



The Alternate Captain (Elite Hockey #3)

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Category: Sport

Description: The Alternate Captain is book three in the Elite Hockey universe but can be read as a standalone.

It's a brother's best friend, fake dating romance with a happy ever after.

Please read content warnings.

No feelings. Nothing. It's as if I'm dead inside.

Johnny Koenig can't recall the last time he experienced any emotion other than the intense pride he has for his team. The team admires, respects, and relies on him as their captain. But outside of hockey, Johnny is desperate to feel something more. And he thinks he's found it when he meets Kelly online.

She's smart and funny. She makes him come alive. And he thinks he's starting to like this girl ... until she ghosts him.

There one minute and gone the next; it's like their three-month conversation never happened.

... this is an alternate version of Johnny I don't know.

Kelly Betts hates hockey. All she wants to do is focus on music, a talent she's put all her effort into since she was a child. When she's invited to an audition for a prestigious music college, she jumps at the chance, even if it means staying with her brother on his side of the city—the same brother who's been injured too many times for Kelly's liking thanks to his career in hockey.

But he begs her to attend the playoff quarterfinals, she reluctantly drags herself through the doors of the rink, but the excitement of the game doesn't last when he takes a hit that has her bolting for the exit, but not before she comes face to face with an eight-foot poster of the guy she's been talking to online. Except, it can't actually be him, can it?

Can Kelly help Johnny find himself when everything seems against them?

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

He's been fighting again. There's a fresh wound above his eyebrow, which tells me it wasn't just a scrap. It was a full-on fight—helmet and gloves removed.

“How did you get that scar?” I ask him. We're both aware of my stance on fighting, but I want to hear him say it. I want him to tell me he's being reckless. “Mike? Answer me.”

“It's just part of the game,” he says, turning and moving to the fridge.

He rummages around in the salad drawers before returning to the counter with a pile of pre-chopped vegetables and a pack of chicken.

He reaches for a wok that's lying upside down on the draining board, then he sets it on the hob before lighting the gas.

“You're singing to yourself again. People will think you're crazy.”

“Don't change the subject.”

“Okay, fine. It's a paper cut,” he says. I scowl at his reply. “What do you want me to say?” I cock my head to the side and stare at him. He'll back down before I do. “Okay, fine. We were down a goal and I needed to apply some pressure. Get the guys riled up. That's how it is.”

Sadly, I understand, but this hasn't always been the case. I'd never known him to fight before he joined his current team. In fact, I'd say he was more of a peacekeeper.

“The captain put you up to it, didn’t he?” I say, widening my eyes.

“Not really.”

“What do you mean, not really?” I stand up from the barstool and step around the counter, pulling his face towards me so I can inspect it.

“Get off me, damn it.” Mike wriggles free before grabbing a spatula from the drawer under the hob.

“Have you had it checked?”

“It’s a cut. Calm your tits.”

Sighing, I make my way back to the counter, accepting defeat. “I just don’t like it.”

“It’s part of the game.” He chuckles softly, which pisses me off even more.

He calls himself ‘The Enforcer’. I call him an idiot.

“Anyway,” he says, tossing some chicken into the wok, “I thought since you were on my side of town, you’d want to come to the game.”

“It’s still a no,” I say.

My usual excuse sits along the line of not wanting to get the bus all the way across the city to freeze my ass off and watch him fight a grown man over the possession of a piece of rubber. I can think of better things to do with my Saturday night.

He stirs and shakes the wok before setting it down. He reaches for an envelope that’s stashed next to the microwave and tosses it towards me.

“Would you hate me if I didn’t come?” I ask.

“Nah, I already hate you, so it makes no difference.” He smirks.

I haven’t been to one of Mike’s games in a long time.

Not since he took a check to the head a few years back.

I hold his linemate fully responsible for it since he was the one the check was intended for.

I’m certain of this because I re-watched the footage repeatedly.

I wanted closure. Instead, I got more riled up.

Mike was out for two weeks. And he ended up losing two teeth that game.

He clears his throat. “It’s a big game, though, Kel. I mean, it’s been a few years since we’ve made the playoff finals. I think we’ve got a chance this year.” His tone is serious, and I watch him as he tosses veggies into the wok, an intense expression on his face.

“You say that every single year,” I say, taking a gulp of my water.

“And you say that every single year.”

I roll my eyes. “I need to prep for tomorrow.”

“No, you don’t. It wouldn’t surprise me if you could play those pieces without even looking at the sheet music.”

But I'm an over-preparer. At least I try to be. And I couldn't live with myself if I spent the evening before my audition chilling—or turning into a block of ice—with no preparation.

I watch Mike cook as I consider my options. I mean, I could watch his game, but I'd be going alone since I don't know anyone else and the likelihood of Tom or Sally making their way across the city at short notice is slim to none.

I open my mouth to speak, but Mike answers the question I haven't asked.

“That ticket is next to Scottsy's wife. She's cool.”

“I don't know Scottsy nor his wife,” I say.

“Do you pay any attention when I talk? Scott McCoy? The winger.”

“Oh, yeah, him.” I roll my eyes. I have no idea.

“Look. The ticket is in the envelope. I won't be mad if you don't come, but I will be pissed if we advance and you don't come to the finals.”

Mike shuts off the hob and grabs some plates, filling the air with the clattering of crockery. He glances at his watch, then reaches for his phone just as the front door swings open .

In walks a guy a few inches shorter than my brother, but wearing an identical outfit of sweats, a team hoodie, and a baseball cap.

“Well, look who crawled home,” he says, without looking up. “Hutch, this is my sister, Kelly.”

Hutch pauses, scanning me quickly before placing his gear bag on the floor.

“Shit, I didn’t realise you had a sister, Betts.” He grins.

“If you weren’t gay, I’d say to keep your fucking eyes off her. Why do you think I haven’t introduced her or Stacey to any of you fuckers?” my brother says. “Besides, she’s got a boyfriend.”

“I don’t—”

“I’m bi. But whatever. Is that your guitar in the hall?” Hutch says, grabbing a plate from Mike.

I don’t have a boyfriend. Mike’s friends were always told that my sister and I had boyfriends. To him, it was a firm sign of our unavailability.

“It’s a cello,” my brother interjects, jabbing his friend in the ribs.

“A cello? I have no fucking clue...” Hutch says, sitting at the counter next to me. “Is that like a big violin?”

Mike scoffs.

“Yes, it’s exactly like a big violin,” I say.

“So, how long are you here for?” Hutch asks.

I awkwardly perch myself on the next available stool and reach for a fork. “Just the night. I’ve got an audition tomorrow at the music college so I’m crashing here—I mean, if it’s okay with you?”

“Of course it’s okay,” Mike cuts across. “Kelly will have my room, and I’ll get in with you,” he tells Hutch.

“Like fuck you will,” Hutch says.

“Don’t be mean.”

“Don’t give me a reason to be. You can take the sofa. You snore. ”

“I’ll take the sofa, I don’t mind,” I say. The thought of what could lurk in my brother’s sheets grosses me out.

“I’m changing my sheets for you,” Mike says, pointing his fork in the air towards me. “You’re taking the bed. I don’t want you going back to Mam moaning about your bad back from sleeping on the sofa.”

I roll my eyes and eat my meal. Knowing Mike, he’ll be back here this evening either shit-faced from celebrating a win, or shit-faced from commiserating a loss. Either way, the sleeping situation will sort itself out when I will inevitably put him to bed, in his bed.

Mike and Hutch both glance up from their plates.

“Are you nervous?” Hutch asks Mike, as he finishes his food.

“No. Are you?” he replies.

They lock eyes briefly, devoid of any emotion.

The buzz of my phone on the counter breaks the silence and my brother’s eyes snap to mine. Then it pings a few more times in close succession, causing Mike to strain

his neck to check the screen. I grab my phone and slide it into the pocket of my jacket, hoping he didn't get a good enough view.

"What's that you're hiding, Kel?" he asks, and I can feel my cheeks flame red.

"Nothing. Just people checking in about tomorrow," I lie.

But it's Hutch who saves the day.

"Nap time," he announces, dropping his plate into the sink. He says goodbye and disappears through the door at the far end of the hall.

"I best get my head down, too. You going to be okay here? Make yourself at home or whatever."

I reassure him I'll be fine, and he disappears into his room, leaving his dirty plate where he was eating. I clean the kitchen up and retreat to the sofa, waiting until a gentle snore emits from my brother's bedroom, telling me it's now safe to check my phone.

John .

Excitement bubbles in the pit of my stomach.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

I can't describe how much I hate hockey. Yet here I am, in a crowd of people, all cheering as my brother smashes an opposing forward into the boards. The entire section of plexiglass vibrates with the impact as the guy falls to the ice.

Mike wrists the puck towards one of his teammates, who clears it from the defensive zone before skating towards the bench. Just before he reaches the door, his whole body flies backwards as he's hit from the front.

"Oh, my God," I gasp, covering my eyes. I've seen this happen a thousand times before, but I still hate it. I've watched him pick teeth up from the ice. It's brutal and the whole thing makes me sick with worry.

"Are you okay?" The woman next to me leans in and offers a smile. This must be Lauren.

"Not really," I squeak, letting my hands sink back to my lap. I watch Mike clamber to his skates. He's off the ice in a flash and back on the bench with the rest of his teammates as if nothing happened.

"First time? "

"Sadly not."

"Boyfriend?" she asks.

"Brother," I say.

“Ah, I thought I hadn’t seen you before. That’s my husband,” she says, pointing towards a guy on the ice.

“I hate hockey,” I say.

“I sort of understand that,” she says. “It’s the stench for me. Scott’s hands always stink, no matter how hard he scrubs them.”

I chuckle. Thankfully, I don’t have to smell my brother’s hands, but the lingering sweaty-hockey-player aroma is not one anyone can forget.

“Who’s your brother?” she asks.

“Mike Betts. But I don’t make a habit of coming to his games. I’m just in town for an audition tomorrow and—” I stop talking because I doubt she wants to hear about that.

“Bettsy is hilarious,” she laughs. “I didn’t realise he had a sister.”

Three thousand people let out a sigh of disappointment as our number nineteen’s shot hits the crossbar and sails out of play.

“There’s two of us. I’m the youngest,” I say.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Lauren.”

“Kelly,” I say.

“Well, Kelly, I’m sure Bettsy appreciates you coming.”

“I told him I wasn’t going to, but I felt guilty since it’s a big game.”

“Of course. It’s Scott’s last chance at the playoff cup before we move to Germany.”

By the time the first period break rolls around, I know all about Lauren’s plans to move to Ingolstadt.

“I think someone is already earmarked to take Scott’s spot.

How well do you know the guys?” She refers to the team, but I shake my head.

Mike talks about them at family events, sure, but I’ve paid no attention to the details.

“Well, number nineteen, he’s a twin. His brother is likely going to be joining the team. ”

As we leave our seats, I smile and nod in all the right places whilst she talks, and we follow a small crowd of people towards the bar.

“So, what makes you hate hockey so much?”

“I remember Mike taking this hit that literally knocked him out cold, and it’s stuck with me since.

I was only a kid and I remember him just lying there, face down on the ice.

He was just lying there like he was... dead.

” I clear my throat, trying to hold back the tears that are desperate to make an appearance.

I can’t bring myself to tell Lauren the full reason why.

“He says it’s part of his game, and I know that, but still. I just don’t like it.”

My brother’s a powerful guy. And until that hit, I loved watching him play.

I loved the joy and concentration on his face as he soared across the ice.

I know all the rules, all the calls, all the play styles—I guess I was obsessed to some degree.

But seeing him like that turned it into something I dreaded to watch.

I know his ‘stay-at-home’ defensive style serves a purpose.

And his style compliments his defensive pairing—an offensive-defencemen.

He says he needs to protect and enable him.

He makes it sound like he’s his guard dog or something, which is ridiculous.

“I’m sorry you had to see that. That must have been tough.”

“Yeah, it was.” I swallow down the emotion pushing to the surface.

We grab a beer each and head back to our seats, just as the Zamboni finishes its last lap of the ice.

By the time the teams skate back out for the second period, my single beer has calmed me down enough so I can enjoy the game.

I’m not a big drinker, so it goes straight to my head.

I sing to the music, joining in the claps and cheers, and I even jump to my feet when we score.

It's all good until Mike and the rest of the guys position themselves, ready to take a face-off.

He shouts something over to the guy wearing the captain's badge, then indistinguishable words fly back and forth between the pair.

The captain shouts and signals across the ice, motioning to someone, and as soon as the face-off is taken, Mike is charging towards the target.

I've seen nothing like it before.

"Why is he spurring him on?" I ask Lauren, splitting my attention between her and the ice.

"It's just part of the game. Try not to worry," she soothes.

But I don't like it. The next moment, Mike gets elbowed in the face as the captain skates off unscathed with the puck. Prick. He should have been the target for that elbow.

To heighten my anxiety, a commotion occurs right against the boards and, of course, my surname flashes into view briefly as the opposing defenceman elbows Mike for a second time and pulls his shirt.

The noise of the crowd ramps up as two sets of gloves are dropped.

I have to adopt the brace position, practically folded in half on my seat as queasiness washes over me. I can't watch.

“He’s fine, he’s fine,” Lauren says. “I’ll tell you when you can look.”

Everyone around me gets to their feet. The music starts and cheers erupt from the spectators. I stay in my seat until Lauren flicks her chair back down and sits again.

“Is he okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, he’s fine. I think he’ll get a major for that, though. But he’s got the energy going.”

“I don’t think I can stay,” I say, defeated. The happy, post-beer sensation I had less than five minutes before has vanished.

I take the opportunity to thank Lauren for being so friendly before I grab my bag and squeeze out of my row, scrambling up the steps towards the upper-level lobby, which opens out into a large area with banners and memorabilia scattered around.

I’m just catching my breath when I glance up and double-take the eight-foot banner draped overhead. An action shot of the captain celebrating. It hits me square in the chest .

Oh my God.

John.

No. Not John. Johnny. Johnny Koenig. The same guy I’ve heard Mike refer to as ‘Cap’ a hundred times.

Confusion sets in after a full minute of standing there, mouth wide open. I reach for my phone and pull up the message thread I’ve got with John. We’ve been chatting on an app for almost three months now, and we’ve exchanged a few photos.

I pull up the most recent picture from three weeks ago and compare it with the banner overhead. The same blue eyes and unmistakable jawline. He's wearing a helmet in the banner, but I can tell it's the same dirty blond hair, freshly cut in the photo.

Fuck. I'm being catfished.

Shame sets in next, and my skin prickles with heat.

Part of me wants to message him and demand to know who the hell he is.

Because I deserve to know who I've shared intimate details of my life with.

I deserve to know who I've confided in about my anxiety over my music career.

I deserve to know who I've been flirting with.

And I definitely deserve to know who I've talked to about Jeremy.

I blink away the tears as I hold down the icon for the app and tap the little 'x' next to it in an attempt to erase it all.

Because I'm too embarrassed to call this stranger out.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

After wandering through the city for the past hour, I return to my brother's apartment, letting the tears flow as soon as the door is closed.

I don't even bother to turn the light on, hiding my shame in the darkness of the empty hallway. I slump down to the floor and hug my knees to my chest, letting go completely. How many hours did I spend talking to him? Or her. It could literally be anyone.

Through blurry eyes, I download the app again, carefully tapping in my username and password, sighing with relief when the conversation history loads. There must be something here showing this guy is a fraud.

I spend ages scrolling right to the top, to the start of our conversation, based on a post I'd put up. It had been a desperate plea after receiving my sixth dick pic of the day. I should've deleted the app right then.

"Are guys only on here for one thing?"

Him

No, we're not.

Me

I've had so many dick pics today and I'm not okay!

Him

I can safely say I've never sent a dick pic in my entire life.

Me

Ha. Well, that's actually refreshing to hear.

Him

Granted, I don't know the etiquette of this app yet. It's my first time.

Me

I definitely wouldn't go around telling people that. People will take advantage of you.

Him

Like penis related advantage?

Me

Exactly that. What are you here for, then?

Him

Honestly, I don't know. Conversation, I guess. You?

Me

Same. Obviously, it's not been a success. I'm close to uninstalling.

Him

But I have so much to offer.

Me

Oh God, you're going to send me a dick pic now, aren't you?

Him

Haha, no. I'd set the bar too high.

Me

You couldn't see, but I just rolled my eyes.

Him

I could sense it, don't worry.

Me

Sense it? That's very intuitive of you.

Him

Well, apparently, you're less than ten miles away, so maybe I could feel the eye-rolling in the air?

Me

Okay, did you hear that laugh you just mustered?

Him

I heard a snicker if that counts.

Me

That'd be it. But don't get used to it. I'm a tough crowd.

Him

Shame. What's your name, anyway?

Me

Kelly. You?

Him

You can call me John.

I freeze. That's the red flag. The reddest flag flapping in the internet's wind. I should have seen it. Who even says that? It screams 'fake name'.

I keep scrolling, flicking my eyes past the snippets of conversation.

John

How old are you, by the way?

Kelly

18. You?

John

I'm 27. Is that okay with you? We're just talking, right?

Kelly

It depends. Do you still have all your hair?

John

Ha. Ha. Yes. I do. And I'm confident that male pattern baldness does not run in my family.

Kelly

I think it runs in mine. My brother is definitely thinning on top.

John

Just the one brother?

Kelly

Now, yes. I had an older brother who died when he was my age. And I have a sister who's 3 years older than me.

John

I'm really sorry for your loss. That must have been difficult for you all.

Kelly

It wasn't great. My parents are still convinced that he could have survived. He went on a night out with some friends and fell over drunk in a bar. He whacked his head on the way down and the group of boys he was with just thought he was sleeping and left him outside of his flat.

I didn't really understand what was going on at the time, but then when it clicked that he wasn't ever coming home, I just felt this sadness settle that never properly left. I think that's why I latched on to my other brother so much.

Sorry. You don't need my pity story.

John

Honestly, don't apologise. I'm glad that you feel comfortable enough to talk to me. I am really sorry that your family went through that.

Kelly

Thanks, John. Do you have any siblings?

John

One sister. She's a year younger than me and we're probably more alike than we care to admit. Though she's much more outgoing than me. We get on most of the time.

Kelly

It's difficult being the youngest. You should cut her some slack.

John

Trust me. She's hard work.

Kelly

Sounds like my sister, actually. My brother and I sort of feel sorry for her boyfriend, even if he is a complete prick.

John

You know, some men like a woman to take charge.

Kelly

Do you like that sort of thing?

John

Is this bordering on inappropriate?

Kelly

Inappropriate how?

John

Well, you're only 18.

Kelly

Okay, well, if you think you'll put your back out... I understand.

John

Less of the old jokes.

Kelly

Well, I guess even those pushing thirty still need a good time.

John

Ha. You're funny.

I tell myself enough is enough when the flirting starts, because it's embarrassing to re-read, even more so when I'm so unclear about who I was flirting with.

I stalk the real Johnny Koenig's social media next, and it only takes me a few minutes to find all three of the photos 'you can call me John' sent me.

There's that one of him in a ball cap, fitted T-shirt hugging his chest, which is clearly the chest of someone who works out a lot.

One of him at a driving range, not particularly posed or anything, but he knows someone's taking the photo.

And the third photo of him with a cat. A standard picture, I guess, to show that you're a 'nice guy' who loves animals.

Of course, there are loads of photos he hadn't shared with me, mostly hockey.

And a note at the top saying it's an account managed by '@vkphotography'.

I close it down as I catch someone fumbling with the lock on the door. Scrambling to my feet, I move in time to see the door creak open and Mike's head peer at me by the light of the corridor.

"Kel? What are you doing in the dark?" he says, hitting the light switch. It's so bright I have to cover my eyes, but I'm not quick enough to hide that I've been crying. "What's going on?"

I step aside to let Mike through, and he dumps his gear down on the floor before studying my face.

"I'm just excited that you won your game." I take a punt, considering he looks relatively happy.

"Bullshit. You don't give a shit about that. What's going on?"

I hesitate for a moment, wondering if I should come clean and tell him I've been deep in conversation with someone who's been pretending to be the captain of his hockey team, but it sounds completely ridiculous, so I opt for another explanation.

"I'm just nervous about my audition tomorrow," I lie. "And I have a confession. I came to your game and saw that hit. I'm done with hockey, Mike."

To my relief, his eyebrows relax, and he pulls me into a hug.

"Ah, you'll be fine. And I'm fine. Look at me. Hey, want to come up and play some cards with the boys? We're having a little celebration thing. Johnny's a stickler for the rules, but he's relaxing them for tonight since we're practically champions."

I have to stifle a yelp at the mention of Johnny's name. But Mike takes my reaction another way, thank God.

"No need to panic. I know they can be a bit much... but they understand you're off-limits."

I roll my eyes. "Actually, I think I'll get an early night after I have a quick play-through." I move into the apartment and grab my cello, a little too eagerly, but Mike shrugs and tells me he'll see me later.

Once he's gone, I set my cello back down and slump onto the sofa, because there's no way in hell I can concentrate right now. My whole body is tense, so I dig some headphones out of my overnight bag and settle them over my ears, desperate to zone out.

I get through one track before my phone starts ringing, Tom's name flashing up on the screen, and he knows straight away that something is up when I answer.

"What's wrong and don't lie to me," he says, his tone flat.

"I'm really anxious about tomorrow," I say. Even though I know, deep down, that if there's anyone I could confide in, it's Tom. We've shared a music stand since we started at the university last year, but I can't bear the thought of anyone else knowing how foolish I'd been.

"Well, you don't need to be. Obviously, I want you to do terribly because I don't want you to leave me, but—"

"How was the rehearsal?" I cut him off, hoping to distract him.

And it works. I let him ramble on and on, listening intently as he talks. Except, after

he wishes me good luck and hangs up, Johnny's back on my mind and the sadness takes over again.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

“Mike? Is that you?” I peer into the darkness from my makeshift bed on the sofa. Then, without warning, the light in the hallway breaks the darkness and I witness my brother face-planting the floor. “Oh, my... what the hell is going on?” I say, throwing the blanket off my legs and hurrying over.

“Fuck,” he groans, rolling onto his side. He pauses before collapsing onto his back.

“How much has he drunk?” I ask Hutch, but he just stares at me, eyes glassy and unfocused.

“Hiya, Kel. Did we wake you?” Mike says. I study the huge grin plastered across his face.

“Do I need to put you to bed?” I ask.

“No, I’ll be fine right here.”

Hutch’s face sinks into a frown and he lurches into action, stepping over my brother and practically falling into the bathroom. He aligns his head with the pan of the toilet, just in time for the contents of his stomach to make an appearance.

Shit. I didn’t sign up for this .

“Do you think you’re going to be sick too, Mike?” I ask. I offer him my hand, and he clasps my palm, pulling himself up into a sitting position. He shuffles himself to lean against the wall.

“No, I need a banana and a pint of water. Maybe two paracetamol, if you can find any.”

The classic attempt to avoid hangovers is hit-and-miss, but Dad always insisted on it.

I coax him to his feet and shuffle him into his bedroom, where I lay him down on his side, pull his shoes off, and drape his duvet over him. I draw the line there. There’s no way in hell I’m undressing him.

“I’ll be right back,” I say, slipping out of his bedroom and towards the kitchen.

I don’t know what Mike and Hutch do in such a circumstance, but I go for the classic solution of emptying the washing-up bowl and grabbing a tea towel.

There are a few bananas on the worktop, so I take one, along with a bottle of water and a blister pack of painkillers I find in the cupboard.

The moon illuminates Mike’s bedroom, which makes him appear even paler than he normally is, and there’s a bruise forming under his eye from tonight’s game. Setting the items down on the floor next to his bed, I check he’s breathing before backing away.

“Kel?”

“Yeah?”

“Kel. I need to tell you something,” Mike slurs. “Are you listening?”

“Yes, I’m right here,” I say.

“Kel, you understand I’m proud of you, right? You’ll be fucking brilliant tomorrow. I

wish I could come and see it.” He ends the sentence with a ‘woo,’ and hiccups loudly.

“Uh, thanks.”

Christ, he must be drunk. He’s never, in my entire life, paid me a compliment. Nor has he ever seen me play outside of our childhood home, and even then, he used to complain about it. I turn to leave again, but Mike’s voice stops me in my tracks.

“Kel?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

The snoring starts after that. And once I make sure he’s still lying on his side, I leave the door ajar so I can listen out for him.

“It was the pizza,” Hutch says from the bathroom. His cheek rests on the toilet rim, arms clutching the porcelain for dear life.

“Can I get you anything?”

“It needs to come out,” he says. “It was that pizza we had, Kelly. Someone ordered a pizza, and it must have been bad. The cheese. It must have been the cheese.”

I wince as he vomits. I haven’t long met the guy and I’m standing here in my pyjamas watching him puke, with no clue how I can help him.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

But he gags again, and I take that as my cue to leave, heading back to my makeshift

bed to settle myself down for a night of terrible sleep.

There's a banging on the door that jolts me awake.

It's an 'I'm pissed off' sort of banging that grows louder and firmer with every knock.

It takes me a few moments to realise where I am and what I'm doing here.

My back aches and I struggle to sit up, so I roll over and hug my pillow, willing myself to move.

Then the shouting starts. I can't make it out, but there's a scrambling from the hallway and then I hear the door fling open.

Footsteps.

"Ah, shit," Hutch says, then my brother's name is called out in a yell. "Betts? Johnny's here."

My heart virtually stops in my chest. I lay perfectly still, hoping he doesn't move any further into the apartment. I mean, it wouldn't make any difference if he did see me here. It's not like he knows me. But the shame sits heavy in my chest.

"Fuck's sake. What did I tell you?" A deep and authoritative voice causes my skin to prickle. Is he talking with an accent? I can't quite tell.

"What's the shouting for?" Mike's voice this time.

Then there are more footsteps.

“I told you we had an early start. How much did you guys drink last night?”

Canadian, I think, by the sound of the vowels. But I’m not a linguist, so I can’t be sure.

“Yeah, yeah, we’re coming,” Hutch says, then more footsteps ring out, as if someone’s moving further into the apartment, and my heart picks up speed.

“Nah, no way are you coming upstairs like that. You have dried puke on your face. Take a damn shower.”

“Hey, calm down, Cap. We just had a bit of fun and—”

“I knew I couldn’t trust you,” Johnny says.

More footsteps, then my brother speaks again, his voice closer this time. “Do you want a coffee or something?”

“No, I don’t want a damn coffee—” That’s when the ranting starts. Back-and-forth between Johnny and my brother. It’s as if Mike has played outside too late and Dad is telling him off.

Who is this guy? I get he’s the team captain, but what right does he have to barge in here and shout at the guys? I guess it’s a good thing that this Johnny isn’t the same person I was speaking with, because he’s a complete dick.

“You need to chill,” Mike says firmly.

“You need to realise what’s at stake here—because we sure as hell aren’t going to win with the way you guys are acting. You’re not just letting yourself down, you’re letting the whole team down. ”

I can almost feel Mike wincing at that one. The words cut through the air, but Mike snaps back straight away.

“It was one night.”

“Save it, Betts. Just get your shit together and get your ass upstairs. Pronto,” Johnny says.

A few seconds later, footsteps retreat, and the front door slams.

I sit up, looking over the sofa to see Mike in the kitchen. His eyes widen when he catches sight of me.

“Sorry, Kel. I forgot you were here. Don’t mind Johnny. He’s wound up at the moment. I hope he didn’t wake you up.”

I get up from the sofa. “Does he always talk to you like that? Because he sounds like a dick.”

“Nah, he’s fine—look, I need to get going, but good luck today. Text me later and let me know how you do.”

Grabbing his mug, he heads back into his bedroom, disappearing out of view.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

My emotions are in turmoil. I don't know how I'll get through the next two hours.

I lied to my mother this morning when she called to check in.

I'm not chilled. In fact, I'm so far from chilled I'm lava and it's all my fault.

My concentration is at an all-time low because I'm repeating the carnage of yesterday over and over in my mind.

Top it off with a horrible night of broken sleep, and it's a whole shit show waiting to happen.

I arrive at the music college in time to freshen up.

Then I wait in the auditorium lobby until my name is called, before walking through to yet another waiting room.

This time, there are six more wannabe students lined up in seats against the wall with an assortment of instruments.

I believe I'm the only cellist. Is this a good sign? How many spots do they have?

Before I can over-analyse the situation more than I already have, I pull my phone out, seeing a flurry of messages wishing me luck for today, but I don't get a chance to reply. A door opens in the distance, and a woman with a clipboard calls my name, gesturing for me to follow .

I grab my instrument and follow her through to the auditorium, where I'm greeted by four stern-looking assessors sitting behind a long table.

This is when my nerves fully hit.

I'm shaking as I unpack my cello, taking care to haul my bow out of the case without snagging the hairs. I give it four turns on the screw to tighten it before I take a deep breath.

"We will give you a few moments to set up before we get started." I notice the name plates sitting in front of each assessor and skim over them, trying to commit them to memory.

"When you're ready, come and sit here and we'll get the interview underway.

" Dr Robertson, the woman who called me through, points at a chair practically sat under a spotlight.

I set my scores out on the music stand, lay my cello on its side, and make my way over to the chair.

Everyone is staring at me.

Staring.

Eyes burning into my soul.

"Why don't you start by telling us a bit about yourself? Why would you like to study here?"

A trick question, of course. I know from asking around that they literally just want

your name and how long you've been playing for. They aren't even interested in where you're from or what your qualifications are. They know all that.

I take a moment before replying.

"I'm Kelly. I've played the cello for eleven years, switching from the violin at age seven."

Blank faces stare back at me. But I really have nothing to lose.

I either get in, or I don't. If I do, happy days, dream come true, yippee.

