



# Rocking the Receiver (Austin Troopers)

**Author:** *Hope Irving*

**Category:** Sport

**Description:** In another lifetime, he'd totally be my type.

I'm a musician and won't risk my shot at making it big by coming out publicly... yet. Only my mother and the woman who poses as my girlfriend know. I haven't confided in my best friend of fifteen years, but his much younger brother, Elliot, suspects. I refuse to allow the French brat's obsession with me to topple the walls I've erected to protect my secrets.

Of course, Elliot wouldn't out me, and my lips are sealed. I'm the only one he told. The only one he claims to want. The only one he trusts to punch his V-card before starting college in the US. I refuse to rock his world; he's way off-limits.

While he works to pursue his dream of playing for his favorite NFL team, the Austin Troopers, my music draws me closer to him... Then tragedy strikes. Elliot turns out to be a surprisingly solid shoulder to lean on.

But there's too much at stake to cave or reveal unspoken truths now. Our safe closet. Our age gap. Our public careers... And most of all, my friendship with his clueless brother.

Is a potential relationship worth the risk?

**Total Pages (Source):** 22

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 3:06 am*

## CHAPTER 1

### (I CAN'T GET NO) SATISFACTION

Elliot

Morning wood is the best. Well, it's a promising start to the day and exactly what my body requires before I fuel it with a hearty breakfast.

"Damn right," I murmur to myself.

I lazily yawn while extending my arms above my head, stretching my sleepy yet yearning body, and breathe in the light breeze entering through the French window that leads to a small balcony. The Rh?ne Valley is known for its hot and dry summer weather, but it's been on the cooler side lately. As cool as my current mood, however that will surely derail when I face my surprise later today. At long last!

For now, I have all the time in the world and have no desire to jump out of bed to fetch said surprise myself. Actually, that's a lie. As eager as I am for it, jacking off is the best way to start the day, and I pride myself on keeping my good mood in check.

"Damn right," I repeat, my lips stretching into a content grin.

I point my toes like I used to when I did ballet as a kid, desperate to make them curl with the wicked ideas I have in mind.

My heart races in anticipation.

Who cares that I remain a permanent resident of the family estate until I depart for Austin next year. Who cares that my bedroom shares a wall with Tim's? Who cares?

Thank goodness, my parents' quarters are on the opposite side. Maybe I shouldn't be so thankful, though. The jealous part of me wanted my big brother to get caught whenever he snuck girls inside his room, but the prodigal son always found workarounds to make his life easier. So easy... Some of us have to work twice as hard.

Sucking in a breath, I don't hear a thing, although friends and family are arriving for his upcoming engagement party. I shake my head to chase Tim out of my head and focus on the task at hand. "Thank you, God, for this welcome reprieve," I shout at the top of my lungs to verify my assumption. Nobody screams at me to shut the fuck up. Success!

Yelling at the top of my lungs is a stretch, though. My mouth feels like sandpaper from last night's excesses. Partying. Singing. Drinking. My typical vacation regimen until the usual suspects are off to far-flung destinations, which will happen next week. Then, I'll have ample time to myself to catch up with my intense football practice: American Football, that is. Not your typical French activity, but it might earn me a scholarship to a prestigious university, so I can't complain. Football is a passion I share with my American mom, who was a die-hard 49ers fan, back in the day. Unfortunately, I'm well-aware that my focus has been off lately. I have no one to blame but myself. I usually employ strict discipline when it comes to football, but these last couple of weeks have been the exception to the rule.

"Soon, I'll behave," I tell myself. "Damn right!" I chuckle. I'm such a mess, but I know exactly why I'm not quite myself...

I sigh, then embrace the blessed silence of the household. Being the youngest of seven—and far from the quietest—enables me to enjoy this rare occurrence. I suspect

they all left for the bike ride and didn't dare wake me since I was out until the wee hours of the morning. I had to unleash the tension that's been building since Tim broke the news two weeks ago.

Unabashed, I slide my hand under the covers. I'm not chasing a quick and messy release. No, no, no... My patience has paid off, and I'm celebrating the occasion; I'll take the slower route and make my morning routine last longer. Teasing my chest. Closing my eyes. Twisting my nipples.

Call me boring if you want, but when it comes to certain things, I love my routine. I have my parents to thank for that. When we were kids, my mother insisted on daily bike rides. We're no longer kids—aside from me—nevertheless, she has corralled my siblings and extended family into a morning ride. As for Dad, he claims that running the family's winery estate demands routine. Looks like I had no choice, right?

That said, I only allow this natural tendency to apply when it comes to football and rubbing one out. And come, I do and will, especially today, considering how much my imagination loves to play variations of the same fantasy. My experience is limited, and after a few attempts, porn doesn't cut it. It's been three years, and I stay fixated on a person that I haven't seen since I was a little kid. Sue me!

Is it genuine attraction? Teenage hormones? Inept obsession? I'll soon find out.

I don't even have social media to blame, but rather said older brother... well, half-brother if we're being specific.

My pulse accelerates. Eventually, I reach down, grip my throbbing erection, and slowly tug on it. "Mmm..." Frustrated by my own restraint, I groan, keep stroking, keep pinching my balls, and keep embracing every single sensation.

So fucking good...

My brain short-circuits when filthy images take the forefront, and I worry my lower lip.

I'm on my knees, my caramel gaze caging his green eyes as he fucks my mouth. My filthy mouth waters, and my brain fast-forwards to him on all fours on my bed, his gorgeous face swiveled my way as I slam into him from behind. My rock-hard dick swells. We're crying out each other's names as his orgasm hits him like a tidal wave. He didn't even touch himself, and I follow suit. My skin tickles.

Sweaty, I gasp for air, sitting on my hand until I nearly burst. This guy is going to be the death of me. I want him so fucking bad. Strike that, I need him... period. I'll do anything to make him my first. The thought alone has my spine arching, and my heart hammers in my chest and I shoot my load across my abs. Sated, I pop my eyes open. "Holy shit, that was phenomenal."

Then, I roll to the side of the bed, snatch some tissues from the box on my nightstand, and clean up.

Staring at the ceiling, I pant, incapable of evening my breathing. Hands splayed on my almost hairless chest, I manage to pace my hectic heartbeat by starting to count the beauty marks around my belly button that's also surrounded by freckles.

"... Fifty-four, fifty-five, fifty-six..." My mouth is so parched that my throat itches. Covering my mouth with the crook of my arm, I cough, then bite my tongue to get some moisture, debating whether to stroll to my en suite bathroom for a sip of water.

Instead, I select to bask in my post-coital glow for a moment longer. Soon enough, the stickiness grosses me out, even though the smell of sex is enticing. "Come on, fucker, move it!"

Yes, I do speak to myself like a lunatic fairly often. I do enjoy the occasional silence,

but it quickly freaks me out because I'm not used to it. Being alone unsettles me, so that helps to fill in the blanks. And it gets me closer to being Brad Pitt, well, at least when he plays the iconic Tyler Durden.

Reluctantly, I trudge to the bathroom, wait for the water to heat, and step into the shower. Once I close the glass door behind me, the warmth of the steam envelops me like a comforting blanket. "Man, this is exactly what I needed," I murmur to myself, enjoying the citrus scent of my body wash. The hot water cascades over my stiff shoulders and down my back. Turning around, I finish washing away the sweat and dry cum. The steady rhythm of the water hitting the tiles is almost hypnotic, and I can feel my muscles beginning to relax.

I reach for the shampoo and squeeze a generous amount into my hand. "This stuff smells amazing!" I exclaim, inhaling the new fragrance from a fancier brand than the one I usually use. I wonder if Mom put it here by mistake or because she had enough of my smelly teenage self. Either way, I can't complain, only notice that I'm hypersensitive this morning.

I massage the rich, foamy lather into my overgrown hair. Why didn't I book a haircut to look my best for today? I scold myself, inwardly this time.

As I rinse myself off, I throw my head back to let the water stream over my face, then jerk myself off again for good measure. Can't be too careful; it wouldn't be polite to greet our guest with a boner, right? My parents raised me better than that. I'll at least wait until I corner him to make my intentions known. I heave a half-growl/half-smirk at that, closing my eyes and reveling in the sensation. I milk my fist in less time than it takes me to take my next breath.

Talk about taking the edge off...

I wrap a towel around the waist and brush my teeth, and my mind instantly revisits

my favorite topic. I'm on a roll, overthinking.

Your brother isn't to blame or to thank for this infatuation, moron.

He was the one to bring his long-distance friendship to my attention—not mine especially, but you get the picture. Of course, he never fathomed the impact his stories would have on his much younger teenage brother, and I'll skip over the pictures of his hot as fuck British friend.

How could I forget my fourteen-year-old self getting all verklempt at the view?

One look was all it took to steal my heart, or rather, talk to my dick in ways no one has before or since. That's how I confirmed what I've felt all of these years without being able to put a word on it: I am gay. On top of being gay (pun intended!), I have a pretty accurate gaydar. It could have been useful in unearthing a high-school buddy to experiment with, but you see, my body and mind agree on one thing: We like older guys, at least one, who surely shares my interest in men.

“Not Daddy style older,” I hear myself say.

My friends and family cannot comprehend how important today is. They don't have a clue about my orientation, and I intend on keeping it that way for the time being.

My chest rises and falls at the prospect of making the object of my desire surrender. Because he will, eventually.

I can't believe this is finally happening. For real...

Must be why the name of my dirty little secret obsession escapes from my swollen lips in a barely audible whisper.

“Rupert Smith.”



### CHAPTER 2

#### LEAN ON ME

Rupert

“Thank you for granting us the pleasure of your presence, given your busy schedule, Your Grace!” Tim bows before me in the middle of the train station parking lot.

The train ride from Marseille to Orange wasn’t that bad, but overall, it’s been a long ass-trip since I boarded the plane in Nashville. My eyes are itchy from the A/C, I’m tired, and I must reek. Nevertheless, the corner of my mouth quirks up. Despite the light breeze, it’s still hot for this time of the day. Not as hot as Nashville, though.

“Will you stop it already?” I slap his bicep for good measure. His praise of my so-called musical stardom has been constant since he witnessed people pointedly staring at me when I got off the train.

“What? I’ve never been asked for autographs myself, so...” He trails off and looks at his feet, probably overthinking the fact that Romain, one of the four brothers, is a somewhat renowned science fiction novelist who also gets what my best friend calls “the royalty treatment.” However, Tim is the prodigal son who his dad chose to run the prosperous family business by his side and someday inherit. I make a mental note to ask for his autograph while we’re having coffee or lunch in a public place this weekend.

“Yeah, small world.” I’m not a star, mind you, but we happened to run into a couple

from Colorado who saw me, along with The Whiskey Barrels, at the US Music Festival less than a month ago. What were the odds, right? We stroll up to his BMW convertible, and my witty self comments, “Nice car.”

He thanks me, unlocking it. “It’s funny, though,” he eventually says as he starts the car, fumbles with his phone to find a playlist, then starts lip-syncing to The Beatles.

Damn, I hate The Beatles with a passion.

Not that I’d tell him that because Tim worships Paul McCartney. His voice. His music. His bands. Whatever.

Then, we’re off to the narrow roads of the South of France. It scared the hell out of me when I first came here as a teenager; to British me, people were driving on the wrong side of the road, and I was expecting a car crash at every turn. Living in New York taught me better, although I don’t own a car.

I jut my chin his way. “What is?”

“You definitely look more like a model than a guitarist in a country band. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve seen your videos and TV appearances, and you do fit in with that strange blend of strong personalities, but you’re definitely not your typical American cowboy, which Hardy is.” He’s the larger-than-life lead singer.

“Don’t judge a book by its cover. I have a buzz cut and don’t wear flannel or own a truck, but pretending isn’t my style.” My heart tightens at my own words... I’m so full of shit. I am a pretender for sure. Hiding who I really am from my closest male friend with whom I’ve shared so much. I’m an asshole. “Maybe I should work on my Texan drawl, though.” I catch my breath, bothered by my own cowardice when I’ve been pushing Sally to be brave.

“Don’t even try; you’d look ridiculous. You’ve already acquired a flawless New York accent and vocabulary. I’m baffled,” Tim marvels. “It’s one thing to hear it over the phone or video chat, but it’s just...”

“Don’t tell me you’re jealous because your stepmom will peg me for a local while you can’t ditch that hint of an annoying pointy French accent.”

“I don’t have a pointy accent, jackass. Plus, Victoria is from California. It’s a totally different accent. Too bad she knows you’re a Brit. Otherwise, I would have asked her to guess where you were from.”

“Ha-ha!”

With his window rolled down, Tim’s left forearm rests on the edge of the window frame until we approach our destination. The short drive is refreshing and full of banter, jokes, and life stories that we’ve forgotten to share since we last spoke.

“Like I said, it’s been too long, man.” Eyes on the road, he says, “I’m glad you could make it. The fact that you took a leave of absence from your band rehearsals and traveled all this way to be here with us... with me, means the world to me.”

“Anytime. What I wouldn’t do for my best friend?” I squeeze the side of his shoulder, then retrieve my hand. “I’m sorry I can’t stay more than an extended weekend and missed your bachelor party, though.”

“Oh, man, you missed out! You’ll have to come back for a month next year, and we’ll party like the good old days.” He tilts his head, winking at me.

“Why don’t we enjoy this weekend first before getting ahead of ourselves?”

“You got it.” Running his fingers through his dark wavy hair, he drives through the

massive iron gates and resumes lip-syncing before releasing an irritated grunt. “Hopefully, by then, our extension will be fully completed, and Claire and I will have our own space. Now that everybody’s moved out, I’m not sure when my siblings are planning to come back here for the holidays... So, basically, it’ll only be my parents and Elliot. You see... you and Sally will have plenty of rooms to choose from. I’m so bummed she couldn’t make it.”

“Same. She’s having a blast in Colorado. There’s an archaeology site she’s been working at for a while.” I rub the back of my neck, wondering how to switch topics because I know where this is going.

“Good for her.”

“I know, right!”

“I used to be so envious of you for finding the right person before me.” Here we go. I should open my big mouth and tell him. I don’t. “But look at us now!”

Bile rises in my mouth, and I offer him a tight smile.

Will I ever be able to come clean?

Forcing myself to focus my attention elsewhere, I look around and take note of festive decorations for tomorrow’s party, including small wrought-iron lanterns, which give a romantic atmosphere to the place. On the drive from the train station, he shared that there’s still a lot to be done before the place looks how it’s supposed to, but they’ve been busy greeting guests and working for the past few days. Lately, he and his fiancée have been in charge of the wine tasting events and vineyard tours. A winery sounds like a demanding business.

And just like that, I blurt out, “I can’t wait to see the place in broad daylight.”

Oblivious to my inner turmoil, he drives around the expansive two-story estate and heads towards the back. Nothing's changed, except everything feels different from what I recall. I remember how overwhelmed my sixteen-year-old self had been upon my first visit to the Lefevre mansion. Because that's what it is, and I'm not exaggerating. Even back then, there was no need to compare it to the tiny house where my mom and I lived; at least the Cotswolds are as beautiful as the Rh?ne Valley. Funny how I met Timothée through my soccer teammate, Dominic, with whom the French teenager stayed over the summer. Our friendship quickly grew into a tight bond, no matter how far apart we've lived over the years.

"We redid the pool area and have an actual pool house now." He points at the area where a few guests are soaking up the last rays of sunshine, as if it wasn't plain to see. My diversion visibly worked to a T.

With him still mouthing lyrics, we reach the back of the main property. He easily maneuvers to park in a row of vehicles that range from trendy to commercial.

Looks like it'll be a full house indeed. But then again, what did I expect?

We exit the car. He slams the trunk shut once my duffle bag hits the gravel.

I heave a content sigh, in spite of being far from a melancholic type.

It's good to be back.

So many things fell into place around the last time I stayed with the Lefevres. I lost my virginity here. I improved my French skills. I landed my first modeling gig, which led to meeting Sally in London shortly after.

Out of reflex, I square my shoulders and stand taller in an attempt to rein in my emotions. I'm about a head taller than my French bestie, but he's sturdier, which

apparently fits his job requirement.

Texting, he doesn't budge from behind the car, then looks up at me. "Everyone's really eager to see you. They'll be hopping in the shower before dinner, so Victoria suggested we get your stuff upstairs through the kitchen door. Come on!" I don't miss how he doesn't call Victoria Mom since she isn't his biological mom, but the divorced American his French dad remarried shortly after Tim's mom died. So, the four kids instantly gained two younger siblings, and later came Elliot, the surprise baby, who's ten years Tim's junior.

With my duffle slung over my shoulder, I notice his family exiting the pool house from afar. We wave at each other, and I follow my friend, my head swiveling in every direction to see if my memory betrayed me. Adjacent to the living room, the large family kitchen has been remodeled and updated with what looks like a new dark blue La Cornue cooking range. All in all, it's modern, while blending perfectly with the medieval castle-like feel of the house. Things look smaller, but then again, I was a late bloomer, and my last visit here prompted my growth spurt.

He halts in front of the massive wooden staircase that always reminded me of the one in Titanic. "I'm really glad you're here," he repeats, as if unable to fathom that his mind isn't playing tricks on him. Then, he awkwardly pats my shoulder blade before pulling me into a quick hug. "It's been what?"

"Since I've been here, you mean? Eleven years, man! Thankfully, I've seen your ugly mug countless times since then." My knuckles rasp over his neatly-styled hair and mess it up until he swats my hand away, grinning and mumbling threats.

Yeah, it's good to be back.

Our jobs require plenty of international travel, which helped us to see each other in person. I haven't seen his family, though. I heard that the oldest girl, Manon, has a

steady boyfriend now, so at least, she won't try to get into my pants like last time. She's a sweet, good-looking girl, but has definitely never been my type to begin with.

"Too bad I never got a chance to attend one of your gigs. When are you touring in France with your band?"

"It's not in the cards in the near future. Once I'm done in Nashville, I'm heading back to Manhattan... Anyway, I doubt France is ready for modern country music... or any type of country music, actually."

"You'd be surprised! I heard they have square-dancing classes scattered across the country." I get a ridiculous visual and put my hand in front of my mouth as I chuckle heartily. "Well, not here or in Orange, obviously, but I swear it's a trend. They dress up and everything..." It doesn't subside easily. I eventually apologize for mocking his fellow citizens.

Eager to meet everyone as well as famished, I sprint up the stairs to drop off my bag only to wait for Tim to show me to my room.

Leading the way, Tim explains, "Samuel's former bedroom has been turned into a guest room because, as always, he whined that he had the smallest room. So, that's where you'll be staying. It's across from Elliot's."

As if on cue, his younger brother, who must have been like six or seven when I last saw him in real life, appears before us.

My windpipe shuts down as I hold back from gaping.

Barely.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 3:06 am*

### CHAPTER 3

#### STARSTRUCK

Elliot

Now. This is happening right now.

The lump that's taken residence in my throat prevents me from breathing properly. My hand is glued to the doorknob as a cold shiver runs through me, and my body refuses to move except for my other hand that forms a fist so I can cough into it to get my bearings.

To no avail because I cannot look away. I must look like a deer caught in headlights. The sound I make reminds me of a strangled cat.

I had no idea they would come upstairs upon arrival... I figured they would stay by the pool instead. Of course, I heard the car!

The plan was to help Mom with the last-minute things like setting the table in the gazebo, after I was done with my umpteenth shower of the day, while Dad worked the barbecue. Yup, jerking off under icy water has become my new favorite activity today. Postponing the reunion would have given me time to brace myself and appear busy enough to conceal how his presence affects me.

No such luck.



Intense green eyes cage my chocolate ones. They're usually the color of milk chocolate that I used to stuff my face with as a kid, but the heat rising in my cheeks tells me that they are getting darker by the second. I hate that he's slightly taller than me, so I have to look up. But with that hungry look on me, the rest of the world ceases to exist. Rupert Smith takes my breath away.

Looking into my soul. Stripping me bare. Unveiling my deepest secrets. So much for concealing who I really am and what I desire the most, well, who .

He knows, doesn't he?

Meanwhile, my damp hair is dripping down my neck. Talk about being uncomfortable! My heart thumps a punishing pace, which leads me to believe I'm about to faint, and my hand tightens around the knob.

"You okay there, bro'?" Tim's fingers snap in front of my eyes and his large hand pats me on the back, yanking me back to reality.

With that, my throat tightens, and I loudly swallow. Chest heaving, I cough into my fisted hand, blinking furiously. "Hairball," I joke, finally managing to catch my breath and gather my wits while I unabashedly take in the delicious piece of man in front of me. It's time to recover, but I can't because I spy, with my little watery eye, the most appetizing mouth that I've ever seen. A mouth that I long to conquer, invade, and fuck.

"Right, Puss in Boots." My brother shakes his head, mocking my uncharacteristic reaction. What happened to my assertiveness? I guess he didn't buy the exaggerated shrug that I was hoping would pass for nonchalance.

"Ha-ha!" I know he got the Shrek reference since it's one of our favorite movies, but it's embarrassing nonetheless.

We've always had a peculiar relationship. Nobody gets where our instant bond originated. My dad once confessed that Tim used to change my diapers and was always protective of me while still giving me shit. I suspect it was brother dearest's way of getting in Dad's good graces since Tim's not a fan of Victoria, but accepts that she makes our dad happy. Also, we both live under the same roof while the other siblings fled the nest years ago... as if we needed an excuse to get even closer.

I usually play along with his teasing, but today isn't the usual. That said, as much as I resent my brother for belittling me in front of his friend, I can only agree with the resemblance to some extent. Strawberry blond. Big eyes. Long lashes... I should have noticed it sooner. And I can be just as sassy, except when my brother's best friend is facing me, apparently.

"Nice to see you again, Elliot. I'm Rupert, remember?" He offers me his hand to shake. As if I'd forgotten him! I'm too shell-shocked by hearing his voice for the first time, and how my name rolled off his tongue, to do anything. Why doesn't he sound British? Why does he keep staring at me like that? Why didn't he hesitate and figured out who I am so easily? Who am I kidding? I'm the only one with fair hair and the youngest of the tribe by five years. "It's been a while." He remains there, his hand extended, but I don't reply, so he slides his hand into his shorts pocket. "Good to see you again."

I'm being rude, but I can't help it. I follow his movement, only my eyes linger a second too long on his crotch. My dick twitches inside my preppy shorts, and I will myself to think of something boring to save myself from embarrassing myself in front of them.

My brain short-circuits back to this awkward reunion.

Rupert purses his lips. "You sure have changed since I last saw you." The back of my wet neck stiffens, regardless of my efforts to overanalyze his words and tone. "Guess

I'll see you at dinner in a bit." And with that, the handsome devil turns around and enters Samuel's room across from mine, giving me a perfect visual of his round, toned, and lickable derrière before my brother closes the door behind them.

With him gone, I recover the ability to move and shake my head in disbelief.

Pathetic fuck! This is so uncharacteristic of me. I've never been tongue-tied before.

Fleeing the scene, I gnaw at my lips, unable to get over my reaction and lack of manners until I remind myself that I'm seventeen years old; why would they be frazzled by my awkwardness?

Why are you getting so worked up over nothing? the angel on my shoulder tries to reason.

It's not nothing, it's everything, Elliot. The guy you've been lusting over for years. Because of his looks. Because of Tim's stories about him. Because of your belief that the man is gay, even though you've heard about the woman he shares his life with. My inner demon is pretty convincing.

"Great job, dumbass!" I grumble to myself for screwing up our first encounter. Then, I head straight to Mom, as if being around her would magically help. It's a shame that busying myself with our guests doesn't alleviate my frustration either.

My intention was to show Rupert that, despite our age difference, I am more mature than other teenagers. Otherwise, he'll never cave, but I've just proved the exact opposite.

There's no way I'll allow that first impression to be permanent.

The warm evening air is filled with the scent of grilled food and fresh vegetables. My

family and our closest are gathered around the large rectangular dinner table. We'll see the rest of the guests tomorrow afternoon.

The sun is just beginning to set, casting a golden glimmer over everything. By the time I finished dinner prep with my parents, I thankfully managed to put on a poker face. The one I've perfected over the years to hide my true self from the outside world. I realize I'll have to reveal some of it if I want to seduce Rupert. I mean, I'm 99.9% sure he's closeted, but that doesn't imply he'd be interested in me. One step at a time.

Mom passes the salad bowl to me, and I scoop a generous portion onto my plate, trying to focus on the fresh greens instead of the prickling sensation of my big brother's eyes on me. The fact that he's across from me and next to Rupert doesn't help my case. This time, I make a point of not looking at my favorite British person. Who cares if I come off as rude again? Well, it's either that or ridicule myself for acting like a lovesick puppy towards a man who I don't know from Adam.

For his benefit, we mostly use English at the dinner table, even if Rupert said he understands French without being able to speak the language. Because of the audience, I refrain from suggesting to tutor him in French kisses. After all, considering how inexperienced I am in the men's department, I might be the one in need of guidance. You can only learn so much from porn, and thanks to my vivid imagination, I haven't needed it since our guest took center stage in my fantasies.

"Pass the dressing, please," I say to my sister, Manon, who hands it to me without looking up from her phone. Calling her out on it burns my tongue, but I'm not that kind of person, and my parents don't seem to mind at the moment.

I drizzle some homemade vinaigrette over my mixed salad, then turn my attention to the guests. Claire, my brother's fiancée, is chatting animatedly with my parents about tomorrow's engagement party.

“So, Claire, tell me again, how did you and Tim meet?” Rupert asks, his mesmerizing eyes boring into hers.

The fuck?

I squirm in my chair. Before Rupert got here, Tim shared that he has a friend who’s into some karma and sophrology bullshit—his words, not mine—so maybe what I interpreted as interest or curiosity is his way of analyzing people, reading their souls.

Claire grins, her eyes twinkling. “Oh, it’s a long story, really.” That Rupert must have heard already, but whatever, since he asked... “We met at a mutual friend’s wedding about two years ago. He was the best man, and I was a bridesmaid.”

I tune everyone out, glancing at Rupert. Observing. Dissecting. Coveting.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Tim glaring at me. He hasn’t said much to me since we sat down. Somehow, I can feel his silent judgment. He must be pissed about my rude behavior earlier.

Mom interrupts my thoughts. “Are you excited to give the toast tomorrow, Elliot?” she asks, her voice warm and inquisitive.

I open my mouth to speak, but Tim beats me to it, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “Just make sure you get your voice back, alright, Puss in Boots?”

My cheeks burn, but I chuckle, playing it off. “Don’t worry! I’ll keep my quirks in check.”

Rupert gives my brother a playful nudge. “Oh, come on, Tim, give the kid a break. We caught him off guard is all.” I nod, grateful for his intervention; granted, being called a kid makes my temper flare, and I will myself to keep quiet.

Tim makes a tssk noise, then turns his attention to someone else. “What about you, Dad? Why don’t you tell us how you and Victoria met?”

I haven’t heard the story, but from his facetious tone, I can tell there’s something embarrassing to reveal in front of an audience.

“You’ll pay for this,” Dad retorts between gritted teeth, his voice playful. Then, he innocently reaches around the back of Rupert’s chair to swat Tim’s head before asking Claire, “So, I’m curious: Is my son’s insolence what drew you to him?”

Too bad Claire’s parents weren’t able to make it today. I’m relieved that the conversation’s shifted away from me, so I relax slightly. I lean back in my chair, absorbed in the hubbub around me. For once, keeping the spotlight off myself is a must. The less everyone notices me, the better... apart from Rupert, that is.

She coughs slightly. A blush creeps across her face, hinting at her embarrassment. “Well... his... determination played a role.” I bet that’s her subtle way of saying stubbornness. “When he sets his mind to something, he really goes for it.” Bingo! He’s definitely pig-headed, but that’s also why he’s so successful in his job.

My brother’s gaze shifts away from me to look at her. “And that’s why we’re here, isn’t it?”

I seize the moment to take a deep breath, relieved to be free from Tim’s scrutiny and enjoy the rest of the evening. Once the table is cleared and we’re all ready to call it a night, I volunteer to do the dishes. Surprisingly, Samuel, Romain, and Rupert join in to get it done faster, though Dad’s waiting for them to join the guys for cigars. He can be so old-fashioned at times.

While everyone’s busy drying the pots and pans, Rupert leans my way, his hot breath in my ear spreading warmth throughout my needy body. My traitorous dick takes

notice. What is it with this guy? He murmurs, “I’m sorry I startled you. I owe you one.”

My suggestive reply startles me even more.

“My pick.”

### CHAPTER 4

#### ALL I KNOW SO FAR

Rupert

On top of being a redhead, my Britishness —as smartass Elliot referred to it at breakfast—doesn't mix well with the blazing late afternoon sun. Yes, I have a love/hate relationship with the sun since my insanely fair skin burns in the blink of an eye. Needless to say, wearing sunscreen wasn't an option, simply because... shininess, stickiness, and whatnot.

