
THESE
WICKED
HEARTS
WICKED SINS BOOK THREE
SOPHIE QUINN

THESE WICKED HEARTS

Book Three

WICKED SINS

SOPHIE QUINN

OceanofPDF.com

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These Wicked Hearts is set in a fictional world of professional hockey. While the story draws inspiration from the world of professional sports, some elements have been created or altered for entertainment purposes. All teams, organizations, players, and athlete names are entirely fictional and A product of my imagination.

These Wicked Hearts contains sensitive topics that may be difficult including sexual extortion and abuse. Suicidal ideation, depression, addiction, and suicide attempts.

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ONE

Atlas



I think I've made a huge mistake.

I drop my duffle onto the floor, the sound echoing through my empty new apartment. I don't bother to unpack it. I'm tired, but it's not enough to quiet my mind. My chest still feels tight. It started back at the arena during practice, and I have no idea why. Nothing on the surface is wrong. Practice was fine, the guys are fine, but something settled behind my ribs hours ago. I can't shake it. I don't know what to do about it.

I know how I used to deal with it.

I drop onto the couch and close my eyes and count to fifteen, trying to clear my mind. One, two, three. I didn't play very well today. Opening game is in two nights, and I played like shit.

Four, five, six.

Maybe I should call Grey. Wait, his ceremony's tonight. Fuck, his ceremony. I forgot. Not like it matters much. He's probably happy I'm not there. How could he even look at me? Seven, eight, nine, ten.

Pressure starts to squeeze my brain. I sit forward, resting my elbows on my knees, and just breathe. Not now. I squeeze my fingers through my hair. Eleven, twelve.

Claws sink into my spine. It's a weird sensation. Sharp and uneasy.

My knee begins to bounce. Just breathe. Everything's okay. Nothing's wrong. Nothing's happening. It's just my brain. Nothing is happening.

I made a huge mistake leaving. Which makes sense. If there's a bad decision to be made my ass will be there, first in line to make it. I squeeze my eyes shut and count again. One, two, three, four, five—

My knee bounces as I finish counting and breathe.

Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.

I take a deep breath and lean back on the couch, the only thing I bought for my new apartment. I didn't have much back at my old apartment in Oregon either. Most of my shit is back home in New Jersey.

The fog inside my mind begins to clear.

I look around the apartment, and everything feels so empty. I feel empty. I'm not sure why I did this. Why did I ask to move? That's what happens when you're a fuckup. You keep outdoing yourself. It's the only thing I'm good at.

I look over at the tower of boxes I still haven't unpacked. Every day after practice I tell myself I'll get around to it. There's not many, but it feels like too much.

I was excited at first. I had plans. I was going to get my shit together. Now my motivation is gone. I need a drink. That would help me. It would shut my brain off. It would stop the pressure in my head and let me just fucking breathe.

My fingers twitch with the thought.

No. No, that's exactly why I need to stay right here. I need to. I can do this. I don't need it. I don't. I repeat that until the ache starts to fade slightly.

Alcohol is weird for me. I don't think about it most of the time, until I do. I don't crave the taste or the feeling of being drunk. I don't like the loss of control.

It's the silence it brings that I crave. It's when I'm alone and the loneliness and boredom sink in. It wrecks me. When I feel like this, I usually find a bar, and one drink makes me feel good. Free. Normal maybe. Then one turns into five. Then, thankfully, everything goes quiet. I don't think, I don't obsess, and most of all, I don't feel.

It's like magic.

As I look around this big apartment, I feel very small. My knee begins to bounce again, my fingers drum on the tops of my thighs. I need to get out of here. I need to do something. No drinking, though. I said no drinking, but just like every day after practice, that need is starting to claw at my lungs.

Come on, you can do it. You're a fuckup, but we can get through this. No drinking. Easy, right?

If I were back home in Oregon right now, I'd have my friends. I'd have shit to keep my mind busy. *Great job, you dumb fuck.* Just move away from the only people who've kept you steady for years.

That's why I needed to leave, though. I'm a burden to everyone around me. I refuse to put more of my issues on Grey. He doesn't need me. He's probably happy he doesn't have to babysit me anymore. I've always been a burden to him, and now he's free. He's got Felix. Grey is happy, and I'm sure they are so happy together.

I bet they laugh about how pathetic I am.

I would too.

I brace my palms on top of my knees to still the shaking. My nails dig into my skin as I try to breathe. One, two, three, four. I am happy for him. I really am. Five, six, seven. Grey is the best man I know. Kind and patient still, even after everything I put him through. Eight, nine, ten, eleven.

I close my eyes, finally feeling the pressure ease a little.

Twelve, thirteen, fourteen.

Fifteen.

I am happy for him, but it's tangled up with something sharp and ugly I can't shake.

I couldn't imagine my life without him, which is why I had to leave.

They're moving on. Both of my best friends. Oli got married over the summer. A wedding I nearly fucked up when I got drunk and kissed Grey, my best friend. And Grey is with Felix. A relationship I nearly fucked up when I kissed him at the wedding and Felix saw.

Years ago, when I was drafted to the Otters, I don't think I was ready. I was just some Jersey kid who could skate fast and hit even harder. Moving to Portland to join an AHL team messed me up more than I expected.

Then I was signed with the Otters and met Grey.

We were roommates—Coach's orders because I was a fucking disaster. One night my thoughts grew too loud, and I needed to quiet them. Images began to circulate in my mind. My brain likes to twist and bend my memories.

Sometimes I see her lifeless body. I'll look down and see my bloody hands as if I pushed her. I didn't. I know I didn't, but still. My brain likes to

make up monsters to torture me, as if the truth of what happened isn't bad enough.

Just breathe deep through my nose and out of my mouth.

One night on the road with Grey, I lost it. I remember looking in the mirror in our hotel room and I hated what looked back. I was already drunk, but it was one of the few times the alcohol didn't numb my brain. Instead, it only sharpened the things I wanted to forget.

Something snapped and I shattered the mirror with my fist before collapsing on the floor bleeding and screaming. I just let everything burn up inside me. Grey came in and sat with me. I remember that. I don't remember what he said. I just remember the deep calm of his voice as he talked me through the rage and grief inside me.

That night I told him everything. Oli, our captain, came down soon after I calmed to see Grey. Then it was just the three of us. My best friends.

Now one of them is married and the other is not far behind, I'm sure.

And me? Well, I'm just me.

Atlas Sgarbossa. Fuckup extraordinaire. Alone in this new fucking state with no fucking friends and nothing to distract me. That tickle of dread begins to web and wind through my lungs.

A knock at my door pulls my attention. I don't even care who it is. I just need a distraction.

When I open it, relief hits me.

Knox.

I don't know what's happened these past few months, but I'm glad he's in my life. He doesn't treat me like a disappointment. I guess I haven't given him enough time to realize it yet. Knox is slightly taller than I am, and his wavy auburn hair is damp from the shower he must have taken after practice. I could have ridden back here with him, but I wanted space at the time.

His green eyes smile at me, and I can see the tattoos covering both his arms in the sleeveless shirt he's wearing. He peeks around me, scrubbing his short beard. "Still haven't unpacked?" I let him inside and he shuts the door. "Damn. Your place is bigger than mine."

"It's nice. Thank you for helping me get it." Knox wrote me a recommendation to the owners of this high rise. He's lived here since he moved to Virginia and became a Viper nearly ten years ago. "Sorry about practice."

“Sorry about yelling at you.” He grins, looking not very sorry at all.

He didn’t really yell at me. We have a game in two days, and my head was elsewhere today. I need to pull it together. “You don’t think Kuli barked at me a time or dozen?” Although Knox and Oli have completely different captain styles. “I’m just tired. Getting used to everything. I’ll get my shit together before the game.”

I hope.

“How are you holding up?” Knox takes a seat, sinking into my couch. “Atlas?”

“Huh, sorry what?”

He smooths his palm along the couch. “This is fucking comfortable.” He stretches out like he may fall asleep. “I asked how you were doing? The move, time difference . . .” His lips press into a flat line. “Grey.”

“Fan-fucking-tastic. Thank you for asking.”

He snorts, sitting up. “Excited for our first game at least?”

Yes and no.

Training camp was fine. Practice is fine when I’m not fucking it up. That’s all without fans, though. This feels a lot like being the new kid at school. I used to play on their rival’s team, and now I’m supposed to win them over. I’m a charming fucking guy, but I can only do so much.

The Otters and Vipers have a long-standing feud. It doesn’t matter who I used to skate for. I’m here now, and I play for this team.

I play to win, and I fucking hate losing.

“Watching tonight?” Knox asks.

Grey’s jersey retirement.

“No. I don’t think so. I’ll watch it later.” I can’t do it right now.

“Want to go to Ruby’s?”

Familiar, safe, and tempting. I could do it. I could go out with him and have a drink that will turn into a few and I’ll feel good for a little while. Loose and happy. No overthinking and obsessing over shit I can’t change. If I did that, I know exactly how my night would end—with my head in a toilet and feeling like shit in the morning, wasting another day off.

“Not tonight. I’m dead tired.”

He nods, pushing himself up. “Alright, well, hit me up if you change your mind, or if you need anything else. I’m always here if you need me.” He claps me on the shoulder. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “Me too.”



I sink onto the couch and turn on the TV. I don't even know why, but my fingers move anyway, clicking on the Otters' ceremony before their opening game tonight against Manitoba. A deep ache twists my gut seeing my old arena bathed in a soft green. Oli is at the podium talking, and even from here I can see the sheen in his eyes.

The ice glows beneath him. When he steps down, he walks to Grey, pulling him into a hug and murmuring something private.

Then Grey takes the podium.

He thanks everyone one by one. He looks . . . good. More than that, he looks healthy. That's one thing that stays with me. After Grey got injured in a game, he looked horrible, and not in an injured way. It was like this cloud of grief just clung to him, and the shadows in his sunken eyes hurt to see. My friend has never been a bubbly guy, but watching him sink into himself was hard to watch.

Then Felix moved in, and those shadows lifted slowly. When I saw them together, I knew he was the reason. My friend was falling in love, and my heart was breaking without him knowing. He looks so different now. Happy and strong. His back straighter, more confident.

I hear my name. "I want to thank my best friend, Atlas, who couldn't be here tonight. I wish you all the luck with your new team. You're going to be amazing, I know it. We miss you here."

The crowd erupts.

"I know we all do."

I shut my TV off and toss the remote.

I shouldn't have watched it. He looks so good, though. My feelings for Grey have grown since that night I lost it in the hotel room way back when I first joined the Otters. I'd always felt this thrum in my chest whenever I was around him. I just didn't really have a name for it.

Then I found out about Andre and Oli. Watching the two of them together helped me put a name to what I was feeling. I've never had feelings for a man before. I've only been with women.

Since these feelings for Grey, it's made me curious about my own sexuality. Growing up where I did, sexuality wasn't something that was ever talked about openly. I didn't even realize I was pansexual until later in life. I didn't realize there was a term for it. Not that I care too much about

labels. I like women, I've always preferred women. Talking to them, kissing them, having sex. It's always been women. Until Grey.

I need some air.

I consider taking Knox up on his offer, but I already lean on him too much. Instead, I grab my hoodie and tug it on, heading out to the elevator. During the tour I was taken up to the roof. There's a seating area, a small greenhouse, and a place to hold parties. It's available to anyone who lives in the building, but parties need to be scheduled through management for safety reasons.

Now it's the perfect place to give me space for my thoughts.

Walking up the stairwell, there's this fuzzy feeling in my gut I can't shake. Maybe I shouldn't have moved. I miss my friends. I miss my old fans. I'm all alone here, and being alone is the worst thing for me.

I open the door and step onto the rooftop, and the warm October air breezes by me. I guess I didn't need the hoodie. I walk out further and see something on the edge of the rooftop. What the fuck?

I slow my steps when I realize there's a person sitting on the brick ledge looking over the side of the building. The last thing I want is to startle him.

I clear my throat, and his head whips in my direction. "What the fuck are you doing?" he snaps.

I glance around. "Me!? You're the one sitting on the edge of a skyscraper."

"It's not a skyscraper." He shakes his head, turning back around. I move carefully up to the wall then lean my elbows on it and look down over the edge. My stomach sinks. "How is your stomach not all swoopy?"

"Swoopy? Are you fucking five?"

"And a half actually."

He stares at me for a second, then his mouth twitches. It's just a whisper of movement before his lips flatten back into place. "Just leave me alone."

I rest my chin on my arms to look at him. "I'm kind of lonely."

"Not my problem."

"What if I want to make it your problem?"

He exhales hard, scratching his fingers through his blue hair. It's long at the top, pulled into a tiny ponytail with some pieces falling in front of his face. The sides are shaved and dark brown. The electric blue brightens his brown eyes a bit. "Why are you even up here? Most people just use their balconies."

I shrug. “Didn’t feel like being in my apartment. I moved recently and I’m—”

He exhales. “I wasn’t really asking.”

“Yeah, but I’m really telling.” I grin. “Sorry. I’m kind of a mess tonight.” *And every other night.*

“And you thought dumping on a stranger was a smart idea?”

“You know, you’re kind of bitchy.”

His dark brows lift. “Did you call me a bitch?”

“Bitchy, technically, but yeah, with confidence.”

“Asshole,” he mutters, but there’s a hint of amusement I catch. “Maybe I think you’re a bitch.”

“You don’t, though.” I smile, and this time I see his own spread a bit wider before he wipes it clean off his face. “Well, fine. I guess I’m a bit bitchy tonight. So, what’s wrong with you?”

He exhales, long and tired. “Too much.”

I take in his clothes. He’s wearing a light, black zip-up hoodie, the zipper open revealing a black tank top. I see tattoos peeking out here and there, and his eyebrow is pierced. I look at his ripped jeans as his fingers pick at the frays. His nails are painted black, and there’s a tattoo on his hand of a sunflower.

“How many tattoos do you have?” I ask.

“A lot.”

“Me too—” I lift my hoodie over my head and watch him take me in. “Sleeves on both sides. Then a tattoo on my chest.” He takes in my arms, and I know they’re hard to see through the shadows. The city lights aren’t very illuminating up here. He turns back, staring out over the city. “I’d feel better if you got down.”

“And I’d feel better if you shut the fuck up.”

“But I don’t want to.” I don’t know why, but I can’t walk away. I should, but something about this feels off.

“Why are you being a brat?”

“Because I like getting my way? Duh. Why does anyone like to get their way?”

“Yeah, well.” His dark eyes burn into me. “Maybe someone should teach you not to be so spoiled.”

Heat curls low in my stomach when he sighs. It’s long and deliberate, like just the weight of that sigh took all his energy.

“If I get down, will you drop it?” He watches me, really watches me. His eyes narrow like he’s trying to decide if I’m worth the trouble or if he wants to topple forward and end this conversation for good. Then he shakes his head and hops down, landing with a thud on the rooftop. “Better?”

I nod, folding my arms a little tighter around my chest. “Yeah. Thank you.”

Silence settles in thick and awkward. Somewhere below, the dull roar of nightlife sounds beneath us. I drag my shoe against the pavement tracing a half circle repeatedly.

“So . . . what’s your name?”

He lets out a short breath through his nose, something between a laugh and a groan. Still, he doesn’t make a move to leave me up here alone. “You’re annoying.”

“You mean intriguing. I think you’re intrigued.” I grin.

“I think I’m irritated.”

“Mm.” I tilt my head, studying him right back. “Can I tell you a secret?”

His eyes flick away for a moment then back to me. “I’ve known you for five seconds and I already know you’re just going to tell me anyway.”

I bite back a smile, thinking about what I want to say. The words press at the back of my throat while I pick at a fraying thread on my hoodie.

“I’m—” My voice catches. I swallow and try again. “I’m really sad.” His gaze sharpens instantly like I’ve flipped some switch. “And I don’t want to be alone right now.”

I feel the words bunch in my chest. It’s too much. I clamp my mouth shut, my teeth biting into the inside of my cheek until the sting steadies me. My thoughts spiral, but I don’t want to let anxiety stop me. I want to reach for things deep inside and let someone see me. The real me. Even if it’s this mildly annoyed stranger.

I exhale again.

“I’m just really sad right now. I’m sorry to bother you.”

He doesn’t answer right away. All he does is look at me.

“What do you have to be sad about?”

I let out a quiet breath. My eyes drop to scuff the pavement between us. “Everything. I came up here for some air, but then I saw you and made the decision to bother you.”

He blinks. “Lucky me.”

“Do you live here?”

“No,” he deadpans. “I just climb random buildings for fun.”

“Are you Spider-Man?”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “No.”

“Shame. That’d be cool. I love Spider-Man.” I move my arm toward him. “There, got him tattooed right there, swinging across The Daily Bugle.”

“The Daily what—” He shakes his head then really looks at my arm. “Are those all superheroes?” I nod. “You have a sleeve of superheroes?”

“Two sleeves. This is the Marvel side, this is DC. I have a special spot down here for the X-Men.” I point to my forearm. “That’s my boy Gambit and my girl Psylocke. Fuck she’s beautiful. I also love Rogue as well.”

“I don’t understand any of what you just said.”

“I think out of all the Marvel heroes I’d like to be Thor. I know he’s technically a god, but like, how cool is that shit, right? First, bitchin cape. And sexy as hell. I prefer long-haired Thor, even though that might be controversial. And he can fly. Like, he’s literally a god. And the hammer. Fuck, don’t get me started on the hammer.”

“Is the hammer a euphemism for his dick?” He quirks a brow.

“N-no. It’s like a literal hammer. It’s his thing. I mean not his *thing* thing. Just like Captain America has a shield, you know? Between you and me, Captain America is kind of a snooze. Then there’s Tony Stark. Not a fan either, I don’t know. I do love Black Widow, though, and Captain Marvel. I’m realizing right now I prefer the female heroes.”

“Do you ever stop talking?”

“No. Not really.”

He exhales. “What can I do to make all of this . . .” He waves his hand over my body. “Stop.”

“We could have sex?” *Oh, word vomit.* My idiot brain!

His mouth falls open. He stands there for a moment, speechless. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

I rock back on my heels, lifting my hands in surrender. “If you say no, then yeah. Total joke.”

“And if I say yes?” His arms fold tight over his chest.

I step a little closer.

“Listen—”

“Rather not.” He doesn’t move, though.

“I think we’ve bonded—”

“No. No we haven’t.”

“Hear me out.”

His head tips back with a long worn-out groan I know I’ve earned, and he rakes his fingers down his face. There’s something about him. Not dangerous. Or at least I don’t think so. He just seems . . . worn thin. Like something’s been pulling at his strings, unraveling him slowly. There’s a heavy weight to his brown eyes that almost stops me from asking this, but he looks about as done as I am. Maybe this is something we both need.

“Something happened,” I say, softer now. “And my brain won’t shut up and I need—” My hand cuts through the space between us. “Something else to focus on.”

His gaze skims over me. “What happens if I say yes?” I watch his jaw tighten, but I can see interest burning inside him.

I clap once, the sound cracking through the quiet. “Here’s my pitch.” I spread my hands out, pointing beside me like I’m drawing out plays on a whiteboard just like our coach. “You come back to my place. We have sex, right? One night. No backstories. No weird morning-after eye contact deciding who should be the first one to leave or tell the other to leave. No wondering if I should kiss you because I don’t know if morning breath will bother you. It doesn’t bother me, just so you know. Then we never have to speak again. Easy peasy. Just a couple of lonely guys fucking.” I set my fake marker down and wiggle my fingers a little in front of my imaginary board. “Impressed?”

Nothing. Not even a twitch of his lips.

“Tough crowd.” I huff. My hands and shoulders drop as I pick up my imagery eraser and wipe away my brilliant invisible plan.

“Who says I’m queer?”

I grin and flex my arms a little. “You were staring at my scrumptious muscles when I showed you my tattoos earlier. Don’t embarrass yourself now.”

His eyes flick to my biceps involuntarily, then he snaps his gaze away. When he looks back at my face his expression is smooth as glass. “Who says I’m lonely?”

I tip my chin toward the ledge of the roof. “You were sitting in the dark on the edge of a building,” I say. “You’re either lonely or you were monologuing before destroying half the city skyline.”

He blinks.

“What is—and I mean this as nicely as possible—fucking wrong with you?”

A laugh slips out of me. “Your words are mean, but your lips are pretty.”

His mouth drops open then snaps shut. He studies me then, really studies me. His gaze moves slower this time. I let him have a minute to think about my brilliant plan, because while he may think I’m ridiculous, I know I’m not the only one feeling this.

“Look,” I say after a second. “I’m trying really hard not to drink tonight.” The words sit heavy between us. “Figured I’d find something else instead.”

His brows rise just a fraction.

“You’re here,” I add. “You’re hot. We both know I’m hot.”

“You’re insane is what you are.” He shakes his head.

“Yeah,” I say. “Probably.”

Silence stretches between us. He looks at me and it’s like he’s fighting the urge to give me what I want. Then finally, he shakes his head. “Your place,” he says at last. “Not mine.”

Relief sparks quickly in my chest. Yes! I am awesome. “Deal.”

Slowly, he walks closer and stops with only a couple of inches between us. This close, I realize just how handsome he really is. Dark eyes, dark brows, and that shock of blue hair. He’s got some scruff on his face like he hasn’t shaved in a few days. “What if I told you I want to top?”

I suck my teeth letting my gaze drag over him like I’m thinking about this critically instead of letting a desperate *yes please* fly from my lips.

“And what if I told you I’d really like that?”

Something in him eases. Not much, but enough to notice. “Okay.” A slow grin spreads across his lips, making me want to lean in and get a quick preview now. “Do you at least want my first name?” His head tilts as he watches me now.

“Why?”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “So you know what to scream later.”

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TWO

Gage



I stand near the window, looking out at the city. How am I here right now!? I can't believe it. I shove my hands into my jean pockets. My body is starting to thaw. My jacket's a bit too thin for the bitter winter air. It's the only one I have right now, though.

This is my second meeting with Jim from Crownline Records. I haven't told the guys yet; I don't want to get their hopes up. We've had other labels interested, but when it came down to it they all passed.

Behind Jim, I can see records plated and hung on the wall. "You've got something not many people do."

"Really?"

Jim nods. "That demo." He smiles, pacing a bit around his office. "It's raw. Your music is powerful. Those lyrics are haunting and beautiful. There's so much heart in it. So much feeling." He taps his fingers on his desk. "The thing is, talent doesn't keep you fed, does it?"

I watch him pace around the room. We have two nights left at the motel and then it's back onto the streets. As it is, I used the money I was going to spend on food for myself to pay for another night. Jesper is fighting a cold right now, and the last thing we need is to be out in the cold. It's supposed to be in the single digits this weekend.

"I want to sign you," he says finally.

My eyes widen. I've dreamt of those words for years now, but I'm not sure why I don't feel the excitement I thought I would. There's something

heavy sitting in my stomach, and I don't know what it is or why it's there.

"Are you serious?"

Jim nods, walking to the front of his desk, folding his arms and leaning against it. "There's just one thing I need from you."

"What? I'll do anything. We'll work hard, you don't understand. We want this." Maybe showing my desperation isn't a smart idea, but we need this.

"I just need to know you're serious about this." Jim says. "About your commitment to this band, to the music."

"I am serious. I want this! I'll do anything. We will work so hard." I swallow the desperation in my tone.

Jim lifts off his desk and walks to his door, locking it. Slowly he turns to me. It's like the room shrinks. The unnamed heaviness pushes down around me. Jim walks over to me slowly, standing so close it takes everything in me not to step back.

I feel my stomach drop, my limbs grow cold.

Jim's fingers lift to brush my cheek, a slow smile spreading across his lips. "Then, Gage, I'm going to need you to show me how serious you are about this."

My phone vibrates again, and I think about just setting it on silent. Or on fire. Or throwing it off my balcony. Not that any of that will help. If I don't answer him soon, I know he'll end up here anyway. It's been a while I think. Months maybe? I'm not sure. I try hard to block out the times Jim finds his way to my apartment.

I have a lot to do before Saturday, but I can't bring myself to give one solid fuck about any of it.

Which is really fucking sad.

This isn't what things were supposed to be like, but I guess I traded happiness and artistic expression for money and fame.

Fame. I nearly snort with the thought. I'm not even famous. I'm a shell. An object for fans to project their feelings onto. No one knows me. No one knows what I've done to get here. Least of all my friends. None of them know I'm a fraud.

My phone lights up again, but I grab it when I see Chen's name instead. "Hey."

"Don't you sound absolutely tickled."

“What the fuck do you want?” I lean back against the couch. My spacious apartment feels more like a looming giant than my safe space right now.

“You okay?”

“Perfect.” Because what else am I going to say?

“Hey, one more, alright. Then we get a break. I know you’re tired.”

More than my best friend will ever understand. And I’ll keep it that way. No one needs to know what a fraud I am, especially my friends. It’ll break them. I don’t mind being broken for them.

“I know.”

“You want some company? I’m out right now but I can swing over.”

“No, that’s okay.”

Chen groans. “Come on, man. The whole point of this is that we still get to live our lives.” I kick my black boots up on my coffee table. “You never leave your apartment.”

“I go to Ruby’s,” I counter.

“Yeah, well, that’s it. You need to get out more.”

“I’m just not in the mood right now.” Tomorrow is so close, and I’m already envisioning Jim walking up here to see me. Sooner or later, he will.

“Fine. Oh, Jim’s been calling me. He’s looking for you.” *Oh, I know it.*

“I’ll call him back in the morning.”

It’s wonderfully quiet for a few moments. “Gage, talk to me. What’s going on with you lately?”

I tip my head back against the couch and stare up at the ceiling. *Oh, nothing, Chen.* I just sold my fucking soul to give us all the life we wanted, and the thing about selling your soul to the devil is he’s never satisfied. He always wants more. Until you’re broken down to nothing and then he’ll still want the scraps like a scavenger scrounging around a carcass.

I’m so tired.

“I just hate traveling. You know that,” I lie. It’s not that I mind traveling, it’s more that Jim gets bolder when we’re on the road without the buffer of other staff around. I do love traveling with my friends, though. Declan, Jesper, and Chen have been my family since we were kids, and I will never let them down. We came from nothing, had nothing, and worked so hard to have something.

We dreamed big, but dreams cost money.

And then we met Jim and I took a short cut.

I thought it was our break. Instead, it was the start of my nightmare. “Gage?”

“Huh, sorry. I’m fine, okay. Don’t worry. I’m just happy we’re going to have a break.”

He’s quiet for a moment, and I know I can’t get away with acting like this for long. I love all my friends, but Chen is the closest to me, and I know he won’t be satisfied much longer with my short replies. I know he thinks something’s going on, and he’s not wrong. I’ve done a shitty job lately of hiding how I’m feeling. The mask I wear is starting to slip.

Oh, the fucking irony of that.

“Fine.” I think he’s done but he continues. “But none of this is worth it if you’re unhappy. I want you to know that.”

“Chen—”

“No. That’s it.” He sighs. “Call me if you need anything. I’ll see you this weekend. Last one.”

Thank fuck.

“See ya.”

I hang up and sink back into the couch. I really need some air. I get up and grab my zip-up before I can think twice about it, then I head up to the rooftop access. When I make it up on top, I head to the edge. We’re allowed up here, and the safety wall is supposed to prevent any accidental falls. We’re allowed to hold parties up here too, but they have to be scheduled to allow security to provide extra safety. There are a few lounging areas, but I go right to the wall.

My shoes dig into the brick as I pull myself up, and I nearly sway forward as I adjust. My stomach swoops but sends a thrill up my spine. I could do it. I could lean forward and not think about anything ever again.

It would stop everything.

I swing my legs over and dare to look down again. My gut twists as I stare down at the unsuspecting cars below. Just one breath. One little movement. Shift forward and it’ll be done.

Fear claws at my chest, but I shove it away. If I think, then I won’t do it. I want to. I want it to stop. I want it more than anything. It’s probably my only way out. At least the only way our reputation would stay intact. I move a little closer to the edge, and my nails bite into the concrete as my stomach sinks. I look down. This is it. I can—

A throat clears behind me.

I whip around and see a man step out from the shadows. He clears his throat and keeps walking forward, slowly, and I can faintly make out his features now. The bright city lights around us allow the rooftop to glow softly. Not enough to clearly see, but enough to navigate.

With his hands in his pockets, he stops a few feet to my left. He's huge. Broad shoulders and defined muscles under a hoodie. He has shaggy black hair and a trimmed beard. "What the fuck are you doing?"

He glances around. "Me!? You're the one sitting on the edge of a skyscraper."

"It's not a skyscraper." I turn back to the drop. The wind presses against my back like it's trying to assist me. I could still do it. I can.

"How is your stomach not all swoopy?"

"Swoopy? Are you fucking five?"

"And a half actually." He grins.

My lip twitches despite myself, and I bite the inside of my cheek. "Just leave me alone."

He walks closer, putting his meaty arms on the wall and resting his chin on them where they're folded on top of the concrete, like he's resting his head on a desk at school after being told to keep his head down.

"I'm kind of lonely."

Okay and? What the hell is wrong with him? "Not my problem."

"What if I want to make it your problem?"

I drag a hand through my hair, scraping my scalp with my nails. Why won't he shut up? Why is he here! He's so irritating. From afar he looked dangerous. Up close he's all crooked smiles and this restless energy. Boyish and ridiculous.

"Why are you even up here? Most people use their balconies."

He shrugs his broad shoulders. "Didn't feel like being in my apartment. I moved recently and I'm—"

"I wasn't really asking."

"Yeah, but I'm really telling." He grins. "Sorry, I'm kind of a mess tonight."

"And you thought dumping on a stranger was a smart idea?"

"You know. You're kind of bitchy."

Ex-fucking-cuse me? "Did you just call me a bitch?"

"Bitchy, technically, but yeah, with confidence."

“Asshole.” I press my lips tightly together, fighting the pull at the corners. “Maybe I think you’re a bitch.”

“You don’t, though.” He smiles and it’s nearly contagious. I wipe the almost-smile off my face and look away. “Well, fine. I guess I’m a bit bitchy tonight.”

“So, what’s wrong with you?” he asks.

I let out a breath that feels like it’s been sitting in my lungs for years. “Too much.”

I can feel him looking at me. Really looking. My shoulders tense as heat curls low in my stomach. It’s sharp and unwelcome. I feel like he’s putting me under a microscope.

“How many tattoos do you have?” he asks.

“A lot.”

“Me too—” He lifts his hoodie over his head and good fucking god. *Holy shit.* How do you get arms that defined? He’s so fucking big. “Sleeves on both sides. Then a tattoo on my chest.” I can’t make out details of the designs, but I notice the defined muscles in his biceps. Dark hair dusts his forearms. I notice more dark hair peeking out of his tank top. “I’d feel better if you got down.”

I drag my gaze away from him. “And I’d feel better if you shut the fuck up.”

“But I don’t want to.”

What the hell is wrong with him? This man needs a solid spank on the ass. Okay where the fuck did that even come from? “Why are you being a brat?” That shouldn’t send a hum of pleasure through me like it does.

“Because I like getting my way? Duh. Why does anyone like to get their way?”

“Yeah, well.” My eyes drink in his body. Big and solid. I wonder what it would be like making a man this large fall to his knees. “Maybe someone should teach you not to be so spoiled.” He watches me with heat in his eyes, but there’s an edge of worry I’m sick of seeing. “If I get down, will you drop it?” He nods.

I hesitate just a moment, as if I’m going to challenge him, then I climb down carefully, my feet hitting the concrete with a thud that seems to echo. Next to him now, I realize just how tall he is. I’m five-eleven, but he has inches in every direction on me. “Better?”

He folds his thick arms over his solid chest. “Yeah. Thank you.” I watch him. Hoodie in his hands, he starts to drag his shoe across the concrete, looking like a scolded kid forced to stand at a wall for recess.

Silence stretches between us. “So . . .” he says. “What’s your name?”

“You’re annoying.”

“You mean intriguing. I think you’re intrigued.” He grins.

I blink at him, my jaw tightening. “I think I’m irritated.”

“Mm.” He cocks his head to look at me. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“I’ve known you for five seconds and I already know you’re just going to tell me anyway.”

He hesitates for a moment then starts to play with the hoodie he has in his hands. “I’m—” There’s a snag to his words that pulls my attention. “I’m really sad.” My eyes snap up. “And I don’t want to be alone right now.” A frustrated noise leaves his lips. “I’m just really sad right now.” The confession comes out rough, and his fists clench around the hoodie in his hands before they relax. He exhales and I feel it in my bones when he does. “I’m sorry to bother you.”

I watch him for a moment. This large ridiculous man, but there’s something in his eyes that matches my own. I know pain when I see it. I know exhaustion and absolute hopelessness. Right now, it’s etched all over his handsome face.

“What do you have to be sad about?”

His eyes drop to the concrete between us. “Everything. I came up here for some air, but then I saw you and made the decision to bother you.”

“Lucky me.”

He smiles softly. “Do you live here?”

“No,” I say flatly. “I just climb random buildings for fun.”

“Are you Spider-Man?”

What the fuck. I squeeze the bridge of my nose. “No.”

“Shame. That’d be cool. I love Spider-Man.” He shoves his sculpted arms toward me. “There, got him tattooed right there swinging across The Daily Bugle.”

“The Daily what—” I look at his sleeves now in the light. “Are those all superheroes?” He nods. “You have a sleeve of superheroes?”

“Two sleeves. This is the Marvel side, this is DC. I have a special spot down here for the X-Men.” He points to his forearms. “That’s my boy

Gambit and my girl Psylocke. Fuck she's beautiful. I also love Rogue as well."

"I don't understand any of what you just said."

"I think out of all the Marvel heroes I'd like to be Thor. I know he's technically a god, but like, how cool is that shit, right? First, bitchin cape. And sexy as hell. I prefer long-haired Thor, even though that might be controversial. And he can fly. Like, he's literally a god. And the hammer. Fuck, don't get me started on the hammer."

"Is the hammer a euphemism for his dick?"

"N-no. It's like a literal hammer. It's his thing. I mean, not his *thing* thing. Just like Captain America has a shield, you know? Between you and me, Captain America is kind of a snooze. Then there's Tony Stark. Not a fan either, I don't know. I do love Black Widow, though, and Captain Marvel."

"Do you ever stop talking?"

"No. Not really."

I exhale. "What can I do to make all of this . . ." I wave my hand over his delicious body. I'm irritated, but that doesn't stop me from admiring it. "Stop."

"We could have sex?"

What. The. Fuck. Oh, okay. I get it now. He's insane. I pinch my eyes closed, taking a moment. "Please tell me you're joking."

He rocks back on his heels, lifting his hands in surrender. "If you say no, then yeah. Total joke."

"And if I say yes?" I fold my arms over my chest, calling his bluff.

"Listen—"

"Rather not." I don't move, though. I stay right here, planted just a couple of feet from this behemoth.

"Something happened," he says, softer now. The change between the boyish ridiculousness and the somber look in his eyes and hard set to his plump lips is giving me whiplash. One minute he's ridiculous and the next it looks like he's carrying the weight of our existence on his very broad shoulders. "And my brain won't shut up and I need—" His hand cuts through the space between us. "Something else to focus on."

"What happens if I say yes?" I should walk away from him right now. This is trouble, but I can't seem to pull myself away from him. Not yet.

He claps, and the abrupt sound startles me. "Here's my pitch." He spreads his hands out, pointing beside himself like he's drawing on a

whiteboard. With an invisible pen, he starts to draw on it. “You come back to my place. We have sex, right? One night. No backstories, no weird morning-after eye contact deciding who should be the first one to leave or tell the other to leave. Then we never have to speak again. Easy peasy. Just a couple of lonely guys fucking.” He sets his marker down and wiggles his fingers a little in front of the imaginary board. “Impressed?” Okay, yes. He is insane. “Tough crowd.” He huffs, then he picks up an imagery eraser and wipes away this invisible plan he has.

“Who says I’m queer?”

He grins a little, flexing his delicious biceps. “You were staring at my scrumptious muscles when I showed you my tattoos earlier. Don’t embarrass yourself.”

My eyes flick to his biceps, then I snap my gaze away, pursing my lips as he smirks. Oh, fine, he has me there. Asshole. “Who says I’m lonely?”

He gestures toward the ledge. “You were sitting in the dark on the edge of a building,” he says. “You’re either lonely or you were monologuing before destroying half the city skyline.”

“What is—and I mean this as nicely as possible—fucking wrong with you?”

A laugh slips out of him. “Your words are mean, but your lips are pretty.”

Who the fuck is this man?

“Look,” he says after a second. “I’m trying really hard not to drink tonight.” My attention sharpens at that. “Figured I’d find something else instead.” I’m not actually considering this, am I? “You’re here,” he adds. “You’re hot. We both know I’m hot.”

“You’re insane is what you are.”

“Yeah. Probably.”

Although he’s insane, he is very hot. Annoying, sure, but there’s that part of me that wants to break him. See him on his knees and begging. The thought of taming this brat is too enticing to ignore. “Your place. Not mine.”

He fist-pumps the air. “Deal!”

I look at him. His body is beautiful, and I can’t wait to see it under me, begging. “What if I told you I want to top?”

He sucks his teeth and nods. “And what if I told you I’d really like that?”

Heat flares in my gut. Oh, this is going to be good. “Okay. Do you at least want my first name?”

“Why?”

“So you know what to scream later?”

He steps in a little, and it’s now that I see how bright his eyes are. A bright electric blue. It’s shocking. I don’t think I’ve ever seen eyes like that. “My name’s Atlas.”

Atlas. “Gage.”

He grins widely, displaying white teeth. “I’m going to go back down to my apartment. Give me some time to get ready. Like an hour. Apartment two-three-one.”

What have I gotten myself into? Not like I’m about to stop it, though.

“See you then, Atlas.”

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THREE

Gage



There’s still time to run away.

And even as I have that thought, my hand lifts and raps against his door. I wait a minute, drowning in nerves. I’m not sure why. It’s not like I’m insecure or anything, but I don’t know. There’s this restlessness, since he left the roof, that I haven’t been able to shake. It’s just one night. That’s all I want. One night to be exactly who I want to be. To fuck someone the way I want to fuck them. One night for my body to be mine and not used in someone else’s sick game.

I knock again, startling when the door jolts open.

Holy fucking shit.

Atlas fills in the doorway with no shirt on. The hard lines of his body look like they’re carved from stone. Dark chest hair covers his pecs and trails down his stomach before dipping beneath his waistband. My fingers twitch at my sides, itching to follow it with my fingers.

“It’s a lot, I know.” He rubs a hand over his chest. “It doesn’t stop either,” he leans in and whispers. “It’s everywhere. Like—” His blue eyes widen. “Everywhere. I hope you don’t mind.” His lips press into a hard line while he blinks.

How can someone be so ridiculous, adorable, and obnoxious at the same time?

I press my lips together to prevent the smile threatening to break through. I will not give him the satisfaction. “I think I’m going to go.”

“No, no wait—” He tugs me by the shirt sleeve and drags me in, locking the door. “I’m just nervous. I’d usually drink or something to calm down, but that’s what got me into this mess to begin with.”

“And what kind of mess is that?”

“Classified.” He wags his finger.

Whatever. “We can smoke if you want?”

“Ah, can’t, but thank you.”

I look around. It’s pretty empty in here. Boxes have been stacked together with zero attempt to open them. “You just move in?”

“Yeah, for work. Which I won’t tell you about.”

The corner of my lips lift. A massive black circular couch dominates the living room. It’s more bed than living room furniture, and aside from the giant TV mounted on the wall, it’s the only thing in here. “This is where my ass usually is when I’m home. I travel a lot.”

“For the job you won’t tell me about.”

“Exactly. I’m very mysterious.” He shifts his weight, bouncing on his toes. He’s all nerves. His hand drifts back to his stomach, rubbing the hair on his belly. It’s like he can’t sit still.

“So, have you ever hooked up with a man?” With the nerves pouring off him I’m assuming that’s a big solid no. Not that I care. He shakes his head. “Closeted? Curious?”

“Yes and no.” He exhales through his nose. “I’m not hiding. I’m not like in the closet or anything. I just never told anyone.”

“But you have bottomed before?” Then it clicks. “Ah, does Atlas like to get pegged?”

His ears flame. “I do.” The image of that strikes hotter than it should. “But some shit happened over the summer, and I want to try it out with a guy.”

“Lucky me.” I look around the room. “Where do you want to do this?” I’ll fuck him anywhere. I just need him to show me the way and let me take care of the rest. My eyes drag over him again. Slow and indulgent. His chest, stomach, those lines that disappear below his waistband. I don’t give a shit how he wants it. I just need it. Those unnerving blue fucking eyes watch me. “Are those contacts?”

“My eyes? Well duh. What else are contacts for? Uh no. They are one thousand percent my father’s, according to my mom, but I wouldn’t know

what the fuck he looks like, so I'll have to take her word for it." He points at me. "Hey, no personal information."

"I asked if you wore contacts; you supplied the rest."

He bounces on his toes. It's like the energy is just spilling out of him. "I'm so nervous. I've never had a guy like—" He waves his hands over his dick. "Get in there, ya know?"

"The more you talk the less I want to do this."

"Like I said. Bitchy."

"And I'm leaving."

"No, no wait," he whines, grabbing my wrist. "I'm just kidding. Kind of. You're very attractive. I like the emo thing you've got going on."

I wrench my arm away. "I don't have an emo thing going on!"

"That hurt worse than the bitchy thing? Really? I'm just kidding anyway. You're very attractive. Love the blue hair. Is that also contacts?"

I open my mouth then snap it back shut, shaking my head. What have I gotten myself into? "You're an idiot."

"Eh, I think you find me a bit endearing."

"Atlas, you don't want to know what I think." I squeeze the back of my neck. I have a headache crawling up into my brain. "Can we just fuck and get this over with?"

"Sure, um, I'm not sure what I'm into, but I'll try anything. So far, it's just been really pretty tits in my face while I'm getting fucked. I'm open to whatever. Very open. I um, I can tell you if I don't like something. I just don't know how you—well, I mean I know how to, but I'm—"

I step closer to him. His mouth snaps shut as I clap my hands on either side of his cheeks. "Stop. Talking."

"Right," he whispers. Some sort of hum runs under my skin. He's very . . . obedient. I wonder how obedient. I just want to run my fingers over his sculpted chest. He's as beautiful as he is obnoxious. And *fuck me*, he's really *really* obnoxious.

Slowly, I brush my fingers across his chest, and he looks down, watching as my hands explore his body. "We do this my way, understood?" He nods slowly. "If you don't like something, or you want me to stop, you need a safe word."

He swallows thickly as I thumb over his nipple. I smile when it tightens under my touch. "Like what?"

I shrug. “Anything you want. Something you wouldn’t normally say during sex.”

“Like pterodactyl?”

My fingers freeze. “I mean, yeah. Is that what we’re going with?” He nods. “I’m already regretting this but . . . why?”

“Dinosaurs are fucking cool. I mean, I guess the word could come up if I want to hit you with some elite dino knowledge mid thrust.”

“Atlas,” I whisper.

“Uh-huh?” I watch his throat work with a swallow.

“I’m the softest I’ve ever been.” I blink at him.

“Fine! Dino trivia is for after sex. Got it. That’s my safe word.”

“Perfect. Lead the way.”

I follow Atlas into his bedroom. A California king sits in the middle of his room, which is otherwise barren except for a long dresser and a floor-length mirror on the wall.

“Most of my things are back in New—” He sucks his teeth. “In a new land that I will not mention because we’re not doing personal. My ass, your dick. That’s the deal. Actually, pro tip. I really love my balls played with. So, if they can join the party at some point, I wouldn’t be mad about it.”

“I don’t think I’m ever going to get hard again.”

Atlas licks his thumb then gently rubs a slow circle around his nipple. “What about this? Huh? *Huh?* This turning you on?”

I bite the inside of my cheek hard. “I’m leaving.”

“Ugh! Why are you no fun!? Fine! I’ll just be boring the rest of the time you’re here.” Something tells me he couldn’t be boring if he tried. “So, like, where we at with testing?”

“I’m negative, but I’m using condoms.”

“Cool cool. I mean, I get tested for my job, so like, I’m alright too, but no worries. I have condoms.”

“You get tested for your job?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You literally just said that.”

“I don’t think I did.”

“Are you a porn star?”

He snorts. “No.” He thinks a moment. “But I am around a lot of naked men. It’s a lot less sexy than it sounds.” What have I gotten myself into? “Should I just like whip my pants off *Bruce Almighty* style.”

“Bruce—what?”

“You know, the movie. Where he whips his clothes off in one motion because he’s got powers.” He makes a motion with his arms that I’m assuming is him taking off his clothing. I’m not sure. I have no fucking idea what he’s talking about. He does it a few more times.

“Atlas. Get on the fucking bed.”

“Aye aye, captain.” He basically leaps onto the bed. Well, at least I know the frame is sturdy. I just want to shut my brain off for a few hours.

And this is the perfect distraction.

When was the last time I had sex with someone? Well, someone new, I guess.

“Ah, so nervous.”

I’m not sure how he has a self-conscious thought in his mind. He’s irritating as fuck, but he’s also sexy as hell. If this were a normal night and we were normal people, he’d be the kind of guy I’d ask out.

I guess until he opened his mouth.

I lift my shirt over my head and watch the way those icy eyes drink me in. “Nice tattoo.”

I should be more careful, but there’s no recognition in his eyes. It’s just a tattoo, and all I see is need. “You want to put your mouth on it?” The albino snake coils over my hip, winding through the red and black roses. The tattoo represents my family. Chen as the snake, and the black and red roses for Jesper and Declan. Always at my side.

His eyes track it. “Would you let me?” I nod, unbuttoning my jeans then shoving them down. His gaze drops, drinking in every inch of me as I kick my pants away. He’s still in his sweats and that just won’t do.

My knee sinks into the mattress as I climb onto the bed between his legs, and his thighs fall back, allowing me to settle between them. The closer I get, the more he sinks back against his pillows, making him seem so much smaller than he is with my mouth hovering just inches above his lips.

“Have you ever kissed a man?”

His throat bobs before he shakes his head. “Not really.” I go to make a move then I’m shocked when his hand comes up and cradles the back of my head. My eyes flick briefly to his lips, and I shift, straddling his waist and sinking onto his lap. My hand slides up his jaw. I love men with beards. The soft hairs tickle my fingers, making my cock ache.

Our lips meet, light at first, just a soft brush, until I feel his breath catch against mine. Then it's like some switch flips and he kisses me back harder. His large hands fit on my hips pulling me closer. Heat rolls through me, and I shift without thinking, grinding once and moaning when I feel him just as hard beneath me.

He makes a soft sound into my mouth then deepens the kiss, this time angling his head like he can't get enough. His grip tightens on my hips, holding on to me like he's afraid I'll disappear. His tongue dips into my mouth, hot and greedy, tasting like mint, and my hips move again, grinding slow and deliberate. "Fuck—" he breathes against my lips.

I don't let him finish whatever he's about to say, sliding my tongue against his. I've had enough of him talking. He groans, his fingers digging into my skin. I know two things about this man. He runs his mouth, and he's also really good with it.

I pull back just enough for air, dropping my forehead against his.

"Damn," he whispers against my lips. "Kissing dudes is—"

I cut him off with another kiss. Hotter and dirtier.

His hands roam over my sides, squeezing my ass then sliding up my spine, gripping, pulling, and roaming like they don't know where to settle. Every touch sends sharp pulses of heat through my stomach.

He breaks the kiss with a grin.

"—awesome."

"Ridiculous." I can't help but laugh and dive back in, amping up the heat. Moans rumble through him. His tongue swipes along my lips. I open for him, losing myself as his tongue dips into my mouth again.

"Fuck me," he groans, squeezing my hips.

I lean back just enough to look at him—face flushed, chest rising and falling rapidly. This wide-eyed man already looks wrecked.

"Oh, I will." My thumb drags along his lower lip before I lean in again. "We're going to have some fun first." His breath stutters. "Anything off limits?" My mouth trails down his throat, my teeth scraping lightly on his skin. I feel him swallow beneath my lips, his hands sliding up my back like he doesn't know what to do with them.

"I'm not sure yet," he admits. "I'll try anything."

I move lower, my lips brushing through the hair on his stomach, feeling the way his muscles flex under my mouth. I glance up. "You smell so good."

For a second he watches me, then his voice breaks through the quiet. “You sure it’s not too much?”

I still

“What?”

He runs his large hand over his stomach again like he’s trying to cover himself up. “I told you it’s a lot.”

I have no idea what to say. I’m not even sure why he’s worried about it. Black hair covers his chest and stomach. With any luck it’s everywhere. Masculine and fucking beautiful.

Instead of answering him, I hook my fingers into the waistband of his sweats and drag them down. The fabric catches on his hips before giving way, allowing me to slide them down his thick thighs.

No underwear.

He’s hard, the tip of his cock pearling with precum. He’s about six good thick inches. Just enough to stretch my lips around. I lean in close enough for him to feel my breath but not touching him yet, and his hips twitch while I wait, holding contact just out of reach. Finally, I lean in, pressing my nose to his pubes, and inhale the intoxicating scent of him. I shove my hand inside my briefs, grabbing my dick and squeezing. “I’m so hard, Atlas.”

“Y-yeah?”

I look up, nodding and pressing kisses under his belly button, then I get off the bed quickly and take off my briefs. My cock juts forward. His eyes grow heavy, drinking me in, and I squeeze myself, stroking slowly with his gaze on me. “You see this?” He swallows and nods. “This is what you do to me. All of it.” I climb back onto the bed. “Your sexy body did this to me. Now, do you still think it’s too much?”

He exhales shakily, the doubt clearing from his eyes as I move back down his body, settling between his muscled thighs. I curl my fingers around him, stroking slowly, and his head falls back immediately, mouth opening with a soft sound as I stroke him firmly. “Holy shit.”

My thumb drags over the tip of his crown, spreading precum there before I dip my tongue into his slit. He jolts. So sensitive. I like it. “You still want it, Atlas?”

He nods fast. I wrap my lips around his crown, slowly sucking down the length of him.

“Yeah. Yes—fuck. I’m just—” He reaches down between his cheeks, and I watch his fingers rub his hole. “I’ve never—”

“I know. Let your knees fall back wider.” He does so. “Mmm good boy.” His cock twitches in my hand. “Oh, you like that, huh?” He swallows and nods, his palm lying across his stomach. Every breath defines his abs. I thought six was the limit.

“Y-yeah.”

“Yeah what, Atlas?”

“Yeah . . . I like it.”

“Stay just like this,” I murmur. “Don’t move unless I tell you.”

I cup his heavy sac in my hand, feeling the weight of him and remembering what he said about his balls being played with. I watch the way his eyes darken, heat slowly spreading hot and heavy in his bright blue eyes as my fingers slide back, tracing between his cheeks. His thighs spread wider.

“Did you stretch yourself before I got here?” A quick nod. “How?”

He lifts a little, reaching into his nightstand and fumbling for a moment before he pulls out a blue ombre dildo.

“Holy shit.” I shake my head. “I like how nothing else seems to be unpacked in this place except that.”

“Moving makes me horny.”

“You’re so weird.”

His head drops back to the pillow as I take the toy from him and slick it up slowly. His breath shifts as his eyes dart from me to the toy in my hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Shh.”

I lean down, pressing slow kisses to his inner thigh, then higher. His body jumps when my lips graze one of his balls. The tension coiling in his stomach snaps when my mouth brushes over the other, then I press the toy against his hole. “Relax.”

He inhales as it slips past that tight ring. Sharp and shaky.

“That’s it, huh?” I murmur, easing the toy deeper and watching the way his ridiculous mouth drops open more with every inch I give him. “There you go.”

His hips grind a little as if he’s chasing more. Not this time. I don’t give it to him. Instead, I pull it back slightly, just enough to make him whine. “Gage—”

“I know.”

Another slow push, deeper this time. The muscles in his thighs quiver on either side of my head. His fingers grip the sheets, his greedy hips trying to take more before I’m ready to give it to him.

“Gage, I—” He squeezes the sheets. “I want you.”

While I want to sit here and tease him, I want it just as bad. Maybe next time.

Although there won’t be a next time, will there. One night, and I better get fucking on with it.

I pull the toy out completely and smile at the frustrated sound that leaves his lips.

“Roll over and arch your back for me.”

He moves, rolling onto his stomach and up on his knees. He spreads them apart, his ass lifted just enough to make my mouth go dry as I study the curve of his cheeks and the lines of his mouthwatering muscles. I admire the graceful lines of his back as he arches, tilting his hips like an offering. My hand smooths over his ass, squeezing a cheek, and a groan slips from my lips when I part them. Dark hair travels between his cheeks.

I don’t want to ask what he does for a living, but he has to go to the gym regularly. Maybe he’s a personal trainer. I’ve never seen an ass this thick in my life.

And I want it to suffocate me. “Fuck me, this is insane.”

“Most of ours are—” His hands stretch forward squeezing his fingers into the sheets.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” He glances back. “No details, remember.”

Whatever. I don’t care.

Still, I wonder what profession requires him to have an ass like this? I squeeze his cheeks in my hand before spreading him again. “Fuck, Atlas.” Then I remember what he said about the hair on his chest. It dusts over his mouthwatering ass, between his crease, over his thighs, and calves. “Fucking sexy.” I lean in, teasing my tongue along his rim, barely grazing him. He jolts. I dive back, firmer this time, stroking along his hole, and his hips push back immediately, chasing my touch while broken sounds fall out of him.

His taste like soap. His masculine scent filling my lungs. I kiss deeper, pushing my tongue past that tight ring, letting the needy sounds he makes

guide me.

“Oh my—fuck—” He whines, fisting his sheets.

“Yeah?” I murmur against him, gripping him tighter. “Feels good?”

“Good?”

I grab his ass in my hands, pushing my tongue deeper.

“Insane.”

I hold him there as he starts to lose the rhythm he had. His whole body goes tense. I kiss one of his fuzzy cheeks before trailing kisses up his crack then lower. Fuck, I needed this. The perfect distraction.

“Stay,” I warn him.

I get off the bed and watch his restless hips twitch as I pull away. “What’s the matter, Atlas? You need to get fucked?”

“Yes.” Zero hesitation.

“On the floor.” He doesn’t move at first, but then the command clicks. He slides off the bed and drops to his knees. I walk to his nightstand and grab the condoms and look down at the eager mess I’ve found myself with. Fuck he’s pretty. “You look good like this.”

“On my knees?”

I tip his chin up to look at me, then lean down, brushing a kiss to his mouth, and I whisper, “No. Silent.” He scowls at first but then looks down at my cock as if he’s waiting for orders. “Have you ever sucked a cock?” I know the answer, but I like the tease.

“No.” He swallows, watching mine.

“Do you want to?”

Atlas’s gaze drags to my tattoo then up at me. “Yeah.”

I nod. “Then show me how badly you want to.”

His tongue pokes out to wet his lips before he leans in, his breath warming my skin. He presses his lips right over the ink on my stomach, and his tongue follows, tracing along the curve of the creature. Slow and deliberate like he’s learning it piece by piece.

My breath catches slightly when his hands slide to the backs of my thighs. He teases and traces the art along my stomach. Then he pulls back slightly, looking at my cock before lifting his gaze to me.

“Nervous?”

He gives me a small shake of his head.

“Open your mouth.”

With his hands braced on the back of my thighs, he parts his pretty lips. I feed him my cock inch by inch, closing my eyes at the soft suction of his mouth. He hums along my length. It's taking everything I can not to shove in too fast and choke him. "You like it?"

He looks up and nods slightly.

I pull out and watch the way he leans in to chase it.

"Don't get greedy on me."

"But I want more." He looks up and takes my cock in hand. That defiant part of me wants to tell him to let go, but I like how desperate he looks. I let him take control for another minute. His lips wrap around my cock, sucking me harder. Messier. He pumps me with his hand while taking me as far as he can go.

"That's enough." I grab his hair and pull him off me.

"You taste good," he says softly. "I like the way you feel in my mouth."

I cup his cheek and lightly slap the side of his face. "Not an inside thought to be found, huh?"

"What? Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot I'm supposed to be boring." He shakes his head. "You know what, I'm not sorry. I'm the opposite of sorry—"

I cock my eyebrow. "Unapologetic?"

"Yeah, that. I am unapologetic about how sexy you are, and how great you smell. I've never seen one so . . . so big. Very aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Nine out of ten."

"Nine?" *What the fuck?* "Why did I lose a point?"

"Uh because you stopped me." He shrugs.

The problem right now is there's only one night, and I have a lot I'd like to do with this beautiful irritating stranger. "Get on the bed."

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FOUR

Atlas



I scramble onto the bed.

While I felt a bit self-conscious at first, *want* burns through me now, overriding any of those annoying little voices in my head. He's driving me crazy. And he's very assertive. Not used to that, but damn, I like it when he bosses me around. Whatever this is between us, I need it.

I get on the bed but I'm not sure where he wants me.

"On your back." I roll over, watching Gage reach into the nightstand to grab my lube and a condom. "Lift a little."

I lift my hips as he slides a pillow under my ass.

"Spread your legs. As wide as you can." I swallow and do it. This position leaves nothing hidden. Heat creeps up my chest. That old flicker of self-consciousness tightens under my ribs. Gage doesn't seem to give a fuck. It's stupid to feel this way about my body hair, but when most of the women I've been with commented on it and the guys in our locker rooms tease me . . . I can't help the complex I have about it.

I feel hands land on my ass, kneading it like he already owns it. "Fucking hell." He sinks his teeth into my skin. Not hard enough to hurt. "Biteable ass." His fingers pad over my hole, and a shiver runs down my spine.

He sinks between my thighs, spreading my ass wide. I feel the cool air hit me, but then I feel the slow indulgent warmth of his tongue drag over

me. I groan, low and helpless, my back arching. I've never had anyone eat my ass, but I already know no one is better at it than him.

He takes his time, tracing the tip of his tongue in slow circles and pulling away to tease when my moans get too loud. I lose his lips, but his fingers replace them, sliding down and tapping my rim lightly.

Heat curls up my spine. The bed shifts as he rises to his knees, grabbing the lube and slicking up his cock. He's bigger than me, and my toy. I'm a little nervous. He runs those wet fingers along my rim. "You said you stretched yourself?" he asks, but his gaze is locked on his fingers massaging my hole.

"Y-yeah." My voice comes out rougher than I want it to.

"I want to see that." *Next time*, is what he doesn't say, and I don't comment on it. "Did you come with that dildo deep in this gorgeous ass?"

"N-no." I shake my head quickly.

"Sir."

I blink. "Wh-what?"

His dark eyes pour over me. "No sir." It takes my brain a moment, but then the realization strikes hot. "I um. N-no sir. I didn't come." Heat pours into my belly. Hot need unlike anything I've ever felt. It's like my body craves his approval. I want to be good for him. I want to impress him and make him proud. Earning one of Gage's smiles feels way too good, and the smile that stretches his lips when I say it feels better than anything. This strange feeling washes over me. I've never felt anything like it.

"Good boy."

It's like he stroked my cock with those words. My hips move restlessly, and I make a sound I don't recognize. "Gage—please."

"You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes sir." The words sound wrecked; I feel like I'm losing my mind. "Please. I want more."

I feel the slick warmth of his cock rubbing between my crease, but instead of pressing into me, he leans down, hovering before my lips. That kiss before was insane. Hands down the best kiss I've ever had. He smells warm and spicy. Like apples and cinnamon. It fills my lungs. Then he kisses me slowly, and I drown under him.

Sometimes I like when kisses feel better than sex, and Gage's kisses feel better than any sex I've ever had. His lips graze along my chest. I feel the

blunt tip of his cock probe my entrance, then I suck in a sharp breath as he pushes inside. “Relax.”

I try as he pushes in slowly. Every inch he feeds me stretches me wide open. My back arches, my fingers clawing the sheets as the pressure inside me builds. It’s different than the toy. Warmer and fuller.

“Fuck—” I gasp.

He doesn’t stop, just keeps going at a steady pace until his hips meet my ass. For a second, we both still. Then his head tips forward and he shakes it. “Strangling the fuck out of me, Atlas.” Then his palms smooth up my thighs and grab my ass. “This ass.”

He pulls out, slow enough I feel every inch of him. Then he drives back in, harder this time. It’s like he’s trying to be careful with me, and I don’t want that. I don’t want him to hold back. I plant my feet on the bed and grind down, trying to chase him. “Stop doing that.”

“Not doing anything.” A long groan leaves my lips as he fills me again. “Fuck me, this is so good.” He drags his fingers lightly down my stomach, my muscles bunching under his gentle touch.

Gage leans down, hovering a moment before pressing a kiss to my lips, thrusting his hips in a rhythm that’s too slow for what I need right now.

“I don’t need you to be gentle,” I whisper against his mouth and watch him pull back a little. He stares at me for a beat. My heart hammers. Then I let out a quiet, frustrated breath. “Stop doing that.”

“Doing what?” he hums.

“Like, flexing inside me. Teasing me. I want you to fuck me. I want—” He cuts me off with his hand wrapped around my throat. I swallow against his grip. Then it’s like the devil himself pours into him.

Gage leans in, his lips next to my ear. “What is it that you want, Atlas, huh?” He bites my lobe, enough to make it sting. “Use your words.”

My face heats. “You’re not . . . I need it harder.”

“Oh?” Gage removes his hand, rising onto his knees and looking down. “How?”

“You know how.” I glare.

“Say it.”

I huff a breath and my head smacks back against my pillows before I lift it to glare at him. He’s being a dick! “You know how.”

“Say it.”

“No! Who’s annoying now?”

Gage's gaze drops. "I can do this all night. I'm enjoying the view."

"I need you—" I swallow. "Fuck me harder!"

Gage's mouth twitches. "Now was that so hard?"

I shake my head. "You're enjoying this way too much."

His hand wraps around my cock and he smirks. "Yeah." My breath catches as his grip tightens on my shaft, stroking me as his thumb smooths across my swollen tip in slow, deliberate, mean as fuck circles. Every rotation around my head makes my spine tingle.

"Gage—"

"Uh-huh." His grip tightens, but then he lets go and slips out. "On your stomach." I exhale sharply and roll onto my stomach. His fingers curl around my hips, guiding me up. "Good."

A grunt leaves my lips when he slides back inside me, my forehead hitting the pillow. "Fuck, that's it." I tilt my hips a little. I'm so full. The pressure is intense, but better than anything I've ever felt. "Don't stop."

Gage stills instantly. Instead of giving me what I need he curls over me, the heat of his skin soaking into my back. "I'm sorry, did you still want it?"

I nod fast.

"Say it." I feel his lips press to my shoulder, and I can just imagine the cocky smirk on his face. "Atlas, answer me."

"Yes. Fuck yes, Gage!"

Gage exhales through his nose like he's not satisfied with that. Almost like he's bored of me. I can feel how not bored he is right now, though. Amusement laces my every thought, and I move, making him slide inside me. He grips my hips hard, instantly preventing me from getting my way.

"What did I say about moving?"

My chest hits the bed. "So mean."

I think he's going to tease me again, but instead his hips begin to move. Every thrust builds pressure in my stomach, every slide against my prostate sending shocks of heat and pleasure through my body. I feel him everywhere. My fingers bunch into the sheets with every rough roll of his hips.

"Don't stop. Don't be mean to me, please." And because Gage really is a supervillain, he stops. "You're evil," I whine.

I feel his breath tickle my ear. "Am I evil? Or maybe, just maybe, you like it."

I grunt when he wraps his hand around my cock.

