







# Totally Opposed (Love In Play #3)

**Author:** *Becca Jackson*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Alan

When you're crushing on a guy, the last thing you want is to get caught singing their name while naked in the locker-room showers. Thankfully, Ryan pretended not to notice. I can play the denial game with the best of them, but I can't ignore the growing feelings I have for him. We've been rivals on the field for two years, but lately, my eyes keep finding him off the field as well, drawn to his piercing blue stare and brilliant smile.

As fate would have it, we're paired together for a sequence of Star-Crossed Lovers skits, and while I'm excited at the prospect of spending more time with him, with rumors of team cuts at the end of the season, it makes me wonder if there is any point in starting anything at all. Maybe we're just destined to stay on opposing sides.

Ryan

Being on the other side of the world from your entire family is hard, especially when you see everyone else going home to theirs every night. So, when I moved in with Duckie and Ian, I was excited to at least have people to come home to.

But they aren't the only ones I see every day. Across the alley lives an old man and his cat who greet me with a demonic howl and a gruff reminder that my favorite game isn't "real" baseball.

Good thing I'm not easily offended, and while I might be still on the fence about the cat, imagine my surprise when I discover the old man is Alan Beaker's grandfather. Suddenly, my days aren't just filled with on field practice and rehearsals with the guy I've been crushing on hard, they're also filled with time spent with him off the field too.

It isn't long until I notice just how devoted to family Alan is, and the more time I spend with his, the more they make me feel like I belong. Now if only I can get Alan to take a chance on us, then I can make this feeling last forever.

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

# Page 1

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## Chapter one

Ryan

It feels a little creepy moving into Harrison's old room at the place he shared with Duckie and Ian. I used to have the biggest crush on him. Crush is probably the wrong word for it. I mean, can an almost thirty-year-old have a crush? It feels like crushes are something only for young people. Well, whatever it was, it's over now, and not just because he's dating Gordon's little brother, Arlo. Though seeing them so loved up together did play a small part in my discovery that what I felt for Harrison was not love. He's hot, and he's kind and is always having a laugh, and I guess I wanted to be close to that, maybe in hopes it would help me be a little more fun, too.

"You get three shelves in the refrigerator, half the door space and those cabinets up there," Ian says, pointing to the topmost cupboards. The apartment is old but clean and the upper cabinets sit high on the wall and reach the ceiling.

"I'll invest in a step stool," I say, and Ian frowns.

"Oh shit, I guess because Harry is so tall, it never... We'll put some of our stuff up in half of those and you can have a few lower ones, too."

"Cheers," I say and run back downstairs to grab another box from the U-Haul. Duckie and Ian's place is right off Main Street, with rear parking, and just up the road from the pool I swim at every morning. This way I can get up, throw down a smoothie, and get to it. It really is the perfect place.

When Duckie put up the flier on our locker room noticeboard, I was sure it was for some duck-themed party. The fact it was in the shape of a rubber duck probably led me to that conclusion, but I'm so glad I checked it out, anyway. I ripped it from the board and called Ian right away when I saw they were looking for a new roommate. The place I was staying wasn't terrible. The guys I shared with were cool enough, but I kind of hooked up with one of them a few months back after a drunken night of strip poker. And by hooked up with, I mean, he blew me in the shared bathroom while the other guys were passed out in their rooms. Turns out he'd never been with a guy, and even though he was the one instigating everything, he insisted I tricked him into something he would never have done sober. He can stay in his closet if that's what he wants, no shame here. But I won't be labeled the bad guy either.

There is no chance of a repeat of that living with these two, although I don't know what they are into, I'm pretty sure they are not looking for a third, and even though I would never rule out anything for me normally, I have zero attraction to either of them.

I've also moved on from gawking and making lame puppy dog eyes at unavailable men. Instead, I gawk at the sexy available men, like Alan Beaker. Not that he'd give me the time of day. I've thrown him what feels like a million hints since part way through last season. I even asked him to work on some promo ideas after practice a few times, hoping it would turn into something, let's say...less professional. It never did. He's either completely oblivious that I'm into him, or he isn't into me at all. It's probably the latter. Not once has he given me even the slightest inclination that he's into me, too. I know I could just man up and ask him out, as I did with Harry, but look how that turned out. If I don't ask, then I can't be rejected and can go on wondering every time I see him if today is the day he finally notices me.

I close up the U-Haul and carry the last two boxes upstairs. As I pass through the kitchen, I spot Ian smiling oddly at me from beside the counter.

“Everything okay?” I ask slowly, heading down the hall to my room.

“Fine,” he replies, turning away quickly and opening the refrigerator. “Is that everything?”

“Yep, now I just need to set it all up. I’ll be in my room for a bit, but maybe we can have dinner later?”

He waves a hand my way. “Sounds great. Have fun.”

“I will,” I reply and carry the last of my boxes to my bedroom but pause when I push open the door. A giant inflatable duck is sitting on my twin bed wearing my robe.

“Ummm, guys...” I call, and then Duckie jumps out from behind it.

“Welcome home,” he cheers, then climbs on the duck’s back like it’s a pony. “Do you like your present?”

“Is it the duck or the image of you riding it on my bed that will forever be scorched into my brain?” I ask, dropping the box on the dresser by the door.

“Both,” Duckie smiles and teeters back and forth on the duck.

Ian comes up behind me. “You’ll get used to him, promise,” he says, patting my shoulder and moving to my side.

“Yee har,” Duckie calls, waving a hand in the air like he’s riding a bull.

“Or you won’t, but rent is cheap,” Ian laughs, and he grabs the bill of the inflatable and leans in close to Duckie.

“You gave him your gift, now let’s leave him to unpack before he decides to turn around and move right out again.”

“You wouldn’t?” Duckie asks, climbing from the bed.

I shrug, even though I have zero intentions of moving anywhere else. My last room was half this size, and I had to share a bathroom with three other guys. Here I got one all to myself. “I might,” I lie.

He pouts like a small child. “Fine, I’ll go, but I’m leaving the duck.”

“I wouldn’t let you take him if you tried. Mr Quacksalot is all mine now.”

Duckie smiles wide and links his arm with Ian. “See? Told you he’d be cool with it.”

Ian just shakes his head, and they leave, closing my bedroom door behind them.

I take a moment to check out my room now that all my furniture is set up. My bed is in the middle and there is a bunch of space on either side, far more than I had before. Actually, as I look it over, this room is even bigger than the one I had all through college. Maybe I could finally get a bigger bed? Though there’s really no point if you’re the only one sleeping in it.

The window on the wall to my left overlooks the alley between this building and the bodega next door. Duckie swears they make the best bagel sandwiches, and when I push up the window and lean out to see the line out the door, he’s not the only one. Above the bodega are more apartments like this, and there is a window lined up perfectly with mine. An older man sits in a chair holding binoculars up to his eyes, angled toward the street.

“Hope you’re quieter than the last one,” he says, lowering the binoculars and turning

to look at me.

“Hi, I’m Ryan,” I offer.

“Name’s Don, and this is Precious,” he says, setting the binoculars on the windowsill and lifting a fluffy black cat. Precious hangs limp in his hands, and I would swear it was dead if it didn’t just now lift its chin and meow at me.

“Nice to meet you both,” I say, pulling my head back inside. I really should unpack.

“You got curtains?” Don asks, his gaze moving past me, and judging by the frown that forms, he’s probably spotted the giant inflatable duck on my bed.

“I don’t, but I can probably get some.”

“Best you do. Precious here was damn near traumatized by seeing the goings on in there with the last one.”

Considering before Harrison met Arlo, he was known to never leave a bar alone, I don’t blame Don for not wanting to see whatever went on in this room before I moved in. But despite his concerns, I haven’t even dated since my ex so the risk of him seeing something he would rather not is slim to none.

Precious meows and hops up onto the windowsill, scratching her face against the rough brick edge.

“Do you play that silly game?” Don continues, and I can’t help but laugh. He isn’t the first person to not take us seriously, and truth be told, we try not to take ourselves too seriously either. That’s the whole point of Banana Ball. Keep all the best parts of baseball and take out the boring stuff to make room for some fun.



There are no walks, on ball four, the hitter will take off, trying to round as many bases as they can while the pitcher throws the ball to every player on the field before it can finally be tossed to whoever is closest to the hitter to try to get them out. Batters can't step out of the box or it's a strike, no mound visits by coaches, and no bunting, because bunting is shite. With a two-hour time limit on games, you win by points, win the inning, you get the point, and in the last inning, every run counts as a point, so every inning really does count, and we always play to win. The crowd get involved in the game and not just the entertainment, too. If they catch a foul ball, it counts as an out, and I've seen it happen more than once in the two years I've been playing in the league.

"I'm a pitcher for the Funky Monkeys in the Banana Ball League, and yeah, we can get pretty silly."

He scoffs. "Bloody crime, what they are doing to the best game in the world. Why don't ya play real baseball?"

"Have you been to a game?"

He shakes his head.

"You should come check it out. I'll get you some tickets. Oh, and I'll try to get those curtains as soon as I can." I slide the window closed and turn back to the giant duck on my bed before he can reply.

Wow, my granny would have a field day with him. While my family are all back in the UK, my granny included, they watch every game, and my phone is filled with messages from them about how much they loved a skit I was in or congratulating me for my throwing game.

The Funky Monkeys and Animal Control joined the main Banan Ball League last

year, but over break there have been rumors that the GM, Bart Erricson, is using this year's tour to determine which one of our teams, the Funky Monkeys or Animal Control, will stay on with the OG teams next year. I don't want to believe it. Playing Banana Ball has been the highlight of my life. I can't go back to marketing other people's dreams. If Granny were here right now, she would tell me not to worry about something that hasn't happened yet, then she'd start singing the Hakuna Matata song, and then Dad would join in on the Pumba part and soon the whole family would be singing along. They really are the best and I miss them so much.

I pull out my phone, take a selfie with Mr. Quacksalot behind me and send it off to my family group chat.

RYAN: Finally, into the new place. Not sure I can trust my new roommate, though.  
\*\*\*Laughing emoji\*\*\*

Dad is the first to message back.

DAD: Careful, he'll have you up at the quack of dawn.

I expected nothing less of his. He's the king of puns and bad dad jokes. Mom, my cousin, Teddy, and Granny are close behind with their congratulations, with both Mom and Granny asking if I'm eating enough. Teddy sends me a separate message a few seconds later. Teddy came to live with us when he was seven and I was sixteen after my aunt and uncle passed. We were close before, our whole family is. Granny and Gramps lived one street over all my childhood. But after Teddy moved in, we became basically brothers.

TEDDY: I broke up with Levi. Got any Funky Monkeys you can set me up with? I'm open to moving abroad.

I would love to have Teddy move here, but I know he's bluffing.

RYAN: Maybe. Move over here and then we'll see about setting you up.

TEDDY: Seems like a lot of work for a maybe date. How about Animal Control? I can also do long distance, phone sex can be fun now with video chats and all that. What about that guy you told me about? What's his name? Alan? Or did you finally get up the balls to ask him out yourself?

RYAN: Why do I have to be the one to ask him out? That went horribly with Harrison. I've dropped hints that I'm interested. If he was interested in me, he would have asked me out by now.

TEDDY: Man up, dude!

RYAN: Dude? Really? Are we twelve?

TEDDY: You look twelve.

RYAN: Fuck off.

TEDDY: \*\*\*Heart emoji\*\*\*

I walked right into that one. I've been told my whole life I have a baby face and as soon as Teddy started getting mistaken as the older out of the two of us, it became a running joke between him and me. I have big eyes, thick lips, and given that I would burn easily with my pale skin, I slathered myself in sunscreen every day since before I can remember, and I guess that has helped my skin maintain a more youthful appearance. I'll probably be chuffed about looking younger when I'm in my fifties, or sixties, but for now, it can make dating hard. I don't really want to date younger guys who are into parties and getting blind drunk on weekends, but the guys I do like, think I'm too young for them, and having to show your ID to prove your age isn't the kind of meet cute story I want.

I thought I found a great guy a few years ago. Before I did this, I was a marketing manager for a new age health supplement company and we met at a launch event for a new line. My ex was great. Until he wanted help to apply for Banana Ball, and the tape we sent in had the GM, Bart Erricson, calling to invite me to fly out instead of him. I apparently stole his dream and all my dreams of a future with him disappeared pretty quickly after that conversation. I don't regret it. Nothing has made me happier than touring with these guys, but family has been everything to me my whole life, and I really thought by now, I'd have found a guy I could share my life with.

Before I can wallow in my loneliness at the ripe old age of twenty-nine, Mr. Quacksalot's big stupid grin draws my eye, and I can't help but laugh.

"You're right, duck. There is still plenty of time for my love story, and until then, I have you. This is going to be great," I say, looking around my new room and then back to Mr Quacksalot. "You better not hog the covers."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:58 am*

### Chapter two

Alan

Don't get me wrong. I love what I do. I love that Banana Ball has brought a new kind of energy to the game I grew up watching with my gramps. But if I am being totally honest with myself, which seldom happens, I do let what other people think get to me. My gramps in particular. My sister, Kelly, tells me to ignore him. And I should. I really fucking should. But that little Alan inside of me is still holding out hope that he'll come around, despite the fact he's made it very clear he doesn't think what I play is baseball at all. There are a lot of differences, true, but the game is essentially the same; we just took out all the boring stuff and got the crowd way more involved. Not only in the celebrations but in the game itself. Having a spectator launch themselves up out of their seat to catch the foul ball that wins the point for their team gets the crowd and the players' hearts racing in a way that nothing else does.

I still don't try to hit a foul ball, but it happens, and I'd be lying if I wasn't rooting for the person in the stands as much as everyone else to catch it. Gramps might get his wish if the rumors are true and only one of our teams will get to continue next year.

"You've got the mic," Dennis calls, handing it over as the rest of the team heads across to the other side of the field.

"You sure?" I ask, more out of politeness. I don't want him to give it to anyone else. I love singing in front of thousands of people almost as much as I love smacking it out of the park.

He raises one brow at me and purses his lips a little in reply.

“Okay, I was just checking,” I say, then flip the mic over in the air, catching it perfectly by the handle again. “Opening choreography?”

“Let’s just see what you feel in the moment, then we can add from there.”

It’s not like Dennis to not have a million and one instructions, but I’m game to see what I’ve got without him. “What are we singing then?”

“I think you’ll know it,” he smiles and taps his phone. It’s connected to a speaker by the dugout. On game day, the music will play all over the stadium, but for rehearsals, we shouldn’t have the whole of Savannah hearing what music we’re planning.

As soon as the music starts, I shake my head. I know this song. Ever since Elton and Britney released it, it’s been on my playlist. It’s also become one of my top three on karaoke night, and seeing as Dennis never misses karaoke either, it’s no surprise he’s picked this song for me.

“I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to go full Elton,” I call, jogging up the stairs. I spin on the first line dramatically, stepping slowly down each step and singing along, then throwing my head back, I spread my legs out at the sides, and belt out the chorus.

The pop version brings a great beat to work in a few moves I usually reserve for Abba night at karaoke, and Dennis watches the whole time, arms folded over his chest, but smiling and nodding along to the music.

I get to the field and throw one arm out at the side, spinning in place.

“This would be a great spot for a few guys to lift me and spin me,” I say, then pretend

I'm lowered down, do a dramatic bow, then wriggle my ass as I sing and dance until the music finally fades to a close.

"So how was it?" I ask.

"It's missing something," he replies, frowning.

"Yeah, it's missing my big orange feathery coat and giant star sunglasses."

"No, I think we should make it a duet," he replies, turning towards where the team is now jogging up and down the stairs of the back stands. "Phillip, get over here," he yells, and after a few snide remarks from the guys still hitting the stairs, he makes his way over.

"What's up?"

"Grab a mic. You're our Britney."

"I'm what now?"

"We're doing the remix song by Britney Spears and Elton John," I say, expecting it to spark realization, but he looks even more confused.

"You have heard of Elton John, right?"

He laughs. "I'm just messing. I'm a gay guy in the world. Of course, I know Britney and Elton."

"Phew," I reply, wiping the imaginary sweat from my brow. "I thought we were going to have to revoke your queer card for a minute."

“You got a card?” he asks, looking me deadpan in the face.

“Shut up and just sing,” I say, and Dennis points towards the mic beside his speaker.

“Both of you up there, in the stands, about two sections up, one on each of those rows. Sit on the aisle seat, and when the music starts, you stand and sing. Phillip, copy Alan’s strut down the stairs and do that thing again on the chorus, but after that, I want you to be at the cross-section between the rows, and that’s when you come together, hold hands and then climb onto the back of the seats and step down them towards the front that way.”

“Won’t people be in them?” Phillip asks as we head up to our starting places.

“No, I’ll have ushers move them to the stairs for the opening. Fans never seem to mind, and we’ll give them a bag of swag to make up for the inconvenience. Okay, are you ready?”

“Ready,” we reply, and Dennis hits play.

Phillip is good. Really good. He matches my strut perfectly and even pulls out his hair tie and does a hair flip when we meet in the middle. I hold out my hand, and his huge fingers clasp over mine, and then we turn and step up on the first chairs. They are strong, and can easily hold our weights, not that I weigh all that much.

“Great, now as you step down, keep singing and looking back at one another, then to the front. Yeah, like that,” Dennis calls.

Voices come from down below, and the Funky Monkeys start jogging out to the field. Now that we are in the League, our training times overlap more than ever, and when Ryan flashes that freaking adorable smile my way, a flutter hits my gut, blood rushes to my face, and then I lose my footing.



I swear I catch his smile turn to a look of shock before I clench my eyes closed, waiting for the smack of the ground against my face, but it doesn't come.

"You okay?" Phillip asks, and I open my eyes. His large hands hold me tight.

"Fuck, that was close," I manage through heavy breaths. "Thanks."

"No worries. You good to stand on your own now?" he asks, and it's only now I realize I'm not standing at all. He's holding me completely off the ground.

"Yeah, sorry again," I say, and he lowers me down. My attention moves to the field, and Dennis, who's just standing there watching, and he has that look on his face that he gets when he's trying to work out a new routine. Ryan is still there, too. I should smile and wave at him, let him know I'm okay. But what if he doesn't even care? What if I wave and just end up looking like a total idiot? More than I just did then.

"Again," Dennis calls.

"Do you think we should reconsider the seats?" Phillip asks, still holding my hand as we step down between them.

"No, I think you should do it exactly like I asked you to do it, but this time, when you get to the bottom seat, I want you to lift Alan into your arms, step those long legs over the rail, then jump down, without dropping him, and then continue the rest of the song on the field."

There it is, the thing Dennis was working out when he should have been worried about the two-B who almost face-planted the cement.

"Is that a good idea?" Phillip asks, and I actually see Dennis's eye twitch a little.

“It’s fine. I’m good,” I say, slipping my hand free from Phillip’s.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t watching what I was doing. I’ll be more careful. Let’s go again.”

He nods, and we head up to take our places. On my way, I glance back to where Ryan had been standing, only he isn’t there, he’s jogging over to where his team is warming up.

Come on, Alan, focus. Sure, he’s the only guy you’ve been interested in for ages, but he’s into guys like Harry, big and buff all over, and he’s a total ten. We’re a six, maybe seven on a good hair day. While I’m pretty fit especially in my arms, my legs seem to struggle to put on any real mass and my skin shows the years growing up on the ranch in the sun, his fair complexion is only marked by the deep dimples that form in both his cheeks when he smiles. And he smiles a lot.

I didn’t notice it at first. Most likely because I was seeing someone, and unlike my douchebag ex, that meant something to me. But now I can’t unsee it. Unsee him. I find him in every room, look for him on the field. I almost cheered for him when he struck out one of our players at the end of last year. And that is just another reason I can’t go there. He’s a Funky Monkey, the enemy.

We’ve played on opposite teams in the Banana Ball League for years now, and he’s never given me any indication he might even be slightly interested in a guy like me. He’s always friendly, and he and I worked on a few ideas last year for some promos, but that was it. The only thing he’s ever talked to me about is baseball. It’s always business. He’s proved he isn’t shy in asking out a guy he likes. If he was interested in me, he’d ask me out like he did with Harry, which just further proves he’s definitely not into me.

Don't let yourself even think of the possibility. I try to tell myself, but my eyes are locked on the way his ass picks up in perfect rounds as he jogs away, and now all I can think about is sinking my teeth into it.

"Monsieur, Alan, are we good?" Dennis calls in his mock French tone that is so far from French.

"Yeah," I reply, not really paying attention, still.

"Then do you think you can sing this time?" he says, and I let the rest of my surroundings in, Phillip is halfway down the stairs, shaking his head at me with a deep frown across his forehead, and Dennis is standing with his hands on his hips like he's about to have a full-blown tantrum.

"Oh shit, yeah. Sorry. I'm ready," I say, and we run it again. This time, I don't fall on the chairs, and it's actually pretty cool being lifted and spun around. Even if it is Phillip, cause no way would I ever go there.

Dennis makes a few additions to the field routine, finally calling in the rest of the team to get them involved, and then we run it three more times with everyone, the last time in full uniform with the media manager, Will, recording on a drone while two guys hold devices in front of Phillip and I. Anyone who thinks what we do isn't hard work just needs to spend a day with us, it's five in the afternoon, and I'm sweating and exhausted. I've been up since four getting in my early workout and steam before training, then we finished batting practice, hit the gym for an hour on weights, then cardio program out on the field, and the last hour, I've been dancing and singing on top of all that. But when Dennis cheers at the end of the run, we know we've nailed it, and the team can finally head inside to shower. I spend a few minutes stretching out my muscles on the field but also watching Ryan. He's pitching into the net on the far side, checking his speed. I can't make out the exact number from here, but I swear I just saw triple digits. Fuck, that's fast. He throws another, but on the release, he

grabs his shoulder.

“Motherfucker,” he calls, and that I hear clear as day.

Shit. He’s hurt. Kyle, one of the team physios, rushes over to him. I want to run over, too. My body is vibrating it wants to so badly. But I’m not a physio. I’m not even first aid trained unless you count the mandatory basic stuff they get us to do each year.

So I just stand there watching as Kyle strips off Ryan’s shirt and moves to sit behind him on the grass. If he’s hurt badly, he could be out for the whole season. Fuck, if it’s really bad, this could be it for his career. A few guys from his team who were still on the field crowd around him making it hard to see what’s happening.

But then a gap opens just in time to watch Kyle slide his hands over Ryan’s shoulder, massaging up his muscled arm, and when relief spreads across Ryan’s face and he leans his head back against Kyle, moaning, “ Yeah right there, ” my dick responds. It’s messed up. I know it is. Ryan’s on the ground hurt, and I’m over here imagining it’s me behind him, exploring his muscles with my hands, making him moan. But by the look on his face, it mustn’t be as bad as it could have been. Maybe it will just need a good massage. I know how to massage. Should have become a PT instead of a player, looks like they have all the fun.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:58 am*

### Chapter three

Ryan

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I groan through gritted teeth as I lay on the cold bed in Kyle’s treatment room. He massages the muscles of my shoulder, pushing his fingers into the tender tissue without a care in the world for how much it fucking hurts.

“A little pain now is better than a whole lotta hurt later,” Kyle repeats for the third time, digging his fingers in harder. I don’t even try to hold in the sounds it elicits. I do wish that this treatment bed had something to bite down on in this face hole, though. I’m clenching my jaw so tight I could break a tooth.

“Okay, okay, okay, that’s enough, right?” I finally say, lifting my head from the bed, and he backs off a little before slathering my skin with a heat gel.

“No pitching for a few days. You’ll need a massage and stretches twice daily, and I’m sending you a revised workout plan. How does five work for you?”

I push up with my good arm to sit.

“I hope you mean five p.m.”

“Nope. Sorry, it’s the only morning slot I have open at the moment with the season starting up. There are more than a few of you a little out of condition. Did you maintain your throwing program over break?”

“If I say no, are you going to tell the coaches?”

He raises one eyebrow. “You’re one of the older players out there. You have to stay on top of it all if you want to avoid retirement.”

“I’m twenty-eight.” He frowns. “Okay, I’m twenty-nine.” But if I’m being honest, I’m almost thirty, but I don’t want to believe how close that number is creeping up on me. Pitchers are in their prime in their twenties. I’m already well over that, and even though I’m not as old as Harry and Gordon, and I look like I could have just stepped out of college. Thank you, fear of turning into a tomato in the sun all those years. Sunscreen really is a skin saver . I already hear Harry and Gordon talking about retirement, and I don’t want to even think about how close that day might be for me, too. Though if the rumors are true, I might not get a choice.

“So I’m no spring chicken anymore, but I got a hell a lot of years left in me. I pitched one hundred and two today. I might not have been sticking to the throwing program all through the break, but I wasn’t slacking off either. I basically lived at the pool. Swimming is a great workout for your arms, you know.”

“Well, if you want to be able to still pitch over one hundred, you better be here at five a.m. and seven p.m. every day this week, and follow the adjusted program I’m sending you.” He taps and swipes on his tablet.

“Five and seven?”

“I did say twice a day, didn’t I?”

“Pretty sure you didn’t.”

“Well, I am now.”

I wonder if Kyle has heard something about this rumor.

“Hey, did you hear that maybe only one of our teams get to stay on next year?” I ask, and his eyebrows rise a little.

“I have heard the gossip, but nothing from anyone that would actually know.”

“So, you don’t think it’s true?”

“I have no idea. But if I were you, I would follow my PT’s advice so that if it is, I’m still throwing the fastest ball in the league,” he says, then goes back to tapping on his tablet. I try to pull on my shirt, but my shoulder screams at me. It hurts worse now than when I felt the twang at practice. The treatment being worse than the freaking injury is so not fair.

I toss the shirt over my shoulder instead. It’ll have had to come back off in the showers, anyway. “I guess I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Five a.m., and don’t be late.”

“You’re the boss,” I reply and head to the locker rooms. I don’t hate getting up early, I love it. Always have. With college, I was always up at four to hit the pool before morning classes, which is something I’ve continued over the years. But with having to get here by five for Kyle’s torture session, I’ll have no time for a decent swim.

When I reach the locker rooms, everyone has cleared out already, but the faint sound of running water echoes through from the showers, so I know at least someone is still here.

I strip off my pants, toss them on top of my bag, and grab a towel, wrapping it around my waist. Before I get to the showers, I hear someone singing, and I pause in the

hallway just outside of the room. They're singing "Tiny Dancer". The original of the song Alan and Phillip were dancing to for the next opening number. I can't tell who it is from just the voice, but he's good. Really good. He's tapping on something that's making a smacking noise to keep time and fully going for it. I feel kind of like a creep standing outside the room listening, and it's not like we haven't all sung or, at minimum, lip-synced to so many songs over the last year. So I step into the doorway ready to tell them how great they can sing, but I freeze when I see it's Alan. His back is to me, soap running over his muscled shoulders. Fuck. What should I do? I could stand here and just watch him, but that's even creepier than staying in the hallway listening. I should just act like it's any other day, cause it is, and any other day if any of the guys are singing in the showers, we just either hum along or join in.

The chorus hits, and I'm about to break through my nerves and join him in singing, but then I swear I hear him sing, "Hold me closer, tiny Tanner." That can't be right. He probably just got water in his mouth or something when he was singing. No way did he just sing my last name instead of the actual words. I step back, ready to abort, but don't see the mop and bucket sitting there. It clangs to the floor, and he spins to face me, wide dark brown eyes boring into my soul. My gaze immediately goes to his wet glistening cock, and then, like a fucking teenager, I instantly go hard.

"Sorry, didn't know anyone was in here," I lie, turning away to hang my towel and hide my erection.

He doesn't reply right away, and it's probably because he either, a, knows I'm full of shit cause he was just singing at the top of his lungs in an empty shower room, or b, is weirded out by the fact he just saw me check out his dick. Yep, probably b.

I sidestep to the showers on the opposite wall and turn the water on, letting the heat wash over my aching muscles, my heart thumping in my ears with every second that passes. If he wants to pretend like nothing weird just happened, then I am totally okay with that. It's better than him freaking out and blasting me for checking him out.



Which he would be justified in doing. It's not cool. I can usually control myself. True, there are normally a whole heap more men in here showering, and not once have they done anything to bring about the situation I'm still dealing with right now, but they are not Alan Beaker.

Fuck. Stop. I can't do this. Harry was right. Hooking up with another player is a bad idea. Plus, he's Animal Control, the competition. How would that even work? No. It wouldn't. Shit, stop thinking about Alan Beaker and his long, thick cock.

I pump a few squirts of soap into a washcloth and rub it over my chest, hoping to better distract myself by actually doing what I came in here to do. After what feels like a fucking long time washing in silence, except for the running water, he begins humming the tune again, and then his hum becomes a soft song, and as much as I want to control myself, I can't. I join in, and we continue like that, our backs toward each other, singing Elton John as we wash the day's dirt and sweat away.

We near the end of the song, and I glance over my shoulder. He's got his back to me, too, his dark hair dripping water over his tanned ass, making it shine, and my cock throbs. Nope. I can't do this. I switch off the shower, grab my towel, and get the hell out of there, throwing on my clothes as fast as I can despite the pain in my shoulder and still being half wet.

When I get home, Duckie and Ian are on the couch snuggled up watching something on television, and they glance my way to say hi.

Ian goes back to watching the television right away, but Duckie's eyebrows pick up on one side, and his lips morph into a sinister smirk.

"What have we been up to tonight?" he asks, and now Ian's paused the television, and his attention is on me again, too.

“Nothing,” I lie, holding my bag in front of me to hide the fact I am still half-hard. While it was able to soften a little on the way home, just the slightest thought of Alan in the shower brings it right back up again.

“It doesn’t look like nothing,” Duckie says.

“Is it raining?” Ian asks, pushing up from the couch to check out the window.

“No,” I reply on my way to my room, and before they can ask anything more, I close the door behind me, lean back against it, and shut my eyes. Water drips from my half-washed hair down my face. Urgh, I have to have a proper shower, and I still have to eat, too.

I crack open the bedroom door.

“Hey, did you guys want to order in, or have you already eaten?” I call, and Duckie leans half over the back of the couch.

“We were just about to ask you the same thing. I’m happy to order pizza if you want one?”

“Sure, I’ll have pepperoni, bacon, and onion. I’ll send you the money, too.”

“You got it last time. Technically, we owe you two dinners.”

“How do you figure?”

“There are two of us and one of you. Ian and I share a lot of things but our taste in pizza isn’t one of them.”

“Cool, well, I’m going to jump in the shower. I mustn’t have washed out this soap

enough. I'll be out soon."

"No quackers," Duckie calls, and as soon as his back is turned, I slip into the bathroom just outside my bedroom door. Having my own bathroom is amazing. I've never had this. Not once in my whole life. I had to share with my asshole ex, which, okay, sharing with a partner is a given, but he claimed the counter for all his random creams and serums, plus two of the three drawers which left me living out of a travel bag I had to put under the sink. Before going to college, I lived with my family sharing a bathroom with not only my parents, but my cousin, Teddy, too. It was madness at times. College was the same, only with more people to share with, but at least they also had more toilets and showers to go around. My shared house was the worst, though. It's one thing to walk in and find piss on the floor from a family member, but when it's from basically strangers, the ick factor goes from low to very fucking high.

I strip off the wet clothes and climb into the shower, only this time when the water washes over my back and my mind replays images of Alan and his glistening cock, I don't push them away. I let them morph into fantasies of him coming up behind me while we sang, pressing his cock between the cheeks of my ass, grinding up against me, and jerking me off while my hands reach around to squeeze that perfect ass until we both come.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:58 am*

### Chapter four

Alan

Holy fucking shit. I was so sure I was busted when he knocked over that mop. I didn't know what to do, so stupid me fucking stood there just looking at him like a goofy idiot. No wonder he turned away. He probably didn't want me to see him laughing his fucking ass off. But once my pulse stopped thrumming in my ears and I could breathe normally again, I couldn't help but start humming the song again. It's fucking catchy, okay. It's one of those songs that as soon as you hear it, it's in your head for hours. But then he started singing, too, and it was sort of normal, like how it is when all the guys are in there, except it wasn't all the guys. It was just me and Ryan Tanner, and my dick was not behaving normally. I was so glad when he left because with the erection I had, there was no getting past him without him seeing it and that would have made things even more awkward. "Oh hey, sorry, Ryan, I was thinking of you while showering and now I have a huge stiffy. No big deal, right?" Nope, I was not having that conversation.

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I get to the field about five most mornings, but today I'm running a little late. I blame Ryan and the filthy dreams he inspired. Most of the guys hate how early they get us here on training days, but for me, I want to be here first. It's nice hitting the gym and getting in a quick steam before the rest of them start arriving. But today, instead of opening the doors to a nice quiet corridor, I'm immediately met with what sounds like someone having sex in one of the rooms.

Moaning echoes down the vacant space in a steady rhythm.

I should leave. But I don't. Instead, I continue down the hall and then slow when I near the physio rooms. The lights are only on in Kyle's room and the door is wide open.

I could just walk past like I heard nothing and peek in on my way past, but that's stupid because they're not exactly being quiet.

"Almost there," Kyle's voice carries through the open doorway.

"Ohhhh fuuuuuuuck," the other guy cries out, and I stop stalling and walk past as normally as I can, peeking out the corner of my eye as I pass, but when I see it's Ryan on the bed, face down, and Kyle's fingers are digging into his shoulder, I freeze.

"Holy fuck, you suck!" Ryan screams, and Kyle laughs and then spots me.

