



Rules of Play (The Saints of Westmont U #3)

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Category: Sport

Description: He was supposed to be my study subject, not my obsession.

Shane

I study elite athletes: their focus, their flaws, their fire. But Patrick Callahan? He's a category of his own.

Too loud, too confident, and way too hot to be safe for science.

He's all swagger and sweat and reckless charm.

Tracking his heartbeat was easy.

Keeping mine under control? Impossible.

Now I'm kissing this bi-curious jock in dark corners and pretending this isn't the most unprofessional thing I've ever done.

He's not just messing with my research—he's messing with my heart.

If I'm not careful, he might just break it.

Patrick

I agreed to let the shy nerd shadow me for a psych project.

Discovering the range of my sexuality and falling for him was never part of the plan.

But Shane—my sweet, brilliant, rule-following Shane—has no idea how much I crave him.

He thinks I don't see how he stares when I stretch after practice, or how red his ears get when I take off my shirt.

He thinks I'm just a jock with no heart. I'll show him just how wrong he is.

I'll make him feel it—on the ice, in my bed, and everywhere in

Page 1

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ONE

SHANE

I stood on the pier and gazed down the length of the beach.

The great Lake Michigan extended into the horizon, borderless and unbound.

Its blueish-gray surface faded into the washed-out sky with only the haziest line separating the two for those whose eyes were sharp and minds grounded.

While my eyes weren't the sharpest at great distances, my mind lacked almost any affinity for poetic imagination.

It wasn't always so gray here.

Just a couple of months ago, the beach was not as empty and windswept.

It was dotted with people enjoying the last chance for a swim for the summer.

Not that it stopped at swimming. Lakeside activities were performed like the courting dances in all of the avian world.

The way it went—and this interested me purely for analytical purposes, of course—was something like this.

A guy grows up with confidence. Sometime earlier, the star in which that particular

guy's atoms were forged was blessed with an incredible amount of confidence to bestow on the said guy. He moves to Chicago to study or work, gets a gym membership, acquires abs, and shows up on the beach.

The whole process gets hazier from that point on. He says he's there to swim, to stay in shape, to be one with the water or some other nonsense, but he walked away from the beach with a girl or a guy under his arm.

Not me.

The lame star that had forged my atoms some eons ago had been rich in athletic affinity combined with spectacular clumsiness, social anxiety mixed with a desperate need for other people, and a body-fat index made for abs, yet such lankiness that they hardly improved a thing about me.

On some days, I was more inclined to think they made me look weird, so I wore my hoodies extra large and my pants baggy to hide the length of my limbs.

I looked down the beach where the birds bopped and spread their wings and walked off for nights of passionate sex, the thought itself making me flush, awkward jitters rising from the pit of my stomach and reaching right into my fingertips.

Not to mention the giggles. I hated the goddamn giggles that took over me whenever a guy winked or asked to buy me a drink.

Don't get me wrong; it didn't happen often.

I drew in a deep breath of air, cold and sobering, and left behind the memory of the beach when it had been cluttered with hormone-brimming bodies of people who had it so much easier than me.

Instead of dwelling on another summer that had run me over, I had more immediate worries.

It was not something I wanted to think about, either.

My hands closed into fists against the cold wind settling over the lake.

Around the South Lagoon and through Lincoln Park, up Stockton Drive and Clark Street, I wandered through the city, waiting until the last moment to turn in the right direction.

Westmont University, the campus where I lived, and the bars I went to, people I saw in passing who wouldn't have noticed me if they tripped over me.

Humming "Mister Cellophane" from the show set in this great, messy, wonderful city—albeit quietly inside my head—I delayed myself until half past six, then rolled my eyes and headed to the meeting.

I generally enjoyed people. I liked meeting them, learning about them, hearing what they had to say, and seeing their brimming confidence and radiant imagination at play.

Some people were easier than others. Some moved smoothly through life like it was a gift given to them by a higher power and only meant for enjoyment.

Others were burdened by the simplest problems, usually of their own making. But none were alike.

My meeting today was with one I couldn't decipher.

Whenever I saw him around, he was at ease, laughing and joking with his buddies,

flirting with girls so effortlessly that I wanted to bite my tongue, and genuinely enjoying himself.

Yet, when I saw him playing, he was a torrent of destruction and vitriol.

I checked the time and picked up my pace.

Lumière was a warm and welcoming bar imitating the interior design of the bohemian bars of Paris, Rome, and Madrid.

It was awash with orange and yellow lamplight, large Edison bulbs screwed into antique lamps, and time-faded oil-on-canvas paintings in large, vintage frames filled up all the walls.

Located in the heart of the Westmont campus, it was part of the student center, surrounded by bars, coworking spaces, fast-food joints, a library, and study areas.

If one were to look for me on most days, I would be across the pedestrian pathway and a lawn, inside the library. Alternatively, I spent plenty of free time blasting music straight into my brain while working out to very mediocre results.

The sky had already darkened by the time I stood before the wood and glass door of Lumière.

My fingertips rubbed the outer seams of my baggy black denim pants.

I stepped inside, triggering the brass bell above the door that made several pairs of eyeballs turn in my direction, putting me in an unwanted and unwelcome spotlight.

Fucking great , I thought as I looked down.

Some distant part of me leaped at the opportunity to be seen.

That was how you met people. That part of me wanted to bask in the attention of the moment, but my shoulders fell, and my head tilted down as I walked over to the bar.

I ordered a wildberry tea, aware of the harder drinks lined before people at the bar, and carried it to an empty table.

My fingers drummed the wooden table, its dark surface polished but chipped, and I stared at the door. Time passed, though I didn't measure it, and I hoped that the entire thing might fall through if he didn't show up.

I wanted to do the project. It was an exciting idea.

But it wasn't the ideas that I struggled with.

The execution was. If he agreed—which wasn't going to happen, and I could tell my professor we'd gotten excited too soon and just had to rework the thesis—I would have to be so far out of my comfort zone for so long that it would hardly be worth it in the end.

My notebook lay open on the table, and my tea was half-finished. I glanced at the door one more time, made up my mind, and shut the notebook to leave. As I did, the brass bell rang, and he swaggered in.

Tall, broad-shouldered, fit as hell in a tight T-shirt, Patrick Callahan was a sullen blond with icy blue eyes, a narrow face, black eyebrows, and the fullest lips you've ever dreamed of kissing.

He scanned the bar, and I froze. We'd only ever spoken over student email.

He didn't know what I looked like. Perhaps he was going to see a friend, join their table, and forget all about me. It would be a lucky escape.

His cool gaze swept over the talking heads in the bar and landed right on me, recognition dawning on his face instantly. Of course. If someone was going to do a semester-long thesis, they were bound to be a lanky nerd with glasses and a hairdo made by their pillow.

He had no clue how annoying that was, but it rubbed me hard enough that I met him coldly when he stepped to my table. "You're Shane," he said, not asking.

"You're late," I said.

His gaze danced over my entire attire. "It's fashionable."

He knew all about fashion. Every piece he wore was branded and well-fitting.

The shirt hugged his shoulder and chest, narrowing around his waist, and the pants emphasized his glutes and quads as he turned around, hooking his black jacket on a vintage coat hanger in the corner.

"I'm afraid I don't see so much value in fashion. "

Patrick glanced at me in mild bewilderment. "Really? A psychologist-in-the-making who can't see the value in self-expression?"

My mouth snapped shut, heat creeping up my neck. "That's not..."

Patrick dropped into the chair like a sack of potatoes. "I'm teasing. What's that?"

"Tea," I said. "Cold."

“Researcher. Snappy,” Patrick said, getting up and walking over to the bar. He put the order in and returned to his chair.

I held my breath, still reeling from the offhand comment. He was very confident. I didn’t do well in interpersonal communication with overly confident people. “So.” My words dried up as he narrowed his piercing blue eyes in anticipation. “Erm.”

Silence.

I hated it already. Professor Halden had been too excited when I mentioned this idea, picking it over all the other ideas I had. He had been my mentor and my compass since the first day of college, and I damn well should have argued against it, but I had given in.

“So,” Patrick said. “You mentioned wanting to work on a project. I’m guessing it’s sports-related, all things considered.”

I swallowed. “Yes, it is.”

“I’m flattered,” he said. “But I have to warn you. I’m not exactly academically inclined.”

I inhaled slowly, frowning. “Right.”

“Seriously,” Patrick said. “I’d love to hear more, but be prepared, I’ll need a lot of help with things like, er, methodology and papers and...if I say statistics, will I sound stupid?”

My frown deepened.

Patrick lifted a corner of his mouth into a lazy, heart-wrenching smirk. “I’m happy to

put my name on it if you get me, but I'm not sure how much more I can add."

"You're not supposed to be my research partner," I said.

He cocked his head. "What am I supposed to be?"

"My subject," I said.

"Whoa. It's only our first date."

I ignored him, but the heat washed over me nonetheless. "I'm sure I told you about my thesis. I'm supposed to shadow a study subject."

"See, I'm sure you didn't put it that way," Patrick said.

Relief relaxed my shoulders a little. He wasn't going to do it.

But Patrick let out a whistle and grinned. "That's a goddamn relief. I was worried for a second."

"So, you want to do it?" I asked.

He shrugged. "What do I have to do?"

"Erm, go on the way you do, basically," I said.

"I don't think that's gonna be a challenge," he told me.

We sat in brief silence as I wondered if there was anything off-putting I could pitch him and get out of this whole thing.

Professor Halden really should have listened to my other pitches—specifically, the ones that didn't involve following a Greek god of our university's hockey team.

“It would involve me observing your routines. Basically, I would follow you to your drills, games, gym sessions, team meetings, and so on. It's a big ask.

I'd have a window into your personal life, too.

And that's not all. I'll probably track some of your physiological responses, fit you with a pedometer, track your heart rate and blood pressure, have you do a drug test, and all sorts of things.

It will definitely involve a lot of recorded conversations after practice or games.

Plus, I'll follow you to some lectures and social events.

Obviously, it's a huge intrusion.” Please tell me to go fuck myself .

“Cool,” Patrick said. “I'm not averse to being the center of attention.”

My heart sank. The more I spoke, the deeper I was stuck in this.

“Why me, though?” Patrick asked.

“Because...” I blurted, then stopped myself. “You have a reputation,” I said. “See, I'm researching how emotional regulation influences an athlete's performance and mental state. And you're, well, a hothead. Out there, I mean. You play it rough.”

“Really?” he thought about it, a glint of pride lighting up his eyes. “I didn't realize that was my reputation. Cool.” He considered it for a moment longer. “So, we'll be inseparable for a few weeks, huh?”

A chance , I thought. It was a bombshell with a potency I had completely ignored. Anyone could be observed for a week or two, and it wouldn't be an intrusion. "Actually," I said. "It's a semester-long project."

His eyes widened. "Holy shit, Shane, that's ambitious."

"There's no guarantee it will result in anything," I admitted. Hopeful. Too hopeful.

But every attempt at putting him off only sealed my fate further. "I like ambition. I respect it. Right on, man."

"Erm, right...on," I said, blowing the delivery so spectacularly that he grinned.

The waiter came around and set down a cup of steaming wildberry tea.

Patrick winked. "There. This one isn't cold."

And what was an easily impressed virgin boy supposed to do if not threaten the entire research project with a sudden burst of deadly attraction?

Patrick took my notebook and my pen without asking, scribbled something down, and pushed it back across. "My number. Let's keep talking about this. I'm feeling real good about it."

I blinked, and he was up, taking his jacket off, saying his friend was in some trouble, and he was gone.

The chatter and laughter faded into dull silence as the sound of my heartbeat swelled. He was a lot more than I had expected. Handsome, beautiful, cocky as fuck, but genuinely interested and with a sense of humor I almost understood and found funny. God, I hated it.

But as I sipped my hot tea, I also felt a deep tingle of excitement that he so willingly put himself under my lens for close inspection. And I knew, even then, just how thin the ethical line I walked was.

May the stars have mercy on my soul.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

TWO

PATRICK

I watched my friends sit in the booth in Lumière for a midweek beer after practice. I'd gotten them to go ahead, pulling an excuse out of my ass so that they could sit alone for a minute or two. My two best buddies, my two boys, finally burying the hatchet one beer at a time.

We'd had a tumultuous few months as a team and as human beings.

Between an asshole teammate and deeply hidden secrets, the Steel Saints had nearly split into two.

Easton Harper captained the team, except an extortionate little fuck had been stressing him out to the breaking point over an attempted kiss and a truth inevitably coming to light.

Easton's focus had wavered, giving that little shit a chance to push Easton out.

But a coach saw our friend's talents, putting Elio into the mix.

To cut a long story short, the shit named Kyle had been ratted out for drug use, suspended, expelled, and all but forgotten about.

But the events he'd put in motion continued, driving the team to choose between a distracted captain and a sharp, focused alternative, even if the two had been friends

for years.

But Elio stepped down in Easton's favor, mending the team and their friendship.

And, at long last, I could have a cold beer with my friends again.

I wasn't ashamed to admit that my heart did a little dance as I stepped inside. I glanced around, thinking I'd run into my shadow-to-be at one of the tables, but I hadn't seen him since the tea party.

Before joining my friends, I got a tall glass of cold, pale ale.

Easton and Elio were sharing a quiet moment of reflection, which wasn't too unlike how they had been acting since mending the rift a few days ago.

In that silence, they acknowledged the weight of their secrets while keeping in mind just how utterly silly it had all been.

Easton was gay, outed to the entire team for the shock effect; Elio was gay, too, yet so deeply closeted until so recently that he still looked over his shoulder when saying the word despite making a grand show last weekend and kissing a cute football player in front of the entire bar.

Heads close together, they talked about the trials of coming out.

I'd overheard them more than once. It was a big part of their lives, one I wasn't completely welcome to.

Not that they excluded me; it simply didn't relate, and both guys felt like they would bore me if they shared these things with me.

I didn't begrudge them, although it wouldn't have bored me in a million years to listen to what my friends were going through.

I carried my beer over to the table, set it down, and dropped into my chair. "Still talking about how awesome dick is?" I asked.

Easton choked on a mouthful of beer before bellowing a laugh, and Elio blushed furiously. They exchanged a look before Easton gave a little. "It's pretty awesome."

"Mm. I've got one of my own. It's provides endless fun." I lifted my beer. "To the ole musketeers," I proclaimed.

Both my friends brought their glasses to mine.

"Aren't we missing D'Artagnan?" Elio mused.

I wasn't so well-read to think through each of my metaphors and similes.

And as I tried to think of a retort, my gaze swept over the opening door.

An out-of-place geek with black-rimmed glasses cautiously stepped into the bar.

"I think I found our D'Artagnan," I said, lifting my arm and waving at Shane.

He spotted me and looked like he regretted all his life choices, something waning in him. He'd had the exact same look when I'd stepped into the bar the first time we'd met. He lifted his hand in a little wave and nodded.

"Another friend?" Easton teased. "How many does a guy need?"

"How many can I have?" I asked.

“I’m not sure there’s a universal limit,” Elio offered.

“I’m just saying, leave some for us,” Easton said, pretending to be friendless and concerned.

“We’re not friends,” I said as Shane carried a glass of something pink between the tables on his way to join us. As he begged for a chair from the table next to ours and dragged it over, I explained to Elio and Easton. “This is Shane. He’s my shadow.”

“Like Peter Pan’s?” Elio asked, earning a slap on his arm from Easton.

Shane sat down and introduced himself somewhat clumsily. “And I’m not, um, in the shadow form tonight.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“The research hasn’t started,” he said. “I’m writing my methodology this week.”

I frowned deeply. “Then who’s been following me everywhere I went for five days?”

The look of worry that struck Shane’s face was priceless. I threw my head back and laughed, but the others didn’t find it funny. That was alright. I cracked myself up.

“Wasn’t me,” Shane said. “I was going to text you some start date options.” He gripped his pink slosh tightly, uncertain.

I thought about it for a moment, then figured I had nothing to lose. “You’re welcome to have a drink with us anyway.”

His hand relaxed, a sliver of surprise crossing his face. He nodded with apparent gratitude, and I considered teaching this nerd the ways of socializing while we had

our ankles tied together.

“How does it work, though?” Easton asked. “The shadow thing.”

Shane gave a half shrug. “I haven’t finished the methodology, but I suppose you’ll be seeing me a lot this semester. It’s an observation-based method of data gathering. Hopefully, I’ll have a passing grade by the end of it.”

“There’s no way you ever got anything lower than A plus,” I said.

“And Patrick gets your uninterrupted attention out of it?” Easton asked, swinging the conversation elsewhere.

Elio nodded. “Sounds like a good deal.”

I poked his rib cage with my elbow.

Shane hesitated. “I guess. I mean, the idea is to be unobtrusive. I have to write up reports on various things I observe for a long while. Not sure how invisible I can be.” Then, almost to himself, he added, “Though that never seemed to be a problem before.”

“And if Patrick gets all cocky and tries to impress you?” Easton asked.

I was about to raise an objection, Your Honor, but Shane just chuckled. “There are mechanisms in place to get around that. It’s all in my methodology.”

“The fabled methodology,” I muttered under my breath.

Elio looked at his beer, the bubbles constantly rising from the bottom of the glass. “I always thought our boy here was ripe for some observation. Of course, I imagined

him strapped down in a soundproof room.”

“Maybe keep your kinky ideas for Jaxon,” I said, causing another furious blush to spawn on Elio’s face.

Easton was amused, turning to Elio. “You walked right into that one, didn’t you?”

“I guess,” Elio said in defeat.

This was it, I realized. This was what I’d been missing all summer long and in the months that followed. We hadn’t been like this since late spring when I was finishing my freshman year.

Shane took a sip of his pink stuff and frowned but quickly smoothed his face. “Do you guys drink a lot?”

Elio let out a low whistle, and Easton laughed. “Now, this sounds like a probing question.”

“Er, no, that’s not how...I mean...look, um, I don’t know how to...talk. Yeah, let’s go with that. I don’t know how to talk. I meant, do you hang out often?” His freaking out and calming down were a roller coaster of a ride.

Elio and Easton exchanged a look, the distance between them still fresh in their memories. Almost in unison, they nodded. “We’re a close bunch,” Easton said.

“We sure are,” Elio agreed.

Shane looked around the table, aware of something going on under the surface, but he didn’t scratch it any further. “Cool,” he said simply, pressing the rim of the glass against his lips and taking another eyebrow-curling sip of the pink potion.

The text message came four days later. I was returning from the gym when my phone pinged. The message was well-structured, almost email-like, asking when it was the most convenient for us to meet up.

My reply wasn't as well worded. "Where you at?"

The dots bubbled on the screen, disappeared, then bubbled again. Shane was in his dormitory and had plenty of time. I went there and knocked on the door of the room he had given me.

He opened the door, once again wearing an oversized hoodie and baggy pants, black-rimmed glasses perched on his nose, hair as shaggy as ever. "Hey," he said, stepping aside to let me in.

I looked into the room. A standard dorm furniture made up of a bed, desk, chair, closet, bookshelf, some shelves, and a score of personal items. "Cute place," I said, looking at the framed certificates, recognitions, and a couple of trophies. I recognized those. "You play?"

Shane's hand rubbed his collarbone, then moved to the back of his neck. "No."

"Got these from a flea market?" I asked, looking at the state hockey wins in the Junior Hockey.

He glanced at them, tearing his gaze away almost as quickly. "That was a long time ago."

"Alright." I was a guy who knew how to take a hint. "What did you want to talk about?"

Shane wiped his hands on his pants and circled the room. "I got the methodology

approved by my mentor. We're good to go."

"Sounds good," I said. "When I open my eyes tomorrow morning, I'll find half your face outside my window?"

He snort-chuckled. "Not exactly. I'll accompany you to your practice and games some, maybe even most, of the time. And to some social events. I'll come with you to watch your exercise routines, downtimes, stuff like that, but not always. And I'll always tell you if I'll be there. I'm not a spy."

I pulled the back of his chair, turned it around, and sat down. "Alright."

"But before we begin," he said and trailed off, wiping his hands on his pants again and shaking them off. He crossed the room to his desk and pulled a drawer out. "It's just a procedure," he said, taking a plastic cup out of the desk with a plastic wrapper still intact around it.

"Oh, you don't trust me," I said grimly, just to watch panic spike all over his face. "Christ, I'm teasing you, Shane. I can pee for you." I grabbed the plastic, savoring the redness that replaced the fright on his face.

I did my thing and brought the cup back, setting it on Shane's desk.

He was still a little torn. "It's just a precaution. If I have your testosterone levels in the normal range, nobody can question my data over an oversight."

"But you're studying behavior, right?" I asked, although I had somewhat of an idea.

"Behavior is just your biochemistry placed within the diverse context of other biochemistries," Shane said. "And performance-enhancing drugs can go to great lengths in affecting your mood and actions."

“Yeah?” I asked. To be honest, I was mostly just prompting him to keep speaking. There was something interesting about the way he talked about the things he knew everything about.

“It’s not unheard of that straight guys who take testosterone for muscle growth over a long period of time experience a spike in libido. In fact, it gets so sharp that regular sex isn’t enough anymore, and they, well, kinda go gay just to get off.”

I barked a laugh. “Boy, that explains more than you can imagine,” I said, thinking of how Easton swore Kyle had been dropping hints for a long time before Easton leaned in to kiss him.

Kyle, of course, freaked out, which was ultimately very lucky for Easton because he was now dating someone much more loyal, if equally scary.

“And you mentioned tracking my physical stuff.”

“Heart rate, blood pressure, stuff like that, yeah,” he said. “We’ll do it before and after some of the drills, all the games I shadow you to, and your workouts, but also at random times to find your baseline. For a start, we could write down some basics.”

I nodded obediently.

Shane produced the measuring tape. “Let’s see your height.”

I lifted a hand and laughed. “Six foot two.”

He didn’t write it down. “Still, if I could just make sure,” he said.

Reluctantly, I exhaled and walked over to the door.

“Your shoes,” Shane reminded me.

My eyebrows fell, but I did it. Shane measured me wordlessly, not even the barest expression on his face as he mouthed, six foot one , and wrote it down. He showed me a scale and weighed me, writing down a hundred and fifty-four.

“On the lighter side for a hockey player.”

“I keep hearing,” I said.

He measured the circumference of my neck and then mentioned my waist.

I lifted my sweater, baring my lean torso, only to earn a flaming blush from Shane. Gotcha , I thought as he moved around me and took the measures medically. “Perfect,” he said. “I’ll calculate your BMI later.”

“And interviews?” I asked.

“Nothing immediate,” Shane explained, looking away from me. His cheeks were still pretty pink long after I had pulled my sweater down my abs. “We can schedule that on the fly.”

“Alright,” I said.

He bit his lip and looked at his bed, then the window, then at my lips, but not all the way to my eyes. “That’s sort of it for now.”

“You want me to go?” I asked.

He hesitated, then nodded. “It’s better if we’re not too familiar. There has to be some distance.”

“Strange idea when you’re my shadow,” I mused.

“It’s a thin line, but I’m the one who has to walk it,” Shane said with a small smile. Yeah, he was fully capable of talking when he was in the right mood and setting. “You just have to understand that it’s not personal. I need to remain professional, that’s all.”

“Got it,” I said.

And we parted there. I left with a light stroll, and Shane stayed behind with a constant blush on his pale cheeks. Everyone liked the goddamn abs.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

THREE

SHANE

The final preparation for my study took two days. It was mostly an administrative task, aligning my schedule with Patrick's. A lot of our lectures overlapped in the timetable, giving us a lot of free time for interviews and shadowing.

Once Patrick approved it, we were good to go.

That was how I found myself stepping out of the shower and looking at the mirror while a knot was twisting and tightening inside my chest. I held my breath as I stared at the thing in the mirror.

I had a strong hunch I was looking at the sole responsible person for all my woes.

I could go on blaming Professor Halden for pressuring me into this research, but the guy in the mirror was the one who pitched the idea so well.

I had imagined it as a sort of academic commitment that would put me on the map.

If I picked an interesting subject and dug deep into his psychology, my paper would be far ahead of anyone else's this semester.

I'd be given the green light to go really big for my final thesis in my senior year.

These things mattered when academia was all that was left to you.

Liar , I thought to myself. That wasn't all I'd been thinking of.

I had once been an athlete, too, but the course of my life had diverged from it.

I had withdrawn into myself over the years, avoiding all the typically popular social circles.

I didn't go where hockey players went. I didn't hang out with football players.

I crossed the street when I saw a swimmer walking.

They intimidated me, but they also attracted me.

That was the crux of it: they attracted me so much that it scared me.

Why couldn't I be into regular people? Why couldn't I just meet a nice guy and like him?

For a psychologist in the making, this was an interesting question to ponder.

Was I attracted to them or to the idea of what I could have been?

And what was that idea, after all? To be a good player or to be a bad player ?

Patrick was both; not that I should have had that opinion so early, but he was.

He was a great hockey player and a notorious campus flirt, exactly the type I had dreamed of being.

The very worst part of it all was this nagging thought I'd had underneath the surface from the start. If I had an excuse to be around a fiery ice demon for a long time, he

would notice me.

Not that I was so delusional to think he would notice me in that way.

Patrick was a devil off the ice, flirtatious to a fault if the few passing encounters were anything to judge by, and with a temper that somehow went from zero to a hundred as soon as he laced his skates.

I'd be crazy if I wanted that kind of attention.

But as I sprayed my cologne along my neck, I pumped out more than I strictly needed.

I dressed quickly, piling layers over layers, from an undershirt to a checkered shirt and a loose sweater over it.

The Saints had drills in an hour, so I packed my blue and red notebooks, enough different-colored pens to last a lifetime, and only the three most important psychology textbooks that I might want to consult during the drills.

I made my way to Patrick's place, pressure rising on my chest as I neared it.

No wonder I was still a damn virgin. Despite dying to be social, I was terrified of people.

Especially cool, successful people like Patrick and his friends.

One evening with them had made my hands sweat so much that I didn't need any workout.

I was melting around them. The other two were gay, but you could trust me not to

even have a passing interest in openly gay guys who might have an interest in me.

Oh no. I was the type who went all in on the least likely ones to have a sliver of interest in me. The less they wanted me, the better.

I crossed the campus space on my way to Patrick's dorm, then worked up the courage to knock on his door.

And holy fucking shit, he opened it after two heartbeats, steam still rising from his honey-tanned skin, droplets of water-like constellations scattered over his bare shoulders, a fluffy white towel wrapped low around his waist, leaving his Apollo's belt in the open to feast my eyes on.

His chest was broad and lifted like he was proud of his appearance, while his waist was trim and narrow, his abs cut and defined like he was made of marble come to life.

"Come in," Patrick said. "I'll only be a minute."

"I can wait outside," I said, my mouth dry and my gaze wandering down the hills and valleys of his torso. Blue veins ran down his swollen biceps, barely under his skin.

"Don't be stupid," Patrick said conversationally and stepped away from the door.

I stepped into his room. One bed was a mess of sheets and clothes, a backpack lying open in the middle, stuffed with approximately everything that had ever been made.

Next to it, a cheap desk typical of dormitories was cluttered with pristine, unopened books with intact spines and a near-mythical absence of dogears.

He'd gone into the year ambitiously, but it was yet to be realized.

Patrick walked into the small bathroom on the other side of the room. His deodorant created a cloud of pine and seaside scents that shot into the room like Cupid's arrows, striking me everywhere. Had the arrows been real, I would have walked out a hedgehog.

The bathroom door was slightly ajar, concealing Patrick but providing a direct view of a mirror.

Patrick's back was turned to it when he untied the towel from around his waist, and I knew—I knew—I had to look away.

It was the only decent thing to do. Anything else would be gross overstepping of the trust he was placing in me.

I was here to observe him more intimately than most people ever would.

It had to be clinical, detached, and built on his trust that I wouldn't abuse this privilege and place of power.

But the towel swooshed away, and strong legs made for ice devilry he was known for were in my view, bare and smooth, spread apart and rising to a perfectly shaped ass several shades paler than the rest of his body.

Patrick Callahan sunbathed in Speedos, and I didn't know what to do with that information other than fight the creeping flush of heat it caused.

Then he looked over his shoulder into the mirror, where he undoubtedly found my reflection.

Could he see how glassy my eyes were from seeing him naked?

Did it please the attention seeker within him?

He looked into my eyes in the mirror, and my heart stopped between one beat and the next. All of time stopped.

The door shut. I had been so absorbed in the intensity of his gaze that I never noticed him move.

There. The show was over, folks, and I'd revealed myself as a peeping creep and a lousy researcher.

Was a glimpse of a cream, smooth ass worth it?

Hardly. But I couldn't get the image out of my mind, which was awkward because Patrick would step out any minute, and I really needed to get my body under control.

I directed my thoughts to the fact that I was absolutely terrified of this project and lurking around the Saints all semester.

It felt like dragging a cat with zoomies from a scratching post, but my attention ripped away from Patrick's naked figure to the pit of despair that sat in the center of my being.

In a minute, Patrick was done. The door flew open, and he stormed around the room with a cheerful grin on his face and a gaze that jumped from one thing to another, never landing on my face.

"We should probably get going," he rambled.

"The drills never start on time, but you should see some locker room time if you want to get a real sense of psychology and dynamics and whatnot. Not sure what happens

later. Sometimes, we go out for drinks. It'll be late enough to drink, right? Do you drink, anyway?"

I shrugged, guilt filling my chest like I was about to be sick. It rose so high I could taste it in the back of my throat. "Occasionally."

"Right, the pink stuff," Patrick said.

"The cleaning paste?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

Patrick zipped up his backpack and faced me, his gaze lagging by a heartbeat before meeting my eyes. "Ready?"

"One more thing," I said and dug through my backpack. "The smartwatch. If you don't mind."

"Nope. I signed up for this, didn't I? Use me however you like." He shot another grin, but it didn't reach his eyes. He must have heard the words that had just left his lips. After the mirror incident, it was hard not to have wild and sweaty images fill my mind. My skull was going to shatter.

I turned the watch in my hand. "And it won't bother you while you play?"

"Not at all," he said.

I tapped the screen before fastening the watch to Patrick's wrist and made sure everything was set to default.

“This is going to record your heartbeat and measure the distance you cross, the speed at which you do it, and add a timestamp to the dataset.” I pressed the watch to Patrick’s wrist and forced my fingers to be calm and quick about strapping it.

Touching his skin was unavoidable. “I’m the only person with access to your data. ”

“It’s safe with you,” Patrick said.

I wondered if this was subtle sarcasm. I said nothing.

We’d already established I was too easily distracted from the ethics of it all.

When the silence stretched too long, I tucked my hands into my pockets.

“I’ll download the data at the end of every day, reset the watch, and hand it back the next day. ”

“Not gonna track me in my sleep?” Patrick asked.

I forced a laugh. “I considered it, but it will have to be a self-assessment.”

He nodded, then gestured at the door with his head. “Let’s get going.”

So we did.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

The rink was a large structure with plenty of supporting space inside where the players gathered and coaches had their offices.

We went in through the back, walking down a well-lit corridor of large white tiles and white walls.

Doors lined both sides of the hallway to the end, where the locker rooms awaited.

One was for guest teams, Patrick explained, although I knew the architecture of a rink from my days in the skates.

The bigger locker room belonged to the Saints, and it was full of muscled guys in various states of undress, setting my cheeks on fire as I stepped inside.

“Alright, everyone, a moment, please,” shouted Easton, their captain.

The guys looked at me before turning to Easton.

“This is Shane. He’s a sports psychology junior, and he’s doing a study.

You’re gonna be seeing him a lot around here, so get used to it.

He’s not here to observe any of you. Just Patrick. ”

A laugh rippled through the room, but the joke escaped me.

“All you need to do is act as you normally would. Any attempts to mess with Patrick

or Shane to skew the data will mean you're picking up the tab at Lumière that night. Am I understood?"

"Aye, aye," the voices boomed.

"The table for the entire team?" someone asked.

"Lennox is loaded, guys," someone else said. "Get him to mess with Patrick."

"I'm not loaded," the guy I suspected was Lennox said. He was a tall, curly-haired guy with sharp features and piercing eyes. When his comment received roaring laughter, he shrugged. "Fine, but I'm still not doing it."

"Fastest way to ruin," someone quipped.

"We're thirsty, Lenny," someone else said.

Lennox darkened. "Don't call me that."

"Settle down, guys," Easton called. Beside him, Elio towered over everyone, his expression very much reinforcing Easton's words. Just looking at his narrow eyes and pursed lips made you want to do what Easton said. "You're gonna treat Shane like one of us. Got it?"

Someone slapped me on the shoulder. Easton had absorbed my attention so fully that I hadn't noticed Patrick stepping up beside me. "Hear that? We're a nice bunch."

"I...expected that," I said.

He chuckled. "I'm sure you didn't, but it's nice of you to say that."

I swallowed and nodded.

The guys changed into their protective gear and bright blue jerseys, their skates strapped on and their sticks in their hands.

Coach Roger Webber waited in the rink for the Saints to file out.

He acknowledged me with a curt nod, having spoken with my mentor about the project before, and I settled in the front row as a spectator.

My red notebook was in my lap after a moment, pen in my hand, and I watched the game begin.

The game was beside the point, but I couldn't resist the rising thrill of it.

My job was to observe Patrick's expressions while Coach Webber pointed out everyone's weaknesses.

I didn't let myself be distracted by the eerie beauty of Patrick's eyes when he steeled himself in a row of players.

I didn't think of his sharp cheekbones or the moment of embarrassing weakness that had possessed me half an hour ago.

I only observed him the way a scientist observed a molecule.

When the team split into practice groups, I followed Patrick across the ice.

As if someone had flicked a switch in the back of his head, the daytime joker was gone.

It made me think of aliens, beaming the real Patrick off the ice and putting in a vicious clone.

For the smallest guy on the team, Patrick moved with swift ease, relying on the speed of his movement rather than the weight of his body to execute hard checks against the boards.

Beyond the roughness, he was focused on the puck and the other players with incredible precision.

He snatched the puck right from under an opponent's nose, flipping it on the edge of his stick with flashy confidence.

Like a magician pulling a coin out of thin air, Patrick made the puck disappear somewhere on the blade of his stick, then reappear as he swept between two opponents coming to crash into him.

Slippery like an eel, he passed through unscathed, leading the puck to Easton so late into the moment that even I was certain Easton would receive it.

When the enemy defenses rounded on Easton, biting the same bait I did, Patrick executed a risky, wild switch, smashing into an enemy defender and letting the impact turn him around, the puck sliding across the ice to Elio, who waited undefended near the goalpost. The point was impossible to contest.

I'd made the mistake of forgetting all about Patrick for a moment, watching the game like an avid fan. When I found my subject again, he was red-faced with a mean frown on his face and a calculating gaze sweeping across the rink.

The whistle pierced through the chill air, and the players dispersed. How much of what Patrick had done was skill and how much was luck, it was hard to tell. It was a

risky maneuver one wouldn't expect from a laid-back guy like Patrick. Not until they saw him on the ice.

