



OFF

A VANCOUVER VIKINGS NOVEL

THE POST

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *GAME CHANGER*

SIERRA HILL

OFF THE POST

A VANCOUVER VIKINGS HOCKEY ROMANCE

SIERRA HILL

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To my extraordinary neurodivergent nieces.

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 **HUMAN AUTHORED**

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

As a romance author, I strive to write stories with inclusive characters who do great things and find great loves. This story includes a character who exhibits neurodivergent behaviors and characteristics, as well as debilitating anxiety. While I conducted thorough research on the topic, especially regarding what an individual might experience under these circumstances, this is still a work of fiction, and therefore not indicative of all experiences within those communities.

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A li

I STARE at the open email, my heart thudding loudly in time with the blinking cursor on my monitor. Terror floods through me.

It might as well be a poisonous snake shaking its tail violently at me for the level of fear it invokes.

Self-doubt spears me with worry, which sends me spiraling in denial. I narrow my eyes, unconvinced it isn't some clerical error sent to the wrong person's email. I'm sure the one I should've received is a *sorry, no thank you* letter.

My fingers nervously dust over my eyebrow while I scan through the words once more. From what I can tell, it seems legit. It includes my name and my current address, which is accurate, and the phrases I skim over all seem... *positive*. The panic and disbelief subsides a bit as I read over the email again.

Hello, Alison.

Congratulations. We would like to offer you the role of Communications and Event Manager.

Excited to work with you at Lighting the Lamp for Kids (LTLFK) Foundation.

We look forward to receiving your reply soon.

I read through the email more closely to pick up on the specifics, such as starting salary, benefits, and start date.

I still can't quite believe I've been offered my dream position in a sports charity that raises money for kids in need. It's a foundation that was the brainchild of and run by someone I am very close to, Vancouver Vikings hockey player and star defenseman, Tanner Rossco.

Who also happens to be my *half brother*.

Which makes me highly suspect on the validity of this job offer. It could very well just be a joke. A prank Tanner is playing on me. I wouldn't put it past him.

Because it's an irrefutable fact that my brother has done some stupid and impetuous things in his life.

Tanner, as my mom always says, is ridiculously irreverent. Outside of hockey and his charity, he takes nothing seriously. He coasts through life wearing rose-colored glasses and is outgoing and spontaneous, a guy who has proven time and time again to be highly inappropriate. Like the time he showed up at my sixteenth birthday party and insisted on carrying me through the room in his arms as everyone sang the birthday song to me. Could he be more embarrassing?

But the thing is, he does it because he cares about me.

Which is precisely the reason I think he's out of his goddamn mind to allow his charity to offer me this role of a lifetime. He knows very well what my previous experience is and how it all blew up in the worst way.

I do love him. So very much. He's my big brother, all protective to a fault and ready to bend over backward for me.

He would do anything for me, which makes me nervous about accepting this job offer. Outside of the fact that it's clearly nepotism, the job's located

in Vancouver BC.

Where I do not currently live. I don't even live in Canada.

Before my life imploded, I was confident young event planner and coordinator at a nonprofit here in San Francisco, my first job out of college. I was new and green, and I spent two years working hard to learn the ropes and get my feet wet in the nonprofit sector.

Now I'm jobless and nearly to the point of eviction because it's expensive to live in the Bay Area. The only reason I haven't been kicked out yet is because my brother has graciously footed the bill for the last two months. It's humiliating to accept handouts from your big brother, even if he is a professional hockey player making the big bucks.

And for the record, I never asked him for help. He weaseled out that I was behind in my rent from my mother—Tanner's stepmother—when he learned I hadn't found a new job after a few weeks. My mother never could resist my brother when he turned on his charms.

So, nothing's holding me here in terms of my career prospects or a lease. And there's no boyfriend to speak of currently—although I still maintain that it's love that got me in this position.

Truthfully, it's not entirely all the fault of Scott, my ex-boyfriend. My own naïveté corrupted my usually sound judgment, and that sent the ball rolling. I am the perfect example of being too lovestruck to see things clearly.

I thought I was doing well on my own as I navigated true adulthood, and then it all came crashing down. Now I'm a jobless, boyfriend-less twenty-five-year-old hoping to leave the past behind me.

And it probably sounds cliché to say it, but I want to change the world. I want to help people—especially children in need—and make a difference in their lives. I was on the cusp of doing just that very thing when I screwed up royally and let myself get blinded by love, which only led to a humiliating and public fall from grace.

Which is the very reason I'm so skeptical of this job offer. The nonprofit sector focused on kids is a small world, and no one in their right mind would take a chance on me now. Except, of course, my protective and adoring older brother.

I look around my tiny kitchen with its four mismatched chairs that I collected at estate sales over the last two years. Maybe someday I'll be able to afford a brand-new kitchen table, no more slightly beat-up chairs, lumpy mattress, or threadbare couch with ripped cushions. That thought alone excites me almost more than anything else.

My gaze skips over the small but clean space and I wave a mental goodbye to my sad apartment, as if it's a foregone conclusion that I'm going to accept the job and show the world I am worthy of it.

As if right on queue, a screen pops up with an incoming video chat box on my laptop. The handsome but goofy face of my brother appears in front of me. I sigh and click Accept.

"Speak of the devil, and the devil will appear."

Tanner's loud guffaw and wide smile has me immediately grinning back him. His hair's all slicked back and wet, so he probably just had a recent shower or took a swim in his pool. Although I can't imagine it's warm enough for a dip in the pool in Vancouver at this time of year. At least, not for the likes of me. Tanner, on the other hand, is... unique.

"Hey, Ali-kins," he greets, his thick French-Canadian accent filtering through my kitchen. Having grown up with his mom in Montreal, Quebec, his speech represents that area of the country. His expression and tone are bright and cheery, even though the Vikings were just eliminated from the league playoffs last week. That optimistic attitude is why he's a fan favorite.

The loss was a sad, bittersweet ending to a terrific season made possible in part by Tanner but most importantly by the guy in the net, Soren "The Wolf" Wolfenspiel.

Tanner's always great about getting me tickets whenever they play San Francisco's team, the Soaring Eagles. The game from a few months ago was exciting to watch, but they lost 3-4 in the end. And while the backup goalie held his own, it was obvious that the team was missing The Wolf, out due to an injury.

Still, I've followed Tanner's career, rooting for him from the sidelines and through the large screen television he bought me just for the occasion, and he's done the same for me.

Case in point? Right now.

On the screen, he runs his hand through his hair, making it drip water onto his face, then scrubs his fingers over his now clean-shaven mouth and blinks his long lashes in that golden retriever manner of his.

"Hey, bro. What's shaking?"

He pulls a face and cocks his head to the side. "Ready to make it official, Ali-gator?"

Am I?

Ugh. Why do I have such mixed feelings over accepting this opportunity?

It's the perfect job, the perfect timing, but my self-confidence is shredded to pieces and at an all-time low. I don't know if I'm perfect for the role.

So, no. I may not be ready.

"*Tanner...*" I start, uncertainty filtering through the vulnerability in my voice. I probably sound like a whiny, bratty little sister. "The only reason I got this offer is because you're my brother."

A loud howl leaves his lungs and practically shakes my Mac with its volume and intensity.

"Ali-gator, you give me far too much credit. Even though I would do anything for you, this wasn't just my decision. I gotta follow all the rules and regs just like everyone else, so I stepped back and let the board decide.

And they *all* agreed.” He pauses momentarily, scratching at the scruff on his chin and glancing off camera. “Well, except for one. But she’s just a crotchety old... chairwoman? Chairperson? Anyway.”

I drop my head in my palm and grumble over the fact that I already have an adversary. “Great. That’s just great.”

“Ah, fuck her. Everyone else—and most importantly, Leanne—sees your potential. And Leanne fucking *loves* you.” He pulls out the sound like it’s a piece of sticky caramel off his tongue. “She has complete trust in you to run the communications and events for LTLFK.”

Leanne Lee is the foundation’s executive director. I met her three times during the interview process, one of which was in person when they flew me up for the final interview. Leanne is one of those do-everything-and-make-it-look-easy kind of women. She graduated at the top of her class, has been in the nonprofit sector for twelve years, and is a busy mom of two young kids.

I’ve become a fangirl already and have deep admiration for her tireless commitment and the coolness that drips like honey from her pores.

She is what I aspire to be in ten years.

“Leanne clearly doesn’t know me that well.”

Tanner’s bear-sized hand flits past his face and snorts. “But I do. You’re the smartest person I know, eh.”

I roll my eyes, snapping back my snarky response. “That doesn’t mean much, bro. Hockey players are your only means of comparison. And they get their heads bashed against the boards on the regular.”

Tanner throws his head back in laughter like that’s the funniest thing he’s ever heard. When his laughter finally ceases—my brother has always laughed easily, where I’m the more serious of the two of us—his assessing gaze reads over my features.

We don’t look much alike. He looks more like his mother, Camille, and I tend to take after our dad. But although we lived in different holds, and

different countries, we've always remained close, even after our dad died.

Tanner may come off as a frat boy gone amuck sometimes, but he and his mom didn't have it that easy after Dad died and the child support payments stopped. He still managed to stay focused on hockey, but that's why this foundation is so important to him.

That's the type of guy my big brother is.

And it's ultimately the reason I have only one answer to his question.

"Okay. Fine," I relent with a huff. "I verbally accept the offer."

Tanner throws his arms up in the air in a celebratory whoop.

"Finally! I knew I'd get my baby sis to cave." He does this weird little dance, pointing his fingers and moving his arms up and down.

"You do realize how this will affect you, right?"

Tanner screws up his forehead and nose. "Huh? How?"

I lean in close to the screen so my face is right in it and slowly move my head side to side, pursing my lips together sternly.

"You, my dear brother, will have to do exactly what I tell you to do, how to do it, and when I tell you to do it."

At this, I move back against the chair, cross my arms over my chest, and smile sweetly.

His expression turns wide-eyed and nervous.

And now I have him right where I want him.

At my absolute disposal.

This is going to be fun.

Soren

“It doesn’t matter what it costs, Anna,” I snap, the words sharper than I meant them to sound. About the only saving grace is that the entire conversation is in my first language, German, so at least the words themselves aren’t mangled.

I hear Anna inhale a quick intake of breath and remind myself to calm down. I shouldn’t take my frustration out on her. Letting out a heavy sigh, I soften my tone. “I’m sorry. I’m just frustrated that I had to cancel my plans last minute and you’ve had to change yours. Just go ahead and book the flights for you and the kids. *Bitte*. Money is not a problem.”

I’m not good with change. It causes me huge anxiety. This unexpected shift in plans is not going over well for me. Plus, I was looking forward to returning home to Austria and spending time with my family for the next two months.

Instead, I’ve had to rearrange things and help Anna book flights for herself, Heinrich, and Clara to come here to Vancouver, which has turned into some circus juggling act as Anna has figured out the new plans around the kids’ various activities and already scheduled events.

In fact, my annoyance over this entire situation has grown exponentially since I first capitulated to Tanner Rossco’s request.

It's all Rossy's fault.

He begged me to stick around this summer so I could participate in several events for his foundation. Knowing how important it is to him and to the kids and parents who benefit from the Lighting the Lamp for Kids charity, I caved. It's all for a good cause, after all. But when I said yes and decided to stay, I didn't factor in the potential difficulties in getting Anna and the kids to Vancouver for a two-week visit.

My bad. I had no clue how many activities the kids are in this summer and how much juggling it would require. A whole fucking lot, as I learned.

When Anna replies in her soft voice, it makes me feel even more shame over my behavior. She's the one who's carried the load and has had to deal with things far more burdensome than what I face. Anna is the one who's had to raise two kids without a partner.

"Okay. Danke, Soren. I'll book our flights and let you know the details." She pauses, and I can hear the smile across the line. "The kids are very excited to visit their favorite uncle in Canada."

This makes me chuckle. "Anna, I'm their only uncle in Canada. What are you implying?"

The light, airy sound of her laughter should make me feel better. In fact, I should be thrilled that she can laugh with me once again. But guilt still overshadows all my other emotions. I'm not sure how, but I think the remorse I still carry over Günther's death is heavier now than it was four years ago.

My role as uncle should be to act as their support, to be there for them whenever they need me. I've tried, but it's never enough and it never will be. I'll never be able to replace my older brother.

Günther had been my protector, my champion. My best friend and father figure. When my parents died when I was just a young teen and Günther was twenty, he stepped in and finished raising me.

He was the one who encouraged me to enter the NHL draft after my first year in the Deutsche Eishockey Liga. In the end, had it not been for my brother, I wouldn't be playing professional hockey in Canada now.

I should have been on that mountain four years ago. Had I been on that climbing trip with my brother, I may have been able to save him. Instead, Anna was left a widow with two young children to care for on her own in Austria.

"Anna," I say, this time with more gravitas as I consider my words carefully. I strum my thumb over the smooth wood of my kitchen table, the very same one she helped me pick out when I moved to Vancouver. "You know I will always take care of you. You and the kids are my family and mean everything to me. I do it for you and the kids as much as I do it for my brother."

A long pause follows, and a deep sigh comes from the other end of the line.

"Soren, you know I appreciate all you've done for our family after Günther passed. You have been a great source of help." I can hear the hesitation in Anna's voice, and anger rises in my throat in anticipation of what she's about to say. "But you do not have to feel so obligated to—"

"I don't," I interject, my tone adamant to the point of insolent.

Anna chuckles. "You do. And we love you for it. But we don't expect to be your lifelong responsibility."

"The fuck you aren't," I all but shout, my frustration ratcheting higher with every minute of this conversation. She doesn't understand the depths of my guilt. "Günther would want me to take care of you. We are *family*."

I remember the day Günther and Anna were married. The wedding was held on a glorious sunny day in the middle of June in a green meadow awash with wildflowers, the base of the mountain slope behind them. As they said their "I dos" and promised each other forever and 'til death did they part, I stood next to my brother, transfixed on his devotion for Anna. I

had never seen my big brother so dressed up, but the new hairstyle and his fancy black tux paled against the joy-filled smile.

He took those vows seriously, asking me before the ceremony—man to man, brother to brother—to always be there for Anna should anything ever happen to him.

It tore me to shreds that I couldn't be with my brother the day he died. Due to my contract's stipulations, I was to refrain from potentially dangerous activities, like mountain climbing, skiing, or any other risky sports. I wasn't even in Austria at the time since I had to be in Boston for a training camp. But I'm for damn sure going to fulfill my promise to my brother and be there for his family. I will honor my commitment to my late brother with everything I am and everything I have.

"Yes, Soren, we are family, and that will always remain true. But we also must find a way to move on with our lives. I know you carry so much guilt in your heart. You must let that go. It won't bring him back."

There's something in her tone, an underlying message that I can't quite figure out. Like a hint of goodbye. A dismissal of the past or maybe a parting for the future.

A panic rips through me at the thought that she would even consider a life without me in it. Is that what she's doing? Is she trying to push me away?

"Are you seeing someone, Anna?"

"No, not really. It's not like that."

"What do you mean, not really?" I sputter in a reproachful tone. "Then tell me, what is it like, Anna? Is there someone new in your life?"

I can hear how I must sound to my sister-in-law, like a jilted lover or a dumped boyfriend who can't come to terms with the breakup. My love for Anna has never been more than familial. She's my brother's wife, yet we've gone through a tragedy together that will bond us forever. It doesn't feel right to think that she's moved on when I haven't.

It's been four years, my conscience whispers.

Yeah. Four fucking years, and it still hurts that he's gone.

"Listen, let's not talk about this now." Her words are quiet, but the tone is insistent. "The kids are just home from school, and I need to get them ready for their practices. I will book the tickets, and we will come see you in June, and we can talk about it all then, ja?"

I know she's trying to preserve my feelings, so I'll let it go. But I feel the change, the slight shift in the earth under my feet. My balance feels off and my skin's entirely too tight. The discomfort is palpable.

Anna is the only person I can talk to about Günther. If she moves on and no longer wants to reminisce about him, who will I have?

No one else will understand.

Clara and Heinrich both join in before we end the call to say a quick hello, then Anna says she'll email me with the confirmation of their trip.

At least I'll see them soon and we can discuss what the future holds and what our lives will look like in person. That gives me a small bit of hope. My only goal is to safeguard and protect my brother's memory and be there for his family.

After disconnecting—with much reluctance on my end—I check my schedule to find out what tasks lay ahead of me for the next month. I've always been a bit obsessive about planning and scheduling. I like order and consistency in my life, just as I do in the net. If I can do everything in my power to keep myself in check, the chaos of the game and life won't get to me.

Since we got booted out of the playoffs last week after our loss to the Chicago Buoy, our season is officially done. It was a tough game. My partner goalie, Deiter Volmer, a fellow German player, was starting since I was injured. He played like fire and made some fantastic saves, but those Buoy boys eked out one more goal than us.

Putting that memory aside, I look forward to next week's scheduled golf weekend with the boys at Ballas's country club while a few of my teammates are still in town. Oliver Thornquist, Dane Axelrod, Brett Canfield, Rossy, and the two rookies, Shaw Benning, and Case Lyons are all scheduled to play, making us an even two groups of four.

Golf isn't my favorite sport—I'd much rather play tennis if I had a choice—but it's fun to hang out and drink some beers in the sunshine with my friends. We don't get that opportunity much during the season. A sports journalist once asked me in an interview why hockey players love to play so much golf. My reply was my standard annoyed response—because what a stupid question.

“We can't die or break our necks playing golf. Next question.”

The reporter appeared put off by my statement, grumbling something under their breath that sounded like *dick*. But they should have known better than to ask me something inane like that.

In fact, the interview was shortly after I'd returned from my brother's funeral, and I probably should've been removed off the list for any media time. Yet there I was, front and center, after being credited for a shutout game against the Pittsburgh Playmakers.

After that, the team's PR coordinator, Nat Stinson, suggested I speak with a therapist to deal with the grief.

What a fucking racket. A complete waste of my time and energy. Talking about my brother and the loss I felt after he died wasn't going to bring him back.

I never went.

The only thing that alleviates my pain and dulls my grief is to let it all play out in front of the net. And why change what's been working so well?

I'm at the top of my game and was in line for the annual Vezina Trophy this past season, the NHL's yearly award for outstanding goalie. But once

again, Connor Madsen received it for the third time in four seasons. And rightfully so—that man is a god.

Someday it will happen. And it will all be due to my late brother's influence on my life.

All I can do now is to ensure I do what I promised in his absence.

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A li

Here I am, in the lobby of my brother's very modern apartment building, dead on my feet after a two-drive from San Fran to BC and absolutely shook by the glitz of this place.

In fact, when I arrived just a few moments ago, I was greeted by a uniformed doorman—yes, this place has a doorman named Burton.

And there's even a concierge. A gorgeous woman wearing a green hijab that flows down over the tops of her shoulders, who greets me upon arrival.

"Welcome to The Concord, Miss St. Francis. My name is Basma, and all of us here are so pleased to have you staying with us. Mr. Rossco mentioned you'd be arriving today while he is away," she says warmly, kindly reminding me that Tanner is out on the golf course with his buddies today. He told me that he'd likely not be here right when I arrived, but that the staff would help me out.

Basma provides me with a key to the condo and even presents me with a welcome basket with cat treats. I accept it and awkwardly shift the bag on my shoulder and set down my cat, carrier.

"Thank you so much, Basma." I extract the pouch of treats from the basket, examining them as I open the bag.

She smiles and peers down into the crate, where Ernest Hemingway sniffs the air, knowing the salmon snacks await him.

“Your brother was truly excited for your arrival and told us we were to make sure both you and your cat had everything you need.”

“Yep, that sounds like Tanner.” I glance around the lobby and then back to the front entrance, where I am parked out on the street. “If it’s not too much trouble, I sure could use some help unloading my boxes and bringing them up to his apartment.”

I’ve never seen such a lavish building before, and it fills me with pride to see how far my brother has come in his life, so far from his humble beginnings—although I’d never choose the word humble to describe my brother. He’s made a name for himself in the world of hockey as a great D-man and is deserving of all this success, but he’s always let people know about it.

Basma lays a well-manicured hand on my forearm. “By all means. That is exactly what we’re here for. Let me call our team up and they’ll handle it all from here. You two just head up to your new home and get yourselves settled.”

“Thank you. Which floor is he on again?” I look down to see if there’s any indication on the key fob. “He didn’t mention...”

Basma tips her chin down and offers a charming smile. “The penthouse.”

I chuckle. “Of course. I should’ve known.”



I AM FREAKING EXHAUSTED.

After leaving San Francisco yesterday, driving nine hundred and fifty miles through several mountain passes that unnerved me to no end and then unpacking it all, I can barely see straight.

Not to mention that Ernie doesn't like to be secured for long in his cat carrier. A chorus of angry purrs and ticked-off whines serenaded me from the backseat every twenty minutes or so during the long drive. On a good day, Ernie is a crabby passenger, so I was prepared with salmon treats and catnip to keep him occupied and somewhat agreeable. It did not work as well as I'd hoped. But here we are, and he is quietly exploring his new home.

Moving into Tanner's apartment in Vancouver temporarily will be a challenge. I'm not sure how I feel about living with my brother. But I had no other choice for now, so I took him up on his offer, although I told him I don't want to mooch off him for too long or put a damper on his lifestyle.

Because let's face it, my brother is a player and man-whore. Tanner likes everything fast—cars, hockey games, relationships. To be fair, I've had temporary henna tattoos that have lasted longer than anyone he's ever dated. No slow burns for him.

I just call him Speedy.

When he offered up his place for me to stay, he promised to be a good boy. Those were his exact words. But regardless of that promise—for whatever that's worth—I'm not quite sure I can live with a twenty-six-year-old man-child. If he's anything like he was in our teens, he probably still leaves the toilet seat up, never puts away dirty dishes, and likes to play classic heavy metal music at one in the morning.

Now that I'm nearly done with my unpacking, I plunk down on the couch and take in the modern, open-concept condo that overlooks downtown Vancouver. The view from his floor-to-ceiling windows is breathtaking, as is the glass-encased pool deck just outside the door. I've only been to Vancouver once before, when I attended a game with my mom and Camille, but Tanner wasn't living in this place yet. I had no idea he was secretly living in the lap of luxury.

Ernie slinks around the corner of the couch, rubbing against the beautiful, soft leather, and offers me a purr of approval. I bend down and scratch behind his ears, and he purrs harder, rubbing against my leg in response.

“Don’t get too used to this, Ernie,” I warn, running a hand down his back and up his tail before releasing it as he begins to investigate the new smells. “This is only until we find a place we can afford on our own.”

I’ve promised myself that we’ll only be here a month or two. Once I have a few paychecks in the bank, I’ll have enough for a deposit, I’m sure. Right now, I’m broke as fuck. My credit cards are maxed and until I get that first paycheck, I’m having to beg for handouts from my ATM of a brother.

My plan was to rent a storage locker for all my stuff, but Tanner said he had enough space in his storage unit in his garage for me to use. My brother is nothing but generous.

I rub my shoulder to ease my tense muscles and then notice the hot tub out on the pool deck. It’s in a semi-enclosed space to ensure privacy, and all I want to do right now is find my swimsuit and jump in.

But that will have to wait. I need to go check the food situation in my brother’s kitchen because I plan to make us dinner tonight.

A peek into a pantry verifies that he keeps his kitchen well-stocked. My plan is to contribute with groceries and cooking while I’m here since Tanner has absolutely forbidden me from paying any rent but also has never been much into making his own meals.

While I’m not a winner of *Top Chef*, I have learned how to whip something up on a tight budget. My guess is that Tanner probably has some sort of meal delivery service.

I confirm this assumption when I open his freezer and find a dozen or more frozen dinners, all labeled to identify the contents. I pick one up to read the description: Ground turkey and sweet potato bowls.

Hmm. Very healthy selection.

I suppose that's the general consensus for diets of professional hockey players. Tanner has to eat carb-friendly and high-protein meals both when he's playing and during the offseason to stay in shape. Which means no junk food for me while I'm living here.

I put the food back in the freezer and leave the kitchen to head down one of two hallways, to where my new bedroom is located. When I first entered the apartment, I found the room that was to become mine from the note Tanner had left on the door. It read:

This bed is yours! And it even has clean sheets. I'm such a good brother.

Oh geez. My brother, always so full of himself.

A warm body presses on my leg, and Ernie looks up at me with his green eyes as if to say, *Can I?* I give him a nod. He jumps up onto the bed and makes himself at home.

"Good boy, Ernie. Just remember, this place belongs to Tanner, so you have to be nice to him."

I sit next to him on the bed and roll my hand down his back. His soft mewls are comforting and make me feel at home.

Just then, I hear my phone ring from somewhere in the room. I know it's my mom calling because it's the ringtone I assigned specifically for her. It's Stewie from Family Guy, his annoying voice calling out *Mom. Mom. Mom. Mommy.*

I follow the sound and find it under an empty box.

"Hey, Mom."

"Well, there she is! My daughter who could've been lying in a ditch somewhere for all I know because she never called me to tell me she made it to Vancouver."

Oops. I guess I deserve that Mom tone. I did indeed forget to call her when I got to Tanner's apartment.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you. But here I am. We made it."

I flop back down on the bed, allowing space for Ernie to curl his fluffy body up next to mine, then check the time on my phone and realize what a long day I've had already. It's after six p.m. Pacific Time. My mom still lives in upstate New York, so it's getting close to her bedtime.

"Did your brother help with all your unloading and unpacking?" she asks, a hint of sarcasm in her voice. She's known Tanner all his life and loves him all the same, despite his ridiculous character and long list of practical shortcomings. "And how did Ernie react to meeting him?"

I chuckle. "Well, I wouldn't know because Tanner is still out golfing and hasn't met Ernie yet."

My mom tuts on the other end of the line. To say Ernie isn't a huge fan of the male population is an understatement. And who knows how he's going to react to a large, loud-mouthed man who has only one speed.

"I guess we'll find out soon enough how that's going to go." I strum my fingers over my eyebrow, as I often do when I'm anxious or nervous. I wasn't sure what I would've done if Tanner hadn't agreed to allow me to bring Ernie. I rescued him from a shelter just over a year ago, and I couldn't possibly fathom the possibility of rehoming him back in California. But Tanner said he was excited for the opportunity to have a pet in the house. We'll see if his sentiment holds true the first time Ernie tries to rip him to shreds.

But knowing Tanner, he'll win over Ernest Hemingway with ease.

"Are you excited for your first day of work, sweetie?"

"Of course, I am."

My mom automatically picks up on my hesitancy. "But you're nervous. That's to be expected, you know. There's nothing wrong with you for feeling that way."

I pick at the edge of my pillowcase and roll to my back, lifting my legs to wiggle my toes at the ceiling. My back muscles are screaming for a dip in the hot tub after this.

“Yeah, my anxiety isn’t doing me any favors right now. I just worry I’ll make another stupid mistake, and they’ll all be disappointed in me.”

“Sweetie,” she coos, the same tone I’ve heard any time she soothed my scraped knees and broken heart. “There’s a reason the backup camera is smaller than the car windshield.”

I furrow my brows. “Huh? What does that have to do with anything?”

She chuckles, and the warmth spreads across my heart. “It means that we shouldn’t put the emphasis on looking back at our past. Our only focus should be forward.”

Tears well in the corners of my eyes. I swipe away the moisture with the pad of my thumb and snifle.

“Gah,” I cry, slapping my bare feet against the mattress and scaring poor Ernie, who jumps from the bed to the floor with a hiss. “I miss you, Mom.”

“Not as much as I miss and love you, Alison.” I can hear the smile in her voice. “You’re going to do great. Just promise me you’ll only look forward, not back.”

“I’ll do my best.”

My heart brims with love for my mom. She’s my one constant in this uncertain world, and I know she always has my back, along with my goofball of a brother.

When we end our conversation, I’m left feeling a little lonely and slightly homesick, even though I’ve lived away from my mom since I moved to California. But I’m also tingling with excitement over this new adventure I’m about to embark on and can’t wait to get settled in and started in this new life of mine in Vancouver.

I’m excited to see what the future holds.

Soren

“Nice drive, bro,” calls out Thorny, who happens to be my partner today.

“Thanks.”

I offer a somewhat satisfied shrug, give a brief head nod to Thorny—who teed off before me—and pick up the broken tee that flew in the air the minute my golf club connected with the ball. When I stand back up, I check out the fairway, which dog-ears a little to the left, to see if I can find where the ball landed. All I know is it went straight.

I locate the ball about five hundred yards or so in front of the tee box. A perfect shot and within chipping distance of the green.

Rossy slaps me on the back and then nudges me hard against my shoulder as I pass him on the way to the golf cart.

“We all know The Wolf can drive his balls deep.”

The group chuckles at the innuendo, and I shake my head at the idiocy that is Rossy sometimes.

“Should I take that as a compliment?”

I shove my driver into the empty golf bag slot and take the seat that Rossy just vacated, next to Cannfield. Canners holds out a can of ice-cold beer to me and I gratefully accept.

He, Thorny, Rossy, and I are currently in front, and the other group, consisting of Shaw Benning, aka Benny, Case Lyons, Ax, and Ballas the Beast, is just finishing up the front nine. I'm surprised that Lyons has time to play today. He and his fiancée, Katie, are getting married this summer, and while I don't know the exact date of the wedding, it must be coming up soon.

Trying to be respectful and quiet while Thorny tees off—although, to be fair, he never keeps his mouth shut on the course—I lean over to Cannors and murmur, “Hey, do you know when Lyons is getting married?”

He turns his head and screws up his face, his lips curling at the corners. “Do I look like I run a social activities calendar, bruh?”

Irritated, I flip him off and swallow a gulp of beer. “I just figured all married men were kept informed by their wives of what's what. I figured wrong. Sorry.”

Cannors gives a loud guffaw and slaps a knee. The noise interrupts Thorny's tee-off, and he swings around to glare at us for messing with his backstroke. I shrug and point at Cannors.

The thing I like most about hanging with Cannfield is that we are similar in many ways. For the most part, we're both introverts and loners. Although he's married, Cannors keeps to himself and is very private about his life. While he's a great team player and engages well with others on the ice, you won't find him going out with his teammates much during the season, and he prefers to chill in small groups rather than at big events.

For me, a day like this with just a handful of guys is doable and feels comfortable, so I can enjoy it. I can be myself—grumpy as that may be—and not have to deal with making inane small talk or wearing the mask required for public engagements. I just don't have the kind of energy to do that all the time.

Throw me into a party, club, or big event with lots of people and my social anxiety ratchets up to a level ten. I instantly feel all kinds of awkward

and can't do the small talk people like Rossy seem to thrive on.

Which is precisely why I will not be going to Case's wedding. The invite came a few weeks ago, or maybe it was a Save the Date reminder. Whatever it was, I promptly threw it out and forgot about it. Until now.

"What does his wedding date have to do with you?" Canners asks, eyes narrowing on me as he throws back the rest of his beer. He shifts in his seat and opens the cooler in the back, tossing the empty can in and extracting a new one. "I know you, bro. There's no way you're going to a wedding. You probably won't even attend your own funeral."

He stops abruptly, his eyes growing wide when he realizes the implication of what he just said, and lays a hand on my shoulder. "Shit, dude. I didn't mean it like that."

I shrug, gesturing with a flap of my hand. "It's fine, bro. It's just words."

He drops his hand, still clearly irritated with himself over the perceived insensitivity of his comment. Only a few of my teammates, Canners included, know what happened to my brother. They know we were close and he was my hero. They also know I don't talk about it to anyone. Ever.

I tug the rim of my ball cap up and run a hand through my hair, adjusting the hat back down to fit snugly in place. My hair's getting long and shaggy and harder to keep out of my eyes. I haven't had a haircut since Christmas, so it's probably time.

Anna said I looked like Brad Pitt's character in some old movie he starred in. I had to look it up because I had no idea which one she was talking about. I'd never seen the film and don't think I resemble him in it at all.

I don't stay current on anything in pop culture or on social media unless it's news press about my performance on the ice. No Instagram or TikTok or Twitter for me. I don't want people to know me outside of the net.

“So back to Lyons’s wedding. I’m not sure, but I think it’s in August.” He pulls up the calendar in his phone to check, looking at me with a sideways glance. “You think you’ll bring a date?”

I snort. The concept of me dating anyone is more like a joke. “Definitely not. I avoid weddings at all costs,” I reply, pulling a face. “I’m just surprised the dude is even allowed out to have fun is all. I thought you married guys were all kept on short leashes.”

I take a drink of my beer to hide my grin and wait for his reaction. And sure enough, Canners scoffs with over-the-top outrage.

His outburst is loud enough that Rossy, who’s about to tee off, stops mid-swing and swivels around to tell us, “Keep it down, losers.”

We look to each other and laugh even harder. I raise my hands in defense and shake my head before thumbing the blame once again to Canner.

The next four hours is spent in a happy buzz of friendship and beer. My golf score didn’t end up too bad, and I took second in our winner’s pool. Ballas, of course, had the best round, but I still walk away with a hundred bucks in my pocket.

As we grab our bags from the back of the carts to carry them out to our cars, Tanner reminds us about the upcoming calendar shoot we’ve all apparently committed to.

“Okay, boys,” he says in his thick French-Canadian accent. “Don’t forget that next Wednesday, you all gotta make sure those abs are looking ripped and slicked up with baby oil.”

Someone in the group, maybe Ax, comments, “I hope this isn’t anything like a Diddy party,” and there’s a chorus of *ooohs* from the guys. Tanner gives him the bird.

“It’s none of my business what you and Halle do with baby oil, bro.”

This garners childish snickers and the expected inappropriately porny comments from the group.

Tanner redirects the conversation in a huff. “Ali has been working hard to get everything lined up and ready for the shoot, so you guys just need to be there on time and ready.”

Shrugging, I glance over at Thorny and mouth, *Who’s Ali?*

Thorny lifts his brows and shrugs back. It’s an expected complication whenever you’re talking with Rossy. He has a way of communicating where he thinks everyone in the world knows what’s going on inside his head when, in fact, we have no idea and just agree to all get along.

One time, Rossy told us a story about something that happened when he was a kid, but he just left that part out. We all thought it had just recently happened, and it made no sense to any of us when he ended the story with, “My mom spanked me so hard.”

Confusion and mayhem, we’ve all come to learn, are just part of the game when talking to Tanner. The plus side is that Rossy is an excellent communicator on the ice, where he is clear and intentional, creating good team dynamics.

Out in the wild, however, Rossy is on an island all his own.

Ballas claps us all on the back as he heads out to his car. “I’m outta here, fellas. Have fun at this *Playgirl* shoot Rossy’s arranged for you all.”

Rossy throws his hands in the air as if aggrieved in some way. “It’s a *calendar* shoot, Beast, not a dirty magazine!”

I click my car fob to open my trunk, set my bag down in it, and pull my phone from my pocket. There had been some sort of conflict the last time Rossy mentioned the photoshoot, but I can’t remember what it was.

And then I see it.

“Oh, shit,” I gripe, noticing the date overlaps with when Anna and the kids arrive. “Dude, I may have a problem.”

Tanner looks at me expectantly. “You can’t back out on me now, bruh. Whatever it is, you’ll have to cancel it.”

I shake my head and let out a loud sigh. I suppose I can schedule a pickup at the airport for them and organize something for them to do while I'm getting my photo taken. How long should a photo take?

"Yeah, fine. I'll make it work."

"It's definitely not a hot date," comments Lyons, clearly feeling freer with his chirps after a few too many beers. "We all know The Wolf is a monk." And then he howls.

Like a goddamn wolf.

I glare and growl menacingly at Lyons. This gives me so much pleasure that I bare my teeth in the wolfish scowl that I've been told makes me look predatorial. He instinctively shrinks back though he's standing two parked cars away from mine and quickly jumps into his car.

Good. He deserves it. The punk.

"I get plenty, asshole."

Honestly, I don't. It's not easy for me to date. The superficial chitchat bores me to tears, to the point where the mere thought of having to do that makes me dread meeting someone new.

I do hope I'll meet someone that just gets me someday. A woman who can read me without explanation, who understands me to the core and accepts my idiosyncrasies without the need to dig deeper.

Because if they do, they'll probably not like what they find.

I know I don't.

A li

“Here. Have some M&M’s,” Leanne suggests helpfully, sliding a bowl of the colorful chocolate candies across her desk. “They’re great for stress relief and PMSing when you feel stabby.”

I look up from my iPad to the dish, then my gaze bounces between my new boss and the candy, as if this decision will impact the rest of my life. Leanne flaps her hand like you would shoo away a concern. “Please, help yourself.”

My fingers smooth over my eyebrow, and I chew on my lower lip. “I don’t know... I have no portion control. An open bag of sweets can quickly turn dangerous.” I shrug and pull a face. “I might end up eating them all in one sitting.”