Thankful for the constant breeze, I nonetheless stand under the retractable awning on the edge of the terrace to benefit from the shade. How is everyone but me unbothered by the heat being all dressed-up? I inwardly thank Sally for insisting that I order a dress shirt and a dark green linen suit—to make my eyes pop, she claimed—for the occasion because I had nothing suitable to bring from Nashville. I'm not a big fan of linen, but I must look good if the appreciative glances I'm getting are any indication. Most of all, it keeps me cooler than a typical designer suit, so no complaints there.

Yeah, this Brit kid's come a long way from second-hand clothes, a crappy house, and a single mom who could barely make ends meet; bless her for always supporting me. Tim got a glimpse of that life. He's the only friend who's stepped foot in my childhood home and who I introduced to my mom. That's how close we are, but I felt the need to make him promise to keep it under wraps because it's nobody's business. Thank fuck, my so-called fame hasn't reached a level where the media digs into the past, and I intend to keep it that way.



Tim is the man of the hour, and I don't mind that he's too busy to chat with me. The point was to share this moment with him. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. He said he was grateful for my presence, so that's all that matters. So, here I am, on my second glass of red—it's the Rh?ne Valley after all—taking stock of the sprawling vineyards and olive groves surrounding the Lefevre estate. I am also people-watching; the numerous guests mingle, guffaw, and drink.

It's a beautiful party. My best friend hasn't stopped smiling and is currently surrounded by family and close friends, their voices rising and falling in cheerful, rapid French. I'm one of two native English speakers, and Victoria is fluent in French. As for me, I can catch most of it if people speak slowly, but I have a hard time speaking it. French grammar is a bitch!

Victoria and I talked for a while earlier, but she's evidently busy entertaining her guests. If I'm honest, I feel a bit isolated. You'd think that my former modeling career and current music one would make me comfortable around people; you'd be wrong. I'm far from a people person, and it's difficult for me to chat with someone I barely know, let alone strangers, especially if they speak a foreign language I haven't exactly mastered. I can discern the topics of most—wine, the honeymoon, and shared moments at school—but I prefer to listen, although most of them speak English.

Tim catches my eye and waves me over. Taking a sip of my wine, I make my way through the crowd. "Rupert!" Tim greets me with a joyful face, clapping me on the back. "What's up, my man? Why were you hiding over there? Scared of the French women?"

I hold up my free hand in surrender. "I'm not hiding..." That's up for debate, actually.

I gulp the rest of my drink to buy some time, and he swiftly signals one of the waiters to pour me a refill. With rapt attention, I watch the bulky blond guy in a dark suit

oblige. His cheeks are reddening. Is it the sun or something else? Expectant, I lick my lips, guessing he plays rugby in his spare time. When he's done filling the glass, his blue gaze meets mine from under his long lashes. A split second suffices. My pulse trips over itself. He's gone before anything remotely inappropriate can be witnessed.

Is it better this way or should I head to the bar area later?

Yes, as much as I adore my best friend, I am lying to him and I'm not even ashamed of it. A big white lie is better than taking the risk of coming out and potentially threatening our long-time friendship, that makes it a no-brainer. I get that it's fine to come out on my own terms, but over the years, we've shared so much. I doubt Tim's homophobic, but I'm afraid he might not comprehend why I'm hiding my sexual orientation, and keep the true nature of my relationship with Sally a secret all this time. Truth be told, I'm scared shitless that he might resent me for not trusting him, no matter how deep-rooted our friendship is.

Before I know it, Tim is joined by his fiancée. Looking radiant in a long lacy summer dress, she's surrounded by a group of well-wishers around our age who I assume are her friends. "It's good to have you here," Claire says, like her beau has about ten times today. Then, her eyes brighten. "I'd like to introduce you to my closest friends." Her intentions are clear. It's flattering, but my mind leans towards the bar.

Why would Tim try to hook me up when he bought into the Sally charade anyway? Surely, he knows I'm not a cheater or a one-night stand kinda guy. But then again, he doesn't really know. I definitely favor anonymous hookups, which are much less risky considering my career path.

"Rupert, this is Camille and her sister, Nadia," Claire says, gesturing to two lovely young women who beam at me. "Ladies, this is Rupert, Tim's best friend from the UK. He's a rock star now and lives in the States."

Who am I to contradict her, right?

Next, Tim informs me of their pedigree, but I zone out until they say, “ Enchantée ,” in unison, their eyes sparkling with interest.

I mirror their greeting in my embarrassing attempt at French.

Tim and Claire are soon pulled away by another relative, leaving me with the two sisters. They start talking, switching seamlessly between French and English for my benefit. I nod along, getting bits and pieces, but my attention keeps drifting back to Elliot.

“Would you like to dance?” Camille asks, her voice breaking through my thoughts.

“Sure, why not?” I set my drink on a nearby table and take her hand. We make our way to the makeshift dance floor where other couples are swaying to the music. Somehow, my eyes spot Tim’s younger brother, Elliot, studying the crowd from afar. Nope, not the crowd; he’s watching me intently, his gaze unwavering. Taking a look around, I realize that everyone else is so engrossed in the party that they couldn’t care less. There’s something about his stare that sends a shiver down my spine. As much as it concerns me, I embrace the feeling—slowly but surely—and berate myself for reveling in it a little too much.

He’s just a kid , I remind myself. Maybe my behavior yesterday upset him, and he’s just pissed at me, unable to get over it. That has to be it.

Last time I saw him, he was what? Six or seven. I remember him vividly because it’s not every day that two unrelated redheads live under the same roof, even for a short period of time. The kid was begging for attention back then, just as he is now. Elliot is the only child born from the union of Philippe and Victoria. A late one at that. He’s the youngest of seven siblings in a family where he’s the only one with fair hair and

freckles. The only one with a not-so-typical French name. The only one with a different physique from his father. The only one who chose American Football over rugby. My buddy, Nathan, would probably have a field trip with Elliot's backstory; he loves a unique story, especially when it involves karma and oddities, and the Lefevre kid definitely strikes me as odd. Shaking my buzzed head, I push my inner debate aside, focusing on the task at hand.

The Beatles version of Twist and Shout propels me to the present, and I push my inner debate aside and focus on Camille. Tim takes the stage with Claire, and I show off my best moves while telling my dance partner how I love the song, which reminds me of Ferris Bueller's Day Off, an 80's movie that I used to watch with my mom.

I still feel the weight of Elliot's stare on my back. I can't help but glance over my shoulder. It's swift, but as our eyes briefly meet, his expression is unreadable. Then he averts his gaze, and I turn mine back to Camille.

I feel self-conscious. It frustrates me that I can't quite put my finger on what pulls me towards Elliot. Well, strike that. I hate that the kid figured me out when the rest of the world believes in my love story with Sally and assumed straight orientation.

"Is everything alright?" Camille, who can't see him, inquires, noticing my distraction.

"Yeah, just... taking it all in." I've perfected my fake smile to a T, so she mustn't read my unease. Dancing to a French song that Camille says is a major hit at the moment, I manage to whirl around in order to face Elliot. The more I try to decipher the younger brother's intense scrutiny, the more intrigued I feel. What's his deal?

As the song ends, I excuse myself and escape to the bathroom, where I splash water on my face, hoping to break my trance. Then, I spot the waiter and make a beeline towards the bar. After discreetly polite and professional small talk, he hands me my Chateldon sparkling water along with a napkin with his digits on it. Later tonight...

That was so easy. Almost too easy, but why bother overthinking things when two consenting adults are on board?

Thoughtful, I make my way back to the edge of the terrace to collect myself. I feel a presence beside me and turn to see Elliot standing there, his gaze finally meeting mine.

“Enjoying the party?” His voice is low, tinged with a hint of sarcasm.

“Yeah, it’s wonderful.” Rubbing the back of my neck, I study him. “Your brother’s very lucky.”

Elliot’s eyes don’t leave mine. “So am I.”

“Oh, yeah?” There’s a tension between us that I can’t ignore, an unspoken connection that makes my heart race. I’m drawn to him, but I know that I can’t act on it. Not here. Not now. Not ever. That hot waiter is a much safer bet. He opens his mouth to speak, but I interject, “Why do you keep staring at me?” I challenge, unable to hold back any longer.

Elliot shrugs, a faint smirk playing on his plump lips that I shouldn’t be lusting after. “Just trying to figure you out,” he blurts out, his tone teasing but his eyes piercing.

“Well, good luck with that.” I force a chuckle. “I’ve been working on that for twenty-eight years, and I remain unsure what the answer is.” I’m not even lying. Reminding him of my age helps put things into perspective. I’m not gonna lie, the kid is hot as fuck, too hot for his own good probably, and the energy he exudes is appealing. In another lifetime, he’d totally be my type.

He laughs softly, the tension easing just a bit. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He swallows. “Don’t think I buy your act, though.” My eyes widen as he turns to walk away, but

changes his mind, glancing back at me. He threads his long fingers through his luscious mane of strawberry blond hair. My fingers twitch, aching to join his. Fuck! “By the way, don’t forget you owe me one.” With that, he leaves me hanging. Mind racing. Mouth parched.

Guilt spiking.

### CHAPTER 5

#### JUST A KISS

Elliot

I immediately spot him from a comfortable distance on the opposite side of a tree-shaded street. Readjusting my baseball cap, I purse my lips, discreetly stealing glimpses of my obsession without being seen. Today is a gorgeous, sunny day, just like yesterday's engagement party. The late afternoon dry heat is more bearable thanks to the light breeze.

Sitting outside, he has his back to me, but is angled in such a way that I see him checking his phone while having a draft beer.

Impatient, much? I'm only two minutes late.

I chose this quaint café located in a small neighboring town where the narrow pedestrian streets are made of cobblestone, lending a French vibe. It's easy enough to reach by bike since I don't drive. As for him, he either took an Uber here or borrowed a car, not that I actually give a shit. I also selected this location to avoid crossing paths with any acquaintances, at least on my part. I wonder what excuse Rupert made up to ditch them. Again, not my problem... All that matters is that he's here as planned.

I'm glad that there's enough space between tables to grant privacy.

Why are you overthinking this? Who cares if people overhear our conversation?

Rupert is a few feet away, within arm's reach. A perfect reminder that this lust isn't a product of my imagination. Now is not the time to chicken out. His broad shoulders are an invitation. I want this man more than I've ever wanted anyone, and I want him to punch my V-card ASAP. My pulse races as I fight to catch my breath, battling my inner urge to bone him in the middle of the busy street. How could people appear so unconcerned by Mr. Rupert Smith's presence? Granted—as he said himself—he's not the biggest star, but he's drop-dead gorgeous.

Spying on him. Salivating at the view. Lusting over him. His warm almond skin. His citrusy perfume. His assertive demeanor. My pseudo-poetic BS registers; what is this guy doing to me? Well, at that very moment, he's getting me hard without even trying. Fucking teenage hormones will embarrass me if I don't calm the fuck down quickly.

Breathe, Elliot, and pace yourself or all you're gonna achieve is blowing this instead of him.

Meanwhile, my feet have a mind of their own. Nervously twisting a lock of hair that escaped from the side of my cap, I heave a heavy sigh and nonchalantly stroll towards the spot where my favorite redhead sits.

“Hey, Rupert.” I stand in front of him. He glances up, his cheeks reddening. “So, you made it!”

Taken aback, he freezes for a split second, then coughs. “Hi, there. I didn't exp—” He pauses mid-sentence, biting the corner of his lower lip. “I'm actually waiting for someone, so...” His long fingers run through his super short hair as he hides behind his Ray-Ban sunglasses, staring with his mouth parted. Mine are stuck in the collar of my T-shirt. It's cute how he's politely trying to get rid of me.



Unabashed, I slide the closest wicker chair for effect and position it across from him, facing the inside of the café. The second my butt hits the seat I lift my face to make sure that the man I'm obsessed with stays silent for a moment.

"I'm not kidding, Elliot. I'm expecting someone, so I'll see you later at your parents', okay?" I hate the way he says parents, stressing the fact that he's been repeating over and over: I'm a kid, and what he's doing here doesn't concern me. And in the blink of an eye, a crease appears between his eyebrows, deepening as he removes his sunglasses and puts them on the table. I'm guessing that he just registered my earlier greeting. "What do you mean I made it?" Same tone he used seconds ago. Man, this is gonna be fun! "How'd you know I'd be here? What the fuck's going on?" A mix of irritation and confusion dances in the depths of his green pools.

"I figured you out is what's going on."

"What are you getting at?" His gaze hardens, then roams his surroundings, certainly praying that the person he was hoping to hook up with hasn't shown up at this point. If he only knew... That's why I let his snappiness slide. It's a given that he isn't willing to be caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Come on, don't play games with me." I rest my hands on the table to resist the urge to touch him. "I'm here, aren't I? Same reason as you..." I wink. "A guy gave you a napkin with digits on it. A guy you texted after the party yesterday. A guy you are meeting for s.e.x." I mouth the last word to prevent unwanted attention. "Well, that guy is me ." The O of his delectable mouth widens. " You texted me , Rupert, not Matthieu, the blond waiter. I convinced him to give you a number if you came back to him... which you did. He's straight, by the way..."

His silence tells me he's mentally replaying our texts that derailed to sexting, quickly confirming the nature of this meetup. He heaves out a pained groan. "Is that some kind of a joke?" His strangled and muttered voice pains me. "Because I?—"

I'm about to cut him off when an overwhelmed waiter stands before us, so I order a beer, too. I may have tricked the guitar hero, but I don't plan to ridicule him.

Covering his hand with mine, I tighten my grip so he doesn't bolt, then shoot him a heated glance. "I felt our chemistry, Rupert, but—" can't confess that I'm obsessed, so I opt for another route "—I had to make sure I was your type... You can't deny that Matthieu and I look kinda alike. Fair hair, athletic, so..." I shrug, trailing off. My gaze flits to our joined hands. He looks numb, but what matters is that he hasn't run for the hills... Interesting. I clear my throat. "I've known him for years. He played along, believing this was a prank, which I swear it isn't. I had to find a way to see you... alone." My eyes are downcast, giving him time to process what I'm saying.

I regretfully end our connection, just in case the waiter delivers the beer sooner rather than later. I quiver; Rupert's proximity makes the tiny hairs on the nape of my neck stand on end.

Teasing, I suggest a toast when my drink arrives. The heat in his cheeks is unmistakable as he hisses his disagreement. "Oh, for fuck's sake, what's gotten into you? You got me. Happy now?" He huffs an exasperated grunt. "Look, I'm gonna play nice and not punch you, even though you deserve it. So, I'm gonna go pay for the beers and wash my hands of this ridiculous idea before hitting the road. When I exit the café, I expect you to be gone. I'm fucking pissed at you right now! Whatever you concocted inside that twisted little head of yours is not happening."

With that, he gulps what's left of his beer and ditches me like I did him at the party. If he thinks he has the upper hand, he's sorely mistaken.

Collecting his forgotten sunglasses as well as mine, I stow them and my baseball hat in my backpack. Chugging the rest of my drink in record time to give him a head start, I then wait in front of the men's bathroom since he's nowhere to be found. Taking my chances, I catch sight of the turning knob, and as soon as the door cracks

open, I push in forcefully. The breath I've been holding whooshes out of my lungs as I grab his forearm and swing him around in a second flat. His back is now flush with the closed bathroom door.

Despite his height, he doesn't resist. I guess the combined effect of surprise and countless hours at the gym will do that. A sly grin tugs at my lips. Without a word, I lean forward, his scent invading my senses, and snatch his wrists, pinning them in place so he won't budge. Our eyes are locked, and the silence is thick with tension, pent-up frustration, and anticipation. His pupils are dilated, his eyes a darker shade of green.

"I want you." My throat itches at the admission as I rein in my eagerness, ignoring my throbbing semi and hammering heart.

Puzzled, he blinks, uselessly writhing under my ironclad grip, visibly not computing what's about to unfold. I don't miss his lust-filled eyes. So, I lean towards him and pause when my face is inches from his. His breath comes out in short pants, caressing my skin and sending a wave of warmth through my needy body. Worried of his next action, I go for gentleness, but clearly my intentions are anything but.

Ever so slowly, my lips graze his tentatively, then brand them. At long last. I whimper as we close our eyes and allow the sensation to sink in.

Unfortunately, time isn't on my side, so I aim to seal the deal when his lips part; he opened to grant access, right? My tongue invades his mouth. He doesn't protest, releasing a soft exhale instead, as if adjusting to the idea. Our tongues move in synch as his body grinds against mine while I fasten my hold around his wrists. My body goes lax. Dazed, we are one.

His taste is intoxicating. Beer. Lip Balm. Hope.

Please don't let me cream my shorts!

My skin's ablaze. More, more, more... And just like that, my horny brain takes the lead. Growling, I drop his wrists and fist his fitted polo, yanking him closer to me. I can't bear the distance.

Released from his trance, he makes a throaty noise and opens his eyes. Within seconds, he presses his palms against my chest and pushes me away.

I shoot him a murderous glance. This encounter set my hormones on fire, igniting my filthiest desires.

"What the fuck am I doing?" Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he takes a step to the right, distancing himself further from temptation. I smirk at him as he grimaces, his chest heaving. Does he realize that the fire he sparked within me isn't about to be extinguished? "I... I shouldn't have... done that," he insists, his face flushed. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" I ask, perplexed, moving towards him.

He retreats closer to the wall and extends his hand in front of him. "Don't!"

I halt, my right side to the bathroom door now. "Fine, but I'm not sorry. This was an appetizer. You owe me one, remember?"

He shakes his head vehemently. "Stop it, Elliot!" he hisses between gritted teeth. "You caught me off guard and I... This can't be... It was a mistake. I'm?—"

With one hand in my pocket to readjust myself, I counter, "You know as well as I do that it wasn't. You wanted this as much as I did."

“It was a mistake,” he repeats without denying his desire. “You’re a kid , Elliot. I’m not a predator.” Funny that he doesn’t claim that, on top of that, he has a girlfriend.

“No, you’re not... no more than I am a kid. I’ll be eighteen in six months. I’ll break it down for you: You have my full consent, if that wasn’t obvious enough already.”

“What the hell don’t you get? No, Elliot,” he snaps before lowering his icy voice to keep this between us. “ I’ll break it down for you : No means no. Are you out of your fucking mind? I’m not after your consent, moron. You’re Tim’s little brother... You’re... you’re...” He makes a big production with his arms and stutters, “You’re not legal! Ohhh, fuck, what have I done?” His eyes are as big as saucers, fixated on me while he rubs his buzz cut. I decipher anger, disappointment, and despair. “You’re a kid. Don’t take it lightly, Elliot. No, just no. Period!” He’s a babbling mess. Boy, does he look pissed! I can’t help but grin, though. He did return the kiss and didn’t say that he’s not into me. That’s a start, right? “You don’t have my consent. Got it? And your brother would kill me if he ever found out.” Is that what he’s afraid of? That he’d be outed? That Tim would find out? That it’d ruin their precious friendship?

The back of my neck stiffens while the front heats and, no doubt, is covered in patches of redness that betray my annoyance.

A sigh escapes his swollen lips. “Listen, this—” he points at us alternatively “—never happened. So... all I can offer you is friendship. Take it or leave it.”

I’ll be legal in a few months. He’s coming back next summer. We’ll be living in the same country soon. I extend my hand for him to shake like he did on the first day. Why not seal a temporary deal?

“Take it.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 3:06 am*

### CHAPTER 6

#### SPEAK LOW

Rupert

“Damn, I needed this...” I murmur to myself. I’d missed Manhattan’s fast pace. Nashville’s fun, but being surrounded by my fellow band members can be exhausting at times. They’re all so hyper, focused, and... straight.

Coming back from France, I was none of those things.

Being gay was never a choice, and my wonderful mother accepted that as soon as I had the courage to come out to her at fourteen. But here I am, over ten years later, struggling to fully open up to some of my closest friends and reveal the real me, or all of me that I shouldn’t aim to hide. The engagement party weekend didn’t come at the ideal time during my hectic summer schedule, but sharing the moment with Tim took priority. Seeing him again was awesome, only the trip unexpectedly stirred conflicting emotions that had nothing to do with nostalgia from being back at his house.

To get my life back in order and clear my head, I had to revisit the basics.

Thank goodness, I attended a couple of Nathan Price’s seminars on the art of breathing a few years ago. I’m well-aware that some people consider meditation and breathing techniques to be bullshit, but they changed my life!

I don't practice as often as I probably should. Mastering the art requires determination and consistency. Trust me, the encounter with Elliot, which should have been a non-event, put this ritual back on the table after I fled. I literally fled the awkward temptation. It took a few more days to forgive myself for caving to his... assault because, truth be told, the selfish, batshit crazy asshole is charming. And I hate him for it, almost as much as I hate myself for having these thoughts. For sure, I hadn't seen this one coming!

Hence, my phone is on airplane mode, my bedroom door is closed, and the blinds are half-down to block the brutal September sun; I'll enjoy this beautiful day later. The spot by the window suits me as I, too, slowly drift into airplane mode.

Quiet. Collected. Peaceful.

Sitting on a cushion that elevates my hips and keeps my back straight and comfortable, I cross my legs and rest my hands on my knees. Eyes screwed shut, I take a moment to feel where my body meets the cushion and floor. Deep breaths through my nose make my belly expand, and I hold them before releasing the air through my mouth, focusing on the sensation when it enters and leaves my body. My mind is centered on the importance of each breath, and when it wanders, I gently redirect it to my breathing. I keep going for several minutes longer, gradually acknowledging the sounds and sensations around me. Refreshed, I slowly open my eyes, taking a moment to register that I found my balance and can move on with the day.

With Sally running errands all morning, it turned out to be somewhat uneventful. I worked on a couple of songs until Tim texted me to inform me that I'll be his best man. (Shocker!) The rapid exchange mentioned that I'll be receiving a formal wedding invitation by snail mail in a few days... and he threatened to kick the living daylight out of me if I bailed on him since he chose his wedding date around my obligations. I guess I'll be back at the Lefevre's after all.

Next July.

\*\*\*

“Of course, you should text him.” My shoulder bumps Sally’s playfully. By now, she knows that I don’t speak in riddles. Talking about Nathan Price puts color in her cheeks. It’s adorable. “I’m shocked that you haven’t already. Weren’t you the one to insist that there’s more to him than his looks... which, by the way, is exactly what I said about you when we met in London years ago!”

Eyes trained on the task at hand, I tighten my hold on one of my beloved Japanese knives and slice the beet, cucumber, and mushrooms. Gathering the ingredients from the wooden cutting board, I toss them with everything else to finish up our lunch salad, then add various herbs to enhance the flavor.

I proudly acquired this Nakiri as my twenty-second birthday present on my first visit to Masamoto Sohonten when a bunch of models from my agency were invited to attend Tokyo Fashion Week. Talk about a change of scenery and lifestyle compared to my pitiful British childhood!

Glancing at my beautiful Canadian roommate, I swiftly rinse my beloved Nakiri and step aside so that she can rinse the last ripe tomato. She juts her chin towards the cutting board. She heaves a contented sigh. What’s going on in that troubled mind of hers? Is she considering giving Nathan—my meditation guru, as Sally referred to him—a chance to breach her walls?

I resume my position, enjoying the knife’s precision. Slicing, dicing, and mincing has always been my job. “You’re staring,” I falsely complain.

Two friends, both carrying enough baggage to recognize the hurt in each other’s eyes the moment that they bumped into each other outside of the Natural History Museum



in South Kensington. In the blink of an eye, we were inseparable—in a platonic way—and became each other's anchor. Our dating charade started soon after. She swore to shield my sexual orientation from the public eye while I helped her to heal from previous toxic relationships. But now, things are rapidly evolving with Nathan. From the way she's been talking about him, I can tell that she's been smitten for weeks. Good for her! I may not know Nathan very well, but from my experience, he is a decent and respectful guy.

Maybe it's time to ? —

I stop short, wondering if I should go there and contemplate the thought of?—

Nope. Nope. Nope.

I should make sure she's comfortable with the idea first. Swallowing my sudden unease, I ponder the question that's bouncing inside my equally messed-up head: Am I okay with ending our arrangement?

“Yup!” A hint of amusement touches her well-defined lips. “You know how I get when your fingers are at work.” Her using innuendos is such a rare occurrence that I can't help but tease her. I always give her my full attention when we broach a potentially sensitive subject, so first, I put the Nakiri away, add some red pepper to the giant bowl, and plate the Indian-spiced chicken breasts. We discuss how she recently became more relaxed when talking about sex, although her libido's been frozen for a while, and I'm the only one privy to that story. I hint that Nathan Price might have a certain influence on its revival. Soon enough, I engulf her in a warm hug; she mostly sets the pace as far as PDA is concerned, and it's generally reserved for when we have an audience. She's such a brave fighter! I'm so proud of her. I'm so ashamed of myself. I'm so conflicted about our relationship.

I cough slightly. “It's not like you need my permission to give him a try.”

She worries her lower lip with her front teeth and eventually admits, “I kind of feel like I do.” Fuck! What have I done? To stay closeted, I keep her locked in some kind of twisted scenario and convinced myself it was beneficial for her. The very sharable and very straight Nathan might be the key to her freedom, but she has to discover that for herself. Yes, I’m ashamed of my selfish self. This talk is much more serious than anticipated. “I know we’re not a couple and all, but I love you nonetheless.... And we have this... agreement.”

“I’m well-aware of that, but don’t stay stuck in this agreement on my account.” I speak my mind. “Sometimes, I feel like I’ve trapped you in something that’s stopping you from moving on with your life.” I tilt my head and peck her cheek. “Sally, I’m not blind. I saw the sparks between you guys. You’re ready to move on, and if you need my blessing, you have it. I mean, I’m thankful for our agreement while it lasted, but looking back, it was utterly selfish of me; I apologize for that. Keeping fans and journalists at bay has been great. It’s nobody’s business that I enjoy sucking cock more than you do.” The second the words leave my mouth, I purse my lips, my eyes widening. “I’m sorry, I got carried away at the thought of blowing Price, which isn’t in the cards for me.”

The corner of my mouth quirks up because blowing will definitely happen tonight. I got a PM on one of my hookup apps during my meditation session. Utterly relaxed, I didn’t even pay attention that my phone had remained on airplane mode, so it took hours before I confirmed that we were on for tonight. At least, he sounds willing and eager. So, there’s that.

As for Sally, she feels the need to reassure me. “It’s fine, Rupert. We’re way past that, aren’t we? It’s not your fault sex has been off the table for me for years. You didn’t trap me. Our agreement was a mutual win-win situation. If anything, you helped me recover from the...” She trails off, and I redirect the conversation towards Price, the possibility of trusting him, building her confidence, and receiving countless earth-shattering orgasms in return.

“I should take my own advice...” I blurt aloud. Thoughtful, I shake my head. “Nah, I have plenty of orgasms. Thank heavens, willing candidates are queuing up. Making sure they don’t run in country music circles is the trick! Anyway, enough about me...” Moments later, my gaze zooms in on her, and I choose my words carefully to talk some sense into her. “I love you with all my heart, but we belong together as friends; Nathan should know that. I’ll always be there for you, but we can’t continue this charade. You are ready to move on, and I should have seen it earlier. This isn’t healthy for either of us anymore.” My brow spikes up.

She frowns. “What do we do now?”

Reading the rising panic in her expressive blue eyes, I shoot her a reassuring smile and kiss her forehead before suggesting in a quizzical tone. “Take chances?”

With that, she nods in approval, then asks me to accompany her to Nathan’s art show tonight. I point out that I assumed she’d go on her own, even though he also invited me, but she feels more comfortable with me by her side.

She kisses my cheek and walks to the dining room to set the table where we eat lunch moments later while listening to some Brit pop. Thankfully, she recognized early on that I can tolerate nearly anything but The Beatles. I share details of my trip to France, saving Elliot’s reunion for the end when I’m saved by the bell in more ways than one since I do not fancy the bitter beverage she makes and dares to call coffee.

“Hello?” I inquire, already leaving the table when I realize that I didn’t check the caller ID for once.

“ Bonjour, mon ami .”

For a second, I mistake the masculine voice for Tim’s. I halt in the middle of the hallway. It’s warmer. It’s deeper. It’s Elliot!

My heart skips a beat. Catching my breath, I breathe in and out, reaping the benefits of this morning's session. Serene, I quickly recover my sanity, head towards my room, and close the door behind me. As expected, I start pacing. "Bonjour, Elliot." I switch to English to avoid making a fool of myself, contemplating asking if it isn't past his bedtime, but why be snappy with a friend, right? Still, given how we parted ways, I wouldn't have contacted him, friendship or not.

As if reading my mind about making small talk, he cuts to the chase. "I have your sunglasses. You forgot them at the café that day." That day... when I lowered my guard down and overstepped boundaries. My throat constricts. "You there?"

Am I imagining the amusement in his tone?

"Yeah, sorry, kiddo —" I say, reminding us both that he's Tim's much younger brother. Off-limits. "It's okay, I have extras." Blatant lie. Truth be told, I do need a new pair to deal with this kid, for sure. Nothing to do with sunglasses, though. "I'll get them back next year."

It's about time I obtained the upper hand in this friendship. The tone of his clipped reply betrays that calling him that struck a nerve, especially when he hangs up on me after muttering an angry,

"Fine!"