I resisted the curiosity to check Patrick's heartbeat and speed of movement right away.

It would slowly add to the formation of bias if I let myself do it.

Instead, I kept a timestamp in my notebook, writing down what had transpired in the last three minutes.

If the data correlated later, as I suspected it would, I would be able to cross-check it.

When the drills were over, I had several pages of notes on Patrick's behavior, mainly relating to his expressions and gestures.

He had, I was pretty sure, done a few showy things for my benefit.

I could tell it was the case because his gaze would find me every time he did it, almost as if he was daring me to dismiss such brilliance.

Obviously, I had to, because it didn't matter how well he played.

It mattered far more how often he searched for a stranger's approval.

It made me wonder what was hiding beneath all that outward confidence.

"Are we debriefing?" Patrick asked as we filed into the locker room.

The thought of sitting across from Patrick and picking his brain after I had already searched every part of his body with my thirsty gaze was deeply unsettling. "I think

not,” I said. “We’re still testing the waters. Let’s call it a day, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Gym, then,” Patrick said. “Is six alright?”

“Perfect,” I said, taking the smartwatch once he unstrapped it. “See you.”

I took a step away from the locker room. “Um,” Patrick stopped me. “Good game, huh?”

I blinked, caught by surprise, and nodded. “I think so.”

“Yeah, it was good,” Patrick assured me. Or he assured himself. I couldn’t tell, but it was worth noting down. He lingered by the locker room a moment longer, then retreated with a wave.

I walked down the hallway, doing my best not to run.

Seeing him move so majestically between much bigger and tougher guys, seeing him employ his smarts and his talents in a way that made him stand out, was more than I could take.

It only made this crawling sensation beneath my skin more present and intense.

I simmered with it, and it terrified me more than having to spend time around all the Saints day after day.

What the hell had I done to myself?

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

FOUR

PATRICK

Jittery, avoidant, and deliciously nervous, Shane appeared at my door around four and insisted he was happy to wait outside while I packed my gym stuff.

That he had walked back on wanting to debrief after a training session was a surprise, especially considering how long his gaze lingered on me.

I'd have imagined him jumping head over heels for an hour longer to feast his naughty eyes.

It amused me on the surface level. Who didn't want to be liked? It didn't really matter if it was heading anywhere—it obviously wasn't, considering the biology of it all.

I put on a clean pair of shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt, shoved my training sneakers into the backpack with a fresh change of clothes, and stepped out of the room. Shane was leaning against the wall, biting his nail.

“That's a bad habit,” I said.

A small frown came over his face before he realized what he'd been doing. I'd only meant to tease, but guilt rose in his eyes. “Oh. Right. I thought I'd left that behind.”

I slapped his shoulder reassuringly and led the way down the hallway. The gym was

just a ten-minute walk away, and it was a bit more crowded than I'd anticipated. It didn't bother me, but I saw the nervous glances Shane sent around.

I swapped my sneakers and let Shane strap the smartwatch to my wrist. He was quick and methodical about it, stepping away as soon as it was done. He followed me upstairs to the training area with his notebooks.

"Do you want me to explain what I'm doing?" I asked.

He shook his head. "The best way to do this is if you just do your training session exactly as you always do. I'll watch."

I'm sure you will, I thought, wondering what this strange ripple of excitement meant. "Feast your eyes," I said, keeping my voice cool. I took headphones out of my pocket and played myself some upbeat music to hype me up for the workout.

I minded my own business for the most part, but Shane was always somewhere in the corner of my vision, be that in front of me or in the reflection in the mirror.

It was hard not to be acutely aware of the weight of Shane's gaze.

Those hungry, wanting eyes sliding over your body, exploring the glow of your skin, locking onto your naked ass if you're dumb enough and vain enough to leave the door ajar.

And your secret inner voice pulsing, see me, see me, see me.

Aren't I beautiful? Don't you want it? The rising thrill of receiving someone's attention, even if I wouldn't do anything with it, was too delicious not to drool all over.

Just there, in the distance, sitting on a bench, Shane pressed his knees together and scribbled in his red notebook, the blue one placed underneath it for support.

Occasionally, he looked up, watching me as I lifted heavy dumbbells—left, right, left, right—my face stern and sweat breaking over my brow, chest, and back.

He observed me for nearly two hours before I called it a day.

Without a word, Shane got up and followed me into the locker room, where he sat on another bench and noted the ending of the routine.

I stood in front of the mirror, looking at my arms and numb with fatigue after trying to elicit some sort of impressed reaction from Shane all this time, and he was focused on his notebook, small in the distance behind me.

“I’ll take a quick shower. I stink,” I said. I waited for a reply, but Shane only nodded and mumbled some kind of assent.

I walked over to my locker, my chest growing tight with anticipation, and I took the bottom edge of my T-shirt into a firm grip.

I could almost feel the point of his gaze landing on the back of my head, or it was all just my imagination.

I could imagine him very clearly just now, even though he was out of my view.

His lips parting, breath barely leaving his lungs, fingers folding around the notebook, a little squirm on the bench, and the gaze so intense and hungry that it devoured my soul in the moment that followed.

I lifted my T-shirt over my head and tossed it into the backpack, my heart thundering

like mad. It was almost as though the weight of his staring heated up the muscles in my upper back. He watched me undress, and it was the most exhilarating thing.

If it's a show you want , I thought, pumping up my excitement.

My thumbs hooked the waistband of my shorts and underwear.

It didn't bother me to be naked around guys, never had, after years of shared locker rooms and showers.

And it definitely didn't bother me to be watched with so much interest. It fed my not-so-secret vanity.

The fabric stretched and slipped over my ass, dropping down my legs to fold around my ankles.

Even though I had enough confidence to fill up the entire locker room, my fingers gave a slight tremble I hadn't seen coming.

I bent down after stepping out of my clothes and picked them up, not looking at Shane.

I tossed my stuff inside the locker and picked up a towel from the backpack, then walked across the locker room with a smirk decorating my face before slipping into the showers.

When I was alone, the heat reached my face. That had been a needless exhibition, and I knew it. Even so, it felt good to be noticed.

And you'll do just about anything for attention , I scolded myself, letting cold water run. I half expected the droplets to sizzle and evaporate the moment they touched my

burning skin, but the water cooled me down instead.

I showered quickly, washing off the sweat and drying myself with the fluffy towel before tossing it over my shoulder and pumping myself up to return to the locker room.

The momentary freakiness of my earlier intentions was gone, and, as always, I had to deal with the consequences.

The consequence on hand was a walk of shame in front of Shane and quick dressing.

But being shy about it now would only portray me as an unstable attention seeker.

Walking back into the locker room, I pinned Shane with my gaze for no other reason than the fact that he was right in front of me, only on the opposite side of the room.

He looked, probably thinking I wouldn't be watching him, and his gaze dragged up my body just the same way it had the night he'd measured my waist. Sinking into his oversized clothes, he let himself examine every inch of me, moving his gaze up my legs, over my dick and balls—where it lingered just a little too long—up my abs and pecs before finally reaching my eyes.

I had been walking over to my locker all that time, but he saw that I had been observing him. He looked into my eyes, guilt filling those chestnuts of his, lingered, and looked down at the notebook.

“Do I get to read what you're writing?” I asked, shattering the stuffy silence in the locker room while picking up my underwear and putting them on.

“I, uh, don't think...no. It's better if you don't,” Shane said.

“That bad?” I asked, trying for a chuckle but producing a weird, strangled sound instead.

“Not at all,” Shane said, finding some firm ground. “It’s just that I don’t want you to tweak your behavior in any way.”

“I might be faking it all along,” I said with a shrug, then dragged a pair of pants up my legs. I tucked my bulge in and pulled the zipper up, turning to Shane with an apologetic smile. “I’m not, by the way.”

“That’s alright,” Shane said. “That’s why it lasts an entire semester. It’s normal to be very aware of being observed at the start. As time goes by, your natural rhythm will return.”

“What? You think I’m faking?” I asked, lifting a clean T-shirt.

Shane shot me a secretive smile. Dimples emerged on each side of his face. Odd how I hadn’t noticed them before. “I think you’re giving too much attention, and that’s normal.”

“Just being myself,” I said. He didn’t say anything to that.

His focus returned, and he scribbled into the blue notebook, then shut it closed before I could peek inside.

The way he so easily cut me out at will pushed a button I didn’t know existed.

“If you really want to shadow me, let’s have a beer,” I said.

“Is a beer something you normally have right after a workout?” he asked, his voice cool and analytical.

Fuck , I thought. “No. I’ll have chicken, rice, and broccoli first and grab a beer in a few hours.”

“Is that often your lunch?” Shane asked.

I shrugged. “It’s what I have in the fridge.”

He nodded.

“So? A drink after? I’ll get you something pink if you want. Just the two of us.”

Shane hesitated. “I’m not sure that’s appropriate.”

“I’m sure a scientist would know how to delineate personal and professional matters,” I said. “Besides, you can bring a notebook if you have to.”

“Alright,” Shane said.

Then I suspected that my insistence on having a drink was about to make its way into his notes. There was no winning here.

Shane waited for me in front of the library. I’d offered him a meal when I was cooking already, but he had already eaten. His backpack appeared much heavier after the intermission, so I had a good idea of where he had spent the last hour and a half.

“How many times a day do you change your clothes?” Shane asked as I joined him at the bottom of the stairs before the library.

“You mean this old thing?” I asked. I looked very good in a tailored shirt that hugged my waist and emphasized my chest and shoulders. Slim-fit pants were a winner, too, especially when the shirt was quarter-tucked. “I just threw it on.”

“Immeasurable, then?” Shane offered and fell in step with me, crossing the street to Lumière.

I shot him a look of disbelief. “He jokes.”

Shane chuckled to himself and quickly looked down as if the attention was more than he could handle. Maybe it was. It only made me want to attend to him more.

“My wingmen are both taken,” I grumbled. “Aren’t people in relationships the most boring ever?”

Shane shrugged. “Dunno.”

“Aren’t your friends getting all cozy in their relationships?” I asked.

Shane glanced at me apprehensively. “I don’t have that many friends. Not here, at least.” When he saw me frown in confusion, he hurried to explain. “I’m focused on my studies. That doesn’t leave you with a lot of time to make friends.”

“Everyone should have friends,” I said. I knew I sounded like a smart-ass, and I didn’t want to be condescending, but Christ Almighty, how did he survive all these years without a pack?

I never would have pulled through on my own.

The pressure of each new academic year, of hockey, of team responsibilities, and so much more was unbearable without people who were in the same boat as you. “Boyfriends?” I asked.

Shane looked at me with horror.

I cringed. “Or girlfriends. You know?” That was a lame attempt to save myself.

But Shane shook his head. “No, you guessed it. I’m gay, but...” He looked at Lumière longingly. “Aren’t we going inside?”

I measured him for a heartbeat or two. No friends, no boyfriends, just his studies. “You have friends now,” I said softly. “Me and my guys.”

Shane looked into my eyes with something cold and detached. “That’s a nice thing to say, Patrick, but I don’t know you. Any of you. And you, well, can’t be my friend. I’m your shadow, remember?”

“I don’t get it, though,” I said, not letting him get off the hook so easily. We stepped into the bar, but it was quiet tonight, and I kept my voice low for Shane. “Why aren’t you dating anyone? It’s not like you couldn’t pick up a guy if you wanted to.”

He snorted as if I’d said a mean joke. Then he looked at me and discovered just how serious I was. He frowned in thought, then inched a little closer. “I don’t even know where I would start.”

It clicked together. A shy nerd with a head full of dreams and wonders and a tongue so tied he didn’t dare speak to people in fear of tripping over his words. I grinned. “Good thing you’re shadowing me, then,” I said. “Watch and learn.”

I led Shane to the bar and ordered us a light beer each. He wasn’t thrilled by it, but he didn’t fuss. We sat on bar stools and faced one another.

“Personal question,” I offered.

“If you must,” Shane sighed.

“Have you ever dated anyone?” It was an important thing to establish if I were to show him a few flirtatious moves.

Shane’s reddening face answered before his lips had a chance. “Um, no. I haven’t...been...” He shook his head.

“Gotcha. And are you waiting for the special one?” I asked.

It wasn’t a joke or a tease. Some people wanted to wait.

I didn’t see how that was possible when so many were throwing themselves at you for attention and one-off fun, but good for those who could resist the song of the mermaids. Me? I shipwrecked every single time.

But Shane thought I was making fun of him. His eyebrows flattened over his eyes, and he shook his head. “Funny.”

“That’s a no?” I asked.

“I think this was a mistake,” Shane told me flatly. “We shouldn’t be so familiar, Patrick.”

“What? I’m just getting to know you,” I said.

“If you’re on the market, guys should know that.

You know? Shadow me, now.” The good news was that he didn’t get up and leave.

He observed as I narrated what I would do.

“Look around and see if there’s anyone catching your attention.

For example, those three girls over there. ”

Shane snort-chuckled.

“It’s applicable across the spectrum,” I said wisely.

“If I were here to hook up, I’d say they were on the lookout.

See how they’re keeping the chatter to a minimum?

They’re watching, waiting, weighing.” And sure enough, the blonde glanced at me, her gaze lingering on mine for a few exhilarating moments before she looked away and pretended like it hadn’t felt amazing.

“Be like that,” I said. “If you want to be picked up. Or, if you’d rather be the one doing the work, watch and learn.

” I lifted my beer and waited for the next time the blonde looked at me.

My eyebrows gave the smallest wiggle as I tilted my glass in a little salute.

She smiled at me, shaking her head as if to reprimand me for being such a devil, and my heart thundered. I turned to Shane to tell him the hard part was over, but he had a lost look in his eyes and a stoney face.

I shrugged. “Goes something like that, anyway.”

Shane cleared his throat and forced a smile. “Some people just have it. Others don’t.” He held his backpack tighter. “I think I should go.”

I wanted to protest, but he was already up, saying we would see each other tomorrow

and wishing me luck with the girl. As he walked away, I watched him disappear. Alone, I sat at the bar with my half-finished beer, not really interested in the girl anymore.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

FIVE

SHANE

I savored the times when he walked in front of me.

It wasn't often. He usually went shoulder to shoulder with me, setting our pace and chatting endlessly.

Those special moments, on stairs or in a crowd, when Patrick stretched his stride and walked in front, were incredible.

He couldn't see my face. He couldn't see how the breezy sea-and-pine scent of his cologne made my eyes glassy with desire and my lips part as if someone was going to kiss them.

He also couldn't see me scanning his lower back, the firm roundness of his incredible ass, and his messily half-tucked shirt and half an inch of his branded underwear.

For a week, I trailed him quietly, avoiding any further talk of dating and sex.

Not only was it irrelevant, but it was coming dangerously close to making me blush and explode right before his eyes.

The mounting desire was like a guilty pleasure, a sweet sin I could pick up and toy with until it came close to destroying me, then put it away for later. I kept indulging in it.

When he changed in front of me, I looked.

When he lifted weights on a flat bench, his shorts hardly concealing the size of his bulge, I glanced.

When he swirled on ice and pulled off an incredible bait and switch, my heart shimmered. And when he slammed someone into the boards, my throat felt as though fear would strangle me to death.

And when he wasn't around, I closed my eyes, and I imagined.

The flashes of what could never be would fill my mind, so vivid before my eyes that it felt like I could live my entire life with nothing more than my imagination.

I could feel the touch of his skin on mine when I wanted to.

I could feel the warmth of his lips under my belly button when I wished.

I could even feel his fingers wrap around my cock, squeeze it hard, while he whispered dirty things into my ears.

Going down the road of fantasizing about Patrick was like wiggling in quicksand. It was only pulling me deeper. At some point, there would be no escape.

I wasn't delusional. In this one week, girls had thrown themselves at Patrick like he was a rock star.

And Patrick loved it. I was certain that he obliged them very happily once I was out of the picture.

His little exercise had shown me as much.

He'd flirted with that girl with ease and confidence I could never muster—the good thing was that I didn't need to.

Not even all of the confidence and charm could land me the guy I wanted because he just didn't play it that way.

A hand waved before my eyes and snapped me out of my wandering thoughts. "Earth to Shane," he said. "You're galaxies away."

I thrust my hand up, slipping my fingers under my glasses and rubbing my eyes. "Sorry. I wasn't paying attention. I'm tired."

Patrick wore his gym clothes, a matching T-shirt and shorts and a pair of spotless sneakers, and he was just a snack.

His legs were tanned and mostly smooth, with some light golden hair scattered along the taut skin.

His calves were defined, and so were his quads.

I didn't dare mention his ass. I'd seen his workout.

Other than hip thrusts, that ass was all genes and conditioning.

He didn't put a lot of effort into it, whereas I carved out a day in the week to do squats, hip thrusts, abductors, stairs, and a whole slew of exercises, only to end up with a butt you'd call cute in the best of circumstances and under a great light.

"I was rambling anyway," Patrick said. "Doesn't matter."

"No. Tell me," I said.

“It’s the pacing,” Patrick said. “It’s easy to have a burst of energy if you spare yourself enough.”

I noted this down and urged him to continue telling me about it.

It wasn’t how I imagined interviewing him, his face red with heat and brow slick with sweat, distracting me in all the most painful ways, but it was good material.

“And when you have this burst of energy, especially on ice, are you thinking about the spectators?”

“We mostly do drills. No audience, remember?” Patrick chuckled. He shook his hands off, timing the rest before he did another set on the bench press.

“There are always spectators,” I said. “Your friends, your rivals, the coaches. Someone’s always watching.”

He shook his head, but not emphatically. “I play for myself. I want to be good at it.”

I nodded and hesitated, then let the question slowly roll over my tongue. “And who decides if you’re good at it? You?”

Patrick blinked, then laughed and slapped my shoulder. “Got me.”

“I’m not trying to get you,” I said. “It’s something to think about.”

“I guess...” He fell silent, eying me and the bench press next to me. “I guess I play for the others a little bit, too. I should probably pretend to be really noble and talk about how it’s all for the sake of the sport, but oh well.”

I chuckled. “I don’t think so. It’s totally normal to want to have your talents seen.

Everyone wants a witness when they're good at something.”

And Patrick wanted to be seen no matter the price.

It was a reckless, desperate need to be noticed that I hadn't expected to discover here.

Walking naked in front of me just because he knew without a shred of doubt that he had a big dick anyone would envy wasn't a flex as much as it was a call to be seen and approved of.

I'd already composed a list of questions for another time.

Patrick lay flat on his back and inhaled before lifting the bar with heavy weights mounted to each side.

He did his set, and I watched. One, two, three, four...

His chest rose and fell in a perfect rhythm.

His feet were planted flat on the floor, and his knees spread apart.

The skin of his inner thigh was completely smooth, the shorts lifting a little as if to torment me on purpose.

And the mound where his cock and balls were packed into his boxers was so easily noticed that I wondered if he even knew he was doing this.

Was it just second nature to him? Someone blessed with good looks, great talents, loads of charm, and a dick that size didn't have a clue about the struggles the rest of us had.

To him, it had to be the most normal thing when his T-shirt lifted a little, and a flash of skin appeared, and everyone drooled over him.

When he finished his last set for the day, we went into the locker room. He wasn't naked around me anymore, not after that first time. Not after he'd guessed I was gay, and I confirmed it. But stepping into the locker room was like walking through a mirror into a dream.

In an instant, I was on my knees, and the lights were nearly all out. He reached over and untied the knot of the towel around his waist, revealing his thick cock, while I opened my mouth as wide as it could go—nowhere near wide enough to take all of him.

“Be back in a minute,” Patrick said, stripping down to his underwear and heading into the bathroom.

He returned quickly, his hair wet and his body slick, and turned away from me to take off the towel around his waist and put on clean underwear. I looked away, especially because Patrick turned his head to a profile, partly adding me to his field of vision as he did so.

When he was dressed, he acted just fine. He invited me for dinner with his friends, but I passed on it. I wasn't going to shadow him everywhere sooner than I strictly had to. We were still trying to find a rhythm.

I carried the smartwatch to download the data for the day and wipe it clear for tomorrow. It had been a whole week, so I felt confident I would see some patterns. The smartwatch sat on a pile of books in my dorm room while I organized my notes, and then I imported all the data into a spreadsheet.

Looking at the timestamps in my notebook and the levels of Patrick's pulse and speed

of movement, I had expected to see these flares of energy he exhibited on ice clearly correlating with his physiological responses. I frowned at the data splashed on my screen and in my notebook.

I couldn't have been wrong every day, even if I'd made an error somewhere.

In the drills, Patrick's heartbeat picked up a little. For a practiced athlete in great condition, these numbers were perfectly fine. Those little wins showed me a spike that was almost negligible, but it existed. The rough contacts with other players correlated with very little in my data.

I looked through his exercise routines. Running was an obvious one, although Patrick's pulse didn't go wild proportionately to the speed at which he was running.

Resistance training did little. But then, as if to compensate for its calm, his heart seemed to hammer like a fleeing rabbit after workouts.

Timestamps...

I looked at them again. The red notebook had shorthand lines of text added to each notable time entry. These were not the moments immediately after Patrick's workout. His heart didn't race once he was nearing the end of a session. It came after. It came in the locker room.

My own heartbeat quickened as I thought about it.

Insecurities, maybe? Was he shy and worried in the locker room, afraid of changing in front of someone, doing it to prove to himself he had no reason to be scared?

Or was it something else entirely? The thrill of being watched?

Was he so excited to walk around naked that it could explain a spike in his heartbeat of this magnitude?

And if so, what the hell was wrong with him?

I'd have imagined exhibitionists in a park in the middle of the day keeping it together a little better than this.

Something wasn't entirely right here. He simply didn't have a reason for these waves that looked rather like panic attacks. His behavior had been cool and composed all that time, but what was going on inside his chest was a whole different matter.

And it begged to be investigated.

Maybe my approximate time entries and notes missed something. Maybe he'd jumped really fast and high for a few minutes in the locker room, and I'd simply forgotten that.

Or was he actually nervous when I watched him undress?

Because he had been aware of it. He must have.

He'd caught me looking too many times not to know by now.

And maybe, if wishful thinking wasn't impeding my ability to read my data, Patrick felt something other than sheer cockiness when he took his clothes off right before my eyes.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

SIX

PATRICK

The first game of the season took place on Tuesday evening when we hosted the Winter Hawks.

As far as the season openers went, it could have been a disaster.

The first period was, at least, slamming our morale into the ground and leaving us furious.

Then again, if I looked into Shane's notebook, I might discover that this fury was precisely what fueled the second period.

We bounced back, skating out there with a purpose. Losing the first game would suck. It was a terrible omen for the team and the year ahead. Despite the constant drills, all the blood and sweat, to lose was demoralizing in the worst way possible.

So when the third period began, Coach Webber made the mistake of keeping me back. The logic was to put some rookies into the thick of it, and the Hawks destroyed them.

"God damn," I muttered to myself.

Every two or three minutes, the whistle blew, and the bodies scattered, rotating players in the rink so that everyone had their chance to play. My performance in the

second period did little to convince Coach Webber to send me out and break the tie.

I glanced around and found him. The rink was hardly brimming with people, but I'd located Shane at the very start. My gaze went to him occasionally, and something strange passed through my chest whenever I found him looking.

Who was I playing for? I'd always imagined playing for myself, but Shane had put this worm of a thought into my head. And he was right. It mattered to me that people saw just how fast I was and how skilled.

Every time I looked, his gaze was on me. Even as I sat with a scowl on my face, Shane was scribbling into his notebook and looking at me. Scribbling about me.

I scratched my head and scoffed. Coach Webber strode in my direction and signaled to get ready.

When the whistle blew again, I was in. We were deadlocked with the Hawks.

Winning by a point or two wouldn't do us any favors.

We'd already spent a year not believing we could clear a real win, let alone a god streak.

The battle was the fiercest in the final minutes of the game.

Every time we scored a point or two, the Hawks roared back with a vengeance.

It wasn't until I was out in the middle of it that our own fury reached its climax.

Easton and Elio, Lennox and Connor, the best guys we had.

We dispersed on the ice, looking like easy prey, giving the Hawks an extra reason to relax.

They'd been kicking our asses for an hour. They had this in the bag.

Until we swept the ice with risky moves and sheer hope that we could pull it off. Elio used his size to attack, protect, and distract. Easton used his coolheadedness to assess and signal to the rest of us how to play it. And I? Well, I was just being myself.

It came by instinct. It was the thrill of the game, a pulse that sped up when my skates touched the ice.

I thought this was what the soldiers felt when they had to climb over the trenches or scale the walls.

It was a need like no other, a need to be there, to do this thing, consuming me until my mind was numb to everything else.

Sliding and skating, evading the oncoming attacks and passing through their defenses, I moved the puck between Easton and myself, losing it seemingly under the stick until their goalie's attention snapped for the briefest of moments, and my hands jerked, sending the puck through.

The rink roared, or however much of it was filled for the opening game, and the Saints lost their minds, tossing their sticks away and skating around victoriously.

It was a near miss, and I knew it better than anyone.

I knew how close I'd come to losing that puck.

Besides, leaving the rink with only a point of difference didn't feel too victorious to

me.

I wanted us to be the best. I wanted us to be so far ahead of everyone else that there couldn't be any debate about it.

Even so, it felt good to go to the locker room a little while later and have my shoulders slapped and shaken.

Shane followed me into the locker room with the entire team. He wore a pleased expression until he saw me looking at him, then wiped his face clean of emotions. He nodded curtly once, and that was the end of it.

Not even a "great job out there"? I sighed to myself before taking my jersey and protective gear off. Shane sat in the corner of the locker room while we all undressed and headed to the shower. He looked resolutely at his notebook and the words he had written there.

It was a far cry from the stolen glimpses of a near-naked body at the gym.

I wasn't sure if I should be relieved or disappointed.

Yet as guys went into the shower, I lingered in the locker room, wearing only my boxer briefs.

When the last of my teammates was in the other room, I stepped closer to Shane.

He looked up, his gaze skipping over me like rocks we used to throw into the lake.

"How did I do?" I asked.

Shane fixed his glasses and nodded. "As a spectator, I'd say great. Real flashy."

I let out a laugh, tossing my head back. When I looked at him, his gaze had fallen lower along my torso, snapping back to my eyes a heartbeat later. “Tell you what, I didn’t think I’d make it.”

“If you lost the puck there, the Hawks would have cut right through the middle and won the game,” Shane said. “And you weren’t sure?”

“I had a good feeling,” I said. “You know your hockey, by the way.”

Shane blinked and looked away. It was my fault for bringing it up. He’d played hockey, I was sure, but he hated talking about that. I’d made the same mistake before.

“Right. I’ll go wash the sweat off,” I said, turning away from him and wondering if his gaze was caressing the length of my spine now. I wondered how low it went and if he had some naughty ideas behind those brown eyes.

It was amusing to think about the ways other people fantasized about you. I liked Shane. I hoped I was really good in those fantasies.

As I stepped into the shower and dropped my underwear, an odd sort of excitement ran through my body. My cock swelled a little, and my heart skipped a few beats. To be fair, winning a game did wonders for your confidence and your libido.

I showered quickly, ignoring the stubborn erection that made my cock ache with desire, and dried myself well before wrapping the towel around my waist and stepping out.

It wasn’t totally gone even as I stepped into the locker room and hurried to my spot, digging through my backpack for clean underwear to pull on under the discreet safety of the towel.

When that was done, I relaxed a little, dressed, and invited Shane to the celebration.

He couldn't miss this. It was so clearly part of his research that he had no excuses.

We had a few rounds of drinks, recounting the highlights from the game. Even then, Shane was writing his little notes, and I wondered how many notebooks he would fill throughout the semester. He never went anywhere without two.

I was glad he was with us. A guy as sweet as Shane would thrive if he had friends to lift him up.

His focus on his studies was a big obstacle to building the social life he deserved.

I hoped he would see that as he spent more time with me and my friends.

If he learned anything at all this semester, I hoped it would be that.

Shane met me the next afternoon in front of the gym.

He was dressed for exercise, which was the first time I'd seen him in anything other than his baggy hoodies and oversized pants.

He'd also had a haircut, the sides of his head faded, and the top long and textured.

It was a nice, clean look, and I could absolutely see guys turning their heads when he walked down the street.

"Looking good," I said. His arms were defined, and his chest was broader than I'd expected. Not that I'd spent a great deal of time pondering the question. Shane presented himself one way, but reality wasn't completely in line with that.

Shane's eyes widened. "Oh, um, thanks."

"I don't think I ever saw you working out," I said as we went in.

"That's because I don't," he explained. "Not when we're there together, at least. But I figured it could be useful to experience your process a little differently."

"You want to try my routine?" I asked, eyebrows rising in surprise.

"Sure," Shane said.

We changed our shoes and started with the treadmill for thirty minutes.

It was intense, and I was aware that I was pushing myself so that Shane would get a better idea of my endurance, but it wasn't Shane who walked away surprised in the end.

Despite increasing the speed until my legs burned, Shane kept up with me very well.

He couldn't run at a high speed for as long as I could, but I hadn't expected him to last half as long as he did.

Sweat dripped from his brow, and his white T-shirt was soaked by the time he got off the treadmill, his face red and legs shaky, but he stood still and waited for me to show him what I would do next.

I wiped my face with a towel and drank plenty of water before taking him away from the warm-up area.

The fact that he simply stood there, unimpressed, pushed my buttons.

Not even a “Wow, that was intense.” He just experienced it as if it were a paragraph describing my routine rather than running five miles in half an hour.

Alright, let me show you what being tough looks like , I thought.

What followed was an hour of exercise that would leave scars on me for days.

I upped all the weights for Shane’s benefit.

And while he couldn’t match me exactly, he quietly set the maximum weights he could possibly lift, making his workout just as challenging.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

“Fuck. Spot me,” I grunted under the weight of the heavy bar on a bench, and Shane hurried over, standing above my head and giving me a hand.

From where I lay, he towered tall and strong, his biceps curling as he lifted the heavy weight.

He lifted it just enough to hook it on the safety pins, and I sat up with a frustrated scoff. “Pushed myself too hard.”

“I saw,” Shane said.

I shot him a murderous glare. “You did?”

He cocked his head in innocent confusion. “I was here all along.”

A laugh ripped free from my chest, taking the frustration away. I’d just spent almost two hours competing with myself for his attention, and he had no clue. Why was I so desperate? It wasn’t like Shane being impressed would improve my life in any way.

“Let’s call it for today,” I said, and Shane agreed.

We headed to the locker room, and I noticed that Shane’s legs trembled as he went down the stairs. Mine felt like jelly, too. When we got there, we both needed a minute on the locker room benches to catch our breath.

I was still sitting down when Shane tapped the screen of his phone a few times and got up.

He walked over to his locker, some five feet in front of me, and pulled out clean clothes.

He set them on the bench, not too far from me, and kicked his shoes off.

He lifted his T-shirt, still soaked with sweat, and pulled it over his head, leaving it unfolded on the bench, then bent down and took his shorts off.

Curiosity soared through me. If he'd been hiding the level of his fitness under baggy clothes but managed to keep up the pace with me all day, I had to know what he looked like.

And when he straightened, I had my answer.

Holy fuck, he was cut and defined. Skinny, yeah, but every muscle of his torso was tense, abs so pronounced that I could imagine what running fingers down his stomach felt like.

Taut, smooth skin a few shades paler than mine glistened with sweat, but it was his figure I was interested in the most. Broad shoulders, narrow waist, strong legs, and—not that I was looking—a pretty sizeable bulge packed in a pair of black briefs wasn't something I'd expected to see here.

He took his glasses off and set them on the gym clothes on the bench, then picked up his towel and tossed it over his shoulder. "Coming?" he asked.

I swallowed. He was kind of like Clark Kent, those glasses tricking you into thinking he was someone else.

Shane was fit as hell, and this haircut suited him great.

He turned away from me and took a few steps, then dropped the towel while holding on to his clean clothes.

He bent quickly to pick it up, and I glanced at the peachy ass before me, the seams of his briefs stretched tight and sliding inward as he bent down and straightened again, and my heart seemingly pounded in my throat.

“Um, yeah,” I answered, although I couldn’t tell how much time had passed between the question and the answer.

Shane slipped into the shower, but I sat still, the image still burned into my head.

It wasn’t a terrible image. And it wasn’t like it mattered.

I was surprised, that was all. Surprised that Shane was both cute and hot.

Surprised that I found him hot...

I shook my head and undressed, my chest crushed under the weight of whatever these odd feelings were called.

I stalked into the shower and took up the stall next to Shane’s.

Hot water poured over my head and shoulders, sliding down my torso and legs.

I listened to the splashing sounds and the shallow breaths coming from the stall next to me.

I pressed my hand against the thin wall between us and shut my eyes.

Why? Why was I doing this crazy thing? Jumping ahead to what I was imagining was

off-putting, to say the least. I had no interest in him or any guy. Boys just didn't make my heart race. But Shane...

I swallowed the knot in my throat, and the wall between us melted away.

He turned partially to face me, water running down his cream skin, his brown eyes focused on me and only me.

He glanced down, teeth closing around his lower lip, ears perking up.

When I took a step toward him, he turned all the way to me.

I didn't look down. The thought of what I would see there scared me; the thought of what I would do if I saw it frightened me even more.

I didn't want this to stop, especially not because I was scared of him.

But I was dying to press my hand against his abs, to run my thumb over his small nipple, to lean toward him until our bodies pressed against one another so hard that we lived in each other's skin.

Fuck , I thought, stepping back from the wall and shivering.

My body was heated up, blood simmering, fingers trembling, and stomach filling with flutters.

I was hard as fuck, and my mind was spinning like mad.

Each beat of my heart echoed throughout my entire body, muscles tensing, cock throbbing, and lungs shrinking.

I squeezed my eyes shut, unsure if I was trying to banish the images of Shane out of my mind or recall them again.

Before I could decide, he came to me. He stepped through the wall, and the wall was the steam of our showers, and I fell into the same alternate reality in which this was something I wanted .

Not me, though. Not in this universe. Some cosmic collision had transported me into a world where a geeky virgin was actually a hottie, and it turned me on.

My fingers ran through my hair, water washing the shampoo out, and I held my breath. My heart thundered like it was about to beat straight out of my chest and keep on beating away.

When the second wave crashed over me, almost pulling me under, I pressed my hands against the tiles in front of me and tried to breathe deeply.

Every muscle in my body burned with tension.

Thankfully, the fucking boner was going away, and I forced myself to think of anything and everything that would speed that process along.

I stepped out of the shower after a long time, my skin raw from hot water and hard scrubbing with the towel. I wished I had brought any of my clothes in with me, but I hadn't. I walked into the locker room, where Shane stood in his underwear, a pair of large pants hanging from his hands.

My feet froze to the floor like the Almighty had turned me to stone, and I held my breath.