“And that is a problem, how?” She grins.

I don’t want to let my boss down, so I pluck out a red one and nibble on it.

“There you go. Join me on the dark side, my young apprentice.” She cackles and waggles her brows, her expression mimicking an evil overlord.

I give her a mock glare. “I thought you were supposed to be my mentor and guide me toward good decisions?” Leanne and I have clicked so easily

in just a few short days that I feel completely at ease as we tease back and forth.

Leanne chuckles. She gracefully tucks her sleek dark hair behind one ear, showing off a diamond earring that coordinates well with her pink silk blouse.

“I do my best to ensure you have the right tools to do the job,” she offers, plucking the dish away from me and dumping a few of the candy pieces in her palm before tossing them into her mouth. “And sometimes, those tools are made with sugar.”

I might have a tiny girl crush on my new boss. She’s breathtakingly beautiful, like right-off-the-runway gorgeous, but also incredibly gifted at her job and has a fantastic sense of humor.

Leanne Lee has a graceful, elegant manner and always appears completely put-together. Unlike me, who stares into my closet each morning wishing for a stylist genie to magically pop out and give me guidance. Most of my clothing consists of concert T’s and holey jeans. Not exactly professional office attire.

She smiles and bats her dark eyelashes, tilting her head in an innocent gesture. “Plus, chocolate is my savior during weeks like this.”

Finally acquiescing, I put down the tablet that’s been attached at my hip since I began and reach out for the dish that now sits between us. I pour a few in my hand, then pick up one piece at a time and nibble carefully. I’m not kidding when I say I don’t have an off switch with junk food. An open bag of chips and candy can leave me regretting my life decisions.

My reaction, though, causes Leanne to laugh out loud. She shakes her head and gives me a look that says *We’ll work on this*.

The first few days at the foundation—getting to know Leanne, the team, and the volunteers—has been one of the best experiences I’ve ever had in my career. Although I don’t want to hear an *I told you so* from Tanner, my

big brother was right. This is my dream job, and I'm so happy to have been given the opportunity to prove myself.

In hindsight, I realize now how difficult and fraught with stress my previous work environment had been for me. There was no supportive supervisor like I have in Leanne. Instead, my former boss, Patrick, would constantly ride my ass, chew me out in front of others, and steal all credit when my work produced something good.

It makes me wonder what Leanne would have done or said if I'd made the same terrible mistake here as I did in my last job. Would she have penalized me and made an example of me in front of the other staff? Or would she have sat me down and coached me on how I could have done it better to avoid it happening in the future?

Based on what I know of her so far, the answer is clear. There is no way she'd berate me in public or steal my thunder. She is far too supportive of a leader. Her style of management wouldn't have left me in tears, swallowed up by self-doubt and questioning my abilities.

Leanne brushes her hands in a gesture that says she's finished and sets them down on the table. "Okay, let's take a look at where we're at with the schedule for tomorrow and the plans for next month."

Most of the bigger events had already been planned out before I arrived but did not entail any action steps from me. Which means I've been doing what I love best in this job, and that is making shit happen. First up is the charity calendar photoshoot.

I scooch forward in my chair and open the tablet, clicking on my calendar and the notes I've jotted down for tomorrow's calendar shoot.

"I've confirmed with the photographer, Joelle, and the stylist, Dante, that they will be at the studio we've rented in Granville near Yaletown at eight a.m. They will have all the props and backgrounds, and I ran out to the Dollar Store today to pick up a few additional items they've requested."

Like baby oil.

When I questioned that request with Joelle, she only said, “It’s a necessity for these types of shoots.” Not wanting to look like an amateur by asking any further clarifying questions, I simply did what she asked and purchased ten large bottles of oil with the corporate credit card I was given on my first day.

In the past, I would’ve had to explain ad nauseum why this purchase was necessary. But I’ve been given complete autonomy at LTLFK and permission to use the company-issued credit card for events as I deem fit. The boost in self-confidence just that one expression of trust gave me was completely unexpected. It has instilled a sense of pride and ownership that I’d lost along the way.

Self-doubt has a way of creeping in and making you question yourself when your boss constantly micromanages your every move. This I know from experience.

Tapping my tablet again, I scroll through the notes for tomorrow’s event.

“I’ve gone through the list of the twelve players who have agreed to participate, as well as their assistants if they have them, and have sent out reminder emails. I will also reach out to each one personally by phone and text today to obtain their confirmations. And the marketing team has created alternate plans, just in case there are emergencies or no-shows.”

Leanne rubs her fingers at her temples. “Thank God you’re on top of this. Last year was a gigantic clusterfuck. We had to track down two last-minute substitutes because the missing players said they never received any updates and therefore didn’t show up.”

“Ack,” I exclaim, screwing up my face and shaking my head. “I certainly hope that taking the extra steps today means we’ll avoid any last-minute problems tomorrow. Unfortunately, we can’t always control someone else’s actions, but I promise, I have a plan to adjust for any late arrivals or missing models.”

“I have complete confidence in you.” She gives me a warm smile and a small nod. “Now, let’s talk about the other ideas you said you have.” She leans forward eagerly, pressing her elbows on the desk and steeping her hands together. I quickly flip through the notes on my iPad to find the ideas I’ve jotted down over the last few days.

The cool thing about this job is that I have complete autonomy, with a few exceptions, to find ways to fundraise and raise awareness for this foundation.

I tried to calm the butterflies that flutter wildly in my stomach, hoping she’ll be happy with these ideas and approve them. My last boss, Patrick, was always dismissive of any suggestions when I brought them forward, but I found out later that he was passing them off as his own in front of the board.

Without question, I know Leanne would never do that. But should something like that happen again, I won’t just suck it up again. I’ll stand up for myself and address it like the professional adult I am.

I inhale deeply, let out a slow breath, and begin to share my suggestions.

“The first one is an auction and fundraising campaign we could call Party at the Park: An Evening Under the Twinkle Lights.” I hesitate, peering up through my eyelashes, and wait for her reaction.

She props her chin on top of her steeped fingers and tips her head to consider this for a moment. “Go on. Tell me more.”

Encouraged, I continue, the quaver in my voice stabilizing as I explain my idea. “Well, in the spirit of Lighting the Lamp for Kids, this could be an event for all ages, possibly held at that big park across from the arena. We would have game stations hosted by the athletes set up around the perimeter. Each game would collect contributions through the Pay to Play. We could charge like a dollar or five dollars, whatever they want to donate. And then there would be a catered dinner, but more like a barbecue than a sit-down one. And, of course, a band, and maybe even a dance contest.”

Leanne claps her hands in excitement and support. “Oh, my word, that does sound like fun. I know my kids and husband would love it.”

My chest fills with a bubbly, effervescent buoyancy. It feels like I’m floating above the clouds, something I never felt in my previous job.

“And in the middle of it all, a large tent decorated with fairy lights streaming above our heads and greenery and topiaries throughout the space.”

“That sounds magical, Ali.” Leanne sighs, gazing off over my shoulder. “And maybe even a little romantic. Maybe include a kissing booth with some of the Viking players. You know...” she waggles her sculpted brows. “That should really bring in the donations for the cause.”

“Or a hugging, high-five, or photo booth, since we *are* family friendly.” I wink.

Leanne rolls her eyes in jest and flaps a hand. “Okay, *fiiine*. You’re right. But I kind of like the idea of kissing that handsome goalie, The Wolf.”

My cheeks flush with warmth at the idea. I admit it, the thought of kissing the sexy and stoic team goalie is very appealing. Soren Wolfenspiel. *The Wolf*.

I’ve never officially met any of Tanner’s teammates, but I’ve heard a lot about them from the wild stories he’s shared. I’ve also researched each player to familiarize myself for the sole purpose of curating my personal list for the foundation’s future events. That research has included reading through each player’s bio and stats and pulling up profiles.

The first time I got a look at Soren’s official team headshot my mouth dropped open and my heart came to a screeching halt.

I’m not sure what it is about Soren Wolfenspiel that stole my breath, but truthfully, I stared at his online picture for so long I got a crick in my neck.

A gloriously dazzling sensation had shivered down my spine and straight to my core. The look in his eyes as he stared into the camera’s lens felt like a warning, a dare that clearly told me to steer clear and stay away.

So of course it had me fantasizing about him ever since, drawn to him like a moth to an open flame.

I'm nothing if not a sucker for an attractive, unavailable man.

I've learned my lessons the hard way, however, and promised myself I will never fall for another emotionally inaccessible man.

Never ever again.

Like my mother said, the only place to go is forward.

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Soren

“A fucking hair and makeup stylist?” I grunt at no one in particular as I stand in a changing room equipped with a full-length mirror and a wardrobe display rack holding various costumes to select from. I run my hand through my hair and grimace. “Not gonna happen.”

My unapologetically sour mood is clearly getting the best of me this morning. I know my outburst is an overreaction to my current situation and not directed at the actual photo prep. The other guys aren’t pissing and moaning over it. Just grumpy me.

When I promised Tanner I’d be here to support his charity work, I was committed. This annual calendar raises a significant amount of the donations needed to continue to run his charity. The problem is the timing.

Anna and the kids’ flight was delayed and I’m unable to fix the shift in our schedule.

Originally, I had made sure there was time for me to pick them at the airport since they were supposed to arrive last night. But the flights Anna had booked out of Vienna were canceled due to equipment maintenance issues, and they had to rebook with an overnight layover at London’s Heathrow. And now their arrival into Vancouver has been pushed to... *today*.

Changes to my carefully planned schedules can throw me into a spiral and make me panicky and irritable.

All night long I worried about their arrival and safety. And because I couldn't be there to pick them up, I had to find a reliable car service to do the job. That sent me down a rabbit hole of anxiety and stress, leaving me extremely tired and cranky when my alarm went off at seven a.m.

The only positive is that, without them here this morning to fuss over, I was able to do a light workout in my personal gym. It wasn't my usual routine, but I did some weights, core exercises, and stretches before leaving my place to head to Granville. That, for the most part, allowed me to expend the pent-up frustration that had built in me all night and calmed my nerves.

Apparently, it didn't do quite the job I thought it had.

Duncan Brewer sits in a stylist chair next to Wyatt Pendergast and narrows his eyes at me.

"Jesus Christ, Wolf. Who pissed in your Wheaties this morning?"

I grumble. "Sorry, Brewsky. Just been a morning. Nice 'do, by the way."

From behind his chair, I nod at the mirror displaying Brewsky's top half, his hair coifed and styled. He places his palms under his chin, fluttering his eyes, and grins.

"I know it's hard to believe anyone can make this face any prettier than it already is, but I do like my new look."

Brewsky gives the stylist, who's applying body paint to Pendency's torso, an exaggerated wink, then admires himself in the mirror. "Now I understand why my girlfriend loves to have her spa days."

I roll my eyes at his absurdity. On any normal day, or if we were joking around in the locker room, I might laugh and banter with him. Today is not either of those.

The stylist gestures for me to take a seat. "Please, make yourself comfortable. I'm Dante and I'll be doing your hair and makeup next."

With no choice in the matter, I take a seat and wait my turn. But I don't need to be happy about it. This is my first time participating in this calendar shoot, and I had no idea they went to all this trouble to turn us into professional models. When I spoke with the woman who called to remind me about the event, my attention was elsewhere, and I don't remember her mentioning anything about this stuff.

Maybe she did and I neglected to catch it.

I barely remember her telling me her name. Maybe it's Alison or Ali? Honestly, my mind had been on trying to resolve the flight issues and not today's plans. I'd be surprised if I said more than two words to her. She probably thinks I'm a dick.

Nothing new there. There's a reason my reputation exists.

Pendy jumps in to tease Brewsky about his appearance, breaking into my thoughts.

"Dude," he says with a chuckle, "I think you have one of those faces they say only a mother could love."

"Hey, bruh," Brewsky replies, poking Pendy in his shoulder, "I resemble that remark."

My chin drops to my chest, and I press my lips in a firm line to keep from grinning as I run a hand through my still damp hair. "I'm going to need some more coffee if I have to deal with you two Dummköpfe today."

Just as I say this, someone taps lightly on my shoulder. Already tense from the last twenty-four hours, I startle and let out an annoyed curse.

"Fuck."

I lift my gaze, ready to ream the person for sneaking up behind me, but my eyes land on a gorgeous woman with curly auburn locks. In one hand, she carries a tablet, and in her other arm is a giant inflatable yellow ducky ring toy like those ones used in pools. An inexplicable current runs down my spine as I stare back into her bright blue eyes.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. I was—” she begins, but I cut her off.

“Well, you did,” I snap, unable to help myself with all the tightly wound emotions swirling inside me. “Announce yourself next time.”

The muscles in my jaw tighten, and I immediately regret my outburst. A heavy exhale leaves my lungs. But it’s too late, the damage is done. Her eyes—a blue that reminds me of the skies back home in Baden bei Wien—widen in response, and her mouth twists into a disapproving frown. I expect her to shrink away from my reproachful tone, which is the one I use when I’m hounded by the media after a loss and want them to leave me alone. Instead, and to my surprise, a smile pulls on the edges of her lips and then expands into something that mirrors the sun.

A breath catches in my throat.

“That’s exactly what I was trying to do,” she replies with a hint of sarcasm woven in her words. Unfazed, she offers me her outstretched hand. “You must be Soren. I’m Ali. Nice to meet you.” But since the duck is still under her arm, it gets stuck between her and my chair and then falls from her grasp, bouncing once before it lands on the floor between us.

This produces a giggle from her exquisite mouth. I tamp down my growing confusion with a biting glare.

“Oops. Sorry.”

The moment our hands join, I’m blinded by my reaction. An electrifying current zings up my arm and hits me in the chest with the speed of a slap shot.

I drop her hand immediately, hoping that even with her bravado, she’ll take heed of my warning vibe. Others usually do. It’s a well-known trick of The Wolf.

But Ali doesn’t seem to be affected by my unkindness.

The thing is, I wasn’t always this way. As a kid, I was happy, goofy, and more than a little precocious. My brother and I were known pranksters,

especially on each other. But oftentimes, we'd get our friends and even our parents on the best jokes.

One time, Günther and I decided we'd create a murder scene using cans of tomato sauce and ketchup. It scared my mom and dad into thinking I'd accidentally killed Günther.

Now, years later, it seems life has played its own prank on me. It's turned me from that happy-go-lucky boy into an oppositional and angry man. Or, as I'd be known in German, an *Arschloch*.

The grief of losing my parents and then my brother has destroyed me. There is so much of it, I hoard it all: the loss, grief, loneliness, and guilt. I don't know how to let it go, so I utilize the anger that curdles in my stomach when I'm between the pipes. Every blocked shot and save is another way for me to deal.

The feeling of warmth remains even after Ali's touch is gone. It's exactly like when I've been given anesthesia for procedures. There's a moment when you feel an uncomfortable prick as the needle goes in but then the sensation takes hold and you're floating.

Up. Up. Up.

It feels *good*.

So good, in fact, that I shove my hands under my armpits to avoid any further touches, hoping she'll take note of my nonverbal cues and leave. I nod brusquely toward the inflatable at our feet and fix her with a resolute stare.

"I'm not getting in that thing if that's what you think."

Ali's laughter is like champagne bubbles. Light, sparkling, and fucking delicious.

When was the last time a woman's laugh made me want to smile?

I. Don't. Smile.

She waves a hand at the object and shakes her head dismissively. "Oh my gosh, no. That, my friend"—she eyes me with an expressive lift of her

brows and jabs a finger toward the duck—“is for Tanner. By request, I might add.”

I glance around the studio in search of my teammate but don't see him loitering around or getting primped and powdered.

“Where *is* Rossy?”

That's when I hear his signature loud—irritatingly loud—laughter from somewhere in the building. Ali offers a knowing smile, clutching her iPad against her chest with crossed arms.

“Tanner has expressly requested to pose for the July pool party scene. Complete with an oversized inflatable duck ring, a grill, and giant hot dog props. Is there any other scene that screams Tanner Rossco as much?”

I try to stifle my chuckle. “We'd expect nothing less from the oversized kid. I can't imagine what he was like when he was an actual child.”

Ali responds with something that sounds like *He was much worse*, but she turns away from me just as the man in question bounds toward us so I can't hear her over Rossy's thunder.

Unlike some of my other, more reserved teammates, Rossy is a man who takes up all the space in a room. Literally and figuratively.

When he steps up next to Ali, Rossy throws an arm around her shoulders and tucks her into his side, placing a loud, wet kiss on her forehead.

“There you are, Ali-kins.” He beams down at her with something that looks like love and then swings his gaze to mine. “Hey, Wolf. I see you've met my Ali. Isn't she the best?”

I stare at the two of them grinning at each other with familiarity and try to parse out the nature of their relationship.

Tanner doesn't do girlfriends, and I can't imagine Ali is just a hookup. But they clearly give off a vibe that suggests love, an intimacy with each other, and even mutual respect.

Whatever it is between the two of them is none of my business.

My only business today is getting through this photoshoot, making sure Anna, Heinrich, and Clara get here without incident, and treating them to a good evening out together.

Outside of that, I need to put away this inexplicable attraction I seem to have to Ali, because it's clear she's with Tanner.

And I don't need any distractions when my family arrives.

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Soren's photos didn't do him justice. And his silky voice with the slight accent that I encountered last night did leave a lasting impression, the sound burying itself deep into my marrow, but *still*.

But nothing prepared me for meeting him in real life, up close and personal. The man is a living, breathing, walking billboard for hot, grumpy loner. He's the type of guy mothers warn their daughters about.

Everything about him says to back off, stay away, don't get close or you'll get snared in his trap.

If Soren thinks this grumpy-boy vibe will turn people off, he obviously hasn't seen himself in the mirror when he does it. Don't ask me why, but the signals Soren sends out only make the allure and magnetism that much stronger, and I'm too weak to resist that pull.

Then the strangest thing occurred in my belly—like hope springing free from a well—when I dropped the pool duck at his feet and Soren nearly cracked a smile during our brief conversation. There was just a flash of something. A teeny, tiny bit of amusement.

But then almost immediately, it disappeared as if a switch flipped. Soren's demeanor changed, turning cold when Tanner joined us and threw an arm around my shoulder. Soren's brows pinched together and his eyes

grew dark, his expression intense. Which was strange to see, considering they are supposedly good friends.

Despite his closed expression, I sensed a vulnerability in his demeanor.

I'm still contemplating Soren's strange behavior a few minutes later while I check in with Joelle in the back room of the studio.

"How's it all going back here?" I ask, stepping into the room designated as the wardrobe fitting room. It's set apart from the makeup and hairstyling area, and Joelle is working with Wyatt Pendergast to get him into costume. If you can call it that.

Wyatt wanted to represent Pride month for the June shoot, and when we'd discussed it last night on the phone, he had been ecstatic to appear naked, wrapped only in a Pride flag.

Dante, however, seemingly upped the heat a few degrees when he decided to paint Wyatt's chest in an assortment of colors. Standing with his back to me, Wyatt smiles in the mirror, posing with the flag draped around his waist.

"Hey, Ali, what do you think about my makeup?"

My eyebrows furrow and I regard him with feigned disappointment. I tap my finger against my chin.

"I don't know, Wyatt," I say with a shake of my head. I twirl my finger at his appearance. "There just seems to be something missing, I just can't quite put my finger on it. Maybe you need more color?"

He laughs at my attempt at humor and a gleam of playfulness sparkles in the mirror's reflection of his eyes. I lift my shoulders in a shrug.

Wyatt casts a glance over his shoulder at Dante, who stands at his side and is completing his masterpiece. Wyatt's eyes crinkle at the corners, and a smile plays at his lips.

"You heard the lady," he says, gesturing with a wide arc of his arms. Then he sweeps his hands in a waterfall motion from the top of his head down to his belly. "We need more color. Stat."

Dante scoffs and waves his makeup brush and color palette in the air.

“I am the artist here and will not work under these conditions.” His wink tells me he’s teasing. “This is a masterpiece in the making.”

From the way they’re flirting, I’m thinking there may be something brewing between these two men.

Who knows? Perhaps I’ve helped facilitate a love connection today on top of a calendar shoot. That would look great on my resume. *Event Coordinator. Part-time Matchmaker.*

Wyatt holds his hands up in mock frustration. “Look what I have to deal with here... an overly sensitive, temperamental, too-hot-for-his-own-good makeup artist.”

I tilt my head and lift a palm. “Artists are notoriously difficult, Wyatt. I’d be nice and let him do his thing if I were you. After all, that palette has some sharp edges.”

I chuckle softly as the carefree vibe of fun in the room washes over me, the camaraderie occurring between the crew and models filling me with joy. It’s a novelty for me, something I haven’t experienced in the past. Once again, I’m reminded how lucky I am to have been given this opportunity.

Besides, how many people get a day job where they hang around a bunch of ripped and handsome hockey players?

I smile to myself and glance down at my tablet to note the time. We need to keep things moving at a faster pace if we don’t want to be here until midnight.

There’s a shiver of awareness that ripples down my spine, and when I lift my eyes, they connect with Soren’s. He stares at me from across the room with a scowl on his face.

I gasp and my belly does somersaults.

Soren crosses his arms, annoyance written over his face, and states loudly, “No way am I dressing up like an elf for the December shoot.”

I open my mouth to speak and then snap it shut when Wyatt hoots with laughter from behind me.

“The Wolf as an elf? That’s classic!”

Soren glowers at him. “Shut your mouth, Pendy.”

This has Wyatt laughing even harder. The cheekiness of Wyatt’s comment is deliciously funny, and I fight myself to keep from joining in. The image of the broody and gruff Wolf dressed up in a green elf costume is too much for me to remain straight-faced. I cover my mouth with my hand and stifle my giggle.

Soren turns to me sharply with a cutting look. And it’s then that I realize why there might be a slight misunderstanding. I reach out to gently touch Soren’s arm.

“Listen, Soren. I think I can clear this up for you.” His eyes narrow, and I clear my throat and then dislodge my hand from the heat of his skin.

“Tanner was just messing with you.” This doesn’t get the response I wanted. Soren’s scowl stays put and even intensifies. “There’s a scene featuring *all* the guys dressed as elves in front of a toyshop background scheduled for our December page, but if that makes you uncomfortable, there’s no expectation that you participate.”

Wyatt pipes in with his not-so-helpful suggestion. “I think Wolf should dress as Frosty the Snowman because he’s ice cold!”

A snort of laughter escapes Dante’s lips and then he pulls a face. I fight to suppress the laugh that bubbles up my throat as the image of Soren in a snowman costume comes to mind. While there is some truth to Wyatt’s wisecrack about Soren’s temperament, there’s also an inexplicable reason why Soren’s frigid gaze, when fixed on me, can shoot flames to my core and melt me into a puddle on the inside.

I surreptitiously glance at him from the corner of my eye and notice the strong, coarsely stubbled jaw clench tight and the grooves in his frown

deepen. Yet even with the combative stance and stern expression, there's still a softening in his golden-hazel eyes.

Soren shares an uncanny resemblance to an actual wolf when his intense gaze is narrowed in on someone. It's meant to frighten and intimidate.

To push people away.

I suppose that's the nature of goaltenders. Their job is to defend—to protect the net at all costs and keep the pucks from getting through. It's what makes him a standout. But that guarded quality doesn't bode well off the ice.

Soren's unwitting smile nearly takes my breath away. It tips up at the corners of his lips as he responds to Dante and Wyatt. "Fuck you both."

And when he turns back to me, he pins me with a softened expression. "It doesn't make me uncomfortable. I just want to get this over with."

"Okay, we can do that. As I mentioned last night, I was thinking you might be interested in posing for the January shot? It's a winter scene." My eyes search his imploringly. "If I recall, you grew up in a small mountain village in Austria, right?"

Something flashes across his face that I can't quite read, but it's gone just as quick. Then he nods and waves his hand. "Ja, that's fine."

The sound of an incoming text on his phone interrupts us, and he pulls out the phone and drops his eyes to the screen. Without another word, he spins around and stalks off in the other direction, leaving me baffled by our interaction.

That man is the most mercurial human I've ever met.

But also, the most intriguing.

Soren

“What are you doing here?” I ask, blinking several times at Anna and the kids’ smiling faces. They look like an apparition so far out of context. “You were supposed to go directly to my house.”

My brain is foggy after my exchanges with Ali this morning, and an inexplicable tingling sensation lingers in my stomach. Everything is off-kilter, as if I just stepped off a carnival ride that messed with my equilibrium.

To find Anna, Clara, and Heinrich standing here in the studio unannounced is a complete mindfuck. I could’ve sworn I told them to have the driver take them to my place.

Both kids rush toward me, wrapping their gangly arms around my waist in dual hugs. A jolt of love courses through my body from the contact, and I return the affection by tugging them into me.

I stare blankly at Anna, who appears beautiful and regal as always—tall and athletic, with long limbs that have helped her on many rock climbing and downhill skiing adventures. That’s how she and Günther originally met years ago. They were two peas in a pod, both born to pursue the riskiest sports known to humans.

Which is precisely why she’s a widow and single mother today.

She shrugs helplessly and places her hands on the tops of both children's heads. Heinrich and Clara bounce with excitement.

"Sorry to mess with your plans, but as you can see," she says in German, her voice light with amusement, "the children were too excited to wait to see their uncle Soren."

Quelling the irritation building inside me over the disruption in my plans, I breathe deeply and work a smile on my face before locating the spots underneath the kids' ribs that I know are ticklish. They squeal in delight and wiggle and squirm in their attempts to get loose, but I clutch them tighter as a rush of love suddenly overcomes me.

How can I possibly be upset by this surprise?

These children mean the world to me. Although we are an ocean away much of my hockey season, I've worked to stay close to them in other ways. Countless hours of video chats, gifts sent from every city where I play, and weekly scheduled online gaming sessions with eleven-year-old Heinrich, who is obsessed with gaming and LEGO. Clara is almost nine and loves her dolls, books, and ice skating.

Someday when I have children of my own, I will be a happy man if they turn out half as great as my brother's kids.

"Uncle Soren," says Heinrich, gazing up at me with his inquisitive baby blues. The gap left from a missing tooth captures my attention when he grins broadly. "Can you take me to your hockey arena to play while we're here? I told Coach Rudy I would practice."

Clara chimes in. "Ja, and I want to ice skate and show you my jumps!"

I lift a brow and look to Anna. She nods.

"I think that can be arranged." I'm about to say more when I hear my name being called from the studio.

"Soren." The lilt of Ali's voice comes from behind me. I swivel around, Heinrich and Clara still glued to my sides, and my eyes connect with Ali's.

She appears to flinch and something flickers in her expression that I can't quite discern. "Oh, excuse me. I didn't mean to interrupt. I just wanted to let you know that we're ready for you in makeup now."

My gaze does a sweep over her face. Her cheeks flame with a deep red blush that matches the color of her long, wavy hair. She glances briefly from me to Anna and then scans over the two kids before landing back on me.

I drop my hold from around Heinrich's and Clara's shoulders and cover their blond heads with my palms.

"Ja, it's no problem. My family has just arrived." I motion to the three with a dip of my chin. "If it's okay with you, Ali, may they stay for the photoshoot?"

Ali's mouth opens then shuts, and she chews her bottom lip. Finally, she waves a hand awkwardly through the air.

"Oh... well, of course," she stammers with a hesitant look down at her iPad and then over her shoulder, as if searching for something. She absently strokes the line of her eyebrow with her index finger. "But, well, there may be a state of *undress* with most of these photos, if you know what I mean."

If possible, her face burns brighter. It's cute. And sweet.

And Goddamn sexy as fuck.

The kids giggle at Ali's announcement. I raise an eyebrow and rub my hand over my stubbled jaw. It reminds me that I was going to shave this morning but ignored the need to give myself five more minutes in bed.

"You didn't mention I'd be posing naked." I'm pulling her chain, and the way it makes Ali's blush deepens almost makes me full-on grin. The bloom expands over her cheeks and down her collarbone, coloring the pale cleavage that peaks out from underneath her T-shirt and overalls.

Unbidden, an image comes to mind of me backing her up into a low-lit studio and slowly removing those pink overalls to uncover all that creamy skin inch by inch to see how far that blush of hers goes.

Jesus, what is wrong with me? I clear my throat and avoid any eye contact with anyone.

“No, no... well, not exactly.” She places a hand on her collarbone, seemingly flustered by my question. “My idea was to put you in an Alpine backdrop to show how comfortable you are in cold, mountainous climates. And, well, okay, maybe you’d be *partially* naked.”

Anna tips her chin down toward the floor and snickers. I nudge her shoulder with mine.

While I like the fact that Ali did her research and wants to pay homage to my culture and home country, there’s a significant detail she doesn’t know that dredges up emotions I’ve buried and tried to avoid.

Günther died in the mountains.

It was a trip I was supposed to be on but due to my team contract, I was forbidden from going unless I wanted to be cut. My brother absolutely forbade me joining him and said he’d cancel the trip on the spot if I showed my face.

So I didn’t go. And had I been there, there’s a strong possibility my brother may have lived.

I breathe in deeply through my nose and exhale loudly. Ali watches me, lips parted, eyes wide, as she waits for my response, her finger see-sawing along her brow.

“So, this calendar is R-rated?”

My question sounds gruff and judgmental, almost menacing. I narrow my eyes and pin her with a glare. I’m totally fucking with her, which is childish and immature. But I like the way she reacts to my moody temperament—how her body responds, the change in the sound of her voice. The breathy hums in between the beats of her words send frenetic waves of excitement through my body.

It’s literally woken me up from a deep, self-imposed hibernation.

Ali vehemently shakes her head and takes an unconscious step back, glancing between Anna and the kids as if searching for help.

“No, no... not at all. I just...” She pushes her palms out and waves them wildly as Anna steps forward and places a hand on my shoulder, ready to play mediator and big sister if necessary.

Ali’s eyes zero in on Anna’s proprietary hand placement, then quickly flash away.

Does she feel threatened by this familiarity?

I don’t have time to consider it because Anna jumps in to provide context.

“Soren, from what I gather, I don’t think that’s what—” Anna hesitates, looking to Ali with an expectant gaze.

“Ali. I’m Ali.”

“Ah, ja, ja.” Anna smiles at her and then looks toward me, her eyes flashing knowingly. She’s on to me. “I don’t think Ali has any inappropriate scenes planned, Soren. I think she’s just looking for some personal tie-in to the photo. Do I have that right, Ali?”

Ali nods, her shoulders dropping slightly in relief. “Yes. Exactly. But if you’d prefer something else, I can rearrange the shot. No problem at all.”

And then I acquiesce, regretting how far I’ve taken my fake outrage. She was prepared to bend over backward for my comfort.

The idea of Ali bending over for me for any reason is too much.

I clear the lump in my throat and let out a small chuckle. “Ali, I’m just messing with you. I’m fine with whatever you want me to do. Where do you want me?”

Ali’s face brightens and her full-wattage smile hits me like a stick to the groin. It’s powerful, yet painful.

Fuck, it’s been a long time since I’ve allowed myself to feel something for a woman.

I’ve guarded my heart.

I've become so fucking good at blocking out love and emotions that I've become immune to the chemistry that exists with attraction.

Ali clearly has broken through my defenses despite my mental toughness and fast reflexes and has found a way to hit the spot in my heart that is hardest for me to block.

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Well, that's it, then.

I'm mentally kicking myself in the butt for thinking there was something happening between Soren and me.

It doesn't matter that I was instantly drawn to Soren and thought we had a connection. The sizzle of heat I felt in his presence was immediately doused when I walked in to find him hugging his children while his wife looked on.

Why am I always attracted to unavailable men?

In my last relationship, I was an unsuspecting mistress and had no reason to think that he wasn't single and unattached.

Scott and I had been industry colleagues. I was the Communications and Events Manager for my former employer in Santa Clara and Scott was the site vendor I'd hired to host an event.

We dated for three months and I fell hard. It's easy to blame it on being young and blinded by the love-bombing. And then I found out about Scott's other life, and I was devastated in one swift move when I learned he had a wife, a son and a newborn baby girl.

I experienced more than heartbreak.

I had a breakdown.

My employer fired me because I couldn't finish the job while I holed up in my shitty apartment for a week, unable to eat or take care of myself.

If it hadn't been for my mom, who dropped everything to fly in from the East Coast and check on me, I'm not sure I would've survived. I was in a world of hurt. The blame and self-doubt I felt was too much to bear.

Now here I am again, lusting over the hot hockey goalie who I thought was giving me flirty vibes. But at least I found out early that Soren's married with kids so I won't continue to be smitten with him.

Damn those dark, penetrating gazes he gave me that sent shivers of lust down my spine. Every look exchanged between us woke up parts of me that had been on hiatus since my breakup.

Admittedly, he is rather grouchy on the outside, but then I'd catch glimpses of a softer side. Something buried beneath that ill-tempered exterior, like he's hiding behind some sort of armor and just acting the part of scary and impenetrable man.

Now that I know the truth, I can go about my day and focus on getting through this photoshoot. I can dust myself off and deal with working with him for the next few hours without incident.

I rap my knuckles on the improvised dressing-room door and hear some of the guys chattering as they change into their assigned costumes.

"Everyone decent in here?" I call out. Several responses are shouted from the other side of the makeshift dressing room.

"All good!" says one, while another yells, "Decent."

I take their word at face value and swing the door open, stepping inside.

The room carries the unmistakable scent of *men*—the distinct and spicy aroma of aftershave, fresh, clean soap, and a hint of fragrant hair products.

The moment I lift my gaze, my eyes naturally land on the one man I'm trying to avoid. Soren has his back to me, and I get an eyeful of his naked ass.

I let out a surprised gasp and stumble backward, my shoulder banging against the wood frame of the door.

“Oof,” I protest in pain. That earns everyone’s attention, their heads all swinging to look at me. Soren snaps his head to peer over his shoulder, a smirk pulling at his lips.

He stands there like a naked Viking warrior, offering me the delectable view of his posterior.

And let me tell you, his butt is the Taj Mahal of male asses.

My mouth drop opens and my gaze involuntarily glides from the top of his broad shoulders to the sloped planes of his muscular back and his tapered waist, then back to his round and perfect hockey butt. I grip the iPad more tightly as I get lost in the sight of his sculpted flesh.

Tanner snaps his fingers in front of my face, drawing my attention back to where it should be.

“Earth to Ali-gator,” he beckons with a wave of his hand. I blink. “You okay?”

“Uh-huh.” I choke out an odd noise. “You guys said you were decent in here.”

Tanner scans around. “We are.”

I roll my eyes. “Differing definitions, I guess.”

I’m still a bit distracted by Soren, who is now pulling on the costume. My gaze drinks in the muscular lines of his hamstrings and bulging calves. He clearly gets a regular workout in front of the net. I’ve seen the warm-ups and stretching routines that happen out there on the ice before games. There’s a reason for the Instagram accounts dedicated to the way goaltenders rhythmically thrust their hips against the ice in that butterfly position.

My imagination runs rampant with the image of Soren on top of me in that same position, strong biceps holding him up as he thrusts inside of me...

Once again, I've been pulled from my inappropriately erotic reverie by my brother's question.

"Where do you want us now?"

I clear my throat and quickly review the schedule, knowing my face is a cherry red that matches my hair color.

"Right. Okay, boys," I grit out, my voice holding a raspy edge to it. When I return my gaze to the group, I intentionally avoid Mr. Sexy Butt. "Here's the plan for today."

Pasting on a diplomatic smile and wiping away all images of Soren's naked tush, I scan the room, noticing that Soren's now covered up to the waist and has turned around to face me, preventing any further accidental views.

"We have three backdrop stations, and we'll arrange each shoot by month. So, Soren." I peer up at him through my lashes, keeping my expression neutral. His brows furrow, and I can't tell what he's thinking. "You'll be in the January winter scene."

He gives me a small nod. I'll take that as agreement.

"Where's Shaw?" I ask, skimming over the roomful of men in search of one of the youngest players, a rookie power forward they call Benny who was new to the team this past year.

"Over here," he calls from back in the corner, where I find him sitting on the floor with an adorable gray and white pit bull curled up in his lap, his thigh completely covered by her big head.

When I'd confirmed with Shaw Benning last night, he'd asked if he could bring his rescue dog, Thora, who has become somewhat of a mascot for the Vikings. I wasn't sure about the idea of having a pit pull in our midst, but he promised that the breed gets a bad rap and that Thora is a sweetheart who loves everyone.

Which gave me the idea to have them both in the February scene for Valentine's Day.

“Hey, Shaw. You and Thora will be in February and dressed as Cupids.”

He chuckles and the dog wags her tail. “Hear that, girl? You’re going to be spreading love all over the pages.” A sharp bark follows his explanation.

“Come here, girl.” Tanner, who is already dressed in his Santa suit, leans over at the waist and pats his thighs. The dog comes bounding toward him with a happy tail wag. My brother ruffles the top of the dog’s huge block head, and she leans her body into him before turning around and planting her butt into his shins.

