someone with more cup runs and wins than any current coaching team can boast. This isn’t what you had in mind, but it’s not the worst that could have happened.”

No shit. The worst is I could be done with hockey forever, injured and unable to play, or so shitty no team wanted to pick me up. I see what Mark’s doing, and I’m rational enough to understand this is a good fucking deal. But fuck, I don’t want to be rational. I want to wallow and stick with my routine and the things I wanted for a change.

Hockey isn’t a sport you get your say in all that often. I’ve been damn lucky to stick with the same team that drafted me right out of college. Ten years is a lifetime to spend with one team, and I guess I was pushing my luck, hoping they’d keep me longer. Knowing that doesn’t make this loss easier to swallow.

“So, what now?” There’s a note of despair in my tone I hate to hear. I need to know what’s expected of me to establish my routine immediately. It’s stupid to some people, but I need everything to be the same and to know what to expect. Knowing

the rules and how to play by them—when to show up and where to be, what to eat, what my training plan is, all that fucking bullshit that’s said makes hockey players superstitious sheep—is my touchstone. And I know what they say about goalies being the worst. I just don’t fucking care.

“You enjoy as much of your summer as possible, settle up in Boston, and get your ass to Atlanta for training camp in September. And hey, I’ll finally have my two best clients in the same city where I can watch both you and Knox play.”

That’s not the silver lining Mark’s trying to make it out to be. I hate Knox Contraire. We have a complicated history that began as best friends and devolved into hating each other's guts. He was so clingy and obsessed with me when we got into high school, and my teammates made fun of me, so I did whatever I could to keep the attention away. But the school called it bullying , and the administration put me on a correction plan because, apparently, there was a zero-tolerance policy. Even a city as big as Atlanta is still too small a space to share with him now. The only saving grace is playing in completely different sports. The NHL and the NFL don’t cross all that often, so as long as we’re not intentionally thrown together, I might be able to avoid him.

“But Kingsy, you’re going to have to keep your shit together. This big of a contract puts a target on your back that will have the owners, GM, and coaches watching to see if you’re worth that much of the team’s salary cap. One step out of line and they’ll trade your ass so fast. You’ll be on thin ice, so keep your nose clean and don’t be reckless. Make them pat themselves on the back for this deal.”

I hate his ominous words and the threat in them, but he’s right. Now I just have to show another team I’m worth keeping.

Great .

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am*

One

Ryder

This town blows. It's hot, the humidity is stifling, and it's not fucking Boston, which has been my home for the last decade. The billionaire brothers' desire to build a giant arena and fill it with nonexistent hockey fans in a state known for football and baseball forced me here. They paid me an ungodly amount of money for the trade, and now I have a three-year contract that made me the highest-paid goalie in the league, forcing me to be here. Otherwise, the only thing Atlanta has going for it so far is a wonderful array of sports bars.

It's a rare Sunday afternoon that my brand-new hockey team, the Atlanta Hydras, has off from training camp. Instead of spending it resting or doing something on our own, we're in some coach-mandated team icebreaker activity and forced to hang out in the name of bonding. I'm grumpier than usual from not sleeping well last night, thanks to the hot brunette I went home with. I spent the night learning my way around her body, and she returned the favor several times. It seemed like a great idea in the moment, but I'm regretting it now that I have to be functional. What was her name? Kayley? Kinsey? Something like that. Doesn't matter now. I left her place in the early hours of the morning after too little sleep and showered off the skank juice—too-sweet cotton candy perfume and unironic body glitter that wanted to stick around—before nursing my hangover with biscuits and gravy delivered directly to my door and a nap before heading here.

I follow a few teammates into a busy bar called the Dirty Bird in Midtown and hope like hell the name means I'll at least get hot wings. Luck seems to be with me when a

few guys from the D-line wave us to a large booth covered in piping hot trays of wings and fries with buckets of icy beers already waiting for us. There is a God.

A couple of wingers and Magnus, my goalie counterpart, follow closely behind us. We wait a few minutes for the centers and our captain, Sebastian, to show up. With the main roster all here, we dig into the spread paid for by Coach Kennedy's dime, and soon the beer has the bonding happening naturally, if good-natured chirping and bagging on each other is the main objective .

"Soupy, Rookie, do you plan on fighting more with each other than the teams we're playing this season, or are you ever going to get along?" Nico asks, referring to Campbell and Rook by their nicknames. It's a fact of hockey life that pretty much everyone ends up with a nickname that's a shortened form of your name or some play on words. Like my own last name of Kingston, which is shortened to Kingsy most of the time.

It's true, Rook and Campbell have been at each other's throats since we started practicing together and it's really fucking bad they're on the same line and end up leaving me in the goal defenseless, having to take the shots from the rest of the team when they're bickering with each other for whatever assumed issue they see. Their playing styles complement one another well, but neither will let their bad blood go long enough to realize it. Which is why we're here, bonding.

Coach Kennedy is tired of screaming at us during practice to get our heads out of our asses and start acting like a team, so now he's trying beer and wings instead. Coach Callahan, the goalie coach, sent Magnus and me along for the ride, even though we're not the ones struggling to work together. Bonding is for the entire team , according to Cal.

I snag a beer bottle by the neck and tip it back. This might help the forced nature of the outing. Several beers and way too many wings later, the TVs hanging around the

bar have caught my attention. Atlanta's football team, the Condors, are playing Buffalo. The commentators have said it's the first Sunday game of the season no less than ten times already. The talking heads report Atlanta played well in the preseason and is favored to win. Not that I've paid any attention before this. Football isn't my sport, so I'm not likely to follow it much. But I do know one of the players on the offense.

Knox Contraire and I grew up together. I called him my best friend until freshman year of high school. Then things got weird, and we went our separate ways. Good riddance, honestly. The bar groans together as Knox fumbles a pass and Buffalo gets a turnover.

"You'd think he'd be better at keeping his eye on the ball than that. He's always liked handling them, a little too much," I say offhandedly. I smile and sip my beer when a few of my teammates' heads turn my way. The comment slipped out like second nature, given how often I used to say shit like this in high school. I know I have no business commenting on another professional sport, but damn, Knox is a prime target after a fumble like that and I couldn't let it slide.

"You know Contraire?" Chad asks, looking intrigued.

"Grew up with the guy. He got weird in high school. Really liked watching everyone change in the locker room after gym class and practices. He popped a boner around all the guys and made things really awkward. No one wanted to change in front of him after that, if you get me."

He'd been a bench over from me that day and I'd been getting so much shit from Commisso and Sanders, juniors on the hockey team who teased me mercilessly for my friendship with Knox. They'd made it clear I needed to make a choice—stick with Knox and suffer their wrath and hazing that would end up forcing me off the hockey team, or distance myself from him and join them. When I'd turned to throw

some comment his way, I'd noticed the obvious tent in his boxers he was trying desperately to hide, and my mouth worked faster than my brain. Knox can't help himself when he's around guys. Hide your bodies, boys, he wants ya! Yeah, it was stupid and immature, but my teammates' voices kept echoing in my head, teasing me about Knox being my boyfriend. So I did the first thing that popped into my head to prove I wasn't into him. When you're fourteen, no one has impulse control, and everyone is a target for whatever thought turns up in your head. I was a victim of my circumstances, even if he was my best friend.

"Wasn't he with that thirst trap chick, Harlowe Sorenson?" Campbell asks.

I shrug and sip my beer before replying. "He might have been, but she's married to one of the rich guys who owns our team now, so who knows what kind of situation they had?" Honestly, I don't know what Knox likes now, but my brain doesn't want to let go of the boy I knew all those years ago who couldn't control his dick anytime dudes undressed.

"I don't know, she's crazy hot, and they were together for months," Nico adds, gesturing with a chicken wing in his fingers. "If you get a chance to hit it with a smoke show like that, you're not going to slum it with dudes. There's no way. "

Now I'm pushed to defend my statements, so I lean in hard. "Knox came on to me," I spit.

It's so vivid, I recall all the details like it happened yesterday. We were hanging out after one of my hockey games early freshman year before things went sideways. My team had won, and I wanted to celebrate with Knox after. We grabbed a pizza and went back to his house to play some video games until way too late. We both passed out on the couch, and I woke up to his fingers in my hair, like playing with it. It took me a minute to realize it wasn't an accident, he was intentionally touching me super softly, like he didn't want to wake me up. It was so confusing, because it felt kind of

good, but I knew I shouldn't like that my guy best friend was doing it, or that he'd touched me at all. When he dragged his fingers down my neck, like he was going to touch me somewhere else, I finally pushed his hand off and asked what he was doing. His face was so scared, but he said my hair looked soft and he'd always wanted to touch it. It was super weird that he waited until I was asleep to touch me, like a fucking stalker.

“He was obsessed with me and wouldn't leave me alone. That's not normal behavior,” I finish.

“Ahh, Kingsy had a boyfriend!” Rook announces in a sing-song voice.

My hackles raise and I want to shut that shit down. It's freshman year all over again with my teammates calling him my boyfriend and giving me shit for Knox always hanging around the ice rink waiting for me. No one is going to make fun of me for what someone else did when we were fourteen.

“Fuck that. Knox was a fucking queer stalker. I wanted nothing to do with that shit.” My voice is harsh. The words come out with a sharp bite to eviscerate their claims before they really begin.

“Chill,” Mercer says, the humor clear in his tone. “No one is saying anything about you, just the unfortunate situation you had to deal with. I think we've all been there with a stalker or someone who was too into us and couldn't take a hint.”

“What does it matter, anyway?” Davy asks. “Who you want to sleep with says nothing about you as a person or a player.” A few heads look at the quiet Russian quizzically. He doesn't normally weigh in on any of our discussions, yet here he is, dropping that bomb.

“Seriously. I think we all know a gay athlete who's absolutely killed it in their sport

at this point. It's not like who you fuck influences how you play," Westin adds, seeming to placate the rest of the table.

"Right? A hole's a hole, and we all know sticking your dick in an asshole feels pretty damn good. It's not too far a jump to gay sex," Chad says.

"Fucking hell, Chad," Campbell says as he throws a celery stick at our left winger who gets in more trouble than all of us combined. We'll have to watch Chad when we play Vegas because there are a few too many rumors of him nearly getting arrested after being kicked out of strip clubs.

"Hey, even our sport has its homoerotic qualities. All the ass patting, helmet kisses, and group showers make us all look a little gay," Fisher adds with a laugh. Campbell launches a carrot stick at him this time.

"I like the helmet kisses. It's part of the tradition," Magnus says in his Swedish accent.

"Can't forget the groin stretches for warm-ups," Sebastian adds, shrugging.

"All I was saying is Knox should be used to playing with balls, so fumbling them is out of character for him," I say, raising my hands to keep them from jumping on me again. I catch the chicken wing Campbell tosses at me now that he's out of veggies. I laugh and bite into the wing and let the conversation move on now that we have finally stopped talking about football and closeted dudes.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am*

Two

Knox

The team is pissed as we file off the field and back to the locker room. A few throw their helmets on the ground, and others are calling it bullshit. No one likes losing the first game of the season. I'm struggling even more knowing I contributed to it with a big-ass fumble. I'm better than that. My hands are huge and sticky, so I don't fumble passes like an amateur, and Luke and I have an almost telepathic connection to know where the other is on the field for shit like that. But this time, Buffalo's lineman held me up, and I couldn't get away as fast as I should have to grab that ball and run it into the end zone. Those points would have won the game.

Luke pats my ass as he follows me into the locker room. "Don't put it all on yourself. I can see you're all up in your head. It's one game, and one fumble. It won't be like that every time, and you know it. We all have our good and bad games. I took that massive hit in the second that absolutely could have been a beautiful pass if I'd decided to throw it instead of run, so I'm just as much at fault."

He means well, and I appreciate it, but that sack he's talking about didn't cause a turnover with the other team running the ball halfway back down the field. "I hear you," I say, anyway. No one wants to listen to me mope, especially Luke, one of the best quarterbacks in the NFL.

"Mathews, Contraire, stop gossiping and get your asses over here," Coach Adams yells, his face a mottled scarlet that doesn't look good for us, or his coronary artery.

We walk all the way into the locker room and sit on the bench in front of our lockers at his command.

“Get the fuck out of your heads and stop feeling sorry for yourselves,” Coach starts, looking around the room at the entire team. “It’s one game. Yeah, you played like shit and had some terrible calls, but we can learn from this. Next week, there’s another game, and the week after that all the way until February, if we’re lucky. We’ve only failed if we walk away from this without learning the lessons it taught us about our weaknesses and where we can improve. Practice this week will drill into those spots so we’re not left holding our dicks in our hands again next game. Now, hit the showers and see the PTs. I want you fresh for the next practice when we’re going to run those plays the way they should have been done today.” Coach Adams finishes with his not-so-motivational speech and turns it over to Coach McAvoy.

“Contraire, you’re on media duty. Don’t let them get in your head about what happened, and I don’t want anyone saying shit about Antwon, got it?” Coach McAvoy tells me.

We nod our heads in understanding, and the coaches make their way out of the locker room. I rise to my feet, feeling a weight on my shoulders that makes me far heavier than two-sixty, and shuffle back out for my newly appointed duties and the media circus that is our post-game press. Once I’m settled behind the microphones and the reporters have closed in on me, I answer questions about the game, sticking to my perfected lines. Finally, I pick my favorite local journalist to finish up by nodding in her direction.

“Contraire, that was a hell of a game tonight. It’s too bad you took a loss after that fourth-quarter fumble. How do you feel about that attempted comeback to bring the Condors into the end zone that resulted in a turnover? Lilah Williams, The Atlanta Free Press.”

I like Lilah. She pays attention and, despite asking questions about our loss now, has been more than fair to the Condors in the five years I've played for Atlanta. She's at all of our home games and often asks for quotes, knowing I'll give her a soundbite or something worthy of print. I keep trying to get her to be my friend, but she's been pretty set on remaining professional, which I respect, but I can tell we'd get along great outside the field. Women in professional sports have it tough, and I'd never make her life harder, so I make sure she's treated with all the respect due to her profession, and give her a worthy response.

"I gotta give all the credit to my main man, Cool Hand Luke, doing everything he could to get me the ball, even if I couldn't hold on to it. The team has unmatched synergy this season, and you're seeing it more and more on the field, whether we win or lose. I was looking for openings, and Luke was counting on me to get there. That pass had a bit too much heat on it, and I couldn't get to where I needed to make it happen with the route I took. We used every second to push and just couldn't keep up with what Buffalo was putting down. They played a good game, but it's always hard to lose. I know we'll get more chances for wins with this being the first game of the season."

"What can you tell us about Antwon Goodwin leaving in the third quarter?" Lilah asks, phone pointed at me, recording as she pries into why our wide receiver left mid-game. I don't fucking know why the asshole left. He's a hothead, looking for glory on and off the field, and has been butting heads with our coaches during the pre-season.

"I couldn't tell you anything about that. I was doing my job, smashing my head against defensemen and looking for openings so I could break tackles, make plays, and catch passes. I wasn't paying attention to where my teammates on the sidelines were. All I know is that those of us out on the field, in the huddle, were doing everything we could to bring it home. We played our game, and that's what counts."

"The way you and Luke Mathews work together shows your chemistry on the field is

unmatched, and you seem tighter than in seasons past. What would you say has been your biggest change this season to create that so-called synergy you mentioned?" Lilah pops a manicured hand on a thick hip and smiles with those luscious lips painted Condors' crimson.

My stomach knots into a ball of dread. What's she getting at? Does she think there's something more than a tight team going on? Because that ain't happening. First of all, I'm not into any of my teammates, and second, I wouldn't tell her if I were, especially here, in a room full of vicious and hungry reporters looking for a compelling story to sell papers or subscriptions. The last thing I need is someone outing me. But I've been managing the press my entire NFL career, and there's nothing to tell other than the truth.

"Luke is one of the best quarterbacks I've played with, and he's leading this team better than ever. We're dialed in. Focused. Our lines are working together, and I'm doing my part to support that. We're a team first and foremost, so we have to know each other inside and out, know how each other thinks, and anticipate where the other will be and what they need. That's what you're seeing this season." If only my team really knew who I was, deep down, off the field.

"We love seeing the Condors come out on top and are hoping for more wins. Thanks for answering my questions," Lilah says, stretching her hand out for me to shake. I stand from the media set up to step around the table and move away from the microphones so she's close enough for me to speak with her directly, without the rest of the media scrum hearing our conversation.

I take her hand, which is firm and warm. I like this chick. She's real and reminds me a lot of Harlowe, my sort of ex-girlfriend-turned-bestie. Lilah and I really could be friends if she'd let me, so I make her the same offer I do a few times every season and hope she takes it as friendly as I intend it to be. "Are you ever gonna hang out with me? We could grab food or drinks, casual-like."

Lilah tilts her head, a slight smile playing on her lips as she appraises me. “Knox Contraire, I told you, I don’t date local athletes. That gets messy too quickly.”

“As friends,” I clarify. “You’re safe with me. Of course you’re hot, but I would never hit on you. I can even set you up with someone on a visiting team if I know any good single dudes, if that’s how you like to date.” I smile and wait for her response. She did make it pretty clear she fucks athletes, just not the home team guys.

“That’s not a bad offer,” she muses, looking up at me, whiskey eyes sparkling with humor. “But I’ll have to pass. I’ve heard the ‘just friends’ line a few too many times to believe it.”

Damn. She’s hard to get through, and I’m not going to come out and tell her I have no interest in her physically. “You wound me with that suspicion. We’ve known each other professionally for years,” I say. When she just stares at me mutely with a knowing smile, I continue. “Fine, if you ever want to grab a drink or just hang out as friends, nothing more, you can text me. No pressure. You have my number and you can use it for more than a soundbite or a quote for a story.”

“I’ll think about it,” she says, sliding the phone into her back pocket and looking up at me. “Good game out there tonight.”

With that, she turns and leaves, hips swaying in tight black pants that hug her curves and catch the eyes of more than a few guys who follow her progress out of the press room. Damn, that woman has it going on. I know it, and I’m not even attracted to women. I turn to leave, my media responsibilities complete.

I need to let off a little frustration after that shitshow of a game, and what better way than jacking it to a stranger on the internet? Once I’m home, I open Vers—an anonymous dick pic app for gay men I’ve been using for a while to get my kicks in the safest way I can to protect my image—and pull up my profile. It’s completely

fake. My username, HandyManCan, is super generic and as far from identifiable as I can make it instead of using anything like my own. I just have a photo of my abs and my hand down my low-slung gray sweatpants as my profile picture, no face or anything identifying. If I end up on a video chat, I disguise my voice, and the app has the selfie camera disabled, so as long as I don't purposely show my face, I'm good.

There are a bunch of messages, as usual, and I open a few until I get to one that looks promising for someone who is currently online. He calls himself JackmeHoff and starts strong with a photo a lot like my profile image, but he's hard, the crown of his cock jutting out of the top of his sweats, the head a ruddy, angry red with a bead of precum dripping out the slit. I hit reply immediately, my cock already growing hard as I lay back in bed.

HandyManCan: You look like you need a hand. Or a tongue to clean you up.

JackmeHoff: I've been waiting for you to get online. I've almost come twice looking at that photo of yours. I want to see the real thing, outside your sweats. Be a good boy and show me what I need.

Fuck me. I like a man who knows how to take charge. I push down my sweats and palm my dick, hard and straining with need like I always am these days, with nowhere to focus this desire that would be safe outside of an app like Vers. I snap a photo that almost looks comical with my hand fisted at the base of my cock as it reaches up to my abs. Both my fists aren't enough to cover my fully erect dick, and he'll see that right away. I send it over and type out a reply.

HandyManCan: Like what you see?

JackmeHoff: Fuck yes. God, I want to swallow you whole. I want to choke on that fat cock. Spit on it, show me how wet you can make it.

A photo comes through from Jack, his sweats are down now also, and he's fisting his cock like I want to. He's just as hard, and he's girthy, if not as long as me, which is more than fine. I know I'm above average, but I don't expect anyone else to be. Honestly, I think it would be easier to take it that way.

I spit in my palm and coast my hand over the head of my cock, leaving a wet trail that glistens and smooths the pass I make down my shaft as I pump my hips up into my fist. I take another photo and send it through as I type out a response one-handed, allowing my secret thoughts to become words.

HandyManCan: I'm wet for you. Choke on me like a good slut and see if you can make me come.

JackmeHoff: I'd be slobbering all over that monster, deep-throating you, and sucking on that fat crown like my favorite lollipop. Jesus, you're massive and delicious. I would stay on my knees all day and night for you. Live call?

I bite back a groan at his message as I continue to stroke myself, imagining this faceless man here in my bedroom straddling my thighs, sucking me off. I click the video button and wait for him to accept. The image on the screen when he does makes me suck in a gasp. That cock of his is glistening as he slowly pumps his fist, and I immediately match his cadence and position so it feels like his hand is on me.

"Fuck, you look even better on video than you do in a photo," I rasp, smoothing my thumb over the sensitive ridge of my crown, my muscles clenching from the sensation as his hips raise into his fist across the screen.

"You're just as big and mouthwatering," he replies, his voice soft and scratchy, like he's barely able to talk through the moment. "Fuck, I want to taste you. I know you'd be musky and salty on my tongue, you have that gym bro build and confidence that insists on it. You probably smell amazing and would linger on my skin for days if I

didn't wash you off.”

I groan, thinking of someone wearing my scent around, letting me mark them in such a primal way, wanting to be mine. My hips flex and I squeeze my cock harder, focusing on the top half, my fist skimming over the head with each tug of my hand, building pressure.

“Would you swallow, or do you want me to come on your abs and use it to get you off?” I ask, my voice guttural as I near my climax, watching this imaginary scene play out in my head and giving voice to my filthiest fantasies.

“Both. Jesus, fuck. I want to taste your cum, and I want you to stroke me with it,” he says, an urgency to his tone as he pulls faster on his cock, matching my pace.

“Mmmmm,” I growl, the sound reverberating through my chest as I arch my back and feel my orgasm building at the base of my spine. “I’ll come on your abs, and you can clean me up with your tongue after. But I want you in my mouth. I’ll swallow that load and get every last drop when you come.”

“Fuck, I’m not going to last with that mouth of yours,” Jack says, voice ragged as his hips flex erratically into his fist. Knowing he wants this as badly as I do sends me racing toward my climax.

“I’m right there with you,” I pant, my breath caught in my lungs as my release seizes me, and I cry out. My cock swells as I pump my fist slowly across the head, hot cum shooting onto my stomach and coating my abs just as Jack comes.

His moans are quiet, muffled like he’s turned his head into a pillow, and I feel a momentary pang of sadness that I couldn’t hear his full response, even while riding the high of this mutual orgasm. Our hands slow at different times, and my breathing evens out faster than his does. I watch as his lower stomach rises and falls under the

mess of cum that I wish I could taste.

Hot regret washes over me as my sticky release cools on my skin. I want nothing more than to find some sort of connection with my faceless online hookup after such an intimate act.

“Fuck, that was good,” I say, keeping my voice low and letting the sexy scratch come through. I need him to want me even more now that we’ve experienced this together.

“Yeah, I like that mouth of yours. You really know how to get me there. Thanks, man. Have a good night.”

Wait, that’s it? But what was I expecting, really? Vers is a faceless app for gay guys to send photos and videos for online hookups. It won't be where I find the love of my life when I can't even show my face.

“Yeah, have a good night,” I say, but Jack has already ended the video chat.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am*

Three

Ryder

Media day for a brand-new hockey team is way more insane than anything I've experienced. We're taking all the photos and videos for our socials, player cards, and every promotion and project they have planned for the season. On top of that, we also have a literal minefield of sports journalists to run through once we finish. It's a long fucking day.

I hate doing anything with the media, but this is mandatory, so I can't slip out unnoticed or shove another player in front of a camera or microphone like I would with a post-game presser. Once I complete my photos and promo videos, I'm shuffled into the press room by a twenty-year-old blonde intern, wearing a Hydras polo with a death grip on her phone that she refuses to put away, even when we're just waiting in line. I follow Westy and his handler, watching as he moves toward the gauntlet ahead and stops at the first media station.

"Westin Dumont, number sixty-nine, center," he says when prompted by his handler from the PR team.

"I'm Garren Thomas with the Southern Sports Network. Dumont, can you tell us your plan for the season ahead as a new team?" a reporter calls, throwing him a softball of a question, if you ask me. We don't know the media that reports on our team yet, so they'll have to introduce themselves now.

"We're going to leave it all on the ice and keep a next-game mentality. Hard work

pays off, boys, eh? We're just going to do our best and play the hardest we can," he replies, using tried-and-true answers that I'm sure the entire team has said at some point. We've all had extensive media coaching, even if it sticks with some of us more than others.

He moves down the line, and I take my place at my first media station with my handler nearby, who is making sure I know what to do and where to go next.

"I'm Lilah Williams with the Atlanta Free Press," a busty brunette with pillowy red lips says as I position myself.

"Ryder Kingston, number one, goalie," I say before my handler prompts. I want it to be done sooner rather than later, so I'll get through the necessary bits quickly.

"Kingston, in mythology, the hydra is a beast with many serpent heads, but you seem to be taking the snake theme to a personal level before the season even begins. Can you elaborate on the comments you made yesterday about the Atlanta Condors, specifically, tight end Knox Contraire?" she asks, her winged eyeliner exaggerating her narrowed eyes and making me look twice as I process her question.

Is she calling me a fucking snake? "What comments?" I ask, not sure what she means. I was expecting the easy shit, like Westy was given.

"The homophobic comments you made while out at a local sports bar insinuating Contraire is gay. The original video now has over three million views on TikTok," she clarifies, turning her phone around and showing me a screenshot of...holy fucking shit, that's me. It looks like a photo of me taken over Nico's shoulder, and the captions on the screen send a wave of nausea through me as sweat beads along my spine.

"Who posted that?" I demand, anger quickly replacing the dread that sinks like lead

to my skates. Fuck my life, this can't be happening. It was an outing with the team, and none of them were taking videos of me. Who got close enough and captured the worst thing I said over several hours of us shit-talking each other?

The reporter taps her screen, and the video plays. It's a bit muffled and the background noise is loud, but you can clearly hear me say, "You'd think he'd be better at keeping his eye on the ball than that. He's always liked handling them, a little too much." The video is clipped so it immediately picks up with another damning statement, my face twisted with disgust. "Knox came onto me. He was obsessed with me and wouldn't leave me alone. That's not normal behavior. Knox was a fucking queer stalker. I wanted nothing to do with that shit."

"What was your relationship with Knox Contraire, and when were you two...together?" she asks.

"What the fuck? We were never together," I fire at her, not about to let this shit start up again. I got enough crap about Knox years ago. I won't let some pumped-up reporter twist the situation even more than it already is. "I knew Knox in high school. He was obsessed with me, which was one-sided."

"Why did you make those comments, like you were informed about his current relationship status or sexuality? Have you reconnected with him since moving to Atlanta?" Her smile is cruel and condemning, calculating as she herds me along whatever booby-trapped path she's set to get me to say something even more incriminating.

Did Knox fucking send her? Why is she putting me through the damn inquisition now? Where are my questions about playing style or season plans? I have to shut her down before this gets even more out of hand.

"I haven't talked to Knox and have nothing more to say about him now. If you have

questions about the Hydras or hockey, you better ask them.” My voice is low and threatening, grittier than the shoulder of I-85, the nastiest freeway I’ve come across in three states.

Clearly, she has no self-preservation instincts as she takes a step closer, her voice low and venom-laced, meant just for me to hear. “How can you possibly know anything about a man you just said you haven’t spoken with in over a decade, who’s never made any statements about his sexuality, nor given anyone reason to suspect he’s anything other than straight as can be?” She ticks off each point on her fingers like the strikes she’s already thrown against me. “You spoke with such conviction and, well, homophobic rhetoric, you must have some knowledge that the rest of us don’t from personal experience. That, or you’re just being an asshole with a nasty mouth looking to bring down the reputation of an upstanding player, in another sports league at that. A player who has given so much of his time and energy to wonderful causes and makes a point to give back quietly rather than run his mouth, like you. I figured you would either double down now and provide the necessary evidence, or backtrack like a scared bigot and dig yourself into a deeper hole. It’s not looking good for you either way, Kingston.”

Holy fuck. This woman is something else. I’ve never had a sports journalist drag me through the mud the way she is, and there have been plenty of shitty stories written about me. But the difference is it was always focused on how I played, not what I said or my fucking character . Shit, this is bad. But more than anything, she’s got me seeing red. The audacity of Lilah Williams. How fucking dare she question me like this?

“Someone decided to violate my privacy and post a video of a conversation they had no part in. It’s taken out of context and edited to only show the worst. If you had any fucking integrity, you would validate your sources and not report clickbait and use negative-leaning videos that are meant to stir up viewers for engagement as your only source.”

“If you want to set the record straight now, we will. Can you clarify why you would call Knox, and I quote a queer stalker ?” She pops a hand on her hip, drawing my gaze to her nails. They’re bright red with the Condors' black and white bird logo and football designs painted along their tips. Of course. It makes so much sense now. She’s a fucking football fan and probably knows Knox through reporting on his games. This is personal for her.

“No comment.” The words barely make it past my grinding molars. I’m fucking done with this interview and this antagonistic woman. She can fucking choke on her questions and take the stupid video with her. I’ll have to get my agent on the phone and see what we can do about controlling the spread of this stupid-ass video before more people see it. Three million views? What the hell is that? How would something like that spread so fast?

I turn toward the social media intern, finally remembering she’s been off to the side, ready to usher me to the next station. I roll my eyes when I catch her wide-eyed stare dropping between me and the video she found on her own phone. Some help she is. Now that’s three million and one views. Fucking hell. I push past Westy as he moves along the line of media stations and head for the door, skipping the rest of the questions and reporters waiting for me. Today is a bust, and I don't have it in me to answer anyone else. My hands shake, and my stomach is in sour knots. I’m in deep shit and so fucking angry about this whole situation.

It can’t get any fucking worse than this.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am*

Four

Knox

My phone pings with a new text from Lilah, which isn't out of the ordinary. She probably needs another quote for her article about the game.

Lilah: Hey, it's Lilah. I think I need to take you up on that drink now.

Oh shit, I didn't expect that turn of events after another refusal to hang out with me. I type a quick response.

Knox: Hey, Lilah girl, good to hear from you. Changed your mind about being friends with me? \*Winky face emoji\*

Lilah: Yeah, actually. Are you free? I could really use a drink. I'm downtown.

Knox: Of course, I'm just hanging out. Wanna meet at Brick and Barley? It's not too far from me.

Lilah: Sure, how soon can you be there?

I look around my condo, like it will give me an estimated time of arrival. I'm in casual clothes and was just watching SportsCenter. Not like I had any plans other than catching Monday Night Football and seeing how the league is shaping up for this season. That and nursing my feelings about fucking up the game yesterday.

Knox: I can be there in twenty minutes. Good?

Lilah: Cool. See you there.

Well, shit. I guess I have plans after all.

When I walk into Brick and Barley fifteen minutes later, Lilah is already in the bar area at a high-top table in a corner. I walk over, keeping my nondescript ball cap pulled low and avoiding eye contact. This isn't a sports bar, but I never know who will recognize me when I'm out and about in Atlanta. It's common to be stopped on the street, out at a restaurant, or even while shopping for groceries. I've taken to getting everything delivered at this point to avoid it. I like fans; that's not the problem. I hate the lack of anonymity and the constant feeling of being under a microscope. Like a fucking goldfish in a bowl, someone is always tapping at the glass and peering in at me.

I slide into the seat across from Lilah and catch the look of surprise that crosses her features before her pretty grin stretches her face, and she breathes a sigh of relief.

"You're early," she says as she turns her phone over so the screen is against the table and gives me her full attention.

"Can't leave a pretty girl like you waiting." I lace my fingers together on the table and give her a quick once-over. She seems off, agitated, maybe. She's usually so unruffled and confident. It's throwing me that she's anything less now that we're one-on-one. I don't want her to feel nervous around me when there's no need.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I didn't message you because I want to get in your pants or anything," she says. "You're awfully complimentary for someone who just wants to be a friend, so don't try too hard to win me over."

“Did you expect me to call you a troll and treat you like one of the guys?”

This makes her laugh, a small snort escapes as she looks down and shakes her head.

“No, of course not. I'm just reiterating that I don't date athletes, so you can chill on the flirty banter.”

I shake my head adamantly. “And I told you, you're safe with me. I have no interest in you except strictly platonic. So what's up? You seem off. We're friends. You can unload about whatever it is.”

Her eyes dart away nervously, and I wonder at the cause. My trepidation is heightened rather than put to rest with her next breath. “This is strictly off the record. I'm not here as a reporter, but as a friend.”

“Okay, that sounds ominous,” I say. “What's so bad you have to preface it by saying this won't be quoted in an article?”

“Have you seen the video of Ryder Kingston making shitty comments about you?”

I lean back, my eyebrows drawing together in confusion as I hear a name I never expected to come out of her mouth. Ryder Kingston . Those two words send fear ricocheting down my spine and anger churning in my gut. He single-handedly made my childhood the best thing ever, and my teenage years a living hell.

“No,” I say slowly. “But it sounds like I should look for it now and potentially get my PR team on whatever mess he's made.” I don't want to do anything in the guy's favor, not after how we left things when we were eighteen, but I may need to get ahead of this shit for my own good, even if it helps him.

“I'm sorry to be the one to show you.” Lilah chews her lip and flips her phone over, tapping the screen to pull up a video from social media and hitting play. I watch in

growing horror as the most beautiful and terrible face fills the screen, those full lips twisted in disgust and hate, with my name on his tongue. It's a quick video, less than ten seconds, but the damage is done. Ryder outed me, whether I admit a single thing or not. Anyone who sees this will begin to question my sexuality. My teammates will look at me differently, despite knowing me as well as they can from playing beside them for years.

"Fuck," I breathe, the sound low and resonant between us.

"That's not all," Lilah says, her face full of anger. "I interviewed him at the Hydras media day, and let's just say it wasn't a friendly conversation. He didn't retract his statements; only confirmed he hasn't spoken with you in over a decade. I made him wish he'd never said anything, though. The big baby left in a huff and wouldn't answer questions after I had my turn with him."

"How bad is this?" I ask her, my eyes focused on the table.

Her nails tap a staccato beat against her water glass. "A lot of people have seen the video of him, but the focus has been on how shitty he is for saying what he did, and less on you. Seeing as he's a major sports star and will be at the forefront of people's minds because of the new team, he has some clout, but you could bury him or let this fade out of people's minds with time. I think you should make a statement acknowledging his comments and calling him out for them. It's not like he knows you now, even if he once did."

"We grew up together," I explain quietly. This is probably going to take some food to get through. I pick up the bar menu. "You hungry?"

"I could eat, and the menu looked good."

I signal for a server, and when the girl approaches our table with a smile that doesn't

hint at recognition, I breathe a sigh of relief. “Order anything you want, I’ve got you,” I tell Lilah. She raises her eyebrows at me, glances at the menu one last time, then turns to the server and rattles off a list of appetizers and a local craft beer. I give my order and ask for a fruity cocktail that looks good because I don’t want Lilah to drink alone. Once that’s done, I turn back to Lilah, who is barely containing her grin.

“That’s not what I expected you to get,” Lilah says with a laugh. “I imagined you would be a whiskey neat or an IPA guy.”

“Fuck that nasty shit. I want to enjoy my alcohol, and that’s when I can’t taste it. So it’s some fruity drink or nothing for me.” Damn, it feels good to just let that out and not have to hide it from Lilah. I haven’t admitted anything to her, and I’m not ready to, but she has to be wondering.

She nods and examines me, cataloging the information. “I’ll be sure to find you the best cocktails should we do this again. So, you and Ryder knew each other?” she prompts, leaning toward me.

“He was my best friend for most of my life. Obviously, things changed, but we started out as close as two kids could be.”

“It must be hard hearing him say those things,” she offers, resting a manicured hand over mine. She has some cool-as-hell nails, done up in Condor’s colors and designs.

“It feels very on brand for the Ryder I knew at the end of things, honestly. High school wasn’t easy for me, thanks to people like him.”

Our server arrives a short while later with drinks and appetizers, halting our conversation while she quickly sets the plates down. My drink is pink and has a plumeria flower on the sugared rim. I lift it and take a deep breath. This is going to be excruciating, but at least I’ll have something nice to drink.

Lilah taps her pint against my outstretched martini glass and takes a sip before she continues right where we left off. “I take it Ryder was a jerk and probably said a lot of unkind things?”

I laugh, the sound far more bitter than the sweet drink that goes down a little too easily. That’s dangerous, especially when I’m planning to let Lilah have a statement at some point tonight. Fuck it. I finish the pretty little drink and signal the server for another.

“Ryder was insecure and didn’t like being on the receiving end of the torture that is high school boys, especially in sports. He found a way to turn that spotlight on others and became my tormentor.”

“Are you saying Ryder bullied you?” Lilah asks, her voice steely.

I sigh. It goes so much deeper than that, but this isn’t the right situation and outlet for that entire story, so unpacking it will be difficult. “Ryder and I were tight. We lived on the same street and grew up together, like I said. We even did that stupid thing you see in movies and cut our fingers to be blood brothers when we were eight.” I turn my left hand over, examining the small scar that bisects the pad of my index finger. Ryder has one that matches.

“That’s actually super cute,” Lilah says, grabbing my wrist and pulling it toward her so she can see the tiny scar for herself.

“Yeah, well, being that close with a guy and showing you care about him gets you labeled when you hit a certain age. When we got into high school, there was this awful junior on Ryder’s hockey team that saw us hanging out a lot and started making fun of Ryder for his boyfriend . You know how douchebags can be, no matter the age. Whenever we could, we went to each other’s games. I was at a hockey game when Ryder took a nasty hit into the crossbar of the goal, neck at a weird angle and

all. He went down hard and didn't get back up. No one likes seeing shit like that, especially not your best friend.”

I pause and swallow hard. It's still so vivid. The sound of the hit echoing in the rink, Ryder going limp and falling like a rag doll. I felt the abject horror of not knowing if my best friend was going to get up. It wasn't the first time I'd seen him hurt in a game, but it was the first time I couldn't get to him, and he hadn't gotten up on his own. I scrub a hand down my face and shake my head slowly before I can continue.

“I was at the glass, screaming for him to get up, working myself up to tears. They finally took him off the ice and out of the game with a concussion. I didn't get to see him for hours, so I was a mess and this asshole, Commisso, couldn't let it go. After that, every time he passed me in the hall at school or saw me somewhere, he made some snide remark asking about my boyfriend. That's when Ryder turned on me, probably to save face with his team and the other guys who were making fun of him, I'm sure. I'm rational enough to know he was probably getting it as badly as I was. But fuck, it hurt like hell to lose my best friend and watch him become someone who hated me instead. He also knew the ways to hurt me the most, since he knew me the best.”

Our server mercifully brings my drink, and I ask her to just start on another now because I'll need it. This sucks, flaying myself open for Lilah to have the backstory. Numbing the pain feels like an especially smart move right now.

“I'm sorry, Knox. It sounds like a horrible few years. Did it ever get better?”

“Not in high school, not with Ryder. I think once he established himself as a bully to ensure everyone knew we weren't together, it was too hard to be anything else or risk that situation coming up again for him. We went to different colleges, thankfully, and the drama didn't seem to follow me, so I finally got to breathe again and feel like myself with my team.”

“What do you mean by your team? Wasn't it the hockey team that was the problem in high school?” Lilah’s eyebrows knit together, and I realize my mistake.

“It was an asshole on the hockey team who started the whole thing, but when someone insinuates you’re gay, and you’re an athlete who by necessity has to spend a lot of time in the locker room with your team, word gets around. Ryder helpfully pointed out one unfortunate incident in the locker room when my body wasn’t working in my favor, and I got a reputation for liking watching boys change. So, I had to change by myself, out of view of my team, or the rest of my gym class, all four years of school, to avoid anyone thinking I was looking at them. I didn’t want to make things weird for anyone. Or, weirder, because fuck, that was hard when the showers are communal and I’m the tallest guy on the team, trying to keep to myself.”

“God, that sounds awful,” Lilah says, twirling a coconut shrimp tail between her fingers. “I know people are the absolute worst, and kids are shit, but this sounds beyond bad. How did you make it through?”

I stare at my fingers twisting the stem of my once again empty glass. How real do I get, how raw, in my attempts to bare my soul now to make Ryder’s stupid, homophobic comments make sense? But the truth is, he should be the one explaining himself. I shouldn’t have to keep covering for him.

“One day at a time and with different friends, that’s how.” I pull the plate of shrimp toward me and pop one in my mouth, chewing quickly before finishing. “I hung out mostly with girls after that. And I dated a lot. You can believe my girlfriends didn’t care if I was obsessed with them. They liked a six-foot-six dude rushing to their defense, fussing over them, and ensuring they were okay if even the smallest thing happened. I got to continue being the concerned, caring friend I am as long as I channeled that energy to the proper recipients. So that’s why I’ve always had more female friends than male friends.”

“We are the superior sex, honestly,” Lilah says, raising her glass to me. “I’m glad you didn’t have to change, and you found people who accepted you for who you are.”

“Well, I didn’t even know who I was in high school, but that’s a story for another day. I think we got through the one that makes Ryder’s comments make sense. I won’t ever excuse what he said because that was shitty and he’s an asshole, but if you were wondering why he would target me, of all people, now you know.”

Lilah’s eyes grow soft, melting into dark pools of whiskey as she looks at me. “Thanks for sharing that with me, Knox. I appreciate it, and I know it can’t be easy to open yourself up to a stranger. I hope this means we’re friends now, and I’ll have a six-foot-six obsessed man at the ready should I need one.”

I roll my eyes playfully. “Of course. You think I’d dangle that bit of information in front of you and not be offering you the same, especially after asking you out and insisting it was just as friends?”

We both laugh, and I feel lighter now, thankfully. The server brings my third pink drink and another beer for Lilah, taking away our empty glasses and plates.

“I think you can have the upper hand with a carefully crafted statement that runs in a professional setting. He threw some serious shade. You’re lucky enough to have a sports reporter as a new bestie who can make that happen.” Lilah’s grin is diabolical, and her words are a balm to the part of me that much wants to see every mean person who had some part in hurting me get what’s coming to them, but that’s not for me to make happen. I don’t believe in retribution. That’s what karma is for.

“I don’t think I need to say anything. There’s so much toxic masculinity in sports as it is, there’s no need to add any extra just to get views or rile people up. Making derogatory and inflammatory comments because someone needs to make others feel small to feel better about themselves is classic bullying behavior. It says more about

the character of the person making the comments than who they are speaking about, regardless of the topic.”

“That’s a perfect shot across the bow without being a direct hit. We can use exactly that!” Lilah says excitedly, pulling up a notes app and beginning her article.

Looks like I’m making a statement after all.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am*

Five

Ryder

“What the actual fuck?” I growl, pulling off the paper taped to my door. I scan it, unlock the door, and let myself in, my hands shaking in fury. An eviction notice? Really? For discriminatory harassment, at that. When was I discriminatory to my landlord? I don’t think I’ve ever even met my landlord to harass them.

I don’t have time for this. The season is picking up, and I need a solid, secure living situation. I can’t be looking for something now. This spot took weeks over the summer to find and a crew to move into. I don’t have weeks. I have forty-eight hours.

I throw my gym bag on the couch and grab my phone, dialing the number on the paper.

“Hello?”

“Is this Venman Properties?” I ask, trying like hell to keep the anger from my tone so I can get to the bottom of this.

“Yes, this is Jonathan Venman speaking,” he answers cautiously. “Who might this be?”

“This is Ryder Kingston. I came home to an eviction notice on my door at fifty-seven-oh-three Peachtree Street, and I wanted to understand what sort of discrimination and harassment you felt you’ve experienced for me to be evicted from

this residence.”

“Ah, Mr. Kingston. We evicted you because we became aware of your homophobic statements made yesterday that put you in breach of your lease agreement. I served your eviction notice this morning. Section four, clause three of your agreement states that all tenants will abide by a code of conduct that includes tolerance of all sexualities and ways of life so as not to belittle or harass others in public or in private while a tenant. You clearly do not live by that code of conduct, and I am rescinding your tenancy.”

“You can’t be serious. You saw something that was taken out of context and put online without my consent. Where’s the outrage at my privacy that was breached?” I ask, my voice rising with my indignation. “I’m not homophobic,” I insist.

“Unfortunately, Mr. Kingston, your statements were telling and said more about your internalized biases than you may acknowledge. Regardless, that video was enough to revoke your tenancy. This is a high-class establishment, and that sort of behavior is not tolerated by any of our tenants. You have forty-eight hours to leave the premises before further legal action is taken against you. Oh, and go Condors.”

He ends the call without so much as a goodbye, and I’m left holding the phone without the resolution I was hoping for. I’m realizing my reckless words from the other day while shooting the shit with the boys are having far-reaching consequences. That, and Knox Contraire is fucking up my life without even being a part of it this time.

“Motherfucker!” I shout. This is so fucked. What the hell am I supposed to do? I hit another number and wait as the phone rings.

“Hey Kingsy, I’m glad you called,” Mark says when he answers.

“Mark, I’m being evicted. I came home from weight training to a notice on my door. What the hell am I supposed to do? I don’t have time to look for another place right now.”

“We both know you have bigger problems than just where to live, but this definitely complicates things.” He pauses to take a deep breath, and I hear the rasp of his fingers rubbing over the stubble on his face. “I just got into Atlanta and need you to meet me in an hour at the local office. I’ll text you the address. We need to fix the situation you’ve got yourself into, and I don’t care what else is going on, so you better be there.”

Relief floods me. Mark’s a problem solver. If he’s here in town, he’s going to make this right. I can breathe for the first time since that Lilah woman put me through the wringer about the video and alerted me to my first mistake, which suddenly thrust me into a spotlight I never asked for. I’d called Mark as I was leaving the arena to tell him about the situation, and apparently, it was big enough for him to fly into town to fix.

“Thanks, Mark. I’ll be there. This is so fucked. My life feels like it’s burning down around me. I don’t know what to do.”

“I know, man. We’ll talk about it later,” he says coolly.

We hang up, and he texts me the address for his firm's local office. I shower and get dressed before leaving the house, hoping there aren’t any extra surprises when I get back, like a water leak, a roach infestation, or something else unimaginable that will be the cherry on top of everything that's been thrown at me so far.

The office is in a high-rise in downtown Atlanta. A receptionist leads me to a conference room when I check in, and not only is Mark there, but so is Knox fucking Contraire. Great .

I step inside the room, and the receptionist closes the door behind me, trapping me in here with the subject of my viral video and the agent who represents us both. “What the hell is going on?” I ask.

“Have a seat, Kingsy. We need to talk.” Mark points to a seat opposite him and a few down from Knox.

I trudge to the chair, carefully avoiding Knox’s gaze and focusing on Mark again when I’m settled. “What’s he doing here?” I ask, tipping my head in Knox’s direction, no longer able to remain silent.

“Well, Ryder,” he begins, and the use of my full name instead of my nickname tells me this isn’t going to be good. “When you decided to run your mouth about another athlete—a former friend and another client of mine at that—it became imperative that I bring you both in and remind you that not only are you public figures who have eyes on you at all times, but you are held to a higher standard by definition.”

“Come on, Mark,” I say, laughing. “I was out with the boys, we were fucking around and I said some shit that was caught on someone’s phone and posted out of context. It’s not that serious. People need to let it go already.” I’m ready to defend my actions any way I can. He shouldn’t be giving me a talking to about it.

“Oh, so you have a legitimate reason to be speaking about another person’s private life or sexuality that was taken out of context? I want to hear what that may have been. Please enlighten us on your conversation with the boys about an athlete from an entirely different sport, and why you were passionately calling him a queer stalker and saying he was obsessed with you. I’d love to hear the rest of it if that was a portion taken out of context.” Mark leans back, crossing his ankle over his knee and steepling his fingers together in his lap, cocking his perfectly coiffed, silver-streaked head.

“Come on, that’s not what I meant,” I say, heat rising in my cheeks. Mark is laying into me in front of my former best friend and the target of so much of my hate, even now, when we’re both adults and far past that contentious place in our lives.

Mark drops his foot back to the ground and throws his hands up. “Exactly. You’re running your mouth in public and allowing people to misinterpret you, or catching parts of your conversations that are unsavory, and show you in a terrible light at best.” Mark leans forward and levels me with an intense blue-eyed glare. “You know better, Ryder.” He holds up a finger. “One, we don’t talk about other people the way you were. You’re called to a higher standard as a professional athlete and person of interest.” He adds a second finger. “Two, this is another professional athlete you’re speaking about, so it’s even worse that you made any comment, especially the kind you did.” He stands, pacing along the table, clearly worked up as I sit and take the dressing down he’s intent on giving me.

“It was a private conversation. It never should have made it online,” I mumble, looking at my hands.

“That’s irrelevant.” He shakes his head. “Look, I expect you to know this already since you’re an adult who’s been in the spotlight for ten years, but it seems the lesson missed its mark at some point.” He bends and plants his hands on the table, looking me in the eye and holding the contact as he delivers his rebuke. “We can’t assume anyone’s preferences in this day and age. We don’t disparage them, even if we do know. That’s low, and people are rightfully eviscerating you online because they’re irate at your bigotry. ”

“It’s about time you get back what you dish out,” Knox says, just loud enough for us to hear.

My head snaps in his direction. “Oh, that’s rich,” I growl, but Mark stops me before I can tear into the asshole.

“Enough, both of you.” He turns his attention away from me, and I breathe in the momentary reprieve from his fury. “Knox, you’re here because you decided, for the first time in your career, to add to my splitting headache by making your own ill-advised statement that I now have to navigate on top of everything else. As if my life wasn’t hard enough with this joker.” Mark thumbs my way before he grips his temples, rubbing like we’re the biggest pains in his ass. I’m sure this sucks for him, but my situation is objectively worse.

What the hell did Knox say, anyway? It had to be about me or in retaliation for what I said. Fantastic. Just what I need on top of a viral video making me look like a douche and an eviction notice. Now I’m in some kind of online inter-sport feud, too.

“You better keep my name out of your mouth.” The condescension drips from my tone as I finally let my eyes land on Knox. He looks so different from what I remember, yet he’s as familiar as my reflection. He’s...grown up and looks so perfect it’s unfair. No man should be that handsome and leave the rest of us with the scraps he left in his race to perfection. His face is sculpted, the skin smooth like satin and rich like milk chocolate over high cheekbones and a square jaw with the slightest shadow, his brow set off by the perfect fade of his dark, buzzed hair. His espresso eyes are hard when they meet mine, causing me to look away when I realize I’ve been staring like a creeper.