“Oh yeah, that’s a lot of precum for someone who doesn’t like it.” Another slow stroke. I can’t think or breathe. He’s stroking me slowly, my skin vibrating. My fingers twist in the sheets. My hips move back, trying to take him deeper with zero luck. He’s solid around me, unyielding. “Look at you. Can’t even stay still.”

“Then stop teasing me.”

“Ask nicely.”

I let out a sharp breath. “You’re mean.”

Gage’s hand tightens around my cock, just enough to make me suck in air. “Try again.”

I swallow, my jaw clenched. For a second I think I won’t. Because fuck him. Who does he think he is? Then I look back slightly, my head pressed to the bed, and when I look into his dark eyes, I know for certain he knows exactly who the fuck he is.

Gage’s expression shifts into something darker.

“You’re so fucking greedy, huh?” I nod slowly. “Yeah.” He smooths his fingers through my hair.

And just like that his patience is gone.

His grip on my hips turns firm, unrelenting. No more pauses or space to think. Instead, he slams into me, fucking me hard, every punch of his hips controlled. My fingers white-knuckle my pillow before I grip it and fling it somewhere to the side.

“Fuck—” I gasp, hands gripping the sheet with every brutal punch of his hips.

“What, Atlas?” he breathes heavily. “Isn’t this what you wanted?” His voice is low, rougher now. “Come on.”

I try, I really do . . . but the way my body reacts can’t be controlled. My cock drips between my legs. I’ve never felt anything like this. It’s a whole-body pleasure that’s lighting up every nerve inside me. My stomach tightens. It’s painful, but at the same time it feels better than anything I’ve ever felt. I grip my sheets hard as unhinged moans fall from my lips.

Gage doesn’t slow down or give me any time to catch my breath.

Where he held back before he now pushes and tests, watching how much I can take before I start to break. He grips my hair, guiding me upward, then braces his arm across my chest, still thrusting into me. “Look at me.”

I shake my head. I'm not sure why. It's like I want to test him. He grips my jaw hard and wrenches my gaze to his.

"I said look at me."

I swallow, snapping my eyes to his.

There's no more playful teasing. Gage looks like someone else altogether.

Then he moves again, harder and faster, enough to pull more broken sounds from my throat as he forces my gaze onto his.

My cock juts forward, dripping onto the sheets, and I bite my cheek, trying to breathe through the onslaught. "Gage," I whine.

He lets go of my jaw. "Yeah? What's wrong? I thought this is what you wanted?"

"I do," I choke out. He's killing me.

"Be a good boy. Don't touch that pretty dick."

I nod, quick and desperate.

"Okay."

"Do you still want it?"

I swallow.

"Atlas? Answer me."

I inhale through my nose, nodding. "Yes sir."

"Then take it." He shoves me face down to the bed, getting onto his feet and fucking me harder.

Every crack of his skin on mine echoes through the room. He's not hitting my prostate, he's assaulting it. It feels so fucking good, a little sting, but the pleasure wraps around the pain, morphing it into something so good I can't breathe. This angle is lethal. "Gage." My fingers squeeze into the sheets. "Fuck—"

My back arches more, tilting my hips up further, and my control slips completely now. Every noise that leaves me is just a string of unfiltered nonsense.

"Too much?" he pants, but there's no doubt in his voice. Just a check-in.

I shake my head. "Don't stop. So close." His hands roam over my body —my back, my stomach, a quick squeeze of my balls. I feel that heat crawl up my spine and I know I'm about to tip over. He doesn't lose his rhythm, doesn't rush me. "Oh, Gage. Oh my god."

"Come on, Atlas. Let go for me."

I lose it, coming hard and groaning into my sheets. Little black dots sprinkle behind my eyelids when I squeeze them tight. My vision blurs. Even as I come he doesn't slow his pace. After a moment I hear him tsk as he slips out of my body. I sag against the bed, aware he hasn't come yet. "Have you had enough?"

Yes. Yes, I've had enough. I can't bring myself to say the words. "I don't know."

He slaps my ass. "Roll over."

I manage to flip myself over. My thighs fall back. I don't care how obscene I must look. My soft cock rests on my stomach while I lie in my cum. I don't even care. I watch him on his knees between my thighs, the hard lines of his body defined as he breathes deep.

And he's so hard.

His fingers prod my hole, a wicked grin spreading on his face. "Hands free." I hiss when he slides two fingers inside me. "Messy fucking brat." He slaps my hole.

My cock jerks, trying to rally.

He grabs his cock, probing my hole and dipping inside before pulling out. "You done?" My back arches when he gives me a bit more. "Had your fill?"

That statement slides down my spine. No. I haven't. Not even close. And I don't know if I'll have had enough by the end of the night either. "Don't tease me."

"Lift your hips." I listen as he slides the pillow under, elevating my ass again, and my knees fall back, more from exhaustion this time. "More?" Even with how sore and tired I am right now, I know it's not enough.

He grabs himself, notching his hard cock to my hole, then fills me inch by inch. Gage sighs. He looks down at where we connect and a thought hits my brain. I want to see. I reach down and touch myself when his hips hit my ass.

"What's wrong."

"Feels good." I rub his cock inside me then dip a little lower to grab his balls. He bites his lip, looking down at my hand. "Is it hot?"

Without a word Gage, leans over me to grab his phone, opening it and taking a picture, then he turns it around to show me. *Fuck.*

"I'd say so." He grins like the devil. "Mind if I keep this one?"

A little flare of panic hits my gut. I mean, who would even know, right, if this picture got out? He doesn't even know me. Still, what if—

"It's okay, Atlas." I watch him delete the photo. "No worries, okay?"

"It's not that—" He sets the phone down then shuts me up with a kiss. My hands land on his back.

"It's okay. I was half joking anyway."

"Half joking?"

"Half joking, half really wanted to jerk off to that picture at some point." He grins, kissing the side of my head before rising to his knees and placing his palms on the tops of mine. "My god, your body." He groans, rolling his hips.

My back arches, that blinding stretch sending pleasure through every inch of me. At first his thrusts are gentle and slow, until a switch flips and he begins to fuck me hard and deep. Groans leave his lips and his hands push my knees back further, folding me in half. Every thrust pegs my prostate hard. Fuck, this is insane. I'm hanging on the edge again, watching Gage's body, every flex, every movement, so fucking beautiful.

"Gage—" My voice comes out breathless, and I can feel myself shaking with every clap of skin. I touch my cock, surprised at how fast it got hard again. "I'm so close."

"Again?" He cocks a pierced brow.

I reach down and squeeze my dick, nodding. I know I won't come hands free again, but he doesn't tell me to stop as I stroke my dick. It's never this insane.

I pump myself fast and just watch him, his face broken with pleasure. Before was for me, but this . . . this is all for him. His warm eyes flutter closed before he leans over me, bracing his hands on either side of my head.

"You want me to come?"

I nod, jerking myself faster.

His eyes flutter open, heat pouring into them. Gage adjusts a little then thrusts inside me, hard and fast. His voice is rough and breathless.

"Give me everything," I tell him.

He grips my thighs, fucking me harder. I can feel him through the condom. Fuck, I want him bare. The thought hits hard, imagining him raw, pounding inside me. "Fucking perfect." He groans. "You want it?"

Gage trembles, and my thighs widen as my climax crawls up my spine. "Yes sir. Give it to me." Gage fucks faster, moaning roughly before I feel

heat.

“Ah, fuck.” He comes, and I squeeze my thighs around his hips as he ruts into me, thrusting slowly before collapsing forward. He laughs, shaking his head, his forehead pressed to my sweaty chest. “Fucking hell.” He laughs again, his hips slowly punching forward.

I smooth my hands down his spine. “Holy shit.”

He lifts his head and leans in, kissing me. I don’t want to let him go, so I just hold him to me, his hips still slowly thrusting into me. His tongue plays with mine. Not rough like before, it feels indulgent. Then he breaks the kiss, pulling back to look at me, and it’s like his mind clears as he blinks. He looks down, clearing his throat as he rises again and pulls out of me.

I feel empty, and not in the way I normally do after sex. This feels . . . heavier. I watch his perfect ass as he lifts off the bed and goes into my bathroom to grab a washcloth. He comes back to clean me up, and when he’s done, he runs it down his stomach, wiping himself, then chucks it in the waste basket.

I think he’s about to leave, but to my surprises he joins me on the bed, lying back against my pillows. “So?” His head lolls to me. “How was your first time with a man?”

My thighs are still open, the outside of mine resting against his. He rolls onto his side to face me, then smooths his hand up the inside of my thigh and cups my balls. I suck in a breath as he plays with me, just touching and caressing. His fingertips brush the head of my soft cock.

“I’m speechless.”

“A nice change.” He kisses the side of my sweaty head.

I turn my head to scowl at him. “I don’t know what I’m feeling,” I admit. It’s great, but also terrible. Maybe a little sad. Also amazing. “It feels like my asshole is vibrating.”

His lips drop open, and his eyes pinch. “You’re a weird one, Atlas.” He pats my stomach, scratching his fingers through the hair there. “Was it good at least?”

Good doesn’t come close. “Incredible.” The best sex I’ve ever had, hands down. “My dildo is pissed at you right now.”

He laughs, laying his head on my shoulder. “Why’s that?”

“You’ve made him obsolete.”

“Well . . .” His finger runs down my chest. “I’d say I don’t mind playing with toys.” And it hangs there without him saying it. *But this was one night.*

“Looks like you’re going to have to learn to love him again.”

I laugh absently, but it’s there in my mind to ask him.

Stay.

Give me your number.

See, this is the issue I have with sex. I’m not good at one-night stands. I crave sex, but I need affection more. I need more than a simple one-night fling, and Gage is possibly the most closed-off person I’ve ever met.

“I’ll learn.” I swallow tightly.

His fingers scratch through my chest hair, and I want to ask what he’s thinking about, but before I can open my mouth, he sighs. “I guess I should get going.”

Everything inside me just sinks.

Yet he’s right. One night. “Oh, yeah.” He looks at me. His eyes are so pretty. Right now they look like they’re shining. Only a few shades lighter than the dark brown of his eyebrows and sides of his head. “You’re very pretty.” It tumbles out of my mouth.

His red lips quirk and he slaps the side of my face lightly. “Not so bad yourself.” He leans over, dropping a kiss to my lips, then he’s up and pulling his clothes on. I want to ask for his number, what apartment he lives in, can I see him again? “Well, this has been an interesting night.”

It’s so awkward, I hate it.

“It was great.”

Gage pulls his shirt on then looks over at me, something warring in his mind before he walks over and drops another kiss onto my forehead then my lips. “Thank you, Atlas.”

I pull back. “For what?”

Instead of answering me he gives me a sad smile. “Have a good night.”

And then he’s gone.

I lie there for a few moments until the sweat starts to irritate me, then I stand, stripping my bed before heading to the shower to wash him from my skin. It feels like what happened was a dream. That just happened, though, right?

I walk over to my door, making sure he locked it on his way out.

I feel odd. Not bad, but not good either. Not good compared to how I just felt and what he just did to me. I walk to the couch, dropping down and grabbing the remote, and I turn on the sports center and find the Otters

game. I start it over and sink back against my couch, watching my friends play.

Oli is vicious, and I will say I'm not looking forward to playing against him. I know he'll show me the same amount of mercy I'll be showing him. Absolutely none. Andre is starting tonight, and every time Oli passes him, I can imagine him whispering something sweet, or most likely something filthy knowing them.

Oli and Andre used to hate each other. Or at least Oli says he did, but I'm not so sure. When Andre got traded to the Otters last season, it was obvious where my friend's attention was. He can say he hated him, but that was pure obsession.

A soft ache fills my gut.

I turn off the TV, my knee bouncing. I should sleep. I have practice early in the morning. Instead, I just sit on this couch and think about Gage and how I'll never see him again most likely. My stupid rules. I only have myself to blame.

My body is spent. Instead of getting up to put fresh sheets on my bed, I lie here thinking about . . . well, everything. The move, my friends, and what just happened. I almost think about her, but thankfully my exhaustion shuts that down before the images start to sink in.

Instead, I close my eyes, and the only thing I see is blue hair and sharp brown eyes.

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FIVE

Atlas



“Left, left!”

I’m a half second too slow as Layton slams into me, knocking me into the boards. The impact rattles my spine as I skid across the ice, and I lie flat, trying to catch my breath.

“Fuck, Atlas!” someone snaps.

I roll to my stomach and push myself up. My blades dig into the ice as I get back on my feet. “Where the fuck is your head at?!” Knox barks, circling back to me. His voice cuts through everything, and if my head wasn’t swimming from the impact, I might find it in myself to be embarrassed.

I grab my stick, adjusting myself. “I’m fine. Sorry, I just—”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

I glare at him and don’t respond.

The puck is already moving again. I pivot, pushing off hard and trying to catch up. My legs burn as we work through the play. My skates bite into the ice as I cut across our zone and open to allow my teammates a pass.

I exhale hard, skating harder, trying to shake off whatever’s wrong with me. Just focus. How hard is it? It’s never been this hard before. Focus. My mind just won’t.

Every stride pulls at my muscles. I shouldn’t be this sore either. My thighs burn. My core tightens when I twist. A dull ache settles in my back, enough to slow me down. I hit the ice hard, but I’ve been hit harder.

“Reset!” Coach’s voice booms through the arena. “Clean this shit up,” he barks.

Knox gives me a look as he passes me to line up.

I get ready, stick in hand. I try to loosen up and focus but my head is still somewhere else.

The whistle blows. Knox and Damien fight for control. Knox slaps it to me and I take possession, taking off faster this time, with more force, pushing through the fog. I look around and see Layton coming right at me. I slap to Rome and collide again with Layton.

“Fuck!” I snap. A whistle slices through the arena.

“Atlas!” Coach barks. *Goddammit*. “Bench, now!”

I coast over, chest tight, frustration buzzing under my skin. I hold my stick under my arm and take off my gloves, watching Casey Fabro skate to me in his goalie pads. “You okay?” he asks quietly.

“Yeah,” I say automatically.

I can tell he doesn’t buy it, but thankfully he leaves me alone. I grab a towel and wipe my face, trying to shake this feeling.

“Just a little off.”

“Yeah, no shit.” He huffs.

“My head’s just not in it,” I admit.

Casey nudges my shin pad with his stick. “Then get it in. Knox is two seconds from losing his mind.” I glance up and watch Knox at center ice, jaw tight. I catch his eye for half a second before he looks away.

Yeah, I’m dead.

I see someone skate toward me and stiffen. “You hurt?” Rome asks.

“Fuck off.” I grab my water and squirt some into my mouth.

I don’t even know why he’s talking to me. Rome Acciari is the biggest dickhead in the league. He also ended my best friend’s career last season. So he can kindly go fuck off anywhere away from me.

His eyes narrow slightly. “We don’t need perfect,” he says softly. “We just need present.” Then he skates away.

“Fuck him.”

Casey shakes his head before skating back to his crease, and I watch them for a moment, trying to figure out whatever the fuck is wrong with me.

“Atlas.” Coach Grady skates over to me. “Can you do me a favor?” he says calmly.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Please go out there and try not to be a waste of cap space. Yeah?” His dark gray brows climb, his eyes going wide. He’s a scary motherfucker.

“Yes, Coach.”

“Great, as you were.”

I stand there for a second longer than I should then grip my stick tighter than I need to.

Head in it. Swallow down my thoughts.

Just like I’ve done a million times before.



I brace my hand on the tile wall and let the hot water slide over my skin. Everything aches. It’s not the good post-practice burn. This is different. A deeper ache I haven’t been able to shake since I was with Gage nights ago.

It had taken less than twenty-four hours afterward for my thoughts to cage me in again.

I drag my hand down my face, exhaling as the water runs over me, but it doesn’t wash away how I feel. When I close my eyes, it only makes everything brighter. I’m not here. Instead, I’m in some shower with steam curling around Gage as his heat presses in behind me.

I suck in a sharp breath. “Fuck.” I shut off the water and grab a towel. This is why I’m off, that’s all. Either way, if I don’t get my shit together, Knox is going to tear me apart. And the worst part . . . I don’t even know if I care.

I love hockey. I breathe hockey. I just need to focus.

I wrap a towel around my waist and dry my hair. At least my body isn’t sore in *that* way anymore. I did not think that part through. It’s not like I haven’t had sex with a woman before practice, but this was different. I was sore, everywhere, days after.

I really hope Knox isn’t too angry with me. He’s a good captain, but he’s not Oli. Which, no shit, I know he’s his own person. Oli was extremely aggressively vocal when we fucked up. Knox is more the grit his teeth and imagine squeezing our necks type.

Maybe I need to find someone to take my mind off all this tonight.

Jerking off sucks. I tried again this morning before getting ready. I even tried with my dildo, but it wasn't the same. I need to do something tonight and erase it from my mind.

What do I want to do tonight? We have a game in two nights. We lost last night and our coach let the entire state of Virginia know what a bunch of shitheads we are. My old coach on the Otters knew we'd have bad nights and good nights, but Coach Grady treats us like we're failures.

Maybe I could somehow find Gage. It's been days since we hooked up, but it's like I can still feel his hands on me. The way he touched me, fucked me. I've never felt anything that good.

Plus, he was fun to annoy.

Maybe if I describe him to Knox, he'll know who he is. There're hundreds of apartments, and even though most of the people who live there keep to themselves, how hard could it be to find a man with bright blue hair? No, I can't do that. I set the stupid-ass rules and now I need to listen to them. I'm just going to go home and jerk off the entire night to thoughts of him. As I walk down the small hallway to the locker room I hear hushed voices.

Rome?

"Good," I hear Coach say. "Now get the fuck out of my face and get your shit together. Game in two nights, and if I see a pathetic show like last game, I'll make it so no team will ever sign you. Understood?"

I duck behind a wall as I hear footsteps. What the hell was that? I peek around and begin to move when Rome barrels out of the alcove. I freeze, sizing him up. He's not much taller than I am, but there's an air about him that feels deadly. "Fuck out of my way." He bumps past me, storming down to the lockers.

What the hell was that about?

I walk to my cubby and drop onto the bench. All I want to do is go home and crash. Exhaustions weighs down my limbs and I'm praying I'll be able to pass out quickly.

Well, no, what I really want to do is knock on every door until I find Gage's apartment. The thing is, I don't even know if he lives there. What if he just works there? What if he was visiting a friend? I'd asked, but he never gave me a straight answer.

I don't know. All I do know is the sex was great. Like, possibly the best sex anyone has ever had. All my thoughts are of him. I just want more. One

night wasn’t enough. I just need one more night.

For the first time in my life, it’s not alcohol I’m craving. It’s him in my bed. On my back as he fucks me. His cock, that tongue. Fuck.

“Hey.” I look up and see Knox shake out his auburn hair. Thankfully he’s not glaring at me now. “What are you doing tonight?” I open my mouth, but he interrupts me. “Just kidding. I already know what you’re doing tonight.”

“And what’s that?”

“You’re coming with me.” He reaches into his locker and waves two tickets in front of my face. “You’re coming with me to the Riot Heart concert tonight at Melborne Park. Front row. VIP backstage access and meeting with the band.”

My brow quirks. “What’s Riot Heart?”

“Oh, fuck, here we go,” Layton murmurs next to us.

“You’re right, here we go!” Knox thunders. “Riot Heart is only the greatest band known to man.” I look at Layton who rolls his eyes. “They’re super fucking cool, anonymous, and have voices like fucking deities, man. We’re going. You and me.”

“What did I do to deserve this?”

“Tanner got sick. These are his tickets. Ha, loser. You going to let the sniffles stop you from experiencing this?” He shakes his head.

“So, I’m your second choice?”

“No.” Knox drops down onto my bench and throws his arm around me. “Fourth, but that’s just because I didn’t know if this was your vibe.” I shrug his arm off me. “You like Abba and shit.”

I tug on my shirt. “I don’t just like Abba.” I just listen to them before practice and games. It reminds me of my mother’s good days. We’d dance in the living room while we cleaned the trailer. Just me, her, and Penn. Dancing in her living room to “Dancing Queen.”

I blink fast, trying to wheel my brain back to the present. “I’m beat, man.”

“No, see, you don’t get what an opportunity this is. Front row. All access backstage. This is huge.”

I turn to him on the bench. “You don’t find it weird how giddy you’re getting right now? You’d think some of the glitz and magic would be tarnished with your own celebrity status.”

“We’re hockey players. Most of the time we go unnoticed! It’s different. You don’t get it. Their music is haunting and fucking beautiful. You’re going. That’s final.”

I look at Knox and shake my head. I don’t want to, but maybe this will keep my mind busy. I haven’t had a drink in months, and I feel both the worst and best I’ve ever been.

It’s taken everything not to knock on every door to find him. Which is super fucking weird. Still, my brain is hung up on it. I’ve never had that much fun before.

And the sex. He opened up something inside me. A whole new world, and I want to keep exploring.

See, no, this is good. I’m already spiraling. My brain gets stuck on things, and I have a hard time letting go. This will keep my mind busy. “Why the fuck not.”

“Yes!” Knox shoots up from the bench, fist pumping the air. “You and me, man. Bro night.”

A quiet hush descends over the locker room, and I look up and see why as Rome walks by us. My jaw ticks. A gentle hand lands on my shoulder, and I’m surprised when I see it’s Layton and not Knox.

“Don’t worry, man. No one likes him.”

I watch him walk back to the showers. Dark eyes. Shaved head. Brown or dark blond, I’m not sure. What I am sure is that Rome Acciari is even larger up close.

Which makes the hit Grey took even more devastating to picture.

“When do we leave?” I ask softly.

“Show’s at seven. We already have front row seats. They’re going by numbers and we are in the front, baby! Going to be amazing. I’m going to go home and change. Want a ride? I’ll be over at six to pick you up.”

“Sure.”

Knox grips my shoulders, shaking me. “Get ready for the night of your life.”

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SIX

Atlas



I grew up in New Jersey with humid as fuck summers. The kind of heat you can feel radiating off sidewalks. I should be used to it, but this heat is killing me. It's only October and I'm dying for the humidity to fuck off. Maybe it's the crowd pressing in around us.

I love hockey. I love my fans. I do not like getting mobbed. It rarely happens, but it makes me nervous when groups of people recognize me on the street. As far as pro athletes go, a hockey life is quiet outside of hockey circles.

"I'm freaking out, man."

Knox is practically vibrating, and I have to laugh. He's so strict on us at practice, but he's basically giggling like a teen going to their first concert.

"They that good?" I like music, but I don't really have favorites. I just listen to whatever's on.

Abba is for hockey. It helps center my mind before games. It makes me feel like my mom is with me. Maybe proud of me. I'm not sure. I don't even know if she knows I play professional hockey.

The feelings I have about my birth mom are all over the place. I hate her and love her. I'm sorry for her and wished she'd been better, while also understanding the systems in place aren't easy on single moms, let alone teenage moms. Listening to Abba before games brings me back to better memories. Abba reminds me of the perfect sober version of her I had so few moments with. "And there's the lead—"

“Whoa start again. Sorry.”

Knox blinks at me, unimpressed by the interruption. He lets out a breath. “They are a four-person band. Each member represents one of the four horsemen. They’re anonymous. No one knows who they really are. You have Conquest. He’s their drummer. He wears a black goblin masquerade mask. It has long curved horns that curve inward. Then you have Famine, on bass and backing vocals. His voice is so fucking deep.” Is he swooning? “Then you have War, he wears an owl mask. He’s on keyboard and backing vocals. He also helps write a lot of their songs. Their hit ‘Fighting With and For’ is written by him. It’s the song that put them on the map.”

“Fascinating.”

“Then there’s the lead singer and songwriter, Death. He’s the only one who doesn’t wear a mask.”

“Then how is he anonymous?”

“His entire neck and head is painted to look like a skull. Black sunken eyes. He always wears this black cloak, black paint streaking down his body. He’s so fucking sexy.”

“Under all that paint? How can you tell?”

“It’s a vibe, Atlas. There’s just something about him. Dangerous and hot as hell. I don’t know what he looks like under all that paint, but I couldn’t care less, man. One night with him, damn. That’s all I’d want. He wears black gloves and has the voice of a fucking angel.”

“Wow, you really are into this.”

“You never listened to any of their songs?”

I shrug. “I’ll just have to listen to them for the first time now.”

“Oh, I envy you. My favorite songs are ‘Marcella’ and ‘Kingdom Come.’”

“So, what are we doing with the VIP thing?”

“We get to go backstage and hang out for a bit. Ask questions. A little behind the scenes stuff. I think we get to tour the stage. It’ll be fun.”

“Maybe we’ll see who they are.” I laugh.

“No one knows who they are. Fans have so many theories, but I don’t know. I guess being on this side of fame it just makes me mad. Let them live, ya know. Why does it matter who they are. Why take that away?” The lights go out and fans start screaming.

No, sorry, the six-foot-five hockey player to my right starts screaming. “Oh my god, you’re in for a fucking treat.” He shakes my shoulders.

I laugh, looking forward as the lights begin to strobe. Fans scream at the top of their lungs. Black smoke curls along the stage. It’s now I notice the stage looks like the fantasy labyrinth belonging to one of Hell’s disciples.

The lights shine on the bassist, the wolf masquerade mask concealing his face. He strums his guitar to the backdrop of the crowd screaming. Then another light goes on showing the drummer giving his best on a solo. His goblin mask looks wicked under the lights. Another light goes on showing the keyboardist and his owl masquerade mask.

Then everything cuts out. We’re dropped into a black ocean. I look at Knox and can barely see him beside me. We’re waiting, and anxiety weaves through my lungs. Lone screams echo through the mostly silent crowd here and there. Then music blares, haunting, like walking in the middle of a forest alone with nothing but faint animal noises breaking through the thick fog.

The lights come on.

Everyone loses their fucking mind as a man strolls onto the stage twirling a mic in his hand. He’s far back by the drums and takes his time drinking in the screams of the audience. Then he lifts that mic and starts to sing acoustically.

It’s haunting.

Haunting and deep. His voice is smooth as silk. Sweet and smoky. He comes closer, the black cloak he wears swaying with his lazy movements. I can’t really make out what he’s saying, all I know is the low timbre of his voice fills me with this sadness. He sounds so fucking sad. Yet people are cheering so loud I can barely hear him. Black paint streaks across his chest, making his abs look slick with oil. There are patches of pale skin here and there.

The guitars strum along as he starts to sing a slow song.

I just stare. He’s magnetic.

He takes his time, strolling to each member on his way up the stage. A camera on the giant screen focuses on each member. His hand moves with what he’s feeling. It’s like the lyrics are coming straight from his soul.

The drums start slowly, and he strolls up to the front of the stage, nearly to the edge. Fans reach their hands toward him despite the barricade between them. He starts to sing again. The white and black skull paint casts

shadows and hugs the sharp lines of his face. His hair is jet black, wet, and slicked back with what looks like gel underneath the hood on his head.

He's singing louder now. He sounds incredible, Knox is right, it's unreal. He moves to the music, not afraid to feel it. Lazy sways like the lyrics consume him and he's helpless to do anything but move to it like he's possessed by the melody.

I look over at Knox singing every lyric like its gospel. It's nice to see him like this and not screaming at me at practice. My gaze fixes back on Death. He's walking along the stage, swaying with the music and feeling everything he's singing like he can heal the audience with his voice alone.

He turns sharply, swaying, his cloak swishing with the movement of his hips and revealing very cut abs. He walks around, the cloak moving, letting little slivers of pale skin show. He moves again and I catch it. There's something on his hip. A tattoo. He moves again and I catch it clearer underneath the streaking paint. An albino snake.

No. No.

No fucking way.

He moves again, the robe flaring with the movement, and I see it again . . . the snake slithers over the curve of his hip. Black and red roses entwined with the animal as if it's slithering through a rose bush.

He's walking along the edge of the stage, singing at each one of us in the crowd as he passes us. He's coming close to our section. So close. He's so close. My heart thuds against my chest. I look at his arms. He's wearing a cloak, but I can imagine the tattoos that lie beneath. The sunflower on his hand beneath those gloves. Maybe it's a coincidence. I mean, Gage isn't the first person to have a snake tattoo.

My eyes trail down to the tattoo on his stomach and it's unmistakable, even behind the streaks of paint. It was one night, but I remember it intimately. The way my mouth traced over the tail. How he tasted on my tongue. Those abs. The way I haven't felt that good since. The obsessive way my brain has fixated on it and won't let go.

No fucking way.

"You okay?" Knox yells over the music. I nod but can't pull my gaze away from him. His voice is insane. Haunting and sad, but so fucking beautiful. A voice forged in the fires of pain and trauma. He's singing, and if I had any doubt it was him. If I thought maybe it was a coincidence, I'm proved wrong in the next moment.

He comes to our section, eyes briefly glancing over all of us in the VIP section. Then they linger on me. Just for a second, but I see the recognition in his eyes. Those same dark eyes that rolled at my bad jokes and hooded when my lips were around his cock.

After another second his eyes release me as he moves on to the next section. “Dude!” Knox shakes my shoulders. “You got eye fucked, bro! Lucky.” He shakes his head, singing along to the lyrics while I just watch him.

Holy fucking shit.

Gage is Death.

For a moment I forget how to breathe.

The screams around me become warbled as if I’ve been plunged underwater. All my attention solely focuses on him. The music pours out of him. He’s singing to the crowd but it’s like I’m imagining him singing just for me. He seems to have ramped up the energy since he came over here. Or maybe I’m imagining that.

I watch the way his body moves. He’s not dancing but he has these rhythmic movements that looks so smooth. Every haunting note cracks me open. When Gage comes to our section, he doesn’t react or look at me that long again.

If anything, it looks like he’s trying his best to avoid me altogether. Sometimes he slips, and each time his eyes meet mine it feels like it costs him something. Like he’s barely holding himself together. I want to know what he’s thinking. If I were in his shoes, I’d be afraid I’d be found out. There’s this restlessness under my skin, and I don’t know what to do to stop the buzz. Every nerve in my body lights up as if it’s plugged straight into the amps.

“No fucking way . . .” I can’t even hear myself think over the screams of the crowd. The music is so loud. Knox is still scream-singing beside me, completely oblivious that I’m spiraling. Singing, jumping, and living his best life while mine is currently imploding.

On stage, Gage—I mean Death—tilts his head back and lets a note rip through the arena. Raw and aching. The kind of sound that doesn’t just fill my ears, it digs into my soul. The crowd screams louder, feeding him their energy. He soaks it in like he needs it to survive.

I get it now. I do. Gage is magnetic. He demands your attention and steals your heart. This man in front of me is cool, wicked, and dangerous.

I can’t help it, though. I prefer the real him I had the other night. A little moody, a lot of fun to irritate. I know he tried more than once not to laugh at me. I like that messy, cynical version of him. This man in front of me is a god to these people. Every sway of his hips and sharp breath between lyrics tells a story. It’s like he’s bleeding himself out in front of thousands of people.

It was just one night, but I can’t let him go just yet. That night he made me feel things I’ve never even thought possible. I don’t know what to call it. I don’t believe in love at first sight. Still, I can’t let go of the chemistry between us. It was one night, but I want more. I’ve never felt this hungry in my life.

The next song shifts the tone. The drums kick softly, the guitars come to life. The entire place quiets. Lights flash like lightening, strobing over the crowd. I don’t know what’s happening. Gage walks up to the microphone. I’m not sure how the paint hasn’t sweated clean off his stomach.

He grabs the mic and looks over the crowd, and I want to know what he’s seeing. Or what he’s even thinking right now. If seeing me shocked him, he doesn’t let it show. The music fades softer now. He’s so close. I should look away, but I can’t.

Music starts up again and he begins to sing. The soft, aching lyrics do something to my chest. I can’t look away. I just watch him.

And I know I should let you fade
But the echo of your love never obeys
It’s just pain
I’m running in circles, screaming your name
Now I’m fighting something living under my skin
In the silence you left me, I might just cave

I’m mesmerized by it. Knox is singing next to me while the crowd around us sings along. Gage’s voice is soft and haunting. The lyrics aching but beautiful. Gage sings to the crowd, but then he looks right at me.

This time his eyes linger. Just for a second.

His voice drops when he takes the mic off the stand, bringing it to his lips. Softer, rougher, a song that fills you with meaning. My chest tightens. There’s something here. Sadness. Or maybe that’s just how I feel after he walked out of my apartment the other night.

He puts the mic back, and his fingers curl around the stand before he forces himself to move again, breaking my trance. The rest of the show

blurs into pieces. I'm aware of him, the talent and production, the way each masked member gets their moment to shine. The playfulness at certain times with his bandmates. Whenever Gage stands beside one of them to sing while they play together the crowd loses it.

Gage never loses momentum. If anything, he gets wilder. Like the longer he's up there the less human he becomes. Every so often his eyes find me. Just for a second, but it's enough to make me believe that night has haunted him too.

Does he feel and see me as clearly as I've seen him? Has he touched himself to the things we did?

Does he want one more night?

By the time the final song hits, my throat is dry, my heart is a mess, and my brain has run loops trying to slow down and think logically. The last note crashes over the arena. The lights cut to black so fast it feels like they blinked out of existence.

Silence rolls over us all.

Then an explosion of screams. Just like that, they're gone.

Knox grabs my shoulders, shaking me hard. "Told you!" he yells, breathless. "Best fucking show of your life, right?!"

I stare back at the empty stage where Gage just stood. My lips part, but I can't say a word because yeah, Knox is right. It was the best show I've ever been to. The show was amazing, but that's not what's sitting heavy on my chest.

It's the way Gage kept sneaking looks at me as if he was helpless to do anything else. A dangerous realization hits me, one with more temptation than any drink has given me. I'm not sure how Gage is feeling right now, but I know one thing.

Whatever this is between us isn't over.

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SEVEN

Gage



It takes a while for adrenaline to fade after a show, but right now I'm freaking the fuck out and it's only adding to the pulse beating in my throat. It's like the blood in my veins has turned electric, buzzing under my skin. This isn't the usual post-show high; this is an adrenaline crash that's leaving me shaky and wired.

This feels dangerous.

What if he tells?

The thought lands heavy, sinking into my gut. What if he runs straight to some tabloid? What if he sells it off for a quick payout? My identity and body. All of it reduced to headlines. Then what?

Should I tell Chen? Maybe it's nothing. Maybe I'm spiraling over nothing.

I don't know him, that's the problem. What if he's been a fan this whole time? What if he's always known? What if he followed me onto that roof because he knew and wanted access to me. I know it's not logical. No one outside my friends and our management has seen my snake tattoo in my personal life.

A sharp breath punches out of me. Try to relax. Just take a breath. I'm getting ahead of myself. I drag my hand down my face, smearing sweat into my makeup that won't budge no matter how hot I get on stage. I have my makeup artist to thank for that.

My tattoos are never an issue, ever. The ones on my arms stay covered during the show, but that snake . . . no one is supposed to see it outside of the show. I watched the way his eyes dragged over it, and while fear grips me, I can't deny the flare of heat at the memory of his lips against it.

Get it together.

For a split second I consider asking for a drink, something to take the edge off, but I shut that down fast.

"You okay?"

I look up and see Chen take off his mask. His long black hair is tied up right now. I watch him drag a towel across his forehead before slipping his mask back into place. "Fuck, I can't wait to take this off," he mutters.

My skin feels heavy with the makeup, as if I'm suffocating under layers of it. I know it won't smudge without specific cleansers, but it doesn't stop this sensation crawling under my skin. "I'm fine." My voice comes out too high. "When are they coming back?"

I need this over with. I need distance. Physically and mentally.

The thing is, I couldn't stop watching him. Even when I tried so hard, my gaze always traveled back to him. I can still feel him. His mouth, his tongue. Fuck, those pretty little noises he made. This hard man was so soft and desperate while I had him under me. I liked watching him unravel piece by piece as all his insecurities faded away.

Fuck!

I force my eyes shut. Just forget it. It was one night. One night was all it was and now he may fuck up everything I've built. Everything I've sacrificed for.

Fuck, it was so good, though. Too good.

For once I got to let go. No expectations or images to uphold. No one watching, judging, or most of all, using me. It was just the two of us. And now my secret might be out because of one selfish night. What if Jim finds out?

My stomach turns cold.

"Gage?"

I snap my eyes open and find Jesper watching me. His mask is pushed up and resting on his head, the curved goblin horns catching the light. He runs his fingers through his brown hair, and beads of sweat form around his forehead, his normally russet skin flushed and shiny. The masks were Chen's suggestion, and while they wear them out of necessity, Jesper hates

it the most. He can complain all he wants, though, because Declan's the reason they wear them, and we all know whatever Declan asks for, Jesper is happy to give him.

"What a fucking show, huh?" He smiles. Declan walks back, catching his eye, and he grabs his wrist, pulling him against his body. "You played great tonight." He gives him a kiss.

"I just want to go home."

"I know. Just a few meet and greets then we're free for three months." Jesper's hand slides along his lower back.

"You guys going anywhere?" Chen asks them, but his eyes slide to mine.

"We're going to Ireland for a couple of weeks. Our flight leaves Monday." Jesper squeezes Declan's arm. Declan has a lot of social anxiety, and even though we've been together most of our lives, he still doesn't talk too much. Which is fine. Jesper runs his mouth enough for everyone.

"What about you, Gage? What are you doing over break?"

Trying to figure out how to end this bullshit for good. Although, since that night on the roof, it means something a little different. I wonder if there's an ending that doesn't involve me blowing up my friends' lives. Although Atlas could be halfway to meet up with some tabloid douchebag and sell his story right now. I look up and remember Chen's question.

"Uh nothing. No plans, just writing." Hopefully, because writing has been difficult lately. Writing used to be as natural as breathing, yet I can't seem to find the desire to lately.

"That's it? Lame. This was your idea and you have no vacation plans?"

"Not having to look at you ugly pricks is enough of a vacation for me." I grin.

Jesper laughs, slapping my arm. "Dick."

I laugh slightly and instantly miss them. I don't know why. They're right in front of me, but still. Maybe I miss the version of us from years ago, barely making enough to survive. I miss how free it all felt back then.

I need to put it out of my brain for now.

"Put your masks on," I mutter. "They'll be back soon."

Normally I like this part, meeting fans, seeing what our music means to them. I love fan theories about our lyrics. I like to read about the way they twist our narratives to fit their own lives and find meaning in our songs I never even intended to deliver. It's art on its own.

Right now, I'd give anything to skip it, go home, scrub everything off, and pretend none of this happened for the next three months of my break. "You alright?" Chen asks, pulling his mask back into place.

"I think I'm getting sick," I lie.

Chen walks up to me, draping my robe back around my shoulders. I don't need it now, huh? Not really. Atlas has already seen everything. *Breathe*. It's fine. It's going to be fine.

"They're coming backstage," Tammy calls as she walks past us, clipboard tucked against her chest. "We have six groups. Ten minutes with them, then we'll do the stage tour. One group photo, sign whatever you want." She smiles warmly. "Then that's it, boys. It's vacation time for us all."

It's crazy to think that people paid hundreds of dollars for this. Ticket prices make me sick. I hate how inflated it's all become. It makes me want to give back even more. I remember when we couldn't fill a room let alone a stadium. We used to let people in for free, so our early shows didn't feel as empty.

Then Jim showed up and everything changed.

I swallow hard, forcing the bile back down. "Alright, first group is coming."

Every single group that comes and goes brings a new wave of anxiety. Relief knocks me out when I don't see Atlas, but I also can't help but wonder where he's at. He was in the VIP section, looking like he was as shocked as I felt. I keep expecting him in each new group, only to be oddly disappointed when he's not with them.

I try to stay in the moment and enjoy this. These fans pay so much for so little, but it's hard to really stay focused. "Last group, boys."

We straighten, slipping into character like we've done each time before. Footsteps echo before they come into view, and my brain completely short circuits.

Atlas.

He's just as beautiful as I remember, maybe more so. Tonight, he's in a dark green T-shirt stretched tight across his shoulders. His dark jeans cling to his solid thighs. Thighs I've dreamt about framing my face again.

Jesus Christ, get a grip.

The guy next to him with auburn hair is practically vibrating out of his skin. He's just as large, with tattoos winding down his arm, but I'm too

focused on Atlas to really look at them. His unreal icy blue eyes are everywhere but on me.

“Holy shit, I’m trying to be cool,” his friend mutters, bracing his hands on his knees. “Be cool, man.”

I nearly laugh.

“Wow, this is a fucking honor,” he says, stepping forward to shake our hands. “I love your music.” I smile on autopilot and shake his hand.

“This is my friend Atlas,” he continues. “He’s new to your music, but I’m sure once he remembers how to speak, he’ll tell you how incredible tonight was. Right?”

Atlas’s gaze snaps to his friend. “Oh uh, yeah—” His throat clears. “You guys were amazing.”

Chen snorts. “Stunned by our presence. Understandable.”

I elbow him lightly, but my attention is already back on Atlas.

“I uh, sorry,” Atlas says suddenly. “Is there a bathroom I can use? I really have to piss.”

Tammy steps forward. “There isn’t—”

“I’ll show you.” The words tumble out too fast, and Tammy shoots me a look. “It’s fine,” I add quickly. “No big deal. Last group, right? A couple of minutes won’t hurt.”

Daniel, our security, steps forward. “I can take him.”

“No.” Everyone’s eyes go to me. I force a smile. “It’s literally right there. I’ll be back in a second. We’re good, right?” I glance at Atlas.

He hesitates then nods.

Daniel still pats him down thoughtfully, as if this man isn’t built like he could snap someone in half if he wanted.

I turn, leading the way down a short hallway, hyperaware of him behind me. His presence heats my back. Or maybe I’m just imagining it. We step into my private room with an attached bathroom, and the second he’s inside I slam the door and lock it, shoving him back against the wall. “How the fuck did you find out?”

“What?” His eyes widen.

“Don’t play dumb. Did you do some digging? Bring your friend here to get access and blackmail me?”

Atlas shoves me back harder. I nearly tumble. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“How did you know?”

He inhales sharply, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Slow down, fuck, just relax.”

“Relax?”

“You’re a lot right now.” He shoots back. “You’re—” He gestures vaguely at me. “This.”

“Answer me.”

He stares at me a moment. “I didn’t know.”

“What?”

“I didn’t know!” he repeats. “My friend had an extra VIP ticket. Asked me to come, that’s it. I swear.”

Something in my chest shakes loose. Not completely, but enough where I can breathe. “You didn’t recognize me?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Not until I saw—” His gaze drops and his tongue pokes out, licking his bottom lip. I’m taken back to nights ago when his eyes looked up at me waiting for my command.

“Say it,” I murmur, stepping closer. “Until what, Atlas?”

He swallows. “Your tattoo.”

“The one you licked?” I lean in, my voice dropping and my teeth grazing his ear. “The one you licked before you sucked my cock?”

His breath shudders. “Jesus—” He pushes me back with no real force behind it. “I didn’t know, alright. I’m still processing that you’re—” He gestures again. “You.”

I watch him for a moment, and I almost prefer the ridiculous dork he was back on that rooftop. “Please don’t tell anyone,” I plead softly.

He meets my eyes. “I wouldn’t. I’d never do that.”

Maybe I’m an idiot.

Maybe it’s just that I want to believe him, but I do. A knock breaks the moment. “Everything okay?” Daniel calls.

“Yeah,” I answer quickly, looking right at Atlas. “Just waiting on him. Stomach problems I think.”

“Oh, fuck you,” he whispers, and I grin. I can’t help it.

He’s so fucking beautiful.

I lean in again, slower this time, giving him space to move away, but he doesn’t.

Our lips meet and that feeling is immediate. Electric and dangerous like striking a match in a room full of gas. He lets out this quiet, pathetic sound against my lips. My fingers brush his arm, but he pulls back like it burns.

He places two fingers against his mouth. “Do I have black on my lips?”

I huff a soft laugh and shake my head. “This won’t come off until I wash it off.”

He swallows hard, nodding. “Your um, your voice. It’s really nice. I liked it.”

My brow cocks. “Oh yeah?” While I’ve had screaming fans tell me that for years, it hits somewhere different hearing it from his lips.

“We should go,” he says, a little breathless. I give him space and then another moment to take a breath and relax before I open the door.

Daniel eyes us both suspiciously.

We return, with me trailing behind him, and I hear his friend talking to mine. An idea hits me hard, and I can’t stop myself as I lean into him.

“Apartment eighty-two.” Atlas looks back at me, his dark brows furrowed. “I’ll be back by eleven.”

I walk around him and join my friends. I have no idea if he’ll come to my apartment, and I have no business meeting up with him like this again, but I can’t let it go. I just need one more night. One more taste to get him out of my system.

One more time to get Atlas out from under my skin.

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EIGHT

Gage



I’ve been pacing around my apartment for nearly two hours now. I don’t like this. Maybe he’s not going to come. Maybe I read it all wrong. I don’t know what to do about this. After the initial shock of seeing him in the crowd, all I’ve felt since then is this need. The same need I’ve felt for days, ever since I left his apartment.

It’s embarrassing to admit how many times since we hooked up that I wanted to go down to his apartment. Just one more taste. I’m lucky we had a lot to do to prepare for our final show or else I may have done something crazy like knocking on his door. We’ve been on tour for nearly six months now, and I’m ready to never go on the road again.

It was Declan’s idea to have our final tour stop be Norfolk, our hometown. Chen and I still live here—or at least have homes here, though Chen likes to spend his downtime in Seattle—but Jesper and Declan spend their time off in New York City.

And then there’s me, stuck in a city that’s treated me well. I don’t want to leave. When we’re recording, we all stay with Declan and Jesper. Those moments are my favorite. They remind me of when we were just four foster kids with a big dream and little resources to see them through.

We have three months off now. I was strict about that. Three entire months off. No meetings, no recording, no fan events. Nothing. Just me and my silence while I decide my next move. I still don’t know what that is, all I know is I can’t keep going like this. I love music, but the music industry is a

monster. Looming and scary. Put there to suck your soul dry and spit you out.

Okay, enough of that. I have one more night with Atlas and I won't waste a second of it. I shouldn't be this hung up on him, but who can blame me. He's beautiful. That's it, I'm just really attracted to him.

After Atlas and his friend were escorted out, I left as soon as I was allowed. I showered in my dressing room, and I showered again when I got here. Then I thought about what I wanted to do with him. Or to him.

A knock pulls me out of my thoughts, and I walk over in three eager strides. It's been a while since I've felt like this. That's all. It's an excitement I can't make sense of. And I don't want to. I don't care if this makes sense.

I open the door. He's now wearing a loose sleeveless blue shirt displaying those delicious arms and ridiculous superhero tattoos. He looks at my bare chest. "How do you wash all that shit off?" I grab the hem of his shirt and pull him in. "And your hair. It was like, black."

"Temporary dye. It's more like a gel. I have special soap that cleans off the body paint, and my hairstylist uses this mask to clean my hair.

"This is insane. Like insane. You're a rock star," he whispers, as if it's not just the two of us. "I banged a rock star."

"Actually, this rock star banged you." I don't want to talk. I just want to fuck.

Atlas walks into my apartment, looking around. "Your voice is amazing. Do you write your own songs? Wait, no, Knox told me, your keyboardist also, right? That's crazy. How do you even come up with ideas for songs? I'm not very creative, but I've always admired artists. Creating something out of nothing. Another reason I love comic books. I love the art. How do people even come up with that shit? It's incredible."

"Ah!" I snap my fingers. "I just remembered."

He turns to me, big blue eyes blinking back at me. "What?"

"How fucking annoying you are."

He rolls his eyes. "The word you're looking for is quirky."

"Well, get your gorgeous quirky ass in my bedroom."

"Wasting no time, huh? I just walked in the door. Maybe I don't feel like putting out."

I stare at him flatly.

"Yeah, j k."

“Did you just say j k?”

“So, like, how long have you been in a band? I’ve never heard of you before, I don’t think. Maybe I have. I don’t really pay attention to celebrities. Not that you’re not great, you are, it’s just—”

I groan, loudly. “Atlas, please stop talking.” But then I think of something. “Wait. Now that you know what I do, I want to know what you do.”

Atlas grins. “Not telling. Not my fault you were reckless.”

“Reckless?” Is he fucking joking? “I’m not reckless!”

“You should have hidden that slutty tattoo.”

“Slutty? My tattoos aren’t slutty.”

“Tell that to my tongue.” He shoves his hands in the pockets of his sweats and grins at me. “And I’m not telling you what I do. I’m open to you guessing, though.”

“A personal trainer?”

“No.”

“A nude model.”

“No.”

“A bodyguard?”

“Why, are you hiring?” He winks. “And no, but I do sometimes punch people in the face.”

“For your job? Are you a boxer?”

“No.”

“So, you’re around naked men, have to get tested regularly, and sometimes you punch people in the face.”

He nods.

“An enigma. Very mysterious.”

He nods quickly. “Can I ask a question?”

“If I say no, we both know you’ll ask anyway.”

“So, like . . .” He turns more to me. “The last time was great, right? Like it wasn’t just me? I mean I just, it was, wow. Like, *wow* wow.”

“I’m rethinking all of this.”

“I’m just saying, it was amazing, right? I mean, I just lay there, so maybe it was only good for me. I don’t normally let my partner do all the work. I’m a giver. I’ve been told I’m a five-star eater. Had to look up what that meant.” He grins like the devil but then it falls flat. “I mean, maybe they were lying to me. Though I like to think what I lack in technique I

make up for with enthusiasm. I'm a very eager lover. Most of the time. I mean, you practically did all the work, and I barely did anything but—"

"Wha—what?" What the hell is he talking about? Just lay there? He offered up his beautiful body like a gift. I've never had that much fun with someone. But instead of all that embarrassing shit I don't feel like sharing, I just shrug.

"It was okay." He glares at me flatly. "Fine. It was great."

"Because I haven't felt like that ever," he admits. "And sometimes when my brain gets fixed on something, I can't think of anything else. I mean, not in an obsessive way. Well, maybe. Like, I'm not 'wearing your skin' obsessive, but like, really craving more of what happened between us. It's all I can think about." He takes a breath. "That's it. Your move, rock star." He snorts. "I fucked a rock star."

"I . . . I don't know what to say." My brain tries to sift through all the word vomit. "You give me a headache."

He nods.

"It was great sex, Atlas. Just relax, okay."

"I prepped in case you were—I mean if we—"

I need to shut this gorgeous boy up. I go to him and push him against my couch and watch him fall on it. I slide into his lap, pleased when his hands find space on my hips then smooth up my spine. "I'm going to fuck you. Okay?" I grab his face and pull his attention to me. "We're going to do this exactly how I want to do it."

"What do you mean?" He kneads my hips as they roll on his lap.

One more night and I'm going to unleash everything I am on him. One more night. "Do you remember your safe word?"

"Pterodactyl."

My eyes shut. "Ridiculous."

"Why?"

"Because you might need it."

I dip my fingers under the hem of his shirt and draw it over his head. His mouthwatering chest is as beautiful as I remember it. He's so fucking masculine, so perfect. I squeeze his pecs in my hand. He drives me fucking crazy.

"Your body's insane." I squeeze again with a smile, and he shudders when my thumbs work over his nipples. "You're beautiful."

He licks his lips. "Kiss me."

I grab his jaw in my hand. “You’re not making the demands, understood?”

“Can I please have a kiss?” he whines, licking his lips.

“Brat.” I lightly pat the side of his face. “What do you say?”

Atlas’s eyes darken. “Please, sir, can I have a kiss?”

Oh, fuck yeah.

“Are you going to be good for me?” He nods. “What?”

“Yes sir. I’m going to be good.”

“Are you going to listen?”

“Yes sir.” His cock jumps under me.

“Did you play with your dildo before coming here?”

“No sir. I wanted you.”

“You want me to stretch you out?”

He nods eagerly. “I want it.”

My fingers lace around his throat and I give in. Just a taste. My lips brush his, and a soft sigh leaves him. Fuck, now I remember. This feeling, this heat. All from a kiss. Our chemistry is insane, that’s all. He’s a good kisser. His lips are soft. He’s so eager.

“Kissing you is awesome,” he says against my mouth.

Ridiculous boy.

I slide off his lap, ignoring the desperate noise that leaves his lips. His black sweats strain in the front. “Pants off. Then turn around.”

He lifts his hips, pushing his sweats and boxers down in one motion. The fabric drags over his thighs, exposing him inch by mouthwatering inch. Strong legs. Gorgeous cock. For a moment I just stare at him.

“Turn around,” I say quieter now. “Face the back of the couch. Ass up.”

He moves quickly, climbing onto the cushions, knees sinking in as he braces himself. There’s no hesitation, just eagerness, like he’s helpless to do anything but follow my orders. My eyes trail down his shoulders, muscles bunched as he grips the couch. The muscles in his back shift. Then I look at his ass and tilt my head, looking at the smooth patch of skin.

“Did you try to shave?” I look at the single hairless patch on his ass. “What were you doing?” He glances back, then groans, dropping his head.

“I tried a wax strip, okay? But that shit hurt!”

A laugh nearly slips out of me. “Why the hell would you do that?” I bite the inside of my cheek.

“I thought you might want, like, I don’t know, a smoother workspace. Forgive me for being considerate!” He pouts. This giant man is actually pouting.

“Your obsession with your own body hair is something, Atlas.”

He twists to look at me. “It’s a lot. I know it’s a lot.” I’m not sure where this fixation comes from, but I don’t mind quieting every negative thought he has.

I step closer and reach for his chin to turn his head just enough to look at me. “Listen to me.” His eyes flick up to mine. “Your body hair is not the problem.” I drag my thumb down the center of his bottom lip. “Your shape, your size, your body. It’s fucking perfect.” I lean in, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. “It’s your fucking mouth you should worry about.”

I get off the back of the couch and look over my prize. I grab his ass in my hands and squeeze.

“Perfect ass.”

His cock hangs between his legs, hard and waiting.

“What do you want, Atlas?”

“Your tongue. Please.”

I dip my fingers between his cheeks.

“Oh, fuck yeah.”

My hands hold him open, keeping him exactly where I want him, and I lean in close enough for him to feel my breath. He’s practically vibrating in my hands.

I lean in slowly at first, just enough to hear him react. His whole body jumps with a flick of my tongue. Broken sounds leave him as he pushes back against me. “Fuck—”

“I said stay.”

He sags a little with a whine.

I dive back in; his cheeks cradle my face. Fuck, he tastes so good. Every moan urges me on. I spit and smooth my fingers over his clenching hole.

I almost laugh at the hairless patch on his ass.

“Don’t you ever wax again, you hear me?” He pushes his ass back to me, and I spread him wider, licking, kissing, all while desperate moans leave his lips.

Atlas arches his back, pushing harder against my face and moaning. I slap him once, twice, then smooth my fingers along his crease. Pulling him apart again, I dip my tongue inside, wiggling my muscle. I’ve never been

this turned on by a muscular body before. I slap his ass then suck and kiss until he's shaking.

His hand works his cock and he spreads his legs wider. "Fuck me, please."

I rise to my feet. "You want it?" I kick off my jeans, jerking my cock as Atlas reaches behind to rub his hole. "That's where you need me?"

"Yes sir."

Those words send a shiver down my spine. I reach for the lube, stroking myself. "Pull your ass apart for me."

He obeys instantly, resting his face on the back of the couch and spreading himself open. I grab a condom, ripping the packet with my teeth, and roll it down my shaft, then I slick myself and stroke, watching his greedy hole clench with anticipation.

I move behind him and slowly push in. The tight resistance makes him groan as I fill him completely, only stopping when my hips meet his ass. I pause to let him catch his breath, his forehead pressed into the couch, buried in his arms.

"Holy fuck."

"Too much?"

"Fucking perfect." His voice comes out strained. He arches his back a little more, pushing his ass back against me, and I start to thrust. Slowly at first, then harder as his moans grow louder. Every movement pulls those beautiful needy sounds from him.

"Oh my god, Gage."

I lean over him, gripping his face to look at me as I drive into him. "Fuck, you feel amazing."

"So good," he mutters. "Oh god . . . Gage."

I lean down, kissing the back of his neck as I thrust harder. My hand snakes between his legs as he whimpers. "More?"

He nods fast. "Harder."

"You want it harder?" I kiss the back of his head. "What do you say?"

He pushes back again, meeting my every movement. "Harder. P-please sir."

I pull out suddenly and slap his ass. His eyes blaze, then confusion hits as I sit down on my couch and pat my lap. "Turn around. Sit on my cock."

He swallows before turning and slowly sitting on my dick. "Holy shit, wait—" He freezes, and I let him take a minute, bracing his feet on the edge

of the couch. His large body nearly swallows me, the heat of him soaking into my skin. He lowers down with a quiet groan.

“You okay?” I adjust a little as he sits halfway on my cock, letting him take his time.

“That, wow, that’s something.”

“A good something?”

“Too good.”

He’s really heavy, but I cup his ass and thrust up into him.

“No, Gage.”

I ignore him and fuck up into him.

“Fuck, wait, wait.” He’s still hovering a bit, not sinking fully onto my lap.

“What’s the matter, Atlas? You’re not going to lose your load, are you? Not yet.”

“Gage!” he whines as I fuck up into him fast. “Oh my god, that feels so good.” He sinks down completely. “Holy sh-shit.”

He begins to grind on my lap, bouncing up and down and moaning louder at every thrust I meet him with. I wish I could see his dick bouncing, but instead his back presses against me. “Gage, I’m—stop, stop.”

“What’s your word?”

“Fuck me . . . Fuck.” He grinds down on my cock, rolling his hips, and I watch his beautiful body move. “Holy shit. Holy fuck. I’m coming!” He grinds down on me, moaning loudly, then collapses back onto me, crushing me under his body weight. “Oh my god.”

He shivers against me, and I wrap my arms around him, holding him close as he spasms around my cock. His skin is so warm, and I sit there hugging him close for just a moment and breathing him in. Just for a moment, before I let go and put my mask back on.

“Did I say you could come?” I sprinkle soft kisses against his shoulder.

He heaves a little. “No.”

“No, huh? Did you say your safe word?”

“No.” I reach around him to stroke his softening cock as he grunts.

“Such a messy brat”

“I’m sorry,” he pants. “That just felt so good.”

“Yeah?” I kiss under his ear. “Get up here. Lie back gently on the floor with your ass on the couch.”

He glances behind him, unsure, and I help guide him into position. His upper body settles on the carpet while his hips remain propped against the couch, leaving him open and exposed in a way that makes my chest tighten.

I sink my fingers into him and watch him squirm. “Sensitive?” He nods. “You know what to say.” I press deeper, twisting my fingers, and watch him moan.

“No,” he whines, though there’s no real resistance in it.

I wrap my fingers around his cock, stroking him back to life. Two fingers turn to three. With a wicked smile, I stroke that bundle of nerves, and he shakes his head weakly, trying to move my hand away. With my fingers inside him, I curl over him, taking his soft cock between my lips.

“Did you think we were done here?” He blinks his eyes open. “We’re just getting started.”

I haven’t had enough, and tonight I’m going to get my fill.

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NINE

Gage



“Have you had enough?”

Atlas blinks at me, those wild blue eyes soaking in everything we’ve done. I’m exhausted, but I’m not ready to end this. I just keep prolonging it. He’s come twice now. Once on my lap and then again with my fingers stuffed deep inside him.

His chest heaves as he blinks up at me. His ass still rests against the couch, his shoulders on my carpet. I take a seat on the backrest of the couch, looking over his gorgeous body. The dark hair on his chest is matted with sweat, every hard line of his body defined as he breathes deep. His legs fall back and open for me. Vulnerable. He’s half hard now, cum drying on his stomach from his last orgasm. He opens his mouth to speak but shuts it and shakes his head.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” My palm cracks across his ass.

“Fuck!” He whines, twisting when I slap his hole, making him hiss. “No. No sir.”

“Look at you. Not talking so much now, are we?” I slap him again, and his yelp morphs into a deep moan. He squeezes his balls in his hand and grips his pec with the other. “What do you want?”

I stroke my cock, sitting here watching, then slide forward and loom over him. I point my dick down, probing his sensitive hole with the blunt head. Then I slip inside his sloppy heat before pulling out again. Fuck, he

feels delicious. I do it again, just tease with the tip then slip out again. “I can’t hear you?”

“Stop teasing ah—” I slap his ass, then grab it hard in my hand, and his moan rolls through me. There’s something addicting about his submission. This giant man crumbling at the promise of me.

I’ve never felt power like this. Nothing this sweet.

My hand smooths through the hair on his stomach, feeling every cut ridge of his abs he’s clearly worked so hard for. It must be appreciated. Worshipped. When he deserves it.

“Come here.” I get off the back of the couch and watch him roll, dropping to the floor and kneeling before me. I walk to him and grip his throat in my hand, smoothing my thumb against his pulse point. “Open.” He opens his mouth and sticks out his tongue.

Jerking my cock, I swipe precum onto my fingers and shove them into his mouth, watching him moan like the greedy mess I know he is. “What do you say?”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Good boy.” I kiss him and almost lose myself to his soft lips on mine. Kissing Atlas is better than any drug I’ve ever tried. The highest dose of dopamine I can get. I nearly lose myself with the swipe of his tongue. I’m drowning and I don’t even care. I pull back, regaining my composure. “On your knees. Show me how bad you want to come again.”

He kneels on the floor and takes my cock in his hand. Fucking hell. He strokes me then drags his gaze to my eyes before latching those sweet lips around my crown. Humming along my length, he sucks me.

“My balls.” I put my foot on the couch, giving him space. My fingers tighten on the back of his head, pulling his hair. With one hand around my dick, the other plays and pulls at my sac. It’s heat and pressure. “*Ungh*, that’s it, Atlas.”

I roll my hips harder and thrust deeper with each passing minute as I cup the back of his head, fucking him roughly. I reach deep, feeling the back of his throat swallow around me. I yank his hair, pulling him off me. “You’re so good, huh?” He nods. “Suck my balls.” He wastes no time burying his face between my legs and drawing them into his mouth. “Fuck, that’s it. So obedient.”

His tongue maps a path along my balls, traveling over my hole as I press his face harder against me. “That’s it. Soften me up.”

Something comes over him and he grips the tops of my thighs, pushing me against his face. A thrill runs through me. My dick aches as he strokes me with his tongue. It's been so long since someone has touched me like this. I forgot how good it feels.

I reach over onto the couch and grab the box of condoms and rip another one open with my teeth.

"Lie down," I demand, and I watch him as he falls back against the plush carpet. I straddle his head and bring my cock to his lips, groaning when he engulfs me. I thrust into his mouth, giving him a little more with each pass until he's slapping my thighs and I'm pulling back to let him breathe.

I move down his body, kissing his jaw then his lips. "Have you had enough?"

He shakes his head like I knew he would. At first, I wanted to test his limits, but now the realization hits me that once we're done here, that's it. We're done. We have to be. As much fun as I'm having, I can't keep it going. I just can't

I settle between his legs as he draws them up, and as I push inside, I watch his eyes roll back, his nails biting under his thighs. "Still so tight." I roll my hips. "Do you want me to come now, Atlas?"

He licks his lips, swallowing with a nod. My body hums with my climax. I'm close, but I want to hear him scream one last time. I'm just having fun right now. That's all.

"Turn around." I slip out of his body and watch him scramble into position, sticking his ass in the air, tilting his hips and spreading his legs. I shove three fingers inside him, drinking in his hiss. "How hard?"

Atlas cranes his neck to look at me. "Make me scream."

I brace his hips and shove into him fast and dirty. He yelps, pressing his fingers tightly into the rug. "That's it?"

"Harder. Fuck me hard." His chest collapses against the carpet, his nails digging into it. "I'm going to come."