“Next up is Case Lyons.” Case glances up from his phone and gives me a wave. “You’ll be posing for March in the whole ‘in like a lion, out like a lamb’ theme.”

Tanner lets out a lion’s roar, and everyone laughs. My brother is such a crack-up. He didn’t inherit that trait from our father, though, who was always far too serious. That might be what led to his early death. He never laughed enough.

“Are you making him dress up like a lion or a lamb? It could be iconic,” Duncan suggests, holding his palms under his chin to frame his face as he bats his eyelashes.

I chuckle. “Nod a bad idea. I think we have both options available in wardrobe.”

“Or, ” Tanner pipes up enthusiastically, his fake white beard bobbing up and down as he speaks, “you could have the lamb and the wolf pictured together, the wolf devouring the lamb.”

Soren’s face turns to pure horror and Case shivers. “Jesus, Rossy. You’re a sick fuck.”

“What?” Tanner says incredulously, raising a shoulder as if befuddled by their pushback.

“Thanks for playing, big brother.” I snort, patting him on that same shoulder. “But our objective with this calendar is to raise money, not shock the donors. Why don’t you leave all the ideas to me?”

He drops his chin to his burly red chest in defeat. “Fine, fine. I’m just trying to help, eh.” Then his head pops up again and he snaps his fingers. “But how about in the scene with Ax, he’s not just chopping wood like a mountain man? Instead, there’s a bloody head on a stump and he’s a serial killer!”

The entire room groans and fills with expletives, and I stifle my laughter. My brother can sometimes be a weirdo. A scary one, at that.

“Alrighty then. I’ll go check on the scenes. Soren, you’re on deck.”

I walk out the door and turn to my left when I find that Soren has quietly snuck up behind me. Sneaky as a wolf.

“Oh, you startled me.” The green in his eyes has lightened exponentially from the more intense dark color I noticed earlier.

“Do you need something before we begin?”

His proximity to my body causes a visceral reaction. The tips of my nipples pebble against my bra and my tummy flutters with a strange sensation.

“You and Tanner... you are siblings, ja?”

The question throws me off-kilter, coming out of left field like it does.

I turn to look over my shoulder to where Tanner now sits on the floor playing with Thora, and I nod.

“Um, yeah? He’s my older half-brother.” I nervously tuck a stray curl of hair behind my ear. I guess I assumed everyone knew about the nepotism. But maybe it wasn’t a big deal to anyone but me.

I’m about to say more—when I get nervous, I have diarrhea of the mouth—but I don’t have a chance because Soren grunts something in a gruff mumble and then turns and walks away.

Again.

That man sure needs to learn a thing or two about ending a conversation the right way. Geesh.

Soren

Ali is Tanner's sister?

Well, that certainly explains a few things. A sigh of relief expels from my lungs, allowing the inexplicable jealousy I'd felt to dissipate from my body. My shoulders relax at this new bit of knowledge. Tanner and Ali aren't together in the sense I initially thought they were.

Why do I feel this way? I don't even know Ali beyond our brief phone conversation last night and our short interactions today.

Yet there is this sizzling, wild energy that circles between us and draws me into her. At least, I feel it. I don't know if Ali does, but it's a magnetic force pulling me to her.

At the moment, I feel like a rag doll as I'm posed and positioned by the photographer, who was introduced to us all as Joelle. Anna and the kids left a little while ago to track down some breakfast and said they'd be back shortly. I was told to get dressed in a ski jacket and ski pants, which are very snug, and now I'm burning up, sweat beading and clinging to the middle of my back.

But it's nothing like the heat I feel from Ali's eyes on me. Each time I see her, those blue eyes quickly turn away, as if she's avoiding my gaze.

When I first began playing in the league, I developed an uneasiness when under the watchful eyes of fans and media. Even geared up in my goaltender pads and helmet that protect me like armor, my skin would tighten from the pressure of all eyes being on me. When I'm alone in the net, it's like I'm an animal in an enclosure at the zoo. But unlike a wolf in a man-made habitat, I can't seek refuge in a cave when I'm on the ice and the arena lights are on me. My anxiety has grown so bad that I've had to ask the team PR rep to help me limit the number of interviews with the media or press.

But I'm enjoying the attention I'm getting from Ali. Contentment curls inside my chest any time a smile plays at her lips or when that pink blush creeps over her neck and cheeks.

It's cute when she takes a lock of her auburn hair and winds the curl around her finger as she studies her notes or gauges any changes to the photo background that might be needed. My own fingers twitch to touch that hair. The muscles in my jaw clench with the desire to bring those curls to my nose and breathe in the heavenly scent of ginger and cinnamon.

I cast a quick glance in her direction to find her regarding me with quiet blue eyes.

"I don't know," Ali says to Joelle, stepping onto the set and moving toward me with a furrowed brow. She waves a hand at my body, her expression twisting in disapproval. "This outerwear doesn't scream hungry predator."

My bicep flexes instinctively when her hand lands on my arm, and she snakes it back like she's been burned.

A searing blaze runs up my arm from that single touch.

"I'm so sorry. I get carried away and forget to ask for permission." She blushes with a sheepish smile.

My nostrils flare and I huff out a pained laugh. "It's fine. You can touch."

She can touch whatever and wherever she wants on my body. A spike of desire hits me square in the groin.

Ali smiles and the tiny lines at the corners of her eyes crinkle. “Hey, Joelle?”

I glance over her shoulder to find the photographer setting up her camera and lighting equipment. Joelle looks up from where she’s bent over the tripod. “Yeah?”

Ali circles around where I stand, a slow perusal of my body, and I can see the wheels turn in her head. She glances behind me at the mountain scenery and motions with a wave toward my chest before leaning in to whisper her request in my ear.

“I have an idea. Can you take off your vest?” It’s discreet and barely audible, but I hear the hitch in her voice.

My own voice betrays me, sounding hoarse and deep. “Ja.”

When I pull the material off my arms and let it drop, leaving my torso uncovered and exposed, a noise escapes Ali’s lips. The sound floods me with desire, my stomach tightening into knots, hands clenching into fists.

She lifts her chin and locks eyes on me but speaks to Joelle. “What do you think about having Soren bare-chested, holding his helmet in the crook of his arm?” The heat in her gaze burns me to the core. She tilts her head, raising an eyebrow. “Did you happen to bring your gear and helmet like I asked everyone to?”

I nod, tipping my chin toward the dressing room area. “Ja. In my bag.”

“Great. Would you mind grabbing it while I rearrange things here?”

I go do as she asks—although at this point, honestly, I’d do anything she wants. If she wants me to drop my pants entirely, I’m game. Lie naked on top of a bed of nails? No problem. The pain might be intolerable, but it would deflect from the pain I feel from being this close to her.

The guys all turn to me as I enter the dressing room but say nothing of my state of undress. I unzip my large bag with the Vikings logo and my

name on the side and extract one of my favorite hand-painted helmets from last year. It's decorated with a silver wolf with piercing gold eyes. The rendering feels like my inner spirit.

When I return to the set, I find Ali busily restaging things. It's fascinating to watch her in action, making course corrections and changes on the fly. You can tell she's an organized woman but can adapt and change quickly when needed.

The similarities between what she does in her role and my job as a goaltender are not lost on me. As a defender in the net, it's critical that I'm able to keep up with every nuance in player positions, stick angles, and puck movement out on the ice.

Flexibility is my middle name. On the ice, that is.

Out in the real world, I have difficulty making those course corrections.

And from the looks of it, Ali is required to do the same.

I'm mesmerized as I watch her assess the situation, her entire body moving expressively. Her blue eyes sparkle like sunlight casting off the ocean and her freckles seem to come alive when she's hit with an idea that adds to the overall set design.

Ali literally bubbles with a joy that I can't comprehend. I have no inner light to speak of anymore. It was dimmed years ago and is now shrouded in guilt and grief.

The light that exudes from Ali is a lighthouse beacon, and I'm a sailor lost at sea. My soul wants to be saved her bright joy, but I let go of that thought immediately. I'm in no state of mind to start something with her.

Besides, the fact remains—Ali is my teammate's sister, which means Ali St. Francis is completely off-limits to me anyway.

Before I was drafted by the Vikings organization, I previously played for a German team where I saw the damage this type of situation can cause. My friend and teammate, Karl Stolz, had a younger sister who was barely legal when she started hanging out with Sasha Petrov, a D-man from

Russia. I've never seen anything quite like the animosity that instantly grew between the two teammates when Karl found out about the relationship, and it's not something I would want to replicate on my own. I like Rossy too much to create that kind of tension.

There's also the fact that I've behaved like a complete dickhead to Ali throughout today's photoshoot. My usual sullen moodiness and surly manners have shown their ugly heads several times today.

Jesus, I've been such a prick to *everyone*, but especially to this sunny woman who is only here to do her job and manage a bunch of hockey-playing idiots so her organization can raise money for kids.

I shake my head at my ridiculous behavior as I head back toward the studio, where my mouth drops open in surprise. Ali has worked her magic and transformed the set.

When she hears my approach, she whirls around, her smile the brightest thing since the invention of the light bulb.

Ja.

There's no way in hell that a woman so full of sunshine would ever choose to go out with the likes of me.

But a guy can fucking dream.

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A li

Holy smokes.

This situation couldn't get any more fantastical if a genie had been thrown out of a bottle and granted me my wildest fantasies.

A nearly naked goalie is waiting on me to tell him what to do.

While he was off finding his helmet, Joelle and I had located a small step stool, which we placed behind the mountains part of the set so it will look like Soren climbed to the top of a snowy mountain range and is defending his domain.

And doing it bare-chested, to boot.

Could it get any hotter than this?

Beads of sweat roll down my cleavage. I have to stop thinking about him in any way other than professional. He's married and has a family.

Damn my fantasies all to hell.

"Here, can you lather Soren up for me?" asks Joelle, absently thrusting a bottle of oil into my hand. My arms clumsily try to juggle that with my iPad and coffee cup. "I need to set up for the shot and Dante's still working on Tanner's hair. I want those abs to *glisten*." She waves a hand and waggles her eyebrows unabashedly at Soren, who has returned with his

helmet in hand. I blanch at her command, at a loss for words as my mouth opens and closes like a fish.

I stare down at the bottle, then at Soren's physique, and swallow.

She wants me to do *what now*?

I expected to get my hands dirty during this shoot—no pun intended. I was ready to run around and coordinate the scenes, get models in their spots when needed, and be here to ensure everything went smoothly and without a hitch.

What I didn't expect was to get my hands literally *dirty* with oil and run them all over Soren's body.

I chew on my bottom lip, then stammer out my reply. "Uh...um... okay. Yeah, sure. I can do that."

Moving slowly forward, I stop in front of the man in question. His imposing figure towers over me, his eyes fixed on my face, and his full lips quirk ever so slightly at the corners of his mouth, which morphs into a smirk.

Is that a twinkle in his eye? Maybe a dare?

Oh, Jesus. I can't breathe. I'm too close. I get a whiff of his masculine scene and feel lightheaded.

Nope. Not going to go there. He's married. End of story. My stupid hormones can take a hike.

I shake my head, dislodging my brain cobwebs, and look up at him. "May I?"

"Be my guest." He raises his brows and hoists his arms out to his sides, making the muscles of his biceps and shoulders contract in a gorgeous series of slopes and valleys.

With trembling fingers, I set down my iPad and now cold coffee. I uncap the baby oil bottle and pour a generous glob of the stuff onto my palms.

This situation wasn't on my bingo card during the planning of this calendar shoot. Yet here I am, ready to oil up one of the hottest men in the league.

I'm not sure if this should be considered a special kind of torture or a nice perk of the job.

Either way, I swallow thickly and rub my cold, shaky hands together before placing them on the top of his shoulders.

I peer up at him in apology. "Sorry for my cold fingers."

A ripple of excitement passes through me at my first touch of his firm skin. Goosebumps form over his heated flesh, which is like touching hot, molten lava.

The temperature of the studio space when we arrived earlier this morning was already cool because it's in a warehouse with climate control. But Joelle had assumed the guys would get too warm and uncomfortable in their costumes under the glare of the lights, so she requested that we adjust it even more. All that did for me was turn my already cold body parts into freezing icicles.

"Don't apologize. It feels good," Soren says with a hum, closing his eyes as if to relish the sensation.

"Bet you didn't expect to be greased up by a stranger today, did you?" We both laugh at the awkward tension between us.

I glide my hands over the curves of his arms, exploring the sinewy and strong structure of his arms. The soft blond hairs along his forearms tickle my palms, and an involuntary shiver runs down my spine.

A strand of my hair comes loose, falling in front of one eye. I lift my hand from his arm and am about to brush the fallen strand away, my knuckles skimming along my face, but then I realize they're coated with oil.

Soren notices my dilemma and looks at me questioningly. I blink.

"May I?" He asks the same question I asked of him before we began. A request for consent. And my knees go weak.

His fingers carefully move the hair from my eye, tucking the fallen strand behind my ear. My body lights up like a New Year's fireworks celebration the moment his fingers brush the shell of my ear.

I mutter my thanks. "I should've pulled my hair back earlier, but I had no idea I'd be lubing up a naked goalie and that it'd be such dirty work."

A bark of laughter bursts from his lungs and I glance up, startled. I literally feel the rumble of noise vibrating through my palms circling his pecs.

Did I just make The Wolf laugh?

His lips twitch with an appreciative smile.

"A partially naked goalie," he corrects, then adds a wink. "You're cute."

"Oh. Um, thanks," I reply awkwardly. "You are too."

A weird but electric silence descends between us.

Did I just call this man cute? Awkward is my middle name, and today's awkwardness is on a whole new level. My brain has short-circuited and refuses to send the correct signals to my mouth.

I continue running my hands over his chest, nervous about what comes next—his abs. I'm a little more than anxious to move my palms across that rippling terrain.

Soren remains motionless except for the slow rise and fall of his chest. I'm not sure how he can remain so calm about this when my heart is speeding.

Biting the proverbial bullet, I follow the tapered lines of his waist, fingers and thumbs gliding over the dips and grooves of those rock-hard abs. I suck my lower lip between my teeth as my hands skim down to his waistband.

Just keep breathing. Don't get lost in this moment and forget about his wife and kids.

He sucks in a deep breath and I stop, raising a hand to my eyebrow to trace over it with my index finger.

“You got oil on your face,” he says matter-of-factly.

Without asking permission this time, he simply sweeps his knuckles over my forehead and wipes the remnants on the back of his pants. Although it’s gentle and quick, the electrifying shock of his touch practically knocks me on my ass.

“Oh.”

The single word carries with it a plethora of meanings.

Oh, I didn’t realize I had oil on my face.

Oh, this moment feels big to me. Does it to you, too?

Oh, I’m attracted to you, and I don’t know what to do with that.

Oh, this is so bad. I need to keep a professional distance.

Oh, I really want you to kiss me right now. Damn the consequences.

Oh, I can’t get involved with a married man.

As the thoughts twirl in a chaotic mess in my head, fueled by my confusion over this strange attraction and its potency that blocks out everything around us, our moment is suddenly interrupted by the sound of children’s laughter.

And I take a giant step backward, remembering where we are and who we are.

“Uncle Soren! We’re back!”

Our heads whirl in the direction of the approaching intrusion. Heinrich barrels toward us, carrying a bag of fast food clutched in his hand. A giant smile accompanies his ecstatic announcement.

“We brought poutine fries and burgers from the Burger Shack,” he exclaims. The scent of greasy fries makes my mouth water and my stomach rumble with hunger, reminding me that I’ve only eaten a banana so far today. “Mutti bought some for you too, Onkel.”

It’s adorable to hear him vacillate between English and German as he speaks with Soren. His excitement is palpable, and it has a way of changing Soren’s whole demeanor.

Suddenly, my brain fog lifts from the heady cloud I'd been in as Heinrich's greeting registers clearly for the first time in my head.

He said *Uncle* Soren. Not Father. Not Dad. Uncle.

I look between Soren and the young boy. There are similarities in their features. They both have blond hair, although Soren's is a little darker than the boy's, a dimple in the side of their chins, and square jawlines. They absolutely could be father and son.

But that's where the familial similarities end. Where the boy is all smiles and innocent joy, Soren is guarded and intense.

Even with the mercurial moods I've witnessed, there's still something about The Wolf that makes my insides spasm with attraction.

A noticeable shift occurs when Anna glides in like some ethereal being, her beautiful daughter in tow.

Anna smiles apologetically and she places a hand over her heart. "I am so sorry we've interrupted, but Heinrich was eager to share his poutine. Do you mind if we sit back and watch?"

Soren's gaze snags mine, looking for a response, and I shrug. "It's totally up to you. As long as you all remain behind the photographer, it should be fine. We're just about ready to get things started."

"Gut," Soren says with a curt nod. His eyes travel to my hands, then down to his chest, and back up again. They twinkle with humor. "Am I lubed up enough for you?"

I cough, dipping my chin as cheeks flush hot. Then I look to where Joelle is testing her lighting.

"If not, I've got you covered. I am now an expert on pre-photo oil application." I waggle the bottle of oil in the air with a flourish.

"Ja, you are very gut."

Soren's voice sounds neutral enough, but I detect a slight hint of flirtation there. Or maybe it's just wishful thinking.

Now that I know he's not married to Anna, I can allow myself just a little bit more freedom to flirt, even if it doesn't lead to anything more than that.

I give a slight curtsy.

"It must've been all those classes I took in college on how to oil up a goalie slash hot model."

He quirks an eyebrow, and I want to disappear into the floor when I realize what I said.

I glance down at my watch. "Okay!" I say cheerfully. "Let's move along. Shall we?"

Soren touches the arm I have extended toward the set.

"Ali, could I ask a favor?"

And my imagination runs wild.

His hand leaves my arm, but the heat still sizzles along my skin, radiating down to the very marrow of my being.

"Of course. Unless you want to change your scene, that is. I'm afraid we're pretty much locked and loaded for this one." I stab my thumb over my shoulder.

This earns me a deep rumble of a chuckle. "Nein. No." He shakes his head firmly and then clears his throat and continues. "Since my family is here—*my brother's family*," he adds for clarification, "I thought it would be nice if the photographer could get a few family shots? Would that be okay?"

If it's one thing in the world I hate doing, it's disappointing anyone.

Saying no to Soren, especially when he asked with such sweet earnestness, would make me feel awful. On the other hand, we are already pushing against the clock today, and I'm not sure we'll have the time.

"I can't promise anything..." I say, giving him a look. "But I'll ask Joelle and we'll try."

"Danke." Soren gives a brisk nod and we both head toward the set. While he gets into place for January, I start checking February and March's

backdrops so Joelle can transition smoothly between setups.

All the while, I try to keep my head in the game and not fantasize about doing wild things with the half-naked goalie I just lathered up.

The one I can still feel under my fingertips.

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Soren

The time with my family has gone by in a blur, including what feels like a year's worth of activity packed into just a mere fourteen days.

I guess that's because, in essence, it is a year's worth.

It breaks my heart to have such limited time with the kids. But as Heinrich and Clara get older, more of their days are spent on new activities and their friends.

My hockey career has always dictated my personal life outside of the sport. While some of my teammates have been successful at it, it takes time to build a relationship with a woman and start a family. There's also the part where I'd need to find a woman to connect with. Someone who gets me.

Until then, my focus has been on becoming the best goaltender I can be, which requires staunch commitment to my game.

I've come to accept that I don't have the emotional depth to have a romantic connection or commitment to another human.

These summers I spend with Anna and the kids is the most I have to offer them.

And now, that means Heinrich and I are playing a rousing game of water football in my pool while Anna and Clara are out shopping one last time before they all leave tomorrow night for home.

“Incoming!” This is the only warning we get before Rossy cannonballs into the water between Heinrich and me.

A massive eruption of water douses me, splashing through the pool and over the sides of the pool deck. A quick check over to Heinrich to make sure he’s okay and I’m greeted by a huge grin on his face, his hair dripping wet from the deluge. The sound of Heinrich’s laugh produces a sharp pain in my gut.

I won’t get to hear it for a while after this.

Rossy’s wet head pops up from the depths, water flooding over his eyes and down his face. I splash him with my hand, and he spits out water through his toothy smile.

“Dude, you’re a fucking dick,” I grouse, flipping him off as he shakes his head like a wet dog. Heinrich snickers at my snarky comment. “That was a shithead thing to do. There are others in this pool, you know.”

Rossy slaps his palms on top of the waterline. “You know what they say... if you don’t want to get wet, don’t come to the pool party when Rossy’s around!”

My gaze darts between Heinrich and my juvenile teammate and friend, and I shake my head incredulously. “This isn’t a party and you *weren’t* even invited, Dummkopf.”

Heinrich covers his mouth and laughs, and I see the joy in his eyes when they alight on his hockey idol. Rossy, for all his idiocy and childish behavior, has a real soft spot for my nephew and has become fast friends with him over the past two weeks, taking him under his wing as his little buddy. Rossy has even taken to calling him Henry instead of Heinrich. My nephew beams proudly whenever he hears the nickname and has specifically told me to “Call me Henry from now on.” As a devoted uncle, I have been doing my best.

Aside from that, now that he’s older, Anna has given him more freedom out from under her watchful eye, which I’ve taken advantage of. *Henry* has

joined me and the guys out on the golf course and even on a four-wheeler day in the forest last week.

I realize I can't replace his father, but my hope at the very least is to be a good male role model, someone who will teach him all the things he needs to learn to become a good man. Both kids need someone in their lives besides their mother to guide them and provide direction on how to maneuver through life.

It brings back the conversation that Anna and I had last night once the kids crashed out after our pizza, popcorn, and movie marathon.

She sits on the couch, long legs covered in black leggings and stretched out comfortably in front of her, heels crossed and planted on the leather ottoman. She runs a finger over the rim of her wineglass, looking contemplatively out my living room windows as the city lights twinkle and shine and bounce off the water below.

"I worry about you, Soren," she says softly, a look of sadness washing over her face. A face that's so familiar to me. We've known each other since before I even hit puberty. She and Günther began dating when he was fifteen. Anna was the love of his life.

"Me? Why?" The comment takes me by surprise. "You have enough on your plate. You don't need to worry about me."

Anna has been able to pick up the pieces and move forward after Günther's death.

I simply broke and neglected to fix it.

She narrows her eyes at me. "I see right through you. That mask you wear may be hard for others to get a glimpse inside, but I know what's going on."

"Oh yeah? And what's that, dear sister?" I quirk a brow. "What do you think is truly going on inside me?"

She wags her finger and there's pity in her eyes. "You, dear brother, are lonely. It breaks my heart to see you living this way. You are far too young

and have too much to offer to live life a recluse.”

I scowl, then roll my eyes hard. “Whatever. I’m fine.”

My chest constricts from the acute pain I feel in my heart, the anger growing inside me. Anger at Anna for calling me out. Anger at the loss I’ve lived through. Anger at my brother for his stupid, selfish need for adventure.

But mostly, I’m angry at myself because I know she’s right.

I inhale a deep, exaggerated breath and let it out slowly between my lips.

“Okay,” she says, keeping her gaze directed on me and quirking her brow. “If you’re so fine”—she uses finger quotes—“then it shouldn’t be a big deal to ask out Ali on a date.”

I make a strangled noise, as if my throat has been sliced with a blade.

“What? Who?”

She snickers at my stupidity. “You know who I mean. Ali, the gorgeous redhead from the calendar shoot. The one you were trying to flirt with—and failed miserably at, I might add.”

“I didn’t flirt,” I say adamantly. It’s true. I wouldn’t know the first thing about how to flirt even if my life depended on it. “And why do you assume I like her?”

“Oh, Soren. It was written across your face, plain as day. You are smitten.” Anna pats my hand patronizingly and shakes her head ruefully.

I snort-laugh. “That’s ridiculous.”

She tsks. “What’s ridiculous is you choosing to not ask that sweet girl out as soon as possible.”

I consider this for a moment, crossing my arms over my chest with a resolute sigh. “I’ll think about it. I’m not sure she’s that into me, though.”

Anna’s eyes open wide and the city lights reflect in them.

“Trust me,” she says with a shrewd grin, sweeping a hand over her bangs to brush them off her forehead and glancing at me under her lashes. “That woman is smitten as well. Lord knows why.”

I give her a mocking shove against her shoulder and she laughs. It's so easy to hang with Anna, falling back into our old patterns, teasing each other like brother and sister.

But then she grows quiet and contemplative, closing her eyes as her expression morphs from silliness to profound sadness.

"I still miss him, Soren. I miss him so much." She wipes away a tear that's escaped the corner of her eye. "Don't ever doubt how much I loved him."

Rossy's loud hoot of laughter brings me out of my reverie, and something thuds against the back of my head. It's a cold, wet, spongy Nerf football that has bounced off my head and landed in the water next to me.

"What the hell?" I rub the spot against my scalp and whirl around to find Rossy swimming ungracefully toward the ball, racing to grab it before Henry does.

Henry beats him to it and hollers in triumph while Rossy pouts with an overdramatic reply.

"I let you beat me, kid." He says swims up to me and nudges his shoulder against my arm. "Henry's fast; I'll give him that."

Shielding his eyes with his hand, he not so subtly glances around the pool deck and then turns to me. "So, where's his MILF?"

I give him a deadly glare, splashing him with water. "Don't fucking talk about my sister-in-law like that. Perv."

Rossy lifts his shoulders haplessly. "What? She's a fucking sexy woman, even if she's older than me and has kids."

Leaning in close, he murmurs near my ear, "Come on, Wolf. You can't tell me you don't think she's smokin' hot."

Just before I dunk him, my hands having settled on top of his head to push him down, I say, "I thought you said sisters are specifically off-limits."

Dunk. Dunk. Dunk.

Rossy comes up sputtering, his laughter rippling off the water like rays of sunshine.

When he catches his breath, he acquiesces. “Yeah, yeah. Okay, bro. You’re right. No sister action. That means you too. Ali’s off-limits as well.”

I scrunch my brows together as if I haven’t been thinking about his sister for over a week.

After my conversation with Anna, I may have done some internet stalking. I sneaked peeks at her LinkedIn profile and checked out her picture and profile on the foundation’s website.

Truth be told, Ali’s the first woman in years that has sparked any flicker of interest in me or given me any physical thrill.

What’s worse? Admitting that Anna’s right about my crush on Ali? Or breaking the bro code with Tanner?

Either way, I’d be doing something I’ve never done before.

I’d be going after a woman I like.

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A li

“You have a visitor here to see you, Ali.”

I glance up from my laptop to find our office coordinator, Luna, standing in the doorway wearing a look that says *Wait 'til you see who it is*.

It's no secret. I'd reached out yesterday to see if Soren would have time to stop by today and check out the photos Joelle took of him and his family.

Regardless, knowing he was coming doesn't stop the nerves from crashing around wildly in my belly or the neurons in my brain from sending out pulsing chemical signals throughout my body. I'm about to see Soren face-to-face again.

And I remember exactly how he looks without a shirt. This time, however, he'll likely be wearing a bit more clothing.

“Thanks, Luna. You can bring him in.”

I reach for the tumbler of water on my desk and take a drink to cool my throat and loosen my tongue, but it doesn't help. The moment I raise my eyes, they land on his broad chest, the one that I know from experience feels incredible under my roaming fingertips. I'm mesmerized by the stretch of his black T-shirt, so tight and fitted that it's practically indecent. Remembering the firm rise of his pecs and the corded rope of his thick arms, I can scarcely breathe from his proximity now.

My hand trembles and the bottle slips from my hand, plopping on its side before taking a rolling dive off the edge of my desk.

“Oh, shit,” I mutter, scrambling up from my chair to rush around the corner of my desk, where water is gushing from the bottle’s opening.

“Here, let me help.”

Soren crouches next to me at the same moment I bend over and our heads collide, clunking solidly together.

“Ouch!” “Oof,” we say over one another. Soren rubs a palm across his forehead.

How am I botching this up so badly? The poor guy already has a hazardous job where head injuries are common, and I come along and give him a concussion when he’s least expecting it.

“I’m such a klutz. Here, forget about the water. Are you okay?”

I kneel next to him and, without a second thought to what I’m doing, reach out to where I clocked him and massage my fingers along his temple.

His mouth carries a hint of a smile, the perfectly full lips pulling at the corners. I’m completely engrossed in what it might feel like to have him brush his mouth against mine ever so slightly... the space between us growing smaller... him crowding me against the back of the desk... lowering his strong, capable body over mine... capturing my mouth with a hard, needy kiss...

The sound of Soren’s throat clearing has me blinking rapidly, and I suddenly realize what I’ve done and where my thoughts have gone. But instead of pulling away, my gaze stalls on his lips.

“Hallo, Ali,” he greets with a quirk of his eyebrow. The way my name rolls off his tongue—so low—triggers a flurry of butterflies to take flight in my belly.

Honest to God, I’ve never been so captivated with the sound of my name being said. I’d be content to listen to him say it on repeat for days.

Maybe it's the way he accentuates the syllables or maybe it's his masculine presence that stirs me up and makes me squirm.

Whatever it is, The Wolf brings about a delicious buzz of electricity that surges riotously within my body.

I search his expression and his eyes flicker with something unreadable.

Is there a spark of interest? Because I sure feel one.

On the other hand, he could also be wondering what the hell is wrong with me and is just trying to locate the nearest exit to make his escape.

Determined to shake this whole situation off rather than make it any worse than it already is, I wave my hand and begin to push myself up to my feet. But he's faster than me, grabbing my elbow to assist me up.

Pheromones are a freaking crazy thing. At just the slightest whiff of his bodywash and aftershave, I can feel my nipples pucker with an urgent desire to be touched.

My inappropriately sexy thoughts have become a liability and are clearly causing serious damage to my mental equilibrium. I run my finger over the line of my eyebrow to resist the temptation to touch him and cause any more emotional wreckage.

"Well, then," I finally spit out, returning the water bottle to my desk and closing the door of my tiny workspace. "Please have a seat. Can I offer you something to eat or drink? Coffee? Water? Red Vines, perhaps?"

Although our offices are small, we do have a well-stocked employee kitchen, where we always have loads of free snacks and drinks. In fact, Sam, our IT guy, loves Red Vines, so all the foundation's Costco deliveries include a big vat of the sweet licorice.

"Nein. Thank you." He offers a short, curt chuckle.

Pull yourself together, girl.

But I'm too painfully aware of his presence to act casually. He's taken a seat across from me, legs open and knees falling to the sides. And in a flash, my memory awakens to the YouTube video I watched on repeat this past

weekend, the one that a fan took of The Wolf during his pre-game warm-up in front of the net.

Holy mother of joy.

That entire stretching routine was the sexiest thing I've ever seen a man do. And then it was just me and my trusty vibrator that night as I imagined Soren hovering over me, curling his hips with a thrusting precision that goalies do. Pelvis tilted and angled so, as he pressed his hard, throbbing dick into me, I would scream out his name...

"Is that you and Tanner?"

I blink hard. I'm already back in my chair and my thumb is unconsciously stroking my bottom lip. I drop my hands to my lap and give myself a stern scolding because, HELLO! Completely inappropriate.

My eyes grow wide and my attention whirls toward the framed photo on my desk, which he picks up to examine more closely.

I clear my throat. "Yeah, it's one of my favorites." My voice breaks with huskiness. "We were both twelve that summer—he's only six months older than me—and our dad had taken us on summer holiday up to Banff."

I smile at the memory. It is truly one of the last beautiful times the three of us spent together before my dad passed away suddenly and unexpectedly.

"My dad would take the two of us camping somewhere different every summer. This picture was taken just after we summited, and we were arguing over who got there first. Tanner and I completely failed to notice this gorgeous backdrop and the lake behind us because we were fighting. Our dad told us as much, and he took the picture as we both turned to look at the same time." I stare at the photo and see our flushed faces looking victorious over the completed adventure.

"Who won?" Soren asks with a small smile.

"Most likely Tanner." I chuckle with a shoulder shrug and then add, "But not by much. And he—"

"Probably cheated."

“Exactly. You know Tanner. He will do almost anything to win.”

Laughter rings out and a new kind of energy flows between us, building like a river current heading toward the rapids. A strong rush of exhilaration and anticipation.

“Your brother hasn’t changed much. He’s still loud, obnoxious, and—”

“Extra,” I blurt.

Soren cocks his pointed finger and thumb at me like a pistol firing. “Facts.”

He tilts his head to the side and runs the pad of his thumb over the blond stubble on his chin.

“I didn’t realize you and Tanner were related when we first met.”

My stomach clenches as he regards me. It’s embarrassing when people learn we’re siblings now that I work for his foundation and what they must think.

I shrug. “Well, we don’t publicize it, but we have different mothers. Tanner’s mom didn’t give him our dad’s last name when he was born. There was some animosity at that point between my dad and Camille, for very valid reasons.” I scrunch my nose and screw my lips. “It was a whole thing I won’t bore you with.”

He nods in understanding, but I can see he’s doing the math. I don’t feel the need to elaborate on my father’s affair with Tanner’s mother. All that matters is that Tanner, for all his quirks, faults, and hubris, has always been a good older brother to me.

“But you are close, ja?”

I grin at the interest in our relationship. “Yes. Even though a border ran between our homes, we really didn’t grow up too far from each other. I was raised in upstate New York, not far from Montreal. Until he started billeting, Dad made sure we had regular visits throughout the year.”

Soren replaces the framed photo on my desk, positioning and then repositioning it several times so that it’s in the same spot and facing the

same direction as it had been before.

His attention to this detail is quirky and kind of cute.

“Say what you will about Tanner, but there’s no one out there with a bigger heart than him.” I wink. “How about you? I think you mentioned that Anna is your brother’s wife. Was he able to visit as well?”

Soren’s dark gaze drops entirely and he dips his chin down to his chest. Something in the sudden disconnect makes me think I’ve just said something wrong.

There’s a long stretch of silence before he says quietly, “Nein. He cannot visit.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Well, maybe another time then.”

“Hmm.” He harrumphs with a shake of his head. He nervously begins tapping his thumb in rapid succession on his thigh. “Probably not.”

His response is confusing, but it’s obvious he doesn’t want to discuss it further.

“Well, I don’t want to keep you much longer than necessary. I know you still have family in town.” I raise an eyebrow, hoping it gives him the opportunity to expound.

“Nein. They left yesterday, back to Austria.”

Sorrow radiates through his tone, and I’m heartsick for him. Soren is clearly shattered over having to see them go, and it makes me wonder what happened to cause such grief around thoughts of his family.

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” I offer in apology. Disregarding the loud voice inside my head that is screaming, *Do not touch*, I move to the seat next to his and place my hand on top of his solid forearm. A seismic jolt runs up my arm like a shooting flame. “It’s clear that they mean the world to you.”

“Ja.”

I give him an encouraging smile. “Well, I’m hopeful that these photos bring you joy when you look at them. Maybe that will help make the

distance a little less painful.”

I’m about to reach for my laptop when he clasps a firm hand around my wrist. His fingers pulse warm against my skin, the heat from his palm penetrating through like sunlight through glass.

“Ali.” He pronounces the two syllables in a way that makes my name sound more like Muhammad Ali instead of alley, and I love it. “Danke. Thank you for giving me this gift. You went above and beyond.”

I flush from his praise. And then, because I’m highly awkward and inappropriate, I say the first thing that comes to mind.

“Well, just you wait ’til you find out what you’ll have to do in exchange for it.”

Yup. That’s me.

Awkward Alison.

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Soren

There are several things—mostly sexual and highly inappropriate—that run through my mind when Ali suggests that I need to give her something in exchange for the photos.

Can you blame a guy?

I may live like a celibate monk as some of my teammates have insinuated, but that doesn't mean I don't have a healthy sexual appetite. I've had hookups, and I enjoy the company of women.

But I'm not sure I've ever reacted with such eagerness nor experienced the clawing need I feel toward Ali.

Of course, I find her insanely attractive, and I'm pulled by her allure. Like the way Ali's bright blue eyes crinkle when she smiles, as if she has a secret she wants to share. And her reddish-gold hair that is sometimes curly and other times fixed in sleek, shiny waves that I want to thread my fingers through and lock in my grip.

Her curvy body has the perfect fullness around her hips and thighs. It shoots raw ripples of need that bite hungrily at my groin whenever I watch her walk away from me. My imagination runs rampant with all the things I could do with Ali if my fingers curled into that flesh around her legs and spread her wide.

My mouth would lay claim to all her hidden secrets between those shapely hips.

Fuck. This is not the time nor the place to have these indecent thoughts.

Besides all that, I'm not the kind of guy a woman like Ali would want to be with. Even Anna flat out told me I'm "not tapped into my emotional IQ," whatever the fuck that means. All I know for sure is that my moody disposition would only dampen Ali's sunny personality.

Plus, she's Rossy's sister.

