



THE
UNDERSTATEMENT
OF THE
YEAR

*sarina
bowen*

IVY
YEARS
#3

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THE UNDERSTATEMENT OF THE YEAR

by Sarina Bowen

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— *September* —

Faceoff: *the start of play, in which the referee drops the puck between two opposing players.*

— *Graham*

In all my favorite movies, when something bad was going to happen, the protagonist usually sensed it. He saw a sign, or felt a disturbance in the force. But that's not how my real life worked. And I'm no action hero. So you can be sure that I didn't see it coming.

My whole life, I never had. Not when it counted, anyway.

That afternoon was the first hockey practice of the season. We were all banging around in the locker room, feeling lucky. Our lineup looked great, too. There were a couple of enormous Canadian recruits, with thick French accents and even thicker beards. We'd known them for all of a half hour, and already one of them had earned himself the nickname Pepé, like the cartoon character Pepé le Pew. And it looked like we were just going to call the other one Frenchie. Because we're real creative like that.

I was almost done suiting up, but my practice jersey snagged on an exposed patch of Velcro on my shoulder pad. After I struggled for a moment, someone yanked it into place from behind.

"Now you're sorted." Both the voice and the assistance came from my friend Bella. And when I turned to face her, she gave me her trademarked apple-cheeked grin.

"Thanks, Mom," I teased.

She kicked me in the ass, hard enough to feel it through my pads.

"Graham, you're supposed to call me *Oh Great One* this year," she said.

"Why don't you practice now? Say, 'thank you, *Oh Great One*.'"

Bella was a strange bird, but in the best possible way. A rich girl from the Upper East Side of Manhattan, she was the most rabid hockey fan I'd ever met, though her snooty parents (and I'd met them) had never seen a game, let alone the inside of a locker room. Nobody knew where Bella came by her enthusiasm for the sport.

Her lust for hockey was exceeded only by her lust for the players. There weren't exact figures, but I was pretty sure she'd slept with 75 percent of the team. Present company included.

This would be the first season that Bella was with us in an official capacity, as our student manager. The power was definitely going to her head. I opened my mouth to tell her so, but I didn't get the chance. Because Coach James banged the hallway door open, and we all turned to give him our attention.

"Look at this room full of hooligans! Who the fuck are you guys, anyway? Slackers, all of ya. Now, I've got some announcements. So shut yer yawps long enough to hear 'em all." His wrinkled face got serious. "First the bad news. Over the summer, Bridger McCaulley dropped hockey, citing family hardship. I yelled at him for an hour, and it didn't change things. So it must really be true."

An unhappy murmur traveled the room. That wasn't good. McCaulley was a solid wing, and I'd always liked the guy.

"The good news is that we have a new player, a transfer from Saint B's. He's a sophomore, forward line. So, the lord taketh away wings and he also giveth them back."

Another body appeared in the open doorway, rolling a hockey bag. And when I saw that face — those big dark eyes, looking out from under a familiar mop of shiny dark hair — I have never been caught so far off guard in my life. Seriously, the edges of my vision went a little funny. And the sound of Coach's voice began to waver, as if I were hearing him from underwater.

It was a sudden clatter that brought me back to the surface. A moment later, Bella was handing me my helmet with a puzzled look on her face. I'd actually dropped it right onto the floor with a bang.

And then the muscle memory that I'd developed from *years* of covering up all kinds of reactions kicked in. I took the helmet from Bella and flipped up the cage, as if opening the clips was the most fascinating thing I'd ever done.

Coach's voice rambled on at the front of room as he introduced the new guy. "...Good foot speed and incredible stats from his season at Saint B's. He's a terrific addition to the room. Please welcome Johnny Rikker to the team."

The sound of his name was like a punch to the stomach. I sat down hard

on the bench behind me, bending over like someone who'd been hammered into the boards. Reaching down, I tugged my skate guards free, just to give myself a reason to cower with my head between my legs. And removing the rubber strips from my skate blades was harder than it should have been, because my hands were actually shaking.

Jesus, Graham, I ordered myself. *Get a grip.*

"Hartley!" Coach bellowed at our team captain. "Rikker can have McCaulley's old locker. That okay with you?"

"Yeah," Hartley answered, his voice rough. He and McCaulley were best friends from way back. So Hartley didn't sound too pleased about it. "Come on over here," he said anyway, calling the new player. The one whose eyes I was going to avoid from now until graduation.

I retied my skates, just so I'd have something to do.

Coach said, "Let's get out there! On the ice in one minute, kids." Then he disappeared.

"How'd you transfer, exactly?" Hartley asked Rikker. And he must not have been the only one who was curious, because the locker room stayed quiet. There were about a hundred ACAA rules against transferring. Usually, if you wanted to switch schools to play Division One hockey, you had to sit out a year.

I heard a familiar chuckle, which made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. "I don't think we have the time right now for that story."

God. The sound of him was like being scraped raw. The rough quality of his voice turned me inside out with memories. Both good and bad.

"...I'll tell you later," he said. "Over beers. It's the kind of story that requires alcohol."

Hartley chuffed out a laugh. "Okay. But with a buildup like that, it better be good."

"Trust me," Rikker muttered.

I couldn't sit there any longer after that. Feeling like I might pop out of my skin, I stood up fast and went for the rink door. Yanking it open, I felt the cold slap of rink air on my face. I sucked down a deep, icy breath, and hurried down the chute, the rubber floor pads springing back against my steel blades. Without slowing down, I stepped over the lip, pushing off across the slick surface.

My heart was still banging around in my chest. So I bent my legs and powered forward, flying down the rink. The boards passing beside me began

to blur. Skating hard would help steady me.
It would have to.

— *Rikker*

In hockey, unlike other sports, there aren't many time-outs. And that's too bad. Because after walking into that locker room and getting a quick glimpse at Michael Graham's face, I really could have used one.

I knew he'd be in there. I'd read the team roster before I transferred. And I thought I was prepared for it. After all, I'd had five years to get over being angry. The scars on my face had long since healed, and the broken ribs were a distant memory. I'd moved on in so many ways.

Crossing that crowded room, I'd only gotten a glimpse of him. But a glance was enough to make me understand just how hard this was going to be. Because you never really get over your first love, right?

That's what the lyrics of pop songs tell me, anyway.

He didn't even look the same. All this time I'd been picturing that skinny, scared teenager who'd left me bleeding on the asphalt. But version 2.0 of Graham suiting up in the corner was a big bruiser of a defenseman. I didn't need X-ray vision to see that there was a hell of a lot of muscle underneath those pads. *Dayum*. But looking down from atop the new rocking bod were the same icy blue eyes, framed by the thickest blond eyelashes I ever saw on a guy.

And I've looked at plenty.

The sight of him was enough to give my heart a big old kick. Unfortunately, the look on his face told me that there were tough times ahead. Because the dude did *not* look happy to see me.

Of course he didn't. No surprise there. If he'd wanted to remember that I existed, he might have called some time in the last five years. Or emailed. Or texted. I already knew he was as done with me as a person could be.

But damn if his scowl didn't hurt.

There weren't any time-outs, though. Not in life, and not in hockey. So I was just going to have to deal with that shit later. Right now it was time to skate. And to say that I'd have something to prove to this team was the understatement of the year. The new guy always does, right? Now, take that typical burden, and multiply by a hundred. That's what it was going to take once they heard my story.

So I strapped on my pads as fast as possible. Everyone else cleared out

of the locker room except for the captain. That guy — the one they called Hartley — seemed to be waiting for me. “You don’t have to be late on my account,” I said, tugging on my skate laces.

“No big thing.” He stood twirling the blade of his stick on the floor. “I’ve heard the opening day speeches before. Coach likes to quote dead presidents.”

“Yeah?” I glanced around. The locker room looked brand new. “Nice place you got here.”

“Right?” Hartley agreed with me. “It was pretty skanky before the renovation. Now there’s a new weight room. New showers. New everything.”

I stood up and crossed the room in my skates, peering around the corner at the tiled facilities in the adjacent shower room. “Maybe that’s why Coach took me on. You’ve got shower stalls with doors on ‘em.”

“How’s that?” Hartley didn’t catch my tactless joke. So that meant Coach had not given him a heads up about me.

I probably should have just shut up then. But the past year had wrung me out. So if Hartley was going to freak out on me, I’d rather just get it over with.

Looking him in the eye, I said, “My transfer came through because the ACAA took a stand on Saint B’s chucking me off the team.” I picked up my stick, and so Hartley turned toward the ice door, holding it open for me.

“That’s cool. But I’m still not following you,” he said, leading the way down the chute.

“The coach at Saint B’s is a hardcore Catholic. And a bigot, I guess.” Hartley didn’t turn around, so I just plunged ahead. “I’m gay, dude.”

Hartley’s back was to me as we walked toward the ice. I felt the seconds ticking by as he covered the last ten feet or so to the plexi door. Putting his glove on the handle, he finally turned to face me. His expression was a hell of a lot more thoughtful than I expected from the average jock. “Coach doesn’t bring in just anybody,” he said. “He must believe you’ll be a good fit for the team.”

“I’m sure I can be,” I said, hoping like hell that it was true.

Hartley shoved a glove under his arm and snapped his helmet shut. “The athletic department is pretty clear where it stands on this issue.”

For a second, I bristled at the idea that I was an *issue*. But what Hartley said was both accurate and informed. One of the reasons I’d transferred to Harkness was that they put the “liberal” in liberal arts. They had even done a

campaign around inclusiveness in sports last year. It was called *If You Can Play, You Should Play*. On the college website, I'd watched a three-minute film of student athletes repeating that phrase, and a narrator assuring the listener that all students were welcome on sporting teams, regardless of sexual orientation.

It was the most progressive thing I'd ever seen. And I hoped like hell that they really meant it.

"I saw the video," I told him. "Didn't see your face in it, though." In other words, *What do you think, pal?*

"Don't read anything into that," he chuckled. "I was laid up all of last year, and not Coach's favorite person." His smile was rueful. "Welcome to Harkness, man. You can play this however you want. If you need me to say something to the team for you, let me know." His brown eyes studied me.

So far, his reaction was as good as I could have ever expected. "I haven't decided how to play it," I said truthfully. I'd never been out to my teammates before. And I probably wouldn't choose to be now, if I could help it.

Hartley swung the ice door open. "Let me know. But for now, we skate."

I went out hard. Ridiculously hard. I skated as if demons were chasing me. And they were. Because this was the last stop on the hockey train for me. Transferring from one great college hockey team to another one was just not something that happened to people. I was all kinds of lucky to be here.

If this didn't work out, I wouldn't get another shot on goal. And I loved this game. As a twenty-one-year-old sophomore, I was eligible to play for three seasons on this team. If they'd have me.

After a warm-up, which I skated as if there would be a quiz later, Coach set up a passing drill. And I lost myself in it. I gave every particle of my attention to the pucks flying at me. This was what had kept me sane the past five years. Hockey required absolute focus on the puck and on the other bodies flying around. If you let your mind wander, even for a split second, it all went to shit; the other guy stole the puck, or you found yourself squashed like a bug into the plexi.

I was good at this — at surrendering my conscious mind to the game. Ninety minutes went by before I knew it. When coach blew that whistle for the last time, I was dripping sweat. When I yanked the helmet off my head, I

could see steam rising up from inside it.

“Next time we’ll scrimmage, I promise,” Coach said as we filed past him, breathing heavy. “I’m not a total asshole.” Coach had a kind word for every guy as he stepped off the ice. “Good hustle,” he’d say. Or, “Bring that attitude back next time.”

I was the last one to step off, and he grabbed my forearm. “Well done, kid. You bring that foot speed with you every day, you won’t have to answer to nobody.”

“That’s the idea,” I said.

Coach chuckled. “I got a good feeling about this. You’re going to shake ‘em up a little bit, but there’s nothing wrong with that. You’ll want to stay close to your Captain, okay? Hartley is a good kid. The best there is.”

“Roger that,” I said, heading for the locker room.

The lockers, I’d noticed, weren’t lockers at all. The Harkness dressing room had attractive wooden cabinets instead. They looked a little like the cubbies I remembered from preschool. Only this was a preschool for warriors. Every guy had about three feet of space, and there was room for the skates, the pads, and a shelf above for the helmet. It was more Ritz Carlton than locker room.

Everything was open to the air, which was damned smart. It would keep the good old hockey stench to a minimum. If the renovation had been done right — and I was sure that it had — this place would also have a billion-horsepower ventilation system.

There was a bench at the bottom of each guy’s space, which meant that when you sat down to unlace your skates, you were facing out. That setup made the room feel spacious, but it wasn’t ideal for me. If I was going to convince my new team that I wasn’t scary like the devil, I couldn’t be staring at them while they stripped. So I turned the other way, lifting one foot onto the rubberized bench to unlace my skates.

“Towels are around the corner,” Hartley said as he pulled off his pads. “It’s your basic setup.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, hallo!” a female voice said into my ear. I looked up to see a very attractive curly-haired girl with a clipboard smiling at me. “I’m Bella. I’m the student manager this year. So if you need anything, you come and find me.” Then she actually put her hand up to the side of my sweaty face. “Anything at

all,” she added. Then she flounced away.

Beside me, Hartley began chuckling. I risked a look at him, and he grinned big. “She’s not subtle,” he said. “Let her down easy, okay? You don’t want to be on the wrong side of Bella.” Then he laughed again.

Whatever. I took my time setting up my locker area. I wrote RIKKER on the white board above my cubby, with the marker provided. Seriously, they’d thought of everything.

Hartley disappeared into the showers. When he returned, wearing only a towel, I left for my own rinse down. Stepping into the brand spanking new shower stall, I pulled the curtain closed. And I stayed in there a long time, letting the hot water beat down on me. By the time I came out, there were very few players left. Hartley was gone. And so was Graham. If I had to put money on it, I would have bet that he was the first one out of the room after practice.

Out on the ice, I’d been too wrapped up in the drills to look around much. But I did notice that each time I came face to face with another player on the lineup, that face was never Graham’s.

It’s not that I expected a warm welcome from him. Five years ago, he’d made it very clear that we were no longer friends. Or anything else. And it didn’t take a genius to see that Graham had decided that he was a straight guy now. Or at least deep in the closet.

So he was probably shitting bricks right now, wondering if I’d start any conversations with, “Guess what Graham tried out in high school?” But I would never do that. Last year at Saint B’s, I’d been outed against my will, and it had been awful. Nobody deserved that. I’d never tell tales on Graham, because if I did, I’d just be sinking to their level.

He wouldn’t know that, though. And seeing me was probably a huge shock. I just hoped that Graham could pull himself together enough to at least shake my hand. Or it was going to be a really long year.

Someone had added a note to my white board. “Capri’s Pizza, 7 PM,” it read. It was signed, “H.”

Huh. That could be read either as an invitation or an order.

Stick with your captain, Coach had said.

Okay, then. I would.

Changing on the fly: the substitution of players between the ice and the bench while the clock is running.

— *Graham*

We were sitting at Capri's with the first pitchers of the season in front of us. Most of the team was crammed into four or five of the little old booths. And the first pizza order of the year had gone in about half an hour ago.

This was my favorite spot in the world, and with all my favorite people. I should have been relaxed.

I wasn't. Not even a little.

My first glass of beer lasted about twenty seconds. Bella noticed, and promptly refilled it.

"You know, you're a natural at this manager thing," I said, looping my arm over her shoulders. "I can see that now."

"Of course I am," she said, lifting her own glass. "What do you have going on for the weekend?"

It was still that glorious early part of the semester, when nobody had any studying to do yet. "The usual. Tonight I really need to get wasted. And laid."

"For you, it should really just be all one word. Because that's how you roll." She tipped her head toward mine, her eyes smiling. "You're going to get... laisted. Because that sounds better than waid."

"If you say so." I pulled her closer to me, and tried to relax. But I felt as if a concrete block had been parked on my chest.

More beer to the rescue. I tipped my glass back and drank deep.

"We need a new win song for this year," Hartley was saying. "What do you got?"

"After Midnight," I said quickly, just to get a rise out of Bella.

"No fucking way," she said immediately. "Clapton may be a living legend, but the man did not write win songs. I think we should use 'What the Hell.'" Bella wiggled her hips to try to get a little more room on the bench. The booth was a tight fit. But that was okay. Because we were tight, Bella

and I. It was fair to say that she was my best friend.

“That’s a good song,” Hartley said, because he was like that — always so fucking diplomatic. “But I’m thinking the win song should probably be by an artist who has a dick.”

Bella snorted. “You know how much I enjoy dicks, Captain. But ‘What the Hell’ is a great song. Even if it is by a girl.”

“‘Can’t Hold Us,’” somebody threw in.

“We’ve worn out Macklemore,” Bella argued. “But I’ll take it under advisement.”

“What, like you’re picking?” Hartley asked, refilling her beer.

“I have keys to the AV system in the locker room. I’m really just pretending to consider your suggestions here.”

Like I said before, the power was going to her head.

“How about ‘‘Timber?’’” Hartley nudged Bella. “Pitbull and Kesha. Something for everyone.”

“Not bad, Captain. Not bad.”

The loudspeaker cracked. “Forty-two! Forty-two, your pies are ready.”

“That’s us!” Bella cheered. She grabbed the ticket off the table and wiggled away from me. I gave her ass a pinch as she went. “Don’t just fondle me, chump,” she said, standing beside the table with a hand on her hip. “Do I look like I could carry two pies by myself?”

“You do, actually,” I said, sliding out to follow her. “But I’ll help. Save our seats,” I called over my shoulder. We wove through the crowd toward the ratty old counter in back. The Capri brothers, in their trademark sweat-stained white T-shirts, were slamming pizza trays down and collecting tickets.

Bella flashed her killer smile, and one of them found our order right away. “Ooh!” she said, grabbing one of the pies, her chin lifting toward the door. “Here comes the tasty new guy. Rikker.”

My stomach dropped right into my shoes. Because I thought I’d have at least tonight to get used to the idea that the worst moments of my life had come back to haunt me. But I wasn’t even going to get that. He was striding toward us, wearing a faded Vermont sweatshirt and shorts that showed off his muscular...

Mayday. Eject!

“You get the plates,” I told Bella, grabbing the pizza out of her hands. Because looking my problems in the eye was not the way I rolled.

What a fucking disaster. By which I meant *me*.

— *Rikker*

Capri's Pizza was a hole in the wall. But it was the good kind — with oak paneling everywhere, and old wooden tables that had been varnished a few thousand times. There were names carved into every visible surface, and the smell of slightly stale beer hung in the air.

Harkness College — even the dodgier parts — gave off the aura of having been around for centuries. Because it had. I loved that about the place. I'd only been here for a week, but I already appreciated its fortitude. I liked knowing that I was just one tiny cog in the wheels of its long history. It made all my troubles feel smaller.

Passing through the front room, I didn't see any hockey players. As I made it toward the back, I realized that Capri's was kind of a rabbit warren. There were two other rooms veering away from the service counter. But I could call off the search. Because Graham and the curly-haired manager chick had just lifted a couple of pizzas from the counter. Even though his face was in profile, I'd know it anywhere.

Once upon a time, I'd touched every inch of that face.

The girl raised her free hand in a wave, saying something over her shoulder to Graham. And I swear to God, his body locked up when he heard her. His eyes flicked in my direction for a split second. And then his back was to me. He relieved Bella of her pizza and made a beeline into another of the cave-like rooms.

My first thought was, *Fuck, I shouldn't have come.*

But screw that. Because if I shouldn't have come to Capri's, then I shouldn't have come to Harkness. I could just spend my life hiding under the bed. Lord knows there were people in the world that wished I would. I didn't come here to stake a claim, or to make a point. I came here to play hockey and to live my goddamn life. So that's what I should do. And Michael Graham could just fuck off if he didn't like it.

As I finished this thought, Bella came closer, a big grin on her face. "You came! We're in there..." she nodded toward the left. Then she grabbed some paper plates and napkins off a table. Leaning over the service counter, she called out. "Hey, Tony! A glass for my new friend please." She reached up and patted my chest possessively.

Tony flipped us a plastic glass, which I caught it before it slid off the counter. "Have a good night," he said. And then he actually *winked* at me as I

turned to follow her.

Bella grabbed the front pocket of my Vermont sweatshirt and actually pulled me through the din of the most crowded room, toward a table where Graham sat in a booth, across from Hartley.

Ugh. I had no idea this would be so cozy. In fact, there was nowhere for me to sit. For a second there I felt like it was seventh grade all over again, and I didn't know where to sit in class.

That's how I met Graham — seventh grade Spanish. We were the two runts in the back row with terrible gringo accents and no friends. The teacher always made the class pair up to practice dialogue. Graham and I were partners.

Hola, Miguel.

Hola, Juan.

Te gusta jugar el futbol?

Sí, me gusta jugar el futbol.

The early days of middle school had been awkward. But this? So much worse.

"I'll sit on Graham's lap," Bella suggested, grabbing a slice of pizza off the tray.

"Naw, let me find a chair," I said, turning quickly into the crowd. And lo, by the grace of God, I found one in front of an ancient pay phone. Setting the chair at the end of their booth gave me some much-needed distance. Bella sat on the end, boxing Graham into the corner. Bella's hand found its way onto my knee about two seconds after I sat down.

Someone filled my glass. "Have a slice?" Hartley offered.

"Thanks, I already ate," I said quickly. But I sucked back some of the beer. It was pretty wimpy stuff, but I'll bet the price was right.

"Tell us about your transfer," Bella prompted while the others dug in. "You said you'd tell it over beers."

Right. Too soon. "Well," I hedged. The thing was, I'd told people I was gay many, many times. I was actually pretty good at it. But you don't say it when you're all trapped at a table. You have to drop the bomb when your victims are free to walk away from you. Because even the people who are going to turn right back around and be there for you often need a minute to digest the idea.

And the fact that Graham was sitting three feet away, staring at his slice of pizza as if it might reveal the secrets of the universe, made this a

particularly bad time. I didn't want to look vulnerable in front of him. I'd tried that before in my life, and it ended badly. Very badly.

"Thing is, I haven't had enough beer yet to tell it."

"There you go with the buildup again," Bella said, nibbling on a slice.

"Yeah? Well my stories don't usually disappoint." That was a bit of pointless bravado. But it was probably true.

I happened to glance toward Graham then. And even in the low light of the pizza place, I saw him freeze. And I realized just how far a little smack talk about *stories* I might tell would freak him out. I hadn't meant it like that. But the effect on him was instant and powerful. His jaw went hard and his fist clenched on the table.

Easy, boy. "Tell me about the practice schedule," I said to change the topic.

Hartley obliged, explaining the afternoon routine, including weight room, dry land training and ice time.

In the corner, Graham drained his glass and then emptied the pitcher into it.

I pulled a twenty-dollar bill out of my back pocket and put it on the table. "I'll buy the next round."

"I'll go get it," Bella said, sliding out of the booth.

"No," Graham said quickly. "I will." It was the first time I'd heard his voice in five years. Without a glance at either one of us, he slid that muscular body out of the booth, stepped around Bella and my chair, and headed for the counter.

He left my twenty on the table.

"So you're a sophomore," Bella said, her fingers sliding into my hair.

This was three beers later. I'd been occupying myself at a different table for a while, chatting with the goalies. But Bella had found me, and she was stepping up her game. I needed a strategy for discouraging her. And fast.

"Uh, yeah," I said, shifting in my chair to buy myself a little more space. But that didn't stop her. Because she just leaned in closer. "I should be a junior. But I took a post-grad year to play on the US development team."

"Sweet," one of the goalies said.

"Sweet," Bella whispered, her fingers wandering down my ribcage.

It's not like she was the first girl to ever hit on me. But I had to tread carefully, because I was going to see a lot of Bella this season. And she was a

great girl. Smart, fun, and obviously a huge hockey fan. She had all the right stuff. She just didn't have all the right stuff for *me*.

I took Bella's hand and stood up. "Can you come with me for a minute? I could use your help with something."

One of the goalies gave an amused snort as I led her away, toward the dark little alcove where the old pay phone was. She came with me, chin up, a happy look on her face. I got the feeling that Bella never did anything for the benefit of the way it looked to others. She gave off a vibe of being 100 percent genuine, all the time. I could think of a few people who could stand to take lessons from her. Like maybe Graham.

The second we stepped into the relative privacy of the little space, she put her hands on my waist. "What did you need?" she asked, a grin playing at her lips.

I caught her prowling fingers in mine. One at a time, I kissed her hands, which made her beam. "Listen, Bella. There's something I need to tell you, and probably the team, too. Somehow. Because it's going to get out." Her face took on a more serious expression, but she didn't look away. The calm look in her blue eyes gave me the courage to keep talking. "The truth is that I like dick just as much as you do. Maybe even more."

Now, I'd had a certain amount of practice at delivering this news to people. It never got easy. Yet by this point, I'd seen every possible reaction to it. Bella looked momentarily confused, as people often do. But then I could almost see the synapses firing behind her eyes. Then her lips twitched. And finally, she tipped her head back and laughed. "Oh my God. You're serious aren't you?"

I was still holding her hands, and I gave them both a squeeze. "Would I lie about a thing like that?"

Bella took her hands back, but only to reach up to cup my face. "You are adorable. And honestly, I don't know why this hasn't happened sooner."

"Sorry?"

"Rikker, hockey players are *hot*. The hottest. And it's weird that other hockey players never noticed that before. Now I have to worry that you're going to cut in on my action."

I let out a bark of surprised laughter. "Somehow I think you'll be okay."

"Also, this is going to mess up a near perfect streak for me."

"Whenever you streak, I'm sure it's perfect," I quipped.

She rolled her eyes. "You don't have to throw me compliments. I'm a

big girl.” She stood back, folding her arms. “Does this have anything to do with leaving Saint B's?”

“Hell yes. When word about me got, um, *out*, Coach lost his shit and threw me off the team.”

Her eyes went wide. “Why? That’s against the ACAA rules.”

“*Ding, ding!* That’s how I got here. My uncle is a lawyer. He wanted to sue Saint B's, but I asked him to tackle the transfer rules instead.”

She blinked up at me. “You’d rather play more hockey than stand in a courtroom.”

“Exactly.”

Bella gave my arm a little punch. “I knew I liked you. And Coach James knows this story?”

“Of course. When my uncle started calling other teams for me, he told them right off why I’d been kicked off Saint B's. And today I dropped this little bomb on Hartley, too.”

“Okay, let me think...” she looked up at the ceiling. “Coach isn’t a judgmental guy. He likes to win, and he likes single malt scotch. In that order. So I can see him taking you on. And Hartley likes everybody, so that’s easy. How can I help?”

See? I knew this girl was awesome. “All I need is advice. I used to think that I could keep my private life private. But that blew up in my face last year. There’s probably somebody on the Harkness team that’s pals with someone at Saint B's, right?”

Bella nodded. “So this will get out.”

“So to speak.”

“Right. And maybe you’d rather that the team heard it from you, and not the rumor mill.”

“It’s a good idea in principal. But I don’t have a strategy.”

She made another thoughtful face. “If you made a big announcement, that would imply that this is a big deal. And you don’t want it to *be* a big deal.”

I wasn’t sure I had a choice in the matter. But even after a few beers, Bella was proving herself to be very perceptive. “That’s exactly right.”

“Telling people one at a time would be more casual.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “Except these aren’t people I’ve ever met.” *Except for one. And he already knows.*

She chewed her lip. “Yeah, in the movies, the athlete wins the big

game, right? And then he cries at the press conference and reveals to the world that he's gay." She put a hand over her heart. "And the team is, like, 'we love you just the way you are!'"

"I'm pretty sure that movie hasn't been made yet."

She crossed her arms. "I'm just pointing out that being the new guy makes this harder."

"You think?"

She gave me another playful punch. But then her face became serious. "Maybe it's something that ought to come from their manager."

That was a generous offer, with one major flaw. When you're the queer guy in the locker room, it's a bad idea to ever show fear. "I can't make it to look like I was too afraid to tell them myself."

"It wouldn't. Because the message they need to hear isn't that Rikker likes dudes. The message they need to hear is that, by the way, Rikker was forced to leave the Saint B's team because he is gay. But at Harkness, that's no concern of ours."

Well, damn. That did sound smart.

"...And, if anybody has a problem with that, feel free to talk to Coach. Or play a different sport."

I put my hands on her shoulders. "Manager, you are a genius. And a total babe."

"New Guy, I know that already," she said. "Both things." And then she moved closer to me, stood up on her tiptoes, and kissed me. And it wasn't just a peck. She took her time, molding her lips to mine, drawing it out. She nibbled my bottom lip. And I kissed her back, at least up to a point. Because just standing there like a statue seemed like an asshole thing to do.

Finally, she stood back. "*That,*" she said, "was because I have a reputation to uphold."

"Gotcha."

"I will take care of this. After I run it by Coach." She squeezed my arm and walked away, smiling as she went.

And that was my cue to go home to the little dorm room I'd been assigned, and call it a night. There's only so much drama a guy can take in one day.

— *Graham*

I drank my sixth, seventh, and eighth beers while Bella and Rikker were

having their private little chat. *My stories don't disappoint*, he'd said. God only knows what he was telling Bella. Was it the version of events where we used to be more than friends? Or was it the blow-by-blow of the day we *stopped* being friends?

At least if he told her that story, it would be a short story: there was an alley. Four rednecks gave chase, while yelling, "Get the faggots!" I ran away, and Rikker spent the next week in a hospital. I didn't visit him, and I never even called. Then he left the state.

The end.

You know that cliché about time healing all wounds? Time had scabbed this one over pretty well. But Rikker showing up had ripped that sucker right off. And I felt sure that anyone looking at me right now would be able to see the bleeding.

Before tonight, I didn't know that you could be both drunk and literally twitching with anxiety at the same time.

Bella and Rikker were in there a long time, hidden just from my view except for her elbow, for what seemed like an eternity. Eventually she rose up to hug him. Or maybe kiss him. (Because we're talking about Bella, here.) Then she came back into view, a cheery smile on her face.

And Rikker went the other direction, leaving the bar.

And I drank yet another beer, feeling nothing but dread.

Bella didn't come back to sit by me for quite a while after that. At least I think it took a while. The details began to get pretty fuzzy.

"Graham."

I opened my eyes, and Bella was shaking me. "What?" Somehow I was still sitting in a booth at Capri's.

"Wake up, Sweetie. Are you okay?"

"Course," I tried to say, although my throat was thick.

Bella laughed. "How did you get so wasted on Capri's pitchers? You'd have to drink a whole *barrel* of this swill."

"You have to really want it," I mumbled.

"Come on. Let's get you home." She led me out the back door and down College Street toward Beaumont House.

"Wait a second." It came out "shecond." We were passing one of the secret societies' crypts. I ducked behind the elegantly-pruned shrubberies and unzipped. Secret societies were a bunch of elitists who probably wanted nothing to do with me. So whenever I needed to take a piss on the way home

from the bar, I favored their walls with my business.

I heard a deep sigh from Bella where she waited on the sidewalk. “We lead a glamorous life, you know?”

“Yeah, baby.”

At a drunk’s pace, I followed Bella to my entryway door. “I can make it from here,” I slurred.

“Don’t argue. I haven’t seen your room yet, anyway.”

“S’good to have a single,” I said, trying to hold up my end of the conversation.

When we’d climbed the stairs to my room, I fumbled with the key for so long that Bella grabbed it out of my hand and unlocked the door herself. Inside, she gave a low whistle. “Nice. Where did you get a second bed?”

Instead of one regulation twin, I had two of them hitched up next to each other. “You know Donovan?”

“The tight end?” Bella kicked off her shoes.

“Yeah. He bought a waterbed, so I took his.”

She giggled. “Seriously? How did he fill it up?”

“Not my problem,” I said, yanking down the comforter on my giant bed. “I had to buy king-sized stuff, so I hope he doesn’t change his mind.” I dropped my jeans and fumbled my shirt over my head. That brought me down to just boxers. I climbed all the way into the bed, making room for Bella.

I closed my eyes, as if I didn’t really care whether she sat down next to me or not. But the truth was, I didn’t want to be alone. I didn’t want to know where my mind would take me tonight if I was left to myself. Nowhere good.

After a few moments’ hesitation, I felt Bella sink down onto the bed. She flopped back onto my second pillow, her arms folded behind her head. “It was a strange evening,” she said.

Tell me about it.

“I’m going to like working for the hockey team. Even if people are going to give me shit for it.”

“What kind of shit?” I mumbled.

“The same kind I always get. They’ll say I might as well ride the bus. Because I’m already riding the players.”

I laughed, although being very drunk made that difficult. I rolled onto my side, which made my head swim. Bella was right there. So I pulled her closer to me and gave her what was probably a pretty sloppy kiss. She went

with it, though, wrapping her arms around me. And when I dove into her soft mouth, she met me stroke for stroke. I hadn't planned to do this tonight. But suddenly it seemed like a great way to keep my head on straight. Losing myself in Bella.

But then she pulled back. "You're so drunk," she whispered. There was accusation in her voice.

"I'm always drunk," I argued. "Never stopped you before."

Now her voice had an edge to it. "*You* stopped me before," she hissed. "You said that we weren't going to do this anymore."

"I changed my mind."

As drunk as I was, I knew it was the wrong thing to say. And Bella confirmed that by giving my chest a rough shove. "Don't treat me like a slut, Graham."

Shit. With great effort, I propped myself up on an elbow to squint down into her pissed-off face. "I would *never* call you that, Bells. I don't think that way." It wasn't an eloquent apology, but it was true. Bella was the greatest. She never apologized for what she wanted. She just owned it.

The way I never could.

Pulling my sloppy thoughts together, I tried to do even better. "I'm *sorry*. I shouldn't have gone there. I'm just a train wreck tonight."

Having said my piece, I slid back down onto the pillow, rolling onto my back. Making a move on Bella had been very, very stupid. Not only was she mad at me now, but it probably wouldn't have worked anyway. There was a window of drunkenness that I had to hit in order to get it up for a girl. I had to be drunk enough for the whole thing to seem like a good idea. And drunk enough to claim whiskey dick if it didn't work out. But I couldn't be *too* sloppy. Because I needed to concentrate to pull it off.

And right now, my eyes were too heavy to stay open. But I curled one hand around Bella's, and she let me.

I was just drifting off when Bella got up off the bed. There was some rustling of clothing. I heard her belt hit the floor. And then my dresser drawer opened and shut, probably as Bella helped herself to one of my T-shirts. A minute later she came back into the bed. She put her head on my chest, and one knee over mine. Her arm snaked around my waist as she curled into me. She'd always been a cuddler.

Tucking a hand over her smooth knee, I fell asleep.

— Rikker

There were pros and cons to signing on at a new college the July before your sophomore year. In the plus column, I'd lucked into a single. But they didn't have room for me in Turner House where I was assigned. So my room was in a little overflow dorm called McHerrin. There were two other rooms on my floor, both housing exchange students from China. McHerrin wasn't exactly the party dorm. But I was okay with that.

After a stop in the shared bathroom to pee and brush my teeth, I let myself into my little habitat. Last year I'd made the effort to hang stuff on the walls, and make the place my own. But this year, I didn't bother. I was jaded, I guess. Before, I'd thought that once you chose a college, you were there for four years. You could go ahead and hang the felt pennant over your bed.

I'd jumped the gun on that one.

So my little room looked like monastic living quarters. Or a prison cell. I got into bed and shut off the light, but sleep didn't come for me right away. I was too amped up by everything that had happened today.

In the positive column, I knew I'd done well on the ice. And both Coach and Hartley had been good to me. Bella had been *great*. But that was only a start. There were still a thousand ways this could all go south.

And then there was Graham, who'd looked as cheerful as a mushroom cloud tonight. I knew things about him that he didn't want others to know. After he got over the shock of seeing me, I hoped he would just call me and say that. If he did, I'd tell him not to worry. I'd never out anybody, because I knew how much that sucked.

Even someone who'd been as lousy a friend as Graham.

But if he wanted that assurance from me, he'd have to actually acknowledge that we knew each other. And when we'd been seated three feet apart at Capri's, he hadn't even been able to manage eye contact.

Hell, it was trippy. It had been Graham *right there*. But also not. It had felt a little like keeping company with a ghost.

I lay there in the dark, thinking about him. And it wasn't the first time I'd done that. When I'd signed on to come to Harkness six weeks ago, the memories had begun to roll over me. Before the bad ending, there had been a whole lot of good. Call it nostalgia. Call it idiocy. But my subconscious preferred the memory of Graham's embrace to the memory of his rejection.

Also, we were fifteen then. Everything I shared with Graham had been so vivid and new. No wonder that shit was still projected on the inside my

skull in Technicolor.

Though I hadn't been near there in five years, I could picture Graham's house so clearly in my mind. We always did our fooling around there, because he had the basement lair, complete with a tattered old sofa and an XBox. During middle school, we were all about the XBox.

Ninth grade, we were all about the sofa.

Whenever I looked back on that time, it was hard to pinpoint the moment I realized how I felt about him. We were two dorky teenage guys, not exactly big on talking about our feelings. Even after we'd started fooling around, we never had a conversation about it. Not even, "Do you like girls?" "Not really!" "Me neither!" For all I knew, maybe Graham did like girls now. I wasn't going to ask.

But five years ago, he liked me.

We were best friends first. Together we survived middle school. We played hockey on a club team, and we went to the same Christian school. In fact, Christianity was a big deal in the corner of Michigan where we grew up. Kids on the playground would ask each other, "Which church do you go to?" Because that's how our parents looked at the world.

My parents were more religious than Graham's, though. I knew this because at Graham's house, nobody cared if we played video games on Sunday. And I'd heard Graham's dad mock some of the things that our classmates' parents thought. "If I take you to the Harry Potter movie, you won't start worshipping the devil, right, guys? I didn't think so."

Nobody found it unusual that Graham and I were so close. Including me. During middle school, I never let myself think about him *that* way. But even then, I was always incredibly aware of him. When he walked into a room, I knew it without looking. By the time we turned fifteen, his voice was already deep and smoky. And the sound of it resonated inside me like no one else's.

Girls never affected me like that. Some of them were nice, and fun to talk to. But they just weren't Graham. I noticed that he never seemed to pay much attention to them either. We went to the middle school dances with a group of our friends, where we all danced to the fast songs. But Graham never pulled me aside to ask, "Do you think she likes me?"

Not once.

Meanwhile, we played video games in Graham's basement like it was our job. And there was a different way that we looked at each other when we

were alone. Graham has always blushed easily. In time I realized how easy it was to make him do that. All I had to do was hold his eyes a little longer than necessary, and pink spots would appear on his cheekbones.

I liked that. So I did it all the time.

The long looks — and sitting a little closer than necessary while we watched movies — that went on for two years. And then one Friday night during our first month of high school, we were tussling over the remote control. In order to win the fight, Graham put his knee across my thighs to hold me down. And then he stretched his long body toward my arm, where I was dangling the remote as far from him as I could. It was then that I realized Graham was *on top of me. Finally*. And without thinking, I put my free hand on his chest.

I'll never forget the wild jerk that his body made under my hand. And then he was staring down at me, cheeks flushed, breath coming fast. I lifted my chin an inch, and that's all it took. Graham dropped his mouth onto mine.

Our first kiss was hot and sloppy, and it lit my body up like a flare.

Yes. This. Yes. Yes. Yes. It was all shock and awe for maybe two minutes. And then Graham's mom called down from the top of the basement stairs. "Hey, Guys? Do you want popcorn?"

Graham jerked back onto his own end of the sofa. "Uh, sure," he called.

Then he got up and switched the TV over to video games. And we played *Call of Duty* until the popcorn was ready.

We didn't speak about it after that. Not one word. But the following week, I thought of almost nothing else, and wore a perpetual boner every time I saw him. And the next time I went to Graham's, my hands sweat through two rounds of whatever video game we were playing. Then Graham's mom yelled down that she was going to the grocery store, and could Graham think of anything they needed?

"Nope," he called up to her.

We heard the sound of shoes clicking a couple of times across the kitchen floor. Then the door to the garage, and finally the sound of her car's engine backing out and driving away.

There was a beat of silence in the basement. "So..." we both said at exactly the same time.

"Jinx," I said.

Graham gave a nervous laugh. "The jinx machine is out of order. Please put in another quarter." He wore a lopsided smile, and his cheeks were

flushed red.

“Dork.”

Two seconds after that, Graham had tackled me, pushing me down on the couch. He moaned on the first kiss, and I felt that sound everywhere.

There is nothing so explosive as two horny, fifteen-year-old boys finally getting a taste of something they both crave. As we made out, Graham rode me with his hips. The motion, and the feel of his hard body pressing down on me was better than any of the fantasies I'd cooked up every half hour since our first kiss.

It was probably only five minutes later when Graham closed his eyes and gasped twice. And just the look on his face took me there, too. I locked my arms around him and hauled him down for one more kiss — wet and dirty and more satisfying than I'd ever dreamed.

And by then, I'd dreamed plenty.

Forty minutes later, Graham's mom came home to find us playing a round of Realstix hockey on the XBox. She would never have noticed that a couple of paper towels were newly buried in the bottom of the family garbage bin.

So it began.

Our make-out sessions were always fast and frantic, because privacy was scarce. There was never any nudity involved, because that would have been far too risky. But there were athletic pants, with their handy elastic waistbands. And I didn't need more, not with the sublime feel of his long fingers sliding down my stomach and onto my groin. He was sometimes slow and teasing, and often fast and rough. I wanted all of it. All the time.

We were exceedingly careful. Looking back on it, I'm amazed at our discipline. Fifteen year-old boys aren't known for their caution or diligence. That same year, I probably lost three pairs of gloves and locked myself out of my own house once a week. But Graham and I never touched each other if another person was inside his house, or scheduled to be there within the hour. And even then, we learned to make out and listen at the same time, often leaping apart at the smallest sound. We were never, ever caught.

Until one awful day in August, before the start of our sophomore year, just after I got my driver's license. Freedom was our downfall.

We'd driven to a seedy part of town to find a comic book shop we'd heard of. But that was really just an excuse to be alone together. After I parked the car, Graham put his hand on my leg, just because he could. We

were together, and we were out in the world in a car. Two huge freedoms in one afternoon. So after a cursory glance out the car windows, I leaned across the gearshift and kissed him.

Smiling, he grabbed my face in both hands and licked into my mouth. We were probably only there for ninety seconds. Maybe even less. But immediately after we stepped out of the car, everything went very, very wrong.

There was shouting, and the pounding of feet behind us. We both ran. I thought we were going to get away. But then I looked over my shoulder to count our pursuers.

That mistake that changed my life.

I tripped. And then came the horror of pitching toward the asphalt, and the terror of those feet pounding closer. A second later, the first kick landed at my ribs. The second one nailed me in the cheekbone, and I heard my own scream.

Curling up into a protective ball was my last conscious act.

Much of the next few hours were lost to me. I woke up in a hospital room with my arm in a sling, stitches on my face and a snug bandage around my chest. My mother was crying, and my father was on the phone.

“Where’s Graham?” was the first thing I tried to say.

“Why?” my mother sobbed.

Telling her the truth turned out to be my second big mistake.

For the next five days, I would lay in that hospital bed wondering what had happened to him. Every time someone walked past my room, my eyes would flick to the doorway. Each time I expected to see Graham.

He never came.

Body Check: *The use of the body against an opponent. A body check is legal against an opposing player who has the puck or was the last player to have the puck.*

— Rikker

Before our next ice time, I stood in the locker room strapping on my pads, half listening while Hartley and a guy they called Big-D argued about the Bruins defense lineup.

Bella skipped through with an armload of practice jerseys, tossing one at everyone in her path.

“Thanks,” I said when she got to me. But before she could dart away, I grabbed her hand for a closer look at her T-shirt. “Hey! I had that shirt once.” *JESUS SAVES*, it read. Jesus was pictured on the front in full goalie gear, deflecting a puck. *W.M.C.A. Hockey* was stamped below the drawing. As in: West Michigan Christian Academy.

She looked down at her chest and then grinned. “I love this thing. I stole it from Graham.” She tipped her head back in his direction.

Ah, of course she did. I lifted my eyes to find Graham staring at us, his gorgeous mouth in a grim line. He looked away as soon as our eyes met.

Well, fuck. This was getting ridiculous. It’s not like I’d walked in here a week ago determined to pretend that Graham and I had never met. We needed to at least be able to nod hello to one another. Or something.

Bella went on her way, sowing practice jerseys like so many seeds. I was just shoving my foot into a skate when I heard my name.

“Rikker?” I looked up to see Coach beckoning me from the doorway. “Can you come here a minute, son?” I kicked the skate off and followed Coach in my stocking feet. He led me all the way to his office, where he shut the door. “Why don’t you have a seat for a minute,” he suggested.

I sat, not knowing why I was there.

“I have some tapes for you to watch this weekend,” he said, opening a desk drawer and pulling out a couple of DVDs. “Our first two games are against Brown and Colgate. We’ll go over the strategy next week, but I

thought you could get a jump on it.”

“Awesome,” I said, taking the discs.

“Do you have a way of watching those? Not everyone’s computer has a slot anymore.”

“I’m good. Thanks.”

“How are you settling in? Classes okay?” He sat in his desk chair, folding his hands as if we had all day for small talk.

“Um, sure. So far so good.”

“Which house were you assigned to?”

“I’m in Turner. But since I wasn’t part of the housing draw last year, I’m living in a building called McHerrin.”

“Ah,” Coach said. “Hartley lived in the handicapped room there last year when he couldn’t climb stairs.”

“That’s what he told me,” I said.

Coach tapped his fingers on the desk blotter. “We’ll just give it another minute, okay? Bella had something she wanted to say to the team before practice.”

“Oh.” *Oh.* “Hell. Sorry. I don’t like being newsworthy.”

He grinned. “I’d like to be newsworthy.” He held up his hands as if hanging text in the air. “Harkness Wins the Frozen Four.”

“All right,” I chuckled. “Your version works for me.”

“I live in hope. We look good this year, kid. Hartley’s back. We scooped you up from Saint B’s. And those Canadian freshmen skate like crazy men.”

“I noticed that.”

The conversation died again. I felt Coach’s eyes on me, and I didn’t enjoy it. “You know...” he said, pausing. “I have a grandson who plays basketball at a small school in the Midwest. He had to conduct a few very awkward conversations with his teammates last year. But nobody died.”

I tried not to gape. Coach had a gay grandson? I didn’t see that coming.

“If we get any pushback from the team, I’m prepared to tell them to shove it,” Coach said. “So I need you to let me know if that’s necessary. But I thought I’d step back, and see if things got by on their own first.”

Jeez. “Thanks?” I managed. “I hope it won’t come to that.”

He looked tired for a moment. “Me too.”

There was a quick little knock at the door, and then Bella put her head in. “I told everybody to hit the ice now.”

Coach stood up and looped his whistle around his neck. “Lace up, kid. Let’s do this thing.”

The only person left in the locker room while I put on my skates was Bella, who sat picking her cuticles on Hartley’s end of our bench. “Well?” I said finally.

She shrugged. “Too soon to tell. Big-D made a face like I’d just served him shit for dinner. Everybody else just blinked at me. Then they picked up their sticks and went.”

I stood up and went for my stick, the last one in the rack. “Thank you, Bella.”

She followed me to the door, patting my ass pads. “Let’s see some action, Rikker. I fucking love this job.”

As I’d done the week before, I skated Coach’s drills as if zombies chased me. Then we scrimmaged for a good forty-five minutes. When I was on the bench, I didn’t try to speak to anyone. Instead, I watched the game as if there was going to be an exam later.

Our side was dominating. About halfway through the game, coach switched up the rotation. After that, whenever we were playing our defensive zone, I ended up covering Graham. I was still in the flow, still skating like the Stanley Cup was on the line. Because if this team was going to end up hating me, it wouldn’t be because I didn’t make an effort.

And Graham, to my surprise, played like a skittish granny. He coughed up the puck to me so many times that it almost got boring. “Focus, Graham!” Coach yelled more than once.

Ouch.

After practice, I volunteered to move the nets out of the way of the Zamboni. I stacked cones, and generally made myself scarce for a little while. By the time I made it back into the locker room, there weren’t very many people left. Facing my locker area, I hung up my pads until it was a safe bet that everyone was dressed. Then I headed to the showers alone.

When I came out, only Bella and Hartley were still around. Their two heads were bent over what looked like a glossy hockey program. Bella made marks on it with a black Sharpie.

“Rikker,” she said as I tried to drag my boxers over damp skin. “We need your bio info by Tuesday. Schools and teams, height, weight. You know the drill.”

“Roger that,” I said, hopping into my jeans.

Bella stuffed her paperwork into a bright pink backpack. “Let’s go eat Coach’s barbecue.”

I hesitated, yanking my socks onto my feet. “I wasn’t going to go.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Bella said, handing me my shirt. “That’s not the message you want to send.”

“I don’t want to send any message at all,” I said from inside my polo. When I could see Bella and Hartley again, they were both staring down at me. “Seriously. I’m going to be everyone’s gossip nugget tonight. Why shouldn’t I sit this one out?”

Bella looped her arm in mine and yanked me off the bench. “You’re coming.”

Crap. “Should we bring anything?”

“Nope,” Hartley said.

“Just your pretty face,” Bella added.

“Not helping,” I said, while Hartley snickered.

Twenty minutes later, we were standing in Coach’s generous backyard. I’d thought it would just be the team, every one of them avoiding me. Luckily, the girlfriends had been invited to Coach’s shindig. With girls there, the conversation was lubricated with summer exploits and other gossip.

“Can you get this?” Bella handed me a bottle of wine, the cork halfway out. “I thought I had it.”

I set my much-needed beer down on the table to do her bidding. Tightening my grip on the corkscrew, I levered it out slowly, trying not to break the cork. That done, I wrapped my hand around my beer bottle again.

“Thanks! Coach’s wife asked me to bring her a glass of white wine. Do you think she meant the chardonnay, or the pinot blanc?”

“Sorry, Bella, but I’m not that kind of gay friend. I wouldn’t know a pinot blanc if it bit me in the ass.”

One of the goalies — a big dude named Orson — choked on his beer when I said it. For a second, I assumed that he couldn’t believe that I’d said the word “gay” out loud. But when he tapped his bottle to mine, I realized that he was only laughing at my joke.

Bella gave us both an eye roll. “So if I want help picking out shoes, I shouldn’t come to you?”

“You can try,” I said. “But my M.O. is just to choose whichever pair

stinks the least.”

“Who says that’s not an improvement? Some of these guys can’t manage that.” Bella picked up a glass of white wine and headed for the house.

“You love us anyway,” Orson yelled after her.

She gave us the finger behind her back, and we both laughed this time. And now I knew then that Orson would put up with me. One down, two dozen to go.

— *Graham*

At Coach’s barbecue, I choked down a couple of pulled pork sandwiches, and wondered how soon I could leave. But Coach hadn’t made his beginning-of-the-year speech yet. And I’d played so badly this afternoon that I didn’t want to draw any more attention to myself.

Pale ale number three wasn’t enough to sooth my nerves. Beer just couldn’t make big enough payments on my overdue buzz bill. Coach was a scotch man, so I wandered into the house to see what he might be pouring.

I found Coach in his study with a handful of guys watching hockey footage on a big screen. “Graham!” he called. “I’ve got video of last year’s Brown game. Watch this defensive play...”

But the video wasn’t what I was after. “Whatcha got there?” I asked one of the new kids — the one we were calling Frenchie. He squinted at me apologetically, probably trying to decide if the word for whiskey was the same in English as it was in French. Instead of attempting to solve the mystery, he handed me the glass, and I took a taste. “Nice.”

“I’ll pour you one,” Coach said, his eyes still on the screen. “Maybe it will put some hair on your chest, Graham. Today you could have used it.”

“My shit was not together,” I agreed with him under my breath.

He put a glass in my hand. “Figure it out, kid. We have a chance to do great things.” Then Coach left the room.

When he was gone, I drank the scotch in two gulps. Big-D picked up the decanter and topped up his glass, and then mine. “Figure it out, kid,” he said, mimicking Coach. “But after practice, be careful not to drop the soap in the showers.”

Another defenseman began to laugh, and then the Canadian kids joined in, the way people do when they’re not sure if they understood the joke. With Big-D right there in my face, I forced a smile and I took another deep drink.

This time, the alcohol burned all the way down.

Coach's speech always came before dessert. So when I saw the cupcakes coming out of the kitchen, and heard the telltale *ding ding ding* of a spoon on a glass, I made my way to the front lawn.

"Tonight," Coach said, scotch glass in hand, "I want to read to you my favorite quote of President Teddy Roosevelt's. Maybe you've heard it before in a history class, or philosophy. But it could have been written for hockey players. We're going to go far this year, and along the way people are going to try to tell us that a little Ivy League school can't play hockey at the national level. But that's bullshit!"

We cheered, of course. We always did. On other nights like this one, I'd breathed in every word Coach said. The last two seasons, I'd stood here taking in his wisdom as gospel. But tonight I felt as though I stood on the edges of my life, looking in.

That's what a weeklong anxiety attack will do to a person.

"Listen up!" Coach squinted at his notes. "It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better." Coach smiled at us. "The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming. And who, if he fails, at least fails while *daring greatly*, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat!"

There was more cheering then. And Hartley put two fingers up to his lips and whistled.

"Now, boys," Coach continued. "I don't love failure. I fucking hate it. But what Teddy meant was that you have to embrace the fact that failure exists, or you will never find greatness. The man wrote a long fucking sentence which really means — go big, or go home!" At that, he raised his glass again, and we all drank whatever we had.

My stomach rolled with discomfort. Again. Because I wasn't feeling the love. Every shitty thing I'd ever done in my life had just caught up to me.

Check, please. It was time for me to sneak out.

First, I headed toward the bathroom to take a leak before walking home. As I wove through the house, I got a little distracted by an oblique glimpse of

Bella in the study. She was standing in front of Frenchie, her hands on his chest. She was rubbing him gently, and talking a mile a minute. And he was gaping at her like she was a vision from heaven. Good God, she was working him over. The kid wouldn't know what hit him.

Lost in half a smirk, I didn't look where I was going. Which is the only way I could have ended up shoulder-checking Johnny Rikker as he came out of the bathroom.

“Jesus,” he swore, grabbing the doorframe to keep his balance.