If I don't, Plan B. Which is still a viable plan—staying in the university and studying music there, except the course doesn't carry the same amount of prestige.

I clear my throat before continuing.

"I am interested in studying here because of the college's distinguished reputation as a world-leading institution in music education. The talent that has emerged from here has influenced my journey as a musician, and I am eager to immerse myself in this inspiring environment.

"The college is all about nurturing artistic excellence and inspiring creativity and innovation, which is exciting. The chance to be instructed by highly esteemed faculty members, who excel both as performers and educators, is an incredibly appealing prospect for me. Their expertise and mentorship will undoubtedly shape my musical progress."

How I manage to drone on for a few more minutes, is anyone's guess.

I talk about the varying range of programs and resources, how I want to make myself

a better soloist and group musician, blah blah blah.

I'm pretty sure I even mention the state-of-the-art facilities.

Standard jargon that I've been half-coached to say by my music teacher and the course director, Patrick.

And I don't stop there.

"Beyond academics, I am impressed by the sense of community and camaraderie that encompasses the college." I pause, shifting in my seat before continuing.

"The opportunity to collaborate with musicians from different countries, exchange ideas, and push the boundaries of artistic expression is appealing. Ultimately, my goal is not only to become a proficient musician, but to contribute meaningfully to the world of music."

What am I even saying? I hope and pray that I'll never have to hear that played back because it was pure and utter cringe.

But, moving on. I smile to signal that my speech has ended.

All four of the assessors nod approvingly and take a few moments to scribble in their notebooks, which is when the panic creeps back.

Did I say enough? Did I say too much? Is my accent too strong? Did they even understand what I was saying? My palms sweat .

"Kelly? Would you mind telling us about which composers and pieces hold importance to you?"

I have an answer lined up: 'Tchaikovsky's Pezzo Capriccioso holds a significant appeal to me. It demonstrates an intense showcase of the cello's technical prowess.'

That's what I should have said. I had rehearsed this answer repeatedly. But, of course, I say something completely off-plan.

"Dvořák's Cello Concerto in B minor is great."

I experience a wave of despair. I can't believe I just said that.

Describing Dvořák's cello concerto as 'great' is blasphemy.

If I could, I would slump down in my chair, but years and years of sitting with a straight back has waived any chance of me slouching.

I still have lingering memories of my first cello teacher sitting behind me with a sharp pencil pointed at my lower back.

Any slouch, even just a minor amount, would result in a sharp poke.

It only took a few weeks to condition me.

Assessor number two looks at me with raised brows, so I dig deep to redeem myself.

"Shostakovich shows a high emotional integrity with his concertos."

Shit. Another crap answer, which doesn't help in the slightest. But I have a feeling that was my last chance.

"Let's move on, shall we?"

And that was that.

Tom meets me back in my dorm room a few hours later. He's let himself in and is sitting on the end of my bed, flicking through a magazine, which he tosses aside as soon as I flop down on my bed.

"Do I need to ask?"

"I referred to Dvořák's Cello Concerto in B minor as 'great,'" I groan into my pillow.

He doesn't say anything. He doesn't need to. The sharp intake of breath he draws in is enough to validate that it was a completely ridiculous thing to say.

"And I droned on about camaraderie and crap."

"Oh, shit. Well, I'm sure they won't even take notice of that."

I crane my head to look at him. "I'm not talking about it anymore."

Tom pushes his glasses up his nose and leans closer. "The others will be back soon. Let's go for drinks."

"Can't. I'm working tonight."

"Ah, yeah. Well, I'll go for drinks to commiserate on your behalf."

I nudge him off my bed and climb under the covers, desperate to hide away from the world and pretend like the past twenty-four hours never happened.

But after Tom pecks me on the forehead and pulls the curtains closed like the best friend he is, all I can think about is John.

Because if we were still chatting, I would have told him all about it and he'd say the right thing to brighten my mood.

And that memory alone has me bawling into my pillow.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

As I use a kick stool to reach the top shelf, I catch sight of my brother's crew cut, longer on top than it usually is, bobbing up the aisle across from me.

I've worked every single evening, practically begging my manager to give me the extra shifts so I can keep myself occupied.

It's been three long days since my audition, and I still haven't got over the embarrassment.

It's stuck on repeat in my head, and I cringe at the memory.

There's little solace in that I played my pieces well, because the questions overshadow the entire event.

I'm in a state of constant worry, and I'm checking my emails every five minutes, just in case.

"Back again?" I ask my brother as he turns into my aisle. "How did you know I was working?"

"You haven't answered any of my calls. I figured I'd just check on my way past."

"Where've you been?" I ask.

"Just came to shoot some pool again after a late practice," Mike says, and I busy myself with shelf-stacking because I cannot be bothered with the shift manager tonight. "I take it you haven't heard anything about your audition, yet?"

I shake my head. I knew he'd ask, but I don't want to talk about it. I was practically forced to replay the whole audition to him when he came in on Monday night. That was after I'd run through it with our parents.

"No." My voice comes out weird, so I clear my throat.

"You okay?" Mike asks.

I nod this time. But I can tell he's not convinced. He gives me a look that I can't read, but not wanting to give him the opportunity to press any further, I change the subject.

"What's up anyway?" I ask, trying to push things along. I doubt he came solely for an update. He could have texted me that.

He absentmindedly picks up a tin of sweetcorn and rolls it in his hands. "We got asked to confirm our ticket requests for the weekend. I told them I need an extra two: one for Mam and Dad, and one for you and Tom, I guess?"

"This weekend?"

"Yes. You promised me, remember?" He sets the tin down amongst the peas and frowns at me.

"Promised?"

"Okay, so you didn't promise, but I said I'd be pissed, and I will be. C'mon, Kel. Mam and Dad are making an effort, and it'll be nice to have people cheering me on."

"You'll have an entire block of fans cheering you on." I step down and replace the sweetcorn, pushing the bitterness towards our parents away. They always attend Mike's big events, but never attend anything for me. "Are you making Stacey go?"

Mike scrunches his nose. “Nah, she’ll insist on bringing that clown.” That’s one thing Mike and I both agree on at least—our sister’s fiancé is a dick. “C’mon, Kel... I’ll even let you have the better seats for the semifinal.”

I know what he’s doing. In case they don’t make it to the final, I’ll at least have got to see him play up close .

“Go away. I’m working.” I swat the air as if I’m shooing away a fly.

He doesn’t let up. He follows me around the shop floor while I work, nagging me every single step of the way. I enter the aisle leading to the back room, hoping he won’t follow me. But before I reach the double swing doors, I’m distracted by a tall figure facing slightly away from me.

Shit. Is that...?

My mouth dries and my whole body buzzes with nerves. My brain screams at me to get the hell out of here.

“Kel? Are you even listening to me?”

“Yes, of course I am. I’m just thinking,” I lie, stepping around Mike so I can get a better view of Johnny. I try to act casual as I flick my focus between Mike and the figure behind him.

Johnny adjusts himself so I can see his profile. I’m surprised to see that he’s got a beard. It looks thick, but it’s neat for what I can only assume is a playoff special. The complete opposite of the bird’s nest taking over Mike’s face.

Even from this angle, I can see the familiarity in the photos I’d spent so long examining, which is obvious, I guess since they were his pictures. A strong jaw,

broad chest that fills the suit he's wearing, and my knees quiver a little when he smiles.

I must force myself to remember that this person isn't John . I was talking to the alternate captain, and this is very much the real, fully-fledged captain that could get any woman in the world.

Johnny is standing next to the main entrance, talking to a woman who flicks her hair and giggles as he speaks. He hands her a pen and notebook, and she bursts into laughter, catching Mike's attention.

"Oh my God. I can't go anywhere with him, honestly. J—"

"Okay, I'll come," I say, cutting Mike off and reaching for his arm.

I can't bring myself to stand face-to-face with Johnny. I've never met him before, and Mike will probably introduce me, and I'll turn into the colour of a beetroot and probably keel over and die of embarrassment.

"Really?" Mike asks.

"Yes. But I need to get on."

I hear him call out that he'll text me tomorrow as I disappear into the back room. Without hesitation, I walk towards the freezer door, closing it behind me, and sit on a box of chicken nuggets nearby.

This is all too much. Every presentation I've seen of Johnny has reinforced one thing—I was catfished. The real Johnny has a presence about him; he stands tall, and carries himself with confidence. But his expression stayed stony and guarded, probably as cold as this freezer.

I finish my wallowing, then I head back out to the shop floor, tentatively checking outside the swing doors before stepping out.

The coast is clear. There's no Mike and there's no Johnny. But there is an angry-looking queue of customers forming at the tills.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

Tom looks completely ridiculous in his get-up.

We're wearing matching 'Betts' jerseys, which Mike dropped off yesterday, but Tom's taken things to another level with the face paint and bobble hat he found in my wardrobe.

I mean, I thought he was extreme with the hat, but the team's logo slapped on his cheeks makes his entire ensemble look even more. .. spirited.

"Where's the bar?" he asks, craning his neck.

I lead the way.

There's a whole rainbow of colour in the rink's atrium, supporters from every single team. Even the ones who didn't make it this far. Some fans proudly display homemade medallions, signifying their allegiance to one of the final four teams.

Tom stops to take a selfie with a mascot before we make our way to our block with our beers and 50/50 tickets.

"What row are we?" Tom asks.

"B. "

As agreed, we're here today. Tomorrow, my parents will sit here, and Tom and I are relegated to the top row. It's only a problem if Mike's team make the final.

“Do you think your brother will spot us?”

“I hope not,” I say, following Tom down the steps to our row.

It’s almost full and we’re arriving a little later than I wanted, but Tom insisted on a few beers in the Wetherspoons across the road beforehand.

“Do you think people realise you’re his sister? I mean, you really do look alike.”

“No, we don’t,” I say, my jaw dropping.

He lets out an evil laugh and we shuffle into our seats halfway across the row. We’re on the left side of the benches.

“Mike’s team will be in front of us, so it’s very unlikely that he’ll spot me.”

Famous last words, though, because when the teams finally make it on the ice ten minutes later, Mike looks up at me, flashing me a toothless grin.

“Why didn’t you tell me there’s so many good-looking men on his team? I mean, I’ll take up hockey if it means...”

“Can you even skate?”

“No, but I can learn. Can you?” Tom asks.

“Well, yeah, but only because I played hockey a little when I was a kid.”

Tom glares at me. “I’m sorry, I don’t buy it.”

I roll my eyes, using the remaining warm-up time to give Tom a rundown of my very

limited hockey career, which involved playing for twenty minutes on a Sunday afternoon, and watching my brother the rest of the time.

“Well, I still think I should take it up,” Tom says, getting to his feet as the buzzer sounds, signalling the end of warm-ups. “I’ll get us some more beers.”

I fan myself with the programme as Tom leaves, settling my gaze on my brother, who circles the net and joins number fifty-six, Johnny.

There’s a nervous energy in my stomach as I watch their conversation as they glide back towards the benches.

Mike says something directly into Johnny’s ear and he nods, just before his head pops up and he looks me directly in the eyes.

He’s not that far away, really. One row and then the bench.

But there’s no mistaking that the gaze he holds is for a second longer than would be expected of someone who’s glancing in your general direction.

His expression hardens slightly before his eyebrows knit together.

I shiver involuntarily, and a warmth fills my whole body. I stand up quickly, quaking on the spot as I excuse myself to the other fans in my row as I shuffle past them.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I say to Tom as I pass him on the steps.

There’s a queue, but I join the back, chewing on my fingernails as the line shuffles forward. What did Mike say to him?

I wait until I’m safely in a cubicle to freak out. And once I’m out, I splash my face

with water, disregarding my make-up.

I grab two more beers from the concession stand before heading back to my seat, thrusting the plastic pint cup into Tom's hand. Because I'm taking him down with me.

"What's going on?" he asks, accepting it without question.

There's a flurry of activity as skaters take to the ice, a flag representing each team held high and fluttering as they skate. The whole arena comes alive with noise, and the buzz of excitement in the air makes this a unique feeling, different than anything I've experienced before.

"I just fancy a drink. Shall we make a weekend of it?"

"See, this is why we're friends. I just hope to Christ that they don't pan across us when this is on TV."

I swig my beer, hoping the same, because we're both meant to be at rehearsal today, and we made up a story about us both getting hit with the same stomach bug after a meal at a questionable Chinese buffet. Apparently, we're never allowed to dine together again, but we're taking that as a win.

The whole arena erupts in applause as they announce the teams. We stand up and join the cheering, shouting a bit louder when my brother skates on.

Honestly, despite my feelings, I am so proud of him, and seeing him out there brings a tear to my eye—or it may be the beer making me emotional. Who knows?

When the guys are out, they skate a few laps of their defensive zones and I catch sight of Johnny again. As if he's planned it, he loops around, and looks toward our block as

he raises his stick, stretching his arms out behind him so his chest puffs out.

Then his eyes lock onto mine again.

“Oh my God. Did you see the way he just looked at me?” Tom says, nudging me so hard I fight to keep hold of my beer.

But I didn't. I saw the way he was looking at me.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

Tom is under strict instructions not to mention who my brother is when we tag along to a bar with a load of other fans after the game.

It's my favourite sort of place. Music pumping from a loudspeaker in the corner, but not so much that you can't hear yourself think, and decent drinks with actual glasses—not the plastic ones they force on you after big events.

We all gravitate towards the back where there are a few tables free, and get some drinks ordered.

Tom sticks to beer, but I decide to mix things up with a gin and tonic that I'll probably regret later—but it may add weight to the fake stomach bug.

My throat is hoarse from cheering, and I know I'll be feeling as rough as sandpaper tomorrow, but the excitement and buzz from the game has everyone on a high.

We're going to the final.

I text my brother, congratulating him on their win and he replies with a single 'thumbs up' emoji. And I guess he's probably celebrating somewhere until he texts me a few hours later.

Mike

Sorry, Kel. Cap's been riding our asses tonight. The pressure is getting to him.

"Is he talking about Johnny?" Tom says, reading over my shoulder.

“Yes,” I say, slipping my phone away. “I think he’s a bit of an authoritarian on and off the ice.”

And straight away, the vision of Johnny’s eyes on mine is back at the forefront of my mind.

“He can ride my ass as much as he wants,” Tom swoons.

“You’re disgusting.”

“All I’m saying is, he can do whatever the hell he likes to me.” And I don’t know if it’s disgust or shock, but my mouth hangs open when Tom pulls his phone out and flashes me his new lock screen. “Look at him, Kel. He’s beautiful.”

He is.

In fact, looking at him makes my whole body ache. He won the gene pool lottery for sure. It’s a pity he’s not got the shining personality to match—not like...

“It’s not all about looks. From what I know, he’s not a very nice person. He’s always shouting at the guys, constantly angry about something.”

“And how do you know this?” Tom says indignantly.

“It’s just what I’ve picked up on.” It’s half a lie.

Obviously, he didn’t make a good impression when I overheard him last Monday morning when I was on Mike’s sofa, but when I saw Mike on Monday evening, he seemed unsettled by the encounter earlier in the day.

I outright asked him if it was because of Johnny, and he shrugged, dismissing my

question.

“Well, I don’t buy it. He looks too sweet. Anyway, do you fancy another, or are you ready to call it a night?”

“Let’s go. I just need to use the bathroom first. ”

I excuse myself, and when I return to our seats, Tom is in a deep conversation with two other fans but signals that we’re leaving when he spots me.

“So, I’ve done some recon and everyone loves Johnny. Told you. I’m right.” We link arms and start the walk back to our hotel.

“I didn’t say that everyone didn’t love him. I just said that he’s not a nice person. That’s different.”

“How is it?”

“It just is. Now leave it,” I snap.

Tom comes to an abrupt halt, causing me to stumble a little to regain my footing. “Why are you being a bitch?”

“I’m not.”

“You bloody are. Now tell me what’s going on.”

I frown at him. “Nothing. Well, not really, anyway.” I think I have to come clean and tell Tom why I’m so uppity towards Johnny. He won’t let it rest otherwise. “Okay, fine. But let me finish before you butt in with your opinion.”

“Agreed,” Tom says, pulling me back into a walking pace. It’s chilly, and neither of us wants to be standing outside in the cold.

“I was talking to someone on that app you put me on to. Three months, altogether. He said his name was John, and that he was a mature student. He sent me some pictures, and I sent pictures...”

“Oh my God. What sort of pictures?”

“Nothing like that. Just selfies or whatever. But he used Johnny Koenig’s pictures. And—”

“Oh, my God. You were talking to Johnny? My Johnny? What happened?” Tom comes to a stop again, turning towards me with his jaw on the floor.

“You said you’d let me finish,” I say. “But, no. I was catfished.”

Tom’s eyes are like saucers. “How do you know?”

“I just do,” I say, tugging at his arm, prompting him to walk again .

“You have the worst luck. How did you find out?” I tell him about the huge Johnny Koenig action shot in the upper lobby of the rink. “Right. And what does that prove?”

“I’m sorry, but the likelihood of the real Johnny Koenig being on a social sharing app to meet new people is wild. You’ve said so yourself—look at him.”

“Yeah, but he could be. Did you ask him?”

“No. I deleted my account,” I say.

“Without asking him?”

We turn the corner and make our way into the lobby of the hotel.

“Yes. I freaked out. I mean, if it is Johnny, which I’m pretty certain it’s not... He plays hockey with my brother and it’s just a bit—”

“So?” Tom pushes the button for the lift, and we climb in when the doors spring open. I hit the button for our floor.

“Mike would kill me. And him for that matter. Besides, I’m me, and he’s an athlete—”

“Stop it. There’s nothing wrong with you,” he says as the lift comes to a stop. A single ‘ding’ and the doors open.

Tom hovers the key card over the lock of the hotel room door and it makes a mechanical unlatching sound before he pushes it open.

“I’m not having this discussion with you right now,” I say.

I put my bag down on the desk, then take off my shoes before collapsing down on the bed.

“For once, Kelly, do me a favour and realise that you don’t have to settle for people like Darren. What if that really was Johnny, and he really was interested in you? Because there’s no way someone would carry on a conversation for three whole months if they weren’t.”

“Well, it wasn’t. And in the unlikely event that it was, I’m not interested. He’s a complete dick to my brother and—”

Tom cuts me off. “You never know. Maybe he can be himself behind a screen?”

I wave him off and busy myself getting ready for bed.

I’m feeling surprisingly sober now I’m in a different head space, reeling over the way Johnny looked at me. It couldn’t have been him, could it?

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

Mike's face resembles that of a champion, not someone who recently suffered a concussion and was sent to the hospital. He's grinning from ear to ear, and he radiates excitement. Our mother, on the other hand, does not appear impressed at all.

"We won, Mam. We won." He beams.

"And we're ecstatic for you, love. But how are you feeling?"

"You know when you wake up on Christmas morning and you really hope you got—"

"Not about the game, Michael. How's your head?" Mam moves closer and starts fussing with his bed sheets.

When they took him to the dressing room, he seemed completely disoriented and unaware of his surroundings, or the game still being played on the ice. Mike only found out they're playoff champions ten minutes ago.

"Ah, it's fine. Where's Dad?"

"He's parking the car," I say, sitting down in the plastic visitor chair next to his bed .

Mam steps aside and forces a cup of water in Mike's direction before stepping to the end of the bed and pulling out the clipboard from the holder.

I know for a fact she can't read hospital notes properly; she works in finance. She flicks through the sheets before putting it back and excusing herself to go and find the

nurse. Now it's only us.

"I feel terrible," he says.

"I'm not surprised."

"No, I mean, forcing them to come here."

"You didn't force them, they wouldn't have not come," I say.

"Yeah, but hospitals and all that."

I nod, then quickly change the subject back to the game that Mike is so excited to have won. At least this will help keep his attention away from the worry of bringing our parents to a hospital. Luckily, this isn't the same hospital in which they had their last moments with our brother, Jeremy.

"Just try to relax. Don't let yourself get worked up with worry."

"Stop babying me, Kel. I mean it."

The door squeaks as it swings inward, and Dad steps into the room, followed closely by Mam.

They both stop at the foot of the bed, solemn expressions on their faces.

"Dad, we w—"

"I think it's best for you to come home and spend the off-season with us, son," Dad says, hands deep in his pockets.

Mike's brows pull together. "You think? Or Mam?"

"I do. I mean, we can keep an eye on you. Make sure you're well and—"

"But I have a summer plan. I'm supposed to work with Danny at his old man's construction site."

"Well, you can tell Danny thanks, but no thanks," Dad says. "I'm sure he'll understand, given the circumstances."

I look at Mike, but his eyes flick towards our mother and I see it—the plea. But she shakes her head.

"This is for the best, Michael. Please. We need to make sure you're safe. If you want to play again next season—"

"What do you mean, 'if I want to play again?'" My brother's voice becomes hoarse.

"Mike," I say, moving to his bedside. "You need to rest. Don't let yourself get worked up."

"Well, tell them they need to go. Can you get me my phone please, Kel? I need to speak with Johnny."

My stomach drops. But I grab Mike's phone from the windowsill and hand it to him.

"Thanks." He looks to Mam and Dad. "Can you give me some space, please? I need to rest, after all."

I'm stuck in the middle. I know what Mike is like, and I also know our parents are in a state of 'cotton wool' deployment. If Mam had her way, she'd let none of us leave

the house.

“I’ll be back in half an hour to check on you. In the meantime, please try to get some rest, Michael,” Mam says. Then she gives me the nod to follow her, and like a puppy, I do.

We leave him and Dad to talk for a few minutes, heading down to the coffee shop.

The same place where Johnny Koenig and a few of the other guys are waiting, Styrofoam cups in hand, around a large circular table.

Luckily, he doesn’t see us, but he pulls his phone out of his pocket and sticks it to his ear, before sliding his chair to stand up.

We join the queue as Dad strides in.

“Did you bring my handbag, Tony?” Mam says, looking him up and down.

“Does it look like I have your handbag, love?” Dad huffs before he turns to me. “Kelly, be a star and fetch Mam’s handbag, will you?”

I turn on the spot and stalk back towards Mike’s room, the anxiety of bumping into Johnny sitting in my chest.

As soon as Mike’s room comes into view, I see Johnny through the window of the door, standing next to his bed as they talk.

The silence from the corridor allows me to pick up a mumbling of raised voices from within the room. Hesitantly, I push the door open. There’s no avoiding him this time.

“Just leave it, will you? For Christ’s sake. Quit nagging me about it,” my brother

snaps, his ire aimed towards Johnny.

But they both turn their heads towards me, and Johnny's eyes lock with mine, his face softening for a fraction of a second before he looks away again.

Mike's room suddenly seems cramped. It's as if the walls are closing in on me. Johnny's six-foot-whatever frame makes me feel fun-sized and I can't help but stare at him. Tom was right, of course. He is handsome.

"Alright, Kel? How's it going?" Mike adjusts himself in bed and offers me a warm smile.

"I need to grab Mam's bag," I say, bending slightly to reach down and grab it from the floor next to his bed. My face flames. Is this my very own 'I carried a watermelon' moment?

My knees wobble a little, but I use all my strength to stand up straight again.

"No worries. Oh, have you met Johnny? Johnny, this is my sister, Kelly. Kelly, this is Johnny, the team captain."

He bows his head slightly, so he's not looking directly at me.

"Hi, Johnny. It's nice to meet you," I say.

My voice doesn't sound like mine when the words are in the air. I sound frail and pathetic.

Then he looks at me. Fully this time, relaxing his face again as he shoves his hands in his pockets. He looks older in person with a beard. Nervous, too. But confidence oozes from his voice when he speaks.

“Hi Kelly, I’m Johnny. But you can call me John.”

And just like that, my heart stops. It couldn’t be... could it ?

Mike bursts out laughing. “You can call me John? Are you expecting her to call you captain, too?”

Johnny doesn’t answer him. Instead, he pulls his phone out of his pocket and glares at the screen, his cheeks turning pink. “Shit, I need to get going, Betts. I’ll call you later, yeah?”

He strides out of the room, leaving nothing but the scent of cologne behind him. I make a mental note to tell Tom that even though Johnny is a douche, he at least smells good.

“That was fucking weird,” Mike says, looking at the door Johnny closed behind him.

But our conversation ends there, thankfully, when the door creaks open, and a nurse comes in, wheeling a machine.

She announces that it’s time to check his observations, so I use that as my cue to leave.

But I don’t make it back to the café. I get to the end of the corridor and come face-to-face with Johnny Koenig.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

My nerves are off the chart as we pull up outside Bettsy's family home, a large detached new-build off the motorway near his hometown.

Ffordey and I returned from France yesterday, and Bettsy thought it'd be nice to have a barbecue this evening before we drive him back to the city tomorrow.

"I'm starving. I hope there's not a long wait for food," Ffordey says as we climb out of my car. The smell of a freshly lit grill wafts through the air, then the front door flings open.

"Thank fuck you guys are here," Bettsy says, running out of the house like a dog who's been home alone all day. He pulls me into a hug and pats heavily on my back. "I'm so glad you could make it. I'm going insane here."

"How's your summer been?" Ffordey asks .

"Shit. Please tell me all your golfing stories because I need to live vicariously through you."

We spent three weeks touring Southern France before settling on a golf course for a week. And it's been great. Except, it hasn't been great, either. I've had too much time to think about Kelly. And since there's every chance I could bump into her today, the anxiety is almost too much to bear.

"It was pretty uneventful," I say. "But Ffordey and I had a blast."

He's my favourite travel companion. He doesn't make idle conversation, and he

doesn't procrastinate with plans. I say ten, and he's ready five minutes before. He's perfect.

I grab our bags from the trunk, and we follow Bettsy inside. I'm a wreck. I can feel my body trembling. Is she here? What will I say? What will she say? What if...

"Mam and Kelly have gone to see Stacey. Something about wedding planning or whatever." We follow Bettsy into the kitchen where he stops at the fridge to grab a few beers.

"Who's getting married?" Ffordey asks, saving me the job.

"Stacey. The guy she's seeing is a dick though. I can't even believe Dad said she could marry the guy."

"It's not the nineteen hundreds, dude. I'm pretty sure that's not a thing anymore," I say.

"I think it's proper. I guess I'm a traditional guy."

Ffordey almost chokes on his beer. "Traditional? You? You realise back in the day, most people didn't have sex before marriage."

Bettsy rolls his eyes. "I'm just saying. The guy is a prick."

"Who's a prick?" Bettsy's dad, Tony, steps into the kitchen from the patio. He's wearing an apron that says 'Prick with a fork' which coaxes a snicker from me and Ffordey.

"Who do you think?" Bettsy says.

“Ah,” Tony says.

“See. Say no more. ”

“I hope you boys like steak,” Tony says, rummaging in the fridge. He pulls out a tray of meat and gestures for us to follow him outside.

We gather around the barbecue, chatting about the upcoming season and Bettsy’s incident. Once Tony serves the food, our conversation flows so smoothly that I completely forget about my concerns for Kelly.

I’m relaxed. Until a distant car door slams, followed by the front door opening and closing, accompanied by a musical call, signifying someone’s return.

Shit.

Bettsy’s mom, Judith, appears at the patio door, waving at us before asking if we’re good for drinks.

“How was it?” Tony calls.

“Don’t ask.” Judith waves her hand dismissively, disappearing back into the kitchen. There’s a clattering of kitchenware, then she returns, carrying a tray of fresh drinks into the yard. “But that aside, Kelly had an email when we were driving home, Tony. It’s not good news.”

“What email?” Tony asks, wrinkling his brow.

“Kelly, love. The music college emailed to say she didn’t get a spot. She’s upset, as you can imagine. I’m going to take her a cuppa now.” Judith disappears again.

Bettsy exhales. “That sucks. I bet she’s gutted.” He pulls his phone out and taps the screen a few times, then holds it to his ear. “Get your arse down here, Kel. Come and have a beer.”

My pulse thunders in my ears and the nerves kick in. Without fully understanding the situation I’m putting myself in, I excuse myself to use the bathroom, hoping I can have a moment alone.

Judith points me towards the washroom, and as I round the corner, I lock eyes with Kelly, who’s making her way down the stairs.

My heart practically falls out of my chest .

She smooths the front of her sundress, and I can see she’s been crying. Her face is red and blotchy, and her eyes, big and green, look puffy.

“Johnny—” She wipes her eyes, stopping at the last step.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

Stupid really, because obviously she’s not.

“Yeah,” she says, giving her face another pass with the back of her hand.

I dip into the bathroom and grab some toilet paper, since that’s all I can think of, and hand it to her.

“Thanks,” she sniffs, moving off the stairs.

The whole thing breaks my heart. Seeing Vicky cry is one thing, but this is completely different. She looks so fucking sad, and I want to comfort her. I want to

make her feel better. I want to see her smile.

I wrap my arms around her, her head fitting into the crook of my neck with ease. For a moment, I think I've over-stepped the mark, but then her arms snake around me and she squeezes me gently.

"It's okay," I soothe, catching myself breathing in the smell of her shampoo.

And despite what happened in April, this doesn't feel weird. It feels...

Her mom's footsteps pull us apart. Kelly discreetly moves back two steps to avoid any obvious sign of our hug. Judith hands her a mug and slips away, not even commenting on my loitering spot.

"I heard about the email," I say. "I'm sorry." I regret it as soon as it's out. But for some reason, I keep fucking talking. "I'd love to tell you it wasn't meant to be or whatever, but you probably don't want to hear that yet. I know I didn't want to hear it when I didn't get—"

"No, I know. I... you know what? It doesn't matter." She sniffs loudly and dabs her eyes with the tissue. A carriage clock on the wall ticks away the seconds before Kelly speaks again. "Mam said Mike was having some friends over. I guess I should have known it'd be you."

"Yeah. I guess I'd have told you, but I don't have your number or anything."