"Oh hey, Alan. Are you all good?" Kyle asks, and Ryan shifts on the bed but can't get up with Kyle pressing into the soft tissue of his back.

"Yeah, headed in for a workout, then a steam. I thought someone was..." You can't tell him the truth. You can't say you thought they were fucking, because then he'll wonder why you walked past. And while Kyle is a good-looking guy, I don't want him thinking I was trying to watch him screwing around in here. "I mean, if I'm totally honest, it sounded like someone was being murdered. Are you okay there, Ryan?" I ask.

"Fuck no. But I will be once Kyle stops torturing me."

"I'm not torturing you," Kyle replies, shaking his head.

My gaze moves over his muscles, like shiny mountains I wish I could explore with my own hands, my mouth, my tongue. Kyle adjusts his position to stand by Ryan's head and starts working his shoulder muscles down towards his lower back. He leans really far forward, and his face gets so close to Ryan's ass. A freaking perfectly round ass that's hugged by short gym shorts right now. Fuck, PTs really do have all the fun, though I'd prefer to be making Ryan moan for a whole lot of other reasons. No. I can't go there. Half because he's a Funky Monkey, the enemy. Well, one of them. Now we've joined the OG teams on their tour, there are three sides we want to thrash each week. And half because there is no way he'd even want me to. He's into big buff guys like Harrison, and while my arms are guns when it comes to throwing power, my legs aren't very big and no amount of working them out seems to be making a difference. I got all the jokes through school, well before I ever started playing baseball. I was the chicken-legged choir boy who got beat up a lot. Not as much as I could have, though. My brothers saw to that. They have all the buff body genes in the family, solid all over those two. With me, it's like they were pouring the mold upside down and ran out about halfway through.

Gramps was the one who signed me up for Little League and drove me to every practice and game growing up. Baseball has always been our family's favorite sport. Gramps took me to my first MLB game, and I would love for him to come to see me now I've finally made it big. But he doesn't see this as making it to the big time, he won't even talk to me about Banana Ball, because to him, this isn't a sport, it's the pre-show clown that messes around before the real bull riders come out. MLB are the bull riders. I'm the clown.

"It's good you're here actually," Kyle says, and I quickly look at him, hoping he didn't just bust me checking out Ryan's ass. "Ryan, Alan is always in the gym early every day. You can join him after our sessions and run through the new program I sent you. You have to strengthen those supporting structures to help avoid a real injury."

“Sure, okaaaaaaaaa owe, fuck, you motherfucker.”

Kyle shakes his head. “He’s being over dramatic. I swear, it’s not actually hurting him that bad.”

“Fuck you, yes it is,” Ryan replies.

“Um, I guess I’ll see you in there,” I say, and I leave them to it. Ryan cries out a few more times, but once the gym door is closed, I can no longer hear him, and that’s a good thing because even knowing those sounds were made because of pain and not pleasure, my mind still went to all the ways I want to make him groan like that, and working out is hard enough without a boner to contend with, too.

I start on the treadmill to warm up and then hit the stairs machine to really get those muscles working. If I am being totally honest, I really come to the gym this early to run through my leg program alone. We all have gym time in our daily training sessions, but I focus on strengthening my upper thoracic and arms then. It’s probably why the team always makes jokes about how I’ll soon be so top-heavy that I’ll fall over if I keep skipping leg day.

I don’t skip it. Every day is leg day for me. I’ve made some improvements in the size of my thighs, and I’m the strongest I’ve ever been, but I don’t see a real change when I look in the mirror. I still look like those weird dinosaur Goombas from the old Mario Brothers movie. Okay, maybe not that bad. But my head isn’t exactly big, and with my broad shoulders and almost no hips, it isn’t far off.

I move on to the leg extension machine and flick the weights to the next level up from yesterday. It burns, but I go slow, pushing through each rep until I finish three full sets. I’m just getting into position on the back squat machine when Ryan walks in.

“You survived,” I say, flicking the weight level up.

“Barely. That guy’s a masochist,” he says, rolling his shoulder back a few times.

“Umm, you know that means you think he gets sexual gratification from his own pain, right?”

“Shit, no. What’s the word for someone who loves inflicting pain on people?”

“Sadist.”

“Right. That. Kyle is a fucking sadist.”

Kyle walks in laughing. “Calm down, it was the first session. It’ll get easier. And just so you know. I’m neither a sadist nor a masochist.”

“That is exactly what a sadist or masochist would say,” Ryan teases.

With one brow raised and the cheeky smirk he’s wearing, I’m reminded just how much he looks like a young Tom Hardy. Dark brown, lush hair, perfect soft skin, plump pink lips, bright blue eyes that sometimes look green depending on the light, and that British accent. Fuck, I could listen to it all day.

“Well, I also don’t date players, so I guess you’ll never really know for sure.”

Ryan’s cheeks blush. Does he have a thing for Kyle?

“Do you have the plan?” Kyle asks, and Ryan nods, pulling out his phone and swiping the screen.

“Yep, there are only seven things on here, though.”



“And you’ll need to stop any one of them if you feel pain.”

I suddenly realize I’m just sitting there watching them go through his exercises, so I push up, take the weight onto my shoulders, and slide the release across so that the weights will lower down with me each rep.

My thighs are instantly on fire as I move into the first squat, and I glance across to see I’ve flicked the weight three blocks higher than my last session. Fuck. My legs shake as I push up, my fingers white-knuckling the handles until I’m past the starting point and can slide the lock over again.

“You good?” Ryan calls, and I smile and wave his way.

“Fine, just warming up,” I lie and adjust the weight back down to where it should be before I go again.

That could have been bad. Really bad. There is a reason the team trainers are always telling us to never work out alone. If I hadn’t been able to push that up, it would have been pretty painful getting out from under it. But I guess I won’t have to worry about being alone at the gym for a little while because now I have a gym buddy. This will be good. It will be fine. I can remain professional and work out with the guy, no problem. I work out with guys all the time. But it’s Ryan Tanner. The same Ryan Tanner I’ve not been able to take my eyes off for the past few months. The Ryan Tanner who totally had to have heard me singing his fucking name yesterday in the shower. The same Ryan Tanner, who right now is crouched on all fours, perfect round ass pointed right in my direction. Yeah. I’m totally fucked.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:58 am*

### Chapter five

Ryan

I get to the gym before Alan and start on some of the stretches Kyle has assigned on the floor by the back wall. When I was in here yesterday, I noticed that Alan was using all the leg machines, and from here, I'll be able to see him without looking like I'm totally creeping on him. Probably.

He pushes through the door a few minutes later and makes a beeline right for the treadmills.

"Hey," I say, and he nods my way but offers nothing else. I mean, true, we're here to work out, but would a hello kill you? "Hitting legs again today?"

"Yeah, not that it makes much difference."

"You beat out half the guys yesterday during sprints, so maybe it is doing something."

"I guess so," he replies, but it doesn't sound like he agrees. "How's the shoulder?" he asks.

I roll it backward a few times, and though the ache heats with each rotation, I try to play it cool.

"Fine. I'll be good by game day for sure."

“Well, that’s great for the Funky Monkeys, not so great for us.”

“You hit off my fastball last year.”

“Yeah, but you weren’t throwing over one hundred miles an hour then.”

He’s been watching me throw? My cheeks begin to warm, and I quickly turn to grab one of the elastic bands Kyle wants me to use for light tension, hoping they will settle if I just don’t stare into his stunning dark eyes for too long, but they only grow warmer as I think about how those same eyes were watching me. When I do turn back, Alan’s got his headphones on, and he’s already jogging on the treadmill. I guess the talking part of our interaction is over. I should at least try to focus on what I came here to do, that is, if I actually do want to be ready to pitch by game day.

I do my best to move through each task, but no matter how much I try to focus on the exercises, my eyes stray to his reflection in the mirror as he works out on the hack squat machine. He’s upped the weight three times and sweat has drenched his shirt, making it cling to the muscles of his torso in all the right places.

He pushes through the last rep, then lifts his shirt to wipe his face, revealing his glistening hard abs. My gaze trails down his torso, but when I look back up, his stare is locked on mine in the reflection of the mirror. I lose my hold on the elastic looped under my foot and it flings to the floor with a thwack.

If only there was a hole beside me right now I could crawl inside , I think, bending to pick the elastic back up and continue with the last of the reps. When I dare look back up at the mirror, Alan isn’t there.

“See you on the field,” he says from the other side of the room, headed toward the steam rooms. His shirt is fully off and slung over his shoulder and the muscles of his back are even more impressive than his abs.

“Yeah, see you then,” I reply, watching him until he disappears behind the corner. I let the elastic go again and card my fingers through my hair. The next few days are going to be torture. Exquisite fucking torture.

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It’s finally game day, and I’m getting pumped in the locker room with the guys. After spending an hour interacting with the crowd and getting them hyped up, it isn’t like we have to work hard to keep that energy going for ourselves.

The choreography for the opening number is burned into my mind, having run it a bazillion times. Mind you, I did screw up more than once because I was too fixated on Alan and Phillip. Okay, just Alan.

Sure, at first, all I could think about was Alan’s large hands exploring my body. His toned, strong arms wrapped around me. But it’s the pure joy he radiates as he helps a group of kids into their sacks for the banana-sack races, the confident gleam in his eye when Dennis hands him a mic, and the wide smile that spread across his face when his eyes landed on his sister in the crowd that has really captured my attention. I overheard him chatting to her on the phone the other day on speaker and the way they joke and laugh reminds me so much of me and Teddy. I’ll have to plan a trip home as soon as the season is over. Fuck. If they cut my team, I could be moving home for good.

Dennis shoves open the locker room door. “Does anyone know Phillip’s part of the opening number?”

My hand is up, and I’m on my feet in a split second.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I do,” I say, and his face lights up.

“Great, Ryan, you’re with me. Now.”

I follow Dennis out of the room into the hall where Phillip and Alan are waiting. Phillip is lying on one of the medic stretchers, an ice pack on his head.

“What happened?” I ask, and he removes the pack, revealing a massive black eye.

“I got beat up.”

“What?” I ask, but Alan is laughing.

“It’s not like that. He got hit in the face by a kid’s bat.”

“So a kid beat you up?” I ask, and Dennis grabs the ice pack out of his hand and shoves it back over his eye.

“Keep that there. You’ll be fine. Now you two,” he says to Alan and me. “Get over here. I want to see you run it through before we have to be out there. Oh, crap.”

“What?” I ask.

“I’m not sure you will be able to lift Alan.”

“I’ll be fine,” I reply, but he doesn’t look convinced.

“Seriously, I bench more than he’s gotta weigh. I’ll be okay.”

Alan shakes his head. “You hurt your shoulder, you can’t lift me. What if it makes it worse?”

“I’m good, I swear. Kyle was overreacting.”

“I’ll do it,” Alan says, and I want to object and insist I’m fine, but I also really, really want him to pick me up in his arms and carry me. Shit, how much do I weigh?

“Umm, it’s okay. We can just jump down together.”

He spins to face me.

“You don’t think I can pick you up, do you?” He’s got one hand on his hip like he’s some diva offended by the implication they can’t do something.

“I’m just heavier than I look,” I reply with a shrug.

“Fuck that. I’m picking you up. Dennis, start the music. We got this.”

He storms back a few steps up the hall, and I follow, my cheeks on fire, and my pulse pounding in my ears. Do I know what to do? I mean, I watched them over and over, more than I watched the rest of the choreography and that shit I needed to know. It’s sexy stepping, then turning, joining in the middle, climbing the stairs holding hands, and then he’s going to pick me up. Oh crap. Okay. You got this. Don’t fuck it up now.

Dennis starts the music, and Alan takes off at a strut. Dennis is calling out instructions.

“More sass, chin up, that’s good, Ryan, just like that, okay, now turn.”

We hold hands and pretend to walk together down the stairs, his fingers lacing with mine but loose like he almost wants to let go but can’t. Even with the lightest of touches, heat spreads through my skin, up my arm, and crosses my chest.

“Now lift,” Dennis calls, and Alan rips his hand away, slips his arm behind my back,

and sweeps his other arm under my legs, lifting me into a bridal carry, then walks a few steps forward.

“See, I got you,” he says, turning his head towards me. His perfect plump lips draw my gaze.

“Are you sure?” I ask, and he smiles.

“Put your arm around me and stay close to my chest. It’s easier that way.”

I lean in and his cologne envelops me in vanilla and sandalwood.

“You’re still supposed to be singing,” Dennis calls. Shit, right. I start mouthing the lyrics again as Dennis puts a chair in front of us.

“See if you can climb onto that, then jump off without dropping him.”

“I’m not so surrre—” I say as he heaves us up onto the chair. He twists at the hip, swinging me side to side, and I hold my arms around his neck tighter.

“I won’t drop you,” he says and then jumps off the chair.

I don’t mean to, but in the split second of freefall, before we hit the ground, I bury my face into his neck like a terrified child.

“Wonderful,” Dennis calls, and though my cheeks are on fire, I can’t bring myself to lift my head because it’s so perfectly nuzzled right here in the crook of his neck.

“Are you okay?” Alan asks.

“Yeah,” I reply, but my mouth is against the soft skin in the crease, and his shoulder

lifts as he giggles and drops my legs.

“Shit, sorry,” he says, immediately as I’m forced onto my own feet. “That tickled.”

“No, I’m sorry. I think I just froze. It won’t happen again.”

He rubs his neck where my lips had just been and turns to Dennis.

“You happy?”

“Ecstatic, darling. Now do it exactly like that in two minutes out there.”

The rest of my team starts filing out into the hall, followed by the rest of Animal Control, and Harrison sidles up next to Alan.

“Fraternizing with the enemy, I see,” he says, slinging an arm over Alan’s shoulder. His tone screams disappointment, but his smile is all fun and games.

“If you had been doing a better job babysitting those nibblings of your sisters, then Phillip would still be dancing the opening number,” Alan replies, shrugging out from under his arm.

Harrison begins to back away, his hands up, palms out.

“Look, those kids are wild. No one can control them. I told Duckie to watch them. It’s his fault,” he says, and further up, I spot Duckie’s arm in the air flipping him the bird.

“Was not!” Duckie yells back.

“Was too,” Harrison continues. “Blame him. Gotta go. See you out there,” he says



before turning and jogging up the hallway to catch up with the others.

They'll wait in the dugout until we jump down, then join us on the field for the rest of the number.

"Ready?" Alan asks, turning to me.

"As I'll ever be," I reply, and we jog out. Will and Frankie are waiting with devices to record, and they follow us into position into the stands.

Frankie is with me, and his face is flushed, and his hands shake as he holds the device up in front of me. The crowd around us cheers and hollers.

"You okay?" I ask him.

"I'm good. I just don't want to mess it up."

"Hey, I've had one run-through in a hallway. I think if anyone's going to mess up, it'll be me."

"But what do I do if you mess up?"

"Make sure you get it on camera."

He smiles, and his hands steady, and it's just in time. The intro music kicks in, and like magic, the crowd falls silent. Spotlights land on Alan and me.

Performing in front of thousands of strangers is the biggest rush, and right now, my heart is like a jackhammer in my chest, but I don't let it throw me off. I strut my stuff down those stairs, belting out the lyrics at the top of my lungs. Then halfway down, my gaze locks with Alan's, and it's like the whole stadium sips away, and it's just us.

He's smiling wide, big brown eyes glistening, and those freaking adorable deep dimples right on show.

It's like we're singing to each other and only to each other, and somehow, I manage to make the turn without realizing, and then his hand is holding mine, and we're stepping down the backs of the seats towards the railing. There's a pause in the lyrics.

"Are you ready?"

"For anything," I reply, my heart in my throat, and then he steps down from the last chair and pulls me into his arms. I want to bury my face in his neck again, to feel the warmth of his skin on my lips, but I keep myself together and sing while his long legs climb over the rail, and then at the perfect moment, he jumps. Time slows down. It's like I'm floating through space, wrapped in a cocoon of vanilla, and it's perfect. Until with an oomph, we land on the red dirt, and he stumbles just a little. I hold onto him tight, his arms flexing around me, and when he manages to find his footing, the players in the dugout run onto the field to surround us.

"Sorry," he whispers into my ear, lowering me down.

"Fine, I'm. I mean, I'm fine," I mumble, and we continue through the number, my heart pounding in my ears the entire time.

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"You're perfect together." Dennis cheers when he spots me coming out of the locker room the next day, and he flips his device around to show me the video of Alan and me. "Meet me after training in the conference room. I've got big plans for you two."

"Umm, okay," I reply, trying to sound unfazed when really, the idea of getting to do more one-on-one numbers with Alan has my stomach in a spin. He might be the

enemy on the field, but maybe off the field, we could be something else, something more. What happens after game day is nobody's business. Right?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:58 am*

### Chapter six

Alan

“Okay, my star-crossed lovers, let’s take advantage of this momentum and get some more stuff out there,” Dennis says when he enters the conference room.

“Star crossed what now?” I ask, and he smiles a cheeky grin.

“Your little performance at the last game is trending on socials. Everyone is talking about it.”

“I don’t think it’s everyone.” Ryan blushes.

“Anyone who’s obsessed with Banana Ball is and as far as we’re concerned, that’s everyone.”

“But we aren’t—” I start but can’t even bring myself to say the words out loud.

“Doesn’t matter. You’re performers. You’ll play my star-crossed lovers, and they will love it.”

Dennis taps a few buttons on his phone and Kissing You by Des’reë starts playing.

“Will half the audience even get this reference?” I ask with a chuckle, and he pauses the song, puts one hand on his hip, and pops it out to the side.

“You got it, so I think we’ll be fine.”

Ryan looks from Dennis to me and back.

“What’s the reference?”

“See,” I say, stretching my arm out towards Ryan.

“It’s from the most incredible Romeo and Juliet movie ever made, the Baz Luhrmann masterpiece. If what I have planned is going to work, you’ll need to at least be able to mime the songs. I’ll send you both the list of songs and movies we will be referencing over the next few weeks. If I were you, I’d watch the movies first, then practice the songs.”

“How many movies are we talking about?” Ryan asks, but before Dennis can reply, I have a more important question.

“Did you say weeks?”

“So far five, and yes, weeks, so get to it, but if this thing takes off, there are countless movies to draw from. It’s one of the most popular tropes after all.”

“I never really liked it,” I say, and Dennis clutches his chest like my words have wounded him.

“Like it or not, you will practice the words to these songs. I don’t want any weird guppy fish mouths out there.” He hits play, and the song continues, and we go through some possible skits to go with it. The scene they used the song for in the movie has Romeo and Juliet spotting each other for the first time through a fish tank, and when Ryan flips his phone over and shows Dennis he can order adult costumes of various fish, he decides that is the way to go for this skit. We move through the list of

songs and movies, Titanic . He wanted to do the bow of the ship scene, but we convinced him recreating the fun dance they do below deck would be way cooler. He's hitting the younger crowd with a vampire skit, and it was nice seeing Ryan go all red-faced at the thought of biting into my neck. To tell you the truth. It excited me far more than I should have let it, too. Ryan is young, well, he's actually about my age, but with his beautiful porcelain skin and bright blue eyes, he could pass for a decade younger. He's sweet, too, and fucking gorgeous, but he's also on the other team, and mixing business with pleasure, no matter how pleasurable it would likely be, I'm told, is not a good idea.

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"It's your turn," Kelly, my sister, whines from the comfort of her bed while I pull on my trainers, sitting on the couch that was my bed for the few nights I stayed here. Getting her crap out of her spare room so that I could have my bed set up was a top priority after night one. This couch sucks. I really should try to get my own place. But I've never liked living alone. I grew up with my brothers and Kelly and Gramps always there, and I had roommates all the time up until I moved in with my ex. Not that living with him was an enjoyable experience. At first it was. You know, when you first meet someone, and they show you the rose-colored version of themselves, then... bam! Their true colors shine through, only now you're invested, you're in love and you explain away all the red flag behaviors because it was good once. It was perfect, and you know that if you are just good enough, they will be that person again. Only with him there was no turning back, because the rose-colored version wasn't just him on his best behavior, it was a complete fabrication of a man he never was and could never be. When I finally got up the courage to leave, Kelly was on my doorstep an hour later with a trailer and she helped move me out of there and into her place.

"How is it my turn?" I reply, grabbing my gym bag from beside the couch.

“I took Precious to the vet for him last week, remember?”

Oh shit, yeah, I do remember. Gramps insisted that his cat, Precious, which I am still not convinced isn't the spawn of Satan, had swallowed a button from one of his shirts. I was not sitting in a vet's office with that thing trying to claw at my face the whole time, seeing as he refused to crate her or go with her, so Kelly took the hit.

“But I have the gym this morning, then training.”

“Go after training.”

“Does he need to eat? I mean, he's old and chubby. Surely he can go a few more days. Oh, we can have Quickdrop deliver him his groceries.”

“Nope, last time we tried that he attacked the delivery guy with a stick, and now none of them will go there. Besides, he likes it better when you shop for him. You get him all the stuff I refuse to.”

Fuck.

“Fine, I'll go after training.”

It isn't that we don't love Gramps. We do. I have some of my best childhood memories with him, and he's the reason I love baseball at all. It's just that he doesn't think what I do is baseball, and he doesn't miss an opportunity to tell me as much whenever I see him. He hasn't even come to a game before. He's basing all of his opinion on what he's seen in the papers about us, so it's really hard not to get into an argument with him over it. Plus, if it's not Banana Ball he's complaining about, it's my love life. He doesn't give a shit that I'm gay. He does care that I am gay and almost thirty and single again. If he knew what a controlling douchebag my ex was, he probably wouldn't give me such a hard time about finding another guy. No. He

probably would. He'd just tell me to pick better next time.

At least now that Harry has moved in with his boyfriend, I won't have to hear about all the visitors he has or fend off the repeated requests that I sneak over there and install curtains.

"Dean and Nial should have him visit the ranch and get him out of our hair for a while," I tell her.

Our other brothers Dean and Nial took over the ranch in Bellerelle when it got too much for Gramps and moved him out to Savannah. I didn't think it would stick, but they found an apartment he didn't hate and got him the spawn of Satan, and he never looked back.

"You'd have better luck getting them to visit here. Actually, it's been ages. We should get them to come to one of your games now that you're actually in the league and all."

I scoff. "I was in the league last year, too."

"Those were like warm-up games. You're playing with the OG's now. That should get them here."

"Whatever. I'll see you tonight."

"Don't get him any of those chocolate cookies, Wheat Thins only," she calls, and I leave before I lie and agree.

I get to the gym, and Ryan isn't here yet, so I start on some stretches, then hit the leg press. It was torture last week working out while Ryan moved through Kyle's program. I tried to stay focused on what I was doing, but I would catch myself



staring, and it would totally put me off what rep or set I was even up to.

“Hey,” Ryan says, walking in and rubbing his shoulder.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I just need to warm up, I think.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard.”

“You’re starting to sound like Kyle.”

“He is the expert in this department. Maybe you should tell Dennis these extra skits are too much.”

“It’s not. They’re not. I’m fine,” he replies and starts on his program. I watch as he moves through each action slower than he did yesterday. If he’s hurting, he should stop. It’s only going to make things worse for him if he pushes himself too far. I climb from the press and walk over to where he’s standing, circling his shoulders.

“How about we skip on the rest of the workout? Nothing I seem to be doing is getting these chicken legs any bigger, anyway. Let’s hit the steam room instead,” I say, and his lips pick up a little in the corner.

“You don’t have chicken legs. Your legs are great. I mean fine. Your legs look fine to me, is what I’m saying.”

I know he’s probably just being nice. He had a thing for Harry, and his legs are thick as tree trunks, his arms too. That guy is all muscle. But the way Ryan’s gaze trails down my body and back up sends a shiver through me and makes me hope that his compliment is more than just a false nicety.

“Thanks. People always joke about me skipping leg day. My ex most of all. He always called them chicken legs, even got in the habit of tossing me a packet of the real things whenever we were at the store.”

I immediately feel my cheeks warm, and I turn my attention to where my shoes rest against the base plate of the leg press. Fuck, why did I bring up my ex? I should just shut up and go back to working out.

“Good thing he’s your ex then,” Ryan says, and I look back up to find his eyebrows raised and a wide smile on his lips. “Because he sounds like a bloody wanker.”

I laugh. “He was, actually. In so many ways.”

“Well, forget what he called them, because those stems are fit.”

“Fit?”

He shrugs, and I catch the slightest wince in his expression. He really should not be working out today. “It’s British. It just means they are...great,” he continues.

“Oh, well, umm, thanks. So do you want to maybe hit the steam room? I think I’ve had enough for today anyway. My stems are a bit sore.”

He smiles softly, my heartbeat racing faster the longer he holds my stare.

“Kyle did say I had to do the whole program,” he replies.

“Kyle also said to stop if it hurts. I’m just suggesting we stop slightly before it hurts. Steam is good for your muscles. It increases blood flow, and reduces stiffness.”

He looks away, his small smile growing into a wide smirk.

“I mean, muscle stiffness. It makes your muscles feel better. Shit, you know what I mean.”

“Okay, but if Kyle asks, I did the whole program,” he says, and he climbs from the floor.

“Got it.”

Note for later. Steam rooms are not a place to get to know someone. The air is thick, and as relaxing as the steam is for your muscles, it also makes you want to just sit or lie there and do nothing but breathe. So that’s what we did until the timer went off and he hit the showers. I lied and said I had to make a phone call before training started. No shower boners for me today. Well, at least not until I get home anyway.

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I walk the distance to the grocer by Gramps’s place after training is finished and start filling a cart. I start with the essentials to not forget them. He’d have a fit if Precious didn’t have her expensive food pouches and salmon treats. Kelly was right about him preferring me to do his shopping, mostly because, like she said, I get him all his favorites, so basically, all the unhealthy things she refuses to get him. I figure he’s old, so he’s lived a long enough life doing what he’s doing, and if he wants to eat a few Chips Ahoy with his cup of tea and start the day with a bowl of Lucky Charms, who am I to stop him? I grab the cereal first, and when I see they have an offer to buy two, get one free, I load up.

“Cat food and Lucky Charms. Okay, so you have a cat and a massive sweet tooth,” Ryan says, suddenly leaning over my cart.

“It’s for my gramps. He doesn’t get out much, so I do his shopping.”

Ryan's cheeky smile softens. "That's sweet of you."

"Thanks. Wait, did you follow me?"

His face flushes a pretty shade of pink, but he shakes his head.

"No, I live up the road now. I moved in with Duckie and Ian."

"You took Harry's old room?" I ask, pushing the cart forward to head towards the biscuit section.

"Yeah. It's been...interesting. I mean, they are pretty quiet guys, not that you would know it. The place is filled with ducks, like there is one in every corner. I thought I was going mad because it was like they were multiplying, but then Duckie got another package of them, and the bottom fell out while he was taking it to his room. There were like fifty red and white ducks strewn across the floor."

"He can get a little obsessed."

"Yeah, but he's not the funniest thing I have to live with."

"Really?" I ask, half hoping he's about to tell me Ian sleepwalks or something, anything other than the words that I'm pretty sure are about to come out of his mouth.

"There is this old guy that lives across from me."

Here we go.

"He's always sitting at his window with his cup of tea and chocolate biscuits, checking out the street with binoculars like he's some detective on a stakeout. Only this guy's partner is a cat that I was pretty sure was dead the first time he held it up."

Yep, he's totally talking about Gramps.

"Yeah, old people can be funny," I say, grabbing a few of the different chocolate biscuit varieties and dropping them into the cart. My gran was from the UK, and growing up, Gramps used to correct Gran every time she called cookies biscuits, but after she passed, he never called them cookies again. I have no idea when I stopped calling them cookies and starting only calling them biscuits too.

"He's hilarious. Asked me the first time I met him why I don't play real baseball. Oh and don't even get me started on the sound his cat makes in the middle of the night. I swear it's like a demon has possessed it."

Precious hates me. The demon cat hisses at me the second Gramps opens the door, and if it doesn't attack me, it's threatening to the entire time I'm there. I reach across from Ryan, grab the big packet of black tea bags, and put them in the cart, too.

His gaze moves down to the cart, across the contents, and then back up to me.

"Where did you say your Gramps's place is again?"

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:58 am*

### Chapter seven

Ryan

When I spotted Alan in the corner grocer, I thought this was my chance to chat in a totally neutral setting. I mean, it has the potential for a really adorable meet cute. Except my life rarely goes the way of romance movies, no matter how much I wish it would, and instead of the sweetest interaction in the world that makes him fall in love with me instantly, I bag out his grandfather in the first minute of conversation.

Alan grabs another couple of packs of chocolate biscuits and puts them in his cart. “Gramps gave Harry a hard time, too. Sorry,” he says moving slowly down the aisle.

“I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine. Has he asked you to buy curtains yet?”

“The first day I moved in, and every day since.”

“Yeah, he tries to convince me to break in and install them whenever I’m at his place, too.”

“I was going to get some, but there is so little light that comes in as it is, and I like having the window open to catch the breeze.”

“Harry told him the same thing. It won’t stop him from asking, though. Just like nothing will convince him what we do is real baseball.”

His sad voice sends a pang to my chest.

“It is, though,” I say, and he gives me a half smile and nods, but it’s almost like he maybe doesn’t believe it either. I grab his arm to stop him from pushing the cart further and turn him to face me. “We are real baseball players, Alan. Don’t let what anyone thinks affect how you see yourself.”

“I try not to, but it’s just so hard. Gramps used to love watching me play ball growing up. He taught me the game on the family ranch, and when I was old enough to play, he took me to every training and was at every game.”

We continue up the aisle, Alan grabbing things from the shelf as we go.

“Has he seen you play Banana Ball?”

“Ha, no. He just sits in his apartment watching the street with those binoculars of his griping about how I’ve ruined the sport he loves.”

“That’s rough.”

“Yeah, but he’s old, so…”

“So what?”

He turns to face me, a frown etched on his forehead.

“Well, there is no point trying to convince an old person they’re wrong, you know, they are so set in their ways and all that.”

“That’s bullshit,” I reply, and he laughs. The way his eyes sparkle when he smiles for real sends a swirl of warmth through my gut.

“He’s just the way he is. I tried way too many times to talk him into coming to a game, to see me play. He won’t budge, so I gave up hoping he’ll change his mind.”

“But you haven’t.”

“I have. I don’t ask anymore.”

“Yeah, but you still want him to come, so really, you gave up trying, not hoping.”

“I guess.”

I can’t imagine not having my family’s support. I’ve always had it. When I was swimming in college, playing cricket, even when I decided to up and leave for a job on the other side of the world, they’ve always been in my corner cheering me on. If Don isn’t going to support him and make him see what he’s doing is amazing, then maybe I can. We’re friends, after all. Sort of. Teammates, or fellow players, at least.

“Do you have much more to get? I could help you carry this stuff back?” I offer, and he grabs a packet of something from the shelf and tosses it into the cart.

“Just a few more things, but that’s okay, I can manage.”

I glance down at the half-full cart. “I’ll help you. I’m headed that way, anyway. I only stopped in here to grab a some stuff for dinner.”

“Okay, then. Thanks, that would be good. Well, I only have milk and a few TV dinners to grab. What do you need?”

“TV dinners?”

“Yeah, Gramps doesn’t cook anymore. My sister Kelly drops off a few homemade



things once in a while, but she can't cook either, so this is kinder, trust me."

I laugh, and we head to the freezer section for him to load up on TV dinners, and then we grab the potatoes, cream, and butter I need.

"You're having potatoes for dinner?"

"No, I've got shepherd's pie going at home. Duckie is watching the sauce thicken. It takes a while. I just didn't realize we were out of potatoes, and you can't have shepherd's pie without creamy mash on top now, can you?"

He's staring at me, eyes wider than normal, eyebrows raised, and with a quizzical grin.

"What?"

"I just never picked you for a cook."

"My granny taught me. She's the real cook of the family. Most of the time, I just follow her recipes and hope not to screw it up too badly, but before I left the UK, I had the shepherd's pie down. Have you ever had it?"

He shakes his head.

"You should come try it, tell me what you think." The second the words are out of my mouth, I feel my face start to warm. Did I seriously just ask Alan Beaker over for dinner? "You know, if you don't have plans, no big deal. Duckie and Ian will be there, too. There is plenty, that's all." Oh my god, just stop.

"Sure, ummm, that would be great," he replies, and I can't stop the stupid smile from spreading across my face. Fuck, come on, I tell myself. Try to be cool.

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We get to the door of Don's apartment, and he pauses.

"If he says anything that offends you, I'm sorry," he says, lowering his head.

"I've met Don, remember. Besides, I'm sure it will be fine. I'm not easily offended."

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you."

"Noted, now can we go in, please? My fingers are starting to go numb."

He pushes open the door, a hiss sounds from somewhere nearby, and Alan takes a step back. My chest is against his back, and he turns his head slightly towards me but doesn't move.

"Demon on the loose," he whispers, and I hold my position, even though his ass is practically pressed against my groin and the warmth of him is sending a swarm of nerves over every inch of my skin. "Gramps, come grab your spawn so I can get to the kitchen," he calls.

"Stop your fussin'. Precious ain't no demon, she's protecting her house is all. Did you get her treats?"

Alan finally takes a step forward again, and I release the breath I didn't realize I had been holding, then follow him inside.

"Yes, I got her treats. You know Ryan, he lives next door. He offered to help carry these up," Alan says, making a beeline down the hallway to the right and into what I assume is the kitchen.