Off-limits. Bro code. No crossing that boundary.

I brush all those issues aside when Ali slides an envelope along the woodgrain of her desk toward me. With a narrowed gaze, I peer down at what looks like a handwritten letter. My name is scrawled out in crayon on the front, the flap already open and unsealed.

"What is this?" I ask, eyeing her quizzically. She grins like a kid on Christmas.

"It's my bargaining chip."

I'm unsure of what we're bargaining for, so I carefully extract and open the tri-folded sheet and briefly scan the contents. It's a letter written in a child's messy handwriting using all the marker colors of the rainbow and at the very top is a recognizable drawing of a wolf.

Ali gestures with a *go ahead* sign, and I sigh heavily.

It's not that I've never received fan letters before, but they've normally come through the Vikings head office, where mail for the players and coaching staff is delivered. A PR intern is responsible for sorting through the messages and packages that arrive. I've heard about—but haven't myself received—various types of underwear for all genders, nude photos, and "I'm pregnant with your baby" kind of messages coming through. As well as the more threatening stalker and death threat type messages.

Mostly, though, the letters and messages are sweet, thoughtful, and flattering, a good boost to a guy's ego.

However, this one being delivered directly through the foundation captures my interest, and I begin reading. Well, as much as I can decipher, that is. Luckily, a second folded sheet is wrapped around the first, and it's typed.

Dear Woff,

U r the best goaly ever. I praktise evry day cuz I want to be as good as u r sumday. I am ate years old. I have a condishon that makes me look difrent. I get bullied. It makes me sad.

But gess whut. My mom says I get a wish and my wish is to play with u.

I luv your helmut. It is scary cool. I want to ware it sumday.

k, by. c u soon.

Luv, Nicolas Petaro

I read the letter once through and then read it again, blinking slowly as I do. The intent of the letter isn't quite clear, and I'm confused. There's no clue who this Nicolas kid is.

Ali offers more information and holds up another piece of paper. "Nicolas's letter was accompanied by this letter, written by his mother. In it, she explained that her son was born with a rare medical condition called Wolf-Hirschhorn Syndrome. Have you ever heard of it?"

I shake my head. "Nein."

"Yeah, I hadn't either until I did some research. Apparently, children born with it generally experience growth delays and intellectual disabilities. Plus, it can cause heart and brain function damage, leading to frequent seizures. The kids, like Nicolas, also share a distinct facial feature." Ali grimaces. "It's common for their heads to be smaller but their eyes are large and widely set. Their appearance is often described as Greek warrior helmet."

I rub the side of my jaw, thinking about this boy's life, and my attention goes back to the letter I hold in my hands. My heart twists into a pretzel of

ache. “This condition sounds fucking unfair.”

Ali holds a finger up, gesturing for me to hold on. Then she makes a few clicks on her laptop, her face morphing from sad to somewhat elated.

“Yes, that is very true. But just look at what Nicolas and his mother, Melanie, have done,” she says with a tinge of wonder, shaking her head thoughtfully.

Ali swivels her silver MacBook around so I can see the image on her screen. It appears to be an Instagram account and a profile grid. “They’ve taken what could be a devastating diagnosis, which would send lesser people into hiding, and made lemonade out of the lemons.”

Using the down arrow on the keyboard, I scroll through the grid filled with reels and posts, most of which are of Nicolas, I assume. He’s an adorable brown-haired boy with a crooked-tooth grin, a repaired cleft lip, and a happy disposition. In each shared video, the content is almost always centered on his love of Vikings hockey.

His profile bio even confidently states: *#1 Vikings fan and Wolf-Hirschhorn Syndrome advocate. This is the story of a boy named Nicolas diagnosed with WHS. Account managed by Nicolas’s mom.*

I glance back to Ali. “Holy shit. The kid has over 50k followers.”

She nods her head enthusiastically, and I click on a short reel where Nicolas is dressed in a too-large-for-his-size Vikings jersey and holds up a foam finger to the camera. He waves it ecstatically in the air, cheering with enthusiasm as he watches TV in his living room. The video pans to the television, which is showing a live broadcast of one of last season’s games.

“Woff, Woff, Woff.” Nicolas chants my nickname excitedly, proudly hoisting a stuffed wolf in his other hand. Then he hugs the animal in the crook of his arm and uses sign language to communicate more.

My breath seizes and the steel lock inside my chest breaks open like ice cracking in front of the net.

I read a caption on the post, typed by his mother, and my throat tightens, threatening to choke me up.

Nicolas is an avid fan of the Vikings team and loves to root for his favorite team and player. Like many with his condition, verbal communication is often fraught with difficulty, so he and others use ASL to communicate. If you don't know ASL, Nicolas just signed: I love The Wolf.

"I need to meet this kid," I state gruffly, spinning the screen back toward Ali. Our eyes catch and her smile radiates a warmth that spreads through my chest. Another piece of my armor threatens to crumble.

It's rare for me to do any special appearances outside the required fan days with the team. I don't like to engage with fans all that much because the personal attention makes me feel uncomfortable and my social anxiety goes into overdrive. I'm fine on the ice where I have my gear and mask on because the padding protects me from the glare and scrutiny, but face-to-face interactions leave me stressed and on edge.

But in this instance, I'm more than willing to go outside my comfort zone to meet such a huge fan.

Ali grins, her face lighting up with joy and she claps her hands. "I was hoping you'd say that."

She leans forward and props her elbows on the desk, resting her chin on her steepled fingers. "I don't want to pressure you, but our next LTLFK event is coming up in July. It's the charity golf game where we pair up kids with celebrities. I was hoping you'd be Nicolas's partner."

No second guessing required. The last time I was this certain about something was the day I announced my intention to put my name in for consideration to the NHL draft.

Completely different circumstances, but like that moment, the idea of doing this fills me with indescribable emotion. A sense a purpose. An excitement to be better. And it will allow me to spend more time with Ali.

Every time I'm with her, my mood has improved. She lights up the room with her radiant smile and her sweet warmth.

At this point, Ali could suggest I get naked on the ice and cluck like a chicken for charity and I'd do it if she'd give me that full-wattage smile of hers.

"Count me in."

"Thank you so much, Soren." She reaches her hand out to me, her fingers brushing lightly over my forearm. The touch is brief but no less charged than the one from earlier. A small hum of electricity ricochets through my body and then straight down to my cock.

When she pulls back, a deep blush spreads over her cheeks, and she begins tapping over her keyboard. "I'll send Nicolas's mom a confirmation email right now."

I watch in wonder at how quickly she types. When I'm at a keyboard, I'm all thumbs and have to hunt and peck to find the letters.

When she's satisfied, she hits Send with a swift nod and her face once again breaks into a dazzling smile. Slapping her palms on the desk, she throws me a satisfied look. "Okay. I think I got what I wanted out of today. How about you?"

Ali has already shown me the photos Joelle had taken of me with the kids and Anna and sent me an email with the link for me to download. Technically, my reason for coming to her office is complete.

But I feel compelled to do what Anna had encouraged that night before she left. Her words ring loudly in my head, a reminder that I need to take a risk, move on.

My words burst free from my throat before I can stop myself.

"No. There's still vun thing left to do."

Ali's eyes grow wide and blink at my statement.

I clear my throat. "Vould you like to go to lunch with me?"

A li

I nearly fall off my chair with surprise. Soren's invite to lunch is not only out of the blue but also seems a bit out of character.

We don't know each other all that well, so my assumption about him may be off base. But from what I've seen, The Wolf's reserved, somber, and somewhat calculating in nature, making this request unexpected and slightly off-brand.

But maybe not.

No matter where it comes from or why, the invitation is flattering and more than a little nerve-wracking. I'm thrown so off-balance that I stammer out my response.

"Lunch? Now? With you?" I ask in a rush, my index finger flying to the line of my brow, rolling over it nervously. I'm flushed with nerves and excitement.

Soren rubs a hand over the gold flecks in his beard. My fingers itch to do the same—scrub over the stiff stubble, feel the burn against my palm. He turns toward my office window and then back to me, his blond brows knitting together in question.

"Ja, now. Unless you have something else to do?"

I nod emphatically and then shake my head. “Yeah, no. I totally have time. I mean, I think I do.” I stare down at my watch as if it has the answer. Eleven thirty a.m. A little earlier than I’d normally grab a bite to eat. In fact, I don’t usually take a lunch, instead bringing leftovers and heating them up in the breakroom before returning to my desk to work.

But who cares about leftovers when a sexy goalie asks if you’re free for lunch?

“Let me check my calendar to make sure I don’t have any meetings.” I hold up a finger and maneuver the mouse to open my day’s schedule. I only have two meetings show up—one with Joelle to go over the calendar one last time, followed by my weekly check-in with Leanne. Perfect.

The other thing more perfect is this meeting with Soren.

I close my laptop and give him a thumbs-up.

“All good. Let’s do it.”

There’s a hint of a smile visible under the golden scruff of his trimmed beard as he scrubs a hand through it.

Then he pushes his chair back to stand. Soren towers over me, which produces a thrill that spreads down my spine like wildfire. The subtle hint of his cologne, coupled with his proximity, have my feet wanting to levitate off the floor like a Dua Lipa song. Grabbing my purse from my desk drawer, I follow the sweep of his arm that leads me out the door ahead of him.

And then out of nowhere, there’s a large hand resting lightly at the small of my back, the warmth of it sending prickles of pleasure straight to my core. When I step into the main office hallway, my gaze connects with Leanne, who peers out from her office, her eyebrows reaching toward the ceiling.

I bite my lower lip and try to hide the smile that can’t be contained.

Giving her a brief wave, I inform her of our plans. “We’re just going to grab a bite to eat. Be back in an hour?” I turn, tilting my head up to Soren,

confirming we're on the same page.

Before he can answer, Leanne calls out, using the back of both hands to shoo us out. "Take as much time as you need. I know how hard it is to get a decent lunch around here in less than an hour. Go, do your thing." She winks.

Oh. My. God. Does Leanne think we're going to have a noontime hookup? A quickie? An afternoon delight?

I feel my cheeks flush red with embarrassment. That wink had a definite vibe of *don't do anything I wouldn't do*.

Just great. Now my boss thinks I'm hooking up with the Vikings' goalie.

Worries flood my mind as we head out to the elevator bank. I'm so lost in thought that I don't at first notice the fans that come up to Soren outside the office across the hall. There's a chorus of hushed whispers and nervous giggles.

"It's The Wolf!" Someone stage-whispers to their friend as they congregate in front of us.

One fan reaches out and touches Soren's arm. I notice an imperceptible flinch, the corners of his eyes tightening as if the interaction hurt him in some way. The woman, probably in her late forties, pulls out her phone and waves it in front of him.

"Oh, Wolf, would you mind? My son is a huge fan. Could we get a selfie?"

A faint growl emanates from his chest, but he complies. "Ja."

The three women all pose around him, the older woman hoisting her hand in front of them to take a selfie, but then she waves her phone toward me and gives me a huge grin. "Would you mind?"

"Sure thing." I accept the phone and take a few steps backward to get them all in the frame. "Everyone ready? Say... *The Wolf!*"

They all smile—well, Soren's expression is more grimace than grin—and say his name aloud.

After a few shots, the older woman steps forward and plucks the phone from my grasp. She scrolls through the images and heaves a swoony sigh. No thank you or appreciative nod.

When she returns her attention back to Soren, she smiles broadly and extends her hand. Soren keeps his hands tucked firmly in his pockets and gives her a tight smile. The woman, nonplussed by his obvious discomfort, squeezes his bicep.

Some people are oblivious. This must be seriously difficult for him.

“Okay, well, if that’s all, we need to get going,” I state bluntly, hoping now that they’ve gotten their picture, they’ll all go their merry way.

The elevator arrives, and Soren stops the doors from closing as the women offer their goodbyes, flushed and starry-eyed over meeting their hockey-playing hero. Then they head toward the bathrooms, giggling and conversing.

As we step inside and Soren presses the button to the ground level, I openly stare at him, impressed by how he handled that interaction when I could see how stressed it made him.

“Does that happen to you often?” I ask, whirling my hand in the air. “People just getting into your space without asking?”

He shrugs, brows narrowing at the thought. “Ja. I guess so. It happens to all of us. Tanner too.”

“Yeah, but you don’t like it.”

He tucks his hands back into his front pockets and shakes his head from side to side.

“Nein. Not really.” He sighs, and brands me with a piercing gaze. “You noticed.”

“Yes. And I hope I didn’t make you feel that way the day of the photoshoot. Now that I know you don’t like it—”

My words are cut off when he extracts his hands from his pockets and corners me against the elevator wall, palms bracketing my head. I tilt my

chin up and stare into the most beautiful green eyes I've ever seen. It's like looking into a forest of evergreens.

"You never made me uncomfortable," he confirms, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. "Just the opposite."

And for the briefest of moments, a tiny blip of a second, I think he's going to say something more. That maybe he's going to whisper in my ear, in that low timber of a voice, and say, "You're so fucking sexy, Ali. I want to fuck you up against the wall right now."

Okay, maybe not that much, but at least maybe that he wants to kiss me.

My knees wobble and my breath catches in anticipation.

But before anything else happens, the elevator bounces slightly and the doors slide open with a mechanical whoosh. Soren drops his arms to his sides, turns to face the open door, and shoves his hands back into his pockets, leaving me once again internally levitating off the floor, floating on the deliciousness of what could happen next.

I'm also left with a slight sense of disappointment that nothing did happen now.

Soren

Fuck me.

I'm such a coward. *Warmduscher.*

Here I am in this small, enclosed space, with the perfect opportunity to kiss Ali, to show this generously sweet and bubbly woman exactly how I feel about her. To tell her how much I crave spending time with her and the way her effervescent personality makes me—the epitome of a lone wolf—feel seen.

Yet I let the moment slip by like it was a shot right through the five hole.

If I'd been between the pipes, I wouldn't have allowed this to happen. Out there, in the net, I'm confident. Clear on my duty. Ready for whatever comes my way.

I am the fucking Wolf.

But get me near a woman whose company I fucking enjoy, and I act like a fool.

I'm determined to turn things around and make this lunch date enjoyable for Ali. If she has a good time, maybe she'll want to do it again.

"Is there some place you'd like to eat?" I ask, holding the building's main entrance door open for her. As she passes through, I catch a whiff of

her light, citrusy scent, and it makes me hungry. Not for food, but for *her*.

I want to devour every inch of her as dessert.

I clear my throat, sidestepping someone on the sidewalk. “Do you have a favorite restaurant around here?”

When she turns her head to look at me, her auburn hair flips over her shoulder and I’m again hit with the luscious scent of her shampoo. I have the compulsion to sink my hands through the silky strands and bury my nose against her scalp, savoring every sniff.

Ali’s face lights up and she points up the street from us.

“If you enjoy a good pad Thai, there’s an amazing place about two blocks that way.”

“I’m down for anything.” And by anything, I mean it.

People assume that because I grew up in Austria, I only eat bland food like schnitzel and sauerkraut, and that pork sausage is the spiciest food on any menu. But I will try anything at least once. It’s the only aspect of my life where I will take risks anymore.

When I first moved to Vancouver, it did take me a few attempts to adjust to the heat of certain international foods, but now I’m firmly believe the hotter and spicier it is, the better.

When we approach the crosswalk opposite the restaurant, the Walk sign turns green. Ali is about to step off the curb when I notice a car clearly not about to stop. I grab hold of Ali’s wrist and yank her back so abruptly that she yelps.

“What the—?”

Adrenaline and guilt rush through me, but the surge is enough to overpower the intense reaction I get from the feel of Ali’s body against mine. I suck in a sharp breath as she wobbles on her feet before finding her equilibrium with a palm against my chest.

Jesus, if she only knew how good that feels.

A squawk of surprise sputters from her mouth and she removes her hand to cup her mouth and yell at the driver. “I’m walking here, asshole!”

The quote is from one of my favorite old movies, *Midnight Cowboy*, and I smile slightly. Günther and I used to watch classic American movies after our parents died. Our favorites were those intense, dark cinematic masterpieces that hold their timelessness regardless of how long ago they were filmed.

And then, to my amazement, Ali shoves both hands in the air and gives the maniac driver two middle fingers.

This girl. The more she shows me the different sides of her, the more I want all of Ali.

A burst of laughter tumbles out of me like a rumbling earthquake dislodged from the depths of Earth’s tectonic plates.

“Gah. Some drivers can be such inattentive dickheads.”

“Yes, they can,” I agree, a stupid smile hovering over my lips. When she drops her arms, I take one of her hands in mine and slip my fingers through hers. I glance up and down the street to make sure the coast is clear before proceeding.

“People drive like they’re on the autobahn around here. I feel sometimes like the streets in this city are more dangerous than being in the net with 100 mile-per-hour pucks hurling at my body.”

She laughs.

“Well, I’m not familiar with *that* type of danger,” she says, lifting her brilliant blue eyes to me as we continue up the sidewalk. “But I did live in the Bay Area for several years, and those cable cars are no freaking joke. Come to think of it, neither was the fog. Sometimes it was so dense you couldn’t even see your hand right in front of your face.”

To demonstrate this, she waves her free hand in front of my eyes. The impulse is too great. I snatch her hand and wrap my fingers around her

delicate wrist, raising it to my mouth and planting a kiss in the center of her palm.

The sound of her breath hitching is like fireworks. Our eyes connect and I pin her with the full force of my longing. I see the heat I feel reflected within her eyes, along with a promise of something more.

I'm not sure I've ever felt this pull toward another person. My body vibrates and comes alive around her in a way I only experience when I'm out on the ice protecting my net. It's fierce and throws me into a game where I'm not familiar with all the rules.

Ali tilts her head to the side, drawing her lower lip between her teeth like a dare. Goddamn, I want to follow through.

"You know... I've heard many things said about The Wolf since I've been here." She crinkles her nose in amusement and counts, one finger at a time. "Intense. Ferocious. Savage."

I nod. "All true."

Ali takes a step closer until only an inch of space exists and goes up on tiptoe, holding onto my shoulders to meet me in the eye. Her sweet, bubble-gum-scented breath seems juxtaposed to her fearlessness. I draw in a ragged breath, my heart hammering under my ribs.

Her voice is breathy and laced with honey. "But I didn't know you were a romantic."

What am I supposed to say to that? I'm not a romantic by any stretch of the imagination.

She has no idea how close I am to relinquishing the hold I have on my savage desire to flip her over my shoulder, slap her ass, and drag her back to my den, where I can have my way with her.

Yet she shows not even the slightest hint of fear or hesitation as she presses her lips lightly against mine. It's gentle and brief, like a whispered prayer. A small peck of gratitude. Before I have a chance to deepen the kiss

and return my own sentiment, Ali hops back, dropping her hands to her sides, and smiles wistfully.

“Now I know. But there’s more to unearth in here.” She pokes my chest with a finger before turning to walk ahead of me, leaving me rooted to the sidewalk, staring after her in confusion. Then she looks back at me and says with a flirtatious wink, “Don’t you worry. I’ll get it out of you. But first, lunch.”

I clear my throat and take the two strides to catch up with her, then we continue toward the restaurant—side by side, hand in hand.

It’s the most content I’ve felt in years.

But unfortunately, that kiss will only serve to taunt and torment me throughout our lunch date. Because now that I know how soft those lips are and how sweet they taste, my thoughts have accelerated into devouring something far more satisfying than pad Thai.

I’ve never been a man to take things slow.

But with Ali—*for Ali*—I want to slow things down. Prepare for what comes next. I can’t fall for her, for all the obvious reasons.

I need to figure out how to squash my desire. Ali’s amazing, a ray of light, and Tanner’s sister. She’s completely out of my league, and I can’t risk ruining my relationship with my teammate for a short-term fling that will end the minute she realizes how little I have to offer her.

A li

I may have misjudged the moment when I kissed Soren.

It was a stupid and impetuous thing to do. But I was helpless to stop myself after he immediately protected me, pulling me into the safety of his body and away from that idiot driver.

I was filled with an energy that sizzled down to my toes. I'd never experienced that type of intense physical reaction to another human being before.

So I did what I had to do. I kissed him.

Fat lot of good it did me because now things are awkward between us.

Per Soren's request, we were seated at a table toward the back of the restaurant, and a dark-haired server has already been by with glasses of water and to take our order.

Now, Soren sits across from me and obsessively fidgets, looking uncomfortable in his own skin. He fiddles with his silverware, adjusting and realigning the fork, spoon, and knife with precision, and pulls slightly at the edges of the cloth napkin.

When we first sat down, he also flipped around the bottles and shakers on the table to all face the same direction and in some order only obvious to himself.

All the excitement that surged through my veins from the kiss outside has now drained into a worry that I was too pushy. His eyes have even dulled to a low flicker, and his expression is now indecipherable. I obviously misread things on our walk here. I now feel like a fool for all the flirting that clearly isn't reciprocated.

God, I am horrible at reading men.

It's almost like he's shut down. I need to find a way back in to salvage this date.

As I watch the signs of his discomfort, I consider the things I now know about Soren.

He's a starting goaltender for the Vikings, having been in the league for over four seasons. He must be close to his family from Austria since they were just here. And I'm no doctor, but Soren exhibits some signs of high anxiety or maybe even a touch of OCD.

I decide to tread carefully into his personal life and go with an innocuous question.

"How did the visit with your family go? Did they enjoy themselves while they were here?"

Soren glances up from the condiments he's reorganized for the second time, and his gaze turns thoughtful. There's softness around the edges of his eyes.

"Ja." He returns his attention back to the bottles.

Okay, maybe I should go with an open-ended question instead. My bad. I might need to try a different approach to get this gorgeous man out of his shell.

I know he appears to be rather guarded in public and rarely does interviews. He keeps his private life off the table and shares very little with his fanbase. But this is a date that *he* asked me on. He must realize conversation is required to get to know each other. Is he having misgivings now that he's out with me?

Damn it. I shouldn't have kissed him.

My thoughts are interrupted by a light thump against my foot under the table, and Soren clears his throat. A small gasp of surprise breaks free from my mouth.

"Ali," he begins, voice laced with hesitancy. He reaches across the table and offers his palm to me. Worry lines form between his brows.

"I'm not—" He looks from side to side and then motions between us with his free hand. "You know. Good with this."

I respond with a squeeze of his hand and raise my eyebrows skyward. "You're not good with lunch?"

His laughter fills me with a warm glow. Okay. Now we're getting somewhere.

Soren sighs, the movement causing his shoulders to rise and fall, the tension visibly releasing.

"Nein. This." He gestures between us. "One-on-one talk, being open with another person. Dating."

I nod in understanding and twist my lips into a smile. "Well, how about we try this? You can ask me the questions, if you'd like. Pop culture is my specialty. Ask me anything about Ryan Gosling and I can give you a full Wiki talk." I add a conspiratorial wink for good measure.

A smile forms at the corners of his mouth, and it's a thing of beauty. He has such an attractive face. A long, slightly bent nose and strong, chiseled cheekbones with a shadow of a beard give him a Viking warrior-like presence.

And his hands. My God, his long, tapered fingers are both strong and gentle as they firmly twine around mine with just the right amount of grip. He's got ropey veins that curl over the thick ridges of his knuckles. Large wrists peek out from the arms of his hoodie, covered in light blond hair that is devastatingly virile.

This man is dangerously handsome, and he does crazy things to my body, but he's locked down as tight as a bank vault.

Which leads me to wonder...

A man this intense, who clearly holds a lot of himself back, might be explosive in the bedroom.

A shiver overtakes me and I clench my thighs together, sliding my foot back and forth against his.

"I don't want to know about Gosling. I want to know about you." He spears me with a heated look.

I lift my shoulder. "Okay, you asked. Here goes, in no particular order. I love a good homemade biscuit. I am a water sign but I'm a horrible swimmer. And I have a guilty pleasure." I bat my eyelashes.

"You do?"

"Yeah." I look back and forth around the restaurant, then lean in and drop my voice to a whisper. "I enjoy *anime*."

Sporting a surprised grin, he leans forward. "Really? Which ones?"

"Mostly old-school stuff. *Dragon Ball Z*. *Demon Slayer*. Gorgeous animation. Oh, and my ultimate favorite, *Attack on Titan*." I gesture with a chef's kiss. "Absolutely love it. The writing is phenomenal."

His mouth drops open. "That show is so brutal and violent. No disrespect, but you don't seem like the typical action anime enthusiast."

"What can I say? I'm a rebel."

"I like that about you, Ali." His voice has dropped low and the syllables of my name roll off his tongue with featherlike softness.

"On the other hand," I add, tapping the tip of my finger against my lips. Soren's eyes track my movement and linger on my mouth. Now we're getting somewhere. The vibe has changed and the flash of intrigue is back in his eyes. "I cry at emotional movies, especially ones where there's some total heartbreaker of a moment. The scene in *Hope Floats*, when the dad

drives off and leaves his little girl behind?” I clutch my chest in anguish. “That near killed me.”

Soren chuckles, casting his eyes down but looking up through those beautiful lashes. “I’ll have to take your word for it. I don’t watch a lot of movies anymore.”

I sit up straighter and chortle. “What? Why not? I thought you liked the classics?”

His gaze shifts off to the side and then he taps his forehead. “No attention span. I can’t sit through a movie without feeling like I’m going to explode.”

“ADHD?”

“Maybe? Probably,” he acknowledges, blinking a few times. He glides a hand through his shaggy blond locks, and I pull my lip between my teeth at the sexiness of it. “I have some issues.”

I lift my brows. “Oh? I hadn’t noticed.”

For a moment I think I have made a serious faux pas by joking about it because there’s a long pause before he finally responds. But when he laughs, I know I’ve hit the mark.

I nod my chin toward the bottles. “Maybe a touch of generalized anxiety?”

He draws his hand away from mine and looks down at the table. “I’m sure a psychologist would have a field day, but I’m too nervous to find out.”

I snatch his wrist back, clasping my fingers around it, and gently roll my thumb back and forth over the heat of his skin.

“It’s what makes you who you are. And it doesn’t make you any less attractive to me. Just saying.”

Threading his fingers through mine, the corners of his mouth quirks up into a warm smile that melts me like butter.

“Danke, Ali. You are beautiful, too.”

Our orders arrive, and Soren snakes his hand away as we scan over each other's lunch plates. The scents make me salivate, and I quickly place my napkin on my lap and pick up my fork. Soren does the same, except he goes through a few additional steps in preparation. I take my first bite, moaning over the savory taste. Soren's mouth slants, and I see his eyes darken and smolder.

We eat in a comfortable silence for a bit, and it feels nice.

About halfway through my lunch, after I take a sip of some water, I decide I want to hear from *him* about his career. And not just what I've read about online.

"Why did you become a goalie and not a different position?"

A thoughtful look passes over his face and he sets his utensil down, blotting his mouth with his napkin and offering me an amused look. "Both my brother and I played hockey, and our coach thought being between the pipes might offer me a stronger sense of purpose, I guess, and provide a way for me to control my need for constant movement. Skating was a good outlet, but defending the net took more focus."

"That makes sense," I say with a nod, sweeping a piece of hair back behind my ear. "Tanner's mom got him involved to help him burn energy. He was a devil child and always in trouble. You know Tanner. When he's bored, he gets annoying."

"Just when he's bored?" Soren quips, and we both laugh at my brother's expense.

There's a moment of silence as we stare into each other's eyes, a shared commonality between us, and it's pure gold. It gives me hope that Soren feels more comfortable around me and enjoys my company as much as I like hanging with him.

And maybe he'll want to pursue it further than lunch.

Placing one palm flat on the table, I lean forward and crook one finger to draw him closer.

“Can I tell you something?” I whisper, cupping my hand over my mouth.

“Ja?”

“I think you’re better at personal conversation than you gave yourself credit for.” I wink and lean back against the chair.

His smile is blinding and swoonworthy.

He swallows thickly, pinning me with the intensity of his gaze. “Or maybe it’s just you.”

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Soren

I should've kissed her.

Why the fuck didn't I kiss her when I dropped her off at her building?

Because I'm anxious and I overthink everything in my life and my indecision has now left me panicky and with a sense of foreboding. Ali is never going to want to go out with me again.

I've been this way since I was a kid, and it only grew worse after first my parents and then Günther died. My brain just balls up and I get stuck in fears and worries about doing something wrong. My anxiety takes over, and I can't move forward without some twitchy response.

The public thinks I'm broody and menacing, and I've gained a reputation of being a lone wolf, when in reality, I'm just fucked up and desperate to hide it.

My anxiety was on high today, starting from the moment I walked into Ali's office, and quadrupled when she nearly got pegged off by the speeding vehicle. It all fed into me fidgeting without control at lunch. Ali was sweet when she mentioned it, but it was embarrassing as hell for me.

Now it's all I can think about, and I'm reviewing every moment to figure out how Ali felt. Did she seem bothered or annoyed? Does she think I'm some sort of freak now?

By the time I dropped her outside her office, I was so in my head about how things were going that I left without kissing her or asking her out again. People were walking in and out of the building, bumping into us on the sidewalk—it all just made me more flustered, and soon enough, my concentration went to counting each person as they passed by.

One.

Two.

Three.

In fact, I'm not even sure I said a proper goodbye when I left. For all I know, I may have just turned around and walked off, leading her to undoubtedly believe I'm a complete asshole.

Fuck. I need to make this right.

I grab my phone and pull up the number she'd given me the day of the photoshoot. My plan is to text her, say thanks for putting up with me at lunch, and see how she responds. If she sounds open, I'll let her know I want to see her again.

And if she doesn't?

I consider this possibility as I walk to my car.

My car is one of the first big purchases I made when I initially signed my contract with the Vikings. The second was my house in Coal Harbour. It's a three-story townhouse on Cordova Street that overlooks the waterfront. The building has amazing views of the marina, the park, and the mountains.

When the kids were here, they loved to ride my private elevator from my parking garage up to the rooftop deck. When I first bought the place, I wondered why someone needed an elevator for a house that's only three stories, but it's turned out to be pretty awesome when I'm sore after a game. I'll admit, that is a really cool feature.

As I slide into my car and start the engine, I formulate how I'll apologize in my text for my odd behavior when my phone alerts me of an

incoming text.

To my surprise, it's from Ali.

Ali: Thanks for lunch. It was fun hanging out with you.

Before I can respond, another one pops up.

Ali: I hope we can see each other again.

Ali: Maybe this weekend at Tanner's BBQ?

I vaguely remember Tanner texting about a party he was planning to host at his place, but like I do with most texts, I scanned it, got sidetracked, and completely forgot about it.

Scrolling back through my texts, I find a message from Tuesday that's marked Read that I never did anything with.

Tanner: My house Sat. 12:30. BBQ and pool party. Bring a date. You need to get laid.

Now I remember why I never replied. The only woman I'd consider asking to come as my date is Ali. *His sister*. Probably not the wisest decision to bring my teammate's sister to his own party.

Then again, Ali mentioned she's living with him temporarily, so technically, we could hang out and have fun at the party without it looking like a date since I'd be showing up alone.

Feeling good about this decision, I type out my response.

Me: Ja. I got his invite but forgot about it.

Me: If you'll be there, I'm in.

Me: I really want to hang with you again, too.

Me: But maybe we should keep things low-key around Rossy. About our date.

Shit. As I reread what I just sent, it sounds like I want to keep her my dirty little secret. That's not at all what I want.

Now I'm getting all spun up with panic that she'll take it the wrong way. I start typing out an apology when I see the three dots appear. The minute it pops up, I skim her response and slump in my seat with a sigh of relief.

Ali: Oh, for real. Tanner is a nosy lil bitch and very overprotective.

Ali: I don't need him all up in my biz.

She adds a winky face emoji, and a whoosh of air bursts from the depths of my lungs and laughter bubbles inside my chest.

And then something smacks me right upside the head.

Ali does this to me.

She makes me feel this way, all light and airy. She gets me, and there's no better feeling in the world than to be able to let your guard down around someone else. Ali makes it easy for me to do so.

Her magic casts a spell over me, making me comfortable in her presence. I never feel the need to protect or hide myself.

My anxiety-induced tics are relatively easy to hide when I'm on the ice. I continuously move around in the net in particular patterns, and goaltenders are notorious for our routines and rituals.

Outside of the rink and locker room, however, I've kept to myself, which only adds to my "lone wolf" mystique. But I've done it out of necessity. It's only when I'm in situations where my anxiety grows too big and I'm overly stimulated in environments with too many distractions that I become overwhelmed, and the last thing I want is to be ridiculed for it.

My parents were great. When they were alive, they helped me manage my anxiety and overly obsessive tendencies and loved me through it all. Their loss is an acute pain that I still feel every day, just like the loss of my

brother. Everyone who took care of me and loved me as I am are gone. Tragically in both instances.

And all of it is my fault.

My parents had been driving home from Salzburg, where I'd played in a weekend tournament. My team took home the championship prize, and Mutti and Vati had stayed late so they could join in the team celebrations.

Blizzard conditions forced them off the road, sending them over a steep mountainside and into a ravine. Their car hit a tree and they both died on impact.

My fault. My fault. My fault.

My brother tried to convince me otherwise, but he should've saved his breath. They were on that road at that time because of me and he couldn't dispute that. The irony is that he died from a similar tragedy.

Günther had invited me to participate in the climb with him and his buddy, but due to the timing and circumstances with my shiny new NHL contract, I remained in Canada.

And I will live with that guilt until the day I die.

I've become good at living with the shame of my selfish actions. At least I've been able to bottle up my anger and self-loathing and infuse it into my dedicated work ethic between the pipes.

The drawback is that shame feeds like a hungry monster, consuming my personal life, leaving me with only the crumbs.

And then someone like Ali comes along, and I want the entire five-course meal.

A li

I may be putting all the finishing touches together for Tanner's BBQ and pool party, but my thoughts haven't strayed too far from the gorgeous goalie who has occupied my mind since our lunch earlier in the week.

Keeping busy has been the name of the game for me, and although Tanner said he had everything "taken care of," there was no way I was going to entrust my brother to host this party on his own. Let's be serious: His idea of preparation is grabbing a few bags of chips, some gallon tubs of dip, and three cases of beer and calling it good.

That kind of lazy-ass prep isn't going to fly, not while I'm living in his condo. I have too much of an obsession for organizing events to allow for a half-ass job on my watch. It is my job, after all.

Plus, Soren said he would be here today, and I want to show off a bit. Not that I expect him to be overly impressed with my decorating skills or my charcuterie board design, but it's something I enjoy doing. It's important to me to know that all the details have been considered.

This is a trait I learned from my mom. As far back as I can remember, she's been one of the best hostesses there was in her circle of friends. She loves hosting events—no matter how big or how small. Whatever the reason, season, or event, whether it was a monthly book club or a PTA

meeting, she'd be the first to offer to host it. She also managed to throw the best holiday and birthday parties a kid could ever want, somehow finding a way of stretching out her meager budget to always make them seem extravagant.

Everyone raves about a Deborah St. Francis party.

She passed that love on to me, and it's why, I suppose, that I ended up here in Vancouver, working for my notoriously obnoxious but lovable brother's foundation.

"What the hell is this?" the man in question asks, dragging a piece of pita bread through the dip, a glob of it dropping on the counter in front of him. "It's delicious!"

"Tanner, that's for your guests," I scold. I expressly forbade him from eating any of the food I placed out in advance of the party, but did he listen? No, of course not.

I reach for a paper napkin to clean off the goopy greenish mess and then toss it in the trash next to the island.

"It's spicy avocado hummus." I move some of the bowls and plates around to make them more aligned. The action has me grinning at the memory of Soren and our lunch date. "And thank you. It's my special recipe."

Tanner chomps down the bit of bread and goes for a second. This time, I'm quick to expect it and slap his hand. "No double-dipping, bro. That's gross."

He grunts. "My house. My rules."

When he tries to go for it again, I give him a playful shove. "Maybe, but it's my dip. So make yourself scarce." I try to swat him away, but he gives me a look of defiance and throws his arms out in a handy octopus move. I laugh because there's no way of defeating him.

"Ali-kins, it's so freaking good. Are you like magic or something? I never saw you do any of this." Tanner gestures to the array of food dishes

and appetizers, swiping another chip that I'm too slow to intercept.

"Mostly while you were at the gym," I say, remembering that I need to find his cooler so I can add the ice and beverages. "By the way, your credit card is back in your wallet. And I have the receipts if you need them."

He waves me off. "Don't need it. I just appreciate you doing all this. The guys are gonna be impressed."

I grin with delight and take one last glance around to make sure I haven't forgotten anything. "Good. By the way, can you get that large cooler down so I can get drinks chilled before everyone gets here? What time do you expect people to start showing up?"

"I told them any time after noon is good. But some may show up later."

As if right on cue, Tanner's doorbell rings. I nearly jump out of my skin, my stomach in knots with anticipation that Soren may come walking through that door any moment.

