



Roughing the Kicker (Austin Troopers)

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Category: Sport

Description: In the dazzling world of professional football, where Austin Troopers star kicker Ryeland Lenhart basks in the limelight of his mansion and supermodel fiancée, darkness lurks beneath the glamorous façade. Rye's life isn't the picture-perfect tale it seems; it's a twisted narrative he's desperate to conceal.

The son of Mexican immigrants, Cutter Hernandez has conquered the American dream, scoring a gig as an athletic trainer for the local pro football team. Yet hidden beneath his success is a secret—he's keeping his sexuality from his conservative Latina family, fearing their rejection.

When a routine injury unravels a web of deceit, Cutter confronts Rye, sparking a high-stakes game of truths and lies. As Rye grapples with his own conflicting desires for Cutter, he throws down the gauntlet, forcing Cutter to face the harsh reality of his own double life.

In a gripping tale of love, deceit, and self-discovery, Cutter must guide Rye out of the shadows of his toxic existence. Will Rye find the strength to break free, and can Cutter summon the courage to unmask his own truth?

Roughing the Kicker is a gay awakening, hurt/comfort interracial MM sports romance and is part of the Austin Troopers shared world.

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A TEX Stadium, filled with 76, 246 fans—the announced attendance—had gone quiet. A moment before, when Elliot LeFevre caught the pass to put the Troopers into field goal range, the crowd had been riotous. Now, one could practically hear a pin drop.

Ryeland Lenhart could picture the fans in their seats. Some biting their nails, others shielding their eyes as if afraid to look. Once upon a time, he'd been one of those fans, watching on TV from his childhood home in Austin as Dallas or Houston—okay, usually Dallas—played to sold-out crowds. Back then, Rye longed for his chance. The chance to not only make the team but be a hero.

Now, he had that chance. This was his moment.

Rye lined up to take the kick. In the back of his head, he thought he might have heard a whistle, but he tuned it out. A player always had to live in the moment, and Rye was ready. The snap was good. The hold was good. He struck the ball cleanly, and watched it sail high in the air, right down the middle of the goalposts.

Rye wanted to pump his fist, jump in the air and celebrate. Instead, he saw the official waving it off.

“Timeout, Oklahoma,” he hears the referee say.

Of course. Why not? They can't take them with them.

The voice of the PA announcer crackled through the stadium speakers. “The Copperheads take their final timeout, just before the snap. Trying to ice Lenhart.

He'll have to kick it again."

Rye cringed inwardly. This was the worst part of being a kicker. Thinking you'd made the kick to win the game, even sending your team to the playoffs, only to realize the opposing team got the timeout called just before the snap, and instead of celebrating, you have to line up and do it all over again.

No one wants to do it over again.

Sure, if you make it, you're the hero. But if you miss, you're the goat. And that's not as in the Greatest of All Time.

Rye wanted to someday be considered the GOAT. Today, though, he'd settle for being the hero. Hitting the game-winning kick that could send the Austin Troopers to the playoffs.

It was fifty-two yards. Long, yes, but nowhere near the NFL record of sixty-six yards. A distance any professional kicker is expected to regularly make. And Rye did. He'd made eighty-five percent of his kicks over fifty yards this season.

Plus, the Troopers were at home. The weather conditions were nearly perfect, with virtually no wind. Rye kicked well the whole game, making a fifty-four yarder earlier. In pre-game warmups, he was hitting kicks from fifty-eight, even sixty yards.

I've got this.

"Lenhart lines up to retake the kick..."

Rye took a deep breath as the ball was snapped. It was a decent snap, but the holder—Patrick—bobbled it, struggling to control it. He finally got control of it just as Rye's foot was about to strike the ball, but the laces were facing the wrong way.

Rye tried to adjust, and thought he hit the ball cleanly, but as he stepped back to watch, he saw it sailing to the left. Maybe, just maybe, it would sneak on through.

He closed his eyes. He turned into one of those fans, the ones who never wanted to look.

‘Please, go through. Please,’ he silently prayed.

But the stadium didn’t erupt in cheers of jubilation. Instead, it was silent.

Rye opened his eyes just in time to hear the announcement.

“Lenhart’s kick sails wide left, and Oklahoma will win the game, twenty-six to twenty-four. That’s your final today. Thank you for coming.”

THE LOCKER ROOM WAS a somber place after the game. The team’s playoff hopes weren’t completely dead, but they were for sure on life support after the loss. The fact that the loss came against their biggest rival made it an even tougher pill to swallow. Losing sucked. But losing to Oklahoma? Unacceptable.

The team listened as Coach Oliviera gave his usual post-game speech. The one he reserved for losses. The whole keep your chin up, stay positive, I’m pleased with the effort, it’s a long season and so on speech. Except it wasn’t a long season, not anymore. There were six games left, and in a tight playoff race, each one mattered more than the last.

With a road trip to face the defending Super Bowl Champions looming in only four days.

“It’s not your fault, Rye,” the team’s quarterback, Addison Kelly, told him on his way to the showers.

No. It was Patrick's fault. If he had lined up the laces properly, Rye would have made the kick.

He couldn't say that, though. He wasn't going to be an ass and blame his teammate. There was enough blame to go around, and even with a less-than-perfect hold, Rye should have made the kick.

"Thanks, Addy," he said to his quarterback. "You led a heck of a comeback. I'm sorry I couldn't get us the win."

"Next week," Addy said, even though they all knew that playing Denver would be tough. Still, Rye loved kicking in that thin, mile high air.

After his shower, Rye dressed in the black pants and gold shirt he'd worn to the stadium. Somehow, his game day attire had seemed a lot more stylish six hours ago than it did now, after a loss. Rye lingered in front of his locker, not anxious to go home.

"Some of us are headed over to Hand Wing for a pint or two," Addy said, and Rye knew that 'us' would include Addison's boyfriend, Cal, who was the team's back-up quarterback. "If you want to join us?"

The craft brewery in Southwest Austin was a popular hangout among the team, both because of its proximity to the team's stadium training facility, and also because the owner, Mattias Wilson, was the brother-in-law of the team doctor. It also didn't hurt that it made some of the best IPAs in town.

Rye used to love joining the guys for a drink there after games, and it didn't matter if the team won or lost. His fiancée, Kristen, often accompanied him, and they had a great time. That seemed like a lifetime ago now.

He shook his head. “Thanks, but not tonight. I’m not feeling very social.”

“Yeah, I get it. I figure they’ll be showing the late game at the bar, though, and seeing Dallas lose will do a lot to improve my mood.”

Rye couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Now that’s true.”

Addison ran a hand through his damp hair. “Did Kris come to the game?”

“No. She hasn’t been feeling well.” It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the whole truth, either. “That’s why I’m anxious to get home.” Okay. That was a total lie.

“Too bad,” the quarterback said. “Tell her we all hope she gets better.”

“Thanks. I will.” Rye grabbed his wallet, cell phone, and car keys from his locker before shutting it. “See you tomorrow.” There would be plenty to talk about during the film breakdown of the game.

He slung his duffel bag over his shoulder and made his way out of the locker room and down the corridor to the stadium exit. After a Troopers win, there were usually throngs of people hanging around outside the stadium, hoping to catch a glimpse of their favorite players. Today, after a loss, the stadium and parking lot had emptied out fast, and Rye could make the walk to his silver Tesla Cybertruck—his sleek new toy that Kristen said resembled a trash can—undisturbed.

He considered texting Kristen to let her know he was on his way but decided against it. Depending on if and how she replied, he might change his mind and head to the brewery with the guys, and that would be asking for trouble later. The last thing he wanted was trouble. No. Better to just leave it and hope he would get home to find Kristen in a good mood.

Rye still missed the way they used to be and the girl he'd fallen in love with at UT. These days, he rarely got glimpses of that girl and the good times they shared now seemed like a lifetime ago.

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The loss was one Cutter Hernandez would deem a good loss, though he doubted any of the players would agree. Yes, he wanted the team to win. He always wanted a victory, but as a member of the Troopers' medical team, his primary concern was that no one was seriously injured during the game.

Mission accomplished. The team might have ended up on the wrong side of the scoreline, but it avoided injury. That made for an easy night for Cutter, and when his boss, the team's lead doctor, Rosaria Jiminez, invited him and the rest of staff out for drinks at the craft brewery her brother-in-law owned, Cutter was happy to accept. He liked the beer, he liked the atmosphere, and besides, his family's food truck was selling there tonight.

Good food, good beer, good company. It made for a good night all around, even if he expected the mood of the players would be somber.

The place was crowded when he walked in with Doc Rosie and Neal, one of the other athletic trainers. He noticed Rosie's wife, Margie, behind the bar serving pints. It wasn't too unusual for her to be helping out. Hand Wing Brewing was a family business much like Hernandez Taqueria was. Cutter might have another job, but if his family needed help with the food truck, he was always happy to offer it.

Cutter knew it wouldn't be long before some of the Troopers players arrived, and he selfishly hoped Rye might be among them, though even if he was, the kicker wouldn't be alone. No. He'd have his supermodel fiancée on his arm. On second thought, Cutter didn't want to see Rye there. It was just his luck. The Troopers roster boasted a number of gay players, and Cutter had to develop a crush on one of the straight ones.

He headed up to the bar, falling in step behind Rosie, studying the electronic sign that displayed the brewery's menu of handcrafted ales as well as sodas.

"I'll have the Gose," Rosie said to her wife. "And a kiss, too."

"All right, but only because you're cute." Margie leaned across to give Rosie a peck on the lips, earning a few whistles from other patrons.

"Do I get one of those, too?" Cutter teased.

Margie laughed. "Ha. Funny guy. You're cute, too, but you're not my type, and I know I'm not yours." She turned around and got to work filling a glass with Rosie's beer.

"I'll have the Mexican lager with a lime when you get a chance," Cutter told her.

"You got it."

"Matt put you to work tonight, huh?" Rosie asked Margie.

"Yeah, with Dallas playing tonight, we're expecting to be slammed." She set Rosie's beer on the bar and got to work pouring Cutter's. "It's a good problem to have, though."

"Hopefully it'll be a crowd that's hungry for tacos, too," Cutter said. It was his parents' dream to one day elevate Hernandez Taqueria from a food truck to a brick and mortar restaurant. Cutter wished he could be more help in financing their dream, but his student loan payments took a large chunk of his salary. Still, the life his family had built in Austin was far better than what they had in Mexico.

He took the glass Margie handed him. "Thanks. Go ahead and start a tab for me."

“I will, but the first one’s on the house,” Margie said. “You’re practically family.”

Cutter shrugged. “If you say so. I’ll make sure to get you a few tacos to even things out.”

Margie grinned. “Deal,” she said, before turning her attention to Neal.

“I like her,” Cutter said to Rosie as they made their way to a table. “You should keep her.”

The doctor laughed. “Don’t worry. I intend to. I know a good thing when I have it.”

They were lucky to find a high-top table with a view of one of the TVs so they could watch Dallas take on New York. Cutter set his drink down as Neal made his way over to join them. “I’m going out to say hi to the familia ,” he said. “I’ll grab tacos for all of us.”

“I like hanging out with you two,” Neal observed. “I get discounts on food and beer.”

“You joined a good team, for sure,” Cutter told him.

He went out the side door to where the food truck was set up in the back lot, happy to see that there was a line of people waiting to be served. Cutter didn’t mind the wait because it meant business was good.

“The fried catfish tacos are the best in town,” he heard one person observe. “I could eat them every day.”

Cutter hoped his sister Leticia heard the comment. After all, she was the one who lobbied hard to include fish tacos on the menu alongside the more traditional tacos. Their father had balked at the idea, but Leticia wouldn’t be dissuaded, insisting that if

they were to serve a wide audience, the menu needed to include more Americanized fare as well. So far, it appeared his sister was right.

Two more people placed their orders and moved out of the way to wait for their food, allowing Cutter to step forward.

“Hola, hermano,” Leticia greeted him. “I wasn’t sure if you’d make it tonight, given the loss.”

Cutter gave a shrug. “Hey, I don’t play. I only treat the injuries of the guys who do.”

“I know, but your stud kicker... he did not have such a good game.”

Self-consciously, Cutter looked around, wondering who might be in earshot of her remark, even if it was silly to be concerned. The comment was innocent enough. Still, his sister was the only one in the family who knew he liked guys. If their father ever found out, he might have a stroke. Meanwhile, their mother would clutch her rosary beads and mutter under her breath for him to be saved.

“It’s not his fault. The hold was off.”

“That’s loyalty right there.” Leticia smiled. “It’s sometimes a fine line with delusional.”

Cutter knew the teasing was well-intentioned, but he wasn’t in the mood. Nor did he want to hold up the line. “Knock it off, Leti. I just want to order some tacos.”

“Then you came to the right place.” She held up her notepad and pen, suddenly all business. “What are you having tonight? Are you here by yourself, or did you bring a date?”

“Not unless you count Neal and Rosie as dates,” he said. “Oh, and I’m ordering for Margie, too. She’s busy at the bar. I know she loves the catfish tacos, though.”

“Smart woman. Your usual?”

Cutter nodded. “Yes. Carne asada. Corn tortillas. Chicken tinga for the doc. And let’s do the bean and cheese for Neal. He’s from the northeast, where they don’t understand Mexican food. Plus, I think he’s vegetarian.”

“A total waste in Texas, but all right. Coming up.”

Cutter handed her his debit card.

“You know you don’t have to pay, brother.” Still, she took it from him and tapped it on the portable card reader.

“Hey, I want the family dream to come true, too. The least I can do is pay for tacos for my hungry colleagues.” He took his card back. “Thanks, Leti,” he added before moving off to the side to await his food and allow the next person in line to order.

The food took a while, and Cutter hoped his beer wouldn’t be warm by the time he got back to the table. “Food for the hungry masses,” he announced, setting the tacos on the table. As he did, he cast his gaze to the door, where several of the Troopers players had walked in. Despite the loss, they were greeted with cheers.

Cutter spotted Addison and Callum, as well as Logan and Coop. There was no sign of Rye, though, or his arm appendage, aka fiancée. Just as well. Cutter didn’t want to watch the buxom blonde hang all over Rye.

“Is there anyone in particular you’re looking for?” Rosie asked, and Cutter was quick to shake his head.

His boss was cool and understanding. She knew the difficulties of being Latina and gay because she lived them every day. That didn't mean Cutter could open up to her about his own love lie, though, and especially not his crush on the team's kicker. There was no way that could ever end well, anyway.

“Not at all.” He handed Rosie the order of catfish tacos. “These are for your woman. I'd offer to deliver them to her, but then she might want to kiss me. Better you have the honors.”

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Rye eased the Tesla into the three-car garage of his multi-million dollar Tarrytown home and killed the engine. Instead of getting out of the truck, though, he lingered for a few minutes, trying to work up the nerve to go inside the house. He knew the house, the car, his fiancée, made him the envy of millions of guys all over the world. Yet here he sat, scared to go inside.

Sad and pathetic much, Lenhart?

He took a deep breath. He couldn't delay the inevitable forever. Rye stepped out of the truck and grabbed his bag from the back. The garage led to a mudroom, and he dropped the bag there on his way to the kitchen. Later, he could go through it and toss whatever needed to be washed into the laundry. For now, he wanted to fix a drink and watch a bit of the football game.

Kristen stood at the counter with her back to him, pouring whiskey into an insulated tumbler. Rye doubted it was her first. "I'm home," he said, but stopped short of approaching her.

"I heard you. Nice kick, by the way." Her words were tinged with sarcasm.

Ouch . "The hold was off."

"Sure." Kristen let out a laugh as she turned to face him. "Tell yourself that if it makes you feel better."

Rye stifled a sigh. He should've have gone out with the guys after all. If this was the mood Kristen was in, it wasn't going to be a good night. "It doesn't make me feel

better,” he said, his tone coming out harsher than intended. “We needed that game. We’ll probably miss the playoffs now, and then everyone will blame me.”

Kristen rolled her eyes. “Dramatic much, Rye?” She snapped the lid on the tumbler and brought it to her lips. “Are you going to spend the rest of the night having a pity party?”

The words took Rye aback, and he studied her. Something was off. Sure, Kristen could be a self-centered bitch. She had that side to her. But most of the time, she tried to console or him, or at least empathize with him, when he had a bad game or the team suffered a tough loss. Not deliberately mock and antagonize him.

This was a new low, even for Kristen.

He pointed to the tumbler in her hand. “How much of that have you had? It’s not your first, is it?”

“So what if it’s not?” She snapped. “I’m not going anywhere.”

It was true. And heck, he planned on having a drink, too. Don’t pick a fight with her , Rye, he cautioned himself. You know what happened last time. He should back off.

“Is there any Coke in there, or just whiskey?” he asked, eyeing the countertop, where the whiskey bottle stood, still open. There was no sign, though, of a bottle of soda. That was the problem. Lately, when Kristen drank, it was straight whiskey, and more of it, because the glasses she used got bigger all the time.

“I don’t need Coke,” she said, and then giggled. “Not that kind, anyway.”

Son of a bitch! She was doing it again. She might not have put any Coca-Cola into her drink, but she’d put coke up her nose.

Rye studied her more closely, especially her eyes, and the pinpoint pupils confirmed it. He'd seen this before, too many times. He knew the signs, and he should have caught it as soon as he walked in, but he'd been too caught up in his pity party, as Kristen called it.

"Your high, aren't you?" She was high on cocaine, and now she was drinking a giant tumbler of whiskey, straight up. "Damn it, Kris. We talked about this. It needs to stop."

"I know, and it will. I haven't been using much lately. I just needed a little pick me up," she said.

A little pick me up? He didn't believe her. He'd heard it too many times. "Is that why you're planning on getting drunk now? To heighten the high?" He'd been reading up on it. He knew that was how it worked.

He also knew how dangerous it could be, and he wasn't going to let her do it to herself. Even if in this moment he hated her, or rather what she'd become, Rye loved her, too. "That's a good way to kill yourself, and I'm not letting you do it," he said, reaching to take the tumbler out of her hand.

"Give that back to me," Kristen demanded, trying to wrestle it from him.

"No." He got the tumbler out of her hand and started to back away, just as Kristen shoved him, sending him backwards with such force that he fell against the refrigerator, hitting his lower back on the door handle.

"Jesus!" The impact came with such force, and was so unexpected, that he sank to the floor. "Who knew you could hit that hard."

Immediately, Kristen was on her knees beside him. "Oh my God, Rye. I'm so sorry. I

didn't mean to do that. You know I didn't mean to do that, right? Are you okay?"

He was in so much pain that he struggled to understand the torrent of words. Sorry. Of course she was sorry. She was always sorry. "My back hurts," Rye managed to say, "but I'll be okay." His back would be, anyway. He was less sure about his wounded pride and he didn't know how much more of this he could put up with.

"Do you need me to help you up?" Kristen asked, and Rye shook his head.

"No. I can get up by myself. I just need a few minutes," he said. "And right now, I'd prefer if you leave me alone."

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His family shut down the food truck at nine, so Cutter headed out to the back a few minutes past to see if they needed any help. The game wasn't very exciting to him anyway, although the customers at the brewery appeared to be enjoying what looked like it would be a Dallas victory. Lots of beer had been poured, anyway, and he guessed lots of tacos had been eaten, too.

Leticia was just closing the order windows on the truck when he approached. "Need any help?"

She shook her head. "Nope. We've got it. Thank you, though."

Leticia's boyfriend, Esteban, who'd been helping her tonight, came down the steps of the truck. "Hey, man. What's the score of the game?"

"Twenty-two to thirteen Dallas right now, and they're in driving for more," Cutter said. "Go inside and grab yourself a drink. Tell the cute blonde working the bar to put it on my tab."

“You sure?” Esteban turned to Leticia. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. Gives me a chance to talk to mi hermano .” She gave her boyfriend a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks for helping me out tonight.”

“How was business?” Cutter asked his sister as Esteban headed inside.

“Excellent. We ran out of some things, but that’s a good problem to have. Business is almost always good here when Dallas is playing, or when the hometown team is playing out of town.”

“That’s good.” Cutter said, taking a seat at one of the picnic tables and gesturing for his sister to join him. “Thanks for doing this while Papa is not feeling well, and bringing Esteban to help.” He liked his sister’s latest boyfriend and hoped it might last.

“He’s a good worker, and he doesn’t mind,” Leticia said.

“Are you bringing him to abuela’s birthday dinner later tomorrow night?” Their grandmother was turning eighty-five, and the family had quite the celebration party planned.

Leticia nodded without hesitation. “Yes. I’ve mentioned it to him, and he wants to come,” she said. “I think it’s time to introduce him to the rest of the family.”

“I think so, too,” Cutter said. “And Mami will probably love him.” What wasn’t to like about Esteban, in their families’ eyes? He was Latino, he went to church, he had a steady job with a construction company, and he doted on Leti. He was a win all around.

“I hope so.” Leticia smiled. “I really like him, Caesar,” she said, using his given

name, which she almost never did. “I would like him to be the one.”

Cutter exhaled. “Wow. Okay.” It struck him as rather quick, as his sister had only been seeing Esteban for a couple of months, but he understood. In a conservative Latino family, there was an expectation that she find a man, and his sister was probably tired of being asked about her romantic life. “I like him, too, Leti. He seems like a good man. If he makes you happy, I’m all for that.”

“Thank you,” she said. “What about you? Will you be bringing a date to the birthday party?”

Immediately, Cutter froze up. “Not funny.”

“I wasn’t trying to be,” she said. “Maybe it’s time for you to put it all out there. Show up with a handsome man and introduce him as your date. Okay, not the stud kicker you crush on. I think he is a lost cause, sorry to say. But someone. You’re a nice-looking guy. You’re fun to be around, at least some of the time. You have a good job. Surely you could find a date.”

“I could find plenty of dates,” Cutter said with a touch of defensiveness.

“Great. Then bring one along.”

“Are you kidding?” His sister had a way of being blunt, but also a bit naïve. “Papa is already not feeling well. Do you want to give him a heart attack?”

“Of course not.” Leticia pushed back the bench and stood up. “Nor do I want to see you continue to live a lie. You deserve love, too, Cutter. And if you give them the chance, I think our family would come around to accepting that when you do find the love of your life, he’s going to be a man.”

“If you say so.” Cutter was less than convinced.

“We’re wired how we’re wired, Cutter. It’s not something that can be changed.”

“Yeah.” He raked a hand through his short, black hair. “I’m glad you get it, and I appreciate the support.” He stood, too. “We’ll see. You’re sure you don’t need any help here?”

“I’m sure. Go back inside with your friends,” Leticia said. “And think about what I said.”

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Rye sat in his upstairs study, a heating pad on his sore back, staring at the TV screen but not paying any attention to the game. It wasn’t very exciting, and besides, he found it difficult to concentrate on football. Instead, he replayed the whole ugly scene with Kristen in his head. He’d known, or at least suspected, for the last couple months that she was using again, but he never confronted her. He’d been too focused on the start of the football season.

Training camp. Long days of practice. Film study. Traveling for road games. He was away from home a lot, and they didn’t spend much time together.

Now, he wondered how bad things had gotten. Although she insisted she wasn’t using much, Rye wasn’t sure he believed her. Not if she was drinking whiskey on top of the cocaine to try to enhance the high. No. That indicated a higher-level of use and a higher tolerance. And he’d blindly let it happen because he was too wrapped up in kicking a football through two posts.

“Rye?” He heard the knock on the doorframe and turned to find Kristen in the doorway. “How’s your back feel?”

“It hurts, but I’ll live.”

“I’m so sorry, baby. You know that, right?” She walked over to where he sat, and Rye noticed she was dressed in lingerie, no doubt with the intent to lure him to bed. They’d have sex, and everything would be okay. That was what she hoped for, and too often, it worked. Tonight, Rye wasn’t in the mood. She was a beautiful woman, but even the sexy lingerie did nothing to turn him on. “I had a bad day.”

Rye ignored that, because it was a common excuse. Instead, he said, “I’m sorry, too. It was wrong to pick a fight with you.” Seriously. He knew better than that by now.

She sat down next to him on the couch, snuggling closer, and Rye turned to face her. “It’s got to stop, though, Kris. You need to get some help.”

“I know, and I will,” she said. “Starting tomorrow.” He heard it before, several times, and the words rang hollow. “Let’s go to bed now. Let me make it up to you.” Her hand moved to the waistband of his sweat pants.

Nothing. Rye felt nothing, and he pushed her hand away. “I’m not in the mood right now, Kris. I want to watch the rest of the game.”

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The Monday after game day was dedicated to the film study of the previous day's game, or as some of the guys liked to call it, the postmortem. After a tough loss, it was an appropriate term. Rye walked gingerly into the film room, his lower back still sore from Kristen slamming him against the refrigerator door in her fit of rage.

She didn't mean it, Rye told himself. As soon as it happened, she'd been remorseful and apologized. Besides, it was partially his fault. He knew better than to pick a fight with her when she'd been drinking, much less snorting her precious white powder. That was the real problem. The coke had too much of a hold on Kristen right now, and she wasn't herself. She wasn't in control of her actions when she was high, and they both knew it.

She said she'd get help, and maybe he needed to be more proactive in helping her find a rehab program, and supporting her while she worked through the program, in the hope she'd stick with it. Maybe if Kristen could be successful this time and kick the drug habit, things would get back to normal. Rye could have his fiancée back, the sweet girl from Abilene he fell in love with all those years ago. The woman he lived with now barely resembled her.

Was it naive and delusional to think they could ever go back to the way it was before? After all, Kristen had talked about going into rehab before, most recently a few months ago, the last time one of their arguments got a little rough.