Damn, but he had a cute ass. Not at all flat like the pants made it seem, but firm,

perky, kind of small but defined.

If he were a girl, I'd be leaning against the locker and trying out a few corny lines by now.

I swallowed hard and watched him bend over to push his legs through the pants, one after the other, and slide the denim up his thighs and over his ass.

He turned in the middle of it, zipping up the pants over his crotch just in time for me to glance at it.

His abs tensed, and he grabbed a hoodie out of the locker, then pulled it over his head, concealing the chiseled body that had made my head spin.

Without a word, I looked away and stepped to my locker.

I dug around for clean underwear, pulled them on under the towel, and muttered inside my head about being way too horny.

Maybe it was all this testosterone around the start of the season.

Maybe I was just running high on it naturally.

Wasn't that what Shane had told me about the use of testosterone?

It could tweak your sexual desire in ways you didn't see coming.

Except I knew it was bullshit. There was no way I had levels that high and for that long. I'd tested a few weeks ago for Shane and even fell a little low for a hockey player of my age.

It wasn't the goddamn testosterone. It was the fact that I hadn't gotten laid in almost two weeks.

It was hard to flirt when there was a guy taking notes on every breath, burp, and fart.

I didn't feel like going over to a girl and taking Shane with me.

Where would that lead us, anyway? If I took the girl to my place, would I stuff Shane into the closet to observe?

A ripple of nervous flutters passed through me.

Was that fucking excitement? God fucking dammit.

The briefest, most fleeting thought of having sex in front of Shane—a ridiculous idea I used solely to illustrate my point, by the way—quickly flipped over, and it was Shane lying under me.

Or over me. Or both during a very long and dirty night.

My chest shuddered, and I finished dressing quickly. I unstrapped the smartwatch and carried it over to Shane.

“Chicken, rice, and beer, then?” Shane asked.

“I'm beat. I better go,” I said a tad more coldly than intended.

“Er, yeah, sure,” Shane said, picking up his backpack. He put his glasses on now, and what I'd hoped would happen didn't happen. They didn't make him nerdy at all. They didn't make him into the Shane I knew before today. He was still a snack.

Fuck my life.

“See you tomorrow?” he asked.

I was already turning away. “I’ll let you know.”

If he said anything else after that, I was too far away to hear it. And it was just ten steps later that I regretted it. Fuck if I didn’t wish to hear him say, “Wait. Come back. Be with me.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

SEVEN

SHANE

Something was going on, and it was my fault.

I stared at the smartwatch in my hand, and guilt rose to my mouth like bile. I knew exactly what I'd done, and I'd gotten all the confirmation I needed. I didn't even need to read the data.

Something in the locker room made Patrick freak out every time. Something about this silence between us in the moments of weakness and exposure made his heart race and his mood sour. And after this, I was pretty sure I knew what was up.

You fucking creep , I told myself and tucked the watch into my backpack before storming out of the gym.

I'd gone too far with him for the sake of curiosity.

His behavior had made no sense. His physiological responses were scattered all over the place.

But here it was, out in the open, needing only one more glance at the data to confirm what I'd suspected.

Patrick wasn't afraid. Those weren't the heartbeats of someone who was scared or shy or experiencing panic. It was lust. Pure, primal lust. The kind of lust that could

wreck you and leave you panting for more. The kind nobody had ever been recorded experiencing around me. Nobody except Patrick.

And even then, it was too egotistical of me to think that he'd actually responded that way because of some secret attraction to me .

I wasn't attractive. I didn't have a gravitational pull that everyone else was born with.

The fabled chemistry I had with people was very much on the charts.

Thinking the campus womanizer was into a lanky virgin with Doctor Who box sets filling up my shelves was the craziest hypothesis of the century.

I went to my room and unpacked. I tossed the smartwatch into the drawer and out of sight.

It was only causing me trouble, and seeing it tempted me too much.

Besides, the data was going to disappoint me.

There was no way his pulse corresponded with my failed attempts at being attractive.

And if somehow it did, then it was wrong.

My methodology was off somewhere. There was something that wasn't accounted for.

The room felt tiny and suffocating. I left everything behind and hurried out.

The chill evening air greeted me like a healing kiss.

I walked off campus and in the direction of the lake.

My mind didn't clear like I'd hoped. The fog didn't lift.

But it was better than pacing around my little room and wanting to see if Patrick was horny for me—because he wasn't.

Patrick's cold goodbye chilled me more than the October evening in Chicago ever could. He didn't need to drool all over what I'd exhibited tonight to become clearly aware of what I was doing. And it put him off. Anyone could have told me this would happen. On some level, I must have known.

I walked and thought about it. In the night air, it felt as though I had more space to reason and think. These things filled me to overflowing, but the open sky couldn't be filled.

I had overstepped today. Patrick had allowed me into his life and his space, and I had used it to measure just how attractive I was to someone who wouldn't notice me if I stood all by myself in the middle of nothing two feet in front of him without the excuse of my thesis. I had to stop doing that.

It had felt good, though. For the first time ever—or in however long I could remember—taking my clothes off in front of another person didn't feel like taking a shield off before an enemy soldier wielding a sword.

It hadn't felt like an admission of defeat.

It hadn't felt like exposure to all the nastiest things that he could think of me.

Something about Patrick had given me confidence that I had lacked before.

I never would have undressed for a crowded beach. I never would have done it in a locker room right in front of another person. Normally, I changed quickly and faced away. But just the mere suspicion that Patrick might want to see what I had to show made me do it without hesitation.

And then he understood that I had done it for his benefit. And he disliked me for it.

Lessons had been taught and learned today. And when I returned to my room, I didn't take the smartwatch out of the drawer.

He texted me like he promised. It was late morning, and I was listening to a lecture when my phone vibrated in my pocket.

He sent a single line of text: his place, two in the afternoon.

What had been an engaging lecture instantly turned into torture.

The professor droned on and on, and the seconds refused to tick away.

I knew what he was going to say to me. He was going to stop the project. I only hoped he would have the pity to say it's just too time-consuming. If he told me I'd made him uncomfortable, I would die of embarrassment on the spot. It was what I deserved, but I still hoped he would be the better man.

Keeping my breaths even, I powered through the hours and dragged my guilty ass to Patrick's dorm. When he opened the door, he was alone and wore a smile like it was any other day. "Come in," he said.

I stepped inside warily, waiting for the snare to close, but he only walked over to his bed and crashed down.

“Elio’s out,” he explained. “He’s always out these days. Jaxon’s keeping him on a tight leash.”

“Yikes,” I said, looking around the room. Elio’s bed was perfectly made and had been every time I was here. Patrick’s was a cozy mess.

“Nah, it’s what he needs,” Patrick said. “Someone to control him a little.”

I nodded, trying to see how this connected to us.

“To be honest, I sometimes envy them,” Patrick said. “Write this stuff down,” he added with a grin.

I let out a nervous laugh. “What do you envy?”

“Would you believe me if I told you I’ve never been in a relationship?” Patrick asked.

I shrugged. “I’m assuming you’re totally transparent when you talk to me, so yeah.”

“Right,” he said, and sarcasm was impossible to miss. “Well, I haven’t. Not once.”

“Only because you didn’t want to, I’m sure,” I said.

He shrugged. “Maybe. But it makes me wonder why I’m avoiding it.”

I licked my lips. Was this some kind of bait? I decided to bite it. “Maybe you can’t imagine settling down for a while when the single lifestyle is good to you.”

He cracked a smile again, laughing a little. “It’s good, alright. But it gets boring, too. Wash, rinse, repeat.”

I swallowed the growing knot in my throat and looked into his eyes. “Why did you invite me?”

“Easton, Jace, Elio, and Jaxon are going out for drinks,” Patrick said. “I’d hate to be the only single. Wanna come?”

A date? I thought. All this circling around and distant taunting to invite me to a triple date? “I don’t...”

“...think it’s appropriate?” Patrick asked, and his voice only had a slight edge to it.

Maybe it wasn’t even there and real. Are you seriously going to talk about what’s appropriate?

You? After undressing me with your virgin little gaze and dropping your pants to test me?

The words may have been from my own conscience, but they were just as true as if he’d spoken them aloud.

“Why not? It’s just drinks. Pretend you’re shadowing me. ”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Patrick laughed out loud and crossed the room in a hop and two long paces. He slapped my shoulder way too fondly, his fingers lingering too close to my neck for a moment too long. “You look like I just sentenced you to hanging.”

“I’m not good in groups,” I admitted. “But I should observe you.”

“We can’t miss a chance to observe,” Patrick teased, his hand on my shoulder,

shaking me a little.

I shot him a look that was a plea for mercy, but he only threw his arm around my shoulders while telling me the details of this get-together.

I held my breath for a moment or two, then nodded. “Sure, alright.” He had plenty of people to choose from. He could have invited any teammate, and they would have felt honored. He could have picked up a girl at a bar, and she would have been hearing the wedding bells.

I slipped from under his arm. The unpredictable shift from cold to warm jarred me enough that I didn’t want to be in this spot at all. I’d rather he picked one, even the cold one, and stuck with it. Anything else was way too confusing.

For no discernible reason under the sun, Patrick’s fingers dug into my rib cage, stabbing a yelp out of me. He laughed. “Fuck, sorry. I didn’t think you’d scream.”

“Er, that’s fine,” I said tightly. “Do you have drills today?”

“You know it,” Patrick said.

I nodded. “I’ll see you then.”

“Oh.” He blanked for a moment, then shrugged like it was nothing. “Sure. Later.”

“Yeah,” I said, a frown creasing my brow as I walked out of his room.

What the hell did he want? My heart raced as I returned to my room.

Jokes, teasing, random touches, an arm around my shoulders, and so much grinning was unlike him.

I didn't know what to do with this attention.

Especially not after he had practically run away from me.

I shut the door and walked over to the desk, pulling the drawer open and staring at the undisturbed smartwatch lying on top of notebooks. I snatched it grudgingly and transferred the data to my laptop.

There it was...

My mouth went dry, lips parting, as I stared at the screen, cross-matching the timestamps.

A steady pulse as he ran on the treadmill, increasing within the reasonable range the faster he went.

I was certain that my heart had been pounding far quicker at that level of straining, but that was irrelevant.

It was much later, just two minutes after I had noted us descending down to the locker room, that Patrick's heart exploded into a drum solo.

His pulse was off the charts then, calming down momentarily and rebounding with fury. And it went on and on, long after I had undressed and left him by the lockers. The graph went on with panic-like inputs to the very moment Patrick had taken the watch off.

Maybe he had been angry that I had tried to be so provocative, but I didn't think that was it. Why would he then invite me today to come over? And for a meeting that could have been a text message? Yeah, I wasn't buying it.

If it annoyed him, fine, but Patrick's body responded in a way that was too clear to keep ignoring.

I stared at the screen, letting this realization sink in. I was attractive. To one unlikely, impossible person's heart, I did this . And I knew it now. I knew it because I was dishonest and in a massive breach of trust.

What a goddamn victory for me.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

EIGHT

PATRICK

I stepped out of a cloud of deodorant in the bathroom and walked around my half of the room, picking and choosing.

I tossed a few pairs of underwear onto the bed, debating whether I felt like wearing something a little more flashy.

You never knew when a hot girl could drop her jacket, and you had to bend down to pick it up, impressing her in the process.

I ultimately chose a pair of simple black cotton ones with a well-known brand's name embedded along the waistband.

For my pants, I went with classy dark blue and paired them with a shirt, the lightest shade of minty green, with a stiff collar.

Leaving a couple of buttons undone made me look like a gift on a silver platter, sent straight from Heaven.

My hair was just the right kind of messy that it complemented an uninterested half scowl that people found irresistible.

With that, I slipped on my double-strap black shoes, picked up my blazer, and stepped out of the dormitory and into the cool fall evening.

I basked in the attention of the three girls stepping out of the library and giving me a thorough scan. A job great done, if I could be that self-congratulatory.

It was a special evening. My friends were so into their relationships that I never saw them these days outside of practice and games. We used to work out together and hang out before and after practice. Hell, I used to share my room with one of them.

And Shane was coming, too. I'd asked him three more times over the days just to make sure.

We ditched Lumière for a nice indie bar downtown. It wasn't often that we had a reason to leave the campus. Everything was here, then a few good ideas for dates. And since I didn't do dates, I rarely went far. Dates got in the way of fun, in a manner of speaking.

Until tonight, triple trouble was about to be released upon this good town, and I was all in.

I strolled to the metro and hopped over to the place just fashionably late.

Shane had texted me when he left his room, but I hadn't been ready, so he would wait for me outside.

I didn't nudge him to go in without me. He was shy and awkward, and he knew me the best, so it was a solid plan.

As I walked down the street toward the bar, I saw him.

A few people stood on one side of the door, smoking and chatting with drinks in their hands, but Shane was keeping a distance.

His black-rimmed glasses were pushed high up his nose, framing his face in a wholly handsome way.

He wore a blue shirt that actually fit him to a dot and a pair of white pants that did wonders for his figure.

My fingers twitched for a second as I neared him. “Pop that button and you’ll be a ten,” I said, regretting it even as the words were coming out of my mouth.

“Crass,” Shane pointed out, and I couldn’t grudge him.

“Nah, you look great,” I said. “Let go in.”

He inhaled and visibly forced himself to relax before stepping into the bar. Three short steps led us down into the spacious open place with candles, lamps, and comfortable chairs surrounding smooth wooden tables. In the far corner, sitting at a booth, my friends and their boyfriends were chatting.

Naturally, Easton was in the middle, the center of gravity of our little group, flanked by his brooding better half.

Jace, a tattooed guy with a sharp and calculating gaze, did something that might be called lighting up if he didn’t wear such a menacing aura when he spotted me.

On the other side, Elio rested his arm along the back of the booth, and Jaxon was leaning into its fold.

I walked up to the booth and thrust Shane to Jace’s side, then sat next to him.

“And the boys’ night begins,” I announced.

“Here, here,” Easton said.

Shane introduced himself to the boyfriends, and a waiter picked up our orders and returned with drinks. Jace ran his fingers along his sharp jawline and pointed at us conversationally. “How’d you two meet?”

I almost choked on my red ale and shook my head quickly. The way Jace had shot us that inquisitive look and question wasn’t even suggestive but all-out presuming.

“We’re not, um, together,” Shane said.

Jace nodded understandingly. “First date, then?”

I kept shaking my head, leaving it to Shane to explain how he was shadowing me for a project. I was pretty certain Jace knew this already, but he chose violence tonight.

It was Shane who blushed the fiercest, but my fingers trembled regardless. A sort of discomfort filled my chest, like tickles rising from within, and I squirmed a little, especially when Jace flashed one of his wolfish grins and said, “You make a nice...pair.”

Easton stabbed his elbow in Jace’s rib cage, which directed the conversation elsewhere. Elio talked about the season and the first win of the predicted streak. I offered some input on how to get there while drilling the younger pups and not letting them cost us victories.

Easton scratched his head. “I don’t think they were the ones costing us victories.”

I held my breath for a short while and then exhaled. “That’s probably right.”

“How so?” Shane asked.

I could see him writing it down behind those cute glasses and analytical eyes.

“Infighting,” Elio said with a shrug, then leaned his shoulder against Easton’s arm. They were their old selves, and my heart did a little dance.

“Ancient history,” Easton assured him.

“Do you think it’s going to be a winning streak?” Shane asked.

“You saw us play,” I said. “Don’t you think we’re good?”

Shane’s lips trembled into a brief smile before he nodded. “I wasn’t supposed to be watching the game. I was supposed to be watching you.”

His words, although nothing out of the ordinary due to our agreement, dialed up the heat in my stomach.

The conversation moved on to me complaining about how I never hung out with Easton and Elio these days, but it somehow went into a broader discussion of dating and relationships.

With all of us together, it was impossible to have a long conversation on any one topic.

Serious words were flipped on their head to provide a dirty meaning, and banter spiced up all the topics.

My dating history seemed to be a dart game for them, sans Shane, and they took their aims and hits like a well-oiled machine.

“There isn’t much you haven’t tried to flirt with,” Easton pointed out, making me

want to shrink into myself. Odd. Any other day, I would have beamed with pride.

“You can’t even turn it off for the librarian, and she’s nearing retirement,” Elio pointed out.

“I was being nice,” I said.

“You don’t know the difference,” Elio said.

“Remember when you flirted with that red-haired girl at the bar all night, went to the toilet before leaving, and invited her to your place on your way out?” Easton asked.

My face drooped with a scowl. I hadn’t realized this was the Roast of Patrick Callahan.

“Why is that funny?” Shane asked.

Easton laughed for a moment longer, then caught enough breath to say, “Because he picked up the wrong redhead and didn’t realize until they were in his room.”

“I was a little drunk, and she did me no favors,” I said.

“I feel like everyone’s like that around you,” Shane said. It wasn’t a tease, and I adored him for being on my side.

“Is that a professional opinion?” Jaxon asked.

Shane shrugged. “Sort of. You can’t not notice that people turn their heads after him. Some people just have it .”

“Alright, that’s enough about me,” I said. “These two were adopted brothers before

hooking up.” I pointed at Jace and Easton, a mean little smirk flashing on my lips and matching Jace’s fascinated gaze.

“It’s not a secret,” Jace said.

“It’s hard to go around it when people ask how we met,” Easton explained.

“And we spent the last seven years apart,” Jace said. “Those kids? They were nothing like us.”

“You sneaky little fuck,” Easton said with an impressed smile.

“What about you, Shane?” Jaxon asked. “Do you match his freak?”

Shane choked mid-sip and shook his head quickly.

“Cut it out, guys,” I said. “Shane’s too sweet for this table.”

“I don’t think he needs you to rescue him, straight guy,” Elio said. “Let the guy speak.”

“No, that’s alright,” Shane said. “I get tongue-tied. Um, Patrick knows this.”

The guys didn’t tease him for it, and I was grateful. We joked around for a while longer, and then Shane yawned and shrugged, saying he might have to leave. I realized it was midnight already. “I’ll walk you back,” I said.

“No, you don’t have to,” Shane said. “Metro’s just outside.”

“Sure?”

He chuckled. “Patrick, I can walk a few paces on my own.”

I scratched the back of my neck. “Right. Of course.” But worrisome images filled my head anyway. It was midnight, and we were downtown, and he had to go down underground.

I wanted to make up to him, too. I’d freaked out a little a few days ago, and I absolutely didn’t want to talk about it, but it felt like he wasn’t going to take my offers of cavalier politeness as an apology for my odd behavior.

Whatever had come over me that evening was in the past. A momentary loss of focus, probably, that had knocked me off my game and tossed me into a weird fever dream. I was fine again.

But as Shane left, silence settled around the table. I looked at their blank faces and wondered if there was beer foam on my face. They just blinked and let the silence linger until I was ready to snap, and then Jace said, “Your boyfriend’s cute.”

“What?” I huffed. “We’re not...”

The four of them burst out laughing.

Easton leaned over to me. “Dude, you’re so dating that guy.”

“Let me walk you home, baby,” Elio paraphrased.

“Shut up,” I said, slapping him with a pout since I couldn’t reach him across the table.

They all laughed, but my heart still squeezed a little at the thought of Shane being alone in the underground.

“We’re not a couple,” I said. “I’m...straight,” I said, but it didn’t sound convincing even to myself. “I think.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

“It happens to the best of us,” Elio said.

“I wouldn’t put you up as an example of the best of us, but alright,” I said.

He flipped me off.

Underneath the jokes and teasing, a question was swelling like dark clouds on the horizon. They were wrong, though. I was a little scattered lately, but I wasn’t questioning myself. Not really. You could imagine something, and it didn’t make it automatically true.

“Okay, but seriously,” Jace said, nudging me with his elbow as we left the restaurant. “Did you two hold hands under the table, or were you just playing footsie?”

I rolled my eyes and pulled my jacket tighter. “You’re hilarious.”

“Come on, man,” Elio added, slinging an arm lazily around Jaxon’s shoulders like the smug bastard he was. “You ordered for him. You literally said, ‘He’ll have the...’ like you were his husband.”

I scoffed. “He couldn’t decide.”

Easton turned with a grin, walking backward like he was leading a damn tour group. “You also took the tomato off your burger and gave it to him.”

“He likes tomatoes. I don’t. That’s just resource management.”

Jaxon snorted. “Resource management. Wow.”

“Shut up.”

The four of them were having the time of their lives at my expense, feeding off each other like gossiping birds, and it was starting to make my skin itch.

I couldn’t stop thinking about the way he’d looked back before walking off.

Like he wanted to stay. Like he wanted me to say something that would make him change his mind.

And I hadn’t.

“So,” Jace drawled. “When’s the wedding?”

“Fuck off.”

Easton grinned. “Patrick and Shane sitting in a tree?—”

“Jesus Christ, I’m leaving,” I muttered, veering off toward the quad.

“Make sure your boyfriend gets home safe!” Jace called after me.

“He’s not my—” But I didn’t finish the sentence. What was the point? They weren’t gonna stop.

I lingered around long enough to finish my drink, then said goodbye.

Outside, I shoved my hands into my pockets and walked faster, the cool night air doing nothing to calm the heat crawling up my neck.

He's not my boyfriend.

So why did it feel like I was lying every time I said it?

The sidewalks were quiet this time of night, just the occasional late jogger or someone dragging a longboard past the dorms. My shoes scuffed against the pavement as I cut across the grass instead of taking the long way around.

Maybe I had acted weird tonight. Maybe I had hovered too much, laughed a little too loud at Shane's jokes, leaned in too close when he pointed something out on the menu.

I hadn't meant to.

But when I was with him, it was like my brain short-circuited. Like something in me just softened.

I stopped walking without meaning to, standing under a row of bare trees behind the library. Shane's dorm wasn't far. Five minutes, tops. I could just swing by. I could pretend I forgot something.

Just make sure he got back okay.

I stared at the sidewalk, frowning.

Was that crazy? Would that freak him out?

But maybe he was still awake. Maybe he was sitting by his window, watching for me.

I huffed a breath and shook my head. What the hell was wrong with me?

It wasn't a big deal to care if a friend got home safe. It didn't have to mean anything. Except it did. At least, it felt like it did.

Because when Shane looked at me, really looked at me—which was the point of this entire goddamn exercise—like I was something more than just a dumb jock with a short fuse, I felt like I couldn't breathe. The intensity of his gaze was like a boulder dropped onto my chest.

That wasn't friendship. Not really.

And I wanted more. Fuck, but I did. Even now, I wanted to stand in the corner and watch him, wanted to see the creamy skin of his inner thigh, run my fingers up its length, and feel...

My heart set off in a gallop.

I rubbed a hand over my face, dragging it down hard.

This was bad.

I couldn't be that guy. The one who caught feelings and spiraled and blew up everything just because he was curious.

I wasn't like this. This could disappear as quickly as it had crashed over me.

If the tide retreated, it would leave us both aground and stranded, and I didn't think I could live with myself if I took a good person and broke them apart.

God, but I was like a child with a new toy truck, obsessing over it to the point of dismantling it irreparably.

But I couldn't stop wanting him, either.

I stood there for another thirty seconds, chewing on the inside of my cheek, torn straight down the middle.

I knew I wasn't gay. And unlike some of my friends, I also knew it was all a spectrum.

Instead of fitting into three or four generic slots, we were all a mash of gooey stuff that moved left and right and up and down.

Sexuality, gender, the size of your ears, it didn't just stop at some point.

It kept on going. But with the exception of the ears, fluidity had the risk of staying in motion.

What if I went in? What if I pinned him against the wall? What if I did to him all the things my crazy brain was proposing, then blinked and found that I'd switched back? His first guy would be taking this thing away from him and leaving him dry... It sounded a lot like me to do just that.

Then I turned and walked away from Shane's dorm.

Each step felt like dragging a hundred-pound weight behind me. He probably made it back just fine. He was a grown-ass adult. He didn't need me hovering.

But I wanted to hover. I wanted to knock on his door and pretend I had a reason, just for the chance to see his face again. To feel whatever it was that lit up in me when he was around.

I didn't look back.

If I did, I might not stop myself next time.

And I wasn't ready to find out what that meant.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

NINE

SHANE

It was another week of being torn by the stitches.

Patrick was like Schrodinger's Flirt, simultaneously brushing me off and dragging me in. You never knew what his current state was because it was never truly current and never, ever static.

He leaned in too close when showing me a silly meme I had no business looking at. He helped me fix my grip on the bench press with hand over hand, skin on skin. He sat so close to me in the locker room that our knees touched.

But then, he swung his head after a passing girl who seemed like his type. He talked about his previous hookups with crass pride. He invited me out, only to bring a friend or ten at the last minute.

I was driving myself crazy as much as he was. We both held the wheel, and the destination was as clear as early morning dew.

When I tried to debrief with him after a game, he seemed too fussy and heated, literally flushed and red-faced, with eyes so glassy that I thought he wanted to jump at me over the table and just do something .

Then he shrugged and said he wasn't feeling it tonight and asked if we could discuss it in the morning.

He was thinking of hitting the bar, picking someone up.

Those were the moments when I felt like he slapped his refusal of me right into my face.

I didn't know what this need to prove himself to me was. It kept me up at night just as often as the foggy imagination of the things I had never done in my life, the things I would have let Patrick do to me in a heartbeat if only he leaned in an inch closer.

He tore me apart, and in some small corner of my heart, I knew I liked every second of it.

Except you blew it , I told myself. You reeled him in with a research project and used the excuse to measure his reaction to you .

His heartbeat.

Underneath it all, his pulse throbbed just the same.

Every goddamn time he dialed up the charm, anxiety gnawed away at his nerves.

He toyed with me as if for the simple pleasure of an increased blood pressure.

He teased me as if it were a ride at an amusement park, and he just wanted to feel the thrill of it.

And at the end of the day, I locked the door of my room, closed my eyes, and used him the same way. I used him to get high. The thrill I hadn't felt for someone in ages.

Being an awkward person with a great deal of fear around undressing, God forbid kissing, or worse, meant I'd done everything under the sun I could do with myself.

They lied when they said switching a hand felt like someone else was doing it for you, by the way.

They also lied on the website that the silicone felt like flesh.

I didn't know what flesh felt like, but that sure as hell wasn't it.

And after a while, it had all gotten old.

I had come to realize that it wasn't about the tightness of your grip or the size of your toy at all. Those were details. Means to an end.

What I lacked was the substance. The allure.

It didn't matter if it was real or rubber.

It mattered that I needed real hands to close around my hoodie, to undress me like it was somehow urgent, to lean in and exhale a warm breath over my skin and lips.

I needed someone's weight to press down on me, to make us both sink into the mattress, to share warmth.

I needed someone to look into my eyes when they entered me.

And in my nightly fantasies, it was always only Patrick.

It was Patrick because I knew exactly what he would look like.

He undressed me with his eyes throughout the day, then grinned and dashed away.

I knew how intense his blue gaze would be in the moment our bodies met, in the

moment he was inside me, in the moment he bit his lower lip and wrinkled his brow and throbbed so deep in me that the sensation reached into my fingers and toes.

I knew all of this because he made it clear.

Passing by the boards from where I watched him in the drills and games, his gaze locked onto my face, and he shot me a grin that was unmistakably and exclusively for my benefit.

Swinging by my place, he always wore his signature scent and threw his arm around my shoulders.

Seeing me outside, he always checked me out and told me I looked good.

If that was all he did, I would have been happy. Like a cat chasing a plushy mouse hanging from a fishing rod, I never would have tired of it. But he needed to deny it later. Every so often, he needed to redraw the line in the sand, even though he'd crossed it countless times.

After the Saints won their third consecutive game in a game that was as thrilling and satisfying as I imagined sex should be, Patrick skated to me first, threw his arms around me, and pulled me into a celebratory hug.

It was nothing odd. Guys on the ice were hugging and jumping like mad, their disbelief that they'd pulled it off still swirling around the rink.

But as he held on to me, his lips found their way to my earlobe. "You're my lucky charm, Shane."

Never had my heart lifted so quickly and so high.

You should keep me , I wanted to say. What came out was, “I don’t think I had anything to do with this.”

Patrick chuckled. “Yeah. I’m just that good, huh?”

The swell of celebration pulled him away from me. I remained where I was with the bitter taste of regret on my tongue.

And when he tossed his stick across the rink in rage a few days later, he was thrown into the sin bin during the drills, and he looked to me with pleading eyes.

But my job wasn’t to console him. My job was to poke around his brain and find out what it felt like to slam into another person with ill intentions, knowingly pushing the boundaries of the rules, and to feel vindictive about receiving your punishment.

I needed to know how it all worked behind his icy blue eyes.

“We’re facing the Arctic Titans on their turf in a week,” he told me angrily. “And instead of letting me practice, I have to sit here. That’s bullshit.”

I wrote it down.

“I swear to God I’m gonna tear that paper and eat it, Shane,” he snapped. “We never won against those fuckers, and I need to be out there.”

I cocked my head with as much compassion as our strict relationship allowed—and I was aware that my transgressions made me a hypocrite. I waited, and then I wrote it down.

Patrick scoffed. “Ask your questions, Aristotle.”

And I did. When did the anger come to him first during this game? What options did he see laid out before him when he chose to slam Dean into the boards? Would he have done it differently? Why hadn't the threat of punishment—and he had had to be aware of it—prevented him from crossing the line?

In fairness, while still sulky about it, Patrick answered my questions. Early; several; he thought it wasn't that bad and Coach Webber was being dramatic.

“Do you ever think that reining in your anger out there would help you play with a clearer mind?” I asked.

He shot me a cold, detached look. “Do you even know me? After all this time?”

I didn't say anything to that, even though his words ripped a hole in my chest the size of Neptune.

“It drives me, Shane,” he said. “That's exactly what clears my mind.

When the fury kicks in, the rest of the world falls off.

There's just the ice and the devils I'm fighting.

None of the other things that cloud my mind exist when I'm playing.

There's no confusion out there. There's no questioning, wondering, thinking about things over and over and over until you've thought them right into the goddamn ground and haven't found an answer.

Nothing. Just the puck and the immediate threat. ”

I wrote it down, although I didn't know how with the trembling fit that possessed my

fingers.

What doubts? What confusion? What are you questioning, Patrick?

But I held my tongue. Perhaps it would have been easily explained by the fact that I needed to ask him tough questions, but I couldn't bring myself to hear his answers.

I couldn't bring myself to use that old excuse again.

Patrick went back in to play in the final period, his drive a little quelled, his fury burning a little dimmer, and his performance taking somewhat of a hit. It was like the questioning he had mentioned was running strong during the last part of the game.

Days came and days went. A thing I had never thought of, never predicted would be a problem, started to appear. Patrick was a fact in my life. More than that, he was a force.

I sometimes wondered what being an undercover cop was like. Sure, you prepared a lot, practiced your cover story until it felt like you'd lived it your entire life, and you went in. But after you had stayed there, after you had worn another person's skin for so long, how did you ever get out of it?

I needed to know this answer.

I needed to know how they returned to their old lives. How did they leave it all behind? What thread of their true selves did they hold onto throughout the missions in order to be able to drag themselves back out?

How was I going to live when this was over and Patrick no longer needed to be a part of my daily life? His presence was so overwhelming and all-encompassing that I couldn't remember what life was like before him, and I couldn't imagine what it

would be like after him.

My studies revolved around Patrick Callahan. My days were shaped around him. My desires gravitated toward him. My dreams were filled with him. Until I told myself he would be off the hook in a month and a half. Then, the future was a bleak dystopia where I would be on my own again, just surviving.

The three days in Detroit, where the Saints played against the Titans on Saturday, arrived. I'd packed lightly for the weekend but brought all the notebooks and reference books I could put into my backpack. The equipment the team carried took up way too much space to leave room for me.

The house the team got to use over the weekend was incredible. It beat any hotel by a mile. It was a large place with a sprawling open-concept living and dining room and a kitchen on the ground floor, a hot tub and a small, private gym in the back, and an upper floor with rooms the players shared.

I carried the key to room four while the Saints unloaded their luggage. It was a delightful one. I shut the door as soon as I stepped inside, worried about having to do small talk with some of the Saints I didn't know well if they appeared in the hallway in front of my room.

A big double bed dominated the room, and a large wardrobe was built into the wall on the other side of it.

Nightstands, lamps, and a canopy over the bed mounted to four high bedposts were all in a semi-rustic style, matching the hardwood floor and the old, burgundy rug covering it.

A small wooden table was flanked by two vintage armchairs.

Beside one of the chairs was a door to a private bathroom, and that was a scream.

An incredible walk-in shower and an elegant cream-tile design made me want to live in this room for the rest of my life.

Westmont had generously agreed to cover the expenses for the purpose of my research, trapping me deeper into having to deliver the thesis, and I couldn't be happier. These hockey players truly lived a good life on the road. I wondered what it cost to build this many rooms for all the players.

Then, like a saw cutting through the wood, a key zipped into the lock, and every hair on the back of my neck stood. A double bed should have been a giveaway. Dear God, was I sharing with some random Saint? They couldn't do that, could they?

The door swung open, and I turned to face the intruder, only for my heart to split in half when Patrick's eyes shone and a grin stretched his lips from ear to ear. "Hey, roomie. Whoa, this is nice."

I swallowed the tightening knot in my throat. Was this heaven or hell? It was somehow both in equal measures.

I glanced at the bed, and Patrick's gaze followed.

"Oh, that's gonna be fun," he said.

I couldn't see how.

"Be warned, I kick in my sleep," he said cheerfully. "You'll be sore and bruised by Sunday." He choked a little as he said this, sparking an unholy image in my head that must have crossed his mind.

“We’re...sharing?” I asked.

“Everyone’s sharing,” Patrick said and dropped his heavy bag by the side of the bed. “I’ll take this side if you don’t mind. I like to face the door. Makes it hard to sneak up on me from behind.”

I listened to his rambling, but my mind was elsewhere.

Christ, this was bad. Sure, we’d gone far beyond the acceptable lines in the locker room, but sharing a bed with Patrick was a sort of torture only a cruel old god would have come with.

It felt like stepping into the Old Testament, and I’d just mixed fabrics.

Eternal damnation, here I come.

“Aren’t you with...Elio or someone?” I asked.

“And let you end up with someone you don’t know?” Patrick asked with a small frown.

“So...you did this on purpose?” I asked.

He snort-chuckled. “Why are we talking about this? I thought I was being noble.”

“No, I mean...” I shrugged. “I’m just surprised.” I swallowed again, harder this time, and nodded. “Thanks.”

He grinned again, unpacking. “We can stay up after bedtime, put on our pajamas, and tell spooky stories in the dark.”

I forced a laugh that so clearly begged the universe to wake me up from this fever dream, but nothing happened.

I could pinch my arm off, and I'd still be here, doomed to spend two nights in Patrick's bed.

Doomed to feel his warmth for excruciating hours of the night when he would sleep and kick and snore, and I would listen to his breaths and remain aware of just how close he was to me.

There wasn't a mattress big enough to make this any easier.