### CHAPTER 7

#### MORE THAN THIS

Elliot

My body buzzes with excitement as we exit the main building. Mrs. Elders—the foreign student coordinator—just congratulated me on acing the math and English tests that’ll be added to my transfer file. One more milestone. Pride lights up my face as I sprint down the stairs.

The Austin campus is busy, and the energy is palpable. The Texas spring sun beats down on us. This destination fits my dreams and my two-week vacation, but it makes it difficult for me to find time to study for my baccalauréat and “high bac.” Passing these exams will mark the end of high school, confirm my aptitude to study in English—if doubts lingered—and be the turning point of my new life.

My mom reaches my side shortly after. “And that field, ho—” Yup, she was so about to call me ‘honey’ in a public place. Thankfully, she stopped before I even glanced over at her. “Totally legit!” Mom practically shouts next to me, her arms flying all over the place and eyes widening with enthusiasm. A group of students strolling in the opposite direction swivel their heads to look at her with an amused grin. She’s so funny when she talks like this.

“Yeah, it’s wicked,” I confirm, doing my best to keep my cool. Inside, I’m practically jumping up and down. “And Coach Stevens seems really solid. I can see myself studying... and playing here, obviously.”

The meeting with Coach Stevens went better than I could've hoped. I was worried that living in France wouldn't play in my favor because American Football isn't as widespread there as it is in the US. It's becoming more popular, and my team won plenty of local and regional competitions. Handing Coach Stevens a letter of recommendation from Coach Cassel, who vouched for me, made my heart thump faster. He was straightforward about his expectations, but he encouraged my potential role on the team based on my current coach's feedback. Then we discussed a potential scholarship.

Things are looking bright, so my nerves subside.

Following my mom's lead on campus, I glance at her. She's beaming, which I'm grateful for. This place is everything I hoped it would be and more, but I'm well-aware my 49ers-fan of a mom would have loved for me to attend a California college. "I think so, too. The classes we looked at are right up your alley, and Coach Stevens seems very dedicated to his players. Win-win situation, right?"

"Indeed! I could barely keep my face straight when he revealed that he was Coach Cassel's rival years ago... Small world! And these facilities, they're top-notch!"

And then, there's the Texas Longhorns and the Austin Troopers that perform their magic at the nearby Darrell K Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium... The fact that I might also play games in the literal backyard of my two favorite teams is a huge bonus. And let's not forget I'll develop skills that might attract the attention of NFL scouts and recruiters. My ultimate goal. I'm so excited, I'm riding my flow already; everything is so much brighter and real today!

We walk through the quad, passing various groups of students laughing and chatting. I can't wait to graduate from high school and hopefully join this vibrant community. It'll be odd to be away from my friends. Most of them are staying in France, but some will study abroad. None are as passionate about and dedicated to football as I am,

though. I applied to other colleges, but I already know what I want.

And I always get what I want ... eventually. Granted, Rupert Smith remains a challenge, and his silence doesn't sit well with me.

Maybe I should get over last September's exchange and contact him?

I store that thought for later as we head toward the administrative building for our meeting with the dean. Gnawing at my lower lip, I register that my stomach's tied in knots again, and Rupert can't be completely to blame.

"Elliot, there's no need to be nervous," Mom reassures me in her soft voice, witnessing my unease.

I bet she longs to hug me, but knows better. It's great that she respects my boundaries, which kinda makes me wonder why I haven't come out to her yet. I guess my limited experience with men stops me from embracing my orientation to the fullest, although I doubt that my closest friends ever browsed gay apps searching for a willing mouth to suck their dick.

I should probably get back on track and focus on today's activity since no one's volunteering anyway. "Dean Witter requires this meeting for each foreign student. It's just to get to know you a bit better, I think."

I'm surprised that Mom hasn't called my unwavering interest for this particular college kismet. Between the perfect-for-me finance undergrad program and the coaches being long-time acquaintances, it's too good to be true.

Trying to sound casual, I mindlessly crack each of my fingers with my thumb. The noise bothers me, but I can't help it. "I just don't want to sound too desperate, you know? The more we walk around campus, the more I'm convinced this is the right fit

for me.” And the fact that Austin is one of the most inclusive cities in the US doesn’t hurt either, in case I step out of the closet... some day!

She puts a hand on my shoulder for a short moment before taking it away again. “Of course, Elliot. You’ve worked hard for this, and it shows. This is a courtesy visit of sorts.”

We walk into the cool, air-conditioned building, and after a short wait, we’re ushered into the dean’s office. She stands up from behind her mahogany desk and rounds it to offer a firm handshake.

“Nice to meet you, Elliot. I’ve heard so much about you!” Her face lights up with a gentle expression. “Looks like you made quite an impression on Mrs. Elders and Coach Stevens.”

My heart swells with pride despite the nagging feeling of embarrassment.

Why was I expecting a man?

Old habits die hard. I definitely didn’t envision someone like her. Her white dress compliments her plump figure. (Sorry, folks, I may be gay, but I don’t know the first thing about fashion!). Her shoulder-length auburn hair has a thick white streak on top, reminding me of Bonnie Raitt, whom I’ve heard of, thanks to Google. Last year, I researched famous country artists so that I wouldn’t be clueless if the subject came up with Rupert.

I berate myself assuming what the dean would be like. I mean, look at me! I don’t look like anyone in my family. For ages, I’ve been haunted by the feeling that I don’t belong.

“Nice to meet you, Dean Witter.” I shake her hand firmly. “I’m really impressed with



the academic and the football program here.”

The conversation flows effortlessly, and Mom scarcely makes her presence known until we discuss the scholarship.

Soon enough, the meeting is over and the weight on my shoulders lifted. On the drive back to the hotel, Mom suggests dinner at a steak house, but I’m beat, so I decline.

Especially because I have something else in mind. I haven’t dug into the gay scene in Austin and I’m too young anyway. Gay porn is out of the question, even though I’m not sharing a room with Mom. So, after spending an hour at the expansive hotel gym while she was getting ready, I order room service. With her gone, I shower and jerk off. (What did you expect?)

My previous tensions have vanished by the time that I deposit the tray of food on the small, modern glass desk. It doesn’t take long for me to wolf down the decent cheeseburger and sweet potato fries, but I have to force myself to eat the tasteless side salad topped with balsamic vinaigrette because, as my mother says, “Greens are good for you, and ketchup isn’t a veggie.”

The tapping of my bare foot on the carpet urges me to snatch my phone from the nearby nightstand that matches the desk. Calling isn’t an option this time, so I take a safer route. My snark only succeeded in scaring him and, in turn, infuriating me last time we talked. So, I delete the words and try again.

Elliot

Hey. It’s been a while. What are you up to?

Please, tell me you’re not mad at me.

After the phone call debacle, I forced myself to stop stalking him on social media, so I have no idea where he could be. It doesn't really matter. I gulp some of my Dr. Pepper, my one and only guilty pleasure. (Masturbating and obsessing over Rupert carry zero guilt, thank you very much!)

My pulse drums when three little dots flash on my screen.

Already?

Rupert

Bonjour Elliot.

Me, mad? I was starting to think YOU were actually mad at me. We're good?

Elliot

Yes, we R.

I'm sorry for the way I acted with you. As of now, I promise I'll behave ) but thanks.

Rupert

February 29! Wow, you really are a rare brand.

It's unnerving how much I like the guy as a person. Well, the fact that he's hot as fuck doesn't hurt either. He doesn't even call me out on my bullshit.

Elliot

You're telling me!

Rupert

18 now, are you?

I won't allow myself to read between the lines or ruin what we've established tonight by teasing him. Maybe he's contemplating his options. Maybe he's simply making small talk. Maybe he's being nice to his best friend's pushy little brother. Regardless, I'm not ready to cut this short, so I put my cards on the table.

Elliot

Indeed, which isn't the legal drinking age here, so I guess my initial offer of meeting up for drinks wouldn't have worked anyway. Too bad.

And just like that, we fall into a series of text messages about this and that. His music influences. My college dreams. Our next encounter. It'll probably have to wait a few more months. A normal conversation between friends unfolds. I'm amazed that he's actually a good listener. He's pretty open as well.

The one subject we don't broach is his sexual orientation—or mine, for that matter. We know where we stand, even if we are both closeted. From what he says, I get that he now lives on his own, so his fake girlfriend—who apparently existed since Tim met her—is out of the picture and he's not attached to anyone else. The jealous part of my heart is soothed.

I haven't felt this at ease with anyone in like... forever. I don't even have to censure myself or be my usual boisterous self. Texting Rupert, I can just...

Be myself.

### CHAPTER 8

#### HE TOUCHED ME

Rupert

The soft hum of the elegant crowd fills the early July air. The massive reception is going strong at the Lefevre estate. The sun begins its descent over the vineyard. As always, the scenery is breathtaking, the late afternoon casting a golden glow over the event.

I'm on my own, people-watching at the edge of the sprawling lawn. I'm utterly overwhelmed by the sheer number of people, amongst which are two Brits and an American, who's also the hostess.

As for the two Brits, that'd be my mom and me. When I eventually informed Tim that Sally moved out, he suggested that Mom tag along. Last time he'd seen her, she was dirt-poor. Thankfully, my so-called stardom enhanced her life, but she adamantly refuses to relocate closer to me, claiming that I'm always traveling anyway, so we compromised and I financed the makeover of my childhood home.

Instinctively, I look for her in the crowd and find her chatting animatedly with a group of the Lefevre's friends. Soon after, she looks up, meets my eyes, and tips her champagne flute my way. Empty-handed, I grin at her; I stopped drinking about an hour ago, too aware of the upcoming performance that Tim and his wife requested from me.

I've been practicing my breathing instead. I'm used to performing in front of large crowds, and I love it, just ask my friend, Dante Reyes. It was so much fun to do a duet with him at the Seaside Music Festival in Oregon, even if I'm prone to stage fright. I wish it would recede with habit or fame, but it hasn't, and Sally—my biggest supporter—gone to lead the life she deserves with Nathan also changes my usual dynamic. I shouldn't complain too much since they'll make the trip to the music festival in Colorado in a couple of weeks; I love seeing her at peace and in love with a good guy.

"Still shy, my boy?" Mom's voice startles me from my reverie. Her British accent is crisp and clear.

"You know me! Also, trying to get in the right mindset for the gig." It's not even a total lie. "Victoria said I should head towards the makeshift stage as soon as the DJ plays 'One.'" How fitting!

"What about you, Mom? Are you okay, surrounded with all these French natives?"

"Oh, darling, I'm wonderful! Most of them speak English... or at least try to. Everybody's so nice. It's been ages since I've seen Timothée. He's grown into such a fine man. He and Claire make a beautiful couple, don't they?"

I agree, scanning the dancing crowd to find them. Looking at the happy couple, Mom and I discuss the newlyweds, the endless mass that she truly enjoyed, and my short stay in my hometown when the festivities are over. Soon enough, she leaves to mingle with other guests.

Lip syncing to Modern Love , I spy him. Finally! Elliot... also, Tim's younger brother, I remind myself. I got caught up in the moment one too many times and won't let it happen again.

The handsome devil looks up and catches my eye, silently acknowledging me.

I get it, nobody actually knows we're friends.

I ignore how his face lights up or how my stupid pulse accelerates. With that, the large crowd I don't particularly care for seems to vanish as his eyes lock on mine. A genuine smile slowly tugs at my lips.

He pops some finger food into his mouth and wipes his hand on a tiny napkin, never averting his eyes, then weaves through the throng of people in my direction. "Salut, mon ami."

"Salut." I bet I'm butchering the second syllable because the letter "u" always gives me trouble, but who cares? At least, I know better than to pronounce the "t."

We both sigh in sync, chuckling at that.

Things have been more than civil between us for the last few months. Since he reached out again, we've primarily texted to keep in touch. Seeing him after a year makes me oddly happy, especially now that we are able to reconnect in person. The previous tension has evolved, and I'm glad to register that, thanks to the distance and our regular texting, I am more at ease around him.

I switch back to English. "How's it going?"

"Great, great. It's quite a party, huh?"

During mass, I overheard that three hundred guests were expected; I'm not sure how many are here now, but way too many for a formal seated dinner. They opted for a high-quality, organic buffet that we eat on high-tables scattered around the beautifully decorated premises.

“Indeed. Your brother looks like he’s walking on cloud nine.”

“Yeah, I can see it... in a stressed-out kinda way, but that’s understandable. After he proposed last year, they didn’t have much time to pull this off.” He extends his arm and waves his hand in a circular motion, his fingers brushing my forearm. I stiffen, and thankfully, he doesn’t pay attention to it. “They’re disgustingly in love, those two!”

I agree, then admit, “I was beginning to think you were intentionally steering clear of me.” I laugh as casually as possible to pretend I’m on top of my game. You do know that my heart lurched because you barely acknowledged me when we stood side by side as best men during the Mairie ceremony. I get that we both had a mission to fulfill... but you stubbornly stayed with your family. Why?

But I don’t say that. I keep my frustration to myself.

“Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to be rude. Family duty...” He shrugs dismissively. “I guess your mom’s presence kinda threw me off. I wasn’t expecting to see her. Call it cold feet at meeting a parent.” There’s a hint of something in his voice that contradicts his laidback attitude; I can’t quite put my finger on it.

Then, he breaks eye-contact to stare at his feet and mumbles, “My dad introduced us. It was awkward...” He trails off, and I don’t press for details. He doesn’t sound eager to elaborate either, his bold personality nowhere in sight for a split second. He recovers quickly. His gaze switches back to intense. “Before you get on that stage, why don’t I treat you to a drink for liquid courage?” He pauses and adds, “...since I’m allowed to drink here and I made sure some of the staff from last year wouldn’t be around.”

“Did you now?” His grateful expression pleases my ego. “Thanks for taking care of my public image. I appreciate your concern, I really do.” His radiant expression is

captivating, even though I doubt he's aware of it. "I could use some sparkling water. Then, I'll be happy to have a beer after my gig."

"Oh, is that a date?" A smirk slips through his luscious lips. My eyes are as big as saucers, and he lifts his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'm kidding, man. I'm kidding!"

I need a second to regain my composure. This kid will be the death of me. So, I decide to switch topics. "By the way, last time I talked to Tim, he was raving about your football skills that landed you a full scholarship."

"You talked about me with Tim?" Reaching for mini veggie skewers from a passing tray, he inhales three at a time.

I look away in order to do anything but stare at his mouth and throat as he swallows his food. What's wrong with me? "Of course! We discuss plenty of topics, including updates on the Lefevre tribe."

"Did you tell him we've been... texting?"

I concentrate on him again. My fingers twitch. I wish I was holding a glass to occupy my hands instead of stashing them in my pants pockets. "I certainly did not. It's none of his business." He raises an eyebrow but doesn't interrupt me. "As for you, why didn't you mention the scholarship to begin with?" He worries his bottom lip, speechless—a first! "It's amazing, Elliot. You must be so proud."

"Well, I worked my ass off for it, so I'm mostly thankful that they acknowledge dedication, hard work, and talent when they see it."

"Modest, as always," I mock him gently.



“Stating facts is all.” His gaze dares me to disagree. I don’t.

“Which position will you be playing when you get to Austin?”

“Wow, so you know about Austin, too! My brother did clue you in, didn’t he?” Expectant, I raise an eyebrow. “Wiiide receiver.” Stretching the word, he winks, his brown gaze full of mischief.

Old habits die hard...

I shake my head to indicate that no matter our shared secret sexual orientation—or maybe because of it—he shouldn’t go there. He did mention once in passing that nobody is privy to his. I remember how heavy a burden that is, although I remain mostly closeted. That said, I strongly believe we should maintain the boundaries I set for our unlikely friendship after he went too far. The troublemaker can’t help but waggle his ginger eyebrows, his eyes burning into mine. “Football innuendo? Really? Don’t even go there, Elliot.” My tone is harsher than intended, but I’m well-aware of his double entendre by now. “If you’re as serious about football as you claim to be and want to go pro, this is no joke.”

“Chillax, Brit! I’m teasing. Yes, I’ve told you countless times, the NFL is my goal, and when I set my mind to something, I don’t derail. I like to keep things light, but that doesn’t imply I’m careless. As for receiving, well, it depends on the circumstances and the guy, I guess. So far, my limited experience hasn’t enabled me to form a proper opinion. Strike that... Actually, when given the opportunity, I think I’d fancy topping over bottoming.”

“You’re an incorrigible little brat, Elliot Lefevre.”

“And that’s what you love about me, isn’t it? Maybe you should envision this friendship with a twist.” His large hand lands on my elbow. This simple gesture,

surely comparable to a nod, does all kinds of naughty things to my body. A mere touch, and I'm hot and bothered like a school girl fangirling over a movie star. It's the first touch since our kiss, though. "Friends with benefits would be fun, don't you think?"

Two parts of my mind duel. I can't deny that his sassy side amuses me, but my rational brain reminds me that I'm the adult. Before I can open my mouth to scold him, Tim catches us off-guard, bursting our cozy little bubble.

Tim's been playing the social butterfly throughout the day. His day, and I would be an asshole to mind. If I'm being honest, the fact that he hasn't been checking on me contributed to my relaxation. A pang of guilt settles in my stomach. From Elliot's sinful proposition that Tim stays oblivious to.

Well, I never told my best friend how close his brother and I have become; I barely hinted it to Sally, and I surely never confessed the forbidden kiss he stole from me... and that I reciprocated before getting a hold of myself. A shrink would have a field trip with that, I'm sure, but there's none in the vicinity, so...

My best friend hands me some sparkling water. The guy knows all of my idiosyncrasies; it's unnerving. "Here you are! Sorry I'm interrupting. Was this guy boring you with football stuff, like he usually does?" Elliot sticks his tongue out at this brother. The back of my neck itches. I gulp the water to regain my composure. "You ready for your big performance, country star?"

I take a deep breath. "As ready as I'll ever be. It's a bit nerve-wracking, to be honest." I glance at Elliot, who's suddenly become silent.

"You'll be amazing, just like you always are."

"Thanks for the support, Tim."

He clinks his wine against my half-full glass. I blank out for a bit before fathoming that Elliot split.

Dammit!

Prior to Tim's wedding party, my thoughts hadn't been sexual as far as Elliot was concerned. I mean, I'm no monk so, naturally, I'd noticed how hot he is. The permanent slight curl of his upper lip. His velvety freckled skin. His phenomenal ass.

Today, it dawns on me that this train of thought is impossible to fight. The sound of his mirth mixed with his inappropriate conversation was enough to make me rock-hard earlier.

My own contradictions return with a vengeance. Elliot is off-limits. I like him a tad too much. Can I indulge in his suggestion? His hungry gaze sure flatters my ego. I bet my eyes conveyed equal pent-up longing. We know each other's secret. We'll live in the same country, but far enough apart to avoid raising suspicion. Would it be so bad to cave? The semi that the dim light hopefully conceals is totally on board, but has yet to convince my other head.

I quiver when I eventually realize one unsettling thing: My friendship with Tim barely enters the equation while I ponder my options.

"... mom's going to cry, you know." Tim's voice wrenches me from my wrongful debate.

"Your mom?" I ask, confused.

"No, I said yours." He chuckles, his hand clasping my shoulder. He leads me to the small stage set up on the lawn. "Even as a teenager, I remember her tearing up when you performed."

“Yeah, she does... and she will.”

Moments later, Tim takes the microphone and announces me. The crowd quiets down, and I grab my guitar that’s waiting for me.

Heart hammering in my chest, I strum my guitar, incapable of looking away from Elliot.

His cocky attitude is oddly refreshing. So alien to my controlled, self-imposed persona that I built to protect myself. I love that he’s not apologetic about who he is—granted, he’s still partially hiding, in a closet that is. He admitted that I’m the only one who he feels comfortable taking his mask off with. Same for me, I’m truer with him than with anyone else.

But why?

### CHAPTER 9

#### IF U SEEK AMY

Elliot

His voice. Raw. Feral. Intense.

Goosebumps spread across my skin. Ablaze. Quivering. Awestruck.

Nothing could've prepared me for Rupert's live performance. Brilliant. Pure. Emotional.

I've heard him countless times on social media, but this doesn't compare, especially when his beautiful green eyes are on mine.

Holy shit! He's perfect.

Standing far enough from everyone to pretend that I'm not that into it, but at the perfect angle to enjoy both the view and the music, I chug the rock that's taken residence in my throat. I shift my weight from one foot to the other and drink him in, despite my blurry vision.

My eager dick gets the message. Convincing Rupert to agree to this friends with benefits deal suddenly takes the forefront, though it never really left. Actually, that's not true. Originally, I intended to find a quick, trustworthy, and dirty solution to my V-card. Don't ask me why I trusted my dream guy so much because I don't have an

answer to that. Maybe because of how my brother talked about him. Maybe because, even in pictures, his eyes convey something genuine. Maybe because giving him the benefit of the doubt suited my hormonal needs.

Who cares?

Clearing my parched mouth, I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. This silly uptight son of a Brit made me all verklempt.

I'm fucking crying! For real?

I've been so enthralled by Rupert's performance that I didn't even register my reaction to it.

I'm fucking crying over this.

Sighing, I comb my fingers through my hair that I have every intention of chopping before I'm go to Austin. Same with my virginity; being a virgin for my first year on campus is unthinkable.

Desire flares. I've never craved anyone as much as I crave Rupert Smith at this exact moment. The memory of us stripping each other's formal clothes threatens to tent my pants.

It contradicts the song that he told me he specifically wrote for the happy couple. A love song about their journey with details only a best friend would be privy to, so subtly hinted that I'm pretty sure I'm missing the point. I'm in a parallel universe anyway, hearing him in front of an audience while coveting him as if this song was ours.

Right now, Rupert Smith is triggering emotions that always have been foreign to me.

My confusion finds an outlet when my front teeth gnaw my lower lip, drawing blood.

My heart skips a beat. There's a moment of silence before the thunderous applause. I can't pretend anymore, so I flee to the house in search of peace and quiet. That's the best way to enjoy the music some more, replay it inside my head, and make it mine.

I sprint upstairs like a man possessed, taking the steps two at a time. It'll take more than that to be out of breath. What I desperately need, though, is some alone time to recover and be in the right headspace when I see him again. About to grip my door handle, my head swivels to the end of the hall.

With my nerve endings on high alert, I don't have much of a choice. A cold shower with a happy ending isn't an option; I won't risk missing Rupert in case he comes up here, which I'm hoping he will.

In less time that it takes to draw my next breath, I make a beeline for Romain's room where I unearth his stash in the back of the desk drawer where his laptop along with his stacks of books await. I smirk. My brother is so predictable!

Old habits die hard...

He probably knows I know his secret, but what're older brothers for? Considering the amount in the bag, I bet he won't even notice some is missing. I rarely indulge in this, but desperate times call for desperate measures. I'll punish my body with extra workouts when the object of my obsession is gone.

Back in my room, I deposit the blunt on the nightstand, fumble nervously with my shoelaces, and kick off my dress shoes. With their fall, a loud thump resonates on the hardwood floor. Oh, well! Unconcerned, I change into gym shorts and a fitted tank top. Only when I'm done, do I remember that Rupert and I agreed to a drink.

Fuck! The talented moron messed with my head big time, but I'm not going back down now. Since my intent is less than honorable with him, I'd rather keep our friendship to ourselves.

Skin itching, I grab the blunt, then open the window and sit on the windowsill. I take a long drag, reveling in the sensation, before exhaling slowly.

Much better...

Phone in hand, I type at record speed, telling Rupert how much I loved his live session and to grab a couple of beers and join me upstairs if he feels like it.

My heart somersaults as I hear a rap on the door.

It's about fucking time!

It hammers inside my chest when I hear his sexy, muffled, and hesitant timbre. "Elliot, you there?" It's cute he doesn't barge in like my siblings would.

"Come in!"

Rupert

AFTER CLOSING THE DOOR , I awkwardly slide my hand behind me and turn the key in the lock while ogling Elliot's filled-out frame. I can't look away.

He ditched his formal attire in favor of more revealing clothes, which I'm grateful for. My mouth waters at the sight of his muscular body. He's definitely all grown-up.

Relaxed by the window, he pulls on a joint, drawing attention to his sinful mouth. And just like that, watching his appetizing lips wrapped around it ignites something



in my lower belly. I couldn't allow myself to dwell on the fact I instinctively searched for him. Nor could I consider why I followed his lead. But at this very moment, there is not an ounce of doubt as to why I am here.

The smell of weed somehow enhances the silence between us. Our muted conversation doesn't require words. Lust. Secrets. Agreement.

Flashes of our brief and forbidden kiss resurface. My pulse trips over itself. His stare shows his true intent. Our labored breathing proves we are on the same page.

I make a mental checklist of the similarities between the man I'm facing and the boy he was only a year ago. He hasn't changed much... Nah, strike that, he's way different. His assertiveness is definitely not that of a spoiled brat, as he used to refer to himself—and I agreed. So much has changed between us since then, and yet, so little.

My entire being yearns to watch him follow his dreams and thrive, like I did. At this very moment, though, I ache to touch him. In turn, my length comes to life, thickening against my zipper. I breathe in and out.

Eventually, I find my voice again, but remain stuck by the door, holding the door knob. "Why did you leave?"

"I needed some time alone," he deadpans, his voice scratchy.

"So, you liked the show, huh?"

"Are you kidding me? You were nothing short of amazing. You managed to bring out emotions..." Elliot stammers, "...emotions that I've never felt before, and you know that country isn't my jam. But you made me want more." His sly grin doesn't go unnoticed as he stands up and takes another hit of the blunt before he puts it away on

a small plate. His eyes don't leave mine. "More of you, that is. Our attraction... It's inevitable. You feel that... pull as much as I do, don't you?" Lightly coughing, I smile approvingly. "It's okay. We're okay. I want you. That won't change anytime soon."

Given free rein, I close the distance between us, put the two beer bottles down on the windowsill, and unabashedly inhale his masculine fragrance. My sweaty palms cup his rosy cheeks, and I angle his face to my liking. My mouth crashes into his, getting reacquainted with the blissful sensation. I close my eyes, all of my focus on him.

I fought so damn hard against it for so long. I stood by what I told him: I'm no predator. But hard is the effect he has on my length while my clueless heart melts for the person he is, or should I say, the man he's becoming more and more every day.

Yes, we're years apart. Yes, he's my best friend's younger brother. Yes, I'm letting my cock overrule my rational brain.

Like a moth to a flame, I didn't stand a chance in the long run. My irrepressible need for him invades my heated body as our tongues stroke one another. Our hard-ons rub against each other. Our hands roam over each other's clothed bodies.

Swallowing his moans is such a turn-on, no matter how much the taste of dry blood from his wounded lower lip stuns me. A primal need to protect him arises, even though there was a time I made a point of protecting us from each other.

God, I should pace myself!

I break the kiss and pop my eyes open.

Groaning, Elliot does, too. Swiftly, he takes a drag of the joint again before plunging his tongue deeper into my mouth. My hand reaches for his soft hair while the other

settles on the back of his neck. I whimper when he slowly sighs, then breaks the welcome back kiss.

“I’ve missed you,” I pant.

He smirks at my admission. He once texted me those exact words, and I berated him for not staying true to our friendship. Today, I am the one implying more than I say.

“Fuck, you’re perfect.” His words are full of wonder, yet laced with pain. “You’re not gonna push me away again, are you?”

I shake my head, following him when he sits on his bed, lights up the blunt again, and passes it to me afterwards. Before I have a chance to inhale the smoke, I choke on it when he confesses, “I’m a virgin.”

My eyes widen. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Well, I haven’t told anyone, so I figured you, of all people, should know.”

“Riiight ... Listen, I’m flattered that you’re sharing this with me, but our kiss doesn’t change anything between us, Elliot: We’re not gonna sleep together.”

“Why not? You said you wouldn’t reject me!” he exclaims, snatching the joint from my hand.

“I’m not. There are more reasons than I can count for not sleeping with you. For starters, I?—”

Before I can reply, he cuts me off, explaining his college conundrum. “Look, I get that punching a V-card isn’t the greatest experience, but I’m a fast learner... and I have to start somewhere.” He shrugs. “I trust you, and only you, to make it good for

me... for us.” I’m amazed that he’s opening up so freely. That said, I can’t help but think that there are things he’s not saying. “I’ll... listen, comply, follow your... instructions. Whatever you want me to do, I’ll do it.”

“You’re sweet, but sex won’t be happening.”

His free hand covers my crotch, gently squeezing. “I make you hard. Why deny it?”

“I’m not denying anything. I’m just giving you information, Elliot. Find someone your own age. Learn what you like—or don’t.”

“Like I said, I want to experience it with you . Maybe I shouldn’t have told you that I thought I’d prefer topping. Is that why you’re not okay with helping me out?”

I guffaw. “You’re definitely single-minded.” He beams, visibly thinking that his stubbornness is a charming quality. Well, maybe that’s what makes him a talented football player. I’m way too aroused and stoned to think straight. I hear myself blurt out, “If you must know, I’m a bottom.”