“Hi, again,” I say, nodding as I walk in the same direction.

“You got those curtains yet?”

“No, sorry, they didn’t have any,” I lie and turn the corner to drop off the rest of Don’s groceries on the counter.

“I’ve got this. You can head home,” Alan says, unloading the bags.

“Just come round when you’re done. It will still be a while before dinner is ready.”

“Sounds good, and really, thanks again.”

“No worries,” I reply, walking back out to the living space. Precious leaps from Gramp’s arms and struts over. I freeze. Is she going to attack? I’m wearing training shorts from practice today, my legs are exposed. Shit, what do I do? I’m about to dash the door, but then Precious lowers her head, and instead of attacking me as I expect, like Alan said she does to him every time he visits, she rubs up against my leg purring, and then looks up at me like I’m her most favorite person in the world. Maybe it’s a ploy to get me to trust her, to bend down to pat her, and then she’ll attack my hand or my arm, or my face?

“Hmm, well ain’t that peculiar,” Gramps says while studying Precious.

“What is?”

“Looks like she likes ya, boy. Well, go on then, give her a pat.”

I lean down and nervously reach to brush my fingers over her back, but she nudges my hand with her face and purrs deeper.

“Oh, you’re a sweet kitty, aren’t you,” I say, and I scratch under her chin. She closes her eyes a little, sitting on the floor and arching her neck higher. I had cats back in the UK. They were not really mine, ferals that decided to claim me and my cousin because we would put milk out for them every night after mum would go to bed.

“Everything’s away—” Alan says, walking out into the living room, and then he stops. Precious stiffens, and her eyes open and lock onto him. The purr becomes a rattle in her throat.

“You’re touching it,” Alan whispers. “Why are you touching it?”

“She wanted a pat,” I say, scratching that spot under her neck again, and I can see as she slightly closes her eyes she wants to give in, but she also doesn’t want to take her attention off Alan. “You’re a good kitty, aren’t you,” I croon.

“She’s a demon sent from hell to try and kill me is what she is. I still have cuts on my legs that haven’t healed.”

Gramps coughs a little in his chair by the window.

“You okay there, Don?” I ask and he waves a hand my way but continues to cough. Alan disappears then walks back in with a tall glass of water, straight past Precious without even a flinch, and kneels beside his grandfather.

“Here, Gramps, drink this,” he says, handing it over. After a few sips, Don is completely back to normal and shooing Alan away with his hand.

“I’m fine,” Gramps says, and Alan stands.

“It didn’t sound like you were fine,” he reasons. “When did you last have a visit from the doctor?”

“I’m fit as a fiddle, no need for no doctor. I’m totally fine. See, Precious is still over there with young Ryan. If I was truly in any danger, she’d be right at my side, I tell ya.”

Gramps climbs from the chair, struts over and picks up Precious, and she actually fights him a little, which makes me smile.

“Go on, out ya get before you get her all worked up,” Gramps says, and Alan walks around me to the door.

“I put on dinner. The microwave will beep when it’s done,” he says.

“Thanks, now be off with ya both.”

“You’re welcome,” I say and follow Alan out to the hall.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” Alan says as we make our way back down the stairs.

“You know, maybe those possessed cries she makes at night are just her trying to get some attention.”

“You can’t be serious. You spent all of two minutes with her and you’re ready to give up on the demon possession theory altogether? You saw how she greeted me, right?”

I shrug. “I guess she just likes me better. Come on, we better get in before Duckie destroys the sauce.”

When we get into the apartment, I find Ian standing by the stove top.

“Duckie got bored, but I think it’s almost done,” he says when we walk in.

“Cheers, I didn’t think I would be so long, but I ran into Alan. He’s going to stay for dinner, too.”

“Nice. No worries. Ryan always makes too much.”

“Do not. I’m following my granny’s recipe.”

Duckie walks out of their room. “And she used to cook for a family of ten.”

“Very funny. There were seven of them, actually.”

“So still more than twice as many as the number of people who live here then. Oh, hey, Alan, do you want a beer?” he asks, like seeing him in our place is the most normal thing in the world.

“Sure,” he replies, and they sit and chat in the living room while Ian helps me finish off dinner in the kitchen. I could halve the recipe to make less, but then I would have to find a smaller baking tray, and half the cream would just sit in the fridge unused. I guess now I could give it to Precious.

“So, you and Alan. Is that new?” Ian asks as he chops the potatoes I’ve peeled and puts them into the pot of boiling water.

“It’s not anything. I just ran into him at the grocery store.”

“Sure it’s not. You just go around inviting everyone to dinner, my mistake,” he chuckles, and I can’t stop the smirk that finds its way to my lips.

“Okay, so I like him, but he’s on the other team, and it would just be...messy.

“Or it could be amazing.”

“Maybe. But how can I know for sure?”

“You can’t.”

“If we did get together and it went bust, it would affect both teams, not just us. I can’t take that risk. I’ll have to settle for just being his friend. I can do that.”

He nods and smiles, but I don’t think he believes a word I said, but I have to. I need to just be his friend because Harry is right. Getting involved with another player is a bad idea.

Duckie holds up his phone from the couch and points it my way.

“Dude, that intro of you two is still trending,” Duckie says, and Alan blushes a little beside him.

“It’s got people talking, that’s for sure,” Alan replies, and I smile, remembering the feeling of being in his arms as he carried me over the rail and jumped down to the dirt. Nope, stop thinking about it. You just said yourself getting involved with a player is a bad idea. You’re friends. Just friends, I tell myself, but then Alan glances my way, and his eyes sparkle the way they do when he’s really chuffed, and my chest swells. Fuck, I am so totally screwed.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:58 am*

### Chapter eight

Alan

We sit around the table at Ryan's place, and it's surprising how easy it is. I thought I would be too nervous to speak and would find myself just sitting here listening to them talking while I stuff my face with this amazing meal he's made. A small moan escapes my lips on the next mouthful, and Ryan's eyes land on me.

"So I take it you like it?" he asks, and I nod, chewing through the hot deliciousness. "Well, there is plenty, so you can take some home if you like."

"Thanks. Your granny taught you to cook, right?" I ask, remembering he said it was her recipe he was following.

"She taught both me and my cousin Teddy, or at least tried to. She looked after us after school, and since she lived only a few houses down from my parents' place, we all ate dinner with her almost every night until I moved to the US."

"Do you get home much?"

"Not as much as I would like. Granny is getting old now, though, so I should make a trip soon. She swears she's flying over for one of our games, but since we lost Grandad about ten years ago, she hasn't left the UK since. He always joked that he had to practically carry her onto the plane, she was that scared. I guess without him, it's not a fear she can face anymore."



“Aww,” Ian sighs, and Duckie reaches over and squeezes his hand. “Maybe if I carry you onboard you will feel better?” Duckie has terrible air sickness and goes green even just thinking about flying most of the time.

“I think the only way I’d feel better is if I was unconscious, and the airlines won’t let you on if that is the case,” he replies.

Ryan chuckles. “She doesn’t get sick like you, just the general fear of being on a plane for hours and the potential for plummeting to the earth if both engines go out that kind of stops her from actually booking a flight, or agreeing to come when my parents visit.”

“Well, we have plenty of games on the coast this season. Maybe she can come to one of those?” I suggest, but he shakes his head.

“It’s still a nine-plus hour flight.”

Duckie shovels another forkful into his mouth and talks through chews. “Then we should convince the league to do a real-world tour and we can bring the game to her.”

“A second ago, you were saying you need to be unconscious to not feel sick on a plane, and now you’re suggesting flying all over the world?” I ask with a grin.

He shrugs. “Not like I can avoid planes in our job. Besides, on the last few flights last year, I only threw up once.”

“A real world tour is actually a great idea,” Ian says, grabbing his phone out and tapping away. “Banana Ball is trending wildly online. Your videos and the OG’s have been watched millions of times by people all over the globe. It could be a great opportunity, and something never done before. They have world leagues for cricket, soccer, and so many other sports, why not Banana Ball?”

It isn't totally out of the realm of possibilities. Though they only just added us to the league, rumors are swirling this year could be the last year for one of us, so I don't see them taking it global any time soon.

"Maybe," Ryan says, standing to take his plate to the kitchen. "Does anyone want dessert?"

"I'm good," I say, finishing off my last bite, and joining him in the kitchen. "Dinner was great, though. Thanks again for inviting me and for helping with Gramps's groceries."

"No problem. You're really lucky he's so close to you, you know?"

I've been thinking the opposite, actually. Both Kelly and I have probably taken for granted how good it is to have him here, the demon cat and grumbly nature the main challenge to seeing the positives, but he's right. We are lucky. He could be back on the ranch where we would hardly get to see him, or in another country completely and we'd almost never get to. I can't imagine how hard that would be to be so far away from family. The ranch is only a few hours away by car, so if one of my brothers needs us, we can get there, but for Ryan, he's pretty much a half-a-day flight away from his family. Fuck that would suck.

"I'm starting to see that, yeah," I reply, and he hands me a covered plate with more of the shepherd's pie on it.

"Thanks again for dinner. I'll see you at the gym in the morning, yeah?"

"Actually, I'm back to my regular fitness routine now, cleared by Kyle and all."

I knew the early visits to the gym were only temporary, but I guess I figured I had more time to... I don't know. Get to know him. Away from the others.

“Oh, okay.”

“You could come to the pool. It’s one up the street. I have an all-hours pass, so I usually get there at five. There is almost never anyone else there at that time. Sometimes on Tuesdays, the old ladies from the home up the street get in about half past to start their aerobics class, but the rest of the week it’s usually just me. I could let you in and we could swim a few laps?”

“Oh, umm, I don’t really...swim.”

“What do you mean?”

“I never really learned to. I mean, I’m sure I can save myself if I fall in, like I can do the basic stroke or whatever you call it but laps , yeah, I don’t think I can do that.”

“I could show you how. It’s not that hard, and swimming is really good for your stamina.” His cheeks blush that pretty pink again.

“Sure, okay.”

What the fuck? One look from him, and now I’m suddenly agreeing to meet him at the pool at five so he can teach me to swim. I hate the water. Have done since I almost drowned as a kid. Why didn’t I just tell him that? If I get there and freak out, I’m going to have to tell him, or I could just not show up. I can text him in the morning, say I’ve got a headache and can’t make it. But then I will miss out on seeing him swim laps. His toned body gliding through the water. Okay. I’ll go, and I’ll make up an excuse not to get in the water and just watch him. I can do that, right?

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I get to the pool, and he’s already waiting by the gate with a big smile. Thankfully,

the parking lot is empty, so I can only hope the inside is too, because if I am going to freak out and run away like a scared child, better to only embarrass myself in front of one person, right? Urgh, why am I doing this?

“I was worried you were going to not show,” he says when I reach him, the smile spreading across his lips, and I’m reminded by the swirl in my stomach exactly why I am here.

“I thought about it,” I reply and then follow him through the doors. The smell of chlorine fills my nose immediately and my mind is flooded with memories of the last time I was at a pool. A big one like this. I was ten, and it was someone’s birthday. I stupidly followed my older brothers up the stairs for this big slide, not thinking about what I would do at the bottom when plunged into the cold water at super speed. Nial pulled me out of the water that day, and a lifeguard did the rest, and I never wanted to get back in again.

“Umm, I don’t think this is a good idea after all,” I say as he strips off his sweats and shirt by the edge of the large lap pool. He’s wearing swim shorts that are not that unlike his training shorts, but maybe a touch tighter, and all I can imagine now is what they’ll look like wet and clinging to the shape of him.

“You can touch the bottom at this end. How about we just get in and see how you go?”

My hands are shaking, and my eyes don’t want to shift from the rippling surface of the water.

“I... You must think I’m being stupid.”

He closes the distance between us and takes my hand in his.

“I think something is keeping you out of the water, and that is not stupid. You don’t have to get in if you don’t want to, but you made it here, so maybe deep down you want to try?”

He’s right. I’ve been invited to swim loads of times, always declining the invite, and I avoid Gordon’s pool like the plague, but I showed up here, wearing swim shorts and a towel, fully intending to get in the water with Ryan. Fuck.

“Um, maybe I’ll sit on the edge and watch you for a bit, if that’s cool?”

“Totally.”

He lets go of my hand and walks to the diving blocks on the far end. I strip off my shirt and flip-flops and walk to the edge. I can see the bottom through the clear water, and the sign on the side says four feet. I’m six feet tall, so If I fall in, I can stand and my head will be out of the water, easily. Okay, come on. You can do this, I tell myself, and I slowly sit on the edge of the pool and then slip my feet into the water. It’s warmer than I expected.

“I used to be able to swim the length of this pool in one minute fifteen seconds in college,” Ryan calls as he perches on the block, hands clasping the edge by his feet, ass up in the air.

“Is that good?” I ask, and he tilts his head up to look at me.

“It was great. Now I’m slow as fuck,” he replies, lowering his head and then leaping off into the water. He glides under the surface, and my pulse quickens as the seconds tick by. Then relief washes over me when his head pops up, and he starts swimming through the water towards me. His arms are like propellers, pushing him forward as his body glides behind him. I half expect to see a lot of kicking and splashing of the water, but it looks like his legs are moving at half the speed of his arms, and as he

flies past me, he reaches the end, dives forward, and flips under the water. He pushes off the end and starts to come back the other way. But instead of popping back up out of the water, he swims at an angle under the surface towards my feet and then comes up between them.

“That was so slow,” he says, running his hands through his sandy brown hair. Wet like this, you would think it was darker, but in the light on the baseball field, it almost looks like antique gold.

“I think that was super speed. How long have you been swimming for?”

“I was on an athletics scholarship at a private school in the UK before I got into Arizona State, so my whole life I’ve been in and out of the water. I used to play cricket, too. They say that’s how I learned to throw a fastball.”

“I didn’t know you didn’t always play baseball.”

“Yeah, compared to you lot, I’m a newbie, I guess. I went home for a few years after school but then moved to the US for work and the company had a team, so I joined.”

He’s standing in the water, waving his arms in and out and making the surface of the water swirl around my legs. I could just slide in. I can stand. He’s standing, and I am a little taller than him, so I would be able to stand. Before I lose my nerve, I push off the edge and slide down, the water wrapping around my body like a cocoon. My arms go up, and I suck in a breath, but when my feet touch the cool smooth tile floor, I grab the edge with one hand and let the other palm sit on the surface of the water and I let my lungs slowly deflate. Ryan doesn’t move.

“So how did you get into Banana Ball then?” I ask, hoping that talking will lessen the fear taking a grip on my nervous system right now.

“My ex wanted to apply and asked me if I would help with some promo audition tape thing. We recorded a bunch of dances and promos so he could show off his talents and the GM invited me instead of him to fly over.”

“Wow, that must have been a hard pill for him to swallow.”

“It was, which is why he’s now my ex.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago now, and I’m better off. Do you want to walk a little?”

I don’t want to let go of the edge. It’s silly, I know. I can stand in this depth, but the idea of it just being me and the water is terrifying.

“I’ll be here with you the whole time,” he says as if reading my mind, and when he holds out his hand, I do the unthinkable and take it, releasing my grip on the edge and taking a step toward him.

It shouldn’t feel different. The edge wasn’t doing anything to keep me up, but it does. The water surrounds us, and as he leads me towards the edge of the shallow end, I find my feet following along without protest. His hand grips mine tightly, resting on the surface of the water between us, and it’s actually amazing.

“It’s like gravity in here is different,” I say as my legs move through the water one slow step at a time.

“It feels good, though, right?”

“Yeah, it does.”

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The next day, I'm shocked as shit to be back at the pool with Ryan. This time, instead of sliding into the water from the edge, he takes my hand and walks me down the ramp at the side.

"It should be less of a shock to your system to walk in like this," he says as the depth of water rises over the hem of my shorts and tickles the sensitive skin of my stomach.

"It's not as...bad," I say, when the word I want to say is terrifying. It is, though. Still scary as fuck. My heart feels like it wants to explode out of my chest and my brain is screaming, "Danger. Get out of the water." But I just squeeze his hand tighter and somehow follow him deeper in.

"Okay, this is far enough, I think," he says, turning to face me. The water is up to our chest, and his free hand is swishing through the water at his side like he was doing yesterday. My free hand is under the water wedged at my side, my fingers gripping my thigh as a way to distract my brain from convincing me that this is a terrible idea and getting the hell out.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Have you ever...been afraid of something?"

He sort of nods, but the look on his face tells me he's struggling to think of anything.

"I mean, I'm sure I have been. Everyone is afraid of something, but not like Duckie with airplanes or...this. What does it feel like?"

"Terror."



“Shit, okay, we can, umm, we can get out.”

“No,” I say before he can move, and I hold his hand tighter. “I don’t want to. I mean. I do want to, but I don’t want to, want to. You know?”

He nods, but I am doing a terrible job of trying to explain, so how could he?

“Think of a situation you would want to run away from, like you’re in the woods and there is a giant feral bear, and it’s running right for you. You want to run away, right? Protect yourself.”

“Depends what kind of bear is it? Some bears you should stand your ground and scream at it to scare them off.”

“Okay, a crazy axe-murderer is running after you trying to kill you. Your whole body would be trying to get away, right?”

“I had this nightmare once I was being chased by a guy with a chainsaw, like in that movie, fuck that was scary.”

“Okay, great, well, the water, the pool, that is my chainsaw murderer.”

“Shit. So your brain is screaming for you to run and your legs want to take off and your heart is racing?” he asks, and he presses his hand against my chest.

“Exactly,” I reply, but my words come out quieter than I expect.

“But you don’t want to get out now?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because when you look at the water, it’s like you’re home, and if something can make you so happy, I don’t think I should let my mind see it only as something that wants to try to kill me.”

“Okay, then we stay in the water. We come every day until it gets easier, until it isn’t a chainsaw murderer anymore. We’ll take it slow. Aim for a lesser evil every time. What is a level down from a chainsaw murderer?”

“Precious.”

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We’ve been at the pool every day for a week, and this is the furthest I’ve gotten into the water. My shoulders just peek out, but now and then he shifts, sending the surface washing over them, and I don’t hate it. We’ve been walking back and forth, talking for twenty minutes. Another five and I’ll get out and watch him swim a few laps before we head to the field.

I never thought I would ever have the courage to face my fear of the water. It’s been twenty years since Nial pulled me out, and I hadn’t been back in, but in a week, Ryan Tanner has me practically neck deep again.

Reaching the side, Ryan leans his back against it, still holding my hand, and as I move in close, I reach past him with my free hand to grip the edge.

“Thank you for this,” I say, and his smile has those adorable deep dimples drawing my eye.

He turns his head to look at my hand, then his gaze follows my arm along to my

shoulder, his big blue eyes shining brighter with the water's reflection, and when his stare moves to my mouth, and he licks his lips, I do something I really shouldn't. I lean in and kiss him.

## Page 9

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### Chapter nine

Ryan

Holy fucking shit. Alan's mouth is hot against my lips, and when his tongue plunges into my mouth, my stomach swirls. I sweep my free hand through the water until it finds the small of his back, and I pull him closer. His other hand grips mine tightly at our side, fingers laced together, my pulse beating so hard it's sure to make ripples in the water around us.

He's still gripping the edge of the pool, and my hand tightly, like he's worried that if he lets go, he could be swept away. As soon as I saw his hesitation to even enter the water, I wasn't going to push him to swim with me. There had to be trauma there. Something from his past that had created this long-lasting fear. But he did get into the water. He got in with me, and he trusted me to let go of the edge. Sure, only for a few steps, and then his free hand reached past me and gripped so tight I thought he might climb out, but he didn't. He came back. Every day this week he came back, and every day he trusted me to take him further.

He breaks the kiss far too soon.

"I shouldn't have done that," he whispers, eyes still closed, chest heaving in time with my own.

"Why?"

I always thought his eyes were brown, but with the water reflecting in them they

appear almost forest green, and when his lips pick up a little at the corner into a sort of half smile, I can't help but lean in and kiss him again. Just a small kiss. And I keep my eyes open and locked on his when I do it, too.

"I think it was a great idea," I say, and the smile widens.

"But we work together. Sort of. Saying we play together sounded too weird in my head, but we do."

I know I'd like to play with him some more. My cock is seriously tenting my swim shorts. Good thing the old ladies are not doing their water aerobics today.

"There are no rules saying we can't do this."

"There probably are."

I shrug. "I'd break the rules to do it again," I say, my gaze moving to his mouth. He lets out a shuddered breath but then steps to the side, and my hand slips from his back.

"We can't, though. If the guys found out. We're on opposing teams. On the field, you're the competition."

"I like to think of it like our two teams are the new guys, and the OG's are the opposing teams, but I get it. It would be...hard."

There are four teams in the league right now, the two original teams that we all refer to as the OG's, and then Alan's team, the Party Animals, and mine, the Funky Monkeys. But if the rumors are true and Bart Erricson is planning on shafting one of us out at the end of this tour, who knows what that could mean for whatever this is between Alan and me.

Alan lets go of my hand and the pool is suddenly five degrees cooler.

“Right. It would be too hard. We should just forget this happened. Umm, I’m going to hit the gym,” he says, climbing from the pool. “See you at training.”

He can’t be serious, can he?

“Yeah, okay, sure. See you at training,” I reply, then sink under the water.

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I’m late to training, which isn’t like me, but after our little pool incident, I swam laps until I could no longer taste his mouth on mine. We go through the regular training program, stretches, throwing, the works, and then take a quick break before we get into the promo and choreography stuff. It’s almost four when I step back onto the field and find Dennis waiting with Alan, and Alan is wearing a billowy white shirt, half tucked into his pants, open at the collar, and fucking sexy as hell.

“Right, we’ve got work to do,” Dennis says, tossing me a similar shirt in black. “Get this on, and we’ll rehearse a few times, then go for a full promo shot.”

The team are all on the field behind us, and a few are wearing foam fish costumes while others are dressed all in blue, holding lengths of blue fabric between them for what I guess are supposed to be waves.

The scene in the movie where Romeo first sees Juliette is through a fish tank, and Dennis has figured out a way to get the guys to simulate a giant one in the middle of the field. Harrison and Stevie, the tallest of the guys, stand several feet apart, arms up high, and each holding one end of a wide black banner. They create the frame, and Arthur, Dave, Benny, Pat, and John are wearing fish costumes, pretending to swim through the water.

“Alright, let’s do this,” Dennis calls, and he hits play on the song, and I quickly strip off my training shirt and throw on the black one. I catch Alan watching me, and I toss him a wink. I know he thinks this is a bad idea. But I think it is a fucking brilliant one, and the sooner I convince him of that, the sooner I get to taste him again.

We play-act the roles of Romeo and Juliet, gazing at each other like we’ve just seen the most beautiful person in the world. It isn’t hard to do, Alan is gorgeous. He’s exactly what you would picture when they say tall, dark, and handsome. He clippers his face but doesn’t clean shave and the slight scruff brushing against my skin when he kissed me is all I can think about as he sings to the music across from me. What would the guys say if they knew that I kissed him? Would they even care? He made it pretty clear we should forget that it happened. Only I swear that his gaze keeps moving to my mouth, so I swipe my tongue over my upper lip and when he bites at his lower one and shakes his head a little, I know for sure he’s thinking of that kiss as much as I am. Now I just have to figure out how I get him to do it again.

Once we reach the edge of the people-made fish tank, we grab hold of each other and waltz in a circle while the rest of the players get into position. He’s avoiding meeting my eyes now, and the scent of his cologne is filling my nose and making my head spin in the best kind of way.

“That kiss—”

“We can’t,” he says, turning me around again and I almost miss my cue to move on to the next part of the choreography.

I’m pitching for the Funky Monkeys, and to add some drama to the close of the skit, they’ve put Alan first up to bat, so after he spins me towards the mound, he releases his hand from mine, and while I keep spinning, doing my best to focus on something still so that when I stop I don’t fall over completely, Alan jogs away, grabs the bat, and then I pull a ball from my pocket on the last turn, line up and throw.

Only my aim is a little off and it goes wide. But Alan swings for it anyway, and his bat clips the ball, sending it to the side.

It might not have been the cleanest hit, but Dennis is cheering from the side, so from his point of view, it must have looked great.

I'm glad Dennis got to stay as one of the lead choreographers for the league. The choreography team all work together to get the game day stuff sorted but having a familiar face telling us what to do really does make it easier to listen. Plus, he knows what our strengths are. He spotted the chemistry between Alan and me, and now I get to be up close every game, every practice, working on our star-crossed lovers' bits. Fuck, I hope I can convince Alan to take a chance on something real.

"I think we should practice the waltz part a bit more. I almost tripped over my own feet a few times," I say to Alan as we're walking off the field. Dennis is within earshot in front of us and turns before Alan can answer.

"Yes, oh, I saw that. Good idea. You two head into the conference room and run it a couple more times. Do you need me to come, too? I can—"

"No," I blurt a little too fast, my cheeks warming. Hopefully, given I'm all sweaty from the rehearsals, neither will notice. "I'll just need the music. I'll grab my phone from the locker room and meet you in there," I say to Alan, and Dennis nods, and I run off.

When I get there, Alan is waiting, leaning against the far wall of the conference room, the white shirt open down to his navel, revealing his glistening chest.

"Cheers for doing this," I say as I put my phone on a chair and close the conference room door.



“No problem, but I thought you did fine out there.”

I shrug. “A little more practice never hurt anyone.” I press play and the song starts slow. This is normally the part where we are walking on either side of the fish tank, and Alan steps into the middle of the room and holds out his hand.

My heart is pounding, and it’s like my skin is electrified by just the thought of touching him again, but I push through the nervous energy and reach out, too. The second his fingers wrap over mine, he pulls me to him, our chests tight against one another, his other hand on the small of my back, sending heat flooding through to my core.

I try not to look at his mouth because when I do, all I can think of is kissing those perfect sweet lips again.

He takes a step and I follow, waltzing through the room with ease like we’ve done it a million times before. When the music stops, he doesn’t let go right away, and I swallow the lump that’s risen in my throat.

“That was...” I begin, my voice a whisper.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” he says, his eyes closing, but his hold on me stays in place.

“Do what?”

“I don’t think I can be close to you and not kiss you.”

“Then kiss me already.”

His eyes open and move straight to my mouth.

“What about the team?”

“They don’t have to know,” I say, and then I close the distance, and his mouth is on mine again, and it’s just as amazing as the last time.

I let go of his hand and slide my palms up the muscles of his back, the thin fabric of the shirt revealing every curve.

He pulls away.

“What if someone comes in?”

I walk to the door, taking his hand and leading him over, too, then slide a chair in front of it.

“Sit,” I tell him, and he smiles, presses the replay on my phone on the chair beside it, and does as I ask.

I straddle his legs and cup the side of his face in my hands.

“Now no one can come in, and we can do this as much as we want.”

I kiss him again, his tongue exploring my mouth, fighting mine for control. Perfectly delicious. My hand moves to the back of his neck, my fingers lace through his hair, and he moans into my mouth, sending a pulse to my balls.

As his palms slide down to grip my ass, he squeezes tight, and pulls me closer, grinding my ass over the thin fabric of his pants and his growing bulge. He moans again.

This time, I break our kiss.

“The chair stops the door being opened. It doesn’t block out the sound.”

“Then we better turn up the music,” he says, reaching over and grabbing my phone. He swipes the volume all the way up and puts it back, his hands immediately moving again to my ass, and I don’t hate it. I only wish I’d suggested we rehearse the lyrics back at his place in the shower instead, where there are better acoustics, and where I could be doing this naked, covered in soapy bubbles.

### Chapter ten

Alan

I have no idea what came over me. One second, we were dancing and I was thinking about how I have to keep this professional, the next, I'm kissing him and he's grinding in my lap, edging me closer and closer to release.

"We shouldn't," he says in between kisses.

"We shouldn't," I repeat, but our bodies don't get the message, and before we know it, we're shirtless and his hand is moving down between us to my pants.

I slide my fingers up the back of his neck through his hair, kissing along his jaw until my lips reach the delicious soft skin in the crease of his neck.

I've thought about this more times than I'd care to admit, but my imagination was nothing compared to reality. I never could have imagined how perfectly his ass fits in my lap, how his skin tastes sweet and salty and stirs a hunger inside me that only more of him can satiate. I'm vibrating under his touch, every fiber of my being alight with desperate need of his touch, of him. His fingers wrap around my cock and my balls throb. Not yet. This can't end yet.

I bite my lip and drop my head back trying to hold on, to last a little bit longer, because I've dreamed of doing this for months, and when he pulls me out and the cool air hits, I get a moment of control back. But then he pulls himself out, too, and wedges us together and it takes everything in me not to come right then.

Both of my hands move to his ass, and he grips my neck tightly with his free hand and kisses me again. His big soft lips fit perfectly with mine, his body like the other piece of a puzzle, fitting in just the exact right way.

We shouldn't be doing this. But it feels so right, so good. Kissing him, holding him, my cock pressed against his, thickening and throbbing and...

"Oh fuck," I say, breaking our kiss as I shudder, no longer able to hold back, and my dick pulses as I unload between us in spurts.

His gaze moves to my cock, watching me come, and then his grip on my neck tightens, and he joins me in a total release. I sink back into the chair, and he rests his head on my shoulder. His chest heaves up and down and the light glistens off the muscles of his back in the most beautiful way that I can't help myself; I move my hand from under his ass and lightly trace the contour of his back with the pads of my fingers.

"I know you said we shouldn't," he begins, his warm breath tickling the sensitive skin between my neck and shoulder.

"You said we shouldn't first."

"But we did."

"Yeah, we did."

"So, does this mean maybe we can... I don't know," he lifts his head, and those bright blue eyes are like giant whirlpools drawing me in. "Can we do it again?"

"Now?"

He laughs, adjusting his pants to put himself away and then helping to tuck me away, too.

“No, not now. Now I think we could use a shower, and we should probably get some rest. We have game one tomorrow. But maybe we can meet up after?”

He climbs from my lap and grabs my shirt from the floor, handing it to me before collecting his own. I pull it on, the mix of his mess and my own sticking it to my skin in several places.

“I, I mean, sure, okay.”

“Great, so tomorrow after the game. Who knows, if we finally beat one of these OG teams, we might have something to celebrate.”

“If you beat the OG’s the whole team will want to celebrate.”

“He frowns. “Crap, that’s right. Okay, so we don’t have to win.”

“Fuck that shit, yes, you do. Change of plans, you beat the OG team and then we’ll celebrate, no win, no... this.”

His mouth opens, and he lets out a small whine.

“That’s so not fair.”

“You have that little faith in beating them, do you?”

“No.”

“Great, then prove it. Then you can have whatever kind of celebration you want.”

That changes his expression, and his eyebrows shoot up and his lips twist into a cheeky devilish smile.

“Oh, now you are on.”

He pulls on his shirt, and the song repeats from the phone on the chair, so I grab it and flick it off.

“Do you think anyone heard us?” he asks as he pulls the chair away from the door. The hallway is dark and empty. Everyone has cleared out for the night, so it will be an easy walk to the showers.

“Unlikely, but it’s probably a good idea we don’t do that again in a room without a proper lock.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

I shake my head and follow him down to the locker rooms. There is no one around, and when he strips off his shirt on the way to the showers and looks back at me over his shoulder, all I can think about is getting under the hot steamy water with him and wrapping my mouth over that cock.

But my phone starts to ring, and I stupidly pull it out to check the message.

“It’s my sister, sorry,” I say, and he strips off his pants and heads into the showers.

I tilt my head to the side to get a better view of him buck naked.

“Hey, sis. What do you need?”

“Gramps called. Something is up with Precious. You have to go check on her.”

“Really, the cat?”

“He said she ate something she shouldn’t have. He sounded really worried. I would go, but I had like three wines with dinner.”

“No. It’s okay. I’ll go,” I say and hang up.

“As much as I would love to join you in there, I have to go,” I call and then leave before I talk myself out of checking on Gramps and the demon spawn.

I change out of my training gear into some fresh shorts and a shirt, using the other to wipe up any remaining mess, and drive right over to Gramp’s place.

The second I open the door, Precious is hissing at me.

“She looks fine,” I say, and Gramps swivels in his chair by the window to look at me.

“She is fine. Now. Silly thing ate one of those rubber things off the you know what, but she spat it out.”

I have zero clue what the rubber thing off you know what even is, but if the spawn of Satan is fine, I left Ryan alone in a hot shower naked, for absolutely nothing.

“Well, you’re here now anyway, so how about a cup of tea?” Gramps asks, and I nod, then walk sideways through to the kitchen so that I don’t lose sight of Precious. The last time I turned my back on that thing, she took a chunk out of my ankle.

“Did you eat?” I ask, opening the freezer to check what meals he has left, and then I pause. Instead of being filled with frozen dinners, there are two stacks of four neatly piled Tupperware containers. I pick up one from the first stack. A strip of masking tape is stuck to the top and in black marker are the words, Sheperd’s Pie, followed by



a drawing of a little smiley face . I grab another, and another; they're all the same. I close the freezer and on a piece of paper I didn't see before is the same black marker, the same handwriting, only this is a list of instructions. Step one, take off the lid, then rest gently back on top of the container. Step two, put the container in the middle of the microwave. It goes on, detailing each step and ending with, Enjoy and another smiley face drawing. Did Ryan do this? But why would he? Gramps drives him nuts. I open the freezer again and crack the lid on one of the containers. It looks like Ryan's shepherd's pie. It has to have been him.