The nerves spooling inside my belly can only be described as a welcome sense of excitement.

Tanner wipes his hands on the napkin I hand him and lumbers over to the door barefoot, his bright orange and blue swim trunks hanging low on his hips. I quickly tidy up the specks of food and crumbs he left behind and adjust my cover-up that hangs to mid-thigh.

I have my bright sunflower yellow bikini on underneath, figuring I'll float in the pool if I have the chance. While I don't swim, I've been eyeing that inflatable rubber ducky since the day Tanner stole it from our photoshoot. It would be fun to just lounge in the sunshine, floating around on that big, giant yellow duck on this hot summer day.

From down the long corridor, I see Tanner standing at the open door and welcoming his friend with a one-armed hug. I let out the breath I was holding when he steps to the side and I see Vikings captain Cale Costa enter with a striking dark-haired woman who I believe is his new wife.

When I was planning the calendar shoot, Tanner mentioned that Cale would be in the US for a few weeks visiting his wife and her family and therefore unavailable for that event. I asked why Cale's wife wasn't up here in Vancouver, and Tanner said that she lived in the States to get treatment. But asking Tanner to elaborate on anything that isn't related to hockey is like trying to squeeze orange juice from a banana.

A few others filter in behind Cale, including Nils Lundren and his wife, Helena, a tall, leggy blonde. They are obviously Scandinavian with their light skin tones, bright blue eyes, and blond locks. I wait to see if anyone else comes in behind him, but when Tanner closes the door, my heart sinks a little. None of them are Soren.

Putting on my game face, I walk past the kitchen island and toward the guests now milling around in the living room and smile a welcoming greeting.

"Hello, everyone! I'm Ali, Tanner's sister."

Tanner scoops me up from behind, his arms locked around my middle. "She's my annoying baby sister!"

I roll my eyes hard enough to pull a hamstring and bat him with the back of my arm when he puts me back down. "I think they all know who between us is the annoying one."

After straightening my clothing, I extend my hand out to Cale first. "Hey, Cale. I know we've met before, but I don't think I've met—" I look expectantly at the slight and pale-skinned woman looking terribly uncomfortable as she stands next to him. "You must be...?"

She smiles shyly up at Cale, who squeezes her hand and grins. "This is my wife, Sommer. Good to see you again, Ali."

I shake Cale's hand and then Sommer's. "Nice to meet you, Sommer. So glad you could join us today. Please, make yourself at home. Tons of food, drinks—both alcoholic and non—and the bathroom is down the hallway." I point in the direction of the restroom. "Just let me know if there's anything

you'd like, and if you can't find it, I'll send this big lug to the corner shop to get it."

Tanner cracks a beer and waves it in Cale's direction. "Costa, you gonna enjoy a brewski with us today?"

The nonverbal exchange that happens between Cale and Sommer is the sweetest thing I've ever seen. There's love, respect, and a desire to act considerately of the other all packed into their meaningful gazes. Gah. My heart pangs with envy as I watch the marital moment between the newlyweds.

Cale nods back at Tanner. "Yeah, maybe just one."

I snag Sommer's eyes. "How about you? What can I get you?"

"I'll take a non-caffeinated soda if you have it," she says, dropping Cale's hand to follow me into the kitchen when I motion her to do so.

I gesture to the subzero stainless-steel fridge. "We have a few. Please help yourself. And we have plenty of healthy and not-so-healthy snacks. Pick your poison."

"Thanks." She opens the fridge and extracts a zero-sugar decaf soda, then swings around to glance over the ever-abundant grouping of salads, fruit, and goodies on the counter. The noise level in the apartment has steadily increased tenfold with only a few couples so far. I can't imagine how loud it will be in here or out by the pool once everyone arrives.

"I hear you don't live in Vancouver during the season. Does that mean you'll be staying for the summer, or are you and Cale planning a big overseas vacation together?"

Having grown up accustomed to Tanner's hockey season schedules and the lengthy summer breaks each year, I know he and his teammates use the long summer months to their advantage. I've been so jealous of some of the fabulously relaxing vacations they've gone on in the past. Tanner's been to Portugal, Italy, and the beaches in Spain, including San Sebastian. He's been sailing in the Mediterranean and visited the gorgeous hillside towns of

the Amalfi Coast. The bastard sent me photos of him indulging in gelato and fresh pasta. How unfair.

That's one thing I'll say about my brother. He works hard and he plays even harder, and I'm totally envious of how he lives such an extravagant and leisurely life during his offseason.

My innocuous question of Sommer, however, has transformed her. It's as if a light has dimmed, and her eyes become shiny with tears.

Well, shit.

I obviously said something I shouldn't have and stuck my flip-flop-wearing foot in my mouth.

I reach out and cup her hand in mine with genuine sincerity. "Sommer, did I say something insensitive?"

I wrack my brain. What question could have caused her to get teary-eyed?

Sommer gently squeezes my hand in hers. "Please, no need for apologies. This is a party, after all."

Cale appears behind her, placing a protective arm around her shoulder. "You had no way of knowing, Ali, but Sommer is getting treatment for her MS and just went through another infusion. If things go as planned, we should be able to do some traveling soon."

He places a kiss on her forehead, and my tummy turns all gooey inside like a melted marshmallow. It's obvious that Cale is madly in love with his wife, and she with him.

I want that in my life someday. A man who is ultra protective, considerate, and tenderly compassionate at the same time.

"Well then, a toast." I hold up my water bottle in the air. "To successful treatments and grand summer vacations."

I leave them alone to check out the buffet and remember I still need to fill up the cooler Tanner brought in with ice. Turning around, I open the freezer door and bend down to find the ice bags at the bottom.

Just as I lift a bag in my arms, cradling it like a baby, I hear the low, sexy voice I've been waiting for and feel him brush up against my hip.

"You better get someone else to do that," Soren says, sending a flurry of goosebumps up my spine. "You're so fucking hot, you're liable to melt it all."

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Soren

My mouth dries up the moment I enter the apartment and see a posterior that I instantly recognize peeking out from behind the open fridge door.

I clench my hands into fists to keep myself from doing something that would probably earn me a face slap.

But goddamn, the sight of Ali fills me with the urge to bend her over, knead my fingers into the soft flesh of her ass, and tease the delicate skin at the juncture of her opening. My cock strains and my shorts tighten uncomfortably.

Fuck me.

Instead, I inhale deeply and exhale slowly to shove those thoughts aside and approach with more gentlemanly caution. I move quietly behind her and announce my presence with a statement of fact; no hyperbole whatsoever. “You better get someone else to do that. You’re so fucking hot, you’re liable to melt it all.”

Ali laughs and slowly stands, the bag of ice cradled in her arms. I remove it and lift a brow. “Where would you like this?”

She points to somewhere behind me, and I swivel around to see the large ice chest sitting empty next to a wall beside the sliding-glass patio

door.

“In there, please,” she says, gesturing with her hand. “I’ll get a pair of scissors to open the bag.”

I shake my head. “Nein. I’ve got it.”

Plunking the cold bag down, I rip the plastic with ease and dump the contents into the cooler.

“Ahh,” she coos, offering a light touch to my forearm, which spikes my already powerful physical reaction. Christ, it’s gonna be a long day.

Then she removes the plastic wrap from my hands and tosses it in the waste bin next to the counter. “Whatever would I do without a big, strong Viking to help me out?”

Tanner uses this moment to join us. “You called?” He laughs boisterously and pumps his biceps in the air like a heavyweight champ, placing a kiss to each muscle.

Ali makes a gagging noise and then squeaks in protest when Rossy wraps an arm around her neck, pulling her into his chest and knuckling her head in a noogie. If he weren’t her brother, I’d have told him to knock it off, maybe even kicked his ass to stop his immature behavior. But Ali handles it with a quick push of her palms against his chest and then sidesteps as Tanner releases her with a flourish.

“Stop it, you oaf. You’re messing my hair.”

My heart squeezes in uncomfortable tension at the sibling bond between Ali and Tanner. Their playful banter and easy companionship opens an archive of memories I’ve stored up of my brother and me during my childhood.

I mentally shove the thoughts away and watch her casually lift a hand to smooth down her hair. The auburn locks are tightly plaited in two intricate braids that hang past her shoulders.

I take the moment to covertly survey the rest of her from head to toe.

My gaze roams over her chest, which is covered in some kind of see-through mesh shirt that leaves nothing to the imagination. Firm, supple breasts spill over the confines of a yellow bikini top and my fingers twitch to untie the string behind her back and let it fall to the floor so I can explore every inch by perfect inch of her body, the thing I've dreamt about doing since our lunch date the other day.

She has been the star attraction every night when I close my eyes. Sometimes even in my daydreams. My fantasies only serve to stoke my desire, which grows stronger and hotter.

But right now, around her brother, is not the time to get caught with a hard cock in my swim trunks.

As if just now realizing I'm standing with them, Rossy thumps me on the back.

"Glad you came, my dude." He looks from side to side as if searching for something else. "Where's your date?"

You just had her in a headlock. I hide my amusement and shrug one shoulder. "Wasn't interested in bringing anyone."

Glancing sideways toward Ali, I notice she strums over her eyebrow with a finger, a telltale sign I now recognize as her nervous tic. A blush grows across her cheeks.

Good. Confirmation that she understands my meaning. She's the woman I want to be here with. No one else.

Rossy, on the other hand, is completely oblivious. He smacks me on top of my shoulder and waggles his brows. "Well, bruh, I've invited more than a few gorgeous single women for you to choose from today. Take your pick."

He gestures with a wide sweep of his hand toward the pool deck, where a few bikini-clad women stretch out on lounge chairs.

"Yeah, sure. Great. Thanks."

He offers me a proud smile, as if he's just given me the greatest gift ever. "No problem. Now, how about some beer?"

He bends over to select a few cans from the cooler, and his brows narrow in dismay. Holding them out toward his sister, he lets out a whiny complaint.

"These are warm, Ali-kins."

Ali rolls her eyes, and I hide my laughter by covering my mouth and tipping my chin down. "Yeah, I know. That's because we haven't put them on ice yet, ya dope. The cold ones are still in the fridge. In fact, why don't you take care of that right now?"

Her brother groans petulantly. "Ah, man. Come on, Ali-gator. I gotta make the rounds with the guests." Rossy puffs up his chest smugly. "I'm the host with the most."

We all glance around the room and toward the pool area to take stock of all the new guests who have arrived.

I suppose he has a point.

"I can help you, Ali. You go do—*whatever* it is you need to do, Rossy." I wave him off and my eyes connect with Ali's. This will give me the chance to be alone with her and keep Rossy out of our hair for a while.

Rossy lets out a loud whoop of delight. "Now that's what I'm talking about, my dude! You're a good man, Wolf. No matter what people say."

My head snaps back. "What do you mean? What people?"

Rossy hoots with laughter, like he's the only one in on a joke, ignoring my questions and spinning around to the fridge. He grabs two cold ones and walks off toward the pool area without a backward glance.

Ali stares after him, a look of amusement across her face.

"Your brother..." I say, shaking my head as he struts off like a peacock on the prowl.

"Is a piece of work. Tell me something I don't already know."

I give another covert check over my shoulder and then step closer to her, catching a whiff of her coconut-scented suntan lotion.

“Okay, then. Here’s something you might not know.” I close the gap between us. The sexy sound of her gasp shoots electricity straight to my cock. I purposefully brush my nose over the shell of her ear. “You look so hot in that bikini.”

Standing side by side, I trace a line up her bare arm with my finger. She shivers and my cock strains for release.

“I do?”

“Mm-hmm,” I rumble, bending down to grab a piece of ice from the box, using it to draw a path up the back of her leg. Past her knee. Underneath the edge of the cover-up. Over the curve of her ass.

The quiet moan that escapes her lips is the sexiest sound I’ve ever heard.

“See? You’re already melting this ice cube.”

When I straighten, Ali tilts her head to look at me and swipes the tip of her tongue over her plump bottom lip.

“I just remembered... I need your help with something,” she whispers, clasping her hand around my wrist and tugging me out of the kitchen. I drop the ice cube into the cooler and follow without question.

We weave our way through clusters of my teammates and their wives and girlfriends congregating in the main living room. Most give me nods of greeting but don’t seem at all interested in where I’m going with Ali, who continues to pull me down a long hallway.

Finally, we reach a door toward the end of the hall. She stops, opens it, glances behind me, and pushes me inside.

The door latches closed behind us, and I quirk a brow.

“You said you need my help with something?” I ask, and she makes a noise from her throat.

The next thing I know, Ali winds her hands around my neck and hoists herself up, wrapping her legs wrap around my waist. I hold her underneath her ass—thank fucking God—as she plants her hot, wet mouth on mine.

In this moment, I know without a shred of doubt that whatever happens in this room today, I will leave it a changed man.

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A li

I can't believe what I just did.

Not only did I drag Soren into my bedroom, my hand in his, while onlookers stared as we passed by them, but then I lassoed my hand around his neck, climbed him like a freakin' tree, and kissed him without his consent the moment I had him alone. All while my brother's party continues to rage right outside these doors.

Despite those potential issues, my thoughts are on one thing and one thing only. And that's Soren's hard body pressed against mine and his mouth kissing me like his life depends on it.

It's the best thing I've ever felt in my whole damn life.

His lips move against my mouth, his tongue taking ownership of me as it glides inside in a wet, hot, rhythmic motion. In response, bolts of electricity shoot off between my legs, making my belly clench, and my hips gyrate against his erection in search of the friction I so desperately need.

Soren groans with the same desperation I feel and spins us around, hands cupping my ass as he pushes my back against the wall.

And this, folks, is exactly what all my sexual fantasies are made of.

He removes a hand from my butt and secures me with an arm around my waist, pinning me against his hard body. I stroke the hair at his nape

before my nails bite into his scalp more forcefully. His erection nestles perfectly in the notch between my legs, and the only thing keeping us from fucking right here and now is the thin material of our swimsuits.

His voice is gruff and raspy as he growls against my lips, “Fuck, Ali. I’ve wanted to do this for so long.”

“Why didn’t you?” I murmur back. Not in judgment but from simple curiosity.

His response is something in German that I don’t understand, but the sound of it is guttural and my name is said like a prayer.

And his mouth. It’s so deliciously eager to devour me whole. My fingers weave through his tousled hair, gripping the soft strands in my hands, tugging at it hard enough that he growls again.

Like a wolf.

That’s what they call him. And I know it to be true. Soren is hungry and predatory, and I want to satiate every one of his physical needs.

Soren shifts the weight on his feet, which angles his lower half—his *very impressive* lower half—to imprison me against his growing arousal. The abdominal muscles in his torso twitch and tighten under his T-shirt. I part my lips in surprise, and he swallows down my gasp of pleasure. His tongue slips inside my mouth once again.

He moves one of his strong hands to gently cup my jaw, gliding a thumb over my cheek and strumming my skin in a way that makes me ache for it elsewhere.

I moan and buck as the motion fuels my desire further.

Our kiss deepens, the intensity to reach that elusive peak becoming a reality. I curl my fingers into his scalp and it draws out a strangled curse that brings me a perverse joy.

“Fuck, Ali.”

He guides a hand to my breast, flicking the taut nipple with his thumbnail. I ache to feel those fingers and mouth teasing my delicate flesh.

His tongue strokes along mine, allowing me to imagine what it would be like if he flicked it over my bud.

As if hearing my thoughts, Soren breaks the connection of our kiss and his palm squeezes the firm globe of my breast.

He stares at me with dark, half-lidded eyes, and I'm caught in the desperation of his gaze. My pulse quickens as he shoves aside the mesh material of my cover-up and peels away my bikini top to expose my breasts. At the wet sweep of his tongue over my pebbled nub, I practically convulse with gratitude, moaning out my thanks.

I arch my back, positioning my nipple into his open and seeking mouth. The heavy weight of his cock, thick inside his trunks, wedges perfectly against the V of my legs. A loud moan erupts from my lips, and I feel lightheaded and weightless in his hold. Under his control.

Jabs of lust pelt needily through my core like bolts of lightning. My clit thrums with anticipation and a yearning so strong that I can barely contain myself.

My palms cradle his face and I tug him back, popping his mouth off my wet flesh. His green eyes stare at me in an unfocused gaze, hazy with lust.

I nod my chin behind him. "Bed. Now."

The corners of Soren's mouth turn up into the sexiest smile I've ever seen.

"Ja."

The sexual assertiveness I've shown in the few encounters I've had with Soren have surprised me. It's not that I'm sexually shy, I've just never been this direct in the pursuit of a man. It's refreshing to find out that he's not turned off by my directness. In fact, he seems quite pleased to have me take the lead.

Yet I believe in having a good balance of give-and-take in a sexual relationship. And right now, I'm more than happy to let go of the reins so he can have his way with me.

With a purposeful grunt, Soren straightens and grips my ass cheeks firmly with both palms as he spins and walks us to the edge of the bed in three long strides. The moment I hit the mattress, I stretch out and reach for him, but he silently steps out of my reach, holding up his index finger.

“Let me take you in.”

His eyes roam over my body, inch by inch, and the heat of his gaze melts me like butter on a hot stove. I watch as his tongue glides along his bottom lip, as if he’s formulating a plan for what he’ll do with me.

I have some ideas, but I want to see what he comes up with first. The sensation of Soren’s heated gaze on my skin is the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced without a physical touch.

In fact, everything about Soren is hot, from the intensity of his broody allure to his reserved manner when in public. The quiet and purposeful way in which he moves and thinks. The guttural sound of his voice and the low vibration of it that makes my head spin. And the hungry desire that emanates through his penetrating gaze.

It’s all too much and has me wanting nothing more than to get my hands on his body—especially the bulge underneath his shorts. My impatience gets the best of me, and I make a grab toward his hips, but he lays his palms over my knuckles and stops me.

I give him a questioning look with a raised eyebrow.

He scolds me with a shake his head and a slight smirk. Then he captures my wrists and pins my arms above my head.

“You touch me, and I’m erledigt.” I’m not familiar with the German word, but I can guess the meaning from the context. “I want you too much, Ali. It will be over too fast.”

His honesty is such a turn-on. I reward him by parting my legs and tilting my head to the side with a sly expression.

“Okay, then. I’m yours to do what you want with.”

Soren's hands land on his hips and he throws his head back with a gruff exhale, followed by some kind of curse in German.

When his gaze returns to me, his eyes are darker and hungrier than I've ever seen them. He collapses to the floor, kneeling between my open legs, and brushes his knuckles along the inside of each thigh. A shiver breaks out like a rogue wave over my body and pulls a low moan from my throat.

"Your skin..." he marvels, skimming his fingertips up and down, teasing the sensitive flesh at the edge of my bikini. "It is so soft. Perfect."

My body responds instinctively to his sensual touch, my belly coiling tightly with a wild, clawing need to be set free. I must make a sound of protest because Soren chuckles.

"You like?"

"So very much."

"Gut."

I peer down and see a smirk of mischief spread across his kissable mouth.

Breathless with anticipation, I prop myself up on my elbows and watch his fingers deftly peel the material of my bikini away. My hips jerk involuntarily from the sudden puff of air over my exposed flesh. I am wet and raw, trembling with need. With hungry eyes fixed on mine, Soren leans in and flicks his tongue against me, sending me flying into the fucking atmosphere.

I fall back onto the mattress, no longer able to hold myself steady as his fingers part my wet folds and then channel inside me.

"Oh God," I hear myself cry out the moment he penetrates inside. His fingers dive in and slide out before circling the wetness over my clit.

It's hot and thrilling, just as I imagined it would be.

I've been turned into a puddle of wanton desire as Soren alternates between swirling his fingers deep inside me and running the rough pad of his thumb over my clit.

Over. And over. And over again. Until I let out a delirious noise of discontent from the torture he's forcing me to endure.

Which is precisely the moment I feel the smile grow at the corners of his lips as he places his mouth between my legs and sucks my clit between his lips. Hard and relentless. It unleashes a new noise, this one produced from pure pleasure, that escapes my throat.

My thighs quiver and I clench them together, knees boxing his ears. His answering rumble vibrates through my core, his hands press more into my thighs. Then he slips one palm under my ass, lifting me to an angle that better works for him.

He devours me hungrily, his tongue slipping inside where his fingers had been. We both moan, and I know with certainty that I'm about to come against his tongue. My core tightens, my body quakes, and I throw my arms out to my sides, seeking purchase on anything that will keep me from levitating off the bed.

I shamelessly rock my hips in search of elusive release, and his expert mouth turns me into a moaning mess.

And when I feel that first pulse of climax roaring through me, Soren's tongue continues to tunnel inside, his thumb circling my clit in tandem...

I'm almost there...

So close...

White dots swim behind my closed eyelids.

And from the corner of my consciousness, I hear the locked door handle jiggle, followed by a loud knock. Soren stops, his head snapping up, eyes growing wide with concern. I shake my head, drawing my finger to my pursed lips.

We remain still and silent as I hold my breath and wait for whoever it is to leave.

And then comes an all-too-familiar voice.

"Yo, Ali-kins. You in there?"

I stare at Soren, biting down my lip, and notice how his mouth glistens with my wetness and his eyes burn with intensity yet he looks alarmed.

WTH, Tanner? Goddammit, my brother is a cockblock.

“Yeah?” My voice sounds husky and breathless from my nearing climax. I clear my throat. “Go away. I’m changing.”

It’s the first thing I can think of to make him go away.

“Okay. Well, hurry up. I can’t find the Solo cups.”

Soren stifles a chuckle by returning his mouth to my center and rolls his tongue over my clit—slowly and seductively. I grab my pillow and shove it onto my face to smother the moan that escapes.

“Mm-hmm. Will do.” The sound is muffled and sounds like I’m teetering on the edge. Which I am.

My clit throbs and pulsates with each circular motion of Soren’s tongue and my thighs shake. I’m barely holding on against the clawing need to come. I thread my fingers through Soren’s messy blond hair, grasping roughly at the ends—to either push him away or keep him from stopping. I’m not sure.

There’s a pause as we wait, as I teeter on the precipice trying not to scream out Soren’s name with my release. Soren flutters his tongue over my clit like he has all the time in the world. Until we finally hear Tanner’s footsteps recede as he stomps back down the hallway.

Not even a moment later, after one more long swipe of Soren’s tongue, I’m releasing a lusty groan into the pillow, breathing through the most spectacular orgasm I’ve ever had.

In. My. Life.

Soren

Jesus Christ, that was close.

How stupid am I to start something up with Ali right under Rossy's nose? It was dangerous and reckless to mess around while the party is going on, but from the euphoric expression on Ali's face, it was totally fucking worth it.

I wipe my mouth off with the back of my hand and smirk at the beautiful woman laid out in front of me. Ali is flushed a pretty pink all the way from her chest to her cheeks. The gorgeous afterglow of her orgasm.

Fuck, I can still smell that intoxicating scent of her release and taste her on my lips. That's not something I'm going to forget as long as I live.

I cup my hands under her hips and slide her forward in one snapping motion so the V of her legs is locked snugly against my aching cock. She's still wet and warm, and all I want to do is thrust inside and find my oblivion, but it's far too risky.

I need to put a stop to this.

Ali presses a hand into her mattress and, drawing out a deep, shuddering breath, pushes herself to a sitting position. She bites down on her bottom lip, her eyes lowering to the bulge in my shorts. With a sexy grin, she palms

my hard erection. My dick surges to life, pulsing with a need so strong I think it might break free from my shorts.

My heart hammers wildly in my chest, and my breathing becomes stilted and uneven. I want her so badly. I could take her right now behind her locked door, free my straining cock and slam into her wet and willing body.

But no, now's not the time. I shake my head, hoping to convince us both. I swallow.

“Nein. Too risky.”

Her lips move into the sexiest pout I've ever seen on a woman and my resolve nearly breaks.

“I want to touch you, Soren.”

Her fingers determinedly burrow under the elastic waistband and I tremble. If I don't stop her right now, I won't have the restraint necessary once her hand reaches that destination.

I snag her wrist with my hand and gently extract her from inside my trunks. I rock back on my knees to give my body the distance it needs for me to make a sound decision. My chest heaves as I take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

I lean in and brush my mouth against the shell of her ear. My voice is ragged with leashed desire.

“Fuck, Ali. I want you so much. But not here. Not now.” I nibble her earlobe and place kisses along her jaw and neckline until I reach her mouth. Slanting my head, and I recapture her lips with mine, hard and demanding.

Her lips part and my tongue plunges in, exploring every inch of her mouth, hungry and searching. I want her to taste herself on me. I want her to savor the intimacy. I want her to remember what I can do to her. But mostly, I want to leave her burning with need for the next time we're together.

Ali's arms wrap around my neck and she pulls me close. I groan in her mouth when her soft, full breasts collide with my chest.

Nein. Nein. Nein.

Ja. Ja. Ja. Ja.

Goddamn. Why is it so fucking hard to break away?

I debate my decision to leave Ali like this with every passing second. My hands find the slope of her lower back and my fingers curl underneath her ass.

Her perfect fucking ass.

How easy it would be to let go of my reservations and give into this moment. To tug my dick out of my shorts, slide her bikini over once again, and slam into her soaking wet pussy.

Fuck.

Finally, common sense prevails through the haze of lust, and I tear my lips from hers, dislodging my hands from her fucking delicious body.

When I look at Ali, I see frustration and disappointment.

I never want to see those emotions cross her face again.

But there's no other option. There's nothing I want more than to stay, but I also don't want to get caught in a compromising position by her brother or any of our teammates.

"Ali." Her name comes out as a hoarse croak full of regret from my throat. I growl, sounding a lot like that dude from Ted Lasso. "I promise. I will make it up to you, mein Sonnenschein."

My sunshine.

I place a placating kiss on her forehead and stand up, then hold my hands out for her to take.

"Auf auf." I nod my chin upward and yank her onto her feet.

She pinches her eyebrows together. "I suppose I should invest in a German to English translation book if I want to spend more time with you."

Her statement sends a warm sense of pride and joy rushing through my body like a puck crashing into the net, and I'm unprepared to stop it.

I wink. "Ja. Du wirst."

Throwing her arms around my neck once again—but careful to leave space between us this time—she stands on her tiptoes and kisses me quickly.

"And just so we're clear," she purrs, a sexy but amused smirk across her swollen lips, "I do want to spend more time with you."

And with that, she smooths down the wispy hairs that have come free from her braids and strides toward the door. I lock eyes on her ass and raise my fist to my mouth and bite down to stifle a groan.

Mein Gott.

I either need to leave now to protect my sanity or stay vigilant to avoid staring at Ali's body.

Neither sounds like a good alternative to what I really want to do, which is finish what we started and spend time in bed exploring every inch of her.



SOMEHOW, with restraint I didn't know I possessed, I survive the next three hours, all while hiding my hard-on for Tanner's younger sister.

To do so, I at first tried to keep my eyes firmly off Ali. That worked for a short time but became increasingly more difficult as the party began to thin out and groups of people started to leave.

Which is usually perfect for me. I'm much better with smaller groups where idle chitchat isn't required and we can instead find a common activity. Right now, that means I'm in the pool with Rossy, Ax, Cannors, Benny, and Thorny playing a version of water volleyball. We have a net and a ball, but we've decided that points are earned by hitting someone on the other side with the ball.

It's a childish, stupid game, started when Thorny wailed the soft, spongy ball into Rossy's head on accident. From then on, it became an all-out war. Which is precisely why none of the remaining women are in the pool with us.

"Thorny, you're going down, bruh," Rossy shouts as he springs out of the water and slaps the ball toward our six-foot-two center.

Thorny ducks to the right, dipping down under the waterline, and the ball splashes between us. When he resurfaces, he glides a hand over his wet face and gives the double bird to Rossy.

"Suck it, Rossy. You're too slow." He laughs at his chirp as Rossy flips him off in return, and I reach for the ball to serve.

I'm not typically an aggressive man when I'm not on the ice. I prefer things to be low-key most of the time, so this game does little to hold my interest. But it has kept my focus on something other than Ali this evening.

That's not to say I haven't been aware of where she's been since we snuck out of her bedroom earlier. Currently, she's at a table poolside and talking animatedly with Cannery's wife, Jeannette, and Ax's fiancée, Halle. Rossy made today an adults-only party, and I can tell how much all the parents are enjoying their child-free evening.

I aim my throw at Ax, who's been chirping me like a motherfucker the entire game.

He bumps the ball and lobs it up for an easy pass to Rossy.

And then my attention is stolen when I spy Ali removing her cover-up to reveal that tiny string bikini I had my hands on earlier.

She walks to the edge of the pool and grins at us all. "Okay boys, playtime is over. The girls and I want some time in the water, too."

I stare in awe as she jumps in, and then resurfaces, water sluicing over her generous breasts.

At the very same moment, the ball flies toward me like a missile, smacking my ear with a wet, stinging slap.

But I don't feel a thing because all my blood has rushed to my dick. All I want to do is swim over to where she is treading water, scoop her up into my arms, and carry her away to somewhere quiet and empty where I can get her naked.

Instead, I call out my departure.

"That's it for me," I offer with a shake of my wet head and a wave. I swim over to the edge and hoist myself up to the pool deck.

"What? Don't be like that, bro," complains Ax.

"You can't leave us now, Wolf," Thorny says incredulously, raising both palms above his head in a gesture of disbelief. "We're winning!"

I thread my fingers through my wet mop of hair and shrug. "Gotta go. Things to do. I'm meeting with the goalie coach and trainers tomorrow."

I grab a towel from the back of a chair and dry off my limbs, then slip my feet into my slides and wrap the towel around my waist.

"Thanks for the invite, Rossy," I say, finding him scowling at me with his big man-child pout. And then my eyes cut to Ali's, the pool water shimmering in her baby blues. "You too, Ali."

She offers me a brief wave. "I'm glad you could join us, Soren. I hope you can come next time."

Is there a double meaning in her wink?

I'm about to walk into the apartment when she calls out to me. At the sound of her voice, I stop and look over my shoulder.

She smiles; her arms hooked over that yellow inflatable pool duck. Her braids are wet and plastered to her tanned shoulders. Her face is radiant and relaxed.

Goddamn. She looks so beautiful. *Mein Sonnenschein*.

"Don't forget the golf tournament next weekend. You'll be partnered up with a new friend, Nicolas."

I wink back. "Wouldn't miss it for the world."

And I mean it. I'm excited to meet this little kid and give him an experience I hope he'll cherish for the rest of his life.

I also am looking forward to another reason to see Ali.

The first thing I do when I grab my things to change in the bathroom is pull out my phone and text her.

Me: I might need to meet up with you before the golf tourney to learn more about this kid.

Me: If you're free tomorrow night?

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Exhaustion from the party ultimately sent me to bed early, but I was unable to sleep much, leaving me in a zombie-like state as I desperately try to get some work done this morning.

The culprit? That incredible and highly unexpected orgasm Soren gave me. I thought about it all last night. And possibly it was also the illicit nature of our stolen moments together in my room and the secrecy of our hookup.

That encounter was unanticipated and exciting, with the promise of possibly future encounters, followed closely by my disappointment when Soren left abruptly. When I'd finally worked up the nerve to jump in the pool, I'd wanted to find a covert way to be closer to Soren. To flirt a little and even offer fleeting touches under the waterline. But then he just up and left.

The party wrapped up around ten, and Tanner and a few of his buddies decided to go out to a club. With all the keyed-up energy I had from my hookup with Soren, I ended the night cleaning the kitchen and tidying up before I went to bed. Lord knows Tanner wouldn't have thought of it.

That's when I found the texts Soren sent me. According to the receipt time, he sent them right about the time he left.

Knowing he wants to see me again helped to buoy my spirits.

I didn't want to come across as hopelessly needy, so I managed to wait until this morning to reply. Now, as I stand idly in the office breakroom, waiting for my coffee to brew, I type out my response.

Me: I'm glad you're so interested in learning more about Nicolas. I'd love to get together and give you the rundown of what I know.

Me: Tonight works. Where and when?

I hold my breath and reason to myself that he may not even be awake yet. After all, Tanner was still in bed when I left for work.

Just as I lift my coffee to my lips, I see the dots indicating he's typing me back. My heart soars with anticipation.

Soren: I have workouts with my trainers today. Done by 3pm.

Soren: Dinner? My place?

Nerves somersault in my stomach when I think about the alone time we'll have together.

Me: Yes to both. Send me your address and I'll come after work.

Soren: I'll make sure you do.

Soren: Come, that is. That's not a question. It's a fact.

I place my hand on my throat and feel the warmth of my blush spread like a wildfire from my face down to my chest. I glance around surreptitiously, hoping no one takes notice of my reaction.

It's this side of Soren that intrigues me the most.

Usually, he's relatively quiet, stoic, and, dare I say, introverted. Even during the party yesterday, Soren stood out as the most reserved of all the guys.

Of course, in Tanner's presence, no one can get in a word edgewise. If you don't yell at the top of your lungs to talk over him, he dominates the conversation and never shuts up.

But when Soren does say something, he crafts his words intentionally and effectively, stating his objective in a way that leaves no room for misunderstanding.

He's direct. Unapologetically blunt. And oh, so dirty.

The pulse between my legs grows and vibrates with the memory of Soren's face between my thighs. His tongue wet with my essence. His heady kiss on my mouth.

"Good morning, Ali." Leanne's voice jolts me back into the present, and steaming coffee spills over the edge of my mug and onto the countertop.

"Ack!" I screech, setting the cup down on the counter and reaching for a paper towel to wipe my hand and the floor.

Leanne tears off another piece and kneels next to me to hand it to me, which I gladly accept.

"Thanks. I'm such a klutz."

I stand and dispose of the waste, then blow out a breath.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." She places a hand on my forearm as a small touch of empathy before pulling it back. "I thought you heard me come in."

As usual, Leanne looks beautiful and elegant in her business casual clothes. She's the only woman I know who wears heels to the office. She says they give her the "lift" she needs to stand up to my brother, who is technically her boss as his title is Chairman of the Board. Today her hair is pulled back in a sleek ponytail.

I pick my coffee up and take a sip. The liquid is hot and strong and fortifies my existence.

Smiling with a hint of apology, I run my fingertip over my eyebrow. "I'm a little tired this morning. We had a pool party yesterday with a bunch

of Tanner's friends from the team, and it wore me out."

Leanne turns on the electric kettle to start her morning ritual drink, then reaches for a mug and a tea bag from the cupboard. Even in her heels, she has to stretch onto her tiptoes, reaching as far as she can to grab a mug from her stash on the second shelf.

That was the only rule she gave me about the breakroom when I first started: "The mugs on the top shelf are mine and mine alone."

She places her selected cup on the counter and, quirking a brow, leans her hip against the granite. "Oh? And was a certain goalie in attendance?"

The heat returns to my face, and I cast my eyes away from Leanne's curious gaze. She didn't ask any questions after I returned from my lunch date last week, but I know she's thinking I have a crush on the Wolf.

And she'd be right.

I give a nonchalant shrug. "Yes, Soren was there, along with many of Tanner's other teammates and friends."

The kettle sings and her attention focuses on pouring the steaming water into her prepared teacup. Leanne dunks the bag in the cup several times, then leaves it to steep and turns back to me.

"Ah, I see," she muses, bringing the mug to her lips to blow on the liquid. "You're going to play it cool and keep your personal life from seeping into your work. I can respect that. It's very admirable and professional of you, even if I do want you to spill all the tea."

Alarm bells ring in my head, and my stomach tightens into knots. Is Leanne trying to tell me not to let my interest in Soren interfere with the foundation's work?

Given my previous employment snafu, I quickly move to reassuring her that nothing I do outside of work will interfere with my job.

"Listen, Leanne. About Soren..." I trail off. I don't even know what to say about him. Or us. "We... umm... I'm..." I stammer, looking for the words of explanation.

Leanne waves her manicured hand dismissively between us and leans close enough that I catch a whiff of her peppermint- and lemon-scented tea.

“You don’t have to explain anything to me, Ali. It’s really none of my business, and there’s no rule against dating a volunteer.” She winks. “Even if he did pose shirtless for our charity calendar.”

My entire body heaves a sigh of relief, and the anxiety triggered by my worry dissipates. I don’t want to make the same mistake I did in the past and allow my personal life to mess up my job and possibly ruin my reputation and career trajectory.

My fear dissolves into thin air like the steam rising from Leanne’s mug.

“Oh, good. Thank you,” I murmur. When I search her brown eyes, all I see is compassion and honesty. “It’s something new, and I wouldn’t even call it dating.”

“Talking, then?” She tilts her head. “That’s what my teen daughter calls it. Whatever the heck that means.”

Tanner chooses that moment to lumber around the corner, eyebrows knit together and arms crossed over his barreled chest.

“Talking? Who are you seeing, Ali?”

Soren

Ali: I don't think I should come over tonight.

Ali: I'm sorry, but Tanner found out I'm seeing someone.