The word “sorry” got trapped in my throat as I realized who it was. And I leapt back, away from his body. But not before the shock of getting so close to him sunk in. The face I'd been ducking all week frowned up at me. I was taller than he was, I realized. When we were fifteen, we'd been the same height.

It had made kissing him really easy.

No doubt the look on my face now was one of total horror, since that had been my default expression since the moment he'd walked into the locker room a week ago.

He studied me for a second, his expression darkening. A hand rose to rub his pectoral where I'd slammed into him the moment before. Then he seemed to pull himself together, lifting an eyebrow tauntingly. “Was that good for you?”

I only stood there, mute, and choking on my own stupidity.

A second later he dropped his gaze and passed me, heading for the front of the house. I watched him go. Because I could not look away.

— October —

Shadow: *Covering an opponent closely, limiting his effectiveness.*

— Rikker

I walked to the hockey weight room through a fine autumn afternoon, admiring the decorative old architecture. After four weeks, I'd learned the campus pretty well, and figured out a lot of that new guy stuff that you have to learn. The dining halls had Pepsi products. The graduate school libraries were open later than the undergrad ones. You didn't need quarters for the laundry, because they took credit cards.

Also, I tried not to get depressed about always being the new guy.

People passed me in twos and threes, chatting together. The transfer student is an awkward thing to be. Friendships have already formed. Allegiances made. I was going to be separate for a while. An outsider.

I was already used to it.

At the gym, I got busy sharing a squat rack with Trevi. He was another forward with curly dark hair and a nice smile. (Though he was obviously as straight as a ruler.)

I put Trevi at a solid six on the Rikker scale. That was my private rating for how tolerant my teammates were of me. Trevi had earned his six by always looking me in the eye, and acting friendly enough when we found ourselves standing next to one another at Capri's or using the same piece of weight room equipment.

But he'd never started a conversation with me. Not once. It was as if volunteering anything about himself would be taking it too far — as if the other dudes might start to wonder, you know?

That was life in the locker room.

"You're up," Trevi said, stepping aside to stretch.

I maneuvered myself beneath the barbell and hoisted it onto my shoulders. Then I took a good step backward, stuck out my ass and squatted. The first three reps were okay, but numbers four and five nearly killed me.

When I'd finally parked the barbell back onto its holders and turned

around, Trevi was massaging his own shoulder with one hand. He'd done that a lot this afternoon. "That bothering you?" I asked him.

"It's just a big knot," he shrugged. "But it's going on two days now. Stubborn bitch."

"Huh," I looked around the weight room. "Do you know if they have any tennis balls around here? I know a trick."

"Yeah? Hang on. It's gettin' to the point where I'll try anything."

I stretched my quads until he came back with a hard rubber ball. "Will this work?"

"Sure." I took it from him. "Now sit down on that bench." That's when I saw the slightest hesitation. Maybe Trevi didn't realize that I'd actually have to *touch* his shoulder. And now he wondered whether it was worth it. "It won't make you queer," I joked.

His expression turned sheepish, and he sat down on the bench. The best thing to do would be to probe his shoulder with my fingers, looking for the knot. But I knew he'd be happier if I kept my hands off him. "Point to the spot," I said. He reached two fingers back, digging them into the muscle.

"Okay," I said, putting the tennis ball there. When he took his hand away, I began to press. "Right there?" I asked, putting some weight behind the ball.

"Yeah. A little higher?"

I adjusted the ball a fraction of a centimeter, and put even more weight behind it.

"Christ," he grunted.

"I know. But it works. In fact, it will still work even if you cry like a little girl right now."

He chuffed out a laugh.

"Drop your head, and just try to relax. It takes a couple of minutes for your muscle to stop fighting back."

"Kay," he said.

Pressing the ball into his muscle, I glanced around the busy room. Hartley and Orson were doing split squats against the windows. Those were the two players who rated highest on the Rikker scale. Orson was a solid eight. I always found him easy to talk to. And Hartley was a nine. That dude *worked* to include me, and never even seemed to notice he was doing it. In fact, he could earn himself a ten. But I was saving room on the Rikker scale. Maybe I'm a tough grader, but I hoped that the unlikely day would come when somebody actually told me that they were glad I showed up to play

hockey here.

After those two, there were a couple of sevens, and a handful of sixes, like Trevi.

Graham was in the opposite corner, his big legs visible on either side of a press bench. He was a zero on the Rikker scale. I'd been at Harkness a month, and he still hadn't looked me in the eye, except by accident.

His avoidance both weirded me out and made me angry. Unfortunately, I hadn't handled it well. Instead of ignoring him, I'd begun trying to provoke him, just to try to get a reaction. Any reaction.

It started the day he'd crashed into me at Coach's house. I don't even know why I'd thrown down that ridiculous comment. *Was that good for you?* Cheesy, much? But even though I'd said something patently ridiculous, he reacted as if I'd threatened his life. He went pale and shrunk back.

I wasn't proud of it, but I'd tortured him a few other times, too. He just made it so damn easy. Last week, we'd come face to face in the hallway here at the rink. There was nobody else around. I didn't say anything, I only blew him a kiss. And I got the same horrified expression all over again. Lately he'd been circling the perimeter of the dressing room just to avoid me.

But I was always aware of him. When he walked into a room, I felt him, like a change in the air pressure. Just an oblique glimpse of him was all it took to put me on high alert. I didn't want to be so sensitive to him. It's just that I didn't know how to stop. We'd been so close all those years ago. My subconscious just couldn't get over the idea that we weren't anymore.

His laugh was the hardest thing to bear. If he were across the room talking to Bella or a couple of buddies, sometimes I would hear him laugh. And the low sound of his quiet chuckle always crushed me.

I used to love to make him laugh. And I didn't know how to quit listening for it.

"Wow," Trevi said, turning his head. "That's trippy."

"What?" I asked, shaking off my reverie. "Did you feel it release?" I eased up on the tennis ball that I'd forgotten I was holding. I chanced putting my fist against his body instead, probing for a knot. But I didn't find one.

"Yeah. Damn." He rolled his shoulder a couple of times. "It's so much better. Awesome." He stood up and turned around. "Thanks."

"Sure thing." I handed him the ball. "If the knot comes back, you can try it by yourself, trapping the ball between you and the wall. But it's hard to get the angle just right."

He held up his hand for a high five, and I met it. “Thanks, man. Seriously. I’m going to hit the treadmills. You coming?”

“Sure.” Maybe Trevi would graduate from a six to a seven on the Rikker scale. As they said of football, mine was a war that would be won by inches.

I followed him into the cardio room, where I wouldn’t have to look at Graham.

— *Graham*

“Yo, Graham. Aren’t you going to spot me?”

“Sure. Of course.” I hopped over to stand behind Smitty’s head, bracing my hands underneath the barbell. God, I’d been zoning out. *Again.*

“So what do you think of our defensive lineup?” Smitty asked just before hefting the bar off the rack. He was a sophomore blueliner. A defenseman, like me.

What did I think? I only wished I *could* think. My head was a frickin’ mess. I hadn’t slept a full night since Rikker had sauntered into the locker room. Bella had begun showing up in my room first thing in the morning, rolling me out of bed and looking for empty bottles.

It didn’t stop me from drinking. But it did make me better at hiding the evidence.

“Um,” I said to Smitty. Because lately nothing came out of my mouth right on the first try. “I think we’re pretty solid. The French kids work well together. I’ll bet Coach puts them on the same line.”

Beneath me, Smitty grunted in agreement. For the next ninety seconds, I focused all my attention on the barbell in my hands, and on my teammate’s straining face below me. I could at least do that, right? I could pay attention long enough to avoid *killing* Smitty with my negligence.

After six reps, Smitty’s shaking arms set the bar back onto the rack, and it was my turn again. I sat back down on the bench. As I lay back, I caught a glimpse of Rikker joking with Trevi. He never smiled like that when he looked at me. And why would he?

Rikker’s anger at me was a physical, tangible thing. Every time he leveled me with a glance, my brain short-circuited. And the more often I saw him, the stupider I acted. Obviously, talking to him was the only possible solution. And it’s not like I never considered the idea. I gave it lots of consideration every night from about midnight until 2 a.m. But how do you

start that conversation? *I'm sorry you took a beating for me. And I'm sorry I was too afraid to ever speak to you again.*

It would be impossible to explain it, because no plausible explanation existed. Fear wasn't a good enough reason to do what I'd done.

The only thing that seemed to help me sleep, even a little, was Scotch whiskey. And thank God for that. When I was barely sixteen, and going through hell after our incident in the alleyway, I didn't even have alcohol to soften the blow.

After Rikker disappeared from my high school and my life, it took me a long time to process what had happened. Before that awful day, naiveté had made me far too content. I'd never realized just how dangerous it was to be with Rikker. I knew we could never tell anyone. That went without saying. But I'd never been forced to witness what would happen if people knew. I hadn't understood the sheer *repulsion* that I'd somehow earned by loving another boy.

It was the look of disgust on our attackers' faces that did me in. "Sick fags," they'd said.

Sick. I was sick. The word vibrated through my chest for months.

I'd been so confused. But I knew one thing. I didn't *ever* want to see that same look on the faces of my family. If there was something sick about me, I hoped I could stomp it out before anyone else saw it.

After Rikker left, his parents told everyone at church that he'd gone to stay with his grandmother for a while.

Me? I spent a couple of months cowering in my bedroom. Sometimes I tried to find answers on the Internet. And we all know where that leads, right? I Googled "same sex experimentation," and found plenty of articles. For a hot second, they made me feel better. I read that straight teens often experimented with their friends, because that's who was available and willing. Basically, teen guys touch each other's junk sometimes, or jerk off together. Then most of them grow up to happily fuck women, eventually getting married and having cute little kids.

Good on me, right?

Not so fast. None of these accounts said anything about straight guys who'd basically tried to superglue their mouths to their best friend's whenever nobody was looking. There weren't any stories by guys who wanted nothing more than to feel their best friend's body blanketing their own, or who could light up just from the sight of his smile from across the

room.

What Rikker and I were to each other was so far past the notion of casual experimentation that it wasn't even funny. And it didn't matter that we'd never had sex, or even gotten up the courage to blow each other. The more I read, the better I understood that this one was of those times when the spirit of the law meant more than the letter of the law.

I stopped Googling things after that.

The basement was off-limits to me, too. It was too hard to be down there and not think of him. Just walking past that couch gave me a sick feeling. I craved him still. And I hated myself for it.

I brought the video game console up into my bedroom. Only it wasn't any fun to play without him.

Then, a few months after Rikker left, hockey season came around again. I tried out for the high school varsity team and made it. Still, every time I laced up my skates, I thought of him. I wondered where he was, and whether he was playing hockey on some team in Vermont.

In an attempt to flush Rikker out of my head, I started dating girls, and that went well for me. A lot of the other sophomore guys were too shy. They liked girls a lot. But there was too much at stake, so they were afraid to ask them out. Or they acted like morons when they got their big chance.

But I was fearless. Getting shot down by a girl wasn't even in the top fifty on the list of things that scared me. So I asked the prettiest girl in my class to the homecoming dance. And that went so well that I asked another one to the movies the following week.

Dating girls? It was as easy as shooting fish in a barrel, as my dad liked to say.

But I still missed Rikker like crazy. Which was stupid. Because even after I blew my chance to visit him in the hospital he was always just a phone call away. It's just that I couldn't *afford* that phone call. The price was too high. Not only was I afraid to face him after I'd been such a coward in that alley, I was afraid to tell him how I really felt. That it was too fucking dangerous to be friends anymore. Because he made me want things that were *sick*.

Five years is a long time. Eventually, hockey stopped reminding me of Rikker. I kept at it, even as the game changed. Varsity hockey — and then college hockey — was a bigger, more physical game than we'd played together in the bantam league. Hockey was the place I went to get out all the

anger. Slamming my opponents into the boards? Nobody ever called that “sick.” When I did it right, the crowd stood up and cheered.

The world is cracked. It really is.

And now I was cracking, too. Because Rikker had walked back into my life, and he did it by telling the whole frickin’ team that he was *gay*. It was the single ballsiest thing I’d ever seen a guy do. Rikker’s appearance at Harkness was like my own personal horror film come to life. I was afraid of what he’d reveal about me. I was afraid of what he might say to my face. I was pants-shitting scared, all the time.

I was afraid *for* Rikker, too. He didn’t seem to understand the risks. I’d stared hatred in the face, and I was never going to forget the look of its snarl.

Over the last five years, I built and polished a set of personal deflector shields that I engaged every time I spoke to a really attractive man. I was careful not to stare, and I knew how to affect the kind of body language that conveyed only polite interest.

But Rikker was hell on my deflector shields. When he was around, nothing worked right. My eyes went where they weren’t supposed to go, and I felt the thrum of expectation just from breathing the same air that he did. Even now, I tried not to keep tabs on him as he crossed the room with Trevi.

It turns out that trying to ignore somebody is about the most distracting, exhausting thing in the world. Whenever Rikker walked into a room, I felt like I’d been stripped of all my skin.

“Are you up for one more set of bench press?” Smitty asked me.

“Sure,” I said automatically. Hell, I was up for ten more sets. Maybe I could finally get tired enough to sleep all the way through the night.

Yeah. Not likely.

— November —

Pinching: *when a defenseman leaves his typical rearward position to push forward into the offensive zone.*

— Rikker

We were on a bus heading to Boston when I got a text from Skippy, my ex-boyfriend. For a couple of minutes, I ignored it. There were rules I'd made for myself with regard to him. The first rule was: Never text Skippy first. Because that was just pathetic. The second rule was: Always wait a half hour before responding.

But I was on a bus, just staring out at the highway. So of course I peeked. He'd sent me a photograph, one that made me say, "aw!" and immediately compose a reply.

"Who are you texting?" Bella asked from the seat beside me.

"My ex," I said, hitting the send button.

"Ooh!" she said. "Can I see a picture?"

"Of my ex? No. I deleted them all. Off my phone, anyway." *As any self-respecting human being would.* "But you can see a picture of his new dog." I handed her the phone.

"Aw," she echoed. I tried to take the phone back, but she moved it out of my reach, still staring at the poodle in the photo. "Why is the dog wearing glasses?"

"I dunno. In fact, I just asked that question a second ago. Not that I expect a reasonable answer." Skippy was kind of a nut.

"You know Rikker..." she trailed off, still squinting at the photo. "I'd kill any guy who ever said this to me. But this dog and I kind of look alike."

"What?" I grabbed the phone back and looked again at the picture. And then I let out the sort of laugh that hurts a little, because you tried and failed to hold it in. "God, Bella! You're right." The dog had curly hair, in a color much like hers. And a goofy smile. "Okay, let's take your picture and send it to my ex."

"Wait!" she held up a hand, and I thought she'd shoot the idea down.

But she turned around in her seat instead. “Hey, Trevi! Can I borrow your reading glasses? Just for a minute.”

Again I snorted. Bella was just about the best sport in the entire world. And I told her so when she came back wearing glasses that were startlingly similar to the ones the poodle wore in the photo.

My phone buzzed with a text, answering the question of why the dog wore glasses: *Rikky, not everyone has perfect vision. Don't make her feel self-conscious. We don't have a name yet. Ross wants to call her Kujo, but I refuse. Ideas?*

“What a goof,” Bella said, reading over my shoulder.

“Yep.”

“Who’s Ross?”

“My replacement.”

She made a face. “Sorry. Let me see the poodle one more time, so we can get this just right.” I showed Bella the photo again, and she adjusted the barrette in her hair to make it poof up like the dog’s. “Let ‘er rip,” Bella said, smiling.

I switched my phone to the camera setting and framed the shot. “Hang on.” I reached up to gently tilt her chin to the side, like the poodle’s. “Okay. Can you make your smile a little... doggie?” But that made Bella laugh, which made me laugh, so we had to take a minute to calm down.

“What eez so amusing?” asked Frenchie from across the aisle.

“Nothing,” Bella giggled, and I lost it again. Several people were turning to stare, now. We were like the loud, raucous table at a restaurant — annoying, unless it’s you. “Okay,” I took a deep breath. “We can do this. Let’s see your pose again.” She made her doggiest smile yet, and I clicked the shutter button.

For a caption, I wrote: *Dear Skippy, your new dog and my new friend... separated at birth?*

“Hit send!” Bella giggled.

I did, and it only took about sixty seconds to get the first response. *OH MY GOD*. Of course, that made us howl. Then he wrote: *I can't even... What is her name?*

Bella, I replied, and my phone rang almost immediately. “Hello?” I chuckled into the receiver.

“Rikky! Let me talk to Bella.”

Figures.

I passed her the phone. She took it with laughing eyes. “This is Bella. Nice to meet you, Skippy.” There was a pause. “I’d be honored if you named her Bella. Seriously. You’re welcome.” She handed the phone back. “He wants to talk to you.”

“What’s up, Skipster?” I asked, dropping my voice.

“I’m glad you made a friend, Rikky.”

Just what I needed — a little patronizing from the ex. The ex who seemed to be doing so much better than I was. “Um, thanks?”

“Can’t be easy being the new guy for three years in a row.”

I sighed, because it was true. “I’ll live. Always do.”

“Of course you will. Where are you, anyway?”

“On a bus to Boston for a tournament.”

“That doesn’t sound bad. A bus full of big, muscular athletes.”

“It has its moments.”

“Glad to hear it. Take care, Rikky. Ross sends his love.”

Seriously? “Uh, thanks. Bye, Skip.”

I hung up with him, to catch Bella watching me. “He seems fun. Do you miss him?”

“Sometimes.” That was the truth. And Skippy *was* fun. Yet I’d somehow decided about a year ago that he and I had outgrown each other. I even told him so, which he did not appreciate. Then, when he made it official by dumping me, I was less sure.

Ugh. Next topic, please.

I stashed my phone and took out the book that I was supposed to be reading for English class. After Bella returned Trevi’s glasses to him, she pulled a folder out of her backpack. “Now that you’ve been with us for two months,” she said, setting her backpack at her feet, “you’ve had time to decide who’s the most attractive man on the team.”

“Nice try, babe,” I said, looking out at highway 95, which was currently flying by the window of our bus.

“Seriously, Rikker. How can you be my gay BFF if we can’t dish about guys?” She clicked a ball-point pen and began to write numbers down the left side of a legal pad. From one to twelve.

“No can do. I’m not getting my ass kicked just to fulfill your Hollywood fantasies.” In my duffel I’d hidden a big bar of dark chocolate with bits of salted caramel in it. Bella could joke as often as she wanted. But my true role as gay BFF was to keep her supplied with fine chocolate.

It worked for both of us.

“I’m only half kidding,” she whispered. “For the past two years I’ve made a close study of who has the nicest ass on the bus. It’s difficult for a girl to keep that kind of thing to herself.”

“You *don’t* keep it to yourself,” I pointed out. “Not a day goes by when you don’t tell each ass’s owner just what you think of it.”

“Not true,” she countered. “I’m very liberal with my praise. A good manager knows to motivate the troops.”

I snorted. Bella’s School of Management was a peculiar institution. But it was *our* peculiar institution.

“The best ass is on Hartley,” she said in the barest whisper. “And that’s why it’s such a buzz kill that he’s my biggest failure.”

Now she had my attention. “Never tapped that one?” As much as I wanted to avoid the subject of Hartley’s (very fine) ass, the lure of hearing just a little more about the inner workings of Bella’s mind was just too great. “Why not?”

“Timing. Last year when he dumped his old girlfriend, he got together with Corey the *next morning*.” She shook her head, looking at once disbelieving and brokenhearted. “And I love Corey to death, so I can’t even wish for them to break up.”

“That’s big of you.” I’d met Corey too, and she was the bomb.

Bella grinned. “It *is* big of me. I’d never sleep with anyone who was attached. Pepé, for instance, has a girl back in Montreal. There are like fifty pictures of her in his room.”

I wondered how she knew that, but I thought I’d just let that question slide.

“So, any given season a lot of the team is out of rotation for me. That’s why Graham and I hooked up so often last year. He’s always single.”

I kept the flinch off my face, but it wasn’t easy. The glimpses I’d gotten of his antics with women always gave me a surprise stab of...I don’t even know what. At Capri’s, girls hung on Graham with as much frequency as they did the other players. A couple of times I’d seen him make hasty, drunken exits in the company of whichever puck bunny had followed us to Capri’s from the rink.

And I already knew that he and Bella were close. They were awfully touchy feely with one another. Then again, Bella touched *everyone* until they asked her to stop. So I hadn’t made any mental pictures of Bella and Graham

naked together. For some reason, I didn't like imagining it.

If I were a better person, I'd be happy for him, I guess. But apparently, I was the sort to hold a grudge.

Not your business, I reminded myself.

It was time to think about something else. Like the saucer shot I'd sunk into the corner of the net last week, scoring Harkness's first goal of the year in our preseason scrimmage against Brown. That would have to be my happy thought. It's not like I would be getting naked with anyone anytime soon. Hockey took up half my time, and that was only going to get worse. School took up the other half.

Besides myself, I couldn't even *name* a gay man at Harkness.

I had no real social life. When the team went to Capri's for pizza and beer, I usually made an appearance. I'd have a slice or two and a pint, and talk hockey with the guys who made me feel welcome. I usually left early, quitting while I was ahead. It wasn't exactly healthy, the way I still felt like I was apologizing for myself half the time. But there was no road map for being me. I was operating under the vague assumption that if I played really great hockey this season, things would just get easier. My teammates might accept me as a true friend, rather than That Gay Guy who can make tape-to-tape passes.

Because everybody loves a winner, right?

Beside me, Bella made more notes on her legal pad. From the folder in her lap, she extracted a glossy hockey program. "Have you seen this yet?" she asked. "They just came back from the printer."

"Nice," I said, because I knew she'd worked hard on it.

She flipped it open to the roster, where our smiling faces looked out at the camera, our uniforms still crisp and unbloodied. "You do take a nice picture, Rikker," she sighed.

I laughed. "And here I was just thinking how Photoshopped those are. We all look like we've just come from having our teeth whitened."

She pulled the page closer to her face. "What do you think of Orson's sideburns? It's a risky look, but I think he pulls it off."

"No comment."

"God, Rik!" she heaved a sigh. "That was a perfectly harmless question. I didn't ask if you wanted to *do* him."

"Bella," I warned, dropping my voice, "I'm really not joking about this. Even if I felt like admitting to you that facial hair doesn't really do it for me,

it's not a conversation I can have. That's exactly what the homophobes are worried about, you know? That I'm staring at them. And taking notes."

"Maybe they need to lighten up," she whispered.

"I don't think I can make them do that," I whispered back.

She held my eyes for a long moment, and I saw understanding flicker through hers. But then her evil grin reappeared. "Seriously — you don't like facial hair? I *love* it. Even when it chafes my inner thighs. *Especially* then."

With a groan, I closed my eyes, banging my head into the headrest. *Thanks for that image, Bella.* Of all the people on the bus to remind me how horny I was, who knew it would be a chick? Fuck my life.

She giggled. "I just had the best idea."

"I can't wait to hear it."

"Just for fun, I'm going to tell everyone on the team that you don't like facial hair. By Christmas, they'll all be as hairy as Wolf Man."

The laugh erupted from me before I could hold it in. "Or you could try the reverse, just for kicks. Tell them I'm *hot* for facial hair, and by tomorrow they'll all be as clean-shaven as the Marine Corps."

We laughed until the tears were leaking down Bella's face.

"What's so funny?" A head popped up from the seat in front of us to ask. But it belonged to Groucho, a senior defenseman with the shaggiest beard on the team. Bella howled again, and Groucho began to frown.

"Time for chocolate," I said, digging into my bag. Because everyone responds to chocolate. I should probably buy it in bulk.

The bus rolled on. We were heading to an invitational in Boston. We'd play one game tonight and another one tomorrow.

With the program still open in her lap, Bella scribbled on the legal pad, occasionally crossing something out and grumbling.

"What are you doing, anyway?" I asked.

"Hotel room assignments. It's like planning the seating at a wedding."

That got my attention. "What are you going to do with me? You'll be my roommate, right?"

"I can't," she said, making a note on her page. "The athletic department woman has to be with me. We're the only chicks."

Well, fuck. "How about Hartley?"

"He asked me to put him with Frenchie, so he can keep an eye on him. Apparently the kid doesn't like to leave his bong at home. And Hartley

doesn't want anyone to get arrested."

"Who then?"

"I'm working on it." Under her breath, she counted all the names on the page. As I watched, she crossed off a name and switched it with another one.

"Okay, I think I'm going to put you in with Graham."

"Whoa," I said, my heart dropping into my stomach. "You can't do that."

She looked up, and her expression was full of genuine surprise. "Why not?"

I swallowed, trying to keep the panic off my face. "That dude *seriously* does not like me. I'm not kidding. Big-D would probably be happier to see me than Graham."

Bella's eyes narrowed. "You did *not* just compare Graham to Big-D."

I blinked back at her, having no idea what to say. It didn't matter that I knew the difference between Big-D, who was just an all-around bigot and total asshole, and Graham, who hated me for a very special reason. We could not share a room.

"Graham is just a big teddy bear," Bella went on. "I wish everyone would just get off his case." Two pink spots appeared on her cheekbones.

If ever there was a moment for treading lightly, I had found it. Because I realized then that there were a couple of details that I'd missed. Though she claimed to be a free agent, Bella obviously carried some kind of a torch for Graham. The flush on her face suggested that he was her *favorite* teddy bear. (Though she'd probably be shocked to learn that I'd snuggled him first.) And also, she was concerned about him. Probably because he had been sucking wind at practice lately.

What to do?

"I'm not on Graham's case, Bella," I said softly. "But if you want him relaxed and ready to play, I'm telling you that you should give him a different roommate."

Bella stuck her nose back into her work. "I'll take it under advisement. But rooms are tight. And you're wrong about him."

Fuck. "Who knows why he doesn't like me? Maybe he thought I was a shitty player in high school. I lived in Michigan before I moved to Vermont."

She looked up. "I noticed that in your bio. The Jesus Saves team, right?"

"Yeah," I chuckled. Cool T-shirt aside, the private Christian schools

we'd attended were not the right place for me.

"I asked Graham about that. He said he didn't remember you. Was it a big place?"

I could only nod at her, because I needed a moment to inwardly choke on that. *He said he didn't remember you.* It gave me a fresh hit of pain to hear that out loud.

She kept talking, oblivious. "It was a Christian School, huh? That must have been a lot of fun for the gay boy. I mean, if you already knew it then."

I laughed, but the sound was bitter to my own ears. "Oh, I knew it all right. And at that school, they preached it just like you read about." Even before Graham, when I was still in denial, they basically condemned me to hell on a daily basis. I hated that place. "Vermont was so much better. Because everybody there is a little bit weird."

"So you were out in high school?" She clicked her pen and studied me with big green eyes.

It was a fair question, but not easily answered. Straight people always assume that you're either in the closet or all the way out. But that's not really how it worked. You could be out for some people and hiding it from others. "My family knew, and my closest friends. But not the hockey team."

Bella chewed on the end of her pen. "Sports really is the final frontier, isn't it? Now there's same-sex marriage in seventeen states. But the NHL is a hundred percent straight."

"*Sure* it is."

"Right?" she laughed.

The bus rolled on, and we sat in silence for a minute. "Don't put me with Graham," I said quietly.

She made an annoyed sound in her throat. "He's not a jerk, okay? The world is papered over with jerks, but Graham is not one of them."

That might even be true. But it didn't matter. If Bella put us in a hotel room, I could almost picture him leaping from the balcony. And it would be my fault, in a way. Because I still took the occasional opportunity to torture him with a knowing smile or a stare.

"How about this?" I asked, hitting on the solution. "Just run it by him first." That way I wouldn't offend Bella by harping on it. He could tell her himself. "If he doesn't like the idea, tell Hartley I'll babysit Frenchie for him." I'd never heard either of our French-speaking teammates slander me. And "faggot" was the same word in English and in French.

“Fine.”

I looked out the window then, watching the world go by. And I tried to think of hockey. Nothing but hockey.

— *Graham*

By some miracle, I finally played a decent game that night in Boston.

It was the bright lights and the sound of the crowd that woke me the hell up. Though I’d been stinking at practice, the chance to mow down a real live opponent shook the cobwebs off of me. I felt lighter on my feet than I had in weeks. Whenever the other guys had the puck, I was energy in motion. *Mine*, I’d chant to myself, poke-checking the puck out of their grasp. And if the guy didn’t give it up, I forced the issue. My pads got a workout. By the time the game was over, I’d tossed every one of their offensive players onto the boards.

It helped that the other team had looked shaky. There’s nothing like an early goal to light up the squad. Hartley sank one when the clock still read 15:55 in the first period.

And it wasn’t just me who was fired up. Our foot speed was good. Passes went where they were intended to go. Our confidence lasted all three periods, for a 4-0 score on the game.

Finally. It was nice to remember that I could play this game.

Pitbull and Ke\$sha were already singing their guts out by the time I made it into the locker room. Stripping off my sweaty pads, the exhaustion began to hit me. But it was the good kind. I stacked my gear as best as I could into a dodgy metal locker. The host school didn’t have the fancy digs that our stadium had. (Either that, or they’d saved it for themselves.)

Behind me, Bella suddenly slammed the heel of her boot onto something skittering across the floor.

“Gross,” Big-D said. “Tell me that wasn’t a roach.”

“Save the white meat,” I joked. There was no use getting too ornery about the surroundings. It would only make us sound like the elitist snobs that everyone expected from the Ivy League.

“This is the way I picture showers in prison,” somebody else said, heading around the corner into the cave-like facility.

“And, just like in prison,” Big-D put in, “you can expect to be eye-fucked by those of us who like boys.”

There it was. The daily queer smear from Big-D. And what did I do

about it? *Look away. Neutral face. Repeat.* My whole life was a cowardly exercise in raising my deflector shields.

“I’m sure you meant *me*,” Bella quipped, because deflection was not her style. “I like boys. A lot. And let me just throw it out there that I won’t be eye-fucking you while you shower.”

“You don’t have to, darlin’. You’ve had the real deal.”

I thought Bella had lost that round, but she lifted one shoulder and proceeded to flatten him. “It’s good that you remind me of that from time to time. Since it only lasted ten seconds, I tend to forget.”

As she so often does, Bella cracked my deflector shields wide open, and I laughed out loud.

Facing the corner, I took a shower that lasted about three and a half seconds.

People like Big-D have it wrong. They think that the gay guy is going to be the one who’s slowly soaping up his dick, watching you shampoo. But that’s not how it works in a varsity locker room on planet Earth. The gay guy is the one who discreetly goes about his business, showering quickly and then getting the hell out of there. He puts his underwear on when his skin is still damp, even though it will stick up his ass crack for the rest of the night.

He isn’t staring at you, and he’d rather eat broken glass than sport some wood in the locker room. That way, when his life explodes in his face because he forgot to raise the deflector shields one time out of a million, you won’t be able to accuse him of being creepy. You’ll look back on your years of showering together, and be unable to remember a single thing he said or did when you were naked.

Because he is invisible. At least he tries to be. His computer’s browser history is deleted every time he steps away from the machine. His clothes are nondescript. His face is carefully blank.

Honestly, it’s exhausting.

As I jammed my feet into my socks, I would have bet cash money that Rikker was setting a similar land speed record across the room for how quickly a guy could get out of this claustrophobic hellhole. Though I couldn’t even settle up that bet with a glance in his direction. Because that would violate more than one of the codes I kept. Number one: never look around the locker room. And number two: never, *ever* look at Rikker.

“Hey, Graham? I have a favor to ask you.” Bella stood beside me, her

hair going frizzy from the shower steam. Ventilation hadn't been invented when this place was built.

"Yeah? Lay it on me."

"I'm going to give out the hotel room assignments now, and I want to put Rikker with you."

The only blessing was that my face was inside my locker when she said it. Because even with years of practice, no deflector shield was strong enough to withstand that kind of shock. I mean... *holy shit*. I needed to give her some kind of reply. But that's pretty hard to do when your heart has just crawled up your throat and into your mouth.

"You're okay with that, right?" she prodded. "I never took you for the homophobic type."

"Right," I mumbled. Because I was going out of my fucking mind just then. She said she didn't take me for the homophobic type. But that was dead wrong. I was the most homophobic person alive. Because "homophobic" means "afraid of homosexuals."

And I was pants-shitting terrified of myself.

"Graham, look at me."

Sorry, honey. No can do. "Just a second," I said. "Cover me." This conversation had just reminded me of something important: the flask in my hockey bag. With the locker door blocking one side, and Bella the other, I yanked it out and screwed off the cap. With my head in the locker, I took a deep pull.

Even as I swallowed, Bella yanked the flask out of my hand. "Graham!" she hissed. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"*Nothing*," I hissed right back. "Now give me that."

"Not a chance." Her fingers actually shook with fury as she tightened down the top. Then she dropped my flask into a pocket of her bag. "You skated really well tonight," she said, her voice tight. "And I was relieved to see it. Because you are freaking me out lately."

I managed to meet her eyes then, but it wasn't easy. Bella was pretty good at reading people. I felt her laser gaze searching my face for clues.

She leaned in close, although nobody was going to hear us over the thump of the music and the slamming of locker doors. "Why are you drinking so much, Graham?" she asked. "What's the matter?"

I just shrugged. Because that's all I had to say on the subject.

"Fine," she said, her face hardening. "Be a jackass to me, if you must."

She pushed a hotel key envelope into my hand. “But don’t be a jackass to him.”

God, how I hated hearing her say that. It killed me every time I saw Bella and Rikker talking together. Not only did I fear for my own privacy, I hated the feeling that I was losing my best friend. To *him*.

“My flask,” I said, hating the sound of my own voice.

“You can have it back tomorrow, after the game.” She marched off then.

Hell.

There was nothing to do then except to go off to find some dinner. And — if there really was a God in heaven, like they taught us at my homophobic hellhole of a high school — more alcohol.

— *Rikker*

I ate a late dinner of crab cakes and lobster roll at some fish place that Coach herded us to. And then everyone walked back toward the hotel in plenty of time for our ten o’clock curfew. But I dawdled, walking down the side streets, buying myself an ice cream cone in a drowsy little cafe. I liked cities. I liked their busy sidewalks and their anonymity.

Where I grew up in western Michigan, there was only a taste of the city life. Most everyone favored the dull suburbs. When I moved to Vermont for tenth grade, I thought I’d hate the rural atmosphere. But it actually grew on me, because it was more honest than the aggressively tended lawns of my youth. There were ragged meadows, with cows munching them. There were miles of pine forest, and the outline of the Green Mountains everywhere you looked.

Still, I preferred the city. Especially a good, old one. My ex-boyfriend and I used to drive ninety minutes from Burlington into Montreal, where the drinking age (and therefore the clubbing age) was only eighteen. We had a blast finding all the gay bars and trying them out.

A group of college kids passed me on the sidewalk, laughing together. There was no denying that I was lonely, and letting it get to me tonight.

At ten o’clock on the dot, I walked into the hotel carrying my duffel bag and a heavy helping of dread. When Bella had given me my key card, she’d done it with a frown. “If you see anybody drinking before the game tomorrow, will you tell me?”

“Um, sure?” You’d have to be a pretty big idiot to want to drink before

getting onto the ice with a bunch of guys who were trying to squish you like a bug.

She didn't say anything about my rooming situation, so I was pretty sure who I'd find. Unless he'd fled, somehow.

Upstairs, the door to room 312 opened with a mechanical click, and I pushed inside. It was so dark in there that I assumed I was alone. In fact, when my eyes adjusted to the dimness it startled the crap out of me to see Graham sitting at the little table near the window, his chin parked on his folded hands.

I dropped my bag on the floor and fumbled for one of the bedside lamps. Even when I clicked it on, making a circle of yellow light on the rug, he didn't move.

"*Hola, Miguel,*" I said, my voice low.

There was no response.

Seriously? Even if I could understand his reluctance to speak to me in a room full of people, ignoring me right now was asinine. He made me feel like I was starring in that movie where Bruce Willis is dead, but doesn't know it.

I *should* have just headed into the bathroom to brush my teeth and pretend like it didn't matter. But it did matter. And during the next ten seconds, my anger swelled. I was suddenly *livid*, with the sound of blood pounding in my ears. Because no matter how much you might want to pretend a person doesn't exist, you can't do that. Especially if that person is your teammate.

Especially if that person used to be your best friend.

Crossing the room, I stood over him. He didn't move. Not a muscle. So I raised a hand, hovering my palm over his forehead, where all that soft blond hair framed his face. I used to run my fingers through it. But I didn't do that now. Instead, I used the heel of my hand to give his head a violent backward shove.

He moved then, because I really didn't give him a choice. His neck snapped back until it collided with the wall, and his wild eyes met mine. But he didn't say a word. And it made me so fucking crazy that I was close to losing it. I didn't even plan to, but I made a fist.

"Hit me," he whispered then. And the expression on his face held so much pain that you might think I'd *already* socked him.

"*FUCK* you," I spat. I wanted to hit him — I really did. But the small flicker of sanity that I still possessed decided to surface, reminding me that I

would only get in trouble for it. He probably *wanted* me to deck him so I'd get kicked off the team.

Not worth it.

Not worth it.

Just breathe.

I didn't punch him. Instead, I reached up like a punk-ass kid and flicked him on the forehead. That's proof right there that I was, at that moment, cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. Hell, just then, I wished he'd hit *me*. Because then I'd have a good reason to feel this insane.

But that didn't happen either. Instead, Graham reached up and caught my retreating hand by the wrist. Awkwardly, he pulled the back of my hand tight against his forehead, trapping it there. He closed his eyes, and heaved out a breath that had the weight of the world in it.

Stunned, I was frozen in place for a split second. My brain went temporarily offline at the feeling of Graham's hand closing around mine. For a long second, I could only manage to take in the warmth of his palm and the trembling fingers.

Freaked out now, I jerked my hand out of his grip. Taking two steps backward, my knees hit the back of one of the beds, bringing me down to a seated position. *Time out*, my consciousness pleaded, trying to catch up. And all the while my heart slammed into my ribs.

"I'm sorry," he said hoarsely.

I cleared my throat. "For what?"

He gave his head a single, violent shake. "For everything. The whole frickin' thing. It's way too late to say it. But I am. Sorry, I mean."

Whoa. More silence from me, while I waited for the world to stop tilting. "Okay," I said, taking in some extra oxygen.

"I'm sorry I *ran*." He put his head down in his hands, and I could see his chest rise and fall with each breath that sawed in and out.

Well, fuck. A part of me had been waiting five years to hear this. But now that he'd actually apologized, I found that it hurt too much to talk about it. "Um, thanks for the sentiment. But I ran too, dude. It's just that you ran faster."

See, running away wasn't Graham's crime. Running from thugs who are yelling "sick little faggots!" is not a bad call. The real damage was that Graham never spoke to me again. And as far as I knew, he never told a soul that he was there the day I was attacked.

Although, if I'd been thinking straight in that E.R., I probably wouldn't have told anyone either. But they gave me painkillers at the hospital. So my parents were treated to a sloppy version of events. It was enough to freak them out for good.

By the time the police arrived to ask me why the thugs had beat me up, I said what my parents told me to say. "They wanted my wallet." The cops didn't even bother to ask why I still had it. I'm pretty sure I wasn't fooling anyone.

My parents' solution was to get me the hell out of Dodge. They thought that if they sent me away from Graham, I wouldn't stay gay. "Vermont will be good for you," they'd said when they brought up my grandmother. "You'll go there to heal."

Permanently, though.

Yeah. Thinking about this was really not my favorite activity.

Graham was still slumped into his hands at the table. He looked like a man who was waiting to be executed for his crimes. And even though I'd been mad at him for five years, I didn't want to talk about it anymore. "Okay, Graham. Here's what we're going to do."

I waited until he picked his head up to look at me. It was the first time he'd made eye contact on purpose since I'd come to Harkness.

"I'm going to stop torturing you," I said. "No more..." I didn't even know what to call the taunting I'd done to him. "I won't bring it up again."

"I deserved it," he said.

Hearing say that really took me back, because that was a classic Graham response. He had that still-waters-run-deep thing going on. Whenever we fought about Xbox, or whether one of us had slighted the other one — whatever fifteen-year-olds argued about — he felt it deeply.

"Fine," I said. "So this is how you're going to make it better. You're going to stop looking like you want to puke every time I walk through a door. I didn't come to Harkness to wreck your life. I came to play hockey. There's a lot of guys in that room who'd like to toss me out on my ass, so you can try to stop being one of them."

His face was as somber as I'd ever seen it. "Okay," he said finally.

"I mean it. Let's forget every fucked up thing that happened. We won't talk about that shit ever again. But in the locker room, we have a truce."

"All right," he said slowly.

"I'm not expecting you to stick up for me," I added quickly. "Just chill

the fuck out. Can you do that?"

His nod was slow. But it was serious.

There was a knock on the door. "Rikker? Graham?" Bella's voice called.

"Yeah?" we both replied at once.

She twisted the lever. "It's locked, morons."

Graham got up quickly, his long legs eating up the distance to the door in just a few strides. When he opened the door, Bella came in, her glance traveling the quiet room, as if taking our temperature. "Whatcha doing?" she asked.

"Heroin," Graham said. "With a side of meth, and a vodka chaser."

For the first time in over five years, I laughed at one of Graham's dry jokes.

Bella looked from him to me and back again. "Okay then. I was just checking to make sure that everyone is in for the night."

"You can check us off," I said. I got up off the bed and picked up my duffel, rummaging inside for flannel pants and my toothbrush.

As I passed Bella on the way into the bathroom, she said, "Hey, Graham, did Rikker tell you that you *were* on the same team for part of high school?"

"We, uh, covered that," he said.

Standing at the sink, I brushed my teeth. Thanks to the mirror, I could see Bella reach up to cup Graham's face in two hands. She rose up on her tiptoes and brought her mouth over his.

With my toe, I kicked the door shut behind me. But because the doors in cheap hotel rooms are made with all the sturdiness of a rice cracker, I heard Graham's comment a long minute later, while I was pulling up my sleep pants. "That was nice and everything, Bella. But did I pass your Breathalyzer test?"

"Maybe that's not why I kissed you," she snapped.

"The hell it isn't."

Her voice got tight. "You're right. I don't like you at all."

"Night, Bella."

"Night, moron."

I waited until I heard the hotel room door close before I came out again. Both beds were untouched, so I chose the nearest one without asking whether Graham had a preference. He and I did not need to have *any* conversations

with the word “bed” in them. Pulling back the bedspread, I climbed in, rolling to put my back to him. It was body language that tried to say, *Nope! No awkwardness here.*

Graham spent a few minutes in the bathroom, too. “You want this shut off, right?” he asked. I turned to find him standing by the lamp, fully dressed, including his hockey jacket and shoes.

“Yeah,” I answered.

He clicked off the light. “I’m going for a walk,” he said, his voice low.

“Okay?” That was against curfew, but I wasn’t going to argue with him.

“I just need, you know, head space.”

Pushing up on one elbow, I asked, “Do you still sleep like shit?” Since I’d known him, he was a terrible sleeper. The only middle school insomniac I’d ever met.

“Yup.” Absently, he reached a hand up to probe the back of his head, where it had hit the wall before.

“Shit. I’m sorry about your head.”

He gave his chin a shake, as if warding off my apology. “All our previous shit is covered under the treaty, no?”

That made me smile, and for a second his expression softened. But then he shut it down, turning away from me. He flicked off the bathroom light. Then, without another word, he opened the door and left.

I lay there in the dark for a long time, wondering what to think. How odd to find myself, after five years, lying sleeplessly in another strange bed, wondering where Graham was.

Part of me would always be hurt. When I was beaten and scared, I’d waited for him to call me. I’d slept with my phone in my hand in that hospital bed. So that nobody would try to keep him from me when he finally called.

But he never did. Not once.

I wasn’t sixteen anymore, though. And the years had provided some much-needed distance from that awful time. What I hadn’t wanted to face at sixteen was the fact that my phone made outgoing calls, too. I was looped up on pain meds for a few days — not a few years. Even after they shipped me off to Vermont, I could have sat myself in one of the wicker chairs on my grandmother’s porch and called him.

I didn’t, though. Because I was scared to hear that he didn’t want me anymore.

Fuck, we were *sixteen*. We’d confided in nobody. And we were too

afraid to ask for help. So I could either carry around this childhood grudge for the rest of my life, or try to set it down. Seems like a no brainer, right?

When I finally fell asleep, I was still alone in the room.

— *Graham*

The following weekend we had practices only — no games. It was our lull before the storm. Regular season games were about to kick in at full force. So Bella and Hartley and I sat a long time over Saturday brunch in the Beaumont dining hall, drinking coffee and shooting the shit. Hartley's girlfriend Corey told us a funny story about holding tryouts for an empty goalie position on the women's team. But I was feeling almost too lazy to listen. Outside of the old arched windows, the fall leaves made a yellow carpet in the courtyard. Sometimes this place was like a freaking postcard for Ye Olde College Experience.

Like a total sap, I loved everything about it.

Eventually I got my lazy butt up to go, and Bella stood up too. "I'll walk you out," she said. Together, we started down the granite steps and out into the autumn day. The air had that Harkness smell — a mixture of decaying leaves and coffee beans.

Bella had a giant duffel on one shoulder and a box under her arm, so I scooped the duffel off her shoulder as we walked along.

She gave me a smile. "Aren't you the gentleman?"

"Once in awhile. When it suits me."

"What are you up to today?"

"I have to hit the library for a couple of hours. You?"

"Team errands. Can I pawn one off on you? It's on your way."

"Sure?"

She stopped and beckoned for the duffel I was carrying. Unzipping it, Bella pulled out a new *Harkness Hockey* jacket in its plastic wrapper. "Can you drop this off? It's Rikker's. He lives in McHerrin."

Aw, *Christ*. "We don't know if he's home, though," I said. "Why don't you give me a different errand. I don't want to carry that around all day if he's out."

She pressed the jacket into my chest. "I just texted him from the dining hall, and he's there. He even propped the outside open for me. It will take you two minutes. He's in the first entryway on the left, third floor."

Damn. It. I couldn't think of a decent reason to turn her down. "Okay."

“You’re the best. See you at practice tonight.” She hefted her duffel again, which was now not quite so large.

She walked away without a backward glance, having no idea what she’d just asked me to do.

Even though Rikker and I had cleared the air in Boston, we weren’t pals. When I’d walked out of that hotel room after our crazy-ass conversation, I was shaking like a leaf. A few laps on foot around Boston had helped.

But I knew I couldn’t stay in that hotel room with Rikker. Talking to him had stirred up a lot of raw memories for me. I couldn’t lay there in the dark, listening to him breathe, and re-live the sound of pounding feet in that alley where we’d been attacked. “Cocksuckers!” they’d yelled. “Faggots!”

It used to be that when I closed my eyes, the voices were always right there, waiting for me. Along with the sound of their laughter. And the heavy thud of Rikker’s body hitting the ground when he’d tripped.

Once in a while I still heard that sound in my dreams.

“Get the other one!” someone had shouted. I’d switched into survival mode, and I just ran. Even after I’d gotten away, I kept running. I ran a mile in the wrong direction. When I’d stopped, the streets were unfamiliar. On shaking legs, I’d found a city bus stop. But I wasn’t that familiar with the bus system. It took me a couple of hours to get home. I was so freaked out when I finally got home that I might have broken down, telling my parents everything. But the house was empty. There was a note from my Mom on the perfectly clean kitchen counter telling me that she and my father had gone to walk around the sculpture garden.

While I’d left Rikker all alone to be beaten.

Panicked, pacing my kitchen, I’d had to run to our bathroom to throw up. I fell asleep on the bathroom floor after that. But somehow, when my parents came home, I’d gotten up and tried to act as normal as possible. Down in the basement, the game controllers sat next to each other on the sofa, right where Rikker and I had left them.

So I’d knocked them off onto the floor, then curled up in a ball and commenced hating myself. And I’d never really stopped.

Last weekend in Boston, I’d given those memories a couple more hours to churn. After pacing the streets, I walked back to the block where our team’s hotel was. But instead of going inside, I went into the hotel on the next corner. Sitting at the bar, I’d dampened those old memories with beer.

(Only beer. Bella would be so proud.) Then I'd gone to the check-in desk and asked for a room. Two hundred dollars later, I walked into another hotel room. I didn't even turn on the lights. I set my phone alarm, dropped my jeans and jacket, climbed into the bed and slept.

The next morning, I'd snuck back into the team's hotel, and into Rikker's room to retrieve my things. He'd been eating breakfast with the rest of my teammates.

Since then, we'd spoken only once. After the final game, we'd found ourselves standing next to each other at a fast food counter. "You okay?" he'd asked without removing his eyes from the lit menu board above our heads.

"Yeah, we're solid," I'd said.

That was it. Until now.

On my way up the stairs in McHerrin, I passed the rooms where Hartley and Corey had lived last year. When I got to the third floor, one of the doors was ajar. I tapped on it with my knuckles.

"Yeah!" he rasped. The familiar sound of his voice clocked me over the head like it always did, and I made myself take a deep breath before I pushed on the door. *Please be fully dressed*, I prayed as I entered.

Rikker reclined on his bed, two different textbooks open in front of him. When he glanced up, I saw him do a double take. In fact, he sat up so fast that one of the books slapped shut.

"Hey," I said. "Bella asked me to drop this for you."

"Thanks," he recovered, shoving the books aside and standing up.

"Heads up."

I tossed him the bundle, and he caught it with a grin, turning it around in his hands. Then he ripped the plastic and tore it back, exposing the wool and leather. "Nice."

Extracting the jacket, he turned it around so that I could see the back, where RIKKER was spelled out.

"Well, put it on already," I said. "You know you want to."

He smiled again, because I was right. "What is it about these things, anyway? It's just a jacket. But..."

But it was *everything*. "I dunno," I said. "Maybe it's that you have to bust your ass six days a week for seven months a year to own one?"

He slid one arm into the jacket. "That must be it." He pulled it on, straightening the shoulders. He spun around once. "I'm in."

If it were any other guy in the world, I would have said “lookin’ good,” or something like that. And he did, of course. But I didn’t trust myself. “You’re in,” I agreed.

Rikker took two steps across his tiny room to reach the little closet in the corner. From there he yanked another jacket, this one red with blue sleeves. “Funny. I thought I was in when they gave me this,” he said, showing me the Saint B’s logo. “I don’t even know why I kept this thing. Probably out of spite.”

“What happened there, anyway?” *Ack*. Even as I asked, I knew it was the wrong thing to do. I should have just gotten the hell out of there. But the question had been burning a hole in my brain, and it kind of slipped out.

Rikker’s smile turned wry. “Now there’s a cautionary tale.” He shoved the Saint B’s jacket back into the closet.

“You don’t have to tell me.”

With a shrug, he sat down on the edge of his bed. And when he raised those big brown eyes to mine, I couldn’t have looked away to save my life. “There was a photo of me, and I sure as hell didn’t know it had been taken.”

“A photo,” I repeated, like an idiot.

He wiggled his eyebrows. “You know, a *photo*. Anyway, during the spring term, my fuck buddy decided he wanted more than I was willing to give him. He got mad at me, and he emailed the picture to the coach. I got chucked off the team the next day.”

It was a real struggle to keep my face impassive, given all that I’d just heard. The first thought that hit me was how *ugly* that betrayal was. My second thought was: *but I hurt him worse*.

And lastly: *Rikker had a fuck buddy*. I tucked that away to think about later.

“God,” I said finally. “How did you not know about the picture?”

He shook his head, that lopsided smile on his face. “Well, when he took it, I had his balls in my mouth. Couldn’t exactly see what he was doing with his hands.”

I laughed, but it came out sounding like a choking fit, as I struggled to fight off that image — of Rikker kneeling down in front of... *Jesus Christ*, I might get hard just thinking about it. “What a jackass,” I said, wondering how to change the subject.

“You think? I heard Big-D telling somebody in the locker room the other day, ‘hey, never stick it in crazy!’ I wanted to say that it was true for

men too. But I didn't want to get my ass kicked."

Another bark-like laugh escaped me, and I could feel myself blushing. My face was probably as red as his Saint B's jacket by now. We both chuckled for a minute, but then it died back to silence.

And now I was having trouble meeting his eyes. So mine roamed the room. "Hey, is that you on a snowboard?" There was a picture tacked up over his desk. It was the only thing on the wall, actually. It showed two figures suspended in the air, mid-jump. And even though they were covered in a whole lot of cold weather gear, the one nearest to the camera had Rikker's lazy smile.

"Yeah! It only took us about thirty tries to get that picture." He smiled at the photo, as if remembering the day. "You ever tried snowboarding? It's pretty great."

I shook my head. "Michigan is still flat, just in case you forgot. That's why we skate, remember? Looks like fun. But I'm not sure I'd like that feeling of having my feet tied together."

"That takes some getting used to."

I found myself leaning back against the doorframe, continuing the conversation instead of cutting it short. That's not what I came up here to do. But I'd missed this. How many hours had Rikker and I spent just shooting the shit during the three years of our friendship? A thousand? Probably more. After he'd left, there was nobody I'd ever been so close to.

Christ, that was depressing.

"...A snowboard is just another blade, with edges, right?" Rikker was saying. "So it shocked the hell out of me that I couldn't even stand up on the thing. And my high school boyfriend was like, just do this." Rikker made a hand motion of someone zig-zagging down a mountain.

My brain snagged on *high school boyfriend*.

"...I finally paid cash for a real lesson, because it was either that or we were going to kill each other. And two hours later, I could handle most of the groomers. The next weekend, I could do even more. It comes fast once you get the basic motion. And I didn't want to be the only Vermonter who couldn't snowboard."

"Vermont, huh?"

Rikker leaned back on his hands, looking more relaxed than he had before. "I fucking love Vermont, honestly. It made me actually *like* high school."

“Cool.”

“It *was* cool. And if I were smarter, I would have played hockey for the University of Vermont, and avoided the shitsplosion at Saint B's.”

But then you wouldn't be sitting here talking to me right now, I thought immediately.

Annd that was my cue to leave. I checked my watch, like the tool that I am. “Shit, I'd better get going. See you at practice?”

Rikker blinked, probably confused by my abrupt departure. “Sure,” he said after a beat. “See you over there.” He dragged one of his books back into his lap. “Thanks for the delivery.”