But this is more than just leftovers. There's enough here for a full batch or more; he had to have made it special just for Gramps. Why would he do something like that for him when he's been nothing but difficult? And why not say anything to me about it? Hey, I dropped off some food for your cranky grandfather. Hope you don't mind. Do I mind? I'm the one supposed to be looking after him. Looking out for him anyway. And true, I can't cook, but I got him those dinners, and he said that he liked them. The shepherd's pie is better. Way better. I'll have to find a way to pay him back, not just for the ingredients, but the time he must have spent cooking all of this.

I put the note back and prepare Gramps's tea. He lifts Precious to his lap when I approach, and she growls a little my way, but seems to be resolved to the fact I am not leaving right away.

When I pass Gramps the tea, he inspects it for a second, then takes a sip.

"So your brothers' called."

"They did?" I ask, trying to sound surprised. Truth is, I knew they were going to. They want to make a few bigger changes to the ranch and in order to do that, they will need a loan, but with the property still in Gramp's name, convincing the bank to lend them money for that will be more difficult. They think it will be easier to get a loan to buy it and add on some money for the additional improvements.

“How is the ranch going?” I ask.

“Fine, I’m sure. I mean, they’ve changed so much of it, I would probably not even recognize it if I were to drive up there tomorrow.”

“Are you planning on going up there?”

“No, what gave you that idea?”

I have no clue. “Sorry, why were they calling?”

“They asked me to sell it to them.”

“Oh, okay.”

He eyes me suspiciously. “You don’t seem too surprised by this.”

“Well, they have been out there running the place for the last five years. I sort of figured they would want to take it over completely, eventually. Kelly and I don’t care if you want to sell to them.”

“Why do y’all think you gotta go buying it off me?”

“They want you to be looked after. It’s your ranch, Gramps.”

“I got this place. Besides, it was my Gramps’s ranch, then my father’s, then mine, and now you lot have it.”

“Wait, what?”

“I sold the back forty and bought this place when I moved out here. I told your

brothers they can buy out you and your sister, if you want to sell, that is.”

“Go back... You own this place?”

He nods and takes a sip of his tea.

“Like your apartment?” I ask, and he frowns.

“Why would I just buy one apartment? I own the building. It will be passed down to you lot eventually, too, but the ranch, that is already yours. You can sell it if you want to.”

“I don’t want to sell them the ranch.”

“See, I’m not crazy. It’s weird asking me to sell them something that’s theirs?”

“But on paper, it’s not. On paper, it’s still yours, right?”

“Nope, took care of that when I came out here. Everything out there was signed over. It’s all yours, your sisters and your brothers. I told ya, I don’t need to sell them anything. It’s their ranch. Your ranch.”

“I don’t think I am understanding you?”

He sighs and takes a slow sip of his tea, the crease in his forehead deepening. Precious is curled up in his lap, and it’s seriously the longest I’ve been in a room with her without her trying to gouge out my eyes, but I don’t relax completely, because, you know, that’s when they get ya.

“Okay, try to keep up. I sold the unused land at the back, I moved out here, bought this place, they took on the ranch, my lawyer added all ya names to the deed, and it’s

yours already.”

“I didn’t know that. Do they know that?”

“They do now.”

“Oh, okay. Umm, I’ll check in with Kelly then and we’ll see what we’re going to do.”

“You might not want it now, but that place is in your blood. Don’t be giving up something unless you’re sure you don’t want it, got it?”

“Got it.”

“Okay, we’re fine here. You can go now.”

“Alright. Well, let me know if Precious chews on any more rubber things from you know what, and I’ll be right over.”

He nods and waves but doesn’t look my way. Instead, he picks up his binoculars and lines them up to look down the alleyway towards the street. How he hasn’t been reported as a peeping Tom yet is beyond me.

Just as I’m closing the door to Gramps’ place, I see the light come on in Ryan’s room across the alleyway and his sweet voice calls out.

“Good evening, Precious.” The fucking demon cat meows the sweetest reply, like he’s her favorite person in the whole world. I glance back towards Gramps’ kitchen, where I spotted the homemade meals he’s dropped by.

You know what, Precious? He might just be becoming my favorite person, too.

### Chapter eleven

Ryan

Precious meows at me from the windowsill from the moment I sit up in bed.

“Well, good morning to you, too,” I say and look past her for signs of Don. He must not be up and moving yet, and by the looks of it, Precious is getting hungry. “I’m sure he’ll be up soon. Now be careful on that ledge.”

Precious meows again.

I head to the bathroom to take a piss, but when I return, Precious is still meowing on the windowsill, and I can’t shake the feeling that something isn’t right. I throw on some sweats and a shirt and jog down the stairs of my building to head over and check on Don.

I knock three times, but there is no answer. Shit. Do I break it down? He could be hard of hearing. Fuck, what do I do?

I grab my phone and call Alan.

“Hey, so I am outside your Gramps’ place,” I blurt the second he answers. “And Precious is meowing, and he won’t come to the door, and it’s probably nothing. He’s probably sleeping, but the cat is being weird and—”

“There is a spare key on top of the door frame on the right,” Alan replies, and I hear

him fumbling around, knocking something over, and then he calls out, “Kelly.”

I reach up and feel across the top of the door frame for the key. It’s stuck down with something that clings and comes away like gum, and I resist the urge to gag, because if it is gum, that’s just gross.

“Okay, got it,” I say and unlock the door, but the second I push it open, the chain grabs.

“Shit, the security chain is there. Mr. Beaker, are you awake? Can you hear me?” I call through the opening.

Precious arrives at the door and pushes her head through the opening.

“No, get back in there, silly cat,” I say, trying to scare her back with my foot.

“Can you break it?” Alan calls through the line, and I take a step back, then shove the door with my shoulder, hard. It sends a ripple of pain through my arm, but the door flies open, and Precious jumps like she’s been struck by lightning.

“Is he okay? Is he there?” Alan asks.

“Mr Beaker, are you in here?” I call, making my way towards the kitchen when I don’t see him in the main living space. Before I can get there, the bathroom door opens up down the hall, steam flooding the hallway, and a surprised Mr Beaker steps out wearing a towel around his waist.

“What the heck are you doing in here, boy?” he asks, and I let out the breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

“He’s fine. He was in the shower,” I say to Alan, and the fucker actually starts

laughing.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Beaker. Precious was meowing, and you didn’t answer and...”

“So you broke in?”

“Well...” I glance back at the door, the security chain hanging with a chunk of door frame still attached to it. “Well, yeah, but I’ll get it fixed. I swear.”

Precious struts through my legs up to him and circles him with a playful cooing noise.

“I told ya I would feed ya in a minute, you silly cat,” he says, like she can understand any of what he is saying.

“Well, I better be getting changed. While you’re here, you want to get her breakfast. That’s why she be calling you over, anyway.” And he disappears into his bedroom and I hold the phone up to my ear.

“I was manipulated by a hungry cat into breaking and entering, and now I have to fix your Gramp’s door.”

Alan laughs harder down the line. “I told you it’s a demon spawn.”

“I guess I’ll see you at warm-up in a bit.”

“Can’t wait,” he replies, and I hang up and grab Precious’s bowl.

She rubs up against me, twisting her way in between my legs as I prepare her food and then sit it down on the floor.

“You seriously were just hungry?” I ask, but she ignores me to eat, a purr rumbling

from her as she devours the bowl of food almost as fast as I placed it.

I check on the damage to the door, rubbing my shoulder where the sting still vibrates through the muscles. I've been off Kyle's routine for a while now, and my throwing speed is back to what it used to be, but that hit still hurt.

"Well, you did make a bit of a mess in here now, didn't you?" Gramps says, coming out into the room fully dressed.

"I'm sorry again, the cat, she."

He waves a hand in my direction and goes to the window.

"I'll have to feed her first next time. Well, since you are here anyway. How about some coffee?"

"Sure, that would be great, cheers."

"No problem, pot's in the kitchen," he replies, and he sits down at the window. Precious is done with her food and hops up onto his lap, curling up immediately into a ball and falling asleep.

"Umm, sure, okay. How do you take it?"

"Creamer and two sugars, oh, and grab the biscuits, the chocolate ones."

"For breakfast?"

"I had my lucky charms for breakfast at five. Are you only just getting your butt out of bed?"



“The baseball game today doesn’t start until four thirty,” I call back, and he scoffs.

“Baseball, pfft, that’s not baseball.”

“What would you call it, then?” I ask, and he doesn’t reply.

I bring back the coffee and biscuits and put them down on the table beside his chair by the window. Looking up, I spot what could be the edge of the arena where we play.

“It might not be the type of baseball you grew up watching, but it’s the baseball I love,” I say, sitting down on his couch. Precious takes this opportunity to leap from his lap and makes herself comfortable at my side, resting her head over my thigh.

“No baseball player in my day would be caught dancing around on the field like a clown in the middle of a game.”

“Clowning is fun. Didn’t you ever go to the circus as a kid?”

“I did, and it wasn’t baseball.”

I laugh. “Yeah, it wasn’t, but it was fun. And you liked it. So maybe you could like baseball that has a bit of that fun worked into it?”

He doesn’t reply, simply takes a sip from his coffee and frowns at Precious, who is now purring away.

“I play one of the OG teams tonight, then Alan’s team will play the other one. You should come to check it out. But I need to be going. We have warm-ups and I still haven’t eaten. Umm, sorry again about the door. I will pop over later and fix it up.”

He shakes his head.

“I’ll call the super to do it. That lock obviously needed replacing anyway if a scrapper like you could bust through. Best be off with ya, then.”

I head out and immediately text my cousin.

RYAN: I was just tricked by a cat into committing a felony.

TEDDY: Please tell me you were carrying an ice cream cone in your back pocket!

RYAN: What? No way that is a felony.

TEDDY: Yep, in Georgia it is.

He proceeds to send me a link to an article about how in the old days people would do this to lure a horse away. Apparently, they never took the law out.

RYAN: Why do you even know this?

TEDDY: Granny and I go to Trivia every Thursday night down the pub. You’d be surprised what you remember. So, what crime did you commit?

RYAN: Break and enter. The old guy, Don, across the way wasn’t answering, and the cat was meowing at me nonstop, so I thought maybe he was hurt, or sick.

TEDDY: Because the cat was meowing? You know cats do that, right?

RYAN: I get how stupid it is now, but he’s Alan’s Gramps.

TEDDY: How are things with Alan? Is the Funky Monkey finally getting his

coconuts cracked?

RYAN: Oh look at the time, gotta get to practice. Chat soon.

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I hit the pool and swim a few laps, trying to shake off the fear my body is still holding onto after this morning. I was totally freaking out about Don for a minute, but the old coot was just in the fucking bathroom. Stupid cat. I rub my shoulder as I head out onto the field for the meet and greet with fans.

“I thought you were all better?” Kyle says when he spots me.

Shit. I feel okay. It’s a little tender, but what if he thinks it’s something more? He’ll bench me, that’s what he’ll do, and then we’ll have zero chance of beating the OG’s. It’s not that the team isn’t great without me. They are. But I’m the fastest pitcher we have, and my fastball was the only thing that scored us any points the last time we were up against them. Tonight, I’m taking the win, and after I do, I’ll be collecting on that celebration Alan promised me.

I swing my arm around, trying to prove it’s totally fine and I wasn’t just rubbing the painful spot where it connected with Gramps’s door.

“Ahh, yeah, I was good. I am good.” Shit, this isn’t going well. “I just shoved a door a little too hard, so it’s a bit...you know, stiff.”

He frowns, like he’s trying to decide if he believes me or not.

“You shoved a door?”

“Okay, I busted through a door, but I’m fine, really.”

“I’ll forget how you maybe hurt yourself, but not that you did. Come on, meet and greets can wait. I have to clear you or you won’t be pitching anything tonight.”

Double fuck. I turn on my heel and follow Kye back towards the locker rooms. He puts me through the paces and after about ten minutes of “do this”, “now that”, “stretch this way”, and “does this hurt?” he clears me to play.

“Cheers,” I call, jogging back out to the field. Now it’s time to win me some one-on-one Alan time.

The crowds at Savannah are what helped propel this game into the incredible league it is now, so we have a few extra games scheduled here this season, which to me, seems only fair. Game one was massive, the whole first weekend was, with celebrity visits and fireworks and flame shows. The second week was smaller, but still huge compared to what we were used to from last season. Now it’s only a few days and we’ll fly out to our first destination, and then it’s full steam ahead across America.

The crowd takes their seats, and I grab my costume for our opening number Dennis has lined up. The OG’s are already on the field, their welcome number went first, and as I stride out onto the field to join the others at our people fish tank and the music starts up, they find themselves a partner and start waltzing along to the music while Alan and I pretend to be Romeo and Juliet.

It’s hard not to blush, gazing at him through the pretend water. Dennis chose us because of our on-camera chemistry, but how long until they see it’s not just on screen?

We meet at the edge, do our dance number, and then while some of the OG team members fan out, the rest head to the dug out or into the first rows of seats to watch. Their first hitter steps into the box right on queue. Alan spins me, and then I pull the ball from my pocket and pitch it fast down the line. It lands square in the catcher’s

mitt.

“Woo hoo,” Alan cheers, and lifts and spins me around by the waist. I was stoked when Dennis changed the skit to be the real first pitch to the OG team, but Alan was supposed to be already headed to the stands with the rest of his team, not cheering me on. I guess, to anyone else, it would look like it was all part of the act. But there is nothing fake about the way Alan makes me feel. He leans in and whispers.

“Keep that up and you’ll get that private celebration I promised.”

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The rest of the game is kind of a blur. I pitched a new personal record, one hundred and three miles per hour before I was swapped out for a break, one of the best things about Banana Ball for a pitcher is that our games have a two-hour timer on them, so I get way more game time than I would if I was playing MLB. John, Dave, and Duckie have been on fire, too, catching outs and sending the ball right onto the next glove, and when the last out is called and we’ve secured the points for the win, the whole team rushes the field including Animal Control who was sitting in the stands. We did it.

I’m getting dressed when my phone chimes, and I grab it to check the message.

ALAN: Are you ready to celebrate?

Fuck, I sure am, but the whole team is going to Gopher, the bar across the street for a drink, and I can’t bail on them after our first win against the OG’s.

RYAN: Drinks at Gopher , then we can celebrate our win.

ALAN: I didn’t win anything. It was all you!

RYAN: It was that pregame release that secured the win for sure. You just wait and see for yourself. I'll make sure you are ready for your game tomorrow night.

ALAN: I'm not normally a superstitious guy, but I'd like to test that theory.

RYAN: I'll make an excuse after the first round of drinks.

ALAN: I'll be waiting by the car.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:58 am*

### Chapter twelve

Alan

Ryan offers to go back to his place, but he's living with Duckie and my sister is off on a girl's weekend at the ranch, so I've got the place to myself.

"Your place is nice," Ryan says, walking into the living room and folding his jacket over the back of the couch.

"Thanks. It's my sister's. I had a place, but then... It didn't work out."

"Terrible roommates?"

"Something like that," I say, heading into the kitchen.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but I'm told I am a fabulous listener," Ryan replies, leaning on the doorframe to the kitchen.

"I was living with my ex before I moved in with Kelly. It was one of those relationships where you really don't see who the other person is until you're out, or ready to get out. You know?" I tell him, surprised by how easy it actually is to talk about this stuff. It took forever for me to even acknowledge what happened. "He wasn't violent, but he was super controlling, like, he would allocate me spending money out of my pay, and he would do this thing where he would make me feel bad for being away from him all day at training, only then he'd make plans with other people the second I was home and act like he never cared that I was gone and that I

was imagining things.”

“I’m glad you found your way out of it,” he says.

“Me too. It’s funny, but well... not funny ha, ha, funny, but, you know, funny still, that all the time I just didn’t see that stuff. It was actually when I caught him texting another guy with plans to hook up that I decided I was done. It was after I decided to leave that all that the possessiveness, controlling, belittling behaviors were even visible to me.”

“I get that.”

“Well, I’m out now. And living with Kelly isn’t too bad. Do you want a drink?”

“No, I’m good. I might need one after, though.”

My stomach flips, and the room grows a few degrees warmer.

“Oh, really?”

“So, where’s your room?”

I grab two bottles of water from the fridge and lead the way down the hallway towards my room

“This way, would you like to see?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

The second I am through the door, his chest is against my back, his arms wrap around me and his mouth is sucking the crease between my shoulder and neck.



“Fuck, that’s good,” I moan, reaching back with one hand to hold his head in that perfect spot.

His hands start trailing down my chest, warmth spreading beneath his touch.

“Do you still think this is a bad idea?” he asks.

“If it is, I don’t care,” I reply, and he spins me around to face him.

“I think this is one of the best ideas I’ve ever had,” he says, brushing the back of his fingers along my jawbone and over my ear. I can’t help but lean into his touch.

“I thought it was my idea,” I say, the excitement in my gut building.

He shrugs. “Either way, it’s brilliant.”

My gaze moves to his mouth, his fingers slip behind my neck, and he pulls me into a deep kiss. His tongue fighting mine for control, heavy and sweet, and it’s perfect. Everything about kissing Ryan is perfect. The way his mouth fits like a puzzle with mine, how his body presses against me until the distance between us disappears and my cock pulses.

The way he’s commanding our kiss, holding me to him, only heightens the lust growing inside me, and my cock throbs, aching for him. His mouth moves along my jaw, sucking and nibbling until he’s back in that soft spot in the dip of my neck, and my heartbeat rises, sending a warm hum across my body.

His fingers move to unbutton my pants, and when he peels them open and pulls my briefs over my hard cock, the cool air sends a rush through me and I shudder.

“He won’t be cold for long,” Ryan whispers into my neck, then he lowers to his

knees, and I look down and watch as he spits into his hand and then wraps his fingers around my thick length and gives it a slow stroke.

“I think he’s still cold,” I say, and Ryan licks his lips and then wraps them over my cock head.

I suck in a sharp breath, the heat from his mouth sending a surge of blood right to my groin, and my cock throbs in his mouth as if to urge him on further. I grip the bedpost in one hand and hold the back of his head with the other, careful not to take control, because what he’s doing is perfect and I don’t want him to change any part of it.

I know I said this was a bad idea. But right now, past Alan can fuck right off because Ryan Tanner sucking me off is the best fucking thing I have experienced in forever. Even if future Alan is the one who will have to deal with pretending we’re nothing once we’re back on the field. After the first time in the conference room, it was difficult but not impossible, but after seeing his mouth deep throat my cock, there is no way I won’t picture exactly this every time I look at him from now until forever.

His mouth and hand move in sync, increasing in speed and pressure, and his free hand slides behind me to grip my ass, squeezing and kneading as he moans into my cock.

I love that it’s my cock that’s eliciting his moans, he’s getting pleasure from pleasing me, and it’s so fucking hot. Watching my length move in and out of his mouth, feeling his hand on my ass, the soft strands of his hair between my fingers, all of it is mind-spinning.

“I’m so close,” I groan.

“Hmmm mmm,” he replies, increasing his speed and grip.

“Oh god, so close, fuck, yes. Yes. Fuck, oh god yes.”

My body spasms, rolling waves of my orgasm filling his mouth. He doesn't slow, he sucks and slurps and milks all of it from me until I soften.

“Holy shit, that was incredible,” I say, helping him to stand.

He swipes the pad of his thumb over his lower lip, and I clutch his hand and suck his thumb into my mouth.

His eyes close for a moment, and I slide my free hand down his front and over the bulge in his pants.

“I think he's waited long enough, don't you?” I ask, and Ryan smiles. “I think you should take off your clothes and get on the bed.”

He doesn't hesitate and strips off his shirt first, turning towards the bed as he moves, and the muscles in his back glisten in a beautiful amber glow from the bedroom light.

He bends slowly as he lowers his pants, peeking over his shoulder as he goes.

“Is this what you wanted?” he asks, and I close the distance between us and slide my hands over his tight, round ass.

“Hell yes.”

“Then take it,” he replies, and I drop down and bury my face between his cheeks. He shudders, and I slide my hand up between his legs and give his balls a soft tug, then pull away.

“On the bed, I want to taste all of you,” I say, and he climbs up and rests with his

back against the pillows.

“How’s this?”

I climb between his legs, grip his ankles, and pull him down until his back is flat against the bed.

“Good, but this is better,” I say, and I raise his legs up and out. “Much better. Do you think you can hold them there?”

His hands replace mine at his ankles, and he smiles.

“Oh, yeah.”

“Good, ‘cause I’ve wanted to take a bite out of that ass for as long as I can remember.”

The blush rises to his cheeks, and it’s totally adorable. I take a second to admire the glorious cock before me with its thick pink flesh and dark blue vein that runs the length . I’ll get to you later, I think before I cup his balls and suck them into my mouth.

“Oh shit,” he cries out, and I release them. “I didn’t mean stop.”

“Sorry, how was I to know? I think we should have a safe word if you are going to be making noises like that.”

“I’ll say stop, that’s the safe word. Now please, please do that again.”

“What...this?” I ask, running my tongue up over his balls.

“No. That was good, but no. The other thing.”

“Hmmm, this?” I tease, cupping them in my hand and giving them a slight tug.

“Fuck, you are loving this whole teasing thing, aren’t you?”

“It is nice watching you squirm a little. Maybe you need to be more specific about what you want.”

“Urgh, Fine. Please, Alan, stop this torture. Please, please suck my balls again.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” I laugh, then I give him exactly what he wants. I wrap my lips over his tightening balls and swirl my tongue over them, paying extra attention to the spot underneath where they are most sensitive. I let the spit dribble from my mouth, and then I spread his cheeks and let my thumb find it, circling it around his opening.

“Oh yeah,” he moans and pulls his legs back a little, giving me easier access. I apply a little pressure to his hole with my thumb, working it in circles, and then when he’s relaxed just enough, it slips a little inside, and the groan that escapes his lips sends a surge right to my balls.

I have to make him make that sound again. Working my thumb in and out, I tug and suck on his balls, his cock dripping with precome and filling the room with the scent of him.

“More,” he begs in a raspy breath, but instead of adding more fingers, I release his balls from my both and force my tongue in beside my thumb.

“Holy shit,” he cries, and I grab his cock with my other hand and start stoking his in time with my tongue fucking his ass. He’s rock hard, and he’s pulling his legs back

over and over, moaning louder and grinding faster with each stroke. It's incredible tasting him but hearing him is even better. Knowing it is me that's eliciting these sounds, making him hard, making him pull his legs so far back he's like a pretzel trying to drive my tongue deeper inside him while his cock fucks my fist is the best feeling in the world.

"Yes, so close, holy shit, don't stop," he calls, and then he explodes, his body jerking against my mouth, hot ribbons coating my hand until he sumps into the bed and his legs bend and rest out at the sides.

I climb up between his legs and lie at his side, licking my fingers clean.

"You taste amazing," I say, and he turns his head toward me, his chest still heaving up and down.

"So do you. Now you'll get to see I was right."

"About what?"

"About this being good luck, you watch. You'll smash the OG tomorrow night."

"I guess if we do win, we'll need to keep testing the theory, you know, for the teams' sake. It would be mean for us to risk losing it for them, right?"

"Exactly. It's for the team."

### Chapter thirteen

Ryan

RYAN: See? We did it for the team.

I text Alan while walking up to Gordon's front door. It's poker night, and the last time I had an invitation, it was because I had a small crush on Harry. Okay, a big crush. But it didn't help that he was so flirty with everyone. I got over it. It was, after all, a crush. Nothing like what this is with Alan. Not that we've even talked about what this is.

ALAN: I still think we need to test the theory out a few more times to be sure. We both could have just been really on.

RYAN: We could be testing the theory out tonight.

ALAN: We don't play tomorrow.

Shit. He's right. We don't play again for a week. I don't want to wait a week.

RYAN: What if we miss a day and it like...jinxes it.

ALAN: You can't be serious. You want to do it every day. Are you twenty?

I'm not. Not really. I mean, sure as far as superstitions go it could be bad luck to stop now that we're on a roll, but it's just as likely that hooking up the day before each

game is also good luck, or that it had zero effect and the OG were just having a bad week. Nope. Not that one. I refuse to believe we didn't beat them at their best.

RYAN: Are you willing to take the risk?

ALAN: How soon do you think we can leave?

I press the doorbell.

RYAN: Considering I just got here, probably no time soon.

I hit send just as Harrison opens the door.

"How many Funky Monkeys did you invite to this thing?" he calls behind him.

"Yes, backup. Get in here, Ryan," Duckie's voice sounds from somewhere down the hall, and I walk past Harrison into the house. Gordon's place is huge. The hallway has nine-foot ceilings with track lights that illuminate the space in a warm blue glow down each side. Through the end, I spot the table set up for the game. Large enough for twelve, it seats the ten of us just fine, and I slide into the seat beside Duckie.

"Thank fuck you're here. These dicks keep ganging up on me," Duckie says, nudging my side.

Harry laughs, takes his seat opposite us, and wraps his arm around his boyfriend, Arlo. Arlo leans into him a little but then adjusts himself when he notices Harry peeking down at his cards.

"No cheating," he warns, and Harry laughs.

Other than Arlo, Duckie, and I, the table is surrounded by Animal Control. Benny,



Phillip, Gordon, Harry, Stevie, Arthur and Alan.

“So, when do you fly out?” Arlo asks, and Duckie shakes his head.

“Nope, can we please not go there tonight?” he asks.

“Why?” I ask with a smirk. Duckie hates flying, and while the thought of it doesn’t always turn his stomach, it has been known to happen.

“I’ve been going to those simulator things to try to get over the whole air sick...thing.”

“Ohh, is that where you went today?” I ask.

“Yep...but I don’t think it’s working. Actually, I think those things might be worse, because at least when I get off a real plane the feeling stops, but my stomach hasn’t stopped flipping since I sat down in the thing today.”

“You don’t think maybe the three drinks and a whole pizza you devoured when you got here might be playing more of a part in your churning stomach right now?” Gordon asks with a laugh. “Awww, little Duckie looks a bit green.”

Harrison throws a pretzel at him as Duckie makes another gagging noise beside me.

“Fuck off, Gordon. Last time I wore it,” Harrison says, pushing back in his chair. Gordon stands.

“Not on the table,” he yells suddenly, taking Duckie’s condition seriously and pointing towards the back doors, which are folded open so that his living room is completely open to the yard with a glistening pool.

Duckie gets up and heads outside.

“Not in the pool,” I yell, but he waves a hand above his head.

“I’m good. Just need air. And for you fuckers to stop talking about it. Change the subject already.”

Stevie is shuffling the cards and starts to deal them out. “So, we’re pregnant again,” he declares as the second card drops in front of me.

“Man, that’s amazing. Congratulations,” I say, and he smiles and nods, but he doesn’t look all that excited. Shit. Did I read the room wrong? He has a kid with his girlfriend, Bella. The kid is only a few months old, but still. You would think a second would be great news, wouldn’t you?

“Am I missing something? I ask.

“She’s due while we’re on tour, isn’t she?” Harry asks, and Stevie takes a long measured breath.

“Yep, right in the middle this time, so there’s no doubt I’ll miss at least some of the tour.”

The guys are apologizing, and I’m just sitting here like, what the fuck?

“Dude, you’re kidding right?” I say, and all eyes move to me.

“You’re young, you don’t get it,” Stevie says, and I scoff.

“I’m almost thirty, fuck head, and I don’t think you get it. You bloody created a whole human being, a person that didn’t exist, and you’re pissed you might miss a

few games of baseball when they take their first breaths in this world. Seriously?”

The guys all stare at me with open mouths like fish, waiting for the bait to come to them.

“They won’t know if I’m not there,” he reasons, and I want to slap him, he’s so thick.

“She will. Bella will. She’ll remember forever that you put a game above bringing your child into the world. You were there for the other one, right?”

“Yeah,” he says, and his brow furrows a little. “It took forever. Bella was a trooper through it all. She didn’t even take the drugs when they offered them. And fuck, you think babies are small and they are, but they’re so big, too, like when you think about how they get out. And then they do get out and they open their eyes and look at you and it’s...surreal. Like until that moment, you would do anything for fun. I went bungee jumping in Bali a few years back, remember? Oh, and cliff diving. I swam with sharks at that theme park, too. But then this tiny baby looks at you and you love it instantly. You want to protect it, you can’t even imagine putting yourself in a dangerous position ever again, except for them. You would die for them, no...you would kill for them.”

“Dude, that’s a little dark, but yeah, see? So don’t you think you’re being a bit of a prick about this next one?”

“You’re right,” Stevie finally says, pulling out his phone. On the home screen is a picture of his girlfriend and daughter. “Fuuuuck. I messed up big with Bella.”

“How?” Gordon asks, and Stevie drops the deck on the table and covers his face with his hands.

“I got into this huge argument before I came here about how the game is important,

too, and it matters to me and that she should be able to see that.”

“You fucking didn’t,” I say, trying not to laugh. But it is funny. It’s funny because it’s so fucking stupid. Like I get that this is the sport we love, but it’s a sport. It’s a game. In no universe should this game be more important than the people in our lives who matter most to us.

“Yeah, you fucked up. So how do we fix it?” I ask.

“We?” Stevie repeats, removing his hands from his face and looking around the table.

“Yeah, we,” Alan replies, and the rest of the guys agree, too.

I push back my chair and stand from the table. “I have an idea,” I say, and they stand too. “You’ve seen those flash mob things, right?”

“Yeah,” they reply.

“How about we do that tomorrow, before the flight? What’s her favorite song?”

“Some Taylor Swift love song. She plays it all the time.”

“Perfect, you find the song. Guys, let’s move this table. We’ve got rehearsing to do.”

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I was first on the bus last year when we left for our tour and would have been first through the security checkpoint this time around, too, had it not been for the dance number we have planned to get Stevie out of the doghouse with his girlfriend. So now I’m just standing around in the open area under the clock at Savannah Hilton Head Airport. They call this space Savannah Square, and while most airports have all the

food, shopping, and amenities tucked away behind the security checkpoint, in this section, there are restaurants, a Starbucks, and a few shops to spend some time in if you need to wait for a family member to arrive. The clock hanging down from the middle of the tall glass ceiling is my favorite part. It looks like an old clock I would see back home.

The restaurants and shops border the large open space, and there are two sections on either side of the room with green tiled floors and a tree in the middle of each, providing park bench seating and an area for kids to run around and burn off some energy before heading through to the security checkpoint and boarding their flights.

A couple hugs goodbye a few feet over to my right, drawing my attention. Her mascara running down her face, she squeezes him one last time, then grabs the handle of her bag and heads through to security. This is what I didn't want. I didn't want to be standing here while the rest of them hug their families, partners, and people. I don't have people. Well, I do, they just aren't here. Don't get me wrong, moving to the States was the best decision I've ever made, but at times like this, I miss being just a short drive away from them. I need to get back home at some point. Granny turns ninety this year. Maybe I can get there for the big do they're putting on for her.

I card my fingers through my still-damp hair, grateful I had time to get in a swim this morning. I try to get in a swim every day. The water has a way of washing away the nervous energy that builds inside me, and if I miss even a day or two, it's like the noise in the world becomes too much and I start to struggle to even get out of bed. Keeping up the routine of it is key. Alan has joined me a few more times, too. He walks through the water in the shallow end, still not quite ready to put his head under the surface, but he did stay in the water while I swam a few laps, so it's still progress.

Gordon stands beside me, his girlfriend, Niki, hugging his side.

"She looks pissed," Gordon whispers in my ear, and I look across to see Stevie and

his girlfriend, Bella, standing by a bench, her frown deepening. Their baby is only a few months old, so the fact she's expecting again planned or not would be a lot to handle, but fuck, I would be pissed at him, too, if he made out that baseball was more important than a whole human being having been created.

"Hopefully not for long. You got the music?"

Niki lets go of Gordon and holds out a mini-speaker.

"I've got it. You guys really are big softies, aren't you?"

"Romantics," I correct, and she smirks and then moves into position, away from where we're about to turn Savannah Square into a stage.

"She's holding the baby," Gordon says.

"I've got that covered, too," I reply just as Neil, our umpire, walks over and asks if he can hold her. If you're going to trust any of these guys holding your kid, it would be Neil. He's got two of his own that he and his ex adopted. They had a scare with the youngest a year or two ago that was too much for his ex to handle, but Neil was in love with those kids the second he saw them. One day, I want that. I want a family. Seeing Neil with his kids at pregame celebrations and in the million and one photos he'll show you the second you ask how they are doing, just proves I don't have to wait to be a dad. But I think I want to do it when I have someone to share it with. I wonder if Alan wants kids.

The music starts, and Bella looks around for where it's coming from. The guys are moving into position around them, trying not to be too obvious, but the way Harry is exaggerating his attempt at avoiding eye contact, he's going to gain the attention of security if he keeps it up. We filled in the rest of the guys while we waited to get started, just so they would know to get out of the way when it was time. Stevie jumps

up onto the chair behind him and spins, and Harry tosses him a microphone so he can belt out the first line. His voice isn't anything like Taylor Swift's, but it isn't bad. Bella's cheeks immediately turn red at the realization this is about her, but she can't stop the smile from spreading across her face, either. I've always wanted to do this. Be a part of a flash mob, and while I totally set this up to help Stevie and Bella, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't getting a hell a lot out of it, too.

Stevie steps down and takes her hand, turning her and leading her more into the open area, and we take our places behind him ready for the perfect moment, and then when he sings the Romeo part, putting in Bella's name instead, we kick into gear, moving through the choreography we practiced last night, mostly in time with each other.