Ali: He doesn't know it's you, but if he finds out...

I stare at the texts that have blown up my phone, a scowl fixed on my face as I hold the device in a crushing grip.

Fucking Rossy.

He's cockblocked me twice now, and he hasn't even done it intentionally.

I try to put myself in Tanner's shoes. If Ali were my sister, I'd be protective, too, just as I am with Anna. I care about her welfare and I would never want to see her hurt again. I may not have been able to protect her from the loss of my brother, but when she finds love again, I won't hesitate to be all up in her business. I'm looking out for Anna's best interests, as well as Heinrich's and Clara's.

I reread Ali's texts. She's obviously concerned about her brother finding out, and I want to do what I can to alleviate that stress, but meeting up with her on the down-low doesn't bother me. In fact, keeping my sex life private and out of the public eye has always been my goal. I don't need people

passing judgment about my personal life. They do enough of that with their critiques of my on-ice skill.

Ali, though, may not want to be a secret.

I choose my response carefully.

Me: I get you're worried. But if it makes you feel better, I've invited you over tonight to discuss the charity work.

Me: Just put aside the fact that I may also want to get you naked. Wink emoji

Me: Please come. I really want to see you.

There.

I said what I needed to say, and I'll leave it in her hands to decide. All I want is to spend time with her away from the prying eyes of others. One-on-one is more my style. It doesn't overwhelm me like the overstimulation of Rossy's pool party.

Glancing at the clock on my microwave, I decide I have time for a shower before my food delivery arrives. I ordered a feast from the local Italian eatery down the street. A variety of pasta dishes that are good fuel for my training workouts. That way, even if Ali chooses not to come by tonight, at least I'll have leftovers.

Today's session was exceptionally brutal. Due to the lower-body strength and speed that I need to be successful in the crease, my workouts and training tend to center on my hip mobility, leg and core strength, and overall flexibility.

And right now, my quads are feeling it.

Although I haven't seen them, I've heard there are Instagram accounts specifically dedicated to hockey goalies and our warm-up routines. We do them because they're critical to avoiding an injury in a game. The Reels, however, lean heavily toward the sexual innuendo inherent in our butterfly stretches and hip thrusts.

I get it. We're hot like that. But to be objectified when we're just doing our job is, quite honestly, annoying. It's also one of the reasons I stay off social media entirely.

As soon as the shower warms up, I step inside and set the modes—both the high-pressure rainfall shower head and the side heads that ease my sore muscles. It's one of my favorite features of this bathroom.

With the water coursing down over my body, my thoughts naturally gravitate to Ali. On how her skin looked golden and smooth in that bikini yesterday and what it would be like to peel it off her, piece by piece, and get her wet under this stream.

The mental images fuel my growing arousal, my cock thickening with need. Taking it in my hand, I stroke it in my tight fist, pleasure seizing my spine and making it ricochet to my balls. I drop my chin, my back muscles tense, my breath choppy, water sluicing down my chest as it rises and falls in an uneven rhythm.

Closing my eyes, I pump my swollen erection and picture Ali the way she lay across her bed, legs spread wide, as my fingertips pressed into her thighs, her pussy glistening for my touch.

The memory is all it takes for my balls to tighten, and my cock jerks out my release in my hand as I come with a low, satisfied groan. My insatiable need for her has become somewhat of a preoccupation. She's all I can think about, and I want to see more of her.

The problem is that we both have concerns about her brother finding out about us.

In the years that I've known him, Rossy's always been an amiable kind of guy. There's little chance that he's ever met someone he doesn't like. The guy enjoys having fun and is the life of every party. He serves as our team clown and resident jokester. In fact, if he didn't play hockey, I could see him as our team mascot, Leif the Viking. He's a goofball with a big heart.

On the ice, Tanner is a quintessential D-man. His role is to attack the opposing players to prevent goals and protect our own. In that respect, we are simpatico.

On the other hand, my guess is he could just as easily employ those traits against any man who dares to make a move on his sister.

If he knew what I want to do with his sister, it could ruin my friendship with him and create tension on the team.

I contemplate this as I turn the water off and shake the excess water from my hair. I grab the towel on the hook outside the shower and wrap it around my waist. The bathroom is steamy and I wipe away the fog from the mirror so I can examine my face. I had planned on trimming my beard or possibly shaving the whole thing off for the summer, but as I rub my fingers over the light-colored bristles, I choose to keep it. I like that the scruff hides my mouth, leaving me with a look that the media has described as an intense, predatory scowl.

Fierce and formidable. Why not keep with that reputation?

Finished with my post-shower routine, I head into the bedroom. The curtains and windows of my third-floor bedroom are open, displaying the slow setting of the sun across the western horizon, which casts an orange, pinky glow in the sky, making the water glisten like diamonds under the light.

The view from up here is spectacular and one of the reasons I chose this home. When I was first looking at real estate listings, I'd sent him this one to my brother, looking for his advice.

He responded first with the question you'd expect to get from a big brother. "*Are you sure you can afford it?*"

Yes, I could easily manage the payments with what I signed for in my initial four-year contract.

The second message he sent was more sentimental and less fiscally conscious. "*Mama and Papa would be proud, Ren.*"

As a kid, Günther had not been able to pronounce Soren, so he simply lobbed off the first syllable and called me Ren. No one else has ever called me by that nickname, not even Anna when she became part of the family. It was solely tied to Günther, and the name died with him.

The memory feels painful and disabling.

I let my towel drop to the floor and sit on the edge of my bed, rubbing my knuckles over the sore spot in my chest, the one that flares up whenever I get emotional about my brother.

It's been four years and I'm still drowning in sorrow. I can't let go of the grief that, for all intents and purposes, has turned me into a shell of a man. I've felt numb for years, just going through the motions, pretending to be alive, when in reality, my heart stopped that day when Anna called to tell me the news.

The sound of the doorbell breaks through my wallowing self-pity. I figure it's the food delivery, so I jump from my bed and grab a pair of jeans from my armchair. After slipping them on, I pick up my phone from my bedside table and slide it in my pocket. Then I take the stairs two at a time down to the main floor.

My wallet sits on the hallway table. I rummage through to find some tip money for the delivery driver and swing open the door open to find it's not my food delivery at all.

Ali stands on the sidewalk, on the other side of my gated entrance, a shy smile across her face, her red hair backlit by the sunset.

"Hey."

A li

You know those amusement park rides, the ones where the centrifugal force literally takes your breath away, levitates you off the ground, and leaves you so dizzy you might pass out?

Well, that's the rush I experience when Soren steps out his front door. Shirtless, casually barefoot, and wearing only a low-slung pair of jeans.

I stare, slack-jawed, as he sweeps a hand through his damp hair, slicking the wavy blond locks away from his face and tucking them behind his ears. There's a slight shadow of stubble coloring his upper lip and his jawline, and his cheeks are flushed.

Have I been transported into my fantasies starring a gorgeous blond Viking?

My eyes immediately graze over his light dusting of chest hair. Of course, I've already had the pleasure of running my hands over his broad shoulders and strong pectorals at the photoshoot. But the view is just as good.

"Hey, yourself," Soren replies, breaking me free from my thoughts. He leans against the doorframe, a slow smile stretching across his face, the very picture of sexy and confident, while my nerves betray me. I pluck at my eyebrow. "I wasn't sure if you'd be coming over."

I gesture with jazz hands. “Ta-da. Here I am.”

He unlocks the front gate, which encloses a small front stoop, and ushers me in with a sweep of his hand. I step inside the small courtyard and wait for him to lock up behind us. While he enters a code, I take in what appears to be a main entry. It has a narrow concrete floor hallway and at the far end is a small dormer window with a hall table.

Soren brushes past me, and I get an intoxicating whiff of his freshly showered scent. He motions me forward toward the staircase, and I notice a wood-paneled elevator door.

I tilt my head and pinch my eyebrows together. “You have an elevator?”

He flattens his palm against the door. “Ja. Would you prefer a ride?”

As soon as he says the word ride, the elevator scene from an erotic book series I read comes to mind and heat flames across my cheeks. I swallow.

Soren cocks his head. “You okay?”

“Of course,” I say a bit too forcefully, and then wave. “Maybe later.”

He doesn’t say anything more and we climb the stairs. He remains two steps in front of me so I’m torn between looking at his home’s impressive architecture and his perfectly sculpted ass.

The staircase is protected by glass and boasts wood trim handrails. It’s beautifully modern, with a hint of dark teak woodwork that warmly balances with the stark white of the walls.

When we reach the top of the landing, the room opens to a large main living area in front of us. A glass and river rock fireplace, with a mantel full of photos and trophies, and a huge flat-screen TV adorn one wall.

On the far end is a brightly lit kitchen with white cabinetry and stainless-steel appliances, and bracketing each end of the open-concept space are floor-to-ceiling windows. One set of windows looks out toward the cityscape, and the other offers the most mind-blowing view of the harbor and the North Shore mountains that I’ve ever seen outside of photographs.

“You have a beautiful home,” I say absently, still taking in my surroundings. “Did you design it yourself?”

This produces a deep, throaty chuckle from Soren. “Nein. It was an existing unit when I purchased. The elevator came with the house, and all the décor is courtesy of Anna’s good eye. I have no taste in interior design.”

I chuckle. “Tanner is the same way. I did a lot of work when I moved in, including purchasing a few necessities. You know, like towels.” I remember asking him where the extra towels were for the guest bathroom. He looked at me like I’d grown three heads.

My gaze lands on a massive four-piece sectional couch in a dark heather gray, which is soft to the touch when I run my hand over the material. It takes up most of the room and even has a chaise lounge.

“This looks like the perfect spot to drink coffee and read a book.”

Next, my eyes catch on the packed built-in bookshelf. I move closer to examine the books, grazing my fingers over the bindings as I do so. They’re arranged in alphabetical order by author, but they also appear to be categorized by genre. It’s almost like a librarian lives here. I look over my shoulder to find Soren watching me, his arms crossed at his chest. “You’re a big reader, then?”

“Ja.” He shrugs. “Sometimes books are better than people.”

I snort out a laugh and point a finger toward him. “Fact.”

“You like thrillers,” I say, noticing a large assortment of authors I’m familiar with.

He’s suddenly behind me, his breath fanning the back of my neck. He smells of minty fresh toothpaste and a spicy cologne. A shiver runs down the length of my spine when his knuckles brush along the sensitive skin of my neck and he leans in to whisper in my ear.

“I like *you*.”

One moment I’m staring at his bookshelf and the next, Soren’s hands are on my hips, and he spins me around to face him. The top of my head

barely reaches his chin, and I tip my head back to look into his eyes. Compelling and magnetic, they hold a sheen of purpose.

I feel it down to my core.

“Do you know how long I’ve obsessed over your taste on my tongue?” He wraps his hands around my wrists and leads my arms above my head, pressing his body into mine and back into the wall of books.

I shake my head and stare up at him with wide-eyed interest and desire.

“All night long, mein Sonnenschein.” His eyes darken.

I tremble, a flash of pleasure sparking hot and needy between my legs. I don’t know what his words mean, but they set off an electricity that hums through my body.

“I can’t get you out of my head, Ali. I want more.”

I’m about to say something like “yes, more,” but it dies on my tongue the moment he captures my mouth in a hot, urgent kiss. With my arms trapped in his hold, all I can do is arch into him, my nipples tightening into peaks against my bra. Small, helpless noises emerge from deep within my throat. I barely recognize myself.

Soren wastes no time as he silences my sounds of desperation with a sweep of his tongue against my lips, and my mouth opens to let him in. The taste of him melds with my own fervent need and fans the flames. The heat radiating from this kiss is so intense that we could burn this whole house down.

He drops my hands and cups my cheeks with a shaky hiss of his breath. My only thought is to be closer, to be skin on skin so that the empty ache in my core can be filled. I hoist myself up and wrap my legs around his waist, curling my hands at his nape and winding my fingers through his damp locks. His hands lift my ass so his hard arousal probes the tender and aching notch between my legs. I draw in a ragged breath.

Soren’s fingers inch toward my center, teasing the edge of my panties underneath my skirt and brushing over my swollen clit.

I hum my consent. There's no stopping us tonight. Truth be told, I wasn't interested in stopping yesterday, but cooler heads prevailed and Soren made the right call.

But tonight's a completely different story.

Tonight I'm Little Red Riding Hood submitting to The Wolf's demands.

I loosen the hold I have on his hair and trail my fingers over the scruff against his jawline. The sensation reminds me of how he rubbed his mouth along my inner thighs. I undulate my hips, hoping for more of him to fill my emptiness inside.

My hands glide over his bunching shoulder muscles as I move back up along the corded ropes of his neck, stroking over the mound of his pecs, and then travel further down his abdomen. He sucks in a sharp breath when I land on the waistband of his jeans. I flirt with the button, running my knuckles over the soft trail of hair that leads underneath.

And then I go for the kill, sliding my palm over his thick erection. Soren drops his head back with a deep, desperate groan, and his fingers dig into my ass.

"Mein Gott," he curses, swinging around and walking us toward the couch, where he sets me down along the chaise I'd admired. His penetrating gaze roams over me with a hungry flicker of desire.

I reach up to undo his jeans, tugging them open and over his hips, letting go of the material so it drops to the floor at his feet.

I let out a surprised gasp when I find him naked from head to toe. Soren is not wearing any underwear, and his hard cock is proud and heavy in front of me, ready for every single part of my attention.

My eyes flash to his face as I marvel in this discovery, my fingernail circling the crown. "Is this on purpose?"

He smirks.

"No time." He shrugs. "Sorry. Not sorry."

I can't hide the pleasure that forms my delighted smile, and I tentatively run the pad of my thumb along the underside of his cock. "No apologies necessary."

My mouth lands on the hard plains of muscle in his abs. Admiring the gorgeous work he's put into his body, I trace them with my tongue and then my inquisitive fingertips. They expand and contract with each featherlight touch.

Without breaking eye contact or asking permission, I skim my knuckles over the velvety steel of the underside of his erection. His dick twitches at my touch and he mutters something in German when I wrap my fist around the base and run the flat of my tongue up the bulging vein of his cock.

When I reach the tip, I swirl the crown with my tongue, savoring the beads of salty wetness at the top, eagerly flicking the slit as he fists my hair in his tight grip. A whimper of desire escapes my lips.

The moment I decided to come over to see Soren tonight, I knew what I wanted. My visit may have been under the guise of business, but it was always my hope that the business would lead to pleasure.

And here we are. Getting down to business.

Since the first time we met, and every instance since, my attraction to Soren has grown like a sunflower chasing the sun and has thrown me into a defenseless tailspin.

It has never been my intention to sleep with one of my brother's teammates, but Soren is too hard to resist.

A rush of fresh desire floods through me as I part my lips and cover the head of his cock with my mouth. He says my name like a prayer. "*Ali*."

I work him to the back of my throat, consumed by his taste, squirming with need. I swallow hard and Soren exhales a sexy, ragged breath. When he pulls my hair to get me to stop my ministrations, I give him a mutinous glare.

“Hey, I’m just getting started,” I say, my voice raspy. My hand is still tightly wrapped around his girth, and he looks down and plucks my fingers off, one by one. His eyes are dark and heavy with desire as he stands tall above me. I wipe the corners of my mouth with my finger and thumb and tilt my head to the side.

“I want to make you come.” I feel oddly rejected like I did yesterday, and this time we have no risk of getting caught. I’m ready and willing, and he’s still putting the brakes on.

Soren hovers over me, one hand pressed into the chaise. His tongue raids my mouth in a claiming stroke. When he pulls back, he says matter-of-factly, “A woman always comes first.”

“Such a gentleman. But”—I want to ensure I get this out there before we get too far ahead of ourselves—“do you have a condom?”

He nods his chin and his eyes flash. “Upstairs.”

He extends a hand, and I place mine in his warm palm, letting him pull me to a stand and lead me to the staircase.

As we near the steps, I stop, and the motion has him jerking back. He stands completely naked and turns to look at me with a question in his gaze.

My eyes flit to the elevator and back to him.

“I’m going to need you to do me a favor later.” I point to the elevator. “Something very ungentlemanly.”

His lips curl up in a slight smile. “Does it involve fucking you in there?”

A wave of excitement ripples inside me. “It might.”

Soren

The minute she's in my bedroom, I waste no time divesting Ali of the sexy little sundress that took my breath away when she showed up at my house.

It's like peeling away the wrapping paper on the best gift ever because underneath the dress all I find is a strapless bra and matching panties. I remove and toss those aside and throw back the covers so she can slip between the cool sheets as I extract a condom from my bedside table.

When I turn back, she's laid bare, her dark red curls fanned out over my pillowcase, so fucking beautiful it gives me heart palpitations. I'm not even sure where to start.

It was excruciatingly painful to stop what she'd started downstairs, but I knew I didn't want to deprive myself of making her come like she did yesterday.

And now that we're alone—prepared and ready—I plan on taking my time, teasing us both before I bury myself deep inside her. I just know her wet, tight pussy will be the end of me.

Even with that small, forbidden taste I got of her yesterday, it proved the fear I have is real. Ali is going to break me wide open, and I will never be the same again.

My body doesn't give a damn about my shuttered heart right now. Ali can tear me to a million pieces and set them on fire if I can have this one moment with her.

Consciously setting that fear aside, I push my shoulders between her open knees. Then I lower my face to her pussy and unleash my tongue.

Her body jerks when I lick my way up the flat of her stomach, reacting with a quiver of her belly. I experiment with a hip roll and nestle my cock into her sweet, wet groove. I close my eyes to fend off the insatiable need to slam inside.

Instead, I redirect my focus to the swell of her breasts, plucking one taut bud between my lips and sucking hard. The satisfaction I get when she squirms underneath me is better than a hundred puck saves in a championship game.

I cup one breast in my hand, circling first my tongue and then the pad of my thumb over her nipple before moving on to the other. Ali's tits are perfect handfuls, what dreams are made of. She bucks and grinds her pelvis against mine, and the friction lights me up to the point of delirium.

My mouth crashes against hers in a demanding kiss, tongue meeting tongue in a duel of need and dominance.

Ali's hands find my bare ass, latching onto each cheek and squeezing. She digs in her short nails, and I grind my cock against her clit. When she circles her hips in a sensual move, I momentarily close my eyes from pleasure as her wet center envelopes the underside of my arousal.

It'll be a miracle if I can hold off much longer. I'm losing control but I need to make sure she's ready.

I may be called The Wolf, but I'm not an animal.

I lower my lips to her neck, kissing the sensitive skin beneath her earlobe. Shifting my weight off her body, I roll to one hip and stroke along her curves with light, feathery touches that produce an outbreak of goosebumps over her soft flesh. I continue to map a path toward her belly,

drawing circles around her navel, enjoying the rise and fall of her breasts. Then I stop at her pelvic bone. I splay my fingers out over her stomach and my gaze lifts to hers.

“I’m going to make you come with my fingers.” I wiggle said fingers in a dance over her pelvis. “Next time, my cock.”

A soft, shaky breath escapes past her lips.

“Is that okay with you?” I search her expression and drag the pad of my thumb along the top of her mound.

She lets out a chuckle.

“Um, yeah. No complaints here.”

“Gut. Now spread your legs.”

She does as I request and adds a flirtatious shake of her hips.

“I like when you use that voice to tell me what to do.”

A growl of satisfaction rips free from my throat. “Don’t say things like that,” I say, dipping my head over her breast to suck a nipple between my teeth. Hard enough that it makes her squirm, a squeak of approval breaking free. “It goes straight to my head.”

She giggles, shifting a hand between us and running exploratory fingers over the crown of my cock. “I see that.”

I huff out a pained groan and rock into her hand as she curls it around the base and strokes.

“Verdammt Scheiße,” I moan out. My ability to hold on has worn thin, and I’m not sure I’ll make it to the finish line if she continues touching me like this. I want to be inside her welcoming body too badly to miss the opportunity by coming too soon.

I gently remove her hand with one of mine, pressing it firmly into the mattress above her head, and return to my quest to make her come. I tease my fingertips over the cleft of her folds before sucking my middle finger into my mouth, getting it nice and slicked. Her eyes turn glassy and her

tongue traces her bottom lip, her hungry gaze following my hand gliding down her center.

With two fingers, I part her velvet entrance and slide a finger through folds. She is hot and wet and so fucking tight.

Ali's eyelashes flutter close on a hushed moan, her lips parting on a long sigh.

My own body reacts with eagerness and my cock twitches with excitement as I grow hungrier and more desperate for release. I want to hear that sound repeatedly once I'm buried deep inside.

I pump my finger, circling and changing the rhythm as our momentum builds. Ali's inner muscles tense and clench around my finger, and I add one more with another claiming stroke.

I'm reaching the point where I may become an aching mess. All I want is to sink inside her tight body and never come up for air. My cock waits my command with delicious anticipation.

Ali's mewls of pleasure do not help matters. She grinds against my hand with each passionate stroke, turning her head toward me and hooking her arm around my neck to offer me her mouth. I claim her mouth in a blinding kiss.

She reacts with a sensual moan; I rumble with a deep growl in response.

We break our kiss and she drops her head onto the mattress, panting for air. As my fingers pump, my thumb deftly strums over her clit and Ali's thighs tighten around my hand. Suddenly, her back arches off the bed and she goes still for a moment, then releases a long, tortured moan as she trembles out her orgasm.

Ali sighs and her muscles relax, and I gently brush the loose strands of hair from her face. I place a kiss on her cheek and smile.

"You gut?"

She turns to look at me, the most beautiful grin I've ever seen fixed across her mouth.

“I’m very, *very* gut.” Ali sighs again, then pauses and chews on her bottom lip, as if considering something important. Flipping to her side so we face each other, she eyes me dubiously.

Her gaze moves downward and zeroes in on my throbbing dick bobbing at her belly. Then she wedges her hand between our hips, envelops my erection in her hand, and gives it a hard tug.

“But I could be a whole lot better.”

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A li

I've never reached orgasm with a romantic partner.

Until now.

I've gotten close in the past but never actually came. It's been this elusive thing hanging over me—no matter what the guy has tried, it always ends with me just faking it for the sake of moving on.

With Soren, though, there's not only an undeniable attraction that exists, but he allows me to feel comfortable with myself. There's no need for me to act or pretend to be overcome with passion.

What I feel toward him is so potent and physically electrifying that I just can't help myself.

The heavy weight of his cock in my hand causes a ripple of desire to zap through my veins as I run my palm over the velvety steel. I tease at the head with my fingernail before quickening my strokes and jerking him from base to tip. The sound of his tortured groans from the back of his throat is a powerful drug spurring me on.

I roll his sac in my hand experimentally, watching for his reaction, smiling with perverse pride when he flops on his back and throws a crooked arm over his eyes theatrically, as if the pleasure is killing him.

The headiness of being in control is all-consuming. I change up the pace, alternating the glide of my hand between quick and long pulls, and an urgent desire rushes directly to my sex with every sound he makes.

“I need to be inside you,” he says in a husky, insistent voice.

I prop myself up on my elbow and stare at his half-lidded eyes as a lazy, sexy grin unfurls on his lips.

“Yes, please.”

Soren reaches across the bed for the condom and rolls it down his engorged cock. I position myself on my back, hair spread out over his pillow and let my legs fall open. He wedges his knees between my thighs and hovers over me.

“You take my breath away,” he says reverently, brushing my cheek delicately with his thumb.

Our eyes lock, his flashing dark with need, and he asks, “Are you still okay with this?”

I can answer that without any hesitation whatsoever. “Hell, yeah.”

Soren draws out a long groan as he tentatively rocks his hips between my thighs, the drag of his cock so delicious that a mewl of urgent plea crawls from my throat.

“Please, Soren. *Now.*”

I wrap my legs around his waist and dig my heels into his lower back as he thrusts inside. He plunges so deep that it steals my breath and I nearly pass out from pleasure. Once fully seated, he grinds his hips over my sensitive clit, and I cry out at the sensations.

“Oh, God. Soren...”

He suddenly stops, and I open my eyes to find him looking down at me with an expression of alarm.

“Did I hurt you? Are you okay?”

I shake my head, fingertips digging into his round ass.

“More.” I raise my head to suck his lower lip between my teeth. “I want more.”

Soren begins thrusting, plunging in and out with an urgency that matches the hammering of my heart. I manage to hold on, but I’m paralyzed with pleasure each time he hits the spot that has me seeing stars.

Soren dips his head, peppering kisses along my neck, under my earlobe, over my collarbone, and then latching onto my nipple, claiming it with his mouth, all while pistoning his hips in a punishing pace. He lets out grunts of gratification at each thrust.

My hand rolls down the straining muscles in his back, enjoying the soft, sinewy feel. We move together in an intimate synchronicity that sets my body on fire.

His mouth claims mine once again, kissing me so hard it unleashes a torrent of flutters in my belly. His tongue dives deep in a demanding and desperate kiss. I’m breathless and getting close to that precipice.

And when he rips his mouth free, he props himself up on a forearm and skims one hand along my stomach until he reaches the place where we’re joined. With expert precision, he finds my clit, pressing and circling so perfectly that it tips me over the edge.

My orgasm skyrockets through me, white lights flashing behind my eyelids. Gravity no longer has any hold on me.

I shudder with the force of my climax, screaming out my pleasure.

“Yes.. yes... yessssss.”

As if this was the code he’d been waiting for, Soren thrusts twice more in quick succession, hitting me so deep I see stars once again. And then, with a quiet resolve I’ve come to expect, he shudders through his orgasm, coming inside me while I shake from the aftershocks of my own release.

“Fuck, yes,” he finally says, nestling his face into the crook of my neck, his beard tickling as his breath ghosts against my ear.

I stroke his hair dreamily, relaxed in my post-coital afterglow, as Soren remains unmoving inside of me, still semi-hard, his chest rising and falling in slow beats against my breasts.

After a bit, I nudge him with my knee. “Did you fall asleep?”

He bucks his hips and I giggle. But then he pulls out and rolls to the side, leaving a chill across my too hot skin. My body feels strangely bereft. I push that feeling away as I watch him leave the bed and walk into the bathroom, closing the door behind him without a word.

Is that strange? Am I overthinking things, creating a negative story in my head because he didn’t behave the way I expected after sex?

Vulnerability and indecision wash over me. I reach for the edge of the sheet and pull it over my breasts, tucking it under my chin, a drag of my finger to my eyebrow where I can scroll through my nerves.

When I hear the shower running, tears sting my eyes. I’m not sure why I’m getting so worked up about this. It’s sex, nothing more. We scratched an itch and made each other come. Big deal. No declarations of love or status changes involved.

Soren has never mentioned wanting a girlfriend or a relationship. He’s said he wanted me physically and called me beautiful, but he didn’t say I’d be his top priority. That spot is taken by hockey and his family in Austria.

I scramble out of bed, stepping into my discarded panties and throwing my dress over my head. My shoes are out by his couch along with my purse. I look longingly at the elevator, reminded of my fantasy that will probably never come true, and pad down the stairs in bare feet. I’m about to grab my shoes and bag and rush out the door when Soren’s voice echoes down the stairwell.

“Ali? Are you still here?”

I remain quiet for a moment, holding my breath and running through my options.

I can quietly sneak out the front door and book it to my car, which is parked a block up the street, or I can stay and see if the cold signals Soren gave me aren't proof of my worst fear come true, that sex is all he wants.

I swallow thickly at the slapping of his feet against the wood steps, the sound becoming louder the closer he gets to where I am.

Clutching my purse and shoes in a protective hold against my body, I debate over my ridiculous predicament, but I don't make a move. Deep in my heart, I want to know that I matter to Soren and am not just a hookup.

He finally appears, a towel wrapped snugly around his waist, his hair wet like it was when I first arrived earlier. He tilts his head and looks at me curiously, like he's trying to solve a problem. "Are you leaving?"

I glance down and wonder how I must look. Deer-in-the-headlights eyes, disheveled sex hair, overall messy appearance.

I stammer, my voice thick with indecision and panic. "Um... well... I figured you wanted me to leave."

"Why? Do you want to leave?" He edges a few feet closer. So close, in fact, that I can smell the soap and deodorant he just used.

My eyes dart side to side. Shoulders tight, body poised for a quick getaway. His questions throw me for a loop. Of course, I don't want to leave. All I want is to be wrapped up in his warmth and cuddled all night as I melt into his side.

I quirk the corner of my lip up. "Only if you want me to."

His hand snaps out and he grabs me by the wrist, tugging me into his chest. The contents in my arms drop to the floor, and I'm suddenly enveloped in his embrace.

"Nein. I want you to stay right here."

Soren

Jesus Christ, that was intense.

When I've hooked up with women in the past, it was always a means to an end.

Sex is just sex. It scratches an itch and that's it, nothing more. Hello, goodbye. Auf Wiedersehen.

But with Ali? Holy fuck. This is a whole different ball game, and I want it to go into overtime.

The time I've spent with her—and inside her—has produced an emotion I can't describe. It's knocked me off my feet, and I'm not sure I can get myself up off the floor.

And today I'm expected to treat her like she means nothing to me, like I didn't spend hours touching her creamy skin or kissing the freckles that pepper the bridge of her nose or witnessing how she comes apart so beautifully when my tongue brings her to orgasm.

Nope. I'm supposed to pretend nothing has happened between us as I hit the links for the LTLFK charity golf event Ali has planned.

I'm also scheduled to meet Nicolas, the kid with Wolf-Hirschhorn Syndrome who's a big fan of mine. It honestly makes me nervous when I meet fans. I hate having to put on a show and try to act friendly and open

and engaging. These are all traits my agent has suggested I work on, and all of them are especially difficult to me to do around kids.

In the past, I've turned down appearances such as this event for those very reasons.

But the moment I see Ali's smiling face from afar, something strange happens to my insides. My nerves and angst seem to evaporate and a warm calm washes over me.

Fuck me. Is Ali my talisman?

I swing the shiny new golf bag over my shoulder and head down the cart path toward the clubhouse and check-in table. Ali's back is now turned away from me as she and another woman organize baskets at a second table. I can't hear what she's saying, but she's chatting animatedly, arms gesticulating wildly. The other woman turns around, sensing my approach, and smiles.

"Hello, Mr. Wolfenspiel," says a dark-haired woman who can't be more than five foot nothing. She offers me her hand to shake. "My name is Leanne Lee, and I'm the foundation's executive director." Ali's back stiffens when the woman says my name, and she glances over her shoulder, hiding a grin by sucking her lower lip between her teeth. I'm half-listening now to what the woman—Leanne—is saying, my thoughts solely on the memory of those lips on me.

Leanne reaches behind her for a packet of materials on the table and holds them out for me. "We're so glad you could join us. I can't tell you how grateful we all are that you've offered your time to participate and raise money for these kids today."

I think I may have seen Leanne during my brief visit with Ali in her office a few weeks ago. But instead of business attire, today she's wearing a bright pink golf shirt with a white sport skirt, and her hair's pulled back into a ponytail. I try to keep my attention focused on Leanne while she speaks,

but my eyes involuntarily drift to Ali, who has at last fully turned around to face me.

A bright pink blush colors her cheeks and her sky-blue eyes sparkle bright in the sunlight.

She has her hair pulled back off her face into a sporty ponytail. The T-shirt sporting the LTLFK logo does nothing to hide her gorgeous curves, and her tanned legs look fucking phenomenal in the short golf skirt she has on.

I remind myself of the agreement we came to the night we slept together: We are keeping it casual and professional in public. No flirtatious banter or fuck-me eyes. It's important we remain discreet around others, especially her brother.

But fuck, this is going to be harder than defending the net against the best team in the league. All I want right now is to lift her in my arms, kiss the hell out of her, and cart her off somewhere private where I can do unspeakable things to that body.

I clear my throat, remembering I need to be polite and courteous and play nice with others. "You can call me Wolf. Everybody else does."

I accept the packet she's handed me and my gaze flicks to Ali, who has stepped up to the table.

"Good morning, Soren," she says, offering me her hand to shake. "Good to see you again."

Her touch sends mystifying electric charges up my arm. I run my thumb over her knuckles with a gentle caress, and her eyelashes flutter slightly. Then I let go of her hand before I do something stupid.

"Guten Morgen, Ali." Her eyes light up even more. She's said she loves to hear me say her name with my German accent, so I throw it on extra thick. "Gut to see you, too. And I'm looking forward to meeting my new friend."

Ali's blush deepens and she quickly glances away, her fingers caressing her eyebrow in a move I now know to be a nervous tic.

Leanne jumps in, her assessing gaze bouncing between Ali and me. I know Ali hasn't said anything to anyone, but the look in Leanne's eyes suggests she may be onto us anyway.

"In your packet is all the information you need about scoring and the rules of play, Wolf. As you know, this is not a typical golf game. It's a Best Ball tournament, which means you and your teammate will tee off and then use and count the best shots until a hole is made. Then you'll use that score. Do you have any questions for us?"

"Um, yeah. I guess. What about the boy I'm supposed to be teamed up with? Nicolas."

"Oh yes, I believe that's..." Leanne is interrupted by a young, chipper voice behind me. I swing around and my eyes drop to the boy in question.

"Nicolas!" he shouts, but it comes out sounding like *Nicawas*.

The little boy stands about four feet tall and is covered in Vikings gear from head to toe. Over his head, he wears a hockey helmet painted with the Vikings emblem on each side and on his shoulder is the strap of a small golf bag, which holds a few child-sized clubs.

While I can't see much of him under the helmet and from my height, I know from the excitement in his voice that he's beaming.

I take a knee so I'm eye level with the little guy. Underneath the helmet guard, a lopsided grin shows off his missing front teeth and his eyes, while wide-set, are a shade of bright blue that rivals the sky.

"Hey there, Nicolas. I hear you're going to be my golfing buddy today, eh?"

He bounces on his toes with excitement that is palpable. "Yeah. You're da Woff. I'm Nicowas."

I take the hand he politely sticks out and give it a firm shake. "Can I call you Little Wolf, since we're partners?"

The light in his expression could rival a sunrise. He turns his head to smile in wonder and amazement at his mother, who stands next to him, holding a bag filled with what appears to be snacks and medical supplies.

“Mama, you hear dat? Woff wants to call me widdle woff.”

She nods her head at her young son. “I think that would be a perfect nickname for you.” Then she shifts her gaze to me, and I can see all her thoughts and emotions in the crinkle of her eyes.

Gratitude and a deep love for her son.

A pang of sorrow hits me because I know with certainty that it would be the same look Günther would have for his children were he alive now.

“Wolf, you have no idea how long Nicolas has waited to meet you. He’s your number one fan.”

She introduces herself as Melanie, and I stand up and shake her hand, glancing between the two of them and then looking at Nicolas when I speak.

“I can see that. And I created a private account just so I can start following his Instagram account. I’ve heard he is a true Vikings influencer.”

Nicolas lets out his cry of victory. “Woff. Woff. Woff.”

My heart cracks open a little wider, and I wonder how I’ll survive the emotional toll this day is sure to deliver.

Suck it up, Wolf.

I hold my knuckles down to Nicolas and he gives me a tiny fist bump.

“Are you ready to get our game on, Little Wolf?” I ask him, narrowing my eyes to stare at him with all seriousness. “Because we’re gonna win, right?”

Nicolas bobs his head up and down, the helmet wobbling loosely. “Win! Win! Win!”

“Okay, Little Wolf. Let’s do it.”

When I spin around to grab the gear I’d left beside the table, I see a sheen of wetness at the corners of Ali’s eyes.

And fuck yeah. I'm ready to do this.

For Nicolas and for Ali.

And for my brother because he can't be here to do it with us.

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A li

Once all the golfers and their young participants are checked in, Leanne, Halle and I work with the caterer to ensure all the post-game snacks and drinks are ready, then do a final tally of the awards that will be presented to each group of golfers.

My heart still flutters madly at the memory of how Soren engaged with Nicolas and his mom during their introductions. In fact, Halle MacAllister, whom I'd met at Tanner's pool party and who offered to assist me in today's tournament, even mentions their sweet interaction.

"Wow. I've never seen The Wolf speak so... not Wolf-like," she says as she continues to assemble the goodie bags we have for our golfers. They're all filled with treats and Vikings and sponsor merchandise. "He was so kind to Nicolas. It reminds me of the way Dane spoke to our daughter the first time he met her."

I'd caught the gist of Halle and Dane's story from the pool party conversations I overheard between the ladies, but my hosting duties had kept me from sussing out the specifics. All I know is that Dane didn't realize he had a child with Halle for quite some time and didn't meet her until Halle moved to Vancouver. It truly is an amazing story, and I couldn't

admire Halle any more now that I know a bit about the sacrifices she made to raise a child as a single mother.

“Oh yeah? How was that?” I prod, hoping not to sound too nosy, but I can’t help it. I’m very curious about the details surrounding their second chance. Talk about romantic. “I didn’t get to talk with you as much as I’d have liked at the party.”