“It's nothing,” I said. And then I practically left a vapor trail on my way out of his building.

Talking to Rikker in his room had been the most vivid ten minutes of my week.

Naturally, I vowed never to go back there.

Odd Man Rush: *creating a scoring opportunity by outnumbering the opposing defense in the zone.*

— *Graham*

The only time I ever ate at The Slippery Elm — one of Harkness’s few fancy restaurants — was when my parents came to town. This time, when I arrived at the entrance to the sleek dining room, none of my family had arrived yet. But the last text I’d received had the ‘rents checking in to their hotel, so I knew it wouldn’t be long.

The place smelled like turkey, stuffing, garlic, and herbs. My stomach growled in appreciation. When a smiling hostess came to rescue me, she asked if I had a reservation.

“It should be under Graham. Four people.”

“Follow me.”

She led me to a nice table by the window, where I received a wine list and the kind of hand-written menu which informed more than it invited you to make selections. But on Thanksgiving, that was only fair. The chefs in the kitchen were busy putting snooty touches on plate after plate of turkey with self-consciously fancy side dishes.

This year, we had hockey games scheduled during both the Thanksgiving and the Christmas breaks. So while most students booked flights for leisurely stays at home, the team would return early to what felt like a ghost town.

Not that I’m complaining. Hockey was a big deal at Harkness. That’s partly because hockey was a New England thing, and partly because Ivy League colleges can compete at a higher level in hockey than in a money sport like football.

And somehow I’d bluffed and blundered my way into the center of it all.

So my parents had flown in from Michigan to eat overpriced turkey with me on Thanksgiving, and then hang around to watch me play Saturday night. It was all pretty glam.

A server glided over to my table. He did, really. He glided. Dressed in a crisp white shirt with a black vest, it was obvious that the restaurant was going for a traditional look. But instead of stodgy slacks, this guy had upped the ante with a pair of very tight black jeans. They hugged his ass in a way that I was trying not to notice. So I looked at his face instead. He was probably about my age, or a couple of years older, with shiny black hair and blue eyes. “Can I bring you a drink while you wait for the rest of your party?” His voice was huskier than I was expecting.

“Um...” *Damn it.* For a second there, I got a little stuck on how attractive he was. Shit. I looked down at the wine list, as if I knew fuck-all about wine. *Deflector shields engaged.* “What do you have on tap?”

He rattled off a string of choices, and I ordered the first beer on the list, just to get rid of him.

“May I see your I.D., sir?”

Great. A Coke would have been the way to go. Live and learn. I dug my wallet out of my back pocket, and handed it up to him, my gaze on the doorway. Now would be a great time for my parents to walk in. Or even my harpy of a sister.

No such luck.

He studied my driver’s license for a beat longer than really seemed necessary. *Don’t look,* I coached myself. *Don’t look.*

I looked. And his eyes met mine immediately. “Nice picture,” he said, handing it back to me. He didn’t wink or anything cheesy like that. But there was an unmistakable flare of interest there.

Stellar job, deflector shields.

I took my ID back, shoved it into my pocket, and then took a big slug of the cold water he’d poured me, just for something to do. He went away, and mercifully it was a different server who delivered my beer. I looked out the window and wondered how long it took my parents to check into a hotel.

And where was my sister? Lori was supposedly taking the Metro North up from New York, where she worked as a minion on Wall Street. I hadn’t seen her since the summer. Or anyone else for that matter, except my teammates and my textbooks.

November had been brutally busy. We’d played six hockey games that month, winning five and tying one. It was a streak unheard of in Harkness history. While our team had been solid for the past two years, we’d *never* sat so firmly atop the Eastern standings before. If I didn’t think it would jinx me,

I would have taken a screen shot of our record and hung it on the wall.

Even better, I'd managed to pull my weight in every game. The truce that Rikker and I established probably had something to do with it. Since our chat in his room, we'd had a nod-and-continue-walking-by relationship, which suited me fine. He knew things about me that I wished he didn't know. I could never quite forget that with a single drunken utterance (*hey, you want to hear a funny story about Graham?*) he could end my life as I knew it.

But he didn't do that. And, like he promised, he'd stopped reminding me that he could.

For the last few weeks we'd been just two teammates on the ice. Rikker just did his job feeding shots to Hartley, and I did my job warding off the other team's offense. For the most part, my life had slipped back into control.

Until tonight.

Earlier this week, I'd realized that my parents' visit to Harkness would rain down a new shower of awkward into my life. And that's why I sat there gulping my pint in the restaurant, wondering how I could get a second one without making eye contact with the sexy waiter. Hell, my parents' arrival in town made me want to change my drink order from ale to Bourbon.

"Mikey!"

I looked up to see my sister hoofing it in a skirt and heels across the room towards me. And my parents were right behind her. I stood up to greet them, taking the onslaught of affection like a man. My sister squeezed me, my mother tousled my hair and kissed me. My father gave me the regulation one-armed man hug with a back slap.

We all sat down, and the family chatter began. My sister complained about her job while my father asked me questions about our last game, and what Coach had in mind for Saturday. Mr. Tight Pants came back to take drink orders and drop off a basket of warm cornbread. I took a single surreptitious glance at his ass as he walked away. I usually wouldn't risk it when my family was around. But the place was crowded. I could have been looking at anybody.

"I got Red Wings tickets for over Christmas," my dad said.

"Yeah?" I dragged my attention back to the table. "That's awesome."

"If we drive down on the twenty-sixth, and return the next day, you'll have another three days before you have to fly back."

"Can't wait," I said. And it was true.

"I would have gotten tickets to the Winter Classic, but..."

“I know. My game schedule.”

But Dad only beamed. “Too busy winning!” He grew up in Texas, where they don’t play much hockey. He had been a big football fan his whole life, until I started skating. Now he followed the Red Wings — and me, of course — with red-blooded enthusiasm.

Three servers approached our table at once, so that our five salad plates could land on the table almost simultaneously. That’s how fancy a joint this place was. As a stylized pile of greens landed in front of me, I got a whiff of men’s cologne. I didn’t even have to look up to guess which waiter had just served me, leaning the smallest fraction of a degree closer than necessary.

With my deflector shields firmly in place, I didn’t even blink. *Peddle it elsewhere, buddy.* Although, my empty beer glass was exchanged for a full one, even though I hadn’t asked for it. So I was grateful. But not grateful enough to spare him a thankful glance.

Too risky.

I forked up a bite of the fern-like salad. There were dried cranberries and some kind of candied nuts in there. It was great. As long as they didn’t run out of turkey in the next ten minutes.

“This is so good!” my sister said. “It was a great idea to come here, Mom. Thank you.” Three years older than I was, Lori had always been the family kiss-up.

“I’m just sorry you can’t stay the night,” my mother told her. “We would have gotten you a room.”

“I have to work tomorrow,” she grimaced.

“That is just ridiculous.”

“Beth,” my father warned. “Those training programs are rigorous. Lori is busy mowing down the competition.”

My father loved that phrase — mowing down the competition. Dad loved winning. There were a couple of tricky years there in middle school when I wasn’t doing so well in football. He tried to help, but I could just feel his frustration with me. The fact that he didn’t know much about hockey when I started playing was actually part of the appeal.

That, and Rikker wanted to try out.

See, that was just another thing that made me a solid contender for Jackass of the Year. I’d spent the first two months of the year wishing Rikker would just get the hell off my hockey team. But I never would have touched a stick in the first place if it weren’t for him. I’d been dining on a steady diet of

anguish and irony all season.

And now, salad greens.

When the turkey finally arrived, I was too hungry to even notice who served it. So at least I had that going for me. And the food was good. Really good. My mother's brainstorm about how to have a family Thanksgiving in spite of my game schedule had paid off. And I was just thinking optimistic thoughts about dessert when my father began to ask questions about Coach's forward lineup. And then I felt the dread roll back in waves, the same tension I'd choked on during the first seven weeks of the year.

Because my parents were going to *recognize* Rikker. And there was nothing to be done about it.

I took a deep breath. "Hey, you know what's funny?" I asked, trying for casual. I'd gone back and forth all morning, trying to decide whether to say something today, or just let them notice him at the game. But I was afraid there would be some kind of loud Mom reaction — an ear splitting scream of surprise when she saw him. I was afraid to hear to hear her squealing, for all the world to hear, "Mike, why didn't you *tell me* that Rikker was *on your team?*"

Anything but that.

"What's funny?" my mom prompted me.

"You'll never guess who turned up on the team this year. Remember Johnny Rikker?"

First, her eyes went wide. Then her mouth dropped open. And, unless I was mistaken, her eyes got wet. "Jesus, really?"

Okay. That was a more dramatic reaction than I'd hoped for. "Yeah." I chased the last bit of pureed sweet potato around on my plate. But when I tried to eat it, my mouth was suddenly as dry as the Sahara.

"Wow, honey. I'd always wondered what happened to him. He just... vanished to his grandmother's. I worried about him."

My sister piped up. "You mean, because he got beat up and then kicked out for being gay?"

"Now that was just a rumor," my mother admonished her.

But now I was quietly freaking out. Because I didn't know my mother had ever heard a rumor like that.

"His family all but FedExed him to the Grandmother," my father said, folding and refolding his napkin.

"So he's okay?" my mother asked. "He's doing well?"

I gave the world's most casual shrug. "He's a second line winger. Seems okay to me."

"Well that's..." my mother swallowed hard. "That's just amazing. I always liked that boy. Such a sweetie, even though his mother was such a witch. And now you have your friend back."

I didn't have a response that would pass Mom's finely-honed Bullshit Radar, so I said nothing at all.

"Speaking of your friends," my father broke in, "how is that young lady you were seeing?"

"Bella?" I smiled. Because it was easy to smile when thinking of her. "It's just casual, Dad. But Bella's great. I see a lot of her." *Because she's the team manager, and on a personal mission to make me drink less. And good luck with that.*

"There's a girl who knows a lot about hockey," Dad said.

"Damned straight." It wasn't until I picked up my third beer and drained it that I realized which words I'd used to agree with him. Jesus. *Paging Dr. Freud.*

My mother reached across the table to grab my hand. "Mike, why don't you invite Johnny Rikker out for dinner with us on Saturday?"

"Naw," I said. "He'll be with his own people, probably. That's nice, though, Mom."

She frowned at me. "Aren't the two of you still friends?"

Another carefully choreographed shrug. "He's in a different house. Does anyone know where the men's is?" I asked. "Excuse me a minute."

I needed a time out. So I found the bathroom, where classical guitar music was playing over a sound system. And I took my time. On the return trip, I spotted our waiter at the table. He was executing that upscale restaurant maneuver of pushing in my empty chair and refolding my napkin. I held back an extra second to make sure he was clear of the place before I came back.

When I pulled out my chair, something fluttered to the floor. Reaching down, I closed my fingers around a slip of paper.

Later, when I'd freed myself of my family and retired to my room to drink alone, I inspected it. *Alex*, he'd printed on it. Followed by a phone number. I crumpled it into a tiny pill-sized thing, and threw it in the trash.

— *Rikker*

I didn't go home to my grandmother's house for Thanksgiving, because

I didn't have a ride up to Vermont. If I were a smarter man, I'd make the effort to figure out who else at Harkness lived near Burlington. There was a bus route, but the bus company somehow turned the four-hour trip into an eight-hour tour of New England's major highways.

Even though Gran was disappointed, it didn't make sense to travel for sixteen hours round-trip when I had just two days off.

For Thanksgiving Day, Coach invited everyone who was stuck in town over to his home for supper. I made myself go, even though I wasn't feeling it. Bella had taken the train to New York to see her parents. Without her as a buffer, dinner at Coach's house sounded like a long few hours.

But it was fine. This time, the social lubricants were copious platters of food and a smorgasbord of football on the big screen in the den.

Coach's wife was a smiling woman who seemed to enjoy watching a dozen giant college guys help themselves to seconds and thirds. "That's what catering is for," she said when I apologized for our collective appetite.

"You're a smart lady," I said, dropping another dollop of garlic mashed potatoes onto my plate.

"I've been a coach's wife for thirty-five years," she said, sipping her wine. "You learn a thing or two. Did you try the cranberry stuffing? I think it's excellent."

Coach's wife was a solid eight on the Rikker Scale, I decided.

McHerrin Hall was as still as a tomb that weekend. I got a lot of studying done in all that silence. When Saturday night finally rolled around, I was ready to hit the ice. With my duffel over my shoulder, I was just opening the ice level door when I heard a shriek, and the sound of someone calling my name.

"Johnny Rikker! Stop right there, young man." I turned around to see Graham's mother trotting down the ramp to catch me.

"Hey, Mrs. G! It's good to see you." I let the rink door fall closed again, and she tackled me in a hug.

"You are enormous! Look at you!" She actually reached up to ruffle my hair. "You sat at my kitchen table eating Oreos maybe fifty pounds ago!"

"Are you telling me I've gotten fat?" I teased.

I glanced at Graham, who looked like he'd rather be anywhere else but here. This little reunion was making him deeply uncomfortable. So I moved away from the door, and he ghosted behind me, slipping into the rink without

comment.

“Are you coming to Michigan for Christmas?” Mrs. G. asked.

“Probably not. My Grandmother’s getting older, and I like to spend time with her when I can.” That was all true. Although, it was also true that unless I started showing an interest in women, my parents were happy to keep up the pretense that I was just too busy on the East Coast to come home.

“She’s lucky to have you,” Graham’s mom said. “*Very* lucky.” There was a firmness to the statement that left me wondering how much of my story was common knowledge back in Michigan. One bonus of my exile was that I never had to listen to the gossip about myself.

Mrs. G. was still beaming at me, and it was easy to smile back. I’d always loved Graham’s mom. In fact, I was pretty sure that if it had been Graham instead of me who accidentally ended up coming out of the closet, that she would have taken it all in stride.

But I guess we’d never know.

“I’d better get in there,” I told her.

“Play safe,” she said, grabbing me for a hug. “And don’t be a stranger.”

Aw. She used to say exactly the same thing before our ninth grade games. Over her shoulder, I saw Bella coming down the ramp. And her keen eyes were taking in the scene of Graham’s mother hugging me. Uh oh. I stepped back and put my hand on the door. “Sure is good seeing you.” Then I opened it and slipped inside.

Before the door closed, I heard Bella say, “Hi, Mrs. Graham.”

“Bella, Sweetie!” was the last thing I heard before the door fell closed.

As I tossed my duffel onto the bench, I did a double-take. The whiteboard over my locker area had been changed. Instead of Rikker, it now read FAGGOT.

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

Leaving it there, I tossed my jacket onto the hook. Jerking the zipper to my duffel open, I had to remind myself to breath. In. Out. In. Out. It was just a slur from some coward. It was middle school stuff, really.

“Hey, Rikker!” Bella’s voice advanced on me from behind. “I didn’t know you knew...” Abruptly she broke off. “What the *fuck*?”

At her outburst, I felt Hartley’s attention swing in our direction. Which probably meant that everyone in the room would be staring in about two point five seconds.

Fanfuckingtastic.

“Oh, hell no,” Hartley said. He stepped right onto my end of our bench, his pads in my face. With his fingers, he scrubbed away the lettering. “What asshole wants to tell me this was his idea of a joke?” Hartley turned, looking around the room.

Nobody spoke up. *Shocker*.

“Just leave it alone,” I muttered, pulling my chest padding over my head.

“No,” Hartley argued, hopping down, red-faced. “We’re not saying that shit in here. This room is a jackass free zone.”

The thing was, nobody had actually said it out loud. That would take actual courage. And I’d learned a long time ago that you had to choose your goddamn battles. “It’s just a word,” I grunted. “The only time I really don’t want to hear it is from a bunch of guys chasing me with baseball bats.”

There came a loud crash from the corner. When I turned to look, Graham was busy gathering up the armful of gear that he’d dropped. And then he seemed to abandon it all and turn away, speed-walking through the doorway leading toward the toilets.

Breathe, I coached myself. *In. Out. In. Out.* There was still a lot of gearing up to be done. So I got busy with the pads and the socks. When I’d almost finished, Bella reappeared in front of me. “Coach wants to see you,” she said softly.

“Oh *fuck* no,” I groaned, wanting to kill her for making a federal case about this. I stepped around her and headed for the hallway.

Coach was sitting on the end of his own desk when I walked in. “Sit down a second,” he said.

I dropped my ass in a chair and waited.

“Sorry about that bullshit in the locker room,” he said.

I put up two hands. “Let’s not blow it out of proportion.”

He shrugged. “Chickenshit move, right? I only told Bella to let me know if it happened again.”

“Works for me.” I felt my shoulders relax.

“Unfortunately, there’s something else we need to talk about. There’s a reporter at the *Connecticut Standard* who’s sniffing around. She’s figured out that it’s pretty unusual to see a transfer approved to another Division One school. She wants the story.”

“Oh, Holy...” I stopped myself from cursing in front of Coach. But I would rather find “faggot” written on my *forehead* than talk to a reporter.

“What happens if I just say no?”

Coach chewed on his lip before answering. “If you turn down the interview, let’s call it a twenty-five percent chance that the story just goes away. But if she’s any damned good, she’ll call Saint B’s and ask them what happened. She might find someone who feels like weaving the tale. And then you’re letting the other side tell it.”

I let that sink in. *Rock? Let me introduce you to Hard Place.*

“...And if we keep winning, and I think we will, ESPN will be asking the same questions pretty soon. It’s unfortunate, son. But the media lives for this shit.”

“So what are you telling me to do? I’ll do whatever you say.” And I would, too. “I mean, you didn’t sign up for any of this shit.”

He grinned. “Actually, I think I did. It’s the price of doing business with you, kid. You keep feeding Hartley those lamp-lighters, and they can cover you on Good Morning America if they want.”

I groaned. “No they can’t. I don’t want to be that guy. I just want to play hockey.”

“I know that,” he chuckled. “Not everybody wants to be an activist. But you don’t have to come off that way. You can just meet the nice lady and tell her the boring version. You lost your place on the team because a coach broke the new regulation. A couple of lawyers argued about it, and the ACAA agreed with your petition. End of story.”

The way he put it was nice and casual. Coming from Coach’s mouth, it didn’t sound like daytime television. Still... I’d rather not talk to any reporters. Ever.

“Think about it,” Coach said, standing up. “We can stall a couple of days, because it’s a holiday weekend, you know? Now I need you out there skating.”

“Will do.”

I went back to the locker room and hurried to suit up. Coach gathered everyone else to talk strategy. Alone in the locker room, I took another look at my whiteboard, which was now blank, except for smudges. I took a second to wipe it down. And then, with Hartley’s marker, I wrote “YOUR AD HERE” in the space.

There is nothing like a hockey game to clear your mind. You can’t skate that hard while stewing over your life. It just isn’t possible. When I’m on the

ice, every particle of my consciousness is taken up by the essential activities of breathing, pushing hard and watching that little black rubber disc.

One thing did not escape my notice, though. Graham played a hard-ass defensive game. He was everywhere tonight, slamming the enemy into the boards when they had the puck, and tripping them when they tried to get away. Since coming to Harkness, I'd been surprised by just how aggressive he was during games. Tonight you could argue that he was a little too aggressive. By the end of the second quarter, he'd already drawn penalties for both hooking and slashing.

He skated *angry*. He skated as if he had something to prove.
Don't we all.

— *Graham*

We tied the game. Believe it or not, that was progress. Last year we'd lost to that team twice.

In the locker room, I sat down on the bench and peeled off my sweaty pads. My contribution was dubious tonight, because I couldn't stay out of the sin bin. When the other team turned up the heat, I got a little crazy. I dug deep and I hit hard, and I wasn't subtle about it. I drew three two-minute penalties, which was two more than Coach had liked.

"A bulldozer uses more finesse," Coach barked at me the second time I forced the team to fend off a power play.

"I'm trying," I said. But it wasn't really accurate. The two days with my parents — and all their well-intentioned questions — had made me crazy. I'd spent the past forty-eight hours feeling raw and transparent. So I was already a little nuts before that slur on Rikker's whiteboard freaked me out. And just when I thought I couldn't take any more drama, he had to go and make that crack about guys with baseball bats.

I'm not proud of what happened next.

The room had just become too claustrophobic for me to take. I'd tried to zone out a little, to relax. But it was no good. That awful day was five *years* ago. More, actually. But whenever something jogged me back to that ugly moment, I could always feel the pounding feet and the shouting, right down to my guts. And there was no fighting it. So I'd walked into a bathroom stall and puked, covering the sound with a flush of the toilet.

Pussy of the Year, right here, people. Just engrave my name on the fricking trophy.

By the time we got out on the ice, I was angry enough at myself that it helped me get my mojo back. Tonight, a couple of guys on the opposing team would be icing their ribs, thanks to me. But this was hockey, not intramural Frisbee. They basically had it coming just for showing up.

Of course, now I felt pretty busted up, too.

I stowed my helmet and gloves. It was time to shower, but I was feeling too wrecked to do anything about it. I skated hard during the overtime period, but we couldn't sink one. So our win song wasn't blasting tonight. It was quiet enough to hear all the conversations going on around me.

"Whatcha up to tonight?" Bella asked Rikker and Hartley.

"Eh," Rikker said. "I was trying to decide whether or not to dress up for the Drag Ball."

There was an awkward silence, while everyone tried to decide if he was serious.

Only Bella laughed. "Very funny."

"Right?" Rikker grinned. "My night is going to be a bag of Doritos and catching up on Sports Center. And I should probably order a set of wiper blades for my grandmother's truck. She always buys the wrong size."

Hartley slapped him on the shoulder. "Capri's first?"

"I can probably fit it in."

"Don't spend too much primping, boys," Bella prodded. "I'm starving. Graham, you coming to Capri's?"

"Maybe," I said, my voice hoarse from growling at the competition all night. I wasn't feeling social, and was therefore on the fence about Capri's. But at least it would give me an excuse to say goodbye to my parents. They were on a morning flight out tomorrow.

And I was starved, too. Because when you freak out and then puke up your dinner, that happens.

The ambiance of Capri's was reassuring to my jangled nerves. There was something about the same old sticky floor and the familiar thirty-minute wait for a pie that soothed a guy. The beer flowed, and the music was loud enough so that nobody really noticed that I said barely a word to anyone.

A few slices of pizza evened me out enough that I could focus on getting my buzz on. Bella kept refilling my beer glass, because she was under the mistaken impression that I wouldn't be able to get the job done on Capri's piss-water. But whenever she got up to refill a pitcher or stroke one of my

teammates' asses, I took a nip from the flask in my pocket.

Since most of the student body was still away for Thanksgiving, the team had Capri's to ourselves. That meant that I didn't even have to decide whether or not I should try to hook up. The pickings were so slim that nobody would wonder why I didn't bother. Just sitting there like a lump in that booth, breathing in my teammates' chatter, was as close to peaceful as my life ever got these days.

Fast forward three hours or so, and I'd drunk the last of the Johnnie Walker in my pocket. Across the room, Bella was busy putting the moves on Frenchie, and so she wasn't going to notice my stagger.

That was my cue to go home.

With a half a wave to Hartley, I angled my tired body out the back door. I stopped to pee on the nearest secret society, as usual. The cold air was just what I needed. But even so, my drunk-guy homing device was flickering a bit. Instead of heading home, I just stood there awhile, holding up the granite wall with my shoulders. The whiskey was hitting me hard, and I needed some time to collect myself.

Across the street, I saw Rikker emerge from Capri's. He walked quickly up the sidewalk in front of me, as if in a terrible hurry. A second later, I saw why. A girl came flying out too, tapping quickly in her heels to catch up. She hauled herself toward him, calling out to him. I was too far away (or too drunk) to make out what they were saying. But I didn't need to hear the conversation to understand. She was performing a pantomime entitled: Take Me Home Tonight. And Rikker was doing his best "no thank you."

Pure comedy.

They drifted closer to me, Rikker removing her hands from his ass as politely as possible. I laughed aloud then. And Rikker turned toward the sound, startled. "You're not his type," I slurred. "Never will be."

The girl's eyes popped wide. She was drunk, too. But nowhere near as drunk as I was. And now she was offended, too.

Whoops.

"I mean, girls aren't his type," I clarified.

She looked at Rikker, and then back at me. And then at Rikker again. "So you weren't kidding about that."

Rikker just sighed, looking irritated at both of us.

"He can pass for straight, can't he?" I laughed. "Some guys hide it well." Like me, for example. Not that it was easy. Lately I spent all my

waking hours just trying to keep the cracks in my deflector shields from splitting apart.

“I’m outie,” the girl said. She’d had enough of Rikker’s rejection, and enough of my drunk philosophizing. Crossing her arms, she spun on her heel and walked away.

“Go home, Graham,” Rikker said. He looked ready to do the same.

“You first.” All the laughing I’d done had made me dizzy. I needed another little rest before I could make it to Beaumont.

With a furrowed brow, Rikker turned toward the dorms. He walked a couple of paces and then stopped. “You okay?” he asked.

“Yap,” I said. Because my mouth couldn’t decide between “yeah” and “yup.” That happened sometimes, especially after I drank a shit-ton of whiskey and a pitcher of beer.

He pointed up the street. “Prove it.”

So I went. Or at least I tried. But my feet weren’t in the mood, really. I tripped on the curb. Rikker’s hand was at my elbow immediately, which kept me from pitching forward onto the asphalt. “Aw, crap,” I said as I swayed.

He smirked in that patient way that people look at a drunk. But even that was enough of a smile to stir me. Since my defenses were for shit right then, I couldn’t help but stare at his mouth. I’d tasted that mouth so many times, and it had always left me wanting more. *Every. Fricking. Time.* Just remembering it filled my head with ideas. Bad ones. The playful curve of his lips... I was leaning towards them even now.

“Whoa,” Rikker said, easing me by the arm down to sit on the curb.

Crap. I almost made an ass of myself. No — I was making an ass of myself right now. I’d almost made a *bigger* ass of myself a minute ago.

“What are you doing?” I asked him next. Because he had his phone in his hands and was tapping on the screen.

“Calling Bella.”

“Not Bella,” I said immediately. “Anyone but Bella. She’ll want to talk about my *addiction*. Thing is, she’s got it wrong. It isn’t the whiskey that’s making me crazy.” God, I could not shut up. In fact, I kept right on babbling about my problems. I rambled about Thanksgiving. I don’t even know all the shit I said to him. The only saving grace was that Rikker seemed to tune me out.

“Yeah, Bella? Hey! I’m just outside, and I think Graham needs a little help. Yup. Pretty sloppy. He keeps mumbling about tight pants, or

something.” He looked at me, frowning. “Sitting on the curb,” he said into the phone. “You can’t miss us.”

“Turned me in to the cops?” I asked when he’d hung up. “Nice of you.”

“You’d rather I leave you in the gutter?” he jammed his phone into his pocket.

“I left you in the gutter.” Damn, that just popped out. “Oops,” I said. “Forgot our deal. Sorry. S’posed to not talk about that. Shit stays buried, you know? Easier that way...”

“*Shut it*, Graham,” Rikker said, exasperated.

I looked up to see Bella and Hartley jogging towards us. “Thanks,” Hartley said, relieving Rikker, as if I were a package that he’d signed for.

Bella leaned down, her face in my face. “You smell like Jack,” she said.

“Schmart girl,” I slurred.

“Best of luck, and goodnight,” Rikker grunted.

Hartley knelt down in front of me. “I’m only saying this once,” he began, his handsome face serious. “Lay off the sauce. Or I’m going to have to tell Coach that you have a problem.”

I *did* have a problem, and he was walking away from me right now. And even though Bella decided that it was her turn to yell at me next, I tuned her out to watch Rikker’s muscular ass disappear up the street and into the night.

— *December* —

Gongshow: a rough, dirty game of maximum intensity.

— *Rikker*

The interview itself was not that bad.

One morning, the week after Thanksgiving, I waited in Coach's office with a young woman from the Harkness College press office. "You don't have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable," she assured me. "Just look at me, and I'll tell the reporter that you're not going to answer."

That sounded easy enough, I guess.

"I'll go get her, if you're ready."

I was never going to be ready. But I nodded anyway.

A minute later, she returned with the reporter, a mild-looking mom type. "I'm Cyndi," the reporter said, putting her digital recorder down on the table between us. "Thank you for meeting me, especially during exams. You must be busy."

"Sure," I said. "Actually, I have my first exam next week. In Spanish. So if we could do this in Spanish, that would really help."

She grinned. "No can do. Not only do I not speak Spanish, I don't really speak sports. I've never interviewed a hockey player before. Do you have any tips for me?" She was trying to put me at ease, I guess.

"I'm sure you'll be fine," I told her. "We don't like to see the words 'bloodthirsty' or 'violent brutes,' though."

She gave me a smile. "Tell me why you left Saint B's."

Straight to the point. Great. "Well, okay. On a Sunday night near the end of the regular season, that would have been last March, the head coach learned of my sexual orientation. He called me in Monday morning and told me to clear out my gear. He said, 'I don't want that in my locker room.'"

She flinched. "That must have hurt."

She wanted to talk about my feelings, but I wasn't going there.

"Honestly, it's about the most lukewarm hate speech ever written."

She tapped a pencil on her knee. "It doesn't matter what words he used,

though, does it? Were you surprised to be kicked off the team?"

Yay. Now I would get to tell the reporter how stupid I was. "Yeah, actually I was surprised. Saint B's is a Catholic college, so I guess that makes me an idiot. But there's a pretty active gay student group." Not that I'd ever gone to an event. "And also, the college has 'sexual orientation' in its non-discrimination clause. I thought that would count for something."

"I saw that, too," she said. "That's fairly progressive for a school with religious roots."

I shrugged. I didn't know whether it was or wasn't. But when Saint B's started courting me, and offering me scholarship money, Skippy made me look it up. "You *cannot* play for them if they can toss you out for being gay," he had said, grumpy that I wanted to go to school in Massachusetts instead of Vermont, where he'd be.

Later, I'd wished that I'd listened.

"What did your teammates think?" the reporter asked.

"Um," I cleared my throat. "I never got a chance to find out, you know? A few of them wrote slurs on my Facebook page."

Her eyes widened. "Did you document that?"

Seriously? Who would want to save a screenshot of assholes writing: *Faggot, I hope you die of AIDS*. "Nope. I deleted my account instead."

"So, the team did not stick up for you."

Careful, I coached myself. "I got a couple of texts that were very supportive. The guy who I was actually rooming with on road trips called to say that he thought the whole thing sucked." I didn't tell her that when I saw his name come up on my phone, I chickened out and let it go to voicemail. Later, I screwed up my courage and listened to the nice things he had to say. I've never been any good at predicting who will turn out to be cool and who will be an ass. One of the *faggot* comments on my Facebook page was from the guy I used to lift with in the weight room. I'd thought of him as a friend.

Called that one wrong.

Still, I did not want this reporter writing that the Saint B's hockey team was a bunch of meatheads. "It's important to remember that most of the team didn't really get a chance to be supportive or not. The coach was a real Napoleon type. And he showed me the door so fast, I never saw most of those guys again."

The reporter chewed on her lip. "So you weren't out to your teammates."

I shook my head. “I was a freshman. I wanted to prove myself. And I just wanted to play hockey.”

She nodded slowly. “How did your coach find out, anyway?”

Even though I’d been expecting this question, I still got a cold sweat when she asked it. “I’m not going to give details about that.”

“Okay.” Her eyes lingered on me. “So, it wasn’t you who volunteered that information to your coach.”

“Not in a million years.”

“Did you plan to stay in the closet for four years? Or were you waiting for the right moment?”

Good question, lady. “I didn’t have a plan, yet,” I told her. “I thought I’d have a while to figure it out.”

After that, it got easier. Cyndi went on to ask me about my transfer, and that was a less personal conversation. “Your uncle called the coaches and explained the situation?”

“Yeah, he did that for me. And I’m ten kinds of lucky that it worked out. It’s not only that Coach didn’t mind the circus.” It was just dawning on me that Coach must have known reporters and news stories would happen. “But also that he needed a wing.”

“So, the schools that said ‘no’ to you weren’t necessarily discriminating against you?” she asked.

“Hell no. The entire Division One roster isn’t very large. And there are hundreds of guys who want to play.”

“You must be a pretty valuable player.”

I wasn’t touching that. “I guess we’ll find out.”

She grinned. “And how have your new teammates treated you?”

“They’ve been great,” I said immediately. “The season is going well. No problems.”

Unfortunately, I spoke too soon.

As luck would have it, our next scheduled game was against Saint B's. Coach called me into his office again before practice on Friday to discuss it.

“How is this game going to go, do you think?” he asked.

“We can beat them,” I said. “The first line is tight but their bench isn’t very deep.”

Coach looked out the window for a moment and then back at me. “Do

you think you should play?”

What? “Of course I’ll play. Why wouldn’t I?”

He sighed. “The article didn’t publish yet, at least. It’s going to make Saint B’s look bad.”

“If anybody reads it.”

He swiveled his chair toward me again. “They will. And you’re going to get even more attention.”

God, I hoped he was wrong. “Let’s just beat Saint B’s.”

Coach grinned. “I like your style, kid. I really do. So I’m putting you on the first line for the Saint B’s game. Make me proud.”

Awesome. “I will, Coach.” I really thought I could.

I was wrong.

— *Graham*

I was not at all prepared for what happened at the Saint B’s game. It was a home game against a so-so team. What could go wrong?

Just everything.

The first sign of trouble came a half an hour before faceoff. During that last thirty minutes in the locker room, every guy was busy getting amped up in his own special way. Some people sat quietly in a corner, thinking calm thoughts. But there was a lot of joking around and smack talk, too. The place was crowded, with everyone strapping on their gear. There were two trainers in the room, too, taping up muscles and helping to stretch out tetchy limbs.

I went into the hallway supply cabinet for some orange hockey tape. Don’t laugh when I tell you that I play better with orange tape. Hockey players are some of the most superstitious people you’ll ever meet. (Just ask Hartley about his lucky underwear.)

At the distant end of the hallway, I saw Coach come out of his office. But before he got very far, a gray-haired guy in a Saint B’s jacket came wheeling out of the visitors’ locker room. He got up in Coach’s face. “There’s a reporter up my ass, and it’s your fucking fault,” he barked.

There was a tense silence, and then I heard Coach chuckle. “Really?” He stood his ground, even though the other guy was practically spitting into his mouth. “That can’t be true. Because I thought you had a team policy against taking anything up the ass.”

Although the other coach’s back was to me, I could hear the fury in his voice. “You want this bitch asking me questions, do you? You think you can

make my team look bad?”

Again, Coach chuckled. “You don’t need my help with that.”

I jammed the tape into my hockey shorts, freeing up my hands in case the other guy threw a punch at Coach. But the bastard only yanked the visitors’ locker room door open and disappeared inside again.

With a pounding pulse, I ducked back into our room to finish taping up my stick. A minute later, Coach stalked in looking tense. “Listen up!” he barked.

The room got quiet immediately.

“Your opponents want to win tonight. But we want it more, right?”

“YEAH!” everyone shouted as one.

Coach was pacing near the door. “Look. Their coach is a blowhard with a nasty temper. And his offensive line is sketchy this year, because we stole one of their best players. We didn’t play this team last year, but you saw how it is on the tapes. To win this thing, they need to get under your skin. Are you going to let them?”

“NO!” we hollered together.

“Good. Because I need you to remember that you’re bigger than that. This game isn’t going to be about finessing the puck. This game is going to be all about attitude. And the team that keeps the coolest head is gonna win. So I need you to repeat after me: Attitude is destiny!”

“Attitude is destiny!”

“Okay. Let’s kill ‘em. Get out there.” Coach’s face looked as tense as I’d ever seen it.

Bella put a hand on my shoulder. “I’m pretty sure that quote is supposed to be, ‘character is destiny.’”

“Yeah? I think I’d keep that critique to myself.”

“I was planning on it.”

“Hey, Bella?” I gave my skate laces one more tug and stood up.

“Yeah?”

“Any reason Coach would be talking to reporters?”

She frowned. “No idea. Why do you ask?”

“Just something he said.” My teammates had begun to stream out the door, cat calling and whooping it up. “Let’s go.”

“Kill ‘em tonight, Graham.”

“Yes ma’am.”

But... yeah. Not so much.

For the first eight minutes of play, I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. In the first place, Hartley was kicking ass, so the D-men like me didn't have a whole lot to worry about. My teammate Trevi, a junior wing, fed Hartley an early goal, and all seemed well.

Things deteriorated very quickly about nine minutes in.

On the next faceoff, I watched one of the Saint B's wings — a giant with the name EROS printed on his back — yapping into Trevi's face. I couldn't hear what was said, but the look on Trevi was far past ordinary annoyance. His face turned the color of raw meat.

The next time I noticed Eros, he was leaning over Orson, who was minding the goal tonight. And Orson's jaw was as hard as concrete, though he didn't remove his eyes from the field of play.

So I knew this Eros must be a real piece of work. But I didn't get to witness his assholery firsthand until a little later. Saint B's had the puck, and it was my job to get it back. As I flew behind our net on the backcheck, I heard the guy ragging on Orson. "You're Rikker's favorite, right? 'Cause you're already wearing knee pads."

Holy crap.

Distracted by the comment, I didn't get to the puck fast enough. Their other wing flung it to the Saint B's center, who flipped it to Eros. The asshole took a shot. But Orson butterflyed himself in the crease, saving it.

Play moved down the ice, but not before I heard Eros lob another one of his gems into Orson's face. "Faggot! I bet you like it when Rikker comes in your crease."

"Go fuck yourself," Orson growled.

A minute later my shift was over, and I swung myself over the wall. A row of tense faces greeted me. The snarl on Big-D's lips was as ugly as I'd ever seen it. Eros's poison had begun to spread.

Rikker was living out my nightmare tonight. Because it's one thing to tolerate the gay guy when everything is going well. And it's another thing to have some red-faced asshole yelling "faggot" into your face.

Trust me. I'd know.

The upshot was that my team began playing a sloppy game of hockey. And that meant that Coach got pissed off. Which meant that Hartley got pissed, too. The players, not to be outdone, got pissed off that Coach and Hartley were pissed off.

And nobody would even *look* at Rikker.

Meanwhile, Eros took long shifts, asking his toxic little questions. “How many to a bed on your road trips?” And, “do y’all usually jerk together before practice, or after?”

Each of these little ditties had the effect of exploding my teammates’ ability to concentrate. Their passes stopped connecting, and our offensive strategy broke down.

Theirs didn’t.

Orson got shelled, saving shot after shot. Each time he fell onto the puck, stopping the action, our team might have had a chance to regroup. Instead, Eros or one of his cronies, shoulder to shoulder in the faceoff circle, started the taunts anew.

Inevitably, Eros and Rikker ended up helmet to helmet on a faceoff. I could not look away. From the bench, I could see Eros’s mouth moving. And Rikker’s eyes were angry slits. After the puck dropped, I saw Rikker haul off and shove his former teammate in the gut. The refs didn’t see it, because Hartley had won the faceoff and play rocketed toward Saint B’s goal.

Rikker didn’t get away with it though. Not really. Because when Hartley passed him the puck a few seconds later, Eros saw his chance.

The next two seconds seemed to last a week. Rikker skimmed the boards and scouted for his opening. I saw him adjust the angle of his stick in preparation to take a shot. But I also saw Eros dig in his edges, accelerating toward Rikker like a torpedo. And it didn’t matter that Rikker got his pass off. There was no stopping the bigger guy’s momentum. Because recovering the puck was no longer the point.

The hit was brutal. Eros slammed Rikker into the plexi, and I watched my teammate crumple like a bag of rocks onto the ice.

Eros stumbled, too. That’s why it wasn’t really efficient to hit another player so hard. Like they taught you in physics, for every action, there was an equal and opposite reaction. So if you go around flattening people, you’re going to get knocked around, too, losing precious seconds with the puck.

The only reason to hit like that is if you’re trying to injure. Or at least make a point.

Eros made his.

Rikker lay on the ice, unmoving.

— *Rikker*

Oh, fuck. Oh... fuck.

Get up, I ordered myself. *Now*. At least once a season this happened. That awful feeling of having the air knocked out of me — like my lungs didn't remember how to expand, and my guts had been permanently compressed.

But even without air, I lurched to a seated position. Somehow I got one skate back onto the ice, and struggled for the second one. The hockey game narrowed down around me, and there was only a thin slice of my consciousness left — a straight tunnel between the spot where I'd been brutalized and the bench. *Go, asshole*, I ordered myself, even though I still hadn't drawn a full breath. Somehow I limped toward my team, and somebody — Bella — yanked the door open for me as I approached.

"Fucking egregious!" she screamed, pushing me onto the bench. "I will *kill* that motherfucker."

Bella kept up her litany of curses while I bent over at the waist, willing myself not to puke through the bars of my helmet grate. I needed to pull myself together, and right away. Even half conscious, I knew I couldn't afford to look beaten right now.

I pulled myself into a vertical position again. Even as my stomach stopped clenching, the other parts of my body that had gotten slammed began announced their displeasure. My ribs were practically vibrating. And I was going to have a bruise the size of Massachusetts on one hip.

Bella's worried face was parked right in front of me, and as I rose up, her eyes went wide. "You're bleeding."

Now that she mentioned it, I could feel something wet on my jaw.

"He *slashed* your *chin*."

Whatever. I was so busy hurting in other places I didn't even care.

But she unclipped my helmet grate and lifted it. Then she grabbed it with two hands and angled my face toward the ice. "Hey ref!" she shouted. "Look at this shit!"

"Bella, *Jesus*." I tried to pull away, but when someone has you by the facemask, that's pretty much impossible. She swung my mask to follow the ref as he skated by, and I had to grab her wrists and wrench her off of me. "Let go of my fucking *head*." It was hard to even describe how angry I was in that moment, and how drunk I felt from the pain and the disbelief. If instant death had somehow been offered to me right then, I would have been tempted to accept.

“But slashing you in the face is a disqualifying penalty!”

“Just...” I yanked my glove off and swiped at my face. When I looked at my hand, there was a pretty good smear of blood there. But I’d live.

Somebody had passed Bella the first aid kit, which she was now yanking open. “Let me wipe that off and see how big the cut is.”

“Better glove up,” Big-D said as the buzzer rang for the end of the first period. “You don’t want to get Rikker’s blood on you.”

“Shut your fucking mouth,” Bella snapped as she pulled on a blue latex glove. Because that was the policy. I’d seen her do it many times before.

But it didn’t matter. Big-D’s comment was out there, and I hung my head like a fucking pariah. I’d spent the whole first semester trying to convince my team that I wasn’t scary. And in the span of twenty minutes, Eros had torn away any goodwill that I might have built up.

Fucking Eros.

Fucking Saint B’s.

Fucking reporter.

Fuck my life.

Coach gave a five-minute rant in the locker room before the next period. He was practically spitting fire. “What did we *just fucking talk about* before the game? This is *your* rink. *Your* ice. And you’re letting some prick from a second rate team throw you off your game! *FUCK* him! How many shots on goal are you going to let these assholes take before you fight back?”

He threw his clipboard into the wall and stormed out.

There was a moment of utter silence in the room before my teammates — red-faced from both exertion and anger — began filing back out to the bench. I followed them, trying not to wince every time my chest pad moved against my ribs.

“Are you good to play?” Hartley asked me when it was time for the second period to begin.

“Of course,” I snapped. They would have to drag my lifeless body off the ice before I’d give up. But, *shit*. Two more periods to go. This was already the longest night of my life.

Every second of the next period cost me.

Eros hadn’t attacked me again. *Yet*. But for the first time in my life, I played scared. When our shifts overlapped, I spent too much time looking out for him, and too little time watching the puck. I missed three passes in a row,

and that made me want to puke almost as badly as getting slammed in the guts had done.

And every time Eros got anywhere near my teammates, he kept up the douchebaggery commentary. "I bet you guys like holding each other's sticks, don't you?" I heard him say.

Stupid shit, right? But he was just distracting enough to do two things: lose us the game, and remind my teammates that I was a liability.

Meanwhile, Saint B's offensive line continued to fire a hailstorm at Orson. And in between, Eros taunted our goalie with questions about how often the team showered together.

Orson let in two goals that period. But he saved about a thousand.

The third period had just begun when Eros finally managed to get in Big-D's face in the corner. I was too far away to hear the first part of it, but when they came toward our bench, I could hear Eros asking: "...do you spit or swallow?"

Big-D's face turned blood-red. And when his shift was up, he straddled the bench and gave me a rough shove out of his way.

"Enough!" Hartley spat. "Pay attention to the fucking puck, okay? What's your job, here?"

"I didn't sign up for this shit," Big-D returned. "And I'm not throwing down for him if they jump him again."

"Shocker," I muttered.

Orson let in another lamplighter, unfortunately, and the whole bench grunted with disappointment. And then it was time to faceoff again. I heaved myself over the wall, coming face to face with Graham for a second. His face was red, and his eyes were burning with something that I couldn't read. But it was probably disgust, the same as everyone else.

Saint B's won the faceoff, and Graham took off after the puck. He correctly anticipated the pass to Eros, and leaned in. *Hit him*, my subconscious begged. As if it mattered. As if anything could make this moment more bearable.

But Graham didn't hit him. Instead, his weapon was a simple poke-check. But he got that stick in there just a little further than necessary, and managed to trip Eros even as Graham passed the puck to Hartley. I blinked, wondering if that was intentional.

Eros went down hard, and the ref didn't call Graham on it.

The moment that Eros picked himself up off the ice, he skated toward

Graham. And in that moment I learned two things: 1) the night could still get worse. And 2) the word “faggot” is the easiest English word to read off someone’s lips. I watched it roll off Eros’s ugly mouth.

Graham flinched so big that I could see it across the rink.

And then? Well... That’s when I really lost my shit. Because my teammates could not be called that word because of me. Shutting him up was the only thing that mattered to me anymore.

Eros went after the puck, and I went after Eros, choosing a vector across the ice that would put me at the same point along the boards where he’d arrive. It wasn’t rational. That spot on the ice wasn’t even mine to cover. But I just charged, both ends of my stick in my hands. I cross-checked him in the hip, and he did a Roadrunner-style splat onto the plexi.

The hit was blatantly illegal. But it didn’t matter. Because I already knew that the refs weren’t going to be my biggest problem.

It only took a couple of seconds for another Saint B’s player to power over to us and throw a punch at me. I ducked, so it only grazed me. I don’t even remember throwing off my gloves. But then they were gone, and I was swinging back at him. The arrival of Hartley at my side to back me up was just a blur on the edge of my consciousness.

Then the blur developed a distinct black and white color scheme, as the linesman and the ref jumped in to separate the four of us.

“You’re done!” the ref shouted, my right arm restrained in his grip. “Major penalty and disqualification. One game suspension.” He gave me a hard shove toward the bench. “Off the ice. Right now, or I’ll make it a two-game suspension.”

In the NHL, fighting was just part of the game. In college? Not legal.

I barely registered the sound of the screaming fans as I skated off, head down. And then Coach was yelling at me. At us, actually. Because Hartley was standing right beside me. “You fucking guys! Dumber than posts, both of you. We have to play fucking Union next week, and you won’t fucking be there. Thanks for that...”

He was still yelling as I limped down the chute. The roar of the arena died when the door shut on us. And then it was just Hartley and I, alone with our shock.

The captain collapsed, defeated, onto his locker bench. His voice was so low that I almost missed what he said. “I have never been ejected from a game before.”

“You’re *welcome*,” I spat. Not that I was making any sense. Another guy might have even thanked Hartley for throwing down like that.

But I didn’t *want* anyone to throw down for me. That was the fucking problem. I didn’t want to be that guy who brought down humiliation on the backs of his teammates.

I tossed my pads onto the floor one after another, and then stomped into the showers, staying under the water as long as I dared. But before the team came off the ice, I was out of there. I got dressed and snuck out of the building. Like the loser that I was.

Scoring Chance: *an attempt or an opportunity for a player to score a goal.*

— Rikker

An hour and a half later, I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling, holding two ice packs against my bare chest. They might or might not keep the swelling on my bruised ribs to a minimum.

Whatever.

A trip to Capri's was out of the question. Not only was I banged up; I'd never been more embarrassed in my life. I just lay there in a pair of ripped jeans, too exhausted to even get ready for bed. Someone knocked on the door. It was probably Bella, come to check on me. If I were to leave town, she'd be the only one to notice. She and Coach. *Fuck*. I didn't even want her company. I just wanted to be left alone to sink into the fucking floor.

We lost the fucking game. 0-4.

The knock repeated—three sharp raps. She was probably going to just beat on the door until I answered. "It's open," I grumbled.

But the doorknob wiggled with the telltale muted click of a door that was *not* open.

With a groan, I sat up and lurched for it, turning the handle to let Bella push the door open. The minute I felt it give, I turned to throw myself onto the bed again.

Someone cleared his throat, and it was not Bella.

I rolled over to see Graham standing there, looking down at me. One hand was shoved into his jacket pocket. The other held a bottle of Jose Cuervo. "Hola, Juan. Quieres un tequila?"

It took me way too long to answer. "Uh, sí?" It wasn't the most gracious response. But shock made me stupid.

"Got glasses?" He set the bottle down on my desk and pulled a lime and a camping knife from his pocket. He flipped up the blade and took it to the lime. Shaking off a little of my surprise, I dropped my ice packs on the floor and found the shot glasses in a desk drawer. I dusted them on my jeans.

Graham swung my desk chair around and sat down in it. He poured two

shots and handed me a wedge of lime. “Knock it back, man,” Graham said. He tipped his shot into his mouth.

I drank too. The tequila stung the back of my throat. At least I hoped it was the alcohol, because it very well could have been Graham’s gesture. Here he was, in his own fucked-up way, offering me support. Of course, it was Graham’s version of support — strong drink. But at that moment, when I was literally friendless, it meant everything to me.

Just looking across at him made it hard for me to swallow. What a mess we were: one gay guy who tried to be out, and it had only led to disaster. And one... I didn’t want to classify Graham. Only Graham could classify Graham. But whatever Graham was, he didn’t make it look easy.

“You’re thinking too hard over there,” Graham said, reaching out a hand. “Let’s have that glass. We’ve got to do that again.”

I did as I was told, and together we threw back a couple more shots. The alcohol did its thing, and began to soften me at the edges. My shame and anger flattened out, which should have been a good thing. But I only became broody instead.

“Saw you trip him,” I said.

Graham fingered his shot glass. “I did it again after you left, and took two minutes for it. Didn’t help things. Felt good, though.”

We sat in silence after that, but somehow it wasn’t awkward. Putting more words to everything that had gone wrong tonight would have been painful and pointless. For both of us. So silence was definitely the way to go. And Graham was here with me, feeding me tequila. He’d been called a faggot to his face tonight, because of *me*. Yet here he was.

Unbelievable.

His long fingers tapped one of his own knees. Sitting in a room with him was still trippy. It was like watching a video of my old life. I could see it and hear it, but not touch.

He was staring at me, though. At my bare chest, if I wasn’t mistaken. Not that I’d call him on it. The conditions of our truce were pretty simple. Graham was solid with me on the team, and I pretended to believe that he was straight. That was only fair, especially since he’d brought tequila as a peace offering.

Except I could feel those blue eyes on me. So I raised one languid hand to rub my chest. I didn’t do it in a porn film way — it was just a casual brush across my pecs, like anyone might do. But man, did his eyes flare. Oh, hell. I

could feel his gaze on me, like a physical touch. I felt it in places I shouldn't.

And then Graham turned away, toward the desk. He picked up the lime. "One more, I think."

"Sure," I said, wondering how this night would play out. Graham and I, drunk together. That's something that had never happened before, back in the day. There was no telling what it might have led to.

He stood up to hand me my glass. "Cheers," he said, holding his own into the air. Then he downed it. Then he set the glass on my desk and turned around again. "Rik?"

It took me a second to answer, because I was swallowing tequila. "Yeah?" I stood up to put my glass onto the desk beside his.

Before I could retreat again to my corner, he moved into my space. When his big hand landed at the side of my neck, I quit breathing. Time slammed to a halt for a second, until I realized that he was examining the place under my jaw where Eros had slashed me with his stick.

"How bad does it look?" I whispered, just to say something normal.

But Graham wasn't even listening. He dropped his hand, only to put it on my bare waist. And then his mouth dipped down to graze the juncture between my neck and my shoulder. A pair of soft, moist lips began to nibble at my skin.

Jesus fuck.

Again, I froze with surprise, too shocked to say anything, or to shove him away. His mouth made a path along my throat, dropping wet kisses on his way. I didn't react at all. Well, that isn't true. My dick jumped to attention, straining against the zipper of my jeans faster than you can say "bad idea." Then Graham raised his head, his tongue landing at my ear. When he sucked my earlobe into his mouth, I let out a gasp.

"Do I still do it for you?" he whispered. Not waiting for an answer, he gave me a shove backward, onto the bed. Even as I sat down he was straddling me, pushing me down. His mouth attacked mine a second later. He kissed me, hot and wild, and I let him. No — I practically rolled out a fucking rug for him, scrambling back to get all the way onto the bed, pulling him into my arms.

Yes, yes, yes, my body chanted. Four shots of tequila in, it was easy to shut off all the logical parts of my brain. With the hard, warm body of my first love practically scaling me like a monkey, I couldn't summon the will to think this through. His big hands threaded into my hair, his mouth slanting

down over mine again and again. His lips were wet and warm, and his tongue made long, greedy draws against mine.

Suddenly, we were fifteen again, and crazy with desire. There was no finesse to our making out. We were too hungry, too desperate. It was all grip strength, grunts, and heavy breathing. The bed barely held four hundred pounds worth of horny hockey players who were trying to achieve nuclear fusion through their mouths.

My clumsy hands found their way under his shirt, and over the hard planes of his back. He dragged his mouth off of mine only long enough to yank his shirt over his head. And then we were skin to skin. When I grabbed his beautiful chest in two hands, tweaking his nipples with my thumbs, he let out a howl of need that I was probably going to hear later in my dreams.

And it was Graham. *My* Graham. Those familiar blue eyes were half-mast with lust, and his golden skin was flushed with desire. For *me*. There was nothing like it. With his hips grinding against mine, I thought I might blow in my jeans the way we did when we were teenagers.

“Want to suck you,” he said between kisses. And before my brain could even unpack that declaration, I lost his mouth on mine. He began dropping hot, open-mouthed kisses across my pecs, lingering over my nipples. Then he traced the centerline of my chest with his tongue.