"Right."

"I suppose I could have tried to message you on socials, but my sister looks after my accounts and she's nosier than Bettsy."

She smiles, ever so subtly. “It’s fine. I mean, I wouldn’t have stopped you coming over or whatever.”

“Well, I was, uh... actually hoping I’d bump into you.”

“You were?” Her eyes are full and sad, but there’s a flash of excitement on her face. I shove my hands into the pockets of my chinos, contemplating what I should say next, but me being me, I fuck it up.

“You didn’t tell Mike about my, uh, problem, did you?”

Her face turns cold again. She stares at me, blank at first, as if she’s processing what I’ve asked, but then she blinks and purses her lips. “No, Johnny. I didn’t. In fact, you haven’t come up once in conversation,” she snaps, setting her mug down on a sideboard.

Shit.

She steps forward, with purpose this time, and I’m forced to step aside and let her pass.

“Kelly, wait—I’m sorry I didn’t mean to—”

I grit my teeth and follow her. But instead of stepping out into the garden, where everyone else is, she disappears behind a door at the far end of the kitchen.

“Johnny? Come on, man. Are you playing or what?” Ffordey calls as he waves a deck of cards at me.

Just as I’m about to step outside, the door Kelly went through flings open, and she strides out with her jacket on.

“I’m going out,” she shouts into the garden before brushing past me towards the front door.

I turn to follow her, but the slam of the front door tells me all I need to know.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

I slide into Johnny's BMW and buckle my seat belt.

I've never been stunned into silence before, but there's a first time for everything.

The sizzling tension spanning between us as we sat together in the beer garden was something I'd never experienced before.

Not even with Darren, or that time I kissed the boy I'd been crushing on for years when I was in primary school.

Johnny's performance was worthy of an Oscar. And when he climbs in the car, I can't even look at him. That sensation, completely alien to me, floods back as soon as his hand moves close to my leg as he reaches for a cable to plug his phone in.

I pull my own phone out of my bag as a distraction, groaning to myself when I see it's dead.

"Do you need to charge your phone?" Johnny asks, gesturing to the wire.

"No. It's fine, thanks," I say, letting my stubborn attitude win .

And what infuriates me is he says nothing more. It's like I've got the alternate version of Johnny again. Which is the precise moment I realise I'd spent my evening with John .

He belts himself up and pushes a few buttons on the console of his car. It's a warm evening, so he gets the air-conditioning blasting through the vents, and within a few

seconds, the cool air whips at my hair and blows his delicious scent around the cabin of his car.

I have to force myself to concentrate on the view outside.

He pulls out of the car park, and we ride in silence. It's probably a full ten minutes before Johnny speaks again.

"How was the rest of your evening?"

"Fine," I say, keeping my eyes fixed outside the window.

"I'm glad."

That's it.

That's all he says. And that's all I say.

And I think he's going to never utter another word, ever again, but he clears his throat as we turn into my street. He pulls up outside and kills the engine, not making any effort to move. So I don't either.

"I'm sorry. I am fucking terrible with words, and emotions and—"

"You were a completely different person back there," I say. "Who are you, Johnny?"

All I get is a stunned silence.

He shifts in his seat. "I'm trying here, Kelly. But I am sorry about earlier. I didn't mean for it to sound as if I don't trust you, but honestly, I was panicking because if that comes out—"

He genuinely looks pained. But I'm reminded of how much he had trusted me when he told me about his issues finishing during sex.

"I get it, Johnny. I understand what guys are like in groups. Believe it or not, the orchestra isn't too dissimilar. People talk and news travels fast. But your secret is safe with me. Don't worry. "

"Thanks."

His eyes drift over to my seat and his arm flexes, as if he's about to do something, when the front door of my house opens and light spills out onto the path. Johnny flinches, unbuckles his seat belt, and clambers out of the car.

"What took you so long?" Mike asks.

I'm out of his car in time to catch Johnny's explanation.

"Kelly didn't answer her phone, so I went to look for her. Some creeper was looking like he was about to eat her alive, so I told him I was her boyfriend. Naturally, I had to stay for a drink. But there wasn't any drama."

Well, colour me surprised.

I gape at Johnny. And he's so casual about it.

My heart pounds so loud, my pulse is strong in my ears. I'm waiting for Mike to react. I'm waiting for Mike to say something... waiting for him to freak out. He holds his fist up, offering it to Johnny, who bumps it.

"Cheers, man. Who was he, Kel? Anyone we know?"

I stutter over my words. “A friend of Charlotte’s, that’s all. No one I’ll likely see again.”

“Good, because remember what I said—no dating. After that fucking loser—”

“Okay, Mike. I get it.”

I glare at Johnny.

Mike nods and turns his attention back to his friend, offering him a drink.

I get the hell out of there, in case Mike asks any more questions.

Pushing past them both, I don’t even bother saying good night. I head upstairs and knock on my parents’ door, which Mam opens in a flash—I knew she’d be waiting up to make sure I was home safe.

“How are you feeling now, love?” she says.

“Yeah, fine, thanks. I had a good evening. ”

“Good. I knew Johnny would get you back safe. Dad had a few drinks, see.”

“Yeah, it’s fine, Mam. Just going to bed.”

She pecks me on the cheek and wishes me a good night before closing her bedroom door.

I get myself ready for bed, plugging my phone in to charge before I climb under my duvet. Laying in the darkness, my mind is working overtime.

Who is Johnny, really? Like deep down. Who is he?

I absentmindedly run my fingers along my lips. Because whichever version of Johnny kissed me—that was something else. I'm wondering if he always kisses like that as my phone vibrates on my bedside table when it comes back to life.

Charlotte

Oh my God. You owe me the full story regarding your fella. He is *flame emoji*

I also have an unread message from earlier.

Unknown

It's Johnny. I'm on my way to pick you up.

I stare at it for a moment, then close my messages, trying to push everything out of my mind.

I have so much to say and nothing to say at the same time. The turmoil of emotions twist and turn not only in my head, but in my heart, too. There's something about Johnny that has me wondering, and I want to understand.

I tap out a message to him and hit send before I change my mind.

Kelly

Why did you kiss me?

He doesn't reply. At least, not until I'm dropping off to sleep and my phone vibrates upon my chest, pulling me back. I scramble for it, blinking vigorously to clear my

eyes.

Johnny

Why did you kiss me back?

He is infuriating.

Though, I'm not sure what I was expecting. Him to tell me it was a mistake? That it shouldn't have happened? But I fume in the darkness of my bedroom. Why did I have to kiss him back? Why was this the best kiss I'd ever had—I mean, stuff like that doesn't happen to me.

The more I think about it, the more confused I get. Does he like me? Do I like him? I can't say I fully understand how I feel about him, but that stupid kiss has added nothing but confusion to my uncertainty.

I toss my phone aside and roll over, pulling my pillow over my head, willing myself to sleep. But all I can think about is Johnny.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

The pickup zone outside the railway station is busy, but everyone falls into a deathly silence as my brother's car comes screeching around the corner like it needs a new exhaust. If I slowly back away from the curb, I can sink into the depths of the station, and he'll never see me—except I'm far too slow.

Mike honks his horn and sticks his head out the window.

“Jump in then, Kel,” he says, resting his elbow on the window frame. “I can't afford to get another ticket.” He's grinning, revelling in how embarrassed I am.

I hang my bag over my shoulder and grab my cello case, careful not to swing it at anyone, then I clasp the handle of my suitcase so I can wheel it behind me.

Mike's car is a three-door hatchback so, ideally, I'd put my cello in the front seat, but I'm keen to get the hell away from here.

I open the passenger door and stuff it into the backseat, careful to wedge it in just enough to stop it rocking during the drive.

“How was the journey?” Mike asks as I climb in next to him.

At least he waits until I've buckled up before speeding off toward the town centre .

“Probably more relaxing than this,” I say, not taking my eyes off the road. His driving is erratic, and if I look away, I know I'll vomit.

He taps the dashboard impatiently as he waits at a red light.

The route from the railway station to my new student house would usually take a full ten minutes in the car with this amount of traffic, but Mike squeals to a stop outside in eight minutes flat.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” he asks, cutting the engine.

It’s a Victorian townhouse, which has seen better days, and because Tom and I left it until the last minute, hoping I would need to live closer to the music college, we were left with the dregs of available accommodation.

Luckily, Sally and Marie, two girls from our orchestra, were also looking for a place, so we pitched together and wound up with this.

“Yes. I know it’s not a palace, but it’s a good price—and within walking distance and all that, so I don’t need my car.

” I wanted my car, of course, but it wasn’t practical to be paying out to keep it going when I didn’t actually need it.

Besides, Tom is bringing his car because he refuses to use public transport.

Mike helps me inside with my things and scrunches his nose up when he navigates the entrance hallway to my bedroom, which is at the very front of the house.

It was clearly a sitting room at some point, with an aged bay window.

But the room itself is large and bright, so I was happy that I picked it out of the baseball cap Tom had commandeered.

“Do you have your landlord’s number handy?” he says, moving towards the hearth. It doesn’t serve as a real fireplace, but Mike peers at it sceptically.

“Why?”

“I need to call him.”

“It’s a her.”

“Don’t care.” He moves over to the window. “Someone needs to sort this out—it looks like it’s leaking.”

I sigh, flinging my suitcase onto my bare bed so I can unpack. “It’s fine.”

“No. It’s not. Did you even view this place?”

“Yeah. We all did.”

He makes an audible ‘hmpf,’ then scratches his head. “Does Mam know?”

“You’re done here. Thank you for the ride,” I say, ushering him out the door.

“Wait—I thought you needed me to take you shopping? How are you going to manage for bedding and stuff?”

Damn him to pieces.

We spend three hours in IKEA, and by the time we’re emptying his car of things, I never want to see another giant blue bag again.

“You’ve got my schedule, right? Because if you need anything, I can get over here in, like, fifteen minutes, depending on traffic,” Mike says after he dumps the last of the shopping bags on my bedroom floor.

It's at least twenty minutes by car back to his place, but I don't correct him.

"Yes, but I'll be fine, honest."

He gives me a hug, squeezing my shoulders, before thumping me in the ribs. Finally, he agrees to leave me to the mammoth task of unpacking, making my bed, and getting my kitchen stuff put away.

I finish making my bed up when the front door clatters open and Tom's sing-song tone calls out.

"In here," I say, moving to hang my clothes up in a rickety wardrobe opposite the fireplace.

Tom bounds in, dropping a holdall in my doorway before collapsing on the bed .

"I've just finished making that."

"I can tell. It's been a long day," he says. "Can I sleep here?"

I eye his bag. "Is that all you've brought?"

Tom props himself up on his elbow, facing me as I stand at my wardrobe.

"No. My car is crammed full of stuff. I'm going to need some help—wait..."

He scrambles to his feet and strides towards me, pulling Johnny's hoodie from my hands, examining it.

"Did your brother make captain?" His eyebrows pinch together, and he looks as if he's trying to work out a complex maths problem.

Shit.

I open my mouth to reply, but Tom's eyes widen as the answer comes to him. "This is Johnny's hoodie," he gasps, slapping a hand over his mouth. "Number '56.' That's not your brother's number."

"Yeah," I say, reaching for it.

But Tom turns away and moves it out of reach. Then, to my horror, he pulls it to his nose and inhales.

"Don't you dare. You'll take all the smell." I fight him for it, and thankfully, he releases his grasp.

"Why do you have Johnny Koenig's hoodie? And that's one of those team-issue ones. And it smells divine, so there's no way you bought that online."

He's right. It smells incredible, and despite my efforts to resist, I've been giving it daily sniffs. I had no intention of handing it back to Mike to pass to Johnny. And I figured, worst case, Johnny would have to message me and ask for it if he wanted it back.

I wanted him to message me.

The memory of the last time I saw him appears like a movie in my head. The kiss. His arm wrapped around me. The clean, fresh scent that is so distinctly... Johnny.

Tom catches my eye, looking at me with an expression of complete bemusement.

"Okay, so something happened," I say, moving to my bedroom door and dragging Tom's holdall inside.

I close it, then turn to face him. He's like a child waiting for someone to open the sweet wrapper.

"Tell. Me. Everything," he says, kicking his shoes off and making himself comfortable on my bed.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

I've had the morning from hell.

Just when I think it can't get any worse, Darren spots me when I walk into the music room. He moves towards me, weaving through a cluster of students, and comes to a stop right in front of me.

"I hear you didn't get in, Kelly. I'm sorry," he says, leaning close so I can see my reflection in his saxophone, which he has slung over his torso.

There's a faint trace of a smile on his lips. Twat.

I hesitate for a moment, taking a step back.

"No, but I understand they didn't take any cellists."

I'm not sure if it's one hundred per cent true, but I've been telling myself that, based on the intel I've gathered.

Darren raises an eyebrow. "Are you sure? Well, regardless, it's a shame for you, of course.

But obviously, I'm glad you're still here.

"I give him a weak smile and move to step around him, but he holds his arm out to stop me.

"Do you fancy catching up at some point? We can get a coffee or something."

I shove his arm aside. “I’m busy. Sorry. ”

“Already? We just started back.”

“Yes. I’m very busy.”

“Oh, right.” A smile creeps onto his face and he cocks an eyebrow up. “Busy with your new boyfriend, right?”

I guess news travels fast through a friendship group that’s hardly in contact anymore. Shit, shit, shit.

“There you are, Kelly.” Tom appears from behind me and steers me over to our seats.

I slip past Darren, inwardly apologising to my cello as I give him a gentle whack on the legs with it on my way past.

Tom scowls at Darren. “What the hell did he want?”

“I think his original intention was to gloat, but then he asked me if I fancied catching up.”

Tom lets out a yelp of disgust. “You’re joking, right?”

I shake my head, unclipping my cello case and prying it open.

“And then he asked me about my new boyfriend,” I whisper, right into Tom’s ear, since the room is getting busy.

“Your boyfriend?” Tom says, not getting the hint that I whispered for a reason before the penny drops into the slot.

“Say it louder, Tom. Dale didn’t hear you.” Tom swivels his head towards the drum kit at the very back of the room but relaxes when he sees Dale deep in conversation with someone. “Sorry. Did you tell him you don’t have a boyfriend?” Tom asks.

“No, you interrupted me.”

“Well, what’s the harm in letting him think you’re seeing someone? I mean, I’m sure Johnny wouldn’t mind.” Tom shrugs.

“It’s completely ridiculous.”

Tom smirks and heaves his cello out of its case.

I’m tightening my bow as the course director, Patrick, saunters into the room, slightly late but not giving a damn about it.

“Welcome back, everyone,” he says, dumping his music bag down at his desk. He moves behind the conductor’s podium and surveys the room .

Patrick runs through a start-of-term speech, giving us an outline of what we can expect in the new academic year, while I tune out. I’m thinking about whether I should give in and wash Johnny’s hoodie when Tom nudges me in the arm.

I pull myself back into the room in time to learn of a recital booked for Christmas.

“So, to confirm, Kelly and Darren will play a duet. I’m keen to experiment with some pieces that Darren has written, which bring together the alto sax and the cello.

Kelly, I would also like you to work with Darren on the piece and ensure that it works well.

In addition, I have something prepared, so we'll be looking to present three ensembles. ”

It takes a few seconds to sink in, but when it does, I'm ready to crawl back into bed and never come out. Ever.

You can't make this stuff up.

I avert my eyes to the woodwind section, where Darren sits at the front with a shit-eating grin on his face. He mouths something that I can't quite work out, but I flick my eyes back towards Patrick, pretending to hang on his every word.

Ultimately, this is unavoidable. Not only will it give me an enormous boost in credits, it'll get me out of two writing assignments. But I never expected Patrick to pair me with Darren. I wonder if I can call the music college and beg them for a place.

“I'll provide updates via the online portal when more information becomes available. Anyway, we have a lot to do this year and we need to get going. I assume everyone has printed out their sheet music?”

At least I did that. I grab them out of my music folder and place them onto the music stand that Tom and I are sharing.

We wait for a further brief, and of course, only in the last ten minutes of our rehearsal do we play a single note.

It's not a piece I'm familiar with, and most of the orchestra is given instructions to run things over with their section lead during the week before we're dismissed .

I waste no time packing my stuff up, and tell Tom that I'll meet him back home, out of pure desperation to get the hell out of here.

Frustratingly, I'm so engrossed in my efforts to avoid Darren, I don't realise that the hard chest my face comes into direct contact with as I round the corner near the library, is Johnny, until I'm flat on my ass, looking up at him.

"Kelly, hi." His freshly shaven face highlights the squareness of his jaw, and oh my God, I can't even look at him.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you."

He chuckles, extending his arm to help me up. "I guess I am difficult to miss. Are you in a rush?"

"No, it's—"

"Kelly. Wait up," Darren calls from behind me.

Johnny glances towards him before looking back at me. "Who—"

"You disappeared before I could talk to you," Darren says, coming to a stop at my side. He sets his saxophone case at his feet and fixes his gaze on Johnny, looking him up and down. "Is this your boyfriend?"

I figure now is my time to come clean. I can either admit that this isn't my boyfriend—implying that someone else is, or say it isn't my boyfriend because I don't have one. I open my mouth to speak but Johnny slips right into character, holding his hand out to Darren.

"Johnny Koenig. Nice to meet you."

Darren wearily shakes Johnny's hand and then pulls his arm back as if he's been electrocuted. He shifts his attention to me.

“Can we chat, Kelly?”

“No, sorry. I have plans,” I say. “We can catch up another day.”

And Johnny, my knight in hockey gear, or a training tracksuit, swoops in. “Yeah, sorry, bud. We’ve got a reservation. Are you ready to go, beautiful?” His eyes land on mine as he waits for my reply .

“Yes. Sure, okay.” I pick my cello up and turn towards Darren briefly. “I’ll catch up with you soon, yeah?”

Johnny is quick to swipe my cello from me, holding it carefully as he walks towards the car park. And since Darren is watching, I have no choice but to follow him.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

“How many sticks did you break last season, Cap?” Bettsy says from the passenger seat.

He’s got his phone clutched in his hands, his thumbs hovering in midair as he waits for my answer.

“I don’t know, why?” I say, flicking my gaze sideways.

“I’m starting a pool. But I need something to go off. A starting point.”

My phone pings in my pocket, and Bettsy chuckles to himself. I suspect he’s dropped something in the team chat.

“A pool?”

“Yeah, like a wager. A bet. A dabble.”

“Fuck’s sake, Betts. You’re wasting your time,” I say.

“So how many was it? Six? Seven?”

Shit. I’d be lying if I said I actually knew, but it’s definitely over seven. “Forget it.”

“Fine. I’ll get the guys to guess this year’s number. Forget last season.”

“If you want to keep your ass away from your head, you’ll drop it,” I say, using my sternest voice .

“Okay, okay, I won’t mention it again,” he says. But he twists in his seat and stares at me. “Alright, who blunted your blades because you’re more tetchy than usual.”

I sigh heavily, not wanting to admit that I can’t even look at him properly since I’ve been having very impure thoughts about what I want to do with his sister. But since I have other shit in my head, I decide to tell him about that.

“My dad’s got this new girlfriend. He called me yesterday to tell me he’s planning a visit since she wants to meet me and Vic.” I half expect Bettsy to make a MILF joke, but he doesn’t.

“Well, I take it you’re not interested in meeting her?”

“Not particularly, but if she makes him happy, whatever. It’ll keep him out of my business.” I always know when my dad isn’t seeing anyone, because he becomes fully invested in my hockey career again. Safe to say, I prefer it when he butts the hell out.

“I’m sure she’s a lovely lady. Maybe she’s hot. Have you seen a picture?” And there it is.

“No, and nor am I going to ask for one.”

I park my car in the players’ parking lot and cut the engine. We both climb out, and I head to the trunk, pulling out our gear and handing Bettsy his bag.

It’s the season opener, and the first game of the Challenge Cup.

I’m bursting with anticipation. And since Prez’s twin brother, Liam, is here, I think we have a high chance of pushing all the way.

But I can't get too excited about that now.

My stomach sinks when I spot my sister making her way in through the double doors at the back of the rink.

This is another problem I'm having to deal with.

"Have you two made up yet?" Bettsy says as the door closes behind her.

"Well, she's still pissed at me, if that's what you mean."

"I'm still pissed at you, too, but I'll get over it." Bettsy pauses for a moment. "Did you honestly not know about Matt? Because if you did and you didn't give me the heads-up—"

Everyone is pissed at me for sure. The team for thinking that I had some prior knowledge that Matt Rodgers, an ex-forward from another league team, had signed with us.

Something that I had no idea about until I saw his name plate last week.

And my sister, for thinking I had something to do with her ex-boyfriend, Liam, calling it a day once and for all—and that's on top of her general pissed-off mood at the moment.

"I honestly found out like half an hour before you guys did. And Coach told me he would brief everyone. I'm sorry, bud. I really am."

He blows out a breath and nods at me, but I know he's not fully convinced.

"And Matt has said nothing to you?" I ask.

“You think we’re on speaking terms? Hell no. I still hate that fucker and the team he came from.” I’ll give him that—he’s passionate. “And before you ask, Rochelle is still out of the picture.”

Rochelle also happens to be Matt’s ex. She’s the one thing Bettsy and he have in common, well, two now, if you include the fact that they’re wearing the same team jersey this season.

We swipe our access cards on the double doors and head through to the dressing room.

We’re amongst the first to arrive, and Vicky gives us some crap about being too early for her to catch the ‘arriving in suits’ shot for social media.

But of course, Bettsy loves to appease her, so he heads back out and pretends to do his walk in again.

I refuse because I’ve got shit to do.

And it’s the right decision, because as soon as I’m left alone, Coach pulls me into his office briefly for a chat about the lines, then I’m readying up and trying to keep myself in the right headspace by consulting my notebook.

I remind myself of the reason I’m here. To lead this team into a victory.

And that’s what I do—well, it’s not all me but we come away from the ice later that evening with a W and I’m absolutely buzzing. Even my worry about the state of Liam Preston’s knee turned out to be nothing.

Once we’re done showering, I give the guys an overview on the plans for the evening.

“We’ll start at a bar before going to my place. Nothing heavy guys, because we’re on the road tomorrow.” I have this tradition of throwing a little house gathering when it comes to the season opener, and tonight is no different.

I wait for Bettsy to be ready to leave before we say our goodbyes to the guys, heading out towards the players’ parking lot.

“Have you bumped into Kelly yet?” he says, causing me to choke on the air I just inhaled.

“What?”

“Well, Ffordey mentioned you guys have to use the library more, now. So, I figured you may see her.”

“Oh, yeah. Just the once. I said ‘hi’,” I say.

And to my complete relief, Bettsy says no more about it. Once we’re on the road, he plays on his phone and casually hums along to the music from my car stereo.

But the mention of her name again has my brain ticking over. My mind has been on the game all day, but now it’s over, it’s gravitating back to that kiss and how she left things.

Once we get to the bar, I check in for our reservation and order a round of drinks as the team starts trickling in.

I stick to water, a tactical plan so I don’t feel like shit tomorrow, and once I’m sure everyone is paying me zero attention, I take my phone out and scroll back through the text messages from the last few days, wondering what the hell to do next.

Kelly

Can I ask you a question?

Johnny

Sure.

Kelly

The times we've kissed. How was it for you?

Johnny

I liked it.

Kelly

Right.

Johnny

You should know by now I'm terrible at articulating my feelings. But I really liked it, Kelly.

Kelly

Shit.

Johnny

What?

Kelly

Nothing.

Johnny

Come on, tell me.

Kelly

It's fine.

I'm not oblivious to the fact that 'fine' means the opposite of fine, considering I grew up with Vicky. And seeing as she sent me a string of one-word answers, there's something going on.

What's she not telling me?

I've drawn a few conclusions—she likes me, or she dislikes me. If she likes me, she may be worried about her brother's reaction, or the age gap between us. If she dislikes me, well, she's probably wanting me to leave her the hell alone.

But I end up re-reading the message thread a few more times. And I land on option one—she likes me. But that's my wishful thinking, because I really fucking like her.

But the other things: my age, my affiliation to her brother; they are a problem.

How can I make this right? I can't fix my age, or that she's related to my linemate... perhaps this is a complete waste of time, and I should forget about her.

But I can't. The more I try to push her out of my mind, the more I'm thinking about her lips and how beautiful she is.

Because kissing her was like some weird out-of-body experience. I felt exhilarated. I didn't even know kissing could be like that—it's literally just touching lips with someone else. But... fuck.

I hear Bettsy laugh from a short distance away, where he's chatting with a group of girls, and I watch him for a moment, thinking how things would be if the roles were reversed.

Would he try it on with Vicky—Liam aside of course, and would I be okay with it?

Probably not actually, but that's because Bettsy is a fuck boy.

But Kelly being eighteen—we're both adults here...

I roll it all over in my head for a while before acting on impulse.

I drop a new message to Kelly, keeping it casual but instantly regretting how lame I sound after I've hit send.

Johnny

What are you up to?

I stare at my phone for a while, and when no reply comes through, I get antsy. Is she working tonight? Is she out with her friends? Is she just hanging out at home, watching a movie or whatever? Is she on a date?

I put my phone away, pull it back out again, then shove it away, telling myself I

won't look anymore, and she'll text back when she can. But thirty minutes later, I'm wondering if anyone would really notice if I was here or not.

I figure the best place to check first is the store, as I'd easily be able to see if she's working or not. But when I'm a few minutes away, I wonder if I'm being a complete asshat.

However, something has me pulling into the parking lot and taking a spot that allows me a glance through the huge window that, luckily, affords a clear view of the aisles.

My heart thuds as I spot her at the checkout pouring coins into one of those counting machines.

She's tied her hair back in a loose bun that has bits of hair escaping around her face, and she looks so damn adorable in her uniform.

A few moments later, I decide that it'll be worse if I sit in my car and watch her, so I get out and head towards the entrance, telling myself that I'll wait until she's free before I try to talk to her ... before trying to find out where we go from here.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

I take my usual Sunday morning swim and go home via my sister's place since we're supposed to be going for brunch. Prez has moved in with Jenna, who was sharing a place with my sister, so I'm not surprised that it's him who answers the door.

"Vicky's not here. She said she'd meet you at brunch," he says.

"No problem," I say.

But even I realise that my voice comes out way too chirpy. Prez looks at me as if I've offered to do the guy's laundry for a month.

"What the hell is going on?" he asks.

"Nothing."

"I don't buy it," he says, leading the way through to the kitchen.

"I'm in a good mood. I had a good swim and I'm feeling positive about our win last night. And let's face it, we're in a good spot to beat these guys later."

"I have to agree but..." Ryan looks at me then shrugs, dropping it luckily and I'm glad because I don't want to tell him I'm into someone .

"Hey, I'm glad I caught you, anyway. Remember when Jen had that idea to do the reverse psychology thing?"

"Yeah?" he says.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about it. And I really think we should leave them to it,” I say.

“Well, maybe, but think of what Lee can actually bring to the game if he’s fully focused. And if he’s laden with distractions, it’ll seep into every aspect of things. Obviously, I’m not going to force you to do anything, Johnny, but consider it. He and Vicky—”

“Yeah. I know.”

In the times I’ve hung out with Liam since he’s been back, he’s never mentioned Vicky. Which I’ve seen as a positive, anyway. But then last night he was acting weird. Something’s going on, but my attention is too busy elsewhere to put much thought into it.

I decide not to press it with Ryan, either. I leave it there, because my sister’s face will probably tell me all I need to know.

The coffee place is busy when I get there, and Vicky has already got us a table. I weave through the room and sit down opposite her.

She pounces on me.

“What’s made you so happy?”

“Nothing,” I lie.

When the truth is, I’m still buzzing about Kelly.

I’ve only sat down for a moment before a pen and napkin are thrust under my nose.

“You stayed out of sight last night.” I scan the QR code to look at the menu. “I was wondering what crap you’d be asking us. ”

She shrugs, and as soon as I notice her complete avoidance of any eye contact, I decide to play the game.

“At least you did nothing to annoy Liam,” I say.

“I didn’t come here to talk about Liam,” she says.

“I know Liam. I can tell when he’s pissed.

He wasn’t himself during the opening game, nor at the bar last week, and he’s been snappy ever since he got here.

He’s been fighting for Christ’s sake. We’re talking about Liam.

What’s going on with you two? Please enlighten me, Victoria.

” I can’t quite believe I threw out her full name, but it flows so well.

“What’s it got to do with you?” she asks.

I can feel my cheeks turning pink, and I suck in a breath through my teeth. “It’s frustrating when my best face-off guy is constantly in the penalty box and not taking any face-offs.”

“Fine. We briefly spoke last week. I told him I wanted him to keep away, and he obviously didn’t take it very well.”

“Oh. Well, I’m not surprised. I understand you two are no longer a thing, and I’ve

told you before, it's probably for the best, but you need to remain professional, Vic.

What the fuck are you playing at?" It comes out a little harsher than it should have, but once it's out, I decide to ride with it.

"Nothing. I tried to keep away last night. I—"

I cut in. "When is this going to stop? When will you stop throwing your toys out of your crib and get your fucking act together?" She busies herself with the menu on her phone and I know I've hit a spot. "Someday, Vic, he'll move on for good and you'll have to cope."

"He can do what he wants. He's a single guy."

But the way her face changes tells me that's the complete opposite of what she wants him to do.

"Could you bear the thought of him properly moving on?" But her silence says it all. "Thought so," I mutter.

"None of this is easy, Johnny," she says.

But that's when I question everything. Because there's no way in hell that anyone can go from being madly in love with someone to the point of getting married to complete disconnection.

"I don't get it. You were going to marry the guy and then suddenly, poof. Nothing. Not to mention that stunt you pulled before Lois passed away."