“See, we’re a match made in heaven! Strict bottom?” At this point, I’m not shocked anymore, just speechless. “Don’t think too hard!” he jokes. “I’d just really love to try both, just to confirm where my preference lies, you know.”

Finally, I repeat, “Elliot, we are not sleeping together. Period.”

“But we did agree you owed me three favors.” The beers he requested are all but forgotten; his pigheadedness is both cute and unnerving. “I can start with a blowjob, right now, if that’s what you want.”

Shaking my head in disbelief, I realize that his hand hasn’t left my stiffy. I don’t object to its current location. Regardless of the weed effect—or thanks to it?—I

remain collected and counter, “We never agreed they would be sexual favors.”

“True, but what are friends with benefits for if no sex is involved?” He grunts.

“Listen, you have no fucking idea how much I want you.” Hitched breaths. Crude words. Burning skin.

Of course, he makes his Puss in Boots eyes, straddles me, and bats his long lashes.

“Please...”

### CHAPTER 10

#### HURRICANES

Elliot

Second quarter, we're down by two touchdowns, but we have the ball. Davis, our rowdy, super blond, and massive quarterback, calls out the play, "Z-Post, on three. Ready, break!"

"Head in the game, E," my awesome roommate and teammate, Chris, encourages me before jogging to the opposite side of the field. "We got this."

"Right." I tilt my head approvingly. Sweat trickles down my forehead. One more game to go before the end of the regular season.

Coach Stevens calls for a deep pass. Focused, I line up; this is my chance to make a difference. If we fuck this up, we won't make it to the conference championship, and where would that leave us? A televised humiliation, that's where. Against California at that... I wonder if Mom got cable to watch me play; she's passionate enough that she manages to watch reruns of my games on repeat. My shoulders stiffen as the pressure builds. What would a miss say about my performance and future on this team?

Once the ball's snapped, I sprint down the field, faking left, then cutting right past the cornerback.

I glance back just in time to see the ball spiraling towards me. “Got it!” I yell, stretching out, fingertips grazing the leather. Just as I’m about to reel it in, a defender appears out of nowhere, slams into me, and knocks it loose.

Fucker! I know he’s doing his job, but I seethe nonetheless.

“Damn it!” I curse under my breath as I get up. Chris runs over, panting.

“Seriously, Lefevre?” Davis shouts, irritation evident in his voice.

I don’t bother answering the asshole. Instead, I pick myself up, with Chris clapping me on the shoulder, whispering his unwavering support. “Shake it off, man.”

By the third quarter, our desperation is palpable. We’re in the red zone, fourth and goal. The coach decides to go for it, putting his faith in me once more. I won’t fail him this time.

“We need this. You ready?” Davis asks, eyes locked on mine.

“Yeah!” I respond, heart pounding.

The snap is clean. I execute my route flawlessly. I see the ball flying in my direction and jump, arms outstretched. I catch it, feel the impact as I hit the ground, but then... the ball is jostled loose. The refs rule it incomplete. Turnover on downs, at least the other team has abysmal field position.

“Damn, that was close.” Chris extends his hand, helping me up.

In the final minutes of the game, we have one last chance to redeem ourselves, but truth be told, we need a miracle. I manage to separate from my defender, running a perfect slant route.

I catch it in stride and sprint towards the end zone. With a lone defender standing between me and a touchdown, I push myself to the limit. About to cross the goal line, I'm tackled from behind, and the ball is jarred loose once again. Fumble. Their top cornerback. How did I miss him? The other team recovers the ball, sealing our fate.

The whistle blows, echoing through the stadium. Throat constricted, I stand on the field, staring at the scoreboard. 24-21. We lost. Again. And a home game at that.

This can't be happening. Not to our team. My team.

And here I thought they'd be thrilled to welcome a big shot like me. Talk about a rude awakening.

Damnit, I cannot be this fucking loser... Never have been... up until I started college, it seems. Fuck!

I came here to live my dream, not experience a nightmare.

My annoyance simmers under the surface as I drag myself off the field, helmet in hand, and join the line of players heading to the locker room, heads hung low.

My mind races with the could-haves and should-haves of the game. The roar of the crowd fading behind me. We gave it our all, but the team's not clicking.

Like most of the previous games, this was a disaster. The opposing team's defense was relentless, and our offensive line struggled to hold them back. Every time I managed to get open, the quarterback was already under pressure. From the murderous glares he's shooting my way, I guess he's blaming me.

I'm mostly mad at him because he's a bad person rather than a bad player. His brainless comments tanked the whole team's morale.



Skin ablaze, cold sweat runs down my spine from dread as I enter the locker room. I'm better than this guy is my mantra, whenever I'm in the same room as him and tempted to open my trap.

It's heavy with disappointment, but big mouths strike again.

"Man, we suck," someone mutters behind me. It's Jones, a linebacker who's always quick with a snide remark, and also Davis's best friend.

"Yeah, no coordination at all," adds Sheridan.

I grit my teeth but stay silent. There's no point in arguing. Chris shakes his head beside me.

"Man, if only we had someone who could hold onto the ball," mutters Davis to no one in particular.

"Yeah, if only you hadn't overthrown," grumbles another player.

"Cut it out," Chris interjects, hoping to keep the peace. "We're a team, aren't we?"

Guess not...

As we peel off our gear, the locker room is filled with grunts, complaints, and whispers. Some of the guys are muttering under their breath, blaming each other, blaming themselves. Others are slumped on the benches, staring at the ground, stunned. I'm one of those, head in my hands. The loss feels like a weight on my shoulders.

"Don't pay attention to their negativity," Chris mutters. "We're all pissed, but that kind of attitude doesn't help."

“Bunch of faggots...” Here we go again. I’m not sure if he’s talking about the opposite team or us, but I tune him out. Other than his derogatory language in the locker room, Davis doesn’t strike me as blatantly homophobic and, unfortunately, this kind of trash talk remains widespread amongst athletes—college and otherwise. Austin is known to be LGBTQ-friendly, but there’ll always be people like Davis. He shakes his head and opens his sailor mouth to curse again.

Thankfully, Coach storms in, eyes blazing. The murmurs cease. He’s usually calm, but tonight is another story. Dark hair in disarray. Round face flushed. Pudgy fingers twitching... He’s ready to explode.

Suddenly, I’m not so thankful and avert my gaze, ready for the upcoming blow.

“Alright, listen up!” he barks. “Cut the crap.” His eyes subtly sweep the room, lingering pointedly at Davis. As mad as I am at myself, relief floods me since Coach Stevens isn’t oblivious to the team’s dynamics, no matter how much effort our star quarterback puts into behaving whenever Coach’s around. “That wasn’t our best game, but it isn’t the end. Yes, we lost. Nobody’s to blame. We played hard. No excuses.”

He paces the room, eyes locking onto each of us. Finally, he stops, and we all sigh. He points at the whiteboard, where he’s already scribbled down some notes that he’s going over tactical suggestions. He turns to me, his gaze hard, but not unkind. “Lefevre, you did good out there. Before next season, we’ll work on your timing with the QB, the three of us.” He stares at Davis, then back at me. “Don’t lose heart. None of you should. Everyone else, take note. We win as a team, we lose as a team. Now, go get cleaned up and keep your heads up.”

I throw my gear into my locker and comply in record time, washing the negativity off of my sweaty skin and aching muscles.

“We should get outta here.”

Later that night, I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling. Lulled by the soft snores of my supportive roommate, I pull out my phone and text Rupert. I don't remember where he said he was this week. But I need him... My friend with not-so-many benefits.

Elliot

Fucked up. Coach was tough. Gonna get kicked out.

Despite everything, my lips stretch into a soft smile when three little dots appear. We may not have parted as I'd wished last summer, but my favorite Brit is there for me. Too bad it's not face to face. All in all, I'm glad he never got the chance to visit and see me play today.

Jones was right; we suck.

Rupert

I watched the game. Sorry your team lost. You're exaggerating. He won't let you down. You have a lot more to learn is all. Did Coach Stevens threaten you?

Wow, Rupert watched the game! My heart hammers in my chest... until I remember my poor performance.

Elliot

Sorry 4 the shitshow. Tx for watching, tho.

He said he believes in us. Team never gelled. Working my ass off. Feels like it's never enough. I'm pissed & worried about my scholarship.

Rupert

Beating yourself up is so uncharacteristic of you. You'll get there. You always do. See, Coach won't kick you out for 1 bad game.

Fidgeting under the light comforter, I know he's right. Davis is messing with my head. He and Jones are a diabolical combo.

Elliot

1++ is more like it.

I'm NO loser

Btw, I blame YOU, my friend. Benefits I ain't getting = football career failure.

Rupert

Me? Why's that?

Elliot

Still a virgin. No BJ whatsoever. My stamina is fucked up: too much useless energy.

& on top of that (lol), I'm stuck here. Can't go back to France during breaks. I mean, we only celebrated Thanksgiving for Mom's benefit, and I have to study anyway. But I'm bummed about Xmas.

Rupert

1st off, I'm deleting this convo as soon as we're done. You promised to behave/SFW

texts.

2nd, we discussed not being an item. I cannot be held accountable for your success or failure. You will succeed, Elliot.

One step forward, two steps back.

Elliot

But YOU kissed me. More than once...

What changed?

Rupert

Nothing changed. What happened in France, stays in France: Past tense, Elliot.

Live your college life. Already told you. I'm not the right person for you. Don't wait around, hoping there'll be more. We're friends. Let's get to know each other.

Anyway, sorry you can't make it to France. In case you want in for Xmas, I'll be in Colorado, at Hardy's with his family & a bunch of friends.

Elliot

Good 4 U.

I'll jack off & study

Will draw a list w/BS Xcuses U find to fight the law of attraction (2 bad I picked finance over physics).

Rupert

Why don't you come?

As expected, he evades my answer with another question. Two can play this game, my friend!

Elliot

Coming IS the plan.

Rupert

I'm serious. Hardy won't mind. His place is big & welcoming. The more, the merrier.

He loves the holidays, always manages to cheer me up when I'm not back home.

Why would he want me around the lead singer of The Whiskey Barrels?

Elliot

U mean it?

Rupert

Think about it. Would be fun to see you. I miss you.

Elliot

U insist we be strictly friends & now say "I miss you." Is it Bcoz of the French kissing benefits?

Rupert

Since when can't friends tell each other that?

The wiseass doesn't play fair, repeating my question from months ago and adding a wink emoji.

Rupert

Get away from campus for a bit. Hardy is into working out. Has his own gym on the premises & we could go skiing... as friends, obvly.

Elliot

I'll think about it.

My fingers play with my hair, twirling one lock, then another. It's the best way to calm myself when I want to rub one out, but Chris is around. No way am I doing it with him in the same room, even asleep... and I'm too tired and into this convo to rush to the shower. At least, it's reserved for Chris and me, but still.

Rupert

Come on! What are you waiting for? It'll lift your spirits. I've never heard you so down.

I might even play 4 U.

Now, that'd be a real treat. Would be a first. Imagining it, I don't reply right away, so he adds.

Rupert

Not above begging?

Elliot

\*Waiting, my friend\*

I can't help but tease him about our so-called friendship. Certain that he'll eventually surrender to our attraction, I beam when I read his answer.

Regardless of his strong denials, this guy is clearly into me. The distance between us doesn't help either. Maybe it'll be easier to convince him face to face without my family around. I think we have a shot at making this work. My virginity remains an obstacle to my freedom, my success, and my obsession.

Meanwhile, he complies and his one-word response is music to my ears...

Rupert

Pleecease!



## CHAPTER 11

### TIME IN A BOTTLE

Rupert

One year later

Who would invite a fellow expat to his Manhattan bachelor pad? Who would suggest following traditions they weren't born with simply because they live in the country? Who would get sidetracked from basting the turkey breast by the convincing young man currently mauling my willing mouth?

That would be me.

"Mmm..." The vibration of Elliot's voice resonates inside my filthy mind, horny body, and wicked soul as his skilled tongue caresses mine.

Imagine how amazing it would feel against my sex-deprived dick.

Ever since Elliot barged into my well-organized life, I can't seem to get a grip. Whenever he's around, lust clusters my brain. It started when he tricked me at that French café and hasn't returned to normal since. First, the occasional texts to the desperate kisses and innuendos... How I found the willpower to resist his plea during the wedding eludes me.

On the other hand, my pleading was met with little resistance and we had an absolute

blast at Christmas in Colorado. Hardy brought his seven-year-old son to a Santas vs. Grinches charity hockey game. We tagged along, and guess what? Elliot recognized one of his brothers' former rugby mates among the players and introduced us. Small world...

My band members and their significant others were oddly unfazed by my guest. Hardy's met Tim many times, but he never pressed about my friendship with his younger brother. As for his wife, she declared that Elliot "being uprooted from his country" made her feel protective of him. Coward me couldn't speak out the truth...

But what was it then, and what is it now?

All I know is that since then, we've done our best to get to know each other better, spending time together as much as our schedules allow and resisting the urge to touch or kiss. I encouraged him to find a deserving boyfriend rather than an older, closeted British country singer who won't pursue commitment. He knew that I hooked up here and there. He didn't know those men were faceless to me. He should have known I was trying to protect us...

So, for Thanksgiving, I aimed for the traditional experience, down to having way too much food (granted, most of it is catered). The original plan was a quiet dinner, catching up on my latest artistic news and his recent football feats, and maybe a movie afterwards.

With an NFL game on in the background, I opened the door to a gleeful Elliot, who played nice and helped with my late dinner prep—European time—since we agreed to watch the game first. He teased me when I admitted that I'd never watched an entire football game, aside from ones he played in. There's a first for everything.

Another first was Elliot staying at my place for an extended weekend. But clear boundaries were drawn: He knew I had a two-bedroom, and that Sally'd moved in

with her boyfriend.

Once everything was either in the oven or slowly reheating on the stove, I took Elliot's duffel to the guest bedroom. From then on, the brat made a point of pushing the envelope.

"Damn, you can be such a snooze sometimes," he called out.

Next thing I know, he effortlessly pushed me onto the sofa like I weighed nothing. In the blink of an eye, he straddled me and claimed my zealous mouth.

Yup, my soul is definitely going to rot in Hell at the pace things are progressing between us today. But then again, I don't believe in Hell. Derailing from my principles is another story, though.

And that's where we're at!

"Come on, Rupert, give me more," Elliot whimpers, wrenching his swollen lips from mine. "I've been behaving... for years..." The little devil's darkened eyes dare me to stop him as he shamelessly grinds against me, creating a delicious friction.

A guttural strangled sound escapes from my throat; a battle between yearning, frustration, and reason.

About to wave the tired friendship excuse, I'm saved by the bell when the timer beeps. Elliot makes a tssk noise, doesn't budge, and concludes in a fevered tone, "Sex first, food later." Then, he slides down my lap, so that his fingers have access to the zipper of my black jeans.

Swiftly, my hand presses over his. "Don't! There's no rush, please..." He surprisingly obeys, his hands grazing the side of my clothed body instead. Sucking in

a breath, I add, my free hand cupping his cheek, “You’re here for a few days.” I’m not sure why I said that. Convincing myself that this is indeed inevitable? Luring him in the hopes that I’ll cave, although I’m not sold on the idea? Tempting fate to see where this extended weekend will lead?

“Damn, I can’t believe I found someone more stubborn than me! Sometimes, I wonder if you’re just an old, bigoted, virgin gay country star!”

With that, I grab his hips and swap positions, forcing his powerful body to lie down and snatching his wrists over his head. An amused smile flashes on his face when I use the other hand to align our erections. My free hand is everywhere. In his silky hair. Along his strong neck. Under his dress shirt. Too bad I can’t reach his ass!

So much for not rushing things...

“You’re gonna pay for this, trust me... and I’m no virgin.”

“Are you attracted to me at all?”

“How can you doubt that?” His face scrunches in confusion. “Listen, I am 100 % into you, Elliot... The thing is, I haven’t made peace with this idea just yet... and taking your virginity isn’t to be taken lightly. You’re my best fr?—”

He eats my words with moans, until he comes up for air. “Look, in case you haven’t noticed, patience isn’t my strong suit, and it’s wearing thin. Sorry, not sorry...” He shrugs. “I’m gonna turn twenty soon! This is Thanksgiving, and I’m thankful you invited me, so I’ll behave... tonight. Do you realize how fucking hot you are?”

I chuckle at his bluntness. “Right back at you.”

“It’s really difficult for me to slow down, but, you’re right. We have time. But this is

only about us... Your friendship with my brother has nothing to do with us. He was never part of the equation. If he was such an issue for you, your dick wouldn't be throbbing against mine right now. So, enough about him!" He pecks my lips and motions to get up.

I don't stop him. Without asking for instructions, he opens drawers like he owns the place and sets the table while we make small talk, pretending we're not sporting boners. Then, I tend to the turkey before we sit back down to watch the game. His animated comments melt my stupid heart.

In between numerous expletives, he explains how it all works. "See, I'm handling your football virginity and not making a big deal out of it!"

"Ha-ha!" I take notes, which he finds endearing. Of course, he's rooting for Dallas. "My endgame is the NFL, as you know, but my college choice in Austin is also tactical. I want to play for The Austin Troopers."

He's so driven for a guy his age. But then again, I was told he's always been that way, and that's a major turn-on. Dallas wins, which earns me another salacious kiss.

Later, we busy ourselves plating food—twice as much in Elliot's case!—that we consume in between easy conversation, laughter, and unabashed glances. I'm trying to control the situation as best I can, subtly pushing him to stuff his face. The idea is that he'll fall asleep, and I'll be off the hook... for now.

It's pretty late into the night once we've cleaned up the kitchen and brush our teeth. I pace the living room, browsing my social media, half-thinking he might already be sound asleep. I halt when he stands before me in his black boxer briefs.

He reaches for my neck and absently caresses my pulse point with his thumb. "I told you I'll behave and I mean it... But I want to sleep next to you," he unapologetically

demands. My heart thumps faster. He doesn't miss it, a sly grin widening on his gorgeous face. The back of my neck stiffens. "Relax, baby, I can tell you're afraid of ruining my virtue. Hence,"—he gestures in front of him—"undies, even though I prefer to sleep naked."

"Baby?"

"Why not?" His hand coasts down my arm until his fingers intertwine with mine. He leans closer and whispers into my ear, "That's what I'll call you when you let me have my way with you before the weekend is over, baby." Goosebumps travel across my fevered skin. He leads me to bed. My bed. Big spooning me, obviously. He falls asleep within minutes with his breath tickling my neck; my plan was somewhat successful, aside from the massive hard-on I'm sporting from having his covered dick nestled between my butt cheeks.

Ignoring it, I focus on his breathing, my own lullaby. I love both a little too much.

Something buzzes loudly and annoyingly inside my head. Dream? Reality? I toss and turn until I reluctantly pry my eyes open. Warmth is laced around my sleepy body. Elliot.

Right, we slept in my bed.

His arm is snaked around my waist, a leg over mine, and his stiffy pressing against my thigh. Was I hard 24/7 when I was his age?

Eventually, the buzzing starts again. Damn phone!

Grumbling, I snatch it from the nightstand, scolding myself for being so distracted by Elliot's presence in my bed I forgot to put it on airplane mode.

Eyes widening in rising anger, I stare at the screen, inwardly cursing to avoid waking him. Unknown number; I never take these calls anyway. My brain is so sluggish that only now do I notice the two missed calls. Same unknown number in Brooklyn.

WTF?

Elliot grunts, but doesn't move.

I decide to pick it up, at least to make the buzzing stop. "Hello?" My usual morning voice, full of gravel, suddenly sounds odd to me.

"Rupert Smith?" a woman's voice inquires. Once I've confirmed my identity, she then recites my full address as well as her name and position. I'm too out of it to pay closer attention until I hear her say, "I'm calling from Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital. You're listed as the emergency contact for a Miss Sally Mitchell."

My throat constricts. Awkwardly, I manage to untangle myself from Elliot's strong hold. A cold knot settles in the pit of my stomach. Standing next to the bed now, I'm frozen in place. "Yes, that is correct. Is she okay?"

"She was admitted a few hours ago. She was in a car accident, and we need someone to come down and discuss her condition." Her words don't quite register.

My words come out on autopilot. "I'll be there as soon as I can." I ask again, "Is she okay?" The woman on the line simply repeats her instructions. I assume she's a nurse, but I'm not familiar with the US healthcare system, so I can't be sure. "I'm on my way," I confirm and hang up, doing my best to control my skyrocketing pulse.

I must have been less than discreet because Elliot's alarmed gaze zooms in on me, concern etched on his young features. My brain is now on full alert, going a mile a

second.

Sally. Brooklyn. Car...

Where the heck is Nathan?

When Sally and I talked this morning, she mentioned a Thanksgiving party with one of his friends.

Catching my breath, I pace the room, debating whether to call Nathan, and yell, “Fuck!” It’s either too early or too late, right?

What the fuck’s going on anyway?

“Everything okay?” Elliot’s collected voice inquires, already jumping out of bed.

“No, it’s Sally. She’s in the hospital.” I huff and puff. “I need to go.”

“I’ll come with you,” Elliot replies immediately, not asking for details. “Get your things. I’ll call an Uber. Let’s go.”

I’m speechless at his assertiveness. The nurse’s words repeat inside my head, so I follow his lead. We get dressed in record time, grab our coats before slamming the door behind us, and head out into the crisp morning air to hop into the Uber.

The ride from Chelsea to Brooklyn takes forever. The city lights blur as we make our way to the hospital. My mind is racing with worry. My shoulder touching Elliot, I brief him on Sally’s Thanksgiving plans. For a split second, I again consider reaching out to Nathan or even his best friend, Virgil Blake. I’m pretty sure when I called her this morning, Sally mentioned he would be there, too. I do have his number for some reason, but I’ve only met him a couple of times during art shows.



Can't do either. One thing at a time.

Elliot's pinky rubs the back of my hand. Even with the small surface it covers, it warms my heart. I whisper a thank you, to which he nods.

Upon our arrival, I rush to the front desk and introduce myself. Silently, Elliot produces my ID that I don't recall getting in the first place. "I'm here for Sally Mitchell." The urgency in my tone freaks me out.

Am I overreacting?

The nurse directs us to the waiting area. "The doctor will be with you shortly."

We sit down, the sterile smell of the hospital enveloping us along with the muttered conversations of strangers. I miss his touch, but his reassuring muffled words help. I like that he doesn't pretend that everything's going to be alright. Nobody knows that. Still, I'm grateful for his anchoring presence, making the excruciating wait a little more bearable.

Eventually, a doctor approaches to deliver more information. "There's been a carjacking incident. Miss Mitchell is in a coma."

My face falls.

"What?"

### CHAPTER 12

#### SOMETHING ABOUT US

Elliot

Who would call for hours daily to maintain the connection with his devastated long-distance non-boyfriend? Who would allow him to vent or make sure he's listening when they babble about random topics in order to keep him company despite the distance? Who would be there for him, ready to hop on the next flight, even if it meant the possibility of jeopardizing their grades?

That would be me.

Before Thanksgiving, we favored texts to calls, but I quickly realized Rupert needed more support. Seeing him so affected by his friend's accident rips me open. He sounds hollow, even more so when he mentions that she hasn't come out of the coma.

Don't get me wrong, I get it and would probably react the same way if I'd been that close to someone. Erecting walls to keep my secrets safe keeps people at bay, which, in turn, prevents me from building such relationships. I love what my brother and I have, but he's family, so it doesn't compare. We may text almost daily, but he isn't privy to the real me, and it sucks. I'd hate to learn that he's hiding things from me or lying by omission. Isn't it ironic that it's exactly what I do? And that's not about to change anytime soon.

Somehow, Rupert and I managed to build some trust, and I'm glad that he eventually

opened up to me, disclosing bits and pieces about his unique relationship with Sally. I'm envious of Tim, who had the opportunity to meet her several times. No wonder everyone believed their fake relationship, though.

I can't confide in Chris, although he's the prime witness of how Rupert's zombie state troubles me. It's a miracle that I stay focused in class and on the field. Guilt gnaws at me. I do what I can, but would simply prefer to be by his side. It won't happen, not anytime soon anyway.

Meanwhile, Rupert put his life on hold to be there for Sally when she wakes up. Hardy was understanding enough to cut him some slack when Rupert told him he wouldn't make it to their upcoming gigs. The Whiskey Barrels tweaked a few dates to accommodate their lead guitarist without harming their tour. Regardless, I'm in awe of his selflessness.

What I didn't expect, though, is my brother barging in on me. Well, he didn't show up unannounced. That's not who he is. He texted me about his business trip to Texas Hill Country. I didn't pay much attention to his plans, too preoccupied by practice, games, and the fact that I kept debating on booking a flight and showing up at Rupert's doorstep.

I'd never expected to face Tim on such a short notice! I'm being an ungrateful jerk because I'm actually genuinely happy to be sitting across from him at Hand Wing Brewing Co. Needless to say, I've picked the burger joint on purpose, in hopes of meeting some of my favorite players. I followed the construction of ATEX Stadium—home of my beloved Troopers—from day one. Being a UT Austin student definitely has its perks: The Troopers mentor our team and sometimes even train with us.

What's not a perk, though, is that I can't have a taste of the beer Tim ordered since I'm not even twenty yet. Chris, who tagged along, pretended he didn't notice my

irritation earlier while munching on my chicken sandwich. What can I say? I hate that I can drink in my own country and can't do it here. Granted, I shouldn't indulge in beer anyway.

"Huh?" I look up at my brother; the crease between his brows tells me that I've missed more than I thought.

He deposits his empty glass on the coaster to his left. "Where did your mind go again, bro?" His voice is laced with concern. I like that he never calls me "little brother." Leaning towards the other side of the booth, his upper body almost touches the wooden table as he extends his arm and ruffles my hair. Such an unusual gesture... "Is the missed championship weighing on you? I've seen you play. You're fast, assertive, and inspired." I appreciate his effort, considering he doesn't know the first thing about American Football. His attention turns to Chris. "You two are so fun to watch." My roommate beams between mouthfuls his juicy steak. We would've been fun to watch in the postseason, too, I think bitterly.

Chris nudges my elbow on the table. His wide eyes are glued to a door that leads to a private room where football events are held for the happy few.

With my back to it, I can't see what caught his attention, but he's already babbling, "Oh, my God, Elliot..." His Adam's apple gets stuck in his throat. He opens his mouth to continue, but someone behind me is faster.

"Hey, guys." A hand lands on my shoulder for a split second, and I gawk at the massive frame of my favorite NFL wide receiver, who is now standing at the edge of our booth. He tilts his head in acknowledgement.

Does he remember our names?

His arms are crossed in front of his chest, which showcases his bulging muscles.

“Ready for my TED Talk next week?” A chuckle follows.

“Hello, Gunner,” I supply after the shock of seeing him off the football field subsides. My eyes are locked on his. “You bet we are! Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” It’s not really a TED Talk, more like sharing his experience with hopeful players like us. “Tim, this is Logan Foster.” I introduce my clueless brother to him.

“They all call me Gunner,” he tells Tim while shaking his hand. “Your brother’s a gifted player, but he also puts in a ton of hard work.” My heart swells with pride, and I shoot him a wide smile at the compliment, hoping my wayward emotions aren’t written all over my face. “Gotta split. See you next week then, Elliot.” Then he pats my friend’s shoulder. “You too, Chris!” With that, he exits the bar.

Holy shit! Did that really happen?

This impromptu encounter actually gives me reason not to drink: I’ll have to prove my worth all over again next year and plan to train hard in the offseason. Davis is the biggest loudmouth around, always spouting off rude remarks. He might not mean harm, but his words are just plain obnoxious. He and his friend Jones really fuck up our spirit by not being team players.

My mind drifts to Rupert. I can’t believe that my virginity remains intact, though I wouldn’t dare remind Rupert that I blame him for spurring my losing streak by leaving me sexually frustrated. He has much bigger issues to deal with at the moment. I’ve Googled info on comas, and I frankly don’t see a happy ending in the near future. My helplessness is killing me softly.

“Anyway, as I was saying before your daydreaming, it’s great I got to see you play. I planned to stop in New York to see Rupert first, but he never returned my calls, so I decided to stay here longer.” A shiver runs down my spine at Tim’s words, and I school my features into my best poker face. It’s the first time he’s mentioned his

friend. “He did say he was about to go on tour or something, but I think he said he canceled it...” He trails off as if realizing he’s been talking to himself rather than to us. “I’m sorry.” His eyes bore into mine. “You remember him, right?”

My mouth goes dry. I take it back; I could use a beer for this conversation! Instead, I snatch my glass of water, chug half of it, and cut a piece of my sandwich, averting my gaze.

As if on cue, my phone chimes, and I don’t need to look at the screen to know who’s calling. I’m always the one calling; my face falls. “I’ve got to take this.” I bolt out of the booth and head towards the front for some privacy.

From afar, I hear Tim ask, “Is everything okay?” I’m already shaking my head out of reflex, even if I have my back to him.

Once I’m outside, I mindlessly wander towards my car, welcoming the light breeze; Texas weather suits me. I can’t help but purse my lips as I press the answer button, my butt resting against the driver’s side. I don’t have time to speak.