I unleash on him all my frustrations and anger. The collision of skin on skin and his moans echo through the room. My hips will probably bruise. His ass is so bright with my handprints. His hand works furiously, and I feel him clench around me as he comes with a cry. I unload into the condom, squeezing his ass in my hands. "Holy fuck, Atlas." My hips punch forward lazily.

“Thank you. Thank you,” Atlas whispers.

His body shudders around me, his walls still strangling my dick.

I look down at us where we’re connected, my hips pressed to his ass, and I curl over him, pressing soft slow kisses along his spine. He’s softly shaking, his head buried in the crook of his elbow. “I’m going to pull out,” I warn him, before slowly pulling out and letting my cock hang between my legs. “Hey.” I kiss along his spine, the adrenaline waning from us both. “On your back.”

I press one last kiss to his shoulder and move off him. He makes a lazy attempt to flip over, lying against the plush carpet, and I cover him again, my hands on either side of his head when I straddle him. How does a nearly six-and-a-half-foot man look so small beneath me?

“You okay?”

His arm is slung over his eyes, but his lips split into a wide smile. “So okay,” he breathes.

I grip his jaw. He pulls his arm away from his eyes and I kiss him firmly. “You’re so good for me.” This feeling is addictive. Watching him obey me is a head rush unlike anything. I feel good. I feel strong. For the first time in fuck, years, I think, I feel like me again.

Atlas surprises me, pulling me against his body. Fuck it. I give in, letting his large arms wrap around me. “Thank you.”

I’m not sure what he’s thanking me for. I look down at him. “We should shower. You’re going to crash soon.”

I stand, reaching out to help him up.

He’s a little unsteady as he gets up. The muscles in his thighs bunch and tremor. “Don’t you want me to go?” Yes, I do. I need him to leave, but I’m too tired to care. That’s it. I’m just feeling lazy is all, and maybe this one night can extend just a little. Only a little.

“Do you want to go?”

He looks around my apartment and shakes his head. “Not really, but I have work in the morning.”

“What? Come on.” Am I whining now? Embarrassing. I clear my throat. “You know what I do for a living. Why can’t I know what you do? What, are you famous too?” I laugh but I watch him chew his bottom lip, looking away from me. Shit, is he? Who the fuck is this man?

He thinks for a moment. “I think it’s best not to. Not right now.”

I’m too tired to argue. “Whatever, be mysterious, mister I’m around a lot of naked men.”

“It’s a lot less sexy than it sounds, trust me.”

I lead him to the bathroom and turn on the shower, sneaking looks at him as I do. He’s swaying a little, his movements slowed. “Tired?”

“Getting there.” I watch him and can’t help admiring him. It’s been a long time since I’ve slept with someone new. It was never worth the trouble of hiding it. I’m not sure what made me go home with Atlas that first night, and I damn sure don’t know why I brought him here tonight. Other than for hot sex, because fuck, this chemistry we have is cinematic. Maybe it’s just attraction. I’ve never been this attracted to someone. That’s it. That’s all it must be.

It’s not like he’s going to ask me for more. He won’t even tell me what he does for a living. Which is good. This is the last time, so I’ll make it a good time. “Here.” I grab his hand and pull him in with me. His movements are lethargic. I wasn’t easy on him.

I take the sponge and soap him up as his eyes droop a bit.

“Three times.” A wide smile grows before I can stop it. “Very impressive.”

“I just—that was.” He lets out a heavy breath. “Yeah.”

“Yeah,” I agree, soaping him up. “Turn.” I forgot about the hairless patch on his ass. “How much did this hurt?” I rub it with a laugh.

He shakes his head. “I don’t know how people do it. That was insane. I guess I only like pain when it’s sexy.” I laugh, kissing his shoulder and hanging the sponge up then wrapping my arms around his large body. Atlas doesn’t say a word. His hands come up to cup mine braced on his stomach. “Can we agree?”

“Huh?”

“Best sex ever?” He looks over his shoulder at me.

I almost don’t want to give in, but my grin is growing before I can stop it. “Best sex ever.”

I hurry and finish cleaning him, his eyes growing heavier with every minute.

Atlas follows me out to my room, and I know this should be the part where he leaves, but I don’t have it in me to let this end right now. “Um, you seem a little shaky. Are you hungry?”

He shakes his head, glancing at my bed. “Just tired.”

I nod. “Well, I mean, you can uh, lie down if you’d like.”

“A sleepover?”

“Not a sleepover. A nap over.”

“It’s like one in the morning.”

“So . . . an extended nap.”

“Gage.” I look up and instantly regret it. His grin is ridiculous. “You want me to sleep over, don’t you?”

My lips purse. “Just get in the fucking bed.”

He slips under my sheets as if he’s done it a million times before.

I slide in after him and don’t stop him when he moves to lie against me. My arm has a mind of its own, coming around him and pulling him closer. It’s quiet for a moment, except for the sound of his breathing, and I almost think he’s fallen asleep.

“You okay?”

He lets out a small breath and looks up at me. “Yeah, I am.” He smiles softly. “That was just a lot.”

I huff a quiet laugh. “Yes, it was.”

He turns a little onto his side to look at me, and watches me a moment like he’s trying to piece some puzzle together. “Is it always like that with you? I mean, do you do that with other people?”

The question washes away any warmth left in me. I swallow. Atlas doesn’t know, he doesn’t know, and it’s a normal question. Get it together. “Uh, what?” I ask.

“Like the yes sir, no sir. That?”

I want to lie and move on. I should, but I don’t know. There’s an innocence about him that I want to lean into. I don’t feel like I need to hide. “Not always,” I decide to say. “Just uh . . . with you, I guess.” Dominance and submission have always turned me on, watching someone wait for my command and eagerly submit, but I’ve never gotten the chance to explore it.

And that’s the truth. Atlas brings out this side of me. I like the way he breaks. I love the way he snaps to obey me. I like the way he craves the same things I do. I guess not the same things. Opposite ends of the same seesaw.

His expression softens, something more vulnerable slipping into those bright blue eyes. “Just with me?”

I nod. “You don’t question. It’s like—” This is stupid.

“Like what, Gage?”

I chew my bottom lip. Exhaustion must be taking hold because I can't seem to keep my mouth shut. "It's like you trust me. That whatever I do to you, it'll be good. You don't question it."

"Why wouldn't I trust you?" he says finally.

Something in my chest tightens at that.

I reach over without thinking and brush my fingers lightly against his arm. This right here isn't about control or intensity, just warm contact. He doesn't flinch away, but instead he leans into my touch, coming back to rest against my chest.

Another stretch of quiet settles between us but it doesn't feel uncomfortable.

"You know . . ." I feel his fingers run down my chest. "You're not as scary as you think you are." I can't see him, but I can imagine the playful smile tugging on his face.

I snort. "Is that so?"

"Yeah." He glances up at me. "Even when it's almost too much you check in. You pay attention, and that isn't scary. You're brutal, but aware. Demanding but gentle." He sighs against me. "I like it."

My fingers don't stop trailing the path on his bicep as we lie here. "Stay for a bit?" I ask.

"Just a nap, right?"

My smile is instant. "Just a quick nap."

Atlas settles more fully against me, then the soft rumble of his snores sound through the room. It doesn't irritate me. If anything, it settles me more. And I close my eyes and pretend for just one night I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

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TEN

Atlas



My alarm splits through the room, forcing my eyes open.

I stretch a little. *Fuuuck*, I'm so sore. How are my muscles this sore? I feel something beside me then realize I'm not alone and this is not my bed. Fuck. Where am I? I lift my head then realize exactly where I am.

Gage didn't kick me out after last night. More than that, it looked for a moment as if he really didn't want to. Like he hated the idea of me leaving.

Okay, apparently my orgasms have made me delusional.

My alarm shrills again. "Shut that fucking thing off." Gage groans into his pillow.

I grab my phone and shut the alarm off before checking the time. Shit, I have to get down to the arena soon. I have a game tonight against the Otters, and until now I've been able push that from my mind.

I'm excited to see my friends, though. A soft ache hits my chest, and part of me wishes I was still on their team. I miss the environment in the Otters' locker room, and I know part of that's because of Oli. It's just a bit harder being the outsider than I thought it would be.

"If I open my eyes and look at my clock and see a number under eight, I'm going to be pissed." I look over at him with his hands tucked under his pillow. The sharp lines in his back rise and fall with his breath, his blue hair erratic from sleep.

I smile and lean in, kissing his shoulder. "Is seven forty-five bad?" He moves his head to glare at me, his bleary eyes thick with sleep. Fuck, he's

so much cuter in the morning. It's unfair. Then last night plays back like a movie. "Oh yeah, I just remembered."

"What?" His voice is rough with sleep.

"You're a rock star."

He snorts, rolling onto his back. "And you're mysterious."

"Very." I wink.

"Why do you have to get up this early?"

I drink him in. "I have to get ready for work."

"Ah." His arm lifts over his forehead as he shuts his eyes.

"Can I ask something?"

"You're going to ask anyway."

I roll onto my side facing him, and I fight the urge to kiss him. I don't know where he's at with morning breath, so I hold in the urge. "Last night was good, right?"

His eyes open. "I mean, wasn't it?"

"Oh, it was great. So great." I think about how I want to say this. "And the thing is, I'd really like it to keep being great." His dark brows knit together. "So, this is what I'm thinking. When we're both here, we can keep doing whatever this is—"

"Atlas—"

"No, listen. Shit, I wish I had my whiteboard." He rolls his eyes. "I know this is supposed to be one night only, but clearly we're having too much fun to stop. So why stop? You said it yourself; you haven't stopped thinking about it. I may irritate you, but I turn you on. Maybe I turn you on *because* I irritate you. I don't know how your brain works." I think I see his lips quirk. "I'm not saying this needs to turn into anything. We're both too busy for anything else. But if we're both home, we bang. Easy."

He's quiet for a moment then his eyes open and he stares up at the ceiling. Anticipation churns in my gut. I don't know what's going on, but I don't want it to stop. Maybe this will be good for me. Casual sex with a stranger, exploring things I've only ever thought about, is a better alternative to drinking, I think.

"Atlas, I don't—"

"Just think about it. Never did the *yes sir* thing before either. That was fun." Aside from how hot it all was, there was something else. There was some part of me that wanted to be good for him. I don't know what's

happening inside my brain, but man, that scratched an itch I didn't know existed.

I want to do it again.

"I don't want a relationship," he says firmly. No arguments from me. I'm in no way ready for all that. I can barely keep myself together let alone care for someone else that way.

"Neither do I." I take a chance and climb over his body, watching his eyes go wide as I lie on top of him, sinking my weight down onto him. He must be about six feet tall himself, but I do have some mass on him.

"Atlas, get off, you weigh like a thousand pounds."

"Two twenty." I lay my head on his chest. "Listen, last night was . . . fuck, Gage. That was something I've never felt before. I never thought I would—"

"Obey? Melt for me? Come with no hands." He grins wider. "You're such a good boy, Atlas." He pats my head and I know he's teasing, but yeah, I like that.

"See, there." I roll off him. "My dick really likes that."

"And we're back to ridiculousness."

"I'm just saying we don't need to get to know each other. You clearly have a lot going on. I'm rarely home for—"

"The work you won't tell me about." His dark eyes roam over my face, and damn, I like him.

Which is bad, but I'm all about bad decisions it seems. "This coming Friday I'll be gone for nearly ten days. When I get back, I think we should try again. Wait. Do you have more shows? Or like, recording? I have no idea how that works."

Something in his eyes hits me in the stomach and I don't know what it is or if I should ask about it. "That was the last show on our tour. At home. We have three months off and then we need to start recording a new album." His voice seems hollow. "I plan on being here most of the time if I can help it."

"Well, when I get back, then. If you're here, if you want." Something's going on with him, but I don't want to ask. No personal information, I guess.

His head lolls to face me. He's got really pretty eyes. "I want to say no," he says softly. "But I can't."

"Yeah?"

“Yes.” He swallows. “You definitely turn me on and irritate me equally.”

“How do you feel about morning breath?”

His brow cocks.

“I want to kiss you.”

With a heavy roll of his eyes, he leans in, pressing his lips to mine. This is a terrible idea, but I can’t stop it. I’ve never felt like this before. I want to lie in bed all day today and touch him.

“I have to get ready.”

“Want me to walk you down to your apartment?”

“Aw, what a gentleman.”

He rolls his eyes. “I need to grab coffee.”

“I think you like me and want to make sure I get home safe.”

“Atlas, you’re twice my size. I’m not protecting you from shit.”

“The muscles are for show. I’m not confrontational.”

“Unless you have to occasionally punch people.”

My smile snaps wide onto my face. “Hazard of the job.” A heavy sigh leaves his lips as he watches me. I want to ask what, but he gets up, flashing me his biteable ass before opening his dresser and grabbing clothes. He tugs on his briefs, a pair of ripped jeans, and a red T-shirt.

I get up and slip on my clothes.



In the elevator, we wait for my floor. There’s this awkward tension settling over us. I’m not sure why. “Do you want my number, just in case?”

“In case of what?” Gage asks.

I shrug. “So you know when I’m home.” I think. “I mean, unless you want me to shine a bat signal from the roof. Then you just look outside and see this flashing light in the sky and know it’s go time.”

“What would our bat signal be?” He surprises me.

“I—” I think. “Damn, that’s a good question. An erect penis seems too obvious.”

“You’re probably right,” he says flatly, taking my phone out of my hand and swiping up. He punches something in then grabs his phone. It vibrates in my hand, and I see his name light up with a text.

Gage: You’re annoying.

“And sexy.” I wink at him. He shakes his head as the door opens. “This is going to be so much fun. Strangers with benefits.”

Gage walks beside me. “I don’t think it’s fair you know what I do for a living.”

“That’s on you, man. You should have covered that tattoo.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not every day I let someone put their mouth on it.”

“I did.” I beam. “I did do that. Lucky me.”

“Ridiculous.”

I stop short, startling him. “Um, just so you know, I won’t tell anyone. I promise.”

He watches me a moment before the hard lines of his face soften. Just a touch. “I know you won’t.”

We turn down the hall and I freeze. “Fuck.” I watch the two towering men bang on my door.

Oli’s head turns to me as we approach my apartment. I’m shocked when I reach him, pulled forward by his strong arms. He hugs me tight, slapping me on the back. “Holy shit, it’s so good to see you,” he says. “It’s been months.”

He squeezes me tighter.

“You’re suffocating me, you ugly prick.”

“Hey, watch it.” I hear Andre. “That’s my very gorgeous husband you’re talking to.” Oli laughs, letting me go, and I give Andre a hug.

“What are you both doing here?”

“We came to see if you wanted to ride with us. We got in last night.”

I nearly forget about the man behind me. Shit. I turn and see Gage standing there with his hands shoved into his pockets, looking bored as ever.

“And what’s going on here? Walk of shame?” Andre grins between us.

“That’s . . . hard to explain.”

“I bet. Real hard.” Andre wiggles his fingers in Gage’s direction. He returns the gesture with a tight-lipped smile.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know these two idiots were coming here.”

“We’re just taking him to—”

“Work!” I cut Oli off. “Work, they’re taking me to work.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Oli asks.

“He doesn’t want me to know what he does for a living.” Gage smiles tightly. “Being really cool about it.”

“Why haven’t you told him?” Andre asks me.

Gage shrugs. “I don’t care, really. All I know is he travels a lot, punches people occasionally, and is around a lot of naked men.” He winks that last part at me sending heat through my belly.

“It’s not as sexy as it sounds,” Oli says.

I slap his chest. “That’s what I said!”

Gage runs his tongue along his cheek then nods, walking up to me. “I’ll leave you to it.” He lingers for a moment, and I almost lean in to kiss him before he gives us a short wave. “Goodbye, giant strangers.”

I want to tell him to come in but that’s stupid. I have to leave anyway. “Bye.” I watch him walk back to the elevator, then I let my friends into my apartment.

“Um, what the fuck was that?” Andre looks back at the door. “He’s fucking hot.”

“Hey!” Oli growls. “You legally gave up your right to look at other men this summer.”

“Not sure that’s how it works, babe.” Andre smacks Oli’s ass as he sits down on my couch. “So, what’s going on there?”

“Nothing’s going on,” I lie, because damn, there’s no way I’m telling my friends about the shit we do together.

“This is a nice place.” Oli drifts through my kitchen like he owns it, tugging drawers open and peeking into cabinets. “How’s practice been?”

I lean back against the counter, watching him rummage through my kitchen like the nosy bastard he is. I try to keep my voice level. Oli has a real gift for knowing when something’s wrong.

“It’s been okay,” I say as evenly as I can manage. “It’s just different. A different environment. Taking some getting used to.” And I will get used to it.

“Have you punched Rome in the fucking face yet, is what my man means.” Andre laughs.

“Rome is . . .” How do I tell them? He’s not what I expected. But I won’t tell them that. It doesn’t matter, at the end of the day Rome’s always been a dirty player, and he ended Grey’s career. “He’s Rome.”

Oli nods, opening my fridge. “No food?”

“I eat out.”

“I bet you do.” Andre grins.

“Shut up.” I roll my eyes, and now the thought is in my mind, I can’t force it to leave. Last night comes back in flashes. Him standing over me, letting my tongue travel between his cheeks. I leave in a few days for a long road trip, but I’m already thinking about the next time I’ll have Gage in my bed.

“There’s no alcohol either.” Oli shuts the fridge.

He glances back at me. I wish they understood this part of me. I think it’s confusing to them, though. I barely understand it myself. It makes me feel like I’m in between. Like it’s not that serious because I go to work, I do my job. So what am I complaining about? I have control, I don’t get withdrawals. It’s not something I need.

Until it is, I guess.

Until my mind starts to unravel and the thoughts choke out any reasoning. When my heart hurts. Then I crave it. It’s worse when I’m alone. “Well, that’s good,” Andre says.

“I’m staying sober. For good this time.”

“That’s incredible,” Andre says.

Another knock echoes against my door. “What now?” I mutter, pushing off the counter. I go to the door and check the peephole and see Knox standing on the other side before I open it.

“Oh shit.” Andre gets up to give Knox a hug. “Sleeping with the enemies I see. Is he telling you all about our plays, which will definitely make us win our game tonight?”

“I’d die before letting anyone just win. You guys are going to eat it tonight.”

“Mmm, but we happen to have the number one goalie in the league.” Oli grins. “Sexy as hell too.” He kisses the side of his head then whispers something in Andre’s ear that makes his eyes heavy.

“I was headed out and came to see if you wanted a ride.” Knox drops down beside Andre on my couch.

“I’m going to ride down with Oli and Andre, thanks though.”

“Of course. So, how’s life on the Otters? How’s Colton? Still a fucking loser?” I still don’t know what the deal is, but I want to. Colton and Knox have some weird feud that none of us fully understand. Even when I was on the Otters, Colton never talked about it.

Andre taps his chin. “What was it, babe? What did Colton say to us?”

“Oh.” Oli snaps his fingers. “Colton said if you see Knox tell him to eat shit, actually.”

Knox salutes Oli. “Message received. I’ll hold it close to my heart.” He grins.

“Are we ever going to know what the deal is between you two?” Oli asks.

“Ask him.” Knox smiles unkindly. “I’m not the scheming backstabbing dick.”

“Doesn’t his brother play on Grey’s college team?”

“Yeah, Brandon,” Andre says.

“I bet the prick apple doesn’t fall far from the prick tree,” Knox says.

“That doesn’t make sense. That’s his half-brother, not his father.”

“Add the whole family to the list.” Knox shakes his head. “Legacies. I’m sure his brother is just as bad and he’ll be picked first round on name alone. He’s a Montague. His grandfather, father, and his brother. That guy’s got a free ride to the pros.” Knox rises. “Well, I guess I’ll see you all down at the arena.” He leans, in hugging Andre one more time. “Get ready to eat shit.” He sticks his tongue out and winks.

Oli looks over at Andre. “We’re going to kick their ass tonight.”

I smirk. “We’ll see.”



Since coming here, I’ve felt a little soft thrum of dread before games and practices, but I don’t know if it’s seeing Oli and Andre or the fact that last night was a solid ten out of ten, but I’m feeling really good right now. I’m excited to play. I’m excited to play against my friends.

During practices when I was on the Otters, I used to have a lot of fun with Grey and Oli. We’re all competitive as hell, but it was on a different level with the three of us. It’s going to be brutal, but I can’t wait to get out there.

Walking down the hall to the locker room, I pull my jersey over my head and freeze when I hear voices down the hall.

“I’m fucking tired of this shit.”

Rome again? What is his deal with Coach?

I slow, instinct telling me to back up, but there's nowhere to go without making a noise.

"You can get as tired as you fucking please," Coach Grady snaps. "You know what your role is here, and if you've forgotten, let me remind you."

"This is stupid," Rome fires back, his voice lower now but no less sharp. "Things are changing. I don't need to hide—"

"If you want to be on this team," Grady cuts in. "Then you play the part you were assigned."

"That might have worked a couple of years ago, but not now."

My stomach tightens. What is he talking about?

"Andre left, and he and Oli are changing—"

"They didn't change shit," Grady barks. "You want to be here? Or do you want to break your contract and owe millions?"

Silence.

I take a slow step back, then another, careful not to make a sound. Rome steps out, nearly slamming into me.

For a second neither of us says anything. His jaw's tight, eyes burning from whatever he was just talking about. His lips part slightly, but then he shakes his head, knocking into my shoulder as he storms past me toward the locker room. I watch him walk for a moment before passing by Coach's office.

"Atlas," he barks.

Shit.

I turn back and duck inside his office. The air feels heavier than it should. The thing is, I used to get chewed out all the time on the Otters, but never once did I feel like this. It's like the instinct to run screams at me. My old coach was a hard ass, but you knew he gave a damn about you. About all of us.

There's something that settles here in the quiet of his office that makes my stomach sink.

"Are you all set to play the Otters tonight?"

"Yes, Coach."

"You remember who you play for tonight. I don't give a shit what friends you have on that team. You go out there and you leave carnage behind you. Understood?"

"Yes, Coach." A little intense, but alright.

He watches me for a moment, brown eyes heavy on me like he's trying to dissect me. He watches me for another unnerving moment then shuffles papers on his desk. "You better be ready."

"Is that it?"

He blinks at me and whips his glasses off. "You need more?"

I shake my head. "No, Coach."

"Then get the hell out of here, and shut the door on your way out."

I step back and into the hall, nearly tripping over myself.

The locker room is louder now. Someone's playing music. Some guys are already dressed, some are ripping tape or getting ready. Everyone is talking normally.

I look across the room and notice Rome is already at his stall, taping his stick like nothing happened. Knox stands in the middle of the room going over something on a tablet with a couple of guys.

I sit down and start lacing up my skates, my fingers moving on autopilot. I focus on them so hard my vision blurs and burns a little. It never felt like this before, and I'm not saying I need the family vibe to play hockey. The Otters weren't the only team I've played for. The thing is, when you've played for a couple of years with such a close group of guys, they become your family.

And I blew all that up.

Right now, I should be listening to Abba. I should be ignoring the way Ryker likes to dance before games, as if any of us want to see his horrible dance moves. Grey would be beside me, getting ready in silence, which I rarely granted him, and Oli would be checking in with each of the guys to make sure our heads were in it. Mental health has always been important to him. Which is one of the reasons why I tucked the ugly truth of mine away in a dark corner so he couldn't evaluate me.

We play a game, but with them it felt like we played for more.

Oli made sure of that. He built that team up. Everyone respected each other, we showed up.

This feels fractured.

Not that Knox isn't trying or he isn't a good captain. He is, you can see it in the way everyone listens to him when he talks. The thing is, leadership trickles down, and if it's broken at the top, the cracks start showing.

Right now, this close to puck drop, our coach would be in the locker room with us trying to keep our heads clear. The Vipers coach is sitting

alone in his office, waiting for us to go out there and win the game for him. Not us, not our team or fans. Him.

Coach Grady doesn't see players, he sees pieces. Pawns on his chessboard. Disposable.

Knox claps his hands, snapping my attention up. "Alright, guys." We all quiet as he speaks. "This is nothing new, right? The Otters know how we fight, that we don't quit. We're fast, clean, and fucking together. Don't get dragged into dumbass fights. Keep the penalties to a minimum. You know Oli's going to antagonize the shit out of us. This is our first game with them since playoffs, and I want to remind them why we're the fucking team to beat. Bring it in."

All the guys get up and go to the center of the room. I look back and see Rome slowly stand before joining us. "It's time to show the fuck up," he says. "For each other."

"For each other," everyone echoes, then we break.

The music starts to cut through the room, and just like that, it's time.

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ELEVEN

Gage



As soon as I step inside my room, I feel like something is wrong. I can't explain it, but it's like this ghost is haunting me, trying to warn me of impending doom. I set my bags down, and although it's quiet in here, I can't help feeling like I'm not alone.

The lamp beside the bed is on for one, which is weird.

The door clicks behind me, and I spin around and see Jim there in the doorway. Jim's nearly fifty, but he looks like he could be in his early to mid-forties.

"There you are."

My chest tightens. I don't like the way he speaks to me. He talks to me like I'm small, like I'm some fragile little thing he has to keep his voice steady around, careful not to spook me. He's always nice at first.

He steps closer and the room begins to shrink, the walls pressing in around me the closer he gets to me. "Jim, I um, I told Chen—"

"Your friends already went out." What is he talking about? Why would they go out without me? "I told them you weren't feeling well."

My throat tightens. I eye the door and wonder if I can slip past him.

Jim keeps talking, but I'm trying to figure out how to get out of this. He said once. Just once. This is the sixth, or is it seventh time he's gotten me alone on the road. Would I have done this if I'd known he'd keep going? He said once, but once has already passed. There's no relief from this.

We nearly sold out our last show.

My friends are fed, warm, and living their dreams.

No, we're living our dreams, right? Isn't this what we always wanted?

Something cold wraps around my hand, and I startle realizing it's his fingers.

Inside me everything freezes. It's like my body shuts down and my mind goes away somewhere quiet during. It freaked me out the first time. Now it's second nature. It's like my mind hides somewhere, my brain blocking out the things he does to me. I'd say it's to protect me, but once it's over those thoughts crash down around me until I can't take it. It's affecting how I write. I noticed that after last time. Words aren't coming as easy as they used to.

Worst thing is, sometimes I don't even feel like writing at all, but when I do, only darkness pours out onto the page. Luckily Chen has stepped up more to help write. Jesper and Declan too. Bouncing ideas around with them is the only time I feel sane.

Jim smiles, slow and sickening. A knowing smile. The smile of a predator who knows their prey is as good as dead.

"Just you and me, Gage. No one to bother us." No one to save me.

The words hit like a face full of ice water. My heart begins to pick up, and I don't know what I can do. The walls begin to fade, the floor disappearing beneath my feet. It's like this black hole swallows me completely.

"You're so good for me, Gage."

I wake with a start, my head lifting to look around my apartment. I'm lying on the couch. I'm not sure when I fell asleep, but my notebook is still draped across my chest.

I've sat in my apartment all day today, restless and unable to do anything but think about last night, the show, and this morning. The apartment feels a hell of a lot smaller than it did days ago. It's still the same. Same kitchen, living room, couch, but something in the air has shifted.

I feel a bit empty and restless.

I've been sitting here with my notebook, writing down some lyrics, but nothing is really sticking. Chen called and asked me to go out but I didn't want to. In my socks, I get up and pace the hardwood in a rhythm that should be calming, but it's only amping up my anxiety. I shouldn't be thinking about anything. I shouldn't think about Atlas and what he's doing right now or what the hell he even does for work.

“Stop.” I grip the counter, stretching and hanging my head.

When I got back from getting coffee, I walked into my room and saw my pillow still fresh with the dent from his head. Then I lay down, and all I smelled was that woodsy scent of his. I think about the irritating words that came out of his mouth and how easily he wiped my annoyance with a simple smile.

Fuck, the idea of him is just as annoying as he is in person.

My eyes flick to my phone again. I unlock it and stare at Chen’s invitation. My friend loves to go out and party, he loves to be social, but every time I’m around a crowd, I feel so out of place.

Maybe I should go out and find someone else to shut this down. Remind myself that sex in general is great, it’s not just Atlas. It’s just the act that’s hot as hell. If I bring someone else home, it’ll feel the exact same way.

I go to my room and dress. I need to get out of here. I need to move. I grab my wallet and phone from the counter and head out the door. One person should be easy to forget. Instead, Atlas has lodged his annoying ass somewhere I can’t reach and easily get rid of. What I need is a distraction.

If he won’t leave my mind, I’ll just go out and remove him myself.



When I walk into Ruby’s, I’m confused seeing Quinn at the bar instead of Vanessa. A moment later, she comes out in a black and lime green jersey, and her eyes light up when she sees me. Vanessa is the owner of Ruby’s, a dive bar a little outside the city that used to be owned by her grandmother. I’ve lived here all my life and yeah, her grandmother kicked my underage ass out of here a few times when Chen and I used to try and sneak in. Ruby May was a sweet yet firm woman who didn’t take shit from anyone.

Just like her granddaughter.

Her red lips break out into a wide smile when she sees me, and I feel at ease already seeing her familiar face. Vanessa’s a Black woman in her mid-thirties. She’s the life and heart in this place and is very protective of her bar and patrons. Tonight, she’s wearing a pair of dark blue jeans, fit to her curvy waist, and her tight curls are pulled up into a voluminous ponytail.

“Hey, sugar.” She kisses me on the cheek as she passes me, walking to a table with a tray of drinks. She’s wearing metallic lime-green eye shadow

that pops against the bronze overtones of her skin. She looks as if she's ready for a pep rally. I catch a green and black ribbon in her hair paired with black hoop earrings as she passes.

I walk to the bar and slide onto a stool, nodding at Quinn. He's alright, but I really wanted to talk to Vanessa. She's easy to talk to and I just need to make sense of this dumbass bullshit I've got myself into. She doesn't tell you what you want to hear, instead she tells you what you need to hear, and I need a bit of that right now.

Why did I give Atlas my number? Why did I agree to keep doing this, and why the hell am I kind of disappointed he hasn't texted me yet? I don't even like him and he's fucking my head up.

The sex is great. Yes. However, it's not "ruin my life" great.

"You want a drink, Gage?"

I look up and smile at Quinn. I know he has a thing for me, but I've never given it much thought. He's cute, a little too young for me, though. I'm only twenty-seven and he's twenty-two I think, but still. Now that I think of it, how old is Atlas? Either way, I haven't given Quinn much thought, even if he flirts with me when I come here.

I wanted to find someone new, though, didn't I? And he is cute. His hair's a dark brown on top and bleached at the sides. He's got a lip piercing and a tattoo of a hummingbird on his neck. He's a bit shorter than I am, which I'd normally go for. Instead, I've found myself obsessing over a giant irritating boy with unnerving blue eyes and an ass sculpted by the gods.

"Gage?" I look up at him and force a smile. "A drink?"

"Uh, sure, can I have whiskey sour?"

He smiles. "You got it."

I feel a hand run along my shoulder and see Vanessa walk around me. "What's up? You look perturbed."

"Perturbed?" I laugh.

"It's my word of the day." Quinn slides my drink in front of me, and I thank him, taking a healthy sip.

"Well, I'm not perturbed. I just wanted to hang out. See if you were working. Why do you look like a cheerleader?"

She slaps my shoulder playfully. "I'm about to head out. Quinn's covering tonight." He gives me a shy wave. "But I don't think you came here to talk to Quinn." I shake my head, ignoring the way his face falls.

“Well, do you want to come to a hockey game? I have an extra ticket. I was supposed to bring a friend, but she’s sick.”

“Hockey?”

“Don’t look so disgusted.” She laughs. “My best friend is playing our home team tonight. She turns a little, showing off the name “Tavares” on her jersey.

“I don’t know anything about hockey.”

She slips off the bar stool. “No knowledge required. Come on. It’ll be fun. I have seats on the glass. Right where the action is.”

I take my drink and down the rest of the contents. I hate sports. I can’t stand the whole entire culture of it. I know some could say the same for rock music, but when you grow up watching your foster dad scream at the TV because his special little football team isn’t winning, it’s a bit of a turn off. It always brought out the worst in him.

Vanessa seems excited, though, and I do like hanging out with her. It’ll keep my mind off *him* at least. I look at Quinn, who seems to be waiting for me to say no and stay here with him instead. Quinn’s nice, but I can’t use him that way. It wouldn’t be fair with his feelings for me.

My shoulders sink. “Sure, fuck it, why not.”



The arena is deafening.

Maybe this chaos is what I need to keep my mind off Atlas. My phone went off on the ride over, and I hate how excited I got thinking it was him. It wasn’t. It was another text from Jim, and I shut my phone off.

I can’t keep doing this and letting him win.

What does that even look like? How can I stop it? If I cut him off, then where does that leave us? That night I met Atlas I was seconds from slipping off the edge. Now, I’m not sure what happened to me, but it’s like he ignited this fight inside me.

I don’t know how to get out of this.

How can I tell my friends our entire career is built on a lie? How can I do that to them? The shame I’d bring us would be career ending. I can’t do that to them. Music is our life, and this band is everything to the four of us.

Music blares, shaking me out of my thoughts. “Who’s playing?”

Not that it matters. I don’t know shit about hockey. I just need a distraction.

“The Vipers are our home team. My best friend used to be their goalie, but he got traded last year to the Oregon Otters. That’s who they’re playing tonight.” Vanessa’s dark eyes seem to sparkle as players begin to spill onto the ice. “I miss him so much, but how can I be sad when he’s so damn happy? It’s all I ever wanted for him.” Her red lips split into a wide smile.

A chorus of boos echo through the stadium as players wearing white jerseys with green and brown trim enter the ice.

Vanessa shoots up, clapping loudly as one of the players skates up near us. He’s wearing bulky gear, different from the rest of his team, and he takes off his helmet, his curly hair pulled back in a ponytail. “I fucking love you,” she screams. I look at the man. Why does he look familiar?

A bunch of fans slap the glass as he skates over, but he’s not paying any of them any mind as he blows her a kiss, mouthing “*Love you too*,” then piles his hair back into his helmet. Another player skates toward him, looking back at us, then grabs the front of his helmet and kisses the top.

Vanessa sits down. “Oh shit, this game should be interesting.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, that’s my friend Andre.” Then she points to a player in a white jersey with black and accents. “And him, right there, he’s the one who used to play for the Otters but was traded at the end of last season. I haven’t watched them in person yet. This is the first game they’re playing against each other. Besides that, the Vipers and Otters have always had a feud. It gets pretty vicious sometimes.”

I follow the man she was talking about as he shoots pucks into their net. “Why’s that?”

“They’re always at the top of their conferences, and the Otters had a years’ long winning streak against them until last year when the Vipers won a playoff round against them. There are also personal feuds between players. I mean, there was Oli and Andre, but that’s a whole thing now.” She laughs. “Then I think there’s a player on the Otters who’s always fighting with our captain, Knox.”

The man she was pointing to before skates around the arena before he lifts his head in her direction. She stands up and waves at him until he starts to skate over to us. I watch him come closer, a smile growing on his . . . face. Wait.

I know that dumbass smile.

When he gets closer, he takes off his helmet.

Holy shit.

He stops for a moment when he sees me, as frozen as I feel as I try to make sense of this. Vanessa slaps the glass, snapping his attention to her. His eyes keep wavering between us as he comes closer. “Ready to get your ass beat?” she yells.

Atlas’s lips split into a smile. “Ready to kick some Otter ass you mean,” he yells back with a smile. His eyes slide to me again and I think I forget how to breathe. The silly boy who found his way into my bed last night is nowhere to be found.

This man is someone else entirely.

And I shouldn’t be as turned on as I am.

Atlas smiles at me then taps the glass before he skates off. “What the hell was that?” She sits.

“What?”

Her eyes narrow on me. “Uh-uh, don’t play dumb. What was that look?”

“There was no look.” I swallow hard, ignoring her.

“Uh-huh.” She smiles with a glint in her eyes. “The last time a guy told me there was nothing going on, he got married.”

I shake my head, trying to keep my eyes forward. I can’t help it, though. My eyes keep going to him.

Number twenty-eight with the name Sgarbossa on his jersey.

Atlas Sgarbossa.

I feel Vanessa’s eyes on me from time to time, but my eyes don’t leave him long enough to acknowledge it. I can’t help it. I can’t really believe it.

Naked men, traveling, and punching people.

My hockey boy.



So, hockey is chaos.

I haven’t decided if I like it or hate it. One thing I do know is it’s fucking loud. And that’s coming from a someone who’s spent the last five years surrounded by massive speakers. “What the fuck, ref!?” Vanessa yells

through the glass with the other screaming fans. “He was clearly tripped!” She shakes her head, sitting down. “That was a tripping call,” she says to me.

“Clearly, I saw it.” I smirk as she shoves me.

I watch them skate. While I know nothing about hockey, what I do know is that Atlas is fast. Impossibly fast. Once he has the puck, it’s hard to catch him as he winds through the players. The agility with which he moves is insane.

Right now, he has the puck and is skating toward the end where the opposing goalie braces. Someone in a white jersey knocks into him, throwing him off balance and into the goalie, knocking them both into the goal post. Or sorry, the crease, as Vanessa keeps calling it.

A man comes out of nowhere, rushing toward the net as Atlas stands, looking like he’s about to help their goalie up. The other man knocks into him. They start fighting. Their gloves are thrown, and they’re punching back and forth. Atlas’s helmet gets knocked off and the other man’s falls off before they’re finally swarmed, teammates grabbing and yanking everyone back as the ref blows the whistle.

“What the fuck was that?”

I’m trying to see Atlas through the chaos. Finally, I see him getting pulled away by a ref who’s still shouting shit at the player who hit him. They’re yelling back and forth, but I think I see a hint of a smile on Atlas’s face.

A ref skates to the center line. “Oregon number sixty-two, two minutes for roughing. Number twenty-eight on the Vipers. Two minutes for roughing.” They’re both put in this glass box as our fans boo.

“What’s going on?”

“They’re in the penalty box for fighting.” She shrugs. “You don’t touch the goalie, specifically *that* goalie.” She laughs with light in her eyes. “Best protected goalie in the league.”

The man who threw punches at Atlas turns to their goalie as the ref tries to pull him away to lead him to the box. The man snatches his arm back then grabs the cage of the goalie’s helmet and talks to him. He nods and kisses the top.

“I don’t want to see that shit,” we hear a man above us say.

Vanessa wrenches around in her seat to face the man. “You want to see something gross, look in the fucking mirror.” She ignores whatever he says

back, shaking her head. “Douchebag.”

“What’s going on?”

“They’re married.”

Wait . . . what the fuck? “Like . . . to each other?”

That wide smile returns as she nods. “Hell yeah. They got married this summer. I was Andre’s best woman.” She beams brighter. “Should have seen it. I looked so hot.”

“Is that, like, allowed?” She quirks her brow. “You know what I mean.” I don’t know hockey, but I do know sports. Last time I checked it was as toxic as ever. Another reason I’ve always hated it.

She shrugs. “It hasn’t been easy. They’re lucky they play for a more progressive team. Some people—” she says loudly, turning to direct it to the man behind us. “Can’t mind their fucking business.” She turns back around and sighs. “Hockey is still very White, very rich, and very conservative. In the pros especially. When I watch hockey, I always watch the women’s league, but I still show up for my friend.” She smiles.

“Why do they bother, then?”

She looks at me seriously. “Because why let the bigots win?”

“Fair point.”

“It’s slow, but the game is changing. Change doesn’t happen by staying silent and hiding away. I’m very proud of my friends. Their coming out has had a ripple effect through the league. A handful of players have come out since, and there are rules in place now to protect athletes that weren’t there years ago. In fact, our team captain on the Vipers came out as bisexual after Oli and Andre did.”

“Really? That’s amazing, actually.” I look over at Atlas, bent over facing another opposing player. “What about twenty-eight?”

Her eyes light up. A teasing smirk plays on her red painted lips “What about him?”

She’s so annoying. “What’s his deal?”

“That’s Atlas Sgarbossa. I don’t know too much about him, other than he likes piña coladas. That’s all I got.” Except he’s trying hard not to drink. “Some shit went down over the summer between him and his best friend. He hasn’t seemed the same after that.”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugs. “He just seems a little sad. I don’t know. He comes into the bar sometimes, but he hasn’t been by lately.”

“Because he’s trying to stay sober.” It slips before I realize what I’ve said. It’s too late. Her eyes light up. “Please don’t.”

“And you know that because nothing is happening, right?”

I sigh heavily. “Can we just forget I said anything?”

She shrugs. “Fine, I’ll let it go.” She leans in. “For now.”

I laugh a little and focus back on the game. On him. I watch him play, but Vanessa’s words hit me.

Sad? Him?

I try to picture it and I can’t.

Then I think about the roof that first night. He’d said he was lonely, and despite the weird shit that came out of his mouth, there was a desperation in his words. A strong need for company. Or a distraction. I’d thought at the time he just didn’t want to drink, but maybe it’s more than that.

And maybe I want to know a little more about what it is.

Maybe.

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TWELVE

Atlas



Why the fuck is Gage here?

Did he find out? Why is he here with Vanessa? I mean, maybe they're friends. They could be. I literally know nothing about him other than he's a hot as hell rock star with the voice of a fucking siren.

The boards rattle as I'm slammed into them, and a familiar sting blooms in my shoulder. Fuck, I need to pay attention. "Get your fucking head in the game," Tanner Vasilov snaps as he skates by.

Right. Game. Easy. Just stop thinking. Stop.

Knox skates to the face-off circle, bending at the waist and saying something I can't hear. He wins the face-off against Oli and slaps the puck toward me. I shift to the right, my skates digging into the ice as I barrel through players. I'm nearly knocked on my ass by Ryker. *Dick*. I slap to Cole Manning who nearly collides with Colton. Knox skates toward him, knocking him on the ice. Fuck.

Colton gets up, but Knox is nowhere to be seen for the ass kicking I know he wants to give him. I find Dimitri, and he strikes it to me. I skate toward the goal, then I'm clipped, cannoning right into Andre and the goal post.

I grab my shoulder, struggling to stand. Dizzy. "Shit, Andre." I try to help him up. "Are you okay? Fuck! I don't like being on this end of it."

Andre laughs. "Uh, I'm fine, but um, incoming my guy."

“What—” Oli grabs me by the jersey, punching me hard. “The fuck!” I shove him back and throw my gloves, punching him back. “You dick.”

He swings again as I feel hands tugging my jersey. I ignore the refs, swinging at Oli. He may be my best friend, but I’m not taking this shit from anyone.

“Don’t touch my man,” he growls.

I grin, shoving him back harder. “Oh, I was all up on him. Landed right in his lap!” He swings. Another punch that I dodge. He grips my jersey. “I may have even grazed his ass when I flew into the net.”

“You fucking prick.” Oli swings, but we’re wrenched back by two refs.

I blow a kiss to Andre, who shakes his head, but it makes murder burn brighter in Oli’s eyes. “What you going to do, Oli?” I laugh as I’m tugged backwards. We’re shouting as we’re escorted off the ice.

“You’re lucky you’re my best fucking friend or you’d be six feet under right now.”

“Ah, don’t stop on my account.” I blow him a kiss. “I love you!”

“I love you more you prick!”

We’re shoved into the box and a penalty is called.

“Hey!” I shout over the crowd as Oli looks over at me with a smirk. “I missed you!”

“I missed you more, asshole.”

The penalty attendant in my box looks very confused as I sit back down and serve my time. “He’s my best friend.”

“Drinks after this with Vee?” Oli shouts.

I think for a moment, but it’s okay. My friends know I’m trying to stay sober. We’re only going because it’s Vanessa’s bar, not to drink. I’ll have my friends there, and they’ll stop me from wanting to. It’s been a while since I’ve seen Vanessa anyway.

Vanessa, who is here with Gage.

“Yeah, sure.”

Gage who is here.

Watching me play.

And I don’t know what to do or how that makes me feel.

“I’m fucking exhausted.” Knox pulls on his hoodie and slings his bag over his back. “You want a ride back?”

“No, I’m going to have drinks with Oli and Andre. I mean, not *drinks*, I mean maybe water or soda. I’m not drinking. You want to come?” Knox nods, clapping me on the shoulder. “Shit game?”

He sighs. “Not a shit game, but not an ideal outcome either. Coach always goes on a tear when we lose.”

“It was five–four.”

“It ain’t winning, so it doesn’t matter. I’m going to go home. I’m beat. If you see Colton, tell him I still fucking hate him, and if he throws another weak punch at me like he did tonight, I’m going to send him home next game in pieces.”

I shake my head. “Will do.” I doubt he’ll be there. “Although his wife just had another baby, so I’m sure he won’t be out. He’ll be checking in on her instead.” Knox’s jaw tightens and he shakes his head. “What?”

He runs his tongue along the inside of his cheek then inhales through his nose. “It’s . . . nothing.” Doesn’t feel like nothing. I watch him swallow, his green eyes going far away before he throws on a small smile. “Have fun with your friends. I’ll see you tomorrow for practice.”

I dress after my shower, and I know I can’t delay any longer. Oli and Andre are probably ready to head out. I walk down the hall and out the back doors of the arena and see Andre on the hood of Oli’s SUV with Oli between his legs. “Gross.”

Andre laughs, pushing Oli back.

“Sorry, just congratulating our incredible goalie. You know, because we kicked your ass,” Oli says.

“You didn’t kick shit. You won by a point.”

“There you all are.” We see Vanessa coming closer with a shadow behind her. “It’s a madhouse in there. They kicked your ass!” she shrieks at me.

“Again, didn’t kick shit. Lost by a point. And I would have made that goal, but it hit the fucking post.”

“Oh, and also that my man is incredible.” Oli beams.

“One point, dickhead.” I shake my head.

“So, who’s up for some drinks?” Vanessa dangles her keys.

“Atlas doesn’t drink.” I turn toward his voice and look at Gage. “I mean, unless you are.”

Heat flows through my belly. “No, I’m not, but I’ll come. Tradition, right?” I smile at Oli.

He nods slightly. “Tradition.”

“Who’s riding with me, and who’s riding with Oli?”

“Sorry, baby.” Andre kisses Oli. “I’m riding with her.”

“Fine.” I look back at Gage who’s already walking toward Vanessa’s car.

“Um, I’ll ride with you,” I say to Oli. I don’t know what to do. I want to talk to Gage, but it can wait. I watch him as he looks back at me briefly.

I get into Oli’s SUV and buckle my seatbelt. He pulls onto the road, and I don’t think I’ve felt this nervous being in a car with my best friend before. “So, what’s going on with all of that. I thought he didn’t know what you did?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know he was coming. Or that he knew Vanessa.”

“When did you two meet?”

“A few weeks ago.” I remember that night on the roof, and I wish I could tell myself to turn around and not engage because ever since that night, he’s all I think about.

“What’s going on between you two?”

I shrug, watching as the city passes us by and the buildings thin out until we’re nearly in the sticks driving toward the bar.

“There’s not much going on.” We have sex. That’s it. I don’t say that, though. Never mind that I’ve never felt more alive in my life than when Gage’s hands are on me. He consumes my every thought.

“Are you okay?” Oli lowers his voice. I jolt, feeling his hand on my knee. “Talk to me.”

“I’m alright.”

“You don’t seem alright. Don’t shut down on me.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Oli. Less than a year ago I lived somewhere different with two people I was close with, and now one of them is up on the east coast and the other is on the west. I’m here on a team I fucking hate.” I shake my head. “No, that’s not fair. I don’t hate them. I hate their coach.”

“Grady?”

I nod. “He’s a fucking dick.”

“Andre said that. He’s got a reputation of being a hard-ass.”

It’s more than being a hard-ass. Our Otters coach is a hard-ass. Grady is something else altogether. “It’s just been an adjustment. I’m fine. Or I will be.” I have to be. “This thing with Grey. I can’t shake it. I’m trying, but I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Over the summer, during Oli and Andre's wedding, I got really drunk at the reception because of how fucking sad I was watching Grey fall in love with someone who wasn't me. Part of me wonders, if I'd confessed earlier, whether things could have been different. As I think it, I know that's not true. Grey was never meant to be mine. When I was drunk and I kissed him and his boyfriend saw, I nearly fucked up everything good for him.

Then I did what I always do when I fuck things up. I ran. I talked to my agent, and the Vipers wanted a trade in exchange for Andre. I'm sure Coach Grady is regretting my signing as we speak. Not that he had any say in it.

Now there's Gage. Normally when fixation takes hold of my brain, I'd drink it away. I'm trying so hard to be good. "I'll be fine, okay. Everything will be okay."

"If you need anything, please call me, alright? Please. I miss the fuck out of you."

I nod, even though there's no way I'm burdening him any more than I already have. Oli has his own life now. A great life with a person he loves more than anything. I need to stop relying on other people to keep my shit together. I need to grow the fuck up. It's hard not to compare myself to them, though. My friends are a lot older than I am. They're in different stages of their lives, secure in their decisions, and it feels like I'm constantly treading water. "I will. I promise."

"Otters game next month," he says to break the tension.

"Yeah, and we're going to kick your ass."



We park and I see Gage outside, leaning against the bar, talking to Vanessa and Andre. I get out of Oli's car. "I'll be in, in a second." He smirks at me but walks ahead, grabbing Andre from behind and planting a kiss on his neck.

Vanessa follows my friends into the bar, but Gage holds back, his pretty brown eyes lit with amusement. Silence stretches between us. Finally, a smile splits his face. "You're . . . something."

"That bad?"

He huffs out a laugh. "Didn't say bad."

"You didn't say good either."

“I’m still processing.” He crosses his arms, leaning back against the building. “You hit people for a living, are around lots of naked men, and you travel. And here I was thinking you were some kind of naked oil wrestler.”

“Did you really?” I lean in. “Did you picture it?”

He pushes me back with a laugh. I don’t miss the grin tugging at his lips. I like the way he smiles. It feels like he’s trying his best not to, but he can’t resist the urge.

“It’s taking some processing. You were . . .”

I step a little closer, not quite in his space but close enough to feel his heat and smell that intoxicating cologne he wears. “I was what, Gage?”

I should be more mindful of an audience, but we’re alone in the middle of nowhere. It’s what drew Oli, Grey, and me here last season. It’s quiet out here now.

“Impressive.”

“You couldn’t keep your eyes off me, huh?”

He shrugs, looking away. “You’re hard to miss.”

“Good hard, or bad hard.”

“Annoying hard.”

My grin splits wider. “Still counts.”

He rolls his eyes, but I see the corner of his mouth threaten to give in. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, Atlas. You’re not as impressive as you think you are.”

“Too late.” I beam. “Already there. Ego inflated.”

There’s a moment where neither of us speaks. The noise from the bar gently floats outside. It’s a Wednesday night and not many cars are in the parking lot. “Did you have fun tonight?” I want to ask why he was there, but I don’t even care. I’m just happy to see him. Even if he knows my secret now.

He hesitates, then sighs. “Parts of it.”

“Which parts?”

His brown eyes pour into mine with so much heat it feels like a gentle hand strokes my stomach. “The parts where I could just watch you without hearing ridiculous shit come out of your mouth.” He grins wide.

“Ouch,” I laugh. “So, you admit you like to watch me. Is voyeurism a kink of yours?”

“Not a fan of watching people have sex, but I’d watch you play with your ass.”

Okay, what the fuck. How mad would my friends be if I left right now with him? “Don’t give me a boner. I’m too tired to sex you right now anyway.”

“Sex *me*? Atlas, I sex *you*.” His eyes soften on me. Less sharp, with a curiosity that’s making me want to go back to his apartment and try to find the energy to let him have his way. “So, now what, hockey boy?”

“Now?”

He nods.

“I mean, we could go back to being strangers. I mean, technically we still are. I only know what you do for a living.”

His expression shifts slightly, but it’s enough to make me wonder if he hates that idea too. Because I do. I hate it. “You don’t actually want that, though?”

“Maybe I don’t want to be strangers with you,” I admit. “I don’t think you do either.”

“You don’t know what I want.”

“I know you wanted to watch me play tonight and had a good time doing it.”

I hold his gaze. He shakes his head, looking away. “I didn’t go to watch you.”

“Happy accident, then?”

“An unfortunate circumstance.”

Fuck me sideways, behind, and forward. Oh my god, I like him. I look around, checking our surroundings, and lean in, shocking him with a quick kiss. I pat the side of his face. “Keep telling yourself that, rock star.”

Then I leave him there and head into the bar.



I know I said I wanted to come here, but now I just want to go home and take Gage back to my apartment. I meant what I said. I’m exhausted, but I already know if Gage ends up with me later tonight, I will squeeze out whatever energy I can find so he can touch me.

I miss my friends, though, and I remind myself that leaving them for a man I've known less than a couple of weeks would be insane, right?

Yes, insane.

I find my friends at a round corner booth. I don't check, but I feel Gage behind me. "There they are." Oli slides over, making room for Gage by squeezing into Andre. Not a hardship for him, I'm sure. Oli slings his arm across the back of Andre's seat.

"You both are disgustingly cute," Gage says.

"Nauseating," I correct him, and Oli laughs, planting a kiss on Andre's lips.

"Ah. I remember now. The giant strangers from earlier," Gage says. "Wait, isn't he the one who punched you tonight?"

"You mean that tickle fight?" I say coolly. "Didn't feel like a punch."

"I rocked your shit and you know it."

"You didn't rock nothing, Oli. You barely touched me."

"Yeah, well, you barely touch my man again and I'll barely throw your ass in a ditch."

"What is wrong with you two?" Gage looks alarmed.

"What?" I blink. "He's my best friend."

"This shit's normal in our world." Andre laughs. "So . . ." Andre looks between us. "Thought we didn't want to know what he did for a living?"

"I didn't," Gage says.

I look at him then see Vanessa coming over with a tray of drinks, and that little itch tickles the back of my neck when I see the yellow drink with a pink umbrella.

"Don't worry. This one's a virgin." She sets the piña colada in front of me. "You say no alcohol, then that's what you'll be getting from here on out." She pats my hair. "Gage. Did you have a good time tonight? I can see nothing's still going on, huh?" She beams.

"Can I have a soda please?" He glares at her, and she smirks, nodding.

"What?" I look at him. "Why aren't you drinking?"

"I'm not going to drink if you're trying to stay sober," he says simply then looks up at Vanessa. "I had an okay time, and I'm still enjoying all the nothing going on right now."

I look between them. "What are you both talking about?"

"Oh, nothing." She blinks then turns her attention to her friend. "You better be at my house early tomorrow to see the kids. They're dying to see

Uncle Andre and Oli," Vanessa says.

"Wouldn't miss it. Oli needs his nails painted anyway."

"Tell Sasha I'd like purple this time. The pink clashed with my jersey."

"Will do." She leaves us to grab Gage's drink.

Oli bumps Andre when he takes a large sip of his own. "Don't get too drunk. We have to get up early, then we have a flight out in the afternoon."

"Yes Daddy." Andre grins, biting the straw and pumping his brows at his husband.

"Ignore my friends."

"You're all six and a half feet tall. I think that would be impossible."

"So, Gage, what do you do?"

His eyes flick to mine. "He's an artist," I say for him.

"Wow, an artist living in an apartment like that?"

"Oli—"

He shrugs. "Must be good is all."

"You have no idea." Gage smiles tightly, drumming his fingers on the table. "How long have you been friends?"

"Since Atlas joined my team a few years ago. I've known this asshole for a decade now."

"He hated me." Andre nods, sucking his straw. "Long story."

"What happened?" Gage asks.

Andre sighs. "Well, the short version is that my man is terrible at communicating." He grins as Oli glares at him.

"I was like eighteen and dealing with my terminally ill mother! I thought my best friend betrayed me. Fuck off."

"And now we're in love." Andre looks at Gage. "Classic love story."

"You're a dick," Oli mutters, taking a drink. A soft blush hits his cheeks as Andre leans in to steal a kiss.

"How old are you?" Gage asks me.

"Why?"

"I just realized I have no idea."

"Isn't that a personal question?"

"Are we still doing this? I thought you didn't want to be strangers anymore."

"I'd like to keep some mystery, you know."

"I'm twenty-seven," he offers. "See, painless."

“Fine, but no more. I already know too much. I’ll be twenty-five in November and don’t ask me what day.”

“It’s the eighteenth,” Oli supplies.

“Goddammit, Oli!”

“Why can’t he know that?” Andre asks.

“Because, Andre, we’re strangers with benefits!”

“Uh-huh.” Andre leans into Oli. “And I thought we were a mess.” He kisses his shoulder.

“How did you two meet anyway?” Oli asks.

“On a roof.”

“On a roof.” Gage nods. “Then we slept together.”

“Really!” I close my eyes. “You are horrible at secrets!”

“What? They already know.”

“I didn’t tell them that!”

“When you said strangers with benefits, I assumed the benefit was dick.” Andre shakes his head. “What other benefit would there be?”

“Maybe he waters my plants while I’m on the road!”

Oli blinks at me. “You’re allergic to most plants. Oh, and peanuts. Do not let him have anything with peanuts.”

“Oli!”

He throws his hands up. “Hey, that’s just lifesaving information.”

“It’s not life—you know what, that’s it. You know too much.”

Gage smirks.

“Ew you like it. You’re a slut for knowledge, aren’t you?”

“It’s okay, hockey boy. I want to know as little as possible. Believe me.”

“So,” Andre says. “Have you talked to Grey at all?”

I turn to Gage in this booth. “Whatever you want to know, I’ll tell you. Literally anything. Just ask right now.”

“No, he hasn’t,” Oli says for me.

“Really? He misses you a lot.” I meet Andre’s eyes and something fills my gut, heavy and sour.

I lean into Gage. “Pterodactyl.”

His dark brows pull tight. “The safe word is for sex,” he whispers.

“If there was ever a time to use it . . .” I look back at Andre. “I will, just not yet.”

“You’re not still in—”

My eyes flash at my friend. “Stop.” I swallow. “Okay, please. Just stop. I need time.” At first it was to get space, but now I just feel embarrassed. Ashamed. Grey must hate me. I’d hate me. “How is he?” Happy as hell like he fucking deserves.

“He’s doing great,” Oli says softly. “Loves his new job. He’s different, but in like the best way possible. You need to talk to him, okay. He misses you.”

I swallow hard, shaking my head. “I’m not feeling well—”

“Not this time, jackass,” Oli says. “Another thing about him,” he says to Gage. “He’s a runner.”

“I’m also a drinker, and that seems like a real good idea right now.”

“Actually,” Gage says, looking at me. “I’m sorry to be like this, but I’m not feeling great either. I think the arena was just too loud. My head hurts. I’m going to head back. If you want to ride with me and save the fare, you can. I mean, unless you want them to bring you all the way back to the apartment building?”

I look at my friends, and while I miss them, I need some space now.

The thing about Oli is, he doesn’t know when to let up. I don’t want to talk about Grey or my mistakes, I just wanted to have drinks with my friends. Not a fucking dissection on every decision I’ve made until this point. And I get it, he just wants his two best friends to talk again, but he doesn’t understand that it’s not that simple.

“I’ll go with you,” I say and ignore the look on my friend’s face. “I missed the hell out of you guys. I’m just really tired. I can’t wait to beat your ass next time.” I smile, but Oli looks like he wants to argue.

Andre squeezes his bicep. “I’m tired too. We have a lot to do tomorrow before we leave.”

Oli’s hard blue eyes needle through me, but I take a tiny breath when he nods and looks at Andre with a soft smile. “Yeah, okay. I’ll close out the tab. Andre’s treat.”

“Hey!” Andre slaps his arm.

“Sorry, who signed a ninety-two-million-dollar contract this year? You’re my sugar daddy now.” He winks, planting a quick kiss on his lips before he gets out of the booth and we stand. Without warning he pulls me in for a tight hug. “I mean it, Atlas. If you need anything, call me.” He squeezes my shoulder. “And talk to Grey soon. He misses the hell out of you.”

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THIRTEEN

Gage



Atlas has been quiet since we walked into my apartment. It’s nice.

Although now it’s starting to creep me out. He’s never been so . . . silent. I could see he was getting upset with his friends, so why they couldn’t see it or stop fucking needling him I don’t know.

If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s smoothly exiting when I don’t want to be a part of something.

I let Atlas in and I don’t know . . . we seem to have carried some awkwardness with us from the bar.

I can’t believe it. Hockey.

Not a huge sports fan, but watching Atlas on the ice tonight was impressive, I’ll admit. He was brutal, but so agile and quick. Even knowing next to nothing about the sport, I know he’s talented.

Atlas walks behind me like he’s not fully here with me now. His shoulders are tight, his gaze a bit unfocused and heavy. Maybe part of him is still back at the bar with them. I don’t know anything about them, but I didn’t like the way the blond one kept pushing him.

“Are you hungry?”

Atlas lifts his head with a soft smile. “Always.”

I walk to my kitchen and I hear the scrape of a chair as he sits himself at the island.

“You alright?”

He looks up then nods.

“Listen, it’s not that I don’t appreciate it, but the silent thing’s a bit unnerving, I won’t lie.”

Atlas’s chest rises slowly with a deep breath. “Really tired. That’s all. Sorry. I mean, I can go if you want. I don’t think I’m in the mood to benefit you with my ass right now.”

I snort, shaking my head. I also wonder if that’s even true, or how much of it’s from the game or his friends’ words. Either way I don’t want him to leave.

I should, though, because why the hell did I let him in here if it wasn’t for sex? That’s all this is, right? I watch him for a moment then make a decision, not caring one bit if it’s a bad one.

Now the silence is nice. I’m not complaining. It’s just his whole demeanor that throws me off. I’m used to funny, loud, and obnoxious, but he seems sad, and I don’t like it one bit. More than that, I’m afraid to let him go home. I don’t think he’ll have alcohol back at his apartment, but I don’t want him to go searching for it.

I focus on what I can do for him and look through my cabinets trying to find something to throw together. I eat out a lot, especially during promotion and tours. There’s no point keeping anything perishable here when I’m never home. Still, there are a couple of things I always have on hand.

“You don’t have to make me anything.”

“I know.” I look back at him. “I want to.”

I find a can of black beans in the cabinet and take them out. Something easy. Something I’ve made a thousand times without a thought, but now I’m a little nervous. “Uh, how does black bean tacos sound?”

“I’ve never had them, but I’m not picky.”

“It’s just uh, I’m vegan. Everything I use is plant based.” Then I remember what his friend said at the bar. “No nuts, though, in anything. Promise.”

“Thanks. I’m not like severely allergic. I just get really bad hives, and it can really hurt my stomach. Sometimes it does make me sick, but my throat won’t close up or anything. I mean, unless I have a bad reaction. That happens sometimes.”

“I’ll keep that in mind either way.” After I drain and rinse the beans, I throw them in a pan than grab the corn tortillas out of the fridge and begin to heat them up. While I finish cooking, Atlas doesn’t say a word. The

silence is starting to squeeze my lungs. I'm not used to having to fill it when he's around.

I take out my plant-based cheese, reading the back just to be safe. Throat closing up or not, I don't want to accidentally give him anything with peanuts. I make sure it's safe then sprinkle some on the mixture, and in another pan, I heat it up to let the cheese melt. I open my fridge and find some salsa verde and pour a little in a ramekin.

"How many do you want?"

"Uh, I don't know. Three?" I plate him four then slide it to him.

"Go ahead, eat." A small reluctant smile flickers across his lips, and I stand on the opposite side of the island, taking one of mine while sneaking glances as he tries it. If he doesn't like them, I wouldn't know with how he devours them. I'm not even sure he's tasting them. "Good?" I laugh.

"Really good. Wow." I turn back to the stove and slide two more onto his plate. I'm not really that hungry myself. Silence settles in again, heavier this time, but I let him eat, a little slower now, watching the life come back into his eyes.