She fumbles in her purse and pulls out a small tin of lip balm. "If you must know, I didn't want to end up like Mom and Dad. Or Mr and Mrs Preston."

My heart lurches at those names.

Deep down, I knew Mom and Dad would never work out with their different life paths and whatever, but Mr and Mrs Preston were end game and it devastated everyone, and it probably got Vicky more than I appreciated, given her admission.

“Fuck,” I say, “I didn’t realise that hit you so hard, Sis.”

“You can’t tell Liam. Promise me?” She points her finger at me.

“Why not?” I ask.

“He’ll want to be the hero and try to fix it, but he can’t. It is what it is. He can’t fix it.”

The server sets a mug of coffee in front of Vicky before returning with my brunch.

“Aren’t you eating?” I ask.

“Not hungry.”

“Well, God knows I can’t force you to eat,” I say. Because she’s the second most stubborn person I’ve met, after Liam.

Vicky looks like she’s deep in thought, so I leave her to it while I eat. Then she snaps back to reality, asking me what I’d do if I didn’t play hockey.

I pause and decide to try to lighten the mood.

“Huh. Random, but I’d probably be a vet,” I chuckle to myself before giving her my actual answer. “Nah, probably a chef.” She gives me a weak smile, and I figure now

is the time to bring up Dad. I ask her if he's called and told her about visiting with his new girlfriend .

"When is he coming?" she asks.

"Not sure yet," I say.

"Excuse me, can I—" a voice to the left of us says.

"Sure, do you have a pen?" I turn on autopilot, but it takes me a second to realise that it's not my autograph she wants.

"What? Sorry, I was after the salt, may I?" She reaches over and grabs the shaker from the centre of the table.

"Are you done?" I ask Vicky, eager to get the hell out of here. And we shuffle out of the coffee place onto the busy street. "Vic, could you not mention that? I mean, you know what the guys are like."

"Fine, you keep quiet to Liam, and I'll keep quiet to everyone about that," she says.

I tell her I'm heading into the bookstore before going home, and she replies that she'll see me later, before strutting out of view.

I'm about to walk away myself, when the door to the coffee place flings open and someone calls my name.

I lock eyes with the girl who asked me for the salt, as a familiar face steps out from behind her. What are the damn chances?

"I thought it was you, Johnny." Charlotte beams. "I spotted you once Lyla grabbed

the salt but didn't want to interrupt, in case that was a date or whatever. I didn't want to assume that you and Kelly are still together. I mean, she has a poor track record for relationships."

"That was my sister," I say flatly. Slightly pissed off that Kelly's so-called friend would have such a negative outlook on her.

"Oh, my gosh. That makes sense. I mean, I was worried about it after the stuff with Darren and her trust issues, but—oh, sorry, I'm rambling."

Kelly told me that she planned to nip this whole thing in the bud at the next opportunity, but since Charlotte's shown her vote of no-confidence in Kelly's dating ability, I have no choice but to keep the torch burning .

"Yeah, we're doing good."

"I'm so happy for you guys, honestly." Her reaction sounds fake as fuck, but I let it go.

"Listen, I'm in the city for a few nights.

Long story, I won't bore you. Do you fancy a double date?

Or shall I text her and check? I know what you guys are like with social calendars.

" She nudges me with her elbow, a smirk slipping across her face.

I must have an out-of-body experience because I see myself nodding in agreement.

"Yes, we'd love to."

"What's your schedule like?" Charlotte asks, pulling her phone out.

I surprise myself by knowing that Kelly always works on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so I tell her we'll be free tomorrow night.

Now all I need to do is tell Kelly.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

This is the most awkward date I've ever been on. And it's got nothing to do with Johnny.

We're squeezed into a booth, opposite Charlotte and her date, Lyla, watching them quarrel about everything and anything.

At first, I think it's playful banter, but it heats pretty quickly.

All Johnny and I can do is talk between us whilst we pretend that there isn't a full-blown catfight happening less than a metre away.

"Shall we leave, or...?" Johnny whispers right in my ear since he's taking up about eighty per cent of the space.

"Oh, shut up, will you? I can't believe you're bringing this up now." Charlotte's voice reaches a tone of frustration and Lyla rolls her eyes before pulling out her phone.

"I knew you'd act like this," Lyla says, and she shifts out of the booth, storming off towards the bathrooms.

"Is everything okay, Char?" I ask.

"Obviously not, Kelly," she snaps. But she changes her tone quickly to apologise. "I'm sorry. It's been stressful. Lyla's grandmother isn't well—which is why we're in the city. She lives in a care home right on the outskirts."

“Oh, that’s not good,” I say.

“Can we do anything to help?” Johnny asks.

“No, no. It’s fine. Thanks. Anyway—you two. You literally make my heart leap with excitement. I can see the honeymoon phase is still going strong.”

“It sure is,” Johnny says, wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

I stumble over my words. “Well, we’re doing okay.”

He leans down and kisses my cheek.

All for show, of course.

Charlotte’s phone buzzes on the table, and she’s quick to snap her attention to the screen, reading for a second before letting out a sigh of contempt.

“I’m going to check on Lyla,” she says, slipping out of the booth.

I expect Johnny’s arm to slip away, since we’re no longer being watched, but he keeps it firmly set while he checks the menu.

“What are you thinking of getting?” he asks, flicking through the pages of the menu.
“The chicken looks good.”

I skim down the list, surveying the prices. “I, uh, the salad.”

“Get what you want, and I’ll square it up,” he says.

“It’s fine. I’m trying to lose a few pounds anyway,” I say.

“The heck you are. You’re perfect. Now do as you’re told and get what you want, Kelly.”

I stare at him, aghast, and I watch his face break into a smile that has my whole body buzzing.

“Do you love telling people what to do, Johnny?”

It just comes out. And a warm, flushed feeling washes over me.

Johnny’s Adam’s apple quivers as he swallows. Hard. Then he clears his throat and shifts in his seat, attention back on the menu .

“I’m only asking if you really want the salad.” He angles himself towards me and sets his eyes right on mine. “Look at me now and tell me you really want the salad. And only the salad.”

Well, crap. I can’t even keep a straight face. I laugh softly and pull the menu towards me to check it again. He leans right into me, his mouth by my ear as he lists other things he likes from the menu. Then, in a slight movement, his lips brush my neck.

“You smell really good, by the way,” he says and I shiver, inadvertently squeezing his thigh in the process. “And I’m sure you’d love for me to—”

Charlotte’s return to the table pulls us out of our whispering, and I’m giggling uncontrollably, probably set off by the giddiness I’m feeling.

She doesn’t scoot back into the booth. Instead, she leans across and grabs her coat.

“I’m sorry to do this, but I’m taking off. I’ve literally had enough. Can you text me and let me know what I owe you for the drinks? Thanks, Kel.”

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“I’ll text you,” she says, retreating towards the exit.

She stops to let a server pass as Lyla comes skidding out from the direction of the bathrooms a few seconds later.

“Wow,” Johnny says, looking at me with a raised eyebrow. “Shall we—”

“Sure,” I say, shuffling in the space I have to reach for my coat, but Johnny knits his brows together.

“Oh, did you want to leave?”

“I thought—”

“I was just going to ask if we should order,” he says, tapping the menu that’s open in front of me. “I’m starving. Unless you want to go home?”

“I don’t.”

“Good,” he says.

I’m not sure what he’s going to do next. He doesn’t have to pretend anymore, but he’s still pressed right up against me. I can see his jaw tighten and then he leans closer, our eyes locking. And for a moment, I think he’s going to kiss me.

Someone clears their throat to the side of us, and we both dart our heads towards the noise.

“Are you guys ready to order—or are you waiting for the rest of your party?” the

server asks.

“Just us and—are you ready, beautiful?” Johnny’s hand runs gently along my arm and my skin prickles with goosebumps. I can’t even remember my own name right now, let alone my order. “Kelly?”

“Yes. Right.”

The server pulls out a little notepad from a front pocket but doesn’t take her eyes off Johnny. She stares at him for a beat before tilting her head to the side, recognition dawning on her face.

“Oh, wait—are you Johnny Koenig?” she asks, widening her eyes slightly, and to my complete surprise, Johnny shakes his head.

“Nah, but I get that all the time.”

I have to bite my lip to hold in a laugh, managing right up to the point where the server walks away after taking our order.

Once it’s just us again, I giggle. Johnny laughs too, a deep, rumble chuckle that has me wondering how often he lets his guard down, allowing the less serious side of him to come out to play.

He takes a sip of water then clears his throat.

“Want to hear something funny but also very embarrassing?” he asks, lips tightening into a straight line. “Aw, man. I can’t even think about it, really.”

“Okay, now I need to know,” I say, grinning at him.

He runs his hands through his hair, then grins at me.

“When I bumped into Charlotte the other day, I was having brunch with my sister. When we first got there, I had a few fans ask me for autographs and whatever. And I have this thing where I feel obliged to say yes, even if I’m eating or whatever.

They pay our wages when you think about it, so it’s the least I can do. ”

“Right...”

“Anyway, someone who turned out to be Lyla wanted to borrow the salt from our table, but I thought she was asking for my autograph, and...” Johnny’s shoulders start shaking as he laughs. “I was so embarrassed.”

“Oh my God,” I say, clamping my hand over my mouth.

“Yeah—honestly, I thought she was going to bring it up. I’ve been worrying about it since we got here, but they were obviously too busy doing whatever they were doing. My sister’s face was a picture. She loved seeing me make a complete idiot of myself.”

Johnny talks about his sister with a glimmer of something in his eyes. And from what he told me about his upbringing during the three months we spent chatting, they were there for each other. It’s endearing.

“I’d love to meet her someday,” I say.

“Why? So, you can ask her about more embarrassing moments? I’m sure she’s captured most of them on camera, to be honest.”

There’s that deep chuckle again.

“Can I get you any more drinks?” The server is back with a beaming smile, and she looks like she’s checking Johnny out again.

“Do you want another drink, babe?” he asks, the same hand dancing gently over my skin.

Babe. That’s a new one.

“I’m fine, thanks,” I say.

She ambles away, keeping her eyes locked on Johnny.

“That was awkward, right?” I say once she’s out of earshot.

Johnny’s brow furrows as he scoffs in disbelief. “Just a little.”

“She was undressing you with her eyes, Johnny.”

“Nah,” he scoffs, suddenly very interested in the dessert menu .

And I realise there are people looking at us. Staring even. Perhaps they recognise Johnny, or they’re possibly wondering why we’re sitting here together. Because let’s face it—right now, I’m punching.

“Why were you on that app, Johnny?”

“I could say the same thing about you,” he says sharply before taking in a breath.

“Well, obvious reasons—but look at you. You’re really good-looking.”

“I don’t think that about myself, Kelly. In fact, I see a therapist and that’s partly why.

My self-esteem was so low at one point.”

He shifts away from me, and I realise that I’ve said the wrong thing.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to sound like that,” I say, feeling like my whole body is crushing itself with the pressure of my poor assumption.

His arm, which was casually draped over the back of my seat, drops to his side.

“Women want the dark and handsome types, Kelly. Not the blue-eyed, blond guys. I mean, it’s the hand I’ve been dealt, and it sucks.”

My jaw drops, because I’m in complete disbelief that Johnny would see himself any different from what I see—and what Tom sees. I could ramble on about how handsome I think he is, and tell him he’s wrong about himself, but it seems like he’s already decided. I try another angle.

“Do you not trust my judgement, Johnny? Because I can’t even look at you sometimes,” I say with a smirk. “You’re really fucking handsome.”

“Oh.”

I can’t even believe I said it out loud. My whole face burns with embarrassment.

Of course, this is the time when the server brings our food, setting the plates down on the table. Johnny insisted on ordering starters and mains to arrive together, so the table fills quickly.

Johnny waits until the server’s left before speaking again.

“How’re your studies going?”

Okay, I'm definitely embarrassed now. And my heart sinks because he's changed the subject so quickly. The sternness of his voice, indicating that 'Johnny the Captain' is back.

But I'm not settling this time. Despite the anxiety building in my chest, there's no way I'm sitting here, eating a meal with this version of him.

"Please don't do this," I say, looking into his eyes. "Please don't switch the conversation or shy away or whatever, whenever things get difficult."

"You're right, I'm sorry. I just don't know how to deal with compliments."

"Well, nor do I, but you'll have to deal with it. Because you're special, Johnny. And I think you should remember that."

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

“Has that happened before?” I ask Johnny.

He pulls out into the flow of traffic and heads for the link road towards my place. The traffic is minimal, so we glide through the streets with ease.

“I struggle with my emotions sometimes. I’m sorry,” he says.

“You don’t need to be sorry for feeling something, Johnny.”

He keeps his eyes on the road, his jaw clenched. Whatever that was back there, has pushed away the Johnny I was having the most incredible time with, and brought out a stranger. Because that wasn’t even Captain Johnny.

“I haven’t seen Sarah since we broke up. I thought she moved back to Canada. It caught me off guard, that’s all.”

“Was it a nasty breakup?” I ask, wondering if I’m being too nosey—I mean, he’s mentioned her before, but I don’t know any details.

“It wasn’t great,” he says, still looking at the road as he drives.

Since it seems like our conversation is over, I switch my attention to the passing scenery illuminated by the streetlights. I’m not sure how much time passes before Johnny talks again .

“I was playing a road game, and we got all the way there to find that they’d cancelled it because the ice was patchy and unsafe.

It was a last-minute thing, but we got back on the coach and headed home.

I called her, but she didn't pick up, then I got back to our place, and she was riding the guy who lived across the hall.

Fully going at it right there in my goddamn bed.

Turned out, it'd been going on for months and I was too dumb to notice it.

“Wanna hear the worst part? I didn't even care.

I was glad to have a valid reason to free myself from her—from her ways.

And if he wanted her? Then happy fucking days.

Ultimately, I ended up moving out that night.

I went to stay with your brother, actually, before I moved to where I am now.

” His hands clench the steering wheel as he talks.

“Did you love her?” For God's sake, Kelly—why did you ask that?

He scoffs. “If you ask her, she'd tell you I'm incapable of love.

But I guess I did at one point, at the very beginning, when she made me feel special.

When I caught her cheating? No. It was probably the complete opposite.

She wasn't a very nice person, Kelly. But I fell for the show she put on.

She followed me around for months before we started dating.

Came to all my games, made out she was really into me, and I fell for it.

But she didn't want me. She wanted money and the status of being a 'WAG' or whatever—except, she didn't want me to play.

She didn't want me to have friends. But you probably know yourself, when you're with a guy on a team like ours, you're not just with the guy.

It's like one big family. The guys are back and forth, and that's how it is. ”

“I'm so sorry that happened to you. She must have really broken your trust. No one deserves that,” I say.

“Well, I'm a fucking failure, aren't I? So, what does it matter?”

His words hit me hard, knocking the air out of my lungs. “What do you mean by that?”

“Forget it,” he says, and he reaches for the dial of the stereo and turns the music up. Volume twenty-five hits different when there's a bad mood in the air.

I twist the dial down again. “You don't get to do that, Johnny,” I say. “You can't lay that one on the table, then refuse to talk about it.”

“I need some time,” he says, setting the volume back to twenty-five.

Volume down.

“Why are you shutting me out?”

I realise I have no right to ask him that. Because, after all, who am I to Johnny?

And as if the evening couldn't get any worse, the console of his car chirps with a new text message.

Sarah

Can we talk?

He glances down at the screen, then straight back at the road, still choosing to say nothing.

As much as things simmer under the surface, I realise he's retreated twenty steps from where we were an hour ago—this is an alternate version of Johnny that I don't know.

And by the time we pull up outside my place, I'm on the brink of tears, frustrated and upset that I started to think that Johnny was becoming comfortable with me, and that he was enjoying my company. And I was really starting to like him.

I've got my hand ready on the door handle, so as soon as he stops the car, I'm climbing out.

"You're right, Kelly. I am emotionally unavailable. I'm sorry I ever put you in a position where you thought this may become something. I'm sorry that I led you on."

I hold back the tears. "It was all a show anyway, right? "

I don't wait for him to reply. I climb out of the car, slamming the door shut behind me just in time for the tears to come.

I can't get to my front door quick enough, just like a replay of that night I saw Johnny's poster at the rink. I get inside and press my back up against the door as I sob.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

“Shall we set up for deadlifts?” I ask Liam, reaching for a barbell.

I’m in the gym with a few of the guys and we’re working our way through the free weights, but I leave Liam to set up the weights when my phone pings.

Unknown

Please, can we talk? It’s Sarah.

I was hoping it was Kelly, but seeing Sarah’s name after I’ve blocked her number is like a kick to the stomach. Why won’t she leave me alone?

Liam is staring at me, then he pulls his eyes away as he crouches down to take the dumbbell clamp off the end of the bar, and I know I need to focus on our workout.

“Figured out what you’re doing after hockey yet?” I say, tossing my phone down next to my gym bag .

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?” he says, fixing the clamp and stepping up to the barbell.

“Because you should have a plan. Simon Pearce had a side hustle for years before he retired.”

“I don’t know who that is, but he can kiss my ass,” he says.

“He was the guy Rodgers replaced. A benchwarmer, but he had his shit together. He

had a plan.”

Liam looks at me with a pensive expression. “Actually, I do have a plan—Ryan and I are going to flip houses.”

All I can do is stare at him because in all my years of knowing Liam, he’s never once shown that he’d be keen to flip houses, that’s for sure. I’m about to open my mouth to reply when the light from my phone screen blinks on and ignites curiosity.

Maybe that’s Kelly.

Then several pings follow.

I try to ignore it, stepping up to the bar and readying myself for my set as my phone buzzes again.

“Want me to get that for you?” Liam asks.

“No. No—just leave it,” I snap.

Because if he sees Sarah’s, or Kelly’s, name for that matter, he’ll start asking questions.

He seems to back off, but my phone rings and panic sets in. What the fuck is going on?

“Shut that fucking thing up,” Danny shouts from where he’s spotting Ryan. And it feels like all eyes are on me, willing me to shut my phone up before someone throws it through the damn window.

“You okay, bud?” Liam asks as I reach for my phone. I take a moment to read the

screen before I notice it was Wes Smith, Matt Rodgers' old team captain, who called me. Not Sarah. Not Kelly.

“Um, yeah. Look, I've got to head off,” I say, grabbing my things. I've known Wes for a few years and he's not a social-call kind of guy.

A voicemail arrives as I reach the stairs .

“Hey Johnny, it's Wes. I wanted to call you and give you a heads-up.

One of the guys here, you don't need his name, said that Rodgers called him a few days ago offering to sell him something.

Nothing came of it here, but I wanted you to know, as he may pull the same bullshit with your men.

Look after your guys, bud. Catch you in a few weeks. ”

Well, shit. That's something I wasn't expecting.

I slip my phone away and consider my next move.

I feel like I know the guys well enough to know that they wouldn't touch anything like that, but then again, I've been proven wrong in the past. And since we underwent mandatory drug testing last week, it's probably going to be another couple of weeks before we have another, which may be a window of opportunity for someone.

I don't mention Wes' voicemail to Ffordey when he meets me in the library a few hours later.

Since we've both got proposals approved, we're now cycling through a shit ton of

textbooks while we gather enough reading material to write literature reviews.

“How many words do we need to write?” he asks, highlighting a load of text on his screen two hours into our studying.

“Dr Wells told me to aim for three thousand words to allow for editing,” I say.

“Well, fuck. I’ve got, like, three hundred. Words are deceptive.” Ffordey frowns.

“Wanna grab something to eat? We can come back here after if we go to the coffee shop.”

“I’ll eat. But I’m done for the day, that’s for sure. ”

We pack up our stuff and head over to the coffee shop to find that it’s closed, so we walk towards the parking lot to get my car so we can head somewhere else.

As we round the corner, Bettsy’s car comes into view, and my heart stops when I spot Kelly climbing out of the passenger’s seat.

I think she hasn’t spotted us, but Bettsy sticks his head out and yells, causing everyone in a five-mile radius to turn and stare.

“Hey, swots. How’s it going? Wanna grab something to eat?” he says, flashing us a full set of pearly whites.

Kelly meets my eyes for the briefest of moments, then reaches for her cello as the campus warden moves in from behind us.

“You can’t park there, mate,” he says, gesturing to Bettsy to move.

“I’ll park up and come find you,” Bettsy shouts, pulling away.

“Oh hey, Parker,” Kelly says.

She looks at me with so much hurt in her eyes, I feel damn right ashamed of myself. There’s so much I want to say, but Ffordey’s standing right next to me.

“How’s little Bettsy?” he says.

“Stressed. I’m having to perform a duet with my ex,” she says. “And speaking of him—”

Darren’s saxophone case bangs me in the shins on his way past, and I stumble into Ffordey.

“Oh, I didn’t realise you were bringing your boyfriend. Nice to see you again, Johnny.”

He’s a dick. Honestly, this guy is something else. And after the second it takes for me to process what he said, I look at Ffordey, who’s staring at me as if he’s trying to calculate how many rolls of tape he’d need in a season.

He opens his mouth to speak, but I talk over him.

“We’re going, aren’t we Ffordey?” I say, completely mortified.

“We’re waiting on—”

“We’ll leave you to it,” Kelly says, more to Ffordey than to me, nudging Darren towards the entrance of the music building .

Once they disappear, Ffordey rounds on me, and I pray for the ground to open up.

“What the hell was that?” he asks.

“Well...” He stares at me, his stony-grey eyes penetrating mine as if I’ve got less than a second to talk. “Remember when we went to visit Bettsy, and I picked Kelly up—”

“That was the guy?”

“Not exactly.” Well, shit. That would have been a decent lie to tell. “That’s her actual ex, who was also giving her shit, so I filled in again. Honestly—it’s nothing. But I don’t want anyone thinking it’s more than it is.”

I swallow hard, careful to maintain eye contact with him because there’s no way I can tell Ffordey the truth.

“She doesn’t think it’s more than that, right? You aren’t leading her on or anything, Cap? I mean, how old is she again?”

I have to fight back the urge to tell him that despite her age, some of the most mature conversations I’ve had in a long time have been with her. That’ll be me showing my hand. Admitting that I’m actually into her, even if she’s not speaking to me right now.

“She’s nineteen. But no. It’s nothing like that. Just do me a favour, please? Don’t tell Bettsy.”

The last thing I need is Bettsy putting two and two together and figuring out it was me Kelly’s upset with. Besides, I know he’s not as dumb as he makes out sometimes.

“I—” Ffordey’s eyes widen as he looks straight past me.

“Don’t tell Bettsy what?” Bettsy’s voice cuts through the air. I spin around and there he is. “What can’t you tell me?” He asks again, shifting his eyes between me and Ffordey.

I feel sick. The heat rises through my body as my blood rushes. I have to give him something. What the hell can I say? I ramble for a moment about him needing to keep his mouth shut, then something pops into my head. Vicky’s going to kill me, but it’s that, or Bettsy breaks my legs .

“I found out that the real reason Liam and Vicky split up was because Vicky couldn’t deal with the prospect of divorce. She didn’t want to end up like our parents. And—”

“Well, I can’t say I blame her. But I don’t really give a shit about that, mate.”

I flash a glance at Ffordey, who shrugs.

“Are we going to eat then or what?” Bettsy says.

As we head towards my car, I realise I’ve made a huge mistake.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

I open my door to find Ryan staring at me, grocery bags in hand.

“Prez? What’s going on?” I ask.

“Do you mind if I use your kitchen?” he asks, pushing past me. “Vicky’s still sick and—”

“I’ve got plans,” I say, and he stops in his tracks, looking down at his watch before catching my eye.

“Plans? What plans?”

The worst thing about being in a team is everyone knowing your plans. Because typically, we’re either in practice together, or at the gym. And since I have neither planned...

“I’m off to the store,” I say, pulling it out of my ass.

“No need, I’ve got loads of stuff here,” he says, holding a bag up.

“I need shampoo.” It’s the first thing that pops into my head.

What I’m actually doing is meeting with Justine, my therapist, but I don’t need Ryan knowing about her.

“Right—well, can I use your kitchen? I’ll clear up after myself. ”

I guess there's no harm in him cooking here, so I agree, reaching for my keys and my phone to shove them into the pocket of my jacket.

Ryan moves into the kitchen and starts rummaging around in my drawers, and I figure I've got a few minutes to spare since I've got him alone, so I walk back to the living area and stop at the threshold of the kitchen.

"Hey, quick question. Have you heard the guys discussing supplements?" I ask.

"Supplements? Like legal ones, right? Or are we talking about something else?" He pauses on his way to the fridge.

I tell him about the voicemail Wes left me regarding Matt.

"Fuck. That guy is something else. But I haven't heard anything. Though things like that aren't discussed in the dressing room, out in the open."

"Well, no. But keep an ear out, will you? Thanks, bud."

I pat him on the shoulder before heading out, barrelling down the stairs two at a time.

Justine's smile calms me. I don't know how she does it, but she has some sort of magic way about presenting herself that makes me feel relaxed and at ease. But I guess that's part of her job.

Her office is above a bakery in a former terraced house. It's a pretty bizarre set up, but I've got used to it, even the narrow staircase that creaks with every single step I take.

"How have you been, Johnny?" she says, gesturing for me to take a seat opposite her.

The chairs are squishy and comfortable, and it feels like I'm sitting in an old lady's front room. She leans back in her chair. Her body language is unguarded, as if she's talking to an old friend. I wonder how long it took her to get into that habit .

"It's been a while since we spoke last," she says.

Where do I even start?

"Fine, I guess. I've had a lot going on. My dad is coming to visit. I saw Sarah, and I've completely pushed my sister's feelings away. And there's the stuff with Kelly—"

Justine shifts in her seat to sit up straight. I told her all about Kelly last time. And how things went from chatting via an app to being ghosted, to finding out she's one of my teammates' sisters. An emotional rollercoaster, to say the least.

"What's troubling you right now?"

The thing at the forefront of my mind is my date with Kelly. And how I reacted after seeing Sarah.

As I recount the evening to Justine, she nods encouragingly as I talk. Standard, really. Part of me wishes she'd interrupt and tell me what I was supposed to do instead, but apparently, this is all about reflective listening and finding my own way. Bullshit.

"I don't remember the last time I had a date, not one like that, anyway. It was easy, and it was fun and—it wasn't even supposed to be a real date," I say. I don't dig into the details, but I tell Justine about how I bumped into her friend and agreed we'd both go out. "And Sarah was there."

"How was it seeing Sarah?" Justine asks.

“It knocked me a little. In hindsight, I recognise that I was overwhelmed. I did try my steps to calm down and then Kelly hugged me, and it was... odd.”

“Odd, how?”

I talk Justine through the events, and she listens, nodding at intervals.

“It felt really calming. Like she was soothing me. It sounds completely stupid, right?”

“Not at all, Johnny,” Justine assures.

It’s only when she hands me the tissue box that I realise I’m crying. A whole well of emotion, buried so deep I’ve forgotten what it feels like to let go.

“But ever since, I’ve been replaying the interaction and how seeing Sarah reminded me of what a fucking failure I am.”

“What makes you believe you’re a failure, Johnny?”

“My sister fucking hates me right now—she seems to think that our parents didn’t want her.

I did my best when we were growing up. I tried to make things as good as possible for her.

Because we were pretty much left to our own devices.

I tried. And hockey. Flitting between pro-teams in North America because there was always someone better to come along and take my roster spot.

And my sex issues—I mean, what the hell is that about? ”

“Let’s consider this, Johnny. When do you feel the least like a failure?”

“I guess when I’m playing, and we win, and the guys are fucking beaming and they’re all buzzing with energy.”

“And do you think your captaincy has anything to do with that success?” she asks.

“I don’t know.” I shrug.

Justine settles her hands on her lap. “Who do they tend to look up to? Who do they unload their concerns regarding hockey onto?”

“Me, I guess.”

“I think so. From what you’ve told me before.

It sounds like they come to you because they trust you, and they see you as a leader and someone who can carry them forward.

Which is why the victories are a little sweeter, most likely.

How do you think you could use this information to focus on other aspects of your life that you find troublesome? ”

I think for a moment; consider a long line of things that I find frustrating, and what is lacking.

And it’s like a lightbulb pings on in my head—I need to be in control of the situation.

Sarah belittled me and made me feel fucking tiny and redundant.

I wonder if this is why I found it so hard to let go when it came to sex.

I always had my guard up. I wasn't willing for her to see me at my most vulnerable because she could do even more damage then.

I replay my view to Justine, who nods thoughtfully.

Then, I remind her of a previous conversation we had. Early on in our sessions. Where I concluded I spent my childhood trying to parent Vicky. And even now, all these years later, I struggle to relinquish control, because it's something I'm so desperate to hold on to.

"See, I think this is something you should consider," she says. "How can you be in control of your orgasm, Johnny?"

Christ, this is embarrassing as hell.

"By doing it myself," I say.

Justine doesn't say anything back. She lets a smile creep over her face.

"So, you're saying I need to be in control to finish?"

"You tell me, Johnny. Do you need to be in control? Or let someone take control, with your full permission. Because when we've discussed Sarah in the past, she took control, but it didn't sound like that was your intention."

"It wasn't. But that doesn't explain my partners before."

"It does, Johnny. Consider it."

She's right. I mean, I wasn't raped, but the times I had sex before were hardly on my terms. It'd be a girl who only wanted sex because of a status thing; an athlete with lots of choice but giving them an ego boost to be picked—the lucky girl for the evening.

They wanted to feel special, except so did I. And I never did.

I wish I knew the answer, because Kelly deserves this. Not a half-assed effort, or, like she's been saying, an alternate version of myself. I need to give her me.

But the sting of potential rejection runs deep.

“Tell me about Kelly.” Justine smiles, and from the premise of talking about her, I can't help but copy her. “She makes you smile like that a lot?”

