

# OFFSIDE



CHICAGO  
**STORM**  
Book #4

A STEAMY HURT/COMFORT FORBIDDEN MM HOCKEY ROMANCE

# PIPER CROSS

# Offside

A Steamy Hurt/Comfort Forbidden MM Hockey Romance

Piper Cross

**WHISPER NEXUS PUBLISHING HOUSE**

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1st edition 2026

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*with Quinn Larsen*

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"Drop," Garrett called.

I was already moving. Theo carried the puck through the neutral zone in a white practice jersey with Hayes low on his left and Volkov trailing wide. Garrett took Hayes. I held the middle and watched Theo's hips. His hands could lie about three different plays at once. His weight couldn't.

He wanted the middle, and I closed it before he reached the blue line.

Theo cut toward the boards, saw Garrett matching Hayes, and put the puck deep instead. It came around the glass hard enough to jump when it hit the uneven section behind our goal line.

I got there first with Volkov half a stride behind me. The puck didn't settle. I had to reach to get my blade over it, pull it off the wall, and bring it back under my body. By then Volkov had committed to the corner. I heard his edges bite and knew exactly how much time I had—not enough to turn cleanly.

I put my right side between his stick and the puck, feet wide and weight low. Garrett was coming around the net for the outlet.

Volkov hit me the instant I got control of it.

It was a clean hit. His shoulder caught mine and drove me into the glass. I'd taken the same contact a thousand times. Usually my body accepted it, found the boards, and sent the force down through my skates. This time the shoulder quit.

There was a hard drop inside the joint, then no strength. Completely useless. My arm went heavy. The puck was still under my stick, so I held it there with my skate and pushed it blind behind the net.

Garrett's blade caught it as I went down on one knee.

No whistle. The play was already moving the other way. I got my left glove on my thigh and stood before anybody could decide to come back.

Volkov did anyway. "Bishop."

"Play."

He looked at my arm. I moved it enough to make the point.

"I barely touched you. You hit the ice yourself."

At the red line, Theo circled and slapped his stick on the ice. Volkov gave me one more look, then turned and joined the rush.

I stayed out. The shoulder had been bad since June. Bad was familiar. I knew how much reach made it grind and how long I could keep an opposing forward on that side before the joint started to burn.

This was different. When I lifted my stick to close the lane, the arm stopped below what I tried to do with it.

So I stopped asking it. I kept the stick lower and used my feet. On the next entry, Hayes tried to cross in front of me. I took two short steps into the lane and made him go around. He sent the puck back to Theo at the point. I stayed between Hayes and the net instead of reaching across his body to tie up his stick.

Theo's shot hit my hip and dropped beside my skate. I chipped it to Garrett with one hand.

"Change," Reeves called from the boards.

He had his tablet under one arm. He didn't look at the puck leaving the zone, he looked at me.

I went to the bench, waited through the next pair's shift, then climbed over the boards when Garrett did. Reeves could remove me if he wanted to.

Volkov came down my side on the next rush. He expected the wall. I gave him the outside, kept my inside edge, and let him carry the puck. Volkov shot from below the circle. Abbott steered it into the corner. No collision, no reach—no problem anybody in the seats would have seen.

Reeves saw it. Vicki did too, and she was waiting at the tunnel door when our group came off.

"Table," she said. She left no room for negotiation.

"I've got another rep. I can finish the drill."

"It's over. Table."

Twenty years with the organization had taught her exactly how much explanation a player could fight her with.

I followed her into the training room. My jersey was off before we reached the corner station. She put one hand at the front of the shoulder and the other under my elbow, then guided the arm through a small circle. It moved because she moved it. When she had me lift it myself, it stopped short.

Her mouth flattened. "Sit."

I sat down. Zoe worked across the room with Eriksson face down on the table, one knee bent as she checked the movement of his hip. Eriksson raised his head when we came in.

"Again?" he asked. His attention shifted to the shoulder.

"Nothing happened," I said.

"That's usually when they make you sit down." He rolled his eyes.

Declan looked up from the laptop at the desk.

He took in the jersey over my left hand, Vicki's fingers on the joint, and the position of my right arm. His expression didn't change. It never did, even when things were happening. Declan was always calm.

"What happened? Did the pain come back?"

"Volkov finished contact in the corner," Vicki said. "Arm went weak. He stayed in for two more shifts and stopped reaching on that side."

"It came back."

Declan closed the laptop and crossed the room.

He knew the shoulder. He'd had his hands on it three mornings a week since July and often enough in the two seasons before that. Vicki let him take my arm without discussing it.

"Active first," he said. "Lift it straight ahead. Stop when it stops, not when you think I want it to stop."

I lifted. The joint tightened near eye level. I pushed another inch and felt the strength drain out again.

"There," I said. "I can go higher."

"You can shrug higher. That's not what I asked for." He set two fingers along the top of the shoulder. "Again, without bringing this up to your ear."

The second attempt ended lower than the first.

He had Vicki read the angle while he kept my shoulder blade from climbing. Then he tested it out to the side, watched the same failure, and

wrote both numbers down.

"Now passive," he said.

He tucked my elbow against my ribs and held my wrist. I let the arm go loose while he rotated it outward. His hands were warm. They were always warm.

The joint stopped before his pressure did, and he eased off immediately.

"Pain? When you lift the arm?"

"Four," I said, keeping my face still.

"You're trying not to show it." Declan studied my face.

"I don't have a pain face."

Across the room, Eriksson said, "You do."

Zoe gently pressed his head back toward the table.

Declan repeated the movement more slowly. The muscle across my upper back locked before he reached the same point. He didn't force past it.

"That's a real change," he said to Vicki.

"That's the comparison?" Vicki asked. She checked the number herself.

"From last week. More from July. Active and passive," Declan said.

Vicki nodded once. "I'll get Reyes."

"I'm skating Thursday," I called after her. She kept walking.

Declan set my arm down. "You can tell Reyes that."

"I'm telling you," I said.

"I report what I find. Reyes decides contact and clearance." He picked up the tablet. "What I find today is less active elevation, less external rotation, and loss of strength after contact."

"You could write that it recovered."

"Did it? Did the shoulder recover?"

The arm hung beside me, heavy but usable. I could close my hand. I could move the elbow. I couldn't raise the shoulder high enough to take a man off the puck without turning my whole body into him.

He made a note in front of me. No drama. No promise that Reyes would clear me and no satisfaction in being right.

"Lie back," he said. "I want the muscle to stop guarding before we test again."

I lay down. He put a folded towel under my elbow so the arm didn't drag on the joint, then worked his thumb into the muscle below my collarbone. He found the place that had tightened around the shoulder and stayed there.

"Breathe, Bishop."

"Trying," I mumbled. The shoulder stayed braced under his hands.

"Then let it go. Stop holding the whole side up."

I let the breath out.

His other hand settled across the top of my shoulder. The muscle gave by degrees under his palm, each breath making room for the next. I watched the shoulder chart above the corner station until the printed labels blurred.

Declan shifted his hand half an inch and found the last hard band of muscle. I closed my eyes.

For months, he'd told me to breathe like this. I'd worked very hard not to notice why obeying him felt different from obeying anybody else in the building.

The shoulder released under his hands, slowly enough for both of us to feel it.

The rest of me didn't.

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The coffee maker clicked off at 5:17. I stood in my dark kitchen and waited another ten seconds before pulling the pot free. It had dripped onto the hot plate the day before, and Anna had laughed at me for wiping it up before I poured the coffee.

I filled my gray travel mug. The old mug had a dent near the bottom from a fall two winters ago. I opened the refrigerator to grab the lunch I'd packed the night before.

Anna came into the kitchen wearing my T-shirt and one sock. "You're sneaking out."

"I make coffee loudly enough to warn the neighbors."

"Your neighbors are eighty and take their hearing aids out at night." She leaned against the counter and closed her eyes. "You said you'd call yesterday."

I had. I remembered at seven-thirty while I was writing up my end-of-day notes, then forgotten again before I left the building.

"I'm sorry," I said. I should have apologized sooner.

"I know." She opened her eyes. There was no accusation in them, which made the apology feel thinner. "Tonight?"

"Your place or mine for dinner?" I asked, picking up my lunch.

"Mine. Your refrigerator has ingredients, not food."

"We can turn said ingredients into food," I pointed out.

"That's why I keep dating you. The romance." Her mouth twitched at the corner.

I smiled. She came close enough to kiss me, one hand flat against my chest.

We'd been together for eight months. I knew which side of the bed she chose, that she hated pulp in her orange juice, and that she would leave a paperback open facedown no matter how many bookmarks I bought her. She knew I left before dawn and that my lunch break rarely occurred at lunch time.

It worked. We were comfortable together.

"Tonight," I said again. Anna pushed away from the counter.

"Go. Vicki will sense you're three minutes late and fine you."

"Vicki doesn't fine staff. She makes them wish she did."

The facility was bright against the gray sky when I pulled into the parking lot just before dawn. Vicki's car occupied its usual space near the staff entrance, and Zoe's was two rows back. Inside, I set my mug under the shoulder chart at the corner station and opened Bishop's assessment before I took off my coat.

His active elevation had dropped thirty degrees from July. Passive external rotation had lost twelve. The strength had returned after the initial contact, but not to his baseline, and the joint's end-feel had changed. He could compensate through his shoulder blade and upper back well enough to make the arm look functional from across a rink. That didn't make the joint functional under a normal load, though.

I said each number aloud before I entered it.

Vicki came out of her office carrying a tablet and her reading glasses.

"Reyes reviewed the overnight note," she said.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"No contact until she examines him and reviews the imaging history—after morning skate. He can skate and handle a puck. She wants your full assessment attached to the order."

"Already done," I said.

Vicki checked the screen. "Good. This season's notes route to medical, hockey operations, and the contract group. Park's office asked for access yesterday."

I looked at the routing line above the form. Bishop's name appeared there, then the season, then the three groups who would be able to read the reports.

"Does Bishop know the contract group will see it?" I asked her.

"It's a contract-year for him. He knows his file isn't private from the club. Let him know today, though." Vicki put on her glasses. "Don't let it change your notes."

"It won't."

"I know." She studied me for a moment, then nodded before moving on to Zoe.

I returned to the assessment. I documented the loss; it wasn't permanent. I documented the strength that had returned already. Under his plan, I entered an individualized progression of pain-limited mobility, rotator-cuff and scapular strength within his current range, controlled loading below the point where compensation began, and staged hockey work after Reyes reviewed the images.

The plan included education and self-management because Bishop needed to be able to manage the shoulder at home, on the road, and in the ten minutes after a game when nobody's hands were available.

Manual work was one part of it, useful for pain and guarding, but it wasn't a cure and wouldn't be enough to tolerate contact again. At the bottom, I recommended physician review before return to contact, plus consideration of further imaging based on the change in range and load response. I read the note once from the top.

I thought about Rochester. That was a different world, a line written carefully enough to be defensible and vaguely enough to let the people above me decide what it meant. It had cost me my job.

What I'd learned from that wasn't how to keep a file harmless. There was no harmless file once money and authority came into play. What I'd learned was that a record should tell the verifiable truth.

I signed the note as Volkov came through the door, one forearm across his ribs. "Pryce. I require immediate care."

"Good morning to you too," I said.

"It won't be a good morning if I die before practice."

Eriksson was already on Zoe's table, working one leg against a resistance band. He didn't even bother to look over.

"He took a stick yesterday," he said. "He's told seven people."

"Six," Volkov said. "You weren't listening the first time."

I pointed him toward the examination table. "Shirt up."

Volkov climbed onto the empty table and lifted his shirt. There was a faint bruise along the lower rib line. His breathing was even. He rotated both directions when I asked and sighed the whole time, as if it cost him an enormous effort.

"That's the spot," he said when I pressed one rib.

"That's a bruise," I told him.

"You haven't completed the examination."

I kept my fingers on the rib. "Breathe in."

He did. No hitch, no guarding.

"Again." I kept my fingers against the same rib.

He filled his lungs until his chest rose under my hand.

"Bruised," I said. "You can skate. Come back if breathing hurts or the pain changes."

"It already hurts."

Eriksson extended his leg against the band. "My grandmother fell off a hay cart and finished loading it before lunch."

Zoe covered a laugh with a cough. Volkov lowered his shirt with dignity.

"I'll skate," he announced. "In silence."

"That'll be the concerning symptom." I suppressed a chuckle.

He left to tell someone else.

By six-thirty the room had filled. The sound of tape tearing, stall doors opening and shutting. A skate blade struck the rubber floor when one of the equipment staff dropped it. I moved between tables, answered a question about a hip, and checked Eriksson's resistance work before Bishop arrived.

He came straight to the corner station.

His practice shirt was folded over his left forearm. The right arm moved, but he kept the elbow close to his body.

"Reyes said no contact," he said.

"She told me. Skating is still cleared."

He looked past me at the tablet. "What did you write?"

I turned the screen toward him. "Your September assessment gets sent to medical, hockey operations, and contract evaluation when the season file is finalized. You'll have access through the portal. I can walk you through today's findings now if you want."

His attention stayed on the routing line. "That's where they see it."

I met his look across the treatment table. "Yes."

"Did that change what you write?"

"No," I said.

"Good," he replied.

I showed him the measurements, the comparison to July, and the recommendation to Reyes. I explained the loading plan without promising what the next assessment would find. He listened through the whole answer.

"Four days?" he asked.

"Three to start," I said. "We adjust from response, not from the calendar. You'll do the mobility work on your own every day."

"And contact?"

"Reyes's call after she has the images."

His jaw moved. He picked up the light resistance band from the table. "Show me."

I stood beside him and demonstrated the first movement with my own arm. Then, without touching him, I watched him do it. His shoulder tried to climb near the end of the range.

"Stop there," I said. "That's your current range."

He lowered the band and looked directly at me. "Only today."

"Today is where we start," I said.

Reyes examined him after morning skate.

She read my notes before she examined him. She also pulled up the prior imaging and the clinical history from the seasons when the joint had first started requiring regular maintenance. Then she tested his strength, sensation, and movements again with me and Vicki in the room.

Bishop answered all her questions with the fewest words available.

"I'm not seeing a sign of an acute tear that requires me to remove you completely," Reyes said when she finished. "That doesn't mean your shoulder is fine."

"Can I play?" Bishop asked.

"You can return to controlled contact in practice if today's response stays stable. In the opener, no repeated overhead loading, no reaching across the body into resistance, and no extra contact work outside the game plan. You report weakness when it happens, not the next morning."

Bishop's jaw tightened. "It happened once."

"Then reporting it should be easy."

Reyes scheduled a reassessment after the opener and another after the next heavy game block. She kept the active rehab plan in place and told Reeves the restrictions she'd given Bishop.

Nothing in the exam promised that the joint would survive the season. It gave him a controlled way to test what it could tolerate next. After they left, I returned to the corner-station laptop. The July intake note was still waiting in the second tab.

I looked at one of my earlier notes. *Avoidant*.

I wasn't sure if it was still accurate, but I closed the file without changing it.

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The home opener reached the third period tied at two. St. Louis had spent the first forty minutes putting pucks behind us and making us turn for them. Their forecheck came in two men deep, the first forcing the puck to the wall and the second arriving where a defenseman wanted to move it. On a healthy shoulder, I could win that play with reach. I would get one hand up the wall and hold the forward away with the other.

This morning's plan didn't include reaching. Reeves had put it in simple terms. Use my feet first. Keep the right elbow under the shoulder. Move the puck before contact came at me. If the play demanded more than that, make a different play.

The St. Louis winger dumped the puck into our right corner on his first shift of the period. I turned before it crossed the goal line. Three strides got me below it. I checked over my left shoulder, saw their second man coming through the circle, and knew Garrett was behind the net.

I didn't wait for the hit. My stick met the puck on the boards and chipped it behind me. Garrett took it in stride. The first forechecker finished through my back, but there was nothing left to win. I absorbed the contact with both skates under me and kept my right arm low.

Garrett sent the puck up to Hayes. Hayes carried it out.

"Early," Garrett said when we crossed behind the net.

"It worked. We cleared the zone before they could reset again."

He knocked his glove against mine.

On our next shift, their center tried the seam between us. I closed it with two steps. He pulled the puck wide. Garrett held the far post, and their center ran out of useful places to go.

He shot from a bad angle. Kieran caught it against his chest and held for the whistle.

"Bishop," he said as the linesman skated in.

"What, Walsh?" I looked back toward the crease.

Kieran settled back into his crease. "Do that again."

We did the same on the next shift.

Seven minutes into the period, Luca won an offensive-zone draw back to me. The puck arrived too far to my right. I could have reached across and held it in. The old play was automatic. I would catch it at full extension, drag it to the middle, and shoot through the bodies before the winger got out to me.

I let it go past. Their winger pushed for the breakaway, but I was already moving backward. I got inside his line at center, turned with him, and used my left shoulder to move him away from the puck. Garrett collected it behind us and sent it back up.

The crowd wanted a hit. Eighteen thousand people groaned when they saw my six-five and two-forty frame refuse to put someone through the boards.

The puck went the other way, and Theo scored twenty seconds later. I heard Reeves behind the bench. "Good decision, Bishop."

That mattered more than the crowd.

St. Louis pulled their goalie with a minute twelve left. We were up three-two. Six skaters moved the puck around our zone while we held the middle. Their defenseman walked the blue line and sent a shot through two screens.

I couldn't lift the right arm high enough to take away the top half of the lane. I turned and caught the puck on my hip. It dropped at my skates.

Their center reached for it. I put my body between his stick and the puck, but I didn't try to hold it there. One touch off the boards sent it to Garrett. He cleared it off the glass and down.

The horn went before they established the zone again.

Kieran shoved his mask up and skated out of the crease. He tapped the back of my helmet as we joined the line at center.

"Adequate," he said with a grin.

"Your praise is overwhelming."

Kieran lowered his mask. "That was praise, coming from me."

The room was jubilant after our first win. The music came on before half the team had both skates off. Sticks hit the stall fronts. Somebody threw a wet towel at Theo and missed him by three feet.

Luca caught it without looking and dropped it on the floor. "Callahan," he said, pointing his stick toward the abandoned towel.

Theo spread both hands in an appeal to the room. "That wasn't mine."

"It's at your feet, Callahan," Luca said.

"Proximity doesn't establish ownership."

Luca looked at him, and Theo picked up the towel, laughing.

Nico sat in Kieran's stall while Kieran stripped off his pads. Their knees touched in the narrow space. Kieran passed him a bottle of water.

Hayes had a legal pad braced on one thigh and was collecting names for our next Korean barbecue.

"Saturday, November seventeenth, after Nashville," he said when he reached me. "You're coming."

"That a question?" I asked.

"Nope. Are you going to argue?" Hayes held the pen over the page.

"Do you want me to?"

"Not even a little." He wrote my name before I could change my mind, then he turned to look at my D partner. "Garrett?"

Garrett was unwinding the tape from his left wrist. He pulled another turn of tape loose and turned to me. "If Bishop is coming."

"Good. We're getting somewhere," Hayes said, writing Garrett's name next to mine.

Hayes moved to Volkov.

"Two seats," Volkov said. He held up two fingers.

"For who?"

"For me. I need extra food."

At the far end of the row, Morrison was working at one skate lace with his head down. Somebody called congratulations on the penalty kill. He answered something too quietly for me to catch.

Declan caught it though, and his laugh came out of his chest. It wasn't the brief breath he gave Volkov when a complaint got too ambitious. This laugh was open, a full sound before he remembered the rest of the room was there. His head tipped back. The smile changed his whole face.

I had my jersey halfway over my head and stopped with my right arm still in the sleeve. The shoulder didn't catch. Nothing hurt. I'd simply forgotten what I was doing.

Declan looked up and found me watching him. The smile stayed for another second before he picked up his tablet and came down the row.

"Good third," he said when he reached my stall.

"You were watching?" I asked.

"Most of it. You gave up the blue line once."

I kept my right arm loose beside me. "By choice."

"I know." He set the tablet on the edge of the stall. "How does it feel?"

"Used," I said.

He rested one hand on the tablet. "Any weakness after the shot block?"

"No. It hit the hip."

His attention shifted to the shoulder. "Any catch on the clear?"

"I didn't reach for it."

He nodded.

"Lift it." Declan's hand remained close without touching me.

I raised the arm through the range he'd cleared that morning. He watched the shoulder blade and the joint, then my face. He didn't put his hands on me until the arm was down. Two fingers at the front of the shoulder. A light check under the joint. Nothing that hadn't happened dozens of times.

My skin knew exactly where he was.

"The adaptation held," he said. "That doesn't mean the shoulder is better."

"I know," I said. "I let a puck go at the blue line in front of eighteen thousand witnesses."

His mouth moved at the corner. "I saw."

He was looking at my face again. There was no clinical reason for it. He'd already seen what he needed in the movement. I wasn't answering a question.

I held his gaze.

The room moved around us. Tape tore. A shower started. Hayes argued with Volkov. Declan's fingers remained at my shoulder for one beat longer, then dropped.

"Ice tonight," he said. "Mobility before bed. We'll progress the strength work if the joint settles by morning. Sunday?" His hand stayed on the tablet.

"I'll be here."

He collected the tablet and went to Garrett.

I showered, dressed, and waited for the room to thin. By the time I left, most of the players' lot was empty.

The corridor split beyond equipment storage. One direction led to the exit. The other led past the training room. Light showed beneath Declan's door.

I stood at the turn with my bag over my left shoulder, then headed for the players' exit.

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By nine-ten, the only roll of rigid tape left beside the sink had three useful turns on it. I held it up to the light as if that might produce more tape.

It didn't.

The morning's supply order was waiting in equipment storage. I'd postponed collecting it twice—once for charting and once because Zoe needed a second set of hands with a rookie's ankle. If I left the roll where it was, six a.m. would arrive before the supplies did. I took the cardboard core with me out of habit.

The facility this late was different. The cafeteria chairs stood upside down on the tables. The video room was dark. Somewhere beyond the concrete wall, the ice compressors ran with the mechanical hum that never stopped during season.