That time, she'd thrown a glass of red wine at him. He'd ducked at the last minute and the glass missed him, instead smashing into the wall. It stained the white curtains, and Kristen cried. Rye comforted her while they picked up the mess, and she promised to do better.

Things were tough on her. He knew that. The modeling jobs weren't coming as often as they used to, and she feared she'd fade into irrelevancy. Or worse, oblivion. After the meltdown was over and the mess cleaned up, she promised to go into rehab.

It didn't happen, though. The curtains were professionally cleaned and came out good as new, and Kristen booked a new print ad in a magazine. She cut down on the coke—although Rye suspected she still used occasionally—and they got along better.

And Rye convinced himself everything was fine.

Last night proved that it wasn't, and now he had the sore back and a few bruises to show for it. It was the first time the fighting had turned physical, and Rye wanted it to be the last.

"You okay, Rye?" The question came from Javon Montrose, one of the team's running backs who also played on special teams.

"Sure," Rye said. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Javon shrugged. "I don't know," he replied. "Just that you seem to be moving kind of gingerly. Like you're in pain or something."

"Yeah. I took a bad hit when I tried to tackle Oklahoma's return man on that one kickoff." He was deliberately vague as to which kickoff, and suspected Javon would let it go. Unless, of course, the film breakdown showed every kickoff and revealed that there hadn't been any rough hit on Rye. Unless you counted the one from his fiancée. "I put a heating pad on it last night and I thought it'd be better, but I woke up sore this morning."

"Sorry, man," Javon said. "You should have one of the trainers look at. They're all good, but I'm partial to Cutter. When I injured my hammy earlier in the season, he

worked magic with me.”

“I remember that,” Rye said. “I’ll probably so see him if it doesn’t ease up.” He’d hoped his back was just tight from sleeping wrong, but so far, being awake and moving hadn’t helped. If anything, he was feeling worse.

Sitting in the film room for an hour didn’t help, and Rye was relieved when Coach Oliviera called an end to the session, freeing the guys for light, optional workouts. They would have a short week to prepare for the Thursday night matchup with Denver.

Normally, Rye would get together with the long snapper and holder and practice a few drills, especially coming off a loss on a missed kick. With the state of his back, though, he didn’t think it was a good idea. Instead, Rye sought out the team’s special team’s coach, Jaxen Ross, and informed him of the injury.

“I didn’t realize the hit was that bad,” Coach J said. “You said you were fine after the game, aside from a bit of wounded pride.”

“Yeah, I thought I was, but the back tightened up on me last night.” The lie was flowing easily now. Soon, he’d probably start believing it himself. “I’m going to sit out drills, if that’s okay, and go have the training staff take look at it.”

Coach J nodded. “Good idea. They’ll fix you up good,” he said. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

“I will. Thanks, Coach J.”

“And Rye?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t beat yourself up over yesterday. The missed kick is only one reason we lost.”

Rye nodded. “Thanks. I appreciate you saying that. I’m going to go get my back worked on so I’m ready to go on Thursday. I won’t let the team down again.”

~&~

Cutter expected a quiet day in the treatment room. It usually was when the team avoided injuries during the game. Sure, there would be routine stuff like taping ankles, and some of the guys who were rehabbing injuries would be in for follow-up care or physical therapy, but he wasn’t aware of any new injuries that were sustained during loss to Oklahoma.

That’s why it took him by surprise when Rye appeared in the training room, walking as if he were in discomfort and holding a hand to his lower back. To Cutter’s trained eye, he appeared to be in considerable pain. He wore a gold T-shirt with the Troopers logo, paired with black athletic shorts, and looked so damn fine that Cutter couldn’t help but check him out, his gaze lingering a bit on Rye’s crotch.

Cutter tried to discern if Rye wore briefs under the shorts, or a jock strap, or if he might be free balling it. Cutter expected the latter, and he found the possibility to be incredibly hot.

Dial it down , Hernandez, he cautioned himself. It wouldn’t do to get turned on by the players he treated, no matter how sexy they might be. “Morning, Rye,” he said, redirecting his gaze to the kicker’s handsome face. “Is there something I can help you with?” His mind could certainly conjure up plenty of possibilities. “You look like you’re in a bit of pain.”

Rye nodded as he rubbed his hand on his back. “Yeah. I’m feeling a little tightness in my lower back,” he said. “I think it must be from when I lunged to try to stop

Oklahoma's return got guy on that one kickoff. Anyway, I'm hoping you might be able to look at it."

Cutter smiled. "That's what I'm here for."

The kicker nodded, appearing relieved. "I appreciate it. Some of the other guys insist you've worked magic on their injuries," he said. "I'm lucky I've been injury free most of my career, so I've yet to experience your services."

Much to my great disappointment, Cutter thought. "I'm sorry you've got an injury now, but let's see if we can get you fixed up," he said. "What's hurting, exactly? Your lower back, you said?"

"Yeah." Rye turned around. "Right in this area." He rubbed a hand on his lower right back. "I tried a heating pad last night, but it didn't do much."

Cutter nodded. "Okay. I've got some things we can try, see if we can get you feeling better," he said. "Good news is I doubt it's anything that would keep you out of a game, unless maybe you'd broken a rib. From what you've described, though, that seems unlikely."

"Nah, I don't think it's anything like that," Rye said. "I mean, not that I would know. I don't have any medical training."

"Hey, that's never stopped most people from trying to diagnose their own injuries," Cutter said, chuckling. He gestured to one of the tables in the training room. "If you want to hop up there, we'll take a look."

"I'm not sure about the hopping part," Rye said with a sheepish smile. "But okay." He pulled himself up to a sitting position on the table, wincing in the process. "Ouch."

“You’re in some obvious discomfort, that’s for sure,” Cutter said. “Do you mind taking your shirt off?”

Rye shook his head and tugged the T-shirt over his head, revealing his broad shoulders, narrow hips, and perfectly sculpted abs. His chest was mostly smooth, except for a smattering of hair in his lower abdomen that disappeared into his shorts, which hung low on his hips.

It was enough to have Cutter salivating. Damn, the man was fine. Cutter knew his fantasies that night would all include Rye Lenhart. For now, since he couldn’t stand there and admire the man’s chest, Cutter moved behind the table to have a look at the kicker’s back, which was equally muscular and attractive.

The bruising, though, was what got Cutter’s attention. It covered an area of Rye’s lower back and torso, about three inches long and an inch wide. The bruising was a pinkish purple in color, suggesting a fresh trauma rather than something actively healing. That would be consistent with a hit sustained in yesterday’s football game, as the kicker reported. The size, shape and location, though, suggested something else.

It suggested an impact to that part of the kicker’s body, the kind that would result from hitting a narrow object. Or being pushed against one. It didn’t look to Cutter at all like a bruise that might result from a football hit. Those were seldom specific and tended to occur in unusual locations.

“That’s a heck of a bruise you’ve got forming there,” Cutter observed, striving to keep his tone casual. “Looks fresh, too.”

“Yeah, I told you.” Was it his imagination, or did the kicker’s shoulders noticeably tighten. “The tackle yesterday.”

“Right.” Except it was not from the tackle. Cutter was all but certain about that. He

wouldn't push it, though. Not now. "I don't think it's too serious. Not something that won't resolve itself with ice, heating pads and maybe some pain relievers," he said. "I do want to make sure you're not potentially dealing with a rib injury, though."

"How do you do that?" Rye asked.

"I'll do a quick exam, check a few things," Cutter said. "If there's anything concerning. I'll send you to Dr. Jiminez for X-rays or an MRI. I don't think that'll be necessary, but I do think it's important to rule it out."

"Do whatever you have to do," the kicker said. "I just want to get back on the field and help the team win."

"And my job is to help you do that," Cutter said. "Will you raise your arms out to your side, please? Both of them. Straight out, like an airplane."

"Sure." Rye extended his arms. "Like this?"

"Perfect." In more ways than one. Cutter moved behind him, placing his hands on either side of Rye's lower back and torso. "How does that feel? Any pain?" It certainly felt good to him.

"Um, no. No pain."

"Great." Cutter moved his hands further up. "How about now?"

"Still good," Rye mumbled. "Real good."

"No pain, then?" Cutter pressed a little harder.

"No. Not on my sides. That feels... good It's just the bruise."

“That’ll resolve over the next week or so. You can ice it if you need to,” Cutter said. “I think you’ll be fine, though. No indication of a rib fracture or anything.”

“That’s g news,” Rye said. “We’re good, then?”

Cutter hesitated. “Yeah, you can sit up.” He backed away from the table as Rye sat up, his hands immediately covering his groin area.

He wasn’t fast enough, though, because Cutter couldn’t help but notice that Rye appeared to be aroused. And no, he definitely wasn’t wearing any underwear.

Cutter sucked in a breath as he glanced downward, making sure he wasn’t aroused himself. Okay, he was. A little. Fortunately, the pants he wore did a decent job of concealing it. Unlike Rye’s shorts, which concealed next to nothing. He was distinctly hard. And generously endowed, too.

“Jesus. Sorry,” Rye muttered, his cheeks reddening as he held his hands over his crotch. “I can’t believe that happened.”

Me neither, but I’m glad it did. “No worries,” Cutter replied, his tone light. “Not much surprises me.” Though that did.

“Good, okay.” Rye slid off the table, holding one hand to his sore back, and keeping the other over his erection, as if it wasn’t already obvious. “Ice, then?”

“Yeah. Ice.” Cutter forced himself to direct his gaze higher. “Rye? Are you okay?”

“Sure. You said nothing’s broken, right?”

“Right.”

“Then what?”

Cutter hesitated. “The bruise... are you sure that came from the game?” He asked.

“There’s nothing else going on?”

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Jesus. Could he just get out of here? Rye didn't know what the hell had happened, but now, in addition to his aching back, he had a raging hard on, and an athletic trainer with an amused smirk on his face. One who was also asking too many personal questions.

"No. What else would be going on?" Just my fiancée slamming me against the refrigerator door, and then later trying to seduce me as if nothing had happened. Yet Rye felt nothing, no arousal at all, when Kristen touched him. There was something about Cutter's hands on his back, though, that was safe, comforting, and oddly arousing at the same time.

And it didn't escape the trainer's notice, judging from the smirk that passed over his face. It disappeared fast enough, though—Cutter's smirk, that is. Rye's erection was taking longer to go away.

"I don't know," Cutter said with a shrug that he probably intended to be casual, but came across as if he were trying too hard. "That's what I'm asking. Look, Rye, I know a thing or two about bruising and football injuries," he said, "and that doesn't look like a bruise that came from contact in a game. That's all I'm saying. I'm not trying to pry. I only want to make sure you're okay. That there's nothing else going on that you might want to talk to somebody about."

Talk to somebody about the fact his fiancée was a cocaine addict with a propensity for slapping him around when she was high? That was for sure not happening, and certainly not with anyone affiliated with the team

"Everything is fine," Rye said a little too tersely. "Other than a sore back from the hit

I rook in yesterday's game. The football game, Cutter. I don't care what you think you know about bruising and all that, but I'm the one who was there. On the field. I know what happened. It was the game, okay?"

The trainer backed away a little bit, nodding his head as he did. "Got it. Sorry if the question upset you. You're right. I don't know anything. I wasn't in the game," Cutter said. "I hope it gets better soon. Let me know if you need anything else."

He'd like more of Cutter's magical hands on his back, but he could do without the personal questions. Rye grabbed his T-shirt and pulled it over his head, grateful his erection had subsided.

"I will. Thanks again, Cutter." He tried for a friendlier tone. Nothing good would come from snapping at a well-intentioned trainer who was only doing his job.

"Hey, that's what I'm here for."

Rye left the training room, closing the door behind him and leaning against the wall. He closed his eyes as his mind replayed what happened. What the heck was that all about, anyway? He hadn't gotten hard from a man's touch since... No. Not going there. Sure, Cutter was handsome enough, if that's what one was into, and he was reportedly into guys. But Rye wasn't. No way, no how. Getting turned on by Cutter's touch was only a one-time fluke thing, just like it had been with Max. Right?

"Rye?" Coach J's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Did you get your back looked at?"

Rye snapped his eyes open and nodded. "Yes, Coach. Cutter examined it, and he doesn't have any concern about broken ribs or anything. Just some soreness and bruising that should be better in a few days," he said. "I'll be fine for Thursday."

"Good. Take the rest of the day off," Coach J said. "We'll reassess tomorrow and see

if you're ready to practice. If not, you don't. We'll have to add you to the injury report if that happens, though." He let out a chuckle. "You might give your fantasy football owners a heart attack when they see an injury designation by your name, though. Especially for an early game."

Rye laughed, too. "Probably, but I'm not planning on that being an issue. Barring a big setback, I'm not missing any practice time." No way was he going to let his personal problems get the better of his game preparation.

~&~

Cutter waited until Rye had left the training room before going down the hall and knocking on the door of his boss's office. He waited for Rosie to yell "Come in," before pushing the door open.

This was probably a bad idea. He should mind his own business. Maybe the bruise was from the game. Or maybe Rye was clumsy. Maybe it was the result of harmless fun, or rough sex with his fiancée. No, his mind sure didn't want to go there.

"What's going on?" Rosie asked, taking off her reading glasses as she looked up from her desk. "Have a seat."

"Thanks." Cutter helped himself to one of the plush chairs opposite Rosie's desk in her well-appointed office. Her diplomas from the University of Texas at San Antonio were displayed on the wall, and the credenza behind her desk was filled with photos of her and Margie. "There's something I need to talk to you about."

Rosie nodded. "Okay."

"We're friends, right?" Cutter asked. "I mean, I know you're my boss, but I've come to think of you as a friend, too." Hopefully, he hadn't overstepped too much or

assumed something that wasn't there.

"Likewise," Rosie said, smiling. "We socialize after games. You've been to my house for dinner. Yes, we're friends. So, what's on your mind, Cutter?" The doctor asked. "Although if you're about to offer me your resignation, I hereby reject it."

Cutter chuckled as he relaxed against the back of the chair. "It's not that. I know a good gig when I have it." He crossed his legs and studied the doctor's academic credentials on the wall. "I have this other friend, more of an acquaintance, really, and I'm kind of worried about them."

"Worried how?"

Cutter hesitated. He'd come this far. He couldn't exactly take it back now. Still, he had to be careful how much he said. "It might be nothing, or it might be the case of my medical training leading to an overactive imagination," he said, "but my friend... I noticed unusual bruising on them, the kind of thing that doesn't look accidental." Or from a sports injury. He couldn't say that, though, without risking Rye's identity.

"Are you saying you think it's a domestic violence situation?"

"I... maybe." Was he simply assuming the worst because he'd never liked Rye's fiancée? Or because he was interested in the sexy football player himself? "I think so, but when I tried to casually ask about the bruise, they deflected the question. Made excuses. Which we know is common in domestic situations."

"Right," Rosie said. "Been there, seen it, own the T-shirt."

"What?" Cutter frowned. "You?" It was difficult to envision his strong, independent boss ever being a victim, but then again, if a millionaire professional football player could be a victim of domestic violence, then so could a tough, no-nonsense doctor.

“Not me, no,” Rosie was quick to say. “But once upon a time, I had a very good friend, and she was involved in a relationship that I... well, I didn’t fully approve of. Mainly because I thought it was unhealthy for her, but also probably because I was a little jealous, too, because I was interested in her myself.”

Ouch. Talk about hitting too close to home. “What did you do?”

“Tried to confront her about my suspicions, resulting in a big, ugly argument and almost ruined a great friendship,” she said.

“Almost?”

The doctor nodded. “Yes, almost. In the end, things worked out okay for me, but if I had it to do over again, I’m not sure I’d take the same approach.”

“What are you saying?” Cutter asked.

“Probably too much,” his boss said, “which is why I’m shutting up now. Except to offer one piece of advice.”

“What’s that?”

“Tread softly, Cutter, and consider the ramifications. These situations aren’t easy for anyone involved.”

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T read softly. Cutter wanted to do exactly that. It wasn't easy, though, because at the same time, he wanted to confront Rye. He wanted to confront him with his suspicions that the kicker's amazing, supermodel fiancée, the one he trotted out as an example of his perfect life, was abusing him.

Better yet, Cutter wanted to confront Rye about the way the football God's body responded to his touch the way it did. Because Cutter knew he hadn't imagined that. No way, now how. That was real. It seemed the sexy kicker might be keeping not just one deep, dark secret, but two.

"You should have brought a date," Leticia said as Cutter eased his car to a stop in the driveway of their parents' modest house. "Even if it was a fake one."

"Shut up," he muttered as he turned off the engine, already regretting that he'd offered to drive his sister and her boyfriend to the party. "I'm not doing fake dates right now." He opened the car door.

"Or real ones, obviously."

"Nope. Not right now," Cutter said. "And I'm good with that."

"I don't believe you." Leticia looked at him. "You know what I said."

"Yep." He rang the doorbell. It might be his parents' house, but that didn't mean he would barge on in. "When it's time, it'll be time. Now is not time."

Right then, Mami pulled the door open. "Not time for what? And since when do you

have to ring the doorbell at your home, Caesar?”

As usual, her timing was perfect. Or perfectly awkward. “I don’t live here anymore,” he said. “And it’s not time for anything other than wishing my favorite abuela a happy birthday.” Cutter pulled his mother into an embrace. “I love you, Mami, but where’s the birthday girl?”

His sister’s gaze met his over their mother’s shoulder, and Cutter could see Leticia mouthing the words, ‘Nice recovery. Smooth.’

He winked at her as the star of the show, eighty-five-year-old Maria Espinoza Gonzalez appeared in the entryway, maneuvering her walker as fast as she could.

“I’m here. Moving as fast as my old legs will allow.”

“Oh, you’re not old, abuela,” Leticia said.

“You sweet talk your old grandmother. I like it,” she said, “and who is the young man?”

“This is my boyfriend, Esteban,” Leticia said, blushing a little.

It was good that they all arrived together, Cutter decided. Less attention on him.

“Esteban Cardoso.” He extended his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am. Leti has told me so much about you.”

“All good, I hope,” Maria said, eliciting laughter from the group.

“Definitely,” Esteban said. “I doubt there’s anything bad she could say.”

“Ah, you’re a smooth one,” Mami said. “I’m Juanita Hernandez, Leticia’s mother.”

“Another pleasure,” Esteban said. “Thank you for having me in your home.”

“We’re all excited. Leticia doesn’t often bring dates home,” Mami said. “And Caesar never does,” she added, with a look in his direction.

Gee, thanks, Mami . “There’s no one to bring home,” he said. “I don’t have time to date right now. Work keeps me too busy.” Along with fantasizing about the players I treat.

“You can’t work all the time, Caesar,” Mami said.

“Listen to your mother,” Maria said. “You need to find a woman and settle down. I’m not going to live forever, and I want great grandchildren.” She looked to Leticia. “That goes for you, too.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, abuela . Thanks.” Leticia looked over their petite grandmother’s head at Cutter and rolled her eyes.

Cutter stifled a groan and nodded. It was going to be a long night of prying questions from his family, but he could handle it. After all, abuela only turned eighty-five once.

~&~

Rye drove around aimlessly after he left the training facility, again in no hurry to get home. Once upon a time, he’d rushed home after practice, anxious to be with Kristen. Where had things gone so wrong that now he sought to avoid her?

The drugs were part of it, obviously, but not the only thing. Sure, it was the drugs that turned Kristen into a person he barely recognized and didn’t like very much, but there

was more to it than that. Even if she went to rehab, actually investing in and completing it this time, and got sober, Rye questioned whether the relationship could be repaired. There was a part of him that still loved her, he didn't doubt that. Sometimes love wasn't enough, though, especially with the like gone, along with the trust and the security.

He knew a therapist would have a field day with him, if he ever went to therapy. He had no plans to do that, though. Why would he when he wasn't sure he wanted to save the relationship in the first place?

Kristen's Lexus SUV was in the garage when Rye got home, and he braced himself for what he might find. He just hoped to hell she was sober this time, because if she wasn't, he might have to leave until things calmed down a bit.

"Oh, good, you're here," he heard Kristen say as he came through the mudroom to the kitchen. "I just put dinner in the oven. I set it on low, because I wasn't sure when you'd get home."

"You're cooking?" Rye looked at her with surprise. Sure enough, she was dressed in casual leggings and T-shirt, with an apron tied around her waist, and the countertop and sink were filled with dishes. "Since when does that happen these days?"

When she was younger, when they first lived together after college when he played for Los Angeles, Kristen used to cook quite a bit, and she wasn't too bad at it. Granted, he'd been a rookie kicker playing for the league minimum, and Kristen's modeling career hadn't taken off. They didn't have the money to go out every night, much less hire personal cooks. "What about Graciela?" he asked, referring to the lady who came on Mondays and prepared meals for them for the week.

"I gave her the day off," Kristen said. "I might give her tomorrow off, too. If I don't have jobs to go to, I can handle some basic meal prep. I used to do it all the time, you

know.”

“You did, yes, and it was great,” Rye assured her. “That’s fine, and I’m sure Graciela will welcome a couple days off.”

“I thought we could benefit from some time alone,” Kristen said. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

Rye saw that there was a bottle of Tempranillo on the counter. It didn’t appear to have been opened, and he saw only one glass beside it.

“I’ll stick to water,” Kristen said, noticing that he looked in the direction of the glass. “And I promise I haven’t used today.”

“I believe you.” Her eyes appeared normal, and her mood was, well, almost pleasant. Almost like the old Kristen. “I’ll open the wine,” he said, getting the corkscrew out of the drawer, “and I don’t mind if you have a glass.”

“You don’t?”

He shook his head. “No. It’s when you mix alcohol with the drugs that I worry. That’s a good way to kill yourself, Kris, and I’m not going to sit around and watch that happen.”

“I know. I won’t do that anymore.” She got another wine glass from the cabinet, and he poured.

“Did you look into rehab today?”

A flicker of hesitation flashed in her eyes, and knew the answer was ‘no.’ The question was whether she’d lie or tell him the truth.

After a second, Kristen shook her head. “Not yet. I didn’t get the chance. I will tomorrow, though.”

Tomorrow. Rye didn’t entirely believe her, but at the same time, at least she was being honest. No, he wouldn’t confront her about that now. “I hope so.” He raised the glass of wine to his lips and took a drink. “This is good,” he said. “What’s for dinner?”

“Eggplant parmesan.”

“Sounds delicious,” Rye said, meaning it.

“How’s your back feel today?” Kristen asked.

“It’ll be fine.”

“I’m so sorry about last night, baby. You know that, right?”

Rye nodded. “Yes.”

“Good.” She put a hand on his chest and drew it down to his waistband. “Dinner’s going to take a while, if you want to go upstairs?” Her breath was hot against his as she lowered her hand over his crotch, stroking him through his clothes.

Nope. Nothing. Yet he’d been hard as a rock when Cutter touched him earlier. Jesus. What the hell was happening to him? “Sure. Let me just take a quick shower first.”

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A quick shower. Fortunately, Kristen didn't protest and didn't find the request strange. In the bathroom, Rye turned on the water and stripped out of his clothes. He stared down at his dick, which was completely flaccid. No surprise. Lately, it didn't respond to Kristen's flirting, or her touch, at all.

Fortunately, there were certain memories that never failed to get Rye turned on, and as he stepped under the stream of water, he let his mind go back to his college years. He was dating Kristen back then, but this particular memory had nothing to do with her.

Rye was lying on his bed, attempting to study for his history exam when Max returned to the room. His hair was wet, and he wore only a towel wrapped around his waist. He'd obviously just come from a shower in the shared bath in their dormitory.

"You going out tonight?" Max asked.

Rye shook his head. "Nah. Gotta study." He was about to return his focus to the war for Texas' independence when Max abruptly dropped his towel to the floor.

"Yeah. I should probably do the same." Max made no move to pick up the towel, instead standing there in the middle of the room, stark naked. "Maybe I'll stay in, too."

Rye saw guys naked all the time in the locker room and thought nothing of it. Now, though, he found his eyes lingering on his roommate's naked body. Probably lingering too long, as Max caught him looking.

“You like what you see or something?”

“What? No.” What kind of question was that? Everyone knew he and Kristen were inseparable, and the sex they had was great. “Kinda surprised you aren’t putting any clothes on, though.”

“I will in a minute,” Max said. He moved to Rye’s bed and sat down on the edge, making Rye sit up, too. “There’s something I’ve been thinking about.”

“What’s that?” Rye asked.

“Have you ever kissed a guy before, Rye?”

What the hell? “Huh? Of course not.”

“You should try it sometime.”

“Forget it, man. I have Kris.”

“And she’s hot,” Mas said. “Still, it can be good to open your mind to other possibilities.”

“Like kissing a guy? No thanks.”

“You sure? Because I bet you’d like it.” The next thing Rye knew, Max scooted closer to him on the bed and leaned in and kissed him.

As Max’s lips met his, Rye’s first instinct was to push him away. Except as his roommate’s lips brushed over his own a second time, something stirred inside Rye. Maybe he did like it, at least a little bit.

That scared the hell of him, and he tried to pull away. “Jesus, Max, what are you doing?”

“Something I’ve wanted to do for a long time. I think you have, too.” Max moved in to kiss him again, and this time Rye met him halfway. It was wrong. So wrong. But damned if it didn’t feel good.

While Kristen’s lips were soft and luscious, Max’s were rougher, more chapped. Rye didn’t mind, though, and as Max pushed at Rye’s lips with his tongue, Rye welcomed him. He was aware of his heart rate accelerated as the kiss deepened. He was aware of something else, too, something that scared him even more.