“Like what?” I ask, shifting my eyes to Justine .

“Like you did then.”

Well, shit.

“She's beautiful. And she's really smart and funny. She's someone completely different from me, but she's nineteen and my linemate's sister, which is... fuck.”

“Do you think he'd disapprove?”

“I know he would. He'd have my balls,” I say.

“What makes you think that? Do you know that for sure? Have you tried to date his sister before?” A twinkle in Justine's eye tells me she's probably trying to hold back a grin.

“No, but...”

“Remember, Johnny. The majority of scenarios we make up in our head are just that—made up in our head.”

“He mentioned something the other day, that’s all.”

I roll my eyes, but as always, Justine doesn’t react. This reflective listening stuff really pisses me off sometimes.

I’m exhausted by the time I get out of my session, and I sit in my car for an hour, reflecting on the conversation and what I can do next.

Because Justine is right. There’s something about Kelly that has me drawn to her.

Is it because she’s forbidden fruit? Or is it because she makes me feel genuinely wanted?

Like, she was into me before she knew who I was. Hell knows, but I’m invested.

I pull my phone out to check my notifications and I end up going back to my message thread with Kelly.

Kelly

I realise Ffordey was there when Darren said what he said.

I’m so sorry. Hopefully, you told him the full story, and he doesn’t get the wrong idea.

I’ll tell Darren we’ve broken up the next opportunity I get.

Johnny

It's fine. He won't say anything to Bettsy, anyway.

Kelly

Okay.

Johnny

Can I talk to you? Please?

Kelly

I've got a lot of stuff going on with our composition and schoolwork, so I'll text you when I'm free. Thanks for respecting the fact that I need space.

But after my conversation with Justine, and my time reflecting, I know I can't wait around for her to be ready without her knowing how I feel.

I need to take control of the situation for once.

Even if it makes me appear desperate. But I have no idea what to do.

Because I'm fucking terrible with words, and I'll say the wrong thing.

I decide to give myself a few days to think this through. To come up with a plan. And if I can't figure anything out, I'll call Scottsy and ask him how he bagged Lauren.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

My dad calls as I'm finishing up with the barber and I answer after the first ring, shocked to feel excited to speak to him since it's been a while.

"Johnathan. How are things?"

"Not bad, thanks. You?"

He ignores my question and presses on with the real reason for his call. Safe to say I'm no longer enthused to be speaking with him.

"Dinner plans. I'll give Liam Preston a call, see if he can join us."

I furrow my brow. "You realise Vicky and him broke up, right?"

He avoids that, too. "Jayne is really looking forward to meeting you all. Her son plays junior hockey, you know. He's got lots of potential. Same barn you used to go to. I think this kid has the ability to go big, Johnathan. Like the twins did."

The sinking feeling that sits in my stomach tightens.

Like the twins did .

"Well, if I can offer him any pointers, I'm more than happy to—"

He cuts me off. "Maybe Ryan can give him some advice."

"Right."

“And I’m proud of him. I mean, he works hard, and he listens. Honestly, I can’t wait for you to meet him.” Like a knife in the chest, Dad’s words hurt probably as much now as they did when I was a kid. And now he’s proud of someone else’s child, but not his own. Fucking brilliant.

“I need to get going. I’ve got something—”

“Before you go, son. Can you arrange tickets for the game on Saturday? Thanks.”

The reminder that I’m a disappointment, a failure, seeps into me, and I fight an inner battle with myself as soon as he hangs up.

All I ever wanted was for my dad to be proud of me.

A heat rises through my muscles, sitting heavy on my chest. I get back to my car, slide into the driver’s seat, and count to ten. Attempting to feel every part of my body, concentrating on each of my limbs—trying to ground myself.

But today, it’s not helping.

I turn my phone off in case he tries to call back. Then I get out of my car and kick the front driver’s side tyre hard, hoping that’ll help. It doesn’t. It angers me more. So, the only thing left to do is head to the rink, where I can cocoon myself.

I head back to my building to grab my gear, finding Bettsy outside the open door of Danny and Ryan’s apartment. His head swivels towards the stairwell when I walk through.

“Why don’t you ever answer your phone?” he says.

“I was busy,” I snap.

“You okay, Cap?” Danny asks, stepping out of his apartment.

“Yep. I’m off to the rink. If anyone wants to join me, you’re not welcome. ”

“Well, that’s rude. Besides, it’s out of action today. They’re replacing some of the glass and have a load of workmen there,” Bettsy says.

“Who told you that?” I ask, unlocking my door.

“If you bothered to check your messages...” He says goodbye to Danny and follows me towards my door. “Question, what are you doing tonight?”

“Not going speed dating, if that’s where this is going.”

“But Ffordey can’t make it. Danny told me he’s got plans and I can’t go on my own, Johnny. Come on, man.”

“Not happening.”

“Please, Johnny?”

Three hours later, Bettsy and I are standing against the back wall of a social club, sizing up the room. Bettsy’s got his new teeth, and he’s ironed his shirt; while I’ve lost my will to live.

“Hey, isn’t that the guy who plays field hockey or something?” Bettsy says, pointing towards a gap in the crowd. “Barry, wasn’t it?”

“Vicky’s date from last Christmas? It looks like, yeah,” I say.

“Well, if he’s the best of the bunch, we shouldn’t have any problems finding

someone.” Bettsy’s grinning when he looks at me, but his expression drops to a frown. “Right, what the fuck is going on with you? I know you’re usually in a mood about something, but this is ridiculous.”

“I—”

“Alright, or what?” Bettsy says when Vicky and Kirsty, the girl from HR, come to a stop next to us.

“Fancy seeing you here, dear brother,” Vicky says .

I honestly don’t know how I agreed to this. The embarrassment I felt prior to seeing Vicky was bad enough, and now I’m completely mortified.

“Vicky.”

I don’t look directly at her, afraid that she’ll see right into my bad mood and ask me fifty questions.

“He’s not here, if that’s what you’re wondering,” Bettsy says as Vicky glances around.

But all of our attention is pulled to the host, who starts giving us a rundown of the event. We’re told the men will rotate seats after each buzzer, allowing us two minutes per person.

“I’ll get us a match card each,” Bettsy says, as we’re ushered towards our seats.

But it’s clear that Vicky is on to me when she sits herself opposite me for the first ‘date.’

“You don’t date,” she says.

I shrug. “Bettsy didn’t want to come alone.”

A buzzer sounds, announcing the start of the session.

“Then why did you get a haircut?” she asks, narrowing her eyes.

“Because I needed a damn haircut. Quit it.”

“I don’t buy it.”

“Well, it’s the truth. I have my hair cut every five weeks. Live with it.”

We argue back and forth before I cut the conversation and switch it to Dad, since putting the focus on him takes the heat away from me.

“He’s due on Friday, you remember?” I say. “He wants to catch my game on Saturday.”

“He’s never cared about your games, John. Why would he care now?” Vicky drones.

“Jayne’s interested by all accounts.”

“How much do we know about Jayne?” she asks.

“I think she’s younger than him,” I say, immediately thinking about Kelly .

Is the look on Vicky’s face judgement? Is she judging Dad? Would she judge me?

I don’t have time to think about it as the buzzer sounds and I’m getting ushered along

to the next seat, opposite Kirsty. At least these two minutes will be relatively easy too. I've known Kirsty since I joined the team, and I don't feel nervous at all.

"Hi, Johnny. Nice haircut," she says.

"How's it going? Were you coerced into coming too?"

"Sort of. But it's fine." She plays with the ends of hair as she talks. "I'm nervous."

"How come? You've always come across as pretty confident."

"Same as you, Johnny. So, are you hoping to meet someone on the off chance? Since you're here?" She raises an eyebrow.

"Can you keep a secret?" I ask, lowering my voice.

"If it's anything work related, maybe not. Since—"

"It's not. I've sort of met someone, and I really like her. But I've fucked up."

"Oh! Well, isn't this a lovely surprise? Care to tell me the name of the lucky lady who's broken through your shell, Johnny?" Kirsty says.

"I can't. Honestly. Just in case. However, saying that... it's probably a complete loss now, considering I was such a dick."

Kirsty tilts her head to the side and studies me. "Want to tell me more about it? I may be able to help. Offer some advice or whatever."

"Really?" I ask, probably sounding too excited.

“Yeah, sure. And I’ll keep it to myself,” she says. “Tick my box and get my number. Give me a shout when you want to talk.”

“Sure. Thanks.” I turn my checklist over to tick the box next to her name. Then I spot a list of questions to use as icebreakers, throwing one out at Kirsty for the fun of it.

“What’s your favourite sport?” I ask, flashing her a grin.

“Not hockey,” she says. “Let’s go with rugby.”

“Right. ”

I relax into the conversation after that, using the prompt card to fire off questions as I move around the room. If I ask my dates questions, it means I have little talking to do myself. I use the time to think about Kelly—and what my next move is.

I text Kirsty as soon as I get home and after an hour of back and forth, I’ve got a plan. Kirsty is a lifesaver.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

“I have a confession to make,” I say ten minutes into our make out session.

Kelly breaks free of my grasp and looks me right in the eyes, terror on her face.

“What? Did something happen at speed dating?”

I cringe. “No, but let’s not talk about it.”

“Okay... what then?”

“Don’t look so scared. Or maybe do, I don’t know.” I shrug. “But... fuck. You’re not helping me here, Kelly. Because I’ve been having the dirtiest thoughts about you and now your hand is right next to my dick. And I told you, I don’t think I can contain myself any longer.”

“Oh,” she says, biting her lip.

I want to bite her lip too, hear that little quiver of excitement fall from her lips as I work my way into a deeper kiss.

But I don’t.

“Yeah.” My lips find the crease of her neck and she smells of soap and something else that is distinctly Kelly, and it drives me wild. It’s her feminine smell that’s sort of like strawberries and vanilla. And I love it.

“Wanna tell me?” she says, leaning her head to the side, giving me more of her neck.

“You know I’m terrible with words,” I say, running my lips over her skin.

And she giggles just a little, rubbing her hand through my hair as she whimpers.

“Wanna show me?” Her voice is teasing now, and my throat makes a noise that sounds almost feral.

Lust-filled eyes. From me and from her. Because my body is buzzing with excitement.

I spring into action. Rolling her onto her back, I coax her out of her T-shirt and toy with the fabric of her bra, wondering why the hell she’s got one on in the first place.

“Are you a boob or a bum guy?” she asks.

“I’m a you guy,” I say, reaching around and fumbling with the clip of her bra.

I’m rewarded after only a minor delay, my fingers gripping the clasp just enough.

She’s got curves and creamy skin. And nipples that have my mouth watering—I can’t believe it’s taken me this long to find her.

“You’re beautiful,” I say, taking a deep breath.

My fingers dance along her collarbone as I toss her bra across the room. I trace my index finger between her breasts before following the curve of her left boob, working my way in a spiral, ending right at her nipple.

Her chest rises and falls, and I lean down and kiss her again, nibbling on her lip as I tentatively pull at her nipple.

“I’ve had lots of thoughts about these, Kelly,” I whisper into her ear. The lust taking over.

“Yeah?” she breathes.

I nod and shift my body down onto the bed slightly before flicking my tongue right across her left nipple. Watching it get harder by the second. Her breathing deepens as I move my hand over to her other nipple, pulling at it slightly.

She shivers and moans in such an erotic tone. It sends a jolt straight to my already hard dick, which is now fucking painful.

I can’t hold back. With one hand pulling and teasing one nipple, I flick and suck the other with my tongue, completely lost in how she writhes and moans beneath me.

She draws in a breath as I move my hand away from her nipple, her skin hot underneath my palm as I move my hand across her chest, then down to her stomach.

“Do you know I’m crazy about you?” I say, watching the path of my hand. I stop right above her waistband, and I can tell she’s waiting, waiting for more, because she bucks her hips ever so slightly. Enough for me to notice. “What do you need, Kelly?”

“Johnny—”

“I’ve been wondering how you’ll feel, and how you’ll taste, and how I ever went a day without knowing.”

“And what if I’d sent you away tonight?” she whispers, a smile playing on her lips.

“Then I’d have spent the rest of my life trying to win you over,” I say.

Yeah, the lust is in full force, but I don't care. My head is cloudy with it—and all I want to do is slip my hand down the front of her panties and find out if she's wet for me. If she's feeling the same for me as I am for her.

“Tell me what you need, beautiful?”

“Touch me, Johnny. Please,” she says, and my dick flexes in anticipation.

It's fighting against the zipper of my pants.

I roll onto my side, laying tight against her and pushing myself back into position so I can nibble a spot just above the curve of her neck.

“Is that what you want?”

She nods, and I'm living for it .

“You want me to touch you here?” I kiss her neck again, and she groans.

“My pussy, Johnny. I want you to touch my pussy.”

I slide my hand right down her stomach and into her panties, not stopping to tease this time. I can't. I'm done waiting.

And by fuck, she's not only wet, she's soaking.

“Fuck, you're wet,” I breathe, pushing my body into hers. “Feel that? That's what you're doing to me.”

I briefly hold my breath in sync with her as I look down to where my hand is, except I can't see what I want to see.

“Slide your pants off. Let me see you.”

The fact she doesn't hesitate has me in a trance.

I watch her, and then shift so I can sit up against her headboard, and I pull her with me so her back is against my chest. Completely naked, her head on my shoulder, and I drink her all in.

I want access to every part of her. I want her in my arms as she comes apart for me.

“Open your legs,” I say, peppering kisses along her neck.

And she does, almost shaking with expectation.

I'm not sure what's more erotic, having her quivering beneath me as I slide my hand up and down her thighs, not quite getting to her pussy, or that she's whimpering in such a way that has me rocking against her.

“Touch me, Johnny. Please,” she says, desperation in her voice.

I run two fingers from her clit all the way down to her pussy. She's soaking and I want to feel her. I do another pass from her clit downwards, but this time I slip a finger inside her.

Her left arm shoots up and grabs at my neck, holding herself in place while I push my finger inside her. She's tight and hot and it's even better than I imagined.

I work my way deeper, then press my thumb to her clit and circle, starting off slowly to determine what she likes, to see how she responds to me .

“How does it feel?” I say, right into her ear. “Is that good for you, baby?”

She moans into me and I settle my mouth down on hers, kissing her deeply.

“Don’t stop,” she says, her breath mixing with mine.

Then, eyes on eyes as she looks at me, almost silently pleading. There’s a change in her body. She tenses under me and pushes her head further into my neck. And then she exhales, giving me a warning.

“Oh my God. Johnny I’m—”

“Come for me,” I say, and she tumbles over the edge, shaking and writhing and moaning right into my neck. Her nipples are hard, and her pussy slick with wetness, but I can’t let go, not yet.

“Fuck,” she says, pushing my hand away.

I finally move away, sliding my finger out and bringing it to my lips, tasting her. Honestly, it can’t get better than this.

“That was embarrassing,” she says into my neck, trying to suppress a laugh. “I’ll put it down to it being a while since I got myself off.”

“Oh really. When was it?”

She slaps my arm playfully.

“Come on, I want to know. I jerked off to you earlier,” I say, right into her ear.

“Oh my God. You did not!”

“I did. All I needed was my memory of you in that green dress.”

She hides her face as I prompt her again.

“Okay, fine. On the weekend, but I’m usually a once-a-day girl.”

I groan, picturing Kelly on her bed, legs spread while she works herself to climax.
“God, you’re killing me.”

She shifts and turns to face me, reaching for the covers as she does, and I lean down to kiss her. Completely melted into the moment .

“Thanks, Johnny. I mean, for the flowers, for apologising, for... that.”

But now I’m fucking terrified of what comes next. And I don’t mean with us. I mean, with me.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

The entire morning throws my routine out of the window—but that's on me, and the fact that I didn't want to leave Kelly's bed.

I ignored my alarm and, surprisingly, didn't care at all. All I wanted to do was make her come again.

I was completely sated. And I was comfortable, even if her bedroom was fucking freezing.

When I finally dragged my ass away, I had a swim, followed by breakfast, then I met Ryan for coffee and a trip to the bookstore a short walk from our apartment building.

Which is where we are now, browsing the aisles for something he doesn't know he needs until he sees it.

"How're you feeling about tonight?" he asks, skimming through the books in the fantasy section.

"Couldn't be more excited," I say.

Ryan suppresses a laugh.

Dad texted me this morning to say they'd arrived, and they were settling into their hotel. He said he'd see me at seven on the dot at the restaurant. My guess is, he'll be late .

"Liam's going too," Ryan says, reaching for a paperback. He turns it over and skims

the blurb. “Apparently, your dad invited him personally.”

I let out a breath. “I’m sure that’ll delight Vicky.”

“I was going to ask you how that’s going from your angle, actually,” Ryan says, flicking through the pages of the novel in his hands.

“As expected, I guess. I’m not really sure what’s going on. I’m a little preoccupied if you must know.”

Ryan discards the book before selecting another.

“Sarah? I thought you blocked her?”

“Well, yeah, I did. But she’s been texting me from a different number. It’s probably time for me to get some new digits.”

“Or a restraining order,” Ryan says sympathetically.

My phone pings, and I slip it out of my pocket to glance at the screen. Kelly.

I can’t even help the smile that creeps across my face, which gives Ryan all the fuel he needs.

“I take it you had success at speed dating?” He wiggles his eyebrows at me.

Now my next move is crucial. Because Vicky knows that Kirsty and I matched, and she probably told either him or Jen. But I don’t want to lie to him, not really—I’ve been doing that enough already.

I keep my response casual. “I guess you could say that.”

“Well, I can’t wait to hear more about her. Or him, if that’s what you’re into.”

Maybe Vicky didn’t mention Kirsty after all.

“Where did you get that impression?”

“I didn’t. But it’s rude to assume.”

I roll my eyes and shove my phone back in my pocket as we move towards the literary fiction section. Ryan plucks a book from the top shelf and turns it over.

“I think Jen would like this,” he says, tossing it into his basket .

And it gets me thinking that maybe I should buy a book for Kelly; to show her I notice her. She’s got a stack of books on a shelf in her bedroom, and I think they’re mostly romance novels. I make a mental note to check next time I’m in her room.

“Speaking of Jenna, how’s the house hunting going?”

At the start of the season, Ryan moved in with Jenna, who happens to live in the same apartment as my sister. I know that Ryan and Jenna are looking for a more permanent place to live, which means either Vicky will be looking for a new housemate, or she’ll be looking to move out too.

“We’ve got a few viewings lined up. But I just can’t find ‘the one’, you know?”

I can’t say I really did know but I nod anyway. As far as I’m concerned, home is wherever my stuff is.

“Right, are you getting anything?” Ryan says, indicating that he’s ready to check out.

We pay and leave, and then we grab some coffee, carrying on the conversation about house buying before switching to hockey. Which is when my anxiety creeps in.

Dad coming to watch a game isn't a new thing, but I always feel a heightened level of stress when I know he's in the crowd. Every time I take to the ice, the nerves hit, and I'm desperate for my shift to go well. I'm desperate to impress him.

"What's on your mind?" Ryan asks me after a few moments of silence.

"I feel like I should have tried harder. I feel like I should have done better."

I can't even look him in the eyes as I speak. Because when I do, all I see is the NHL superstar that I could have been.

"We've all got different parts to play, bud," he says. "You're killing it here. The guys love you. They respect you. And yeah, you need to be less serious at times, but you're doing great." He pauses for a moment and studies my expression. "What's brought this on? "

"We both know why my dad has invited Liam tonight. Hell—he probably would have called you if he had your number."

"He did call me," Ryan says. "I told him I'm busy."

I raise an eyebrow at him.

"Date night with Jen. Nothing ever hinders date night. Sorry, bud, but not even your old man." Ryan smiles.

"I respect that."

“Now, let’s kick a ball for a bit. Get your mind on something else. Worry about tonight later.”

And that’s what we do.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

I can't even look at Bettsy when he arrives for morning skate. The only thing I can think of is his sister coming on my fingers, that beautiful sound she makes as she comes running through my head.

He ambles into the room with his gear and then tosses his bag down before greeting the rest of the guys, completely oblivious to my antics. Then he looks right at me, and I swear to God he's trying to read my mind.

"Danny and I are going to shoot some pool tonight if you fancy it, Cap?" he says, taking a seat.

I sigh in relief. But before I can reply, one of the equipment managers sticks his head around the door.

"Johnny, your dad is looking for you."

Great.

"Your dad?" Bettsy says. "Shit, how did it go last night?"

"Don't ask," I say, slipping past him half-dressed.

Dad is waiting for me in the tunnel. He doesn't even bother saying hi.

"Have you asked Coach if Cody can join in on your skate? "

Last night, Dad asked me if Jayne's son could join in morning skate, so it doesn't

surprise me that is what he's leading with.

"Really?" I ask. "Nothing to say about last night?"

"Come on, son. It was embarrassing for me. How do you think I felt seeing my kids react like that in front of Jayne?"

I can't believe this is the avenue he's taking after the way he reacted to Vicky's upset.

"You need to apologise to Vicky," I say.

"Yeah. Sure. Now, Cody—come on, son. Be a champ and ask." He pats my shoulder, and like a puppy, I chase after the ball he pretended to throw.

I head towards Coach's office to find it already occupied.

Matt Rodgers' voice slips through the crack underneath the door, and I strain to listen; it sounds like an argument. But before I can actually hear anything, he comes bounding out and pushes right past me, veering straight for the dressing room.

"Koenig. In you come," Coach says, gesturing for me to step into his office.

"I need to talk with you," I say, disregarding the Cody conversation for a moment. "I had a call from Wes Jones—about Rodgers. Something about him offering supplements before. He warned me to keep my ear out."

"Thanks, Johnny. I appreciate that because I've heard whisperings myself. Can't find anything amiss though, so I guess he's innocent for now." He takes his cap off and places it on his desk. "Anyway, things okay? All good with—"

Therapy. He's going to ask me about therapy. But since I know how easy it is to

eavesdrop, I cut him off.

“Yeah, all good, thanks.”

I keep the conversation going for a little, assuring him that I’m doing all I need to be doing, then I ask him for a favour.

“Cody? Sorry, Johnny. We’re not insured, anyway.” He winks.

I head out to break the news to my dad, only to find he’s gone—probably back to Jayne and Cody. So, I call him and tell him it’s a no, as my sister powers past me, a smug look on her face.

I want to ask her how she is, but she makes a beeline for a reporter and slips into conversation with him.

I return to the dressing room and finish getting myself ready, but my mood is already sour as hell, and when I finally catch up with Vicky, I’m snappy and irritable.

The conversation is one I’m not overly proud of, because all my frustration turns into a lecture on how she needs to stay away from Liam.

To make matters worse, Coach yells out that today we’ll be bag skating. Basically, a puck-less practice where we skate back and forth until we’re ready to collapse.

At first, I’m hoping it will be an ideal opportunity to work out my frustration, but of course, the universe has other plans today.

One minute, I’m skating towards Hutch, the next, I’m flat on my ass with Liam towering over me.

He tosses his gloves to the side as if he's ready to fight.

"What the fuck, man?" I say.

"Get up!" He grabs my jersey, pulling me to my skates, then he takes a swing at me, but I duck, avoiding the blow.

"Fucking fight back, you fucking..."

But the guys gather around and then Coach yells.

Liam is getting pulled away, Ryan's arms around him as he fights against his brother.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Coach Adams is between Liam and me. "Get him off the damn ice. Now," he says, directing Ryan to take him off.

"What the hell was that about?" I ask, but when no one answers me, I have no other choice but to rush towards the dressing room.

"What the fuck was that?" I ask.

"Sorry. I didn't get a punch in. You're supposed to be bleeding. "

"What the fuck is going on, Lee?" I pull my helmet off and shake my head.

"Why wouldn't you tell me you knew why Vicky called off our wedding?"

"Oh. That."

"What do you mean 'Oh, that?'"

“How—”

“Bettsy.”

“Fucking, Bettsy,” I say.

“No. Atta boy, Bettsy. You should have told me if you knew, because Vicky wasn’t going to. I deserve to know!”

“It’s not for me to tell. Besides, I promised her I wouldn’t,” I say.

“It didn’t stop you telling Bettsy, though, did it? You’re supposed to be my best friend. You know what?” Looking furious, he stands up and for a second I wonder if he’s going to swing for me again. “Don’t speak to me,” he says.

I try to reason with him but he’s not listening. Not that I can make things any better. My own selfish behaviour has caused this, and Coach...

“Office. Now,” Coach says, and I follow him.

He rounds his desk and pushes his chair away but doesn’t sit. Instead, he leans on its back and buries his face in his hands.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t book Liam Preston a one-way flight back to Toronto, Johnny? Because whatever the fuck that was—it’s interfering with my practice. You guys may think that I’m here for the fun of it but believe me—”

“That was on me, Coach. I’m sorry. We had a misunderstanding, and I can promise you it won’t happen again.”

“Between you and Tweedle-dee, I had faith in Liam. I trusted that giving him another

chance would be a good move for us.”

“Coach. Please? Considering that was half my fault, you should consider kicking me off, too. ”

“Well, that’d be a fucking idea—but I can’t, dammit.

How’s that going to look? There’s some shit with Rodgers and—fuck.

” Coach lets go of his desk chair and slips into it.

“Right, Koenig. Here’s what’s going to happen.

I’ll bench him—lower body injury if anyone outside our need-to-know circles asks, but you have to promise me that this shit won’t happen again. ”

Like a nodding dog, I agree. Because being benched and having to watch us play tonight will be punishment enough for Liam. The bottom line is, he needs to stay away from Vicky because the two of them are causing an entire load of unnecessary shit.

Before I can leave, I need to address something else. Something that’s been sitting heavy on my chest since I got here today.

I wasn’t feeling guilty about seeing Kelly until today. Until Bettsy walked into that dressing room and looked right at me with trust and adoration that I’d seen so many times before. There’s no way in hell I can have him depending on me when I’m not even able to depend on myself.

“Hey, Coach,” I say before I turn to leave. “I think it’d be a good idea to play Betts with the rookie. He’s got potential and Bettsy’s play style would really compliment

him, you know, give him the opportunity to grow.”

“Huh? What’s brought this on?” Coach says, narrowing his eyes.

“I’ve been watching him for a while, and I believe it’d be a good call to make. I mean, it’s your call obviously, but I wanted to offer some insight—things I see when we’re on the ice.”

Coach rubs his stubble and then nods to himself before dismissing me. I have no idea what will come out of that, but I’ve tried.

I’m fully fired up, and my anger boils right to the surface when I return to the dressing room to find Vicky standing outside of the logo in the centre, and I highly suspect she was in here talking to Liam .

“What are you doing in here?” I sneer, borderline ready to punch the damn wall.

“My tri—”

“Were you talking with Liam? Because you need to keep away. You’re fucking his game up. Listen to me. I’ve told him, and now I’m telling you.”

Once she’s gone, I rush to the showers and scream into a towel.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

I stare at Tom for at least half a minute before I realise where I know him from. He's beaming, almost in tears, as he steps onto the red carpet to collect my jersey.

"Great game, Johnny," he says, keeping hold of my hand for a little too long as I shake it, then I pull my jersey off and hold it out for him.

"Thanks."

"Kelly says 'hi'," he says, then he leaves the ice, my jersey clutched to his chest, into a crowd of people.

Still avoiding eye contact, my sister gives me the signal that it's time for the post-game awards.

I feel sick with guilt. Throwing her under a bus to protect myself—I mean, I'm a complete and utter dick. Why Kelly gave me a second chance is beyond me.

I turn and skate back to the rest of the guys, taking a quick glance around the crowd, wondering if Kelly is actually here.

And if she is, the likelihood of spotting her is pretty much non-existent.

But I'm focused on checking anyway whilst I complete a victory lap with the guys, holding my stick in the air in appreciation for the fans before tossing it over the glass to a kid sitting on his dad's shoulders.

That's when I spot Sarah; eyes locked on mine as she stands a few rows up from ice

level. For the love of Christ, why won't she leave me alone?

"Is that who I think it is?" Ryan asks as he skates alongside me. I don't even need to answer. "Well, you're having a great day, right, bud?"

We get the hell off the ice and the elated mood I was in from our win is extinguished as soon as Bettsy walks into the dressing room after me.

"What was that about earlier?"

I didn't get much of a chance to talk with him before the game, so it figures that he'd want to talk to me the first chance he got.

And all I can think is that I'm standing here, lying to his face to save myself.

Because that's who I am right now. And, like the coward I am, I pull the reason I've been running with right out of my ass.

"Nothing, man. I figured you'd be the best guy to pair with Yatesy. Give you a chance to show him how it's done."

"Why didn't you mention it before?" he says, his voice raising a few decibels to talk over the chatter of the guys' post-game conversations. "Is it because I told Liam what you said? I mean... it slipped out. I didn't mean to blab."

"Honestly, no. It's not. You've got a tonne of stuff you can teach him," I say. "Besides, that was on me. I shouldn't have broken Vicky's trust by telling you. I'm not proud of myself at all."

"And did you know about Liam getting the 'A'?"

“Sort of. Coach mentioned it briefly.”

“Did you tell him I was interested—I mean, I am. You know that, right?”

“He knows. But it was Jani’s idea, forcing some leadership on Lee since he’s a bit preoccupied at the moment. ”

Bettsy considers this for a moment before slouching down into his cubby.

“We’re good though, right?” he says, chewing his lip.

“Yeah, man,” I say, patting him on the back. “Just give the kid as much support as you can. Show him how it’s done. You know Team GB scouts are always watching, right?”

“Yeah, right.” He nods.

I leave him at his cubby and get showered and dressed at record speed since I’m not in the mood to socialise anymore. But when I exit through the back door of the rink and close in on my car, I spot my dad leaning up against it with an expression on his face that tells me he’s not happy.