It was all happening so fast, and I was on fire, panting like a maniac. Rough hands yanked my jeans open. When he tugged, I lifted my hips. But then I was lying there, exposed for him, my knees still tangled in my jeans. So vulnerable. I experienced a twinge of worry, hoping that Graham didn't plan it this way, spreading me bare so he could teach me some kind of lesson.

But before I could even finish that ugly thought, his breath was there, nuzzling my groin. On the sound of his sigh, my shoulders relaxed against the bed. Hungry lips began tracing my shaft, and I flexed my hips, desperate for a little friction.

When he opened his mouth and took me in, my brain took another sabbatical. Everything was wet heat and motion. I looked down my body, and the sight almost undid me. Graham knelt on the floor beside the bed. With eyes shut tight, he worked me over. I saw his cheeks draw in, and he gave a good, hard suck. An involuntary shout flew from my mouth. And at the sound of it, Graham moaned. The vibration caressed me, and as I watched, Graham's free hand dipped down to rub himself through his jeans. He moaned again, and the vibration almost finished me off.

I reached toward his body on the floor. “Give it to me,” I rasped, smacking him on the hip so that he’d understand what I wanted.

Graham jerked up from the floor. With two hands, he yanked his jeans open. They hit the deck with a jingle, and then he was stepping out of his jeans and boxers. Putting one knee on the bed beside me, he bent over my waist again, taking me in from an even better angle than before.

“Uhhhn...” I said. Because it’s hard to be eloquent when your dick is in somebody’s mouth. I ran my hand up the inside of Graham’s bare thigh, my fingers sifting through his soft leg hair on the way to the good stuff. When I cupped him, he gasped. When I stroked him, he moaned.

And then it was practically all over but the crying. He was moaning and thrusting into my hand, and I was not going to survive it. My nuts got tight and my spine hitched and I took one more big breath. “Look out,” I gasped. Graham didn’t duck and cover, but it was probably too late anyway. Slamming my head back onto the pillow, I came like a rocket launcher. And he took it like a champ. A few seconds later he came on a muffled groan, spilling into my hand, shuddering with satisfaction.

When silence descended a minute later, Graham lay panting on my belly.

“Up here,” I croaked. I pushed further back onto the narrow bed, my back up against the cold plaster of the wall. I wiped my hand on my discarded T-shirt, and then threw that on the floor.

Graham swiveled and fell, his head landing near mine. But his eyes were focused on the ceiling, and I had no idea what was in his brain. I tucked my chin down to place a soft kiss on his shoulder. He didn’t flinch or move away, but neither did he roll into me. “Graham, are you...”

But that was as far as I got, because he held up a hand. “We’re not talking right now,” he said, his eyes drooping. “Don’t want to discuss it.”

I gave a strangled laugh. “Okay. I was only going to ask if you’re as drunk as I am.” Because I’d just noticed how loopy four shots of tequila could leave you after a long, disastrous game and on an empty stomach.

“The room is spinning,” Graham mumbled.

“That’s because you got naked with me, baby,” I joked, biting his shoulder a little.

“Shut it,” he whispered, hitching away from me, rolling onto his side.

Right. Even drunk, I could extrapolate. Graham would probably crawl out of here in about two minutes. Then he’d shut down again, and go back to

ignoring me.

But at the moment, the bed was so small that his body was still only inches from mine. I put my hands to his shoulders and squeezed, massaging the muscles under my palms. He was beautiful, and I didn't want to stop touching him.

With a firm grip, I dug my thumbs into his traps, my fingers working his neck. I gave it a fifty-fifty chance that he'd pop up off the bed and go away. But I kept going. *Carpe Diem* and all that. I worked both my hands up his neck to the base of his skull. And then I massaged his scalp, because there isn't a person alive who isn't a sucker for having his head rubbed. All that fine, pale hair went sifting through my fingers. Finally, I felt Graham sigh and relax.

I knew there was wisdom in quitting while you're ahead. But Graham had thrown a switch inside me that could not easily be turned off. Just from massaging him, I was ready to go again. So I slipped an arm around his waist, hitching my body against his, so that my erection lay against his ass. His muscles stiffened in my arms. But I wasn't going to give up easily. My hand began a slow tour of his chest, and I pressed my lips to the back of his neck.

When I felt his breath catch a minute later, I knew that I had won.

It didn't take long until he was rolling over, reaching for me. His mouth was salty now. I could taste myself on him. We went slower this time, exploring one another thoroughly. Graham's eyes were slammed shut, as if looking at me was more than he could handle. But his touch was reverent — his big hands sliding around my hips as if trying to memorize them.

He reached between our bodies and took me in hand. Arching his back, bringing his torso even closer, he was able to grasp us both at the same time. It was glorious. I rocked my hips, thrusting into his hand and against his cock, taking long gulps from his mouth. As good as it was, this taste of him only made me hungrier.

Someone knocked loudly on my door.

Graham jerked his hand away from me as if he'd just discovered he was touching a stick of dynamite. His whole body went rock solid, his eyes popping wide with panic.

The knock came again. *Bang bang bang*. "Rikker, if you're in there, open up." It was Bella's voice. "Or at least answer your phone. Tonight wasn't your fault."

Beside me, Graham began to tremble.

I put my lips right beside his ear, barely whispering. “The door is still locked.”

“Come on, Rik,” Bella called again. And when she rattled the doorknob, Graham’s body gave a horrified jerk, like he’d been tasered.

But the door held, of course. And then after an aching long silence of a minute or so, we heard the sound of Bella’s footsteps tapping away, heading down the stairs.

It was so quiet then that I could actually count our heartbeats. And after a dozen or so of them, Graham got up and fumbled for his clothes.

“Graham,” I whispered. “You don’t have to panic.”

But he wouldn’t even *look* at me. With shaking hands, he stumbled into his jeans.

I pulled the blanket up from the foot of the bed, mostly covering myself. And I watched a freaked-out Graham prepare for a hasty exit from my room. I could almost hear the worry loop trailing around inside his head. *Never should have done that. Never should have done that.*

Whatever. If he wanted to freak out and run away after hooking up with me, that was his loss. That’s what I was going to tell myself, anyway. What’s one more bruise on a battered heart? Mine probably already looked like a veteran NHL player’s face.

Before the door closed on him, he said one word to me. “Sorry.”

I was tired of hearing that word from him.

His footsteps echoed as he retreated down the stairwell. For the second time tonight, I lay alone on my bed, nursing my wounded ribs. The next time I heard footsteps on the stair, I knew that it was only one of my exchange-student neighbors on his way in for the night. There would be nobody else calling, or coming to visit me.

My bruises throbbed again and my head began to ache. But the silence hurt worst of all.

The next event in my fun-filled life was a team meeting in the wood-paneled club room at the rink. Like a brave man does, I snuck in at the last minute, holding up the wall beside the door. At the front of the room, Coach paced, his hands in fists.

“It’s not that you lost the game, you idiots. It’s that you lost your *cool*. That asshole played you like a whole fucking *orchestra* of fiddles. Watching

last night's tape? It took me half a bottle of scotch. Seven minutes, guys. Seven. Minutes. That's how long it took that dickface to wreck your game. The wheels came off early, and they stayed off. And all because of a few carefully planned taunts. Baby stuff! You got taken down by yourselves, basically. Because if you don't know how to be immune to petty shit like that, you're not going to last very long in hockey."

He stopped pacing, his hands clenched at his sides. "We're not watching that tape, because there's nothing to watch. There's no point in analyzing the plays, because you idiots didn't even show up to play the game."

I was new to the team and all, but I'd never seen Coach as angry as this. It must not happen very often.

Fuck me.

"I don't know if you noticed, but I gave one of your teammates the day off. The only guy who can hold his head up high after that shit show is Orson. *Seventy-six* fucking shots on goal Saint B's took. And you punks took *thirty*. And Orson kept his shit together for three periods, and only let in four! Who was your MVP last night? Orson. That ass from Saint B's taunted him the worst of all, and it was a fucking waste of breath, people."

Coach took a minute to look every guy in the eye, one at a time. "Where. The. Fuck. Were the rest of you?"

— *Graham*

The following weekend, on the way home from the Union game, the bus was dark and quiet.

Needless to say, there'd been no cause to blast our win song after the buzzer. Orson did his best, letting in two goals the whole game. But we couldn't put the biscuit in the basket to save our lives. Without two of our best offensive players, our rhythm broke down.

So here we were, riding home late on a silent bus, every guy thinking dark thoughts. And then there was Bella. She was currently curled up in the seat beside me, her head on my chest as if I was her own personal bolster pillow.

Across the aisle, Hartley sat with his arms folded across his chest. He wore the stoic expression of a man serving out the last bit of his prison term. As our captain, he'd ridden along to the game even though he wasn't allowed on the bench. It couldn't have been fun to watch us lose from the stands.

Knowing Hartley, he blamed himself for the loss to Union.

Nobody on the bus was happy right now. And I'm sure everyone sat in his seat, assigning blame. It's just that I'm pretty sure they didn't all blame themselves.

Poor Rikker.

Thinking of him gave me a weird little nauseous rush. I was pretty embarrassed about what I'd done. Running away from him after practically pouncing on him? *God*. I couldn't imagine what he thought of me.

Tomorrow, I would call him and apologize. I'd tell him that I was glad he was my teammate, and I hoped we could be friends. I could do that. I'd still be the world's biggest coward, but I could make a fucking phone call.

I would have already apologized, it's just that I hadn't seen Rikker. He'd stood at the back of the world's most depressing team meeting. And then I heard Coach tell him that even though Hartley would be attending the Union game as captain, Rikker would not be on the bus.

He did not manage to keep the flinch off his face.

After that, Rikker walked straight out of the room, and I hadn't glimpsed him again. If his exams were done, he'd probably already gone home to Vermont. We got three weeks off, before we had to come back for hockey just before New Year's.

"Hey, Coach!" somebody yelled from the back of the darkened bus. And when he stood up, I saw that it was Big-D.

"Yeah, kid?" A couple of seats ahead of me, Coach swiveled around to answer him.

Big-D trundled down the narrow little aisle, his phone in his hand. "There's some news story out there about our team. I just got, like, twenty texts warning me not to drop the soap in the shower."

Jesus.

Coach stood up, parking his butt against the seat back. "Okay, guys, listen up. There is an article, and it's in the *Connecticut Standard*. But the national outlets are going to jump on this. Rikker's transfer was pretty unusual, and a reporter sniffed that out and interviewed him. So the team is going to be in the news for a little while."

There was a collective groan, and a few curses thrown around.

"Hey!" Coach barked, holding up a hand. "It's just noise. If you want people to respect your game, if you want to *win*, you need to play through the noise. You guys fucked that up once already, right? I'm telling you right

now, if you can't concentrate, go ahead and hang up your skates. *Not* on the news or on the shit people send to your phone. Your game is all that matters. Figure out how to win again, and the reporters will be asking much different questions. Like, 'how does a small school like Harkness do it?'"

Coach folded his arms, and the bus got very quiet. "I know you don't like having this shit in the news. But neither does your teammate, Rikker. What happens next in your team story is completely up to you. Don't blow it by getting distracted by the noise."

Coach turned around, as if he was going to sit down. But then he stopped and turned toward the back again. "I can practically hear your wheels turning. You're thinking, 'my buddies are going to have a field day with this.'"

"We didn't sign up for this shit," Big-D grumbled.

Coach just shook his head. "That is exactly the wrong way to look at it. The truth is simple: you can either have an easy life, or you can be hockey players. The pro scouts are poking around, keeping tabs on some of you. You're hoping make it into the AHL after college, or — God bless you — the NHL. Guess what? People are going to write shit on the Internet about *you*. You're too slow. You're too small. You're ugly. Some of it might even be true."

There was a little chuckle at that.

"It's just noise, right? And you're sitting on this bus thinking, 'Yeah, but I won't care, because I'll be a professional hockey player.'" Coach paused to smile at us in the dark. "Nothing is *ever* getting easier for you in this sport. The noise only gets louder. The hits get harder. You're a bunch of pampered little shits right now. Did you stop to consider that some of teams you play against have their own noise? Maybe they practice on shitty ice, or the coach is a drunk. You think you're being tested by this shit on the Internet? Fine. But find a way to pass the test. Because there will only be bigger ones."

Then Coach sat down. And I let out a giant breath that I didn't even know I'd been holding.

"Wow," Bella whispered beside me.

Wow, indeed.

Eventually, the bus pulled off at a rest stop, so that everyone could have a pee break and maybe buy a candy bar out of the vending machine. "Ten minutes," the driver called. Bella counted everyone as we got off the bus.

I didn't go into the building like the others. Instead, I hung back in the parking lot. When I was sure that I was all alone, I took out my phone.

— *Rikker*

When my phone rang, I hauled myself up off the couch in Gran's den and turned down my music. I was surprised to see a 616 area code lighting up my phone. Graham had the same number he'd had in high school. I really never thought I'd see that on my phone again. "Hello?"

"Hi." Then there was a small silence. "I was going to call you tomorrow. To apologize. But then something happened on the bus just now, and I wanted to tell you about it."

"Uh, okay?" That sounded ominous.

"There's some newspaper article out there, but I guess you know that already. But it must be making the rounds on Reddit or wherever, because guys started getting texts about it."

"Fuck," I said. So this was really happening.

"Yeah. But Coach just gave Big-D a smackdown for whining about it. And it was a hell of a speech. He didn't even quote any dead presidents. He basically just said that if you're the kind of wuss who lets a few texts wreck your day, don't bother calling yourself a hockey player. And forget about the pros."

Shit! "And how did that go down?"

"Okay, I think. It was hard to argue his point."

I just stood there in Gran's old farmhouse, losing my everloving mind. "Did you read the article?" I trapped my phone with my shoulder and leaned over my laptop to type my name into Google.

"No, I just called you."

My screen lit up with hits. I clicked on the link that would take me straight to the reporter's original article. I was hoping that the title would end up being something bland about transfer rules. Instead it read, "I Just Wanted to Play Hockey."

There was a photo, too — an action shot of me in my Harkness uniform, lunging for the puck. Thank God they'd chosen that, and not the goofy one from the team program. In this one, you could hardly see my face.

"Rikker, are you still there?" Graham asked into my ear.

I stood up quickly, feeling a little lightheaded. "Yeah, I'm here." *I'm here, but I wish this weren't happening.* The article had fifty-seven comments

under it already.

It would probably be a bad idea to read them.

My phone beeped, and I took a peek at it. “Actually, Bella’s trying to call me.”

“Yeah?” Graham chuckled. “Well you’ll have to call her back, because I need to talk to you for one more minute. Listen, I just wanted to say I’m sorry I freaked out on you the other night.”

Funny. I’d thought of almost nothing else for the last five days. Until right this second, when it suddenly seemed pretty unimportant. “It’s okay,” I told him. When I let Graham jump me, I’d already known that he was nursing some size XXL issues.

It was *always* going to end like that.

“I just...” Graham stammered. “It made me realize that I just can’t... do that with you again. Or *any* guy. I’m not going to be... going there.”

Jeez. *Just say it out loud, Graham*, I begged him in my mind. *Say “gay.”* He couldn’t even fucking say the *word*.

“I forgot for a little while the other night. But it’s still true. And I’m sorry I freaked.” he finished.

What a head case. “Okay, man. I get it. You do what you have to do.”

“But I want us to be friends again.”

Well, ouch. Even in the most fucked-up of circumstances, it hurt to be friend-zoned. “Okay,” I said. What other choice did I have?

“I missed you, you know. You’re the only reason I kept playing hockey. Because it made me think of you.”

Dayum! This was quickly becoming the most tweaked conversation I’d ever had. “You could have called, you know,” I said. Though I didn’t really intend to take the conversation in this direction. I didn’t want him to know how much it had hurt to be abandoned so completely. I lay in that hospital bed for days, and every time someone opened the door, I waited for it to be him.

“I was afraid.”

Yeah, I got that.

“...But it was wrong not to call, and I spent five years feeling bad about it. So I’m calling now. We were always tight, and I threw that away.”

Yeah, you did.

“So tell me how we can be friends again, and I’ll do it.”

Sure, pal! We could be the kind of friends who never, ever drank

tequila together. Because if we did, that scene from the other night would probably play out all over again.

“I guess you’re going home to Michigan for Christmas, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. Tomorrow.”

“Cool.” He didn’t even have to pretend that we were going to hang out together, because winter break was here. “You know,” I said on a whim, “you could come to Vermont for a night on your way back.” But there was no way he would say yes to that. And it felt a little mean to call him on it.

There was another silence. “How would that work?”

“You could fly into Burlington instead of Hartford, and we’ll drive down in time for practice on the thirtieth. I’m renting a car anyway.”

“I didn’t buy my ticket yet,” he said slowly. “I’ll look into it.”

“You do that.” But what were the odds? He’d probably just tell me later that the tickets didn’t work out. It might even be true. There weren’t that many flights into Burlington.

“Okay man. Hang in there. You know, with the whole article thing.”

“Yeah, it’s going to be a party.”

He chuckled, and the sound of it was so familiar that it made me sad.

“Later.”

“*Adios, Miguel.*”

But he didn’t answer me in Spanish. Instead, he just disconnected.

After I hung up with Graham, shit got serious.

My phone started ringing again, and it never stopped. By the next morning, I didn’t even recognize the bulk of the incoming numbers. One of them said ESPN on it. What athlete doesn’t want to take a call from ESPN, right?

This guy.

I kept my cell phone powered down most of the time. I logged into the Harkness College directory and unlisted my telephone number and email address. Everybody who mattered in my life (all four of them, or whatever) knew how to reach me on Gran’s house phone, anyway.

Hunkering down on my bed with an old Kurt Vonnegut novel, I tried to shut out the world.

“John?” my grandmother called up the stairs to me around noon.

“Yeah?”

“Your coach is on the land line.”

“Thanks, Gran! I got it!” I picked up the house phone. “Hi, Coach.”

“Rikker! Quite a stir you’re causing on the interwebs. Is your phone ringing?”

“Yeah, but I don’t answer.”

He chuckled. “The press office wanted me to wake you up at dawn with instructions. But I told them there was no way you’d speak to another reporter if you could help it.”

“This is true.”

“Look, kid, the timing of this is good for you. Outside the rink right now there’s three news vans.”

“What? Why?” I felt nauseous all of a sudden. Hopefully, my teammates were all too busy leaving town to notice.

“First Division One hockey player to come out, yada yada. That, and it’s a slow news day in sports.”

“So you’re saying I should pray for some NFL player to get arrested for something.”

Coach laughed. “Yeah, but until one does, you need to call the Harkness press office and have a chat with them. They’re expecting you.”

“What for?”

“They’re going to work on answering some questions from the press. It’s either that or you’re doing a press conference.”

“...Or I’m changing my name and moving to Fiji.”

“Shitty hockey teams in Fiji, kid. Now write down this phone number.”

When I called the press office, I didn’t get the same young woman who had sat through the interview with me. It seemed I’d moved up the ranks to the head of the press office. “Call me Bob,” the guy said. “My question for you is this — would you rather sit down with ESPN or *Sports Illustrated*?”

“None of the above?”

Bob chuckled. “Now, that’s no fun. You have a chance to make a difference, Mr. Rikker. What if there’s another athlete somewhere, too afraid to tell his teammates the truth? What do you say to that guy?”

I’d say he’s not crazy. Because this was no fun.

“I don’t have anything new to add,” I pointed out. “I’m not going to talk about my personal life to a reporter. And the first reporter already printed everything I told her.”

“That’s not how it works,” Bob argued. “She didn’t print your

conversation verbatim. So even if you say exactly the same things, the next reporter puts his own spin on it.”

But I didn’t want to be spun. “Sir, here’s the problem. Since I gave that interview, all my teammates were called ‘faggots’ to their faces by the Saint B’s team. And then I was ejected from a home game for punching one of my ex-teammates. How do think the press will spin that?”

There was a silence on the line. “Who saw this happen?”

“Like, a few hundred spectators.”

He actually cursed under his breath. “All right. Maybe we should wait on the interviews. We can do a personal statement instead. We’ve got to give them something, though. The beast is hungry, and it wants you.”

How encouraging. “What’s a personal statement?”

“A letter, basically. ‘Dear journalists, I am humbled and overwhelmed by your interest in the story of my transfer. While I need to keep my focus on my game and my schoolwork at this time, I’d like to thank Coach James for his faith in me, and my teammates for their patience with their new teammate.’”

I stifled a snort.

“...Then you just recount what you told the *Connecticut Standard*. Just the facts. ‘The coach let me go. My uncle pointed out that it was against ACAA regulations. Coach James offered me a spot. The end.’”

“Okay. I can do that.”

“Great. Put some words on a page, and send me what you’ve got in an hour. We’ll help you work the kinks out of it, and then we’ll get this puppy out to all your new fans.”

I wrote down his email address and got the hell off that call. It was only after we hung up that I realized I’d let Bob from the press office assign me homework. Over Christmas break.

Shoot me.

By mid afternoon, it was all done. My new BFF Bob had edited my original two-pager to make it sound like it had been written by a happy-go-lucky boy scout. It had an “aw, shucks” quality to it that didn’t sound like me. But I wanted to be done with it, so I’d approved all but the stupidest of his changes and shut down my computer.

Downstairs, I found Gran rolling out Christmas cookies at the kitchen table. “When you’re famous, you’ll still remember the little people, won’t

you John?” She peered over her glasses at me.

“If there are cookies, I think I can fit you into my busy schedule.” I helped myself to another cup of coffee. “You know, a cookie would go really well with this.”

“Check that batch in the oven, would you? I always burn at least one batch. If the phone keeps ringing, it could get ugly.”

“I’m sorry about this,” I said quickly. “I have a feeling that it’s going to get worse before it gets better. Maybe we should just let every call go to the machine. I just can’t answer the phone today.”

She waved a floury hand, dismissing the idea. “It’s mostly my friends who call on this line. It’s very exciting, really. Gertie saw it on Facebook already.”

“Gertie is on Facebook?” I opened the oven door. With Gran’s oven mitt, I slid the tray of cookies out of the oven and set them on the cooling rack. They looked done to me. So I scraped one off the sheet with the spatula, and then flipped the blazing hot thing into my mouth.

That was a mistake.

“Owrrh,” I yelped as my tongue got singed.

Gran watched this foolishness with one eyebrow cocked. “Should I be worried how you’re doing at that school for geniuses?”

And that made me laugh, which made me choke a little bit. I had to set down my coffee mug to get a grip on myself.

“It’s a good thing you’re handsome,” Gran said, turning back to her rolling pin. “At least you have that going for you.”

The phone rang again. Gran adjusted her glasses and peered at the caller ID. With a little sigh, she picked it up. “Good afternoon, Rebekkah.”

Uh oh. My mother. I’d seen her name on my cell phone earlier, too. But I didn’t check to see if she’d left a voicemail. I couldn’t handle her today.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Gran said to her. “Why? Because I can hear in your voice that you’re not in the proper frame of mind to speak to him right now. It would be best if you could calm down first.” As I watched, Gran winced. “Why would you assume that the press coverage was his idea in the first place?” she asked. “You do not sound entirely sensible right now, my dear. I’m going to hang up now, and perhaps we can talk later, when you’re feeling more relaxed.” At that, Gran set the phone back into its cradle.

Her tone had been remarkably composed while she spoke to my mother. But now she was glaring at the phone as if hoping that lasers might shoot

from her eyes and incinerate it.

“Gran?” I said lightly. “If there’s a chance that my parents won’t send me my Hallmark card this Christmas, I’ll carry on somehow.”

Her shoulders slumped. “That’s not funny, John.”

“It isn’t?” I was pretty sure it was. Because my parents had already done their worst to me. Now they were freaking out because I’d made the news, and their church friends would see it.

Whatever. Not my problem.

“It’s *sad* is what it is,” Gran said, turning around. “Because some day your mother is going to be an old woman. And old age has a way of stripping away the distractions, and making you see the big picture of your life. So she’ll be sitting alone in some nursing home asking herself ‘what have I done?’ And it will be too late for her to fix it.”

That did sound depressing. Except that Gran probably overestimated my mother. As an old lady, she would probably pat herself on the back for doing everything the Bible told her to. And she’d probably be feeling pretty smug about it.

Again, not my problem. As long as my parents still paid the portion of my school fees that financial aid did not cover, then I could live with their rejection. “Let’s just eat more cookies,” I suggested.

“Let’s,” Gran agreed.

Breakaway: taking possession of the puck when there are no defenders other than the goalie in the way of the net.

— *Graham*

As the plane taxied up to the airport, I took off my seatbelt.

I'm sure that Rikker would have bet any amount of money against me actually getting on a plane to Burlington. He'd probably been stunned when I'd texted him my flight information last week. Even now, he was probably in that airport wondering if I'd really show.

We may have known each other for a long time, but Rikker doesn't really know how my fucked-up little brain works. I'm always looking for the loophole — for any way that I can get past all the rules I'd made for myself. And Vermont is the perfect loophole. Except for Rikker, I didn't know a soul there. I bought my ticket with my personal credit card, and had my dad drop me off at the airport's curb, so he'd never see my boarding passes.

The man hates to pay for parking. You can take that to the bank.

So here I was, shuffling down the narrow aisle to visit a state I'd never seen, and nobody but Rikker had a clue.

When I deplaned, I noticed that the Burlington airport was, if possible, even smaller than the one I'd left that morning in Grand Rapids. After passing two or three gates, I left the secure area toward baggage claim. I spotted him right away. He was wearing a flannel shirt over faded jeans, and leaning casually against a poster for rental cars. Damn, my heart skipped a beat just seeing his face.

Engage deflector shields.

Before I reached Rikker, a big black dude stopped to talk to him. They shook hands as I approached. Rikker spotted me anyway, beckoning me over. "Hey! You made it." I got the same handshake as the other guy. "This is Ross," he said, indicating the bruiser standing beside him. The guy wore a "UVM Weightlifting" T-shirt and a duffel over one shoulder. He'd been on my connecting flight from Chicago, I think. "Ross," Rikker continued, "this is my teammate, Mike."

Mike. I hadn't heard Rikker call me that in years. Maybe never.

"Nice to meet you," the big dude said. He had a goofy smile for such a mountain of a man. "You haven't seen Skippy?" he asked, looking around.

Rikker shook his head. "But he's never on time, right? The apology texts won't even start rolling in for another ten minutes."

Ross laughed. "Good point."

"Got another bag?" Rikker nodded toward the luggage carousel.

"Nope. I'm good to go," I said.

Rikker eyed the door. "Can we drop you somewhere, Ross?" There was something a little stiff about the way he said it, as if Rikker hoped he'd turn down the offer.

"Naw, I'm sure he'll..." The guy didn't get a chance to finish the sentence. Because a skinny, dark-haired streak ran up, leaping into Ross's arms. The big man swayed for a second as his mouth was taken in a hard kiss, and his face grabbed in two long, skinny hands.

It took a great deal of effort not stare at the unlikely sight of two guys making out in the Burlington airport arrivals terminal.

"Jesus, get a room," Rikker grumbled.

With an exaggerated groan of affection, the newcomer released Ross's face. "Sorry, it's been a long ten days." The skinny guy turned with a smile and then tackled Rikker in a hug. "Damn! *You're* looking good. Even better than in your press photography."

"Oh, fuck off."

The newcomer giggled. "We have you up on our refrigerator. The *Free Press* version."

"*The Free Press*, too? Fuck. Is it cocktail hour yet?"

"Oh, Rikky. It's *always* cocktail hour! In fact, tonight is guerrilla night at *Slate*. Are you coming?" He glanced at me, too. "And who's your pretty friend?"

"This is my *teammate*, Mike. Mike, meet Skippy."

I shook hands with Skippy, while Rikker chewed on his lip. "You know," he said, "I'm not sure that guerrilla night is Mike's scene. But we'll make some plans and get back to you."

"You should totally come! I'd talk you into it, but we have to scoot. I'm double parked." Skinny Skippy grabbed the big guy's hand and dragged him toward the door.

"Of course you are," Rikker muttered.

“Text me!” Skippy called over his shoulder as they trotted off.

“He’s... colorful,” I said, following Rikker toward the exit.

“That he is,” Rikker said. “I’m parked just over there.” He pointed at an old red pickup truck just inside the garage.

I tossed my duffel onto the floor of the truck and climbed in. The engine started with a growl. “Nice ride,” I said.

“I love this old thing. My grandmother refuses to give it up, which is cool. Though I just hope she doesn’t fall out of it or anything.”

As he drove out of the airport, there was a silence between us, the kind that comes from having no clue how we were supposed to behave together. But five years of distance and a shit-ton of baggage will do that to a friendship.

A black Mini Cooper passed us, honking as it went. Rikker smiled and shook his head as they passed by.

“Who were those guys, anyway?” I asked.

“You just met my ex,” Rikker said.

Holy shit. I revisited the airport in my mind, trying to place Rikker with one of those guys. “The big dude?”

He gave me half a grin. “Try door number two.”

“Seriously?” That wasn’t an easy image to reconcile. Skippy was everything Rikker was not — a scrawny, effeminate twink, basically.

Rikker chuckled. “You should see your face.”

“He just didn’t strike me as your type.”

“Because he’s such a flamer, right? It’s okay, you can say it. He wouldn’t even be offended. You have to get up pretty early in the morning to offend Skippy. That’s part of his charm. He doesn’t give a fuck what other people think.” He drove in silence for a minute. “The first time I met him, I thought, ‘who is this nut bar?’ But he grew on me.”

“Were you together a long time?”

“Three years.”

“Jeez.” That made Skippy the other guy in Rikker’s snowboarding picture.

“Yep. Two years in high school. And then when I played on the devo team, we did the long distance thing for a year. And he waited for me. But then I committed to Saint B’s instead of Vermont, where he goes to school.”

“He was pissed?”

Rikker nodded. “But I thought I had the world by the ear, you know?”

Saint B's was going to give me lots of playing time, and I was going to meet all kinds of new people. I wasn't sure I wanted to be tied down. Then, during my first week in Massachusetts, Skippy called to tell me we were finished because he was in love."

I was still having trouble picturing it. "That was fast," I said, hoping it was the right thing to say.

"That's Skippy. But he and Ross are still going strong, so I guess he was right."

I did the math in my head. First he got dumped, and then he got tossed off the hockey team. "You had quite a year last year."

"Yep."

"What's this place they want to go to tonight?"

Rikker grinned. "Burlington isn't big enough to have a gay bar. So once a month they have a guerrilla night, where some bar becomes a gay bar for the evening. They put the word out on a Facebook page, and everybody knows where to go. It's pretty clever. I've been to dozens of them."

"Huh," that sounded cool, except for one obvious problem. "What does everyone else in the bar think?"

"There are always a few people who get up and leave. There are plenty of bars in Burlington, though, so it's not the end of the world. And bar owners like guerrilla night, because it's always held on a weeknight. So they're, like, full to the gills on a Wednesday."

Up to this point, I had never had a discussion with anyone about gay bars. "Cool."

"We don't have to go, though. I'm good either way."

"You don't mind hanging out with your ex?"

Rikker shrugged. "I ducked him once already this week, which was kind of rude. And I'd rather see him at the bar than hang out at their apartment."

"So let's go," I said.

He gave me a sideways glance, and then returned his eyes to the road. "Okay." Clearly he wasn't expecting me to get behind this idea. But again, he didn't know about my loopholes. This might be the only chance I'd ever had to go into a gay bar, even a makeshift one.

Bring it on.

The ride to Rikker's place was twenty minutes, and it was dark by the

time we pulled up in front of an old farmhouse. He couldn't know it, but I'd tried a thousand times to picture Rikker in Vermont. "It sure got country fast," I said, looking around as I got out of the truck. You couldn't even see the nearest neighbor.

"You drive fifteen minutes from any place in Vermont, and you get basically this," he said, climbing the granite stoop. His hand was on the doorknob. "You ready?"

"For what?"

He grinned and opened the door. "Grans, we're home!"

As I entered the house, I heard the tip-tap of heels on the wooden floors. "Hiiiiii!" A little woman came skittering into the room. She grabbed Rikker around the midsection and squeezed him. "Sorry," she said, patting his chest afterward. "I have to get those in before you go away again tomorrow." Then she turned to me, stood up on tiptoe and grabbed my face in both hands. "Hello! You've gotten so tall I can hardly reach you! And what a handsome man!" She rubbed my cheeks until she'd probably removed a layer of skin before finally letting me go.

"Good to see you again, Mrs. Rikker." I'd only met her once before, some Christmas when she'd visited Rikker's family in Michigan.

"Come in, come in! Dinner is ready. Sit down, because Gertie is going to pick me up for poker night in a few minutes." She flew toward the back of the house, her heels tapping out a rhythm.

Rikker toed off his boots, smiling as effortlessly as a Labrador retriever. "Hope you're hungry," he said. "Seems like she's on a tear."

We walked past some ancient-looking furniture into an old kitchen, where the table was set for three. "Don't forget to wash your hands," Rikker's grandmother said over her shoulder.

Rikker went over to the sink first, giving me a wink as he went. "We ran into Skippy at the airport," he told his Gran as he scrubbed up. "He invited us out tonight."

"I'm leaving you the truck," she said, putting a casserole dish on the table. "So go if you wish. Did I tell you that Skippy and his new man turned up to snow-blow my walk when we got that early storm over Thanksgiving?"

"What a kiss-ass," Rikker said.

She turned to slap him on the backside. "Language!" But she was grinning. This was obviously a shtick they had going. "They dug an old lady out of the snow. It's *almost* enough to make me forgive him."

Rikker grunted, tossing me a dishtowel. I washed my hands, feeling certain that I'd landed in a parallel universe, where a guy could talk about his ex-boyfriend with his Gran.

We all sat down at the table, which was set with glasses of milk for Rikker and I, the same way it would have been when we were twelve.

Not for nothing was I raised in the most conservative corner of the heartland. I sat back in my chair and waited for her to say grace. Rikker's Gran folded her hands and spoke. "Dear Lord, thank you for these blessings we are about to receive, and for the safe delivery of our guest, who is kind enough to visit an old friend and an old lady. And please bless clueless Edna, whose granddaughter landed in jail again last night, the poor misguided girl."

I raised my eyes to catch Rikker's, and he bit back a smile.

"...And God bless our family and our dear friends. Especially Gertie, and may you help her to learn before she dies that cheating at poker is wrong. Amen."

"Amen," Rikker said, and then he grabbed the serving spoon and heaved a big scoop of the steaming dish onto his plate. It was a casserole made from noodles, chicken and mushrooms. Then he handed me the spoon.

"This smells great," I said. And that was the God's honest truth.

"Have as much as you wish," she encouraged me. "I made a second one for poker night." There was also a plate of vegetables and dip, and from this she took a piece of celery and nibbled at it. "I put sheets on the sewing room bed," she said.

"I would have done it," Rikker said, forking up some pasta.

"First you would have had to take all the quilting crap off of it," she said. "I saved you the trouble."

"Thanks for having me," I said.

She patted my hand. "Anytime, dear. We like visitors."

From outside came the sound of a car horn. Mrs. Rikker stood up. "Sorry to dash. Have fun tonight." She grabbed a coat off the back of her chair and shrugged it on. "And take care in all the usual ways, boys. Say no to drugs, and drinking and driving. Yes to seat belts and condoms."

"You too, Gran," Rikker said.

From the sideboard she grabbed a casserole dish with two hot pads. "TTFN, boys."

Then she was gone, leaving Rikker smiling into his milk glass, and me with my face burning from the condom remark. The door shut behind her,

and Rikker continued eating as if that hadn't just been the weirdest exchange ever. "TTFN?" I asked.

"Ta-ta for now," Rikker explained. "She's a piece of work, right?"

That was the understatement of the year. "I don't see any resemblance between her and your father."

Rikker chuckled. "Isn't it great?" He helped himself to more of the food.

"I don't get it, though. How did your dad get that stick up his ass, anyway?" And that was the nice way to put it. Rikker's parents were aggressively evangelical.

"Well, my mom rules that roost," he said. "Also, he works for the Christian college. So he's drinking the Kool-Aid at work and at home."

"Do you ever go back there?"

Rikker shook his head. "Nope. The P's and I have a Hallmark relationship."

"What do you mean?"

"We send each other cards. Theirs come from the devotional section of the store, of course. Sometimes they call me on my birthday."

Wow. Even though I had a lot of trouble feeling comfortable around my family, I couldn't imagine my parents cutting me off like that. "That's harsh."

"I kind of like it this way," he said. "Gran has a few choice words for them. So it sucks to be the wedge between Gran and one of her sons. But she likes my company." He got up to rinse his plate and put it in the dishwasher. "You need anything else?"

"Nope. This was great." It was entirely trippy to be Rikker's guest. A few minutes later, I'd dealt with my own dishes and followed him into a den at the back of the house. Unlike the living room I'd passed through when we arrived, this one was comfortable, with big chairs and a generous couch.

Rikker threw himself onto the couch and looked at his watch. "We don't need to leave for a while. Skippy is late to everything. You want to play some RealStix?"

I grinned. "Hell yeah."

He set up the game. "I'll even let you be the Red Wings without a fight."

"Let me guess — you're a Bruins fan now. Convenient of you, becoming a New Englander for the last five years. But just because they won the cup once doesn't mean they can do it again."

“Smack talker,” Rikker said, tossing me a controller.

Even though it didn't help my view of the screen, I dropped myself in one of the chairs. Sitting next to him on the couch was just a little too much like old times.

Deflector shields engaged.

He started up the game. And for a couple of hours, the years just fell away.

“You are a total asshole,” Rikker grumbled whenever I stole the puck.

“Right back at you, baby.” I skated for his goal, passed to my wing and shot.

He blocked it. *Crap.* Then he laughed like a hyena.

The period ended. “Rematch,” I said.

But he didn't start the game up right away. “This is fun,” he said instead.

“Yeah, it is.” We were quiet for a second, but this time it was the good kind of silence. “I like your corner of Vermont, Rik. Your Gran is great, too.”

“She is,” he said, dropping his head back against the sofa. “I invited you here on a whim. But it's good here, you know? Just in case you worried about what happened to me, or whatever.” His voice dropped, as if he thought that sounded vain. “I had it good here. You should know that.”

“I did worry,” I whispered.

“Now you don't have to,” he said. Then he picked up his controller and restarted the game.

— *Rikker*

An hour later, I somehow parallel-parked Gran's truck into an inadequate space on the street in Burlington. “And they say I'm not a manly man,” I said, snapping the keys from the ignition.

Graham tipped his head back against the headrest and laughed.

I hesitated for a second before opening the door. “Are you sure you don't mind this?”

Even though it was too dark to see their icy blue color, Graham's eyes were still beautiful in the dim light. “Why do you keep asking me that?”

I jerked my thumb toward the entrance. “Because we're outside the gayest place in Vermont right now. And you can't even say that word out loud.”

But his gaze was steady. “Doesn't mean I don't *wish* I could say it.”

Well, *dayum*. That was a big revelation from Mr. Uptight. But if he actually wanted to see the inside of a gay bar, then this was the place. It would be thoroughly queer, but not too hardcore or creepy, unlike a couple of the clubs Skippy and I had blundered into in Montreal. “Let’s go, then,” I said.

There was a reason that Slate had always been our favorite guerrilla destination, and that reason was *dancing*. Not every bar in Burlington had the space. But when we cracked open the door of the crowded place, there were already bodies gyrating to a song by Fun.

“You know it’s queer night?” the bouncer asked from his stool just inside the door.

“We are well aware of that fact,” I said, offering him my driver’s license.

“Then off you go,” he said, stamping my hand with *OVER 21*.

I scanned the room as Graham got his hand stamped. From a high table off to the side, I found Skippy motioning to me. “Over there,” I said to Graham, but the music drowned me out. So I grabbed his hand to pull him through the crowd. And as his fingers closed over mine I almost laughed out loud. If you’d told me a month ago whether I’d be leading Graham by the hand through a gay dance party, I would have called you insane.

“You’re late,” Skippy shouted as we took seats.

“Bullshit. You got here five minutes ago.”

He made a defeated face, leaning in to talk to me. “How did you *know?*”

“In the first case, there aren’t any glasses on the table. And also because you’re oversexed, and Ross has been out of town for ten days.”

Skippy pouted. “He’s at the bar, buying the first round.”

“I’ll grab a couple of beers,” Graham shouted from the other side of the table. “What do you like?”

“Anything better than Capri’s piss-water.”

He grinned and disappeared into the crowd.

Skippy leaned over to speak into my ear. “Are you with him?”

I shook my head. “He’s not a member of the tribe.”

My ex tipped his head for a better look at the bar. “Interesting that you’d say that. Because I think your teammate Mike is as gay as a Judy Garland sing-along. You should see his face right now. He looks like a kid getting his first look at the presents under the Christmas tree.”

Skippy's gaydar was rock solid. Always had been. "Go easy on him, okay? He's kind of a wreck."

"Good pick for you, then."

Well, *ouch*. That stung because it was true. Hanging out with both Skippy and Graham in one night was some kind of weird self-torture. Even though I'd agreed to be Just Friends with Graham, I still felt a big tug every time I looked at him. Heartbreak was pretty much inevitable.

"You're pissed at me for saying that," Skippy said, his face propped into one hand. He had long, dark eyelashes. And his dressy black button-down shirt made those big brown eyes as dark as coal. There was something truly magnetic about Skippy, as if he could see right into your soul.

"Don't want to talk about it," I said.

"Dance with me instead?"

Now there was a dubious idea. "We'd lose our table."

He rolled those luminous eyes. "Okay, Dad."

Luckily, Ross and Graham showed up then with the drinks. Hooray for a little ethanol lubrication. I drank half of the Long Trail that Graham brought me in the first thirty seconds. He'd also bought what looked like two shots of Jack. "Shot?" he mouthed over the music. With a shake of my head, I mimed driving. So Graham drank them both.

"How was Christmas?" I asked Ross, shouting over the song.

"Not bad," he said with a grin. "My relatives kept the fag slurs down to a couple dozen, so I can't complain."

"Ross is from Alabama," I shouted by way of explanation to Graham.

"And not the nice part," he added.

Graham put his second empty glass down on the table. As I watched his eyes sweep the room, I wondered what he saw. It was the typical mixed-up scene. There were a handful of exhibitionists in their over-the-top leather getups. (Whenever I saw a man in leather pants, it always made my own balls sweat in sympathy.) For every outrageously dressed queer there were three other guys in flannel shirts and baseball caps. But it was early yet. Those shirts would come off when it got hotter in here.

Daft Punk started singing *Get Lucky*, and Graham's shoulders found the beat. Skippy poked me in the shoulder, and I leaned in to hear what he had to say.

"I'm sorry I was a dick."

"You mean a minute ago?" I was primed to forget about it already.

I was granted one more Skippy eye-roll. “Yeah, a minute ago. Was I a dick some other time, too?”

“No,” I laughed. I drained my beer and put down the empty. “Let’s dance. All of us. That ought to shake up my friend.”

Skippy’s eyes sparkled with mischief. He tipped the last of his drink into his mouth, then stood up. “Come on,” he said, tugging Graham’s elbow. “We’re going to dance now.”

Graham’s eyes widened. “I may not be drunk enough for that.”

“It’s just dancing,” Skippy shouted, grabbing Graham’s hand. “It won’t make you queer!”

“Too late,” I said directly into Graham’s ear as Skippy tugged him into the crowd. Graham reached back, pinching my ass in retribution. Hard.

“Ow,” I complained.

He just grinned over his shoulder.

Before I started hanging around with Skippy, I wasn’t a fan of dancing. But not even reluctant dancers could resist him. All you had to do was look at Skippy, and you couldn’t help but move. The music just seemed to pulse up his body, past those skinny hips, up his straight spine and then through two fluid arms.

When he danced, Skippy closed his eyes, as if taking orders from some celestial plane. And when he was dancing, it was easier for everyone else to enjoy it, too. You could just watch him and imagine that you moved as well as he did. And somehow it became true. Because you were having fun, and that was the big secret to dancing, anyway.

Tonight Ross was wearing a T-shirt that read: *Boys Will Do Boys*. He moved around behind Skippy, curving one big arm around his chest. And somehow the two of them didn’t even look ridiculous. Because Skippy was just that good a dancer.

As one song morphed into the next, I heard a squeal in my ear, even louder than Lady Gaga. “Rikker!” I turned around to find Rachel and Daphne, friends of mine from high school.

I gave each of them a quick kiss on the cheek. “What’s up!” I shouted over the music. When Daphne jutted a thumb towards Graham, I said, “My friend from school.”

They both gave him appreciative looks. *Good luck with that, girls*. But the company of a couple of girls was just what Graham needed, apparently. When Daphne stepped in closer to him, he seemed to loosen up. He smiled,

and began to move in a way that was less self-conscious. Daphne sidled up in front of him, and he put a hand on her waist.

Even though Graham was touching Daphne, his eyes worked the room. The place was heating up in every possible way. The guys around us on the dance floor were losing their shirts one at a time. While torsos writhed with the music, hands slid over skin and fabric. Denim to denim, hips pulsed and ground to the beat. We were a giant undulating mass of bodies, sweating through songs by Macklemore, and for the older crowd, Depeche Mode.

When the music slowed, Rachel put her arms around me so we could have a catch-up chat. “I saw the articles. What made you go public?” She was one of the friends I was out to in high school.

“No choice in the matter.”

She gave me a peck on the cheek. “Somehow I knew you’d say that. A few people at school mentioned it to me. Like Petey, for one.”

Petey was the co-captain of my high school team, now playing for UVM where Rachel went to school. “Yeah? What did he say?”

“He said he always had a hunch.”

I chewed on that for a second. “I guess that doesn’t make him a genius, right?” It was a pretty small school, and I hung out with Skippy all the time, even if we never touched anywhere near school. Then again, Skippy was popular with lots of straight people, too.

Rachel put her mouth next to my ear. “Maybe it’s something that people say, because it sounds better than ‘I’m totally clueless.’”

I kissed her cheek again. “Whichever.”

“You know, I don’t like seeing Skippy with another guy,” she said.

I took the high road, as usual. Although it was getting old. “I met Ross over the summer. He seems like a pretty good guy.”

Rachel smiled. “I’m sure you’re right, but I was trying to be loyal. Is your friend straight? Daphne is working it pretty hard.”

I took a peek over my shoulder, where the two of them were slow-dancing. “Not sure where he stands,” I said. *And neither is he.*

Eventually the music picked up again, and we all danced ourselves silly. It had been a while since I’d had a night out like this, and I’d forgotten what dancing was for. It was such a release. (Like sex, only not as messy, and with less heartbreak.) The music coursed through me, and I stopped thinking and let myself just feel.

When we needed a break, Graham bought a couple more beers.

Standing side by side, we propped up a wall beside the dancers, alternately swallowing the beer and pressing the cool bottles to our faces.

When Graham tipped his chin up to drain the bottle, I had an involuntary flashback to the sight of those lips wrapped around a certain part of my anatomy.

Dayum. That image was burned on my brain, and chance of a repeat was slim. But at least I had the one memory.

We stashed our bottles on a ledge when the Communards version of “Don’t Leave Me This Way” started up. Like Gaga’s “Born this Way,” it had been adopted as a gay anthem. Skippy boogied over to me with a serious look in those smoky eyes. Back in the day, we’d danced to this song all the time.

He yanked me by the hand, and I went along with it. Dancing to this track meant raising your arms up every time the vocalist shouted “Awwwwwwww BABY!” With hands in the air, there were a lot of hip collisions, and frat-style beer gut bumps. It was sweaty and silly and glorious. Dancing wasn’t supposed to take itself too seriously. Skippy was in front of me, and Graham was behind me. I could feel him up against my ass. That was a new development. So I slipped a hand behind me and gave Graham’s fly a single caress. If he wanted a night at the gay bar, I’d make sure he got the whole experience.

What are friends for, right?

A moment later, his hand landed on my backside, tracing the seam of my pants. Oh, man. Payback was a bitch. So I took an experimental half step back, tucking my ass against his crotch. If he didn’t like it, all he had to do was move away from me.

He didn’t move away.

Faster than you could say “horny much?” his hand slid onto my hip. And then a Maroon Five song came on. I leaned back against Graham. And as Adam Levine’s voice crooned from the speakers, Graham and I were giving each other the *Moves Like Jagger*.

It was a sweaty, heated business. I ground my hips to the beat, and Graham’s body went right along with me, pulsing wherever the music took us. One song dissolved into another, and then another. Around us, glistening bodies torqued and jived. The longer we moved, the hotter I felt. It was getting late, but I didn’t want the night to end. I’d never danced with Graham in my life, and I probably never would again.

But eventually the DJ decided to take things down a few notches. The

music slowed to a heartbeat pace, and Madonna began singing an old one, “Crazy for You.” All around us, couples curled into one another, arms finding purchase. Lips finding lips.

“We should split, right?” I panted into Graham’s ear.

He nodded immediately, as I knew he would. There was no way we could go full-frontal in a slow dance and still pretend that tonight was just some crazy when-in-Rome kind of situation.

I wanted to, though. I wanted to pull his chest to mine, and press my face into his neck. *It’s just dancing*, I could tell myself. But it would be a lie. No matter what label I put on it, and no matter how stupid it made me, I still wanted Graham.

Yep. Time to go home.

“I’m going to tell the other guys that we’re out of here. Meet you by the door?” He nodded again. So I threaded through the crowd, finding Skippy and Ross beside our old table, guzzling water. “We’re going to head out,” I said.

“Stowe tomorrow?” Skippy asked between gulps. Then he refilled the glass from a pitcher they’d acquired somehow.

“I dunno,” I said, wondering if there was time for snowboarding. Probably not. “I’ll have to see when Graham wants to get back.” I snagged Skippy’s water glass from his hand and brought it to my lips. But I’d only managed a sip when his fingers closed tightly around my wrist, his eyes going wide. I didn’t understand why he’d object to my getting some water. “You have a whole pitcher,” I argued.

But water was not Skippy’s problem. “*What* did you call him?”

Oh, fuck. I tried to shrug off the question, shaking his hand off me and draining the glass.

But Skippy wasn’t having it. “You *cannot* be serious. *That’s* your Michigan guy?” He took the empty glass from my hand and set it down. Then he took my face in both of his hands. “You cannot get involved with a guy who fucked you over when you had three broken ribs and internal bleeding.” His dark eyes glittered with righteous indignation.

For a second time, I pushed his hands off me. “Guess what? You don’t get to tell me what to do anymore.” Fuck, that sounded bitter. And we both knew it.

He blinked at me for a beat. “Rikky, *Jesus*. Be careful.”

“Yes, *Dad*.” Even though I knew he really did care about me, I still

didn't want to hear it. We can't all have a Skippy and Ross love story, with a cute apartment and a poodle curled up on the rug. Their Instagram selfies were so cheerful that I could hardly look.

From a few feet away, Ross was watching us, a wary look on his face. I was too pissed off to say a polite goodnight to either of them. I gave Ross a kind of salute, and Skippy a look of irritation. Then I made my way back through the dancing bodies toward the door. Graham pushed it open when he saw me coming.

Outside, the temperature had descended to negative freeze-your-nuts-off, but it felt good against my sweaty skin. As we approached the truck, I noticed that there were two gay couples bookending it — one making out against the car parked behind us, and the other lip-locked beside the car parked in front of us.

It was hook-up o'clock, because Guerrilla Night was drawing to a close.

We climbed into the truck. When my door slammed, one half of the couple in front of us raised his eyes to check if we were about to run him down. But his partner, a short little guy, grabbed his jacket and pulled him back into the kiss.

Graham sat in the passenger seat, just staring at them.

Rubbing my cold hands together, and still distracted by the argument I'd had with Skippy, it took me a minute to realize where Graham's thoughts were probably headed. Kissing in public had been lethal to our friendship. And here we were, literally surrounded by men who weren't afraid to let the kisses fly.

"Welcome to Vermont," I said.

He said nothing. His eyes were still trained on the couple in front of us. I flipped on the truck's headlights, which illuminated them. But I couldn't tell if Graham was really watching, or if he was far away, inside a memory.

Either way, I knew what we had to do. "Come here," I whispered.

He gave a slow shake of his head. "Bad idea."

But it wasn't a bad idea. It was a powerful one. Five years ago, two boys had kissed in a car. And a bunch of assholes turned that moment into a life-altering disaster. But right now, two grown men could kiss in a car. And then go home to play one more game of RealStix like it was no big deal.

I stretched one hand across the seat to take Graham's. But he wouldn't look at me, even when I gave his arm a tug. "Come here," I said. "Or I'm coming over there." The truck had a bench seat, so it would be easy to make

good on that threat.

He looked at me then, a warning on his face.

“It’s just a kiss,” I whispered, rubbing his big hand in mine. “Do this for me.” I pulled him toward me again.

He came *almost* willingly.

Slowly, we eased closer, our eyes locked on one another, until I could feel his breath on my face. I closed the final inches between us, just ghosting my lips over his on the first pass. I saw his Adam’s apple bob nervously. So I was gentle when I cupped the back of his head, pulling him in. I pressed my lips to his, tasting musk and beer. *Mmm...* My kiss was slow. Appreciative.

After several beats of my heart, he relaxed into the kiss, melting for me. I licked into his mouth then. If I was only getting a kiss, I wanted to make it a good one. On the first wet slide of tongue against tongue, Graham made an achy little sound in the back of his throat.

Heaven.

Leaning in, I wrapped him in my arms. This wasn’t like the frantic, tequila-soaked mashup after the Saint B’s game. This time, I could feel us both holding tightly to our control. And even though my body wouldn’t have minded an escalation, we both knew that it wasn’t going to happen. This kiss was all about heartache. It was deep and sweet and sad. My chest fluttered with disbelief that I was holding him, and kissing him. Each moist slide of his lips against mine undid me a little more.

It was possibly the best kiss I’d ever had.

But eventually, the car in front of us roared to life, its taillights bathing the truck’s cab in bright red glow. With the moment broken, Graham eased back, and I let him go. As the other car pulled away and drove off, the sound of its motor faded. We were left alone with our own silence. Graham put his elbow on the window and looked away from me, already lost inside his own head. So I cranked the engine. As I let the engine heat up, I rubbed my own lips together. They were swollen and tender from Graham’s stubble.