TEN

PATRICK

I kept my cool until ten in the evening, when most of my guys had split from the bar and only a handful remained, sipping from their nearly empty glasses. I'd had a couple of beers, but I couldn't risk our game against the Titans, no matter how thirsty the sleeping situation made me.

I was pretty sure Shane didn't suspect a thing.

I'd told him the truth about asking for a room together, but I hadn't realized it would be a shared freaking bed.

Even so, I didn't want him to see just how freaked-out I was about it.

He could get ideas, poor guy, and I would eventually have to break it to him.

Then again, there I was, getting ideas, and they parched my tongue and dried the roof of my mouth.

I tipped my glass and poured the already warm sip of beer into my mouth, wiped my lips, and headed back.

Shane hadn't been in the mood for a drink, and he had decided to stay and look over his literature.

“Making sure I observe you correctly tomorrow is more important than what you do tonight,” he’d explained.

He was probably right. I wasn’t doing anything of any consequence tonight.

Or any night. The only thing I did that ever mattered was on the ice and realizing that kind of sucked.

I was a hockey player, not much else. I was a slightly more active version of the old “pretty face and no brains” adage.

It was alright. My life didn’t amount to much when I wasn’t doing the one thing I was good at.

Lately, chasing the thrill of a quick fuck didn’t inspire me like it used to.

I would have blamed it on Shane’s constant presence and observation, but I knew it ran deeper than that.

I’d never had an issue being watched while flirting before.

As I neared the door of the bar, it opened, and Shane stepped in.

“Oh,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

He shrugged. “I saw guys coming back, but you were still out.”

“You were...looking for me?” I asked.

He didn’t answer immediately. His gaze swept the room. “I thought I could have a drink after all.”

“Good idea,” I said. “Drinks all around.”

Shane lifted one corner of his lips into a half smile, and God, he looked cool.

Pull yourself together , I snapped at myself.

I had promised myself not to act on this.

I didn’t understand it. I didn’t understand the risk of it.

I didn’t know how far it would take me or how devastating it would be for Shane.

Truth be told, I rarely knew the risks with the girls I hooked up with, either, but they were always aware of that.

I’d never picked up a doe-eyed virgin. I’d gone out with the sort of girls who knew exactly what they wanted, and it happened to match what I wanted perfectly.

A nice, passionate night of pleasure and a nice breakfast in the morning.

As far as I could remember, I’d never led anyone on.

Yet every time I let it slip and flirted with Shane—unintentionally, I might add—he’d perked up as if I was asking him out on a date.

The hard part was that I wanted to. Wouldn’t it be great?

Because I could sit across from him over dinner and listen to him tell me why Pluto isn’t a planet and how the Earth came to exist when Zeus picked a grain of sand from under his fingernail during a bath.

We'd eat and laugh, and I would say something sweet while looking into his eyes, and he would blush so furiously that my heart would want to explode.

And I'd walk him back to his place. And he'd linger before going in. And I would kiss him.

Dammit , I told myself. I'd promised I wouldn't go there.

Shane and I walked over to the bar near a couple chatting with one another. We ordered drinks and stayed at the bar while the girl laughed loudly at what the guy said.

"What made you change your mind?" I asked.

"My eyes were about ready to pop. I showered and had to get out before going crazy," he said. "There's a case to be made about a work-life balance. Or study-life balance."

"If life is what you want, I can totally show you a good time," I said and wondered if this was accidental flirting or a friendly offer.

I watched Shane's emerging blush and looked at the girl and the guy behind him. The guy glanced at us and took a measure of me. And I mean a measure . So they weren't a couple at all.

The girl must have followed the guy's gaze because she turned to look. Our gazes locked, and I dialed up the intensity of my charming look back at her. We held eye contact for a heartbeat or two before she looked away.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?" Shane asked.

“Is this an interview?” I teased, then gestured at a table.

We moved over, and I picked a seat with a clear view of the bar. The girl’s gaze followed me, but I acted cool and uninterested. “Just chatting,” he replied.

“I think so. The drills went well, right? We have a good chance,” I said, getting comfortable in the booth. “The Titans that had been kicking our asses the last two years are gone. That Partridge was a helluva player.”

“Was?” Shane asked.

“In their team, I mean,” I said. Beckett Partridge had gone on to build a shiny career right after graduating, just like his boyfriend, playing for the NHL.

I’d sometimes let myself imagine joining the team he was on and telling him how much I had hated him back in college.

He seemed like a cool guy when he wasn’t beating your ass on the ice.

“Avery, Sebastian, Jordan, the whole lot of them are gone now.”

“Doesn’t that just mean the bar is lower?” Shane asked.

I shot him a murderous glare. “If you wanna be a dick about it, yeah.”

He laughed.

“I see how it sounds like that,” I said with a shrug. “I think we’re better this year.”

Shane nodded. “I think so, too.”

I cocked my head. “Have you watched us play before?”

He nodded again, a little more shyly.

“Tell me,” I said. “Sports psychology is a very specific choice.” My eyes narrowed. “You were an athlete, Shane. I saw your trophies.”

He snorted. “Junior Hockey. It was nothing.”

“Nah, it was something,” I pressed. The beer’s encouragement canceled the discouragement I got from Shane’s wary look. “You know everything about me.”

He lifted an eyebrow in challenge. Everything?

it asked. But he sighed and shook his head.

“I played. I was going to be you. Well, more awkward and not as good, obviously, but I used to daydream about having what you have. Until...” He hesitated a moment, just enough to make me wonder if I was cruel for asking.

“Until I got hard checked in a really bad way. An accident. But it nearly broke my knee, tore my ligaments, had to have surgery, and spent a year recovering.”

“Oh, God, Shane, I’m sorry,” I said.

“No, don’t...don’t pity me,” he said. “It was a tough year. You’d be right to pity that kid because he just couldn’t accept how his life changed. But me? I’m fine. I learned I’d never be, um, popular or famous or rich or even just good at it.”

My heart sank a little. “Fuck. We don’t have to talk about it if it’s hard.”

“It’s not hard,” Shane said. “Not with you. I don’t know why I never mentioned it. I guess I didn’t want you to know that I’ll never be able to be more like you. It’s silly.”

“You don’t have to be like me,” I said. I was pretty sure I knew what he meant. “I like you because you’re different.”

Shane smiled and looked away, and then the smile faded. He must have had a fleeting thought, just like me, and he must have remembered that this was never going to work out.

We finished our drinks, and I went to the restroom. As I stepped out, I realized I wanted to stay with Shane. A bed awaited us in the house, and I just wasn’t ready to face a night of sleeping next to him. Not yet, anyway.

I headed for the bar without looking at Shane. I was afraid he would catch my gaze and signal that he wanted to leave. If I returned with drinks, he’d have to stay.

“Two small ones,” I said, pointing at the tap.

The bartender nodded and got down to work. Next to me, the girl with flaming red hair was alone. She was looking at me from under her long eyelashes.

“‘Sup?” I asked. “How are you?”

“Having the time of my life,” she joked.

“Yeah, a sports bar with a pool table really is something special,” I said.

She laughed, her voice like smoke and honey. “Are you staying a while longer?” she asked.

I cracked a smile. It was my turn to ask her what she was drinking. But Shane was waiting for me. Then again, it was good luck to clear your mind the night before a big game. Not even just luck but basic logic. “Where’s your friend?” I asked.

She blinked so seductively, her eyes shining with cheeky cleverness. “Ah, he’s over there, charming your friend.”

Every hair on my body stood out. My gaze darted to Shane, chuckling and sitting stiffly in the booth while that handsome motherfucker told jokes or whatever.

Shane was awkward, but not awkward enough to put the guy off.

If anything, it was goddamn cute how shy and red he was, his eyes glimmering and his shoulders shaking as he laughed nervously.

“Don’t worry,” the girl said as I pushed myself a little away from the counter. “Ian’s a sweet guy.”

“Sure, sure,” I murmured, not actually sure what she had said.

I drifted across the bar, my stride becoming firmer as I neared them.

I didn’t look at the guy who dared come near Shane and risk breaking Shane’s heart.

Didn’t he fucking see Shane was more delicate than your onetime hookup?

Couldn’t he see he was making Shane nervous?

Did he think he could just slide in there, do a dirty, and disappear?

Not on my goddamn watch. “We should go,” I announced.

Page 14

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The guy's head whipped around to look at me. He didn't matter. He wanted to take advantage of Shane, and the white rage that filled me at the thought of it was worse than any I'd felt on the ice, even when I was fighting against the worst odds. "Aren't you getting drinks?"

"It's late," I said. "We should probably get some sleep." Why was he not getting the hint? The guy was a shallow flirt with only one thing on his mind.

Takes one to know one , I thought, and it wasn't an unfair remark.

"Please?" I said.

Shane's brow wrinkled for a split second, and he nodded. He looked at Ian. "Thanks for keeping me company."

"Let's stay in touch," Ian said smoothly. "I'd love to get to know you better while you're here."

Oh, sure. You'd love to know him real good , I thought. He was obnoxious.

"Ah, we're returning to Chicago on Sunday," Shane said.

"Chicago? I'm there all the time for work. I'll text you," he said.

The nerve of this guy!

Shane smiled sweetly as he got up, and Ian took the cue. He followed us a few steps,

then said goodbye to Shane and rejoined his redheaded friend at the bar.

We stepped outside, and I scoffed. “Can you believe that guy?”

Shane cocked his head and frowned. “Why? I thought he was sweet.”

“Sweet,” I said with contempt. “Shane, guys like that only want one thing.”

He pressed his lips together. “I, uh...wouldn’t mind getting it over with, to be honest. I don’t get guys swinging by that often, you know?”

“Not with someone like that. Trust me. He’s a player, and he’ll disappear by the time you’ve showered the sweat off,” I growled.

“Huh, I didn’t get that feeling at all,” Shane said. “Um, thanks.”

My fists balled so quickly and tightly that I had to stop walking for a moment.

It was like my muscles were locked. He wasn’t supposed to be thanking me, right?

I thought I was doing the right thing, but being thanked felt like I’d somehow cheated.

“You’ll find a good guy, Shane. And soon, I bet.

You’re way more interesting and attractive than you think. ”

Shane said nothing. We walked on silently, and I felt dirty. I felt so dirty that I craved a hot shower.

Most of my guys were downstairs in the lounge, sitting around, chatting, playing pool

and table soccer, but I moved past them to the upper floor and my and Shane's bedroom. I told Shane I would shower and didn't wait for a reply.

The bathroom was amazing, and I turned on all of the showerheads at once as soon as I had stripped off my clothes.

Water poured from above and sprayed me from three sides, heating up the bathroom and filling it with a cloud of steam.

My head remained as foggy as it had been at the bar, my vision narrow and mind scattered.

It was only when I dried myself and put on my underwear and an old pair of shorts and stepped into the bedroom that all the fog cleared.

The moment made me think that simplicity was a literal, tangible thing, like an object you placed in your space that filtered out all your doubts and insecurities.

Shane sat in the bed, wearing a T-shirt, his legs covered by the thick duvet, a book open in his lap, and locks of messy hair falling over his glasses to obscure his vision.

He was bathed in the soft glow of the reading lamp on top of his nightstand, and I pressed my hand against the frame of the bathroom door as if to steady myself once the weight lifted off my chest. The lightness of standing here, of simply being , made my knees click.

All the diverging paths fell off. The spur of jealousy that had made me drag him away from someone who'd finally paid him a shred of attention, the relentless attempts to distance myself from him, the fear that I would take him, dismantle him, and never find a way to put him back together, it all dropped away.

Only one way forward remained, and it coiled itself around my waist, my chest, my throat, and my wrists.

It tugged me forward, but I resisted even now, so it tightened around me until it felt like it would suffocate me.

I didn't know how much this changed things.

I didn't know if I dared to do anything.

But there were some facts I couldn't ignore.

No, I wasn't straight. And yes, I wanted Shane.

Just knowing as much defined me, grounded me in reality rather than letting me float away into the endless, worrisome possibilities.

Shane lifted his gaze off the pages of his book, looking right into my eyes, and I knew I was seen.

Not in the way I'd been dying for all this time, to be seen at my best, my greatest, my handsomest, my strongest, and my most talented.

Not like that at all. He saw the core of me, the very soul which I often doubted existed.

His book lay in his lap, abandoned, and he folded his lips shortly before parting them a little.

I took a step toward the bed, but sleep was a long-forgotten dream. "Shane, I'm sorry," I said.

His eyebrows lifted hopefully. His entire face lit up. “What for?”

I swallowed the clump of guilt choking me. “I shouldn’t have dragged you away. Ian could have been your first, and I ruined it. It was a stupid mistake.”

For the rest of the night, I wondered what I’d said to wipe away every hint of glimmering hope from his face. His eyes went out like a campfire’s last embers at the crack of dawn. His warmth was extinguished. “That’s okay. He was probably just interested in one thing.”

Shane picked up the book again, and I could see the walls rising around him. He was lost to me.

ELEVEN

SHANE

Sleeping next to Patrick that night was easier than I could have hoped. He'd exhibited the same lack of interest and the same friendly distance as ever, which meant I didn't need to fret.

He crossed the room and slipped under the cover.

His shorts were terribly short, and I couldn't stop myself from glancing at his defined quads in the moment before he hid them from sight.

His torso, as stunning as Michelangelo's David, was only an anatomical thing.

Yeah, I could appreciate the aesthetic, but I knew just how closed those doors were to me.

What did it matter that I slept next to a semi-naked Greek god when he didn't want me?

And Patrick made it a point to put across.

Even so, drifting asleep had an overwhelming power of grasping the last threads of reality and braiding them with dreams. Still awake, I conjured the image of Patrick exactly as he was, lying behind my back, into an eager and passionate lover.

The snapshot was so powerful that I felt it entering me, my body desperate to coil, fingers itching to sink into something soft, toes curling until my foot was about to cramp.

I woke up to a ray of sunshine screaming into my pupils, burning away whatever dreams had left me breathless, and grew suddenly aware of the boiling warmth behind my back.

The searing spot was my lower back, where I could feel my T-shirt had lifted in my sleep.

That heat was not a branding rod or a pile of coals but flesh.

His flesh. His body pressed against mine like someone had stacked us together with a purpose.

I couldn't decide whether I had woken up painfully hard from some lost dream or if the heat of his barely covered body pressed against my back did the trick, but I knew I wasn't getting up soon. The coiling arm tossed over my middle wasn't helping, either.

My breath grew shallow, and my throat was too tight to let me inhale any better. Even in his sleep, he found a way to torment me. Yet instead of slipping from under his arm and disappearing into the bathroom until this terrible erection went away, I sank deeper into the mattress and Patrick's arm.

He exhaled, his warm breath caressing my bare neck, a tiny little snore escaping him, and I squeezed my eyes shut in hopes of sliding back into my dreams.

I failed.

My heart was beating too fast, and my body was running too hot to let me sleep.

I matched my breathing to Patrick's and took effort to remember what it felt like to be spooned from the back.

I doubted I'd get to feel this anytime soon.

I simply didn't have what it took to move from wanting to having these things.

The gap between my desire and my ability to demand its fulfillment could fit an ocean.

It was Patrick who came to his senses first. If I had nurtured some silly little idea that he would wake up and let his hand drift down the length of my torso, denying me my indecision and taking the reins, it didn't happen.

"Fuck, you should get a part-time job as a body pillow," Patrick crackled as he turned onto his back. "Sorry about that."

It wasn't until I said, "Uh, it's fine," that I realized just how dry my throat was.

Patrick had no problem getting up and strolling into the bathroom.

My gaze drifted down, but he was already facing away from me, and if there was anything to see, I missed it.

Instead, I gazed at his back, shoulders swinging, waist narrow, ass hugged by the shorts that seemed even tighter this morning.

When he reemerged, my crisis was averted, but only for a moment.

His blue eyes glimmered with droplets of water still clinging to his ridiculously long eyelashes, as if he'd splashed his face and decided not to bother with the towel.

He strutted around the room as I hopped out of bed and rushed into the bathroom to brush my teeth.

My head was spinning. There was another night ahead of us, and I just didn't think I could hold myself together. I was splitting by the seams.

Thankfully, the day was a busy one. All morning was a buzz of activity.

The owners of the house had put out a huge breakfast, anticipating the hunger these young athletes seemed to possess at all times.

A mandatory hour of rest followed, so I carried my books to the living room and found a nice spot on the window bench to read and take notes.

After that, everyone went to the gym together, but the workout was not a demanding one.

I strapped the smartwatch to Patrick's wrist, but I almost didn't need to bother with it.

It was after the workout that Patrick and I had a debriefing session in a café across the street from the house while the other guys went in to rest.

Patrick talked about the excitement more than anything, but he didn't seem willing to touch on the anticipation. Worse still, he wouldn't even hint at the pressure.

This was their first game against the Arctic Titans in Detroit.

The Titans would come to Chicago for a game a month from now, and it sucked that

the Saints had to play on someone else's turf when they had a history of losing to this team.

If there were such things as archenemies, the Titans fit the bill.

The rink was packed this evening, and Patrick still seemed to be keeping his cool.

There was a general sense of anticipation in the locker room.

It felt a little like watching a medieval fantasy movie, and this was the eve of battle.

Guys sat on their benches, checking that their gear was strapped on correctly, holding their sticks, stretching their calves, nervously humming, or simply moving around in circles.

Easton gave a little speech of encouragement, but it didn't shift the mood in the locker room.

It was interesting to observe my own feelings in the middle of it all. The tension wasn't reserved for the players. Even the animosity towards the Titans spilled over to me.

I could be developing a bias , I thought. Remaining impartial was far more difficult than I'd ever imagined.

When the game began, Patrick sat calmly on the bench, waiting for his turn, but I watched with fervor. The crowd was not on our side, cheering on their home team rather than offering some support for the enemy.

The Titans were led by a fast and fiery guy, Phoenix, who had a prominent tattoo covering his neck and a skill on the ice that matched Patrick's.

He knew how to get his guys going, and the Titans dealt a devastating blow to the Saints in the first round.

The period ended with an abyss between the two teams.

When Patrick entered the game in the second period, after Coach Webber and Easton agreed on a new strategy, it seemed like it was too late.

The blow to their confidence was almost too much to salvage.

The battle was fierce. The gap was too big.

Patrick blazed like a wildfire, lighting up the night sky, baiting, switching, and dancing on the ice like it was a game of life and death.

I had never seen him so furious and passionate at the same time.

He was a storm that could make you believe in gods because only Zeus or Odin could have imbued him with such rage.

I was so engrossed in the game that I struggled to remember to take notes. Aside from the welling admiration for Patrick's skill, I couldn't hide from the sneaking feeling of envy. It sat there, deep in my chest, eating away at my soul.

I wanted to be out there, to feel the ice under my blades, to feel the thrill of that moment when you tried your best to evade the beast hurtling toward you.

I clutched the notebook and heard myself cheering on the Saints as they closed the gap between them and the Titans.

At the last minute, Elio rallied the Saints and brought them to a tie.

If they were riding a wind of hope, it was soon eviscerated. Coach Webber sent out the best of the best into the third period, but the Titans did the same thing. It was like a clash of gods, of beings that were superior to me in every way.

The tug-of-war left me wrecked as the teams deadlocked, upending one another every few minutes to an increasingly more tense crowd.

It was in the very last minutes of the game, with the Titans leading, that Easton brought them to a tie.

The Titans returned with a vengeance, wanting their win both for what it would do to their team morale and for the sake of the tradition of beating the Saints.

My heart banged against my rib cage as I watched Patrick move through the ranks, his signature moves all on display like he wanted to be predictable.

He swung left and right, slipping the puck under his stick and revealing it in unexpected moments, facing guys twice his size and sliding between them like they were unmoving monoliths.

But he headed straight for Phoenix, who was just as quick and ruthless.

It felt like my heart had climbed into my throat. My speeding pulse pounded inside my skull.

Phoenix went straight for Patrick with no chance of taking the puck off Patrick and the Saints' defense and with no Titans nearby to offer him help. He was on a destructive mission just to prevent the Saints from winning.

Patrick had had this in the bag until Phoenix landed in front of him and sent them both crashing into the boards, the puck skidding away in Patrick's last act of fury.

My gaze skipped from the puck to the mess of limbs slamming against the boards.

A pained expression on Patrick's face broke my heart, but the crowd erupted in boos, and I looked at Elio, snatching the puck and sending it straight between the goalie's legs, breaking the endless, grueling tie and winning the Saints an unlikely, unprecedented win.

Patrick stumbled to his feet while Phoenix skated away furiously. The buzz of joy roared from the ice as the Saints gathered in the middle, the ones on the benches pouring into the rink, and my vision blurred with genuine tears of joy.

Across the rink, skating like one of the furies, Patrick lifted his head, his gaze spotting me instantly. The grin he wore in that moment was bigger and warmer than any I had ever seen.

TWELVE

SHANE

The Saints carried Patrick on their shoulders out of the locker room and out of the rink. He had sacrificed himself for the team rather than chasing his own glory, and the guys knew it. I had never seen him so happy.

He beamed through the night, glancing at me with red, glossy eyes and red cheeks, letting his gaze linger, letting his lips pause in a brilliant smile.

It took my breath away each time, and each time, I told myself not to be silly.

He had made their first win against the Titans possible at the risk of his own well-being.

He deserved to beam like a lighthouse. It didn't mean anything.

Oddly enough, Patrick was the first to pick himself up from the joined tables and ask me if I wanted to head back.

"Don't you want to celebrate?" I asked.

"We have time to celebrate," Patrick said. "This is just the beginning."

If winning streaks were this ephemeral thing of part talent and part magic, the Saints had captured one and expected it to last.

Yes, I wanted to go back with Patrick. And no, I didn't think his invitation was anything beyond kindness.

He wouldn't leave me with a crowd of semi-familiar guys, that was all.

And I could make his heart explode in his chest every time I undressed him shamelessly with my eyes, but it didn't mean he would ever leap across the canyon between us.

Patrick and I waved the guys goodbye and headed out of the sports bar near the Northwood campus. It would be a walk to the house, but I welcomed it. The cold air made me pull my head between my shoulders, and my jacket bundled around me.

Patrick's breath was misty when he spoke. "Do you want to go back to that bar across the street?"

My frown furrowed my brow. "We just left a bar."

Patrick chuckled as if I'd said a joke. "Ian could be there."

I clenched my teeth and looked ahead. I'd accepted a lot of truths about this relationship in the last few days, but I couldn't see why he would have to rub it in.

"What?" Patrick asked, his tone half-amused. Mocking? I hated to think so, but the thought welled to the forefront of my mind.

"I don't want Ian," I said coldly.

"Jeez, alright," Patrick said, snort-chuckling to soften the edges of the tension that crystallized between us. "Can you blame me for wanting to help a friend out?"

I looked at him, shoulder to shoulder with me, and wondered if he picked these things to say on purpose.

We turned the corner and walked down the street, where our bed-and-breakfast was.

The bar across the street was lively and radiating warmth, but it didn't cross my mind to go in. "Is that what you're doing?" I asked.

Patrick's dark eyebrows trembled into a small frown. "What else?"

I swallowed the words that came up first. Maybe you're deflecting from the fact that you're attracted to me.

Maybe you're pretending like you don't know I'm attracted to you.

Maybe you think you're giving me a clear, painless rejection, but you should know that it hurts just the same. I said none of that. "You tell me."

Patrick shook his head. "Are you...analyzing me?"

I rolled my eyes and trudged on toward the house. Patrick produced his keys first as he entered the small front yard and walked up to the front door.

"I was gonna be your wingman, that's all," Patrick said. "I figured it would make you happy. Hell, I can sleep on the sofa if you wanna do it on the home turf."

My cheeks burst aflame. "I'm not that desperate to reel in any guy who looks at me," I said.

Before unlocking the door, he turned to me and lifted his hands in defense. "I never said you were. Christ, Shane, I thought you said you wanted to get it over with."

“I changed my mind,” I said.

“Fine. Fine.” He looked at me, still not opening the front door, and his gaze wandered over my face as if he were searching for something. “I’m sorry I brought it up. I misunderstood. It’s totally cool if you want your first time to be special.”

I swallowed again, but this time, there were no impulsive words I needed to hold back. “I do want it to be special,” I said. “And I want to be done with it, too.”

“Well, you’ll meet someone you like soon, I bet,” Patrick said, his gaze dropping to my lips. He couldn’t look into my eyes when he said that.

I nodded. “I just hope he doesn’t get my hopes up, then step back all the damn time.”

Patrick’s face hardened as he lifted his surprised gaze to my eyes. “What?”

“You know, tease and let go,” I said, unable to keep the accusation out of my voice.

“I don’t...” His frown deepened, and his gaze cooled.

He cocked his head to one side as his cheeks heated up.

He took a small step back, inching toward the door, but I stared at him evenly.

Finally, he licked his lips and found a deep voice that carried all his warmth and quiet fury. “Don’t play games with me, Shane.”

“Or what?” What did I have to lose? My project. Let the project go to hell. I was sick of it anyway. I would find a way to explain its sudden end somehow. I just wasn’t cut out to be a researcher. I couldn’t be impartial when I fell for the subject of my research.

“I don’t like it,” Patrick said.

“Seriously?” I asked. To say I was shocked would be an understatement. “I don’t like being teased if it isn’t going anywhere.”

“You think I did that?” Patrick asked. “I’m...I...”

“Your pulse goes crazy when you’re around me,” I said.

The realization that this was a terrible mistake came to me a moment after the words were out, but my course was charted for me.

I clenched my fists and went on. “When we’re in the locker room, when you take your clothes off, when I do it, it looks like a panic attack. Don’t deny it.”

Patrick’s face was awash with horror. “You can see that?” He lifted his hand a little, the smartwatch strapped to his wrist, a little traitor.

I took a step back by instinct. Every code of conduct, every rule of ethics, every shred of basic decency went out the window. He knew that I knew. But at what cost? He knew what a cheat I was, too. Guilt rippled over me, and I stepped toward him. “Patrick, I’m...” Sorry .

I never got to say the last word. Patrick’s hand shot between us, and the world spun sideways. He clutched my jacket as we stepped around one another, and the door slammed into my back.

A huff of surprise and impact left my lungs, but it didn’t go far. My breath, warm and misty, went right into Patrick’s mouth as he slammed his lips against mine.

I didn’t remember to close my eyes.

I didn't remember to keep breathing.

Pinned against the door, trapped in Patrick's grip, I parted my lips and felt him.

I felt all of him. His lips dragging over my mouth, his body rubbing against mine, his leg pushing in between my legs to feel my devastatingly hard cock, and his tongue venturing between my lips.

As he exhaled through his nose, mist rose between our heated faces, but I was barely aware of it.

All I knew was that a guy had just kissed me and that it was hotter and infinitely more furious than I had imagined in my wildest fantasies.

My chest trembled and my knees clicked, but he held me against the door, kissing me for what felt like an eternity, except that only a heartbeat or two had passed. And when he pulled his head back and opened his eyes, they weren't icy at all. "Is this what you want?" he asked.

"If you..."

"No," Patrick said in a softer voice. "I'm asking what you want.

" He held me in place just the same, even as he stepped back.

His hand remained on my chest, although his gaze alone would have kept me nailed to the door.

"You think I was teasing you just to take it away? Okay. And what were you doing, Shane? 'Cause every time I thought you wanted me, you shut down, but you carried out your little experiment anyway. Talk about teasing."

“Patrick, I’m sorry,” I said.

“Sure. But you owe me an answer,” he said. “This...do you want it? Or is it just a test?”

“It’s not a test,” I said.

“Say the words,” he said. His voice had gone from quiet anger to an irresistible temptation.

I reached for his jacket, pulling him toward me, groping and struggling to keep my fingers from trembling. “I want it,” I said, desperation far louder than I’d hoped. “It’s all I think about. You’re all I think about, Patrick.”

Patrick took an easy step toward me, but instead of kissing me again, I heard the distinct sound of the key sliding into the lock and turning.

The door opened behind my back, and a spark of mischief lit up Patrick’s face.

“The house is empty,” he said, a combination of excitement and naughtiness painting his voice the most irresistible colors.

His hand dropped from my chest and grabbed my hand, yanking me into the house as he hurried before me. My heartbeat was the only thing I heard as he stumbled and raced up the stairs and into our room.

Patrick flicked on only some of the lights, a pro doing what he did best, but I froze as the door of our bedroom closed. “Er, I...”

“Don’t tell me you’re changing your mind,” Patrick said, his chest heaving as he ripped his jacket off and let it fall on the floor.

“No,” I assured him. “It’s not that. I...I need to...” I looked at the bathroom. “Can you wait a minute?”

I could see the realization light up behind his eyes. It was almost like relief to some degree. “Oh,” he said, and his mouth formed the shape of that sound. He laughed. “Of course. Take your time.”

And I did. I wasn’t risking a freaking accident on my first try, especially not with Patrick. With Patrick , I thought, my heart fluttering like a newborn butterfly on its first flight. I couldn’t believe it. I had stepped through the looking glass and into a realm of the impossible.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

When I put my clothes on and took a few steps toward the bathroom door, my heart seemed to beat in my throat, and I closed my eyes.

There was a chance I would step out there and find Patrick fiddling with his phone, looking at me awkwardly and apologizing for changing his mind.

Hell, he might not even be there. I didn't know how long I'd been in the bathroom; I just knew I'd seen him naked before, and if my hunch was right, I needed to be ready.

Whatever was out there, I had to stay calm.

I opened the door, light and steam pouring into the bedroom, and my eyes almost popped out with shock.

Every empty surface, every scrap of table or nightstand, was covered with candles, their wild scents of orange, cinnamon, rose, apple, leather, chocolate, and vanilla filling the room until it felt like walking through a tangible thickness of scents.

Patrick stood in the far corner of the room, arms crossed on his chest, chin high, and gaze sharp. "It's all the candles I could find," he said.

I looked around again. "It's about a million more than I'd expected."

He bit his lower lip hard and let his arms drop to his sides. He still wore his black shirt, a few top buttons undone for a roguish look, light cream pants tight on his muscled legs, chest rising high with each breath. "You didn't...change your mind, did you?"

I wanted to laugh, but only a nervous breath escaped me. I shook my head. “No, I didn’t.”

Those three words gave him confidence. I could see that each step closer was firmer, more decisive, until he stopped a pace away from me.

It was like he had walked away from a shadow of doubts and stood before me with nothing but decision.

His gaze scanned me slowly, and I tucked my hands into my pockets, not sure if I needed to do something to move this along.

“You’re already hard,” Patrick said, his voice a little cheeky.

I snorted. “Are you trying to embarrass me?”

“You tested me,” Patrick said, but it wasn’t an accusation. There was almost a note of respect in his voice. “You took my pulse every time we were alone and in, ah, risky situations.”

I shook my head, hating that he was still talking about this. But he had every right. Except he wasn’t making me face the ethical breaches; he was teasing me.

“That’s kinda hot,” Patrick said, his voice dropping half an octave lower, raspy and husky, the last word crackling with possibilities.

“What do you think you’ll see now?” he asked, baring his wrist to show me the smartwatch.

“A smart guy like you, looking at data tomorrow like it’s a dirty photo,” he said, close to laughing. “Wanna find out?”

My mouth was dry and throat tight with tension, but it wasn't the bad kind. Hell, I lived for this feeling now. I wanted him to keep going. I wanted him to stretch me so thinly that I would be ready to snap. "Yes," I said, my voice barely louder than a whisper.

Patrick lit up a little. "Take your clothes off," he said. "Let me see you." A shiver passed over him, and I could see the spike in his heartbeat without downloading the data from the watch.

"Won't you kiss me first?" I asked.

Whatever it was—pleading, asserting, yearning—it made Patrick's eyes shine brighter.

He reached over, his hand closing around my hoodie, and pulled me in.

His lips touched mine, a far sweeter kiss than the raw inability to resist the temptation downstairs.

He kissed me softly, his tongue slipping just between my lips, and he lifted his head a little, just enough to be out of my reach.

"I'm gonna kiss every inch of you if you do as I say," he said.

Oh, fuck, I thought, my knees buckling.

Patrick stepped back, his eyes hungry for it.

I didn't hesitate anymore. I took the edge of my hoodie and pulled it over my head, replacing my glasses as soon as the hoodie was off.

I didn't wear an undershirt. It was just me, tall, slim, lanky as fuck, but something in Patrick's eyes glimmered with unfiltered desire.

He wanted me like this. There was no mistaking it.

"Your pants," he said, his gaze dragging slowly down my torso to where my cock bulged toward my right hip.

My pants were baggy and loose. I undid one button, and they opened, sliding easily down my legs and leaving me in my dark blue briefs. The seam along my leg was lifted off the flesh with how hard I was and how far the fabric was stretched.

I stepped out of my pants as Patrick bit his lower lip, his gaze caressing my cock. I'd expected at least a little uncertainty from him, but there was none. Not anymore.

"Now you," I said.

The corners of his lips ticked up, and he nodded.

"Fair enough." He undid the buttons of his shirt, one after another, and so slowly that I wanted to cross the space between us and rip it apart.

Flesh revealed itself inch by grueling inch, until Patrick shrugged the shirt off his shoulders and let it fold on the floor.

He was divine, but that was no surprise.

Taut skin stretched over the firm muscles of his torso, and I followed their curves all the way to his Apollo's belt.

He didn't need me to ask; he pulled the belt out of his pants and took them off,

bending down to drag them over his feet, then straightening to reveal that the bulge in his bright red boxer briefs was as fierce and excited as mine, if significantly bigger.

My throat tightened with a mix of surprise and devastating lust.

Patrick grinned. “You first,” he said.

I scoff-chuckled. It was an immature, childish game, but I played it anyway. I hooked my thumbs inside my underwear, but an alarm went off and made my heart drop.

Patrick glanced at the watch on his wrist and laughed. “Look at that,” he said. An alert was flashing a warning that his heartbeat was too high, proposing to call the emergency hotline.

Instead of undressing, I stepped closer to Patrick and took his hand in both of mine. “I don’t need this data, Patrick. I know you want me.”

He shot me a surprisingly shy look as I stripped off the watch from his wrist and tossed it on the nightstand by the cluster of candles.

I was glad the undressing game was over now.

I stepped even closer, sliding my arms under his and wrapping them around his torso.

My hands went to his upper back, and I pulled him into a close, tight hug.

His body was like a furnace, and I could feel his heart beating against my chest.

Patrick held me, too. He held me tightly, rubbing his body against mine with every little move, and I just about went mad with desire.

“I’m nervous. This is crazy,” he said, voice cracking.

“It’s all new for you, too,” I said. “First time with a guy.”

He pulled away from me just enough to look into my eyes. “It’s not that. I got over that weeks ago. It’s just...” He licked his lips and lifted his hands to cup my cheeks. “I want this to be good for you.”

“How could it be anything other than that?” I asked in a whisper.