“After all those years of you being so reckless with my name, you think I should respect yours now? That’s a level of hypocrisy I didn’t know existed, but it shouldn’t surprise me, coming from you,” Knox bites out, leaning toward me, his shoulders bunching under his shirt as he grips the armrests of his chair as if barely containing himself.

“You keeping score, Contraire? That’s not a surprise, since you’ve always been obsessed with me. You would still hold on to that.” It comes out so easily, the words right there on my tongue, and let loose like arrows flying toward my target before I

even realize I've drawn the bowstring. I've learned a few lessons about controlling my impulses in the decade or more since I've seen him, but somehow, they don't seem to pertain to Knox. Despite the time and distance, I still can't seem to bite my tongue around him.

"Cut the shit, both of you," Mark snaps, stopping his pacing across from us. "If you want to act like middle school girls with your bickering, I'll treat you like middle school girls. Ryder, you need to learn to control your temper and your mouth. Knox, until recently, has had a perfect record of saying exactly what he should in interviews, so he's going to teach you how to carry yourself even when you've lost, had a bad day, or are angry."

"Mark, seriously, why do I have to—" Knox begins, but Mark stops him with an outstretched hand.

"This is your punishment for clapping back in that piece that ran today in the Atlanta Free Press." He looks between us to make sure neither of us is going to interrupt him again. "And you're going to be roommates for the rest of the season, so you can live together and learn to get along."

"Absolutely not, this is bullshit—" Knox growls.

"Not on your fucking life—" I grit out at the same time before Mark whistles sharply and stops our grumbling.

"This isn't a request. You both need representation. I've been your agent for years, and I'm the best in the business. You could find someone else, but we have a contract, and you'd each owe me millions if you decided to leave now." He turns his intensity on Knox and points a finger his way. "On top of that, Knox, this is a negotiation year. I know you want to stay with the Condors for at least a few more seasons, and I can get you the contract you deserve to retire with. You're going to

take Ryder in and teach him how to behave as part of this service, and by the end of the season, we'll have the contract you want."

"Why the fuck would I do any of this? I can find my own place to live, even if it's inconvenient," I grumble.

"You're going to do it because the Hydras are already nervous as hell about you. I got a call from the GM and the PR team yesterday about the video. I assured them we could keep this under control and it wouldn't happen again, which means I have to keep an eye on you. I called them back when I found out you were evicted and told them you will stay with Knox, who will be the good influence you so desperately need."

"I don't need a fucking babysitter," I insist, throwing up my hands. Mark waves off my outburst like it doesn't matter. He's made up his mind. Fuck my life ten ways to Sunday.

"But you do need a place to live and have to learn how to control that temper. Being the highest-paid goalie in the league puts a giant target on your back with this new team. I told you if you put one foot out of line, they'll trade you faster than you take a coffee shit before a game, and they'd have a ton of salary capacity to work with to get several great goalies to replace you. Don't fucking tempt them, Ryder. I'll smooth things over with the team to make sure that doesn't happen, because you know you'd go somewhere like Bumfuck Nowhere, Canada, and no one wants that." He visibly shudders, and I grab my chair, thinking about ending up in the Great White North.

"Respectfully, I don't see the purpose of this. We have a history that doesn't bode well with living together, and it's not like we'll have all that much time to actually work on anything, anyway," Knox says, and I hate to say I agree with the guy.

"The purpose of this is to teach Ryder to control his emotions. To show him how to

give an interview that's respectful when he's battling anger and frustration from a loss, or keep him from lashing out and saying something damning about someone different when under pressure. The PR team is really worried about Ryder and insists that he rein it in before any more media opportunities," Mark says to Knox. "You do well under pressure. You don't party or get into trouble, and you pick excellent hobbies and ways to give your time back to the community. It's exactly the influence Ryder needs for this inaugural season with the Hydras, even if you don't think there's much time to do it. Living together will ensure that the time you do have will be spent working on this."

"He's always been the golden boy," I say, rolling my eyes.

"Now, who's obsessed?" Knox snaps, and I twist my head, sending a sneer at him, ready to fire off another remark. I catch it, just barely, when I see Mark's disappointed and frustrated face.

"I'll have a team of movers at your place in a few hours, Ryder. They'll box up everything. They'll take your furniture to storage, and your personal items can go with you to Knox's condo tonight. You're going to be respectful of his space and rules, so don't even think of being an asshole as a way of lashing out. I'll let the Hydras trade you if it comes to that. This is my decision, not Knox's. Now, learn to play nice, or else."

And just like that, my life got worse.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am*

Six

Knox

My heart hammers in my chest as I sit on my couch and stare at the wood floors in my condo, waiting for the inevitable knock on my door. I have a roommate. The one man I never expected to run into again, let alone spend any amount of time with, will now be living with me for the rest of the season. I assume Mark meant the hockey season, which is months longer than the football season. So I'm stuck with Ryder for the next seven to nine months, depending on if the Hydras make it to the playoffs.

I should have kept my mouth shut and not allowed Lilah to use that quote. She ran a scathing piece in the Atlanta Free Press today about toxic masculinity in sports that highlighted several recent stories and used my statement about men who put others down to feel bigger just being bullies. Maybe Mark would have less to hold over me if I'd kept my head down, and I would have my space to myself. But hindsight is twenty-twenty, and I'm looking at the past with what-if eyes when the present is showing me the unfortunate consequences of my actions.

The only saving grace in this situation, and I'm grasping at straws here, is the busy practice and game schedules with a ton of travel for both of us. We'll barely be home, and when we are, I'm sure our schedules will rarely overlap. Because while it's clear he still hates me, I've never hated him a day in my life despite everything he put me through, and that's what makes this so much worse. I don't like who he became or how he's treated me, but fuck, I still can't find it in me to erase everything we had before it went sideways.

The knock on the door finally comes, and I drag myself to my feet, feeling heavier than my two-sixty, every step to the entry feeling like I'm going to the gallows. It's morbid, but when I'm approaching the man who made me question everything about myself and was the biggest contributor as to why I hide who I am now, it feels appropriate.

I throw open the door and stare at the familiar face on the threshold. He stares back, all perfect, wavy dark brown hair that falls in his face, emphasizing his chiseled jaw covered in a soft, short beard that's so effortless and chill. His rugged features are even more compelling with the small imperfections that do less to mar his visage but enhance it. The small scar that cuts the tail of one eyebrow and the slightly crooked bridge of his nose from a break that didn't heal right only makes him sexier, more manly, than detracting from his beauty. I hate him for being the physical representation of everything I could possibly want in a man while being the vilest creature on earth.

I sigh and hold the door open wider, remaining silent. Our lessons on staying kind and saying the right thing while in a situation that sucks don't have to begin just yet. Ryder turns and picks up a box from the exterior hallway before following me inside. I lead him to one of the guest rooms—the one furthest from my room—and open that door so he can walk in with his box and set it on the ground next to the bed.

“Do you have more boxes?” I ask.

Ryder turns to me with a sneer. “Of course I do. There are three more in the hallway, and my suitcases are in my car.”

I hold my hands up in a placating gesture. Damn, he's so touchy. “Calm down. It was a simple question, not me looking for a fight. It was an opening for you to ask for help, but now you're on your own. Here's the key.” He snatches the spare key from my fingers. “I'll give you a quick tour, and you can finish moving in.” Without

waiting for him to acknowledge, I turn and expect him to follow.

“Nice manners, Golden Boy,” he mutters.

I roll my eyes, ignoring the comment. “You have an en suite bathroom, but there’s another bathroom to the left and a guest room just past it. My room is down the hall on the right. The kitchen and living room are where you entered. You can have one of the dedicated parking spots for the condo; it’s marked in the garage, and if you’re going to have guests, they’ll have to use the building’s first-come-first-serve guest parking. Just let me know so I can expect another person in my space.”

“Gonna be jealous if I bring a girl home?”

I look over my shoulder with the most confused what the fuck face I can manage. “You’re delusional if you think I have any feelings for you that go beyond animosity. Now quit being a troll, and maybe we can get Mark to end our prison sentence early for time served and good behavior.”

“Ah, a prison joke. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, all the guys you could handle and everyone wanting to butt fu—”

He’s not able to finish his sentence as I slam him against the wall and cut off his air supply with my hand clamped around his throat. His eyes go wide, and his fingers claw at my hand, but I don’t release him. Finally, my two inches of height and thirty pounds on him give me an advantage I can use. As I get closer, my tone is low and dangerous when I speak.

“You think you know so much about me and want to make all the gay jokes because that’s what you did in high school. But we’re grown-ass men, Ryder, and you’re in my house now. I won’t stand for disrespect and you popping off on things you don’t have a single clue about. So shut your fucking mouth before I knock all those pretty

teeth out. No more gay jokes. About anyone. Not. One. Word.” Each word is emphasized by tightening my fist until his face is red and he’s gasping. I straighten my arm, making space, and finally let his throat go, satisfied that the only sound I hear is his desperate inhale as I walk to my bedroom. I clench my hands into fists to keep them from shaking.

Once I’ve closed the door on my rare display of confrontational aggression, I let out a shaky breath and fall face-first onto my bed. No, no, no. This isn’t how I wanted this whole thing to start. Ryder pushes all my buttons. Gets under my skin like he wants to wear it. He antagonizes me like it’s his second nature, and I have to be the bigger person because history proves that he will take every opportunity to push me to react. If this is going to work, and for fuck’s sake, it has to because I’m not about to fail at this , then I have to be the one that rises above his demeaning and insulting taunts and sets the tone.

I groan and roll over, staring at the ceiling fan spinning in dizzying circles. This can’t be a futile cause. My contract with the Condors is on the line. Starting the season with a loss on my back isn’t how I wanted to enter negotiations. I’ve played with the team for five years, but I’m getting close to retirement age. I don’t have all that many seasons left before an injury decides when my body is done for me, so I want to play this smart and plan for at least a few more where I’m comfortable. Staying in Atlanta is the ideal situation. Picking up and moving to another team for a season or two would fucking suck. Mark knows he has me by the balls with this .

I should start with a peace offering and help Ryder move the rest of his boxes. That could bridge the gap between all the shit that’s in our past and where we need to be. I pull myself up and leave my room, intent on swallowing any retorts to Ryder’s likely taunts to teach him what it means to be the bigger person. I find him struggling to get two boxes inside the door. I prop it open and take one of the boxes, quickly checking the hall for others. It’s clear, so I let the door swing closed behind me and follow Ryder to his room.

It's so weird to think of those words. His room . In my house. It knocks a memory loose, and that kind of shocks me to realize how many we have together that still fill me with nostalgia for when things were easy and simpler between us.

“Remember when we wanted to be roommates back when we were ten and thought we could make it as pro athletes together?” I say, cautiously extending the proverbial olive branch with a pleasant memory.

“We were stupid kids. We had grand plans but didn't think about logistics like being drafted to teams in different cities,” he says without looking at me, dropping the box on the bed and shaking out his hands before twisting his wrists. His forearms flex, causing the corded muscles to dance under the tan skin, keeping my eyes glued to the tantalizing sight.

Fuck me, forearm porn is a real thing, and Ryder Kingston could have an Only Fans devoted to his forearms. I'd be an anonymous subscriber the second I knew about it. I drop my eyes and chase the thought away with the golden-tinged nostalgia that I was using to try to reach the surly asshole who is now turning in my direction and sizing me up.

“We were just kids . We thought we'd be first-round picks for our dream teams in Detroit, of course. That's what we get for being Michigan boys, through and through.” I laugh, thinking about it now. I run a hand over the back of my neck and turn to leave. He follows me into the living room.

“Yeah, well, that didn't happen. I went to Boston, not Detroit, and I wasn't a fucking first-round pick,” he says with a self-deprecating chuckle.

At least he doesn't sound angry about that fact. By the time the draft came, we both had a better understanding of how things worked in professional sports.

“Funny that we both ended up in the same city and now we’re living together, anyway. Somehow, we’re seeing our childhood dreams coming to fruition despite the convoluted road through hell it took to get to this fucked up place,” I mumble, opening the front door and letting him lead us to the elevator that will take us down to the garage for the rest of his stuff.

“I didn't fucking choose this,” he says, finally meeting my eyes. “It doesn't matter what Mark says or how you spin it. This isn't some childhood dream. This is my worst fucking nightmare.” He stabs the button for the garage, and the doors slide closed, sealing us in the small box for the endless ride so his words can play on repeat in my head.

I take a deep, calming breath before I level him with a serious look. “Right there. These things are what we call keep-inside-your-head comments. It goes back to the golden rule—if you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all.”

“Don't fucking patronize me with your golden rule bullshit,” Ryder growls, fingers gripping the railing, probably to keep from throwing hands at me.

I stand tall, crossing my arms over my chest so he knows I'm not about to throw a punch of my own his way. “Consider this your first lesson in comportment and how to deal with an interview when you're not feeling it. You're in a shitty mood, you don't like what I'm saying. You can either stay silent, or you can say something neutral and focus on your game. Or in this case, our shared history as kids when we didn't hate each other.” I tap my head. “Start thinking before you speak, or you'll end up traded and I'll have my condo to myself again and not have to worry about you either way.”

The elevator stops and the doors slide open in the garage. He slaps his hands against the wall, pushing off the shiny metal with a growl as he stomps away, leaving me to follow in his haughty wake. The dude seriously can't let his anger go. He just wants

to hold on to it, feeling like the victim when it was his stupid mouth that landed him here in the first place.

I know it needed to be said because he was crossing a line, but I shouldn't have put my hands on him earlier. I can still feel his throat flexing under my palm, his fingers clawing at mine trying to pry me off his neck. Yeah, I fucking got my point across, but did I set myself back by getting physical, or did I speak his language more accurately than any words can?

I follow him to a black Cadillac Escalade and wait as he opens the back.

"I don't need your help," he snarls when I come up beside him.

"You have four suitcases and two hands. We can make it in one trip if I help you now," I insist, keeping my voice low and even so he doesn't blow a gasket over something so simple.

"I don't need you telling me what to do," he spits as he rips a suitcase out of the back of the SUV. "I'm perfectly capable of managing interviews without you molding me in your perfect image." The sarcasm is thick and the mockery blatant as he eyes me with hostility.

I roll my eyes. "I'm not perfect and I didn't ask for this, either."

"You seem more than happy to give me, what the fuck did you call them? Comportment lessons ? Yeah, whatever the fuck that means." He grips the handle of the last suitcase and tugs it out of the car while I settle the others and pull up the handles.

"I'm making the best of a bad situation. It's the only thing you can do."

“You don’t have to eat the shit sandwich when it’s handed to you, Golden Boy,” Ryder mutters, slamming the hatch shut.

I squeeze my fists and grind my molars hard enough that I’m sure I crack the enamel. This fucking man. I swear to all the gods he will be the death of me and my dentist is going to rake in the cash after the grinding I’m sure to do with him around. Golden Boy? That’s the name he’s settled on thinking it’s going to get under my skin now? But I put up with much worse from him and others for years. I can do seven months. I take a steadying breath, blowing it out with a renewed focus.

“Conduct and demeanor. How you carry yourself. Your behavior,” I call to his retreating back as I gather the other suitcases and begin to follow.

He stabs the elevator button before whirling on me. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Comportment,” I say with measured calm. “It’s about your dignity and the respect you show in how you carry yourself in any given situation. That’s what we have to work on because you speak or act first and think later. Which is how you ended up here getting lessons on comportment, sensitivity training, and interview skills from me.” The silver doors open, and I walk past him inside the elevator, leaving him gaping at me. “You coming, Reckless?”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am*

Seven

Ryder

He called me Reckless.

I'm still hung up on the tragic nickname Knox decided on days later. He's been away for an out-of-town game, and I've had the condo to myself, but training camp has been brutal, so it's not like I'm throwing a rager every night to spite him. Nope, I just want to order a pizza from the Detroit-style pizza joint I found and soak in an Epsom salt bath so my hips and quads can get some relief from the dry land training session today. I had a cold plunge and spent time on the bike to work out the lactic acid, but that couldn't keep up with Scotty, our trainer's regime, and I'm feeling it.

Knox is on the couch, one arm draped across his stomach, with some sports highlights show on the TV even though his eyes are closed. I freeze, my hand hovering over the side table with the keys dangling from my fingers. If I drop them into the bowl, it'll make a shit ton of noise and probably wake him up if he's sleeping, and that would make me a total ass. I roll my eyes for even caring, but I set the keys down gently, anyway. Look who isn't reckless all the time, jackass.

"Hey," Knox says, eyes opening and stretching his arms out from his spot on the absurdly long couch. No wonder he got one so big, he needed an extra-large couch to be able to lie down on the thing comfortably. It's L-shaped, so there's a whole other section open, too, so even I could fit. He gingerly sits up, adjusting an ice pack I hadn't noticed on his neck, and leans his forearms on his giant quads. He squints and brings a hand up to shade his eyes like the low light in the room is too bright.

“You injured or just recovering?” I ask, keeping any sort of concern out of my tone as I grab a water bottle from the refrigerator and feign disinterest. I don't care, but it bothers me to see anyone in pain, and he's not moving right as he stands, favoring his left side.

“It's nothing. I took a hard hit at the game yesterday. The med staff were worried about a concussion but cleared me. Just a strained trap and a nasty headache. I'll be fine. How's training camp?” He follows my lead and gets a bottle of water before sitting on one of the stools along the island while I lean against the counter in the kitchen.

He's light-sensitive like he has a concussion. Why did they clear him if he still has a headache a day later? Did he downplay his injury so they wouldn't put him on an injured reserve list and pull him out of the next game?

What the fuck am I doing? It's not my place to care about Knox or if he plays. He asked me a question, I just have to answer that.

“It's a whole lot of work, and Coach seems to think running us ragged now will make us like each other better.” I roll my eyes. This is a brand-new team with some of the best talent in the league brought together. Having the most talented players—and some of the biggest egos—makes for a few difficulties in connecting and playing together. “If my defensemen would stop fighting each other long enough to defend me, I might have a bit more confidence in our ability to stop another team effectively. I guess we'll see at our first game.”

“Good luck with the game, but I'm sure you'll do great. You've always been an amazing player, and the team has to be good, going by the early speculation I've seen.”

I grind my teeth as my fingers curl around the edge of the counter, tightening until the

stone bites into my skin. I swallow the shitty comment about him being obsessed with me that instantly bubbles in my throat and stay silent instead of throwing the barb. His unwavering faith and kind words despite me being a dick any chance I get kills me. I want him to fight back, say something as nasty as I would so I don't feel like human garbage when he continues to rise above.

How can he be nice despite our history? He should hate me more than anyone. He has every right to. I've been horrible to him, yet he's undeterred by my old habits that just won't die. No matter what I say that is intended to make his life a living hell, again , he somehow manages to turn the other fucking cheek. I could try to bait him, keep pushing him until he snaps, but I know Knox, and I'm betting he's set himself some impossible goal of being the bigger person, and I'll never measure up. Not only that, I've been thrust on him as some sort of charity case he has to work on and house because I fucked things up. He's the shining example of what a person should be. The best athlete for an interview. The better man in every situation.

Ugh, it makes me want to throw up. Somehow, I have to prove to the Hydras organization, Mark, and Knox, that I'm not always a loser that runs my mouth. I can be nice . The fact that we've been civil for this brief conversation proves it. I haven't said anything mean, and I've had nice thoughts, even if they stayed inside my head, which he said I needed to learn to do, anyway, so there's that. I'm not going to be the one that fucks it up for once. Hell, I can even offer a nice gesture.

Take that, Golden Boy.

"I'm ordering some Detroit-style square pizzas from Via 313. I can't decide between the extra pepperoni and the meat supreme, so I'm getting both. There will be more than I can eat if you want some." See, easy-peasy. This Mr. Nice Guy shit is a piece of cake.

Knox looks up, surprise overtaking his features for a moment before smoothing out.

“Yeah, thanks, that would be great. I won’t have to think too hard about dinner with this fucking headache.”

“I can show you some eye drills and nerve glides for neck pain and headaches, too, if you want to try them out while we wait for the pizza. I do so much vision training work I’ve figured out what helps with the strain.”

That’s two nice things. Just wait, I’ll have a W by the end of the night the way this is going. Knox doesn’t have the fucking monopoly on nice. Regular guys can do it, too.

Knox’s shoulders sag with relief as he rubs his temples. “Sure, I’ll try anything that’s not a pill at this point. I just want my head to stop pounding. It’s like it wants to split me open.”

I bite my tongue at the pounding and splitting joke that’s just right there . It’s like he’s setting me up for it to test me. Instead, I pull my phone out of my pocket and order the pizzas. This holding back the jokes and thinking before I speak thing is fucking hard, but look at me acing it tonight. We go back into the living room and sit on the couch, where I walk him through the nerve glides and eye drills like I promised while we wait. Thirty minutes of eye drills is more than enough to make anyone sick if they’re not used to the strain on their optic nerve, so I stop him even though the pizza is going to take longer.

“Feeling any better?” I settle back on the couch. It’s pretty comfortable. No wonder Knox chose to nap out here earlier rather than in his room.

Knox rolls his neck a few times and looks around the room. “Actually, yeah. It’s a dull throbbing now, and the light doesn’t feel like glass shards in my eyes.”

I cringe. Been there, and yeah, that fucking sucks. “You sure you don’t have a concussion?”

He shakes his head. “Nope. Guess my skull is harder than I thought.” He inclines his head toward the TV. “Want to play a round of Mario Kart?”

I laugh. “You still have that game? It's like a classic now.”

“Classic for a reason. It's on like version eight now, and there are international competitions for it,” he retorts, standing up and getting the controllers. He tosses one to me, and I easily snag it out of the air.

“Okay, grandpa, nice story. Were the dinosaurs cool, too?”

“Damn, bro, you're like two months younger than me and played this game, too,” he says with a laugh. “We camped out at Best Buy for a video game launch, so you can't be hating on Mario Kart.”

“We did,” I say with a laugh. “But it was one of the Call of Duty games, so there's more street cred there.” That was a fun weekend. We were thirteen, and it feels like one of our last good memories together. One of Knox's older brothers took us into Detroit, and we stayed up all night with a bunch of other gamers outside the store .

“Get ready to lose on Rainbow Road, street cred or not,” he says, queuing up the infamous racetrack.

“You would pick Rainbow Road,” I say before I can stop myself. Fuck, Ryder, be a nice guy. Quick, I have to find a way to retract. “You know all the stupid shortcuts on this track,” I add.

“Just for that, you get to be Princess Peach,” he says, selecting Wario.

“Fuck your Peach, I'm picking Yoshi, he's better.” Honestly, Yoshi is a balanced choice that will help me since it's been so long since I've played. Wait, did I just

make an ass-play joke without realizing it? I'm worse than I thought. Knox thankfully either doesn't notice or lets it go.

The game starts, and while it's just a game, there's no such thing as casual for me. I play to win, and my competitive nature is in high gear from the countdown. But I'm rusty. It's been years since I've played this dumb game, and I'm used to my Xbox. The stupid Nintendo controller has the buttons in weird spots that are messing me up. Knox gets a lead right off the bat, but I get some bombs that wreck him, which allows me to get ahead. I chirp him mercilessly every time I fire off a shot that kicks his ass, making sure he knows I can keep up and keep him humble.

We go back and forth, but I manage to get the better power-ups and keep him from getting too much of an advantage. He swears whenever I send him off the track or spin him out. I'm enjoying my last lap to victory when Knox takes a fucking hidden shortcut I forgot about that puts him out ahead of me, right in front of the finish line, and he yeets me off the fucking track into rainbow space and wins the damn race.

"Take that, cocksucker! Even after you blew me up and threw bananas at me, I still won," he gloats, whooping and doing some ridiculous celly dance that actually looks smooth because, of course, it does. There's not much Knox does that doesn't look effortless and perfect. "That's what you get for hitting me with that blue shell on the apex. How's that dick taste now, loser?" He throws his controller at me and laughs.

I toss my controller on the floor and dig my fingers into my hair at his taunts. It's too much to be on the other side of the gay digs that take me right back to high school and put me into the irrational frame of mind that ruined our friendship to begin with. Heat courses through my blood, anger vibrating along every nerve until I feel raw, exposed, and so full of hate that the insults build too fast to even think about what I say. Everything just comes out like word vomit before I can stop the tidal wave of loathing. I turn to Knox and lash out with all the frustration I've been keeping at bay while trying to prove I can be nice.

“That’s such a butt pirate move taking that gay-ass shortcut. You couldn't even make it a fair race, you had to take the back door at the last minute, like the fucking perv you are. Now you’re a sore winner and want me to suck your dick, too, queer boy? ”

Knox stops celebrating and goes eerily still, his shoulders swelling with anger as he levels me with a seething glare and I know I fucked up. He points a finger at my face, and it takes everything in me not to move away from the powerful hand that is shaking in indignation.

“See, that shit right there is what we need to fix. It doesn't matter how angry or frustrated you are, you can’t make comments like that.” He drops his hand and turns toward me, his coaching voice fully engaged, and I know I’m in for one of his stupid sensitivity lessons. “You need to learn how to master your emotions and get over this immature reaction of lashing out with what you think is the most hurtful thing you can say. Because honestly, it’s not as bad as you think. Queer people have taken that word back and celebrate it now.”

I scoff at his reasoning, looking for anything to throw at him to help shield me from the inadequacy that settles on me without knowing why. I hate it. “The only reason you'd know what queer people celebrate is because you’re...oh, shit.” I stop talking, knowing I’ve said too much once again.

He swallows, meeting my eyes. There’s so much conviction and courage in those espresso depths, replacing the anger that’s quickly fading. It makes me fucking uncomfortable. I’m squirming in my skin with the turn this situation took. How were we just playing a damn video game that ended with me running my mouth again and getting grilled by Knox with another one of his annoying lessons?

“So, yeah, I’m queer.” His voice breaks a little on the word, like it’s the first time he’s used it. My heart fucking cracks, the pieces dropping into my stomach as everything I’ve ever known about him experiences a seismic shift great enough to

rock me to my core.

“You’re what?” I ask, my voice grating the air. I’m stunned, grappling with the million thoughts blasting through my brain.

He shakes his head and somehow grows more determined, his face set and eyes hard as he stares me down. “You know what, fuck that. I’m fucking gay, Ryder, but I never did anything to make you treat me the way you did back in high school, or even now. So it’s time you learn some self-regulation and respect, and stop using those fucking slurs.”

“Wait...you’re gay? Since when?” I’m numb, the news has shocked the absolute shit out of me. After all my teasing, my taunts, and the bullying we both experienced, I never actually believed he was gay. He never admitted it. It was just something stupid that kids decided to latch onto because we were such close friends and people suck. I was terrified of people believing I was gay, so I made his life hell, not even thinking he could be gay.

His head drops in defeat like I’m a child who can’t learn his lesson, no matter how many times the teacher tells him. Maybe that’s just it. I’m unteachable. “Yes, I’m gay. I’ve known since I was like eight.”

“But you’re not out,” I say, feeling fucking stupid for stating the obvious, but I need this spelled out in Crayon, apparently .

“I’m not required to make a public statement to be gay, you idiot.” He leans over, rubbing his face as his knee bobs in agitation, like this conversation is making him antsy and he’s ready to be done with it. He drops his elbows to his thighs and lets his head hang so he’s talking to the floor between his feet. His words are low, rumbling when he says, “Who I want to fuck is no one’s business but the person I want to fuck, anyway.”

“But why wouldn’t you say anything?”

He groans and leans back, letting his head fall onto the couch and breathing deeply, scrubbing his hands over his hair before he’s able to look at me again. The memories and pain that are etched across his features when he does tell me what I fear before his words do.

“You made it pretty fucking clear that coming out as an athlete wasn’t an option when you and your buddies bullied me all through high school and treated me like garbage for even thinking I was gay. I knew there was no way I could come out at the professional level and expect to be treated any differently than I was back then.”

I was such a shit, and I ruined this guy’s life even more than I realized. All because I couldn’t handle the crap the same people I sided with put me through, and would have run me out of the hockey program that was my only way out of my hellhole of a life. So I had to drag him through it and make it even worse, just to make it easier for myself. I was a fucking coward. But that’s why I did it. Knox has always been the stronger, more emotionally mature of the two of us. I couldn’t handle the teasing back then, but I knew...Well, I thought he’d be able to let it roll right off his back, whereas I’d crack under the pressure. I’ve always cared about what people thought about me, but Knox just lived his life. His unapologetic confidence is one thing that drew me to him in the first place, even as kids.

That, and Knox had a support system to help him deal with it. He has all these siblings he actually liked, and the most caring parents alive. Everyone was always up in each other’s business, and they took care of each other. His mom cooked every night, and everyone always had dinner together, even his father. I had a drunk for a dad who treated me like a punching bag when he remembered I existed, and a mom who escaped Dad’s wrath by staying out of the house as much as possible with the many odd jobs she managed to find, so she was never around to stop him. It’s not like I could have told either of them about what was going on at school. Dad would have

called me a fairy boy, one of his favorite insults because of how much time I spent with Knox, and told me I deserved it. Just another thing for him to be disappointed in me about. I was so relieved when he died a few years ago, despite not seeing him since leaving home. Knowing he no longer occupied the same plane of existence made me feel a little better.

Knox shifts, bringing me back to the present, but I'm still stuck, not able to wrap my head around this. "You've had girlfriends. You were with Harlowe Sorenson, that social media foodie chef with the thirst traps, a few years ago."

"Harlowe is one of my best friends. We were together, but I never slept with her. She was the first person I came out to. Not many people know." He eyes me meaningfully, and I know he's asking me to keep my mouth shut.

I find it pretty ironic that he would trust me with this information, given the whole reason I'm here in the first place is that I ran my mouth about him being gay when I didn't even think he was. Fuck, this just got so much more complicated. If I'd known I was potentially outing him, maybe I wouldn't have been so cavalier with what I was saying. I don't know, but this feels so much bigger now. This whole thing has been too serious for too long, and I need time to process this new information without facing Knox. I have to turn it around for now.

"Is this why you're so obsessed with me?" I ask, cracking a smile to soften the threadbare joke.

"Oh, fuck off," he says, throwing a pillow at my head. "You're not my type."

I dodge it easily, but stop smiling. "What the fuck, *Contraire*? I'm everyone's type."

I'm shocked he would deny me this ego boost. It would be nice to know a gay dude finds me attractive, yet he wants to bring me down instead. How mean. I guess even

golden boys can play dirty.

My phone buzzes with a notification that our pizza has arrived, and thankfully, my ego is spared any further beatings.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am*

Eight

Knox

Ryder took me coming out better than I expected. True, it was on the heels of one of his typical homophobic tirades and an epic blowup of his short temper that he can't quite keep under control, but the actual coming out part wasn't too bad.

I could tell he was trying hard not to fuck things up before we played video games, too. The offer to order pizza for dinner and showing me those eye drills was a huge olive branch and a step in the right direction for him, even if they are the bare minimum of human decency. Baby steps from a chronic asshole are all I can hope for. It was good to see him making an effort when he could have been reticent to any sort of change and set on acting like a pernicious jackass for as long as possible.

The eye stuff he showed me made a huge difference, too. He reminded me to repeat the exercises before bed, and my headache finally went away. I woke up without the stiff neck and pounding in my skull I'd had for the last forty-eight hours. It felt amazing to finally get a good night's rest. He didn't have to give two shits about me when I was feeling horrible, and I believe in positive reinforcement.

"Good, you're back from practice," I say when I walk into the condo after my own practice and find him lounging on the couch with a bowl of cereal. I don't usually eat on the couch, but instead of calling him out for that, I'll let it slide for now. "We're going to work on controlling emotions in public today. That mouth of yours is going to get a workout in restraint."

He closes his eyes tightly and shakes his head. "It's really hard not to take the bait and crack a gay joke when you leave the opening right there," he says, sounding pained. "That mouth of yours is going to get a workout ? Come on, Golden Boy, do better."

"No, you do better, Reckless. The world is full of opportunities for you to make jokes in poor taste. The marker of comportment is not making the joke even when it's set up perfectly. Rise above it," I say with faux cheer, pointing my index fingers up.

He sneers at me. "You're seriously the worst. Why do you insist on removing all the fun from everything? Humor is a great way to enjoy life. You should try it sometime."

"Get up, we're going to volunteer with a foundation that does great work. We'll leave in five minutes, so master your emotions and that mouth," I say, walking past him toward the bedrooms so I can put my bag down and change quickly.

"What if I have plans and don't want to go with you?" he calls to my back.

"Too bad. Mark said your time is mine when it comes to making over your image and getting your emotions interview-ready. You're going with me. If you're good, we can stop and get ice cream on the way home," I tack on with forced enthusiasm, like he's a child just to poke him a bit.

"Hey, those aren't the fighting words you think they are. I like ice cream, Golden Boy!" he shouts. "Now you owe me ice cream."

I close my bedroom door on that demand and change. When I return to the living room, Ryder is standing by the door, running his hands through his longish, silky hair that always looks a little wild, cereal bowl gone. I was joking, but it looks like ice cream is a good enough motivator and can be his positive reinforcement for today.

“Let’s go,” I say, trying not to look too closely at, or let him get to me with his pretty hazel-green eyes, that floppy hair, and his stupid tattoos that peek out from the sleeves of his T-shirt. He has half sleeves on both arms that stop just above his elbows with swirling clouds of black ink, but I’m not sure what the tattoos are .

“You gonna tell me what we’re doing now?” he asks as we head for the elevator, sliding on a backward baseball cap to contain his messy hair. It doesn't help make him less eye-fuckable, and that’s a problem. I don't want to look at Ryder like that. I need to keep my lust in check where he’s concerned.

“We’re going to volunteer at an organization I work with a lot called the Elysium Garden Project. They plant gardens in urban spaces and give locals jobs, teach business skills through produce stands, and feed the community. We’ll be working with kids today. Elysium focuses a lot on youth in the communities they plant gardens in, knowing the skills they build can help break the cycle of poverty and get these kids out of some bad situations. A lot of these kids have it rough,” I explain as the elevator takes us to the garage.

Ryder is quiet as we walk to my SUV. He grew up like a lot of the kids he’ll meet today. Absent parents working hard to keep a roof over their heads, or treated badly by them when around. He slides into the front seat as I start the car and looks over.

“What exactly are you trying to teach me with this excursion? I do plenty of volunteer work.” He looks straight ahead as I drive us to the garden.

“It’s not about the volunteer work, that’s just a bonus. These kids will push your buttons. They’re not always nice and don't always want to be there, kind of like you.” I give him a wry smile that he doesn’t return. “So instead of snapping at anyone, you’ll have to work to control your emotions and think before you react.” I leave him alone for the remainder of the drive to let that sink in.

We arrive at the garden site, and I see Paige Olsen, the founder of the Elysium Garden Project, waiting at the gate, greeting the kids and adults working today.

“Knox, it’s so good to see you,” she says, wrapping me in a hug when Ryder and I walk up to her. “I didn’t expect to see you much during the season, what a treat to get you and Ryder at one of our newest gardens. The kids are going to love it.”

“I didn’t realize you knew Mrs. Olsen,” Ryder says to me, looking between us.

“Oh, please, call me Paige,” she says to Ryder. “Mrs. Olsen is reserved just for my husband to call me, otherwise, it feels too dowdy. I’m not even thirty.” She laughs and waves us into the garden.

“I’ve been working with the foundation from its inception, so I’m close with Paige and Hayes. They didn’t become hockey franchise owners until recently, so we go way back,” I explain to Ryder, who is looking confused about my connection to the wife of one of the billionaire brothers who owns the Hydras hockey team.

“He’s also besties with Harlowe, my sister-in-law, and he’s friendly with Ainsley, who is dating Payton, so that’s a triple connection to team ownership. Careful, Ryder, Knox is well-connected to the big guys,” Paige adds with a smile. “We just love Knox. ”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Ryder says, looking at me nervously. I laugh at his discomfort. It’s about time he realizes I also have some power here, not that I’d ever use it to fuck with his career. He can do that well enough on his own.

“What can we do for you today, Paige?” I ask.

“This is a new neighborhood for us, so the kids are still wary. It’s been a struggle to get their cooperation. If you could help Abel teach them about running the produce

stands, counting money, making change, weighing vegetables, and also get some produce boxes made, that would be so helpful,” she says. “They always seem to love working with you, Knox.”

“It’s my pleasure, and I think they like Elysium more than anything. I’m just here to help.” Paige waves as she heads to a tool shed, and we split off.

I lead Ryder to the produce stand, which is actually a freestanding storefront. When we walk in, Abel, a familiar face with the garden project, greets us and waves us over to a few tables covered in various produce boxes, scales, bags, and cash registers, all ready for us.

“Good to see you, Knox. Looks like you brought a friend this time?” the veteran gardener who moves around the foundation’s sites asks. A handful of curious faces, ranging from early teens to probably twenty, stare at us with varying shades of interest, some trying to hide it more than others.

“Right back at you, Abel. This is Ryder Kingston, the goalie for the Hydras hockey team here in town. He’s going to help us out today,” I say, making the introduction. Ryder waves .

“You guys are freakishly tall,” one boy in a worn black hoodie with floppy dark brown curls says. He has to be about fifteen, but he’s small for his age. He might be acutely aware of it to make that kind of statement.

“Or you’re just freakishly small,” Ryder says immediately. I elbow him in the ribs discreetly and look over, catching his eye in warning. He bites his lip, and holy hell, I know he’s doing it in embarrassment, but it looks a little too mischievous and sexy for his own good. I turn my attention back to the kid in the hoodie.

“What’s your name?” I ask him.

“Samuel,” he says, flicking his curls out of his eyes with a head shake.

“Well, Samuel, it sounds like you and Ryder here have something in common to work on today. While that’s an accurate observation, sometimes there are these things called intrusive thoughts that don’t always have to be spoken out loud or can be phrased differently. I wouldn’t mind if you asked me how tall I am instead,” I say gently with a smile.

The kid’s cheeks turn red, but he doesn’t shut down at the correction, which is good. He’s teachable. Ryder, I’m not sure.

“Okay, how tall are you?” the kid asks.

“I’m six feet six inches tall. Ryder here is six feet four inches tall, but there are guys on both our teams who are under six feet and are absolute beasts. What about you, my man, how tall are you?” I ask.

“I’m five-four,” he says quietly. “But I’ll probably be six feet, easy. My mom says my dad was big, and I’ll have a growth spurt.” He looks up with fire in his eyes. I was right about this subject being a bit sore for him.

“Sure you will,” another boy says, and laughs. “You ain’t hitting six feet. Your dad was probably some short bald dude. You’ll be lucky if you grow any more at all. You’ll be little your whole life.”

“You don’t know that,” Ryder says, moving next to Samuel and staring down at the other kid, who is closer to six feet. “Why does height matter so much? Do either of you want to be a basketball star or a defensive lineman? Because that’s probably the only place where your height comes into play.” He puts his hand on Samuel’s shoulder and looks over at the mouthy kid again. “But if Samuel here wants to play, his height won’t stop him. Greatness comes with passion and commitment, not a

measuring stick. Besides, if any of you want to work in sports and not play, there are so many opportunities available. You could be a sports agent, a physical therapist or team doctor, a reporter, a trainer, a sports statistician, do public relations or social media for a team, be an equipment manager, or work at an arena or stadium, just to name a few.”

Samuel looks up at Ryder with appreciation before he stuffs his hands in his hoodie pocket and plays off the whole interaction like it didn’t mean anything. Ryder playfully knocks his shoulder with his fist and holds it out for Samuel to bump. Samuel pulls a hand out of his pocket and bumps Ryder’s fist.

Well, look at that. Ryder stepped up and stopped a bit of bullying and taught his own valuable lesson. He can learn after all. I swallow the proud lump in my throat and clap my hands together.

“Okay, who wants to learn how to make these dang scales work right? Because I know the first few times I tried them, they messed me up good,” I say to the group to get us back on track.

We spend the next few hours arranging the produce stand, hanging out with the kids, and teaching them how to work the cash registers and count back change in different amounts since that seems to be tricky in the age of cashless purchases. I notice Ryder spends a lot of time with Samuel, getting him to open up, and they chat throughout their time setting up the produce. I’m glad to see him taking an interest and investing in the kids. They need it. So does he.

We also make produce boxes to deliver to families and seniors identified in the immediate area who want fresh produce. Ryder is remarkably on his best behavior, and aside from some good-natured teasing comments back and forth with the kids, he doesn’t rise to any of their bait. He also leaves me alone and doesn’t try to get under my skin. On the ride home, he finally talks to me again.

“That Samuel kid has it rough. He opened up a bit when we were stocking the shelves. No dad in the picture, and his mom works a couple of jobs. He’s at the garden to try to make some extra money to help her out and get food for a little brother who stays with a neighbor.”

“A lot of the kids who come to the community gardens have stories just like his, or worse. We just give them a safe place to learn some new skills and make sure they get paid for any work they do and take home food for their families,” I explain. “There’s even a weekly class at the garden sites that teaches canning so the veggies last longer. Okra and cucumbers seem to fly off the shelves when they’re pickled around here.”

“Samuel also mentioned he gets picked on a lot because he’s small and wears the same hoodie every day,” Ryder says, looking out his window and gripping the door handle as his knee bounces.

“How’d that make you feel?” I ask, tone neutral.

“Oh, is this a therapy session now in addition to a lesson about controlling my emotions?” Ryder snaps, pulling his hat off and dragging a hand through his hair.

“I was just asking because it seems like you need to talk.”

“It pissed me off,” he grumbles. “And that made me feel like a hypocrite,” he admits.

Holy fuck, that’s huge for him to say. I remain silent, not wanting him to stop if he’s in a sharing mood. But he stays quiet. I pull into the parking lot of a small shopping area and find a spot.

“What are you doing?” Ryder asks, looking around at the random assortment of shops and storefronts.

“We’re getting ice cream. You earned it,” I say casually. Positive reinforcement at its best. I get out of the car and make my way to What’s The Scoop, a little family-owned ice cream shop I found a few years ago that makes its own ice cream. Ryder falls into step beside me.

“I thought you were joking. We’re actually going to get fucking ice cream?” he asks.

I hold the black lacquered door open for him to enter the old-fashioned style ice cream parlor. It has a black-and-white checkered floor, a rich walnut beadboard display case that takes up a good portion of one side of the shop, and lots of small tables and chairs for customers. The whole place smells like waffle cones and sugar, making my mouth water.

I follow Ryder as he approaches the display case and checks out all the flavor options. It’s pretty overwhelming. “Everything is homemade and amazing. It’s the creamiest I’ve had.”

He turns and raises an eyebrow at me. “Ignoring the obvious creamy joke, just so you know.”

“It doesn't count if you tell me you’re ignoring the joke that could have been made, you idiot,” I say, rolling my eyes. He laughs, and it sounds good to hear his genuine laugh, without any animosity coming from it like shrapnel.

We each sample a few flavors before deciding. Ryder orders the chocolate chip cookie dough in a waffle cone. I get the butter pecan in a waffle bowl, because why not? I’m not about to eat ice cream while driving, so I find a table in the back that looks barely big enough for both of us, and sit, ready to enjoy an indulgent treat after extolling the virtues of fruit and vegetables for hours.

“What if people think we’re on a date?” Ryder asks as he looks at the table and two

chairs. “This feels an awful lot like a date, Golden Boy.”

“Oh, don't flatter yourself, asshole. I wouldn't date you even if you wanted me to,” I say around a spoonful of my ice cream as I raise an eyebrow at his stupid remark.

“Are you serious?” he asks, sitting heavily in the chair across from me. “You wouldn't date me? Why not?” He sounds kind of hurt and put out by the notion. “I'm objectively attractive, I'm in shape, I have a good job, I can fuck like a winner. I mean, I always leave women satisfied, so the same is likely to be said if I ever decided to go the other direction, and I have a wonderful personality with the best sense of humor.”

I point my spoon at him. “You think you're such a catch, but what you really are is an egotistical jerk who thinks too highly of himself and too little of everyone else. No thanks. Not my type.”

“You say that, yet you were obsessed with me, admit it, Golden Boy,” he presses, leaning over the small table, giving me an evil grin.

I lean toward him until our faces are so close that our noses touch. He stays still, but his pupils dilate and his smile drops, obviously uncomfortable. Good. Maybe he'll realize I'll call his stupid bluff if he pushes too hard, and he won't like the prize for his stupid game .

“You think being friends meant I was obsessed? Get over yourself, Reckless. You were like a brother to me and I'm not into that, even one I've cut off because he became the most intolerable dick. Now, you're just a lesson to teach.” I sit back calmly and take another bite of my ice cream to remove the smell of him from my senses. He smells like cologne, all cedar and sandalwood, mixed with his sweat and sunshine from working in the garden. I shouldn't like it so goddamn much.

He sits back in his chair and contemplates his ice cream like it'll give him all the answers. He finally takes a bite and swallows before he looks at me again, and there's calculation in his eyes.

"I bet I know your type."

I sigh. "You don't have to bet anything. My type is someone who listens. Who considers my feelings. Who wants to be with me more than anything. It's not that hard, and it's not about a physical look like you think it is. It goes so much deeper than that for me." I go back to my ice cream, a little embarrassed that I just told that to Ryder of all people. The last thing he needs is to know those truths about me. But knowing him, he's going to think I'm joking or telling him those things to throw him off.

"I'm onto you, Contraire. I see your game. You think if you keep denying that you're into me, I'll go easier on you. Not a chance, Golden Boy." He takes a decisive bite out of his waffle cone and chews aggressively to make his ridiculous point.

I shake my head and know there's no convincing him otherwise. He can believe whatever he wants. I'll keep ignoring him when he tries to push my buttons or get under my skin, and he'll see it's all a futile exercise he's wasting his time on.

Nine

Knox

Ryder was great with the kids at the Elysium Garden yesterday, connecting with Samuel, but also getting through to some of the other harder-to-reach boys who picked on him. I think Ryder's unique perspective, having been on both sides of the aisle with bullying, allowed him to reach both audiences, and they appreciated him meeting them where they were, using his humor constructively and even some teasing that didn't delve too far into making fun of them. I want him to stick to that kind of thing, where he considers the impact of his words and actions, so I'm making my mama's lasagna as a thank you.

The rich aromas of garlic, Italian sausage, and homemade marinara waft around me. I have a kitchen towel slung over my shoulder as I cook and earbuds in my ears, listening to a hot-as-fuck gay hockey romance audiobook Harlowe told me about when she found out Ryder was staying with me. She's a fucking instigator and said this could be the perfect forced proximity situation Ryder needs to realize his homophobia is just years of pent-up sexual frustration that needs to be taken out with me.

She's crazy. Ryder is straighter than a ruler and just as inflexible. Her fantasies have no business in my life, but I treat her book recommendations like gospel. The girl knows her smut, and we've been sharing books for years since I told her I used to read my mama's romance novels.

I'm practically sweating from the spice in the book as I layer lasagna noodles with a

ricotta mix next to a pot of meat and marinara sauce that smells incredible. There's even a tray of garlic bread prepped and ready to go into the oven, but first, these men have to have their fuck it moment, throw caution to the wind, and give in to their forbidden love because they're teammates.

"Who are you cooking for?"

"Oh, fuck!" I jump and spin, pulling the earbuds from my ears. "I didn't hear you come in. You scared the shit out of me." I lean against the counter, head hanging between my shoulders as I take deep breaths to bring my heart rate back down from the scare. I turn off the audiobook and swipe away the app so it doesn't accidentally start playing while some dude is getting a cock shoved in his ass or something. Just what Ryder would want to hear after learning that's what I want more than anything.

"Is this your normal weekday afternoon activity? You make a family-style meal for one?" he asks, the snark entering his tone so easily.

Damn, he doesn't even have to try, the asshole just appears. I take a measured breath and pray for patience. After all, this is to reward his good behavior at the garden, even if he's being a little shit now.

"I felt like my mama's lasagna, and since she's several states away, I'm the one who has to make it if I want the real thing. Besides, it's even better the next day, so it's good for leftovers. You're welcome to have some if you're hungry. It'll be done in about an hour."

It's an easy answer to a simple question, but I have ulterior motives. I know Ryder loves my mom's lasagna. Not only is this positive reinforcement and a peace offering, but it's also a reminder of our friendship and the many years we spent connected at the hip, where he was as close as a brother to me. Our conversation at the ice cream parlor yesterday got me thinking that maybe I need to remind him of

what it was like to be such close friends that we felt like brothers. Maybe he'll be slower to react and more willing to work with me if he remembers what he lost when he decided to let his emotions rule him.

My mama is one of the best people I know. She treated Ryder like another kid, never batting an eye when he showed up for dinner, just setting an extra place at our already crowded dining table next to mine and telling him to help himself. It didn't take us long to realize Ryder's home life wasn't as easy as he made it seem. Mama could guess and fill in the blanks, and seemed content to step in where his family lacked.

Ryder's mom worked two jobs to keep Ryder in hockey while his dad worked at a local manufacturing plant and made a valiant effort to drink himself to death when he wasn't working. I'm pretty sure Ryder's dad called him a disappointment every chance he got, but he never told Ryder what he was failing at; the goal always moved somehow. Ryder spent more time at my house than his own to avoid his dad, I'm pretty sure, not that he wanted me to know that. The few times I stopped by to ask him to play and ran into Mr. Kingston were enough to figure it out for myself. I heard him yelling at Ryder each time, throwing things in the house, calling him a fairy boy, telling him he'd made a huge mess, or getting mad about something that didn't seem important. That and the bruises. Ryder was good about hiding them, but there's only so much you can do when your arms have constant hand marks, and he had a few too many black eyes that didn't come from hockey.

I remember my mom and dad talking about it a few times when they thought we couldn't hear. They hated seeing Ryder hurt. After that, he spent the summers and school breaks with us, went to church on Sundays with us, and my dad took Ryder to hockey practice and games more often than not. They said hockey was his way out, and they'd make sure he'd get it.

I didn't just lose my best friend when Ryder pushed me away in high school. My family lost a son. They knew something happened between us, but I couldn't tell them

what was going on, just that we weren't friends anymore because I didn't want them to think badly of Ryder. It was my burden to bear, not theirs. They were so proud when he got a scholarship to play hockey and later was drafted. I know they miss him.