“Oh, God,” Max murmured, his breath hot against Rye’s mouth. As Max pulled away, Rye noticed his roommate’s cock was hard, and Rye couldn’t stop staring at it. “Now you’ve done it. You got me hard, Rye.” Max put his hand on his penis and began to stroke himself.

Rye knew he should look away, but he couldn’t. Nor could he ignore his own growing arousal.

“I know you like what you see now,” Max said, directing his eyes to the obvious bulge in Rye’s shorts. “I bet you want to touch it, don’t you?”

Rye was about to shake his head, but Max reached over and grabbed his hand, directing it to his cock. “That’s right,” his roommate said. “Touch me, stroke me. Like you’ve wanted to do for a long time.”

Rye wanted to deny it, but he knew he couldn’t deny that he wanted to do it now, so he closed his hand around Max’s cock and stroked him.

“That’s it. That’s it,” Max encouraged. “God, Ryeland. That feels so good. Please,

don't stop."

It felt good to Rye, too, so he kept up his motion until finally Max let out a guttural moan and spilled his juices all over Rye's hand and bed.

Rye snapped his eyes open. His hand was clasped around his penis, which was now fully erect. He quickly turned the water off. No jerking off in the shower now. Kristen expected him to make love to her, and he couldn't lose his hard on until he'd satisfied her.

If he needed to, he'd think about Max some more. Or maybe Cutter.

He toweled off quickly and stepped into the bedroom, where Kristen waited for him.

Her eyes landed on his erection, and she smiled. "That's more like it. You had me a little worried last night."

~&~

"How's the food?" Kristen asked later, as they sat at the table eating dinner and drinking wine. "Is it okay?"

"It's delicious, babe. Really." Rye wanted to reassure her. He knew Kristen had gone to a lot of effort to fix a nice dinner for them. She was trying, and he needed to try to.

"Okay." She looked at him uncertainly. "You're kind of quiet, that's all."

He was, because he knew after dinner that Kristen would want to have sex again, and Rye wasn't sure he was up for it. Or rather, that he could get up for it. And he couldn't stall by saying he wanted to shower again so he could spend a few minutes alone while he fantasized about touching and kissing a man.

“Sorry. I’m kind of lost in my thoughts tonight.” He took another bite of the eggplant parmesan. It was one of his favorite meals, and he did appreciate Kristen’s effort and thoughtfulness in making it for him.

“About us? And what happened yesterday?” she asked. “I promise I’m going to see about treatment, baby.”

He waved his hand. “I know you will. It’s not about that. I’m preoccupied with the game coming up.”

“Denver, right?”

Rye nodded. “Yeah. The defending champs. It’ll be a tough game.”

“You always play well there, though.”

“True. I love the thin, mile high air.” He smiled. “It can make kicks soar.” He always told Coach J that his comfort range in Denver’s high altitude was a good five yards longer than in any other stadium, even the closed-roof ones where he didn’t have to worry about weather conditions.

“You’ll be fine,” Kristen said.

“I hope so. We’ve got the playoffs on the line,” he said. “Besides, I always want to be the best. You know that.” He reached for the bottle of wine and topped off his glass. “Do you want a little more?”

After a second, she shook her head. “No, I’m good. Thanks.” Rye suspected she wanted another glass but was holding back in an effort to keep the peace and make amends for the previous night.

“I want to be the best, too,” she continued. “That’s why the past year has been so hard with the shoots not coming as often as I’d like.”

“I know.” Rye reached across the table and touched her hand. “That’ll change. The jobs will come. It’s only a matter of finding the right ones,” he said. “You’re still the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“You mean that?”

“Yes.” It wasn’t a complete lie. She was still a stunningly beautiful woman. The fact that he no longer desired her the way he once had did nothing to change that.

“Thanks, baby. It helps hearing that. I love you so much.”

Rye nodded. “I love you, too, Kris. That hasn’t changed.”

They finished dinner, and Rye helped her clean up the kitchen, something he hadn’t done in years. He didn’t have too. That’s what they had a cleaning service for. Graciela prepared the meals, leaving detailed instructions on how to reheat them, and the cleaning service picked up after them. It had become an easy, posh lifestyle.

“Kind of feels like old times a little bit, doesn’t it?” Kristen asked. “Before we could afford to hire people to do these things for us?”

“It does, yeah,” Rye said. “This nice, though.” It might do them both some good to recall the way things used to be and try to get back to that a little bit. “Thanks again for dinner.”

“My pleasure.” Kristen finished loading the dishwasher and turned it on. “Are you ready to go back upstairs and pick up where we left off?”

Yeah. There it was. The moment Rye dreaded. He was in no way ready, but he couldn't say that. "Maybe a little later. I've got some film to watch first." It was a convenient lie, but one she Kristen usually believed. He gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Love you."

He could only hope that would be enough to reassure her for the rest of the night.

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“How was dinner with the fam?” Rosie asked Cutter the next day when he arrived at the training facility?”

“It was fine,” Cutter said. “Good food. My abuela was radiant at eighty-five, and she basked in being the star of the show.” While her health was still good for her age, he always wondered how many more birthdays he would have with her. “Leticia brought her new boyfriend along, and that was met with much approval.”

While he talked, he worked to prepare the training tables. Hopefully there wouldn’t be a slate of injuries during the team’s practice, but they had to be ready in case there was.

“And did that take some pressure of you?” His boss asked. “You know, about not bringing a date of your own?”

“A little. Maybe. They still asked questions. They always ask questions.” Cutter sighed. “It’s not easy. My sister keeps insisting it’s time to tell them the truth.”

“Do you think she’s wrong?” Rosie wanted to know. “Because, let me tell you, there’s something very liberating in finally being able to be true to yourself, and express all aspects of your identity, without holding anything back.”

“I’m sure there is,” Cutter agreed. “It’s not like I don’t want that.” On the contrary, he wanted more than anything to be able to show up to family functions with a handsome man he could introduce to everyone as his boyfriend. “My family is complicated.”

Now Rosie laughed. “Families usually are. Complicated and messy,” she said. “Mine included.”

“So, how did you do it? Just show up one day with Margie and introduce her as your girlfriend?”

“Not quite like that,” the doctor said. “It was different for me, though. Margie and I had been friends for a long time. We’d both been in relationships with men, and my father had passed away. So, it was only my mom I had to worry about, and she took it in stride.” She paused. “Your family might, too.”

“Sure, they might,” Cutter agreed, but he didn’t believe it. “Or Papa might have a heart attack. His health is already not great. I don’t want his death on my conscience.”

“Obviously.” Rosie gave him a pat on his arm. “If you’re not ready, you’re not ready,” she said. “Take all the time you need. I’m simply offering that coming out to your family doesn’t have to be a negative experience. Sometimes it can be a very good one.”

Cutter managed a wry smile. “Too bad I don’t have a crystal ball to show me how mine might turn out.”

“No. None of us do,” Rosie said. “Sometimes we simply have to take chances.” She let out a chuckle. “And that, my friend, is the end of my pearls of wisdom for the day.”

“I missed pearls of wisdom?” Neal walked into the training room. “Aw, shucks.”

“See, if you get here earlier, there are many more benefits,” Rosie teased. “All right, gentlemen. I’m retreating to my corners. If you need me for actual medical type stuff, you know where to find me.”

Neal rolled his eyes. “Yes, boss.” He turned to Cutter. “Anything else I missed besides Rosie’s pearls of wisdom?”

“Nope.” Cutter shook his head. “Nothing.” He liked Neal, he was even beginning to consider the newest member of the medical team a friend. That didn’t mean he was ready to share all the details of his life with Neal, though.

Fortunately, he was spared that because Rye chose that moment to walk into the training room. “You guys open for business yet?”

Cutter met his gaze. Not surprisingly, the kicker looked deliciously handsome, wearing sweatpants and a white T-shirt with the team logo, and his blond hair hanging over his forehead. Down boy, Cutter cautioned himself. “We’re always open if any of the players are around.”

Usually Tuesday was often a day off from practice, with the real game preparation beginning on Wednesday, but with the Thursday game the schedule was compressed. There would be a lot of players at the facility, either working out, watching film, or seeking treatment for the myriad of aches and pains they might be suffering from.

“How’s your back feeling today?” Cutter asked Rye.

“Better, but still a little sore,” the kicker said.

“Do you want me to try to work my magic on it again?”

“I don’t know.” Rye glanced at the floor, then looked up and turned in Neal’s direction. “Maybe you can treat it today?”

Ouch!

“Um, I suppose,” Neal said, with an awkward glance in Cutter’s direction. “If it’s okay with you? I don’t want to take your patient away from you.”

“No, he’s not my patient.” Especially if he’s not interested in my services . “He’s all yours, Neal. Good luck, Rye.”

Cutter directed his attention to the door, as one of the other players walked in. “Hey, Javon. How’s the ankle? Want me to wrap it for you?”

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Talk about juvenile! Rye watched as Cutter turned his attention to the wide receiver’s ankle, chastising himself for his actions. What was he trying to prove, anyway? And better yet, to whom?

“Rye? Are you ready?” Neal asked, interrupting his thoughts. “If you want to get up on the table and lay on your stomach, I can take a look at your back.”

“Sounds good.” Hopefully it would come without the a-little-too-uncomfortable personal questions, as well as the physical reaction. Rye could especially do without that. And if he was being honest with himself, it was the physical reaction that most concerned him.

He needed to prove to himself that his reaction to Cutter’s touch was merely a fluke. An aberration. The same as it was with Max back in college years. Nothing more than a crazy fluke.

Rye pulled his shirt off and assumed his position on the table. “I’m sure you’ve heard the story. It was that hit in the fourth quarter on Sunday,” he explained.

“Sure, I remember. You were trying to save the touchdown on the return,” Neal said.

“It was tough the way the Copperheads’ dude laid you out.”

There. That was more like it. No prying, awkward questions about where the bruise came from. Why couldn’t everyone accept the lie? Why did they have to make it difficult.

“It was, but I’m already feeling better today,” Rye said. “I know I’ll be fine for the game. I’m mainly here in an abundance of caution. You know, a little muscle massage. Work the kinks out. That’s all.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” Neal placed his hands on Rye’s lower back, the same as Cutter had the day before, and gently massaged the soft tissue. “How’s that.”

“Good.” It was the same technique. The same gentle, yet relieving pressure. It didn’t hurt—good news—but it didn’t feel great, either. In other words, Neal’s touch didn’t feel like magic on his back the way Cutter’s had. And his body didn’t react the same way.

Not at all. No excitement. No arousal. No embarrassing erection. Okay, that last part was probably a good thing, and Rye couldn’t help but be a little relieved. Getting turned on by Cutter’s touch had been nothing more than a fluke. He had nothing to be concerned about. He wasn’t into guys.

“No increase in pain?” Neal asked.

“No,” Rye said. “I think it’s fine. We’re good.”

“Nothing else I can do for you?”

“I don’t think so.” Rye turned and sat up, this time without the embarrassing need to hold his hands over his crotch to hide his erection. He’d made sure to wear

sweatpants today—and boxer briefs underneath—just in case his body let him down again. But no. Nothing to worry about it.

“Okay, good. If there is something, just let me know,” Neal said. “Or Cutter, or one of the other guys.”

“I will. Thanks, man.” Rye scooted off the table and pulled his T-shirt back on, noticing that Neal’s gaze didn’t linger on his chest the way Cutter’s had. Yeah. This was so much better. Rye liked Cutter. He was a great trainer. But maybe knowing he was into guys made things a bit awkward, especially after the other day. He’d stick with Neal, if the need arose. He hoped it wouldn’t, though. It was time to move past the stupid lie about the back injury and just play football. “I’m feeling good now, though. I don’t think it’ll be necessary.”

“I hope not,” Neal said. “Good luck in Denver. Bring home the ‘dub.’”

~&~

Cutter finished taping Javon’s ankle just as Rye left the training room after having Neal work on his back. “Good luck on Sunday, Javon. I hope the ankle’s okay.” He forced himself to focus on the player he’d finished treating, not the one he wished he had.

“I’m sure it will be. Thanks for the help.”

Javon made his way out of the training room, leaving Cutter and Neal alone, at least for a few minutes. Another one of the players could wander in at any moment seeking treatment.

“How’s Rye’s back?” Cutter asked Neal. “Any better?”

“He says it is,” his colleague answered. “I hope so, because we’re going to need our kicker at his best to beat Denver. I think he’ll be fine, though.”

“That’s good.”

“You don’t mind that I treated him, do you?” Neal asked.

Yes . “No.” Cutter shook his head. “I already told you that.” He busied himself putting the tape away and straightening up the area. “Did you notice anything unusual about the bruising on his back? Or anything else?” Like maybe him becoming noticeably aroused?

The other trainer appeared to think about it for a moment before shaking his head. “No, I don’t think so. Was there something I should have been looking for?” Now Neal looked concerned, and Cutter regretted bringing it up. He didn’t want his new colleague getting self-conscious that he might have missed something.

“Not necessarily, no,” Cutter was quick to say. “I was a little curious about the pattern of the bruising, and whether it was consistent with a football hit, but I’m probably wrong.” He cracked a smile. “It’s been known to happen on occasion.”

“Not often, I’m sure,” Neal said, his expression completely serious. “I didn’t think anything of it. Rye said the injury was from the game. Why would I question that?”

Why, indeed? Maybe because Neal was one hundred percent objective, rather than wrapped up in his personal feelings— and desires—for the team’s kicker. Rosie had been right. Cutter needed to tread carefully on this.

“You wouldn’t. You shouldn’t,” Cutter said. “That’s my point. Good work, Neal. I’m glad Rye asked for you to treat him. I think it’s for the best, and that should continue. If he comes back in, for this injury or anything else, he’s all yours.”

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There had been a time, early in his career and his relationship with Kristen, when Rye didn't enjoy travelling for road games because they missed each other so much. He recalled those days fondly, but they were far in the past. By the time the Troopers boarded their charter flight to Denver on Thursday morning, Rye was more than ready to get away.

He and Kristen had both circled each other warily and worked to build a fragile peace at the same time. She was still preparing meals and being attentive, and she insisted her new rehab program was beginning in a few days. Rye still had doubts, but there were no signs Kristen was using, so he didn't press the issue. He'd never been much for conflict, instead choosing to avoid it whenever possible. Maybe that was why he was where he was. Living a life that no longer fulfilled him, but he was scared to leave behind, because the alternative might be worse.

Rye recognized the possibility it might be better, too, but never having been much of a risk taker, he had difficulty embracing that possibility. Instead, he found himself living in inertia.

It was pathetic, and he knew decisions would have to be made, probably sooner rather than later. For now, though, his focus was on beating Denver.

It was a quiet game, from a kicking standpoint, and a defensive struggle well into the fourth quarter. The home team held a fifteen to seven advantage, when Addison hit Elliott for a touchdown with fifty-two seconds left on the clock. Fifteen-thirteen. Kicking an extra point would do no good. Austin would have to go for the two-point conversion to try to force overtime. At least Rye assumed that was the plan.

Coach J walked up to him. “Be ready,” he said. “If we get the two here, we’re trying the onside kick.”

“Got it,” Rye said, even if it surprised him. Coach Oliviera wasn’t known as a huge risk taker himself. Rye assumed they’d go for the two, kick deep, and play for overtime. Now he was being told otherwise. “Go big or go home, right?”

If this gamble didn’t pay off, home was exactly where Austin would be headed. Miss the onside kick, and Denver would have a short field to a game-winning field goal. Their kicker would be the hero. Not Rye.

“That’s right.” Coach J smiled. “Overtime is for pussies. We want to win in regulation.”

“Then I guess we better make the two-point conversion.”

Rye wasn’t sure he wanted to watch. There was nothing he could do about it, anyway, and he wanted to stay mentally sharp for when it was his turn. Yet how could he not watch?

He stood stoic on the sideline, hands clutched on the neck of his jersey, as Addison lined up under center. The team practiced several two-point conversion plays in practice. The most popular one was a run-pass option that let the quarterback decide. He could hand the ball off to the running back, throw one of the designed pass plays, or keep it himself for a quarterback sneak.

Rye watched as Addy took the snap, looked to Javon, and opted to call his own number instead, running a bootleg to right side and stretching the ball inside the pylon and over the goal line as he went out of bounds. The Troopers sideline celebrated while Denver’s looked shell-shocked. Rye grabbed his helmet. It was time for his show.

“Austin lines up to kick off, and it looks like they’re going to try for the onside kick,” the PA announcer side.

“Damn straight we are,” Rye muttered under his breath. “And we’re going to get it, too.”

One of the down sides of being a placekicker was sometimes feeling a little outside, on the fringe. Special teams players practiced separately from the offense and the defense and didn’t get any of the hype and attention. The focus was always on the offensive game plan or the defensive game plan. Sure, there were times kickers could be the hero, or the one blamed for a loss, like the previous week, but more often than not, the position was overlooked.

Heck, even the onside kick was about who recovered the ball or didn’t. No one would talk about the kick itself. Rye was okay with that. He knew his role, and he relished it.

He struck the ball cleanly, just as they drew it up in practice, trying to put a little bounce on it. It worked, as the ball bounced favorably and Javon was able to make the recovery. After a quick review to make sure the ball traveled the requisite ten yards before being recovered—it had—the Troopers were in business.

First and ten from the Denver forty-five.

The offense took the field, and Rye assumed his position on the sideline, watching and hoping he would get the chance to be the hero and redeem himself for last week’s miss.

“How’re you feeling, Rye?” Coach J asked him. “What’s your comfort level?”

Rye considered that for a moment. “I was hitting from sixty, sixty-one in warm-ups,”

he said.

Coach J nodded. “We all saw it, but warm-ups are different from the game. Plus, there’s more wind now.”

“Yeah, but I won’t be kicking into it,” Rye pointed out. “Besides, I love this stadium.”

“Are you saying you’re comfortable kicking from that distance?” Coach asked. “Because if you hit it low and Denver blocks it, it sets them up with a short field.”

“And very little time,” Rye countered. “Yes. If Addison can get us five or six yards, I’m comfortable in that range. I want a shot to win it.”

After a second, Coach nodded. “Okay. If we get at least five yards, we’ll send you out there.”

Rye grinned. This was one of those moments he loved being a kicker. “Thanks, Coach. Really.”

The first down call was a draw up the middle for four yards. Addison threw incomplete on second down. All Rye could do was watch. He’d told Coach he wanted five yards. Now he wished he wouldn’t have been so firm. If they didn’t gain another inch, would he get his chance?

‘ C’mon, Addy ,’ he silently prayed. Surely, even on a busted play, his quarterback could manage to scramble for a yard, right?

“Jones looks right, then left. Nothing open. He lunges forward for a yard, maybe two, and Austin takes its final time out.”

Coach Oliveira walked up to Rye. “You’re up. Let’s do this.”

Rye strapped his helmet on and jogged out on the field.

Predictably, Denver called timeout to try to ice him. Last week, it worked for Oklahoma. Rye was determined this time would be different.

The ball was snapped, and Patrick got down cleanly, with the laces facing where Rye wanted them.

Yes. This was going to be different.

He struck the ball with his foot and then closed his eyes, not even wanting to watch.

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Kristen played nice after Rye returned from the Denver trip. Almost too nice, as her attentiveness bordered on stifling. There was a time when Rye would've quietly told her to back off, or simply gone to another room of the house. They had plenty of them, after all.

He didn't want to be in the house with her, though, so to get away, Rye went for a run. Unfortunately, it was only a temporary solace. She was still there when he got back, ready to smother him again.

"What are we doing today? It's your day off, right?"

"Yes. We'll start game prep for Tennessee tomorrow." That was the nice thing about playing the Thursday night game. The team got a couple days off while the rest of the league played. "I want to watch some of the games, though."

"More football?" Kristen gave an exaggerated roll of her eyes. "Do you ever think about anything besides football?"

Rye considered that and shrugged. "Occasionally, but it's kind of my job, you know?"

"Still, you're a little obsessed." Kristen put on a pout. "I hoped we could spend the day together. We used to enjoy that."

I used to like your company . Rye swallowed the words. He didn't want to fight. He simply wanted to be left alone. "Maybe later," he said.

“But I’m bored.”

“Why don’t you go to a spin class,” he suggested. “Or call one of your friends to go shopping.” Spend my money .

“I don’t have a lot of friends anymore.”

Whose fault is that? More words he couldn’t say, which was more proof that this relationship was increasingly toxic.

“Then read a book,” Rye suggested. “Or log into your online rehab group.” The one he didn’t think she was actively participating in. “I’m going to take a shower and then watch a game.”

He walked away, the sound of her protests following him all the way, only becoming muffled as he shut the door. Jesus. What the hell was he still doing here? With her? Was his image so much more important than his happiness?

He opened the medicine cabinet to find some ibuprofen for his aching head. As he pulled the bottle out, he noticed something behind it. A small vial on a short chain. He’d seen it hooked on Kristen’s handbag before and never thought anything of it, assuming it probably held perfume, or maybe breath mints. Now Rye was more suspicious.

He reached for the vial and opened it, peering inside. It wasn’t perfume, or breath mints, or pain reliever tablets. Instead, the vial was filled with a white powdery substance.

Son of a bitch!

It was all a lie. Kristen’s promise to get clean. Her so-called rehab classes. All of it.

She was still using, and now her almost over-the-top cheerfulness made sense. It was all a front.

Still holding the vial in his hand, he opened the door. “Kris? Can you come here for a minute?” He shouted.

“What?” She asked, coming into the bedroom. “I thought you were taking a shower.”

“I haven’t gotten that far yet. I needed an ibuprofen for my headache first.” His voice relayed a calmness he didn’t feel. “And I found this.” He held up the vial. “I’m guessing this isn’t baby powder or sugar,” he said, sarcasm now finding its way into his tone.

Panic crossed Kristen’s face. “You weren’t supposed to find that.”

“But I did,” he said. “Maybe you need to find better hiding places.”

“I can explain,” she started to say, and he waved a hand to stop her.

“I’m not interested in any explanation you have.” He shook his head. “It was a lie again, wasn’t it? Going to rehab. Getting clean. All of it.”

“I’m trying, Rye. I really am.”

“Try harder.” His words were ice. “If you have other stashes in this house, I’ll be looking for them. In the meantime, this is gone.” He dumped the contents of the vial in the toilet.

Kristen stared, her eyes wide in fury. “You bastard. Do you know how much that cost?”

“Don’t care,” Rye snapped. “It was bought with my money anyway. It’s not like you’ve made any in a while.”

Too late, Rye regretted the words, as the palm of Kristen’s hand struck his cheek.

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Cutter loved days off on the weekend, and he could thank the rare Thursday night game for that. In typical Texas fashion, the early-December weather was downright balmy. Perfect weather for a bike ride in Zilker Park. As a bonus, there was a food festival happening in the park, and Cutter’s family would be selling their tacos.

His condo wasn’t far from the park and he planned to cycle over there, but just as he was about to leave, he got a phone call. Cutter almost didn’t answer until he saw the name on the display.

Rye Lenhart.

Cutter could feel his heartbeat accelerate as he answered. “Cutter Hernandez.”

“You sound so professional. I like it. It’s Rye, by the way. From the team.”

As if he knew, and lusted after, another guy named Rye? “Yes, I remember you.” He chuckled softly. Please don’t make a fool of yourself, he silently prayed. “Is there something I can help you with?” What a stupid thing to say. “Is your back bothering you again?”

“No. If it were, I’d call Neal,” Rye said. “He’s my trainer of choice now, remember?”

“Right. Yes. So why are you calling me?” Cutter hoped his tone didn’t sound too clipped.

A moment of silence hung in the air before Rye spoke. “Because I kind of need a friend right now, if you’re still offering.”

The hint of vulnerability in the kicker’s voice caught Cutter off guard and he wasn’t sure how to respond. “The offer is always there,” he managed. Sure, he wanted more than friendship. It was a start, though.

“I was about to go for a bike ride in Zilker,” he told Rye. “I don’t mind company, if you like to ride.”

“I don’t have as much for it as I’d prefer, but I’ve got a nice bike,” Rye said, “and that’s a great trail.”

“Care to join me, then?” Cutter asked.

Rye didn’t hesitate. “Sure. Meet you on the trail?”

“Why don’t we meet at my place, if you don’t mind?” Cutter suggested. “I’m not far from the park. We can leave from here. I assume you can fit a bicycle in that crazy looking vehicle of yours?”

“My fiancée says it looks like a garbage dumpster on wheels,” Rye said, his voice devoid of humor. “And yes, it has plenty of room for a bike. I’ll change and head over. What’s the address?”

Cutter rattled it off.

“Great. You’re not far from me. I live in Tarrytown. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Cutter ended the call, more confused than ever before. Something was wrong, he was sure about that. Otherwise, there was little chance Rye would call him out of the blue

on a day off.

Whatever it was, Cutter decided he wouldn't pry. He'd let Rye confide in him whenever he was ready. Until then, Cutter would simply be a friend to Rye, if that's what he needed. He had his water bottle on his bike and was waiting outside his condo when Rye pulled up in his truck.

"Hey. Sorry if I kept you waiting," Rye said, stepping out of the truck. He wore cycling shorts and T-shirt, and Cutter couldn't help but stare at his taut buttocks and long legs, not to mention the bulge Rye's shorts, which left very little to the imagination. Especially since Cutter had already seen Rye with a hard on and knew he was generously endowed.