It was encouragement enough. Patrick leaned in, kissing me gently on the lips, his eyes closing as he inhaled in the middle of it, as if drawing the very essence of me into his lungs.

I remembered to close my eyes this time.

It was so much better that way. There were no shimmering lights to distract me from how tasty he was, from how much I liked his cologne, from the warmth of each of his fingertips, his torso, his leg between mine.

Nothing to distract me from the very present sensation of his hard cock pressed between our bodies.

We inched toward the bed until I felt the edge of the mattress behind my knees.

I sank on it lightly, Patrick leaning down and not letting it break the kiss.

His lips pressed harder against mine, his body towering over mine as he pushed me down on my back and lay flat on top of me.

His hands went from my face to my arms and down their length to my wrists until he

closed his fists around them.

He lifted my hands above my head and pinned them down with an unbreakable hold, kissing me evenly throughout.

And when the shivers ran down my arms and into my torso, he kissed me just the same.

“Weeks ago?” I whispered between the kisses, my chest shuddering with a unique cocktail of desire and fear.

Patrick lifted his head and looked into my eyes. “Weeks and weeks.”

I nodded, although it made no sense. “You never said a word.”

“You knew anyway,” he said.

My chest rose with a breath and touched his chest. His abs pressed down on my stomach.

“I needed time,” Patrick said and leaned in. He kissed the tip of my nose. “I had to be sure.”

I nodded, then lifted my chin a little and kissed him back.

I wondered what I had been afraid of all this time.

I had imagined such awkwardness and uncertainty around sex.

Not in my fantasies, of course; I was always very confident in my fantasies.

But when the fantasies passed, the cold shower of reality would remind me that I wasn't so sure of myself and that the real thing would be terribly weird.

With Patrick kissing me slowly, almost lazily, there didn't seem to be a thing to worry about.

He held my crossed wrists with his left hand and dragged his right down the length of my left arm.

He kissed me when I wiggled, the tickling sensation enhanced by the fact I was trapped, and kissed me still when the tickles passed.

His fingers trailed the length of my ribcage, and his lips moved on from mine to kiss my neck instead.

The neck kisses made me antsy. I wiggled again, but his hand and his weight held me in place. I craned my neck to defend myself, but Patrick only chuckled. "This tickles you?"

I knew I was screwed. "Yeah," I admitted.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

His tongue pressed hard against the bottom of my neck and dragged hotly up its length all the way to my ear, leaving a blazing trail of dampness, followed quickly by Patrick's breezy breath. The sensation of hot and cold made my eyes roll back in my skull and my heart race faster.

I thrust my hips up for the sheer need to do something against the torrent of new sensations. My stomach pressed harder against Patrick's, and my cock throbbed under the pressure of our bodies grinding against one another.

Patrick's right hand slipped lower, sliding to my ass and feeling it over my underwear. "Fuck," he purred. "I've been dying to know what it feels like."

I wanted to tell him it probably felt like nothing. A bony ass on a skinny twink couldn't be a nice squeeze, right? But Patrick shuddered as his fingers sank into my flesh.

"So fucking firm," he grunted into my neck. "I bet you're tight as fuck."

His words broke something in me, some obstacle I hadn't even known was there, and I let out a moan.

It was a genuine reaction to his dirty language and to his naughty fingers.

They moved closer to the middle, feeling the curve of my cheek until he reached the space between.

I wished I had taken my underwear off when he'd asked.

Feeling the pressure on my hole over the soft fabric of my underwear made my chest fill with air until I seemed so light and empty that I could float away.

Patrick growled against my neck, kissing and licking and sucking it while thrusting his fingers deeper and harder between my cheeks. I felt it all so closely, so intimately, and begged him quietly to tear my briefs off; I needed his skin on mine, his fingertips on my hole, his mouth around my cock.

God, would he do that? I hoped so.

I pulled my hands free as Patrick lowered himself to my collarbone, kissing its length on one side and then on the other, fulfilling his first promise to me.

I'm gonna kiss every inch of you . His lips left a blazing trail behind as he moved lower and lower, sucking my left nipple and biting it playfully just as he squeezed my ass harder.

A high-pitched moan ripped free from my throat. I slapped my hands on Patrick's back, my nails scratching his skin and my toes curling in ecstasy.

Patrick kept going, mercilessly kissing and licking my body on his slow journey down.

And when his lips grazed the edge of my briefs, his chin touching my cock in passing and setting my body on fire, I almost lost it.

The candles glimmered in my blurring vision as Patrick made a soft, excited sound in his throat, lifting the waistband of my briefs over my cock.

I felt far more naked than I was, if such a thing was possible.

I had never felt anything like it. Still, the awkwardness I expected was not knocking on the door.

With Patrick, it just felt natural. I wasn't embarrassed by the fact that I was hard as a rock or shivering under every touch.

I wasn't ashamed of my perfectly average size or the thought that he would notice I had shaved before coming on this trip.

It didn't bother me that he would see my cock was wet with precum or that I couldn't string three coherent words anymore.

And most importantly of all, I didn't think I was so unattractive after all.

He liked me. He liked me so much that he kissed all of me, touched all of me, and still wanted more.

Perhaps it was no such thing as being universally attractive. Perhaps all there was in the end was just one person and the way they saw you.

Patrick made me feel hot. He made me feel sexy and flirtatious and wildly horny. And if that was all he ever did to me, I would walk out of this room a happy guy.

But that wasn't all.

Patrick yanked my underwear down and purred deep in his throat. "Fuck, Shane," he said. "Can I suck your dick?" He let out a short chuckle, probably surprised by the shape of those words on his lips.

I breathed the words, one after the other, unable to inhale enough oxygen for two at a time.

“Yes. Please.” And they were enough. Patrick wiggled down the length of the bed and knelt between my legs, his lips caressing the skin of my abdomen and the very short hair that had begun to appear around my dick in the last two days.

His left hand wrapped around my cock while he moved his right from my ass to my hip and finally to my abs.

The pressure of my abs distracted me for a moment. He touched me there so firmly that my attention flicked to it in the same instant as his heated lips closed around the tip of my cock.

As he went down, taking an inch or two of me into his warm, wet mouth, he moved his hands to his boxer briefs and dragged them down to his knees.

The whole world became a blur, like watercolors in a rainstorm, except for the blond head sinking down the length of my cock.

The way he knelt, I could see the top of his head, his broad, bare shoulders, his narrowing back, and the steep incline that led to his peach-like ass.

I could see the curves of his cheeks rising high and falling toward the middle, and I could imagine clearly what he looked like from behind.

Patrick’s hands returned to my body, rising slowly up my legs, feeling my inner thighs while he bobbed his head in tiny motions, never letting my cock slip out of my mouth.

I didn’t know what a good head was. I didn’t have anything to compare it to.

Just from guessing, I’d have imagined this was rookie for both of us, and I knew I couldn’t do any better when we switched.

And with all that said, Patrick's mouth taking my dick was the best sensation of my entire life.

It wasn't all about the physical sensation at all; the blossoming feeling of unity between two vastly different souls in this strange, binding ritual brought me closer to Patrick than I thought was possible.

He did something to me, for me, and it made the edges of our beings touch. Connect.

The contact produced a spark, which was no wonder, considering how charged our souls were, and the spark was a lightning rod. It streamed through me like a current and ripped the bonds away from my limbs.

I grabbed Patrick's hand and pulled him down, making him produce a choking sound, followed quickly by the welling sense of success. Ramming myself a little deeper into him, bringing myself a little closer to him, it filled me with even more desire.

I didn't just want him to suck my dick, to give me pleasure. I wanted us both to touch this incredible, unreachable thing.

I wanted him to know what this felt like.

Patrick's hands rose higher up my thighs as his head went up and down my cock, each thrust a little better, each dip a little lower.

When he moved the fingers of his right hand under my balls and touched my taint, I felt the tension run through him.

Even his mouth grew a little stiffer, but it relaxed in a moment, and his fingers traveled a bit lower.

There.

I gasped and choked all at once. His fingers passed over my hole, making me feel so taut and strung that I was ready to tear apart. It was just a passing touch, a caress of the curious, but it made itself known in every corner of my body.

My fingers curled in Patrick's hair as he pressed his finger against my hole a little harder.

The strangeness of it was just as jarring as the sheer pleasure.

The growing intimacy between us, two guys who had had all the reasons not to do this, touching one another in ways they had never been touched. That was a bond I couldn't ignore.

But Patrick's naughty finger did more than tease. It brought me so close to the edge that I had to yank Patrick away from my cock. No matter how good it felt and how tempting it was, I didn't dare let him drag his tongue up the length of my cock. I was far too close to breaking.

I heaved a deep breath of air, and Patrick moved his hands away, lifting his head and shooting me a teary-eyed look that clashed with a proud smile on his lips. "Huh? Was that...wrong?"

"What? No," I huffed. "Not wrong at all. It was perfect. Too perfect."

He blinked in surprise. "Oh. Awesome."

I lifted myself up to sit and looked down at the gorgeous relief of Patrick's torso. His underwear was still around his knees, and as he straightened his back, I watched his dick rise and extend.

He was painfully beautiful in all his naked glory.

With the dancing lights and shadows from the restless candles, the depth of contours between Patrick's muscles changed endlessly, and I followed the lines to his Apollo's belt and lower, over the smooth skin of his abdomen to his big dick and heavy balls, all swaying at every movement of his body.

His cock curved lightly, and as I reached to touch his chest, it throbbed, springing up and swaying faster.

"Fuck," I whispered, half in awe and half-afraid. "I didn't think you were that big."

"Don't worry," he said. "I'm not an expert, but I'm pretty sure I know how to take it slowly."

If he were the one taking it slowly, I wouldn't worry at all, but I was afraid I would end up disappointing him after all.

Patrick covered my hand with his, dragging it just a little closer to his heart, and inched toward me.

He kissed me deeply, almost lovingly, and my body buzzed with the realization that the scent on his tongue and lips was my own.

He kissed me reassuringly, coming close to me until our bodies pressed together.

His dick pulsed between our abdomens, and mine throbbed against his leg.

It was real, all of it, and he wanted us to do more.

He wasn't freaking out, not with kissing a guy or sucking a dick or comforting a

virgin boy whose eyes may have been hungrier than he could handle.

“I want to suck you,” I said.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

He bit his lip against a rising grin and sat down, leaning a little back, the room behind him in partial darkness, only the glow of the candles from the little table fighting against the shadows.

I planted my lips on Patrick's solar plexus, blown away that I could even do that, and dragged myself down while remembering what each of his muscles felt like under the tip of my tongue.

I'd loved the feeling when he had done it to me.

It felt like a sacrilegious sort of worship—a worship of his body, of what he had made himself into, and of the things he could do to me.

It was a tribute at the altar of the highest, most divine force in the universe, the only force I could believe in—the force of human nature, of psyche, of our desperate longing to connect.

Patrick leaned further back, arms spreading behind his torso, supporting his slow descent, and I went on kissing and licking his body until my lips were at the base of his cock.

I followed it.

I felt naughty for doing it, and it thrilled me as much as anything we had done to one another. It exhilarated me to climb his length with my lips, inch by inch, until I found the swollen, wet tip of his dick right under my tongue.

My mouth gaped wide as I tried to take him in, not sure how wide it needed to go. My whole sense of perspective was wrong, though, because I could close my lips just fine around the head of his cock, and if I settled my tongue against the underside, I could even lower my head a little.

His thickness rubbed against the foot of my mouth, and Patrick grunted, his abs shuddering visibly. He held his breath as I lifted my head a little and tried again, reaching as far as the very top of my throat, but no more.

I'd seen it in videos, guys with their heads hanging off the edge of the bed, taking these monstrous things so deep that you could almost see the movement of the throat.

I had never imagined it was easy and never fooled myself into thinking I could do it, but a sudden flash of envy filled me, followed by stubbornness, and I dipped my head lower, forcing my throat to accept him.

Patrick sprawled on his back, legs spread out around me, and I wrapped my fingers around the base of his cock. I couldn't take him all in, even if I had all night to practice, but I could make him feel good.

I stroked him and sucked him, trying to keep my movements in sync and failing every other heartbeat. I let myself savor the fact that I was even doing this. He tasted of salt and honey, his scent a mix of pine-scented bodywash and a deep, irresistible musk.

My free hand slapped Patrick's chest, feeling his round, swollen pec and the small, hard nipple at its lower edge.

I held him there, fingers sinking into his muscle, while my head moved up and down the length of his cock.

If I'd managed to take half of him, it was a success, but I doubted my estimate was

correct.

My hand stroked him mercilessly, tightening and relaxing to make up for all else I lacked.

It was only after the roaring hum of my own blood had faded away that I heard Patrick's heavy breathing, his deep moans, his occasional panting for air.

I looked, seeing only the shape and the blur of lights after I had taken my glasses off, and I was certain that his chest was rising and falling rapidly and that his hands clutched the comforter under us like it was all that tethered him to the bed.

"Ah, fuck, Shane, I...I can't..." A half whimper cut off his words, and he sucked in a shallow breath of air. "Can't keep it..."

I instantly knew what he meant, although it was hard to believe I had done something so wild to him that he couldn't keep it back. I stopped, feeling now so clearly how rapidly his dick was pulsing in my hand and against my tongue. If he came, I wanted to taste it.

But only shaky breaths left Patrick's lips in the next few moments. "Fuck, that was close," he said and laughed. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

I frowned. "Do what?"

"Edge someone," he said.

I didn't want to tell him that I had done something similar to myself a fair number of times—that sounded like a lame foreplay talk—so I just chuckled. "Dunno. It felt right." And it was true. I hadn't realized I had been doing it to him at all.

“Well,” Patrick exhaled and sat up. “It felt incredible.” I could see the brilliance of his smile even without my glasses. When he was close enough, only the rest of the universe was blurry. “Let me make you feel good, Shane.”

I was about to tell him he’d already done it, but Patrick was already moving around the bed.

“Lie down like that,” he said, meaning on my front, and I did.

I was nervous as hell, knowing the moment was coming, and I feared I just couldn’t take what he had to give me.

My experience was limited to an average-sized rubber dildo on occasion and one terrible time when I’d been tempted by a large cucumber that had only succeeded in causing a brief flash of pain before embarrassment took over and I quit fooling around with vegetables.

The things we learned from porn weren’t always representative of reality, was my empirically tested hypothesis.

And yet I’m in bed with a hung god, acting like I know what’s what , I thought.

But as Patrick settled over me, he didn’t try to enter me. I was sure I heard him mutter, “Can’t be that different,” at some point as he knelt behind me and between my spread legs.

His lips touched the back of my neck, kissing me slowly while his hands played with my ass. He pressed my cheeks together for a playful spike of tension, then massaged them apart and brought them together again. It went on and on while his lips followed my spine all the way to my lower back.

“Ready?” he asked, his breath hot on my skin, and I moaned my assent.

Nothing could have prepared me for it. Not toys or cucumbers or my own finger, not the videos or fantasies. When Patrick’s warm, wet tongue touched me there, my soul left my body.

His grip on my ass was firm, a comfort of sorts, and his tongue was direct, unafraid.

He licked me, dragging his tongue over my hole until every nerve in my body was tense and alert.

The explosion of signals traveling through the synapses of my body, a purely physical, biochemical thing, was nothing compared to the swelling of my soul.

My heart grew so ridiculously big that I feared I had no room for it.

He worked me slowly and thoroughly, and I just couldn’t deny the thought that he truly enjoyed it.

Hell, I hadn’t enjoyed anything in my life like this.

It was beyond pleasure, it was beyond any ecstasy I could conjure in my own imagination.

It was so divine that only the searing sensation in my lungs once I’d inhaled alerted me that I had forgotten how to breathe.

Patrick thrust his tongue, moaning occasionally, its tip probing me as if he thought he could enter me. He couldn’t. I was too tense, too tight to let him any closer, but he worked me anyway.

He was relentless, kneading my ass with both hands while licking and sucking my hole with his devious mouth. I hadn't realized he was capable of something like it, and I wondered if it really was all the same, regardless of sex, if the person really wanted to offer someone a moment of pleasure.

All it took was for the shame—and not just that personal moment of having to undress, but the societal shame we attached first to sex, then to queerness—to drop away. Once it did, there were no limits.

I lifted my ass, needy for more of what he gave me. I was spoiled so quickly by him, and I basked in it.

“I wanna finger you,” Patrick purred behind me, licking me once again and making my dick pulse like it was going to explode. “It’ll make it easier later.”

“Uh-huh,” I managed in a gasp. “Yes. Fuck.”

I dragged over a pillow and tucked it under my chest and head, its soft pillowcase cool on my heated cheek, and I hugged it hard as Patrick dragged his index finger between my cheeks. “Ready?”

“Yes,” I huffed. I was as ready as I could be. I relaxed by the sheer force of my will, but it couldn't last long. My will was not that forceful. The first moment when Patrick's finger touched my hole, it clenched hard at the contact.

“Easy,” Patrick said softly. “I’ll be gentle.”

Those weren't the words I had fantasized about hearing from Patrick Callahan's lips. I'm going to wreck your world, Shane , would have been more like it. Except these were the precise words I needed to hear. These meant more than any promise to leave me panting and begging for more could.

I'll be gentle . And it relaxed me, opened me to him both physically and emotionally. I embraced him not only with my trust but also with my body.

The pressure increased rapidly on my hole, Patrick's finger moving in circles over the rim. He exhaled, his heated breath washing over my skin and my hole, and he sucked something shortly before saliva struck my hole's center.

His finger pressed harder against me. The sensation was familiar, even if the mechanics of it were all new. I'd done this countless times to myself. I knew what it felt like to take a breath and simply let it in.

Patrick's finger slipped into my body with a blaze of passion. It couldn't have been more than an inch, but it felt like we had traversed a galaxy together.

"God, you're so warm," Patrick whispered, his lips and voice so near me, and his finger probed me a little deeper, but only so much. "Does this feel good?"

I huffed a confirmation. It felt wonderful, but those were far too many syllables to say.

"Hold on," he said, his finger sliding smoothly out of me. He rummaged through a backpack by the bed and lifted a bottle of lube and a pack of condoms. I made a note to myself to kiss him for it later. If he still wanted kisses. I didn't think he would say no.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

The lube was cold when it first touched the skin between my cheeks, its thick drops trickling down the middle and over my perineum.

Patrick was more than generous with it, dragging his finger up from my taint to my hole and spreading the lube over me and his fingers.

He slipped into me after a short warning, and it was smoother than silk passing through fingers.

I groaned, and Patrick released a sigh of relief and pleasure as his finger sank into me. “Better?”

“Fuck yes,” I grunted, my voice hoarse as I forced myself to remain relaxed for him.

There was something magical about it. My abs needed to tense in order to force myself open to him, and his finger reaching into my body sparked an instinctive reaction in me—tensing my cock, making my hole tighten, making me push harder to stay relaxed for him, and moving in this enchanted circle.

“Think you can handle more?” Patrick asked, his hand moving back and forth, twisting this way and that.

I’d better, I thought. “Please,” I said, my voice no more than a ripple in the air.

My head lifted off the pillow when Patrick’s middle finger joined the first, stretching me so suddenly that the air hitched in my throat. He didn’t go hard at all, but the shift in size seemed monumental to me.

I dug my fingers into the pillow and looked at the flickering candles, their light bouncing and shifting.

Air flowed through me again, and I relaxed, letting Patrick enter me deeper with two fingers.

It wasn't at all the lack of wanting on my part; I wanted him inside me so badly I could taste it.

I wanted his fingers, his tongue, his dick, his very soul to enter me.

But my body kept getting spooked. In the back of my mind, a steady rhythm pulsed.

It'll happen now. You're gonna fail. It'll all go to hell.

It'll happen now. You're gonna fail. It'll all be a waste .

"You're doing so fucking great," Patrick said, quieting that voice as if he could hear it, too. "Turn off your brain. It'll be better."

I wanted to chuckle at that. It made total sense why people preferred sex on drugs and alcohol; they helped you shut the fears off.

Not me, though. I wanted to be sober with him, even if it left me terrified.

I wanted to be aware of every move of his hand, of every breath we took in sync, of every passing moment when his fingers rubbed against my prostate and made me want to melt into the mattress.

Patrick felt it before I did, this new wave of relaxation and openness. I welcomed him in, two fingers and then three, and didn't worry so much anymore.

“Just like that,” he said from time to time, usually when I was breathing properly, and would twist his hand a little and grunt, ramming his fingers into me with growing ease. “I stretched your little hole so nice, Shane,” he purred. “You’re all slick and ready.”

It wasn’t the thickness of his cock I feared so much anymore, but it wasn’t going to deter me anyway. “Fuck me, Patrick,” I pleaded.

“Turn around,” he told me, sliding his fingers out of my body and rubbing my hole soothingly. “I want to look at your face when I enter you.”

Had I not been so completely hard until now, this would have done it. My very soul tightened in response to his words.

I turned around and stuffed a pillow under my lower back, a trick I’d lifted from porn and tested with myself more than once, certain that it was one of the rare things we could actually learn from it.

Patrick ripped the condom wrapper with his teeth, and it was somehow the sexiest thing he’d done so far.

There was something manly about it, something like the furious devil skating across the rink to let himself be slammed into the boards just so his team could score a point.

He was that person again, both mischievous and wholly on fire.

When he slipped the condom onto his cock, I bit my lip hard and waited. He poured plenty of lube down his length and rubbed it slowly, his cock as hard as it had been when I sucked him.

Patrick positioned himself between my legs and cocked his head this way and that.

“Wanna put your feet on my chest?” he asked.

I nodded. It was a good position, intimate and easy to do.

I planted my bare feet on his pecs, pointing to his shoulders, and Patrick covered my left foot with his left hand, reaching down with his right to touch my hard cock.

He stroked me with the generous traces of lube on his fingers, then slipped his hand down to my hole and soothingly circled the rim.

His dick slipped through his hand, aimed perfectly at my hole, and its pressure replaced Patrick’s fingers. It was so overwhelmingly real that I stopped breathing.

My lips parted. My gaze locked onto Patrick’s face. My chest didn’t move. My toes sunk into his flesh, all the while he pushed his cock into my body, breaking the last barrier toward this idea of adulthood that I had carried deep within me for years.

Patrick gazed into my eyes, letting go of his cock and placing both hands on my thighs, close to my hips. He hooked my body that way and waited, letting me inhale before thrusting himself a fraction of an inch deeper. “Good?”

“It’s fucking heaven,” I told him, breathing again with relief as Patrick swayed his hips back and thrust them forward.

A layer of sweat glistened on Patrick’s tanned skin.

His abs flexed hard, a gorgeous view between my legs, and he jerked himself forward, ramming into me slightly harder.

Each time, the thrust was a little more powerful than the last. Or it appeared to me that way.

He was deeper, I knew that, and it felt almost like trying to inhale more air than my lungs could hold, except that I kept finding that I very much could if only I did it the right way.

Because it felt like breath. It felt like oxygen, like the source of life, like the essence of existence. It freed me just the same as it bound me. It freed me from the anticipation and anxiety, and it bound me to him. I didn't go into this wanting that to happen, but I had known it might.

I looked at his face, at his body, into his blazing blue eyes as he fucked me, and I knew I was his. Utterly, completely, indestructibly his.

For better or worse.

"Fuck me harder," I begged, probably because I had heard it before, not because I was confident I could take it.

But it didn't hurt. Not after that first brief flash of white heat that consumed your body and made you think you could never go through with it.

Not when he was so careful—so very careful—about your needs and your limits.

Did men like this even exist? If so, they were as rare as unicorns. I struggled to believe one was with me, here, inside me. I struggled to believe any of this was real until the moment Patrick's hips quickened their pace and he leaned deep in, pressing his lips hard against mine.

He fucked me like I only could have dreamed. There were few words that could come close to capturing what these moments were.

My feet slipped off his chest, and my legs coiled around his waist, my arms twisting

around his shoulders and holding him close. He buried his tongue in my mouth, kissing me, filling me with his heated breaths, his saliva, and his body.

Each thrust of his hips brought me closer to Heaven of sorts, or Hell if you wanted to be literal about it.

But I didn't care which one it was. Sin or virtue, joy or damnation, it was all the same to me so long as I could hold on to him, so long as I could feel him deep inside me, impaling me and owning me.

I had no doubt about who I belonged to. This, in a way, was a ritual, a transfer of power and a surrender.

You are the only god I believe in , I thought. And I believe in you with all I have. And all I have is all I give you .

My hands found Patrick's. My fingers feathered up his arm until I reached his biceps, holding them in a merciless grip, and his fingers went to my throat. It wasn't a threat. It wasn't even domination. It was only a level of intimacy that could be born out of a whole lot of trust.

I bared my neck for him a little more, digging my fingers into his arms while he tightened his hands around my throat.

He kissed me, sweat dripping from his brow and into my face, his cock sliding into me just the way I needed.

The tip pressed hard against my prostate over and over again.

And Patrick's years of fooling around made him such an idea lover that it never crossed my mind to hold his past against him.

I adored the things he knew. And he knew when to speed up and when to slow down.

He knew, without me telling him, that he was pushing me to my limit, and he didn't try to push himself any deeper than that.

Instead, he hurried up, filling my body with sensations I could hardly process, then slowing all the way down, making me focus on this brilliant, breathtaking feeling of his dick reaching for my prostate, rubbing against it, pressing it, pressuring it until the sensation was such that I felt like an overflowing dam. I felt like I was about to burst.

"Fuck," I panted. "Just like that. Please. Just...a little more." And he did exactly that. For all the flashiness in the rink and fancy moves, Patrick had nothing to prove to anyone here. He didn't need to go above and beyond. He just did what made me feel the best.

My face rippled with pain and pleasure as he brought me close to the climax, keeping me there for a few heartbeats longer before the tension simply snapped.

It buzzed through me like a bare wire, surging through my whole body with a single end in mind.

Every part of me twisted and coiled, lit up as if I were made of fire.

My dick throbbed harder still. My hole clenched so hard and fast that I couldn't control it, and I could see its effect on Patrick's beautiful face.

The heat of my cum sprayed my stomach and chest just as I reached between us to hold my cock. It spurted continuously after hours and days of teasing and running away, of being on the edge even when I wasn't hard and horny.

I came messily, almost embarrassingly so, and the world spun around me while I was

afloat, in an entirely different realm.

Patrick's eyebrows contorted harder the longer I failed to make my hole relax. Did it hurt? Did he enjoy it? His eyes rolled upward, and he cried for God, telling me he was coming.

His throbbing dick buried deep into me sent ripples of tingles and shivers through the rest of my body. He came hard, shuddering all over, sweaty and glorious, and smiling like he didn't have a regret in the world.

I had never seen someone smile while coming. Not in a million videos. I had never seen someone so genuinely joyful in that moment of barest intimacy.

His arms trembled. His legs shook. His abs rippled restlessly with electric tension. And as he pulled his dick out and slipped the condom off—his dripping cum left a beautiful trail along my left thigh—he kept the smile on.

He tossed the condom onto a towel at the edge of the bed and crashed next to me, pulling me tight against his sweaty body.

There wasn't an inkling, not even a hint, that he might have changed his mind after coming.

Whatever that clarity they spoke of was, it had no room here.

I was as far from clearheaded as I had ever been.

Not horny anymore, but drunk on lust and glory we had just shared.

He held me, his face buried into the crook of my neck. I could feel his smile without having to look.

“What’s funny?” I asked.

“Funny? Nothing,” he said. “I’m just...fuck, I just did it with a guy.”

I tensed a little. Clarity? Is that you?

But Patrick lifted his head and looked into my eyes. “And not just any guy. The best guy. You.”

His words sparked in me something that felt oddly similar to what it felt like when he put his tongue against my hole. New and bold and beautiful.

“How do you feel after...the first time?” he asked.

“I...” I’m alright. I lifted my hand and cupped his cheek. Did I want to be cool at the expense of being honest? No. Not with Patrick. “I’ve never felt this good in my life, Patrick.”

He exhaled with such relief that I sent a thankful prayer to any god listening for making me choose honesty.

He leaned in, slamming his lips against mine like we were at the peak of passion and kissing me for a long while.

When he pulled back, he was still smiling.

“I was afraid I’d freak out. Or hurt you.

Or that you’d want it the other way around, and I’d freak out again. Fuck, this was lucky.”

I nodded. Doing it the other way around was an interesting idea but not one I would have leaped on. “Lucky.”

He kissed me again, softly, then hopped out of the bed. He dragged me with him, still half-hard and covered in cum. “Let’s shower together. I wanna see you covered in foam.”

I barked out a laugh. Hadn’t we just had sex? If he was insatiable, I was twice as lucky as I’d thought.

It didn’t take asking me twice to get me to follow.

THIRTEEN

PATRICK

It wasn't a sinking feeling that woke me up.

It wasn't a bolt of fear, either. I might have expected something along those lines.

Hell, a week ago, I had very much imagined it playing out that way, blinking myself awake to see the size of my horny mistake.

It wouldn't have been the first time. I'd woken up with after-sex guilt more than a few times in my Casanova phase, and I had no reason to think the phase was behind me.

Except, as the silk curtain of sleep pulled away, and my conscious mind seeped in, my heart didn't clench with regrets.

I opened my eyes to a crisp, sunny morning in a house in Detroit, in a bed so warm that it begged me to stay longer, with my arm draping Shane's naked body.

Yesterday, waking up in a fairly similar spot, I had been flooded with embarrassment, thinking if I'd made him uncomfortable, if I'd had a few accidental—though perfectly natural! —hard-ons through the night.

No embarrassment now. We both lay naked, and the memory of last night was imprinted deeply into my mind. It was so fresh and colorful that it was still before my

eyes.

The comforter was low on our bodies, draping us up to our waists, and I focused my gaze on the back of Shane's head.

Dark hair covered the top of his head messily, and the fade on the sides was disappearing slowly as new hair grew.

Below, his neck was smooth and creamy, extending to his shoulders and his pronounced shoulder blades.

I moved my left arm back, though it still rested over his body, and ran the back of my index finger over Shane's sharp cheekbone, his smooth cheek, and his long neck. I turned my hand over and let my fingertips travel over his chest.

When I shut my eyes, all I saw was that pained, blissful expression on Shane's face. In the moment of ecstasy, like Saint Sebastian pierced by the arrows, he had looked deep into my eyes, lips parting to let out a small, choked sound, muscles tensing in the instant before he came.

I never wanted to forget it. The mere thought of it made me heat up a little. Something fuzzy grew in my chest, and tingling shot down into my stomach. My dick woke up, too, and grew harder until it pressed right between Shane's cheeks.

My hand moved over his abs just as his breathing changed. He didn't turn around. He didn't say anything, but I knew he was awake. And as my hand traveled up and down his flat stomach, Shane's hand covered mine.

He didn't direct it, merely followed where it went, and offered no objections when it went lower.

Partly, it was curiosity. Last night, I'd had a beer or two to celebrate the game, and I had been driven wild by the weeks of unintended teasing. This morning, he was here, ready for me and willing, and I needed to know what that did to my heart.

It turns out it did wonders. My pulse quickened as my fingers passed over his abdomen and found that he was just as hard. Breath hitched in his throat and he thrust his ass a few inches back at me.

The footsteps, the clamoring, the clinking of cutlery were enough of an indicator that the house was well awake and gearing up to be vacated, but I didn't fuss.

I took my time, feeling Shane's thighs, cupping his balls, touching his hardened taint before finally lifting my hand and closing it around his cock.

It struck me as strange again to hold it so. The only dick I'd touched before had always been mine. It was much more appealing than I would have imagined. It fit in so perfectly that my body melted with heated desire.

I pressed myself harder against him. Our bodies squished together, my dick between his cheeks, my fist moving up and down his cock. I wanted to be even closer, wanted to crawl under his skin, wanted us to merge both spiritually and literally, but there was no time.

Shane shifted a little and pressed his ass harder against me, giving me an eye-popping sensation to hold on to.

He moaned once or twice as my fist sped up, working his cock the only way I knew how—the way I would have done to myself.

Easy, slowly, then a little faster. My grip tightened on him, feeling that irresistible pulse of excitement in him, and I relaxed it again.

It was a little like playing music. You couldn't go all in with one gigantic crescendo.

You couldn't step on a stage before an orchestra and just play that final, satisfying chord.

It wasn't satisfying without the buildup.

The longer the journey, the more winding the road, the sweeter the destination.

I swayed my hips back and forth incrementally. Each thrust made me harder, each taking my breath away a little more.

As each second ticked away, I possessed less and less control over myself.

It was like a flaying of resistance and composure.

They flaked away, then scattered altogether.

As if something snapped inside us both, the tormenting, teasing moves were no longer even possible.

It had to be rougher. We had to be closer.

I needed to get us over that hill, over the edge of that canyon, and into the free fall.

My body worked harder. My arm burned, first hurting, but I jerked him off just the same, bringing the tension to an impossible level all the while my dick slid under an excruciating angle, thrusting down between his cheeks.

It wasn't the fact that I was touching him so liberally or that his ass was just that good, but a shuddering whimper that left his lips that tipped me over. My dick

stiffened and throbbed, spilling cum over his ass in an endless trickle.

The pulse of climax in my left hand brought me exactly as much pleasure as my own orgasm had.

While I shuddered and rode the wave of joy, Shane came onto the bedsheet, his stomach, and my hand.

His heated cum trickled down the back of my fingers, and I, still dazed by lust, squeezed him a little harder, drawing the last drops of him he had to offer before lifting my hand to my lips and licking his cum off my fingers.

And fuck, it tasted like a fruity dessert.

A delicious, sweet, and salty mix of sin and pleasure.

After sucking in a surprised breath of air, Shane closed his hand around my wrist and pulled my fingers closer to his lips.

He kissed the stains off the back of my hand as I leaned in, licking off what was left, then kissing him just for the kick of it.

After I pulled back my head, Shane folded his lips and fought against a rising smile. "That's...kinda dirty."

"It's kinda hot, is what it is," I said.

Hesitating just a heartbeat, he nodded.

I got out of bed like a firing squad was waiting for me.

The bed was safe and warm and had Shane in it, but the time was running out.

Chicago was calling, real life waiting to resume.

Part of me wanted to stay in this room forever.

This was the room of endless possibilities, impossible outcomes, unimaginable victories, but it was just a room, I suppose.

I could take this feeling with me. I could take it and sweep Shane off his feet every day, over and over again.

I splashed my face, brushed my teeth, and stepped out of the bathroom to give Shane a chance. He came out a minute later, still as naked and beautiful as an angel in a particularly salacious heaven, and searched for a clean pair of underwear in his backpack.

My gaze dragged over his sexy ass. God, how I wanted him again.

The smooth skin taut over the firm butt, designed for my lips and their searing effect, the small of his back curving inward, legs spread just a little to offer a glimpse of his balls from behind.

I wanted to step closer and slide my hand between his legs, cup his balls, and tell him to beg me to let him go.