“Sally’s dead.” A heavy breath echoes on the other end of the line. His voice is devoid of emotion. My heart stops for a second. I want to tell him how sorry I am for his loss, but somehow, I feel that voicing this would prompt him to hang up on me. “Her parents came in from Toronto. They decided that life-support wasn’t an option after the doctors told us she was brain-dead. Not sure how soon it happened after the carjacking. Nathan was with her at the time. He was admitted to the same hospital.” He already told me about Nathan and what happened to him, but I don’t interrupt. “They had to perform surgery on him. He couldn’t stand on his own two feet to check on her, so it took the doctors some time to reveal her condition to him.” He pauses. “I can’t believe she’s dead... for real.” Only now do I notice a tinge of grief in his voice. He makes a throaty noise. “Isn’t it odd that you’re the first person I called? Not my mom, not your?—”

Before he breaks our pact by mentioning Tim, I speak up, in a firm tone. “I’ll hop on the first plane and meet you wherever you need me.”

My offer is met with long silence interrupted only by pained breathing until he eventually replies in a muttered voice, “Thank you, Elliot. I know your schedule doesn’t allow much freedom.” Studying for finals doesn’t help either. “I’m flying to Canada with Nathan to attend her... funeral.” He pauses, then clears his throat. “Do you think there’s a chance you could meet me back in New York this weekend? All expenses paid, obviously.”

“I’ll meet you at the airport when you get back, if that’s okay.” Since when do I ask for permission? I guess the situation dictates it. “Text me your flight information.” As much as I wanted to argue that I’d much rather join him in Canada, it doesn’t make sense. It’s not like I’d crash a private ceremony to stand by a man who isn’t even mine to begin with. I remind myself that there’s no label for what we are; we’re much more than friends, and I wish for more benefits, but he matters, and that’s all that matters. At once, the entirety of the situation registers, and I add, “Nathan won’t be with you, right?”

“I don’t know... Either way, it doesn’t matter to me. I need you.” He trails off, sighs, and delivers in a strangled voice, “I—” There’s another, much longer pause. I give him the time he needs. He doesn’t mind if Nathan reads between the lines, and I’m grateful for it. Just like I don’t mind that I’m being rude to my brother and my teammate. “I... I don’t think I can handle staying in Chelsea ever again. Sally and I have been roommates for too long. I’d see her in every corner, you know... her ghost haunts the place.” He coughs. “Can’t do it.” His voice is pained, and my heart lurches.

I ache to hug him and comfort him. But I don’t express my needs. At this moment, his are more important. “You don’t have to. Where are you now?” I swallow my annoyance at the distance between us, especially when he says he’s at the hospital.

“You know what? I’ll find a hotel for us to stay at while I’m there. That’ll give you some time to decide on your next step. Would that work for you?”

“You have no idea...” He doesn’t finish his sentence, but also kind of does. “Thank you for being there for me. I’ll text you my flight info ASAP.”

“That’s okay. Of course, I’m here for you.” I open my mouth to tell him ‘ That’s what friends are for ,’ but decide against it. I’m through pretending we’re friends. “Call whenever you need, okay? Day or night, I’ll do my best.” But I’ve never lost anyone dear to me, unlike Tim. He lost a parent and Rupert knows it. However, Rupert chose to reach out to me . I’m not sure what to make of this sudden realization. I shrug, as if he could see me. “I’m here for you, okay?” I repeat.

He murmurs something I don’t get, but right before hanging up, concludes,

“See you.”



### CHAPTER 13

#### SMILE

Rupert

“I’ll grab our duffels.” Nathan elegantly glides out of his seat and effortlessly unlatches the overhead compartment.

I watch him. Others do too, stopping in their tracks rather than drag their carry-ons—and themselves—off the plane. The corner of my lips quirks up. I inwardly grin.

Before this trip, I never paid attention to the effect that my friend has on people. Strangers, no matter their gender, often do a double take. His insane confidence. His cocky attitude. His outstanding beauty. But Sally’s attraction to him was of another nature, and after spending four days joined at the hip, I can understand the appeal. He’s respectful, caring, and a good listener. The funny thing is that he says the same about me.

“We better get moving.” He hands me my spanking new leather bag that he bought me for this unfortunate trip; it’s identical to his black one except that mine is a caramel color that he claims matches my hair.

Riiight ...

I do appreciate the gift, though. In return, I wrote a song about the intensely

heartbreaking experience we shared. Days filled with bottomless grief and tears that show in the dark circles under our eyes.

“I would have suggested hitting a diner for a late dinner, but I have plans.” I shrug. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine, Rupert. I’m beat and need to catch up on my beauty sleep anyway.”

We chuckle at that. Bags slung over our shoulders, we nod at each other. This is it. His hand firmly grips my shoulder. We walk side by side, our breathing and stride unintentionally in sync. Just as it was when we practiced the aptly named ‘Art of Breathing,’ during these excruciatingly difficult days.

Soon enough, the sliding doors of LaGuardia Airport open to our new reality. One where Sally doesn’t exist. One where Nathan suggested we take a breather from each other until further notice. One where Elliot rearranged his priorities to be here for me.

Now that he’s done with finals and doesn’t have pressing football affairs, he is able to visit for a few days. As much as I hate the circumstances that brought him back to New York, I couldn’t be more relieved.

My mouth goes dry and my pulse races at the sight of him. Solid frame. Broad shoulders. Perfect height. Could he have grown taller since I saw him about three weeks ago? My hungry dick thickens inside my dark blue jeans. My skin tickles deliciously. I embrace it; and here I thought Sally’s death rendered me immune to positive emotions. I suck in a strangled breath.

This man is going to be the death of me...

The uncharacteristic timid grin on Elliot’s face betrays his nerves at Nathan’s presence. Within seconds, his collected expression morphs. Darkened eyes. Flushed

face. Tapping foot. At first, I mistake it for impatience due to lust, until he's glaring at the spot where Nathan's hand is attached to my shoulder.

Jealous, much? All in all, I find it endearing, and some twisted part of my fragile ego delights at his possessiveness. Does he really think Nathan's gesture is fueled by anything other than consolation?

I'll take all the support I can get lately. That's why Elliot's plan pleases me to no end. Fathoming that I couldn't stand to return to my place right after burying Sally, he suggested what he referred to as a comforting bubble to pause the outside world for an extended weekend. Hence, he got here ahead of me, settled in a hotel of his choosing, and went sightseeing while waiting for me to arrive.

I'm amazed at how considerate he is and simultaneously flattered by his territoriality. But I'm not an asshole, mind you. I don't play games with Elliot. He is here. I want him here.

My head swivels, and I stare at Nathan's friendly hand, then his gaze meets mine. Without a word, he places his hand in his dark pants pocket and follows my lead.

A warm glow spreads across my face as I greet Elliot and introduce them. "Thanks for picking me up, Elliot. This is my friend, Nathan Price." I gesture towards Nathan. "Nathan, this is my..." The words get stuck in my mouth for a beat. Blinking, I eventually add in a more determined voice. "Elliot." Yeah, he is my Elliot ... Mine... I cough lightly. "This is Elliot Lefevre." My heart thumps so violently, it resonates in my ears. "My?—"

Before I am able to continue, Nathan glances at me, extends his hand for Elliot to shake, and supplies in a playful yet unfazed tone, "Boyfriend, I suppose."

Elliot's lips part to counter him, no doubt, but I beat him to the punch. This time,

there's no stutter or pause when I reply, heat coursing through my body. Not numb, then. "Yes, he is."

I don't recall sharing my sexual orientation with Nathan, but we shared a few drunken evenings with Sally where I might have given it away. Oh, well, maybe my attraction to Elliot isn't as well hidden as I thought. But I meant what I told Elliot: Why hide things from Nathan, even if his assumption is slightly far-fetched?

With that, my green gaze captures his as I reach his side and intertwine my fingers with his for a split second. I shiver at the contact, and some more when he wets his lips with the tip of his tongue. His cheeks stay rosy, which is adorable along with his freckles. I'm about to release his hand when he tightens his hold. I don't pull away. After all, I just claimed him as mine... I might as well enjoy the thrill of his touch. All of this doesn't help with my semi, so I tuck my free hand in my pocket and conceal it as best as I can.

Come what may.

"Nice to meet you, Nathan. I've heard so much about you." Does Elliot's voice sound more gravelly than I remember? It does something X-rated to my brain. My fingers crook around his as his other hand releases Nathan's. "You've got to teach me some of your breathing techniques one of these days. Maybe they'll help to restrain my impulse to smack a couple of my brainless teammates." Reminded of Elliot's situation with Davis and his equally foul-mouthed linebacker buddy, my heart tightens.

"Feel free to attend any of my seminars, but I'm afraid none are scheduled in the near future because I have more pressing deadlines... Don't worry, though, your man is fully capable of teaching you."

I sure am... Well, if I can finally have my wicked way with Elliot, his education

would cover so much more than a typical class... More like moaning, whimpering, and grunting.

All in due time...

But I ache for this man.

So much.

Elliot

THE LONG UBER RIDE to the hotel is eerily quiet, but his hand remains locked in mine. I take shallow breaths as the warmth radiating from the contact travels across my skin.

His boyfriend ... I'm doing my best to adjust to the white lie. Why did he do that? Who cares? It did funny things to my insides and boosted my bruised ego. Yup, my ego's been on an emotional rollercoaster since the engagement party two years ago. Bruised by his initial rejection... until he initiated a welcome back kiss and then some. Thanksgiving was a missed opportunity; too bad. For once, I command my mojo to behave; I'll be the shoulder Rupert needs to lean on and will provide solace to my grieving boyfriend . Period. The bags under his eyes are all the evidence I need. Truth be told, I'm at a loss when it comes to him. I thought I knew what I wanted from him, but he's been sending mixed signals, which make me reconsider everything. Today, I should proceed with caution, even though I ache for him. This isn't about me; he's in bad shape.

I inwardly congratulate myself for deciding on this quiet, upscale hotel—that he insisted paying for. The Upper East Side doesn't hold any memories of Sally.

"I've missed you, Elliot," Rupert utters as we cross the threshold, hand in hand, his

front glued to my back. His breath caresses the back of my neck.

When the door closes behind us, he whirls me around and presses my back against the nearest wall. The noise I make is covered by the thump of his weekender on the floor.

His hand cradles my face. My breath hitches. Next thing I know, I yelp as he slants our mouths together, seeking entrance. I growl.

Frozen by his initiative, my arms don't budge, stuck on the side of my body, as if this wasn't the all-clear first I've been waiting for. My heart is pounding nonetheless. One of his hands reaches into my hair and gently pulls on it. The other unzips my winter coat before settling on my lower back. Wiggling, I don't resist his sweet assault.

So much for having good intentions and putting my hormones on hold. If this is what he needs, I'm all for it.

Swapping spit, we smile into the molten kiss. The delicious friction of our tongues paired with his enticing ministrations are a perfect appetizer. I groan. Devouring his mouth, I ignore my throbbing semi. I melt into him, but he wrenches his lips from mine.

His pupils are as dilated as mine must be. "I've missed this, so fucking much," he pants. We lock eyes. His hand skids down to my ass and squeezes. Finally, my hands are everywhere. "I've missed us, babe." My pulse trips on itself. Boyfriend? Babe? What's next? "I don't want to wait anymore. I can't." He gasps. "I want to feel alive again." His plea guts me, but it's delivered with such hunger that I quickly recover. "Only you have the power to do that." Holy shit! My heart swells with pride. "If you're still on board, that is."

"Hell, yeah!" As if I'd ever say no to that. I should probably tell him that he isn't

quite himself, and we should wait. But I'm a selfish bastard. Instead, my lips steal a sloppy kiss to seal the deal, and I blindly moon-walk towards the bed.

Oh, so slowly, we shed each other's clothing with each step, lip-locked, only stopping to clumsily toe off our shoes. Skin grazing. Horniness skyrocketing. Expectations soaring.

The back of my calves hit the edge of the bed when we're down to our skivvies. I plop down on the bed without further ado and lean on my elbow. My gaze takes a slow perusal over his pale freckled skin. There are so many. Everywhere. And taut muscles I yearn to lick. My mouth waters at the view. "Oh, God, you're so fucking gorgeous."

"Right back at you." He pulls on his covered erection, eliciting loads of wicked ideas. "How have I waited so long?" At once, he pauses, then raises his index finger. "Hold that thought, I'll be right back." My brows furrow. WTF? He can't be having second thoughts, can he?

Checking out how perfectly his boxer briefs showcase his assets, I hear his warning loud and clear. "Don't you dare move." As if...

Instead, I watch him disappear into the entryway. A latch and zipper noises follow. Seconds later, heavy lidded eyes gauge my reaction when he tosses a bottle of lube and a strip of condoms on the mattress. "Supplies," he unnecessarily blurts out as I shiver in anticipation, stealing a glance at the ridge of his impressive erection.

This is real, I remind myself, my clogged throat finally able to relax and swallow. I've fantasized about him. I've dreamed of seeing his dick. I've jacked off to the thought of pounding into him.

Rupert must be a fucking mind reader: He strips, exposing his glorious nakedness,

and strokes himself for good measure. As if he wasn't hard enough already. Red hot!

I curl my index finger to coax him to join me on the bed while I hastily ditch my undies. "You really thought this through!" My dick is already leaking precum. Damn, now is not the time to blow my load.

He pounces on the bed, whispering, "I like to come... prepared." His tall figure covers mine. His enticing familiar scent overwhelms me. His mouth peppers me with open-mouth kisses, tormenting my nipples with his teeth.

"I've done my homework, you know." My cockiness conceals a slight lingering doubt. "Can't mess up, right?" I ask myself aloud, then shake my head. "Nah, shouldn't have a problem making you come." His zealous mouth molds against mine for another quick taste.

"Good. Look, I trust you, Elliot..." Hand snatching our erect cocks, he tugs on them, licking his appetizing lips. "I'm sorry, though... I aimed to take good care of you and go slow for your first time ... But I'm... you... I want you too much..." His voice comes out ragged. "I will let you do whatever you want to do to me later." With that, he coasts down my body, engulfs my length, and gives it a good suck.

Holy shit!

With an audible grunt, I arch my back so he'll take more of me. The tip of his tongue circles the tip of my cock. He releases me with a pop before switching places with me. "Just speak up if you need direction at any time." I kneel between his spread legs and watch him position himself. Soles on the mattress, he adds a pillow behind the small of his back to grant me better access. "I'm all yours. Get that gorgeous cock of yours inside me."

Kissing, licking, nibbling, I comply after squirting a generous amount of lube on my



fingers. Using one at a time, I work him over, rather impatiently since I can barely manage to control my urges.

“So good... Yeah, right there...” He writhes under me, proving that I’ve hit that special spot. The one every gay guy raves about. The one I haven’t been acquainted with, so far. The one he will hopefully explore with me.

Way back, I did admit my extremely limited experience without disclosing that I was reserving most of my firsts for my dream guy.

Enthralled, I watch my three fingers go in and out of him, loving how he shamelessly fucks them. “Mmm...” he grumbles.

“You’re so fucking tight... I’m afraid I’ll hurt you.”

“You won’t. Fuck me before I come all over my stomach, babe.” The term of endearment twists my stupid heart. I revel in his choked voice that sounds more urgent than cajoling. “I want the burn... Feel you for hours once we’re done. I want you so bloody bad.” Oh, his Britishness is showing, interesting. His unfocused eyes and ruddy cheeks show that he’s already too far gone to put up much resistance anyway.

Who am I to deny him? This is empowering.

Taking a big breath, I suit up, lube up and kneel in front of him, gripping my aching cock. Anal was always the real test. I’ve heard some guys don’t enjoy it at all and stick to other activities that I can’t wait to discover with him. I tease his entrance. I’m about to fuck Rupert Smith. My fantasy guy. My spank bank favorite. My boyfriend.

“Don’t hold back!”

I inhale deeply. Unable to comply with his demand, the head of my dick carefully enters him. I halt, allowing the insane sensation to sink in. Holy shit, this is beyond my wildest dreams, and we're just getting started. I wasn't nervous per se, more like expectant. Just like when I enter the field.

Digging my fingernails into his silky skin, I blink at him and gasp before I go any further. Rupert slightly rocks his hips towards me, and my whole body convulses. My thighs are quivering. My heart is hammering. My ego is bruised.

The most earth-shattering orgasm overtakes me, and I can't help but cry out a strained, "Oh, meeerde !" A mixture of elicitation, surprise, and shame.

I didn't milk the clock and came in two seconds flat.

WTF?

### CHAPTER 14

#### THE PROMISE

Rupert

“Humph...” Such an unsophisticated and loud yawn!

Did I do that?

Face buried on the fluffy hotel pillow and arms beneath it, I lie on my stomach, fidget, and grumble my satisfaction.

“Mmm, that feels good.” I wet my swollen lips. One touch from his fingertips is enough to set my body ablaze. My lover intensifies the feather light patterns he’s drawing on my back in a feeble attempt to wake me.

“Need more sleep... Need to recover...” I whimper at his TLC as my sleepy body pebbles in bliss. We haven’t left the room since Elliot met me at the airport. Ordering room service, we keep testing our chemistry. Skin slapping became his new favorite fun. Christening every inch of this place was his idea, though. This is so atypical of me. I rarely do repeats, preferring faceless hookups and not spending the night... until Elliot. But it’s not like I’m not on board with his plans. He’s delivered what I asked for: make me feel alive again. His honor demanded that he make amends for—I quote—“his poor initial performance.” My reassurance wasn’t met with success, so practice made perfect.

One of my thighs artfully rests over the comforter. The room reeks of sweat, food, and sex. Today is the last of our four-day retreat, or should I call it our sex-marathon. He's been rubbing off on me, and we've been going at it like horny teenagers. He said that we should make up for lost time. I agreed to disagree. We happened at the right time.

"Need you..." Elliot's hand makes descends to my lower back, then kneads my butt cheek. His index finger brushes my tailbone before heading to the cleft of my ass.

I swat his adventurous hand. "Stop," I warn.

"Ouch! You're mean," the brat whines.

"And you're insatiable!" I swivel my head to the left and meet his raunchy gaze.

My uncertainty about what he sees in me lingers. Not that it matters right now. All I know is that these few days have pleased me to no end. Elliot makes me ridiculously happy... alive, and that's not only lust talking. He's funny. He's attentive. He's passionate, in every sense of the word.

If I'm just a means to an end, that's fine by me. Punching his V-card weighed heavily on him, as if he wasn't "truly gay" until it was done. I could very well be the only gay person he knows, and directing his interest towards me was because I'm a safe bet, obviously incapable of hurting him.

"Look, Elliot, I'm old and tired," I supply, in case it's not obvious. "What time is it anyway?" The drawn curtains don't give much away, except for a sliver of natural light.

"Morning sex is the best sex," the expert retorts instead of answering me. In a swift move, he snatches the comforter to expose more of my naked body.

His tongue hungrily travels across my shoulder blade, and I quiver. With that, he leans over, wickedly licking the back of my neck up to my ear.

“And shut up! Thirty isn’t old,” he counters in a breathless whisper. “Don’t you get it? You’re like a fine wine anyway: You improve with age.” Guess I missed that point; what I do get, though, is the delicious tingle of his impressive wood. Caressing my rear end. Taunting my weaknesses. Crumbling my defenses.

I will myself to focus on the conversation rather than the sensations he elicits in me, between his ministrations and his impressive manhood tempting me while resting between my butt cheeks—for now.

“Enlighten me, then. How have I improved according to your twisted logic? By the way, I turned thirty-one two months ago, so...”

His powerful gulp proves he’s registering this information. So far, we haven’t discussed milestones, apart from his unique birthday that earns him an annual video chat on March 1st. I wait for his answer.

“What? You finally succumbed to my boyish charms. If that doesn’t show improvement, I don’t know what does.” His lips nibble at mine. His hand glides along my hipbone, clumsily reaching for my balls. He fondles them before taking hold of my semi. He squeezes. I hiss. We moan.

“You’re not playing fair. Not that I’m complaining, mind you, but...” I trail off, slowly getting my bearings from this sweet wakeup call.

His teeth gently bite my earlobe. “Never said I was.” His fat cock is lodged between my cheeks now.

“Last night you said you loved late night sex,” I remind him in a teasing tone.

The fucker subtly moves behind me, and my ass clenches. So much for being focused on the conversation. He's a fast learner and already knows exactly what he's doing. "I do." His hot breath tickles my ear. "With you, I love every moment of sex."

"With me, huh? Me!" I insist. "Didn't you confess that, aside from being on the receiving end of a few blow-jobs, you made a point of saving your firsts for me?"

"And?"

"And I don't see how what you said makes sense!"

"I shall clarify, then." Still pancaked to my back, his fingertips wander along my side. His heady scent is messing with my willpower. I exhale to suppress yet another moan. "It just means that I want you 24/7." He grinds against my fevered skin. "You, Rupert David Smith! I'm not interested in anybody else. What can I say? You're as addictive as I thought you'd be. I've had a taste, but I want the whole shebang."

Only the first four words register. He can't quite see me frown. "What did you call me?" In the blink of an eye, I untangle my body from his, roll over, and snatch a large pillow for better support. I stare at him and mourn his warmth now that he's lying on his side.

"Rupert Smith. Why? Isn't it your name?" His voice is laced with confusion.

"No, no, no, you called me David. No one calls me David. Ever!" Damn, this might have come out too harshly. Despite the relative darkness, the unmistakable crease between his brows deepens. There's no way I would have used my middle name around him; how does he know it? Racking my brain, I try to remember if even Tim is privy to this information... Nah, he definitely isn't.

Extending his arm, he switches on the nightstand lamp and purses his lips.

Blinking a few times, I adjust to the sudden brightness and look at this gorgeous man. He hasn't looked like a teenager in a long time, even though I've convinced myself of the opposite. With his elbow bent, his head rests on his splayed hand, so I eye his bulging bicep and mimic his posture. His eyes are shooting daggers.

What exactly happened?

"What's going on?" he eventually asks, flustered, then he raises his voice that's tinged with amusement and annoyance. "Chillax, okay. What's gotten into you anyway? I just made it up, okay?" Elliot's chest heaves. He sucks in a breath. "Damn, you're impossible!"

"You took a wild guess?" My astonishment must be written all over my face.

He shrugs, his eyes downcast. "Sure did. What can I say? You make me think of the David. I dunno. WTF anyway?" Then he stares into my eyes, daring me. Talk about a rude awakening! "Well, if you really want to know, you're way hotter than the David. Not that I ever fantasized about Michelangelo's statue! No matter what they say, size matters, and your dick suits me way more." A mischievous smile stretches on his luscious lips, his tone suddenly playful.

Flabbergasted, I'm speechless and try to wrap my head around what just happened.

What were the odds that he'd randomly guess the name of my absent father that I'd never had the pleasure of knowing? I'm nowhere near ready to disclose that piece of information.

My fingers twitch; I ache to touch him. I reluctantly refrain, allowing him to carry on.

"Always, Rupert. As far as I can recall, I've always wanted you." His fingertips stroke my forearm. I swallow my confusion. "I was starstruck by your looks, but

being around you made me realize that there's so much more to you." He pauses, screws his eyes shut for a split second, then pops them open, as if trying to read my soul. "That's why I want to try this thing with you..." He splays his palm over my heart and the sprinkling of fair body hair that I kept after my modeling career ended. "Not the sex part, I mean, the relationship part..." He's speaking faster than usual, his excitement palpable—unless it's nervousness? "Well, the sex part on top of the relationship part, obviously." A short intake of breath. "It's not a marriage proposal, Rupert... and I'm not asking you to publicly come out or anything if we're a thing, but I want to be closer to you. Being your short-term or long-distance boyfriend won't do. My life is in Texas and that's not about to change. I want you there."

"You're serious?" Again, I'm stunned. My lover nods, his gaze expectant. I take a deep breath, regretting that he chose to ask me to relocate closer to him while we're both naked. My trembling hand cups his face. "Listen, I'm flattered by everything you just said... I really am. Don't you think you're getting ahead of yourself? I mean... I did call you my boyfriend, and I meant it, even before this." I point at us alternatively. "I've never had a long-term boyfriend before, but I'm willing to give us a shot."

He beams, kissing my forehead. It's the sweetest kiss he's ever given me, so I feel bad when I blurt out, "But like I also said, I'm old... er, and probably wiser." He mutters something between clenched teeth that I don't catch, but I don't inquire. "This is a lot, Elliot. I can't keep up with your energy and enthusiasm. I'm not against the idea, but moving away from New York is a big step. My life is here."

"Is it?"

"Come on, you know it's not as simple as that. I need to think this through, and to do that, I need more sleep." I catch my breath. "Look, we've mostly interacted online. Don't you think it's time we really get to know each other, now that we have the chance? Let's take it slow, huh..." Considering how I begged for him to jump my



bones yesterday, I rephrase. “Well, slower.”

“That’d actually be counterproductive, sweetheart.” He covers my hand with his. Sweetheart... It rolled off his tongue so naturally that my heart skips a beat. “Stop overanalyzing everything. You said it yourself: You need a change of scenery. Austin is an amazing city. What better way to get to know each other better than to spend more quality time together by living nearby?”

Damn, he’s so single-minded. “You have a point.”

“Assertive is my middle name!” He winks.

“I’ve never heard such a true statement.” My teasing tone is met with a blistering kiss. I shiver and reluctantly break it. His earlier fiery reaction’s been bothering me. “What was this all about, really?”

“I hated that you doubted me. I am driven, but I can be a little impulsive and... passionate at times.” No kidding. “Coach says that, with the right guidance, that’s what’s going to make me an outstanding player. I want the right guidance from you when it comes to sex.”

“We’ve done plenty already.”

“Oh, come on! Don’t be a bore, Rupert. Plenty isn’t nearly close to what we discussed. There are things I want to try with you before this day ends,” he growls into my ear.

“Actually, checkout is at noon, babe, so we’ll have to get out of bed sooner or later.” I clear my throat. “That is, if I’m able to walk.”

“My point exactly.” In the blink of an eye, I’m on my back, with him lying on top of

me. Who am I to complain? His suddenly gravelly voice soothes me. “I love your ass as much as it loves me, but it should rest. Your dick on the other hand...” Another squeeze. Another growl. Another demand. “You inside me, Rupert...” His damp hair grazes my temple. “I want it. Right. Fucking. Now.” The head of my cock awakens under his thumb’s attention. “I can tell you’re as raring to go as I am, old man.”

I squeal when his free hand playfully but forcefully slaps my cheek. “Are you sure you’re a virgin, babe?” I’ve never had such an ardent lover, but then again, I never had someone so much younger in my bed. Is it because of his age, his hormone-induced brain, vibrant personality, or limited experience that he can’t get enough sex? “I mean, you haven’t shied away from anything we tried.”

Fingering. Rimming. Fucking... and let’s not forget his impressive blow-job skills. He swears he’s not been influenced by porn.

The guy loves giving as much as receiving. Granted, I haven’t caved to his request to bottom. I want to ensure that I’m in the right mood to worship every inch of him. When the time comes, in Austin maybe?

After we had sex that first night, he offered to return the favor, which I politely declined, drifting into a peaceful sleep for a change. His constant pleas have received the same response. I don’t think he’s ready. I know I’m not. Elliot’s fervor to learn blinds him to what it implies for us. Maybe he’s right, I might be overthinking this. What can I say? I strongly believe that it’d change the dynamics we’re building as lovers. They have to be strengthened first. I like what we have. Exploring with him is definitely entertaining.

He claims that trying every possible gay thing in the book will help him become a better gay man. I understand his thirst for knowledge and respect his boundaries, like when I mentioned a couple of kinks, and he scrunched his nose. Then, he confirmed that he might be more vanilla than he originally thought. I laughed at that. To each

their own, right?

One step at a time is the way to go, I remind myself. However, that's not how we've been rolling lately.

Part of me is wary. What am I to him? I'm not sure what I was when we started this. Certainly, not commitment, and not for him to voice such a well-thought-out plan. I'm amazed at how his mind works. Must be why he's so talented on the field, thinking several steps ahead.

Could we give this a shot? Give us a shot? For real?

One issue lingers, though. Whether Elliot wants to acknowledge it or not, my friendship with Tim is also on the line here. If Tim learns that I'm sleeping with his brother, he might believe I'm taking advantage of Elliot. Will he be able to grasp that I'm genuinely attracted to Elliot. So...

What now?

### CHAPTER 15

#### CLAP YOUR HANDS

Elliot

One year later - Junior Year

“Earth to Elliot...” Chris’s hand waving in front of my face paired with his alarmed voice snap me out of my reverie. “Hey! You zoned out again, man! What the fuck’s wrong with you?” He’s fast to snatch my dark green beanie.

It’s a good thing that the late January weather has been relatively mild or I would have smacked his preppy face. It’s scary how easily my teammate, my roommate, and my best friend detects tiny details that no one else notices. I probably should be more careful around him if I want to keep my secrets safe. Nah, seriously, I would trust this guy with my life... Well, almost every part of my life since a certain hot ginger man with a perfected American accent remains in an alternate slice of my equally hot life.