The corridor between the training room and equipment storage was narrow enough that two equipment carts couldn't pass. One strip light in the ceiling flickered at the far end. I'd submitted a request to replace it in August.

I came through the training room door at the same time Bishop entered from the other end. He carried a stick under his left arm. His hair was damp at the temples, and the smell of cold air came off his practice gear.

"Pryce."

"Bishop." Neither of us moved.

There was an open doorway behind me. I could have stepped into it and given him the corridor.

"Extra ice?" I asked, looking at the stick in his hand.

"Garrett wanted extra reps."

"So you gave him the time." I turned the cardboard core in my hand.

"I was already here." He shrugged.

The stick tapped the concrete when he shifted it under his arm.

"Your shoulder's low," I said.

"I'm not on your table." He adjusted the stick without raising the shoulder.

"No. You're in a hallway carrying a stick after nine at night."

"It's fine," he said. His right hand stayed loose on the stick.

That should have been the end of it. I still had the empty tape roll in my hand and he had a stick to return. We each had somewhere else to be.

"You changed Volkov's wrist wrap," he said suddenly.

I looked at him in surprise. "Last week."

"Figure-eight to a spiral."

"Yes." I turned the empty roll around my finger.

"Why?" he asked. Most questions asked in passing wanted a quick answer. Better support. Less pain. An answer that could be handed off in passing. Bishop waited.

"The figure-eight crossed the ulnar side at the same point on every turn," I said. "It put more pressure where he was already sore, and it limited the amount of extension he could use on his backhand. He kept adding another layer before warmups because he didn't trust it. More tape made both problems worse."

"The spiral leaves the joint open."

"More open. It still supports him. The load spreads instead of collecting in one place."

Bishop tapped the stick once against the concrete. "He took two hard passes on that side against St. Louis."

"I know."

"No hesitation."

"No extra tape the next morning either." I stopped turning the cardboard core.

Bishop nodded. He was fitting my answer next to his own observations.

"How did you notice the wrap?" I asked.

Bishop shifted the stick higher beneath his arm. "I saw the angle during warmups."

"From the blue line?"

Bishop's eyes dropped to the cardboard core in my hand. "I watch everyone."

"Volkov isn't your D partner or your assignment."

"It doesn't matter. I watch hands. Hips tell me where somebody's going. Hands tell me what he trusts when he gets there. He stopped protecting the backhand after you changed it."

His answer was professional. So was the attention behind it. That should have made the moment simple.

"You watch everyone that closely?"

"If I can. Trouble shows up early if you're looking."

I held the tape core against my palm. "And if nobody is?"

He shifted his weight. His right shoulder stayed lower than the left, but the stick rested safely against his side.

"Then it costs more when they finally notice."

I understood that beyond wrists and shoulders. I thought he did too.

Footsteps sounded at the intersection behind him. Garrett crossed the opening with his own stick bag over one shoulder. He glanced down our corridor, saw us facing each other in the narrow band of light, and kept going toward the players' exit.

Bishop watched him leave. When he looked back, his attention landed on my mouth.

My body felt his gaze. The width of him blocked most of the corridor. A clean-soap smell sat beneath the cold from the rink. His lower lip was split at one corner, a small red line I hadn't noticed in the room that morning.

The training-room doorway remained open behind me. I could have stepped into it.

"The wrap is working." I lifted the empty roll between us.

"I know. I wanted to hear why from you."

"You'd already worked it out," I said.

"Thinking it isn't the same as hearing you say it." His voice was rough.

He moved the stick to his right hand so he could pass on the left. I turned sideways at the same time. There was room if neither of us breathed.

His shoulder touched mine, warm through the fabric of his thin practice shirt, pressed briefly along my upper arm and chest. This wasn't an

assessment or positioning for an exercise—neither of us had a reason to touch. He stopped for less than a second, and so did I. I held my breath.

Then he was past me.

"Good night, Pryce."

I found my voice after he turned away. "Drive safe."

His footsteps receded toward the equipment room.

I stood in the corridor holding an empty roll of tape until a door shut behind him. I collected a new case and carried it back to the training room. The corridor was wide enough when I was alone.

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The assessment appeared in my medical portal at 7:08 on Monday morning, October 29. I'd already heard every number in it. Declan had shown me the loss in September and the improvements since. Reyes had gone through the imaging, cleared me to return to contact, and made it clear that clearance meant the shoulder could take the planned load, not that the joint had become new.

The file still looked worse in black and white. It documented chronic right-shoulder impairment and reduced overhead function under fatigue, then recommended load modification and continued reassessment through the season.

There was no accusation in it. Nothing said I couldn't play. The home opener had proved I could play, and the nine games after it had proved the same thing in nine different ways. At 7:19, Park's office sent a one-line notice postponing the extension meeting scheduled for ten. The notice didn't offer a new time or a reason.

The assessment said what the shoulder couldn't do. I read it three times in my truck outside the practice facility, then called Marchetti.

He answered on the second ring. "You've seen it."

"Yeah," I said.

"So has the club."

I watched the staff entrance through the windshield. "Park's office postponed the ten o'clock."

"I saw. They haven't given us another time."

"Eleven minutes after the assessment appeared."

"We know both of the events," Marchetti said. "We don't know what conversation moved through their offices between them. Let me ask before you decide what they mean."

"It's a medical file. That's all it is."

"In a contract year, which means it's also a valuation document. We can object to how they use it. We can't pretend they don't have it."

I looked through the windshield at the dark glass window over the staff entrance. Declan would already be inside. He arrived before the sun and before most of the equipment crew.

"The file's accurate," I said.

"I didn't say it wasn't, Colt. I said it gives them language. Reduced. Modified. Reassess. Those words shorten the term they offer when a player is thirty-one."

I tightened my grip on the phone. "They offered four years in August."

"Four at three-point-four, with a response deadline we let pass because both of us believed there was more on the table. That offer is gone."

I knew that. Marchetti had sent me three separate reminders before the deadline and called twice the day it expired. We'd let it go because the club wanted the discount of an early deal without paying for the season I was about to have.

That had been before Volkov hit me in a corner and my right arm stopped working. "Get it back," I said.

"That's the job. But the conversation has changed. They don't have to argue you can't contribute. They can argue they won't guarantee four years to a defenseman whose shoulder needs a management plan before opening night."

"It needed a plan in August."

Marchetti's answer came without a pause. "Not in their contract file."

My right hand tightened on the phone. "Pryce didn't send them anything that wasn't true."

Marchetti took a moment before he answered.

"I'm not coming after your PT," Marchetti said. "I'm telling you what management will do with the record. Let me handle that part. You handle

the ice."

"I have been."

"Keep doing it. And don't give them new footage today."

The line went dead. I stayed in the truck until the clock on the dash changed twice, then put the phone in my coat and went inside. The practice plan had a corner-pressure drill after rush work. Reeves paired Garrett and me against Theo, Hayes, and Volkov. One forward retrieved below the goal line, one supported along the wall, one found the slot. We had to kill the possession and move the puck cleanly out.

First rep, Theo beat me to the puck. I closed the lane behind the net and made him reverse it. Garrett pinned Hayes at the wall. Volkov drifted high, waiting for the loose puck, but it never came. Garrett moved it to me and I sent it off the glass.

On the second rep, Hayes tried to carry the puck through my side. I kept my stick inside his hands and forced him below the line. He made the right play and dropped it back to Theo.

On the third, Volkov came into the corner first. He got his hips between me and the puck. I could have held the inside lane and waited for Garrett to close from the other side. That was the drill. Two men, one decision, no need to turn a routine rep into a collision.

The words "reduced," "modified," and "reassess" stayed in front of me. I drove through Volkov's right side.

He hit the glass hard. The puck kicked free, but so did his stick. It spun across the ice and stopped near the bottom of the circle.

The whistle went, and Volkov turned toward me slowly. "That was enthusiastic."

"You lost the puck."

"I also lost several organs."

"They'll grow back." I pointed toward his stick.

Reeves skated in from the boards. He didn't raise his voice.

"Bishop, out."

"I'm fine."

Reeves pointed to the line. "I didn't ask. Garrett, take him."

I skated to the line and stopped beside Mikkola. Nobody looked at me. That was worse than if they had.

Garrett ran the same drill with Odell. Volkov protected the puck. Garrett held the inside lane. Odell came down the wall and closed the other exit, so

Volkov had to reverse. Garrett anticipated it, stepped behind the net, and took the puck without putting anybody into the glass.

Reeves let the play finish before he came to me.

"What did you see?"

"Garrett held the lane."

Reeves tapped his blade against the ice. "What did you do?"

"Finished the hit."

"You solved your mood with another man's body." He tapped the blade of his stick against the ice. "Use this. Use the ice. That's what the rep is for."

I looked at Volkov. He had his stick back and was making a show of checking that all his limbs were attached.

"You want me out?" I kept my eyes on Volkov.

"One rep was enough. Now I want you to do the next one correctly."

That was all—no speech, no question about the contract. Reeves knew something had made me put too much force into the hit. He didn't need to know what to correct the choice.

I went back in.

Theo took the puck below the goal line. I used my feet, held the route to the front of the net, and waited. When he reversed, Garrett was there. The puck left the zone.

Reeves blew the whistle and pointed to the next group.

Volkov skated past me on his way to the line.

"My organs have returned," he said.

"Good," I replied.

Volkov pressed a glove to his chest. "I'm glad of your concern."

Garrett waited until Volkov was out of earshot. "You good?"

"Yeah."

He turned his stick over in his gloves, then let the silence sit. Garrett could do that longer than anybody I knew.

The next whistle sent us back onto the ice.

By the afternoon session, the shoulder had tightened from the hit.

Declan found it before I told him. He had me lift the arm once, watched the right side climb, and stepped closer.

"Again." He held one hand near the shoulder without touching it. "I want to see when it starts."

I raised the arm more slowly. At the top of the current range, the joint caught and my upper back took over.

"What happened at practice?" His hand stayed beside my shoulder.

"Contact drill."

Declan waited until I met his eyes. "Bishop. That isn't what I asked."

Zoe was two tables over with Mikkola. Vicki stood at the counter entering an order into the supply system. Neither of them looked over. They didn't have to. The training room heard everything said at normal volume.

"I hit Volkov harder than I needed to."

Declan's eyes moved from my shoulder to my face. "Why?"

I didn't answer, and he waited without filling the space for me.

"The season assessment hit the portal this morning."

"You'd already seen the assessment."

I looked past him, sitting on the edge of the corner table with both feet flat on the floor. The shoulder chart hung behind him. I'd looked at it through more hours of treatment than I could count. Every tendon on it was bright, clean, and easy to separate from the next one.

"Marchetti says the August offer is gone. The club can use the shoulder to shorten my offer."

Declan put the tablet down. "Did he say the note was inaccurate?"

"No. He said it gave them language."

He left the tablet where it was. "Do you think it is? Inaccurate?"

"No."

"Then tell me what you're angry about."

The direct answer was the contract. It was the lost offer, the words on the screen, and my own decision to wait because I thought I could make the club pay more by playing a good season.

Under all of that was something simpler. "It scared me."

The room continued around us. Mikkola counted through an exercise. Vicki opened a cabinet. Somewhere near the locker room, a stall door slammed.

Declan didn't give me the quick denial. He could have said the file didn't decide anything. He could have said I'd played ten games and the shoulder had held just fine. That was true enough to get me off the table without making me feel better.

He didn't use them. "I understand," he said.

"That's it? No forecast?"

"Do you want an honest plan or a comfortable forecast?"

I shifted on the table. "Give me the honest one."

"The joint overreacted to a contact load you chose badly. That doesn't erase the progress you've made. It only tells us three mornings aren't enough while the game schedule and practice contact overlap." He picked up the tablet again. "Four mornings for the next two weeks. One is a response check, not another heavy session. Zoe or Vicki joins us for the weekly measurements so we have another set of eyes on the trend. We hold overhead load where you can control it and progress everything else as the shoulder allows."

"And if it keeps doing this?"

"Then Reyes reviews it again and the plan changes. I won't tell you where the shoulder will be in February based on one bad Monday in October."

I looked down at my hands. "Marchetti wants an answer now."

"I don't work for Marchetti."

"The club does."

"No. The club employs me. The contract group is not my patient," he said. "You are. I can tell you what I find and what I recommend. I can document how you respond. I can't make the uncertainty disappear because somebody wants to put a dollar figure beside it."

I looked down at my hands. The right one rested lower on my thigh.

"Four mornings," I said.

"For two weeks. Then we decide from the response. Not before."

He came around behind me and set his hands across the top of my shoulder. The muscle had locked hard after practice. His thumbs found the edge of it.

"Breathe." My first breath stopped beneath my collarbone.

"Again," he said, his voice calm. I let the second one go farther.

His pressure stayed steady. No force against the joint. No attempt to work the answer out of me with his hands. He waited for the muscle to yield while Zoe talked Mikkola through his last set across the room.

"I shouldn't have hit him like that," I said.

"No," Declan said. His hands stayed at the same pressure.

"Reeves sat me for a rep."

His thumbs held the same pressure. "Only one?"

"I did the next one right."

"Good."

I breathed again. This one finally reached my lungs.

The muscle under Declan's left hand loosened first. The right followed. My fingers opened on my thighs.

"The file is still true." I sighed. "I still hate it."

His hands moved slowly once, checking that the guarding hadn't returned.

"You just can't body-check it," he said.

I looked over my shoulder at him. His face was completely composed. The corner of his mouth wasn't.

"That sounded like a joke, Pryce."

"Documented impairment in my judgment. Temporary, I hope."

I laughed before I meant to. It pulled at the shoulder.

Declan felt the reaction under his hands and eased the pressure without removing them.

"Four mornings," he said again.

"I'll be here."

Anna had chosen the table beside the window. The café was narrow, with six tables along one brick wall and a counter that took up most of the other side. At eleven on a Saturday, every chair was occupied. People came through the door carrying November with them, cold air and damp leaves, and kept their coats on while they waited for coffee.

I arrived ten minutes early. I also chose a different table, the one farthest from the door, and ordered her tea before she got there.

"You hate this table," I said. The draft had already found the back of my neck.

"I hate the draft. I like being able to see outside."

I moved my chair so my back blocked most of the cold coming through the glass.

Anna watched me do it. "See? That's what I mean."

"Moving the chair?"

She put both hands around the cup. "Knowing I don't like the draft. Ordering the right tea. Texting me when you're going to be late. You do everything a person is supposed to do."

"I'm trying." It sounded like praise until she stopped.

"I know." Her thumbs moved over the paper seam of the cup.

"Last week was bad. The schedule changed, and I should have—"

"This isn't about last week. It's not about one bad night."

I looked down at my coffee.

We'd been together for eight months. We didn't fight. We divided restaurant bills without negotiating and slept well in the same bed. I kept orange juice without pulp in my refrigerator because she hated pulp. She kept coffee at her apartment even though she didn't drink it. If she left a paperback open facedown, I put a bookmark beside it and no longer closed the book for her.

I'd mistaken the absence of friction for proof that nothing was missing.

"What is it about?" I asked.

Anna looked through the window at a bus pulling away from the curb.

"You remember things about me," she said. "But you don't wonder about me. Not anymore. I tell you something happened at school, and you ask the right follow-up question. Then two days later, I realize you never asked how it ended."

"I can do better. I know I can."

"You would." She smiled, and the kindness in it hurt more than anger would have. "You'd put it in your calendar. You'd check in on Wednesday. You'd do it, even if you wouldn't be perfect about it."

I opened my mouth and found another promise waiting there.

"You're right," I said instead.

Her eyes filled. She blinked once and looked back outside.

"I didn't want to be right."

The honest answer took longer than another apology would have. "I didn't notice soon enough."

She nodded. The tea sat between her hands, untouched.

"Is there someone else?"

My first reaction was— No. I hadn't kissed anyone. I hadn't made plans or sent a message I wouldn't want her to see. My days contained work, hockey, Anna, and the apartment. Nothing else.

My attention was another matter, though. It had contained Bishop for much longer than I was prepared to admit.

"Nothing has happened," I said.

Anna kept both hands around the cup. "That's not what I asked."

"There's no relationship. There can't be one."

The professional truth overruled the personal one. Anna heard it.

"But there is someone."

I looked at her. "There's someone I've been thinking about. I haven't done anything with that. I won't while the situation is what it is."

"At work?"

"Yes." I kept my hands around the coffee.

"Do they know?" Her voice stayed even.

"He doesn't. No. Nothing has happened."

That was the truth. I intended it to remain true for reasons that had nothing to do with Anna and everything to do with the power I held over another person's care.

She took a breath. "Thank you for not lying."

I looked at the untouched tea between us. "I should have told you before you had to ask."

"Maybe. I don't think it would change this."

I could have argued that thought wasn't action. I could have listed the ways I'd remained faithful, the evenings I'd shown up, the future plans neither of us had made far enough in advance to cancel.

All of it would have answered a charge Anna hadn't made.

"No," I said. "It wouldn't."

She put one hand over mine for a moment. Her thumb pressed once against my knuckle, a familiar touch with an ending inside it.

"You're a good man, Declan."

I looked at her hand as she pulled it away. "I wasn't very good at this."

"Neither was I, if I let eight months go by because it was easy." She took her hand back. "I don't want you to fix it."

"I— I don't think I could," I said softly.

We sat until the tea cooled. When we stood, she took the paperback she'd often left at my apartment out of her bag and held it against her coat.

"I found the bookmark," she said. She ran a thumb along the book's spine.

"I wondered where it went."

She put the book into her bag.

She hugged me. I held her carefully, not because she was fragile but because the moment was. Then she stepped back.

"Goodbye, Declan." She settled the bag on her shoulder.

I held the door for her. "Take care, Anna."

The bell over the door rang when she left. Cold air moved through the café.

Outside, I walked three blocks before I recognized the first feeling. There was room to breathe. Relief came before grief, and the guilt arrived immediately after it, as if the order could be corrected by punishing myself for noticing.

I kept walking.

My sister called at four while I was cleaning a refrigerator that was already clean.

"How's the defenseman?" she asked. The refrigerator motor filled my silence.

I shut the refrigerator door. "Hello to you too."

"The one who watches everybody's hands. You told me the wrist-wrap story twice."

"Once," I said.

"Long enough to count as twice. And how is Anna?"

Her order of the questions were a stark reminder on how focused I'd been on Bishop.

"Anna ended it this morning."

"Oh, Dec."

I leaned against the counter. "She was right."

"What does that mean? Do you want to talk about it?"

From where I stood, I could see my dented travel mug drying beside the sink and the two ordinary mugs on the shelf above it.

"No. Not yet."

My sister waited. She was good at that. Most of my family filled silence before it had a chance to become uncomfortable. She let it become useful.

"And the defenseman?" she asked.

I looked at the gray mug on the shelf. "Is my patient."

"I didn't ask what his relationship to your paperwork was."

"That's the only relationship I can discuss," I said.

"Listen to yourself, Declan."

"Anna was right," I said again.

"Okay... I'm here when you're ready to talk about him."

So we talked about our parents and the leak beneath her kitchen sink instead. When the call ended, the apartment was quiet again.

I checked my phone for a message from Anna. There wasn't one. Below the empty thread, an unread message had been sitting since Thursday, from

Karin Halvorsen.

We'd met at a sports medicine conference in July. She ran rehabilitation services for a clinic network in Denver and had spent twenty minutes after my panel asking how I built return-to-play progressions around a travel schedule. Before we parted, she'd asked whether I would ever want to lead a clinic rather than fit my work around a professional team and their schedule.

I'd told her Chicago was home. Her first message in August had said the question remained open. Thursday's said she'd be in Chicago after Thanksgiving and wanted to talk before her organization posted a lead role.

I read the message once, then set the phone facedown without answering.

Anna had ended a relationship because I'd been absent inside it.

That didn't turn this thing with Bishop into an invitation. On Monday, he would still be my patient and I would still be his physical therapist. The facts didn't become less important because I was relieved to be alone.

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Mackenzie ordered the same bourbon she'd ordered the first time we had dinner together.

She'd changed her hair since then. It was shorter now, with dark curls ending at her jaw instead of her shoulders. She wore a red sweater and silver hoops that caught the light when she turned her head.

"You keep staring," she said.

I gestured with my glass. "Hair's different."

"Six months and that's what I get?"

I held her gaze across the table. "Looks good."

"Still devastating with words," she teased. She lifted her glass.

I touched mine to it. We'd been easy together for two years, whenever we were both in Chicago. Neither of us wanted more than dinner and a night that ended before breakfast.

She ran commercial renovation jobs. Her hours changed with permits, inspectors, and other people's mistakes. Mine changed with flights and games. Neither of us had ever asked the other to build a life together. It worked because we liked each other. We were honest about what it was—and wasn't.

She told me about a restaurant job in River North where the architect had moved a wall on paper and not in the plumbing plan. I told her about Volkov losing his organs in practice and finding them before the next rep.

"I missed this," she said.

"Bad construction?" I lifted my glass.

She laughed. "Your face when you tell a joke and refuse to admit it's a joke."

"It wasn't a joke. He really checked."

I liked her laugh. I liked the silver at her ears and the way her fingers looked around the glass. Wanting women had never been an uncertainty. The women I'd dated weren't evidence against what I'd begun to understand about myself. They were part of it.

Mackenzie rested her hand on my forearm when the server cleared our plates. "Do you want to come over?"

Her invitation was clear. So was the warmth in her face. For a few seconds, I thought about giving her the same answer as before. Her apartment. Her bed. My jeans back on before dawn. A familiar night with somebody I trusted, nothing more. My body wouldn't object.

But that wasn't the same as wanting to go.

I thought about a pair of hands on my shoulder and a man who waited for the real answer even when it made both of our jobs harder. Pryce remained my physical therapist. Wanting him didn't give me permission to do anything about it, and going upstairs with Mackenzie wouldn't make wanting him less true.

"I can't," I said.

Her hand stayed on my arm. "Shoulder?"

"No. It isn't the shoulder."