“True! We didn’t have a lot of privacy, but it sure was a fun party.” She leans toward me conspiratorially and winks. “And it was nice to have some adults-only time.”

Halle smiles dreamily, looking off toward the golf course. “To answer your question about Dane and I, well... I’d just moved from my home in Calgary to join the Vikings front office, and my dad was helping me and Lenni get settled in. He brought her into the office to meet her new teacher and see her new classroom at the on-site daycare the Vikings provide. Anyway, long story short, she literally plowed into Dane, who just happened to be at the team offices at the same time.”

Laughing at her memory, Halle hands me a finished bag. I tie the cellophane together with a blue ribbon and set it over on the opposite table, then I take a quick peek at my to-do list and time schedules and give myself a nod of approval. On time and everything is set. This is the final task that needs to be done before I head out on the course and check in with the groups.

“I’m sure both were surprised with the run-in. Did Dane know Lenni was his daughter at that point?”

Halle tips her head to the side and raises her eyes expressively under her long, dark lashes.

“No, he didn’t.” Her voice is wistful and maybe filled with a tinge of regret. “We were both very young when I got pregnant, and due to the circumstances, I decided at the time not to tell him about the baby.”

“I can’t even imagine. I bet being a single mom for the first few years of Lenni’s life was tough to do on your own.”

I’m not new to the concept of single motherhood; Tanner and I were both raised almost single-handedly by just our moms. Tanner’s mom, especially, raised him by herself during most of his childhood. While my dad helped financially while he was alive and included Tanner in our family vacations, Camille still had the primary parenting responsibilities.

Halle nods. “Yeah, it wasn’t easy, even with Dad’s help. But it would’ve been just as hard, if different, if Dane had known about Lenni. That was when he was a very young rookie and on the road.”

“Well, seeing you guys together now, it’s so obvious that you’ve made the right decision and things worked. The two of you make a cute couple.”

She looks off longingly toward the eighteenth hole and sighs. I know exactly what it means.

Because I already feel the same about Soren, straight to my core. My body goes on high alert with a tingling sensation that erupts with every touch, smile, and glance from him. My acting skills were put to the test this morning when he arrived and I had to pretend I’m not into him. I’m sure my attraction could be read all over my face.

Somehow, I managed, although the looks he’d given me proved that he was in the same boat.

I was successfully able to let down my guard once he left the vicinity, but before he teed off at the first hole, he sent me a text that had my heart racing all over again.

Soren: You look beautiful today.

Soren: I really wanted to kiss that blush off your face.

Soren: Or do something else to make you blush.

Soren: Maybe later, eh?

It was short, sweet, and a bit steamy, and filled me to the brim with happiness. Not to mention lust.

Halle returns her gaze to me and hands me the last bag in our pile.

“Dane is the best dad to Lenni, and I can’t imagine our life without him now.”

“Do you think you’ll get married or have more kids?” The question pops out before I can stop it. Sometimes I’m such a nosy Nelly.

I’m filled with concern over my faux pax when Halle looks away, but not before I see her bite her lip and her cheekbones pinken.

“*Ohh...* understood.” I reach out and place my hand on her forearm, and she turns back with a worried expression on her face. “Your secret’s safe with me, Halle. In fact, I know we don’t know each other very well, but I’ll share one of mine with you.”

Her eyebrows lift. “You mean the secret thing you have for The Wolf?”

I blink and my mouth gapes incredulously. “What? How?”

Halle swirls a finger toward my face. “Girl, it was written all over you like a headline. Don’t ever play poker with the guys.” She chuckles and pats my shoulder. I duck my chin to my chest and raise my hand to cover my eyes in embarrassed disbelief.

When I lift my head, I stare at her imploringly.

“Please don’t tell anyone. Not even Dane,” I plead. “We’re keeping it under wraps, and I do *not* want my brother to find out.”

Halle gives me a quick salute and then mimes zipping her lips and throwing away the key. “Got it. My lips are sealed, and even Dane’s lips won’t get it out of me.”

“Oh, geez.” I roll my eyes. “The way you two look at each other does not bode well for your secret-keeping ability.”

She laughs, gesturing with her palms up. “Hey, I kept our daughter secret for almost five years! I think I’m pretty good at it.”

Touché.



IF I LEARNED one lesson today, it's that driving a golf cart around a course is a lot of frickin' fun. It was so exciting to feel the wind whip across my face and blow my hair back, giving me feeling of freedom I've never felt before.

When I stop the cart on the path next to the fifteenth hole where Soren, Nicolas, Oliver Thornquist, and his young partner, Alesia Conrad, are set to tee off, a broad smile is already fixed across my face. But to watch Soren as he stands behind Nicolas, his large goalie hands cupping the smaller ones as he helps the boy swing the club is too much for me to hide my joy.

My heart seems to grow three sizes too big for my chest and is about to burst through my ribs.

The scene in front me is one that I'll forever remember as the sexiest, sweetest thing a man could ever do. My ovaries better not get any ideas.

There should be a verb for Soren, like "I just got Wolfed" or better yet, "My heart got Wolfed apart."

Nicolas's giggles ring across the tee box as the ball goes sailing in the air about five feet. He turns around to give his golfing partner a high five and then a fist bump. The rest of the audience gives them a round of applause.

"Nice job, Little Wolf," Oliver says in recognition of Nicolas's shot, ruffling up the little boy's curly mop of hair.

Nicolas walks off the mound and trots to his mother, who welcomes him in a warm embrace.

"You sure are getting good at hitting the ball," she marvels, placing a kiss on the top of his head. His gap-toothed smile is filled with pride.

He nods emphatically. "Yeah. I'm better than Woof."

Soren picks up the broken tees and turns around, a mocking glare of protest pinned on his partner. "Hey, I'm trying here. You've got some mad

skills, Little Wolf.”

When Soren notices me in the cart, I give him a friendly wave. He winks back.

“How’s it going out here? Everyone doing okay so far?” I ask, hoping my voice doesn’t sound like I’m in desperate need of Soren’s attention. “I see you haven’t brought The Wolf to tears yet, Nicolas.”

Nicolas raises his fists above his head and pumps them in the air with a celebratory whoop of laughter. It’s light and joyous, and his enthusiasm for life despite his limitations fills my heart. It’s for this reason I love working with the LTLFK Foundation and am proud of the work we do to help kids get the most out of life.

Nicolas jumps up to sit on the bench seat of their golf cart, chanting, “Go, Vikings, go!”

In a conversation with his mother before the event, Melanie explained that Nicolas has a difficult time forming words and talking due to various delays brought on by WHS. While bright and very aware of the world around him, his capacity to speak clearly is hampered at this stage by his cleft palate and where the gum repairs are at and his developmental delays, so he will often chant or sing instead.

Soren secures the clubs in their bags on the back of their golf cart and walks directly toward mine. I think my heart skips a beat. I lift my fingers to my eyebrow, rolling the tip of my index over the fine hairs to calm my nerves.

He stops at my side and, crooking his elbow on the roof, leans his head down so his face is visible to me. His grin is heart-stopping.

“If it weren’t for Little Wolf, I’d be losing to Thorny over there.” He winks and I feel it between my legs. Then he pins me with a heady stare. “Are you going to join us, Ali?”

“Oh goodness, no. I’m not a golfer.” I wave my hand in the air. “I’m just popping through to make sure everyone knows we have a big post-

tournament awards ceremony after all the groups are finished. We'll all meet up at the clubhouse. I hope you can stick around for that, Soren."

"I'll be there." The corners of his mouth quirk up into a smirk. "You can count on that."

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Soren

“Wolf, thank you so much for your kindness today with Nicolas.” Melanie’s eyes glisten with unshed tears, and a tight lump forms in my throat. I’m not exceptionally great with showing emotion and don’t always respond accordingly, but this time I manage to find the words.

“Think nothing of it, Melanie. The honor was all mine. Your son is amazing.”

The kid is pure joy, and what he lacks in stature he makes up for with the biggest heart of any person I’ve ever met. The cheerfulness he freely shares has inspired me to view the world in a different way.

And the opportunity to spend the day out on the course with Nicolas has taught me a ton about children with disabilities, giving me a new perspective on how I can learn to be more open with people, especially people I care about.

Nicolas presents himself to the world in a way that says you can be happy despite the difficulties and pain you might experience in your life. Something that I’m grateful to be reminded of.

The kid is also great for my ego. It’s pretty fucking great to be told I’m his all-time favorite goalie.

As our foursome and the kids' parents enter the clubhouse, Melanie encourages her son to head over to the treat table where he can grab a snack.

"Remember to use your manners, though," she reminds her son, giving him a tap on the butt.

Nicolas's reply is priceless. He rolls his eyes and says very clearly, "Duh, Mama."

I chuckle and watch him run off toward the table where a few of the other kids are congregating, all of them chatting like they're best friends.

Melanie gives me a watery smile, glancing at her child as he examines the table full of treats and snacks. "When Nicolas was born, we weren't sure what to expect. The doctors warned us there would be developmental delays, problems with verbal communication, impacts to his heart and lungs. It was devastating." She swipes a finger over her cheek, wiping away a tear. "His biological father couldn't handle it and took off within the first two months."

"Jesus, I'm sorry." My words are wholly inadequate for the pain she must have endured. "That must've been rough."

She nods. "Yes, it was. But Nicolas means everything to me. He taught me how to be resilient and never give up. And a few years later, I met a man who loved and cherished us both. Allen became Nicolas's stepfather."

This takes me by surprise. The information from Ali had indicated that Melanie was a single mother. I cast a glance around us, thinking maybe I somehow missed meeting him. "Is he here today?"

A sad look that flashes across Melanie's face. "Allen died suddenly last year in a motorcycle accident. My poor boy and I have been going through a traumatic time."

The wind gets knocked out of my lungs, and I gasp for breath.

"Mein Gott," I mumble. It feels like I've been ripped open with a cleaver. "That's awful."

You'd never know by Nicolas's behavior and his never-ending smile what he's gone through at such a young age. I wish he could teach me how to get through the grief that eats away at me.

Melanie clutches her bag to her chest in a protective manner, her own small version of armor, just like my helmet is for me. "It was. *It is*," she agrees, a wan smile turning up at the corners of her mouth. "It was you, Wolf, who helped Nicolas regain his bright spirit."

I pinch my brows together, my voice incredulous. "Me?"

"Nicolas found you—*The Wolf*—and made you his hero," she says. "You're tough and scary and give off a sense of mental and physical strength when you protect your team's net. It's metaphorical, for sure, but Nicolas grabbed onto your image as a big, strong, lone wolf and used it as an assist against his own heartbreak."

Sounds of laughter draw my attention. I look toward the tables and find Ali kneeling beside Nicolas. They're both laughing over something that was said, and I can't hear the words being spoken, but Nicolas is animated, his whole body coming alive as he communicates.

I'm not sure if I can process what Melanie has shared. It's a heavy, profound weight to realize this kid looked to me for strength as he navigated traumatic waters when I'm the one who's drowning in my own grief and barely knows how to survive.

The irony is not lost on me.

I know, without a doubt, that had it not been for hockey, I may not have even been here. Which makes me feel even shittier now that I've learned what Nicolas has experienced in his young life. I'm not hero material. *He is*.

My thoughts are interrupted when Tanner approaches us from behind, his golf cart stopping a mere inch from where I stand outside the clubhouse.

As usual, Tanner is ridiculously loud. In fact, we could hear his voice carrying on the course from two fairways behind during most of the

tournament.

“How’d it go out there, Wolf? You gonna go back to your wolf den howling like a little baby because I crushed your ass?” He grabs the scorecard that dangles from my hand and scoffs before handing it back. “Cheaters.”

I roll my eyes and Melanie giggles from next to me. Yeah, I get the appeal that Rossy has on women. His character is larger than life and his charm promises a good time.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ali now fist-bumping with Nicolas.

What is it she sees in me? What is it that I can promise her?

We’ve made no declarations except that we want to keep seeing each other on the down-low. In fact, if it weren’t for our agreement and that this is her job, I’d cart her off somewhere private right now and show her much she means to me.

Much like Nicolas, Ali holds a special quality that spreads like wildfire. She burns with an intensity and passion for life that was doused inside me years ago.

If she’s wildfire, then I’m the dark and angry thundercloud that will only end up dampening her spark.

Fuck. This is why I can’t do relationships.

I’m once again pulled out of my sullen thoughts when Rossy says something about Ali. My head whips back to him.

“Looks like Ali has a new man in her life.”

His statement throws me off-balance, and I grab hold of his golf cart to steady myself on my feet. Rossy lifts his head, eyes narrowed. “You okay, bro?”

I stare at him, wide-eyed, my gaze searching his face. Did he figure it out? Is he mad at me for my feelings I have for Ali?

“Uh, ja... I’m fine,” I stammer, blinking several times. I am expecting his fist to snap out and punch me in the jaw for sleeping with his sister.

“What new man?”

Rossy chuckles and points over to where Ali is tangled up in an embrace with Nicolas.

Aha. *That* new man.

Crisis averted. For now.

Maybe I should just tell Tanner right now and let the chips fall where they may.

But then I stare over at Ali, her smile a beacon of joy and warmth, and the realization hits me hard. If I don't figure out what I want from her soon and what I'm willing to give her in return, I might lose her in the process.

And that's not something I want to happen.

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A li

I find Soren in the clubhouse sitting at a high table, his back to me, with Tanner, Oliver, Wyatt Pendergast and his partner, Dante, and one of the rookies, Shaw Benning. Due to the late hour, the bar is cleared out of any other golfers from the event, and the kids and their parents went home long ago. From the sounds coming from the table, I would venture a guess that those left have imbibed quite a bit.

Tanner is most certainly inebriated. On a normal day, he's loud and boisterous.

Drunk Tanner? He could compete with a jumbo jet in volume and noise levels.

As I approach, I scan the empty and half-empty pints and shot glasses and notice Soren has what looks like to be an iced tea. Wise choice.

I hook my arms over both Tanner's and Wyatt's shoulders and congenially lean in toward the table, searching each of their faces.

"Who'd like me to call an Uber?"

A grinning Dante holds up a set of keys and jingles them in the air. "I'm sober and will be this lightweight's DD." He tips his head toward Wyatt, who grins a half-lidded, dopey smile at his boyfriend. It thrills me to know these two got together after they met at the calendar shoot.

When my gaze lands on Shaw, he raises a shoulder and gives me a sheepish look. “I’ve already called Emery to come pick me up. You need a lift, Oli?”

Oliver waves a hand in the air. “I’m good. I’ve got my handy-dandy breathalyzer keychain to tell me when I’m okay to drive.” He waggles a small plastic kit that dangles from a keyring. Then he attaches a clear tube to the square box before demonstrating its use. “You blow until it beeps, and if you’re over the 0.08 percent BAC, you just drink some water, wait, and try it again in ten minutes. Easy-peasy.”

Tanner lets out a loud guffaw, hard enough that spittle lands on the table. His next words slur from his obvious intoxication. “Dude, you said blow!”

Laughter erupts around the table, along with a chorus of groans.

“Oh Jesus, Rossy. You’re well and truly fucked up, my man. You’re gonna have one helluva hangover tomorrow.” Wyatt pats my brother sympathetically on his shoulder and stands up. Dante slides his hand in Wyatt’s to steady him on his feet. “Good luck to whoever has to get him home. We’re outta here. See ya later.”

Wyatt and Dante wave their goodbyes to the table and Wyatt tips forward, awkwardly looping an arm around my neck and stumbling into me as he does.

“You did a great job with this, Ali.” He places a sweet but sloppy kiss on my cheek. “Thanks for the fun day and making it so inclusive.”

My eyes connect with Soren’s over Wyatt’s shoulder, and the proprietary heat I see blazing in his gaze sends the ripple of a thrill down my spine.

There’s no reason for Soren to be jealous of Wyatt. We all know he’s very much on a different team. But Wyatt’s comment, his gratitude, and his boyfriend currently trying to hold him upright make my heart happy. He’s the only gay teammate on the Vikings, but he feels accepted by everyone

and is unapologetic about his sexuality. I'm glad to see that the team takes the organization's DEI policies to heart and Wyatt is free from the type of harassment and homophobic remarks that are too often prevalent in professional men's sports.

"Thanks, Wyatt. It was great to have you both here today," I say as they head toward the exits. I don't see Tanner rise from his barstool, and a yelp escapes from me when he nearly topples into me. Soren's fast reflexes catch him before he falls over and takes me down with him.

I shake my head, placing a steadying hand on his back. "And you, my dear brother, have some sobering up to do. Let's get you some water and coffee, and I'll schedule an Uber."

If it weren't for the clean-up I must do and the supplies I'm transporting, he could come home with me. However, my car is already packed to the brim with the event decorations and remaining party favors.

Tanner waves a hand in the air and then cups my cheeks in his palms. When he speaks—louder than necessary—his hot whiskey breath fans across my face. "I'm good, Ali-gator. And you done good today, too. So proud."

He closes his eyes and his head flops forward, his forehead hitting my shoulder, his thick hair tickling my neck. My brother is on the verge of passing out any minute now, and I need to get him home.

"Aww, thanks, Tanner. That's sweet of you to say." I bite back my laughter and pat his head. "Even if you won't remember it in the morning."

When I turn my head, Soren meets my gaze with a knowing look, then says to Tanner, "I can take you home, buddy. You're in no shape to drive."

Instead of responding to Soren's offer, Tanner twists his head to look at me, his glassy eyes unfocused and his lids heavy.

"I'm s'glad yous shere now, Ali, so I can watch out for you..." His head bobs up and down like it's on a puppet string, then jerks upright. He's

unsteady, clearly past the point of intoxication. I nod to Soren, giving him the go-ahead to try and herd my brother out of here.

Tanner just keeps talking, babbling and slurring in an embarrassing display. I don't begrudge my brother letting off steam during his downtime, especially since it's the offseason. He works hard at these public events, expending a lot of extroverted energy to make people happy.

Soren walks forward and comes to a stop behind us as I drop my arm from my brother and Soren steps into Tanner's side, placing a steadying arm around his waist.

"Right, Wolf? Gotta protect m'baby sister from guys like us. 'Cause you're a wolf with the ladies, aren't you, bro?" Tanner chuckles darkly, like it's an inside joke.

Soren sighs heavily. "You're not making any sense, Rossy. It's time we go."

Tanner stumbles onto his feet, bumping me in the chest as he does, and then stops as Soren tries to balance them both. Tanner is at least fifty pounds heavier than Soren and taller, too. He raises his finger and points it at me, shaking his head regretfully.

"I wasn't there for you the last time, Ali-kins," he says in a remorseful tone. "I don't ever want to see you hurt like that again."

Once I dissect his drunken statement, I swallow the lump of pain in my throat and fight back the tears. My eyes dart to Soren's in alarm, hoping against all hope that he has no idea what Tanner is rambling on about.

Oh my God. I will die from embarrassment if Soren ever finds out about my last breakup and the following breakdown that caused me to lose my job.

I let out a fake, tinny laugh and reach in to hug my brother, my breasts brushing against Soren's chest as I do.

"You don't have to worry about me anymore, Tanner. Let's just get you home safe." My eyes plead with Soren's, and he nods briskly. "I'll be right

behind you.”

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Soren

I don't catch half of what Rossy said during the twenty-minute car ride back to his apartment. The few things I manage to decipher are wild tales around Ali's previous job and some ex-boyfriend who duped her. Things I hadn't known and that she may have wanted to keep secret.

Based on how Rossy describes it, the experience caused her some serious heartbreak and emotional upheaval.

"That motherfucking asshole," he mutters, throwing out a sloppy air punch and then stomping his foot into the passenger floorboard with so much anger that I think he might blow a hole right through it.

"Whoa there, big guy." I place a firm hand on his thigh to calm him down. I've never seen him this heated off the ice. On the ice is a different story—he winds up more often in the sin bin than anyone else on the team. But when he's not in hockey defender mode, he's generally an affable guy. "You don't have to take it out on my car just because some guy broke it off with your sister."

"You don't understand, man," he growls. A noise of distress releases from the depths of his core and he backhands my arm with a thwack of his knuckles. "He fucking fucked with her, bro. Dude was married and messed with her head, man. Still want to find that fucker and fuck that guy up."

Saliva sprays across my dash with all the F bombs he spits out.

Well, shit.

This is new info and only a fraction of what I knew about Ali's past. On our lunch date, she said she had recently left her previous job and moved to Canada. She also casually mentioned her ex-boyfriend but didn't expound on the details, quickly asking me about my romantic past. I had found it a bit strange at the time that she asked me if I had a wife back in Austria.

"Of course not," I had replied, twisting my lips and cocking my head. "Why would I be here with you if I did?"

She had shrugged and said, "Oh, you know. Some guys don't see a problem with side pieces."

I think back on the nonchalance she displayed, but now it all makes a lot more sense. My light mood after today's events has now soured, my own rage boiling to match Rossy's at the thought of the cheating douchebag who hurt Ali like that. I want a piece of him, too, for being a creep and pulling the wool over Ali's eyes.

Even so, Ali is still so open and free with people. If I had found out a woman I was dating was married and living a lie, I wouldn't trust another woman ever again.

Either Ali's a great actress and puts on a happy face, keeping her pain under a tight lid, or she can process her pain and then move forward.

Which is exactly what Anna has done and has begged me to do as well. I just can't seem to find the will to do so.

By the time I park in front of Rossy's apartment building, his cheek is pressed against the window, drool's dripping from the corner of his mouth, and he's snoring like a drunken mule.

It takes a lot of prodding and work to get him out of the car, into the condo building, and up to his floor without him taking me down, but when I finally do, he passes out like a starfish across his bed. He just needs to sleep

it off, but I use his bathroom to take a leak and bring a waste bin to the side of his bed anyway, just in case he gets sick.

Then I head out into the kitchen, grab him a bottle of water from the fridge, and leave it by his bedside before I stretch out on the couch to wait for Ali.

I can only imagine she will be exhausted after today's event. The way she worked the crowd, handled all the kids and their parents, ensured the players were prepped on their buddy's needs—her organizational skills made it all a success. From my perspective, everything went off without a hitch. She's a true pro in her field and a natural people person. Unlike me, who prefers solitude and only a select few in my midst.

One of whom is on her way home now.

The sound of the code being entered on the keypad has me jumping to my feet and I see the door open. I rush toward her as she enters carrying a large box of leftover supplies in her arms. She smiles gratefully when I take it and set it on the entryway floor.

"Thanks," she says in a soft whisper, toeing off her shoes before heading to the couch. She collapses in a heap, a heavy sigh leaving her lips, her limbs slumped over like a rag doll. "You got Tanner home in one piece?"

The fact that her first thought is of her brother's wellbeing has my heart filling with an emotion I can't quite place. Ali cares a lot about everyone and puts other people first.

"He's fine. Passed out in his bed with water and a basket next to him, just in case."

I struggle not to fidget, unsure of what I should do. What I want to do is make her night easier and take care of her for once. Someone should do that. "Can I get you something to eat or drink?"

Her hair fans out over the back of the cushion, and she casts a glance my way with one eye open and the other shut against the glare of the

overhead lights. Without a word, I find the correct wall switch and dim them down a few notches.

“A glass of wine would be amazing. Thank you.” She extends her legs and props them up on the leather ottoman in front of her. “The white grigio is in the fridge and glasses are—”

“In the cabinet next to it. Got it.”

I head into the kitchen, carefully remove a glass from an upper cabinet, and pull the bottle from the fridge, then pour out some wine. I recork and place it back inside next to a few beer cans, straightening them up slightly before I let the door swing shut.

I return to the living area and find Ali with her eyes closed, long lashes spilling over her cheeks, her face relaxed. When the couch dips as I take the spot next to her, she pries open a lid and extends her hand for the glass.

She takes a sip and then plops her head back against the cushion. “Aww. Now all I need is a deep tissue massage and ten hours of sleep and I’ll be back to running marathons.” She snickers.

I string my arm over the backside of the couch and let my fingers glide over the hair behind her neck, my fingers toying with the smooth strands before burrowing underneath and rubbing the tight muscles there.

The sigh she lets out sends Morse code signals straight to my cock.

“You did great today. Your brother couldn’t stop going on and on about how proud he is of you.”

She smiles sleepily. “My brother has always been one of my biggest cheerleaders, and I love him dearly for it, but Tanner is also blind to my many faults.” She takes another sip and swallows it down.

I watch her elegant throat work, wanting to trace the move with my tongue, and I scoot closer to her until my knee nudges Ali’s thigh. The edge of her golf skirt bunches up and exposes the creaminess of her leg. The skin-on-skin contact sends shivers up my spine.

My fingers curl and work along her neck as I begin to massage her muscles with tight circles. That in turn provokes grateful moans from Ali's mouth, and I want to swallow them down with my own.

"Don't start what you can't finish, Wolf." She turns her head to face me. "It feels entirely too good and I'm not going to want you to stop."

Ahh, fuck.

I didn't plan for this to happen tonight. I only meant to stick around until she arrived to make sure she made it home safe.

Bullshit.

The noises she hums as I continue to rub have my dick growing rigid in my golf shorts. I was already on thin ice the moment she walked through the door, but hooking up in her brother's apartment while he sleeps down the hall isn't on my bingo card tonight or any night.

I continue my ministrations and plan my exit for once she falls asleep, which I believe is at any moment.

But she surprises me when she sits up, leans forward, and sets down the glass on the ottoman. Without a word, she stands, yanks her shirt over her head, and unceremoniously drops it to the floor.

"Is this a good idea?"

Ali spins around and wedges herself in front of me. I arch a brow, questioning the sanity of us getting together, and point my chin toward her brother's bedroom.

She presses the palms of her hands together and tilts her head to the side to indicate sleep.

"He's not going to wake up anytime soon," she murmurs, and wiggles out of her skirt, throwing it next to the shirt. Next is her bra, the straps of which she seductively slides down her arms before she cups her breasts with her hands.

Her naked body is mere inches from me. I could reach out and run my fingers down her arms and across her belly, settle them between her legs.

But I don't make a move.

Ali registers my hesitation and hooks a thumb down the hallway behind her. "We can go to my room if it's more comfortable for you."

My hard-on strains against the zipper of my shorts while I consider this proposition. But my worries disappear the moment Ali climbs over my lap, straddling me in nothing but panties and a sexy grin.

"You don't leave a guy much of a choice, do you?" I suck in a breath between my teeth as she nestles her cleft against my stiff cock and slingshots her bra to the floor behind me, leaving her incredible tits ready for my palms to cup them.

She does short, experimental hip rolls while my thumbs skim over her pert nipples, then balances on top of me, hands placed on my shoulders, and raises and lowers herself in a sensual move that drives me wild. I suck one rosy bud between my lips and lave my tongue over the stiff peak until she's thrusting her hips in earnest.

"Can I tell you something?" she asks with a shuddering breath.

"Ja." I absently toy with her breast, drawing my gaze to her parted mouth.

She looks down at me, fingers lassoed behind my neck.

"Watching you today with Nicolas was one of the sexiest things I've ever seen," she admits in a husky whisper. She raises her hips and sweeps her body forward again. I groan in pleasure against her breast.

"Ja?" I say, skimming my hands up the sides of her body, plumping the swells of her breasts, sucking the other nipple between my lips and teasing it with a hard tug. It makes a wet pop when I let it go. "I'd say the same thing about you, mein Sonnenschein."

She grinds her hips forward again and then whispers directly into my ear, her hands clasping my jaw. "I love it when you call me that."

Her fingers tangle in my hair and our mouths find one another, lips crashing, teeth gnashing together as we drive the friction and intensity

higher.

“Will you say it again while I ride you?”

I growl and plant wet, hot kisses along her cheekbone and over her neck, my fingers trailing down her spine. Then I wedge my fingertips underneath the edge of her panties and slip them inside. “Fuck, yeah, I will.”

“Good.”

She deftly lifts her hips and undoes my shorts to free my aching cock into her waiting palm. The growl I make is probably loud enough to wake even a sleeping bear.

At this point, I’m lost to anything except the sounds of her sexy mewls and breathy noises. Nothing else matters but getting inside her snug body and fucking her into oblivion.

In one swift move, Ali impales herself on my straining erection. As her head drops forward, her falls over her shoulders in a cascade of red, and she begins to ride me in earnest.

And I am hopeless to do anything but allow it.

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A li

I think I like having sex in risky, compromising positions.

Because having forbidden sex with my brother's hot friend while my brother sleeps in the other room is risky as hell, but it's worth getting caught to have sex this good with a man this hot. Totally worth the possibility.

When I arrived back to the apartment and found Soren waiting for me, and he then doted on me after the day I had, it was impossible to stop the need to have him inside me. And moving ourselves somewhere safer would have required too much effort.

From my vantage point right now, I absolutely made the right call.

Soren's face is illuminated by the room's low lights as sexual euphoria passes over his features. The look is priceless and drives me to be bold and confident.

With every thrust of his hips and surge of his cock, he manages to hit that perfect spot against my sensitive clit, shooting me into the ether. My thighs tremble from exertion as my limbs tingle with anticipation of the orgasm that skims at the surface, ready to detonate at any moment.

My body is a live wire of overly stimulated nerves. With every touch of Soren's fingers along my neck, his mouth sucking at my collarbone, and then at my nipples—it's already too much sensation for me to handle.

I'm getting close to release when Soren adjusts his hips and wedges his hand between my legs. His thumb glides dips low to where we are joined and draws from the wetness there, swirling it around in an unmerciful ploy to make me come.

"Just like that," I encourage when his thumb works its magic, touching me in that electrifying way that I know is sure to have me shooting across the universe at any moment.

He intensifies the motion, and I undulate my hips at the same time as his cock pistons inside me.

"Like that?"

"Yes. Just like—"

My words get caught in the back of my throat and the entire world comes to a screeching halt. I score my fingers into his back, searching for purchase as I fall into that black hole of oblivion. My body shakes with the intensity of my release, and I stifle my cries of passion as I bury my face against his neck to muffle my moans. "*Soren.*"

A noise from the other room—a cough or maybe a drunken mumble—puts us both on high alert. I tense and Soren's hold on my hips tightens. I stare wide-eyed but make no move to stop this moving train.

He presses a finger to his lips and we're silent for a moment, both breathing hard. In a swift move, he lifts me off his erection and fits his stiff cock back into his shorts. He gestures for me to wait and tiptoes down the hall, placing an ear to Tanner's bedroom door.

He hesitates and my breath stalls.

If Tanner comes out right now, I'm not sure how to play it. Would I lie to his face about what Soren and I are up to, or tell him the truth, that it's more than a hookup?

Or is it?

Tanner's loud snores return from the other side of his bedroom door. Safe for now.

Soren waits just another moment before he walks back toward me, beckoning me with the crook of his finger to follow him as he continues down to my bedroom. I swing down to pick up my clothes and scurry behind him quietly.

Once inside, he locks the door behind us and I turn around. I begin to slowly remove his shirt and shorts and boxer briefs one by one.

I lick my lips at the sight of him standing gloriously naked, cock bobbing long and thick between legs dusted with soft golden blond. He has the body of a warrior Adonis.

My greedy fist wraps around his still slick erection, and he closes his eyes on a needy groan.

Something inside my chest breaks free and crumbles between us. I never expected to hook up with one of my brother's teammates when I moved here. And I certainly didn't plan on falling for him.

But here I am, my heart clearly deciding what it wants regardless of my brain's plans.

And what it wants is The Wolf.

Soren pulls my hand free and tugs me to the edge of the bed, which he gives a quick glance as if sizing it out. With a satisfied harrumph, he hoists me off the floor, my knees pressing into the mattress. Hand on my shoulder, he bends me forward on all fours over the bed.

"I seem to recall you asked for this, mein Sonnenschein."

His hands at my hips, he slams into me, and I choke on whatever I'm about to say, my heart skipping a beat. And the intensity of his action is so ferocious, it's befitting his nickname.



I HAVE a dream that I'm in a deep, dark cave, the sounds of wolves howling in the distance and soft snores surrounding me, hovering in a protective

guard.

But I'm not scared. I'm safe and secure in their company. Oddly, there's no canine scent, only a spicy, musky fragrance that penetrates the air.

And hot. Did I mention it's hot?

My eyes fly open in a panic, and I find myself staring at the source of the warmth in this dream.

I'm lying on my side, a strong arm wrapped heavily around my middle. Soren's hand covers one of my breasts.

Behind me is a wall of chest, a deliciously hard morning erection wedged into my back. It's glorious and stirs a mix of emotions in me that I can't quite define.

Comfort and longing and contentment.

The dreams from the night slowly dissolve through the recesses of my mind, and I look at my phone laying on top of my nightstand. With the dark being purged from around us, the light cracks through the window and alarm bells fire in my head.

I dislodge myself from the cozy circle of Soren's arm and sit up in bed, taking in our surroundings. Clothing is strewn all over the floor, the comforter is in a heap at the end of the bed, and a single sheet covers Soren's naked body.

"Soren," I panic-whisper, giving him a hard enough shove against his shoulder to jostle him awake. "Get up. You have to leave. Quick."

One eye pries open and squints at me. Lethargic from slumber and still clearly tired from the night we spent together, he scrubs a hand down his face.

And wow, what a night it was. My body is rung out and sore in all the right places, and I clench my thighs together at the memories. I was well fucked—first by Soren taking me hard and fast, growling in my ear, and then at a slow, languid pace.

"Mein Sonnenschein."

When I finally asked him between rounds last night what it meant, he said it's German for *my sunshine*. My heart spasmed inside my chest from the sweetness of it. I love it.

Not baby. Not darlin'. Not even my name rolling off his tongue could be a more touching expression of tenderness to me.

Soren props himself up with one elbow and reaches out to cup my face in his palm, closing the gap between us. His mouth covers mine in a possessive and commanding kiss that makes my head spin. It's slow and drugging, and very persuasive.

I fall back against the mattress, and his body shifts to hover over me. Skin to skin, he makes me weak to resist as he glides his featherlike touches along the sides of my waist and over my belly. When he reaches my sensitive center, with a touch as gentle as butterfly wings, he opens me and then plunges inside. I release a gasp, my hips buck off the mattress, and my legs fall open.

"I can't get enough of you," he murmurs into my ear, sucking an earlobe between his teeth.

"I want to be inside you one more time."

"Mm-hmm..." I'm in a trance, my brain and body frozen and unable to make any logical decision. All I know is I can't say no. "Yes."

Soren covers me, wedging himself between my legs, and guides his erection to my entrance.

"You still okay?" he asks, rubbing the tip of his cock through my already aroused and wet folds.

I clasp my fingers around his nape, pulling his mouth to mine, my lips brushing his as I say, "I want you inside me. Now."

He swallows my gasp when he plunges into me, taking my breath away with his first thrust.

It doesn't take long until we're both breathless, our bodies writhing in sync as he drives inside me with a punishing pace. We know we're on

borrowed time, and our only goal is to reach the peak together.

I quiver silently underneath him, the only sound I make a small gasp of pleasure as I come, the heat of his release bringing about another small orgasm for me.

Soren's body weight is heavy against mine when his entire body relaxes, warm and delicious.

"I don't want to leave this spot."

I dig my heels into the small of his back and clutch my knees around his torso. He teasingly thrusts again. I giggle and push at his shoulders so my exhausted body can take a breath.

"You might get your wish to stay a little while longer," I whisper, my eyes darting to the door. "I'll go check if Tanner's left for his morning workout already."

During the offseason, Tanner may party like a rockstar, but he's diligent about his regular training and workouts. His personal trainer typically meets him at the gym three times a week, and Tanner will use the workout space in the apartment complex the other days.

Either way, he doesn't miss out on his routine.

Soren grumbles and pulls out, then flops to his side as I roll out of the comfort of my bed.

After pulling on a T-shirt from my dresser drawer, I turn to see the man they call The Wolf sprawled out on my bed, naked and disheveled, a sexy half-smile at the corners of his mouth and an arm crooked to cover his eyes.

God, he looks too good for words.

With a sigh, I slowly open the door and peek my head out, listening for any signs of life. Hearing none, I give the sign to be quiet and close the door behind me. I head out toward the bathroom to freshen up and then out to the kitchen.

Based on his bedroom door being wide open and the mess he left in the kitchen, it appears Tanner has left for the morning.

“Tanner?” I call out to confirm before I give the go-ahead for Soren to come out. His room and bathroom come up empty.

I release a sigh of relief, and I give Soren the all-clear.

“We’re good. You can come out.”

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Soren

I slowly stretch and release all the kinks in my shoulders and back, enjoying the leisurely movement after a rigorous night of sex.

Fuck. What a night it was.

Ali is literally sexy sunshine in a bottle. She's sweet yet unafraid to take a risk, like the way she took over and eagerly fucked me on the couch last night.

Watching her come on top of me in that uninhibited way of hers is the hottest thing I've ever experienced.