"Not at all," Cutter said, forcing himself to direct his gaze away from Rye's manhood. "Nice bike you've got there."

Rye lifted it out of the truck. "Thanks. I like it. Not enough time to use it, though."

"Your fiancée doesn't like to ride?" Cutter asked.

"She used to." Rye shrugged. "Not so much, anymore." He paused. "Shall we go?"

"Do you need a bottle of water or anything?"

"Nope." Rye shook his head. "I've got one."

It was then that Cutter noticed the scratch on Rye's cheek. It looked as if he'd been cut or something. He wanted to ask but thought better of it. He wasn't going to pry anymore. It was probably a cut from shaving. "Great," he said. "Then let's go."

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Rye wasn't sure what compelled him to call Cutter. Probably nothing good could come of it, but the idea of a bike ride around Zilker park sounded fun. Who was he fooling? Anything that didn't involve being around Kristen sounded like fun.

His damn cheek still hurt. She's drawn blood when she smacked him with that stupid, ostentatious ring she wore. The one he'd bought her and now regretted. Things had gone too far. He was done. He had to find a way to extricate himself from the relationship, and the sooner the better. It was simply a matter of figuring out how. In the meantime, a bike ride with a sexy trainer was perfectly harmless, right?

Sexy. Where did that come from? Sure, Cutter was an attractive guy, at least if one was into guys. But Rye wasn't, and the whole thing was weird. Except he liked Cutter, and right now, more than anything, he needed a friend.

"Do you ride this trail often?" Rye asked as they got on the bike path just off of Cutter's street.

"When I have time. Like you said, there's not much of that. At least not during football season."

"No," Rye agreed. "It was nice to play on Thursday this week and get the win so I have a weekend off."

"It's a tough schedule for sure." Cutter moved slightly ahead of him, and Rye found himself admiring the trainer's ass. "You guys work so hard."

"So do you," Rye said. "We all appreciate you. The whole medical staff."

“It’s no problem.” Cutter continued to pedal, and Rye moved beside him. “Do you like tacos? My family’s food truck is selling at the festival in the park today.”

“I love tacos.” He didn’t realize Cutter’s family operated a food truck. “What’s the name?”

“Hernandez Taqueria,” Cutter said. “It’s my mami and papa who run the truck, along with my sister, Leticia.”

“I think I know the name. I’ve probably had their tacos a few times.”

“We appreciate the support. My family hopes to one day open a restaurant.”

“I hope that happens,” Rye said. “If we’re talking about the same tacos, they’re amazing.”

They continued to cycle, enjoying casual conversation as they rode. This was exactly what Rye needed. No stress. Everything about living with Kristen these days was stress, and it was taking a toll on his mental and physical health.

“The food truck is down this way, maybe a half mile or so,” Cutter said. “In the main part of the park, if you want to stop?”

“Sure.” They’d been riding for a while, and a food break sounded good. “Lead the way.”

Rye hadn’t realized there was a food truck festival going on in the park, but the timing worked out. After Kristen’s tirade, he was in a hurry to get out of the house. The heck with eating lunch and watching some football. If he stayed in the house with her any longer, Rye feared he might do something he might regret.

Did she regret slapping him, or did the drugs have so much of a hold on her that it barely even registered what she had done? Rye wanted to believe she realized it and regretted it. Hopefully, it tore at her, at least a little bit. But he couldn't be sure. Kristen hadn't been the woman he'd fallen in love with for a very long time.

"We can stop here," Cutter suggested, easing his bike to a stop. "The truck is right down there." He pointed to the center of the park, where several food trucks were set up. "We can park the bikes next to it. Hopefully we'll be able to find a table nearby. Otherwise, my sister can keep an eye on them."

They got off and walked the bikes down the path to the food truck, where a young woman waved at them and came out the side door of the truck. "Caesar! I didn't know you were coming by today," she said. "And bringing a friend," she added, with a smile in Rye's direction.

"Spur of the moment," Cutter said. "Leti, this is Ryeland Lenhart. Rye, my baby sister, Leticia."

"I am no baby," the young woman protested. "A pleasure to meet you." She pointed to an empty table. "Have a seat. I'll bring you tacos. What kind do you like, Rye?"

"I'll let you choose," Rye said. "Whatever your favorites are. I haven't met too many tacos I don't like."

Leticia smiled. "Ah, you're my kind of man. Sit. I'll bring you food in a few minutes."

"Thanks, Leti," Cutter said. They parked their bikes beside the truck and walked to the nearby picnic table.

"I didn't realize your real name is Caesar," Rye said as they sat down.

“Yep. Most everyone calls me Cutter, though.”

“How did you get the nickname?”

“I have Leti to thank for that,” Cutter said. “When we were younger, and she was first learning to talk, both in English and Spanish, the way she said my name, Ceasar, with the Spanish pronunciation, sounded like English word, ‘scissor.’ You know, like you cut with.”

“Cutter.” Rye chuckled. “I like it. It suits you.”

“I’m glad you approve,” Cutter said. “I’m glad you called, too. I was planning to ride down here, anyway, but it’s good to have some company.”

“Yeah,” Rye said. “I, um, needed to get out of the house.”

Cutter gave him a look, as if he hoped Rye would expand on that, or he wanted to ask questions. Neither of which Rye was ready for. Fortunately, Leticia chose the perfect moment to approach the table, her hands full of tacos in little paper boats.

“ Gracias .” Rye tried out his very limited Spanish as Cutter’s sister, set the paper boats of tacos on the table.

“You speak Spanish?” She asked, raising an eyebrow.

Rye shook his head. “Fraid not. That’s pretty much the extent of my Spanish right there.” Okay, he could order beer, too. Beyond that, nothing. He was somewhat embarrassed to have lived his entire life in Austin or Los Angeles and to speak so little Spanish. If this... whatever it was that was developing between himself and Cutter turned into anything, he would have to make a point to learn more Spanish. For now, he was stuck listening to a conversation between Cutter and his sister and

not understanding a word.

“ Tu novio es simpático. Lindo también ,” Leti said to Cutter.

“ él no es mi novio ,” Cutter replied, his cheeks reddening.

Leti chuckled. “ Si tú lo dices .”

As Cutter’s sister walked away, Rye picked up one of his tacos and unwrapped it. “What was all that about?”

“Oh, nothing.” Cutter’s face broke out in a grin that Rye had to admit was sexy as hell. “She just said my boyfriend is nice. And cute.”

“Ah, okay,” Rye said. “I didn’t realize you had a boyfriend.” Then it set in. Leticia thought he was Cutter’s boyfriend. There was part of him that kind of liked that idea, while another part of him was terrified. “Cutter...”

“Relax. I told her you aren’t my boyfriend.”

“Okay. Good.” Then, “Did she believe you?”

Cutter laughed as he shook his head. “Not at all,” he admitted. “It’s all right, though. Leti’s cool.”

“I hope so.” Rye had to admit she seemed to be. “So, your family knows? That you’re into guys?” Pretty much everyone on the team knew, just like they knew Doc Rosie was married to a woman, and several players on the team were out. It was cool, and everyone accepted it.

“No. No one besides Leti knows,” Cutter explained. “I came out to her a few years

ago. Mostly because we were crushing on the same guy, so I thought it would be better if she knew she had competition.”

Rye laughed. “I suppose.” He took another bite of his taco. The sauce was spicy, but he liked it that way. “Who won?”

“She did. My gaydar failed me on that one.” He shrugged. “It turned out he wasn’t much of a prize, though.”

“Maybe you won, then.”

“Right.” Cutter nodded in the direction of the Rye’s food. “You like it?”

“Delicious,” Rye said. He took a drink of water and found himself hoping the Hernandez family was able to open the restaurant they dreamed of, because as good as the tacos were, they would be a lot better paired with a beer. “Gaydar. Is that really a thing? Or a myth?”

Cutter appeared to think about that as he munched on his own taco. “Probably a bit of both, but usually I’m pretty good at telling,” he said. “I like to think so, anyway.”

“Hmm. What was your gaydar saying about me, then?” Rye asked.

“Not much,” Cutter replied. “Maybe because I was so used to seeing you with Kristen that it was never a consideration.”

“Aren’t some guys in denial, though? And like to flaunt their beautiful women?” Rye didn’t think that’s what he’d been doing, but then again, everything in his life was a confusing mess these days.

“Sure,” Cutter said. “I’m just saying you didn’t ping anything. Well, until last week,

when you were on the training table, and... never mind.”

Rye could feel the heat rise to his cheeks. “Yeah. That... was unexpected,” he said. “And your questions—”

“Made you uncomfortable,” Cutter said. “Got it. Water under the bridge, and all that.”

Rye wished it was that easy. “Things at home aren’t great,” he said. “With Kristen. We’re having some problems. That’s why the questions hit a little too close to home, and why I was a bit of a jerk.”

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable,” Cutter said. “If you want to talk about it... your relationship issues... we can. Or I can back off.”

Part of Rye wanted to talk about it, but the other part of him was too embarrassed. How was he supposed to admit his fiancée was a drug addict who likes to slap him around. “Maybe back off, at least on the relationship questions.”

“Got it. I’ll back off,” Cutter assured him.

“Thank you,” Rye said. “But Cutter?”

“Hmm?”

“There’s something you should know...” Rye allowed his voice to trail off as he considered the best way to say thus. “You’re not the first man my body has responded to that way.”

“Okay...”

“My roommate at UT, way back in the day, we, um... did some things.” He’d never told anyone before, but it was time. He needed to be honest with Cutter, and more importantly, with himself. “We never went all the way. Nothing like that. But we kissed sometimes and touched each other.”

Rye recalled he always liked it when Max touched him, or he touched Max. At least until Max got all weird about it, like it was suddenly wrong, even though he’d been the one who started it. “I suppose I wondered back then if I might be bi or something, but then there was never anyone else. I never experienced any attraction or got turned on by another guy, so then I dismissed it as just two young guys experimenting,” he explained. “Until the training room, when your hands were on my back, and... well, anyway.” He cut himself off before he turned bright red. “I... um, just thought you should know.”

~&~

“I see,” Cutter said, his mind racing. “I’m glad you told me.” Very, very glad, because even though he knew Rye’s personal life was difficult now, and while he was careful not to presume anything about what was happening between them, simply hearing that Rye had experienced attraction to another man before—even if he’d been an inexperienced college kid at the time—gave him hope. Maybe if Rye worked up the courage to leave Kristen, he might be receptive to exploring the attraction developing between them.

And maybe you’re a delusional idiot, the insecure voice inside Cutter’s head said. Rye would probably never leave Kristen. Even in a progressive and progressively weird town like Austin, where the Troopers fans embraced the team’s out players, Rye’s reputation and super star status was bolstered by having a supermodel fiancée. Not leaving her for the team’s Latino athletic trainer.

“I want to be honest with you,” Rye continued. “I don’t want to be a jerk about this.”

“I don’t think you’re being a jerk.” Not anymore, anyway. “Like I said, I know it’s difficult. You have a long history with Kristen, and I’m sure some of it’s been very good.”

“A lot of it has been great,” Rye said, running a hand through his hair. “I still think about those days. I have those memories. And yeah, I wonder if we can get back to that.”

Cutter nodded, trying to show that he got it. He understood. Even if he hated this, and he wished Rye would realize that if he stayed with Kristen, it probably wouldn’t get better. In fact, it might even get worse. He remembered Rosie’s cautionary words, though, and knew he had to be careful.

“At the same time, I like you. I enjoy the time we’ve spent together, and not only because it gets me away from Kris and all her issues. It’s comfortable. Easy,” Rye continued. “No drama.”

“That’s good. I don’t want to create drama in your life.” He knew Rye had enough of that, and he wanted to be a friend. Yes, he wanted more. But for now, Cutter could simply be a friend.

“I appreciate that. I’ve had enough drama to last quite a while.” Rye didn’t offer specifics, instead taking a long drink from his water bottle. He set it down and wiped his hand across his mouth. “I’m not sure where things are going with Kris. I just know it’s not good right now.”

The news was both revealing and frustrating for Cutter, and on top of how sexy Rye looked as he drank water—seriously, he had it bad if he thought watching Rye drink water was hot—he needed to get things under control. Rye admitting there were problems in his relationship didn’t mean it was an abusive relationship, nor did it mean that Rye was leaving Kristen, much less that he wanted to date Cutter. Talk

about jumping to conclusions.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Cutter said. “You’ve got a friend if you need one.”

“I do, and I appreciate that,” Rye said. “I like you, Caesar ‘Cutter’ Hernandez. Thanks for listening, and for being my friend.”

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After a low-key afternoon with Cutter on the trail, Rye was in no hurry to go back home and face Kristen. Knowing she'd been lying to him all week made Rye furious, and he didn't know if he could avoid confronting her when he saw her again. And if he did confront her, it would likely end badly.

Talking to Cutter was surprisingly easy. Even with the undercurrent of attraction between them, an attraction that scared him, Rye was completely relaxed with Cutter. He didn't want the afternoon to end.

"Do you have to rush home?" Cutter asked when they got home to his condo. "If not, do you want to come inside for a beer and watch a little bit of football?"

"Home is the last place I want to be right now," Rye said. "A beer sounds great."

"I have a couple of crows I picked up at Hand Wing Brewing after last Sunday's home game," Cutter said. "Rosie's wife, Margie, her brother owns the brewery. I don't know if you knew that." He got his keys from the pouch on his bike unlocked the front door.

"I heard that, yeah," Rye said. "I like their beer. I knew some of the guys were headed there after that game, but I wasn't in the mood. I don't get out much these days." He missed socializing with the guys on the team and was aware he'd become increasingly isolated from them as his relationship deteriorated. With her erratic behavior, Rye didn't want to take Kristen to team functions, and if he went by himself, he always worried about what he would go home to.

"If you wait here for a second, I'll go open the garage door, and we can put the bikes

in there.”

Rye waited outside Cutter’s condo until he heard the garage door, and then wheeled both bikes over that way. The single garage was neat and tidy, with an assortment of sports equipment, including a kayak, inside, along with a blue Ford Explorer. He got the impression Cutter was a very athletic guy and into outdoor sports.

“You can keep your bike in here until you leave,” Cutter said. “It’s probably safer than in the back of your truck.”

“Probably.” Cutter’s neighborhood appeared nice and safe, but there was no need to take chances.

“Follow me.” Cutter led the way from the garage inside the house. His condo featured an open floor plan, neatly decorated in black and gray with a smattering of red accents.

“I like your place,” Rye said as he looked around. “You have an eye for design.”

Cutter chuckled. “I’m a gay man. I guess you can say it comes naturally to me.”

“I wasn’t going to say that.”

“Maybe, but you were thinking it.” Cutter smiled. “Admit it.”

“I don’t like to draw stereotypes,” Rye insisted.

“It’s okay. They exist for a reason.” He nodded in the direction of the living room.

“Go sit down, turn on the TV. I’ll get us some drinks.”

“You don’t need any help?”

Cutter shook his head. “Nope. I got it.”

Rye wandered into the living room, finding the remote on the coffee table. He picked it up and aimed it at the giant TV on the wall. It looked to be about the size of the one Rye had at home in his study. He was forced to put it there because Kristen insisted a sixty-inch television didn’t fit with her décor. She was probably right, but Rye didn’t particularly care for her decorating tastes, finding their whole house to be rather stark and sterile. The only room she allowed him to put his touch on was the study. He preferred Cutter’s place. It was neat and uncluttered yet appeared lived in and masculine at the same time.

The TV came on, and Rye located the football game just as Cutter came into the room holding two beers poured into pint glasses. “Thanks,” he said, taking one. He sat down on the sofa, and Cutter sat next to him, seemingly careful to keep some distance between them

“You live here alone, then?” Rye asked, and Cutter laughed.

“Obviously. If I had a boyfriend, I wouldn’t be inviting you here.”

“I figured,” Rye said. “Just making sure.” He had enough issues with his fiancée slapping him around. He sure didn’t need a jealous boyfriend coming after him.

“You mentioned things are difficult with Kristen right now,” Cutter said, “and I get the impression you don’t want to go home very badly. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. I mean, no, I don’t want to go home,” Rye said. He wasn’t sure he wanted to talk to Cutter about it, either. Though it might do him some good if he did. “I called you this afternoon because I needed to get out of the house.” He took a drink of beer before setting the glass down and focusing on the game for a moment. Houston was beating Jacksonville. “Kristen is... dealing with some personal struggles,” he

managed. “She has good days and bad, but it makes things difficult around the house sometimes. We’ve been arguing a lot more recently.”

“Arguing?” Cutter raised an eyebrow. “Or fighting?”

“Is there a difference?” Rye asked, perhaps a little too strongly. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You can say as much or as little as you want. I’m your friend, regardless.”

“And I appreciate that.” Rye let out a sigh. “Whatever you call it, it’s hard.”

“I’m sure it is.” Cutter drank from his glass before setting it down on a coaster on the table. “These fights... arguments, if you prefer. Are they physical?” He shook his head. “You don’t have to answer if it makes you uncomfortable. I told you I wouldn’t pry.”

Rye nodded, appreciating that. “Most of the time, no. At least not until recently.” He raked a hand through his hair. “It’s gotten worse, though. She’s shoved me a few times,” he said. “Like last week. You were right that the bruising on my back wasn’t from the game.”

“What happened, then?” Cutter asked.

“A disagreement. Over Kristen’s... struggles. I should have been more sensitive, but I wasn’t.” There he went again blaming himself and excusing her behavior. “She pushed me, not very hard, but I fell back against the refrigerator. My back struck the handle, and that’s how I got the bruising,” Rye said. “So, you were right all along.”

Cutter shook his head as he reached over and touched Rye’s hand. “I didn’t want to be right. I wanted desperately to be wrong. I’m sorry my questions made you

uncomfortable,” he said. “I hate that you’re dealing with this.”

“I’m sorry for the way I reacted to the question. It’s hard, though,” he said. “Embarrassing.” Opening up to Cutter helped a little. Rye realized he needed friends, but it had been a while since he truly had any.

“You don’t have to be embarrassed,” Cutter said. “I promise this stays between us.” He gently put his hand on Rye’s cheek. “What happened here?”

“She slapped my cheek.” Rye moved his own hand to his cheek, meeting Cutter’s. His touch was so nice. Gentle. Comforting. Everything Kristen wasn’t right now. “This afternoon. We had... words. It got kind of ugly.” He closed his eyes for a second, as if that would block it out. “It was her ring that cut me, but it was an accident. I know she didn’t mean it.”

“Didn’t mean it? She hit you!” Cutter said. “That cut. It looks like it bled.”

“A little. Not very much. Like I said, it was an accident,” Rye insisted. “I shouldn’t have provoked her.” Talk about sounding pathetic.

“It’s not your fault.” Cutter reached out and caressed Rye’s cheek, where the cut was. “I only hate that she damaged your beautiful, perfect face,” he said as he leaned closer.

“Cutter...”

“Shh. You don’t have to talk,” Cutter said as his lips met Rye’s.

No. He didn’t have to talk, and he didn’t have to respond, either. He should push Cutter away. Tell him no. Rye wasn’t into this. He didn’t like guys. Not that way. That day in the training room was simply a fluke.

Except it felt so damn good, and it made him want more. More of Cutter's touch. More of his kisses. So much more.

No! He remembered what happened last time. With Max. Their friendship was never the same. Rye couldn't let that happen again.

He pulled away. "I think it's time for me to go."

~&~

No. Damn it. No. Rye pulled away and Cutter did, too, cursing under his breath. What the hell happened to being a friend? No pressure? Talk about screwing things up.

"Please, no," he said, almost pleading. "Don't go. I don't want you to leave. I crossed a line, but it won't happen again." Was that how Rye's fiancée sounded when she hit him?

"You're saying you didn't mean it, then? You didn't want to kiss me?"

"No. Jesus, no," Cutter said. "I did. Very much. I still do." He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. Maybe it was time to just own it. He'd likely already messed things up beyond all repair, anyway. "Look, Rye, I won't lie. I'm very attracted to you. I'm a gay man, and you're sexy as hell. You have a body like a Greek God." And oh, the things he'd like to do to that body. Then there was the sun-drenched blond hair. Yeah. Greek God, for sure.

He moved away from Rye, standing up as if pacing would help. It usually didn't, but whatever. "I meant what I said, though. About being a friend. I respect that your personal life is complicated right now, and the last thing I want to do is complicate it more, so I give you my word that nothing like that will ever happen again," he said.

“I can honor boundaries.”

“Boundaries,” Rye repeated. “That’s good, except for one thing... what if I want it to happen again.”

Huh? Cutter blinked, trying to follow a conversation that was becoming increasingly hard to track. “You’re saying you want me to kiss you again?” If that was the case, he was more than ready.

“No. I mean, probably yes,” Rye said. “Not right now, tough. I’m not ready for that. I’m just... confused. I have a lot to figure out. I liked it when you kissed me, the same way I liked it when you touched me. I like the way it makes me feel, but it scares me, too. A lot. And with everything with Kris being such a mess, I’m not ready. I’m not saying that someday I won’t be, because I might, but right now I’m not.

“Are you serious about honoring that, and sticking to friends for the time being?” Rye’s eyes met Cutter’s, and he tried to read the emotion in them. The kicker was hurting, for sure, and searching for something. Cutter wasn’t sure what it was, or if he could offer it, but he knew he wanted to try.

“I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t mean it. If friends is as good as it gets, then I’m cool with that,” Cutter vowed. He sat back down on the couch. “Do you really have to leave, because I don’t want you to.” He smiled. “I promise to behave myself.”

“Okay.” Rye nodded. “I never wanted to leave. I don’t want to be at home right now. I mean, eventually I’ll have to go back, but it doesn’t have to be this minute.”

“Great,” Cutter said. “Then stay and finish your beer. Watch more of the game with me. If it makes you more comfortable, I can go sit in the chair over there.” He pointed to a chaise lounge on the other side of the room.

“That’s not necessary,” Rye insisted. “I’m comfortable with you exactly where you are.”

“Okay, good.” Cutter let out a laugh. “The view of the TV is better from here anyway.”

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As much as he questioned if it was a good idea to stay there, Rye didn't want to leave Cutter's condo. If ever there was a safe place, it was with Cutter. Going home to Kristen offered no such sanctuary. In fact, he dreaded everything about it.

He parked in the garage and hung his bike on the rack—how nice it was to finally be able to use it—before going inside. Rye tried to brace himself for the fight, even if he wanted with everything he had to avoid another fight.

What kind of life was this?

Not the one he wanted, for sure.

Yes, he loved being the envy of the universe, engaged to Kristen Summerton. Who wouldn't want that? It was the perfect life.

Or merely a beautiful disaster.

He heard Kristen's voice as soon as he entered the house. "Rye? You're finally home? I was beginning to wonder."

'No, you didn't care,' he thought to himself.

"Yes, it's me," he said, as Kristen met him in the living room. "Sorry it's been so long." There he went, apologizing again. At what point did that ever get old?

"No problem," she said. "Just kind of surprised, because you don't usually ride very much anymore."

“You’re right, I don’t,” Rye acknowledged. “I met up with one of the guys from the team, thought, and we rode the trail down at Zilker and got some food afterward, then went to his place and watched some of the Houston game.” He tried to keep his tone casual. “Just enjoying my day off.”

“You’re sure?” Kristen asked. “Nothing else?”

“Nope.” She might be pathetic, but Rye was pretty good at pacifying her insecurities. At least he used to be. “Just a couple of guys watching the game,” he said. “Houston won. If you care.”

“I don’t.” Kristen closed the distance between them, placing a hand on his cheek. The one that sported a nice cut now, thanks to her. “I only care about you. I’m sorry I hurt you,” she said. “I don’t want to lose you. There’s no one else, right? Promise me there’s not another woman.”

“I can definitely promise you that,” Rye said, trying to not laugh, or even smile. No, there wasn’t another woman, and no way would Kristen ever suspect there might be a man.

“Okay, good. I know I don’t make things easy right now, but I’m going to do better,” she said. “I’m going to get better.”

It was the same tired words, over and over, and Rye couldn’t do it anymore. “For your sake, I hope so.” Rye pushed past her, making his way to the bedroom. “Me, I don’t much care anymore.” He pulled his dresser drawer open and began removing clothes. Just a few things. He wasn’t going far.

“Wait, what are you doing?” Kristen demanded, her face suddenly etched with concern. “Are you leaving? I thought you said there’s no one else.”

“There’s not, and I’m not leaving,” Rye said with a calmness he didn’t feel. “Not the house, anyway.” It was his house. If anyone left, it would be Kristen. He wasn’t ready to kick her out. He did, however, need a break. “I’m moving down the hall to one of the guest rooms, at least for a few days. It’ll give us both a chance to think.”

“Think?” Kristen repeated. “About what?”

“For you, whether you prefer the drugs, or our relationship, would probably be a good place to start,” Rye said, “because there’s no way you get both.” He grabbed a few shirts from the closet.

“As for me, even if you do choose the relationship, I’ll have to decide if that’s enough.” He went into the bathroom and grabbed his toothbrush and his razor. “At the moment, I am honestly not sure.”

~&~

Cutter finished watching the game after Rye left but found it difficult to concentrate. There were too many thoughts racing through his head. There was the kiss. Rye’s revelation that he’d been turned on by a man’s touch before. And then there was the confirmation that his suspicions about Rye’s personal life had been correct. His relationship had become abusive. Yet still he stayed.