I began the drive home. There was a nearly full moon tonight, which lit the snowy fields outside Burlington with an otherworldly, bluish glow.

“Some of that music was pretty dubious,” Graham said eventually.

“Yeah,” I chuckled. “If you want to be queer, you have to be okay with dance tunes.”

“One point for being straight, then,” he said.

I didn’t even reply, because that was such a sad way to think.

We pulled up to Gran's brightly lit house. Graham looked up at the house, and then over at me. In the dark, he studied me. "Rik," he whispered. "I had fun tonight."

"Me too, G."

He moved then, hitching across the seat to reach me. "One more," he breathed. "For old time's sake." Then he turned my face toward his, capturing my mouth in a kiss.

Stupid or not, I just went with it. If you stripped away all the confusion and the old heartaches, I'd had an almost perfect day. And this right here was pretty much all I'd ever wanted from Graham. I wanted his friendship, and then I wanted him to reach for me at the end of the night. So for those few minutes, I had everything.

The kiss got heated. Graham's hands wandered over my chest, and I wrapped my arms around his big shoulders. The size of him was a real turn-on. *Hell*. Everything about him was a real turn-on. The more we kissed, the harder I got.

I let my mouth wander down his gorgeous jaw. And I'd begun tasting the skin on the side of his neck when he let out a big, frustrated sigh. Reluctantly I sat back, checking his face.

"We'd better go in," he said. "Your grandmother is going to wonder why we didn't come inside."

Slowly, I passed my palm over the whiskers on his cheek. "G, if she's not asleep, she'll just assume we were making out in the truck. And she won't think less of you for it."

But we both already knew that didn't matter to Graham. Without another word, he opened the door and got out. The idea of someone suspecting us was a barrier that he simply could not get past.

When I jumped out of the truck, I had to adjust myself inside my too-tight jeans. My body really wanted to get Graham alone. The problem was, there was no place on *Earth* alone enough for Graham.

— *Graham*

The next morning I woke up with a start, briefly confused about where I was. The sun shone through an unfamiliar window. I pulled my phone off Mrs. Rikker's sewing table and saw that it was almost ten. That wasn't terribly surprising, because I often slept late. More interestingly, after falling head first into the guest bed at around one in the morning, I hadn't woken up

even once. Weird. Usually I spent part of the night tracing the ceiling beams, going a few rounds with the demons in my head.

Sitting up, I shoved my drowsy limbs into my clothes. Then I followed the voices into the kitchen.

“He lives,” Rikker said when I shuffled in. He was standing at the counter, grating cheese into a pile on a wooden cutting board.

I cleared my sleepy throat. “Sorry. I slept hard.”

On her way between the open refrigerator and the stove, his Grandmother patted me on the arm. “Nothing to be sorry for. You’re on vacation.” She set a dozen eggs on the counter and opened the carton. “Do you eat eggs, Graham?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Rikker reached over his head and fetched a mug, which he filled with coffee from a pot in front of him. This he handed back to me without comment. Then he picked up the cheese grater again.

I took a deep gulp of the coffee and began to feel almost human. “Can I do anything to help?”

“Just stand there lookin’ pretty,” Rikker drawled. Then he flashed me a wicked grin.

I pulled a face. But *God*, that smile was disarming. When he aimed it at me, I would probably do anything he asked.

Anything except the one thing that mattered. Anything except love him the way he deserved.

“If you boys are here for another two hours, I can send you back with meatballs in tomato sauce,” Grandma Rikker said. She was cracking eggs into a mixing bowl.

“I’m free then,” Rikker said. “What do you think, G? Do we need to leave before noon?”

Sometime yesterday he’d begun calling me “G” again, just like the old days. I liked it. “There’s no rush,” I told him. “I’ll need to grab a shower at some point, but that’s the only thing on my to-do list.”

Rikker lifted his chin toward the stairs. “You can go now. Breakfast will be another fifteen minutes.”

As I climbed the stairs, I could hear Rikker and his grandmother gossiping.

“Was that boyfriend of Daphne’s there? The one with the bar through his eyebrow, who says ‘fuck’ every other word?”

“Bruno?” Rikker chuckled. “Didn’t see him. So maybe he’s out of the picture.”

“Maybe she came to her senses. Daphne’s a smart girl. I always hoped she was just experimenting on him.”

“I hope so too.”

My time in Vermont came to an end before I was ready. A couple of hours later, Grandma Rikker drove us to the rental car place, and Rikker went inside to pick up his reservation. I leaned forward from the back seat of the truck to thank her for having me as a guest.

She swiveled around, squeezing my forearm. “Any time, dear. I wish you boys had more vacation days. I really do. These last few years with John have been such a gift to me.”

I smiled, because you couldn’t look at the love in her watery blue eyes and not smile. “I’m sure it isn’t always sunshine and roses,” I said, trying for a joke. “He probably leaves the toilet seat up.”

“I had two boys before him,” she said, patting my arm. “I don’t even notice anymore.”

I saw Rikker coming outside again with a set of keys in his hand. “I think we’re all set to go,” I said.

But when I went to open the door, she grabbed my hand. “You take care of yourself, Michael Graham,” she insisted.

“I will,” I said.

“And don’t forget to vent the plastic containers before you nuke those meatballs I made you boys. So they don’t explode.”

Chuckling, I got out. “Thanks for everything!”

She blew me a kiss after I slammed the door.

“I want to do that again some time,” I admitted when we were on the road. “Your grandma’s place is so relaxing.” Rikker was so quiet after I said it that I had to wonder if I’d overstepped. “I mean... I had fun. That’s all.”

“I did, too,” he said quickly. “But I think it’s fascinating that you say you were practically climbing the walls at home, yet Gran’s place is like an oasis. Because she’s the only person in the world who probably suspects you of being gay.” His eyes flicked over to give me a glance. “Because you’re visiting me. Not for any other reason. But that’s, like, backwards. No?”

When I opened my mouth to argue, absolutely nothing came out.

Because Rikker was right. Most of the time I walked around in a panic trying to act like a straight guy. In Vermont, I spent my time twerking at a queer dance party and making out with my gay friend in his grandmother's truck. Then I slept for nine hours straight and woke up feeling like a superhero. It didn't make a lick of sense.

"What did your parents say about my news story?" he asked suddenly. "Did they see it?"

I gave a big sigh. During the days I'd been at home, I'd ducked out of several conversations about those damned articles. "They said people were talking about it at church. That's where my mother heard about it."

"But what did *your* mom say about me? Was she, like, shocked or anything?"

"She didn't seem shocked," I said slowly. This whole topic freaked me right out. "She asked me if you were okay, and if I thought that Coach handled it well. I told her I thought so. Both things."

"That's it?"

"Yeah." The truth was that Mom tried to talk to me about it. But I ran out of the room every time it came up. And I sure as hell didn't tell her about the Saint B's game.

"What do you think your mom would say to me if I walked into your house right now?" he pressed.

"Um... hello John?" I didn't like where this conversation was headed. Because it didn't matter that my parents weren't bigots like Rikker's parents. I didn't want to be their gay son.

"I bet she'd offer me cookies and milk." He was smiling now, picturing it. "She was always good for a bag of Oreos."

"Sure," I said quietly. "My mom is cool. But that doesn't mean she'd want to walk in on us in the basement. Or explain to her friends at church..." I trailed off. Because the more I spoke, the more obvious it was that I'd thought through all of this. So many times.

Rikker let a couple of miles go by before saying anything. "You know, my parents tried to convince me to go to one of those places where you pray the gay away."

"Really?"

"I refused to go. But you know what's funny?" he started chuckling to himself. "You know what they do at those weekend retreats? They cuddle."

"What? You mean, like, they put you with a girl?"

“Negative. They sit everybody down on the floor in pairs, and make you cuddle a man. They have this batshit theory that gay comes from not getting the right fathering. So if a man holds you all weekend, you won’t crave that anymore.”

“You are pulling my chain.”

He shook his head. “While I do enjoy pulling your chain, this is the God’s honest truth. I met somebody who went to one of those things. He said what he really got out of it was the knowledge that he really liked cuddling men.”

Grabbing the headrest behind me, I laughed. “Best scam ever.”

“Right? That will be two thousand dollars, please.”

“What do they do if someone gets a stiffy?”

“He said you were just supposed to ignore it. But I pictured something like a fire brigade. ‘Boner alert in sector three! Get the hose!’”

He made siren noises. And I laughed as hard as I used to when I was fifteen, and we were busy deconstructing the inanity of whichever superhero movie we’d just seen.

And *that* was why I was sitting in a car with Rikker right now. I laughed more easily today than I ever could with my other friends. Rikker already knew I was a freaking mess, so I didn’t have to expend any effort pretending that I wasn’t. In spite of the fact that we had a whole lot of baggage, there was nobody on earth who knew me like he did. It was terrifying and liberating all at once.

The miles were rolling by, though. And pretty soon we’d be back at school. Back to the grind of trying to do well and figure my own shit out at the same time. And I couldn’t help but wonder how Rikker did it. “How do you walk into that locker room every day knowing what they say about you?”

Rikker didn’t move his eyes off the road. “I dunno. I just do it. Because walking in is better than not walking in, I guess.” We rode in silence for a while. “I know I’m not a good advertisement for the product.”

“What?”

“I don’t make being ‘out’ look like fun. On the other hand, I don’t worry anymore if people are going to find out, you know? I don’t ever do that crazy math I used to do. If I left my fuck buddy’s room by eleven, I figured people wouldn’t assume we were hooking up. But twelve-thirty seemed risky.” He laughed. “None of it makes a difference if the guy emails your picture to the coach.”

“Is that picture still in circulation?”

“Why, you need a copy?”

I snorted. “Very funny. I’m just thinking that even the guys who are cool to you in the locker room probably don’t want to see that picture on any news websites.”

Rikker groaned. “It must not be out there anymore. Because that would have already happened. It was a bad shot, thank God. The camera focused on his hip instead of me. So you can only see the back of my head, which is blurry. If I hadn’t had the team tattoo on my shoulder blade, Coach might not have even believed that it was me.” He reached back to touch his shoulder for a second. “The minute I got kicked off the team, I had that thing covered up. Now I’ve got this big...”

“I saw it.” Rikker had a kick-ass black widow spider on one shoulder blade. And around her, a web spread across his back. “I like it,” I admitted. (But that was an understatement. The tat was sexy as hell.)

“Me too. It was all the artist’s idea. The red hourglass on the spider’s back is the Saint B’s ink showing through. I’m not trying to be deep or anything, but I like the fact that a spider swallowed that shit up.”

“Just be careful not to ever get your picture taken again. You’d need a monstrosity to cover up that spider web.”

Rikker laughed. “I know, right? Ow.”

The rental car ate up the miles, and we passed from Vermont into Massachusetts. As we passed exit 27, Rikker held up his middle finger toward route 2, and the approach to Eastern Massachusetts.

I didn’t have to ask which school lay in that direction. “I wish there was such a thing as trading at the college level. We could just trade Big-D to Saint B’s.”

“I could get behind that,” Rikker snorted.

“How do you walk past him every day and not punch him in the teeth? The shit that comes out of his mouth...”

Rikker sighed. “Yeah. See, even though I think he’s a moron and a giant, gaping asshole, I don’t think it’s curable. He’s squicked out by me, and that comes from somewhere deep inside. That’s why I don’t punch him. Because he can’t help being a dick like I can’t help being gay.”

“You can’t use the word ‘deep’ with his name in the same sentence.”

“Fair enough.”

“And I don’t buy it, anyway. Because if he’s squicked, that means that

in order to be your friend, he has to be able to picture you having sex, and *like* that image. So *now* who's the pervert?"

He laughed. "That is a hell of a point, G. Did you ever think about saying that to his face?"

Fuck, no. Because I am the biggest pussy that ever was.

"Never mind," Rikker sighed. He knew already that I was a coward. I'd been proving it to him all my life. "Maybe you'll find this funny. Big-D got up in my face in the locker room once, asking me how many girls I fucked before I decided I was gay."

"Christ. What did you say?"

Rikker got that slow grin on his face, the one that always made it hard for me to think straight. "I asked him how many dicks he sucked before he decided he was straight."

"Get out of town! And he didn't take a swing at you?"

"Too many witnesses," Rikker shrugged. "The funny thing is that I *am* a little squicked out by the idea of having sex with a girl."

I laughed. "You ever try it?"

He shook his head.

"Aw, Rikker is a virgin," I teased.

He shook his head. "If you say so. Do you like it?"

"Yeah," I said. But then I qualified my answer. "When I'm drunk and very horny. It helps if she's really into it."

"You get off?"

"Usually. Unless I'm really wasted." *Too wasted to remember the finer points of whatever gay porn I'd watched earlier in the evening.* I'd never shared this crap with *anyone*. But alone with Rikker in that car, I couldn't stop spilling my guts.

"What's your plan?" he asked, his eyes still on the road.

"What do you mean? For today?"

He chuckled. "No, moron. For life. Girls? Guys? Girls and guys?"

"I don't plan." And that was certainly the truth. "But I do hope. I hope I meet some girl who really does it for me, you know?" God knows I'd been auditioning them the last three years at Harkness. There was just one girl who had always been able to make me hot for her. And that was only because she was game to do some things with me that most girls didn't like to do.

And *that* meant that I'd had to stop sleeping with her. Because my enthusiasm for her extra-credit activities gave away more clues about me than

I was comfortable revealing.

My phone chimed with a text from Bella. *Where R U?*

Think of the devil, and she appears.

I didn't answer Bella's text. Because my story was going to be that I'd flown into Hartford today. Every truly enjoyable day was one that required a lie to explain. How depressing.

A minute later, I heard Rikker's phone chime. "That will be Bella. I think she's trying to figure out if anyone is going to be late."

"We'll be on time," he said, changing lanes. "Bella is a little hung up on you. You got that, right?"

"Not true," I said immediately. "She plays the field. Can't imagine her getting hung up on anybody."

He gave a fake cough into his hand. "If you say so."

Bella was, however, *worried* about me, because I'd been such a wreck all year. Rikker wouldn't see that. And I wasn't going to explain how his reappearance in my life had turned me inside out. I was pretty much done with that topic.

Traffic began to pick up as we headed toward the Connecticut border. We passed the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield. And the two of us made the mutual decision that even if time *and* money were in infinite supply, we still had precisely zero interest in visiting it.

We drove through Hartford, its high-rise buildings whipping by. And then reality began to set in, at least on my side of the car. My twenty-four hour trip into Rikker's life was coming to a close. The exits began to tick downward in number and I wondered how this ride would end. "So, where's the rental car place in Harkness?" I asked.

"At the train station."

That made plenty of sense. I pictured the two of us getting out of the car there, while half the hockey team wandered by on their way back to campus.

"Quit squirming," Rikker said darkly. "I'll drop you off somewhere else."

At the sound of those words, the tight feeling I was so used to feeling inside my chest returned. "Thanks," I made myself say.

I am *such* an asshole.

He didn't say anything else for the last few miles. But he did pull up at a gas station just on the edge of town. Fishing a credit card out of his wallet, he looked over at me. "You can walk from here, or I'll drop you wherever

you want.”

“Here’s good,” I muttered. “Let me give you some money for gas.”

He waved me off. “You bought the drinks last night.”

Last night. Already that seemed like a hundred years ago. From the back seat, I grabbed my duffel.

Rikker leaned against the car, waiting for the tank to fill. He gave me a salute.

I forced myself to pause there for a moment, even though my eyes wanted to flick into every passing car, looking for people who might be watching us. “I had a great time,” I said, meeting his gaze.

Those brown eyes turned away. “I know you did.”

The tightness in my chest squeezed like a fist. “I’ll see you at practice.”
But we won’t speak.

“See you,” he said as the gas nozzle clicked off. He gave it his full attention.

There was nothing left to say. So I just turned and walked away, zipping my jacket against the cold.

It wasn’t until later that I realized I’d left behind the food Grandma Rikker had sent back. She’d packed a plastic tub of her cooking for each of us, but I’d left mine on the back seat. It had smelled great, too. And now I wouldn’t get a chance to enjoy it.

Like so many other things I craved.

Celly: Short for “celebration.” Exuberance performed after scoring a goal.

— Rikker

Walking into practice was an uncomfortable experience. There was a TV van parked at the curb, for one thing. Also, my new BFF Bob from the press office was standing around in the locker room when I arrived, looking wildly out of place. “How are you holding up, Mr. Rikker?” he asked after introducing himself, while the whole team listened in.

“Um, fine, sir.”

“Excellent! Now, I’ve allowed some journalists to photograph your practice today. The rule is that they cannot ask questions or interfere, okay? So if anyone steps out of line, you give me a jingle.”

A jingle. I managed to refrain from rolling my eyes. “Okay,” I said. Because what was my choice?

He left, thank God. And I stood there, facing my locker, gearing up and trying to be invisible.

At first, everyone just ignored me. Even Hartley, who was arguing with Bella about some NHL game they’d both watched last night. *Last night*, when I was dancing with Graham.

That seemed like a hundred years ago already. Graham was standing about fifteen feet away from me right now, tying up his skates, silent as a stone. Pretending he’d never seen me before in his life.

Just when I thought I’d be given the silent treatment by everyone, Smitty and Big-D began reading snippets of the news stories about me out loud, and laughing.

“Hey, Rikker! Did you know there’s a story on ESPN’s website?”

“I heard,” I said. (I’d read it, obviously.)

“There’s *two*, actually,” Smitty said. “I like this one. ‘Will John Rikker Become the First Out Gay Man in the NHL?’”

Well, shit. That was a new one. My blood pressure kicked up a notch. Would this never end?

“...With gaudy stats during high school, and a spot on the U.S.

Development Team,” Smitty continued, a smirk in his voice, ““Rikker was destined for Division One hockey.’ *Destined*. How sweet.”

I pulled on my chest pads and said nothing. But I was boiling inside.

“...Fast feet and even faster hands...” he read. “Hey, Rikker! ESPN thinks you’re ‘responsible defensively.’ I guess they didn’t watch the Saint B’s game.”

“Guess not,” I muttered.

“But they’re still not sure about your recruiting prospects. They’re calling you ‘fast, but undersized,’” Smitty read.

There was a guffaw in the room over that.

“Undersized?” I said over my shoulder. “Great. Now I’ll never get a date.”

That brought out a few laughs, but an even louder chorus of groans. And one “gross,” from somewhere across the room.

Whatever. I jammed my feet into my skates, and prayed that the cameramen in the stands would not be too obvious.

My life? A giant suckfest.

Two lonely days later, we had a game. This time, it was a road trip to — wait for it — The University of Vermont.

I tried to give myself a pep talk about it. There was just no *way* the UVM team could possibly hate me as much as Saint B’s. In the first place, I knew some of them. And more importantly, they weren’t on the wrong end of the press coverage of my transfer.

But when I climbed the three steps onto the team bus, I was nervous anyway. No one greeted me when I boarded. So I took the seat nobody wants — the one just behind the bus driver. Then I proceeded to bury myself in schoolwork for the entire trip up there. The new semester hadn’t even started yet, which made me the biggest dork on the bus. But it was so much easier to think about calculus than about the upcoming game.

I was deep inside my head when we pulled up beside the Vermont rink. So it took me a little while to pack my books away, and follow my teammates off the bus. The rink’s beat-up metal door was familiar to me. I’d played a couple of games here in high school. We’d always loved those, because the rink was so much nicer than the high school’s.

As I approached the door in my distracted trance, I was startled to hear my name. “Rikker!”

I did a big double take. Daphne, Rachel, Skippy and Ross were standing there. And each of them had my jersey number painted on their faces.

“Hey!” I said, truly stunned. “You guys look ridiculous.”

Daphne punched me in the arm. “We know that. But you don’t have to point it out.”

I laughed. “It’s good to see you,” I said, more touched by the gesture than I cared to admit. But... Damn. If I *was* targeted by assholes again tonight, I was going to have to commit ritual suicide after the game. My stomach gave a nervous twist.

Chill, I coached myself. This was Vermont, after all. If I couldn’t have a good game here, then I might as well hang up my skates. Some of the guys on the Vermont team were friends of mine.

At least, they were when I was in the closet in high school.

Shit.

Daphne waved to someone behind me, but then her face fell. “Your friend didn’t stop,” she said.

I looked up just in time to see Graham disappear through the doorway.

“Let me guess,” Skippy said. “He’s never seen any of us before in his life. Especially you, Rik.”

“Oh...” Daphne said, frowning. “That’s not cool.”

“It is what it is,” I said.

“Coward,” Skippy hissed.

I held in my groan. Because even though Skippy was probably right, I really didn’t want to hear it from him.

“Coming, Rikker?” Bella called. She was holding the door for me, and everyone else had gone in.

“Come here a second, Bells,” I replied.

“Oh, it’s her!” Skippy jumped up and down. “Ross, unzip Bella.”

Ross was holding a duffel bag on his shoulder. And when he unzipped the end of it, I noticed that it wasn’t an ordinary bag. It was a mesh-walled dog carrier. From inside, he extracted a wiggling poodle.

When Bella joined me, I said, “Bella, this is...”

“Ooooooh!” she crooned, reaching for the dog. “Hello my lovely! Hello! Who’s a good girl?” Bella (the dog) began to vigorously lick Bella (the girl) on the face. Laughing, she passed the dog back to Ross. And then she introduced herself, before announcing that we had to go inside. “Coach is going to wonder what happened to us.”

“Just a sec,” I said. Then I gathered my friends into a semi-awkward group hug. “Nice of you to show up for the game. Seriously.”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Skippy said, kissing my cheek. “Break a leg.”

“That is not what you say to a hockey player,” I laughed, wiping a little orange face paint off my cheek.

“I *know* that, I used to date one,” Skippy winked. “I was just being ironical.”

I gave them a wave and followed Bella inside, praying to myself. *Please don’t let this be the most embarrassing night of my life.*

“Your ex is pretty cute, for a skinny guy,” Bella said, swatting me on the butt. “So that’s your type, huh?”

I couldn’t help it. My eyes flicked over to Graham, who I caught watching us. He looked away. *Busted.* “My type? Eh. It’s not that simple. I like ‘em tall and complicated.”

Bella laughed. “So do I!”

The locker assignments were sorted out. And then the usual checklist of locker room antics was followed. Hockey sticks were taped and retaped. Sore muscles were taped and retaped. Coach paced the room, reminding us not to go postal at the first sign of trouble, like a pack of cranky toddlers. Bella did nervous little circles around me, wearing a groove into the blade-proof rubber padding underfoot. “It’s going to be fine this time,” she kept saying.

The lady doth protest too much.

“Hey, Johnny Rikker!” came a shout through the partially-opened locker room door. “Getcha ass out here!”

The sound of my name pushed past the clouds out of my brain. Petey Pulaski’s rough voice brought me the first untroubled smile I’d had all day. I went through that door in a hurry, and was immediately tackled into that sort of half hug, half beating that guys began perfecting during their teenage years.

“Jesus, Petey,” I laughed as I fought off the headlock with my knuckles in his ribs.

“HEY! Knock it off!”

Coach’s ear-busting shout startled the both of us. Petey eased up quickly, and I took my hands off my friend. “We’re just kiddin’ around here, Coach,” I said quickly.

The old man’s face did not immediately relax. He stared at us for a beat before turning back into the locker room.

“Jesus, Rikker. Do you have a rep for brawling?” Petey asked. He couldn’t resist one more playful punch to my hip.

“Ow! He’s just, um, wound a little tight.”

“*Dude*. Shouldn’t you be wearing, like, one of those rainbow jerseys?”

“*Nice*, Petey. I haven’t seen you for two years or whatever, and you open with gay jokes?”

His face fell. “You know that’s only gallows humor, right? *Shit*. I saw those articles, and I thought you must be climbing under a rock right about now. You didn’t even like talking to the high school newspaper about our games. Always made me do it.”

That shut me up for a second, because I’d never taken Petey for the perceptive type. But he was right about that. I had always let him speak for the team. “It hasn’t been a fun month.” *To put it mildly*.

Petey chuckled. “The Saint B’s coach sounds like a real dick. The guys on my team are all glad they don’t skate for him.”

“Yeah. Wish I hadn’t made that mistake.”

“We could have used you here, you know. Still wish you’d committed to Vermont.”

Me too, buddy. Our conversation lagged then, as I sunk under the weight of my own shitty decision-making.

“You know...” Petey paused. “You never told me. I mean... I noticed that Skippy became a hockey fan. And I knew you two were tight. But you didn’t say anything.” His blue eyes were troubled. “I wouldn’t have... I dunno... been a jerk about it.”

Heaving a sigh, I apologized. “Yeah, I’m sorry about that. But I also never told you why I moved to Vermont for sophomore year. And that’s because my parents basically kicked me out of their house.” Petey winced. “...And it was *high school*, dude. Nobody wants to fly the freak flag, you know. But I *loved* playing on that team with you. The rink was a bullshit free zone.”

“Hope it was,” he said. “I kind of wish I could rewind all the things I said for three years. I’m pretty sure there were fag jokes.”

I shrugged. “Skippy makes fag jokes. His are more accurate, though.”

Petey laughed, and then I felt a little better. Then, two more of my high school teammates came out of the Vermont locker room. “Dude!” they yelled by way of a greeting.

At the sound, the visitors’ locker room door opened, and Coach peered

out, taking measure of the newcomers. After a long stare, he closed the door again.

“What’s with him?” Petey asked.

“No idea,” I lied.

“I love what you’ve done with the place,” McGarry said with a playful punch to my chest. He was a year behind Petey and me. Behind him was a guy we called J.J.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

McGarry raised his thick eyebrows. “The banners?”

“What banners?”

All three of them laughed. “You’ll see. I think the stands are going to be packed tonight. Even though the semester hasn’t started yet.”

“Really?” That seemed unlikely.

“Too bad they’re all going to see your team get smeared,” J.J. grinned.

“Smack talk much?” I asked.

“The Harkness nerds have had a good run,” McGarry said. “But it’s over.”

“Nice,” I said. “After all the queer jokes I’m getting, you have to bring out the nerd jokes too?”

“If the skate fits…” Petey gave me one more punch to the bicep. “See you out there. But you aint’ gonna win.”

“We’ll see,” I smirked. Then I went back inside, feeling just a *shred* less anxious than I had before.

— *Graham*

After the way I left things following our weird little visit in Vermont, Rikker and I weren’t really speaking. (*Again*. I was going to be eligible for Jackass of the Year for a second year running.) So he didn’t have a clue how tense I felt about this game. That was probably for the best. If I were him, I wouldn’t want to know that my teammates were worried that he’d become a permanent liability.

I finished applying some more orange tape to my stick (not that it helped the last time) just before Coach made his final speech.

“Time for a comeback, kids! Vermont has a strong team, so you’re going to have to work for this. But you can do it. You have the chops! And you’re coming off a rough couple of games, so you want this. Go take it! Grab it with both hands, and bite its head off. Let’s go!”

Bella hauled open the ice door, and we ran down the chute in our skates, jumping the lip and hitting the ice. The visiting team was allowed exactly ninety seconds of warm up, which we were all smart enough to use to the fullest. That's why it took me more than a few strokes down the rink before I noticed that there was something odd about the crowd.

In the first place, they let out a whoop of excitement when we skated onto the ice. If this were a home game, that would be perfectly normal. But how many fans could we have this far from home? And the cheers and hollers did not let up. The clapping and stomping actually escalated as we skated, as if The Rolling Stones were due to follow us out for a command performance.

Raising my head, I tried to make sense of it. The first thing I saw was a sea of color. Some of it was on the people. Quite a few of the fans were wearing... were those *rainbow* hockey jerseys? What the fuck? I whizzed past the student section, which was full of Vermont's green and gold. No surprises there. But elsewhere, especially behind the visitors' net, spectators were holding giant rainbow banners. "EVERYONE CAN PLAY," read one banner. "BIGOTRY IS FOR SISSY MEN," read another one. And "WELCOME BACK TO VERMONT."

Distracted, I stumbled and almost fell.

Coach's whistle blew, and we skated toward our bench, still craning my neck to read the signs. I passed a little kid wearing a sweatshirt reading, "RIKKER IS MY HERO."

"What the fuck?" someone said, which was pretty much the same as my reaction.

"Rikker, would you be my hero, too?" another guy asked.

"Take a number," Rikker muttered. He looked dazed, his eyes darting around the arena.

"This is nuts!" Bella said in a breathless voice. She pressed herself against the boards, taking pictures with her phone.

"Change of lineup!" Coach bellowed. We all turned to listen. "Rikker's skating first line with Hartley, and Trevi. Davies, you're on second. We have to give these fans what they came here to see."

Nobody argued. Not out loud, anyway. Rikker's expression was serious behind his facemask. I couldn't guess what he was thinking. Maybe his prayers were the same as mine: *let this not be another disaster*.

After Vermont's team got its own standing ovation, our first line was

back on the ice, skating to a stop at our net. The announcer began introducing players, giving the name, class, hometown and position of the Vermont first line. Each player skated to Vermont's blue line when his name was called, receiving applause.

Then it was our turn. "From Etna, Connecticut, Harkness senior and team captain Adam Hartley." There was applause even for the competitor. This crowd was fired up tonight.

"From Kent, Michigan, junior defenseman Michael Graham." I'd never admit it, but I liked hearing the announcer call my name. I skated to the blue line to polite applause.

"And... from Burlington Vermont! Sophomore forward John Rikker!" The stands absolutely *erupted* then, with screams and the stomping of feet. I turned my head to see Rikker skate to the blue line, eyes wide, an embarrassed smirk on his face.

Across the ice, on the opposing line, I saw his high school friend roll his eyes and smile.

The announcer had to pause before reading the last Harkness player's name because the crowd was screaming too loud for him to go on. "What planet are we on?" Trevi asked when he finally arrived beside me.

"No clue," I said, distracted by the relief coursing through me. The ice lights dimmed, and the announcer asked the crowd to stand for the national anthem. A spotlight went up on some dude who played it on the electric guitar, and the sound of it gave me chills. I didn't even have a name for the way I felt right now. All I knew was that this game would be different from the one against Saint B's.

Even if it was crazy, and embarrassing to Rikker, the whole thing was awe-inspiring. There had to be a thousand newly-converted hockey fans in this place tonight. (Tomorrow we would read on the news sites that a few drove from as far away as Toronto and Maryland to attend this game, just to show support for the first out gay Division One player.) The place was crammed full of people who'd come to see a guy they didn't know play in a sport they might not understand. But they were all watching.

As usual, I tried not to let my true feelings show on my face. But the whole thing was really freaking cool.

Unfortunately, Coach had been right about one thing. Vermont wasn't going to give the game up easily.

The first period was a big donut for both teams. Then, in the second, Hartley got lucky with an ugly goal right in front of the net. But the pressure from Vermont redoubled, and it was a sweaty third period. Vermont scored, unfortunately, and with five minutes left on the clock, the tension on the bench was ridiculous.

With just three minutes left, Rikker took a shot that looked awesome as it flew toward the net. The crowd flipped out. But Vermont's goalie scrambled, deflecting it with the very tip of his glove.

That might have been the end of it. But while the crowd was still yelling over Rikker's near miss, Big-D slapped that baby back into play, and Hartley tipped it behind the goalie and into the basket. From where I sat on the bench at that point, I couldn't even see it happen. I only knew from the screaming.

From there, we ran down the clock and won it, 2-1.

Ladies and gentlemen, we were *back*.

— *January* —

Lamp Lighter: *a goal. In pro hockey, a goal is signified by a red light on the goal itself or on the boards behind the goal.*

— *Rikker*

After the Vermont game, we kept right on winning. In the middle of January, the college newspaper put our stats on the front page in enormous type: 14 WINS, 3 LOSSES, 3 TIES. Coach was all fired up. And now, when the guys from the Harkness press office showed up with a reporter in tow, it wasn't to talk about me. (I'd been relegated to a single sentence at the bottom of these articles, usually "...the same team that welcomed gay left wing John Rikker," blah blah blah.)

"Tell us how it feels to be the winningest college team on the Eastern Seaboard," a sports writer had asked Hartley last week.

"It feels like hard work," Hartley told him.

And that was true. But it was the best job ever.

One pleasant side effect of all that success was that I didn't have time to feel lonely. Between school and hockey, all my hours were spoken for. I fell into bed like a dead man every night.

Success also meant a lack of friction in the locker room. The fact that our win song played all the time helped to promote a "live and let live" vibe. The result was that the whole team inched up the Rikker scale, simply by default. They were too busy winning to snub me.

Only one teammate was actively avoiding my eyes these days. And that was Graham, of course. He wasn't rude or anything. It's just that he seemed to always find a reason to walk out of a room if I walked into it. I don't know what I expected to happen after our strange little Vermont interlude. But if I'd thought we might be close again, it wasn't happening.

I didn't like it, but I wasn't offended anymore. Because I knew that Graham wasn't afraid of what I might do. These days, I was pretty sure that Graham was afraid of what *Graham* might do.

The second weekend in January, we had only one game scheduled. To

celebrate our Friday night off, Bella and I blew off the dining hall in favor of a cheap Chinese restaurant off campus. Together, we ate General Tso's chicken and greasy fried rice. When the fortune cookies arrived, hers and mine had identical fortunes inside.

"What a scam," Bella sniffed. "If they match, it feels as if my fortune is cheapened."

"It's a pretty good fortune, though," I pointed out. Our little paper slips had read: *True love awaits*.

"Eh. I feel more optimistic whenever the lucky number on the back is sixty-nine."

I laughed, of course. With Bella, you just had to.

"How's *your* sex life, Rikker?"

"I sort of remember sex. Though the details are fuzzy." Fortune cookie or not, I was never going to have a boyfriend if I didn't meet some available gay men. In theory, there were plenty of those at Harkness. But none of them spent twenty hours a week at the hockey rink.

Bella made a wry face. "There's a harsh irony. The team pervert gets no play."

"I know, right? I have to do the time, but I can't do the crime."

She pointed to my fortune. "Maybe you'll meet some cute boy soon."

"As it happens, *my* lucky number on here is sixty-nine," I said, waving the cookie slip.

"What?" she jumped for it. "That's not fair."

Laughing, I held it out of her reach. I was only kidding, of course. The lucky number was 16. Which did nothing for me.

Bella's phone chimed, and she read the text on it. "Hmf," she said. "I don't know whether to be flattered or insulted."

"Why?"

"Graham is texting me. Hartley and his girlfriend are hanging out, playing RealStix in his room. He invited me over. But he's also hoping I'll pick up a couple of six packs on the way. What an ass."

In spite of her protestations, after we left the restaurant, she cheerfully dragged me into the package store. (That's what you call a liquor store in Connecticut, for some reason.)

"What shall we bring?" Bella asked.

"I dunno. Am I coming with you?"

"Sure you are. It's Friday night. Do you have a better offer?"

“That would be no.”

“Then choose an ale. I’ll pick a lager.”

I bought a six of Switchback. Not only do I love that beer, but it’s the stuff that Graham and I drank at guerrilla night. The most immature part of me was hoping he’d remember.

Bella led me to an entryway in the very beautiful Beaumont House. “He’s on the third floor,” she said. We climbed up two flights of marble steps. There were four rooms and a bathroom on the third floor landing. Bella opened the left-hand door as if she owned the place. “Hey guys,” she said, breezing in. “We brought the goods.”

“Awesome,” Hartley said from where he sat cross-legged on the bed.

Beside him, Graham looked up at us. When he saw that I’d come in with Bella, a flicker of confusion crossed his face.

Good.

“Damn, this is a sweet room, Graham,” I said.

“Thanks,” he muttered. Graham had a generous single, with a big screen TV on the wall and a giant bed. There was even room enough for a beanbag chair in the corner, where Hartley’s girlfriend Corey lounged, a video game controller in her hand.

Hartley and Graham both sat the wrong way on the bed, propped up against the wall. Bella climbed on too, snuggling up to Graham’s side.

I wandered over to the desk, where Graham’s computer and a couple of speakers were playing his favorite tunes. He was half-way through a classic rock playlist. I decided to fuck with him a little. With a few taps of the keyboard, I switched to a list of dance music. Lady Gaga began to sing “Bad Romance.”

Although Corey began to move her shoulders to the beat, Graham gave me a look of irritation.

I just grinned at him, forcing him to look away.

Perfect.

I parked my butt on the floor next to Corey, who was battling it out in a game of RealStix against her boyfriend. There were only ten seconds left in the game. When the buzzer sounded, Pittsburgh had beat the Bruins 3-2.

“Who’s your team?” I asked Corey. “Did you just beat Hartley?”

“Of course,” she grinned. “I *always* play Pittsburgh.”

“Ask her why,” Hartley said with a smirk.

I gave Corey a sidelong glance. “Maybe I don’t need to. Pittsburgh is a

great team. And the captain is the hottest dude in the NHL.”

“*Jesus*, not you too!” Hartley complained as I high-fived his laughing girlfriend.

Corey put a hand over her heart. “It’s his boyish smile, you know? And he and I play well together. Right, Hartley? You owe me five bucks.”

“Beginners luck,” Hartley mumbled.

Corey just smiled. “Beginner’s luck means something different to Hartley than to other people. I’ve been kicking his butt for a year and a half now.”

“Who’s going to take on Graham’s Red Wings?” Hartley asked. “Bella?”

“I’m more of a spectator,” Bella said. “Even when it’s on a screen.”

“Graham versus Rikker, then.” Hartley tossed me his controller.

Without a word, Graham pulled up the menu on the screen. He dialed up the Red Wings versus the Bruins without asking me which team I wanted to play. But nobody seemed to notice except me. The Bruins were popular enough around these parts, anyway. (If I were, say, a Ducks fan and he knew that without asking, then tongues might wag.)

Hartley opened a beer for everybody. I took a slug of it before Graham started the game.

Right from the first minute, it was a battle.

He and I attacked each other’s weaknesses like two people who had spent the better part of junior high matching wits. When we’d played that night in Vermont, I’d noticed that Graham had upped his game over the years. (Because he had it in his dorm room, obviously. Not because his reflexes were better than mine.) Even so, I was lucky enough to score the first goal today. As soon as the lamp lit, I glanced at him. *Take that, G-man.*

His gaze said: *bite me, Rikker.* And there was heat in it.

The ref dropped the puck and we were at it again. I skated away with the puck, sending it flying behind the net where I knew that Graham’s slowest D-man would have to chase me. And the sharp elbows were out as the two of us battled it out.

“*Jesus*, kids,” Bella muttered. “You know this is your night off, right?”

Around us, conversations were begun and ended. Corey left to go to her roommate’s concert, and Orson arrived with a six-pack of Harpoon.

Graham and I played all three periods of the game without handing it off to anyone else. I was up by one goal when the buzzer rang.

“I’m next!” Orson said immediately. “Trade you a Harpoon for the controller.”

“Deal.”

I handed Orson my controller, but turned to look at Graham. His face was as sweaty as mine felt. And his expression said: *this ain't over*.

A couple of beers later, Graham broke out the scotch. He and I sipped wordlessly while Hartley battled Orson to a tie. Bella was engrossed in her phone the whole time. “I have to go,” she said eventually, standing up. “Pepé’s girlfriend dumped him, and I think he needs some comforting.”

“Is that what we’re calling it these days?” Graham asked.

Bella gave him an ornery look and shouldered her bag. “Goodnight all,” she said. I received a kiss on the cheek, and then she was gone.

After Hartley beat Orson, Graham cued up another Red Wings vs. Bruins game. “Rematch,” he said, his voice stiff.

“If you insist,” I said. “It will only end the same way, dude.”

“Arrogant,” Graham grumbled.

“Slow reflexes,” I returned.

Orson laughed. “Competitive much?”

“Good clean fun,” I said, covering a smile. Poor Orson had no way of knowing that RealStix had once been our favorite form of foreplay.

Shit, I really needed to get out of this room before too long. Just a few minutes more...

But the game sucked me in. And when I looked up again, Hartley and Orson were gone. It was the middle of the third period of a scoreless game. And my mind snagged on the idea that I was sitting here with Graham alone, at lonely-o’clock. It was just enough distraction to be my undoing. Graham snuck around the net and scored on me. “FUCK!” I yelled, wiping my forehead.

“That’s right. Patience is a virtue.”

As the faux crowd went wild, I put the controller down. “Your game, dude. I should go.”

“What? With three minutes on the clock? You just can’t stand *officially* losing.”

“Jackass.”

His face wore a teasing smile — the same one I used to see when we played video games alone five years ago.

I *really* needed to get out of here.

Graham kicked the controller with his bare foot, nudging it into my hip. Fine. Three minutes. Then I was going to be history.

The clock ticked down, leaving Graham and his Red Wings as the winners. “Finally!” he crowed, standing up to stretch.

“Okay, happy?” I asked. Getting up off the beanbag, I grabbed my shoes. I perched on the edge of his bed to put them on. I had just untangled the laces on the first one when my shoe disappeared from view, ripped from my hands by Graham. I raised my eyes, knowing exactly what I’d find there. Graham’s face was flushed, and there was a lusty gleam in his eye.

Fuck. When he looked at me like that, it was hard to breathe. Even so, I had a moment of absolute clarity. *Here we go again,* I chided myself even as he pushed my shoulders back onto the bed. I caught myself on my elbows, and time paused for the briefest speck of a moment. Then Graham closed his needy eyes, lowering himself onto me. And then his mouth landed on mine, hot and determined.

I’m sure I grunted in disbelief. And maybe for two or three seconds, I was too wary to let go. But he cupped my jaw, deepening the kiss. Then I opened for him, and that’s all it took. The first real taste of him ruined me. As Graham began to take long pulls from my mouth, the kiss went wild. I shoved myself further up onto that bed, and he followed me in a rush. And then my arms were free to yank him closer.

Fused at the mouth, we bumped and twisted on the bed. For a moment I was on my side, jamming one of my legs between his. Then the world tilted and I found myself on my back, Graham’s hot weight pressing me into the mattress. All the while, our limbs clamped gracelessly around each other. And we were kissing. Always kissing. We couldn’t keep our mouths apart. In fact, Graham made a clumsy attempt to strip me of my shirt. But it was unsuccessful because he wouldn’t release my mouth long enough to pull it over my face. And I wouldn’t remove my hands from his ass long enough to help.

I stroked him through the denim, my hands delving down his crease, as far down as I could reach, and he let out a monstrous groan.

So I did it again, with the same result, until he ground his dick against mine, then pulled up short, panting. “Strip,” he demanded.

“Are you sure that...”

“*Strip.*” He pulled his shirt over his head. A second later, he yanked his jeans down, leaving absolutely nothing but miles of golden skin and a jutting

erection.

Holy shit. Graham wanted to get naked with me, and I was going to let him. And it was going to end badly. I knew that already. The fact that Graham and I always ended badly was fucking written in the stars somewhere.

But did that stop me? Nope. When it came to Graham, I could never keep my head on straight.

And all the thinking I was doing meant that I wasn't moving fast enough for Graham. So he came after me. He dragged my jeans down off my legs, even yanking my socks off with them. I watched my underwear follow in his hands.

And then we were skin on skin. He was on top again, devouring me. His dick scraped against mine, hard and ambitious. I began to feel greedy. At this rate, the whole encounter was going to reach its inevitable conclusion in the next couple of minutes. That wasn't okay with me. If I was going to make this mistake, I wanted to make it good.

With a palm against Graham's shoulder, I gave him a shove, rolling him to his side. His body felt so fucking good against mine. "Slow down," I urged, rubbing his sculpted pecs with my hand.

"Can't," he said simply, leaning in for my mouth.

We kissed again, softer this time. Trailing a hand down his body, I took us both in hand, pumping my palm against our parallel shafts. Graham gave a deep bellow of a groan. And just the sound alone took me to the edge.

Stilling my hand, I took a deep breath. "Can I suck you?"

His eyes squeezed shut at the very idea. But then he shook his head, and those cool eyes flipped back open. "No. I want you to fuck me."

For a second, all I could do was blink back at him, wondering if he'd just said what I thought he just said. The request shocked me almost as much as the fact that I was here with him in the first place.

"It's been a long time coming," he said into the silence. "Don't make me beg."

I cleared my throat. "Have you ever...?"

"Only with toys."

Damn. I didn't know what to do. So I made a joke. "G, that's pretty pervy for a straight guy."

Graham dropped his face into the pillow and smiled.

I leaned over him, reaching for his bedside drawer. Right inside I found

what I was looking for — lube and a condom. The second that Graham saw them, he rolled onto his stomach. Even before I'd lubed up my fingers, he pushed his ass up off the bed. And when I finally reached my slicked fingertips over to caress him, he shuddered and groaned.

My body was absolutely throbbing with expectation. But I still didn't know if I could go through with it. This was different than a kiss and a grope. If Graham freaked out after sex I'd feel awful.

Nervous, I began playing with him. And with my free hand, I rubbed up and down his beautiful back. Leaning over, I worked kisses into the smooth skin at his waist and tried not to think too hard. My arms were full of this beautiful boy, and each time I pressed my lips against him, it felt like coming home.

And all the while, Graham squirmed against my fingers, his greedy body asking for more. "Come on, man," he gasped. "Give it to me."

"I don't want to hurt you," I said, my voice low.

"Hurt me," he said, pushing back onto my hand. I stretched my fingers inside him, rubbing up against his spot, and he moaned. "Oh yeah. Do it."

Jesus fuck. It was the most erotic invitation I'd heard in my life. And I ached for him. But something still held me back. Graham was facing away from me, his eyes closed. *Hurt me*, he'd demanded. It sounded as if Graham was trying to punish himself.

I wanted him. But I wanted it to be real. Not some twisted revenge fuck. "Turn over," I ordered, slapping his hip.

"What? I think you're a tease, Rik."

"I need to see your face," I whispered.

With a frown, he turned that great body over, bending his knees to get around me. God, he was so gorgeous. I could have just stared at him for hours, all spread out in front of me, ready to be fucked.

But he was *still* evading my eyes.

Climbing on top of him, I took his face in hand, forcing him to look up at me. My thumb slid over his beautiful cheekbone, over his handsome jaw. "Look at me."

When those cool blue eyes connected with mine, time slid to a stop. "Jesus, Rik," he whispered, his voice hoarse.

Slowly, without breaking eye contact, I dropped my head for a very soft, very sensual kiss. I knew it was more intimacy than he could probably handle. But he held my gaze, blinking a little, but staying with me. His mouth

softened into the kiss, and big hands wrapped around my ribs, holding me in place. I kissed him sweet and slow, until he moaned, his legs wrapping over me to hold me close.

“Good boy,” I breathed. “Now spread for me.” In a big hurry, he did exactly as told. And his eyes never left mine.

Ever so slowly, I gave him exactly what he’d asked me for. And when he broke our gaze a while later, it was only because his eyes rolled back in his head on a shuddering gasp.

That time, I wasn’t offended at all.

* * * *

Afterward, I had never been so sated. And Graham felt it, too. His body was relaxed to the point of bonelessness. As if I’d fucked all the tension out of him.

Unlike the night of our tequila adventure, he didn’t look like he wanted to bolt. True, we were in his room. So his options for bolting were more limited. But he didn’t *look* panicked. In fact, he barely looked conscious.

“It’s a shame you didn’t enjoy that at all,” I teased him as he lazed in my arms.

“Smug, much?” he asked, grinning without opening his eyes. “I am covered in jizz.”

“I know. Isn’t it great?” I kissed the place where his neck met his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Rik,” he said then. And I thought he might tell me to leave. Except his hands were running up and down my body as he said it. So maybe not.

“What are you sorry for?”

“Ducking you. Ducking this.”

It was only four words, but they made my eyes sting. “We’re here now.”

“Yeah we are,” he said on a sigh. “Nobody can know.”

Well, *ouch*.

But it was hard to blame him. Hiding sucked, and I’d already proven that it didn’t really work very well. But on the other hand, I didn’t make a very good advertisement for coming out. Nobody would look at me and say, *Heck yeah! Sign me up for some of that media attention!*

Most gay men who've been around the block a few times will tell you that it's a bad idea to be with somebody who won't acknowledge you in public. Was I willing to be with Graham if I had to sneak around?

Actually, it was a pretty easy decision. "Does this mean tonight isn't just a one time thing?"

Graham buried his face in my neck. "It's always been you for me. Always."

And now he'd shocked me *again* tonight. The hits just kept on coming. I couldn't even say anything back, I was just too stunned. But Graham's unlikely affection fed something hungry inside me. So I held him tightly, and let my contented sighs tell him how I felt.

For a long time, we lay there together, tangled up on the bed. And here I'd thought that naked cuddling with Graham was never going to happen. But his big hands continued to warm the skin of my back. He buried his nose in my hair and breathed deeply.

"I gotta clean myself up," he said eventually. "Hang tight. I'll bring you a Zamboni."

Graham dressed in boxers and a T-shirt, and then disappeared into the bathroom. He came back a couple of minutes later, hair damp from a quick shower. I used the warm washcloth he brought back to clean myself up.

Then I sat up, pulling on my shirt and my jeans.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

The vulnerability in his voice was not what I'd expected. I paused, my zipper in my hands. "Well, I have to use the john. Which means that I have to use yours, or go home. So which is it going to be?"

His eyes traveled to the door. It was after midnight on a Friday night. There were three other rooms on this floor. I could bump into someone in there. Even then, his neighbor would have no reason to suspect us.

I could see him doing the math, because it was the same math that I used to do when I was in the closet at Saint B's. I put a hand on his chest. "Look, I'm putting my shoes on. And my jacket. So if someone sees me in your bathroom, they'll just assume that I'm on my way home. You know — after pissing out the beer that real men drink while they watch the game on T.V."

He nodded. But I could see the reluctance in his eyes.

"I didn't see a soul," I said when I came back into his room.

Graham lay on the bed in his boxer shorts. His expression was sheepish. “Didn’t mean to make a federal case out of it.”

I kicked my shoes off and dropped my jacket and jeans over his chair. Then I flopped onto the bed beside him. “Look, I know how it is. But I need you to trust me a little bit. I would never expose you.”

His smile was rueful. “You could have outed me your first day on campus if you felt like it.”

“Never,” I said. “Even when you wouldn’t look at me, I never wanted to do that. I’ve *been* outed, G. Nobody deserves that.”

He propped himself up on an elbow. And I let myself admire the curve of his bicep. Tonight, I was allowed to do that. “Nobody?” he asked. “How about that television pastor who preached that gays should all die of AIDS, before he got busted for soliciting men in a public bathroom?”

“Okay. Maybe him.”

We laughed, but then things got serious again. “If you could undo it,” Graham said. “If that asshole never outed you at Saint B’s, would you rather be back in the closet?”

“Nope,” I said immediately. “It sucked to be outed, because I never got a chance to make that call for myself. But now I know who my real friends are.” *Even if there aren’t too many of them.* “There’s nobody in my life who doesn’t know.”

“There’s nobody who reads the *Sports Illustrated* website who doesn’t know.”

I grinned at him. “Okay, so I no longer have even a shred of privacy. But tomorrow, when you’re skating a little funny, I’ll be the only one who knows why.”

Graham turned his face away and blushed. Fuck, I *loved* that blush. I scooted closer to him and pulled him into a hug.

And he let me. Then we were kissing again. Graham’s fingers slid into my hair, and he chuffed out a satisfied sigh between kisses. It was almost more intense than the fucking. We’d taken the edge off our desire. So this wasn’t a frantic let’s-get-naked-before-I-come-to-my-senses moment. Every slide of his lips against mine was loving and deliberate. We made out like two people who had all the time in the world, and every moment of it was delicious.

A little later, I set my phone to wake me up at five in the morning. Then, for the first time in my life, I fell asleep in Graham’s arms.

— *February* —

First Touch: *an action which stops the puck so that it may be passed to a teammate.*

— *Graham*

During the weeks that followed, I could not believe my own luck.

Pinch me, I thought to myself as I collapsed into yet another sweaty heap, tangled up with Rikker. My body was heavy with the delicious exhaustion that comes from intense sexual gratification. I rested my head on his thigh to catch my breath.

But Rikker wriggled out from under me, turned himself the right way around, and dropped his head onto my pillow. He slid one of his muscular thighs between mine, hiked his body closer, and kissed me.

It was a lazy, satisfied kiss. Just one of hundreds I'd received since we'd become lovers again. Life in the bedroom was very, very good.

Of course, in order to accommodate my paranoia, we followed a complicated set of rules at all other times. Under no circumstances would Rikker and I leave Capri's together, for example.

Tonight, I'd left after my third beer, drifting out without saying goodbye to anyone. (My interest in drinking had plummeted now that my interest in sex had done the opposite.) When I'd made it into the Beaumont courtyard, I opened up a messaging app that I used only to communicate with Rikker. *Just got home*, I sent him.

Climbing the stairs, my anticipation began to build. Rikker probably wouldn't answer my text. And some nights — if he was super tired — he didn't show up.

Tonight, as always, I'd really hoped he would.

After unlocking my room, I always flipped the latch to keep it open. I brushed my teeth in a hurry, and then climbed into bed in a T-shirt and boxers. Then I pulled a copy of *Sports Illustrated* off the bedside table. But I didn't have much patience for reading. My mind was on Rikker, and I hoped like hell that he was on his way up my stairs. Just thinking about him, I

usually had to slide my hand down into my boxers and grip myself.

Tonight, when I'd heard footsteps on the stairs, I started to stroke. And then my door opened, with Rikker filling it. I watched him click the lock back into position and close the door. Then he turned to me. And when he saw what I was doing, his eyes flared. "Hands off that," he rasped. "That's mine."

I'd complied, and then sunk back against the pillows. Rikker dropped his jacket onto my chair. Then he hauled his shirt over his head.

The sight of his rippling chest made my mouth start to water. I never bothered to watch porn anymore, because I had my heart's desire any time I wanted. Right in my own bed.

"Take your clothes off," he said. Just the rough sound of his voice was enough to get me fired up. I didn't do it right away, because I was busy watching him unbuckle his belt. The jeans fell away from his lean hips, and I could see a prominent bulge in his briefs. "Clothes off. Now," he repeated.

This time, I'd listened, shedding my T-shirt and my boxers in record time. I was naked against the sheets, with his muscular body stalking toward me. He'd worn a determined look in his eye.

Sexiest. Thing. Ever.