“I would say I’m boring you, but there’s a sparkle in your eyes that appears every once in a while.” Teasing, he shakes his head in disbelief, stuffing said beanie into his hoodie pocket.

Busted!

Blinking a few times to get my bearings, I feign innocence and roll my eyes at him.

“Look, I’d hate to interrupt your train of thought, but we’re here for a reason, remember?” Chris raises his voice, berating me loud enough for others to hear. Subtly, he leans closer and whispers, “I wouldn’t dare interpret the look on your face, but... is there a special someone you wanna tell me about?” His tone is so earnest.

The guy’s been nagging me for details about my personal life, or relationship status to be precise; he couldn’t care less about anything else... Well, he did inquire about my life in France, which he’s never visited.

Football, plus what it entails like working out and Coach’s strategy sessions, doesn’t leave much room to party, and that’s fine by me. I don’t need any distractions. But Chris apparently believes that I can’t live like a monk, and he has to play matchmaker. So, whenever he hooks up with a hot babe, he feels compelled to introduce me to her sidekick, then I’m left playing a role I despise until I bail. I’m not into girls. Period. I’ll never pretend otherwise, especially when I’m lucky enough to have found my dream boyfriend.

I flip him the bird. “Fuck you!” I add in a playful tone as we settle into our seats.

“You wish, pretty boy.” Chris blows me an air kiss, squirming in his seat.

“It’s none of your goddamn business anyway.” Whenever the topic comes up, I overplay it. Harsh words. Amused tone. Closed subject. These are key to making him drop the issue. Locker room banter gets way worse, and I make a point of playing along, although it makes my roommate uneasy; I find his embarrassment cute. Yes, thick skin is a prerequisite, especially in my case. In turn, his hood falls down to reveal his dark hair. He offers me a goofy grin, and I finally register the roars of the fellow fans. The players start warming up on the field. The energy is insane.

Oak Hill. Southwest of downtown Austin. The new ATEX stadium.

The Troopers' home. A Troopers game. My Troopers dream.

Our entire team is scattered in the 100 level, thanks to Coach Stevens's magic. He managed to unearth Sunday afternoon tickets as a consolation prize for not making it to the championship. That way, it doesn't interfere with our tight football schedule and busy academic program. The strategic man surely hopes that witnessing greatness in real life will trigger what's been missing in our team. Unless a couple of players move to the other side of the country, I doubt that'll happen.

That said, I'm grateful for this opportunity. Watching the Troopers play live has been on my bucket list for years... However, I'm incapable of staying focused. Chris is right: What the fuck's wrong with me?

Nothing should be wrong because life is good; I have everything I've ever wanted. An honorable football season, despite a lingering lack of team spirit, because of our talented quarterback, Davis. A great GPA, thanks to hard work and Rupert's tutoring in a couple of my classes where I struggled. A healthy sex life, courtesy of the chemistry my boyfriend and I have.

Actually, strike that. I have everything I've ever wanted... minus playing in and winning the Playoff National Championship and getting Rupert to top, that is.

Ever since my epic failure when we first slept together over a year ago, we've been challenging each other in the bedroom—and elsewhere—to explore “new frontiers,” as my favorite Star Trek fan calls it. Too happy that he shared religiously watching the show with his mom as a kid, I resisted the urge to open my big mouth and label it corny; I definitely love when my guarded Brit opens up to me. Anyway, we'd never push each other to do something that would make the other uncomfortable, and my stubborn man claims he'll eventually be on board with topping. Yet, he pretends it'd change our dynamic that we have to fully own first. Whatever.

No wonder I'm lost inside my head more often than not, trying to find ways to make him cave. To no avail, so far. Thankfully, he did listen to my relocation suggestion. After all, Texas has a much stronger country music scene than New York! Within a few weeks, he moved from Chelsea to East Austin. Granted, I demanded that he settle down near West Campus, which would be easier to get to from the dorms. He wouldn't listen, insisting on some distance, because he prefers the unique creative vibe of East Austin. Meanwhile, I'm mostly the one hopping on my bike to meet him, but he does have a point. Neither of us needs too many distractions, and we wouldn't want to run into anyone too frequently. Not that PDA is part of our outings; touching strictly happens behind closed doors. Our relationship may be exclusive, but it remains too new to risk being exposed.

In turn, I've been neglecting my down time with Chris, in favor of rushing to East Austin. I didn't want my roomie to get all suspicious and nosy, thinking there was a girl involved, so I partially admitted the truth: One of my brother's friends had just been uprooted, and I had to help him settle down and enjoy Austin's scenery.

Riiight , as if I'd seen much of Austin since I landed here. Between studying, playing, and now fooling around, I don't have spare time to explore the city. If I'm being honest, Rupert does enjoy the scenery whenever he's beneath me, and I'm slamming into his sweet tight ass, and when he fists my hair when I'm on my knees for him and drink every drop he shoots down my throat. Yep, I'd much rather explore our chemistry than the actual city with the man I had such a hard time convincing to give us a try.

That said, my lover and I recognized that it's better to be safe than sorry. Hence, he steers clear of a five-mile radius of UT Austin so we can't cross paths in "my" territory. It saddens me, yet we're in the same boat: We do not want out of our closet in the near future.

As is often the case, we both had plans of our own today. While I'm fulfilling a

dream of mine, he's surely having a blast rehearsing for a gig somewhere in the city later today. It's fine, really, we both have busy lives. I'm absolutely not jealous of his blossoming friendship with a couple of his neighbors who also happen to be musicians. I inwardly scold myself for forgetting to ask if the upcoming concert involves them.

Hence, the daydreaming instead of appreciating the experience of seeing some of my NFL idols, guys I hope to be playing alongside in a few years. Now that my focus has returned, my adrenaline's pumping. I bet this game will demonstrate how far we have to go as college players. We're all so full of ourselves, so gifted but so clueless.

The game kicks off. They're playing Indiana, which I'm not familiar with. I only have eyes for the Troopers anyway, and they immediately lock onto their wide receiver. I nudge Chris. "Check out number 11."

"Parker, right? The new guy." For some reason, Chris is immune to the Who's Who of famous players. On an inebriated night when we first met, we attended an out-of-control sorority party, for once, during which he blurted out that he never collected trading cards as a kid. What do they teach kids in school in Oklahoma these days? Even I found ways to get some, even though American Football isn't a popular sport in France, and they don't carry football cards, apart from soccer ones.

"Yup! Watch how he runs his routes. Dude's a machine."

My teammate leans forward, intently watching Parker, who's going through a series of cuts and catches. "Man, his footwork is unreal." He shakes his head in awe. "If we could get half that crispness ..."

I agree. "It's all in the details." Mesmerized, my eyes widen. "Look how he adjusts his body mid-air. He's already thinking about where the defender is before he even catches the ball."



Every play feels like it could shift the momentum. When the home team's quarterback fires a deep pass down the sideline to Parker, Chris and I both jump to our feet, instinctively mimicking the anticipation of a catch. Parker leaps, snatches the ball out of the air, and somehow manages to drag both feet inbound. The crowd goes wild, including my teammates. Our faces brighten, excitement buzzing in our veins.

“Did you see that?!” I yell over the cheers, turning to Chris. “That’s the kind of catch that gets you a highlight reel. You think we’re ready for that?”

Eyes wide with admiration, Chris hands my beanie back, shrugging. “One day, man.” His Adam’s apple bobs up and down. He swallows, then sighs. “One day... Maybe!”

Throughout the game, our closest teammates, Chris, and I exchange comments, analyzing plays and discussing how we can bring that level of play back to our college team. From the corner of my eye, I see Coach Stevens observing us, and even Davis provides some valuable input. Maybe next season we’ll be able to prove our worth?

Every time Parker or one of the other receivers make a big catch or the O-line makes a key block, Chris and I are right there, soaking it all in. They’re dominating the game; Indiana’s wrestling to do its best to stay afloat.

It’s more than just a game for us—it’s a glimpse of what we’re working toward.

The final whistle blows. I gawk at the score. 31-14. My favorite Texas team dominated the opposition. The teams start clearing the field, and I take one last look at Parker, watching how he interacts with his teammates and fans waiting near the tunnel. Signing autographs with a genuine smile. Owning his amazing skills that he worked so hard to master. Soaking in the team’s success without making it all about it him; he clearly pulled his weight.

This is the life we want, the life I want, for sure, the stage I strive for. I'll knock down every Davis who stands in my way if I have to. Tonight, seeing it up close boosted my confidence. Trust me, I don't lack confidence in myself, but I'm lacking confidence in my team, which is a real shame. I know a turnaround is possible. We just have to keep grinding, keep pushing each other, and one day, it'll be us down there, making those plays.

Hope skyrocketing, we chatter as we exit the stadium, replaying the moves that led to the Troopers' massive triumph.

Damn, they're so dedicated, focused, and talented.

When we hit the parking lot, I follow Chris to his grey Toyota hybrid, about to part ways with the rest of the group when Coach's stomach growls. We bark out a laugh in unison, then he suggests out of the blue, "Tell you what, why don't we all grab a bite to eat and discuss the game?" He doesn't usually mix practice with personal stuff, but this is different. "Listen, guys, there's a pretty cool place with simple, but amazing food, and sometimes live music to boot. I'm starving! Who's in?"

It takes all of a second to the obnoxious homophobe who believes he's our leader to rally the troops in his authoritative voice.

"Let's go!"

### CHAPTER 16

#### KILLING ME SOFTLY WITH HIS SONG

Elliot

Davis pushes his way through the doors of the bar with the team in his wake, guffawing and jostling each other after the incredible game.

I'm literally living the dream.

The Rusty Spurs is nothing like I imagined—a sports bar. In truth, since my mind tends to be in the gutter more often than not, I associated the name with a gay bar. Nah, we may live in liberal Austin, but Coach Stevens wouldn't intentionally hang out at a gay bar, no matter the cool vibes or delicious food, would he? Especially not with a bunch of college football players! Imagining the shock on Davis and Jones's faces as they step into a gay bar brings a mischievous grin to my stupid face; it doesn't really make sense since I haven't set foot in one yet.

Oh, well! Maybe in another lifetime...

The wood floors creak under our feet as we walk in, and the smell of smoked brisket, fried food, and grilled jalapeños immediately hits us. I can already feel my stomach rumbling.

"Smells like heaven," one of the guys behind me says over the classic country tune cranking out of the jukebox, blending with the background noise of clinking glasses

and animated conversations.

I tilt my head approvingly and glance around. The bar is slammed. The laid-back vibe and slight edge make it the perfect Austin spot. Such a perfectly cool place mirroring our post-game energy.

Coach raved about this joint, saying it was a must-visit. From the looks of it, he wasn't wrong, and I make a mental note to suggest it to Rupert. He's usually the one pushing me to go out rather than ordering takeout, insisting that there's nothing revealing about us having dinner together.

Then, why do I cringe when patrons pointedly look at him? Yes, I get that they recognize him or want to come up to him for an autograph, but I worry. Don't get me wrong, I'm proud of his achievements and cheer at his gigs, but as ridiculously clueless about country music as Tim. I can't fully grasp the extent of The Whiskey Barrels' stardom or the success of Rupert's other collaborations. His fans keep startling me.

I like that this place is low-key, and I'm sure he'd appreciate that, too. It's a mix between a cozy bar and a classic Texas barbecue joint, with wooden tables and worn leather booths that lend a lived-in feeling. The walls are lined with vintage concert posters, neon beer signs, and a few Texas flags thrown in for good measure. It's dimly lit, with a few strings of soft yellow lights draped across the ceiling, casting a warm glow over everything. A couple of older locals are perched on stools at the bar that runs along the opposite side of the room, nursing drinks and chatting with the much younger bartenders.

A small raised stage is tucked in the back.

Still amped up from the game, we grab two big booths since there's too many of us to fit into one. I purse my lips, reining in my irritation because, of course, Davis had to

slide next to Chris, across from me, closer to Coach. His sidekick, Jones, follows like a well-trained puppy.

I scan the menu that's definitely not our regular diet. I guess it's Coach's way of encouraging us to enjoy the carefree moment for once.

"Listen up! Y'all have your DD, correct?" Coach inquires. Chris and a few others confirm. "Good. Enjoy your night, guys!" Then, he waves over an older waitress who resembles Dolly Parton. She sashays to Coach's booth first. He doesn't give her the opportunity to introduce herself and do her regular spiel. "Good evening, Susan." Ohhh, he's a regular. "How ya doin' tonight?"

Very smooth, à la Joe Tribiani. Good job, Coach!

Susan greets him, then us after he jokingly introduces us as his "adopted pack" without going into more detail because who cares. She looks at him with stars in her eyes, and they make small talk about how packed it is and the specials, and I tune them out. Funny how I'm seeing Coach Stevens in a new light, in what could very well be his natural habitat, as if he didn't exist off the field until now. But I can understand the appeal for the ladies: brawny body, strong jaw, and driven attitude.

I fidget, suddenly realizing that I don't have a clue about Coach's personal life. Apart from bits and pieces of Chris's life—his outdoorsy family and his single sister—I know close to nothing about the people around me. It was the same in France, where I haven't set foot since I started college. I don't ask. I don't share. I don't lie... but restrict my conversations to campus life and tidbits about my former life in France, including wine tasting and no-consequence clichés. My private life remains... private, vague enough to avoid questions.

"I'm famished!" Chris announces, and we confirm in unison.

Coach orders enough food to feed the entire team: wings, fries, ribs, you name it... as well as beer to quench our thirst and Susan saunters off under Coach's coveting gaze.

He wouldn't be flirting with her if he was otherwise attached, right?

I block my train of thought. Whatever it is I just witnessed doesn't concern me, so I feign a renewed interest in looking around the place when he praises the regular live performances.

Contorting my body, I look over my right shoulder. It's hard to see the stage, especially with the small round tables surrounding it. The tables all have the ridiculously tiny lamps, reminding me of a French cabaret.

People are slowly gathering around the stage, but that's not what we're here for. I appreciate the treat from Coach. Bonding off the field might be the trick to help us click. For now, we forget about the missed championship and homework. The conversation flows easily, and soon enough, trays of food and cold beer land on our tables.

"It smells fantastic!" we exclaim in unison and hungrily dive in, wiping sauce from our fingers, forgetting our—barely there—manners, going back and forth about the best plays we witnessed earlier. We're all barely taking a breath between bites and stories.

Kiss-ass Davis's doing his best play-by-play impression to amuse Coach, causing everyone at the table to guffaw. I even join in, until Davis starts making a big production of slurping the sauce from his sticky fingers with his pointy tongue. Doing so, his mouth parts as he intently stares at the twenty-something waitress's massive cleavage as she clears our table. He then proceeds to shoot her a raunchy once-over for good measure.

Classy, huh? I can't believe he dares to call himself an Alpha. I guess he's confusing rude jerk with true leader. If I didn't have anything to lose, I'd enlighten him. But I know better.

"Damn, these wings are on point, Coach!" he shouts, as if the food needed his validation. Truth be told, I bet his words don't match his actual thoughts, considering his eyes are now locked on the girl's derrière .

As much as I despise the guy's opinions on certain topics, I must admit that he can be fun otherwise. What I hate the most about him, though, is that I don't stand up to him. I simply can't. I loathe what his foul mouth full of hatred and bigoted comments makes of me: a speechless, cowardly, pathetic fuck.

Trying to flag down Susan for a beer refill, I see excitement ripple through the room. The lights dim a bit, and a voice says something about tonight's band over the speakers. I'm too far away from the stage and too caught up in our conversation to catch the details. Grabbing another rib while waiting for my cold beverage requires my full attention.

The first few notes of the music hit. It's a slow, soulful strum of a guitar, the kind that feels like it sinks right into your chest. I stop mid-bite, the rib hanging in the air. My body tenses. A couple of words, and the room tilts on its axis.

What are the odds?

Enthralled, the room slowly fades away, and it's just me and that voice. Rich. Haunting. Painfully familiar... As always, it evokes something unprecedented within me, raw emotion that has no place here.

Dropping my food, I freeze. My sudden panic has nothing to do with Rupert's presence. It's linked to my inevitable reaction to the way he sings. My breath catches

in my throat as I will myself to behave.

I remind myself how different his voice sounds when shouting my name in pleasure. My dick thickens in approval. I squirm in my seat.

Fuck! Sporting a semi while listening to a live performance won't help my case either. At least, it's hidden under the table.

Every fiber of my being wants to look at the stage. To be on stage next to him. To kiss him senseless in front of the entire audience. My lover. My boyfriend. My secret.

Eventually noticing I've gone quiet while the others are joking around and talking shit, Chris mouths, "You okay over there?" His words barely register until he reaches across the table and taps my elbow. His simple gesture rips me from my stupefaction. Chris frowns. I worry my lower lip. We engage in a silent conversation like we do on the field.

His deep brown eyes search for an answer that I obviously can't voice. I mumble that live music does this to me sometimes, then work on my breathing to recover as quickly as possible. I couldn't be more thankful that Nathan Price taught Rupert valuable tools in what he called "the art of breathing." Pompous but effective.

In the blink of an eye, I'm able to enjoy the music. That is until our kicker Dillard, who's sitting towards the edge of the booth, bursts out, "Holy shit, that's Rupert Smith!"

"Who?" someone from the other booth asks, but they've all shut up and are listening to the performance.

"Smith, the guitarist from The Whiskey Barrels," he clues them in. "They're one of my favorite country bands. Nothing like the whiny country songs about trucks,



religion and other shit.” I chuckle at Dillard’s words, knowing full well how Rupert came to enjoy these specific themes when he met Hardy, who introduced him to country music. Oh, well, to each their own, and it’s not like I’m gonna share that piece of info anyway. “The Barrels are more modern. I’ve seen them in Tulsa and in Bear Creek several times.”

The mention of Tulsa makes me think of Chris; we’re so close. It pains me that there are so many things we don’t share, and I’m the one at fault here. Didn’t he once say he was from Oklahoma? I make a mental note to ask later. Keeping my mouth shut about my personal life taught me to ask others questions, but keep a distance... Otherwise, they might stick their nose where it doesn’t belong without even realizing it. Thanks, but no thanks.

“The guy’s freakin’ talented,” Dillard continues, hyping the team. “He’s been working with Dante Reyes lately.” They all seem to know who Reyes is; I’m more of a classic rock enthusiast, thanks to my mom’s influence. Rupert and Tim have both mentioned Reyes on separate occasions, which is the only reason that I recognize the name.

“Come on, guys! We gotta watch his performance from up there.”

Most of the conversations have ceased, patrons apparently too absorbed by the live performance. So are we, standing behind the cabaret tables, entranced by the artist who’s playing the acoustic guitar along with two other musicians.

And then, Davis’s big mouth strikes again as he glances in my direction and snorts out a laugh. “Hey, Lefevre!” What now? He can’t possibly know what’s going on, right? His amused tone rubs me the wrong way. “You never told me you had a twin brother!”

“Ha-ha.” I roll my eyes, then look at Chris helplessly; what’s wrong with this guy

anyway? Rupert and I look nothing alike. He's lankier, which makes him look taller. Then, I realize what he sees before he voices it. The ginger hair. The alabaster skin. The freckled face.

These damn freckles that speak right to my dick while his beautiful green eyes always spoke to my soul. This man... Somehow, he helped me become my own person.

I watch Davis scroll on his phone, gawk, and show the screen to Jones, whose jaw drops so low it's comical. "Holy shit!" I'm torn between annoyance—because their attention isn't on the music—and curiosity—because what could possibly be so fascinating—but I'm sure Coach will have something to say about their choice of words.

Unfortunately, he doesn't get the opportunity to intervene before Davis explains, "Just checked out the guy's profile. Look at this!" He turns the screen for everyone to see. "There's a bunch of pics of a smoking hot babe in his arms." My heart lurches at the thought, remembering how Sally's sudden death affected Rupert. But Davis's next words brighten my mood. "The fucker has good taste."

"You're right, he totally does," I can't help but reply, doing my best to keep a straight face.

"Yup, the guy's banging a sweet piece of ass." More like the other way around, Davis, because Rupert Smith's ass is the most gorgeous, lickable, and bitable ass I've ever encountered. But I wish he'd bang me; a boy can dream...

"Bet he has fun in the sack," Jones adds, snorting stupidly while glancing at Coach, who's frowning and telling them to knock it off.

As misplaced as their assumptions are, I'm having too much fun to stop myself. My mischievous gaze goes unnoticed in the dim light anyway.

“For sure!”

### CHAPTER 17

#### GOOD LOOKING

Rupert

Tim's hand suddenly claws my tense shoulder, jolting me back to the present. To the stadium. To the cheering crowd. My heart races as the two-minute warning approaches. "Are you following the action or do you need me to clue you in?" He takes a bite of his pretzel, then licks the salt from his fingers. "Sorry, it's about time I ask." His offer is endearing, considering his knowledge of football is minimal, slightly better than mine was prior to dating Elliot. "I'm so hyped to see Elliot play that I got sucked in right off the bat."

Today is Elliot's third pro game. His first home game. Against Carolina.

Yes! I'm officially dating an NFL player, and I'm pretty hyped as well. Known for controlling my emotions, I'm torn between showing how invested I am in the game playing out in front of my mesmerized eyes and concealing my genuine interest.

Not wanted to get busted, I smile at Tim, reach for my water, and guzzle half of the bottle. "Nah, I'm good. I did some research. But thanks."

I'm no football novice anymore. Only I can't admit that hearing Elliot talk about games helped to enlighten me. Attending his first professional games strengthened my burgeoning knowledge.

Elliot's dream came true. He was draft eligible thanks to UT Austin's mentorship program with The Troopers. It gave him the opportunity to practice under Logan Foster's supervision, a wide receiver who saw his potential and basically took him under his wing. Elliot's unwavering determination, hard work, and focus paid off. He got drafted right after college, thanks to a wide receiver named Parker. My boyfriend was pissed that he won't play alongside Parker, who got traded to Philadelphia, but was thrilled for the opportunity of a lifetime.

After the draft, Elliot dragged me to a tattoo parlor to immortalize his success by marking his skin. "Tattoos are addictive," Elliot had said once it was done, and I bailed. "It's the first of many." Both of his biceps are now adorned with sexy tribal tats.

His impressive preseason performance reinforced his value to the team; Head Coach Oliviera and Wide Receiver Coach Schott confirmed what Foster—or Gunner, as players call him—saw in him. Apparently, Elliot is quick on his feet and blended seamlessly with his NFL team following a somewhat sour college experience. It's as if he's always been part of The Austin Troopers, which earned him the LeFire nickname from Coach Dyers, the Offensive Line Coach, who loves to bestow creative monikers.

Go, Elliot!

Consequently, my favorite rookie was given the amazing opportunity to actually play in the first regular season game, then the next one, too.

Right now, though, the score is tight. Carolina is winning 17-14. We're in the final minutes of the first half, and every play feels like it could shift the momentum. Callum Jones, the impressive quarterback, drops back, scanning the field, and I spot broad shoulders and powerful thighs. Elliot. Too bad his helmet hides his gorgeous strawberry blond hair. The talented rookie makes a break down the sideline. The ball

sails through the air in a perfect spiral, landing right in his hands, just past the defender. Dodging a tackle, Elliot cuts inside, surges forward, and crosses into the end zone for a touchdown.

Holy shit. That's my man!

And now the Troopers are leading.

The crowd erupts. The cheerful Lefevre clan stands as one. The proud secret boyfriend forgets his telltale British nonchalance.

That play is a game-changer, and I jump to my feet.

Woot! Woot!

I catch my breath and chest-bump Tim, overcome with mirth. Elliot's family is hugging, shouting their excitement over the touchdown celebration music.

Due to conflicting schedules, Elliot's family couldn't travel to see his first games live. They made amends by flying over as soon as possible, which means today, and lucked out with a beautiful Sunday afternoon.

And here I am, surrounded by the entire Lefevre family, including their significant others. I'm sitting between my best friend and Elliot's mother. She's a die-hard football fan, so seeing her youngest play for the NFL has her on edge.

I have to say that I was taken aback when Tim urged me to fly to Texas so that we could attend one of Elliot's games together. Needless to say that I feel shitty he has no idea how many secrets have piled up over time. My sexual orientation. My fake relationship with Sally. My first ever lasting relationship. My very real relationship with his younger brother. I remained evasive about my relocation to Texas—well,

Austin—but our frequent travels limited this line of questioning since we often met in various states.

And last but not least, my paparazzi charade... Thankfully, my stardom hasn't reached France, and over the years, the few European Barrels performances have been restricted to Scandinavia. Even in the US, I'm not front-page tabloid material. Nevertheless, I make sure the meager number of paparazzi interested in me get a good shot—preferably outside of Texas—and always around a groupie or a female friend.

Lies that my currently high-profile NFL rookie encourages; we both have to work through a few lingering issues... But let's not get into that just yet and enjoy the ride.

Unaware of my sudden interest in football, Tim has no idea about the perks I get, like free last-minute tickets whenever my music plans allow me to cheer for my boyfriend—courtesy of Caitlin Cole from the PR team.

My best friend claimed I'd been missing out on this piece of American culture. He couldn't wait for us to watch the star of the family together. I gleefully accepted, telling him he could treat me to dinner instead of the outrageously expensive tickets.

I love Elliot in action, not only when I'm beneath him, my eyes locked on his, and wearing his jersey.

Tim's hand snatches my wrist, and I'm pulled into the group hug, overwhelmed by excited screams. "Kudos, bro!" For a minute, I forget that I'm a deceitful best friend. At this very moment, only Elliot Lefevre's success matters.

The audience remains amped during halftime. "Damn, the fans are wild!" my best friend exclaims once he retakes his seat, as does his family. They're all commenting on the game and actions I'm not sure I follow. I may be well-versed in football now,

but I'm far from being an expert like Mrs. Lefevre.

Tim's right, though, the fans won't stop. How can I blame them? They're all raving about LeFire, but either it's too noisy for Tim to pick it up, or he doesn't realize who the audience means. I clue him in. "Seriously?"

"Yup! From what I've read, giving nicknames is one of the coaches' favorite pastimes apparently. Every newbie gets one."

"At least, they didn't choose The Frog or something similar. I hated it when your friends called me that."

"I'd forgotten about that. They were idiots. It doesn't matter now."

He shrugs. "True." His hand grasps mine and squeezes. "I'm glad you're here." My heart lurches at my treason. I worry my lips. "I've missed this..." Not sure if he's talking about our friendship or the atmosphere of the game. "It's been a while." Another squeeze before he releases his hold and answers his stepmom's question that I somehow missed.

To get a breather from my gloomy thoughts on this glorious day, I volunteer to grab some snacks and beverages and quickly head for the nearest concourse.

Lost in my thoughts, I push my secrets away and focus on people talking about Elliot. Would they keep on raving about him if they knew he was gay? Would his personal life make a difference? Would they actually care?

I'm somehow relieved that Elliot came out to his former roommate, Chris; I felt bad that he didn't have anyone to confide in and be his real self with, except for me. Looks like we've been fighting the same demons.



During their college years, those two built a solid friendship. Eventually, Chris said he'd guessed something was up because, as months passed, Elliot spent less and less time on campus. His friend was oddly unperturbed by the news, but enraged at Davis's BS in retrospect. My man is lucky to have found someone who complained to Coach Stevens so that such behavior would be condemned; Elliot didn't.

Maybe Elliot and Gunner will end up being friends. After all, they do spend extensive hours together, while Chris chose to pursue a Masters' degree.

The fact that the Troopers are a super inclusive team wasn't enough to assuage Elliot's paranoia. Hence, my boyfriend reluctantly felt the need to share his sexual orientation with Caitlin Cole, a PR person for the Troopers, before preseason began. He invited her to our home for brunch, which wasn't customary, but LeFire's Frenchness apparently granted him a pass. The forty-something woman was telling him she appreciated his coming forward so that she'll be prepared in case something came up, when I came down from the rooftop gym. Who would have guessed that she'd fangirl over me? But her lips are sealed. Remembering her gawking face, I stroke the back of my neck, a cocky grin spreading on my face.

Elliot's cockiness is rubbing off on me...

Oops!

Once I'm done distributing refreshments to my grateful former host family, I sit back down to enjoy the show, and my attention returns to the game. The third quarter is about to start.

Soon enough, I'm leaning forward, elbows resting on my knees. The tension builds as Elliot lines up for the snap.

"Come on, Elliot," Tim encourages. "You got this!"

The play begins, and Elliot bursts off the line, sprinting downfield with incredible speed. Heat rushes through my body, and my cheeks redden.

I knew he had it in him.

Jones fakes a handoff, then fires a quick pass to him just as Elliot cuts inside.

My eyes widen, glued to the field.

Elliot pivots, and his foot slips awkwardly on the turf.

My heart skips a beat when he crumples to the ground, grabbing his ankle and rolling in agony. I gawk, my eyes bulging from their sockets.

This can't be happening.

But it is... Overcoming the surge of emotion, I jump out of my seat. "Oh, no!" Blood rushes to my temples while my pulse pounds so hard in my ears that I cover them with my hands to make it stop.