She studied me. "Someone else?"

I looked at her across the table. "Not in the way you're asking."

She took her hand off my arm. "That sounds complicated."

"It is. I haven't figured it out."

"Do you want complicated?"

"Yeah." The answer came without thought.

Mackenzie sat back. She looked disappointed, not mad.

"Well, don't come over just because it's easier than figuring your feelings out," she said fondly.

"I wasn't going to."

"Good. I'd hate to remember you as a coward." She laughed softly. She reached for her coat.

I paid for dinner. We walked out together, and I waited while her car came around. Before she got in, she put both hands on my coat and kissed my cheek.

"For the record," she said, "the hair deserved more than two words."

"It looks very good. Better?"

"Growth," she said as the driver opened her door.

She got into the car, and I watched until it pulled into traffic.

We'd had a good run; we'd been honest with each other and broken no promises.

But it was history now.

I sat behind the wheel with the engine off and called Garrett.

He answered after four rings. "Somebody dead?"

"No," I said.

"Then why are you calling instead of texting?"

I put my free hand on the wheel. "I need to talk."

"All right." There was movement on his end, a cabinet closing and water running.

I watched my breath fade from the windshield. "I had dinner with Mackenzie. She invited me to her place."

"Okay. What happened?"

I rubbed my thumb over the seam in the wheel. "I didn't go."

"Also okay."

"You're bad at this."

The water stopped on Garrett's end. "You haven't told me what *this* is."

The restaurant door opened across the street. A couple came out laughing, the man holding the woman's coat while she found the sleeve.

"I wanted to go," I said.

"Okay." Garrett waited.

"Just not with her," I said.

Garrett continued waiting silently.

"It's Pryce," I said.

"Okay," Garrett said again.

"Stop saying that." I leaned my head back against the seat.

"You called me. Talk to me."

I put my left hand on the wheel.

"I want him," I said.

There. I'd said it.

"Does he know?" Garrett let out a breath.

"No."

"Is he still treating you?"

"Yeah." I looked at my right hand beside the gearshift.

"Then he can't know."

"I know. That's not all of it."

"Go on." The cabinet on his end closed.

I looked at the restaurant window across the street. My faint reflection stared back at me, broad shoulders filling the seat, face unchanged by what I was trying to say.

"I think I'm bisexual."

Garrett was quiet long enough that I checked the phone.

"You there?"

"Yeah. Just giving you room to decide if you're finished."

I watched my reflection in the restaurant window. "I'm finished."

"All right."

"That's it?"

Garrett's voice stayed flat over the line. "You want fireworks?" He sounded oddly amused.

"Wasn't asking for any."

"Good. I don't have any." I could hear the teasing in his voice. He opened the tap again.

The knot between my shoulder blades loosened.

"I've been with women," I said. "That was real."

"Nobody's said otherwise."

Headlights moved through the cab as a truck passed behind me. "This doesn't change that."

"I know, Bishop."

I'd expected the label to revise my history. It didn't. It just added an angle I should have seen earlier and hadn't. I could want men. I wanted one man in particular. That didn't reduce what I felt with women.

"Whatever word you choose fits you, does it change what you owe him?" Garrett asked.

"No, of course not."

"You good?" Garrett asked after the quiet stretched between us.

"Yeah." The answer came too quickly.

"Real answer."

"Better than I was before dinner." I took a breath. "Worse than I was before September."

"That sounds honest enough."

He didn't congratulate me. He didn't tell me how to talk to Pryce. He stayed on the phone until I reached for the ignition.

"Garrett." I tightened my hand on the phone.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks." I started the engine.

"Don't make it weird." He hung up before I could answer.

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The knot sat beneath the back of my left shoulder, just beyond the angle I could reach with my own thumb. By nine-thirty on Thursday night, I'd tried a massage ball against the wall, two mobility drills, and the long blue resistance band. All three reached the area around it. None reached the knot.

Zoe had offered to work on it before she left, but I'd told her it would loosen on its own. It hadn't.

I anchored the band around the rail outside equipment storage and stepped into the narrow corridor. The position gave me more space than the training area, where two tables were already covered in clean paper for morning. I took the band in my left hand, drew the arm across my body, and rotated until the pull reached the back of the shoulder.

The pull came close but it didn't quite hit it. I changed my feet and tried again.

"You're coming at it from the wrong angle."

Bishop stood at the far end of the corridor, his jacket over a T-shirt, keys in his left hand. I hadn't heard the door from the players' side open over the compressors.

"Thank you for the consultation," I said dryly.

"I wasn't questioning what you know," he backtracked.

"No?" I kept the band under tension.

"The band reaches the front of it. You're trying to get behind the shoulder blade."

I let the tension off the band. "How do you know where I'm trying to get at?"

He pointed to a place on his own back, a few inches below the shoulder. "You keep moving the band and checking there."

He was right. "The angle would work on somebody else. My arm isn't long enough to stabilize the shoulder blade and apply pressure at the same time."

Bishop looked at the knot, then at me. "Let me."

The corridor became smaller.

For months, I'd placed my hands on his body because my job required it. I'd felt the exact moment his muscle stopped resisting, counted degrees while his arm rested in my palm, and told myself the direction of his attention was irrelevant, as long as mine stayed clinical. There was no clinical reason for him to touch me.

"I can show you the spot," he said. "If you don't mind."

He didn't move any closer. The choice hung in the air for a moment.

"All right," I finally said.

I slipped the band off my hand and turned my back to him. "Medial edge of the shoulder blade. Lower than you think."

"Here?" His right thumb landed beside the knot, not on it. Even through my shirt, the pressure of his hands was warm.

"Half an inch down." I kept my shoulders level for him.

He adjusted, and the knot fired pain across my upper back.

"There," I groaned. "Hold that spot."

Bishop set his other thumb beside the first. His hands were much larger than mine. He could brace the shoulder with the heel of one hand and hold the pressure with the other without forcing the joint forward.

"Too much?" His pressure stayed steady while he waited.

"No. Hold it." I counted because that gave the sensation a boundary. One. The muscle tightened against him. Two. Three. His breathing stayed even behind me. He didn't dig harder when the knot refused to release. He waited.

Four. Five. Six.

I knew those hands. I'd watched them close around sticks and water bottles, seen the tape around his wrists and the small cuts across his

knuckles. On the ice, they so often directed bodies by force.

Here, they did exactly the opposite. Seven. Eight. The muscle began to give. Nine. Ten. My head lowered before I could stop it. The relief moved down my back and left heat in its place.

Eleven. Bishop's thumbs remained steady. Twelve.

My phone rang on the training-room counter.

His hands came off me at once; cold air reached the place they'd been. Neither of us moved toward the phone. It rang again.

The screen lit the dark training-room doorway. A Denver number I hadn't saved, but I recognized it.

Karin.

The call ended before I reached it. No voicemail appeared.

When I turned back, Bishop had stepped to the other side of the corridor. He wasn't apologizing. He wasn't pretending, either.

"Better?" he asked.

I rolled the shoulder once. The knot had loosened. "Yes. You found it quickly." I struggled to find my voice.

"You've spent long enough showing me where people hold tension."

He'd touched me as himself. I'd allowed it—as myself.

Bishop picked up his keys from the equipment cart where he'd set them. "Good night, Pryce. See you tomorrow." He left through the players' door.

I stood alone in the corridor and put my left hand over the place his thumbs had been. The knot was gone.

The problem wasn't.

Nashville went on the power play with one minute forty-two left and the score three-two. Hayes sat in the box for hooking. He'd stopped a clean look from the slot and bought us two minutes we didn't have to enjoy.

Reeves sent Luca, Eriksson, Garrett, and me over the boards. "Middle first," Garrett said as we took the draw.

Nashville had six skaters on the ice with their goalie pulled. Two men at the points, three across the middle, one below the goal line. They wanted our box to turn toward the puck until a seam opened behind it.

Luca lost the draw. Their right defenseman caught it at the blue line and moved it across before Eriksson could close. I tracked the forward at the side of the net. His stick stayed flat behind my skates, waiting for the pass through the crease.

The point shot never came. Their defenseman sent the puck down the wall instead, and I got my stick into the lane and deflected it behind the net.

Their low forward collected it and tried to come out on my right. The old play was to reach across his body, put my top hand through his hands, and lift his stick while I drove him off the puck.

I kept the right elbow down. One step closed the route to the crease. My hip met his. The shoulder took contact inside the range Declan and Reyes had cleared, tight to my body instead of extended.

He had nowhere to go. He sent the puck back up the wall. Eriksson challenged the point, and the pass across the blue line arrived behind the other defenseman's skates and forced him out of the zone. Thirty seconds gone.

They came back in with speed. Their center carried through the middle and pulled both our forwards toward him. Garrett held the far side. I watched the hands at the goal line.

The center looked left and passed right. I'd already moved. My blade covered the seam before the puck reached it, and the pass struck my stick and kicked toward the boards.

Their winger got there first. I stayed between him and Kieran while Garrett closed from the blue line. No hit, no fight for a puck with my arm away from my body. We pinned him against the wall until the puck worked loose under his skate. Luca dug it out and sent it the length of the ice. The building rose with the clear.

Twenty-three seconds remained on the clock when Nashville regained the zone. Their point man shot through Eriksson's legs. Kieran kicked the puck to the right circle.

I turned before the rebound landed. The Nashville forward reached it with an open net on his left. I couldn't get my right arm high enough to take away the shot, so I put my stick flat in front of his blade and drove through the lane with my feet.

He shot into my shin pad.

The puck dropped. Garrett cleared it off the glass, and Hayes came out of the box as the horn sounded.

Kieran stayed in his crease for a second with both hands on his knees. Then he straightened and hit the back of my left leg with his stick.

"You blocked my view," he said.

I tapped my shin pad with the blade of my stick. "I stopped the puck. You're welcome."

Kieran skated away before I could see that he was smiling.

The shoulder burned. It had taken the wall contact. I moved the arm once as we lined up to salute the crowd, felt the limit where it had been all month, and stopped there.

It was enough for the night.

Hayes had reserved the back half of the Korean barbecue restaurant for seven-thirty. By seven-forty, Volkov had taken charge.

He moved between two neighboring tables with a pair of tongs in each hand, cooking short ribs on one grill and turning pork belly on the other. Morrison sat across the first grill from him, his coat still on.

"Those aren't your tongs," Morrison pointed out.

"They're in my hands," Volkov said.

Morrison held out one hand for the tongs. "That doesn't make them yours. You took them from me."

"It's the fastest form of ownership." Volkov shrugged innocently.

Morrison looked at Hayes, who lifted both hands. "I told him one grill."

"One grill cannot serve a team," Volkov said.

Theo had taken the chair beside Luca and pulled it close enough that their thighs touched. Luca turned a piece of meat on their grill and handed the tongs to Theo. He took them back when Theo reached over the grate with his cuff too close to the heat.

"I had it," Theo said, his sleeve still hanging toward the flame.

Luca rolled Theo's cuff back. "You had fabric over fire, Callahan."

"It was under control."

"Not your control," Luca argued.

Abbott sat beside Hayes at the end of the center table. Hayes kept passing him food without asking. Abbott ate it without interrupting the story Garrett was telling across from them.

The room was loud enough that individual conversations bled into each other. Metal tongs struck grill plates. Smoke rose into the vents. Somebody ordered another round.

Declan sat with Zoe and Vicki two tables over. I knew where he was without looking. I'd known since I walked in.

Garrett stopped talking and glanced at me.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing." He reached for the mushrooms without looking away from me.

Eriksson leaned over the grill to move a mushroom out of the hottest section.

"My grandmother says a man who watches food burn while discussing hockey deserves the food he gets."

"Your grandmother has opinions about Korean barbecue?" Hayes moved a mushroom onto his own plate.

"She has opinions about men and heat. The location is irrelevant."

"She's right." Abbott nodded.

Across the room, Declan laughed.

The sound reached me through the scrape of chairs and the fans over the grills. I knew it before I turned. Not the short, professional laugh. The real one, open from his chest.

I found him through the smoke. He was already looking at me.

The laugh left his mouth. The warmth of it didn't. We held each other's eyes across two tables, Volkov's moving tongs, and the whole room that hadn't noticed yet.

Then Abbott noticed. He sat back beside Hayes and looked from me to Declan. His expression didn't change, but his eyes did. He'd spent too many years watching a game from the bench to miss a turn that happened away from the puck.

He looked down at his plate without saying anything, and I went back to Garrett's story.

When the last plates were cleared, I found the server near the register and handed her my card.

"All of it," I said.

"The full party?" She looked toward the tables.

"Everybody," I confirmed.

She glanced at the screen. "They already split it by table."

"Put it back together. I'll cover the whole thing."

She stared at me for a second, then took the card.

Garrett appeared at my shoulder while she ran it. "You know Hayes organized this. He'll argue."

I watched the server feed my card into the reader. "Too late," I said, fighting a grin.

Garrett looked past me toward the tables. Declan was pulling on his coat.

I signed the receipt before Hayes discovered what I'd done. By the time he reached the register, the server had already closed the check.

"Bishop," Hayes said. "This was my dinner."

I turned the receipt facedown on the counter. "Still is. You got everybody here."

He looked at the receipt and back at me. He wasn't going to win the argument.

"Next one is mine," he said.

"We'll see." I put the receipt in my pocket.

Outside, the parking lot was full of people separating into cars and rides, Theo arguing that he was sober enough to choose the music while Luca told him that wasn't the relevant qualification.

Declan fell into step beside me. Neither of us mentioned that we'd been watching each other.

"You ate three servings of short rib," he said.

"Four." I corrected him as we crossed the parking lot.

We passed Vicki's car, and she lifted a hand before getting in. Zoe called good night from two rows over.

"You didn't take any kimchi," I said. Declan's car was two spaces past mine.

"I had some. Volkov moved it to Morrison's table before you sat down."

"He rearranged half the restaurant before we sat down."

Declan smiled as we reached my truck. "Good night, Bishop."

"Drive safe, Pryce."

He kept walking to his car. I unlocked my truck and stood with one hand on the door. The whole conversation had been about food, the first one we'd had in weeks that didn't involve my shoulder.

Bishop arrived at six-forty-three for a seven o'clock session. He'd been early every Monday since the September assessment. On Wednesdays he appeared before the first full line came off the ice. On Fridays he waited until the room cleared after practice, then came through the door carrying his folded shirt and pretending the timing was because of his schedule. I'd accepted each explanation because the treatment got done.

After Thursday in the corridor and Saturday across the restaurant, acceptance was no longer the same as not noticing.

"You're early," I said.

"You're here already. Why not?" Bishop put his folded shirt on top of his bag and took the light band from the wall rack.

We'd done four times a week for two weeks. His response measures had stabilized enough to return to three, with the weekly shared checkpoint still in place.

I walked him through the first set. He controlled the movement without lifting the shoulder toward his ear. On the second, fatigue brought the compensation back two repetitions earlier than Friday.

"Stop," I said. He released the band, and I asked, "Sore from Saturday?"

"Five when I woke up Sunday. Three now."

"Any weakness or catching?" I asked.

"No weakness. It caught when I got dressed, but just the once."

I recorded his response. When I looked up, Bishop was watching my face.

"How are you, Pryce?"

"I'm fine."

"Fine isn't good enough when I say it," Bishop pointed out.

"Because I'm asking a clinical question."

"Well, I'm not. How are you?"

Behind him, the training-room door stood open. Vicki moved through the far end carrying a case of wrap. Zoe would arrive in ten minutes. The building started its day around us, but our corner station was still quiet.

"Anna ended our relationship." I'm not sure why I told him that.

Bishop's hand tightened once around the loose band. "When?"

"Two weeks ago. The weekend after your assessment hit the portal."

He didn't ask if it was because of him. He didn't look down at his shoulder or give me a symptom so I could retreat into the work.

"I'm sorry," he said simply.

"It's—" I swallowed. "It's okay. She was right."

He waited for me to continue.

"We were good at being comfortable," I said. "I wasn't good at being present."

"Was comfortable enough?" His eyes stayed on mine.

"It wasn't." I shook my head.

Vicki set the case on the counter. The sound brought me back to reality. I looked at the band in Bishop's hand.

"One more set at the lower resistance. Then mobility."

That night, I opened the scheduling history because the December travel plan needed reconciling. We had two road stretches, three back-to-backs, and a holiday week when Vicki wanted every ongoing rehabilitation case assigned to a named person before anyone boarded a plane. Bishop's Monday appointment conflicted with Zoe's coverage meeting. His Wednesday time overlapped a team lift. I needed to move both without creating another early hour nobody else could cover. The current calendar showed a seven a.m. Monday, a late Wednesday, and a Friday after most of the room had emptied.

I opened the change log. The most recent request had come from Bishop through the player portal, moving Friday from two-thirty to five-fifteen.

The reason field said media, but media had ended at four. The request before that moved a Wednesday from eleven, when Zoe and Vicki were both in the room, to six-forty-five the next morning. I kept going. He'd made four changes in October and five in September. Earlier requests reached back across the established treatment history, through summer maintenance, even back into the prior season. I counted nineteen in all. None moved him away from me.

Every change moved him away from a busy room and into the narrow edges of the day. He came before the room filled or after the last player left, when he knew I would still be there because my name was on the coverage schedule. I opened the July intake note in the second window and found the word *avoidant*.

I'd thought he avoided being observed while being treated. That fit the man who watched the shoulder chart instead of the hands on him, the man who carried pain into practice and reported it only when the joint made concealment impossible. The nineteen requests suggested something more. He hadn't moved away from care. He'd moved toward privacy with me.

I sat back from the screen.

I thought about the corridor. His thumbs at the back of my shoulder, his hands stopping when the phone rang, and my own decision not to step away. At the restaurant, I'd found his face across the room before I admitted I was looking for it. Nineteen requests didn't tell me what Bishop intended. But they told me enough.

I was still the therapist documenting his function. My notes still moved into the group evaluating his contract. He still came to the corner station and gave me access to pain, weakness, and a body he couldn't safely withhold. Private hours had made that easier. They'd also made it possible for both of us to avoid admitting that it mattered.

I closed the intake note.

I rebuilt the remaining schedule. Monday moved to eight-fifteen, when Zoe ran the next station and Vicki was in the room. Wednesday moved to the open recovery block after morning skate. Friday stayed late only on travel weeks, with the assigned coverage person beside it. I added the December road designees Vicki had requested and sent the full grid to her and Zoe for review. The player system required a reason when I changed an established appointment. *Care coverage and shared-room availability*. I entered the same line for each remaining session.

When I saved the calendar, the system sent Bishop an automatic notice. I didn't add a private message. I didn't explain the change with an intimacy neither of us had acknowledged. The room would no longer clear for us by accident. At ten-twelve, my phone lit beside the laptop.

**Bishop:** Got the changes.

I waited. No question followed.

**Me:** Eight-fifteen Monday. Zoe and Vicki have the December coverage plan.

Three dots appeared, then vanished.

**Bishop:** I'll be there.

I set the phone down. Keeping other people around didn't change what those nineteen requests meant. It only made the next choice harder to hide inside the schedule.

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The hit was clean. Their winger came down the wall with the puck on his forehand and his head up. I held the inside lane. He ran out of room below the circle, chipped the puck behind our net, and finished through my right side before I could turn away. His shoulder caught mine against the glass. For a second, the joint held. Then my arm stopped working.

The puck had gone behind the net. Garrett collected it and sent it up the boards while I pushed away from the glass. My right glove hung below my hip. I could close my hand around the stick, but I couldn't lift it high enough to put both hands back in position. I skated to the bench one-handed.

"Change," Reeves said before I reached it.

I went over the boards and sat without arguing, without trying to roll the shoulder. The strength had gone once in September and come back within the shift.

This time, it didn't. The broadcast camera at the end of the bench turned toward me and its red light came on.

I kept both gloves on my knees, the right one lower. The arena board showed a replay of the hit from above in slow motion. On the second angle, my arm dropped before the rest of me left the glass.

Vicki touched my left shoulder from behind the bench. "Tunnel."

I stood. The camera followed me to the door. In the training room, Declan cut the tape at my right wrist while Vicki pulled my jersey free without

lifting the arm. Zoe closed the door to the corridor.

"Numbness?" Declan asked.

"No numbness. No tingling either."

"Grip," he said, holding out two fingers. I squeezed them. He checked the other side, then had me lift the arm. It stopped near my ear. I tried again. The shoulder blade climbed; the joint didn't.

"Don't force it," he said.

"I can move it." I tried to lift it again.

"You're moving around it."

Zoe stood on my left and repeated the strength checks while Declan recorded the result. Vicki called Reyes from the doorway.

Reyes arrived before the period ended. She checked sensation, grip, and strength again. Then she took the joint through a passive range while I let the arm stay heavy.

"The passive range is better than the active," she said. "That doesn't clear you to go back, but it tells me what needs another look."

"What gets me back?"

"No repeat weakness. No overhead use. No reaching into resistance. Short shifts, and you leave the ice if the arm fails again." She looked at Vicki, then Declan and Zoe. "He reports after every shift. If any of you see a change, he's done."

"And if it doesn't change?"

"You can finish under those limits. Tomorrow I examine you again. This is a new episode, Bishop. September's clearance doesn't cover this."

Reeves came in while she was speaking. Reyes gave him the same list. He didn't negotiate it down.

"Can you play inside that?" Reeves asked me.

"Yeah. I can play inside it."

"Can you leave if it fails again?"

That was a different question.

"Yes. I can," I said.

Reeves held my eyes for another second. "Then get dressed. Garrett takes the wall. You hold the middle and move it early."

Declan stepped in front of me while Vicki helped me back into the jersey. His hands didn't touch my shoulder again.

"What?" I asked.

"You heard the limits." Declan held my eyes.

"Every one of them."

"I'm asking whether you're going to follow them," Declan said.

"I will."

He stepped aside. We were up three-two with nine minutes left when I returned. Garrett met me at the bench door.

"Wall's mine," he said.

"I know." I went over the boards behind him.