He put a knee on the bed, and I could have watched his shoulder muscles pop all night as he crawled over me. Those big brown eyes appeared only inches above me, and my whole body tingled, anticipating him. When I was sure I couldn't wait any longer, he dropped his sinful mouth over mine. And we were *gone*. All rational thought fled, as we nipped and licked and manhandled one another.

There was nothing like it. And the fact that I'd spent years trying to talk myself out of this was frankly astonishing.

Afterwards, we lay entwined, his arms around me. It took a minute or five until we were both breathing normally again. But then Rikker said, "Did you see that slapshot that Trevi bounced off Orson's glove at practice?"

I laughed. "He was so pissed."

"That's because Orson owes Trevi a *case* of Red Stripe now, because they went double-or-nothing from last week's bet."

I put my head on Rikker's chest, where I could hear the sound of his voice rumbling beneath my ear. The truth was that this part of the night mattered as much to me as the sex. Rikker and I always lay here talking about everything and nothing. Sports. School. Whatever.

Before, I was so used to being lonely that I'd barely noticed. My teammates were always around. But Rikker was the only person alive who knew my secrets. In bed with him, I talked more freely than I ever did with anyone else. I joked more. I felt lighter.

I was in love with Rikker, and had been forever. I didn't tell him, though. I mean, this is *me* we're talking about here. The usual coward. Rikker would have liked to hear it, I'm sure. And I would have liked to hear it back. But me being me, that wasn't going to happen.

He loved me too, I guess. He'd have to, right? Why else would he stay with my cowardly ass, and sneak around like a stalker every time he needed to use the john? In the locker room he ignored me, as I needed him to. And — this was my worst sin — when someone made a fag joke, I said nothing at all. That's how I repaid Rikker's nighttime affection during the daylight hours. With my silence.

But at night, we held each other. We whispered and laughed, and we kissed until our lips were bruised. We worked our way through a serious stash of condoms, and then bought more. In the mornings, he stole out of my room before daybreak. That kind of sucked, because I would have liked to wake up next to him.

I just didn't want it badly enough to ask him to stay.

Meanwhile, the team continued to kick ass. For the first time in fifty years, Harkness was ranked number two in the country. With six games left in our regular season, there was a good chance we'd go far during the postseason.

The first weekend of February, we took a road trip to Cambridge, where we defeated Harvard five to nothing in front of a giant crowd. That felt damned good. When we got back on the bus after a late pizza dinner, Bella sat down beside me. "Hey, Graham. How are you doing?"

It took me a second to reply, because I was texting Rikker, who was somewhere in the front of the bus. *Good game*, I'd teased him. *Next time you might even score*. Because Rikker had a tricky night. All his best shots on goal had been thwarted.

Nice, came his reply. *Tho there are other ways 2 score*.

We used a separate messaging app to talk to each other, in case anyone (like Bella) ever looked too closely at my phone. I killed the app, stuffed the phone in my pocket and turned to her. "Sorry, what was the question?"

She studied me for a moment. “I just asked how you were.”

“Good.”

She smirked. “I can see that. A little distracted, maybe?”

I just shrugged.

“Who is she?”

Ah. I gave Bella an innocent smile. “What do you mean?”

There was a silence while she watched me for another long moment.

“You aren’t drinking so much these days. And you always have your phone in your face. Is it anyone I know?”

Again, I just shrugged, which was probably going to infuriate her. But there was no helping it.

“Spill, Graham.”

“Nothing to spill, Bells.”

She gave me an eye roll. But I wasn’t going to feel guilty about this. She hadn’t liked it when I was drinking too much. So she should just be happy that I’d stopped, right? It was only fair.

“I need to ask,” she said, interrupting my thoughts. “Is it okay if I put Rikker with you again tonight?”

When she’d done that back in the fall, I’d panicked. This time, it took all my effort to fight off a grin. “Sure. No problem,” I told her.

“Thanks. You’re a big help.”

If that’s what you want to call it. Bella reached into her pocket and handed me a hotel key card. “Room four-twelve,” she said.

“Got it. Thanks.” I stuffed the card in my pocket, and then changed the subject. “What time is breakfast tomorrow?”

“Seven-thirty, unfortunately. Probably half the team will skip it. The bus leaves at eight-thirty. If you don’t want to bother with breakfast, the hotel website says there’s free coffee in the lobby.”

“Good tip. Thanks.”

I took my time getting off the bus. There was really no reason to feel nervous, but my heart rate was elevated just knowing who would be waiting for me in that hotel room. There were days when my secret felt like a weight around my neck. But tonight it just felt *hot*. In half an hour, while my teammates were watching Sports Night or maybe a little porn on their phones, I’d be getting some.

The elevator was full of hockey players, but I was the only one who got off on the fourth floor. “Night, Graham,” Big-D called.

“Later,” I said without a glance over my shoulder. The hallway was empty, which probably meant that Rikker was already in the room. I found number 412 and tapped my card on the scanner. Nothing. I did it again, but the light stayed red.

But that was only a minor setback, right? I knocked on the door. Then I did it again. I expected to hear Rikker moving to let me in, but there was only silence.

Shit.

Then I heard the elevator doors open again, and I waited to see if anyone I knew would appear. After a couple of beats of my heart, Rikker strode into view, a smile on his face.

“Oh, it’s you again,” I complained. But my smile surely gave me away.

“Sorry,” he said, pulling a key card out of his pocket. “Looks like you’re stuck with the gay guy.” He put his hand on my ass right there in the hallway, and I felt my blood stir. “No key?” he asked, waving his card in front of the sensor.

“Didn’t work. I must have demagnetized it already.” I shoved the door open the moment the light flashed green. And Rikker pushed me inside, his hand on my ass.

He threw his duffel onto the floor, and then pressed me chest-first to the wall beside the bathroom door. He kissed the sensitive skin just below my ear. “I made Bella check with you about sharing a room. Wasn’t sure you’d want to.”

I flexed my hips back, pressing my ass into his crotch. “On what planet do I not want to share a room with you?”

He pushed against me. “I don’t know. The planet where you’re thinking up ten different ways that we could get caught.” Rikker reached around my body to slide his hand down the fly of my jeans. “Mmm,” he said, tracing the bulge he found there. “Maybe you are happy to see me.”

“You think?” Putting my forehead on the wall, I angled my crotch into his hand. I was raring to go already. Rikker was the only one who had ever had this effect on me. When he put his hands on my body, I just lit up. And whenever he was a little bit pushy, I was on fire.

“I made a little pit stop in the hotel shop, for supplies. And before you ask, nobody saw me.” His chest pressed into my back, and both his arms came around me. He went for my belt, and then my zipper. Just the sound of the metal teeth giving way made me breathe faster. And then he wrapped his

hand around my dick, and I tipped my head back against his shoulder, telling him without words how much I appreciated it.

“I know,” he whispered, as if I’d spoken. “And I like you up against this wall. But I’m looking at a walk-in shower stall in there. And I like that even better.” He took a half step backward. “How fast can you get naked for me?”

The answer? Pretty damned fast.

We left our clothes in a heap right there on the floor. And it was probably only a minute later when Rikker had the warm water beating down onto his bare chest. I walked into the shower stall and let the glass door close behind me. A second later, a wet, slippery Rikker had me by the hips. “Hands on the wall,” he ordered. And I complied.

Our life outside the bedroom was organized completely by my rules. No eye contact in the locker room. No texting my ordinary number. But at night, Rikker was the one in charge. He pushed my ass against the tile wall, and then dropped to his knees. Before I could even fill my lungs with air, he took me in his mouth.

The water ran over his back in rivulets while he worked me over with his tongue... *Jesus*. A little more of that, and I would probably explode. “Oh, damn,” I gasped. It was so potent. I was so worked up already. He took me deep, and I moaned. “So good. So good,” I chanted. Whenever he touched me, I became a live wire. Before, when I had sex with women, I could go for hours. Sometimes I never finished at all. But just the *idea* of Rikker touching me always had me ready to shoot. “Damn, Rikker.” I pumped my hips involuntarily.

He released me with a popping sound. “Don’t you dare come,” he warned. “I’ve got plans for you.” I shoved my hands into his wet hair. “Mmm,” he said, nuzzling me. “Did I say you could use your hands, yet?”

Quickly, I put them on the wall again.

He stood up. “Am I fucking you tonight?”

Rikker always asked this question, and sometimes I told him no, to give my ass a break. But now he was kissing me so hard that I couldn’t answer right away. “Yesss...” I said eventually.

“Yes, *what?*” he asked, his voice husky.

“Yes, doofus?”

Sputtering with laughter, he reached down to pinch my ass. “I don’t think you have this whole submissive thing down yet.”

“I’ll listen better after you make me come. Get on it already.”

Rikker grabbed me by the hips and turned me around. “Pushy bottom.” I heard the crinkle of a condom wrapper. “Spread.” He tugged my hips back, angling my ass away from the wall to give him better access.

If ever there was a *holy shit* moment for me, it would be that one. Because you can’t bend over in the shower for your gay boyfriend and pretend that your life hasn’t totally changed course.

But did I freak out just then? No. Because Rikker pressed his hips against me, wrapping his arms around my chest. And I was so turned on that I was practically vibrating. But first, all I got was this full-body hug. And when I turned my head to the side, I could see him in the mirror. The shower was already steaming up the glass walls, but I got a blurry view of him, eyes closed, a look of unconscious, blissful affection on his face. As I watched, he held on tight, kissing me between the shoulder blades and groaning into my back. “I looove road trips,” he said.

I laughed, because that was just so easy to do when I was with him. God, I had it so bad for Rikker. Whenever we were alone, the world shrank down to a manageable size. In his company I became my real self. And it wasn’t just the sex. We might be arguing about the NHL entry draft, or dining hall food. It was all just right.

The shower rained down on us, and I closed my eyes and pressed back against Rikker’s body. Groaning with anticipation, he began to stroke me.

I wanted him on me, around me. In me. Right where he belonged.

— *Rikker*

The next morning, I woke up halfway off the hotel bed. I rolled over. Or rather, I tried to. “You are such a bed hog,” I whispered to Graham, who was sleeping spread-eagled on the double bed that we’d ended up sharing. It was so much smaller than the big bed that Graham had rigged up in his dorm room.

Graham did not reply, seeing as he was dead to the world. His face was serene, chin tipped up toward the ceiling. In the stillness of our hotel room, I could hear the faintest whistle each time he exhaled.

I liked to study Graham when he was sleeping, because only then did he look truly peaceful.

But nature called. And it was a luxury to stumble into the hotel bathroom and take a piss without worrying that one of Graham’s neighbors

would spot me.

When I came back out, Graham's phone alarm had just gone off in the little docking station he traveled with. It played — naturally — a Clapton tune. Though I'd never admit it, the acoustic version of "Layla" was a really good song. And kind of sexy, too. Even though it was time to get up, I slipped back into bed. Or I tried to. "Move over, hottie." I swatted his big thigh.

Without opening his eyes, Graham gave me a sleepy grin. Then he stretched his legs a little wider.

So what could I do but climb on him? I maneuvered into position, straddling his sleepy body. "The bus leaves in thirty minutes. I'm on the fence about breakfast. But I'm not leaving here until I know you'll get up."

"Good of you," he slurred, turning his face away from the light.

I reached up, stroking his cheekbone. He had such a beautiful face, I loved touching it. "Wake up, baby."

His lips twisted. "You are too cheerful in the morning. I don't like it."

I leaned down, dropping kisses onto his hairline. "I know better ways to wake you up. But I don't think we have the time."

"Mmm," he said. His eyes were still closed, but his hips shifted underneath me. At least one part of Graham was properly awake. The feel of him beneath me was divine. Too bad I didn't have a half an hour to waste...

Sleepy hands rose up to grasp my ribs. I dropped my lips down to his neck, kissing softly along the sensitive skin beneath his ear. "Wake up," I whispered.

He turned his head then, capturing me in a kiss. So sweet. I still got a thrill whenever he made a move on me. It was stupid, really. We were together now in every possible way. But I craved his affection. Every kiss still felt like a gift, because I knew how much they cost him.

I sank into Graham's kiss, my hips riding him just enough to probably frustrate the both of us. I was so absorbed in the moment, and in the sound of each breathy exhalation that I didn't hear the door open.

"Graham, I gave you my key by mistake! Had to get another one from the..." Bella's voice died away. Then there was a loud gasp. And then, "Rikker? What the...?"

Beneath me, Graham went absolutely still. I turned my head to see Bella standing there, her face reddening, her mouth open.

I eased off Graham's naked body, giving him time to yank the sheet up

higher. “What the fuck are you doing in here?” he rasped.

That was the wrong thing to say.

Bella stood there, a molded tray with three coffee cups in one hand. “You...” she stammered. “He...” It was horrible to watch. Her eyes filled with tears. Then she took a deep breath. “I was bringing you coffee. You asshole,” she said. “Because I was under the mistaken impression that we were *friends*.”

“Bella,” I said softly. But then I ran out of words. Because there really was nothing else to say on the subject. I put a bed pillow in front of my package and dove for my underwear on the floor.

Her face had turned bright red. “This isn’t just a fluke, is it?” she sputtered. “You’ve done this before. God, Graham.” His eyes were squeezed shut, and his face was red, too. Maybe redder than hers. Bella stomped toward the door, turning around once more before she got there. “I thought we were *close*!” she yelled.

And then she turned around and left, the door slamming behind her.

“Oh, God. How the hell did she get in here?” Graham covered his face in his hands.

“She said something about her key. I don’t fucking know. I’m sorry,” I said, hopping into my jeans. “I’m going to catch her. You okay with that?”

Graham just lay there, stunned. “Yeah. I guess.”

“She’s not going to tell anyone,” I said as I shoved my feet into my shoes.

He just sighed, the weight of the world in it.

I put one knee on the bed, and a hand on his chest. “Are you okay?”

“She’s pretty pissed.”

“You know why, right?” *Because she loves you.*

He pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. “I guess. I’m such an asshole.”

“No, you’re not. Just kind of stupid.” I patted him on the hip and then stood up. “You’re not going to freak out, are you?”

Another sigh. “Probably not.”

“Good. Because your very fine ass needs to be on the bus in half an hour.” I shoved my stuff into my duffel at warp speed. “Can you grab my toiletries when you leave? I don’t have time.”

Bella wasn’t hard to catch. When I got to the elevators, she wasn’t

there. But a quick scan of the lobby revealed a defeated-looking figure on a lonesome bench between two ficus trees. She sat there, staring at her shoes, her face blotchy.

She didn't look up when I sat down beside her. But she didn't order me to leave. So that was something. "Would it be really obnoxious of me to ask right now if one of those coffees was supposed to be for me?"

Bella practically growled. "I kind of hate you right now."

"I know," I whispered.

She took one of the cups out of the tray and handed it to me. Then she took a big slug of another one. "What the fuck, Rikker. How could I be such an idiot?"

"You're not."

She made a face. "I... It's hard to wrap my head around." She raked her hands over her forehead. "I mean... I never thought that Graham..." I watched the emotions duke it out on her face. "You went to the same high school for a while. He said he didn't remember you." She looked up at me for the first time. "That wasn't true, was it?"

I cleared my throat. "He would have to have a pretty impressive case of amnesia."

Bella groaned in frustration. "I'm so *pissed* at him. It's like... we had so many conversations about relationships. And sex. And our pasts, you know? We talked all the time." She dropped her voice. "Graham is *gay*." These last words came slowly, as if she were trying them on.

And I'd still never heard Graham say it out loud.

"...So then he lied to me for *years*," she went on. "Even last night, I asked who he was texting... I'm *offended*, okay? Because I would have been cool with the truth, you know? I'm not *like* that."

I just put my arm around her, and let her get it all out.

"I knew he didn't love me."

"He *does* love you."

She flapped a hand, making the universal sign for *enough already*. "I don't usually fall for people. And whenever I do, it's a huge disaster."

"We have that in common, then." I moved closer to her on the bench. "Come here, would you?"

She hesitated. Then she leaned in, letting me wrap my arms around her. "I *definitely* hate you right now," she said in a small voice.

"I know."

“I hate Graham more.”

“He’s kind of an idiot,” I said. She giggled, her face in my neck. But a few tears came along for the ride, too. “Bella, for what it’s worth, I don’t think he ever knew how you felt about him.” This was weird, really.

Comforting my friend because she couldn’t have my lover. But whatever.

“I never told him. Because I knew it wouldn’t help. He didn’t love me. I just didn’t know *why*. But everything makes so much more sense now. Graham likes *guys*. That’s why he would only have sex drunk. And that’s why I always had to work so hard to...”

“...That’s T.M.I.” Thankfully, she didn’t finish that thought. I didn’t want to hear anything about the sex they had. Partly I was jealous. But also, I felt protective of poor Graham. For a few minutes I just held her. And then, at the risk of setting her off, I said what I had to say. “Bella, please don’t tell anyone.”

She jerked away from me, her expression fierce. “Is that why you’re being nice to me? So I’ll keep his little secret?”

I pulled her to me again. “No. And you know it. You’re my friend. Pretty much my only one.”

She made an irritated sound, but didn’t pull away. “Why does it have to be such a big secret, anyway?”

“Seriously? Do you think I make this look fun?”

She put her chin on my shoulder. “If everybody came out at once, it wouldn’t be a thing anymore.”

“Dream on. I’ve been comfy in the closet before. Christian school, and all.”

She looked up at me. “Jesus saves. Unless you’re gay?”

I gave her a squeeze. “That’s exactly right.”

“Graham went there for four years?” she asked.

“Six, because we did the middle school first. Fire and brimstone, and reading, writing and arithmetic.”

“God, what a mess.” She sighed, her head dropping onto my shoulder again. “I just can’t even...” Her sentences kept stopping and starting. But shock will do that to a person. After a while, though, she seemed to calm down. “What happened between you two, before?”

I shook my head. “Sorry. It’s not my story to tell.”

“Sure it is.” When I shook my head again, her brow furrowed. “It must have been something bad. And that’s why you didn’t want me to put you in

that other hotel room together.” She clapped a hand onto her forehead.

“That turned out okay,” I said quickly.

“For you.” Her laugh was dark. “The night we met, I *told* you that I was afraid you’d cut in on my action.”

“When I said that it would never happen, I really believed it.”

Bella let out a big groan. “Fuck. I loved Graham in spite of his dark corners. I thought someday he’d realize he felt the same way about me.” She was quiet for a moment, her hands over her eyes. “Saying it out loud sounds so pathetic.”

I took a big slug of my rapidly cooling coffee, and then offered her a hand. “You aren’t pathetic.”

“I am, though,” she insisted. “It’s just that usually I can get through the day without being reminded of it. Fucking Graham. Why didn’t he just tell me?”

Because he couldn’t even tell himself. “You’ll have to ask him.”

We sat there in silence a little longer. “You and Graham,” Bella said under her breath. “*Damn.* I don’t suppose you’d let me watch? That would be pretty hot.”

I choked on my last swallow of coffee.

“Didn’t think so,” Bella mumbled.

— *March* —

Brain Bucket (or simply *Bucket*): the helmet.

— *Graham*

The regular season ended with Harkness ranked number one on the Eastern seaboard. *Sports Illustrated* wanted to interview Hartley and Orson, so the press office was setting it up. But Hartley wasn't wild about giving an interview. "Anyone else want to be captain?" Hartley asked in the locker room before practice. "I'm taking applications."

"Whiner," Rikker teased him. "You get to talk about your game stats, not your sex life. How tough could that be?"

"Eh. They want to ask me a bunch of questions about what it's like to represent an Ivy League school. They're going to photograph the dining hall during Sunday dinner. How do I talk about Harkness without coming off as an elitist jackass? I'm just a poor kid from a shitty part of Connecticut."

"Then just say that," I suggested. "Tell the truth."

"What would you know about that?" Bella mumbled, walking by with a stack of practice jerseys. She tossed one at me without meeting my eyes.

Bella was still pissed at me, and though she kept her reasons to herself, every guy in the locker room knew it.

"What on Earth did you do?" they all asked me during the first week of Bella's freeze-out.

"More like... *who* did you do?" Trevi asked.

I didn't know what was worse — the fact that the whole world (except me) had already known that Bella had a thing for me. Or that my love life was up for discussion. It sure didn't help my raging case of chronic paranoia.

Also, I missed her. Our relationship had never been simple. Or even honest. But there had been happy nights together, with the two of us tucked into a booth at Capri's telling jokes into the wee hours. It sucked knowing that I'd blown up our friendship.

For the Eastern Conference quarterfinals, we were matched up against

Central Mass. It was a three game series. During the first game, we cut through their defense like a hot knife through butter, winning 3-0. Coach warned us that they'd come out swinging for the second game, and that we'd better be ready.

He was right.

Game two was fast and brutal. I got sent to the sin bin before the first period was over. But their side had even more fouls. There was one player in particular, a giant of a guy with a nasty attitude. His jersey actually said TRODER on the back. What kind of a name was that? He had a way of sweeping my teammates' skates out from under them when the refs weren't looking.

He was egregious, and I was sick of it. Before the game was over, I was sure I could teach him a lesson. I just needed to bide my time, watching for an opening.

It never came.

In the meantime, I saw Rikker and Hartley score one of the most exciting goals I'd ever seen in any hockey game, ever. The second period was almost over, and Rikker took a shot on goal that missed. Quick as lightning, he skated behind the net to retrieve the puck. But instead of skating it back around, Rikker popped the puck off the ice and over the net.

Hartley couldn't see much of what Rikker was doing, though, with the goalie in the way. Working on sheer instinct, Hartley raised his stick at precisely the right nanosecond. Tipping the blade, he smacked the puck back toward the net.

Four thousand jaws dropped as it ricocheted off his stick, flying into the goal.

It was a once-in-a-lifetime moment, and Hartley stood there looking stunned even as the scoreboard lit up with his goal.

We were all a little stunned, actually. And that proved dangerous for me. When I wasn't watching, that asshole Troder got me. One minute I was shipping the puck around behind the net, passing to Big-D. And the next moment I was sailing head-first toward the ice.

Shit!

That simple sentiment was all I could manage as the bright surface raced toward my eyes. Then everything went black.

— *Rikker*

I didn't actually see Graham take the hit.

Instead, I heard Trevi say, "oh fuck," in a sort of awed voice that made me turn to look. And when I saw one of our players spread out on the ice, I just knew it was him.

I just knew.

Later, I'd realize that this was the minute the whole thing fell apart. You can tell each other that your relationship is private. That nobody else needs to know. But that sort of thinking requires that everything go exactly right. It doesn't account for the dark minute when your lover is being carried off the ice on a stretcher, while you try: A) not to puke from worry and B) not to even look interested.

This wasn't soccer, where they ran onto the field every five minutes to cart somebody off. A hockey player gets up and skates off, even if he's bleeding all over the place. Even if he has a broken limb. But Graham wasn't *moving*. The sight of his limp hand dangling off the side of the stretcher made me forget to breathe.

As his unconscious body disappeared down the chute, a chill slid down my spine, from my neck to the small of my back.

Bella and Coach followed on the medics' heels.

The game resumed, but I couldn't concentrate long enough to keep track of my own shifts. In fact, I don't even remember the third period of that game, even though we clinched it.

Coach reappeared at some point to resume calling the shots. But Bella did not come back. I sneaked looks down the chute every chance I got. But neither she nor Graham emerged to put me out of my misery.

"Wake up, Rikker!" Hartley elbowed me.

I stood up and vaulted over the wall, jumping into the fray for what would prove to be my last shift of the game.

But even the final buzzer didn't offer any relief, since the team took for-fucking-ever to shower and pack up. Coach spent a fair bit of time staring at his phone, while I tried to guess from his face whether or not he'd learned anything.

Naturally, I texted Bella about a dozen times. But she didn't answer me, which was terrifying. I felt like vomiting just from the stress of not knowing what was going on.

Finally, Coach told everyone to get on the bus. "We're going to stop at the emergency room so I can check on Graham."

By the time the bus pulled up outside the little hospital, I was sweating through my clean shirt. I needed to go inside and see Graham. But at the same time, I knew he wouldn't want me hovering in there. Too obvious, right?

Fuck!

But when Coach got off the bus, a handful of players followed him. So I got up too, and a couple more guys followed me. A minute later, there were probably a dozen guys in hockey jackets standing under the fluorescent waiting room lights, looking around for someone to tell us where Graham was. Coach approached the desk, but the lady manning it was on the phone.

And then, from somewhere behind the desk, I heard my name.

“Rikker?” It was Graham's voice.

At first, I was just flooded with relief. If Graham was saying my name, then he was okay, right? I took a big breath, as if I'd been deprived of oxygen for hours.

“Rikker?” He called again, sounding agitated. Someone answered him in a low voice. But then Graham spoke again. “Where am I? What happened to Rikker?”

A chill snaked its way up my spine again. And one by one, my teammates, who had been talking to one another, went quiet.

“RIKKER,” came Graham's hoarse voice again. Then my teammates were looking at me, confusion on their faces. Coach turned, his bushy eyebrows raised in my direction.

An older nurse wearing pink scrubs came out from the back just then. “Is someone here named Rikker?”

For a moment I just stood there, rooted to the linoleum, unsure what to do. Graham was going to burst a vessel when he found out that the team was standing out here listening to him call my name.

That woke me up. Lifting a shoulder in the world's least-convincing casual shrug, I followed the nurse, with Coach on my heels.

Walking into that hospital room was like having an out-of-body experience.

Graham was lying on a bed in a hospital Johnnie, looking sweaty and confused. Bella stood next to him, holding his hand. And the look on her face was 100 percent freaked out. At that second, my heart went across the room to put my hands on Graham. I really just needed to touch him.

But my feet stayed locked at the foot of the bed, my body rigid with indecision. *Don't do it*, I reminded myself. Graham wouldn't want me touching him in front of other people.

His eyes locked onto me the second I entered the room. "Where am I?" he croaked.

The question took me aback. "Um, at the hospital?"

"Why?"

Shit! Wasn't it obvious? I opened my mouth, but no answer came out. No wonder Bella looked so scared.

The nurse bailed me out. "You got hit on the head during your hockey game," she said calmly. "You have a concussion, but you're going to be fine."

"Okay," Graham said, sounding entirely unconvinced.

The nurse lifted her chin to me. "He's been asking for you. He thought you might have gotten hurt, too."

"I'm fine," I said slowly. There was something in Graham's expression that wasn't quite right. He had a pained squint, and his gaze wobbled.

"Son, how are you feeling?" Coach asked. "That was quite a hit."

"Head hurts," Graham said, raising a hand to rub his temple. "Where am I?" he asked.

What the fuck? Hadn't we just been over that?

"West Regional Hospital," the nurse said, her voice patient. "You got hit on the head during your hockey game. You have a concussion, but you're going to be fine."

Graham squinted at her. "Okay."

"Why is he...?" I looked to the nurse for help.

But it was Coach who answered my question. "It's called retrograde amnesia. When you get hit that hard, for a little while the brain can't make new memories. You don't remember the game, do you, big guy?" Graham looked up at him, confused. Coach moved closer to him, giving him the same gentle punch on the arm that you'd give a toddler. "Hang in there, kid."

"How are we doing?" a heavyset female doctor asked, stomping into the room. She had a voice like a chainsaw.

"What happened?" Graham asked.

"You took a hit on the head," the doctor said, jotting something on the chart she was holding. Then she looked up at Coach and me. "I sure hope one of you is Rikker. We're getting tired of making excuses for you."

“Um...” I started.

“Did they get you too?” Graham asked, looking me up and down.

“I’m *fine*,” I said again. “I didn’t take a hit.”

He squinted at me. “What are we doing at the hospital?”

“Jesus, Graham!” Bella put a hand to her heart. She looked like she might even pass out. So I moved around the crowded little room and put my hands on her shoulders.

The doctor approached Graham with a little penlight in her hand. “You’re at the hospital because you have a concussion. We need to watch you for a few hours just to make sure everything is going well for you.”

“Can I take him home tonight?” Coach asked. “It’s a two-hour drive. We could have him checked out at our own hospital by midnight.”

The doctor frowned. “I’m sure you know your way around a concussion. But I can’t advise that. These next couple of hours are the ones that matter the most. We need to be sure he doesn’t have an even more serious head injury.”

Coach held his hands up. “Okay. It was just a suggestion. I want him to have whatever he needs.” He nodded to Bella and me and then tipped his head toward the door. “Let’s go figure out what we’re going to do. The rest of the team needs to get back.”

“I’ll be right back, Sweetie,” Bella whispered. She lifted Graham’s hand and gave his palm the same kiss that I would have liked to give it. Then she patted his arm, and she and I followed Coach the short distance into the waiting room. “If he has to stay, I can drive him back in the morning,” Bella offered in a shaky voice. I’d never seen her so rattled.

Coach put a hand on her shoulder. “I was just going to ask if you could do that, honey.”

“*Is Rikker here?*” came from the back.

Oh, fuck.

“What the hell?” Hartley asked, wandering up to us. “Is he okay?”

“He’s confused,” I said, feeling sweat begin to coat my back. “*Really* confused. It’s a concussion. Maybe he thinks we all just left him here.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Hartley said, maneuvering around us towards the back.

“That would be great,” I said, relaxing a little.

“So, Bella needs a car and a hotel room,” Coach said, pulling out his phone. “We’ll set that up. Then I’ll speak to the doctor again. And when

we're sure that he's okay, the rest of us can head out."

Most of my teammates were milling around the waiting room now. "I saw some vending machines by the front door," Orson said. "Anybody want to spot me a dollar?"

"*What happened to Rikker?*" came from the exam room.

Fuck. There he went again. My neck got hot, and I began sending some very desperate thoughts back in Graham's direction. *For the love of all that's holy, please stop asking for me.*

Big-D was rifling through his wallet, looking for singles for the vending machine. "What's up with him?" he asked. "He must be really out of his mind if he's looking for the team homo."

At that, my blood pressure spiked. And then it spiked again, because Graham picked that moment to call, "*Rikker!*"

I took a deep breath in through my nose. "Maybe he was trying to pass me the puck before he got clonked. He wants to know if the pass was complete."

Bella gave me a skittish look that implied that I should probably just shut up now.

Hartley emerged from the back, a startled look on his face. "Shit, he is confused. He doesn't know why we're at a hospital."

Coach nodded, tapping on his phone. "I know it's a little creepy, but it always goes away. Tomorrow he'll make more sense."

"...And he really wants to talk to Rikker," Hartley finished with a shrug. "Like, he doesn't know he just talked to you five minutes ago."

"Weird," I said, sweating.

"*Rikker!*"

With too many sets of eyes on me, I turned and hustled toward the back. When I stepped into Graham's room again, his face went right to relief. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Of course I am, G."

"They didn't get you?"

I shook my head. "You're the only one who's hurt," I said carefully. There was something about the way he kept worrying about me that just didn't make sense. If I could figure out what it was, maybe he'd stop yelling my name.

"How did I get hurt?"

"You got knocked down in the hockey game against Central Mass." I

sat down on the plastic chair on the wall at the head of his bed. “Everything is going to be fine, G.” I checked to be sure that we were completely alone before reaching over to give his shoulder a little squeeze. “Seriously, just relax.”

“We’re at the hospital?” Graham asked.

Jesus. “Yes, G. We are at the hospital. You got hit on the head. But you’re going to be okay.” I yawned like a lion, suddenly exhausted. Graham closed his eyes, and it made me want to do the same. So I leaned back against the wall and relaxed.

A couple of minutes later, Bella appeared in the doorway. Graham’s eyes flew open. “Where am I?” he asked her.

“In the hospital,” she said, her face drawn with worry.

“Where’s Rikker?” Graham asked.

Bella’s eyes went wide, and she pointed at me.

With great effort, Graham turned, spotting me. “Rikker are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said yet again. “Dude, why do you keep asking me that?”

He looked frustrated. “We’re in the *hospital*. Did they get us both?”

Goosebumps rose up on my arms. “Did *who* get us?”

Graham’s face flushed, and his eyes got red. But he didn’t say a word.

And now my own throat was tightening up, because I thought I understood. “G,” I whispered. “Do you think that somebody got beat up? Like in the alley?”

His voice was scratchy, and his eyes were enormous. “Why are we at a hospital? Tell me the truth.”

“*Whoa*,” I said, putting a hand on the side of his face, my thumb brushing his top lip. “No, man. It’s not like that. We’re here because of a *hockey* injury. Just a hockey game.”

Those cool blue eyes measured me. I could see him trying to decide whether or not it was safe to relax.

There was a sound in the hallway then, and I yanked my hand back just in time.

Coach stuck his head in. “Rikker, Bella, let’s strategize.” He beckoned to us and then disappeared. I’d forgotten that Bella was even in the room with us. She stood there, frozen, staring at us.

I looked down at Graham. “Listen. We’re at the hospital because of a hit you took in the hockey game.”

Slowly, Graham nodded.

“Repeat it,” I demanded. “Why are we here?”

“The hockey game,” he said.

“That’s right. And everyone else is fine, okay? I’m going to talk to Coach for a second. Don’t yell for me, okay? Because the whole team can hear you. And I’m right outside.”

Grabbing a speechless Bella by the elbow, I pulled her into the waiting area.

The doctor was giving instructions to Coach. “Two weeks at the bare minimum. But he’ll need to be evaluated then. Don’t rush it. You do not want a second concussion. The second time takes twice as long to recover.”

Coach winced. “Okay. We’ll be conservative.”

I was practically hopping from foot to foot, wondering how long Graham would remember what I’d just told him. But the doctor wasn’t finished with Coach.

“Please do,” the doctor continued. “I’ve seen far too many repeat concussions in this E.R., always because a big game was coming up, and the athlete insisted he was fine. I’m going to send him home with a lot of care information. But he’ll need help making decisions. I know he’s an adult, but his parents should be involved.”

“They will be. Thank you.” Coach turned to the whole crew. “Okay, guys. Last call for the men’s, or the soda machine. We’re going to hit the road.” Then he put a hand on Bella’s shoulder and began talking about a rental car and a hotel room.

“*Rikker!*” Graham barked from the other room.

Aw Christ. There was so much fear in his voice it was practically ripping me in two.

Bella and Coach looked up from their conversation. Coach frowned. “Damn. I wish he was doing better already. I’ll go tell him goodbye.” He walked to the back, with Bella on his heels.

Hartley waved me over. “You’re coming on the bus, right?”

My mouth went dry, wondering what would happen after I left. Was Graham going to yell my name all night? And all because he thought some thugs beat me up in an alley. But if I stayed here, everyone might wonder why. Or would they? I felt utterly paranoid. I felt like Graham. “Uh, yeah,” I said to Hartley. “Unless you think Bella could use my help. She might like that. I mean... whatever makes sense, man.” I tried to sound casual, but my voice was shaking.

Hartley just looked at me right then. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that Hartley looked right *through* me. I could actually see the understanding blossom in his brown eyes. What followed was the most awkward silence of my life. Just a vacuum in space between my captain and I, with the guffaws of the French freshman and Big-D as background noise.

Finally, Hartley cleared his throat. "Would he, uh, want you stay here?"

I looked down at the linoleum floor tiles. "I don't fucking know. He's not making any sense."

And then Big-D was standing there too, chewing peanut M&Ms and asking Hartley when they were leaving.

"Whenever Coach says," Hartley snapped.

From the back, Graham yelled for me again. And Big-D's eyes lifted toward the corridor, and I felt my whole body go tense. *Please just go out to the fucking bus, asshole.* Instead, he popped another candy in his mouth and locked eyes with me. "If I'm ever hit on the head hard enough to yell for the team homo, one of you will just shoot me, right? Put me out of my misery."

"Really?" Hartley asked, his jaw tight. "You want to do this right now, with your teammate flat out in the next room?"

"That's the thing, though," Big-D said, folding his arms. "I'm just looking out for Graham. Actually, Rikker never told us whether he likes to give or receive." He stared me down. "Which is it? If you like to be the cumbucket, maybe Graham is safe."

A spear of red-hot anger sliced through my chest. "Funny. You seem real eager to know what sex with me is like," I said. "Curious, maybe?"

His ground his teeth. "Watch your *fucking* mouth."

"Yeah? You feel like making me?" I was too stressed out to back down. "That's your strategy, maybe. You want my hands on you any way you can get them."

Big-D made two fists, his face red. "Shut it, faggot."

Hartley jumped between us. "STOP! *Both* of you."

"*Rikker!*" Graham yelled. And the tension I felt was unbearable.

Hartley pointed at me. "Stay with... Bella," he finished. Then he jerked a thumb at Big-D. "You, on the bus. *Right* now."

Big-D gave me one last, angry stare before he turned around.

Hartley gave me a shove toward the back, and we both went into Graham's room.

"There's too many people in here," the doctor grumbled, checking

Graham's eyes again. "You all can sit in the waiting room. Except for Rikker, because he's going to save my eardrums."

"Where's...?" Graham tried to see around the doctor.

"Right here," I ground out.

"Why are we in a hospital, Rik?" he asked.

"Uh, Hockey game, G. You took a hit on the head."

Bella tugged on my arm. "He's afraid of something. Why?"

I put my lips close to her ear. "Not now, Bella."

"He doesn't want you to go," she said, her face flushing.

"Then I'll sit in that fucking chair all night, okay? Now hush." I could still feel the blood pounding in my ears. Hitting something sounded really good right about now.

Bella took a shaky breath. Then she went over to ask Coach if I could stay with her to keep her company.

"Sounds like a fine plan, if Rikker is willing," Coach said.

"Hey, no problem," I stammered.

The doctor finished her examination. "He's awfully agitated," she said, frowning. "I don't love that. But there's been no vomiting for an hour now." She patted Graham on the shoulder. "Why are you so upset, buddy?"

Coach tugged his chin. "Shit. I don't feel like I should walk out of here."

"Why are we here?" Graham asked.

I cleared my throat. "You took a hit during the hockey game," I said for the millionth time. But then I had an idea. "Hey. Where is his stuff? Did he come in here with his helmet?"

"Why?" the doctor asked.

But I'd already found the door of a flimsy little closet in the corner, and yanked it open. Graham's hockey bag was crammed inside, the helmet on top. "G, look at this," I said, pointing to the crack. "This is why we're here."

"The hockey game," Graham said.

"That's right." I handed him the helmet. "That's the only reason."

Graham fingered the crack in the helmet while everyone watched.

"Coach, just leave me here with Bella," I said. "We'll be fine."

He looked from Graham to me and then to Bella. "You can just add a room with the team card," he said.

"I'll just stay in this chair," I pointed. "Seriously. One night. We'll leave in the morning."

“You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m good. They’re waiting for you.”

Still frowning, Coach patted Graham’s shin. “Stay strong, kid. And I’ll see you tomorrow when you get back.” Then he turned and left the room.

I sagged into the plastic hospital chair, feeling the first hit of relief.

An hour and a half later, I woke up with a start. My head lay on my crossed arms, which were propped onto Graham’s bed.

“Sorry,” Bella said from behind me. It was her return to the room that had startled me.

I picked up my head, untangling my stiff neck. Graham was asleep, his fingers curled into the cage of his helmet. “What time is it?”

“Midnight. I got the rental car.”

I yawned and stood up. “You can have the chair.”

She shook her head. “I already asked them to bring in another one, and they said it’s against policy.” Bella rolled her eyes. “So I’m going to the hotel, unless I can talk you into going in my place.”

“Naw. I’ll stay,” I said.

“Thought you’d say that,” Bella said, her eyes downcast. “He wants you, anyway.” She let out another sigh, and then walked over to the head of Graham’s bed. Bending down, she barely touched her fingers to his sleeping head. “Tell me what happened, Rikker. What were you talking about before? Something happened in an alley. Graham got beaten up?”

I shook my head. It wasn’t something I could discuss with her.

But Bella’s laser eyes did not retreat. “Graham didn’t get beat up,” she whispered. “You did.”

Ugh. “It was a long time ago, Bella. I’m over it.”

“But he isn’t,” she whispered.

Chivalry be damned, I sat back down in my chair. “I guess not,” I agreed with her in a low voice. “I didn’t really know that until tonight.”

“Was it bad? Must’ve been, if the hospital is freaking him out.”

I didn’t really know what to make of that, since Graham hadn’t even come to the hospital with me. And I didn’t remember it so well, to be fair. “I got through it,” I said, not wanting to go into specifics. “But maybe that’s why I’m over it, you know? I dealt with the injuries. They sucked, but it’s done with.”

Bella looked down at my sleeping boyfriend. “But he’s still duking it

out, isn't he? The hardest-hitting defenseman we have. Trying to intimidate the other team, night after night." Her eyes never left Graham, even as she spoke to me.

Well, shit. I hoped she was wrong about that. I hoped Graham wasn't still trying to dole out retribution after all these years. How absofuckinglutely depressing.

Bella leaned down farther, kissing Graham's hair. "Mmm, helmet sweat," she said. It was supposed to be a joke, but she looked too sad to pull it off. "Goodnight, sweetie," she whispered to him. Then Bella walked over to the wall and flipped the overhead light off. "Night, Rikker."

Then she left.

— *Graham*

Someone was trying to press my head into a vice. And *Christ* that hurt.

Prying my eyes open, the first thing I saw was an unfamiliar ceiling. Wait. It wasn't entirely unfamiliar. I moved my eyes a few degrees, which was painful. But the edges of the room came into focus. A *hospital* room. Memories of last night began flickering at the edge of my consciousness. There was a lot that didn't make sense. But I knew Coach had been here. And Bella, Hartley and...

I moved my chin to see more. In my left hand I held my hockey helmet, which had a nasty crack in it. Under my right hand lay Rikker's sleeping head. My heart gave a little squeeze just seeing him there, his strong arms folded onto my mattress, the soft skin at the side of his neck disappearing into the collar of his T-shirt.

Gently, I removed my hand from his hair, though. I never touched Rikker in public, not even a playful punch to the shoulder.

God, my head hurt so badly. What else happened last night? I'd been confused, and I could picture the faces of my friends trying to calm me down. Rikker, especially. He'd looked shaken. But why?

Beside me, Rikker groaned. He rolled his head around on the mattress, slowly stretching out his neck. Then he picked his sleepy face up and studied me. "You're awake," he said, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "We're at the Central Mass hospital, because you got knocked on the head during the..."

"...Hockey game," I said.

He blinked at me. "Okay. Good job remembering that."

A doctor strode into the room then, stethoscope around her neck. She

wore honest-to-God combat boots with her scrubs, and a blue jewel in her nose. “Morning, sunshine. I’m just going to look you over one more time before we can release you, okay? Same drill as last night.”

“Last night?” I asked. But as she came closer, I realized that I remembered her. It had been dark in the room, but during the night I’d awoken several times to see her stalking towards me with a light that she’d shined in my eyes while I was trying to sleep. “Oh. Yeah.”

“Yep,” she said. “Every two hours you tried to eject me from the premises. Good times.”

“Sorry,” I managed. “I was confused.”

Rikker moaned into his hands. “Yes, you were. It was a long night.”

The doctor moved around to the side of the bed where Rikker was still sitting. “Now that we’re friends again, I want to look at that contusion on your hip, too. Maybe your boyfriend could step out for a minute.”

Boyfriend.

The word hit me like an ice bath. *Holy crap.* For the first time it occurred to me to wonder whether my deflector shields had taken a worse beating last night than my hockey helmet or my skull.

I must not have kept the flinch off my face. Because the doctor cocked an eyebrow. “Sorry. My mistake. It’s just that you did an awful lot of yellin’ for him last night. Wouldn’t let him leave the room.”

I turned my head too fast toward Rikker. The result was a new flash of pain. But the troubled expression on Rikker’s face was even worse. “What happened here?” I croaked, afraid of his answer.

“We’ll talk in a bit,” he said. “I’m going to look around for coffee.” He got up and slid out of the room.

“Roll for me, hon,” the doctor said with a nudge to my shoulder.

Reeling, I turned my body so that she could lift the hospital gown that I was wearing. I didn’t remember putting it on. I didn’t remember how I got here, or who drove me.

I had no idea what I might have said last night, and who might have heard it.

Just then, Bella waltzed into the room, sipping from a Starbucks cup.

“Give us a second, sweetie,” the doctor said.

“Oh, I’ve seen it all before,” she said, parking herself against the wall and taking another slug of her coffee.

“Huh,” the doctor said, probing my groin with gloved fingers. “Y’all

seem to have more fun in college than I ever did.”

Bella ignored her. “You’re looking better, Graham.”

“How bad was it?” I asked, my voice cracking.

“This will heal up easily,” the doctor said. “But that concussion is going to slow you down for a month or more.”

But that wasn’t what I was asking. “Bella,” I rasped. “What happened here last night?”

She sighed. “You were pretty out of it. And maybe that’s all people will think. That you were out of it.”

“What did I say when I was out of it?”

She avoided my eyes. “You just kept calling for Rikker. And whenever he walked away, you’d start yelling for him again.”

Unfortunately, that sounded awfully familiar. I remembered being really confused about where I was, and how I’d gotten hurt.

And I’d assumed the worst.

“Shit.” Even now I fended off a shudder. And now I knew why I’d woken up with my hockey helmet in my hand. Someone was trying to help me remember what happened.

Rikker.

“Why didn’t he get on the bus with the rest of the team?” There was panic rising in my throat, and when I swallowed, I tasted bile.

Bella’s eyes narrowed at me. “What would you have him do? The choice was between staying with you, which you demanded out loud to anyone who would listen. Or walking away while you shouted his name. He did his fucking best, Graham.”

Rikker walked in then, carrying a white cup of coffee. After he sipped from it, he made a face. Pointing at Bella, he said, “You got *good* coffee. Where’s mine?”

“Patience,” she snapped. “I will drive you both to get something when Graham is released.”

“I’m just going to go over some instructions with you all, and then he can go,” the doctor said. I’d actually forgotten she was in the room with us. “These are for whomever will care for you.” The doctor held out a sheaf of papers. Bella took a half step forward, as if to take them. But then she bit her lip and looked at Rikker.

My boyfriend reached out to take the paperwork.

“Read it through carefully,” the doctor said. “He can’t do it himself,

because he's not supposed to read anything for a while, until the headaches stop."

"That will make midterms fun," I grumbled.

"I'll read them," Rikker said gruffly.

"Now listen up," the doctor said. "You're going to need a lot more sleep than usual. No reading. No aerobic exercise..."

After the doctor gave us a ten-minute lecture about all the things I wasn't supposed to do for at least two weeks, we went outside. I thought I'd felt bad before, but out in the sun it was ten times worse. The light glinted off the snow banks at the edges of the parking lot. And the glare went like a needle straight to my brain.

"Uhhn," I complained.

"The car is just right over here," Bella said, pointing at a green rental sedan. "Graham, you can have shotgun or the back seat. Wherever you're going to be the most comfortable."

I didn't think it mattered. I was going to be miserable no matter what. My head still felt as if angry gorillas had beaten on it. "I'll take the back," I said, opening the rear door.

"You know, I'd be happy to drive," Rikker offered.

Bella shot him a glare over the hood of the car. "News flash, Rik. Even though I possess a vagina, I'm still capable of driving a car."

He held his hands up in submission. "Easy, Bella. I was just trying to be helpful. One would think that you'd spent all night in a plastic hospital chair. Oh wait, that was me."

She got in and cranked the engine. "And that's why I'm driving. I'm the only one who slept. Also, I know where the Starbucks is."

"I won't argue with that," Rikker mumbled. He reclined the passenger seat a few degrees and let out a weary sigh.

"I'm sorry," I said as Bella pulled the car around the hospital's drive circle.

"For what?" She asked. "Getting tripped by that fucker last night? Rikker and I will live. We might even stop bitching at each other."

Putting my head back, I covered my eyes with my forearm. Everything was just so fricking bleak. I'd never been injured at hockey before — not like this. The worst I'd had were bruises and strained muscles. Before we'd left the hospital, the doctor had been careful to tell me that it wasn't clear yet how

much time I'd need to heal. At least two weeks. But I had a bad feeling.

The car made a couple more turns and then stopped. "Do you mind going in for us?" Rikker asked. "I'd really appreciate it."

I was sure that Bella would tell Rikker to go and buy his own damned coffee. But she didn't. "Double cappuccino with skim milk?"

Money changed hands. "A couple of muffins would be awesome. G, are you awake?"

I grunted.

"You're not supposed to have coffee, but you should eat," Rikker said.

"Not hungry," I mumbled.

Bella disappeared, her car door slamming. And then there was silence. Even though I couldn't see him, I felt Rikker's eyes on me.

"We have to talk," he said eventually.

"About how I made a complete fool of myself last night?"

He didn't say anything for a moment. I opened my eyes, and found his unhappy ones looking back at me. "Okay. How about we just skip over the part where I get offended at the idea that your wanting me nearby makes you a..." he made quote marks out of his fingers, "complete fool."

God, I was such an asshole. "Rik, my head is killing me. We can talk now if you want. But I'm going to be even stupider than usual."

He sighed. Then he opened the passenger side door and got out. A second later, he opened the rear door and slid into the back seat next to me. Reaching up, he took my head in his hands and began rubbing gently.

Oh, yeah. The pain was almost bearable when he did that. I did a quick scan of the parking lot (even though it hurt my eyes to shift them left and right) before leaning over to rest my head on his chest.

He kept up the massage, even dropping a quick kiss onto the top of my head. "How about I talk, and you just listen."

I nodded.

"Good boy. Now, I realized something last night, and I feel like a big idiot for not getting this before."

His fingertips smoothed down my brow line, and I leaned into him even though I was positive that I wouldn't like whatever he said next.

"Somehow, I'd sort of forgotten that you were there too, in that alley five years ago."

I grunted. "Not ever talking about this. You said so yourself."

He palmed my forehead, holding my head in place against his chest.

“New rule. We can talk about it any time one of us has a fucking panic attack in a hospital. See, I always thought that I was the only one who got hurt that day. But that isn’t true, is it? Yeah, the cracked ribs really sucked. But they *healed*.”

His hands were still, just cupping my head. And I hoped he was done with this subject. But no such luck.

“See, this is really fucked,” he continued. “Because now I’m starting to think that maybe my parents did me a favor sending me away to Vermont. They did it for the wrong reasons, of course. But I got to start over in a new place, right? No chance I’d ever run into the assholes who beat me. I got a brand new school, where they didn’t preach about sin all fucking day. But you had to stay there and pretend like nothing happened.”

“Didn’t *have* to,” I said. My silence had been a choice. And I made that choice out of pure cowardice.

He began massaging my temples again. “You were sixteen, G, and you’d just been jumped. I never realized how much that fucked with your head.”

I didn’t want any of Rikker’s sympathy, and I sure as hell didn’t deserve it. “The only thing that fucked with my head was the surface of the ice.”

Rikker gave a grunt of disapproval. He wanted a confession from me — some kind of closure for old fears. As if that would help me become a better boyfriend, the kind that wasn’t afraid to hold his hand in the hospital.

But he was only partly right. That scene in the alley had scared me silly. But admitting it now wouldn’t help. Those old fears had crusted over into something more like disgust. And I’d been trapped in it from the moment I left Rikker alone there to fend for himself.

You can’t solve that with a quick chat in the back of a rental car. You can’t solve it at *all*.

Even so, I relaxed my body against his. I had to. Everything was just so screwed up. I was injured and in pain. And my teammates thought... I didn’t have a clue what they thought. I felt sick just wondering. The touch of Rikker’s hands was the only thing in the world I had going for me.

The only thing.

His fingertips made slow circles through my pain. His whisper was so soft that I wouldn’t have heard it if I weren’t practically sitting on him.

“What am I going to do with you, G?”

My eyes had drifted closed, and so when Bella opened the driver's door, they startled open again. But I didn't pick my head up off Rikker's chest. That would have required more effort than I was capable of exerting.

Bella slid into the driver's seat and turned around. When she saw us basically cuddling in the backseat, a flash of raw hurt crossed her face. Then, without comment, she passed a cup of coffee and a bakery bag into the backseat. Rikker set the bag in his lap, and took the coffee into his free hand. He kept his other one on my head. The engine fired up, and Bella reversed out of the parking spot.

We rode back to Harkness that way, with me drowsing on Rikker. He had to wake me when the car pulled up in front of Beaumont House. "Let's go, big man. Time to get you set up inside. Bella, I'll return the car if you want."

"I got it," she said, her voice low. "And then I'll hit the pharmacy for his meds, too. See you upstairs."

"Thanks," I said, my voice thick.

"It's nothing," she said.

— *Rikker*

I followed Graham into the Beaumont House courtyard. He seemed a little unsteady on his feet, and I didn't want to leave him alone, even though we'd never really walked around together before.

Not once.

For some reason, my mind picked that moment to realize just how fucked up our relationship really was. There were people in the world who would have used the word "perverse" to describe the things that Graham and I did in the bedroom. But they had it backwards. What was *really* perverse was the way we pretended like we didn't know each other all the other times.

Graham had to get a *head injury* before he forgot to get pissy about me walking beside him. Fuck my life.

At his entryway door, Graham waved his ID in front of the sensor. I followed him upstairs, and into his room. His eyes were at half-mast.

"What can I get you?" I asked.

He put his hand over his face. "A new head, or a bottle of Johnnie Walker."

"Okay, what's third on your list?"

"I need a shower."

“That you can have.”

Graham carried his towel and his toiletries out into the hallway, and I made myself sit down on his desk chair instead of following him. But sixty seconds later, I heard a crash from the bathroom. With my heart in my throat, I shot out of the room and into the bathroom, all the while picturing Graham prone on the marble tiles. But I found him kneeling there instead, staring down at his shower stuff where it had scattered all over the floor.

“Shit. Are you okay?”

He looked sheepish. “I stumbled a little. It’s nothing.”

Standing over him, I pushed one hand through his soft hair, willing my heart to stop pounding. “Let me pick this stuff up. Come on.” I turned on the shower for him and watched him strip. But he looked steady enough, I guess. So I collected the shampoo and the shaving stuff he’d dropped and handed the caddy into the shower stall.

“Thanks,” he sighed. “I’m okay now.”

I stood there for a second, wondering what to do. “I’ll be in your room,” I said finally. “Don’t be a stranger.”

He gave me a half-hearted chuckle. So I pushed open the bathroom door, and almost collided with Hartley.

“Hey,” he said, his eyes darting to the bathroom door. “Bella texted that you were back. How is he?”

“He’s better,” I said. “He’s not confused anymore, but his head hurts.”