"So uh . . ." I watch him destroy the other two. "You want more?"

"Oh, no. Thank you. I didn't realize how hungry I was."

I take his plate away from him. "So uh, do you want to talk about it?"

"What?" His head picks up.

"Your friends. I'm not a mind reader, but even I could feel the tension and how bad you wanted to get out of there."

Atlas stares down at his empty plate. "They mean well. Oli means well."

I lean forward on my elbows, angling toward him. "Well, people can mean well all they want, but sometimes they can be a pain in the ass too." That brings a soft smile to those beautiful lips. "Who is Grey?"

Atlas meets my eyes instantly and something in them hits me in the gut. I don't know who that is, but I can tell he means something to this man. "I don't want to talk about Grey."

"Understood." Although I'm interested, I let it go.

"Not because I don't want to tell you," he says. "I just hate thinking about it."

We're quiet for a long moment as I think of what to say next. It's funny to think I'm sitting here with him, trying to fill the silence, when every time we've been together before I was desperately wanting it.

“The thing with Oli is, he sees a problem then he wants to fix it. He won’t stop until the problem’s fixed, but this thing with all of us can’t be fixed like that. I really messed up, Gage, and I don’t know how to see myself out of it.”

Atlas lets out a long breath, as if he’s been holding it all night.

I take his plate and put it in the sink, rinsing it quickly and trying to find something meaningful to say. I dry my hands and turn back to him. “Well.” His pretty eyes lift to mine. “I’m not sure what’s going on, and you don’t have to tell me, but whatever it is, I can see how much you care about it. Whatever it is, even if it’s something you did, I can see that it weighs on you, and that right there is a start. That’s how you know you’ll come out the other side of it. Even if it’s at your own pace.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Because people who are careless with other people don’t give a shit about it. I can see whatever you did or didn’t do is affecting you badly, and that, Atlas, is how you know you’re a good person.”

Atlas shifts on the bar stool, swallowing hard. “Thank you.”

I reach across the table and grab his hand, just a quick hold, and I watch him for a moment. I don’t like how sad he looks. The words tumble out of me before I can stop them. “Do you want to stay the night?”

“I’m not in the mood for sex.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

He stares at me a moment, and I should make him leave, but I don’t like the thought of him going home alone right now. “Yeah. Okay. I’m beat, though.”

I nod, walking around the island and holding my hand out to him. “Come on. I’m tired too.” I let him use my bathroom and give him a toothbrush I have still in its package for when Chen decides he wants to sleep over. After he’s done, I wash up and brush my teeth, trying to get my head together, but it seems logic and reasoning isn’t something I want to deal with right now.

I walk into my room as he hooks his thumb beneath the hem of his shirt, dragging it upward inch by inch. I follow the dark hair on his stomach before it disappears beneath the waistband of his sweats. The thicker patch of hair spreads across his pecs. Every motion pulls and shifts the muscles beneath his tan skin. His bicep tightens as he rubs the back of his neck. My gaze drops down, following his stomach then the sharp V of his hips.

“Can you stop checking me out? I’m not a piece of meat.”

My gaze snaps up. “I wasn’t checking you out!”

“You’re so desperate, it’s kind of sad.” A soft smile splits across his handsome face and I’m relieved to see it. He winks, posing for me and flexing his arms. “Go ahead, look your fill.” He turns and does some motion with his hands I can’t see, but it tightens the muscles in his back. “I’m really impressive, I know.”

A smile flashes on my lips and I’m too slow to wipe it away before he turns back around and catches it. “Fuck off.”

He chuckles, stripping down to his boxers and getting into my bed. I slowly take off my own clothes and slide in beside him, surprised when he moves to lie beside me in the dark. “Thank you for the food,” he murmurs, his voice slipping with sleep.

I loll my head toward him then decide to roll and gather him into my arms. “Anytime.” My fingers lightly trace down his tattooed arms. I don’t want to talk about hockey or his friends. “When did you start this superhero obsession of yours?” He pulls back a little. “Or is that also too personal?”

“When I was a kid,” he starts slowly. “I always wondered what it would be like to be one. What kind of hero I’d be. Sometimes I’d draw these horrible sketches about what my costume would be. My powers. If I’d have a villain arc or not.”

I don’t interrupt him even though I want to ask more.

“I always thought how cool it would be to have something happen that would change my whole life like that. I always said to myself that no matter how much power was given to me, I’d always be good. I would always do the right thing.”

My fingers idly brush his skin. “Oh yeah?”

He nods. “Turns out real life isn’t that simple.”

My lips press into his hair. “No, it’s not.” I can’t help but think of my own life. When Jesper, Chen, Declan, and I would dream about sold-out shows and screaming fans, we’d always say no matter what we’d never sell out. It would always be about the music.

I sold out before we even started.

“I think that’s why I like superheroes so much. They have rules. Good and bad. You know where you stand.”

I hum softly into his hair. “Real life isn’t like that.”

“Yeah,” he huffs. “It’s annoying.”

A small smile tugs on my face. “Very.”

“I think that’s why I like the X-Men so much. They have every reason to be villains, all of them. Society treats them terribly, yet there they are, still protecting what’s good, no matter what. I used to think like that too, but I don’t really feel like that guy anymore, the one who stands up to evil no matter how much life beats him down. That’s not me anymore.”

“Maybe that person isn’t who you’re meant to be anyway. You’re still here, and you clearly care about what’s happened between you and your friends. You’re still here and still trying. That has to count for something.”

“It’s not that simple.” He’s quiet for a moment. “Being a villain would be fucking awesome, though.”

“Atlas, I can’t picture you being a villain even if you really tried.” He’s too sweet for that. Whatever happened is weighing him down, and if he doesn’t want to share, that’s fine. I shouldn’t care anyway. Whatever it is, though, it hurts him.

“I bet wearing tights sucks, though. My balls would be smashed up into my stomach, I just know it.”

I snort. And we’re back to ridiculous. Although this time it calms me a bit. A little sliver of who he is. I don’t like the sad, depressed version of this obnoxious boy. Not because he can’t be sad. Everyone gets upset. It’s because there’s so much light in him while he’s smiling, and I don’t like to see his shine dull.

“Atlas, you’re weird. You know that?”

“You say that a lot.”

He lifts his head to me and some of his features seem to have softened.

“I mean a good weird.”

“Mm, living the dream. Thanks.”

I pat his arm. “Anytime, Atlas.”

Silence settles between us once again. His arm is slung over my waist, and he’s crushing me a little, but I don’t have the heart to tell him to move. Who needs air? “Sorry about tonight. I know this isn’t exactly the arrangement we had in mind.”

I rub his arm. “You don’t have to apologize for having a bad night. You don’t owe me anything. Not even a good mood.”

I stare up at my ceiling for a moment, neither of us speaking. I feel Atlas’s fingers slowly trace the tattoo on my hip. He’s laying most of his

weight on me, but even still, he feels small like this in my arms. His warm breath puffs against my chest.

"Atlas."

"Yeah?" His head picks up, and even in the darkness of my room I can faintly make him out. I don't push him. I just shift a little by instinct, cupping his face.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

I feel him nod in my hands. "Can I kiss you?"

The question settles someplace deep, burrowing into my chest. "Yeah," I answer. "Please."

Atlas moves a little before I feel his lips on mine, gently at first. I don't lead or push. I let him take whatever he needs from me right now. For the first time, I let him lead. It's not rushed or desperate. It's warm, like a gentle hug.

It's . . . real.

My fingers trace up his spine, and I let him deepen the kiss slightly. His tongue doesn't come out to play, and his movements don't heat up. He just stays like this, kissing me softly in the dark.

When he finally pulls back, he rests his head back down on my chest and settles back into the quiet of the room. "Good night, Gage."

I smile quickly before wiping it free a moment later. "Yeah, good night, Atlas."

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FOURTEEN

Gage



I’m sweating to death.

I pop my eye open and remember why. I don’t even remember falling asleep. Atlas snores next to me, his lips so close to my ear I can feel his warm breath. I go to push him off, but I just look at him instead.

So much ridiculousness in one large body.

His arm is slung across my chest, one hairy leg thrown over my thighs. He’s hugging me to death, clinging like his life depends on it. My fingers have a mind of their own, reaching out and dragging across his arm. I think back to last night with his friends.

Who were they talking about? Who’s Grey? An ex? I don’t think so. I know I’m the only man he’s slept with. Or maybe, right? Who knows, he could have lied. As soon as I think it, I wave it away. Atlas isn’t one to lie. Avoid and change the subject sure, but he’s not a liar. Somehow, I know that.

What I do know is that as soon as that giant man said his name, Atlas’s demeanor shifted and I wanted to get him out of there.

He called Atlas a runner, but I’d run too if you were constantly bringing up shit I don’t want to talk about. He shifts a little against me. The soft hairs of his beard scratch my skin. Then his eyes open slowly, and I don’t think I can breathe.

They’re such an odd shade of blue. Nearly electric. I’ve never seen anything like it. “Sorry. Am I snoring on you?”

“More worried about the puddle of drool.”

He scowls, lifting his head a little, then rests his head back down. “No I didn’t.”

I laugh a little. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I have a five-hour flight later today and I don’t want to leave this bed.”

I grin wider.

“Are you hungry?”

“I’m a hockey player. We’re always hungry.”

I huff a laugh then drop a kiss onto his lips. “Let me go make my hockey player something to eat.” He blinks before I realize what I’ve just said. “My, in the general sense.”

“Uh-huh. Of course. *My.* Perfectly mundane and not possessive at all.”

“Shut up.”

He presses a quick kiss to my mouth, smirking as he gets up, and I roll onto my stomach, watching his perfect ass until my bathroom door shuts.

I better get up.

I grab a pair of sweats and slip them on before tugging a shirt over my head. I find his clothes folded on my dresser and have a thought to hide them. Should have taken his boxers too. I’d be more than okay with him walking around my apartment naked.

That’s all this is. He’s gorgeous. That’s all. I’ve never been this attracted to someone in my entire life. The chemistry is messing with me. I’ve never felt anything like this before.

Shaking it off, I walk into the kitchen and open the fridge. I don’t have much in here. I grab some potatoes and start to cut them up, tossing them in olive oil and seasoning them. Then I dump them in the air fryer.

Atlas walks in a few minutes later with briefs on and damp hair. “When is your flight?”

“I have to be down at the arena by noon.” I look at the clock. We have a few hours.

“Do you like traveling? It’s my least favorite part of my job.” Well, second least favorite. I’m lucky we don’t have to do it as much now. Not that I don’t love performing for fans, but I love being home.

“Yes and no. It keeps me busy. On schedule. When I’m home in the off season, I’m kind of all over the place. It gives me structure.”

“Can I ask something very personal?”

He shrugs his large shoulders. “Well, you already know my birthday. Nothing’s sacred anymore.” I smile, making a mental note. His birthday’s in a couple of weeks. “When’s yours?”

I ignore his question. “Do you consider yourself an alcoholic?” In this industry, I’ve been around a lot of drug addicts and alcoholics, but last night with him, the way he declined was impressive.

He sighs, drumming his fingers on my countertop. “I would say yes, but I’ve had people tell me I can’t be. It’s odd, I guess. It’s like, if I know I have a game in the morning, I don’t drink. If I have practice or media, I don’t either. It’s when I have nothing to do. It’s like my mind goes *hey, one drink won’t hurt. It’s not like I have plans.* Once that thought hits me and I know I have nothing to do, that’s it. Then one turns to five. I don’t have any control and I can’t say no. Once I start it’s almost impossible for me to stop. Next thing I know I’m spending my day off on the couch, sick, with a killer headache and very little memory of what happened.”

“Then I would definitely say yes.”

Atlas looks at me. “I’ve had people tell me it doesn’t count. I don’t crave it. I don’t have withdrawals. Impulse control is the issue I’ve been told, not alcohol.”

“That doesn’t matter, Atlas.” Who the hell are these people? “If you have a problem with it, then take it seriously. You know your body and your mind. Don’t minimize it.” He should be proud of himself for refusing when he has. “You didn’t drink last night when your friends did. That was amazing.”

“It’s not that hard.”

“It is that hard. You made a choice. A great choice. Be proud.”

He smiles, looking up at me. “In my mind I know I have responsibilities, so I won’t fuck that up. I know I can’t have just one. That night on the roof I had nothing to do, so I went up there to check it out. Found you instead.”

“Lucky me.” I blink with a smile, but I can’t help thinking about why I was on that roof. I swallow the thought, shoving it away. “I’m sorry I don’t have real eggs or something more for you. Pathetic breakfast.”

“Food is food. I think it’s really cool you’re vegan.” He drums his fingers on the counter. “So, how long have you been playing music?”

“My whole life. It’s always been this thing that’s consumed me. Music is everything to me.” Sourness seeps into my stomach. This thing I love

more than anything has become so tainted and twisted. I want to find the joy in it again. Music has helped carry me through the worst moments of my life. Through my birth parents' death, then moving from home to home until I landed with the Marshalls for good. Music helped me through my first breakup, the first time I had sex. The time I got so shitfaced drunk on cheap vodka I thought I'd never stop throwing up. Music has always been there.

I want to love it again.

"When will you have to start working again?"

"We're on hiatus right now. Three months." They all think I just need some inspiration to write our next album. If they knew the truth, though, I would never be left alone. "I need some time. It's been a crazy year."

"I listened to your songs before the last game." He smiles wide. "I like your voice a lot."

Warmth hits my stomach. "Oh yeah? Do you have any favorites?" I'm just teasing, but also kind of curious.

Atlas thinks. "I've only listened to your *End of Me* album. I downloaded *Crystal Earth* and *Fighting with Fire* for my flight today. My favorite song so far is 'Magenta Sky.'"

I smile a little and try to hide it. I remember when I wrote that song. Chen helped me tweak the verse when we started recording it.

"Did you write it?"

I nod.

"What's it about?"

A heavy weight settles somewhere deep. I go to say something but decide on the truth instead.

"It's about feeling hopeless, but then you're sitting there and you look up and there's the sky, turning colors. That feeling you have when you realize all your problems seem so small. In comparison, we're all so insignificant."

"Depressing."

"It's not." I lean my elbows on the counter. "Think about it like this. You're stressed, maybe having the worst day of your life, then you go outside and sit somewhere and watch the sunset. It's like this calm washes over you. You remember how insignificant it all is. Nothing matters. All of this is made up. The things that upset you won't matter in weeks or months to come. Shit happens all the time. Everything will be fine because none of

this matters in the long run. So don’t worry about it. It’s all bullshit anyway.”

“Except, what if something happens that is significant and shakes you for the rest of your life? You can say it’s all fake and it won’t matter, but that’s not reality. We’re not here for long and we’ll die and whatever, but bad shit happens. Bad shit that feels very fucking significant.” He blinks hard, glaring at the counter. Then he shakes his head. “I understand what you mean, but living a lifetime with guilt, grief, and shame feels really fucking real to some people. It matters.” He swallows hard.

“Are you speaking from experience?”

His head lifts, and the hard look in his blue eyes throws me. There’s no light in them. “Are you?”

“Atlas—”

He shakes his head. “It’s easy to say ‘who cares,’ but when all your body and mind can do is relive, remember, and feel . . . well then, it feels very fucking real, Gage.”

What the hell is happening right now? I turn to the air fryer and plate his food, then I grab the hot sauce out and put it in front of him. Atlas grabs the plate and takes a fork. We eat quietly.

“I’m sorry,” he says finally. “I just don’t buy the ‘this is all fake and made up’ thing when horrible real things still feel physical. I think that’s an excuse people use not to care about anything at all.”

I want to know what horrible things this man has been through. I look at his chest, the script peeking out behind the hair on his chest. The tattoos on his arms are done in a specific style that make the simple script feel out of place. Everything feels very heavy right now, and I’m realizing how little I know about him.

We’re strangers.

If I were to feel the way he does, I know my thoughts and feelings would drown me. I keep telling myself that what’s happening doesn’t matter because in the long run I’ll be gone anyway. All of this will be gone. Being famous has a time limit and our time is about up. My time specifically.

Atlas’s words hit me in the chest. If I’d leapt off the roof that night we met, would it be insignificant to my friends? The people my body would have landed in front of? My fans? It would have hurt maybe, but I can’t imagine them mourning my absence for long. Why would they? Despite

what Atlas may think, I am insignificant. In the long run, in the scale of the universe, my presence won't mean shit. None of this is real.

"Gage—"

A knock makes me jolt.

"Fuck."

"Who's that?"

"I'm not sure. I can't see through my door, now, can I?"

He rolls his eyes, still annoyed with me, and I don't like the role reversal. I much prefer being irritated not the irritator. I walk up to the door as another round of knocks echoes. I look through the peephole. My forehead thuds on the door.

"Fuck."

Mouth full of potatoes, he looks at me. "Who is it?"

I could ignore him. I could pretend I'm not home.

"I see your shadow, dick. Let me in!"

Or not.

I open the door and let Chen inside. This is going to suck.

"What are you—oh." Chen looks back at me. "Oh, hello." Chen grins wide, looking between us. "I'm interrupting something?"

I look back at Atlas who now has that ridiculous wide-eyed look. I will say it's better than the hard lines from earlier. "Who's this?" Atlas asks.

"His best friend." Chen sits beside him on the stool, sticking out his hand. "And who are you, gorgeous, large man?" He looks at me and mouths, "*Oh my god*." His eyes study him then his mouth drops open. "Wait! Why do you look so familiar?" Then I see the moment in his brown eyes that he remembers. "Oh shit! You're the guy from the show. The bathroom guy."

Atlas's brows rise. "The bathroom guy?"

He looks at me. "You've never slept with a fan before."

"I'm not a fan," Atlas says.

Chen's brow lifts. "I bet you're a big fan now." He winks.

"Can you please fuck off."

"He's so moody." Chen shakes his head at Atlas then takes one of his potatoes. "I can leave—"

"Please."

"But this is too much fun."

"I actually have to get going," Atlas says.

I look at the clock and I know, technically, he has hours left before he has to leave. Fun's over, then, I guess. I'm not upset at all about it.

"Thanks for breakfast."

I want to keep him here and ask him if he's okay. I don't know what happened, but it's jarring seeing him so serious and upset. Even worse that I know I'm the reason.

"I'll see you. It was nice to meet you."

"You too."

"Have a good flight," I say simply, as he walks back into my bedroom only to return a moment later, dressed now. He nods at Chen before his blue eyes pass to me. I watch him walk away and there's this urge to kiss him before he leaves. I can't stop thinking about it. Atlas looks at Chen then me before making it to the door.

"Go ahead and kiss him. You know you want to."

I look over at my idiot best friend with his chin resting on his palms, elbows on my counter.

"You're a dick."

Atlas smiles now and it brings me a little bit of relief. This is how he should always look. Happy. I walk over to him, because fuck my best friend very much, and press a quick kiss to his lips.

"Have a safe flight." I bite my tongue when the urge to tell him to call me later hits.

"Yeah." There's something in his eyes, but it clears fast before he walks out the door.

"Holy fucking shit he's hot!"

"You're an idiot."

"Damn, I came here to see why you've been so distant lately. Now I get it. I'd be distant too."

"Is that all you came for?"

"Uh no, unfortunately. Jim's been blowing up my phone. He said you bailed on the meeting about the studio session. That's not like you."

"I wanted a break. That means nothing music related for three months. He should know better." Although that's not what I bailed on, but Chen doesn't know that. "I'm just tired. I just need some time."

Chen folds his arms over his chest. "I've known you since way before anyone gave a shit about us. I know something's up, Gage. Talk to me."

My grip on the counter tightens. "Drop it."

“No.” Chen shakes his head. Stubborn idiot. “I’m not going to drop it. There’s something going on with you, aside from sleeping with that sexy-ass man. You look like you’re falling apart.”

“I’m not falling apart.”

“Then why are you ignoring us? Huh?” Chen shoots back. “Why haven’t you joined us for writing sessions? I know you said no music or anything for three months, but I know you. You always used to be the one who begged us to write with you. We’d play and write for hours. Lately it’s like you’re a ghost.”

I look up at him, and his inky irises sharpen on me. “I’m not a ghost. I want a fucking break. How hard is that to understand?”

“Uh because I know you. Break or not you never needed space from music. We’d be the ones telling you to leave us the hell alone when you’d call us at three in the morning with some lyrics you wrote. Music’s your life, and if you need a break from it, there’s a problem. When’s the last time you even played for fun?” He shrugs. “What’s going on, Gage?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me.” He waits a moment. “You’ve been so different lately. This isn’t you.”

My jaw tightens. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then tell me.” Chen lifts off the bar stool, lowering his voice. “You can tell me nothing’s wrong, but I know you. Better than anyone. Never forget that. I know something’s wrong. I just hope you know you can tell me.”

I won’t put that on them. I won’t let them know the only reason we have what we do is because of the sacrifices I’ve had to make. I took a short cut. I sold my soul and now I’m dealing with the payout.

Chen steps in front of me, jaw tight.

A wave of hurt slaps me. I miss him. I miss how everything used to be. I miss when it was just the four of us in a shitty motel coming up with new lyrics and concepts. At the time we joked about wanting to do this anonymously, with masks. Declan has really bad anxiety, so we tried to come up with a solution that meant he wouldn’t feel so exposed when we got famous, which we joked about, because in our minds it was the goal, but we thought that dream was impossible. Now it’s who we are.

Except my mask never comes off. It just morphs and changes depending on who’s around me.

Except with Atlas.

"I'm just in my head is all," I say quietly. "Every time I try to write it's like something in my brain pushes back. Like it doesn't want me to."

Chen frowns. "What does that even mean?"

"It means . . ." I take a breath. "It means the music doesn't feel like mine anymore." I swallow. "When I try, it's like I'm not writing for us. I'm writing to fulfill a quota. It's all money to them. It all feels empty." While it's not the whole truth, it's part of it. Our last album was the worst. It was fine, the music was fine, but it was filled with corporate-approved songs they thought would appeal to the masses.

I don't have social media, but even that didn't stop me hearing how some fans called us out. And you know what? I agree with them. I did sell out. When we wrote that last album, I could barely care about it. I just want to write the songs we used to, without the air of our label pressing down around us.

Chen looks at me. A chill slips between us and I don't think I should have said that. "Gage—"

"I just wanted a couple of months to get my head together. Okay? That's all." Chen takes another step closer, slowly, like he's approaching something fragile. Only that something is me.

"We all go through it. Writer's block." I nearly snort. If only it were that easy. "You shouldn't be dealing with this alone either way."

I let out a shaky breath. "It's fine. I'll be fine. I'm not going to drag you into my bullshit when we're supposed to be on a break."

Chen's eyes meet mine again. "Gage, I'm already in it. You're my best friend. I'm not going anywhere." His expression wavers and something flashes—fear then relief—across his face. "I want you to bother me, okay? I want you to complain and tell me when shit bothers you."

"Eh, you might regret that." I try to joke.

Chen's eyes stay hard on me. "I'd regret leaving you to deal with this alone a hell of a lot more than getting a phone call at three in the morning because you need to talk."

I study my friend. The words ball in my throat. For a fraction of a second I think I'll tell him, but the closer those words crawl up my throat, the more I want to swallow them down. Chen doesn't know what he's asking for.

Jim offered me a chance and I took it. Simple as that.

He asked for something in return, and I gave it to him.

I was desperate and we were so hungry for this.

At the time, I thought it would stop. Just once, right? Just one time and then that would be it and Jim would help us. Only it didn't stop. I was too young at the time, and I didn't know how to stop it. Now here we are years later, and I still don't know how to stop it.

Not without my whole world imploding and bringing the people I love most down with me.

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FIFTEEN

Atlas



I don’t mind flying, but I sometimes get motion sickness when I do. Today wasn’t a good one, and I kept having to fight my brain each time our stewardess asked if I’d like a drink. Yes, I would, but I can’t.

As I walk up to my floor of the hotel to find my room, Gage’s words from this morning still crawl under my skin. What is it called? Depression? Nihilism? I don’t know, but to live like nothing matters feels impossible. This may all be nothing in the long run, but the things I’ve seen with my own eyes weigh on me. They matter.

When I find my room, I swipe the keycard and open the door. There’s already a suitcase in here. I wish I could stay with Knox, but I know they assigned us permanent roommates, and the captain rooms with the rookies. I grab my phone and think about texting Gage, but that’s stupid, because why would I do that?

The bathroom door opens and I nearly swallow my tongue. “Fuck.”

Rome looms in the doorway, glaring at me for a moment before he huffs a laugh and shakes his head. “Right back at ya.”

I hate his face.

Rome looks like the kind of supervillain in comic books who starts burning entire cities without a second thought. You know, now that I look at him, he looks a little like the Punisher. Rome is no antihero, though.

He fills the room without even trying, looking more like an assassin than a hockey player. The dim light in this room carves through the lines of

his broad frame as he walks to his bed and sinks down. He reaches over, grabbing his shirt and pulling it over his head, the collar catching on his nose that has a slight crook in it.

He looks up at me, his pale eyes filled with amusement. Theres no warmth in them.

Even sitting down, he seems enormous. Heavy and dangerous in a quiet way most predators are. Rome leans over, grabbing his lotion and rubbing it on his sculpted arms. Detached and unbothered. Like he's already accepted being the villain in my story.

It makes me want to punch him.

"Get it out of your system, Atlas. It'll make this season a lot easier."

"You're a fucking prick."

"Ouch," he says, deadpan, setting the bottle back on his nightstand. "Anything else?"

"You know, fuck you, alright. You ended my best friend's career!" His jaw clenches. "You just go around hurting people."

"We play hockey. Yes?" He cocks his head.

"We play hockey," I snap. "We don't purposely end careers, you asshole."

I turn toward the bathroom. "I didn't mean to hurt your friend that way," he says. "I didn't."

My jaw ticks and I turn, seeing something sharp flicker behind Rome's pale eyes. "You knocked into him. On purpose."

"I know I did," he says, dragging a hand over his shaved head. "But I tripped going into it. It was supposed to be clean. I messed up. I'm sorry." He swallows, his gaze drifting around the room. "There are things that happen that no one understands. Your friend, though, that was an accident."

I think about the other day with him in Coach's office. Whatever they were arguing about couldn't be good. "Is it something with Coach?"

His pale eyes lift to mine, and for the first time since I met him something cracks through his armor. Surprise. It flashes quickly before he smooths it away behind his unreadable bored expression.

"That's none of your business."

My arms fold tight across my chest. "Why even bring it up? Why apologize?"

A smile tugs at the corner of his lips. Crooked and irritating. He shrugs his broad shoulders. "Maybe I like you."

I snort. “Yeah, right.”

His gaze lingers on me a moment. “Or maybe I’m jealous.”

I blink at him. What the hell is he even talking about? “Jealous of what?’

Rome doesn’t answer. Instead, he leans forward, bracing his massive hands on his knees before pushing himself upright. “I’m going to find a bar,” he says casually. “Would you like to come?”

Yes.

The answer slams into me instantly.

“I uh . . . n-no.” I glance up at him, and for one strange second, I think I see disappointment flicker across his face before he blinks it away. “Not because I hate you,” I add quickly, which is insane because why do I fucking care? “I’m sober.”

His eyebrows lift immediately. “Oh, uh, sorry. I wouldn’t have offered if I’d known.”

Something inside me relaxes at that. “It’s fine.”

Rome reaches for a dark hoodie and tugs it over his head. The fabric stretches across his shoulders. “Then we’ll get food instead.”

“Why?”

He sighs heavily, grabbing his phone from his nightstand. “I don’t fucking know, Atlas. Do you want to or not?”

I should say no, I really should, but I don’t know . . . up close, Rome doesn’t seem so scary. He’s kind of, I don’t know . . . sad? Pathetic? I don’t know, but I do know I’m too curious to say no.

“You can still drink,” I say quickly. “That’s fine. I won’t like spiral or anything.”

His eyes settle on me again. Pale and steady.

“Addiction isn’t something I take lightly.” His accent thickens around the words. “I will not drink in front of you.”

This is a bad idea.

It looks like I’m going to dinner with the devil.

This is weird. Really fucking weird.

If Grey saw me right now, he’d lose his mind. But I’ve already crossed a line, haven’t I? What’s one more bad decision?

“I can feel you thinking,” Rome says, resting his elbows on the table we’re sitting at. “Relax. If anyone sees us, just tell them I abducted you.”

I snort. “You couldn’t abduct me.”

One dark brow lifts. “You don’t think I could? I’m one of the strongest defensemen in the league.”

“And I’m the fastest skater.”

“But how are you at running?” He winks.

I scoff, folding my arms across my chest. “You couldn’t catch me.”

He smiles, softer this time. Something about it throws me off. Our waitress appears. “Can I take your drink orders?”

“Lime seltzer,” I say. Sometimes, when the urge to drink gets a little too strong, I can trick my brain with a good seltzer. Who knew being here with my enemy would make me want to drink.

She looks at Rome. “Iced tea please.”

“Are we ready to order?”

Rome orders a burger and I almost do too, but then I remember Gage. I look at the vegan options on the menu and find a black bean burger. I’ll give that a shot. “Thank you.” She takes our menus and goes to put the orders in. I glance at him. “You can drink. I mean it.”

He shakes his head. “I’m good, thanks.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. What? You think because I’m Russian, I need to drink?”

“No. I mean, not completely.”

“Good, because I’m not Russian.” He huffs a quiet laugh.

“Wait . . . You’re not? Where are you from?”

He shakes his head. “Belarus, though I’ve lived in the States since I was a teenager to play hockey.”

“What did you do to piss Coach off the other day?”

Rome’s dark brow cocks.

“I mean I—”

He huffs, and a small smile slips onto his lips. “I knew you were eavesdropping.”

“I wasn’t eavesdropping! I was eaveswalkingby and heard you both arguing. What’s up with that? Coach is kind of a dick to you. I mean to all of us, but like, you specifically.”

“That, Atlas, is one thing we can agree on.” He doesn’t say any more, and I let it go for now.

“So, who was your roommate before me?” I asked.

“I roomed with Andre before.”

“What? He never mentioned that.”

Rome shrugs. “We didn’t talk much.” No one seems to talk to him.

“This is weird,” I say. “I can’t relax.”

Rome sighs, drumming his fingers on the table. “I’m sorry about Grey. I didn’t mean for everything to go like that. I know you don’t believe me, but I hate it happened that way. Despite what you may believe, I don’t go around hoping to end careers.”

“I mean, you did hit him, though.”

“I’m a defenseman, Atlas. That’s my job.”

“Yeah, well, you take it to an extreme. Don’t you?”

“I don’t set out to permanently injure anyone.”

I study him, trying to decide if I believe him.

“You have a reputation, though. Don’t really correct anyone either.”

He laughs sharply, shaking his head. “Yes, I do, but the thing about reputations is they fester. It only takes one little rumor, one person to whisper something about me or anyone into the wind before it grows and mutates into a shadowed monster of its original idea.”

“Wha—”

“People see what they want. They hear what they want. Their ideas and thoughts are formed off the opinions of others. Somewhere in all of that is the truth.”

“So, what you’re saying is, you’re not really an asshole.”

A smile twists the corners of his lips. “Oh, make no mistake, Atlas. I am indeed an asshole.”

I can’t deal with this. I don’t even know why I came here. Rome is a little twisted.

“So, is Coach always this much of a dick, or is he just pissed about losing the Cup last season?”

“He’s a dick. All the time,” Rome says flatly. “More so since then, though.”

“I get it, but like, he’s intense. In a bad way.” Coaches like Grady don’t build teams, they break them down. I want to hate Rome, but it’s what I see that holds me back from fully hating him. Rome looks broken, vacant behind his eyes. Every time I bring Coach up it’s like I’m physically striking him.

Coaches like Grady treat players like pawns. No trust, chemistry, or reason. Just win or else. There’s no pride in that. That’s not what the Otters

had. What we had was family. We won, lost, and fought like family.

And now, sitting here, I realize how much I miss it. A deep ache settles in my gut, burrowing somewhere and making me sick. Maybe one drink wouldn't be so bad. Rome could stop me from having more than one, right? I think if I just ask him, just one, it'll be fine.

My phone buzzes, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Sorry," I mutter, checking the screen.

Gage: Sorry about this morning, I didn't mean to upset you. Hope you had a good flight, hockey boy

A stupid smile spreads on my face before I can stop it.

Do you miss me?????

Gage: no

liar liar I'd strip your pants off in a fire

Gage: *Gage has blocked Atlas*

Gage has not blocked Atlas because Gage likes his ass too much

Gage: You're full of yourself

I'd much rather be full of you

Gage: I'm ignoring you now. Have fun with your little game. Don't get hurt.

Little game????!!!! Excuse me. Nothing little about my game!

Are you going to watch my big manly exciting game tonight??

Are you??? GAAAAGGGEEEEEEEE

Are you going to watch because you're obsessed with me? You want to see how good my ass looks in my shorts on TV, huh???

Spoiler alert . . .

Very thick and juicy.

I wait for a minute and feel relief when I see dots on his end.

Goodbye, hockey boy

I stare at the message longer than I should, holding in the smile I feel. “Girlfriend?” Rome asks, startling me.

I set my phone down. “No.”

“Boyfriend?”

I glare at him. “No.”

Our food arrives, thankfully, and I look down at my burger. Damn, I’m fucking starving.

“Atlas,” Rome says after a moment. “I just want to talk to someone. One person. Don’t turn it into something it doesn’t have to be.”

“Grey is my best friend.”

He picks up a fry, chewing it, then swallows. “I know. I meant what I said. I did not try to hurt him like that.”

“But you did try to hurt him.”

He sighs heavily, staring down at his plate. “Yes, but not like that. I tripped and hit him harder than I meant to. I am sorry about your friend.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I eat instead. We have a dangerous job. We’re a bunch of hotheaded assholes who have tunnel vision when it comes to the game when we’re on the ice. Score, mow down anyone in our path. Get the job done.

“I meant what I said,” he adds. “I’m jealous of you.”

I laugh under my breath. “I’m a mess.”

“Yeah,” he smiles slightly. “But you’re a mess with people. You’ve got family. Someone at the end of the day, yes?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Something about that hits me harder than expected. Then I remember something. “Wait, aren’t you married?” Rome’s face drops, then it’s like he tightens it back up.

“My wife is . . . the best person I know,” he says. “She knows she’s my light. I’d never hurt her and that’s all I’m going to say about that.”

“Fair enough.”

“Some advice? About Grady.”

I look up at him mid chew. Okay, this is good. I’ve never given much thought to being vegan, but this burger is good. I nod.

“Whatever you do, stay as far from him as you can. Short answers. Yes Coach. No Coach. Don’t engage.”

“Okay . . .”

Rome takes a sip of his tea. “And most importantly, don’t give him anything to use against you. Even if it seems harmless, he will turn it into a weapon.”



The arena is loud in a way that crawls under my skin. I’m expecting an easy game. Not because I have my shit together, but because it’s the Vermont Miners and well, yeah, this is going to be a breeze.

The Vermont Miners have been at the bottom of the stats every year for the past six seasons. They’re in a fifteen-year playoff drought. Going to the Miners is a career death sentence, and they’ve struggled to really find their ground after some bad management nearly a decade ago.

Their GM gutted their entire staffing team at the end of last season. New coach, new assistant coach, and a couple of new players. Still, they’re having a hard time finding their ground so far this season. I see people talk about their players. They say the team is too old, they need fresh blood, which I don’t agree with. They have a handful of veteran players close to retirement, including their star—well, only star player—Theo Zepper.

Theo was one of those players every hockey player looked up to early in his career. He was drafted to the Manitoba Ravens when he was twenty, where he played and dominated the roster for nearly a decade, winning them two cups, until a huge trade rocked the hockey world when he chose to trade to the Miners. No one knows why. Still, he made the most of what he could with this sad excuse for a team. He became the first ever Black hockey captain for the Miners. He’s also won many awards on his own, despite the team’s poor performance.

The noise thumps like a second heartbeat here in the arena. I can feel the vibrations through the bench, the floor, through my skates, my chest.

I lean forward on the bench, my elbows resting on the boards, feeling restless. Coach moved me back a line, and I’ve barely had any ice time so far. Across the rink I watch Rome thunder down the ice, body-checking Theo. As solid as a brick wall, Theo doesn’t move, standing his ground.

I think about his words from earlier, and I’ve watched our coach. When Rome is on the ice it’s like he holds a special kind of attention.

“Hey.” Knox bumps my shoulder as he drops down, breathing hard beside me. He takes a towel and wipes his forehead. “You good?”

Coach yells over us at someone on the ice. I can barely make out the words and my focus drifts. Rome takes a pass, settles the puck, then fires clean straight through the crease and scores. “Yeah!” we yell on the bench, but I notice most of the guys don’t even go over to him to congratulate him.

“Why does everyone hate Rome?” I know why the league and fans hate him. His own team, though?

I watch as the man in question glances toward the bench.

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t say hate, he’s just kind of a dick. Very closed off, and we all know he’s a dirty player. We kind of let him have his distance.”

I think about Rome’s confession. That’s not what he wants at all. Rome skates to the bench as we slide down the line.

“Yeah, man.” I stand and watch him glare before he realizes what I’m doing and bumps my fist. I think I catch a tiny smile on his lips before it slips clean off to be replaced by his normal bored stare.

We’re up by four goals, and I wait then hop over the boards. Everything narrows. My mind sharpens in the way I love. No thoughts at all. Just me, the puck, and instinct. This is where I’m supposed to be. It’s the only thing in my life that makes sense. The only thing I’m good at. I chase down the loose puck along the boards and shoulder an opposing player. He shoves me hard, but I manage to free the puck, backhanding it to one of my guys.

“—fuck off me.”

I shove someone back and free myself and find the puck. A teammate shoulders a winger at my side. I watch him then skate fast down the ice. I match him, shoving another player away from me. The puck kicks free and I’m gone, pushing hard toward it. My legs burn in the best way.

A defenseman comes my way. I find my teammate with the puck. He shoots to me and I’m off. I slip past my opponent and shoot. “Fuck!” It hits the post. I’m signaled and hop over, sliding into the bench.

“So close,” Knox whispers.

“Fuck off.” I squirt water in my mouth. “Closer than you’ve got tonight.”

“Ouch,” Knox laughs. “They’re down by three with five minutes left, they’re not getting shit.” Knox stands, waiting. “Hey.”

I look up at him.

“A couple of the guys are hanging out tonight. You want to come? Casual. No clubs or nothing.”

“Where?”

“At Theo’s house.”

“Theo?”

Knox nods. “He’s a good friend of mine. It’ll be quiet. Nothing crazy.”

“Oh, uh, okay.”

Coach is riding us harder even though it’s almost impossible to lose. I hop over the boards, legs screaming, but I push. The puck comes to me. I cut wide, building momentum, with one defenseman closing in. I find Pyotr and shoot it to him. Not paying attention, I hit hard into another player, and for a split second my world tilts before I crash onto the ice.

“Fuck!” I grab the back of my head, my vision swimming.

“Hey.” I hear our trainer in my ear. “Atlas?”

“I’m okay.”

I plant my skates into the ice, trying to steady the dizziness in my head. The arena lights blur together, bright and nauseating.

“Atlas, look at me.”

He guides me to the bench, and I look at him as he helps me through the tunnel. “I said I’m fine,” I snap, though I don’t mean to. My stomach twists when I stand upright too fast, and I hunch back over.

“You can barely stand.”

“I can stand.” I pull away from him and sit down. Stubbornness flares hot in my gut. Hotter than the pain pulsing behind my eyes. I can already imagine Coach screaming at me for this.

We only have a couple of minutes left. There’s no point going back out there now. “We’re not taking the risk,” our trainer says as if he can hear my thoughts.

My head throbs like a pulse beating against my skull, and I sink back against the bench, breathing through the nausea.

“Where are you right now?”

I blink up at him. “At a hockey game.” I swallow.

“What happened in the game?”

“I got my shit rocked.”

He smirks a little. “What was the score before you got hit?”

“We’re up by three,” I say instead.

I let the doctor do his thing and answer his questions while the guys pour in, and by the sounds of their cheers, we won. Not that I had any doubt.

“Oh, damn.” Knox looks at me. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks.” I smile.

“How is he?” Knox ask our doctor.

“He’ll be fine. I just want to monitor and make sure he doesn’t have a concussion.” I’m starting to feel better already. The nausea is ebbing and I can see fine now. I need to start paying attention.

“Still up to go to Theo’s? I can take you back to the hotel first.”

I wave him away. I have a dull headache, but I really don’t want to go back yet.

“Just give me a little time to shower.”

“I have to do a couple of things with Coach first. Here. It’s my spare.” He hands me his keys. “Just wait for me in my car if I’m not done before you’re ready. I’ll meet you out there. I’ll be quick.”

“No rush.”



I walk out of the arena after satisfying our trainer, and Coach looked like he didn’t give one shit about a concussion. I was playing next game either way. Thankfully I’m cleared, but I need to let my doctor know if my symptoms come back. Taking it easy, I guess, until the next game.

I find Knox in his SUV and slide inside. “Sorry I took longer. The doctor wanted to wait and make sure I was okay.” I had him back his spare keys.

He shrugs. “No problem. How are you feeling?”

“Just a hard hit is all. I’m okay. I’ll be okay. Barely a headache.”

“You still up to coming with us? If not, I can take you back to the hotel.”

“Uh, yeah, sure. I uh—” I hear my phone buzz in my bag, and when I see the number, I smile. “Sorry, one second.” I swipe and see three missed calls. All from Gage. *Fuck*. I answer and smile. “You’re a little obsessed with me. It’s a bit smothering if I’m being honest,” I say softly.

“I’ve called you like three times, seriously, why weren’t you paying attention?!”

“What are you talking about?” And then understanding hits me. “Holy shit. You watched my game!”

“Atlas—”

“You fucking like me.”

“Fuck off—”

“This is a little bit much, okay. I am a bird. You have to let me fly. I can’t be tied down.”

I hear him growl something. “I was just curious. It was interesting when I went with Vanessa.”

“Uh-huh. Were you impressed? I’m very attractive in my gear.”

“Better looking when you don’t eat ice.”

“Excuse me, I didn’t fucking eat ice.”

“You kind of did,” Knox laughs.

“Fuck you both.”

“Seriously, are you okay?”

A small smile springs to my lips. “I’m okay, all cleared. Just hit hard and fast. No damage. So, how impressed were you? Did they zoom in on my ass during my face-offs? That’s all mine, you know. No padding.”

“You’re an idiot.” Knox laughs, peeling out of the parking lot.

“Where are you now?” he asks.

“I’m going out with a friend.”

“Going out?”

“Yeah. A couple of guys are meeting up at another player’s house. Why, what are you doing besides touching yourself to my game?” I say softly.

“I wasn’t jerking off!” he bites back. “I’m glad you’re okay. As idiotic as ever.”

“Hey, I’m alright. Really.” I look over at Knox. “I’ll talk to you when I get back from their house, okay? If you’ll be up?”

He waits a long moment. “I’ll be up.”

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SIXTEEN

Atlas



I’m not good in crowds, and I’m even worse in situations where I don’t know people. My chest tightens until every breath feels shallow. It’s like my brain starts spinning itself, trying to think of things to say to fill the silence.

At my core I’m not very interesting. Not particularly funny either.

“Bank it, Layton.”

A couple of guys crowd around the pool table down in Theo’s finished basement, shoulder checking each other as if they’re playing a game of hockey and not pool. The sharp crack of the pool balls colliding echoes in the space down here.

Theo’s house sits high on one of the hills just outside town. The kind of place with huge windows and expensive woodwork that somehow feels lived in instead of staged for a magazine. A lot like Oli’s house.

It took us nearly twenty minutes to get here through the winding roads edged with dirty snowbanks.

The basement smells faintly of cedar, beer, and something spicy from the amount of body wash and cologne floating through the small space. There are jerseys framed along the walls.

I find Theo across the room, watching his friends play. Out of his gear, he’s somehow even more intimidating. He’s handsome, in a severe sort of way, nearing forty and carrying the confidence of someone who knows

exactly who he is. He should be close to retirement, but there are zero rumors of him slowing down anytime soon.

He's a handsome guy, with a face that's shaped from years of playing this game, and his rich brown skin is smooth save for a few scattered scars. One on his chin and one just beneath his eye socket from a stray puck years ago that sidelined him for weeks. His nose has a slight crook from a break that never healed quite right.

His eyes stay sharp and intense while he watches the game. Beer bottles hang loose from most of the guys' fingers, but the second someone fucks up a shot, his whole face softens with amusement. "You guys are terrible at this." His full lips split into a grin as he rubs one hand over his shaved head.

I was nervous to come tonight, but somewhere between the arguing and terrible pool-playing skills, I've started to relax. A little. I glance around the room again. Hockey sticks are mounted carefully along the side walls beside the framed jerseys and old photographs. Some look decades old.

I take in all the jerseys he has mounted, and one catches my eye.

"What's that jersey from?"

Theo follows my gaze upward toward a black and red jersey hanging near the corner of the room. Something unreadable flashes across his face before he schools the expression. "It's uh, from before I went pro," he says.

I squint at the name across the back.

Carrillo?

"That's not your last name."

"Very good, Atlas." Theo looks at me for a moment before the side of his mouth pulls upward. "It's also not your business." He winks.

Okay then. Noted.

Before I can embarrass myself further, I hear Knox yell at the pool table. "You scratch that again and you're paying my next in-game penalty."

"Can you imagine how much Kuli pays in fines." Layton snorts, talking about my friend Oli, or as the league calls him, Kuli.

"Doesn't matter now. Andre signed a ninety-two-million-dollar contract for eight years. They're doing just fine," Kenton, a defenseman on the Miners, says.

"He really hasn't been fined that often," Theo says carefully before taking another drink. "He's brutal, but he's careful. He doesn't take things too far."

"Unless you touch Andre," Knox mutters. "Good fucking luck."

Layton snorts. “That shit is insane to think about.”

We all look at him.

Layton drops his stick to his side. “Not like that, okay. Jesus Christ. I just mean, it’s crazy to think about. It’s awesome. That’s all I meant by it. You know I have zero issue with it. I love the LGBTQ and all the pluses.”

Knox snorts loudly while Theo laughs into his beer.

“How’s it been for you?” Knox asks Theo after a second.

Theo leans against the wall. “Most of the time I can ignore the noise. I’m used to ignorant dumbasses with nothing better to do than bother other people.”

Then his dark eyes slide to mine.

“So how are you doing on the Vipers? We couldn’t believe you left Oregon.”

Every head turns toward me. My stomach twists. I am not good in the spotlight. “Um . . .” I rub the back of my neck. “It’s been good.”

“Don’t lie,” Knox says immediately. “He’s slowly discovering we have the worst coach in the league.”

Layton huffs a laugh, lining up his shot. “Grady needs to get fired.”

“You know he won’t, though. Daddy wouldn’t allow it.” Knox takes a sip of his drink.

I blink. “What?”

Knox straightens, resting both hands on the top of his pool cue. “His dad is our general manger.”

“Oh. Shit.” Honestly, that explains a lot.

“Yeah,” Knox mutters tightly after sinking a shot. “And he’s not exactly thrilled we lost last year. He wanted a three-peat.”

Theo crosses toward the fridge in the corner. “Atlas, I have beer if you prefer. You’ve been nursing that ginger ale for like an hour.”

My eyes drop to the can sweating in my hand.

I hate ginger ale.

I only grabbed it because it gave me something to hold. Watching everyone else drink has been making my skin itch for the last twenty minutes, and for one dangerous second the word yeah nearly slips out of my lips.

“He can’t,” Knox says before I can answer.

Theo pauses halfway to opening the fridge. “Can’t?”

Heat crawls up the back of my neck. “I uh . . .” God, I hate this part. “I’m sober.”

Theo shuts the fridge door. “Shit, sorry man. I won’t ask again.” He gestures upstairs. “I’ve got soda and other stuff too if you want something different.”

“No, this is okay.”

I already opened it anyway, and wasting things is not something I like doing.

Theo nods then hands Knox, Layton, and his defenseman Denton another beer.

The sound of pool balls and their laughter fills the room, but their voices feel far away, like I’m listening underwater. It’s fine. I’m fine. I’ve got my shitty little drink, and everyone is having a good time. Everything is great.

“You alright?” Knox asks quietly, taking a seat beside me.

“Yeah.” My fingers tighten around the can, and I quickly set it down on the side table before anyone notices they’re shaking. I ball my fingers in my lap. “Tired.”

“We can head back.”

“No, no. It’s fine. I’m gonna grab some air, though, I think.” I slap his thigh and stand up.

I head upstairs, through Theo’s kitchen, and shove open the sliding back door. Cold air hits my lungs hard enough to sting. The porch overlooks a dark stretch of yard dusted with snow.

I grip the railing and stare out into the dark.

Part of me wants to call Gage. Another part of me feels a little pathetic for thinking it. I’ve bothered him a lot, and I’m afraid he’s going to get tired of my constant whining. I know we’re only casual, and I don’t want to scare him away.

The sliding door opens behind me, and I turn to see Theo step onto the porch, beer still in hand.

“Oh—sorry.”

Theo narrows his eyes slightly. “Why are you apologizing?”

“I . . .” I let out a quiet laugh. “I honestly don’t know.”

I look away, turning back toward the dark yard beyond the porch. Snow dusts the grass in uneven patches, faintly glowing against the porch light.

“Not looking forward to snow,” he says. “It irritates me.”

I huff a laugh through my nose. “You picked the wrong sport and location to live in, then.”

Theo smiles at that. Slow and easy. “Love the sport. Hate that it’s a winter sport. I should be on a beach somewhere right now where it never drops below eighty.”

“Ew I hate the heat.”

“Crazy.”

“Says the guy voluntarily living in Vermont.”

That pulls another laugh from him. For a moment we stand there listening to the quiet. It’s feels strangely easy out here, and I don’t feel the need to fill the silence like I always do to avoid awkward lulls.

Theo glances toward me. “Sorry about the jersey thing earlier. I didn’t mean to come off like a dick.”

“It’s fine. I get it.”

And I do. There are some things people ask about because they care, and then some things they ask about because they want to own a piece of you afterward. That’s what getting interviewed is like. You say things to the media and then fans of the sport can twist and morph your words to suit themselves. We learn the difference fast.

Theo studies me for a second longer, like he knows there’s more I’m not saying. “So, how are you really doing?” he asks. “We can’t believe you moved. Andre made sense. You, not so much. You, Oli, and Grey on a line meant trouble for everyone else.”

Something twists painfully in my chest. I miss it more than I let myself admit. There’s no point. What’s done is done. “Yeah, well . . . Grey got injured, so I guess that would have ended either way.”

Theo’s expression softens immediately. “Real sorry to hear that. I’d hate to go out that way.”

“Are you retiring soon?”

Theo cocks one perfectly groomed brow. “Are you calling me old?”

A laugh escapes me before I can stop it. “Wouldn’t even dream of it.”

“Good answer.”

I smile despite myself while he laughs.

“Not yet. Still got some work to do.”

There’s something deeply confident about the way he says it. Not arrogant, just certain. Like he already sees the ending he wants and will do anything he can to get there.

“Can I ask something?” I say carefully. “Even if it’s not my business?”

“Maybe.”

“Why did you move to Vermont? Like on purpose.”

He snorts, shaking his head. Everybody in the league knows Vermont is the worst. I’m not sure how the culture has been since their complete staffing overhaul and some new players, but we all know coming here is a career death sentence. Bad winters. Small market. Constant rebuilds year after year.

Theo could’ve played anywhere.

“I actually used to play here,” he says. “My family moved up this way when I was nine. My mom married a man from here, and I joined the local little league team.” His eyes soften, somewhere far away. “This place is special to me. I wanted to live here again.” I think he’s done, but he surprises me. “So, bad management. We’re having a rough season.” He shrugs. “Everybody has them.”

“Your team seems to have one every season.”

“Ouch. Damn.” He laughs, leaning against the railing. “I know where we stand, but I wouldn’t play for anyone else.”

I don’t fully understand that kind of loyalty. “You can only do so much.”

“We’ve got good players,” he says. “They’re just young. They have to find their footing. When you’re that young, you don’t understand the shift playing for the pros. You should remember.”

He’s right. I do. You can train, play, and grind your body to dust, but nothing prepares you for the big league better than playing for it.

“And I will get that Cup before I retire. I can promise you that.”

I snort. “Okay, sure.”

He bumps my shoulder lightly. “So, why did you really leave?” The question hits and settles somewhere under my ribs. I think about last season. About the locker room after wins. Grey yelling over everyone not listening to him because we were all hyped up. Oli shoving me into walls, laughing when I shoved him back. The constant arguing, bickering, and play fighting. We were a family.

Maybe I’ve been thinking about this all wrong. I’ve spent so much time trying not to take up space, trying to not be too difficult or need much from anyone. Maybe it’s time I started making some noise. “I needed a change. Believe me, Oli is more than okay.”

Theo smirks immediately. “Coming home to that fine man? I’m sure he is.” I roll my eyes, but I can feel myself smile. “Can I tell you a secret?” Something mischievous lights up his face suddenly. I nod carefully. “Andre and I used to hook up years ago.”

My brain short circuits. Of all the things I expected him to say tonight, that somehow didn’t cross my mind. “What?!”

Theo bursts out laughing. “Don’t tell anybody. Especially Oli. I don’t need that heat on my back.”

“Oh, that is definitely deadly information to hand to me.”

“I think he already knows,” Theo says, still grinning. “He’s been extra aggressive with me on the ice lately.” His eyes sparkle with amusement.

It’s strange hearing him talk like this. No shame or hesitation. Just open and honest. Years ago, we wouldn’t have brought these things up. Sometimes fans think we stop being human once we hit the ice. We don’t. We’re human. We all have families and lives beyond this game. Some of us are queer. Some of us aren’t. Some of us are just barely getting by inside the mental prison our minds make up.

I haven’t thought about coming out. It’s not something I want to do. I like my privacy. Still, I know conversations like this matter, and I love that we’re having them now. “How’s it been for you?” I ask quietly. “Since you came out publicly.”

Theo thinks for a moment.

“Not so bad.” He shrugs. “Could be worse.” The answer feels practiced. Not dishonest, but maybe not the whole truth.

“Do you have someone?”

Theo goes quiet long enough to make me regret asking. I shouldn’t have pushed. Finally, he looks over at me with a small smile. “There’s someone,” he says softly. “But I don’t have him.” Theo takes a long pull from his drink. “But he sure as hell has me.”

I open my mouth to ask, but he turns to me and smiles, clapping his hand against my shoulder.

“I’m glad you came, Atlas. It’s nice talking to you.”

I follow him back into the house where yelling immediately crashes over us.

“Interference!”

“How is it interference?!” Knox shouts. “It’s pool, not hockey.”

“What the hell’s going on?”

Layton throws both hands up dramatically. “Knox’s meaty fucking hand bumped the table and moved the ball I was about to sink!”

“You were nowhere near the ball,” Knox argues. “It moved millimeters. Millimeters, Lay! You were not making that shot.”

“Yes, I would have!”

“Rematch, right now!”

Layton pulls back, cradling his wrist. “My hand’s cramping.”

“Excuses from a loser.”

I laugh, the tension in my chest easing a bit, and Knox shakes his head, looking at me.

“Are you ready to go? I’m beat.”

I look at the guys and nod. “Yeah, sure.”

“Here.” He tosses his keys at me. “Go start up the car, I’ll be there in a sec. Just going to piss.”

“I have those snacks for you too,” Theo says. “He’s obsessed with these chips he can only find here,” Theo says to me.

“Oh, shit. I’ll be out in a minute, okay?”

I nod, looking at Theo, and say goodbye to the guys, then I head out to Knox’s car and slide in. It’s been so long since I last drove. I have a truck back home in Jersey, but when I’m playing, I don’t even bother. I’m constantly being shuffled from one place to the next.

I grab my phone out, my thumb hovering over Gage’s name.

You up?

I wait for a moment. Light flashes when I see his name on my screen, and I answer. “Hey.”

“Hey.” His sleepy voice makes me take note.

“Were you sleeping?”

“I was waiting for you to call, lying in bed.”

“I’m sorry. I’m uh, heading back to the hotel now. I just wanted to talk to you. I’m going to be busy pretty much all day tomorrow.”

“Did you have fun with your friends?”

“Yeah, it was nice.”

“You didn’t drink, right?”

“No.”

“Good boy.” I can imagine the smile on his lips.

“Um, is it okay if I text you while I’m away?”

“You texted me now.”

“Yeah no. I meant like . . .” I scrub a hand down my face. “I don’t want to annoy you.”

“You already annoy me, Atlas.”

“But like, in a sexy way, right?”

“What does that even mean?”

“I just . . .” I swallow. “I don’t want you to get annoyed if I’m calling or texting a lot.”

I see Theo’s door open as Knox steps out, and I swallow. “I’m sorry, um, get some sleep, okay—”

“Hey Atlas.” His sleep voice feels like a soft touch. “Call or text whenever you need to, okay.”

I nod even though he can’t see me. “Okay. Uh, have a good night. Get some sleep.”

“I will. Good night, hockey boy.”

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SEVENTEEN

Gage



Atlas: My legs are killing me.

Why? You barely played tonight.

Atlas: Mean! I played enough. Do you know how much work it is to skate like that? That's how I got this gorgeous ass! Put some respect on the game.

I don't know much about hockey, but I'm assuming it's bad when your team spends most of the time defending instead of scoring

Atlas: OUCH that was uncalled for!!

True but uncalled for

Ugh I wish you were here to massage my legs for me

Why would you assume I'd massage them if I was?

Atlas: No, you're right, you'd be massaging other things, if you know what I mean

😒😒

Atlas: My balls. I meant my balls.

No, I got it

Atlas: I need to go shower

Good. I can't imagine how bad you smell right now

Atlas: Excuse me! This is the scent of athletic perfection!

Well, go take your athletically potent ass into a shower. I'll talk to you tomorrow.



Atlas: I hate the bus more than the plane, I think.

What are you doing today?

I'm going to try and write today

Atlas: Write about me. How hot I am

How smart

Kind

Adorable

Annoying. Loud. Obnoxious.

Atlas: Write me a song we can share with our grandkids.

I don't want kids.

Atlas: Neither do I. I was talking about the six bullmastiffs we'll have.

And where we will be keeping these giant dogs?

Atlas: On our farm of course.

I feel my phone vibrate in my hand. "You see," he says, without missing a beat the second I answer. "We'll have this house on all this land, like tons of room. I've always lived in a city with no yard. We'll have a farm, but it'll be all dogs. A dog rescue."

“A dog rescue?” I laugh, sitting on my couch.

“Yeah, and we’ll have all this room. You’ll have a studio, and I’ll have my comic room. Then maybe I’ll build a rink—”

“With your bare hands no doubt.”

“Yeah, you can watch my manly muscles flex as I work. You’re such a slut for my arms.” I snort. “Then we’ll teach kids how to play hockey, or you can give them guitar lessons.”

“I can play the piano too. And the trumpet, actually.”

“See! Perfect.”

“All with our six bullmastiffs.”

“And one bulldog we’ll name Freginold. Freggie for short. The rest will be fosters.”

“I . . . don’t know what to say to that.”

“Say yes to our dreams, Gage! That’s what you say.”

I smile for a moment then chew my bottom lip.

“Yes.”



Atlas: Are you asleep? I know the time difference is about three hours. Sorry.

I look at his message and smile, wiping the sleep from my eyes. I tap his number and listen before my lungs ease, hearing his voice.

“Hey.”

“Sorry it’s late.”

“It’s okay.” I smother a yawn and sit up in bed, leaning over to turn my light on. “Are you okay? You fell hard tonight.”

“Yeah, that was nothing. I just wanted to hear your voice, I guess.”

“Are you happy to be coming home this weekend?”

“Yeah. I miss my apartment. It’s my least favorite part of playing—not going to new places but like, traveling between them. I usually bring comics with me, but I always forget to pack them. Which is fine, they just end up ruined from the travel most of the time. I’ve just been doomscrolling and watching your music videos.”

“My music videos?”

“Yeah, it’s funny. Like, I know it’s you, but it feels like I’m watching someone else. I know it’s a persona, but still.”

“You don’t sound very impressed. Many people would love a chance to take Death home.”

“Yeah, well, I only want to take you home, Gage.”

A warm rush of soft heat fills my stomach. “Well, you can always call me. You know that.”

“You’re busy. I don’t want to call you every time I think about it.”

“I don’t mind. I can usually text, if nothing else.” I’ve spent my days walking around this apartment, writing a little and avoiding my friends. Chen and I are going out in the morning. He wants to do some shopping. Atlas’s birthday is next week, so maybe I’ll find something for him.

“Thank you.”

“Where’s your roommate?”

“I guess he has family here, so I’m alone tonight.”

“Are you thinking about what you shouldn’t be?”

His heavy sigh makes my chest ache. “Yeah.”

“Don’t do it, okay. You don’t need it.”

“It’s not . . .” He’s quiet for a little on the other end of the line. “It’s not like I crave it like that. It’s just, when I’m alone, it’s hard to distract myself, I guess.”

“Distract you from what?” He’s quiet for a moment, but I can hear his heavy breathing.

I pull back and click the video button, my lungs easing a bit when I see him. Atlas is lying against his pillows on his side, his black hair a little messy as if he air-dried it after a shower and ran his fingers through it. He’s shirtless, but it’s not his body I’m missing. It’s how warm I know those arms would be around me right now.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” He gives me a sad smile.

“Distract you from what, Atlas?” He watches me for a moment then squeezes his eyes shut. “Atlas?”

“From being me,” he says softly. “It helps distract me from myself.”

“Atlas.” I sit up a little. “What’s going on with you? Talk to me?”

“I wish you were here. I don’t want to be alone.”

I try and remember where he is right now, because I’m about to find the first flight out to him. I know logically that’s dumb. By the time I’d get

there he'd be on a plane to the next place. "You're not alone. I'm here. Talk to me."

"Today's a bad day." He swallows. "That's all. It's a bad day with bad memories and I'm just trying really hard not to think about it."

"Do you want me to sing to you?"

"Really?"

I shrug. "I don't mind, if you want."

"What are you going to play me?"

"I'll think of something." I set my phone down and walk over to pick up my guitar. Then I get back on my bed and get comfortable. "I'm going to put my earbuds in, okay, just listen."

"Okay." I take one more look at him before I switch back to voice only and grab my earbud, sticking it in my ear.

"Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you."

I take a breath and think about the lyrics I wrote earlier. "Just close your eyes, okay. Got 'em closed?"

"Yeah."

Somehow, I know he's not lying. I take a breath and start to hum, singing to the beat of what I'm working on now.

When the night has fallen and there's nowhere else to run
When the light from your eyes is brighter than the sun
When you're not here with me and everything feels numb
I think of youu, I'll think of youu, you.
Stars beat across the sky, but the thing I see is you and I,
Way up high, there we are, and I can't believe I fell so far
Without youu, youu.
I'll be chasing
Right here facing
Whatever you want me to
Because all I think of is youu, youu
I just think of youu.

I hum along to the soft flowing rhythm with enough beat to make it sound poppy. A lot different than the normal rock edge of our Riot Heart songs. I listen and still hear him breathing softly.

When the night is over and there's nowhere to run
When the light from your eyes is more than enough

I’ll think of you, I’ll think of you.

I don’t know the rest and I’m still working on the lyrics. I just can’t keep the night we met out of my mind. It was supposed to be simple, but this is as close to peace as I’ve felt in my entire life.