On our first shift, the winger sent the puck deep on my side again. I didn't race him to the glass. I stopped at the bottom of the circle, gave Garrett the corner, and watched the play develop around the net. Garrett took the contact and moved the puck behind him. I was already where the pass arrived. One touch sent it up to Eriksson without a reach or a fight. The puck left the zone before their second forward could close. I looked at the bench. Vicki held up one finger for the first report.

I moved the right hand once on my stick and shook my head. Nothing had changed.

The next shift started with a defensive-zone draw. Luca tied up their center. The puck went to the wall. Their winger tried to pull it into the slot, but his hips opened before the puck moved. I stepped into the lane and forced him back outside. My stick stayed low and my shoulder stayed quiet. After thirty seconds, I changed.

With two minutes left, they pulled their goalie. Six skaters spread across our zone. I held the space in front of Kieran and let Garrett chase the puck below the line.

Their point man looked for the backdoor pass. I couldn't take the whole lane with my reach. I took the half that mattered and made him send it through two bodies instead of one. The puck hit Luca's skate and kicked toward the boards. Garrett cleared it.

The horn sounded with the score still three-two. The building got loud. I tapped Kieran's pad and joined the line at center without lifting my right glove above my shoulder.

The next afternoon, active elevation stopped at my ear. Declan measured it twice. Zoe stood at the next station with her tablet, watching the second attempt. Vicki moved through the room behind us. Our corner was no longer private.

"Same point," Zoe said.

Declan entered the number. He said it aloud before he wrote it like he always did.

"Strength is down from Monday," he said. "Passive range is preserved compared with last night. Pain is six at the top and three at rest."

"Four at rest," I said.

He looked at me.

"It changed."

He nodded, then finished the note without softening it or turning the night into a permanent forecast. When he reached the assessment, he angled the screen toward me.

"You want to read it?"

I stood. There were two chairs beside the station. I didn't use either. I came around behind him and read over his left shoulder, close enough to see the fields without taking the tablet from his hands. The door stayed open. The uncovered window looked into the corridor.

The note said the joint had sustained a new loss after contact. I'd finished within physician restrictions through adapted positioning and early puck movement. Preservation of passive motion didn't erase the reduction in active function. A new physician review and a revised load plan were recommended.

"That's going to contract evaluation," I said. I read the assessment again. "That's the first honest thing anybody's written about what it costs."

Declan's hand stopped over the screen.

"The September note was honest."

"It said what I couldn't do. This also says what I can do instead."

He looked up at me. We were close enough that I could see the ring around his irises.

Reyes came into the room with Vicki.

I moved back before she reached the station. She repeated the strength checks, compared both arms, then had me work through a controlled low-load movement while she watched where the compensation began. The shoulder tired earlier than it had in September.

"No contact at morning skate," she said. "Tomorrow's game is conditional. If strength returns to the level you had before last night and it stays there through warmup, you can dress on reduced minutes. Same use limits, and tighter reporting. Zoe checks you after."

"And if strength doesn't come back?"

"Then you don't play," Reyes said.

"Do we image it?"

"If the loss persists or the next load produces another decline, yes. Today we revise the plan and watch the response."

Declan entered Reyes's decision into the record. The clearance belonged to her. The numbers indicated what my arm was capable of.

When I left the room, a television above the equipment counter was replaying the previous night's game. The red light had caught twelve seconds of me sitting still. Anybody could see it now.

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Bishop played Thursday on reduced minutes. He came through the game without another strength failure, but the right arm stayed close to his body when he left the ice. By the time he reached the training room, his undershirt was soaked through and stuck to his back.

Zoe completed the postgame check. She measured active movement, tested the response at low load, and gave him the written plan for the night. Vicki needed her for two other players before the building cleared. I'd finished with Eriksson and was putting my tablet away when Bishop stopped beside me.

"I need a ride," he said. "Garrett has my truck at the facility."

He didn't ask me to look at the shoulder or to interpret Zoe's findings.

"Garrett drove us over," he explained.

The game arena and practice facility were separate buildings. His keys were in the stall. His right arm was too limited to drive safely across the city even if the truck had been here.

Zoe looked up from the next table. "A ride is a good idea. Tonight's plan is in his portal and on paper. If the weakness changes, he calls Reyes."

"I'll take him," I said. "My car's in the garage."

In the car, we talked about the traffic on Lake Shore Drive. Bishop held his right hand low on his thigh. I kept both of mine on the wheel.

His apartment was quiet, and larger than I expected. The furniture fit his massive body. The kitchen counters were clear except for a roll of paper towels, a bowl with two apples in it, and the sheet Zoe had given him. He put his keys beside the paper.

"You can go," he said. "I have Zoe's instructions."

"I know." I stayed where I was.

He looked at me once, then reached for the hem of his undershirt with his left hand. The damp fabric peeled up his left side and stopped across his ribs. He tried to pull it higher without lifting the right arm, but the neckline caught under his chin. When he shifted his weight to free it, the right shoulder tightened and his breath cut off. He lowered the shirt again.

"I can do it. Give me another minute."

He tried a second time. The left side came free, but the wet shirt twisted across his back and pulled the right sleeve upward. His jaw set. I waited where I was. He let the fabric fall.

"Help me get it off," he said, frustrated. "I can't free the right sleeve."

"Keep the right arm down." I stepped in front of him.

I took the hem on his left side and drew it upward, keeping the right side loose. He bent his head, and I eased the neckline over the back of his skull and freed his face first. He pulled his left arm out on his own. The shirt remained bunched around the right upper arm.

I gathered the wet fabric and slid it down the arm instead of lifting the arm through the sleeve. His elbow stayed against his side. The cuff passed over his wrist and came free.

Bishop stood shirtless in front of me, breathing hard for a reason that was no longer just pain. The broad right shoulder sat lower than the left. His muscle tightened around the joint in a pattern my hands knew. I wouldn't touch him here. I carried the wet shirt to the table and laid it over the back of a chair.

He read Zoe's sheet. Then he took the cold sleeve out of his bag, positioned it over the shoulder with his left hand, and used the edge of the counter to hold one end while he fastened the strap himself. He set the timer on his phone. I watched him. When he finished, he glanced at the door.

"Stay until the timer goes?"

There was no medical need for me to stay. Zoe's instructions were clear. Bishop had his phone if he needed to call Reyes.

"All right." I nodded. "I'll stay until it finishes."

He sat at the kitchen table. I took the chair across from him. For the first minute, the timer was the loudest thing in the room.

"I don't usually ask," Bishop said. "Not for something like this."

"For help with a shirt? That's not much to ask."

"For anybody to help. To stay." He cocked his head, looking at me. "The shirt was the easy part."

I waited.

He put his left forearm on the table. "Mackenzie used to leave before morning because she knew I would. Before her, it had been the same in hotels and apartments, regardless of whose they were. Ten years in the league, and I don't think I've woken up next to somebody once without already knowing which one of us was leaving."

"Did you want them to stay? Even if you never asked?"

"I never asked. I decided for them first," he admitted. "It was always easier if I decided before anyone could choose to leave."

I knew that instinct. It made him take the wall instead of waiting for support, and kept him on the ice after the arm failed in September.

"You asked tonight," I said. "You made a different choice."

"Yeah."

"Why tonight? What changed enough for you to ask?"

"You know why." His eyes met mine.

I did, but knowing didn't make the situation any cleaner.

"I lost a job in Rochester," I blurted out. "I was twenty-six and I had a relationship with someone above me in the practice. She signed my evaluations."

He frowned.

"When people found out, I told less than the truth. I thought I was protecting her." I watched his face as I said it.

"What happened? Did the practice force you out?"

"I left," I said. "Severance, confidentiality agreement, a recommendation that made the move sound voluntary."

"And what happened to her after you left?"

"She stayed."

"She had power over you. That matters even if you chose her." His mouth hardened.

"Yes, but I also made choices. I kept quiet. I told myself silence protected her, and let other people decide what that silence meant." I looked at the

cold sleeve strapped over his shoulder. "I'm not doing that again."

"This isn't Rochester."

"No," I said. "But I'm still responsible for your care. My notes are in your contract process. Wanting this to be different doesn't make the power imbalance disappear."

"What do you want to be different? Tell me what you want." His voice was rough.

The timer still had four minutes on it.

"I don't want ordinary," I said. "Not with you."

Bishop's left hand opened on the table.

"This isn't ordinary. Not for me either."

"You're right." I stood before I'd decided to.

He stayed in his chair, looking up at me. The size of him usually changed the scale of a room. Seated with his right arm held close, it was my choice to close the space between us. I crossed it.

My fingers touched his face. The contact was personal from the first electric touch. I didn't need a professional excuse. His beard was rough beneath my palm, his jaw warm. He turned his head into my hand. His left hand came to my waist and stopped there.

"Pryce," he said, his hand still at my waist.

"Declan," I breathed.

His eyes changed. He stood. Even careful of the shoulder, he rose into my space until my hand slid from his cheek to the side of his neck. His mouth was close enough that I felt his breath against mine. He waited. So did I. The distance narrowed without either of us moving enough to claim it.

I wanted his mouth. I could feel how hard he was for me.

But that didn't erase the file, the table, or the fact that he'd trusted me with a failing joint less than an hour earlier.

"Wait," I said, fighting for control of myself.

Bishop stopped. We were so close I could feel his breath mingling with mine.

"Okay." His hand remained at my waist without tightening, and he leaned his forehead against mine, breathing hard.

I stepped back. Losing the heat of him felt sudden enough to hurt.

"I can't be your physical therapist and pursue this," I said firmly.

"Then I want a transfer. I want Zoe to take my shoulder."

I looked at him.

"First," he said. "I want a transfer to her care."

"That has consequences for you. Your care may feel different under her hands."

"I know it will. I still want the transfer."

"And there may be consequences for my job and reputation too," I added.

"I know that too. Mine, too. We'll disclose it together." He ran the back of his fingers along my jaw. "We'll tell them before they find out." His eyes held mine. "I want the transfer. And I want you. I'll settle for that order."

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Zoe was setting out resistance bands when I reached the training room Friday morning. Declan stood at the far table with Eriksson's ankle in his hands. He looked up when I came through the door. Neither of us had slept much. I could see it in the skin beneath his eyes and the way he held still while he waited to see what I would do. I went to Zoe.

"I need you to take responsibility for my care."

She stopped with one band looped over her fingers. "For today?"

"Permanent transfer. I want you to take the whole case."

Across the room, Eriksson looked at the ceiling. Declan's hands remained steady where they were.

Zoe set the band down. "Tell me why. I need enough to accept the handoff."

"There's a personal conflict. Pryce and I will disclose it together. I want the care transferred before anything happens."

Declan closed his eyes once. Vicki came out of her office before Zoe answered. She'd heard enough.

"Both of you," she said. "Zoe, keep the station clear. Bishop waits." She glanced at Declan. "Pryce finishes the session. Then we're going upstairs."

I looked at him.

"Eriksson has six minutes left," he said.

"Five," Eriksson said. "You lost count while they were talking."

"The full six," Declan pushed back firmly.

Vicki checked the clock. "Finish your session."

Nobody whispered. Nobody acted as if the room had caught fire. Vicki took control and made a plan, and we followed it. At the end of Eriksson's six minutes, Declan documented the response and released him. He put his tablet on Vicki's desk and joined me at the door.

"You went to Zoe first," he said. "I thought we were explaining together."

"Those nineteen appointments were mine, Declan. I'm not letting you carry that."

Park's conference room had one long table and glass along the corridor side. He closed the blinds after we all arrived. Zoe took the chair at the end with Bishop's current plan open on a tablet; Vicki sat beside Reyes.

Declan sat across from them, and I pulled my chair beside his. Park remained standing.

"Vicki gave me the basics," he said. "I need the two of you to confirm, then medical tells us how care continues. Nobody in this room needs private details beyond the existence of a professional conflict."

"We're interested in pursuing a personal relationship," Declan said. "I'm currently Bishop's treating physical therapist. We have not kissed or had sexual contact," he said for the record. "Last night I stopped a personal interaction before anything occurred and told him our provider relationship had to end first."

Park looked at me.

I nodded. "I requested the transfer this morning."

"Has any treatment decision been affected by this personal interest?"

"No," Declan said firmly. "When I identified a pattern of private scheduling that could create a concern, I restored appointments to times others would be in the room."

"I requested the private hours," I said. "I didn't even realize I was doing it at first. Nineteen changes over the care history. He found them and moved the remaining sessions."

Vicki scanned through the records and nodded. "The schedule trail supports that."

Park sat down. "Good. That's the kind of thing we document."

Reyes turned to Zoe. "Can you assume primary care today without interruption?"

"Yes. I've been there for the weekly measurements since October twenty-ninth. I have the current active program and response history. I can run today's session."

"Any information you need from Pryce that isn't already in the chart?"

Zoe glanced at the screen. "No. His notes are complete. If anything needs clarification, it goes through you or Vicki, not through him."

Declan's hand closed on his thigh.

Reyes looked at him. "Effective immediately, Bishop comes off your caseload. You don't assess him, measure his range of motion, mobilize the shoulder, prescribe or supervise his rehabilitation, or document his care. You don't access the chart. You're also removed from the routine club-level routing on his case. Zoe will be the point person."

"I understand," Declan said. "Bishop is off my caseload, effective immediately."

"If an immediate emergency occurs and no one qualified is available, you're permitted to stabilize him within your scope. Then you hand off as soon as possible, document why no alternative was available, and the access is audited. Emergency exception only. It's not road coverage and it's not a consultation loophole."

"I understand the exception," Declan said.

"Zoe is primary. If she's unavailable, medical operations assigns someone else. Vicki and I cover within our scopes. Before every road trip, the plan names the designee."

"Good," I said.

Reyes met my eyes. "You understand that Pryce is not the backup."

I nodded.

"Say it," Reyes said. "I want the boundary clear in the record."

"Pryce is not my PT. He's not backup for my rehab except in an emergency."

The statement took away the familiar assurance of Declan's hands on my shoulder.

It also opened up possibilities for our future.

Vicki slid a printed form toward Declan. "Your roster remains the same, except Bishop. You and Zoe already split coverage. Recusal isn't discipline. We're treating this as a recusal."

"The pre-transfer notes?" he asked.

"They remain part of the chart," Reyes said. "They'll be reviewed in the ordinary course because care changed hands. Accuracy is assessed by the record and the clinical picture, not by this conversation."

Declan read the form before signing it.

Park opened a second document on his laptop. "I'm recording a staff-player conflict disclosed before a relationship, with medical transfer effective today. The contract group doesn't need personal details. They receive medical information through the same authorized channel as before. Nothing from Pryce after this point."

"What if my agent asks?" I said.

"You can tell your own representative what you choose about your personal life. Pryce can decide whether you use his name or employment details. That's for you two to discuss. The club will only confirm that uninterrupted care and an internal conflict process exist—and only if confirmation becomes necessary and it's authorized."

I looked at Declan. "We'll decide before I tell him anything."

Declan nodded.

Park finished the entry and turned the screen so both of us could read the summary. It said enough to explain the boundary and no more.

"Any questions?" Vicki asked.

"When does Zoe take over?" I said.

Zoe closed the tablet. "When we go downstairs."

Declan and I both signed. Zoe and Reyes signed the medical transfer. Vicki took the forms with her when we stood. Park opened the blinds.

The corridor outside looked the same, but the world felt different.

Declan and I stopped near the stairwell while the others went back to the training room.

"It hurts," he said. "I'm the best care for your shoulder, even though I know the transfer is right."

I knew what he meant. He'd built the plan that kept me playing. He knew the joint's history. Handing his authority to Zoe was the right move, but it was still a loss.

"Sometimes the right thing hurts," I said gently.

He looked at me as if he'd expected reassurance.

"I'm not going to tell you it shouldn't." I wanted to reach for him.

"Thank you." He let out a long breath.

"Should we tell Marchetti?"

Declan leaned against the wall. "He needs to know enough to represent you if the club raises a conflict later. Nothing about Rochester. Nothing about last night, other than that nothing physical happened while you were under my care."

"Can I give him your name and your role in the transfer?"

He considered it. "You can tell him I was the treating PT, we disclosed and I recused, and that care transferred cleanly today. You can tell him there's a potential personal relationship. That's all."

"You want to be on the call?"

"No," Declan said. "Just tell him what we agreed. Let me know if he asks for more."

We stayed by the stairwell for another moment. I wanted to put my hand on the back of his neck. I didn't know whether the signed transfer gave me that right, or whether he'd be comfortable with that. I kept my hands at my sides.

"Zoe's waiting," Declan said.

"I know."

He went downstairs first. I called Marchetti from an empty office before I returned to the training room.

"My treating PT was Declan Pryce," I told him. "We disclosed a potential personal relationship and he recused today. My care transferred to Zoe. Everything was done cleanly and documented. There was no physical relationship during care. I have his consent to tell you."

Marchetti was quiet for a beat. "Does the club know?"

"The necessary people."

"Any interruption in care?"

"None," I said. "My care transferred this morning with the current plan intact."

"Any claim that the prior notes were compromised or need review?"

"They're accurate." I kept my voice level. "Nobody's challenged them."

"All right. I may need the conflict record if the club puts it into the contract discussion."

"Ask me first," I said. "That record isn't yours to deploy without my express consent."

"Of course. Anything else I need to know?"

"No, that's all, at least for now. Anything more requires another conversation."

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On Monday morning, Zoe measured Bishop's active elevation while I worked with Eriksson at the next station.

"Again," she told Bishop. "Same range. Don't buy another inch with your neck."

I knew the point where his shoulder would try to climb. My attention moved toward him before I stopped it.

Eriksson pressed his heel into the table. "You missed two."

"What?" I startled. "I did not."

"You stopped counting."

He was right. "Start the set again from one," I said.

"That seems like an unnecessarily punitive answer to two missed repetitions."

"Then count the whole set for yourself out loud this time."

"One," he said, with the patience of a man correcting a child. "Two."

Across the room, Zoe reduced the band resistance and changed Bishop's stance. She didn't ask my opinion, and I didn't offer it. Bishop looked toward me once, but I kept my attention on Eriksson's ankle.

This separation wasn't something I'd thought about upstairs. It meant hearing the familiar catch in Bishop's breath and letting Zoe decide what it meant. I knew the current program, but I refused to check whether she ran it the way I would have.

When the room cleared, Vicki stopped beside my desk. "The transfer review's completed."

"What did it find?" I asked curiously. Complete isn't the same as cleared.

"It's complete. Zoe's baseline matches the prior trend. Your notes remain in the chart; they're part of his record. We review them the same way we review any handoff."

I waited for reassurance. She didn't give it to me.

"Good. That's all I needed to hear." I let out a sigh of relief.

"Pryce." I looked up.

"Accurate work is accurate work. You don't need me to verify what you already know."

At eleven-thirty, Karin Halvorsen called again. This time I answered.

Karin offered me a department. The Denver role would put me in charge of rehabilitation across three sports-medicine clinics, with the authority to build protocols, hire two clinicians in the first year, and create the return-to-sport program I'd described at the conference in July.

There would be no team travel. The salary was good. The resources were better. There would be more administration.

And fewer hours at a table.

"I'm not asking you to decide on the phone," she said. "The formal offer will be in your inbox this afternoon. We need an answer by New Year's Day."

"Why are you working so hard to get me?" I asked.

"Because you spent half your panel disagreeing with the premise and the other half explaining how to fix it."

"That's not usually a hiring qualification," I said. "Most employers prefer agreement."

"It is when I agreed with you and wanted the same fix."

I smiled despite myself.

"Read the offer," she said. "Call me with any questions. And if the answer is no, I want it to be because Chicago is the work you choose, not because moving is inconvenient. We can help with that."

"I'll read the formal offer when it comes."

The document arrived at two-twelve and specified the start date, authority, salary, reporting line, and the New Year's deadline, with a generous relocation incentive. Nothing in it knew Anna had left or that

Bishop's care had transferred. Karin had begun this process before either of those things. I read it once and saved it to my personal drive. Then I sent Bishop a message.

**Me:** I need to tell you something after work. Nothing to do with your shoulder.

His answer arrived before I put the phone down.

**Bishop:** Are you free for dinner?

Bishop waited outside the staff entrance at six-thirty. He wore a dark coat, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. The transfer of his care had been effective for three days. He hadn't found a reason to pass my table, ask my opinion, or send me a shoulder update. I missed him.

"Before we go," he said. "I need to say something."

"Go ahead." I waited.

"Our professional relationship is over."

I nodded. "It ended Friday when Zoe accepted your case. It won't return to me."

He looked at my hand. "Can I?"

I reached for him, and his left hand closed around mine. The contact was simple; warm palm, rough fingers, and pressure that adjusted when I squeezed gently. I was surprised how strong it affected me—even more than those twelve seconds of his thumb against a knot in my back—because we didn't need a reason to explain it.

"Let's eat," he said. I let him lead me toward the restaurant.

We walked three blocks to a neighborhood place with red booths and laminated menus. Bishop had chosen somewhere neither the team nor staff regularly went. Finally, we didn't need an excuse to be alone together. We ordered burgers. He took his without onions. I ordered mine with everything and watched him steal a pickle from my plate without asking.

"You don't eat them, and I'm not letting it go to waste," he said, his eyes scanning the restaurant.

I watched him set the pickle beside his own burger. "You're monitoring the entire place and pretending not to watch me."

"Occupational hazard. I watch everything."

I told him about Denver.

"Karin Halvorsen sent a formal offer today. Lead rehabilitation role. Three clinics, program authority, staff. They need an answer by New

Year's."

His thumb stopped against the back of my hand. "You applied?"

"No. She approached me in July. I didn't answer the recent calls until today." I kept my hand under his on the table.

"Do you want it? It sounds like an impressive offer."

"There are good parts to it, for sure. But other parts, I'm not as sure about."

"Which parts of the Denver job do you want most?" Bishop asked.