Honestly, today can fuck right off.

“Congratulations on your win,” he says, his stony-faced expression not budging.

“Thanks,” I say, moving to the trunk of my car to toss my bag in.

“Cody enjoyed it. Do you suppose he could spend a bit of time with you before we head home?”

The question hits me in the chest.

“Slim pickings, huh?”

“Don’t be like this, Johnathan. I’ve got enough on my plate with your sister. I don’t need you causing any drama.”

“Have you apologised to her yet?”

“I have.”

“And?” I stare at him, watching his expression.

“She said she needs some space. And she doesn’t need my help financially anymore.”

That gets my attention. From what I understand, Vicky relies on an allowance from Dad.

Which gets me thinking... Ryan and Jenna are moving out soon, how is she going to afford to keep living where she’s living if she isn’t accepting help from Dad?

I know her salary doesn’t stretch as far as her expenses demand, and that’s before all the shoes and crap she buys.

“Do you want to grab a beer?” Dad asks .

“Can’t. I’ve got plans.”

“I’ve flown all this way, and that’s what I get?”

I scoff. “Let’s face it, Dad. You didn’t come here to see me, nor Vicky.”

His face changes, an expression that I can't put my finger on.

"Well, are you surprised? The pair of you are an embarrassment. How do you think that made me feel? You humiliated me in front of Jayne and Cody. She told me she doesn't know if she wants to keep seeing me," he says, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Probably because she realised you're not a ticket to the NHL," I say.

Then it gets worse.

"If you'd done as you were told and had those extra lessons..."

My jaw drops. "Are you serious right now?"

"Yes, I am. Because you could have done better."

"And you wanted me to suck my coach's dick for the privilege? You're crazy."

"It wasn't like that," Dad says.

But I'm done with this conversation. I can feel myself tensing up with frustration.

Just once, I'd love for my dad to tell me he's proud of me and that he enjoyed my game, without making it all about him.

I move around to the front of my car and reach for the door handle. "I've got to go."

And I'm hoping beyond all hope that Kelly did actually go to my place, because she's like a single flame, burning bright in my world of darkness.

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Her face is centimetres away from my dick. It's so close I can feel the warmth exuding from her mouth. And I'm so damn hard, I think I'm about to pass out.

"So, let's try now," she says. And the nerves hit me like a check, right into the boards. The air leaves my lungs and my body tenses.

"I, umm..."

"I mean, if you want to, that is?"

Oh, I want to. I want everything with this girl.

I reach out and take her chin in my hand, pulling her towards me and kissing her. Parting her lips with my tongue, melting right into her.

"I want you to touch me," I say.

She pauses for a moment, and I wonder if I've gone too far. But she sits back and studies my dick for a second. She's thinking. And I want to know what she's thinking. But I'm so mesmerised by her, I'm watching and waiting.

She leans forward slightly and looks up at me through her eyelashes. Big green eyes on mine as she parts her lips and runs her tongue along the bottom one.

I don't think anything could have prepared me for her tongue.

Hot and wanting, right on the tip of my dick, teasing at my piercing.

Her hands wrap around the base of my dick as she holds it firm.

Then she parts her lips a little, spitting onto me before she wraps her mouth around the head of my dick. Hot and wet and—

“Fuck,” I breathe, instinctively running my fingers through her hair and gripping, gently tugging at her locks. It feels really fucking good.

She moves slowly, taking a little more of me as she adjusts her position. Her tongue caresses my dick, right under the head near the piercing, where it’s the most sensitive. My eyes roll back in my head. Honestly, it’s such an intense experience, my whole body lights up.

She takes me halfway, and I have to use every ounce of self-control I have not to thrust into her, because she feels so good, and I need more.

She slips away with a pop and looks up at me, and I can’t help it. I reach for my dick and wrap my hand around my shaft and stroke. Up and down. Slow movements. Because I’m so hard, I could explode at any moment... could I explode?

Her hands run up and down my thighs and my pace quickens. Then she leans forwards and cups my balls in her hand. Caressing them gently. They’re tight and heavy—like they’re waiting to give her my release.

“Can I try something?” she says.

I stop, giving her my attention. Curious.

“Sure?”

“Put your legs up on the bed,” she says, pushing to scoot me back. I do what I’m told,

and watch as she disappears, returning a few moments later with a bottle of lube.
“Any hard limits?”

“Fuck. I... I don’t think so. What are you doing?”

“I want to try something,” she says. “I’ve been doing a bit of research, and... do you trust me?”

I figure I literally have nothing to lose except my load, which I’m willing to rid myself of at this point, so I nod.

She slips between my legs again, and I hear the squelch of the bottle.

“Keep jerking yourself,” she says, and I do. Slow and steady. “Does it feel good?”

“Yeah,” I breathe, then there’s a cold pressure right on my ass. “Christ, what are you doing?”

“If you hate it, I’ll stop. But let’s try.”

I keep up the work on my dick. Long strokes. Pressure building all through my body. And I feel it. Her finger probing at me, then it slips inside just a tiny amount and I exhale.

It’s not bad. In fact, it feels—

“Fuck.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I mean—can you try a little more lube?”

Another squelch of the bottle, then the absence of her hand briefly before she runs her finger around my rim and pushes into me again.

I exhale, shuddering on the spot.

“Is this okay, Johnny?”

I can’t even answer her, so I groan. Nodding.

And she slides in a little deeper. And a little deeper.

“Just keep going with your hand,” she coaxes.

And I do. Picking up the pace as I jerk myself off. All the while, Kelly’s finger is in my ass, and I want more.

“Deeper,” I say.

“Are you sure?” she says, not waiting for me to reply.

Pushing into me a little more, I swear to God I’m going to pass out. Because she hits a spot, and it’s like everything I’ve ever wanted has come true. The euphoria and the way my whole body comes alive.

“Fuck, that’s good,” I pant, picking up my pace .

She presses into me a little more, and I think I’m about to blackout. I can’t even keep up the pace of jerking my dick. My hand wilts but it’s replaced by another hand. Smaller. Wetter. Slick with lube, I guess.

“Fuck. Right there,” I groan, and she keeps it going.

My balls tighten and there's that feeling right in the bottom of my stomach... all the way to the base of my spine. And I know there's no going back as soon as my mind completely clears of anything.

Blackness.

And I come.

I don't even give her a warning. I come hard and I watch in complete awe as she covers me with her mouth. I don't even understand what is going on.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck. Oh, my... fuck."

Her hot, tight lips are wrapped around my dick as I come. I ride out my orgasm, her finger still deep inside me and her lips around my dick. And I realise from this one experience, I'll never be able to jerk off on my own again.

"That was hot," she says before giving my dick another long suck.

I'm quaking. Almost in pieces, and I realise I'm crying. Literal tears are trickling down my face.

"I'm going to pull out now, okay?" she says.

I brace myself, feeling oddly empty once she's gone, and her tongue darts out to lick a bit of cum that dribbled into my naval.

Then she's gone. She vanishes into the bathroom, and I steady my breathing, trying to come round.

I need the moment to compose myself. Because I've never come so hard in my entire

life. I've never been so fulfilled.

"Are you okay, Johnny?" Kelly's voice floats through the air, pulling me back into the moment.

I try to settle my breathing, still in the moment, as she leans down and kisses me.

"I came," I say .

"Yeah, you did." She's hovering over me, running her hands up and down my chest. "I sort of managed my own expectation that you may not. But... I hope that was okay."

"Fuck. That was more than okay."

I pull her towards me and kiss her with all the passion I possess. Because that was something else. I can't even find the words to tell her how good that was.

But this is just the beginning. When I wanted to shut myself away, Kelly opened the door.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

My dad texts me on the drive over to Kelly's, telling me he and Jayne have split up. And he has the audacity to blame me.

I don't reply, because I'm so fucking angry at him. I end up putting my stereo on loud, and driving to Kelly's at a speed I should reserve for the highway.

I spot the cardboard covering Kelly's window as soon as I pull into the street. You can't miss it. It's taped over where a single pane of glass should be and it looks like whoever did it rushed the job.

Parking up, I hop out of my car, giving her front door a quick knock before it swings open to reveal a girl I've never seen before carrying empty shopping bags.

"Can I help you?" she asks, raising a brow.

"I'm looking for Kelly," I say.

The girl's eyes widen slightly as she studies me before she turns her head and shouts down the hallway.

Kelly's bedroom door swings open a moment later, and she pads out, wearing her hair up in a messy bun, and my damn hoodie .

Fuck, she's cute.

"Johnny?" she says. "I wasn't expecting you tonight."

“I, uh...”

“I was just heading to the shop,” her roommate says. “Do you need anything picking up, Kel?”

“I’m fine, thanks, Sally.”

Sally squeezes past us, leaving Kelly and me alone.

“What happened to your window?”

“I got home from uni earlier and the glass had literally fallen inside. I’m not sure if it was deliberate damage, or if it had lost the will to go on. But anyway, I called my landlady, and she sent someone over, but they covered it until they can get a replacement pane.”

“The whole damn window needs replacing,” I say, raising my tone.

“Well, I agree, but it’s not my call to make.”

“You can’t sleep in there like that,” I say.

“It’s fine, Johnny.”

“It’s not. It’s too damn cold in there as it is. You’ll freeze,” I say.

“I’ll be fine.”

“Get your stuff. You’re coming back to mine.”

She widens her eyes, then bites her bottom lip.

“We’ll be careful. I promise,” I say, trying to reassure her.

“Are you sure? I mean, I could ask Mike, I guess. Or stay in Tom’s room.”

“Kelly—”

“Okay, fine. Just give me a minute.”

By the time we get to my place, we’ve come up with a plan.

Kelly will use the elevator to come and go since most of the guys use the stairs.

That’s been the case ever since a few of us got stuck in the elevator last season.

I tell Kelly that it’s the best idea we have, and if she sees anyone when the doors open to the eighth floor, she can say she was looking for Mike’s apartment and she pressed the wrong button.

The whole thing is a bit of an effort since she’s got her cello and a bag of her essentials. I offered to carry them both, but she assured me she’s done it enough times to manage herself, and she pointed out that if someone sees me with both items, more questions will be asked.

When we make it safely into my apartment, we put all her things in my bedroom, just in case.

“Do you still have your key?” I ask.

“My key?”

“Well, yeah. The key I gave you. You can stay here until the glass is replaced.”

“Johnny—”

“Well, the offer is there.”

She hugs me, and it’s something I realised I’ve been wanting all day—at least since the shit with my sister earlier.

“Are you okay?” she asks, studying my face.

“I guess. Another rough day for me.”

I lead Kelly into the living room and we relax on the sofa, sitting close so her legs can lay over my lap.

“Wanna talk about it?” she asks.

“No,” I say.

But ten minutes later, I’ve told her all about the photoshoot at the rink this morning, and how my sister’s still pissed at me because she thinks I’m like our dad.

“That pissed me off,” I say. “It made me really fucking angry, actually, because there’s no way in hell I’d put my son’s career prospects ahead of his welfare.”

“Do you think he knew?” Kelly asks.

“Of course he fucking knew.”

I finish venting about my dad, and then I make Kelly and me some dinner .

After we eat, she offers to wash up while I work for a little while on my thesis.

I don't get much done, because my phone pings in my pocket and I consider if I should bother reading it or not, until I see it's from Vicky, telling me about a side gig she has lined up.

Vicky

If you want to come along, you can.

Johnny

I'm good, thanks.

I show Kelly the message.

"You have to go," she says. "This is a great opportunity to reconcile."

"At a rugby match?" I ask.

"It doesn't matter what it is. It's time with your sister while she has a primary task to focus on. Maybe you should consider it."

"I'm oblivious to rugby," I explain as I hover my thumbs over the keyboard on my phone, readying myself to text Vicky again.

"You don't need to, but you could always Google it to find out."

Which is what I do. Abandoning my uni work, I learn what a scrum and a line-up is; getting myself mildly clued up enough to go with her, so I don't appear like a complete ass. Moments later, I text her back and tell her I'll go.

And because I've mentally checked out of my thesis, I put on an old hockey game to

study instead.

“You can turn it off if you like,” I say, passing Kelly the remote control once the second period ends.

She’s sitting next to me on the sofa with her music book in front of her, cycling through a few of the pages and tapping a beat out on her leg .

“Nah, it’s fine,” she says, and I notice her eyes drifting to the screen as the game plays on. She moves her book to the floor, putting all her attention on the TV. “That number eleven always goes for the right side in the D-zone. Have you noticed?”

“Yeah. I have actually. And the way the play changes to match his position is always the same,” I say. “I thought you hated hockey?”

“I do. But that doesn’t mean I’m clueless about it.” She chuckles and I stare at her. “What?” she asks.

“You. I just—I’m waiting to figure out what your red flag is. I mean, you know mine, but there’s got to be something that isn’t—”

“Hey,” she says, nudging me playfully on the arm, but I pull her right on top of me, wrapping my arms around her waist as I kiss her.

“I’m feeling stuff for you, Kelly,” I admit.

“Oh.”

And I lift her up and carry her right into my bedroom, putting her down in the centre of my bed.

All I can think about is how fucking fantastic she made me feel when she—fuck. I can't even think straight.

I want her to come as hard as she made me.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

At least Vicky and I are on speaking terms again. Which makes two road games in a row bearable when she's sticking her camera in your face.

I usually love road games, but I've been getting into a routine with Kelly. I'm already excited about getting home and seeing her again.

I left her lying in my bed this morning, fully aware that I wanted to sack off the weekend and spend all day between her legs—but then Bettsy was knocking on my door like the cock-block he is.

If only he knew.

As soon as we get to the rink for the first game, I'm off the coach first and rooting around under the bus for the ball, tossing it towards Hutch who flicks it towards Bettsy.

Bettsy sat by me the whole way up, and even though I kept my head buried in my notebook for a huge chunk of time, I couldn't get away with ignoring him the whole trip.

I feel so guilty, I can hardly look at the guy.

Even when he kicks the ball in my direction, I avoid eye contact with him .

“You know what I found out the other day?” he says to no one in particular. “A strimmer is just a shortened way of saying ‘string trimmer’. I mean, what is that about?”

“Where do you come up with this stuff?” Hutch asks.

“I didn’t make it up,” he says. “But it’s sort of blown my mind. I won’t be able to garden the same way ever again.”

“When have you been gardening?” Danny asks, ducking to head the ball towards Prez.

“That girl I met at speed dating. Her nan has this enormous garden that needed cutting back. I was doing a good deed.”

“You’ve met her nan already?” Hutch says.

“Well, she lives with her nan. Which means it’s a nightmare to actually get any alone time. Since you’re a creeper, I can’t go for it at our place. You’d probably listen to us with a glass against the wall.”

“I most definitely would not,” Hutch says. “But you’re right. Living with someone else always makes sex difficult. Spontaneous sex anyway. I mean, I can hardly bring someone back and get down to it on the sofa, can I? Or the table.”

“Our table? Please tell me you haven’t.”

“No—but I’ve wanted to.”

The ball sails through the air and Liam catches it on his chest, flicking it with his shoulder to delight the crowd of guys watching him.

Everyone whoops and cheers. But as I watch him, I wonder how often he and Vicky are sneaking around—if they are.

Ryan and Jen moving out is an ideal opportunity for them to keep it up.

I tried to gauge her reaction during the rugby match, but I couldn't work it out.

Though, on the topic of sneaking around—what if Vicky had to move in with me?

I'd never be able to have Kelly stop over.

..not unless I could guarantee Vicky was out for the night.

Regardless, she'd know I'd had a girl over.

I quickly snap out of my thoughts when the ball comes sailing towards me, almost hitting me square in the face. But my reaction time is good enough to head it into the direction of Danny, who knocks it towards Ffordey.

We switch things up and play a game where the first guy to let the ball touch the ground is out, and that takes us right up until we're called through to the dressing room to suit up.

The energy is high again now, all thanks to the game of ball, and Hutch puts the portable stereo in the corner of the room and connects his phone, blasting out a playlist he made at the start of the season.

I take my phone out to text Kelly when someone taps me on the shoulder, and I turn on the spot, coming face-to-face with Robbo, a defenceman who plays in our third pair.

“Hey, Cap, can I have a word?” He's fully dressed, bar his sweater, clutching his bucket in his hand as he chews at his lower lip.

“You okay, bud?” I ask, locking my phone and tossing it into my bag.

I can tell he’s anything other than okay, so I cock my head towards the dressing room door and signal for him to follow me.

The tunnels are teeming with activity, mainly the support staff setting up for the game, so I check in a small office-type space that looks empty, making sure no one is inside before stepping in and closing the door behind us.

Robbo stands opposite me, shifting his weight from left to right as he fidgets with the strap of his helmet.

I furrow my brow and give him time to get his words out; I know they’re right on the tip of his tongue.

“This is awkward, and I just want you to understand that I’m only telling you because it’s the right thing to do. I’m not a grass, though, for the record—and if it was anything else... shit. Cap, can you do me a solid and not tell him I was the one to tell you?”

“What’s going on?” I ask, standing tall.

“I think I saw Rodgers with some pills. I mean, they could have been something innocent but—”

“Ah, shit. I was afraid of this,” I say, rubbing the stubble on my chin.

“Do you know something?” Robbo asks.

“You remember Wes Smith, right? We played together a few years back, and we sort of keep in touch—I mean, as much as most guys do now we’re playing on opposing

teams, but anyway.

He called me and mentioned something about Rodgers and—actually, I’ve probably said too much. Let’s keep this locked, right, bud?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“When did this happen?”

“Earlier today. But I mean, I don’t know the full story—he could be on meds or something.”

“Leave it with me,” I say, patting him on the shoulder before reaching for the door handle.

Instead of heading back to the dressing room, I make my way towards the benches, hoping to find Coach there.

As soon as I round the corner, I spot him standing, heads together, with Springy, the assistant coach, as they study something on Coach’s clipboard. He looks up when I approach and beckons me towards him with his hand.

“Come and see this, Koenig,” Coach says. “What do you think about changing the power play unit?” He flashes the paper at me.

“What’re you thinking?” I ask, trying to keep my tone level.

“Just want to add more net-front presence against these guys, but—what’s wrong?” he asks, frowning.

I lower my voice. “I don’t know how serious this is, but I just had one of the guys tell

me that they saw Rodgers with pills. And I figured you'd have a good idea if he was on anything official from the doc or whatever."

"For Christ's sake." Coach presses the clipboard to Springy's chest before striding away towards the dressing room .

"I had a feeling this would come and bite us in the ass," Springy says. "His stats were good, and he was cheap. The GM told us it was an easy decision. It figures."

I nod, considering it for a moment, but then a flurry of people crowd the benches.

"Finish readying up, Johnny. I'll see you shortly."

I head back towards the dressing room, just in time to see Matt Rodgers coming out of the same office I went into with Robbo, looking nervous as hell.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

“I think my sister’s coming to the game tonight,” Bettsy says, tossing his phone back into his bag.

My heart jerks in my chest.

She didn’t mention anything to me, I’m sure she didn’t. I pull my phone out from my bag, trying to be discreet as I check my messages. All that’s there is the stuff we were chatting about on the coach, which only entailed questions about porn.

Kelly

Random, but what porn do you watch?

Johnny

Is this a trick?

Kelly

No, just wondering.

Johnny

I guess I enjoy watching the usual stuff.

Kelly

Which is? Come on, Johnny. I'm not judging you (unless it's anything illegal).

Johnny

Fine. I guess my favourite is like role play, BJs, a bit of anal sometimes. But I don't need it now. I have you.

Kelly

Ha. Aren't you the sweetest? Maybe we should watch something together sometime. Do you have any favourite videos you could send to me? Just curious.

Johnny

I'll see what I can dig out.

Kelly

Don't pretend you don't have something bookmarked.

Johnny

Want to tell me what you watch?

Kelly

I like dirty talk.

Johnny

What sort of dirty talk? I mean, I can do dirty talk...

I don't even realise I'm smirking at my phone until someone slaps me on the shoulder, and I have to wipe the look off my face. All our messages have heated up, and since we're still getting to know each other in the bedroom, it's exciting.

"What's got you so happy?" Ffordey says, raising his eyebrows. He's half-dressed, wearing just his underlayer.

"I'm excited that you're about to beat your own personal record for the highest save percentage on the road."

My attempt to distract him fails miserably when he raises an eyebrow at me.

"Who're you texting?" he asks.

"Just a friend."

"Is that the same friend who you met at speed dating?"

"Kirsty?"

"Yeah. I've seen you texting her a few times now," he says.

"Nothing's happening," I say. "Besides, I don't think we're all that compatible anyway. And if Vicky has to move back in with me—"

I cut myself off. Because that issue doesn't go away, regardless. Because Kirsty may not be coming around to stay over, but Kelly certainly has been, and I want her to keep doing it.

"You're a better man than me," he says. "I wouldn't want my sister moving back in with me. I mean, I wouldn't see her homeless or whatever, but I'd rather get into that

net without a cup.”

I feel a similar way about Vicky. She’s hard work, and not to mention the whole Liam thing.

In an ideal world, I know Vicky would want to stay put anyway, but I don’t have the spare cash to help her out with her rent, and I really don’t want to ask either of my parents, even though I know my mom would probably give it over just to get me off the phone—that’s the sad case of it.

But I park that for now, because Coach strides into the dressing room and puts his hands on his hips, ready to give his pre-game speech.

“Challenge Cup, boys. And we’re getting it done. I’d like to see more presence in front of the net, and it’d be useful to try out a different power play unit. I’ve been considering it for a short time, but I think we’ll give it a whirl tonight.” He looks at me and nods. “Koenig, you’re up.”

I take a few steps towards the front of the room, and I stop next to Coach, giving the guys a once-over before I talk.

“We’ve got something special here, guys. And Bettsy is showing us how strong and adaptable he can be, so please show him your support and create those plays. Remember, our focus is always on the next goal.”

A chorus of applause rings out, and I step back to my cubby to toss my jersey on and finish taping my stick.

Ultimately, I haven’t broken as many as I have done previously at this point in the season, and I don’t know if that’s down to Kelly or...

Shit, Kelly.

I glance over to the door where Bettsy is having a moment with the kid. Heads together. Laughing. I realise I'm actually jealous—not that it makes much sense. Ultimately, I miss being paired with him. And I'm wondering how long it'll take him to notice how much I've been distancing myself from him.

But Kelly.

Is she here tonight to surprise me? Who knows? I spend time looking for her, wondering if I can spot her in the crowd. I'm scanning the rows to see if—

“Johnny, it's yours!”

I'm checked into the boards, missing the puck entirely because I'm not paying attention.

For fuck's sake. Luckily for me, I chase the puck down and then clear it back to Danny, who receives it in the neutral zone.

He presses on with a forward attack, so I change it up with Bettsy, my heart sinking a little when he sails past me towards the point.

I try to push Kelly out of my head, putting all my focus on the game, but it's harder than I expect. Since I know she won't be at any home games, this is never usually a problem.

It takes until the end of the second period for me to get a break from the thoughts of Kelly, when Bettsy stops at the end of the bench and waves up into the crowd and I spot not Kelly, but his other sister, Stacey.

All that's similar is the deep shade of auburn hair, but otherwise, I probably wouldn't have recognised her.

"Who the hell is that?" Danny says, coming to a stop behind Bettsy.

"My sister, and before you ask, no, she's not available."

"How many sisters do you have again?" Danny says. "Isn't there one called Kelly?"

"Again, she's not available either. In fact, she's more off-limits than Stacey. And I'll break anyone's legs who tries so much as a smile in her direction. She's nineteen and has potential. She doesn't need any losers like you sniffing around."

There's a lump in my throat that I can't swallow down. Guilt.

The same guilt that I carry around the rest of the evening that only slips away, temporarily, when I video call Kelly. I'm happy in that bubble. I even go to sleep with a grin on my face after some unexpected phone sex.

But as soon as I see Bettsy the next day, it bubbles to the surface again.

Morning skate, team brunch, video playback. All I can hear is the voice in the back of my head screaming at me, telling me I'm a disgrace and that he's gearing up to snap my legs in two.

Even a win doesn't put me back in high spirits.

But there's a conflicting thought pushing through .

Kelly is supposed to be waiting for me at my apartment. And I can't fucking wait. I've never been this excited to get back from a road trip before.

As I stand next to the coach after helping to load the gear on, I end up texting Kelly back and forth about my impending arrival home and how I plan to show her how much I missed her.

I only slip my phone away when I hear the double doors open, and I see my sister approaching me with her bag. She looks upset.

“Are you alright?” I ask as she pulls me into a hug. “What’s going on?” I hug her back, feeling compelled to comfort her. “Is this about Liam? Because I’ll kill him.”

And that makes me feel even fucking worse. I’ve been so wrapped up in my own little world, I haven’t been looking out for Vicky like I usually would.

I know how Bettsy feels, and here I am, doing whatever the hell I like.

“No, it’s nothing. I just wanted to give you a hug,” she says, quickly disappearing onto the coach.

But I’m racking my brain. If it’s not Liam, what else could it be?

When I board the coach, I spot Ryan and Jenna snuggled up together, and it hits me.

I bet Vicky’s heart is broken about having to move out of her place once they’ve bought a place to live.

It’s a big change, and I know that she’ll probably find it difficult.

Not to mention, the possibility of living with me isn’t likely injecting too much excitement into her day.

We’ve done it before, and we swore not to do it again.

I need to do something.

I need to look after her.

I need to fix this.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

“I need to tell you something,” Kelly says.

I’ll be honest—Kelly was the last person I expected to see when I was drinking coffee with the guys earlier.

Vicky rounded the entire team up to get fitted for suits ahead of Ladies’ Night, and since none of us can read an email properly, we all turned up and crammed into the tailors at the same time.

Since the place is the same size as the damn penalty box, Vicky dismissed us and told most of us to come back later, which led us to this place.

I’ve made my way back over to speak to Kelly briefly, since my suit fitting was pretty quick—same as last year.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, confused. “Is this about you coming to a game this weekend? I mean, it shocked me to hear it, but I’m excited.”

I’m unsure of how much time we have to talk since the entire team is buzzing around in the area—and if someone spots me having a private conversation with Bettsy’s sister, it’ll lead to many questions that I’m not ready to answer .

Kelly fidgets with the drawstring of her hoodie, eyes on the floor for a moment before she sets her gaze on mine.

“No, nothing about that—though, that’s another story. But listen, remember when you were on your double-header road trip? I met up with Charlotte—she told me that

Lyla is pregnant and, never mind that, but I bumped into Sarah and she—”

“Sarah? Wait, what? Lyla’s pregnant?”

I’m confused. Probably more confused than I should be, but Kelly presses on with her point.

“Don’t worry about that for now. But yeah, Sarah. She wanted to tell me all about you. But I just wanted you to know, I don’t believe what she said—I mean, I’ve heard your side of the story.”

I take a few seconds to process what she’s telling me. Because Sarah hassling me is one thing, but seeking out Kelly is another. That familiar heat starts creeping up through my body and I tense my jaw.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I was trying to find the right time, but it’s been chipping away at me.” She places her hand on my arm before retracting it quickly. “But try not to worry. You’ve changed your number, so I’m sure she won’t bother us again.”

“What did she say to you?” I ask.

But before Kelly can reply, the door to the coffee shop opens and in walks my sister and Jen.

Shit.

“I’ve got to go,” I say, rushing towards my sister.

She’s staring at me with mild confusion on her face, and I stumble over what to say,

blurting out the first thing that pops into my head.

“Did you know Bettsy had a sister?”

“No?”

“Well, that’s her. She said she’s coming along to the home game this weekend.” I’m digging myself into a hole here, so I cut myself loose. “Anyway, gotta head out. See you later.”

Back on the street, I pull my phone out and see a few messages in our group chat, telling me they’re in a pub a little further up the street.

So, I let my legs carry me there while I pull up the latest message I received from Sarah to my new number.

God knows how she got it, but right now, that’s not the issue.

Johnny

Okay. Let’s talk.

I head into the pub, finding the guys in a corner near the bar, full beers in front of most of them, chatting excitedly about the upcoming Ladies’ Night.

I order a water and occupy myself with conversation, all while I wonder how long it’ll take Sarah to message me back.

“I think this year will be decent,” Ffordey says, shifting into a ramble about the change of venue and how many tickets they’ve sold, but I’m not listening. I’m way too tense and fired up.

I pull my phone back out to message Kelly, asking if she can give me a full rundown of what Sarah said to her, but just after I hit send, I get a reply from Sarah, giving me the name of a bar across town where she said she'll meet in twenty minutes.

"I need to head off," I tell Ffordey, pushing my way through the crowd of people now filling the bar area.

He calls after me, but I'm out on the street and hurrying away before he can stop me.

I make it to the bar in fifteen minutes, thanks to a cab that drove past as I was debating calling for one, and I'm annoyed that Sarah's here already, giving me zero chance to prepare myself in the new setting .

She gives me a small wave as I head inside, and I meander through the empty tables over to where she's sitting.

"Hi, Johnny," she says, her lips curving into her best fake smile.

I've seen it all before. And I know how she plays these games. She looks evil. Really fucking evil. And as soon as I slide into the seat opposite her, I regret texting her back.

"Do you love her?" she says.

"What's it to you?" I say.

She laughs. Actually laughs, throwing her head back as the shrill sound of her cackle fills the air.

"I called it because you can't love anyone, Johnny. You're incapable. Why do you think I was forced towards Charlie?"

I've already had enough.

"What do you want, Sarah? What's so important that you can't leave me alone?"

"Your dad gave me your new number," she says. "He was incredibly helpful, actually. And I told him all about my problem and that you've left me on my own to struggle."

I scoff. "I left you on your own to struggle?"

"My visa is running out, Johnny. And I'm pregnant."