“Atlas?” I whisper but smile when I hear the unmistakable sounds of his snores. “Are you asleep?” I’m met with more rumbling. “Atlas?”

I play gently, trying to work out the chords with the sounds of his sleep keeping me company for another minute. I swallow hard.

“I think I made a mistake, Atlas.” I say softly. “I don’t think I want to be strangers with you.”

I listen to him for a moment more before deciding to hang up.

“Good night.”



I erase the line I just wrote, frustration starting to sink in.

But I’ve written most of it, which is way more than I’ve done in months.

Best of all, this song is for me. It’s not for anyone else. I don’t plan to put it on an album or sing it for a crowd. It takes the pressure off, knowing I don’t have to impress anyone. It’s just for me.

I should probably go to sleep soon. Chen’s coming over in the morning so we can shop before Atlas comes home tomorrow night. I don’t know if he’ll come straight here or crash back at his place.

Just as I think it my phone lights up.

“Hey.”

“You sound awake.”

“I am.” Atlas texted me again this morning after we talked last night. I’ve written down the lyrics since then but I’m still a bit stuck. “I stayed up.”

“For little ole me? You’re so obsessed.”

“Shut up.” I snort. “You were a disaster tonight. What’s going on?”

“A disaster? Excuse me I played—”

“Horribly.”

“Horribly, I know. I’m surprised Coach hasn’t grabbed me by the neck to shake loose whatever money they gave me in my contract.”

“I hope you were cheap.”

“Ouch. Fuck, my ego, Gage.”

“You don’t have an ego.” I laugh. “You just don’t seem as focused as you were last year.”

As soon as the words come out, I want to take them back.

“What? Gage. What are you saying to me right now?”

“Can we just not.”

“You watched my games! Are you joking right now? Oh my god. I’m feeling a little smothered by your obsession with me. It’s a little pathetic.”

“I just watched some clips from last season, okay. It’s not a big deal.”

“You like me!”

“No. I was wondering why the Vipers even signed you and if there’d ever been a moment you were good at hockey.”

“Ouch. Damn. My heart is breaking. I wish you were here to nurse it better.”

“I’m the one hurting it.”

“I know, it’s very confusing for my brain, yes.”

“You were okay tonight. You just seemed sluggish,” I say more quietly. “You’re so fast, but your reaction time needs work.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m having a hard time.”

“With what?”

“I don’t know. This whole thing. The change of it. I miss my friends. More than I thought I would, in ways I didn’t even realize.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just mean, I knew I’d miss them, but I didn’t realize I’d miss them here on the ice. I keep thinking about us as a group, and I knew them better then I knew myself. It made playing easier, and I’m having a hard time finding that groove again.

I sit with that for a moment. “I was only joking, okay. You played fine, it just seemed like something was wrong.”

“I love hockey a lot. I just wish I could love it here. But I haven’t gotten there yet. It’s not all bad, though. I went out tonight with a couple of guys from the team. It was a lot of fun. I’m trying to put myself out there more.”

“Oh yeah? You went out?”

“I had a good time.”

I don’t like the way that feels in my stomach. Not that I don’t want him to have fun while he’s out, he deserves it, but still, that little feeling in my

gut is not fun. I don’t want to, but I have to ask. “Have you met up with anyone?”

“Met up?”

“You know, to like . . . you know.”

“You mean have I fucked anyone?” He laughs as if that’s a ridiculous thing to ask. While I researched a little game play, I also came across thread after thread of hockey players notoriously cheating on their wives. It’s a common practice it seems. I had to think logically. I mean rock-star reputations are no better I suppose. Besides, why does it even matter? Good for him if he went out and found someone. Great even.

I swallow that lie down.

“Why, would that make you jealous?”

“No!”

“Kind of sounds like you’re jealous.”

“I’m not. Just wear a condom, that’s all.”

“Hey, Gage . . .”

“What?”

“I haven’t hooked up with anyone. What about you?”

I nearly laugh. I’ve barely left my apartment. “No. I haven’t.”

“Good, because that would make me insanely jealous.”

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EIGHTEEN

Gage



I give my black beans a toss and smile when my phone lights up. “Hey.”

“Are you busy?”

“No, I’m making food. I’m about to go out with Chen in a bit.”

“That sounds nice. I can’t wait to come home. I’m at the airport right now. Thankfully I’ve got two days off. I’m so tired.”

“Too bad you have to play on your birthday.”

“Yeah, but I get to see you before it. How did my ass look on TV yesterday?”

Part of me wants to tease. He always assumes I’m watching now, but how can I tease him when the assumption is right. “Very delicious. Too bad the way you played distracted from it.”

“Hey, I played fine!”

“Yeah, okay. You played fine.”

“How good do I look in my jersey on TV? Real muscular and manly, right? Tell me.”

“Noodle arms.” He huffs loudly on the other end and I smile. “Pretty sure I’d look better in it,” I lie.

“Oh, I have no doubt. While wearing nothing underneath.”

My spatula freezes in my hand. “Oh yeah? And what would you do to me?”

“I’d slide my hands up your thighs and lift you in my arms, carrying your gorgeous ass to bed.” I slide my hand down the front of my sweats and

squeeze.

“What happens then?”

“I’d slide it up past your stomach and take your cock in my mouth and—”

“Hey!” I hear someone shout near him. “Oh, shit, sorry man. Didn’t know you were on the phone.”

“Asshole,” Atlas laughs. “Sorry,” he says to me. “We’re getting ready to board.”

“You don’t have to come right over tonight. I’m sure you’ll want to sleep.”

Atlas is quiet for a moment. “I’ll see how I feel. I just can’t wait to see you.”

I take a moment, letting it all settle. I try to fight it, but I already know I’m going to show my hand.

“I can’t wait to see you too.”



“I almost wish you were hooking up with me.”

“No you don’t, and you’re a millionaire. Buy your own e-reader.” I mean, I don’t know Atlas’s financial situation, but I’m assuming he didn’t burn through the thirty-six-million-dollar contract he just signed with the Vipers.

“What’s going on with you and the giant anyway?”

“Nothing. We’re just friends.”

Chen scoffs. “I wish my friends were that hot.”

I glare at him.

“You know I’m not attracted to you. I’ve seen too much. We grew up together.”

“Yeah, I guess the romance dies when your best friend constantly ends up in your bed crying every night.” I bite back my smile seeing Chen’s eyes pin me in place in my peripheral.

“Oh, excuse the fuck out of me.”

I look around the cafe and try not to smile.

“Sorry to burden you with my childhood trauma.”

“It was very off-putting actually.”

He chucks a napkin at my face. “Dick.” But he chuckles after a moment. If we can’t joke about shit like this, then fuck is life bleak. “So, what’s the deal with this guy? Because you can say just friends all you want, but I know you and I know you are riding that man.”

Actually, he’s been riding me, but that’s none of Chen’s business. “I don’t know. We just hang out. It’s been . . . fun.”

“Fun.” He snorts. “I remember when I used to have fun.”

“You can have fun.”

Chen shrugs. “I don’t know. Just not into it lately, I guess. So, where are we going after this?”

I’ve been avoiding asking this, but I want to check it out and I don’t want to go alone. “You ever go to a comic store?”

“No.”

“Well, today’s your lucky day. There’s one a couple of blocks over at the mall complex. I want to check it out.”

“Oh, that dick must be so good.”

“Shut up.” And yes, it is, but again, he doesn’t need to know that.

“Let’s go.” He grabs his coffee and pulls at my sleeve.



By the time we make it to the comic store, Chen has spent the entire walk making increasingly dirty comments about Atlas.

“You know what really pisses me off?” Chen says, opening the door and letting me in. “You somehow pull the hottest man alive while I have to suffer through dating apps. It’s so unfair.”

The little bell goes off as we step through. “You’re being dramatic.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, not all of us have a six-foot-five god fall into our laps and bounce on them.”

I ignore my friend as I look around the store. It’s pretty dead in here right now. It’s bigger than I expected too. There are comic books lining the walls and on tables spread throughout the store. There’re figurines and memorabilia displayed in cases and on shelves, and posters and props take up most of the wall space. There’s music playing, and I close my eyes when I recognize the melody.

“Riot Heart.” Chen smiles at the guy at the counter. “Love their music.”

“Eh.” He shrugs. “It’s a little too melodramatic for me.”

Chen’s mouth drops open and he turns his head to blink at me. “Melo-fucking-dramatic.” He turns back to the man. “Some might say it’s heartwarming and holds deep meaning.”

“And whiny lyrics.”

“I’m going to burn this place to fucking the ground,” he whispers to me. There’s a dark curtain with a neon sign above leading to a room that says *Adults Only.*

I walk over to the rack of comics, but I don’t even know where to start. Which is why I got the e-reader. I figure he can download whatever he wants to take with him. His books won’t get ruined, and he can take unlimited comics with him to keep him busy on the road.

Although I don’t mind how much he’s been calling me.

I make my way to the figurines, looking at all the muscular men and voluptuous women. “White man, White man, White man.” Chen shakes his head, turning to the clerk. “Any Asian superheroes? Maybe ones from Singapore?”

The guy walks around the counter and over to us, pointing to a spot on the shelf. “This is Ghost Maker. He’s a rich vigilante like Batman. Very good at fighting. He takes a lot of pride in it, and he’s against killing people. He’s pretty badass. If you’re into X-Men, there’s Jitter. She’s a mutant. Very cool ability. I don’t have any action figures of her, but I can always order them.”

“Thank you.” Chen takes the action hero from him. “He’s pretty cool looking, right?”

I focus back on the shelf then turn to the man. “What’s the adult room for?”

“Oh uh . . .” The guy smirks. “It’s like adult toys and stuff.”

Okay, that intrigues me. “Can we go inside?”

“Are you not an adult?” Chen blinks at me, and I turn to him with a glare.

“Yeah, go ahead, uh . . . just don’t like, jerk off in there, you know?”

“I want to ask if that’s happened, but I’m scared to know the answer.”

“You already know the answer,” Chen whispers, giving me a flat smile and walking around me to the curtain. We move the curtain aside, and wow.

“Holy shit. Nerds are kinky, man.” There’s a wall of toys on display. All themed, I’m sure. There are outfits and tables of magazines in blacked-out

sleeves. “Holy shit.” Chen walks over to the wall of toys and picks up a box, showing me a tentacle dildo. “Ouch.” His brows pop. “Although, those suction cups might feel nice.”

“Put it back!” I yank it from him and set it back on the shelf.

To my right, I see the rack of costumes that seem to be missing a lot of fabric. “Ninety dollars.” Chen looks at the price tag of a black leather lingerie suit that comes with a whip. “Where’s the rest of it? Ninety dollars. I pay less than that for a full fucking coat.”

“You’re a millionaire.”

“Uh, yes, and I will stay a millionaire by not buying expensive scraps of fabric. You may have forgotten what it’s like to be poor, but I have not. I know there’s a time limit on all this.” He waves his hand in the air. “I’ll be smart with my money. Don’t you dare come around and ask for any when you’ve spent it all on slutty costumes.”

I shake my head, but one thing sticks out to me. “A time limit?” I look at him. “What um, what’s your ideal time limit?” Chen holds up another obscene dildo in his hand.

“How does this even fit?” He reads the box. “A hellhound dildo with a knot and everything. Damn.” He sets it down. “I don’t know. I haven’t thought too much about it. I mean, we can’t do this forever, right? Although playing shows at like eighty would be sick.”

His words settle somewhere deep.

Chen is back to browsing the toys. “Why do I kind of want one? It’s been a while, I’ll admit.”

“Oh yeah? When’s the last time you hooked up with someone.”

“Oh god, I don’t know. Months at least. Maybe more. We’ve been really busy. Not all of us have giant muscular men just appear out of nowhere to have our dirty way with.” He laughs, shaking his head, then turns to look at me and his eyes widen as realization sinks in. I regret bringing him here. “His tattoos!” he yells, making me jump.

“What!?”

“You fucking like him!”

“I do not!”

“Gage, I’m getting secondhand embarrassment. I remember now. His arms, those delicious arms. They were covered in superheroes. Holy shit.” He folds forward, bracing his hands on his knees to laugh. “I’m going to

cry.” He continues laughing. “The e-reader, the comics. When the fuck have you ever liked comics?”

“Am I not allowed to find a new hobby?!”

“Is that new hobby going to be using this on your hot behemoth?” He waves a toy around.

I go to tell him to fuck off then look at the toy in his hand. “Wait, let me see that?”

His face scrunches up but he hands it to me. I look at the obscenely thick toy. It comes with a suction cup, and I see the name at the bottom. The Bruce Banner. Dark green with thick veins running up the shaft. An idea comes to mind, and I can’t unthink it now. “I’m getting it.”

Chen looks horrified. “That thing is insane.”

“It’s perfect.” It’s funny, and I know Atlas will find it funny too.

Maybe he’ll want to use it.

It’s a little too big for me, but maybe for him. I look up at my friend.

“Oh, I am going to be unbearable about this,” he says.

“Can you shut up.” But Chen looks elated.

“I need like, all the details.”

“Come on.” I tug him out of the room, checking around to make sure we’re still the only ones in here, and walk to the counter. My face heats a bit as I set it down while trying not to make eye contact. “Will this be uh, all?”

I clear my throat. “Uh, yeah.”

“Brings a whole new meaning to Hulk smash, am I right?”

I slap Chen in the stomach, but something catches my eye. “What’s that?”

The man looks over at the flashlight on the counter

“It’s a bat signal.” He grabs it and turns it on then points it, displaying the light.

“Can I get that too.”

“A bat signal?”

Warmth spreads through my chest. I’m getting more excited about this by the moment.

“Talk about a gag gift.” The guy laughs at Chen.

I look up at the man who seems a few shades redder, then I pay for my things and wait so Chen can buy his action figure.

“Why are you getting it?”

“Because he looks sick, man. Maybe I can ask that fine man you’re seeing about him. I bet he knows all about this nerdy shit.” He looks at the man. “No offense.” He thinks. “Actually, full offense for that Riot Heart comment. They’re incredible musicians.”

“If you like mediocre radio rock.”

My friend goes still.

“Right, uh, thank you. We’ll be going now.” I tug my friend away before he can commit any crimes.

“Mediocre radio rock. Fuck that guy.” He shakes his head, but I hate to say it.

I think he might be right.

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NINETEEN

Atlas



It might be embarrassing how fast I took the elevator down to Gage's apartment after flinging my duffle bag inside my own and taking a shower. I should have texted him, but from the trip on the plane to getting down to the arena to take care of some business, then showering when I got home, there was no time. I just wanted to be here.

I smile wide when he opens the door. I mean, we've talked every day since I've been away, but I prefer in person. "Ugh, I forgot how much I like your face."

"Ridiculous." But he pulls me in for a kiss

"I missed you," I say against his lips.

"Uh-huh." Gage kisses me harder. "Shh, no talking."

"I know, I'd be stunned quiet too. Missed me so much."

Gage pulls back to watch me.

"Damn your eyes are pretty."

"Please stop talking."

A deep groan rolls through my chest with his mouth back on my neck. His fingers slide down slipping into my sweats.

"Ugh, better."

"You're acting kind of desperate," I say. His fingers freeze. "Real thirsty."

I lose his fingers. "Are you going to tease me the entire time or are you going to let me fuck you?" Before I can open my mouth to answer, he peels

off his shirt and fuck me, I'll be as quiet as I possibly can.

"You know what's strange?"

His head drops back and he groans. "No, Atlas. What's so strange?"

"Like, I don't know. I've never really been this attracted to someone. Like I've never seen a guy naked and been like, damn, give me a piece of that. You, though." I shake my head. "I like your nipples."

He pinches the bridge of his nose, inhaling deeply. His fists clench, and I think he's about to open the door and kick me out. Instead, he grabs the front of my shirt, tugging me forward and mashing our lips together. "God you're irritating."

"And sexy," I murmur against his mouth. "You always forget that part."

Okay, enough messing around.

I cup the back of his thighs, lifting him up into my arms. His arms lock around my neck and he kisses me harder as I walk us to his room. "Hey, Atlas," he moans into my mouth.

"Yeah?"

"I did miss you." He grins against my lips. I can't get enough. This is all I thought about on the road. "You know, I read about your reputation. Or hockey players' reputations." I freeze, pulling back. "Most of you fuck on the road?"

I could be wrong, but I swear I see fire in his eyes. Is he jealous? Oh, fuck, I like the thought of that. "Why, Gage?" I bite his lower lip. "Does that piss you off?"

"No." His eyes cut into me.

"No? You wouldn't mind another man's hands on me?" I grin slowly. "A gorgeous woman with her mouth around my cock?" I lean in, nipping at his throat. "Someone's cock in my ass?"

I yelp when he fists my hair and wrenches my head back. "Shut up."

My grin is slow, spreading across my face. "Oh, you'd fucking hate that."

His hands wrap around my throat, his thumb pressing against my pulse point. "Looks like I just need to mark you up and claim you."

"What—" His lips drag across my throat before sucking a teasing kiss against my neck right under my ear. I hiss at the sting of his teeth and lay him down, parting his thighs with my knee.

"Gage—"

“Shut up, Atlas.” He bites my throat, claiming his territory. “You know, I was here all alone with nothing but time.”

“Oh yeah?”

“And I went shopping.” His lips suck another bruise into my collarbone. “I may have bought you a birthday present.”

That shocks me a little. “Did you?”

“You wanna see?”

I get off him and let him get up off the bed. I love him like this, shirtless and barefoot, his movements loose and easy. Nothing like the rigid man he was that first night we met. Not that I minded, but it’s like all his jagged edges have sanded down around me. He disappears into his bathroom before coming back out with a box. “What is that?”

He grins, handing me the wrapped box “Oh, this should be good.”

I unwrap the present and it takes me a moment to realize what the hell I’m holding. A laugh bursts through my lips as I take in the abnormal-looking dildo.

“Chen and I went to a comic store. They make toys shaped like fantasy creatures and this one—” He grins.

“Whoa, wait, back up. You went to a comic store?”

He shrugs, sitting beside me. “Yeah.”

“Why?”

He shrugs again. “I was curious.”

I look at him for a moment, and his gaze goes back to the Hulk-themed dildo. I take it out of the box, inspecting the thick green toy with veins running along the shaft. “It’s so thick and veiny.”

Gage laughs. “It’s called the Banner, and I thought it was funny.” Fuck, it’s so big. “Best part? It sticks to a wall.”

“Yeah?”

“Like, maybe a shower wall.” His eyes drift to the bathroom door. “And maybe if someone is feeling brave enough to take on the Hulk . . . I’d like you to fuck me, while this fucks you.”

I grab his hand, springing off his bed and walking fast to the bathroom, ignoring his laugh as he follows me in. “Eager thing.”

I want to tell him I meant what I said. I missed him so much while I was gone. Texting and calling were fine, but this here is so much more fun. Gage just makes everything fun. He sticks the toy on the counter, and I watch the veiny green monster wiggle back and forth. “It’s really big.”

“Yeah.” Gage’s fingers slide down the front of my sweats. “Do you think you can take it?”

I’m not sure, but I know I want to try. “I’ll be good for you.”

He pats my face lightly. “I have no doubt about that, hockey boy.” He drops to his knees, shimmying my sweats down over my ass. “God damn.” His palms slide up the back of my legs before roaming over my ass. “If it’s too much, tell me. It’s just meant to be funny. I didn’t really intend to use it.”

“But you thought of me using it?” I swallow.

He looks up, his brown eyes melting like chocolate. They’re heavy, practically drunk. He nods slowly. “I want to see how much this greedy hole can take.” He runs the pads of his fingers along my crease. “Do you want it?” He rises to his feet, grabbing himself and holding his dick through the front of his sweats. The outline is thick.

“Yours?”

“Yeah.”

“On your knees.”

I lower carefully, my muscles still sore from the hockey and traveling. I look up and watch him smile. It’s like a devilish shadow comes over him. It’s like he’s hosting a demon. Eagerly, I dip my fingers into his jeans, slowly unzipping the fly with measured patience. The anticipation feels so good.

I look up at him, his red lips spread into a smile.

He gives me a slight nod as if he can read my mind, and I lean into the soft cloth of his briefs, pressing my lips against the bulge in the fabric. I inhale, his scent going straight to my brain. My cock aches between my legs, but I don’t reach to touch it. Not until he tells me to.

I dip my fingers into his briefs, dragging them down his legs, and his cock hits me on the chin. I can’t help laughing a little. He rolls his eyes, but I see amusement touch his smile. The purplish head shines with precum, and he smells so good. He tastes even better. He steps out of his briefs as I look up at him, in awe of him.

The chemistry between us is insane, and I feel like I’m burning up under his stare. This buzz is unlike anything I’ve ever felt. His fingers slide under my chin, lifting my gaze to his as he takes his cock in hand and strokes it, the tip inches from my lips.

“Open your mouth. Stick out your tongue.”

Without breaking eye contact, I open my mouth. He slaps his dick on my tongue before I suck his crown into my mouth, and I drink him down, moaning as I feel the smooth slide of his shaft on my tongue. I love this feeling. I don't know what it is about it, but when I look up and see the broken look in those beautiful brown eyes, I suck harder, watching them roll back.

He signals me to stand and takes the toy and lube, slicking it up in his hands. "Grab a condom."

"I mean, I got tested, I'm—"

"Condom." Disappointment pinches my chest. "It's not like that, Atlas, I just . . . not right now, okay."

"It's okay. I'm okay." I don't know why I feel like this. I don't care. I take a condom and rip it with my teeth, sliding it down my cock. I haven't topped in a while now and anticipation buzzes under my skin. The last time I even hooked up with someone it was a woman at a nightclub, and she was not shy at all about fucking me.

Gage grabs my hand, leading me into the shower with the toy in his grip. He adjusts it for me, sticking it firmly to the wall. "Turn around, Atlas." I hesitate a moment before I turn and brace my hands on the wall, and he sinks to his knees, water raining down around us. His palms smooth up my ass before he squeezes it in his hands.

"Oh fuck." I rest my head on my arm against the shower wall as he licks and opens me up. I don't know how all the prepping in the world is going to make it possible to fit that thing inside me, but I love a challenge.

His tongue strokes my hole, and I reach back, grabbing his hair and pulling him closer. "Fuck, Gage." His tongue slides inside me. His hands smooth up my legs and press on my stomach, pulling me back against his face. I reach for my cock but let my hand fall to my side. Not until he tells me to. It just feels so good.

He finally rises, turning me gently. His hands smooth over my waist. His fingers dip between my cheeks, and he rubs my hole, looking me right in the eyes as he smirks. "Slowly, take your time."

I nod, moving back until I feel the toy nudge against my hole.

A long groan leaves my lips. "Holy shit."

"Yeah?" He grins wide.

"It's so much." I push back, needing a minute. "You know—" I take a breath. "I've never thought he was circumcised. Kind of a surprise."

“You are something.” He grips my jaw. “How is it?”

“So thick.”

His fingers land on my hips, guiding me back on the toy as I take a little bit more each time. “Does it hurt?”

“I’m okay.”

“Good.” He kisses my mouth. “Look how good you are.”

“It feels so good, Gage.”

“You better not come.” He runs the pad of his thumb over my slit, making my knees buckle.

“Yeah. Huh?” I groan, taking it halfway down, the thick shaft stretching me to the limits. Gage’s hands brace my hips, his gaze unnerving as he watches me. A smile slips onto his lips as I take more. “Gage,” I whine, but he only smiles wider. It’s like he wants me to break.

He turns around, and I look down as he pushes back on me. “Go ahead, Atlas. Take what you want from me.”

I stroke my cock, notching myself to his hole. “Fuck.” I slip inside. I can barely think. Every movement on this toy makes me hotter. I swallow as Gage crowds my space, pushing back on me, and my pulse hammers in my throat. “Oh my god, you’re the worst.” Gage chuckles, pushing back until his ass meets my hips with a pulse-pounding groan. “Holy shit. Gage, this is going to be really fast.”

“You better not come until I tell you to.”

“I hate you,” I whine.

“Hate how good this feels.”

I try to think of a smart-ass remark, but nothing comes to mind. I can’t think. He’s stolen anything coherent from my brain. Gage looks back, satisfied by my suffering. “Come on, Atlas. Come on.” He smiles softly; it nearly looks cruel. “You know, for an all-star athlete your stamina leaves a lot to be desired.”

My thighs are shaking. I’m having a hard time keeping it together. I’ve never experienced anything like this. The pressure, pleasure, and feel of his body gripping mine is too much.

“You’re enjoying this way too much.”

His back arches and he grabs the back of my head, tugging me to his lips. “Obviously.” He grins against my mouth then sighs when he moves. “God, it’s so deep huh? How does it feel?”

“So good.” I kiss him hard. “So fucking good.” My hands travel around his stomach, locking around his waist, and I press my forehead to the back of his neck, holding on to him like I’m going to explode with this feeling. I rut into him. Each thrust makes me slide down the toy. “Holy shit. Betty Ross is so lucky.”

“Who?”

“His wife.” I groan when Gage pushes back on me. “Holy—wait. I’m close, Gage, wait.”

“No way.” He looks back at me. His grin sharpens against my lips. “You may be untouchable on the ice, but in here, you belong to me.” He pulls back. “Is that clear?”

I hug him tighter, burying my face back against his neck, and press kisses to the back of his spine, slowly pumping my hips. The give and take he gives me is so much sweeter than I could even dream. There’s pressure everywhere. In my ass, on my cock. His body is tight in my arms. Gage moans when my hips pick up speed.

“Gage—”

“Y-yeah.” He moans, squeezing me so tight he strangles my cock.

“I’m pretty sure I’d let you ruin my life if you asked nicely right now.” Gage’s knees buckle when I pick up speed. Steam swirls through the shower, mixing with the heat between us. “You know what . . . I think . . .” I purr into his ear then bite the junction of his shoulder.

“Enlighten me, Atlas,” he pants.

“I think you like this. I think you like me taking control.” He responds with more of those sweet noises. “You just needed someone worth taking it from you.”

Gage’s eyes snap back to mine. His pretty lips drop open. And for one moment neither of us says a word. I hold him to me, my hand sliding down his stomach, then I wrap it around his cock, watching his lips part more on a gasp.

“You know what else I think?” His eyes narrow. “I think you missed me more than you’ll admit.”

He watches me for a moment, and I watch him swallow then turn back around, pushing back against me. “Atlas, I’m going to come.”

I wrap my arm around his waist and thrust up into him. My climax crashes over me so hard it nearly hurts, my ass spasming around the obscene toy. “Oh my god. Fuck. Fuck, Gage. Holy sh-shit.”

I watch his arm work before he moans, sliding down my shaft and squeezing the life out of me as he comes. He sags against me and laughs. “Wow. That was. Unexpected.”

Okay, what? “Should I be offended? I’m a very gentle lover.”

He laughs as I slip from his body, and he turns to me, cupping my face and kissing me hard. “I had no doubt about that.”

I swallow and carefully slide off the toy with a wince, my body a bit too sensitive as my climax fades. “Oh, wow.” I turn and look at the toy stuck to the wall. “How funny would it be if it doesn’t come off? Clean it and you can use it as a sponge hanger.”

He pats the side of my face. “My ridiculous hockey boy.”

I open my mouth to tease him, but he doesn’t catch himself or correct what he said. Instead, he peels the toy off the wall and brings it out to clean it. He hands me a towel, which I wrap around my waist. There’s no word about me staying over, and I’d like to think it’s because he just expects me to.

“Thanks for the birthday present.” I’m not sure what, but something’s going on with him.

He smiles softly at me. “This was just for fun, but I got you something else. Uh. Something better.”

“Better than Bruce Banner’s dick? You got me a dick in a box for my birthday.”

“What?”

“You know the song.” He blinks at me. “*Saturday Night Live*? Do you not know any pop culture?”

“I’ll take your word for it.” His eyes flick down my chest. “Dry up and I’ll give it to you.”

“I don’t know how you’re going to top Hulk’s hammer, but I can’t wait to see.”

I don’t really want to bother putting clothes on, so when I walk out of his bathroom after washing my face and brushing my teeth for bed, I’m pleased he’s also naked. I wasn’t kidding when I told him I’ve never felt attraction this strong before. He’s on the bed with his knee bent on the mattress and turns toward me as I sit. “This is more practical, I think.”

“More practical than a giant green dick? Sounds fake.”

He rolls his eyes, but more and more there’s a soft smile accompanying the gesture. I look in the bag and take out the tissue paper, and I watch him

as I pull out one of the boxes in there. I look at it, confused for a moment.

"An e-reader," he says finally. "So you can take comics with you. They won't get ruined and you can download as many as you want for your trips." He rubs the back of his neck. "I mean, unless you don't like electronic—"

I pull him in for a hug, squeezing him harder than I should if the grunt that leaves his lips is any indication. I hug him tight for a minute because I don't trust my own voice right away. Finally, I let him breathe. "Thank you. Wow. I don't know why this didn't cross my mind." And I'm glad it didn't.

"It's supposed to have some sort of filter so you can read for a while and not hurt your eyes. I also read that you can read on like a plane or a bus, whatever, and it won't make you sick. If you get motion sickness."

I look at him. "Come here."

He frowns. "Why?"

"Just come here."

He moves, and before I overthink anything, I pull him in for a kiss. Gage makes a soft sound against my mouth, making me dizzy. Warmth spreads across my chest and I try so hard to swallow this down. My throat is tight with whatever the hell's going on with me. "Not very stranger-like." He huffs, pulling back. "Thank you."

"You said that."

"And I'm saying it again." I become very aware of him. The warmth of his leg pressed to mine, his warm eyes as they watch me. Then I remember the second box. "I lied. This topped the dildo." He smiles as I reach in and pull it out.

I open it and bark out a laugh. "A flashlight?" My eyes widen. "Is this one of those sex flashlights?"

"Sex—no, Atlas."

I grab it from him and flick the button and shine it against the wall.

"A bat signal." He laughs, taking it from me.

"I'll flash it whenever I want to have sex."

"How will I see it all the way up at my place?" He laughs, setting it on his nightstand. "That's amazing. I love it." I look at it then down at my e-reader, feeling something strange. I turn to Gage and lean in for another quick kiss.

"I'm glad you like everything."

"Officially the best gift I've ever been given."

“Which one?”

“Yes.”

He looks away and I pull him forward, tugging him onto my lap and stealing a couple more kisses. His arms wrap around my shoulders, and I lift him up and lay him back against the bed, then I slide in beside him. Gage doesn’t say another word. He doesn’t ask me to leave. I’m exhausted, but I can’t help thinking about my gifts.

No, this doesn’t feel very stranger-like at all.

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TWENTY

Gage



“This is fucking insane.”

Chen stands cheering with the crowd. I should have known he’d like this. Chen loves everything. It’s one of the reasons we got so close at first. He always used to have me go along on the insane things he loved to do, even as kids. Where I’m more cautious and suspicious, Chen goes into everything with an open mind.

The arena roars around us like a living, breathing thing, but just like at the game with Vanessa, I can’t help feeling claustrophobic, like the arena is pressing down all around me. It’s so much different than on TV. It’s like you can feel the excitement. The sharp scrape of skates, the slap of sticks, and the screams from fans, players, and refs build into this symphony around us.

“Fuck, your guy’s fast,” Chen says beside me, sitting back down, and oh, if he only knew. I watch Atlas, and again I’m hit with this feeling. I don’t know what it is or what to call it but it’s there, heavy, sitting in my gut. Atlas is . . . oh, fuck, how do I even begin to explain him?

Obnoxious, loud, ridiculous, and maybe a touch immature.

But here . . . holy shit. Here, he owns this place. He commands the arena. There’s a dominance and confidence about him that’s just so sexy. I enjoy our roles in the bedroom, but this man right here, playing this wild game, is a completely different animal. I would almost think he’s possessed if it weren’t for the goofy smiles he shoots my way from time to time.

I find Atlas again. I've tried to keep my eyes on him, but the way he cuts across the rink is lethal. Atlas skates to face off with a player. He hunches low and precise, shoulders tight and ready, his stick glued to the spot, waiting to strike while the ref holds a puck just out of their reach.

Measured and focused.

The puck drops and Atlas strikes fast. Slapping it to the side, he weaves through the defenders as his teammates skate toward the end. He's cut off by an opponent reaching out with his stick. "What the fuck. That's a slash, ref," I yell.

Then I slowly sit down, because what the fuck is wrong with me?

I ignore the heat of my friend's eyes as he stares at me. "Fuck off," I whisper.

"What the hell was that?"

I clear my throat. "It was a slash. Obviously." I shake my head. The ref does blow the whistle on a delayed penalty, and the fact that I know what any of this means is concerning. What's happened to me?

Chen leans into me. "The dick must be—" I shove him away.

The player who hit my hockey boy goes to the time-out box. They set up again and Atlas is off. I know now he's probably nearing his end. It's almost been a minute, and I can tell he's starting to get tired. "Come on," I whisper to myself, and thankfully Chen doesn't hear me over the roar of the fans. I've embarrassed myself enough for one night.

A player with the last name Acciari finds Atlas in the cluster and shoots to him. He takes possession alone and turns sharply toward the goalie, who braces for impact.

It happens so fast. Faster than Atlas can prepare for. An opposing player comes in hard from his side and slams Atlas to the ice with a thunderous noise.

Everything goes silent.

Atlas doesn't move, his hands gripping the back of his head. Acciari skates fast, taking hold of the opponent and throwing off his gloves, then he swings. They're fighting, the crowd is roaring. It's chaos as other players grab jerseys and find a sparring partner.

All I focus on is him. He's slow to get up and collapses back onto the ice at the attempt. The crowd roars, but it's drowned out by the rushing heat in my ears. Slowly the noise starts to fade as the fans realize this is more serious than they thought.

“Shit, he’s not getting up.” I feel a tug on my jeans and look down at Chen. When did I stand?

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

Their doctor walks onto the ice and crouches down by Atlas, who’s slowly trying to stand. Two of his teammates come over and help him up, each taking a side. Atlas attempts to steady himself with their help but topples forward a bit, unsteady on his skates.

“Hey, you alright?” I blink and look down at my friend

I slowly sit with a nod. “Yeah, I’m fine.” My voice feels strained. I watch as long as I can until I see them take Atlas out of the arena. “I hope he’s okay.”

“You good?” Chen laughs, trying to lighten the mood. “You look like you were about to jump down there yourself.”

I force a smile, but it feels weak, and I stop the attempt halfway through the gesture. “I hope he’s okay.” I feel like I can’t breathe.

“You sure you’re okay? You’re pale as fuck. Not the normal pale, sickly pale.”

“Fuck off.” I laugh a little, but it sounds far away. “I’m okay, just nauseous, I guess. That was nasty.”

The ref skates to the center and announces the call. I barely hear it over the crescendo of boos that echo through the arena. “What happened?”

“I didn’t hear.”

“Rome Acciari got a double minor for fighting and drawing blood,” the woman next to me says.

“What about the guy who hit Atlas?”

“Atlas? Oh, right. Sgarbossa. I keep forgetting he’s on our team now. It was a clean hit according to the refs.” She shrugs.

“A clean hit! He knocked him right out.”

“Shoulder to shoulder. He had the puck. That’s hockey.” She goes back to watching.

“That’s fucking bullshit.”

“Look at you, so into hockey.”

Yeah, hockey. That’s what it is, Chen.

I drag a hand over my face, forcing myself to focus. We still have another period, but I don’t want to be here right now. All I want to do is see if he’s okay. My friend’s knee knocks into mine. “You sure you’re good? He’ll be okay, alright. Doesn’t this type of thing happen all the time?”

“Yeah.” I look down at the rink as all the players get back into formation as if one of their own didn’t just get injured. “Yeah, I know. You’re right.”

I hate hockey.

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TWENTY-ONE

Gage



My apartment door slams shut behind me. I jump, the sound a lot louder than it should be rattling the walls and my chest. Jim stands between me and the door as if I might run, but he knows I won't. He's threatened me enough times that I know better. Lately I don't even fight it. I don't even care. I just don't. Let him have me. As long as my friends are okay, I'll survive this.

For a moment neither of us speaks. This is the second time he's followed me home. "You embarrassed me today."

I didn't embarrass him, I just pushed back. I had four songs rejected today, and I'm not sure why. They're great songs, but lately the restrictions have gotten tighter. I thought once we started making money for the label we'd have more freedom, but three years in and it's only getting tighter.

"Gage?"

I don't look at him. The soft tone of his voice crawls under my skin. That's the thing about Jim. He's never angry. He doesn't need to be. Jim walks toward me, and I take a step back. "I didn't mean to. Those songs were good."

My pulse hammers in my ears the closer he gets.

"I don't want to do this right now."

Even after years, my body still reacts this way. "We had a deal, Gage."

A deal. I nearly snort.

I try to run away but my legs won't cooperate. It's like my hardwood has turned to cement, keeping my feet here. Then his fingers are wrapped about my wrist.

"Not right now," I whisper.

Jim smiles. Sometimes I wish he'd get angry. Scream. Fight. Yell. I don't care. I don't know why, this calmness sickens me. The satisfied smile. It's like a game to him.

I can struggle, but I already know it won't matter. It never matters. The faster I give in, the faster it's over.

Weak. Pathetic.

The words hit hard, but they're not the first time I've felt them. The fear clings to me, but I do my best to swallow it. It's not like it'll help.

Nothing ever does.

I feel something vibrating near my arm, and I groan as I wake up, my brain fuzzy. Somehow, I fell asleep. I open my eyes and realize my phone is still in my hand. I'd been waiting for Atlas to call me. I don't know why. For one, why would he think to call me after getting his brain bashed into the ice? Also, he's probably at the hospital.

I check the time and see it's nearly eight in the morning. I sit up, still in the clothes I wore last night, as my phone vibrates again. I look and see Atlas's name and answer. "Holy shit, are you okay?"

"You answered your phone so fast." I hear this asshole laugh. "Wow, Gage."

"Excuse me, motherfucker. I just watched you eat shit on the ice last night, and I didn't know if you were even still alive."

"First of all, I did not eat shit. Second, you're worried about me. So cute."

"Fuck off. I wanted to know if I had to find another fuck buddy."

He chuckles low, sending heat through my stomach. Relief hits me just as fast, though. He's fine, he's talking and being as irritating as usual.

"You were so worried about me," he teases.

"No I wasn't!"

"Well, I guess I'll have to go back to my own apartment, then."

I get up out of bed fast and walk to my door, pulling it open. Atlas is standing there with a bruise cradling his face and a grin on his lips, with his phone tucked between his ear and shoulder.

“Wow. You opened your door pathetically fast.”

“You’re an asshole.” I hang up and tug him inside instead. Seeing him here and whole eases my mind. “Oh, shit.” I reach for the bruise curved around his eye. He winces when my fingers brush it. “Sorry.”

“Just sore as fuck. Makes me look kind of badass, though, right?”

I shake my head. “When did you get home?”

“Uh, right now.”

And he came right here. “What happened? Are you hungry?”

“Relax, okay. I’m alright.” I nod, looking around the living room, my lungs still gripped with fear. “I’m okay, Gage. This shit happens all the time.”

“I hate hockey,” I admit, looking at him. “I fucking hate it.”

“Uh—”

“It’s too much. The skates. The fights. It’s brutal. It’s like, you know what would be fun? If we put everyone on knives and let them fuck each other up with zero consequences.”

“There are consequences. That’s literally what the penalty box is for.”

“Well, your time-out corner isn’t working!”

He bites his bottom lip, blinking at me. “My god, you are so worried about me.”

“Shut up.”

“Did nurse Gage want to take care of my boo boos?” His blue eyes fill with heat. “Our team doctor is great, but if you need to do a thorough check, you’re welcome to.”

I can’t help myself, I don’t even know where it comes from. I grab his shirt, pulling him into a kiss. I hate how my soul settles and my lungs ease with his lips on mine. Kissing Atlas feels like a deep breath, centering in a way I’ve never felt, and I hate how I badly I needed it. He’s making light of this, but watching him barely able to stand scared the shit out of me.

“I didn’t know how to find out if you were okay,” I say against his mouth then pull back. “I kept checking websites, but all they said was ‘head injury.’”

“I’m just on concussion watch. I have about ten days to rest before they check to make sure I’m symptom free.”

I don’t like how I’m feeling. It’s tight and too warm. It’s making my palms sweat and my heart beat faster. I can’t control myself. I know he said he’s okay, but I can’t stop thinking about him struggling to stand.

“Hey.” He cups my face. “I’m okay.

I want it to stop. Whatever this is.

I curl my fingers in the front of his sweats, and while I can’t fuck out this frustration on him, I need to touch him. I crave it. I can’t get enough of this frustrating man.

“Can I suck your cock?”

Atlas’s brows pull together, and I lick my lips.

“I really need to touch you right now.”

He nods softly. I reach inside and cup his balls before sliding my hand up and wrapping my fingers around his dick. “Go easy on me.”

I smile. “Just this once.”

I lower onto my knees and shimmy his sweats down over his ass. His soft cock hangs there. He’s fucking perfect. I look up at him and take him in my mouth. We moan at the same time as I flick my tongue under his head.

After a moment his dick is still limp.

I look up, confused.

“Ah—” He scratches the back of his head.

“Should I be offended?” I laugh.

“It’s the concussion, I swear.”

“Sure, sure.”

“Hey! It’s the concussion! My doctor said it could happen for a couple of days.”

I rise, pulling up his sweats slowly, but I shove my hands inside the back to squeeze his ass. “I can do it to you,” he whispers.

“No, you need to rest. I’m okay.” Standing this close to him, I don’t care. I’m just happy he’s okay. I kiss him softly.

“I should go.” He smiles sadly. “I have strict rest rules.”

“I mean, you can rest here,” I say way too fast.

“My friends are playing tonight. I want to watch them.”

“Watch it here.”

“But you hate hockey.”

My lips quirk. “Yes, well. It seems I hate the idea of you watching it somewhere else more.”

Atlas stares at me for a minute too long. “You don’t want me to go?”

“More like . . . I wouldn’t care if you’d want to stay.”

His smile grows on his handsome face. He’s so fucking gorgeous, and when I look into his eyes there’s an innocence and joy about them. Then I

think about the night he called, the bad day he told me about, and I don't know . . . there might be more to him than he's showing me. I think I want to get to know that side of him too.

"Say it, Gage."

His fingers curl into my pants, pulling me forward into a kiss I'm too weak to stop. He doesn't move to do more, he just stands there for a lingering moment with his lips pressed tightly to mine.

Then he releases me.

My jaw ticks at the goofy look in his eyes as he waits. I sigh.

"I don't want you to go, Atlas."

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TWENTY-TWO

Atlas



“Atlas.” A soft hand runs over my chest. “Hey.”

I open my eyes and focus for a moment, watching Gage look at me. “What? Shit, I fell asleep again.”

He smiles at me then kisses me quickly. “Your game is about to start. Sorry to wake you up.”

“It’s okay. Thank you.” My head’s a bit spacey as I try and wake up. I suck in a breath, feeling his hand on me and looking down at my erection. “Oh, thank god.”

He laughs. “What? Were you worried?”

“I knew it was just the concussion, but still. I’m relieved.” I’ve pretty much spent the whole day sleeping on and off. I think at one point Gage was playing the guitar. Or maybe I dreamed that.

“How are you feeling?”

“Still kind of out of it. My doctor said it would be like this for a bit. Lots of rest for me, I guess.” A soft smile spreads on Gage’s lips before he presses a firm kiss to the center of my chest. I don’t know what’s happening right now, but what I do know is that I’ve never wanted anything or anyone as badly as I want him.

I think about Grey, and I love him. I do. He’s my best friend, and I’ll always have a special place for him. This, though . . . this feels different.

Gage moves down, rubbing his face along my stomach, pressing slow kisses into my skin. I’ve spent most of the day on his couch, sleeping and

watching movies. Most of the time he's lain with me, just like this, with his body on mine. Naked. His suggestion, not mine. My breath stutters as he practically purrs against me.

He's just been touching me idly. He comes back up and tucks himself under my arm. His fingers dust along my chest then skim across my nipple as my fingers lightly caress his hip. I've never felt this comfortable with anyone in my life.

"What do you want me to do, Atlas?" I'm confused until he gets up and inches down my body, pressing kisses along my stomach. I don't feel that little twinge of insecurity. Not when he can't stop touching me. I want to know if he's as crazy about this as I am.

I pull one leg up to give him room, so he can settle between my thighs. His head rests on me, his lips so close to my dick. He lightly touches me and looks up with a grin.

I find my voice. "Touch me. Please." I'm barely breathing. I can't look away. I'm so hard. I don't think I've ever been this hard in my life. Looking down, I see beads of precum pearling from my slit. Gage's clear eyes watch me hungrily. "Fuck." He leans down as my thighs spread a little wider, and he laces his fingers around my cock, giving me a slow stroke from root to tip.

"Beautiful." I love that playful smirk.

The sex is amazing, but I'm starting to realize that's only part of it. It's just this. Us together, on my couch or in his apartment. Watching a game, movies. Anything really.

I crave him so much it drives me crazy. The sex is top tier, but I think I like this more. The in-between moments that make living not so miserable. With Gage around, I'm not afraid my past will come and haunt me.

Under Gage, my mind doesn't scare me.

Logically, we both have demanding jobs, but right here, in this moment . . . this is everything.

He's everything.

"What's wrong?" His pierced brow lifts.

What's wrong? Nothing, right? Then why does it feel like something is? "I think . . ." I swallow. "This would be easier if your mouth wasn't near my dick."

His eyes brighten with his laugh. "Oh?" He licks his lips. "What if it was *on* your dick?"

He wraps his sexy lips around my cock and *fuuuck*, what was I even thinking about? My back arches slightly when he takes me as far as he can go, burying his nose into my pubes. He swallows around me and I lose my fucking mind. “Jesus, Gage.”

He pops off my cock with a laugh then lays his head on my pelvis. It’s so lazy and it feels nice.

Having him here feels nice. He was worried about me. Doesn’t that mean something? “This just feels good.” Lazily, he strokes me. No real pressure or meaning. Just touching my body, pressing kisses here and there.

I comb my fingers through his blue strands. I hate to move him, but I need more. Not more sex, more of him. His tattoos pop against his skin under the soft light in the living room. I thought his couch would be a little small, but we both fit tightly here on it. I do prefer my circular movie sofa, though. It allows plenty of room to lie down and watch TV.

Or have a pretty boy lie with you.

I switch his TV to the sports channel and choose the Otters broadcast. Gage comes back to me, lying against my body, tucked under my arm. His hand goes to the hair on my chest, running his fingers through it. “Who are your friends playing tonight?” he says absently, his eyes on my body. I used to be self-conscious about the hair on my chest, but Gage’s fingers caress a slow trail down the center of my stomach.

“Otters and Reapers. They’re in North Carolina right now.”

It’s so funny how quickly he goes from dominant to pliant. Right now, he feels small in my arms, but I know the power he has.

Especially the power he has over me.

“Do you still miss being there with them? Or have you gotten used to your new team?”

I think about this for a moment, and a soft ache settles in my chest. What’s done is done and I can’t go back. Impulse control is something I have to live with, and I made the most impulsive decision last season when I decided to leave. I remind myself why I left to begin with, though. As much as I miss them, I still stand by it. I need to figure myself out, and being around my friends who I leaned on too much was hurting me. I need to grow up. I still do, but it’s hard.

I miss drinks at a shitty bar with my friends.

I miss late-night talks around a fire with Grey.

I miss it so much.

“You okay?” I blink fast, trying to clear the burn in my eyes.

I clear my throat. “Yeah.” His fingers land on my jaw. He pulls me in for a kiss, and I feel that knot in my throat all over again. His thumb smooths along my beard as he kisses me slowly. Damn he tastes good. Sweet like mint. Warm and firm. These kisses center my mind. Better than any buzz I’ve ever had.

I break our kiss and drink in the look in his eyes.

“Your head?”

“I’m okay. No contact sports for a couple of weeks. I’ll be fine.” A thought comes to mind. The Otters play the Hawks this weekend.

“Can I ask something? You can say no if you don’t want to. No pressure.” He nods. I have no clue what I’m doing. “I think I want to go home to New Jersey. I want to show you the ice rink I used to play at. Maybe see my foster mom. Then to New York to see the Otters play.”

So I can finally talk to Grey.

His brows knit. “You were in foster care?”

“I mean like, yes and no. Yes, but like basically there was a woman and her husband who took me in um, after my birth mother couldn’t take care of me anymore.”

He nods softly.

“Why?”

He smiles sadly. “I was in foster care too.”

“Really?”

He nods.

“How long?”

“Since I was about four.” I go to ask him more, but he cuts me off. “So, like . . . you want me to meet your parents?”

I want to push, but I know him well enough now to know he’s not going to give me anything more. “No. I mean maybe. I mean kind of. Not like, seriously, but like just—”

“Casually?” An amused smirk lifts his lips. “Would you like me to casually meet your adoptive parents?”

I smile. “Well, just my mom. My foster dad died a few years ago.”

“Oh shit. I’m sorry.”

“And we’ll probably see my ex-girlfriend, but she’s really nice and works at the rink my mom owns. But don’t worry.”

“What would I be worried about?” He smirks.

“Nothing. I’m mean, obviously not. Why would you be jealous?” I swallow. “She’s um, a great person. So uh, would you?”

Gage thinks about it and I know the wheels are turning. He’s going to say no. Gage has been clear, and while I really want him to go with me, I understand this is more than we promised. Nothing serious. That was the deal. Only, I think it’s been serious from the start. At least on my end.

“Sure, yeah.”

“Wait, really?” He nods, settling back against me, his arm across my chest and his thigh across my legs.

It all feels domestic. And nice.

“So, tell me, hockey boy. Tell me about your friends. Oli is the blond one from the bar, right?” I nod. “What number is he again?”

“Number sixty-two. White jerseys with brown and green.” I kiss the top of his head before I realize I’ve done it. I feel his fingers stiffen then his body relaxes against me, his head on my chest. My fingers continue their path.

“He’s a great captain, and an even better friend.”

“When he’s not needling information out of you.”

How to explain Oli. “It’s not that he wants to be nosy or overbearing, it’s just that he wants to make sure I’m okay, so he pushes because he wants to fix problems as fast as he can. His two best friends aren’t talking, and he wants that to stop. It’s a control thing, yeah, but it’s also because he cares a lot about the people in his life. He wants everyone to be happy.”

“Not all of us can be happy just because someone wants us to be.”

He looks up at me for a moment as the realization of what he just said hits him. “You’re right.” I brush some of his blue hair back as it falls in front of his eyes. “But if you love someone, you’re going to do everything you can to make them happy, right?”

Instead of answering me he settles back against my chest. “Is he gay? He’s married to the goalie, right?”

“Bisexual,” I correct him. “And yeah, his husband’s the goalie. Not that goalie, though. That’s Landon, the backup goalie tonight.”

Gage nods then lift his chin, resting it on my sternum. “I’m gay, you know.”

“I know.”

He looks at me then smiles softly. “But you’re not? Mister ‘my ex-girlfriend is very nice.’”

I laugh then think about what I want to say. “I’m not gay. I lived in a very small town, and no one talked about sexuality. There was just gay and straight. That’s all I was taught, but gender has never really mattered for me.” I think about how I want to say this. I’ve never even told my friends. The whole idea of coming out makes my chest tight. My sexuality isn’t any more or less valid because other people know about it. It’s not for anyone to dissect or make sense of or become a sound bite for some gossip site. It’s just mine. “My ex-girlfriend in high school.” I smile. “I lost my virginity to her.”

“Really? Well, I think I need details.” He laughs a little with light in his eyes.

“She’s a trans woman. She grew up near the rink my adoptive mom owns. She actually taught me how to skate. Fell on my ass so many times I think she was sick of me crying about it.” I laugh at the memories. “We were only twelve when we met, but I um, I was pretty gone for her from the start. I was going through some hard shit, and she just made everything feel so much better. She was my first everything. My first friend, first kiss. She was everything to me. I was so young at the time, but it felt like she was end game. I thought we’d be together forever.”

“Why did you two break up?”

I smile, even though it still stings to this day. “I’m a bit of a handful, if you can believe it.” He laughs. “When we were older, we dated for almost three years, but I signed to an AHL league in Minnesota when I was nineteen. She didn’t want to do the long-distance thing.” Only I know that’s not the whole truth. This league has many steps to take in accepting queer people. We exist in this league, and our queer partners should be respected too.

Oli and Andre have gone through hell and are a lot stronger than me. Hockey culture is closed-minded and I hate it. I can’t take it. It makes me angry, and being angry makes me want a drink. I just wish it were different. “You still love her?”

Yes and no. “Not in love, but I still love her very much. I visit when I’m off for the summer.”

Gage’s fingers smooth strands of hair out of my eyes. “And who else has had a shot at the great Atlas Sgarbossa?” His wide grin lights me up.

“I tried dating and I’ve had relationships here and there. Then I dated another woman for a few months when I was twenty-two. It was going

really well. I liked her a lot, but um, she didn't—" I swallow the embarrassment. "I needed things in the bedroom she wasn't prepared to give me."

Gage looks at me flatly. "She didn't want to fuck you?"

"Shut up!" I push him, laughing. "She was uncomfortable with it and I was so embarrassed. It's fine if that's not your thing, but I couldn't be with someone who thinks it's wrong or weird. So I broke it off."

"Who else?"

I've always been more attracted to women. Then Grey comes to mind, and even now I can't believe what I did. "I got signed to the Otters and I rarely dated. I'm always away. It makes having a relationship hard." It's all nice in the beginning, but most of the time people aren't prepared for just how absent we are. "Then I messed up." I don't want to hide anything from him.

"What happened?"

"When I got signed, they had me room with a veteran defenseman. I know it pissed him off at first, being stuck with a rookie. Grey likes his privacy. He doesn't people well." I smile. "He was really kind to me, though. We became close."

Gage watches me and I see the wheels turning in his brown eyes. "You were in love with him?"

When I think about Grey now it just hurts, but not in the way it did when he was falling in love with Felix. That shit was painful, but now I just feel shame. "I thought I was."

"He didn't feel the same?"

I shake my head softly.

"Do you still love him now?"

It takes me a moment, but the truth finally sinks in. I look at Gage's eyes. An espresso brown. There are these little flecks of gold in them.

"No." And I'm not sure if I ever was. "I was confused."

"Are you okay?" Gage leans in, pressing kisses along the corner of my lips and jaw.

Kissing has never felt like this. I comb my fingers through his hair. He's so sweet when he's like this. His eyes hood then he leans in, kissing me hard. His thigh drapes over my hip, and a gentle hum of pleasure makes my back arch.

A soft moan slips my lips.

“Your body on mine,” I whisper.

He breathes along my throat, pressing his lips to my pulse point.

“It’s just perfect.”

Gage settles back against my chest while we watch the game. I think about Grey, and I’m still ashamed of how I acted at the wedding. I’m realizing now, though, that Grey was right. As much as his rejection hurt, I know he was right. If Grey feels for Felix even a fraction of how I feel about Gage, I wouldn’t have picked me either.

I need to make this right.

I’m going to see Grey when I go to New York.

I’m going to get my friend back.

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TWENTY-THREE

Gage



“You know, I’m so used to tour buses, but I didn’t think this would be as bad. I can’t wait to get out.” I’ve been fine most of the ride. We stopped for a quick bite to eat, and now it’s nearing five. “I’m ready to get out of here.”

“Do you mind if we stop at the rink first? Then we can go back to my house.”

“I mean yeah, why?”

“I just want to let Sarah know I’m in town. I’ll call my mother tomorrow. We’ll just say hi quickly.”

“Whatever you want. This is your trip.” I want him to make peace with whatever’s hurting him. Grey seems to be the key, and I don’t like the way the jealous squeeze feels in my stomach. I mean, I shouldn’t be, but I can’t help it.

Atlas pulls the rental truck into the parking lot. It’s dark now and there’s only one other car here.

“They’re about to close.”

He parks and gets out of the truck, and I follow.

I walk behind him, shoving my hands into my pockets as he lets himself in. It’s quiet in here, the sun nearly setting despite it only being five in the afternoon. Most of the lights are off, but then I hear footsteps ahead before a woman squeals. “Jesus! You scared the shit out of me!” But she’s laughing and runs up to Atlas, giving him the biggest hug I’ve ever seen.

She buries her face into his neck and squeezes him tight. And no, I don't feel any type of way about it at all. I definitely don't want her to get her fucking hands off him.

"I missed you too." He smiles.

"Oh my god, let me look." He turns his head and lets her inspect him. "Oh, that's nasty. You know what that was like seeing it in real time?" She cups his face, and a little flare of jealousy sparks in my stomach.

"I do know what that was like," I cut in, because apparently we've forgotten I'm standing here.

As if she's just now noticing me, she smiles. "Who is this?"

Atlas turns to me. "This is my friend Gage. Gage, this is my ex-girlfriend, Sarah."

"It's so nice to meet you."

A little stab of envy hits me and I have no idea why. She's really pretty. Her light brown hair is pulled into a bun that's probably meant to be messy but instead makes her effortlessly beautiful. She's wearing tight jeans and a sweater draped off one shoulder. Piercing green eyes light on him, and her red lips grow into a wide smile. I remember now what he said about her last night, and I wonder if she still feels something for him too. The soft cast of her eyes on him is a little too warm for my liking.

"I texted Mom and told her I'm in town. I can lock up if you're heading out."

"Yeah, no problem. I wish I'd known you were coming! I miss you so much. I'm glad you're okay." She squeezes his arm, her manicured hands wrapping around his biceps. "How long will you be here for?"

"Oh, just the day. I'm um, going to the Hawks game in a couple of days."

"Okay, well, please see me before you head out. I'll be here all day tomorrow." She pulls him in for another squeezing hug, rubbing his back. I watch the way her hand slides down his spine, and I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me. "It was really nice to meet you, Gage. Keep an eye on him, he's trouble." She pinches his stomach with a laugh then she's out the door.

Atlas grabs my hand then leads me to a room with skates. "What size?"

What is he talking about? It takes me a moment to realize. "Oh no, I'm not—"

“Oh, but you are.” He beams, grabbing himself a pair of skates. He waits for me. “Gage, I think by now you know I’ll get my way. Just give in.”

I glare at him for a moment but it’s pointless. We both know he’s right. “Twelve.”

He grabs another pair and I follow him out into the rink. We sit down on a bench, and I watch him take his sneakers off and then slide on his skates. I try and watch so I know how to do the same.

“So, that was your ex-girlfriend? The one from high school?” The one he told me not to worry about. “She’s very beautiful.”

He looks up with a grin, a lick of amusement on his lips. “She is very beautiful.” He ties his skates. “Very sweet.”

“She seems to care about you a lot.” *And she touches you and hugs you*. “Why did you two break up?”

Atlas freezes a little, a slip of something I nearly miss. “Well, I know the reason she told me, and the then there are the reasons I assume.”

“Tell me both?” I hedge.

“She told me she wasn’t ready to do long distance. I know she loved me, but hockey players have a reputation. She had it in her head I was going to cheat on her while I was away. I would never do that, but I know she had some trust issues there.”

“And the reason you think?”

Atlas turns on the bench, gently lifting my foot to rest in his lap. He slips off my shoe then grabs the skate, sliding it on. I watch him lace up my skates with expertise.

“I love this sport, but it’s not very welcoming.” He focuses on my shoe. “Hockey is nowhere near as popular on the same level as like basketball or football. We want to grow the game, yet the league is constantly discriminating against people who want to join or want to watch. I know she wasn’t ready for that type of media attention. I love this sport with everything in my soul, but it can be ugly and dangerous. I don’t blame her one bit. She broke up with me when I signed the affiliate contract.”

“You still care about her?”

“In a way I still love her. Maybe not in love with her, but she was everything to me for so long. She knows everything about me. I miss parts of who we were together. I know we were just kids then but—”

“It doesn’t matter how young you were.”

He shakes his head. “She’s happy now, so it makes it easy, you know. She’s happy and that’s all I want for her. It all worked out. She’s married to a great guy, and they adopted a little girl a few years back. They’re happy, and I’m happy for her.”

“The league is getting better, right? I mean Oli and Andre are married. Vanessa said there were other players too.”

He sighs. “Yes and no. Oli and Andre are lucky they’re on the Otters. Our team . . .” He shakes his head with a smile. “No, sorry, *their* team. I have to get used to that. Their team is one of the more progressive teams in the league. Their fans are amazing and open, but I mean, if they played for another team, it might be different. On my team there’s Knox, he’s bisexual.”

“He’s the one who brought you to my concert, right?” He nods. “How’s that been for him?”

He shrugs, grabbing my other foot and doing the same, slipping off my shoe and lacing up my skate. “It seems like for the most part everyone on the team is fine with it.”

“And what about you? Do you want to come out?”

“I don’t really want to. Not because of backlash or anything like that, I just don’t want to. I don’t think I should have to. It’s a weird thing, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“Having to come out. Why does everyone assume you’re straight until you come out? I’ve always been queer, and I don’t just assume the people I meet are straight. I don’t even think about it. Why do people care so much?” I note the anger in his voice. He cups my heel in his hand when he’s done lacing my skate up. “Why are straight people so angry about us existing? It pisses me off.”

“Because you might be with Sarah if people like that didn’t exist?”

He stares down at my skate. “Because too many people are hurt or worse just for simply being themselves. It’s sick. It’s evil. That might sound harsh, but it’s true. Homophobes are evil. If you can sit there and vote against anyone having the right to exist, you are fucking evil, I don’t care.” He’s quiet for a moment and I let him gather himself. “And yeah, okay, I hate that she thought that by being her beautiful, amazing, sweet self she’d somehow be detrimental to my career. Or worse, that she’d be in danger. I fucking hate that. And I hate anyone who thinks it’s okay to hate her.” He scrubs a hand down his face.

I sit there unable to move or think. Red creeps along his temples, his jaw tight. “You’re a good guy, Atlas.” I lift my hand to his face and pull him in for a kiss. “I’m sorry you two didn’t work out.”

His hand drops my skate and he stands with ease. “I’m not pining after her, just so you know. I just wish shit were different. I’m happy for her, and I know she’s in love with who she’s meant to be with. I just wish sometimes, a little, that that person could’ve been me.” He smiles softly. “I just want someone to love me like that. Just once. I bet it would feel like the best thing in the world.”

I stare at him for a moment before I need to look away.

“Anyway,” he laughs. “That shit was heavy. Come on. Let me see how terrible you are at this.” With my hand in his, he helps me up on unsteady feet. “Have you ever worn skates before?”

“No.”

“I can tell.” I glare at him. Atlas smiles softly. “Hold on to the wall, okay. I’ll help you on.” He moves with ease, stepping onto the ice as easy as if he were wearing sneakers while I grip the bench for dear life. Atlas is already on the ice, skating backwards with easy control. “Look how cute you are. Like a baby deer.”

“Shut up.” I try to find my balance and Atlas skates over to me, reaching out his hand.

“You trust me?”

I huff. “I drove hours with you to a place I’ve never been to before, and you’re asking me that now?”

“Come on, Gage.” I look up and take his hand. The warmth soaks into me fast. Grounding.

“Don’t let go.”

Atlas’s grip tightens just a little. “Wouldn’t think of it.”

He guides me onto the ice, and the moment I step onto it I slip a little, but he holds me firm. Atlas’s shoulders tense, and his fingers tighten around me. “Just relax, okay.” Warm in his arms, I start to unwind. “Bend your knees a little,” he says, lips close to my ear. “You’re too stiff.”

“I have a very good reason to be stiff.”

Atlas guides us, holding me upright for most of it. He leans into me. “Bend your knees.”

I glare, then I comply.

“Good boy.”