I told him about having authority over a program from the beginning; the hiring decisions and time to build the long return-to-sport progression instead of fitting it into the next flight. I told him what I'd miss if I took the job. The direct work with players, being in the room with them, as well as colleagues who understood when a note needed a second set of eyes and when a person needed silence. Bishop listened through all of it.

"Denver's a good city, from what I've seen of it," he said.

"Have you spent enough time there to know that?" I asked curiously.

"I've played there a lot—never lived there."

"Then you don't know if it's a good city to live in."

"The mountains look expensive," he said, grinning. His thumb resumed its slow movement against my hand.

I laughed. "That's your entire assessment of the city?"

"You asked for my opinion," he said. "Or you were about to."

We moved on to other topics. Bishop told me about his first year in the league, when he'd lived out of two duffel bags for six months. Unpacking seemed like a commitment the roster might punish. I told him I'd signed my Chicago lease after viewing the apartment for eleven minutes, then spent the first night listening to the radiator strike the wall.

"You've stayed in the same apartment?" he asked.

"Three years. The radiator still wins."

"Nothing keeps you in that apartment except the fact that you chose to stay," Bishop said.

"I know." He was talking about Denver, and smaller choices too. A different apartment or a different job. Any future needed an active decision instead of remaining where I was.

After dinner, Bishop walked me back to my car. He kept my hand in his coat pocket because the cold wind had picked up. At the driver's door, we stopped.

He looked at my mouth.

"Saturday," he said. "Dinner at my place."

"What are you cooking?"

"Stew," he said.

"Then I'll be there. I'll bring the bread."

He lifted our joined hands and pressed his thumb to my knuckles. Not a kiss. The restraint was deliberate now. Anticipation.

"Good night, Declan."

"I'll see you Saturday, Colt."

It was the first time I used his first name.

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The Detroit defenseman knew the whistle had gone. Everybody on the ice knew it. Kieran had the puck under his glove. The official stood behind the net with one arm up.

Nico turned toward the bench and stopped playing. The defenseman put both hands into Nico's back and drove him into the end boards. His helmet struck the glass and he went down on one knee.

I was at the bottom of the circle. I saw the defenseman's hands come up before the hit. I saw his weight continue through.

I went after him.

He turned when my shadow reached him. His gloves came off before mine did.

"Bishop—" Garrett called.

I dropped the left glove, then the right. The shoulder was already warm from the game; I'd stayed inside its planned range. I knew what it could take and what it couldn't.

I caught the front of his jersey with my right hand, low against his chest. I didn't reach high and never extended the arm away from my body. I pulled him off balance and hit him with the left. The first punch landed on his jaw and the second below his helmet. He tried to answer over the top. I turned his right shoulder with the jersey grip and let the punch pass behind my head. My left landed again. The building rose up around us.

The defenseman got his hand into the collar of my jersey and hauled, and my right arm started to rise with the fabric. My shoulder caught before it reached the dangerous point, a hard warning through the front of the joint. I stopped.

The old answer would have been to wrench the arm free and keep going until one of us hit the ice.

But I'd made my point. Nico was on his skates behind the official. I folded my left forearm across the defenseman's arms and held him close instead. The linesmen came between us.

"Done," I said. The defenseman tried to pull free for one last shot. I kept the right elbow down and let the officials take his weight. They sent us to separate penalty boxes. Nico skated past mine on his way to the bench. A red mark ran along his cheek where his visor had shifted.

"You good?" I asked through the glass. "The visor caught your cheek."

His eyes fell to my right arm. "Are you?"

"I'm good."

"I'm good too." He nodded as he skated away.

There was a minute seven left in the second. I sat through it with my right glove off and the hand low on my thigh. The shoulder burned where the jersey had pulled it, but my strength was unchanged. At the horn, Vicki pointed toward the tunnel. Zoe had a table ready; Reyes stood beside her.

Declan was across the room with Hayes, checking where a blocked shot had caught him above the skate. Declan looked up when I entered. His eyes went to my right arm, then back to Hayes. Zoe checked my grip, sensation, active movement, and low-load strength. The shoulder stopped at its current limit and held there.

"Tell me exactly what you felt when he pulled the arm," she said.

"It caught when his grip pulled the arm up. No weakness. It burned afterward."

"Why did you stop?" Zoe asked. "I thought you'd throw another punch."

"The shoulder told me to stop. The fight was finished, anyway."

Reyes watched the second strength check. "No new loss. You have fifty-three seconds carrying into the third. When you come out, no more fighting and no overhead reach. If the burn turns into weakness, you report it."

"I will. The next warning from this shoulder ends my night."

"It's not up for discussion," Reyes said. "I need you to follow it."

"I heard you. No more fighting; no overhead reach."

Zoe entered the response and handed me a fresh shirt. "Postgame check before you leave."

I dressed without looking across the room again. Declan had followed the boundary. So had I. The distance between his table and mine was less than twenty feet—and more complete than a closed door.

In the third, Detroit scored while I was in the box. We answered after I came out. Theo carried the puck deep, Luca won it back along the wall, and Garrett's shot from the point went through traffic before the goalie saw it. We won four-two. Nico waited by my stall after the room started clearing.

"You didn't have to do that," he said.

"I did. You were hit after the whistle."

"And you stopped before the officials had to stop you," Nico said.

"When it was done. The next punch would have been mine."

He looked at me for another second, then bumped his left fist against mine. "Thank you."

Kieran called his name from the showers.

After the postgame check, Zoe wrote the night plan on a card, even though it was already in the portal. I was to use the cold sleeve for fifteen minutes when I got home and put on the support afterward. If the strength changed, I would call Reyes before the morning recheck. Declan left the building before I did.

He arrived at my apartment an hour later. He brought bread and a bottle of wine.

"I said I was cooking," I told him. "You didn't need to bring food."

"Then don't eat it. More for me." He grinned. I took the bag from his hand.

The stew had been in the slow cooker since morning. I'd set it up before the game because dinner would happen no matter what happened on the ice. The apartment smelled of beef, onions, and rosemary. Declan took off his coat and hung it on the hook by the door, but he didn't say anything else. His eyes went to the cold sleeve in my left hand.

That was all. I placed the sleeve over my right shoulder, held it in place against the wall, and fastened the strap across my chest with my left hand. I set a timer for fifteen minutes.

Declan opened the wine while I filled two bowls. He didn't adjust the sleeve or ask for the postgame numbers. He asked why I owned six bowls

and only two plates.

"Bowls hold more. Plates are just bowls with a structural problem."

"That explains why you own only two of them." He laughed.

We ate at the kitchen table. I told him Nico was fine. He told me Eriksson had once complained about the bread selection at a team meal and proceeded to eat half the loaf.

When the timer sounded, I removed the cold sleeve and checked the strength the way Zoe had shown me. It hadn't changed. I fitted the elastic support myself, pulling the strap across my chest and securing it where my left hand could reach. Declan watched my face, not the shoulder.

"Does tonight still count as dinner, or do you need space?" he asked.

"I'm not sending you home."

His shoulders loosened. We slowly finished the bottle of wine. The dishes went into the sink. I wiped the table because doing something gave me somewhere to put all the energy under my skin.

Declan leaned against the counter. His sleeves were pushed to his forearms. I'd watched those hands work for years. Now they rested loose around an empty wineglass in my home.

"Stay," I said out of the blue.

His attention came up to my face. "Tonight?"

"I want you here when I wake up."

"Are you asking because the shoulder hurts?"

"It has nothing to do with the shoulder," I said.

"Because you don't want to be alone after the fight?" he pressed.

"No." I put the dish towel down. "I'm asking because I want to wake up next to you. If you don't want to—"

"Yes," he interrupted me, setting the glass on the counter.

The answer landed harder than I thought it would.

I'd never been with a man before.

I crossed the kitchen and stopped in front of him. He didn't step back. His head tipped up, mouth close to mine—the same distance we'd left between us nine nights earlier.

There was nothing professional between us tonight.

"Can I kiss you?"

"Please kiss me," he whispered, his breath short.

I put my left hand on the side of his neck and kissed him. I was careful at first, because I didn't know what he would do. Then he opened for me, and

being careful lasted all of a heartbeat.

He caught my shirt in both hands and pulled me closer. I went with him. His mouth was warm, his stubble rougher than it looked.

I'd kissed enough people to know what I liked.

I'd never kissed a man.

The difference was real and physical. I felt it in the angle of his jaw under my palm, the breadth of his chest against mine, and the low sound he made when I put my tongue in his mouth. Wanting women had been real. This was real too.

God, was this real.

Declan slid one hand around my waist. The other stopped on my chest, below the support strap.

"Okay?" he asked against my mouth.

"Yeah. Not the shoulder."

"I know," Declan said.

"I need you to keep asking anyway." Kissing him made the ground fall away under my feet.

His eyes opened. "Okay, I will."

I kissed him again, harder. He turned us until my hips met the edge of the counter. My right arm stayed low. I used the left to pull him against me. His erection pressed against mine through our jeans. I broke the kiss on a breath.

"God, Declan. I want to take you to bed."

"Lead the way," he murmured, his voice rough.

He followed me down the hall. I removed my own shirt by freeing the left arm first, then my head, and finally the right sleeve—without lifting the joint. The support stayed in place. I put two pillows behind me and another under the right arm until the shoulder rested instead of pulling forward. Declan stood beside the bed, watching me arrange it.

"Come here," I said.

He took off his shirt and came to me. The sight of him stopped me for a second. Lean muscle covered his chest and stomach. Dark hair narrowed below his navel.

"What?" he asked.

"Just looking," I said.

"Like what you see?" Declan teased.

"Yeah." I swallowed. "I do."

"Good. So do I."

He climbed onto the bed on my left side and kissed me until the brace felt like the only thing on my body that wasn't on fire. His hand moved over my chest, down my stomach, and stopped at the waistband of my jeans.

"Can I take these off?"

"God, please."

I lifted my hips. He opened the button and zipper, pulled the denim down, then waited with his hand at the waistband of my briefs.

"Those too," I said.

He pulled them off. My cock stood up, rock hard for him. Declan looked at it without hiding the desire in his face.

"Touch me," I said.

His hand closed around me. The first stroke made my hips move. He adjusted his grip, thumb passing over the head, and watched my face as he did it again.

"Like that?"

"Yeah, more. More pressure."

His hands felt different, a new part of my body under his touch. He moved slower at the base and firmer on the way up, his thumb gathering the wetness at the tip and spreading it down. I put my left hand over his wrist. I didn't want to stop him. I wanted to feel the movement.

"I want your mouth," I said, my hips chasing his hand.

He moved between my legs. The first touch of his tongue ran over the head of my cock, wet and warm. I watched his lips close around me, and I forgot how to breathe.

Declan took me deeper by degrees, one hand firm at the base. His mouth was wet and tight. Each time he drew back, his tongue pressed along the underside before he took me in again.

I kept my right arm on the pillow.

My left hand fisted in the sheet, then I reached for his hair. The strands were softer than I expected. I didn't push. I held on while he found a rhythm that pulled pleasure through my whole body.

Receiving pleasure from him without giving back felt more exposed than being naked. My body wanted to take over, roll him beneath me, prove I could give as much as I got.

The shoulder wouldn't let me today.

"Don't stop," I said.

His hand tightened at the base while his mouth worked the head. My hips lifted once. He followed, taking me deeper, and the control went out of my body in a rush.

"Declan. I'm going to—"

He kept his mouth on me. I came with my hand in his hair. He swallowed, then stayed there through the last pulse, one hand resting on my thigh. When he lifted his head, his mouth was wet. The sight of it made my cock twitch against my stomach.

"Good?" he asked.

"Fuck, yes." I laughed, breathless, pulling him up with my left hand. I tasted myself on his tongue when I kissed him. "Come here."

He settled beside me, still dressed from the waist down, hard enough that the fabric strained.

"You don't have to," he said when I ran a finger along the ridge in his pants.

"I know."

"Colt."

"I'm not paying you back." I held his gaze. "I want you in my mouth." I put my hand on his waistband. "Can I?"

His breath changed. "Colt." He struggled to get my name out. "God, yes."

I opened his jeans and pushed them down with his briefs. His cock sprang free, thick and flushed at the head. I wrapped my left hand around him and felt the heat through my palm.

"I haven't done this before. Tell me what you like."

"Your hand first."

I stroked him. He coached me with words instead of guiding with his hands over mine.

"Slower. More pressure at the base. Yes." His voice dropped almost to a growl. "Yes."

His words went through me. I shifted onto my left side, keeping the right arm supported against my body, and lowered my mouth to him. I'd thought about this in the truck—after Mackenzie. I'd imagined his hands, then his mouth; then what it would mean to put my own mouth on his body.

The first taste was warm salty skin. I opened wider and took the head onto my tongue. Declan made a rough sound above me.

"Still yes?" I asked.

"More. Yes."

I took more. I learned the angle by watching his body. His stomach tightened when I drew my tongue along the underside. His hand closed on the sheet when I added my fist at the base. I couldn't take all of him without losing the rhythm, so I didn't try. Mouth and hand together worked better.

"Like this?"

"Exactly."

His hand came to the back of my neck, but stopped before touching.

"Can I?"

I nodded. His fingers settled into my hair. He didn't direct me. He held on. I took him deeper, drew back, and felt his hips tense under my palm.

"Colt." His voice broke on my name. "I'm close."

He came against my tongue, his hand tightening in my hair. I swallowed what I could, my hand bringing him the rest of the way. I watched the tension leave his body one hard breath at a time. When I moved back up the bed, Declan pulled me into another kiss.

My right shoulder ached. It still stopped where it had before the game. The brace pressed across my chest. None of that had been repaired by this.

But I was more comfortable in my body than I had been in months. Declan lay on his back beside me, and I rested my left forearm across his stomach.

"Stay," I said again.

I woke up because Bishop was no longer in bed. For one disorienting second, the empty space beside me felt familiar; a room I had chosen. But he was gone before we could decide what this meant.

Then a cabinet closed in the kitchen. I lay still and listened while the water ran, the coffee maker clicked, and a spoon struck ceramic.

My clothes were folded over the chair instead of scattered across the floor. Bishop had put his own jeans on, but his shirt remained at the foot of the bed. The elastic support still crossed his chest. He'd slept with his right arm arranged against a pillow, and sometime during the night he'd turned close enough that his left knee rested behind mine. I'd woken twice and felt him there. The third time I woke, he'd gotten up first and made coffee.

I dressed and followed the sound.

Bishop stood at the kitchen counter in jeans and bare feet. Morning light reached across the floor. He'd cleared the cold sleeve, support packaging, and last night's unopened mail from one side of the counter. In the space where they'd been, he'd put out two mugs. One was black and large enough to serve soup in. The other was dark green and smaller. It looked new.

He turned when I entered. "Morning."

"You made coffee before I found all my clothes."

Neither of us moved for a moment. I'd slept with him. I'd put my mouth on him and let him put his on me. The fact had occupied my body all night.

In daylight, what I noticed first was the empty section of counter he'd made for me.

"Coffee?" he asked, lifting the pot in his left hand.

"Sure. Please."

"How do you take it?" Bishop kept the pot raised.

"You don't already know how I take my coffee?" I teased.

"Seen your travel mug. Never seen you fill it," Bishop said.

"A little milk, no sugar—and no commentary about either."

He poured coffee into the green mug, opened the refrigerator, and added milk without guessing at the amount. He held it out to me.

"That mug looks new," I said.

"I've had it for two years. It came with the black one."

"It looks like you kept the unused half of the set for two years," I said, taking the warm mug in both hands.

"It's a mug, Pryce. Mugs don't expire if you ignore them."

The use of my last name in his kitchen felt so familiar it made me smile into my coffee. Bishop poured his own and leaned one hip against the counter. The right arm stayed supported and low. He didn't ask me whether it looked worse this morning.

"Your appointment with Zoe is still at ten this morning?" I asked.

"Yeah. Reyes sees me afterward if anything's changed."

"Good."

"One question." He drank from the black mug.

Part of me braced for something.

"Do you want to keep a toothbrush here for next time?"

I looked at him.

"Not asking you to move in," he said. "But if you stay..."

"Yes. Keep one for me."

He nodded as if I'd answered a mundane question. "There's a new one under the sink. Still wrapped."

"You always keep spare toothbrushes under your kitchen sink?"

"Sometimes family stays." He drank from the black mug.

"You told me nobody stays here after sleeping with you."

"Nobody I've slept with," Bishop said. "My sister isn't part of that statistic."

"Thank goodness for that." I held back a smirk.

His mouth shifted into an almost smile.

I put the mug on the cleared counter. "What happens between us when we go back to work tomorrow?"

Bishop didn't answer quickly. He'd never used speed to disguise that he was thinking. "Zoe handles the shoulder," he said. "I don't give you updates, and I don't ask what you think about her plan."

Bishop put his mug down.

"What happens if you get hurt on the ice again?"

"I go to the designated person," Bishop said. "Emergency exception stays what Reyes said. No stretching it because you're closer."

"Yes. We keep any emergency exceptions narrow and documented."

"We don't hide from the people who need to know," he continued. "Vicki, Reyes, Zoe, Park already do. If somebody else needs the information for an actual reason, we tell them together unless one of us can't be there."

"What do we tell the rest of the team tomorrow?"

"The team doesn't need to know Monday morning," Bishop said.

"I agree. We don't need our private life on display."

"But I'm not going to act like you can't stand next to me. Privacy doesn't mean that I'm ashamed of you," he pointed out.

That struck harder than I expected.

"Privacy isn't shame. I don't want you confusing them," I said.

"That's what I mean. We keep what's ours because it's ours. We don't turn it into a secret."

I picked up the green mug again and nodded.

"And if Marchetti asks about the recusal, I stay inside what you approved."

"If he wants more, ask me first," I said.

He nodded. I took another drink.

"You said you'd never kissed a man before," I said.

"I meant it when I said it." He grinned. "Can't say that anymore."

"Do you want to talk about that?" I asked.

"I've already thought about it enough to understand myself." He shrugged.

I waited.

"I like women. They were never practice," he said. "Mackenzie wasn't. None of them were."

I nodded, waiting for more.

"And you aren't a correction." He watched my face. "I'm bisexual."

He said it casually. He didn't need to reinterpret every person he'd been with before me. It gave his present desire language.

"All right. It doesn't change how I see you or them," I said.

His jaw tightened. "That's it?"

"Do you need more than that?"

He considered the question. "I don't know."

"What support do you want from me?" I moved closer, leaving enough room for him to decide whether to close it. It had taken me years to accept that I was bisexual. He was in no rush from me.

"Just don't make it fragile because the word is new."

"It's not. It's part of who you are." I stayed close without touching him.

"Don't tell me I need to announce it right now to prove anything."

"You don't have to tell anyone unless you want to," I reassured him. "And you don't need to prove anything to anyone."

He put his left hand at my waist. "I told you because I wanted you to know."

"Then thank you for trusting me."

I kissed him softly. When I stepped back, Bishop touched his forehead to mine.

"Toothbrush," he said.

"Very romantic."

"You said yes," Bishop said, a smile on his face.

I found the unopened brush beneath the sink. In the bathroom, his own stood alone in a ceramic cup beside the faucet. I unwrapped mine and put it next to his.

The article went live Thursday morning with a picture of my right arm hanging below the bench. I saw it on Garrett's phone before I saw the link Marchetti sent me. We were in the players' lounge waiting for video. Garrett looked at the screen, then at me, and turned the phone so I could read it. The headline called my shoulder a contract problem.

The first three paragraphs were built from things anybody could see. They showed the nationally televised hit, the camera following me down the tunnel, the reduced minutes in the next game, and a veteran defenseman playing through a chronic issue while his contract extension remained unsigned. Then the article gave insider details.

On October twenty-ninth, it said, the club postponed my extension meeting the same morning medical operations forwarded a "load-management concern" into contract evaluation.

I read that sentence twice. The portal had shown my season assessment at seven-oh-eight. Park's office had postponed the ten o'clock meeting at seven-nineteen. Marchetti and I knew that much. We hadn't known what moved through club offices between them. The article apparently did.

"That's not from the broadcast," Garrett said.

"No, it's not."

"You want me to clear the room?"

Around us, players were arriving for video. Theo and Luca stood near the coffee machine. Eriksson had one skate guard in his hand for no apparent reason. Nobody had mentioned Declan's name. The article didn't either. It didn't mention a transfer, a recusal, or a relationship. An insider had exposed my medical record as a bargaining weapon.

"No," I said. "Park needs to see it. Then we do video."

Garrett nodded. I sent the link to Park and walked upstairs.

Park had already called Vicki and Reyes by the time I reached his office. Vicki stood beside the conference table, arms folded. Reyes had the article open on a tablet. Park's phone sat face down between them.

"The quoted phrase is ours," Park said. "It appears in the October twenty-ninth medical-operations routing summary."

"Who saw it?" I asked.

"Vicki, Dr. Reyes, me, and the necessary contract staff. The administrative logs should show which of those authorized accounts opened or forwarded the summary. We're reviewing that trail."

"Could Pryce have written it?"

Vicki's expression sharpened. "No. It summarizes the clinical record for operations. His assessment used functional findings, not that phrase."

I'd known he hadn't, but I wanted it said.

"Does Zoe have access?" I asked.

"To the medical chart she needs for care," Reyes said. "Not to contract evaluation. The routing summary is separate."

"And the review?"

"Open," Park said. "We're not naming a source until the evidence supports one."

"What are you telling media?"

"That you remain under an established physician-led plan, participation decisions are medical, and contract discussions are private. We won't confirm specific allegations or speculate about a source."

"Good. Use it," I said.

Park leaned forward. "Do you want to say anything yourself?"

"Same thing. Shoulder's managed. I'm following the plan. Contract's private."

"Nothing about the internal process?"

"No, at least not until we know what happened," I said.

Park's phone began vibrating against the table.

"That's likely communications," he said. "The access review remains unresolved. If we find evidence, I'll tell you what I can."

I left him to answer.

Zoe reduced my contact repetitions before I stepped onto the ice. She'd made the change the previous afternoon after my strength dropped on the final set. The article didn't cause it, and she refused to restore the load. Nobody could accuse us of reacting.