Shane glanced over his shoulder as he produced a pair of briefs from the backpack. “Seriously?” he asked, a smirk touching his lips.

I glanced down, and sure enough, my dick was making its greedy way to full mast. “What can I say? You’re just a hottie.”

Shane snorted as if I were teasing, but the words got to him anyway. He pulled his underwear on. “You’ll have to save it for later.”

I took two steps toward him, closed the distance, and put my hands on his ass, bringing our torsos together. My hard dick pressed against his bulge and leg. “Sure I can’t talk you into just staying here forever?”

Shane looked at me like I was crazy. “You wouldn’t have to try hard,” he said, lifting his hands to my chest. “That’s why I have to stop you.”

I pulled him closer, wrapping my arms around his lower back. “Nope. Not letting you leave.”

Shane laughed. “They’ll come looking.”

“It’s their funeral.”

“Come on. Everyone’s packed already,” Shane said, but there was no conviction in his tone.

“Stay, stay, stay,” I said, my voice dripping with amusement. The battle on his face was so fierce that I could watch it forever.

“Tonight,” Shane said. “Come over tonight.”

“Ah, that’s eons away,” I said. “And in another state!”

“I know,” Shane said, leaning in a little. “But you can have me all night if you wait.”

The boiling heat in my chest was hard to contain, but I managed somehow. “You’ve no idea how much I want you,” I told him.

“I think I have a pretty good idea,” Shane said, shifting his leg to rub against my hard cock just enough to make my brain spin. “And I want you, too.”

One side of my lips quirked into a smile.

“You know, you’re pretty gay for a straight guy,” Shane said.

I threw my head back and laughed in surprise.

When I looked at him again, he was smiling.

“You know how sometimes you just don’t want to try eating something because you’re so sure you don’t like it?” I asked. “Then someone serves it for you, and you freaking lick the plate clean.”

A ripple of a frown creased Shane’s eyebrows. “Are you talking about my ass?”

“I’m talking about your ass,” I said, almost in unison. We laughed and let the silence fill the very narrow space between us. “I like it a lot,” I said. “You, your body, your...way of doing it.” My voice dropped lower with each word I said. I couldn’t control it.

Shane’s eyes lit up with curiosity. “I didn’t think I had a way of doing it. First time, remember?”

I shrugged. “Maybe it’s a gay thing. I never...” I searched for the right words, unconvinced I would ever find them. “I never felt like someone enjoyed my body that way.”

“What do you mean?” Shane asked, his hands moving over my chest as if to feel more of me.

Case in point , I thought. “Before, it felt somehow selfish. Like I’d have sex with someone, and we did it in a way to make ourselves feel good. You...you’re different. It was like touching me turned you on.”

“It did,” Shane said, bewildered. It had never crossed his mind that it could be anything else.

“Maybe I was doing it wrong all this time,” I said with a forced laugh. “If I took a girl home, it was mostly to do whatever felt good to me. And I think they were the same. Never had any complaints.”

Shane shot me a look that bordered on jealousy.

“I don’t think anyone I slept with before was that into me,” I said. “To want to touch me so much, or kiss so much of me, or hold me so close. It’s different with you. It’s like you...”

“Worshiped you.” His words were exactly what I had been thinking of.

“Worshiped me,” I repeated in a softer voice. “Yes.”

Shane watched me for a few moments longer. “I felt the same.”

“Kiss me,” I said.

Shane didn’t hesitate. He leaned in and pressed his lips hard against mine. He kissed me like we’d never have another chance. It was a bright, brilliant kiss that left me gasping and throbbing, shivering all over, and wanting him more than ever.

When he pulled his head back, I nodded. That was convincing enough. It was time to go.

As I scouted the room for my scattered clothes, Shane sat on the chair by the small table. “We should probably keep this...discreet.”

I let the waistband of my boxer briefs go, and it slapped my waist. “Um, sure?”

“It’s just...I’m supposed to study you,” Shane said. “That’s all.”

“For a moment there, I thought you were ashamed of me,” I said. The horrified look on his face was delightful. “I’m fucking with you. I get it.”

Shane nodded. “It’s only another four weeks before I have to write the thesis.”

I perked up. “We’re dating.”

Shane stammered and folded his lips. A blush rose to his cheeks.

My face split into a broad grin. “Yeah, we are,” I said. “We’re so dating.”

Shane swallowed and tilted his head a little, still keeping his gaze on my face. “Do you want to?”

“Hmm, what do you think?” I asked, stepping toward him so that his head was level with my abdomen.

Shane’s gaze traveled down my torso. He leaned in and pressed his heated lips against my abs, hands resting on my hips.

“I didn’t think this could be real.” He looked up, his chin resting just under my belly button.

“Even when I fantasized we might, you know, have sex,” he said, the heat in his face

almost palpable. “I didn’t think you’d want to date me.”

My heart sank at those words. Had I made myself look so proud and full of myself that I came across as untouchable? Unreachable? To hell with me. “Shane, we’ve been dating for weeks. At least all the Saints say so.”

Shane’s eyes widened for a second. “They do?”

“I don’t think we need to overthink this,” I said. “You make me feel good. I make you feel good. How about we just keep doing that?”

Shane’s smile was shy at first, but it beamed brighter the longer he failed to contain it. He was beautiful. And when he nodded against my stomach, I leaned down and kissed him the best I knew how.

FOURTEEN

SHANE

I hadn't meant to stay this late.

The pool of light from my desk lamp was the only thing keeping the darkness of the library at bay. Most of the building had emptied out hours ago, and yet here I was, still scribbling notes into my journal like the fate of my degree depended on it. Which, to be fair, it sort of did.

I blinked at the open textbook in front of me, the words blurring into one another until I realized I'd been reading the same sentence for the third time.

Something about emotional regulation and pre-performance anxiety.

Ironically fitting, considering the slight prickle of nerves crawling down my neck.

I had told Patrick I'd meet him at the bar tonight.

Just a casual hangout. Nothing big. Except now it was past nine, and my phone, long forgotten on silent mode, blinked with notifications.

I cursed under my breath and ran a hand through my hair.

A shadow fell across the table.

I flinched. My heart did a weird, startled twist before I even looked up. When I did, it was him.

Patrick.

Towering, grinning, and beautiful. He was wearing that black hoodie with the little rip in the collar, the one that drove me crazy for no good reason. And he had his hands in his pockets like he hadn't just scared the hell out of me.

"Jesus," I said, pressing a hand to my chest. "You can't sneak up on me like that."

He tilted his head. "You ghosted me. I thought maybe you got hit by a bus."

"So you came to the library," I said.

"It could have been one of those book carts, to be fair," Patrick said.

I groaned and rubbed my eyes. "God, I haven't even showered or changed my clothes. I'm sorry. I lost track of time."

Patrick shrugged and pulled out the chair across from mine, sitting like he owned the place. "I figured. You always look kinda cute when you're in panicked nerd mode."

I gave him a withering glare that had zero effect. His grin just widened.

"You didn't have to come all the way here," I said. My voice was soft, embarrassed. I felt gross, still in the same jeans I'd worn to his afternoon practice, my shirt slightly rumpled, hair sticking up in the back.

"I wanted to see you," Patrick said simply. His voice was so calm about it, so sure, like that was the most natural thing in the world.

He looked around the quiet floor, eyes flicking from the empty desks to the shadows between shelves. “We don’t have to go to the bar. I’d be happy just sitting here, watching you bite your pen and mutter to yourself.”

I laughed under my breath and stood, stretching. “Tempting, but no. We should go. Give me five minutes. Help me reshelve some of these books?”

“Of course, Professor.”

I rolled my eyes as I gathered the stack of texts on sports aggression, resilience, and emotional fatigue.

Patrick scooped up the rest without effort, following me to the back of the library.

The rows were dark but familiar, quiet except for the faint hum of the heating system and the dull thud of our footsteps on the carpet.

We reached the right shelf. I began sliding books into place, fingers brushing worn spines.

Patrick moved beside me, sliding his stack into the middle shelf without much precision. I was about to scold him when he stepped closer. Too close.

The footsteps I’d half registered earlier paused somewhere at the far end of the aisle.

And then he did it.

Patrick’s hand landed against the bookcase beside my head. His body pressed into mine. One smooth, defiant motion. The kiss came fast, hard, and hungry. His mouth crushed against mine with the kind of heat that left no room for thought. My spine hit the shelf behind me. I gasped against his lips.

His hands weren't roaming, weren't greedy. Just his mouth, his weight, and the absolute surety in the way he kissed me like he couldn't wait another second.

And God, I didn't care, either.

I kissed him back, harder than I meant to. I wrapped a hand behind his neck and pulled him down. I could taste mint and adrenaline. My knees wanted to give in. My pulse pounded behind my eyes.

He pulled away just barely, forehead pressing to mine. His breathing was rough. So was mine.

We stared at each other in the silence.

Somewhere far off, a door creaked. A janitor? A late-night straggler? I didn't know.

"That was insane," I whispered. I could barely speak. My lips were swollen. My hands trembled slightly.

Patrick just smiled. A little dangerous, a little dazed. "Totally worth it."

I looked down, catching my breath.

"We said we wouldn't risk that," I said. "Someone could've walked right by."

"But they didn't," he said.

I grabbed his hoodie and kissed him one more time, quick and aching. "Forget about the bar. Come home with me," I whispered against his mouth. "Not the bed. I want you on the floor. All night."

Patrick groaned softly and grabbed my hand. “Lead the way.”

We left the books where they were.

Patrick waited for me as if only a minute had passed when I stepped out of the bathroom. He spun around in my desk chair, his chest rising a little faster at the sight of me.

I didn’t think I would ever get used to it—someone looking at me like I was a wonder.

Like I was that hot. But he bit his lip as I crossed the room in nothing but a towel, and he grabbed my hips with both hands, planting his sexy lips against my stomach and dragging them down.

“I’ve been waiting for this the whole day,” he said.

Then he shot me a guilty look and smiled.

“And riveting, intellectual discussions, of course.”

I snorted and pressed my hand against the back of his head. “Would you rather have that?”

Patrick’s lips pursed when I caught him lying. “Must we?”

I shook my head. “I had enough academic work for today. Make me forget everything about it.”

Patrick rose to his feet, still holding my hips, and leaned in.

“That, my darling, is my specialty.” He leaped at me, burying his face in the crook of my neck, making me yelp in surprise, and kissed me with such passion that it felt like I was catapulted out of this galaxy.

Wherever it was that I landed, I wanted to stay there.

It only took him half a minute to heat up in the way that was still so unfamiliar and jarring to me.

It was as though I still believed I would wake up and discover it had all been a dream.

But Patrick kissed me heatedly and untied my towel, sending it on the floor and grabbing my bare ass with both hands.

I hadn’t expected him to want me with such fervor, but he did.

He grabbed me and groped me and pulled me so tight that I could feel how hard his muscles were under his hoodie.

His hands held my ass while he kissed my neck and bit my ear.

Then, in a display of unchecked lust, he slipped his hands lower and lifted me off the ground.

I cried out in surprise, but Patrick was a steady monolith, strong and stable, perfectly capable of lifting me up.

My legs curled around Patrick’s waist, my ass resting on his abdomen and crotch, and my head tilting down to kiss him. I couldn’t do anything about the smile that stretched the corners of my lips while I kissed him, but I could feel him smiling, too.

Patrick's hands supported me very bluntly on the bottom of my butt. He held me there while I wrapped my arms around his neck and shoulders. We kissed harder, my blood simmering, then boiling with lust I had nowhere to spend. It glimmered within me, trapped, built up, threatening to shatter me.

"On the floor?" Patrick asked, then kissed me again.

"Yeah," I said, short of breath.

He set me down, then swept his hoodie up and over his head.

The light of the reading lamp was the only one on in the room, giving us a soft glow and a whole range of warm shadows.

When Patrick reached for his belt, I slid down, falling to my knees.

A week after our first time together, I hardly counted myself as experienced, but I moved with growing ease and confidence.

I undid Patrick's belt and opened his pants, then pulled them down his legs together with his underwear. I didn't want it to be slow and romantic. Not tonight. I was needy, craving him like someone craved a powerful drug. Right now, I would have said and done anything just to get a taste of him.

Patrick had no price for it. He offered himself willingly, and I took him. My lips closed around the tip of his hard cock before his pants were down to his ankles.

A visible shudder passed through Patrick's chest as I leaned in and impaled myself on his long dick, taking him to my throat and failing to take him any deeper.

I gazed up at him. It was not intentional, but I knew I wore a pleading, needy look on

my face. My eyes were on him, begging him to take me, to use me, to pleasure himself with my body however he liked.

Patrick's eyes were glowing like blue ice with a fire burning deep within. He put his hands on the back of my head and threaded his fingers, then swung his hips back and fucked my mouth in the only right way: without mercy.

The flavor of Patrick's precum soaking into my tongue, the scent of his musk crawling into my nose, the sound of his restrained grunts and throaty purrs flickered around me, sparking an unquenchable thirst in me. It was a fire you couldn't contain. It was a tsunami of desperate, devastating desire.

I slapped my hands on Patrick's butt and pulled him into myself, though my head bobbed back by stubborn instinct. I inhaled through my nose and moaned against his dick. I took him, forcing my throat to open and failing again, only constricting it around the tip of Patrick's cock.

But the ripples of pleasure were unmistakable on his face and his body. The shudders that tensed his abs and the tremors around his mouth and eyes gave me confidence.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

Patrick thrust his hips forward, sliding his dick into my mouth and pressing it hard against my throat. It cut my flow of air, but I liked it. I liked that the oxygen was a secondary need tonight.

My hands moved from his ass up his lower back and around to feel his abs. I was like a poor faithful, sprawling before the altar, reaching up to the glory above. I dragged my hands over his body, lending him my power, my faith, my sacrifice. He was my religion and I his subject.

When Patrick pulled back, he bent down and slammed his mouth against mine, kissing me and thrusting his tongue deep into my mouth.

“You’re so fucking dirty, you know that?” he said over my lips. It was the highest praise I could think of.

“I’ll be anything you want,” I said.

“Yeah?” The excitement that welled in his eyes made my heart grow twice its size. My stomach fluttered with tingling, and my dick pulsed, untouched for the risk of blowing at a single stroke. “Ride me, then.”

Patrick knelt before me, then lay on his back, sprawling on the floor.

His cock was so stiff it wouldn’t rest on his abdomen, standing at full size a few inches above his flesh.

His balls hung between his legs, and I leaned in, burying my face in his thighs,

opening my mouth to taste him, to suck them between my lips each in turn, to eat him like nobody ever had.

Because he felt it, too, he felt what worshiping his body was like. He felt it was different . I stood out, and I didn't plan to stop.

My lips dragged at an excruciating pace up from his balls, over his dick, and along the middle of his torso. I crawled on my palms and knees along his body until my lips found his mouth and my ass sank into his lap. His dick pulsed, lifting higher and pressing against my crotch.

Patrick's hand closed around both our dicks.

I'd never felt anything like it. The strange, exhilarating contact of them rubbing together, stroked by Patrick's firm hand.

The difference in size didn't matter when Patrick swung his fist this way and that, my saliva on his cock still wet and helping against the friction.

I lifted my torso, fists planted on either side of Patrick's head, and thrust my hips forward, fucking his fist with his dick still pressed against the underside of mine.

He gasped, tightening his fist, and told me he wanted me. He told me he wanted to be inside me.

I picked up lube and condoms from my nightstand—a lesson we had learned the hard way last week, when Patrick hadn't had any left on him, and we ended up sucking each other a little begrudgingly. He'd used his fingers to do magical things to my body, giving us both the satisfaction we had desired.

Tonight, we came prepared. I slipped the condom on his dick, something that still felt

a little strange to do while he watched me, and poured lube down his shaft before stroking him for a long while.

In that time, I used my other hand to prepare myself for him while Patrick's hands were folded under his head, and his gaze was on my face.

When my fingers slipped into my body, a tremor passed over my face, and Patrick's dick flexed in my fist. It's pumping eagerness, and the ease with which I could probe myself told me what to do next.

I crawled up and set my knees on each side of Patrick's waist, watching as his chest rose and fell with increasing speed.

The tip of his cock pressed against my slick, relaxing hole, and I held my breath.

He caught my gaze, held it, and I bit my lip as I sank onto him.

The pain was instant, yet it was gone just as quickly.

I lifted myself a little higher, letting my heart calm down, and lowered myself on his dick again, feeling him penetrate that first barrier.

After exploring sex with Patrick for an entire week—and years of going at it on my own—I was certain that half the trouble was purely psychological.

I was able to relax, to loosen myself with little more than correct breathing and a reminder that I wanted him inside me.

Because what came after a short flash of pain was an unimaginable warmth of pleasure.

Patrick entered me, slapping his hands on my hips and holding me in place, holding himself just the same. He didn't move in or out until I released a long sigh of relief, and we both moved closer to one another. He entered me deeper, and I sank lower.

The sensation, another first to me, of him entering me from below, from under me, was a whole new revelation.

His dick, curving slightly to one side, eased itself into my body, entering me deeper with each jerky thrust. And when he reached my prostate, the tip of his cock rubbing against it in passing, my body pulsed with a new wave of pleasure.

It was an odd feeling, more pleasurable as a whole than any of its parts.

When he rubbed against my prostate, it felt as though I would come in an instant, uncontrolled and uncontrollable.

It felt as though I couldn't take any more of him than I already had.

It felt as though something was ready to spill out of me, out of my chest and heart as much as from my dick.

I was full to the brim with these flickering, fluttering sensations.

They welled in me, sputtered out of me, made my hips swing and ass sink lower on the hard length of Patrick's cock.

I pressed my hands against Patrick's chest, pushing the air out of his lungs, and he sank his fingers into the flesh of my waist, yanking me down on his dick with increasing force.

Sometimes, it felt like lovemaking in its purest, most innocent form; when he lay on

top of me and slid his dick into me, crunching his abs to thrust himself deeper into me, pressing his body against mine to feel with everywhere and with everything he had.

Other times, like now, it felt like fucking.

I wouldn't have known the difference before trying it all.

It was, to me, just as intimate, but there was nothing pure or innocent about it.

This was an act in which two people trusted one another so greatly that they allowed their deepest urges to take over.

Wrestling, grabbing one another's limbs, holding on, kissing and biting in equal parts, ramming out bodies against one another in any and all ways that would provoke a cry; all that was only half-human. No superego lived here. Only ID.

This passion, tainted and salacious, dragged us into a whole new world of curiosity.

I wanted to know what it felt like to be pushed to my admittedly near limit.

I wanted to know what taking him all the way in would do to me—not that I had found that out at any point during this week.

Three-quarters was the best I could do before slapping my hand against his abdomen and apologizing.

“Never apologize for that, Shane,” he said when it happened.

“I'm the one who's sorry for going that far. ”

But I didn't want him to be sorry. There was nothing to be sorry about. That moment of not-pain—because it didn't hurt. It was simply too much—was the feeling I chased. I wanted it to be further out every time I ran to it, but I wanted to run to it always.

Patrick's hands found mine, fingers threading until it was impossible to say which were whose, and I swayed back and forth in his lap, taking him in and watching how it made my dick spring. Precum trickled down my swollen, aching shaft, and Patrick hissed with growing tension.

I leaned my torso back, holding on to Patrick's hands for support. I arched lower and lower, my head hanging until the room was upside down, my arms stretched out in front of me, and depending on Patrick's sweaty, slipping hands to keep a hold of me.

As I leaned back, my hips slowed down and lifted, giving Patrick room to maneuver. He thrust himself up, lifting his ass off the floor, and rammed his cock into me from below.

The lightning bolt of lust slashed through me as he fucked me, his hips speeding up, then slowing down.

Sweat poured down my brow and chest, down my neck,, and along my spine, trickling between my shoulder blades and making its way to my lower back.

The scent of sex filled the room and my nostrils.

The sound of our breaths, our panting, our moaning, and the wet slap of my ass against his slightly upraised upper legs filled my ears.

There was more to it than just the physical sensations. There was the knowledge that we were here, alone, giving each other permission to be as wild or tame, creative or

destructive, dirty or tame as we liked.

I didn't think Patrick would scoff or roll his eyes because my voice ripped from my throat, and I begged him to fuck me just like this.

And it never could have turned me off when he indulged in licking the pooling cum in my belly button, even if we'd both finished already.

There was that unique, inexplicable bond between us that said, Yes, do it, do anything you like because I'll still want you when it's done .

Patrick's moans grew to a higher pitch, and I knew how close he was. It was only tiredness and the saturation of my mind with the studies that had kept me going for this long.

I straightened my back and sat down on him, groaning as I exhaled, and I let him hold my cock. The tip was dark with all the blood that filled my dick. Patrick spat on his hand after a few strokes, then replaced it and jerked me faster.

My hands pressed down on his chest as my entire body bounced on him.

I wondered what other positions we might graduate to when I had more experience.

I wondered if they could be better than this.

This let us look into one another's eyes, observe every little reaction on each other's faces, as I let my fingernails sink into the flesh of his muscled pecs and his hand worked me toward my orgasm.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

I came after an excruciating crescendo of rising tension. Hot cum sprayed Patrick's body in wild ribbons just as Patrick lifted his other hand to my face, slipping two fingers into my mouth and cupping my chin with the rest of his palm.

I sucked his fingers, coming on his chest and stomach and riding him just as needily. Something about it, either my tongue toying with his fingers or the heat of my cum on his body, tipped him over the edge.

He shuddered and rammed himself into me, throbbing so hard that I felt its ripples in my entire body. I swam through the depths of this sensation, my moans growing quieter and my breathing deepening.

Even as Patrick's dick calmed and each move of my hips made his abs tremble with tension, I rode him.

Little by little, I slowed down, though he didn't go soft yet.

It was a thing I'd discovered early that kept me fascinated ever since.

Patrick stayed hard for a while, and even when it passed, it didn't take much to get him back up.

Pinching his nipple, licking his ear, whispering something dirty over his lips, and he was hard and ready.

I adored my insatiable lover. I adored his willingness and readiness to spend the night with me, not sleeping a single minute of it, giving me the kinds of pleasure I hadn't

been able to conjure up in my dreams.

Slowly, I lifted myself off Patrick and offered him a hand.

I didn't need to say it. He got up and spanked my ass on the way to the bathroom.

The cabin was just big enough for both of us to shower together, and we didn't mind that it forced us to stand very close or touch parts of our bodies with every move.

A month ago, I would have been mortified if someone saw me naked. Hell, I'd struggled with changing my clothes when my underwear was very safely on me. And I wasn't racing to strip off in front of a crowd of people, but I was very comfortable next to Patrick.

It surprised me that I would be comfortable.

Patrick was way too hot in any setting, especially standing next to me.

I'd been comparing myself to him all this time as I took notes about his workouts and diet.

In the back of my mind, this nagging thought reminded me over and over again that I could be like that if only I were more disciplined.

But it was bullshit. Discipline and diet were only a slice of it, and it was especially untrue when taken without the rest of the pie.

Genes played a huge part, early development did, too, hormone levels, daily routines, upbringing, and the entire biosystem that made a single body.

It wasn't so simple as upping my protein intake or running for longer.

And when Patrick spread his foamy fingers over my body with such care and longing, I let myself believe that I didn't need to look like him.

I could just be the lanky old me. There was someone who adored me that way and wasn't ashamed about it.

So I relaxed and let our arms wrap around one another while the hot water poured down on us.

I didn't want to compare my flat features with his curved ones. I didn't want to live my life thinking if he would like me more if I were muscled. So I believed him on his word and his actions. I believed him when he told me I was hot as all hell breaking loose and sexy as a mortal sin.

Patrick kissed me, licked my lips and tongue, and laughed as he pressed me against the cold tiles that made me squeal.

He moved his hand over me, washing the soap off my body, and turned the shower off before handing me a towel from outside the little cabin.

And when we were clean and dry, I didn't hurry to hide in layers of baggy clothes.

I let myself be the way I was because he didn't look away with disinterest.

Next summer, I might dare go with him to the lake, undress on the beach, let people's gaze skim over me with no interest at all, because Patrick's glances would be enough.

My heart clenched when I thought about it. Would he be interested until then? Would he always be? And what about winter break? Would it last so long?

"God, I can watch you like that all night," Patrick said, pulling me out of my

thoughts.

“Like what?” I asked, finding a smile for him.

“Lost in thoughts,” Patrick said. “I’ll bet you anything you were overthinking just then.”

I tried to snort, but a laugh rippled out of me. “Got me.”

“What was it this time?” he asked, tucking his hands under his head and sinking deeper into my pillow. I sat by his shins, glancing down at his soft dick and smooth legs.

“Not telling you,” I said.

“Let me guess,” he said, taking a smaller pillow off the side of the bed.

He lifted it and brought it down on me with surprising speed and force.

“Dick size?” The pillow smacked my bare back.

“Muscles?” The pillow came around and thumped my chest. “Being a virgin for so long?” The pillow hit the back of my head.

“Running late on weekly data analysis?” He tossed the pillow in my face, laughing. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

I swallowed and folded my arms on the pillow, keeping it safe in my lap. “A bit of everything, I think,” I said. “But...muscles.”

“You’re so ridiculous, you know that?” Patrick said, his torso glowing under the

reading lamp's subdued light.

"I'm not gonna bullshit you about how annoying it is to work to keep up the physique.

I'm sick of guys who do that 'cause it's all crap anyway.

If they were sick, they'd quit. It's pity talk. I'm proud to look the way I do."

I nodded.

Patrick's gaze sharpened as he examined my face.

"I'm an athlete. I need whatever is gonna give me the edge against my opponent.

Otherwise, that little shit Titan would have run me over before we even hit the boards last week.

But it's not a standard of beauty, Shane.

I couldn't care less if you were ripped, curvy, or skinny.

And, more to the point, you shouldn't care what I think. "

"I bet you always took home the hottest girl," I teased, or tried to. It came out a little flat, a little accusatory.

"Didn't go home with freaking bodybuilders, I'll tell you that," Patrick said. "I have enough of that in the rink."

I laughed at the nonchalant way he said that. "You're right. And I think I'm getting

better at keeping it in mind.” I glanced down. “And I’m not fussing about the size.”

“Sure you’re not,” Patrick teased.

He was incredulous. But he was also just a little right. Not that I would want him to know that. “Let’s put it this way: if I were any bigger, you’d be in a lot of trouble.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked, lifting himself up and grabbing the pillow from under my arms.

“How so?”

“You think your virgin ass could survive it?” I asked, trying to catch the pillow.

“Yours did,” Patrick said, pulling the pillow just out of reach.

“I’ve had years of practice with unspeakable objects, and you’ve never even had a finger,” I said, yanking the corner of it and tugging it back.

Patrick wasn’t parting ways with the pillow. “Empty threats from a bottom.”

“Verse,” I shot back.

“I heard that’s what bottoms say to other bottoms, hoping it would turn the other one into a top,” Patrick said and snatched the pillow from my hand, then tossed it in my face again.

I was laughing too hard to notice. “Where the hell did you hear that?”

“So, you’re saying it’s not true,” Patrick said, skepticism so strong in his voice that I picked up on the underlying sarcasm.

“I’m definitely verse,” I said and shrugged. “I just let you fuck me because I don’t

wanna scare you. Yet.”

And sure enough, Patrick was getting hard again.

“Mm, you’re not so much of a top as you thought,” I said.

“You can try scaring me,” Patrick said, his voice a little more airy now. “Next time.” Then, as an afterthought, he said, “I’ll need to look up a manual.”

I licked my lips and swallowed the words that had nearly left my lips.

Patrick cocked his head and looked at me. “What?”

“Nothing.” Busted.

“You didn’t say something,” Patrick said. “What is it?”

My pulse hurried. “It’s just...I’ve been thinking.”

“Oh boy,” Patrick said.

I threw the pillow at him, but he caught it before it did any intended damage. “I wanna start taking pills so we can...” I chuckled. Some things were still hard to talk about, even with him.

“So we can raw-dog it?” he asked.

My nose wrinkled, and I laughed. “If you wanna put it that way.”

“Define ‘put’ and ‘it,’” Patrick said, making me laugh harder. “Do you need the pills for that? I can just get tested.”

A campus-based NGO offered free tests for STDs. The idea of walking in mortified me, so I never thought to ask Patrick to do it for me. Besides, I would get tested, too, just in case, if he went with me. “We both can,” I said.

“And then,” Patrick said in a deeper voice, rubbing his hands like a greedy cartoon character.

It excited me into feral lust to think of doing it without the condom. Don’t get me wrong, I loved the purpose of it, but to think I could be even closer to Patrick, that this last, thin barrier between our bodies would be gone, was more than my mind could process.

“Who’s horny now?” Patrick asked, smirking.

“Shut up,” I said. “It’ll pass.”

“I can give you a hand.”

“I’d rather catch a breath,” I said.

“Mm, good thinking. Save your strength for later.” And he looked at me with so much adoration that I knew he wanted me again. I couldn’t miss it. It was right there on his honest, glowing face.

Patrick reached over and pulled me down to lie next to him. I did it without a complaint. He kissed my cheek and jaw, then bit the soft part of my earlobe and let out a short, hot breath over it. “To recap, you want to fuck me, and you want it bare.”

Fuzzy feelings turned into glowing coals in me. “You’re still doing it,” I told him.

“Hush, I know exactly what I’m doing,” Patrick said. “I bet you want to feel what I’m

like when you're inside. And do you think you could feel me coming better?"

I laughed. He knew how to be so insufferable when he was horny.

And the worst part was that it was so easy to catch.

It made me the same. It made me uncomfortable with desire and desperate to direct it somewhere.

It reminded me of the long summer nights when I would stay up late and fantasize about all the boys I liked, barely able to breathe with the weight of those dreams pressing down on me.

But I had Patrick. And I knew I was safe with him.

So I turned around to face him, the same old gleeful spark in his eyes and mine and the devastating attraction that pulled us closer and closer together.

The second time was always tamer than the first. It was like we had sex first to feed the beast and satisfy the urges, then again to actually feel it.

And the mirage never shattered; whichever kind we picked, it felt like the superior one.

We slept after. The damned alarm woke us up and told us it was time to go.

We had lectures separately on Monday morning, and I couldn't miss these.

I took my notes religiously, but my mind caressed the memories of last night, of our conversations, of the time when words no longer sufficed, of the gentle touches in the strangest of places, and the things they made me feel.

When I saw him again, it was afternoon, and it was in a locker room full of his friends.

He walked around with a beaming smile on his face, bright enough to draw a few bewildered looks.

The trouble with that was just how brilliant he was.

You couldn't look at him for so long and not go blind.

He was a beacon in total darkness, blazing his warmth and light for us sinners who stumbled around.

"Look at you all cheerful," Easton said in passing. "You look like a whole bus of Arctic Titans went over the cliff."

"Do I?" Patrick asked.

He did.

Easton's gaze betrayed him. It didn't stay on Patrick. It bounced, shielding itself away from the brightness that radiated from under Patrick's skin. And it landed straight on my face. "How's the research going?" he asked, covering it up. He knew everything like it was laid out in piano sheets.

"I think I'm getting there," I said. "I get to see you guys kick some ass every week. It's a pretty sweet deal."

Easton grinned and slapped my shoulder, shaking it with fondness. "Yeah, you're so one of us. Even if you don't play."

I contained the smile that would have blinded him after all.

It made me wonder how a friendless virgin landed here.

A boyfriend, people willing to be friends, more sex than I could keep track of, and this moving, speeding current underneath it all that pulsed with the desire to stay alive.

To live for something. Because something was coming, something was in my future—something I needed to be around for.

Something. Or someone.

I looked at Patrick again and felt my heartbeat in my throat, swelling and speeding up. And I knew without a shred of doubt that I was in love with him.

FIFTEEN

PATRICK

Go ahead. Call it predictable. Call it sugar-rotting sweet. See if I care , I thought at some imaginary spectator as I knocked on Shane's door. It was another Saturday, another week since we hooked up the first time.

If someone could see me now, beaming as I listened to Shane's approaching footsteps, they'd probably think I had nosedived into this thing without a second thought.

Maybe I had. It didn't bother me. I had never nosedived so hard in my life, so I didn't have a reason to worry.

I'd done all my worrying before our clothes dropped off and unimaginable lust burst to life between us.

I didn't fool myself, though. This was no work of lust. I should know. I had spent the last two years of college chasing every spark of lust right to its cold, extinguished grave. Lust made you jump off the cliff; it didn't make you fly.

It was Shane, pure and simple. His analytical eyes, his scribbling, his attention, his profound understanding of the core of who I was. How could a boy not come back for more?

When the door opened, Shane's eyes almost popped out. "That's huge. Are you

crazy?”

I cleared my throat and pitched my voice to a modestly embarrassed tone. “Thanks.”

“The flowers, Patrick,” Shane said, pretending to be tired of me. He fucking wasn’t even close.

“Oh,” I said, lifting them up and pushing them at Shane. It was a bouquet of one hundred and one red roses, and Shane did not have anywhere to put them. “Hold these.”

“Thank you,” he said, sounding bewildered.

I bent down and picked up the vase. It was a simple clay one with a nice, abstract design and subdued shades of green paint melting from one to another. It was just about big enough to fit the bouquet. I knew that, as Shane would have put it, from empirical research.

He laughed out loud as I hauled the thing in and set it on his desk. “If you could call the firefighters to fill this up, that’d be magic,” I said.

Still laughing, Shane set the flowers on the desk by the vase and tossed his arms around my shoulders. “I didn’t get you anything.”

“Seriously?” I asked, a frown warping my face. “I thought we were celebrating our fortnight. Is nothing sacred to you?”

He laughed on, leaning in and planting a blazing kiss on my lips. It was more than I’d hoped for and just enough to last me forever. “Happy fortnight, Mr. Romance.”

“You owe me so bad,” I muttered, my hands going for his ass.

“Tsk.” His lips were almost on mine, but he pulled his head back a little. “I didn’t say you’re not getting anything.” He moved his hand behind his back and put it on mine, lifted it off his ass, and slipped it under the waistband of his pants.

Where I expected fabric, there was bare skin, and my entire body perked up with attention. “Oh,” I said, delighted. My fingers dragged over the strap under the curve of his cheek, following it towards the middle. “A jockstrap at the movies. I like it.”

Speaking nearly against my lips, he said, “Keep going.”

I didn’t need much convincing. If Shane thought we had enough time for a quick one before the movies, hell, I would try to get us there twice.

But when my fingers moved over his hole, there was something there.

It was firm but not hard, and it took me a second to realize he was wearing a plug.

“Fuck, I wish I put it there,” I said, hoarse and right over Shane’s lips.

“You’ll get to take it out,” Shane said. Then, before I had the time to close my fingers around the plug and give it a little push, Shane pulled my hand out of his pants, biting his lip in that sexy way when he was being sneaky.

“It came with this,” he said and tucked his hand into his pocket. What came out was a very small disk with three buttons on it.

I reached for it, but Shane pulled it away.