The small crowd of people in the airport gather around us, too, most with their phones out, recording us. It's nothing new, us being recorded, but given this isn't a Banana Ball organized dance, there is a small chance the big bosses won't be impressed. Stevie's singing along, tweaking the lyrics a little to fit his and Bella's story, swapping getting out of a mess with something about loving her more than she could ever guess, and it's the sweetest fucking thing ever.

We step and slide and spin, and Bella is shaking her head, but she's smiling and super chuffed, and then Stevie does something we didn't plan for. But it's something that has been done at Swift's concerts all over the world. He sings that line, spins her around, then drops to one knee and pulls out a shiny teal blue box. Bella's hands cover her open mouth, tears welling in her eyes. I glance at Alan and the others, all of them as surprised as me, but we keep doing our part behind them as he opens the box, and she nods and bounces on her toes as he slips the ring on her finger and stands to kiss her.

My eyes prickle, and I try to blink away the tear that wants to fall as I finish off the choreography with the guys.

When the song stops, camera flashes go off, and the crowd that's gathered, along with the other players, all cheer and congratulate the happy couple. I turn away.

"Here," Alan says, suddenly by my side. I look down, and he's handing me a tissue.

"I'm not crying," I tell him, but the quaver in my voice betrays me, and I take it, dabbing my eye before blowing my nose.

"Sure you aren't. But just so you know. You don't have to hide the fact that you have a big heart, Ryan. What you did here, what you helped Stevie do, it's changed his life, and Bella's. That's truly amazing."

"I planned a dance. He did the proposing all on his own."

"Don't do that."

"Do what?" I ask, looking at him for the first time since he stood beside me.

"Don't downplay how amazing this is. How amazing you are."

I can feel my face warming, and my gaze moves to his mouth, and I want so badly to kiss him. Would he even let me if I tried? Maybe the guys will be cool with it. With us. Maybe I should just do it.

"Boys!" Harry cheers, wrapping his arms around both our shoulders and wedging himself between us. "That was epic. Great work, Funky Monkey. Now, Alan, you're sitting next to me. I'm not risking being stuck next to Duckie."

"Aren't they assigned seats?" I ask, and Harrison smiles and nods towards the stewardess by the gate.



“They are, but turns out Marybeth over there is a fan, so she hooked me up.” He waves his boarding pass in my face for good measure. “Duckie will be someone else’s problem today.”

“Who’s?” Alan asks and Harry shrugs.

“I didn’t ask where he was going, just that he went. Come on, we’ve still got to get through security, and who knows how long that is going to take.”

The guys say their final farewells, and we head through to the checkpoint. When I finally step on board the plane, I pass Harrison and Alan sitting in one of the first rows in coach, and as I keep moving through the section, it looks like my row couldn’t be any further from him if I tried.

“Fucking hell,” I say under my breath when I see him. Duckie is in the seat beside mine, his face already buried in a barf bag. Alan was supposed to be beside me. We would have had the whole flight together.

“Sorry, dude, I took the aisle seat ‘cause I’ll probably have to get up a few times,” Duckie says, looking up from the bag, his face taking on a green hue.

“No worries. Is there anything I can do to help?”

He shakes his head, then gags but holds it together.

“It’s bile at this point. Not much to do but ride it out and hydrate the second I get my feet on solid ground.”

“We haven’t taken off yet. You’re on solid ground now.”

“Yeah, my stomach doesn’t think so. The thought of flying.” He gags. “You know,

then the smell of the plane, too.” He gags again. “It’s just...” The third time, he can’t hold it back, and he gags, then spits into the bag in his lap.

I press the call button above my head.

“Is everything okay over here?” the stewardess asks, frowning down at Duckie.

“I think we’ll need a few more bags.”

She nods and leaves and while I hate that I missed my chance to sit next to Alan this whole flight, I’m probably the best person to be stuck beside Duckie. Once you watch your granny dump half a gallon of pig’s blood into a bowl and tell ya to get mixin’, not a lot of things gross you out. It sure smelled better than Duckie barfing beside me, but once they swap out his bag for a fresh one, the smell mostly leaves with it, and I settle back into the chair and pull out my phone. We’ll be taking off any second, so I connect to the plane’s internet and flick it to my socials. The Banana Ball page is blowing up with videos of the airport serenade proposal, and watching it over again, even with the sound turned down, I can feel my body reacting the same way it did in the moment. Stevie had no reservations, no doubt about what he was doing. He wanted to ask Bella to marry him, and he wanted the world to see it. That’s the kind of love I want.

### Chapter fourteen

Alan

Finding time to be alone with Ryan on the tour hasn't been as hard as I thought it could be. With Dennis and the choreographing team setting us up with these star-crossed lovers numbers, we're tasked with extra rehearsals on nights at the hotel after everyone else heads to bed. It's working, too. In the last three games, when either of us played against an OG team, we won. We've played against each other a couple of times, too, and it looks like whatever luck our hookups are giving us stops there. We won the first time against them but the Funky Monkeys kicked our butts last game. I sneak back into my room that I'm sharing with Phillip and crawl into bed just before eleven.

Ryan and I were...rehearsing our next number and lost track of time. We play against each other tomorrow, and our late-night shenanigans will probably have more influence over his fastball than it will my ability to cover second base. But we'll see. My phone vibrates on the bedside, and I grab it, expecting a message from Ryan. But what I get instead is a notification from the group chat I have with the guys.

PHILLIP: Sooo Alan, what's going on with you and the Funky Monkey?

WTF? Do they know? Did someone see us?

BENNY: Come on, guys, leave him be. If he and the kid have a thing, then they have a thing.

Kid? They can't mean Ryan. He's like a year younger than me. He's no kid.

HARRISON: You remember what happened when Casey and Pat were hooking up and then Casey met that bartender from Missouri. We hadn't even started our tour yet and the infighting in that team was so bad Casey quit. Ryan is the best pitcher that team has. Do you think the bosses would be happy if he up and left?

STEVIE: Didn't Casey do his knee?

GORDON: He did his knee after he quit, got drunk, and fell down a flight of stairs. Luckily, he didn't break his neck.

BENNY: This is not like that. They play on opposite teams. If it didn't work out, worst it might do is make Alan swing for that fast ball a little harder.

STEVIE: We can't tell Alan who he can and can't date. If you are dating. It's okay if you are or aren't. No judgment here. You better always be swinging hard for that fast ball either way!

HARRISON: You all used to tell me all the time who I could and couldn't date.  
\*\*\*Middle finger emoji\*\*\*

GORDON: We strongly advised you who you should and shouldn't fuck, and that was different.

HARRISON: Because it was me?

GORDON: Because you were blind drunk, hitting on anything that had a dick. Are we really going to argue about how many times we stopped you from sleeping with random men? Should we add Arlo to this chat?

Seriously, why the fuck am I in this chat?

HARRISON: Arlo knows about my past and loves me, anyway.

GORDON: Exactly fuckhead. And you have Arlo because you stopped fucking around. Look, they brought in rules after the Casey thing. If Alan and the kid want to do whatever Alan and the kid are doing, they can talk to the bosses, sign the waivers, and go for it.

He's not a fucking kid . Oh my god, this shit has to stop.

ALAN: Firstly, WTF? And second, Ryan is not a kid! He's 29 and I'm 30.

STEVIE: He's 29? Seriously? I thought he was like 23, 24 tops.

BENNY: Yeah, I was sure no way over 25. He looks great for 29. Do you think it's genetics or like does he have a whole skincare routine thing he does?

HARRISON: Gordon's the only one with a skincare routine.

Seriously, how do these guys get anything done?

ALAN: Yes, he's 29. And whatever Ryan and I do is between Ryan and me and doesn't need the input from you lot. So can you stop discussing it like it's something you get to debate and decide on?

PHILLIP: He's right. Besides, if the rumors are true, they might not be on opposing teams for long. Plus, I'm pretty sure those agreements are for players on the same team, anyway. It says teammates on them.

BENNY: How do you know what the agreement has on them?

PHILLIP: I might have asked for one at one point last year.

BENNY: Really? Who was it? Are they on our team?

PHILLIP: It never eventuated to anything, so it doesn't matter. I was curious about how hard it would be and it's really not that hard. We're all adults here, after all.

ALAN: I think that's debatable judging from this chat thread.

HARRISON: We're just worried about you. I've said it before, but I'll say it just one more time. I really think dating a player is a bad idea.

ALAN: Noted, now can we all go to bed? We play the Funky Monkeys tomorrow, and as much as you might think otherwise, I want to kick their asses.

HARRISON: I'm sure that's all you want to do to a Funky Monkey's ass. \*\*\*Winky Face emoji\*\*\*

Fucking Harry. Now all I can do is think about Ryan's perfect round ass, and though we snuck into a linen closet for some mutual pleasuring before heading to bed, now my cock is thickening, and I wonder will it be bad luck to head to the bathroom to do a little solo stroking? I close my eyes, but when I do, all I picture is Ryan's cock plump and heavy in my grasp. Fuck it. I climb from the bed and head to the bathroom.

If the Funky Monkeys beat us tomorrow, it can be all Harry's fault.

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I get a few disappointed looks from the guys when I get to the locker room. With the rumor on everyone's minds, they probably think me being late reflects badly on all of

them, but truth be told, if they are going to cut back to three teams, they would pick the best players from the lot of us to fill them, not just keep who's on the teams now, so if anything, me being late helps them. I change and head out to the crowd, spend some time taking pictures with fans, and signing autographs, and then we play some fun old-school fair games. They set up a sack race down one side; the sacks are shaped like split-open banana peels and the people in them are wearing cream shirts with hoods to make them look more like the bananas as they hop down the field to the finish line. The winners get their choice of a plushie of their favorite mascot. Most of them choose the Banana, because the OG's are legendary no matter where you go, but a few pick the Funky Monkey, too. Our mascot is a big-headed dude in an animal catcher's outfit with a giant net. Kind of hard to complete. But when the next kid crosses the line and reaches for the AC mascot, I cheer.

"Yes, legend!" I call, and Benny and Harry look my way and then at the kid hugging the large soft toy.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Harry asks, and Benny and I both nod. "Stay there, kid," Harry calls and we run up the stairs to the box seats. They always deck them out with the best displays, swag, and merch. And unlike the regular-sized plushies they are giving out on the field. Up here there are three bigger sizes, and we each grab one.

Harry runs down first with a plushie a little bigger than the one the kid has and he hands it over. The kid is clutching both at his chest with the biggest smile on his face. But then he spots Benny coming down with another slightly bigger again and his face lights up even brighter.

The kid's mother is standing beside him, shaking her head with a smile as he's passed the next one to add to his collection. He struggles to hold all three, and one hangs down by the arm, but his happiness is unmatched. At least it is until I come down with the largest of the plushies. This thing is about the same size as the kid, and when

he sees me, he jumps up and down squealing.

I drop the large one in front of him, and he leaps forward, tackling it to the ground with the others still in his grasp. Now this is why we do this. Why we spend time with the fans before the game, after the game, fuck, even during the game. This right here. This pure joy, pure excitement. The fun and happiness it brings into people's lives, but also into ours. This is what it's all about.

Ryan walks by really close and I feel a slight pinch on my ass cheek as he passes.

I spin around, but it doesn't look like anyone saw it. They're all still looking at the kid as he and his mother struggle to carry all four plushies up to their seats for the start of the game.

I should warn him that the guys know about us. But I don't want him to worry about what they think. I mean, I'm ninety percent sure he won't care that they know, but in that ten percent, my heart is doing backflips at the thought of him ending it all.

He deserves to know. I should just text him, and then he'll at least know to be a bit more discreet. If the players on my team know, it won't be long doing things like that until the whole of the league knows. I pull out my phone and on the screen is a message from Harry. The notifications are still silenced from last night, so I have no idea when he even sent it, but when I slide open the chat, I do.

HARRISON: I guess when they post photos of that, you can say it's part of the star-crossed lovers act.

Well, fuck. I guess someone did see. And he's not wrong. This place is full of cameras. Someone could have gotten that pinch in a shot, and before we know it, photos could be everywhere on our social media. But maybe that's okay. Maybe it's time we just owned whatever this is. The guys got over it pretty quickly in the chat.



None seemed really bothered by it at all this morning. His team is going to find out, eventually. Nothing stays secret for long in this place.

Maybe we can talk about it tonight. He needs to know that this has become so much more than sex to me. He's sweet. He cares about people. He cares about family.

When I asked him about the dinners in Gramp's freezer, he said he did it because helping out my Gramps made him feel like he wasn't so far away from his own family. But I know it wasn't just about making himself feel good, he's always looking for ways to help other people. Even grumpy old men who think Banana Ball isn't baseball. When I was at Gramps's, he let slip that Ryan had promised to keep him well-fed while we were away. He was down to his last Tupperware container, and just the suggestion that I was going to pick him up a few TV dinners had his nose scrunching up like a child being asked to take medicine.

So instead, Kelly and I helped Ryan cook up another month's worth of home-cooked meals for Gramps before we left. And by helping, we bought the ingredients, cut things up, and passed Ryan stuff. Guys like Ryan that spend their whole Sunday cooking for someone else's grandfather, guys that care more about other people than themselves, are rare, fucking non-existent, in my experience. Now that I have him in my life, I don't want to even think about what it would be like if he wasn't there. But how do I tell him I'm falling in love without freaking him out?

### Chapter fifteen

Ryan

Alan smiles my way from second base as I step up to bat.

Harrison is crouched down, bouncing his ass in time to the strut music. Gordon is winding up, ready to pitch one right down the line to me.

“You found another Animal Control tree to climb up, I see,” Harrison says, and I spin to face him.

“What did you say?”

The smack of the ball hitting his glove has half the crowd cheering and my team screaming at me from the dugout. Fuck. I should know better than to let him get under my skin.

Harrison laughs. “Relax, little monkey, your secret is safe with me.”

I have no idea if he really does know anything about Alan and me. They’re friends, and it makes sense he might tell him about us, but we haven’t gone public because we worried what the guys might think, and we didn’t want to cause any drama if they had a problem with it.

“Are you having second thoughts about us?” I ask, full well knowing he’s totally happy with Arlo and having zero interest in him at all, but it’s all I can think of to say

that might throw his focus, too.

Gordon lines up again, and this time when he sends the ball down, it connects with the bat, and with a crack, the ball goes flying towards the crowd.

I drop the bat and take off rounding first easily. My gaze lands on Alan, waiting at second base. His attention switches between me and the guys going after the ball. Stevie Peterson has it and is about to throw it our way.

I can make it to second, I think and run harder. Alan smirks as I get closer, and my stomach swirls, and it's different to the rush of adrenaline the game brings. I hope no matter how many times he smiles my way, it always feels like this. My heart is thumping, breath sharp and cold in my throat, and as the ball flies towards his mitt, I dive. I hit the ground hard, dirt flying up into my face, stinging my skin and clouding my vision. I desperately swipe for the plate, my finger landing on the corner just before Alan slams the ball into my shoulder.

Half the crowd cheers, and Alan tosses the ball back to the pitcher.

"I wasn't sure you were going to go for it or not," Alan says as I stand and try to brush off some of the dirt. It's in my mouth, too, and I turn away from the bulk of the crowd to spit out what I can.

"Would you have really tapped me out?"

"I tried to," he replies, watching Tim Sage step up to bat.

"Good thing I went for the slide then."

He glances my way, his stare traveling down my uniform, before his attention returns to Tim.

“Except now you’re all dirty.”

“That’s okay. You can help clean me later.”

“And where will I be doing this?”

“I scored a single, so I was thinking, my room.”

“How did you manage that?”

“I guess I’m just luckier than you. Probably means my team is, too.”

“Have you checked the score? We’re leading, you know.”

“Not for long,” I say, and then Tim hits the ball and I take off, rounding third and sprinting for home. Tim is right behind me, his hit soaring high into the crowd.

“Bloody brilliant, mate,” Tim laughs, slapping me on the shoulder as we walk back to the dugout. “That should score us some points with the GM.”

Every game, the guys are all trying to put on the best show they can, not just for the crowd, but for the GM, Bart Erricson. To show him that we deserve to be here. That we deserve to stay in the league next year. As much as I know Alan and I play with everything we have, every single time we step onto the field, I can understand, if the guys knew about us, that they might think we were taking it easy on each other out here.

“Woooo, Tim, you were amazing. Can I get an autograph?” a tall guy wearing a Funky Monkey jersey calls, leaning over the rail.

“Sure thing, mate,” Tim replies, jogging over. “The jersey looks good on you,” Tim

says, signing something and handing it back. To say this guy's face went from zero to flaming red in two seconds would be downplaying it.

Tim doesn't appear to notice and jogs back to where I'm waiting.

"Think you made his whole week," I say, nodding towards where the guy is still watching us, smiling wide and clutching the paper in his hands.

"Any day I get asked for an autograph is a great day for me. Everyone is always falling over Pat and John with their pretty boy Hollywood looks."

"Well, that guy was not looking at anyone but you. Wasn't half bad looking himself, too."

Tim glances back towards the rail and sends a smile to the fan before we take our seats with the rest of the team.

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"We'll get you next time," Alan says as he strips off my shirt on our way to the bedroom. "I hate that we shower in the locker room. I was looking forward to cleaning you off."

"Make me all dirty again and then you can clean me with your tongue," I reply, and his eyes go a little wide at the thought and he strips off his shirt, too. "Umm, so I was meaning to ask you..."

"You can ask me anything as long as you're taking off your pants while you do it."

I undo the top button of them, then pause. "Did you tell your friends about this...us?"

His tanned face starts to take on a more red undertone.

“Shit, who said something?” he asks, walking to the window before turning to face me. “It was Harry, wasn’t it? When you were at bat. Is that why you missed the first pitch?”

“So they know?”

He rubs the back of his neck with one hand, but bending his arm that way makes his bicep bulge, and now I forget why I was even asking the question, and I reach over and slide my fingers over the perfect curve of his muscle.

“They don’t care, I mean, not really,” he says, and I’m not so sure I believe him. It’s not like we would be the first guys in the league to hook up, but the last time, it didn’t end exactly well, and with talk of the only keeping one team next year growing, I can’t imagine they are cool with us getting involved. Not that we would let it affect our game. We will always go for the win, no matter what.

I loop my arms around his waist.

“I don’t care that they know if you are okay with them knowing,” I say, and his hands cup my face, the rough pads of his fingers brushing against the soft skin by my ears and sending a swarm of butterflies swirling through my gut. Alan grew up on a ranch and his hands hold the memories of that time in every line and scar. The feel of them as they glide over my body brings every nerve alive.

“It’s only my friends that know, not the whole team, and they won’t tell anyone if we don’t want to make this...us...what we are, public.”

“The public are the ones that will be the least surprised. Did you see the comments on that last intro video we did? Dennis cast us as star-crossed lovers and the fans are

eating it up.”

“So you aren’t mad that they know?”

I kiss him. His mouth welcomes mine as one hand slips behind my neck, and I let out a soft moan before I pull away.

“I’m okay with them knowing about us, but maybe we should talk about what we actually are.”

“What do you want us to be?” he asks and all the blood in my body rushes to my face.

“I’d like us to be exclusive.”

“We weren’t already?” he replies with a frown stretching across his brow line that I don’t like at all.

“I was. I just didn’t know if you were. You never said, and I didn’t want to assume.”

Relief floods his expression, and he kisses me again. This time, soft and slow and only for a moment. “Exclusive sounds great.”

“So, we are a couple then, like...boyfriends?”

He smiles widely. “Hmm, I like that even better.”

“But maybe we should wait to go public with everyone else, like until the tour is over?”

“By then, we will know if the rumors are true, too.”

“Do you think they are?”

He shrugs. “Could be. But if we show him how amazing the cross promo can be and how much the crowds love both of our teams, he’ll have no reason to axe one of us, right?”

“I guess we should wait, then.”

“Whatever my boyfriend wants, my boyfriend gets,” he replies, kissing my cheek. His soft lips move to my jaw, then down my neck, and I melt into him.

“So...” he says between kisses. “Does my...boyfriend...want to...get naked now?”

“Your boyfriend wants to do all sorts of things.”

He turns me around to face the window, slides his hands down my arms, and then, holding my wrists, lifts them to place my palms against the window.

“Stay right there,” he says, and his fingers glide back up, over my shoulders and down the muscles of my back, tracing the curves so slowly, like he’s committing them to memory, then his hot mouth is in the crease of my neck and his fingers move around my waist and are unzipping my pants.

I rest my head back against him, moaning as he nuzzles and sucks at my neck, his bare chest pressed against my back, and my cock growing thicker by the second.

“Someone could see in,” I say when he drops my pants to the floor and the cool hotel room air hits my wet cock head, sending a shiver through me.

“The windows are mirrored,” he replies, kissing his way down my back. I can see him work his way to his knees in the reflection of the glass. He’s still wearing his



pants, but his bare shoulders extend past my smaller frame, and I want so badly to touch him, but I also don't want this to stop, so I stay where I am, watching him as his mouth and hands explore my body.

He glides his palms, rough and perfect, down my sides to my ankles, then sweeps them back up the backs of my legs until he grips my ass cheeks.

"Take one step back," he says, kissing the dimple right at the base of my spine, and I shudder but do as he asks.

His breath is warm and tickles the sensitive skin of my lower back.

"I've wanted to take a bite out of this perfect ass for so long," he says as his hands massage the cheeks, squeezing and clenching.

Before I can reply, he spreads me open and buries his face between my cheeks, his hot mouth pressing against my hole and sending a jolt of lightning through my body, right to my balls.

"Holy shit," I call out, fingers pressed hard against the glass. The city below is a buzz with lights and action, but it's all just a blur of colors to me. I don't think I would even care if the windows were not mirrored because nothing would want to make me move from this spot right now. The building could be on fire, and I'd stand here, hands glued to the glass, with Alan on his knees behind me while it crumbled around us.

His tongue slides up over the sensitive skin and circles my entrance, teasing it between kisses.

"That's so fucking good," I moan, and he releases his grip on my ass cheeks, and they close around his face, the slight stubble of his day-old shave tickling the soft skin and

holding him in place.

He grabs my hips and encourages me back another step closer to him, and when he groans, I worry for a second he can't breathe, but then the tip of his tongue finds my opening and pushes its way inside. His hands move back to spread my cheeks, and I push against the glass, arching my back and pushing out my ass even more to give him better access. His tongue moves in and out, wet hot lips sucking and kissing, and then he slips in a thumb and my knees almost buckle beneath me.

"Oh god, fucking hell yeah," I cry out, and he moves the thumb in and out, working in opposite time to his tongue so that I'm always filled by some part of him. My cock is leaking, begging to be touched, but I can't take my hands off the glass. "I wish I could see you doing that," I say, and he pulls back, the cold air hitting me, and I immediately regret saying anything.

He stands behind me and turns me to face him.

"Get on the bed, and you can," he says, and as I climb onto the bed resting back against the pillow, he takes off his pants, his long thick cock springing free. He gives it a slow stroke as his gaze trails down my naked body.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," he says, and I can't help but smile.

"So are you."

"Are you ready?"

I nod, and he grabs one of the spare pillows and lifts my hips to place it under my lower back.

"This should give you a better view," he says, moving between my legs. He lifts my

knees and spreads them out as far as they will go, the slight sting of the stretch perfect in every way.

He starts by kissing the sensitive skin of my inner thigh, as his fingertips tease my hole gently, sliding up and down my crease.

When his mouth finds me this time, he doesn't wait to tease me. He slides one of his fingers inside with his tongue and starts working me. I grip the bed sheets, watching him between my legs, but I can't see as well as I want to, so I reach down, and grab myself, coupling my balls, squeezing them, and moving them to the side to give me a better view. The combination of his tongue and fingers inside me and my grip on my balls sends me closer to the edge. But I will hold off. This is too good to end yet.

He locks his gaze on mine, then another finger joins his tongue. The mixture of his soft tongue and his rough fingers awakens every nerve in my body, and this is no different. I can feel myself opening for him, and when he adds in his thumb and starts stretching me, his tongue can no longer assist, but he stays close, mouth kissing the sides, tongue and warm breath sending shivers along my skin.

"I want you inside me," I say, and he lifts his head.

"Grab a condom."

We're both on PrEP and have regular health screenings and I want to feel him, all of him, so I shake my head.

"Are you okay if we don't use one?"

His lips pick up in a devilish smile.

"Fuck yeah, I don't think I'll last too long though with this tight ass wrapped around

me, but we can always fool around until we can go again if that happens.”

“Even if it doesn’t,” I reply, and he buries his fingers deep, and my back arches, and I let go of my balls and grip the bed.

“Oh fuck, okay, please fuck me now. I have to have you inside me.”

He maneuvers up between my legs but doesn’t pull his fingers out right away, instead turning them in place slowly, teasing me again with that devilish smirk on his lips as he watches what he’s doing.

“Can you pass me the lube?” he asks, and while his fingers move in and out easily with the wetness from his mouth, his cock is thick and will be moving so much deeper.

I reach over to the bedside and grab the bottle I put there when I got into the room. He unclicks the lid, and while still teasing my ass, he coats himself with his other hand then squeezes some over my balls and as it drips down the crease of my ass and joins with his fingers moving in and out, twisting, preparing me to take him I close my eyes.

“Urgh, please, Alan, now!”

“Ohh, I like that, beg me again,” he says, and I open my eyes and hold his stare.

“Please, Alan, I’m begging. Please fuck me with your huge, thick cock until we both come.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he replies with a small laugh, and then the second his fingers slide free from me, he holds his base and positions his cock head there. My ass is ready for him, his fingers working me open so well, but it still stings, and heat

floods to the space as he inches deeper and deeper inside me.

He moves slowly, his eyes never leaving mine, mouth open slightly, lips still swollen and wet with the taste of me.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and I nod. His hands move to my hips, and he lifts me a little as he bottoms out.

“Oh god, you feel so good,” he moans. I clench my ass and his fingers dig into my sides.

“Do that again,” he says, and I bite my lower lips and do as he asks. His head lolls back for a second as he groans.

Then he starts moving in and out. A little at first, and slowly, but after a few thrusts, my ass has adjusted and is taking him easily, and I lift my hips to encourage him to go deeper, harder, faster.

He gets the message, and his hold on my hips tightens, and he pushes in hard. His thick cock brushes against my prostate and sends a surge of lightning to my balls, and I grab my cock in one hand and grip the bed tight with the other.

“Fucking hell, yeah, fuck me just like that,” I moan, and he thrusts deep again, and again. Fucking me faster and faster as I grip my cock tight and work my shaft in matching strokes.

He bites at his lower lip hard, and I wish so badly I could kiss him right now, but he hits that perfect spot again, and my cock can no longer contain itself. Ribbons of come explode and coat my stomach.

When he sees this, his thrusts become ragged, and I clench my ass around him as he

jerks against me, groaning as his hot come fills me with every thrust.

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Lying in his arms, the smell of sex surrounding us in the most perfect way, I can't think of anything better than this right here. He yawns and I yawn, too.

"Sorry," he says, his eyes closing slowly, then opening again just as slowly. "I don't think I can go again tonight."

"That's okay. We can always sneak back here before the flight tomorrow night."

"I should get back to my room before I fall asleep here," he says, forcing himself from the bed. I hate that he has to leave, but he's right. He leans down and kisses me.

"Tomorrow night we can celebrate an Animal Control win."

I laugh. "How about if Animal Control wins, I'll let you do whatever you like?"

His eyes look immediately awake now.

"I like that idea. Okay, and ditto. If Funky Monkeys win, you can do whatever you like."

"Ohh, even tie you up?" I ask, and he pumps his eyebrows.

"Anything," he says, pulling on his shirt and heading for the door. "Sleep well."

"Oh, I will. I'll be dreaming of all the things I'm going to do to you tomorrow night."

"You mean all the things I am going to do to you."

“We’ll see.”

“Yes, my Funky Monkey, we will.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:58 am*

Chapter sixteen

Alan

I get back to my room and text the group chat.

ALAN: So Ryan knows that you all know, but we are not telling anyone else, so can you all try to keep this to yourselves?

HARRISON: So it is a thing then?

STEVIE: Of course it's a thing! Did you see the way they were looking at each other on second base today? Bella looked at me like that a few months ago and now we're having another baby.

GORDON: I don't think he has to worry about that, but I saw it. Chances are other people did, too. Are you just going to play it off as part of the star-crossed thing?

ALAN: Yeah, given Dennis has us play acting anyway, it's the perfect cover.

HARRISON: Except we can all tell neither one of you is acting.

BENNY: You might want to avoid the late-night visits to his room if you are wanting to keep this a secret long.

Fuck. I swear I didn't see anyone on the way back. I was so careful. I even carried a towel with me so I could say I was headed to the sauna if I ran into anyone.



HARRISON: At least someone is getting some. I swear I can't wait for Arlo to visit.

GORDON: Come on, dude, that's my brother.

HARRISON: Sorry. I mean, I can't wait for my boyfriend to visit so I can fuck his brains out in my hotel room.

GORDON: \*\*\* Middle finger emoji\*\*\*

ALAN: I have no idea what Benny is talking about. I've been in my room all night.

Phillip rolls over in the bed on the other side of our hotel room, his phone in his hands and the screen illuminating his cheeky grin.

"Come on, back me up, please?" I beg.

"You literally just walked in."

"They don't have to know that."

"Why do you care?"

"I don't. I just... I don't know."

He frowns and then starts tapping on his phone. I don't know why I care. They know we are together. So it stands to reason we'd be wanting some alone time. Why is it a big deal?

PHILLIP: The dude has been in the room all night. No idea what Benny was seeing, but it wasn't Alan.

“Thank you.”

“No problem, but when I need an alibi, I expect your support, no questions.”

“You got it.”

BENNY: I didn't say I saw him. My room is next to Ryan's. Let's just say that the walls in this place are not exactly super thick.

Phillip laughs, and I throw one of my pillows at his head.

“Shut up.”

He tosses it back, still laughing.

HARRISON: Maybe he was watching porn, hotels have decent porn, I mean you have to pay for it, but it's not bad.

GORDON: Please tell me you didn't order porn to our room.

STEVIE: Are you two texting each other while in the same room?

HARRISON: No, Gordon went for a walk because he couldn't stand listening to me and Arlo on video chat.

GORDON: Excuse me if I don't want to hear you make kissy noises at the screen to my little brother. It's weird.

HARRISON: No weirder than you acting like a teenager and playing the “no, you hang up first” game with Niki every fucking night.

ALAN: I think that's our cue to go to bed. So to recap. All you dickheads will keep this to yourselves, and if anyone even hints at knowing, I hope you will help squash any rumors. At least until the tour is over.

HARRISON: We got you. If anyone says boo, we'll just say it's all part of Dennis's master plan.

GORDON: Yep, totally got your back, man.

STEVIE: After what the little monkey did for me and Bella, I owe you two. You got it. Whatever you need.

BENNY: No problem. But if I get a room next to either of you next time, you are buying me earplugs.

ALAN: Thanks, guys.

"I've got your back, too," Phillip says, switching his phone screen off and placing it on the bedside table.

"Thanks. Good night."

"Night."

\*\*\*

Ryan was right. Lady Luck does like him better. Or at least she likes the Funky Monkeys better because they kicked our asses, again. Losing sucks, sure, but losing to Ryan stings a little less knowing his prize for winning is to get to do whatever he wants with me, and that means I win, too. But it also means that if Bart Erricson is looking to dump one of the new teams next year, the party Animals are not exactly

showing him our best. But it's early in the season, we play the OG teams soon, and that is where we get to really show him how amazing we are. If we can both kick their asses and he has to keep us all.

ALAN: So we have an hour before we have to head to the airport with the team. What were you thinking?

RYAN: Thinking about what?

He can't be serious.

ALAN: About claiming your prize. Phillip already packed up his stuff and headed down to grab a meal with the guys. You could come to my room.

RYAN: We did agree on whatever I want, right?

ALAN: Yep. Anything at all. Did you want me to come to your room?

RYAN: No, let's go down and grab something to eat, too. I'm starving.

He wants to eat.

ALAN: You're choosing to get dinner as your prize when you can have whatever you want?

RYAN: No. I'm saying let's get dinner with the guys and I'll collect my prize later.

ALAN: I guess I'll see you downstairs.

RYAN: See you soon.

I throw the last of my things into my bag and head down. Leaving my suitcase with the others piled up beside the doors of the hotel ready to be loaded onto the bus taking us to the airport, I make my way into the restaurant. The room is packed, and I scan the faces, looking for the guys.

“Wow, everyone is here,” Ryan says from beside me.

“Yeah, you sure you would rather be here than...you know?”

A soft pink blush rises to his cheeks.

“Yeah, I’m sure. We’ll have plenty of time once we get to the next hotel,” he says, stretching an arm up to wave at Duckie, who is standing on a chair on the other side of the room, trying to flag us down. “Come on.”

“Allllllaaaaaannnnnnn,” Duckie calls out, and a bunch of people turn to look my way as we weave through the sea of people to the table they’ve secured by the back wall.

“You okay?” Gordon asks as I take the open seat next to him. Ryan is sitting three seats down between Stevie and Tim Sage, and I hear him laughing at something someone has said. I love the sound of his laugh. It’s like a song for my heart, filling it like air fills a balloon.

“Fine, just tired.”

“Well, you can sleep on the plane. There’s plenty of food. Did you want a beer?”