"Four controlled contacts," she said at the gate. "No high reach. You report after two and after four."

"I know the drill."

Declan was at the other end of the rink with Hayes, watching a return-to-skate progression. He didn't look toward Zoe's tablet. He didn't come to the boards when I started.

The first contact came from Eriksson on a low-angle retrieval. I got my feet around early, put my left side toward him, and moved the puck before his weight arrived. The impact went through my back and hips instead of the right shoulder.

The second was Garrett because he knew how to make a controlled drill honest. He drove through my center, forced me off the puck, and made me recover it with my feet.

"Change?" Zoe asked at the boards.

"No weakness. Pain three."

She wrote it down. "Two more."

I completed them. They didn't get a high-arm finish. When Reeves sent the next pair over the boards, I changed with mine. The old need to prove health had always been loudest when somebody questioned it. This time, I let my play speak for itself.

Declan and I didn't speak until the building had emptied. He waited near the staff exit in his coat.

"My place?" I asked.

"The conference room is free."

"You want to stay here?" I asked.

"For the conversation with your agent, yes."

He opened the small glass-walled room beside the lobby. There was no one left on the floor except security at the front desk. We sat on the same

side of the table.

"Tell me what Marchetti said," Declan said.

I told him all of it. Marchetti had called during lunch. He considered the leak useful evidence that medical risk was already affecting valuation, but not proof of misconduct by itself. He wanted an independent orthopedic assessment so our counter didn't depend only on club medical summaries. He wanted my game usage, adapted play, penalty-kill results, and current role organized into a firm performance counter. He'd also asked whether the internal conflict belonged in our response.

"What did you tell him?" Declan asked.

"That I needed to talk to you first."

Declan looked through the glass toward the empty lobby. "And what do you want?"

"Independent assessment. Performance counter. No public fight while Park's review is open."

"What about the leak?" Declan asked.

"If anyone asks, I say that the shoulder is under a medical plan and the contract is private. I don't lie about the article, but I don't confirm anything, either."

"And us?" Declan asked.

"Not relevant. No recusal. No relationship. Nobody exposed it, and we don't do it for them."

His hands rested on the table. I could remember how warm they were on my bare skin. I shook the thought from my head.

"The independent assessment will need your file," he said. "I'll authorize the release when Marchetti has the specialist and scope. Zoe and Reyes handle what's necessary."

"If the club brings the recusal into negotiations, we stop before anybody uses it," I said.

"Call me before you answer."

"We decide together." I nodded.

He turned toward me. "Are you agreeing because it's what I want?"

"It's the outcome I want too."

"Tell me why."

I looked at the article still open on my phone. The picture showed my body at its weakest because weakness made a clean story. The writing underneath made something public that shouldn't be.

"Because somebody already decided my medical record was useful without asking me," I said. "I'm not doing the same thing to you."

The tension around Declan's mouth eased.

He nodded.

I called Marchetti while Declan sat beside me.

"Independent specialist and performance counter," I said. "Nothing public beyond the medical line. The staff conflict stays out."

"For now," Marchetti said.

"Until I tell you differently."

He heard the distinction. "Understood. I'll send options for the assessment."

We left the conference room together. He put his hand into mine where everyone could see.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

On Friday night, Bishop ate noodles from a white takeout carton, six feet away from a sealed letter sitting in the back of my desk drawer. He'd come to my apartment because I'd asked him to.

The radiator struck the wall twice while we ate. He looked toward it with an odd satisfaction.

"It wins," Bishop said, laughing.

"Every night. I stopped expecting it to improve."

"You could move," he said.

The Denver offer was open on my laptop. I'd moved it to one side when the food arrived, but Bishop had seen the subject line. He hadn't asked whether I was taking it.

The article earlier had changed everything around us. Reporters had waited at the facility entrance. Park's access review remained open. Bishop had repeated the club's narrow line and walked past the questions about his future without offering further comment. He'd kept our agreement.

That didn't make the drawer behind me easier to open.

"You said you'd tell me about Rochester when you were ready," Bishop said.

I set my carton.

"Is this you being ready?"

"No." I looked at him. "It's me choosing to tell you anyway. I'm not sure I'd ever be ready, to be honest."

"I'm listening," he said. He put his food aside.

I began with the facts I'd spent years compressing.

"I worked at a sports-medicine practice in Rochester for three years. I was twenty-six when the relationship began. Her name was Marguerite Feld. She was forty-one. She ran my division and signed my evaluations."

"How long?" he asked. His face held still.

"Fourteen months. Long enough to believe we knew how to manage it."

"Did anybody know?"

"Not until somebody did." I sighed. "We were careful. We thought being careful and ethical were the same thing." I paused. "Separate arrivals. No messages on work accounts. No affection in the clinic. She reviewed my work as if we were strangers. Sometimes more harshly because she was afraid fairness would look like favor."

"That wasn't fair. Either way, she changed the way she treated you."

"She overcorrected."

I folded the top of the takeout carton down, then opened it again.

"When the relationship was discovered, the practice opened a review. I had opportunities to tell the complete truth." That was the hardest part. "I didn't. I said it had been private, mutual, and unrelated to work. All three statements were true, but none of them were complete."

"What did you leave out?" Bishop asked. "Tell me all of it."

"She'd evaluated me the whole time. I'd stopped disagreeing with her in meetings because I knew we would argue about it at home. When a promotion opened, I didn't apply because we'd already discussed how it would look. Sometimes she made decisions without asking what I wanted."

Bishop's left hand rested open on the table. "Why did you leave that out? Who were you protecting?"

"I thought the truth would end her career," I said. "I thought I was protecting her from a punishment that would land harder because she was the superior. Because she was a woman who had fought for that authority. I also thought if I admitted the relationship had shaped my work, every good decision I'd made for three years would become suspect."

"So you protected yourself too. Not only her."

"I guess." I thought about that. "I protected the version of myself who believed I'd kept work and my personal life separate."

The review lasted eleven weeks. I sat in conference rooms while the practice's lawyers asked whether each decision was clinical, operational, or personal—like anything was ever that clear cut.

"Did you see her outside the meetings?" Bishop asked.

"Only once." I stood and went to the desk. The wood was narrow and scarred from three moves. "She brought me into her office before one of the final meetings. I was talking too fast. I kept asking what we were going to say."

Bishop stayed in his chair. I looked at the desk instead of him.

"She stood behind me and put her hands over mine. It was something she'd done when she was teaching me. That day, we were standing at her desk, and she told me to be still and let her handle the outcome."

"Did you?"

"Yes. I stopped asking questions." I turned back to him. "The practice proposed an exit. My severance, a confidentiality agreement, and a recommendation that protected my license and made the move sound voluntary. Marguerite helped shape it. She said leaving cleanly would protect my future and preserve the division."

"Her division," Bishop said.

"Ours, she called it."

"Did you want to leave?"

The question stopped me. He hadn't asked whether she was wrong, whether she'd used me, or whether I loved her. Those were the questions I continually asked myself.

"I don't know," I said honestly.

Bishop waited.

"That's the worst part. By the time the paperwork arrived, the plan was already set up and I was grateful enough to sign it."

"What did you want from her?" Bishop asked. "Not from the practice—from her."

"To ask me." My voice broke on the last word. Bishop stood, but he didn't cross the room.

"Can I come over there?" he asked softly.

I nodded. He came to me and stopped within my reach, his hands at his sides.

"I want to show you something," I said, turning to him. "How she used to teach me. Will you stand here? Face the desk."

He looked at the space I indicated, then turned into it. I moved behind him.

"Keep your hands low. Just where they're comfortable."

He rested them near the front edge of the desk, close to his body, his right elbow at his side. I reached around his sides and laid my hands over his. I leaned my chest into him.

"This all right?" I asked.

"Yeah."

I let my palms settle against the backs of his hands. I could feel their warmth and the small movement of his breath through his back. He hadn't turned to look at me. That made it easier to speak.

"She was a good teacher. I'd watch her work, but some things I couldn't get from watching. She'd stand behind me like this and guide my hands so I could feel what she meant. Where to put my fingers. The right amount of pressure."

My fingers rested along his.

"She'd talk beside my ear. I could feel her against my back. I was supposed to be concentrating on what she was teaching me. I was, but I was concentrating on her too."

Bishop's left thumb moved once against the wood. He waited for me to go on.

"I wanted her. Before either of us said anything about it. I'd get something right and she'd tell me how smart I was, and I'd feel good for the rest of the day. Sometimes I wanted her to show me again even when I understood."

I looked down at my hands on his. Remembering that pleasure was harder than telling him about the meetings. I could still feel how much I'd wanted her attention, and how young I'd been when getting it had seemed to settle every doubt I had about myself.

"I learned a lot from her. I loved being close to her. Those two things happened together, and I didn't think I had to separate them."

"And in her office?" he asked quietly.

"It still felt good when she touched me, even then. I was frightened about the review, and she came up behind me. For a minute, I thought we were going to be all right. She knew what to do. I could stop trying to work it out."

I swallowed. Bishop's hands were warm beneath mine. He hadn't moved them or asked me to hurry.

"I needed to ask what would happen if I stayed. Whether there was another way to do it. But with her hands over mine, I couldn't seem to get any of it out. I didn't want her to let go."

"You trusted her."

"I did. And I wanted her to keep wanting me. I knew how to listen to her. I was good at it. I would agree before I'd even worked out what I really thought."

I lifted my hands from his and stepped back. Bishop straightened his fingers, then turned around. He left the space between us.

For a moment I couldn't look at him. I had wanted to give him the whole truth. That included having been happy with her, and still wanting her while she helped arrange a future without me in it.

"There's something else," I said.

Bishop moved aside when I turned toward the desk. I opened the drawer. The envelope lay beneath old tax records and a packet of spare keys. It was cream paper, with my Chicago address written in Marguerite's hand. It had arrived six months after I left Rochester. The seal was still unbroken.

I placed it on the desk where we could both see it.

"She wrote to me. I've never opened it."

Bishop looked at the envelope and then at me. "Do you think the answer's in there?"

"I used to."

I could open it. I could find an apology or a justification, a confession or another offer of protection. Marguerite might explain why she'd accepted a solution that removed me and left her authority intact. Nothing inside the envelope could tell me what I'd wanted when I was twenty-six. I picked up the letter. For one second, Bishop's attention tensed, as if he expected me to tear the seal.

I put it back in the drawer.

"Her explanation belongs to her," I said. "Whatever it is, it's not the answer I was looking for."

I closed the drawer.

"I loved her." I turned around and looked at him. "I was also younger, and she had power over my work. We both made choices that hurt me."

Bishop nodded; he stayed where he was. "Can I hold you?"

"Yes." I stepped close and took his hands. I placed them at my waist, keeping his right hand low. "Here."

His left hand settled against my side. I could have stayed there for a while, letting him hold me, but I wanted his mouth too. I slid a hand up the back of his neck and kissed him.

His hands warm at my waist, exactly where I'd put them.

Marguerite's letter was back in the closed drawer. When I took Bishop's hand and led him down the hall, I wasn't continuing Marguerite's story. I was choosing.

In the bedroom, Bishop stopped beside the bed. "Tell me," he said.

"I want you to top me."

"Tonight?" His eyes darkened.

"That's what I want."

"Are you sure?" Bishop asked.

"I'm not certain about Denver. I'm not certain what Marguerite would say if I opened that letter. But I am certain I want your cock inside me tonight."

He let out a loud breath. "All right."

I took off my own clothes. He watched without hiding it. When I was naked, I reached for the hem of his shirt and stopped.

"Can I?"

"Yeah. Left side first."

He managed the right sleeve himself after I lifted the shirt over his head. The support stayed in place until he removed it and set it beside his clothes. He arranged a pillow where he wanted it and rolled the shoulder once within his own comfortable range.

"This works," he said before I could ask.

I opened the bedside drawer, which held condoms and lube.

"Prepared," he teased.

"I had a week."

He laughed. I put my left hand behind his neck and kissed the sound out of him.

We went down onto the bed together. He kept his weight off the right arm. I lay on my back and pulled him over me, his body broad enough to block the light.

"Where do you want my hands?" he asked.

I brought both to my waist again. "Here first."

"And then?" Bishop asked.

He kissed my mouth, then my jaw. His stubble dragged over my throat. One hand moved from my waist to my chest.

"Is this right? Tell me if you want my hand somewhere else."

His thumb crossed my nipple. Pleasure tightened low in my body. "Right there." He did it again when he saw my body's response, then used his mouth. He sucked hard enough to make my hips rise.

"More," I gasped. His hand moved down my stomach and closed around my cock. The scale of him changed the contact. His palm swallowed me, and his fingers adjusted when I pushed into his hand.

"Like that?"

"A little slower. Harder at the top. Yes."

He listened with his whole body. Each answer altered the next stroke because he wanted my pleasure and asked what I desired. I reached between us and wrapped my hand around him. He was already hard and thick against my palm.

"Fuck," he said. "Your hand feels good."

"Don't stop," he said. I stroked him until his hips followed. His forehead dropped to mine. Bishop kissed down my body and stopped between my legs.

"Your mouth," I said.

He licked the head of my cock, then took me in. Last week I'd told him what I liked with his mouth around me. He remembered now.

I loosened my grip so he could set the depth. He took me deeper. I held his head without pushing, my fingers moving through the short hair at his crown. The sight of a man this large on his knees for me was an aphrodisiac itself. It also carried the simple safety of knowing he would stop the second I asked.

I pulled gently at his hair. "Come up here."

"I want you inside me before I come."

"Tell me how."

I reached for the lube and handed it to him. "Start with your fingers. One first."

He slicked his left hand. His right stayed low at my hip. He moved between my legs and waited until I nodded. The first press was cool, then warm as his finger entered me. I breathed through the stretch.

"Still?" he asked.

"Stay there. Kiss me." He bent over me and kissed me while his finger remained still. When I relaxed around him, I moved my hips.

"Now move." He moved slowly at first, watching my face. The drag became pleasure as he curled his finger inside me.

"There," I said. He found it again. My cock jumped against my stomach.

"Do you want another? I can take my time."

"Add another." He added the second finger by degrees. I told him when to stop, when to move, when I wanted more. His cock pressed hard against my thigh. Sweat gathered along his chest.

"Colt."

"Yeah?" Bishop said.

"I want your cock now."

His eyes held mine. "How do you want to lie?"

"On my back. I want to see you." He withdrew his fingers, opened a condom, and rolled it on. I watched his hands. The right one worked without reaching. The left spread more lube over himself. Then he came between my legs. I took both his hands and put them on my waist for the third time that night.

"Here," I said.

His grip firmed at my waist. "I've got you."

He guided the head of his cock to me. "Can I push in?"

"Yes. Slowly." The first stretch stole my breath. He stopped without pulling away.

"Stay," I said. I opened around him a little at a time. When I was ready for more, I drew him closer with my heels. "Now."

He pushed deeper. I felt every inch of him. The pressure was intense enough to hurt at the edge; then it changed when I breathed and let my body take him in. Bishop's face had gone rigid with control.

"Look at me," I said. "I want to see your face." He met my gaze. "All the way."

He pushed inside me and stopped. For a moment neither of us moved. His cock filled me. His hands held my waist.

"Move," I said. His first stroke was shallow. The second went deeper. "Harder." His hips answered. Pleasure built with the drag of him inside me.

I reached for my cock.

Bishop caught my wrist gently. "Can I?"

"Touch me." He wrapped his left hand around me and matched the strokes of his hips. His right hand stayed fixed at my waist.

"Faster now," I said. He gave it to me. The bed struck the wall in an uneven rhythm. Bishop's breath broke against my mouth. His cock drove into me.

"Colt. Like that."

His fist tightened around my cock. I came between us, the orgasm pulling through me hard enough that my body closed around him. Bishop made a rough sound.

"Can I—"

"Come inside me," I said. "Yes."

He thrust twice more and came, his grip at my waist holding firm while the rest of him shook.

Afterward, he lowered himself beside me instead of onto the right arm.

"All right?" I asked.

"Yeah."

I lay beside him, skin cooling where sweat dried. His left hand came back to my waist.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Better than." I kissed him.

Later, while we were sitting at the kitchen table with some water, I turned the laptop toward him. The Denver offer filled the screen. It promised lead rehabilitation across three clinics, authority to build the program, two hires, a salary, resources, relocation, and a reporting line. New Year's Day appeared in bold near the end.

"That's the whole thing," I said. Bishop read it from the first line to the last. He didn't look for a weakness in the offer. He didn't tell me Chicago needed me or that Denver was running away.

"It would be a good job," he said.

"It might be."

"You want my input?" Bishop asked.

"No, not this time. This one has to belong to me."

The club's offer reached Marchetti while the team plane was somewhere over Michigan. He sent me the number without commentary. *The offer ran for two years at \$1.7M AAV.*

I read it with the cabin lights low and Garrett asleep against the window beside me. In August, the club had put four years at three-point-four in front of us. Marchetti and I had let it lapse because we thought another full season would buy more term and more money.

But the shoulder had changed. I'd lost active strength, minutes, and some of the game I used to play by force. I'd also kept playing. I'd changed my feet, moved the puck earlier, and killed penalties without reaching for lanes I couldn't safely hold. The club's own coaches kept putting me over the boards late in close games.

One-point-seven wasn't an assessment of that player. They were betting I'd accept it out of fear.

I texted Marchetti that I would call from Buffalo.

Marchetti called my hotel room at six-twenty. "The offer. It's lower than the risk justifies," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "That's why I called."

"Some of it is legitimate risk. Two-year term isn't surprising after the new strength loss. One-seven is a discount well beyond the risk."

I stood at the window. Snow moved sideways across the street below. "Counter."

"I have two tracks. The first is clean. Independent orthopedic assessment, complete performance package, usage and role, the adapted game on tape, and comparables. We counter on the player you are now, not the shoulder you had in August."

"Do it," I said.

"The second is leverage. Private letter to Park and club counsel, backed by a public response if they refuse to correct the process."

My hand tightened around the phone. "What process?"

"October twenty-ninth. Medical operations routes a load-management concern into contract evaluation. Your extension meeting is postponed that same morning. Then you disclose a conflict involving the treating PT, he recuses, and the club continues relying on his pre-recusal clinical record while cutting its offer nearly in half."

"His record is accurate. The transfer didn't change that," I said.

"I know. That's part of the argument. They can't rely on Pryce's work as sound while using his clean recusal to create a cloud around you. The sequence creates the appearance of retaliation after a protected internal disclosure or, at minimum, a conflicted process contaminating the valuation."

The phrase sounded built for a conference room. It also sounded like pressure.

"What would the public response say?" I asked.

"If they won't move privately, we say the club sharply reduced its valuation after a medical provider disclosed a conflict and was removed, even while the club continued to rely on that provider's prior notes. We demand independent review of both the medical and contract process. No intimate details."

"Would you use his name in public?" I asked.

"The private letter should name him and attach the recusal date," Marchetti said. "A public response can be prepared with or without his name, but the threat has more force if the club knows we're willing to connect the record."

Marchetti knew only what Declan had agreed to on November thirtieth. He knew Declan had been my treating PT, had made a clean disclosure and

recusal, and had completed an uninterrupted transfer before any potential personal relationship.

He knew nothing about Rochester or Marguerite, those eleven weeks in conference rooms, or the sealed letter in Declan's desk.

"Draft it," I said. "Send me both tracks."

"You want both tracks drafted?" he asked.

"Yeah. Use Pryce's name in the private letter. Say the notes are accurate. He did the recusal properly. If the club thinks we're ready to put the sequence in public, they can't turn around and blame him for it."

Marchetti was quiet before he answered.

"I need you to be clear," he said. "You're authorizing the use of his name, the recusal, and the potential relationship fact he consented to disclose to me."

"Yes," I said. "That's what I'm authorizing."

"And a threatened public response based on the timing."

"Yes," I said again. "Put it in the draft."

"I'll have both drafts for you tonight. Nothing goes to the club before you approve it."

"Good," I said. "I'll read it tonight."

I ended the call. The club wouldn't be able to turn his decision into a reason to cut my value if Marchetti made it clear we would expose that. They couldn't blame him for the leak if I defended his work.

Declan came up after the staff dinner because I asked him to.

I opened the door before he knocked a second time. He wore dark pants and the gray sweater he'd worn on our first date. Snow had melted into the shoulders of his coat.

"You said it was contract news," he said. "What happened?"

"The club made an offer," I said. "Two years, one-point-seven."

His face changed. "That's less than—"

"It's half the August AAV," I said. "Half the term."

"What does Marchetti think?" he asked.

I laid out the independent assessment and performance counter, then the private letter alleging the appearance of retaliation after his disclosure. I told him about the threatened public response and the plan to use his recusal and the limited relationship fact as leverage. Declan stood by the door through the whole account.

"You authorized that?" he asked. "All of it?"

"I authorized the draft, but nothing's gone out," I said.

"You authorized my name." His voice stayed level.

"Privately. Marchetti can keep the public version unnamed unless they force it," I said.

"That's not what I asked," he said. "Did you authorize my name?"

"I told you before it went anywhere," I said.

"After you decided it—which is the problem," he said.

"They're cutting my offer after your recusal," I reminded him. I understood his point, but he needed to understand mine. "If we put the timing in front of them, they can't use you and then blame you."

"Use me how?" he asked, crossing his arms.

"Your notes. The disclosure. The article makes it look like medical drove the number. Now they want to say the conflict tainted the record."

"Has the club said that?" Declan asked.

"Not yet," I said. "Not to us."

"Has the access review named me as the source of the leak?"

"No," I said. "The review is still open."

"Has Park challenged the accuracy of my notes?"

"No," I said again. "Nobody has challenged them. You know that."

Each answer removed a reason and left my fear standing alone.

"Then your letter makes my work the alleged harm," Declan said. "It takes a disclosure we made to protect your care and turns it into evidence that the club damaged you. It puts my employment and my clinical record into your salary negotiation."

"It keeps them from doing it first," I said. "That's the point."