Not at all like the lost and hurt woman Rossy described her when he drunk-shared in my car back to his place after the event. I can't imagine Ali crumbling apart like Rossy said she did over the situation in San Francisco. The way he told it, it sounds like Ali came close to a mental breakdown.

That's not the woman I've come to know. Ali is confident and strong. Bold yet soft. Honest but empathetic.

And now as I stride out into the kitchen where Ali is making coffee, it's impossible to believe she is anything other than happy. She's dancing to music coming from some wireless speaker, and the bright, cheery smile she gives me over her shoulder hits hard in my solar plexus.

I roll up behind her to wrap my arms around her waist and lean my chest into her back. She drops her head back and turns her chin up so I can bend down and capture her mouth with mine.

A beeping noise snaps my attention away. At first, I think it's the coffee machine or the end of a microwave cycle, but Ali's head whirls toward the front door.

Fuck. We're about to get caught in the act.

"Oh shit," Ali wheezes, and extracts herself from my arms. She drops down behind the kitchen island to hide at my feet.

Tanner strides through the door, leaving it open behind him as he scans the apartment in search of something. When his gaze finally lands on me in the kitchen, he looks confused.

"Hey, Wolf. What the fuck you doing here?"

I've never been good with making up stories, so I tell him the truth. Or, at least, a portion of the truth.

"I stayed the night after I dropped you off."

"Huh. I didn't notice you on the couch when I left this morning."

Hoping he won't ask for further details, I don't respond or stretch the truth further. Rossy tilts his head, then throws a look over his shoulder toward Ali's bedroom and the light streaming from the doorway.

"Where's Ali?"

I shrug nonchalantly and look for a way to steer clear of that subject.

"I'm about to take off but was brewing a pot of coffee first. What you up to?"

My diversion tactic works. He shakes his head and then finds what he came back for. His phone, which he left on the counter. He picks it up and waves it victoriously.

"I forgot my fucking phone like an idiot. Wasn't quite myself this morning," he says with a chuckle, smacking his forehead with a palm. "I've

got a meeting with my agent right after my sesh, and I need the address of where I'm supposed to be."

"That would be helpful." I round the corner, leaving Ali in her hiding spot. Rossy gives me a strange look, his eyes traveling down to my briefs, but he doesn't comment. Instead, he comes in for our choreographed dab and double fist bump and then rushes toward the open door.

Just as he's about to walk out, he pauses and turns his head toward me with a look of uneasiness flashing in his eyes.

I swallow. This is it. He's figured us out.

"Hey, man, if I said anything about Ali last night on the way home, will you just forget it?" He screws up his forehead. "I talk shit when I'm drunk."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ali raise her head, and she eyeballs me curiously.

Well, shit. This could get messy.

I give him a dismissive wave. "Nah, It's all good. You always talk shit about stuff nobody cares about."

"True." He laughs, rapping his knuckles against the wood frame. "Catch ya later, bruh."

"Ja. Later."

I heave a loud sigh the moment he shuts the door and rush toward it to make sure it locks, dropping my forehead against it in relief.

"Shit," I say, letting out a breath. "That was close."

When I turn around, I lock eyes with a pale-faced Ali, who has stood up and now lifts her fingertips to graze over her eyebrow.

She eyes me suspiciously and asks, "What exactly did Tanner say about me last night?"

I walk toward her, arms extended, but she sidesteps and whirls around on one heel. She folds her arms around her chest in a protective maneuver.

I snick my teeth.

“Nothing really. just stuff about your ex, which I already knew.” I leave out the other part.

“And?” she prods. Like I said, I’m a terrible liar. It’s the reason I never play poker with the guys.

I unfold her arms and take her hands in mine, tugging her into my chest. Placing a finger underneath her chin, I lift her head and stare down into her doubting eyes.

“Ali, none of what he said changes the way I feel about you or see you.”

Her chin quivers and her lips tremble. I stoop to kiss her gently on the forehead and then the top of her head, breathing in her sweet, lemony scent.

“It was a really bad time in my life, and I’m embarrassed that I allowed it to happen.”

Something in her vulnerability makes me want to open up and share how my brother’s accident tore me apart, and how I’ve never gotten over the grief from losing him.

But I don’t. I hold back for fear she’ll look at me with pity.

Keeping it buried all these years may have cost me parts of myself and left me damaged and broken, but at least it’s protected me. I’ve turned all that pain and loss into a disguise that I wear for the outside world, becoming the lone Wolf that everyone believes me to be. And that’s who I need to stay.

But you need more.

I swallow thickly and clear my throat. “You’re okay now. That’s all that matters.”

Releasing her from my arms, I glance over to the clock on the microwave oven. Ali must be able to read minds; she obviously sees my need for escape and backs away.

“I’m sure you need to get going.”

“Ja. I should go.”

It's a coward's move. I gather my clothes and get dressed in her bedroom, all the while telling myself not to go.

Don't leave, you dummkopf. Let her in. She's the best thing to happen to you in years.

The words are in my dead brother's voice.

But do I listen?

No.

Instead, I allow my self-loathing to crowd out the sound guidance and tell myself Ali will be better off if I leave now. Before things go too far. Before our feelings get too deep.

Before I open up and she finds out what kind of person I really am. I'm not the brave, feared wolf that everyone believes me to be.

I'm just a scared, lonely man who would never be good enough for a woman like Ali.

A li

“How did things go after the tournament?” Leanne looks up from the forms I’ve handed her for an upcoming event merchandise order. Because she had a sick child at home on Monday and so wasn’t in the office, I had to wait until her return to get these signed.

She scribbles her signature on one and flips it over to sign the other.

My first thought is of my hookup with Soren. I blink, assessing whether she somehow knows or can sense that we were together after the golf tournament.

Leanne waves the pen in the air and hands me back the signed docs.

“I’m so sorry I had to leave you to handle the rest on your own. Mia came down with a fever, and I swear, Gabriel went into a total spiral. You’d think that man has never taken care of one of his own sick children before. My God, for such a brilliant man, he can be helpless without me.”

I dip my chin and chew on my lower lip to hide my laughter at her plight. She points the ballpoint pen at me in warning.

“Heed my advice,” she says sternly. “Before you ever decide to have kids, make sure your partner takes parenting classes and reads all the books. Trust me. Never assume they’ll be a natural at it.”

I raise two fingers. “Girl Scout promise. In fact, I swear to never have kids. Period.”

This extracts a laugh from Leanne, which turns into a cackle as she throws her head back and hoots wildly. Then she wags the pen again.

“Good thinking. Parenting is hard. I love it when a woman knows her position on the subject and sticks with it.” She gives a quick glance to the family photo sitting on her desk, and her shoulders rise and fall. “Then again, you can always change your mind. I did. That’s the beauty of life. You might someday find the right person, and they make you believe in happily ever after, so your dreams evolve to something new.”

My heart flickers in response. For a moment, I thought I had the beginnings of that with Soren.

Except he hasn’t been in touch since he made his fast getaway so maybe I was wrong.

Although that’s not technically accurate. He did have the courtesy to reply to the texts I sent last night after I hadn’t heard from him in over twenty-four hours.

Me: Hi there. How did your workout go?

Soren: Good. Tough. Tiring.

Me: I bet. Well, I hope you get some rest tonight. You deserve it. I was worn out, too. 😊😊

After an hour-long pause of hope that he’d continue the flirting, I got the hint. Crickets. I didn’t want to embarrass myself by pushing my agenda when he’s no longer interested, so I let it go.

I’ve made up a myriad of reasons why he hasn’t replied yet. With each passing moment, I spiraled and my thoughts went dark. And my God, my imagination can create some gruesome explanations for his lack of response.

I keep reminding myself that I went into this hookup with my eyes wide open. I even told him I wasn't ready for a relationship. Soren obviously took my words at face value and has held the line on his end, which I can't fault him for.

But this isn't just about the great sex we've had. It's the inexplicable connection and the thread of promise I saw in his heated gaze each time he looked me.

Obviously, I read too much into it. Soren isn't into me the way I am to him.

I pretend to myself that I'm not smitten with Soren. He's soft-spoken, genuinely kind, extremely attractive. Clearly devoted to family. All of that is a total turn-on.

But there's something just beneath the surface that gives me pause, a pervasive sadness that slips through cracks in his demeanor. Some may see The Wolf as a fierce loner and elite athlete, and they love him for it, but I've gotten a few inside peeks behind the curtain.

I've seen him around Nicolas. So kind and patient. And in the intimacy department, he's both restrained yet furiously wild.

He's a contradiction. I want to peel back the layers to understand Soren for who he truly is.

I know I will love what I find there.

"Okay. Where were we?" Leanne says, tugging me back to the business at hand. "Ah, yes. These purchases are for the upcoming August Evening Under the Stars dinner and auction, right? You'll send out the Save the Date invites to all our donors and celebrities? It's right around the corner and we'll need RSVPs stat."

I nod. "Already on my to-do list. I'll submit these orders tonight and those emails will go out first thing tomorrow." I check my phone and calendar. "I'm not sure if you're aware, but we've had some latency issues and error messages with our website lately. I've asked Sam and he said he'd

investigate it. Otherwise, we're set for August twentieth. I have the park booked and I've confirmed with the vendor who's supplying the games and portable bouncy houses."

Leanne claps her hands together and grins. "Oh, my kids are going to freak out! They love those things. And Ali, let me just say that it's such a nice change to have you come on board with these fresh and family-friendly ideas. Your predecessor thought everything had to be boring wine-and-dine events to drum up the dollars." She shakes her head and rolls her eyes. "I like your style. Keep up the good work."

I blush under her compliment. "Thank you, Leanne. I'd love to see this one become an annual event."



THE REST of the day is one fire after another. By the time I finish up at the office and go home for the evening, my brain is mush, and I'm dead on my feet. There's still plenty of work I must get done at home, but I need sustenance first.

When I open the apartment door, looking forward to a quiet evening, I walk into a scene out of *Animal House*. Tanner and four of his friends are watching a soccer game on the big screen and yelling loudly over the bad calls.

"Hey, Ali-kins," Tanner calls out from his chair, glancing back briefly to confirm it's me before turning back to the game and yelling an obscenity. "There's pizza on the counter if you're hungry."

"Thanks. Hey, guys." I wave and scan the room, hoping I'll see Soren, but he's not here.

I drop my laptop bag and purse on the barstool and check out the pizza boxes. The one bright spot in my day is the idea of plain cheese pizza.

BINGO. I grab two slices and find a clean plate in the cupboard before joining the guys.

I don't want to make it seem obvious that I'm interested in Soren, but I am curious why he's not here tonight. Is he on a mission to avoid me now? Did I do something to make things awkward between us?

I suppose nearly getting caught by my brother the other morning could be reason enough to steer clear.

I take a bite of my pizza, savoring the delicious garlic and pesto flavors, and listen in while the guys talk, my ears prickling any time Soren's name is mentioned. Anyone who says men don't gossip is full of shit. These dudes chatter a *lot* about other people's lives.

"Anyone seen Costa lately? What's he up to? Does he look ready for preseason?"

The question reminds me of the conversation Sommer and I had had at the pool party. She'd said Cale had been injured in a game toward the end of last season and was rehabbing after a surgery.

"Yeah, man. He seems good," my brother says, then takes a swig of his beer. "Seems pretty pussy-whipped, too."

I clear my throat. "Uh-huh."

"Sorry," he grumbles apologetically over his comment. "I mean, he's totally in love with and would do anything for his wife."

The corners of my mouth quirk up in a grin. "Much better."

The guys all chuckle and then something big happens on screen and they stand and cheer raucously. When they return to their positions, they continue their light chatter and banter as if nothing had interrupted them.

I finish my dinner and go to the kitchen to wash my hands, then pause to consider if I want to take a drink to my room while I work. Meanwhile, I half listen to the guys' talk as I putter a bit more.

"Speaking of wife, Lyons's wedding is next Saturday. You going, Rossy? And anyone bringing a date?"

“I’m going, of course, but not sure about date,” Tanner says noncommittally. “I like to weigh my options for weddings. Sometimes not bringing a date is better. Single bridesmaids make for good fucks.”

“Sure, Rossy,” Oliver teases, slapping his knee. “We all know you just can’t get anyone to date you.” Tanner flips him off and snarls.

“What about Wolf? Is he bringing someone?”

Duncan’s comment makes my breath catch in my throat, and I stop in my tracks.

My brother snorts. “Fuck that motherfucker. He’s too picky. He probably has a contact list of puck bunnies a mile long who all want the distinction of being the woman who nails down The Wolf.”

The guys all laugh, but I don’t hear the rest of the conversation. I’ve closed my bedroom door and am leaning against it to hold myself upright. Ernie comes out of his hiding place under my bed to rub against my leg, possibly knowing that my heart twinges at the mention of Soren.

Soren never mentioned anything about a wedding or even the possibility of inviting me along as his plus-one.

It’s ridiculous that I think he would. Bringing me as his wedding date to an event where all his teammates would be in attendance, including my brother, is out of the question and, considering our agreement, the last thing he would ever think of doing.

But it doesn’t stop me from wondering *what if*... And as I open my email to finish out my day, Ernie curled up against me, I can barely focus on anything else.

My mind reels back to that morning after we’d nearly been caught by Tanner.

I saw the lights in Soren’s eyes grow shadowed when they’d just been an open valley of green.

My heart sinks to my toes. Soren ultimately running away from me as fast as he could must be tied to whatever Tanner told him about my past.

Although Soren said it hadn't changed how he felt about me, I now know he was lying.

It changed everything.

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Soren

“Hey, Uncle Ren,” Henry says across the line.

He holds the phone up toward the ceiling so all I can see is the top of his blond, shaggy hair. His use of the nickname only Günther ever used makes me choke down a lump of sadness. I’m sure Henry just abbreviated my name because I’ve caught him eating his breakfast.

I give a watery chuckle and wave a hand into the camera lens, gesturing for him to move his phone.

“How’s it going, Henry? What are you doing and why can’t I see you?”

Henry adjusts the phone so his pre-pubescent face peers at me, their bright, modern kitchen a cheerful backdrop.

“Oh, oops. Sorry, I’m eating breakfast. Mom’s taking me to the rink today. I’m meeting up with my friend Jack and we’re going to run some drills.”

“Well, that sounds fun. What about Clara?”

“I don’t know.” He pinches his lips together in a sour face. “I think Mom’s taking her shopping or something boring like that.”

“Yuck. Shopping. I couldn’t agree more,” I offer in sympathy. “Are you still working with the hockey coach I set up for you?”

As a present last Christmas, I'd gifted coaching sessions with my friend Rudy to Henry. Rudy and I used to play together in the German league, and he now does private hockey coaching and personal training. In June, Henry had regaled me with how much Rudy's tutelage and guidance had helped him improve. For myself, I'm thrilled to be a small part of his hockey development even though I'm so far away.

"Oh yeah," Henry says, stuffing his mouth with a spoonful of cereal. His next words come out muddled because he doesn't swallow first. "Coach Rudy is great. He spends a lot of time over here now."

I blink, confused about why Rudy would be at their house, but before I can ask, the screen moves.

Suddenly, Anna appears on my video screen, her blond hair up in a bun on top of her head. She smiles at me with a tinge of apprehension.

"Hallo, Soren." She turns her head to the side and motions to where I assume Henry still is, mouthing, *Hurry up*. She looks back at me with a hapless shrug. "Sorry about that. I need to light a fire under his butt to make sure he brushes his teeth before we leave. That boy finds a way to be late for everything." She exhales a long breath. "He reminds me so much of Günther."

A sharp pain stabs me in my chest, and I rub at it absently. The inside joke between us all used to be that Günther would probably be late for his own funeral. The irony is that his death came earlier than expected. The one time in his life he was early, and we were the ones not ready for it.

"What's this I hear about Rudy spending a lot of time with you guys? Does he mean at the rink?"

While I was the one who paid and arranged for the coaching sessions, Anna is obviously the one who makes it work. She had checked the family's schedule and agreed to two-hour sessions, twice weekly during the summer and once a week during the school year.

Anna blows out a breath and closes her eyes, as if resolving an internal conflict. When she opens her eyes again, she pins me with a sincere gaze.

“Yes, Soren. Rudy spends time with us at our home. He and I have been seeing each other.”

I stared blankly at her, trying to dissect the meaning of her words. She’s dating Rudy? What the hell? When did this happen?

When I don’t immediately respond, Anna sighs again and her expression softens into apologetic look.

She touches her lips with her fingers and gestures with her hand over her heart.

“Rudy and I just clicked.”

“Clicked? What the fuck does that mean, Anna? You were just here and you didn’t mention anything about Rudy.”

I know I’m acting childish. Logically, I know she has every right to find love again. By why the fuck is it Rudy? My old friend and hockey teammate?

Am I angry over her decision to date my friend? Or is it because Anna has found a way to move on with her life after tragedy and I’m still fucking stuck in my own pain and remorse?

“This thing between us is new. We were only casually dating when the kids and I came to visit you. So yeah, I didn’t mention it because it wasn’t serious at the time.”

I clench my fists and take deep breaths to quell the growing outburst I feel coming. I don’t want to do it on the phone, but Anna can see it all over my face.

“Soren,” she whispers softly, “I still miss Günther more than ever. Don’t ever think that I’ve forgotten about him. I still write in my journal every night. It’s my way of telling him about our lives, sharing stories of his children and how much I see him in things Clara and Henry do or say. He is always present in my heart.” Anna’s eyes fill with tears, which begin to

slowly fall over her cheeks. She wipes them away, and in the background, I hear the kids arguing. I smile sadly.

It reminds me of how Günther and I used to squabble over the stupidest things. We would fight and joke and rail on each other like all brothers do. He was my best friend and was always there for me when I needed him most.

And now it feels like Anna is pulling away and moving on. For the first time in my life, I truly feel lonely, with no one else to share my life with.

Ali's face comes to mind. I think of the light she has sparked inside of me in the short time I've known her, the way her smile turns my heart into a blazing inferno inside my chest. Her bright aura removed the darkness in my life.

Anna looks behind her as the kids come stomping down the stairs. She turns back to me and wipes away all remnants of her sadness, then smiles for the sake of her children. And perhaps to placate me.

"I've got to get going now, Soren," she says. I can hear the keys she picks up from the bowl on the table just inside their mudroom. "I want you to consider something for me, please. I've learned from my grief counseling that there's no one right way to experience grief. It's not a weakness and there's no timeline for getting through it. But the key is to give yourself grace and shed the guilt and blame that holds you back."

I'm brought up short. Anna's words pierce the balloon of sorrow I've held tightly in my heart for so fucking long.

She gives me one last smile and a wave and turns the phone so I can see Henry and Clara as they put on their shoes. "Say goodbye to your uncle, kids."

"Goodbye, Uncle Soren," says Clara, who grabs a bag from a hook and throws it over her shoulder. Her long blond braid gets stuck under the bag strap, and she frees it without looking back.

Henry gives me a wave and a giant smile, and I see traces of my brother's face in his.

"Talk to you guys later," I say, swallowing down the lump of emotion that sits in the base of my throat. And when Anna appears in the frame one last time, her expression is filled with love.

"We love you, Soren. We just want you to be happy and to see you smile again."

I drop my phone on the couch and hang my head in my hands.

Happy and smiling.

When was the last time that happened?

Oh, right. When I was with Ali.

Something clicks in me. I pick up my phone again and scroll through my contacts, looking for a number I was given by Nat Stinson several years earlier.

Then I do something I never thought I'd do.

I reach out and ask for help.

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A li

“Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod. Oh, shit. Holy shit.”

My voice grows infinitely louder with each word I utter until I slap my hand over my mouth to keep a scream from ripping free from my throat.

How could I let this happen? I gape, bewildered and terrified, at the screen in front of me. Then I drop my head into my hands. If I weren't in the office, I'd be wailing and sobbing ugly tears over this terrible, horrible, completely avoidable error I made.

The mistake blinks back at me in the form of an email I composed a week ago. The one I'd written, saved, and modified after hours at home. The invitation I supposedly had scheduled to go out to thousands of donors and vendors for the upcoming event at the park.

But it didn't.

Instead, it stares accusingly at me from my monitor, sitting in scheduled-and-unsent mode, waiting. Now in panic mode, I search my history tracking and find exactly where it happened. I was hoping, rightly or wrongly, that the reason behind the unsent mail was due to a system failure. We had been dealing with issues on our website backend that week, after all.

But the email in question not sending was totally operator error. And the operator is me.

It's scheduled to be sent out on August twentieth. Which is two weeks from today. And is the actual date of the event itself.

Oh. My. God. I am a freaking idiot!

Somehow, I'd scheduled two similar emails to go to two different email segments of our list. The one that did get sent out promptly and with the right information went to a small subset of donors.

The other one was supposed to be sent to the largest group, which included volunteers, VIPs and athletes, and participating families who were connected with the charity in the past. That's the one taunting me now.

Hot tears sting my eyes, and a ball of dread roils in my stomach.

"Hey, Ali. Is everything okay in here?"

I look up to find the foundation's grant and research administrator, Rashida, peering in through the doorway, her eyes narrowed in concern.

All I can do is shake my head and snifle. "No. I think I fucked up."

"What?" she asks, her tone incredulous and disbelieving. "No way. And if a problem exists, I'm sure you can fix it."

If only that were true. But with only two weeks before the event, I've lost too much time.

By now, we should have had hundreds of RSVPs. When I pull up the foundation's event inbox, I only see twenty-seven.

Twenty-seven!

What good is that number going to do in raising hundreds of thousands of dollars? Even if all the RSVPs were billionaires who wanted to do good in the world and spend their money on helping others, the table attendance alone wouldn't even be enough to cover the cost of the catering bill.

Disappointment floods my body, and I punch my forehead with my fist. I'm going to have to come clean and enlist the help of my boss. "Do you know if Leanne is back in her office?"

Rashida takes a step back, stretches sideways, and pokes her head around the doorframe next door. Leanne had gone to an off-site meeting earlier, and I hadn't heard that she'd returned yet.

If she's still out, it might buy me time to do some crisis management and come up with a solution before I have to tell her about my mistake.

Or maybe I'll just start packing my belongings now so I'm ready when she fires me on the spot.

My coworker shakes her head. "Nope, doesn't look like she's back yet. Is there anything I can help you with? How about some water? You're looking rather pale."

"You can find me a large coffin and bury me in the shitstorm I've created."

Rashida laughs but her eyes soften. "Seriously, though, maybe you can step away for a bit and come back with a fresh pair of eyes? That's what I do whenever I'm stuck."

With a slight nod, I rise sharply from my chair and grab for my water bottle. Rounding the corner of my desk, I step past Rashida, who offers me a congenial smile and a pat on the back.

"You're right. I just need to clear my head for a bit, take some deep breaths, and come back with a new mindset on how to get this handled before Leanne returns."

No sooner do I say that than a smiling Leanne comes around the corner of the hallway. "Get what handled?"

And the words of my grandmother ring loudly in my ears: *Lord, just take me now.*



BY SIX P.M., Leanne, myself, and a team of very helpful volunteers we begged to come in and help have finished the arduous task of personally

calling every person on our list to officially invite them to the event.

I should've remembered that Leanne's not like my former boss. When she learned what happened, she didn't get mad. She simply said, "Shit happens. Let's clean it up," coordinated a war room of sorts, and enlisted our helpers to assist us in contacting everyone who hadn't received the email.

After all our calls, I sent out the original email and then called my brother and asked him to call his Viking teammates and get them signed up and on board.

With Tanner's help, we were able to reach out to those players and the Vikings administrative staff and support personnel whom we knew would be in town.

At last, it's time for my final call. The one I've been dreading since we went into Operation Fix It.

My heart beats out of my ribs as I click on Soren's contact number and press Send.

His phone rings several times and each ring has my breath stalling out. I'm about to hang up when he finally answers, his low baritone making my body vibrate.

"Hallo? Ali?"

My response gets stuck in my throat, and I feel like I'm about to vomit. Instead, I inhale deeply and hurl out a slew of words on the exhale.

"Um, hi, yeah, it's me, Ali. I know you already know that, obviously. I'm calling because I made a huge mistake at work and I need help from all of Tanner's friends and I'm hoping that you wouldn't mind helping me out even though I know we're not together and you obviously don't want to see me anymore, or whatever, but—"

Soren's laughter interrupts my verbal spiral, and I cringe. Nice job, Awkward Ali.

“Back up, Ali. What now?” he asks. Just the sound of his voice makes me want to cry.

“Um, which part?”

“The part where you think I don’t want to see you.”

“Well, I mean, you haven’t really texted so, you know, I figured...”

The growl on the other end has me trembling. “Fuck, Ali, I’m sorry. I’ve been... Jesus, fuck. This would be much easier if we could talk in person. Can I see you tonight? Can you come over?”

His question scratches at a nerve, reopening an old wound.

It’s very much like what my ex-boyfriend would say when I’d get frustrated with our situation. He’d keep a distance for days on end and I’d be hanging by a thread, waiting for him to reply or reach out. Then, when we finally connected, Scott would pour on the charm and beg me to see him in person so he could apologize.

It never resolved the problems we had in our relationship. It only made me ultimately give him yet another break and prolong the inevitable. I won’t live like that again. I won’t allow myself to fall so easily for an unavailable man.

“I don’t know if I can. I’m in a big hurry and was only calling to ask you this favor. For the charity.”

“Oh. Sure. Yeah, I see. No problem. Whatever you need from me, you’ve got it. I’m in. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, Ali.”

My heart skips a beat and replays what he’s just said.

There’s nothing I wouldn’t do.

Considering I haven’t heard from him in weeks, I’m confused.

“I’m sorry. What?” My voice is almost shrill. “Why?”

“Please,” he pleads. “Come over and let me explain. Or I can meet you wherever you want.”

I blow out a breath, my finger automatically and unconsciously rolling over my eyebrow.

“Fine.” I look at my watch. If I really mean more to him than just a casual hookup, then he can say whatever he has to say in front of my brother. “My place at eight.”

There’s a pause. “Will your brother be there?”

“Likely.”

“Okay then. I’ll see you at eight.”

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Soren

I stand outside the door of Tanner's apartment and knock. Within seconds, I hear his loud voice yelling to his sister.

"I've got it, Ali-gator."

When the door opens, Rossy stands on the threshold and cocks his head to the side, then grins. That grin will probably disappear the minute he finds out the reason I'm here.

"My guy," he greets amiably, grasping my elbow and sliding his hand down my forearm in a dab. "What the hell are you doing here, Wolf?"

I press my lips together in a pensive smile. "I'm here to see Ali."

It takes him a second to put two and two together, although it's probably the wrong two. He gestures for me to step inside with a wave.

"Oh yeah. But, dude, you didn't have to come all the way over here to help her out with that work mess. Since you did, want a beer?"

I shake my head. "Nah, thanks, man. I need to talk to Ali about something more personal." I let that sit between us and watch as his wide grin slowly shifts into a scowl.

"Personal in what way, bro?" he asks, pulling a beer from the fridge for himself.

A movement at the corner of my eye has me turning to see Ali striding down the hallway. She's barefoot and wearing a bikini top and beach cover-up over a pair of shorts. My chest feels flayed open, and I take a sharp intake of breath, trying to locate something to say.

"Hey, Ali."

Not the most original, but at least it's something.

She falters as she gives me a wan smile.

"Hi, Soren." With a wide arc of her arm, she gestures toward the outdoor patio. "Would you like to talk out there?"

I look out the open glass slider, back to her, and then to Rossy, who is staring at us both with a baffled look on his face. He takes a swig of beer.

"I don't know what's going on here, but you both are acting weird." Rossy's gaze bounces from Ali to me. He set his bottle on the counter, crosses his arms, and puffs up his chest, glaring at me. "What'd you do, Wolf?"

I glance down at my feet and do as my therapist has suggested when I'm in stressful situations or feel anxiety threatening to overwhelm me. I count five things I can see and breathe in and out through my nose to calm my nerves.

When I raise my eyes again, I look directly at Rossy. "I came to apologize to Ali for being a dick to her."

This earns a laugh from Tanner. "Dude, you're a dick to everyone."

I shrug and turn to Ali, who now looks more than a little petrified as she chews on her bottom lip, her blue eyes wary.

"Maybe so, but it's not the way I want to be. Especially toward someone I love and care deeply for."

A disgruntled noise comes out of Rossy and Ali's eyes grow wide as saucers—in shock or embarrassed disbelief, I'm not sure. But I forge ahead with what I have to say anyway. I need to get this all out.

I step toward Ali and take her trembling hand in mine. She peers from underneath her lashes at her brother and then looks up at me.

“Ali, I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to finally get to this point. I have been living in a mental hell the last four years, locked in a prison of my own grief and sorrow over the death of my brother. I blamed myself for his death.” I pause, and Ali gasps. I draw her hands up to my chest and hold them there.

“I wasn’t there for my brother when he needed me most. The way I dealt with that guilt was to become a shell of a man, with no room for love and no place for forgiveness in my heart.”

I inch a step closer and cup her face in my hands. I stare longingly for a moment at her lips and the inviting way they part, as if waiting for me to press my mouth to hers.

The corners of my mouth curl up when her breath catches. It’s a sign that she still feels something for me and could forgive me for being an idiot.

“My sister-in-law, Anna, said something to me recently that finally made me realize how deep a hole I’d dug for myself. The only way out was to talk to someone. So I started seeing a grief counselor.”

“A shrink?” Rossy cries out in disbelief. I return the glare.

Ali’s eyes well up with unshed tears. “I knew there was something going on, but I thought it was that you didn’t care for me the way I cared about you.”

“Oh Jesus. Are you two fucking?”

Ali and I both respond with a resounding, “Yes!”

Tanner makes a loud noise of discontent but says nothing more. I am a tad impressed.

“I need you to know it’s so much more than that. I love you, Ali. You’ve unlocked something inside me, and you’ve made me feel seen behind the persona I have used as protection against the world. You’ve brightened my

life with your warm smile and your pure heart. I want all of you, all the time.”

Without any hesitation, Ali flings her arms around me and crashes her lips to mine. I kiss her back with everything I have saved up for her.

All the love. All the desire. All the need to be with her every day from now until forever.

“You’re my forever person, Ali. And I’m yours if you’ll have me.”

“Jesus Christ, you two. You are so disgusting right now. Get a room. Fine, I’m leaving.” Rossy says with a stomp of his foot. But then he stops and points an accusatory finger my way. “But don’t you dare have sex on my couch while I’m gone.”

Ali’s eyes light up with amusement and I chuckle and lift one shoulder.

“What? Noooo!” He stomps away in a disgruntled huff, grabbing his cell phone as he heads toward the door. Before he leaves, he turns back around and gives us a crooked grin.

“Ali-kins, at least you chose one of the best dudes I know. He may be a grump, but his heart’s in the right place.”

When he closes the door behind him, I smile down at the woman I love and kiss her slowly, my tongue sweeping through her parted lips.

After a few moments, I break the connection to stare into her heated gaze.

“Your brother didn’t say anything about sex in the hot tub,” I deadpan, tipping my head toward the private hot tub on the patio.

She raises her eyebrows and her eyes flash with mischief. “He most certainly didn’t.”

She takes my hand and guides me through the open doorway.

A doorway to the rest of our lives.

EPILOGUE

A li

My nerves are twisted and tangled like a Bavarian pretzel.

As soon as the Vikings training camp concludes today, we're setting up for tonight's big charity game.

I watch from behind the glass as the players and hockey coaching staff—many whom I've gotten to know personally over the last year—conduct their workouts and fitness challenges out on the ice.

Watching Soren move with the speed and agility he's known for is just as exciting now as it was in his first home game last season. The easy way he shifts back and forth, a hungry predator in front of the net, does all the things to my lady parts.

Especially when he warms up prior to a game.

Holy mama, that is downright hockey porn.

The build-up for this Vikings season is palpable, and fans of all ages are here at their open practice to get a look at their favorite players while they get ready for their upcoming home opener. It's a beautiful tradition that encourages hockey lovers to see behind the curtain as their favorites, old and new, return to the ice and prepare for the season.

The noise of the chants and applause from those behind me add to the excitement of the day. I turn around to skim the audience in the seats of the

practice rink. It's a big deal to welcome all the new prospects, the baby players on their newly signed debuts, and the traded veterans. And, of course, the guys who have been on the team for years.

The team just signed a new center, Gunnar Svensson, who has a reputation for being somewhat of an instigator. Knowing Tanner, he can't wait to find the best ways to rile his new teammate up.

Scanning the crowd of onlookers, my eyes lock on a little boy sitting next to his mother.

Sweet little Nicolas Petaro stands with his arms raised about his head, holding a handmade sign with an illustration of a wolf that he must've drawn. The sign reads, *Go, Wolf, Go!* My lips pull into a watery smile, and my eyes prick with tears of happiness.

Over the past year, not only has Soren changed outwardly thanks to his therapy, but our relationship has blossomed into something strong and lasting. In fact, we've been talking about me moving in with him soon.

I've yet to give him my answer, though, because of Ernest Hemingway. Soon after we began dating and our secret was out in the open, Soren informed me of the bad news.

We were lying in his bed one night and I realized he hadn't been sneezing like he often did when he stayed with me.

"It's your cat," he says on a sigh, rolling to his side to peer down over me. "I'm allergic to cats."

"What?" I am completely shocked. He'd never mentioned his allergy before, and it had been months since we'd started sleeping with each other. "Why didn't you ever say anything? I would've done something about it."

His smirk is deliciously devious and sexy. "It's not a big deal. I can live with a few sniffles. But I can't live without you."

And then he tracks the length of my body with his fingers, playing a concert over my sensitive flesh until he finds himself at my entrance.

“That’s fair,” I says in a breathy tone as he enters me with a swift glide of his fingers. “But we still need to work on being open and honest with each other.”

“Agreed,” he replies, then dips his head to my neck...

Soren has truly made strides on his communication since then. Not only with matters of intimacy like that, but also when it comes to Nicolas.

He has stepped up in a way I never could have imagined and has become such a role model and friend to this young boy.

Every time I see them together it feels like my heart—and maybe my ovaries to some degree—could burst with love.

And tonight it will culminate in a special charity hockey game. It was watching that connection blossom that had me coming up with this idea. This is my brainchild and one I’m very proud to have organized and planned, but I couldn’t have done any of it without the support of Tanner and everyone involved with the LTLFK Foundation.

Each of the children who have been selected by Lighting the Lamp for Kids will get a special gift of a uniform, skates, and sticks, and get to play next to their assigned professional player. Nicolas doesn’t know it yet, but he’ll get to be in the net with his all-time favorite, The Wolf.

My gaze connects with his mother, Melanie, and I give her a brief wave. She returns it with a thumbs-up sign and then stops and points toward the glass.

Confused, I whip back around, shocked to find Soren standing directly in my view. His decorated wolf helmet has been removed and tucked under his arm, and his hair is a sweaty, matted mess. His cheeks are flushed from excursion, and he wears the biggest, most wolfish grin I’ve ever seen on his face.

I notice that the rink has been cleared of everyone except a few players, all of whom are lined up behind Soren.

A tug on the back of my jersey grabs my attention, and I spin around to find Nicolas standing there holding a sign. This one is different from the one he had in the air earlier.

This one reads, “Mein Sonnenschein” and there is a heart and a wolf drawn next to it.

Then Nicolas, with his toothless grin and adorable face, points me back toward the rink.

“What is going on?” I ask, and he giggles delightedly.

And there on the rink behind Soren, four of his teammates hoist their own signs over their heads. One by one, they skate forward, show me their sign, and skate off.

Will

You

Marry

Me

I blink, staring back in Soren, whose cheeks now sport a reddish blush. Then he gets down on one knee and holds out a ring. It sparkles brightly under the arena lights.

My eyes prickle with emotion. My fingers find my eyebrow and nervously trace the fine hairs.

Is this really happening?

To solidify the moment, Tanner’s voice projects across the rink.

“I said yes for you, Ali-kins!”

The arena erupts in laughter.

My heart flutters wildly. If my own brother thinks we’re a love match, I suppose there’s no question about it.

I nod emphatically and mold my hands into a heart against the plexiglass. Soren’s hands flatten over mine.

And the crowd goes wild.

The End

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Baylen Dupree-Dooley: I began watching the TLC show, *Baylen Out Loud*, earlier this year. Having known nothing about Tourette's Syndrome, I became fascinated with the show and how the neurological condition affects her life and her relationships. I am so appreciative of her bravery and how she's given the world a chance to learn more about people with disabilities and to become more empathetic to those with conditions like Tourette's. Thank you. Find her at @baylen_dooley

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Sierra Hill is a **2020 RONE Award-Winning** author of *Game Changer*, as well as over 50 novels, including the award-winning college sports series, *Courting Love*, and the twice award-finalist erotic ménage serial, *Reckless – The Smoky Mountain Trio*.

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