Was Rye’s public image that important to him that he was willing to put up with it, or was the cycle of abuse so difficult to break free of? As much as Cutter hated Rye’s fiancée for what she was doing to him, he found the second scenario more palatable. He wanted to believe that Rye wanted out of the situation he was in, even if he hadn’t found that way out yet.

He recalled his conversation with Rosie and wished he could talk with her further about this, wasn’t sure he could do that without breaking Rye’s trust, or if his boss

would even be receptive to continuing the conversation.

He was still pondering that when his phone. Cutter hoped it might be Rye, but instead it was his sister. Of course. He was surprised it had taken her this long to call.

“Hey, Leti,” he greeted. “Are you guys done selling tacos?” He didn’t recall how long the food event at the park ran.

“Yes. Just finished up,” his sister said. “It was a great day.”

“I’m glad.”

“Are you alone, or is your stud kicker with you?”

I wish. “Alone,” Cutter said. “He had to leave.”

“I wasn’t expecting to see you with him today.”

“Yeah, it was kind of spur of the moment,” he said, “but he called me, and it was good day for a ride.”

“He called you? That’s interesting.”

“He’s a nice guy. We’re friends.”

“Friends are good,” his sister said. “If that’s enough for you.”

Cutter stifled a sigh. He loved Leticia, but sometimes she was too perceptive. “For now, it has to be,” he said. “He liked the tacos.”

“Then there might be hope for him after all.” Leticia laughed. “I admit I found him

very polite,” she said, “but I wish you would set your sights on someone a little more... attainable.”

That was the thing. Cutter had begun to think of Rye as potentially being attainable. He couldn't say that to his sister, though.

He was relieved when his phone signaled another call, and the relief turned to excitement when he saw who it was. “I've got another call. I've got to go,” Cutter told Leticia, and ended their call before his sister could reply, quickly switching to the other one.

“Rye? Sorry it took me a minute to answer.”

“You're fine,” the kicker said. “I'm just happy you did answer.”

“I'll never not answer a call from you if I see it come in,” Cutter told him. “Anytime. Day or night.”

“That's nice, but you probably shouldn't make promises you can't keep.”

“Don't assume I can't keep them,” Cutter replied. “Is everything okay, Rye?” He asked. “At home, I mean.” He hoped there hadn't been another fight with Kristen.

“Yes. It's... fine.”

“You're sure?”

“Yeah.” A pause came over the line. “I, um, moved out of the master bedroom when I got home,” Rye said. “I'm staying in one of the spare rooms. What happened earlier today, I know there can't be a repeat of that, and that's what I told Kristen. There have to be some changes, and until there are, I won't be sharing a room with her.”

Until there were changes. Implying once there were, Rye intended to share a room, and a bed, with Kristen again. Cutter tried to block that thought from his head and instead focus on the positive. For now, at least, Rye wouldn't be sleeping with Kristen. It was some solace, but not much.

"I'm glad, but you know you can stay with me, right?" As soon as it was out, Cutter regretted it. Slow down, Hernandez. Slow down. "I have two bedrooms in my condo."

"And I have four in my house," Rye countered. "Also, it's my house. If anyone's going anywhere, it's going to be Kristen."

Then kick her out. Cutter stopped himself just short of saying the words. He wasn't going to push. "Right. I understand that," he said. "Just... offering, if you need it."

"Got it," Rye replied. "Thanks for being cool. And I'm trying to figure this out, Cutter."

He sounded sincere, and Cutter wanted to believe him. "I know that, Rye, and I appreciate the honesty. I'm trying to be patient." He wasn't sure he was succeeding, but he was trying.

"You're a good friend," Rye said. "Maybe better than I deserve."

"I told you. I'll always be your friend. And more if you want it."

"Cutter..."

"Right. Sorry." He needed to stop saying things like that.

"I've got to go. Early practice tomorrow."

“Yep. Time to get ready for Tennessee,” Cutter said. “Thanks for calling.”

“I wanted you to know where things stand. I’ll see you later. ‘Night, Cutter.”

The call ended, and Cutter still stared at the phone in his hand, trying to make sense of a situation that appeared to have gotten more complicated.

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After a restless night of sleep, preoccupied with too many thoughts of Rye, Cutter was at the facility early. He didn't need to be. With the guys having Sunday off, he didn't expect a busy day of treatments or therapy. There was always something to do, though, and being there put him closer to Rye.

Cutter wanted to talk to him, follow up and make sure things were truly okay at home. He didn't want to intrude too much, though, understanding the need to give Rye the space he needed. He spotted the kicker's truck parked at the facility when he got there, but instead of seeking Rye out, Cutter went to see if Rosie was in.

Nor surprisingly, she was.

Since the door to her office was open, Cutter went in without knocking. "Just the person I'm looking for."

"You're here early." Rosie appeared to have only beat him by a minute or two, since she still wore a light jacket.

Cutter shrugged. "I didn't sleep well, and I could say the same for you."

"I've always been an early riser." She took the jacket off and hung it on the rack in her office. "And Margie had class."

Rosie's wife had gone back to school to work on her Master's degree in mental health counseling. "She's probably close to being done, isn't she?"

Rosie nodded. "A couple more classes after this one," she said. "Since I doubt you

were looking for me to inquire about my wife's educational pursuits, what's up?"

Cutter jammed his hands in his pockets. He probably shouldn't bring it up, but now he'd piqued Rosie's curiosity and had little choice but to continue. "The matter we discussed last week," he began. "That friend of mine..."

"The one you suspect might be in a bad relationship?"

He nodded. "That one, yes. Except it's not so much a suspicion anymore. I, um, have confirmation on that. And it's complicated."

Rosie smiled. "Matters of the heart usually are."

"Right?" Cutter raked a hand through his hair. "This one totally is, because I'm trying to be a good friend. Only a friend. Because that's what I promised them I would be, and I'm not going to pressure them, because it's the last thing they need—"

"Even though you want to?"

Jesus. She was almost as bad as his sister. "Did you learn this in med school? You're incredible perceptive abilities?"

"Yep." The doctor grinned. "We cut up cadavers, and while we did, we were instructed on reading minds."

"Cadavers?" Cutter grimaced. "Thanks for reminding me why I didn't go to med school."

"My pleasure." Rosie laughed. "Kidding aside, I have a gift." Her tone became gentle. "I've also known you a long time."

“True. Anyway, I wondered if we might talk about this a little more,” Cutter said. “Not now, obviously, since we have work to do. But sometime?”

“Sometime soon, is what you’re saying. I can tell this is eating at you.”

“More than I care to admit.” He was so torn between wanting to be the friend he promised to be and give Rye the space Cutter recognized the kicker needed and wanting to push the issue and confront Rye about why he insisted on staying in a relationship that was no longer fulfilling and had even turned violent. The woman had shoved him. Slapped him. Even made him bleed. Yet Rye couldn’t, wouldn’t, kick her out of his house. Why?

“I might be able to help,” Rosie said. “Or rather, I might know someone who can.”

“The friend you mentioned? The one who might’ve been through something similar to my friend?”

“That one, yes. I’ll have talk to Margie first, but maybe we can get together for dinner later.”

Margie? Was she the friend Rosie referred to? Suddenly, it all made more sense. “I’d appreciate that,” Cutter said. “I’m free tonight, or whenever. Just let me know.”

He thanked his boss for her time and left her office, just as one of the team’s defensive backs wandered in. “What’s the matter, Darius?”

“Tweaked something when I tried to jump up to intercept a pass. Probably a hammy,” Darius said. “Coach said I should have someone check it out.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

Cutter dealt with Darius' hamstring issue—which appeared to be minor—and a few other maladies, and the time passed quickly. It was mid-morning when Rosie approached.

“If tonight is still good, dinner's a go,” she said. “Six thirty, my house?”

“I'll be there,” Cutter said. “Anything you need me to bring?”

The doctor shook her head. “Just yourself, and I ask you to please keep this between us.”

~&~

It was an ironic Monday morning for Rye. His relationship with Kristen had taken a dramatic turn for the worse, but at least he didn't have to worry about it impacting his job. A little nick on the cheek could be easily explained away as a shaving cut. Either that or he could grow a beard. He was considering it and didn't shave that morning. People could think what they thought. It was at least better than being slammed into a refrigerator door and hurting his back.

He went through a good morning of practice. Rye kicked well. Garrett punted well. The snaps were good, and Rye no longer blamed Patrick for the errant ball placement against Oklahoma. Sure, he wished it could have been better. But he could always be better, too.

He grabbed a tuna salad sandwich from the cafeteria and was about to sit down with a few of his teammates when Cutter walked in. Instead of joining the guys, Rye deliberately sat down at an empty table. As he did, he gestured to Cutter, trying to get his attention. Fortunately, the trainer got the hint and headed his way, even if he wasn't carrying a tray of food.

“Were you planning on sitting with anyone?” Rye asked, and Cutter laughed.

“Why do I suddenly feel as if I’m back in grade school?” He pulled out a seat and sat down.

“I don’t know. You tell me. Grade school sucked,” Rye said.

“That it did.” Cutter studied him, and Rye wondered what he was thinking. Was it about yesterday, and the cut on Rye’s cheek? If so, was he focused on the cut, or something else? All of this overthinking was giving him a headache. “I was never one of the most popular kids in school. In fact, I was usually the last one picked for everything.”

“You were?” Rye frowned. “That’s hard to believe. I mean, you’re athletic. You have a great personality.”

“I’m Latino, my family spoke mostly Spanish, and I was small for my age. Not to mention probably a little too effeminate for some people’s taste,” Cutter said. “I bet you were one of the popular kids, though. You probably would’ve picked on me if we were in the same class.”

“I hope I wouldn’t have been that kid.” Would he have been, though? He hadn’t been a bully by any means, and he sometimes got picked on for being scrawny, but Rye recalled he’d sometimes picked on people, too. Usually because he’d been goaded into it by someone else, and he wanted to fit in, but still. It didn’t make it right. It struck Rye that maybe he’d always been too concerned about what other people thought and what his image was. Look where that got him.

“I hope not, either.” Cutter pushed the chair back and stood. “I’m going to go get some food, but if you’re serious about me sitting with you, I’ll be right back.”

“I’m serious,” Rye said. “I’ll save your seat.” His eyes followed Cutter as he walked to the front of the dining room.

He was back in a couple minutes with a hamburger and fries and sat down. “You used to play in Los Angeles, right?”

Rye nodded, impressed that Cutter knew. “Yeah. Why?”

“How was the training facility there? How’d the food compare? And how was the medical staff?”

“Why? Are you thinking of exploring options outside of the Troopers organization?”

The trainer was quick to shake his head. “Not at all. I’m here for as long as the team wants me, which I hope is for a long time,” he said. “Just curious.”

“L.A. was okay. The facilities were a little older, at least at that time,” Rye said. “That’s the nice thing about being a newer franchise. Our facilities here—from the training center to the stadium, all of it—are top notch.” He took a bite of his sandwich. “I wouldn’t say the food is the greatest, though.”

Cutter let out a laugh. “I have to agree with that. I mean, the burgers are decent, but what they try to pass off as a taco?” He grimaced and shook his head. “No.”

“And there’s no bias at all in that statement, right?” Rye teased.

“Not at all,” Cutter insisted. “Or not much, anyway.”

“I enjoyed Los Angeles, but it was my dream to sign here, being a local kid and all.” Hopefully, he would get to end his career in Austin, but there was never any guarantee. Especially if he missed more kicks that cost the team games. At least he

redeemed himself in Denver.

“I was so happy to land this job when I finished school,” Cutter said. “My family is very close-knit, and it would have been hard to move away.

“Where did you go to school?” Rye asked.

“Texas State, just down the road in San Marcos.”

Rye nodded. “Good school. Not a bad football program, for a smaller university,” he said. “I’m glad you landed this gig, too. The whole medical staff is great, at least from what I’ve seen. Though I’m lucky not to have had too many injuries. At least not football ones.”

“The back is better, then?”

“Yeah. No more issues.” Other than wounded pride, maybe. “I’ll just avoid refrigerators from now on.” Or better yet, Kristen when she was high.

“I hope things get better at home,” Cutter said.

“Me too. I blame myself sometimes. I mean, I couldn’t wait to sign with Austin and come back home, but I never really considered the impact leaving L.A. would have on Kristen’s career. Maybe I should have.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Rye. None of what’s happening is your fault.”

He nodded. “I keep telling myself that, and I want to believe it, but it’s not easy.” Rye finished his sandwich and stood. “I have to get back to practice, but thanks for sitting with me. I like talking to you.”

Cutter smiled. “I like talking to you, too.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 10:31 am

Cutter arrived at Rosie and Margie's house with a bottle of red wine from a local Texas Hill Country winery, despite being told not to bring anything. His mami had raised him right.

As Rosie opened the door to him, he held out the bottle. "Thanks for having me. I know you said not to bring anything, but—"

"It's okay. That's a great wine." Rosie laughed as she took the bottle from him. "You really didn't have to, though. I know people always say that, but it's almost always true."

"Right. Yet people still feel as if they're obligated to bring something, anyway."

"Just call it a fallacy of society," Margie quipped as she rounded the corner from their kitchen into the foyer. "Thanks for coming, Cutter."

"Thanks for having me." He studied his boss's wife, who wore jeans and a sweatshirt sporting the logo of her brother's business. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she appeared completely happy. And why not? Anyone who looked at Margie knew her life was in a good place right now. It was difficult to believe she'd once been a victim of domestic violence, but everything Cutter knew about tonight's dinner invitation was telling him that was the case.

He could only hope that when and if Rye extricated himself from his toxic situation with Kristen, that he would find happiness and a second chance at love with someone. Whomever it might be.

Cutter followed the two women into their kitchen, where Rosie busied herself with opening the wine. “Since we were short notice tonight, nobody cooked. I just had Margie pick up barbecue and various side dishes on her way home, and we’ve got ice cream for dessert. Plus, root beer, if you want to make a float.”

“That sounds great,” he said. “I’m not interested in anything fancy. More the conversation.”

“And getting to pry into my past romantic history,” Margie said. “I get it, and I assure you, it’s a doozie.”

“I’m not sure I like the sound of that.” Rosie was more than just his boss. These women were his friends. Cutter didn’t want to think about either of them being in an unhealthy relationship. Then again, he didn’t like it for Rye, either, but it was the reality.

“Relax, it’s fine,” Rosie assured him. “We wouldn’t be doing this if it wasn’t. Right, hon?”

“Right.” Margie gave Rosie a hug from behind. “All good here. Grab a plate, Cutter. I hope you brought a big appetite, because I got lots of food.”

“I can see that.” He was familiar with the layout of their kitchen, having been in it before, so he opened one of the cupboards and got out three plates while the women worked on opening all the containers of food.

There was brisket, smoked turkey, creamed corn, roasted potatoes and pinto beans, and Cutter fixed himself a huge plate and carried it to the table and set it down next to the glass of wine Rosie poured him. “You might have to roll me out of here,” he quipped. “I haven’t eaten like this in a long time.” That was the problem with being single. Cooking for one was nearly impossible, but he hated making too much and

having leftovers that he would eat on for days.

“If that’s what it takes,” Margie set her own heaping plate of food on the table and set down. “I usually do eat like this, because I love Texas barbecue,” she said. “Plus, I know my wife loves me fat and happy.”

“You’re hardly fat,” Rosie corrected. “Happy is how I love you. And beautiful, which you are every day.”

Margie grinned. “See, I kind of had to marry her since she talks to me like that.” She looked at Cutter. “I’m happier than I’ve ever been with Rosie, but it took me a while to get there,” she said. “My romantic history hasn’t always been the greatest, as you’ve probably guessed.”

“Yeah, I kind of got that impression.” Cutter took a bite of brisket and turned to Rosie. “She’s the one you were talking about, right? The friend in the bad relationship.”

“Yes, I’m the one,” Margie said. “Bad doesn’t tell the whole story. It was toxic as hell.”

“I’m sorry,” Cutter said. “Who was it?”

“A guy I dated. He sort of rescued me from a difficult financial situation, and then he decided he owned me,” Margie said. “And by owned, I mean my body. He thought he could do whatever he wanted with it. There was abuse, physical and sexual, and I’m not proud that I allowed myself to get into that situation, much less that I let it go on for as long as I did.”

“That isn’t your fault,” Cutter said. Nor was it Rye’s fault. He needed to keep telling himself that.

“That’s right.” Rosie reached over and took her wife’s hand. “We’d been friends, casually, for a while,” she explained, “but my feelings were starting to shift to more romantic ones. I told myself I wouldn’t go there. She was off-limits.” The doctor shrugged. “I couldn’t help it, though. She was so darn cute.” She smiled at Margie. “Even when you caked on too much makeup to try to cover the bruising.”

“I never thought I was fooling you.” Margie took a drink of wine and looked at Cutter. “She tried to call me on it, and even though deep down, I understood she only wanted to help, I wasn’t ready for help. Instead, I accused her of saying bad stuff about Paul because she wanted me for herself.”

“Which I did, but I wasn’t trying to deliberately sabotage her relationship,” Rosie continued. “Is any of this helping add clarity to your situation?” She asked Cutter. “The one with your friend?”

“It is, yes.” He helped himself to more potatoes and beans. “It’s very complicated, like you said, because I’d be lying if I tried to say I didn’t have a romantic interest in him, but that’s not the reason I’m concerned. Especially now that I know my initial suspicions were correct.”

“This person is in an abusive relationship, then?”

“Yes,” Cutter said, without offering details. He understood the importance of protecting Rye’s identity, because if anyone affiliated with the team found out, it could be disastrous. “I’ve learned that much, and it makes me sick. Furious. But I’m trying to focus on being a friend to him. Just a friend, for now, because that’s what he needs the most.”

“Then I’d say you’re handling it the best way you can.” Rosie picked up the bottle of wine and refilled her glass and Margie’s, and then passed it to him. “I hope your friend gets through this, and the romantic in me hopes that maybe something more

than friendship can come out of it for you.”

“That’s what I hope, too,” Cutter admitted. “We’ll see.” Did he dare to dream?

~&~

Rye got home to find a snarky note from Kristen on the kitchen counter. It read simply:

I went out. If you care.

He didn’t. Not much. He crumpled the note up and tossed it in the trash. Truthfully, he was quite relieved she wasn’t home. Sleeping in separate rooms helped, but if they were still in the same house, there was no way to completely avoid each other. It wasn’t a workable arrangement in the long term.

Rye opened the refrigerator, grabbed a beer and searched for something to eat. Fortunately, Kristen had already moved past her domestic goddess phase and Graciela was back at work and had prepared their meals.

Tonight’s was a baked spaghetti casserole. Rye put a little on a plate and warmed it up and browsed social media while he ate. He didn’t like to spend much time on social media because he didn’t want to know what people were saying about him or his game. The first few days after the loss to Oklahoma were especially brutal. Things got a little better after the win in Denver, but Rye still preferred to limit his exposure. Today, though, something showed up that got his attention.

It was Max Winters’ birthday. His former college roommate now played tight end for the Copperheads, and even though they weren’t close friends anymore, they remained connected through football and on social media. Rye still had Max’s phone number stored in his contacts, and they sometimes exchanged text messages throughout the

season, usually complete with some good-natured ribbing about whose team was playing better.

He considered texting Max a quick 'Happy Birthday' text, but instead decided he'd try to call. Rye knew Max would be busy with his family, but hopefully he could take a few minutes to talk. After rinsing his dinner plate and putting it in the dishwasher, Rye took his beer upstairs to his study and then turned the TV on to the Monday Night Football game while he called Max.

After three rings, he concluded Max must not be available and was prepared to leave a message. Instead, his friend picked up.

"Hello? Rye, is that you."

"It's me." He settled back against the couch. "I wanted to wish you happy birthday."

"Hey, thanks, man."

"Do you have a few minutes to talk?" Rye asked.

"Sure, I guess," Max said. "I had a day off after our big win yesterday. I spent it with Mandi and the younger kids."

Rye couldn't help but roll his eyes. Of course, Max would mention that. He knew the ribbing was good-natured, though, given the rivalry between their teams. Besides, the Troopers were coming off a big win themselves. "Yeah, congrats on the win. I guess," he teased. "You have New York up next, right?"

"Yep. That'll be tough," Max said.

The polite thing to do would be to wish the other player good luck, but it would also

be a little disingenuous. Instead, Rye changed the subject. “How’s your family?”

“Good. Kids are getting bigger all the time. I think Mandi and I are going to try for another.” That would make five kids for the tight end and his wife. Rye couldn’t even imagine, but if Max was happy, that was what mattered.

“That’s great,” Rye said.

“I think so. When are you and Kristen finally going to get hitched and start making babies?” Max asked. “It’s got to be the longest engagement in history.”

“I doubt that,” Rye said with a touch of defensiveness. Sure, it had been a few years, but they’d been busy. Then there were Kristen’s problems, but he wasn’t mentioning those to Max. “We’re working on it.” Or working to get out of it, more accurately.

“I hope so. Let me know when you set a date,” Max said. “Maybe I can be there for the wedding.”

“Sure.” Even if there was a wedding, and Rye was by no means certain there would be, he didn’t know if he would invite Max. It was easier to let his former roommate believe there would be both a wedding and invitation, though, than to let on to Max that he and Kristen were having problems.

“Hey, Max?”

“What?”

“Do you remember when we were in college and we... did those things? Kissed and stuff?”

Silence lingered over the line until Max finally said, “Why are you bringing that up?”

“I don’t know. No reason, really. Just something I was thinking about.” Because I’m finding myself attracted to a man again.

“You need to stop thinking about it, Rye.” It wasn’t quite a threat, but maybe close to one. “It was a mistake.”

“Was it, though?” He asked. “I mean, I know you felt something, too. I know you liked kissing me. I remember how your body responded.”

“Only because of you. The things you did.” Rye was taken aback by the harshness in Max’s tone. “You made me do it. You got me all hot and bothered. It was your fault, Rye.”

What the hell? “That isn’t the way I remember it. You practically begged me to touch you.”

“Damn it, Rye. Shut up,” Max hissed. “It was a mistake, and you started it, but I’m not like that, okay?”

“Like what?” Gay?

“You know what I mean. I’m not into that kind of deviant stuff. I go to church, all right? I have a family. I live a proper life. Don’t you ever bring that shit up again.” Now it did sound like a threat.

“Or what?”

“Just... don’t. Goodbye, Rye. Thanks for the birthday wishes.” Max ended the call before Rye could say another word.

“Whatever, Max,” he muttered to himself. “I know you liked it.”

I liked it, too .

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The big win in Denver bolstered the team's confidence, and the mood and energy going into the Tennessee game was positive. Another win on the road would greatly improve the team's playoff chances, while a loss would make things very grim.

With so much on the line, some teams might elect to play it safe. Instead, Coach Oliviera drew up an aggressive game plan. The head coach appeared to be firmly in the 'go big or go home' mindset. It worked well against Denver, so why not?

The plan didn't work, though, and the team suffered a close loss to Tennessee, effectively putting the team in a do or die situation in the next game. Despite the pressure, the mood surrounding the team was generally positive in the days before the game in Jacksonville. They still had a chance. They simply had to take it.

It sounded great in theory, but after unfortunate turnovers on two of the first three possessions, Austin found itself playing from behind. It was a position the players never liked to be in, and the pressure got to them. They fought hard, but never clawed their way back into the game.

Jacksonville 42, Austin 23.

It probably shouldn't have been that close. The reality was it was a good, old-fashioned ass-kicking. Even though Rye converted all three of his field goals and both extra points, he took no comfort in the defeat. If the team could win while he missed every kick he took, he'd enjoy that much more.

A few weeks earlier, it was Addison who had tried to assure Rye that the loss wasn't his fault, even though he blamed himself. Now it was Rye's turn to be there for his

quarterback after a three-interception performance.

Even worse, Addison had sprained his ankle and his status for the remainder of the season was in question.

“Even if I’m ready to go, I probably don’t start. Not with the playoffs out of reach,” the starting quarterback lamented on the flight home. Addy sat next to his back-up quarterback and boyfriend, Callum, while Rye had the aisle seat in the row. Cal had dozed off, his fingers laced through Addy’s and his head resting on Addy’s shoulder.

It might have been an off arrangement for some, but it worked for them. Cal knew his role as Addison’s back-up, and it never seemed to be a problem. They’d been together for several years and shared an easy rapport. They seldom fought, and Rye thought they made a great couple.

Sometimes he wondered if he had more courage and left Kristen to explore his attraction to Cutter if they might have a chance at a relationship like the two quarterbacks did. Or maybe that was wishful thinking.

“The loss isn’t on you,” Rye assured Addison. “If you’re healthy, you deserve to start. You’ve had a great season.”

“Thanks, man. Appreciate you saying that.” Addison glanced over at Callum, still dozing. “It’s okay if Cal gets the start, though,” he said. “We’re cool. Once the game is over and we go home, we won’t be thinking about football at all, anyway.”

“That’s good.” Rye couldn’t believe Cal was still asleep, even with their conversation being about him. “Does he always sleep this well?”

Addison grinned. “Pretty much, yeah. He can sleep through anything.”

“I’m jealous,” Rye said. “I’ve never been a good sleeper.” He especially wasn’t lately. The bed in the spare room he was staying in wasn’t very comfortable, and the uncertainty surrounding his relationship with Kristen had him plagued with anxiety.

“I hear ya.” Addison tried to stretch out his leg and visibly winced. “Ouch.”

“The ankle bothering you?”

“Quite a bit,” Addie said. “I’m going to have to get Cutter to look at it tomorrow. Dude’s got magic hands, I swear.”

“Mm. Yeah,” Rye agreed, remembering the feel of Cutter’s hands on his back.