And just that like I feel sorry for a foetus.

"It's not Charlie's, before you ask."

I wasn't going to, but whatever.

"And what's this got to do with me?" I ask.

"I made a mistake, Johnny. I told Charlie that it was yours and—"

This woman, honestly. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I panicked. And I don't know how to fix it. Because he won't believe me, and he wants answers. I think he's going to leave me, Johnny."

"So? Tell him the truth. I literally have no idea what any of this has to do with me."

"I need money, Johnny. And I remember you had savings from your dad, and—"

Ah, yes. The only money I managed to keep from her clutches. It only figures that she'd remember I have it, though.

"I'm done here," I say, moving to slide my chair out.

"Johnny—I don't know what else to do. I told you; my visa is running out and I literally have nothing. Please, I just need some money to get back home, and I'll leave you alone for good—I promise."

That's the icing on the cake for me. Because all the promises she's ever made me have turned into a pile of lies. Instead of acting rationally, I kick the chair I was sitting on and high tail it out of there.

"You'll regret this," she says.

And what pains me the most? A small part of me is actually considering paying up just to get rid of her.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

I successfully fended off my sister on the road trip yesterday.

But how I go an entire pre-game at home avoiding her is anyone's guess.

She's lurking on the edge of the ice, and every time she looks like she's about to speak to me, someone else catches her attention or mine.

Since we're making progress in our climb of the league, that's where my focus is tonight.

Hockey.

One hundred per cent hockey.

At least, that's what I tell myself, anyway.

I know Kelly is here. And even though I know where the club seats are, I try my hardest not to look in that direction as we skate onto the ice for the intros. And when we line up for the national anthem, I avoid looking then too.

She said she'd be in the bar, but a tiny piece of me wonders if she is actually here. At her seat. Watching.

Fortunately, the position of the benches is in my favour too, so when the puck drops and the clock counts down, I have zero distractions.

The first defensive pair on the ice tonight are Bettsey and Yatesy, and considering the

kid's play style a few weeks ago, I can already see a vast improvement in his game.

I'm watching the play, so I don't notice Matt Rodgers coming to stand directly behind me, leaning down to talk right into my ear.

"What's your fucking problem, mate?" he says, his tone laced with rage.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but if you're not careful, you'll be my problem soon enough," I growl back, not shifting my attention away from the ice.

The forward line changes and bodies move away from the bench, clearing some space, and Rodgers sits down next to me, popping out his mouthguard to talk.

"I hear it was you who started shit about me," he says.

"Regardless of what you heard, you don't play fucking dirty in my dressing room," I say, dropping my leg over the boards and hopping onto the ice when my change comes in.

The puck goes out of play, but I skate over to the face-off circle and ready myself.

I'm shoulder to shoulder with Prez for a moment as he takes position, and I talk under my breath, telling him to play back into the neutral a little before we push forward, and he nods, getting himself ready to receive the puck from Liam's face-off.

It's a good play for us, resulting in receiving possession of the puck and forcing the opposition to keep their play without a line change. Heavy legs on the ice mean opportunity for us.

By the time my shift is over, I scan the bench for Matt and make sure I hop off the ice at the opposite end of the bench, because I really cannot deal with his attitude right

now, considering I'm permanently simmering in a bad mood.

Ever since that day I saw Sarah, I've been a wreck. And for once, Justine wasn't able to help.

I make it the whole way through the first without thinking about Kelly again, or allowing her to be a distraction more like, and luckily for me Vicky is completely absent during the intermission.

When we return to the ice for the second period, I'm in the starting pair on the blue line.

Danny takes the opening face-off and wins, sending the puck my way before I pass it over to Hutch, who's ready to receive it.

He shoots it straight across the ice to Danny, who's placed himself right at the edge of the ice, and he plucks it up with the blade of his stick and moves it forward.

Hutch has speed, but I've got the position, right at the point, and I see Danny look over his shoulder for a second before he sends it through the gap he's created between his legs. I one-time it in the direction of the net, assuming that Hutch will be ready in time.

But when the red light buzzes, I stare at the opposing netminder for a second, checking that it's actually gone in. He's looking around for it, and the puck is jammed right on the edge of the net, but I spot the stripes pointing at the goal line.

Goal.

"Fucking A," someone shouts, banging my lid, and we hustle around for a group hug.

It's when I'm skating back to the bench that I spot her. My eyes lock onto hers, a grin spreads across her face, and there's fucking evil behind those eyes as she stares at me from a few rows behind the bench. I wouldn't have noticed her, except she's the only person sitting down.

My stomach lurches as I tear my eyes away from Sarah. And then my concentration is stolen by her request, hanging over me like a bad smell.

By the time the clock runs down the second period, I'm buzzing with an anxious energy, and I'm pissed off.

The third period trickles by, but I block six shots in the first ten minutes, and another four in the last eight, making sure I play my game with as much caution as I can. We're leading 2-1 and I'm not in the mood to let this thing go to overtime .

As I'm skating back to the bench, with two minutes left on the clock, I spot Kelly, standing right at the top of the block—at least I think it's her, anyway. She's talking with a blonde—fuck my life. She's talking to Sarah.

When the final buzzer sounds and we have to do all the post-game stuff, my eyes are flicking towards that spot, but neither Kelly nor Sarah is there. When we do the victory lap, I'm skating as slowly as I can so I can keep a lookout, but my blood is boiling with rage. Complete and utter rage.

I step off the ice first, snapping my stick over my knee as I exit, then tossing the remnants of it into the gutter of the bench. I don't pay anyone any attention as I head for the dressing room and no one attempts to talk with me, probably out of their better judgement.

I've never turned myself around so quickly from post-game to fully dressed, but I'm striding past the guys, and past Vicky, who yells after me as I push the double doors

open into the chilly December air.

I pull my phone out and immediately dial Kelly, but it goes to voicemail.

It goes to voicemail the following six times I try to call her, all while I'm driving to her place, but when I pull up outside, the lights are off, and the anxiety builds in my chest.

Just as I'm about to leave, my phone rings and Kelly's name flashes up on the screen. Relief floods through me when I answer, but it quickly diminishes when she talks.

"Johnny, I'm at your place and you need to come home. There's someone here to see you."

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

I get to Kelly's place just after one in the morning. She left me a key under an old plant pot near the front door, so I let myself in as quietly as I can before slipping into her room.

I lose my clothes quickly, keeping just my boxers on as I slide into her bed, wrapping my arms around her and kissing her neck.

At least her window's fixed, and it's not completely freezing in here.

"Hey, Johnny," she says, rolling over. "Are you okay?"

"I've been better," I say.

"What happened?" She reaches for the lamp on the table next to her bed, flicking the switch, and letting her eyes adjust to the light. "What did you say to Parker?"

"He's not going to say anything," I say.

"Johnny—"

She's thinking.

Overdrive.

"It'll be okay. He won't say anything. I told him that once things settle down for us, we'll tell Bettsy. "

She doesn't look convinced, and she'd be right not to be. I had to beg for his silence, and he insisted on giving me a lecture. Kelly being 'only' nineteen was at the top of his list. According to him, she'll likely fall in love easily and then cling on to me, but I don't believe it.

"Honestly, babe, it's fine. He's a good guy. Besides, once I told him all about Sarah, he shifted his focus. I just have to figure out my next step."

That bit wasn't a lie. Ffordey called Sarah, and I quote, 'a creature'.

"About Sarah. She sent me a message on social media, and she came to find me at your game. I spent the majority of it in the bar area—I'm still not ready to watch. I just thought you should know," Kelly says.

"What did she say?"

"The message on socials was just a general note begging me to see sense and cut you out. And then at the game, she asked me if I needed help getting away from you. Nothing I couldn't handle."

I exhale, thanking the stars that I don't even have to convince Kelly that Sarah is poison and manipulative. I don't have to convince her that she can trust me.

But instead of pushing Sarah out of my head, I move onto my back and lay there, staring at the ceiling.

Thinking.

Thinking about everything she said to me. All the horrible things she would say to get under my skin.

Am I incapable of loving anyone? Because I don't even know what I'm feeling right now. Angry, for sure, but not the same kind of anger I'm used to feeling. In fact, right now, I'm exasperated.

The more I lay here thinking, the more I allow myself to embrace my worries.

Highlight reel for Johnny:

Incapable of loving anyone, even his sister, apparently .

Incapable of having a sex-induced orgasm.

Incapable of having the balls to tell his best friend he's been fucking his sister. That one really hits me.

"Johnny? Stay in the moment with me." Kelly's voice floats right into my ear, and then her hand is on my chest. Warm and calming.

Incapable of getting called up.

Incapable of being the son my dad wanted.

"Remember when we first started chatting, and I called you an old man?" She laughs, probably hoping that I will too. "Remember our first kiss, Johnny? I thought about it for weeks after and I—"

Incapable of being the boyfriend someone wants. And to think—she cheated on me with Charlie. And he had the audacity to accuse me of cheating with her. After all she put me through.

"Johnny?"

And then there's Kelly.

Comforting. Funny. Beautiful inside and out. And driven. I love that she wants to carve her own way in the world—she doesn't need anyone else.

"I thought about it, too," I say, pulling myself back. "And I still think about it now. And... you know I wouldn't cheat on you, right?"

"I know."

"I wouldn't—I..."

"I know, Johnny."

I rub at the stubble on my face. Thinking.

Because even if I was the sort of person to cheat, it wouldn't be with her.

I can probably list a load of things I'd rather do than go near her again.

And one of them has to be taking Ffordey's place.

With no pads. Or a cup. I'd rather be pummelled with pucks to the head for sixty minutes than go near her again.

The thought alone has me laughing, well, chuckling to myself.

"Are you okay, Johnny?" she asks.

"What's funny is Sarah being a problem in my life long after I ended things with her.

Honestly, Kelly—she made me feel so weak.

Even if she was the last person on the planet, I'd play an entire game naked between the pipes rather than go there with her.

And she has the audacity to have Charlie thinking that I would. I mean come on."

And that's when my floodgates open. Years of keeping it all locked in. Because I'd told myself it was weak to cry.

I was weak.

"She stopped me from seeing my friends. She used to control all my money, tell me what I could or couldn't spend it on.

She used to tell me what I could wear, how I had to have my hair cut, and when I got offered the captaincy first, she told me I wasn't allowed to take it because it meant that I'd be spending more time focusing on hockey.

You know what? I even found out she was piercing holes in a stack of condoms. I caught her doing it.

And when I first told her I was going to leave, she told me she'd kill herself if I did.

What's someone supposed to do with that? "

Kelly stares at me for a moment, then I sigh.

"I'm so sorry that you went through that, Johnny. I can't imagine how that must have felt for you."

“Well, sure. But the worst part is, she told me she loved me. Who does that to someone they love? I don’t even believe it exists if I’m being honest.”

I wrinkle my nose. “You don’t believe what exists?”

“Love.”

“Well, I think it does. And you make me feel really loved, Johnny.”

Silence takes over me once again. And Kelly, patient and brilliant, lets me cohere my thoughts.

What can I even say to that?

My entire body swims with emotion, and before I know it, I pull at her arm, tugging her onto me so she’s straddling my hips.

And of course, my dick is nestled right between her legs.

But I’m looking right at her. Taking her in.

Her pink lips that plump when she kisses me, and those adorable freckles, and her long deep auburn locks that are really fucking smooth and shiny.

And then she sits up straight and pulls off the T-shirt she’s wearing. One of mine. The ‘C’ distorting slightly when she pulls it over her perfect breasts.

“Are you with me, Johnny?” she asks.

And I am.

I'm fixed on her. Everything about her has me in a trance.

I'm in the moment, reaching up and cupping her face in my hands for a moment, then tracing them down the smooth skin of her body and cupping her boobs.

Watching in complete fascination as her nipples harden under my touch.

And she moans on me, and I can feel her rubbing her pussy against the bulge in my pants.

I adjust our position so I can push my boxers down, freeing myself, and feeling completely in the moment.

When she moves to shimmy down the bed, knowing that she's likely planning on taking me in her mouth, I pull her back towards me, kissing her deep, letting our tongues meet as I smooth over her ass, feeling her skin hot under my hands.

"I need you," I whisper right into her mouth as I pull back slightly. There's a movement from her, and I feel the wetness of her pussy as her hands take my cock and push me inside her. Her panties are shoved to the side, and it's hot and dirty, like she's just as desperate for me.

My brain stops functioning as she sinks down onto me. The tightness. The heat. The fucking wetness. Everything about her has me prickling with excitement.

"Fuckkk," she whispers as she sits back.

And I glance down between us, seeing our bodies together.

I run my palm all the way down from her neck, over her nipples, and right down to her clit, where I graze it with my thumb. And when she rocks back, shifting her hips

slightly, creating a small motion, it's enough to have me seeing stars .

There's nothing about this that could get any better.

"That feels so good, Johnny," she gasps. I grip her hip with my other hand and try to match her rhythm.

"You feel so fucking good riding my dick," I say.

She moans and I feel shivers everywhere. I want to hear it again.

"Tell me how it feels for you," I coax.

"Fuck, Johnny. You're so deep—there. Right there."

And there it is. That moan, just as I thrust up into her at an angle that has her pussy tightening around me.

"I'm going to come for you, Johnny," she says. And those words.

She's going to come.

For me.

Just for me.

"For me?" I find myself asking. "Are you going to come for me?" It's barely a whisper.

"Yes, Johnny. I'm coming for you," she says, just as her voice gives away a moan that causes my balls to pull tight.

And then there's a feeling I'm sure I'm familiar with, but I'm not expecting.

Her name is on my lips and I'm coming. Right over the edge with her.

I'm coming hard, and the way her pussy tightens even more—I'm groaning.

Almost crying out in euphoria. Because it's like nothing I've felt before.

“I love you, Johnny.”

Then her lips are on mine and we're kissing. I've never been more in the moment than I am right now.

And then I'm crying. While my dick is still inside her. Because the moment is just so much, and I don't know what else to do. Or what else to say. I don't have any words.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

The team group chat is fired up. Texts flying back and forth all day, but I only check my phone after Kelly's show once I'm back in the hotel.

Bettsy

What the hell just happened?

Twinnies, where did you go?

Danny

Jenna just called me. No fucking way @Ryan Preston.

Hutch

What the hell is going on?

Danny

*wedding bells emoji *

Bettsy

Wait. Did someone get married?

Prez

Photo

My heart skips in my chest. Married? Ryan got married? I don't even think I can believe it until I tap on the photo and pinch the screen to zoom in. Yeah, it's him and Jen, alright. Donned in casual dress, standing outside the registry office.

Well, shit.

Without thinking, I call Ryan and he answers after the third ring, his voice a buzz of excitement on the line.

"You got married?" I ask. "Well, congratulations are in order."

"Yeah, bud. I mean, it was just for the paperwork stuff for the house. Last-minute cancellation. We're going to have a formal wedding soon. But I'm sorry you weren't there."

"Yeah, don't worry about it. I'm happy for you guys."

An unsettling feeling swims in my stomach, but since I'm so goddamn out of tune with my feelings, I have no clue what to think.

"Look, I know you're in a bit of a place right now, John. But I've got you, you know that, right?"

I'm just relieved he doesn't ask me about why I've been coming and going in the early hours of the morning.

"Yeah, of course. I just needed to take a few days," I say.

I had to. I needed the space from hockey. I think I'm coming to terms with the fact

that I may be able to feel something. Because I've been thinking about Kelly's words non-stop. She told me she loved me for one. And I came. Shit, I came, and we didn't use a —

“Johnny?”

“Sorry—I got distracted then.”

“Call your sister. She's really worried about you, bud.”

That knot sits heavy in my stomach. But I agree and hang up.

Before I call Vicky, I pull out my notebook and jot down the date and time, and pen a few words about the situation and how I'm feeling. Then I check it over before dialling Vicky's number.

“How are you, Johnny?” she asks, her voice shaking.

“I'm okay, Vic. I'm just feeling exhausted, and I need a break,” I say.

“Where did you go after the suit fitting?”

“I just needed to get away,” I say.

And then she starts flooding me with questions, but I get a notification that there's a call waiting and Kelly's contact card pops up.

“Look, I'll talk to you another time. Just trust me on this, will you? I know I'll miss Ladies' Night, and I'm sorry, but trust me.”

Once we hang up, I dial Kelly and she answers straight away.

“Where are you?”

“At your hotel. In the lobby,” I say.

And then I spot her hurrying towards me, cello in tow.

“Call the lift, quickly,” she says, looking behind her.

“What’s going on?” I ask, following her inside the elevator that’s stopped in front of us.

She nibbles her thumbnail as we ride up to the sixth floor, and as soon as the doors spring open, she leads me down the corridor and pulls inside room ‘606’.

“Darren is on to us,” she says as soon as the door closes behind me. “He started asking me all these questions, wondering why you’re here, and then—shit. He made out he was calling my brother and I panicked, Johnny.”

I take her cello from her, setting it in the corner, and then I walk forward and wrap my arms around her .

“Okay, so we didn’t think it through. We’ll figure it out,” I say.

She pulls back and looks right up at me. “Johnny—”

I lean down and kiss my name right from her mouth.

“What happened to that dress?” I ask, kissing her neck.

She giggles, and it sends a fucking shiver right through me.

“Johnny... I’m being serious here. I’m worried.”

“I’m sorry, I’m distracted,” I say, raising an eyebrow.

“Last night?”

“Fucking last night. Wanna see if we can do it again?”

I feel like my hunger for her has pushed all seriousness aside. And I’m fumbling out of my suit quicker than I care to admit. I want to be naked. And I want her naked. In that bed. Or on that dressing table, actually, because that looks good.

“Johnny,” she giggles, pushing at my chest.

“You realise seeing you playing today got me excited? You’re incredible. Do you know that?”

My hands find the hem of her T-shirt and I pull it over her head eagerly.

And as soon as she’s standing there, naked, right in front of me, my lips are on hers. Devouring. I’m desperate to feel her again.

Instead of going to the bed, I settle for the sofa, pulling her onto my lap and taking a nipple into my mouth. Hearing her moaning and running her hands through my hair with need is really fucking hot. I don’t even know myself.

“What are you doing to me?” I ask, pulling her mouth down to mine again.

“Johnny—yesterday we didn’t—”

“Shit,” I say. Halting in my tracks. “Do we need to?”

“No, I’m taking the pill but I just—”

“Well, fuck.”

I pull her in closer, so her pussy is right on my dick, and I adjust the position so the tip, right where my piercing is, is rubbing against her clit. I know I get the right spot when she flings her hair back and moans, pushing her perfect nipples right within reach of my tongue.

Honestly, I don’t even know how I survived before.

“Johnny, I think—”

I can’t help myself. I adjust my position again so I can slip inside her.

That tight, hot feeling completely engulfs me and takes my breath away.

I grip her hips and thrust into her, fast and hard.

I live for this. It takes me a matter of moments to come apart, to fall right over that edge as Kelly comes on top of me.

And I’m almost shaking by the time her lips find mine, completely transfixing me in whatever spell she’s put over me.

I don’t even notice that my phone is ringing. It’s vibrating in the pocket of my pants, and I let it ring a few times before the calls get more and more angry sounding. If a phone can sound angry, that is.

“You should get that,” Kelly says, kissing my jaw and shifting away from me. The coldness of her tone hits me and I look around for something to clean myself with as

she tosses me a pack of tissues from the counter.

When I finally get to my phone, I cover my dick with my boxers because it feels odd to talk to someone fully naked, especially when I see my dad's name on the screen.

I look at Kelly. "It's my dad."

"Oh?" she says, wrapping a robe around herself, then tossing one to me. "I hope everything is okay."

I shove my arms into the robe, which is snuggier than snug, and then I answer the next incoming call.

"Hey, son. Just checking in."

"Checking in? You've called me about five times. Is everything okay?"

I take only a few seconds to realise that he's been drinking. I can hear it in his voice.

"Just checking in, that's all. Seeing how my superstar is doing. "

"Superstar? You're kidding right?" I let out a burst of a laugh that I genuinely can't contain.

"What? Am I not allowed to miss my son?" he says, and I can hear his tone change slightly.

"Well, sure, but it's out of character."

"I see you're doing well with the Challenge Cup, Johnathan."

“Sure.”

“I mean, it’s hardly the Stanley Cup, but I guess we’ll get what we get.”

Kelly sits on the bed and ruffles her hair, her eyes not leaving mine. She mouths ‘are you okay’ and I nod, but I have no idea where this is going.

“Wow. Okay,” I say.

“But you know, Johnny—I expected you to tell me I was going to be a grandfather. I mean, after everything I’ve done for you and your sister—”

My heart hammers hard in my chest. And here comes the feeling. It creeps all the way through my body, warming my muscles.

“Excuse me?”

“I had to learn from Sarah—how do you think that made me feel?”

Kelly drops to her knees and scoots towards me, rubbing her hands on my thighs as I grit my teeth.

“Thanks for trusting her over me, I guess.”

“A man wouldn’t disown his child,” he says.

But I don’t think I want to hear anymore. That response was all I needed. I hang up and toss my phone past Kelly and onto the bed.

“Johnny?” she says, her voice soft, and I pull her onto me, needing the comfort she offers.

“That was the most bizarre conversation I’ve ever had,” I say. “I mean—fuck.”

She runs her hands through my hair as I hug her to my chest, and the rage that was building momentum through my body edges away slightly.

“Let’s go for a walk, Johnny. Let’s get dressed and go for a walk. Get some fresh air and maybe grab something to eat. Yeah?”

That is exactly what I need. And when I look right into her eyes and lean in to kiss her, I don’t think I can ever be without this girl.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

Apparently, the equipment storage room at the far end of the tunnels is a good spot for a little alone time. I hadn't known about it until Danny mentioned it in passing, so I grabbed the key from the key store earlier. It's not usually locked, but I want to be prepared.

As soon as Kelly calls me to say she's outside, I make sure the coast is clear and slip out of the dressing room, navigating to the double doors to let her inside. She's wearing a huge winter coat, and she looks so adorable.

"I'm so glad you're back," I say, pulling her inside.

"Where are we going?" she says as I lead her through the tunnels towards the storage room.

We slip inside and I look around, reaching for a crate and sliding it in front of the door before locking it from the inside—knowing my luck, someone else has a key and they'll be able to push my key out from the other side given the age of these locks.

"I've missed you, beautiful," I say, cupping her face in my hands .

"You can't be serious, Johnny. It stinks in here. It smells like—"

"Don't say it," I say, pressing my finger to her lips. "Forget about everything and come here."

She hums into me as I kiss her, and before I know it, her hands are pushing at the

waistband of my sweats. Pre-training kit is handy for this sort of thing.

“You’re hard already,” she says into my lips.

And when her hand grips my shaft, I let out a shudder.

“I’ve really fucking missed you,” I say.

My breath halts in my throat as she drops to her knees in front of me.

Teasing me, she works her way all the way from the base of my dick, right to the tip, and she moans onto me as she opens her mouth, letting me slip inside a little.

I can’t stop myself from running my hand through her hair, pushing her face into me a little as I try to coax more of me into her mouth.

But when I drop my head back to moan, she stands and kisses my chin.

“Do you have any tape around here?” she says.

I raise a brow at her. “Huh?”

And then she holds out her wrists, tight together. My dick leaks with excitement.

We’d talked about it briefly while she was away. I said I wanted to try a new position, and Kelly agreed that she was interested. And now she mentions it... this is the perfect place, given the circumstances.

“Take your coat off and stand next to the shelf,” I say, nudging her towards the steel railing that supports the side of the shelf.

I reach for a roll of tape and find the end, then I tape her wrists around the railing above her head, but with enough flex for her to bend her arms.

My heart is beating so hard, because we also talked about increasing the dirty chat. It is completely new for me, and, to put it bluntly, I'm embarrassed. What if she laughs at me? What if I say the wrong thing and she gets the ick ?

But here she is. Waiting for me to take control. And I figure I won't get better at it unless I try and see how she reacts.

I tug the zip of her jeans down and pop the button.

"Are you wet for me?" I whisper into her ear.

"Yes," she pants.

"Have you missed me?"

She nods.

"Good. Now let me give you what you need, beautiful."

She practically purrs as I kiss her neck. I slip her jeans down; she swallows.

"Is this what you need?" I ask, reaching for her underwear and tugging them down.

"Yes," she says.

"Do you need my dick to make you feel good, Kelly?"

Another nod.

“I want you to tell me,” I say, kissing her jaw. “Tell me what you want, and I’ll give it to you.”

“I want you to fuck me, Johnny.”

I rub my hand over my dick, still exposed from the blowjob, then rub the head right onto her clit.

“Yeah? Do you want me to make you come, baby? Spread your legs a little wider,” I say, nudging them open with my knee.

And with a few adjustments, we find the right angle.

I get her clit with my piercing like before and she writhes against the tape, eyes closing and mouth parting as she moans.

And when I edge myself into her, she gasps, so I slide my hands up under her shirt to toy with her nipples, teasing her even more.

“Hold still and relax for me. I want to go deep,” I tell her, eyes locked on each other as I push in.

I take a deep breath in, letting myself adjust to her. Because despite how busy we’ve been in the bedroom, it never gets old—she always feels fucking incredible .

I watch my dick disappear and I slide out again, before thrusting in slowly, building a steady rhythm, trying to hold back a little, willing the moment to last longer.

“Please, Johnny,” she says, biting her lip and looking down between us.

“You want me to make you come?” I say.

“Yes.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” she says.

“If I rub your clit for you, are you going to be a good girl for me, and come on my dick?”

I don’t even know where that came from, but I’m going with it. She quivers around me, so that must be a good sign.

“Yes. Please.”

Having her practically begging for it is more than enough to entice me. I drop one hand to her clit and move in circles, building up the speed with the rhythm of my fucking. I bury my head in her neck to nibble on her skin; delicate and fresh and just so very her .

“Johnny—”

She comes on my dick just as the door rattles.

“Shit,” I say, probably a little too loud. And in the panic, I pull out and yank her jeans up, forgetting about my dick.

A moment later, there are footsteps walking away from the room, and I glance back at Kelly, the horror on her face making me feel a little queasy.

“Johnny—ohmigod.”

I pull the tape off her wrists and then fix myself, except I'm harder than ever—the thought of getting caught pulling at my balls, and I need to come.

“There's no way I can go out there like this,” I say. “I'm going to have to finish.”

Kelly fixes her clothes before stepping towards me, lowering her voice. “Do you think they've gone? ”

We listen hard for a moment and I nod. “I heard footsteps walking away, so—”

“Okay, but make it quick,” she says, dropping to her knees.

It doesn't take me long at all, and I bite my tongue as I come down her throat a moment later.

Then, I get to work cleaning up as best as I can before putting the room back to how we found it.

“How was the dirty talk, by the way? Any feedback is welcome.” I grin, trying to push past my embarrassment.

Kelly giggles. “It was fine.”

“Just fine? Damn.”

“Okay, it was great. I mean, I had a good time.”

Pulling her face towards mine, I drop a kiss onto her lips and make a mental note to do more research.

I'm also stalling, because there's something I'm keen to ask her, and I'm feeling

really fucking nervous about what she may say.

“Are you okay?” she asks, cocking her head to the side. “Was it okay for you?”

“Oh, heck yeah. I just... how do you feel about spending Christmas in Canada with me?” I ask.

It’s been something I’ve been mulling over ever since I got back from Kelly’s tour. Since having those few days together really set me up for wanting more. I’m so keen to have more one-on-one time with her. And I figured, if we go to Canada, we’d have the whole place to ourselves.

“What?” she asks, cocking her head to the side. “Are you kidding?”

“No. How do you feel about it? I mean, you don’t have to, but I remember you telling me Christmas hasn’t been the same since Jeremy... and I figured that it may be nice to give you a new memory of it. We can stay at my mom’s place since she’s never there. I can fix your plane ticket.”

“I don’t know, Johnny. What would I tell my parents?”

“Shit. I guess, just tell them you’re spending it with a friend? ”

Kelly’s expression changes from pensive to something a little more curious.

“And your mom wouldn’t be there?”

“Well, she never is. But if you wanted to meet her—”

“Can I think about it?”

“Which part? Coming or meeting her?”

“Both. I just want to make sure it’d be okay. And I have some savings, Johnny. I wouldn’t want you paying for my ticket.”

She pulls out her phone and curses at the poor signal.

“You do realise we’d only be there for like three days? With your schedule and—”

“I guess you’re right,” I say, realising that I’m probably talking with my dick. But then she turns to me with a glint in her eye.

“You know what? Fuck it. Let’s do it.”

The universe is on our side, because whoever was trying to force their way in earlier is nowhere to be seen when I peek around the door to sneak Kelly out.

And when she’s safely out of the back door, I wander back to the locker room. It’s as if I never left. In fact, I blend right into the background—which is fine by me.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

This has to be the wildest thing I've ever done.

Literally.

I rack my brain for anything that'd come close to this, but I think this is actually it; travelling for over half a day to get to Johnny's mother's place all the way on a completely different continent.

I've never been outside of Europe before and here I am, in Canada, for Christmas.

As soon as I saw the mountains—the mountains that are everywhere I look—I knew I'd made the right decision to sack off the holidays at my parents' house, because it's like nothing I've seen before. British Columbia makes the mountains back home look like molehills.

Johnny's mother's house is right on the edge of the mountains, and it's so beautiful, I want to cry. It's comprised of expansive rooms with a log cabin feel I want to tell everyone about. Except, the only person I can tell is Tom, because he's covering for me .

“Why the hell did you pick Britain over this?” I ask, gazing out of his old bedroom window. The scene outside is, of course, the mountains, and countless fir and spruce trees.

Johnny moves behind me and wraps his arms around my shoulders, finding my neck with his lips.

“I’d never have met you if I didn’t. I think the logic works out.”