“Okay,” Hartley crossed and uncrossed his arms. “That’s progress, I guess.”

“Sure,” I said, feeling miserable. I was worried about Graham, but I sure as hell wasn’t allowed to say so. “Let’s, uh, give him a minute.”

“Yeah,” Hartley said. “So, listen. I just propped open the entryway for...”

But now there were rapid footsteps coming up the staircase. And when I looked down, it was Graham’s mom who was charging up them. “Johnny Rikker!” she squealed. “I have a bone to pick with you.”

“Uh, what’s that Mrs. G?”

Beside me, Hartley lifted an eyebrow.

“My baby has a concussion, and it’s all your fault.” Mrs. Graham reached the landing and launched herself at me, throwing her arms around me in a hug.

Awkwardly, I hugged her back. “I didn’t trip him. You should really

take it out on that bruiser at Central Mass.”

“*Hockey*, John. He never mentioned playing hockey until you wanted to try out in the eighth grade.”

Over her shoulder, I took another involuntary look at Hartley. He was now staring at the two of us with undisguised curiosity. “Sorry about that,” I stammered. “He wasn’t supposed to get his bell rung.”

“Oh, I don’t really mean it,” she said, releasing me. “Is he okay? I was worried enough to get on a plane at seven this morning.”

“He’ll be okay. You can see for yourself in a minute.” I jerked my thumb toward the bathroom door, where the sound of the shower had ceased. Then, remembering all the paperwork from the hospital, I opened the door to Graham’s dorm room and grabbed my duffel off the floor. From inside, I pulled the packet of instructions. “Here’s what they sent for... you to read.”

I stopped myself just in time from putting “me” in that sentence.

“Thank you, honey.” Mrs Graham took the papers from me and began to flip through them, right there on the landing.

My sleep-deprived brain was just figuring out that I was handing Graham over to his mother, the same way I’d handed over the paperwork.

Graham opened the bathroom door then, wearing a towel around his waist. “*Mom*,” he said, shock in his voice.

She hug-tackled him. “Sweetie, I was so worried.”

“I’m all wet. Jeez. Everybody give me a minute, okay?” Graham disappeared into his bedroom, glowering all the way.

“I’m going to baby him,” she announced. “He’s just going to have to put up with it.”

Hartley smiled at her. “Good luck with that.”

That’s when Bella came charging up the stairs, too. “Oh, Mrs. Graham!”

“Bella, sweetie!” They hugged, and I noticed just how crowded it had become here outside Graham’s room.

Bella held up a little white bag. “I filled his prescription. And the pharmacist said not to take these on an empty stomach. So I bought him a sandwich at the deli.”

“Oh honey, thank you! Here I was practically flapping my arms to come here to take care of him, and the three of you have already done it.” Mrs. Graham rapped a knuckle on the room door. “Michael, can we come in yet?”

“Yeah,” came Graham’s reluctant voice from inside the room. The door opened, and he stood there, filling the space, a freaked-out look on his face.

I could see how this would play out. It wasn’t going to be me who sat down beside Graham, asking him whether or not he wanted to take something for the pain. It wasn’t going to be me who read the proper dose off the medicine bottle.

Ten minutes ago, I’d assumed that Graham and I would spend the rest of the day napping on his bed, so that I could keep an eye on him. But that wasn’t going to happen. I wasn’t going to take care of him. Or even tell him how much I wanted him to feel better.

That was not allowed.

Mrs. Graham put her hands on her son’s clean T-shirt, nudging him aside to enter the room. And Bella followed her.

That left Hartley and I in the hallway, with a nervous Graham practically blocking the way into his room. His wishes could not have been any plainer even if he’d held up a sign reading: *You Are Dismissed*.

Message received.

I shouldered my duffel bag. “Feel better,” I said lamely.

His answer was gruff. “Thanks.”

With out another word, I turned around and began to trudge down the stairs. Exhaustion made my legs feel heavy. And when I pushed the entryway door open at the bottom of the stairs, the damp March air gave me a shiver. I stopped to zip up my jacket.

“Hey, Rikker.”

I turned to see Hartley jogging up to me. “Hey.”

When I headed for the courtyard gate, he followed. “You knew Graham in high school? He never mentioned that.”

Shit. “I’m pretty sure that was intentional,” I said, my voice low.

“Wow.” There was a silence while Hartley did the math about why that might be. Graham would probably shoot me if he heard this conversation. But what was I supposed to say?

When Hartley spoke again, what he said took me by surprise. “You want to grab a slice somewhere? I’m starved.”

The invitation made my throat feel thick. Because I did, in fact, want to grab a slice with Hartley. But if we did that, he might ask me more questions. And I’d be tempted to answer them. And that was simply not allowed.

I was feeling so raw, and totally friendless. “I didn’t really sleep last

night,” I ground out. “I think I’ll have to take a rain check. Thanks, though.”

“Yeah, okay.” Hartley held the gate open. When I walked through, he touched my shoulder. “See you at practice Monday.”

“See you,” I grunted.

I’d made it only a few paces when Hartley called after me. “Hey Rikker?”

When I turned to look at him over my shoulder, he was smiling at me. “Awesome play last night. You know. Before...”

The game, and our crazy combo goal, felt like a hundred years ago. But it had, indeed, been awesome. “It was, wasn’t it?”

“The best.” He gave me a wave, and I crossed the street alone. Because that’s how I did everything.

I let myself into McHerrin and trudged up the stairs. When I opened my room door and looked inside, what I saw was an empty little shithole with bare walls. And I was never going to take down Skippy’s snowboarding picture to replace it with a shot of me and Graham on a beach somewhere. Even your classic bro shot — two guys holding cans of beer, with baseball caps on backwards — that would never be okay with Graham. Because one of the two visitors I had to my room in seven months might *guess*.

Dropping my bag on the floor, I flopped down on the bed, alone with my bitter thoughts. Sleep would help, so I tried to make myself comfortable. It was nice for Graham that his mom had come running into town to take care of him. But I’d bet cash money that I was a better napping partner than she was.

As I tried to fall asleep, another dark thought bothered me. It could have been *me* who sustained the concussion. And when I tried to flip the picture around in my mind, I didn’t like what I saw. Would *my* mom fly out to take care of me? Not hardly. And would Graham be willing to sit on the edge of my bed, asking me if I needed anything? Sure. Unless Hartley or Coach showed up to check on me. And then what would he do?

I had a feeling I wouldn’t like the answer.

In a few short weeks, the hockey postseason would be finished. I’d have my weekends free again. My teammates would use that time to go to parties with their girlfriends, or hang out with their buddies in the student center. And where would I be? Killing time until it was late enough to sneak into Graham’s room for a few hours, before I snuck out again before dawn.

Graham was never going to budge from his closet. So my choice was to

either leave him, or just get used to dining on the scraps he gave me.

So pathetic.

I rolled over, feeling sorry for both of us.

The next two days sucked in much the same way.

For almost forty-eight hours I'd heard nothing from Graham. My texts went unanswered. Just when I was really getting worried, he finally called me Monday afternoon as I was walking out of Spanish class.

"Hey," he said. "I only have a minute. My mom's in the bathroom, but I just wanted to say hi."

"Hi," I said, maybe a little testily. "How's your big old melon?"

"Hurts," he said. "We just got back from the doctor, and there's a whole lot of shit that I'm not supposed to do for a while. Like read."

"All right..." I tried to imagine getting through a week at Harkness without reading. "How's that supposed to work?"

"Exactly. This week Mom is coming to class with me to take notes."

"No shit?" I stopped walking just outside of the Harkness Commons dining hall to finish our conversation.

"No shit. And I have no idea how long this will last. Shoot me."

"God, I'm sorry, G." And I really was. The sound of his voice did something to me, too. It made me realize how badly I missed him. There was a reason I put up with the whole stealthy-like-a-ninja act. He was important to me, whether it was convenient or not. "Can I come over tonight?"

He cleared his throat. "There's a whole lot of things I'm not supposed to do."

"Okay. Is talking to me one of them?"

"No," he laughed.

"I'll text you before I come, just to make sure the coast is clear. But that means you'll actually have to text me back."

"Sorry about that," he said. "But it hurts when I look at the screen."

And now I felt like an ass. "Shit. Should I call instead?"

"I'll ring you when it's all clear."

All clear. As if I was a criminal. *Christ.* "Be well, G. I miss you."

He cleared his throat. "Later."

Sigh.

That afternoon I went to practice.

I hadn't seen any of my teammates since the weirdness at the hospital. For some reason I felt more awkward about walking into the locker room than I ever had before. I'd always wished that Graham could be with me in a way that wasn't like a state secret. But I'd always understood his struggle, too. He didn't want eyes on him. I got that.

But now all those eyes were on me as I walked into the locker room. Or at least it felt like they were. I was pretty sure that a couple of conversations stopped as I entered the room.

I didn't even know what to think about that, other than I knew that Graham wouldn't like it.

Hartley greeted me with a familiar nod, and I began stripping out of my jacket and jeans, and pulling on my pads.

"How is he?" Hartley asked in a voice too low to be overheard.

"He feels better, but the news is still shitty," I said. "There's nothing he can do, and his mom is, like, his permanent nursemaid."

"Fuck," Hartley said.

"Yeah," I agreed. Although I would have chosen a different expression. Because fucking was off the table, apparently.

The locker room door opened and Coach's voice rang out. "Afternoon, hooligans! Listen up, I have news." The chatter and smack talk died down. "Now, I'm sorry to tell you that Mike Graham's concussion is going to keep him off the ice, probably for the rest of the season. I am sad as hell to lose him. Furthermore, Davis's tendinitis is going to keep him out for another two games. But fear not! I have I brought you some back-up. For a limited engagement only, please welcome Bridger McCaulley back to the room."

"No shit!" somebody yelled. And then cheers and applause practically thundered off the walls as a red-haired guy appeared in the doorway, pulling a hockey bag behind him. He smiled a little sheepishly, this guy that I'd replaced in the fall.

"Suit up fast, Bridger. Ice in ten minutes!" Coach yelled. "We'll sort out who's switching to defense this afternoon. Everybody skate hard, and it will all work out."

Hartley waved Bridger over, holding up a hand for a high-five. "Glad to see you here, man," he said.

"Yeah? We'll see if you're still glad ninety minutes from now," Bridger said. He turned to me and stuck out a hand. "I'm Bridger. Nice to meet you."

"Rikker," I said, shaking his hand.

“I know,” he drawled. “Didn’t know I was going to be replaced by a celebrity.”

“Yeah, well. It was my lifelong dream to be famous for getting kicked off a hockey team. But if you need an autograph or anything, I can probably fit you in.”

Bridger grinned. Then he glanced around the locker room. “Hartley, where do you want to put me?”

Right. I was in his spot. *Whoops.*

“Over here, Bridge,” Bella called, waving the guy into the corner, where she was stuffing Bridger’s gear into a bag. “Sorry, we weren’t quite ready for you.”

“No biggie.” He leaned down to unzip his bag, and I turned my back to shrug my chest pads over my head.

“Hey!” Big-D crossed the room to slap Bridger on the back. “Please tell me you’re back permanently. Things just aren’t the same this year.”

My blood pressure spiked. Only Big-D would find a compliment for Bridger which also managed to put me down.

“You’re right,” Bridger said, shaking out his hockey shorts. “What’s different is that you win all the fucking time. But I promise not to wreck it too bad. You only get me for the post-season, anyway. Even playing a handful of games with you is more than I can afford. I’m going to owe my girlfriend for covering for me at home. Big time.”

Big-D snorted. “There is no way that Bridger McCaulley just used the word ‘girlfriend’ in a sentence. We have to meet this girl. I need proof.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that a lot,” Bridger said.

On his way back across the room, Big-D pointed at Trevi’s feet. “Dude, those socks are so gay.”

Everybody looked at Trevi’s socks, even me. They were striped: blue and violet. “My sister knitted them for Christmas,” Trevi said, unconcerned.

“Next time, tell her to...” Big-D cut himself off, putting one hand across his own mouth in an exaggerated gesture. “Oops,” he said, turning back to Bridger. “Forgot to warn you, man. We can’t make gay jokes anymore. Because some people might get offended.” This little performance was put on entirely to embarrass me. On a good day, Big-D didn’t go five minutes without using “gay” to describe anything that displeased him.

“Naw,” I piped up. “You go ahead, Big-D. I don’t give a flying fuck if you say a pair of socks is gay. Or Smitty’s watch, or what-the-fuck-ever.”

There's pretty much nothing you can say that will offend me. It only makes me wonder if you know what the word means."

There was silence in the locker room then.

I should have just shut up, of course. But I was just too strung out to rein myself in. "...Because it would be pretty fuckin' hard for a pair of socks or a watch to act gay. Those would have to be some really talented socks." I made quotation marks with my fingers. "Gay does not mean bright colors. Gay means my mouth on another guy's dick..."

A loud groan of distress rose up in the locker room.

"Check, please!" Trevi hollered. "No thank you for that visual."

Hartley gave me a nudge. "Cool it, will you? It's time to skate."

Bending over, I yanked on my laces. Usually, I didn't bait Big-D. And Graham would probably have a coronary if he'd heard what I'd said. But today I just felt so raw. The universe was fucking with me, and I felt like fighting back.

Because that always works.

I almost had my skates tied by the time Bella rolled the hockey bag full of Graham's gear away from the lockers. Making eye contact with me, she pointed at it, asking if I'd take it to him. With a frown, I gave her a single shake of my head. God forbid I help out Graham by bringing him his gear. He'd have a second coronary, and while they were giving him the defibrillator, he'd ask me if there were any witnesses.

"Let's go, guys!" Bella called. "Ninety-six hours until the semifinals!"

She was right. We had more games to win. And it was a bad idea to sit around feeling confused about Graham.

Chippy: irritated with the other team, potentially on the brink of fighting.

— *Graham*

Note to self: do not *ever* get another fricking concussion.

They told me that most of the pain would *probably* go away after a week. After that, I'd experience intermittent pain whenever I overdid it. And by "it" they meant everything you use either your brain or your eyes to do.

But the pain wasn't even the worst part. My clouded thinking was just freaky. Honestly, it felt like being *drunk* all the time. My reaction time was sluggish, and I couldn't always process what people said to me. It frustrated the crap out of me.

And while I'm on a roll here, I'd add that the doctor warned me that I'd feel emotional. *Sure, dude*, I thought. *Whatever*. But an hour later, when I couldn't find the words to explain the Roman History syllabus to my mother, I honestly wanted to smash something. And after I got done feeling enraged, I felt really guilty about getting mad. So guilty that I felt like crying. And I haven't cried for half a decade.

Good times.

My mother had been endlessly patient with me all day. Spending an hour at the doctor's office meant that I'd missed my two morning classes. But after lunch, I made it to the history class. Actually, *we* made it to history class. Mom was going to have to help me with everything for a while, including note taking.

After that, I napped like a toddler while my mother watched. Then Mom read me a couple of chapters of my psychology textbook. When I'd paged through the book to find where I'd left off, the words had seemed to swim on the page.

I could tell you that it didn't freak me out, but I'd be lying.

For dinner, Mom and I went out for sushi. By the time eight o'clock came around, I was headachy and exhausted. My mother went back to her hotel, and I told her I was going to go to bed early.

Instead, I left a message for Rikker. Then I put on a Clapton playlist and

lay down on my bed to wait for him. But even the desk lamp seemed too bright. So I got up to turn it off. When I lay back down in the dark, I listened to every footstep on the stair, hoping it would be him.

“Hey, G,” a voice whispered in the dark. A pair of slightly roughened hands skimmed my face. Then there were kisses dropped on my forehead. Two strong arms pulled me close. I wanted to hug him back, but I was too sleepy. The best I could do was to lean in close and breathe him in.

Rikker.

“I missed you today,” he purred. “And yesterday, too.” He stopped speaking for a moment, then. I think he was listening for a reaction from me. But a head-injured, half-asleep man is no good at returning affection.

“Actually,” he continued as if we were having a real conversation, “you’re all I can think about.”

Those words ought to have been comforting, but there was an edge in his voice that made me nervous.

“See, I know that you and I don’t talk to each other at practice,” he said. “And sometimes that whole setup gets to me. Okay, a lot of the time. But it was weird for me today. You weren’t there at all, and I didn’t like it. I kept thinking of things I wanted to remember to tell you.”

Rikker shifted further onto the bed, fitting me against him.

“So, let’s see,” he said. “Bridger McCaulley came back, but only for the post-season. He’s a little rusty, but I think it’s going to be okay. He has pretty good footspeed. Actually, I think his feet are faster than his hands. If you were awake you could tell me if you think I’m right.”

I pressed my achy head a little closer to his chest, to tell him I agreed. But I don’t think he caught my meaning.

“Big-D was an ass. But I guess I don’t need to tell you that. And apparently Pepé broke up with his Canadian girlfriend *again*, so Bella was all over that. Also, she packed all your gear into a hockey bag. I think it ended up in Coach’s office...”

Rikker trailed off. Maybe he was finishing the conversation inside his own head. But his hand made slow circles on my back, and it felt great.

“This concussion thing sucks,” he said finally. “And I’ve been all depressed about it. I don’t like it that you’re hurting, and I don’t like it that I’m not allowed to help you.”

You’re helping me right now, I wanted to say.

“I’ve been thinking things through,” he said. “See, just like I know you can’t help being gay, I also know that you can’t help being twisted up over it. I never blamed you for that, G. I *get* it.”

That was nice of him to say. But his sad tone made my heart stutter with fear.

“I just don’t know what to *do* with it, though,” he whispered. “I keep spinning my wheels, trying to come up with a solution.”

My eyes, which were still slammed shut, began to burn. I tried to concentrate on the warmth of his body in all the places it touched me — under my cheek, against my shoulder. I knew there would come a day when I didn’t have him anymore. Pretty soon he’d get sick of my bullshit and leave me.

Not yet, I begged him silently. My throat began to burn, too. *I don’t want to be lonely again.*

The silence beat loudly in my ears, echoing with all the words I could not make myself say.

“Maybe we’ll be okay, you know?” he whispered eventually. “Maybe things will get a little easier for us. You should visit me this summer in Vermont. If you made it a long visit, we could work for this apple orchard near Gran’s house. They do blueberries and peaches before the apples are ripe. The pay isn’t bad, and you get to be outside all day. We could go to guerrilla night again, or maybe clubbing in Montreal.”

The sudden change in topic was a little confusing to me, but I liked the sound of this.

“...But if you can only get away for a weekend, or something, I think we should go camping instead. That could be awesome. How does sex beside a campfire sound? Wait... the mosquitoes could be a problem. Maybe sex in a tent, then.” Rikker chuckled to himself.

“Anyway, that’s going to be my happy thought, until you’re better. If your mom is around all the time, I’m not going to get to see you. I know she wouldn’t mind me coming by, but *I’d* mind. I don’t think I can be in this room with you and have to watch what I say all the time. I don’t mind tricking a bunch of homophobic athletes, but I don’t want to lie to your mom, G. She’s always been good to me.”

The silence stretched for a moment, and I could almost hear him struggling with his thoughts.

“Ugh. Okay,” he continued. “Happy thoughts. Vermont. Drive-in

movies. Dancing to bad music with you. As Gran would say, this too shall pass. Although I find myself saying that a lot lately.” He hugged me even tighter. “I’m going to go now, G. So sleep tight. Call me if you can tomorrow. Wait. I can’t believe I just reminded a sleeping person to call me. How ‘bout I call you? Yeah? It’s a plan.”

I found enough muscle control to grin against his shirt.

He set me back down on the pillow. Then I received a single kiss on the lips. It was soft and sweet, and I did my best to return it.

Then I felt him pull away. His footsteps retreated quietly across my room. A crack of painful hallway light infiltrated my dark cave, and then he was gone.

* * *

The next seven days went by very slowly. The Beaumont dean helped Mom rent a discounted hotel room at the college conference center. “I’m not going home until I know you don’t need help,” she said.

Unfortunately, I really did need help. And I hated that.

The all-over headaches began to ease up, becoming intermittent instead of constant. But I still got an odd pain across my brow line, as if someone had pulled a cord that cinched my face too tightly. It came on whenever I focused my eyes on a book for longer than ten minutes.

So Mom did most of the reading. We sat in my room — me on the bed, and her in the desk chair — and she read chapter after chapter to me of developmental psychology and Roman history. She also attended my classes, taking notes for me.

Until you’ve dragged your mom to three lectures a day, you haven’t lived.

By dinnertime, we were always exhausted and rather tired of each other. But we ate together anyway, sometimes putting in a little more reading time after dinner. And then she’d retreat to her hotel room, and I’d lie on my bed doing nothing. I couldn’t even surf the web, because staring at the screen made my head hurt. So I listened to playlist after playlist, tossing a tennis ball over my head and catching it again.

Meanwhile, my hockey team was busy trying to set new records for post-season victories. They beat Providence in the semis, advancing to the conference championship. Rikker had long practices every night. A few times

he stopped by afterwards, but I was pretty much useless by nine o'clock. And usually grumpy. Which made him sort of grumpy too.

It sucked. All of it.

Coach called me to ask me if I wanted to ride the bus to Colgate with the team. "This is your game too, kid. I'd make room for you at the hotel."

"Wow, Coach," I said, feeling a little choked up. "That is such a nice offer." I searched for a reason to say no, though. "I have a doctor's appointment on Friday, and my mom is real eager to see what they say. And she's been so much help to me that I'd feel bad about blowing it off."

"Let me know how that goes, okay? Shoot me an email."

"I'll be watching the game on TV, Coach. Can't wait."

"Hang in there, kid."

Could I have gone to that game? Probably. But I just wasn't ready. It was partly that I still felt like shit all the time. The glare and noise of a jam-packed hockey stadium wouldn't have been easy on me. But that wasn't the whole problem. For the first time ever, I was reluctant to face my teammates. If I walked into the room, they'd look at me and remember that the last time they saw me I was screaming Rikker's name.

A smarter man would talk this over with Rikker, and ask if there had been any further discussion about me. Rikker would probably remind me that that paranoia is one of the many symptoms of concussion. He'd say that I was being ridiculous. That these were my friends. And by the way — who fucking cares what they think?

Well, I did, unfortunately. And I was always going to care. When I walked out of the room, I didn't want them whispering about me. I didn't want anyone to look at me and think *sick*.

Paranoia was a symptom of being Michael Graham.

* * *

The Thursday before Rikker's big game, my mom decided to take the train to Manhattan to have lunch with my sister. "She can only take an hour and a half for lunch," my mom said, rolling her eyes. "But she promised not to check her messages every two minutes during the meal."

We'd just come back from statistics class, and I dumped my backpack on the dorm room floor. "You raised quite the brood, Mom. You're keeping company with either your bitchy daughter or your grumpy, dopey son."

“I love you both equally, all the time,” she winked at me.

“Even during statistics class?” We’d gotten ornery at each other a half hour ago, when she’d had trouble keeping up with the formulas the professor had written on the whiteboard.

Mom tucked her phone into her purse and prepared to leave. “Even then.” She looked at me, her face serious now. “I don’t mind all this, Mikey. I like that I have this extra chance to take care of you for a little while.” She took two steps and hugged me. “You’re still my baby, you know. If my baby needs me to draw the Z and T distributions on graph paper, I’ll do it.”

Oh, man. Watch the concussion patient get emotional. *Again*. I had to swallow hard a few times before I could choke out, “Thanks, Mom.”

She let go of me and went to the door. “I’ll bring you some dinner when I come back. Okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Then she was gone, and I was alone for the first time in a week.

I sat down on my bed and pulled out my phone. Rikker answered on the first ring. “*Hola, Miguel*,” he said. “How’s the head?”

“Not bad,” I said. “What are you doing right now?”

“*Voy a la clase de Español.*”

“Okay. What about after that?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Well, Mom went to the city to hang out with Lori,” I said, feeling excited for something for the first time in a week. “Come over. I’ll get us some lunch.”

“That’s cool. I could pick something up,” Rikker offered.

“No, I got it. What else am I going to do with the next hour? It’s really boring to be me.” I still couldn’t read, and if I looked at a screen for more than a couple of minutes, I got a headache. I wasn’t even supposed to exercise much. Having a concussion made me into a waste of space.

“Okay. I’ll be there. I don’t have practice today, either.”

“Really?”

“Really. Coach gave us the day off. He says he wants us rested for tomorrow night.”

“I can help with that. All I do is rest.”

“You’re hired. See you in an hour.”

I bought meatball subs for lunch, because I remembered that Rikker had

always loved those back in Michigan. (In Connecticut, though, subs are called “grinders” for some reason.)

Rikker came through the door whistling at a quarter past twelve. We clobbered our lunch while Rikker caught me up on the hockey gossip. Coach had Trevi playing defense. And Pepé the French kid? We all knew that his surname name was Gerault, because it said so on his jersey. “The revelation this week? His *real* first name is actually Pepé.”

“No shit!” I laughed. “I thought it was just a joke.”

“I know, right?” Rikker wadded up his sandwich wrapper and tossed it into my trash bin.

“Two points,” I said automatically. Then I yawned.

“Do you need to sleep?” Rikker asked.

“Not necessarily,” I said, because I didn’t want him to go. Though I’d already complained to him how weird it was that I couldn’t make it through the afternoon without a nap.

“You look beat,” he said. “Lie down, G. I could use a nap too.”

I didn’t know if that was true. But if I didn’t close my eyes for a little while, I’d only get a headache. So I set the alarm on my phone for three o’clock, just in case. The train ride back from New York took an hour and forty-five minutes. My mom couldn’t possibly walk through the door before three or three-thirty.

Then I lay down on my bed, and Rikker kicked off his shoes. We’d never napped together. In fact, he’d never been to my room like this, in the middle of the day. This was all brand new territory.

Rikker stretched out beside me, and then opened his arms. I went willingly, resting my head on his shoulder, wrapping an arm around his waist. He kissed the top of my head. And then, as if one just wasn’t enough, he did it again. And that made me irrationally happy. I’d had one of the shittiest weeks of my life. But with Rikker pressed warm and solid against me, none of it mattered.

And here was another first — I’d never lain beside Rikker before without turning into an instant horn dog. But today I fell right to sleep.

Two hours later, I awoke in a panic to the sound of my room door opening. Startled, I sat up fast, spasming into damage-control mode. Even asleep, I was worried about being busted napping with Rikker.

But it was Rikker himself who came through the door. “Easy, tiger,” he said. “It’s just me.” He carried two paper coffee cups, one stacked on top of

the other, balanced with his chin.

Taking a slow breath, I willed by heart rate back into the normal range. “Did you sleep?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

“Sure did. Just not as long as you. I brought you a double cappuccino. Hope you like it.”

“Thanks.” I took the cup from him, cracked the little sipping window and tasted it. “Wow.” It was milky and fantastic. So I removed the lid entirely and took a big gulp. “I guess the Italians know a thing or two about coffee.”

Rikker eyed me over the top of his own cup. “You never order these?”

I shook my head, struck by two things. In the first place, it was depressing that my own boyfriend didn’t know how I drank my coffee. When you only see someone in the dark of night, these are the little details that go missing. We had the relationship of a pair of vampires.

Even worse, I’d made it to age twenty-one without ordering a cappuccino. Because at some point during my ignorant youth, I’d heard somebody say that it was a girly drink. And I’d crossed cappuccinos off the list without a second thought. That’s how I’d always done it. There were a *thousand* little decisions I made in service to hiding something big. All my clothes were blue or gray or black. (Except my hockey jacket. And there could hardly be a manlier piece of clothing.) My backpack was a plain color. My bedspread was regulation navy blue. I lived by a weird, self-imposed aesthetic, focused on never appearing gay.

The result? Not only did Rikker not know my taste in coffee, I didn’t either.

Rikker made himself comfortable on my beanbag chair, and sipped his coffee. “How are you feeling?”

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. “Today I feel a little better. Finally.”

“Glad to hear it,” he said, kicking off his shoes. “What were you supposed to read next? I’ll take a shift, if you want.”

I swirled my excellent coffee, so that none of the foam would be left behind in the cup. “My mom would be pumped if you read a couple chapters of Roman history. She hates that book.”

“Pass it over,” he said.

With his feet propped up into my lap, he read to me for over an hour. Listening to the rough, warm sound of his voice, I felt happier than I’d been in a week. I’d needed this — a few casual hours with him. Just having Rikker

in the room with me was like medicine.

Unfortunately for him, Mom was right — Rikker was reading from the least interesting book on earth. Eventually he let it fall into his lap. “*Fuck, G. Aren’t there any naughty bits in here?*” He’d just read another stifling paragraph about Roman wall painting. “Can we skip to the part about the orgies?”

“I wish.”

“I’m pretty sure the Romans liked to get it on. What chapter is that?”

Pulling one of his feet into my hands, I gave the arch a squeeze.

He closed his eyes. “Do that again,” he demanded. Rikker was kind of a sensualist. He liked to be touched, even if it wasn’t sexual.

Maybe I’d be a sensualist too, if I weren’t so goddamn uptight.

I massaged both of his feet. And after a time, he picked the book up again and kept reading. I did a decent job of paying attention, closing my eyes to try to picture the ancient buildings that Rikker described. I didn’t think anything of it when he removed his feet from my lap mid-paragraph. He kept reading, though, as my room door opened and my mother walked in.

“...in contrast to the three-dimensional Second Style. Yada yada yada,” he finished. “Hi, Mrs. G!”

“Johnny Rikker!” she said, walking over to kiss him on the cheek, before doing the same to me. She was holding a bag from the Chinese restaurant. “Have you eaten dinner?”

“Actually, I’m on my way to the dining hall,” he said, standing up to stuff his feet into his shoes. “My Spanish class has a language table once a week. And thanks to hockey, I’m usually a no-show.”

I hoped to God that Rikker was telling the truth about his dinner plans. Because I suspected that he ate alone a lot of the time. Apart from his peculiar relationship with me, and the rest of his somewhat-friendly teammates, he didn’t have a social life.

Rikker pulled on his jacket. He’d just spent five hours with me, and I still had to stop myself from begging him not to go.

“Thanks for taking a shift with the history book,” Mom called after him as he went the door. “The psych class has been fun, but that one is killing me.”

“Yeah? I’m going to borrow that book next time I can’t fall asleep.”

Laughing, Mom wished him a good night. After the door closed on Rikker, she opened the bag of Chinese food on the desk. “What a good friend

he is to you,” she said, pulling out a white cardboard container.

That was the moment when I was supposed to say, “yeah,” and then change the subject, like I always did. But just then, my head gave a lurch of pain. Because it just felt so *wrong*. Every time I ducked the truth, it was like betraying Rikker all over again. Not to be dramatic, but I kept thinking about Peter’s denial of Jesus. Except I was worse than Peter. Instead of denying Rikker three times, I denied him every fricking day.

I put my hands to my temples.

“Michael?” my mother asked. “What’s wrong?”

I was too caught up in my own misery to answer her.

Worried, Mom abandoned the take-out order to come over to me. She sat beside me on the bed and cupped two hands under my chin. “What is it?”

I’d finally reached the point where I didn’t want to lie anymore. But I wasn’t capable of speaking the truth, either. So I was just stuck there, the words choking me.

“Sweetie, please. You’re scaring me.”

“He’s not...” My voice cracked.

She held me a little tighter. “He’s not *what*, Sweetie?”

I wasn’t making any sense, and I knew it. It’s just that I wasn’t sure I could do any better. Not with the hot, crackling ball of fear lodged in my throat. “He’s not...” I gasped the last part out, “*just my friend*.”

For a second, nothing happened. I waited for my world to cleave in two, like the San Andreas fault. I’d spent my entire life trying to choke it all back. But I just couldn’t stand it anymore. I’d had *enough*. But that didn’t mean I was ready to face the consequences.

My mother didn’t breathe for a long time. And when she finally did, it was in one great gust. “Michael,” she gasped. Her eyes began to fill with tears. “How long have you held that in?”

“So damn long,” I said immediately.

“Oh, Sweetie,” she said, pulling me to her. “My poor boy. So hard on yourself.”

And then I just couldn’t hang on anymore. I leaned into her shoulder, and a giant sob came heaving out of my chest.

“Shh,” she said, rocking me. “Shh.”

But I’d kept it bottled up for so long that I couldn’t stop. Another sob followed the first one, and then another after that. There was just no containing that flood. I cried until I couldn’t breathe, just like a kindergartner.

I think Mom cried too. And when I finally began to calm down, my head balanced in my own hands, my breath stuttering, she got up to find tissues for both of us. I felt her sit down beside me again. “You are all the son I’ve ever wanted,” she said in a shaking voice. “Please don’t think you could disappoint me with this.”

“Dad,” I choked out. It was just a single word, but it was a big one.

“He may not be as surprised as you think,” she said quietly.

I raised my eyes to her red ones. But I couldn’t even make myself ask why. I wasn’t any good at this.

“When John moved away, you barely came out of your room for months,” she said. “And that’s what heartbreak looks like. We were both worried about you. At the time, we wondered.”

Holy shit. I never saw that coming.

“Your father loves you,” she said. But then there was a pause. “I’m not saying that he won’t struggle. He’s going to have to adjust his... vision for your future.”

I could feel how much effort it took her to avoid using the word “expectations” in that sentence. And that’s just what I’d always feared — becoming second best in everyone’s eyes.

“...But your father loves you. So much, Sweetie. He will always be proud of you. Always.”

“I don’t want to tell him,” I said.

Mom studied me. “But how does *not* telling him feel?”

“Awful.”

She gave me a watery smile. “Rock, meet hard place.”

“We are already acquainted.”

At that, my mother actually laughed. “Oh, Mikey. Just *breathe*. It’s okay. Everything is okay.”

It wasn’t, actually. But telling her hadn’t killed me. At least I had that. I still didn’t want to be... that way. I didn’t want people to see me as a stereotype. Faggot. Queen. Fairy. I didn’t feel like any of those things, and I didn’t want to be called those names. I just wanted to be Michael Graham. It’s just that Michael Graham was attracted to men. And always had been.

By then, I’d had just about as much drama tonight as I could take. “Can we eat Chinese food now?” I was completely wrung out. Eating would be better than more talking.

Mom looked at the food on the desk as if she’d never seen it before. “I

guess we can.” She fixed the plates, and I turned on the evening news. Though I’m pretty sure neither of us heard a single word of it. We were both lost inside our own heads.

Eventually we gave up on the food. When I came back into the room after throwing the cartons away, mom hit me with the question that I’d been avoiding for more than five years.

“What happened to Johnny back in Michigan?”

My eyes burned again just from thinking about it. “I can’t talk about that tonight.”

She looked so sad. “You blame yourself.”

“I have reasons.”

I watched her struggle with her desire to press me on it. “His parents weren’t good to him when it happened, were they?”

I shook my head.

She pinched the bridge of her nose with two fingers. “Please tell me that you didn’t think we’d send you away like that? Like they did to him?”

“Aw, no Mom! His parents are assholes.”

She smiled at me, but she looked pained. “Sending you to that Christian school was a mistake, wasn’t it? I can only imagine what they preached about...” she swallowed.

Shit. Now Mom was sitting here, blaming herself for my troubles. And that made no sense at all. “This isn’t the school’s fault,” I told her. *Though it didn’t help.*

“We only sent you there because the public school was struggling.”

“I know, Mom. It’s okay.”

“If it was okay, you wouldn’t have waited years to say anything.”

“That’s on me,” I said. “*All on me.*” But it was finally dawning on me that keeping secrets hurt people. I already knew that it hurt Rikker. I saw it in his eyes every day. But it hadn’t occurred to me that my parents deserved to know the important things in my heart. They were honest with me, and I hadn’t given them the benefit of the doubt.

Looking at my mom’s face right then, I saw a lot of hurt. And here’s the crazy thing — I knew without a doubt that her sadness had nothing to do with the fact that Rikker was my boyfriend. And it had *everything* to do with my not telling her sooner. “I wish I’d said something before.” Not that I’d ever had the urge to. But I was beginning to understand why she deserved it.

“Me too,” she said, pulling me into another hug. “But I’m glad you told

me now.”

My phone buzzed with a text, and after I untangled myself from Mom, I checked it. It was Rikker saying he’d left his Spanish book next to my bed, and asking if he could come over later. I told him yes, without giving any other details. Man, he wasn’t going to *believe* what I’d done tonight.

For a little while, Mom read me some more Roman history. But both of us were too exhausted to take it in.

“I might go to the hotel,” my mother said on a yawn. “Unless you don’t want to be alone.”

“I’m good,” I said. *And I won’t be alone.* This was going to get weirder before it got easier.

She closed the book, grabbing my face in two hands. “Mikey, are you sure you’re okay right now? Would you tell me if you weren’t?”

“Yeah, Mom. I’m tired, too. But I’m okay. Are you going to talk to Dad?”

She hesitated. “He’ll probably call. What am I allowed to say?”

I just shrugged. “I’m not going to call him myself right now. I’m too exhausted. You can say something or not. Whatever seems right.” I didn’t want her to have to do my work for me. But I couldn’t ask Mom to lie, either.

She squeezed my arm. “Try to get some rest.”

“I will.”

She hugged me one more time. Hard. And then she was gone.

— *Rikker*

I’d texted Graham earlier asking if I could come by later. He had replied immediately. *Was hoping U would.*

Well, shit. That made me feel like a million bucks. *Awesome. I’ll txt b4 I come up.*

After I did some studying in my room, I threw on my hockey jacket, patting my travel toothbrush to be sure it was still in the pocket. Graham wasn’t the sort of lover with whom you could take the liberty of leaving your toothbrush in his toiletry tray. He’d develop some wild theory about what the neighbor might think if he saw two blue toothbrushes together, or some shit. So I packed mine in and out with me, the way you handle refuse on the Appalachian Trail.

Walking over to Beaumont House, another student was exiting the iron gates just as I arrived. So I had no trouble getting in. I stopped there on the

flagstone path, and pulled out my phone to text Graham.

“*Mister Rikker,*” came a voice in the dark.

I looked up to see Graham’s mom walking toward me. Well, crap. Graham wasn’t going to be happy about the fact that I’d run into her here. “Hi, Mrs. G,” I said as casually as possible. I shoved my phone into my pocket, like the guilty man that I was.

She marched up to me and threw her arms around my neck. Then she kissed me on the cheek. “I love you. Always have. Always will. No matter what.”

Then, as I stood there, speechless, she let go. Without another word, she walked away into the night. I still hadn’t moved a minute later when I heard the iron gate open and shut again as she left the Beaumont courtyard for the street outside.

Okay...

Collecting myself, I walked to Graham’s entryway, following another student inside. Taking the stairs two at a time, I opened Graham’s door without knocking. Inside, it was dark except for the desk lamp, lonely in its corner. Graham was lying on his back on the big bed, his arms out in submission, like Christ on the cross.

“Hola, Miguel.” Kicking off my shoes, I crawled onto the bed beside him, looking down at him from hands and knees. His eyes were red and swollen. “What happened here tonight? I just got hug-mugged by your mother in the courtyard.”

He reached up to catch the back of my head in one of his big hands. Guiding me down onto his chest, he said, “I guess you don’t need to text before you come up anymore.”

“I see,” I said, snuggling up to him. Although I didn’t, really. Did Graham actually *tell* his mother? That seemed categorically impossible.

“She’s taking notes for three courses for me. She read four hundred pages to me this week,” he said.

“Yeah?” I whispered, hoping that he’d keep talking. Graham’s arm looped around me, his fingers swishing through my hair. I leaned in, wanting this unbidden affection from him almost as badly as I wanted to find out what had happened.

“Just couldn’t lie anymore,” he whispered. “Not to *her*,” he amended quickly, as if I were dumb enough to think that he could ever really go public about us.

“That’s big,” I said. Because it really, really was.

He only grunted. But he pulled me closer, too. He buried his face in my hair and took a big breath. His fingers traveled the length of my back. Skimming. Caressing. Graham wasn’t always so affectionate, and I was a slut for it. I burrowed into him. *Hug me. Rub me more*, my body language said. And he did. Maybe he felt he’d earned the right to hold me, somehow. I knew how hard it must have been for him to be honest with his mom.

We lay there a long time, just cuddling. I never wanted it to end. “Rub my head?” he asked eventually.

“Which one?” I joked. But I pushed myself up on the pillow, pulling my big, golden boy onto my chest. And I massaged his scalp with my fingertips, applying gentle force to the skin and muscle under my hands.

“Mmm,” he said. “Cómo fue tu mesa de Español?” *How was your Spanish table?*

“Muy bien,” I told him. Then I asked the question I’d been dying to ask for the past hour. “Qué dice tu madre?” *What did you mother say?*

He groaned into my chest. “What did she say to you?”

I had to swallow hard before repeating it. Because the words were ones that my *own* mother would never, ever say to me. “She said that she loves me no matter what.”

“Lo mismo para mi,” he whispered. *The same for me.*

I traced a few more circles into his scalp. “I know you believe her. But I know that it’s still hard.”

“The rest of my family...” his words were muffled by my shirt. “Ugh. I don’t want to be talked about.”

“I know you don’t.”

“I don’t want them to look at me funny.”

“I know.”

He slid his fingers under the hem of my shirt, his rough hands finding the tender skin on my belly. “I’m a fucking coward.”

My own hands slid down his body then, fingertips breeching the waistline of his sweatpants. “Mmm... did someone say ‘fucking?’”

Chuckling, he hiked himself up, fitting his hips against mine. The weight of his body on top of me made me deliriously happy. “Pretty stupid of me to come out to my mom when I can’t even do the things I’m confessing to.”

I groaned, wriggling underneath his hard body. “Maybe the doctors are

wrong about this. I'm sure we can do it without smacking your skull into anything."

"It's about *exertion*," he said. "This, like, hundred-year-old doctor told me that orgasm would bring on a killer headache. He didn't say anything about *giving* blowjobs, though."

Just hearing the *word* made me hard. And when Graham's hands began to work my fly open, I let loose a moan which told him exactly how much I liked the idea. He started by teasing me — leaning down to drop light kisses in all the best places. "I don't think exertion is going to be a problem, here," I panted. We hadn't had sex in ten days. I was going to blow like a land mine if he ever got around to taking me deep.

Graham's warm breath ghosted over me, and I held my breath.

And then his phone rang.

He tried to ignore it. He really did. He took me in hand as the ringing ceased, and I received a few happy strokes. But the damned phone rang again, and I could feel just how much it put him on edge, especially with everything that had gone down tonight.

Shit.

I put my hands on his shoulders. "I think you need to check that."

With a sigh, Graham slid off of me, grabbing his phone off the desk. The blue light from the phone's screen illuminated his wince. "My father." Then he looked at me on the bed, with my throbbing dick hanging out, and he actually began to laugh.

Smiling back at him, I sat up, tucking everything back into my jeans. "You're going to have to talk to him."

The phone was silent again. "I know," he said, laughing, sounding a little manic. "God, I don't want to."

"Just do it," I told him. "Rip that bandage off."

He sat down in the desk chair, looking at the phone as if it would lash out and attack him. "Shit."

"Dial," I ordered.

With a sigh, he tapped the screen.

"I'm going to brush my teeth," I told him. Then I went for the door.

"Hi," poor Graham said into the phone as I turned the knob. "I'm okay, I guess." His voice shook.

I left him alone then, taking my time in the deserted bathroom. When I'd run out of reasons to stand around in there, I opened Graham's door

again, prepared to leave if he was still on the phone. But he wasn't. He was just sitting on the edge of the bed now, his head in his hands. And even though I was pretty sure that both Graham's parents were as solid as they come, the defeated slump of his shoulders gave me a shiver of uncertainty.

Tiptoeing inside, I closed the door behind me. Then I went over to Graham, gingerly, the way one approaches a potentially rabid beast. He didn't look up. And I realized that he was crying.

That gave me a moment's hesitation. Because sometimes a man just needs to shed a few tears in private. But Graham leaned then, until his forehead made contact with my hip. I put a hand to the back of his neck, just holding him. "Is he shaken up?" I asked. Because even if Graham's dad didn't manage to say the right thing, it couldn't possibly be permanent. There's no way that Mr. Graham would adopt the Rikker Family School of Parenting.

"Not sure," Graham sniffed. "But I am."

Aw, Christ. I sat down beside him then and pulled him into my arms. "Did he say the right things?"

"All of 'em. Not sure I deserve him. *Them.*"

"Huh," I said. "Then maybe you deserve your sister? Because she's kind of a bitch."

He tried to laugh, but it came out as a sob. "My head is fucking killing me."

"How bad?"

"A solid seven."

"You want a couple of pills?"

"Yup."

I got him the painkillers and a fresh glass of water. Then I removed his socks and sweats, and tucked him into bed. Stripping down to my boxers, I climbed in after him. Graham scooted backwards, fitting his back against my chest. I dropped my arm over his body, and a kiss on the back of his neck.

"I might not be worth the trouble," he mumbled.

I stroked my hand across his belly, dragging my thumb through the fine hair of his happy trail. "I know you feel like shit right now," I said. "But you've got nowhere to go but up."

"Hope so." He was quiet for a few minutes, and I thought he'd fallen asleep. "Rik?" he said, surprising me.

"Yeah?"

“Love you. Always have.”

I was so stunned that I couldn't do anything for a moment except lie there and replay the sound of his words in my head. Then I laughed. “*Fuck, G. You might even be worth the trouble.*” I hugged him a little tighter. “You're the second person to say that to me tonight, though. Your mom beat you to it.”

“You'll have to let her down easy,” he said.

I grinned into my boyfriend's neck, and then I held him while we both fell asleep.

— *Graham*

Saturday night, Mom and I watched the hockey game on a big screen TV in the lobby of the college conference center where she was staying.

It was trippy, watching my team on television, knowing that I ought to be there with them. The helplessness was almost unbearable. I'd never been more nervous for a game in my entire life.

The first period was non-scoring, and I almost lost my mind. But Rikker shot one between the goalie's legs early in the second period, and Mom and I laughed and cheered like a couple of lunatics. But then Colgate followed up with a goal of their own. And I was back to being a nervous wreck for the rest of the second period and part of the third.

Finally, a freshman D-man (A freshman! A defensive player!) scored with an assist from Hartley. And the other team never got its mojo back. By the time the buzzer rang, I was hoarse from yelling at the screen.

Mom flopped back against the sofa. “That was exhausting. When is the next game? I'm going to need to prepare myself.”

“In a week,” I said. “There are two ACAA Eastern Seaboard elimination games. If we're still standing after that, it's off to the Frozen Four.”

How crazy was that?

After saying goodnight to Mom, I headed back to Beaumont, dialing Rikker as I walked. Since he was in a loud, joyous locker room somewhere, my call went to voicemail. I left him a message, telling him how awesome it was that he'd scored that goal, and how badly I missed him.

The last block back to Beaumont was the loneliest of my life. And Rikker must not have gotten my message until late. Or else he wasn't alone. Because he didn't call back.

The next day had me feeling pretty stir-crazy. After spending way too many hours trying to get me ready for the history midterm, Mom and I were annoyed with each other. We'd just come back from a bite out at the sushi place. I'm sure she would have left me alone for the evening already, except she'd left her book in my room. "And that's what I usually do after I read to you all day," she said. "Read some more."

"I'm sorry, Ma," I said. It didn't sound like fun for her either.

She just smiled. "I know we've had a couple of tough weeks, and that your head still aches. But a couple of years from now I'm going to look back on this time like a gift. When your kids grow up, they don't need you anymore. I don't mind a bit of drudgery for one more shot at helping you."

At that, I felt myself tearing up again. Oh, the joys of concussion. Everything made me either mad or turned me into a total pussy.

I turned on my TV, sifting for a hockey game. Although I'd settle for basketball if necessary. Mom was gathering her things when somebody knocked.

"It's open," I said.

Rikker came in the door. "Hey G. Hi, Mrs. G."

"Johnny! Congratulations!" My mom ran over to hug him.

I stayed put, of course. It's not that I didn't want a hug. But there wasn't going to be any kind of PDA in front of my mom. Ever.

"You look tired, honey," Mom said to Rikker.

He grinned. "Well, ouch. But you look fabulous."

She ruffled his hair. "Tell your coach that he has to keep to the twenty hour rule, even during the post-season."

"I will fire off that memo first thing," he said, his dimple showing. "But before I do, I came to drag your son off to Capri's for a couple of hours."

"I don't think so," I said quickly.

Rikker crossed the room and took the remote out of my hand. He muted the TV and crossed his arms. "I know you feel like crap every night. But getting out of here might do you some good."

"Maybe another time."

He put my remote in his back pocket. "It will be quiet there tonight. Sunday night and all. Seems perfect to me."

I lunged, but he anticipated me, weaving to the side well before I could get to him. And I wasn't willing to tackle my boyfriend in front of my

mother.

“You should go, Mikey,” she said gently. “Johnny is right.”

Great. Now the Mom-guilt was kicking in. “Naw. You go ahead, Rik.”

His face got serious, and he sat down on my desk chair. “Come on, G. I’ll make a deal with you. *You* go to Capri’s, and I’ll stay away tonight. God knows I see enough of that place.”

Way to make me feel like a total asshole. And I could feel my mother watching us, wondering why he would offer to do that. “That’s not cool, Rik.” I mumbled. “It’s your celebration.”

“And yours.”

I shook my head.

“Your friends are going to wonder why you’re ducking them. I mean, they’re playing for the Eastern cup next week. Show your face.”

Ugh. I couldn’t even look up at my mom. She just stood there, silent, listening to Rikker and I have this disagreement. Walking into Capri’s with Rikker at my side wasn’t something I wanted to do. But I couldn’t ask him to stay away from the we-just-clinched-the-conference party, either. I was a jackass. But I wasn’t *that* big of a jackass.

“We’ll both go,” I said finally.

Rikker’s smile lit up his whole face. “Get your jacket.”

I’m not proud of the way that I broke into the cold sweats as Rikker pushed the door open and stepped inside. Daft Punk was playing on the sound system, but the beat was drowned out by one of the Capri brothers’ voices calling “pie number thirty-seven!” over the intercom.

I don’t know what I was expecting, exactly. But the room did not go absolutely silent when Rikker and I walked into that place together. Nobody turned to point and stare. The ground did not drop out from under my feet and swallow me up.

Rikker was on to me, of course. He knew me too well. So, after we passed the pizza counter, he paused in the doorway to our usual room to talk to Orson. Without a glance in my direction, he let me pass by, working my way toward the three or four tables the hockey team had commandeered.

“Hey!” Hartley crowed. “Does anybody recognize this guy? He looks vaguely familiar.”

“He needs a glass,” someone said.

There was an open seat at Bridger McCaulley’s table, and so I slid in

next to his eight-year-old sister, Lucy. “Hi there,” I said to her.

“Hi Graham. I thought you were hurt.” Her freckled face tilted up toward mine, her eyes scanning me for injuries.

“My head was injured, and it’s not done healing,” I told her. “Still hurts.”

“Looks the same, though,” she said, setting down the crust of her pizza.

“Good to know,” I told her, and Bridger laughed.

Someone poured me a beer, and I relaxed a little bit. How many times had I sat here like this, listening to the evening’s latest smack talk? A hundred? Two hundred? I’d missed this. I sipped my beer, soaking up the sound of my teammates’ arguments and laughter.

Bridger and Lucy went home, but Bella took the empty seat instead. “Hi, Sweetie,” she said, teasing a straw wrapper around her finger. “You look a little better than the last time I saw you.”

I fiddled with my beer glass. “That’s because the last time you saw me was not so recently.”

She popped a hand under her chin. “Your mom is here.”

“So?”

Her green eyes rose to meet mine. But her voice dropped so low I could barely hear her. “It’s hard for me, okay?” It was just five words. But they said a lot.

“I’m sorry,” I told her. And it was the truth. I’d basically lost my best friend, and there was nothing to be done about it. I’d spent whole years of my life wishing that I could be attracted to Bella, or any other girl. But it just wasn’t there.

Still, I wanted to explain myself. “The reason we stopped...” I cleared my throat.

“...*Fucking*,” Bella prompted.

I sighed. “The reason we stopped, is because I was a mess.”

Her eyes grew shiny. “And you knew I was hung up on you?”

I gave my head such a hard shake that it actually hurt. “No. I didn’t know that at all. But I cared about you. You’re just about my favorite person at Harkness. And even though I kept hoping I could change, I didn’t want to keep dragging you through my little charade.”

Her eyes dropped to the tabletop. “I was pretty far gone already.”

I covered both her hands with mine, and squeezed. “Seriously, Bella. If I was into girls, you’d be the only one for me.”

“Don’t make me cry, you dick,” she said, wrestling a hand from mine to wipe her eyes. But she gave me a shaky smile then.

“Fine,” I told her. “But come over here and sit next to me. For old times’ sake.”

Wearing a grudging expression, Bella maneuvered around the table to sit next to me. And then the other side of the booth was taken up by Pepé and Frenchie, who told us a story about getting locked out of their hotel room at Colgate.

I didn’t say much all night. The music made my head hurt, and I nursed my beer like somebody’s grandmother. You wouldn’t know it to look at me, but I was happy just sitting there letting the game stats and the smack talk roll over me. Rikker was right that I’d been ducking this. I’d been afraid to look my teammates in the face, because I didn’t know what would look back at me.

But I did it, and nobody died. There were a few curious glances coming my way. But it was hard to say whether those were the result of speculation about my head injury or speculation about my sex life.

Rikker stayed away from me, which was easy enough to do when there were three-dozen people in the mix. I caught him glancing at me once, probably checking to make sure that I was doing all right. Busted, he actually winked and then turned back to the conversation he was having with Trevi.

I watched Rikker for a while then, forgetting to care whether anyone saw. The easy set of his muscular shoulders was something I always noticed about him. He moved like a man who was comfortable in his body. And that didn’t change whether he was walking naked across the bedroom toward me, or standing in a bar with his teammates. I was attracted to it, and I envied it. All at the same time.

Tonight it was almost possible to be all the parts of me at once. The part that loved Rikker, and the part that insisted on being the same old Michael Graham.

I started to get really drowsy around ten, so I said my goodbyes. Then I walked outside and texted Rikker. *I’m out front. Wait 4 U or go home?*

A minute later, he answered me by coming out the front door. We both said “hey,” at exactly the same time.

Rikker grinned. “The jinx machine is out of order. Please put in another quarter.” Turning toward College Street, we headed into the night. “Was it okay?” he asked.