“What’s that look for?” Addison asked.

Rye frowned. “What look?”

“The dopey expression on your face. There’s not something going on between you and Cutter, is there?”

“Huh?” Rye tried to keep the surprise out of his voice. “Where did that come from?”

“I don’t know.” Addison shrugged. “I’ve noticed you guys have been having lunch together a lot at the training center.”

It was true. If Rye was the first one there, he’d save a seat for Cutter. If he got there and found the trainer already there, Rye made a point of joining him at his table. He liked the conversation. He liked the friendship. Lately, he found they didn’t even need to talk that much. They simply enjoyed each other’s company. After isolating himself for so long due to his problems at home, Rye welcomed the solace and comfort he found with Cutter.

“What if we do? Is it a crime to have lunch with someone?” Great. Now he sounded like a defensive asshole.

“What the hell? No, man,” Addison said. “I think it’d be great if you had something going on with Cutter. He seems like a great guy.”

“He is, but we’re just friends,” Rye insisted. “If we’re done, I’m going to try to get some sleep now.” He closed his eyes and pretended to sleep for the rest of the flight, avoiding future conversation.

Avoidance. He seemed to be getting good at it.

When the flight landed back in Austin, Rye was quick to grab his bag and hurry off. He wasn’t fast enough, though, as he heard someone call his name as he approached.

Cutter.

Rye couldn’t avoid him even if he wanted to, so he turned around. “Hey.”

~&~

Cutter hoped Rye might come sit with him on the long flight back from Jacksonville, but instead he sat with a couple of his teammates. He didn’t know if it was because Rye was in a bad mood about the team’s loss or something else. Either way, Cutter was disappointed, and when the kicker hurried off to his truck, he hurried after him.

“Hey, yourself. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing,” Rye replied. “I hate losing, and I think the playoffs are done now.”

“Probably.” Cutter wanted to believe otherwise, but he wouldn’t sugar coat it.

Everyone affiliated with the team knew the reality of the situation. “There’s still a chance at a winning season, though,” he said. “And you had a good game.” Rye hadn’t missed a kick, even converting a fifty-four yard field goal. If anyone tried to pin this loss on Rye, they were crazy. Still, Cutter realized his words were mainly platitudes and were unlikely to make Rye feel any better.

“Thanks.” Rye shifted his duffle bag from one hand to the other. “Addison’s worried about his ankle.”

“Then he needs to come see me or one of the other trainers. We’ll get him fixed up.” He’d treated the team’s quarterback before and they got along well.

“It’s not so much that, but maybe losing his starting gig,” Rye said. “It was a tough loss.” His eyes met Cutter’s. “Sorry if you thought I was avoiding you.”

Cutter was quick to shake his head. “It’s fine. You’re not obligated to spend time with me,” he said. “I did want to say a quick hi, though, and that’s why I called after you.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“Are you going straight home?”

Rye hesitated, appearing to think about it, and it gave Cutter a glimmer of hope that he would say no, and suggest they go get a drink together somewhere, or better yet, go back to Cutter’s house and... no. He wasn’t going to let his mind go there, as much as he wanted it to.

“Yeah,” Rye said. “I mean I probably should. It’s late. I’m tired. It was a long flight.”

“Right.” Cutter tried to quell his disappointment and his frustration. If Rye and

Kristen weren't truly together anymore—even if they were still living under the same roof—then what did Rye have to rush home to? He wanted to believe it was simply because Rye was tired, and not because things were better with Kristen and he wanted to hurry home to be with her. “I get it. I heard some of the gang say they might swing by Hand Wing and grab a pint, but I think I'll head home, too.”

It was said with the hope that he might change his friend's mind and Rye would suggest they go get a beer after all, but Rye merely nodded. “Okay. I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Guess so.” Rye turned around, unlocking his truck. “Wait, Rye.”

The kicker paused with his hand on the door and turned around. “Hmm?”

He looked impossibly handsome, standing in the dark, but his near perfect features illuminated by the moonlight and the light of the parking lot. It might be a bad idea. He might live to regret it, but Cutter threw caution to the wind and leaned in and brushed his lips across Rye's.

He wondered if Rye might push him away, but he didn't. Not right away. Instead, he let the kiss linger, even parted his lips to respond before ultimately pulling away. “What was that for?” The words came out in a breathless whisper.

“That was just because I wanted to. Goodnight, Rye.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 10:31 am

“Are you bringing a date to the holiday party?” Rosie asked Cutter one morning. With the playoffs no longer a viable option, absent a minor miracle, and the Troopers on their bye week, preparations were in full force for the holiday party. Having been with the team since the inaugural season, Cutter was fully aware that the holiday party was a big event. This year, it would feature a casino night fundraiser which would be open to the public to raise money for the team’s charity foundation. Tickets had sold out weeks ago.

Cutter wasn’t much into gambling, even for charity, but he supported the cause and had every intention of being at the party. Rosie’s question, though, had him struggling to stifle a groan.

“Do we really have to go there?” He asked, as he stowed his personal belongings in his cubby. “You’re getting to be as bad as my sister.” His teasing was good-natured, and he knew his boss wouldn’t bind.

“It was perfectly well-intentioned question,” she replied. “I like you. I want you to be happy.”

“I want that, too,” Cutter said, “but at the moment, my personal life is non-existent.” Unless one counted fantasizing about Rye and wishing, hoping, for more than conversation, laughter, longing glances and occasional stolen kisses. None of those things were bad, but he still wanted more.

“And your friend? The one with the relationship problems? Where do things stand with that?” Rosie wanted to know.

“Exactly where they stood the last time we talked,” Cutter said. “We’re friends. Nothing more. He’s in a toxic, abusive relationship that he won’t leave, and I’ve vowed that I won’t pressure him to.”

“Even though you want to,” his boss surmised.

“Of course I want to,” Cutter all but snapped. “But I won’t.”

“Right. Because you’re a good guy, and a good friend.” She sighed and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Yeah, and we all know what they say about good guys,” Cutter muttered. “Or nice ones, anyway.”

“Hey, that’s not always true,” Rosie insisted. “I refuse to believe that.” She paused, her brow furrowed. “I have an idea.”

Cutter groaned. “I’m not sure I want to hear it.” Seriously, had any monumental, great things ever materialized from the words ‘I have an idea?’ Maybe when it came to inventions. The light bulb was certainly a good enough idea. Cutter was fairly certain Rosie wasn’t about to announce a new idea for a patent, though.”

“Bring a date. Make him jealous,” she said.

Nope. It wasn’t about an invention. The good doctor had stepped firmly into matchmaking—meddling?—territory, and Cutter wasn’t impressed. “Check that. I know I don’t want to hear it.”

“Don’t knock it,” Rosie said with a smile. “It worked out well enough for me.”

“Huh? You’re saying you pulled this stunt on your beautiful wife, and actually got

good results?” Cutter wasn’t sure he believed it.

“Okay, maybe not the first time,” the doctor admitted. “That kind of resulted in her being royally pissed off at me.”

“Shocking,” Cutter muttered as he rolled his eyes. “I’ll take taking a pass.”

His boss shrugged. “Suit yourself, but I’m telling you, the second time I pulled that stunt, she was less angry with me. And the third time?” Her lips curled in a mischievous smile. “That was pure magic.”

“Great. Third time’s the charm.” Cutter shook his head. “No, thanks. Playing games isn’t my thing. I’ll leave that to the, you know, actual players.” Was that what Rye was doing? Playing games with his heart? Cutter didn’t want to believe it, but it had been several weeks since Rye supposedly moved into the guest room. He still hadn’t moved out of the house, or better yet, kicked Kristen out of it. “No dates for me, real or otherwise. Not for this party, anyway.”

Cutter walked over to the white board which listed the appointments on it. Even during a bye week, there were injuries to treat, and even if they weren’t listed on the board, he expected walk ins.

“Fair enough,” Rosie said. “I don’t mean to press. I’ll be in my office, at least until Casen comes in about his back. I want to have a look at it. I think he needs an MRI.”

“That was my thought as well,” Cutter said. “For whatever that’s worth.”

“Something, for sure,” his boss said. “You know I value your work and your opinion. Did you ever consider going to med school?”

“I did, yeah,” he admitted. “But the timing wasn’t there.” He needed to get a job to

help his family. Maybe, someday, if they got the restaurant going, he could think about going back to school. If not, it didn't matter. He had a career and a job he loved. That was more than many people had.

Rosie nodded, understanding. "Perhaps it will be sometime. Look at Margie, after everything she's been through, and soon she'll have her Master's degree."

"Because she got out of a bad situation, and because she has you," Cutter said. It wasn't the same, and yet there were still parallels. "I'll let you know when Casen gets here."

The morning passed quickly enough, with the routine appointments as well as the unscheduled ones. Addison's ankle was better, which was fortunate for the quarterback, not only for the sake of his starting job, but also because he was set to deal poker during casino night.

Casen got his MRI, and the results would be ready in a day or so. Hopefully, the tight end would be good to go when the team returned from the late-season bye. Aside from that, the morning was uneventful.

Cutter walked into the dining hall, ordered himself a club sandwich, and took his seat across from Rye at the table in the back of the room. They'd been sitting there together, every day at lunch now, for the past three and beyond weeks. While Cutter welcomed any opportunity he had to spend time with Rye, it was foolish to pretend he didn't want more.

Or that others on and affiliated with the team weren't beginning to speculate about the exact nature of their relationship.

As far as Cutter was concerned, people could speculate all they wanted. He didn't care. He suspected Rye did, though.

“How’s your day going?” Rye asked as Cutter set down.

“Living the dream. Another day in paradise,” he said. “You know. All that.”

“Okay.” Rye smiled, making him even sexier than usual. “Good to know.”

“Yeah. Perfect,” Cutter said.

“Or not,” the kicker replied. “What’s up. You seem like you’re in a mood.”

He probably was, and Cutter hated when he got in moods. Especially when he knew he had little to know right to be in, given the nature of their situation. The very terms he agreed to. Friendship. Nothing more.

“I’m not. I’m fine,” Cutter lied, unwrapping his sandwich.

“Great. Let’s talk about the party,” Rye said. “Are you bringing a date?”

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“Oh, for gosh sake, why the hell does everyone keep asking me if I’m bringing a damn date to the holiday party?”

“Whoa!” Rye leaned back in his seat and held his hands up as if in surrender. He’d been right. Cutter was obviously in a bad mood. He could sense it in the way the trainer had walked into the dining hall and approached their usual table. The one they’d been sitting together at for weeks. Today, something seemed a little... different. Tense. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to set you off. I thought it was a reasonable question. You know, big party coming up. Most everyone will be bringing a date. You’re a handsome guy.”

“I’m sorry, too. I didn’t mean to snap at you.” Cutter’s tone softened. “You’re not the first person to ask me that question today, and I’m kind of over it.”

“Gotcha,” Rye said. He took a bite of salad and washed it down with a swallow of water, waiting as Cutter unwrapped his sandwich.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” The trainer asked.

Man, he was touchy today. “I’m wondering if you’re going to, you know, answer the question. The one you’re so sick of everyone asking you.”

Cutter let out a sigh. “No, I’m not bringing a date to the holiday party. Are you happy now?”

Rye weighed the question. If he were being honest, he had to admit there was a part of him that was happy that Cutter wasn’t bringing a date. As wrong as it was, he’d probably be jealous seeing the handsome athletic trainer with a sexy guy on his arm. He couldn’t exactly admit that, though. “Not really,” he said. “You should bring a date.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” Rye shrugged. “I know you’re not exactly out to your family, but you are around here.” He didn’t exactly get why Cutter was still in the closet with most of his family, yet out at work, but that was none of his business. He wouldn’t pretend to understand the family dynamics at play.

“It has nothing to do with being ‘out’ or not,” Cutter said. “It has everything to do with the simple fact that I’m not seeing anyone right now. You know, because we sort of have this ‘thing’ going, whatever the heck it is.”

“Wait, what?” Did he hear that correctly. “Are you saying the reason you’re not seeing anyone, the reason you won’t consider bringing a date to the party, is because of me? Us?” Rye tried to wrap his head around that. “Because there isn’t an us, Cutter. At least not now, and I’m not sure there ever will be.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” The words came out louder than usual, and Cutter immediately glanced around the room. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

Rye looked around to, checking to see if they’d attracted unwanted attention. If they had, everyone else in the dining room had already moved past it. No one was looking their way. “And I didn’t mean to hit a nerve.”

He’d have to be more careful what he said, knowing full well that Cutter was attracted to him and interested in him. Rye sighed. “Look, I’m sorry. I know this isn’t easy for you. It isn’t easy for me, either.” He hoped he didn’t sound like a selfish jerk. “I’m still processing a lot of things. The mess that is my relationship with Kristen, my attraction to you—”

“You’re admitting there’s an attraction then?” Cutter interrupted, causing Rye to chuckle.

“I think it’d be pretty hard to deny it at this point,” he said. “It’s there, and I’m trying to figure out what it all means. You’re a good friend, and I don’t want to lead you on and make you believe we have a future together. That’s not something I can promise right now. Not when there’s so much stuff I don’t understand.”

Like why he suddenly found himself attracted to guys. Was it something that was always there, and he’d repressed, or were the problems with Kristen triggering some of it? Whatever it was, Rye hoped he could figure it out without hurting Cutter, because that was the last thing he wanted to do.

“I get it, Rye,” Cutter said. “I’m focused on our friendship for now. If something else develops, great. If not, I’ll deal with it.” He shrugged. “I’m still not bringing a date to the party, though.”

“Suit yourself.” He was done asking about it.

“Hey, on the bright side, since we’ll both be there alone, maybe we can spend a bit of time together,” Cutter said.

“Alone?” Rye frowned. “I’m not going to be there by myself. I guess I should have mentioned it earlier. Kristen will be with me.”

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Rye hoped he wasn't making a colossal mistake taking Kristen to the party. What was he supposed to do, though? She was still his fiancée, and nobody affiliated with the team, besides Cutter, had any idea that their relation was rocky.

Rocky. Talk about an understatement.

Yet here he was, getting ready to escort Kristen to a team function, trot her out as if everything was great, all because he was too much of a coward to admit it was all a lie and he could barely stand her anymore.

Rye felt like an ass, knowing he was essentially leading both Kristen and Cutter on. Kristen, because she'd likely assume this meant he wasn't angry anymore and was ready to move back into their bedroom. And Cutter. Jesus. He'd never forget the look on the trainer's face when Rye told him he'd be bringing Kristen as his date.

What a mess. He didn't want to hurt anyone, but he'd probably end up hurting both.

He studied himself in the mirror, making sure his hair was smooth and his tie straight. Appearances again.

"Rye? Are you ready?"

At the sound of Kristen's voice, he turned around. She stood in the doorway of the guest room, wearing an emerald green cocktail dress with matching heels, and a black shawl over her shoulders. Her blonde hair hung in soft waves past her shoulders, and her makeup was subtle. It was impossible to deny that she looked positively stunning, better than she had in months. Now if she could only behave herself for the duration

of the party, and maybe they could have a pleasant evening.

“I am, yes,” he said. “You look great.” She held a small clutch purse, which he assumed contained her phone and maybe lipstick. Hopefully nothing else. There was a part of him that wanted to search it to make sure she didn’t have any drugs on her, but he wouldn’t. He’d give her the benefit of the doubt. He couldn’t risk picking a fight with her now.

“Thanks. So do you.” She nodded toward his green tie. “We match.”

Rye glanced down. “I guess so. Great minds think alike.” If nothing else, they’d make a beautiful couple, at least as long as no one looked too deep beneath the surface. “Shall we go?”

He reached for her hand and escorted her out of the house and into his truck, helping her inside. He waited for her to say something snide about the truck, but she didn’t, instead smiling and saying. “Thanks.”

Her pleasantness helped Rye to relax, and they were able to share a normal, even pleasant conversation on the way to The Domain, where the party was being held in one of the hotels there. Rye found a space in the parking garage and helped Kristen out of the truck. “I have to take my turn dealing blackjack,” he said as they made their way to the banquet room. He always enjoyed the casino night and made sure he signed up for a stint or two at the dealer’s table. “That means you’ll be on your own for a bit. I figure you can mingle with some of the other WAGs.”

There was a time when Kristen used to enjoy getting together with the other wives and girlfriends, but now her face tightened. “That might be difficult, since most of your team is gay.”

Rye barely suppressed an eyeroll. “That’s hardly true.” Sure, there’d been a few

players on the team come out over the past couple of seasons, but it was by no means a majority. It wasn't even anywhere close to half.

"If you say so."

He bit down on his lower lip. Her pleasantness had lasted what, twenty-five minutes? Thank goodness for blackjack. "Jan Ross will be here," Rye said, referring to Coach J's wife. "I know you've always liked her."

"True." Kristen gave a half-smile. "I'll be fine, don't worry."

"Good." Rye did worry. That was the problem. Her increasingly erratic behavior meant he was constantly on edge. He didn't want it to be that way tonight. He wanted to be able to relax and enjoy himself. He didn't know if that was possible, though.

They parted ways, with Kristen heading straight for the bar. Rye tried to tell himself it was fine. She could have a few drinks. It would only be a problem if she had them on top of snorting a line of coke, and Kristen had sworn up and down she'd quit using.

"Yo, Lenhart, you're up!" It was Casen, waving to him from the blackjack table.

There was no time to worry about whether Kristen could avoid embarrassing him. It was time to report for duty. "Has it been busy?" Rye asked Casen.

"Yeah. It's fun, though."

"Always is." Rye took the cards from Casen and looked at the players at the table. "Is everyone in?"

One man stepped away from the table. "I'll have to sit this one out," he said. "Smoke

break.”

“All right,” Rye said, surveying the crowd around the table. “We got a spot open, if anyone wants in.”

“What the heck. I’ll play.” The man who stepped up to empty position at the table had shaggy brown hair and a goatee, but that wasn’t what Rye noticed first.

No. He noticed that the man was holding hands with another man.

Cutter.

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Lane said he loved blackjack, and even though it wasn’t his thing, Cutter didn’t mind if his date played a round or two. If it was Lane’s own money on the line, why should he care?

Until Casen’s stint as dealer ended and Rye took over.

Cutter wanted to drag Lane away from the table and suggest they get a drink and mingle a bit before playing, but when the spot opened up, Lane rushed over. There was little Cutter could do but tag along.

Rye’s eyes met Cutter’s, and he tried to read what the football player was thinking. “Only one of you can play.”

“Only one of us is.” Cutter let go of Lane’s hand. “I’ll be at the bar. Good luck.” He wasn’t going to crowd the table while Rye dealt blackjack to his date. He did, however, let his gaze linger on Lane for a few seconds before he headed for the bar. Why not?

He wasn't deliberately trying to make Rye jealous. Cutter liked to think he was more mature than that. But if seeing him with Lane had that effect on Rye, well, Cutter didn't mind that all. Lane might not excite him in the same way Rye did, but there was no denying he was good eye candy. For a last-minute date, he more than fit the bill.

"What are you having?" The bartender asked.

Cutter hesitated, almost ordering his usual IPA. "Get me a lemon drop martini, please." Maybe it was a girly drink, but Cutter liked them.

"Coming up."

As the bartender fixed his drink, he glanced over at the blackjack table. Rye appeared to be a natural at dealing, and judging from the smile on Lane's face, his date was having a good time. Cutter hoped so, anyway. He wasn't at all interested in Lane romantically, sexy though he might be, and once tonight was over, Cutter doubted if they would ever see each other again. But Lane was helping him out, so Cutter wanted him to have a good time.

He nursed his drink and studied the room. The blackjack tables were all busy, as was the poker table, where Margie and Rosie sat. Cutter wasn't surprised. The good doc was an ace card player. She'd cleaned up the one and only time Cutter had played with her. There was a reason why he didn't even try anymore.

Cutter didn't see Rye's fiancée anywhere. He'd noticed the two of them come in, looking every bit the perfect couple, her in a green dress and Rye with his matching tie. They'd separated quickly, though, with Rye going to deal blackjack. Now, there was no sign of Kristen, and Cutter selfishly hoped she'd gotten pissed off and left. Maybe he had no business being upset with Rye for bringing her to the party, but he was. He hated that Rye was so damn insistent on pretending his life was perfect when

Cutter knew full well it was a toxic mess.

He was still pondering that when Lane sat down at the bar, helping himself to the stool next to Cutter. “How’d you fare?” he asked his date.

“Not bad.” The bartender came over and Lane ordered a beer.

“I figured you might play a little longer.”

Lane shrugged. “I’d had enough. The other guy came back.” The bartender set the beer in front of him, and Lane picked it up, taking a drink. “Is there something between you and the guy dealing blackjack?”

“What?” Cutter shook his head. “No. He plays for the team, that’s all.” Sheesh. He was a terrible liar. “Why?”

“Just curious. After you left the table and came over here, he kept looking this way,” Lane said.

“Probably a coincidence,” Cutter said. “I barely know the guy. He’s come in for treatment a few times, but that’s it.”

“Then it’s just a coincidence, too, that he’s coming this way?”

Cutter turned his head to look past Lane in the direction of the blackjack table. Sure enough, Rye had left the table, leaving Casen in charge of dealing, and was striding in the direction of the bar. Maybe he was only coming to order a drink, Cutter decided. No reason to read more into it.

Until Rye stopped right beside him. “Can we talk?”

Cutter hesitated. He wasn't sure this was the time or the place.

"Go ahead," Lane said, scooting off the bar stool. "I may try to get back in for another deal." He picked up his beer and sauntered off.

"Who's the guy?" Rye demanded.

Cutter didn't like his tone. At all. "His name is Lane Warren. He plays hockey for the minor league team in town," he said. "Why? What's it to you?"

"Nothing. Just..." Rye glanced down at the floor. "I thought you said you weren't bringing a date."

"I wasn't planning to," Cutter said, "until you insisted I should." Along with told me you were. That was the real issue. He'd been fine with the idea of coming alone until he found out Rye would be bringing Kristen. Then Cutter knew he needed a date.

"That didn't mean you had to do as I said."

The arrogance in Rye's tone only served to annoy Cutter. "Oh, trust me, that wasn't why I did it."

"What's that supposed to mean? What kind of game are you playing, Cutter?"

Before he could answer, the team's special team's coach came running in their direction. "Ryeland." The coach sounded out of breath. "I've been looking all over for you."

"Why?" Rye frowned. "What's wrong?"

"It's your fiancée, Kristen. My wife found her in the bathroom, and said she was

acting weird. I think you need to come, Rye. Jan sounds very worried about her.”

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As soon as he saw Coach J rushing in his direction, Rye knew it couldn't be good. So much for the pleasant evening he'd hoped for. Instead, he had Cutter flaunting his date in Rye's face, and now a Kristen crisis. And he had a pretty good idea what that was about.

"Which way?" He asked.

"The restroom's over that way. Down the hall." Coach pointed. "I'll come with you. I can guard the door and make sure nobody else goes in there until you can figure out what's going on."

"Thanks." He took off toward the hall where the bathrooms were, with his coach trailing behind.

"Wait, Rye." The voice belonged to Cutter, and Rye stopped. "Do you need me to come, too?"

"No." The last thing he wanted to do was drag Cutter further into his sordid personal life. It was bad enough Coach J and his wife were now involved. "Get back to your date. Have a good time."

"Okay, but call me if you need anything."

Rye barely heard him. His focus was on Kristen and any damage control that might be necessary. He located the women's restroom, where Jan Ross stood outside the door. Behind her, Rye could hear Kristen's voice, but he couldn't make out what she was saying. It sounded like some sort of nonsensical ramble.

“Rye, thank goodness you’re here,” Jan said. “Kristen and I were at the bar chatting and she said she had to use the restroom. I was talking to a few other people, so I wasn’t paying much attention. Then I realized I hadn’t seen her come out after about fifteen minutes, and I got worried. I came to check on her in here, and I found her hunched over the sink. She was pale and shaking and saying something about there’s going to be a reckoning, over and over. I didn’t know what to do.”

“You did the right thing having Jaxon come get me. Thanks, Jan.” Rye moved past her into the bathroom, where the scene was exactly as the coach’s wife described. The only thing she left out was the empty vial laying by the sink.

That damn precious vial of hers. He knew he should have checked Kristen’s purse before they left the house.

They’d deal with that later. Now, Rye had to save face with Coach and his wife. Time to play the concerned fiancée. Appearances were everything, after all. “Kris, baby, are you okay?”

“They’re coming.” Her body trembled. “They were here, and they left, but they’re coming back. You know, right?”

He knew, all right. He’d heard it before. The rambling. The paranoia. All of it. He knew what usually followed, too. “I do know, baby. I’ll get you home before they come.”

“Is she okay?” Jan wanted to know. “What’s going on? Has this happened before?”

So many questions, and Rye wasn’t sure how to answer them. He tried to take them in order. “I think so. I hope so. She’s on a new medication.” There came the lies. “It doesn’t mix well with alcohol,” he said. That part was true at least. “Do you know how much she had to drink, Jan?”

The coach's wife hesitated. "I'm not sure. A couple glasses of wine. I think she was on number three when she left. I thought maybe it was a lot, and kind of fast, but that's not my business." Her face took on a worried expression. "Is she going to be all right?"

"Yes." For now, Kristen appeared to be coming down from her high. The rambling had stopped, anyway, though she was still trembling. Rye took his jacket off and put it around Kristen's shoulders. "We've been through this before. She's had some health issues lately, and then this new med she's taking. She's still adjusting to it," Rye told Jan, hoping that would mean the end to the questions. "She shouldn't be drinking on top of it, but she wanted to come tonight, and I thought it would be okay. It's my fault.