An injury timeout is called. The crowd is silent. The panic is palpable.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, fuck.

Helpless, I watch the medical staff hurry Elliot's way, willing myself to get my bearings. Hands on my thighs, I work to get my breathing in check.

From the distance, the grim look on the medical staff's faces says it all as far as Elliot's future in today's game is concerned.

Over.

Nathan's breathing techniques come in handy throughout this whole ordeal. I'm amazed by my ability to follow the steps so religiously, but it prevents me from having a panic attack, unlike Elliot's family members next to me. Dealing with my own shit takes priority, and they're all too stressed to focus on me anyway.

Certain that I've switched my phone to airplane mode, I almost miss the buzzing sound coming from my pants pocket. Fingers clutching my phone, I see a string of rapid-fire texts from Caitlin Cole.

"Fuck!" I mutter between clenched teeth and blankly stare at the screen. Struggling to make sense of the words, I reread the first text.

Caitlin

Hey.

E said you're here.

Sorry you had to witness that. He's OK, sort of.

At this point, Dr. Rosie can't determine if his ankle is sprained or fractured. We're taking him to the hospital.

Meet me in front of the locker rooms.

Directions follow, as well as another text from my current favorite person, the only one in the know... unless Caitlin informed management after Elliot's revelation. Either way, I have to trust her, trust them. I haven't met anyone from the team, aside from her, but I put all of my hopes in Doctor Rosie.

Rosie said he passed out while on his way to St. David's South Austin Medical

Center.

Where are U? Meet me in front of the stadium. I've arranged transportation for U. Will tag along.

R, are U on your way?

Rupert

Sorry I'm just seeing this now. I'll be right there.

FYI, his family is also here from France. I know them,

well mostly one of their kids. They're sitting next to me.

Three little dots dance on the screen.

Caitlin

How do you want to handle that?

Now, that's a damn good question. My mind races. My heart tightens. My body trembles. Probably sensing my hesitation, Caitlin sends another text.

Tell you what. You & I get a head start so you can go see him on your own terms.

E's mother is listed in his contact list. I'll text her now with updates. I'll tell her to wait for further instructions.

We'll drive them there in a bit. Would that work?

Relief floods my insides. From the corner of my eye, I see them going back and forth in a guessing game about what's going to happen next.

Meanwhile, the actual game is back on, but I couldn't care less.

What a clusterfuck!

Rupert

Thanks for your understanding.

They're all busy talking, but very worried as you can imagine.

I'll escape & meet you.

Caitlin

Just doing my job. Now, move it.

Her business tone on texts is contradicted by the care she takes handling Elliot's case, and mine. With that in mind, I do as planned, reluctantly leaving Tim.

Another treason.

### CHAPTER 18

#### IMPOSSIBLE

Rupert

Sporting sunglasses and a baseball cap to somewhat conceal my identity, I hop into Caitlin Cole's grey sedan. The car couldn't be less conspicuous, which is perfect. I appreciate that she asks me if I'd like background music to calm my nerves. Despite what brought us together, she teases me when I reply, "Anything but my music and The Beatles is fine."

Then she proceeds to warn me about the media circus that awaits us. Elliot may be a rookie, but he's a promising one; vultures thrive on the success and failure of NFL players, and are always chasing the next juicy story.

Secrecy is a bitch.

Because of it, I couldn't attend my boyfriend of three years' graduation. I hated being shunned. I hated that I couldn't sit with his family and cheer his success. I hated that I had to wait for them to return to France to celebrate with him.

Instead, I managed to book a Whiskey Barrels concert in Tijuana so that I wouldn't sulk while my successful man would walk across the stage to collect his BBA in Finance.

The point is, we don't want Tim, more than anyone, to connect the dots.

Don't get me wrong, I love what Elliot and I have and wouldn't change a thing. Otherwise, our relationship wouldn't be what it is now, and I'm perfectly content with it.

Throughout the short drive, Caitlin wears a mask of professionalism; no prying, no inappropriate questions.

I suspect that her constant rambling is her way of keeping my mind—and hers—occupied. It proves that she's just as worried as I am, obviously for completely different reasons.

Hearing about Elliot's football life from another perspective is refreshing. She recounts Gunner's mentorship; he's acted like a mother hen since meeting Elliot, and Caitlin says he must be crushed to retake the field after witnessing his protégé's injury.

Her fondness for Elliot is evident in her tone, too. My boyfriend wasn't exaggerating when he told me that this competitive team is also a caring one.

Noticing the hospital facilities from the road, I sigh for the umpteenth time.

The anxiety coiling in my stomach must be written all over my exhausted face because she feels the need to reassure me. "I'm no doctor, but I'm sure it's gonna be okay, Rupert. This is nothing Doctor Rosie and I haven't dealt with before. We'll do everything to have Elliot back on the field in no time." She pauses. "That's probably not what you wanna hear... More risks... Sorry... You want him safe and sound, right?" There is no judgment in her eyes, and from what I've seen, she's down to earth and driven.

I glance her way. "Don't worry, I know what you mean, and thank you... for being there for me, and everything..."

“Don’t mention it.” She gestures with her free hand. “Who would have thought that working PR for an NFL player would lead to sitting with a member of The Whiskey Barrels?” She lets out a nervous chuckle. “Shut up, Caitlin,” she murmurs to herself, then speaks up again, “I promise, I’ll get over it soon!”

Her attempt to lighten the mood hits home. My tension eases, and the conversation flows as she navigates to find a parking spot that’s hidden from the public eye and will enable us to use a more concealed entrance. She sure knows her way around here.

I walk down the hospital corridor with her beside me, my heavy footsteps echoing on the drab tiles. The telltale hospital smell assaults my nostrils, bringing me back to darker times. Elliot had been my rock then; I’ll be his now.

My erratic heart hammers in my chest with every step I take closer to him .

In turn, the weight of the situation registers. Elliot injured his ankle, but the diagnosis is pending. At this point, nobody knows when he’ll be able to play again. I’m his emergency contact, but we’re not even supposed to truly know each other. His family must be worried sick... But wait until the shit hits the fan, and the truth about us is eventually revealed! I can’t even start to imagine their reaction.

I did text Tim so that he wouldn’t look for me once the shock has subsided. I simply told him the truth: He should be with his family, and I’ll see him soon. I didn’t have the heart to text anything revealing the true nature of my absence.

I would have preferred to be brave enough to confess my secrets to Tim. Our regular talks include off-limit topics, and I’m never the one bringing up Elliot.

The sight of the man I love going down, clutching his ankle, had me frozen in the stands and will forever be carved in my memory... Because, yes, I’m very much



aware that I'm in love and have been for longer than I care to admit. He deserves to hear the words that I never dared to utter for fear of making him freak out and reevaluate our commitment. The fact that we recently moved in together proves that we're serious, but our age difference on top of our choice to fly under the radar troubles me. What if he finds someone his age who's not closeted?

Shaking my head to chase the gloomy thought away, I will myself to get a grip; I'm here for Elliot, overanalyzing will have to wait.

A pang of unease washes over me for keeping Elliot's family in the dark for now. I shoot a quick text to Chris, who's surely watching the game, to inform him that I'll keep him posted. His immediate thank you brings warmth to my pained heart.

We near his room, and Caitlin gives me a reassuring nod. The doctor we met upon our arrival is the one who took care of Elliot when he checked in with Doctor Rosie, whose name isn't actually that. Not that it matters since the doctor confirmed I could see Elliot for now as tests and scans will soon follow to assess his exact condition. He said that he's been responsive so far, yet painkillers had to be administered due to a headache and ankle swelling.

Damn!

Caitlin pushes open the door, whispering that she's gonna go find Doctor Rosie and will come back in a bit. I can barely breathe. "Thanks for giving us privacy."

"You're welcome."

I timidly step into the room, and there he is—my lover, my boyfriend, my Elliot—lying in the hospital bed. My mouth goes dry when I realize how pale and disoriented he looks.

I make a point to look him in the eye rather than stare at the massive ice pack on his ankle. It must hurt like hell. I push down my impulse to rush to his bedside and squeeze him in a comforting hug. I remind myself that the nurse warned me he might be out of it because of the painkillers they gave him once the possibility of a concussion had been ruled out.

He may be groggy, but he has to set the pace, not me.

His eyes flutter open as the door clicks shut. He stares blankly at me for a tad too long. Is he trying to remember where he is? Is he trying to figure out who I am? Is he trying to figure out if I'm real? Then, a small, sleepy grin tugs at the corner of his luscious mouth.

"Hey," he murmurs, his voice raspy. "You came."

"Of course, I came," I reply, forcing my voice to stay steady, though relief is flooding me. "You always make me come for you, babe," I joke, moving closer to the bed and snatching a chair on the way.

He smirks, hisses, and complains softly, "You shouldn't make me laugh... My ribs are aching." His hand reaches out for mine, his grip weak but warm.

I kiss his knuckles, which oddly soothes my soul. "Sorry. It's just good to see you... awake."

I can see the confusion in his deep brown eyes, then a flicker of recognition. "I can't believe I fucked up. Third game, and I screwed up!" His self-deprecation guts me.

I squeeze his hand and sit down on the edge of the bed. "Don't be too hard on yourself. You went down pretty hard, babe. Soon we'll know what's going on, then you'll have a game plan to your recovery. You'll be okay... eventually. You need

some rest first.”

His face falls a little. Turning his head slightly to look at me, he grimaces as he moves. “But what about the team? They took my phone from me.” He grunts. “What time is it? Did they win?” He pauses, averting his gaze. “Am I... out?”

My heart sinks at the worry in his eyes. He’s always so focused, so determined. Needless to say that the thought of being benched is killing him. I brush a strand of hair from his damp forehead.

“Hey, don’t think about that right now. You just need to heal, and you’ll be back out there in no time. You rocked today. This,” I gesture at the hospital bed, “is just a bump in the road.” I lean in closer and deposit a gentle kiss on his dry lips. “Just know that I’m here, and you’re going to be okay. We’ll get through this together.”

For a minute, it's just us, holding hands. The fear, the shock, and the uncertainty all fade away. Everything is right in the world again. He’s here. He’s okay... and he’s perfect.

“I should get going.” I stand up but remain near him while I reluctantly clue him in. “I left the game without telling your family.” I probably should have suggested riding to see Elliot with them. “Well, I sent Tim a short text after I split.” I berate myself for being so selfish, and my front teeth gnaw at my lower lip. Fidgeting on the bed, he hisses as he leans closer to me, his thumb gently releasing my lip. Screw selfishness, I needed a moment with him. Alone. “Your parents will be here any minute now.” I eventually notice the crease between his brows. “What is it?”

His eyes zoom in on me. “I think it’s time, Rupert.”

“Time for what?” Is he saying what I think he is?

“To tell them.” His fingers intertwine with mine. “About me, and us... Your mom knows, I think they should be on the same page. We don’t have to tell the rest of the world right now...”

“You’re ready to come out to your family?”

“If you’re on board with the idea... I mean, it also implies that you come out to them... my entire family.”

“Actually, I was with them at the game. Tim texted to say if I was anywhere near Austin, I should tag along.” As I come clean, a myriad of emotions runs across his face. Amusement. Disbelief. Doubt. “I couldn’t refuse, although, as you know, he believes I still live in Chelsea.” That’s why we agreed to keep our relationship under wraps during his family’s stay, and I checked into a nearby hotel.

“Please, Rupert.” His fingers tighten around mine before letting go. “Stay.”

Am I ready, though?

It’s a much bigger step for him than it is for me.

So, if he’s ready, then I’m ? —

I don’t have time to form a complete thought or mull over my decision: The door swings open, and I feel him tense beside me.

Tilting my head, I watch his parents walk in. Their faces are a mask of concern and confusion, their brows furrow in distress. The coward in me is relieved that Tim isn’t with them. His mom’s eyes narrow slightly as she takes in the scene.

Caught between my boyfriend’s request and the weight of his parents’ curious stares,

my face heats up before my breathing techniques limit my embarrassment.

Ah, the joy of being a redhead with my emotions displayed for everyone to see!

Elliot's beautiful face doesn't hide his feelings. Resolve. Hope. Defiance. That's my man!

"Hey, Mom." His voice much stronger than earlier. Uncertainty flashes in his eyes.

I can tell he's strategizing, probably on how to get straight to the point.

Glancing at me, he shoots me a confident smile before staring back at her. "Guess today's game didn't exactly play out as expected, huh?" He shrugs. His laser gaze finds his father's, finally acknowledging him with a quick nod.

"Dad."

### CHAPTER 19

YOU

Elliot

Mom's soft gaze is ping-ponging between Dad, Rupert, and me as she strolls towards the edge of the bed to face me. We've never had to live through a medical emergency, but by now, she's surely fathomed that Rupert's presence implies that he's my emergency contact.

Obviously, it hardly makes sense since they think that Rupert resides in Manhattan. I hate that we decided it was safer for us to have him check into a hotel during their stay. My heart sinks.

It's not just an elephant in the room now, more like a herd.

My dad's face becomes a blank slate, devoid of emotion. He stands frozen in time, rooted by the door, as if I hadn't spoken to him seconds ago. If I'm being honest, I wish I could get up and ditch this place, snatch Rupert's wrist and run away with him. The sterile hospital smell reminds me of sickness, doubt, and sadness.

Actually, I wouldn't run because I'm scared to face my parents right now. I'm not. I'd run to remove my man from a place he abhors because of the heartbreaking memories linked to it. It sucks that I'm the one who brought him back to a hospital.

I shoot Rupert a sideways glance, watching him force a polite smile onto his face. I

admire that he's trying to make this encounter as casual as possible; it's anything but. I make a mental note to tell him how thankful I am he doesn't step in. It's my call to decide how I want this to play out.

I've thought about this moment a lot. I've rehearsed the conversation in my head. I've envisioned the right timing.

I'm mostly at peace with the idea. It's about time I stop pretending to be someone I'm not, but on the other hand, I'm sort of cornered. I wish Rupert and I could have discussed the logistics prior to my injury. Stuck in this hospital bed, time seems to have stopped.

I'm about to say the words I'd been dreading, and I must admit I'm not afraid anymore. I'm not ashamed. I'm more confident than ever.

You see, when I got drafted, I told Rupert that I was finally living my dream. I was wrong. Wrong to consider football the ultimate goal. Wrong to erase him from the equation. Wrong to believe I grasped my priorities.

This is not a dream; I'm living my reality with a job I worked my ass off to get and a man I can't get enough of and am proud to call my boyfriend. I'm ready to deal with the bumps in the road head on. This is my reality, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

Rupert didn't object, but what about me? Am I overthinking things? My mind can't seem to decide between following what's going on or staying out of it due to the meds and lingering pain.

Mom eventually breaks the deafening silence. Her strangled voice is filled with such anguish. "You okay, honey?" I shouldn't be surprised that she'd focus on my health over the awkwardness of the situation. "I mean, as much as you can be after what

you've just been through." I nod approvingly. Then, her attention turns to Rupert. "I'm sorry, Rupert, with all the chaos, I didn't even realize you were gone." Didn't Rupert say he texted Tim? Where is he anyway? Her next question posed to me is barely a whisper. "Can I... can I approach?"

"Mom, it's me. Of course, you can approach."

She rounds the bed until she faces Rupert from the opposite side of the bed. Massaging my shoulder, she kisses my forehead.

I toy with the scratchy bed sheet for a split second.

Nope, I'm not going back .

Hesitation has no place in this room. So, I square my shoulders, hiss in pain, then grin at Rupert.

I look at my parents alternatively. As if I'd uttered a silent command, my dad walks to my mom's side.

"So, here's the thing," I start, but the door startles me as it opens. At first, I assume the medical staff is about to interrupt me... Instead, Tim barges in.

"Can you believe this?" he asks, oblivious of what's unfolding. "They fought me..." His eyes roam around the room. "They said there were already too many..." He catches his breath. "But they couldn't stop me from—" He stops again, his intense gaze on the potential intruder. "Ru?" Ohhh, I haven't heard that nickname since they became legal, but then again, my brother must be utterly confused. "I thought you said?—"

Clearing my throat with all my might to get everyone's attention once and for all, I



wave at Tim. “Hey, bro. Do you mind closing the door behind you to give us some privacy?” He obliges. “Come here, don’t be shy... The more, the merrier,” I joke, amused by his perplexed expression and spiked brow. I gesture for him to join my parents.

“Sooo...” I say, oh-so-slowly, for effect, “like I wanted to say before this... abrupt interruption.” Tim rolls his eyes, then purses his lips. I’m on a roll. “Here’s the thing: I’m gay.” There, I’ve said it! My voice didn’t even falter, and I don’t feel like throwing up like I did when I figured out I liked boys... Well, one in particular, and he’s standing next to me, expectant, beautiful, and proud. “Rupert is my boyfriend, and we just moved in together in East Austin.” There’s the emergency contact explanation! “Also, I’ve been in love with him for a while now.” There, he’s not a fling!

That’s enough information. I exhale softly. The full story will always be ours anyway.

Besides Nathan—who Rupert only saw for an extended weekend trip to Canada to honor Sally—only Hardy and the other band members are privy of our actual life status. Meaning me moving into his two-bedroom apartment right after graduation, which led him to break the news to his mother so that she wouldn’t be surprised on her next Christmas visit.

That said, he does have to work on hating himself for keeping things about us from the people he loves—my brother, Sally... My heart aches whenever he mentions how he cowardly broke his promise of coming out soon after she met Nathan. Just like guilt gnaws at him for postponing to reveal to her who the “special someone” he’d just met was. He never got the chance.

This unexpected hospital reunion might be oddly cathartic for both of us.

Once again, time freezes. I wonder what's next. None of this was planned, especially not my injury, but this unfortunate turn of events might be the extra push that Rupert and I needed.

Tim gawks before moving to speak, but my man is faster.

Rupert's gorgeous green eyes darken as his perfect face brightens. "You... You have? You do?"

"Duh!" My fingers graze his. The world around us vanishes. I only have eyes for him. "I meant to say it before, but I was too chickenshit... for once." I pause, acknowledging the goosebumps splayed across my arms.

Relax, I may have chemicals in my system, but I'm the same guy who'll never be a sappy romantic. However, it's pretty cool to take a step back and live this blissful moment to the fullest. As far as I can recall, I've always been attracted to this guy, there was no way around it. Pursuing him. Courting him. Convincing him...

My thumb caresses the back of his hand. "I love you, Rupert Smith. Always have and always will. There's no getting rid of me now!"

"Never! I love you, too, babe... so bloo—," he stops mid-sentence to avoid cursing in front of some of the most important people in my life. People who are dear to me, and who he respects. People who saw him as Tim's best friend until now. People who are watching him, us... as a couple. Awkward! "So much..."

"In case you're all wondering, Rupert played hard to get for way too long, too. But you know me, driven and all... Shocker, right?" I smile, shrugging nonchalantly in hopes of brightening the mood since the three of them are so stunned and eerily quiet.

Boy, I really need to stop babbling!

I hope my parents will understand, love me, and accept my choices, no matter what. Granted, my sexual orientation was never a choice, but Rupert is, so is moving in with him. Or was it kismet all along?

Rubbing my forehead with my splayed palm, I replay the question inside my tired and nonetheless wired brain.

Seriously, what the fuck did the nurses give me to think about shit like this?

I love the guy, okay. Case closed! Says the same closeted football player who hesitated to come out for so long.

Initially, I waited because I preferred to meet the right person first—or at least one who mattered enough—so that my gayness would be attached to someone real. Then, Tim introduced me to Rupert... virtually, and meeting him took the forefront. Once I eventually did and things progressed, his own closet became another comforting wall to protect us from the outside world. Later, he mentioned that it wasn't fair to hold me back from coming out; he wasn't. He'd mentioned that he'd be ready when I was. We didn't get a chance to discuss it further since my football dreams took off. I told him that there's a lot to lose at this point in my life and career. "Just a little longer," I kept demanding, using the commanding voice he loves so much because I sound the same when edging in the bedroom. Yup, I'll always be the bossy man who growls, "This is mine!" in a deep and threatening tone and swats his hand whenever he attempts to touch himself when I'm inside of him. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. We are definitely in sync; I wouldn't change a thing.

Sex with Rupert is a toe-curling experience that was sooo worth the wait. I've been lusty over him for as long as I can recall, and punched my V-card at almost twenty years old, so much later than most of my friends and teammates. It may sound outdated, but I'm glad I saved myself to experience sex with him. Let's face it, I was far from the expert I thought I was! Porn has never been my thing and research can

only do so much. Practice makes perfect, or at least, that's my goal; I'm only twenty-three and have much more to learn with him. He's been a patient, attentive, and helpful teacher. Over time, we explored what we enjoy the most. Together. Hence, long before caving to my demand and making me 100% gay by allowing me to give bottoming a try, my stubborn lover introduced me to my prostate by finger-fucking me, but I'm stubborn—yes, I invented a word that truly defines me!

He did cave, eventually, though that's a discussion for another time. What matters is that we're 100% in sync.

That works for me. Learning what makes him tick is so much fun already!

“ Ben, merde alors ,” Tim finally blurts out in French, snapping me out of my drifting thoughts. Thankfully, my trip down filthy Memory Lane stayed inside my head.

Damn, these drugs are strong...

My brother pats my dad's shoulder before addressing my parents in English. “I don't know about you guys, but I think Elliot couldn't have found a better person.”

I mouth a thank you as he purposefully keeps quiet to give my folks room. Holy shit! My brother's expressive face shows that he has a zillion questions, some less appropriate than others, but I'm sure he'll keep them under wraps until it's just us, outside of a hospital room.

Being so light-headed wouldn't mix well with such details anyway, so I put all my willpower on keeping my big mouth shut for a change. For now, I take everything in.

Never in a million years would I have imagined it would play out like this. My coming out to my parents and beloved brother, in this hospital room, with my boyfriend by my side. All in all, it's as good a time as any because there is no right

time for this.

Finally, Mom hugs me, whispering, “I’m happy as long as you’re happy, Elliot.” There’s no judgment in her eyes. No questions either, just acceptance.

This jumpstarts Dad’s reaction, which mimics hers, awkwardly hugging us both. “Your mom was always better with words than me. I’m with her on this one, son.” His voice is warm and playful. My heart somersaults. “So, here’s the deal,”—his tone turns businesslike, so I frown—“you need to recover quickly and go back to your boyfriend.” With that, he strolls towards said boyfriend, looks up to meet his eyes, and engulfs him in a manly hug. “It’s good to welcome you to the family... again.”

My man is definitely not a hugger. For some reason, it brings out his uptight background, which I love to blame on his British upbringing as a whole rather than on his sweet mom.

“Thank you, sir,” Rupert replies when my dad releases him from his embrace.

Dad remains unshaken, his impressive and weirdly demonstrative frame showing his emotions in all their glory. Mom grins at everyone and takes the lead again in a gentle and composed voice. “Now, I think we should stay in the waiting room and leave the medical staff do their job. I need to know that my baby does not have a fractured ankle and will be back on the field in no time!”

I grunt at the moniker—which has her rolling her eyes—because I’m no longer a baby, but can’t get enough of Rupert calling me babe . We all chuckle at her pragmatism, though.

“Also, just a heads up. After the doctors send you back home, you owe us a party for your football success and this.” Tim points at us. “If you need help with the wine, I’ll help, obviously.” He shoots us the goofiest of smiles before heading to the door.

I'm both surprised and pleased at how well they're taking the news. It's a lot to process, and the rest of the family has to be updated eventually, so there's that. But between the numbing painkillers and the positive vibes that are making me hyper, I'm a hot mess.

Oh, well!

### CHAPTER 20

#### A VIOLENT NOISE

Elliot

My padding weighs nearly as much as the expectant eyes focused on me in the locker room. It's heavy yet unbelievably comforting.

Damn, I fucking missed this!

Shoulders squared, I step onto the field again. Countless exams to confirm the diagnosis and healing process for my sprained ankle. Weeks of rehab to make sure I was ready to return stronger than ever. Restless nights because the swelling and the pain didn't subside as quickly as expected, and I panicked.

That's all behind me now, so I take a deep breath to soothe my sudden nerves. Exactly like Rupert taught me.

Outside, the crowd roars in anticipation, but inside, I grapple with a whirlwind of emotions. Five games—five long games—I've been out, watching my team push through without me. On TV for the first part, then on the bench. Pride and irritation settled in my gut with each of their successes.

Today, I'm past the resentment and anger at myself. Today, I'm back. Today, I'll prove I'm worth every ounce of faith The Troopers put in me when they drafted me.

My determination has always been a powerful weapon, but my resilience is even stronger. The fact that Rupert kissed me senseless before we parted ways at the hotel earlier boosted my confidence; the idea of booking two rooms angered me at first, but after all we've done to not get flagged, it's safer this way, especially with the copious media people around. Earlier tonight, I crossed paths with Casey West from Football Fandom in the elevator. Granted, he's overtly supportive of the LGBTQIA+ community, but exposing the Troopers' rookie and his famous male lover—whose fame has been skyrocketing lately—would be a scoop nonetheless. Staying under the radar at the hospital was enough of a hassle.

All in due time.

Getting outed was never the idea. When we do come out publicly, neither Rupert nor I wish to be LGBTQIA+ spokespeople. We just happen to be two people who love each other and choose not to flaunt our sexual orientation. To each their own, but that's how we agreed to roll, eventually.

Eventually ... The adverb somehow became our new motto, but as far as football is concerned, my return and our win were always sooner rather than later.

“How's the ankle, LeFire?” Coach Schott, our wide receiver coach, asks as he pats me on the back near the sideline, glancing sideways at Doctor Rosie and Cutter, the assistant athletic trainer.

I'm tempted to suggest a change of moniker, unsure whether my flame will be as bright as before. Or maybe it will be...

No, no, no, strike that, there's no maybe. I will make an impact. “Good to go, Coach.” My voice is steady with a hint of eagerness... I need to play, so badly, so fiercely, so much that it aches. In the best of ways, that is. “Physical therapy team did wonders. I'm forever in debt to Rosie and the wizard that is Cutter. Excited to be



back.”

Coach Oliveira, the head coach, glances down at my ankle, then back at me. “Take it easy at first. We don’t need you pushing too hard right out of the gate. Got it?”

“Got it, Coach.” Inside, I’m buzzing to hit the field running, but I get it: Rosie and Cutter have been hammering the same point at home during rehab. They cautioned that a premature return could lead to extended time on the bench—or worse. Neither option is acceptable if I want to cement my future with the team. I’ve worked too hard for this to fail now.

We hit the ground running, and a thrill rushes through me as we line up for the snap. I catch our quarterback’s eyes across the huddle. Cal’s his usual self: calm, single-minded, in control, which, in turn, boosts my confidence. He looks at me, jutting his head slightly.

“Ready to make a statement, LeFire?” Cal smirks.

“Always.” I adjust my gloves.

The ball snaps, and I explode off the line. I’m a live wire, and it feels fucking great—better than I expected. Taking short intakes of breath, I take a sharp cut and shake off the defender. The ball hits my hands. First down. The crowd cheers, and for a second, I allow myself to enjoy it. It’s not enough, though.

The next few plays go by in a blur, adrenaline pumping through my veins. My heart pounds in rhythm with each play call, and I ignore how fast sweat forms beneath my helmet. Instead, I’m fixated on my routes, cutting and accelerating with that well-known mix of speed and precision.

I shut down the little voice in the back of my mind, nagging me to be careful while

proving myself. Thankfully, Gunner is never far, his eye eagle on me, not as a babysitter, but as a true ally. This guy is golden. The offense is clicking. I adore this team and the staff.

We keep pushing, moving methodically down the field. When we punch it in for the touchdown, my shoulders relax for the first time since my injury. We're up 7-0, and I'm back in the game. At last!

As I reach the sideline, Coach Schott shouts, "Looking sharp out there. Stay smart."

Attentive Cutter joins in, "Don't overextend."

I catch my breath, gesturing in approval. "Appreciate it, Coach. Will do."

The game is electric. The ankle holds up with every cut, every sprint, and I feel like I'm back in my element. We close out the first quarter leading 10-3 after a field goal.

Gunner comes over and bumps my shoulder while the defense is on the field. "You good, LeFire? Looks like you're moving well out there."

I wipe sweat from my forehead and beam. "Yeah, bro, thanks. Like I told Coach earlier, it feels good to be out here again. Just gotta keep it up."

"Pretty cool comeback, man. Congratulations!" He offers me his signature all-American smile.

"Too soon for that. We need to dominate this game from here on out."

"Then we party? Unless you have romantic dinner plans for your big comeback?" he jokes.

He's teasing about partying. Despite being the youngest on the team, he's well-aware I don't stray from my strict football regimen, especially not when I've just recovered.

Head in the game, I evade the second question, chuckling. "There's no place like home, Toto."

In truth, I can't wait to snuggle in bed with my man, instead of worrying I might screw up because of a weak ankle. A home game would have been a less stressful return... but then again, playing the Oklahoma Copperheads, our long-time rivals, is my welcome back gift. Even Chris said he wanted me to win against his home team! Also, the irony isn't lost on me. Being the only ginger on the field is a good omen: Slaying them is my self-appointed mission.