I turn around and study his face. His handsome face that I think I’ve fallen in love with—even though we’re not talking about the ‘L’ bomb I dropped during sex weeks ago; Johnny hasn’t brought it up, and nor have I.

“Speaking of home, we need to carry on like we’re on UK time. Trust me. It’ll make returning a load easier.”

I welcome the notion, because I’m ready to pass out from exhaustion.

The first thing we did once we got here was take showers. Then Johnny ordered in some food, and I’ve been fighting the fatigue ever since.

Nevertheless, I do agree with him, because neither of us has time to adjust back to UK time once we get home, so pushing another hour and setting an alarm to wake up at ‘normal’ time tomorrow is probably the best idea.

When we finally climb into his bed, he pulls me close, settling on a steady rhythm of stroking my arm while we lie in silence.

My eyes droop closed almost immediately, because I’m tired, I’m really fucking tired. But my head is reeling, and there’s only one topic on my mind.

The more I try to push my thoughts away, the harder they root themselves in. And when I try my countdown from one hundred, I get through it twice before Johnny’s voice breaks the silence.

“I can hear you thinking,” he says.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Do you want to talk about it? ”

He shifts in bed, turning towards me. Though I can’t see him properly, I can make out the outline of his face.

“I’m just worried about telling Mike,” I say.

It’s all I’ve been thinking about, if I’m being honest. Ever since that close call in my bedroom, I’ve been worrying how he’ll react when we tell him. At least I think it’ll be a ‘we’ thing, anyway.

“I understand. But please, try not to worry. I’ll talk to him, and he’ll understand.”

“Will he, John? Because I’m not sure.”

Johnny says nothing. Instead, he reaches for my cheek and pulls my face towards him, dropping his lips onto mine.

“If he doesn’t, then I’ll do all I can to convince him we’re a good idea.”

My heart dances through my chest, because that’s been another thing on my mind—the unrequited ‘L’ word I said.

He hasn’t even mentioned it, and since I know it’s probably unlikely that he’s there yet, I don’t mention it either.

“I think it should be me,” I say. “I should be the one to tell him.”

Johnny sucks in a breath. “I actually don’t agree. I think it needs to come from me.”

“But he’ll be furious with me—for keeping this to myself.”

“Yeah, and he’ll be furious with me, but at least I can hold my own.”

“He wouldn’t attack me, though,” I say.

My thought process follows the rationale that Johnny will have broken legs by the end of the interaction, whereas I’ll probably end up in tears—which is fixable.

“It’ll be fine, babe. Leave your brother to me.”

I roll over and snuggle into the pillow, hoping that Johnny is right. Because what’s the alternative?

“Kelly?”

“Yeah?”

“I should probably tell you something,” Johnny says .

I flip onto my other side and gaze towards him in the darkness. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. But I just wanted you to know I told Sarah I wasn’t going to give her any money.”

I extend my arm, searching for his hand in the dark.

Before we were due to board our flight, Sarah texted him and asked if he’d made a decision. She gave him an ultimatum: either he pay up, or she’d go to the local media about him—alluding that he’s a liar and has fathered a child he wants nothing to do with.

Johnny had laughed out loud when he read the message, but I could tell it was

playing on his mind. Instead of the chirpy Johnny I'd become accustomed to, he was back to his old ways of short answers and sharp attitude.

But I let him be. I gave him time to think and to stew over it.

And rather than try to influence his decision, I held back, knowing that he'd do what was right for him—and I'd support him no matter what.

Even if I didn't agree with his decision.

Besides, he knew what I thought. I didn't need to remind him.

“And there's a good chance my dad will show up and kick up a fuss. I've told him I want nothing more to do with him, either.” Johnny rolls onto his back. “Out with the crap, Kelly. Out with the crap.”

“So that's it then?” I ask, tucking myself into the crease of his deltoid.

“Yep. Both Vicky and I. Cutting the rope. He can go fuck himself for all I care.”

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

He still hasn't told him.

And I feel sick with worry because we're now seeing in a New Year. A New Year that was supposed to start with no secrets.

Except Johnny maintains the guise that he hasn't found the right time yet.

And I finish telling Tom all about it just as carnage ensues at the New Year's Eve party which he is throwing in our student house.

And if there's anything I've learnt in my nineteen years, it's that I can't deal with it. I'm physically incapable of confrontation with strangers—even ones that burst into our home.

Not only does Darren show up with a plus one, but someone Tom fooled around with before Christmas turns up with a load of his friends.

“What are we going to do?” Marie asks, eyeing the crowd of delinquents that settle themselves in the corner of the living room .

One of them picks up the lamp and swings it around by the cord, and my stomach tenses with queasiness.

“I'd call Jake, but he's away with the team,” Marie says, worrying her lip.

She's onto something, because her rugby-playing boyfriend would definitely get them removed.

She exhales and looks at me, saying, “Can you call your fella?”

“No. But I can call my brother.”

Mike, Hutch, Danny, and, of course, Johnny turn up twenty minutes later, all dressed in post-game suits that have girls staring with eyes like pucks as they filter in.

Honestly, this is like something out of James Bond, because all of them are donning expressions that say ‘I mean business.’

“What the hell is going on?” Mike says, coming to a stop next to me.

“It’s Johnny,” Tom shouts at the top of his voice, turning his head to project his speech over the music. And since I take longer than a second to answer, he’s hell-bent on getting a response. “Kelly? Didn’t you hear me? Johnny’s here.”

“Yes, Johnny is here,” I say.

I see him. And he sees me. Our eyes lock for a moment before a smile creeps across his face.

Bloody Johnny and his handsome face. Honestly, I could scream at him right now.

“Who the hell are those guys?” Mike says, breaking the gaze between me and Johnny.

“Don’t ask. But we can’t get them to leave,” I say, ignoring Tom’s hoots of excitement. “They weren’t invited, nor are they welcome.”

“J-Dog. Can I call you J-Dog?” Tom says, right in Johnny’s face .

Johnny sniggers, patting Tom on the shoulder. “Do you need some water, bud?”

And when I tell you Tom almost faints, I’m not exaggerating, but all the attention shifts to the crowd of boys, who’ve just spotted the looming hockey players. They slip into the kitchen, leaving a trail of un-plumped cushions and a broken lamp behind them.

Johnny sits Tom down on the sofa before navigating through our living room towards the kitchen, right behind Mike and Danny.

There’s shouting, then the smash of something, then the sound of a cupboard slamming, and moments later, cheers erupt in the living room as the intruders are escorted out.

“They made that look so easy,” Marie says, downing the rest of her drink. “But I think it’s time for a refill.”

I follow her into the kitchen, and assess the damage—which is luckily just a few glasses.

Marie and I rummage around in the fridge, looking to see what’s left when Darren waltzes in, followed by his new girlfriend.

“You know things are bad when even Darren can get a date,” Marie whispers into my ear.

Then the shrill tone of Darren’s voice cuts through the air.

“Kelly, I wanted to introduce you to—”

“Kel, a word please?”

Mike pokes his head around the door frame and my stomach drops.

Has Johnny told him?

I study his face, trying to decide if he knows or not, and relief washes over me when I realise this is nothing about Johnny.

But of course, Darren is here, so it's only a matter of time before he sticks his size tens in the mix. He holds his hand out to shake Mike's.

“Nice to see you again, Mike. Hope hockey is treating you well. ”

Mike stares at him for a moment then shakes his hand, trying to maintain the manners that Mam enforced upon us.

And when Johnny appears behind him, I practically leap in between Darren and Mike—because there's no way in hell that Darren is outing me. Not now. Not ever.

I wiggle through the gap between them and motion for Mike to lead us away from the kitchen.

“Do you mind if we head off? Ryan and Jen are having a little bit of a party back at their place for the team, well, and the WAGs and stuff—I'm just glad I'm not the only single fucker there. Isn't that right, Johnny?”

Mike slaps Johnny on the back and Johnny looks away, just as my eyes meet his.

Because that's the thing about this. I'm just Mike's sister—not in a position to be seen with Johnny outside of the comfort of our own bedrooms, really.

And it's really starting to grate on me.

And what's worse? Johnny stands there and says nothing.

"Yeah, that's fine. Thanks for coming to help."

"See you next week," Mike says, following Hutch and Danny out.

Johnny looks at me for a second, then nods before trailing after my brother.

"Is your boyfriend not staying?" Darren says, coming to a stop behind me. "Because now, more than ever, I'm convinced that there's something going on—something you're keeping from your brother."

"Why are you even here?" I say, turning towards him. "No one invited you. In fact—"

But then there's a vibrating from the pocket of my jeans. And since I'm more invested in that than I am in Darren, I shift away from him and pull my phone out.

Johnny

I really wish I could see in the New Year with you.

Kelly

Tell him then.

Johnny

I will. I just need to find the right time.

Kelly

Are you having second thoughts?

Johnny

Not at all. I just need to find the right time.

Kelly

Will you tell him before my sister's wedding?

We'd had a brief conversation about Johnny being my plus one. But it's seeming more and more unlikely the longer this drags on. And I'm not sure if it's the booze I've drunk, but I'm getting pretty pissed off.

Johnny

I'm not sure. I hope so. Like I said, I just need to find the right time.

What's the point in being in love with someone—who you think may feel the same, when you can't do the things that couples do together?

Johnny

Can I come see you later tonight?

But I'm too pissed off to reply.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

My brother's idea of a wedding is getting pissed and dad-dancing until the DJ calls it a day, but since he's got morning skate at an ungodly hour—his words—he's forced to be sensible.

“Honestly, I can't wait for this to be over,” he says, sipping at the glass of water he's clutching. “What is it with weddings? Because this is torture.”

“It's not that bad,” I say, looking over at Stacey and her new husband—who is still a prick. And I feel it too. This is torture.

He follows my gaze and grunts.

My sister's wedding is on a Thursday, to accommodate Mike's schedule and save money since it's cheaper. But although this is supposed to be the happiest day of Stacey's life, Mike and I are both miserable—but for different reasons.

We're hovering near the bar, watching the happy couple travel around the room, thanking people for attending.

“It makes you sick though, doesn't it?” Mike says, glancing around the room.

“The wedding?” I ask .

“No. People being happy. And in love.”

“What happened to that girl from speed dating?” I ask, but he scowls at me.

“Honestly, Kel. I’m sick of dating now. Most of the women I meet are trying to tick a box labelled ‘hockey player’. They don’t actually care about who I am.”

“Maybe if you stopped putting yourself out there as much, you’d have more chance,” I say, taking another sip of my drink. “You don’t want to get a reputation as a fuck boy.”

Mike cringes. “I already think that’s the case, to be honest, but I don’t want to talk about that with you. I’m just glad Johnny is a stone wall and down to be single forever. At least we’ll have each other in our old age.”

I nod, feeling the guilt settle in my stomach. Because Johnny still hasn’t told him. And there’s no way in hell I can either.

“What about Ellie?” I ask, trying to shift Mike’s thoughts away from Johnny.

“Found her on Facebook. She’s engaged. Everyone is pairing off, Kel.”

Auntie Julie, our mam’s sister, ambles over to us, leaning against the bar while she tries to flag the server down.

“It’ll be your turn next, Kelly,” she says, cheeks flushing from the wine she’s been drinking all day. Mike and I were seated at the same table as her, so we witnessed it firsthand. “Are you seeing anyone?”

“No. And Mike insists I don’t date,” I say, finally grateful for the excuse.

But he chooses now of all times to change his mind.

“I’m actually thinking of lifting the ban,” he says. “No point in Kelly being as miserable as I am.”

He's frowning. A genuine frown that shows nothing but heartache.

"In that case—what do you think about him?" Auntie Julie points to a guy sitting at a spot a few tables away. He downs a pint, then slams the empty glass down on the table before whooping at the top of his voice.

"Who the hell is that?" Mike asks, straightening up.

"Maggie's son. He's lovely. Said he was hoping to meet a nice girl here today."

I don't know who Maggie is, but I'm not keen on meeting her son, either.

Mike scowls. "I bet he fucking did. But it's a no thanks to him. Ain't that right, Kel?"

I have to agree with him, because, despite everything, I want Mike to approve.

Not only is he such an important person to me, but seeing how he and Stacey's new husband are together breaks my heart. It's not a brother-in-law relationship that anyone would want, really. And the question sits heavy in my chest—would Mike be okay with Johnny?

"I'm not interested," I say. "Thanks anyway."

"Why, love? He's a good-looking boy."

"Yeah, but I'm... busy with uni and music and that."

"Ah, so you are seeing someone, then?" Auntie Julie asks, raising her pencil-thin eyebrows.

"No."

“I can see the twinkle in your eyes,” she says. “Tell me more.”

“She’s not seeing anyone, Auntie Jule. Besides, if there’s a chance that she’ll end up with someone like Stacey, then I’m getting involved, whether she likes it or not.”

My heart thunders in my chest.

What do I do? What do I say? Should I break the plan and tell Mike myself right now?

“Mike?”

“I’m just going to take a leak, Kel. I’ll be back soon.”

I watch him disappear through the double doors of the event space.

“What’s going on then, Kel? Tell me because I can see it written all over your face.”

But the scenarios play in my head. What if Mike disowns me? Doesn’t want to associate with me any longer—and Johnny? What if he refuses to play on the same team as him?

It could ruin Mike’s career—his chance for Team GB.

It could ruin Johnny’s career, too.

“I need to go,” I say to Auntie Julie, and I turn on my heel and amble out of the room towards the reception desk.

Because I need to cry in peace.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

My brother chokes on his pre-nap snack when I phone him on Saturday afternoon. I timed my call perfectly, ensuring that it's just before his nap time because waking him up to ask him for a favour wouldn't go down well.

“And you want the tickets... for you?” he says, trying to suppress another chortle.

“I don't understand why this is so funny,” I say.

“Because it's you asking me for tickets. I mean—who are you and what have you done with Kelly?”

“So, can I have one or not?” I say, chewing on the end of my pencil.

I've got my music score sheets spread out in front of me, reviewing a part of my third piece that I'm planning to play on Monday for my audition, except, I'm freaking out and I need one of Johnny's pep talks.

One that'll ground me and give me a level head when I go to my audition on Monday—because right now, I'm a complete fucking mess.

I opened our texting thread at least six times before closing it again, reading over the last few lines of messages. My heart hurts.

Kelly

I'll see you once we figure it out, Johnny. I can't keep this a secret any longer.

Johnny

But can I see you?

Kelly

It'll only make things harder.

Johnny

I'm sorry

Can I call you at least?

I hope you're doing okay.

How's your practice going?

Please just let me know you're okay.

Kelly

I'm okay x

I'm as desperate to see him as he is me.

And it's only been two weeks.

But right now—this is the only thing I can think of as part of my plan. Just getting a glance of him in his natural habitat, and you never know, he may see me and realise that I am still here, and I support him. Because if I can do this, he can surely tell

Mike.

“Just the one? Not bringing Tom or whoever? Or Darren?”

There’s a playful jibe in Mike’s tone, which pisses me off. “Why would you mention Darren?”

“Oh, I bumped into him the other day in town, and he mentioned—” My soul nearly escapes. “—that he still really likes you.”

Phew.

I can live with that.

“Well, he can suck it. But the ticket, Mike...”

“Right. I’ll be sure they’re ready for you to collect from the box office. If they ask for a passcode, it’s ‘Bettsy is a legend’.”

He laughs at his own joke, and I cringe.

“I only need the one,” I say, pulling the conversation back to business.

“Sure, whatever. I’ll fix it. But you best be coming to actually watch the game and not mope around in the bar area. Because we’re making waves here, Kel. We’re on fire, and Ffordey and the twins are—”

“—bringing the best out of the team,” I say without even thinking.

A nervous laugh rumbles down the line. “How do you know how they’re doing?”

Shit.

My eyes flick over towards my open laptop, a copy of Johnny's dissertation, work in progress, on the screen. I said I'd review it for him before Christmas, and this morning I finished—but it's put him right back in my mind. And his approach to leadership is in the forefront of my mind.

"I just pay attention to the social media feeds. I take an interest, you know."

And I'm obsessed with Johnny.

He makes a noise that has me under the impression that he doesn't really believe me, but he doesn't press anymore, opting to say goodbye in favour of his nap .

And it's only when I'm sitting in the post-call silence that it really hits me—I'm going to watch a hockey game.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

I get a text from Mike to meet him outside the dressing room after the game, with instructions to look for Vicky, Johnny's sister, as she'll get me to where I need to go.

I spot her when there are a few minutes left on the clock—just before the guys are ready to progress to the Challenge Cup finals—she beckons for me to head down to the barrier and then instructs some security guy to let me through.

The stench of cold and sweat hits my nose, but it's one of the few times where I can't focus on it enough to be repulsed.

I'm shaking with anticipation because it's either going to be news that he's made the preliminary roster for Team GB, or that Johnny's told him—but Johnny couldn't have told him since they've both been out on the ice tonight.

"It's nice to see you again," Vicky says, flashing a smile. "We didn't get a chance to meet each other properly last time."

She looks at me with a glint in her eye and I see it straight away.

She knows .

But she grins and slips away, leaving me standing here, awkwardly waiting for the end of the game.

And then the final buzzer sounds and the nerves kick up a notch. Because I'm shaking now. Trembling with worry—and I hate surprises, so this is a nightmare.

The post-game awards begin, and I spot Johnny and his vacant smile as he involves himself in conversation with some of the guys from the opposition.

It's one of the smiles he does when he's acting. It's the smile of the 'Alternate Captain'—except there's an 'A' stitched on his jersey. My heart drops. He really is the Alternate Captain.

“And tonight's 'Man of the Match' award...”

I don't even pick up who wins it, because my head is spinning. Why would he give up his captaincy? And why didn't Mike mention it?

I run it over in my head, right up until the bench door opens, followed by the heavy sound of skates on the rubber matting.

Then he's there. Towering over me in his gear.

Tom would jizz in his pants right now, because Johnny is really fucking handsome—all hot and sweaty and tall. He's really tall.

“Hey,” Johnny's voice cuts through the music that's blasting over the PA system.

I don't even know what to say to him, because I was expecting Mike to be the first one to greet me. But he looks... different, somehow. And he beams at me. His face lights up. And my stomach becomes so light it's floating.

He puts his helmet and gloves down on the floor next to us before tugging his jersey off, his underlayer tight over his torso. His eyes lock on mine as he hands it to me, damp with sweat and completely disgusting—but I take it from him.

“This is for you.”

“For me?”

“Yeah. You came to a game,” he says, still smiling .

“I wanted you to know that I’m still waiting for you,” I say, my voice shaking.

“I’m really fucking glad,” he says. “Because I told him. Long story short. He saw the note you left me and—”

“Oh, fuck.”

“I was telling him anyway,” he says, stepping right up towards me. “I told him I’m in love with you.”

There’s an emotion bubbling through me I can’t even comprehend.

Did he just say—

“Did you just say—”

“I love you. I really fucking love you.”

And sweaty hockey player or not, I step towards him, closing the gap. “And Mike?”

“Jelly!”

The word flies through the air, and I glance over at my brother. My cheeks flame red.

Shit.

“Mike, I—”

“I got selected for the preliminary roster, Kel!”

And there’s an almost deafening roar of cheers and excited chatter as the rest of the team leaves the ice. Mike edges closer, pushing Johnny aside so he can scoop me up into a hug.

“Does he make you happy? Cap, I mean. Does he?”

“Yes.”

He nods once, then turns to Johnny. “Do I need to remind you about the leg breaking thing... because—”

“Got it,” Johnny snaps.

Then Mike steps away, joining the back of the line towards the dressing room, leaving Johnny and I standing alone, bar the support staff.

“I love you,” he says again. “And I’m sorry for being such a fucking—”

“I love you,” I say, and then he leans down and touches my cheek with his rough hand that he pulled right out of his glove—still moist and sweaty.

But I don’t care that he stinks. My lips find his sticky, clammy face, and I still don’t care.

I really don’t. I don’t know how long we kiss for, but I pull away, taking in a deep breath before speaking. “And I need you.”

“Like, need me?” he says, in a voice that needs no explanation.

“Well, yeah, but I need a pep talk. For Monday. Because this is big, Johnny. And I need you.”

“I got you, beautiful. Give me, like, twenty minutes and I’ll be out.”

What’s weird is that when Johnny emerges from the dressing room and heads straight for me, I don’t feel awkward.

And no one bats an eye when he lifts me up and swings me in a circle.

“Do you need the pep talk now or do you fancy celebrating with the team?”

“I—”

The nerves swim in my stomach because this is completely different territory. But he gives me a reassuring squeeze of the hand and I nod, letting him lead the way.

And celebrate we do.

We cheer Danny and Mike as they make it to the bar which Johnny selected for the evening.

“I gave Danny the ‘C’ for this reason,” he says. “Because I know it’d be the icing on the cake for him, so to speak. Give him the boost he needs to be really seen.”

And Johnny—the most selfless person I know, with a heart the size of the world, kisses me, right there, in front of everyone.

And no one pays us any attention—at least, I don’t think they do. Because I’m all about Johnny.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:28 am

Kelly sinks down on top of me as my phone rings.

“Ignore it,” I say, encouraging her to start a rhythm by grabbing her hips. “Just ignore it.”

Shifting my hand from her side, I run my thumb over her clit, just enough to tease her.

She grinds down on me and I can’t think of a time where it felt this good—apart from the other times, but still.

“Johnny, it’s ringing again,” Kelly says, running her hands up and down my chest to get my attention.

But it has the opposite effect. Her touch ignites me and spurs me on. I grip her firmly, breathing, “Just keep going, forget about it.”

“John—”

Impatience gets me, so I grab her hips and roll her onto the bed, working my hips to build a rhythm that has her squealing beneath me.

“Do you like that?” I ask, breathing into her neck. “Do you like the way my dick fills that tight little hole?”

“Oh, my—I wasn’t expecting...”

“Shh. Unless you’re begging me for more, I don’t want to hear it,” I say, a wicked grin breaking out across my face.

Her mouth forms the perfect ‘o’ and I wonder if this is too much—until she licks her lips gently and nods her head.

“You’re going to come for me soon, yeah? And I’m going to fill you up, beautiful. I’m going to fill that tight pussy of yours because it’s mine, remember?”

Christ, the dirty talk I’ve been trying to master is flowing now, and it’s getting me hot. I think I’m going to explode really fucking soon.

“It’s yours, Johnny,” she says, moaning beneath me.

And I reach for her clit again, kissing her neck and whispering right into her ear as I adjust my position, so she’s pressed into me.

My hand shifts and I grip her neck, ever so gently.

“Look at me and tell me you want it. Tell me you want me to fuck you like you’re mine.”

Her eyes flutter and she moans, and I try my hardest to keep the rhythm up as I edge closer to paradise.

“I want it, Johnny. I want you to come inside me. Please, come inside me.”

“Yeah, that’s it. You’re taking it so good, baby. You feel fucking incredible—have I told you that? And I want you to come while I’m buried inside of you—while I’m giving you what you want.”

And she cries out, my hand keeping her head aligned with mine so I can look right in

her eyes as she comes apart, her pussy tightening around me as she comes. And I feel it. The love between us in such a way that has me spending my load right inside of her.

My favourite place to come.

“Johnny—”

“Hmph.”

“Your phone is still ringing,” she says .

I loosen myself from her and reach for my nightstand, not even bothering to keep the sheets clean at this point.

“Okay—what?” I say, putting my phone to my ear.

“Finally,” Vicky says, exasperated. “John, I need a favour.”

“Is everything okay?” The guilt in my chest turns up a notch.

“Can you come and give me away?”

“Excuse me?”

“Look—Liam and I are getting married. Please don’t tell me I can’t or whatever, but I want you to give me away.”

“When?”

“In an hour.”

Well, fuck me—again.

Part of me wonders if she's serious, but this is Vicky. She's impulsive. But I check anyway.

“Are you kidding?”

“No. Look, Liam and I—well, you know. But we're doing it. Today. And we'd love for you to be there. Please, Johnny?”

I shift my gaze to Kelly, who, hearing the conversation from the volume of the call, beams at me.

“Text me the details, and I'll be there.”

I feel... odd. Almost like I knew this was coming, but also didn't fully comprehend that it would ever happen either. I leap out of bed and head towards the bathroom, because there's no way I'm going anywhere without a shower, and I'm expecting Kelly to be right behind me, but she's not.

“Are you coming, beautiful?” I ask, peeking around the door frame at her.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, you're my girlfriend. You're coming.”

Shit. I've not said that out loud before, but I don't hate it.

I disappear back into the bathroom, turning the shower on and waiting for a second, letting the water run hot before stepping in. And a moment later, Kelly's familiar arms wrap around me from behind.

"I don't think you've called me your girlfriend before," she says.

I turn to face her and plant a kiss on her lips. "Is that okay?"

"Yes," she says. A troublesome grin forms on her face and she grabs the soap with a washcloth from the shower shelf. "How long do we have?"

She spins me around and starts lathering up my back.

"Not long—maybe say, half an hour?"

"That's enough," she says, dropping to her knees.

"What're you—oh fuck."

I have a feeling I know exactly what she's doing. And my dick, spent just a few moments ago, is hard again, begging for the attention that it's not going to be getting straight away.

"Lean forward a little," she says, pulling at my hips to bend.

I set my hands in front of me on the wall of the shower. Bracing myself.

Then I feel it. The washcloth right between my ass cheeks. Then she parts me and adjusts her position, the water from the shower beating down on us as she slips her tongue right onto my asshole.

She probes around, not penetrating me straight away, but teasing me. And it's enough

to have me wanting to pull my hand away from the wall to jerk my dick.

Then her tongue flicks over my hole, and I gasp, almost choking on the air in my lungs as she works me right where I need it.

“Fuck.”

“Is that okay?” she asks, taking a moment away.

And I grunt—it’s all I can manage as I feel her tongue intimately exploring me in a way I wouldn’t want anyone else doing.

“That’s really fucking good, baby,” I breathe. “But I need more. ”

I need to come.

And she knows exactly how to get me there.

She obliges, her touch gentle yet purposeful. I can sense her finger delicately exploring, gradually making its way inside. At the same time, her other hand firmly wraps around my shaft, sending a jolt of pleasure through my body.

“Yes,” I hiss. Or at least I think I do—because I’m ignited. Hard, and eager for faster strokes.

I meet her hand on my dick, taking over the stroking as I chase the release that I know she’s working me up to. Giving her a little more room to focus on the finger she’s got buried inside me gets me there in a flash, and I’m groaning loudly, coming all over the wall of the shower.

“Fuck.”

She gets to her feet and shimmies under the stream of water, washing herself before turning towards me.

“Any more thoughts on pegging?” There’s a grin on her face that I can’t help but mirror. Because I’m high on my second orgasm of the day.

“You can do whatever the hell you want to me if it’s that good.”

Liam ambles out of a side room in the registry hall, closely followed by Ryan as they make their way towards me in their matching suits.

“You remember, Kelly, right?” I say, pulling her right beside me and draping my arm around her shoulders.

“Yeah, nice to see you. Thanks for coming,” Liam says.

“Where’re the guys?” I ask.

“It’s just us,” Liam says.

“Well, and Jen. She’s just in with Vicky. But—we’re just doing this as a little thing. No big deal for now. But you can’t tell Bettsy because he’s expecting a huge stag-do or whatever it’s called.”

Both Kelly and I groan audibly. “We can’t keep any more secrets,” I say.

“It’s not your secret to tell, anyway. Besides, Vicky and I are having a big event in the summer—with Jen and Ryan.”

“A joint wedding?” I ask.

“Well, sort of. More like a two-day extravaganza.”

I gape at him, but the sound of a door opening in the distance pulls my attention away, and Jen beckons me towards her.

“Come on,” I say to Kelly, leading her away.

Vicky looks incredible. A huge white gown that is very... Vicky, and her hair in a wave over her shoulders.

“Thanks, Jen,” she says. “I’ll be fine with Johnny.”

And Jen ambles out, steering Kelly away with her.

“Vic—”

“Do I look okay?” she says, tears forming in her eyes.

“You look beautiful. Like in an ugly way,” I say with a grin.

“Thanks, Johnny.”

“Are you sure you want me to—you know...”

“Of course I do,” she says, stepping towards me, her gown billowing out behind her.

She really does look beautiful.

“Come here,” I say, pulling her into a hug. She sniffs loudly and I glance down to see that she is trying hard to not sob. “Hey, don’t cry. You’ll probably ruin your make-up or something.”

“You’re different,” she says, looking up at me, a smile creeping across her face.

“You’re happy, Johnny.”

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

“You’re in love,” she says, her eyes brightening.

“I’m in love, Vic.”

There’s a moment of stillness as we just stand there hugging.

It feels like everything we’ve gone through has led us up to this moment.

I wouldn’t say we were always close or anything, but we have a bond—probably more than a sibling thing.

Probably because we’ve both lived through the same experience of our parents.

Except, Vicky had Liam. And it’s only now, when I’ve opened my own heart up, I realise how much he must really fucking love her.

“So, you and Lee then?”

“Yeah. It’s real, Johnny. There’s no one else—”

“I know. I’m so glad that you’ve worked things out,” I say.

There’s a tap on the door and Jen pokes her head in. “They’re ready for you, Vic.”

Vicky nods and sniffs loudly, reaching for a tissue from a box set on a table next to the door.

“Are you really sure you want me to—”

“Yes. You’re my brother. Besides, I don’t have a dad anymore.”

Her words stun me, but I find myself agreeing.

“Well, yeah. But I don’t want to talk about him,” I say.

“But you will, right? Tell me everything that happened between you both?” she says.

“Sure. Honest answer. I’ll tell you. Because we made it, Vic. We made it.”

She nods, both of us understanding the unspoken words between us.

We made it.