“Absolutely.” Then, after verifying that we were alone, I grabbed his hand. Bringing it up to my lips, I kissed his knuckles before dropping his hand again. “Thank you,” I said, my voice rough.

“No sweat.” I couldn’t tell from his voice, but I’d probably stunned him with even that miserly show of affection.

When we approached the turnoff to Bank Street, and Rikker’s dorm, I went even further. “Come home with me?”

He followed, wordlessly. Before, I’d never said it out loud. And we’d never walked into Beaumont together.

I hoped he knew that I was trying.

We were both awfully quiet on the way back to my room. I opened the door, and he stepped inside. Once it was closed and locked behind us, I put my arms around him. For a long minute we just stood there, holding each other.

“You were brave tonight,” he whispered.

“Brave is driving a tank in Afghanistan,” I argued quietly. “Brave is stealing the puck from a Red Wings defenseman.”

He chuckled into my ear. “Kiss me, moron.”

Pushing him back against the door, I did what he asked. Lowering my mouth onto his willing one, I kept it soft, kissing him slowly. He was eager, opening up for me, inviting me in. Our tongues tangled together, and he made a needy noise in the back of his throat.

But I receded, gentling the kiss, slowing it down again. Whenever we had sex, I was always the desperate, greedy one. Tonight I wanted to give him something else. Something sweet. I let my hands wander his ass while we kissed. And pretty soon I had him growling into my mouth, his hips pressing into mine.

“Let’s have you in my bed,” I demanded.

“Now who’s bossy?” he panted. As he crossed the room, Rikker stripped off his jacket and his T-shirt.

I watched with greedy eyes. Every since I could remember wanting anyone, I’d wanted him. I never had a choice in the matter. There was never a moment when I said, “okay, I’ve decided to choose Rikker over the entire female population.” In fact, I’d wasted a whole lot of time trying not to want him. But the desire I carried for him came from someplace deep. When his hands moved down to unzip his fly, I watched the muscles flex in his back. And I wanted to run my fingers over everything I saw.

My desire for him was there whether I wanted it or not. And if I could figure out how to just own up to it, maybe I could get some peace.

Naked, Rikker climbed onto my bed. He propped his head on an arm and waited for me to follow.

So I shook off my reverie and began shedding clothes. The jacket fell by the door. The t-shirt was next. He watched me with the same hungry expression that I probably wore. I don't know what I ever did to deserve it, either.

I dropped my jeans and boxers in one go. Rikker licked his lips, then. And *man* did that light me up. It was all I could do to keep calm. Instead of throwing myself at him, I slid onto the bed, gave his shoulder a nudge and pushed Rik onto his back. He reached up to put his arms around me, but I took his wrists in my hands and pinned them to the bed. "Just hold still," I whispered.

His hips twitched beneath me. "If you insist."

"I do." Dropping my head into his neck, I kissed the path his evening whiskers had made. The scrape of his stubble against my lips was a turn-on. There was really no way I could ever go back to sleeping with women, and pretending to like it. I had a pang of remorse for the girls I'd talked into my bed these past few years. They didn't know that they had bit parts in the melodrama of my sexual confusion.

But my desire for Rikker was as clear as the day was long. His hard body beneath my hips was everything I wanted. Following the dark outline of his happy trail down his chest, I released his wrists. Kissing lower, I paused to lay my face on his flat belly. I just paused there, nuzzling him. With one hand, I traced the skin from his rib cage down past his hipbone. *Mine*, I thought. It wasn't often that I allowed myself to think possessive thoughts about him. I didn't deserve to. Tonight, at least, I had him all to myself.

"Mmm," he said, running a hand over my hair. A couple of inches from my face, his cock stood at attention. I stuck out my tongue, just grazing the tip of it, and his stomach tightened beneath me as I heard him sucking in air.

I inched closer, just teasing him with glancing kisses. Each touch bought me another gasp or twitch of anticipation.

After making him suffer for a minute or two, I picked my head up, opened my mouth and sucked him down.

"Oh baby, yes," he panted. He tried to arch off the bed, but I wasn't having it. Just for fun, I pinned his hips down and worked him at my own

speed. And my speed was slow. I took long, loving strokes, swirling my tongue around the head of him. “Ahhhh,” he moaned, and it turned into a chuckle. He rose up on his elbows for a better view.

Holding his eyes, I sucked him down again. “You’re killing me, and you like it,” he complained.

“Mmmmm hmmm,” I hummed around him.

“Arrrgh,” he panted, dropping his head backward.

Releasing him, I let up on his hips. “So give it to me,” I ordered.

He didn’t wait for another invitation. Rikker jacked his hips up off the bed, pumping into my mouth. Happier than I’d been in weeks, I made my boyfriend lose his mind.

Afterward, there was a lot more kissing, and a lot of holding each other. I was feeling pleased with myself, and Rikker was pretty pleased with me. So I asked him a question that had been on my mind many times before. “Rik?”

“Yeah?” he said, sucking on my ear lobe.

“Would you ever let me top you?”

“Sure,” he said, kissing my neck.

The quick answer surprised me. I rose up to look at him. “Really?”

His brown eyes were soft and lazy. “All you have to do is ask, G. There’s almost nothing I wouldn’t give you if you asked.”

All that generosity made me feel like a heel. “Don’t know why you should,” I muttered, dropping back onto the pillow we were sharing.

But now it was his turn to pull back and take a look at me. “You’ve got to stop with that,” he said, his voice low and serious.

“With what?”

“You know what I mean. With always beating yourself up over the past. Something happened a long time ago that you regret. And you’re still dragging that around with you. Set that shit down, man.”

I sighed. It sounded nice the way he put it. But it wasn’t just one bad decision I’d made. I had a perfect record for torturing all the people who loved me. Including him. *Especially* him.

“I’m not kidding,” Rikker pressed. “You keep that up, and it won’t work out between us.”

My heart squeezed with fear. “Why not?” I didn’t like the plaintive sound of my voice. So vulnerable.

“Because you’ll wreck it. You have to be able to say what you need,

just like I do. It doesn't work any other way. I don't want to always have to guess what you want from me."

"That shit that happened five years ago..."

"Six," Rikker corrected.

"Five, six, whatever. It doesn't matter if I let it go, because that's not the only problem."

"What is, then?"

Damn. It. See, one of the benefits of never, ever having a girlfriend was that I never had to Talk About the Relationship. Guys in the locker room always got super pissy whenever the Big Conversations happened. And now I was having one of those too, and I didn't even have a clue how to do it.

I cleared my throat. "Okay, you're only going to leave me, eventually. Because I can't be like you. I can't be *out*. I can't talk to a reporter, or tell Big-D to go fuck himself. So when you finally get sick of being with a guy who won't even make eye contact in the locker room, I'm history anyway. I know this. So how in the hell do you expect me to stop feeling *bad* about that shit? It's bad, and if I pretend it isn't, that's a lie."

After a beat, Rikker put both hands over his eyes. "I don't even know where to start with all that."

"You don't have to start anywhere. I didn't want to talk about it in the first place. But all those things are true. And I don't have a clue why you're still here."

His hands slid up to his forehead, revealing his eyes. "You don't?"

I shook my head, which had just begun to throb.

With a look of utter exasperation, he sat up. "Because I *love* you, you stupid fuck. And I always have. It's not always so convenient, loving you. But when you climb out of that thick blond head of yours for a few minutes, you're a hell of a lot of fun. And you're loyal, too, in that tortured way of yours."

It was a crazy ass speech. And not even a little bit romantic. But even so, my eyes welled.

"Aw hell, G!" Rikker slid back down and put his head on my chest. "I'm sorry. I didn't say that right."

"You said it fine." I palmed my eyes, wiping the tears out and praying there wouldn't be more.

"I know you don't believe me. But I think that everything is going to get easier for you."

“Are you giving me an *It Gets Better* speech?”

He kissed my chin. “Sort of. Yes, actually. Because I know how you don’t want to change the way people look at you. And that’s not crazy. But you’ve only got one year left in the locker room, right? One year left to be the D-squad enforcer, and to beat on your chest and mow down the enemy. And then you’re moving on to grad school or a job or whatever. College is great, but there isn’t any privacy. After this, it just gets easier.”

“What if it doesn’t?” I asked in a small voice.

“It *has* to, G. You told your parents. Every time you move a person into the truth column, breathing gets a little easier, right?”

“I guess.”

“Did you talk to Hartley tonight?” Rikker asked suddenly.

“Sure.”

“He knows.”

I stopped breathing. “How?”

Rik shrugged. “The hospital. He went back there into your room and tried to calm you down. But you just kept asking him where I was. And... I can’t explain it. I just saw the moment he figured it out. And then when your mom showed up she made a big deal about how we played hockey together in eighth grade.”

“Ugh.” I felt a little sick just picturing that.

Rikker picked up his head to look at me. “No, G. *Not* ugh. You need to stop thinking that way, for your own sanity. I mean, Hartley is good to *me*. And also to you. He knows, and just doesn’t care.”

“He *is* good to you. And he isn’t just phoning it in.” But I was just so conditioned to hold on to my secret, I couldn’t even conceive of a day when I didn’t care who knew.

“That’s right. He’s a guy who doesn’t care who you get naked with. He doesn’t give a damn what people think. That’s a real man right there. And a real *friend*. You don’t have to wonder how he’d treat you if he knew. Because you already have the answer.”

I closed my eyes, exhausted. “It’s just so hard for me to get there.”

“I know,” Rikker said. “The thing is, each new person who learns the truth lets you breathe a little easier. And then the one after that is a little easier. And so on.”

It almost sounded possible. You know. For someone who wasn’t me.

We stopped talking for a little while. Rikker eased himself back into the

bed. He rolled toward me, and I rolled away, so that he was spooning me. And it felt ridiculously good.

“There’s one thing I wish you could do for me,” he said eventually.

“What’s that?”

“Say the word.”

“What word?”

Rikker sighed. “The big scary g-word.”

Oh. “Why do you want me to?”

“I’m *gay*, Graham. Or queer, if you like that word better. Whatever. I’m attracted to guys. You won’t say that out loud, will you? I’ll bet you didn’t even say the word to your mother when you told her. Did you?”

“No,” I told the pillow. He was right. I’d only said that Rikker was *not just my friend*.

“It’s like... you want to be able to tell people you’re straight, for some reason. Like gay isn’t good enough for you. Like it’s second class. Which makes *me* second class.”

I rolled over to face him. “There’s nothing second class about you. I think more highly of you than anyone I know.”

“Do you really? Then tell me the truth about you. I’m really fucking patient about the way you hide from the people who don’t matter so much. But at least you could be honest with the guy in your bed.”

“I’m gay,” I whispered.

Rikker grinned. “Fuck. *Finally*.”

“I don’t know why that makes you so happy.”

He tightened his arms around me. “Because someday, when you find that easier to say, it will make you happy, too. And I want that for you, G. I want you to be happy.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you were happy, too.”

“Big of you.”

I snuggled into his body. We’d had a little bit of a fight there, and it had left me feeling clingy. “You’ll really let me fuck you some time? I didn’t know you liked that.”

“Well...” he hesitated, studying my ceiling. “I’m not opposed to it as a concept. It’s just that I never enjoyed it as much as you seem to.”

I picked my head up to look at him. “What — you can’t come like that?”

“Not even close. But I’ll still do that for you. Fair’s fair.”

Wow. My heart was *full*. Even so, I had a question. “Who’ve you done that with?” We hadn’t really had this conversation before, and I was desperately curious.

“Only Skippy. He said I couldn’t call myself queer if I didn’t give bottoming a try. We never got the hang of it, though. So we went back to what worked best.”

“I like a challenge.”

He smiled at me. “Just don’t be mad if I don’t see fireworks, or whatever.”

“Okay,” I laughed. “But I hope you do. Because... damn. Seriously. If you haven’t had your prostate pounded, you haven’t lived.”

“Now there’s a slogan.”

“I’m going to make bumper stickers.” I made myself comfortable again. Or, I tried to. My head was still spinning with needy thoughts. “Rikker?” I whispered, in case he was sleeping.

“Yeah?”

“Are you still in love with Skippy?” After I asked the question, I regretted it. Did I really want to know?

“No,” he said slowly. “We had our thing, and that’s over now. But I’ll always love him. He was really important to me.”

“I understand,” I said quickly.

Rikker put his hand on my hip, his fingers stroking my skin absently. “See, Skippy had a vision for life as a gay man even when he was only seventeen. He was like... ‘Look at all the fun we’re going to have! We have to go snowboarding. We have to go dancing. We’re going to Montreal this weekend, even though we don’t speak the language.’” Rikker laughed to himself.

“Sounds pretty good,” I said, hoping it didn’t sound too bitter.

“It was just what I needed at the time,” he said. “But you know what? Skippy is awfully controlling. He means well, but he likes to get his own way. I’m pretty easy-going, so for a long time I was fine with it. Then, at some point, I wasn’t. But our roles were set, and I could never seem to renegotiate the balance of power in our relationship.”

“Interesting,” I said. Because it really was.

“Yeah. Stereotypes don’t always hold up, G. He was the bottom in bed. But he wanted to be in charge every other damn minute. He picked the restaurants, he made the plans. When I had an idea, there was always a reason

why his was better.”

“That would get old.”

“It did, and that’s why I thought I should move on. Then when he dumped me, I was so pissed.” He chuckled again, and I felt his breath tickle my neck.

“You’ll tell me if I’m a pain, right?” I was twenty-one years old, and I’d never been in a relationship before. I didn’t know what I was doing. But tonight we’d had some tricky conversations, and I felt better for it. Not worse. Who knew?

He kissed me between the shoulder blades. “Getting along together was never the problem with you and me,” he said. “We’re both easy. It’s just the rest of the world that’s hard.”

Aint that the truth. I tugged his arm closer to my body, stretching his hand up to my mouth, where I kissed his palm.

He gave a happy sigh. “I used to dream about sleeping with you. In Michigan, I mean. Just like this.”

My throat got tight. “Me too.”

“Yeah? I don’t mean sex. Well, I dreamed about that, too. *Plenty.* But when I got in bed every night, I wished you were there. You know I love you, right?”

“Yeah,” I choked out. I was happy that the lights were out, so that he couldn’t see my eyes shining again.

“Goodnight, G.”

“Goodnight, Rik.”

— *Rikker*

After all that heavy conversation, I forgot to set the alarm on my phone. So I woke up the next morning in Graham’s bed. The sunlight streaming in through the windows was a bit of a surprise, as was the sight of Graham’s broad shoulders.

Also, someone was knocking on the door to Graham’s room.

“Sweetie, are you up?”

Shit! His mom was out there. I lifted my head to look down at Graham. He swallowed and stretched a little. Sleepily, Graham lifted his head off the pillow. “Need a few minutes,” he said. The fact that he wasn’t freaking out yet made me want to check his pulse.

There was a pause, and then his mother said, “I think I’ll pick up coffee

and muffins.”

Graham sat up and looked at me, and I waited for the inevitable look of panic to cross his face. But it didn't. Instead, there was just a ruffled, sweet expression that made me want to reach for his naked body. “Hey, Mom?” he called, his voice still thick from sleep. “Can you grab a cup for Rikker too?”

My heart stuttered in my chest.

“Sure. Fifteen minutes,” she said. “Twenty if the line is long.”

I said nothing, keeping still until she'd moved away from the door.

But Graham threw back the covers and got out of bed as if nothing had shifted. As if it was no big thing to basically admit that she'd caught him in bed with his boyfriend. I watched him walk, bare-assed, across the room to his towel. He tied it around his waist, unlocked the door and left the room.

It was tempting to let myself drowse, but I wouldn't do that to Mrs. G. So I began looking around for my underwear.

A second later the door opened again. “There's nobody in the bathroom,” Graham said. “If you want a shower...”

Holy crap. Maybe his head injury was more serious than I thought. “Um, okay?”

“You go first.” Graham undid the towel from his own waist and threw it to me.

Fifteen minutes later I was straightening up the bed when he came back into the room after his own shower. “Nice shirt,” he smirked.

I'd stolen a plain gray tee out of his drawer. “I like it,” I said, patting the shirt. “It smells like you.”

His expression softened for a whole two seconds, maybe three. It wasn't often that I disarmed Graham, getting a peek at the tender soul hiding under that toughened shell. He made me work for it. But last night and this morning I'd been reaping the rewards.

I was tying my shoes when Graham's mom knocked again.

“It's open,” Graham said.

“That's nice,” Mrs. G's voice came through the door. “But my hands are full.”

“Sorry,” he laughed, going for the door.

“Always be polite to the bearer of coffee,” she said, stepping over the threshold. “Hi John,” she said to me. “I made yours with a splash of milk. I hope that's okay.”

“That is awesome,” I said, trying not to feel awkward. I took the cup she offered me from the molded paper tray. “Thank you.”

“Any time.”

I took an appreciative gulp, and enjoyed the way the hot liquid felt going down. Like life itself pouring into me.

“When is practice today?” Graham asked.

“Not sure,” I said. “I’m afraid to look at my phone. Coach started getting a little nutty about the next game before we were even off the bus yesterday.”

“You’re up against Union,” Mrs. Graham said, shaking her head.

“Yeah. Could be the last road trip of the year.”

“That’s the spirit,” Graham said with a smirk.

“Hey, it’s early. I haven’t had enough coffee.” I set the cup down so I could scoop my Spanish book into my backpack. “Have a good one, G. And Mrs. G. Feel free to read the next chapter of Roman history without me.”

“Bye, John,” Graham’s mom said.

“Thanks for the coffee,” I said again. Then I slipped out the door, saving us all any additional awkwardness.

When it shut behind me, I heard her voice. “I just love that boy.”

“He’s taken,” Graham replied.

— April —

Coast to Coast: *Carrying the puck from deep in your own defensive zone all the way to the opposing team's goal.*

— Graham

My mother spent almost a *month* at Harkness helping me stay current on my schoolwork. I ended up dropping my computer programming class, but everything else got done.

Eventually, as my stamina increased, there was less for her to do. So, in mid-April, the morning after taking Rikker and I out for a nice steak dinner, she flew home to Michigan.

For the first time in fifty-three years, the Harkness hockey team had made it all the way to the Frozen Four. This time, I rode the bus to Boston with the team. And I watched from VIP seats as my teammates eked out a win over North Dakota. And then promptly got their asses handed to them by the Minnesota Gophers.

Watching the loss of the national championship game was heartbreaking. On the other hand, it was our most winning season ever. And apparently, the hockey alumni gave more money to the school's endowment than any other year in history.

So at least somebody at Harkness won.

Now the world's longest hockey season was finally over. All that was left was the end-of-the-season surf 'n turf party that Coach always threw. On a sunny Sunday around noon, I walked out of the Beaumont Gates with Bella and Hartley. We were supposed to clear the last few items out of our lockers, and then head over to Coach's house together.

I didn't have any stuff in my locker, obviously. It had all been cleared out for Bridger. But I tagged along anyway, following my friends to the rink.

The first thing I saw when I walked back into the locker room was Rikker.

Eight months ago, I'd been sent into a tailspin by the sight of him. This time, he was a sight for sore eyes. Rikker sat on the bench in front of his

locker, pulling his phone out of his pocket. But instead of looking up at me, he frowned.

Rikker put the phone up to his ear. “Hey,” he said. “I saw that you called, but I’m kind of…”

Whomever was on the other end of the call must have interrupted him. Because Rikker’s mouth closed into a grim line. And then I watched the color drain from his face. The phone slid out of his hand, clattering onto the bench beside him. Then Rikker hunched forward, his free hand covering his eyes.

One second later I was across that room, grabbing the forgotten phone. The display said SKIPPY on it. And the thin sound of a voice was coming from the speaker. “Rik? Rikky, are you there?”

“Hey,” I said into the phone. “Skippy?” I sat down beside Rikker. “What the hell happened?”

“Who is this?”

“Mike Graham,” I said.

There was a beat of silence. “I had some bad news for Rikker. Can you get him to talk to me?”

I took another look at my boyfriend. He was staring at the floor with unseeing eyes. If I had to describe him in one word, I would have chosen “catatonic.”

My chest got tight. “Skippy,” I prompted. “Just tell me what’s the matter.”

He sighed into the phone. “Rikker’s Gran collapsed after church this morning. They took her away in an ambulance.”

“No!”

“Yeah.”

In my head, I was chanting it again. *No. No. No.* She had to be okay. She just had to. “Where is she now?”

“Fletcher Allen, I’m pretty sure. It’s the big hospital up here.”

“Uh, okay.” *Fletcher Allen.* I didn’t even have a pen. I looked around, and Hartley was standing beside me. “Can you… I need something to write on.” He turned on a heel and walked off. “Okay, Skippy. Does Rikker know how to get there?”

“Yeah, he’ll know where it is. And I’m going over there now to see what I can learn.”

“How did you hear about this, anyway?” I had a wild hope that maybe Skippy was just wrong. Rikker’s Gran was just about the heartiest old lady

I'd ever met.

"My mom was there at church. She called the ambulance. This only happened like a half hour ago. Mom sounded pretty shaken up."

Damn. "All right," I swallowed. "I'm going to find a car. And it will take us about... three-and-a-half hours of driving time. Maybe four." In my panic, I couldn't remember how long it had taken us to drive it at New Year's.

"I'll call you when I hear something."

"Thanks," I said, uselessly. I ended the call, thinking only about the fact that I needed to borrow some wheels. Who had a car?

I looked up then. And every guy in the locker room was staring at me. *At us*, actually. Because Rikker was still curled into himself. And my free arm was on his back, my palm on his neck, my fingers in his too-long hair. It wasn't sexual. But it wasn't how you touch a teammate. It was the touch you gave your boyfriend when his world was splitting in half, and there wasn't anything you could do to stop it.

For a long second, I just went still. It occurred to me that I could jerk my hand off of Rikker. Any other day, I would have done just that. But for once in my sorry life, there were more important things to worry about. So I took a long breath in through my nose, and left my hand right where it was. "We need to borrow a car," I said. "We have to get to Vermont. Like, yesterday."

The deep silence lasted a little longer, until Bridger McCaulley broke it. "My girlfriend has a car. But I'll have to find her and get the keys."

I stood then, ready to take him up on it. And I moved my hand to the top of Rikker's head, my fingers in his soft hair. Until now, I'd failed Rikker at every opportunity. But not today. His grandmother had said that her years with him were a joy. She was practically *bursting* with pride for him. I could do that, too. I could stand here, claiming him as someone who mattered to me. It was really the least I could do.

"You can take mine," someone said. I turned to see Trevi fishing a set of keys out of his pocket. "And I'm parked right behind the rink."

"Thanks, man." I let go of Rikker only so I could catch the keys as he tossed them.

"I'll walk you out there," Trevi said, heading for the door.

I bent over Rikker, still feeling eyes on my back. "Come on, Rik. Let's go see her." I squeezed his shoulder.

Numbly, Rikker stood up and walked out after Trevi. He'd left his duffel bag on the floor.

At some point Hartley had come back with a pad and a pen, which I no longer wanted. "What's the problem?" he asked as I hoisted Rikker's bag onto my shoulder.

The locker room was still listening to every word I said. "Rikker's grandmother in Vermont — that's where he lived after his parents kicked him out. She collapsed today. We don't know why."

"His parents *kicked him out*?" Hartley sputtered. "Like, permanently?"

"Pretty much. Gotta run." I left the locker room without so much as a glance back over my shoulder.

Trevi drove a Volkswagen Jetta in cherry red. "Thanks, really," I said when he showed us his car. "I'll take good care of her."

"Don't mention it."

Minutes later, Rikker and I were speeding up the interstate. For a hundred miles, he said almost nothing. He sat in the passenger seat beside me, his eyes on the road. During the long stretch on highway 91, I reached over to palm his thigh. And he took my hand absently, holding on to me with dry fingers. I didn't know what was going through his head. I only knew that it wasn't good.

"Where does your uncle Alan live?" I asked at one point. Because we really needed to call him. "Somewhere near Atlanta, right?"

"Yeah."

As we drove through Central Massachusetts, I felt Rikker's phone vibrate in my back pocket. Since I was driving, I ignored it. If the news was really dire, they'd call back. And there was no way to get him there any faster, anyway. But as we crossed into Southern Vermont, the phone began to vibrate again. So I pulled off the highway in Brattleboro, stopping at a gas station. I set the gas nozzle to fill Trevi's tank, and then I took a look at Rikker's phone.

There were two text messages from Skippy. The first one had read: *I'm @ the Fletcher Allen ER waiting room. No news yet.* The recent message said: *She's alive but unconscious. Being treated for stroke.*

I replied: *Thx. Just hit VT border. -MG*

Ducking back into the car, I took a look at Rikker. His head was tipped back on the headrest, staring at the windshield.

“Rik?” He turned to look at me, but his eyes were blank. As if I could see right through him. “Skippy texted that she’s alive, but unconscious.”

My boyfriend swallowed roughly. “Okay. We’re not too late.”

I’d never heard Rikker sound so vulnerable. And if his Gran died, I was going to be really hacked off at the universe. I crawled forward a few inches and captured the side of his face in my hand. “We’re not going to be too late. Come on, now.”

He sighed. “She’s only seventy-six. I’m not ready.”

There was a lump in my throat now about a mile wide. And I couldn’t even blame my concussion. “This could turn out fine.”

He knocked his head back against the headrest. “If she goes, I have nobody left. That’s it.”

Something shifted in my gut, and not in a good way. I leaned all the way over to him now, catching the back of his neck in my hand. “That is just not true. I know she’s special, and I hope she lives to be a hundred. But you are *not* alone. You hear me?”

His eyes shifted in my direction, and for a split second I saw him emerge far enough from his misery to really read my face. So I kissed him on the forehead.

“Thank you,” he said. “For...” he waved his hand toward the steering wheel.

“It’s nothing.” I heard the gas pump click off. “You need anything?” I pointed at the store. Because I was basically starving to death.

“Just need to get there.”

“You got it.” I hopped out to replace the gas cap. Food could wait.

I accelerated up the on-ramp again, marveling at my own stupidity. *You need anything?* That was the question I’d just asked Rikker. Today, for once, I really meant it. Too bad it took a freaking tragedy to extract my head from my ass.

The headache kicked in around White River Junction. And by Montpelier, it was fierce. “How fast can I drive this stretch?” I asked Rikker. I hadn’t seen a cop in a good long time.

“Eighty,” he said without hesitation. “They don’t patrol very hard. Just watch those U-turn spots in the median. Slow down for the ones that are blocked by trees.”

I kept our speed up, and I tried to ignore the pressure along my brow

line. Rikker grew agitated as we approached the Burlington area. When his foot tapping started making me crazy, I reached over and settled a hand on his knee.

“Sorry,” he sighed.

There was nothing I could do but drive and give his leg a squeeze. No more texts had come through, either.

“You want exit fourteen,” Rikker said eventually.

Yes, yes I do. The last five miles seemed to take forever. But then we were finally pulling into a big parking lot, and then jogging on stiff legs toward the E.R. doors.

Inside, Rikker charged toward a desk, although there were too many other people waiting in front of it. Abruptly he changed course, veering into the waiting area. I spotted Skippy with two older women, and they were waving him down.

Skippy stood up to wrap Rikker in a hug, which should not have bothered me. But there was something awfully intimate about that hug, the way he pulled Rikker’s ear close to him and began to whisper. And Rikker’s eyes fell shut, listening to whatever soothing words Skippy had to say.

It’s hard to describe how badly this ate at me. But it wasn’t a typical lover’s jealousy. The problem was that I had *never* greeted Rikker that way, and certainly not in a room full of people. It struck me how badly I wanted *my* share of that affection. I’d been missing out, and all because of fear.

Right then, a little light went on inside my thick head. I already knew that my refusal to come out had hurt Rikker. But until that moment, I don’t think I ever understood that it had hurt me, too. Because the cost of avoiding unfriendly eyes wasn’t nearly as great as the cost of forgoing even one of Rikker’s hugs.

I approached the two of them slowly, making a path between the people. And not a soul was bothered by the two men embracing on the green linoleum tiles.

When I arrived beside them, Skippy stepped back, but he held tightly to both of Rikker’s hands. “Okay, here’s what we know. If you’re going to have a stroke, you want to do it in a room full of people. She got her first CT scan about twenty minutes after she collapsed. And the window for treating a stroke with the strongest meds is something like three hours.”

“Did they give it to her?” I asked. “What’s that stuff... it breaks up clots, if you get it soon enough?”

Skippy nodded. “They gave it to her. She’s being scanned again right now.”

“John,” one of the older women said. She wrapped a wrinkled arm around Rikker. “Hang in there, honey.” Then she extended a hand to me. “I’m Gertie.”

Gertie? The one who cheats at poker? “Graham,” I said, shaking her hand.

“If you don’t mind,” Gertie said, “I’ll take John to try to find the doctor that explained everything to us. He won’t be able to see her until she’s back from the tests, though.”

“Is she conscious?” Rikker asked, his voice husky.

Gertie shook her head. “No, honey. But the doctor said that’s not unusual.”

Rikker’s eyes closed, and then opened again. “Let’s go, then.”

They walked off toward the back, leaving me standing there with Skippy and a woman who looked an awful lot like him. She had the same quick brown eyes. “I’m Linda,” she said. And then I saw that she had the same carefree smile as her son, too.

“Graham. Nice to meet you.” We shook, and my head gave me a stab of pain.

Now that my hands were finally free, I could indulge in a full-on massage of my own forehead. The ache had spread, radiating out to my hairline and temples.

“Are you okay?” Linda asked.

“Sure.”

“Wait... you have a head injury, I thought?” Skippy asked.

“I’m okay, I’m just...” *probably going to collapse now.* Because I’d delivered Rikker to the hospital, my body chose that moment to experience a massive adrenaline crash, and a blood sugar crash, too. Also, I’d skipped my head-injury-patient nap. The only thing to do was to look around for an empty chair. And when I found it, I sort of oozed into it like a blob.

“My goodness,” Skippy’s mother said. I felt her sit down beside me, although I couldn’t see her because my face was in my hands. “Can I scare up some aspirin for you?”

“That is a great idea. But I’ve got it.” I shoved a hand in my pocket and came up with my magic little bottle. I’d downgraded to plain old ibuprofen, and it usually took the edge off. I took out two of them and dry-swallowed

them.

“Seriously, are you okay?” Skippy asked, sitting on my other side. “When’s the last time you ate?”

“Uh,” *good question*. “Yesterday, I think. We were on our way to a party when you called.” There was probably a vending machine around here somewhere. And I knew I should find it.

Skippy made a sound of disapproval. “You know it’s almost five o’clock?” He pulled out his phone and tapped it a few times. “Hiiii Sweetie! No real news yet. But Rikker got here, so that’s good. His boyfriend is about to pass out, though. So maybe we should have that Thai food sooner rather than later.” Skippy tipped his head in my direction. “You eat Thai?”

“Sure?”

“Put in an extra pad Thai for Rikker, because that’s good warm or cold. Thank you, Sweetie. Love you too.”

Skippy’s mom, who had wandered off, returned to my side. This time, she held out an ice cold can of Coke. “This is what I drink when I have a headache.”

“Wow, thanks,” I said. Sugar and caffeine were excellent headache remedies. “You didn’t have to do that.”

She smiled at me. “We’ve been here all day, just wishing there was someone we could shore up,” she said. “You’re elected.”

Skippy’s mom put one hand on my back, and Skippy added one on his side. I was so delirious with exhaustion that it almost seemed as though their touch was the only thing holding me together. I popped the can open and took a long drag of the soda. Then I looked down at the floor so neither one of them would notice that my eyes had become curiously damp.

— *Rikker*

A month ago, when I watched them carry Graham off the ice, I thought I knew fear. But it was nothing like this.

They finally let me in to see Gran about an hour-and-a-half after I got there. And then I almost wished they hadn’t. The ICU was full of frighteningly ill people. And Gran frightened me the most. She was so still, and so fragile-looking in that bed.

It was a lonely vigil, because only one family member was allowed to accompany her. There was nothing I could do but sit in another awful plastic chair and make deals with God. *Please make this turn out okay*, I begged.

The trouble with this strategy was that I wasn't on great terms with God. Even if he looked past all the swearing and fornication, I hadn't been a regular churchgoer for years. And I was angry at pretty much anyone who brought up Jesus in a non-ironic way, because I'd been brought up by and among a bunch of fundamentalist homophobes who claimed to be doing God's work as they shunned me.

That wasn't really His fault, though. But prayer was probably a dead-end for me. That only left hope, and I guess I had plenty of that.

I hoped Gran would wake up.

I hoped that the effects of her stroke would not be too vast. (And by too vast, I meant that I hoped her sharp mind and her sharp eyes would scrutinize me by morning.)

I hoped that I could help her even a fraction as much as she helped me. At some point during this vigil, I fell asleep.

Someone patted my hand.

I woke up with a start, to find that the hand-patter was a stout nurse. "She's awake, honey."

My eyes flew to Gran, who was looking around critically. Another nurse raised Gran's head a few inches, and then held the straw of a water glass, and I saw Gran take a sip. When she swallowed, a little of the water dribbled out on one side. "Dis can't be good," she slurred.

At the sound of her voice, my eyes welled. And that was the moment she locked onto me, and I saw her make a sad face.

"Oh, don't you worry about him," the nurse said to Gran. "He's just exhausted because it's the middle of the night."

I heaved myself out of the chair and wiped my eyes. "Hi, Gran," I said. I leaned down to give her a kiss on the forehead, and my stupid eyes filled again.

"Honey," she said, her voice thick and awkward. "I'm shtill here."

"I can see that," I managed. But I was losing my battle with the tears.

"Go home," she said. "S'late."

"She's right, sweetheart," the nurse who'd awoken me said. "Tomorrow morning she'll be transferred to a proper room. You can talk then." She gave me a gentle nudge. "Your grandmother will rest better if she's not worrying about you."

I took a minute to mull over that logic, and decided that she had a point.

“Okay. I’ll come back first thing.”

The nurse fished a scrap of paper from her pocket. “Your friends left this note for you, in case your phone went dead. Now have a good night.”

I kissed Gran once again, and she looked at me with soft eyes. Then I stumbled out of the ICU, leaving all of its beeping machines behind. The note was from Skippy. “It’s midnight. Taking Graham home with us. Ring if you need anything, or want us there. Or come over. Call my cell or knock on the window to the right of the stoop.”

According to the clock in the waiting room, it was three in the morning. When I passed through the hospital doors, it took me a couple of minutes to get my bearings. I’d toured around the University campus with Skippy before, but I’d never paid much attention to the medical complex. Eventually I figured out where I was, and walked about ten minutes through the quiet little streets to Skippy’s place.

I pulled out my dying phone to verify that I was in front of the right house, because it would suck to accidentally wake a stranger at this hour. Right after I rapped on the window glass, I heard movement inside the room. So I climbed the little wooden stoop, and Skippy appeared at the door in a kimono. He and Ross lived in an old Victorian that had long ago been broken up into cute, creaky little apartments.

Wordlessly, he let me in. When I stepped into the living room, I saw a Graham-shaped lump asleep on the pull-out couch.

“Thanks,” I whispered.

“How is she?” he mouthed.

“She woke up, and spoke a little. But she looks awful.”

Skippy winced. “Tomorrow you’ll know more.”

“Yeah.”

He pointed toward the back. “Help yourself to anything in the bathroom. I’m going back to bed.”

“Skippy, thanks,” I said again.

Big parts of the day had been lost in my stressed-out haze. But I knew that the people in this room — the sleeping one, and the kimono-wearing one — had been pulling puppet strings in the background, making my nightmare just a little more bearable. Hours ago, I’d caught Skippy waving maniacally from the other side of the ICU glass. When I’d gone out to see what he wanted, he’d shoved a paper carton of pad Thai into one of my hands, and a pair of chopsticks in the other. Then he’d pointed at a bench. “You can’t go

back in there until you eat that,” he’d said. It had been easier to comply than to argue with him.

Now, Skippy leaned in to give me a quick squeeze. “Any time, honey. You’d do the same for me.” He turned away then, heading back to bed. We didn’t have to say anything more, because we both knew it was true.

I kicked off my shoes, and turned my attention to Graham, who had somehow zapped me from Connecticut to Vermont like a superhero. Even though we’d spent four hours in a car together, I felt as though I hadn’t talked to Graham in a year.

Dropping my jacket and jeans, I crawled onto the bed beside him. The pull-out sofa was the usual disaster — a thin mattress over dubious springs. But I’d never been so happy to be anyplace. It would have been polite to just lie down quietly and go to sleep. But that wasn’t good enough for me. I curled into Graham, tugging him into my arms.

“Are you okay?” he asked sleepily. I watched him wake up fast, his eyes snapping open, assessing me. “What’s wrong?”

I shook my head. “I just miss you. Maybe I should have just let you sleep, but I love you too damn much.” If the people in my life were going to start collapsing everywhere, it suddenly seemed important that I let them know.

He put a heavy palm on my cheek. “Love you, too, Rik.” The sentiment just rolled off his sleepy tongue. Then he let out a colossal yawn. “What time is it?”

“Three? Four?” I yawned, too.

“How is she?”

“Woke up. She sounds awful, but she’s *there*, you know?”

“Thank God.” His arms came around to squeeze me. “When I picked up that phone today, and Skippy told me what happened, I panicked.”

I tucked my body even closer to his, my mouth just beside his ear, so we could talk quietly. It was so still here. That’s how Vermont always sounded at night — quiet enough to hear your own thoughts. “That part of the day is hazy for me,” I admitted. “Thank you for getting me up to Burlington.”

“It’s hazy for you,” he repeated.

“Yeah. I was freaking.”

For a minute he didn’t say anything. He just nuzzled my neck. “I don’t think the team will forget it anytime soon.”

“What do you mean?”

Graham kissed my jaw a few times before he answered. “I don’t have to agonize over staying in the closet anymore.”

“What?” I pulled back so I could see his face.

But Graham’s eyes were closed, and his face was serene. “Just didn’t have time for the cover-up today. I kind of let it all hang out. For *me*, anyway.”

I traced back in my mind to try to figure out what he meant. “In the locker room?” It hadn’t been my sharpest hour, but I didn’t remember any words exchanged, other than Graham asking to borrow a car. “It couldn’t have been that bad.”

He gave a sleepy, half-shrug. “Doesn’t matter. Don’t care anymore.” He tugged me back down onto his body. “Middle of the night, Rik. I’m only good for sleep or sex.”

Smiling, I rubbed up against him. “I guess it would be rude to fuck on Skippy’s sofa bed.”

“Sofa might not survive it,” Graham mumbled.

“Good point.” I pulled up the blanket and lay down in Graham’s arms. Sleep clobbered me immediately, and I was out.

* * *

I woke up the next morning to the sound of Ross making coffee about ten feet away in their little kitchen. Graham’s big thigh was practically wedged into my ass, and I was clinging to the edge of the bed. I was either going to have to become a more assertive sleeper, or share only king-sized beds with him. With both my feet, I shoved his leg out of the way.

“Unnrgh,” he said.

“So true,” I agreed. And Ross laughed over the burble of the coffee maker.

Skippy came barreling out of the bedroom a few minutes later, and began organizing us in his Skiptastic way. “Graham can shower while you call your uncle,” he ordered. “Let me find a couple of Ross’s t-shirts for both of you.”

I gave Ross an apologetic look, and he just shrugged, sticking a piece of toast in his mouth.

“...Ross and I have class later this morning, but I want to run into the hospital with you, so I can report back to Mom. Now come over here and eat something quick.”

Graham and I let Skippy march us around. As a result, thirty minutes

later we were both more refreshed and better fed than would have otherwise been possible.

Ross tucked their little poodle into its duffel bag and put it over his shoulder. Then we all went outside to walk to the hospital together.

On the way into the building, Graham took my hand and gave it a squeeze. Oddly enough, he didn't let it go. We all approached the information desk together, where I learned that Gran had been transferred from the ICU to a regular room on the fourth floor.

"It's good news that they moved her, right?" I asked as all four of us waited for the elevator.

"It's awesome," Skippy agreed.

Graham squeezed my hand, which he was still holding. Weird.

On the fourth floor, we looked around for the right set of room numbers. And I was so eagerly scanning the signs that I didn't notice the woman standing outside a room at the end of the hall until we were almost upon her.

My mother.

As we moved toward her, I watched her mouth fall open.

Nice to see you, too, Mom. "How is she?" I asked without preamble.

"What is *he* doing here?" she asked.

Beside me, Graham's body went completely still. But he did not remove his hand from mine.

There was a nasty silence, and then I felt Skippy push past my other side, as if to get a better look. "That's her?" he asked. For obvious reasons, he'd never met my mother. "That's the crazy bitch who calls herself your mom?"

"Skip," Ross warned. "Simmer down."

"You think I should be *polite*?" My ex-boyfriend spat. "Fine. Thank you, Mrs. Rikker, for kicking your son out when he was sixteen. Because if you hadn't, someone else would have had to take my virginity."

My mother gasped, and clenched her fists. And it seemed entirely possible that I was about to witness a physical altercation between my mother and my ex-boyfriend, who was currently wearing a pink t-shirt reading *Power Bottoms for Jesus*. The dog, sensing trouble, chose that moment to let out a high-pitched yip. And Graham squeezed my hand as if he meant to solder himself to me.

At that moment, I felt as if I was looking down at my whole life from

above. And what I saw was *hysterical*. A gurgle of inappropriate laughter contracted my stomach.

“Don’t *laugh*, Rikky,” Skippy said, his voice tight.

But why not, right? Because the only thing really wrong was the fact that my grandmother had just had a stroke. All the rest was, as Coach liked to say, *noise*.

Ross put two meaty hands on Skippy’s shoulders and eased him back. “You’re upsetting Bella,” he said. “And if that happens, we’ll get thrown out of here.”

“It would be worth it,” Skippy snapped.

My mother spoke again. “You are not welcome here,” she said. And something in her tone made me pay attention. To my horror, she was pointing at Graham.

I didn’t even know that it was physically possible to go so quickly from zen to absolutely enraged. My chest squeezed like a vice, and I actually gagged for a second on my own haste to shut my mother up. I was finished being wounded by her. But you do not get to *say* that shit to Graham.

But it wasn’t me who told her off. And it wasn’t Skippy, either.

“Oh, *hell* no,” Graham spat. His hand finally let go of mine, but only because he wrapped it around my shoulder instead. “That is not *even true*.” His voice was shaking, the same way mine would be if I even tried to speak right now. “It took me six *years* to realize that I am welcome here, and *you* are not going to change that.”

My mother’s face was bright red. “You’re not helping,” she whispered. “Except to condemn him to hell.”

And there it was. No appeal to my mother could ever breach the seawall. Her Bible was her rulebook. And it wouldn’t even help if Skippy started in on his list of all the contradictory shit in the Bible: thou shalt not eat bacon, or wear clothing of mixed threads. That wouldn’t matter to my mother. Because she had been taught to fear rather than to think. And she was good at fear. A real pro.

“BOYSSS!” came a warble from inside the hospital room.

My grandmother’s voice woke me from my stupor. I gave Graham a little nudge toward the open doorway. We went inside, where my father and my uncle Alan stood, their asses parked side-by-side against the windowsill. “Gran,” I said, coming over to kiss her. She looked bright-eyed today, although her face was pale and puffy.

Skippy and Ross followed, and it was now quite crowded.

“I need to talk to John,” Gran said, her words not quite clear. With her left hand, she shooed my father and uncle toward the door.

Skippy took the hint, too. “Good to see you, Mrs. Rikker,” he said. “My mom will be by later.” He gave her a wave and tugged Ross out the door with him.

My father followed them. But on his way past me he stopped. Then he put a hand on my shoulder. “John,” he said simply. And I could feel his eyes heavy on my face. But I couldn’t go there right now. I wasn’t ready to have a Moment with this man who had not stood up for me when I needed him. After a few seconds, he reluctantly let go of me and walked out.

Graham also detached his arm from my back, but I caught him by the hand. “Stay,” I said. I didn’t want him in the hallway with my parents. I shut Gran’s door and faced her.

“I haven’t done the right thing,” Gran said.

“What? Sure you have.”

She gave her chin a little shake. “I let your father off the hook because I liked your company.” Her speech was slow, as if it took more concentration than normal. “Should have forced the issue before now. The longer you avoid each other, the harder it gets.”

Oh, hell. My eyes were getting hot. “I loved living with you.” Wait, I didn’t want that in the past tense. “I *love* it, and I’m spending the summer in Vermont.”

She shook her head again. “Taking care of an old lady is not what you should be doing.”

I yanked the only chair closer to the bed and sat down beside her. “That’s not your call. I like it here. My friends are here. And Graham is going to visit me.” I looked over my shoulder, up into the serious face of my boyfriend, who nodded.

“Your father needs to see you,” she said, clearing her throat. “And I need more care than you can give.”

“So what? We’ll get a part-time nurse. That pantry off the kitchen can become a main-floor bathroom, and you can move into the sewing room. It’s not that tricky.”

Her eyes were soft now. “Your father,” she repeated.

“I’ll visit him. A little. A week or two,” I promised. “I’ll try it. And if it’s awful, Graham’s mom will let me crash at their place. But you’re not

throwing me out, Gran. You wouldn't do that."

Her eyes teared up. "No, I wouldn't."

"So cut it out," I said, wiping mine.

"All right," she sniffed.

"You just folded like a bad hand of poker," I joked.

That earned me an eye roll. "I will throw you out now, though," she said. "You should be at school."

"For five more weeks," I said. "How long are they going to keep you here?" For all my big plans about keeping Gran in her home, I didn't know if it would actually work.

"There's a rehab unit I'll go to," she said. "Then maybe Gertie's."

"Okay," I said, because I was in over my head.

"School," she said, squeezing my hand. She looked exhausted now.

"I'll call tomorrow?"

She smiled at me, and I stood up.

"See you soon, Mrs. Rikker," Graham said, his hand on the doorknob. "Feel better."

"Wait," I said, stopping him. I stepped into Graham's personal space and wrapped my arms around him. "Thank you for telling off my mother instead of strangling her, like I wanted to. Because now I don't have to visit you in prison."

Chuckling, he hugged me back. Right in front of Gran.

Outside the hospital room, my parents and my uncle Alan were standing around looking tense. I pulled Gran's door shut behind me. "What did the doctor say this morning?" I asked.

My dad cleared his throat. "The anti-clotting medicines are working for her. There will be a lot of recovery time, but they like what they see so far."

"Good," I said.

"I'm sticking around for the week, to see her settled into a rehab program," Alan said.

"We need to put in a bathroom downstairs," I said.

He smiled. "I'm on it, kid. I'll call around today, unless you want to steer me to any particular guys?"

"Gertie is the one to ask," I told him. "She knows all the gossip. And maybe Skippy's mom." I glanced at Graham, who was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, and staring down my mom. "We have to get back to

Connecticut,” I told the group. Then I grabbed for Graham’s hand and turned toward the elevators. I wouldn’t have minded talking to Alan a bit longer, but I’d reached my breaking point. I couldn’t handle my parents on top of Gran’s stroke. That was just more than I could take.

“I’ll walk you out,” my father said, jogging to keep up.

Great. I pressed the elevator button and prayed for deliverance. Graham squeezed my wrist. Then his hand came to the small of my back, where he rubbed a reassuring circle. It was both sweet and devious at the same time, because my father would not appreciate the PDA, no matter how mild.

“You look good, John,” my father said.

I said nothing.

“I want you to come home this summer,” he added.

“What, did she threaten to cut you out of the will?” I tapped a rhythm on the elevator button like an impatient fool.

“John,” my father sighed. “I do love you.”

“Got a weird way of showing it,” I said. “Although the tuition checks are always on time. So I suppose Mom wants me to be grateful.”

“Your mother thinks...” he sighed.

“That is debatable,” I argued.

“She believes in tough love.”

“...Which worked so well.” I wasn’t going to make this easy for him. “You are never going to change me, okay? Not about this. So you can take me or leave me.”

“I’ll take you, then.” The elevator doors opened, finally, revealing four other people. I stepped in, and Graham and my father followed. “Will you please come home this summer?” my father asked.

Ugh. I could just picture it. Tense silences at the dinner table, or worse. If my mother campaigned for me to attend a Healing Camp, I was not going to be nice about it. “I will visit,” I said. “Because Gran wants me to. But not right away. I need to be around for her.”

The doors opened, and we all got out. I plowed forward toward freedom. The automatic doors parted, and then I was sucking down the fresh Vermont air. That helped.

“John?”

God, he was like a dog with a bone. “Yeah?”

“You’re a good grandson.”

“I know that already.” I patted my pockets. “Car keys?” I asked

Graham. He held them up. Because I couldn't avoid it any longer, I finally met my father's eyes. He looked a lot like me, actually. And I spent a long second wondering if someday I'd have worry lines on my forehead, like him. "I'll see you. Maybe in August."

"I hope so, son."

It shouldn't have made a difference to me that he called me "son." But somehow, it did. "Okay," I said, my voice gruff.

"I look forward to it," he said.

* * *

I drove us out of town and onto the highway. We didn't speak, probably because I was thinking too hard. And when I checked Graham's face, I found him dozing in the passenger seat. Eventually I pulled off the highway, and up to the drive-through window of a fast food restaurant.

When it was almost our turn to order, I put a hand on Graham's knee to wake him, because I didn't know what he'd want. "Lunch time, baby. What do you like from Wendy's?"

He shook himself into consciousness. "Um, taco salad?"

I just stared at him. "Really? A salad?"

Graham gave me a sleepy grin. "I have a lot of salads for lunch. But never for dinner."

"I didn't know that. We never eat lunch together."

A sad expression passed through his eyes, but then he smiled again. "Some idiot thought we shouldn't. Can't remember why."

My heart gave a little kick just to hear him say that. "We'll start now."

"Okay." Graham leaned toward me then, cupping my chin in his hands. Then he kissed me, just like that. In front of God and everybody.

"*Ahem.*"

I pulled away from Graham to look up into the face of the pimply young man in the Wendy's window. "Sorry," I said automatically.

"You could let me join in," the guy said. "Or order your food. One or the other."

I just blinked up at him, too surprised to go on. Graham leapt in, ordering his salad, and then I pulled it together, adding my order.

As soon as I pulled ahead to wait for the food, Graham began to laugh. "The look on your *face*," he chuckled. "I thought I was the prude."

“He just took me by surprise, that’s all.”

Graham stretched as best he could in the passenger seat. “Jesus. What a rough couple of days.”

“I could use one or two with no drama.”

“You know what I want? Forty-eight hours in bed. You. Me. Maybe a couple of movies. Sleeping. Sex. Food, because eventually we’d get hungry. But no interruptions.”

“Sounds great. But instead, you’re going to get midterms. And spring training.”

He sighed. “I know. But eventually we’ll be off this treadmill, right? You promised me a camping trip in Vermont. I want to pick apples and have sex in a tent.”

At that, I cracked up. “You *heard* that?”

“Of course I did.” Graham tried to give me money for lunch, but I waved him off. The lady from the next window handed down our bag, and I moved the car to face a grassy slope at the back of the restaurant.

Graham passed me my sandwich, but he said something that made me forget to eat it. “Hey, Rik? I’ve decided not to play hockey next year.”

“*What?*”

Calmly, he stirred his salad together while he talked. “There are a whole lot of reasons. And some of them you’re not going to like. But just listen, okay?”

“Okay.” Although I doubted that I could ever agree with this.

“For one, I don’t want to risk another concussion. Supposedly, if I got another one, it would take twice as long to heal.”

Oh. “Ouch.”

“No kidding. But also — I need to make some changes. I want to stop hiding. But I have to do it on my own time. And I don’t want us to be the gay couple on the team. I don’t want to be in the news. So I’m not going to play.”

“*Jesus*, Graham! You...”

He held up a hand. “You’re still listening right now, please. Originally, I played hockey because of you. It was your pick.”

“...But you’re *good* at it.”

Graham shrugged. “Not as good as you. But that’s not the point. Just shut it for a minute, okay? There are other things I want to do instead. Do you know Dan Armitage?”

I shook my head.

“He’s going to edit the *Daily News* next year.” That was our college paper. “He needs a sports editor, and I’ve always kind of wanted that job.”

“Really?”

“Really. I want to write about lacrosse and football. A couple of guys have gotten jobs at ESPN from working that beat.”

Huh. “That’s cool. Except you never mentioned that before.”

He put down his fork. “I *know* that. My whole life, I never got in the habit of saying what I wanted. I’ve got one year of college left. And I want to spend it on the things I choose.” He reached across the gearbox and put a hand on my chest. “*All* the things I choose. And mostly, I choose you.”

“Well, shit...” That made me swallow hard. “It was your team first, though.”

“Whatever. I’m just glad you showed up to be on it.”

Holy hell! It had finally happened.

Carefully, so as not to disturb the various food items on our laps, I pulled him by the back of the neck just far enough over to kiss me. “You’re it,” I whispered. “A perfect ten on the Rikker scale.”

“The what?”

But I couldn’t even explain without my voice breaking. So I sat back in my seat and just studied him. He was wearing Ross’s crimson ‘Bama t-shirt, and watching me with those cool blue eyes.

“Love you so much, G,” I choked out.

He stole one of my French fries. “Love you, too, Rik. Now eat your lunch so that we can go home.”

THE END

THANK YOU!

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**The sport she loves is out of reach. The boy she loves has someone else.
What now?**

She expected to start Harkness College as a varsity ice hockey player. But a serious accident means that Corey Callahan will start school in a wheelchair instead.

Across the hall, in the other handicapped-accessible dorm room, lives the too-delicious-to-be real Adam Hartley, another would-be hockey star with his leg broken in two places. He's way out of Corey's league.

Also, he's taken.

Nevertheless, an unlikely alliance blooms between Corey and Hartley in the "gimp ghetto" of McHerrin Hall. Over tequila, perilously balanced dining hall trays, and video games, the two cope with disappointments that nobody else understands.

They're just friends, of course, until one night when things fall apart. Or fall together. All Corey knows is that she's falling. Hard.

But will Hartley set aside his trophy girl to love someone as broken as Corey? If he won't, she will need to find the courage to make a life for herself at Harkness — one which does not revolve around the sport she can no longer play, or the brown-eyed boy who's afraid to love her back.

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