And because I love to bait my former mentor, both on and off the field, I can't stop myself from adding, "If you must know, no romantic dinner, but my significant other understands my demanding career. We're in the same boat..." I bolt from the bench without giving Gunner the opportunity to inquire further. We're due on the field anyway. "Now, let's win this!" I exclaim, mostly for my benefit.

When he strolls behind me, he whispers between clenched teeth, "Don't think I missed that piece of info... You owe me details."

"Later," I promise as we head into the second quarter, which doesn't go as smoothly.

The opposing team's defense adjusts, and suddenly, our drives stall. We struggle to maintain the momentum. The intensity rises, and my pulse quickens. On one play, I break free on a deep route, but Cal's pass sails over my fingertips. My frustration builds.

"Almost had that one," I mutter, jogging back to the huddle.

Cal shoots me a quick look. “We’ll get it next time. Stay ready.”

They tie it up at 10-10, and by halftime, we’re down 13-17. Fuck! I shiver from unease, anxiety creeping in; this isn’t how I wanted my comeback to go.

The locker room is quiet, except for the sound of heavy breathing and water bottles being cracked open. Rosie and Cutter check my ankle again, which I’m thankful for, although I don’t particularly enjoy the attention. My head is in the game. The pressure is mounting, my heart is pounding in my chest, and my ankle is throbbing slightly.

Coach Oliveira talks strategy, reminding us to stay focused. But my doubts linger. How uncharacteristic of me... but evidence sucks.

His pep talk doesn’t help. I feel like shit, replaying the missed opportunities in my head. Have I done enough? Can I help turn this around? Since when do I think this way?

Cal and Gunner walk over and sit on either side of me. “You’re doing fine, LeFire. We’ve got this. Just keep your head in the game.”

“Yeah, I know...” My voice betrays my worry. “I just... I need to step it up.”

Cal claps me on the shoulder. “We all do. We’ll get there.”

The third quarter is a grind. We’re fighting for every yard, every first down. Cal and Gunner are in sync, and the rest of the team is amped up. The scoreboard starts shifting in our favor. As the game goes on, we start to find our rhythm again. It’s not just me—everyone’s clicking, making plays, pushing through. This team’s vibe doesn’t compare with my previous sour experience.

At this very moment, the opponents are tough, no doubt, but we're tougher. I make a catch on third and long, getting hit hard as I go down. My ankle twinges, but I shake it off, getting up quickly. My teammates are in the zone, too. It's not just about one guy—it's the whole team working together, sticking together as a united front.

"Nice catch!" Woodhull, one of the linemen, yells as I dash to the huddle.

"Thanks," I reply, breathless. My pulse is racing, and the sweat is dripping down my face. My concentration doesn't waver on the next play. We manage to close the gap—24-20 now—but it's still anyone's game.

As I take a quick break, Cutter leans in. "Ankle okay?"

"Good enough," I reply, though my body is screaming for a breather.

He looks at me with a knowing glance. "You heard the coaches earlier, right?" I tilt my head in approval.

Coach Schott catches my eye sideways after a solid drive. "Well done. Keep up the good work... at your own pace."

"Thank you, Coach. I'll do my best."

When I return to the field, Gunner encourages me, "Let's power through this for a while longer. We got this."

And we do.

In the final minutes, it's do-or-die. We're down by a single point, 26-27, and the clock is ticking. Every play counts.

My legs are heavy, my lungs are burning, and my back is drenched, but my ankle behaves. So, I ignore the pain and fatigue, aiming at finding any edge I can.

On a crucial third down, Cal looks at me. “You ready?”

I nod, determination burning in my chest. “Let’s do it.”

The ball snaps, and I cut hard, breaking free just enough to give Cal a window. The pass is perfect—tight spiral, right into my hands. First down. The sideline erupts, and a surge of relief and adrenaline floods me.

We drive down the field, getting into field goal range. As our kicker lines up, I stand on the sideline, heart pounding. This is it. True to his reputation, he nails it, and we’re up 29-27.

The next few minutes feel like hours.

Only when the final whistle blows do we exhale. We won! My exhaustion melts away, replaced by pure joy. We did it—together.

Gunner jogs over, beaming. “You’re on fire, LeFire!”

“Thanks.” I laugh in relief. The weight of the last few weeks vanishes at once. There’s plenty left to accomplish, but it was a hard-fought win, one that means everything after sitting out the last five games.

As we head back to the locker room, a couple of guys slap me on the back, congratulating me on the win.

“Nice work, man,” Cal says, handing me a towel. “Glad you’re back.”

“Same.” A surge of adrenaline-fueled euphoria courses through my veins. I’m finally back where I belong. Blood rushes through my veins at the thought of celebrating my success with my man, who must be exiting the stadium as we speak. “Feels damn good.”

After we’ve showered and conducted interviews, the journalists disappear. Of course, Gunner shines the spotlight on me by congratulating me once again for my victory in front of the entire team, including the coaches. In a flash, they all engulf me in a group hug, shouting my nickname. Standing here, back with my team, I wouldn’t trade this moment for anything.

As soon as they release me from their warm embrace, they start giving each other shit again, and Gunner asks me, “It’s pretty late, but... since you’re not a party guy, wanna grab a drink with us at the hotel?”

“Sorry, man. I already have plans.” His brow spikes up as he remembers our previous exchange.

“Oh, I’m the one who’s sorry. I had no idea your busy girlfriend was around.”

Unable to hide my grin, I shake my head in amusement. “Well, about that...” I trail off. “If life didn’t get in the way, I probably would have said something sooner.”

At once, their banter stops. Glee is evident in Cal’s voice and posture. “Woodhull, you owe me twenty... You see, some of us had a bet going on about your vow of celibacy... since you never mentioned anyone. Guess Gunner’s got a head start.” Then Cal’s attention goes to him. “You know her?”

I’m sick of lying by omission, so I clue them in. “Listen, I’m pretty sure most of you have heard of Rupert Smith, right?” They confirm, probably wondering where I’m going with this. “He’s the one I have plans with.” My statement is met with silence.

Their quizzical looks say it all. “Because he’s my...” I swallow, then smile.

“Boyfriend.”



### CHAPTER 21

#### RAN INTO YOU

Rupert

8 months later

The waft of a barbecue makes my stomach rumble. A look of approval washes over my freckled face at the female voice that can be heard from the stage. As expected on this early spring Saturday night, the place is packed, but the vibes are intact.

“Wow! Smells fantastic,” my best friend exclaims as soon as the door of The Rusty Spurs closes behind us, and we weave through the crowd in the direction of the quiet end bar that takes most of the left-hand side of the place.

“You ain’t seen nothing yet. You’re in for a treat... my treat, actually,” I confirm. “We should have done that way back. The two of us.” In great need of liquid courage, I can’t wait for the round of draft IPAs we ordered while I made small talk with Frank, the barely legal bartender; a nice, witty, and quirky kid. Strike that, he must be Elliot’s age, so definitely not a kid. With our backs to the door, we can see the stage better, and we can refrain from shouting and the risk of patrons eavesdropping.

When Elliot was released from the hospital, we preferred to take Elliot’s family to the Hand Wing. Tim’s been there a few times over the years, even before Elliot got drafted, and loves it. The Troopers go there a lot and even have a reserved space in the back; it’s not so secret nowadays, but at least, the whole team can gather in a

somewhat private setting. A team that was completely unfazed by Elliot's revelation, well, the sexual orientation part, but they demanded to meet me; apparently, some of them were huge fans!

As for Elliot's family, they took the news well, but Elliot's health took priority, and we didn't give them time to question further, giving them space to process it instead. Needless to say that at first, they didn't fully grasp what it meant for their son, being such a rising public figure, to share his life with a somewhat famous artist like myself.

For now, Caitlin Cole confirmed that nothing's leaked to the media. Who'd care about two friends spending some time together? But you can never be too careful. That's why Caitlin gave us some clever advice to remain under the radar. Granted, Elliot and I reached an agreement, so it won't be long before word gets out.

Two worlds colliding, and as soon as it becomes public, we trust social media to spread the news like wildfire, at least enough to make us the flavor of the week. So, we had to prepare both of our families for the aftermath.

Our drinks land on the counter in no time, then discreet Frank scurries away. The staff here is as friendly as the food is amazing, and I'm not saying that because I'm a regular. It's just their trademark.

This particular bar has become one of our favorites to hang out and lay low, that is when I'm not performing here. It's also where I bumped into Elliot and his college teammates a while back, and that Dillard guy, who's a huge fan. After my performance that night, Dillard asked for an autograph and introduced me to the team, including Elliot, who eventually blurted out that we were actually friends—not a total lie—and others complained that he kept that a secret. All the while, Elliot and I did our best to plaster poker faces on, mutely sharing our amusement.

Much later that night, I (finally) caved, making him 100% gay, aka I topped, which was a first for both of us. Satisfied, I grinned when a sweaty, sore, and sated Elliot confirmed that it didn't compare with finger-fucking and suggested that we should do it more often if I was on board with it. I am, on occasion. I love everything with him. Everything... and I didn't even blink when he brought toys in the mix. Versatility became our new normal. He asserts that I'm the reason for his insatiable sex drive. I'm flattered, but believe it has more to do with finding an outlet for his career-related stress. Either way, I couldn't be happier.

I scold my dirty mind for drifting to sex with Elliot while I'm around his older brother. "I'm sorry," I add sheepishly, staring at my beer. Not sure if I'm apologizing for my thoughts or my silence.

"There's no need to be sorry, my friend. I get it. We all have our lives, and pushing you was never the idea. Cheers!" Tim's brown eyes follow my every move. I can tell that he's been waiting for the right opening for the long overdue heart-to-heart since Elliot broke the news about our relationship. But then again, last time my best friend was here, his brother was in the hospital, so the attention was focused on Elliot's recovery. This is Tim's first time back.

"Cheers. I'm happy you're here, mate ." Oops, British English. It's been a while...

We clink our glasses to the long overdue reunion.

Tim purses his lips. "Listen, I'm really glad that business brought me back here. Can't believe you live in Texas now! When music took the forefront after your modeling career, I told you I was surprised you chose country music... Not quite Brit pop or punk!" We chuckle at that. "Well, The Barrels and some of your other collabs are more country rock, but still... Texas suits you."

"Thanks, Tim. I missed you, man. It's been ages since we had the opportunity to see

each other... just us, I mean.” Well, in a bit, we’ll be joined by Elliot and Chris, his former teammate and roommate and current best friend.

“Indeed.” He takes a sip of his IPA and looks me straight in the eye. “I missed you, too... along missing out on quite a few developments.” After we parted ways last time, things were up in the air. Nobody in the Lefevre family asked questions or had a clue about how Elliot and I became a thing. It must be why I hear a hint of pain in his voice, unless I’m imagining it. “What I just said about Texas, I also meant that my brother suits you. I’ve never seen you look happier.”

See what I was saying?

“Thanks, I really appreciate the support and, yes, I am very happy.”

“Good for you... One thing’s nagging me, though...” He hesitates. “My mind’s been reeling. I want to make sure that our friendship is solid, and I’m honestly not sure it is.”

“It’s all my fault...” I avert my gaze, trying to find inspiration in my glass. I eventually add, “I like that you don’t waste time skirting around... issues, though. I’ve done that for too long.”

“Your secrets were never an issue. At least, not to me, Rupert.” Yeah, that’s the whole point; my secrets have been my own issues all along. “I’m surprised you think this is about me, though. I don’t blame you... I mean, I was hurt you kept a big part of your life from me, but my ego quickly recovered.” He stops and takes a long pull of his beer. “If you insist, we can play Twenty Questions,” he taunts. “I don’t want to pry, you know that... if you don’t feel comfortable with this conversation... It’s not my business anyway.” He downs what’s left of his beverage.

“Listen, this one-on-one,” I point my index finger between us before mimicking him,

“It’s about time... Elliot said he wanted you and me to have a chance to discuss things first before broaching the subject with you. As for the years of silence on my part, well... guess I was a coward, and after Elliot’s coming out, I convinced myself that talking to you in person would be best... a few more months wouldn’t make much difference, you know. But to be honest, I was buying myself time... again. I was worried you’d blame me and end our friendship.”

“Blame you?” His voice sounds high-pitched for once. “Was I ever your enemy?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. Why don’t we start over, huh?” He juts his head forward, and I explain, “I’m just... tense is all. To this day, I don’t really talk about my sexual orientation. I never wanted it to define me. Of course, it’s part of who I am, like being an introvert, a redhead, and a musician, you know. I wish it would be a random fact. Even the idea of coming out is unnerving to me. Can you imagine actually confessing ,” I emphasize the word, “or formally announcing to your parents, loved ones, and fans that you’re straight? Sounds silly, doesn’t it?”

Sighing, I shake my head and flag down Frank to order another round and some mozzarella sticks out of reflex. It won’t ruin my appetite anyway. “Loving who you love matters. But it should only matter to you because it’s your life. It’s not a choice, so it shouldn’t matter to others. The thing is... when you’re gay, it does. It’s just not fair...” I trail off, taking a pull of my fresh beer, then lick the foam from my top lip with the tip of my tongue. “Are you gonna ask me why then?”

“Why what?” He eyes the appetizer, patiently waiting.

“You know what ?” I snatch one, burning my fingertips, but munch on it anyway. “Why didn’t I confide in you about being gay?”

Handing me a cocktail napkin, he shrugs. “Truth is, even after Elliot said he was gay, I had no clue how you identified. I figured you were straight because of Sally, then

assumed you were bi because of Elliot. But you just said you're gay... Not that it makes a difference to me, but were you ever in a relationship with Sally or did you make that up?"

I wince. Hearing her name doesn't hurt as much as it used to; I'm not quite over it. "I never lied to you, ever." Another gulp of liquid courage. "Well, I lied by omission and led you to believe what was convenient for me at the time. I am gay. Always have been and always will be." Memories of Elliot's declaration of love at the hospital come to mind, and my heart fills with warmth.

"So... you and Sally..."

"I loved Sally with all my heart, only not in a romantic way, and sex was never part of our fake relationship that benefitted both of us." Tim's eyes narrow. From the sudden hurt flashing in his eyes, I can tell he's ascertained that I confided in her while keeping this from him. Nothing I can do about it now, so I continue, "Her reasons are not mine to share... I will always love her." Now, things take a different turn. "Look, what you should hear from me is the naked truth: I am in love with your brother."

"I can tell." His fingers run through his dark hair.

"My sexual orientation isn't a choice, and I didn't plan to fall for him. But every time we met, we... clicked." I shirk his scrutiny for a moment, mulling over how to phrase it. He waits. "Maybe there are things he should tell you himself, but basically, he saw through me and shared his own orientation with me. He was very determined to give us a try." Remembering how persistent Elliot's been, the corner of my lips quirks up. "I fought my attraction to him for a long time, but then Sally died..." My throat tightens. "Fucking carjacker." Anger seethes. Deep breathing helps take the edge off. "I was a wreck, and your brother was nothing short of amazing." I pause, watching him do the math that I'm not eager to spell out for him. He doesn't have to know the specifics.

“Can’t say it’s a big surprise. He might have been... impulsive growing up, but he’s also much more mature than I am in so many ways.”

“What can I say?” I chuckle as we exchange memories of our drunken teenage nights. A couple of anecdotes resurface, and we burst out laughing as I steal another mozzarella stick from the small plate.

The previous conversation isn’t over, so I redirect it to the more pressing matter. “Anyway, Elliot and I are out of the closet for good, one step at a time. Earlier this year, once football season was over for the Troopers,”—I deliberately steer clear of dwelling on how bummed Elliot was that they didn’t make it as far in the postseason as he’d hoped—“Elliot was reunited with some of his college teammates and came out to them. Their former coach threw a massive dinner party to celebrate marrying a waitress who he used to work with. Some couldn’t make it, but Elliot made do, involuntarily stealing the show.”

“Yeah, he told me. That says a lot about how open Elliot is about it now. It brought back memories of him saying that the college quarterback was constantly saying derogatory things that he ached to report but didn’t. Learning my brother was gay only made it worse. I wanted to punch the guy. But Elliot was right, the asshole shouldn’t have said those things, whether there was a gay player around or not. It’s just plain wrong.”

“True... That said, Davis apologized in front of the team, and so did his wingman, Jones. Elliot said they looked like they meant it, and since then Davis has been trying to make amends. They’ll never be friends, but it’s a truce.”

As if on cue, I spy my man stepping into the bar alongside Chris. It brings a barely hidden proud grin to my face. I spy patrons recognizing him. It makes my heart swell with pride. I spy Tim wiggling his eyebrows at me in amusement. It looks like he easily guessed who’s strolling our way.

My phone buzzes in my jean pocket, and I read Elliot's text.

Let's do this!

Game on, then. I bite the inside of my cheeks to stop my Cheshire Cat smile from ruining our plans.

With Chris in his wake, Elliot whirls around the patrons. His eyes don't leave mine, even when he passes his brother, acknowledging him with a "Hey, bro!"

In the blink of an eye, my driven, hot as fuck, and talented man stands in front of me. I don't budge from my stool as his long fingers tighten around the back of my neck, his nose rubbing mine. This tender gesture has my dick thickening in my pants. "Missed you, sweetheart." His hot breath is enticing.

A sideways glance proves we have an audience. Perfect.

One of my arms snakes around his powerful body. "Likewise, babe." My free hand cups his cheek, and he bridges the unbearable distance between us. His heart thumps in his chest, just like mine, as he shoves his skillful tongue inside my willing mouth for what we both longed for. For a searing kiss. For the world to see.

At last.



## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 3:06 am*

Elliot

Two years later

“THAT WAS A GREAT PARTY, but I needed this peace and quiet.” Eyes on the road for our short drive home, my ears feel like they’re stuffed with cotton. I can’t believe they haven’t stopped buzzing from the numerous guests’ guffaws and conversations. From the shrieking of the kids. From the sheer number of former and present Troopers and the rowdy atmosphere we mustered.

“Coop and Lucas really know how to throw a party, huh?”

“Yup. Their Super Bowl Sunday party is as sacred for The Troopers as Hardy’s Christmas getaway is for the Barrels.”

“I’m bummed that I missed it last year.” My fingers intertwine with his that are resting on his thigh. “I’m not even such a football fan,” he deadpans, his focus on the road to avoid my murderous glare.

I slap his forearm for good measure, mumbling, “Ass,” because I can recognize a lie when I hear one.

“What? You love my ass!” he brags as I stop at a red light, then glance at my boyfriend.

“I most definitely adore your ass and can’t wait to claim it. But banging you in the back of this clown car won’t do. There’s not enough room. Maybe I can take you on

the hood of your beloved car once we're back in the privacy of our garage... Mmm... Decisions, decisions..."

His boisterous mirth fills the car. "And then what? You're gonna tie me to the rearview mirrors, too?"

Shaking my head in disbelief, I allow him—not so subtly—to redirect the conversation to aforementioned sport, the game, and the party.

Our Super Bowl Sunday party hosts are amazing, talented, and fun. Cooper "Coop" Howard—one of the cornerbacks—and his man, Lucas Ortiz—our former back spot from the cheerleading squad—are one of the nicest couples there is. Granted, Coop's mood sunk throughout the Super Bowl. Much to his despair, Dallas won by the skin of their teeth against Jacksonville in the last quarter; a victory followed by deafening shouts, the pinnacle of this larger-than-life party. Full of friends. Full of adrenaline. Full of football.

Ever since I recovered from my ankle injury, the extended Troopers team—players, cheerleading squad, management, and staff—has been particularly attentive in making me feel welcome. Hence, I became close to people I barely knew before, including Lucas and Marisol. She's my favorite flyer on the cheer squad and also thick as thieves with Lucas, on and off the field. Earlier today, she mentioned that she'll stay for a couple more years, but Lucas quit a while back and now volunteers at Queering Sports, a youth charity backed by the Troopers.

Marisol Uriegas was a vital component cementing our diverse and colorful team. And here I thought the petite Latina woman was shy because she silently appraised me when Gunner introduced me to her. As we got to know each other better, she declared I was the sweetest Trooper. I bet her words aren't reserved for me, but you know me, I'll take all the attention I can get! Either way, I adore her and was grateful to have her by my side when heinous people lashed out after Rupert and I went public.

When we got to Lucas and Coop's, I couldn't contain my frustration from failing to make it to the Super Bowl yet again, despite our impeccable performance this year. As happy as I was for today's reunion, it felt utterly disheartening, and I'm a sore loser. These are my people, just like Rupert has his own crew. Mixing them isn't easy, but we sometimes do. Finding time together and making time for ourselves as a couple is our greatest challenge so far, especially since we're splitting our precious time between the team, Rupert's music clan, Chris and his lovely girlfriend, and our families, obviously.

Damn, I love my team.

Their spirit always does wonders to brighten my mood. The other reason I wasn't quite my happy, cocky, and confident self when we got there was because of Gunner, my former mentor and favorite player. A couple of weeks ago, the traitor confided that he'd be officially announcing his retirement to our teammates today; Caitlin Cole will draft a press release next week. It made it all the more real, no matter how thrilled everyone was when he mentioned his increased support of LGBTQAI+ causes that are dear to The Troopers' heart, such as Queering Sports. Gunner convinced me to donate my time as well, as if my schedule wasn't jam-packed already.

Nothing's gonna be the same without Gunner... The times they are a-changin'.

"What time's your flight again tomorrow?" I inquire, tssking at the honking behind me since I didn't notice the light turned green. I put both hands on the wheel, pick up the pace, eager to arrive home.

The joyous mayhem of the party was such a jarring contrast to my quiet life with Rupert, especially now that we bought a house on the outskirts of Austin. I've always lived in a house, and it was a natural next step to ensure we have a peaceful place to regroup, hang out with our friends, and keep out of the public eye—mostly.

If the revelation initially came as a shock, Rupert and I are now old news. It was a relief to see that life quickly returned to business as usual, apart from some odd feedback. Apparently, we were an unlikely pairing, but nobody dared to specify the reasons. Our age difference? Our supposed resemblance? Our overall discreet life? Must be why there's always paparazzi hunting us to steal a picture and make up a story about how there's trouble in paradise. Lies; it's been over seven years since our first kiss—the one I stole from him—and five since he eventually came to his sense, and we're still living on cloud nine.

“Fivish, I think. Let me check.” Rupert snatches his phone from the center console. “I feel like airports are my new home lately. I live out of my suitcase. It sucks.” He provides the flight information, and I mouth a thank you.

“I know the feeling. Traveling is exhausting, but first class eases the hassle, doesn't it?”

“Sure does. It remains stressful, though. For some reason, I always sleep poorly the night before a trip. Thankfully, the next one will be our well-deserved European vacation.” Visiting his mom, then heading to my parents' estate where we'll see Tim and Claire and attend their newborn's baptism. Yes, I'm an uncle, and Rupert's a godfather!

I slightly lean his way, take his hand in mine, and bring it to my lips as I round the corner of our street.

Sighing like a love-sick puppy, I kiss his knuckles. I love to think that I'm the one running the show, and everyone seems to believe that's how we roll, but Rupert and I both know that's utter bullshit. He's had me wrapped around his finger since day one.

Clicking on the garage door opener, I wait, then park the car. “Are you ready for the Grammys after your trip to Canada, babe?”

Fist over his mouth, he clears his throat and fidgets in the passenger seat before exiting the car without answering me. I'm well-aware that the upcoming ceremony's putting extra pressure on his shoulders since both The Whiskey Barrels and his first solo album are nominated this year. My heart fills with pride while an endearing blush takes residence on his freckled face. Could my man be any hotter?

Starved for his touch, I possessively slide my hand in his as soon as we step into the comfort and quiet of our home and ditch our coats. As if on cue, his thumb strokes my skin, eliciting a shiver that runs from my head to my toes, paired with dirty thoughts about what I want to do to him, and him to me, as soon as we make it to the bedroom.

Strike that, the need becomes too strong. "I didn't get dessert," I start. "I want it now." My authoritative tone makes him chuckle. He's so disarmingly clueless at times.

With my single-mindedness back, I lead him through the open-plan kitchen to the massive glass windows that usher in the glow of the moon and stars.

On a mission, Rupert opens the mostly empty fridge and offers a few options to satiate my sweet tooth.

What I'm after isn't in the fridge, but is standing in front of it... or rather is confined in black boxer briefs. I don't waste any time and snatch his wrist to make him face me, then slam the door shut with my free hand. In the blink of an eye, my knees hit the cold tiles. My mouth waters as my hard-on grows in anticipation. It's been too many hours since I've had my mouth on him.

"What are you doing?" my boyfriend inquires when my hands fumble with his zipper and manage to drop his jeans to his ankles. They are joined by his boxer briefs.

There...

My pulse trips on itself at the enticing display. “What does it look like I’m doing?” With a hooded gaze, I glance from his beautiful dick up to his darkening green eyes. I lick my lips. He watches me.

His proud erection twitches, begging for attention. Hands clutching his toned ass cheeks, I lean in, my tongue circling the head. He growls, and my heart hammers inside my chest. Without further ado, I take more of him.

Rupert strokes the top of my hair. Soon after, his hips buck without restraint as he finds his rhythm, His fingers fist my overgrown strawberry-blond hair, tightening around it. He hits the back of my throat. A loud moan escapes from my lips. The erotic noises he makes drive me crazy, but I want more, so I give him more. Taunting. Teasing. Tormenting. “Fuck... Elliot, you’re kill—” His breath catches. “Oh, fuck... Yeah, right there.”

Then, my fingers, tongue, and mouth are everywhere. Fondling his tightening balls. Jacking his engorged length. Taunting his responsive crack. I engulf him at once, enjoying the taste of him as he quivers under my ministrations. Without a word, I move in ways that encourage him to fuck my mouth, ignoring my watering eyes. His grip on my hair sets a faster tempo.

His breathing turns ragged, but our eyes continue carrying on a silent conversation that’s anything but tame. Yearning. My index finger breaches him. Craving. My tongue twirls around him. Needing.

I feel his knees buckling when my crooked finger rubs his prostate. He’s so close already. I put the pedal to the metal and watch his cheeks redden as my cheeks hollow; the pleasure I give him is the best aphrodisiac.

“Holy shit, babe... I’m... Oh, my God, yes...” He doesn’t have time to warn me, but we’re way past that anyway. He spills into my swollen mouth, and I welcome every drop. My favorite dessert. My favorite man. My favorite, period.

My mouth releases him with a pop, cleaning the remnants of his pleasure with my tongue. His ass sets me free, and I get back on my feet. Snaking his arm around my neck for balance, he kisses me senseless, then comes up for air. “Damn, you’re gifted.”

“I learned from the best,” I tease.

“Indeed.” His hand presses against my aching boner, but I manage to escape. This isn’t about me. “I taught you well, but you’ve always been a fast learner, my sweet Elliot.” His face morphs into an even more blissed-out expression. The back of his fingers lazily grazes my waist. I fidget under his touch. “Can’t wait to have my way with you as soon as we hit the sack.”

This cockier, bolder side of him has recently made an appearance, and I love that I get to discover a different aspect of the man I love.

Since I moved in, Rupert’s shared bits and pieces of his past, and I’m glad he trusts me enough to do so. My heart aches for him, though. Apparently, his dad ran for the hills when his mom told him she was pregnant. I’ll never understand why she assigned his sperm donor’s first name as his middle one. No wonder why he flinched when I randomly called him David. Rupert confessed that his modeling career helped his single mom make ends meet and also felt like silent, bittersweet revenge on his absent father, as if his fame proved his worth to a ghost. He pretends this is all behind him, but the shadows in his eyes reveal otherwise.

One step at a time. He’s the most beautiful person I know, inside and out, and I can’t wait to grow old by his side.

And that’s when it hits me, harder than when he was slamming into my mouth a mere minute ago. My hands cradle his face, and I kiss him chastely. I exhale before deciding it’s too late to chicken out... especially since it’s not like me.

“Marry me, Rupert.”

His brows furrow. His eyes scrutinize me. His heart thumps against my chest.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Of course, I am, sweetheart!”

“You just had my cock in your mouth and swallowed my cum, and now you’re asking me to marry you?”

“I am!” I confirm, torn between amusement at his astonishment and annoyance at his lack of response.

“Moved by the power of my cum... Mmm... Interesting. Since it’s the most romantic thing you’ve ever said to me, I’m tempted to say “yes!”

“Tempted? That’s not enough. How about, you’re the first man who made me cry with your magical voice. The first who made me come with your wicked ways. The first who showed me unwavering patience. I love you and your quirks. You are so fucking perfect for me...”

He nods his head yes while peppering kisses along my collarbone, tickling me. “I love you, Elliot. And yes, I’ll marry you.”

“I’m the luckiest fucker on the planet. Musician or not, you’ve been rocking my world since day one. You are caring, selfless, and so damn hot... but what I’m most thankful for is that you manage to bring out the best in me. Like I said before, my love, it’s always been you, and it always will be. You were always it for me, like I was it for you before you even knew it.”

Always.



\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*