"C'mon, Kris. It's time to go home." He helped Kristen to her feet, hugging her against him. She was pale and trembling, but at least the nonsensical rambles had stopped. "Thanks again, Jan. Coach," he said. "For everything you've done." Hopefully, they would keep things quiet. Rye didn't think it would be a problem. The coach and his wife were good people.

"I'm sorry the night didn't turn out the way you'd hoped," Coach J said. "Please, let us know if you need anything."

"I will," Rye promised. Hopefully he could get Kristen out of the banquet room without too much attention. Image was everything right now.

"Rye? Are they here?" Kristen's body shook next to his as he escorted her out of the bathroom and through the ballroom.

Please, no one stop us, he thought. Rye wondered where Cutter might be, but he didn't scan the room to seek him out. He'd worry about that later. For now, he wanted to save face and get home. He owed Coach J and his wife for keeping a buffer

between them and anyone else at the party as he half escorted and half drug Kristen to the truck.

“There’s no one here, Kris. It’s just us. No one is after us.” He helped her into the truck. “We’re going home now.”

He understood that the ramblings, the paranoid thoughts, the tremors were all the result of her cocaine high, and it was only made worse by the alcohol. Rye had been dealing with it long enough to know the signs. Kristen was fine now, in a manner of speaking. The real threat was when she came down from her high. And she would. It was only a matter of when.

“Where are they?” Kristen repeated over and over on the drive home, and even when Rye helped her into the house. “Did you do something to them?”

“No, I didn’t. I promise,” he said, struggling to keep calm. He’d never seen Kristen quite this bad before, and he was beginning to get scared. Jan said she’d had two, maybe three, glasses of wine, but there was no way of knowing how much cocaine she’d snorted. Rye had just seen the empty vial. “They’ll be here. Let’s get you to bed.”

He half carried; half dragged Kristen to the master bedroom. The one he’d vacated weeks before and didn’t miss. Sure, the mattress in the guest room wasn’t comfortable, but Rye still slept more peacefully on it.

“Do you want to take a shower?” He asked Kristen when he got her to the bedroom. “I can help you get in.”

“No!” She shouted. “I don’t want a shower, and I don’t need your help. I want to know what you did to them.”

“There’s no them, Kris.” Rye reached for her arms, trying to steady her. “I didn’t do anything, and no one is coming.”

“Because of you. It’s all your fault,” she shouted as she pushed him back.

The last thing Rye felt was his head making contact with the armoire.

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Cutter handed Lane a beer and encouraged him to make himself at home, even if he never should have invited the sexy—but a little bit vapid—hockey player to house. Now Lane might expect sex, and Cutter was by no means ready to deliver that. No, this whole thing was a mistake. He blamed it on his messed up headspace ever since Coach Ross interrupted Cutter’s conversation with Rye with the news about Kristen. Whatever that news was.

“Thanks.” Lane took the beer from him. It was nothing fancy. Only the cheap stuff. When Rye was here, Cutter offered him the good stuff from the local brewery. “I had fun tonight.”

“I’m glad.” Cutter wished he could say he’d had fun, too, but it wasn’t true. He’d watched Rye enter the party with Kristen and been jealous. He’d watched his date play blackjack with Rye dealing and been preoccupied with the dealer. And then when he finally got a minute or two alone with Rye, they were interrupted with a Kristen crisis.

Cutter officially hated Rye’s fiancée. It wasn’t one of his more mature moments, but whatever. He didn’t know much about Kristen, other than she abused Rye. That was more than enough to hate her.

“You’re sure there’s nothing between you and the guy who was dealing blackjack?”

Lane asked. "He's the team's kicker, right?"

"Yes, he's the kicker," Cutter said. "And no. I told you before, there's nothing going on between the two of us. We're friends. That's all." He didn't believe the lie himself, so why should he expect Lane to find any veracity in it?

"Okay, good," Lane said, "because I want you to know that I really like you."

He should have been flattered. He should have been thrilled. He should probably move in for a kiss, which was sure to be reciprocated. This was an extremely sexy professional hockey player. What the hell was Cutter's problem?

Rye. Rye was his problem.

And Rye was way too wrapped up in Kristen and their toxic drama to ever care about Cutter.

Fine. If that was the way it was going to be, he could, and would, move on.

"I like you, too," Cutter said, inching closer to Lane with the intent of kissing him. Before he could, though, the doorbell rang.

Lane jerked away. "Are you expecting someone?"

"No. Definitely not." Cutter got up from the couch. "Let me just get rid of them quick, and we can get back to what we were doing." Which wasn't much but might have potential. He walked to the door and pulled it open.

Rye stood there, bleeding from the head.

"Rye! Jesus, what happened?" Cutter demanded.

Before he could answer, though, Rye fell into Cutter's living room.

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Rye had no idea how he got to Cutter's house. The last thing he remembered was blacking out when his head hit the armoire. No. That wasn't true. He had a vague recollection of Kristen hovering over him, attempting to apologize, because it was always like that. She was always sorry, especially when she'd drawn blood.

It didn't matter. Rye was done. He recalled pushing past her on his way out of the house and getting into his truck. After that, it was a complete blur. He must've driven to Cutter's house on autopilot, because he remembered nothing of the drive. Not the traffic, the stoplights, none of it.

He simply ended up there, falling into Cutter's house. He hoped he didn't bleed onto the rug.

The boytoy was there. The shaggy-haired hockey star he'd dealt blackjack to. The one Cutter insisted meant nothing to him, but Rye didn't believe it. If it was nothing, why was he there?

Lance—Lane?—wanted to call 9-1-1, but Rye was having none of that. The last thing he needed was to end up in the emergency room being asked a bunch of personal questions. 'Have you fallen lately?' 'Do you feel safe in your home?'

Yes. I fall frequently when my fiancée shoves me into furniture. And no, of course I don't feel safe in my home.

Yet I still don't leave.

My name is Rye, and I'm a pathetic idiot who cares more about his image than his

safety. Or his happiness.

Fortunately, Cutter got the hint. No way was he allowing anyone to call 9-1-1. The hockey player left, with a promise from Cutter to call him later. Rye didn't know if they shared a kiss before parting because he turned his head away.

It didn't matter. Soon, they were alone, with Cutter cradling Rye's head in his lap. "Do you want to tell me what happened? Or do I have to guess?"

"Guess," Rye muttered. "It shouldn't be too hard. I doubt you'll need three." His head throbbed, but he tried for humor, nonetheless.

"Kristen."

"And he gets it in one!" Ouch. Maybe he got too excited there, because that hurt.

"Do you think this is funny, Rye?"

"No." He shook his head. "Not particularly. But I'm trying to cope," he said. "We had a fight."

"I figured that much out," Cutter muttered. "I would have thought you'd be tired of this by now."

"I am," Rye insisted, "but it's not that easy."

"So I keep hearing."

Yeah. He was testy. Rye didn't blame him. "I'm sorry I ruined your date."

"It's fine. It wasn't much of a date," Cutter said.

“Yet he was here, so you must have been looking for something.”

“Maybe. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” Cutter brushed a strand of Rye’s hair away from his forehead, leaving him wondering if Cutter would kiss him, and hoping he would. “How’s your head?”

He wanted to insist it was fine, but he couldn’t. “It still hurts.”

“I’m sure.” Cutter sighed. “Look, Rye, I know you didn’t want to go to the hospital. I don’t blame you for that. You need to have your head looked at, though,” he said. “The cut is bad enough, plus you might have a concussion.”

Right. He’d been wondering that himself. “Aren’t you looking at it? You have medical training.”

“Some, but I’m not a doctor,” Cutter said. “I’m going to call Dr. Jiminez.”

The team doctor. To the extent that Rye knew Doc Rosie, he liked her. But no. No way did he want her involved in this. Or anyone affiliated with the team, for that matter. “No!” It came out harsher than Rye intended. “Cutter, please, can’t we just keep this between us? I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“I hope so, and you’re probably right,” Cutter said, “but my training and experience won’t allow me to do that. This needs to be checked out, and by an actual doctor.” He picked up one of the pillows from his couch and positioned it under Rye’s head. “I’ll be right back.”

Cutter scooted off the couch and moved to another room. Rye could faintly hear him talking on the phone but couldn’t make out anything he said.

He was back in less than five minutes. “Dr. Jiminez is on her way over.”

Rye closed his eyes, wishing he could block out everything about this night, starting with taking Kristen to the party. Then again, that fateful decision had been made days before. “I wish you wouldn’t have done that.”

“I know, but I had to,” Cutter said. “Don’t worry. She’s the consummate professional. Everything stays between the walls of this house.”

“Okay.” Rye knew Cutter was right. His injury had to be checked out, and this was better than going to the hospital.

“I just ask one thing. Insist on it, really.”

“What’s that?”

“You need to be honest with Rosie. You’ve got to tell her the truth about what happened tonight.”

~&~

It didn’t take Rosie long to get there, and her concern was evident when she saw Rye’s head. Cutter expected Rye to try to downplay things to the team doctor, but instead he was surprisingly forthcoming.

“My fiancée had a little too much to drink tonight, and she might’ve taken some drugs, too. She was acting erratic, and it alarmed Coach Ross’s wife,” he said, “so I took her home. I was trying to help her into the house and to bed, and we scuffled a bit. I fell and hit my head on the armoire, but it was an accident.”

Okay, he was forthcoming except for the part about insisting it was an accident. Much like he always did. Still, at least Rye hadn’t fabricated some ridiculous story about tripping on a dog toy or something. If he even had a dog.

“I’m sure it was,” Rosie said, her eyes meeting Cutter’s above Rye’s head.

Her expression told Cutter everything he needed to know. She’d figured it all out. That Rye was the friend who was in the abusive relationship, and that Cutter was interested in more than friendship with the troubled kicker.

“I appreciate you coming to look at my head, doctor,” Rye said. “I’m sure it’s going to be fine, though. Right?”

“The cut will be.” It had been cleaned and closed with Steri-Strips as a precaution. “It should heal well.”

“I figured as much. I have a hard head,” Rye quipped. “If it scars, I can always wear my hair differently.”

Rosie smiled. “Your sense of humor is intact. I like that,” she said. “It makes me worry less about a concussion. Still, it needs to be watched.” She looked at Cutter. “He’s staying with you tonight?”

Cutter didn’t hesitate. “Yes. Absolutely.” Now that he had Rye here, he didn’t intend on letting him go. “Right?” he asked Rye.

He half expected the kicker to argue. Instead, Rye nodded. “Yes. There’s no way I’m going back to that house tonight.”

The fact he was able to say that spoke volumes, and in that moment, Cutter decided he wasn’t simply in lust with Rye. It was growing into love, and whatever happened between them, he wanted more than anything for Rye to escape his toxic home life and find peace. Wherever and whomever that might be with.

“Good,” Rosie said. “You know the drill, right, Cutter? Wake him every hour or so,

see how he's doing, check for cognitive impairment, that kind of thing?"

Cutter nodded. "Yes." He may have had to give up on his dream of attending medical school, at least for now, but he'd paid attention in all his college classes and learned a lot from Rosie.

"Good. If you notice anything suspicious, get him to the ER right away," she said. "Or call me. That works, too." Rosie looked at Rye. "If there's nothing else you need, I'll leave you in Cutter's capable hands."

"Thanks, Dr. Jiminez."

"Please. It's Rosie. I know you haven't had a lot of injuries and haven't had to see much of me, but my name is Rosie."

Rye nodded. "Got it. Thanks, Doc Rosie," he said. "There is one more thing, though. I need to know if Kristen is okay."

"What?" It came out harsher than Cutter intended. "I'm sorry, but you're not going back home to her."

"No. I already said that." Rye let out a sigh. "I know what you're both thinking, but once upon a time, I loved her very much. I still care about her."

"That's understandable," Rosie said. "Do you want me to call for a welfare check at your address. Because I can."

"No. Not that that." Rye fished his phone from his pocket. "Just... call her. While you're both here. So, you know, she can't manipulate me or figure out where I am." He shook his head. "I'm so pathetic."

“No, you’re not.” Cutter took the phone from him. “What’s your passcode?”

Rye told him, and Cutter put it in, unlocking the phone. He found Rye’s contacts and tapped at Kristen’s name to connect the call.

To her credit, she answered right away, and Cutter put the call on speaker. “Rye! Is that you?”

“It’s me.”

“Where are you?” She demanded. “When are you coming home?”

Nothing about whether Rye was okay. In that moment, Cutter had never hated Kristen more.

“I’m at a friend’s house. I’ll be staying here for at least tonight. Maybe longer. I need some space.”

“Space? What does that mean? You know I’m sorry, right?”

Yep. He pretty much hated her.

“I hope so,” Rye said, “but I won’t be home tonight.”

“Damn it, Rye! I can’t believe you’re acting like this. Okay, I messed up tonight. I’m sorry. You need to come home, though.”

“He already told you he won’t be home tonight.” Rosie’s voice portrayed more calmness than Cutter could ever manage, and he wondered if it could be chalked up to experience. “I suggest you leave it at that.”

“Who the hell are you?” Kristen demanded. “Are you sleeping with my fiancée?”

To her credit, Rosie laughed. “No. I can assure you that is not happening.” She paused. “We merely called to see if you’re okay. I’m delighted to hear you are.” Rosie took the phone from Cutter. “Good night,” she added, before ending the call.

Rosie handed the phone back to Rye. “Are we good here?”

“Yes. Thank you,” he said.

“Okay. Then I’m going home to my wife. Feel free to call me in an emergency, but only an emergency. You’re in good hands with Cutter.”

“I know that,” Rye said. “Thanks again.”

Cutter walked Rosie to the door, then looked at Rye. “Let me help you to the guest room, get you settled in bed.”

“Bed. I like that.” Rye gave Cutter a sexy grin. “Are you staying with me?”

“Yes. Only because I’ve got to wake you up every hour to check on you.”

Rye laughed as he stood up. “Oh, I think we both know that’s not the only reason.”

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True to his word, Cutter woke Rye up regularly throughout the night to monitor for any sign of concussion or other side effects from the head injury. By three in the morning, Rye was convinced he was fine and simply wanted to get some sleep. He was going to suggest that to Cutter, but the truth was, Rye enjoyed having Cutter dote on him. He made a very sexy nurse, and knowing Cutter was right beside him on the bed was a source of comfort. Rye felt safe with Cutter, the exact opposite of how things were with Kristen.

As soon as Rosie had hung up on her the night before, Kristen immediately called back. Rye let it go straight to voice mail. When she called two more times after that, he shut his phone off. He needed rest, not to be sucked back into her drama. He was sure when he turned the phone back on, there would be a slew of text messages and voice mails. None of which Rye wanted to deal with. No. He'd leave the phone off for a little bit longer.

Cutter stirred beside him and Rye rolled over to face him. "Morning."

"What time is it?" Cutter sat up and looked at his watch.

"Just past seven," Rye said. "And we're off today, remember?" There was something to be said for a bye week late in the season. It meant everyone, from the coaches on down to the equipment staff, could enjoy a day off after the party. The team facilities weren't even open, although the players had access if they wanted to work out. Rye didn't. He intended to enjoy the day off.

"Right." Cutter raked a hand through his hair, making it stand up on top. It only had the effect of making him more adorable. "How's your head?"

“It’s okay,” Rye told him. “Doesn’t hurt at all.” He hadn’t looked at the cut, though, and wasn’t sure he wanted to.

“We should take that bandage off and check underneath,” Cutter said.

Rye nodded, knowing he was right. “Whatever you say.”

“All right, get your pretty head over here, then.”

“Not so pretty anymore,” Rye said, but he sat up and moved closer to Cutter so he could remove the bandage. Thankfully, he did so gently, with Rye barely feeling it.

“Well? What’s the verdict?”

Cutter chuckled. “You’ll be pretty again. It might just be an edgier sort of pretty.”

Rye wasn’t sure exactly what that meant, but he decided he liked the sound of it. “I can live with that,” he said. “It’s okay, then?”

“Yep. Looks good. You’ll want to keep the strips on there for another day or so, but in my not-so-expert opinion, it’s going to heal nicely,” Cutter said. “You’ll have to be careful when you shower that you don’t get it wet. No washing your hair today.”

“Got it.” The mentioning of showering, though, reminded him that he didn’t have any clothes other than the ones he had on the night before. He’d left his house in such a hurry he hadn’t thought about packing clothes. All Rye had cared about was getting out of there. “There’s a problem, though. I don’t have any clothes.”

“I thought of that, and you can borrow some of mine,” Cutter said. “They should fit you okay. I mean, you’re taller, so my pants might look funny, but you can wear shorts. It’s supposed to be warm today.”

“Benefits of living in Texas rather than Minnesota, I guess,” Rye said. “Thanks. For everything.”

“Don’t mention it.” Cutter swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. “There are towels in the bathroom there. Soap, anything you should need,” he said. “I’ll leave you some clothes on the bed for when you get out.”

“Great.” Rye looked forward to getting out of last night’s clothes, regardless of what Cutter left him to wear.

“I’ll be in the kitchen making coffee,” Cutter said. “Try not to get your head wet. We’ll bandage you up again in a bit.”

He left the room, probably in search of clothes, and Rye went into the guest bathroom. It wasn’t fancy, but it was fully stocked with soap, shower gel, shampoo and plenty of towels. Since he couldn’t wash his hair or get his head wet, Rye was happy it wasn’t a rain head shower, and he was able to position his body so the stream of water hit him below his head. When he was done, he dried off and wrapped the towel around his waist as he walked back into the bedroom.

In the time he’d been in the shower, Cutter had made the bed left a stack of clothes on top, neatly folded. There was a pair of boxer briefs, several shirts, and a pair of shorts. Rye put on the underwear and the shorts, which were elastic waist and fit him well, and selected the shirt that paired best with it. That left his feet. He’d have to ask his host what size shoe he wore, because all Rye had was the black dress shoes he'd worn the night before.

Barefoot, he made his way to the kitchen where Cutter was having a cup of coffee. He looked up when Rye walked in. “Are the clothes okay?”

“Fine,” Rye said. “What size shoe are you?”

“Oh, crap. I didn’t think about that. I’m a ten. You?”

“Ten and a half, so I should be able to your shoes.” They might hurt a bit, but he could get them on. They’d certainly do until he could get to a store, or back in his house without running into Kristen.

“I’ll find you a pair that run kind of big,” Cutter said. “Help yourself to coffee. I’m going to get cleaned up and find you some shoes.”

“Okay.” Rye picked up the coffee mug and poured himself a cup. “Are you hungry?” he asked. “I can dig through your fridge and see what you have and make some breakfast.”

“A sexy man cooking breakfast for me?” Cutter grinned. “Life doesn’t get much better.”

Rye laughed. “You don’t even know what I’m going to make yet. But thanks.”

~&~

After a quick shower, Cutter located a pair of athletic shoes and socks for Rye to wear and went to rejoin him in the kitchen. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of the easy flirting they were engaging in, but it already felt natural to have Rye here. He also realized that was probably a dangerous way of thinking considering the circumstances that had brought Rye to his house. Still, Cutter intended to enjoy it for however long it might last.

“Shoes and socks,” he said, holding them up for Rye to see before putting them on the floor. He walked closer to the stove. “What are you making?”

“I found eggs, and little sausage. You’ve got cheese and tortillas,” Rye said. “I’m

whipping up some breakfast tacos. Kind of my specialty.” Then he blushed, looking completely adorable. “I hope that’s not a mistake, given your family’s business.”

“Nope,” Cutter assured him. “It’s pretty hard to ruin a breakfast taco, and besides, that’s the sausage my mami uses in the tacos she makes for the business.”

“It looks delicious,” Rye said.

“It is.” Cutter poured himself another cup of coffee and leaned against the counter, watching Rye cook. “I’d offer to help,” he said, “but I’m enjoying the view too much.”

Rye chuckled. “I aim to please. And no worries. It’s almost ready, anyway.”

“Then I’ll get plates.” Cutter moved around him to the cabinet where he kept the plates, marveling at the easy rapport between them. He’d never lived with a boyfriend before, but he’d had some spend the night, and the morning after’s were never this casual or comfortable. Maybe it was because he and Rye had never slept together, but Cutter preferred to think there was something else at play. Like maybe this was the way it was supposed to be. They belonged together.

He cautioned himself not to get too caught up in that way of thinking. With everything going on in Rye’s life, Cutter understood the importance of moving slowly. Even if he didn’t want to.

“You’re quiet,” Rye observed while they ate. “The tacos aren’t that bad, are they?”

“What? No. They’re very good, actually.” Cutter noticed the grin on Rye’s face and realized he’d been joking. “It’s good to see you smiling.”

“It’s easy around you,” Rye said.

“Simple solution, then. Stay with me.”

“Right now, I think I kind of have to.”

It wasn't completely true. He had plenty of options. They were both well aware of that. The fact that Rye had come here last night, when he could have gone anywhere, was not lost on Cutter. Rye wasn't there out of desperation. He was there because he wanted to be.

“I need to get some things, though,” Rye continued. “Wearing your clothes isn't a long-term solution.”

Cutter loved that he was thinking long-term. “Does that mean you're going back to your house to pack stuff?” He knew it wasn't something Rye could avoid forever.

His friend surprised him by shaking his head. “No. I'm not ready for that,” he said. “I'll go shopping.”

“Sounds like a better idea.”

“Yeah.” Rye finished eating and took his plate to the sink. “I turned my phone back on. Kristen's called ten times.”

Cutter wasn't surprised. “She's persistent.”

“I'm not answering, though,” Rye said. “I'm done. Last night was the final straw.”

“I'm glad.” Sure, Cutter wished Rye had reached that point sooner, and without sustaining a cut on his head, but there was no point in dwelling on that. What mattered was only that he was done now. He wasn't going back to Kristen.

Cutter took own plate to the sink. “Let me wash my hands and I’ll put a new bandage on your head.”

“I can do it.”

“I know that, but I’m still doing it.”

“Whatever.” Rye sat back down, and Cutter pulled a chair opposite him so he could affix a fresh bandage to the wound.

“There,” Cutter said. “All set.” He didn’t move the chair back or stand, though. Instead, he leaned closer and brushed his lips across Rye’s.

Just as Rye responded, though, his phone rang and he jerked away. “Probably her again. I’ll turn it off.” As he glanced at the display, though, his face went pale.

“What? Who is it?” Cutter asked.

“The hospital. Seton Medical Center.”

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Rye didn't want to answer the phone. He wanted to get lost in the feeling of Cutter's lips on his. Damn it. He knew he should've turned the phone off as soon as he deleted all of Kristen's texts and voice mails. Cutter was right. She was nothing if not persistent.

Persistently annoying.

Interrupting that kiss? Nope. He'd had enough. He was turning the damn phone off now so he could get back to what mattered. Kissing Cutter. It didn't get much better than that.

When he glanced at the display, though, he it wasn't Kristen's name on the caller ID. Instead, the screen read 'Seton Medical Center.' One of the local hospitals, and the one closest to his house.

Rye froze as Cutter asked him who it was. "The hospital. Seton Medical Center," he said as he picked up the call. "Hello?"

"Yes, hello. I'm looking for Ryeland Lenhart," a female voice said.

"That's me," he said, apprehension setting in.

"Oh, good. My name is Melody. I'm a nurse in the Emergency Department here at Seton Medical Center. You're listed as the emergency contact for a Kristen Somerton?"

Oh, God. Various scenarios started running through his head, and none of them were

good ones. “Yes. She’s my fiancée.” In his mind, she was his ex-fiancée, but until he officially ended things, she wasn’t an ex. “What’s wrong? Did something happen to Kris?”

Rye noticed a look cross Cutter’s face and tried to read it. It appeared to be a mix of concern and annoyance, which wasn’t too different from what Rye felt himself.

“Ms. Somerton was brought to our ED by ambulance about half an hour,” the nurse said. “From what we’ve been able to figure out, she was outside your house, incoherent and shaking, by one of your neighbors.”

One of the neighbors. They weren’t close to any of them anymore. With Kristen’s problems, it became easier to keep them at a distance as well. Except Kimberly two doors down resented that, and the nosey divorcee continued to try to ingratiate herself into their lives. The more they tried to push her away, the more meddlesome Kimberly became. Rye didn’t how or why Kimberly would have ended up at their house, but his money was on her being the neighbor in question.

“Is Kristen okay?” He asked the nurse. “Do you know what happened?” Rye had his suspicions, but he’d wait for the nurse to tell him.

“We’re not sure. The doctor is in with her now,” she said, “but he suspects some kind of overdose.”

Overdose. Rye sucked in a breath. Nailed it.

“You said Ms. Somerton is your fiancée?”

“That’s right.”

“Then I think you need to be here.”

“Yes. Okay,” Rye said. “I’m on my way.” He ended the call and looked at Cutter. “I have to go.”

“I heard that,” Cutter said. “What’s going on? What happened to Kristen?”

“They’re not sure, but she might have overdosed.” Probably because he was ignoring her calls, and she was desperate and alone. No. Rye didn’t want to think about that. He wasn’t going to blame himself. It wasn’t his fault.

Or was it?

“Oh, man. I’m sorry, Rye.” Cutter sounded like he meant it, which made Rye appreciate him even more.

“Thanks.” He grabbed the shoes and socks Cutter had brought for him and put them on. They were a little snug, but they’d do, and Rye was thankful they were a similar size. Dress shoes and shorts would be an awful look, and he wouldn’t be allowed in a hospital emergency room barefoot.