“No, I’m good. Water is fine,” I say, reaching into the middle of the large table to grab the tongs resting on top of a bowl of what looks like beef and black bean noodles. The whole middle of the table is filled with a bunch of different dishes, and everyone is sampling from whatever they like.

“Here, have one of these, too,” Gordon says, handing me a slider.

I dig in, chatting with the guys near me and trying not to let my attention keep drifting to what Ryan is saying.

“How is your arm?” I ask Gordon. His pitches are perfect when it comes to accuracy, but I noticed today they were a little slower than we’ve seen him. Ryan’s looked like they were double his speed. They weren’t, not really, but it was noticeably slower for sure.

“It’s fine. Why? Who said it wasn’t?”

“No one, I was just watching today and...”

“I just had an off day. It was nothing.”

It sounds like it was not nothing. Gordon is one of the oldest players on the team. It has to be rougher on his body than it is on, say, a guy like Tim who’s still in his twenties.

“It happens. Was just checking in. So your business is still going well?”

His expression immediately shifts from apprehension to pure excitement. His eyes widen and he smiles ear to ear.

“Amazing. Oh, man. It’s so much fun, too. This next gig we’re doing is for Hail Fenton’s twenty-fifth birthday and every celebrity you can think of will be there. It’s the biggest event yet. I’ve been on the phone with my vendors all week, making sure everything is on track.”

I’ve seen Hail Fenton’s latest blockbuster, Tides. It was good. He’s Aussie like Tim

but does the American accent so well that most people didn't even know he was Aussie until he did the press tour.

"How did you score that?"

"His girlfriend is a model who was at the last event, and she's planning the party for him. But it's fucking hard to stay on top of it all with the tour as well. I got three more emails enquiring about events, too, just yesterday. Who knew, celebrities partied so hard?"

"Yeah, 'cause they are totally known for staying out of the spotlight," I laugh. "At least you have something lined up for when this all ends."

"That's the plan. Not that I want to stop playing anytime soon, but I see all the young guys coming up, and pretty soon I won't have a choice, I guess. What will you do when it's all over?"

"Fuck, I have no clue. I guess maybe go work on the ranch with my brothers."

"How are Dean and Nial?"

"Good. They want Gramps to sell it to them, but the old guy already added all our names to the deed, and he doesn't want any of their money. So I guess I own a ranch now, too."

"Well, with him refusing to leave the house, he doesn't exactly need it. Still can't get him to a game?"

"Nope. I might be able to get him to agree to a visit to the ranch, though. Maybe when the season is over, I can head up there in break. See what my brothers have done with the place for myself. We should all go. If we keep losing, we might get

axed and it could be the last time we get to all hang out together.”

“Way to make it sound super appealing.”

“You know what I mean. It would be great to have you all come see it.”

“I’ve never been to a ranch,” Gordon says, and Harrison points my way from across the table.

“Yes,” he declares. “We needed to find something amazing to do on break. The ranch would be perfect. Arlo can come, too, right?”

“I guess. I mean, I’ll have to check if they don’t already have it booked out, but sure.

Harrison pulls out his phone, and a second later several chimes sound as the guys all check their phones. I grab mine, too.

HARRISON: Thinking of a week at Alan’s ranch to unwind at the end of the season this year? You know, in case it’s our last. Looking for numbers before we lock it in. Who’s up for it?

At least I am not the only one who was thinking this could be our final hurrah. I text my brother Nial.

ALAN: How are the bookings for the first week of October? I’d love to bring the guys to the ranch. Not sure of the exact numbers, but if they are all in, we might need all the cabins.

The three dots appear right away, and his message comes through a few seconds later.

NIAL: We’re free that whole week. We have the pool going in the week before and



weren't sure if it was going to be done on schedule, so had it already blocked out. Let us know the numbers when you know. BTW an awesome game last week. Dean and I will make the next one at Savannah, promise.

ALAN: I think the guys are more interested in pretending to be cowboys than swimming, anyway. No worries if you don't get there, you have a lot going on.

They came to only a couple of games last year with all the renovations and upkeep at the ranch keeping them busy. Kelly was at every Savannah game and always is. She bought tickets the second they went live online to be sure she wouldn't miss out. I told her I could probably get her tickets, but she said she wanted to support me in every way, and that included paying for her ticket. She's the best big sister in the world.

Harrison turns his phone to face me. "They're all in. Oh, except Stevie. He's not sure cause they'll have a newborn at home, but maybe Bella will want to get away for some country air with the kids?"

"Maybe. Nial has the whole first week of October blocked out for us."

"Awesome."

I quickly text Ryan.

ALAN: So the guys are planning to visit the ranch for a week in break. Do you want to come?

RYAN: Sounds like fun. You should bring Gramps. He hasn't been back in years, has he?

ALAN: I was thinking the same thing. If we get him there, he'll probably try to talk

you into cooking the whole time. Still swears your shepherd's pie is the best thing he's eaten in decades.

RYAN: Please tell me there will be a cabin away from the prying ears of others. I hear we were not exactly discrete last night.

ALAN: We could try to be more.

RYAN: But I like your noises.

ALAN: Okay, I'll make sure we have the most secluded cabin, then you can make me make allllll the noises you like.

RYAN: Deal.

### Chapter seventeen

Ryan

I get in ten laps in the hotel pool before throwing on some clothes and meeting the others on the bus to head to the airport. It wasn't the best swim, but like the coach always said, "Chlorine is the breakfast of champions." When we board the plane, I'm thankful neither Alan nor I get sat next to Duckie. You would think he would be used to flying by now. Alan has an aisle seat, and while I've drawn a middle seat, there is no one sitting on the aisle, so I move over and Tim, who's sitting by the window, and I take advantage of the extra space.

"You can have the window if ya want," Tim says, pulling out his AirPods. "I'll be sleeping the whole time, anyway."

"No, thanks. I'm good with the aisle."

"No worries, mate, see you in a few hours," he replies, pulling down an eye mask and leaning back a little in his chair. Not that the seats in economy lean back far.

I pull out my phone to switch it to airplane mode and spot a message from Teddy.

TEDDY: Amazing game! We finally settled on a location for Granny's ninetieth. You'll never guess where.

Well, that sounds ominous. Granny is notorious for picking obscure places to celebrate her birthday. When she turned eighty, she hired a double-decker ghost bus

comedy show on wheels thing to drive us around London, revealing the haunted history of London's most famous and well-loved attractions. It was actually amazing.

RYAN: About to fly to the next stop on the tour, please don't make me guess.

TEDDY: She's chosen the karaoke bar, and get this. She's picking a song for every person who's coming to sing. So, book that flight! Second Saturday in October, you better be coming.

That's perfect. If she had chosen the weekend before her actual birthday, I would have had to miss out on visiting the ranch with Alan.

RYAN: Wouldn't miss it.

I flick my phone to airplane mode and am about to put on my headphones when I suddenly recognize the stewardess walking down the aisle.

"Lorna, is that you?" I ask and she smiles and makes her way towards me.

"Blimey Ryan? How long has it been?"

"Too long," I say, standing for a second to give her a hug.

"How's the family?" she asks, and it's funny. We've both been living in the US for years now, and while my accent has morphed into some hybrid sound, Lorna has kept her full cockney accent, and it has me slipping back deeper.

"Good, they haven't been out to watch a game yet, but Mum swears she puts it on the telly for Granny. How about you? Have you been back much?"

"Not as much as I'd like. Don't get me wrong, I love living in the US, but it can get

lonely sometimes not having family close by.”

“I get that.”

“Dad retired a few months back, and he’s already driving Mum up the wall, and me little brother Donny is engaged to some girl he met down the pub only a few months back, so I guess I’ll be headed home for a wedding before long.”

Duckie barrels past us and rushes into the standard bathroom.

“There’s always one on every flight,” she sighs. “Poor lad, I’ll get him some ginger tea.”

“I doubt it will help. Duckie’s always hated flying. You might want to leave a few extra sick bags on his chair, though.”

“Will do. Well, hun. If you need anything at all, just press ya button.”

“Cheers, Lorna.”

She pats my shoulder and heads towards the bathroom where Duckie is hurling up whatever he has left in his stomach. I didn’t see him eat much at the dinner, but he did polish off a few drinks, probably trying to steady his nerves about taking this flight.

I distract myself by scrolling through social media on my phone, but I keep thinking of how I could have had Alan before we got on the plane and I stupidly chose dinner with the guys. What was I thinking? I crane my head back to look at him and he smiles my way, stretching his arms above his head. I could have had those arms wrapped around me. Urgh, this flight is going to be torture. How long is it again? Maybe I should try to sleep like Tim? I close my eyes, but my mind throws the

memory of Alan's mouth wrapped around my cock and I open my eyes. I guess sleep is out of the question. My cock is at half-mast from just the memory of him. Maybe I could go take care of this in the bathroom once we take off?

Orrr, maybe I could get Alan to join me in the bathroom and then I can take care of him? But Airplane bathrooms are small. Oh, but not in first class. Not that I have been in first class, but Lorna shares videos on her socials of the different amenities on flights and the first class bathroom is big. It has a bench and a shower, aaaaaand I don't know why I am thinking about the first class bathroom. I'm sitting in economy plus.

The engines kick in and as the plane picks up speed and starts to tilt, my mind is thankfully on getting us in the air and not on Alan's beautiful mouth on my cock. But the second we are stable, back the memory comes.

I spot Lorna talking with another passenger ahead of me and an idea comes to mind. I mean, it is probably a long shot, but if I don't ask, I have zero chance.

I reach up and press the call button. She finishes up with the passenger and heads my way.

"What can I get for yah, hun?"

"I was actually wondering, and like, I totally get if you can't, but what are the chances I could get a look at the first-class bathroom? I saw that video you took on your page, and it looks amazing. I've never showered on a plane before.

She laughs.

"Yeah, me neither."

“I mean, it’s okay if I can’t I just thought I would ask.”

She looks up the aisle towards where the other staff are chatting between the sections.

“I can’t make any promises, but let me see what I can do,” she says, and she heads up the aisle.

I’ve almost given up hope when the lights start getting turned down and people are settling back in their chairs to try to get some sleep, but then Lorna comes over and crouches beside me.

“I’ve booked a time slot for a shower at half past twelve. I’ll come and get you when it’s time and show you where it is, okay?”

“Oh, my god that’s amazing,” I whisper back, trying not to disturb the other passengers. “Cheers. You won’t get into trouble, will ya?”

She shakes her head. “No, first class is surprisingly empty. Besides, you’re not taking a seat, just using the bathroom.”

“I’ll be back when it’s time.”

I look back to where Alan is sitting. He isn’t asleep either, and he’s looking my way as he mouths what I am pretty sure is, “What was that about?”

I really didn’t think Lorna would actually be able to get me into the first-class bathroom, but I totally chickened out asking if I could bring a friend. How creepy would that be? She would have to know what we would be doing in there. So now I just have to figure out how to get Alan in, too.

I’m a bundle of nerves as I watch the clock counting down the minutes until Lorna

comes back to get me. When she finally arrives at my side to collect me, I practically jump from my seat.

“This way, hun,” she says, and I follow her into the first-class section, where only two of the pod-like things are closed over and the rest of the seats sit empty. Seems like a waste to me. They could have upgraded a few of the other passengers, you would think.

“If there is turbulence, the seat belt light will come on and there is a bench seat in the shower and another in the room. Strap in and wait for the light to go off before trying to leave. You will have five minutes of hot water, and keep in mind, the water will not turn on unless you have the shower door all the way closed and locked. You can use any of the amenities inside you like, and there is a call button by the door in case you need anything not provided.”

Lorna opens the door, and I have to say I’m pretty impressed. The bathroom is as big as some hotel bathrooms I’ve been in, and it smells like vanilla and orange and nothing like an airplane.

“Wow,” I say, stepping inside.

She lets out a soft giggle. “Have a nice shower.”

“Oh, bugga, I had a change of clothes in my bag I was going to bring. I will just duck back, is that okay?” I ask, and she smiles and nods.

“Me and the girls are grabbing something to eat while most of the passengers are asleep. You know your way back?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” I say, and I head back towards the main section of the plane. As soon as I am in Alan’s sight, I make a motion with my head for him to follow me. It



probably looks like I am having a seizure, but he gets the idea and heads my way. I slip into the section where they prepare the drinks.

“What are you doing?” he whispers, glancing back down to make sure he wasn’t seen.

“Follow me,” I tell him and take his hand. His large fingers wrap around mine and send warmth spreading through my arm all the way to my chest. How does he do that?

“Should we be in here?” he whispers when we pass the first class pods.

“I hooked us up, you have to see this,” I say, and I push open the bathroom door and usher him inside.

“How the hell did you do this?” he asks as his gaze moves through the room in awe.

“The stewardess you saw me talking to is named Lorna. We went to school together back in London. Grew up together, actually, we were only a few houses down. We’ve kept in touch over the years, and so when I saw her, I had this idea.”

“I never even knew airplanes had this on board.”

“I’ve never been inside a first-class bathroom either, but Lorna posted a few videos online a year or so ago. Check it out, we even get a hot shower,” I say, pulling open the door to the shower stall, and Alan peers inside.

“I don’t think we’ll be sharing that space,” he laughs, and I let the door fall closed.

“It is a bit tight, but we have plenty of space out here.”

“That we do,” he says, closing the distance between us, gripping my waist and pulling me against him. I slide my hands up his arms to his neck and kiss him. The aroma of vanilla and orange surrounds us in a delicate haze as he strips off my shirt and unbuttons my pants.

His mouth moves down my neck, and I lean against the countertop as he kisses his way down my chest to my thickening cock.

“I’ve been wanting to do this for hours. How much time do we have?” he asks as he kneels before me.

“Thirty minutes. Less because our slot started at half twelve.”

He chuckles.

“What?”

“Nothing, I just love how you tell time. Half twelve. It’s cute.”

“You want to waste our time in here debating the better way to tell time?”

“No, I want to spend it with my mouth wrapped around your cock, actually,” he says, then he pulls my briefs down and takes me in his hand. “Are you ready to join the mile-high club, Mr. Tanner?”

The way he says my name, all formal, sends a shiver through me.

“Why yes, Mr. Beaker, I am.”

He licks his lips and then wraps his mouth over my cockhead.

“That’s so fucking hot,” I say as he swirls his tongue around and starts to swallow me deeper. My hands grip the sides of the countertop, my ass half up on the edge as he strokes and sucks over and over. His free hand works its way between my legs to grip my balls, tugging them slightly on the down stroke, and I groan.

“Shhh,” he pulls back to hush me.

“I doubt they can hear anything,” I say, and he smiles and shakes his head.

“Put something in your mouth, just in case,” he says, and I bite my lip.

“Oh, I’ll put something in my mouth alright,” I say, and I step around him, kneel on the floor, grab a few towels, and lay them out.

“Strip,” I say, and he shuffles out of his clothes as I lie on the towels on my side.

“Ohh, the floor is warm. It’s heated. Fuck, they really do have it good in first class, don’t they?”

“Well, it’s all ours now,” he says and moves to join me.

“Other way, I want your cock right here, not your mouth, it’s going back to where it was,” I say, and he does as I ask, lowering himself beside me with his long thick cock, hard and leaking right in my face.

“Perfect,” I tell him, grabbing his base and running my tongue up his length.

He moans softly, and then his hand directs my cock into his mouth, and it’s incredible. Laying side by side, I move my free hand to between his thighs and grip his ass to pull him deeper into my throat. His fingers slide between the cheeks of my ass, teasing my hole and itching me closer and closer to the edge.

I love the way his ass clenches when his cockhead pushes past the back of my throat. The soft moans escape him as I bring him closer to climax. Knowing I am bringing those noises, though muted, out of him is the best feeling. Being with Alan is unlike being with any man before. His touch sends electric pulses through my skin to my core. His hand brushes against my cheek, and I want to melt into him, be wrapped up in his arms, be one with him. Like this. Now, on the floor of a first-class bathroom, we are one. Joined in every way, and fucking hell, it's incredible.

He moans again, and he starts to thrust a little against me, fucking my mouth with his long, hard cock. I try to match his pace, but my balls are full, and when he slips his finger inside me, I explode, fucking his mouth, jerking as I try to control my suction around him and come at the same time. Just when I am almost spent, the first of his salty bursts hit my tongue, and I clench his ass tight and draw him deep into my mouth, his body convulsing as he fills my throat until he softens and slips free.

I roll onto my back, staring up at the ceiling, and he moves to lie beside me right way up.

"That was incredible, also probably a dangerous position to be in if we had hit any form of turbulence," he says, kissing my cheek.

I turn my head to face him, and his lips meet mine, the taste of us mixing in a delicious medley, and I pull him on top of me and deepen the kiss for a moment before he pulls back.

"We don't have much time," he says, and I smile.

"I should have asked for two slots."

"We have the rest of the night at the hotel," he replies, kissing me softly once more, then climbing up and holding out a hand for me.

“The flight gets in at two. By the time they get us to our rooms, we won’t have much time at all, not if we want to sleep.”

“Who needs sleep?” he laughs, opening the shower door. “Come on, I think we’ll both fit.”

I squeeze in with him, and I’m thankful the water is instantly warm the second it comes out of the shower head. Once we’re wet down, he switches it off.

“Hey,” I start, but he grabs the washcloth and covers it in body wash.

“The timer there shows only five minutes of water. We’ll need it to wash off.”

“Oh, right. Lorna did say something about that.”

“You weren’t listening?”

“Nope, I just kept thinking, shut up already so I can go get Alan so I can make him come at fifty thousand feet.”

He shakes his head and then kisses me again. This time, he doesn’t pull away, and we stand in the cocoon of the shower, his mouth on mine, our hands soaping up each other’s bodies and rinsing each other off until the timer reaches red, and we climb out. I pop open the door first, peeking out to make sure no one can see us both leave, and when I am sure the coast is clear, he slips out and heads back to his seat.

I close the door and follow not too close behind. Once back in my seat, I lean back and close my eyes, hoping I might be able to get in a power nap before we land so I will have the energy to go again when we get to the hotel.

Tim clears his throat beside me, and I look over to see him peeking over at me from

under the corner of his eye mask, a smirk on his lips.

“Where have you been?” he asks, and I shrug.

“Had to use the bathroom,” I reply, then pull on my headphones and look away before he sees the giant smile on my lips.

Best flight ever.

### Chapter eighteen

Alan

The next few games, we don't get to spend much alone time together at all, but with the guys knowing about us, Ryan's been able to hang when we catch up outside of the team stuff.

"So what's this ranch like?" Duckie asks as we sit around the large wood table at Brend's Steak House. The second we walked through the door, I knew I was going to like this place. The scent of wood and sizzling meat tickles my nose and reminds me of home.

"A lot like this actually," I say, looking around at the wooden walls, floors, and furniture. "My family built the place forever ago and other than the obvious additions of modern technology and plumbing, it's stayed pretty much as it was when it was first crafted."

"Are there horses? I've always wanted to ride a horse. I reckon I'd be awesome at it. Ohhh bulls, can we ride bulls?" Duckie asks.

"Horses, yes, bulls, no. Or at least I don't think so. But just so we are clear, if there is a bull, you won't be riding it."

"We'll see," he says, finishing off his beer and refilling it from a jug in the middle of the table.

“There are some pictures online,” Ryan says, turning his phone for the others to see. My brothers set up a webpage to help with bookings, and Ryan scrolls through the pictures of the online gallery. “There are twelve cabins on the property they’ve added for guests and the main house is kept more for family.”

“So, where are we staying?” Duckie asks.

“Nial booked us all the cabins, but if we need more room, they’re happy for us to stay in the main house, too. You just have to let me know who’s coming.”

“You’re bringing Gramps, too, right?” Ryan asks, and Harrison makes a choking sound on his beer.

“You’re getting the old guy to leave his apartment? No way. How did you manage that?”

Gordon and a few of the others look confused.

“My grandfather lives next door to Duckie, Ian, and Ryan. He’s become sort of a homebody for, well, years now. He only goes out if he has to, and it’s a big drama even then. I still don’t think he’ll come.”

“He told me yesterday he’s coming. He ordered a special cat travel thing for Precious and everything,” Ryan says, and Harrison raises his brows with a cheeky smile.

“You and the old guy getting along then?” he asks Ryan.

“We talk. He’s at the window across from my room all the time with Precious. Why?”

“No reason. I guess the only thing he would really say to me was to tell me I need



curtains and to get a real job.”

I laugh. “Yeah, Don can be...fun. He asked about the curtains once, but after a bit, he said not to bother. I guess the view improved.”

“Fuck you. I’m fabulous to look at.”

Ryan looks at me, a half smile on his lips, but a nervousness in his eyes like he doesn’t want to say the wrong thing here. I know he had a thing for Harry ages ago, but I don’t care. I stretch my arm over Ryan’s shoulder, and his blush deepens.

“It’s okay, Ryan. You can tell Harry he’s pretty. He needs to hear it more and more the older he gets.”

Harry gains insult, clutching at his chest, but Duckie is looking at my arm around Ryan with a raised brow and a smirk. I immediately pull it away, grab my drink to take a sip, trying to act like it was nothing before I turn my attention back to Harry. “As pretty as you are, Ryan is British. He has the whole Tom Hardy thing going for him. Gramps always said the Brits are the only ones who know how to speak properly. My Gran was from London, too. He tried to pick her up in a pub in town and she called him a cheeky fella and that was that.”

“Really? That’s what hooked him? Cheeky fella,” Ryan says, and the whole table looks his way.

“Okay, I hear it now,” Harrison says with a chuckle, and the guys all agree, then start asking him to pronounce all sorts of things. I love Ryan’s accent, it’s smooth and dreamy, and I have no idea how the others didn’t notice how amazing it is until now.

Nights like this are what I want all the time, only I want them to end with us going home together, not to separate hotel rooms we’re sharing with two other guys.

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“I guess I’ll see you on the bus?” I say when we get back to the hotel.

“I can’t wait to get back to Savannah. I miss my bed.”

“Me, too. It’s cool they have us returning to play for our home crowd through the tour. They really are the best.”

“And we will finally get some proper alone time.”

“Sort of,” I say, and he frowns.

“Why sort of?”

“Well, I live with my sister, and you live with Duckie and Ian, oh and across from my Gramps, and there are no curtains.”

That gets a laugh out of him.

“Right. Blimey, I guess going home won’t make things that much easier.”

Is this too hard for him? I know we agreed to keep this a secret, well, secret from the public and most of the teams, at least until the tour is over, but it is hard remembering to keep my distance. He walks by me, and I want to take his hand in mine, and it pains me that I can’t. Being at home should make things easy, but it doesn’t. What if he decides that I’m not worth this much trouble?

“Hey,” he says, stepping closer. It’s dark and late, and we’re outside the hotel, but I still look around to make sure no one is watching us. “What’s going on in that pretty head of yours?” he asks, and I swear, I want to melt into his arms.

“I guess I was worrying this might all be too hard.”

“You... is it too hard for you?”

“No. Fuck no,” I say, my pulse doubling instantly. I close the distance between us and take his hands in mine. “I was worried it was too hard for you .”

“It’s not,” he says, and my racing heart starts to slow. “Nothing will ever be too hard, not for us.”

“Are you sure?”

He glances to the left, then right, then pushes up on his toes to kiss me. It’s over way too quick and my heart is beating a million times a minute when it’s over, but it brings the same warmth to my chest that it always has, and I smile.

“So we’re okay?” I ask, and he releases my hands slowly, stuffing them into his pockets.

“We’re good. We’ll figure it out. That’s what couples do, right? They work stuff out together?”

He bites his lip in a way that makes me want to kiss him so badly.

I glance around. No one is outside, but the street is lit well enough that someone could see us.

“What is it?” he asks.

“I want to kiss you again, but I don’t think out here is the best idea.”

“How about we check out the gym?”

“It’s a bit late for a workout, don’t you think?”

“Exactly. It should be empty. I’d like to kiss my boyfriend goodnight before I go to bed.”

I follow him inside, praying the entire way to the gym that there is no one there.

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Landing in Savannah, we’re greeted by the home crowd we love so much. Fans and family have all turned out to welcome us. We’ll be here for a little over a week, play three games, and then fly out again to continue the tour.

I grab my bag from the carousel and immediately see Kelly waving me over.

“Thank god you’re back,” she says, wrapping me in a tight hug.

“Why?”

She lets me go and grabs Ryan on his way past, pulling him into an even tighter hug.

“Oh my God, I am so happy to see you,” she says, and I look around to see if anyone is watching, because if anyone sees them, I am fucked. After all, I have no explanation for why my sister is hugging Ryan in the middle of the airport.

“Umm, Kell, you can let him go now,” I say, taking my sister’s arm and almost prying it off my boyfriend. Even in my head, I love the way that sounds.

“Sorry, but you have no idea what it’s been like the last two weeks.”

“We’ve been gone for four,” I correct her.

“Yeah, but Gramps ate through all of Ryan’s meals in two, so who do you think has had to hear about it for two weeks straight?”

Ryan laughs. “I’m glad he enjoyed them. I’ll make him up some more before we fly out again.”

“Seriously, you need to teach me how to make them because I tried to make the casserole thing and the shepherd’s pie, and neither went over well.”

“Why didn’t you just buy him some frozen dinners?” I ask, and she starts waving her hands around.

“Oh, don’t even get me started on that. I tried to stock him up with frozen meals. You know what he did with them?”

“What?”

“He threw them out the window and down into the dumpster. Said he would rather starve than eat that trash anymore. Told me to call the mortuary and prepare the casket because he was on his way.”

I can’t help but laugh at that one, too.

“Ryan, look what you’ve done to my sister,” I say, and he blushes a beautiful rosy glow. “She was the cool and collected one when we left.”

She sighs and drapes one arm over Ryan’s shoulder, leaning her head against him.

“Please, can you teach me how to cook, because I don’t think the authorities will

believe me when I tell them he jumped from the window?”

“What’s this all about?” Harry asks, sidling up beside us. Most of the team have already left the airport luggage section.

“Ryan is going to teach me to cook,” Kelly says, letting Ryan go again to place her hands together in front of her, begging him with her pleading gaze.

“I can give you the recipe, and we can go through it tonight. I was planning on cooking up a shepherd’s pie, anyway.”

“Seriously, oh my god, you are amazing.”

Harry slaps a hand on Ryan’s shoulder. “What I’m hearing is dinner at Kelly’s?”

“Yes,” Kelly replies before I can shut it down. “You should invite all the guys. We haven’t had them over in forever.”

“Yeah, like never,” I say, and she frowns and waves a hand in my direction.

“You used to have them over at your place all the time. I keep telling you to treat my place as your place for as long as you want. This is good. Ryan, you and I will go shopping for ingredients. Alan, you go check on Gramps. I’m not visiting him until I have a Ryan dish in my hands.”

“I’ll invite Arlo and text the guys,” Harry says.

“Where is Arlo?” I ask, and Harry smiles wide and proud.

“He’s at the library teaching a bunch of niblets to draw their pets as cartoon characters.”

Kelly gushes. “Aww, that’s so sweet. We should get him to do a drawing of Precious for Gramps. Does he take commissions?”

“I’m sure he’d do it for free. We can ask him tonight. He’s in for dinner. Texting the guys now. See you all later,” Harry says, walking away.

“You don’t have to cook for everyone. We can order pizza or something,” I say to Ryan as Kelly grabs his bag from his hand and loops it over her shoulder.

“Yes, he does. He said it was fine. I’ll carry this, you start on the grocery list. Come on, Alan, we’ll drop you at Gramps’s on the way.”

“Great,” I reply as Ryan smiles my way, then pulls out his phone and starts typing a list on his notes app. “Can’t wait.”

### Chapter nineteen

Ryan

Kelly drops Alan at the front of the building, and he takes my bag, offering to run it up for me while I go shopping with Kelly for tonight's dinner.

"So when are you two going to properly come out?" Kelly asks, pulling into the grocery store parking lot.

"Umm, pretty sure we're both out. I mean, I came out in high school."

"Not out like that. You two, together. When are you going to stop pretending it's all pretend?"

"Oh, that. Yeah, after the tour."

"Why?"

"We don't want the stories to become more about us and less about the sport, I guess. Plus, we don't really know how the public will take it. Support with the star-crossed lovers bits has been mostly great, but like anything online, there are always the trolls looking to spout some homophobic bullshit. There was a big mess last year with two players that broke up, too, so we're a little nervous the other players might have a problem with it, with us. Our friends know, but we're keeping it to ourselves otherwise."



“Well, just so you know, I think it’s awesome.”

“You do?”

“I do. Alan hasn’t been this happy in forever.”

“I think my family would say the same about me,” I reply, climbing from the car. We walk into the store, and I grab a basket.

“They’re all in London?”

I nod. “I came over to the US for school. I went to Arizona State, and then I got a job and then somehow made it onto a professional baseball team, and well, I guess this has become home for me. It’s hard, though, not being able to just pop over and see my parents or my gran. I think I miss her most.”

“I know I complain about Gramps a lot, but I’d feel the same if he was a plane trip away. We grew up with him always there, you know. On the ranch.”

“Yeah, Alan said. It’s good of you two to look after him.”

“It’s just what family does.”

It is what I’ve always thought family does, but until seeing Alan with his gramps, Don, I hadn’t met a guy who really felt the same way. I started to believe it might have been a cultural thing, like maybe in America, it was normal not to see your parents for years or grandparents. One guy I dated had never met his mother’s parents at all, and they lived only two states over. But it turns out it isn’t a cultural thing. The guys I was dating were just dicks.

“Okay, let’s get double everything you need so that we can make a full freezer batch

for Gramps and still feed the guys,” Kelly says, and we make our way around the store, gathering supplies. We’re just about done when her phone starts buzzing.

“We’re almost done here,” she says as I push the cart to the register to check us out. “Really? Okay, I mean, sure, if he wants to. He’s not bringing the cat, is he?”

She looks my way with raised brows and the same smile Alan gives me when I’m being cheeky.

“Sure, okay. See you soon,” she says and hangs up the phone. “So, you’ll never guess what.”

“Okay, so how about you don’t make me guess and you just tell me?” I reply, putting the last of our things on the belt for the cashier to scan through.

“Gramps is coming to dinner.”

“Tonight?”

“Yep. We have to pick him and Alan up on our way back.”

“He’s going to leave his house?”

“Yep, that’s what Alan said. He’s even leaving the cat behind.”

“Nice, well the more the merrier, right?”

She laughs, covering her mouth as her eyes go a little wider, like she’s just thought of something hilarious.

“What?”

“Gramps is coming to dinner with a house full of Banana Ball players.”

Don hasn't made it any secret he doesn't think what we play is baseball. I steer clear of the topic as best I can when I visit him. He'd much rather talk about Precious and what I miss most about London, so it usually isn't hard to steer the conversation that way whenever it does come up.

“Umm, maybe he should bring the cat.”

We finish paying and drive back to collect them. Surprisingly, Alan and Gramps are on the curb waiting when we arrive. I quickly jump out of the front passenger seat the second she stops.

“Here, Mr. Beaker,” I say, holding the door open for him. He's carrying an old bowling ball bag and places it on the floor in front of the front seat floor before climbing in.

“He knows we're having dinner at Kelly's, not at some bowling alley, right?” I ask Alan before he opens the back door for me to climb in.

“Don't ask,” he says, climbing in after me. Kelly drives as Don's attention is on the view out of the windshield. Alan leans in close to my side.

“I tried to tell him he doesn't need to bring anything, but he insisted. I'm just shocked we actually got him out the door.”

“And without the cat.”

“Exactly. He said he closed her in the bedroom, so she should be fine. She better be, or we'll never hear the end of it. I warned the guys, too. Told them I didn't mind if they wanted to bail on dinner.”

“Why would they do that?” I ask, shocked by his suggestion. While Don has his opinions about baseball, he’s still his family, and in a way, that makes him our family, too. At least, that’s how I see it.

“Did anyone take you up on that?” I ask, a pit forming in my stomach while I wait for his reply. I am pretty sure I know these guys well, but even the idea that one of them would skip tonight because they might have an awkward conversation with Don doesn’t sit well with me.

“Not yet, but let’s see how quickly they run once it gets going.”

“Don’t worry, my shepherd’s pie will keep them there. Trust me. Speaking of which, we’ll need to get right into it if we’re going to eat anytime soon.”

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Once at Alan and Kelly’s place, Alan and I start on the prep for dinner while Kelly shows her grandfather around their place, all the while carrying the bowling bag. I wonder what he has in there.

Working beside Alan in the kitchen is nice. Easy. It’s like we can feel each other’s movements before we even make them. I step to the side when he needs the trash, and he passes me a knife just before I ask where I’d find one. We’re in perfect sync, and when we finally get the two giant trays into the oven, Gramps sits down on the other side of the kitchen counter.

“Now that’s over with, she can come out,” Gramps says, unzipping the bowling bag on the chair beside him and out pops Precious’s head. She meows my way and leaps free from the bag. Alan retreats, knocking over a mug on the counter behind him, and Precious hisses his way.

“Did he scare you?” I ask, bringing her attention back to me, and she lowers her head to rub her ears against my hand.

“I thought you left her at home?” Alan asks, manoeuvring his way out of the kitchen, all the while keeping his eyes on the cat.

“Now, why would I do that? It’s not fair of me to keep her locked up at home all alone if I am going out. She hasn’t seen Kelly’s place either.”

“Gramps,” Kelly sighs. “What if she gets out? She doesn’t know this area; she could get lost.”