“Ah, aren't you sweet,” he grumbles, pulling me from my reminiscing as he turns from the kitchen and stomps away toward his bedroom.

“You can just say thank you, you know,” I call after him. “It doesn't have to be a battle every time you open your mouth.” I shake my head as I stir the marinara and ladle the sauce over the lasagna.

When I hear his bedroom door close, I lean against the cabinets and try to breathe through the tightness in my chest. What is this? Sadness? Nostalgia? I don't even know, but I hate it. Ryder is the one who fucked things up between us. I'm just trying to live my life. But what kind of life can I possibly have if I can't even be my true self in public? The honest voice in my head surprises me. And has no place in the kitchen with me while I make a thank you lasagna for my frenemy who kind of took care of me when I was feeling shitty, then was only kind of dumb when I came out, and was nice to some kids down on their luck when we were volunteering .

Wow, the bar is really low. I shake my head at myself. Get some fucking standards, Contraire.

When Ryder comes back into the kitchen a few minutes later, I think I have my shit together. Until I take one look at him, and the rational thoughts fly right out of my head as all the blood in my body rushes south. He's in loose gray joggers that do obscene things to his ass and leave nothing to the imagination in his dick department. The man is packing and doesn't like wearing underwear at home, it appears.

He's also shirtless, showing off the tattoos that decorate his arms, upper back, and

part of his chest. I can see them more clearly now, and realize they're some depiction of Greek mythology, I think, because of the winged horse, mythical beasts, the columns, battle helmets and spears. Maybe Achilles, even? There's an arrow about to strike one of the warrior's ankles on his shoulder.

I shake my head. The black and white art is beautiful, enhancing his muscular body even more. What the fuck is he trying to do? Make life even harder for me? Before I can tell him to put a shirt on and stop being a cocktease, he opens his mouth and reminds me why I don't find him attractive. Okay, not that attractive.

"Is that a fucking goldfish?" he asks, walking toward the island and bending to look at the glass bowl housing a small orange fish with a big fan tail. Ah, he finally noticed our new little friend .

"Appears to be," I answer, putting the lasagna pan into the oven and setting a timer. Just ignore the hot as fuck hockey goalie with delicious muscles doing a—are you fucking kidding me right now? He's doing push-ups against the island. Because, of course, he would find a way to show off that insane chest and those arms of his even more, probably because I told him he's not my type and he wants to prove me wrong. Look away. Nothing to see here, folks.

"What the fuck are you doing with a goldfish?" he asks, straightening up and crossing his arms over his chest.

Why is he doing this to me? His biceps are bulging, and his chest is so broad. The man is giving Henry Cavill a run for his money, and he's even hotter with the intricate ink decorating his skin. I'm such a slut for good body art, and Ryder has gorgeous pieces. Shit. No, I'm not looking at Ryder's tattoos, his chest, or his arms. Or anything else.

"Nothing. I'm going to flush it down the toilet the first chance I get," I reply without

thinking, collecting my used dishes in the sink, trying to appear nonchalant as shit about murdering a fish I care nothing about because a hockey god is standing in my kitchen, distracting the ever-loving hell out of me.

“Why’d you even bring it home if you’re just going to flush it?” he asks, tapping the glass and watching the little fish swim in circles. “She’s kind of cute, with her puffy lips and big, vacant eyes that remind me of influencers or Hollywood actresses. It sucks, living your entire life in a tiny bowl for all to see, no privacy, everyone speculating about you. I hate that feeling.”

Do. Not. Look. At. The. Muscles. This is Harlowe’s fault. She gave me the hockey romance audiobook, and now I’m all hopped up on gay romance where they secretly pine for each other until they can’t take it anymore. I shake my head, remembering he asked a question.

“One of my teammates’ kids won it at a charity fundraiser we were at today, and he didn’t want to take it home, but she freaked out. He told her I’d take it to a goldfish farm instead. So that’s what I’m doing as soon as I finish dinner. Fishy gets to swim to the farm.”

His eyebrows shoot up to his hairline as he slaps his palms against the granite on either side of the fishbowl. “You of all people, with your talk of comportment and respect, all your kindness matters lessons, and watch what you say attitude, are going to murder a fish?”

I shrug as I soap up the dishes and start to scrub them clean. “Fine, I’ll dump it into the lake or something instead.” He’s getting worked up about this fish. It’s pretty fucking cute. I like seeing him care about something other than hockey, or fucking with my life, for a change.

He throws his hands up and stalks around the island toward me in outrage. “How dare

you! It's a domestic goldfish, you cold-blooded killer, it can't make it in the wild." He pokes me in the chest, but he's not the only one who's a solid wall of muscle, and I don't even rock back. "We're keeping it," he says with finality. Did his eyes just flicker back to my chest? Huh, that's interesting. I file that away to think about later.

I look down at him with calm disinterest, careful not to fuel his hysteria. No negative reactions to his bad behavior. Only positive reinforcement for good actions and words. Besides, I like that he felt comfortable touching me despite knowing I'm gay. With him parading around in his slutty sweats and showing off shirtless, tattooed muscles, and now touching me, it's like he wants me to find him attractive or something. Usually it's gay guys who want to know the straight guy finds them attractive, like they can be the one exception, or turn them. Not that I've experienced the phenomenon before, but I've done my research and spent plenty of time anonymously participating in online spaces to explore my sexuality. I didn't realize it could work the other way and a straight guy would be this adamant about me finding him attractive. And Ryder seems to think I'm into him, which I'm not.

I sigh and shut off the water, drying my hands with a dish towel while considering his irrational distress over the damn goldfish. "Fine, whatever, but you're taking care of it if you want it to stay so badly. It's your fish now."

He leans back on the counter and smiles in victory. "That's fine. Goldie and I will have a beautiful life together."

I cross my arms and give him a look. "Goldie? That's the lamest name anyone could have come up with for a fish."

"No, it's not. She's named after Goldie Hawn, who was a total smoke show back in the day. She was awesome in Overboard."

Damn, he's really into this name. I tip my head back and let out a laugh that booms

through the kitchen. When I look at Ryder again, I think I catch a tiny shiver.

“Overboard? Shut the fuck up, man, that’s some chick flick shit right there. Are you sure you don’t have something to say to me? Because it would make sense why you’ve always been such a hater.”

He points a finger at my face for the taunt. “Fuck you, asshole. Kurt Russell is the G.O.A.T. in that movie, and he’s one of the manliest men there are, so don’t call it a chick flick, and put some respect on it.”

“Kurt Russell? Maybe if you named *Escape From New York*, or even fucking *Miracle* because you’re a hockey fan boy or something, but *Overboard*?” I say. He gives me a withering stare before I continue. “Fine, the fish lives in your room. I don’t want to smell the weird fish water in the kitchen.”

He shakes his head. “No way, we need to get a tank with a filter that runs all night so it’ll fuck with my sleep. Goldie Spawn will stay in the living room instead.”

I look down but can’t fight a smile. This fucking man. I swear he will be the death of me, whether from anger or exasperation. “Whatever, man, as long as you’re the one taking care of it.”

“Her, Knox, Goldie Spawn is a HER. Learn to use your damn pronouns.”

“Jesus.” I can’t stop the chuckle that escapes me. He’s too fucking funny, even if he’s being a shit on purpose and using the lessons I’ve been trying to teach him back on me. At least his humor is funny in this case and not hurtful. “If only you cared as much about how you came across in interviews and what you say when upset as you do about this damn fish, you’d be set,” I say, throwing up my hands.

“Have the interviewers ask me about Goldie Spawn instead of game losses, and I

think it would be fine,” he muses seriously.

Ten

Ryder

Olympus Arena is packed. The league commissioner and a bunch of rich and powerful people are in attendance to watch The Hydras' first home game. Not only do we have the typical ceremonial puck drop, but there's even some crazy shit going down with the owners, Hayes, Payton, and Zander Olsen before the game starts. The Olsens are billionaire brothers who decided to bring hockey back to Atlanta, build a multimillion-dollar sports and entertainment complex, and, I guess, get to shoot pucks at me as part of the public relations team's plan to entertain the crowd, given this isn't a city known for hockey fans. Football, baseball, and even basketball, sure. We'll have to win over their loyalty, which is where my participation comes in.

I was voluntold to defend the goal as the Olsens all took shots at me. It wasn't explicitly stated that I had to let them score, but I got the idea that blocking their shots could be seen as unsportsmanlike, as this is all in good fun. I was also told that my part in this was to help revamp my image, and I wouldn't be able to decline, given that they have me on some kind of disciplinary action plan with Mark's help. So here I am, suited up, ready for the game, and I have the owners' pack of kids sending pucks flying down the ice with mini sticks, though not necessarily in my direction. Anything that gets close, I let them by because that's what you do for kids. They're pretty cute.

Suddenly, one hellion of a toddler hurls his stick at me, which I manage to block. He kicks the puck and screams like a fucking banshee as he rushes toward me, launching himself at my leg pad and hanging on like a monkey. He's beating a tiny fist against

my pads like I wrecked his life, and honestly, I feel for him and know this sort of expression of emotion. I try to gently shake him off and hear cheering and laughing from the crowd. This was so not in the cards. His dad, Zander, hurries up to us and pries the child off my pads, throwing him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“Sorry, man. Axel is a terror on a good day, but give him anything resembling a weapon, and suddenly, it’s war. I didn’t expect him to take it out on you.”

I tap my glove on my leg pad. “At least I’m prepared for it. Get a stick into his hands, and put that kid on skates. You’ll have a real bruiser on the ice in no time.”

Zander laughs and pats the toddler on the back. “Maybe we’ll hold off on the knife shoes and wooden death stick for this one.” I grimace at the truth in his words.

Once Axel is safe with his mom and the rest of the family, the billionaire brothers are squaring up with me like they’ve waited their whole lives to take on an NHL goalie and test their luck. Well, fuck you very much, you’re not scoring on my net, no matter your net worth.

I easily bat away Zander’s shot with a bored sweep of my stick just to play with him because of Axel’s antics. Hayes shoots next, and while his form is good, he sends it straight to center mass, and I easily deflect. As the final brother, Payton, takes a stick for his turn, I skate out of the goal to his girlfriend, Ainsley. The last part of this pre-game show is a little something special I’m helping with. I hand her my stick.

“What are you doing?” she asks, looking around, confused.

It’s a pretty cute proposal idea, so I’m happy to help with it. If it helps rehabilitate my image so people forget about the viral video of me, which now has four million views, even better.

I lift my mask. “Everyone thinks that the Olsens aren’t making their shots because I’m in the net. I think you need to give your man hell and stand in for me. Show all these fans it’s not who’s in the net that matters, it’s their poor shooting skills keeping them from scoring.”

I give her a wink and put my blocker on her other hand before pushing her toward the goal. I flip a puck to Payton and skate after her. I make sure she’s positioned in the net, show her how to stand, and where to put the stick.

I move to the back of the goal and let Payton do the rest of the work. The puck I gave him is all marked up in silver Sharpie, telling Ainsley to look up, so when it stops at her feet, she finds Payton on his knee with a ring. Of course, she says yes to him, and they look so fucking happy. Watching them hug and kiss, sprawled on the ice in front of thousands of people, gives me a new feeling of longing that lodges in my chest and pokes at something like loneliness I hadn’t realized lived there already. I’ve never thought of settling down all that much, but I have to admit, coming home to another person has been kind of nice, especially when he does all the cooking. The theatrics settle when the Olsen family clears the ice, and we finally get the game started.

I sweep my stick along the painted lines of the crease, scraping ice away as the team sets up for the face-off. My body buzzes with awareness, watching the puck as the players quickly jostle for possession. Chad takes control and passes to Westin as they push down the ice. Our captain, Sebastian Montenegro, Monty, opens up, and Westy passes to him. A winger from Colorado steals the puck, and the play turns back toward me. Our defensemen, Rook and Campbell, skate like their asses are on fire to get back into position, but Colorado has the advantage with the turnover and quickly passes the puck back behind the goal to a waiting player on the other side.

I drop to butterfly and slide to the other post, blocking the corner as I track the puck and where these players are to anticipate where a shot could come from. Campbell and a player from Colorado get into a puck battle in the corner before Campbell

manages to flick the puck out to Chad, who works to get it out of our zone.

Fucking Smith from Colorado has a screen on me, keeping me from having a clear field of vision as the game moves across the ice in front of us. He loved putting his ass in my face any chance he got when I played in Boston, too. I shove him out of the crease to give myself space so I can see. It's a habit I have that I don't even think about. If a player has a problem with me getting physical when they're in my goal and wants to get in my face about it, my team has always had my back and shuts it down. I just don't know what my new team will do. Hopefully, they feel like most teams that the other team shouldn't touch their goalie, but we're not that tight yet.

Smith pushes back into the crease, letting his elbow ram into my face mask as he moves across the goal, following the play. This motherfucker wants to test my patience tonight. As a new team, we have something to prove, and no one has respect for us until we show them we're worthy of it. I sweep my stick at Smith's skates, and his feet fly out from under him as he goes down in a heap on the ice. Finally, I can see what's happening in front of me, and it's a break in play as the refs blow a whistle and position for another face-off.

Unfortunately, a few Colorado players watched the exchange and skate toward me like they're going to do something about it. Campbell and Rook see the Colorado players and pursue, with Monty, Chad, and Westy turning to see where everyone is going and immediately joining the exodus down the ice.

"The fuck, man," Jonesy, a Colorado forward—and mouthy bastard—calls as the ref blows a whistle further down the ice.

"Keep your dogs on a leash, Jonsey. He can't be smashing me in the face if he doesn't want to get it back," I say, standing to my full height and skating forward.

"Stay in your fucking goal and don't run your damn mouth, Kingsy. You don't have a

team worth shit, and no one's here to back you up this time," Jonsey calls as he comes to a stop, sending a snow shower onto my pads, and pushes my chest so I slide back toward the goal. That's rude.

Before I can move forward to do anything about it, Rook throws an arm around Jonsey's neck from behind and pulls him down and onto his back on the ice. "Welcome to Atlanta, bitch," he says as he bends over the other player. He straightens up and goes for Smith next, who is up on his skates again. "Don't touch my fucking goalie. I saw that elbow, jackass."

A Colorado player grabs Rook before he can throw a punch, but Campbell gets past and grabs the front of Smith's jersey, pulling him in and landing a hit or two before the refs can pull them apart. Campbell's mouth runs even as the refs push him away, and I hear the threats and chirps he's throwing Smith's way. Looks like Campbell is going to be an enforcer .

Finally, the Hydras feel like a team that has my back. Or feel like a team at all. Usually, Rook and Campbell are fighting each other. Seeing them work together to go after someone else gives me hope that we can make this work. Monty stops at the net next to me, where I have my mask off, squirting water on my face. Once I realized I wouldn't have to finish the fight, I moved back for a hydration break.

"Was it necessary to drop Smith like that and start a fight in the first few minutes of play, or were you just making a statement?" my captain asks.

"Establish dominance, Monty. I'm not letting anyone push us around because we're a new team. Smith got in my space, so I made room. When his elbow was introduced to my face mask, I made a bigger correction to ensure I could see around the distraction in my crease."

Monty laughs and shakes his head. "Okay, point made. We've got your back,

Kingsy.”

They’ve got my back .

For the first time since I got the news of my trade from Boston to Atlanta, I’m at peace. Having a team behind me, working to defend me here in my net, I know I’ll be able to do this after all.

Unfortunately, Campbell goes to the penalty box for his part in the squabble, and Colorado has the power play. The line changes, and thankfully, we manage to keep Colorado occupied for most of it. A Colorado player makes a breakaway with the puck and barrels down the ice at me. I skate forward, challenging him and watching every movement for when he shoots. He slaps the puck, and I stretch out, knocking it down to the ice with my glove and smothering it as players converge in the crease around me.

Our first period continues with more shots that I block and the boys hustling on the ice, trying to score, until the horn blows for the first intermission with a score that’s still zero-zero. I fucking hate this. While it’s great that Colorado hasn’t scored on me, we haven’t scored either, and a tie means both teams will be out for blood in the second period, hoping to change that. Will I have what it takes to stop them? Every team in the league wants to see us fail because we’re new and have nothing to prove our merit but individual records.

As I skate off the ice and walk down the tunnel to the locker room, I run through the plays from this period, thankful nothing’s gotten past me despite their many shots on goal. When I get to my stall, I grab my phone in nervous agitation, needing a distraction from the stalemate on the ice and the pressure that rests on my shoulders to provide a shutout game or make sure we don’t lose. I rarely look at my phone until after the game, but tonight, everything feels different, and I’m changing things up. I have a text from Knox that I click curiously. We’ve only exchanged the briefest texts

with necessary information, so I'm not sure what this could be.

Knox: Good luck tonight, not that you need it because you're a fucking incredible goalie and bring so much skill and talent that Colorado won't know what's hit them. Have a great game, and remember, no matter what happens, you've already won because they chose you. They wanted you. Be the fucking star you are.

Knox: And think about what you say before you say it for any post-game interviews, for Goldie's sake. She doesn't want to end up in Canada or Minnesota or wherever they've threatened to send you.

I set my phone down, swallowing the unexpected lump in my throat, and chuckle at his stupid second message. Knox would come at me with a pep talk to hype me up and then wrap it up with a reminder of my current situation. The crazy thing is, he's out of town for a game, yet he remembered my first game is today and took the time to send me a message. All because the golden boy is actually nice, thoughtful, and wants to do good things, whereas I have to work to not be an asshole as my baseline.

I put my phone away and, oddly, feel more prepared for the next period. It's not like Knox said anything groundbreaking, and Coach gave a perfectly fine pre-game speech that got us ready to play. This is still somehow different. Knox has every reason to hate me. He could ignore me outside of the short interactions we have to work on whatever it is that will help me learn my lesson and be well within his rights. Yet, he's making a point to pump me up for a game he doesn't even play, knowing me well enough to anticipate that I'd be in my head right now.

"Don't start any fights this period, Kingsy," Coach says as he strides in.

"But Coach, you know the rules," Rook says from his stall. He waves his hand like he's conducting a choir.

“Don’t touch our goalie,” the team says in unison.

We’re running down the clock in the third period, the score is one-zero in our favor, and we’ll pull off a shutout if we can keep Colorado from scoring in this last minute of play. They’ve pulled the Colorado goalie and added a sixth man to the ice to give themselves an advantage, hoping to get a point on the board, tie us up—and send the game into overtime and potentially a shootout, where the chances of scoring are higher.

Sweat drips into my eyes, and I shake my head, not daring to blink or lose sight of the puck that’s being passed like lightning across the ice as my team battles to steal it back. Nico slams a Colorado player into the boards, and they scrabble for the puck. Smith is back in my crease, waiting for his chance to score if they can pass to him. Nico knocks the puck away from the boards to Monty, who skates around the back of my net and passes to Westy. Jonsey from Colorado is there to steal the puck and passes to Smith. He’s ready and takes advantage of the chaos around the goal, sending it at my left shoulder, the opposite side of the goal from where I’ve been crouched. I explode, reflexes running on instinct, my glove reaching up and out as I push off my skate to propel me across the goal. I just manage to snag the puck before it crosses under the top bar.

The arena explodes with noise as the clock hits zero and the horn blows, signaling the end of the game. Holy fucking shit, that was so close. I rise, and my teammates on the ice skate toward me, jumping onto me in a group hug that feels like we’ve won the Cup rather than our first game, but I go with it. The adrenaline is flowing, and that last save has me feeling like we’re gods of the ice.

Monty grabs me by the back of my neck, knocking his helmet against mine before moving back and shouting to the team, “That’s how you do it, boys!”

“That’s my goalie!” Campbell adds, sliding into the team hug.

And I do feel like their goalie after this game.

“Celly at the bar tonight,” Nico crows as we make our way back into the locker room.

“Before you boys start your celebrations, I need Kingsy and Monty to do the post-game pressers. Then you boys can do whatever the hell you want. Go answer some questions, shower, and get out of here. You have tomorrow off, but I’ll see you bright and early the next day for morning skate before we leave for the plane. Don’t do anything that will land you in jail or my office,” Coach Kennedy shouts over our raucous noise.

I groan. Of course he wants me to field media after our first game being a shutout. I strip out of my pads and put on a team shirt and shorts. I slide a hat on backwards and join Monty as we follow our head of PR, McKenna Kresley, into the media room.

I see that fucking reporter who ambushed me on media day and started the downward trajectory of my life with her stupid questions. The piece she published the following day about toxic masculinity in sports blasted my stunted emotional empathy and intelligence. She can fuck right off with her questions, I won't be entertaining her after that warm reception.

“Ryder, that was an amazing last-second save right before the buzzer. What was going through your mind during that play?” a reporter asks. I’m not familiar with the cadre of journalists in the room, though I’m sure I’ll learn all their names and who they work with, whether a major network, a local newspaper, or a sports podcast, within the season.

Finally, a piece of cake question I can answer easily. This is what media day should have been. “I was dialed in, thinking like a winner. There’s not much you can do in a chaotic play like that other than know where the key players are and follow the puck with anticipation. Everything worked together for us, and that’s the mindset I’m

taking with me into the season,” I say, my answer professional, finally using my years of team media training and post-game press experience to give a soundbite-worthy response.

A reporter asks Monty about his goal, the game's only one. I look around the room while he answers and catch the catty reporter's eyes. Her red lips are set in a slight smile that looks scarier than you'd expect after a win like this. I'm not looking forward to whatever she has up her sleeve.

“Speaking of mindsets, how were you able to focus and get your mind off your viral video going into the game? The video of you has reached a wide audience, nearly four-point-five million views now, and that can't be easy to forget. Did it have any impact on your playing style or focus? How have you been working to correct your attitude regarding other athletes' alleged sexuality?” The reporter, Lilah, I remember, crosses her arms, her phone held out, recording my answer.

I tense in the hard plastic chair, her questions striking like arrows in battle, each one hitting my one exposed weakness. She couldn't just let it go and let me move on. Heat rises in my blood, anger building fast, a sharp retort already forming. But before I let it out and rip her a new one, I look over at McKenna and clock her wide eyes as she fiddles with the end of her shiny red ponytail nervously. I know she's telepathically communicating with me to keep my shit together and be careful about the words that come out of my mouth next. I bite my tongue and stop myself before answering rashly as I remember Knox's text. He told me to think before I speak, even if I'm angry. And Lilah is a woman who makes me mad enough to spit flames, which is what I fucking want to do. Instead, I dig deep for a calm that desperately eludes me and pretend she's anyone else, asking any other question. I nod at McKenna to let her know I got her message before I answer.

“Mindset is the most powerful tool a player can bring onto the ice with them,” I begin, hoping Lilah can feel the holes I'm burning in her face with the anger I know

is still in my eyes, even if my voice remains calm. “We can’t let the outside world distract us from what’s happening right in the moment during the game. I leave the past where it belongs and move on, knowing I can’t change how I’ve played before, or even what I said or how it came off. I can only work to do better going forward.” That’s an answer worthy of the training Knox is driving into me. McKenna and her entire PR staff couldn’t even find fault in that.

Lilah considers me, her whiskey eyes shrewd and calculating. I turn away as another reporter asks Monty about the offensive tactics that were used. Once he’s answered, she springs another question on me.

“Sources say you’ve moved in with the very man you slandered in that video. How did that come about, and has it influenced how you see him now?” Lilah thrusts her phone back toward me. I cannot believe her audacity or her sources.

What the actual fuck? Who told her I moved in with Knox? I don’t have to answer this. It’s not a question about the game or even hockey-related, but I have a feeling Lilah will take my refusal to answer as a cop-out or infer some kind of nefarious meaning into it when she should just mind her own business. I have to answer it and put a stop to this train of questioning for good.

“As I’ve told you before, I knew Knox back in the day, and we use the same agent. I needed a place to stay, and our agent arranged it. That’s the last personal question I’ll answer. If it’s not focused on the hockey game, don’t bother asking me.”

I’m seething, my voice tight as I grind my molars around the words that I can barely grit out. At least I didn’t tell her to fuck off or flip the table like I wanted to. I didn’t even say anything too telling or go off on some belligerent tangent that would get me canceled and traded, or worse, put on waivers and potentially hidden away in some minor league team or overseas. McKenna looks relieved from her spot in the corner and points at another reporter for the next question.

Thankfully, Lilah leaves me alone for the rest of the post-game press. I'm able to get through the remaining questions, which are all focused on hockey, as they should be, and much easier to field.

Monty pats my back as we enter the locker room after the media circus finishes. "You handled that well. I didn't know you moved in with the footballer. What happened to your place?"

"It's the fucking video, man. My landlord kicked me out," I explain. "I never should have opened my mouth in the first place, but damn, it feels shitty that someone had to capture the worst of me and share it like that's all I am. "

"We know you're more than your words from one conversation. We all say shit we don't mean on occasion, and sometimes what we say comes off the wrong way, even if we meant it differently. It'll get better."

Monty sounds every bit the dad he is, reminding me that I'm more than this one crappy situation, and that he believes in me, even if he doesn't say the words outright. His kid, Enzo, has it good with a dad like that. I wish I'd had a dad like him. I wouldn't want to be a single dad like Monty, but he has a troupe of nannies, and his parents moved to Atlanta to help him, so at least he has a support system in place for our insane schedules.

I shower and change back into my game day suit to go out with the boys to a bar that Nico picked called The Hideout. It's outside of the sports and entertainment complex, so hopefully, there won't be too many hockey fans who were at the game. It's high-end because that's how Nico rolls with his Miami vibe. We're given a semi-private section with several booths to fit our group of big athletes and the collection of people we've picked up on the way from the arena to the bar.

Davy brought his wife, Tatiana, who looks like a model and probably is. They

converse quickly in Russian and sound like they're fighting, then suddenly they're making out, which confuses the hell out of me. Several players brought their stunning wives and girlfriends, who are all talking to one another at a booth together because they've already grown tight. There are suddenly a lot of people around. It leaves me feeling inadequate and lonely again.

I look for the single guys. Chad, Westin, Monty, Rook, Nico, and Campbell have a booth that looks a lot friendlier than a bunch of couples. Monty scoots over and makes room for me to sit down.

"The star of the game needs to celebrate," Rook says, passing me a beer. How he managed to get a bucket of iced-down beers already is a mystery in this busy place.

I wave off the compliment. "The team made it happen, and if anyone is a star, it's our captain, with the only goal of the night," I say, raising my beer to Monty, and the boys follow suit, clinking our bottles together.

"Let's keep that energy going into the next game against Carolina, and we'll see who rules the dirty South," Monty says before tipping his bottle back.

"Atlanta isn't as bad as I expected," Nico says, setting his bottle on the table. "The food is amazing, the nightlife is more than decent, and there's every sport you would want to see live."

"It's hot as hell, though, and the humidity is something else," Rook complains, wiping his face like he can feel the humidity inside the air-conditioned building.

"That's the Minnesota talking," Westin says, laughing. "You'll get used to it." He came from a team in Florida and knows heat and humidity.

"My brother has been keeping the thermostat at seventy-five like the cheap ass he is,"

Rook goes on. “I told him I can afford to keep the place feeling like a Minnesota winter if I want to, but he said something about it being better for the environment.”

“I didn’t realize your brother moved here with you,” I say. “You’re a twin, right?”

“There are two of you?” Campbell asks, horrified. “That’s another level of messed up. You’re bad enough on your own.” We all laugh, and Rook shakes his head, though he’s smiling.

“Knight moved with me to take care of my dog when I’m on the road, since he works from home as a telehealth therapist, rarely leaves the house, and didn’t have anything keeping him up North. He’s nothing like me,” Rook insists. “He’s a total nerd. His idea of fun is reading a shit ton of books instead of having a life, or going out to do things that would actually make sense.”

“Wait, your brother’s name is Knight, and you’re Rook? What the fuck were your parents thinking?” Westin asks, his face a priceless blend of shock and humor that has Rook turning red.

Rook puffs his chest and punches Westy in the arm. “Fuck you, man. My dad’s a chess grand champion.”

“Your dad’s a chess master, and your brother’s a nerdy therapist who is probably super smart, too. What happened to you?” Campbell asks, the blow landing on Rook’s pride and making everyone at the table laugh.

“I was smart enough to know I should focus on hockey and make that my end goal rather than chess club or a career in rocket science,” Rook counters once his flaming cheeks are less nuclear-looking.

I shake my head as I laugh and let my gaze wander the bar absently while the guys

continue to poke and prod at each other's egos. Tan, smooth legs that look a mile long capture my attention. The sleek real estate leads my eyes up to a short skirt and a cropped shirt that shows a flat stomach. Silky black strands of hair fall to a tiny waist that highlights an unbelievable rack that wants to spill out of the low neckline of a strappy white top. The face that finally grabs my attention is mid at best. She's pretty, and she knows it, but she's trying so hard to be stunning that she looks like every Instagram girl with her plumped lips and contoured, heavy makeup hiding whatever she naturally looks like. What captures my interest the most are her eyes, which are the same espresso shade as Knox's.

What. The. Actual. Fuck? Did I just compare this chick in the bar to...Knox? That won't do. Why is he even in my head right now when I'm looking for a hookup? I'm hanging out with the boys, my teammates, and we're having a good time without any need for a sensitivity lesson or correction of my behavior. There's no reason for Knox to come barreling through my thoughts. Yet, here I am, seeing his face when this girl caught my attention, and I can't have that. I think back through the day and realize this isn't the first time I've thought of Knox. I've let my thoughts flit back to him far more than I'd care to admit to anyone, more than just trying to keep my anger under control or watching what I say. After a few weeks of living with the guy, and a few opportunities to try out being the nice guy for a change, suddenly I've got him on my brain. I think the fuck not.

I need to prove to myself that Knox isn't the only one on my mind and that he doesn't control my choices when it comes to who I take home. I rise from the booth, cross the room to the exotic smoke show with legs for days, and introduce myself. With any luck, we'll be getting to know each other a whole lot better soon, and I'll be a little less lonely in the morning.

Eleven

Knox

I 'm so ready to be home, in my bed, after days on the road. Even luxury hotel beds don't hold a candle to my customized Alaskan king mattress that lets me sleep like a baby, and I miss it. I can't sleep well on planes, so my night was trash, and I'm feeling every gritty hour I spent not dreaming on our overnight flight back from San Francisco, where we won our Thursday night game. The team stayed later than expected on Friday for a partnership with the Firebirds as part of a youth sports initiative their foundation launched, then took a redeye home. I'll need at least a three-hour nap before even thinking about being human again. We have another away game next week in Tennessee, but I get a few days off before we start practice again to reset.

I unlock the door and stumble inside, dead-tired and already feeling the relief of being home. A gasp from the kitchen has me turning that way as I drop my suitcase in the entry, looking for the source. A woman with messy black hair and makeup-smudged eyes is standing naked in my kitchen, wearing only a man's button-down shirt that's fully open and showing off her considerable assets.

Her surprise turns into interest as she smiles. "Well, hey there, handsome. Are you joining us for round three?" she asks, her voice smoky and, I'm sure, seductive to the right person, but she does absolutely nothing for me.

"Wrong fucking tree, baby girl." I keep my tone kind and even when I answer her, but what the actual fuck?

Fucking Ryder . I close my eyes and pray for patience. That motherfucker brought a woman home and let her parade naked around my house. I told him to give me a heads-up if he was having company. Could the asshole think to do that? No, he was selfish and only cared about sticking his dick in something.

“You’re home early.”

I look up to find Ryder walking in from the hallway that leads to the bedrooms. His dark brown hair is extra messy, like the woman in my kitchen spent the whole night with her fingers in it. He’s shirtless so his tattoos and muscles are on full display, and he’s wearing those damn gray joggers that make him look like a snack and let his dick swing freely again. He leans against the kitchen island like he doesn't have a care in the world, while I’m uncomfortable as hell with the strange woman propositioning me to join their threesome.

I turn to the woman and with the utmost respect and compassion say, “Sweetheart, it’s time for you to go home now. Go get your things, and I’ll call you a Lyft.”

To her credit, the woman isn’t dumb and doesn’t try to stick around somewhere she realizes she’s unwanted. She shrugs and saunters up to Ryder, grabbing his dick and squeezing it so he groans. “That was a lot of fun. I left my number on the notepad in the kitchen. Call me anytime.” She lifts on her toes, and Ryder kisses her while she continues to cup him through his pants, all while I watch. This is a fucking nightmare.

When she walks away, Ryder is sporting an impressive semi. I have to look anywhere but at him or the cock saluting me through his loose joggers.

“Are you serious right now?” I say, keeping my voice low. “You did that in front of Goldie? How dare you expose her to your questionable choices.” I point at the fish tank in the living room where the fish swims. She probably has a four-second memory, but it’s a good enough start for the lesson he needs to learn today. I pull my

phone out and open the Lyft app, calling a car that will arrive within ten minutes.

“Goldie liked watching. It was nice for her to be the voyeur instead of the exhibitionist for once. She gets tired of always being watched,” Ryder says, cracking a smile as he presses the heel of his hand into his erection, willing it to go down.

I groan at his bad joke and the fact that he’s touching himself right in front of me. What is wrong with him? He knows I’m attracted to men. He has to know this will more than do it for me. Why would he tease me like this? I have to be tripping from not getting enough sleep. A horrible thought occurs to me, and I whip my head to the living room.

“You better not have had jersey chaser sex on my couch,” I say. “I don’t need skank juice on my favorite spot to nap.” I’m too tired to deal with this. It feels like a nightmare I stumbled into where I can’t wake up, and Ryder gets to torment me.

“Relax, we just made out as we walked through the living room.” He pauses and looks at me with a guilty smile. “But...I may have dented the drywall in the hallway. I picked her up, and the way she moved on my cock like she was riding a damn pole about buckled my knees, bro. I hit the wall to catch myself. I’ll have it fixed.” He’s so damn nonchalant, sharing details of his hookup like I’m one of the boys and want to hear it.

All it does is make me picture him naked, ass flexing and clenching as he drives his cock into a faceless person, his powerful body in control and dominating the other as their flesh slaps together and the scent of sex fills the air. He has to be a top, with his masculine, alpha energy, and authoritative way about him. He would absolutely crush his partner into submission, and they would thank him for it as they drooled into a pillow.

I should be drooling into my pillow, none-the-wiser to Ryder’s bedroom proclivities

or what his dick looks like saluting me, passed out getting the sleep I desperately need, but here I am thinking of being bent over the couch and fucked hard. But it's Ryder who's doing all the fucking. I'm having none of it, and it should stay that way.

Stalking into the kitchen, I rip open the refrigerator and grab a water bottle. I open it and chug the contents to calm the raging volcano of lust that erupted when I started thinking about the way Ryder fucks. I can't be picturing this man fucking anyone. He's not here to be my personal porn fantasy, he's here because I have to teach him to be a better person, in interviews and in life. That effectively clears my brain enough of the sex fog and allows me to have some kind of rational thought again. I level Ryder with a murderous glare so he knows I'm serious.

"You're here as a favor. I don't want you bringing random puck bunnies, or whatever your sport calls them, here and fucking them in common spaces, or letting them prance around naked for me to walk in on. Show some damn respect."

"Come on, Golden Boy, let me have some fun," he says with a devastating smile, his hand roaming his bare chest like he knows where my thoughts have strayed, and he wants my attention to stay there. He can't know, but I turn away and run through offensive plays in my head to keep from matching the semi he was sporting.

"You can have your fun somewhere else, Reckless," I grumble, pulling out the blender base and a cup attachment, then the protein powder and ingredients for a shake.

"You should still be able to appreciate the finer things in life, even if you don't like women. Her tits were nice, but her ass was truly spectacular. I bounced her on my cock like a rodeo queen, and she rode me like a bronco she wanted to break in. You ever been to the rodeo, Knox? I think you'd like all those cowboys in their tight jeans, riding the shit out of those horses and bulls. It's really something to see."

He comes up next to me in the kitchen, picks up a banana I've placed on the counter for my protein shake, and grips it like he's measuring its girth while I try to keep my heart rate under control. He has to be doing this to get under my skin, to see how far he can push me and what it will take for me to snap. Too bad for him, my line is a football field long, and he's nowhere near the end zone.

"Fuck off. I don't need to hear the details. I don't want them. Fuck your skanks at their places, while you're on road trips, or at a hotel, but don't bring them here and mess with the only peace I have." I snatch the banana out of his hand, peel it, and throw it into the blender cup with the rest of the ingredients before screwing the cap on.

"What if I like talking about it with you?" He gets a devious look on his face when I glance over, so I quickly avert my gaze back to the shake, setting it in the blender base. His voice is low, rough, and close as he moves into my space, one hand on the counter next to me, his mouth right at my ear, and his body pressed against my side so I can feel every hard ridge and muscle of him as he boxes me in before he continues. "She let me bend her over and fuck her ass like I had something to prov—"

I cut him off when I turn on the blender and let it cover his salacious words that are stirring up shit in me that I do not want to confront right now. If I can't hear him, he can't tell me more details of how he fucked the woman. And hopefully, I'll stop picturing him bending someone over, gripping their hips, and driving his cock into them in a punishing rhythm. I bet he split that poor girl in half. Her ass has got to be sore after taking his fat cock that likes to swing around in his sweats, showing off his size when he's not even aroused. What's he like, fully hard? Ugh. This isn't what I need in my head now or ever.

He slaps my back like he knows where my thoughts have strayed, but instead of leaving me alone as the blender whirs, his hand smooths up to the back of my neck

and squeezes.

Oh, fuck, no. I have an embarrassingly visceral reaction to the small touch, my body shivering under his palm and goosebumps racing down my arms to my hands that grip the blender like a lifeline. I can't move, not to push him off or get away. I'm frozen, stuck here like I've been electrocuted, and he's the live wire that is rewiring my neurons and frying my circuits until my brain is no longer capable of rational thought. It must be the lack of sleep and his proximity. I can smell him, his slept-in woodsy cologne mingling with a hint of sweat and musky sex invading my nose and wrapping around my brain, making me salivate for the sinful scent and the feel of his hot skin that burns even through the layers of my suit.

"Stop," I beg, the word guttural despite keeping my tone low. I have no idea if he can even hear me over the blender, which has more than crushed the ice and done its job at this point, but I can't shut it off or he'll hear my heartbeat galloping in my chest and my breaths coming out in labored pants from one stupid, errant touch he didn't even mean. He's fucking with me, and I can't let him know it feels too good even though I know it's stupid and reckless, and everything about this—him—is so wrong for me.

His mouth is close again, speaking directly against the shell of my ear so I feel each word down to my toes. "I don't think you actually want me to stop doing any of this." The hand on my neck slides down slowly to my waist and squeezes, pulling me tighter against his body. Is he...hard? Fuck, he is, and he's not hiding that he's turned on, he's subtly grinding his cock against my hip so I'm sure not to miss it.

"What the fuck are you doing?" My voice breaks with confusion on the question. I don't want Ryder, no matter how attractive he is, or how often he wears his slutty sweats and shows off his muscles and tattoos, I've known him too long. I've been on the receiving end of his cruelty and seen how he likes to mess with people. This is all to prove a point, not because he wants me. Right?

“This is...interesting. I guess my cock just likes the way you feel. And you smell so damn good. What the fuck is that cologne? Or maybe my dick thinks you’re going to feed me again with that shake and he got excited,” he says, confusion and curiosity coloring his gravelly voice.

Is he amused by this? Does he find it funny that I’m dying inside, knowing he’s turned on by teasing me? Is he turned on because he knows it will fuck with me? I don't know what caused the other, but I do know none of this should be happening.

With more self-restraint than I realized I was capable of, I stop the blender and take a few unsteady steps away from Ryder and his savage humor. “You’re just horny. Go fuck your puck bunny once more before her ride gets here and get it out of your system. Fix this.” I can't look at him. I turn my back and scrub my hands across my face, my chest heaving with my jagged breaths as my mind races.

“I don't know how.”

I look up at the vulnerable confession and catch the confusion on Ryder’s face, quickly infused with disgust. He narrows his eyes at me, and I know whatever just happened is going to be an enormous boulder in our path to getting to the end of this forced roommate situation. Great, just what I need, him to be disgusted by his reaction to me, and to turn it into another reason to make my life a living hell. Because the one thing I do know for sure is Ryder will use this against me later, and he’s going to be vicious and brutal with his words and actions because he’s uncomfortable with what just happened.

The sound of heels on the hardwood has me straightening up and moving further away from Ryder like my ass is on fire. I don’t want to have any accidental touches or meaningful looks caught by anyone, especially some random woman Ryder spent the night with. I look at my phone and see the notification for the Lyft arriving shortly.

“Your ride will be here by the time you get downstairs. White Nissan Altima, the driver is named Marissa,” I tell the woman who is now dressed, if you can call it that, in a tiny skirt, cropped top, and tall heels. Her smudged eye makeup has been fixed, and her hair is up in a bun on top of her head, so she looks more presentable than she did when I walked in and got a good look at her full frontal.

She smiles at me as she approaches Ryder. “You didn't tell me you had such a nice roommate. If you like to share, I'm into that, too.”

Ryder's eyes shoot to mine, and he gets a dirty grin, but I stop him before he can say a word. “I'm not into him, and I don't like sharing. You should go before the driver leaves.”

Ryder pouts, but he remains remarkably silent. The woman puts her hand on his chest and leans in. Instead of the full-on makeout session like earlier, he only gives her a perfunctory kiss before he straightens up and guides her toward the exit. I hear him speaking to her in a low voice at the door, but I make a point not to listen. I rescue my shake from the blender, putting everything away and cleaning up any mess I've made quickly so I can escape to my room and fall into a deep sleep. Hopefully, I'll wake up and realize this has all been one long, horrible nightmare.

Twelve

Ryder

I 'm a dick. Well, I think with my dick, but I'm an asshole, a big old jerk. I liked antagonizing Knox, teasing him, and making him uncomfortable because I knew I could. That reaction to him was purely physical and not at all because of him . I could rub myself wrong in my sweaty, smelly hockey pads and get an erection, so it's not like Knox caused my cock to get hard, it was just from being pressed against his muscular thigh and getting a little friction. Whatever my sleep-deprived brain decided to come up with after that, about the way he smelled, was simply putting my mouth on autopilot and letting the first thing that popped into my head come out. Maybe Knox is right, I should think first before I speak .

Knox's cologne is pretty amazing, though. I've caught a whiff of it several times as he's come and gone through the house and always stopped to breathe in a little deeper to see if I could place it. His scent lingers on the couch and in the kitchen and floats in the air down the hallway. It's woodsy with a softer underlying scent like vanilla or maybe coconut. I don't know, but it smells amazing, and I think it might be custom because I haven't come across a cologne that smells even remotely like his. I might have to go sniff some candles to find one that smells like him so I can burn it when he's gone to get my fix. It's probably called sandalwood and vanilla or something frou-frou like that.

Why I'm even thinking about Knox's cologne is pointless. We both went to our separate bedrooms after that thing in the kitchen, but I couldn't sleep for long. I decide to shower off my night of casual sex when lying in bed proves fruitless. I

should be dead tired after a game and going out with the boys, then bringing Veronica home and fucking her until the early morning, only to get a few hours of sleep before getting up early and catching Knox's arrival. Instead, I'm wired.

He was pissed seeing her in the kitchen, half naked, and from what I heard, asking him to join in on the fun. From his quick negative answer, I can take bisexual off the table and know for sure he's gay because she was hot and nothing stirred below the belt for him. He didn't react until Veronica grabbed my dick and I got hard, then Knox was flustered and rushed to the kitchen to make himself busy. I saw the bulge in his slacks when I followed and teased him with a recounting of my night, getting into his space a bit to see if he'd react to me more. Again, I'm a shithead and know that was stupid, and he didn't deserve to be taunted or touched or have me in his space, trying to get him to admit I'm his type and he finds me attractive. But my ego needs to know I do it for him, and well, I could tell enough.

When I finish getting dressed in casual shorts and a navy button-down short-sleeve shirt, I hear movement in the hallway and know Knox is up again, even though it's only been a few hours. He must not want to sleep his day away, either. I open my door and lean on the doorframe as he walks past, looking extra sharp in a fitted white shirt and gray pants that hug his thighs and ass like they know the joy of their job or something. They have to be Lululemon ABC slacks. I have a drawer full of them myself because they're the only thing that fit my thighs and butt off the rack. Knox is taller, broader, and just as round in the ass region as I am, so I know what he'd wear.

"Going somewhere already?" I ask, keeping my tone even as I let my eyes roam the length of him. No curiosity or confusion this time. I just want to know what he's up to. Right.

He pauses at the living room entrance and turns. "I'm going to brunch with a friend. It's what people do on Saturday mornings."

A shot of jealousy streaks through me, and my fear of missing out kicks in. “Is brunch an exclusive club you and your friend are only allowed to attend?” I ask, emphasizing the word friend. Who’s he going with? Does Knox have friends? I haven’t paid much attention, but he’s probably friends with his teammates, and he likely knows more people in Atlanta. He did say Harlowe was one of his best friends, so maybe he’s going to brunch with her. That would be acceptable. Would he go out with a guy? He’s not technically out, but maybe he’s testing the waters with brunch to see about dating. Why does that make my insides churn violently? Not unpacking that thought right now.

Knox smiles slowly, his full lips parting and showing off even, white teeth as he studies me. “Are you trying to get an invitation to brunch, Reckless?”

That fucking nickname. But I am being reckless because I’m willing to do dangerous things without the slightest impulse control. No wonder it’s stuck. “I love brunch. Breakfast at lunchtime is the best.”

“I don’t think you’d like this brunch. Not your style,” Knox says, turning away from me and heading into the living room. I follow him, intent on knowing his meaning now.

“Brunch is everyone’s style, Golden Boy. What’s not to love? Eggs Benedict, all the carbs, breakfast meats, and mimosas by the gallon. Who wouldn’t want avocado toast and Bloody Marys?”

Knox sighs. “Seriously, it’s not your scene. Besides, I’m going with a friend I don’t think you’ll like all that much. It might be awkward for you, and you don’t adapt well in new situations.”

“Everyone loves me,” I insist, outraged by his audacity. “Why wouldn’t I like your friend? And I’m adaptable. Just look at me adapting to having a roommate for the

first time in years. I'm ready to go, so it's not like you'd have to wait on me or anything," I say, removing any further arguments.

Knox looks at me for a few beats, his face inscrutable. Finally, he shakes his head, and I know I've won. "Fine, but no complaining. And you're not allowed to say anything offensive, or you'll owe me \$500 per nasty statement."

"Are you kidding me? You're going to fine me for being offensive? Not on your life, Contraire. I'll be on my best behavior. You have no idea how nice and charming I can be. This will be a piece of cake, and you'll end up owing me money when it's all said and done because you'll be the mean one today."

He laughs. "Fat chance of that when you're around, Reckless." He sighs and inclines his head toward the front door. "I'm leaving now. If you're riding with me, it's time to go; otherwise, you're on your own, and I'm not telling you where brunch is."

I duck back into my room for my wallet and phone before jogging to catch up with him. "You take brunch so fucking seriously. It's so gay of you, and I say that in a complimentary way, not an offensive one."

Knox snorts and pushes the garage button as we enter the elevator. "That was borderline offensive, and you know it. "

"How do you treat brunch with this much reverence and people not know you're gay? This can't be a one-time thing. Someone has to know of your affinity for breakfast foods late in the day. Come on, I'm kidding," I say when he shoves my shoulder and gives me an annoyed look.

"Enough of your mouth, Reckless. Once we get in the car, you can't even toe the damn line or you'll be paying out."

I swallow the retort about him not being able to get enough of my mouth because, hello, that's not the track we need to go down, and I find something else to say instead. "What do I get if I manage to make it through brunch without saying anything offensive?" I ask. "I need a reason to abide by your dumb rules; otherwise, it's worthless because I'm not paying you jack-shit."

He sighs, the sound deep and resonant in the garage as our steps echo off the concrete walls around us. "I'll take care of Goldie while you're away on road trips."

"Now that I can get behind. Goldie needs two parents, Knox. She can't know she comes from a broken home, or she'll end up with daddy issues."

He shakes his head and makes a sound of derision as we get in the car, but he doesn't disagree.

Knox drives us to brunch and lets me pick the music, even though he gets veto power for song choices. I put on Bad Omens, and he tells me it's too hard for how little sleep he's gotten. I put on Post Malone instead, which seems easy enough for him even though he says my music choices are bland. We park and walk up to what looks like a music venue of some sort, and I'm fucking confused.

"I thought you said we're going to brunch? This looks like a club or something. Where are you taking me? Not to some pop-up thing, right? That sounds awful," I say, digging for information.

"Rule one: you're not allowed to complain," he reminds me. "Rule two: you can't say anything offensive." He waits for me to agree.

My brows knit together, and I give him a confused look because what the fuck? "I already agreed to this at the condo," I remind him.

“This is drag brunch. It’s brunch and a show, so you’ll have plenty of entertainment.” He pauses, waiting for my reaction with a hesitant look on his face.

It’s slowly sinking in what I’ve gotten myself into. I insisted he bring me, and now I realize I’m in way over my head. Holy fuck, what am I even doing here? This isn’t my scene. I’ll be so out of place and uncomfortable. I should have listened to Knox when he said this wasn’t my style. He was right. This could get expensive if Knox has his way about fining me, because how am I supposed to hold back my thoughts when we’re at a fucking drag brunch?

Knox looks over my shoulder, and his face brightens. “And my friend is here. Please be nice and remember the rules.”

I turn, and my confusion morphs to anger. The motherfucker tricked me. He told me just enough to perk my interest and I forced him to bring me. Now I have to spend a few hours of my precious Saturday with Lilah fucking Williams from the Atlanta Free Press of all people. She’s walking toward us in a body-hugging dress and sandals, her signature red lipstick painted on, but her razor-sharp eyeliner is hidden behind big black shades. I turn back to Knox and grab his forearm. He flexes under my fingers, and fuck if it doesn’t do something to me to know that even subconsciously, he wants me to feel his hard, muscled arm and the veins that work their way down to his big hands. I ignore that thought immediately because I have more pressing matters to deal with.

“No. This isn’t happening. I don’t hang out with the media, and she’s got it out for me. It’s not going to work. I’ll get a ride home,” I say, dropping his arm and pulling my phone out.

Knox puts his hand on my arm to stop me. I glance up, catching the disappointment on his face. Fuck, I don’t want him to look at me like that. Why can’t he be mad or apathetic? Disappointed is an expression I know all too well and never want to see on

anyone's face when it comes to me. Disappointed was my dad's default because I wasn't the son he thought I should have been, and that always led to him taking his rage out on me. My defenses rise at that look, even though rationally I know Knox isn't my dad.