Rye slipped his phone in the pocket of the shorts. “Have you seen my wallet?”

Cutter nodded. “It’s on the coffee table in the living room.”

Where he left it the night before. He remembered now. Rye headed for the living room and grabbed his wallet, shoving it in the other pocket. The keys to his truck were on the table, too. He sure had been a mess the night before.

“You understand why I have to do this, right?” he asked Cutter.

“Sure. I get it.” It sounded like he was trying to insist it didn’t bother him when clearly it did. “You love her.”

Jesus. “No!” The last Rye needed was for Cutter to think he was rushing to Kristen’s bedside because he still loved her. That wasn’t it. It wasn’t love. That part was gone. There was, however, a sense of obligation. “It isn’t that.”

“If you say so,” Cutter said. “Just go. Do what you have to do.” His smile appeared forced, but at least it was a smile. “I’ll see you later.”

“Thanks for understanding.” Rye kissed his cheek, enjoying the feel of Cutter’s beard against his mouth. “You’re the best.”

~&~

“Yeah. The best,” Cutter muttered to himself as he watched Rye’s truck pull away from his house. At least he’d gotten a kiss before Rye left, even if it was only a peck on the cheek.

He tried to tell himself it was going to be fine. Once Rye knew that Kristen would be fine, he’d be back. And Kristen would be fine. Cutter refused to consider any other possibility.

Besides, it might not even be an overdose. It didn’t sound like the doctors knew much of anything at this point. Given what Rye had shared with Cutter about Kristen’s history, though, an overdose seemed pretty likely.

And here he’d been looking forward to spending a quiet day at home with Rye. So much for that. He could go for a bike ride, but Cutter doubted he would enjoy it. He’d be thinking too much about the day Rye went riding with him.

His phone rang as he walked back into the house. Rosie. Cutter expected she would call.

“How’s the patient?” she asked as soon as he answered.

“No sign of a concussion,” Cutter said matter-of-factly. “The wound looks okay too. That doc sure did a great job with the suture strips, especially since the procedure was done in my living room.”

“Yeah, she’s the best,” Rosie quipped. “You put a new bandage on it, right?”

“Obviously,” Cutter said. “I learned from the best, or did you forget that?”

“Wow, someone is in a mood. I thought you’d be happier, what with having a sexy man staying with you who needs you to take care of him.”

Cutter rolled his eyes even though she couldn’t see him. He adored his boss, but she could be annoying sometimes. “I’m not in a mood.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Fine.” He nearly spit out the word. “Rye’s not here. He left.”

“Why?” Rosie asked. “What did you do, Cutter? Did you screw up?”

“I didn’t do anything.” She was so quick to assume he was the one who messed up. Good grief. Women! Was it any wonder he preferred to date men? “If you must know, he went back to Kristen.”

“Are you kidding? That idiot. He swore he wouldn’t do that. Ugh. Men! Madre de dios . No wonder I married a woman!”

Cutter couldn’t help but laugh at that, at least for a second, before turning serious. “Rye got a call a little bit ago, from the hospital. Kristen’s in the ED. Possible

overdose,” he said. “So, naturally, Rye went running.”

Rosie sighed audibly. “Okay, that sucks, but he probably only went out of obligation. Right?”

“I’m sure that’s part of it. Rye is all about obligation. And image.”

“One part good, one part bad,” Rosie mused. “Like so much of life.”

“You’re way too philosophical for nine in the morning,” Cutter told her.

“Whatever. What are you doing today, on your day off?”

Good question. What was he doing? Not spending the day with Rye, obviously.

“Nothing now.”

“Okay, enough of the pity party,” Rosie scolded. “Margie and I were about to head to the farmer’s market. We’ll swing by to pick you up.”

“What? No.” Cutter groaned. “I have no desire to go to the farmer’s market.”

“Well, too bad. You can’t sit at home and pout. We’re coming to get you.”

Since he knew there was no point in arguing, Cutter muttered, “Fine,” and ended the call. The market might be marginally better than spending the day alone, wondering about Rye and Kristen. If nothing else, he could get some fresh green beans.

~&~

Rye half-listened, trying to piece together what the emergency room doctor was telling him. Apparently, the neighbor—most likely Kimberly—had seen Kristen

wandering around outside their house, acting nonsensical and muttering to herself. Rye could picture it, because it didn't sound too different from what he'd observed the night before. Except this time, Kristen's drug use had gone too far. The effects of the cocaine had spiked both her blood pressure and her heart rate dangerously high, and she could've died. If she hadn't been found when she was, she probably would have.

"We administered naloxone to bring her rate down, stabilize her blood pressure, and reduce the tremors," the doctor said. "Essentially reduce the effects of the overdose."

"Naloxone. I've heard of that," Rye said. "Is it working?"

"It would appear so. Your wife is stable now. Awake. Her heart rate is getting back to normal. It was a bad scare, but she should be okay."

His wife. Rye wasn't in the mood to correct the doctor. "Thanks. Can I go in and see her now?"

"In a minute. There's something else I want to talk to you about, first."

"What's that, doctor," Rye looked at the name on his badge. "Mallorca?"

The young doctor, probably only a few years out of medical school, shuffled his feet. "Look, it may be none of my business. I admit I don't know you," he said. "But this could have been a lot worse than it was. If it happens again, it probably will be. You might want to look at some rehab places for your wife. Get her some help."

The doctor was right. It was none of his damn business. Yet Rye knew he was right, so he simply nodded. "We'll think about that. Now, can I see her?"

"Yes." Dr. Mallorca stepped aside. "Go right ahead."

“Thanks.” Rye pushed the door open and stepped inside the room, where Kristen lay in bed. She looked like hell, but smiled when he walked in.

“Hi, Rye. Thanks for coming,” she said.

“Like I’d miss it?” He rolled a chair over and sat down. “How are you?”

“I’ve been better. I know I messed up,” she said. “How’s your head?”

“It’ll be fine. The team doc fixed me up.”

“I’m glad.” She looked at him. “Whose clothes are you wearing?”

Rye hesitated. “A guy from the team. Let’s not talk about that,” he said. “Right now, my only concern is that you’re okay.”

“I will be. That’s what the doctor says, anyway. It was Kimberly who found me outside.”

Of course. “I assumed so,” Rye said. “I’m glad she helped you.”

“From what they say, she might have saved my life,” Kristen continued. “I’m so sorry. I was in such a bad place after what happened last night. Us fighting. You getting hurt,” she said. “And you know what happens then.”

Rye nodded. “Yeah. I do,” he said. “I get it, but it doesn’t make it okay, Kris. None of this is okay.”

“I know that. I do.” She was almost pleading now, and Rye they needed to end the conversation. “I need to get into treatment, and not this online stuff anymore. I need to go somewhere for a while. Sober up. Make some real changes.”

At least now maybe she was getting it and moving beyond the contemplation stage to the action stage. It was a long time coming. “Yes,” Rye said. “It’s time for that.” It had been for a while, but he’d keep that part to himself.

“Will you help me?” she asked. “To find a place?”

He hesitated, but only for a second. “Of course I will.” He gave her hand a squeeze. “I’m not going to abandon you now,” Rye promised. “Get some rest, and we’ll talk about it some more later.”

“Okay.” She gave a weak smile and closed her eyes. “Thanks, Rye?”

Once he was satisfied Kristen was resting, Rye slipped out of the room to call Cutter and fill him in on what was happening.

The trainer answered on the second ring. “I’ve been waiting to hear from you. What’s up?” he asked. “How’s Kristen?”

Rye appreciated that he would ask, because he knew Kristen was not on Cutter’s list of favorite people. “Stable,” he said. “She’ll be okay, thank goodness. She’s got to go to rehab, though.” If it was obvious before, it was more than obvious now, even without the not-so-subtle nudging from Dr. Mallorca.

“Good. I hope she can get the help she needs.”

“Me, too. At least she seems to understand now that she does need help. That she can’t do it on her own.” Rye braced himself for what he was about to do next. “I’m going to look at some places, and we’re going to figure out the best one for her.”

“We? As in you and Kristen? Together?” Naturally, Cutter picked up on the ‘we.’

“Yes,” he admitted. “I mean, it’s not what you think. I’m not sure where the relationship stands, or if I can ever go back to what we had before. That’s what I need to figure out.” Less than twenty-four hours ago, he’d been adamant that he absolutely would not be going back to Kristen, and here he was, waffling again. Was her hold on him that powerful? “I know I’ve got to help her, though. She doesn’t have any family around here. I’m all she’s got.”

“Help her,” Cutter repeated. “Does that mean help her get into rehab, or stay with her long-term? Because addiction recovery is seldom a quick process.”

“No, it isn’t.” Rye let out a sigh. “And that’s what I don’t know. What I need to figure out. I’m sorry, Cutter. I really am. But this changes things.”

“Of course it does. I get it,” Cutter said. “I’m sorry, too. That any of this had to happen.”

“Thank you.” Rye exhaled. He got it. Cutter was giving him the time he needed to figure things out. “For understanding. You’re the best.”

“No, I’m not,” he replied. “And I didn’t say I understand. I get what you feel like you need to do, but that doesn’t mean I think it’s right. Or that I’m still going to be here, patiently waiting, while you figure out what the hell you want.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 10:31 am

Cutter recognized he was being a jerk. He didn't need his boss reminding him of it every chance she got. Not that he entirely blamed Rosie. She and Neal and everyone else on the medical staff were tired of his mood, which had been awful in the two weeks since Rye went back to Kristen.

If that was indeed what happened. It's not like he knew for sure, because he was the one who opted to cut off communication with Rye while he figured things out. Whatever the hell that meant.

All Cutter knew for sure was that it hurt like hell to see Rye every day at the team facility and not talk to him. Sure, he was pissed off at the way Rye was jerking him around, but he missed his friend, too. And going out of the way to avoid him wasn't helping things. It sure wasn't helping his mood.

He got his lunch and went in search of Rye. Cutter had noticed over the past couple weeks that Rye still sat at the same table—their table, and they'd come to call it—by himself. He always ate alone, never with any of his teammates, and there were times when Cutter would catch Rye looking his way when he came into the dining room.

Sometimes, they would make eye contact, and then Cutter would turn away. Yeah, he was being a jerk and an idiot. He didn't need Rosie to remind him of that.

"Is this seat taken?" he asked as he approached Rye's table.

"By you, if you want it." Cutter noticed Rye didn't smile.

"Might as well," Cutter said. "I've got to sit somewhere."

“How are you?” Rye asked, and Cutter shrugged.

“Fine, mostly. You?”

“Same ole, same ole. Just playing out the string.” There were two games in the season, one home and one away, but there would be no playoffs.

“I’m sorry it hasn’t been a better season,” Cutter said. He knew all the guys were upset. They’d made a good run the year before, and it seemed as if everyone expected them to build on. Unfortunately, it wasn’t meant to be.

“We all are. We had high expectations this year.” Rye gave a shrug. “For whatever reason, it didn’t work out. That’s not on any one person.”

“Definitely not,” Cutter assured him. “You had a great season.”

“Thanks for saying that.” Rye gave him a smile. “I want that Oklahoma game back, though.”

“You can’t beat yourself up, man. One kick against Oklahoma did not seal the season.”

“Yeah, I know.” Rye brushed a strand of hair away from his forehead. Cutter noticed it had grown longer and Rye hadn’t cut it. Did that have anything to do with the injury to his head a few weeks ago. “Still, it’s tough.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Cutter said. “How’s Kristen?”

“She’s all right,” Rye said. “She’s actually finishing up her inpatient treatment and is coming home.”

“That’s great.” Cutter tried to sound happy. Home. Whatever that might mean. “So, you’ll be living together again?”

“I didn’t say that.” There was an edge to Rye’s voice.

“Fine. I don’t mean to pressure you.”

“Really? Because it doesn’t sound like you’re fine,” Rye said. “Funny, the guy who’s been lying to his family for God knows how long is pressuring me to figure my life out.” He pushed his chair back and stood. “That’s cool. Maybe we both need some time.”

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As soon as practice was over, Rye went to pick up Kristen from the treatment center. She’d spent two weeks there as an inpatient and was now being discharged. She was still expected to follow-up with an outpatient treatment program. Whether she would was anyone’s guess, but so far she at least sounded committed to it.

Rye had talked to her every day while she was at the facility, and he’d been impressed with her mood and outlook. He hoped she would stick with the program and maintain sobriety, but he’d accepted the fact that Kristen’s success or failure was up to her, and only her. He wasn’t responsible for it.

“How are you feeling?” he asked when he arrived to pick her up.

Kristen sat on the edge of the bed in the small room, devoid of any décor. Rye knew she hated the sterile surroundings, yet she hadn’t complained. A small duffel bag, containing all of the belongings she’d been allowed to have with her, was on the floor beside the bed. She was dressed casually, in yoga pants and an oversized sweatshirt, and she appeared healthier and more beautiful than any time Rye could recall in the

recent past. "I'm good," she said. "Ready to go home, though."

"Then let's get you there." Rye forced a smile on his face. "I stopped at the front desk on my way in. They said your discharge paperwork is ready to go."

"It is." She held up a folder she'd been holding in her lap. "In here. Along with my first outpatient appointment," she said. "It's Tuesday at two."

"That's great. We'll make sure you get there." He managed a smile. "You look good, Kris. Real good."

"Thanks." She smiled. "I appreciate you saying that. And for picking me up."

"Hey, I told you I wouldn't abandon you." Not while she was in rehab, anyway. He picked up her bag. "I drove your car, because I know you hate my truck."

"I don't hate it," she insisted. "It might even be growing on me."

It was funny she would say that, because Rye was beginning to like it less and less. Either way, it didn't matter. He escorted Kristen to her Lexus SUV and stowed her bag in the back before helping her inside the car.

Once they were home, Rye helped her inside the house. He was doing all the right things. He knew that. Yet still he felt nothing.

No. That wasn't true. Rye felt an overwhelming desire to be free. He knew it wasn't right, but it was there.

"Do you want to lay down?" he asked, once they were inside.

"Lay down?" Kristn repeated. "Like I've been doing anything else lately?"

“I’m sorry... I didn’t mean...” He stopped. Sighed. “I’m not even sure what to say anymore.”

“Yeah. Me neither.” Kristen looked at him. “This isn’t going to work, is it?”

Rye played dumb. “I’m not sure what you mean?”

“Us. This. You and me,” she said. “You don’t want to talk about it, do you?”

No. Rye tried for a smile. It was difficult, for sure, but not nearly as hard as it should have been. “Not really.” He managed a shrug. “I don’t like this anymore than you do. In fact, I think it sucks.” Rye closed his eyes, opened them again. “There’s a part of me that still loves you, and always will.”

“But it’s not enough, is it?” Kristen asked, and Rye shook his head.

“No. At this point, I don’t think it is.” He looked to the floor, then up again. “I’m sorry,” Rye said, “and I hope you get well.”

“Me, too. I know I’m not giving up.” Kristen smiled. “Thanks, Rye. For sticking with me. You know, until the bitter end. I’m going to be okay, though.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 10:31 am

Cutter sat at home, absently channel-surfing in the hope of finding something to watch on TV. His sister had called, inviting him to go to a movie. Esteban was out of town working at a job site, so Leticia was bored. Cutter was bored, too, but the movie she suggested didn't interest him, so he declined the invitation.

Lane had called, too. Cutter hadn't heard from the hockey player since the night of the team's holiday party, and he didn't expect to. Then, suddenly, out of the blue, Lane was calling him, citing a busy schedule for not being in contact. He complained about a long flight back from Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada to play a team Cutter had never heard of and didn't care about, all while lamenting that he hadn't gotten a chance with the big club yet.

"You'll get there," he tried to assure Lane, but realized he didn't care one way or another if the hockey player ever made it out of the minor leagues. They talked for a few more minutes while Cutter searched for a way to politely end the conversation. He got it when the doorbell rang. Thank goodness.

"I've got to go. Someone's at the door," Cutter told Lane. "Maybe I'll call you tomorrow." He doubted the hockey player would be waiting for the call that wouldn't come.

Cutter checked his doorbell camera and saw that it was Rye standing on his front porch. If Lane's call was unexpected—and it was—Rye showing up at his house took unexpected to a whole new level. He hurried to answer it.

"Hey," he said. "What brings you here?"

“Can I come in?” Rye asked. He blew on his hands. “It’s cold out here.”

“Yeah.” Cutter opened the door wider to let Rye in. “Hard to believe a couple weeks ago we were wearing shorts, huh?” He closed the door

“That’s Texas for you, though,” Rye said. “If you don’t like it, wait five minutes. It’ll change.”

Cutter laughed at the familiar statement. “We can go into the living room to talk,” he said. “Do you want anything to drink?”

Rye shook his head. “Thanks, but no. I’m fine.” He followed Cutter into the living room. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“Me, too, since you’re here.” Cutter sat down. “Just having a quiet evening.” He decided not to mention that he’d been talking to Lane. “Is everything okay? I wasn’t expecting you.” No. He expected Rye to be at home with Kristen, his newly sober fiancée, and he hadn’t wanted to think about what that might mean.

“No,” Rye said. “I probably should have called first.”

“It’s fine,” Cutter assured him. “You’re always welcome here.”

“I appreciate that,” Rye said. “And everything you’ve done for me.”

Great. So he was here out of gratitude? One final ‘thank you’ before riding off into the sunset with Kristen? No. Cutter refused to believe that. His connection with Rye was too real. That, and he didn’t want to believe Rye could stay with Kristen. Now with everything that happened. “I told you, you’ve got a friend for as long as you need one.”

“A friend, right,” Rye said. “What if I want more, though?”

Had he heard that correctly? “What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. What if I want more from you than friendship?” Rye repeated. “Because Kristen and I are done, and for real this time,” he said. “I picked her up from treatment and drove her home. Helped her get settled in. And then I ended things.”

It was what Cutter had wanted to hear for a very long, but now that he was, he didn’t know how to react. “I’m sorry.” No. He wasn’t. “I’m sure that was difficult.”

“A little,” Rye said. “There’s a lot of history. She took it well, though. She knew it was coming.” He nodded, as if affirming that to himself. “We have some stuff to figure out. Property, that kind of thing. It’s done, though. We both know it’s over. And that’s why I’m here.”

Rye looked at Cutter, his expression earnest. “I know I’ve kind of strung things along, and you’ve gotten tired of it, but if you’re still interested, if there’s still a chance, I’ve figured it out. I want to be with you, Cutter. I want to see where this goes. You know, if you want me?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you talk too much?” Cutter asked. “Because you do.” And to shut Rye up, Cutter kissed him.

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If Rye had any doubt that this was real, and it where he belonged, those doubts were erased when Cutter’s lips met his. Sure, they’d shared a few kisses before, but Rye was always holding back. Fighting something. Repressing something.

Now, finally, he could be done with that. No more fighting the obvious.

Kissing Cutter was better than kissing anyone else. Ever.

Until he abruptly pulled away. “Is this too much? Too fast?” Cutter asked, his eyes searching Rye’s. “Do you want to stop? Because we can take this as slow as you want.”

Slow? No. He wanted fast. “Now who talks too much?” Rye teased, before his lips met Cutter’s again. Fortunately, Cutter got the hint, and instead of pulling back and talking again, he deepened the kiss.

Yes. This was it. This was what he’d been wanting.

Rye’s body responded immediately. For months, he’d struggled to get aroused enough to satisfy Kristen. Now, his cock sprang to attention. Like it did every time Cutter touched him.

Like it did with Max all those years ago.

“Oh, God, Cutter.” The words came out in a breathless gasp. “I want you so bad.”

“That’s what I want, too. What I’ve always wanted,” Cutter whispered. “For so long, but I thought I never had a chance with you.”

“Ssh. No more talking.” To silence him, Rye kissed him again. “We’ve wasted so much time, but I don’t want to talk about that. Take me to bed. Make love to me.”

Cutter reached for Rye’s hand and led him to the bedroom. Not the guest room where Rye had stayed a few weeks before, but to the master bedroom. As soon as they were they fell on the bed, in a mess of limbs and discarded clothes.

“God, you’re so beautiful. So perfect,” Rye said, closing his hand around Cutter’s erection. “Please, love me. And don’t ever stop.”

Cutter did, bringing Rye to heights of passion he never thought was possible. This was real. This was home. And Rye never wanted to leave.

Later, much later, Rye studied Cutter’s body as they lay next to each other, and he concluded it was perfect in nearly every way. From his arms, which were muscular, but not overly so, to his perfectly toned abs. Then there was the little smattering of dark hair on his chest, tapering down to his narrow waist, and to the promised land below.

Cutter was relaxed now, his cock in a state of rest, and a satisfied smile on his face. He should be satisfied, Rye decided, because the pleasure Cutter had just given him was greater than any he had ever experienced in his life.

“What are you thinking about?” Cutter asked.

“How sexy you are,” Rye said. “How incredible that was. How happy I am to finally be here, at this point, with you. And how much of an idiot I’ve been to wait so long.”

“Wow. That’s a lot.” Cutter turned on his side and propped himself up on one elbow, facing Rye. “First, you’re not an idiot. You’ve been dealing with a lot of difficult things, and there’s been a lot of feelings and emotions to process. You’re entitled to take the time you need to do that,” he said. “I am, however, very glad you finally did, and that the end result brought you here.”

“You’ve been so patient. Probably more than I deserve.”

“No,” Cutter said. “You deserved patience. You deserved safety. You deserved love.” His lips met Rye’s. “And now you have it.”

One Year Later

It was a beautiful December day in Austin, and with the Troopers' playoff berth secured the day before, Cutter and Rye turned their attention to something else. Dinner with the family, celebrating another trip around the sun for the family matriarch.

The driveway was already full of cars, meaning they were the last to arrive. Cutter wasn't surprised, given it had already been a momentous day and they'd gotten a little distracted while dressing for dinner. He parked his car on the street in front of his parents' house and turned to face Rye. "Are you ready to face the firing squad?" He was joking, mostly, fully expecting it to be fine.

"Yes." Rye answered without hesitation. "I've been looking forward to this for weeks."

Cutter believed him, and he looked forward to it, too. More importantly, he knew his family was, too. Leticia's impending wedding to Esteban finally had finally given him the courage he needed to come out to his family. He couldn't possibly go to his sister's wedding without a date. For one thing, she would pressure him endlessly to bring Rye as his plus one. Then there was the fact that Cutter didn't want to go alone. He was tired of hiding. Tired of lying. His relationship with Rye was beautiful. It was something to be celebrated, not hidden.

That meant when his mother casually asked him if he would be bringing a date to his sister's wedding, Cutter smiled and said, "Yes, Mami. My boyfriend. His name is Ryeland."

“The one from the team?” she had asked. “The kicker?”

Cutter confirmed it, and his mother smiled and said simply, “Good for you. He’s very handsome. You two will look wonderful together.”

And just like that, he was out, and he had his mother’s approval.

His sister had been right. It was easier than he ever thought it could be, and now that it was done, Cutter felt as if a weight had been lifted from him.

His family wouldn’t meet Rye for the first time at the wedding, though. First, there was the matter of his abuela’s birthday. Every year, when the family gathered for the party, they feared it might be the last. But here they were again. Maria had faced a few health challenges, but she was a strong and feisty woman. If Cutter were a betting man, he’d take the odds of his beloved abuela having more birthdays in her.

“You’re very lucky to still have your grandmother in your life,” Rye said, as if reading his thoughts.

“I know that,” Cutter said. “I’m lucky to have you in my life, too.” He leaned over and kissed Rye’s lips.

“I’m the lucky one, but you better stop doing that,” Rye teased. “Unless you want me to meet your family for the first time with a raging hard on, because you know the effect you have on me.”

“That’s for sure.” Cutter loved that Rye had so fully and completely embraced his love of men, and of him in particular. Cutter could behave himself now, because they would have plenty of time to make love later. They’d have the rest of their lives. “All right. Let’s do this.”

He opened the door, and when they met outside the car, Cutter linked his hand

through Rye's. "Do you need me to quiz you on any names before we go in?"

Rye grinned. "Nope. I've got it. Your dad is Pablo. Mom is Juanita. I already know Leticia. Your older brother is Manny," he said, rattling them off with ease. "And the star of the show, your beloved abuela, is Maria."

"Damn, you're good," Cutter said. "I'm proud of you. And I love you." Plenty of guys might have been scared off by the prospect of meeting his family, but instead Rye embraced it.

"I love you back."

Holding hands, they walked to the door. Cutter was about to open it, when instead, his sister pulled it open. "It's about time. We saw the car pull up minutes ago. Were you guys making out or something?"

"So what if they were?" Maria asked. "Love is a beautiful thing. Ceasar, introduce your old grandmother to your young man."

"Yes, ma'am. Abuela, this Ryeland Lenhart." Cutter paused. "My fiancé."

"What? Jesus." Letica squealed.

"Language, young lady," Mami admonished. "Caesar, when did this happen?"

"This morning," Cutter said. "Rye surprised me over breakfast. When he said he had a question, I thought he meant if I wanted more eggs." He grinned. "I did, but becoming his husband appealed to me more."

"At lease we have lots of wine, so we can have a double celebration," Cutter's brother said. "Congratulations, little brother."

“Thanks, Manny.” Cutter looked at his sister. “Don’t worry. We’re not stealing your day from you. Let’s get you and Esteban married off first, then Rye and I can plan our wedding.”

As excited as he was to call Rye his husband, Cutter could wait a little bit. After all, they had plenty of time together.

They had the rest of their lives.