“Uh-uh. That’s for you. It’s not for me.”

“Oh? You don’t want to be a good boy for me?”

“Atlas, if you keep that up, I will have your ass painted red by the end of the night.” His grin is feral. The shift is subtle, but it helps me relax. I wobble less as he helps me.

“See, slightly less terrible.” Atlas smiles.

We move slowly. Atlas leads, careful and attentive. His grip on me lightens up the more we’re on the ice. I’m getting used to the feel and find a little ground. “Keep your eyes up.”

“What?”

“You’re staring at your feet.”

“Oh, like you did when you got knocked the fuck out the other night?”

“I didn’t—” His lips purse. “I didn’t get knocked the fuck out. And I was paying attention!”

“Not what I saw.”

With my hands in his, he skates backward in front of me, and I’m not wobbling as much anymore as he guides me. “Do you like this?”

The skating’s whatever, but I like watching him in his element. Atlas is nervous, and awkward, and a little lost most of the time. Here, though, he’s confident, and it’s doing things to my chest.

“It’s better.”

We skate for a bit, and I feel like I’m getting the hang of it.

“See, easy. Look at you.”

“Don’t patronize me. I am a world-famous musician.” I glare at him, but it costs me.

I wobble and nearly fall forward. It happens fast, but Atlas reacts faster, pulling me into his body instead of letting me fall. We collide. His grip is tight and immediate, pressing me against his chest, and my breath stutters.

“You okay?”

I let out a quiet laugh, sliding my hands over his pecs to right myself. “Undecided.”

Our faces are closer than before. Close enough I can see the shift in Atlas’s blue eyes. They slide from my mouth to my eyes.

Something tight pulls at my chest. “Are you always this handsy with beginners?” I smile.

“No.”

“Lucky me.” I swallow, suddenly so aware of everything around us. Atlas grabs my hand, pulling me toward the boards until my back rests against the glass. “What are you doing?”

The space between us disappears. Atlas’s body heat pours into my mine. His hand comes up to cup my jaw. On skates he’s even more imposing. Big and solid. He lifts my jaw and I can’t look away from his eyes.

“I just want someone to love me.”

I swallow, letting his words wrap around me, as I watch those blue eyes track my throat before they lift to mine. “Is this part of your lesson plan?”

A smile breaks onto his lips. “Only for my top students.”

Atlas leans in, his lips soft, testing for a moment before he puts his full weight into it. My grip tightens on his sleeves. I swear he’s holding me upright. I’m so warm right here, in this place that should make me cold. His soft touch sends heat pouring through me.

When he releases me, I let out a low breath. Atlas’s forehead rests briefly against mine.

“I just want someone to love me.”

A dangerous thought slips into my brain before I can shove it away.

What if I wanted that someone to be me?

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TWENTY-FOUR

Gage



“Holy shit, it’s coming down.” He’s like a goddamn puppy. I watch him, nose practically pressed to the window. “Let’s go outside.”

We arrived at his house about an hour ago, just in time for the snow to start falling. His house is not what I expected at all. It’s small, for one, but warm and filled with pictures, knickknacks, and yes, a big bookshelf in the living room with some comics on it. There’s also a TV mounted on the wall and a big wraparound couch taking up the middle.

The room is just starting to warm up now that Atlas turned the heat on in the house. “Come on,” he whines.

“In the cold? Atlas, it’s like eight at night.” And freezing.

“Come on. There’s so much of it already. It’s coming down so hard now.” I look out the window, watching as fat flakes fall from the sky.

“Fine.” I get up. Atlas puts his winter coat on.

“Wait here.” Atlas disappears and returns again with a giant hat.

“No.”

“Oh, come on. Got to protect your ears.” He puts the fluffy hat on my head and pulls the ear flaps down.

“I look ridiculous.”

“You look fucking adorable.” Atlas grabs the stupid flaps of this fuzzy hat and pulls me toward him. “God you’re cute.” I bite the inside of my cheek. “So cute!”

“And pissed.”

“Makes you cuter.” He gives me a quick peck on the nose then opens the door to the freezing fucking cold. *Fantastic*. “It’s so pretty.”

Atlas steps outside and I follow him. The wind bites my face.

Okay fine, it is pretty, but I’ll keep that to myself. Atlas needs no encouragement. I watch him looking up at the sky. White dusts against his black hat, and the flannel coat he’s wearing does shit to me I’m not ready for. He looks so ridiculous.

And happy.

He’s always so happy. “Isn’t it pretty? Come on, Gage.”

“It’s just white powder.”

“God, you’re so dead inside.” He laughs.

“No, I was warm inside,” I correct. “And now I’m slowly freezing to death.” I tuck my hands into my pockets. “I could die.”

“You’re not going to die. You’re such a drama queen.”

Atlas sighs and I feel myself crumbling. How can I not when he looks like that. Bright eyes, so happy. He’s practically vibrating.

The cold brushes my face sharply, and Atlas walks over, his smile frozen with joy. “It’s so pretty.” He tugs my ear flaps again. “You’re so pretty.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Then his lips are on mine, and it all feels a lot less stupid.

“Are you okay? Too cold?”

“I’m fine.” Warmth soaks into me as he holds me here.

He looks up at the soft flakes falling peacefully around us. “I like how quiet it feels when it snows.” He grins. “I think that’s the part I miss about living here instead of in the cities. Everything feels so quiet.”

“It’s just frozen water.”

“You’re frozen water.”

“Do you always have to be the most ridiculous person?” He grins wide, all white teeth. Impressive for his line of work. I wonder if they’re all real. “Have you had any teeth knocked out?”

“Not yet. Now shh, we’re having a moment.” Atlas watches me then tilts his face to the sky. Eyes closed, he sticks out his tongue, and he smiles as snowflakes dust his lashes.

“I’m cold.”

“Got to move and get warm. Let’s build a snowman.”

“I’m not building a snowman.”

Atlas ignores me, grabbing a shovel and piling snow into a heap. “We have to think aesthetics. What kind of snow person are we building? What does he do for a living? Is he magic? Oh, a snow wizard would be awesome.”

“Atlas I’m not building a snowman.”

“Why are you such a hater? Come on, Gage. Help me build this snow creature. I want him to be majestic, but with kind eyes.”

I watch him push snow into an odd shape I’m assuming has to be the base. It’s lumpy, no structural integrity at all. “That thing will collapse.”

“It has personality.”

“And structural issues.”

“You have structural issues.”

“Excuse me, there is nothing wrong with my structure.”

Atlas grins like the devil. “I know that’s right.” Heat pours into my stomach, and he grins wider. “Come on,” he whines. “Help.”

How can someone be so sexy one minute and so annoying the next?

I give in, crouching down to help him push snow into a shape. When he’s satisfied with the base, he piles more snow for the center. It’s a little lopsided but not terrible.

Atlas puts his hat on top of his head. “Don’t want him to get cold.”

“Isn’t that their preferred state?”

“How amazing does it look?”

“Acceptable.” As I gather more snow to pack around the base, so this monstrosity doesn’t collapse during the night, snow explodes against my shoulder.

Slowly, I turn around and see Atlas there with another snowball. “You didn’t.”

He scoffs. “Uh, yeah, I did.” He tosses the ball in his hand, then he crouches, packing more snow between his gloves, his tongue poking out in concentration. “Come on, Gage. Live a little.”

“I am living a nightmare.”

Another snowball hits me in the chest. My lips purse as I inhale.

That fucker.

I bend down, gathering snow and quickly packing it into something with more structural integrity than that snowman. Atlas laughs, running, as I aim poorly and attempt to hit him. I catch him on his back. “You ass. Stay still. I don’t sport, Atlas. I’m not athletic.”

Atlas packs more snow, flinging two as I dive behind the snowman and block his shots. “Hey, no fair! He is not a human shield!”

I pack more snow, ignoring him, and stand, flinging it fast.

Hitting Atlas square in the face.

We stand there in silence as Atlas’s eyes widen. “Oh shit, I’m—” I squeal as he grabs me and throws me over his shoulder, spanking my ass. “Stop,” I laugh. He trips and we fall with a thud into the snow. He’s laughing so hard. Snow blankets his black hair, the streetlights and moon above shining down on his face. He lies flat on his back, sticking his tongue out and tasting the falling snow. I roll onto my side to watch him. I wish I loved anything the way Atlas loves things.

He lolls his head toward me. “This is fun. Admit it.”

“No.”

“You don’t hate this.”

Snow clings to his hair and lashes. His cheeks are flushed in the light shining down. Happiness practically clings to him.

I exhale.

“No. I don’t.”

Atlas leans into me and kisses me softly. Rolling more toward me, he cups my face, deepening the kiss, and I don’t pull away. Instead, I lie here under his large body. He’s pressed into the cradle of my hips, his thumb brushing my cheek.

He kisses me harder, no space left between our bodies, and I like how heavy he is. I like that he crushes me. It’s grounding in a way I’ve never felt. He deepens the kiss, it’s soft and unhurried, not urgent or rushed. Warm despite the cold seeping into my back. Slowly, he strokes his tongue along mine. His tongue that forces the weirdest shit from his lips but also brings me this feeling, heavy and hot. Warming me from the inside out. Snow falls around me. Some lands on my face but I don’t care about any of it. My chest tightens further with every minute we lie here kissing.

Finally, he pulls back, cheeks pink. Some unnamed feeling balls in my chest.

How have I gotten so lost?

Something passes through his eyes, and I can see him thinking about saying whatever it is.

Thankfully he doesn’t say a word. Instead, he rolls off me to lie on his back.

“Do you want to go inside and shower with me?” I open my mouth to answer. “And then let me show you my comic book collection?”

“Had me in the first half.” But I already know that whatever he wants to do tonight, that’s what we’re doing.



“Harder.” The muscles in his back bunch as water sluices down his spine, his fingers clawing against the shower wall. “Harder, Gage.”

“How much harder can I go without slipping and breaking my ass on the shower floor?” I wind my arms around him gripping him tight as I fuck into him. If I fall, I’m taking him down with me. He’s panting, whining, tightening around me.

“Oh, fuck, there. Right there.”

His nails bite into my skin as he reaches back to pull my thigh against his ass.

My hand snakes up to grip his throat hard in my hand. “Are you going to come?”

He nods, head pressed to the wall. His right arm begins to work furiously. “More. More, Gage. Fuck yes. *Oh fuck*.” He arches a bit more, his legs shaky. “I’m coming. I’m coming.”

My hips punch into him as I drink in the unhinged sounds leaving his lips. I come hard, pressing my forehead to the center of his back and squeezing him tight. I wait for him to calm down, pressing kisses across his back.

“You good?”

He nods against his arm resting on the shower wall, as my hands trail a path over his chest. “You feel so good, Gage.”

My fingers freeze on his skin. “Yeah?” He nods then pulls himself from his arms. Reaching behind, he pulls me out then turns to face me.

He nods, still panting slightly and shutting the water off. “Do you want to see my comic room?”

I go to comment on how fast he snapped from moaning hungry slut to goofy adorable nerd, but I can’t say a word because I honestly don’t care. I just want more of that fire in his eyes. “Sure, Atlas. Show me.”



“Holy shit.”

I step inside the room, and it’s strange walking in here when his apartment back in Virginia barely has furniture let alone this. When he flicks on the lights, the room explodes with color. There are mounted shelves with action figures, and comic books. A table sits in the middle of the room with comic books in plastic sleeves. Figurines pose on his shelves, and there are three framed posters placed along the walls. “Those are movie posters I got signed by Stan Lee.”

“Who’s Stan Lee?”

Atlas huffs. “Where am I even going to begin with you?” He shakes his head. “I don’t have to show you if you don’t want?”

Atlas waits, like he’s bracing himself for a reaction he’s probably gotten a million times before. Instead, I step inside and look around. “Are those all your comics?”

“Uh, yeah. They’re alphabetized by publisher and timeline. I don’t buy as many as I used to. During the summer breaks I try and catch up on issues I’ve missed of my favorites.”

“You don’t bring them with you?”

“Not these ones. Traveling will ruin them.” He flips through some on the table. “My older ones are over there on that shelf behind you.” I turn, seeing a wall of neatly displayed comics in hard plastic cases. “Sometimes I like to reorganize them. I like to keep the older arcs separate. My Marvel ones are on the left here, some miscellaneous ones in the center, and my DC ones in the middle. X-Men have their own section. They’re my favorite. When I try and catch up, I usually start with them first.” His eyes lift to mine. A soft blush hits his cheeks. “I can stop. I know it sounds um—”

“No.” He’s so animated right now, I can’t stop him. “Keep going, Atlas.”

I can tell he’s dying to show someone, and I hate that I actually want to be in here. I shut the door with us inside, and I look at him now. No shirt, gray pajama bottoms, and bare feet. Relaxed, calm.

Two things that I’m not right now.

My skin feels too tight and there’s this heaviness that’s followed me since we arrived, and I don’t know how to shake it or what to even do with

it. I watch Atlas's eyes on me then look around the room. "Which is your favorite figurine?"

"Oh, that's impossible."

"Naturally."

Atlas shakes his head, walking over to a shelf and picking up a woman wearing what looks like a one-piece bikini and matching thigh-high navy boots. She has two swords in her hand. Her purple hair is flowing in the wind. One eye patch covers her eye. "This is Psylocke, she's my dream woman."

I lift my brow. "She's very . . . voluptuous. I'm jealous."

He laughs. "She's badass. Her power is like mind control and astral projection. She's got these badass knives." He turns, showing me the same woman tattooed on his forearm. "When I was little, I wanted to do martial arts because of her."

"Did you?"

Something dark flashes over his face as he shakes his head. Then he smiles softly and places the toy back on the shelf. "I have graphic novel bind-ups here. I love the ones that are darker story-wise. Absolutely in love with Poison Ivy on the DC side."

"Batman?"

"I like Batman too. I actually have this . . . he turns and gently grabs a comic from a separate display. "This is my wall of like really rare comics. I don't read these. They're in near perfect condition. This one is from nineteen forty. It was the first issue to debut Joker and Catwoman. It's a nine-point-two graded copy."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means it's worth over twenty grand."

"Holy shit."

He looks to the wall with about fourteen comics. "These are the all-stars here. I slowly collect them. I don't spend too much money really, except on this stuff. And the rink."

"The rink?"

He nods, setting the copy down carefully back on the display. "I send my foster mom money for the rink every year. For kids who can't afford gear, free lessons. I mean, I was a poor kid who didn't know shit about hockey when I came to them. Hockey changed my life. I want it to change

someone else's too. I also used to send tickets to some kids when we'd play the Jersey Cyclones."

A slow smile spreads on my face. "When do you buy new comics?"

"When I find them for decent prices. I don't think I'm really collecting to sell later on, but they're cool to have. This one here . . ." He grabs another. "Not as pricey as that one, but this one is the Uncanny X-Men issue two fifty-six. It was the first issue where Psylocke was introduced. It's signed by Jim Lee and Chris Claremont—artist and writer. It's a nine-point-eight. Nearly perfect. I have no idea how much it's even worth."

"Where do you get the figures?"

He shrugs. "Online sometimes. Oli, Grey, and I would always go to comic stores if they had any in the cities we went to. I'd get one to remember the place." He walks over to the shelf. "I got this one in California." He holds up the figure with a blindfold over his eyes and cards in his hand. "This is Gambit. He's in the X-Men world."

I nod, looking around. "You like talking about this."

"Yeah." Atlas sets the statue back. "Most people don't really get it."

Gently, I take one of the comics from the middle, looking at the vibrant cover. Atlas walks over and our shoulders brush when he reaches toward the table. "I had this table built specifically for them.

"What's your favorite comic?"

"Well, I mean there's storyline, character, run—"

"Atlas—" I turn to him. "Right now. Without thinking. Show me what your favorite is. Of these. Story-wise, art, I don't know, just pick one." I slide the comic I had back into its place.

"But . . ." He chews on his bottom lip. "That's like asking me to pick a favorite body part."

"It's your penis, isn't it?"

"It is my dick. Yes."

A laugh explodes from my lips. "Show me your favorite."

"Okay." He scans the magazines then turns to the all-star wall. "This arc here, *The Infinity Gauntlet*. Yes, it's one of the most famous Marvel storylines, but what means a lot to me is that these were the first comics I got to read. My um, my birth mom had this boyfriend, and I don't know, he was trying to impress me and Penn—"

"Penn?"

All the blood drains from Atlas's face and I don't know what to do to take that question back.

"Um . . ."

I smooth the hair from his chest and see the name scrawled there. "Penelope?"

"She was um, my sister." Whatever just happened snuffed all the light out of him. I want to put it back.

"Your mom's boyfriend?" I ask, trying to pull his attention back to me and not wherever his mind just went.

"Yeah um, he used to bring them for me to read so we would sit in my room and leave them alone. I'd read them to her." He laughs sadly. "It's like my favorite childhood memory." He turns to the prized wall and grabs one down. "This is the issue I used to read." He hands me the beat-up copy sealed behind hard plastic like the others worth thousands.

I have a feeling this one is priceless.

I want to ask more but I see him shutting down on me. "Uh . . ." It's like I'm watching him lose himself in real time. I don't know how to fix this. "Sorry uh . . ." I set the comic back on the wall. "I mean, I've got more boxes in the closet, I just—"

I grip his wrist. Not tight, just enough to make his attention come back to me. Atlas goes still. "I think I get the idea." I step closer, sliding my hands around his waist, and look up at him. "I'm very intrigued."

"About the comics?"

"About you."

I watch the way his eyes focus and narrow on me. I cup his face lightly, brushing my thumb along his cheek. Atlas leans in first, kissing me softly, like he's testing the ground and seeing if it can handle his weight. Tension unravels when he pulls me against his large body, his free hand coming up to rest on my waist. He backs me up to one of the few bare walls.

"Are you okay?" I whisper against him.

Atlas exhales, pulling back and meeting my eyes. "Yeah. I'm okay."

That's all the reassurance I need.

I kiss him back hungrier. Atlas's fingers curl into the fabric of my sleep pants before gripping under my thighs and lifting me up into his arms. I'm used to how pliant and obedient he is. This dominant feeling grips my throat as his hands hold me up, grabbing my ass in them. His hard body presses

tight to mine, and a soft moan leaves his lips. My arm comes up to wrap around his shoulders.

Pain shoots through my elbow. “Ouch!” I glare at the shelf next to us. “Fuck.” Atlas’s forehead presses to my collarbone and he laughs. “Not funny!”

“Kind of funny.” He leans in, pressing a kiss to my lips then my elbow. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Fine.” I scowl.

Atlas sets me down, and I want to lean back into it, but the moment is gone. “I’m tired. We’ve got a drive tomorrow. About four hours,” he says finally. The shadows have disappeared.

I look at his shelves. “If I were to read one of these, which one would you have me read?”

Atlas thinks a moment, walking over to his bookshelf. “Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy. I think you’ll like this one.”

“Can I read it?”

“Okay, but if you take it, please let me know if you read it, because I’ll want to talk about it, and I get really enthusiastic. I’m warning you. I am a lot.”

I hear his warning, but a smile slips onto my face. “I have no doubt about that, hockey boy.”

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TWENTY-FIVE

Atlas



I wake up and realize Gage's heat is missing and only silence keeps me company in my room, so I get up and slip on a pair of sweats. Light filters in from down the hall. Then I hear it. The soft strum of his guitar.

Slowly, I make my way toward the sound and can't help the smile that hits my lips when I hear his voice. Soft and warm like a hug. I can't really make out the lyrics, because the guitar is muffling most of whatever he's singing, and I can only see a sliver of his face, but his eyes are closed as he plays softly.

Then his eyes open and he sees me. "Oh, sorry. Was I loud? I was trying to be quiet."

"No, I didn't hear you until I came out." I walk around the couch. "Are you okay?"

Gage looks up, but there's something in his eyes that catches me. I've noticed it lately, and I don't know if that's because I'm just more aware of him or if something is chipping away at him. The hard lines of his face have softened.

His fingers move with ease against the guitar. "Yeah, I'm okay." A quick smile flashes. "Just couldn't sleep. I was in the mood to write something."

"Can I join you?"

"It's your house, babe." Gage's eyes snap up to me at the slip.

"Babe." I grin. "Wow.

“Shut up.” He rolls his eyes, but I catch the smile. His fingers find the strings and start strumming again. The notes are soft, like he’s testing them out, afraid to commit fully.

“My friend would be so jealous of me right now.”

Gage’s eyes light with amusement. “The red-haired one?”

“Yeah, Knox. He’s a huge fan.” I shake my head. “If he only knew.” His eyes lift to mine. “Which he won’t, I promise. I’ll never tell anyone. No matter what.”

Gage doesn’t look at me, his focus on the guitar as he plays with the rhythm. Then he begins singing. It’s soft at first, his voice deep. He was powerful on stage, but here there’s something delicate about him. Something fragile in his voice.

“Have you written anything since you’ve been on break?”

Gage glances up, shaking his head. “Not really.”

I sit beside him and he looks up, then stands with his guitar in hand. “Move a little. Sit back.” I sit back against the couch, allowing Gage to sit inside my legs and lean back against my chest.

“When did you learn to play?”

“When I was nine. My foster dad had this old guitar and he let me practice.” He sits comfortably between my thighs. He looks so relaxed like this. I dare a little, wrapping one arm around his waist and resting it there while his head settles against my chest.

“I like your voice.”

Gage looks up at me.

“It’s deep and calming. Nice.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been listening to you before practices. Knox thinks that’s what’s fucking up my game.”

His brows scrunch “Why would it fuck up your game?”

“It’s superstition. I always listen to Abba before games, but lately I’ve been listening to your voice. I mean, not your—I mean your music.”

He nods slowly. “Abba, huh?” I catch his smirk. “Is Atlas a dancing queen?”

My arms tighten around his waist. “It’s um, I listen to it to remind me of my mother. She loved Abba. It just makes me feel like she’s with me, I guess. She never got to experience this version of me.”

He looks up. “Did she pass away?”

My lungs seize up, but I don’t want to keep this in. The feelings I have about my mother are so twisted and confusing. I hate her and love her. I never want to talk to her ever again, but I miss her more than anything.

And I want to tell him about it. Not everything right now, but maybe a little.

“No um, she’s in prison. For life.” I swallow. “I haven’t seen her since I was a kid.” The guilt is killing me, but I just can’t. There’s too much pain and resentment in me to handle that. “I miss her a lot, though. I wonder sometimes how she’s doing.”

“Would you—”

I drop a kiss onto his mouth to quiet his question.

He pulls back, glaring. “Don’t distract me.”

I press a kiss to the back of his head. “I’d never do that.”

“You distract me all the time,” Gage admits.

“That’s because I’m incredibly distracting.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And sexy. Sexily distracting.”

He smiles, shaking his head. “You’re insufferable.”

“Insufferably sexy?”

He shakes his head, adjusting the guitar before plucking the strings. The room feels warm, the smell of his shampoo floating in the space between us. I listen quietly with my arms around his waist, and the soft melody of his lyrics calms my heart. There’s this song of Riot Heart’s called “Twisted Intentions,” about a man who tries so hard to do the right thing, but the world around him breaks him down and turns him into a villain. It’s a sad song, but the way he sings it, it feels like hope. I’ve noticed that a lot about their music. Even the sad songs are filled with hope.

My thumb soothes his stomach with him warm in my lap. “That sounds nice.”

He looks back at me with a soft smile. “For a while now, this has all felt like work. I don’t want to complain, because I’m incredibly privileged to do what I do, but sometimes I wish it was just me and my guitar again. No pressure, no fans’ expectations, no management telling me what to do. Just me and my guitar.” He shakes his head. “I was so poor back then, but so free.”

The gentle hum of the chords floats between us while I let his words sink in. My arm tightens around his waist on instinct. It’s there to ask him

about his childhood. I know he was in foster care, but he hasn't given me anything more.

"Do you like writing music?"

"I actually enjoy it more than singing."

"Really?"

He nods. "Sometimes writing feels like the world disappears for a while. It's like this calm that settles over me. Writing down how I feel. I just write and then later I'll try and put it together. It's therapy and healing and —" He shakes his head. "It's just the best feeling in the world. When I write, I feel the most like me I can ever feel."

"Would you write a song about me?"

"What?" He laughs, looking up at me.

"You know. A song about how ridiculous I am. How annoying I am."

He shakes his head with a soft smile. "For the record, your ridiculousness is my favorite thing about you." He looks up at me, and the room suddenly feels way too small. "You say the most insane things so casually."

"I am a simple man."

"You literally are not." He grins.

I lean in, kissing him gently without a thought. Slow enough that a soft noise leaves his lips. My fingers spread along his stomach, and when he pulls back, he looks up at me.

"There's nothing simple about you, Atlas."

My hands stay firm on his stomach. Neither of us moves, locked in this standstill. A rush of emotion so strong hits me hard.

Our mouths are inches apart, his breath mingling with mine. I'm sure he can feel my heart beating against his back. Then Gage kisses me again, slow at first, as if he's waiting for my brain to catch up.

Gage slowly sets his guitar down then turns in my lap, straddling my waist. My hands curl over his hips. Then he leans in, pressing a deeper kiss against my lips.

Everything about it feels warm. A little dizzying. The lazy drag of his lips and slow grind on my lap making my cock take note. But he doesn't move to do more, even though I know he feels it. The way he keeps rolling and shifting his hips would give me away.

"Atlas," he murmurs into my mouth.

The way he says my name makes heat flow right through me.

“Yeah?”

Gage pulls back and looks at me for a second. “I love being strangers with you.”

I huff a laugh then kiss him harder. The tension snaps instantly. My hands slide up into his hair, fingers threading through the blue strands. Gage’s mouth moves against mine with growing urgency, while his fingers dig into my shoulders as if he’s trying to keep control.

My thumbs trace small circles over his hips as my fingers dip into his waistband, my hands on his ass. His hands trail down before dipping into the front of my sweats and cupping my length. I break the kiss and watch him

“Gage—”

“Yeah?” He strokes me, making my eyes roll back, but I take his hand out, ignoring his frown. “What’s wrong?”

I lick my lips and shake my head because I don’t know what’s wrong. Nothing is wrong. “Nothing. I just, I like lying here like this. I don’t, I mean, this is nice. I want to keep listening to you, though.”

Gage blinks at me for a moment. “Okay.”

I pull him in for one last kiss. My hands smooth up his back then hug him against my chest. He collapses against me, resting his head on my chest with my fingers slowly stroking along his spine. “Your heart is racing.”

You make my heart race.

As I think it, I shove it away for later. Instead, I adjust, letting him turn back around in my lap. He picks up the guitar and starts to play while I sit and try so hard not to tell him how much I feel and how badly I’ve fallen.



I hear footsteps and open my eyes just as Gage walks into my room naked. “Oh, hello, good morning.” I smile, trying to focus through the grogginess.

“Don’t get any ideas, we’ll have to head out soon if we want to get up there before noon.”

I look at him and follow his line of sight. “He’s saying hi.”

“Enthusiastically, it seems.”

I squeeze my erection and sit up. “Or, and here me out . . . we stay here, I don’t see Grey, and I let you fuck me. That sounds better, huh?”

Unfortunately, he pulls his briefs up over his ass. “Come on!”

He turns to me, bracing his hands on my thighs, and leans in to kiss me. “While I would love to stay in this bed with you all day, I know that if we don’t get going now, you’re going to try and talk yourself out of it.”

“Pterodactyl.”

“Atlas.” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “The safe word is for sex.”

“Come on! Why do you care? You have no robot in this fight.”

His lids cut to slits. “What? You mean dog?”

“I don’t like that saying, why would I want dogs to fight? Now a robot fight, I can get behind that.”

He closes his eyes for a moment then kisses me. “Get your gorgeous ass up and get ready.”

“Fine!” I whip my blankets off. “You’re so mean to me.”

“Very cruel and evil, yes.” I shuffle past him toward the bathroom. Still half asleep I hit the edge of the bedpost, stubbing my toe. “Fuck!”

“Jesus Christ.” Gage pinches the bridge of his nose. “You’re not getting out of this.”

I hold my foot, trying so hard not to cry. This shit hurts. “I don’t think I can go. Too injured.”

“Atlas.” He tilts his head into my line of sight. “Get in . . . the bathroom. Now.”

I squeeze my foot, letting it go, and get ready in the bathroom.

When I come back out to the kitchen, Gage has his hoodie on and is pouring a cup of coffee. “Oh, you made coffee. So domestic.” Gage looks up at me then shakes his head as I wander toward the cabinets to grab a mug. I pour myself a small cup and bring it to my lips as I notice his eyes on me. “What?”

“Nothing.” He sips his own. “This is all I could find. We can grab food on the way up if you want.”

“I’m not really hungry.”

“You need to eat. We’ve got a long day. We’ll grab something quick. I’m sure I can find something wherever we go.”

“You sound like a parent.”

“Well, you act like a toddler, so here we are.” I roll my eyes, sipping my coffee and trying so hard not to overthink. It’s Grey. Grey is one of the kindest, gentlest men I know. Today will be fine.

“Nervous?”

“A little.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No.” He sighs, pushing off the counter to walk up to me. I think he’s going to pat my face like he always does, but instead his hand rests gently on my jaw. “It’s going to be okay, alright.”

I nod. “I know.” I set my mug in the sink. “Are you ready to spend another three and a half hours in a truck with me?”

He sighs but laughs a little, leaning in to plant a quick kiss on my lips.

“Lucky me.”

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TWENTY-SIX

Atlas



“Not that I’m not enjoying this at all, but why are you so quiet? I don’t think you’ve said a word this last hour.”

“It’s just sinking in. I’m so nervous.” I glance at him quickly. “I had the thought that I could drive somewhere else, and you’d never know the difference, and next thing we knew we’d be in like Canada or something.”

He shakes his head. “What are you nervous about?”

“Are you serious? You know what.”

I hear him move and glance quickly at him as he turns toward me. “Atlas, think about it. What’s the fear? Where is it coming from? What’s the worst-case scenario?”

I stare ahead, jaw tight. The answer is there, deep down, but I don’t want to say it out loud. My mind does this all the time. It spirals until I can’t find my way out and see reality clearly.

“I’m afraid I’ll lose him as a friend,” I admit. “I’m afraid I’ll walk up to his door and he’ll tell me to fuck off. That his life is better without me in it. That he never wants to see me again.”

Gage’s hand slides onto my thigh, giving me a squeeze. “I can’t imagine anyone not wanting to see you.”

I glance at him quickly then force my gaze back on the road. “You didn’t want to see me again.”

I sigh. “And yet here I am driving to upstate New York, huh?”

“That’s because you like my ass.”

Gage is quiet for a moment. “Hey.” He pats my leg then massages the muscle. “He’s not going to say any of that. Okay? He’s not.”

I find the number I’m looking for on the mailbox. It’s not up on a hill like his old place, but I haven’t seen another house for a bit. Of course Grey found a house in the middle of nowhere.

We pull into his driveway, and I see his pickup truck parked by the blue house. There are flowers planted in boxes along the front of the house, and a small stone path leads up to a big porch. There’s a swinging chair sitting on it that looks big enough for multiple people.

Or just Grey and Felix.

“Hey.”

I look at Gage and feel my heart race out of my chest.

“Look at me.”

I do, because I mean, look at him. He’s so pretty. His fingers lace the back of my neck, squeezing the tension out of it.

“He’s going to be happy to see you.”

“You don’t know that.”

Gage watches me a moment. “I don’t, you’re right, but I promise I’ll be here in case he doesn’t.” He leans in, brushing his lips against mine. Quick and steadying. “I got you, Atlas. We didn’t come this far to chicken out.”

“I’m not a chicken,” I grumble. “I’m a majestic eagle.”

He laughs, resting his forehead on mine. “Fuck me, you’re ridiculous.” He presses a quick kiss to my forehead then pulls back, and I look beyond him out the passenger window. Grey stands in his doorway, staring at us.

“Fuck. Okay, here we go.”

“You want me to get out?”

“Please.”

He nods and I’m out of my truck. Each step toward Grey feels heavier than the last. My thoughts spiral, but I try to focus on Gage’s footsteps behind me.

“He’s going to punch me.”

“He’s not going to punch you,” Gage whispers.

“Atlas?” Grey’s voice feels like a relief. He glances back into his home and Felix appears behind him. He stares at me for half a second, just long enough for my stomach to clench. Then he moves, grabbing me and pulling me into a crushing hug. “Holy shit, I missed you.”

It knocks the air out of my lungs. My arms hesitate a moment before wrapping around him. “I missed you too.”

He pulls back, hands still on my shoulders. That’s when I remember we have an audience. Grey looks over my shoulder at Gage then looks back at me. “Who um . . .”

“This is my friend, Gage.” I’m still thrown by Grey’s hug. I’d braced for a punch. “He came with me.”

“Hey.” Gage gives them a tiny wave.

Grey looks him over briefly. “I was just on my way down to campus. I have to do something quickly. It’s not far from here. I won’t be long. I um, I wish I knew you were coming.”

“Surprise,” I say softly, wiggling my fingers at my sides. A soft laugh leaves his lips.

“Why don’t you take Atlas with you?” Felix suggests. “Gage and I will be fine here.”

I look back at Gage. “Yeah, that’s fine.” He smiles at me.

Grey hesitates for a moment. “He’s safe with him,” I say softly when I see the worry in my friend’s eyes.

Grey looks behind him. “You sure, Angel?”

Felix smiles. “We’ll be fine.”

Grey leans in, kissing him quickly, then jerks his head toward the truck. “We’ll be quick.” I follow him, glancing back in time to see Gage watching me, a faint smile on his lips.

“*Have fun*,” he mouths to me, and then disappears into the house with Felix.



Ten minutes of silence and I’m about ready to crawl out of my skin. “Say something, please!”

Grey glances over. “What?”

“I’m choking on air in this fucking truck. Will you please say something.”

“You say something!”

“I am saying something!”

He exhales sharply. “Jesus Christ, Atlas.”

I turn in my seat. “Are you still mad at me? Like actually mad?”

“I was never mad at you.”

“That’s not true. You were pissed.”

“No. I was in shock.” He shakes his head. “Then I was worried because the guy I’m in love with had just seen us kissing. It was a lot.” He glances at me. “I didn’t even know you were queer, let alone that you felt that way about me. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrug. “It’s not something I really think about.” Then I add, “I usually date women. I’ve just never been with a man before. And with you . . . nope, not going there. No. It’s just never happened with a man before.”

“Before Gage you mean?” I look at my friend. “That’s right. I saw that kiss.”

I settle back into my seat. “Before Gage.”

He huffs out a laugh. “I have so many questions.”

“I might have some answers.”

He laughs, softer now. “I missed you. You have no idea.” His hand lands on my thigh, giving it a squeeze. “I’m sorry for how things went down. I should’ve—”

“No. Please don’t.” I shake my head. “It’s okay. Really. I’m okay. Felix is good for you.”

He swallows hard. There’s something different about my best friend. In a way he seems lighter, happier for sure, but it’s more than that. His hair’s a touch longer than the last time I saw him, and his beard is trimmed close to his face. He’s wearing a navy-blue shirt that says “Hornets” under his flannel coat.

“I just wish I’d known. I would have set that boundary fast. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“You didn’t know. No one knew.”

“Andre and Oli knew.”

I blink. “What?”

“They said when I got injured, you freaked out. Not just normal freaked out. They said it seemed different.”

My stomach twists, and I stare out the window, watching the trees pass by. Why didn’t they say anything to me then?

“I do love you Atlas,” he says finally. “More than anything.”

The words don’t hurt like they used to. I don’t want him to mean it any other way than how he does now. “I love you too,” I say. “As a brother. I

know that now.”

“When I saw you got hurt, I called Oli. I wanted updates. I wanted to drive to Virginia, but . . . I didn’t know if I’d be crossing a line.” He pauses. “Are you okay?”

“Concussion. Fucked my shoulder up, but nothing too bad. Ten-day concussion protocol.” I exhale. “I needed this break, a chance to get my head straight. They put me on leave for a couple of weeks to rest.” I swallow, thinking about this next part. I haven’t stopped thinking about it. “I wanted to come visit, but I uh, I decided I’m going to tell Gage about her on this trip.”

Grey’s head snaps toward me. “You are? Holy shit.”

“I’m trying,” I say quietly. “I’m trying to deal with everything.” I debate telling him this part. I haven’t even told Gage yet. “I had a psych eval before they put me on leave. They suggested time off and prescribed me medication for the anxiety and depression. I haven’t had a drink since that day you found me in my apartment. I’m trying so hard, Grey.”

“I’m so proud of you.” I feel his fingers lace around the back of my neck and squeeze, then they slip away. “Tell me about him.”

“We met a couple of months ago. We live in the same building, and we started hanging out.”

“Hanging out.” He snorts.

“Yeah, asshole, among other things.”

He chuckles. “And are you happy ‘hanging out’ with him?”

I look back out the window. “I’m the happiest I’ve ever been.”

“So, what’s wrong, then?”

Of course he can tell. “I don’t know.” How can I be upset? I told him I didn’t want that either. It wasn’t something I wanted then, but the more time we spend together, I can’t deny how I feel. “This wasn’t on my whiteboard.”

“What?” He laughs a little.

“Nothing.” I look at him. “I knew what this was. Gage doesn’t want a relationship.”

“And you do?”

I try to lie, but I just can’t, not to him. Not anymore. In this truck again, I’m reminded why I became so close to Grey to begin with. He’s easy to talk to and gives me space to think without being judgmental. He does have

this sort of look he gives me sometimes that feels judgy, but it's not like Oli's.

Oli likes to solve issues immediately. If Oli were here, he'd tell me to go back to that house and tell Gage how I really feel.

I know Grey won't do that

"Not at first." I admit to him, "I really do."

Silence settles between us again, less uncomfortable than before.

A truth wedges its way into my lungs, and I can't keep it to myself anymore.

"I think I'm in love with him," I whisper.

I see the campus as we drive up a hill. It looms ahead, and Grey takes a few roads before he pulls into a parking lot. He stops the car but doesn't get out. Instead, he pulls me into a hug across the console.

I didn't even realize I was crying.

His grip on the back of my head is firm. "I'm sorry," he murmurs.

"I don't know what to do." This was all my stupid idea, and I've gone and broken the rules. He holds the back of my head while I cling to him. This doesn't feel like before. It's not rejection. That was sharp and swift. This is heavier. Deeper.

Eventually Grey pulls back and gives me a soft smile. "You need to talk to him."

"I know." My voice shakes. "But what if I do, and it ends. Everything ends. What if I lose him completely?"

"If he doesn't want the same things you do, you never had him to begin with. Not all of him." He pats the side of my face. "How is everything else? The team and all that. Are they treating you good?"

I take it for the distraction I know it is. I take a breath and wipe my eyes.

"It's okay. Not like the Otters." I smile sadly. "I uh . . . you're not going to like this next part." Grey's eyes narrow. "I room with Rome, actually."

"What?"

"I know, I don't know." I scratch the back of my head. "He's not like I pictured."

"A bigger dick than you imagined." He snorts.

"Honestly, no. I mean, I confronted him the first day we roomed together. About you. He said he didn't mean it, that he tripped going into the hit. I don't know if I believe him, though." I look at my friend, and his

jaw tightens as he looks out his windshield. “It’s not like we’re friends, don’t worry. I’d never.”

A soft smile splits his lips. “You can relax, it’s okay. I don’t know, though. That hit was dirty. He can make all the excuses in the world for it, but it was.” He sighs. “The thing is, looking back now, if it wasn’t him, it would have been the next one.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve had two ACL tears. Ligament strains. I’ve had cartilage damage. The list goes on. It was only a matter of time before it caught up to me. What he did was wrong, but looking back on it now, I know it would have happened at some point anyway. Turns out I’m not Superman.”

“Of course not. Superman is an alien.”

He chuckles, patting my head. “I missed you.” Grey watches me a moment. His blue-gray eyes make me feel like he’s trying to take me apart piece by piece. Oli calls it his look of judgement. “I mean it, Atlas. No more hiding.”

“I promise. No more hiding.”



“These are awesome,” I say, holding up a navy-blue jersey. “Can I have one?”

“No.”

“Why not? I’ll pay for it.”

He shakes his head. “I just need to check to make sure they’re correct. We got our last shipment, and we had to return them all. We have a game next week. If they’re not right, I need to have them sent back today,” Grey says. “Are you uh, staying?”

“You’re going to the game, right?” I ask. Grey nods. “I wanted to go watch them play.”

“Come with us. We’re in a box with some of the other family. Does that mean you’re staying?”

“If it’s not a problem. If not, we can get a hotel.”

“You’re staying with us. I’ll text Felix. We can cook out on the grill tonight. Oli and Andre are supposed to be coming up tonight too. I’ll get a fire going. It’s supposed to be mild today. New York weather is weird.”

“If it’s not a problem.”

“It’s never a problem. We have two guest rooms, and Lianna has her own room.”

“How far along is Alyssa?” Grey’s sister is engaged to the other goalie on the Otters, and she announced she was pregnant when they got back from Oli and Andre’s wedding.

“Almost six months. She’s having a boy.”

“Holy shit, congratulations to them. How does Lianna feel?”

“She’s making it real clear that she’s still my number one. As if there was even a question about it.” He laughs. “We’re going to fly out when she has the baby to help with Lianna. Landon’s just hoping he’s not on the road when she goes into labor.”

“Coming around to him, then, are you?” I grin.

Landon is the Otters’ backup goalie. It’s not that Grey hates him. It’s just that when Grey brought his sister around, he made it clear we were all supposed to fuck off. Landon did not fuck off. In fact, he fucked on. It’s taken Grey a while to trust him, and with what they dealt with from their father and then Alyssa’s deadbeat ex who left her and their brand-new baby when she was sixteen, Grey’s trust isn’t given out easily. Especially when it comes to her.

“He’s not the worst.” He rolls his eyes. “They’re getting married after the season’s over.”

A knock on the door interrupts us.

A guy stands there with brown hair and a short beard, wearing shorts and a tank top. “Sorry, I didn’t know you had company.”

“You’re good,” Grey says. “What are you doing here?”

“Working out,” he says. “Some practice before I head home.” His eyes keep passing to me before darting back to my friend.

Grey sighs. “Russo, this is my best friend—”

“Atlas Sgarbossa,” he says immediately. “Yeah, I know. Wow. Oh wow.”

“Don’t fawn over him, his ego can’t handle it,” Grey mutters.

“No, please.” I grin. “Fawn away. Want me to do a spin for you?”

Grey groans.

The guy laughs. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

“This is Hunter Russo. He’s our captain.”

“Oh, nice! How is he as a coach? A pain in the ass probably.” Grey shoves me playfully. “Want me to sign something?”

“Can you not?” Grey shakes his head.

Hunter laughs. “What are you doing here on the weekend?”

I hold up the jersey. “New jerseys.”

“Oh shit, these are much better. They gave us baby-blue ones. We had to return them and wear practice jerseys instead at our last game.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard. I want you fresh for next week.”

“You got it, Coach.” He looks between us and I laugh, grabbing a marker off Grey’s desk.

“What do you have?”

Hunter drops his drawstring bag, grabbing an old puck.

“What’s this?”

“I got it at an Otters game when I was thirteen. I take it everywhere for good luck,” he says.

I take the puck and look at my friend. “You haven’t signed it?” I uncap the marker with my teeth, shaking my head and signing my name. The silver sharpie pops against the black. I hand the puck to Grey, who’s glowering at me. “He’s no fun, right? Must be a hard-ass.” Then I hand him the marker and he reluctantly signs it.

“For your information, I didn’t sign anything because he never asked.” He grabs the cap from me and places the marker back on the desk. “I’m their coach. I’m not some superstar.”

“See, no fun.”

Hunter bites back a laugh.

“Alright. Go, have a good weekend.”

“You too, Coach.” Hunter dips out of the office and I look at my friend.

“Don’t start.”

“Oh, I am starting. The start has already begun. You can’t stop the start once the start starts starting.” I smirk at the flick of his eye roll. “I guess no more Road Daddy, huh?” I laugh as he glowers at the nickname our old team used to give him. “I’ll call you Coach Daddy now.”

Grey stares at me. “If I had a nickel for every time I’ve been called that . . .”

“How much?”

“Ten cents actually.”

“Twice?” I laugh.

“Twice too many, Atlas.”

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TWENTY-SEVEN

Gage



“They’re on the way back now.”

“Oh, good.”

Felix leans against the kitchen counter, mug in hand. He brings it to his lips, watching me over the rim. The kitchen is warm in a way that feels lived in. Soft lighting, an open space, and a wax melt warming on the counter. I shift awkwardly in my chair at the table. It’s only been about half an hour, and I’ve never been great at small talk.

Felix gave me a tour when I first came in here, and has spent most of the time since filling every silence before it can turn uncomfortable. “You sure you don’t want anything else to drink?” he asks.

I glance down at the half-finished glass of water I have. “I’m okay.” I take a breath. “This is a little awkward, right?”

Felix snorts softly into his mug. “A little.”

With his admission, I relax a bit. “Sorry,” I mutter. “I know this whole thing was kind of last minute.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “Oli and Andre are coming up tonight anyway. We’re all going to the same game tomorrow.” He tilts his head. “Is that what you guys came up for?”

I nod. “Yeah, he was nervous.”

Felix’s expression softens, understanding something I don’t. The words sit between us for a second before I have the nerve to ask what’s been bothering me. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“I don’t really know what happened, but Atlas has been nervous to come here. I think he expected Grey to scream at him or something. I don’t really know, just that he seemed to be . . . I don’t know—”

“In love with Grey?”

That surprises me. I mean, I knew that, but hearing Felix just say it makes me wonder how he’s doing right now. “I mean, Grey seemed happy to see him, but what about you?”

“Are you asking me if I’m angry with Atlas? Or jealous?” I nod. Felix lowers his mug, placing it on the counter. His eyes stay on the mug for a moment before he shakes his head. “No.” He smiles. “I’m not angry with him. Honestly, I feel bad for him.”

That surprises me. “What do you mean?”

“Atlas has been through a lot,” he says carefully. “And the worst part is you wouldn’t realize it because he hides it so well.”

“What do you mean?”

“He keeps everything inside.” Felix rubs his thumb along the handle of his mug. “If he’s hurting, you probably won’t know unless he decides to tell you, but even then, he likes to downplay it.” He smiles faintly. “I thought he hated me for the longest time.”

I blink. “Seriously?” I can’t imagine Atlas hating anybody.

He laughs. “Atlas loves hard, and once he decides someone matters to him, that’s it.” Felix shrugs.

Something twists low in my stomach. I know exactly what he means.

“What about you, Gage? You care about him?”

My eyes lift to him.

“I mean, we’ve been hanging out for a couple of months.”

“That’s not what I asked.” Before I can answer, tires crunch over gravel outside. *Thank fuck*. Both of us glance to the windows, and Felix smiles. “Saved by our men.”

I almost correct him, but then a car door slams outside and voices drift through the door. A second later it opens. Grey walks in first, carrying a couple of grocery bags in both hands, while Atlas follows behind him with another bag tucked against his chest.

Atlas looks cold, his cheeks pink from the winter air and hair messy from the wind. His eyes find mine immediately and brighten, sending little pulses of heat through my stomach.

“Hey,” he says softly.

“Hey.”

Grey kicks the door shut behind them. “Sorry, grocery store was insane.” He walks over to Felix and plants a kiss on his lips. Atlas moves toward me while Grey and Felix unpack groceries.

“You okay?” Atlas asks quietly.

“Yeah.”

“You sure?”

“You were gone for like forty minutes. I can survive without you just fine.”

He snorts. “Debatable.”

Grey pulls things from the bags. “Okay, important question. Is vegan cheese as good as the other cheese, or is Atlas lying to me?”

I blink up at Atlas. “You bought vegan cheese?”

Atlas shrugs as if I’m being silly. “You have to eat, right?”

Something warm settles heavily in my stomach. Felix digs through another bag. “Vegan burgers too?”

“And mayo. So many things I never considered have animal products in them.” He smiles down at me, but I can’t stop the rush of heat that’s flowing through me. Grey tosses a can of soda to Atlas, who catches it instantly.

“You two staying a couple of nights?” Felix asks.

Atlas looks toward Grey. “If that’s alright.”

Grey gestures around the house. “That’s literally why we bought this place. Plenty of room for my asshole friends.”

“Dick.”

Felix nudges him with his hip. “Tell him the real reason we bought this house.”

Grey sighs heavily, but I catch the glint of amusement in his eyes as he turns his attention to Felix. “Because someone wanted their dream kitchen and I love to spoil you.” He kisses him.

“I was going to say the giant fire pit in the back yard, but sure, my kitchen.” Felix’s cheeks pinken slightly. “Although you know I like cooking.”

“And I love eating.” Grey smiles quickly. “He actually started a cooking channel.”

Felix groans. “It’s not a channel. I just started sharing recipes on ReelDreams. I’ve got a little bit of a following.”

“You’re famous.”

“I have like forty thousand followers. Hardly famous. And it doesn’t help that most of those followers are from the sourdough video I did where you were in the background walking around with just a towel on.”

Atlas whistles. “That’s disgusting.”

Grey looks at Atlas. “I’m sorry, who did the nearly nude *Men’s Sports Illustrated* issue their rookie year?”

“Excuse me, what?” I lift my attention. “You did what?”

“I didn’t—” His lips purse. “I wasn’t nearly nude! It was tasteful!”

“Tastefully nude,” I mutter to myself. “Men’s Sports you said?” I grab my phone, twisting out of reach when Atlas lunges for it. I search online, and holy hot damn. “Uh . . .” I turn my screen to our audience. “I wasn’t aware that helmets could be worn on either head.” I wink.

“Oh, come on!” Atlas goes to grab my phone, but I snatch it away.

“This is my new wallpaper.” I grin. “Didn’t realize someone could make hockey gear look so slutty.”

“It’s art!” Atlas growls.

Grey looks at Felix. “I missed this.”

Then the front door flies open again, and cold air rushes inside along with more voices. I recognize the men immediately. Oli comes into the kitchen carrying an overnight bag, while Andre trails behind him with two more slung over his shoulders.

Oli freezes when he sees Atlas. “Holy shit.”

“Holy shit right back at you.” Atlas smiles. Oli drops his bag to give Atlas a tight hug then does the same to Grey. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

“A welcome surprise,” Grey says.

“How’s the head?” Oli inspects him as if he can see the concussion.

“I’m fine.” Atlas swats him away. “How was the flight?”

“Oh, you know. Ryker sat with me and tried to fit himself inside my skin.”

Atlas laughs, then Oli looks at me. “Our friend Ryker is terrified of flying, and since these two dipshits abandoned me this year, guess who’s on Ryker watch.”

“The team captain.” Andre claps him on the back. “Deal with it, babe.”

“Easy for you to say. You get to sit next to Landon.”

“Goalie bros.”

“And I didn’t abandon you, dickhead.” Grey rolls his eyes.

“I did do that. I did abandon you all.” Atlas laughs.

Oli leans on the counter, inspecting us. “Oli, don’t,” Andre warns.

“What?” He blinks innocently. “I thought they were strangers.” He shrugs. “Doesn’t seem very safe to get in a car and drive six hours away with a stranger.”

“Stranger?” Grey cocks a brow. “What is he talking about?”

“Nothing,” Atlas grits out. “Clearly he’s taken too many pucks to the brain.”

“Wait,” Grey says. “You knew about this?”

“What is it you say?” Oli thinks. “Not my story to tell.”

“I have the worst friends in the world,” Grey says to Felix.

Felix smiles up at Grey, laying a hand on the center of his chest. “Tell that to the giant smile on your face that hasn’t left since they arrived.”

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TWENTY-EIGHT

Atlas



Sitting like this with my friends is exactly what I think I've been missing. Throughout my life, I haven't had many friends. I had Sarah, but she had her own group of friends and didn't really spend much time with me in school. The rink was our place.

Then, when I started playing hockey, I was a little bit of an outcast. I didn't have any of the expensive new gear all the other players had. Which was fine. My foster parents did what they could, and I'll never be able to pay them back enough for the support they gave me.

The affiliate team was alright, but there was this competition between us all to get to the next level. It was hard to trust my teammates completely. We were all hungry, and we were playing beside our competition.

When I met Grey then Oli, that was the first time in my life I had a core group of friends. Eventually I became close with most of the other guys, but Oli and Grey and me, we were a unit, unstoppable together when we played and causing chaos when we weren't.

"I'm so happy you finally came here." I look up at Oli's words. "I've been telling him for months to come see you."

Grey smiles softly, drinking his soda. I didn't need him to not drink tonight, but it does feel good that he refused to buy any. "Me too. I missed the hell out of you."

"I watched your retirement ceremony," I say. "It was amazing."

Something soft hits Grey's eyes before he blinks it away, and Oli clears his throat, ruining the moment. "So, what's really going on with Gage? And don't give me any strangers with benefits bullshit. Why is he here with you?"

I look at Oli, and maybe it's the new medication I'm on or maybe I'm just ready, but I'm tired of pretending I'm okay. I'm far from okay, and if I need to unload on someone, why can't it be with someone I've considered family for the past few years?

I haven't told anyone this, not even Gage. "During the last game we had, where I got injured, I had an anxiety attack during the game. That's what caused me to lose focus. I felt like I couldn't breathe. Everything just crashed down on me. They used to be manageable, but lately I can't stop it. I wasn't paying attention and I was hit. If I'd been paying attention, I could have blocked or moved. After I was cleared by my doctor, I went to see our psychologist. I told them about the panic attacks, and my doctor put me on concussion watch, and it was, but also mainly for my mental health. I needed a break. We told everyone concussion watch because if you say mental health, the media runs wild with accusations. Anyway, we agreed to a two-week break while I adjusted to the new meds and just took some time. I needed to get my shit together."

"Have you gotten your shit together?"

I bark out a laugh. "No. Maybe. It is helping, though." The tightness in my chest is gone, and I still feel like me, which I'd been afraid I wouldn't. I'm still me, just less panicky. My thoughts don't suffocate me, and I don't crave the quiet like I did before.

"Help me understand, okay. I know Grey does, but I'm your best friend too. I want you to talk to me." The fire snaps and hisses, sending sparks twisting up into the night. The smell of smoke lingers around us. Normally, when I used to hang out with Grey during the summers, we'd spend hours out by the fire talking and drinking. Just the two of us. I miss that a lot.

Oli sits back on his Adirondack chair, beer in hand. I'm staring too hard at the flames like they'll somehow tell Oli my secrets for me. My lungs begin to tighten.

Breathe.

"The drinking . . . I didn't realize it was that bad." Oli thinks. "I mean, I know you could overdo it, but you never seemed like you craved it, that you needed it, so I didn't think it was an addiction."

A small humorless laugh leaves my lips.

“I don’t crave the alcohol. I crave how it makes me feel. If the thoughts in my head get too loud, it’s all I think about. I become obsessive and it’s hard to function let alone think of anything else. It’s like my body can’t rest. It’s like my mind is holding me hostage. The alcohol helps numb my thoughts.”

“You never told me it was this bad?”

I shrug. “I didn’t even know it was this bad.” I admit. “I didn’t even have a name for it until I saw the doctor. I think about the movies and shit, and how you think being an alcoholic is the way Hollywood likes to portray it. And I thought, ‘I don’t have a problem because I can function just fine.’ Then my thoughts get heavy, and the panic settles in. I can’t think or breathe. When I’m alone, I have nothing but time to think. The sickness, the panic, the guilt. Fuck me, Oli, the guilt. The guilt is constant. And then with the guilt comes anger and sadness, and her fucking body and—” I swallow.

Oli sits forward in his chair. “What?”

I stare ahead into the flames until my eyes begin to burn.

“On a loop. Over and over and over until I want to numb it all. I want it to stop. If I don’t shut it off or numb myself, I get this pressure in my chest. Like something terrible is about to happen and it’ll all be my fault.”

Oli looks at me, worry in his blue eyes. “That sounds exhausting.”

“It is.” My voice breaks. I cough to clear it. “And that’s just the beginning of it.”

“Depression?”

“And PTSD.” I nod slowly. “Some days I don’t even want to get out of bed. Not because I can’t, it’s just . . . what’s the point? So I can spend the entire day second-guessing every fucking move? So I can wonder if I’m fucking everything up again? It feels so fucking heavy. All the time. Even just breathing.”

“Until you drink?”

“Until I drink.” I nod. “I’m not addicted to it in the sense that I love being drunk. I’m addicted to feeling nothing. To hearing nothing in my head but silence.”

Oli leans toward me, gripping my knee and forcing my gaze up to him. “Atlas, you don’t have to carry this alone. We’re here. Me, Grey, and Andre. Fuck, even Felix.” And Gage, I think. I have Gage. But not really, right?

We’re supposed to be strangers with benefits. This trip has made it feel like shit it can’t be. “Talk to me. Please, Atlas.”

“What is talking going to do? I can’t change what happened.” I swallow hard, pushing back the emotion. “Only Grey knows.”

“Tell me, Atlas.”

I feel like I’m standing on the edge of a balance beam, except the beam is placed over a ledge with boiling lava bubbling beneath me. “I had a sister, Oli,” I finally say and feel the way relief washes over me. “Her name was Penelope. She was everything good to me. She was my best friend even though she was four years younger.” A smile slips onto my lips.

I straighten up in my seat and try to push past the pressure in my chest. Oli watches me carefully, waiting for me to get myself together.

“My mother was an addict, the best and worst mom. She went through waves of addiction. Sober for a while, then using again. It was constant. When she had Penn, I basically took over raising her.”

I swallow hard and try not to let the images hurt me.

“One day I came home, and my mother was passed out on the couch. She’d been going through one of her bad periods again, using. Penn was watching TV, and I assumed she’d been in the house all day. It was so nice out, and I just wanted to take her outside. Like I’d done a hundred times before. It was basically routine at that point.” I shake my head, my knee bouncing.

The fire pops sharply, making me flinch.

“It just took a second. Just one fucking second, and I just—” I swallow hard. “That was it. She was riding her bike and the next second she wasn’t, Oli, I can’t—”

“Hey.” He grips my hand as I try to pull away. My knee bounces harder and I can’t look at him. The grip he has on me is the only thing keeping me here. “You were a kid, Atlas.”

“No I wasn’t!” I look at him. “I’ve never been a fucking kid, Oli. Never. Not once in my life have I felt like a normal fucking kid. I was responsible for her, and I was careless!” My voice sharpens. “I was supposed to protect her. I was the one person in her life that she was supposed to be safe with, and she wasn’t.”

Oli shakes his head, grabbing the side of my chair, and somehow pulls me forward a little to face him. “You were a kid,” Oli repeats, blue eyes

hard. “You were a kid. That doesn’t make you responsible for something like that.”

I laugh, though it feels so hollow. “Tell that to my brain. It’s been punishing me all my life. That’s what all this is—” I grip the center of my shirt. “It’s me. I fuck everything up, Oli. Everything. I fucked up my mother’s life, my sisters, Grey’s—”

“Don’t you fucking dare.” We both look up at Grey. “You didn’t fuck anything up, Atlas. You did something kind of shitty while you were drunk, which no, doesn’t excuse it, but it’s the truth. You were drunk and then you did what you always do and tucked your tail between your legs and ran away.”

“You’re happier without me. Look at your life now, Grey!”

“That’s not how it works,” Grey grits out. “I am happy, but it’s not because my best friend won’t speak to me. In fact, that’s the worst thing in my life right now.” The fire spits and crackles. No one says a thing.

“You should have told me sooner,” Oli says.

My shoulders slump. “I didn’t want you to look at me differently.”

Oli huffs a laugh. “Atlas, you’re a fucking mess and I know it. We all know it. How else would I look at you?”

“You’re not some broken fucking doll,” Grey says. “We don’t look at you like you’re broken. We look at you like someone who’s been hurting a really long time. Someone who needs help but won’t ask for it and instead runs away from his problems.”

My throat tightens. “It doesn’t change what happened.”

“No, you’re right, and I’m sorry. I can’t take that pain away from you.” Grey gets up before crouching down in front of me, and I look at his knee. “I’m fine. Good as almost new.” He smiles softly. “You can’t change what happened, but you can change how you live going forward.”

“Like maybe not hiding all this shit to yourself anymore.” Oli nudges me. “Atlas?”

I swallow hard, shaking my head. “I hate you both so much.” I laugh, but it breaks apart. I’m engulfed on both sides by the biggest idiots I’ve ever met.

“Yeah, well, we love you right back.” Grey grips the back of my neck. “We’re not letting you run anymore, Atlas.”



It’s nearly midnight now and Gage is still passed out. It’s been a long week, a longer day. It’s been a long fucking life.

This mess in my chest has gotten stickier. I don’t know what’s going to happen when we get back home. He’s slept beside me all week, and I’m not sure I’ll know how to go back to sleeping alone. I watch his back slowly rise. His face is so gentle like this, it makes me laugh knowing how grumpy he is awake.

I think I’m in love with him.

That’s really fucking unfortunate.

Careful not to wake him, I slip out of bed and pull on a shirt. I walk out into the hall and notice a soft light glowing in the living room, and I follow it to find Felix lying on the couch watching some old movie.

Grey is lying between his legs, his head on his chest, snoring like a damn chainsaw. “That asshole always gave me shit for snoring.”

Felix laughs softly. “Are you alright? Can’t sleep?”

“I’m just getting water.”

I look around the living room. It’s a little bigger than his other house back in Oregon. I walk into his kitchen and grab a glass of water, trying to sort out the tightness in my chest. I’m not good at admitting when I’m wrong. I know this.

I set my glass down and walk back into the living room. Felix’s attention is still on the TV, his fingers idly smoothing through Grey’s hair. The jagged pain I felt last year is nearly gone. It’s morphed into shame. I was awful to Felix. I love Grey. I always will, I think. Just not in the way I thought I’d love him.

Grey needs someone calm and reliable. That’s not me. We’d never fit. I know that now.

“Do you mind if I sit for a minute?” Felix nods, looking at the chair next to him, and I take the invitation. I watch him a moment, his gentle fingers smoothing through Grey’s hair and brushing his temple. “How is he not crushing you?”

“I lost feeling in my legs hours ago.”

That makes me laugh. He looks down at Grey, giving him another more private smile. Fuck he loves him. This man loves my best friend in a way that he needs. Grey’s lucky, they both are. Both of them deserve to be happy, and I almost ruined it.

“Felix, I just want to say—”

“I know you are.” He lolls his head to me.

“I’m sorry for how I treated you. I kissed him and that’s awful. I’m awful. He’s the most loyal guy I know. He’d never do that to you.”

“Atlas, it’s okay. Really. I know.” His fingers softly brush hair behind his ear. “He missed you a lot. He nearly called you almost every day. He wanted to respect your space, but he needs you.”

I disagree. No one needs me. Especially Grey. He’s always been the person I go to when the dark corners of my brain begin to swell and hurt me. “I’m not in love with him,” I say, because it’s the truth.

He smirks. “Are you in love with Gage?”

I lean back in the chair and think about it. I don’t know what to do or what’s going on. The thing is, it doesn’t matter how bad I want something. When we’re not together everything feels heavy. This weight feels different than it did with my friends.

Oli and Grey were always the people I went to when everything became a bit too much. When everything got too crowded in my head, I’d go to one of their houses with the excuse I was bored. I wasn’t bored. I was terrified. Terrified of being alone because being me sucks most of the time. When I’m alone, I think too much. Then I drink so I don’t have to think at all.

Just one. Just one to take the edge off. Then I’m feeling so fucking good, and two turns into three and then four. Then four turns into me being blackout drunk with only my alarm in the morning to wake me up for practice.