"You, going to drag brunch, is a huge step in the right direction for your image. It shows you're tolerant and accepting of different ways of life, and the queens are funny as hell, so you'll be entertained no matter what else happens. And the food is good. They have this amazing Southern restaurant, Mama P's, doing the brunch, and it's out of this world delicious."

How did I end up here, at drag brunch, with my closeted gay roommate and the sports reporter who wants to see my career end? Did I even wake up today, or am I still asleep, and this is a nightmare of epic proportions?

"Hey, Knox," Lilah says, stopping next to us and hugging him. She turns to me and lowers her sunglasses with a Condor's manicured finger, appraising me from head to toe and pursing her lips like I didn't pass muster. "I didn't realize you were bringing him ." She says it conspiratorially, like they've spoken about me before and their judgment has been passed.

"Brunch is open to everyone, Lilah," I snap. "It's not just for judgmental women who have it out for athletes who happen to slip up once."

Knox lowers his brows and holds his finger and thumb up in a this-close gesture, and I know I'm treading on the edge of his rules for the day. I have to keep it together, to prove I'm more than the asshole he thinks I am. I'll be wonderful company and can enjoy even a fucking drag brunch if that's what these two think is fun. I won't be the annoying third wheel that rains on their Pride parade.

"Let's go find seats," Knox says, weariness in his tone already. Great, he doesn't

believe I can do this, and I'm ruining his morning .

Nope. I think the fuck not.

I won't ruin anything. In fact, I'll be so fantastic, he's going to have the best fucking time at drag brunch. Even better than it would be with just Lilah, because I'm not the awkward third wheel on their bestie brunch date he's thinking I will be. I'm the party. It'll be so much fun that he'll want me to join him at every outing from now on. Just you wait and see, Golden Boy.

A heavily made-up queen in a big blonde Marilyn Monroe-style wig, tall heels, and a sparkly red dress leads us to a table. She's almost as tall as me, though she's slimmer. "Just look at you two beefcakes. Gawd, what did we do to get you in the house this morning?" She whips out a fan and flutters it in front of herself with a hand that has long red nails and glittery rings. "It's a praise Jesus hallelujah miracle, and it's not even Sunday morning."

I laugh and play along. "Is it really a miracle if I'm the demon your mama warned you about rather than the boy you'd take to church?" I joke. It's easy enough to flirt if I just imagine it's any woman I'd meet in the bar or someone's friend. I don't have to think about the specifics. Just look at me, proving Knox wrong.

She presses the back of her hand to her forehead and faux swoons against me. "Oh, lawd have mercy. We've got a lively one. I'm keeping my eye on you, big boy." She swaggers off, hips swaying and fan fluttering quickly.

"I didn't know you'd be into drag brunch, Ryder," Lilah says once we're seated. "Doesn't seem like your style after your sentiments recently went viral." She leans her elbow on the table and props her chin on her palm as she grins, clearly goading me.

What is her problem? She won't let this go. I need to put a stop to this, or we'll never be able to move on. "Well, Lilah, people are complicated, with layers and different sides to them that aren't always seen in one video or interaction. Human nature means we're not perfect and will inevitably fuck up."

I throw a packet of sugar from the holder on the table and make it into the coffee mug in front of her, and smile sweetly. She picks it out and rolls her eyes. "You're like the annoying little brother I never wanted," she grumbles. I ignore her comment and continue.

"Sure, the video was an unflattering portrayal of one thing I said that was caught and shared out of context, and I'm not proud of it. But it helped me realize I had some things to work on." I pick up the rolled-up silverware and point it at her, using all the props on the table to my advantage. "But you continually bringing up my mistake isn't helping me move on. It's only proving that you think people are one-dimensional and incapable of change. If you can't acknowledge that people can learn from their mistakes, then I don't think we'll ever get along." I dramatically unroll the napkin and let the fork, knife, and spoon fall into my hand as I snap the linen and set it in my lap with finality.

Lilah's grin has slipped away, replaced by a look of deep contemplation. She seems to be weighing my words, looking for the truth in them, or deciding if I'm full of shit. It was the most honest thing I've said in a while, so I don't know what I'll do if she doesn't accept it.

"You're right," she says slowly, like it hurts to admit. "I judged you based on one bad moment. That was pretty shitty of me. In my defense, I'm protective of my friend and hated that you dragged his name through the mud and cast any sort of doubt on his character with your statements being so hateful. I don't care if what you said was true or not; it's the way you said it and how it unintentionally defamed Knox that got to me. But I should have been more professional about the whole situation. I'm sorry,

and I won't bring it up again if you do better going forward." Her face is serious, contrite even, and I feel like I've won a conference final with that admission, even with her caveat at the end.

Holy shit, I never expected her to see reason or to agree with me. I just wanted to call her out for how she's been hounding me in interviews. She eases the tension by throwing the packet of sugar back at me, aiming for my face, but I have superior reflexes and catch it in the air before it even comes close.

Knox looks between us and blows out a breath like he's been holding it during our standoff. "Glad that's out of the way." He laughs, the sound rich, deep, and relieved. "I thought I was going to have to referee your sparring match all day."

A queen with purple victory-rolled hair dressed like a Betty Page pin-up girl stops by our table, blowing a pink bubble from her gum before popping it and pulling out an electronic ordering pad. "I'm Tess Tickles, and I'll be taking care of ya. What can I getcha studs, and you fine lady?"

We place our brunch orders with the appropriately named server and get our mimosas just as the house lights go down and the stage lights brighten.

"Hello, all you good girls, boys, and toys! I'm your hostess with the mostest, your drag lurker and twerker, Miss Fonda Cox!" She bends over and skillfully shakes her ass in a fringed green dress before standing upright again. "You can call me Fonda, Miss Cox, or Mama, 'cause I'm taking care of you for the duration of this show, got it?" She nods her head, her bright red curly wig sliding around her shoulders.

The room erupts into hoots and mmhmmms and yaasss queen s as people snap and clap and nod.

"We have the best food from Mama P's, so I hope y'all ordered brunch, and don't

forget to tip your servers; they need it, honey,” she says, placing a hand by her mouth and lowering her tone conspiratorially before brightening and skipping to the center of the stage in her tall gold heels. “Today we’ve got a brilliant show all ready to go, with some of the best queens in Atlanta about to blow your minds. Or, you know, other anatomy, should that interest you, but you’ll have to be very good and make it rain, dolla, dolla bills y’all!” she shouts into her microphone, and the place screams like they know some secret I’m not privy to.

I look around and see Lilah and people all around the room holding up fistfuls of bills, waving them around, and dancing in their seats. What the hell? Is this like a strip club? Was I supposed to bring small bills with me, and what would I do with them if I had? I fish for my wallet, but I know I only have a hundred, maybe a twenty if I’m lucky. I rarely carry cash. Knox puts his hand on my arm and catches my attention.

“Relax, I have cash,” he says evenly, a small smile on his full lips at my apparent distress. I don’t want to do this wrong. He slides over a stack of ones and pats my hand. “If a queen comes up to the table, you can either hand her cash directly or tuck it into her outfit wherever they present an opportunity to you. They’re forward and open, so you’ll know if they don’t want something.”

“Thanks,” I say, taking the money and looking away so he doesn’t see how touched I am by his kind gesture. Why does he have to go and one-up me with his niceness every chance he gets? It raises the bar for what I have to meet and exceed to show him I can be better.

This is weird enough without knowing the unspoken rules of drag brunch. I feel like I’m three steps behind everyone and standing out like a sore thumb as an obviously straight dude who doesn’t know what he’s doing here. Well, the thing with Knox in the kitchen this morning makes me question just how straight I might be if my cock was that happy to be rubbing up against him, but I’ve already ruled it out as a friction

rather than feelings thing.

Fonda Cox captures our attention again from the stage, where she's twirling lazily around a pole off to one side. "Are you ready to be wowed by your favorite entertainers?"

She waits for us to shout our enthusiasm. The crowd sends up a murmur of assent, and she frowns, her exaggerated makeup doing even more for her expression.

"I can't hear you, my babies. You must be louder for the queens in the back to know it's show time."

The room erupts into noise, and I look around, wide-eyed at the spectacle. People really get into drag brunch, including Knox and Lilah, who are shouting and wooing like the rest.

"We have the grand dame of Atlanta, Gloria Hole, the illustrious Ivanna Dix, Hotlanta hotness herself Honor Back, and our luscious Lucinda Rear all kicking up their heels and clutching their pearl necklaces, waiting to come out here to knock your socks off. Now, put your hands together for our queens!"

I follow the crowd and clap along as Chappell Roan's "Pink Pony Club" blasts through the speakers, and a queen in a pink wig and cowboy hat, high-cut bodysuit, and cowboy boots gallops onto the stage, riding a hobby horse while lip-syncing and dancing. This is fucking surreal. I cannot believe what I'm seeing or where I am. No one would believe me if I told them because it's so beyond my normal that they would say I'd made it up as a funny story to entertain the boys.

Our food is brought out by Tess Tickles, and things get even more bizarre as I eat a plate of biscuits and gravy, bacon, and eggs, with a side of pancakes and fruit while drag queens prance around a stage, singing their hearts out. The food is phenomenal,

though, so I start to relax a bit and sink back into the booth as I try to enjoy the spectacle in front of me.

I look over at Knox. He's smiling and singing along, his shoulders doing a slight bounce as he eats his eggs Benedict. He's so happy and lighter than I've seen him in—well, since we were kids. I only notice now that he carries such a heavy weight around with him daily because he's free of it, at least for a few hours. It must be hard not to live your truth, hiding who you are just to fit in and make others comfortable. I feel a pang of remorse for my part in that. Okay, I was probably the biggest contributing factor to Knox's closeting himself for this long and living behind this pretense to satisfy the image of how others see him. I need to be the one who helps him realize that he can change now, and he's free to be the man he truly is and love who he wants to love.

“Ivanna Dix needs a big, strapping beefcake of a man to come up here and show us what he's made of for this next performance. Tess Tickle let me know there are two such lads in attendance, and one might just be the bad boy we need,” Fonda Cox says, stretching out a long, manicured finger and slowly turning around the room until she stops at our table. “You, big boy with the long hair, look like just the man for the job. How about we show him our appreciation and get him up here!”

The crowd turns to our table with curious and appreciative looks alike. My face goes up in flames as they start screaming and clapping to encourage me to go up on that stage. “Oh, fuck no,” I say as Lilah howls in glee and points at me.

“It's not so bad. You play in front of a crowd way bigger than this, and you like being objectified and having your ego stroked, anyway. This is exactly the crowd to do it,” Knox counters, squeezing my shoulder to incentivize me to leave the safety of my table for the spotlight.

Just then, three of the queens stop at our table in a cloud of wigs, pantyhose, and

sequins, and I no longer have a choice. They haul me from the table with remarkably powerful hands and frog march me up on the stage as they titter and compliment my arm muscles and call me pretty . When they move to the side, I'm suddenly in a spotlight, and all hell breaks loose on the stage. "I'm Coming Out" by Diana Ross starts to play and my heart drops into my ass. I cut my hands in front of me in a no way gesture and look around frantically. I don't want anyone thinking I volunteered to be part of this act or knew what song would be played, and this is somehow part of some big coming out plan. I'm not gay. I can't be. Except ...a little voice in my head hedges, and I shut it down before it can go on. Not happening.

Now what the fuck is going on? The three queens who dragged me up here know some kind of choreography and are dancing around me like I'm a prop. One of them positions my arm into a biceps curl and then abruptly hangs off it, so I have to flex to not drop her. They're treating me like a damn jungle gym. I stare out into the crowd, in the general direction of my table, and can vaguely make out Knox, grinning and laughing like this is his birthday and I've made his whole fucking year. Okay, fine, if this is what makes him happy and shows I can do nice things, I can get into it a little.

I do some more muscle man poses, and suddenly the entire room is catcalling and dollar bills are flying onto the stage as people get out of their seats to get closer. This is all it takes to entertain the drag brunch crowd? Easy enough. I lift my shirt and flex my abs, getting the biggest reaction of all. I smile and take the hand of one of the closest queens, twirl her into me, and dip her just as the song transitions to "Whatta Man" by Salt-N-Pepa and En Vogue.

"Oh, you're strong," she says with a smile. I set her back on her feet and attempt to leave the stage, but she grabs my arm and holds me in place. "Not yet, honey bear, don't you hear this song? It's your anthem, baby. We need you up here."

Another drag queen enters the stage and approaches me as she lip-syncs to the song about a man with a body like Arnold. I make an "Oh gosh, me?" face at her as I press

my hand to my chest like I'm so flattered. I cross my arms because it's fucking awkward to be up here, not knowing what to do, even if I'm trying to play this off for Knox's sake. My heart is pounding from the scrutiny, but it also kind of feels good to know that I'm the object of attention for so many of these people. Knox was right, I do want to be objectified. He knows me better than I do, apparently.

The drag queen, who I think is called Ivanna Dix, drapes a purple feather boa around my shoulders, and suddenly, I have a prop. I grab the ends and shimmy my shoulders, getting the crowd going again. More dollars end up on the stage, and now I know I can do this. I move my hips back and forth and even pop my ass a bit in an attempt to twerk, which gets even more of a reaction. I catch Knox's eye, and he's looking at me with awe and like he has no idea who I am, so I keep going. I gyrate my hips in his direction, pumping along to the beat of the song, and then turn and shake my ass. I have no rhythm, and this cannot be called dancing, but it's certainly entertaining.

When the song ends, I'm kind of out of breath from the theatrics of it all, and Ivanna Dix bends, scoops up a handful of bills, and shoves them down the open front of my shirt. "You deserve this and more, honey," she says, squeezing my biceps and leading me to the edge of the stage. "That was priceless. I should have you come out for all my sets, and I'll be taking home more money than I'll know what to do with."

I pull my wallet out of my pocket and fish out the hundred, holding it up. "I should be the one thanking you. That just proved to my roommate that I could overcome stereotypes and have a little fun, so you deserve it."

"I won't stop you, baby," she says, leaning forward from the stage and presenting her contoured chest and the stuffed bodice of her dress for me to stick the bill into. It's one of the oddest things I've done, but I'm racking those up today, so I shouldn't be surprised by this.

I walk back to my table slowly because I'm stopped by more than a few people

giving me their numbers or saying I was the highlight of their brunch, and complimenting me. When I finally slide back into our table, Knox is leaning back with a satisfied grin, and Lilah is looking impressed. I hand the wad of cash from my shirt to Knox.

“Thanks for taking me to drag brunch,” I say.

“That was something,” Knox replies, a little awed.

“I got video and pictures, so we know it actually happened. I’ll send some to you,” Lilah says to Knox.

I groan. “Great, just what I need, evidence of this out in the wild with the one person who wants to take me down more than anything.”

“Hey, we’re past that,” Lilah says, waving her hand like it’s nothing that she trashed me in the press. “This is insurance to keep you from doing anything to Knox in the future.”

I don't think Lilah and I will ever be the kind of friends she and Knox seem to be, but I can appreciate her wanting to protect him. “Make sure you only send him the ones where I look good,” I say, giving in to the teasing. “Can’t have him holding bad photos of me over my head.”

Lilah laughs wickedly. “Deal.”

Okay, drag brunch wasn’t so bad.

Thirteen

Knox

I stare at Goldie's fish tank and make a sound between a snort of anger and a sigh of defeat. It's littered with fish flakes. They're floating on the surface and sunk to the bottom of the tank, coating the bright pink rocks, fake plants, and the sparkly castle in gross goop. I pick up the jar of fish flakes and realize it's half empty. Fucking Ryder. He must have dumped a week's worth of food into the tank before he left on his road trip this morning. I told him before drag brunch last weekend that if he could keep it together, I'd watch Goldie for him while he's out of town, yet somehow it didn't click for him.

I queue up a new audiobook—a gay billionaire firefighter and sexy mechanic romance that is so full of yearning and desire, I can hardly keep from sighing as I scoop Goldie out of the tank and plop her into a cup of water so I can clean up the mess Ryder made. Funny, I seem to be doing a lot of that lately. But even though this is a physical mess to clean, it doesn't bother me quite as much. I use the net to skim the water for all the soggy flakes I can catch, drain the tank, rinse the rocks until I can't see any more of the nasty flakes, then refill the water and treat it with the drops Ryder brought home from the pet store. I finally release Goldie from her temporary holding cell back into her sparkly castle wonderland. Ryder went out of his way to decorate the fish tank. It's like a mansion for a goldfish and incredibly...girly. If I didn't know better, I'd say Ryder has a feminine side or might lean a bit bi himself to have made the choices he did for the fish.

Could Ryder be bi ? I think about the way he touched me in the kitchen, pulling me

close and grinding his hard cock against my hip. There was no denying he was turned on by the situation, if not by me. He made sure I felt his lips when he spoke his words directly into my ear, wanting a response from me. Just how straight is Ryder? It's a spectrum for most people, anyway. But it's not my place to assume anything. It's easier to remember Ryder likes a reaction, and is reckless enough to push his limits to get one out of me than it is to consider he would have done that because he has feelings for me that toe the line of platonic or verge into my kind of territory that has him wanting me. I'm smarter than that.

Once Goldie is safely back in her clean tank, I head to the pet store. As I slide into my car, I type out a text to Ryder.

Knox: You're an attempted murderer.

Ryder's reply comes minutes later. I wait until I'm at a light to check the message, and his confusion is obvious.

Ryder: The fuck? Did you choke on your protein shake or something? I had nothing to do with that if that's the case.

Knox: You tried to kill Goldie. That's no way to take care of your fish, you idiot.

Ryder: Whoa, I didn't try to kill Goldie. I love her. She's my child. I want her to thrive.

Knox: So you dumped a week, or even a month's worth of food, into her tank before you left? You're a shitty fish dad.

Ryder: Take that back! I'm a good fish dad! She needs to eat, Golden Boy. I made sure she had food while I'm gone.

Knox: No. Just no. Goldfish will eat until they explode. You tried to blow up your fish, Reckless. Besides, the food got all soggy and was super gross in her tank, which is bad for her. That's no way to care for your fish .

I continue driving while my phone pings with new messages. Once I park at the pet store, I check them.

Ryder: Goldie is smarter than that. She's disciplined. She eats when she's hungry, you've seen how she leaves some flakes for later.

Ryder: Goldie's okay, right?

Ryder: She left food for later and didn't eat until exploding. Right?

Ryder: KNOX! Answer me!

Ryder: My fish is alive, right? I didn't kill her?

Ryder: You fucking suck. I'm mourning the loss of my fish, and it's all your fault.

I shake my head at the projection of his guilt onto me, and his depth of feeling for the little fish that probably can't even distinguish between his face and the castle in her tank. At least it shows he's capable of caring deeply about another living creature, and he wants to take care of something. He's more nurturing than he lets on. I decide to put him out of his self-inflicted misery and text back.

Knox: Goldie is fine. I saved her life. I cleaned her tank out. You can thank me later.

My phone rings as I'm walking into the pet store. I answer it when I see it's Ryder.

"The fish is alive, chill," I start, knowing he's probably spiraling and wanting to put

his fears to rest.

“Don’t fuck with me about my fish, Knox,” Ryder says, impertinence in his voice.

“What the fuck do you mean? I’m fixing your mess and taking better care of it than you are, you lame fish dad. I wasn’t about to let your fish eat itself to death like a tiny glutton.” I rub a palm over my face as I look for the fish section of the store. Why am I even putting up with this? I’m doing something nice for him, helping him out, and he’s just an irrational, angry bastard who doesn’t know how to say thank you.

“Nothing can happen to her, you got it?” he says, impatience coloring his words now.

“You don’t have to be so grumpy, I’m the one saving your ass. You caused your own distress this time. I was going to have to buy another fish if you killed this one.”

“That’s not even funny.” His voice is deadly serious. Okay, no jokes about his fish dying and replacing it.

“Lesson learned, right? The fish can’t handle half a jar of flakes at once. She’s not like you and your insatiable appetite,” I say, spotting the aquariums and fish bowls. I head down the aisle, looking at all the options and trying to find what I need.

“Hey, fuck you. I’m a growing boy, and I burn a million calories between all my training and games. I can eat what I want. Besides, you know I look good despite what I eat. I’ve seen you checking out my abs.” His tone is haughty, and I can just imagine his eyebrows drawing together as he puffs his chest and points at his abs like he did on stage at the drag show when he proudly showed off his physique. Yeah, he works hard for that body and should be proud. He looks damn good.

“I’m ignoring your statement since you can’t see me rolling my eyes,” I say, my cheeks heating when he calls me out. Finding what I’m looking for, I pick up the

package, turning it around and reading the description to make sure it will work. “I’m at the pet store buying an automatic feeder, so there’s no need to dump in so much food if you’re leaving. You just set up the feeder, and she’ll get food every day at a specified time.”

“Ah, Knox, you do care about Goldie! We’re already playing house, so you can be mommy, and I’ll be daddy. We both know you’re more nurturing, anyway,” he quips, a laugh in his words. Why does he always have to laugh at me? I want to wipe the smirk right off his beautiful face.

“You motherfucker, that’s not even funny,” I say, gesturing with the box in my hand to the empty aisle around me.

“Hmm, calling me a motherfucker implies you want me to fuck a mother, and we did just decide you’re Goldie’s, so...you trying to tell me something, Contraire? I knew you were obsessed with me, but this is a new level of interest. I’ll have to think about that proposition.”

His arrogance is unmatched. “You’re an idiot, and once again, I’m ignoring you. This is your damn fish we’re talking about. I shouldn’t be doing anything for it. You left it in squalid conditions and forced me into this.”

“Admit it, you like being forced and told what to do. I know you need a man to dominate you in the bedroom. A little force is a good thing when you’re both into it,” he says, his voice dropping low and dragging through gravel, it’s so rough as he continues with his innuendo and taunting.

My body goes still, my skin burning at his depraved suggestion as I shut my eyes, even though the images he’s conjured play on a loop against the backdrop of my mind. Do I want to be dominated? From this instant reaction, the idea sounds more than ideal. How could Ryder guess that about me? I swallow around the lump in my

throat and will myself not to react. I'm in public, a damn pet store, and he's just fucking with me, anyway.

"I'll buy the feeder. You need to be more responsible with your fish. Stop messing with me, or you're going to get it back."

"Is that a threat, Golden Boy?" he asks with obvious interest. "You want to give me a taste of my own medicine, see how good it feels to be bad for once? Go ahead, give it a try. I'm waiting."

"I'm hanging up now," I say, pulling the phone away from my ear.

"Be bad, Knox. It feels really fucking good." I hear before I end the call.

Fourteen

Ryder

F ucking Lilah. Photos of me at the drag brunch ended up online, and hockey social media accounts have gotten hold of them. Pictures of me shaking my ass onstage with a purple feather boa. Flashing my abs and flexing my arms. Shots of me dipping a drag queen. Images of me and Knox in conversation at our table. The headlines come in fast and hot, and my phone pings with notifications whenever something new attached to my name or tagging me on socials is posted.

Unlikely bromance hard launched at Drag Brunch checks the hockey world into the boards.

Hydra' s goalie gets wild onstage with drag queens after a viral homophobic rant.

Kingston's unexpected friendship with NFL star thrust him into the spotlight, leaving us nearly as surprised as seeing him thrust his hips onstage at a recent Drag Brunch.

Publicity stunt to rehabilitate problematic goalie's image, or a fun outing with friends? The Atlanta Hydras' goalie Ryder Kingston spotted with NFL star and unknown woman at a bawdy Drag Brunch.

I shoot off a text before I finally turn off my social media notifications and flip my phone over. I'm annoyed as hell about this, and Knox needs to know the kind of company he's keeping so he doesn't trust her with anything important, like who he wants to fuck.

Ryder: Lilah is a bitch. She released those photos of me she promised would be kept between us, and now I'm back in the headlines, and sports socials are blowing up with our "adventures." Send her my biggest thanks and both middle fingers.

I'm not even home to tell Knox to his face that he has terrible taste in friends. I've been on this ten-day road trip that feels like it'll never end, hitting Philadelphia and Pittsburgh before playing Boston. We won against Philadelphia, but Pittsburgh gave us a run for our money, and we lost that one admirably. Tomorrow, we head to Boston for our last game. It will be incredibly weird to play my former team. To see the uniform I wore for years and not be in it. To be in the arena that felt like home and skate onto the ice from the visitors' entrance. To have the fans booing me when I make a save rather than celebrating.

To deal with the stress, I did something I promised myself I'd never do again—download the Vers app and log in for the first time in years. Guilt washes over me now as I scroll through the profiles of faceless men in various states of undress, looking for someone to have a virtual hookup with.

I've messed with the app a few times before and always told myself it was just for fun, to scratch an itch, and to get my ego stroked unconventionally. But this time, it feels different. I created a new account name, as I do each time I download the app. This time, I'm HotnHandsy, which kind of feels stupid, but I'd rather it be that than HockeyHottie or something that would link back to me. The profile photo I post is a standard tented sweats shot, so the viewer knows I'm hard, big, and leaving something to the imagination to get them to message me for more.

I stop my scrolling on a profile with a photo of the most delicious rich, light brown abs and a hand down low-slung gray sweatpants, showing off a veiny forearm corded with muscle, letting me know he's fisting his cock in his pants. HandyManCan is the winner of my attention, hands down. I click and message him immediately.

HotnHandsy: Do you think we both have a hand kink, with usernames like ours? Only, your hands are suspiciously absent from your profile photo, and now I'm curious. Put my mind at ease and help me figure out if I have a thing for hands, or just for you.

I favorite his profile and back out because he doesn't have his online indicator turned on, so I don't know if he's available. While scrolling a few minutes later, still thinking of that hand hidden by his sweats and what he was gripping, I get a notification of a new message. I click my direct messages and see that HandyManCan has responded. Hell fucking yes. I'm unreasonably excited by the idea of chatting with him after his photo piqued my interest so thoroughly. I've found a lot of the guys on this app aren't great conversationalists, so I have a low bar, but I like to talk as much as I like to fuck, and it would be nice if I found someone who held my interest longer than it took to get off.

HandyManCan: That's too funny. I've never considered a hand kink. Total coincidence. Unless...you want to test your theory? I'll show you mine if you show me yours, and we'll see if they do anything for us.

He sent me a photo, too. It's taken from chest level, showing an open lavender button-down shirt, highlighting that heavily muscled torso. He's wearing silver-gray suit pants, undone, with a black leather belt unbuckled. Maybe he's a businessman of some sort if he's wearing dress clothes. One hand rests so he's perfectly highlighting his cum gutter—the V cut of his abs leading to his cock—and it looks entirely too lickable and just right for spilling a load onto. He has perfect hands. Broad palm, long fingers, short-cut nails, and a hint of calluses from what I can make out without seeing the other side of his hand. Never have I loved a photo of a hand more. Maybe it's just him because his hands are doing things to me that no one else's ever have.

I'm in my hotel room, already stripped down to my boxer briefs and sporting a semi from this brief interaction alone. The illicitness of this conversation has me breathing

heavily, my heart racing with the adrenaline rush of acting on something forbidden, something that I've always said wasn't for me. Yet here I am, obviously getting a thrill from this, so something has to be up with me.

I casually rest a hand on my lower abs, fingers playing with the waistband of my briefs, and snap a photo that I send over with my next message.

HotnHandsy: That'll do it. Can confirm that maybe I have a little bit of a hand kink. Or maybe I just like how you set up the shot and want to see more.

I'm brazen, but holding back from sending a dick pic or asking for nudes. I can be crass, but I know I need to approach this slowly and feel out HandyManCan so I know he's worthy of my attention and body. I want to get off, but only with someone who deserves it. Maybe that's a convoluted way of thinking since I'll take home any pretty female face who's down to fuck, yet I want my virtual male hookup to earn it. I'll let someone else unpack that. Right now, I have a hot set of abs and a hand I want wrapped around my cock writing back.

HandyManCan: Well fuck me, look at that, my pants fell off and I do have a thing for your hands after all. Are you gonna show me what that hand can do?

The attached photo is of his now shirtless, pantsless body stretched out, one knee bent up and his hand pushing down his briefs so he can grip the base of his—holy shit, that is the most flawless cock I've ever seen. Thick, long, a perfect, deep shade of tan, and veined so prettily I'd get on my knees and lick each one. And fuck, he's manscaped, his dark hair neatly trimmed and just enough to lead up his stomach in a trail I'd like to explore more. I've been with so many women over the years who are shaved or waxed bare. It's nice to see a little something natural to remind me I'm dealing with a man, and damn, do I like the distinction.

I groan as I push down my briefs and free my cock that is straining, precum already

weeping from the ruddy tip, with how excited I am about this. I'm an equal-opportunity attention whore, but this feels different. It's something I keep for myself, and giving in to the temptation feels like a relief and a line I'm crossing at the same time. I spread the precum with my thumb, holding my shaft tight up near the head, and take a photo that I send over to HandyManCan.

HotnHandsy: Look what you're doing to me, big sexy. I'm weeping for that fat cock of yours. If you were here, I'd wrap my hand around us both, squeeze, and ever so slowly jack you off against me until your knees gave out and you were begging me to come. I bet you beg so pretty. Now, tell me what you want, and say please.

I'm typing one-handed as I stroke myself as slowly as I promised him I would. My body shudders under my own touch as I imagine his big, callused palm sliding over me instead. I don't have to wait long for a response, and it has me stopping my strokes to squeeze hard, so I don't shoot my load onto my stomach immediately at how fucking sexy it is and how it about ends me.

HandyManCan: You got me so twisted. I hate to say it, but I'm about to come right now with how fucking hot it is that you described a top-three fantasy for me right out of the gate. I can usually last longer, I swear, but your mouth is so damn sexy. All I want is to see you come for me, please, baby.

It's the baby that sends me over the edge, and I'm clenching my abs, thinking of the way my hockey gear smells, and running through visual warm-up drills to keep myself in check. I hit the video chat button so fast you'd think it was on the cusp of disappearing and don't give it a second thought. Normally, I'm a photos-only chatter, worried something about me will be too identifiable, but this man can have anything he wants, including watching me come apart to his words. The best part of this app is the fact that the selfie camera is disabled, so I'd have to turn my phone completely around to show off my face, which gives me some semblance of safety.

The video connects and I get an even better view of his cock as he shuttles his fist up the incredible length of it, and my cock jerks in response. So worth the video call.

“Oh, thank fuck you answered,” I breathe, my voice pitched lower and coarser than I typically speak to help disguise my identity, not that I imagine a hockey fan will stumble across my profile, but stranger things have happened.

“You fucking beautiful thing,” he says, his voice deep and rumbling, sending a shiver of longing straight to my balls. “How could I resist when I’m already about to come from your tempting photos? I had to see the real thing before I blow.”

Oh shit. I really like being his beautiful thing. “Do you see what you’re doing to me?” I ask raggedly, as liquid arousal leaks slowly from my tip and I groan with how close I am. “Fuck, I need you to clean this up with that sinful-sounding mouth so I can give you what you’ve earned.”

“Jesus. Fuck,” he mutters. His fist closes tighter as he angles his cock toward his phone so I get the prettiest view of drops of precum beading at the slit. His monster cock is uncut, and the mental images I get of pressing the head of my dick to his and sliding his foreskin over us both as I jack us off has me clutching the phone hard enough to crack the plastic. I’m valiantly holding back my orgasm that is barreling down on me, the pressure building at the base of my spine. I don’t have long.

“Call me baby when you come and let it pool on your stomach. I want to see you fall apart for me,” I growl, getting bossy and loving the goosebumps that rise on his skin beneath the sheen of sweat that has him glowing in the dim light of his room. I just know he wants to be told what to do.

“Baby,” he groans, the word stretched and low, the sound hitting me right in the balls as his fist moves faster. “Oh, fuck, baby, I can’t stop. I’m coming for you.” He grunts, the sound far sexier than I could have imagined as he jerks his release onto his

stomach just like I demanded.

“You're such a good boy for me,” I grit out as I finally give in to the need to let go. “Ahh, fuck,” I moan, coming when I see his spill hit his skin.

Our hands harmonize, moving in tandem as we both milk the last of the cum out onto our stomachs. I watch in awe as his pearly release shines against his skin while his abs rise and fall with breaths that sync with my own. I'm lost to the sight, speechless, feeling way more about the intimate moment than I'm sure anyone should with a faceless hookup app. Finding my voice, I can't stop the words that fall from my mouth.

“You...” I croak, my voice broken from the viciousness of my orgasm that strained my entire body with the force. “Are so fucking sexy.”

“That was...so good,” he says, equally breathless. “Where the hell did you come from? How do I get one of you in real life?”

My drained cock jumps at his praise as hot pride fills my chest. “I'm right here, and you can have me whenever you want to fuck your fist for me.”

Part of me is stuck on the real-life piece of his question. Could I actually do this? It's one thing to open an app and jack off to a dude, but to live out these fantasies with a man isn't something I've wanted to make happen...until now. That makes this itch, my dirty little secret, real .

Every time I've downloaded the Vers app and acted on the urge to connect with a dude, I've exited immediately and felt like shit. I've always been disgusted by these desires, ashamed that I could even entertain the idea of finding a man attractive or wanting to do more than look at one from afar, especially after what people said about me in high school and how I turned that back on Knox.

Knox . I've been so horrible to him for something he's incapable of changing and is more honest about than I am when it comes to what I want. I don't know how to undo the past. I don't even know how to bridge the gap between how I treated him back then, and why I have some not quite platonic thoughts and the desire to touch him now.

My mind is reeling from my orgasm and thinking about Knox. The two things had never crossed previously, but now that they have, I can't untangle them. The morning Knox found a naked woman in his kitchen, I'd gotten hard and rubbed my cock on him, needing him to know he'd done that to me even as I grappled with the incomprehensible realization that I wanted to touch him. He told me to fix this and wanted me to fuck the girl I'd brought home. He thought I was just generally horny, but it wasn't her I was thinking about. I answered that I didn't know how to fix it because all that was in my head right then was what I wanted to do to him , no matter what I told myself at the moment.

I can't fucking fix this. I'm obviously broken. I've always been better at wrecking things than fixing them. His statement hit me in waves, the full weight of it crashing against me over and over. That day at drag brunch, I realized I needed to make things right, but I had no idea how, and I still don't.

“You ever hurt someone you love and not know how to fix it?” I ask absently, letting my mouth wander along with my thoughts.

“I've been hurt by someone I loved,” he answers solemnly, voice quiet and so honest I feel more naked now than I have since we started chatting.

When I look back at the screen, his fingers are absently tracing along his oblique, and fuck, I want to be the one touching him. Wanting my fingers dipping along his muscles, pressing into his smooth skin and hard flesh beneath. I don't think of myself as a cuddler, preferring my space, but I have the insistent ache to roll this man to his

side, slide up behind him, my cock nestled between his ass cheeks where he can keep me warm, wrap my arm around his waist, and pull him into me. I want to hold him for meeting me with his vulnerability when I said something off the cuff. Maybe I can't hold him physically, but I can share more of myself with him for the connection.

“I have this friend. I fucked things up a long time ago and we never got past it. I never thought I'd get a chance to make it right, but work brought us together, and now I have to live with what I did in my face all the time. There's this canyon between who we are now and the friends we used to be, and it hurts to look back over that split in the earth and know it didn't have to be there, but I caused it,” I admit. This is the first time I've said this out loud, and it feels good to get it off my chest, even to a stranger.

His hand slows as he reaches the cum on his belly. He passes a finger through the mess, and I shudder. I mimic his movements and imagine he's touching me.

“Who says you can't get past it if you're both willing? Actions speak louder than words, so you could show them you're sorry.” He's silent as he waits for my response.

“I'm not sure they're willing. I messed up badly. They don't owe me anything, so it's not right to even ask for their forgiveness. Wow, that's way more honest than I wanted to get after coming harder than I have in years. You got me all sentimental with that orgasm,” I joke, trying to lighten the mood I've unintentionally dragged down with my morose topics.

“You're not cheating on anyone right now, are you? No one thinks they're in a relationship with you and would be hurt if they knew you just jacked off with a stranger on the internet?” he asks, his voice growing distant. I guess he has his own serious questions weighing on him.

I snort, grateful for a simple question I can answer honestly. “No, I’m definitely single. This was fun and also nice. Thanks for listening to me when you could have just disconnected after getting off.”

He chuckles a humorless sound. “That’s not how I roll, baby. I’m looking for more than most use this app for, I guess.”

Baby. Damn, he knows exactly how to send chills racing down my spine and turn me to mush with one word. I decide I’m keeping him. “I want to do this again with you.”

“I’d like that.” He sounds almost shy, and I can’t imagine why this big, cocksure man would get shy for me, but I fucking love it.

“You better favorite my profile and put on a notification for me, Big Sexy. I want you shaking for me when I see you again.” It’s too easy to slip into a commanding role and push him now, after seeing his reaction to my bossiness earlier.

But what if he doesn’t like a pushy man? He’s big, with alpha energy, and clearly fueled by testosterone and a love of working out, which can be hard to come by. He could have been turned off by this and only let it slide at the moment because he was horny and wanted to get off more than he wanted to correct me.

“Already did, baby. I’ll be fucking my hand thinking of you every day until I catch you next. You can believe I’ll be a pathetic mess needing you to make me come that hard again.”

Oh fuck, that’s music to my ears. He’s so perfect. “That’s my good boy.” He sighs in appreciation, and I smile, liking this little exchange we’ve established with the short online tryst.

When I exit the app a few minutes later, I have a text waiting from Knox.

Knox: Fuck you. Lilah said she didn't post any photos. Those were from other people at brunch. You have to deal with the fact that you were seen shaking your ass on stage with drag queens and you were having fun. It's not a crime.

I breathe out a huge sigh. He's right. I did have fun, and even if people are speculating about it, it's not something I have to be ashamed of. I type back a text.

Ryder: Fine. Maybe she didn't post the photos, but if I find out she's sharing any of them, her forgiven privileges are revoked.

Now I have to clean myself up and think about why a faceless man on an app was able to get me off quicker than anyone has in years, and I wanted to spill my guts to him immediately after in some kind of awkward pillow talk.

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*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am*

Fifteen

Ryder

“Ryder, just the man I wanted to see!”

I freeze, biting back a groan as I exit the locker room after morning practice. I turn slowly at the bright, sunny voice of McKenna Kresley. She probably has some publicity request or promo idea to insist I help with again, like the opening night bullshit she roped me into by holding the rehabilitation of my image over my head. Her shiny red hair bounces in a high ponytail as she jogs up to me in her usual pantsuit over a Hydras graphic T-shirt and sneakers.

“McKenna, always good to see you,” I lie. She’s actually nice, but her job makes it difficult to enjoy being around her, despite her having a likable personality.

“I loved seeing your drag brunch photos. It was a perfect turnaround from the last time you were in the press, and people are eating it up. I couldn’t have planned it better myself.”

“That’s great?” I say, with more of a question in my words.

“We’re getting a lot of inquiries about the nature of the outing and your relationship with Knox Contraire, so any information you can provide me to field those would be great,” she says, her eyebrows raising like she wants me to clue into what she’s not saying. I hear her loud and clear. My shoulders creeping toward my ears and have to fight the urge to snap at her because it’s not her fault she’s getting questions about

what I'm doing, but it is her job to help me look good. I roll my eyes and commit to answering the best I can.

"It's part of the fucking sensitivity training I'm doing. Knox is helping me. Our agent knows he's great with interviews and keeping his cool under pressure, and wanted me to learn from him," I say quickly. "We were both forced into this. It's not like we're doing any of it together because we want to. Knox is putting me in these stupid situations that push my boundaries to force me to keep my head when I'd normally get mad. The drag brunch was sort of the live version of that. It was pretty fun."

Her face brightens even more. "That's incredible. What a story. You knew each other when you were younger, too, right? What's it like reconnecting now?"

That's a loaded fucking question even if she doesn't mean for it to be. Living with Knox, seeing him as much as I do, and having him beat these sensitivity lessons into me every chance he gets has been weird. It's both nostalgic and awful. I'm constantly reminded of our friendship growing up and the rift I caused between us, but I don't even know where to begin to fix it. Learning how much I miss him has been eye-opening.

"We're navigating what it's like seeing each other as adults when we didn't leave things on great terms as kids," I say, honestly. "I think the drag brunch was the first time we've had fun together in ages." Look at me, being honest and open with more people. Turning over a new leaf and shit. Knox really is rubbing off on me.

"Well, the coverage has been amazing and has brought a lot of attention to the Hydras that we hadn't expected, and ticket sales are up," she says, wiggling her fingers at me like I should be excited about this, too.

"Yay," I say without her enthusiasm, but I'm relieved to be moving on from the topic of Knox.

“We want to capitalize on the good feelings and pair you with our Pride Night initiative coming up.” She beams at me, but my stomach is about to fall out of my ass.

“You want what?” There’s no way she wants me to do anything that would align me with, what exactly—being gay? Because I’m not gay, and I don’t want people to think I am. This is a terrible idea.

“We’re partnering with Outlanta, a local organization that helps at-risk youth with resources. Things like providing community education, medical care after traumatic events, or basic needs like housing for those who lose their homes after coming out to their families, and resources for those who can’t come out for whatever reason. It’s a great organization and does amazing work for the community. They even provide a ton of resources and medical care for those living with HIV/AIDs, which gets pretty expensive.” McKenna is ticking off all of these things this organization does on her fingers, her big blue eyes widening as she goes.

“And how are you wanting to pair me up with them, exactly?” I ask hesitantly. Please don’t say you want me to do some campaign that would put a giant spotlight on my sexuality.

“You’ll be the face of Pride Night! We’ll shoot a campaign of photos and videos with you, touting the benefits of Outlanta, letting fans know how they can help by bidding on the Pride Night jerseys or making direct donations. It’s a tight turnaround because Pride Night is next week, and our current campaign is fine, but having you involved would kick it up, so we’re willing to reshoot everything to include you. Besides, it would be so good for your optics. The GM and ownership would look favorably on the partnership,” she finishes, pounding the final nail in the coffin.

How can I say no to that? I’m already a PR nightmare, threatened with being traded. I’m at their mercy to do whatever is required to rehabilitate my image.

“So, what do I do in these photos and videos? Kiss a dude? Because that’s going too far for my image,” I tell her seriously.

Her freckled nose crinkles as she laughs like I’ve made a joke. “Oh, God, no. I mean, not unless you wanted to.” She looks at me quizzically, trying to decipher if she could convince me before shaking her head. “For the videos, we’ll give you scripts about how important Outlanta is and why the Hydras have partnered with their organization, and we’ll do a shoot with you in the Pride Night jersey. They’ll be game-worn when we finish the online auction, and we’ll have them signed by all the players. We’ll do all the B-roll shots for socials and make sure our team has what they need to tease it.”

That sounds easy enough. “I don’t have to talk to the media or anything, right? Just the photos and videos before the game?” I ask, needing to know exactly what I’m getting into.

McKenna’s smile falters slightly before she renews her look of excitement. “We have a few interviews set up specifically for this campaign because it’s so important to us. They’re highly controlled, and I’m vetting the questions so there won’t be any surprises. It will be so good for you, Ryder,” she gushes, trying extra hard to sell me on something she’s already roped me into.

I sigh. “Fine. But this is the last thing I’m doing,” I threaten, hoping she’ll take me seriously.

Her smile flattens like she’s trying not to laugh because we both know I’m at the whims of the organization for the foreseeable future. But someday, I’ll have made it past this bump in my career, and they won’t have so much to hold over me.

“Of course, Ryder. I’ll email you the details for the shoot. See you tonight for the game.” McKenna flutters her fingers in a little wave, turns, and bounces away while

I'm stuck, thinking about this Pride Night thing.

As I leave the arena and head for the hotel—which is really fucking weird to not leave for my place after living in Boston for almost ten years—I pull my phone out and text Knox.

Ryder: The Hydras want me to be the face of some Pride Night campaign we're doing. I don't know how to do that.

He texts back faster than expected. Probably because he doesn't have a life.

Knox: Are you asking me how to represent the gays? Because I'm the last person you should ask. Hello, in the closet, remember?

Ryder: No! They're taking photos and videos, and have this special jersey we have to wear. But I have to, like, be an ambassador for it or something. I don't know how to do that. I'm better at sticking my foot in my mouth and saying shitty things than I am talking up an organization known for their work with at-risk youth and the LGBTQ+ community.

Knox: It's easy. You just let people love who they want to love and don't say shit about what people want to do in their bedrooms.

Ryder: Obviously there's more to it than that, dumbass! Like, how do I show support without, you know, coming off as gay?

Wow, that feels way too fucking vulnerable to even ask. I don't think I could have said those words to Knox's face, but typing them in a text is a bit easier.

Knox: ...

Knox: Okay, Reckless, let me get this straight. You're worried about people thinking you're gay if you participate in a Pride Night campaign or wear a Pride jersey?

Okay, when he puts it like that, it sounds fucking stupid to be worried about it. I also hear the unsaid, "How insecure about your sexuality are you?" loud and clear. I have my reasons for being worried, and he should know this. But maybe he doesn't? I never explained to Knox why I decided it was better to ruin his life than have mine ruined back in high school.

Ryder: Listen, when Commisso started fucking with us freshman year, calling us boyfriends and saying we just needed to come out already, it wasn't because we were actually gay. It was just because we were close friends. I don't know why he singled us out. We weren't doing anything different from any other guys with their friends. But somehow, just the idea that we could be gay was enough to start rumors and torment us. He would have harassed me until I quit hockey. That's how much of an ass he was and how bad it felt for me.

Ryder: I did the worst thing I could think of to put distance between myself and those rumors, hoping to keep the one thing I had that could pull me out of my shitty life by siding with him and redirecting the hate elsewhere. I don't have to tell you the rest. I was horrible in the name of saving face.

Ryder: What if aligning with this LGBTQ+ organization and being the face of Pride Night brings it all back, and people make fun of me? I don't think I can take it.

Jesus. Fuck. Look at me just spilling my guts out over text these days. First through the Vers app and now to Knox. I feel fourteen all over again, but this time, I'm letting Knox into the inner turmoil of what this is doing to me rather than pushing him out and pointing the ridicule his way to get the spotlight off me. At least I've matured a bit this time around and am not repeating the same horrible mistakes of my youth. I wait anxiously for Knox's response, but it doesn't come right away. I'm back in my

hotel room, pacing by the time my phone pings.

Knox: It comes down to fear. You have to overcome fears to make it through every single day, and you have things that help you get past them. Some fears are so small you don't even notice them anymore, like getting hit in the face with a puck. You wear protective gear and a face mask to keep yourself safe. Some fears are bigger, like flying in an airplane. You probably have coping mechanisms that help you get through every takeoff and landing, otherwise, you wouldn't be able to travel with the team.

Fuck, he remembered my fear of flying. And he's right. I go through a visualization exercise on the tarmac before every flight to remind myself that the plane will make it up and land safely, to help with my anxiety. It's not as bad anymore, but some flights with a lot of turbulence or bad weather fuck with me and I have to repeat the exercises.

Knox: Your fear of what others think about you is another thing you will have to overcome. You're the only one who can do the work required. You have to remember that it's none of your business what other people think of you, one, and two, fuck them if they want to judge.

I snort a laugh and flop onto the bed, rereading Knox's texts. He's always been so good with motivation and pep talks. He's incredibly positive and realistic. It's reassuring. It's sinking in how much I've missed this.

Knox: If you're worried people will think you're gay because you wear a special jersey and happen to talk about an organization doing good work for others, you're focusing on the wrong things. Sure, some small-minded people will always say shitty things about anything LGBTQ+ related, but that's not personal to you. That's a them problem. Let them deal with it. Hold your head high and know you're doing something worthy and respectable for people who deserve it, and that's you standing

on business.

Damn. It's that fucking simple. Let people love who they want to love. Let people think what they want, it's not for me to know or care. Let people deal with their own insecurities, it's their problem. Let worthy causes have my attention.

I type out a quick reply that I know can never convey the depth of my appreciation, but it's all I have.

Ryder: Thank you .

Now, if only I could get him to talk me up for the game against Boston because that shit is eating me alive.

My phone pings with another text.

Knox: You're going to crush Boston tonight. Don't let them get in your head. Show them what they're missing and that you're better off without them.

Well, shit.

Three goals. My former teammates have sunk three past me already, and my head is buzzing with the sound of the goal horn that normally would be incredible to hear, yet is salt in the wound tonight.

"Looks like we traded you for a draft pick just in time. You've really lost your edge, Kingsy," Miller chirps as he skates into the crease following Rogers's latest goal. Matt Miller and I were friends, and here he is, chirping at me not six months after we played together last.

Campbell pushes Miller out of the crease, giving me space to take a breath and deal

with letting in another goal. “Fuck off, Miller. You haven’t scored. You don’t get to run your mouth,” he says, getting into the smaller forward’s face. Campbell has been quick to defend me in each game, playing his role of enforcer when needed, and it feels good to see my new team have my back as well as Boston used to.

Westy skates up and hits my leg pad with his stick. “Don’t let them get to you, Kingsy. We have two. We’ll tie it up and get ahead. We’re not letting Boston win tonight.”

Monty follows Westy and pulls my helmet into his. “Bring it back. You’re better than this. Don’t think about what’s happened, only what you have ahead of you, and that’s stopping more shots and being our backbone.” He slaps my helmet encouragingly and grunts.

I appreciate their motivation because this shit is hard. Boston is a phenomenal team, I know for a fact as I was part of it for so long. It’s hard to play against a team that works as such a well-oiled unit. I push up my mask and shake the sweat out of my face as I grab water. How are we supposed to get past them when they work so well together? Actually, I may be able to use some of the knowledge I picked up in my decade with the team to exploit the few weaknesses they have.

“Hey, Monty,” I call before he can skate back to center ice for the face-off. He turns and skates closer. “Watch Hodgins on defense. He tends to get lazy on the left, leaving a pocket perfect to slip into. Tell Westy to pass to you if he gets the puck, and make sure you get into that spot. I know Upton’s weaknesses,” I tell him. Upton was my goalie tandem partner and is now their number one, the goalie Boston kept when they traded me to Atlanta. “He’s slow to react to dekes, and you can get it past him if you take it around the back. He focuses too hard on what’s in front of you.” I pass along the information to my captain, knowing he’ll do what he can if they get the chance. Monty nods in understanding and skates off to huddle with Westin and Chad before they set up for the face-off.