“Pfft, she’s a smart cat. She’d find her way home.”

“Want to test that theory?” Alan says under his breath, but still loud enough for me to hear. If Gramps heard him, though, he isn’t letting on. I pick Precious up off the counter and carry her around to the couch.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” he says as I sit on the lounge, and Precious curls up in my lap, nuzzling her head into the crook of my arm.

“She’s sweet, you just have to give her a chance,” I reason.

“Nope, not happening. You stay there, I’ll finish cleaning up. I’ll have to disinfect the kitchen counter now that Satan’s feet have been on it.”

Gramps shakes his head and carries the bowling bag down the hallway.

“I’ll set her litter up in here, but she won’t need it.”

“No problem, Gramps,” Kelly calls, and Alan just stares at her wide-eyed and open-

mouthed.

“No problem? It is a big problem. The guys are going to get here soon, and the spawn of Satan is going to either scratch their eyes out or seduce them into submission like with my boyfriend over there,” Alan argues, and Kelly raises her brow, a smile creeping onto her lips.

“So, boyfriend, huh?”

“Shut up and go make sure your windows are closed. He might be confident in its ability to find its way home, but I’m not, and I don’t want to spend my evening searching the city for that thing.”

She laughs but does as he asks.

“Do you think she can tell you hate her?” I ask, and Alan turns to me, shocked.

“I don’t hate Kelly.”

“Not Kelly, you daft fool. Precious. I reckon if you stopped worrying so much about her attacking you, she might stop trying to.”

“Yeah, I’m not so sure that’s it. But you just stay there keeping it happy, and I will take care of everything else.”

“Gramps will be bringing her to the ranch, too, remember. He bought the carrier?”

“What’s this I hear about the ranch?” Gramps asks, walking in. Precious immediately picks her head up and watches him until he takes a seat in the cozy chair opposite me. That appears to be her cue to climb off my lap and trade it for his.

“We were just talking about the trip we’ve organized,” I say, and Gramps side-eyes Alan.

“I was thinking about that. You young fellas don’t need an old codger around like me on your trip.”

“Actually,” I say before Alan can respond. “We were hoping while we were there, you would tell us all about how the ranch used to be. You grew up there, didn’t you? I’m sure you have loads of stories about the palace.”

“Yeah, Gramps, you used to tell us stories about the ranch all the time as kids,” Alan adds, and Don settles back into the chair.

“We’ll see. I’m not sure what’s left of the old place now that your brothers have been doin’ it up, though.”

“Oh, they’ve kept it almost the same,” Alan says, pulling out his phone and bringing it over to Gramps. It’s the closest he’s gotten to Precious in the whole time we’ve been here and his excitement to show Don the photos of the ranch overpowering his fear of being attacked. “Look, the main house is exactly like I remember it as a kid. They even got the old banister rails replaced where the ram got in that time. A local wood guy made them by hand just like they were done originally.”

Gramps’s head tilts to the side a little, his eyes getting that far-off look to them as Alan scrolls through the pages. Does he miss the ranch? Has he wanted to go back before now and just never had the chance? It’s his ranch, so it seems odd he wouldn’t just go, but Alan said he hasn’t left his house at all in years. Maybe this is the first step to getting him back there.

“The cabins are new, though,” Alan says, taking his phone back, shoving it into his pocket, and heading back to the kitchen to continue to wipe over the counter for what

has to be the third time now. Either he's a germaphobe and I never noticed, or he's really worried about how tonight's going to go.

"So tell me about these new additions?" Gramps asks.

"They had them built in sections already vacant," Alan begins. "So there are a few smaller ones that only suit a couple or single, but further back there are some great sized family ones, too. They've been booking up pretty quickly as well, so it was lucky we wanted the week they blocked out for the pool install. We've got the whole place, so you won't have to deal with strangers."

"They're putting in a pool?"

"It's more like a pond," I reply.

"And you've invited the people you work with?" Gramps asks, patting Precious.

"Yeah, I've invited some of the guys from the teams to come. So, I guess, once you meet them, they won't be strangers."

And with that, the doorbell chimes. Time to see what these guys are made of.



### Chapter twenty

Alan

Harrison is first through the door, Arlo by his side snuggled under his arm like a puzzle piece fitting just perfectly. Gramps's eyebrows rise the second he spots him, but Harry gets in the first word.

"New guy giving you a hard time, Mr B?" Harry asks, and Gramps shakes his head.

"Young Mr. Tanner is a model neighbor."

"I bet he is," Harrison replies, turning his head to smirk at me but turning back just as Arlo moves in to say hello to Precious.

"Careful," Harrison and Alan say at once.

Just like with Ryan, Precious is all purrs and soft head nudges, no teeth or hisses.

"I actually brought you something, Mr. Beaker," Arlo says, reaching back to Harrison. "Did you grab the book?" he asks Harry, and he slips a notebook out from a bag slung over his back and hands it to Arlo.

"Kelly sent me a few pictures of Precious, and I had some free time this afternoon, so I drew you this," Arlo says, sliding a page out and handing it over to Gramps. He immediately sits straighter in the chair, jostling Precious a little, but she settles again quickly.

He takes the page from him but doesn't say a word, his gaze locked on what I can see from here is a cartoon representation of his Precious Satan, only without the horns and flames of hell. I'll have to ask him to give me that version.

A small laugh escapes my lips at the thought, and Gramps's attention flicks to me for a second before returning to the page.

"You drew this?" he finally asks, and Arlo nods, pushing his glasses up on his nose.

"Yeah, Kelly asked me to. Do you...like it?" Arlo asks, and I can tell he's worried now too that Gramps doesn't. He can be a tough old bastard, but he's usually polite enough when it counts.

"Well, Mr. B, what do you think?" Harrison prompts, and Gramps smiles and leans down to Precious in his lap and holds the drawing in front of her face like she would be even able to make out what it is.

"It's perfect, look, Precious, look at how pretty you are," he says and then lifts the page back up to admire it more himself.

I release the breath I didn't realize I'd been holding and lean back on the counter just as the doorbell chimes again. Here we go again.

I collect Duckie and Ian from the hall and am about to close the door when Gordon, Nicki, and Stevie arrive.

"How did you get a night off?" I ask Stevie as he saunters in all smiles.

"Bella is busy wedding planning, and my suggestions were starting to annoy her and her sister, so they sent me out for a few hours," he replies, and Duckie laughs.

“Dude, you totally did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“I have no idea what you mean. I was serious when I suggested we theme the whole wedding on baseball. It’s what brought us together, after all.”

“And you were shocked she didn’t go for that?” Harrison asks, sitting on the couch with Arlo beside him.

“Okay, maybe not shocked, but I hope she at least lets me have the little baseball chocolates for the favors. Oh, and I want you all to help me with a dance number on the night, too. You’ve seen those viral wedding dances, we are way cooler than them, so ours should be killer.”

“If you invite Dennis, he’ll make sure of it.”

“I might have to swap out a cousin, but hey, there are so many of those it’s not like the parents will notice one missing.”

“Sure,” Harry replies, rolling his eyes.

“Sorry, Gramps, this is Stevie. He recently got engaged to his girlfriend, and you know Duckie and Ian from across the alley.”

“Mr. Beaker,” Stevie says, reaching out to shake his hand.

“You best be leaving your fiancée to the wedding plans. It’s the honeymoon you want to be planning,” Gramps says, and my cheeks immediately burn.

“Gramps!” I say, and Ryan is trying to stifle a laugh across from me.

“Oh hush, if he’s getting married, he knows I’m right. The wedding is for everyone

else, the honeymoon is for just you two. So make it special.”

“I was just going to go to Hawaii. I see posts all the time about how it’s the best honeymoon spot,” Stevie says, and Gramps nods and smiles.

“Is that where she always be wantin’ to go?” Gramps asks, and Stevie frowns.

“Actually, I don’t think so. She likes the beach, but she’s paler than me, so has to cover up all the time or she goes bright red like a lobster.”

“Then maybe not Hawaii,” Gramps says, and Duckie throws a small yellow duck at Stevie. It hits him in the chest and rolls into his lap.

“Think harder,” Gramps probes.

“She has this tower thing on her keyring and has had it forever. It’s the one in Paris, I think.”

“Ahh, the city of love,” Harrison says, snuggling into Arlo and kissing his forehead. “I’ll take you to Paris one day, my love.”

“I’d prefer Australia. Have you seen their animals? They are so cute.”

“Noted.”

“Don’t even think of proposing yet. I just got used to the idea of you two dating, I’m not ready for marriage,” Gordon pipes in.

Niki elbows his side.

“Like you wouldn’t love to have your best friend be your brother-in-law,” she teases.

“See, even Niki knows you’re full of shit,” Harrison says, and Gordon tilts his head up a little and sniffs the air.

“Ohh, what is that smell? It’s amazing!”

“Dinner and it will be ready soon.”

“Best you boys be going to wash up then,” Gramps says, and he climbs from the chair, Precious leaping from his lap. I see Harrison flinch, and it’s nice to know it isn’t just me that doesn’t buy this fake angelic persona the spawn of Satan is putting on for everyone else.

Gramps takes the drawing with him through to the other room, and I catch sight of the biggest smile on his face when he passes.

“I’ll set the table,” Ryan says, climbing from his chair.

“I’ll help,” Duckie offers, and when I bring the shepherd’s pie over to sit in the middle on the chopping board they put down, I see why he was so eager to help. On every plate sitting on top of the napkin is a rubber duck, only they are all different, like the fun ones we found all over the tour last year. The one on my plate is wearing a cowboy hat and holding a ring of rope. Arlo’s has a pencil under its wing and an ink smear on its cheek, and then I spot the one on the plate at the head of the table. The spot where Gramps is going to sit. It’s slightly paler than the other ducks, and there is a tuft of gray hair on top of the little duck head, and it’s wearing those half-circle glasses on the end of its little beak.

Gramps takes his seat and picks it up.

“Well, isn’t this a nice touch,” he says, sitting it to the side of his plate. I look over at Duckie and he’s wearing the same confused frown probably on my face right now.

“Smells fantastic. Shall we say grace?” Gramps asks, and just like that, everyone sits and takes each other’s hands. I don’t think we’ve ever said grace at any of the group dinners, but the second Gramps says it, they all just go along. My friends really are the best. But will they still be willing to play along when Gramps starts on about Banana Ball? Fuck. I hope none of them bring it up.

We get to the end of the prayer, and just when I think we’re in the clear, Harry opens his mouth.

“Oh, and thank you to the amazing sport of Banana Ball for which we would not have all met and come together tonight.” I open my eyes and look at Gramps, whose lips have pursed together a little, but his eyes remain closed.

But instead of making a snide comment about the Banana Ball, he just nods and says, “Amen.”

We all release hands, and Gramps nods to Ryan.

“Your meal. Do you want to do the honors?” he asks, and Ryan grabs the large spoon and takes Gramps’s plate first to dish him up.

“Have you ever played baseball?” Ryan asks Gramps, and my stomach flips. Really ?

“I did, in my youth, didn’t go on with it, though.”

“It’s the best game in the world, isn’t it?” Duckie adds, and I look at him pleading with my eyes that he stop.

“I’d have to agree with you there,” Gramps replies, taking a mouthful of his dinner.

“I never really liked it before I met Gordie, and now I’m obsessed. I heard you

pitched over two hundred miles per hour a few weeks ago, Ryan,” Niki asks, and Gramps’s eyebrows rise a little.

“Yeah, two-oh-three, but I haven’t done it again. I’m stuck at two hundred and two.”

“You pitch two hundred and two miles per hour?” Gramps asks, but before he can respond, I find my mouth opening.

“Ryan is amazing,” I say, and he smiles my way and continues to dish out the food. “He’s the best pitcher in the league.”

“Hey,” Gordon chimes in. “You’re supposed to be on my team.”

“I am. But I was brought up to never lie, sorry if the truth hurts.”

“You lied about...” Gordon starts but then stops before finishing the sentence, his eyes moving between Ryan and me.

“About what?” Gramps asks, shoveling in another mouthful and looking around the table as he chews, waiting for his reply. We haven’t officially told Gramps about us. He probably suspects, given the amount of time Ryan and I are together, but he could also be totally oblivious, and at a dinner party in a room full of Banana Ball players is probably not the best time to announce our relationship to him.

“About being friends with a Funky Monkey,” Ryan finishes, and I smile.

“Ahh, well, good company is good company, no matter what they call themselves.”

Duckie goes in for a second helping, having almost inhaled his first serving in about two seconds.

“Alan still got his bat around that fastball last week,” Duckie says. “Were you a two-B like Alan when you played, Mr. B?”

He shakes his head. “I played center field for a little while and got a few good hits in, but never anything that fast. I’m not sure I’d even see that ball coming.”

“I can’t see it either. Half the time, I swear I’m guessing when to swing and hoping to feel the sting of the bat when it connects.”

“You haven’t seen Alan play, Mr. B?” Niki asks, and the whole table falls silent.

“I don’t really go out.”

“Oh, but you should for this. I mean, what they are doing is amazing. Banana Ball is everything you could love about baseball mixed with...”

“A circus,” Gramps finishes, and the guys go back to eating.

“That’s pretty right,” Ryan replies, only he’s happy about the comparison. I’m wondering why I didn’t put a stop to this the second it was suggested. I love Gramps and I love my friends, but the two of them in a room talking about baseball is not my idea of a good time.

“I loved the circus as a kid. Didn’t you?” Ryan goes on to say. “The way the ringmaster gets the crowd excited, ready for the show, the clowns lightening the mood, making people laugh, kids smiling, playing, and having fun. Then the real show begins and everyone is already hyped up and cheering along. A circus is a great way of putting it. All the fun of the circus mixed with all the best parts of baseball.”

Gramps doesn’t reply, just nods and continues to eat his dinner. It’s the closest I think he’s come to acceptance of anything baseball being related to what we play, and you



know what? I'll take it.

Something brushes up against my leg, and my heart jumps into my throat as I shove back in my chair, all eyes on me as it clamors to the floor behind me.

Precious meows from beneath the table.

"Seriously, dude, what is it with you and this cat?" Stevie asks, and Harry holds up his hands.

"Not getting into it. I moved out. I'm good now."

Gramps calls Precious over and lifts her to his lap while everyone laughs, and Ryan dishes another helping onto Gramps's plate.

"Alan thinks she hates him, but..." Ryan starts to explain.

"No buts. You've seen the gashes on my leg, the way that thing hisses at me the second I'm in the room," I interject.

"And the way she just rubbed up against you to say hi," Ryan adds, a smirk on his lips. "That was so scary."

"It was. I had no idea what was under the table."

"Because in a house with no other pets, it could have been anything?" Kelly adds.

"You would have freaked out, too," I say, righting the chair and sitting back down, my heart still beating a million miles a minute.

"Would not," she argues, but we both know she's lying. When it comes to Gramps

and his demon cat, we're both always a little on edge. But tonight has been good. Great even, and as I look over at Ryan and Gramps deep in another conversation about the he grew up on, I can't help but wonder, how did anyone ever let this guy go?

### Chapter twenty-one

Ryan

“Tonight went better than I thought it would,” Alan says as he hands me another plate to dry. We’re standing in his sister’s kitchen washing up while she sits on the couch chatting with their Gramps.

“How did you think it would go?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Gramps would say something bad about baseball and piss off one of the guys.”

“Your Gramps loves baseball, though.”

“Yeah, but not our kind of baseball. You heard him. He called it a circus.”

He’s not wrong. But what I’m struggling to see is why that is a problem.

“It is, though. You see that, don’t you?”

“No. We’re baseball players, not clowns.”

The harshness in his tone is nothing I’ve heard from him before, and I’m starting to think it isn’t just Don who has a problem with the kind of baseball we play. Does Alan think of us, of himself as less than an MLB player?

I put the plate down and rest my hand on his forearm. “We are baseball players,” I say, trying to keep my voice low so that I don’t draw attention from Kelly and Gramps. “But we are clowns, too, and singers and dancers.”

“But why can’t he just see me as a baseball player?”

“Because you are so much more than that.”

He sighs and drops the plate he’s half washed into the soapy water in the sink and turns to face me.

“I just wish he’d come watch me. Come see how good I am.”

“Then ask him.”

“I did, and he said no. I asked him a hundred different ways and every time he’d make a comment about it not being baseball and why would he leave his house to go to some show when he could watch the real baseball on television.”

I glance over at Kelly and Gramps. How did he say no when Alan told him how much he wanted him to come watch him? How could anyone say no to those gorgeous, pleading eyes?

“And you told him you wanted him to watch you?”

He lowered his head a little to the side. “I asked him if he wanted to come to a game,” he says, leaning in close to whisper so they don’t hear. “I asked him to come. I might not have said I want you to come watch me play, but I asked him and eventually, I just got sick of asking.”

“Hey, Gramps,” I call, and Alan immediately turns back to washing the plate he

dropped earlier.

“The next game is against Animal Control and the OG’s. Did you want to come with me to cheer on Alan? The OG’s think no one can beat them, but Alan hit off their best pitcher last time they were up against them. Want to come watch him do it again?”

“I’m not sure I can leave Precious,” he says, and the cat picks up her head a little at the sound of her name. Alan stiffens beside me.

“She’d be fine for a short while. The game only goes for two hours.”

“I...”

“It’s fine, Gramps. You don’t have to come,” Alan says, never taking his eyes off the plate in his hands.

“I can watch Precious,” Kelly offers.

“You aren’t going?” Gramps asks, and Kelly shakes her head. “I was going to. I go every time he plays here, but if you want to go watch him, I can sit with Precious so you can go.”

“You would have to watch her at my place. This whole evening out has been so tiring for her. Look at how tired you are, my Precious,” he says, lifting the cat. She looks just as dead as she did the first time he presented her to me across the alleyway, and I try not to laugh.

“So you’ll come then?” I ask, and Don’s attention moves to Alan, but Alan isn’t going to turn around. He’s standing so still waiting for Don’s reply, I think he might have even stopped breathing.

“If Alan would like me to go, I will go,” Gramps finally says, and I grab Alan’s arm.

“He’d love you to. Wouldn’t you, Alan?” I ask.

“Ummm, yeah. That would be great. Umm, I’d love you to come,” Alan says, and Gramps nods, then lowers Precious to the ground.

“Well, young Mr. Tanner, best we be off, don’t you think?”

“Ahhh, they drove us,” I reply, and Kelly laughs.

“I’ll get my keys.”

“I’ll take them,” Alan says, pulling the plug in the sink and reaching for the cloth to dry his hands. His face is flushed like he’s just run a marathon.

“I’ll gather her things and meet you downstairs then,” Gramps offers and heads to the back.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Alan says when we reach the car.

“Did what?”

“Got Gramps to agree to come watch me. I mean, he will probably cancel, but he actually agreed.”

“To be honest, I think he thought you didn’t want him there.”

Alan’s mouth opens in awe, and he scrunches up his forehead.

“I told you I asked him a billion times.”

“You said a hundred, but judging by how easy that was, now I’m starting to wonder if you asked him at all.”

“Seriously, he hates Banana Ball.”

“He might. But he loves you.”

That softens his fire, and he leans back against the car. I step forward, closing the distance between us, and wrap my arms around his waist.

“Look, maybe he still doesn’t think what we do is baseball. Duckie didn’t, and he’s just as in love with the game as we are now. So does it matter?”

“But it is baseball.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, so why does it matter that he knows it?”

“I guess I just want him to be...”

“Proud of you?”

His eyes get a little glassy, and right there it hits me how much he wants his grandfather’s approval. How much he wants to be seen by him, not just as he is but for what he does. He said Don is the reason he loves baseball in the first place, so I guess thinking he didn’t approve of how he’s playing hit harder than I realized.

“He pretty much raised us, so yeah. I want him to be proud of me. Of what I do.”

“I’m sure he is. And hey, you said yourself, he doesn’t understand because he hasn’t been to a game. Now we are getting him to come to one, we can show him just how amazing you are.”

“How amazing we are.”

“True, he will get to witness my amazing dance skills in this next sketch we’re opening with. How did that turn go again?” I ask, and Alan reaches behind him, takes my hands, and spins me twice before pulling me close and dipping me back. His face is so close, his smile so big, I lean up and kiss him.

“We can come back in a few minutes if you like,” Gramps says, and Alan breaks our kiss and lifts me to stand. Gramps is standing in the doorway of their building with Kelly, holding the bowling bag. I guess Don knows about us now.

“No, we’re ready to go,” Alan replies, rushing around to the driver’s side of the car to climb in. The lights out here are not that bright, but I still caught the red flush to his cheeks and smile on his lips before he turned away.

“You can take the front seat,” I offer, but Gramps shakes his head.

“The back is fine for me. Be able to put Precious on the seat beside me that way.”

“No problem,” I reply and open the back door for him to climb inside. Once he is settled, I close the door and Kelly wraps her arms around me.

“I don’t know how you two got together,” she whispers into my ear. “But I’m glad he found you.”

My smile is instant and wide.

“Thank you,” I reply, letting the warmth of her hug spread through me until I’m warm all over and Alan is winding down his window.

“You coming?”



“Yep, sorry,” I reply and start to pull away from Kelly. “Cheers for hosting,” I say, and she lets me go and shakes her head.

“Please. I provided the place, you did all the work. I do have the recipe now though, so at least Gramps won’t go hungry for a while.”

“Oh, the other meals.”

“I’ll pack them up and take them over to his place tomorrow. It was still a bit too hot to dish out,” she replies, and I nod.

“No worries. Umm, next time we’ll make Lancashire hot pot.”

“If it’s half as good as that shepherd’s pie, we’ll have all the guys begging to try it, too.”

“I don’t mind. I like cooking and I get to share my granny’s recipes. She’d get a kick out of that. I’ll have to tell her how much you all liked it next time I call home.”

“Thanks again,” Kelly says, and I climb in the front with Alan, and he drives us back to our apartment buildings. Gramps climbs out before we can get the door for him.

“I’m fine on my own,” he assures us and leaves to carry Precious inside before we can even get out of the car.

“Did you want to come up?” I ask, and Alan’s eyes glance to the alleyway between the buildings. The window of Don’s living room looks right across into my bedroom, and while I’ve been meaning to order some kind of blind that will let light and air in while blocking Don’s view into my room, I haven’t done it yet. But now I wish I had picked something up. Anything. “We probably can’t... you know, but I’d still like you to stay. I mean, if you want to.”

He smiles in the way that he does that lights up his eyes and it's like the whole night sky is illuminated in them.

"I'd like that," he says, closing the door of the car and clicking the lock before taking my hand in his. "Lead the way."

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I wake in his arms and it's the best feeling in the world. I'm warm, and snuggled right up against him, wedged in like he's the missing piece of the Ryan-shaped puzzle.

We stayed up for hours talking. Mostly about Don and how Alan is now super freaking out that if he does come, he is going to hate it more than he thinks he hated it before. I don't think Don hates Banana Ball at all. I think he doesn't understand it, and I am all for helping to change that. What I did see, and what I kept telling Alan last night when he would dip into the spiral of what he remembered from the past, is that the only thing that matters now is the future. All we have to do is get him there and he'll see just how amazing he is. How could he not?

"Good morning." Alan yawns, stretching his arms above his head and jostling me out of my perfect position. But his hand comes down and rests against the small of my back, so I decide immediately to forgive him.

"Morning."

"How long until we have to be up?"

I glance over at the clock.

"I have to get up now If I am going to get a swim in before the lanes open up to the public."

“I guess I could go...swimming.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I mean, I said I would let you teach me, and I haven’t gotten back into the pool for a while.”

I remember back to the last time. He was still terrified, that I could tell, but he stayed in the water watching me swim laps instead of getting out the second I moved away from him.

“I wasn’t going to say anything, but I was worried I scared you off the water even more.”

“It’s not you, it’s just...well, you know. But I should keep trying. It wasn’t all bad the last time, if I remember correctly.”

“It was so long ago I’m surprised you remember at all.”

He shoves me with his hip, and I wrap my arms around him tight so that I don’t go rolling off the side of the bed.

“I’d love you to come. You can watch, you can swim, too, sit on the edge, whatever you like, no pressure.”

“Oh, there is pressure alright,” he replies, and I push up onto my hand to look down at him, resting back against the pillow.

“Why?”

“My brothers are putting in a pool at the ranch. From what Nial sent me, it will look

more like a pond than a pool, so it blends in with the place, but without you know, frogs and shit.”

“And you want to go swimming at the ranch?”

“I want to go swimming with you at the ranch. Naked.”

I let out a laugh.

“You want to skinny dip at your family ranch?”

“You don’t want to?”

“Oh, I want to. I want to be in any place where you are going to be naked for sure. I just don’t know how easy that will be with all the guys and your family, including your gramps, staying at the same place.”

“We’ll find a way.”

“Okay, well, I guess we better get to work.”

“Can we cuddle in bed for a few more minutes first?” he whines, wrapping his arms around me and trying to pull me on top of him.

“Your gramps will be up soon,” I reply, and he lets go and rolls out of bed, crawling over to peek out the window that looks out onto the alley.

“Okay, I’m up, let’s go.” He laughs and then drops to his hands and crawls under the window frame to the bedroom door. He reaches up and pushes it open. Down the hallway, Duckie laughs.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Alan looks back over his shoulder at me, sitting on the bed shirtless and covered by the sheet from the waist down.

“Never mind, I don’t want to know,” Duckie goes on to say and walks away, shaking his head.

“On a scale of one to ten, how weird do you think this looked?” Alan asks, still looking my way.

“To Duckie, eight, but from where I’m sitting, that isn’t the word I would use to describe how great your ass looks from this angle.”

He wriggles it a little and starts to crawl forward.

“Got any place in here without a window?”

“The bathroom has one, but it’s frosted, can’t see a thing.”

He clears the doorway and stands leaning against the hallway. He strips off his shirt.

“So, are you coming?”

“Oh, we both will be any minute,” I reply and jump from the bed and chase him into the bathroom.

### Chapter twenty-two

Alan

The pool water isn't cold, but it isn't warm either, and as I take each step down the stairs, my grip on the rail tightens. How does something that happened so long ago hold so much power over me even now? There is no slide here. I can touch the fucking bottom of the pool, but my heart is racing a million miles and my brain is screaming at me to get out.

Ryan dives in from the other side, and I suck in a sharp breath, watching as he glides under the surface towards me. He's completely at home in the water. His head pops up and his face is alight with joy.

"You're doing great," he says, wading over to the stairs as I take the next step down. I'm only as deep as my waist, and as the water shifts side to side, it tickles the soft skin of my stomach.

"I'm not."

"You are tough. Facing fears is hard. It's okay if it takes a while to get there."

He stands, and the water glistens, rolling down his chiseled chest.

"I think you need to come closer," I say, and he walks towards me and holds out his hands.

“Whatever you need.”

I reach out with my free hand, and when his fingers tighten around mine, it does actually help, and I let go of the rail and take his other hand.

“See, you’re doing great,” he says, and I force my feet to move in closer to him.

“I didn’t tell you what happened for me to get like...well, this. Did I?”

He shakes his head.

“It was forever ago. I was ten, I think, and me and my brothers were at a party for one of their friends. I was supposed to be staying with Mom and Kelly in the small pool, but I followed my brothers everywhere back then.”

Ryan guides my hands out at the sides and back in as I speak, swishing the water around us in a soft rhythm.

“I used to follow one of my cousins around like that.”

“Well, that day I should have listened to my mom. The pool we were at was a big one, It had diving towers and slides, and I thought it was a good idea to follow them up the stairs of the giant slide. Because it’s a slide, and I’d been on slides before. No big deal, right?”

He smiles at me softly and keeps moving our arms through the water, my feet following him as we step side to side.

“I wasn’t a bad swimmer either. I mean, I could swim. I wasn’t like a proper swimmer, but I could get to the edge of a pool with no problem, and it never occurred to me that when the slide shoots you out at super speed, it plunges you down, deep

into the water. It was so cold, my chest went tight the second I hit the water, and when the surface grew further and further away from me, I kicked and tried to make myself rise, but I just kept sinking deeper. The chlorine filled my nose and burned and then just when everything started to go dark, Nial was there. He jumped in and grabbed me and pulled me up out of the water.”

“Wow, thank god he saw you.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t like it is now, with lifeguards at every edge of the pool. If he hadn’t pulled me up, it would have ended very differently for our family that day.”

“Well, no wonder you don’t like pools. Fuck, I’ve never had anything that scary happen to me. I have no idea how to help you,” he says, his grip on my hands tightening just a little.

“This helps.”

“What?”

“Having you here with me. Seeing you swim, seeing how happy it makes you. I guess it kind of makes me want to see the water as something more than the thing that almost killed me.”

He pulls me in close, and I let go of his hands so that he can wrap them around me. My fingers link behind his back, and when his chest presses against mine, my cock responds.

“Okay, now all I can think about is how much I wish we were both naked right now.” I laugh, and he smiles that cheeky grin.

“If I didn’t care about my membership here, I’d say let’s do it. But at least your mind



is on something else, right?”

“Right.”

“Do you want to try to go deeper?”

“No. I mean, yes. I don’t want to, but I think I can.”

“We’ll take it slow,” he says, leaning up and kissing me. His lips are cool and have a slight chlorine taste. I’d rather have the memories of his mouth on mine brought to the surface whenever I smell chlorine than that day, so I deepen the kiss and breathe in deeply, trying to replace the bad with the absolutely freaking amazing.

He moves us deeper, my eyes closed, my mouth busy tasting him, and when we finally break our kiss, I find the water is up to my neck.

I take a deep breath. My heart rate starts to pick up a little, but I can’t let this fear beat me. I sweep my hands down his arms to his hands and hold on tight.

“Don’t let me go,” I say, and he nods.

“I won’t.”

Then I do something I haven’t done since I was a ten-year-old boy at a pool with his brothers. I let my knees bend and let myself slip under the surface of the water. My eyes and mouth are squeezed shut tight, and I count in my head. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. I have to get to ten. I know I can get to ten. Ryan doesn’t move a muscle, and when I finally reach ten seconds, push up out of the water, and see his smiling face waiting for me, I kiss him again.

“I can’t believe I did that,” I say, breaking our kiss. My heart is pounding so fast as

the adrenaline sweeps through my body. I went under the water and I'm okay. I'm better than okay. I feel amazing. Like I can do anything. "I've never had any issues having my face under the water of the shower, but the idea of being under the water in the pool was never something I thought I would even want to try. But it wasn't as scary as I thought."

"Did you want to do it again, together?"

"Yes. Oh, I'll try to open my eyes this time."

"Just be careful. The chlorine might sting your eyes if they are open too long. How about we go for five seconds with our eyes open?"

"Okay, ready?"

"Whenever you are."

I count down, and then we both go under the water. My eyes close on instinct, but I force them open, and when I see his brilliant bright blue eyes smiling back at me, I am so glad I did. I forget about counting and let go of his hands to take hold of his face and kiss him under the water.

Big mistake. Everything I've seen in movies is a lie. Kissing underwater is fucking hard. The second I open my mouth, the water gushes inside, and my nose wants to breathe, so I snort back a little before breaking away and pushing up out of the water, coughing and sputtering.

"Are you okay? Oh my god, I'm sorry, are you alright?" Ryan asks, patting my back as I spit and sputter, and he leads me towards the edge.

I want to tell him I'm okay. It just got up my nose, but the sting of the water burns,

and all my focus is on clearing it.

Finally, I suck in a few deep breaths and relax against the edge.

“I’m okay. That was stupid.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? I’m the idiot that tried to kiss you underwater.”

“Yeah, but I know how hard it is to do that, and I should have stopped you.”

“You’ve kissed many guys underwater?”

His cheeks blush, and he bites his top lip. “No.”

“Why do I think that’s a lie?”

“It wasn’t a guy that I kissed. It was before I came out. We’d been dating for a year and she was on the girls’ swim team at school, so we were always in the water. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I didn’t freak out completely and jump out of the pool.”

He runs his hands over my shoulders and down my back.

“You said you could swim before. Do you remember how?”

I shrug. “Is it like riding a bike?”

“Maybe. I guess it depends on how much you knew to begin with. Do you want to

start with floating?”

“So, I don’t have my feet on the ground at all?” Just the idea of it sends my stomach into knots.

“Yeah, but I’ll be right here.”

“Holding onto me so that I don’t go under. Because while I’m fine, and I am fine. I don’t think I want to go under again just yet.”

“I’ll make sure you stay floating. You can trust me.”

His words wash over me like a calming haze, and I let him lead me away from the edge into slightly shallower water that comes up to our chests.

“Now, I want you to let the water lift your legs. It wants to. Your body wants to float. It’s our brains that keep our feet on the ground. I’m going to put my hand behind your back and you’re going to lie back onto it. All you have to do is trust me.”

If I wasn’t already soaked through, I’d be covered in sweat. I hold one of his hands tight as the other slides down to rest on the small of my back.

“Okay, lean back,” he says, but my feet don’t move.

“I can’t.”

“You can, you just have to let go. Let the water bring them up. Relax into it.”

I asked for this. I wanted to face this fear. To overcome it. Come on. You can do this. He has you. He won’t let you go under. You just went under yourself and were fine. This is floating. Babies can float. Come on. I take a big breath and fill my lungs, then

when it releases, I let my feet go out from under me with it. Ryan's hand is pressed firmly against me, and my fingers dig into him as I lean further back.