"You don't know that they will."

"The offer's one-point-seven, so something changed," I said.

"Fight the offer," Declan said.

"I am," I said. "Marchetti is building the performance counter."

"Then fight your contract." His voice remained low, which made every word harder. "Don't decide that my name and my work belong in the fight for my own good."

"I was trying to protect you because I didn't see another way," I said.

Declan looked at me for a long moment.

"I know." He sounded disappointed.

"You think that's the same as Rochester," I said. "You think I'm doing what she did."

"It's not the same thing, but don't you see? It's the same choice. You decided what protection looked like and told me after you arranged it."

"I didn't make you leave," I said. "I didn't choose your job."

"That's why I said it's not the same thing," Declan said.

"Then don't put her on me," I said. "Don't make this about her choice."

"I'm not." His voice cracked. "I'm putting your decision on you."

I turned away from him. The room was becoming too small.

"Marchetti asked me to authorize it," I said. "It's my contract."

"Yes. Your contract. Your performance. Your medical assessment. Use all of them. My name and my recusal aren't yours to use just because you're afraid of the numbers."

"The numbers didn't frighten me. They just made me pay attention," I said.

"Then why do you need to make my life part of the answer?"

I had no response to that.

Declan reached for the door, ending the argument.

"Where are you going?" I asked. "Don't leave yet."

"I need to go." He looked at me, his face crestfallen.

"We're not done with this," I said.

"No," he said. "We're not."

Buffalo scored first on a puck nobody cleanly controlled. Their winger won the wall below the right circle and sent it to the point. The shot hit Luca's stick, changed direction, then struck a Buffalo skate in front of Kieran. The rebound dropped behind his right pad, and their center reached it before Garrett could tie up his stick. Buffalo led one-nothing.

From the medical position behind the bench, I watched the game in front of me, forcing myself to watch more than just Bishop on the ice. He'd taken the weak side and closed the backdoor lane. He couldn't cover the rebound and the pass at once.

The goal wasn't his failure simply because I was angry with him.

Zoe watched him come to the bench after the next shift. He gave her the normal update. She entered it on her tablet.

Hayes took a stick across the wrist late in the first. I brought him down the tunnel, checked the joint, and let him return after examining him. Eriksson opened the second with a skate problem that turned out to be a folded tongue, then blamed equipment staff for the tongue he'd folded himself.

I did my job, and across the ice, Bishop did his.

He didn't turn the first period into an argument with the contract offer. He didn't finish checks after the puck had moved or wind up from the point to

prove the right arm could still rise. He closed space with his feet and used his body where the contact stayed low.

The Storm tied the game midway through the second. Bishop recovered a dump-in below our goal line as Buffalo's forechecker came through his right side. Bishop let the man commit, turned off his left edge, and moved the puck early to Garrett instead of carrying it into the hit. Garrett found Theo through the middle. Theo entered with speed and sent the puck wide to Nico, who scored under the goalie's blocker.

The score was one-one. Bishop didn't get the point, but he'd created the exit that created the goal.

Marchetti's letter existed somewhere between his laptop and Bishop's unopened email. The club's one-point-seven offer was out there. Park's access review remained unresolved.

None of it changed what happened on the ice.

Buffalo's defenseman pinched down the wall after the Storm failed to clear. Bishop forced the puck carrier outside, but the low shot left a rebound in the slot. A trailing forward beat Eriksson to it and put the second attempt over Kieran's pad for a two-one lead again with six minutes left in the third.

Reeves pulled Kieran with ninety seconds left, giving the Storm one final push.

Bishop held the blue line. The puck came around the boards too high for him to stop without reaching above the limit. He let it go rather than turn one desperate play into a new loss of strength, pivoted, and beat the Buffalo winger to center ice. He recovered the puck and sent it forward again.

The Storm got one final entry, but Theo's shot went wide. The horn sounded with Buffalo still ahead two-one. Bishop stood at the blue line for half a second after the play ended, then turned toward the bench without looking at me.

The visiting medical room filled quickly after the loss, every table claimed within minutes.

Vicki took Nico's cut lip while I began postgame checks on Hayes's wrist. Zoe waited at the open end of the room with Bishop's chart ready.

Bishop stopped before he reached her table and waited for her attention.

"Any acute change?" Zoe asked.

"No weakness, the same pain," Bishop reported. "I need ten minutes before the full check," he said. "Is that safe?"

Zoe looked at him, then at the clock. "Ten. If anything changes, you come back immediately."

"I'll come back if it changes," Bishop assured her.

He looked across the room at me. "Pryce. Can we sit down for a minute before she evaluates me?"

Hayes followed my attention. His wrist had held through the first set.

"You're cleared to shower," I told him. "Report any swelling before the bus."

"Got it," Hayes said.

I documented the result and handed the case to Vicki. Bishop waited at the door until I followed him down the corridor.

The arena had left an unused visiting-team meal room open down the corridor. At nearly eleven at night, the warming trays were empty and the lights over the buffet were off.

He set his phone on a table between two chairs.

"Marchetti sent the two drafts," he said. "I haven't opened either of them."

I remained standing. "I'm listening."

"Will you sit?" Bishop asked. "I don't want you standing over me."

I did as he asked.

He took the chair beside mine. His right arm stayed close after the game. I noticed because I was a person with eyes, not because he was mine to assess.

"I told you what I decided yesterday," he said. "I didn't ask what you wanted done with your name."

"No," I said. "You didn't."

"I'm asking now," he said. "Before I touch the phone again."

"Remove my name from the private letter," I said. "Remove the recusal, the relationship, and any suggestion that the transfer harmed you. Don't use my work as the basis for a retaliation claim."

"And the public response?" Bishop asked.

"Cancel it. No threat to disclose any part of this. Named or unnamed."

"Everything about you goes, named or unnamed," he said.

"Yes," I said. "All of it."

He nodded once. "What stays?"

"That's your contract decision," I said.

"I'm asking which parts touch you because I want the line clear," he said.

"The independent medical assessment doesn't involve me if the file release and review stay with Zoe and Reyes. The performance counter is your work. Neither uses my name or the recusal."

"So only those parts stay," he said.

"If you want them," I pointed out.

"I do," he said. "That's the counter I want."

He picked up the phone, then stopped before unlocking it.

"Do you want to be here when I call?" he asked. "You can hear every word."

I nodded.

"You can talk if you want to."

"No. This is between you and your agent."

He called Marchetti and put the phone on speaker so I could hear both sides.

The agent answered on the third ring. "I've got the draft ready."

"Kill the second track," Bishop said.

After a pause, Marchetti asked, "The process letter? All of it?"

"All of it. No retaliation argument. No conflicted-process argument. No threatened public response. Take out every reference to Declan Pryce, the recusal, the potential relationship, and the transfer."

Marchetti was quiet for a beat before he answered.

"That removes significant leverage," he said. "You understand that."

"It removes something that isn't mine to use," Bishop replied.

"October twenty-ninth is still public. Do you want to challenge the leak itself?" Marchetti asked. "That can stay separate."

"Not in the contract counter," Bishop said. "Park's access review is still open. We aren't inventing an answer before they have one."

"What am I authorized to send?" Marchetti asked. "Give me the new scope."

Bishop looked at me before he answered.

"Independent assessment and performance counter," he said. "My current role, usage, adapted play, comparables, and the medical opinion from somebody outside the club once it's done. Nothing about Declan."

"And the two-year term?" Marchetti asked. "Do I counter that too?"

"Counter it. The dollar too. On my performance and the independent assessment."

"Understood. I'll delete the second draft and revise the counter scope."

"Send the clean counter," Bishop said.

The call ended, leaving the phone dark between us.

The club still valued Bishop at one-point-seven. The shoulder still required an outside assessment. Denver still waited in my inbox, and Buffalo had still won tonight. He'd self-corrected before any of those facts changed.

"I should've asked yesterday," he said. "Before I authorized anything."

"Yes," I said. "You should have."

"I thought if I made them look at the whole sequence, they couldn't make you the problem."

"You don't have to make me smaller than your contract to understand why the choice was wrong."

"I know," Bishop said. "I see that now."

"Do you?" I asked. "What exactly do you understand?"

He looked at the dark buffet instead of at me. "I made your work into a problem because it gave Marchetti leverage. I made your disclosure mine because I was scared the club would use it first. Then I thought I was protecting you so I didn't have to admit I wanted control."

The answer wasn't elegant, but it was a fair assessment.

"Yes," I said. "That's what you did."

"I'm not asking you to forgive it because I fixed it before he sent anything."

"Good," I said drily. "I'm not offering absolution."

"I'm asking if you still want me to come back."

He was asking about us, my apartment, and the unfinished relationship we hadn't solved with a phone call.

"Come back to the medical room first," I said. "Zoe's been waiting nine minutes."

His mouth shifted. "That's not an answer. It's a delay."

At the door, I put my hand against the middle of his back, left of the spine and nowhere near the joint Zoe was about to evaluate. The touch lasted only long enough to tell him I was leaving the room *with* him, and he didn't turn it into more.

The specialist's release form reached my phone on the bus to the airport Sunday morning.

Marchetti had found three independent sports-orthopedic practices. I'd chosen the one in Chicago because its first available appointment was the first full week of January and because the physician didn't consult for the Storm. The form listed the material she would receive, including existing imaging, physician examinations, active and passive measurements, strength and load response, participation restrictions, and the progression from preseason through Buffalo. It excluded the contract correspondence, the conflict record, and any information about Declan.

The medical file would go from Reyes and Zoe to the specialist. The report would return to me and, with my authorization, to Marchetti and the club medical office. I read the scope twice before I signed it.

Declan sat three rows ahead beside Vicki. He'd put his headphones on but nothing was playing. I could see the empty progress bar when he turned toward the window.

I sent the signed form to Marchetti, copied Reyes and Zoe, and put the phone away.

At the airport, staff unloaded first. Declan lifted his bag from beneath the bus and stood while everybody formed the usual line around him. I waited

until the equipment cases were moving toward the terminal before I came over.

"I signed the specialist release through Zoe and Reyes," I said. "The appointment's the first week of January, and I'll get the report after."

"Good."

He wouldn't ask to see the report. He'd removed himself from my care, even when the care became part of a decision that could keep me in Chicago.

I shifted my bag higher with my left hand. "Do you want company while you decide about Denver?"

He looked past me toward the terminal doors before answering.

"Not yet. I need to decide alone," he said.

"Okay," I said. The words hurt.

"That doesn't mean—"

"I heard you, Declan." I sighed. "You don't owe me more."

He watched me for another second. "Then we're clear. Thank you."

We walked into the terminal separately because our tickets put us in different security lines. Garrett fell into step beside me.

He had his coat unzipped and his passport between his teeth while he tried to close an outside pocket on his bag. I took the passport before he dropped it.

"Thanks for catching that before I lost it," he said.

"You know pockets work better when you don't stuff everything into them."

"I have a system that works—most of the time," he said.

"Your system's on the floor, which is a poor success rate," I pointed out.

He picked up a charging cable and shoved it into another pocket. We moved forward with the line.

"You fixed whatever happened with the agent?" he asked. "You look less likely to punch something."

"Why do you think the fight was with Marchetti?" I asked.

"You looked like you wanted to hit a wall last night."

"I didn't, though. That's what matters," I said.

"I noticed. So did Pryce," he said.

We reached the bins. Garrett put his bag down and looked at me.

"Stopping a force after it starts is harder than never having it," he said.

I thought about that. His wisdom could have been about the Detroit fight. It could have been about the letter I'd authorized, the call I'd made in the empty meal room, or the way I'd accepted Declan's words.

"Yeah." I sighed. "It is."

He put his shoes in a bin. "I still hate airports."

Declan texted at four-sixteen. *Dinner? No Denver conversation.*

I went to his apartment with a frozen pizza and a bag of groceries he hadn't asked for.

"What's all that?" he asked when he opened the door.

"Pizza, milk, coffee, and eggs," I said.

"I can see that, but why did you bring them?"

"Your refrigerator had mustard and noodles. That's not food."

"It's makeup groceries." He took the bag from me.

"It's food," I said. "That's all."

"That you brought after a fight," he said. "The timing is suspicious." The corner of his mouth curved up.

"I would've brought it before," I countered. "Do you want me to leave?"

"We're eating the pizza. Put the groceries away," he said.

We ate on the couch with the television on. A holiday movie had started twenty minutes earlier. Neither of us knew who the man in the red scarf was or why everybody in his hometown hated the real-estate developer.

"He's going to save the tree farm," Declan said.

"He owns a hotel. He doesn't know anything about trees."

"But he has resources," Declan said.

"The woman in the bakery hates him."

"That'll change," Declan said.

At eight, Marchetti sent a message confirming the release had gone to Reyes and Zoe. The offer hadn't changed, and the club had done nothing besides acknowledge the performance counter.

I showed Declan. "The release is with them," I said.

"Good," he said. "Leave it with them."

I put the phone facedown and left it there.

Denver remained open on his laptop across the room, but we didn't discuss it. The fight hadn't disappeared. Trust hadn't been restored just because I'd fixed one bad decision. I couldn't ask him to turn an ordinary evening into proof that we were safe.

When the movie ended, Declan collected our plates and carried them to the kitchen.

"Do you want to stay?" he asked from the kitchen.

I looked at him over the back of the couch. "Yeah, if you want me here."

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My sister called on Christmas Eve while I was standing in a grocery-store line with six people. Every single one of them looked like they'd forgotten butter.

"You sound distracted," she said. "Where are you?"

"I'm buying potatoes," I said. "The store is about to close. Luca told everyone to bring one thing tomorrow. Bishop was assigned rolls and bought enough for an arena. I was assigned potatoes, and I was smart enough to wait until the store was closing."

"Bishop," she repeated after a pause.

I watched the woman in front of me add four pounds of butter to the conveyor belt.

"The defenseman from the wrist-wrap story," she said. "The one you keep mentioning."

"That was Volkov's wrist," I said. "Bishop was the one that noticed the change."

"Go on," she encouraged.

"I'm dating him," I said. The line moved forward one cart length.

"Ah," she said. "That explains the correction."

"That can't be your whole reaction," I said. "You've never been short on questions."

"I'm allowing you to continue. You dislike interruption." She laughed. "I'm being considerate."

I'd called to ask her about Denver. Instead, I ended up talking about the part of Chicago I hadn't told her yet.

"His name is Colt," I said. "He knows about the Denver offer. He hasn't asked me to stay."

"Do you want him to?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I need this choice to stay mine."

The answer came easily. That wasn't the part I needed help with.

"Good," she said. "Then what do you want from me?"

The cashier scanned the potatoes. I paid, carried the bag outside, and stood beneath the overhang. I looked at the mountains of snow across the parking lot.

"Tell me I'm not refusing Denver because change is difficult," I said.

"I can't tell you that," she said.

"You could try," I said. "It would save time."

"Talk." She laughed softly.

"Denver gives me authority," I said. "Three clinics, and a program I could build right from the beginning. Better resources."

"And distance," she said softly. "That's part of the offer too."

"Yes," I admitted. "It would be a clean break."

"From Colt?" she asked. "Or from the job?"

"From a complicated team situation. From the place where I made a professional boundary necessary. From a job that would always look different now, even if the people involved handled it well."

"Do you want that distance?" she asked.

I watched a man drag a Christmas tree through the snow toward a car too small to carry it.

"Some days," I said.

"That doesn't really answer the question," she said.

"No. I don't want to leave just because leaving is cleaner," I said.

"What *do* you want?" she asked.

The answer was bigger than Bishop. I liked the direct work with players.

I wanted Vicki's refusal to reassure me when the facts already did. I wanted Zoe disagreeing with my progression and making me prove it. I wanted Eriksson inventing his silly structural failures and Hayes pretending a question was casual after carrying it for a week. I wanted the program

we'd improved over time with limited resources and people who understood why that mattered.

I wanted my apartment with the damn radiator until I chose another one, and I wanted the history I'd made here—including the parts that were no longer clean. I wanted Colt inside that life, if he would have me.

"Chicago," I said. "I want the life I have here."

"Then you have your answer," she said. "Denver can still be a good offer."

"It's difficult to turn down something that good," I said.

"You can respect what they're offering and still choose the life you want most," she reminded me.

The man got the tree into the car by leaving half of it through an open window.

"Thank you," I said. "That was what I needed."

"Send a picture," she said. "I want proof this man exists." She laughed and ended the call before I could object again.

Karin Halvorsen answered on the first ring Christmas morning, sounding as alert as she had after my panel.

"I wasn't expecting you until next week," she said. "Has something changed?"

"I didn't want to wait until the deadline just because you gave me one."

"All right," Karin said. "I'm listening."

I stood at my apartment window. The Denver offer was open on the desk behind me.

"I'm declining," I said. "The decision is final."

Karin was quiet for a moment. "Is there a counter that could change the answer?"

"No. The offer is generous, but it would take me away from the work I value most," I said.

"Direct care," she guessed.

"And the colleagues and program I have in Chicago," I added.

"And the player who appeared in every example after your panel in July?"

I smiled despite myself. "He's part of the life I'm choosing. He didn't ask me to make the choice."

"Would you stay if he left?" she asked suddenly. "You should answer that honestly."

The contract hadn't been resolved, and the independent assessment hadn't happened. Bishop could still decide the future Chicago offered him was too narrow.

"Yes," I said. "I would be hurt, but I would still know why I stayed."

"Then I believe you," she said. "You're choosing Chicago for yourself."

She didn't make me defend my answer. She told me the door to future professional conversations remained open. I thanked her for the offer. When the call ended, I sent the formal decline by email, then called Bishop.

He answered over enough voices to fill a room, then moved away from them so he could hear me.

"You at Luca's already?" I asked. "It sounds full."

"Theo needed help moving a table," he said. "Luca was supervising."

"I declined Denver," I said. "I just sent the email."

The voices behind him faded as he moved into a quieter room.

"What tipped the decision?" he asked.

"You're part of it, but not all of it," I said. "I want the work here, my colleagues, and the life I've built. The imperfect parts belong to something I still choose."

He breathed once into the phone before he spoke again.

"So Chicago is yours."

"The life here is," I said. "You're a part of that, if you want to be."

"Yeah," Bishop said. "I understand the difference."

He didn't thank me for staying. He didn't promise his contract would keep him here.

"Bring the potatoes," he said. "Volkov brought a homemade pie nobody can identify."

"Is it sweet or savory?" I asked. "That seems important."

"He won't say," Bishop told me.

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Luca and Theo had opened their home to enough players and staff that every flat surface held food.

The team didn't know about us yet. Garrett did, and Vicki, Zoe, and Reyes knew because work required it. Everyone else knew only that Bishop

and I arrived within an hour of each other and spent Christmas Day on opposite ends of the same crowded table.

Volkov's mystery pie contained salmon, potatoes, and hard-boiled eggs. It was excellent, and he accepted praise as his due. Nico beat Hayes at cards. Kieran sat behind him with one hand on the back of his chair. Abbott fell asleep on Jamie's shoulder during the second half of a movie. Luca told Theo three times that nobody needed more food, then brought out another plate himself.

Bishop passed me the rolls and gave me a secret smile.

Our privacy felt temporary, something we'd change when we were ready.

We left separately and met at his apartment.

The green mug waited beside the black one on the kitchen counter. Bishop poured my coffee without asking how I took it.

"Your contract is still unresolved," I said. "The assessment could change what the club will do."

"I know," Bishop said. "Nothing's settled yet."

"I didn't stay to make you stay," I said. "I need you to know that."

"I know," he said. "You chose before my contract was safe." He put my coffee down and leaned against the counter.

"Do you want company tonight?" he asked.

The independent specialist asked me to lift my right arm until I couldn't. I stopped before the hand reached the level of my ear.

"What stops the lift?" she asked.

"Weakness," I said. "Pain, if I keep pushing."

"Don't keep pushing. Lower it," she said. "I have what I need."

I did as she said, the arm dropping back to my side.

The appointment took place during the first full week of January in a clinic twelve miles from the Storm facility. The waiting room had no team logos or photographs of players. Marchetti had offered to attend, but I'd told him it was unnecessary.

She'd reviewed the medical file Reyes and Zoe sent, including the imaging, changing strength and range, prior restrictions, and my response to the adapted game. She didn't have the contract correspondence or conflict record, and Declan didn't even know when the appointment was.

The specialist compared the movement I could make with the passive range she could guide. Then she tested strength at low and usable-range loads, repeating the work after rest. The first effort held, but the fourth weakened.

"That's what happens late in practice," I said.

"And in games?" she asked. "Is contact the difference?"

"Depends on contact. Worse after a high reach. Better if I keep the arm low and get my feet there first."

"Your file says you've changed which pucks you contest," she said. "Is that deliberate?"

"Yeah," I said. "I don't chase the high ones."

"Does that keep you effective?" she asked.

"Most nights," I said. "Not all of them."

"I need the report to distinguish them," she said.

"I know," I answered. "Don't blur it for the contract."

She stopped the sequence before fatigue could turn the assessment into damage. After comparing the response with the earlier numbers, she sat across from me with the file open between us.

"The clinical progression is consistent," she said. "The initial worsening, the later contact episode, the difference between active and passive movement, and the load response—they all fit the same chronic shoulder picture. I don't see any evidence that the rehabilitation approach caused the limitation or concealed it."

"Can I keep playing?" I asked.

"With management, yes. Based on today's findings, continued play is reasonable if your physician retains participation oversight and the load plan keeps adapting to response. That's not a guarantee against another decline."

"Can you clear me without restrictions?" I asked. "Even with the adaptations?"

"No," she said firmly. "The limitations are still present."

I was glad she didn't soften it.

"Your usable capacity is real," she said. "So are the limitations. They both belong in my report."

It was the same thing Declan had done in September. He'd recorded the function lost and the function remaining without claiming that either erased the other.

"Put both in," I said. "The club needs the real answer."

"I planned on it," she said.