The Hydras win the face-off, Westy tipping the puck back to Chad, who pushes it forward as Boston comes at them hot. He passes back to Rook when there's no clear forward opening, and Rook gets it to Westy, who sees Monty in the pocket I told him about. Westy fires the puck over to Monty, who charges toward the net. Upton is on high alert, waiting for the shot, and the defenders are working to keep our team apart. Monty fakes a shot at Upton's glove side, sending the big goalie lunging to his left, only to slide the puck back between his legs with his stick and flip it over the goalie's shoulder as he skates past. The lamp lights and Upton throws his stick down in frustration as the score ties. It was a shot you don't see often, happening so quickly I have to look up to the Jumbotron to watch the replay as Monty enjoys his celly at the other end of the ice, and the guys join him.

I squirt water through my mask as the players reset. A tied score feels better than being behind, but there's more pressure than ever to score again and to keep Boston from getting any other points. I quickly scan the crowd as I tip my head back, and that's when I see the sign.

Kingsy, you're not our king anymore. We're up with Upton. Get bent!

Ouch. I shouldn't be surprised to see it; this happens all the time when players are traded, but it still hurts after all the years I gave this team and the fans. Get bent, huh? How about we win this thing and shut up all those naysayers with their signs and my former teammates with their chirps. Now I have even more to prove. I resettle my stick and adjust my glove and blocker. Let's fucking do this.

The rest of the period is a bloodbath. Both teams are battling for the puck, players flying into the boards and starting fights when play gets a bit too rough. Campbell gets the puck and sees Miller skating for him, clearly looking for a body check. Campbell ducks, throwing his shoulder into Miller's stomach and lifting, sending Miller tumbling over his back and onto the ice instead. But that gets the attention of two other Boston players, who meet him in the corner, both players checking him

brutally as they fight for the puck. Campbell drops to his knees on the ice, and Boston takes possession, skating back toward me. How the refs don't call that is beyond me, but I don't have time to argue the point when I have every Boston player on the ice barreling down on me. Coach calls a line change, sending Nico and Davy onto the ice for Rook and Campbell, and they're hustling to get back to defend our zone, but Boston is locked in and passing fluidly.

It all flashes through my mind in an instant, like it was meant to return. Miller favors glove-side shots but will occasionally aim for the five-hole, trying to sneak it between my legs. Rogers knows I'm weaker over my left shoulder and already took advantage of that once tonight, so he's probably going to try it again. Hodgins is a mean fucker who likes to skate right into the crease before firing off a shot once I'm stretched out to block his fake.

I follow the progression of their play, watching the passes and knowing where it will go next like clockwork. This is a play they've drilled a million times before, I can defend this. When Hodgins predictably skates right up into the crease and takes the pass from Rogers, I throw myself over his stick and smother the puck before he can make the shot. It results in him kneeing the shit out of my mask and tumbling over my body into the goal, but I stopped the fucking puck.

I untangle myself from Hodgins and hold the puck for the ref. I stop every shot Boston takes the rest of the game, like I can read their playbook. We manage to score one more goal to win against my former team. Leaving the arena from the visitors' side doesn't feel so bad after that.

Sixteen

Ryder

The photos and videos are done, and the jersey is super nice. Pride Night is here, and no matter my mixed feelings, I'm committed to this thing. Knox was right. I have to say fuck you to the people who will judge and give my attention to the causes that matter.

"Hey, you're up," Knox says when I wander into the kitchen after my nap, looking to get my pre-game ritual started. He's standing by the stove, shirtless, with a dish towel thrown over his shoulder, looking like he stepped right out of some culinary porn set, plating something that smells really fucking good.

"Yes, Chef," I say before I can stop myself. My voice is rough and gravelly from sleep, and apparently, I'm not fully awake yet to be flirting with him like that. I run my hands through my hair and yawn. It takes me a few minutes to truly wake up after a midday nap, but I'll get there.

He chuckles but mercifully lets my slip go. "I made pasta for you. Chicken parmesan with rigatoni." He moves over to the island and sets the plate of pasta and chicken down next to a place setting of silverware and a cloth napkin.

I look up quickly, suddenly more awake now. "Why would you do that?"

Knox looks away, biting his lip against a shy smile before he answers. "I saw you ordered it last time you had a home game. I know goalies are even weirder about your

pre-game rituals than most hockey players. You probably have the same meal every time. Hope that's okay." He gives me a look I can only call hopeful. Fuck. For an incredibly secure man, he sure looks good when he's fishing for approval.

He made my pre-game meal, the one he was right about me having before every game. We haven't crossed paths much lately with our travel schedules. I think this is the first home game he's been around for. I have a methodical pre-game ritual that I follow. I wake up at the same time, have the same breakfast before morning skate, come home to nap, and then have the same pre-game meal before heading back to the arena. It also includes the same routine of a leisurely ride on an exercise bike, visualizations, and putting my gear on in the same order. Left side first, always.

For Knox to have picked up on something like what food I ordered based on my leftovers from the last game, and then to make it for me is huge. It's a simple act that means so much. I can even let his weird goalie comment slide...because he's also right about that. We're an eccentric bunch of weirdos with more superstitions than other players and quirks that have some calling us psychos. I think I'm perfectly normal, I just have a prescriptive order for things I like. Nothing wrong with that.

"Oh, I got you a roll of rainbow tape for your stick. Thought it might be nice for Pride Night. You don't have to use it or anything," he says, gesturing at a roll of tape on the island before running a hand across the back of his neck.

Damn, he really thought of everything. My insides are warm and gooey, and I'm feeling too many things for coherent speech. I want to thank him, but the urge to touch him is stronger. I have the most pressing need to show him what he's done to me.

Before I can think too hard about the impulse, I walk up behind Knox, grab the ends of the dish towel, drawing it across his shoulders and pulling so it bends him toward me, lining his back up against my chest and grinding my cock into his ass. My mouth

is perfectly level with his ear as his head rests on my shoulder in this position. His body is coiled tightly, ready to spring, but his hands grip the granite island rather than pull at the towel to get away from me.

“That was really nice of you, Golden Boy. You keep feeding me like this, my dick is gonna get hard every time I see you.” I press my hips forward for emphasis, trapping him against the island and showing him my appreciation for the meal he made me.

“Ryder.” Knox gasps, the sound low and full of warning.

“What? You want me to thank you another way? Tell me what you want, Knox,” I rasp, begging him to say it, to tell me he wants me and I’m his type, finally. I pull harder on the ends of the towel, and his hands fly back to grip my hips as his back arches. There it fucking is. He doesn’t want me to stop any more than I do. His touch feels like molten pleasure, burning hot and sending shivers of lust straight to my cock so it jumps against him.

“We can’t,” he says, his voice almost a sob of longing that I feel in my chest. “You don’t...you’re not...”

“I’m not what?” I ask, rolling my hips harder into his fucking amazing ass that taunts me every time I see him. He has me worked up, and I can’t stop the words or what I’m doing. “You don’t know what I am, do you? You’ve never asked. But you think you know me so well. You have my character all pinned down. I’m reckless.” I thrust against him, the friction and his ass cheeks somehow the best thing I’ve felt. “I say the first thing that comes to mind.” Thrust. “I’m all action, no thought.” Thrust. “Maybe that’s a good thing, though.” Thrust. “I make things happen.” Thrust. “I get what I want.” I give him one last vicious thrust and swear in his ear as I do something I haven’t since I hit puberty—I come in my pants. I bite down on his neck to stop myself from moaning through the rest of my orgasm that doesn’t seem to want to end.

“Fuck,” Knox grunts, pressing back into me harder.

My cock jerks against his ass as I spill into my shorts in hot bursts, quickly soaking through the thin material. Saliva pools in my mouth around the spot on his neck I don't want to let go of. He tastes amazing. The woodsy and vanilla notes of his cologne, with the slight saltiness of his skin, are something I want to lick off the rest of his body with painstaking care. I'm experiencing too much pleasure to be embarrassed or have a thought beyond wanting to do that again without our clothes in the way. What would it be like to fuck Knox, for real? I've never touched a man sexually, other than what I've done to tease Knox, but I've fucked enough asses to know I love anal, and the idea of bending this big, muscular man over and taking him is becoming far too appealing. I release Knox's neck and lick the imprints my teeth made in his skin, liking the mark a little too much.

Yeah, this is bad, is the first rational thought that stumbles back into my awareness. I release the dish towel, my hands falling away from Knox's broad shoulders almost reverently. The shaky steps I take back from him feel leaden, my feet cemented in place as my body fights to stay right the fuck there against him. My chest heaves from the force of coming like a damn geyser. It's like the idea of rubbing up against Knox squeezed my balls dry.

“I don't...” I start, not sure how to explain what the fuck that was.

Knox leans over the island, his back rising and falling with his breaths. “I know. You just did what you always do. You acted without thought, and now you don't know how to handle the aftermath,” he says, the words low, harsh, and strangled. “I wouldn't expect anything else.”

“Did I...” I have to pause to swallow down the terror rising in my throat. “...hurt you?” I ask, afraid of the answer. Did I pull the towel too tightly? Push him too hard against the island? Did I take too much from him? Oh fuck, does he hate me now?

Knox turns slowly until he's facing me. His eyes are bright, and red stains his cheeks. He looks embarrassed and he's pressing a fist into his incredibly hard dick, but he doesn't look injured. "I'm fine, Ryder. Let it go. I know you were just getting under my skin, and it didn't mean anything to you."

Did it mean something to me? Well, yeah, it fucking did, but how do I tell him that I don't even understand what it was? "That's not...I mean...come on, Golden Boy," I say, defaulting to easy humor to diffuse the tension. "I wanted to show my appreciation for you making my favorite pre-game meal. It means a lot that you would cook for me. Thanks, bro."

Knox's face locks down. His eyes narrow, brows coming together, and mouth setting in a harsh line flattening those beautiful lips that steal my attention far too easily. "You don't get to bro me when your cum is still warm against the back of my shorts because you got off, humping my ass like an errant dog. That's not how you show appreciation. If you really appreciated what I did, you would have been on your knees making sure I got off." He shakes his head. "Enjoy your meal, I'm going to change."

He turns and storms out of the kitchen, leaving me alone with cum splashed down my shorts and cheeks that match the red dish towel I had around Knox's neck just moments before, because now all I can think about is getting on my knees and sucking Knox off.

Seventeen

Knox

I slip into the owner's box following Harlowe and her brood of children, carrying her three-year-old, Hana. I almost canceled after the thing with Ryder in the kitchen, but Harlowe doesn't take last-minute changes well, and I don't like letting people down.

"Axel, I swear to God, if you throw that cup over the railing, you will be in timeout the rest of the game," Harlowe says, following her toddler son to the outer seating area and pulling a sippy cup from his hand before he can launch it into the crowd below. I set Hana down and she runs to play with her toys in a corner of the suite.

"Give me the baby. Your hands are full with the warmonger," I say, holding my hands out for Everly, Harlowe's youngest. She gratefully passes the one-year-old girl my way, and I prop the easiest baby in the world in my arms. "Hey, little love, I missed you," I coo to her to get a smile. She giggles and tucks her head into my neck in the cutest way. Damn, I love babies so much. I've held Harlowe's three youngest like this and it never gets old.

"The Hydras have won six of their ten games," Hendricks tells me. "But don't worry, they play eighty-two games, so they have a lot of time to make it up." This kid is way too smart at seven, but he's always been that way. At four, he was explaining math concepts to me.

"Good to know," I say.

“You only play twenty games in football, if you include preseason,” he points out, looking at me like he’s disappointed. “Hockey players are tougher than football players.”

“That’s rough, little man. I thought we were friends,” I say, ruffling his hair and pushing him toward our seats. He blinks his serious gray eyes at me before laughing and running for his seat with Hana and Axel.

“Lolo, your kid is roasting me. I don’t want to play anymore,” I tell her with a laugh, checking out the plush seats on the balcony portion of the owner’s box overlooking Olympus Arena.

“What can I say? I trained him well,” she quips, bringing a tray of chicken tenders and fries out with her. In a quiet, conspiratorial voice she says to me, “I cook gourmet shit from scratch every day, and my kids go crazy for the damn concessions stand chicken strips and fries.”

“Ah, your life is so hard,” I tease, taking the tray and passing out the baskets to Hendricks and Hana before cautiously giving Axel a basket. I anticipate the hellion immediately throwing it, so I catch the basket and preserve his dinner before handing it back to him. “I know you want to eat these, you silly goose. Don’t throw food, please.” I pop a fry in his laughing mouth, and he munches happily, taking the basket from me and holding it this time.

“Thank you so much for agreeing to come with me tonight. Zander had to fly to New York at the last minute with the boys for work, and I told the nanny she could have the night off. I’d already committed to showing up, and I did not want to do all four kids on my own.” Harlowe looks meaningfully at Axel. She could easily handle Hendricks, Hana, and Everly, but Axel on his own is hard enough, let alone putting him with the others.

“Of course. I love your kids, even that one,” I say, meaning every word.

Harlowe is a fantastic mother who has raised incredible children that I adore. I love spending time with her whenever I can, with the kids or without.

We have an interesting history, Harlowe and I. We dated for a few months about three years ago when I wanted to play up the straight card for people around me. She was a single mom, had a huge social media following as an influencer and chef, and was so fun to hang out with, even if I didn’t want to be with her romantically. While it was good for my image to be seen with her, I enjoyed our time together because I liked her as a person more than anything. I’ve always had more female friends, given some of the shit I’ve been through, so it was natural to fall into that sort of thing with Harlowe. But I felt horrible for leading her on to hide my truth. I finally came clean and told her I was gay when Zander, her baby daddy, came back into the picture and was pushing for them to try something again. She has been incredibly supportive of me ever since and guards my secret with her life. And she gives me all the good book recommendations, knowing we both enjoy smutty romances. I told her no more hockey romance after that kitchen debacle, though.

“Oh, this is my favorite part,” Harlowe says, waving her soda cup toward the ice.

I look down where she’s indicating and see both teams on the ice warming up. Growing up with Ryder, I went to many hockey games with him, so this isn’t new. I spot the Hydras’ big goalie easily. He’s at center ice in front of the home bench, wearing the special Pride Night jersey. It’s navy with a rainbow shield featuring a stylized neon green H with serpent heads at the tops and bottoms of the legs of the H. The big number one under Kingston on his back stands out and draws my eyes as he turns.

He pushes off one skate, gliding around in a circle and smoothly down onto his knees, stretching out one leg and leaning toward it before centering himself and

moving to the other side. Is he in a full split? Holy shit, he is. He's incredibly flexible. His feet windshield-wipers behind him before moving back up to his hands and knees, pressing his hips up and down on the ice to get a groin stretch. This isn't good for my obscene imagination, picturing Ryder in that position, driving into someone, or in front of me as I drive into him.

Whoa. Uh, no, I can't even go there. He's been making me crazy with his insistence on getting under my skin any way he can. It was nearly too much today. My football field of a line felt shorter than ever, that end zone rushing toward me faster than my restraint could keep up.

I almost snapped and turned to call his bluff. Instead, I barely held it together with the tiniest hope that maybe he was doing it because he wanted to. I let him touch me, grind on me, control me, and bite me hard enough to leave a mark I had to hide with a collared shirt. He knew exactly what to do to me to have my cock painfully hard in seconds. Wantonly, I'd pushed my ass back for his use because I liked how he handled me too damn much. I wanted to be used, and wasn't surprised when he'd come against my ass. I was so close to believing he wanted me until he opened his stupid mouth and didn't know what to say for himself. He fucking bro'd me.

I should have stopped him, but I liked how he touched me, that he wanted to, at least a little bit, even if his motivations were wrong. That didn't keep me from jacking off violently in the bathroom immediately after, using my cum-soaked shorts wrapped around my cock, with the feel of him still thrusting against my ass to get off to. Am I proud of my actions? Fuck no. But it was better than turning around in the kitchen and mauling the confused man who got me so worked up I resorted to that depraved act in the first place.

I look up and catch Harlowe watching me. My cheeks heat, but not for the reason I'm sure she thinks when she waggles her eyebrows at me and laughs. "They don't wear tight football pants, but I'm a big hockey fan now. Owning a boy aquarium is the best

thing ever.”

I shake my head at her, stifling a chuckle at her silly phrase, and try not to watch Ryder too closely for the rest of warm-ups.

The game itself is great. It’s fast-paced, and Minnesota is playing clean. The arena is electric, energy pulsing through the building as the Hydras push to the final buzzer with a three-one lead in the final period. I love the camaraderie fans have. The chants are fun. The energy is electric. I like how the game is played. I like watching Ryder in the net, sprawling out and filling the crease to block shots.

I’d like to fill his crease . The unbidden thought sounds a hell of a lot like something Ryder himself would say and makes me chuckle at the inappropriateness of it before my eyes are once again drawn to the man himself. He’s always been magnetic, my eyes locked on his fluidity and grace on the ice despite the bulky pads and gear. He moves effortlessly, his eyes tracking the puck and blocking shots faster than I can see them taken. When the final horn sounds and the Hydras win, it feels like I have, too. That’s the kind of excitement that courses through the arena.

Everly and Axel have fallen asleep inside the suite, and Harlowe isn’t in a hurry to wake them up in order to leave. I relax in my seat, chatting with Hendricks as the stands clear long after the teams have left the ice.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and see a new text.

Lilah: Word is some guys from the team are going to a gay club to celebrate the Pride Night win. Ryder agreed to go. Wanna join me?

Knox: Ryder?! You’ve got to be kidding me. He’s the last person I’d expect to voluntarily go to a gay club.

Lilah: Pfft, right? Maybe PR said he has to? I don't know, but he was part of the post-game media and said he's celebrating the win with Outlanta and they're going to Luscious. He's really leaned into this one.

Knox: I'm shocked. Send me the details. I'll meet you there.

Lilah: Deal! Can't wait to dance. It's been too long.

I look up when Harlowe calls Hendricks. "Hey, kiddo, time for us to go home."

"I'll carry Axel and Everly for you," I say, standing and holding my arms out for her.

"I love having your big, strong arms around," Harlowe says, no shame in her game.

I scoop up Axel in one arm, resting his head against my shoulder, and she puts Everly on my other side. I have two of the most beautiful babies in the world resting comfortably in my arms, and it feels better than I could have imagined.

Growing up knowing I was gay, I knew I wouldn't get the traditional wife and kids, so I didn't make any plans for myself. Hell, I'm in my thirties now and haven't even come out, so who knows if I'll ever get the happily ever after I want so badly. But I have a big family, and among all my siblings, twelve nieces and nephews, so I have plenty of kids around to know I love them. Holding Harlowe's babies like this now, though? It's made me want something I never expected—a family of my own.

That desire springs up fiercely, like it's been hiding in my soul, waiting to be acknowledged, and now that I have, it's all I can think about. My rational side is quick to contain the hope and longing without crushing my own spirit. The logistics are ridiculous.

There's so much that needs to happen before I can even think about adding kids to

my life. I carefully tuck the idea back in my heart, safeguarding it for when the time is right.

I feel a new glow, a sense of peace that warms me and gives me a vision for the future that I was lacking. It also gives me the courage to embrace what I want and accept myself so I can achieve that future. Now I have to start letting the world know who I am, one small step at a time, to get there.

When I arrive at Luscious, I find Lilah waiting for me.

“There you are! Took you long enough. Did you go home to change or something?” she says, looking me up and down.

I laugh. “I always look this good.” I run a hand down my fitted button-down shirt tucked into slacks. I dressed up for the game when I had to hide the mark on my neck. It’s a good thing, too, because I wouldn’t have wanted to show up here looking casual. Not after I just decided I’m going to be more open about who I am, and that means living out loud a bit more.

“You really do,” she says appreciatively. “You dance, right?”

I rock my hips with one hand on my stomach and the other hand up, throwing my ass around in a bachata kind of move for her benefit. “Yes, girl, I dance.”

“Shake it, baby!” someone calls from the line along the side of the building.

“Save me a dance, sexy!” I hear from another high male voice. My face heats, but I grin, for once feeling like I’m getting the kind of attention I want.

“Looks like I’m going to have competition,” Lilah says, laughing. “Come on, Outlanta put us on a list, and we don’t have to wait in line.” She takes my hand, and

we walk up to the door, giving our names to a man with a clipboard who lets us inside.

The club is loud, the pop music remixed and pulsing through the speakers by a live DJ with a dance floor full of people, well, men mostly, dancing with abandon. It's a beautiful gay buffet of men in all states of dress—from twink in colorful shorts and mesh shirts, to bears in tight pants with suspenders and no shirts, to himbo guys in tight shirts and jeans, to others who are dressed like me, and more who look like they stepped out of a neon rave all blending seamlessly on the dance floor.

But the one thing they have in common is their joy and freedom to be who they are right out in the open without judgment. It's so beautiful my eyes prick with tears, and I have to blink rapidly to keep them back. I've never allowed myself to go to a club like this for fear of someone finding out my secret.

Lilah and I wander past the bar toward a roped-off VIP area where we're allowed in by someone from Outlanta when we give our names again. It's a bit quieter over here, around the corner from the main dance floor, with booths flanking the walls and low tables with buckets of iced-down bottles of champagne, liquors, and mixers. Several groups of large men stand around talking with glasses in their hands, and I imagine those must be the players who were brave enough to come out to a gay club. I look at Lilah, glad to have her with me in this awkward situation. I don't know anyone here, and these are a bunch of straight, mostly white, hockey players who wouldn't normally go to a gay club.

Suddenly, the crowd parts, and my eyes meet Ryder's. I can't look away. He's staring so intently, and when he starts toward me, it's like my legs lock up, too. I don't know what to say to him, or how to act after what happened this afternoon, and the way we left things. He kind of used me while trying to push my buttons and then felt weird about it. That doesn't feel good, and I'm tired of him making excuses for his bad behavior when he should know better. I finally blink and look away just as he stops in

front of us.

“You came. Let me get you some drinks. What do you want?” he asks.

“Rum and Coke,” Lilah says quickly, easier in the interaction than I am.

“Same,” I say because I can barely think when he’s so close and smells so good, all freshly showered, his hair still damp, and his cologne fresh in his black game-day suit. He looks incredible in a burgundy shirt that sets off his tan skin and does unholy things to his hazel-green eyes, turning them into a shade that looks like the forest at golden hour, with sunlight slanting through the trees.

He nods and turns away to get our drinks. Lilah and I move to one of the booths and sit while we wait. I try to breathe past the knot in my chest. This all feels so foreign, being at a gay club, with Ryder present, no less.

“You’re wound so tightly. You okay?” Lilah asks.

“Yeah, just in my head,” I tell her.

“Sounds like you need to dance and let it all go,” she tells me, just as Ryder returns with our drinks and a few guys.

“Knox, Lilah, this is Westin, Rook, Campbell, and Nico. They play with me on the Hydras. Boys, this is my friend Knox, from the Atlanta Condors football team, and you know Lilah, from the Atlanta Free Press,” he says, introducing me to his teammates. He called me his friend . That’s something I haven’t heard from him in a long time.

I say hey to the guys and take a sip of the drink Ryder brought me, hoping this won’t be awkward.

“Man, you were amazing in the game last Sunday. That catch and run you made in the fourth quarter for a touchdown blew my mind. I didn't think you were going to hold on to the ball,” the guy with slick black hair and sparkling brown eyes says as he smiles. Nico, I think is his name.

“Thanks,” I say, amused. “You watch football?” I ask the group.

Two of them nod. “When I can,” Rook says. “I’m a Minnesota fan by birth, but I’m acclimating to Atlanta and starting to warm to the Condors. You’re not bad out there.”

“They may watch football, but I bet you don’t watch hockey,” Campbell challenges.

“Not true. I grew up on it. I’m a lifelong Detroit fan, but I’ve caught all the Hydras games this season, whether on TV or a recording, and I was at the game tonight,” I say with gusto to prove him wrong. It’s easy enough to talk about neutral subjects like our sports.

“You were at the game tonight?” Ryder asks, looking shocked, then pleased.

“Yeah, it was a great game,” I say, looking down so I don't have to think too hard about his smile and the way his shoulders drew back, making him look impossibly broader.

I get to know Ryder’s teammates for a while as we drink and chat until Lilah finally stands up from the booth with an exaggerated sigh. “Y’all can keep talking, but I came here to dance. Anyone joining one of the only single, straight women in the building?” She looks around the group, popping her hip out. Rook and Nico jostle each other as they stand, fighting to get out of the booth area first.

“I’m a Puerto Rican from South Florida, chica. I have better rhythm than all these

white boys, so I'm your best bet," Nico says, taking Lilah's hand.

"But I have a twin brother and know how to share, so let me join you anyway," Rook says, sliding in behind Lilah and taking her other hand as she follows Nico.

Standing, I know this is a chance to enjoy myself, too. I feel Ryder's presence behind me as I make my way to the dance floor. Ignoring him, I focus on Lilah with the two big hockey players she's captured for the evening. She throws her hands up and circles her hips to the song's beat as Nico and Rook sandwich her in and dance with her. Knowing her stance on not dating within her city, she's probably just having fun. I purposefully don't look for Ryder as I nod my head to the beat and get a feel for the rhythm, my body moving as I loosen up.

I drift through the crowd, away from Lilah and her guys. I want some anonymity to feel the press of bodies and know what it's like to have a man's hands on me for the first time in public. Dancing along with the music as Ariana Grande and Zedd's "Break Free" plays, feeling myself and loving how everyone else is in the moment with me.

The men here are so free with their touches, hands move across my chest and squeeze my biceps as I pass. Smiles are sent my way like butterfly kisses as I glide across the floor. Hips bump mine as I find my groove in a group of sweaty men who make space for me to join them.

A stunning blond, built twink of a man in rainbow booty shorts and face glitter looks up and smiles. His pretty blue eyes sparkle in the colorful strobe lights winking over the dance floor. He spins into my arms and pulls me close as my hips grind against his incredible ass to the beat. I've never purposefully been this close and personal with a man who I can be reasonably sure finds me attractive before. It's fucking incredible. He leans his head back against my chest, looking up at me with a beautiful smile. I cup his delicate face, running a thumb along the high cheekbone dotted with

gemstones in wonder at how free he is with his self-expression. He's ethereal and having the best time dancing, smiling, and singing along to the song with me .

"Knox, don't dance with him," a deep voice says in my ear as hands pull me back and away from the blond man in my arms.

Annoyance fills me. I turn my head and find Ryder standing stock still as men dance all around us. "You're not even dancing," I say, moving out of his grip. I don't want to put up with his button-pushing tonight. I just want to be free and have fun for once.

I hear a groan of frustration, but sure enough, a moment later, Ryder is at my back, his hips moving stiffly along with mine as his arm loops around my waist to hold me close. "Is this what you want, someone rubbing their cock against you? Because I already proved I have no problem doing that," he bites out against my ear.

The blond in front of me looks at Ryder like this is the best thing he's seen and pets the arm around my waist. "Hey, hockey hottie," he yells, his voice high and pretty even over the music. Clearly, he recognizes Ryder, which I'm sure is going to go over so well for him.

I hear a growl. This fucker growled and probably bared his teeth at a poor twink in a gay club. The blond raises his hands, fingers splayed, and takes a step back. "Oh, yaasss queen, you got yourself a possessive man," he says with a smile at me. "You can have this big beautiful man, hockey daddy. There's plenty to go around tonight." He blows a kiss at me and sashays away into the crowd in his sparkly rainbow shorts that look oh so tempting.

I step out of Ryder's hold and turn around. "You've got to be kidding me. You cannot growl at people, you Neanderthal. What would Goldie think?" I shout over the music. Admittedly, it was pretty hot, but he doesn't need to know I liked it even a little bit.

Ryder doesn't look ashamed. "He was too close."

"We were dancing," I say in exasperation. "I'm allowed to be close to someone I'm dancing with." I turn and move through the throng of bodies, hoping to be swallowed up again and lose myself in the music and freedom I've finally embraced.

A handsome as hell man with pretty brown eyes grabs my wrist and pulls me close. I follow willingly, dancing to a remix of "Love Myself" by Hailee Steinfeld. The man is built, his unbuttoned shirt showing off a broad, well-defined chest and abs I could do laundry on. I run my fingers up his abs to his chest just to try it out, and hell, does it feel good to touch someone because I want to. Mr. Muscles tips his head back and loops an arm around my waist as we move to the beat. I'm a good six inches taller than him, but that's not unusual, so he's looking up at me like I'm the prettiest thing he's seen all night, and it sets me on fire to be the object of someone's desire for once. He runs his fingers down my chest and over my abs, my muscles jumping under his touch. It has my breath coming in hot pants. I'm attention starved, and this night feels like a buffet after being on a diet for too long.

A big arm slides between me and Mr. Muscles, the giant hand pushing my dance partner away as Ryder steps between us. "He's here with someone. Get your fucking hands off of him."

"The fuck are you doing now?" I say, grabbing Ryder's shoulder.

"It's a club. We were dancing," Mr. Muscles says, not put off by Ryder's aggression. Actually, he seems to like it. "You want to join us? I wouldn't mind being the meat in your big Manwich."

"I don't share," Ryder and I say in unison before looking at each other. Well, that was fucking awkward.

“It’s not like you were dancing with him,” Mr. Muscles points out to Ryder.

I push Ryder away from Mr. Muscles before he can respond. “Why won't you let me have this, Ryder? You’re not even dancing with me the way I want to dance. Why can’t I dance with someone else? Is it because you want me?” I ask as a club remix of Rihanna’s “We Found Love” plays.

I’m done with his tantrums. Done with being pushed to my limit by this man-child who won’t admit what he wants. Done with being the bigger person and not rising to his bait. If he wants to push me, he can see what happens.

Turning, I pull Ryder into my body, scissoring our thighs together, putting a hand on his shoulder and leaning back to roll my hips into his like I’m fucking him. I gyrate down and sway my way back up his thigh, holding a hand on my head, biting my lip and getting into it. I’m really giving him everything I have so he knows what it feels like to be pushed the way he’s been pushing me for months. When I’m chest-to-chest with him, I slip my arms around his waist and put my hands on his fucking amazing ass. Pulling him tight, I grind even harder, circling our hips sinfully, and put my face close to his. There’s no mistaking his hard cock when mine is smashed against his and I’m rocking our hips together. Goddamn it feels good even if I’m fucking with him, so I try to memorize every stolen second so I can recall it later when I’m alone. I drag my nose along his cheek until my lips are a breath away from his.

“What’re you going to do about it, Reckless?” I taunt as I lick my lips, letting my tongue brush over his.

Ryder’s hands come up lightning fast and latch around my throat and the back of my head, holding me in place as his lips crash into mine. He’s demanding and insistent, and I go pliant immediately, my mouth opening for him to plunder and take what he wants. I grip his shirt like a lifeline as the dangerous whitewater rapids of Ryder Kingston wash over me and pull me into his undertow. Even his still waters disguise

deadly drop-offs and jagged rocks. I'm swept into the current of his rushing river eyes as his tongue tangles with mine, and I taste the astringent whiskey and sweet Coke he was drinking along with the incredible taste of him . Holy fuck, can this man kiss. He moans against me and my cock goes rigid at the needy sound, my tongue working furiously against his, wanting everything he'll give me before he realizes his mistake. But it's him who takes everything from me, stealing my breath and leaving me gasping as he finally slows the kiss and sucks my bottom lip into his mouth.

He rests his forehead against mine, his hands gripping my shoulders tightly, like he doesn't want to let go. My heart jackhammers in my chest as my hips rub shamelessly against him in search of friction and relief for the ache he's put in me. I've been so good, keeping to myself, not reacting to him when it would have been so easy, but now I can't stop my body's urge to touch and be touched. My eyes flutter open, the club lights strobing and flashing around us in pinks, greens, and blues, lighting up the most beautiful face I've ever seen as he stares in wide-eyed shock back at me. It breaks my damn heart to see that look on his face. That was the best fucking kiss of my life and it was with a guy who is so caught up in his identity he probably didn't even know what he was doing.

Eighteen

Ryder

Holy fuck. I just kissed Knox. No, this can't be happening. I crossed a line that is beyond bad because it was too fucking good. The worst part is that I want to do it again and again until my lips are bruised and raw.

Knox grabs my arm, steering me off the dance floor, through the sweaty crowd of people, and into a corridor toward the exit. It's quieter here. I can hear the rushing of blood pounding in my ears that sounds like kiss him kiss him kiss him .

"Ryder, that was..." Knox begins, his fingers coming up to his lips, his big espresso eyes trained on me like he's seeing me for the first time.

"A mistake," I finish for him because it has to be. No way can that happen again, and I shouldn't want it to. I'm not gay. I don't like dudes.

Uh, about that, a voice says in my head that sounds a lot like my dick, which is rock hard in my pants, and wanting, badly, for Knox to rub up on me again. He moved in a way that shouldn't be possible for an athlete of his size—all fluidity and sexy curves, bending and rolling like his bones were rubber. His cock was hard as he pressed against me in that fucking sexy dance, and I loved it. Okay, maybe I'm not exactly straight, but I can't unpack that now when I'm reeling from this wildly inappropriate mistake.

"No, it wasn't," Knox says, his face settling into a calm I hadn't expected.

“I’m not like you,” I snap, anger rising in me.

“You don’t have to be like me, Ryder. You have your own identity and will figure out what that means,” he says, voice even, like he’s explaining something to a child. “But that wasn’t a mistake, and you need to own your actions. You’ve been pushing me, getting closer and more physical, because you want to. Stop denying it.”

“Fuck you,” I spit, furious now that he’s lumping me in with anyone in this club and sending my mind back to high school and the fucking mean guys who made me turn on my best friend. The fuckers who said I had to ruin his life, or mine would be ruined instead. I didn’t have a choice if I wanted to play hockey with them and get out of the hellhole that was my life. It was my only option, and I hated choosing it .

I push at Knox’s chest, ready to leave this fucking conversation and the truths he’s trying to force onto me. Knox shakes his head and pins me to the wall instead. He’s bigger and stronger than me, and he’s finally using it to his advantage after letting me drive every interaction when he could have easily turned the situation around when I was being an asshole.

It’s like the first day in his condo when he held me by the throat and told me no more gay jokes. Not only did I like the way it felt to be handled that way, but he set the tone that day and showed me he was fully capable of stopping me when I got too close or touched him, but he hasn’t, until tonight. He’s let me push him and try out my insidious interest through our interactions to see what I think of it. What it made me realize is I’m more confused than ever, and I like touching Knox. I especially liked it tonight when he turned around and gave it back just as hard as I have been.

“ I see you, Ryder,” he says with a definitive edge. Suddenly, I feel like a spotlight has been blasted into my shadows, and I can’t hide anymore. “I know why you’re so angry about this. Why you’re lashing out. You’re mad at yourself. Mad about the way you feel, and you’re pointing negative shit my way because of it. It’s your own

feelings and truths. It's festering inside you because you won't admit what you really are or how you feel. You won't be able to get past this until you're honest with yourself, man."

"You pushed me to do that. I didn't want to kiss you," I say, anxiety rising in my chest. My heart is beating too damn fast, this can't be good. I pound on the damn thing with my fist to resettlement my heart. It doesn't help. I grip Knox's wrist where he still holds me against the wall, but he won't let go. He won't stop looking at me, dissecting my motives and peeking inside my chest.

"I think you wanted to kiss me. Otherwise, why would that have been the best fucking kiss of my life?"

"We shouldn't be doing this," I rasp, my voice and body betraying me, pulling him closer when I want to put distance between us.

But now he's too close. I can smell his cologne and see a bit of a bruise on his neck peeking out of his collared shirt that must be from where I bit him. The dumb beast in me that likes seeing him marked roars in triumph, and it sounds a whole lot like MINE .

His mouth is so beautiful, and when his tongue darts out to wet a trail across the lush bottom lip, I can't fucking stop. I reach up and pull him to me again, taking that mouth I want so fucking badly. He's not as compliant this time. Instead, he fights me for control and it lights me the fuck up. His forearm rests against the wall next to my head, and his other hand settles at my waist. He presses me into the wall, pushing his weight against me in the most gloriously fulfilling way, my thighs splitting around his as our tongues tangle and teeth clash.

This isn't a pretty kiss—it's desperate. I'm hopeless, lost in the moment, clinging to him, trusting him. I give him everything. My desperation and my confusion, my need

and desire. I take everything he gives. His reassurance and steadiness, his calm and hope. I surrender, and the groan that comes out of me can only be called feral and needy. It seems to spur Knox on. He kisses me harder, his hand roaming from my waist to my ass and pulling me tighter. My cock pressing against his makes me see fucking stars. If I'm not careful, I'll be coming in my pants a second time today, and I don't want him to think that's a normal occurrence for me. It's just something that seems to happen with him, unfortunately.

Reluctantly, I slide my hands to his chest and gently push to put some distance between us. He immediately steps back, his lips slowing and then parting from mine.

"See, best kiss of my fucking life," Knox breathes against my lips, and I feel his words branded onto my soul. He kisses me softly and brushes his nose against mine.

But I can't do it.

I push against him harder. "This isn't me," I argue.

Knox groans in frustration, his big hands swiping up to his face as he takes another step away from me that feels like the Grand Canyon after having him so close we breathed the same air.

"You're so emotionally stunted that you can't even accept the most basic truth," he says, letting his hands drop. "You know what, deny yourself all you want. I'm done playing this game. I've lived it for too long, and I'm not doing it anymore. You're a coward, that's what you are, Ryder."

He turns and walks toward the exit, his long, powerful legs eating up the distance quickly. I'm left in the dark corridor with a huge case of embarrassment, a raging hard-on, and more confusion than I know what to do with. Watching him go feels like I'm losing something precious, that this moment is pivotal, and Knox is right. I am a

coward.

I never stood up for him in high school. I let bullies coerce me into becoming just like them to avoid the discomfort of losing my social standing and place on the team. But in doing that, I lost something even more valuable instead—my best friend.

I was a coward when I made those homophobic remarks and got my ass handed to me by social media. I could have kept my mouth shut instead of running it thoughtlessly in the first place. I damn sure could have owned up to my mistake when it came out instead of letting it go viral and staying complacent in the wrongness of my actions.

I'm a coward now for not admitting that I feel something for him. That I may not be as straight as I thought I had to be. And that feels like the most ground-shaking cowardice of all. Why do I think it's wrong to want Knox, a man, now? I don't think it's wrong for him or others to like men, but somehow it feels taboo to consider the same for myself. That feels like a me problem, as Knox would say. And, if I'm being honest with myself, I know this isn't the first time I've found a man attractive or wanted a man sexually—my forays with the Vers app over the years are proof that I've been curious and wanted it enough to go looking for those connections with men. So, how do I fix this?

I run a hand through my hair and follow in Knox's path, knowing I won't catch him, but I know where to find him if I want to come clean. I just don't know if I can, yet.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am*

Nineteen

Ryder

I don't see Knox the night of the club, or the next day, and I leave the day after that for a string of away games in California. How I left things between us feels shitty, and I know the ball is definitely in my court to fix them. Deciding to start slowly, I text Knox as I'm finishing up with a post-practice workout before heading back to my hotel in Anaheim.

Ryder: Things got a little out of hand the other night.

When Knox doesn't text back right away, I wonder if he's giving me the silent treatment, and this will be a one-way conversation. An hour later, I'm hanging in my hotel room, doing a hip-opening yoga routine when my phone pings. I roll out of pigeon pose and grab it like it's a bomb about to detonate and click on Knox's text.

Knox: That's what happens when assholes are allowed to run wild.

What the fuck? This isn't like Knox. He's normally far more positive than this, but I deserve this for hurting him the way I did.

Ryder: I thought it was asshole night at the club. They do themes there, you know. Just trying to fit in and all.

Knox: Hah.

Fuck, he's not engaging with me at all. I really messed this up. Pressing my face into the floor, I huff in exasperation. Knox has to forgive me. I guess I have to apologize for that to happen. Rolling to my back, I pick my phone up, looking at the screen.

Ryder: I know I fucked up. This is confusing as hell. I don't know what to do.

Well, it was embarrassing as hell to rip my chest open and admit that. I wait for a reply. And wait some more.

Ryder: Knox?

Knox: Oh, was there something in there directed at me? Because it sounded like you were making some general statements that didn't require my input at all. You fucked up, fact. It's confusing, fact. You don't know what to do, your problem, not mine.

Ryder: I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have been such an asshole to you at the club.

Knox: What an apology. Do you need a pat on the back for getting that one out? It's gonna take a lot more than that for me to forgive you for acting the way you did. You scared away the first men to interact with me in public without me hiding my interest. I could have had rainbow booty shorts on my floor before the night was over. You robbed me of rainbow booty shorts, Ryder.

He wanted that scrawny dude in the short-shorts?

Ryder: That tiny man wasn't even your type. I did you a favor by scaring the guy away!

Knox: What makes you the authority on what my type is? I could like gorgeous little twinkies that I can split in half and bounce on my cock in the bedroom, and parade around like my pretty little prince in public. You don't know me like you think you

do, Reckless.

The fucker has me seeing red. He's back to that stupid nickname that is far too accurate, and I want to put a hole in the wall thinking of Knox bouncing anyone on his dick or having someone he parades around proudly. Someone that's not me, the dick voice says. I've got to shut that thing up, but he really likes Knox. I let my dick speak when I type out my next text.

Ryder: I know you, and I know a guy you can break isn't what you need. You want someone who will meet your strength with theirs. You need someone who can throw you around as easily as you can throw them around, so the power goes both ways. Because the best kind of sex is when you both give and take. You want to let go of your perfectly controlled self for a few minutes and become a beast that feels and takes selfishly from someone who wants to be taken from. You can't get that from someone a foot shorter and a hundred pounds lighter than you.

I barely stop myself from adding you need me before hitting send. My stomach still curls up and strangles my heart like I did. Why is it so hard to talk about this? To be vulnerable and admit how I feel, even to myself? I don't like it.

Knox: You really are an arrogant fucker. It's not even about the men when it comes down to it, but you don't want to acknowledge the huge fucking elephant in the room. I'm cool off texting until you're man enough to talk to me without avoiding the most important subject. Have a good game.

I don't text him again, because I know Knox is serious, and I'm not ready to bring up what he wants me to. Knox is the bigger person, still wishing me a good game despite being pissed at me.

I'm agitated and in need of a release for my pent-up feelings that yoga just won't cure. I'm superstitious as fuck and I got off against Knox before my last game that we

won. That means I need to come again tonight, even if Knox isn't here for me to rub up against.

I hop up onto the bed and breathe out a frustrated sigh as I open the Vers app. Not bothering to scroll, I go right to my DMs and find HandyManCan with his beautiful skin that reminds me of Knox enough to imagine his face on the faceless photos in our chat history. I start a new message to him, wanting someone who doesn't know all my baggage and won't judge me for wanting to get off anonymously.

HotnHandsy: I've been thinking about those hands of yours. Especially wrapped around that gorgeous cock. Hope your day is going well .

I click out of my DMs, feeling a bit stupid for sending a pleasantry along with an obvious cry for a dick pic. I scroll through the feed of recent uploads, admiring those who have the art of the dick pic down and critiquing those who most certainly do not. Come on, man. Your socks are in the pic, and so is the damn dirty toilet. At least get some better lighting so your beast looks better. My notification of a new message pings several minutes later, and I check my messages to find one from HandyManCan.

HandyManCan: There you are. I thought you forgot about me. Hit it and quit it or something. Glad to know I've been on your mind, even a little bit.

HotnHandsy: There's nothing little about you, and of course, I've thought about you. I don't get much time to use this app, honestly.

HandyManCan: I feel that. Work keeps me going nonstop. I travel a lot, and when I'm home, it's just as insane.

HotnHandsy: Same. Another thing we have in common with our hand kink and big dicks.

HandyManCan: Is it weird to say I miss your big dick?

HotnHandsy: Fuck no. I want to see yours, too. Here you go.

I push my shorts down and take a photo of my cock lying heavy against my stomach, lit by the open window so the head gleams with the precum that's already gathering in my excitement. It doesn't take much to get me going.

HandyManCan: \*groan\* I want to taste you. Were you just working out? Are you still sweaty? Fuck me, why is that so hot?

He sends me a photo in front of a window from a side chair I always think of as the cuck chair you'd find in any upscale hotel room, his abs bunching and his cock jutting out of joggers he's pushed down his hips.

HotnHandsy: I was doing yoga before I messaged. Limbering up, I guess haha you should see my happy baby pose, it's incredibly suggestive. Well, a lot of poses are.

HandyManCan: I just looked up happy baby and fuck me sideways. The things I would do to get you in that pose. I'd tear you up. You'd be my happy baby.

I groan. There's that baby again. Why does it do something to me to have him call me that? I hit the video call button so fast. He answers just as quickly. My voice is low and raspy when I speak.

"You are a dirty, dirty man to defile yoga for me. I'll never be able to get through a class with a straight face or without thinking of your cock again," I say quickly, smoothing my thumb over the head of my cock that is leaking precum at the thought. To be on my back, feet in the air, thighs pressed back against my chest and this man's cock driving into my ass? The thought sends tingles racing along my spine.

“I think I have to take up yoga. I could use the flexibility, and if it’s gonna have me learning new poses I could use in the bedroom, it will be extra beneficial,” he says, the deep timbre of his voice caressing me through the screen. It feels like velvet and steel, soft but unyielding, like him.

His hand lazily shuttles along his big cock, and I bite my lip, watching through the screen. I love the size of him and how he looks with his fist wrapped around that girth. This is what I can imagine Knox looks like. The thought has my dick jumping in my hand, throbbing painfully as pleasure rockets through me unexpectedly.

“Uh, yeah, yoga is good. You have an incredible body, though, so I don't think you’re skipping the gym. I appreciate what you’ve done with whatever it is you do. You gonna come on those perfect abs for me, Big Sexy?” I growl, needing to see him come apart for me again.

“You’re training me to be a two-pump chump with how fast I want to come when I see you. It’s a problem,” he says, voice sounding strained and a bit breathy. Good. I want him pathetic and needy for me .

“Did you fuck your fist thinking of me?” I ask.

“Yes,” he breathes, the single word sounding like a plea for more of me, and I fucking love it.

“You poor, pathetic thing. Did you come hard every time, but not as hard as when I talked you through it?”

“God, how do you do that? How do you know exactly what you do to me? Fuck,” he groans, his strokes speeding up.

“Did you need me and my fat cock to get you there the way you wanted?”

I'm stroking my cock at the same rhythm he is, and it feels so good, even without any lube, but damn I need something. I stop and spit in my hand, not about to get up and find lotion when I have this fucking beautiful specimen of a man to watch. He groans and passes his palm over the head of his cock and gathers the slickness there with a few pumps before he goes back to the top of his shaft with short, hard strokes.

"Yeah, baby, I did. I needed to see this. Squeeze harder, I want that cock milked for me."

Holy shit. His comment goes to my balls that retract, and I grunt, staving off the urge to come, but just barely. I squeeze the way he instructed, and stars explode behind my eyelids before I can pry them open to watch him again. The back-and-forth we have is amazing. One minute I'm in charge, watching him fall apart for me, the next, he's crumbling me with a single word.

"Show me how bad you want me. Give me that cum all over those pretty abs you work so hard for, Big Sexy," I say, heart racing. "Tell me you want me when you come."

Why is it so much easier to ask for this when I'm faceless, on an anonymous hookup app, but know it's exactly what I want to say to Knox? The thought of Knox and his big body pressing me into the wall, his lips on mine demanding my truths and showing me what I can have if I just admit it and come clean, has my release coiling at the base of my spine, my breaths coming in pants as this stranger who feels so close matches my furious strokes.

"Fuck, baby, I want you so bad. Fill me up, give it to me, please," he groans, cum spilling over his fingers and onto those defined abs in thick ropes.

My response is a strangled "Oh, shit, yes," as I come all over my stomach in violent spurts that drain me.

But it's Knox's face I see. Knox's hands I wish were on the screen. Knox's body covered in cum. My cum. The instant slide into a post-nut low is steep and harrowing, sending me careening past enjoyment and relaxation and straight into freak-out territory. My hands shake, and my breathing goes shallow and desperate.

"Hey, you okay?" HandyMan asks gently.

How do I tell him I'm thinking about my best friend? I can't admit to my online hookup the way I feel when his face isn't the one that I imagined while coming just now. This stranger on the internet doesn't want to know I'm thinking about someone else. He doesn't need my shit heaped on him when he's looking for some harmless fun .

"Fine." I gasp. "Just in my head." But my chest is tight, and Knox's disappointed face right before he turned and left me in the hallway at the club keeps flashing in my mind.

"Talk to me, baby. Just let it out, whatever it is," he says softly, the words exactly what I need to hear.

"My friend," I start, fighting to keep my voice lower despite the anxiety clawing at me. "The one I told you I hurt a long time ago, and is back in my life now with work?"

"I remember," he says, reassuring and calm, his phone trained on the mess on his abs and his softening cock that is still far too big. God, I want to put it in my mouth and feel it harden again.

"I think I messed it up even more. I might have feelings for him, but I'm not even sure I'm gay."

“Baby, I’m gonna say this gently, but firmly, because it’s not the first time I’ve been through this.” His voice is tired as he pulls up his joggers and grabs a tissue to take care of the mess on his stomach. Once he’s situated again, he continues. “Maybe you’re not gay, but you’re not straight if you’re coming with me, even in secret. You’re probably bi, and there’s nothing wrong with that. You can like and get off with anyone you want. It doesn’t change who you are. You’re still hot as hell and a good person if you’re worried about what happened with your friend in the past and how to fix it now.”

I let out a surprised chuckle and follow his lead, tucking my cock away and cleaning myself up. “I appreciate you thinking well of me, despite me losing my shit after coming. Feel free to just hang up on my ass next time if you don’t want to deal with me.”

He laughs now. “I don’t let people go through it on their own when they open up to me. Besides, I have my own shit to deal with, and it’s kind of therapeutic hearing you say what I wish I could hear in my situation.”

“There’s someone for you, isn’t there?” I ask, kind of sad, but I feel the same.

He breathes out a long breath. “I’ve been in love with the same man for as long as I can remember knowing what romantic love was, and it’s always been unrequited. I’ve never expected him to even see me romantically. He’s an idiot and can’t get his shit together, so I don’t know if it’ll ever work out for us, but I can’t help holding onto hope that maybe someday he’ll see me the same way I see him. Call me a stupid romantic.”

“If you’re such a romantic, why do you use this app?” I ask with genuine curiosity.