“Um, I haven’t...tried it yet,” he said. Meaning he wanted to try it with me. “Don’t go crazy right away.”

I smiled to myself. All I had thought about the reasons I couldn't look away from Shane was still there and as true as ever, but lust still played a part, too. Nobody could bait me this hard and still get away with it. Nobody but Shane. "I'll be gentle."

Shane gave me his most flirtatious look, the kind he hadn't dared make a month or two ago. "Only at the beginning." And the fucker winked as he handed me the remote and spun away from me.

He carried the vase into the bathroom and filled it with water, then placed the roses inside and picked up his jacket. Before we went out, he pressed a kiss to my lips and thanked me for the roses. I hadn't been sure whether or not he would like them.

The movie was a lavish drama-comedy starring Caleb Elison as an attractive gay assassin at a doomed wedding, falling for the groom's twin brother.

It had all the elements of an old rom-com, except that it went in wild directions with violence, intertwining stories of multiple characters, and a gut-wrenching ending that had the internet going crazy and meme makers in ER for their thumbs falling off from the amount of work they did.

Caleb was handsome like always, somehow managing to come across as a Hugh Grant type of bumbling and cute, but with a dark and complicated depth swelling to the surface in the most surprising ways.

This was easily his millionth big-screen gay role.

"You know, I'm starting to suspect this guy is gay," I said to Shane at the thirty-minute mark.

Shane chuckled. "What could have given you that idea?"

And just for being a tease, I touched one of the buttons on the remote, watching as Shane's chuckle hitched in his throat and his knees crashed together, thighs rubbing as he squirmed from one side to the other.

"Fuck," he whispered, his breath shallow.

That was the PULSE option, then—a single wave of sudden vibration that left Shane shuddering for breath for ten more seconds.

I bit my lip against a rising smile and focused on the film.

Caleb Elison was tracking the drink he had laced with a sleeping drug, but an overbearing aunt of the groom descended on him with too many distractions.

Crazy idea, but I was on the edge of my seat, especially as the upbeat mix of electro and classical music filled the screening room.

Shane leaned toward me and rested his head on my shoulder. Nobody knew us here. We were just two guys watching a movie. There was no pesky research project, no ethical conundrums, and no teasing from my teammates. It didn't matter if someone saw us smooching in the corner or holding hands.

Instead of holding hands, mine rested on Shane's knee, and it moved a little higher as the movie progressed.

He didn't seem to mind it. And though we were doing a lot of things a lot of the time to one another, I could shake off this feeling of nervous excitement.

Whenever I touched him, my body reacted the same way.

It always felt like the first, risky time.

Except for one big difference.

I didn't see myself freaking out and bailing on him. Hell no. I was going to stick around. I was going to be his roguish lover boy.

For as long as he wanted me.

The thought, oddly enough, didn't fill me with fear. I didn't think he would stop wanting me soon. Sometimes, it just felt right. Sometimes, you just knew a good thing when it landed in your lap and kissed you on the lips.

So if there was a worm of fear boring into my heart somewhere deep down and undetected, I failed to see it.

And if I considered it a reward rather than a sudden burst of fearful jealousy, I would; I pressed the PULSE button again, making Shane grab the armrest and my forearm, digging his nails into my flesh and twisting his back in wild ways.

I could feel it, too. In my imagination, here in the dark, I could feel that provocative, unscratchable itch traversing his body and the desperate need to move and shake it off.

Three seconds passed, and Shane settled down, exhaling a nearly silent "Fuck."

The other function that the remote offered was just as fun, especially while Shane's lips closed around the paper straw dipping into his milkshake in the diner across from the cinema.

He sat in the red, faux-leather, retro booth across from me while Elvis sang about falling in love with you from an old jukebox that had legit vinyl records and a crackling sound of the needle moving through their microscopic valleys.

Shane slammed the thick glass of frothy, creamy milkshake on the smooth surface of the table and pressed his back painfully against the back of the booth.

His lips parted, but he held back the sounds, and I adored the expression he made.

That pleased, tormented wave of heat that made his cheeks redden and the shudder that ricked his chest. “Fuck,” he said when the intensifying wave of vibration I’d sent into his plug passed.

It had lasted a solid eight seconds. The trick was to hold the button and let the current grow.

“I never should have given you so much power.”

I took his milkshake. “Don’t lie. You love it.” My lips closed around his straw and sucked a mouthful. It was very sweet, but it couldn’t compare to what I was going to suck on in an hour. The thought amused me as I pushed the milkshake back across the table and folded my arms.

Shane had a slightly embarrassed, heated look on his face, and I knew he loved it even more than he was willing to say.

It was another hour before we went to his place.

Climbing up the stairs behind Shane and giving him sudden waves of vibration pulses was a kind of joy I hadn’t thought existed.

It was hard to imagine being with anyone else, and not only because Shane was so eager to push the boundaries of what was allowed but because he did it at the same rate as I. We matched. It was as easy as that.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

When I undressed him, he shivered under my hands. And when we went to bed, he held me with such shameless neediness that it filled a hole in my chest where happiness should have been all my life.

We kissed and wrestled, doing a kind of passionate dance girls had never been thrilled about. The worship Shane had mentioned had never been so delicious.

And when I pressed my thumb against the button that sent a continuous current of tingles and vibration through Shane's body, speeding up and strengthening to an incredible climax, I made sure my lips were tight around his cock because I wanted to have every last drop of him.

Our days were busy, but our nights went on forever. I lived for them.

It caught me unaware that all I did on any given day was just a way to pass the time. What I really ate for, what I played for, what I worked out for, were the hours I got to spend with Shane in the privacy of our rooms.

By the end of November, Elio had all but moved in with Jaxon.

And I hadn't quite moved in with Shane, but it was getting there.

It crept up on me in the little ways. A toothbrush on his sink, a clean T-shirt in his drawer, his hoodie clinging to my chair like it belonged there. I wasn't staying the night every night, but it was enough that the space between us never lasted long.

Late November brought a cold wind through the city, the kind that made you grateful

for warm beds and warmer bodies. After practice, after studying, after the team dinners and the casual beers and the chaos of the locker room, it was Shane I found myself drifting toward.

There was a night, maybe a week ago, when we'd gone for a walk through Lincoln Park.

Shane had insisted the lights on the paths were atmospheric.

It was freezing, but I didn't complain. He had this ridiculous wool hat pulled down over his ears, and I could see the outline of his glasses fogging with every exhale.

We passed a guy playing guitar under a bridge.

Shane stopped to listen. Just stood there, watching him with this thoughtful tilt of his head.

I stood beside him, closer than necessary, our shoulders brushing.

He didn't move away. That night, he kissed me outside my dorm before I could invite him in, and it knocked the air out of me for a full five seconds.

Another night, he came over to help me with a paper. We sat on my bed with our laptops open, but somewhere along the way, I lost my place in the textbook and started tracing patterns on the back of his hand. He let me, not even looking up. He just smiled and leaned into my side.

We didn't ask ourselves what we were or where this was going.

We didn't have to.

And it wasn't always deep talks and hand-holding, either.

Sometimes, it was him giggling in the middle of a kiss because I was tickling his ribs by accident.

Sometimes, it was the way he rolled his eyes at my texts but still answered every one.

Sometimes, it was him stealing my hoodie and pretending it was for research purposes.

He was still shadowing me. Still scribbling in those notebooks sometimes, but not always. He asked questions and measured things. And when he left in the morning, I watched him go with a strange ache in my chest that hadn't been there before.

I didn't want to name it. I didn't want to jinx it.

But I was starting to know what it felt like to want someone in your life for longer than just right now.

That weekend, he stayed over. We didn't have sex—not that night.

We just lay there, tangled together, sharing old stories and dumb theories about why professors always used blue pens.

He asked me if I remembered my first goal in high school hockey.

I told him, then asked what music he listened to when he was sad.

We drifted to sleep in the middle of a debate about the best bagel place in Chicago.

And when I woke up to find him still there, still wrapped around me, I smiled like a

fucking idiot.

This wasn't a game anymore. Not to me.

Not when he made me want to stay in bed all day.

Not when he made the world feel like it had slowed down just enough for me to breathe.

The windows began to frost during the night around the same time Shane began writing his thesis.

My anxiety skyrocketed for no apparent reason.

He'd promised to remove all actual references to my identity and protect me from detection, except that I knew it was me.

I knew he was digging through everything I had ever said, through all my wandering glances, my flourishes on the ice, and my behaviors, good or bad.

Even so, I wondered what the final result would be. Had I opened a wound with this project that wouldn't close? Had I carved my heart out by accident? Had I given more of myself than I had thought?

The answer, of course, came in the worst way possible.

It came in a little blue notebook that Shane hadn't let me look at. He hadn't, except that he had left it in my room, sneaking out after sleeping in. And I knew it was wrong, but dammit, it was my life he was writing about. Didn't I have the right to know?

Later, I wished to gods that lightning had struck me before I opened the blue cover of Shane's notebook. I wished I hadn't looked.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

SIXTEEN

SHANE

I stood in the middle of my dorm room, staring at the scattered belongings across my bed.

My textbooks, pens, my favorite hoodie, and the glaring absence of my blue notebook.

My heartbeat quickened into an uncomfortable staccato rhythm.

Panic spiked in my chest, sharp and undeniable. It wasn't here.

I'd turned my backpack inside out, my entire desk had been meticulously excavated, and I'd even dropped to my knees and searched under the bed twice. It was no use. The sinking sensation in my stomach told me exactly where I'd left it.

Patrick's dorm.

I could picture it now, resting on his desk, a silent grenade just waiting to explode.

A thousand humiliating scenarios raced through my mind.

How many times had I opened that notebook and scribbled something down?

How many times had I tracked Patrick's moods, his self-critical remarks, his fleeting

insecurities?

How many notes had I scrawled without thinking, without censoring?

“Fuck,” I muttered to myself. My palms were clammy and shaking, but I forced myself to draw a deep breath and exhale slowly. I had to face him.

Outside, it was drizzling, the cold November air seeping into my bones despite my coat.

My steps were heavy and reluctant as I crossed the campus, each footfall echoing in my ears like a countdown to disaster.

Patrick’s dorm loomed ahead, and for a moment, I hesitated.

Turning back now would spare me an awful confrontation—but only temporarily. There was no way around it.

I knocked.

The door opened almost immediately, as if Patrick had been waiting on the other side, tension tightly coiled in his frame. My eyes fell instantly to the desk behind him, and my breath caught. There it was, my blue notebook, neatly closed, perfectly still. The sight of it confirmed everything.

“Come in,” Patrick said, his voice flat and cold. There was a sharpness to him tonight, a troubled edge beneath the carefully maintained exterior.

“Hey,” I mumbled, stepping inside and awkwardly hovering near the door. His room felt colder than usual, despite the warm yellow glow from his desk lamp. “Sorry I’m late.”

He didn't respond. Instead, he just stood there, silently watching me, his icy blue eyes unreadable. I felt dissected beneath his gaze, and I shuffled awkwardly, unable to meet his stare directly.

"Is something wrong?" I asked finally, breaking under the heavy silence.

Patrick shook his head slightly, but his expression darkened, the muscles in his jaw visibly tightening.

He was never good at controlling his emotions.

Only, I'd never played against him on the ice.

I'd never had a chance to see something other than his uncontrolled lust and desire.

"Wrong? Why would something be wrong?"

I swallowed thickly. "You just seem?—"

"Seem what, Shane?" Patrick interrupted sharply. He turned away, busying himself unnecessarily by moving things around on his desk. His movements were quick and agitated. "I seem upset? Or maybe just insecure?"

I froze. He had definitely read the notebook. My heart hammered painfully against my ribs.

"No," I lied, barely audible. "You just seem...off."

Patrick's anger simmered dangerously close to the surface now, and when he faced me again, it was clear he wasn't going to let it go. His eyes glittered with barely restrained fury, but there was something else there, too—raw, unguarded sadness.

“You think I’m stupid, don’t you?” he snapped suddenly, so unexpectedly that I nearly stumbled backward. “You think I’m worthless, incompetent, insecure, and good for absolutely nothing except hockey.”

“What?” I stammered, blindsided by his intensity. “I never...”

“You didn’t have to say it out loud!” Patrick said.

“Oh, come on,” I snapped back, my voice rising defensively. “Now you’re twisting this into something it isn’t. You’re just looking for things to be mad about!”

“You’ve been doing that all along,” Patrick said, taking a step closer. “You’re always scheduling around your time, your availability, and never mine. I’m supposed to drop everything when you suddenly decide you need more data?”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it,” I said, heat rushing into my cheeks. “I’ve been nothing but accommodating. I’m the one skipping classes, rearranging my meetings, bending backward so I don’t inconvenience your hockey practice.”

Patrick scoffed bitterly, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Yeah, Shane, because we all know I’m so precious and special. God forbid you interrupt my workouts—but hey, feel free to barge into my life every other moment of the day, right?”

“I don’t barge in,” I snapped, frustration and defensiveness warring in my voice. “You agreed to this schedule. You signed off on everything.”

“Oh, did I?” Patrick threw his hands up, incredulous. “When did I agree to you shadowing my every move? When did I say you could invade every goddamn second of my life, writing shit about me whenever you feel like it? Even when we’re not supposed to be working. When we are together, Shane.”

My jaw clenched tight. “If you had a problem, maybe you should’ve said something sooner instead of acting like everything’s fine and then exploding on me out of nowhere.”

“Maybe you should’ve noticed,” Patrick shot back, eyes blazing with frustration. “If you’re such a brilliant fucking observer, how come you missed that?”

“Patrick, this is ridiculous!” I finally exclaimed, exasperation flooding through me. “We’re fighting over nothing.”

“No,” he growled, voice rough with hurt. “We’re fighting because you wrote down everything you think is wrong with me, like I’m some fucking lab rat for you to dissect.”

My heart plunged. I stared helplessly, unable to find words. He was right, of course, but the truth felt brutal, too exposed. “You’re taking it out of context,” I managed weakly, voice shaking.

He laughed bitterly. “Oh, really? So when you wrote down ‘worthless,’ you meant that kindly? Or was ‘insecure’ a compliment? I trusted you.”

I pressed my lips together, suddenly angry, too, because this was unfair. “You wanna talk about trust? You read my notes.”

He took a huge step forward, growing taller and broader as he neared me. “You read my heartbeat, my thoughts, everything!”

The air grew heavier between us, an electric charge crackling. Patrick was silent. And so was I, stunned for the first time.

His eyes narrowed, lips parting as though to argue, but nothing came out.

“I did,” I admitted. “I read your heartbeat. I didn’t believe my eyes. I didn’t even believe the watch measuring your pulse until the end. I didn’t believe you’d ever be attracted to me.”

His lips quivered, and then anger buried whatever emotion had almost surfaced. “You used me. And now I know what you think of me.”

“Everything in there, Patrick—it’s just quotes. You said these things to me.” I said, my voice pleading more than flinging the truth at him vindictively.

Disbelief flashed across his face. He shook his head slowly. “You’re lying.”

Anger and hurt made my fingers clumsy as I snatched up the notebook, flipping through pages until I found the entry I remembered vividly.

“October thirteenth, five in the afternoon,” I said, my voice tight, strained.

“You were getting ready for your workout, and we talked about your diet. You told me that at sixteen, you ate raw oats because you didn’t realize they needed cooking.

You laughed about it. And then you said, ‘I’m really no good for anything other than hockey.

’” I slapped the notebook closed, the sound harsh and abrupt.

“I wrote down only what I needed. It was insightful.”

His expression crumbled slightly, just enough to show vulnerability. Yet, pride surged forward, shielding him quickly. “Fine. But the rest...you chose the worst parts, Shane. That notebook makes me look like a self-hating disaster.”

I exhaled sharply, flipping the notebook open again. “Here. October twenty-ninth. ‘Incompetent.’ Just that one word, underlined. You called yourself that after a bad game. I noted it down because I was studying how harshly you talk to yourself. Not because I agree with you.”

He faltered, the anger fading from his face, replaced by embarrassment. His teeth dug into his lower lip, eyes flickering away. I waited, needing an apology I knew he wouldn’t give.

“You’re not going to say sorry, are you?” I asked quietly.

He glared, the tension rising again. “For what?”

My heart sank. “For reading my notes. For assuming the worst about me. For anything.”

Patrick’s jaw tightened stubbornly. “Maybe you shouldn’t have written those things.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have read them. You’re insecure enough not to be able to handle it,” I shot back, voice thick with hurt.

The silence expanded painfully between us until I couldn’t stand it anymore.

I regretted saying that, but I couldn’t swallow my pride, either.

“Forget it,” I finally said, turning away. “I’m leaving.”

Suddenly, panic flashed in Patrick’s eyes. “Why? Hold on. We’re not done yet.”

I hesitated, the pain in my chest nearly unbearable. “Aren’t we?” My voice cracked. It was all I could manage before turning my back on him.

“Shane.”

But I didn't stop. I couldn't. Walking out of that room felt like ripping myself away from the only genuine connection I'd ever had, knowing I'd likely severed it forever. My footsteps echoed dully down the hall, each one dragging me further from Patrick, further from reconciliation.

Outside, the drizzle had turned into a steady rain, cold drops soaking through my coat, numbing my skin. My fingers tightened around the notebook, and my chest squeezed painfully. Had I really gone too far at the end? Had I let pride ruin everything we'd built?

My dorm loomed ahead, dark and lifeless. By the time I climbed the stairs and fumbled open the door to my room, tears were burning fiercely behind my eyes. I stumbled inside, closed the door, and leaned heavily against it. My head fell back, hitting the wood with a dull thump.

Then, finally, in the safety of my solitude, the tears escaped.

My throat closed around a strangled sob as the weight of everything crashed down on me.

My knees shook, my entire body trembling.

Patrick was right, in some ways. I'd used his vulnerabilities, even if unintentionally.

But he'd breached my trust just as deeply.

And yet, standing there alone, miserable, I didn't care who was more wrong. I only knew the unbearable pain of walking away from him, the sickening feeling of having ruined something precious, something rare and true.

My notebook slipped from my fingers, hitting the floor softly, insignificant now. It was just words on paper, meaningless without context, meaningless without him.

In that moment, standing alone, broken by a loss I'd brought upon myself, I wondered bitterly if this was exactly what I'd feared from the start—this painful consequence of getting too close, too attached, too vulnerable.

I sank slowly to the floor, hugging my knees to my chest. As the room blurred with tears, I realized I'd learned something vital and horrible all at once:

The cost of caring this deeply was losing everything.

SEVENTEEN

PATRICK

I tightened my grip around my stick, circling restlessly on my skates as I waited for the puck to drop. The ref hesitated, holding the moment in suspense, and I stole a glance toward the stands.

Habit, maybe. Or maybe something more.

But for the first time in two months, Shane wasn't there.

The spot he usually claimed—a spot I'd grown annoyingly used to—sat empty and glaring, a silent accusation in a sea of noisy faces.

My stomach twisted sharply, raw and hollow.

It felt like someone had carved a hole into my chest and left it open to the cold air of the rink.

I clenched my jaw, trying to ignore the ache. It wasn't working.

“Hey, P, you awake?” Easton teased, nudging me gently with his elbow as we prepared for the face-off. I didn't answer, barely even registered his voice. I was locked into that empty seat, searching for Shane's messy hair, his oversized hoodie, and those damn notebooks of his.

Nothing.

When the puck dropped, something inside me snapped.

The blade of my stick hit the ice with a furious crack, and I lunged forward, faster and harder than I'd ever moved in practice.

Ice sprayed up behind me, and my muscles burned, but I embraced it, pouring every bit of frustration and confusion into each stride.

I caught the puck effortlessly, weaving around two Ice Hawks who hadn't anticipated the fury I brought tonight. One guy—big and mean-looking—tried to knock me into the boards, but I ducked low, skating circles around him. If I'd cared, I might've smiled at the curses he hurled after me.

But tonight, nothing was funny.

I'd spent two days replaying our fight, two nights staring at the ceiling, wondering how it had all gone so wrong.

Shane thought I'd betrayed him, that I'd violated his trust, but hadn't he done the same thing?

Hadn't he been watching my every move, noting my every flaw, reducing me to a case study, an experiment?

Anger flared hot in my chest as I fired the puck to Elio, who redirected it quickly toward Easton.

It narrowly missed the net, bouncing off the post with a hollow clang that echoed my frustration.

“Fuck!” Easton growled, slamming his stick against the ice.

I circled back, heart pounding. It didn’t matter. I’d set it up again. I’d fight harder, skate faster, anything to quiet the noise in my head, to fill the gaping hole Shane had left behind.

When play resumed, I went at it relentlessly. I raced down the ice, narrowly dodging an elbow aimed directly at my head. My shoulder collided with one of the Ice Hawks, and a sharp jolt ran through my body, but I didn’t care. Pain was better than the numbness, better than the ache I couldn’t shake.

I stole the puck, my pulse thundering in my ears as I charged the goal again. I felt eyes on me, hundreds of them, but none were his. Shane had been the steady, quiet observer, the one face I never admitted I searched for after each shift. Now he was gone, and I was playing blind.

I cut right, faking out the defender, passing the puck to Elio once more. This time, Easton caught Elio’s pass and flicked it sharply into the net.

The crowd erupted in cheers, a wave of sound crashing around me. But it felt distant, muted somehow. Elio and Easton were celebrating, embracing each other in triumph, and my teammates slammed into me in congratulations, patting my back, shouting praise.

I forced a smile, accepting their high fives with numb fingers.

My pulse didn’t slow, my breathing came ragged, and the emptiness gnawed deeper.

I searched again—pointlessly—eyes scanning the stands for Shane’s absent face, desperate to share this moment of victory, even if only silently, from afar.

But his seat remained vacant.

As the game went on, my intensity grew, fueled by a strange mix of hurt and fury.

My moves became more reckless, the plays more aggressive.

I welcomed each rough check, threw my body willingly into every collision.

Anything was better than facing the fact that Shane had cut me out, severed the fragile bond we'd built, and left me alone in the spotlight I'd foolishly convinced myself I hated.

By the third period, the Ice Hawks had begun to fear me. They gave me space when I took the puck, eyed me warily as I sped toward them. And still, none of it was enough.

With only a few minutes left, I caught the puck again, pushing through defenders, breath harsh in my throat, muscles trembling with exhaustion.

Sweat blurred my vision, but I didn't slow down.

I couldn't. Stopping meant feeling the hollow ache again, acknowledging the empty seat, the broken connection.

I unleashed a wild, desperate shot toward the net, watching it sail past the goalie's reach. The arena exploded with sound, roaring my name, celebrating my ruthless victory.

But as my teammates crashed into me, elation shining in their eyes, I felt nothing but emptiness. My gaze drifted once more toward Shane's empty spot, hoping foolishly he might've appeared suddenly, forgiving everything, erasing the hurt.

He hadn't.

Instead, I skated toward the bench, hollow and weary. I dropped my head into my hands, breathing shakily, knowing I'd poured everything I had onto the ice tonight—and it hadn't fixed a single damn thing.

After the game, we all gathered at Lumière, the air thick with laughter and lingering adrenaline.

I sat quietly among the chatter, feeling more bruised and battered on the inside than from any check I'd taken on the ice.

Halfway through my beer, I realized I couldn't do it tonight.

I couldn't pretend everything was fine while Shane's empty seat back at the rink still haunted me.

Quietly, I pushed my chair back, leaving the beer unfinished as I slipped outside. The cool air bit into my skin, and I breathed deep, hoping it might numb the rawness that clung stubbornly inside my chest.

I hadn't expected company. But moments later, the door behind me creaked open, and I glanced over my shoulder to see Elio stepping out into the chilly night. He approached slowly, eyes thoughtful, cautious, reading me the way he always seemed to do so effortlessly.

"You okay, P?" he asked gently.

I shrugged, unwilling to admit just how far from okay I really was. "Just tired. Rough game."

He hummed softly, leaning against the brick wall beside me. Silence fell between us, broken only by distant laughter from inside the bar. Eventually, he spoke again, voice careful yet firm. “Shane wasn’t there tonight.”

I felt my throat tighten. “Nope.”

Elio paused, waiting. But I wasn’t giving anything away, not willingly. I’d always been good at hiding behind silence. Until now. This time, Elio wasn’t letting me slip by.

“Listen,” he started again, quieter, more direct, “we don’t really talk about this stuff. You never said anything officially, but it’s pretty obvious.”

“What’s obvious?” I asked, turning my head, forcing defiance into my tone.

“You and Shane,” Elio said plainly. “You’re dating.”

I stared at the ground, my jaw clenched tight. It hurt hearing it aloud. It felt like ripping open a wound I’d barely managed to close.

“Patrick,” Elio insisted softly, “come on. It’s just me.”

I exhaled shakily, defeat creeping into my bones. “Fine. Yeah. We were ...together. Or whatever.”

Elio waited a beat. “What happened?”

The story crawled out slowly, painfully.

It dragged out of me piece by humiliating piece.

I told him about the notebook, the betrayal, the fight, and how everything spiraled out of control in a matter of moments.

How Shane's words had cut deeper than I'd imagined possible and how mine had wounded him just as badly.

By the time I finished, I felt drained, exposed in a way that made me desperately want to run.

Elio said nothing for a moment, absorbing every word. When he finally spoke, his voice was steady, deliberate, full of quiet understanding. "You know, when things went bad with Jaxon, I was ready to give up, too."

I glanced up at him, surprised. He rarely talked openly about his relationship, especially when things had gotten tough. But here he was, laying it bare for my sake.

"We pushed each other away hard," Elio admitted. "I hurt him because I was scared, Patrick. I'd convinced myself I didn't deserve him and that if he saw the real me, he'd leave. So I made sure he never had the chance."

I swallowed thickly, recognizing myself in his words. "But you guys figured it out."

Elio nodded slowly, eyes serious. "Yeah, we did. But it took courage, Patrick. Real courage. More than any hockey game ever demanded. I had to stop running from my mistakes and face them head-on. I had to admit that I was scared, vulnerable...and wrong."

I closed my eyes, exhaling through the tightness in my chest. "What if it's too late?"

Elio offered a small, knowing smile. "If Shane feels half of what you feel right now, it's not too late. Sometimes we hurt the people we care about because they're the

ones close enough to take the hit. But you don't give up just because things got messy. Love is messy."

My throat tightened painfully. "I don't even know if he wants to talk to me."

"He might not right away," Elio agreed gently. "But if you don't even try, you'll never know. It'll eat you up, Patrick. Trust me, I know."

I nodded silently, staring down at my feet, my mind swirling with doubt, fear, and fragile hope. Elio placed a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"You guys deserve a real shot," he said, voice firm. "But that means you have to be brave enough to risk failing again. Maybe you'll screw it up—maybe it'll hurt even worse—but at least you'll know you didn't just give up when it mattered most."

His words lingered, heavy and honest, sinking deep into my chest. He squeezed my shoulder gently and turned toward the door. "Think about it. If you really care about him, you have to fight for it."

Elio disappeared back inside Lumière, leaving me alone again, standing in the cold with my heartbeat echoing his advice.

I took a deep breath, the first one in days that didn't feel suffocating. Maybe Elio was right. Maybe Shane deserved a real fight—not a hockey game, not an angry exchange of words—but an honest, vulnerable battle for something deeper, something worth every bruise along the way.

I wasn't sure if I could do it, if I was brave enough. But as I stood there, the ache inside me softened just a little, enough for me to realize that I owed it to Shane, and to myself, to try.

After all, what was the point of winning on the ice if I lost the one person who made it all mean something?

EIGHTEEN

SHANE

My computer screen glowed harshly in the darkness, words about the elusive Player blurring together until they meant nothing at all. I lifted my glasses, pressed my fingertips against my closed eyelids, and rubbed hard, as if I could somehow erase the exhaustion that clung stubbornly behind them.

It didn't help.

When I opened my eyes, my gaze drifted upward to the small shelf above my desk, cluttered with trophies from a past life—Junior Hockey hockey championships, shining gently under a layer of dust. They were symbols of a promise I'd once held in my hands: talent, potential, a future carved out in skates and ice.

But promises broke easily, didn't they?

The ache in my chest deepened, tugging painfully at the edges of the emptiness that had grown since the day I'd walked away from Patrick.

I'd been a promising hockey player once, but injury had snatched that away.

And just when I'd thought I could have something good again, I'd gone and ruined it myself.

I was good at ruining things.

My eyes returned unwillingly to the unfinished thesis.

Studying Patrick—Player, as I called him—had seemed like a terrible yet brilliant idea at the start.

But now, every line on the screen was a reminder of how spectacularly I'd failed.

It was far worse than I'd feared before I'd started.

My notes, my careful observations, the meticulous tracking of his heartbeat and moods—they'd destroyed everything we'd carefully built.

All my data, all my insights, suddenly felt meaningless, poisoned by regret and guilt.

I sighed heavily, leaning back in my chair, feeling utterly defeated.

Maybe I should abandon this altogether. Drop the project entirely, admit my failure, and write something else.

Something less dangerous, something safe.

NHL sports psychology, perhaps. There were countless videos and interviews already available.

Easy sources, easy analysis. Maybe late submissions would still earn a passing grade.

Professor Halden would understand. Probably.

I stared at the ceiling, heart twisting.

Was that really who I wanted to be? Someone who backed out when things got tough,

someone who couldn't even face the consequences of his own mistakes?

Fear locked me inside a hard, impenetrable shell.

Hell, I'd never skated again after the injury.

I'd never dared strap the laces of my skates and step onto the ice. Would I dare look at him again?

But God, it hurt. I missed Patrick in ways I hadn't thought possible.

I missed the cocky grin that slipped out when he thought I wasn't looking, the genuine warmth in his eyes when he teased me, even the stubborn pride that kept him from ever admitting defeat.

I missed the easy way he touched me without thinking, how my heart raced embarrassingly whenever he smiled.

My throat tightened. I missed being someone Patrick could trust, someone who hadn't let him down.

I swallowed back the heaviness pressing behind my eyes. Maybe I was being dramatic. Maybe things could still be fixed. But my pride had always been my worst enemy—pride that kept me from texting him, pride that stopped me from running to him right now and begging for forgiveness. Or fear.

I closed my laptop, plunging the room into darkness, the screen's afterglow burning behind my eyelids.

Maybe I couldn't have hockey again, couldn't reclaim the lost years, or fix the broken dreams lining my shelf.

But Patrick?

If there was even the smallest chance I could fix things with him, shouldn't I be doing something?

The sharp knock on my dorm room door nearly sent me tumbling out of my chair. My heart leaped painfully into my throat as adrenaline flooded my veins. Who the hell knocked this late? Was it Patrick? Had something happened?

I flicked my desk lamp on, squinting against its sudden brightness, and stumbled toward the door. When I opened it, my heart plummeted again, confusion and worry surging forward.

"Elio?" I asked, bewildered. I gripped the door handle tighter, searching his face anxiously. "What's wrong? Is everything okay?"

Elio's eyebrows rose, and he laughed softly, shaking his head. "Shit, sorry, Shane. Didn't mean to scare you." His expression relaxed into a gentle, apologetic smile. "I must look like I'm here to tell you somebody died or something."

"You kinda do," I admitted, heart rate slowly settling back toward normal, though anxiety still lingered. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing like that." Elio raised both hands defensively, his smile growing warmer. "Relax. I'm just the messenger. I have a message for you—if you're willing to hear it."

I swallowed hard, suddenly realizing exactly what kind of message this might be. My pulse sped up again, but this time, it was hopeful, electric, flooding every inch of my body with anticipation. "Patrick?" I asked quietly.

Elio nodded once, seriously. “He asked if you’d meet him at the rink.

Tonight. He’s already there, waiting for you.

” His eyes softened, filled with quiet sincerity.

“Listen, Shane. I don’t usually do this whole meddling-in-relationships thing.

It’s not really my style. But I care about Patrick, and...

if you still have feelings for him at all, I think you should go and just hear him out. ”

A dizzying wave of relief and joy crashed through me, powerful enough that I had to grip the door frame to steady myself. My throat tightened, words lost for a moment, until I finally managed, “Are you kidding me? Of course I’ll go. Right now?”

Elio laughed gently, stepping aside as I hurriedly grabbed my coat from the hook by the door. “He’s there already, probably skating circles to clear his head. You really should go.”

“I’m going,” I assured him, breathless. I tugged my coat over my shoulders, nearly stumbling over my own feet in my hurry. “Thank you, Elio. I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” he said warmly, stepping back into the hallway to let me pass. “Just...don’t hurt him, okay?”

I paused, meeting Elio’s eyes with raw honesty. “I won’t. I never meant to.”

“I know,” he said softly. “Neither did he.”

Outside, the night air was sharp and cold, but I barely felt it as I stepped onto the

sidewalk.

My feet hardly touched the ground, my pulse racing with every step.

The world around me blurred in a whirl of hopeful disbelief.

I felt like I'd just won the lottery. Hell, this was better than the lottery.

Elio lingered at the dorm entrance a moment longer, hands shoved deep into his pockets. "Good luck, Shane. You deserve this. Both of you do."

"Thank you," I said again and meant it with every ounce of my being.

With a last nod, he turned and headed off toward Jaxon's place. Watching him go, I felt a rush of gratitude for Elio, who'd somehow managed to repair something I'd believed irreparably broken.

As I turned toward the rink, anticipation surged inside me, bright and overwhelming. Patrick was waiting for me. Maybe I didn't deserve a second chance, but I had it, and there was no way in hell I was going to waste it.

Tonight, I'd listen. Tonight, I'd finally get it right.

The rink was silent and shadowed, lit only by the faint glow of a few overhead lights.

My footsteps echoed softly as I walked down the corridor, the familiar chill settling onto my skin, waking something inside me.

Two months of shadowing Patrick here had transformed this place into something close to home.

Its quiet hum, the bite of cold air, even the lingering scent of ice, felt strangely comforting.

The locker room door stood open. Empty. Rows of vacant benches and neatly organized gear, dimly lit, greeted me with a familiar warmth, though tonight, it felt different, expectant, almost like it knew why I was here.

I continued down the hallway, anxiety and hope tangling tight inside my chest. My heartbeat quickened when I stepped through the doorway into the main arena, my breath catching as I took in the vastness of the ice stretching quietly before me.

Then I saw him.

Patrick stood by the player benches, dressed in his normal clothes, a nice jacket zipped halfway up over his chest, his breath visible in faint puffs beneath the dim lights.

He wore his skates already, standing comfortably, effortlessly balanced, the way he always seemed to be.

He turned slowly, his eyes meeting mine, and a small smile tugged at his lips.

“Hey,” he said quietly, warmth unmistakable in his voice. “Thanks for coming.”

My pulse raced as I approached him, each step feeling surreal. Patrick shifted slightly, revealing what he’d been holding—a pair of skates, laces tied neatly together, dangling from his fingers.