"You got this," he says, and I feel like I might, then my toes break the surface of the water and my ass begins to fall, and I can feel his hand trying to lift me higher, and instead of laying back like I know I probably should, I try to sit and I start to sink.

But just like he promised, I don't go under. He wraps his arm around me and pulls me to him. My legs wrap around his waist and close behind his back.

"Oh, I like this better than floating, let's practice this," I say, all traces of my fear gone, replaced by a hungry desire growing stronger as my groin slides down over his mound and semi-hard cock. "I think you like this better, too."

"You're so bad," he says, moving his hands to my ass and lifting me higher. "We can't do that here either."

"Aww, but I was just starting to relax."

"I thought you were doing great before."

"I sucked at floating."

"Backwards floating yes, a little, but you will get there. How about we try floating forwards?"

"How about we keep doing seated floating? I like this."

"I thought you wanted to be confident enough to skinny dip at your ranch?"

"I can skinny dip like this. I think this is the perfect way to do it, don't you?"

“As much as I would love to have your wet naked body wrapped around me in a pool, I’d also love to swim with you.”

“Okay, fine, let’s do forward floating then,” I say, and I let my feet slip from around his waist to stand in the pool again. He holds my hand the whole way to the edge. Actually, since stepping fully into the water, he’s always had a hold of me in some way.

“Okay, take the edge of the pool,” he says, and I reach out with one hand but keep the other holding his.

“This will be easier if you hold the edge with both hands. I know, here, how about this,” he says, and he moves to stand against the edge in front of me and rests his free hand on my side, sending a shiver through me. “Take the edge, I’ll keep a hold of you, too, and then when you are ready, let your legs lift behind you and if you can get them both up to float, I’ll let you kiss me.”

“Ohhh, I like incentives. Okay. I can do this,” I say, and I release his hand to take the edge on his other side. If I leaned forward and kissed him, I don’t think he would stop me, but I said I would try, so I step back, his hands softly resting at my sides, and then I let my feet lift from the slick floor of the pool. They don’t float as fast as they wanted to when I leaned back, but they want to rise. I try to lift them higher myself, and as I swish them upward, my body moves back and my face nears the water. Ryan ducks down, too, the water sitting just below his shoulders, and with a final little kick, my legs are up and I’m floating in front of him.

“I knew you could do it,” he says, and he closes the short distance between our faces and kisses me. I don’t know how long I am floating, only that by the time the alarm sounds on his phone over on the chairs, and he breaks our kiss, my face tingles from his three-day-old shave and I love it.

“Does this place have private showers?” I ask, and he smiles.

“It does.”

“Good, it’s time we got out and I thanked you properly. We have a game tomorrow, and I want to make sure we win.”

### Chapter twenty-three

Ryan

I get off the phone with Granny, after promising her for the tenth time I will be coming home for her birthday, and head over to pick up Don early. Alan and I have our pregame show to do, and all the teams are out with the crowd entertaining them before the game, really building up the hype and it's what I want him to see, too. I want him to see how amazing it all is, the sport his grandson loves. But when I get to the door, he doesn't open it.

"Don, are you there?" I call through the door, but he doesn't reply. He's probably just in the shower again, I think, so lean against the hall and wait a few minutes before knocking and trying again.

"Don," I call and then try the handle. It's not locked, so I push open the door carefully to keep my eyes on the floor to stop Precious should she try to make a run for it.

"Mr. Beaker, it's time to go. The game will be starting soon," I call and close the door behind me. It's oddly quiet, and an uneasy feeling settles in my gut.

"Don, are you in the bathroom?" I call, making my way down the hall towards his room. I don't like the sinking pit that's growing inside me. Where is Precious? Even if she was asleep when I came in, there is no way her super hearing wouldn't have picked up my movement and come out to investigate. What the fuck is going on? I walk past the bathroom. The door is open, and no one is inside. Don's bedroom door



is closed, though, and my stomach flips as I turn the handle. Please no, please God no, I whisper, but when I push it open, he isn't there. Is the fucker even home?

I check around the room and back through the house. What the fuck? Where are they? I was picking him up, wasn't I? Kelly was watching the cat, and I was picking up Gramps.

I spot a cup of tea and his binoculars on the windowsill across from my apartment, steam still wafting from the rim. He was here not that long ago . I do another scan of the space. Did Precious get out, shit did she fall from the edge? I rush to the windowsill. I don't know what I'm expecting to see. It's not like if the cat did fall it would still be there on the ground. My elbow knocks the binoculars and I scramble to grab them before they fall, and my eyes land on the bookcase shoved up against the side wall of his living room. It's covered in photo frames and books and the odd baseball, but it looks like there is a door hidden behind it, too. Probably another closet he doesn't need. Old places like this loved adding in closet space.

I'm setting the binoculars back on the windowsill when I look up the alleyway down towards the main street, and I spot the bright lights of the stadium.

"It can't be," I think, bringing the binoculars up to my eyes. The view from this window is perfect. From here, Gramps's window looks right through to the diamond, and with the binoculars, I can already see the ground crew setting up for the theatrics tonight. Has he been watching all this time?

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I grab it out, answering immediately when I see Alan's name.

"Hey, he's okay, he's at the hospital though," Alan says, and my heart is in my throat.

"What happened?"

“Kelly came to watch Precious, and he passed out.”

“Holy shit, but he’s okay?”

“Yeah, he’s okay.”

“Precious isn’t here. I think she might have gotten out.”

“No, she’s okay, too. Kelly has her. He came to when the paramedics got there and refused to leave if Kelly didn’t bag her up and bring her.”

“That would have been interesting.”

“Yeah, she got two stitches getting her into the bowling bag.”

“Fuck. Okay, I’m coming, I’ll be there in five.”

“You don’t have to come. He’s fine. Really.”

“I know. See you soon.”

I hang up before he can argue, close the window, and do a quick sweep of the room. He’ll probably want his own things. Staying in hospital gowns is horrible. But would he want me going through his things? Fuck. Okay, if I do and he flips out, I’ll just bake him a big batch of cobbler. That should win him over.

I collect his slippers, socks, and dressing gown and find a folded pair of pajamas on his bed that he has to have put there after changing this morning. I throw them in a bag, a pair of pants, a shirt, his regular shoes, socks, and the hat he has sitting on his dresser. It looks like a going out-of-the-house hat, not that he goes out of the house often, or at all apparently. He must hate being at the hospital. I grab his toothbrush

and comb, and some of Precious's treats before locking his door behind me and heading over to the hospital.

Turns out they like keeping people's room numbers private in this place and the woman behind the reception desk shakes her head for the third time.

"I'm sorry, if you aren't family, I can't."

"I'm his grandson's...partner," I say, and her eyebrows rise a little.

"Oh, sorry, yes, okay, well, umm, Mr Beaker is in M, two one five." She suddenly looks confused.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes. It's just that's our pet therapy ward."

"That sounds right," I reply, and she shrugs and points towards the hallway to my right.

"Take the elevator to the second floor, then follow the signs to section M, bed fifteen."

"Thank you," I reply, heading for the elevator. I pass the nurses' station at the doors to section M, strolling past like I own the place, and when I turn the corner, following the signs for bed fifteen, I see him. Alan resting against the corridor wall, his head down, shoulders slumped like the whole world has fallen on him.

"I'm here," I say, dropping the bag beside his feet and wrapping him in my arms.  
"Did he...did something?"

“No,” he gets out before his arms pull me in tighter and his head buries into the crook of my neck.

I stay in the hallway, holding him, just standing there, breathing with him, letting him hold on for as long as he needs, and then the door to the room beside him opens, and Kelly steps out.

“Oh Ryan, thank god you’re here,” she says, wrapping her arms around us both. “He’s been asking for you.”

“He has?” I ask, and Alan lets me go, though the way his face is so drawn, so tired and so sad, all I want to do is pull him close again and hold him until all of his joy and color returns.

“He was worried about you,” she goes on to say.

“About me, why?”

“He knew you were coming to get him and he thought you might hurt yourself trying to check on him again.”

“Oh, well, I mean, I would have, but the door was unlocked this time,” I say, and Kelly covers her mouth with her hand.

“Oh god, don’t tell him that, please.”

“No worries, I’ll say I got the super to unlock it.”

“Oh good, that will work.”

“Where is Precious?” I ask, and she nods towards the room.

“I can’t believe they let him bring her in here.”

“In the bowling bag in the room. I brought her in my car while the paramedics drove him here, but when he found out I left her in the car to come inside to check on him, he had a meltdown. He’s got top-level insurance and always has, so they suggested moving him to the pet therapy ward to get him to calm down, but he had to promise she would stay in the bag. He’s fine. Did Alan tell you he stopped taking his heart meds?”

“What? No. Seriously, why would he do that?” I ask, and Alan shakes his head, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. He looks so tired. We should have gotten more sleep last night.

“He was feeling better ,” Alan says, using air quotes when he says it. “Who needs meds when you have good old-fashioned home cooking.”

“He seriously did not say that.”

“Fraid so,” Alan says, and I feel the heat rising to my face.

“Right, well best I be filling the old codger in on how many home-cooked meals he’s going to get if he ever pulls this shit again,” I say, and Alan laughs, and it’s the first time since I walked in this place that he looks like himself.

“Oh, I’ve gotta see this,” Kelly says and holds open the door for us both to go in first.

The fire in me settles a little when I see Don in the hospital bed. He’s got wires sticking out the top of his gown attached to a monitor at the side and he looks old, like really old. Older than he ever really looked, anyway.

“Ahh, young Mr Tanner,” he starts, but I interject before I lose my cool to say

anything. I respect my elders, and I love my granny to bits, but what Don did was just plain stupid and careless and I can't stand what it's done to Alan, and he has to know that.

“Nope. You just listen. Now, Mr Beaker, I just heard that you decided that home cooking was better for you than the medication they prescribed to keep your heart working properly.”

He goes to open his mouth, but the blush to his cheeks begins to darken, and he closes it and purses his lips a little without replying.

“Now you listen here. I will not be cooking even a scrap of anything for you if you ever pull this shit again. And yes, I said shit, because what you've gone and done here is so far beyond politeness. Look at these two. What you did to them. Now sure, you're old and one day we are going to have to say goodbye one last time, but no way in hell or high water will it be because you decided to do something stupid.”

“I felt better,” he says, and I shake my head.

“Ever think that was because you were on the meds and getting good food?”

He frowns, like that thought never occurred to him.

“Well, now I can see that I may have been wrong.”

Kelly steps up beside the bed.

“Wait, what did you say?”

“You heard me,” he replies.

“Nope, don’t think I did,” she repeats, and he shakes his head and takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly like he’s trying to prolong the inevitable.

“I was wrong.”

“Yep, got it,” she cheers, tapping her phone.

“What are you doin’ there?” he asks.

“I recorded it. Needed proof. No way are Nial and Dean ever going to believe you said that.”

“Cheeky girl.”

“Love you, too, Gramps,” she says, then Gramps spots the bag in my hands.

“What have you got there?”

“I grabbed a few of your things. I wasn’t sure how long you would be staying.”

“Oh no, I’m not staying. I have a game to get to.”

“Gramps, it’s okay. You can come another time. You really should—”

“The doctor said an hour for observation. I was only off the meds for a week. They say the meds will start doin’ their thing again in an hour or so. I’ll be good to go. I just need to get Precious her treats so she has something to eat.”

“Oh, I grabbed those, too,” I say, handing Kelly the bag.

“Nice, then I guess you will be all set,” she replies. “I can drop him to the game when

he's cleared. You two better get going or you'll miss your opening number."

"I don't know," Alan says, and I reach over and take his hand.

"If you want to stay, you can, we can. They can just skip our number. The OG's have their thing planned, anyway. The crowd won't mind."

"Like hell," Gramps interjects. "You said you wanted to whoop these fellas, and that starts as soon as the gates open. Off you go. I'll be there before the first pitch is thrown. Kelly, go find that young doctor of mine. It's time we got me out of this joint."

"If you're sure," Alan says, reaching over with his free hand and laying it over his grandfathers'. It's the first time I've seen them have any contact, and Don's eyes move to where their hands touch, then he lays his free hand over the top sandwiching Alan's hand between his.

"I'm positive. Go. I'll see you soon."

We leave the room, and Kelly walks with us to the nurses' station.

"Fucking hell, that was scary," she says when we are far enough away from earshot of Don.

"Are you okay?" I ask, and she nods and smiles, her gaze moving between Alan and me.

"He's a good man," she says to Alan, and he nods and looks at me.

"I know. He's the best."



“I’ll let you know if they want to keep him longer, but the doc did say he could go soon, so I’ll get him checked out and I’ll text you when we’re there, I might even come in and watch, I still have my ticket, okay?”

“They won’t let the cat in,” Alan warns, and Kelly laughs.

“I got it into the bowling bag once, I can do it again. Fingers crossed they don’t ask to look in the bag or they might be the ones headed to the hospital,” she says, holding up her hand and the fresh two stitches, and we leave her to it.

I drive the short distance to the stadium and park the car.

“He’s been watching all along,” I say, and Alan turns in the chair towards me.

“What?”

“Your gramps. His window has a perfect view of the stadium and with those binoculars, he can see the diamond.”

“He watches people from the window like a creepy busybody,” Alan objects, but I shake my head.

“I saw it today. When I was at his place. From his chair by the window, he can watch it all. And you heard him just now. He wants to come. He wants to watch you.”

“But why now?”

“Maybe he regretted saying no and was waiting for you to ask again so he could say yes.”

“You think?”

“He’s always at that window when I get home on game nights.”

“He is?”

“He is.”

Alan’s smile grows wider and the weight bearing down on him lifts just a little.

“Thank you for coming,” he says, reaching over and placing his hand on my thigh. I will never get sick of the way my body reacts to even the slightest of his touches. Heat floods to the spot, vibrations reverberating from under his hand through my body, right to my groin. And then he leans in and kisses me, and I want to sink into him, but the flash of a camera pulls us apart.

“What was that?” he asks, and I look out the front windscreen of the car where a guy holding up his phone clicks again.

“Shit,” Alan says, holding his hand up to the side of his face to try to shield himself from view. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. I’m so sorry.”

I reach over and take his hand, pulling it down, then I lean in close.

“I’m not sorry,” I say, and then I kiss him again.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:58 am*

### Chapter twenty-four

Alan

Turns out nobody was surprised to learn that what Ryan and I were projecting on the field in our performances was real. The photo the guy in the parking lot took got him a few hits online but fizzled out quickly when it was replaced by an onfield kiss I planted on Ryan at the end of the game after our win.

KELLY: Did you see him cheering?

Kelly texts me as I wait for Ryan out in the corridor after the game. He sat with Kelly and Gramps for the game against the OG's but at the end, he was still expected to participate in the meet and greets and games and fun with the rest of the Funky Monkeys.

ALAN: Ryan?

KELLY: No! Gramps, you idiot.

No way she means it. Sure, he was determined at the hospital to come, but that could have just been him wanting to get out of there, or the whole close-call brush with death thing. No way was my grandfather cheering at a Banana Ball game.

ALAN: Are you sure you didn't hit your head earlier? You can't be serious.

KELLY: OMG I am completely serious. He nearly knocked Precious out of the bag

when you hit that last ball deep into left field he was up on his feet so fast. Never knew the old guy could move that quickly.

I stare at the message. Could he really have enjoyed himself that much?

ALAN: TBH I still can't believe we got him here. Does he still think it isn't real baseball?

KELLY: Do you want me to actually ask him that?

I think about it for a moment. Do I need him to see this as real baseball? It's Banana Ball. That is the game I play. It isn't the same as regular baseball and that is part of what I love about it. Why am I angry at him for not seeing it for something that it isn't? Fuck. Ryan was right. It's me who has the issue. I'm the one trying to force him to see it for something that it isn't like there is something wrong with it, something less.

ALAN: No. Actually, I don't. Was he really cheering?

KELLY: I got a video. I'll show you later.

"What's that smile for?" Ryan asks, coming out to meet me.

"Gramps was cheering apparently," I reply, and his eyes light up.

"Yeah, he was. It was so cute. He nearly dropped Precious. I caught her, though. She stayed on my lap for the rest of the game. Until I joined you on the field, that is."

"He really had fun?"

"Yeah, he did. See, I told you he probably regretted saying no those times and was

just waiting for you to ask, and when you didn't, he probably thought you didn't care if he watched or not. But I swear that window, he was watching."

"I just can't believe it."

He presses his hands against my chest and leans up and kisses me.

"Believe it, babe. He's proud of you. You should be, too."

"Babe?" I ask, and he shrugs and kisses me again.

"I was just trying it on. Not a fan? How about darlin'?"

"I swear anything you call me in that accent of yours is amazing."

"What about...mine."

"Especially that."

"Good, because now that we are officially out, cheers to that kiss you planted on me on the field, I want the world to know that you are mine, and I am yours."

"Me, too."

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"How is your grandfather?" Bart Erricson, the General Manager for Banana Ball, asks, sitting across from me at his large desk shaped like a banana. It's only the second time I've been in his office since joining, the first time was when he offered me the contract. Is this when he takes it away? The rumors of them only taking one team through to next year have been growing all season, and on top of that, the last

time players got involved, it ended badly. He can't be too excited about my and Ryan's relationship going public last week, especially when they all had no idea it was going on.

"Better. Between my sister and I, we make sure he's taking his medication every day. In truth, the threat of never eating Ryan's cooking again was probably going to be enough to ensure he never skips a dose."

"Yes, well, that is why I've asked you here."

Here we go.

"As you know, we have had some...instances in the past that have not worked out favorably."

This is what I was worried about. They want us to stop seeing each other. To avoid a messy breakup. But he doesn't know that we will break up. I can't imagine my life without Ryan in it, so if it's a choice between Ryan and the game, Ryan wins. I can go back to the ranch and work it with my brothers. Ryan can stay in the league, and we can be happy. We are happy.

"That said, there are no conflicts here that the league needs to manage. I did feel like we should chat to allow you to speak freely about any concerns you might have. To let me know of any situations that may have arisen since your relationship has gone public."

"Wait, so you don't want us to stop seeing each other or sign a relationship form or something?"

He frowns and shakes his head. "No, we don't think that will be necessary."

“Oh, okay then, umm, no, I don’t have any concerns. No one has been a dick about it or anything. There are the usual homophobic comments that pop up now and again online, but the tech team is quick to delete them. Our teams are all great guys, so they’ve been good. I mean, Dennis is claiming he’s cupid now, so expect a few promos with one of the guys dressed as a giant baby with a crossbow, but other than that, I think we’re good.”

His lips pick up at the corner at the mention of Dennis, like he’s trying to suppress a smile.

“I guess I should pencil in a chat with him about not trying to set up any of the other players to extend his winning streak, then.”

“Might not be a bad idea,” I laugh, and he relaxes back in his chair a little.

“I wasn’t sure we needed another lead choreographer, but what he’s done with your teams and even for the league has been...impressive.”

“All the guys love him,” I say, and his brows pick up a little.

“Anyone in particular?”

“Not like that,” I go on to say. “He’s the utmost professional when it comes to us guys. He’s never... He wouldn’t...” Shit. I don’t want him to think that Dennis is hitting on the guys. He isn’t.

Bart folds his arms over his chest and smiles at me while I try to collect my thoughts to continue.

“He wouldn’t do anything unprofessional. I guess that’s what I am trying to say.”

“Thank you for clarifying. That’s good to know. While relationships between colleagues can happen, we do want to avoid any...situations where there could be a perceived conflict.”

“No, I get it, like if it was Dennis and you, ‘cause you know, you’re his boss.”

The second the words are out of my mouth, my face is on fire and I want to crawl into a hole. “I didn’t mean—”

“Dennis is under contract. I don’t think that particular situation could be perceived as having any kind of conflict. Regardless, with you and Mr. Tanner, there could have been some perception of taking it easy on one another out there. But I’ve seen that in every game for weeks, you both go out to win and never let your relationship affect your job.”

“Exactly. And I didn’t mean, like if you and Dennis—” Oh my god, just shut up.

“I think we’ve covered everything we need to,” he says, moving a few papers around on his desk. “Again, thank you for coming in. If there is anything you need from us, just reach out.”

I feel like this meeting took me in a whole other direction than I expected. I thought for sure I was coming in to be given the rules of having a relationship with another player, the do’s and don’ts, but somehow, I made it even more awkward by suggesting Bart and Dennis would...could... Well, he didn’t seem disturbed by the suggestion. Now that I think about it, he almost seemed more annoyed that I suggested there could be a conflict if they were to date.

“Thanks, Mr. Erricson,” I say, standing and reaching across the desk to shake his hand. I’m about to turn on my heel and leave, but I stop myself. “Actually, there was one thing I was hoping you could clear up for me,” I say, and he looks up from the



papers Infront of him to meet my eye.

“Yes?”

“Well, we’ve been hearing these rumors all season about the teams, and well...”

He’s shaking his head as his lips pick up on one side in a devilish smirk.

“Rest assured, both teams are staying in the league next year.”

“So, you knew about the rumor?”

“Of course.”

“Then why didn’t you say anything? The guys have all been worried about it almost all year.”

“I honestly didn’t think you all put so much stock in rumors. Especially one so ridiculous as that.”

“How do you mean?”

“We might appear to be all about the fun, but we are a business, too. Do you honestly think we would spend all that money and effort and time building both the Funky Monkeys and Animal Control into the league only to send one right out again?”

“I guess I never thought about it that way.”

“Well, feel free to spread the word, Mr. Beaker.”

“Thanks, Mr. Erricson, I will.”

I walk out and find Ryan sitting in the waiting room, his hands nervously clasped together in front of him.

“Was it bad?” he asks.

“Nope, they don’t care. We’re good. He just wants to make sure no one is being dicks about it.”

“Wow? I thought for sure they would have like a bunch of rules and stuff we have to agree to now that we’re together.”

“Nope, I guess they see what I see.”

“And that is?” he asks, standing and coming to wrap his hands around my waist. Even through the thick fabric of my shirt, the warmth of his touch spreads through to my core.

“That we’re perfect for each other.”

He kisses me softly and quickly.

“Oh, and guess what?” he asks, bouncing on his toes.

“What?”

“The rumor is just a rumor. He’s keeping both sides next year.”

“Oh my God, that’s amazing,” he replies, wrapping his arms around me and squeezing me tight. “I was dreading going back to marketing other people’s dreams.”

“You were never in danger. You’ve got the fastest arm in the league. I was ready for

whatever happened with me,” I reassure him.

“You were?”

“Yep. I figured if they booted me out, I’d go work the ranch with my brothers. That is when I wasn’t at every one of your games, cheering you on against the OG’s.”

“You would still come see me play?”

“I’ll always be there to support you. Shit, I struggle now not cheering when you strike one of us out.”

He smiles and pulls me close, kissing me again, deeper this time, his fingers lacing through the hair at the back of my neck.

The receptionist clears her throat. “Mr. Erricson will see you now, Mr. Tanner,” she says, and Ryan releases me and heads inside.

When I get down to the field, the teams are all out of the grass, holding hands in a giant heart shape. Yep, Dennis is going to milk this Cupid shtick for as long as he can.

“Where’s Ryan?” Dennis asks as I jog onto the field.

“Still with the GM. He’ll be done soon.”

“Not giving you too much grief over your performance last night?”

“No, he was pretty cool about it. I mean, it’s not like we are on the same team. We always play to win, and we aren’t each other’s bosses either, so no conflict.”

“Right, well until he gets here, into the middle with Tim, you go. Dave, you join the rest of the heart.”

Dave jogs over to find a spot with the others.

“What are we doing exactly?”

“It’s your final love song. We’ve played out the star-crossed lovers bit as far as it will go. Last night you threw a Hail Mary with that kiss at the end of the game, so we’ll finish up with Somebody To Love . You know it?”

“Of course.”

“Great, ‘cause you’ll be starting us off. Ryan will begin in the stands. Tim, on you go, you’re our placeholder. Everyone else fan out to starting places.”

I stay where I am as the players around me move out to stand like a choir behind me. Dennis presses play on his speaker and the music starts. It’s not the original, it sounds like the song from that movie a few years ago. I glance behind me and see the guys all moving in time side to side, and they all raise their right arm and bring it forward and down slowly as they sing love.

“Okay, Alan, follow me if you can,” Dennis says, and he starts the choreography. It’s basic, at least compared to what we’ve done in the past. A side step, a twist, and dip and single arm work to keep the mic in my other hand at my mouth for the signing. We get further into the song and the team starts moving around me into the heart shape they were in when I arrived, holding hands and moving in and out like a pulsing heart. It would have to look amazing from up in the stands. Tim is just sitting on one of the chairs up there. This is a one-sided song. I don’t know how Dennis plans to make this a duet.

Then, as the song wraps up and I sing the last line, the team all turn and point towards where Tim was waiting, only Tim isn't there now. Ryan is, and the music shifts into something tropical. When he brings the mic up to his mouth and starts to sing, really sing, the first line I know right away. I'm Yours by Jason Mraz.

I glance around at the guys as they all smile and nod. Harrison raises his brows with the cheekiest grin on his face. Did those fuckers plan this?

"Do I just stand here?" I ask Dennis, and he nods.

"If you know what's good for you, you will."

Ryan's singing voice is amazing. If he wasn't an incredible pitcher, he could be a professional singer, and the way his smile flows through the words as he walks down the stairs towards the field, towards me, has my heart beating a mile a minute.

The guys start clicking in time with music and move out, creating an opening for Ryan to walk through and he stops right at my feet before the last line, singing, "I'm yours", then adding in, "Will you be mine?"

"Always."

Ryan

Stevie stands at the front of the church, waiting for the ceremony to start, Harrison, Gordon, and his brothers beside him. Alan and I are up front next to his parents, and the rest of the team fills half the seats in the room behind us. The music starts and we all stand to watch the bridesmaids enter. When they reach the front, Bella and her children make their way down, the newborn in her arms instead of a bouquet, and the oldest holding onto her hand, toddling down beside her. She has to stop a couple of times for the oldest to find her footing, but it's sweet. It's them. Family is what matters most, and this day is about joining them all together forever.

I squeeze Alan's hand, and he glances my way with a soft smile on his lips.

"You know you're supposed to cry during the ceremony, not before it even starts," he leans over and whispers into my ear, then he brushes the tear I didn't feel on my cheek.

"It's just so beautiful," I reason, and he returns his attention to Bella as she takes her final steps as an unmarried woman. When she reaches the front, Stevie takes the baby, a boy named Frankie, from her and kisses his head before passing it off to his soon-to-be father-in-law. The oldest child, their daughter, Sage, moves to sit on her grandmother's lap.

The ceremony starts and is over almost as quickly. They left the vows somewhat traditional, but without the obey part, and everyone had a little chuckle when the priest added in a promise to support him and cheer him on, even if he were to be traded to the Funky Monkeys.

“Do you want that one day?” I ask Alan, nodding towards where Stevie and Bella are on their way out.

“Kids or a husband?”

“Both.”

“I could see myself with both. What do you say?”

“Is that a proposal?”

“No, but not because I don’t love you. When I propose I want it to be grand, special, like what you helped Stevie do for Bella.”

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want that, too. Not because it’s big, but because it means something to ask someone to marry you, so it should be special.

“But seriously, do you want it one day? Kids and a husband?” Alan goes on to ask.

“More than almost anything else.”

“That’s good.”

“It is?”

“Yeah, it is. Because I can’t imagine my life without you in it and knowing you want the same things as me for your future, just proves all the much more how perfect we are for each other.”

“Careful. Dennis will get on his soapbox about how he orchestrated our entire love story again.”

“Let him claim it.”

“Why, because, you and I both know it was that first day in the shower when you were singing my name that started it all?”

His cheeks go bright red.

“You never said. Oh, my god. I thought you didn’t hear that.”

“How could I not? You were belting it out at the top of your lungs. It was sweet.”

“I don’t think my thoughts were on anything sweet that day.”

“Just my sweet ass.”

“Shh, you can’t say ass in a church.”

“I just did, and so did you.”

“Let’s get out of here before we get ass-ed to leave.”

We follow the rest of the guests, and while the bridal party is off taking photos, we head to the reception at the stadium. When Bella asked Bart Erricson, the GM, about taking some wedding shots on the field after the ceremony, he offered one better and asked her if she wanted to host the whole reception there. They brought in a big marquee, tables and chairs, and a floating floor to not damage the field. The season just ended a few days ago, but we’ll be back at it in a few months.

Walking into the marquee, I glance up and find every second ceiling panel is clear plastic, giving us the perfect view of the sky as the sun starts to set on the day. String lights are hung crisscrossed over the tables and a giant chandelier hovers over the dancefloor in the middle of the space. The back of the marquee is open, and the



diamond is lit up by the field lights, the brilliant green grass and red dirt matching perfectly with the roses they've chosen for the flowers on the tables.

"Wow," I say, and Alan squeezes my hand and brings it up to his lips to kiss the back of it.

"I was about to say the same thing," he says.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yeah, you are. Oh, sorry. Were you looking at the tent?"

"It's a marquee, but yeah, I was."

"Well, excuse me if I'm distracted by my incredibly beautiful boyfriend."

"You're excused, I guess."

With an oomph, Tim wraps his arms over our shoulders from behind and sticks his face between ours.

"Ready to party, boys," he cheers as a few more people start to make their way in to find their seats.

"Sounds like you are," Alan replies, and Tim leans in closer.

"Hey, does that guy look familiar?" he asks, nodding towards where a tall handsome guy in a server uniform is placing water jugs on the tables and side-eyeing us.

"Not really," I reply.

"I swear I've seen him before," Tim says, and I take another look. He doesn't seem

familiar to me, but he keeps looking our way out of the corner of his eye with a growing smile on his lips. It certainly seems like he might know one of us.

“Maybe he’s just a fan?” Alan offers, and Tim releases us.

“Yeah, maybe. Oh well, fellas, I’m headed to the bar. You want a drink?” Tim asks.

“Lead the way,” I reply, and we follow Tim to grab a drink while we wait for the rest of the bride and groom to arrive.

Thankfully, we don’t have to wait long. Two drinks in, we’re ushered to our tables to cheer as the newlyweds dance their way into the reception to an acoustic version of Cheerleader by OMI. The second they step onto the dancefloor though, the music changes to the song that led them to today, Love Story by Taylor Swift, and Stevie holds Bella close for their first official dance and husband and wife.

Alan squeezes my hand as the song comes to a close, and he lifts it and presses his lips against the back of my hand.

Tim cheers beside us. “Come on boys, back to the bar.”

“I was actually thinking of asking my boyfriend here if he’d like to dance,” Alan replies.

“Really?” I ask, and Alan stands.

Tim leaves us to go get the first of what is likely to be many, many drinks. I swear Aussies are built differently. He can finish a dozen beers and still hold a conversation. I have four and I’m tripping all over myself.

“I believe this is our song,” Alan says, and only then do I hear it. An acoustic version of Hold Me Closer by Elton and Britney is playing, and when I glance over to the

dancefloor both Bella and Stevie are smiling our way.

“You asked them to play this for us?”

“I asked them to play this for you.”

“Why?”

“Because I love making you smile.”

I let him lead me onto the dance floor.

Others start to join in, too, and by the time the music shifts into another song, the dancefloor is full of people.

“So, there was something I did need to talk to you about,” Alan says, his tone shifting into his serious voice.

“You can talk to me about anything.”

“Well, Gramps is starting to need more care, so—”

“You’re not putting him in a home, are you?” I stop dancing. “I can help out more. I’m just across the alley. I can pop over in the mornings and the afternoons. I’m there at least once a day now, pretty much, but I can visit more.”

“Shh,” he says, pressing a single finger over my lips. “It’s nothing like that,” he says, and he leads us on the dancefloor more towards the edge of the others.

“What is it then?”

“When we get back from visiting your family for Granny’s ninetieth birthday, I’m

moving in with Gramps.”

“Oh. Okay. You had me worried there. That’s great. You’ll be right across the alleyway.”

“That wasn’t everything. I have something else that I wanted to ask you.”

“It wasn’t? Oh, sorry. Alright, what do you need to ask?”

He pauses and only now do I see the slight blush that has risen to his cheeks. He’s nervous. But what could he have to be nervous about?

“Do you want to move in, too?” he finally blurts.

“With you and Gramps?”

He lets go of my waist and rubs the back of his neck. “Well, when you say it like that, it doesn’t sound all that romantic, but yeah.”

“Wait, isn’t his place like a one-bedroom?”

“Ha, no. His place is actually a duplex.”

“No way.”

“Yeah, but he hasn’t been up there in years. There is a bedroom, bathroom and I think a small office or study or something.”

“How did I not know this?”

“He’s covered the door with a bookcase in his living room.”

“Oh, I saw that door. I figured it was a closet.”

“Nope, it’s the door to my new room, well, our new room, new space, if you want to move in, too. You didn’t exactly answer me before. And I get if you don’t want to, it’s weird. Asking you to live with me and my grandfather.”

“No, it’s not. It’s exactly why I fell in love with you in the first place.”

“It is?”

“You love your family with all your heart and that told me I could trust you with mine.”

“So you’ll move in with us?”

I laugh, because it does sound a little weird when he puts it like that. But I don’t care. I love Gramps like he’s my own grandfather, and I love Alan more than any man I’ve ever loved.

“I will.”

He wraps me in a hug and spins me around.

“He’ll be so happy you said yes. I think he was more excited to ask you to move in than me.”

“It’s just because he likes my cooking better than yours.”

“He loves your cooking. But I love your everything.”

“I love your everything, too.”