It takes him a second to respond. He plays with the tie on his joggers, his long fingers moving in a mesmerizing way. “I don’t have the option to go out and hook up or

connect with guys like this. It's safer for me to stay anonymous and send dick pics to get off. You're the first person to ask me more than if I like your dick," he says, sounding genuinely pleased. "Why are you on it?"

"It was curiosity, at first, and for attention, I think."

"The attention is nice," he says. "I bet you get a lot on here with that perfect cock. "

"You're the only one I talk to on this app, but you must be speaking from experience because yours is the most amazing one I've seen," I say immediately. He chuckles in appreciation before I continue. "But I realized maybe it wasn't just for attention. I don't know, maybe I've always been interested in men, even if I couldn't admit it, and I realized coming with a man, even through an app, felt as good as coming with a woman."

"That's nothing to be ashamed about," he says evenly.

"For me, there's a lot of shit wrapped up in the idea of being gay. I have, I guess trauma or some shit that really fucked me up about the idea. I couldn't wrap my head around what I wanted and what I knew was expected of me, so I shoved the part that wanted men down and went hard in the other direction. It terrifies me what it would mean, and who I would be if I looked too hard at that."

"It's just a term that helps other people categorize you, not anything that actually tells them who you are. You're bi like you're a poker player, or a pilot, or a dog owner. How much does that actually define you, right? Your worth as a human is more than what title you wear." His tone is casual, the words said like we're talking about the weather, and it all hits me.

Holy shit. He's right. I've been so worried about other people—how they would think of me, what they would say, and if they would judge me—that I stopped myself from

even daring to admit the truth. The truth is, I like women and men, and I've been lusting after my best friend in a big way that could be so beautiful if I just came clean about it, so he knows he's worthy of love, and I want to be the one that gives it to him.

"I'd kiss you if I could. Know I'm sending you a big, sloppy, virtual tongue-in-your-mouth kiss. You just made things feel so much simpler. Thank you," I say, my voice coarse and gravelly as I fight the emotion rising in my chest.

He chuckles softly. "I may have to take you up on your virtual kisses because the only person I want kissing me right now has his head up his ass and doesn't want to kiss me," he replies. "Until next time when we have more messy emotions to sort out, baby."

I feel lighter disconnecting from the app. Now, I have to figure out what this all means in real life, where it's not as simple.

Twenty

Knox

I can't believe I'm doing this.

I put the finishing touches on the package—a red bow on the white paper—and shake my head. This is so dumb. I shouldn't be making grand gestures, but here I am, wrapping a present for Ryder to find when he gets home. I prop the package on the couch facing the front door, where he won't be able to miss it when he gets back from his road trip, and leave for practice.

When I return hours later, I hear music before I even unlock the door. Once I swing it open, the sight that greets me makes my knees weak. Ryder's ass is in the air as he's bent fully in half with his head on the floor, his legs spread out to the sides and his hands on his ankles, elbows on his knees. I have the most amazing view of his round ass and the bulge of his cock nestled in the sling of his shorts that are bunched up at his hips to allow for the generous spread of his muscular legs.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I croak, my voice failing me at the view of this magnificent man in such a compromising position.

He opens his eyes and reaches up toward his phone to stop the playlist, but he stays curled in his upside-down position. “Yoga. This is a wide-legged forward fold. It really opens up the hips while stretching my inner thighs and hamstrings.” He walks his hands up his neon green Hydras branded yoga mat and finally rises. He turns his feet to the side, stretches his arms out wide, and bends at the waist over his front leg,

touching his front hand to the floor while raising the top arm in the air and twisting his chest forward.

God bless yoga.

I shake my head and close the door because I can't stand in the doorway gawking at him while he stretches. "Do you do yoga often?" I ask, grateful for a neutral subject that has us kind of talking again after our spectacular blow-up and the lonely silence ever since.

"I do it most days. It's been good for my flexibility and joints."

Yeah, no shit. I can see his flexibility isn't an issue at all as he plants both hands on the mat and moves his feet back, sending his hips up and stretching his back as his chest pushes toward the floor. Once again, his ass is in a tempting position. I have to turn and scurry for the kitchen like the horny dog I am before I do something regrettable, like grab that perfect ass and make it mine. But Ryder isn't mine. He's not even comfortable with who he is. I won't be able to touch him again until he makes up his mind about that; it doesn't feel right.

I noticed the package was missing from the couch, so he must have found it when he came home. I'm dying to know what he thought, but don't want to ask. He might hate it. When I close the refrigerator door after pulling out a water bottle, Ryder is standing right there, making me jump from the unexpected shock.

"Fuck, don't do that." I gasp, my hand flying to my heart that is galloping in my chest after taking a quick detour around my thoracic cavity, touching my throat and my stomach before making its way back home.

"I found your gift."

I take a step away from him, turning so I don't have to look at his stupidly handsome face. His beard is a little thicker, and his hair is wild from his yoga session. He looks rugged and sexy, and smells like sweat, and it all turns me on when it shouldn't. "Glad you found it. Goldie's been missing you."

"Getting me a big canvas print of my goldfish when she's been missing me is kind of backward, but I like it, anyway. It seems fitting to have a picture of my child." He moves back into my line of sight and runs a hand through his wild waves, brushing the strands out of his eyes that are a deeper hazel, bordering on forest green, today. "I hung it in my bedroom so I can always look at my pretty girl."

I snort out a laugh. He's ridiculous about the damn fish, which is why I thought he might like the canvas. "Yeah, well, I got her a tiny canvas of your face and propped it by her tank so she can always see you, too," I joke. "Goldie's good company when you're gone. I like her. She keeps to herself and doesn't make a mess. She's quiet." That's about as much as I can say about missing him as I'm able.

"Do you like my fish more than me, Golden Boy?" He cocks his head and narrows his eyes at me. "You saying I'm messy and loud?" Ryder's face is intense, and I can't tell if he's serious or joking. He steps closer, moving slowly as I back up and hit the counter behind me. "I can be clean." He places a hand on the counter to the left of my hip. "I can be quiet." His other hand lands silently on my right side.

What's this fucker doing now? He's boxed me in, and his intense eyes are locked on mine as his face inches closer. Is he going to kiss me? He hasn't even admitted he wants me, and I'm not strong enough to resist him if he does that. I'll end up breaking my own heart when he pulls away again because he still can't grasp that he's bi and has feelings for me that go beyond getting under my skin.

"Ryder, please," I say softly, begging him to have mercy on me.

But what am I asking, exactly? Do I want him to give me space and leave me alone, going back to his pretend hetero-normative life where I'm just the guy he used to be friends with that's helping him rehabilitate his image? Or am I asking him to give me a romance novel fuck it moment and close the distance, kiss me savagely, and admit his feelings? Knowing Ryder, that's not happening.

"I need to show my appreciation for your kind gift. Properly, this time. See, I can learn my lesson," he says, voice a sexy growl as he begins to lower to his knees in front of me.

I grip his shoulder to stop him. "You don't have to do that. I know you don't actually want—"

Ryder cuts me off when he presses a finger against my lips. "Shh. You deserve this." When I remain quiet, he pulls his finger away and nods. Then he gets on his knees in front of me.

Holy fucking shit, what is happening right now? This isn't real. Ryder wouldn't do this. He's too caught up in his straightness, worried what others will think, to do what I said in anger when he used me, rutting against my ass in what he said was his appreciation when I cooked for him.

But Ryder kneeling before me is a gorgeous sight. He's so beautiful, his unruly waves framing his sexy, hooded eyes as he looks up at me. He bites his lip as his hands slide up my thighs and ghost over the silky material of my shorts. Goosebumps explode across my skin when he tucks his fingers in the elastic waistband and pulls my shorts and boxer briefs down my thighs. I don't stop him, I can't, as his eyes go wide when my cock springs free. I bring a hand up to my face in embarrassment, covering my eyes as my whole body quivers in anticipation and nerves. Watching him see me like this, so vulnerable and exposed and excited for him, is mortifying.

“Eyes on me, Knox,” he says in a commanding tone that leaves no room for argument.

Oh, fucking hell, he did not just say that. I shakily drop my hand and let my eyes meet his. His gaze is steady, burning with lust, needy even, when he leans forward and flattens his tongue against my shaft and licks me from balls to tip. I grip the granite behind me to steady myself when my knees threaten to give out with that one taste he’s taken, not sure how I’ll make it through anymore.

“Fuck,” he says, dragging the word out so it carries a multitude of meanings within the low and gravelly sound. “How can you taste this good?” He doesn't wait for an answer before he licks the sensitive ridge of the crown, brings his hand up to grip my shaft, and swirls his tongue around the head in a way that has me swearing.

“Don't play with me, Ryder,” I say. If he’s teasing me, intending to leave me hard, unfulfilled, and leaking precum, I’ll scream. “Think about what you’re doing and if you’re okay with it.” Fuck, those are the hardest words to say right now, with his tongue learning the taste and shape of me, but I don't want him to do anything he’s uncomfortable with or will regret, and I certainly don’t want him to hold this against me when he’s thinking straight .

“Does this look like I’m playing or not okay with what I’m doing?” he says before he works up a mouthful of saliva, lets it pool over his gorgeous lips, and falls onto my dick, coating the length in his spit, making me moan. He opens his mouth and slides the head and a good portion of my cock straight down his throat before he gags and backs off. It takes him a minute to figure out how much of me he’s comfortable fitting into his mouth, but when he does, he smiles around my cock, and I about lose it right then. What is it about this big, strong, beautiful man with his teasing mouth that just does it for me? I shouldn't want him as much as I do, but I can't stop.

He pries my hand from its death grip on the counter and guides it to his head, a

devilish smirk on his lips as he bobs along my cock. I love the feel of his hair in my fingers, and revel in the fact that he wants me to touch him while he does this. A moan slips from him, eyes fluttering shut when my fingers thread through his hair. The sound and the hum of it nearly undo me, and I grip him tighter, trying to hold on. His eyes roll back in bliss, and he sucks harder. Oh. He likes it a little rough.

“I’ve never...” I trail off when he swirls his tongue as his hands twist my shaft, and it’s fucking hard to think as he touches me like that. “No one has ever gone down on me,” I admit, the words exhaled in a shaky rush.

He pops off my dick and looks at me. “Good. You won’t know how bad I am because this is the first blowjob I’ve given. Do I get points for my sloppy enthusiasm?” he asks, cheekily.

I scratch his scalp affectionately before I take another handful of his hair and tug his head back. “Baby, you get all the points for even touching my dick.”

His eyes glaze as he looks up at me, a shy smile turning his lips up before he sucks my cock into his mouth with even more gusto. He grips my ass with both hands and works my cock like he has something to prove, even though I just told him I have nothing to compare this to. I tentatively put a little pressure on his head. He blinks up at me and hums in encouragement, so I set a pace that feels good and seems to work for him, too. My hips buck when one of his hands slips down to cup my balls and tug. He keeps doing that, so now I’m fucking his face, my hips joining in as my hand brings his head along my length until he’s gagging. I pull back until I pop out of his mouth.

“Fuck, did I hurt you?” I ask, my hands cupping his face as he gasps.

He laughs. “No, you just have the world’s biggest dick, and I have to figure out how to get past my gag reflex to take all of you down my throat,” he says huskily.

“You don't have to do that,” I say quickly.

“Are you kidding me? I want to. If I'm doing this, I'm doing it right and you're getting the best head of your fucking life. Now, let me relax my throat and swallow that monster dick down the way I want, and don't you stop, even if I gag.”

“What about when I'm close?” I ask, not sure if he wants my cum anywhere near him.

“I'll tell you when we stop. If I can shotgun a beer, I can swallow your cum. Now, shut the fuck up and let me take that dick like a good boy.”

Oh. My. Fucking. God. I get a full-body shiver of pleasure before my basest urge to fuck his face takes over. Dropping his cheeks, I grasp the base of my cock, feeding the head past his eager lips that latch around me and suck. Threading my fingers into his silky hair, I tug his head back until he moans. I slam my hips forward and let him have me. He braces one hand on my thigh and wraps his other around my base, jacking me as I use him the way he wants me to. His tongue is strong and skillful, moving along my shaft as his cheeks hollow and his eyes widen as he takes even more of my length. I pull back and take what feels good, because I don't need him gagging around me to get off. Everything he does sends shockwaves of rapture ricocheting along my nerve endings, lighting up my synapses, and turning me inside out with pleasure.

“Fuuuck. I knew your mouth had to be good for more than just speaking without thinking and making inappropriate jokes.” I gasp, letting my head fall back, unable to process how this is my reality.

Ryder laughs around my cock and the vibration has me gripping his hair tighter and swearing as he continues his efforts.

I settle in and enjoy Ryder's mouth on my cock, the juxtaposition of his silky lips and the scratch of his beard against my balls as they slap against his chin, and so many sensations all at once send tingles of awareness and straight-up disbelief that this is even happening careening through my brain. I roll with the rhythm we establish together, my push and his pull, his eyes looking up at me, and his smiles when I moan his name.

"Ryder, I'm so close, baby, I'm gonna come," I groan, barely able to speak with his mouth on me. He moves both hands to my shaft and rotates them in opposite directions as they move up to meet his incredibly talented mouth, and I lose my damn mind. "Fuck, like that, goddamn, Ryder, yes, baby, please," I whine, incoherent and babbling as my release grips me, pressure building and my cock swelling. Ryder's eyes grow wide, but he sucks harder and I explode, cum spilling into his throat as he swallows hard. I keep my eyes on his face, watching in fascination as I come into a man's mouth for the first time when all I can think is holy shit, it's Ryder who just sucked me off and made that happen.

I tenderly pet him, combing through his hair and cupping his face as my thumb strokes over his cheek when he lets my cock fall from his mouth and takes gasping breaths. Bracing for what I know is coming, I try to memorize this moment when he's soft and lovely, and he looks proud for just rocking my entire world. Already I'm preparing for the worst, expecting him to push away and his face to get a look of disgust. I look away from the gorgeous man that's taken up so many of my thoughts and try to guard my damn soft heart. I let my hands fall away from him and pull my shorts back up.

"That's harder than I thought, but so fucking worth the effort. I have to give credit to the women who were good at it."

He doesn't sound like he's about to lash out. I dare a look at him as he rises, running a thumb along his bottom lip that's swollen and well-used.

“You okay?” I ask, afraid of the answer.

“My jaw is sore as fuck and I think you knocked a tonsil out of place, but I’m fine.”  
He slaps me on the ass and turns to head out of the room.

What the fuck just happened? He didn’t freak out, but that is not the reaction I expected, either.

Twenty-one

Knox

I run my hands over my head and exhale. I can't do this with him again. He can't dismiss me or what we have together as a mistake. It's not fair to me, and it's not right for him to deny himself this truth now. I drop my arms and follow him out of the kitchen. He's rolling up his yoga mat like he didn't just blow my mind while blowing me.

"Do you have something you want to tell me?" I ask as calmly as I can manage. I need answers, and I need him to tell me what's happening between us. He shuts down when I get too close, so I have to be strategic about how I go about this.

He glances over his shoulder briefly and goes back to his mat. "I think we established that was the best head of your life, Golden Boy."

I growl my frustration, done with his constant flippancy and deflecting with humor to avoid the subject because he's uncomfortable or won't admit what he needs to. "Ryder, I'm serious. You've been escalating for months. Little digs to get under my skin. Getting in my face. Touching me. You dry-humped me for fuck's sake. You kissed me. You just put my dick in your mouth. But every time, you pull away and won't take responsibility for your actions."

Turning, he walks toward his bedroom, and my heart sinks. He's going to deny me again. He's going to shut me out and leave me guessing when he'll finally admit his feelings.

“I think I claimed that blowjob pretty well, don't you?” He tosses over his shoulder carelessly, a smile added on for good measure.

“You're not admitting anything, though!” I say, my voice rising with my agitation. He's not acting the way he normally would, but he's cavalier with my feelings, and that's no better.

He pauses when he reaches his bedroom door with me close on his heels and turns as I grip the top of the doorframe to keep myself from following him in. His smile is gone, a frown replacing it, and his eyes are hard as he stares at me.

“What am I supposed to admit, Knox? I loved sucking your cock? Kissing you felt more natural than anything ever has? Fucking against your perfect ass was so good I couldn't stop and that's why I came in my pants? What do you want me to fucking say? ”

He's gesturing at me like all of this is some story we're concocting, not the most basic truth we've lived together. It pisses me off and hurts even more. I drop my hands from the doorframe and clutch the front of my compression shirt that's suddenly too tight, right over my heart that's ripping to shreds.

“I need you to say you want this. You want me.” I pound my chest, desperate now as my voice breaks. I look down, feeling like a damn fool for pursuing this when he looks away first. But I have more to say, so I find whatever courage I can, knowing it's time to ask for what I deserve and stop taking his shitty treatment. “I need you to admit you've been the aggressor and keep pushing things because you want to be with me.”

“I can't,” he says, voice rough and full of so much more than those two words can express. “Not yet.”

Fuck, those words do more to tear a hole in my chest than anything can. I feel them eviscerating me, flesh ripping, bones crunching, sinew snapping, marrow obliterated by the most innocuous words that expose my weak fucking heart to the stabbing knife Ryder's wielding.

I meet his eyes and see the fear and self-loathing and know, I fucking know, he's not ready. As much as I want him to own this, to be on the same page as me, I can't make him go any faster than he's ready to. It fucks me up more than anything because I'm so ready to be with him, in every sense of the word.

I shake my head. The yoke of loneliness settles over my shoulders once again while the freedom to live the life I'd dreamed of, that I'd just embraced, is snatched away by his inability to admit he wants me, too. The future I want so badly is only achievable if it includes him. I let out a sigh heavy with reluctance and defeat.

"I'm here, Ryder. Whenever you're ready. I'll be here to listen and accept you. You're not alone and never will be. Not like I was. You already have all of me. I just need you to want me."

I leave him at his door and retreat to my room. I can't be anywhere near him right now. I want to force him to talk, make him see logic, and rationally walk him through everything he's done and how that adds up so he can come to the same conclusion I have.

But Ryder doesn't work like I do, and he's resistant to my way of doing things. Hell, it took me till thirty-one to want to be open about my sexuality, and I've been sure about it since I was a kid. Ryder hasn't even acknowledged he's not straight. I guess I can understand his hesitance and confusion.

I fall onto my bed and mindlessly scroll social media, liking Harlowe's latest food posts. But mostly I'm caught up in my mind. I can't believe the first time I

experienced a blow job, it was Ryder's talented mouth that rocked my world, and he initiated it. Well, his initiating isn't surprising, given his recent history. But that was way beyond a fully clothed touch as he was proving a point or trying to push my buttons.

A notification crosses my screen for the Vers app, and I almost ignore it because I'm not in the mood, but I think better of it and click in. I've enjoyed my heart-to-hearts with HotnHandsy as much as the way we make each other come. We have a lot in common, which is a surprise. I don't know if I'll be able to perform for him now, after Ryder so thoroughly took care of me, but maybe he'll let me talk through this mess, or I can help him.

The message that's waiting for me isn't the sexy prelude to a dick pic request I'd expected.

HotnHandsy: I kind of have a different request today. I hope that's okay.

HandyManCan: I guess it depends on the request. I'm having a pretty weird day.

HotnHandsy: Well, same. I need to talk, and you were the first person I thought of, but that's kind of weird, right?

HandyManCan: Not at all. I'm fine with talking. That's about all I'm good for right now, actually.

HotnHandsy: I never expected to be so relieved that someone on a dick pic app didn't want to see my dick and was okay with just talking haha

HandyManCan: For real, what's on your mind?

HotnHandsy: I just did something that went well beyond crossing the line with the

guy I've told you about. I keep, I don't know, poking the bear, seeing what will get him to snap, but it's because I want to touch him. He's not stupid, he knows what I'm doing and doesn't rise to the bait, which is infuriating in its own way that he's so patient and controlled.

HandyManCan: When you say you keep poking him, what do you mean?

HotnHandsy: He calls it escalating. I call it not being able to resist his appeal and finding ways to touch him that look like I'm teasing him or something.

HotnHandsy: Listen, I'm not proud of this, but the last time he did something nice for me, I kind of dry-humped him and played it off like it was in appreciation. He rightfully called me out and said appreciation would have gone the other way, and he would have gotten off instead of me. So today, when he did another nice thing for me, because he's truly the best, I got on my knees and gave him my first blow job. It was insane, but it felt so good, like that's where I belonged, and he was so perfect.

HotnHandsy: Now I'm freaking out because he wants me to admit I'm bi and tell him I want him, but I'm not ready and it freaks me the fuck out to say it out loud. The actions thing I can do, but I can't say the words because that makes it real. I know we've talked about this, and you helped me realize it's just a label and doesn't mean anything, but I'm still stuck, especially after all I've put him through. I don't know how to do this.

My hands shake as I throw the phone down on the bed, breaths coming in shallow gasps. I knew this was too good to be true. I knew his story sounded too familiar. There were too many similarities to be a coincidence. But I let myself believe I'd found a kindred soul who'd been through something close enough to my own experience that we could bond over it.

It's fucking Ryder pouring his heart out to me—no, he thinks he's talking to a

stranger on the internet—which is a million times worse. I wanted him to say this to me , not to my faceless alter ego. What are the odds that I would match with Ryder of all fucking people on an anonymous dick pic app for gay dudes? This is a fucking twist of fate of Machiavellian proportions. Someone must hate me. I reach for the phone again, not sure how to navigate this new reality, but I know he needs me to be his voice of reason more than ever, and I have to say something .

HandyManCan: Why not just tell him you have feelings for him? That seems simple enough, and you do, right?

HotnHandsy: My feelings are bigger than that. I can't put them into a few words the way he wants me to. It's not as simple as that, because my whole life would change, and I'm not ready.

HandyManCan: What do you have to be ready for?

HotnHandsy: I'd have to come out, and I don't want people to dissect my sex life publicly.

That I can understand. I've kept myself in the closet my entire adult life because I didn't want anyone to hold my sexuality against me in my professional life, or have it hold me back in any way. But I'm done having this conversation with him over private messages. I stand from the bed, shakily make my way down the hall, and knock on Ryder's door. My stomach flips when I hear him moving around. I take a half step back when he opens the door.

I hold my phone out, screen open, in front of me. "Do you have anything to say to me now ?"

Ryder's brows draw together as his eyes drop from my face to the phone, shock registering quickly as he realizes what he's seeing. The color drains from his face,

and his mouth opens, no words come at first before he snaps his eyes to mine, and they're blazing with fury.

"How the fuck did you get that?"

"You stuck my dick in your mouth earlier tonight. Didn't it look familiar to you, HotnHandsy?" I ask, scrolling up through our conversation for him to see the photos we've sent each other. "Although the angle of the photo makes it appear bigger, so I can see how you may have had your doubts."

Ryder's cheeks burn red as he pushes my hand holding the phone away roughly. "Fuck off." He tries to close the door on me, but I'm not letting this go. I push it open and block the door frame with my body.

"Why won't you talk to me, Ryder? I know how you feel. I just need you to say it so we're on the same page. Otherwise, this all means nothing, and you're playing with my emotions for sport. I'm not okay with that. I deserve to be treated better. I deserve someone who wants to be with me in public as much as they do in private," I say, the conviction shredding my voice.

"I don't want to talk about this!" he shouts, unable to look at me as he drives his fingers into his hair and paces around the room. I notice he's placed the canvas print of Goldie on the dresser across from his bed, and my heart skips like the traitorous bastard it is, thinking this means something.

"You can't keep running away from me. I don't care if you're scared, so am I. I just want to be with you and know we're in this together," I tell him calmly, lowering my voice and putting up my hands to hopefully show him I'm not trying to fight, I just want to support him.

"I'm not scared, I just don't want to talk to you," he insists, turning the other way and

crossing his arms. He's so wound up, he can't stop moving, and he won't even look at me. His hands move back into his hair in agitation.

"You had no problem talking to me when I was just a faceless man you jacked off to on the internet," I say softly. "We talked about this, and I didn't judge you. I listened to you. You can just say it to my face now. Hell, you have no problem saying everything else to my face without thinking. This should be nothing," I joke to lighten the mood.

It doesn't lighten the mood.

Instead, it seems to flip the switch from agitated to enraged in Ryder. His hands drop from his hair, and his face turns red. His brows scrunch and his jaw tightens as he stalks up to me and gets right in my face.

"I don't need your fucking sensitivity training or comportment lessons. I don't need to stay here, and I don't need to say shit to you," he says slowly, each word ripped through his clenched jaw. "I'm done with this Golden Boy babysitting bullshit that's done nothing for me, anyway. I'll take my things and get the fuck out of here and you can have your space back just the way you like it, and we'll forget any of this even happened." He pushes me out of the room and slams the door in my face.

I let him, because I know this isn't a fight I can win.

Instead, I lose what I want most.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am*

Twenty-two

Knox

The condo is quiet without all of Ryder's ubiquitous noises, which I've become used to when he's home. Silence is stifling. The filter on Goldie's tank is loud in the stillness, breaking through my thoughts and annoying me more than ever. I should have flushed her when I had the chance, but then I wouldn't have this small reminder of Ryder even now. I hate this so much. Pulling up my phone, I text Lilah before I do something rash, like text Ryder and threaten to send Goldie to the fish farm if he doesn't come back.

Knox: Want to grab a drink? I need some company.

Lilah: Big bestie needs a hug?

Knox: Yes, and alcohol. Maybe you can scratch my head, too? I don't want to be alone right now.

Lilah: Alone? Isn't Ryder there? The Hydras have a home game tomorrow. He's in town, right?

Knox: ...he left. I have a lot to explain. Want to come over?

Lilah: That sounds like code for bring drinks and snacks. Sweet or savory?

Knox: Both.

Lilah: Gotcha. Send me the address. I'll be over in half an hour.

When Lilah arrives forty-five minutes later, she's armed with a large canvas grocery bag stuffed with items. "Hey, sorry I'm late. Publix was way busier than I thought it would be, but this sounded serious, so it was worth the stop to get supplies." She breezes past me to the couch. Settling herself, she unloads her bag on the coffee table. She pulls out Flamin' Hot Cheetos, ranch dip, peanut butter Oreos, a jar of peanut butter, a carton of milk, a bottle of wine, a lime, and a bottle of tequila.

"Girl, who are you feeding, and why is this such a random assortment of shit?" I ask in astonishment. I don't think I've had this much junk food in my home at once in years. I don't eat entirely clean all the time, but I'm generally pretty healthy.

"You said you needed alcohol and didn't want to be alone. When I feel like that, sometimes I need wine, other times I need tequila, so I brought both. If we do wine, we need Oreos and peanut butter. If we do the tequila, we need the hot Cheetos and ranch dip. Trust me. Grab napkins, cups, shot glasses, plates, and a knife for the lime."

I get everything from the kitchen she's requested, bringing my armload back into the living room where she's ripping open the bags and containers, arranging things with what I give her.

"Okay, is this a wine or tequila emergency?" she asks, holding up the bottles once I've fallen back into the couch cushions.

"I'm gay," I say abruptly. It feels good to finally say it out loud to her. I'm sure she's had her suspicions with everything that's happened, but actually saying it out loud is new territory for us.

"Tequila night it is," she says, blinking quickly, before putting the wine bottle back in

her tote bag and pulling the shot glasses closer. She fills them and hands one to me, holding hers up for me to clink. “Cheers to queers!” she says merrily.

I can’t help laughing before I take my shot and suck the lime she hands me. “You’re really casual about this,” I say, my heart nearly jumping through my ribs as the tequila burns down my throat.

“Honey, I’ve known you were gay since the night you ordered pink cocktails and told me all about Ryder with hearts in your eyes, even though he was awful to you. If that wasn’t enough, going to drag brunch with you where you knew every word and lip-synced better than the queens did was a big fucking clue. You’re a secret RuPaul’s Drag Race fan, aren’t you?” she accuses with a raised eyebrow, pouring another round of shots.

“Guilty,” I say, shuddering as I hold up the next shot. “I told you I don’t like tasting my alcohol, but you still brought tequila?”

“This is serious. You will take the alcohol I provide and spill your secrets. Now, drink, bitch.”

I make a face as I down the shot and place the glass far away on the coffee table so she won’t refill it. Tequila and I don’t get along so well. She holds out the bag of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos, and I put a handful on the plate she gives me, already containing a dollop of ranch dip.

“Wait, did something happen at Luscious after Pride Night? You and Ryder disappeared, but I was kind of busy, so I wasn’t paying too close attention. Oh my God, it did, look at you! Spill,” she commands with wide eyes, brandishing a Cheeto at me as I groan and try to hide my face in embarrassment.

“Ryder and I have a complicated history, you know that, and living together the last

few months has been weird. At first, we were constantly fighting, and he was always trying to get under my skin. Well, that turned into him trying to push my buttons and see what would make me snap. At the club, he was following me around, stopping guys from dancing with me, and I finally snapped. I pulled him close and suggestively danced on him, and said maybe he wanted me for himself if he wouldn't let anyone else have me, and he kissed me.”

“Oh fuck, he’s in love with you,” Lilah screams, grabbing for the Oreos. “This makes so much sense why he said all that nasty shit. He’s internalized his feelings into homophobia because he hates what he wants. So what happened, why did he leave?” She scoops up a glob of peanut butter with her Oreo and pops it in her mouth. The girl knows her junk food.

I sigh and twist apart an Oreo, adding extra peanut butter to the cream before putting the cookie back together. “I think I pushed him too hard. Every time he’s come on to me, he says it was, I don't know, like an accident or something, and he won't take responsibility for his actions. I just want him to admit that he’s been doing all this because he wants to be with me. But Ryder can't even say he’s bi, let alone that he wants me beyond the stolen touches or the kisses we shared at the club. I’m ready to come out already, and he’s so behind, he hasn’t even made it into the closet.” I hold off on sharing the more intimate details. Those are for me and Ryder to keep.

“That’s hard,” Lilah says, rubbing my arm. “Relationships aren’t easy at the best of times, but to have someone who’s afraid to acknowledge their orientation, well, you’re working on a different timeline and with different playbooks.” She scoops up ranch dip with a Cheeto and crunches it decisively.

“We’re playing different sports,” I muse around a mouthful of Oreo and peanut butter. We’ve gone full junk food mode. I’ll probably regret this at practice tomorrow, but right now, it’s helping my wounded heart.

“You know what you need to do, right?” Lilah says, sitting up and brushing red Cheeto dust off her chest. “You need to come out for real. You’re asking Ryder to do something you haven’t even done yet, not really. He’s terrified about his feelings for you and claiming his identity. If you take the risk first, it will show him you’re serious about wanting to be with him and make it easier for him all around.”

My heart kicks in my chest and decides now is a great time to run a fifty-yard dash without an end zone in sight. That’s scary enough to make my stomach turn over and mix the tequila, Oreos, and Cheetos into a disgusting sludge that threatens to come right back up. I swallow the bile that rises in my throat.

“You think that’s necessary?” I manage to squeak out.

Lilah pins me with way too sober a stare. “Knox, how long have you been in the closet, my big, bad, gay bestie?”

“A long, long time,” I admit, leaning over and pulling the bottle of wine out of Lilah’s tote. This sounds like I’ll need additional alcohol that doesn’t taste like fire. Lilah holds the glasses out for me to pour when I pull the cork out of her pink wine.

“If you want Ryder to admit he’s bi and wants to be with you, you’re going to have to make the first big step. That’s coming out to the world and showing him it’s not that bad. We’ll make sure of it. Let’s write your story and take back the narrative. With Ryder’s viral video thrusting you into the spotlight, people were making assumptions, but no one’s heard from you directly. Tell your story, explain what it’s like being gay in professional sports, and how that hasn’t affected you even once in your career, because it shouldn’t. It’s not like straight people go into the office every day saying I’m straight, my work is going to be so much harder because of it, so why would being gay be any different?” She’s on a roll, pulling her phone out and typing into a notes app already.

I drink the surprisingly tasty pink wine and look at the bottle. It's a pink Moscato from a California winery called Villa Sonoma. Leave it to Lilah to find pretty wine that I actually like. Ryder would have a field day if he knew of my preference for pink drinks. I look over at Goldie's tank and catch her looking at me. No, I'm not your mommy, you damn fish. She's definitely his child. I refocus on Lilah.

“Okay, so I'm doing this. I have to tell my agent first, let him know there's going to be backlash, and get a plan for PR going. I'm doing this right if I'm doing it at all.” The words sound eerily similar to what Ryder said when he was on his knees sucking my dick, and the thought sends me spiraling a little. But if I ever want to repeat that amazing moment with him, I have to show what bravery looks like and prove how much I want to be with him.

Lilah fiddles with her phone, pulling up a music app, and raising the volume before hitting play. “I'm Coming Out” by Diana Ross blasts through the speaker, and she cackles. I set my wineglass down as she pulls me to my feet. We dance around my living room like fools. I even show her my best Drag Race moves I've never shown anyone else, and for once, I don't feel so alone or scared of what the future holds.

Twenty-three

Ryder

Proving my superstitions correct because I couldn't get off with Knox, or even his alter ego HandyManCan, before this game, I played like shit against Seattle. It fucking sucked to realize I didn't want to find another anonymous hookup on Vers because it wouldn't have been the man I wanted. Three goals got past me in the first period alone before I could even get my head in the game. Seattle was on fire and got another two goals in the second and third periods, while we could only score three goals the whole game.

It was embarrassing as shit, and Coach threatened to replace me with Magnus if I let another in, which would have been warranted. I sucked out there and I hate losing. I'm just glad he didn't pull me for media after the game where I would have been roasted for my shitty performance, and all I could have said for myself is sorry, I'm in a fight and I didn't come with my best friend like I needed to so we lost. That would have gone over so well.

I'm tired and grumpier than usual as I get a post-game workout in, trying to clear my head, but I'm still mad as hell. My teammates are giving me a wide berth to avoid me snapping at them. I've been staying with Westy and his guestroom sucks. I can't fucking sleep when I'm there. It doesn't feel like home, and I hate that Knox's condo even felt like that in the first place.

"Hey, Kingsy, looks like you were right about Knox Contraire after all," Rook calls from across the gym. I look up from the exercise bike I'm riding to find him waving

his phone at me from the treadmill. “Did you see this story in the Atlanta Free Press? He came out publicly.”

My heart rate spikes even though I’ve been trying to keep it steady on the bike. Knox came out? For real? Why would he do that?

“Weren’t you living with him? You’re friends. Did he bring guys over?” Campbell asks from the bike beside me. He sounds more curious than anything.

“No. He never brought anyone over,” I growl, but I’m barely paying attention as I pull my phone out of my pocket and search for the newspaper where Lilah works and find the article, scanning it before I read through in detail.

## Knox Contraire on Coming Out Later in Life

By Lilah Williams

One thing that can be said about the star tight end for the Atlanta Condors is that his sexual identity has never been a consideration within his football career. Known for his encouraging pep talks and motivating spirit, Knox Contraire is well-loved by his teammates, performs well under pressure, and has helped Atlanta progress to the playoffs four of the five seasons he has played for the Condors. His track record has more than proven his worth within the organization, and his field time shows it. You could say he’s a model player. But he’s had a secret that until recently, no one could even guess.

A shocking viral video put a spotlight on Contraire that suddenly told a different story—one that painted him as a man who was living a lie but lacked any substance or veritas to explain what could have made the storyteller step forward in the first place. “I was the victim of bullying for what people thought of me for years. This video felt like a visit back to high school,” Contraire said with a shrug at a local

coffee shop. “That’s part of why I didn’t want to come out sooner. I knew how bad it was for me without saying a word about my sexuality. I couldn’t imagine it would be any better if I came out as gay and lived that truth, so I stayed silent and didn’t rock the boat. I wanted to make life easier for everyone.”

Contraire defaults to this selfless mindset in all aspects of his life. On the field, he is the first to give credit to his teammates for the plays he was instrumental in. Off the field, his free time is spent volunteering with various organizations around the city, from local garden projects to literacy programs, and even Meals On Wheels deliveries to seniors.

“I knew it had to get better,” Contraire said about why he didn’t give up despite years of bullying. “Sports saved me. Football gave me an outlet and a place to be when I needed a team. Even through the hardest times of my life when I couldn’t depend on my team for the support I needed, I could depend on the sport itself.”

So why come out now? “The viral video made me realize I’d let others determine how I lived my life for too long. I stayed quiet and took the bullying in high school because I didn’t have another choice, but I do now. I don’t have to hide that I’m a professional athlete who happens to be gay. My sexuality has never stopped me from playing well, and it won’t change that now that I’m out. I want to find love and be proud of the man by my side, not hide that I even have feelings for him.”

What’s next for the NFL star? With a self-deprecating laugh, Contraire gestures around vaguely. “I don’t expect anything to change, not on my team, or in the sport at large. I just want to play the game I love, with a team I believe in, and leave my personal life off the field where it belongs. I’ve always treated my career in sports as a profession, and I’ll continue doing my best so I can build a life for a future family. I hope to make someone very happy someday, and it starts with me showing up as the man I’ve always wanted to be, so he’ll see he can, too.”

It's as simple as that for Contraire. His personal life doesn't affect his time on the field. Now he's free to experience the fullness that life offers without hiding parts of himself to make others more comfortable. As we leave the coffee shop, Contraire appears even taller than his impressive six-foot-six frame, his head held higher, and a new light in his eyes as he takes in the world around him. A world that just opened up by coming out, and it's remarkable to watch.

I close the browser on my phone. He said he wants to find love and not hide his feelings. Is he taking a swipe at me because I won't tell him how I feel? Did he come out like this to show me he's over me and not going to wait for me to get my shit together?

I hop off the bike and abandon the cooldown workout. I need to go home. Fuck! I run a hand through my hair. I don't even have a home to go to, just Westy's lumpy guest room mattress and curtains that don't close all the way, so light streams in around them and I can't nap properly before games.

"It's a nice article. Good for him, right? Dude seems cool," Westy says, looking up from his phone as I pass him.

"Shut it," I snap.

As I head back to the locker room, I think through Knox's motivations. Maybe this has nothing to do with me. It feels personal, but it doesn't have to be. The idea of him wanting to make someone happy someday is driving me insane. He shouldn't be with anyone else. He's always been mine...

Am I really going there?

I can't put any claim on Knox, no matter what the screaming voice in my head, or maybe it's my dick, seems to think. Not when I was the one too scared to tell him I

wanted him. I was too much of a coward to embrace the part of me that thinks divergently, feels more, and looks different from what I was told I should want or need.

“Care to comment on my latest piece, Kingston?”

I look up to find Lilah leaning against the wall outside the locker room, looking professional in a tailored black pantsuit with a bright red shirt that matches her lips, her hair up in a high ponytail. She’s the last person I want to talk to right now, but maybe she has answers for me.

“Why did Knox do that?” I ask. “Off the record. I’m not speaking to you as an athlete and a reporter. This is only because we’re kind of friends.”

She smirks. “Kind of friends? That’s so compelling.”

“You know what I mean,” I say, jamming my fingers back in my sweaty hair. I could use a shower badly and I’m sure Lilah smells me, but she’s the one waiting for me, so she’ll have to deal.

“Knox said what he needed to in the article. He wanted to tell his story after hiding and letting others tell it for so long. He’s done with that. What did you think of it?” she asks.

“I think it’s crazy. He didn’t have to go public like that. Now everyone knows his business when it shouldn’t matter,” I say. “It’s going to change his life.”

“Maybe that’s exactly what he wanted,” Lilah says with a smile that is too knowing. I hate that she has the inside scoop on Knox, and I can’t ask her anything that would tell her how I’m feeling. “He’s showing up as the man he’s always wanted to be, so the person he’ll be with someday sees they can, too.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I snap, pacing the width of the hallway.

“It’s an indirect quote from Knox in the article. He knows he has to come out and live as a gay man publicly and proudly to ensure whoever he ends up with feels comfortable being with him, since he’s a public figure and all.”

Is that why he did it? That’s insane. But it does make some sense, I guess. “Is he okay? Has he gotten a lot of shit from people?” She’ll know exactly what I’m not saying aloud. I’m really asking if people are being shitty like I was when that person caught me on video and my remarks went viral. I hate that I started something that could come back to haunt Knox now that he’s trying to live boldly. He doesn't deserve even one rude comment about him.

Comments on the Hydras’ social media from Pride Night were mixed. Plenty of fans were supportive and liked our initiative, while others were super hateful. Comments like stick to hockey, no longer a fan, this is sick, when is straight night, not watching, and ridiculous! It’s one thing to be gay, which I have nothing against, but now you’re forcing players to wear those jerseys? That’s a no for me were common enough during the campaign. All the jerseys were auctioned off and brought in thousands of dollars for Outlanta, and direct donations topped another twenty thousand, which was more than we expected. Westy, Campbell, Rook, and Nico even offered to join me in volunteering at some other events Outlanta is putting on, so we will continue the Hydras partnership. They’re a really cool foundation and I like what they’re doing.

“He’s okay,” she says, her face serious, whiskey eyes swimming with emotion. She waves a hand in the air and blows out a breath as she continues. “There’s the expected vitriol from sports fans who don't want to see anything but the status quo and say they’re not interested in a player’s sex life, yet don't make a peep when a girlfriend or wife is shown on a Jumbotron or talked about in an interview, so you know they just don't want to see anything gay in their face. But there has been some good stuff, too. A few new sponsors reached out, and he has some unexpected

opportunities presented that weren't in his plan. Overall, I think it's been positive. He's happy."

He's happy without me, is what I hear loud and clear, and that feels like a knife to my heart. He's better without me dragging him down. "Thanks, Lilah," I say, nodding and swallowing the hard lump in my throat.

"You should reach out to him," she offers as I head into the locker room. I just lift a hand to let her know I heard her.

Twenty-four

Knox

“How do I look?” I ask, turning in a tight circle and smoothing my hands down the lapels of the bespoke suit I had made for events just like this.

“Like I can bounce a quarter off that ass and you’re going to break a bunch of hearts tonight,” Lilah replies from where she’s lounging on my couch. “Are you sure you don’t have a suit that doesn’t fit quite so well? That one is molded to you and leaves nothing to the imagination. You know you’re going to an event for a gay app, my friend. You’re a walking temptation. If you don’t want to be slobbered over by everyone and their bestie, you might want to change. Even I’m struggling right now, and I know you’re not into me.”

Laughing, I spin again. “I take it that means I look fucking good, and I should feel great about my chances tonight.” I wish I was interested in hitting it off with anyone other than Ryder, but alas, my heart is a fool for a fool.

“Your chances are one hundred percent that you will be in everyone’s spank bank, regardless of their orientation. So yeah, dust your shoulders off because you look so good,” she says, standing and coming over to do just that.

“Thanks for rizzing me up. I’m kind of nervous about this. It’s my first event being out, and for a new sponsor that is literally so gay. There’s a lot that feels weird about tonight,” I admit. I consider all the changes that have occurred since the article ran. Mark has pulled in full-time PR to handle some of the backlash, as well as the

unexpected outpouring of support.

The NFL, and my team, have been generally supportive, even if a few were initially standoffish. Luke was the first to come over and hug me, telling me how proud he was to be my friend and that he loved the article. He's been wonderful as always and told me he has my back, and nothing will change between us. Antwon, being the hot-headed jerk he usually is, loudly announced to the locker room that he didn't want to change around me because he felt uncomfortable with a gay man on the team.

In a moment of bravery brought on by finally living my truth, I told him there's nothing about his cranky, ashy ass that even remotely turns me on, so there's never been a moment where I've even considered checking him out, clothed or otherwise. The entire team ooh'd and roasted the shit out of him for the burn and being a whiny bitch about the situation. After that, the ones who were a bit hesitant eased up and realized I'm still the same person they've known for years, and coming out didn't change anything for our team. I'm grateful it went that direction, rather than going up in flames and costing me my career as I expected.

However, in a shocking turn of events, my coming out actually secured me a new sponsorship from the Vers app of all things. I'm now the new face of the faceless gay dick pic app, even though it's not advertised that way. Instead, it's a place for gay men to connect anonymously without the pressure that is often associated with dating offline. Tonight, I'll be hosting an event Vers is putting on in Atlanta to celebrate the launch of a new feature, which is a local matching option, to assist with dating, so you can take your online hookups into real life if you want to. The app has been wildly popular, and this new feature is highly anticipated. I'll even be shooting a commercial for them, which is beyond anything I imagined for myself.

"You do public speaking engagements all the time, this will be a piece of cake to show up and pose for photos, talk to reporters, then rub shoulders with a bunch of people for a few hours while you drink. Just be yourself and enjoy the evening. The

best part is, you don't have to hide a single thing about yourself tonight!" she says excitedly. "Now go, your ride is downstairs, and I'm jealous Vers sent a car for you like you're a superstar. "

"You can be my date to the next fancy event I go to," I tell her to appease her FOMO.

"I will cash in that receipt, just wait," she assures me.

I take a moment to snap a photo of Goldie in her tank and send a text to Ryder that I hope I won't regret.

Knox: [photo] Goldie misses you. She wants you to come home. I'm not the dad you are, and she knows I wanted to flush her. She judges me for it.

I exit my messages and lock my screen, not expecting a reply from him. I pocket my phone and head for the door with Lilah on my heels.

"What does Vers stand for, anyway? I've never looked it up," she says as she follows me out of the condo to the elevator.

I look over at her and grin when I push the button for the ground floor. "It's a term meaning you're willing to be a top or a bottom for anal, rather than being one or the other. So if you're vers, you don't mind giving or receiving."

"They named an app after a term related to anal? You have to be fucking kidding me. That is the single greatest thing I've ever heard," she says as her smile stretches across her face. "Having a dick must be so great. I have the biggest case of penis envy right now, you don't even know."

We both howl with laughter as we ride the elevator down together so she can leave and I can go to my event as a gay man, rather than Knox the athlete, who never talks

about his sexuality.

The deep purple carpet matches the Vers app logo and is strewn with people posing in front of the step-and-repeat backdrop for photos with various news outlets and photographers. As my town car pulls to the curb outside the swanky hotel, I take a deep breath and open the door.

“Mr. Contraire, this way please,” a woman wearing a headset and holding a clipboard says as soon as she sees me. “I’m Tia, and I’ll be walking you through the press before we get into the party. Just follow me.”

Well, that’s a pleasant surprise. I expected to be alone for this. Having Tia direct me is already a welcome change.

“Thanks, Tia, it’s nice to meet you.”

She nods and walks me to the start of the purple carpet gauntlet. “This is Sergio Mendes. He’s a singer and another Vers ambassador. Sergio, this is Knox Contraire, from the Atlanta Condors,” Tia says, introducing me to an incredibly attractive man. He has caramel-streaked brown hair that flows to the collar of his shiny royal blue slim-fit suit which sets off his perfectly bronzed skin, highlights his stunning brown eyes, and is topped by a smile so white he could do Crest commercials.

“Knox, it’s so good to meet you,” Sergio says, reaching for my hand and clasping both of his around it. He pulls me in and kisses my cheek. I swear it has to be fifty degrees warmer than the rest of me as I blush furiously.

We’re out in public where anyone can see us, and he has no problem kissing me? It was one thing to be in a gay club dancing and touching men, but this feels so different, and I like it. Sergio’s voice is melodic and makes me want to listen to anything he says, and his smile and direct eye contact give him an effusive,

charismatic charm that makes you feel like you have all of his attention. It's overwhelming in the best way.

"Wonderful to meet you," I manage, taking my hand back from him and staring a little longer than is polite, I'm sure, at his perfectly symmetrical face. No one is that perfect; he has to be augmented in some way, or he's blessed by the gods.

"Come, let's face the vultures together and make the best of it. I hate these things, but find it's easier when you have a friend by your side," he says, taking my hand and leading me to the first media station for a LGBTQ+ podcast.

"Knox, you are freshly out, congratulations," a woman with rainbow-streaked hair says into a microphone when Sergio stops us in front of the barrier. He's still holding my hand and squeezes it reassuringly, which actually helps. "How has your entry into the LGBTQ+ world been so far?" She holds the microphone for my answer.

"Thank you. It's been eye-opening, and feels like I've been welcomed with open arms into a family I didn't know was waiting for me," I say honestly. "The outpouring of support has been unmatched, and more than makes up for any negativity I expected, given my position in professional sports and as a public figure."

"The gays know how to throw a party and welcome their people," Sergio says by my side, rubbing my arm affectionately, and I smile his way.

"We know advocacy and charitable work are important to you. Are there any organizations or causes that are particularly close to you that you plan to work with going forward?" the podcaster asks.

"I was recently introduced to an organization called Outlanta that works with at-risk youth right here in Atlanta. They provide counseling and resources for kids who

either can't come out or are unhoused because their families kicked them out when they did. As someone who didn't feel safe to come out as a teen, their work resonates with me, and I would like to partner with them to further their cause," I answer.

I'm picking at a fresh wound that isn't fully healed by saying this now.

My parents...haven't come to terms with my coming out. I called them before the article ran and told them, and they were confused, given how well I've guarded this secret from them. Immediately, Dad said that my path wasn't God's will for us. It stung to have him criticize my truth, even as an adult, but tracks with how I was raised. I don't think it mattered that I told them I've known since I was little that I was gay and it wasn't a choice. It's not something I can change or hide any longer. Mama cried and said she'd hoped I would marry and have a family. I told her I still hope to someday, it'll just look a little different from what my brothers and sisters have. Dad was quiet until the end of our call when he told me to be safe, and that he didn't want to see me hurt, which choked me up and had me in tears as I hung up the phone. It was so like him to just want what's best for me and to see me taken care of, even if he doesn't understand me. It will take time for them, but I hope we can see eye-to-eye someday on this.

I can see this having been a bigger fight when I was in high school, though. I could have been one of the kids who had to leave my family if I'd come out to them when I was younger. I would have needed the services of an organization like Outlanta if that had been the case, and I'll be sure kids like me have the resources they need in the future. I've already donated money to them, but my time is just as valuable, and I plan to give that as well.

"That's wonderful. They'll be lucky to have your support," the podcaster says.

Tia cuts in and points to the next station, moving us along the step-and-repeat for photos next. She has us pose separately and together for photos. It's a little awkward

to put my arm around Sergio's shoulders for one of them, but Tia instructs us for the cameras, so I follow her lead.

We go through this a few more times before we finally make it into the party, and it feels like I've spoken to fifty reporters and taken a million photos. My face hurts from smiling.

"Don't your cheeks hurt at this point?" Sergio asks as he grabs two purple cocktails off a passed tray and hands one to me.