“I have a lot to say,” he began gently. “A lot to apologize for, Shane. But first...” He paused, almost shyly, as he held out the skates toward me. “I realized we’ve never done this as a date. Not once. We’ve never gone skating together.”

My throat tightened. The sight of those skates sent a rush of icy panic through me, memories I'd buried long ago surging back, sharp and relentless.

My injury, the accident, the helpless slide across the ice, the pain...

I couldn't stop the images, the sudden shortness of breath, the dizziness creeping in at the edges of my vision.

Patrick's face shifted immediately, concern flaring in his eyes. "Shane? What's wrong?"

"I—I can't," I managed to choke out, my voice shaking. "Patrick, I haven't skated since...since my injury."

Instantly, Patrick stepped closer, the skates dangling between us, forgotten momentarily. He placed a gentle hand on my shoulder, his grip warm and reassuring.

"Hey, breathe. It's okay," he murmured, his voice a calming anchor amidst the storm in my chest. "I didn't know. I'm sorry. But you're not alone, Shane. You don't have to do it alone."

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

His words were soft, filled with quiet strength, determination radiating from his touch. My gaze locked onto his, desperation tangling with trust as I struggled to steady my breathing.

“You don’t understand,” I whispered, shame coloring my words. “I can’t skate anymore. I’m scared, Patrick. Really fucking scared.”

He smiled then, softly, kindly, his thumb tracing a gentle, reassuring circle on my shoulder. “I do understand,” he whispered back. “Maybe not about the skating, but about being afraid. About feeling like you’re losing control, about thinking you’ll fall and never get back up again.”

My breathing slowed, the knot in my chest loosening slightly. He held my gaze, unwavering.

“Shane, I’m here,” he continued earnestly. “I’m right here, and I promise you, no matter what, I won’t let anything happen to you. I’ll hold you, skate right beside you, catch you if you stumble. And if you really can’t, that’s okay, too. But let’s just try, together.”

I hesitated, my heart pounding against my ribs, my gaze flickering uncertainly between Patrick’s steady eyes and the skates in his hand. His assurance wrapped gently around me, his unwavering belief thawing the ice-cold fear gripping my chest.

Slowly, I reached out and took the skates from him. My fingers brushed against his, the contact sending a pulse of warmth through me, chasing away some of the lingering dread.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I admitted softly.

Patrick’s smile widened, full of gentle understanding. “You don’t have to know. That’s the point, Shane. You don’t have to do this perfectly. You just have to trust me.”

The way he said it, the openness in his voice, the gentle confidence, it shattered something inside me, some last wall I’d stubbornly held on to. I found myself nodding slowly, heart racing with an entirely new kind of anticipation.

“Okay,” I whispered. “I trust you.”

He smiled again, brightening the dim arena, and moved a step closer. “Good. Then let’s get these on.”

I sat down on the player bench and slipped off my shoes, my hands shaking only slightly as I laced up the skates.

Patrick watched quietly, patiently, his eyes warm with encouragement.

When I stood, wobbling uncertainly, he stepped immediately to my side, his strong arm sliding protectively around my waist.

“I’ve got you,” he promised, his voice steady, unshakable. “Just hold on to me.”

As we moved cautiously toward the ice, his warmth pressed close against my side, my heart filled with something I hadn’t felt in far too long. Hope, courage, and the terrifying, exhilarating sensation of finally letting someone catch me.

“In case you’re wondering, and I know you are, Easton has the keys. He and Jace are drinking at Lumière, so we have all the time in the world,” Patrick said softly,

holding my hand firmly as we carefully eased onto the ice.

Oddly enough, something lifted off my chest, and I relaxed into it a little more. We had time. There was no rush at all. We could take all the time we needed.

My breath quickened as the skates glided unsteadily beneath me. Patrick's grip tightened reassuringly around my fingers, his thumb brushing gently over my knuckles. My legs shook slightly, but he was right there, a steady, calming presence.

"Easy," he murmured, close enough that his breath ghosted warmly over my cheek. "I won't let you fall, Shane."

I nodded, my heart fluttering wildly. Trusting him wasn't the hard part. It was trusting myself. But his quiet assurance soothed the worst of my fear. Carefully, slowly, we began to move together, my body instinctively leaning into his warmth.

We found our rhythm, skating cautiously along the perimeter, our strides short and uncertain at first. Gradually, as minutes passed and nothing terrible happened, my fear started to ebb away, replaced by something softer and gentler.

Patrick's presence, patient and unwavering, grounded me.

For the first time in years, skating felt like breathing. It felt natural.

He smiled encouragingly, blue eyes bright and gentle beneath the faint glow of the rink lights. "Better?"

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding, nodding slightly. "Surprisingly, yes."

He laughed softly, warmth radiating from him and spreading into me. "Good. Let's

keep going.”

With every careful glide, my confidence grew, my body relaxing into the easy rhythm we created together.

Patrick moved close, never leaving my side, our shoulders brushing occasionally as our pace grew steadier.

Slowly, the ice transformed beneath my feet, no longer something dangerous or terrifying but something beautiful and inviting.

It felt like rediscovering a part of myself that I’d lost long ago.

After several laps, Patrick gently slowed our pace, guiding us back to the side of the rink.

He reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out his phone, the glow illuminating his face softly.

I watched curiously as he selected a song, the first gentle notes floating around us, sweet and comforting, filling the empty rink with music.

He pocketed the phone, reaching out to me again with a shy smile. “Dance with me?”

I felt myself blushing, a warmth rushing up my neck. But I nodded immediately, moving willingly into his open arms. Patrick held me close, one hand resting gently on my waist, the other cradling my fingers as we swayed carefully together on the ice.

My heartbeat slowed into something steady and strong, matching the rhythm of the music, our skates gliding softly in small, slow circles. Patrick’s breath brushed warm

against my ear, making my pulse stutter pleasantly.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about us,” he began quietly, voice tender but serious. “About how we got here. About how badly I screwed things up.”

My throat tightened, but I waited, letting him speak.

“I know I’m too much,” he continued gently, his thumb brushing soothingly along my back. “I’ve always been that way. I’m too much like fire for anyone’s good. I run fast, and I love hard. And I’ve got a short fuse that’ll probably cost me my head someday.”

He paused, breathing deeply, as though gathering courage. I raised my head slightly, searching his eyes. They were open, raw with honesty, reflecting everything he felt.

“But that’s the point, Shane,” Patrick said firmly, quietly. “I love hard. I don’t hold back when I care about something...or someone. And it’s you I love.”

My heart stumbled, breath catching painfully in my chest. For a moment, the words felt unreal, as fragile as the ice beneath us. I clutched Patrick tighter, desperate to believe that this moment, this declaration, could be mine to keep.

“You’re sure?” I whispered finally, vulnerable, hopeful, terrified.

Patrick smiled softly, eyes warm and clear. “Yeah. I’ve never been more sure about anything. I know it’s scary, and I know we’ll probably mess things up again. But that’s okay because I’ll keep fighting for you, Shane. For us.”

Tears burned the edges of my vision. His honesty, his quiet, unshakable resolve, unraveled every last piece of doubt lingering inside me. I pressed myself closer, resting my head gently against his chest, his heartbeat steady beneath my ear.

“I love you, too,” I said quietly, words slightly muffled but unmistakable. “I’m sorry for being stubborn. It was a stupid idea, Patrick. I never should have continued with the paper once I knew I was in love with you.”

“You knew,” Patrick said, his lips curling into a pleased smile.

“God, I did,” I said, words flying away from me after I’d spent so much energy to keep them back.

“I knew I loved you before I ever knew you could love me back, Patrick.” I pressed my hands against his chest. Right now, I needed all his physical support.

The rink was spinning around me even though we weren’t moving.

“I was scared and stupid. I was terrified.”

Patrick gently squeezed me tighter, lips brushing softly against my hair. “I get it. But I promise, Shane—I’ll always be right here. You can lean on me.”

We swayed together, letting the music wrap warmly around us, his steady breathing and solid presence anchoring me completely. It felt safe, like finally being home.

After a long moment, I lifted my head, meeting his eyes again. “Thank you,” I murmured softly. “For not letting me give up.”

He smiled, leaning down to press his lips gently to mine. The kiss was soft, careful, and perfect, exactly like him.

“Never,” he whispered when we parted, eyes shining brightly with quiet certainty. “We don’t give up on things worth fighting for.”

And as I skated with Patrick in quiet, easy circles beneath the dim glow of the rink lights, wrapped safely in his arms, I knew he was right. This was worth every fall, every bruise, every stumble we would ever face. Because together, we'd always find our way back up.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

Six Months Later

It was the kind of evening that made you forget the rest of the world existed, just heat radiating off the sand, the hush of water stretching endlessly toward the horizon, and the wind tousling your hair like it had always known you.

I carried our towels over my shoulder, my other hand clasped around Shane's as we stepped barefoot onto the warm, late-July sand. The breeze off Lake Michigan was gentle tonight, brushing against our skin like it, too, had nothing left to prove.

Shane led the way.

It still hit me sometimes, that shift. He no longer waited for me to take the first step. He wasn't walking behind me anymore, trying to shrink himself smaller. He moved with an ease that was all new and all his, and God, I never got tired of watching him.

He looked back over his shoulder and smiled. "You're dragging your feet, Callahan. Too old to keep up?"

I grinned. "I'm enjoying the view."

He flushed, then rolled his eyes and turned away quickly. But I caught the way his shoulders relaxed, the way his steps lightened just a little more.

We set our things down near the shoreline. The beach was quiet. Families had packed up for the night, the volleyball nets were empty, and the city behind us glowed in soft gold and blue, fading as twilight crept in.

Without fanfare, Shane peeled his shirt off in one fluid motion.

I stood there, stunned, as if I hadn't already seen him shirtless a hundred times: sweaty after a workout, breathless after sex, half-asleep in my bed.

But this was different. There was no hesitation, no tugging at the hem, no subtle angling away from the world.

Though rather empty, this beach still contained enough strangers who would have made my old Shane fidget.

Lean and lightly tanned, freckles scattered along his collarbone, an old scar on his left side like a piece of punctuation. He stretched, arms raised above his head, and the gesture was so casual, so confident, I nearly forgot to breathe.

Six months ago, he would've worn long sleeves to the beach. Six months ago, he would've pretended he wasn't watching everyone else.

Today, he knew he was being watched.

And he let me.

"Are you coming or just gonna stand there like a creep?" he called over his shoulder, wading into the lake.

I blinked, my mouth twitching into a grin. "Creep's a strong word."

He shrugged. "So is boyfriend. But here we are."

I stripped down and jogged after him, splashing into the water with a yelp at the initial cold. He laughed, already knee-deep, his hair wind-blown and slightly damp

from sweat.

“You’re stalling,” he teased.

“I’m still enjoying the view,” I said again, closing the distance and wrapping my arms around his waist. “Different verbs.”

He tilted his chin toward me, brown eyes soft and open. “Then enjoy properly.”

I kissed him, slow and deep, the lake curling around our calves and our bodies melting together like the world had been waiting for this.

The kiss tasted like sun and sweat and water. Like him. Always him.

Later, we sprawled side by side on our towels, towels barely long enough for both of us, but that had never stopped me from pulling him half onto mine.

His legs were still wet, sand clinging to his calves and the edges of his shorts. He leaned into me, bare chest pressed against my side, his head resting on my shoulder as I combed fingers absently through his hair.

His hand played with mine, fingers tracing idle lines along my wrist. I looked down at him, heart tripping stupidly over itself the way it always did when he touched me like this.

“Remember the first time you came to the beach with me?” I asked.

He snorted. “You mean when I told you I hated the beach and how I always spent the whole time in a hoodie pretending to be allergic to sunlight? Thank God it was winter.”

We stayed there for a while, watching the sky shift through pink and gold and into something quieter, more blue. A few joggers passed in the distance. Someone played acoustic guitar further up the beach. It felt like a movie, but we weren't pretending.

Shane sat up after a while, brushing sand off his thighs. "You know, if I rewrote the thesis now, it'd just say: 'Hopelessly in love with my subject.'"

I laughed. "You better not. That's private data."

He turned toward me, his grin lopsided. "Oh, you mean like your full-frontal exhibitionism in the locker room?"

"You're never letting that go, are you?"

"Not a chance." He batted his long eyelashes at me. "I'd love to see more of it."

"And here I was,, worrying you'd get bored," I teased.

He laughed, and the conversation quieted, and for a while, we just watched the lake ripple gently under the twilight.

Then, Shane leaned back on his elbows and looked at me with something like wonder, like he still couldn't quite believe this was real. "I've never been with someone who made me feel...visible," he said. "And not just when I'm naked."

My throat tightened. "You've always been visible, Shane. I just had to see you."

He blinked a few times, eyes glassy in the fading light.

"I have a confession," I added softly.

He nudged me. “You always do.”

“I didn’t think I could do this. The relationship. Being someone you’d let hold your hand in public. I’m fire, Shane. I burn everything I touch. And with a guy after a lifetime of thinking I was straight? Not a chance. I was dead certain I’d wake up one morning and freak out and just walk away.”

Shane was quiet for a moment, studying me, before he shifted onto his knees and straddled my lap. “Yeah,” he said, brushing my hair back from my forehead. “You run fast. You love hard. You have a temper that could level a city block.”

“Romantic,” I muttered.

“But that’s the point,” he said. “You love hard, Patrick. And it’s me you love.”

I looked up at him, heat washing through my chest. He was bare above me, skin warm from the sun, lips parted just slightly. The confidence he wore now didn’t erase the boy who once flinched at his reflection.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled him down against me. “I do,” I whispered against his mouth. “I love you.”

The kiss was deeper this time, slower, full of everything we didn’t need to say. His hips moved lazily against mine, not quite a tease, not quite an invitation, just contact. Wanting. Familiar. Safe.

When he pulled back, he rested his forehead against mine, breathing hard.

We stayed until the stars came out, until the air cooled, and our towels were damp beneath us. We lay side by side, fingers twined, the soft sound of waves rolling toward us like a lullaby.

There were no guarantees, no blueprints for forever.

Love was like skating with someone who might fall and swearing you'd catch them anyway.

It was letting yourself be seen.

It was choosing each other, again and again, when the world got loud.

And it was lying beside him now, skin to skin, saying nothing at all—because nothing needed to be said.

Shane turned toward me, eyes half-lidded, body relaxed and beautiful and wholly, unmistakably mine.

I watched him in the moonlight, thinking of that first night at Lumière, the cold tea, the awkward silence, the creeping blush he tried to hide.

Then I smiled.

This time, I didn't chase the feeling.

I caught it.

Want more hockey boys falling in love? Don't miss *Depths of Desire* . When a hockey playboy and a swimming champion of Westmont U get snowed in, their ambitions are put aside, and they spend a fateful night together that will forever change their lives. Read an exclusive preview on the next page.

The End .

CHAPTER ONE: LENNOX

I hit save on the essay, stared at the blinking cursor, and let my forehead drop to the edge of the keyboard in defeat. The keys clacked under the weight of my skull like they were applauding my descent into academic mediocrity. One paragraph left and nothing left in my brain but static.

The bathroom door creaked open behind me.

A wave of steam rolled into the dorm room, along with Rhett, who looked like he'd just wrestled the shower to a draw.

His skin was pink and raw, drops of water trickling down his body.

He wore nothing but a pair of black gym shorts that hung low on his hips, and the scowl he was sporting could've soured milk.

"Your turn," he grumbled, grabbing his phone off his bed like it had personally wronged him.

I turned in my chair, still half-slumped. "Thanks for leaving me the last three molecules of hot water."

He shot me a contemptuous look. "You get what you get."

Classic Rhett. Always three seconds from throwing hands, but never with me. We'd lived together since freshman year and had settled into a rhythm that worked—he

grunted and glowered, I smiled and made tea. Balance.

“Did you finish the psychology essay?” I asked, mostly because misery loves company.

Rhett squinted at me, then dropped back onto his bed like his muscles were over it. “What essay?”

“The one due tomorrow at nine.”

He groaned into the pillow, then turned his head toward me, face half-smashed and expression bleak. “God. I thought that was next week.”

“You going to write it?”

“Hell no. I’ve got enough points to pass.”

I laughed, because of course he did. Rhett was one of those guys who never looked like he was trying, but always landed just shy of failing, by design. It was his brand. Casual chaos.

He stretched, long arms folding behind his head, and I caught myself looking, just for a second.

His chest was damp, flushed from the heat of the shower, and the water droplets on his collarbones shimmered in the low dorm light.

He had that hockey build, a testament to the countless hours spent between the rink and the gym.

And the scowl he wore like a second skin pulled something deep and weird out of

me.

I blinked, turned back to my laptop, and pretended I hadn't noticed anything.

What the hell was that? I wondered.

It wasn't an attraction. Not really. It was one of those moments where someone looked a little too good for a second, and your brain short-circuited. A glitch in the matrix. A hot flash of "maybe," followed immediately by a wave of "no, no, no."

Still, I couldn't help the thought. Why do I react like that to a scowl?

Was something wrong with me?

No. Not wrong. Just...a little messed up in a way I was used to by now.

I knew where that line was. Rhett was too close, too familiar, too quietly queer in the same unspoken way I was.

We'd never talked about it. We never needed to.

It hung between us like an agreement carved into stone: We could, but we won't .

I liked our friendship too much to touch it. And I think, deep down, he did too.

I typed another line of my essay, letting the sound of his playlist fill the silence. Something moody and low-fi. Something that matched the smell of eucalyptus shampoo still hanging in the air.

One day, maybe, I'd stop staring at hard abs and bad attitudes like they were invitations. One day, I'd have something real enough to anchor me.

But tonight wasn't that night.

"Hey," Rhett said suddenly. "If you go down to the laundry room, can you grab my stuff from the dryer? I'll owe you a protein bar."

I smirked. "Make it two, and I won't fold your underwear wrong on purpose."

"Deal."

And just like that, we were back to normal. Whatever static I'd felt was gone, replaced by the easy, familiar rhythm of a friendship built on convenience and earned loyalty.

It wasn't Rhett I lusted after. In fact, the very idea of Rhett like that made me wrinkle my nose.

He was too much like family in all the important ways.

Rhett just happened to look a little like my type.

Impatient, sometimes cold, rocking an aesthetic body, and seething with misplaced anger and passion underneath the surface.

Besides, I had plenty of similar guys to call up for some fun.

When it came to worshiping a toned body or getting a scowl from high above while kneeling for his pleasure, I was well covered.

And more than covered, I had a whole list of passing crushes to test out and see if they could lead anywhere.

Rhett rolled onto his side, propped up on one elbow, and scrolled absently through his phone. “You heading out Thursday morning?”

“Yeah,” I said, glancing at the corner of my screen. 12:17 AM. “Driving.”

“Driving?” He blinked like I’d told him I was going to ice skate home backwards. “To Nebraska?”

I grinned. “Yup.”

“You’re insane.”

“Maybe. Or maybe I like a little peace and freedom before I’m neck-deep in holiday small talk and roast beef politics.”

He snorted. “I forgot your parents do the whole ‘heritage dinner’ with speeches and coordinated sweaters.”

“Don’t forget the ice sculpture centerpiece. One year it was a swan. Last year, a puck with my face in it.”

Rhett grimaced. “Nightmare fuel.”

I leaned back in my chair, arms stretching over my head until my spine cracked. “Anyway, I forgot to book a flight, prices skyrocketed, and the forecast’s a mess, so car rental it is. I leave early. Real early. Like ‘still dark outside’ early.”

“You’ve lost your damn mind,” Rhett muttered, tossing his phone to the side and burrowing into his pillow. “Hope your deathmobile has chains and snow mode.”

“It’s a four-wheel drive.” I grinned again, because it was going to be a long-ass drive,

but there was something about taking the wheel and setting the pace that felt right.

No TSA. No lines. Just me, my playlist, a coffee thermos, and the open road, even if that road was half-frozen and covered in god knows how many feet of snow by the time I hit the western part of the state.

I was looking forward to it.

“It’s not so bad,” I added. “Nine hours if I don’t stop too much. Eight if I pretend speed limits are more like suggestions.”

“Your corpse better not be on the news,” Rhett mumbled into the blanket.

“If I die, delete my browser history and tell my mom I died a noble death.”

“Your mom’s not gonna believe that. She knows you too well.”

“Fair.”

The truth was, I liked the stretch of highway between Chicago and the little town of Hastings, Nebraska.

It gave me time to think, to shed the layers of Westmont and glide back into the familiar boredom of suburbia.

I could listen to sad music and pretend it meant something, maybe stop at the same grimy gas station in Iowa where I always picked up sour gummy worms and regret.

“I might hit some snow on the last leg,” I said, more to myself than to Rhett. “But I’ve driven worse.”

“You’re a jock with confidence issues and a god complex. You think you’re invincible.”

I chuckled. “And yet, you trust me to do your laundry.”

He lifted a single finger in salute without opening his eyes. “Not trust. Desperation.”

I let the silence settle again. Rhett’s playlist had shifted into a sleepy synth ballad with vocals that sounded like someone singing through a dream.

My essay still wasn’t finished. But my mind had already wandered forward—to the open road, the sound of tires on slush, and the quiet thought that, maybe, something unexpected could happen this time.

It was a ridiculous thing to get me excited.

It was just a possibility. An old acquaintance asked if I was driving home this winter and, if I was, could there be room for a passenger.

I knew who she meant. Lena was hardly a friend, but we’d known each other for years.

You simply couldn’t not know someone in Hastings.

Especially when that someone had an older brother who’d attracted all the attention at the local swimming pool.

Not that he’d done it to flaunt his skill and good looks—or at least I didn’t think so—but because he was freaking majestic.

I’d never seen anyone swim as gracefully as Oliver.

Even now, I could picture it with embarrassing clarity, him slicing through the water at the Hastings public pool like he belonged in some kind of cinematic montage.

All long limbs, sculpted shoulders, and that terrifying, focused calm.

Everyone used to gawk, whisper, and stare.

Me included. The water clung to him like it wanted to be close.

He never even looked like he was trying.

There were days I lingered longer than I needed to, pretending I was still drying off or searching for a towel that didn't exist, just so I could sneak one more glance as he hit the wall and turned.

I don't think he ever noticed me. Not then.

Maybe once, our eyes met briefly, hazily.

And I remembered blinking away the contact so fast it stung.

I hadn't come out to myself yet, much less anyone else.

We were eighteen. It was that hot, sticky summer before college. He was already committed to swim for Westmont. I was headed here too, for hockey, but we'd never spoken about it. We didn't speak at all.

And I sure as hell didn't flirt. I didn't even breathe when he was around.

Two and a half years later, we'd shared a campus, and it was like he lived on a different planet.

I saw him a handful of times. At the dining hall, walking out of the recreational center, once coming out of the aquatic center with water still dripping from his hair, earbuds in, jaw tight, eyes locked on the pavement like he was at war with it.

He never looked around, and he never noticed me. Or if he did, he gave no indication.

Not that I expected anything else.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:50 am

I mean, the guy had been on TV. Freaking TV. Silver medalist at the Olympics last summer, standing there with the flag draped around his shoulders and no expression on his face.

I'd watched the race live on the common room couch with a bunch of guys from the hockey team, acting like I didn't care, like I barely remembered him. They teased me about the fact we were from the same small town, but I'd only shrugged. "It's small, alright, but I don't know everyone."

But I remembered everything. I remembered the way his back flexed when he dove off the block. I remembered the little tilt of his head when they played the national anthem and the camera zoomed in. I remembered the fact that, even when they placed the medal around his neck, he didn't smile.

Not once.

Lena had messaged me out of the blue last week. Just a short text: "Hey. April said it was cool to text you. Are you driving back for break? My brother's plans are still in the air—think you could give him a lift if the storm hits?"

She didn't even say his name. She didn't have to.

Lena went to school with my sister, April, which somehow never translated into a friendship between all the siblings.

We'd never gone to each other's birthday parties.

We'd never even met a mutual friend on the same occasion. We'd only been aware of each other.

At the time, I said maybe. I told her I wasn't sure of my schedule, that I'd let her know. But the truth was, the second I read the message, my heart did a weird somersault and my thumb was already hovering over yes.

I hadn't seen Oliver up close in over a year. I hadn't spoken to him in longer than that. And it wasn't like we'd ever had anything between us. No hookup. No missed moment. Just a quiet, one-sided crush that had never dared to cross into the real world.

Still, the idea of spending an entire day in a car with him?

Just us, trapped in a moving metal box with nowhere to hide?

That lit something in me. Not lust exactly, and definitely not hope.

Just a nervous, buzzing curiosity about who he'd become and whether the guy with the perfect freestyle and the frostbite stare was still human underneath all that Olympic glory.

I wasn't expecting anything. That would've been stupid.

But maybe I could make him laugh. Or at least talk.

Maybe we'd drive through a snowstorm and find something resembling common ground between Hastings and here. Maybe I could stop seeing him as the boy I was too scared to want back then. Maybe I could start seeing him as just a guy.

A hot, complicated, emotionally walled-up guy.

But just a guy nonetheless.

I saved the essay again, just in case, then shut my laptop and stood up. Rhett was snoring softly, one arm dangling off the edge of his bed like it had given up on life. I grabbed my towel and headed for the shower, the image of Oliver Hayworth already playing behind my eyes.

And despite everything I told myself, I couldn't help but feel like there was something important in my near future.

CHAPTER TWO: OLIVER

The water was the only thing that ever shut the noise off.

It didn't matter what time it was or how much sleep I'd gotten or whether my legs were aching from dryland the day before. Once I hit the water, it all stopped.

I pushed off the wall, body long, tight, and efficient. The world dulled to a low hum. No clocks. No thoughts. No questions. Just the lane ahead of me, slicing forward with every pull of my arms, every flick of my legs.

My breath rationed itself on autopilot. One, two, three, turn. One, two, three, breathe. The burn in my shoulders was familiar and welcome. My heartbeat wasn't panic, it was rhythm. My skin didn't prickle with cold, it adapted.

It always did.

I kept going. Flip turns, tight streamlines. The coach's voice barking muffled commands from the side of the pool. I didn't process them. I didn't need to. My body understood before my brain had the chance to argue.

Laps blurred. One set became another. Stroke after stroke, I chased the perfect

moment where my arms moved faster than the water could resist, where the timing was so exact it felt like I wasn't even swimming. I was flying.

By the time Coach Johnson blew the final whistle, I was vibrating under my skin. Not from fatigue, but from satisfaction. I knew I'd hit the zone. That rare alignment where body, breath, and focus lined up so clean I forgot I was human.

I hoisted myself out of the pool without using the ladder. My muscles trembled, but it felt good. Clean.

Coach clapped a hand on my back, heavy and wet. "That last set, Hayworth, that's what I want to see more of."

I didn't say anything. I just nodded. I didn't need his approval. But I wasn't above letting it settle somewhere warm in my chest.

The air outside the swimming pool was colder than I expected.

My skin tightened as I padded barefoot into the locker room, a towel hanging around my neck.

The tile floor chilled my soles, and my legs still felt rubbery with use, the kind of burn that told me I'd gone to the edge without falling over it.

I turned the dial in the locker I always used, third from the left, bottom row, dented corner from the time someone slammed it too hard after a loss. The routine was the same as it always was: suit off, towel off, hang everything neatly. No wasted motion. I hated wasted motion.

The locker room was empty except for me. Evening sessions always ended that way. Guys went home, went out, went anywhere but here.

I preferred this.

In the shower, I turned the heat up just past reasonable. The water hit my shoulders and spilled down my back like the sound of static turning to silence.

I braced both hands against the cool tile and let my head fall forward, eyes closing, breaths steadying a little.

God, I needed that.

Not the swim, but the stillness after.

No noise in my head. No pressure waiting in the wings. Just the warmth on my back, the sharp scent of chlorine bleeding off my skin, the small thrum of satisfaction that came from doing the thing right.

Coach had been pleased.

I'd been sharper than yesterday. I'd kept my hips high on the water and got out of my own way.

If I didn't have to go home for the holidays, I could've built on that. Kept the streak going. Every week away from the pool was a step backward. Every day with family was noise I didn't know how to tune out.

But I couldn't think about that now.

I took one more breath under the stream of water and let it all roll off me; expectation, distraction, whatever came next. None of it mattered.

The swim was done. The work was done. For now.

And it had been good.

After drying and dressing, I left the pool and went to my place.

It was an apartment on the thirteenth floor, just off campus, with a view of Westmont's landscape, its dormitories, faculty buildings, recreation centers, library, and student center.

I'd wanted to be close enough to the coach and the pool.

The apartment itself wasn't huge. Open kitchen, living area, one bedroom, small balcony. But it was mine. Quiet, clean, easy to maintain. The kind of space I'd never had growing up, where the walls weren't paper-thin and I didn't have to share a bathroom with three people.

There was more money now; sponsorships helped, endorsements, gear deals.

I had a pair of running shoes in the closet worth more than my old bike.

But it didn't mean much to me. I didn't buy flashy things or host parties.

The extra cash went to groceries and water filters and the same meal-prep service that shipped the exact portions of vegetables and protein I needed for training.

My sister teased me about it constantly.

I dropped my bag by the door, shrugged off my jacket, and walked into the kitchen.

There was a rhythm to my movements. Everything was pre-set, pre-measured, and clean.

I didn't even have to think about what I was making.

Chicken, spinach, a little rice. I cooked it in silence, not because I didn't like music but because I didn't like distraction.

Once it was ready, I carried the plate to the couch, set my tablet on the coffee table, and called Lena.

It rang twice before she picked up, her face filling the screen in warm lamplight. She was wrapped in a hoodie, chin deep in a blanket, and smiling like she'd been expecting me, which she probably had.

"Well, if it isn't Captain Hydration himself," she said. "Still alive?"

"Barely," I muttered, stabbing a fork into the rice.

"How was practice?"

"Good."

She narrowed her eyes. "That's it?"

"Coach said it was one of my best days this month."

Her smile turned genuine. "See? I told you the back-to-back sprints were worth it."

I didn't answer, but she knew I agreed. She always knew.

She let me eat a few bites in peace, then said, too casually, "So I figured you wouldn't book your ticket home."

I looked up. "I haven't had time."

"Mmm," she said, smug. "That's why I already arranged your ride."

My fork paused midair, rice crumbling back onto the plate. “You what?”

“Yup.” She popped the ‘p’ and looked far too pleased with herself. “You have a ride. Thursday morning. Leaves early. And no, you don’t get to complain.”

“Lena,” I said slowly, “I didn’t say I wasn’t coming. I just...”

“You were stalling. You always stall. Last year, you ‘forgot’ until the tickets were three hundred dollars and you blamed it on training.”

“I was training.”

“You always are. But not this time. You’re coming home, and you’re not allowed to back out. Ride’s already confirmed.”

I sat back, suspicious. “With who?”

She hesitated just a second too long. “Lennox.”

“Lennox Ellery?”

She nodded, eyes all fake innocence. “Yup. His sister and I were talking, and it came up. He’s driving. He’s got space. It’s not a big deal.”

It sounded like a big deal. Lennox Ellery was...

memorable. All easy charm and bright smiles, the kind of guy who seemed to glide through campus with sunrise in his eyes.

I’d seen him around. He was big on the hockey team, everyone liked him, and he moved through people like they didn’t weigh him down.

The opposite of me.

Still, a ride was a ride.

“I could’ve booked a flight, Snip,” I said.

“But you wouldn’t have.”

She wasn’t wrong.

I sighed. “Fine. Send me the details.”

“They’re already in your inbox.” She grinned like she’d just won something.

“Thursday. Don’t make him wait.”

I shook my head, but I felt the corners of my mouth twitch. “You’re a menace.”

“And you’re predictable.” She stuck her tongue out at me. “But seriously, come home, Ollie. You need the break.”

I didn’t. Not really. Especially not there. But I didn’t say that.

“I’ll see you Thursday,” I said instead.

“Love you,” she said.

I hesitated for half a second. “Love you too, Snip.”

She hung up, still smiling, and I stared at the blank screen for a long moment after.

Lennox Ellery. That name hadn’t crossed my mind in years. I didn’t even know he remembered who I was.

But I remembered him.

Not in vivid detail. Not like a crush, not quite. Just...moments and glimmering flashes. A summer memory left out in the sun too long, faded around the edges but still mostly intact.

He'd always been surrounded by people. Girls, especially, were clinging to his arms or flopping on poolside towels and tossing their heads back whenever he so much as smiled.

It wasn't obnoxious. That was the thing.

He wasn't trying to impress anyone. They'd just gravitated toward him, like the sun finally showed up and everyone wanted a piece of the warmth.

I watched from a distance. Not because I was scared, exactly. Just because I didn't see the point.

Lennox was the kind of boy who laughed easily, who belonged in groups, who glowed in public. His hands were always moving, offering, nudging, passing someone a bottle of water, slapping a teammate's back. I couldn't imagine him still, couldn't imagine him quiet.

So I stayed where I was. Focused on my laps, on my breathing, on keeping my pulse down whenever he walked by, wet hair slicked back, skin flushed from the heat, eyes bright.

He might've looked at me once. Maybe twice. I never gave him a reason to look again.

And later, when I started figuring myself out, slowly, painfully, in the solitude of hotel rooms and locker rooms and questions in the back of my head, I realized I

wasn't built for that kind of life—the loud, easy, lovable one.

I wasn't meant for passing kisses and arm touches and Saturday night hookups that turned into Sunday breakfasts.

I didn't do complicated.

I didn't do dating.

The people I fucked—and that's what it was, nothing softer than that—came from apps. Or bars I didn't frequent more than once. It was cleaner that way. Controlled. No names, no promises, no risk.

Because anything with stakes could be used against me. Anything real required space.

And I didn't have any.

Not after this summer. Not after the medal.

God, the medal.

I didn't hang it up. Didn't even open the box after the airport ceremony. It sat in my bedroom closet behind my spare towels and backup resistance bands. I didn't need to see it to feel it. It was always there. A silver sun pressed to my spine. A reminder.

Not good enough.

Not first.

Too slow.

People called it an achievement. They wanted to celebrate and to ask questions. To

post my name and stats on screens and lockers and banners across Westmont's athletic page. But for me, it was just...weight.

No wonder I didn't decorate the apartment. No wonder I couldn't deal with family visits or check-ins about my love life or conversations about who I was or who I might be someday.

There wasn't space for it. Not with that thing burning a hole through my chest.

If I wasn't training, I was recovering. If I wasn't recovering, I was planning the next round. If I wasn't doing any of it, I felt like I was drowning.

So no. I hadn't thought about Lennox Ellery.

Not until tonight.

And even now, I wasn't sure why the idea of sharing a car ride with him had struck me so hard. It wasn't nerves. It wasn't excitement.

It was more like a shift. A tremor in a carefully built schedule. A name from a summer I barely remembered shaking loose from the back of my mind.

Still, it was just a ride. A long stretch of road and maybe some awkward silence. I could handle that.

I had to.

Lena wanted me home, and that just had to be my priority.

The story continue in *Depths of Desire* .