Hockey keeps me in check. Most of the guys hate the busy routines and schedule, constant flights and hotels. For me it’s necessary. It keeps me distracted and busy. It gives me very little time to think. The busier I am, the less time I have for my thoughts to cut me.

“I don’t know.” I feel something. Maybe it’s love. Maybe it’s dependency. Maybe obsession. The thing is I can’t ever get enough of him. I want more and more. Every time we’re together just makes me crave his attention that much stronger. I refuse to burden another person with my heart, though. I nearly drove Grey away. Gage will run away if he finds out my feelings are stronger. “I’m something. I just haven’t figured out if it’s lust, love, or a big pile of shit.”

Felix looks over at me. “I think you know, Atlas.”

Yeah. Unfortunately, I do.

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TWENTY-NINE

Gage



The arena lights dim, leaving the rink glowing beneath us, and the crowd buzzes, hyped for their home team winning. Their friends pour back onto the ice.

“I can’t believe they’re losing.”

Atlas looks over at Grey, nodding. “Me either. Oli must be so pissed.”

“Remember that game against the Cyclones?”

Atlas barks out a laugh.

“I thought he was going to skin Ryker alive.”

Atlas smiles. “I don’t know where his head was at.”

“What happened?” I like seeing him this animated.

Atlas turns to me, his mouth only inches from mine, and my eyes drop to the slow smile that spreads on his lips. I can’t stop thinking about that night in his comic room. This man has shocked, surprised, and irritated me ever since we met.

That night was the first night he awed me.

So animated and alive, I couldn’t believe it. Seeing him talk about the things he loves reminds me a lot about how I used to feel about music. I want to feel that passion again. It’s slowly coming back to me piece by piece.

“Our friend Ryker. I don’t know what happened to him in that game. He was making so many mistakes, and Oli does not do well with losing.”

Grey snorts. “Understatement.”

“I don’t know how you can follow this. It’s chaos up here. I can’t imagine how it is down there actually playing.” Warmth tickles my face and I turn to see his lips inches from my ear.

“It takes some getting used to. You’re watching the puck too much,” he murmurs close, sending a thrill down my spine.

“Is that the tactic you use down there? Don’t watch the puck?”

“No.” He laughs. “Right now, see those players? They’re changing lines,” he says softly. “Fresh players. Watch number thirty-seven.”

I find him in the crowd. “Who’s that?” I watch the player glide over. “He doesn’t have the puck, though.”

“Not yet. That’s Ivan, he’s a defenseman, and although his job is defending, he’s also one of the Otters’ top goal scorers. He’s hunting.” I watch him skate away, keeping track. A teammate snaps the puck. He shoulder-checks him to steal it and barrels down the ice. “Don’t watch the puck. Watch the players.”

The man snaps across the ice.

“Hockey’s about space. Everyone thinks it’s chaos, but really, it’s just predicting your opponent’s next move. It’s why we study game play. We learn our opponent as well as we know ourselves. Watch this. Number fifty-six on the Hawks.”

I find the player he’s talking about. I look to the side and see his mouth right there. The low hum of his voice feels like a soft hand pressing against my lower back. “I see him.”

“That’s Vincent Donovan. He’s a winger. I bet you once he has the puck, which he will get in a moment . . . I bet you he’s going to go straight to the goal, and when the Otters come to him, he’s going to just hit it as hard as he can in their D zone.”

“D zone?”

“Where their goalie is. Watch.”

I watch them go, and he’s right. The Otters are in possession, but Vincent comes out of nowhere, body-checking his opponent and taking possession of the puck. He barrels down the ice but there are two players who come in hot. He does it, he shoots it hard and fast. I look to the side and see Atlas grin wide.

“Impressive.”

“He always does it, it’s like he panics. Just shoot the puck, ya know? What’s the worst that can happen? You miss? He misses a lot of chances

that way. I'd rather shoot and miss than shoot away from pressure." Atlas doesn't move away from my ear. "This one's a forecheck," he whispers, quieter now.

"What does that mean?"

"A forecheck is when the other team has possession in or near their zone. A forward like yours truly would try to force it away. A backcheck is when the other team has it and you're carrying it to your zone. A forward."

"Like yours truly." I smirk.

He laughs. "We skate our ass off and try to force a turnover. There's a little more to it, but I can teach you. Since, you know, you're so into hockey now."

"I wouldn't go that far."

His hand slides along the back of my chair. It's like we're in this private world just for us, despite the crowd around us.

"It seems chaotic, but it's actually very simple once you get the hang of it. It seems messy, but there's a lot of thought going into the chaos. It's a game of strategy."

On the ice, players slam into the boards hard enough to rattle the glass in front of us. I jump slightly. "Crazy fucking game." Atlas chuckles under his breath. "What's a power play?"

"That's an easy one. That's what our time-out box is for." I roll my eyes at his grin. "If you do something against the rules, you're put in the penalty box for whatever amount of time is granted. Most of the time it's only two minutes. That gives the other team a man advantage. Now, if the opposing team successfully keeps the other team with the advantage from scoring, that's called a penalty kill."

"Penalty kill."

"Something we know all too well," Grey mumbles. "Thanks to Oli."

Atlas laughs. "The Otters are the most successful penalty killers, because once we're on the disadvantage we move as a team. The only focus is keeping that puck away from our crease. We forget about scoring. We all defend as a unit."

"Everything seems so brutal."

He nods. "It's true, but patience matters. You wait for that shot. If you get too nervous and anxious, you make mistakes. Stay calm and cool and focus on what you need to do." I look at him, and his eyes hold mine. It's

unbearably warm in this space here between us. “What is it, Gage?” he whispers.

“N-nothing.”

“You seem like it’s something.”

I lick my lips. “It’s nothing.”

Only it doesn’t feel like nothing at all.



“Right there.”

“Shh.” I take the shell of his ear between my lips and slowly rotate my hips. “Can’t make too much noise.”

“I’m sure they’ve done way wor—fuck yes, there. Shit, Gage, yes. Worse. They’ve done worse.”

“Well, this is their home, huh?” I chuckle, and while I would love to drive into him hard and fast, this slow roll of my hips feels too good to amp up. I press kisses to his neck. His eyes are shut now and he’s on his stomach. He can’t touch himself at all like this. “I’m going to pump a load deep inside you.”

“Please.”

“Yeah?”

He nods softly, and with my arm braced across his chest, I groan, picking up speed just a little.

“Give it to me, Gage.” I cut his moans off with a kiss.

“I’m going to come.” Mindfully, I punch my hips forward, loving the squeeze of his body around mine. “Fuck, Atlas. Fuck.”

He struggles beneath me, to push back on my cock and get some friction for himself, as I punch my hips, unloading into the condom.

“That’s right, huh?”

“Feels so good.”

Still deep inside him, I sit up on my knees, jiggling his ass in my hands. “Fuck, so beautiful.” I pull out of him slowly and tap his cheek. “On your back.”

He moves as I lie between his thighs, teasing him with two fingers as I slide them inside his sloppy hole.

“You’re so close, huh?” He nods, sucking in a breath as I wrap my fingers around his cock.

I twist my fingers inside him and swallow around his length, and his fingers slide into my hair. “Oh yes. I’m going to come.” I moan with the first drops of cum, and Atlas’s muscles quiver, his fingers tightening. “Jesus.”

He sags back against the bed with that dopey smile of his.

I press slow kisses up his stomach to the center of his chest.

Dazed, he smiles up at me. “You’re so good at that.”

“Yeah.” I drop a kiss down onto his lips before collapsing against him. His arms instantly engulf me, and my fingers run through the soft hairs on his chest. We’re going back home and I’m not any closer to figuring out what I can do.

I’ve made a mistake, and I don’t know how to get out of it.

“Are you happy you came here?” I rest my chin on his chest.

“I am.”

“Do you feel better? After the stress of coming, I mean, and being afraid.”

Atlas smiles softly and nods. “I’m really happy for my friend.”

I think about my own issues and wonder if that’s what I need. Atlas faced his fears and came here despite them. When I think about what I need to do to get out of my mess, there’s no clean ending. There’s no option where everything will work in my favor.

Of course Grey forgave him; Atlas is Atlas. Sweet, kind, and caring. I’d forgive him too. My fingers graze over his tattoo and my heart hurts for him.

“I think I’m going to get some water. Do you want anything?”

“Oh, uh, I’m good.” He sprawls his arms out.

I pull on my sweats and go to our attached bathroom to wash up. Then I make my way out to the kitchen. I just need a minute to breathe. To think. Thinking isn’t easy when he’s around. The sex is too much, it’s too good, but somewhere along the way I started to crave all the other shit too. His warm crushing weight. His stupid jokes and dorky grin. I can’t handle it. The way he lights up talking about the things he loves.

I want to love anything like that.

I want him to love me like that.

I find the cabinet Felix showed me had mugs, and I grab one and fill it with water, bracing against the counter. I just need a minute to myself to figure this out. I need this to end, but for the first time in a long time, I don't want it to end with me. I don't want to blow my life up. I don't know how to fix this without doing just that. Confessing what I did will be admitting how desperate I was. That I'm a fraud.

Footsteps sound down the hall and for a moment I think it's Atlas, but then I see Grey appear in the kitchen. "Oh uh, sorry. I thought you were Atlas."

"Sorry." I sip my drink softly. "Just wanted some water."

He nods, going to the cabinet and throwing on the teapot. "Sometimes I can't sleep. My knee, it aches sometimes. Felix bought me some tea that helps, though. Never was a tea guy before." I don't know what to say to him. Grey's intimidating. "So, happy to be heading home tomorrow?"

He grabs a tea bag, setting it in his mug.

"Uh, I don't know. I've had a good time. Thank you for letting us stay."

Grey smiles softly and squeezes some honey into the mug. "It's good to see him. I've missed him a lot."

"He was nervous, but he's been wanting to come for a while now." Or at least since I met him. But knowing Atlas, I'm sure he's been torn up for months. "I can tell he loves you very much."

"I know he does." Just as the teapot whistles faintly, he pours some in a mug. "So, how long have you been together?"

The question catches me off guard. "I mean, we've known each other for a couple of months. I mean, we're not like *together* together. We're friends."

He nods his head slowly. "Friends." He steeps his tea bag then rests against the counter to look at me. "He seems to think it's a little more than that."

"I don't know, we um. We're not. He knows."

"Look, I don't know you at all. I don't know what relationship you two have. I do know my friend, though, and he likes to fall forward without a parachute. He's impulsive, and I can tell he cares about you a lot. My friend doesn't do casual very well."

"Well, it seems you don't know him as well as you think because this arrangement was his idea." The words taste sour even if they're true. Yeah,

this was Atlas's idea, but I should have run the moment he started to divert from it.

Grey watches me for a moment, making me want to crawl out of my skin. "Atlas is a lot to deal with," he says finally. "He's got a lot of demons, and he's going to need a lot of patience, but he's one of the sweetest, most caring, loving men I've ever met. He's got a heart so big he needs someone who knows how to handle it." I swallow hard. "And if that's not you, you need to let him down as gently as you can. Don't hurt my friend more than you already are."

"I'm not—" His words poke at me. I'm not hurting him. This entire thing was Atlas's idea. Strangers with benefits. He came up with the idea.

Then I think of the snowman, and the comic room, and then him pouring his heart out to me, so afraid the man in front of me now was going to abandon or hate him.

"I don't want to hurt him," I say softly, staring at the wooden floor.

Footsteps come down the hall, and I suck in a steadying breath. I see Felix poke his head around the corner. "Oh, Gage." He smiles, then turns to Grey. "Sorry, just wanted to make sure you're okay."

Grey's arm slings around Felix's shoulders, pulling him in for a kiss against his head. "I'm fine, Angel. Just talking to Atlas's friend." Felix's hand pats his stomach.

"Just talking, huh?" He gives him a look.

Grey's lips split into a smile.

"Hey." Atlas walks into the kitchen. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. Just getting some tea and talking to your friend." Atlas rolls his eyes at him.

"If he's threatening you, it's all talk. He just looks mean and scary. I have the photo of him dressed as a mermaid to prove it."

"You have a picture?!" Grey glares.

"Damn right. And I made copies." Atlas sticks out his tongue.

"I was a very manly mermaid."

"With a purple shelled bra and everything." Felix laughs.

"Felix, I'll send you a copy once we get home. Print out a poster-sized picture and hang it at the college." Grey rolls his eyes at Atlas. "Are you okay?"

I blink, realizing he's talking to me. "Uh, yeah. Just tired is all." Atlas smiles, taking my hand in his. "We'll see you all in the morning."

Atlas leads me out, and I take one quick glance at Grey and the look he gives me.

Atlas is wrong.

His friend is very, very scary.

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THIRTY

Gage



“Are you happy to be going home tomorrow?”

Atlas drops his bag by the doorway. I look around his small house, and all I feel is a sense of doom wash over me. Tomorrow we’ll be back home, which means I’ll have to face this thing with Jim. I know he’ll be there. I can’t avoid it any longer, and I’m no closer to figuring out what I can do.

All I know is that I don’t want this thing with Atlas to end, which is why I’ll have to end it tomorrow.

This was only supposed to be something fun, but it’s turned so unfun I can’t stand it. Grey’s words from the other night hit me hard in the chest. He’s right. I can’t keep this up if I don’t want anything serious.

“Why bother having all this here? Why not bring some to your apartment?”

He shrugs. “Hockey players have short careers. By the time I know it, I’ll be retired. I plan to live here when it’s over. I love it here.”

“Did you ever want to get drafted to the New Jersey team?”

Atlas smiles softly. “I don’t know. I didn’t really think about it. You pretty much go where they tell you. I wasn’t some first-round pick. I was just a guy who got lucky, really.”

“You’re really good.”

“I’m okay. I’m fast, and that quickness has won me more games than strength or skill have. I don’t mind. It makes this place feel a little more special. I have a neighbor down the way, an elderly woman who keeps an

eye on the place for me. I also stay here when I play New Jersey and the teams in the city.

"Are you tired?"

"Sort of. I guess I'm just sad more than anything. I've had a good time."

I nod, looking away.

"What about you?"

I feel like there's more meaning to that question, but I choose to answer it obviously. "I've had a good time here. Thank you for inviting me."

Atlas smiles softly, looking at the floor. "Do you want to take a bath with me?"



My fingers scratch through his hair as he sits between my legs, his full weight pressed against me. "You're crushing me."

"You like it." His head is lying on my chest, his eyes closed while I massage his scalp. He's right. I do like it. I love his body. Not just the sight of it, but the feel of it. I love the warmth of it. The solid weight of him. I love it when he's wrapped around me, even when he's snoring in his sleep. I love the way his hands always seem to find my waist even if he's just passing by me. It's like he's helpless to touch me.

I look down at him and almost think he's asleep. I know he's probably exhausted from the drive. A thought hits me so fast.

I'm going to miss him when this ends. Like, really miss him. It's going to hurt without him. I still have another night, though.

"Are you excited to get back to practice?"

"I'm not missing it like I thought I would." He blinks his eyes open and looks up at me. "I've had a good distraction."

I smile, kissing his head. I know Jim has been calling me nonstop. The only thing keeping him from hiring a private investigator to find me is probably Chen. He knows what I'm doing. Or at least part of it.

We need to start preparing our next album, but I hate to admit the truth.

I don't want to.

Music used to be my escape, but all the joy has gone from it. The money's nice, but I can't help feeling like I need more. There has to be more than this. I don't give a fuck about status.

If I did, we wouldn't be anonymous.

My fingers run across his chest, over the name there. "Can I ask about her?" Atlas never talks about it or what happened. I want to be delicate, but I want him to talk to me.

He's quiet for a moment as I run my thumb along his pec, waiting for him to speak. Atlas then cups my hand on his chest, holding it in place over the tattoo, and I feel his heartbeat pick up a little under my palm. I don't want to push him. I know there's a darkness that swallows him up. Maybe if he tells me about it, it'll brighten the edges a bit.

He's quiet for a moment, and I think for a second. "You know I was in foster care," I say quietly. He looks up at me and nods. "My parents died in a car accident when I was really young. I barely remember what it was like to be their son. We had no other family, so I became a ward of the state."

"Was your foster home bad?"

"No." I smile softly. "Not bad, it just *was*, I guess. They weren't bad people. There were a lot of kids like me there. That's where I met my bandmates." At any given time, there were about eight to ten foster kids in that home. Even with the best intentions, that's a lot of attention to spread around. That was okay, though, because I found my family with Chen, Jesper, and Declan.

"I'm really sorry." He rubs my arm.

I kiss the side of his head. "Talk to me, Atlas."

"Our house was so lonely most of the time, then my mom had Penn. It was like she was my best friend, even if she was years younger."

His thumb begins to smooth over my hand. I feel his heart racing beneath my fingertips.

"My mom was the best and worst mom ever."

"What do you mean?" I press my lips to the side of his head.

"She was an addict. On and off. When she was sober, she was the best mom in the world." He shakes his head. "When she wasn't, it was horrible. She never did anything bad to me, but seeing her like that . . ." He shakes his head. "I still have nightmares."

He breathes deep a couple of times, and I feel that thump in his chest speed up under my fingers. "Talk to me," I whisper into his hair, pressing a kiss to his head and letting my lips linger. My thumb soothes across his pec. I slip my other arm around his large body, hugging him against me. I feel

him shutting down. I watch him and can see him struggling. “Talk to me, Atlas.”

“It’s so bad,” he whispers.

“I’m here, okay. Talk to me.”

“I hate it. I hate seeing it. I see it all so clearly and it never stops.”

“I got you. I’m right here.”

He breathes deep a couple of times and nods. “She had Penn when I was five. I’m not sure who her father was. I don’t remember any men coming around at the time she was pregnant. I just remember her stomach getting bigger and bigger. She was sober during the pregnancy, and she got me so excited. I actually thought everything was going to change. She explained I was going to have a sister. I was so small it didn’t really register what that meant.” He takes a deep breath. “Then she had Penelope. Then she got bad again. She started using. I took care of Penn from the day she was born. I had her bassinet in my room most of the time. She got so many calls from school about me sleeping in classes.” He laughs with zero humor. “It was a miracle I passed any of them.”

“What happened?”

He takes a deep shuddering breath. “I was nine. I got home from school, and my mom was passed out on the couch.” He starts to breathe harder.

“It’s okay—”

“I’m so fucking stupid,” he whispers. “So fucking stupid.”

“Hey, no you’re not.” I kiss him. “Talk to me. What happened?”

His fingers tighten around my hand. “Where we lived—” He shakes his head. “We lived in this trailer next to one of the county highways. I can’t, Gage. I just can’t.”

I hug him tightly to me, giving him whatever strength I can to get through this. “I’m not going anywhere, okay. I’m right here with you.”

He clutches onto me, shaking in my arms. “She’d gotten bad again after being sober for nearly a year. When I would come home from school she was usually passed out and I’d take Penn outside to play until she woke up. I came home and Penn was crying. My mother was too gone to hear her. So I decided to take her outside and play for a bit until our mom woke up. Everything was fine, and then I lost sight of her for a second.” He swallows, shaking his head. “I can’t.”

“Hey, it’s okay.” He cries against me as I grip his body to my chest. “I understand, okay. You don’t have to say it.”

He nods, settling a bit after a moment. “There were so many cops. It was chaos. I have few clear memories of my childhood, but that, seeing her like that.” He shakes his head. “I can’t ever get that out of my head. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

“What happened after?”

“The driver called the ambulance and cops. I was screaming so loud I couldn’t speak for a while after. The cops arrived and one came to me. I thought I was going to be arrested.” He snorts humorlessly. “I was in shock. My mother was still sleeping. I don’t know how with how loud I was screaming. They went inside and found her passed out. The trailer was disgusting, but I was so used to it didn’t bother me. They wanted to take me and I was so scared. I’d just seen my baby sister get hit by a car and I was screaming and they were trying to calm me down, but they were just grabbing at me. Everything was so loud. In my mind they were going to kill me too. I don’t know why I thought that. I wrenched away from one of them and grabbed my bike and pedaled as fast as I could.

“I cut through lawns and just pedaled until I was too tired and had to stop. I walked my bike through town and found the ice rink. I broke inside and hid there, sobbing for hours behind the bench.

“George and Millie found me. They were coming in to start lessons. They knew my mom. Well, everyone in town did. She had a reputation. They didn’t know what to do with me. George gave me a pair of skates and told me to get out there for hockey practice. I had no idea how to even skate, but I think I was just so numb I was moving on autopilot. It’s like my mind just shut down and tried to shield me. At that time, they still didn’t know what had happened. They just assumed that I’d run away.

“Cops came by hours later. They’d been searching for me. I don’t know how, but George convinced them to let me stay with them. They didn’t have kids of their own. They adopted me, and my mother went to prison. For life.”

“I’m so sorry.” I press my lips firmly into his hair, trying to hold him tight against me as if I can erase the bad memories with just the feel of my arms.

“That’s why I can’t see her.” He shakes his head. “I know that’s awful, but I can’t. At first out of fear, because it was my fault. I should have been more careful. But now I know our mother should have watched us. It’s just hard to hate her. It is. I want to sometimes, but she was a kid too. My

mother got pregnant when she was sixteen and her family kicked her out of the house. Mix postpartum depression, isolation, and a brand-new screaming baby when you're a baby yourself . . . yeah, I get it. She had no one, and the people who did come around didn't offer help. They offered her an escape she became addicted to."

"How do you know this?"

I feel him take a deep breath. "A few years after, she sent me a letter. It wasn't long, but she was asking for forgiveness. That she missed me. She wanted to see me."

"Would you ever visit her?"

Atlas is quiet for a moment. "It's just been so long. I'm not ready for that yet. I don't know if I will ever be. I have so much resentment." It's quiet for a moment but then he adds, "That day was so normal. I went to school, came home, took my sister out. All these decisions, all these things I'd done before. I had no idea where it would lead me." He licks his bottom lip and shakes his head. "Now I wake up every day wondering if any of the decisions I make will lead me to another horrible thing that I'll be responsible for. I second-guess everything."

"Until you drink?"

He nods. "Drinking is the only way to numb it. To let go and be able to just fucking breathe." He tips his head up at me. "When I was put on leave, my doctor prescribed me medication for the anxiety and my depression. I didn't tell you that."

"Is it helping?"

He smiles a little. "It's better. At first it was a little weird, but it is helping, I think. It's either helping or something else is quieting the voices." He tips his head up at me. "Can you um, tell me more about you?"

I almost tell him I don't want to share more, but how can I when he's told me so much.

"I mean, there's nothing dramatic or anything, aside from my parents' death. I was really young. I don't really remember them. I don't even have a picture of them. After, I went to a couple of homes before my permanent foster parents. They were a couple who fostered anywhere from eight to sometimes fifteen kids at a time. They were okay, I guess. It never felt like a home, though. More like a boarding school. I was young when they took me in. They weren't mean or anything, it just felt a little lonely at times. I didn't fully understand why my parents weren't around anymore. I was

there for a while until Jesper, Chen, and Declan were fostered. I was the first, then Chen. Jesper and Declan moved in within months of each other. We all became really close."

"What happened?"

I shrug. "We aged out. They clothed us, fed us, and paid for whatever we needed, but we all knew once we turned eighteen that was it. We were on our own."

"That seems cold."

"I can't complain. They took care of me, and with the horror stories I've heard, we were some of the lucky ones. We had everything we needed."

"Except love," Atlas says softly, and the words ring through my chest.

"Yeah, well, you don't need love to live."

He tips his head back up. The water's getting cold now. "Have you ever been in love?"

My breaths slow to a halt. My skin feels too tight. "No, Atlas. I haven't." But I feel the lie on my tongue. It tastes sour and I don't know what to do about it. I've never been in love before, but I feel something now, and this . . . well, if this isn't love, I don't know what could be.



I take off my towel and turn as I see Atlas come into his room and drop his own towel into the hamper. My gaze drags over his body. His damp chest, tapered waist, and strong, thick thighs. An athlete's body. A body that submits to me in the sweetest way possible.

He walks to me, and I can't find an ounce of that submission in his blue eyes.

Without a word, his hand slides up my face to cup my cheek, forcing my gaze onto him. His thumb idly drags along my jaw.

"What are you doing?"

Instead of answering, he licks his lips then presses a soft kiss to my mouth.

"Lie down, Gage." I arch my brow at that, not used to demands like this from him. "Not right now," he whispers, and suddenly I feel very small. He kisses me softly, walking me back against the edge of the bed. I fall back onto it, looking up at him as I inch up the mattress.

His knee dips onto the bed as he crawls over me. My hands are greedy, touching his stomach before they travel back to grab his ass and pull him closer. I've never been with an athlete before him, let alone a hockey player. I know I'll never see an ass like this again in my entire life.

I tug him forward, but he shakes his head. "Not this time, Gage." My confusion grows thicker when he leans down, kissing me into the bed.

He covers my body.

"Spread your thighs for me."

My thighs widen on instinct, making space for him as he kisses me. I think I like this part the most. The calm before the storm. His lips center me, and with his large body on top, I can't escape.

And I don't want to.

His palms smooth up my thighs. "Damn, Gage. You're fucking beautiful." He leans his body down in the center of my hips and grinds against me. I reach between our bodies, between my thighs, and rub where I want him.

He pulls back enough to look down at where my fingers touch, then he moves down. I don't have time to ask before he shoves my thighs back and strokes his tongue across my hole.

"Atlas." My back arches as he licks and teases me. He looks up, those blue eyes the heaviest I've ever seen them. "O-oh fuck. Yes."

He closes his eyes, tugging me closer and fucking me deeper with his tongue. He presses kisses along my cheek, and I feel his fingers tease before slowly pumping their way inside.

"Fuck, Gage." He bites his bottom lip, watching his thick fingers stretch me open.

"That's it, Atlas." His name comes out breathy.

He swallows hard, his eyes flicking between my face and his fingers.

"I want you to fuck me."

"Yeah?"

I nod, and he climbs over me, pressing a kiss to my lips. "Let me grab the lube and a condom." He gets off and goes through his bag.

"No condom."

He stills, looking over at me. "You sure? I don't mind."

What's wrong with me? I swallow. "No condom, Atlas."

He nods, grabbing the lube before joining me back on the bed. On his knees, he slicks up his cock. His eyes drag across my skin. He fits himself

between my thighs, watching me as he guides his cock inside.

His head tilts back. “Fuck, Gage.”

I pull my legs back a little, letting him fuck me deeper. He leans over me, and my hands trace down his back before grabbing his ass. I love his big body on me. I love the way his crushing weight feels. Like my own security blanket. Under Atlas, I feel like no one can touch me. “Fuck, you feel so good,” he groans in my ear.

I kiss the side of his head before he lifts to kiss my lips. I need him deeper. My legs around his waist, he kisses me hard, moaning against my lips. His warm breath tickles my skin. Then he lifts a little, grabbing my hips.

His fingers wrap around my cock, and my back arches. I take him deeper. “Atlas.”

“Can I come inside you?” I nod, feeling him everywhere. His breath picks up with a shudder and moan. His muscles tighten more the closer he gets. His lips drop into an O as warmth fills me, and he groans, sending shivers down my spine.

I’m confused when he rolls me onto my stomach and pulls my hips up, my back arching as he enters me roughly. “Fuck, Gage.”

I widen my thighs, changing the angle, and he fucks me hard, stroking my cock. My fingers grip the arm braced against my chest. He knocks into my prostate with every rough clap of skin. “Atlas.” I fall forward, gripping the sheets. “Fuck. Fuck.”

I come hard, muffling my screams into the comforter. The pleasure is unlike anything I’ve ever felt in my life. My eyes prickle with tears, and I bury my face into the blanket, trying to swallow whatever the fuck is going on with me.

I feel his hand slide up my spine before the soft press of his lips pulls me out of the cocoon I’ve built around my head. “You okay?” I swallow hard, nodding and looking back at him. I drop down against him, and he pulls me to him. It’s the worst thing he can do right now. I feel like I’m shaking. Or maybe my heart’s beating so hard it’s rattling my chest.

Atlas hugs me tight, the air thick with sex. I know I should get up and rinse off, but I can’t force myself to move.

Instead, I lie here in his arms. His chin rests on top of my head, my lips nearly pressed to his collarbone as his hand smooths down my spine, squeezing me in a hug here and there. “You’re incredible.”

I freeze then pull back a little to watch him. “Back at you.”

“No, I mean it, Gage.” He presses a soft kiss to my mouth. “I used to think about what my person would be like. I don’t think I couldn’t have imagined this.”

“That bad, huh?” I laugh softly.

“No.” He hugs my body tight against his. “My imagination isn’t this good.”

I freeze in his arms. His large body smothers me. He’s so hot I’m burning up, but I don’t move. I lie here with him until I feel his body soften around me and the unmistakable sounds of his soft snores rumble against my ear.

I’m trapped here in his arms with nowhere to go, drowning under the sweetest man I’ve ever met. My fingers smooth through his chest hair as he sleeps.

I lie here, enjoying the last few moments of peace I have, because once tomorrow comes, I’m going to ruin everything.

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THIRTY-ONE

Gage



I let Atlas inside my apartment. We just got back from the rental place where he dropped off the truck. Everything's been a little awkward, but it's not him for once, it's me, because I know what I need to do and I'm not ready to give this up yet.

I'm trying so hard to hold it together. This was a bad idea, but I went anyway. I'm helpless when it comes to him. All I wanted was one last time with him. A break from the bullshit. Then back to strangers like we had planned.

I got way more than I wanted.

"Do you want some time alone?" I turn, looking at him standing there in my living room. He's so big, so powerful and strong. He's also the sweetest most fragile person I've ever met in my life, and I need to break this off. I can't have a relationship and Grey was right, I'm going to hurt his heart, and that's the last thing I want.

Well, no, the last thing I want is for him to leave.

And it seems I'm a selfish prick.

"That's okay. Um, you can stay for a bit." One more night can't hurt, right?

Atlas walks toward me, hesitation clear in those gorgeous blue eyes. Does he see what's going on with me? He can't, right? Because if he knew, he'd be disgusted with me. He'd hate me. More than I hate myself.

What I’ve learned about him confirms this. Atlas didn’t give up. He fought through every disadvantage and difficult thing thrown at him and came out on top. He’s a fighter. Not me. I gave in and took the easy way out.

“You alright?” His arm comes up, and he cups my cheek.

I tug him closer, bringing his lips to mine, and feel that comforting weight in my soul when he kisses me. It’s everything I’ve always wanted to feel. I want him so bad. One last day. Just one. He pulls back to look at me.

With Atlas here with me, I just want his perfection to soak into me. Because he is perfect. He’s got a messy heart, but he’s so good. So perfect. I’ve never been one to hate a stranger, but I hate whoever he ends up with. They won’t deserve him. None of us do. Men like him are once in a lifetime, and I’m just sad that I can’t have this lifetime with him.

“Are you okay?” He cups my face, pulling my attention back to him. “What’s wrong?” I feel him smooth his thumb over my cheek.

“N-nothing. Feels so good.” I kiss him hard, trying to right my brain. One more day. Just one. “Just tired.”

Atlas peels off his shirt, stripping down to his boxers and sliding into my bed. “Come on. Nap with me. I have to go down to the arena tomorrow. One more day.”

One more day.

If only he knew how literal that was.

I undress and get back in beside him, and I feel his hand on my spine before the soft press of his lips pulls my attention to him. I’m wrapped in the cocoon of his arms as he holds me tight to his big body.

It doesn’t take long before I fall asleep inside them.



I move a little then open my eyes, and I see that Atlas’s eyes are still closed.

I smile wide then close them again. I’m too comfortable to move him, but I know he has practice soon, and part of me hopes they’ll tell him he needs a few more days of rest.

I can’t push this off any longer, I know.

I shouldn’t even have gone with him, but here I am taking and taking. My fingers move before I can stop them, smoothing a piece of hair off his

forehead. He's snoring like a damn train whistle, but I don't even care. I like when he looks like this. Peaceful.

He's too sweet. Too sweet for me. Too good for me. I'm a coward and a sellout.

I'm still stroking the side of his face when his eyes open a little and he moves against me. "Mmm." His lips split into a sleepy smile. "You're so obsessed with me." He grins wider. I want to say something with bite, but instead I lean in and kiss him.

I kiss him hard, rolling on top of him, and moan as his large hands slip down my spine while he's still half asleep. I want him wrapped around me all day. I want to hear his breaths while he sleeps and feel his warm skin under my fingers.

"What are you thinking about?" He laughs with his eyes still closed, squeezing my ass in his hands.

I grin and lean in, kissing him softly. "Thinking about how good you felt inside me."

"Yeah?" He cocks an eye open. "I'm very dominant. I have many layers, Gage."

I reach down and cup his erection, then give him a slow stroke.

"Gage." He opens his eyes, his cock growing in my hand. "Gage."

I blink up to look at him, but it's not heat I find. It's a clarity in his electric eyes that scares me. "What?"

He licks his lips then cups my face in his large hands. I watch his throat bob while he finds the courage to say whatever he needs to. "I think I'm . . . I mean I know that I . . ." He looks away then back at me again. "I know what I said. I mean, this was my idea. That damn whiteboard." I laugh. "I had a great plan. Thought it was foolproof."

"What do you mean?"

He shrugs. "I don't know if I can stay just strangers with you."

"You do seem to know a lot about me."

"Not enough. I want to know everything." He takes my hand in his, bringing my palm to his lips. "Gage, I think I'm—" A knock on my bedroom door pulls us apart. "Who the fuck is that?" Knocks sound again and I'm frozen here against him. "What's going on? How is someone here?"

I'm frozen. "I don't—"

“Gage!” The familiar voice sickens me. The knocks echo louder as another round rattles the door. My stomach sinks with every one.

“Who is that?” His eyes widen and I don’t know what to do. I should have broken this off yesterday. I shouldn’t even have gone with him. It was just supposed to be an escape, to think about what I can do, but instead I got way more than I wanted.

I got him, and now I’m going to lose him.

“Gage—”

I ignore Atlas and get out of bed, finding my clothes and tugging them on. “Please get dressed.” I feel hollow, my chest tightening as my brain tries to work through the ice freezing it.

“What’s going on?”

I look at Atlas, pulling my shirt over my head as I watch him slowly dress. I walk to the door and look back at him while he tugs his shirt over his head.

I’m going to miss him so much.

Another knock rattles the door. I swallow the thought and take a deep breath and look at him. His lips part slightly, like he wants to ask again, but I cut him off. I crack the door enough to speak through it. “I’ll be out in a minute.” I don’t wait for Jim to respond before I slam it shut.

My pulse spikes, my head swims. There’s no use trying to make sense of this. I should have ended this weeks ago.

“What the fuck is going on?” Atlas looks at me, raking his large hand through his hair. I can’t ignore the hurt in his eyes.

I’m fucked.

Atlas is going to find out. He’s going to be disgusted. I’m going to disappoint him.

“Gage,” he says softly. “What the hell is going on?”

I press my forehead against the door and force myself to breathe. Think. Think. My mind is reeling too fast. There’s no fixing this. I glance back toward Atlas, his beautiful eyes filled with confusion.

I hate myself for what I’m about to do.

A million thoughts crash through me at once.

Tell him. Lie. Run. Fight. End it.

Maybe part of me always knew I’d end up here eventually, because I’m a coward. Maybe I waited so long for everything to explode on its own so I didn’t have to do it myself. There’s no hiding anymore. The door vibrates

again under Jim's fist, but all I see is Atlas. My beautiful broken boy who deserves more love and care than I'm capable of giving him.

I love him, but I can't risk the band.

I can't risk my friends and their dreams. We've worked so hard for this, five years under Jim's thumb. So I swallow the bile crawling up my throat and steel my spine.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper.

Then I open the door.

Jim stands there, looking furious, his red face blotched with rage. His brown hair, peppered with gray, is a bit erratic, like he's had his fingers traveling through it. I push past him smoothly before he can look too closely at me. I shut it down. All the emotion, the warmth, and the love that Atlas gives me. I shut it all out.

"What do you want?" I ask flatly.

"I've been calling you all fucking week," he thunders.

"Well, I'm here now. What?"

His eyes slide toward the bedroom as Atlas walks out looking like a scolded dog. I try not to focus on him too much, because if I do, I'll destroy everything. "Who the fuck is that?" Jim growls.

Atlas looks between us. I look at him, probably for the last time, and hate myself.

I swallow hard. "Nobody important."

The words come out so cold they make me sick. My words are empty, dead.

Exactly how I feel inside.

I try so hard not to look at him, but I'm greedy. I've always been greedy where he's concerned. It's never enough with him. I thought that first night I could do this once and get him out of my mind, but he's crawled under my skin and now lives there. The fucked-up part is that it's not even the sex with him that I'll miss, even if it is how this started.

I'm going to miss that goofy grin when he says something ridiculous or the way he nerds out about superheroes. I'll miss the way, even when the weight of all his stress, trauma, and grief hurts him, he always finds the light. He always makes everything brighter. I'm going to miss his big crushing body and warm arms. I'll even miss the way he snores in my ear while we sleep.

"Gage? What's going on?" I can't look at him.

“Leave,” I say. “You had your fun. Night’s over.”

The silence that follows is heavy. I can’t help myself, and I glance at him quickly. Atlas looks like he wants to argue, but his eyes slide to Jim. Slowly he walks toward my door and slips on his shoes. Right before he leaves, he looks back at me one last time.

The confusion and pain in his eyes nearly destroy me.

Then he’s gone.

The apartment feels instantly colder. With Atlas gone, Jim rounds on me. Now I’m going to throw up for a whole new reason. “What the fuck was that about?”

I swallow it, all the pain inside me. I did what I had to for five fucking years and I swallowed it. It’s the only way I’ve survived. “What do you want?” I ask in a bored tone. “I’m too tired for this.”

“Too tired?” He scoffs. “You haven’t worked in weeks. You won’t come to the studio. The guys want to know what the fuck is going on.” His clammy hand wraps around my wrist. “Gage, talk to me.” The fakeness in those caring words makes me sick.

I rip my arm free. “Don’t touch me.”

His expression darkens, shifting like a monster showing its true form. His smile grows, slow and dangerous. “Careful now.” My stomach twists.

I hate the way after all these years my body still reacts to it. I force myself still, because I know I can’t win this right now. Not yet. Not while I’m slowly dying inside and can’t get the look Atlas gave me out of my mind.

“Where have you been?” he asks quietly, stepping closer. “What’s going on with you lately?”

I can’t do this anymore.

It hits me so suddenly, nearly knocking the breath out of my lungs. I can’t do this anymore. I don’t want to, and not in the way I wanted it to end the night I met Atlas. I want to fight. I want to stop. If this is the price of fame, then fuck it. I don’t want it. I’ve never wanted it.

With Atlas, for the first time in my life someone put me first, and I crave that.

I want to fight. Not survive, not coast. I want to fight. Five years is enough. I can’t keep living like this. I need a plan. Because no matter what happens to me, I will not let Jim do this to another person. And I won’t let him hurt my friends.

Jim is a problem, and I know how people in power deal with problems like Jim. They simply don't. Without proof, I have nothing. Without proof, it's my word against a legend in this industry. Jim makes stars, and it's going to take a lot more than my word to stop him.

I need proof.

Which means I need help.

"Look," I start as the wheels in my mind start to turn. "Can you come back later? I promise we can talk about whatever, I'm just beat. I told you I need a break, right?" Then I think about it, and an idea comes to mind. "I actually want to throw a party." His brows pop in surprise. "This weekend. I uh, I want to celebrate our highest grossing tour. Just crew and friends and family. Down at Ruby's"

A genuine smile splits his face. "That sounds like a great idea. It's about time you enjoy the success you've earned." *Earned.*

It's an innocent statement, but he knows what he's doing. I stare at him, and I know in this moment I'm fucking done. I won't let him put his hands on me again. I won't let him dictate my life anymore. I'm not his plaything.

I'm done surviving.

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THIRTY-TWO

Atlas



The puck bounces off my stick for the third time in about ten minutes. “Atlas!” Coach barks. “Try again, but this time let’s not act like it’s our first day on ice, huh!?”

Prick. A couple of guys laugh under their breath as blood rushes to my ears. I have to remind myself I’m in a no-contact jersey, and that means I can’t contact my own fist with their faces. Which is a shame. I’ve never been a violent man outside a hockey game, but damn do I want to hit something.

“Again!” Coach Grady barks.

We come to the center, and Knox resets to the blue line. I’ve tried ignoring the looks he’s giving me. I’m trying to shut everything out. I don’t want to be here. Part of me wanted to fake some symptoms so I could go home and just fucking sleep.

The thing is, I know myself, and I wouldn’t be sleeping. I’d be at a bar right now trying to chase away the pain in my gut.

“Nobody important.”

How am I this fucking bad at reading people? I feel like I’m going insane. These last couple of weeks—hell, months—have been different. They felt different, right? Am I just that stupid? Had my fun? Fuck him. Who the hell was that man this morning?

For a split second I thought I saw fear on Gage’s face. I didn’t want to leave him there, but it was clear I was dismissed. I’d served my purpose.

Fuck, I’m so stupid.

Shoulders tight under my practice jersey, I try and focus. I’m just lucky no one’s allowed to hurt me, because I’m sure quite a few of them want to. Everything just feels wrong. Heavy, like I’m wading through sludge. My brain is taking a minute to react, and it has nothing to do with the concussion.

I keep playing this morning back, trying to make some sense of it.

“Nobody important.”

Then why did he make me feel like I was? Why go through all this? Why even come home with me?

Knox passes the puck to me, and I react too late, missing the pass. “Fuck,” I hiss.

I skate harder after the puck, trying to use all the pain and anger inside me. I’ve played through a broken rib, pulled muscles, and one time a fractured cheekbone after a loose puck hit me right in the face. One time I even played through food poisoning. Zero stars, do not recommend. I did it, though. This, I can’t.

“Again,” Coach grits out so hard I’m surprised his teeth don’t crack. Our whole team gets back into formation. I feel eyes on me and see Knox watching me. I try to ignore the mix of annoyance and concern in his green eyes.

The whistle blows. Pass, pass, shoot. I catch the puck. I go through the motions, just wanting this to end. I’m not allowed to play these next two home games. The doctor wants me to take a couple more days, but I am to show up at practices and morning skates.

If coach could void my contract, I know he would right now. If he has his way, I’ll be shipped off to whatever team will have me, far, far away from him.

And right now, I’d let him.



I drop down on the bench by my cubby, ready to go home.

“Bad night?” I look up and see Rome sitting down carefully beside me, a water bottle in his hand.

“I’m fine.”

Rome nods slowly. “Usually when people are fine, they don’t spend the entire practice glaring at their teammates or looking like they’ve never seen a hockey stick before.”

I huff, shaking my head. “Dick.”

“What’s going on with you?” I ignore him, grabbing my shoes and slipping them on. “Silent game. Real mature.”

“I just don’t want to talk about it, okay.”

“What the fuck was that out there?”

I look up as Knox marches into the locker room. I want to tell him to fuck off, but I bite my tongue. “Practicing. What the fuck did it look like?”

He recoils like I slapped him. “Atlas.”

“Just leave me alone, alright.”

“What’s going on with you? I haven’t seen you in a week. You haven’t responded to me at all.”

“Nothing.” I cut him off, shoving my jersey into my bag.

“Atlas.” He touches my shoulder as I stand. “If you do dumb shit like what you pulled today, you’re going to be back on concussion watch.”

I shrug his hand off. “Look. I’m sorry, alright. I just need some space. Please.”

The hurt on his face twists into something ugly inside my chest. I can’t deal with it right now. I just want to go home.

Or to a bar. I want a fucking drink.

I’ve been playing back our entire trip this morning, and I can’t make sense of it. What the hell happened? Who the fuck is that guy?

I’ve never seen Gage that cold.

There was nothing in his eyes when he looked at me. I almost told him I loved him. What the fuck is wrong with me? How do I keep ending up here?

Knox shakes his head. “Whatever, man. Fuck me, I guess.” He turns away, out of the locker room, and I fight the urge to go after him. I don’t have the energy.

“Well, that was painful to watch.”

Right. Rome is here. “Fuck off, alright.”

His eyebrows climb his forehead then he laughs. “Yeah, wow. Let’s go get something to eat.”

I tug my hoodie over my head. “I don’t want to eat, Rome. Least of all with you. I just want to go back to my apartment and—”

“Drink?” I freeze. “Is that what you want to do, Atlas?”

“I said fuck off.”

“Sure, but first, let’s get something to eat.” He braces his hands on his knees and stands. “And before you say it, no isn’t an option.”



“I fucking love pizza,” I say around another slice of cheesy goodness. “Whoever invented pizza deserves a soft, tender kiss on the lips.” Fuck, I didn’t realize how hungry I was. I don’t think I’ve eaten at all today.

“Modern pizza was invented in Naples, Italy.” Rome says. “A baker naked Raffaele Esposito made the first modern American pizza in eighteen eighty-nine. Gennaro Lombardi opened the first pizzeria in Manhattan in nineteen oh five.”

I stare at him. “How the fuck do you know that?”

“I studied history in college.”

“You went to college?”

“Got a big ol’ degree and everything.”

I snort. “Asshole.” Rome grins before taking a bite of his own pizza. “What the fuck is with you?”

He freezes with his slice to his lips. “What?”

“You’re like . . .” I wave a hand vaguely. “Not the worst.”

“That might be the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“I’m serious. Why does everyone hate you? I mean, I know why I hated you but—”

“Hated. Wow, past tense. Moving up in the world.” The smile slips from his face so fast. “I’d rather talk about why you’re pissed off.”

I groan. “Can you give me something? Anything?”

Rome sighs then shrugs. “Bad guys make headlines. Headlines bring money and attention. Coach thinks I’m good for the role.”

“And you just . . . do it because he tells you?”

He takes a bite. “Your turn. What’s going on?”

My knee starts bouncing under the table. This is the part where I usually run. Or drink. Usually both together.

“I won’t tell anyone, Atlas.”

I stare at the table and think. How did I fucking get here with Rome Acciari of all people?

“I’m in love with someone who doesn’t love me back.” *Again.*

Rome’s expression softens slightly. “I figured.”

I blink. “How?”

“I know heartbreak when I see it.”

I laugh under my breath. “Great, well, now you know how pathetic I am—”

“You’re not pathetic,” he says between bites. “You’re human, Atlas.”

I take my time chewing my pizza. “Coach is going to kill me.”

“Probably.”

“That’s not very comforting.”

“Not, but it’s honest.” He sets his slice down. “Tell me what happened.”

Grey’s rejection had hurt, but Gage’s is destroying me. I get it, people aren’t obligated to return my feelings, but that night with Gage back at my house was the most intimate thing I’ve experienced with anyone. For a moment I thought he felt it too.

“I went home during my break and they came with me. I thought maybe it meant something. Turns out no. It meant nothing.”

“Nobody important.”

“That’s rough,” he says after a second. “Did he actually say that or are you assuming?”

“Oh, he said it.” My eyes widen immediately. “Shit, don’t—”

“Atlas.” Rome cuts me off. “You can think the worst of me all you want, but I’d never out somebody. Ever. Your business is your business. I just had a feeling, okay?”

I exhale shakily. “He said I’m nobody important.” I put my pizza down, pressing my palms into my eyes. “I ruin everything. I’m so fucking stupid. I talk too much, I’m annoying and childish. I like comic books for fuck’s sake—”

“I think you’re spiraling.”

“And I snore,” I continue miserably. “Like, loud. I tell people I don’t, but I know I do. I drove him away.” My forehead thuds on the table. “All I want to do is shut my brain off for a few hours.”

It’s quiet for a moment. When I look up again Rome is resting his head on his folded arms too, watching me sideways.

“Want me to tell you a secret?”

I shrug.

“I hate that everyone hates me.” I lift my head, sitting up at that. “I never meant to hurt your friend,” he says quietly. “I never mean to hurt anyone. But people think I’m the villain now, so . . .” He shrugs, lifting his head and sitting up straight. “I play the part.” For the first time since I met him, he just looks tired. “I’m really lonely, Atlas.”

“But I mean . . . you’re married. Isn’t that like having a contract with your best friend? How can you be lonely?”

His expression softens immediately, a slow smile on his face. “Things aren’t always black and white, Atlas.” A small smile slips onto his lips. “Sometimes they’re lavender.”

“What do—”

He silences me with his hand, holding it up. “That’s all I’ll say about that.” He lifts his soda and takes another drink.



Rome’s words follow me from the restaurant. I’m happy I went with him. The desire to drink has faded, but the ache is still there. I’m upset, but I don’t want to ruin my life or the sobriety I’ve worked so hard to maintain. The anger is gone, and all I’m left with is this deep ache in my chest.

I startle seeing someone at my door, and I think for a moment it’s Gage.

Then I recognize Chen.

“Uh, hey.” I want to run, but since he’s in front of my door, I move him aside and let us both in. “Is everything okay?”

He looks around my apartment, shaking his head. I don’t know him, but if Gage were in danger, I’m sure he would lead with that instead of casually looking around my place. “Can I get you a drink? I only have water and seltzer.”

“Do you know why I’m here?”

“Uh, no.” I look up at him, and I’m just out of anything to say. “Is Gage okay?”

“No.” My head snaps up. “Just listen, please, and keep an open mind while you do.”

I sit at my counter, too tired to stand. “Um, okay.”

“I think something’s happening and I want to tell you what, and I need you to just listen to me.”

“Okay . . .”

“I’ve had my suspicions for a while that something’s going on with Gage. He won’t talk to me about it, but I feel like something is wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think . . .” He shakes his head. “I think our manager is somehow manipulating Gage, but I don’t know how. I don’t have any proof, it’s just that I know him and lately he’s like a shell of who he really is. He wanted a break and that’s fine, but Gage doesn’t need a break from music. The politics of it yeah, sure, we all do, but Gage lives and breathes music yet he’s barely even played or written anything.”

I think about that guy this morning. “Is his name Jim?”

Chen’s eyes snap up. “Yeah? How do you know that? Has he talked to you? Do you know what’s—”

“Whoa, slow down, okay. No, I don’t know who the fuck he is. He was there this morning.” And Gage kicked me out. I don’t say that, though. There’s no point.

Chen drags a hand through his hair, pacing before turning back to me.

“He kicked you out, didn’t he?” The fact that he knows that makes my stomach twist. I cross my arms tight across my chest and nod slightly. “Was he an asshole when he did it?” *Oh, you have no fucking idea.* Instead, I just nod again.

A cold feeling creeps up my spine. “Why are you asking me this?”

“Jim’s had his claws in Gage for years now.” He purses his lips. “At first, I thought okay, maybe it’s normal manager stuff. Gage is our leader. Scheduling, PR, shit like that. Over this last year, though, I don’t know.” He shakes his head. “It’s gotten weird.”

I sit down at the counter, not trusting my legs to keep me standing. “Weird how?”

“He’s like, isolating him,” Chen says. “Controls who he talks to. Tries to get him alone. Jim likes to call meetings but tries to make them only with Gage. Tells us we don’t really need to be there. Then when we insist on being there, Gage talks us out of it. It feels desperate. Like he’s desperately trying to stop us from finding something out.

Chen isn’t saying it, but my mind goes to the worst.

He sighs. “I haven’t said anything before. I kept it to myself because I thought I was overreacting, that maybe he is just burned out and needs a break.” He looks at me carefully. “Then he met you.”

I blink. “Me?”

Chen gives a small shrug. “He’s different, or not different. It’s like I have my friend back.” My throat tightens instantly. “He smiles more. He’s writing again. Hell, he texted me at two in the morning a couple of nights ago with this verse he wrote. It’s been so long since he did that. He’s changed, in the best way possible.

“I just went up to his apartment and he’s not answering me, but I know he’s there. The location on his phone says he’s in there, and I just, I don’t know . . . I need him to talk to me.”

“What are you asking me? Gage broke it off with me this morning.”

He nods slowly, sliding into the stool across from me. “Before or after Jim?” I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. “When he got there, right?” I swallow but nod.

“He said I was nobody.”

Chen’s smile is instant. “Well then he lied to you, because I know my friend, and the last thing you are to him is nobody.”

“I appreciate that, but I’m telling you, he’s done with me.” And it’s slowly breaking me.

Chen watches me carefully. “I’m worried about my friend, Atlas. I just want to know if you know anything. I’m telling you something is wrong.”

I think about the way Gage was at his door this morning, his forehead pressed to the wood, his eyes closed, and now that I’m thinking more clearly, I remember something.

“Before he opened the door he said, ‘I’m so sorry.’”

Now that I’m thinking, the look on his face unsettled me. The look in his eyes, the soft way he spoke as if it was physically hurting him. Then under all that pain was fear.

Chen reaches into his pocket and pulls out a piece of paper and hands it to me. I unfold it and see the messy handwriting scrawled across the torn-out page of a notebook. “He’s going to kill me.” He laughs softly. “He gave me this to look over. It’s something he’s been working on.”

I grab it from him, and it takes a minute to understand what I’m looking at. I recognize the words instantly. This is the song he sang for me as I fell

asleep to his voice when I called him on the anniversary of Penelope's death.

When the night has fallen and there's nowhere else to run
When the light from your eyes is brighter than the sun
When you're not here with me and everything feels numb
I think of you, I'll think of you, you.
Stars beat across the sky, but the thing I see is you and I,
Way up high, there we are, and I can't believe I fell so far
With you, you.
I'll be chasing
Right here facing
Whatever you want me to
Because all I think of is you, you
I just think of youu.

My vision blurs. Hearing the lyrics and seeing them here in front of me feels different. At the time I thought he was just singing something random. "It's . . ." My voice wavers. "It's about me, isn't it?"

Chen says nothing. He doesn't have to. For the first time all day I finally have some clarity. Gage didn't want to let me go, but he felt he had to. He knew to hit me where it hurt because I would have sat there and asked questions.

What does that guy have on Gage? I want to go up there and bang down his door until he lets me in and answers me. I know how stubborn he is, though. I know he won't tell me.

I'm at a loss. "I know what you're showing me, I get it, but he was clear to me. What do you want me to do?" I ask.

Chen sits there for a moment, drumming his fingers on the counter. Then he shrugs softly, a sad smile slipping onto his face. "I just don't want you to give up on him yet."

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THIRTY-THREE

Gage



I stare so hard at my sheets my vision begins to burn and wobble. I don't feel a thing, and maybe it's been a while since I've felt anything at all. I don't even care anymore. Nothing matters. One part of me is here in this room with Jim, and then the other part of me is somewhere far from here. So far removed from myself no one can touch me. It's easier when I separate my mind and body.

His hands, his scent, the noises he makes. All of it is manageable if I shove my mind somewhere far away. The problem is, each time this happens I push my mind farther away and it takes longer each time to get myself back. Sometimes it's days. Other times it takes a week or two to feel somewhat human again.

My bathroom door opens and Jim walks out freshly showered. He eyes me still sitting naked in the bed. I can't move. I don't even care to. "Are you excited?" I lift my gaze to him. "For the tour."

I swallow hard, trying to find the words. "Yeah." I run my tongue along my cheek.

"Ready to sell out?"

My eyes snap to him. "What?"

Jim smiles. "Sell out. Sold-out arenas. I guarantee you. This is what all that hard work has been for." I stare at him. He knows exactly what he's doing. Jim doesn't see me as a person. He sees me as a toy. A toy for him, a toy for the label.

He walks over to my side of the bed, giving me this soft smile that makes me sick. He leans in and I move on autopilot, giving him a quick kiss that churns my gut.

I'm still sitting there hours after Jim leaves. My hands are still shaking.

I can't do this anymore. I can't.

And I won't.

I'll give them all one last tour. Just one. One last time to spend with my friends and make sure they're okay before I end this. I make peace with the thought. I still feel trapped, but now beyond this cage is hope. Just a little.

And for now, it's enough.

I rub my temples, getting up from my bed. My friends will be here soon, and the closer it gets the more nervous I become. The last time Jim and I slept together, I decided I was going to end my life. I didn't want to fight anymore. I wanted silence. Then Atlas came into my life and made everything so loud.

It's been a couple of days and all I've tried to do is avoid thinking about Atlas, a nearly impossible task. Instead, I think about my plan. I don't have many friends, and holding a party like this is tricky. I know Jim will expect us to wear our masks, but that's not how it'll happen.

Which means I need to talk to my friends first.

My door rattles with a knock, and when I open it, all my courage disappears like smoke. I've been through this plan a million times over the last few days, but seeing my friends now makes it feel real. This is it. No going back.

Jesper's wearing a beanie on his head, his black hair poking out here and there from under it. His dark eyes look bored as usual. Declan hugs me, walking in with his blond hair tied up messily. He's changed out the gauges in his ears for hot pink ones, and he's got an unlit joint hanging from his lips. I haven't seen either of them since our last show ended.

"I missed you, man." Declan squeezes my arm and takes a seat beside his boyfriend.

Chen hugs me tightly, grounding me in the way he does. This is the other thing that's crossed my mind over the last few days. I miss him. I miss them. I miss our friend group. I'm tired of hiding things from him and feeling like I can't be around him because I know he'll get all my secrets if we're together for any length of time.

"Who the fuck died?" Jesper asks, sitting on the arm of my chair.

“Yeah, something’s off.” Declan nods beside him. He takes the joint from between his lips and sticks it in his jacket pocket. “Better be alert for this.”

Chen takes a seat on my couch.

I shove my hands in my pockets and look at my friends. Four foster kids who found a family with each other. I never had much growing up, but I always had them. Atlas said I was missing love as a child, but he’s wrong about that. With them I had more love than I ever needed.

And I trust them to believe me.

“I um, I need to tell you all something.”

All their eyes snap to mine.

“Oh, that doesn’t sound good.” Chen elbows Declan then turns his attention to me.

“You know, all our lives, all we wanted to do was be musicians. We had this romanticized vision of what that would look like. It’s all we wanted. Making music with you guys has been the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I can’t even begin to tell you what you’ve meant to me.”

Chen watches me sharply, sliding forward and bracing his hands on his knees. I can’t stop now. I need to just say it.

“I lied to you all.” I take a breath. The truth. It’s what I need. I need to tell them all everything. “I’ve been very depressed for a while now, and a couple of months ago, I nearly killed myself.”

“What?!” Chen stands. “Gage—”

“Wait, I know. Wait, please.” I swallow hard, blinking rapidly. “Just listen to me, and then I’ll answer any questions.” Come on, don’t stop now. “I almost did. Not because I wanted to die, but because I wanted this to stop. I fucked up. I fucked up really bad, and I can’t get out of it, and I don’t know what to do.” I feel an arm and realize Jesper is standing on my right with his arm across my shoulders, hugging me close as I tremble.

“Tell us, Gage. Holy shit. Just talk to us.” I feel his lips press hard into my temple. I take a watery breath and nod.

“I need to sit.” I turn and sit on the end of the coffee table, raking firm hands through my hair and tugging a little. “When we first met Jim, we thought ‘this is it.’ He pushed us into stardom, but it came with a price.”

“Gage—” Chen grits his teeth, his nostrils flaring.

Declan sits forward, his jaw clenched. “What about Jim?” I look at my friends and my eyes land on Chen. His eyes are hard, his jaw tight, as if he

already knows what I'm about to say, but he's praying he's wrong.

I swallow hard. "When we first met him, he made me touch him. I mean he um, he told me in order to get signed I'd need to sleep with him. That's all. He said I'd sleep with him, and that's it. We'd get signed. We'd have our dream." I stare at the floor. "At the time I thought, just once. It's fine. Just once and all our dreams will come true. It was my choice. Or so I thought at the time—"

"You were fucking twenty-one when we met him! He's fucking fifty-three!" I look up and see Jesper squeeze Declan's hand tight in his. "Sorry, continue."

"He's been assaulting me ever since, or at least I know now that's what he's been doing. Or sexual extortion. Whatever. For a long time, I thought because I willingly did it, that's not what it was. I thought it would only be once, and that would be it, and then once turned into twice, and then he was threatening me. Threatening you guys. Every time, I'd say no. Then before I knew it, I was trapped. I didn't know how to stop without destroying your lives and everything we worked so hard to build."

I look up and meet their faces. Jesper looks like he's going to murder someone, Declan's head is in his hands, and Chen . . . Chen looks confused, like his brain is trying to reject the truth outright.

"Gage—" Declan begins peeling his hands away from his face.

"He'd get me alone after shows and when we traveled. He'd rarely come here, but lately he's been getting bold. It's why he always wanted me to have my own hotel room when we toured." I ignore the hurt on Chen's face. I'm already barely holding it together. "For a while I stopped fighting him. I just let him have his way because our careers were on the line. I'm the one who started this whole thing anyway—"

"Don't you fucking dare." Jesper's jaw clenches.

"It's true! I slept with him. I didn't have to, but I did it to further our—"

"Bullshit!" Chen stands. "None of this is your fault." He looks away, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Gage, holy shit." He chokes back a sob. "I knew something was going on, but this—" He clasps a hand over his face, shaking his head. He takes a moment then looks at me before opening his mouth to speak.

"That's why you've been disappearing in front of us," Declan says quietly. We all turn our attention to him. Jesper's face has gone ashen. His

knee bounces as if he can barely contain his rage. “I thought maybe he was threatening you or being a dick, but god, Gage. Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Because I was scared,” I admit, hugging myself tight. “I was ashamed. I didn’t want you all to go down with me.”

Chen closes his eyes, taking a minute. “I’m going to kill him.”

“No,” I say instantly.

“No, I mean it, Gage. I’m killing that fucking prick.”

“No.” I stand in front of Chen. “No you’re not. That’s not what I want.”

“Yeah, and I want that fucker six feet under for hurting you. You almost —” He drags in a breath. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he says softly, covering his mouth, his dark eyes shining. I grab him to me, holding him tight. His arms wrap around me, hugging me harder. “I knew something was wrong,” he whispers. “I should have asked more questions. Demanded more.”

“I wouldn’t have said anything.” I cup the back of his head. “I wasn’t ready. There’s nothing you could have done. I promise I don’t have those thoughts anymore. I don’t want to end my life. I don’t want that anymore.”

Chen pulls back, sniffing. “So, what do you want?”

I look at my friends. “I want him exposed.” I’ve been through every plan I can think of and I’m ready to do this. “He thinks I’ll stay quiet. He thinks I won’t tell you. He knows you guys have always been my priority.” I shake my head. “He believes he owns us and anything we create, but the music is ours. Those are our lyrics, our voices. Not his. Even if he gave us the shot, the music is still ours. The label connections, the contracts, the money, I don’t fucking care about it, but I wasn’t going to take that choice away from you guys.”

“Fuck the money,” Chen practically growls.

I look at Declan and Jesper, and while I know money isn’t the only issue at hand, I hope they agree. “This is going to be the death of our career.”

Jesper looks at Declan, giving him a soft smile. “Then let it burn.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Chen asks. “I’m still open to a tiny little murder. Just a little. I promise, no one will barely even notice it.”

I laugh and it feels so fucking good. I feel so empty in the best way imaginable. “I want to throw a party.” They look at me. “Celebrating our tour. I already told Jim about it. He thinks we’ll be in costume.”

“And we won’t?”

I shake my head. “We’ll come as we are, as we’ve always been. Four former foster kids who’ve had dreams bigger than the circumstances around

us allowed. We'll invite a bunch of people in our company, and I'll expose him publicly."

"You want to do it publicly?"

I nod. I've thought a lot about it. "I'll be honest, though. I don't know if I hold much faith that he'll be fired or even arrested. But I want everyone around him to see who he is. I want to expose him." I take out my phone. "I'm going to tell everybody." My eyes slide to Chen, who seems to be thinking. "What?"

"You sure I can't kill him?" He pinches his fingers together. "Just a tiny little murder. I promise, I'll be discreet."