"I was just thinking that," I say with a laugh before I take a tentative sip of the drink. It's a lavender-infused gin and tonic, I think, and not too bad, even if it's not pink.

"Now, we mingle," Sergio says with a smile as we move into the party proper.

And that's exactly what we do. We speak with more people than I can remember and talk about the Vers app with people who have no problem describing their hookups in great detail. I don't share about my own, other than that I've used the app, because of course an ambassador would. I make no commitments when asked if I'll use the new local match feature to begin dating. Instead, I say it's a great new addition to the app, and I hope users find it helpful for their love lives.

At the end of the night, I walk with Sergio to our town cars. We hug before going our separate ways after exchanging numbers, but no promises to connect later. He was nice, and it was great to have a partner to get through the event with, but I didn't feel that spark with him beyond an initial attraction I'd feel for anyone who was that perfectly beautiful.

Twenty-five

Ryder

“W ho the fuck is that?”

“Man, it is too early for you to be shouting like that,” Westy says, rubbing his eyes as he pours coffee into a travel mug before morning practice.

I scroll through the gallery of photos attached to the article and seethe while my mug of coffee is forgotten. Knox looks like a million bucks in a dark burgundy suit and black shirt that’s molded to his body, diamonds in his ears sparkling like his smile. I didn’t even know his ears were pierced. In some photos he’s by himself and looking incredible, in others he laughs with the most stunning man I’ve ever seen beside him on a purple carpet at some event for the damn Vers app, where he’s a new ambassador. How can a faceless dick pic app have a face? Two faces, actually, that are as incomparably gorgeous as these men.

“What are you looking at that has you so red?” Westy asks, looking at my phone over my shoulder. “Hey, that’s Knox. Is that a new boyfriend or something? Damn, good for him, that dude is objectively smoking hot.”

“Shut the fuck up or I will break your face,” I snap, locking my phone and stuffing it in the pocket of my bag so he can’t comment on Knox. I grab my travel mug to leave.

“Damn, it’s cool if you miss him. He’s your friend, and you’re going through something, but there’s no need to bite my head off.” Westy steps back when I shoot

him a glare.

“I don't want to talk about Knox,” I grumble, stalking out the door. Westy follows, because, of course, we're carpooling today and I can't just leave him here.

“Bro, you're obviously going through it, and those photos pissed you off. All I'm saying is I get it, and I'm not judging. I'm giving you an outlet to talk because you're a real jerk when you get like this, and no one likes you like that. If you want the D-line and the team to have your back, you have to be a bit more likable, man.” He holds his hands up in a don't hold it against me for speaking the truth kind of way, and I roll my eyes as I start the car.

I pinch my temples and rub my eyes for a moment before looking up and beginning the drive. What do I even tell him? It's not like I can come out to my teammates .

But why can't I? Knox came out, and he seems to be doing fine. The Condors rallied around him, making a big public statement about supporting all of their players, regardless of their identities, and pledging to create initiatives for LGBTQ+ inclusion in sports throughout the organization, which is huge.

“I'm...” I begin, feeling the word stick in my throat and having to swallow around it before I can get it out. “...bisexual.” My stomach churns at the words spoken out loud for the first time.

“And I'm Québécois, but most people just call me Canadian,” Westy says, like we're talking about our nationalities.

“I'm not talking about where I'm from, I'm talking about who I want to fuck,” I snap at him, exasperation rising when I have to even say this.

“Well, that's how I feel about it. It's of such little consequence as where you're from

to me. I don't care who you want to fuck. Take a woman home. Take a man home. Take both. I don't fucking care. Just get some. I'm sure half our team is bi or has at least experimented. Everyone's getting way too comfortable with each other, ya know?"

"Seriously?" I say slowly, wondering if it's that easy.

"Yes, you idiot. Now, what's up with Knox? Was there something between you, and that's why you're crashing at my place in the world's most uncomfortable bed?"

"Dude, you know that bed sucks and you let me stay with you anyway?" I ask in annoyance.

"It's how I keep people from staying too long. The bed guarantees guests will go home because they can't stand the accommodations. Sorry, not sorry," he says with a grin.

"Rude," I say with a grimace before I go back to his original question. "Yeah, there's something between us. Knox wants me to admit I have feelings for him," I say slowly. "We got into a fight because I'm not ready to come out and say it. So I left." I don't tell him about the text Knox sent me about Goldie missing me and wanting me to come home. I know Knox has ulterior motives, and he's using my fish against me to get me to break down and do what he wants.

"You really want to avoid the conversation that badly, huh?" he asks, sipping his coffee.

"I was in a different headspace, okay? This was before his coming-out article, anyway. He was still in the closet, so it's not like he had anything to stand on." It's a weak argument, and I know it.

“Bro, he did that for you.” I can feel Westy’s eyes boring into my face as he stares at me in disbelief.

“What are you talking about?” I ask, merging onto the highway.

“The article, coming out so publicly. He made several comments about his future man, and being the man he’s always wanted to be, so his future man can be, too. It was really cute, and he was talking about you, you big dummy. He went out on a limb, took that big, bold step first, and showed you he’s ready to be in the spotlight and will make it okay for you . He knew you were afraid to come out, and didn’t see him out, so why should you be? So he went even bigger. That dude has balls.”

He has no idea . But I don’t say that. Knox’s balls are for me, and me alone. And maybe that dude in the blue suit he was photographed with my dick voice reminds me, unhelpfully. That guy was way too hot, and Knox had his arm around him in a few photos. He said he wanted to be with someone proud to be by his side in that same article, and look at him posing with another guy not a week later. He’s an incredible man, and I know I’m not the only one who sees it. But I’ve been too afraid to step up and be there for him the way he deserves. Maybe I’ve waited too long.

“Well, Knox may not think I’m worth waiting for, since those photos were taken yesterday and he looked oh so friendly with that hot guy with the amazing smile,” I mumble as I work to not strangle the steering wheel. Maybe if it was that guy’s scrawny neck.

“Oh, come on. You never know what’s going on in photos like that. They were taken at an event, they could have been told to pose like that. Why not just ask Knox? Then you’ll know for sure and won’t have to guess at the nature of their relationship, if there even is one,” Westy says, sounding way too wise.

“Have you been through this before?” I ask as I take the exit for the arena .

“No, but I’ve seen this in movies so many times. You’re stupid if you do anything but ask him about it, and I know you’re not stupid. A dummy about emotions and your orientation, maybe, but not outright stupid.”

“Thanks for that vote of confidence,” I say with a frown.

“Oh, after practice, you should totally go to his place and surprise him with flowers or something and tell him how you feel,” Westy says, smiling in his excitement as I pull into the parking garage.

“He’s gay, not some chick who wants that kind of treatment,” I say and shudder. “That sounds awful. Why would you even suggest that? It’s not like I’m going to pick him up for a date or some shit.”

“Dude, movies, duh. And everyone likes flowers, not just chicks. You’re such an asshole. No wonder you’re the one who messed things up. Now you have to make things better somehow. You left, he came out in a big ass public article where he made it so fucking obvious how he feels for you, now it’s on you to fix things. If not flowers, you have to figure something out. Grand gestures or some shit, I think. We’ll tell the boys and figure it out during practice and get you sorted,” he assures me.

“No, I don't want everyone to know,” I say immediately, the thought of my entire team knowing my secret sending a shot of fear careening through my body and knocking every nerve on its way until I’m a frayed mess. They’ll make fun of me. It’ll be high school all over again .

“You think they don't already know? I bet they do, and no one’s going to care. It’s not like you hit on us or anything.” He unbuckles and hops out of the SUV, grabbing his coffee and bag.

Could my teammates already know I’m bi, and not care? He’s right about me not

finding any of them attractive. They're all disgusting, honestly. I spend too much time with them and know their worst habits. I watch them sweat, bleed, spit, fart, and do ungodly things regularly. None of that is sexy.

When we walk into the locker room, Westy claps his hands to get everyone's attention, and my heart rate jacks up. "Kingsy has something to say, and you better be supportive." He turns to me and nods. That's it? That's all the warm-up I get before I lay myself bare before my team?

My hands shake, and my entire body is coated in a sheen of sweat as I look around at the semi-interested faces of those assembled. "I, um, I'm bi," I say haltingly, and in just a loud enough voice that I'm not sure they can even hear me.

"So what? Is that going to change what we do for practice today or something?" Nico asks as he straps on his pads.

"You owe me twenty bucks," Rook says, turning to Campbell as he pulls his practice jersey over his head.

"I'll Venmo you," Campbell grumbles, tying off his uniform shorts and begrudgingly pulling out his phone.

"Should have listened to me when I said I saw him go off with Knox at the club, and I had a feeling there was something more than friendship between them," Rook says, pointing at me.

"You're betting on me, now?" I ask, incredulously. "And no, you didn't see anything. Remove that from your brain," I insist, looking at Rook.

He laughs and looks at Nico, who holds out a fist for him to bump.

“Don’t worry, bro, we were too busy with Lilah to really see anything,” Nico assures me.

I guess my team really doesn't care about my sexual orientation or that I might have a thing for Knox, after all. My shoulders slowly lower, my heart rate gradually returning to a normal speed as I look around at the uninterested faces. It’s a stark difference from the hate and constant shit I got from my high school team for even having a close guy friend. This is...weird.

“Hey, so, since you’re into guys and would know, can you tell me, is my chest better than Davy’s?” Chad asks, pulling his gitch off and flexing his bare chest next to the muscular, stoic Russian, who is eyeing him warily.

“It does not matter whose chest is better. It’s ball size,” Davy answers seriously, leaning forward and slapping the back of his hand into Chad’s testicle region. Chad groans and drops to his knees. “See? Big balls drop faster. Must wear jock.” He goes back to taping his stick like he didn't just take out our left winger right before practice.

“Hey boys,” Monty says as he walks in behind us. “What did I miss?” he asks, looking around the room, then between Westy and me standing like idiots in front of everyone.

“Kingsy told us he’s bi and thought we’d care,” Chad says, using the chair in front of his stall to climb back to his feet, sufficiently recovered from the nut tap.

“Oh, cool, about time. So, are you going for it with Knox? There’s obviously something there, and he’s got it going on,” Monty says, clapping me on the shoulder as he strides past us to his stall to get his gear on.

I shake my head incredulously and leave the center of the room for my stall to get my

pads on, too. “Did you all think I was gay or something?” I ask, too curious to hold back.

“Dude, you don't pop off with as much hate like you did at the wing place about another guy being gay without something going on inside yourself,” Monty answers, shrugging as he strips down to his compression shorts and starts layering on padding.

“Yeah, and you were extra sensitive about Knox in general,” Westy adds.

“Not to mention the insane chemistry between you two at the club after Pride Night,” Campbell says, holding a finger up as he pulls a jersey over his head.

“Oh, yeah, for sure. You eye-fucked him spectacularly before we even got to the dance floor,” Rook says, tying his skates.

“It even had me sweating watching you follow him around, stopping everyone from dancing with him,” Nico says, fanning his face. “What do I have to do to get someone to care about me that much, damn. I just want someone to love me.” He falls back in his chair and clutches his chest.

“You find a big, possessive motherfucker like Kingsy who doesn't want anyone touching what's his,” Monty says, laughing at my expense.

“I hate all of you,” I grumble, but it feels good to have my team know what has been my dirty secret for so long and give me hell about it lovingly, instead of shutting me out for it. Okay, maybe I can do this, after all. Now to gain the courage to finally tell Knox what he deserves to hear from me. I hope I'm not too late.

Twenty-six

Knox

When I push the door open after practice, I'm ready for a nap in my quiet home, but music and the smell of food stop me in the entryway. What the fuck?

I look around the corner toward the kitchen and glimpse a sight I wasn't sure I would ever see again—Ryder standing barefoot at the stove, in a pair of his gray sweats that hug his ass and nothing else so the tattoos across his upper back and arms are on full display.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my voice hoarse with disbelief as I walk slowly toward the kitchen, not sure what to expect. Did my text about Goldie make him come back? Is he here for good, or just a visit? Is he here for me ?

Ryder twists the stove burners off, stops his phone playlist, and turns around. He runs his fingers through his hair to brush it out of his face as he looks at me sheepishly. “I got your text that Goldie was getting daddy issues, and I couldn't have that. She's at an impressionable age. I don't want her to end up a stripper or something,” he jokes.

Ah, there's his stupid humor to deal with the things he can't face. I nod and turn to head for my room, not sure how to handle him being here if he's still not ready to tell me what I need to hear. I'll just have to figure out how to coexist with the man I can't stop thinking about. It shouldn't be hard, I've done it before.

“Knox, wait.”

I close my eyes when hearing my name on his lips sends goosebumps pebbling across my skin in a rush. I fight the urge to turn around and make this easy for him. He doesn't deserve easy. He deserves to work for my attention.

“I know I fucked up. Hell, I have years of fucking up to account for, and I’m sorry.”

His voice breaks on his apology. I hear the sincerity in it and know he means it, but words only go so far. He’s right, he spent years ruining my life with both words and actions, and it’ll take more than one apology to make up for it now. I gave him a free pass for so long, and he threw it back in my face by not being able to just own what he really wants. I was willing to overlook everything that happened, everything he put me through, so we could be together, but he couldn't even tell me he wanted me.

“I’m sorry for being a coward in high school. I should have told Commisso, Sanders, and those guys to shove it and reported them for the shit they were doing, so they couldn't hold it over me. They deserved to lose their place on the hockey team. I can see the path so clearly now for what I could have done differently instead of siding with them and bullying you. I thought I would lose hockey and the way out of my crappy home life if I didn’t, but I lost something even more important, my best friend.”

Okay, that’s a start. But hindsight is twenty-twenty, and it’s so easy to say what you should have done. It’s harder to make choices for the present that will affect your future.

“And I’m really fucking sorry I’ve been a coward about telling you I’m incredibly bi. I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you I think you’re so damn amazing and I can’t imagine my life without you in it, and how badly I want you to be mine.”

I turn slowly and find Ryder behind me, wringing his hands together, an anxious look on his face. He could finally say exactly what I wanted to hear, in a very Ryder sort

of way, and it floods my heart with hope that maybe he's serious, maybe he wants this as badly as I do.

"What are you saying?" I ask, needing the extra clarity from the notoriously ambiguous idiot.

Ryder takes a step toward me and puts his hands on my face. "I'm saying I fucking want to be with you, and I would be so proud to be by your side." He pulls my face down to his and kisses me like I'm the air he needs to breathe. Like I'll fortify his soul after forty days in the desert. Like I can make his world right again. When we break apart, I search his face for the discomfort and hesitancy I expect to find about his declaration, but all I find is anticipation.

"Are you serious?"

"I'm so serious. I hated myself for hurting you when I didn't know what else to do. When I kissed you in the club, everything made so much sense. It felt so right, and for the first time, I felt those stupid sparks people talk about and it scared the shit out of me. But now it's the only thing I want to do, and it's been driving me insane seeing your lips and knowing how you taste without letting myself have you."

"Do you actually want to be with me, an out gay man, even if that means you're going to have to be out also?" I ask because getting the facts hammered out with Ryder and ensuring we're both on the same page is incredibly important for me before I let my heart go further.

"I came out to my team today. I don't know if I want to have Lilah write a whole fucking article for me to come out to the world or make a public statement of some kind, but I know at some point it'll come up and we'll have to deal with it then. Can we take it one day at a time?" he asks.

I pull away because it sounds like he's making excuses. "I don't want to be with someone who's ashamed to be with me. Or someone afraid of what others will say if they know we're together," I admit, even if it means he's going to walk away .

"I won't deny you, ever, that's not what I'm saying. But I do want our privacy. Like, I don't think we have to hard launch this with anything out of the ordinary. Let's just do us, and people will get the idea, and if they ask, we tell them we're together," he explains.

"That sounds reasonable," I agree slowly.

He's right. It's not like my teammate Luke would write an article about having a new girlfriend, so why should I worry about telling the world I have my first boyfriend? Ryder is running his hands up and down my back and it feels way too fucking good to think rationally, but I do have one last question for him.

"You saw the photos of me with Sergio at the Vers event, didn't you?" I fight the grin that's pulling at the corners of my mouth when Ryder's face grows dark, and jealousy lifts his own lips in a sneer.

His hands stop their exploration at the hem of my T-shirt and dip under the material, finding skin. "Is that his name, Mr. Too Hot For His Own Good, in the blue suit, who had his hands all over you? If he ever touches you again, I'll knock his too-perfect white teeth out and break his scrawny neck. He got a one-night pass that I'll forgive." His fingers slide inside my sweats and cup my ass. "This is mine now. I'm the only one who gets to touch it, look at it, eat it, fuck it, you name it, it's mine. I do not share," he growls, squeezing and sending bolts of lust streaking through me and all the blood in my body heads straight to my cock.

I groan and drop my forehead to his. "Goddamn, you're a possessive monster."

“You have no fucking idea. You knew this was what you were asking for when you wanted me to say I wanted you, right? I’m about to tear this ass up and mark you with my cum, make you wear it for the rest of the day, so you know you’re mine. You’re prepared for that, aren’t you? Because I don’t do half-assed. I do the whole fucking ass and I want yours.” He presses his lips to my neck and kisses a wet trail down to the crook of my shoulder and bites, making my knees weak.

“Jesus. Fuck. Ryder, oh my God,” I hiss, the pain and pleasure so glorious it’s hard to even think about everything he’s doing to me. My cock is so hard and rubbing against his, his powerful hands are on my ass and kneading, and now he’s biting the hell out of my neck again. The flurry of sensations has me seeing stars, and I blurt out the most important thing he needs to know. “I’m a virgin.”

His teeth pop off the flesh of my neck and he kisses the spot gently as his hands release my ass and move up to wrap around my waist. He’s still holding me tightly to him as he pulls back to look me in the eye. “You’ve never had sex?” His voice holds disbelief.

Adrenaline joins the other hormones gallivanting through my system, sending an icy wave of terror straight to my brain that this is where it’ll all go wrong. I roll my lips in and squeeze my eyes shut, embarrassment flooding me with this admission, so I can’t look him in the eye when I say, “Never really had the opportunity.”

“I know you’ve been keeping it quiet, but I would think someone as hot and as fantastic as you would have found someone, somehow, at some point,” he says, voice a bit awestruck.

I open my eyes and catch his, and there’s no judgment, which is such a fucking relief. I shake my head, but can’t answer.

“On Vers you were so confident and sexy, and fuck, you had me coming harder than I

thought possible with just your words and how you handled yourself.” His praise is a balm to my mortification, easing the sting of admitting what feels like a big fucking deal.

“I mean, I’ve watched plenty of porn, and I’ve done everything I can by myself, so I’m not a complete novice. I know what I like, and know what I think I’d like with someone else, but no partners.” I duck my head into his shoulder and exhale, feeling the burden I’ve carried with me for thirty-one years now shared with someone else. It’s not gone entirely, but it doesn’t feel quite so heavy.

“I’ve never fucked a man before,” Ryder says, quietly. “But an ass is an ass, and I know I like those, so we’ll get there.” He runs his fingers up my spine to my neck and pulls my face out of his shoulder so I’m looking at him when he speaks next. “Let’s take it slow and figure it out together, okay? No rush. All I need is you and the promise that someday soon I will absolutely be tearing up this amazing ass. ”

“Oh, trust me, I want that, too. I...I have things I use on myself, so we can always try,” I say with hope. I’m quite familiar with my prostate and know the joys of a vibrating wand, thank you. In fact, I could use it on Ryder and open his world up a bit...

“Not in front of Goldie, though,” Ryder says, nodding toward the fish tank. “We don’t want to give her any ideas about her daddies. Let me see that big bed of yours.”

I laugh, thankful for his gift of levity when this could have become incredibly awkward. Not being sexually experienced when Ryder is the opposite freaked me out. It was one thing to be giving and receiving a blow job for the first time together, without him realizing the extent of my inexperience. But to tell him I’ve done nothing with anyone and taking it as well as he did was...unexpected.

Ryder doesn’t let me go. Instead, he walks us toward the hallway, kissing his way up

my neck until he's at my mouth again. I'm not about to fight him when the attention feels so damn good. He kisses me hungrily, and my hands are in his hair, running through the silky strands, loving that I can touch him and know he's mine after wanting him for so long. He bumps me into the wall, and I groan when he grinds his hips into mine and my cock brushes against his. Fuck, that feels good. He rolls us toward my bedroom until I have him pinned to the wall, my thigh between his legs, and he shamelessly grinds against me as he pulls at my T-shirt. I raise my arms, becoming a tangle of limbs when my shirt gets stuck. We work to extricate ourselves from the mess of clothes, arms, and lips when we finally make it to my door.

I palm the doorknob, twisting it open and letting us inside as I find the collar of my shirt and pull it off my body so I can be skin-to-skin with Ryder at last. He's so hot we burn as soon as our bodies collide, and I push him down on the bed, following close behind after my shoes and socks come off. He rolls me to my back and runs his hands over my chest, his fingers skating over my pecs and flicking my nipples so I hiss, and down over my abs that jump and shudder at his touch.

"These fucking lines," he says, tracing the V lines along my obliques to my cock.

"You have them, too," I point out, fingering his own Adonis belt.

"Not like this. Fuck, they make me damn near lose my mind."

He straddles my legs, bending to lick along the lines he was just admiring. I groan, my cock jumping and hitting him in the throat through my sweats as he goes. He chose his position; it's a hazard of the spot, unfortunately.

"Please tell me you have lube," he rasps, his mouth tracing hot kisses across my stomach to the trail of hair leading below the waistband of my sweats.

"Top drawer of my nightstand," I whisper, the words extremely hard to get out when

my brain is oxygen-deprived due to all the blood in my body circulating to my dick, where Ryder has pulled my sweats down and is sucking me through my briefs. Goddamn, that feels good.

He climbs off me and finds the lube before coming back. "Sit up against the headboard. I need to kiss you whenever I want."

Damn, he's so bossy. I fucking love it.

I scoot until my back is against the pillows and the headboard, and Ryder is on his knees at my feet. I have to take a shuddering breath because this doesn't feel real. He's so beautiful as he crawls toward me, hair in his face, those hazel-green eyes making him look even more like a damn predator stalking his prey. I should be scared, but all I feel is a thrill of anticipation and a hell of a lot of desire.

"Please touch me," I demand, needy already.

He smiles, satisfied as hell as he sits back on his heels between my knees, still not touching me. "God, I like you pathetic for me. You know, I picked HandyManCan on the Vers app because he reminded me of you. I pictured your face, not knowing it was actually you on the other side of the screen. How am I the lucky fucker that got that wish fulfilled?"

Shaking my head, I brush my fingers over his cheek. "I never thought you would use an app like Vers. I couldn't have guessed I would find you. Seriously, stop talking and touch me before I take over."

He licks his lips as he runs his hand along my leg and squeezes my thigh, pulling my pants tight and highlighting the tent my cock is making.

"You told me I hit on a top-three fantasy for you the first time we talked. I want to

make your dreams come true. Now, take your fucking pants off and let me see that big cock of yours before I go crazy.”

Ryder pushes his sweats down faster than I can, falling to his side and trapping my legs in his rush to kick them off. We wind up a tangle of legs and pants. We're laughing when we finally end up naked, and it helps dispel some nerves to laugh with him and not be so serious despite how fucking charged the moment is with sex and testosterone.

“Oh, Jesus, fuck,” I swear, taking Ryder in as he lies fully naked on my bed, his fat cock hard for me, his eyes twin pools of lust for me. The fun and laughter is extinguished as my cock jerks painfully, standing fully erect and so hard I could punch through the drywall. “Baby, I don't know what's going to happen when you touch me, just know I'll enjoy all ten seconds of it before I blackout with pleasure and make a giant mess of us both.”

Ryder shivers, his eyes closing in pleasure as he smiles. “I fucking love when you call me baby in that deep voice of yours. It feels like you're scratching my scalp and tugging my balls at the same time.”

He grabs the bottle of lube and climbs over my legs, settling so he's straddling my thighs, showing his hip flexibility to great advantage. As he adjusts, his cock brushes mine and I swear the world explodes around me from that tiny touch.

I groan and reach for him, cupping the back of his head and bringing his face to mine to kiss him. His hips flex as he leans his chest against me. His cock rubs mine with each roll of his hips, mine bucking erratically as I fight the urge to roll him over and rut against him, and oh fuck, I could come just from this. I have a long way to go to last with a partner, it seems, but Ryder doesn't appear concerned about my stamina. He kisses me savagely, his tongue twisting with mine before he pulls back and bites my lip. My eyes roll at the delicious feel of him kissing down my neck as his hips

rock, and I get every bit of friction I was hoping for.

He plants his hands on my chest and pushes himself back like he needs the extra help. We're both a little frenzied, and it's good to see him just as breathless and turned on as I am.

"You're not as innocent as you say. You're a fucking devil," he says with a bemused laugh as he pops the cap of the lube and pours some in his hand. "Good thing I like you naughty."

Any retort I could have made is cut off when he palms my cock, slicks it with lube in a smooth pass, and presses it to his. He leans back on one hand, his quads and abs flexing as he slowly flicks his wrist in the most wonderful, tortuously slow pace imaginable to jack us off together.

"Ooooh fuuuck," I groan, reaching for him and gripping his ass, needing to sink my fingers into his flesh and hold on because I'm about to blast off into the damn solar system having this fantasy fulfilled. I feel drunk with lust, pleasure, and Ryder. My eyes flick between the delicious sight of Ryder's hand around our cocks, and the alluring picture of his lip caught in his teeth as he stares down at where we're connected, not sure what I like more.

"Ah, fuck, Knox, this is better than I imagined," he groans, letting his head fall back, his hand working us a little faster.

"You have no fucking idea," I grit out, getting even higher on the sensations of Ryder above me, his hand around me, my cock rubbing against his. I need him to move faster, and I need to touch him.

I let my hand drop from his ass and move to where he connects us. He seems to sense what I need and twists his wrist, opening his fingers so he releases his cock for me to

grip while he circles mine entirely. I take a few slow, exploratory strokes up and down his length, learning him while he continues to stroke me slowly. Feeling his veins, where he's ridged, where he's extra sensitive, where his head flares out, and what makes him pant when I squeeze. Then, I give in to the urge to have him whining my name and give him short, vicious pulls that mimic what I remember he would do to himself.

His mouth falls open as his hips snap unconsciously with my motion. He chants my name as he finally, mercifully, speeds up his strokes on me, and I get some of the relief I crave so badly.

"Knox...Knox, oh shit, yes," he grunts as his cock swells in my fist.

"Baby, just like..." I groan, lost to the moment as my release builds faster than a bullet train and Sparta kicks me right over the edge with Ryder. Hot cum hits my stomach and coats my hand, and I'm not sure who it came from, but I know Ryder is covered as well and doesn't seem bothered as we both slow our frantic hands and breathe heavily.

"Your cum gutters are working," Ryder says, breathless and still teasing.

I look down and watch as cum slides down the V lines of my abs he was so interested in earlier. "Yours or mine?" I ask as he watches in rapture.

"Yours, and it won't be wasted." He moves off my thighs and lays flat on his stomach over my legs so he can lick the cum off my abs. This filthy, depraved boy.

I laugh as his beard and tongue tickle the sensitive skin of my lower hips. Gripping a handful of his hair, I pull him up, then grab a pair of boxers, not sure which of ours they are, and quickly run them over my stomach and then Ryder's. I lie down before holding my arms out in invitation. Ryder doesn't hesitate, he crawls up next to me

and covers me with his body, putting his head on my chest, right where my neck and shoulder meet. He hitches his leg over my hips tightly as I wrap my arms around him.

My heart is so full I feel like bursting.

But my stomach chooses that moment to let out a loud rumble under Ryder's fingers that are gently tracing over my skin, alerting me that I came home starving and was planning to eat before I was side-tracked so thoroughly.

"I made you dinner," Ryder says, propping his chin on my chest. "It's probably cold by now, but everything can be reheated. "

"Is that what you were doing in my kitchen when I came home?" I ask, fighting my smile. Ryder making kind overtures is rare, and I'll take every single one.

"I figured I might have a better chance of earning your forgiveness if you had a full stomach, but looks like finally owning my shit worked pretty well."

"Yeah, it did, baby. But dinner is still appreciated." I kiss his head and unwrap my arms from his back so we can get up. I roll out of bed once he's untangled his legs from mine, and walk to the bathroom.

"Don't you fucking shower," Ryder barks before I can close the door. My brow scrunches as I turn and give him a perplexed look. What's his deal now? He continues, "You're wearing my scent the rest of the night. We'll shower together when I'm ready for you to get clean."

This man. I drop my head back and laugh. "You're a dirty motherfucker. Let me use the bathroom at least, you asshole."

When I come back out, Ryder is wearing my shirt, and I can't help the smile that

takes over my face like the warmth that spreads through my chest. I start to harden for him again as I reach for my sweats, trying in vain to keep my lust in check while seeing him in something of mine.

He points at me. “See, you’re a possessive asshole, too,” he jokes. “You like seeing me in your clothes.”

I can’t argue that. I just shake my head and push him out of my room, trying to hide my grin and the semi in my pants.

He doesn’t hide his smile. Instead, he tucks his nose into the collar of the shirt and inhales noisily, groaning in pleasure and falling back against me so I have to grip his shoulders to propel him the rest of the way down the hall. “You smell so fucking good. I need a bottle of your cologne to take with me on road trips.”

“You can have anything you want,” I promise, feeling incredibly generous because I have everything I’ve always wanted. The evening doesn’t feel real, but I soak up every moment and commit it to memory.

Twenty-seven

Ryder

Prepping for a game I know Knox will be at gives a new meaning to “on my game.” I want to play well when he’s watching, and the energy I have from the freedom of embracing this side of myself and being with Knox is like rocket fuel. I’m on fire at morning skate, blocking shots and finishing drills like I’m in contention for the All-Star team.

“Looking good, Kingsy,” Cal says as he feeds pucks to the guys to shoot at me. “Stay sharp like this and we’ll have a shutout for Utah tonight.” Hearing the praise from the quiet goalie coach pumps me up even more.

I’m first off the ice and headed for the locker room after practice, anxious to get home and meet Knox after his practice. We had to leave too early this morning to mess around, but I’ll have some time before my pre-game nap, and I know exactly how I want to spend it.

“Hey, Kingsy, how’d things go yesterday? You’re in a much better mood, and you didn’t end up in my guestroom, so I’m going to assume it went well?” Westy asks, filing in behind me as I walk through the tunnel. “What grand gesture did you go with? Flowers? A bunch of signs at his door? A boombox over your head playing Peter Gabriel?”

“Bro, are all the movies you watch from the eighties?” I ask, not about to tell him where I got the name for my goldfish.

“The best ones are,” he says, shrugging. “Seriously, though, everything good?”

I nod and purse my lips in consideration. “Yeah, man, they really are. He’s the best. I don’t think anyone else would have forgiven me. I’ll grab the rest of my things this weekend.”

“No rush. I’m happy for you. I hope this means you’ll be less of a dick if you’re getting some regularly and have a nice guy keeping you in check.” He taps his stick against my pads and heads to his stall, laughing.

“I’m not a dick, I’m discerning,” I insist, putting my gear in my stall. “And I know you guys need to be kept on your toes. Knox won’t change that.”

“Ah, but Knox is gonna change up your insides. Careful, he looks like a big boy,” Chad says, passing me and ruffling my hair.

“One, don’t talk about my insides. Two, don’t talk about my boyfriend,” I say, stepping on his stick with my skate so it pulls out of his hand and smacks him in the shin.

Damn, I just called Knox my boyfriend, out loud, to a room full of my teammates, and I didn’t even blink. So, that’s what progress feels like?

“You know, you jumped down my throat once when I said you had a boyfriend because you were talking about Knox, and here you are getting all possessive, not wanting us to know he’s packing an anaconda in his football pants, and saying we can’t talk about your boyfriend,” Rook says, unlacing his skates across from me. “If there isn’t some injustice in that, I’ll let my dog lick peanut butter off my d—”

“No one wants you to finish that sentence!” Campbell yells, throwing his elbow pad at Rook to stop the stream of words coming from his mouth.

“My kid loves dogs, and I don’t like hearing about bad things happening to them. If I find out you’re abusing yours by making it do horrible things like you’re alluding to, I’ll have it forcibly removed from your ownership,” Monty says, pointing his stick at Rook, his captain's face on.

“It was a joke! You guys are so sensitive. I would never. Indiana Bones lives like a queen,” Rook says, crossing his arms peevishly after tossing Campbell’s pad back to him.

“Indiana Bones?” Magnus asks, his Swedish accent adding a sweet lilt to the words. “Like the movie?”

“That’s Indiana Jones,” Westy explains as he thumbs at Rook. “This guy thought he’d be funny and play off the name for his dog. It’s actually pretty good.” He shakes his head and snickers, unable to hold back his amusement.

“Not as good as my goldfish, Goldie Spawn,” I say, pulling off my pads, feeling like one-upping them.

“Americans are weird,” Davy says, walking into the showers, butt-ass naked.

“At least we respect our teammates and wear towels in common spaces,” Nico yells, rolling his eyes as he pats my head and passes, wrapped in a towel.

“For the record, I think you’re all disgusting and don’t find any of you attractive. Also, none of your dicks compare to my boyfriend’s, so don’t try to measure up. I’m not interested, even if I like one guy,” I growl loud enough for everyone to hear and set the record straight once and for all.

The locker room bursts into laughter. Various pieces of equipment come flying at me as the guys give me shit about thinking they’re hot or insisting their dicks are big, it’s

just cold on the ice.

When I get home from practice, I open the door to find the shades drawn, darkening the condo so the lit candles on every surface make the space glow warmly. It smells like Knox's cologne, making my dick twitch. The man himself is sitting on the couch, his arms stretched out along the back, shirtless, in only athletic shorts, with his legs spread, and the sexiest look on his face I could have imagined. The man screams sex, and I'm all for it. My mouth is already watering, and I want what he's offering.

"Put your stuff down, take off your clothes, and crawl to me," he says calmly, his voice like velvet in the dark. I shiver at the quiet command. Holy fuck. This is the HandyManCan version of Knox, and I get him in real life after all.

I toe off my shoes, fumble with emptying my pockets, and strip out of my clothes as fast as I can. I leave everything in a pile at the door and drop to my knees on the hardwood, keeping my eyes fixed on Knox, who wears a soft smile for me that's in no way gentle. It's soft in the way the leather of a belt is when it's broken in; it'll still leave a welt when struck against your skin.

In contrast, my cock is hard and bobbing as I fucking crawl across the floor to him, sure there's a graceful way to do this, but not attempting to make it anything other than what it is—the fastest way to do as he's asked so I can fuck him. When I'm at Knox's legs, I look over to where Goldie's tank usually is and see it's been covered with a towel.

"Knox, did you cover Goldie so she wouldn't witness what's about to take place?" I ask, choking back the laugh that wants to come out despite the heavy tension of sex in the air.

"She doesn't want to see her daddies like this, no matter how much she'd like to be a voyeur," he explains, with a hint of amusement before he sobers and raises an

eyebrow at me. “I believe you promised to tear up my ass last night. I’m more than ready for you to make good on that now.”

Climbing onto the couch, I straddle his lap, and take the control back from him. I slide my hand up his chest to his throat and tip his head back onto the cushion, watching his eyes go hazy. He’s pliant, his arms still stretched out to his sides, gripping the couch like I’ve told him not to move, and I bring my mouth to his.

“Do you need me to fuck your tight little ass with my big fat cock until you’re screaming my name and begging me to let you come?” I whisper against his lips.

A breathy moan escapes his mouth that I capture as I kiss him, my tongue sliding along his lips, demanding entry and finding him obedient. He opens for me, our tongues twisting, tasting, letting me fuck his mouth and take what I want. His arms finally drop from the couch and come around my back, holding me tightly as his hands roam my skin.

I reluctantly pull away from his decadent mouth, slightly breathless, and look down at his dazed face. “I want you in the bedroom, naked, on the bed,” I command, moving off his lap so he can comply. He stands, kissing me as he does, and I follow him into the bedroom where I get to watch him strip out of his shorts and crawl onto the bed like I told him to.

I head to the bathroom for a towel and grab the lube on my way back to the bed, where he’s lying. I put the towel down. “So we don’t fuck up your comforter,” I explain, and he nods, chuckling. Sometimes, the unsexy things matter. Speaking of...there’s another subject we have to touch on. “I’m clean. I haven’t fucked anyone bare because I didn’t want any oopsy babies, but this is new. I have condoms,” I say, running a hand through my hair, aware of the obvious risks, and wanting to make sure I’m doing this right for him. He sits up and looks at his hands.

“Ryder, I’ve never been with anyone. And if you’re clean, I want to be as close to you as possible. If this were something casual, I’d have a different opinion, but I don’t think that’s what this is.” A look of insecurity crosses his face. “Right?” he asks. I don’t like that look at all.

I sit next to him and place my hand on the back of his neck, pulling his head into mine. “I called you my boyfriend several times today and felt really fucking good about it. Even that is such a bullshit term for what you are to me, because it’s always been you. Yeah, this is new for both of us, and I’m a total wild card you don’t know if you can trust, but I still want you to go all in and bet on us. This isn’t casual to me. It took me years to get here and accept this part of myself, and I’m not backing down from it, or giving up the best part, which is you.”

“Then I want you to fuck me bare,” he says, blinking his dark-lashed eyes at me, nearly stopping my heart with the rawness of the request.

“I’ll give you anything you want, big sexy. Now turn over on your hands and knees and let me eat your ass for lunch.”

Knox huffs a sound between surprise and a moan as he pulls back and turns over. I press my palm between his shoulder blades and stretch him out onto the bed more, so his ass is in the air and his face is in his pillows before I move behind him on my knees.

Ho-ly shit. The view. The goddamn view. Knox has a nice ass, gorgeous globes for cheeks on any given day, but like this? He’s a dream. I make a noise of appreciation and tug my aching cock that is incredibly excited about the prospect of finding a home right there in that tight ring of muscle.

Gently, I run my finger down his crack, and he shivers, pressing back against me. I cup his balls and roll them in my palm, getting used to the heft of them, before

trailing my fingers back up and circling his tight ring. Using both hands, I spread his cheeks and give him an exploratory lick from his balls up. The sound he makes can only be called rapturous. Yeah, he likes having his ass eaten.

“Oh, fuck, do that again,” he says, his voice half muffled by the pillow until he turns his face and I hear his rapid breathing.

So I settle in, learning his clean taste, because he was kind and showered before I got home. He said he does the prep work, so I assume he’s got everything ready for me if he wants me to fuck his ass. I circle his tight ring with my tongue, and he gasps. I get him nice and sloppy, dripping with my spit, before I move a finger back to his hole and press in slowly. He groans in delight and pushes into the pressure, making my finger sink deeper. I add another and play with him until he’s panting, gasping, and begging me to fuck him already.

“Turn over,” I say when I’ve had enough of the tortuous foreplay and need to fuck him, too .

“Wait, isn’t it easier with me this way?” he asks, indicating on his hands and knees with me behind him, doggy-style.

“Knox, I want to see your face, to know how you’re feeling. It will be just as easy on your back, trust me.”

He repositions himself on the pillows while I get the lube and pour some into my hand, coating my cock as I pump my fist over my aching erection that is desperate to be inside him. I push his knees up and move his legs over my thighs as I sit back on my heels before drizzling lube down his cock, over his balls, and onto his hole. I give him attention everywhere before I work my finger in again, then add a second, and a third as he adjusts to the size and stretch, his hips rocking along with my movements as I use my other hand to stroke him.

When I remove my fingers, his eyes open and he smiles as I position the head of my cock against his hole. "Tell me to stop if it's too much, or you don't want to do this," I say.

"Baby, I don't want you to stop for anything. Fuck me, please," he begs, and I want to give him everything he wants.

"Since you asked so nicely," I say, pushing in slowly and breaching that tight ring. It's quite a stretch, and his eyes widen, but he doesn't say anything. "I want you to breathe for me now," I tell him.

He blows out a breath as I rock my hips forward and watch his face, looking for pain or fear. "Your." Breath. "Cock." Breath. "Is huge." Breath.

"Glad you noticed, but I'm sure yours is bigger, and I'll be struggling to take that monster up the ass soon enough. But for now, I'm trying really hard not to blow my load because you're so tight and feel amazing. Damn, Knox, relax and stop squeezing the shit out of my cock because I'm only halfway in and I don't want to hurt you."

He laughs, which adds more pressure and makes me see stars as his ass compresses around me again. "Halfway? Jesus, fuck. Pull out a little and slide in harder. I can take you," he commands, hands reaching for my hips to do it himself.

I growl low in my throat, stopping him by wrapping my hands around his wrists and holding them at his sides. "You may have gotten used to doing this on your own, but you're mine now, and I'm going to take care of you, got it? We're doing this my way, and I'm not about to split you open because we were impatient." I blow out a breath because it feels really good just to sit here inside him like this, and talking is harder than I'd like to admit, even if he needs the words.

I pull out a bit and rock forward, this time meeting less of his tight resistance as he

relaxes around me. With small, gentle thrusts, I ease into him and watch as he goes from anxious to adoring, his espresso eyes meeting mine with wonder and satisfaction as my hips fit flush against his ass, finally.

“Fuck, Knox, you feel like heaven,” I groan, dropping my head down next to his, keeping my hips as still as I can when my dick has a mind of its own and wants to rut into him. I kiss along his collarbone, to his neck, biting and sucking the skin until I make it to his mouth. “You were made for me.” He kisses me back, holding my head and rocking his hips to get me moving. When he pulls me back by the hair, his face is needy and pleading.

“You’ve been gentle and I appreciate it, but I’m a lot rougher with myself. I can handle my man losing himself to me. I need you to really fuck me now, baby. Show me how badly you want me.”

My eyes widen as my chest expands along with my cock. He just took the leash off the beast. My restraint is fucking snapped. I rear up, grip his hips, and pull out nearly to the tip before I pound into him hard enough to rattle the headboard against the wall. He groans, plants his feet on the bed, and rocks his hips as I establish the punishing rhythm he asked for. If my man wants it rough, I’ll give him everything he can take. And oh, he can take it. Fuck, he was made for this, for me, his hands wandering my abs, holding my waist, twisting my nipples as I work him over and he takes every punishing thrust like a good boy.

His cock is hard and calling me, jostling with each fervent thrust. I’ve never tried to jack someone off while fucking them, but I’m sure as hell going to try. I slow down my ferocious thrusts enough to grip him, making him hiss on contact, his eyes rolling in pleasure. I roll my hips and pump my fist at the same rhythm. That’s not too hard, and watching Knox squirm on his pillows, moaning and calling my name, his hands fisting the blankets, is sending me to another level of pleasure. It’s not long before we’re both writhing, our rhythm faltering, the grip we have on each other digging in

hard enough to leave bruises .

“Baby, I'm gonna come. Fuck, ohmyGod,” Knox mumbles, his cock swelling in my fist as his words break down into gibberish and swearing. His tense, muscled body shines with a thin layer of sweat, and I'm working hard not to come before he does.

“Give me a little more. I'm right there. Your ass is amazing, fuck,” I curse. My hips snap forward, the orgasm ripped from me when his muscles bear down and he erupts, cum coating my hand while I paint his insides. We both groan, cocks jerking, chests heaving, hands stilling as the scent of sex wafts around us.

I look up and catch Knox's lust-drunk eyes. “That was amazing,” he rasps, breaths still uneven and voice sex-dazed. “Better than I even imagined.”

My mouth works faster than my brain, which is fully floating in hormones and hopped up on coming when I say, “I've never experienced anything like that. I don't think I've ever come that hard, ass or not.” Knox's face falls a little, and I realize it's probably not wise to speak of any other sexual experience while buried balls deep in my partner. “Seriously, that was the best I've ever had,” I say, leaning over and kissing his forehead tenderly to soften the words even more.

Knox chuckles. “I wouldn't expect anything less than you to run your mouth, even after sex, baby. If you suddenly turned into the perfect gentleman and said all kinds of nice things, I might think you were faking it or someone had replaced you.”

I pull out slowly and watch in fascination as my cum follows. Fuck yes. Bareback sex with Knox is now my favorite thing. I look up at him with what I'm sure is a goofy grin. “I fucking love your ass.”

He laughs and rolls away from me. “Let's get cleaned up, take a nap, and I'll make you chicken parm again before the game.”

I fall back on the bed, arms outstretched, chest tight from so much happiness. “I think I’m in love.”

“I’m the sappy romantic, you asshole. Don’t steal my thunder by joking about it because I cook for you and let you fuck my ass as part of your game-day rituals.”

“But I already know you love me, Golden Boy,” I say, getting up and following him into the bathroom before he can shut the door on my face and think I’m kidding. I wrap my arms around him from behind as he turns on the shower. “You just thought it was always going to be unrequited because my head was so far up my ass I’d never reciprocate, or some shit. But here I am, willing to be as far up your ass as you’ll let me, crazy about you, making sure my teammates don’t talk about my boyfriend’s dick, which they tried, by the way, they’re fans, learning how to love you back. So, say it or don’t, I know, and I’m trying to be worthy of it.”

“Fuck, Ryder, you can’t say shit like that,” Knox says, wrapping his arm over mine and ducking his head down as I rest my chin on his shoulder. “You mix your typical bro humor in with sweet stuff, and I don’t know if I’m supposed to be flattered and cry or laugh. ”

“Just laugh, Knox. You know I’m funny as hell, and you want to. Now, get in the shower and let me clean you up.”

Twenty-eight

Knox

Ryder: Hey, I forgot my socks. I can't leave the arena now, would you mind bringing them to me? They're my game socks. The ones I wear for every game. I don't know how I missed them. Maybe your lips distracted me? You look really good on your knees...

I snort as I read Ryder's text while finally getting around to cleaning up the chicken parmesan dishes. He hasn't been gone long, less than an hour, but it's good to have his praises for the first blow job I've given coming through still. I fumbled my way through the blow job but he was incredibly complimentary despite only having the one time with him to go off of, but he didn't seem to mind. He was right. It's harder than it seems, but worth the effort to watch him fall apart because of what I do to him.

Knox: Of course. Tell me where they are and I'll leave now. Where should I meet you?

Ryder: You're a lifesaver, thank you! I'd play like shit without them, and I'd hate to suck with you watching. They're blue and white striped socks and should be on top of my dresser. You can meet me at the players' entrance. I'll send you a location pin. Text me when you park in the players' lot. I'll send you the code, and I'll meet you there. Thanks, baby.

My heart warms at his use of the endearment we've both settled on. I know he melts when I call him baby, but having him use it feels pretty damn good, too.

This is the first normal text conversation we've had, and I like the domesticity of it. I like helping him when he needs it. It's nice to have the free time to do this for him. My season is winding down, and our games are once a week, typically on Sundays or Mondays, with a rare Thursday night game, anyway. My weekdays are for practice, and I have more flexibility, but I'm not always free, and I travel, too.

What would it be like to be home all the time so I could run any errand for him, or to travel with Ryder whenever I wanted? His season is much longer than mine, and he has so many more games. He's gone a lot more than I am, and his travel schedule is truly insane. What will our relationship look like as we settle in? How often will we even see each other? A few months ago, I was thankful for this fact because it meant we wouldn't cross paths all that often, but now, I'm dreading it. He leaves tomorrow for a road trip, and I'll be gone when he gets back. Just when we get our shit together, we have to be apart for a week.

I don't get to stew long on this because my phone chimes again. Ryder sends me a pin for the location to drive to and a code for the lot to park in. I find his socks right where he says they should be, and I set out on my little errand to bring my boyfriend his lucky fucking socks for game day. Not to say football players don't have their own superstitions, but Ryder definitely tops everyone I've known with his need for routine and habits.

At least I'm now a part of his game day routine, and that feels really damn good.

Ryder got me glass seats behind the home goal for the game tonight, and Harlowe deemed my first game as Ryder's boyfriend worthy of coming down from her fancy owner's box to sit in the crowd. Zander is home with the kids, so she's living it up. We each have a Hypnotic Hydra, some neon green colored cocktail made with sour gummy worms on the rim that are supposed to be the mythical creatures the team is named after, pretzel sticks Harlowe swears are legit the best she's ever had, and popcorn as we wait for warmups to start.

“Is he being good to you?” Harlowe asks, flipping her dark hair over her shoulder and sipping her drink as she narrows her eyes at me now that we have a chance to sit and talk.

“Lolo, I’m not holding your earrings so you can fight my man.” I laugh, and she smirks as she kicks her heeled boot at the boards in front of us.

“At least you know I’d kick his ass for you if he deserved it,” she says, shrugging. “I may have four kids and be in my mid-thirties—” She makes a retching face before she can continue. “Oh gross, I just threw up a little in my mouth saying that. Anyway, I will still go hood on a bitch when needed. You can take the girl out of the streets of Atlanta, but you can’t take the streets out of the girl.”

“Girl, I know you grew up in the suburbs and had a strict-ass Asian mom who wouldn’t let you roam the streets. You act so hard, but you’re the biggest softy.”

She cackles and wags her finger at me like I got her there.

“I made him crawl to me today, and he didn’t even argue before he did it,” I say quietly as I roll my lips in and try to keep my smile from taking over my entire face. This is the kind of thing I can tell Harlowe, as my closest friend and confidante, and know she won’t judge or let it slip. She carefully held my secret for years and allowed me to be myself with her.

“My man!” she says, holding up her hand for me to high-five. I slap her palm. “You’re reading the books I sent you and taking notes. What a fucking king. God, I love this for you. You deserve so much goodness, Knox. I can’t even begin to tell you how happy I am for you.”

The goal horn blows several times, and the music cranks up as the visiting team from Utah skates onto the ice. A moment later, the Hydras take the ice, with Ryder leading

them. They skate out in a swarm, doing fast circles and shooting pucks into the empty net until Ryder and the second goalie move toward us. I can see the moment Ryder notices me. He locks onto my position, and instead of skating to the goal or finding a spot to stretch, he comes right up to the glass and rips off his mask.

“Ooooh, you’re in trouble,” Harlowe says, smiling around her drink like she thinks something is hilarious. True, Ryder’s face is stormy, and he doesn’t look happy, but I can’t imagine why.

He knocks his stick against the glass. “Jersey!” he shouts, barely audible above the pumping music and noise of the crowd, but the word is clear enough. “Put it on!”