Marchetti used the medical report and the proof in the shifts. He sent the club clips of the Nashville penalty kill, the Detroit game after the televised decline, and the Buffalo exit that created our only goal. Six other sequences

showed me giving up an old option and still finishing the play. He built the counter around minutes, matchups, late-game use, and what the independent specialist called real managed capacity. He didn't mention Declan.

The club moved, though not all the way. The calls happened over three days. Park held the term at two years. Marchetti pushed the money and role. The independent report didn't make my shoulder healthy, and neither of them bargained as if it had.

The final proposal arrived Friday afternoon. It offered two years at three-point-two million a year.

I sat alone in the same fourth-floor conference room where the extension meeting had been postponed in October. Park had left the contract on the screen and gone to give me privacy for the call.

In August, I could have taken four years at three-point-four.

That future was gone. The new deal cost me two years of security, and two hundred thousand a season, because the body attached to it was no longer what I had in summer. It was also one-point-five million a year better than the earlier offer.

The contract kept me in the role I was already playing, as a veteran defenseman on the penalty kill, with managed minutes rather than a promise to carry unrestricted use. Nothing guaranteed my shoulder would last two seasons. Nothing promised the club would keep me if it didn't.

Marchetti thought the risk was defensible. He reminded me that I could walk toward free agency and see whether another team valued the same report differently. I called Declan.

He answered from somewhere loud. "I have Eriksson arguing that tape color affects recovery. Can I call you in five minutes?"

"Yeah," I said. "Five minutes is fine."

He heard something in my voice. "Is it your contract?"

"The club moved," I told him.

The noise moved farther away, and a door closed before he answered again.

"Tell me," he said. "Start with the term."

"Two years at three-point-two. Same role we've been using. Managed body, no claim I'm unrestricted."

"What does Marchetti think?" he asked. "Would he take it?"

"Acceptable risk. He thinks I could test free agency too."

"What do you think?" he asked. "You, not your agent."

I looked at the signature line while I worked out the honest answer.

"In August I had four years. That would've been safer," I said.

"It's not August anymore," Declan said patiently.

"The first two-year offer priced me like I was already finished. This one doesn't. It keeps me playing here if I can do the job without pretending the shoulder's fixed."

Declan waited.

"You turned down Denver before this was settled," I said.

"For the work and life I wanted," he reminded me.

"Tell me to sign," I said. "Make the choice easy."

"No. The contract belongs to you. I can listen while you decide."

His answer made me smile.

"That doesn't mean your stake in it disappears," I said.

"It doesn't. I hope you stay in Chicago, but I need you to choose something you can live with."

I rubbed my left thumb along the edge of the table. The right shoulder ached from the specialist's repeated load even though the examination had ended days earlier and the response had returned to baseline.

The money didn't make that ache smaller, and Declan staying didn't make a two-year playing future safer. Neither of those had to change for me to choose.

"I'm signing," I said. "The risk is mine."

"Do it," Declan said. "I'll stay on the line."

I signed while he remained on the phone.

Park returned after I called him in. He checked the signature, added his, and shook my hand.

"Two years," Park said. "You know what you're signing."

"I do," I said, "and I'm taking it."

He gave me a copy and left to call ownership. Marchetti sent a message with three exclamation points, which was two more than I'd ever seen him use. I told Declan the signatures were done, put the contract in my bag, and went downstairs for practice.

Bishop told the team on a game day in the middle of January. The night before, he'd asked whether I wanted to wait until the end of the season or have Vicki tell staff separately. He'd also asked whether I wanted to stand beside him and whether he should use my first name or last. By the fourth question, I understood how seriously he was taking the difference between asking and arranging.

"I want to stand with you," I told him. "We'll tell the room we're together. I can answer anything about myself."

"Could've said that first," he said. "Saved me three questions."

"You were doing so well. I didn't want to interrupt." I laughed. "It seemed educational."

The next afternoon, he waited until Reeves finished the pregame meeting.

Players were still in partial gear. Kieran sat at his stall wrapping fresh tape around the knob of his stick, and Nico leaned against the divider beside him. Theo had one sock on. Luca stood near the whiteboard with his arms folded, watching the room empty of coaches.

Vicki and Zoe knew what was coming. Neither of them acted surprised when Bishop stepped into the middle of the carpet and looked toward the training-room door where I waited.

"Pryce," he said. "Come in."

I came in and stood beside him as the room went quiet in stages.

Bishop didn't explain the medical transfer. He didn't make our ethics the opening of our relationship.

"Pryce and I are together," he said. "We're telling you because we want you to hear it from us."

Garrett never blinked. Abbott's mouth changed as if a private theory had just been confirmed, and every face turned toward me.

"I'm with Colt," I said, "and Zoe is his physical therapist now."

Theo stood so fast his half-pulled sock slid down his shin.

"Finally," he said. "That took months."

"Sit down, Callahan," Luca said.

"You're smiling," Theo said to him. "The whole room can see it."

"I'm not," Luca said. "Fix your sock."

The corner of Luca's mouth moved.

Volkov crossed the room with both arms open. "This is celly."

"No," Bishop said. "This is information."

"This is absolutely celly," Volkov insisted.

Volkov ignored him, took my face between his hands, and kissed one cheek, then the other. He released me and did the same to Bishop despite having to rise onto his toes.

"I write letter," he announced.

"To who?" Hayes asked.

"Formal complaint for unnecessary delay. Team has suffered."

"No letter," Bishop laughed. "Nothing formal."

"Then card," Volkov said.

"No card," Bishop said. "Drop it."

"I will send edible arrangement."

Bishop stared at him. "Volkov."

Kieran tore the tape with his teeth and returned to wrapping his stick. He'd looked at Bishop long enough to make sure everything was good, then went back to work. Nico touched the back of Kieran's neck as he passed behind him.

Eriksson considered Bishop and me from his stall. "My grandmother says two people who take this long to say something obvious should pay rent to everyone forced to wait." The room laughed.

"Your grandmother doesn't know us," Bishop said. "She doesn't get a vote."

"She knows people." Eriksson shrugged. "That's enough."

Hayes leaned toward Abbott. "Do we clap now?"

"No," Abbott said. "This is the part where everybody discovers Garrett already knew."

The room turned toward Garrett. He kept his back to us while he adjusted the tape on his shin pad.

"How much is the pot?" Theo asked.

Garrett shook his head. "We stopped keeping a pot."

Everyone began talking again. Our news entered the same space as tape, bad socks, and the game waiting for us.

When Bishop turned toward me, he put his left hand at the back of my neck and tapped his forehead lightly against mine, a headbutt reduced to affection.

Volkov made an approving sound.

I laughed—not the controlled breath I used when somebody had made an acceptable joke, but with the real thing.

The Storm led one-nothing after the first period. Garrett's point shot found Theo's stick above the crease and changed direction under the goalie's blocker. The visitors tied it in the second on a rebound that crossed the slot before Kieran could recover.

Early in the third, a failed change gave them a three-on-two. Bishop took the middle pass and forced the puck carrier outside, but the trailing winger beat our second forward into open ice and scored high on Kieran's glove to make it two-one.

Nico tied it four minutes later after Luca won a puck behind the net and put it through the crease. Nico reached the back post before his defenseman did, making it two-two.

The game tightened into short shifts. Pucks moved before the second forechecker arrived. Bishop gave up the boards when his feet could own the middle and used his left side when contact couldn't be avoided.

The Storm took the lead with seven minutes left. Eriksson disrupted an entry at center, and Theo collected the loose puck and carried it over the line. Bishop joined late without driving below the circles, held enough width to pull one defender away, and sent Theo's return pass immediately across to Luca. Luca scored before the goalie crossed the crease, putting the Storm ahead three-two.

With two minutes left, the visitors rimmed the puck high around the boards in our zone. Bishop reached with his right hand to stop it.

The shoulder caught. I saw the change before the arm stopped. His body tightened around the joint as the puck rode above the height he could control safely, so he let it go. The puck crossed the blue line, giving up the zone and giving the visitors possession.

Bishop pivoted instead of chasing it with his arm. Their winger gathered the puck near center and tried to turn the retreat into speed. Bishop held the inside lane, matched him through the neutral zone, and forced him toward the wall.

The winger crossed the line without a passing angle, and Garrett took the puck when he tried to cut back.

Bishop was already moving the other direction. Garrett sent it to him low. Bishop advanced it with one touch, and Eriksson carried it deep enough for the Storm to change. His body had lost the reach, but his next play preserved the lead. The final horn sounded with the score still at three-two.

The building emptied slowly after the win. Equipment carts moved first. Coaches left with video already open on their tablets. Players showered and dressed, then headed out for the night.

Zoe completed Bishop's postgame assessment at the corner station. Reyes reviewed the response and left him with the established overnight plan. I remained at my desk with Hayes's note open until Bishop's care was finished and both women were gone. I didn't know the details; I knew only what anybody in the room could have seen. The shoulder had caught, he'd released the puck, and he'd finished the game.

When I saved the last note, Bishop stood at the edge of the corner station in his coat.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Not yet," I said.

The table between us was empty. The overhead light was off, leaving the station lit by the wider room. For years I'd stood there with professional access to his body and told myself the limits around that access made wanting him irrelevant.

It had never been irrelevant.

"I love you," I said. "I wanted to say it here."

Bishop went completely still. I kept going. Stopping would have turned it into something he had to rescue.

"I love you, and I think part of me will always want to reach for your shoulder when it hurts. I spent years being the person who did. I know what the catch looked like tonight. I wanted to be there for you."

"You didn't," he said. "You stayed with Hayes." He looked toward the table Zoe had used.

"No." I had to say it. "Wanting to help doesn't give me the right to make myself your clinician again. Loving you doesn't either."

"I know," he said.

"I can stay near you without turning that into your therapist. I can care that it hurts and let Zoe handle the work."

*Dammit*, I was getting emotional. Bishop heard it. He moved around the table, stepping closer to me.

"Breathe, Declan," he said. "I'm here."

He put his left hand at the back of my neck.

"Wanting someone doesn't mean authority," he said. "You taught me that." His thumb moved once across my cheek. "I love you."

I held his gaze while the words landed. His forehead touched mine. The plainness of it hurt more than a speech would have.

"Shoulder's still mine," he murmured, "but you're still who I want beside me when it hurts."

At Bishop's apartment, his shirt got caught at the right elbow again.

He'd pulled the left sleeve free and brought the collar over his head, but the fabric twisted before he could slide it down the right arm. The shoulder caught, and he stopped with half his face covered.

"Don't," he said from inside the shirt. "I've got it."

"I didn't even move." My hands were still at my sides.

"You thought about it," he said.

"You can't even see me," I said.

"I can feel your thoughts," he said. "They're loud."

"That seems medically unlikely," I said.

He made a laughing noise through the shirt. Then he sat on the edge of the bed, loosened the fabric with his left hand, and worked the trapped sleeve down instead of lifting the arm through it. When the shirt came free, he looked at me with his hair standing up on one side.

"You all right?" I asked.

"Yeah." He put a pillow on the bed and rested the right arm across it while he removed his jeans. I watched him manage the body he'd chosen to keep playing in, then looked at the rest of him. I loved that body and wanted it.

"What?" he asked.

"Your hair."

He rubbed a hand over it, making it worse.

"Fixed?" he asked.

"Completely." I fought back a smile. I took off my own shirt and let him look at me.

His attention lowered over my chest and stomach. "You planning to stay over there?" His mouth curved. "Get over here, Pryce."

I crossed the room, and he pulled me between his knees with his left hand and kissed my stomach. His stubble dragged over the skin below my navel. I put both hands in his hair.

"Want me on my knees?" I asked.

"Not yet," he said. "Stay where I can reach you."

He opened my jeans and put his mouth over the shape of my erection through my briefs. The heat of it made my fingers tighten in his hair.

"Colt," I said.

"Yeah?" He lifted his head.

"Take them off," I said.

He did, jeans first and briefs after. My cock rose against my stomach. He closed his left hand around the base before taking the head into his mouth.

I watched him lick me slowly, then take me in his mouth. He no longer approached it as something he had to prove he could want. He enjoyed it openly, his eyes lifting to mine while his tongue pressed along the underside of my cock.

"You like that," I said.

He drew back far enough to answer. "Yeah. I like watching you lose control."

"Tell me what else you like," I said.

"I like your hand in my hair. I like when you forget to be quiet."

"I don't forget," I laughed. "You make being quiet a bit difficult."

He took me deep enough to make my next breath falter. His eyes narrowed with satisfaction.

"That," he said when he lifted his head. "Like that."

I bent and kissed him, tasting myself on his mouth.

"Lie down," I said.

"How?" he asked.

"Left side. I want to be behind you," I said. "We'll support your right arm."

He arranged himself without my help. His left shoulder rested against the mattress, his head lay on one pillow, and a second pillow supported the right arm in front of his chest. He shifted his hips until the position worked, then looked over his shoulder at me.

"This works," he said. "The shoulder's okay like this."

"Comfortable?" I asked. "Nothing pulling?"

"I'm comfortable," he said.

"Do you want me inside you?" I asked.

His gaze held mine. "Fuck, Declan. Yes, I want you inside me."

Desire moved through me hard enough to make my cock pulse.

I undressed the rest of the way and lay behind him. His back fit against my chest. I kissed the base of his neck, then moved lower along his spine. One hand went to his waist.

"Do you want my hand here?" I asked.

He turned his head enough that I could see his smile. "Yes. Right there. Don't move it."

The ease between us didn't remove consent. It never would. But it made the question easy. I slicked my fingers and touched him from behind.

Bishop opened his legs. "One first. Give me time."

I nodded so he knew I was listening, then pressed one finger into him slowly. His body tightened, then relaxed as I kissed his shoulder blade on the left side. I moved when he pushed back toward me.

"More," he said. "I'm ready for two."

I added a second and watched his body stretch for me.

The angle let me hold him close while I opened him. His right arm stayed loose over the pillow. His left hand reached behind and found my thigh.

"There," he said when my fingers curled. "Again."

I found the place a second time. His cock hardened fully, heavy against his stomach, and I reached my other hand around to stroke him.

His hips jerked. The pillow beneath his right arm slid toward the edge of the bed.

Bishop caught it with his left hand before it fell and shoved it back into place.

"Your fort's failing," I teased, laughing against his back.

"Are you stopping?" he asked, his voice rough.

"I hadn't planned on it," I smirked.

"Good, keep going," he said. "I want more."

I worked a third finger into him while my other hand stayed around his cock. He told me when the stretch was enough. He was ready. His left hand tightened on my thigh.

"Condom. Then you. I need you inside me."

I reached for the bedside drawer. The first wrapper slipped from my fingers and landed between the mattress and the wall, and Bishop looked back at me.

"Don't say it," I warned.

He reached into the drawer and handed me another condom.

"Try again, Doctor."

His laugh shook through both of us.

I opened the wrapper, rolled the condom on, and added lube. Then I fitted myself behind him again and guided the head of my cock to his body.

"Ready?" I asked. "Tell me how you want it."

"Yeah. Slow first," he said. "Let me adjust."

I pushed in and watched his breathing change.

His body opened around me a little at a time. The position kept us close enough that every breath moved between his back and my chest. I stopped halfway when his left hand tightened on my thigh.

"Stay there," he said. "Don't move yet."

I held still until he moved first, pressing back and taking me deeper.

"More now," he said. "I'm ready."

I slid fully inside him and felt his body close around me.

Pleasure pulled low through my body. Bishop was tight and hot around my cock. I put my mouth against the back of his neck and waited until he shifted again.

"Move," he said.

I drew back and thrust into him, still slow enough for him to set the pace.

The first strokes were slow. He met each one, the muscles of his back moving against my chest. I held his waist with one hand and reached around for his cock with the other.

"Too much?" I asked.

"Not even close," he said. "Keep going."

I kept my hand moving over him. "Faster? Or harder?"

"Harder. Same speed," he said. "Just like that."

I gave him what he wanted and felt him push back to meet me.

The bed moved beneath us. My hips struck his ass, each thrust driving me deep while my fist worked his cock. Bishop made a sound that ended in my name. I asked for it again, and he said it louder.

The pleasure in his voice broke something open in me. I kissed his neck and fucked him harder. His left hand came back to my hip.

"You close?" I asked. "I want to feel it."

"Yeah," he said. "Don't stop."

"Then come for me," I said. "I've got you."

His laugh broke on a breath. "Bossy."

"You like it," I teased.

"I do," he said.

I tightened my hand around him and kept the rhythm he'd set.

Bishop came with a rough laugh that turned into a groan. His cock pulsed over my fingers and across his stomach. His body closed around mine, pulling me deeper. I lost my rhythm.

"Come inside me," he said.

I thrust twice, once more, and came inside him with my face against his back and his hand gripping my hip. For a while, neither of us moved.

He turned carefully after I withdrew and disposed of the condom. We lay facing each other with the right arm still supported between us.

I kissed him.

"I love you," I said.

He kissed me back. "Love you too."

The shoulder began to ache more as his body cooled. I saw the moment he noticed. He didn't hide it from me. Bishop got out of bed, retrieved the ice sleeve, and fastened it around his right shoulder using the wall to hold one end. He set the ten-minute timer Zoe had given him and returned to bed with the strap secured.

I moved close enough that our feet touched beneath the blanket while my hands stayed away from the sleeve.

"Sexy." I laughed.

His left hand found mine beneath the blanket. "Stay."

By the time the alarm went off, we were laughing about who was responsible for the lost wrapper.

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## Epilogue

BISHOP

The cold reached the roof before the sun went down. Hayes had four heaters set along the rail and enough food inside the stairwell to feed the group twice. It was the first week of March. Chicago had given us one clear afternoon, then dropped the temperature as soon as everybody arrived. Nobody left.

Theo argued with Volkov near the closest heater. Luca stood behind Theo with one hand at his waist. Nico wore a coat too light for the wind. Kieran had already zipped it to his chin once and was watching him work the zipper down again.

Declan stood beside me at the rail, close enough to share the nearest heater.

The team had known about us for six weeks. The welcome had become sustained chirping, which was how the room turned private news into ordinary life. Volkov had produced a card after I'd prohibited both a letter and an edible arrangement. Hayes still joked whether he and Abbott should clap whenever Declan and I entered the same room.

We weren't public. Reporters knew nothing beyond the shoulder and contract facts the club had released. But inside the room, Declan could lean his shoulder against me. That was enough.

Park arrived while the sky was turning dark. A man I hadn't met came through the roof door beside him with a phone in one hand and a folder

tucked beneath his arm. He was tall and dark-haired, with his coat buttoned. He listened while Park pointed out the heaters, the stairs, and the players most likely to say something a camera shouldn't keep.

The new PR manager had arrived. He was already working, already treating the gathering as part of the job.

Park's access review was still open, with the source of the routing phrase unconfirmed. The unanswered leak belonged to the club now.

It wasn't my concern.

Garrett was halfway through a comment to Theo when he saw him. He went quiet; the beer in his hand stopped short of his mouth for a beat. Then he drank and looked over the rail at the city. I saw it and gave him the same space he'd given me.

Reeves came up later with his son Ryan. The door swung shut behind them. He paused there, looking around the room with his hands in his coat pockets.

My shoulder locked just before eleven. I'd been holding a plate in my left hand and a cup in my right. The ache had been building for an hour. When the wind shifted across the roof, the joint tightened until the right arm stopped moving away from my side and I had to put the cup down.

Zoe saw my face from across the table and came over without touching me.

"Cold flare?" she asked. "Tell me when it started."

"Yeah," I said. "It built for about an hour."

"Any contact today?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Nothing since practice."

"Weakness change?" she asked. "Before it locked?"

"Locked before I could check," I said.

She pointed toward the roof door. "Inside. Heat for ten minutes under the established plan. If it releases enough, keep the wrap on and stay beside a heater. If it doesn't, you call Reyes and we change tomorrow's load."

"I know," I said. "I'll follow it."

"My wrap's in Hayes's kitchen," I told Declan. "It's in the outside pocket of my bag."

"I'll get it," he said, putting his plate down. "You stay here."

He went down one flight while I sat on the broad stairwell landing. After the roof, the air inside felt warm enough to hurt my face.

Declan returned with the heated wrap folded between both hands. He held it out without placing it on me.

I took the wrap, laid it over my shirt, and fastened it around the joint, then set a ten-minute timer on my phone. I put the phone on the step between us as it began counting down.

Declan sat one stair below me, close enough that our knees touched.

"My lease ends May thirty-first," he said.

"All right." I looked at him.

"We said we wouldn't turn information into a decision one of us had already made."

"We agreed to ask first." I nodded, then opened the property app on my phone and turned the screen toward him.

"I've got three places saved," I said.

Declan looked from the screen to my face. "You already looked at apartments?"

"I picked three places for us to look at, that's all."

"Show me," he said. "I want to see all of them."

I moved down one stair to be closer to him. The first listing was north of the facility, but the second had better parking. The third cost too much, but its kitchen island was wide enough that neither of us would have to clear a medical sleeve or a laptop off the counter before making coffee.

"All three have elevators," I said. "Enough drawers for both of us. A kitchen big enough for both of us."

He looked through the photographs again, slower this time.

"Do you want me to move in with you?" he asked.

"I'd like us to find somewhere that's ours, if you do." I'd separated the invitation from the decision, and Declan understood why.

"Yes," he said. "I do, too."

"All right," I said. "We look together."

I opened a note titled **MOVE** and handed him the phone.

The first line said *green mug*, the only item I'd already decided belonged there.

Declan read it. "Before furniture?"

"Furniture's replaceable," I pointed out.

The timer reached zero. I turned it off and tested the arm as far as Zoe's plan allowed. The joint released enough to move low, even though it still ached.

"Better?" Declan asked. "Enough to go back outside?"

"Some," I said. "It still aches, but I'm okay."

"Ready to go back up?" he asked. "We can stay here if you need longer."

I looked at the closed roof door. Music and voices came through it. Tomorrow, Zoe would adjust the load if the flare demanded it. Monday I would skate. The two-year contract carried me into the next season, and I would enter September as an active Storm player.

"Yeah," I said. "Let's go."

THE END

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