"No. I'd rather not have you go to prison. But thank you."

"This could go bad fast," Declan says.

"I know."

"He'll deny it," Jesper says.

"I know.

"They'll swarm us online, and every tabloid will plaster our faces everywhere. The press will—"

"I know." I press my hands against my eyes, taking a breath. "I've thought of every possible scenario. I don't want this to happen to anyone else. I can't let it happen anymore, and if there's a chance I can stop it, I'm taking it. I can figure out how to do that alone—"

"Fuck that," Chen yells. "We're in this together."

I look at Jesper and Declan as they nod.

I look at my friends, and for the first time in so long, I don't feel alone in this. Jesper stands, followed by Declan. They hug around me, squeezing me hard. "I'm so sorry."

They squeeze harder. "We've got you," Chen whispers, pressing a kiss against my head, and we stand like that for a moment while I let their strength seep into me. I can't change the past. I can only fight for my future.

It's taken me a while to realize that I don't have to do this alone.

My friends let me go one by one.

"So . . ." Declan smiles. "What's the plan?"



It’s like my confession drained the life out of me. My friends stayed with me all day yesterday. I think they were afraid to leave me alone, but I didn’t lie to them. I’m done lying to people. I don’t want to take my life. I want to live. And not just live. I want to enjoy it. I want to write music without people breathing down my neck and criticizing everything I do. I want to love the music again.

I think about that guy in the comic store. Chen may have been pissed, but he was right. Our fans ride hard for us, but I know there’s been a shift. Our music lately has felt hollow, but that’s what happens when the person who writes it feels hollow. I may as well have been a robot. I don’t want to live like that anymore.

I want to be happy, which brings me to my other problem.

Atlas.

He doesn’t have a game tonight, but I’m really not sure how practice works. He is gone a lot, though, and I hope he’s gone now. I can’t see him. Not yet. I haven’t gotten his haunted look out of my mind.

He played aggressively the other night. Way more brutal than the soft man I’ve come to know. A man who owns my whole heart. I take the paper and shove it under his door. I said he was nobody when it couldn’t be further from the truth.

Atlas is everything to me.

With my confession came realization. I love him. I love him so much I can’t stand it. I thought it might be obsession, great sex, but that’s not what’s left me wanting more. It’s him. The goofy, the unserious, nerdy, and yeah, even the sad. I want all of him. I want him so badly.

I only have a few days left before my life implodes, and I can’t wait.

I slide the invitation under his door. As I crouch, I think about whether I should knock. No, not yet. I will then, after, but not right now. I stand and turn, then freeze.

Atlas stands next to a man I remember. His friend and teammate Knox. The screaming one at our show. I blink at them both and stand slowly. I don’t know what to say. I did not practice for this. I open my mouth and close it.

“Gage—”

I turn away and walk down the hall, fast, ignoring him when he says my name a couple more times. I’m not ready to face him. Not yet.

I turn down the hall and find the elevator, pressing the buttons desperately. Finally, the stupid thing opens and I step through, then the door closes slowly behind me. I hear footsteps, then see him through the sliver of the elevator door as it closes.

A few more days.

Then it’ll all be over. For better or worse.

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THIRTY-FOUR

Atlas



I walk slowly back to my apartment, trying so hard not to let this get the best of me again. I look up, and I forgot Knox is with me until I see him standing at my door. “What was that about?”

I shake my head, unlocking the door and stepping inside, when I feel something beneath my feet.

I bend to pick it up, looking at the paper.

I read it, my confusion only growing. What the hell?

Riot Heart End of Tour Celebration.

What the hell is this? Whatever it is, it’s at nine on Saturday down at Ruby’s. “Whoa, what the hell is this? Riot Heart?” Knox looks over my shoulder to read it then takes the invitation from my hands. “Atlas, what is this?”

I look at Knox, my mind reeling. Gage just slipped that under my door. He wants me there, right? Why, though? I’m nothing. He said it himself.

I think about Chen’s visit and the song. I’m something, and I don’t think that’s nothing. I’m just not sure if we’re strangers, friends, or maybe something more.

The way he looked hearing that man’s voice, and the way he looked at me right before he opened the door . . . I don’t want to believe I’m nothing.

“Atlas?”

I look at Knox. “Um . . .” Then I look down at the invite. Knox snatches it from my hands.

His eyes widen. “Why do you have an invite like this? To a Riot Heart event?!” I open my mouth to answer. “Oh my god, I know!” He glares. “You fell in love with their music too, didn’t you?! What is this? Some secret membership I don’t know about! Not cool, man. I introduced you to them.”

“Do you hear yourself?” I snatch the paper back, looking at it. We don’t have a game on Saturday. Part of me wonders if that’s why it’s that night. I don’t want to go alone, though. I look at Knox and decide to tell him. I know he won’t tell anyone.

“If I tell you something, you have to promise not to freak out.”

“I wouldn’t freak out,” he scoffs. “Seriously, it’s like you don’t know me at all.” He folds his thick arms in front of his chest. “Go ahead. Tell me. I’ll show you how cool I am.”

I nod. “You know Gage?”

“Yeah.”

I nod. “Well, we’ve been hooking up for months now.”

“Yeah, no shit.” He rolls his eyes. “Pfft. See how cool I am?”

“And Gage is Death.” His eyes narrow. “You know, lead singer of Riot Heart.” His mouth slowly falls open. “And I’m not sure why, but he invited me to this party, and I’m going to go because he broke my fucking heart last time we were together and I want to know why?” And I’m not sure, but I’m assuming this is the answer.

“Bullshit,” he scoffs. “Anyway, what’s really going on?”

“Knox, that’s it. Gage is Death. Riot Heart is his band.” And he’s beautiful, and has an attitude, but he’s so sweet, and I know deep down he wants someone to love him, and I’m hoping it might still be me. Even if he hurt me.

“No. No. No way. No.” He shakes his head. “No, there’s—” I wait for it to sink in. Knox shakes his head. “You were sleeping with a god and didn’t tell me?”

“He’s not a god, he’s a man.”

“No, see, this is, no. What?! Their music, they’re like, deities. They are—”

“Just people. Like you and me. Just people. Gage is just a person.” A sad person with a lot more baggage than he lets me know.

“I can’t believe this. I can’t—oh my god, you are sleeping with my idol.”

“Idol? Really? At the age of thirty-nine?”

“Oh, fuck you, I’m thirty-one, you prick.”

“Sorry, you move like you’re close to retirement.”

His eyes narrow. “Oh, you’re just mean.”

I drop down beside him. “I’m sorry, okay. I couldn’t tell you.”

“Then why tell me now?”

I look down at the invitation in my hands. “I don’t know, but I think he doesn’t care anymore. Or maybe I’m tired of hiding it, I don’t know. I know you won’t say anything.”

“I’ve idolized that man for years and then I find out you’re fucking him.” He shakes his head.

“Actually, he’s fucking me, but yeah.”

Knox looks at me, shaking his head. “I bet it was incredible. He’s like a magician the way he puts song lyrics together. I can’t imagine how creative he must be in bed.”

Oh, pretty creative.

“He didn’t want anyone to know.”

Knox is quiet.

“Are you really mad at me?”

Knox takes a breath, and shit, I think he’s actually upset. “Not about that.”

“Then what could you possibly be upset with me about?”

“I’ve been trying all season to be your friend.” He swallows. “I’ve been trying, and I mean, you’re off with Rome of all people. Why don’t you lean on me a little? I didn’t know about the things you were going through, about you being sober. I want to help you. I want you to be my friend. Am I just not someone you want that with or what? Is it me? Honestly. Tell me.”

I don’t know where the hell this is coming from, but then I think back. Since last season Knox has been there for me. We roomed together at Oli and Andre’s wedding. He listened to me when I was drunk, took care of me, and when I kissed Grey, he was there to talk me through the spiral I was going into. He’s the reason I got my apartment, and he always offers to go out and take me places if I need.

This entire time I've been upset because I miss the family vibe of the Otters without realizing I can have that here too. Knox is right. I've been a shitty friend.

"I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel like that. I think sometimes my brain makes me believe I'll burden people. You've got your own shit going on and a team to maintain. You don't need my shit on top of it. I wasn't trying to avoid you. I promise."

He nods. "Can I ask about it? Not, like, because he's famous, but you don't seem happy right now. Did something happen?"

A deep ache settles in my chest, but talking about him is better than not thinking about him at all. "What do you want to know?"

"How did you find out he was Death?"

"The night of the concert." He looks at me. "Yeah. When he came close to our section I saw the snake tattoo. I knew it intimately."

"The bathroom. That's why he took you to the bathroom!"

I nod. "He wanted to know if I'd been stalking him. If I knew who he was all along. I didn't. I just promised him I wouldn't tell."

"And you guys kept going."

And couldn't stop. "He came with me to New Jersey, and to the Hawks and Otters game. I went to visit Grey with him."

"So what happened?"

I shrug. "I may have thought it was more than it is." I look down at the invite. I'm too curious not to go. "The morning we got back from New Jersey there was a man here, and Gage basically told him I was nothing when he asked who I was."

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry."

Me too, but right now I feel more hope than I should. He gave me the invite. It has to mean something. "So, now that I've told you, can you finally tell me about Colton? You two weren't hooking up, right?"

"Ew, fuck no." Okay, damn. He sighs heavily and I watch his knee bounce. Finally, he places his hands on his knees and sighs. "Colton and I used to be best friends. We ran in the same hockey circles and became really close. We all knew he was going to get into the NHL, so maybe I was a bit lucky for meeting him then. Scouts were always around for him. Not that he needed them. Mr. Legacy had a one-way ticket, we all knew that. They noticed me too, through proximity. I thought he was my best friend, and he betrayed me. He stabbed me in the back. I don't want to get into the

specifics, though, because it involves more people than just me and him. No matter how much they hurt me, I'd never want to hurt the other person involved that way. Even after all the pain they've caused me."

"He always seemed like a good guy when I was playing with him. I'm sorry, though. For whatever he did to hurt you."

"I don't know him now, but I used to think so too." Knox stands. "So, you need a ride for Saturday."

"Knox—"

"Oh, what? You think I'm going to sit here while the love of your life gives you an invite and you don't go? I'll be over by five Saturday. You better be showered and dressed to go when I show up."

"You sure you want to do this? It might taint their image for you when you realize they're just normal people like you and me."

"Do you think it'll be weird if I wear their band T-shirt? I have a real slutty one of your man. His abs are very prominent behind the black paint." I bark out a laugh. "Hey! You may have dibs on Death, but there are still three more bandmates."

"Uh, well, Jesper and Declan are together."

"Who?"

"Famine and Conquest. They're like, dating, I think."

"No shit! Oh my god, I have so much lore, this is fucking awesome. What about War? What's he like?"

"He's hot, I'll give you that. I don't know if he's into men, though." And he loves his best friend and only wants the best for him.

Knox stretches his arms above his head then turns slowly, cracking his back. "Only one way to find out."



"I'm so nervous."

"Why are you nervous?"

Knox ruffles his hair. He's not wearing the band shirt, thank god. Instead, he's wearing a normal black shirt without the man I love's abs on it. "How do I look? Would you take me home if you were a rock star?"

"I can smell the desperation leaking from you."

When we enter the bar, I'm shocked by the number of people here. "Hey there." Vanessa approaches us with a tray of drinks. "Glad you guys could come." She ruffles my hair. "No alcohol for you. I've already told the bartenders."

I laugh at that. "Thank you."

There are a lot of people here, and the chatter from the crowd is making the place feel a bit small. "So, what are we doing? What kind of party is this?" I find a table toward the back and make our way to it.

"I don't know," I say, sitting down and casually scanning for Gage. "The invite didn't say."

"Looking for Gage?"

"Huh?"

"You've been scanning the crowd. Kind of impressed. Should've been a goalie."

"No thank you." I exhale through my nose.

"What can I get you both?" Vanessa's manicured hand rests on the back of my chair.

"Some kind of zero sugar soda. I don't care what," Knox says.

"Uh, same." Vanessa smiles, turning away. "Hey, Vee?" She turns back around. "Do you know what's going on right now? Like, why are they throwing a party here?"

She shrugs. "I'm not sure. Gage asked me if he could throw a party here for some work thing with a couple of his friends. I said, you want to bring in paying customers to my bar, go right ahead. I had no clue he was in a band."

"They're only the greatest band alive," Knox says.

"Please ignore him."

"I planned to." She smiles tightly then pats his head when he scowls. "So, what's going on with you and Gage? He told me to let him know if I see you."

"Uh, well, nothing really."

She nods. "Uh-huh, can't wait to be invited to another wedding born out of nothing." She squeezes my shoulder. "I'll be back with your drinks. I'll let your nothing know you're here." I laugh as she ruffles my hair.

"There's a lot of people here."

He's right. I look up and scan the room, still not seeing Gage. I'm not sure who any of these people are. I don't see his friend either. I look around

the bar, and it's only now I notice the clothes most of the people here are wearing. A little out of place for a small-town dive. Some people are wearing suits, and some dresses that probably cost more than my rent.

"What's going on?"

Up on the little stage Vanessa has for local musicians, I see someone appear and notice Chen step up to the microphone.

"Hello." He looks over the crowd, waiting for the chatter to simmer down. "Hello, hi. Thank you all for coming tonight. I know this was a little last minute, but I appreciate everyone's attendance." He takes a moment to scan the bar. "I know most of you know who I am, but there are also a handful of reporters here tonight who do not."

He hesitates a moment, like he's not sure he wants to say this next part.

"My name is Chen Wei, and I'm the keyboardist for Riot Heart."

The flashes come immediately. A soft murmur rolls over the crowd. As he waits for their voices to stop, I see the man I saw at Gage's walk up to the stage, furious. Chen pulls the mic away from his reach.

"That's right," he continues. "Perfect timing."

Then I see him. Gage walks up to the stage with his two other bandmates behind him. I've never seen them without their masks, but they both stand hand in hand.

The older man who was in Gage's apartment grabs for Gage's hand as he walks by, but Gage swiftly moves his hand away and walks up to Chen.

"Now, if you don't mind, my friend has a few words he'd like to say."

Chen hands the mic to Gage as he walks onto the stage, and the older man from his apartment's eyes narrow. Gage stands there for a moment, scanning the crowd. Then his eyes land on me. It's like time stops.

A small smile hits his lips as he focuses back on everyone. A hush rolls through the room. Gage's hand tightens around the microphone. "Thank you all for coming tonight," he begins smoothly. "I know this is a little weird. Half of you know exactly who I am but have been kept silent per NDAs, and the other half have no idea why you're here.

"For those of you who don't know who I am, my name is Gage Hart. I'm the lead singer of our band, Riot Heart." A soft murmur ripples through the crowd. "We just finished our most successful tour, and that's something to celebrate." He smiles softly. "Tonight, though, is not a celebration."

The voices around the room grow louder, and Gage waits for them to stop before he continues. At the edge of the stage that man looks at Gage,

something shifting in his eyes. He's smiling politely but there's this edge to it as he watches.

"You see," he continues. "Making music has been a gift, but this gift has come with terrible strings." That man's face falters as Gage continues. "When I was twenty-one, I met Jim here, the senior executive and group manager for our band. You see, this industry will swallow you if you let it. And I did. I let it swallow me."

Gage looks at Jim with a sickening smile, and Jim's face is ashen as he stares back at Gage. I stand instantly.

"What are you doing?"

I ignore Knox and pull my arm away when he grabs my sleeve. I make my way up to the platform, pushing through the crowd to watch him.

"When I was twenty-one, Jim promised to make us famous. My friends and I were living on the streets. We were incredibly poor and hungry. I just wanted a chance. We played a lot of bars. We'd play on the streets. We'd play anywhere someone would listen." He laughs softly. "We played even when no one was listening." He turns his attention to Jim. "Then one day we met Jim."

Gage turns his attention back to the crowd. I see phones out, recording him. His eyes pass over the crowd, but then they land on mine and linger. A tiny smile grows on his lips.

"When I was twenty-one, Jim assaulted me. He told me that if I wanted to be famous, all I had to do was sleep with him."

Jim barks out a laugh. "Now hold on—"

"He told me nobody would believe me. That it was just the cost of fame," Gage says over him. "He told me that speaking up would destroy my career. My friends' careers." A camera flashes somewhere in the crowd. "And I thought he was right," Gage says quietly. "For a while I stayed silent because I thought surviving meant pretending it wasn't happening. As long as my friends were taken care of, I didn't care what happened to me.

Jim steps toward him as two bodyguards step between them. "This is absurd—"

"No," Gage says, fury now cracking his smooth expression. "What's absurd is how many people there must have been before me. What's absurd is taking advantage of someone so young and desperate."

Silence cuts through the room. My stomach is churning. Memories from the other morning hit me. Gage looked terrified.

“Holy shit.” I blink and see Knox beside me. “This is insane, Atlas.”

I focus back on Gage. I think back further, to that first night on the roof when I found him on the edge . . . holy shit. Oh, god. Was he going to—

“You lying little—”

Jim lunges for Gage.

“Don’t—” Knox whispers, but I’m already moving.

I reach the front of the stage, rage coating every inch of my movements. Jim stands rigidly beside Gage as the truth sinks in to the people around us. I storm onto the stage. Something inside me snaps. I cross to Jim in a few easy strides.

“Atlas—” Gage calls after me.

Jim turns and I punch him in the face. The crack echoes through the room. Gasps explode around us. Jim stumbles back, bumping into sound equipment. Pain shoots through my knuckles, but I don’t care. Worth it.

Security surges forward instantly, voices shouting over one another. I barely hear any of it. My blood’s roaring too loud in my ears. Jim clutches his bleeding nose and screams. “Are you fucking insane!?”

I lunge again, but two guards catch me. I try to break free from them, but I don’t want to hurt them. “You fucking touched him,” I shout, struggling to get out of their hold. “You put your filthy fucking hands on him!”

“He’s fucking lying.”

I lunge again, seething. The grip on my arms tightens. “No he’s not. He wouldn’t lie about that.”

Security pulls me back as the room descends into chaos. Reporters are shouting and people in the crowd are talking. Blood gushes down Jim’s face onto the pressed shirt he’s wearing.

I’m yanked back, but then I catch Gage who’s looking at me.

The man who broke my heart. The man whose heart has been breaking this entire time.

As I’m pulled away, I look at him. Gage’s eyes glisten under the bright spotlight. Despite everything, I reach for Gage’s hand and squeeze it in mine before I’m pulled away.

Just before I’m wrenched away, I feel him squeeze back.



I barely remember the ride back to the apartment building. I went with Knox, wordlessly, my legs moving on auto pilot.

One second I was being dragged away from Gage, then the next moment I'm in the elevator going up to Knox's apartment.

I glance down and notice my knuckles are swollen. I don't know if it's the adrenaline, but I don't feel a thing. Knox is swearing under his breath, looking at his phone. He doesn't say a word to me, still typing away. We walk into his apartment and he tosses his keys onto the kitchen island without looking. "Jesus Christ."

"Knox—"

"Hold on." He texts something and I just feel numb. My heart is racing. I don't normally get into fights off the ice, but if I could go back and relive that moment, I would do it all over again. Maybe even worse.

"What's wrong?"

Knox's auburn brows climb to his forehead. "What's wrong?" He laughs humorlessly. "Oh, I don't know, Atlas. You just punched one of the most powerful executives in the music industry in front of a room full of people with cameras.

"He deserved worse."

Knox blows out a breath, shutting his eyes. "I know," he says quietly.

My anger begins to falter, but only because I'm exhausted. Exhausted and scared out of my fucking mind. I want to go to Gage, but I'm sure he's dealing with enough right now. He doesn't need me to add to his issues.

I watch Knox typing away on his phone. "What are you doing?"

"Damage control." He sighs. "Trying to get ahead of this."

"I doubt anyone even recognized me."

Knox snorts. "The internet detectives will find out who punched him, it's only a matter of time. I contacted Leon and let him know what happened. He's going to call down to the office and see how they want to handle this."

"Will I be in trouble?" That never even crossed my mind. What did cross my mind is snapping Jim's neck. And even as I ask, I realize I don't even care. I look down at my shaking hands.

Worth every second.

Knox's phone rings. He glances at me before answering. "Hey, yeah, he's here. Yes. Lots of cameras. No, nothing else, just what I wrote." He

glances at me again while listening and nods. “Jim Cassidy. Yeah.” He smiles without humor. “That’s the one.”

I can hear our PR agent on the other line yelling something I can’t make out. By the look on Knox’s face that’s probably for the best. I’m starting to feel a little bad. Not because I punched him. Fuck Jim. No, I feel bad because here I am again causing issues when I shouldn’t be.

“Yeah, no, I expected that.” Knox starts to pace, running his hands through his hair. “No, nobody’s dead.”

“Yet,” I mutter.

Knox shoots me a scathing look. “Yes, probably a few videos.” He waits for a moment. “No, I don’t know how many. Everyone’s got a fucking phone.” He glances toward me. “No, he didn’t start it.” I let out a bitter laugh. “He was defending someone.”

I sink further into the couch. Everything hurts. Not physically, but on a level I never thought I could feel again. There’s grief, but so much fucking rage inside me too.

That fucking monster.

Then I think back on our relationship. Everything, every moment. I think about how he slowly softened over the last few months. How his sharp attitude melted with a sort of dependence that I love.

“Yes, I know, not legally, yeah. No, I don’t think so.”

I can still see Gage under the lights, telling his story to the crowd. He’s so fucking brave. I want him to know that. I love him more than anything, and he’s the bravest man I know.

“Okay, yeah.” Then he laughs. “Yeah, I guess. No problem. He’s staying over tonight so he’ll be here for any questions you have. Yes. Okay, yeah. Talk to you tomorrow.”

Knox sets his phone down and then braces against the counter, taking a deep breath and letting his head drop.

“How bad?”

“Do you want the good news or bad news?”

“Bad news?”

“You left Jim breathing.” He looks at me. I’m surprised. “Sorry. Everything is just sinking in now. The adrenaline. Are you okay?”

“I mean, no.”

He nods. “Good news is that Melissa and Leon are getting ahead of it. And at the end of the day, you punched a sexual predator. It’s the first time I

think the headlines will have the words ‘predator’ and ‘hockey player’ in the same sentence and have that be a positive headline.”

I snort.

“Sorry, bad joke. True, but bad.”

“This is a fucking mess. I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s not like people will hold that against you. They’re contacting Coach for us, thank fuck, and we’ll need to answer any questions they have, but it’ll be okay.”

My knee begins to bounce. “I should’ve known, Knox.”

“You couldn’t have known.”

“I was there; I saw him. I saw it that morning that dick came to the apartment, and I fucking left him there.” *He’s nobody*. The words play back, but now I realize why he said it. He knew where to hurt me. And I left him there with a predator. “I feel fucking sick.” My voice cracks.

My head sinks into my hands, and I feel his hand squeeze the back of my neck. “You couldn’t have known, Atlas.”

“He was hurting the entire time, and I just left him there.”

I feel an arm around me and lift my head to see Knox by my side. “Listen to me,” he says softly. “You are not responsible for not knowing shit others aren’t ready to tell you.” He squeezes my shoulder. “You couldn’t have known.”

I swallow hard. “He looked terrified that morning, and I was too fucking concerned with my own hurt to make sense of it. I felt like something was wrong and I fucking left him there.”

“Because he pushed you away.”

I understand he’s trying to help, but there’s nothing he can do or say right now. Maybe nothing will ever be enough. I left him there, and I shouldn’t have.

“You still love him, right?”

I laugh. “Stupid question.”

A faint smile appears on Knox’s face. “I knew it was.” He squeezes my shoulder. My chest aches. All I can think about is Gage’s face and the way he grabbed my hand as I was pulled away after I punched Jim.

That tiny squeeze. It was like he couldn’t let go.

Knox’s phone vibrates. He ignores it until it goes to voicemail, but then it starts up again. “For fuck’s sake.” He grabs his phone, swiping it. “Fuck.”

“What?”

“Already making the rounds, but Melissa insisted they’re doing damage control.

An unexpected laugh bubbles out of me.

“What’s so fucking funny?”

“Nothing.” I sigh. “Crazy fucking night.” *Crazy fucking year*. “I’m exhausted.” Reality starts to sink in, and all I’m worried about is Gage, and the look in his eyes when he saw me. I wonder where he is right now?

“Are you staying over?”

I don’t think I have the energy to even move, and I don’t want to be alone right now. I don’t trust myself right now. “Yeah, if you don’t mind.”

“Whatever you need. I told you. I’m no Oli or Grey . . .” That makes me laugh. “But I want to be your friend.”

“You’ve more than done that. Thank you. For now, for the beginning, for the season, at Oli’s wedding. All of it.”

Knox smiles slightly then claps me on the back. “It’s going to be alright. He’ll get through this.”

I nod and say good night.

Knox shuts off the lights, and I attempt to lie down, but sleep won’t come. All I keep playing back are the words he said to me that morning. That lie. I knew it was a lie, and I should’ve listened to my gut.

The guilt is relentless, but this time another thought comes to me. Gage was on that stage because he wanted to fight. He’s not giving up. And neither will I. Whatever mess waits for us in the morning, I’m not giving up.

I won’t give up on him.

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THIRTY-FIVE

Atlas



“Where the fuck has this guy been!?”

I startle at the sudden weight of hands shaking my shoulders before realizing it’s just Connor. He laughs, slapping my back hard while the locker room erupts around us like we just won the Stanley Cup instead of a random Thursday night game in December.

I force a smile, but my attention is elsewhere. It’s been that way since Gage’s party on Saturday. My face throbs from a high stick I took in the second period. All I want to do is go home and shower, maybe shut my brain off for a few hours.

It’s been a few days since everything about Riot Heart exploded online.

At first, the internet obsessed over the reveal itself—everyone finally learning the identity behind the masks. The shock of it all. A couple of days after, though, more accusations came forward. More victims. Now there are rumors about a case being built against Jim, and another manager from the label too.

I hope every single one of them burns for what they’ve done.

Still, part of me stays skeptical. I know this industry. Maybe not his, but there have been enough similar situations in our league to know that the bad guys don’t always pay. Unfortunately, most of the time they keep their jobs, or worse, get promotions. Money protects reputations. I know how hard people work to bury things like this.

Through it all I haven’t seen Gage once. Not since he grabbed my hand as I was pulled away from him. I want to go to him, but I’m trying to give him space. He’s probably drowning in questions, lawyers, statements, and reporters. I just want to know if he’s okay. I wish I had Chen’s number at least.

“There he is.” I glance up as Knox drops onto the bench beside me. “You played incredibly tonight.”

“Easy to do when you imagine all your opponents with Jim’s ugly fucking face.”

He gives me a short laugh, gripping my shoulder and squeezing. “You talk to him at all?”

I shake my head, stuffing my shirt into my bag. “No. I want to, but I don’t know. I feel like he’s probably got enough going on right now.”

“This whole thing is insane.” Knox rubs his hand over his jaw. “You were right, though. They really are just a bunch of regular guys.”

Just a group of guys who wanted to make music before someone twisted it into something ugly.

I zip my bag shut. We may have won tonight, but my body feels wrecked. I spent most of my ice time looking for excuses to hit something. Three trips to the penalty box, and honestly, if there’d been more time left on the clock, I probably would’ve earned a fourth.

“You want a ride home?” Knox asks.

“Yeah, uh, just give me a few minutes. I gotta do something first.”

“Sure, I’ll meet you outside.”

He claps my shoulder on the way out.

I wait until he disappears down the hall before slinging my bag over one shoulder and making my way toward the offices. I stop outside one of the partially open doors and peek inside.

Dr. Morales sits behind her desk, reading over something on her laptop. Her dark hair is pulled back in a slicked ponytail, her glasses slightly slipping down her nose as she reads.

I knock softly.

She looks up immediately, her expression warming. “Oh, Atlas. It’s good to see you.”

“Hey.” I shift awkwardly in the door frame. “Uh, do you have a minute?”

“Of course.” She gestures me inside. “Close the door.”

I step in, shutting it quietly behind me. Her office smells faintly of peppermint candy and old books. Calm, in a way that makes me wonder if it's intentional. I sit in one of the chairs across from her desk.

Dr. Alexandra Morales is our team psychologist. She evaluated me after my concussion and prescribed me the medication for my panic attacks, depression, and anxiety.

"How is the medication working?" she asks gently in that soothing voice of hers. "Any more anxiety attacks?"

I shake my head. "No. It's actually been really good." I hesitate. "I think I was scared it would change me somehow. Like I wouldn't feel like myself anymore."

A small smile touches her mouth. "And how do you feel?"

"Like myself." I exhale. "Just steadier, I guess. My head's clearer."

"That's good to hear. You actually played well tonight."

"Ouch." I laugh, making her chuckle softly.

Silence settles between us. Not uncomfortable, but just enough to give me space to think. For the last week I've been thinking about this. About Gage and me. About the way I seem to throw myself into people and substances.

I loved being with him. I still do. But somewhere along the line I think I started to cling to him the way I used to cling to alcohol. Like if I could just stay wrapped up in him long enough, I wouldn't have to feel anything else. It's like I used his body to shield me from my thoughts.

And that isn't fair to him. Love shouldn't feel like dependency. I want him, badly, but I shouldn't need him. Gage isn't a crutch or a drug. He's a person. Someone with a lot of shit going on. He's not responsible for my recovery.

I swallow hard. "I think . . ." I stare down at my hands. "My sister's birthday was yesterday."

Her expression softens immediately. "How old would she have been?"

Surprised, I lift my head to look at her. "Twenty."

That still feels impossible. Sometimes I try and imagine who she would've become. Would she have gone to college, fallen in love? Would my mom have finally gotten sober on her own? Would I even be playing hockey right now?

I rub a hand over my face. "She died when I was nine," I say softly. "We were outside playing and I was watching her." The guilt slices just as

sharp all these years later. “She was on her bike and was hit by a car. I keep thinking eventually it won’t hurt this much,” I admit. “But it’s been fifteen years, and somehow I still feel it as fresh as when it happened. It gets so fucking—sorry, excuse me—my mind is so loud sometimes.”

Dr. Morales nods. “That’s an incredibly traumatic thing for a child to experience. Grief like that doesn’t disappear because time passes.”

“Yeah, but most people don’t immediately want to drink every time they think about someone they lost.”

“That’s not necessarily true. Grief and addiction are deeply connected,” she says gently. “Especially when substances become a way to numb emotions.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “I keep telling myself I don’t really have a problem, because I still function.” I swallow and find my voice. “I show up to practice. I take care of people. I can stop whenever I want.”

“Until you can’t?” she says carefully.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “I don’t want to spend my entire life needing something just to survive being me.” Before she can say anything, I say, “I met someone recently.” I look up at her.

“That’s good.”

“It doesn’t feel good,” I admit. “I think maybe I shifted my addiction from alcohol to them.” For a moment I stare at the bookshelf behind her desk. Sports, psychology texts. Trauma and recovery. Addiction studies. “I think I’m in worse shape than I thought. I’m tired of pretending I’m fine.” Watching Gage be so brave the other night made me want to be brave myself.

Dr. Morales sits for a moment. “And what would help you?”

It catches me off guard. What would help me? I stare down at my hands again.

“I think if you have time, I’d like to talk about it. I want to come here and maybe see you. Like once or twice a week. I want to get better.”

She nods.

“And I know technically I’m only supposed to see you when the team schedules it, but . . .” I exhale. “Can I start coming regularly?”

Her face remains calm, but warmth flickers in her eyes. “How often do you think?” She smiles, grabbing her planner and opening it.

“Uh, once a week. Maybe more if things get bad.”

She looks up at me. “That’s absolutely something we can arrange, I’m sure.”

The tension in my shoulders eases. “I keep thinking that if I ask for help, I’m failing somehow. Or burdening people.” My throat grows tight. “I don’t want to live like this anymore.” I want to be different, and I want to be someone Gage can lean on. I’m not sure what he wants, or if he’ll even want me, but I want to be strong enough to handle his weight. He’s been through a lot, and I want him to be able to lean on me.

She sits back a little in her chair. “Being here right now is a huge first step, Atlas. That’s very brave. It’s not easy to ask for help. How about I meet with you on Tuesday? At one, before the game. It might help clear your head, and we can go from there.”

I nod. “Yes. I can do that. Um, thank you. I’ll be here next week.”

“Great. I’ll look forward to it. You have a great night, Atlas. Go get some rest.”



I walk with Knox to his apartment on the floor below mine, but when I get to the elevator I don’t hit my floor. Instead, I find Gage’s and hit it instead. I wait, nerves rattling my gut, but I just want to see him and make sure he’s okay. I don’t want anything from him. He owes me nothing. I just want to see him and know that he’s whole.

I walk down to his apartment and pause in front of his door before finding the courage to knock. I wait a moment, surprised by the person who opens it. “Chen?”

“Oh uh, hey, Atlas.” He looks so tired, his normally bright brown eyes a bit dull. “Listen, uh, Gage is asleep. It’s been a long week.”

“I can imagine.” I swallow. “Did he get arrested yet?”

Chen’s expression darkens for a moment. “Not yet, but there are rumors it’ll happen this week. Another artist from our label just came forward. There are also rumors there’s video. I’m not sure how deep this goes.” Anger burns inside me all over again. “How’s your hand?” He smirks.

I look down, flexing my fingers. “A little bruised. Totally worth it.”

“You broke his nose.”

“I wish I’d broken more.”

Chen’s lips split into a smile. “I’ll tell him you came by, okay. He’s just going through a lot right now.”

“I know. I just wanted to make sure he’s okay.”

“I’m keeping an eye on him. Don’t worry, alright. I won’t let him out of my sight.”

“Good.” I shove my hands in my pockets. “I’m uh, I’ll go. I just wanted to check on him. I might go up on the roof for a bit. If he wakes up soon, will you just tell him that. Please. No expectation at all. I’ll be up there for a bit. I need some air.”

“Uh, yeah, I’ll tell him.” I turn away from him. “Hey, Atlas.”

“Yeah?” I turn back to face him.

“Thank you.”

“I would punch him all over again. I have dreams about it, actually. They make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.”

Chen laughs. “I didn’t mean for that, but it was magical.”

I smile. “Good night.”

I turn away and head up to the roof.

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THIRTY-SIX

Gage



I towel dry my hair and walk into my room, grabbing a pair of sweats and pulling them on. I feel odd. Being trapped for years and finally being free doesn't feel like I thought it would. I don't know. I thought I would feel different.

My career as I know it is over, but I don't care. I always thought that this entire thing blowing up would destroy me, but that couldn't be further from the truth. I feel like I can take a full breath without struggling now. My friends are the reason. Once I knew they were okay, I made peace with it.

I'm still worried about them, though. Our real identities are out there and I'm not sure where we go from here. But I don't want it like I thought I would. If they want to keep the band together, I'll do anything for them, but I'm realizing I won't be upset if we're done for good.

I dress and walk out into my living room, watching Chen slowly shut the front door. I want to tell him to go home, but he hasn't left my side for more than twenty minutes since that night at the bar. There are also photographers outside still, I think. The crowd has thinned, but a few stragglers have camped out, waiting to get a good look at us or ask us questions.

He turns to me and I instantly know who it was.

Atlas.

I've been avoiding him, I know, but I just can't see him right now. I'm so ashamed of how I treated him the morning Jim came to me, and I can't

deal with the pain I caused him. Everything imploded, and worst of all was the look on Atlas's face when I told him he was nothing. I don't think I'll ever get that look out of my mind.

"What did he want?"

Chen wrestles with whatever he's not telling me.

"What is it?"

Chen walks in and sits on the couch. "He wanted to see if you were okay. He said he's going to up to the roof for a bit." I sit beside my friend, and he turns to me. "I don't know what you've been through fully, but I do know you love him. I think you should just talk to him at least."

I shake my head. "He deserves better. He's so bright and happy. I'll just bring him down." Atlas deserves someone as animated as he is.

"Is that what you want?"

"It doesn't matter what I want. The reality is he's better off without me."

"I don't think that's a decision you can make for him." He grabs my knee, forcing me to look at him. "Stop making decisions for everyone else. You hid what you were going through because you thought we'd let you go through all that rather than stop playing music. You thought we'd be ashamed of you for what Jim did. It was him, not you. Jim took advantage of a hungry kid. You did what you thought you had to do to keep us off the streets. Then you hid it thinking we'd rather be famous than have our friend okay. Stop making decisions for all of us. Stop assuming what you think we all want. You think Atlas is better off without you, but I can tell you now that man is broken without you. You need to stop thinking the solution to all our problems is your absence. It's the last thing any of us want. We all love you, and that man fucking loves you. Are you just willing to let that go?"

I stare down at the floor, my vision blurring then burning. "It's not that simple."

"Then say you want to let him go." Chen ducks his head in front of my face. "Go ahead. Say it. Tell me, Gage. Tell me you don't—"

"Of course I want him!" I yell. "Okay! I fucking need him. I don't know what the hell happened to me, but I do. He's so fucking annoying, and, and perfect, and sweet. Fuck, he never stops talking, Chen." I collapse against my friend. His arm goes around my shoulder, rubbing my arm.

"And . . ."

I take a breath, pulling myself together, letting his arm slip off me. "And I never want him to stop talking. Especially to me." I want to hear every

insane, crazy thought in his beautiful mind for the rest of my life.

“For once, please do yourself a favor and live for yourself. If you want him, go get him. Don’t let fear ruin this for you.” Chen stands.

I get up, making a decision, grabbing my coat and slipping it on. I hope he’s still there. I make my way to the door and pause then turn back into my room, grabbing the flashlight he left here from my dresser. I walk back out.

“Why are you grabbing a flashlight?”

I smile, turning it on. “It’s a bat signal.”

“Your foreplay is weird.”

I laugh, making my way out the door.



I run up the stairs, not waiting for the elevator but climbing the stair access to the roof so fast I nearly trip up them. I walk through the door and don’t see him at first, but as I slowly walk across the roof, I finally see his silhouette with his arms resting on the wall where we first met.

I slow my steps, just watching him look out over the city. I quietly walk a little bit closer then point the flashlight, turning it on. The bat signal shines against the brick safety wall. Atlas startles, looking down at it, then whips his attention to me.

Every ugly thing I said to him hits me. He walks closer to me, and I can make out his pink cheeks in the lights from the city. I wonder how much damage he did to his hand when he hit Jim. Not enough to keep him from playing from what I saw.

“Hi,” I say finally.

“Hi.” He gives me a gentle smile.

“How’s um, your hand?”

Atlas lifts it, flexing his fingers. “I’m okay, just bruised.” For the first time since we met, Atlas looks lost. “How um . . . I guess, how is everything? Are you okay? I mean, not okay, just . . . how are you coping with everything?”

“Does it matter?” I shrug. “I kind of made a huge mess, no?”

Atlas’s thick brows pull tight. “Of course it matters how you feel, after everything you went through.”

“I didn’t go through anything, Atlas. I chose this—”

“Bullshit,” he snaps. I look into his eyes and see a fire in them that makes me swallow. “He took advantage of you. No one who wants to help you does it for a price. He took advantage of you, and I want to know how you’re doing because it’s a lot.”

I swallow. “I think we might be done playing—”

“No.” Atlas steps forward, closing the distance between us. “I don’t give a fuck about the band, your fans, and I’m sorry, but right now I don’t give a fuck about your friends. How are *you*, Gage?”

My lungs pull tight when the wall I’ve built inside my chest crumbles. Instead of falling, Atlas catches me. He holds me tight in his arms. I feel his large hand on the back of my head and his lips at my temple, and he’s slowly rocking me in his arms while I lose it. I let everything hit me all at once.

“It’s over,” he whispers after a while.

I know what he means, but in a way, things are just beginning. I don’t even care. I just want to keep thinking about our time in New Jersey. I think that’s the happiest I’ve been in my entire life. I have a lot to figure out, but I’d like to do it all beside him.

My throat works as I swallow. I look up at him, and I can’t stop the rush of emotion hitting me. He’s so handsome, and kind. He’s the most ridiculous person I’ve ever met.

My palms press into my eyes and pull away. I don’t know what’s going to happen. I don’t know if I’ll get justice or if we’ll ever play again. I know none of that. What I do know is that I want this man to smother me for the rest of my life.

I pull back a little, smoothing my thumbs along his beard.

I clear my throat and pull away from him. “Can you hold this?” I hand him his flashlight and step away from him.

“What are you doing?”

I crack my neck then stretch out my hands. “Just listen, okay.” I stifle a laugh as he nods. Without another word I turn toward the empty space beside me, and I lift an imaginary marker, pretending to write. I try not to lose my focus when he laughs softly. “One night, months ago, I was really upset, and I didn’t know what to do.” I write across the invisible whiteboard. “That night I was sitting on the ledge—”

“You didn’t ask me if you could use my whiteboard.”

“I knew you wouldn’t mind me borrowing it.”

“Fine, but make sure to put it back when you’re done.”

“Atlas,” I laugh. “Stop talking.”

“Sorry.” He mimics zipping his lips.

“Don’t interrupt me.” I stab at the empty space and keep writing. “The night we met I was planning to jump.” His eyes widen. “I just wanted everything to end. Then you came up here and started to run that ridiculous mouth of yours. Since that night, you saved my life in ways you’ll never really understand.”

I grab my invisible eraser, pretending to erase part of the air.

I pretend to draw, my gestures exaggerated as I write. “I’ve been so depressed for so long, and then you just came into my life with that goofy smile, warm arms, and elite superhero collection.”

“I know that’s right.” He laughs softly.

“And now I don’t know what to do because I hurt you. I lied to you, and I just want you to know what I told you back in my room wasn’t true. I want to tell you.” I turn to the other side, still writing. “I want to tell you that somewhere between Virginia and New York I fell for you. That you’re very special to me, but I’m worried I’ve hurt you too much and I’ve been too afraid to face it.”

I step back, admiring my work on his invisible whiteboard.

Atlas walks up to the board made of air and wipes the back of his hand as if he’s erasing all my worry and fear with the movement. “You said I was nobody.”

I nod slowly. “I lied through my fucking teeth.”

“Then tell me the truth, Gage.”

I cup his face, pulling his forehead to mine.

I look at him for a moment. “All I’ve thought about since I met you is when I’ll see you next. Or the next time you’ll be in my bed. The next time I’ll hear your laugh or the ridiculous shit that comes out of your mouth.” He smiles wider. “I always want more of you. It’s never enough. It drives me crazy. I love you. That’s the truth, Atlas.”

“You love me?” He points to his wide chest.

“Yes.”

“Only me?”

“Only you.”

“Even if I annoy you?”

“Probably a little because you annoy me.” He laughs, and fuck, I want to hear that for the rest of my life. I don’t care what’s headed my way. I don’t care if I never play on a stage again or what the public thinks of me. I just want him with me.

I’m tugged forward, engulfed inside his arms. I can barely breathe. My hand dips inside his open coat and wraps around his waist to squeeze him to me.

“I love being strangers with you.”



We break through Atlas’s bedroom door. His lips haven’t left mine since we barreled into his apartment. “I have practice early. Just so you know,” he says against my mouth.

I nod, tugging his shirt over his head, laughing as it gets stuck on his chin. He cups the back of my thighs, lifting me up, and my legs wrap around his waist as he lays me down. His hungry mouth trails down my neck. He pulls back, unbuttoning his pants, and I help him slide them down his legs.

He peels mine down then reaches over me to his nightstand and grabs his lube, wasting no time even though we have as much of it as we want together.

There’s no power dynamic right now. I can’t even fix my lips to demand a thing from him. Instead, I watch his beautiful body climb over me. Sit on me. Roll his hips down on me. My palms smooth up his powerful thighs as he takes his pleasure.

“So deep.” He gasps, rolling his hips back onto me while I lie here under him, watching his powerful body take whatever he needs.

I wrap my hand around his cock, stroking as he moans on me. “I love you so much.” I watch him, his eyes rolling back, my free hand running down his stomach. He leans down, his lips meeting mine and moaning into my mouth. I can’t stop touching him. I want to stay here like this forever.

“Oh my god, Gage.” He breathes softly against my lips. “Your body.”

“It’s yours.”

Atlas looks down at me, his hips still moving in a slow rhythm. “No it’s not.” He moans. “It’s yours. I’m just lucky you’re sharing it with me.”

I lift up, wrapping my arms around him. There's no space between us. "I belong right here," I whisper. "Right here, Atlas."

His eyes blink open. He looks drunk, but instead of the poison he's tried to numb his beautiful mind with in the past, he's drunk on me. And if he'll have me, I'll keep giving him a fix anytime he needs.

"Look at you." I drag my hand down his stomach.

When he comes between us, I'm right there behind him. His arms wrap around me, engulfing me in his heat. It's not suffocating at all.

It's the easiest I've ever been able to breathe.



"What do we do now?"

I loll my head toward him then move to lie against him. He engulfs me in his arms, and I let myself just feel his warm body. His strong arms tighten around me. Right here this is all I want. For the rest of my life. The reality is a bit trickier, though.

"I'm not sure." I trace my fingers over his chest, following the curve of his pec. "I know you don't want to go public."

He shifts a little to look down at me. "No, I don't. I mean, not yet. Maybe not until I retire. I don't know." He traces his fingers down my chest. "It's not like I'm going to hide you, though. I don't care if people talk about it. I'm just not really a public person. I like being private. Don't think, though, that I'm ashamed to be with you. That's not what this is. It's just if the media asks me, I'm just not going to comment. It's my business." He kisses me quickly. "Our business. It would be the same if I were with a woman."

I nod with a smile. "That's okay. I don't mind that."

"What about you, now that everything's out?"

I take a deep breath. The reality is that everything's imploding, but my friends are by my side, and that's enough for now.

"I just didn't want to take them down with me," I admit. "It's why I didn't say anything. I thought he would ruin them."

His fingers slide along my jaw. "You matter too, Gage." He presses a kiss to my forehead. "If anything was possible, what would you want to do?"

My first thought is this. I just want this. That’s not reality, though. While I can lie here with him and be happier than I ever thought I could be, I know I need more. “I want to make music.” I swallow. “I just want to love it again. I want to make music, and I don’t want to hide anymore. I want to be me.”

His fingers soothe down my spine. “Then just be you, Gage, because who you are is incredible, and I can’t wait to see what your brilliant mind comes up with next.”

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THIRTY-SEVEN

Atlas



“And the last one.”

I carefully place my new Mystique figurine onto the shelf beside Magneto and Rogue. Her tiny painted eyes stare back at me.

“Perfect.”

Sunlight spills through the room. I’ve spent all morning moving things around. There’s something therapeutic about rearranging my things. I’ve had the new figures Gage has bought me over the last six months in my apartment back in Virginia, and I couldn’t wait to put them up here.

I step back and inspect the new X-Men shelf I set up. “No offense, Psylocke.” I glance down at her. “You’ve been my favorite for years. This isn’t personal.”

The purple-haired figurine remains unbothered by this development.

Being back home in New Jersey during the off season always feels calming in a way. The quiet streets, familiar rain-scented pavement, and mundane daily routines I miss during hockey season ground me.

But this year, coming home feels different.

For the first time in a long time, home doesn’t just feel like a break from hockey. It feels like so much more.

I leave the comic room and head down the hall to what used to be my old office. Now it’s a half studio, half recording room thanks to Gage slowly taking over the space piece by piece. There’s soundproof padding on

the walls, wires everywhere. Guitars sit in stands by the window, catching the sunlight.

The door is open a crack. I push it gently and find Gage sitting at the computer in his boxers and one of my hoodies. Headphones dangle around his neck. Chen's face fills the monitor in front of him.

I stop in the doorway, not wanting to interrupt, but Chen notices me immediately. "Well, look who finally emerged from his nerd cave."

Gage spins around in his chair.

His entire face lights up when he sees me. It still gets me every time. His hair is completely dark brown now, and he's grown a little scruff on his face that I love to run my hands through. He swivels back around to his friend, and I step up behind him, bracing my hands on the back of his chair before leaning down to steal a soft kiss.

"Is he working you too hard?" I ask Chen.

"I'm trying to tell him the song is finished." Chen shakes his head. "But apparently Mr. Producer here needs to tweak every vocal layer until he gets perfection."

Gage groans. "There are just a few things that could sound cleaner—"

"Gage!" Chen whines. "It's perfect. You need to let it go."

Gage sighs before finally conceding. "Fine, I'll let it go." He leans back further in his chair, then he glances up at me with a crooked smile. "Are you done in your bat cave, hockey boy?"

"I am. I had to make room for all the new ones you bought me." I kiss his forehead. "Are you done?"

"Yeah, I guess we are." He sighs. "This just feels weird, I guess."

"What does?" I ask.

"My job being done." He laughs softly. "Usually, I still have to perform everything after recording it. Now I just—" He motions vaguely to the computer. "Hand it off."

"That has to feel good, though, right?" I ask.

"It does." He smiles slowly. "A little terrifying too."

"Yeah, well," Chen cuts in. "My vocals sound better anyway."

Gage flips him off immediately.

I laugh, running my fingers absently through Gage's hair. "Are you nervous?" I ask Chen.

His confidence slips enough for me to notice. "No," he says, too quickly. Then his shoulders sink. "Okay, maybe a little. It's weird doing this

solo.”

“You know you’ve always got me,” Gage tells him. “Anytime you want company on tour or whatever, I can be there.”

Chen snorts. “Yeah, right, you’re too busy playing house these days.”

I grin shamelessly. “Guilty.” Although we aren’t officially living together. We’ve both kept our own apartments through the rest of my season, but I’ve debated asking him to move in with me permanently. It’s not like we don’t spend most of my off time together anyway.

“If you need a road buddy, I’m sure Knox will more than volunteer.”

Chen thinks about this. “You know,” he says slowly. “I’ve never hooked up with a hockey player before.”

“Ten out of ten,” Gage laughs.

“He is kind of cute too,” Chen continues. “Maybe I’ll think about it.”

That makes me laugh. “They’re going to be here soon,” I say to Gage.

“Call me tomorrow. Let me know what they think of it.”

“You got it. Love you guys.” Chen disconnects the call.

Gage swivels around to me. “Hi.”

“Hi.” I grin back and lean down to kiss him. I pull back, but Gage tugs me closer, deepening the kiss. There’s something different about him lately. Lighter and happier. Not healed fully, but I don’t think either of us are. He’s alive in a way he wasn’t before, though.

For months after everything came out about Riot Heart and Jim’s abuse, I worried I’d lose him to the weight of it all. Instead, little by little, he’s started finding pieces of himself again. Not the Riot Heart version of himself. He’s his own person now, and I love getting to witness who he’s become.

“You better stop,” I murmur against his mouth. “My friends will be here soon.”

“Okay.” His hands slide briefly around my waist before they drop. “Fine,” he huffs. “I’ll be out in a second.”

I drop one last kiss on his forehead and head out to the kitchen.

The counters are already covered with food, because apparently Gage copes with the stress of throwing a get together by cooking enough for a small crowd. I mean, we’re athletes, but still, this is a lot of food even for us. There are trays of snacks, dips, vegetables, and homemade vegan sliders just waiting to be heated up.

Thank god he’s good at cooking, because I absolutely cannot.

Voices boom from the front entryway a moment later, and I head into the living room just as Oli and Andre walk through the door carrying bags and arguing about something. “There he is,” Oli says, opening his arms.

I pull him into a hug first then Andre. It feels strange having everyone here like this. Not bad, just different.

“No one else here yet?” Andre asks, glancing around.

“Knox is on the way,” I answer. “Grey and Felix—”

Almost on cue the front door opens again. Grey barely gets two steps inside before I’m hugging him. “There he is.”

Felix appears behind him and instantly gets dragged into a hug too. Oli looks around my house slowly as everything settles, and I wouldn’t be surprised if I find him snooping later. “This is not what I expected,” he says.

“What does that mean?”

“Your apartment looks like a depressed hotel room.”

“He’s right,” Grey adds.

I shrug. “I don’t need much during the on season.”

Gage walks into the room then in a pair of black ripped jeans and one of the Vipers shirts I bought him with my number on the back. He smiles at everyone shyly, but when his eyes land on me there’s something so immediately warm it makes my chest ache.

Six months ago, he barely smiled at all. Now I catch him doing it constantly. We’re going to enjoy this time together, because once summer is over, things are going to be hard.

Jim’s trial won’t even start until well into next season. More victims came forward publicly against both him and another executive at the label. Every week somehow reveals another awful thing he’s done with the help of men who’ve covered his tracks for years. The case against him is strong, especially after one of the victims turned over recordings and video evidence showing clear manipulation and coercion.

Whatever sentence they get won’t feel like nearly enough, though.

Riot Heart is officially over now. Gage wasn’t even the reason why.

Declan and Jesper decided they were both done with music entirely. Gage and Chen both supported them completely, even though I think sometimes Gage secretly misses it. Declan and Jesper moved to Ireland two months ago, and Gage can’t wait to visit them before training camp. We plan on going for vacation right before I start. Chen moved to New York to start recording his first solo album. Half the songs on it are written by Gage.

And for the first time since I've known him, Gage is creating music because he wants to, not because someone is forcing him to. I haven't told Knox this, but Gage even made me some secret songs to listen to during warmups.

Songs just for me the world will never hear.

I walk into the living room and hand Grey a beer. "Thanks."

I drop onto the couch beside Gage, throwing my arm along the back of it behind him. "You want anything else?"

He shakes his head before leaning in to kiss me once. "I'm good." The ease of it still surprises me. Not wanting him. That's never changed. But there's a softness to him now. Maybe it's the comfort or the way he no longer feels tangled up in fear every second of the day.

Although he still breaks out his dominant side from time to time.

And I enjoy every second.

"Any rumors for next season?" Grey asks Oli.

"Brandon's still supposed to go to the Otters," Oli says immediately. "That's basically guaranteed."

"They have the ninth pick," Felix says. "How can they guarantee?"

"The league knows better than to mess with the Montague dynasty," Andre says.

"It's an Otters birthright at this point." Oli laughs. "His grandfather, father, and Colton."

Grey nods. "Kid's insanely talented, though."

"Kid? He's like two years younger than me!" I glare. "Kid," I scoff.

"He's been milking his time at college. Doesn't he have like a masters or some shit?" Andre asks.

"No, he switched majors. I'm not sure what was going on, but he finally graduated."

"Any whispers for the Vipers?" Oli asks Knox.

"Coach hasn't told us shit yet," Knox mutters.

"He's still as terrifying as ever," I say.

"He's pissed we missed playoffs."

"Not like that was the fault of any one player," I say loudly.

Knox laughs. "Hey, rough seasons happen, and by the end there you were playing incredibly."

I glance down at the mocktail in my hands. I have Dr. Morales to thank for that. For months I saw her every week, then every other week. By the end of the season, I was going once a month for a check-in, and more often if things felt too heavy.

The depression and anxiety will always be there, I think, but now it feels manageable. I don't crave silence anymore. I'm not scared of my own thoughts. And slowly, very slowly, we've started working toward contact with my mother.

I still haven't seen her, but I did write her a letter. Sixteen years of pain, anger, and grief poured onto a piece of paper. I don't know if she read it. I don't even know if she got it. Writing it felt like finally locking a door inside myself. I don't know if I'm ready to forgive her, but I think someday I might want to at least try taking that step.

"So, who's staying over this weekend?"

"I think everyone. We've got a spare room, and this couch pulls out."

"Knox, you're welcome to sleep with us." Gage smirks.

My friend perks up.

"No! No, he was kidding. Only one of us here gets to sleep with the rock star!"

"Former rock star, babe." Gage kisses my face.

"I snore. A ton." I glare at Knox.

"We've all traveled with you," Oli says. "We know.

Andre leans against Oli with a grin. "We'll be heading home tomorrow night. Someone booked us a two-week vacation."

Oli kisses his cheek with a grin. "Tulum, baby. Just you, me, and whatever slutty bathing suits you decide to bring."

"I'd be surprised if you don't chuck my suitcase into the ocean as soon as we get there."

"You know, that's a good idea." He grins into Andre's neck, planting a kiss.

"Can you two be gross elsewhere?" I roll my eyes. "I'm sorry for my friends."

"Like you're any better." Gage laughs.

"Some people don't have any decorum." Grey shakes his head, sipping his beer.

Felix slowly turns his face to Grey. "I'm sorry, who's the one who broke Oli and Andre's shower head when we—" Grey covers Felix's mouth.

“That was you?” Oli growls. “I told you I didn’t do it,” he hisses at Andre.

“Hush now, Angel.” Grey laughs, kissing him after pulling his hand away from his grinning mouth. Grey looks at me and Gage. “What about you two?”

Gage’s entire face brightens instantly. “We’re going to Comic-Con in San Diego next month.”

“He’s such a nerd,” Oli whispers into his drink.

“I’m sorry, whose favorite movie is the *Princess Diaries*?” I wait while Oli’s face twists into a scowl. “And just so you know, he’s just as nerdy as me now.”

“Baby,” Gage says, smiling. “No one’s as nerdy as you.”

The urge to kiss him hits so hard it nearly knocks the air from my lungs. Therapy was supposed to help balance some of this out, I thought, but this overwhelming need for him has only gotten worse.

I still want him constantly. I still crave him in every possible way. Some nights I look at him and genuinely don’t understand how one person can hold so much space inside me. And he loves me just as much.

I was right, it does feel like the best thing in the world.

The draft broadcast suddenly begins.

Grey stands with his beer raised. “Oh no,” Oli groans. “He’s going to make a speech.”

“Shut up.” He glares at him then turns his attention to us. “Being here with you guys makes me feel like we’ve kind of come full circle. A couple of years ago, it was just us. And that was enough. Oli, we’ve been friends for over a decade, but when we found this idiot, that’s when we truly became a family.” His eyes scan over us and look at me. “Now it feels like, I don’t know . . . complete, maybe. All of you are my family, and I’m so happy our group has only gotten bigger.” He smiles down at Felix. “Atlas, Oli, and I used to have this tradition after away wins. We’d find some hole-in-the-wall bar and celebrate.”

“Some of them were truly questionable bars,” Oli says.

“I miss them, though,” Grey admits. “I miss us all together like that.”

A soft ache hits my chest. “So . . .” Grey lifts his drink higher. “I think we should start a new tradition. Every year during the draft we all get together for a weekend.”

“I like that.” Oli stands with his drink. “Rotating hosts every year.”

“And I’m invited even though I’m tragically single?” Knox asks.

“For now,” Felix says. “I’m sure your person is out there somewhere.”

He snorts. “Sure. I don’t see that happening anytime soon.”

The broadcast starts, and Andre grabs the spinach dip. “I’m taking this home with me.”

“As if you’re not about to inhale that entire tray.” Oli rolls his eyes, sipping his drink.

“Mind your business.” Andre glares.

“I’ll make you some more before you leave,” Gage says to him. “It’s vegan, just so you know.”

“Really?” Andre takes a chip. “So fucking good.”

The first few picks go by. We take bets on who we think will be chosen for each team. Then we quiet as the Vipers GM steps up to the podium. Knox sits forward instantly. “We better get somebody useful,” he mutters.

The announcer smiles at the camera. “And with the sixth overall pick, the Virginia Vipers select . . .” We’re all silent, waiting as he scans the crowd then looks down at his paper. A quick frown flashes across his face then straightens so fast I barely catch it. “Brandon Montague.”

“What?!” Oli shoots to his feet.

“No fucking way.” Grey shakes his head in disbelief.

On TV, Brandon looks stunned as the camera cuts to him. Slowly he rises, hugging a Black woman and a White man I’m assuming are his parents. His mom hugs him tight as if she’s afraid to let him go. It’s much different than the stilted half hug he gives his father.

His father who looks furious.

I turn to Knox. He’s just staring at the TV so hard, his jaw tight.

“Your commissioner has balls,” Oli says.

“This is insane,” Andre mutters. “The league wanted both Montague brothers together. Montague’s are always on the Otter’s. What the fuck was your GM thinking?”

“That this is media gold.” Grey says softly.

Brandon finally walks onto the stage, looking like he’s moving through sludge to get there.

“Knox.”

“Huh?” He’s watching, his face still as stone. His blank expression is starting to freak me out.

“You okay?”

He swallows once then sits back down on the couch. “Yeah, I’m good.” He stands abruptly. “Going to use the bathroom.”

The second he disappears I look at my friends. “Holy fucking shit, right?”

“Holy fucking shit indeed,” Andre says.

“The Otters front office is probably losing their shit right now.” Oli shakes his head. We barely focus on the rest. Knox comes back out, but for the rest of the broadcast it’s like he can’t shake what’s on his face.

And it looks a hell of a lot like fear.

I slowly open the door to our room and smile when I see Gage’s end table light still on. He’s sitting up on his side of the bed, scribbling something in a notebook. His head lifts when he hears the door close. “Your friends finally go to bed?”

I nod. “Oli made Andre go to bed. I was showing him my comics.”

“Very impressed, I’m sure.”

Gage sets the notebook aside and switches off his light as I climb into bed. His arms find me instantly, pulling me against his chest. I feel his lips press to the top of my head.

“Did you have a good day with your friends?”

I nod again. “Yeah, it was really nice.”

“How’s Knox doing?”

“He seems alright now.” Though he never really went back to normal after Brandon’s announcement. Online, the press is having a field day with the Vipers upset. “I mean, its hockey. It’s a sport. But there’s still a code, and everyone knew the Otters were supposed to get him. I don’t know what the hell our GM was thinking.”

All I know is that next season should be interesting.

“What were you writing?”

Gage kisses my head again. “Just messing around with a song.”

“For Chen?”

“No.” Another soft kiss presses to my lips. “For you. It’s not ready yet, though.”

I run my hand along his stomach. We still have months together before life gets busy again. I’m going to enjoy every second while I can.

“Gage?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s going to be a great summer. We’re going to have fun, and do stupid things, and have lots of hot sex, and spend a lot of time together—”

“The horror.” He laughs.

I shift slightly so he can look at me through the dark. “But when fall comes, and I have hockey, and you have the trial, and everything starts to feel heavy again, and things aren’t as easy or fun . . . I still want you to know that I’ll be here, through it all, no matter what. I’m always here for you. Always.” I find his hand and bring it to my lips. “I love you. Don’t forget that, please.”

Gage’s fingers slide through my hair, tucking loose strands behind my ear.

He kisses me hard and lets it linger a moment before pulling back. “Becoming strangers with you is the best decision I ever made.”

“Good, because I plan on irritating you for the rest of my life.”

Slow and careful, Gage’s fingers run through my hair. Then he leans in and presses another kiss to my lips. I smile against it. When we finally pull apart, Gage rests his forehead against mine and huffs out a quiet laugh.

“Lucky me.”

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AFTERWORD

Gage's story in *These Wicked Hearts* is fictional, but the trauma he carries is not.

When I wrote the scene where Gage finally tells his friends what has been happening, I wanted something very specific for him. After years of swallowing the pain and reality of what he was living, I wanted his friends to believe him without question. I wanted Atlas to believe him. I wanted the media to believe him.

Because that's how it should be.

Survivors shouldn't have to wonder whether they'll be believed before they find the courage to speak. They shouldn't have to become the perfect victim in order for someone to believe them.

And you shouldn't have to face it alone.

If you are a survivor, I believe you. I see you. Your pain matters. Your life matters. You deserve support.

And you deserve to be heard.

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Sophie Quinn is a queer author who writes contemporary queer romances with lots of sweet, spice, angst, and humor sprinkled in. Happy ever afters are guaranteed and hard-won.

She lives in Upstate New York with her family, dog, and all the characters inside her head screaming to have their stories heard. You can follow her on Instagram and tiktok for news, updates, and more.

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