Oh. I hold up the jersey Ryder laid out on the bed before he left, so I brought it with me. I’m not sure he intended for me to wear it, as that would be a pretty big indication I’m here for him, and we’re not hard-launching our relationship. His words, not mine, because I’m ready to hard launch every fucking thing with him. But I get it. Ryder needs to do things at a slower pace than I do.

“You sure?” I yell back, looking down at the jersey. “Maybe I’ll go buy a Magnus Gustafsson jersey. He doesn’t get enough ice time with you always in the goal,” I yell back. He slams his gloves against the glass and bares his teeth like the fucking animal he is. Oh, hell yes, I love when he goes feral caveman.

“Don’t fucking play with me, Knox. I’ll tear that ass up,” he says, clear as day through the plexiglass barrier.

Harlowe and I both start laughing. “You heard your man,” Harlowe says, taking my cocktail from me so I can put the jersey on. “You gotta wear his name like a good boy-toy.”

I slide the oversized jersey on, which hangs on me since it’s one of his and meant to

be worn over his bulky pads. “Better,” I call to Ryder, pinching the shoulders of the jersey and popping them a few times as I nod my chin at him and lower my lashes so he knows I’m flirting.

Ryder nods and finally smiles. “Don't take it off. I have my eye on you.” He sends me a wink before he puts his mask back on and returns to warmups.

“Holy shit, I think I just got pregnant again,” Harlowe says, handing my drink back. “You two have so much testosterone flowing between you, you untied my tubes. Why I like that extra macho bullshit as an independent woman capable of taking care of myself, I don't even know, but it’s hot as hell.” She fans herself, and I join her.

“Why do I love that meathead?” I muse, sighing dreamily.

“The heart wants what it wants. And he ,” she motions at Ryder, “ a sperm factory on skates, got on his knees and crawled to you ?” she asks, sounding skeptical. I nod and raise my brows while biting my lip so she knows how fucking hot it was. “Daaayamn. If I didn't have the love of my life at home with the most beautiful children imaginable, I’d be the same shade of green as this cocktail because of my jealousy. Ugh. I’m so damn happy for you.”

We sit back and enjoy warm-ups as we chat and eat our snacks. When the game starts a little later, I’m ready to watch Ryder kick ass. Being just to the side and behind the goal means that every time there’s a break in play and Ryder turns around to get water, he looks at me. If he keeps his mask down, it’s hard for most people to see where he’s looking, but I feel his eyes bore into me and know he’s smiling. When he pulls his mask off for a longer break, to shake his hair out or spray water in his face, because of course he does, I get to see his eyes and face uninterrupted, and it’s gorgeous.

It’s also attracting a bit of attention to have the goalie flirting with someone in the

audience pretty blatantly. Harlowe and I are on the Jumbotron a few times throughout the night, so we smile and wave or sing along to the song playing, or do whatever the silly game is that's happening on the screen. I'm just glad I'm here with a woman, even if I'm out, and she's the wife of an owner at that, so it feels like I have some kind of protection from any potential scrutiny. Back to being a goldfish in a bowl. Damn, no wonder Goldie likes watching others after being watched all the time. It's even worse being right up against the plexiglass barrier of Harlowe's "boy aquarium" as she calls it.

Ryder is playing like a man possessed by the hockey gods, blocking shots and stopping advances like he can read the players' minds. The score is three-one in the Hydras' favor going into the third period, but I'm sure Ryder is kicking himself for allowing even that one goal when I know he would have preferred a shutout. He's back defending the goal we're sitting behind, and I get to watch his ass as he bends over and blocks shots as the timer counts down the last minutes of the game.

My phone vibrates in my pocket as a breakaway play happens on the ice, Utah stealing the puck and making a mad dash toward Ryder. I ignore my phone, intent on the action. The Hydras players are quick to scramble back into position, battling for possession, but it's happening too late, too close to the goal. There are so many players in the crease, the puck is lost in the scrum, sticks slapping, gloves shoving, Ryder caught up in the middle of it all. He spreads out, covering as much of the goal as he can in a near full split, his glove coming down right in the middle of a bunch of men with knives strapped to their shoes, and I still don't know where the puck went amid the chaos that happened in a matter of seconds. The refs blow their whistles, stopping play and pulling players away as Ryder rolls over and uncovers the puck inches from the goal line, where he'd stopped it by throwing his body into the mix and pulling it under himself. The arena erupts, Harlowe and I jumping up and screaming with them at the close save.

The spectators stay on their feet, anxious as the refs set up another face-off with ten

seconds left on the clock, which is just long enough to do some damage for either team. Utah has pulled their goalie for a sixth man on the ice, and fans are vibrating with the possibility of an empty net goal. The Hydras gain possession, passing with skill that keeps Utah's D-men spinning to keep up. Number sixty-nine on the Hydras winds up and slaps the puck, sending it sailing at the empty Utah goal and sinking it into the net just as the final buzzer blares and ends the game with a four-to-one score and sealing another Hydras win.

Ryder is already moving out of the goal and coming straight for the glass where I'm standing as his team rushes to pile on the guy who scored. I put my fist up against the plexiglass, and he mirrors the movement with his glove on the other side, something we haven't done since we were kids, and I'd go to his games. I feel a knot of emotion rising in my throat as I open my hand and press my index finger against the glass. He's already shaking his hand out of his glove and presses his finger that bears the matching scar to mine to the same spot, then nods at me before he retrieves his glove and skates back to his team. He remembered.

"Okay, Mr. ET Phone Home, what in the cuteness overload was that?" Harlowe asks, hooking her arm in mine as we filter out of the stands.

I swallow around the lump in my throat. "It's something we did growing up, at any game I'd go to. We have matching scars, like blood brother shit," I say, showing her my finger. "At the end of every game, before he even celebrated with his team, he'd come up to the glass, bump my fist, and we'd touch scars. We haven't done that since things went bad between us."

"I seriously hate how fucking cute you two are and that you go back to childhood with your stories."

"Yeah, well, we have plenty of baggage and years of bad times to go with the good, so it's not all rainbows and flowers," I remind her.

“Hello, my husband knocked me up on vacation, then cut off all contact with me when we got back, so I couldn't even tell him for five years. You think you're the only one with baggage?” She scoffs and waves a hand like it's no big deal, when it was actually a huge deal for us both. “But look at us, getting our happily ever afters like the baddies we are.” She guides me to a special corridor and flashes her all-access I'm the owner of this whole damn place don't question where I can go badge at the security guard who lets us through.

We end up outside the locker room, and I see Lilah coming out of the media room down the hall. “Oh, hey, Ryder should be out in a second. He had to do press and was remarkably nice. Did you have anything to do with that?” she asks, smiling at me.

“No comment,” I say while nodding vigorously. “Lilah, this is Harlowe Olsen. Harlowe, this is Lilah Williams. It's about time my favorite girls met. ”

The women greet one another, full of compliments, and immediately hit it off when Lilah mentions working through Harlowe's latest cookbook, *The Foulmouthed Foodie's Guide to Guilt-Free Snacks*. The big man exiting the media room catches my attention, half-stripped of his goalie pads and wearing a Hydras team shirt. He heads straight for me, bypassing Lilah and Harlowe and pushing me up against the wall with a ferocious kiss. He's taller in his skates, and his bulky pads make it hard to get truly close, but he's doing his best. I push him off as I laugh.

“Ryder, you stink like an unwashed ball sack met a gym bag, and you're entirely too sweaty to be kissing me here, but thank you for that very public display of affection when members of the press are literally all around us,” I remind him.

“You're in my jersey, with my name on your back. I'll kiss you however I fucking want, no matter who's around,” he says, clearly hopped up on the win and adrenaline.

“Why don't you go shower, and we can talk after?” I suggest.

“We’re going out to celebrate. I want you with me,” he says, a note of possession in his tone that I can't argue with.

“Of course, you monster. Now go shower, you really smell. How often do you wash your pads?” I hold up a hand to stop his answer. “You know what, I don't think I want to know. We’ll wait for you.”

I watch Ryder disappear into the locker room and return to Harlowe and Lilah, who is smiling like a fool.

“I swear that man had a lobotomy or was replaced by aliens,” she quips, and I ignore it.

“Come on, I know where we can wait that’s more comfortable,” Harlowe says, leading the way. “I have to head home to my kids, but y’all can try out the fancy flavored water dispenser I had installed while you’re waiting, and I’ll walk you out after.”

Twenty-nine

Ryder

Knox and I walk into the Dirty Bird with Westy, Campbell, Rook, Nico, and Lilah. It feels like I'm coming full circle when we end up at a booth in the same section as the last time the team was here for our coach-mandated bonding experiment. Lilah goes with Campbell and Rook to place an order for our group, while Westy and Nico get into a heated argument about the best early two-thousand boy bands, allowing me a moment to reflect on the last several months.

Two men come up to the table with their eyes fixed on Knox. Instinctively, I turn my body to block him from them, not sure of their intentions .

"Knox Contraire?" one man in a Condors T-shirt asks as he nervously shifts from foot to foot.

Knox puts his hand on my shoulder and gently eases me back. I do so grudgingly, still not comfortable allowing anyone to have access to him without being between them.

"Yeah, that's me. What can I do for you guys tonight?" he asks pleasantly, though with a reservation that I can pick up because I'm used to his moods now.

"We just wanted to say how brave you are, and how much we admire you. We've been together for a few months now. Reading your story helped give us the courage to tell our families about our relationship. Thank you," the second man says, grasping

the hand of the first man who spoke and lacing their fingers.

I hear Knox swallow next to me, and I feel my own chest tightening. “Thank you for saying that. It means the world to me to know that I had any kind of positive contribution to your lives. I hope telling your families has made you both happier.”

“It really has,” the first man says, looking at his boyfriend. “Charlie and I are still kind of new to this, but having our families know has taken so much pressure off.”

“I won’t let Danny talk your ear off any longer. We’re big fans and just wanted to thank you. Hope you have a good night, and you get the love you’re looking for,” Charlie says, before pulling Danny away from our booth toward the bar exit .

“That’s crazy,” I say quietly when Charlie and Danny have gone. “Has that happened before?”

“It’s been happening a lot, actually. People will come up to me after games, or when I’m out and about, and tell me how I’ve influenced or affected them. I didn’t realize Lilah’s article or my coming out would have any sort of ripple effect. I just thought it would make my team hate me and people turn their backs on me. Instead, the team has been amazingly supportive, and more people are cool than not, even though some are still hateful dicks.”

My heart hurts when I hear him say that, because it’s what I did to him in high school, and even a few months ago.

“You know, this is where I was sitting when I watched you fumble that pass and opened my stupid mouth that got me in so much trouble and made me go viral,” I confess, my chin on his shoulder as I look around the bar, which isn’t super crowded. I make sure there aren’t any phones pointed at me this time. Not that it would matter. There won’t be any slurs coming out of my mouth ever again, but I want us to be the

ones to break the news of our relationship, rather than some nosy asshole with a phone and internet access.

“You know this is a Condors bar, right? The name kind of gives it away. Football fans come here for watch parties when we have games,” Knox says, looking around. He was nervous to come here when I told him where we were going because he thought he’d get recognized by fans, which he clearly already has. “It’s no wonder someone filmed you and put you on blast when you said what you did. You were in the wrong territory to be saying something bad about their team during a game,” he finishes with a laugh.

“I should have known, but I wasn't thinking, which has always been my problem.” I slide my hand along his inner thigh of the leg that’s resting against mine and tuck my fingers under his balls for a quick squeeze.

“Watch your hands, baby, or we’ll have a big problem,” he reminds me. “You’re the one who wanted to go out to celebrate. We could have gone home just as easily.”

I groan and move my hand back to more neutral territory, knowing he’s right. “Fine, I’ll behave,” I agree, kissing his neck quickly, hoping I wasn’t too obvious. It’s really hard to stop touching him. “When that video got out, I thought I’d just cost myself my future. The Hydras looked at me like I was nuclear waste. I lost my place to live, and it felt like everyone was against me. But it looks like I was unknowingly securing an even better future. Mark putting us together was the best thing that ever happened to me,” I tell him earnestly.

Knox’s eyes go soft before flashing with recognition. “Oh, shit, Mark called me during the game. I forgot to call him back. It’s kind of late, but he’s on the West Coast and usually up. I’ll call him now.”

He pulls his phone from his pocket and dials our agent. I watch curiously, wondering

if he'll even be able to hear over the late-night bar noise. I can only hear Knox's side of the conversation, which proves infuriating as the conversation goes on.

"Hey, Mark, sorry I was at Ryder's game." Pause . "Yeah, things are going well." Pause . "No, he's been great." He chuckles at something Mark says. "Oh, we're really getting along." He listens intently for a longer stretch, his forehead creasing, and his smile dropping as Mark goes on. "Okay. That's a lot to think about." Pause. "Yeah, I'll take some time." Pause . "Of course, I know it's almost everything I wanted." Pause. "Alright, I'll call you tomorrow."

What the fuck is Mark telling him? Did he get dropped by his sponsors? Or did he get a new one like the Vers campaign? Is it something with the team? When Knox hangs up, I'm about ready to drag him out of the bar to have him describe in agonizing detail what that call was about .

"Knox, you better start explaining what he said, because I don't like that look on your face. My mind is spinning through worst-case scenarios here," I tell him immediately.

He passes a hand over his face and sighs. "Mark has been working on my contract details since this is a negotiation year. The Condors haven't committed to my requests. Mark has been shopping me around to have offers in case they don't want to renew. Chicago and Arizona have made two-year offers already with everything I want. I may end up having to leave Atlanta." He rolls his lips in and lets them slide out again, a nervous tell when he doesn't know what to say. I love that I know him so well to have picked that up, but hate that he's doing it now because of this.

"You could leave?" I repeat, the thought of losing Knox so soon after getting him back hits me like a sledgehammer to the gut. It's hard to breathe around the knowledge that I wouldn't be able to come home to him, even with our crazy schedules. I took for granted that we would both be in the same city for the remainder of our careers, retiring from our respective sports, and then figuring out what came

next together. It hadn't even crossed my mind that we could be separated, despite the ever-present fear of being traded and now losing the security of remaining with his current team.

“It’s a possibility,” Knox says, running a hand over his head and sliding it down the back of his neck as he blows out a breath. “I’d planned to play a few more seasons with Atlanta, but if they don't want to renew my contract, I won't have a choice but to find a team willing to take me. I’m healthy now, and I have great stats, but I have a limited shelf life at this point in my career, so I’m not the prize most teams are looking for. It’s great to have two teams showing this much interest in me, honestly.”

That’s the worst part about professional sports—the short-lived careers that can be made even shorter by injuries. We have to play as hard as we can, for as long as we can, and make the most of the time we’re given with the teams that will have us, which is how I ended up here in Atlanta, anyway.

“The Condors would be fucking stupid to let you go,” I say with righteous anger as Lilah and the guys come back with trays of wings, buckets of beer, and a red cocktail that she puts in front of Knox.

“It’s the Crazy Condor,” Lilah says. “It’s Southern Comfort, gin, and sweet stuff. A badass cocktail for my badass bestie who doesn't drink beer.” She drops a kiss to the top of his head and moves to the other side of the booth to slide in beside Nico.

“Don’t kiss my boyfriend,” I snap at her, on edge from the call, before turning back to Knox. “Wait, how does she know you don't drink beer and I’m only just finding out?”

“We’ve actually gone out for drinks, and she asks?” he replies with a shrug.

“Okay, fine, now I know. But what are you going to do about the contract?” I ask.

“I don't know yet. I have another month or two of the season, so I don't have to decide right away. But this isn't what I had planned, baby. Can we talk about it later? I want you to celebrate, not be worried about my contract when we only have tonight together before you leave for a road trip tomorrow afternoon, and I won't see you for a week.”

“Yeah, sure,” I agree reluctantly, because there's nothing else to do.

So we put on the fakest smiles and face my teammates, celebrating a win that had put me on a high, only to be dragged back to earth by the reality of life with a man in another professional sport. The impermanence of our situation hammers home the one truth I can bank on at the moment: I need to love the hell out of him as much as I can .

When the group parts later, I know how I want to spend the remainder of my night. “Take me home and fuck me,” I tell Knox as we walk hand-in-hand to my SUV.

He stops, pushing me against the wall of the closest building, and in the amber glow of the streetlight, caresses my face like a man holding his most priceless possession. “Are you sure you're ready for that? It's a bit intense, and I don't mind what we have.”

Taking his hand, I slide it down to my throat as I stare him straight in the eye. “I want your cock buried so deep in my ass you're knocking on my sternum because I want to be marked as yours more than anything. I'll take that ache with me on the road and think of you every time I feel the slightest tenderness.” I can't wait for him to tear me up.

“Let's get you home, then,” Knox says with his soft like leather smile as he squeezes my throat and kisses me.

When we get to the condo, my mind is spinning with the new information I have on bottoming. Knox educated me on a few things and gave me some tips on how to prep, so I'm about to spend a bit of time doing self-care in the bathroom. I'm not afraid or resistant to the idea of taking it up the ass as part of some masculine bullshit, because this is Knox, and when it comes to him, there's nothing I wouldn't do. But this is virgin territory we're treading, and he wants to take care of me this time. It's weird being on this side of the physical line after leading us through it so far, but Knox is confident, and it's sexy as hell, despite what I'm doing to get myself ready for him.

When I walk into the bedroom, Knox has candles lit and a sexy playlist on, and damn if that cliché bullshit doesn't work. Seeing my man stretched out on the bed in just a pair of black boxer briefs, with his gorgeous velvety soft skin gleaming in the low light, has my cock instantly hardening. He's propped up on his elbow, casual as can be, as my heart races like a breakaway play is happening right in front of me, and I've lost sight of the puck. Only, it's all excitement that has my heart rate hitting my max now.

"You are my walking, breathing fantasy, Ryder Kingston. I want you right here, in my arms in three seconds or I'll show you what else I can do to that ass before I fuck it," Knox says in his impossibly deep, smooth voice that sends shivers racing along my skin and lighting up every nerve ending with awareness of him. His scent is stronger than the candles, enveloping me and pulling me toward the bed.

I move up toward him as if on a string that's been retracted at lightning speed, and fall into his arms as he smiles sinfully. Yeah, I'm not opposed to whatever he's threatening, but I think I want what we've discussed even more tonight than to fuck around and find out what my sweet, devoted man can do when he really gets into his HandyManCan persona.

"Fast enough for the fastest tight end in the NFL?" I ask, taunting him with one of his player stats I've kept in my mind for years. His eyes widen as if he didn't think I

would care or pay attention. “Yeah, that’s right, I’ve followed your career. I’m so proud of everything you’ve accomplished and done. You are insanely talented. You’re remarkable, Knox. Turns out I was the one obsessed all along.”

Knox ducks his head into my shoulder to avoid the praise I’m heaping on him, but I nudge him with my nose and take his mouth with mine in a searing kiss, sealing the sentiments with my love and devotion. The sweetness quickly takes on a spicy edge when I part Knox’s thighs with mine and grind my hips against him. It’s so easy to get lost in the sensations when I’m with him. I don’t have to worry about being too rough, putting my full weight on him, or having to treat him gently when I’m running on instinct. He can take everything I dish out. He’s hard everywhere, from his impressively muscular frame that has a ladder of abs and those cum gutter lines so cut I could take measurements with them, to his damn amazing monster cock that is proud and rigid behind his briefs as I rub on him shamelessly.

Knox’s hands wander, sliding down my back and into my boxer briefs to grip my ass, and my hips flex involuntarily against him as I groan into his mouth. He pulls my hip and positions my leg higher over his legs, giving me better access to fuck against him as his fingers delicately trace along my balls and higher into my crack. I am acutely aware of where his fingers are while being so caught up in his fervent kiss and the rutting my hips are doing as my body fully takes over and has me moving against him, searching for friction. My cock is poking out of my briefs, which are bunching lower as both Knox’s hand and my movements push them down, and still I can’t stop my incessant humping even to get fully naked. Yeah, men are dogs sometimes, it’s just the facts. When his finger slips inside me, it’s not the foreign invasion I expected, but a quick stretch and then a pleasant fullness I know can’t even begin to rival what Knox will feel like.

“Fuck, I need more,” I say, voice rough and needy.

“If you want more than this, I need you naked,” Knox says, voice low and

demanding.

Okay, fine, I can stop for that. His finger slips out and I hurriedly pull my briefs off as he does, before moving right back on top of him so my aching, weeping cock can rub against his. I open my legs further, straddling his hips and bending forward as I capture his mouth. A trickle of cool liquid hits my skin, sliding down my crack as my anticipation ratchets skyward, and I moan against Knox's mouth.

"Give it to me," I groan as his fingers lazily stroke along my slick crack. I do not have the patience for this man to take it too slow with me. I've had a long-ass day, and I want him all up in my ass, now.

"You're such a power bottom. Not content as my pillow prince, letting me handle things. No, you want to control everything," he says, slipping a finger inside my tight ring and sending a flood of tingles lighting up my awareness. "Even gotta be on top as I play with your ass for the first time." He adds a second finger, the stretch becoming more noticeable, but decadently pleasurable as he pumps. My hips flex erratically, pushing back against him and feeling something altogether new when he touches a place inside me and stays there.

"Holy fucking shit," I breathe out harshly as he taps almost in a come here motion.

"Say hello to your prostate, Ryder. It's your new best friend." Knox grins when I'm finally able to open my eyes and look down at him. I'm rocking back on his fingers, pushing myself harder against them so he can hit that new magic spot that has me seeing stars and precum making a mess of my cock.

"I'm about to come, so you better stop if that's not the endgame here, because I can't," I pant, so caught up in what he's doing to me, but finding a nugget of my rationality before I completely devolve into a rutting beast.

Knox pulls his fingers away, and the loss of that incredible pleasure is both a relief and the worst feeling in the world. He pushes me back to straddle his thighs and grabs the lube, slicking his gorgeous cock with several pumps of his hand, then moves to mine and has me flexing into his touch. He's leaning back against pillows and I think he wants me to ride his dick, which, to be honest, I'm going to do like a total fucking rodeo star. The PRCA champ Walker DeVille has nothing on me when it comes to bronc busting. I'm about to rock Knox's world.

He holds his cock upright and looks at me. "Take it at your pace, baby."

Ah, fuck, when he calls me that, I feel like I can do anything. I scoot up on my knees, position him at my ass and take a deep breath that I let out as I relax and slowly drop onto his—oh, shit, his monster cock is absolutely splitting me open, the fullness unlike anything before, and I have to pant out my breaths as I inch slowly down. Getting past the first few inches of him feels like the biggest hurdle, but the man is big, and it takes some getting used to the feeling of having him so deep inside me before I can even think of moving. Okay, maybe I won't be rocking his world tonight, after all.

"Damn, baby, you feel so fucking good," Knox croons, his eyes rolling in pleasure. "Fuck, this is incredible." He moves a hand from my hip to my cock and shuttles up the length, giving me something to focus on besides his words stroking my ego.

I'm breathing easier now, and he's hit that spot again that feels like liquid pleasure while his fist expertly navigates my cock. I place my hands on his chest and realize I can get exactly the speed and depth I need like this, while he jacks me, and holy hell, am I in heaven with the onslaught of pleasure. Who knew it could be like this? My world has opened, and I'm a fan.

"Knox, goddamn, you feel good. Fuck, I need this so bad." I rock my hips as his snap up to meet mine and his fist shuttles along my cock, bringing me to the brink so much

faster than I expected.

“I know. Show me how good you feel, baby. Be a good boy and come for me while my cock is buried in your ass. Mark me as yours,” he says, voice low and rough with urgent need .

Knox focuses on short, hard tugs on my cock, pointing it down toward his chest where he wants me to spill my release. The sight of him biting his lip in pleasure, eyes rolled, back bowed, hips rolling under me as I fuck myself on him is too much. I groan, my cock swelling in his hand as my fingers flex into his chest, nails digging into his pecs while my cum spills onto his skin in hot ropes.

He grunts, gripping my hip with one hand, and pulses inside me, painting me with his own release, which forces more spasms to my endless orgasm. When my eyes focus again, his stomach and chest are painted with my cum as he breathes heavily, looking entirely sated and content, his legs having relaxed, arms falling to his sides.

“You officially are no longer the only bottom in this relationship. That was amazing,” I tell him, slowly moving off him and falling to his side, where he opens his arm and pulls me into him. I kiss his neck, right over his erratically beating pulse point, and lick the salt from his skin.

“You were right,” he says simply.

“Yeah, I know, but what about, specifically?” I ask, feeling lust-dazed. My body is twitching with phantom spasms of pleasure from the adrenaline and dopamine still coursing through me. My ass aches deliciously and I feel him still. It’s fucking wonderful.

He chuckles softly and kisses my hair before running his fingers through it. “You said I wanted someone to meet my strength with theirs, so the power goes both ways. You

said the best kind of sex is when you both give and take. Now I know for sure you were right.”

“See, I knew I was your type,” I say on a yawn, burrowing my face into his neck and inhaling his amazing scent. “It’s about time you agreed.” I throw my leg over his and wrap my arm over his chest, above where he’s still wearing my cum, holding him possessively, because I’m not ready for him to be free of me.

“Ryder,” he says softly into my hair a few moments later.

“Yeah, baby,” I say, the long day catching up to me and sleep trying valiantly to take hold.

“I love you so goddamn much it makes my chest ache.” The emotion in Knox’s tone is heavier than the scent of sex in the air.

My eyes fly open, sleep forgotten as he finally says the words I’ve longed to hear, but feel all the same. I push up on my elbow and look down at him, his beautiful face warmed by the candlelight in the room and the heat in his cheeks from his admission. He turns toward me, hand trembling on my thigh that covers his.

“You don’t have to say it back, and you don’t have to earn anything. You’re worthy of love just as you are, and you’ll always have mine, no matter what happens between us,” he says, reaching up and smoothing hair away from my face.

I lean down and kiss the mouth that just said the most beautiful words to me. I rest my forehead against his and breathe through the unexpected tumult of feelings pinballing through my chest, hitting vital organs, making me bleed out the words, feelings, and so much soft stuff I’m not used to. It all coalesces into a caramel sweetness that bursts out of me in a rush I couldn’t stop with all the duct tape or comportment lessons in the world.

“You’re everything I’ve ever wanted and didn't think I deserved. You're the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Goodness and light and safety when everything else sucked. You’re my whole life and I love you so fucking much I don't even have words to describe it. You’re my everything, and I will burn down the entire world to make sure I get to keep you in mine.”

“Damn, baby, where the hell did that even come from?” Knox says on a shaky laugh as he finds a pair of boxers and cleans off his chest and stomach. He turns toward me, kissing my eyes and cheeks. “Stop making these grand proclamations in bed, or I’m going to expect you to be a romantic all the time.”

Thirty

Knox

I 'm so ready to be home. It's been a week since I've seen Ryder in person, and I'm dying to touch him. Having the Vers app and texts for when we're both on the road has helped us stay connected, but there is nothing like having my hands on the man I'm crazy in love with.

It's late, and I don't expect Ryder to be up, so when I quietly open the door and see the glow of candles, I'm taken by surprise. I push the door open all the way and gasp at the view. Candles line every surface, with roses and flowers in vases artfully staged around the room, the heady floral fragrance surrounding me as I step inside. Rose petals are scattered on the floor, and sultry music that sounds more like one of my playlists than Ryder's is playing softly from somewhere.

"Baby?" I call, looking for the big dumb idiot who made me fall in love with him despite our past and has a big romantic side after all.

Soft steps come from the hallway, and Ryder appears a moment later, wearing one of his game day suits, looking hot as hell in deep green. The suit hugs his frame perfectly and sets off his eyes so they sparkle like molten emeralds in the low light. His hair is less wild, pushed away from his face, and I long to run my fingers through those waves to send them back into disarray. His smile is wide and full of longing and damn does it set me on fire to see that look on his face for me.

I set my bags down, needing to hold him. He meets me halfway, pulling me close and

capturing my mouth in a fierce kiss that is all Ryder—a clash of lips, a tangle of tongues, and the sweetest taste I’ve ever experienced. He drinks me in, sweeping me up in the exuberance of his welcome home, and fuck, does it feel good to have someone to come home to like this. To someone who wants me like this. Someone who knows how badly I need to be wanted like this. When we break apart, it’s with heaving chests from our breathless encounter as Ryder buries his face in my neck and inhales me deeply.

“That’s a hell of a way to be welcomed home,” I tell him, sliding my hands up into his hair finally as he nuzzles his nose against me.

“God, I’ve fucking missed you. I couldn’t sleep on the road even with one of your shirts doused in your cologne, and your bed is too big without you in it next to me.” He grips me tighter, his arms wrapping around me, fingers digging in almost painfully. “Fuck, Knox, I can’t lose you,” he continues, his voice ardent, panicked, and desperate now. “I don’t know what’s going to happen at the end of your season or what you want to do, but I’m going to be selfish and just say it. If you don’t stay in Atlanta for the Condors, stay for me.” He pulls his face out of my neck and finally looks at me, his lip quivering and his eyes wide with the act of laying his most anguished thoughts out for me to see.

My heart jumps against my ribs, straining to reach into Ryder’s chest and hold his breaking heart. My boy needs me.

“Hey, baby, don’t look like that.” I run my fingers through his hair and take his hand, leading him to the couch and sitting with him.

“I just fucked that all up. I had it all planned out. I set this up so I could welcome you home and show you how badly I want you here, and then I was going to give you this speech I’d worked on that explained why it could work out this way. I even had a list of what you could do, even though I’d be asking you to give up something you love

so much. Instead, I just let my fucking mouth run again.” He drops his face into his hands and sighs as I rub his back.

“So the selfish option won out again?” I ask, smiling. It’s so on brand and true to the Ryder I know and love.

“Looks like I’m truly unteachable, even after all these months with you,” he says miserably. “Please don’t hate me for asking you to give up everything for me. I...I understand if that’s not what you want. I just needed you to know where I stand with us and what I want .”

I tip his chin up with my finger, getting him to look at me again. I kiss him gently, and he eagerly takes the affection before I pull back. “I already told Mark that I won’t be taking a contract with another team, even if Atlanta doesn’t extend. I’ll retire at the end of this season if that happens. I want to stay with you, too.”

His face transforms from distressed to glowing with jubilation. “Are you serious? You’re staying?”

“Yeah, baby. I want to be here with you. I want to spend time with you when you’re home, or bring your lucky socks to the arena if you forget them. I want to work at the Elysium Gardens with you and have ice cream dates after. I want to make you pre-game meals and sit behind the goal at all your games so I can watch your ass and cheer when you win or hold you if you lose. I just want to do life with you in whatever way that looks like for us, and maybe even have a family someday,” I finish, allowing my shiny, bright dream to peek out of my heart just a little bit to see if it warms Ryder’s heart the same way.

“You’d want a family with me ?” he asks, stunned. “But the way I grew up...my dad...what if I’m...” He looks down, shame weighing heavily on his shoulders as he’s unable to finish voicing his fears, but I know.

“Ryder, you’re not your dad, and you would never hurt anyone the way he hurt you. I would love to have a family with you and watch you raise a kid to be an incredible, funny, strong, and caring person. You love with everything in you, and it would be an honor to share that love with another little soul who needs it so badly. Just look at what you did for your goldfish.”

“God, you would be the absolute best fucking dad,” Ryder says, looking at me with awe. “I can’t wait to watch you with our kids and see how perfect they turn out. Golden children for my Golden Boy.” He smiles wide and looks at the fish tank in the corner. “You know I named the fish Goldie in your honor, too, right? Not just for Goldie Hawn?”

“Oh, shut up, you did not.” I laugh and push his chest, thankful once again for his gift of levity when the mood gets too heavy.

“No, really, I did. Goldie for my Golden Boy. But enough about the fish. I need to fuck you because planning out our future has my dick so fucking hard, and I’ve missed you more than I have words for, so let me show you.”

He stands and pulls me to my feet, then leads me down the hallway to our room. He’s fully moved into mine at this point. Seeing his clothes next to mine in the closet and the canvas print of Goldie on the dresser makes it feel so much more real that this is my life now. It feels more like coming home than it ever has before.

Ryder and I work the knots of our ties and strip out of the suits we’re wearing, mine from traveling, his from his romantic setup to win me over. Once we’re free of all the layers, we attack each other for real. He tackles me onto the bed, laughing as his hands roam and his lips trace over my skin. He rubs his face against my chest and moans, sending a shockwave of lust streaking through me and all the blood in my body rushing to my cock. His soft beard scratches along my skin in direct contrast to his pillowy lips and wet tongue tracing my abs and heading straight for the V lines he

loves so much.

My cock is jerking erratically as he hits sensitive spots, tickling and then making me hiss when he bites my hip. All the sounds leave me when he puts my cock in his warm mouth and sucks the ability to speak right out of me. My head drops back and my eyes close in ecstasy as he works me over, licking and sucking along my shaft and playing with my balls until I think I'll combust from the overload of incredible sensations. It feels too good in his warm mouth, with his tongue teasing the sensitive head of my cock. I grip his hair and pull him off my dick with a wet pop that pains me as much as it seems to disappoint him to lose his mouthful of cock.

"Ryder, we've been apart too long for me to come in your mouth the second I get home. I want you to be buried deep inside of me, coming with me."

"God, I fucking love you so much," Ryder says, kissing my hip before hopping off the bed and returning a second later with lube. "Come up here with me," he says, moving to the head of the bed and motioning me to follow.

I position myself on the pillows next to him, and he kisses me like he can't stop himself, then rips his mouth away with effort and smiles. He rolls me onto my side away from him and kisses my shoulder as he lubes his cock and plays with my ass until I'm pushing back and writhing, needing him inside me.

"I'm ready for you, baby. Please, I need you to fuck me. I'm desperate to have your big cock splitting me open again," I beg, pushing my ass back into him, seeking out the pressure and friction I want so badly.

"You beg so pretty for me, Knox. God, I fucking love hearing you needy. I'll fill you up and come so deep you'll feel me for days."

I feel him at my entrance as I arch my back, needing more. He parts my legs, pushing

his thigh between mine, and drives into me slowly. The stretch is delicious, and I moan as he fills me with short thrusts of his powerful hips that have me seeing stars and crying his name in ecstasy already.

“Fuck, Ryder. Yes, like that, baby. Harder, please use me. I need you to own me, make me yours,” I cry, lost to the pleasure of Ryder’s body covering mine from shoulder to ankles, his big arm holding me tight around my waist, fisting my cock as he drives deep and hard into me.

“How are you so tight and perfect,” he groans into my ear, his face buried in my neck as he takes ragged breaths, inhaling against my skin like a junkie looking for a fix. “You’re mine, Knox. God, you’re all mine and I’m yours.”

He bites into my trap, the sharp pain a stark contrast to my entire body being lit up like a Christmas tree from the pleasure he’s infusing into my system. Every nerve ending is alive, the energy of Ryder powering me like a live wire connected to the largest power bank imaginable—endless love and devotion from someone who knows you better than anyone.

“Baby, I’m right there,” I groan, reaching back and gripping his thigh, pulling him tighter against me. His thrusts turn jerky, and I feel the impossible swell of him inside me as he squeezes my cock and works me in short tugs.

My release comes in waves that feel prismatic, hot ropes of cum coating his fingers as he strokes his fist over the head of my cock, finishing me off. His groan is muffled, his mouth still pressed against my skin where he bit me, as his hips snap against my ass and still, his cock spasming as he paints my insides with his release.

His heart beats against my back, mine syncing to his rhythm like a familiar song, and our breaths slowly even out as he holds me tight and kisses along my neck and shoulder. I grab the towel he put on the side of the bed and clean up as he pulls out of

me and groans in delight, watching the mess he made of me.

“You’re such a dirty monster,” I tell him with a laugh, knowing what he’s enjoying.

“I love seeing your ass marked with my cum, Knox. You have no idea what it does to me.”

“Oh, trust me, baby, I know.” I toss the towel to him, and he cleans up the rest before he tucks himself in against my side, throwing his leg over mine, and lets me wrap my arms around him. “This should always be our life together,” I say quietly into his hair as he rests his head on my chest. “I want us coming home to each other, fucking like maniacs, and so in love we make people sick to see us because they want what we have.”

Ryder raises his head and looks at me with excitement in his eyes. “Let’s show the world what this love looks like. Hard launch us. Now.” He sits up all the way and starts looking for his phone amongst the clothes scattered on the ground. “Let’s take a photo right now and put it on our socials. We’ll tell everyone that I was such a hateful douchebag because I couldn’t admit what I wanted and who I am, so I hated that part of myself, never you, but I took it out on you anyway. Your sensitivity training and lessons helped me overcome my dickery and internalized hate to acknowledge what I truly wanted while learning about acceptance, or whatever better way you can say it. I don’t want to suppress that part of myself anymore. I want people to know we have feelings for one another and want to be together.”

“You want to take a photo right now and post it on socials?” I ask, pointedly looking at his dick.

He looks down, then at my dick, and shrugs. “It would get the point across really fucking well that we love each other if they realize we’re naked in bed together, right?”

I laugh as he comes back to bed with his phone in hand and curls up in my arms again. “I am not taking photos of us naked to post online, Reckless,” I tell him, using the old nickname so he knows he’s not thinking this through. “It’s one thing to jack off together on an app or send spicy photos to each other, but baby, think about it. We can do this so much better.” I chuckle at his frown now that I refuse to go along with his impulsive idea. “I have a whole folder on my phone called Fire Photos of Kingsy where I’ll save anything you take right now for my private use, but let’s not scandalize the professional sports world with our racy selfie from bed, okay?”

In the end, we take the photos anyway, because our love should be documented in a way we can look back on anytime we want. I manage to convince Ryder not to post them at midnight to his social media like a psycho. A psycho in love, but still a crazy man. We do, however, find time to take fully clothed photos the next day, me sitting behind Ryder with his head on my shoulder, face turned toward mine as he smiles with Goldie in her fish tank next to us. We post to both our socials with a caption that includes the two guys holding hands emoji and reads Sometimes, your family looks a little different, but the love is just as big. It was a long, bumpy road to get here, but the journey is where all the memories are made. Looking forward to all the future holds for us.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am*

Ryder

The roar of the crowd is a tinny sound blocked out as I focus on the play happening to the right of me, staying pinned to the side post, ready to spring across and defend the net.

Rook and Campbell are fighting to take possession of the puck along the boards against two Boston players as the clock races down in the third period.

The score is two-to-two, and we need to clinch another goal to seal our win.

This playoff series has been especially contentious, with both Boston and the Hydras having three wins each and needing this deciding game to see who will advance to the Stanley Cup Finals.

Having this final game in our arena, on home ice, gives us even more to play for.

We don't want to let our fans down .

Playoffs have always been a struggle for me, my nerves becoming a problem, and my focus lost when a goal is scored, leading to more mistakes and letting my team down.

Or at least it was in Boston, which was a contributing factor to why they traded me away after ten years with them.

I've proven through this playoff series that I can be dependable after all, staying sharp and shaking off the goals, knowing my teammates have my back and will do

their part to even the score.

It's been good to know I wasn't destined to always be a fuck up when it mattered the most.

Having a coach and a team that believes in me despite my past has been game-changing, literally.

This season, the mental game has been completely different.

I've been learning to manage my emotions and think before I speak, and that's translated into how I play on the ice.

I'm more focused on the game and less caught up in my head, which has made a big difference.

The Hydras have restored my faith in my playing ability, making me feel like a god on the ice, and with Knox by my side, I feel like a god off it, too.

Hell, I'm not as reckless on ice or off, period.

Rook snaps the puck out to Westy, who clears it up to Monty along the boards, and they race for the other goal.

Monty passes to Nico and switches spots with him, taking the Boston D-man with him, leaving Westy open for the pass Nico sends sailing his way.

Westy slaps the puck and clears Upton's right shoulder just as he was turning, too slowly, to defend from Westy's angle.

The lamp lights as the goal horn blares, and our guys surge into the boards,

smothering Westy as he takes us out of our tied score, while fans scream their excitement all around Olympus Arena.

Now, we just have to defend and not let another Boston goal in for the last minute of game time, and we'll be onto the Stanley.

Holy shit, it's so close.

I turn to get water with the break in play, lifting my mask and spotting Knox in the stands behind me, clapping with the other spectators and grinning like the proud boyfriend he is.

He holds up a sign that says "Kingsy, you'll always be my king, on the ice and off!" making me damn near burst with happiness.

I spray water on my face to rinse off the sweat that's stinging my eyes and making them water, shaking out my wet hair before I put my mask back on, but not before blowing him a quick kiss of thanks.

He just shakes his head shyly and sits back in his seat as I return to my position in the goal.

The boys set up for a face-off at center ice, everyone tense and ready to spring as the refs reset them several times before they can get a clean puck drop.

Boston wins the face-off, and once again, I'm faced with my former teammates looking to score against me.

They've changed up their plays and adjusted to the Hydras' style throughout this series once they realized I could pick out all their old plays and their old style wouldn't be effective against me.

Now, I have to watch for each player's tell, and focus on minute details that keep me riveted on where the puck is and who is around to take a pass for potential shots.

The Boston center fakes a pass that sends Rook after the winger it was intended for, leaving a gap as he drops back and lets the D-man who was behind him take the puck instead.

He passes to the right winger, who passes again, and I'm on alert, my glove up and legs ready to sprawl whichever way the puck comes.

I see the wind up before the puck is even passed back, and I make my move, hoping like hell it's the right one.

When the stick connects with the puck and it comes sailing at me where I'd anticipated, I'm able to stop it with my shoulder as I fall forward, my head craning back to follow the puck's progress as my glove whips around and I somehow manage to trap it behind my back despite the weird angle.

I've clamped my glove shut before I've even hit the ice on my chest, the game-ending buzzer a beautiful sound that fills me with relief.

I stopped the goal.

I kept the score three-to-two in our favor, and we won .

We're going to the fucking Stanley Cup Finals, and I didn't fuck it up, for once!

My teammates pile on top of me in the net, screaming with elation and more joy than grown men are usually capable of.

When they finally get off of me and help me up, they move out of my way, patting

my back and kissing my helmet.

I go to the glass for my ritual with Knox, which they now know is more important to me than anything.

I rip my mask off, dropping my stick and gloves as I glide and crash into the plexiglass barrier where he already has his hands pressed.

All around him, fans are screaming and pounding on the glass, but all I see are his deep espresso eyes that hold my heart, his smile that is infinitely calming and reassuring, and so much love.

He makes a fist and I knock my knuckles into his.

We pull our hands away and press our index fingers to the glass, scar-to-scar.

He bobs his chin, shooing me back to the celebration on the ice.

I return to my teammates, everyone now on the ice with gloves and sticks scattered all around as they celebrate and hug.

I glance over at the bench and catch Coach Kennedy's rare head nod, a silent but unmistakable sign of his calm approval.

When Knox and I finally make it home, I'm exhausted from the insane travel schedule going back and forth to Boston for the series, and the incredible adrenaline dump this last game was.

After the game, we celebrated at The Hideout, which has quickly become a Hydra favorite for post-game celebrations and where fans go to watch our games when we're on the road.

The Condors aren't the only team with a fan base in Atlanta now.

Hockey is picking up steam, and we're winning over the South.

"What kind of prize do I get for stopping that last shot and getting us to the Stanley Cup Finals?" I ask Knox as I drag him through the condo toward our room.

"Oh, your eleven million dollar a year salary isn't enough? You want something from me now?" he asks with a grin.

"Yeah, I do, Mr. Just Had My Contract Extended For Two Years And Will Be Making Seventeen Million A Year. I want your dick on mine. Let's try one of my fantasies now, yeah?" I've been dreaming up more and more new ways to fuck Knox and get off with him, and it's been endless fun experimenting to see what we like. My good boy is always up to play, and while he's giving me shit now, he'll be happy enough to give in once we get naked.

Knox finished his season in the playoffs, but the Condors didn't make it to the Super Bowl. They have a strong team for next year, and with his contract extension finally coming through, we have some finality to what his future looks like in football. Knox will play two more years here in Atlanta, after all, and then he'll retire so we can start the family we both want.

We're already exploring adoption through the foster system, knowing there are so many amazing kids in need of a home full of love. We also have plans to get married this summer during the off-season. Something small, though with Knox's family alone, it will be large.

His parents have come around a bit more after he came out to them, and most of his siblings are accepting this new information. There are a couple who have been less than understanding, and still won't talk to him, which I know hurts him deeply. I told

him we're creating our own family now, so whether everyone in his family is on our side or not doesn't matter.

My side will be less family, more teammates-turned-family. My dad died years ago after finally drinking himself to death, but my mom and I have been slowly working on our relationship. I didn't talk to her for a long time. I blamed her for knowing Dad hurt me and not protecting me from him. Opening up to Knox about what happened back then has helped me realize she was a victim, too, and was working as hard as she could to make sure I could have something that would help me get out of the situation we were stuck in. While she didn't protect me physically from his abuse, she provided for me where she could. It's no excuse, but I can understand her a little better now.

"I think you'd better tell me about this fantasy of yours, baby, because I'm quite curious now," Knox says, sliding his hands under my suit jacket and slipping it off my shoulders. "I like it when you bring up something new for us." His long fingers deftly unbutton my shirt as I work on his belt and get his pants undone.

I shrug out of my shirt as he pulls my jersey that I now consider his over his head and lets it drop to the floor behind him. Seeing him with my name and number on his back makes me feral for him. I rip the T-shirt he's wearing right over his head and let my mouth find his chest, his skin so smooth and soft over the hard muscle of his pecs. I suck his nipple into my mouth and flick it with my tongue, making him swear and grab my head. He's sensitive, and I love knowing I can make his knees weak just with this little bit of play. I move to his other nipple and repeat the motion, savoring his curses as I push his pants down. Our hands are frenzied, both working quickly to disrobe the other.

"I want that hot foreskin of yours stretched over my cockhead while we jack each other off," I say, breathing the words against his mouth as I rise to kiss him again. "I want to be so covered in cum when we finish, we don't know where one started and

the other begins.”

He groans against me and grips my cock. “Fuck, you make me crazy with how badly I want you. That mouth of yours knows exactly what to say.”

“Not too long ago you thought my mouth was just for getting me in trouble,” I joke, sliding my tongue along his jaw to his ear and sucking just below until he squirms. “Maybe I can be taught a lesson.”

“Baby, you can learn lots of things, and you can teach them, too. Now, fuck me like a good student learning a lesson,” he demands, the neediness coming through in his tone so beautifully.

“Does that make me your MVP? Most Valuable Penis.”

“Fuck, Ryder,” Knox says, bursting into laughter.

The laughter quickly fades when I grip his shaft and lay mine on top, circling my fingers and stroking us both as he pushes me against the wall with a gasp. I lean into the wall and let Knox rest his forehead on mine, both of us looking down at where we’re connected so beautifully. Once both of our cocks are slippery with precum and we’re breathing heavy, our gasps mixing in the small space between our faces, I slide my hips back until the heads of our cocks touch. I gently stretch and roll his foreskin forward and onto my cockhead, the sensation snug and warm and oh so good.

“Jesus, baby, you get this all the time? Holy shit, no wonder you’re so sensitive,” I mutter, working to keep my mind on the task at hand, so I don’t lose it right here and ruin what I’ve thought so much about doing. I spit in my hand and bring it to Knox’s beautiful monster cock to stroke him. He follows suit, and my knees just about buckle from the pleasure.

“It’s so much better when you’re touching me,” Knox admits, hips moving into my fist as he shuttles his palm up and down my length. He gently tugs his foreskin further down my cock with each pass, pressing our heads together and creating the best kind of friction around the crown where he knows I’m most sensitive. It’s incredible. I’m glad I’m leaning against the wall because my knees are getting weaker with every tug, and my hips are joining in the frenzied movement of our bodies as we race toward our releases together.

“Fuck, like that, Knox, right there,” I growl, voice growing hoarse as my orgasm builds at the base of my spine, balls drawing up as my cock swells.

“Come for me, baby,” he begs, face dropping against my neck as his hot breaths skate across my skin. He kisses my shoulder and rolls his face to look down again. I moan and shake against him. “Goddamn you’re sexy. Fuck, baby, look at you, your cum is going to get me off,” he says as my release explodes from me, spasming against his cockhead and dripping around our hands as I lose the ability to speak. His cock swells in my hand and I focus my attention on flicking my wrist up near the head to finish him off. He makes the most beautiful sound as he falls apart in my hands and his release damn near sets me off again with the force against my sensitive head .

“So much better than I even thought it would be,” I gasp, my lips finding his warm cheek. I love that Knox blushes, and I can heat his cheeks even now.

“That’s life with you, baby,” he says, raising his head and looking at me. “It’s so much better than either of us could ever have expected when we were thrown together again. Now I can't imagine my life without you in it.”

“You don't have to. I’m here for good. I'll never be reckless with you and our life together. That’s the most important lesson you’ve taught me.”

This concludes Reckless On Ice.

Thank you for reading Reckless On Ice! If you enjoyed this book, I would be so grateful if you would leave a review on the platform(s) of your choice. Reviews are so valuable to authors, and each one helps share our stories with others.

XOXO, Adrian

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*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am*

Cocktails of Reckless On Ice

Violet Vers Cocktail Recipe

Ingredients

1 1/2 oz Empress 1908 gin

1/4 oz lavender simple syrup

tonic water

splash of grapefruit juice— optional

Sprig of lavender for garnish

Directions

In a cocktail shaker or measuring glass, combine the Empress 1908 Gin and the lavender simple syrup.

Add a handful of ice and stir to both combine and chill.

Strain into a lowball glass filled with ice.

Top off the rest of the glass with tonic water & watch the color change before your eyes.

Add a small splash or squeeze of grapefruit juice.

Stir again before enjoying and add a sprig of lavender for garnish.

## Hypnotic Hydra Cocktail Recipe

### Ingredients

2 ounces Midori Liqueur

1 ounce vodka

1 ounce sour mix (or 1/2 ounce each lemon juice and lime juice) can also be omitted if you want it sweeter

Lemon-lime soda

Sour gummy worms

### Directions

Fill a highball glass with ice.

Combine Midori, vodka, and sour mix.

Top with lemon-lime soda.

Garnish with sour gummy worms for a Hydra appearance.

## Crazy Condor Cocktail Recipe

### Ingredients

1 1/2 ounces vodka

1 1/2 ounces peach schnapps

1 1/2 ounces Southern Comfort

1 1/2 ounces gin

2 ounces triple sec

2 ounces orange juice

Grenadine

Directions

Mix alcohols into an ice-filled cocktail shaker.

Add the juice and grenadine, and shake.

Serve in a 10-12 oz. glass.